
An Unfettered Faith

THE RELIGION
OF A
UNITARIAN

by A. Phillip Hewett

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FOREWORD

MILLIONS of people in all parts of the world have broken away from the religious beliefs and practices of their forefathers. For most of them the very words "religion" and "church" are suspect. Many of those who still claim to belong to a church never take any part in its life and work. Organized religion in the traditional sense has, in fact, declined steeply during the last half-century, largely because it seems to multitudes of people to have nothing to offer that would be meaningful in their lives.

This is a state of mind that Unitarians understand. Many of them have gone through it themselves. They feel themselves in agreement with much that is said about the traditional churches, but at the same time they recognize that there are timeless values in religion, without which the life of man is greatly impoverished. Unitarianism represents an attempt to reinterpret these universal truths in terms of modern knowledge about the world in which we live, and to provide churches in which religion, stripped of the superstitions of the past, can become a living force for good in the lives of men and women today.

The purpose of this book is to describe such an attitude towards life. As the title indicates, the writer's conviction is that faith, though its nature has been much misunderstood, is the essential basis of any satisfactory attitude towards life as a whole:

We live by faith; but faith is not the slave
Of text and legend.

Past experience has shown that some advance explanation of the word "Unitarian" may be called for. This term has at times given rise to some confusion of thought, largely because many of those who have set out to criticize the spirit it denotes have not succeeded in grasping the real nature of that spirit. Unitarianism is an evolving faith which grows with growing knowledge. It thus differs from those forms of faith which claim that their beliefs have never changed since they were first established. It takes full account of all advances that are made in thought and discovery, and such advances have been enormous in recent years. Descriptions belonging to the nineteenth or earlier centuries are therefore quite inadequate to show where Unitarian thought stands today.

The little word "a" in the sub-title has an importance beyond its size. It emphasizes one of the fundamental Unitarian principles, that of the freedom of belief of each individual. The views expressed here carry no "official" endorsement; they are simply those of the writer. Though it is probable that most Unitarians would agree with most of what is written, no one can take it for granted that they must do so. The bond of union between Unitarians is not one of allegiance to a common creed, but one of general approach to life. Though this is an unusual basis of unity in a church, its strength has been proved by the experience of Unitarians during the course of many years.

I

FAITH AND FAITHS

"As a man thinketh, so is he," wrote a Hebrew sage thousands of years ago. Men's beliefs, as well as their actions, have always been the concern of religion. This concern has often expressed itself in undesirable ways, but its basis is sound. Widespread attempts are being made today to gain control over the lives of men by gaining control over their beliefs. Propaganda, advertising, thought-control, brain-washing, the party line, papal decrees on dogma, the struggle for the control of education, press and radio that is going on in so many parts of the world: all these testify to the importance of people's beliefs.

Those who profess a particular religion have often been called simply "believers". It is because they cannot share their beliefs that so many people have drifted away from the traditional churches. In any discussion of religion it is usually belief that takes the first place. "What do you believe?" . . . "What are the beliefs of your church?" Questions such as these are almost always forthcoming when someone becomes known as a member of a religious group with which most people are unfamiliar. Unitarians, certainly, are often asked such questions, and it is by no means easy to give a short answer, for they show that the questioner has already taken a very great deal for granted. Not only has he accepted the general view that the most outstanding feature of a religion is its

beliefs, but he has also ignored all the preliminary stages which must be passed through before exact beliefs can be expressed. For if it is important to know *what* people believe, it is no less important to know *how* they believe, and *why* they believe. No matter what the subject under discussion might be, if someone is told, "You must believe this!", his most natural reaction is to ask "Why?" (unless he is so overawed by the "authority" of the person making the assertion that he dare not ask questions). And if his reply should be, "I cannot believe it", we ought at least to consider how beliefs can in fact arise before deciding that such a reply is blameworthy, or praiseworthy.

All our beliefs are answers to questions which must have been asked at some time or other, consciously or unconsciously. One of man's most characteristic features is an all-encompassing curiosity. When a child, or an uncivilized person, meets a new object for the first time, he is seized by a powerful desire to know what it is, what it is for, how it works—and very often he goes on to ask who designed it, and why. The small boy who is caught in the act of dismantling the clock furnishes the classical example of this, but it is a tendency found in adults as in children, in civilized people as in uncivilized. The urge to know is a basic part of our human personality.

The Quest for Knowledge

The knowledge sought by man is not simply of a type that would be useful for practical purposes. The developed mind reaches out towards a direct insight into the nature of things. Thus, science may be divided under two broad classifications, pure and applied.

Applied science is "knowing how", the application of particular skills, guided by the discoveries and concepts which emerge from pure science. The latter examines and tries to understand things as they are in themselves, without reference to human needs. It is guided in most instances simply by a disinterested curiosity. But beyond all science, which asks, "What?" and "How?", man's curiosity goads him to ask "Why?" This entails a search for ultimate reasons, which leads into philosophy and eventually into religion. For when curiosity goes beyond a certain point it develops into wonder, and thence into reverence or awe, the characteristic sentiments of religion, which man experiences in the presence of life's deepest mysteries.

The quest for knowledge in these areas is something which is distinctively human. Certain forms of curiosity appear obviously enough in animals, and they are satisfied when knowledge of an appropriate sort is gained. When the distinguished psychologist Wolfgang Köhler experimented with apes to see whether they could use a stick to pull in a banana which lay beyond their reach, there were certain things which the ape might in no paradoxical sense have been said to know. He knew that what he saw was food, and when he used the stick to pull it in he could be said to know how to obtain it. But by no stretch of the imagination could he be said to know why the particular arrangement of stick and banana had been so made—for what purpose the experiment was being conducted. The total extent of his inquiry covered no more than the satisfaction of his hunger with the immediately available food.

Man's wider and deeper curiosity in all departments

of life has provided him with the amenities of civilized living, and with the security which arises from a knowledge of the underlying causes of the natural events that confront him in his everyday experience. But, on the other hand, this curiosity can result in much frustration of spirit for him. There is nothing more tantalizing than unsatisfied curiosity, and very often the knowledge we seek is beyond our present grasp. There is a continual tension between what we want to know and what we actually do know.

Concerning what we do know there may be varying opinions. One man may certainly know much more than another, but there are, we would all agree, many things that no man knows. Certain people may lay claim to an occult knowledge of matters that are hidden from all others, but these claims are usually treated with scepticism by the world at large, and the history of such occult claims to knowledge hardly encourages us to think this scepticism unjustified. Even within more normally recognized limits, there is room for much difference of opinion as to how far our knowledge extends. "Now we know in part," wrote the Apostle Paul; many things that he expected us to know in a higher or heavenly condition we do not now know. But at least we have partial knowledge. Others have set the limits more narrowly. The philosopher Descartes thought that the only piece of information which he could know for certain was this: "I think; therefore I am." But it has been pointed out by later philosophers who have used the same method that even this is far from self-evident. It is possible to be completely sceptical with regard to the possibility of any knowledge at all; to say that we live by impulse, or act on probabilities, but that we know absolutely nothing.

This intriguing question cannot be followed up here. A whole branch of philosophy (epistemology, or theory of knowledge) is concerned with how we know, what we know, and what is meant by knowing. But there are certain matters which should be taken into account here, where our primary concern is with belief, and, in particular, with religious belief. Speaking as ordinary persons and not as professional sceptics, there are many things which we feel ourselves justified in saying that we really do know. We know that $3 + 2 = 5$. No sooner do we understand the meaning of the symbols used than we *see* that we know this. Again, to take an example of a different type, if we are disturbed by a sudden explosion, we know that we have heard a noise, though we may not know what caused the noise. There are many other things which we have learned from experience and which no one in ordinary conversation would deny that we know. For instance, we know that when the temperature of water falls below a certain level it freezes.

From Knowledge to Belief

We may go still farther from direct observation and reasonably claim that we know, for example, the approximate size of the present population of London. For such knowledge as this we depend on our trust in certain established procedures of inquiry, such as the taking of a census. But this trust can obviously vary a great deal according to the circumstances. We say that we know the size of the present population of London. We are much less sure that we know the size of the population of Paris in the thirteenth century, and we are still less sure that we know what Babylon's

population was in the sixth century B.C. Here we have less information to use in our inquiry, and more and more guesswork is called for.

Such guesswork plays a very great part in our lives. For there are many matters of immensely greater concern to us than the size of the population of Babylon about which we have to guess. In fact, all the more important questions in life are such that no clear, definite, proved answer can be given. We cannot be sure that we know. We have to use intelligent guesswork to answer these questions, and answer them we must, for they cannot be evaded for long. I may be asked, for example, to testify to the character of a man whom I know well and who is applying for an important and responsible position. I cannot *prove* that he is honest and trustworthy, although I have reasonable grounds for supposing that he is and none for supposing that he is not. I therefore recommend him. It is a guess, but an intelligent guess. If I had practically no acquaintance at all with the man I was recommending, it would not be an intelligent guess, and I should be morally as well as intellectually to blame for recommending him.

Again, two young people are deciding whether they will get married. They cannot prove in advance, and no one can prove to them, that the marriage will be a successful one. Some marriages work out well, others do not. There are certain pointers, of course, in each instance, which will help those concerned to decide. But in the end, they have to make an intelligent guess, and act upon it. It is not a leap in the dark, for they have considered all the aspects of the situation that are known to them. That is the role of intelligence. The rest is acting upon guesswork.

The same is true of any of the great decisions of life, such as deciding upon a career, or on a move to new surroundings. Decisions such as these confront each one of us inescapably at some time or other.

We have also to make our decisions on still more ultimate issues, and these decisions will shape for good or for ill the sort of people we are. Are we going to be optimistic or pessimistic in our attitude towards life? Both these positions can be well supported by reference to facts, and neither can be shown to be untenable. Do we believe that in the long run good will prevail over evil, or evil over good? We don't know; we have to make an intelligent guess.

The results of these guesses, as of all guesses, cannot in any sense be called knowledge. They are beliefs. A belief is a conviction in the absence of knowledge, and, unlike knowledge, it may vary in degree. Belief may be strong or weak. Belief rather than knowledge underlies the whole of our religious approach to life. If we ask why the universe is as it is, whether the idea of God is acceptable, and if so, in what sense, what is the nature and destiny of man, or how he should behave in his dealings with his fellows, all these questions touch upon religious belief. Religious beliefs, like all beliefs, may arise in many different ways, but it is important that they should represent the best answers to these enormously important questions that we are capable of reaching.

Causes of Belief

Causes of belief are not the same as reasons for belief. A great many beliefs are, in fact, produced by causes that are not at all reasonable, though they may be

natural. Our desire for what we would like to be true and our revulsion from what we would not like to be true are prominent among these. Hence the phrase, "the wish was father to the thought". Closely connected with this is the so-called "will to believe", of which much has been made by some religious apologists. The widespread idea among spokesmen for religion that it is morally right to believe one thing and morally wrong to believe another presupposes the view that beliefs are deliberately chosen by an act of will. We do not praise or blame people for doing what they cannot help doing.

But in the strictest sense, belief is not under the free control of the will. We can will to examine or not to examine the evidence we are given, but we cannot will ourselves into accepting a conclusion if all the evidence points against it. If we do accept a conclusion contrary to the evidence, it is not because we will to do so, but because of the influence of desires and emotions. We might as well frankly acknowledge that these influences are at work in the formation of all beliefs. But if they are brought out into the open and taken account of, it is less likely that unreasonable beliefs will arise.

Another frequent cause of belief is the acceptance of whatever is said by someone whom we acknowledge as "an authority". In our childhood we adopt those beliefs which are presented to us by parents and teachers, and in adult life the reputation of an "expert" in a particular field gains for his views wide acceptance among those who have neither the training nor the ability to follow all his reasoning. Religious beliefs are usually accepted on authority. Someone brought up to accept all the teachings which come from one

particular source will frequently continue to do so unless his faith is violently shaken by facts which cast strong doubt upon the reliability of his authority. Where there is open conflict between alleged authorities, it becomes obvious that intelligent guesswork is called for in choosing between them or in rejecting both.*

A weaker form of authority as a source of belief is the acceptance of testimony. A person does not have to be "an authority" for his testimony to be accepted under normal circumstances. Thus, if someone says, "It's raining", we believe him unless there is some special reason for supposing that he is lying, even though we may not feel it worth the trouble to check what he says. (Most testimony is not so easy to check as this particular example.) Testimony is far from reliable; the inability of honest witnesses to agree in their accounts is notorious, and the further removed from first-hand observation the event becomes, the less reliable the testimony, unless it is abundantly confirmed by independent witnesses.

Many of the influences which give rise to our general beliefs are not normally suspected, because no occasion for doubting the beliefs ever arises. The "climate of opinion" of a particular time or place has an inescapable effect upon all those whom it touches. At a time when everyone thought the world was flat, it would have taken a powerful intellect even to consider any other possibility. There was no reason for doing so. The belief was unchallenged, and so accepted.

* Authority in religion is considered more fully in Chapter III.

The Demand for Reasonable Belief

Few people like being called unreasonable. If our beliefs are challenged and we seek to defend them, we usually try to produce reasoned evidence for them. Even though the belief was originally adopted in deference to some authority, we may attempt to justify it in this way. The appeal to reason may take several different forms. First, there is the adoption of the adage, "seeing is believing". Things we have seen with our own eyes, or heard, or touched, thereby become credible, though we are aware that there are such things as illusions and hallucinations.

But our immediate awareness of things is a source of belief only while they are actually presented to us; after this, we become dependent on memory. We normally believe things that we remember, though memory is certainly very far from infallible. We not only forget things, but frequently think we remember things that never really happened. This does not usually take such extreme forms as George IV's "remembering" his part in a cavalry charge at Waterloo, when in fact he never went near the battlefield.* But memory nearly always distorts: a simple proof of this is to conjure up a mental picture of a place we remember and then compare it with an actual photograph.

The most generally respected procedure in establishing the reasonableness of a belief is the use of logic. This is the method by which the great fabric of beliefs underlying modern science is supported. Here the

* These facts about memory are usually overlooked by those who claim that unless we believe all the miracles recorded in the New Testament we are calling the writers deliberate liars.

most typical form of reasoning is by observation and induction, depending upon our faith that what has always been known to happen in one particular way in the past will always happen in the same way in the future. We feel so certain of such beliefs in many instances, such as in that of our belief that the sun will rise tomorrow, that we regard them as knowledge, as proved; but it is always possible to doubt them without running into any logical error.

There have been distinguished thinkers who have argued that it is morally wrong to hold or to act on any belief that is not established by some form of logical reasoning from adequate evidence. One of the strongest supporters of this view was the prominent agnostic of the late nineteenth century, W. K. Clifford, who once declared: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."* Such a statement springs from the highest motives, and is entitled for that reason to respectful consideration. Clifford feared that a fostering of human credulity would mean a return to barbarism. And such a fear is certainly not without its justification. It was Mussolini who said "the capacity of modern man to believe is unbelievable", and he had had considerable experience of testing that credulity to its furthestmost limits.

But Clifford's demand for sufficient evidence before any belief may be adopted is an impossible one. We can never be as sure as he thought we could just when the evidence is sufficient. What one man considers sufficient may not be so considered by another; indeed, what one man considers evidence may not be so considered at all by another. In the most important

* *Lectures and Essays*, 2nd Edition, p. 346.

questions of life, as William James pointed out in his criticism of Clifford, we seldom have sufficient indisputable evidence to tip the scales decisively one way or the other. But in the meantime we have to live and act, and our living and acting in a particular way must imply beliefs of one sort or another. We have to make an intelligent guess, and sometimes, where a guess may be equally intelligent one way or the other on a purely rational reckoning, we have to be guided by our general feeling of what is right. In religious issues we adopt the alternative which appears to open the greater possibilities of spiritual advance.

The reasonable procedure, then, is this: we gather all the evidence we can, and then, if it seems decisive, we adopt the conviction it dictates. If it seems indecisive, our belief goes beyond what the evidence alone would justify. Sometimes, indeed, it is only by such means that further evidence justifying the belief can be brought in. This is the basis of experiment, illustrated in such classic examples as Columbus's faith that he could reach land by sailing west. The truth of such a belief can be established only by a decision to act upon it at a time when its truth is not established. Clifford himself saw some need for such a concession from his point of view. "There are many cases", he wrote, "in which it is our duty to act upon probabilities, although the evidence is not such as to justify present belief; because it is precisely by such action, and by observation of its fruits, that evidence is got which may justify future belief."* It should be noted here that we do not act decisively *unless* we believe, and that often the greatest advances in knowledge have been the result of men's deciding

* *Lectures and Essays*, 2nd Edition, p. 347.

to act on possibilities which would not even have been called "probable" by most of their contemporaries. This, of course, is not to say they were irrational; if they had been they could never have been vindicated by their results.

In matters of religion the further evidence in favour of a belief which is gained by action seldom reaches the point of being conclusive (though it may be *convincing* to the holder of the belief). As James said, its "corroboration or repudiation by the nature of things may be deferred until the day of judgment".* But in the meantime we have to live in one way or another, believing either that moral and spiritual endeavour is justified or that it is not.

The place of reason in the formation of beliefs will be discussed more fully in connection with the principles underlying Unitarianism.

What is Faith ?

A discussion of acting upon beliefs leads naturally to the subject of faith, for this is precisely what faith is. It has sometimes been supposed that it is just another name for religious belief, and, in particular, for irrational religious belief. From this view arose the traditional idea of an opposition between faith and reason. But faith is irrational only when it is adopted in the teeth of established facts (as it sometimes is); where there is no proof one way or the other it is reasonable. And it is not simply a form of belief. It includes belief, but it must, in order to be called faith, also include action in accordance with belief.

Faith is by no means confined to religion. The faith

* *Selected Papers of William James* (Everyman Edition), p. 152.

of Columbus has already been mentioned, as has the faith of scientists in the uniformity of nature. Some of the most notable men of faith have been scientists who have spent their whole lives experimenting to find the facts which would vindicate their faith in a particular hypothesis. But the typical examples of faith are drawn from religious history, including such "heroes of faith" as are described in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Here faith is correctly called a "conviction of things not seen". Whether "seeing" is taken literally or figuratively (as when we say we "see" the solution of a problem), this means that there is no strict proof for what is believed. Tennyson echoes the same idea in his *In Memoriam*:

We have but faith; we cannot know,
For knowledge is of things we see.

The number of things we "see" in this way is, as has already been shown, very small, and faith is consequently demanded of everyone by the practical needs of life.

Answers to the most fundamental questions that can be asked, concerning our place in the universe, the meaning of life, and the way we ought to live, are given, if they are given at all, by faith. These are the questions of religion, in which we face life as a whole and respond with our whole being. Here there is no proved knowledge, yet we have to act in accordance with one belief or another. The quality of our lives depends upon the quality of these religious beliefs. Obviously, all the questions with which we are here concerned are related one to another, and the answers given them should be linked together to form a system.

The formation of a general system of religious belief

and action presents very great difficulties, for the evidence which has to be examined is not only indecisive in its requirements upon our belief, but it is also very complex and covers a vast field. Yet the attempt has to be made, if we are to rise to the full stature of mature manhood. One of the most tragic features of the life of the world is that there are so many people with no real faith in anything, who are just drifting through life without any guiding plan. Where beliefs do exist on specific matters of religious concern, very often those beliefs form no connected system, but are simply vague and confused. In one survey of religious beliefs current today there were people who were reported as saying that they had no belief in God and yet that at times they prayed to this "non-existent" God. Again, those who profess a particular belief may be quite blind to the demands which such a belief makes upon their conduct. These people may have beliefs, but they have no faith.

Organized Faiths

Thought must be consistent with itself and with practice in the man of faith. His beliefs form a system, a philosophy of life, a faith. It should be noted that in the two preceding sentences the word "faith" has been used in two different senses. When we speak of "faith" we do not mean the same as when we speak of "a faith". In the first case we are speaking about a certain inner condition in a person, a state of mind; whereas in the second we are speaking about a system of ideas which form part of the content of that state of mind. The reference to faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews as a "conviction of things not seen" describes

a state of mind. But in the Epistle of Jude we are urged to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints". This is certainly not a state of mind. It is the content of a state of mind, and more than this, it is the content of many minds shared by all and capable of being passed on from one to another. Faith cannot be taught by one person to another, though it may be caught by one person from another. But *a* faith can be and is taught. It is collective in its scope. It is a shared allegiance to certain great ideals, which governs the thought and action not only of individuals but also of whole societies. Those who share this allegiance are called the adherents of a particular faith. It is in this sense, for example, that we speak of the Christian faith, or the Jewish faith.

Such faiths not only command widespread allegiance at one particular time, but they also persist through long periods of time. They have, in a very real sense, a life of their own, independent of the lives of those who profess them. Men may come and go, but the faith goes on and on, though a complete change in the climate of opinion may eventually kill it. As a body of teaching and practice it can survive as long as it enkindles faith as a quality of the spirit within those whom it commands; and it can even survive, though not indefinitely, when it no longer does so, but merely enforces men's outward conformity. It finally dies when it grows completely out of touch with the inner faith of living men.

In order to avoid the possible confusions arising from two meanings of the same word, some modern writers have used the word "ideology" to describe a faith in the sense of a systematic body of belief and

practice.* It will be argued here that all such faiths or ideologies may properly be called religions, although they have not all been traditionally recognized as such.

We can never escape being influenced in one way or another by the faiths or religions which are dominant in the society in which we live. No one builds up his own faith by working in the abstract from first principles, without any reference at all to what those around him believe. Even a professional philosopher who spends his entire life in working out in an original way a systematic approach to the world as he experiences it, still stands, so to speak, on the shoulders of those who have gone before him. The same is true of the great prophets and sages of religious history. Jesus, for example, drew heavily from the traditional faith of his people, as embodied in the Old Testament, when setting forth his new type of faith. We, who have neither the time nor the training, nor, in most cases, the ability, to engage in large-scale original construction, have to begin from one of the faiths we find ready to hand. We cannot act as though we were the first persons who ever lived, when the accumulated wisdom of our culture confronts us on every side.

But, on the other hand, we have to guard against a blind and uncritical acceptance of a ready-made faith simply because it happens to be the first one we come across—perhaps the faith of our parents or the one we were taught at school. We have to find which of the forms of faith that surround us appeals as being the most reasonable, as ringing true in our own experience,

* I refrain from using it here, because it has usually carried the further suggestion that the faith in question is false or evil. Faiths and religions are not by definition either good or bad, false or true.

making sense of life as we find it and producing the highest type of life in those who profess it. Then we may sift, amend, modify, as we feel compelled to do, but ultimately we have to base ourselves upon one great tradition.

The choice is not so difficult as it would be if we were compelled to take into consideration every form of faith that man has ever known. Only a few faiths are possible choices, or what William James called "live hypotheses", for us. The faith of ancient Egypt, or the primitive religions of central Africa today, are not live hypotheses for us. There is nothing in our general outlook upon life to which they can make any strong appeal. It would not be possible to accept one of them and still remain within the general thought-pattern of twentieth-century Western civilization.

We have now to ask which faiths offer themselves to us as living alternatives, trained as we are, knowing what we do, living where we do and when we do.

II

GODS MANY AND LORDS MANY

IN the early pages of the Old Testament there is a well-known story describing how Moses sought to prepare the people of Israel for the most fundamental challenge that was going to confront them when they entered the new land which was to be their future home. The challenge would not be one of political organization but of underlying faith: that is to say, it would be a religious challenge. Were they to follow a high form of faith or a low one? Was it to be one of those they would find ready-made for them in the land they were to possess, or was it to be their own? The issue was placed before them as a choice between gods, between the Lord of Israel and the gods of the land. The decisive consequences of such a choice were summed up in these dramatic words: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed." * Nothing was left vague or ambiguous—one form of faith would lead to life, other forms to death and destruction.

The way in which the matter is here placed springs from a very deep insight into human life. It was a fact that such alternative forms of faith, each with its proper consequences, lay before the people to whom Moses spoke; it is a fact that such alternative forms lie before us today. The fate of our Western civilization

* Deut. xxx. 19.

is going to depend ultimately on which of these alternatives is taken.

It has been well said that some people make the world and the rest just live in it. It is equally true that those who make the world are possessed of some sort of faith, whether exalted or debased. This it is which gives them the drive and initiative necessary to the carrying out of their plans. All the great names in the history both of religion and of politics have been those of men who had a burning devotion to certain ideals, high or low, and in most cases it has been by means of an organization of men all devoted to the same ideals that they have reached their positions of power and influence. Where they have led the way, millions have followed.

Moses, in common with the founders of all the great traditional religions, was such a man. He attempted to lead his followers to the sort of faith that would result in more abundant life, in face of the welter of lower, degrading faiths. The comparison between his age and our own is an illuminating one in many ways. For we are living in a period of history that is more like that early one in certain important respects than any our Western world has known for many centuries. At that time every nation had its own god, and one of the most prominent features of the numerous conflicts which took place was that the faiths typified by these different gods were struggling for mastery. The Israelites might well have chosen, and nearly did choose, a form of religion different from the Jewish faith which finally emerged. One has only to read, for example, the story of the conflict between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, as told in the First Book of Kings, to realize that the issue was by no means determined in advance.

The Struggle Today

Similar conditions existed in the Mediterranean world at the time of the rise of Christianity. Scores of different faiths were active, each with its own band of devoted followers, and none of them with sufficient power to be able to suppress all its rivals. There were the ancient religions of Greece and Rome, and of each of the subjugated nations, including the now virile Jewish faith. There were Mithraism and other importations from the East; there were the cults of Egypt and the mystery religions. As Paul the Apostle puts it in one of his letters, "there are gods many and lords many".* But eventually Christianity triumphed over all the other faiths; and thenceforth ruled without serious challenge in the Western world. The conflict had come to an end. Judaism continued to exist as unobtrusively as possible; Islam became at one point a force to be feared; but most of the people of Europe had no first-hand acquaintance with any faith other than Christianity for many centuries. Even the Reformation brought only sub-divisions within the one faith. It could be spoken of as "the Faith", and everyone knew what was meant. You were for it or you were against it. The eighteenth-century sceptics like Hume and Voltaire were simply called "unbelievers" (or "infidels", which meant the same thing). It was not necessary to specify what it was that they did not believe. "Believer" was just another name for "Christian".

This state of affairs continued almost down to our own day. But in recent times, and particularly during

* 1 Cor. viii. 5.

the last half-century, the situation has changed back again to what it was at the beginning of our era. Once again many rival forms of faith are in conflict. It is no longer sufficient to call someone a believer; we have also to say what sort of believer, what it is he believes in. More and more people are aligning themselves actively behind one or other of our contemporary forms of faith, while millions of others are drifting apathetically with no sense of direction or feeling of purpose in life. This latter condition can be no more than temporary. Man cannot live for long with no faith at all; if he has abandoned his old view of life he will find a new one. Sooner or later the drifters get picked up by one of the vigorous faiths, whether by active choice or by default. So it was that in Germany under Hitler all who were not possessed by a dynamic counter-faith were carried along to a greater or lesser extent with the Nazis. So in Spain today one must be a Catholic unless one has some other faith strong enough to resist the ubiquitous pressure in that direction; so in Poland the same factors tend to carry all to the service of Communism.

Thus must it always be in the presence of really vigorous faiths. In Calvin's Geneva you could not be indifferent—you had to be either for the established faith or against it. So too in North Africa under the Muslims. And is not Jesus reported to have said, "He who is not with me is against me"? * Neutrality is possible only in a society where there are no strong convictions governing men's thoughts and actions—and no society remains in such a state for long. Our period in history offers scope for choice between faiths in a way in which more settled periods usually do not.

* Matt. xii. 30.

There is another aspect of life in an age when vigorous faiths are struggling for mastery that deserves mention. Just as they struggle within the world at large, so also, though it may be only to a very small degree in some instances, they struggle within each individual. There is something in each one of us to which each of them can make an appeal. That is what makes them all "live hypotheses", in the sense in which William James used that expression in *The Will to Believe*. And as the claims of each one present themselves before us from time to time, still in our ears there rings the distant echo of the voice that sounds across the centuries: "I have set before you life and death. Choose life!"

Five Types of Faith

Many catchwords and slogans are being used by spokesmen for the different forms of faith active today. Only when we make a sincere attempt to penetrate below these to the underlying ideas can we really determine which faiths are in fact distinctive alternatives, and which are merely minor variations on a theme common to organizations bearing a number of different names. As far as our Western world is concerned, there are today five quite distinct types of faith operating upon the minds of men, each with its own bands of devotees, each professing to give an answer to questions about the meaning and value of life.

These may be briefly identified as follows:

- (i) Mammon-worship; materialistic self-interest.

- (ii) The cult of the State: dogmatic Nationalism, with its logical outcome in Fascism.
- (iii) Marxian Communism.
- (iv) Traditional dogmatic religions, predominantly Christian and most powerfully represented by the Roman Catholic Church.
- (v) Liberalism, Christian and non-Christian.

It is coming to be increasingly realized that all these are active religious faiths, giving men a sense of meaning and purpose in life. They are not all to be found in the more conventional text-books of comparative religion, but none the less the real choice for the vast majority of men and women in the Western world today lies between these alternatives.* It follows naturally from the fact that there is in each one of us some tendency, however small, towards each of these faiths, that the lines of division here drawn are not to be regarded as impenetrable walls. One faith shades over into another, until it becomes somewhat arbitrary to fix the line of demarcation at one point rather than another. The situation is further complicated by the fact that each form of faith is inevitably affected to some extent by those others with which it is in competition. Moreover, a man may profess to follow one faith, while his real allegiance is to another.

There are some Christians, for example, about whom it would be difficult to say whether they were dogmatic or liberal; they seem to straddle the fence

* If our survey were broadened to include areas which do not touch our experience so closely, we would have to include other faiths, such as Islam, which is today struggling to gain as complete a dominance in such countries as Pakistan and Indonesia as Catholicism enjoys in Spain, dogmatic Judaism in Israel, or Communism in Bulgaria.

between the two. There may, again, be certain functionaries in a country such as Spain about whom it would be difficult to say whether their faith was dogmatic Christianity or Fascism. Both faiths would be manifested, and since there is no clash between the interests of church and fatherland as they see them, there is no means of determining which is the stronger. To take another example, complete devotion to one's own personal ends can pass over into a form of dogmatic nationalism when the ends of a small or larger group, rather than those of an individual, are served at the expense of other people.

The danger of drawing rigid distinctions where none exist in fact must be guarded against as we proceed to a more detailed examination of the living faiths of the modern world.

The Cult of Mammon

Materialistic self-interest is a form of faith which is always being denounced from the pulpit, though often encouraged, overtly or covertly, from the political platform. It has survived through times when few people would have cared to acknowledge their allegiance to it openly (as during the period of the unquestioned supremacy of Christianity), and, human nature being what it is, it is likely to survive for ages yet to come. Today it is openly professed as well as practised by large sections of society. It consists primarily in a cult of one's own personal craving for wealth, or power, or fame, adopting whatever means are available for the satisfaction of that craving without any regard for other people's rights or interests. It is a faith to which a democratic society is particularly vulnerable. This

was pointed out in striking manner early in the nineteenth century by the great French historian Alexis de Tocqueville. His words deserve to be remembered:

In all nations materialism is a dangerous malady of the human spirit; but it is to be feared particularly in a democratic people because it combines marvellously with their most familiar moral vice.

Democracy favours a taste for material pleasures. This taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that there is only matter; and materialism, in turn, finishes by driving them towards material satisfactions with a senseless ardour. Such is the vicious circle into which democratic nations are drawn. It is good that they should see this peril, and hold back.*

These few words illustrate clearly how much of a religious faith materialistic selfishness really is. In our everyday speech we refer to a man making a religion of his business, or making money his god. If it is for his own wealth, power, or fame that a man lives; if he subordinates all else (or almost everything else) to this; if his life would become blank and meaningless if he were forcibly deterred from such a quest, then this constitutes his faith. There will always be those who live by such a faith, though history has proved over and over again that it can bring no enduring satisfaction. But if in any society there are great multitudes who live in this way, the ultimate consequence must be the disintegration of that society. These strange gods of money, power, and glory lead in the end to disaster.

There is a striking parable of this in the Old Testament. The Book of Daniel tells the story of a legendary king of Babylon who celebrated the triumphs of his

* *Democracy in America*, vol. iii, ch. 15.

empire by a feast in honour of the gods under whose might all this had been accomplished—the gods of gold and silver, of iron and brass, of wood and stone. To the service of these gods of wealth and power and glory King Belshazzar had been devoted. Then the story tells of the “writing on the wall” that spelt out a message of doom for the man and empire who had directed their allegiance to these gods and had forgotten the demands of a higher and spiritual faith. The end thus prophesied speedily came. Babylon was overthrown. And in real history that has been the fate of every empire so constituted. The lesson is one that we dare not ignore today.

The Worship of the State

The second form of faith to be considered, dogmatic nationalism, is like the first in being a complete consecration to a selfish interest. But here the interest is not that of an individual, or his immediate family and friends, but that of a much larger group, normally a national state. “My country, right or wrong” might be taken as a fair statement of the creed endorsed by such a faith. Its typical manifestation lies in the worship of the State or of some symbol of the State—most notably in modern times of the Leader who claims to be the embodiment of the State.

Such worship has occurred during the past sixty years on a scale probably unparalleled in the West since the days when the worship of Caesar was enforced in the Roman Empire. Today, as then, it is a religious faith, though not usually considered as such except in the one case of Japanese Shinto—presumably because the latter has a long history and has gathered around it the

traditions and rituals generally associated with a religious faith, while other forms are usually not so long-lived and have a much less developed ritual and theology.

But Nazism, the most vigorous of the European manifestations of this faith in the present century, went far in that direction. A ritual grew up in the mass meetings which were a feature of that movement, hymns were sung and allegiance pledged. In many private homes and public gatherings, we are told, the old custom of grace before meals was revised in that the prayer of thanksgiving was addressed to Hitler. The Nazi Party conducted ceremonies, particularly commemorative rites, which followed very closely the traditional pattern of religious worship. Finally, it imparted to its members its own code of ethics, glorifying war, courage, loyalty to the race, and sheer brutality to all who were outside the pale.

Here, in extreme form, lie the essentials of every manifestation of this faith. The State, personified in its ruler, is paramount over all. Its interests are the interests of all its citizens, and none is allowed any interest at all that would conflict with the interests of the State (i.e., of the leaders). The State "is the absolute power on earth: it is its own end and object. It is the ultimate end which has the highest right against the individual." * Sin against the State is the greatest of all crimes, and is condemned by a tribunal in which prosecutor is also judge. The individual counts for nothing; he is simply part of the greater whole, and is to be completely identified in his thinking, aspirations, and actions with that greater whole. To

* G. W. F. Hegel, quoted by W. R. Inge, *Outspoken Essays*, 2nd Series, p. 128.

this there is fervent, violent allegiance. Force is glorified by display, by official teaching, and, eventually, by its use. The leader is the god.

Such is the violent expression of nationalism today. It does not consist simply in a love for one's own country, which, of course, in conjunction with a higher faith is in itself a desirable thing. Nor is it simply a cult of the "great man", a form of hero-worship. This in itself is again not an evil thing. It depends upon the reason why the hero is worshipped. If it be for commendable qualities, as is presumably the case when a devoted Christian expresses his allegiance to Christ, then such a "worship" can be a powerful adjunct to a higher faith. But when the leader is worshipped because he typifies the physical power of a totalitarian state, such a faith is undeniably evil.

There can be no doubt as to the prevalence of this type of faith in the world today. It was the primary enemy in the Second World War, but the overthrow of its armies did not mean its extinction. Explosively dogmatic nationalism and devotion to the military leader confront us on every side. Even where to outward appearances another faith is all-powerful it shows its manifestations; in several places the late Joseph Stalin was publicly spoken of as a god, and religious devotion was addressed to him. This type of faith is in fact by no means as irreconcilable with Communism as some people have supposed.

Communism as a Religion

Communism, the third type of faith to be considered, is regarded by many people as the most powerful of the new forces that have broken loose in

the Western world since the ending of the unchallenged rule of Christianity. "Of all the foes which today oppose the Christian Church", writes the Archbishop of York, "Communism is by far the most dangerous. . . . It has missionaries and evangelists as enthusiastic and self-sacrificing as those who spread the gospel in the early days of Christianity. . . . It is the gravest peril which the Christian Church has had to meet since the time when the victorious armies of a militant Mohammedanism threatened to over-run Europe." *

Communism has undoubtedly drawn heavily upon the great reservoirs of hope and willingness for sacrifice in service to an ideal which exist among men and women in all ages, and which in our own day have often found no outlet through the older faiths of our civilization. Communism has promised a new heaven and a new earth, at the cost of a great struggle. This challenge has attracted many who were disillusioned with things as they found them and could see no possibility of their being changed for the better by the practical effects of any of the other faiths professed by those around them. There is a lip-service to the welfare of mankind as a whole, and tangible progress in the material realm has been made, though at the cost of great suffering, in many countries under Communist rule.

But the idealistic impulses to which Communism has frequently made its appeal have been diverted to the service of lower ends. Hatred of man against man, of class against class, has been fostered, and in face of this the professed aim of a brotherhood of all men becomes meaningless. Noble ends are not achieved by ignoble means. The concept of the class war is one which is

* Cyril Garbett, *In an Age of Revolution*, p. 164.

integral to all Communist thinking. To this all else must be made subservient; there can be no code of ethics other than the service of class and party. "We must", said Lenin, "practise everything possible: ruses and tricks, illegal methods; be ready to be silent and hide the truth; in short, it is from the interests of the class war that we deduce our morality." * Recent history provides an adequate footnote to this statement.

The adoption of this principle means the complete negation of any striving after justice, and freedom becomes meaningless. A mechanistic determinism governs the whole of life, and man becomes merely the plaything of vast economic and social forces that operate with no regard for the individual. Personality is something of no account. Man can never be an end in himself, but only a means to the unfolding of the forces which constitute the materialistic directive in history. Submission to this process, work and sacrifice to speed up its operations—these are what Communism demands. With its effects manifest in the world today, there can be no question as to whether this is a life-giving faith or one which leads through spiritual death to physical destruction and the overthrow of human culture.

Authoritarian Christianity

Opposition to Communism provides one of the most constantly heard themes in the Western world today, and the form of faith which is frequently held up as constituting the greatest bulwark against Communism is that of the Roman Catholic Church. But this

* V. I. Lenin, *The Infantile Sickness of Leftism in Communism*, quoted in *The Times*, Jan. 7, 1948.

church is only one representative, though the most powerful and self-consistent one, of the fourth type of faith to be considered here, that of the traditional dogmatic religions. Some Protestant bodies hover uneasily between dogmatism and liberalism, but at this point it is with uncompromising dogmatism that we are concerned.

Dogmatic Christianity has declined considerably in influence all over the world, except on the American continent, in recent years. But it is still capable of vigorous expression. It resembles the types of faith already considered in that its various branches are intolerant of forms of personal belief other than those which they themselves prescribe. They also draw a sharp distinction between those within the circle of the faith and those outside it. The latter are still regarded as lost souls, or infidels, or heretics, not on account of their way of life, but because of the words in which they express their convictions. Allegiance to a set creed, or at least to certain specific patterns of thought and expression, is demanded by all branches of dogmatic Christianity and Judaism, and it is an allegiance which increasing numbers of men and women are unwilling to give.

But in other respects these traditional dogmatic faiths of our civilization are immensely superior to the other faiths that have thus far been considered. Though there may be scant respect for beliefs which do not conform to the required pattern, there is none the less a very large measure of respect for the individual personality, as sacred in the eyes of God. Christianity regards each person as a soul to be saved, and the sacrifice of such a person to an impersonal end or to someone else's personal self-interest is regarded by

dogmatic Christianity in its highest forms as inexcusable under all circumstances.

The moral ideals defended by the traditional faiths are lofty ones, and have set the tone for civilized conduct. But when we move from basic principles to practical applications, we find that they are often not sufficiently flexible to meet the changing demands of a world in rapid development. "Morality ought not to be static. As the generations and the centuries pass, the ethical code of mankind should evolve. It should change with experience, with discoveries, with changes of environment, with the development of ideas. But so far as a code of conduct is prescribed by a religion, and so far as the religion is rigid and unchangeable, this process is inhibited." *

The greatest obstacle, however, which prevents this type of faith from becoming a strong influence for good in our contemporary world is simply that the picture of life which it presents is one which has very little contact with the thought and experience of men and women today. The situation is like that described in the well-known story of the travellers who were lost on a lonely road in Ireland. Eventually they met an old man, and asked if he could tell them the way to Limerick. To which he replied, after due deliberation, "Well, if it's Limerick you're wanting to go to, this isn't a very good place to be starting from."

Too frequently this is the reply given by the traditional religious faiths. Though they may often have good directions to give, they lose their audience by insisting at the outset that this isn't a very good place to be starting from. They want to take us back to

* Viscount Samuel, *Belief and Action*, revised edition (1953), p. 32.

another place to start from: to a world remote from our experience today, where pre-scientific thinking is dominant and forms of language that now seem almost meaningless are demanded. And it can't be done. The only place from which we can possibly start is the one where we now stand. We have to accept all the discoveries about the universe and about ourselves that have been made in recent times, and these discoveries must be given their due weight in determining what form our religious faith shall take.

The Liberal Alternative

The fifth type of faith to be considered sets out deliberately to take account of all human experience and discovery, past and present. It shares with our traditional religious faiths a respect for the individual personality of each person such as is not shown by the first three faiths that have been discussed. But it shows respect not only for all personalities but also for all sincere convictions. It takes as the point of departure in its thinking the picture of the world and of ourselves that is given by the best thought of our own day, not ignoring the great insights of the past, but seeking to express what is of abiding value in them in terms that are meaningful to our modern world.

This faith has been called liberal, in the broadest sense of that word, which has had a long and distinguished association with the highest values of a free society. The use of the word "liberal" in this sense should not be confused with its use as a label for one particular political party in some countries. In a free country every party which agrees to uphold the constitution, to govern by consent of the governed and with

due respect for the rights of dissenting minorities, is to that extent liberal. Unless this liberal basis is shared by the strongest parties in a country, however wide their differences on other issues, parliamentary democracy becomes almost unworkable. However, it is not with any specifically political reference that we are here concerned with the word liberal. The liberal spirit has its manifestations in politics, as in all aspects of life, but it is with liberalism in religion that we are here primarily concerned.

Unitarians are committed to the liberal approach in religion. They certainly do not claim a monopoly of it in the sense of demanding that whoever adopts this faith as his own must call himself a Unitarian. But Unitarianism is an organized movement dedicated to liberal principles, and in many places it is the only specifically religious movement so dedicated.

A fuller description of the principles and beliefs characteristic of this type of faith must be deferred to the following chapters. But here it must be said that the listing of the great faiths between which we have to choose is now complete. It could be further extended by taking account of the great historic faiths other than those of our own heritage, but here again, with different applications, the distinction between the dogmatic and the liberal point of view can be drawn.

One or other of these faiths must necessarily become dominant in the life of each one of us. Much rests, both for ourselves and for our society, upon the choice we make. Not all people will choose in the same way. But for the person who seeks to combine a spiritual depth in his faith with a high moral demand which is yet responsive to the needs of our present conditions of life, who wishes to draw upon the treasures of our age-

old religious inheritance without closing his eyes to half the discoveries made by the great minds of our own age, the direction to be taken is clear. He has turned towards the liberal alternative, and has aligned himself, albeit tentatively, with the faith shared by Unitarians.

The Unitarian, as he confronts the challenge contained in the words of Moses with which this chapter began, is convinced that only this liberal form of faith can be fully responsive to our spiritual needs today and provide us with a course that will lead to life—physical and spiritual life in abundant measure, life for each individual, for societies, nations, and civilizations, life for our own generation and for generations yet to come.

III

UNITARIAN PRINCIPLES

THE need to speak in terms which will make an effective contact with the living issues of the day is one which has always been recognized and fulfilled by the greatest spiritual geniuses. It was this, as well as the intrinsic worth of their teachings and example, that made them great. Jesus made constant reference to the life of his times and to those who figured prominently in that life. Caesar, the Scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests and the Sadducees—these all stood for forces in opposition to the message he proclaimed, and constitute part of the background against which that message is to be understood. In the same way it was necessary to consider those forces ranged against the Unitarian faith, before proceeding to a direct examination of that faith itself. These preliminaries having been concluded, Unitarianism may now be considered in greater detail.

There are two distinct aspects to all forms of faith, both of which have to be examined. In the previous chapter faiths were compared chiefly in terms of the basic principles by which they proceed in forming their specific beliefs, though some attention was paid to the latter as well. But ordinarily, the tendency of most people is to concentrate exclusively on the aspect of a faith represented by its beliefs on particular subjects. Thus, Unitarians may be asked, "What do you believe about the Bible?", or "What do you believe about everlasting punishment?", without any preliminary

inquiry into what principles govern Unitarian thinking upon these and other matters.

There may be many causes of belief, but when due allowance is made for all these, certain principles must be avowedly adopted as a basis for acceptable beliefs. So far as the members of totalitarian faiths are concerned, the principle involved is a simple one; in its crudest form it is: "Believe what you're told!" It is usually phrased a little more subtly than this, but at root it is no more than an unquestioning trust in the person, institution, book, or passion that constitutes this particular devotee's spiritual Fuehrer. For purposes of argument with outsiders a great many reasons may be brought forward to show why we should accept this source as the fount of all true beliefs. But such reasons, for the member himself, follow rather than precede his acceptance of the "authority".

Unitarians seek to proceed in the opposite way, beginning with reasons and with a certain degree of scepticism towards all alleged authorities, derived from the fact that there are so many of them and they differ so widely. Both aspects of a faith must be given their proper weight, but since the principles governing belief are causes and the beliefs themselves effects, it seems better to begin with the former.

There is a danger, of course, that one might become so preoccupied with principles that they are never carried into practice and embodied in specific beliefs. Unitarians have been accused of not believing anything at all, but such criticisms usually turn out to mean that they don't believe those things which their critic thinks everyone ought to believe. Beliefs arise inevitably from any form of faith, not least from the Unitarian faith. "There is no such thing as poetry

without poems, art without paintings, architecture without buildings, and there is no such thing as an enduring faith without beliefs",* writes Dr. J. L. Adams, a leading American Unitarian of today.

Not only do Unitarians have definite beliefs, but they have shared beliefs, to which the majority of the members of a Unitarian church would subscribe. These beliefs do not, however, constitute the bond of union of the church, and they vary from age to age, in accordance with man's increasing knowledge and with the different problems which have to be solved in each generation. But the principles which, when applied to the problems of the day in the light of the best knowledge of the day, result in such beliefs are of permanent value. To an examination of these we now turn.

A man who had spent the greater part of his life in examining the historical evolution of Unitarian thought and practice, Dr. E. M. Wilbur, writes on this subject as follows: "Modern Unitarianism is now characterized not so much by its beliefs as by its insistence upon the fundamental principles of entire *freedom* in belief, the full use of *reason* in religion, and generous *tolerance* of differences of view." † This statement may well serve as a starting-point for the present discussion. Though it is certainly true that no expression as brief as this can do full justice to the principles underlying Unitarianism, yet Dr. Wilbur's statement has been widely acclaimed as capturing the essential spirit of the Unitarian position.

* "A Faith for Free Men", in *Together We Advance* (ed. Fritchman), p. 59.

† Article on "Unitarianism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Ferm).

Freedom of Belief

In passing to a more detailed examination of these principles, we depart from the order in which they are listed above. Although freedom and tolerance are both part of what in the broader sense may be called "the life of reason", they are more closely related to each other than to reason, and will therefore be considered as parts of one general attitude. Tolerance is, in essence, a willingness to extend to other people the same freedom as one claims for oneself.

But what *is* freedom? The word has been used so frequently and so loosely in recent times that it has become much devalued. This process has almost reached a point where "freedom" means simply the state of affairs which the speaker thinks desirable, while all ideas of freedom which conflict with this are thrust aside as false or superficial. One of the stock accusations of Communist propaganda is that the freedom of the masses of the people in the West is only a pseudo-freedom—the freedom to be exploited or to starve. "Real" freedom, on this view, can be achieved only through the "dictatorship of the proletariat". But discussion of freedom has not yet reduced the term to the final meaninglessness of the "Freedom is Slavery" slogan in George Orwell's *1984*. Most liberal thinkers who use the term have a fairly clear idea of what they mean by it, despite all the admitted difficulties and ambiguities.

The most obvious characteristic of freedom is that it involves the absence of some form of bondage or constraint. In this sense it is a negative term, though it has positive values as well, which emerge at a later

stage. A man "regains his freedom" when he is released from jail. The poet who speaks of "the storm-winds coursing free" means that their movement is not constrained by anything external to themselves. Yet freedom, so far as men are concerned, does not mean the absence of all external constraint. If it did, no man could ever be free. Constraint is laid upon us by the nature of things. We are not free to jump more than a few feet into the air; we are not free to continue living indefinitely; we are not free to move backwards in time instead of forwards. Imaginative writers have exploited man's occasional longing for such impossible freedoms, but obviously this is not what is meant when we normally speak of freedom. The only persons who believe that man is free in this sense are to be found in asylums for the insane.

Jesus is reported to have said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."* This prophecy is literally correct. In so far as we know the truth about the order of nature and about our position in the history and development of the human race, we gain the freedom of action that comes from knowing where we must submit to unchangeable circumstances outside ourselves, and where it lies within our power to control events. Freedom does not mean the absence of all constraint; it means the absence of arbitrary constraint. Individual freedom of belief, which is what Unitarians seek, involves the ability to distinguish between those forms of external constraint that are arbitrary and those that are not. Constraint based on fact is not arbitrary. Constraint based purely upon opinion is arbitrary.

But it would be wrong to assume that a clear line of

* John viii. 32.

distinction can be drawn in real life, for most forms of constraint in human society are based partly on fact and partly on opinion. It is the role of intelligence to decide which is primary in particular instances. The belief that it is wrong (in time of peace) to kill one's fellow-man produces a form of constraint which is not arbitrary. This is because there are very good grounds for supposing it to be a fact, and not simply an opinion, that without such constraint and the system of which it forms part, society would disintegrate and human freedom would thereby be greatly diminished. Constraint based upon the sort of beliefs usually embodied in religious creeds (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity), on the other hand, is always arbitrary. Its basis is opinion, not fact.

In matters of religious belief, no man can prove that he is unquestionably right and that someone else is unquestionably wrong, however firmly he may believe this to be so. He would therefore violate the second man's freedom unwarrantably in attempting to convert him by force, in a way that he would not if he sought to prevent him from committing a murder. Such violations frequently take place, and they arise from a belief on the part of the violator that he is in possession of all truth. In other words, he has mistaken belief for knowledge, opinion for fact. His arrogant assumption of infallibility shows a lack of the virtue of humility, which admits that our knowledge is limited, and that great realms of truth lie as yet unexplored.

Release from Servitude

Liberal religion has had to fight a constant battle against those who, claiming an infallible knowledge of

all truth and a divine mission to silence "error", have sought to impose shackles upon men's speaking, and, so far as possible, upon their thinking on all matters of ultimate concern. Four centuries ago, when the first signs of an organized liberal religious movement were beginning to emerge, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake by the Protestants of Calvin's Geneva because he dared to express himself in a way that was radically different from their established pattern of thought. In this act, the Calvinists were simply following the example of the Catholic Church, which still today, wherever it has the power to do so, takes active steps to stifle all religious thinking which takes forms other than its own. This is particularly true of contemporary Spain and Colombia, though it shows itself in many other countries.

It is scarcely necessary to add that the same is true of the Communists in countries which they rule. Dissent is ruthlessly suppressed. It is still true today that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. There are those on all sides who would suppress man's freedom of thought, and they are actively at work to spread their influence. It is in opposition to such tendencies as these that Unitarians and religious liberals have always stressed the right of all men to think and express their own thoughts without being persecuted for them. A traditional toast among the dissenting groups in which modern Unitarianism grew up in England was to "civil and religious liberty".

Freedom of belief in matters of religion means that nothing which has been handed down from the past is acceptable as a complete and final exposition of all truth. A Unitarian would assert that even though a carefully phrased creed might be drawn up expressing

exactly all that he believes at present, he could not give any undertaking to maintain this creed unreservedly for the rest of his days. For who knows what new discoveries about the nature of things may be made in the years to come, which may transform our present outlook upon the world? It would be folly, in the face of such a possibility, to bind oneself down in advance to maintaining all one's present beliefs inviolate, and it would be a still greater folly to bind oneself to accept beliefs formulated in the distant past and handed down unchanged from generation to generation. The passing of the centuries has brought new knowledge and new insights. Changing circumstances always demand a great deal of revision of the traditional points of view. As the Unitarian poet James Russell Lowell put it:

New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of Truth.

The attitude demanded of the Unitarian has been well called one of "open-minded certainty". Here the man of religion takes the same position as the scientist. The latter may have great faith in the theory which he has come to adopt—so great in fact that he might be prepared to stake the work of a whole lifetime upon its validity. Yet, if he remains loyal to his principles as distinct from his beliefs, he is bound to concede the possibility that new discoveries might be made which would cause his theories to be amended or abandoned. And if such discoveries were in fact made, he would feel bound not to denounce them as illusory, but examine them on their own merits and modify his

views in the light of that examination. As a matter of historical fact, the record of science in this respect has not been consistently good, any more than that of religion has been consistently bad, but the principle at issue has long since been accepted by scientists, as it has not been by the majority of churchmen.

For the Unitarian, a free mind is the first requirement in religious belief, and upon its attainment depends all further progress. This attitude has nowhere been better expressed than by one of the greatest of the pioneers of modern Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, in words written well over a hundred years ago:

I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, whilst consulting others, enquires still more of the oracle within itself, and uses instruction from abroad not to supersede but to quicken and exalt its own energies. . . .

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically repeat itself and copy the past, which does not live on its old virtues, which does not enslave itself to precise rules, but forgets what is behind, listens for new and higher monitions of conscience, and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.*

Liberty and Licence

This insistence upon mental freedom is undoubtedly one of the features of Unitarianism which give it its greatest appeal to those who have slowly and painfully emancipated themselves from bondage to a creed

* Sermon on "Spiritual Freedom".

enforced on them by others. But at the same time there is a danger at the opposite extreme which has to be avoided. It has repeatedly been shown how liberty can degenerate into licence, unless it is exercised with a sense of responsibility. Unitarians and liberal thinkers generally have sometimes been accused by the supporters of creedal religion of rushing headlong into just such an irresponsible licence. According to this view, Unitarianism is to be regarded as a negative and care-free attitude, which is always prepared to make our voyage across the sea of life less hazardous by throwing out of the ship any part of the cargo that happens to get in the way and become a nuisance to us at the moment, without any regard for the possible value of that cargo. Unitarianism is represented as making no demands either on the credulity or on the character of its adherents; as saying in effect, "Believe what you please and do what you like!"

If this charge were justified the matter would be serious indeed. A religion which makes no demands on its adherents is worthless—it is worse than worthless, for it encourages a complacent attitude towards life and saps the vitality of those whom it infects. So far as Unitarianism is concerned, however, the attack is quite misplaced. There have been, it is true, a few people who, whether actively associated with Unitarianism or some other form of organized religious liberalism or not, have adopted a form of procedure somewhat as follows: they have taken the Bible (or some other ancient document or tradition) and have examined it in the light of their own personal likes and dislikes. Then they have taken up a blue pencil and censored it heavily, accepting only those parts which appealed to them personally and rejecting the rest, rather

in the spirit in which one might gather a bunch of flowers from a garden: "Well, yes, I might take some of these. No—I don't care for those."

But such an attitude as this is certainly not typical of the Unitarian approach to religion, nor has it ever been so. It may be superficially similar, because it is quite true that Unitarians, in the exercise of their mental freedom, do select their beliefs in a way that is different from that of conventionally religious people, rejecting many things that the latter accept, and accepting many things that they reject. *But it is the underlying reason for this that counts.* Unlike the so-called liberals described above, Unitarians do not pick their beliefs in accordance with whim or caprice. In adopting his beliefs a Unitarian is submitting himself to a very exacting process, in which the paramount place is given not to his own casual inclinations, nor to the opinions of others, but rather to the claims of sincerity and truth. These constitute the authority upon his thinking, irrespective of his personal interests or wishes.

An Inner Authority

Behind freedom too there rests an authority, and it is the acceptance of this authority that prevents it from degenerating into licence. Freedom is not, as some enthusiasts have been inclined to believe, opposed to authority; it is opposed rather to servitude, or slavery. Freedom is dependent upon the existence of some authority. For instance, civic freedom can exist only within an ordered community in which there is some recognized authority to prevent the freedom of the citizen from being encroached upon. The authority of law is not inconsistent with the idea of a free state;

it is essential to the existence of a free state. It is true that authority is notably characteristic also of states that are not free, but what distinguishes the free state is that the authoritative law reflects the best moral insights of the citizens as a whole and is administered by them as a whole, through regularly accepted channels. The authority is not external to them, arbitrarily imposed from without, or freedom no longer exists. It is an authority exerted from them, by them, through a machinery which they themselves in the last resort control. *It is an internal authority.*

The analogy between a state and an individual is an old one, going back at least as far as Plato's *Republic*, and in many of its applications it is a valid one. Just as an authority arising from within is necessary in the state as a condition of freedom, so also those who seek freedom in religion acknowledge an internal authority. Externally-imposed authority is incompatible with freedom in an individual as in a society, but there is an experienced internal constraint. This is the authority of an allegiance to the highest ideals that we know—to truth, to justice, to the insights portrayed so well by the great spiritual leaders of humanity in all ages, to the dictates of reason and conscience; in the traditional language of the religions of the West, obedience to the will of God.*

A conclusion along these lines forms an essential part of the Unitarian position with regard to freedom, and saves it from passing over into licence, where no authority at all is acknowledged and where the most

* This presupposes the view that God is known through inner experience, rather than through the words of a book or some human agency. The latter can at most be only secondary, their validity dependent upon the individual's inner response to them.

prominent characteristic is irresponsibility. Freedom does not mean an attempt to satisfy every passing whim, whatever its nature. Such an attempt is, in fact, more closely akin to slavery than to freedom. It is by no mere figure of speech that we speak of a man as being enslaved to his passions. Freedom involves service to one's fellow-men, service to great ideals, service to God.

This view was powerfully set forth by the greatest British Unitarian of the nineteenth century, James Martineau, in his book *The Seat of Authority in Religion*. Vigorously denouncing all attempts to impose external shackles upon the mind of man, Martineau laid great stress on the internal authority of reason and conscience. "Reason for the rational, conscience for the right—these are the sole organs for appreciating the last claims upon us, the courts of ultimate appeal, whose verdict it is not only weakness but treason to resist." *

Reason and Conscience as Authorities

Although there can be no appeal from these courts, something remains to be said about their composition. Fuller consideration will be given to reason later, but here it may be said that both reason and conscience may be either enlightened or unenlightened. The notorious variations between the deliverances of these "organs" in different people are not all reducible to differences in knowledge, but this latter is one very important factor in the situation. Knowledge of matters beyond ourselves is a social concern, shared by a great body of thinkers in each generation and handed on in expanded form to the next. This is where external authority re-enters the

* *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

picture, as playing a secondary but very important role in educating our reason and conscience.

Returning to the analogy with the state, it may be noted that the external authority in a free state is not something which emerges suddenly as the result of the act of passing a new constitution. It draws deeply on the wisdom of the past. In other words, all forms of authority have a *history*. Any attempt to escape entirely from the influences of history results in an enslavement to the fleeting concerns of the moment, and an outlook which lacks perspective.

Reason and conscience are necessarily conditioned by history and by present-day environment, and knowledge of all the influences which may be brought into play is needed for enlightenment. Here again it is a case of the truth making us free. If we know what men have thought all down the ages on the questions which concern us today, we are the better enabled to reach a free decision of our own. We are certainly not bound to think as others have thought, but if we find ourselves in opposition to the general consensus of opinion among all those who have thought most deeply about such matters, we may well think again, considering it possible that we may be wrong. Such a process is one of enlightenment. It is in the last resort to his own *enlightened* reason and conscience that each man must appeal.

One of the finest sources of enlightenment lies in the interchange of ideas and experiences between free minds. This may result in the emergence of a new authority, proceeding from all, freely accepted by all, as in a free state. Such is the nature of the derivative authority of a liberal church. It provides a fellowship in which each personality is free to develop as fully

as possible, its right to do so being recognised by all, and all being united in a "free and acceptable service" to the highest ideals. The Apostle Paul expressed the underlying sentiment admirably when he wrote to the Galatians: "You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"* Little needs to be added to this: love is both the fulfilment of freedom and the link between it and tolerance.

The Meaning of Tolerance

What does tolerance mean in a Unitarian church? As an expression of love in freedom it must include respect not only for the persons of others but also for their opinions. No Unitarian can hold over another person the demand that he accept a particular form of belief, nor threaten him with penalties, temporal or eternal, if he refuses so to believe. Belief or disbelief in given doctrines can never be grounds for exclusion from a Unitarian church, which in this matter strives for the realization of Channing's vision of a Universal Church, from which "no man can be excommunicated but by himself, by the death of goodness in his own breast".†

All sincere beliefs are admitted, therefore, into a Unitarian church, subject always to the qualification that freedom must be used responsibly. The authority of truth and goodness upon thought and conduct must be acknowledged by all. Tolerance may permit the

* Gal. v. 13 (R.S.V.).

† Sermon on "The Church".

admission to the church of those who have not as yet recognized this, but the task of the church is to unfold before its members all the time a vision of the commanding nature of the spiritual life. There is no toleration for evil among Unitarians; the stand they take on this matter remains to be described later. Respect for the personality of others, even of those who have gained a reputation as evil-doers (and these above all others stand in need of such respect to restore their self-respect), does not mean condoning the evil that they do. One of the highest and most difficult of our religious duties is that of hating the sin and loving the sinner.

Tolerance is an aspect of freedom, and can be exercised only within the limits of freedom—namely, towards those who recognize an ethical imperative upon their thought and conduct. It is not for us to stand in judgment upon the details of their ethical code, but we have to draw a line where the recognized demands of morality are flagrantly transgressed. When a man says, "Evil, be thou my good", he thereby becomes a criminal and deprives himself of the right to be tolerated. But short of this, there can be no room in the thinking or practice of Unitarians for the persecution of others on account of their convictions. We may not share those convictions; we may object strongly to them, but those who hold them have a right to do so as long as they do not transgress the ethical code which binds the very foundations of civilized life together.

The most celebrated expression of tolerance towards those holding different opinions is Voltaire's saying, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Unitarians have tradi-

tionally rallied to the defence of those who have been persecuted for expressing unpopular opinions. Dogmatism inevitably results in bigotry, and bigotry results in persecution. But a liberal outlook accepts free inquiry, persuasion, and mutual consent as the only way of propagating ideas, and reason as the only weapon of defence against those ideas with which it disagrees. Such an attitude is the only one consistent with a recognition both of the dignity and of the limitations of human nature, and it is the one best calculated to obtain the maximum growth of knowledge. It frankly faces the fact that people do not and cannot all think in the same way, and that no man has a right to force his opinions upon those who are unwilling to accept them.

Reason as a Guide

Freedom and tolerance demand that the ultimate appeal shall be made to man's reason and conscience, both enlightened by the fullest available knowledge. But what is reason? Like "freedom", the word "reason" has become somewhat devalued, though not to the same extent. Many people have at least a tendency to identify the reasonable with what they themselves think and the unreasonable with what those who disagree with them think. The issue is further confused by the fact that the word "reason" has been used in a number of different ways by a long succession of reputable thinkers. "So ambiguously has this term been used in philosophical and theological writings that it has embraced common shrewdness, the processes involved in ratiocination, the forming of clear ideas, the framing of working-hypotheses, logical

recognition of agreement and difference between ideas and between the forms of propositions, experimental investigation of matters of fact, activities having an end in view or a moral motive behind them, apprehension of universals and eternal verities, and many other things. Sometimes it has been identified with understanding and sometimes distinguished therefrom." *

This is not the place for an examination of all these varying usages. It must be sufficient to note that they have existed, and that we must therefore proceed with caution. A comparatively short space of time may bring considerable changes in men's ideas of reason. There is a vast difference between the way in which the word was used by Coleridge early in the last century and the way in which it is commonly used today. The modern tendency is to confine its scope to certain specific aspects of intellectual activity. "Ask any man of average intelligence what he considers to be the function of reason, and he will refer you to the processes of logical reasoning, the deductive method of the geometrician, or the inductive methods of the experimental scientist, the historian, and the detective," wrote W. G. de Burgh. But he went on to call for "an enlarged view of reason—a view that will sanction the inclusion of intuitive thinking, aesthetic and scientific imagination, the higher levels of emotion and moral and religious faith".† In other words, reason should be the descriptive term for intellectual activity as a whole, effective in building up a system of thought and conduct that shall be consistent with itself and with human experience.

This broader outlook is what is involved in the Uni-

* F. R. Tennant, *The Nature of Belief*, p. 25.

† *The Life of Reason*, pp. 2 and 19.

tarian's demand for the use of reason in religion. Most Unitarians would certainly not endorse the view of such rationalists as Clifford, that the only acceptable religion would be one built up entirely by processes of logic. This conception is an impossibly narrow one. The language of poetry is frequently more effective than the language of logical argument in conveying religious meanings. What is demanded is intellectual activity in the wider sense, including watchfulness that nothing said in defence of liberal religion shall be illogical or irrational. No man sits back in his arm-chair and constructs a religion for himself by the same sort of mental processes as he would use in solving a crossword puzzle or working out a problem in geometry. All he knows, all he does, all he is, are involved in his religion; it is not simply one isolated phase of intellectual activity. But on the other hand, so far as the religious liberal is concerned, rational argument is not to be set aside or flouted.

Perhaps the best way in which this could be expressed, in order to avoid misunderstanding, is to say that it is *reasonableness* that we require in religion. If we say that something seems reasonable to us, we mean that our knowledge and experience as a whole seem to back it up. It forms part of one coherent system with them. If it is out of accord with this background of knowledge and experience we call it unreasonable. Unitarians would insist that every part of their religion must be reasonable in this sense.

Most of the intellectual leaders of the traditional faiths would agree with this observation, and would go to considerable lengths to show that their beliefs are not unreasonable. "The Catholic Church has always affirmed that the believer, when he gives his adhesion

to the divine revelation with which she is entrusted for his instruction, is not called upon to repudiate any of the legitimate acquisitions of his reason." * The doctrines said to be revealed, though they may go beyond reason, are not, according to their defenders, contrary to reason. Unitarians may disagree about the reasonableness of some of the beliefs involved, but they recognize the appeal to reason here. However, they would add that *all* religious teachings must be based on reason; we have no knowledge of any authentic revelation going "beyond reason".

Religious Irrationalism

Neither Catholics nor Protestants are prepared to make reason the court of ultimate appeal. Most of them would claim that what is proclaimed on their authority must be accepted not because it is reasonable (though it is), but because it is divinely revealed. However, there is one school of Protestant thought, very influential today, which would not be at all disturbed if told that its faith was irrational or preposterous. That, they would reply, is certainly true, and that is precisely why they accept it. Such an attitude is not confined to wild or uneducated extremists. A few years ago a book with the title *The Absurdity of Christianity* was published, written by a Christian professor of theology. This glorification of the irrational needs further attention. We have to see what it is we are opposing if we say that our religion must be reasonable.

A strong reaction against reason is nothing new in the Christian tradition. The respective roles of faith and reason were the subject of a long and acrimonious debate

* G. Brunhes, *Faith and its Rational Justification*, p. vii.

which went on for many centuries, coming down to the modern age in the nineteenth-century warfare between science and theology, and in the twentieth-century revolt against reason. One of the classic expressions of the opponents of the use of reason in religion was that of one of the early Christian writers, Tertullian. *Credo quia absurdum est*, he wrote: "I believe it just because it is absurd." Alongside this might be set the story of the old lady who won hearty approval from the leaders of her church for saying that she would be perfectly prepared to believe that Jonah had swallowed the whale, if the Bible said so.

The foundations for such a view may be found as far back as Paul. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he writes: "Where is the wise man? . . . Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. . . . Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards . . . but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." *

Paul here envisages a wisdom of God which is quite different from wisdom as understood by those who are learned by worldly standards, and he stresses this distinction by lauding the former and disparaging the latter. What is wisdom to those who judge by one standard is foolishness to those who judge by the other. This argument has a powerful effect upon those who have come to believe that it is not simply the idea of one man, Paul of Tarsus, but the infallible word of God. A belief which rests on these foundations is impregnable. Those who accept it are not to be convinced by being

* 1 Cor. i. 20-22 (R.S.V.).

shown that it is unreasonable. They reply that of course it is unreasonable by our standards, because we judge by the canons of worldly wisdom, which is corrupt, while they speak from a divine wisdom which contradicts and supplants all human reason. There can be no further discussion. The minimum common basis for discussion is lacking. It is as though the situation involved people speaking two different languages, with neither able to understand the language of the other.

Many prominent spokesmen for traditional Christianity have used very strong words about reason. Martin Luther once called it "the devil's harlot". Kierkegaard, the strange nineteenth-century prophet who has become so influential today, said that the Christian revelation is a paradox against which "reason beats its brow till the blood comes". Karl Barth, probably the most influential leader of contemporary Protestantism, teaches that reason has no competence to find out anything about God or to hold any true beliefs in matters of religion. The whole of human nature, of which this is part, is thoroughly corrupt and must inevitably take the wrong direction unless supernaturally guided by God, not through reason but through revelation. No human agency dare stand in judgment on the revelation, the Word of God.

This irrationalism in religion, so widespread today, is only one feature of a more all-embracing irrationalism in face of the complexities of life in the modern world. Many people, having found that the human intellect has been unable to solve all the problems of the world, have assumed that it is not competent to solve any of them. Such an attitude is illustrated in the readiness with which men and women of today have accepted the

most preposterous ideologies, such as the "blood and soil" doctrines of Nazi Germany or the strange apocalyptic of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The quest today is for security rather than for freedom or reasonableness, and the feeling of security is usually best aroused by dogmatic statements from someone who "knows all the answers", and by a sense of solidarity with the group. There is thus in modern mass society a pressure everywhere against the non-conformist. A great many people do not want to be involved in intellectual effort, such as a liberal religious faith must demand. This is too "highbrow"; they prefer to be told, and to be entertained. Such a desire dictates much of the material that is presented to the public mind through advertising—even church advertising!

Unitarians are under no illusion that their faith will become a great mass movement; its effectiveness must rather be that of a leaven within the lump. But the future of our civilization depends upon those who are prepared to think, and to think responsibly. These are the people to whom the Unitarian call to enlightened reason and conscience must finally appeal.

IV

THE THOUGHT OF THE DIVINE

It has been said by critics of their faith that Unitarians have no settled beliefs, and even among Unitarians themselves there is a standing joke to the effect that where you have two Unitarians, there you have three opinions. Yet such pronouncements are, as Mark Twain said of the reports of his death, much exaggerated. There is among Unitarians at any one time a broad consensus of opinion on the basic questions of religion, the more valuable in that it is not forced by the intervention of any external authority. There are always those who dissent from the beliefs predominant in the Unitarianism of any period, and of course they are quite free to voice their objections within the organization, and to try to direct it towards a different type of belief. It has often happened that the minority view of one generation has become the majority view of the next.

In what follows an attempt is made to set forth in outline form some of the answers given by Unitarians today to those questions which are of perennial interest in religion. There will be, if this attempt has any success at all, a great many Unitarians who will find themselves in broad agreement with the positions here expressed. But there will certainly be some who will find themselves in disagreement with parts of the argument, and there would probably be none, apart

from the writer, who would endorse the whole of it word for word. That is as it should be, in matters of faith rather than knowledge.

One of the great tasks of religion in every age is to put forward an interpretation of the nature of that which is most basic and fundamental in the universe, and commanding upon the life of man. Since from a historical point of view Unitarianism in the Western world is an outgrowth of the Judeo-Christian tradition (though there are forms of Unitarianism in the East which have developed from Hinduism), the Unitarian outlook on this question may best be prefaced by a brief statement of the historical background against which it is set. The terms in which we do our religious thinking are dictated to a very large extent by the tradition to which we belong, and we can no more escape its influence than we can escape the influence of Newton and Darwin and Einstein upon our scientific thinking or that of Bach and Beethoven on our musical appreciation. We cannot, without conscious effort and training, think in terms of medieval science, or react with full appreciation to Indian or Chinese music.

The leaders of religious thought in our tradition have interpreted that which lies behind the aspects of the universe known to us through our senses, and which gives meaning and significance to the natural order and to human life, in terms of belief in God. In other religious traditions, Brahma or the Tao have been the guiding concepts, and they cannot always be translated exactly in terms of our theology. Attempts made by Christians to criticize the concepts used by other religions in terms of our own general pattern of thought rather than theirs rarely achieve any very valuable results. The difference between religions is not simply

one of specific ideas, but one embracing the whole of a man's outlook upon life.

In the early history of Judaism, recorded in the pages of the Old Testament, we see the gradual development of the idea of the God who was served. The struggle between gods was one of the features of this early period. Each god was a local sovereign; none was regarded as being omnipotent and all-embracing. "Which god will you serve?" was the great question of the day.* In other words, what is your conception of God? As time went by, the conception which became dominant, under the influence of the preaching of the Hebrew prophets, was that of a Creator, eternal and unconditioned, omnipotent and moral, with whom man could enter into specific and meaningful relationships. At first such relationships took the form of a bargain between man and God, in which each assumed certain rights and certain responsibilities. But their later and higher form was that of a seeking out and obedience to the will of God, interpreted as a moral command. This was the theme taken up by Jesus; he called for devotion to the will of a moral God with whom one can stand in a close spiritual relationship, and an attempt to bring the whole of human life to an allegiance to the same ideal. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness!"

Poetic Imagery

It is, of course, obvious that it was upon the insights of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus that the religious tradition in which we stand was founded. But none of them were theologians. Their language was that

* See, for example, Joshua xxiv. 14-16; 1 Kings xviii.

of the poet rather than that of the logician. This is a fact of very great importance. They spoke, as the poet speaks, of that which they felt, and it was not the precise literal meaning of the words they used that mattered so much as the communication of the feeling about life and its significance that they shared.

The imagery which they used to express their idea of God was therefore designed to be interpreted in terms of the feelings it evoked rather than its strict and literal meaning. When they spoke of God as a Rock, or a Sun, or a Fountain of living Waters, this was obvious enough. But the most popular form of imagery has been anthropomorphic: that is to say, it speaks of God in the image of man.

The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,
And his ears are open unto their cry,

writes the Psalmist. Elsewhere we hear of the Hand of God, the Divine Voice, the Everlasting Arms. Jesus, when speaking of God, habitually used the image of a Heavenly Father.*

In all of this there was no attempt to produce a *definition* of God. There had been an instinctive realization among the greatest spiritual geniuses that this is an improper procedure. The nature of that which is experienced as divinely and morally compulsive upon our allegiance cannot be explored in the same way as the nature of a physical object is to be explored. There are three stories in the Old Testament which give dramatic point to this lesson; the story of Jacob at the ford of Jabbok (Genesis xxxii),

* That this metaphor should have been so meaningful to him is surely a high tribute to a figure who has been almost forgotten even by a Christianity obsessed with the memories of its past—Jesus' own father, Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth.

the story of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus iii), and the story of the vision of Manoah (Judges xiii). In all of these a man has a vivid spiritual experience, apprehended as a vision of a divine reality. In each he seeks to know the name of the compelling Mystery with which he is confronted. In two of the three stories no name is given, and the inquirer is rebuked for his presumption in asking for one. In the third, that of Moses, a name is indeed given, but it is so obscure and ambiguous that it cannot be regarded as anything more than an affirmation of a real and significant existence. The point in all these stories is that for the primitive mind, with which we are here dealing, name is the same as nature. To know the name of something is also to know its nature. To pronounce a man's name was to know him and hence to have power over him. That is why among some primitive tribes even today a man's "real" name is a closely guarded secret which he alone knows. Charles Wesley gave a faithful rendering of Jacob's quest for knowledge when he wrote:

Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

This wrestling is destined to go on throughout our lives. In spite of man's ever-renewed curiosity, no explanation in exact terms of what it is that lies at the heart of the universe and gives significance to the life of man has ever been forthcoming.

Theological Definitions

The greatest prophets have always been content with significant imagery. But there arose a lesser generation who were more literally minded, and for whom

imagery was to be treated not as metaphor but as exact description. Christian theology has been largely the product of the work of such men on the imagery of the Old Testament, of Jesus and of Paul. When Jesus speaks of a Heavenly Father, or, as reported in the fourth Gospel, speaks of God as Father and himself as Son in the same breath, there has, according to such literalists, to be a precise family relationship. So arose all the early disputes concerning the nature of Christ, which eventually gave rise to the doctrine of one God as a Trinity of three persons. Standardized by the Roman Catholic Church, this doctrine was taken over by Protestants at the time of the Reformation and maintained unaltered.

But quite apart from the doctrine of the Trinity, which has never played any great role in Christian devotion, there remained the idea of God as literally a being who was personal (though tripersonal), benevolent and omnipotent: one who was properly to be envisaged under the analogy of an exceedingly great and powerful King.

Unitarianism has popularly been supposed to consist chiefly in a view of God different from the prevailing one. Most dictionaries lend colour to this idea when they give such definitions of "Unitarian" as the following: "One who affirms the unipersonality of the Godhead, especially as opposed to an orthodox Trinitarian; a member of a Christian body or sect holding this doctrine."* It is certainly true that Unitarians have never accepted the dogma of the Trinity, and that many of the heretics who also rejected it in an earlier day came far closer to the spirit of modern Unitarianism than did most of their contemporaries.

* *Shorter Oxford Dictionary.*

But at the same time the Unitarian attitude towards this doctrine was usually a result of their thinking about the nature of Christ rather than about the nature of God.

Broadly speaking, the Unitarians of an earlier generation shared the general conception of God as it was set forth by Jewish and Christian teachers. They argued for the unity of God, but that, though compromised by some, was denied by no one. They argued for the moral nature of God, but this again was something no one would deny, though the Calvinists against whom in particular the Unitarians ranged themselves held a view of God's morality which did not exclude his arbitrary damnation of some men. By the middle of the nineteenth century Unitarian ideas about the nature of God had settled down to an avowal of faith in "the Fatherhood of God"—the first of James Freeman Clarke's celebrated "Five Points of Unitarian Belief". This was an idea which appeared both simple and meaningful.

But there were other Unitarian thinkers at that time who were pioneering the way towards a complete restatement of the whole position. They were alarmed at the extent to which fatherhood had become a frozen metaphor, which could restrict man's approach to the thought of the divine. Upon such a frozen metaphor was founded the idea, widespread among those with little imagination, of a god in the form of an enormous old man with a white flowing beard living somewhere in the sky. In order to lessen the peril of such literalism, the Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker habitually spoke of "our Father and our Mother". Others went farther from the common phraseology, and tended to emphasize that "God is a Spirit", thereby setting the proper mood of approach, while guarding against

the misunderstandings which could arise from the ancient belief that name means nature.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the notable exponents of this line of thought, making spiritual experience paramount over all hearsay and speculative thought. "When we have broken our god of tradition and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence."* James Martineau wrote in similar terms, likewise undermining the complacency which could rest in a frozen metaphor. "Every man's highest, nameless though it be, is his living God, while, oftener than we can tell, the being of whom he hears at church is his dead God."† The truth of this observation is presupposed by all that has been said here about the nature of religion and the nature of God.

At the same time as these men were writing, a powerful revolution in all traditional ways of thinking was going on. The result has been that in the twentieth century the traditional schemes of thought have become to an ever-increasing extent out of touch with the thinking and the needs of the contemporary world. That has been one of the reasons for the spectacular growth of the new faiths. Today many people are saying that they can no longer believe in God—and by "God" they mean, of course, the sort of God that has been presented to them by Judaism and Christianity in their traditional forms.

What Do We Mean by "God"?

It is no longer enough to set forth a belief in "the Fatherhood of God". This is countered by the in-

* *Works* (Centenary Edition), vol. ii, p. 292.

† *Endeavours after the Christian Life*, 2nd Series, Sermon I.

evitable demand, "What do you mean by God?" "The important question", wrote Dean Inge, "is not whether God exists, but what we mean when we speak of God."* M. Gabriel Marcel, who has given a faithful picture of many aspects of the thinking of men and women in the twentieth century, puts the matter thus:

The question, "Do you believe in God?" is one of those which, according to the common belief, can be answered by a simple "Yes" or "No". But a deeper analysis would enable us to lay bare the invariably illusory character of these answers. There is a mass of people who imagine that they believe in God, when in fact they are bowing down to an idol to whom any decent theology whatever would undoubtedly refuse the name of God; and on the other hand, there are many others who believe themselves to be atheists because they conceive of God only as an idol to be rejected, and who yet reveal in their acts, which far transcend their professed opinions, a totally inarticulate religious belief. It follows from all this that the answer to a referendum on the question "Do you believe in God?" ought to be in the great majority of cases, "I don't know whether I believe in God or not—and I am not even quite sure that I know what 'believing in God' is." Note, carefully, the contrast between these formulae and those of the agnosticism of the last century: "I don't know whether there is a God or not." †

Those who have actually been responsible for conducting such a referendum as the one here described appear to have realized that this is so. Gallup Polls on this particular question have been held in a number of countries, but whereas the earlier ones had simply asked, "Do you believe in God?", the more recent

* *Outspoken Essays*, 2nd Series, p. 2.

† *The Mystery of Being*, vol. i, pp. 10-12.

ones have given a number of alternative ideas of the nature of God (including the idea that he does not exist) and asked which of these comes nearest to the belief of the person questioned.

This procedure is certainly one which has much to recommend it, for the term "God", like "freedom", "democracy", and "education", has undergone a process of devaluation. These terms all tend to become catchwords, used by politicians and other orators on account of the favourable emotional reaction they may expect them to produce upon their audiences. But the question "What do you mean by God?" cuts below all this. And there is an ambiguity in the word "mean" that is perhaps instructive here. A man's conception of God is closely bound up with what gives life *meaning* for him. His beliefs and actions which concern themselves with what this may be constitute his religious faith. They show where he puts his ultimate trust. It may be in his creed, or his nation, or power, or fame, or money, or even in his hobby. All these can become objects of worship—idolatrous worship, but worship none the less. All these can become the gods of modern paganism.

The object of a man's religious faith is his god, and, as we have seen, there are many types of religious faith active today. Each faith has its corresponding god, and this it is which gives meaning to the life of the believer. If a man says that life, whether it be his own life or the life of the world as a whole, has no meaning, then he has no god; he is, in the only true sense of the word, an atheist.

Idolatry is a worship of false gods, a placing of man's supreme confidence in things which in the last resort cannot justify that confidence, an attribution of meaning

for life as a whole to things which at best can give meaning only to isolated parts of life. But how are we to distinguish between true and false objects of worship? In other words, how do we avoid idolatry and arrive at our most adequate idea of God?

The Limits of Language

In spite of the limited scope of human knowledge, and in spite of the impenetrable mystery that lies at the heart of things, a definite answer can be given to these questions. The objects of worship which have been described as idolatrous are so because they are all limited by other objects beyond themselves. They are not all-embracing in their sway. The same is, of course, true of man, both man as an individual and Man in the abstract. Yet there is truth in the ancient saying that man is the measure of all things. That which can make all existence significant cannot be wholly beyond man's powers of apprehension, or he would never be conscious of it at all.

This means that there is that in man which is responsive to the structure of reality experienced as significant, and it is by virtue of this that man is the measure. In the language of the traditional theology, God is immanent in man. But although man is thus responsive to the supreme significance which lies at the heart of things, its scope is none the less vastly greater than man can embrace; this has traditionally been expressed in terms of divine transcendence. It lies beyond man, but it touches upon his experience and is commanding upon him; it is such that the structure of the universe as a whole must come within its range. Otherwise it becomes only partially significant, and can

therefore be no more than an idol if given unqualified worship.

Any attempt to deal discursively with such a subject runs the risk of becoming impossibly obscure. Here language is necessarily inadequate. We reach the limits of articulate speech, which can be used only within definable limits and cannot therefore define the unlimited. There is a growing and well-founded belief that any attempt to put God into a dictionary (or into a creed) is a disastrous folly. The lengths to which such folly can go may be seen, for example, in the so-called Athanasian Creed. Unitarians are united in their opposition to such a policy.

A recent expression of the prevailing opinion among British Unitarians, obtained through an analysis of the findings of discussion groups in a large number of churches, showed that there was a general feeling that the nature of God should be left undefined. This, it was added, was not due to any lack of conviction, and there is, indeed, no reason for supposing that it might have been, since the mystics of all religions, whose spiritual experience has been of the deepest type, have likewise agreed that no such definition is possible. "God is nameless", wrote Meister Eckhart, "for no man can either say or deny anything about him. Therefore do not prate about God, for when thou pratest about God, thou liest." Similar advice is given by Emerson: "Do not speak of God much. After a very little conversation on the highest nature, thought deserts us and we run into formalism."

The Divine Will

We will do well to heed this advice. Not precision of definition, but poetry and imagery furnish the key to religious understanding. The forms of words used by Unitarians on this subject vary widely, and, so far as can be foreseen, will almost certainly continue to do so. Yet, returning now to the original question of *how* we arrive at our most adequate idea of God, we are justified in the claim that a definite answer can be given. It is this. Only the highest moral and spiritual endeavour can give rise to any adequate expression of thought in these realms. It is in obedience to the heavenly vision that we gain some clue as to its meaning. The deepest mysteries of life are understandable only through the nature of our living, and not by intellectual exercise alone. This is presumably what is meant by the saying attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, that he who seeks to do the will of God shall be able to judge between doctrines.

The moral and spiritual life is here interpreted as a response to a divine command providing its own expression in words. A similar view was well expressed by the philosopher T. H. Green: "There may be a consciousness of God, which is not a knowledge of him of a kind with our knowledge of matters of fact, and yet is the most real, because the most operative, of all spiritual principles; a consciousness not definable like an ordinary conception, but which defines itself in a moral life expressive of it; which is not indeed an external proof of the existence of God, but is in principle that existence itself, a first communication of the God-

head."* To the validity of such a view for himself Green's own life bore impressive witness.

We are unlikely to come any closer than this to an answer to the questions man must ask concerning his thought of the divine. Nor is it desirable that we should seek to do so. The Unitarian accepts with humility the vastness of the mystery within which we are set and can accept none of the presumptuous dogmatism which causes a man to speak "as though he were God's private secretary". In his hymn-book he finds the words in which John Greenleaf Whittier replied to such dogmatists:

Who fathoms the Eternal Thought?
Who talks of scheme and plan?
The Lord is God! He needeth not
The poor device of man.

I walk with bare hushed feet the ground
Ye tread with boldness shod;
I dare not fix with mete and bound
The love and power of God.

This is not lack of faith. It is simply a refusal to claim certified knowledge in a sphere where, from the nature of things, it is not attainable. A life consecrated to the service of the highest ideals of thought and conduct gives rise in increasing measure to the conviction that such endeavours are not in vain—that there is that in the universe which nourishes and sustains and justifies them. Such a conviction, however interpreted in words, is the Unitarian's consciousness of God.

God in Nature

The idea of God has been traditionally associated by religious people with certain beliefs concerning the

* *Works*, vol. iii, pp. 268-9.

order of Nature. God has been regarded as the Lord of Nature, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. With such a belief, thus baldly stated, most Unitarians would not quarrel. It involves the practical effect of a deep-seated optimism concerning the nature of things: a belief that whatever the appearances may be, the universe is fundamentally moral, and that good is more ultimate than evil. This is a belief that can neither be proved nor disproved; in other words, it is a matter of faith. Such faith must always be combined with a vigilance against the wishful thinking which would allow our interpretation of events to blind us to a proper appreciation of the true nature of the events themselves.

However, when these broad generalizations are left behind, and we come to a detailed interpretation of the working of God in Nature, Unitarians part company with most Christians, and, for that matter, with most adherents of all the great traditional faiths. For Unitarians accept without reserve the best thinking of modern science about the nature and operation of the physical universe. Description of such matters is a task for the expert, and theologians are not, with rare exceptions, trained experts in this department of knowledge. Foremost among the postulates of science which are indispensable for the advance of our knowledge of the physical universe is that of the uniformity of Nature—the rule of law* in the cosmos. Most religions accept this as a general statement of the way in which Nature operates, but they do not accept it as an invariable order, which would be destroyed if it admitted of particular exceptions. They would argue,

* It should be noted that this use of "law" is as much a metaphor from human life as is "fatherhood" when applied to God.

as the scientist and the religious liberal would not, that this is one of the areas in which "the exception proves the rule". The exception that they have in mind is a form of direct intervention by a God from outside Nature which sets aside the normal operation of the natural order. Such interventions are "miracles".

Belief in Miracles

Many people might feel that it is not necessary even to consider belief in miracles, much less to condemn it, in these enlightened days. But the fact remains that the great majority of professed Christians do give their allegiance to this idea. The largest church in Christendom teaches that miracles have occurred and still do occur. To give but one example where hundreds are available, there is the miracle of the liquefaction of the "blood of St Januarius". This takes place in Naples two or three times each year, when the small vials containing what is said to be the powdered blood of the saint are borne in procession through the streets by high ecclesiastics. The blood, according to these same ecclesiastics (no independent observers are allowed to see what takes place), then becomes liquid, and is efficacious in protecting from misfortune those who venerate it. Less regular in occurrence are the stories which appear from time to time in Catholic countries of statues which shed tears, or blood.

Though many Protestants may scoff at such superstitions, it should be remembered that the majority of Protestant churches, while not claiming that miracles take place today, certainly profess a belief in the miracles said to have occurred in bygone days, and, in particular, in those recorded in the Bible. But there

is nothing more preposterous in the idea of dried blood becoming a magical liquid or statues weeping today than there is in that of water suddenly turning to wine or the dead being restored to life thousands of years ago. In fact, the Catholic view is the more consistent one, for if there are valid reasons for supposing that miracles are possible at all, one would naturally expect them to occur in all ages.

It is essential that this belief in miracles should be properly understood. The word "miracle" is loosely used by journalists, who speak of miraculous escapes from burning houses, of new "miracle drugs", of the "modern miracle" of television, and so forth. This has nothing in common with the traditional religious use of the word. The miracles claimed to be part of religious history are definitely violations of the established order of Nature, not simply new or inexplicable occurrences. Furthermore, they are violations of the natural order of a special type, namely, "wonders performed by supernatural power as signs of some special mission or gift and explicitly ascribed to God . . . Catholic theologians hold that the great primary ends of miracles are the manifestation of God's glory and the good of man; that the particular or secondary ends, subordinate to the former, are to confirm the truth of a mission or a doctrine in faith or morals, to attest the sanctity of God's servants, to confer benefits and vindicate Divine justice." *

Unitarians deny that any alleged violation of the natural order as established by human experience over a long period of time has actually occurred unless it can be attested by the critical witness of a number of scientifically trained observers. They would also

* *Catholic Encyclopedia*, article on "Miracle".

claim that no change whatsoever in the physical sphere can be directly connected with the truth or otherwise of doctrines of faith and morals. There is no real connection between the offices of spiritual teacher and of wonder-worker. "Spiritual things must be spiritually discerned."

Whatever conception men may hold of God or of the nature of true religion, such conceptions are not likely to be satisfactorily arrived at by magical methods. Things that are distinct must be accepted as such. The truth of religious conceptions and teachings can be attested to us only by the inner response within ourselves that they call forth by their own intrinsic worth. It cannot be established by physical occurrences, normal or abnormal. Though there is much that is mysterious in life, producing happenings that we cannot fully understand, a due sense of wonder, such as is typical of the child and is also in the adult world the key to all aesthetic appreciation, is very different from a belief in miracles as arbitrary acts of God to teach supernatural lessons to men. The sense of wonder involved both in religion and in art should be aroused by objects that are worthy and awe-inspiring in their majestic mystery, not by trivial occurrences which bear a suspicious resemblance to the products of the conjuror's skill.

The Idea of Revelation

Another aspect of the same general conception of the mode of divine activity in the world has been even more important in religious history. Just as God was supposed to have produced strange occurrences in Nature for man's benefit, so he was supposed to have produced strange occurrences within individual men for the same

purpose—that of teaching religious truth. This underlies the traditional belief in “revelation”, according to which all religion has been divided under the twofold classification of “natural” and “revealed”. The former represents man’s own speculations in the realm of religion; the latter, authoritative teachings dictated by God through one medium or another. Most frequently belief in miracle and in revelation have been linked closely together, the occurrence of miracles attesting the validity of the revelation. “Catholic theologians . . . place miracles among the strongest and most certain evidences of Divine revelation.” *

Revelation has usually been regarded as the imparting by God of certain specific teachings to specially chosen men, who then become custodians of the teaching and either commit it to writing or communicate it to some or all of their fellows by word of mouth. In the process of revelation itself, the human recipient is simply a passive listener. So it was, for example, that Moses was said to have received the revelation on Mount Sinai.

Revelation, in this traditional sense, can appeal no more to the Unitarian than can miracle (of which it is really a particular species). In terms of the distinction between natural and revealed religion, Unitarianism is a “natural religion”. Or rather, Unitarians would deny the validity of this distinction altogether, holding that there is no such thing as revelation in the sense alleged, and that all religion is natural religion. Unitarianism is essentially a religion without revelation, though a fairly general tendency among Unitarians has been to retain the term “revelation”, while interpreting it in an entirely different way. They have

* *Catholic Encyclopedia*, article on “Miracle”.

regarded it as part of the human process of discovery, the activity of God being an activity within man and not an activity directed towards man from without.

Thus a meaningful way of using the term in Unitarian circles exists, but at the same time it has to be recognized that its etymology as well as its history are unfavourable to such a reinterpretation. In view of the possibilities of misunderstanding, it is probably better to abandon the use of the word altogether. This is the easier in that there lies ready to hand an alternative word, also with a long history of religious usage behind it, which expresses all that the Unitarian can accept as real in the idea of revelation, and is not open to the same degree of confusion. That word is “inspiration”.

The prophets, and all those great figures in religious history who have traditionally been regarded as the mouthpieces of a revelation, may legitimately be called inspired men. So may the great poets and artists, and creative original workers in all fields of human endeavour. The word “genius” is often used here, and it expresses just what a Unitarian means when he speaks of someone who was inspired. In this sense Moses was inspired, and Jesus, and Plato, Shakespeare and Bach, Newton and Einstein. The inspired man is active. He does not sit back waiting for inspiration to come upon him, as in the caricature of the writer who never achieves anything. Genius has been defined as an infinite capacity for taking pains. This certainly understates the original creativity involved, but corrects the false impression engendered if the person concerned is described as the recipient of a “revelation”.

The great geniuses of the race, the inspired ones, stand in much the same relationship to humanity as a whole as the peaks of a mountain range stand to the

foothills and the rolling country beyond. They are essentially one with the race. They have a capacity for gathering up the knowledge and experience of the past, sifting it, using the labours of others who were groping towards a new step forward, and then, as in a flash of insight, discerning the great idea that would be the consummation of the work of the past, a great stride forward in the present, and the incentive to further advance in the future. A new insight in religion, art, or science may seem to come as a bolt from the blue and may require centuries for all its implications to be worked out, but the great name with which it is associated represents only one link, though an indispensable one, in the one ongoing process. What is gained, whether it be called revelation or, more accurately, discovery, is continuous and progressive, the product of the labours both of great minds and of smaller ones.

Inspiration was originally regarded as a form of divine inbreathing upon a man, and as such it may still be regarded. The spirit of truth and beauty and goodness is operative within him, drawing him onward to new levels of achievement. Here is the work of God in man—not in the dictation of a series of propositions, but as the spirit guiding man to new discovery, whether in realms of fact or of value. Knowledge of all types corresponds to man's endeavour: knowledge of God and of moral and spiritual wisdom comes from his striving after a deep and moral life; knowledge of the physical universe comes from his endeavour to discover the nature of things. In none of this is there anything miraculous or untenable in terms of modern thought. Here, as elsewhere, the Unitarian seeks to make his view of the world harmonious, a unity in all its many branches.

V

MAN'S NATURE AND DESTINY

ONE point which emerged quite definitely from the last chapter was that the question "Do you believe in God?" is one which does not, except within very clearly defined contexts, admit of a direct "Yes" or "No" answer. It can always be countered by the question "What sort of God?", or "What do you mean by 'God'?"

If we speak of belief in man, on the other hand, it might seem at first sight that the case is entirely different. The question "What do you mean by 'man'?" is one which might be supposed to be rather unnecessary. It could be answered by pointing; we can indicate a man physically, in a way in which we obviously cannot indicate God. Here is a representative of the species "man"; he appears, for example, in a child's ABC book beside the letter M. But we have hardly advanced any further towards an attempt to satisfy someone who asks us what we mean by man. We have done no more than give a picture which is interchangeable with the name; in fact, in Chinese orthography the distinction between the two comes close to disappearing.

It is in asking what more there is in man than is shown by this conventional picture that the question "What do you mean by man?" becomes really significant. It is in fact a question of very deep significance—the most important question, from a

religious point of view, that we can ask about man. From this question and the answers given to it we can derive all the doctrines about man, his nature and his destiny, that underlie the great religions of the world. Definitions of man are legion; they range from the Psalmist's description of him as but little lower than the angels and master of all created things to the modern characterization of man as nothing but a monkey with megalomania.

Either of these views of man, or any of the positions which lie between them, may serve as the basis for a religious faith. Man can be regarded, if we look at him from the point of view of the animal creation, as a very exalted being. Or he can be regarded, if we look at him from the point of view of an imagined perfection, as a very poor and miserable being. Unitarians have always tended towards a higher view of man than has been typical of the other forms of faith against which they have reacted. They were among the first people associated with organized religion in any form to accept the Darwinian theory of evolution, looking on man as at the apex of an evolutionary process. The old idea of a "fall of man" from an original ideal condition has thereby been replaced by the idea of a "rise of man".

This exalted view of human nature has been shared by Unitarians with liberal thinkers in all ages. There is, they claim, some spark of the divine within the breast of every man, and this power may manifest itself in the life of each individual in the degree to which he himself chooses to open himself to its operations. If he responds to the call of reason, of conscience, of the so-called "inner light", then to that extent the divine is made manifest in him.

Such a view might be accepted by most people as applicable to a few saintly characters. But it is very difficult to sustain it as true of mankind as a whole in the times in which we live. Those who have always stressed that man is depraved and corrupt and hopelessly weak and sinful can point to the state of the world and say, "I told you so". There are many today who feel tempted to echo the prophet Jeremiah's despairing comment on man: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."* The great task of religious liberals today is to restore man's faith in himself without losing a realistic view of the world or closing our eyes to the evils which confront us on every side. How is such a task to be attempted? Without faith in ourselves nothing can be achieved; that is a simple axiom of psychology. But where do we begin?

Saints and Sinners

It is impossible to enter upon any discussion of this subject without taking account of the ideas concerning the nature of man which have been disseminated by the traditional religions for many centuries. The dominant concept in their thinking has been that of sin, which has been regarded as an affront to the majesty of God, involved in man's refusal to obey the law which he has ordained. This law, in turn, demands from man a standard of perfection. "Be ye perfect" is the commandment which has been disobeyed, and this disobedience constitutes sin.

There will be little disagreement from any quarter with the proposition that mankind is far from perfect.

* Jer. xvii. 19.

It is more difficult, however, to say what being perfect means. It is very doubtful whether any of us can be said to have a clear idea of what a perfect man would be like. We can distinguish a good man from a bad one, if the difference is sufficiently marked, but who could claim to know when a man is so good that he could no longer become any better?

However, traditional Christian thought looks upon perfection as a definite standard, which can furthermore be determined in terms of quantity. It is as though a man were thought of as having within him a number of containers, each of which might be filled with "merit" by the exercise of specific virtues. If all the containers were filled, the man would be perfect, and he could no longer be said to offer any affront to the divine majesty.

Such an idea might appear fantastic, but it is certainly implied by the Catholic doctrine of "works of supererogation". According to this theory, the recognized saints have not only filled all their own containers, but have accumulated a surplus of merit which can be transferred to the containers of other people at the discretion of the Church. They have gone beyond perfection; they might perhaps be called pluperfect. Protestants, on the other hand, maintain that the containers can never be filled by man. There remains in them, beyond the merit, a large space which is, by definition, filled with sin. This sin can be taken out and replaced with merit only by Christ.

This account of sin and merit in quantitative terms is untenable. Such traditionally recognized sins as pride and envy (the first two of the so-called Seven Deadly Sins) are not deeds comparable with crimes, the severity of which can be assessed in terms of the quantity of

punishment deemed appropriate by the judge.* They are qualities, not quantities. They are states of mind and heart, and cannot be assessed in quantitative terms. Overt actions, such as adultery, which are usually called sins but not crimes, are likewise the product of an underlying qualitative condition in the persons concerned. It has usually been recognized that the inner disposition which leads to evil acts (whether criminal or non-criminal in the eyes of the law) is the sin.

This opens the way to a meaningful reinterpretation of sin. It is not disobedience to any law. That is crime. It is a disposition, not an event, and it consists in the dominance of lower passions such as jealousy, hatred and greed over man's impulses to strive towards ideal ends. It does not, in itself, entail any particular theological scheme. But it is a fact of human experience. The question remains, how important a fact of human experience?

Is Human Nature Evil?

Christian theologians have frequently spoken of man as a sinner. This, in terms of the analysis of their idea of sin already given, means that the "containers" are not full—but very often it is taken to mean that they are not even half-full. It would not be appropriate to speak of man as a sinner, without further qualification, unless his sinfulness were supposed to be his most characteristic feature. If we abandon, as we must, this idea of quantities of merit and sin, and look upon them as qualities, the same still holds good. Man

* A retributive theory of punishment is presupposed here, since this has, historically speaking, dominated both legal and religious thought.

should not be called a sinner unless sinfulness were the most distinctive characteristic of the great majority of men; in other words, unless man's nature is primarily evil, so that on the whole the world is worse off rather than better off for having him in it.

Can we honestly say that the human race as a whole is so constituted that the world would be a better place if it had never existed? Some people may think so in their moments of deepest despair, but their verdict would not be supported by any dispassionate judgment. But if it is not true, then those theologians who have alleged that man is primarily a sinner are wrong. It is to be feared that many of them have concentrated their attention upon an abstract idea of "man", which has little in common with actual men as we meet them in their homes or in the workshop or even on the battlefield.

In Clarence Day's *Life with Father*, Father reacts with characteristic indignation to the clergyman's prayer for Mother on her sickbed, in which he refers to her as a "poor miserable sinner". Mother had her shortcomings, as Father well knew, but he would not tolerate this as a fit and proper description of her, and being the man he was, he did not keep his feelings to himself. We can hardly say that his reaction was unjustified. It is doubtful whether even those theologians who have had most to say about human depravity could bring themselves to regard their wives as primarily miserable sinners, and one might be tempted to question whether, whatever they might have said, they really thought of themselves as such.

It is an easy matter to find outstanding examples of the depths of evil to which men can sink. Moreover, in some instances one single very evil man may have had

an effect upon the life of the world vastly in excess of that of ninety-nine good men, but he still represents no more than 1 per cent of this particular cross-section of humanity. To take him as typical would be very misleading. One has also to take into account the very great difficulty involved in judging a human personality—a judgment against which there are numerous warnings in the great religious literature of the world, including that in the Sermon on the Mount: "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

The whole idea of judgment has been given far too much weight in traditional Christian thinking on the subject of human sinfulness. There is to be a "Last Judgment", and very often there is a present judgment, in which the "sheep" are divided from the "goats". In a trial there are two verdicts, "guilty" and "not guilty". Intermediate conditions have to be ruled out and the decision made in terms of a black-and-white distinction. This may be difficult enough in many cases when it is with a specific crime that the accused is charged; it becomes wholly impossible when one's entire life is under review. We may well endorse Mark Rutherford's comment: "I hardly ever see a pure breed either of goat or sheep. I never see anybody who deserves to go straight to heaven or straight to hell." *

Unitarians seek to avoid the legalism which asserts that men must be either saints or devils, and can be divided sharply under the two classifications. All men do things that are good, and all men do things that are evil; but the vast majority of men do more that is good or morally neutral than they do that is evil. The character of the "average man" is, therefore, some-

* Quoted by W. L. Sperry, *Jesus, Then and Now*, p. 180.

what more saintly than devilish. His sinfulness is not his most characteristic feature.

The fact that it is not, on the whole, the "average man" who presides over the destinies of nations is quite another matter, but it does not alter the facts just recorded. Evil men may gain control of societies and nations. There have been some thinkers, such as Rousseau, who have believed that man as an individual is *good*, but that society as such is *evil*. This, though wildly exaggerated, does point to a feature of our situation which has to be reckoned with. Men, when organized into groups and acting as a mass, may and frequently do perform or condone deeds which they would not do as isolated individuals. They lose their individuality, that distinctive personality which marks man off most clearly from the animals, and they revert to the type of herd-behaviour that is typical of most animals. Military life affords many good examples of this; here there are occasions when the pressure of the group towards a participation of each individual in drunkenness, or fornication, or sheer wanton destructiveness, is all but irresistible for those whose personalities are not well developed. Precisely the same influence is at work in promoting much of the juvenile delinquency which troubles every large city today.

The Brotherhood of Man

It would seem to be true that in so far as a man is impervious to the unguided pressures of the herd, and is a real individual with a distinctive personality, he normally tends towards goodness rather than evil. If this is so, it underlines one important feature of Unitarian belief in man which is widely (though by no

means universally) shared by members of all ethical religions.

This has been traditionally summed up in the expression "the Brotherhood of Man", another of James Freeman Clarke's "Five Points of Unitarian Belief". Such a brotherhood can be realized, if it is to be realized at all, only by means of a free association between those who are in the truest sense of the word "men"; that is to say, individual personalities. It is not achieved by lip-service to the general concept of brotherhood, nor by relationships, of whatever sort they may be, between great masses of men in which the individual is submerged.

The reason why an individual American, let us say, can suggest the dropping of a hydrogen bomb on Moscow, is that the whole point of view from which he thinks is depersonalized. If he were personally acquainted with individual Russians living in Moscow, men of outlook and interests similar to his own, he would never dream of making such a suggestion. It arises only when he submerges himself in one abstract entity ("America") and speaks about another abstract entity ("Russia"). In the same way, a Canadian correspondent recently returned from the Soviet Union commented on the way in which most of the ordinary Russians he had met were convinced of the evil intentions of Western countries but were yet almost without exception extremely friendly towards such nationals of those countries as they met. They just did not associate these individuals with the caricature of the Western "warmonger".

When the herd consciousness breaks down and men confront each other as individuals rather than as representatives of groups or nations or classes or creeds,

the brotherhood of man becomes a living possibility. Brotherhood is essentially a personal relationship. In an occupied country at the end of a war it frequently happens that the troops of the occupying power begin for the first time to encounter the people whom they have been accustomed to regard as their enemies as *individuals*. Then "fraternization" begins; they find that the official "enmity" has no basis as a personal issue between individuals. Enmity can continue only where the group exclusiveness on both sides is so strong as to prevent such fraternization from taking place.

A genuine feeling of brotherhood may embrace wider relationships than that between one single individual and another. It emerges easily within the family as a whole, or within any small group. It can occur within a tribe, and the fraternal feeling within the tribe, even where the other member is unknown, can break down the enmity demanded by a larger depersonalized agency. In the eighteenth century a Welsh regiment was on one occasion put into the field against a Breton regiment. Both sides refused to take part in a fight in which they had no personal interest when they discovered their kinship through the emergence of the fact that they spoke different versions of a common tongue.

One of the most urgent tasks confronting the world today is that of carrying the feeling of brotherhood over into wider and wider spheres. It is because religion is so fundamentally a personal as well as a social force, and politics is not, that the brotherhood of man will in the last resort be achieved only through religion and not through politics.

Human Progress

An optimistic view of the nature of man tends to look forward to a progressive realization in time, though not without great travail and long delay, of a human brotherhood which knows no limitation of race or colour or creed. Unitarians are committed to work for the development of such a process. They look to the future to justify present hopes and aspirations, though the extent to which it can do so and the means by which it may do so remain matters for further discussion.

The nineteenth-century formula for the content of this faith in the future, included among Clarke's "Five Points", was "the progress of mankind, onward and upward for ever". This phrase, like the one which speaks of "the Fatherhood of God", lays itself open to misunderstanding today, and is therefore not so frequently used. But it has never been completely abandoned, and the vital idea lying behind it is as strongly accepted by present-day Unitarians as at any time in the past. It extends the optimistic view of man into a further dimension, that of time, by asserting that he is better today than he was in the past, and that he will be better in the future than he is today.

This brief statement of the position needs further clarification. Firstly, "man" does not in this context mean any particular man, or any particular group of men, but the general level of human achievement determined not by concentrating on given examples but by an attempt to formulate as complete a picture as possible. There are men and women at all levels of human development in the ranks of modern society, but a distorted picture would result from exclusive

emphasis on either the highest or the lowest of these levels.

Secondly, and more difficult to answer, what is meant by "better"? This can, in the last resort, simply mean more in accordance with the standards of conduct prescribed by the great ethical religions of the world. These standards certainly vary in detail, and in our day much stress has been laid in some quarters upon the alleged relativity of moral standards,* but the fundamental ethical demands expressed, for example, in the Golden Rule ("Act towards others in the way you would have them act towards you"), and in the demand for the sacrifice of a narrow selfishness to a sincere altruism, are universally accepted. "If there is any aspect of their teaching in which the higher religions tend to converge", says a recent writer on the subject of progress, "it is to be found in the emphasis they all lay on moral universalism." †

Progress may therefore be measured by an increase in human knowledge and reasonableness, by man's harmonious co-operation with his fellows and with the natural processes that sustain life, and by his spontaneous veneration for the recognized virtues and his attempt to realize them within himself.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell,

wrote one ardent disciple of the idea of progress. Knowledge and reverence embody the Unitarian's conception of what marks out a man who has made real

* It is interesting to note that one of the foremost proponents of such a view, Edward Westermarck, none the less agreed that progress, in the sense of an increase in man's altruistic qualities, is a reality.

† M. Ginsberg, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 65.

progress over the achievements of the past. These are the qualities he strives to bring to ever fuller fruition within himself. Many modern Unitarians would acknowledge that they find their highest ethical ideal in Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life".

The idea of progress, as here defined, is a comparatively new one in the history of human thought. Until little more than a century ago, the manner of life and thinking of one generation did not normally differ much from that of the preceding generation, and there was practically no conception of a general progress. All down the ages, from Homer to Rousseau, men looked back to a Golden Age in the distant past; the best we could hope for in the future would be a restoration of those bygone splendours. The Jewish dream of the rule of Messiah was for the most part a nostalgic longing for a recovery of the vanished glories of the kingdom of David and Solomon.

Early Unitarians protested against the doctrine that man had fallen from an original Eden, but they scarcely raised the claim that he was, on the contrary, rising, and certainly the idea of any automatic progress was foreign to their thinking. As late as Channing, who was the leading Unitarian figure of the early nineteenth century, the view to be found is that progress and regress in the future are both possible, and that which of these actually takes place will depend upon our efforts in the present. This is substantially the position of Unitarians today.

But in the middle of the nineteenth century a new and very influential view of human progress arose, which regarded it as a sort of escalator on which man, by inexorable processes quite outside his control, was carried ever upward. The age was one in which

advances in science and discovery were being made on a scale unparalleled before in human history. Thought seemed to be on the brink of discovering laws which would unlock all the mysteries of the universe. Standards of living were visibly rising, and automatic progress seemed to be almost equally apparent. Evolution or Providence, or both, seemed to be agencies which could carry the process onward with little human effort. Herbert Spencer, the philosopher of the age, summed up its thinking thus: "Progress is not an accident, not a thing within human control, but a beneficent necessity."* Many liberal thinkers, including Unitarians, were deluded into a belief that the millennium was just around the corner.

No Automatic Advance

It is easy today to see how wrong all this was—but it was not so easy then. We owe our latter-day wisdom to the experience gained in fifty years of crisis, war, despotisms, and disaster. We have seen examples of brutality which our grandfathers would have imagined impossible in Christendom. It is hardly surprising that the pendulum has now swung to the opposite extreme, and that many people have given up hope of any possibility of human progress at all. Unitarians have refused to be carried along blindly by this reaction, which is as shallow as the belief against which it protests. If Unitarians still sing as a hymn—and they do—Whittier's words,

And step by step since time began
We see the steady gain of man,

they do so with a full awareness that this is taking a very

* *Universal Progress*, p. 58.

long-term view. There *has* been human progress from savagery to civilization, however superficial that civilization may sometimes seem. Periods of advance may alternate with periods of retrogression, but the long-term picture is still one of advance, as the tide may still move in while the individual waves advance and recede upon the shore. Progress comes only at great cost in human effort and suffering—perhaps we might better sing "we see the *painful* gain of man"—and there is no fixed guarantee that progress will continue in the future.

We are well aware today that no earthly millennium is about to be ushered in. Some of the hymns written in the nineteenth century by Unitarians who believed that this was so have to be abandoned today, as quite unrealistic. One of them, for instance, says:

And lo, already on the hills
The flags of dawn appear;
Gird up your loins, ye prophet-souls,
Proclaim the day is near!

We know now that the day which the writer describes, "when justice shall be throned in might, and every hurt be healed", is not as near as that. We still have a very long pilgrimage "through the night of doubt and sorrow" before it dawns. The absence of creedal fetters makes it a simple matter for the Unitarian of today to abandon beliefs held by Unitarians of yesterday, where these proved to be in error. Progress in thought may thus be safeguarded.

A modern Unitarian's belief in progress is, therefore, a sober belief, which strives to take full account of *all* the facts, and not simply of those which are most obvious at a particular time or place. The progress of

mankind has to be struggled for by individual men, who have faith in ultimate victory, but cannot have assured knowledge that this outcome is predetermined. This being so, it is at once apparent how closely faith in progress must be linked with faith in man. If he is to be regarded as corrupt and helpless, then the progress of the race is impossible without some external divine intervention incompatible with human freedom. This is a popular Protestant view, and it postpones all progress till a cataclysmic moment at the end of time.

Unitarians have never accepted this. They believe that man is free to determine his destiny, and that progress depends on how he uses that freedom. In lower life and at an earlier age, evolutionary progress * may have been semi-automatic, but not today, where it involves self-conscious personalities, real *men*. "Progress", writes Dr Julian Huxley, "is a major fact of past evolution, but it is limited to a few select stocks. It may continue in the future, but it is not inevitable; man must work and plan if he is to achieve further progress for himself and so for life." †

Everything depends, then, on man's use of his freedom to map out his own destiny; in the words of the Apostle Paul, to work out his own salvation. The idea of salvation and that of progress are linked closely together in Unitarian thought. The salvation of society is the goal of social progress, though the word "salvation" has more usually been employed in the past to describe a condition to be aimed at by individuals.

* Evolutionary progress is not necessarily continuous with moral progress. Many writers have assumed that it is, but this is an article of faith, not of knowledge. We cannot take it for granted that it is so.

† Quoted by L. Belton, *Can We Still Believe in Man?*, p. 33, from *Proceedings of the British Association*, 1936, p. 100.

One of the safeguards of the idea of progress is that even during a period of general regress there can still be progress in some individuals, who thereby save themselves and contribute to the eventual salvation of the society in which they live. "Men of character", wrote Emerson, "are the conscience of their society." And in the five points of Unitarian belief, "salvation by character" was the formula adopted. Character means the progressive development of an individual and responsible personality. That is what we mean when we speak of someone as having a strong character. But salvation is a term which is more open to misunderstanding, especially since it is so commonly used among religious sects of a type that is poles apart from Unitarianism. Salvation means being saved from *something*, but we have now to ask, saved from what, and saved for what?

The Mystery of Evil

The things from which most men and women seek to be saved are obvious enough. They are those things which are most feared. Foremost among such fears today is that of war, with its boundless possibilities of atomic destruction. Prominent, too, are fears of economic disaster, of political tyranny, of famine and disease, and of everything that disrupts those freedoms and securities which provide favourable conditions for human happiness.

The evils which men fear may be divided into two broad classes: those which are, humanly speaking, avoidable, and those which are not. Earthquakes, storms, and many diseases are examples of the second type. Man lacks the control over events to prevent

their occurrence, though he may do much to mitigate their effects. Death is regarded by normal people as an evil to be avoided so far as possible, though it may sometimes become the lesser of two evils. The great religions of salvation have promised their adherents some form of deliverance from the power of death, but in its literal sense death comes sooner or later to each one of us.

The "problem of evil" is one which has perplexed the mind of man from the earliest times, and it is one to which no wholly satisfactory answer on the intellectual level can ever be given. No matter whether a man takes the view that the universe is a great machine, which cannot care for the feelings of conscious creatures; or whether he believes that everything that happens is the product of blind chance; or whether he believes that the universe is governed by an omnipotent being whose ways are inscrutable and not for us to question; or whether he believes in a loving God who cares for all his creatures; or whether he thinks that

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport,

there is still the sense of immediate outrage when undeserved evil descends upon himself or upon those whom he loves. However he may seek to reason with himself, he will still *feel* deep in his heart that this ought not to be. The form of his faith will certainly govern his total reaction to what happens, whether it be submission or defiance, but it cannot alter his feelings. A mother standing by the grave of her child, who a few days before had been full of health and vigour, may be comforted, but her grief remains the

deepest aspect of the situation. Evil is never willingly embraced, except for the sake of diverting a greater evil from oneself or from others.

Such evils as are not subject to human control have to be accepted as a part of life, however they may be interpreted. The only effective answer to them lies in the response of courage. Courage is one of the highest virtues which man can display, and it must supplant the quest for salvation from those happenings which, the world being as it is, we can never wholly escape. Faith that in the long run evil will be overcome by good may be a great spur to such courage, but its effectiveness in real life is destroyed if it attempts to deny the full tragedy of the fact of natural evil in the present.

But there are many evils, the most outstanding being war, which are obviously the product of man's own folly. Such evils are avoidable, not usually by the individuals who suffer most from them, but by mankind as a whole. There is nothing unrealistic in a faith that such evils may be progressively eliminated from human life, though thousands of years may pass before this is completely fulfilled.

Being the work of man, these evils may have causes assigned to them which are subject to moral judgment, in a way that is not possible for natural evils. It is with these underlying causes, indeed, that we should be chiefly concerned. They are often not as spectacular as the symptoms to which they give rise, and it is usually the latter which arouse men's fears and drive them to a quest for salvation. But the things that are most feared are not always those which are most to be feared. Almost all the avoidable evils which come upon the world are the result of the unhampered opera-

tion of man's lower impulses and passions. It is from bondage to these that we should seek to be saved: from jealousy, hatred and malice; from treating other people as means to our own private ends rather than as ends in themselves; from being blinded through a passion for ideas to the need for respect for persons.

Reverting to the traditional language of religion, we can say that what we need to be saved from is *sin*. It is true that the significance of this word has been blunted by its use to describe things that are not sins at all, such as smoking, or playing tennis on Sunday. Bondage to the lower passions of our animal nature constitutes real sin. It is this, and its consequences for the lives of individuals and society, that we need to fear; it is from this that we need to be saved.

Salvation by Character

It is only by means of such a salvation, beginning within the lives of individuals and manifesting its effect upon society as a leaven working within the lump, that what has been called "the kingdom of God upon earth" can ever be realized. This is the goal of our striving after social progress; the social effect of "salvation by character". Man's movement towards it depends upon a continuous struggle, and those who fail to take their full share in that struggle stand accused before their own conscience. The condition of the world in the twentieth century urgently demands that the movement forward be speeded up. The social effects of sin are plain to all today.

The view of salvation here described differs considerably from that of the majority of Christian churches. Their general tendency has been to regard

the chief object of fear, from which we need to be saved, not as sin itself (which most of them look upon as a permanent and inescapable part of human nature) but as the *consequences* of sin, usually framed in terms of punishment in a life beyond the grave. Their chief object of hope has likewise been, not so much temporal progress within the individual or society, as a redemption of the world by Christ resulting for the believer in a life of everlasting happiness beyond the grave. There is an increasing tendency in Protestant circles today to localize this hope around a "second coming of the Lord".

The traditional idea of heaven and hell as places of bliss and torment to which the soul is consigned after death is closely associated with this way of thinking. Unitarians reject this idea; they believe, in common with many others, that "heaven" and "hell" are meaningful only as names for conditions within the human spirit. Bondage to our lower passions produces the conditions which might properly be described as hell, while a free allegiance to the highest ideals of thought and practice produces conditions which may well be called heaven. Such hellish or heavenly conditions are not sharply divided from each other but shade over gradually through intermediate stages. Experience of them is not deferred until after death, but is a present reality. The extent to which they may be permanent so far as the individual experiencing them is concerned remains to be considered.

The more consistently we allow ourselves to become enslaved to our lower passions, the stronger do these passions become, and the less our chance of releasing ourselves from subservience to their dictates. An unqualified endeavour to satisfy each of these passions

in turn tends to break down and finally to disintegrate the character altogether, character being essentially dependent on a harmonizing of the personality so that all its passions are under control and directed towards a single end. We do not speak of animals as having a character, though they may have characteristics. This is because they are largely at the mercy of each passion as it seizes them in turn, its effects being avertible only by the intervention of another stronger passion. An animal, or a human being in this condition, has no real character—it is not dependable. Salvation consists in the forming of a character that will harmonize all the forces of our being towards a certain ideal, and the higher the ideal, the better the character. The end to be achieved integrates body, mind and spirit, seeking the ancient ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

The satisfaction of immediate passions can never be more than temporary. If all our lives we exist from one momentary partial satisfaction to another in this way, we shall be no nearer to having achieved anything at the end than we were at the beginning. We shall have made no advance towards salvation. It is here that considerations of progress in time and of a destiny beyond time interlock, and lead us on to the various speculations which have surrounded the religious concept of eternity.

Time and Eternity

Salvation and eternal life are concepts of traditional religion which belong closely together, and are in fact often interchangeable. This appears, for example, in the episodes recorded in the New Testament, where persons come to Jesus or to his disciples and ask,

“What shall I do to be saved?”, or, alternatively, “What shall I do to gain eternal life?” The two questions meant much the same thing. Being saved from bondage to the things of space and time means living in the eternal. The highest values in our lives, for which and by which we are called upon to live, are eternal. It follows from this that we can live in eternity now. “What a sublime doctrine it is”, wrote Channing, “that goodness cherished now is eternal life already entered upon.”

Just as heaven and hell are not, for the Unitarian, places to be experienced in the future, but the two poles in a condition to be experienced now, so eternity is not a period of time in the future, however extended, but something outside time altogether, which is in another dimension from that of time, and impinges upon us now. “The passing event that marks the moment”, said James Martineau, “is but a point of contact where the curve of our being meets the tangent of Eternity.”* Life in eternity is heaven; exclusion from such life is hell. If we accept this as a definition, it follows that hell is not eternal, as some of the traditional dogmatists of Christendom have argued.

But we are here entering upon a sphere of thought where exact ideas are not easy to formulate. All our conceptual thought is conditioned by our existence as beings in space and time, and to advance beyond this is impossible save by the use of spatial or temporal metaphors. The dimension of eternity is perhaps best described as that of “depth” in experience, if we may suppose the latter to have length in time and breadth in space. Normally we live, as we say, “on the surface of things”, but when we penetrate below the

* *Hours of Thought*, vol. i, pp. 131-2.

surface, as the great artist or poet or religious mystic is able to do, and to help us to do, considerations of space and time seem to be of no importance. We move into a dimension where our experience is one with that of the seers in all ages, and at one with That towards which their aspirations and devotions have been directed: the eternal realm of ultimate values which constitute for us the discernible features of the "ineffable life of God". One of the earliest Christians, who was profoundly influenced by this way of thinking, summed it up thus, in words attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Jesus: "This is life eternal, that they know thee, the only true God." *

Certainly there are moments when we feel ourselves caught up out of the passing flux of affairs in space and time, and in so far as we make these moments determinative of our lives, we participate in eternity. It follows if this is so that the death of the body, as an event in space and time, is irrelevant to such a participation. This may or may not be adequate as a ground for belief in immortality, and it certainly gives little support to particular theories about personal immortality, but it provides us with the only reasoned approach in this direction.

The old Christian argument for immortality as a "resurrection of the body" based on the alleged physical resurrection of Jesus has long since been left behind by Unitarians, as it has by most thinking persons. What happens to one's body after death is of no importance whatsoever, despite the continued attempts on the part of theologians to show that it was important that the body of Jesus should have risen from the tomb, and despite the common superstitions of our

* John xvii. 3.

day manifesting themselves in the cult of cemeteries, in embalming and in other practices which show all too clearly the belief that the deceased is still in some sense especially present where his or her body rests.

Survival or Immortality ?

Eternal life has usually been associated in popular thinking with something that is quite different, namely, with survival in time after death, generally regarded as of indefinite duration. This is not at all what we have thus far been considering as immortality, or eternal life. As one expression of twentieth-century Unitarian thinking puts it :

A religious view of immortality is not concerned with persistence or everlastingness as such; so conceived, as implying the mere continuance of the human individual in some extra-terrestrial sphere, the idea of immortality lacks that essential significance and value which a religious view of life implies. . . . Evidence, therefore, which points to the prolongation of temporal existence is not proof of immortal life, although such evidence may provide grounds for presuming personal immortality in so far as it is able to demonstrate the persistence of human individuality after death.*

The evidence here referred to is, of course, that which might be adduced by psychical research. The results of study in this very difficult field have, up to the present, been so inconclusive that the possibility of belief or of disbelief in a personal survival in time after death remains a completely open one.

There is, however, one further aspect of thinking on this subject which involves both the possibility of personal survival and the concept of eternal life. This

* *A Free Religious Faith*, p. 130.

is the so-called "dilemma of universalism". So far as the experience of each individual is concerned, eternal life may certainly have a beginning in time, which comes when one becomes conscious within himself of the ideal that is in God—when, in the language of the mystics, he realizes his oneness with God. This, once embarked upon, proceeds in a different dimension from that of time, and achieves immortality in the dimension of eternity. "The destiny of the soul", says one Unitarian writer on this subject, "is that continuous true vision and love of God which is the content of eternal life." *

But is this the destiny of *every* soul? It is obvious that not every soul has this consciousness of God and of life in the eternal here and now. Many do not rise far above the animal, purely physical level of life, and some it would seem, so far as we with our imperfect knowledge can dare to judge, have said, consciously or unconsciously, with Milton's Satan, "Evil, be thou my good!" We find this in some of the modern faiths that have been mentioned.

Unitarians, and even more specifically Universalists, whose point of view is today identical with that of Unitarians, have long believed that if any soul is saved, none is ultimately lost. "Final communion with God is the destiny of every soul, and not alone of those who know in this present by living experience what such communion is." † If we believe in the solidarity of the human race, in the worth of each personality, in the rationality and harmony of the order of the universe, may it not be—and here we enter upon sheer speculation—that the Catholic doctrine of purgatory

* S. H. Mellone, *Eternal Life Here and Hereafter*, p. 272.

† *Ibid.*, p. 273.

is not altogether wide of the mark; that there *may* be some form of survival in time during which, as now, souls may enter upon the life of eternity? If salvation is eventually to be for all, this seems to be the only reasonable theory. The more evil the life of a man has been, the greater the distance he would have to traverse before he would be capable of entering into eternity.

There would be wide disagreement among Unitarians as to how far such arguments are valid. But all would be agreed upon the fundamental belief underlying all that has here been said, namely, that life in accordance with the highest principles is what really counts, irrespective of what interpretation might be given of the consequences of such a life.

VI

OUR HERITAGE FROM THE PAST

IN what has thus far been written we have been concerned primarily with questions that are essentially independent of particular times and particular places. The mystery of the universe within which man is set, the felt compulsion upon him of the moral law, the views which are taken of human nature and human destiny, are matters to which the mind of man returns in each generation, and concerning which each generation has to provide its own beliefs in the light of the best knowledge of the day. But, as was pointed out in a previous chapter, we can never ignore the fact that we are historically conditioned beings; we can never divorce ourselves completely from the thinking of those who have gone before us in our own tradition. So far as we in the West are concerned, our spiritual inheritance is that of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Multitudes of men and women are today in revolt against many of the ideas represented in that tradition. Such a revolt is understandable when we consider how complete a change in our conception of the universe has been wrought by the discoveries of modern science during the past two centuries. Belief in the miraculous and the supernatural is no longer as easy as once it was, and these elements are closely woven into our religious heritage. There are many who feel that we must begin completely anew, and this is often a reaction, though not usually a permanent one, found in those who

come to Unitarian churches from an "orthodox" background. They object to the continued use of phrases and practices reminiscent of the older scheme of thought which they have outgrown. Some justification for their view may be found in the care which needs to be taken to avoid a confusion which all too commonly takes place in the public mind. Unitarianism, being "unusual", is thought to be one of the wilder evangelical sects which are springing up on all sides today.

The motives of those who urge a break with the thought and practice of the past, not only in religion, but also in education, social organization, economics and even philosophy, are almost wholly good. And they have laid their finger upon an important truth in pointing out that there is much that we have inherited which needs to be abandoned or drastically modified. But such a process can go too far, and result in the abandonment not only of what was bad, but also of the very real values accumulated through the experience of the past. No break, however revolutionary, can ever be complete, and we may count ourselves fortunate that this is so, for our cultural heritage is one which it would be an unimaginable folly to cast heedlessly away.

We need deep roots in the past in order to weather the storms of the present, in all areas of human thought and activity. Not least is this true in religion. The inherited wisdom of the religions of a whole civilization is not likely to be completely in error. Unitarians have, on the whole, shown a soundly realistic attitude in this matter, not prejudging the value of any contribution to religion on account either of its antiquity or its modernity. They have striven, in fact, to think in the spirit of the famous words of Paul: "Prove

all things; hold fast that which is good." It is in the light of such a principle as this that the past from which we have arisen may be considered.

Sifting the Scriptures

Historic religions in modern times keep in touch with their own past by means of the printed word. In earlier periods it was not so. Primitive societies handed down their folklore, poetry, and prophecy from generation to generation by word of mouth, and it changed gradually in the process, which accounts for many ancient legends having been finally preserved in several different forms. This is true, for example, of the stories of the creation of the world and of the great flood which are to be found in the Bible. But later, the invention of writing made it possible to preserve stories and ideas more accurately. The mistakes of copyists were fewer than those of story-tellers, and the great myths which symbolized the experience of the race ceased to evolve with changing circumstances. Each religion became possessed of Scriptures, usually regarded by its adherents as peculiarly sacred and not to be tampered with.

The Bible is, of course, the Scripture with which we are most familiar. It is a human record, describing the religious and political thought and experiences of men and nations in the remote past (roughly from the period 1250 B.C.—A.D. 150). Its contemporary importance lies in the fact that many of the problems which concerned men then are problems which concern men today, and that these problems were tackled by men of great religious insight. We see their experience, their response, their reflection, their faith. The Bible shows

their spiritual aspirations, and their coming to grips with the issues of individual, social, and international life which still confront us today.

But it is only in so far as what they say of their experience rings true in ours that it can become a meaningful guide to us. Words may be just words, learned by rote, and this has in fact been one of the ways in which the Bible has been used. It may be years later that the real significance of words so learned "comes home" to one; it may never do so, and could hardly be expected to if the experience which gave rise to them is not one which is likely to be repeated in us. But where the experience is a recurrent one in human life, the advice of those who have gone before us is of as great help to us as that of those living today—in fact, more so, for few generations produce spiritual guides of the stature of the greatest characters of the Bible.

The Bible is unique in that it is the record of such religious thinking as it developed in one tradition for more than a thousand years. But its effectiveness as a guide to us is enhanced when it is supplemented both by the records of later development of thought and life within the same tradition and by the great insights of other traditions. Today we have the recorded wisdom of the greatest minds of all ages and all places to draw upon in our search for resources for living at the highest level. Unitarians seek to make the fullest use of these records.

The traditional Jewish and Christian belief has been that the Bible is the infallible word of God, the ultimate authority on all questions with which it deals. This has often occasioned much difficulty. Some of the incidents reported in the Bible as historical events are entirely out of keeping with what our modern scientific

view of the world leads us to believe could possibly have happened. Moreover, the Biblical accounts and sentiments often conflict among themselves. None the less, the traditional view of the Bible is still widespread, and its supporters lay their greatest stress not on the underlying spirit of what is said in the Bible, but on the exact words in which it is said. On this foundation a very complicated theological structure has been reared. It has already been remarked how the language in which Jesus expressed his metaphor of the Fatherhood of God was later used as a basis for the metaphysical doctrine of the Trinity.

The same is true of the idea that the Bible somehow gives detailed information about the natural world. In fact, it is a record of spiritual experience, not of scientific thinking. We would not think of consulting a volume of sermons today if we wanted enlightenment as to the view of the universe underlying modern physics, even though there might be illustrations in the sermons drawn from the physical sciences.

Who was Jesus ?

Recent critical studies lead inevitably to the conclusion that both the cosmology and the history of the Bible have severe limitations. The historical events described are at all times mixed with legend, and in the earliest parts myth supplants history altogether. It is, broadly speaking, true that the later the date of the Biblical document, the more reliable its narrative is likely to be. Yet even in the latest documents there are descriptions of incredible events and many inconsistencies between one record and another. There are four Gospels, each claiming to portray the life and

teaching of Jesus. The first three of them agree at many points, while disagreeing at others, but the fourth gives an account which is quite distinct from that of all the others, and presents a Jesus who speaks and acts in an entirely different way.

Since Jesus was the founder and inspirer of the Christian religion which has so deeply affected the lives of all of us, whether we like it or not, his life and teachings are of outstanding interest. What sort of man was he, and what did he really teach? These questions are not at all easy to answer. It is certain that he was one of the greatest prophetic souls of whom history bears record, but there is much material in the stories concerning his life and work that was obviously added by pious interpreters at a later date.

Legends sprang up around the figure of Jesus even within his own lifetime, and it soon became difficult to know which episodes related of him were true and which were imaginary. In those days the two were not as sharply distinguished as they are today. During the first centuries of the Christian era, scores of documents purporting to describe the words and works of Jesus circulated among the churches. Some of these were wildly fantastic. Most of them were excluded from the canon of the New Testament, when this was drawn up, and are now called "apocryphal writings". But the documents which did find their way into the Bible, though certainly more authentic, bear many marks of the same influences.

It is a common occurrence in history for stories, whatever their origin, to gather around the figures of great men. Sometimes the same story is told about a number of different persons. Particularly is this inventive tendency noticeable in times of great emotional

stress, such as the early Christians were under. During the Second World War, for example, dozens of stories circulated, telling of incidents in which the leaders of the combatant nations were supposed to have figured. They were mostly in keeping with the known characters of those leaders, but in the majority of cases were without any foundation in fact.

Modern stories do not usually include any element of the miraculous, because such ideas play no part in our general background of thought today. But in the East they did—and still do. Jesus was the principal character in many stories of miraculous events, some of them founded no doubt upon remarkable cures of mentally based illnesses which actually took place. Similarly, Jesus was credited by his followers with a number of sayings which were in fact current maxims of his day, in the same way as the Jews of an earlier age had attributed their psalms to David and their proverbs to Solomon.

But beyond all such accretions, there is undoubtedly a figure of vast spiritual proportions. The influence of his personality must have been dynamic, if we are to judge by its effects. Here is an instance in which the oft-misused saying "there is no smoke without fire" really holds true. Unitarians, while discounting the unhistorical elements in the narratives, have never been slow to recognize this.

Some, indeed, have gone farther. Not so long ago many Unitarians were prepared to say that Jesus was an ideal man, who lived a perfect life. No less a person than James Martineau would appear to have taken something approaching this as his standard when he argued that we are entitled to dismiss as unhistorical anything recorded of Jesus which does not correspond

with what we conceive to have been his character, but which seems, on the other hand, to reflect the level of thought of those among whom he moved. But this is an illegitimate procedure, supposing as it does that we have a clear picture of the real character of Jesus by which we can judge sayings or actions attributed to him. We do have, it is true, a general reflection of his spirit which is fairly trustworthy, but no detailed picture of his character; and in judging the accounts of his life and teaching the only possible yardstick to use is that of impartial historical criticism.

Unitarians today are more cautious in the claims they make for Jesus. To the misleadingly straightforward question, "Was Jesus the greatest man who ever lived?", put to a large number of Unitarian discussion groups in Great Britain recently, the unanimous reply was that we have no means of knowing, and there was a strong suggestion that such comparisons are odious when they deal with the higher realms of spiritual achievement—as they certainly are.

The Spirit of Jesus

There is no foundation, therefore, for a belief either that Jesus was perfect or that he never said or did things which we think would have been out of keeping with the sort of person that in our view he must have been. It seems, indeed, that the quest for the historical Jesus is foredoomed to failure. This was the conclusion reached by Albert Schweitzer in his lengthy investigation of the attempts that have been made to discover just what sort of person Jesus really was, and he was not perturbed that it should be so. It is not the details of Jesus' life and teaching that are important, but the

general spirit underlying them. "Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery. . . . Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world." *

This spirit has to be grasped *as a whole*. Only so can we free ourselves from the confusion of detail in the records, and realize the creative genius of Jesus in penetrating to the inmost depths of the spiritual heritage of his race and transmitting it to future ages without its legalistic encrustations. The distinguished liberal Jewish scholar, Claude Montefiore, writing of Jesus, said: "A great personality is more than the record of its teaching, and the teaching is more than the bits of it, taken one by one. It has a spirit, an aroma, which evaporates when its elements or fragments are looked at separately." †

The general spirit pervading the personality and the teachings of Jesus is undoubtedly that of love, the original "Christian charity". Beyond this reflected spirit, there is little that is known for certain about him. The time and place at which he lived are known. He was very popular with some people and very unpopular with others, as has been the case with all great prophets. He was finally seized by his enemies among the established authorities and put to a cruel death.

Vastly more than this has been claimed by those who have followed the traditional Christian pattern of thought. Jesus has been the pivot of a whole scheme of

* *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, pp. 397 and 399.

† *The Synoptic Gospels*, vol. i, p. cxi.

salvation. Man, though originally created sinless, was tempted and fell. The whole human race thereby became hopelessly evil and corrupt. God's act of redemption was to send his Son, who was, in his earthly form, Jesus, to suffer death upon a cross as an atonement for the sins of all mankind. One who was without sin died for the sins of the world, and those who place their wholehearted faith in the efficacy of this sacrifice will be saved from the consequences of their participation in the general sin of the race, as well as from those of their own more specific sins. This salvation means the assurance of a blissful and everlasting life in a heavenly realm which is entered after death.

Unitarians reject the whole of this elaborate theory. They reject it in the first place because they see no good reason for accepting it except that it has been taught, with minor variations, by all the traditional churches. But there is more involved in their rejection than this. There exists among Unitarians an acknowledged variety of conceptions of God, just as there exists an unacknowledged variety of conceptions among people allegedly united by subscription to the same creed, but no Unitarian accepts such a view of God as lies behind this doctrine. To say that the universe is under the rule of an omnipotent Being who, in order to excuse men their sins and their guilt for the sins of their ancestors, demands and accepts the sacrifice of his sinless, supernaturally begotten son, is not only out of accord with all that we know of our world but is also an offence to all our conceptions of morality. It takes away man's moral responsibility for his salvation, which it gives him on easy terms, by an intellectual act of acceptance of a creed. It has never been endorsed by any person of

the first rank in spiritual stature, least of all by Jesus. He claimed that salvation depended, not on any atonement, but on *repentance*, that is to say, a sincere attempt to turn away from a low and self-centred way of life towards a larger life dominated and directed by love.

Discipleship

If the traditional Christian estimate of the importance of Jesus for the world of today is to be abandoned, by what is it to be replaced? So far as Unitarians are concerned, the question turns around the idea of discipleship. "The Leadership of Jesus" was one of Clarke's "Five Points", and Unitarians have in the past laid considerable stress upon discipleship to Jesus. The more recent tendency is for Unitarians to claim that their primary allegiance is to principles, rather than to any person or persons. The working-principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance have already been discussed. The principles of truth and sincerity are accepted as the guides of all thinking, and the principles of justice, love, peace and brotherhood as the guides to all action.

Irrespective of who preached the value of these virtues, they are worthy of our allegiance for their own sake. There can be no doubt that, although devotion to a person has been central in many religions, devotion to principles offers a very real, though perhaps more difficult, alternative. The existence of Judaism, with a history much longer than that of Christianity, shows this to be so. Placing the focus of religious commitment here guards against the dangers of an external authoritarianism, where an idea or command is accepted just because a given "authority" can be cited

in its support, and not because of its intrinsic appeal to our minds and hearts.

On the other hand, discipleship to a person does not necessarily mean an acceptance of such authoritarianism. In order to call oneself a disciple of Jesus all that is imperative is that which was involved for his first disciples: a heeding of the call, "Follow me!" This means living in the same spirit as he lived, not a slavish adherence to the letter of everything he is reported to have said. So far was he from prescribing a set form of words to which men must assent in order to share his spirit that the greater part of his teaching was done in the obviously figurative language of parables. He appealed not to any knowledge learned by rote on the part of his hearers, but to their insight and natural perceptiveness. All who are capable of sharing such insights and attempting to live by them can make a fair claim to discipleship, without being called upon to say, "Lord! Lord!"—an attitude which he strongly implied that he did not welcome.

The Unitarian attitude here is substantially that expressed by Martineau: "Between soul and soul, even the greatest and the least, there can be, in the things of righteousness and love, no lordship and servitude, but the sublime sympathy of a joint worship on the several steps of a never-ending ascent." *

Discipleship to Jesus is, on this view, *a serving with him of the principles which he served*, and an acknowledgment of the outstanding way in which he served them. So envisaged, it is in no way incompatible with discipleship to other spiritual leaders who have also served the same principles. If devotion to any person can help us to serve more faithfully the principles they cherished,

* *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, p. 356.

such devotion is certainly to be encouraged. But one must always guard against its development into idolatry.

The very real danger of such a development is shown by the history of Christendom. The person of Jesus has been exalted to such a degree that he is worshipped as a god. The words attributed to him in the Gospels are regarded as an absolute and infallible authority. As Emerson said, churches are founded not upon his principles, but on his figures of speech. This brings into being a type of faith which Unitarians cannot share. In reaction against it they say, again with Emerson, "I am for the principles; they are for the men. . . . They magnify inspiration, miracles, mediatorship, the Trinity, baptism and eucharist. I let them all drop in sight of the glorious beauty of those inward laws or harmonies which ravished the eye of Jesus, of Socrates, of Plato, of Dante, of Milton, of George Fox, of Swedenborg." *

For the vision of Jesus and of those of his followers who have penetrated below the letter to the spirit, Unitarians are thankful. For all other such visions they are thankful too. They seek in every case to distinguish between the moral and spiritual insight and the intellectual framework in which it was set by the accidents of time and place. We could hardly expect any person of bygone times to share the knowledge of the universe that is ours today as a result of centuries of subsequent discovery. If he were living in the modern world, he would express himself differently. But the spiritual experience which underlies what is said is of permanent significance, and Unitarians treasure the moral values which are to be gained from

* *Journals*, vol. i, p. 834.

the inspirational prophets and writers of all ages, not excluding those of today.

In an ever-contracting world we are continually being drawn closer together with those whose spiritual experience is framed in terms of one of the other great traditions of ethical religion. We cannot enter at will into the whole pattern of thought characteristic of those traditions, but we can seek an ever fuller understanding with those who belong to them, and realize that all of them, at their highest levels, converge. Only by keeping ourselves open to the possibility of seeing the highest conceptions of life through new modes of expression, rather than confining ourselves to the terms that have been most customary in our own tradition, can we maintain the living spirit of religion.

Christian History

The main stream of Christian history has followed an entirely different course. The early emergence of the great creeds which are still accepted by most Christians today resulted from a demand for precise and literal religious doctrines—something quite different from either a spirit or a life. Far from being the religion of Jesus, Christianity soon became a religion *about* Jesus. Speculations concerning his nature and his part in a scheme of divine redemption for the world arose, largely through the influence of the mystery religions current in the Mediterranean world of those days, which promised their followers salvation through a form of mystical communion with a dying and rising god. Ideas drawn from Hellenistic thought, notably that of the "logos" or divine Word, were also used in the construction of Christian theology. It thus drew upon

those resources for the interpretation of life and destiny which were most readily available in its day, but it was not, on the whole, a product of calm reflection; it was the work of men emotionally roused to a degree amounting at times to fanaticism. This, it is true, resulted largely from the perils under which they had to live, but it did not provide the soundest of foundations for a system which was later to be regarded as infallibly correct.

As time went by, new influences came to be felt. Christianity developed from a persecuted sect into the official religion of the Roman Empire, and political considerations began to affect the thought of the Church. The Nicene Creed was adopted by a Council acting under pressure from the Emperor, whose motives were primarily political rather than religious.

Another influence at work was that of the Roman genius for legal codification. Excellent though this undoubtedly was in producing a great system of law, it had disastrous results when applied to theology. The language of religion, as used by the greatest spiritual geniuses, is most closely akin to that of poetry. There is no temperament farther removed from the poetic than the legalistic. An attempt to examine a poem as though it were a legal document would be scarcely less absurd than the process which took place in Christian theology. Definition usurped the place of inspiration and, except in the writings of the medieval mystics, the latter almost died. Just as laws were carefully defined so that any departure from them could be distinguished and punished, so the same process took place for religious doctrines. Heresy was a crime.

The Reformation brought little relief from this

process. Its two most outstanding leaders, Luther and Calvin, were both men who had been trained as lawyers before turning to theology. One of the first steps taken by those who broke away from the Catholic Church and set up churches of their own was to draw up creeds which would set the pattern of belief for their communion. Examples of such creeds, still enforced today in the denominations which produced them, are the Westminster Confession (Presbyterian) and the Thirty-nine Articles (Anglican).

Christianity as a way of life was not wholly lost in this welter of formalism. In the darkest times there were always those who managed to penetrate through the husks to the living kernel, and to live in a spirit similar to that of Jesus. But the organized churches could hardly be said to have encouraged this. Outward conformity of speech and conduct was what was required. For the rest, it was better that any deep exploration of the nature of religion should be left to those with a juristic and theological training. Independent thought was dangerous. It might, and often did, result in heresy.

The Unitarian Protest

Unitarianism first arose as a protest against certain beliefs which were taught in the creeds, and soon developed into a protest against all creeds as such. Freedom of belief for all became the watchword. In the seventeenth century John Milton wrote his *Areopagitica* (reissued recently by the Unitarian press in the United States) and John Locke his *Letters on Toleration*, in defence of this principle. Both these men are usually reckoned among the early pioneers of

Unitarianism in England, and the influence of Locke upon Unitarian thinking right down to the nineteenth century was profound.

Unitarianism had no one founder or place of origin. From the earliest times there were dissenters (usually branded as heretics) within the Christian tradition, as within all religious traditions. All those dissenters who sought a broadening of the faith, who insisted on the necessity for reasoned beliefs, who preached freedom and tolerance, were Unitarian in spirit.

As an organized group of churches, Unitarianism first appeared in the early days of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. A number of churches called Socinian, after their leader Socinus, sprang up in Poland. Although these were not Unitarian in the sense in which that word is used today, they nourished the seeds which were later to germinate into Unitarian thought. Their forcible suppression by the Catholics dispersed their members all over Europe, and thus helped to sow that seed more widely.

Unitarian churches were meanwhile flourishing in the mountainous principality of Transylvania, part of modern Rumania. The king himself, John Sigismund, became a strong supporter of the new faith. This was the only time in history when Unitarianism has ever had the power of a state behind it, and it is noteworthy that during this reign an edict was issued which was far ahead of its time in the spirit of tolerance it expressed. It decreed that "preachers shall be allowed to preach the gospel everywhere, each according to his own understanding of it. . . . No one shall be made to suffer on account of his religion." * This, at a time when "heretics" were still being burned at the stake

* E. M. Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage*, p. 224.

by Catholics and Protestants alike in many parts of Europe, was remarkable indeed.

In England organized Unitarianism emerged as a result of ferments at work within other religious groups. A long struggle for a larger liberty within the Church of England culminated in 1774, when Theophilus Lindsey left that church to set up in London the first avowedly Unitarian church in the country. A similar development of thought within the English Presbyterian churches had a different result. Many of the churches as a whole became Unitarian in due course, not by means of a sharp break with the past, but by a process of gradual development. This was possible in their case, as it was not for liberal-minded congregations in the Church of England, because the trust deeds under which the meeting-houses had been founded did not give specific directions with regard to doctrines or forms of service. British Unitarian churches today are therefore of two historical types: there are those which evolved into Unitarianism from something else, and those which were founded as avowedly Unitarian. The latter, of course, provided in their trust deeds for the same freedom of belief and practice.

Exactly the same is true of Unitarian churches in the United States. A great many of the old Congregational churches in New England became Unitarian in the early part of the nineteenth century. Before this time, however, Joseph Priestley, known to history as the discoverer of oxygen, but who was also a Unitarian minister, emigrated to the United States after suffering mob violence in England as a result of his religious and political views. He founded in Pennsylvania the first churches in America to bear the Unitarian name.

Outside of New England, practically all the existing Unitarian churches were founded as such.

This general pattern is repeated in many other parts of the world. Some Unitarian or liberal churches were set up in the first instance by people whose religious attitude was the same as is preserved in those churches today; others have gradually become Unitarian in thought after having originally represented some other form of faith. Some in fact are still minority groups within larger communions which are not liberal as a whole.

Today such groups and churches are scattered through many lands, and most of them are linked together through the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom, with headquarters in The Hague, Holland. But besides those organized in this way there are others who share the same attitude. There is a vigorous and growing Liberal Jewish movement. There is the liberal Brahmo Somaj within the Hindu tradition. There are multitudes of isolated individuals who endorse the liberal religious position but who do not belong to any organized group.

One of the most pressing problems confronted by those who are concerned for the effectiveness of a liberal religious faith in the life of the world is that of finding a means of enlisting these individual supporters within an organized movement. In the present world situation an unorganized faith cannot stand against the impact of those which are powerfully organized. Nothing less than an organization on the scale of those which are striving, as has already been described, for the soul of our civilization, will be adequate to the demands which are made upon liberal religion today. Nothing less than this can prevent the eventual triumph of totalitarianism in religion, and, through religion, in life as a whole.

VII

UNITARIAN PRACTICE

THERE are many people who would disagree strongly with the view expressed in these pages, that the force which gives direction and purpose to the life of a man is his religious faith. They have never been accustomed to think of religion in this way. It is for them one isolated department of life, without much bearing on other departments; a sort of private hobby for those who like to indulge in it. Like the best china, it is brought out on formal occasions and then packed away and forgotten. Religion, they say, is all very well in its place, but it should be kept in its place, and that place is a very limited one.

This results from a very narrow interpretation of what is meant by religion. If it were true that being religious consisted in nothing more than repeating a formal and superficial creed, then such an attitude would be justified. Where belief goes no deeper than this one may endorse the oft-heard remark that it doesn't really matter what a man believes as long as he lives in a decent and law-abiding way. But beliefs which are genuinely held have an inescapable effect on the life of their holder. Where they concern the meaning and purpose of life they constitute a religious faith, whatever the person concerned may call himself.

Unitarians accept the fact that faith and action are necessarily welded together. Evil or purposeless acts betoken a bad faith or the complete absence of one.

Professed beliefs which do not affect the believer's life cannot be taken seriously. As the Epistle of James puts it, "faith without works is dead".

A living faith manifests its effects through all aspects of life, in feeling, thought, and action. Just as it cannot be exhaustively described in terms of intellectual belief, so it does not consist entirely in a feeling about certain aspects of life or about life as a whole. Nor is religion to be equated with a "way of life", though this, too, is an essential feature. It is a force giving direction to the whole of life, by virtue of which man is freed from a subservience to the transient fascinations of the moment.

Both aspects of the interaction between faith and works in producing a lofty human character have already been touched upon. A vision of great principles accepted as a guide in life has its inevitable results in practice, and the moral life in turn produces its own intellectual convictions. Both are rooted in an invincible feeling that this is the way in which man was meant to live.

A brief statement, long used in many Unitarian churches to describe the practical outcome of a free religious faith, runs thus: "In the love of truth, and in the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man." This will serve as a good starting-point from which to begin an examination of Unitarian practice.

The quest for truth, as one of the paramount obligations laid upon Unitarians, has already been described. So, too, has the way in which Unitarians seek to share the spirit of Jesus, rather than attach themselves to any dogmatic statements about his nature. Continuing with the statement from this point, the next

two words are significant: "we unite". Despite all the emphasis upon individual freedom of belief and despite the absence of external constraint, a Unitarian church is none the less a unity, possessed of a corporate spirit of its own.

It is true that there have been many liberal thinkers, aware of the existence of liberal churches, who have yet not sought to attach themselves to any organization. Some have described themselves as "flying buttresses", supporting the church from outside rather than from within. Others have felt no responsibility at all for supporting churches dedicated to principles akin to their own, claiming that a man can be religious without belonging to any church. The latter remark contains some measure of truth, but it is woefully inadequate. It springs from the view that religion is strictly an individual concern, with no roots in social life. But religion has always involved a corporate life as well. The flame of faith resulting from the kindled thought and experience of a group of people is in every way stronger and less easily extinguished by outside forces than a collection of individual flickers. Just as a single rope is able to bear strains vastly greater than could be borne by an equal number of strands in isolation from each other, so the power of the church is greater than the sum of the powers of its individual members. There is an increment of spiritual force which arises from the very fact of their coming together.

If the man who seeks to cut himself off from the life of the church is a great spiritual genius, then he is unwarrantably depriving others of help he can give; if, as is more likely, he is quite an ordinary person, then not only does he have a contribution to place in the common pool of church life, but he also needs the

strength and inspiration which come from a close association with others of a like mind with his own.

A Society of Friends

Unitarians seek to make their church what the Quakers so beautifully call theirs, a "society of friends". Dr. L. P. Jacks described this as "the best name that has ever been given to a religious movement, a true pointer to the Universal Church".* In the churches of a liberal religious faith each individual personality is fully respected, while at the same time a spirit of unity in devotion to a common cause is actively pursued. The church is, to use a metaphor made familiar by the Apostle Paul, one body with many members. All members do not have the same function. Just as each member makes his or her own particular contribution to the body as a whole, so each is supported by the existence of that body. And a warm welcome always awaits those who, sharing the same spirit, seek to become new members.

It has frequently been alleged that Unitarianism is a faith which can appeal only to "intellectuals". Anyone with a wide experience of Unitarian churches will know that such a belief is unfounded. While it is true that Unitarian churches often tend to have a larger proportion of well-educated people than most other churches, none the less they contain members from all walks of life and with all types of education. It is perfectly true that all people are not equally capable of using freedom of belief for large-scale intellectual construction, but this is not what Unitarianism demands. One is not expected to be a Shakespeare in

* *Confessions of an Octogenarian*, p. 157.

order to appreciate great literature, or a Beethoven in order to appreciate good music.

Whatever may be the source of insight, it is the *response* of the individual that counts. A person may attend a Unitarian church each week and always feel in full agreement with all that he hears from its pulpit. That does not make him less than a good Unitarian, *so long as he does not take it for granted that he will always accept what he hears there because he hears it there.* So long as his response is a free response, not dictated by any outside authority, the expression of his beliefs may be wholly in terms derived from a source other than his own thinking. What is usually involved under such circumstances is that the hearer feels, "That is what I believe too, though I have never been able to express it so adequately." Everyone has experienced such a feeling at some time or other; the difference between people lies only in the frequency of its occurrence. None of us is, in the strictest sense, an original thinker. Those who bring less to the common pool in the form of productive ideas often bring much more in many other ways, no less essential to the life of the church and its influence in the world.

The church brings many diverse talents to one focal point, and all benefit. But more than its effect upon its actual membership is involved in the existence of such an organization. The church is a witness in the world, making a far more effective impact upon society than isolated individuals could. Again it should be stressed that there is an urgent need for organizations representing a liberal religious faith to make that faith a force in a world which is being so strongly infiltrated by well-organized dogmatic faiths. The voice of an individual, unless he happens to be an exceptionally

influential person, is usually lost; the voice of a church stands a better chance of being heard, particularly if that church becomes known for its vigorous and independent thought.

Just as the church is a fellowship of friends in the present, so it preserves a fellowship with those who have gone before us in the same tradition. Liberal religion has had its great prophets in the past, and acknowledges its indebtedness to the leaders of all spiritual religions. The church is the custodian of the heritage they have bequeathed to those who come after them. If such a custodian had not existed, many of the great insights of the past might have been lost to posterity, or at least have remained inaccessible to all but a few. The church treasures them and transmits them to each succeeding generation. The spiritual life of any person who cuts himself off from this process is greatly impoverished. Here again the institution of the church fulfils a vital function.

So far as buildings and external appearance are concerned, a Unitarian church is likely to be indistinguishable from other churches. There are no architectural peculiarities common to Unitarian churches which would serve to mark them out. The pattern of general church activities, too, is similar to that of other religious groups. There are the Sunday service, the religious education programme, the men's and women's organizations, and various groups with special interests within the church. In keeping with the principle of individual freedom, each church is autonomous and determines its own practices; its association with the national and international movements is similar to that of the individual with the church.

The minister in a Unitarian church is not regarded

as a priest possessed of particular powers on account of his position, but as the spiritual leader of the group, trained in the intricacies of religious thought and expression, spokesman for the church in the community, active in social enterprises, and ministering to the people of the church on a personal basis.

Minister and members are knit closely together in one fellowship, joining in a co-operative endeavour to realize the highest values in their own lives and to act as a leaven for the betterment of society at large. Within the church, each man and woman is regarded as worthy of the fullest respect, not on account of wealth or profession or social standing, but as a unique personality, and sacred as such. This is one of the few places in modern society, outside of the family, where people meet as individual persons rather than as representatives of some social classification. Gabriel Marcel has aptly called such a relationship "inter-subjective", where others are regarded not as objects from our point of view, but as subjects with us in a reciprocal position. This sense is strengthened through corporate endeavour in pursuit of common ends.

Within the church, each member finds social confirmation of his faith. Whatever may be the case in his everyday life, here he is not swimming against the tide. Here he is in the company of others who believe and feel as he does, and the sense that he is not alone may do much to fortify his determination not to waver in his faith.

A Worshipping Community

However many or few activities the church may organize, there is one which is essential, and which

provides the focus of its life. This is the regular service of worship, the first of the two aspects in which, in the words of the affirmation already quoted, the church reaches out beyond itself: "the worship of God".

Worship is a fundamental feature of all the great religions of the world, and it may take a multitude of different forms. Basically it is, as the writers of *A Free Religious Faith* put it, "the dedication of the soul to the highest, regarded as having supreme 'worth'" (p. 185). The nature of that towards which worship is directed has been variously conceived, sometimes in very unworthy ways (e.g., as the guiding spirit of a particular race, leading it in conflict with other races). Its noblest expression is in the idea of a God who is the source and sustainer of the highest values that we know; One, in the words of a hymn by Robert Bridges,

For whom all is, from whom was all begun,
In whom all Beauty, Truth and Love are one.

The difficulty of forming a definition in words which will do justice to this idea from a theological and philosophical point of view has already been touched upon. Here such difficulties are largely beside the point; an adequate service of worship carries the mind and heart beyond all word-play and argument. In whatever imagery man may clothe "the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity", the mood of worship is far removed from that of speculation and formal definition. If the latter intrudes, it may be either the fault of the person who is leading the worship, for using language which is incongruous with the expressions of devotion that would be most natural today, or it may be due to an unduly prosaic mind in

the participant, which is unable to make use of the large degree of imagery and metaphor present in all religious language.

The dominant mood in worship is *reverence*. This is an attitude of mind which is sadly lacking in our life today, and this lack is responsible for much of the frustration and insensitivity to good and evil that characterize our times. On the other hand, there are many people outside the churches who unquestionably feel the need for reverence in their lives, but who cannot in all sincerity direct it towards the dogmatically defined God of orthodox Christian theology. The Unitarian refusal to define and insistence that imagery be treated as imagery, mystery as mystery, can appeal to such people and give them a satisfying basis on which to participate in the life of a worshipping community.

Unitarian services of worship may vary a great deal. Some are precisely ordered by a written liturgy; others follow a pattern set by custom, within which the detail is much more variable. Whatever forms are employed, they represent the endeavour of this particular church to find the highest type of worship "in spirit and in truth". Since symbolism is treated avowedly as such, it, too, can vary much. There may be a wide appeal to the eye and ear in an attempt to carry the mind outward and upward, or the same effect may be sought by the elimination from one's surroundings of all that could become a distraction from the contemplative spirit. The tendency today is towards an ever fuller enlistment of man's aesthetic sense, in all its aspects, in the service of religious devotion.

Amid all the haste and complexity of modern conditions of life, the hour of worship stands as an oasis of

quiet and calm and recollection. It stands for unity and harmony within the self as well as between all who are participating in the corporate experience. It involves a confession of our failure to live up to the highest insights we have known, and an outreaching for the spiritual reinforcement that will enable us to be more faithful in the future. It expresses thanksgiving for all that life has brought us, and rededication to the service of the highest ideals. At its loftiest levels, it realizes a spiritual communion between man and God.

It is not something into which we enter in order to gain special ends for ourselves, as is implied in so many of the conceptions of prayer current in some other religious bodies. No Unitarian church offers prayers for changes in the weather, or other violations of the due course of natural law to satisfy our own particular demands. Nor is worship intended as a sort of flattery of a God who would thereby be induced to give his favour to the schemes of men.

The effects of worship upon the life of the worshipper are most marked when they are least sought for their own sake. They manifest themselves in a greater moral and spiritual support within to stand against "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", new courage to venture boldly in life, a sense of rededication to all that calls forth man's highest endeavours, above all, unity, harmony, and peace. This is, of course, not something which is to be derived only from Unitarian worship. It is the outgrowth of all deep and sincere worship; to this multitudes of men and women in all ages have testified.

For its full results to become apparent worship needs to be regular—a fixed part of the general pattern of life, not something superficially imposed at lengthy and

irregular intervals. Failure on the part of many of its adherents to realize this has been one of the weaknesses of Unitarianism. None the less, the effects of worship in reshaping personal and social life have been abundantly illustrated within Unitarian churches.

The Service of Man

The second of the avowed objectives of the practical work of the church is "the service of man". During the past century more and more emphasis has come to be laid on the church's responsibility to society as well as to the individual. This emphasis has been particularly marked in liberal churches, though it has by no means been confined to them. It is, of course, not an entirely new development in the history of religious life. Organized religious bodies have always been concerned with the structure and the well-being of the society in which they existed, but the "social gospel" has in recent years been brought farther to the fore in their attention. One example of this appears in the fact that whereas in earlier times missionaries sent out by evangelical churches were charged almost exclusively with the task of "saving the souls of the heathen", today educational and medical work accounts for a much larger proportion of their activities.

The churches of a free religious faith, believing as they do that religion must show its effects in all aspects of the life of man, are bound to concern themselves with social, political, and economic problems. The number of members who believe that it is not the business of religion to interfere in these matters is much smaller in liberal churches than it is in most others. The ideal of a "Kingdom of God upon earth" is taken seriously, and this results in a support for all practical schemes

which would lead in that direction. Without the support and direction of people dominated by religious interests, such schemes tend all too frequently to pay more heed to political or economic dogmas than to the needs of persons, thereby losing the humane spirit which alone can make them fruitful in real life.

Those who do not claim to be "religious" often view with suspicion the intervention of religious bodies in matters of social concern. This attitude is shared not only by those who fear the exposure of their own questionable methods, but also by people who sincerely feel that religious bodies can do more harm than good. It is unfortunately true that the influence of organized religion in social life has not always been for the benefit of the latter. Corrupt political personages and regimes have been supported by churches, as have practices which have delayed the evolution of a juster order of society. Campaigns by religious bodies to prohibit activities harmless enough in themselves have given organized religion as a whole the reputation of seeking to stop people from enjoying themselves. Ridiculous tabus and survivals of earlier ways of thought and conduct ("sacred cows") have been endorsed by some religious sects. Unitarians have dissociated themselves from this type of intervention in social life.

The real social problems which have been made the centre of attention for religious bodies are not always the ones most in need of their intervention. It is true that there have been times when the soup-kitchen type of charity has been badly needed, as it is needed in many places today. It is true, too, that sexual licence, drunkenness, and gambling, the three evils which most churches have reserved for their most vigorous denunciation, have ruined the lives of millions of people.

But these are, for the most part, symptoms of a more deep-seated social malady. Liberal churches, in particular, are today devoting their attention to a search for the underlying causes of these undesirable effects. People who are economically secure do not need soup-kitchens, unless they are visited by such catastrophes as earthquake or flood. People who are adequately fed and clothed are more likely to understand that there are higher ends in life than an all-embracing attempt to satisfy lust or greed or a desire to escape from reality.

Liberal churches are therefore concerned to seek out the roots of the more obvious evils in the life of the individual and the life of society. An attempt is made to understand human psychology, to find out why people choose a lower way of life when there is the possibility of a higher, to straighten out those whose outlook upon life has become warped, to care for the mentally retarded. There is an investigation of the means whereby a just and free order of society may be established, in which all may have their economic needs provided for and be given an opportunity to develop culturally and spiritually.

In dealing with this latter sphere of interest, there is always a danger that religious organizations may become tied to particular parties, and this must be resisted, so far as the liberal church is concerned, since the outlook of parties is almost always dogmatic. While preserving their independence of thought and action, the representatives of a deep religious faith have a duty to make their voices heard on the economic and social causes of human misery. Individuals may and often must, when dealing with these matters, work in and through a political party, but the church as a whole must never become tied to one.

Aims of the Social Gospel

As he confronts the social issues of his day, the Unitarian seeks to foster as far as possible the same sense of corporate responsibility within the community at large as he finds in his church; each must be concerned for the welfare of all, and the ills of one must be felt to be the ills of all. The care of those in misfortune must not remain dependent on the uncertainties of private almsgiving (which has both good and bad effects upon the character of those involved in it), but must be felt to be the responsibility of society as a whole.

What is sought, in a word, is the fulfilment of the injunction, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself". No one should seek benefits for himself or his own group at the expense of others, whether on a local scale or on a world scale; no one should profit from things which are sources of degradation for others. Social pressure should be applied to secure the attainment of these ends. Co-operation should replace unscrupulous rivalry between men and nations. Each person should be respected as an individual, instead of being treated as though he were no more than a statistic in a table. Self-reliance and the fullest possible degree of personal development should be fostered.

These are objectives which are not going to be fully achieved in any short space of time. But they are progressively brought into being in proportion to the efforts devoted to their realization. Such effort is felt by the member of a liberal religious fellowship to be a personal responsibility. It sometimes happens that Unitarian churches as a body take a public stand on

certain social issues, and in many cases the denomination has made its voice heard by resolutions passed at its assemblies. But the implementation of the spirit behind such resolutions has generally been the work of individual members of the churches. The most usual Unitarian procedure has always been to encourage members to take an active part in public life, and to carry out into that sphere the practical results of the thinking and inspiration originating within the church.

The educational field offers particularly good examples of Unitarian practice, since this is one in which activity is constant both inside and outside of the church. In the church itself adult education is a normal part of the programme. Not only is the best thinking of our own day drawn upon in an attempt to grapple with specific problems, but the church is also in a broader sense a "school of life", in which experiences are pooled and the significance of those experiences pondered, in the light of the wisdom of the ages.

The religious education of the child is a special activity of its own, and it is one in which Unitarians have always been pioneers. Some of the earliest Sunday schools were organized by Unitarians. Today modern methods of education, starting from a consideration of the child as a unique individual who has to be helped to find his or her own pattern of religious development, are adopted by Unitarian churches. The idea underlying the Unitarian religious education curriculum is that religion is not a body of information to be handed on, but a state of mind and heart to be stimulated. It is an application of the old adage, "religion is caught, not taught". An attempt is made to arouse a sense of wonder and reverence within

the child, to develop his spiritual perception, and to evoke spontaneously from him the questions to which a religious faith attempts to provide answers. The historical side of religion is thus brought in as a reinforcement of present realities rather than being taught, as it so frequently is elsewhere, as a subject divorced from the child's experience in the contemporary world.

In the educational field at large Unitarians have long been prominent, believing as they do in the potentialities of men which can be more and more fully realized in proportion as they are given opportunities to develop. Education is, of course, one of the chief agencies in providing this opportunity for development. Not only have many outstanding educators been Unitarians, but many other Unitarians have actively supported the work of establishing systems to provide a more widespread and liberal education. Many of the modern English universities came into being largely through the efforts of Unitarians, while in America the non-sectarian public schools resulted from the work of a Unitarian, and are today being defended by Unitarians against strong sectarian pressures. Unitarians believe that education for all should be on the broadest possible basis, and that knowledge should be freely disseminated, however unpalatable new ideas may sometimes be to established authorities. Their support of and active interest in public libraries is another aspect of the application of this belief.

Freedom and Progress

Unitarian belief in civil and religious liberty has been described in an earlier chapter. Such a belief has naturally resulted in efforts directed towards the

establishment of these conditions wherever Unitarians have been active. Liberal religion has been one of the great agencies working for the establishment of a liberal society, and today, when the world is learning anew the truth of the dictum that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, Unitarians stand in defence of man's fundamental freedoms wherever these are attacked. It is unfortunately true that all the other faiths described in Chapter II are illiberal socially as well as doctrinally.* Unitarians are therefore forced to enter the lists actively against them, always endeavouring at the same time to make the issue one of principles, and not one of personalities. The fomenting of hatred against individual men, because they have been rallied to the support of unacceptable principles, is indefensible.

Concern for the rights and liberties of all, with an equal emphasis on the responsibilities of all, manifests itself politically in support for a democratic system of government. But such a system is an unstable one, and can be maintained only by constant effort to bring into being an enlightened public opinion which will carry men of the best type to positions of power. Unitarians have laboured to bring moral considerations into political life, and have themselves taken an active share in the work of responsible government at all its levels.

At a local level, Unitarian churches take a close interest in the affairs of their community, and many of their members are prominent in civic life. In the past, as in the present, the membership rolls of Unitarian churches have shown a very considerable number of

* So far as traditional Christianity is concerned, this now holds good only for the Catholic Church, not for Protestants, with the exception of a few uninfluential groups.

mayors, councillors, and public officials. In national and international affairs, too, Unitarians have made their mark in all countries in which they are established.

The same wide range of activities, from a local to an international scale, marks Unitarian activity in promoting social progress. The force of religion, and in particular of liberal religion, has been behind most of the great social reforms of the past century. The story, so far as Great Britain is concerned, is so impressive as to demand for its telling a substantial volume, R. V. Holt's *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England*. In the United States a competent student of the national history (not himself a Unitarian) has calculated that Unitarians have supplied 150 times more leaders of the first rank than the remainder of the population.

Many social workers of various types are members of Unitarian churches, and the recognized agencies of social service in each locality are supported by churches as a whole and by individual members. The form this service to others takes is usually rather different today from that which it took in previous generations. Large-scale distribution of material comforts to those in need has become less necessary in the more advanced areas of the world, owing to the rise in the standard of living of the poorest sections of the population. This rise has been in part due to social legislation, in which Unitarians have often had a share, and its consequences have been that relief in the form of food and clothing now usually goes to under-privileged countries or to those stricken by war or other calamities.

In enlightened countries the State is more and more taking over the responsibility for caring for the material well-being of the less fortunate of its citizens. As a

result, the efforts of Unitarians and members of many other religious bodies now turn to an increasing extent towards forms of social service in which the personal factor is most important, and which can therefore never be adequately provided for through large-scale schemes organized by an impersonal State. Such work as help to released prisoners in re-establishing themselves as decent members of society, guidance to young people through clubs and other activities, advice on family problems, the care of the old and the chronically ill, falls under this general classification.

International Work

A belief in the ideal of international peace and goodwill leads to support for such agencies in bringing the peoples of the world together as the United Nations. Unitarians co-operate in spreading information about these agencies and in encouraging greater support for them. It was a Unitarian who suggested the establishment of United Nations Day, now observed in many parts of the world.

The international outlook of Unitarians in specifically religious matters is shown by their refusal to undertake missionary activities of the conventional type. Instead of trying to swing people out of one religious tradition into another, Unitarians have sought to collaborate with members of all ethical faiths in attempts to find the highest levels within their own tradition, together with a respect for other traditions and a willingness to learn from them. Unitarians have played an active part in the work of the World Congress of Faiths, which seeks to establish a better understanding and a closer fellowship between those belonging to all the world's great traditions of ethical religion.

Work among less advanced races, besides taking this form, has included active steps to raise the standard of living at all levels, to introduce education and sanitation, and to bring into being a sense of self-respect and self-confidence among the peoples concerned. British Unitarians have long supported a mission of this type in the Khasi Hills of Assam, now under the direction of the Rev. Margaret Barr. Considerable support from Unitarian sources has also gone to Dr. Albert Schweitzer's hospital in equatorial Africa. Unitarian Service Committees have been established in several countries to give aid of all kinds to stricken areas of the world, without distinction of creed or colour, and always with the basic aim of helping the people concerned to reach a level of economic and personal independence.

VIII

ENDS AND MEANS

WHATEVER criticisms anyone may see fit to level at the faith of a Unitarian, it certainly cannot be said that it is irrelevant to life as experienced by men and women today. It is a form of faith that is meaningful in the modern world. Furthermore, if the argument of the first two chapters of the present work carries any weight at all, then the Unitarian alternative in the present struggle of faiths offers at least the possibility of being the positive road which could lead to the salvation of our civilization, so that we may not lose the culture which has been so slowly and painfully built up during the course of many centuries.

There will be those who will agree with the writer that this is definitely so, and that such a faith, whatever its name or source, and whatever its detailed expression, is essential to the survival of the highest values that mankind has come to treasure.

Yet it is not to this argument that we must appeal in the last resort. The faith of a Unitarian is to be justified, if it is to be justified at all, by such arguments as those of the third and subsequent chapters. Not even so lofty an aim as the preservation of civilization can become an acceptable motive for the adoption of a faith, unless that faith carries conviction on its own merits. Ultimately we have to adopt a faith as our own because we are entirely convinced that it gives us the highest vision of truth that we are at present able

to achieve. It must give an interpretation of our lives and their cosmic setting which calls forth our free and spontaneous assent. Such a faith should, we may be sure, make for the survival of the highest human values, but this is the effect of something which is sought from other motives.

History bears record of many attempts to use religion for ends other than its own. When Marx, following Kingsley, spoke of religion as "the opium of the people", he was simply giving an accurate description of one particular form such degradations of religion may take. Oppressors have used "the consolations of religion" to make the oppressed more content with their present lot, promising them "pie in the sky when they die". Similarly, people who have some particular axe to grind have frequently sought to use religion, or the names of great religious leaders, to support their views. Thus, it has been argued that Jesus was a socialist, or an exponent of "free enterprise", or a pacifist, or a total abstainer.

This type of approach to religion is quite indefensible. "Religious sentiment", writes Sir Walter Moberly, "may be fostered as a means to an end for the purpose of 'moral rearmament', as a bulwark to the institutions of the country and a counterweight to Communism. . . . Such exploitation of . . . religion for ends other than its own would be the ultimate profanity."* With this we may cordially agree. We are not concerned to argue that religion should be used for good ends rather than for evil ones (though it has frequently been used for both), but to maintain that the whole idea of religion as primarily something to be used as one would use a tool or a medicine shows a completely

* *The Crisis in the University*, pp. 103-4.

distorted perspective. Social usefulness is certainly a commendation for a faith, but in the end social usefulness alone cannot cause it to survive if it becomes cut off from its roots in sincere conviction. There must be no ulterior motives in sight when a religious faith is adopted.

It has been well said that a forced morality is no morality at all, and precisely the same holds true of a religious faith. Those who profess a faith not because they share fully in its spirit, but through fear of consequences if they do not, or hope of reward if they do, are not examples that we hold up for admiration. We honour the memory of those who died rather than abandon their sincere convictions. We may understand and sympathize with those who recanted under pressure, but we do not honour them. Fear and hope have been much exploited in religious history, but a genuine faith does not arise from an appeal to them. The true spirit of devotion appears in such utterances as the prayer attributed to the Catholic saint Teresa: "O God, if I serve thee from fear of hell, send me to hell; if I serve thee for love of heaven, keep me from heaven; but if I serve thee for love of thyself, withhold thyself not from me." Unitarians might not use this language, but they recognize and appreciate the sentiments expressed.

Nothing short of a complete devotion to the Object of his faith is acceptable for the genuine believer. An unqualified devotion of this sort, if constrained by outward circumstances, is a form of slavery. A progressive religion for today can tolerate slavery in no form at all; it involves a free response to the call of One "whose service is perfect freedom". The faith and action of a Unitarian are based upon a sincere and spontaneous

response to those things in life which call forth man's moral and spiritual allegiance. In his approach to the great Unity behind and beneath all these he can say with Augustine, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

Invitation to Fellowship

Unitarians have a very high regard for their churches, but they are none the less painfully aware of the many imperfections of those churches. Like all human institutions, they often fall far short of the ideals they profess. They strive, but they do not always achieve. Not all the practices which they deplore in churches of the traditional type have been fully abandoned by Unitarians, and not all of the new ideas and practices that have come to be adopted among them may eventually turn out to be for the best. Fully recognizing their own limitations, Unitarians work together for the evolution of a pattern of religious life and thought which will be adequate to the needs of the times. The door is never closed to new experiments, or to a considered judgment on all forms of religious thought and activity, old and new. However short of their ideals Unitarian churches may fall at present, at least they know what they are aiming for, and are determined ultimately to reach it.

In some places Unitarian churches are still comparatively small and weak, where they should be vigorous and strong. In some large centres of population there is no Unitarian church at all. Unitarianism has not yet succeeded in making itself so well known that all who share its outlook are at least aware that they have an opportunity of linking themselves

with an organization. It is a common observation among Unitarians that there are a great many people who are "Unitarians without knowing it", and the truth of this is borne out by the fact that new members are continually joining Unitarian churches with the comment that they would have joined years ago, but they never before knew that there was a church which shared their outlook.

There will always be those who feel the appeal of the faith that Unitarianism represents—people who believe in the value of a disciplined freedom, in reasonableness, and in a charitable outlook; people who seek to gain what inspiration they can from the lives and insights of the past without binding themselves to outmoded dogmas and superstitions; people who demand that the problems of the present be attacked with all the resources of modern discovery, and who endeavour to blaze a trail to ever higher levels in the future. These men and women the Unitarian recognizes as comrades in a cause he cherishes above all others. To all of them he offers the right hand of fellowship.