On Being a Unitarian

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The Lindsey Press, 1-6 Essex Street, London WC 2

Distributors in North America:
Unitarian Church of Vancouver,
949 West 49th Avenue,
VANCOUVER 14, British Columbia, Canada

Set in 10 on 12 point Old Style

Printed by LSG Printers (Lincoln), Chronicle Building, Waterside North, Lincoln

PREFACE

THE rejection of traditional forms of religion by ever-increasing numbers of men and women has produced ferment and crisis in ecclesiastical circles. Can they adapt to meet changing conditions? Will any form of organized religion meet the needs of those who have left the old forms? These are questions of more than usual interest to Unitarians, who have for centuries provided a home for at least some of the refugees from orthodoxy.

During the past few years I have had the privilege of talking with hundreds of people who have wanted to know more about where Unitarians stand with regard to matters which are of deep concern to themselves. Many of these have subsequently found a congenial home within a Unitarian congregation. Yet it remains notoriously difficult to give a short explanation of just what Unitarianism is. Having rejected the idea that a religion can be summed up in a set of words, Unitarians have become very conscious of the inadequacy of words, though they most certainly do not for that reason remain silent.

But the attempt to express in words what it means to be a Unitarian has to be made over and over again in this world of change. It is to respond to this need, however inadequately, that the words which follow have been written.

I am most grateful to Greta Stewart for typing the manuscript and to my wife Margaret for reading the proofs and making a number of very valuable suggestions. It will be obvious from the text how much I owe to Unitarian thinkers and writers of the past four centuries, without, I hope, being too parochial in my appreciation. My chief indebtedness, however, is expressed in the dedication.

PHILLIP HEWETT

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I

AN EPOCH OF HOMELESSNESS

In recent years some of the 'stately homes of England' have been blown up with dynamite, their owners having chosen this as the easiest way of coping with the impossibility of living in them any longer. Others have crumbled less dramatically into uninhabitable decay. Others again have been converted from homes into museums, showplaces or public institutions.

Something like this has happened in our century to the mansions of thought, many of them elaborate and impressive, which were built by our ancestors to give themselves a home amid the storms of life in a bewildering universe. 'In the history of the human spirit,' wrote Martin Buber, 'I distinguish between epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness. In the former, man lives in the universe as in a house, as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field, and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent.'[1]

Our own age is one of homelessness. There are still, it is true, a few remote and sheltered corners of the earth in which men still live in the homes of their ancestors, following a traditional pattern of life in which all the parts fall into a familiar and universally accepted scheme handed down from one generation to the next. This was the way most people lived in the past. Each person had his accepted position and function in an apparently unchanging order of society. The traditional wisdom of the tribe told him how to think and act in each situation. His life

was not easy, but at least he had the reassuring sense of feeling at home in the setting in which he lived.

The chances of a person's being born into such a form of society in any part of the world grow smaller and smaller each year. Modern communications take care of that. Revolutions in people's ways of thinking and living could in days gone by be confined to certain parts of the world and leave the other parts totally unaffected. Not so today. The revolution of our era is world-wide in scope.

The uprooting is most obvious where a person has moved far from the surroundings into which he was born. During the present century millions have been uprooted against their will, forced by circumstances over which they had no control to leave their familiar setting and to reconcile themselves rapidly to new surroundings, new patterns of thought and behaviour. Millions more move voluntarily, and often continue to move at frequent intervals. Each such move means another breaking of personal and traditional ties, a further step away from the old settled order of things.

But the process is equally inevitable, though slower, for those who stay in the same place. The same place no longer remains the same. It rolls away from us even when we try to stand still. It is possible to become a stranger in the city in which one was born. But even more significantly, it is possible to become a stranger in the universe in which one was born. The old landmarks we once used as guides are being swept away. The person who desperately wants to live by inherited traditions finds it increasingly impossible.

The only prediction that can safely be made about the future is that it will be vastly different from the present, and far more so from the past. Change is rapid and at times devastating. We know that it holds great promise

and yet we are often more keenly aware that it holds a great threat. This threat is of a different kind from the ones most commonly feared in the past. Our ancestors lived in apprehension of a failure of the crops, or sudden and inexplicable epidemics, or natural catastrophes arising out of unknown and possibly supernatural causes. For us, the enemies are more likely to be our own creations, the products of our new ways of thinking and of doing things.

From a purely intellectual standpoint, the changes recently made in man's understanding of himself and of the world in which he lives have marked a great advance. But they have often wrought havoc in his emotional life. No longer is there any assurance that all our problems can be solved by processes of logical thinking, now that depth psychology has gained some few insights into the vastness and the potency of the unconscious realms of the human psyche. Gone too is the assurance of living in an intimate universe in which everything revolved around an earth upon which in turn everything revolved around man. The being who once regarded himself as the crown of creation feels reduced to insignificance by the disclosures of modern astronomy, till the ancient assurance in the *Book of Deuteronomy* that 'underneath are the everlasting arms' comes far less naturally to the lips than the prescient words uttered by Pascal as he confronted the unfolding of the universe at the very dawn of the modern era: 'The eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me.'

The universe pictured by the sciences seems far less warmly hospitable than the universe as pictured in pre-scientific days. The world of astrophysics and analytical chemistry is not one in which the spirit of man naturally feels at home. But the edge would have been taken off our discomfort if the traditional sense of community had remained as a reinforcement for the individual. Here too

the old order has broken down. The small group or tribe in which a man was known and accepted as a person is no more. In the mass society which has taken its place, the individual feels that he personally counts for less and less. Furthermore, he is only too often regarded as a functionary, more or less interchangeable with any number of similar functionaries, rather than as a person in his own right.

Much has been written and said in recent years about the process of depersonalization in industry, which sets the pattern for so many of our social practices. Just as progress in thought, by which man hoped to free himself from ancient error, has increased his sense of alienation in the universe, so also progress in technology, by which man hoped to free himself from dependence upon the strength of his own arm, has too often turned him into little more than a part of his own machines. A prominent industrialist declared a few years ago that 'the biggest trouble with industry is that it is full of human beings'. With the rapid development of automation, industry itself is in process of rectifying this situation, but whether this will in fact bring greater freedom remains to be seen. In the meantime depersonalization, symbolized in the referring to workers simply as 'hands', has been the dominant effect of industry upon the human spirit. The same attitude runs over into other contexts, as in the case of a class's examination results being evaluated with the comment: 'There's some promising material in this group.' The furthest extreme of this tendency is found in military thinking, where the agonized deaths of thousands of persons can be presented simply as statistics in a table.

Under these conditions a man stands in danger of losing his sense of personal identity as well as his sense of belonging and of having a home. Any remaining feeling of security is further undermined by his awareness of the threat of

annihilation hung over the heads of us all by the world's stock-pile of nuclear weapons, stored in quantities well beyond the requirements for the total destruction of life on earth. Subtler but equally real threats to survival, such as the soaring rate of over-population and the increasing pollution of the earth's surface, make their presence felt more insistently all the time. No wonder that ours is an age in which philosophies of despair flourish.

The same could hardly be said of religion in the traditional sense. Like so many other features of the past, religion today seems remote and irrelevant so far as great masses of people are concerned. It is true that the conventional bow to God is still socially acceptable, especially among politicians trying to give an air of respectability to their policies and slogans, but this has become no more than one of the meaningless formulas of mass persuasion used by those who market ideas or commodities.

The ancient phrases of traditional forms of religion, which emerged new-minted from the vital experience of men and women centuries ago, today pass back and forth upon the wind, scarcely raising a vital response in anyone. We speak of someone having 'taken up' religion as we would speak of his having taken up chess or stamp collecting.

As for the organizations associated with religion in the conventional sense — the churches — these are regarded either as irrelevant survivals from another world or as social clubs of some value for the contacts to be made at them. The historical forms of religion have declined steeply in influence throughout the world in recent years, despite such local exceptions as the spread of Islam in Africa or the superficial 'success' of most forms of Christianity in North America. If measured in terms of their influence on the everyday outlook and conduct of the

people, historical religions count for less today than ever before.

The average person looks at a church in a quizzical or cynical way. To him it represents something out of line with the rest of his experience. To belong to such an institution, it would seem, you need a number of qualifications at which he balks. You should be prepared to use a special vocabulary, quite different from the one in which you express your normal everyday concerns. You should have a rather starchy, Victorian view of life, with particular reference to stopping people from enjoying themselves (especially on a Sunday). You should have a fairly pronounced feeling that you are better than other people, and appointed to sit in judgment upon their conduct and affairs. You should have a strong antiquarian interest, which makes you a keen student of the history of the kings of ancient Israel and of the empires of Egypt and Babylon. You should be gullible enough to believe such stories as that Jonah lived three days inside a fish, that Noah's Ark with its animal cargo figured in the real history of the world, that water could suddenly and magically be transformed into wine. Finally, you should believe in the geographical existence of places called Heaven and Hell, and in the virtues of prayer as a means of procuring fine weather at a time when we have been getting too much rain.

Practising members of traditional churches may object that this is a caricature, which of course it is. But like most caricatures, it contains enough elements of truth to come uncomfortably close to the mark. Many of the contortions through which traditional churches are now going represent no more than an attempt to dress up old ideas and practices in new and glamorous clothing. But this can have little success in making them more acceptable

to the world of today. A few ingenious people may find forms of interpretation which, for them at any rate, reconcile traditional vocabulary and customs with personal integrity, but most people are scarcely likely to go to all this trouble. In the realm of morals, matters are even worse, for changes in traditional attitudes cannot be masked as readily as they can in the realm of thought. Yet the traditional morality, strongly influenced by a rejection of the 'things of this world' and a negative attitude towards sex, must inevitably change. Change is not necessarily for the better, but it cannot be steered towards the better by those who resist it altogether.

Religion, then, is thrown into the melting-pot along with everything else in the tumultuous world of the twentieth century. The world of change into which we have been born was aptly summed up by one of its most acute observers, the philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead. As recorded by Lucien Price, he said:

> 'I was at Cambridge in the 1880's, first as an undergraduate, later as one of the staff. It was from two hundred to two hundred and fifty years since mathematics had had its fresh impulse from men like Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton; there were certain borderlands where affairs in that science were considered indefinable, but in the main, mathematical physics looked sound and solid . . . . By the turn of the century, nothing, absolutely nothing was left that had not been challenged, if not shaken; not a single major concept. This I consider to have been one of the supreme facts of my experience.'
>
> 'Could the same be said of religion and ethics?' I asked.
>
> 'Yes, with this difference, that philosophy and science welcomed these new hypotheses which upset their old ones, and thus profited by them, whereas religion resisted the new ideas and has suffered in consequence.'[2]

The upheavals of the late nineteenth century were only the first of a series which have transformed the world. Scientific, technological, economic, military, sociological, political, religious change is inescapable in our century. It may be resisted; it may be accepted; it may even be steered; it cannot be checked.

With little experience from the past to guide us, most people have no real grasp of how to live in such times as these. Some are exuberant in their enthusiasm for change. They see only the positive aspects of each new development and welcome it as a further step in human progress. Others see only the negative aspects, the catastrophic possibilities, and urge us to turn back to the old ways of life and thought before it is too late.

A great many people — perhaps most people — are simply not alive to the realities of our situation. They take what comes without ever pausing to ask why. They initiate nothing. They question little. They drift with the tide. Yet even those content to accept such a passive role cannot avoid sharing the troubled spirit of the age as it expresses itself in worries and tensions, outbreaks of violence, fear of war or disaster, an underlying sense of general insecurity. However much a man may turn his eyes only towards technological progress, his own financial success, and the material satisfactions which these may bring, he cannot evade the subconscious influence of the all-pervasive fears and disturbances of the age in which he lives.

Far more profoundly affected is the person who makes a conscious effort to understand the world and take an intelligent and active part in its life. Such a person feels in the depths of his own being the excitements, the upheavals, the apprehensions, the perils, and the dilemmas of contemporary life. He himself experiences the forces

and counterforces surging back and forth beneath the glittering surface.

Young people growing up into the world of the present share this awareness. So do writers and artists. So do scientists aware of the limitations as well as the achievements of science, who will not abandon the intellectual rationality that is a part of their scientific training, but yet ask something more of life than this. An awareness of what it means to live in the world of today is shared also by all who are trying to enter into a sympathetic understanding of their fellowmen, and to grasp the essentials of how to live fully and deeply in a world from which the old signposts and landmarks have vanished.

Some people within the existing religious organizations have responded strongly to this same awareness. They are often regarded by their fellow-members as radicals or trouble-makers, but in many denominations they have made their presence felt, and in some they have begun to exert an influence.

Among religious organizations, the Unitarian movement is uniquely equipped to respond as a whole to the challenges of the present. Originally shaped in radical protest against the traditional religious order, it has continued down to the present day to explore new paths in religion. Unitarians are therefore encouraged to look forward, not backward, and to respond fully to the impact of changing ideas and ways of life. Many of them became Unitarians through a process of uprooting themselves from the religion of their ancestors because that religion seemed to have nothing relevant to say to their own experience.

Even those who grew up in Unitarian circles have experienced the same process in a less radical way, for one of the features of Unitarianism is that it changes constantly in response to its adherents' changing experience of life and

their changing reflection upon that experience. A Unitarian of today looks at life very differently from a Unitarian of fifty years ago, or even twenty-five years ago; yet there is a basic continuity with the attitudes of a Unitarian of four hundred years ago.

Unitarianism represents an attempt to make sense of life as it is, and to find effective ways of living it. Thus it shares in the basic objectives of all forms of religion. Where it differs from most forms of religion is in its refusal to be tied down to ideas and attitudes formulated in the past. The best our ancestors could achieve is by no means necessarily the best in the vastly different world of today. A religion for our own day must reckon with the facts of our own day. It must express the real feelings of human beings in this new and bewildering age. It must not conflict with the best thought of our times, provisional though all ideas must be. It must be flexible enough to grow with new advances in knowledge. It must help the individual in his personal growth and ability to cope with the demands of life in such times as these. And it must bear fruit in social life, particularly in promoting the worldwide understanding and mutual acceptance that has to grow out of our consciousness of the one basic fact of our common humanity.

In this direction Unitarians attempt to move. It is a difficult and never-ending process. But it holds the promise of relevance to human needs and aspirations in a world where the ancestral homes are no longer habitable.

II

FINDING A FOOTING FOR FREEDOM

FINDING a footing amid the bewildering cross-currents of the contemporary world is a delicate and precarious process. Most difficult of all is deciding where to begin. Is there firm ground anywhere? How can you determine which way to go, either in thought or conduct? What warrant can you give for your ideas or your actions, particularly if they differ from the most conventionally accepted ones of your time and place? To say, 'Because I choose to', is scarcely sufficient, for it prompts, fairly enough, the question, 'Why?' This question 'Why?' has always lurked in the background, challenging established beliefs and practices. Today it cannot be evaded. Reasons have to be given by anyone who is seriously asking to be considered a responsible person.

A wide range of possibilities is open to anyone trying to answer the question 'Why?', though some of them were far more realistic options in the past than they are today. During what Buber called 'epochs of habitation' it was difficult, for example, to overthrow an appeal to common consent: 'Everyone believes that' or 'Everyone does that.' What further warrant was needed? It was a rare and rash person who would presume to suggest that everyone might in fact be wrong.

Where an argument of this sort is used today, it is usually more cautiously phrased, taking the form that this particular idea or action stands in need of no detailed arguments in its support, since it is so obviously and self-evidently right.

Whether expressed bluntly or subtly, such an appeal to universal consensus carries less and less weight in the world today. We are well aware that there is practically nothing that everyone believes and does, or that is so self-evident as to be beyond question. What is approved by a majority in one part of the world is disapproved by an equally large majority in another part of the world. What was believed by 'everyone' a few years ago is now believed by no one. Whitehead's description of the downfall of Newton's scientific theories, which had seemed so unassailable a century ago, provides an excellent example.

A second type of appeal which can be made by the person in search of a firm footing is to the authority of a particular institution or person. 'The government ordered me to do it, so I did it.' (So Adolf Eichmann argued before the war crimes tribunal in Jerusalem). 'The Bishop, or the Pope, has so decreed.' 'This person is so much wiser than I, that I accept what he says without question.' In religion, appeal to this type of authority usually follows the form: 'This is the teaching of the Church, so I have to accept it' — or: 'This was taught by such-and-such a prophet, or divine being, and who am I to set my fallible judgment against it?'

A somewhat different appeal, but of basically the same sort, is to the written word. Uncritical acceptance of whatever one reads in the newspaper is perhaps the lowest form of this. But there have been and are more widely defended forms. The writings of Aristotle were once so highly regarded as giving the last word on every subject with which they dealt that during the late Middle Ages he was referred to simply as The Philosopher. The classics of China, the Muslim Koran, the Granth of the Sikhs, have all in the same way been looked upon by many people as the last word, the ultimate authority. So, in the same

way, for most Protestant Christians, the Bible is the final authority. Ways of interpreting and using it may be in dispute, but its final authority is not. To claim the Bible as one's warrant is, on this view, to give a complete and unanswerable justification.

As soon as you begin to doubt the final authority of any of these institutions, or persons, or books, the case collapses. Either you accept them on trust or you don't accept them as a final court of appeal at all. Once you recognize how many of them there are and how widely their verdicts vary, you are at a loss as to how to choose between them. An ever-broadening consciousness of this fact, coupled with an awareness that blind acceptance of an 'authority' of this sort is an abdication of personal freedom, has brought about a widespread repudiation of traditional authorities. But new ones spring up with disconcerting frequency.

A third type of appeal looks inward rather than outward. It bases itself upon what is sometimes called intuition, sometimes revelation, or the voice of God speaking directly to you as an individual. In George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* the heroine says:

'I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.'

'They come,' replies Robert, 'from your imagination.'

'Of course,' she says. 'That is how the messages of God come to us.'

This phenomenon can be interpreted in various ways, but it certainly exists. At times it has led people in odd and irrational directions. But as part of a broader process, including reason, it seems to lead to insights not otherwise attainable even in science. Alexis Carrel, himself a distinguished scientist, wrote: 'Men of genius, in addition to their powers of observation and comprehension, possess

other qualities, such as intuition and creative imagination. Through intuition they learn things ignored by other men, they perceive relations between seemingly isolated phenomena, they unconsciously feel the presence of the unknown treasure . . . . A great scientist instinctively takes the path leading to a discovery. This phenomenon, in former times, was called inspiration.'[3]

As in science, so also (and more obviously) in art, this process is wholly compatible with individual freedom. Its reliability, taken alone, as a guide to action is more open to question. In religion it has been the characteristic approach taken by such people as the Hebrew prophets, including Jesus, by the mystics of the various religions of the world, and by such groups as the Quakers. It has also been part of the Unitarian approach to life for centuries past.

More prominence as a Unitarian procedure has, however, been given to an appeal to reason, the process of argument to establish a conclusion from facts which can be demonstrated and observed. This was the way of the Greek philosophers, the Stoics and humanists of a later age, and of scientists in the modern era. It has been stressed in the Unitarian movement since its earliest days. From the most casual glance at the Unitarian literature of the sixteenth century, one is struck by the recurrence of the phrase *recta ratio:* right reason.

There have been times since then when the use of reason has been narrowed to a literalistic and unimaginative logic-chopping. But generally it has had a far broader application than this, finding room for all the various ways in which a person can open himself to the influences of growing knowledge and experience.

In his personal search for a firm footing from which to take stock of what it means to live this life and how it may most productively be done, a Unitarian stands at the far

end of the scale from anyone who is prepared simply to endorse second-hand ideas, whether relayed through public opinion or through supposedly authoritative institutions, persons or books. He insists on thinking for himself and trying to plan his own way of life.

In earlier times appeals by Unitarians to external authorities — the Bible and the figure of Jesus in particular — were frequent. The whole history of the movement has been marked by a gradual swing away from this emphasis, towards an appeal to what James Martineau in the nineteenth century called the authority of reason and conscience, and which today would be called the informed and responsible judgment of the individual. A painstaking attempt to take account of all known facts is combined with imaginative vision to produce a well-integrated and balanced insight into life and its problems.

Needless to add, such a process gives no guarantee of infallibility. But infallibility is in any case a will-o'-the-wisp in this world of uncertainties, despite the continued existence of so-called 'authorities' whose pronouncements may not under any circumstances be questioned. There are still too many of these in the world, and too many places where it would be unsafe, to say the least, to challenge them. The fact that there are so many of them, and their pronouncements differ so widely, makes it easier for anyone who has free access to information about what is being said and done in all parts of the world to see through their pretensions and try to find a more reasonable way of charting his own course in life.

It would be unrealistic to pretend that freedom is an easy alternative. A person may in fact be far less free than he thinks he is. What he feels to be his own spontaneous and reasoned decision may turn out to be simply an echo of forgotten demands inculcated into him in his

youth, or of subsconscious wishes and fears that enslave him as effectively as any outside authorities could do.

In spite of risks such as these, Unitarians have still felt the way of personal freedom to offer the best possibilities of progress. This is where Unitarians have found their footing down the ages, often in times and places where freedom was a less popular word than it is today. Today, in fact, the word has been so abused by its use as an ideological weapon that a distinguished philosopher could go so far as to say that 'the only thing constant in the meaning of "freedom" is the tendency of the word to express and generate favourable feelings.'[4]

Such a verdict is exaggerated, as people can testify who know from first-hand experience the difference between freedom and slavery. The past four centuries, during which Unitarianism has existed as an organized movement, have been marked by a continuous struggle for freedom and the rights of the individual in all aspects of his life. In that struggle Unitarians have always been active. When they came briefly to power in one state, Transylvania, in the late sixteenth century, it became the first country in Europe to establish freedom of religious belief.

In such a policy Unitarianism was true to the Renaissance spirit out of which it arose. One of the great keywords of the Renaissance was freedom. As against the massive authoritarian system of the Middle Ages, with church and state knit closely together as part of a vast apparatus within which each person had his appointed place — a place it was not for him to question — the Renaissance man made his claim to individual freedom and initiative, liberty to determine for himself his own way of thinking, his own way of making a living, his own patterns of conduct. The modern man who emerged out of the conflict and breakdown of the old order was a liberal,

liberalis, a free man, one who believes in, demands and practises freedom. Scientists asserted their freedom from the restrictions laid upon them by theology. National groups asserted their freedom from the repressive power of the old empires. Writers and artists asserted their freedom from censorship. And in religion men asserted their freedom to think for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions. Many were not wholehearted about this. They endorsed only a strictly limited freedom. But those who were wholehearted about it, who shared to the full the spirit of the age, were among the earliest pioneers of the Unitarian tradition.

Since that time Unitarians have continued to work for freedom at all levels of life, not just at one. In the first place they have worked for the emancipation of the human mind so that it may follow truth wherever it may lead, undeterred by prejudices, fears, inherited beliefs and untested assumptions. This is the most difficult area of all in which to assert one's freedom, yet without freedom here other forms of freedom provide only unused opportunities. The attempt has to be made over and over again, and each person's freedom of thought tested by open discussion and consideration of varying points of view.

The second level of freedom for which Unitarians work is that which removes external rather than internal limits upon the integrity of the individual's thought and action. No one should be permitted to say: 'Thus far shall your thinking go and no further!' Each person should be free to reach his own conclusions and voice them openly.

Thirdly, the idea of a free church has been central among Unitarian concerns. No creedal requirements are made upon those seeking to join a Unitarian church. Other religious groups may have promoted the idea of a free church in the sense that the church should be free of state

control. Unitarians have insisted also that it be free in its internal structure, so that wide divergences of opinion are allowed not only to exist, but to interact and enrich each other within the fellowship of the church. There is usually a broad consensus within the congregation on important matters, but almost everywhere dissenting minorities will take a different point of view, and express it without embarrassment or bitterness. Such minorities may be of several sorts. One may represent the remnant of the dominant view of the preceding generation; another may be the vanguard of what is going to be the prevailing view of the next generation; others again may represent an experimental point of view which will not stand the test of time. It is virtually impossible to identify where particular groups stand within this classification; in fact, the classification itself is too neat to be wholly accurate. But the important fact is that the freedom of these various points of view to co-exist and inter-act within the church is safeguarded and cherished.

The fourth area in which Unitarians have been concerned to maintain and extend liberty is that of the state. No one can be wholly free as an individual unless he lives in an order of society where basic freedoms are upheld and respected. Unitarians have often had to live under political systems where such respect was rudimentary or non-existent. But they have always worked for those civil and religious liberties which will extend to others the same freedom as they claim for themselves.

All this is on the positive side. On the other hand, it must be conceded that Unitarians have found the idea of freedom no easier to handle and put into practice than have so many others who in their various ways have tried to do the same. Some Unitarians have thought the establishment of a democracy to be a sure safeguard of

liberty. But that isn't true. Socrates was put to death by a democracy. The tyranny of a majority over a dissenter may be as bad as the tyranny of an autocrat or despot — in fact, it may be worse, because it is much harder to dislodge.

Part of the problem is that too much of the classical Unitarian approach to freedom has been based upon an unsound philosophy. This was associated, in particular, with John Locke, one of the greatest figures in English philosophy. Locke played an important part in the ferment of thought that brought the Unitarian movement into being in the English-speaking world, and was the greatest single influence upon the thinking of Unitarians for more than a century after his death.

His doctrine was that freedom was an original possession of human beings, a natural and inalienable right. But though the right might be inalienable, the possession was by no means secure. Human beings were being forever deprived of their freedom by the actions of society. As Rousseau was to put it later: 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.'

But what is this 'society' which has deprived the individual of his freedom? According to Locke and his followers, it came into being as the result of a contract or compact between individuals. The idea was that originally men were free, just as a tiger or an antelope is free, but the anarchy of jungle life made life too insecure. So individuals got together for their mutual protection and entered into a contract with each other, each sacrificing just as much of his natural freedom as was essential for the existence of this social order and no more.

So the individual came first, the community second. The community could claim only those powers which had been specifically given to it by the members. This idea

was very powerful indeed in Unitarian circles, as it has been in all western liberal circles. It expressed itself classically in the phrase 'That government is best which governs least.'

As a reaction against the medieval system, where society counted for everything and the individual for practically nothing, this doctrine was natural and understandable. It made individual thought and expression possible to an extent seldom known elsewhere. But it arose out of quite unrealistic assumptions.

In the first place, there never was a time, so far as anthropologists have been able to discover, when men did live as individuals in the jungle. The social contract bringing the community into being is a fiction. Man has always led a social life, and in early forms of society the very idea of an isolated individual apart from the group was unthinkable. Individualism was a late development, arising only when it became possible for a man to be a non-conformist, to reject some of the ideas held all around him without being immediately put to death.

What made the social contract theory so attractive to Unitarians was that though it did not correspond to what happened in the early history of mankind, it did correspond to what happened in the early history of Unitarianism. In various parts of Europe the movement began with isolated individuals, and it was some years before they got together in countries where freedom seemed possible, and set up churches. Throughout its history the movement has been marked by strong individualism, sometimes so much to the detriment of organization that its influence has been far weaker than it need have been. Where this runs to extremes, the whole idea of freedom is jeopardized in the eyes of many who might otherwise be attracted to it.

One unhealthy influence has been that of the fact that

freedom had to be gained at the cost of a long and often bitter struggle against authoritarianism. Old creeds, old hierarchies, old organizations were the chief enemies of freedom. They had to be attacked in order to get them out of the way. But the attack upon them was only a means to an end, not the end itself. This, however, is a point which has not always been kept clearly in mind. There have been some people who have thought of themselves as liberals, but whose idea of freedom consists simply in attacking creeds and dogmas and ecclesiastical authorities. A person who has just succeeded, perhaps painfully, in freeing himself of these bonds is particularly susceptible to such a temptation.

But it is a negative and sterile caricature of freedom. The critic becomes a parasite upon the system he attacks, for if it should go out of existence he could only wither and die. Freedom has to be more positive than that. True, as long as arbitrary restraints upon freedom exist, the battle has to continue, but the battle continues for the sake of freedom, not freedom for the sake of the battle.

Another peril which has greatly weakened the cause of freedom is the constant temptation to forget that freedom makes demands as well as offering promises. The free is confused with the free-and-easy. Again it is understandable that people who have been held down by rigid controls all their lives are likely to be inadequately prepared to handle freedom if they gain it. They feel that they can now think and act exactly as they like. Many of the former colonial territories of the world, now liberated, are running into precisely this situation at a political level. Disillusionment with freedom rapidly sets in and leads to a swing back towards another form of authoritarianism, much to the dismay of liberals who had pinned their hopes to the brilliant promises of what liberty could mean.

This is an old story in the history of religion and of civilizations. Christianity, for example, began with a claim to freedom, as against the external authority of Jewish law. 'Christ set us free, to be free men,' wrote Paul in one of his letters. 'Stand firm, then, and refuse to be tied to the yoke of slavery again.' But his readers carried this idea too far. They used freedom as the pretext for every sort of irresponsible indulgence, and soon Paul and his successors were talking less about freedom and more about authority. Before long, the rigid controls began which resulted in the completely totalitarian system of medieval Christianity.

The same story repeated itself at the time of the Renaissance and Reformation. Once again ancient authorities were to be cast off in the name of freedom. Once again freedom ran riot into licence. Once again there was a reversion to authoritarian controls.

Freedom is an unstable condition. There is always the danger that it will degenerate into licence or be abolished in the name of order and authority. One is sometimes forced into a position where one has to choose which risk to accept. Most people would if pushed into such a position probably prefer the risk of authoritarianism. Unitarians and liberals generally prefer the risk of licence. This is not to say that Unitarians condone licence. A responsible and constructive use of freedom is their aim, but they would insist that the abuse of freedom by some people is not usually a valid reason for abolishing freedom altogether.

Licence is freedom without responsibility. There can be licentious thinking as well as licentious living. For instance, it is licentious thinking to believe that the moon is made of green cheese, or that a white skin is the mark of a superior man, or that a God of love can order everlasting

torture. A person may be free to hold such beliefs, but they are either held in defiance of proven facts or else include propositions which contradict each other. They can only be adopted irresponsibly, that is to say, with no attempt to respond to the demands of truth. The irresponsible person blinds himself to the facts of life beyond his own wishes and inclinations.

In the same way licentious living is marked by a blindness to the demands made upon one by the existence and rights of other people, or of the earth and the life it supports. Both in life and in thought, freedom demands an awareness of what lies beyond one's own immediate inclinations and caprices, a capacity to respond to the facts of life, among which one must number the world and its other inhabitants. Such a capacity to respond is what responsibility means, and it marks the difference between licence and liberty.

The extreme individualism which resulted from the assertion of the claims of freedom at the beginning of the modern era represented as lopsided a picture of the real human condition as did the medieval totalitarianism which preceded it. The old order had little room for freedom, but it did include a whole network of human relationships which saved the individual from feeling cut off and isolated from the world of nature and from his fellow men.

The new society which came into being at the same time as the Unitarian movement was a fiercely individualistic and competitive one. Man's sense of community was destroyed, and his responsibility thereby weakened. The ultimate effect of this is to be seen in our own day in the sense of 'dreadful freedom' described by existentialists, where man is appalled by his freedom to move in every direction without seeming to get anywhere in any direction. He gives up in despair, and throws himself into the arms of some form of religious or political totalitarianism.

This we see happening before our eyes at the present time, to the consternation of all who stand in the liberal tradition. But it's no use just holding up our hands in horror. We have to ask what was wrong with the old notion of freedom, that it should have borne such unwelcome fruit, first in the strife between individuals within a society, second in the exploitation of one individual by another (which reached its heyday perhaps in the nineteenth century) and thirdly in the rush back to totalitarianism which is so widespread today. If all this is the product of freedom without responsibility, then how and where are we to find that responsibility through which alone freedom will flower?

III

LOVE AND FAITH

We recognize the fact that freedom and responsibility have to go together when we say that a person who is not free cannot be held responsible for his actions. A person is responsible only when he is free to act in more than one way. But by the same token, just as responsibility entails freedom, so freedom entails responsibility.

In the more usual language of religion, this is to say that it entails love. *Love is the response that makes men responsible.*

A love for truth makes us responsible in our thinking. A love for beauty makes us responsible in our feeling. A love for our world and our fellow-men makes us responsible in our acting. A responsible freedom unites us in love with others, so that we do not tolerate easily a situation where some squander wealth recklessly while others are in want, either physically, intellectually or spiritually. It means a reverence for the earth which is our home, so that we do not plunder her resources without regard to the future and pollute land, sea and air with the by-products of our hatred and our greed. All this is involved in the fulfilment of freedom in love. Reponsible freedom does not mean simply a liberation of the mind to frame its own intellectual conclusions. It means also a liberation of the heart to go out in fellowship and sympathy to all those around us and to all life in this world in which we have the privilege of living.

The ultimate solution to the problem of the use of

freedom therefore lies in acknowledging the primacy of love. Love means responsibility. Freedom is thereby preserved from passing over into licence by a discipline that is internal, not arbitrarily imposed from the outside.

Licentious thinking is ruled out by a love of truth, which means that one will do one's best to uncover the facts. We thereby get beyond the caricature of freedom of thought that is expressed in the declaration, 'I'm free to believe whatever I like.' No one with a love of truth is free to believe that water freezes at any temperature higher than zero Centigrade. Nor is there a freedom to believe that the sun could stand still or dance in the heavens, once the known facts of astronomy are assimilated. Love of truth means a reverence for fact. In practice, of course, the facts are rarely all laid out for inspection. But he who is possessed by a love of truth will work to uncover as many of them as he can to the fullest extent possible.

It follows in the same way that no one with a love of truth would wish to attach equal value to knowledge and ignorance. Freedom of belief does not mean that an ill-considered, hasty, or unthinkingly repeated belief has the same claims upon our respect as the product of reasoned and well-informed thinking.

A love of beauty will express itself according to the same pattern. It will obviously lead to a dissatisfaction with anything less than the most beautiful form that can be achieved in physical objects, including the human body. Equally obvious is the need for beauty in sounds and colours. Less obvious, but of no lesser importance, is the need for beauty in words and other symbols used in communication, and in the life of man as a whole. Assessments of human life are not very often made in aesthetic terms; yet nothing can be more beautiful than human

character and actions — a life that flows with a natural grace.

Sometimes in the past an over-emphasis upon rationalism has worked to the detriment of a concern for beauty, but in a well-balanced personality there can be no conflict. Instead there is a realization of the way in which a love for life issues naturally in the frequently quoted words of Keats:

> Beauty is truth, truth beauty — that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Love of beauty, like love of truth, results in a discriminating judgment. Love of truth rules out any respect for the patently false; love of beauty rules out any respect for the patently ugly. In both cases, no person's judgment is infallible; there is always room for learning and growth. But respect for differences of belief does not entail a willingness to accept the false, the ugly, the mean, the degrading, in the face of other and better alternatives.

When we turn to the subject of love for one's fellow-man the picture becomes more complicated. Obviously there are certain people whom we admire and respect more than others, yet if we are serious about love for our fellowman we cannot make this love conditional upon liking and respect. 'Man' has no contrary to be ruled out, as truth rules out falsehood or beauty ugliness. We may detest falsehood or ugliness of life in a person, but we may not proceed to detest that person in his essential nature as a fellow human being. Somehow or other we have to penetrate to the insight which enabled Walt Whitman to write:

> I walk with delinquents with passionate love,
> I feel I am of them — I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself.
> And henceforth I will not deny them — for how can I deny myself?

Our natural reluctance to accept this raises one of the central issues of religion. In their varying ways all the greatest prophets who have been revered by millions of professed followers have stressed the paramount importance of love. Yet we continue to live in a largely loveless world. There is an enormous gulf between precept and practice.

Why?

One of the problems is that most people just don't know what love means. In fact, it has no precise meaning; it is used in a bewildering variety of ways, so that it means one thing to one person and quite a different thing to the next person.

Often enough love is confused with lust, which is simply an attempt to bend things and people to our own self-centred interests, without any regard for what they are in themselves. We 'love' them because we feel they can be of service to our supposed interests. This is so in the sexual exploitation of another person, which often masquerades as love; it is deeply embedded in much of what conventionally passes for religious piety. That remarkable man Meister Eckhart summed it up six centuries ago when he wrote: 'Some people want to see God with their eyes as they see a cow, and to love him as they love their cow — for the milk and cheese and profit it brings them.'

If this sort of lust can pass itself off as love, the other popular fictions are more easily understood. Hollywood gets blamed for a great many things, but all it really does is bring out into the open and give expression to the values which are in fact typical of present-day society. So when it gives currency to popular songs presenting a greed for domination and exploitation of another person as 'love', or when it portrays 'falling in love' as an episode in which two people are each using the other as a means of getting

emotional and physical exhilaration for themselves, there we see presented in stark relief the current confusion of lust with love.

For other people love is a gushing sentimentality, some great tempestuous emotion. Or it means a state of absolute bliss in which all tensions, all points of difference, all individual sharpnesses are smoothed over and obliterated in a general fog of superhuman — or inhuman — niceness.

Yet in classical religious usage, and in the usage of thoughtful and sensitive people today, love has a meaning far removed from these caricatures. It is in this deeper sense that it is the response that makes men responsible. It is not simply an emotion. It is an orientation of the entire personality: 'heart and soul and mind and strength.'

Whole volumes could be written on the nature of love; yet when we take life seriously we realize that it is not so much to be talked about as to be experienced. We learn to swim by swimming, and we learn to love by loving. None the less, descriptions in words can in both cases be of some help if we don't take them as complete in themselves. In a phrase which goes to the heart of the matter, Paul Tillich speaks of love as 'the drive towards the reunion of the separated'. Of all forms of love, he says, this holds true: of love between man and God, between man and woman, between man and his fellow creatures, within the personality of a man himself.

To this Erich Fromm adds that 'mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality. Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity'.[5]

Here we see outlined the key characteristics of love.

Firstly, it is a response of the entire personality, unifying that personality within itself. Secondly, it reunites the individual personality with the cosmic and human setting within which his life is to be lived. Thirdly, it does not mean a surrender of individual integrity; rather it means a flowering of individual integrity made possible by the overcoming of isolation and loneliness.

The concept of wholeness is essential to love. Just as it is an act of a whole personality, so also it is directed towards an object in all its wholeness, whether that object be a person, or a principle, or an animate or inanimate object. In a world where we seem to spend so much of our time in breaking things into pieces (including ourselves), love reunites. You do not love another person in his capacity as dentist, or client, or customer, or Negro, or Russian or fellow-member of this or that organization. You do not even love another person in his capacity as parent, husband, wife, or child. You love him as a whole person or your love is not pure. Love rebuilds the personality that modern life carves into fragments. It rules out treating another person in a fragmentary way, so that you are concerned only with those fragments of his being that touch upon your concerns at the moment, and treat him as a means to your ends. That sort of attitude may range from the crude level of prostitution up through using a waiter in a restaurant as though he were a piece of food-serving machinery to looking at a person solely in terms of the ways he may be useful to your party or business — or even your church. Love transcends all these fragmentary and depersonalizing attitudes.

There are very few groups, organizations or enterprises in the present-day world which are concerned not with some fragmentary part of a person but with that person in his wholeness. The family should provide one such

group. Any organization brought together for specifically religious purposes should provide another, whether it calls itself a church, a fellowship, a society or anything else.

In a church or religious organization which meets this need each individual is accepted in the fullness of his personal integrity and yet can enter into deep relationships with others. Both the depersonalizing tendencies of collectivism and the isolating tendencies of individualism are overcome where life's most significant issues are explored together in a free and open atmosphere.

Judged by such standards as these, not many churches have risen to the challenge. Some have themselves been infected by the depersonalizing process, so that the individual is relegated to the status of one more statistic on the roll of 'souls saved'. Or advertising techniques may be used to 'sell religion' by the same procedures as are used for selling soap. Or there may be a spurious 'togetherness' based on techniques more concerned with winning friends and influencing people than with entering into any deeper levels of mutual acceptance and understanding.

If such common hazards as these are avoided, substantial problems still remain. Even where a deeply meaningful community life exists within a religious organization, that organization's effectiveness is immensely weakened if the intellectual demands it makes upon its members are unrealistic in the light of modern knowledge. Too often this is so. Membership in a community of mutual acceptance and shared endeavour has then to be purchased at too high a price — that of accepting a theology which to most thinking persons would seem to be so much at variance with their whole experience of life, with scientific knowledge and sober thought, that they would not feel it honest to try to force themselves into an acceptance of it.

The Unitarian experiment in religion marks an attempt to

meet precisely this dilemma. Back in the year 1821 it was stated clearly and concisely in a letter composed by English Unitarians for circulation among sympathetic readers on the Continent:

> The worship of the Unitarians particularly recommends itself by its simplicity. They admit with entire goodwill a difference of rites and ceremonies in their churches. They take love as their bond of union instead of faith.

The last sentence strikes a particularly significant note. For centuries it had been assumed that the bond of union in a church must be one of faith. The acceptance of a creed or confession of faith, affirming one's belief in specific propositions and doctrines, had been the condition upon which one could gain admission as a church member. With scarcely an exception all the many new sects and denominations had maintained that principle rigidly.

Such a procedure might seem oddly at variance with the initial impetus from which the Christian tradition of the west sprang. Even Paul, who had so much to say about the importance of faith, relegated it to a subordinate position in the life of the religious fellowship. After describing the varieties of talent and personal contribution that individuals might bring for the enrichment of the community, he made it clear that love is the greatest contribution of all. Though most contributions had only a transient value, 'there are three things that last for ever, faith, hope and love, but the greatest of them all is love'.

But that has not been the way it has been seen by the historic Christian churches which still dominate the scene in organized religion. Faith has taken priority over love, and to make matters worse faith has usually been regarded as the equivalent of 'correct' belief on matters of theological

doctrine. Sometimes, acknowledging the difficulties often encountered in achieving such belief, faith has been looked upon as having all the more merit because it has had to overcome a natural incredulity on many of these subjects.

So faith, not love, became the bond of union. John Calvin, the greatest of the early Protestant theologians, expressed the dominant attitude when he wrote: 'What the Schoolmen advance concerning the priority of love to faith and hope is a mere reverie of a distempered imagination.' Such a downgrading of love in favour of faith found its logical outcome in Calvin's action in having the early Unitarian Michael Servetus burned at the stake. Servetus was deficient in faith so far as Calvin was concerned, and this was enough to outweigh any claims that might be put forward on behalf of love.

If, by contrast to this, love and not faith becomes the bond of union, then all heresy-hunting and recriminations about differences in belief are at once abolished. The church becomes an enterprise in loving, an attempt to respond to others, to overcome isolation and alienation in a community seeking the responsible fulfilment of freedom. In the words of a leading Unitarian of a century ago, John Hamilton Thom: 'Fellowship does not stand on the narrow basis of intellectual agreement. We maintain our spiritual fellowship in combination with absolute allegiance to our own individual convictions . . . . We will not suffer the one essential and universal attribute of spiritual love to injure the reverence for individual conviction which to the individual is an essential honesty; neither will we suffer our own individual conceptions of truth to separate us from the church, from the communion and brotherhood of any in whom that spiritual love exists'.

Another way of expressing this is to turn to another of the key-words in the classical vocabulary of religion:

worship. The bond of unity in a church is not a shared belief but a shared worship. Worship (worth-ship) is an act of reverence for what is regarded as of great, or supreme worth. In the ultimate analysis this is but another way of capturing the real meaning of love. 'With my body I thee worship', says the man to the woman in the marriage service in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. What is of real worth to us, in the full sense, we cannot help but love. Love is reverence for life, to use Albert Schweitzer's phrase, and reverence is a mode of worship. Worship in a Unitarian setting becomes a shared act of celebration expressing our love for things of worth — those values by which and for which we live, in whatever picture-language they may be symbolized.

It would be unfair in the extreme to suggest that this emphasis in church life is uniquely Unitarian. Wherever churchgoing is anything more than a stereotyped and impersonal process it exists. But Unitarians are free to lay their chief emphasis here. Energy does not have to be dissipated in finding ways around a tradition in which faith has usurped the paramount place of love. Responsibility for his thinking and his living rests upon the individual. The role of the larger group is to accept, support and help to clarify, not to dictate. Freedom can find its fulfilment in love.

How far has the Unitarian movement succeeded in realizing this in practice? In such an undertaking ambition always outruns performance. There have been and will continue to be many occasions when Unitarians have been untrue to their own principles. The history of any group is the story of such failures. Yet the degree of success achieved has justified the experiment. Unitarians have established centres from which a kindlier and more enlightened spirit has flowed into the world around them,

particularly in such matters as education and social reform. Visiting the centre of Polish Unitarianism in the year 1612, a writer noted that 'whereas elsewhere all was full of wars and tumult, there all was quiet, men were calm and modest in behaviour . . . although they were spirited in debate and expert in language'.

It has been generally acknowledged by historians that Unitarians have exerted an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. But if the principles for which the movement stands are valid, then there remains a great deal more to be done on their behalf.

IV

ON THE DRAWING OF CIRCLES

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

EDWIN MARKHAM'S well-known verse has often been quoted by Unitarians, expressing as it does the inclusiveness of love as against the exclusiveness of faith. One way, in fact, of picturing the Unitarian approach to religion would be to draw a series of concentric circles, each more broadly inclusive than the one before, but each also representing a principle of real importance within its own circumference.

The innermost circle would be drawn around the individual himself, to express his own wholeness and safeguard his personal integrity. It should be drawn firmly enough to defend him against the pressures to submerge himself in the mass, taking on a mask in place of a face and becoming an unquestioning conformist. But it should not be drawn so tightly that he could have any illusion of being completely self-sufficient, and therefore refuse to look outward to the more widely inclusive circles beyond.

The next in the series of circles is that of the small group: one in which all the members are in frequent contact with each other, where relationships are governed by spontaneity rather than rule or convention, where each member receives support from the others and gives support to the others, where he is known and accepted for what he really is. Such a circle must of necessity be small, for this depth

of relationship cannot be experienced simultaneously by a large number of people. Ideally the family forms a group of this sort, but this is something which cannot be taken for granted. It has to be worked for, and it is by no means always, or even very frequently, achieved.

Whether bound together by family ties or not, such a circle will consist of a small group of close friends united not by some specialized interest such as a common profession or hobby, but rather by a willingness to communicate on all subjects, and in particular upon those which have the greatest and most all-encompassing significance for themselves. Such issues, whether the word is used or not, are in their essence religious.

The third circle is that of the religious fellowship, or congregation. This is normally a larger group, in which the member does not necessarily know everyone well, but feels none the less the contagion of a common spirit. Here is a group that gathers together regularly for the celebration and cultivation of deep insights into life, probings and questionings, shared consideration of the new ideas that are forever coming to birth in an ever-changing world. What is the real nature of this universe in which we are placed and what is our relationship to it? How are we related to one another, and what should be our attitude towards each other?

This circle is always open to newcomers, who are invited to share in the same enterprise. Inevitably the newcomer will need time to experience the full sense of community in such a group, born of familiarity not only with people, but also with their modes of thought and expression. The unifying spirit will not be felt by everyone with the same force. In any congregation there are people with all degrees of commitment. The boundaries are fluid, so that there are always those of whom it would be difficult

to say whether they are really inside or outside the circle. Yet the way remains open for each person to gravitate towards the centre.

Beyond this circle lie wider ones again. Whatever the limitations of organizations and labels, it remains true that in all religious groups built upon this free basis there is a common spirit linking people together, which makes them able to communicate with each other on the assumption of a common approach to religion and life. Thus the Unitarian and liberal movement in religion, wherever in the world it may be found and under whatever label, has this common basis which will enable the traveller to recognize that it does form one circle, one fraternity. Differences are many and obvious but the underlying unity remains.

But the circles of inclusiveness cannot be limited by a similarity of approach to life's basic problems. A wider circle still has to be drawn, embracing all who have felt the impact of these problems and have tried in their own way to come to terms with them, though their way of doing so may have been very different from ours. This is the meaning of what is sometimes, but very inadequately, called religious tolerance. Basically, it is a recognition of the fact that when faced by life's ultimate majesty and mystery, each man and each group has to find his own mode of response, and that we need not quarrel with others because their response is quite different from our own.

Here is the basis of a real 'unity in diversity', bringing men together in love despite the widest differences of thought and expression. Under such circumstances men can learn from each other and make a constructive rather than destructive use of their disagreements.

Early in the nineteenth century, the most prominent figure among the pioneers of the Unitarian movement in America, William Ellery Channing, expressed his feeling

of membership in a Church Universal in which everyone could share a sense of kinship with the great and good of all ages and places. 'Do I not hold them dear? Does not their spirit, flowing through their writings and lives, penetrate my soul? Are they not a portion of my being? . . . . And is it in the power of synod or conclave, or of all the ecclesiastical combinations on earth, to part me from them?'

Yet once again such a circle cannot set the final limits to the inclusiveness of love. Beyond this circle uniting within itself all who are concerned with the basic issues of religion lies the circle of our common humanity which embraces all men, whatever their sentiments, ideas and achievements in the art of living. In the fortunes of humanity as a whole we are all of us inextricably involved, even though with many of its activities and many of its representatives we may feel profoundly out of sympathy. But love is not contingent upon liking, and the parlous prospects for human survival in the world today re-emphasize as never before the need for a sense of the brotherhood of man that shall not be based upon anything more limited than our common humanity.

But just as there is a danger in exclusive emphasis upon the smaller circles, so in the same way there are corresponding dangers in an exclusive emphasis upon the larger ones. We are all familiar with the phenomenon of the person who is so absorbed in his love for all mankind that he has no love available for those particular representatives of mankind who happen to live closest to himself. Wider loyalties build upon closer loyalties. They do not compete or conflict; they enhance and fulfil. But only in person-to-person encounter can real understanding, the foundation for sympathy, emerge. That is the unique and irreplaceable value of the small group. It is within the

intimate setting that values are most likely to be translated into practice. Too heavy an emphasis upon the broader picture can cause one to lose sight of the individual and fall prey to the pernicious temptation to think that the individual may be sacrificed to 'noble' purposes beyond himself. On such a temptation is founded the doctrine that the end justifies the means.

If the circle representing the brotherhood of man should not distract our loyalties from the more limited ones, neither should it distract them from the wider one still. Our sense of fellowhip should extend beyond mankind to embrace all that lives in a deep-rooted 'reverence for life'. This represents an outreach of the self towards our entire natural and cosmic setting, in recognition of the fact that our life finds its ultimate fulfilment only as a part of the life of all that is. It may be expressed in the mystical language of oneness with God, or in any of half a dozen other vocabularies. The forms of expression matter little; what does matter is a recognition of the oneness underlying the multiplicity which confronts us in the universe, and an acceptance of the fact that we are not detached spectators of this oneness, but inextricably part of it.

If there is any validity in this picture of ever-widening circles, then each circle broadens out from the one before it like ripples from a stone thrown into a lake. At each level there is an appropriate response to be called forth from the individual. All the circles range outward along our basic concern for life and its living, rather than the sectional and usually divisive interests represented by the circles more commonly drawn on the basis of race, nationality, ideology, class, wealth, skills or occupation. Too often circles of this sort artificially restrict our response and responsibility, rather than leading it outward more widely.

But we have not done with this metaphor yet. A circle is a symbol of unity and harmony; yet it should not be supposed that within any one of the circles that have been described there will be utter peace and tranquillity with no internal tensions and contradictions. Even within the smallest circle of all — that around the individual — this is not true. Much less is it true of the wider circles. They are maintained in being by internal tensions.

A tension can be constructive or destructive. It may be as constructive as that on the strings of a violin producing great music, or it may be as destructive as that on a rope which is about to snap.

One of the best pictorial representations of constructive tensions is given in the Chinese symbol of the *tai-chi*. This symbol is a circle divided in half by a line which is not straight but flowing, and shows expressively how the parts act one upon the other.

The two halves of the circle, known respectively as the *ying* and the *yang*, stand for opposites in tension with each other: light and darkness, heat and cold, male and female, good and evil, and so on indefinitely. They are held in this perpetual tension with each other by the surrounding circle representing the *tai-chi*, or ultimate reality. Destroy either of them and you destroy the *tai-chi:* you destroy life

itself. The continuance of life depends upon the tensior of opposites, though it should be added that no opposites are absolute. Each is arrived at by what is to some extent a process of over-simplification. The Chinese thinkers, in recognition of this, included a small part of the *ying* within the *yang* and a small part of the *yang* within the *ying*.

Such a picture of reality stands in marked contrast to the more usual one in the western world, where opposites must be engaged in conflict with the aim of totally destroying one or the other. This is summed up as clearly as anywhere in the picture of St George and the Dragon. The struggle must end in total victory. The dragon must be slain. Sides must be taken in the battle; hatred for the enemy rules out an all-encompassing love.

The consequence is a destructive conflict within the individual as he tries to repress and exterminate the 'bad' side of his personality. This conflict is often pictured as a war of the 'spirit' against the 'flesh'. In the same way there is conflict between people — 'the good guys and the bad guys', 'the sheep and the goats' — between races, nations and ideologies. Compromise is impossible, only total victory can be contemplated. From the personal level to the international, fearful destruction is the consequence, and to no avail, for after the destruction is over the 'enemy' is still there. Far wiser is the traditional religious counsel to 'love your enemies', whether those enemies are looked upon as human beings, or systems of ideas, or parts of your own individual make-up.

The symbol of the *tai-chi* recognizes this. It shows that the destruction of either of the opposites which confront each other must mean the destruction of that life which together they hold in being. But it shows also that the drawing of circles does not mean the elimination of all

contradictions and tensions. Effective living consists in knowing how to handle these constructively, that is to say, in an atmosphere of love.

Many are the apparent opposites whose claims upon us have to be held in permanent tension within a circle of acceptance in this way. Even at a strictly intellectual level this holds good. In science it is expressed by Bohr's principle of complementarity, according to which the same reality may have quite contradictory features, and the only way of describing it as a whole may consist in adding together the various descriptions even though they seem to contradict each other.

This is so in philosophy too, as in the perennial and insoluble debate between determinism and freedom of the will. It embraces the traditional religious antagonism between body and spirit, or between reason and emotion, or between firmness of conviction and tolerance of differing points of view. It embraces the active life of involvement in affairs and the contemplative life of quiet reflection. It embraces the claims of the individual and the claims of the community. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, 'Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.'

All these and many other areas of contradiction lend themselves to be handled in this way. They are not resolved, either by one eliminating the other or by both losing themselves in a compromise half-way between the two. They are both accepted, lived in, their tension embraced within the comprehending circle of love.

In each of the circles described above the collision of parts drawn into conflict with each other is always a very real possibility. The only constructive way of handling this possibility of conflict is to recognize that it arises

out of a real opposition which is a permanent and inescapable fact of life. The most we can achieve either by attempting a total victory for one side or by dissolving both in a compromise is to alter the field of conflict. A new pair of opposites now arises, just as apparently irreconcilable as the old ones.

Only acceptance of the co-existence of opposites within an embracing circle is an adequate response to the complexities of our human situation, and such an acceptance is essentially the response of love. Unitarians, in spite of their frequent failures to put this into practice, are in as favourable a position as can be found to make the attempt. The cultivation of a sturdy resistance to the common tendency to rule beliefs out of consideration or exclude persons from sympathy in advance of any adequate knowledge of them is an obvious first step in that direction.

V

PRINCIPLES, PERSONS AND PICTURES

Of the many pairs of opposites which can give rise to vigorous but inconclusive battles, one of the most familiar is the pair often described under the heading 'reason versus emotion'. Or it may be expressed as 'intellect versus imagination', or again (in terms of their typical products) as 'science versus art'.

If religion is man's basic response to life as a whole, it is obviously going to have to reckon with this collision of opposites at every turn. Certainly this has been true of Unitarianism, which in the English-speaking world began to flower just at the time when spokesmen for a warm imaginative approach to life, such as Blake and Coleridge, were launching violent onslaughts upon the apostles of intellectualistic rationalism such as Locke, Newton and Priestley, who had held most of the field during the eighteenth century.

In this conflict Unitarians took the side of the rationalists; in fact the usual descriptive term for them in England at that time was 'rational dissenters'. This was the reason why a poet like Coleridge, who at one point embraced Unitarianism eagerly, found it impossible to stay within the movement and later became one of its most outspoken antagonists.

The so-called Age of Reason was a particularly fruitful period for the growth of Unitarianism simply because Unitarians insisted from the outset upon reason as the ultimate authority in religion. Truth is to be discovered

by processes of reason, and in their devotion to this process the early Unitarians were prepared to make enormous sacrifices for what they considered to be the cause of truth.

This emphasis has continued to the present day, and echoes of the earlier conflicts still persist. Coleridge described Unitarianism as 'moonlight', that is to say, illumination without warmth, and the criticism that Unitarianism is 'cold', lop-sidedly intellectual, lacking in imaginative warmth in its services and celebrations, is still heard. The movement has continued to appeal strongly to people who have been trained in scientific disciplines, and consequently find many of the ideas they are asked to accept by other forms of religion altogether repugnant to reason. Some of the attempts to 'enrich' Unitarian services with artistic forms of expression have failed because the experiments have been undertaken in a much too self-consciously intellectual spirit, and have lost the warmth of spontaneity.

Skill in holding apparent opposites together in tension within the one circle can resolve this conflict as effectively and fruitfully as others. Such skill has never been absent from the Unitarian movement, but it has become much more widely apparent in recent years, with a growing realization that the legitimate claims of reason do not have to be sacrificed in order to give fuller expression to the imaginative and artistic side of human nature — that in fact the functioning of these in harmony as parts of a total personality is indispensable for a full flowering of religion.

'The heart,' wrote George Santayana, 'cannot feed on thin and elaborate abstractions, irrelevant to its needs and divorced from the natural objects of its interest. Men will often accept the baldest fictions as truths; but it is impossible for them to give a human meaning to vacuous conceptions, or to grow to love the categories of logic,

interweaving their image with the actions and emotions of daily life.'[6]

The truth of this assertion has been well illustrated in practice. Over and over again, philosophers and prophets have patiently expounded the principles which for them furnished the key to human living. But few of those who claimed to accept their leadership gained any thorough understanding of those principles. Most of their followers built cults around their personality, often going so far as to make them an object of worship. Their words might be repeated ritually, but had something less than a real impact upon the lives of those repeating them.

The founders of the great religions had different degrees of success in escaping this fate. Moses and Mohammed largely escaped; Confucius and the Buddha were deified and worshipped by more people than made a serious attempt to follow their precepts; Jesus and Lao-tzu had least success of all in this regard, their teachings having been largely overlooked by those professing a deep reverence for their persons.

The whole issue may be rephrased in terms of principles versus personalities. The moonlight of intellect is drawn toward principles; the warmth of emotion, imagination, art, builds around personalities.

To put the matter thus brings out the full force of Santayana's words. However intellectual we may think we are, it remains true that to all of us some of the time, and to some of us all of the time, persons make a far stronger appeal than principles. The powerful pull of a human relationship is involved, whether the person to whom we respond lives close at hand, or is long since dead and known to us only through the records of his words and life.

Political and commercial propagandists are well aware

of this fact. More soap is sold by announcing that it is used by the screen goddesses of Hollywood than by arguing that it is good for the complexion. A nationally-known leader can fill a hall to hear a mediocre speech, while a first-class talk by a well-informed but unknown speaker attracts only a handful.

Moreover, it is far easier to talk about persons than ideas. Most people would report more proudly that they had met a distinguished scientist or philosopher than that they were able to understand what he said. Everyone gladly acknowledges the greatness of men like Galileo and Newton, Darwin, Freud and Einstein, but how many have even a nodding acquaintance with the systems of thought associated with their names?

In religion, the craving for a personality is so strong that there is an almost universal reluctance to accept the fact that most religious systems grow and develop slowly, like a plant. Everything must be credited to the founder, and if there is no known founder, then one must be invented. There is some doubt as to whether Moses and Zoroaster and Lao-tzu were historical personages. If they were, they probably bore little resemblance to the legendary figures who now bear their names.

The same is true of literature. The early Hebrews were not prepared to let their psalms and proverbs make their way in the world on their own merits. The psalms had to be ascribed to David and the proverbs to Solomon, in the same way as the law was ascribed to Moses. The reputation of the great man reinforced their authority. In just the same way *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, an early Christian document of unknown authorship, was given greater authority by being passed off as the work of the apostle Paul. Thomas à Kempis may have been on unassailable ground logically when he wrote: 'Inquire not who spoke

this or that, but attend to what is spoken' — but he was arguing in the teeth of powerful psychological drives. If a person has achieved eminence, no matter how, what he says is listened to with greater attention than the opinions of someone unknown.

Real perils begin to arise when reverence for the 'great man' begins to over-ride our critical judgment of what he says and does. When abstract principles are asked to stand on their own without the support of human relationships, the balance between opposing forces is toppled in one direction. But when a cult of the individual goes so far that we reverence him for who he is rather than for what he is, the balance is toppled the opposite way. When that situation is reached, respect for the personality of someone else has infringed upon respect for one's own personality, and personal integrity has been forfeited.

It is one of the ironies of history that the figure of Jesus should have been treated in this way by a majority of Christians. They have made no attempt to judge the rightness or otherwise of sayings and actions attributed to him. Everything he is reported to have said or done is accepted as right and good simply because it was he who said or did them. A realistic appraisal would move in exactly the opposite direction. For instance, to take a story from the life of another person, there is general approval of the action of Sir Philip Sidney, who when he lay parched and dying on the field of battle directed that a flask of water which had been brought him should be given instead to another wounded man who was lying in pain and crying out for water. It would be nonsense to say that we admire this action because it was performed by Sir Philip Sidney; rather, we admire Sir Philip Sidney because he was the sort of man who could act in such a way. A person has to be judged on the basis of the principles he

managed to embody in his life. If we forget that, then we are in danger of idolatry, which entails that we accept without question whatever our 'authority' says because he says it. To question it becomes an act of treason, and this holds good whether the 'authority' in our particular instance happens to be Mohammed, or Jesus, or Lenin or Mary Baker Eddy.

The full force of the tension between the opposing forces in this particular circle can now be felt. Intellectual integrity demands a search for truth. All principles must be established through the exercise of critical reason and judgment, no matter who taught them or teaches them. By the same token, one's admiration for personalities ought to be related to the principles for which those personalities stand.

On the other hand, principles seldom carry much weight in human affairs until they find expression through a personality who can command love and acceptance. Otherwise, they remain cold and remote, appealing only to a very limited circle of philosophically-inclined people. Moreover, there is always the danger that in these theoretical realms the humane spirit will somehow be lost, so that logical consistency is followed without any regard for human feeling, and persons may ultimately be sacrificed in the supposed interest of principle. Some of the most inhuman acts in history have been carried out by people professing to act in the light of the highest principle, but who have lost sight of the value of persons.

A further illustration of the powerful appeal of the personal is given by the way personality has been enshrined in the very heart of the universe in the concept of God. For a few people God stands as the name of abstract principles and impersonal forces, but the great majority of religions have pictured God, or the gods, in personal

form. Rules and commandments expressing principles of conduct, or systems of ideas presenting a philosophical interpretation of reality, have had their authority underwritten by being treated as an explicit revelation from a personal God.

Discussion of the nature of God has seldom been a very edifying procedure. It has been marked by crude and often degrading notions which have come into violent collision with each other. Tempers have been lost, wars have been fought, individuals have been slandered, persecuted, attacked, tortured, put to death. This indicates, at least, just how deeply people have been involved at the level of feeling. Debate between more abstract philosophies has seldom taken so ruthless a form, though in the age of ideologies in which we now find ourselves the same degree of bitterness has been reached. God as a person, however, is still invoked as a partisan even in this ideological warfare.

The question of what meaning, if any, the idea of God can have in the sort of world we are living in today must be deferred till a later chapter, but the way in which this idea has developed in the past illustrates not only the tension between principles and persons, but also some of the features of a religion which make it into something more than a form of academic speculation.

Again and again the word has been made flesh. God has been made in the image of man. Most religions will concede that the idea of personality is inadequate to convey what they want to convey when they speak of God; yet the idea itself persists.

In what are usually thought of as less developed religions, there is a variety of divine personalities. The primitive tribesman may have a god for every feature of the natural world around him. The more sophisticated Greeks and Romans had gods representing abstract qualities and

aspects of life. With the development of the idea of the universe as one rational whole has come the dominance of the view that 'the Lord thy God is one Lord'; yet still there is the personal picture. God is referred to by the masculine personal pronoun, 'He'. He is spoken of as having personal characteristics, such as love, anger, impatience, forgiveness. He is depicted with eyes, ears, hands. He communicates with other persons and makes his will known.

Though there are millions of people who take all these assertions very literally, and justify the indignant remark of the nineteenth-century philosopher Josiah Royce that 'God never sat for his photograph', it would be unfair to suggest that this is true of any of the higher forms of traditional religion. One and all, they would deplore the poverty of our language, and declare that such expressions in personal terms are the best we can do, but very inadequate.

As one looks back over the story of religion as an organized force in human life, one is struck by the fact that the language customarily used in religious circles has far more in common with the language of poetry than it has with the language of scientific description. Some people, in fact, have pressed the similarity so far as to make religion almost identical with poetry. Certainly the religious figure usually called a prophet was almost always, among other things, a poet, and this formed part of the secret of his power. The words he used struck home because of their poetic force, and were memorable for the same reason. This enabled them to be passed down from generation to generation in an age when writing was a little-known or altogether unknown art.

No one would wish to push the language of poetry too closely for literal meanings. To analyse a poem as though

it were a page from a book on chemistry or logic would be absurd. The use of metaphor is a common feature: we accept at once the description of a starlit sky as 'all the fire-folk sitting in the air' without wanting to push the metaphor beyond the imaginative insight it brings to bear upon our more usual and more prosaic approach to reality.

In religion, the use of metaphor is only the beginning of a far-reaching use of forms of language which are not to be taken literally, but rather to be lived in for their imaginative insight. Next in line stands the obvious example of the parable, a common form of religious utterance in which a simple story is told, not in any sense as a record of an actual occurrence, but rather to illustrate some insight as to the nature of things or the way life should be lived.

Beyond the parable lies the allegory, a much longer and more fully developed story in which the various persons and occurrences all have their symbolic meanings. Usually, if the allegory is successful, the meaning it conveys is self-evident to the hearer; but sometimes an allegory, like a parable, has been deliberately used to convey in veiled terms a message which it would have been politically impossible to express in straightforward language. The same is true of the kindred form of speech, the fable.

All these forms of speech rest upon the assumption that the word is to be the chief vehicle of communication. The appropriate setting for its use is that of a group of people sitting and listening to a speaker. They do nothing but listen, or perhaps ask questions. This, however, is not the most usual way in which language has been used in religion. Just as music first arose as an accompaniment to action, and only later evolved into forms where people could sit quietly and listen to it, so also with the spoken word. Words in religion accompanied rituals, forms of action.

Such performances presented either a story with which the performers identified themselves, or else a desire for such things as rain or success in the hunt, enacted symbolically. Everyone felt involved, spectators as well as performers, and this religious ritual was intimately connected with the deepest concerns of everyday life.

This has been true in the same way of more recent periods in the development of religion in the western world. Dramatic presentations in which words were linked with the acting out of a story were performed in the churches of medieval Europe, sometimes as part of the regular services. In fact, the regular services in churches of a ritualistic type have the character of dramatic performances, in which the words spoken are not complete in themselves, but only as an accompaniment to action. And the action itself represents a story. It is usually a re-enactment of one of the central stories of the religious tradition, retold with the appropriate observances every year.

What exactly is the nature of these central stories of a religious tradition, built around persons and events rather than around precepts and principles? There has been much exploration of this question in recent years, leading into those realms where religions differ most strikingly from philosophies. In a word, this is the realm of mythology.

There has in the past been a good deal of misunderstanding of myths. They have commonly been looked upon simply as fascinating stories to be told. But they are far more than this. They are expressions in symbolic form of perennial human concerns, and they succeed in bringing these alive to the ordinary man far more readily than either science or theology (which latter usually turns out to be mythology masquerading as science).

It is true that a myth is a story. It may be based upon

some historical happening, though this is by no means essential, or even usual. More often it is entirely the product of human imagination, communicated from one mind to another and evolving as it goes. But to treat it purely as a piece of entertaining fiction is to miss its chief significance. Myths are modes of response to man's aspirations and questionings, his search for meaning. Why are things as they are? What is life all about? How did it all begin? How will it all end? Why do we suffer as we do? What does it mean to die? What is the ideal life for man?

Questions such as these do not arise out of idle curiosity. They come from wrestlings and yearnings of the heart. They express hopes and fears as well as inquiries. They express a demand not only for knowledge but also for strength and inspiriation. Stories which arise out of such powerful forces within the human personality have a correspondingly powerful hold over the lives of the individuals and groups who accept them. They don't just hear the story — they are the story. They participate. They identify themselves with the figures in the myth, share their triumphs and their sufferings. For them the story is not a piece of historical or unhistorical narrative. It is a drama in which they are involved, and in which they attain, or fail to attain, salvation.

The extent to which this is true has been masked by the fact that in the past when we have talked about myths we have usually had in mind the myths of ancient Greece and Rome, or of the Norsemen. These formed part of religions which are no longer practised by anyone, and so it is difficult to understand their full range of meaning. It is far otherwise when myths are studied as a living force in the day-to-day experience of men and women. Bronislaw Malinowski, who immersed himself for years in a study of

the outlook upon life of tribes still living at a primitive level, wrote:

> Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived . . . . It is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements.[7]

What is true of the religion of primitive people is also true — far truer than we usually assume — of the religion of civilized people. At the core of all the great religions of the world lie myths by which their followers live. The more developed the religion, the more developed its myth. In more primitive societies each myth is separate, explains one feature of life only, and has no particular connection with other myths. In fact, a whole series of mutually inconsistent myths may be accepted at one and the same time. But as civilization develops, so the various independent myths are assimilated into one great over-arching myth in which the community lives continuously and finds an interpretation of all aspects of its experience. Now one story and now another comes up in turn, finding its place within the framework of the whole and also within the life of each participant. As new experiences come up for each individual, he interprets them automatically in terms of the myth he is living. He is not lost in a bewildering world. He knows and understands his place in the scheme of things as set forth in the myth.

VI

DIALOGUE WITH CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY

THE most powerful and familiar myth in the history of our western civilization is the one accepted by Christian orthodoxy. For centuries it provided the framework within which practically everyone did his thinking and his living. It interpreted the universe in such a way that a man could feel at home in it.

This is true today only for a comparatively few people. For great masses of men and women the Christian myth seems almost as remote as those of Greece and Rome. In any case they are aware only of fragmentary and disconnected parts of it, not with the grand sweep of the entire drama.

But no understanding of the religious predicament of our time can be complete without a knowledge of the scheme of things by which our ancestors lived and which continues to influence our own lives in various subtle ways. Its main outlines must therefore be sketched. Like all myths, it has evolved slowly over a long period of time, but after the formative centuries its most important features were established and have remained so to the present day. The description which follows gives the scheme of things which has been accepted with minor variations by practically all those who have called themselves Christians for the past six or seven centuries.

Before time began, we are told, there existed one Eternal Being, perfect in every way and beyond the power of human thought to comprehend. He existed alone. But although alone, he was not lonely. For not only was he one, he

was also in a mysterious and incomprehensible way three, three Persons in one God, the Glorious and Blessed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

God being perfection, needed nothing beyond himself. But as an act of divine will, or love, he began the process of creation by which other beings were called into existence. Vast multitudes of spiritual beings were created, lesser lights revolving around the Light of Lights and reflecting back his celestial glory. These beings were angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim. Their function was to praise and glorify God, and subsequently, when other created things came into being, to serve as intermediaries between the pure spirituality of God and the grossness of the material universe.

Angels have freedom of action, but since they are pure spirit or thought they know all the consequences of their actions. Once they make a decision, there can be for them no change or repentance; neither can there be forgiveness, which is reserved for weaker and less spiritual creatures.

One of the angels was named Lucifer, or Satan. In spite of the impossibility of success, his inordinate pride in his own splendour drove him on to lead a revolt against God Several million angels rallied to his cause, but the inevitable happened: they were defeated and banished from heaven, the abode of God, to a domain of their own, a place of torment called hell.

At this point, therefore, the universe was divided into two parts, heaven and hell. But then God began further acts of creation. He created light, inhabited by the sun, moon and stars. He created a firmament or atmosphere, inhabited by the birds. He created great waters, inhabited by fish. He created dry land, inhabited by plants, animals and men.

Man was the last created being, and was made by God

in his own likeness. He was created, like the animals, in two sexes: the first man was called Adam and the first woman Eve. God set them in a garden where they lived in bliss, and gave them jurisdiction over the plants and animals of the earth. There was, however, one significant qualification. In the garden were two symbolic trees, the Tree of Everlasting Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They bore fruits which man was forbidden to eat. It might perhaps have been rash to suppose that in the absence of any knowledge of good and evil man would know how to observe such a prohibition, and in the event he failed to do so. Satan, pursuing his feud against God, approached Eve in the guise of a snake and urged her to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. She was easily persuaded to do it, and in turn persuaded her husband. So occurred the first of the long series of human acts of disobedience to God, the technical name for which is sin. The sin of Adam and Eve was the Original Sin.

Sin brings punishment. God condemned Man (the Hebrew word 'Adam' means 'Man', so the two may be used interchangeably) to work for his living all his days; furthermore, he was to be exiled from the garden in case he ate also from the Tree of Everlasting Life. Pain and death, sin and evil, were to be the fate of all Adam's descendants.

But God could not permit this temporary triumph of Satan to continue unchallenged. Though his justice made it necessary that Man be punished, yet his love required that he find a way to bring Man back to the bliss he had forfeited. To use the traditional terminology, God looked for a way to redeem Man.

This did not follow immediately, though the passage of a few centuries can be no more than incidental to One of whom we are told that a thousand years in his sight are

but as yesterday when it is past. But in human eyes the redemption seemed long delayed; things appeared to go from bad to worse, until at one time the primeval waters were summoned again to cover the earth and blot out the wickedness of Man. But even the chosen few who survived the flood repeopled the earth with a humanity which was just as sinful as ever.

God's plan of redemption called for the coming upon earth of a Saviour. This Saviour would in fact be the the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son, taking human flesh from the stock of a chosen race, the Hebrews, singled out from among the peoples of the earth. For centuries before his coming this dramatic intervention by God was foretold by words and symbolic actions among the Hebrew people.

Then, at the predetermined time, the Saviour came. A virgin of the chosen race was impregnated by the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost. Of this union the Saviour, both God and Man, was born. He was the Second Adam, who would avenge the downfall of the First Adam at the hands of Satan.

The Saviour is identified with the figure of Jesus, but of the historical facts of the life of Jesus only the crucifixion plays any important part in the story. For the rest, Jesus of Nazareth and Christ the Saviour might as well be two separate beings, though they are inseparably, if sometimes incongruously, fused in the thinking of Christian orthodoxy. It is Christ the Saviour who redeems man from his predicament, by making a supreme sacrifice. The Original Sin of Man was an infinite offence: infinite because it was a direct affront to the infinite majesty of God. Man could make no infinite restitution for this, which would be the only way of restoring the situation. But what Man could not do, another could do on his behalf. The sin was, as it

were, a debt; if the debtor could not repay, there was no injustice in someone else's paying it on his behalf. The same procedure applies in criminal behaviour: if someone has been given the option of a fine or jail and has been unable to pay, it is quite permissible for someone else to pay on his behalf and so release him. The traditional term for this is ransom, and in former times there were few crimes for which one could not be ransomed, if the sum offered were large enough.

The work of the Redeemer was to ransom Man, to 'pay the price of sin'. This he did by submitting to death at the hands of men who were the agents of Satan. But once he, an infinite and sinless being, had suffered death as the penalty for sin, the debt was paid, God's justice was vindicated, his love could prevail, he could manifest his power. The Saviour broke down the gates of hell and redeemed all the righteous souls who had been imprisoned there during the centuries since the fall of Adam. Then, on the third day, he rose again triumphantly to life on earth.

Now Man is redeemed. All who identify themselves with the Saviour by an act of acceptance and faith may share in his victory. But those who do not accept him and identify themselves with him, eating his flesh and drinking his blood, remain under the power of Satan. The schemes of faith and ritual set forth by the various forms of Christian orthodoxy simply represent means by which man can identify himself with the saving power of Christ and therefore rise with him to victory over death and evil. The Bible and the Church are agents in this process.

But man cannot be fully redeemed as long as he remains a physical being, for the fullness of redemption means admission to the presence of God in heaven, and heaven is a realm which can be entered only by spirits. Only after death can man enter into this state of bliss. For the

redeemed, therefore, death becomes not a threat but the gateway to glory.

Those who are not redeemed, who do not identify themselves with the saving power of Christ, remain under the power of Satan, and their destination is hell, the place of everlasting torture.

The end of the story is yet to come. There will dawn a day when God, who began the physical universe which we know, will bring it to an end. Christ, who according to some versions of the story was his agent in its creation, will be his agent in its destruction. He will return to earth on clouds of glory and separate mankind into two groups, those bound for heaven and those bound for hell. Then everything will return to the conditions existing before the creation of the sun, stars and earth, except that the redeemed among men will be caught up into heaven in the company of God and his angels, while the unredeemed spend eternity in hell with the fallen angels and their leader Satan.

Such, in outline form, is the picture of the ultimate meaning of things as presented by Christian orthodoxy. It is important to remember that this is not simply an exciting story to be told and listened to. All who tell or hear it participate in it; they themselves play the part of Man, or Everyman. The alternatives of salvation and damnation lie before them. They are like actors in a play — in fact, the entire story can easily be set forth in acts and scenes like a Shakespearean tragedy. As in a great tragedy, the audience identifies with the actors and with the persons they portray; as in a great tragedy, the underlying theme is deep with meaning in terms of human experience.

As in a great tragedy, too, all the parts hang together. A few minor scenes may be modified or omitted, but cut

out any of the major characters, such as the Devil or the Saviour, and the plot is destroyed. Some parts of the story could then be used in another drama, but it cannot be pretended that it is the same one.

The Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, though they broke with Rome at many points, preserved the main outline of the drama intact, as the Orthodox Churches of the East had done when they split with Rome centuries earlier. But liberals of a later date, once they began to cut out major elements in the story, caused it to fall apart completely, though often they refused to recognize that this is what had happened. It is possible to build a religion around the figure of Jesus as a prophet and teacher who showed men how to live and taught them about a loving God who will preserve them from ultimate evil — but this is a far cry from Christianity as embodied in its historic forms.

Protestants as a whole, however, have throughout their history pushed the myth hard and far in a direction that was bound to hasten its decay. They treated it more and more as consisting of a set of propositions to be accepted intellectually, rather than a drama to be lived in and acted out. By abolishing festivals and rituals in which the story was enacted, and limiting corporate religious observances largely to talk, they inevitably made the traditional story a more remote and theoretical affair. At the same time they paved the way for Unitarians and other heretics, since what was proposed as a scheme of beliefs to be accepted at an intellectual level could also be rejected at an intellectual level.

This emphasis in Christianity did not begin with Protestantism, however. It had been there to some extent from the outset. While in other religions there was usually no attempt to anchor myths to history, there was a strong

tendency in Christianity to assert that the myth did indeed give a factual historical account of real happenings. This could only work to undermine the true value of the myth as a piece of imaginative art, and to open the way for the weapons of historical criticism that were later to be applied with such devastating effect.

But this was not all. Alongside its myth Christianity had always laid a heavy emphasis upon law. To some extent it inherited this from Jewish thought. In Judaism, as in some other religions, the system of laws and regulations by which men are to govern their conduct is seen as revealed and commanded by God. In the Jewish scriptures, from which Christians drew for part of their myth, there is frequent reference to a contract between the people and God. The people contract to obey God's laws; God in turn contracts to be their protector and send them prosperity. If one side of the contract is broken by the people's disobedience to the law, then God is released from his obligations.

Such a concept has the advantage of giving clear-cut standards of right and wrong, but the frame of mind it encourages is quite different from that in which one participates in the enactment of a myth. It encourages the temperament of the lawyer rather than that of the poet. It encourages a literalistic and logical approach to life rather than one of imaginative involvement.

In Christianity the idea of law takes a different emphasis. There was a widespread though by no means complete revolt against the Jewish interpretation of divine law as regulating conduct; instead, there arose an insistence that God had commanded not so much what you should do as what you should believe. Belief, not conduct, was to be prescribed by law. Just as under the older system God was thought to have prescribed penalties for those who

didn't act rightly, he was now thought to have prescribed penalties for those who didn't think rightly.

The result of this emphasis was that imaginative reflection about life's meaning and mystery, which gives rise to poetry and myth, was partially suppressed in the interests of a strictly disciplined intellectual exercise. The correct way to think was spelt out at great length after the pattern of a legal system. Theology became the most important aspect of religion for those who accepted this emphasis, and it is scarcely an exaggeration to describe theology as an attempt to present man's response to his total experience of life in the guise of a code of law, much as Spinoza attempted to present his ethics in the guise of a system of geometry.

This tendency became more marked as the impress of Rome, with its traditional emphasis upon legal codification, was set upon Christianity, and it became almost all-pervasive in Protestantism after the Reformation. The two leading figures among the early Protestants, Martin Luther and John Calvin, had both studied law before turning to theology.

The result of this long process has been that for all Christians to some extent, and to many Christians almost entirely, religion has become a matter of assent to the propositions which make up orthodox belief. Thinking outside the prescribed pattern became a crime. Often enough, heresy was regarded as a far worse crime than theft or assault or even murder. In fact, there have been times and places where these latter offences have been regarded as justifiable if the victim were a heretic.

To outside observers, it has sometimes seemed as remarkable that those within the confines of Christian orthodoxy could draw spiritual sustenance from arid and abstract dogmas as it is that some insects can feed on the hard and

dry wood of antique furniture. However, it has to be assumed that even for the most intransigent dogmatist the warm feeling-tones of the myth have not entirely vanished from the background of his life.

The character of Christian orthodoxy inevitably had a strong influence in determining the character of Unitarianism, particularly during its earliest period. Any movement in human life and thought is necessarily influenced by its contacts with other such movements. The contacts may be friendly or unfriendly; they may be between movements competing in the same areas of human concern or movements overlapping from separate areas of concern; they may take place between organizations, between individuals, or even within the mind of one individual as he feels the force of different ways of looking at life. But wherever the contacts are made and whatever their form, such movements inevitably influence each other, attracting, repelling, or moving towards something new that will embody the better features of both.

During the four centuries of its existence Unitarianism has entered into this sort of dialogue with many other movements. Some were influential upon it right from the outset, others became so later. Some were in essential harmony with its spirit, others were to a greater or lesser extent opposed to it. But the nature of the Unitarian movement cannot be fully understood without some account of this long-continued dialogue.

Christian orthodoxy was simply the first and most obvious movement with which Unitarianism came into interaction in this way. The earliest Unitarians were all people whose upbringing had been in Christian orthodoxy. Throughout its history the movement has received a continuous influx of newcomers from the same source, bringing with them the influence of their earlier ways of life and

thought and their later reaction against at least some parts of these. Moreover, Unitarianism has almost everywhere worked within forms of society in which Christianity has been the dominant religious influence. Naturally then, the ideas of Unitarians have for centuries been sharpened in dialogue with Christian orthodoxy.

For many of the early Unitarians the traditional scheme remained almost intact. They ventured at first to make only one or two further modifications to the structure of faith, but the custodians of orthodoxy, both Catholic and Protestant, instinctively felt the danger to the whole edifice that the removal of these stones would entail. They resisted the Unitarians strenuously, using violent persecution against them wherever possible.

The typical Unitarian response was to disclaim any intention to destroy the edifice of faith. The Unitarians were, according to themselves, simply reformers engaged in the laudable task of removing those unnecessary accretions which were creating difficulties in the way of making it a habitable home. When they were denounced as heretical, unchristian infidels, they repudiated the charge. Not only were they Christians, they said, but they were the truest Christians. The line of argument has continued in some Unitarian circles to the present day. Little more than twenty years ago a prominent British Unitarian minister expressed it as follows:

> In answer to the question, 'Do Unitarians regard themselves as Christians?' we may say: 'They do'. On the grounds of their history, their inherited traditions, and the type of spiritual experience which is common amongst them, they not only claim to be Christians, but further, they assert that their kind of Christianity is Christianity 'in its simplest and most intelligible form'.[8]

Arguments of this sort often appear where one form of religion develops historically out of another. No matter who has the best right to claim the name of 'Christian', it must be obvious even at a casual glance that the orthodox Christian scheme of things outlined above and the typical outlook of a Unitarian have diverged further and further as time has gone by and are today quite different. This divergence has been masked to some extent by the fact that many Unitarians have continued to use much the same vocabulary as orthodox Christians, though they have used it to say different things. Moreover, in some places Unitarians continued for many years as members of the same churches as orthodox Christians. There are countries where this is still true today.

In the English-speaking countries separate Unitarian movements developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but before the break came Unitarians and orthodox Christians co-existed uneasily within the same churches. The same had been true for a very brief period in Poland in the sixteenth century. In England there were many Unitarians inside the Established Church during the closing years of the seventeenth century and for the greater part of the eighteenth. Men like John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton, who exerted a profound influence upon the whole of Unitarian history by their thinking, remained within the Church of England. So too did avowedly Unitarian contemporaries of theirs like Stephen Nye and Thomas Firmin. In the eighteenth century so many members of the Established Church leaned towards Unitarianism that a petition was presented to Parliament to relieve them of the necessity of subscribing to the creeds. It was after this petition failed that Theophilus Lindsey withdrew in 1773 from his position as a clergyman of the Church of England and subsequently opened the first

definitely Unitarian church in England. During the same period many of the Presbyterian churches in England fell so completely under the sway of Unitarian thought that they evolved into Unitarian congregations, the final stage being marked by the withdrawal of the remaining orthodox Christians.

In America the same pattern repeated itself. Most of the early Unitarians were in the Established Church of Massachusetts, where their co-existence with orthodox Christians continued with increasing acrimony until the second decade of the nineteenth century, when most of the churches split, the larger section carrying the property with it. In other parts of the United States, Unitarians remained for years in the existing churches.

These historical facts masked the emergence of a new religion from the old. Unitarianism today is recognizably quite different from what the overwhelming majority of people regard as Christianity, yet there are still Unitarians who claim not only that they are Christians, but that they are the truest Christians. And they can point to an unbroken line of descent from indisputably Christian origins. The main stream of Christianity could conceivably have taken the direction they did, but in fact it did not. The picture becomes clearer when we look at the way in which one religion does actually emerge out of another. A familiar example is the emergence of Christianity out of Judaism, where we see most of the same features.

Christianity was indebted for a very great deal to Judaism, and some features of the Christian story, such as the Devil, the Creation and the angels, come from Jewish sources. For some years after the emergence of Christianity a debate raged as to whether Christians were Jews or not. Most Jews said they were not, accusing them of abandoning important features of the Jewish faith, the same sort of

accusation as most Christians were later to level at Unitarians.

At this early period many Christians felt very strongly that they were Jews and would remain so. This was the school of thought originally led by Peter, in Jerusalem. At the other extreme were some Christians who said they were most definitely not Jews — not only that, but they were bitterly anti-Jewish, repudiating any connection whatsoever between Christianity and Judaism and criticising the character of the God worshipped by Jews. The leader of this school was Marcion. Between these two extremes lay the main body of developing Christian opinion, at first led by Paul, who declared that he would be a Jew or a Greek or anything else as long as he could convince people of the Christian scheme of things. Paul also anticipated the 'Unitarians are the truest Christians' view in his 'true Israel' theory: the Christians constituted the true inheritors of the Jewish tradition, while the Jews who did not accept Christianity (ie, the overwhelming majority of Jews) had gone astray and were lost, though he held to the hope of their eventual redemption through their coming to an acceptance of the Christian interpretation of what their tradition really meant.[9]

But Christianity remained for many years in a state of more or less antagonistic dialogue with Judaism, just as Unitarianism has remained in a state of dialogue, more often than not antagonistic, with Christian orthodoxy. For years the world at large regarded Christians as a heretical group of Jews, just as the world at large regarded Unitarians as a heretical group of Christians. As time went by Christianity entered into dialogue with other forces in the life of the world of its day which eventually became more important than the dialogue with Judaism: dialogue with the mystery religions of the Middle East, with Greek

philosophy, with the Roman tendency to reduce ideas and forms of life to legal and ordered patterns. Throughout its history Christianity has absorbed the influence of the many forces in human life and thought with which it has come to contact. An outstanding example of this is the wide variety of elements from so many different religions and folk customs which have gone into the making of Christmas, which is at least ostensibly a Christian festival and has been interpreted by Christian orthodoxy in such a way as to make it so.

In the same way Unitarianism too has entered into a dialogue with non-Christian forces in life and thought which have had far-reaching effects upon its historical development and carried it further and further from Christian orthodoxy.

Parallels must not be pressed too far. There are many striking similarities between the process by which Christianity emerged from Judaism and the process by which Unitarianism emerged from Christianity. But there are also two notable differences between the two processes.

In the first place, after its earliest period of all, Christianity developed in an environment which was not predominantly Jewish, but was dominated rather by the thought and practice of Greece and Rome. It therefore moved away from its Jewish antecedents more rapidly than Unitarianism has moved away from its Christian antecedents, for Unitarianism has developed in an environment the formal religious aspects of which have been dominated by Christian orthodoxy.

In the second place, Christianity after its earliest period came to be backed by the political power of a great empire. It therefore grew rapidly in numbers and prestige, though the changes in its structure brought about by its rise to power were not necessarily for the better. Unitarianism,

on the contrary, has not only not been backed by political power but has frequently been persecuted by political power, as Christianity was in its earliest days. No corresponding expansion, therefore, has taken place; the movement has remained small. This need not be regarded as necessarily a disadvantage. It means that those who have joined it have done so out of conviction rather than expediency.

One result of the great disparity in numbers and prestige between Unitarianism and the Christian orthodoxy with which it has been engaged in such a long and often bitterly controversial dialogue is that Unitarianism has often had the appearance of being essentially negative in spirit. As more and more parts of the traditional Christian scheme of things came to be looked upon as incredible and unacceptable by a majority of Unitarians, so the movement was accused of being based upon denials. The most shocking denial of all was the denial of the deity of Christ and therefore of his pivotal place in the orthodox scheme of salvation. This was even more fundamental than the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, which caused the defenders of Christian orthodoxy to dub the movement 'Unitarian' back in the sixteenth century. For the doctrine of the Trinity is a somewhat remote and theoretical affair except insofar as it makes contact with human life through the nature, both human and divine, of its Second Person, and therefore becomes a logical consequence of the idea of the deity of Christ.

If the situation is looked at logically, it is at once obvious that to call a point of view positive or negative depends on which way you yourself are facing. You will call the views of those facing the same way as yourself positive and you will call the views of those facing the opposite way negative. Where two points of view are diametrically

opposed, each can be presented as a denial of the other, and if they are not diametrically opposed, each can be presented as a denial of certain parts of the other. Unitarianism can be presented as involving a denial of the deity of Christ; Christian orthodoxy can be presented as involving a denial of the greatness of Jesus as simply a man among men. So much for the logic of the situation. But its psychology has to be considered as well. And here the weight of numbers becomes more significant. If a great majority of people accept one point of view and only a small minority accepts the opposing point of view, then the pressure is strong to regard the majority view as the positive one and the minority view as the negative one. The minority itself can be affected by this attitude, so that it can come to look upon itself as casting a negative vote. Many Unitarians have had the experience of catching themselves presenting Unitarianism as a rejection of the positions taken by Christian orthodoxy.

Much more serious is the situation which arises when the minority becomes so affected by a negative stance that it automatically rejects ideas held by orthodoxy simply because they are held by orthodoxy. As a Unitarian minister said a few years ago: 'while there are good and sufficient reasons for disbelief, let us say, in the Virgin Birth, the orthodox Christian belief in it is hardly a reason for announcing that it is incredible.'[10]

The fact that such an obvious statement needed to be made shows how much we are guided by the psychology rather than the logic of the situation. There is always a danger that the introduction of orthodox Christian terminology or ideas will so antagonize the Unitarian hearer that he will automatically reject what he hears. The same holds true, of course, wherever dialogue becomes debate, no matter who the participants may be. And sometimes,

under provocation from attacks by orthodoxy, Unitarians have gone so far as to use bitter satire rather than argument. Unitarianism was born in revolt against Christian orthodoxy. Throughout its history it has had to declare vigorously its objections to some of the points of view presented by that orthodoxy. But though there is value in the clearing away of outmoded ideas which may hinder human progress, the final evaluation of the Unitarian contribution to religion will have to be on the basis of what it has presented in a positive and constructive spirit. No Unitarian who has got beyond the initial stages of violent revolt against an orthodoxy which he may once have accepted himself will feel that he has anything to fear from such an evaluation.

The temptation towards negativism shows how necessary it is to stand back repeatedly from the logical analysis of ideas, whether constructive or destructive, to which Unitarians have been so often inclined, and to take a look at the psychology of the critic. Is his motive simply to establish a clearer and truer view of things, or is it to express feelings of rebellion and rejection?

There is another aspect to the whole question in which psychology becomes as important as logic. Unitarianism was from the outset affected by the almost exclusively intellectual approach to religion that is to be found among the early Protestants. It treated the structure of Christian orthodoxy as essentially an intellectual scheme, embodied in creeds and dogmas which might be defended or attacked by logic. Two very disconcerting facts for anyone who takes this approach to religion have become more and more apparent over the years.

The first is that it is entirely possible to demolish the orthodox structure of beliefs by impeccable arguments and yet find its defenders not only unwilling to abandon it,

but unwilling even to admit that anything significant has happened. For them this intellectual swordplay, though embarrassing, does not touch the vital core of religion. They hold fast to the myth, not as a set of logical propositions, but as a dramatic interpretation of life in which they participate and find meaning. As the story unfolds, it leads them to a feeling that they have resolved some of the most vexing and momentous problems of life and death. No wonder that something which can do this is not lightly abandoned.

To take a partial parallel from drama, the power over its audiences of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not in the least diminished by historical criticism to the effect that Hamlet was not really an historical personage, or if he was, did not do the things attributed to him in the play. Nor is it diminished by rationalistic attack upon the existence of ghosts. In just the same way the Christian myth can survive adverse historical judgments upon Adam and Eve, or the virgin birth of Christ, just as it can survive philosophical criticism of God or Satan. The power of the myth, like the power of the play, lies in the deep hold it has upon the emotions of the participants and audience, simply because it expresses and satisfies some of their deepest concerns about life and its meaning.

For those under the compelling power of the myth in this way, it will die only if it loses its hold over their hearts and lives. The intellectual contortions into which they are thown in an attempt to defend themselves in argument do not disturb them very deeply; these are simply froth on the surface. The system to which they hold is not based upon history and philosophy, and cannot be dismantled by historical and philosophical criticism.

The second disconcerting fact for the critic of Christian orthodoxy is that those who do abandon it (and this

includes a majority of the people in the traditionally 'Christian countries' today) encounter surprising difficulties in finding anything satisfying to take its place. They often report a sense of loss and nostalgia for what they have left behind. This was poignantly expressed in the nineteenth century by the great biologist George John Romanes, who became one of the leading interpreters of Darwin's evolutionary theory. 'The universe,' he said, 'has lost to me its soul of loveliness. When at times I think, as at times I must, of the apalling contrast between the hallowed glory of that creed which once was mine, and the lonely mystery of existence as now I find it, at such times I shall ever find it impossible to avoid the sharpest pang of which my nature is susceptible.'

If such expressions of what is conventionally called 'loss of faith' are less frequent today than they were a hundred years ago, it is because we belong to a generation that for the most part never knew at first hand the 'hallowed glory' of the acceptance of the ancient myth, and has grown to accept 'the lonely mystery of existence'. Not that this makes our situation any more comfortable; frequently one hears expressions of envy for the unsophisticated faith of those who really entertain no doubts with regard to traditional orthodoxy. But though many voices are lifted up to urge mankind back to the old certainties, that way is forever barred to those who have drunk deep of the spirit of the modern age. It would represent an intellectual crucifixion of which the man of today is not capable, though he is surprisingly prone to fall prey to the specious myths of our own time, as Hitler discovered to the world's cost.

Whatever else it may prove, man's nostalgia for the abandoned myths of his past and his readiness to accept the no less illogical myths of the present show that we do not

live by the intellect alone. The vacuum created by the disappearance of traditional orthodoxy has to be replaced not only at the level of thought — that is comparatively easy — but also at the level of feeling. This is a lesson which Unitarians are now absorbing. It is now possible to draw inspiration from all the world's myths without being possessed by any of them. When they are treated in this way it becomes apparent that there are deep psychological truths portrayed in all of them, and that these can be portrayed also in modern poetry, drama and art. These too can be brought into the service of the church, as a new and exciting era of discovery begins. We may be, as Buber asserted, in an epoch of homelessness, but this too can be celebrated in song and story, and warmed by the fire of love.

Traditional Christianity is itself showing signs of having learnt this lesson, at least in some quarters, and Unitarianism's long dialogue with it may be expected to continue fruitfully. Where the Unitarian will assert his advantage is in not being tied down to any one form of thought and practice, and in being free to enter into the spirit of myths from all the traditions of men, translating freely from one to another. So the way is held open for a form of religion which will welcome the insights from all human traditions, and not simply from one.

VII

THE DIALOGUE BROADENS

IMPORTANT though the dialogue with Christian orthodoxy has been for the development of Unitarianism, this alone could not have made the movement what it is. Christianity itself in its earliest period had to take account not only of its Jewish inheritance, but also of its new situation, placed as it was in a world where Greek philosophy, Oriental mystery religions and Roman law were the most powerful influences in moulding the lives of men. Unitarianism likewise came to birth in a world full of new and powerful forces which have shaped modern western civilization, and with which for the past four centuries it has maintained a close and continuing dialogue.

Only this, in fact, has preserved the movement from becoming a heretical Christian sect, just as Christianity was preserved only by its dialogue with the strongest forces in the life of the Roman world from becoming a heretical Jewish sect. Sectarianism consists in a refusal of dialogue with the real forces that are in fact influencing the lives and thoughts of men at any given period. Openness to these forces and continuous interaction with them is what preserves a small movement like Unitarianism from becoming sectarian, and has given it an influence out of all proportion to its size.

The earliest of these forces acting upon Unitarianism, and the one to which most of the others ultimately trace their origin, was the Renaissance. The effect of this spectacular upheaval in the attitudes of men, which

brought the medieval world to an end and ushered in the modern age, was two fold. In its earlier period it reopened the doors that had so long been closed upon the achievements in science, philosophy and art of the ancient world. In its later and more productive phase it began anew where the ancient world had left off, and with the aid of new attitudes and techniques began to build its own science, philosophy and art.

The Renaissance began and flowered most luxuriantly in Italy. It is no accident that this is where Unitarianism too began. If one looks at the names of those who in the middle of the sixteenth century were feeling their way towards a Unitarian position and were to set the Unitarian movement in motion, one sees how overwhelmingly Italian the influence was. This stood in marked contrast with the Protestant reformation, where most of the leaders were drawn from the northern half of Europe.

With the exception of Servetus and Valdes, who were Spaniards, Castellio, a Frenchman, and Palaeologus, a Greek, all the names in the earliest chapter of Unitarian history are Italian, and even these four spent greater or lesser parts of their lives in Italy. A brief listing of some of the names illustrates the background of interest and experience these men brought to their religious explorations: Bernardino Ochino, from Siena, at first a Catholic friar and a notable preacher; Camillo Renato, a teacher from Sicily; Francesco Negri, first an Augustinian monk, then a teacher of Hebrew; Matteo Gribaldi, professor of law at the university of Padua; Giorgio Biandrata, a physician from Piedmont; Gianpaolo Alciati, also from Piedmont, a nobleman who followed for some years a military career; Giovanni Gentile, a teacher of Latin from Naples (subsequently executed in Protestant Berne for heresy); Lelio Sozini from Siena, who turned to theology from the family

tradition of law; and the most famous of them all, his nephew Fausto Sozzini, better known by his Latinized name Faustus Socinus, and so indelibly associated with the beginnings of Unitarianism that throughout Europe the movement was for the better part of two centuries commonly called 'Socinian' after him.

The re-establishment of the Italian Inquisition in 1542 marked the end of Renaissance tolerance and made Italy an uncomfortable place for independent thinkers in religion. The distinguished men listed above all spent the latter part of their lives in exile. Only Biandrata and Socinus lived to enjoy the fellowship of organized Unitarian churches. The others all had to work in relative isolation, communicating with each other through informal groups where this was possible and by the written word where it was not. Together they constitute a galaxy of no mean brilliance at the beginning of the story of organized Unitarianism, and the spirit they represented spread rapidly from Italy to many other parts of Europe.

The result of this Italian influence was that from the outset Unitarianism was strongly affected by the Renaissance approach to life. Though Christianity as a whole was modified by the spirit of the new age, this came about far more slowly and reluctantly. Christian orthodoxy entered only into an uneasy dialogue with the new humanism (Protestants rejected it altogether as a part of the decadent Papal order) and for many years refused any dialogue at all with the emerging sciences. Unitarians eagerly responded to both, and contributed to the development of both.

The chief features of Renaissance humanism which had their effect upon Unitarianism were firstly, its emphasis upon things human as against the non-human, and secondly, the encouragement it gave to thinking outside the traditional patterns. Both these became permanent features of the characteristically Unitarian point of view, held in tension within Unitarian thinking with the inherited influences of Christianity. The humanism of the Renaissance was far more concerned with human well-being and enjoyment of this life than with salvation beyond this life in the traditional Christian sense. It broadened the horizons of those it touched by introducing them to ideas and interpretations of life that found no place within the traditional scheme. The philosophy of Greece and the religious ideas of classical antiquity had something of the broadening impact that the discovery of the great religions of the Orient was later to have. But it was an affair of the head, not of the heart. The typical man of the Renaissance was primarily an intellectual, a rationalist, though he held before himself the ideal of the 'universal man' and was expected to be knowledgeable and proficient in the arts.

Beginning early in the sixteenth century and continuing to the present day, another major dialogue which has had profound effects upon the development of Unitarianism has been that with the sciences. Whereas the Renaissance had looked back for its inspiration to the classical past, the new sciences looked forward to the exploration of vast realms hitherto unknown. The results of such exploration have done more than anything else to transform man's environment during the past four centuries.

A scientific approach to the world rests upon observed facts, public in the sense that anyone with the necessary skill and equipment can verify them. Theories are drawn from observation and experiment, and these theories are verified, modified or abandoned in the light of further observation and experiment. This is, of course, an intellectual exercise, though the history of science shows clearly how impossible it is to exclude all non-rational

factors even in this most strictly factual of disciplines.

Commenting on an experiment, one of the most distinguished figures in the history both of science and of Unitarianism, Joseph Priestley, declared: 'When the decisive facts did at length obtrude themselves upon my notice, it was very slowly and with great hesitation, that I yielded to the evidence of my senses . . . . We may take a maxim so strongly for granted, that the plainest evidence of sense will not entirely change, and often hardly modify our persuasions; the more ingenious a man is, the more effectually he is entangled in his errors; his ingenuity only helping him to deceive himself by evading the force of truth.'

The story of Priestley's own life dramatically reinforces this statement, for though his greatest scientific achievement was the discovery of oxygen, he was so wedded to another theory that he never recognized that this was what he had done.

Priestley, like Newton and Servetus before him in the Unitarian tradition, attempted to apply the same procedures to religion as they had successfully used in their scientific discoveries. Obviously there are greater difficulties in establishing universally accepted facts upon which theories in religion may be based, and they were even more likely to go astray here than Priestley was with regard to oxygen, but none the less they made the attempt.

Unitarianism has in fact been sometimes called an attempt to use scientific procedures in religion, though this is an over-simplification. What can be illustrated over and over again from Unitarian history is the attempt to use scientific procedures in theology, with the aim of grounding beliefs upon observable facts. Under the influence of the philosophy of John Locke and the science of Sir Isaac Newton, the Unitarians of the eighteenth

century laboured to create what Kant was to call a 'religion within the bounds of reason alone'. This did not, in the minds of men of that time, rule out a belief in revelation, or in the Bible as a record of a revelation, but it did mean that revelation itself had to be grounded in reason. It was inconceivable that anything could be revealed which ran counter to the plain dictates of reason, and Locke himself regarded revelation simply as a convenient short-cut to truth for the benefit of those who were unable by lack of ability or education to reach the same position through the exercise of reason.

This attitude enjoyed a temporary popularity in religious circles other than Unitarian. But when the inevitable conflict eventually arose between what appeared to be reasonable and what was claimed to be revealed, Unitarians were forced to come down unequivocally on the side of reason, while orthodoxy came down, as it had to do, on the side of revelation.

The outcome of any attempt to apply scientific procedures to traditional forms of religion could only be to provoke a clash. The traditional forms of religion arose in a pre-scientific era, and the myths in which they found expression were the product of an altogether different thought-process from that to be found in science. As long as a myth gave an imaginative interpretation of life in harmony with human feelings it was not required to conform to the canons of logical consistency. One story might be told at one time to account for certain facts of experience and another quite different story at another time.

Even at a later stage, when the stories were written down and brought together as parts of one all-embracing myth, variety was not sacrificed to consistency. For instance, in the earliest chapters of the Bible there are two quite distinct accounts of the creation of man. In one

God creates the world, then the animals, then man. In the other, man is created first and the animals afterwards, man giving the animals their names as God creates them. Even to the present day, few people are particularly bothered by this inconsistency. Most of those who claim to read the Bible faithfully have probably never even noticed it.

But once the attempt is made to use scientific procedures in religion, a myth either has to be treated frankly as a product of poetic imagination or else as a literal chronicle of facts giving a scientific explanation. At first the attempt was made to choose the second alternative, with disastrous results. The great stories of the myth were transformed by the exercise of considerable ingenuity into propositions of theology which at least sounded like propositions of science:

> Man was made
> On March the ninth, at ten o'clock in the morning
> (A Tuesday) just six thousand years ago:
> A legend of a somewhat different cast
> From the deep music of the first great phrase
> In *Genesis*.[11]

A clash was inevitable between such pseudo-scientific conclusions advanced in the name of religion and the products of a genuinely scientific search for the facts and their most reasonable interpretation. Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, Freud and a host of others were denounced and where possible persecuted by the representatives of the religious tradition, because the theories advanced by them as the most logical explanation of the facts they had considered clashed with the views officially endorsed by religious orthodoxy.

Always and inevitably the final outcome of this struggle has been that the pseudo-science supported in the name of

religion has had to give way to true science. The results for the prestige of religion have been catastrophic. A caricature has emerged in the public mind picturing religion as a benign old gentleman quietly dozing in his chair while science goes about excavating a hole underneath until the chair suddenly falls through. The old gentleman, thus rudely awakened, is not unnaturally indignant and says some rather hard things. But in the nature of the case he is unable to put his chair back in the same place and go to sleep again, so he is reluctantly compelled to move it a little further along. The same process is then repeated over again.

Even today, when the representatives of Christian and other orthodoxies are more willing than ever before to acknowledge the existence and the role of myths as a foundation for their religion, science is still unassimilated and is widely regarded as, if not actually a hostile force, at least one to be kept in an entirely separate compartment of life from the things of religion.

Unitarianism has seldom felt the force of this problem. The movement came into being at the same time as modern science and has continued in a fruitful dialogue with it ever since. The picture of the universe inherited from Christian orthodoxy was in no sense sacrosanct and could be modified or abandoned in the light of scientific research. Even in the sixteenth century a pioneer Unitarian writer like Servetus could casually throw an allusion to his new discovery of the pulmonary circulation of the blood into a work on theology, or mention in a work of geography that, contrary to the popular belief that Palestine was a land flowing with milk and honey, the facts were that it was mostly arid and barren.

By the eighteenth century Unitarians, having long since accepted the demolition by scientific discovery of the whole

medieval picture of the universe, were eagerly at work in constructing a new picture on the basis of the work of Newton. For a while it seemed that they had succeeded; a new and orderly system of things was built, each part of which could be rationally explained and illustrated by scientifically established facts.

But science moved on. Each new discovery raised new questions. Each new extension of knowledge gave further glimpses of the immensity of the unknown. In spite of the accelerating pace of scientific discovery it became less and less possible to assume that science could give a complete, comprehensive and final picture of the nature of things. The universe of modern astronomy is one at which the imagination boggles, even though no one would claim that the known is more than a fragment beside the unknown.

The immensities of time and space unfolded by present-day science cannot be illustrated in picture or story form, as theories of the nature of the universe used to be. Previous revolutions in men's thinking, such as the one required when it became necessary to stop thinking of the earth as flat and begin thinking of it as round, were almost trivial beside the revolution of thought required to come to terms with the cosmos as partially sketched by modern astro-physics. To draw a comparison from another realm which the imagination can still — barely — encompass, men had been able to accept the growing power of explosives from gunpowder to TNT. But to continue this same scale in an effort to understand the nature of thermonuclear explosions is almost meaningless. An entirely new dimension has been entered.

Unitarians today have reached an acceptance of the fact that we no longer have an overall scheme of things which can be presented in simple terms around a camp fire, in a church, or even in a lecture room. We have to live with

the imponderables. We can learn from science a humility in the face of the unknown, a determination to submit to the discipline of such facts as are known, and a willingness to let old interpretations go when a new and more comprehensive theory arises. But we cannot expect complete and final explanations, nor can we expect, as many people expected not so long ago, that science itself will produce a religion.

The long-continued Unitarian dialogue with science has made Unitarianism peculiarly attractive to people with a scientific outlook and training. On the other hand, it has strengthened the perennial Unitarian tendency to make of religion primarily an intellectual exercise, in which sense it is conceivable that science could create a religion. The task of Unitarians today is to integrate scientific and other approaches to life into one harmonious whole. Leading scientists in the world today are well aware of the limitations of their own approach to life and are looking for something of this sort. Professor CA Coulson has called for a fellowship of all who 'wonder' — the scientist, the poet, the artist, the philosopher and the man of religion. Only with a united front including all these disciplines can we hope to tackle the problems of our age with any prospect of success. Unitarians concerned to help bring this into being will feel an obligation to work for at least a modest degree of competence in these varied fields. Thus the re-emergence of the 'universal man' of the Renaissance period may begin to overcome the unhappy results of the over-specialization of today.

The universal man is a person not only of thought, but of action. Coming to terms with the vastly changed conditions of modern life requires not only an effort of thought, but practical activity as well. The medieval world, in which Christian orthodoxy reigned supreme,

was one which accepted not only a systematic picture of an ordered universe, but a similarly systematic picture of a human order. The two orders, in fact, were seen as intimately connected. The nature of man was fully described in the theology of the time, and human society was governed by well-established principles. Each man had his position in society, which contributed to the functioning of the whole. Some of these positions enjoyed extensive privileges, while others had nothing to offer but servile conformity. But whatever his position, it was not for the individual to question it, for the order of society had been established by God, and he should accept his permanent and recognized place in it.

The collapse of the old system meant the collapse of this order of society and the emergence of a new one in which the individual was to count for far more. Unitarians threw themselves as wholeheartedly into the task of reconstructing human society as they did into the task of constructing a new world-view. This has meant, throughout Unitarian history, a continuing dialogue with the forces of political, social and economic reform.

There was a danger at one point in the early history of the movement that this dialogue would be broken off. Some of the Unitarians of that time were strongly influenced by the view of the Reformation Anabaptists that in order to create conditions under which the individual would be able to live according to the highest insights of religion it was necessary to withdraw completely from society as a whole. The Anabaptists established their own communities, in which private property was abolished, and they refused to take any part in the public life of the countries in which their communities were established. This refusal included an absolute pacifism with regard to all wars.

In the Unitarian churches of sixteenth-century Poland

this issue was furiously debated. But the strong individualism and wide-ranging interests of the Unitarians never placed the final outcome in any doubt. It was agreed that the exercise of the duties of citizenship was essential, though there remained a division of opinion as to how far this involved participation in war. Such a division has remained ever since. The folly of war and the need for constructive work for peace have never been held in question; on these points there has been universal agreement and much practical effort. But as to whether the evils of war are under some circumstances more acceptable than alternative evils there has been no such agreement, though with the ever-increasing destructiveness of modern war it has become more and more difficult to envisage alternative evils which would be worse.

Unitarians have, then, worked actively with all who have tried to promote international harmony and understanding, and this reflects itself today in efforts to support and strengthen the United Nations. The institution of United Nations Day was the outcome of the efforts of Unitarians.

At a national level, Unitarians have worked for political and social reform in the lives of the various countries in which they have become established. First among the areas of effort has been the establishment of civil and religious liberty, with toleration for dissenting opinions in religion, politics, economics and other fields of human concern. Each century and each country has produced its own persuasive literature from Unitarians on behalf of this cause, as well as active work to remove social and legal disabilities directed at Jews, Catholics or other minorities, including Unitarians themselves. Both in England and America, Unitarians campaigned vigorously for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery as an

institution, for the extension of the right to vote to all citizens, and for freedom from censorship over opinions.

A characteristic Unitarian concern has been an enthusiasm, amounting almost to a passion, for education. In the days before public education existed, Unitarian educational institutions were founded. In the sixteenth century thriving universities were established by Unitarians at Rakow in Poland and at Kolozsvar in Transylvania. At a later date came institutions of higher learning in the English-speaking world, with their curriculum slanted heavily towards the new fields of science and philosophy rather than the traditional studies of theology and the classics. Many of the existing colleges and universities both in England and America were brought into being and substantially endowed by Unitarians. Schools were also established for elementary education, while the campaign was pushed for a free public system open to everyone and devoid of all forms of sectarian indoctrination.

Other major areas of concern for Unitarians have been public health measures, the protection of those who have suffered because of their inability to defend themselves in an unregulated economic system, the extension of facilities for mental health, and penal reform. In all these fields the record of recent efforts to study the problems and promote a more enlightened attempt to tackle them is studded with the names of Unitarians. In legislative bodies, from the local to the national, Unitarians have been represented out of all proportion to their numbers, sometimes rising to the highest levels of influence (for instance, no fewer than five presidents of the United States have been Unitarians).

This devotion to activities for change and reform has earned Unitarians the reputation of being radicals not only in religion but also in politics. In each generation the current epithets of abuse reserved for those who constituted

a threat to entrenched inequities have been thrown at them, and the violent reaction which brought suffering and often sudden death to many Unitarians in the earlier centuries is not yet at an end, as was dramatically illustrated by the battering to death of James Reeb in the American civil rights struggle in Selma, Alabama.

The developments in communication which during the past 150 years have brought the nations and cultures of all parts of the world into ever-increasing contact with one another have during the same period made it possible for Unitarians to enter into another sort of dialogue. Knowledge of the world's various great traditions of religion was in earlier times so limited that it was impossible to approach them with any understanding. In fact, the typical approach to a person belonging to another religious tradition was to treat him as a heathen stumbling in darkness and to try to convert him to one's own particular form of religion. Such an attitude still persists in some quarters. In contrast to this, the typical declaration of Unitarians is that we want to converse, not to convert.

It is now possible to enter into a real dialogue with forms of religion far removed from the western Christian tradition. Early Unitarianism was able to test its words and ways only against those of Christian orthodoxy, and was therefore to a large extent restricted to the same vocabulary and ways of thinking, though not to the same conclusions. As time went by there were attempts at intelligent discussion with Jews, particularly in eastern Europe, and in more recent times dialogue with Judaism has been frequent and fruitful. Early in the present century a Unitarian scholar, Travers Herford, was the first non-Jew to demonstrate by painstaking research how one-sided and unfair a picture of the Pharisees of two thousand years ago has been handed down in Christian tradition.

As early as 1682 there was an attempt to broaden the discussion to include other religions, when some English Unitarians made an unsuccessful effort to get in touch with the Moroccan ambassador in London to discuss their respective religious positions. When in the nineteenth century the opportunity came to enter with some degree of understanding into the thought-world of the Orient, leading Unitarians seized it eagerly, and one of them in particular, Estlin Carpenter, made a lasting contribution to the new study of comparative religion. They were in agreement with Max Müller (who spoke many times under Unitarian auspices) when he said that 'he who knows only one religion knows none'. Only by testing our ideas in a free atmosphere against those of people who think in ways very different from our own can we really come to grips with those presuppositions of our point of view which we too easily take for granted.

The various religions have been well compared with the various languages of mankind. They represent different ways of trying to report on and interpret some fundamental and universal facts of human experience. There are still hostilities between men because they speak different languages. Language as such is a means of communication; the existence of so many different languages forms a barrier to communication. Exact translation from one language to another is sometimes impossible, because the language itself forms part of the interpretation of the experience described.

All these features are true of the various religions too. They crystallize man's basic response to life in certain generally accepted forms which not only report experiences but also interpret them. Each tradition has its own vocabulary both of words and of patterns of thought. When different traditions confront each other the important

matter is not to quarrel about the vocabularies used but to uncover what they are attempting to convey. This, however, is seldom done. We content ourselves with a war of words.

The developing Unitarian dialogue with the various traditions of world religion opens up new possibilities of enormous significance. First, it re-emphasizes that words and symbols are of value only to the extent that they convey real meanings, and that the same meanings may be conveyed through various words and symbols. The attempt to translate from one to another can broaden our outlook immeasurably.

Second, it exposes the need for some understanding and mutual acceptance between the various traditions of world religion. It is tragic that at a time when the dangers of conflict are so great and the need for ways of bringing men together is so desperate, organized religion is in no position to furnish leadership in promoting world unity. Instead, religion is more often a force in dividing men instead of bringing them together. At a time when the leaders in the political life of the world are at least able to sit down in a common debating hall, we have yet to see any parallel situation so far as the leaders of the organized religions of the world are concerned. Exclusive and presumptuous claims still bar the way. Unitarians may be able to play some part in promoting understanding here, as they think their way out of a past in which they first regarded themselves as part of a Christian world, then as part of a western world, now as a part of one world without any qualification whatsoever.

The final and newest dialogue to be mentioned is that between Unitarianism and the contemporary arts. The rationalistic emphasis in the movement combined during

its early period with the reaction against art resulting from the Protestant Reformation, so that the works of creative imagination are largely absent from the first two centuries of Unitarian history. One has only to read the polemics of Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge against Unitarianism to understand how true this was.

The nineteenth century altered the picture, but not for the better except in literature. Other experiments into the arts undertaken by Unitarians of the Victorian era were purely imitative and in no way part of a real dialogue between the Unitarian spirit and the genuinely creative forces of the period.

In literature, Unitarian writers of the nineteenth century like Dickens, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Emerson, Leigh Hunt, Mrs Gaskell and Louisa May Alcott show a breakthrough from a purely rationalistic approach to life to a more broadly imaginative response. Gradually this extended to the other arts as well. The early period shows no Unitarians at all among the great composers; at a later date men of the stature of Edvard Grieg and Bela Bartok could be Unitarians.

Today a new renaissance of the arts is under way in Unitarian circles. Many of the experiments being made will no doubt not stand the test of time, but they do represent an attempt at a dialogue with the spirit of the modern age through a medium which is more significant for religion at the present time than at any period since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Now, as then, an old world-view has collapsed. It lies beyond the power of anyone to pick up all the pieces and rebuild them into a rationally complete structure, but the poet, the sculptor, the artist, the composer are able through their own media to express the fears, frustrations, hopes and aspirations of

men. Through its dialogue with the contemporary arts Unitarianism puts itself in a position to speak meaningfully to the modern age, as well as escaping from the one-sided intellectualism that has so often blocked its development into a well-rounded religion satisfying to the soul of man.

VIII

SOME FUNCTIONS OF A UNITARIAN CONGREGATION

THE Unitarian movement in the world of today is the product of a long period of change and development. Recognizably derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition, it has been so profoundly modified by its interaction with the creative forces shaping the life and thought of modern man that it now occupies a distinctive position of its own in the spectrum of organized religion.

In recent years the pace of change has accelerated, in Unitarianism as in life as a whole. New and fascinating opportunities for dialogue offer themselves. One obvious requirement of our times is for thought to encompass the world picture as a whole, rather than confining itself as so often in the past to narrower sectional concerns. During the past century Unitarians have eagerly embraced the increasing opportunities to reach out across all boundaries of national, religious and cultural tradition, and to seek an understanding of the outlook of people from distant parts of the earth. There has been an attempt to build in microcosm that unity in diversity which is desperately needed on a far wider scale if mankind is to survive the perils of the present and learn to work together for peace and progress.

Organized religion as a whole has been slow to rise to this challenge. It is still regarded as a major achievement for the various branches of Christianity to be able to co-operate harmoniously; efforts towards religious harmony at

wider levels than this are scarcely beginning. Yet if the responsibility assumed by those who take it upon themselves to speak for religion were being effectively discharged then religion could become a major unifying force in the life of man rather than, as at present, a force which is still very largely divisive. Perhaps the efforts of Unitarians to participate in a wider dialogue can make a difference; there are at least some signs at the present time of the opening of a new era in inter-religious relationships.

For the individual member, standing within the Unitarian tradition involves a conscious acceptance of personal responsibility for his choices, both in belief and in action. There can never be any question of coercion by the church. On the basis of his own total experience of life (of which his reading and his discussions with others necessarily form part) each member makes his own contribution to the common pool of feeling, ideas and activities.

This common pool exists as a central feature of Unitarian life. It represents the working together of a group of concerned persons trying to frame a response to life which will do justice to its depth, breadth and rich variety. They meet to share their ideas, experiences, hopes and intentions. Together they attempt to discover how to live in the contemporary world with sensitivity and integrity.

The local congregation has been the most significant unit in Unitarian life throughout the movement's history. Being a thinking and concerned individual in isolation does not make a person fully a Unitarian, nor does a sense of identification with Unitarianism as a broad historical movement. The vitality of Unitarianism is put to the test at the local level where individuals meet together on a person-to-person basis. A weak congregational life, or one so formalized and artificial as to lose touch with living

realities, would indicate that whatever else continued, here the essential spirit of Unitarianism had died.

Congregations of many different sizes may have an active and fruitful life, from a tiny handful of people meeting informally in members' homes to a huge church with a multitude of related organizations. What do they have in common? Obviously, the existence of a building is not necessary, though for any group beyond the smallest it is desirable to have somewhere to call 'home'. Nor again is there any creed or belief held in common; the whole tradition of Unitarianism has been anti-creedal. Nor is there a common pattern of activities and observances. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that no two Unitarian congregations follow exactly the same pattern of shared observances.

What Unitarian congregations do have in common is that all of them represent the attempt of a number of people to create a living community on the basis of their concern with life's central and inescapable issues. The questions to which they address themselves are not petty or peripheral (though petty and peripheral questions have a habit of intruding, and have to be guarded against as a perpetual peril). Nor are they questions related to some conceivable future life but not to this one, though the fact and significance of death have always to be explored by any group trying to keep in touch with reality as a whole. One of the symptoms of the sickness of religion in our day is that in the popular mind it is more closely associated with death than with life, so that people can excuse their reluctance to associate with churches by saying: 'I'm not old enough to be concerning myself with that sort of thing yet!'

To a Unitarian the whole sweep of life and death, for the individual and for the human race, is the concern of the

church. It gathers to a focus the response of the whole person and the whole community to the total impact life has had upon them. No other form of human organization expresses this overall response to life, which sets all immediate and particular questions in the broadest perspective we can encompass, and brings us face to face with the whole of reality, with all its majesty and mystery, glory and tragedy, meaning and meaninglessness. Within the fellowship of the congregation people gather as authentic persons to explore together why and how things are as they are, what we ourselves are in our inmost and essential nature, how we are related to the universe as a whole and to one another. The congregation may and often does concentrate its attention upon closer and more specific questions, but its aim is to see them not as disconnected and self-contained fragments of human life, but rather as parts of an overarching and interconnected whole.

Unitarians often encounter a reluctance on the part of other people to consider the possibility that a church may be based upon concerns as broad and open as these. More usually a church is thought of as an institution offering a specific scheme of supernatural salvation, embodied in a shared set of beliefs. Many people take a lot of convincing that Unitarians really mean what they say when they describe their church. The suspicion remains that there must be a set of dogmas and beliefs hidden away somewhere, to be produced after the newcomer has become so entrapped by swallowing the publicly-offered bait that he would find it difficult and embarrassing to withdraw from involvement in the church into which he had entered with such enthusiasm.

So the question is still asked: 'What does your church believe?', a question which is proper enough with regard to churches which are in fact based upon a common creed.

The only answer a Unitarian can give is that this question is like asking: 'What does your family believe?', or, 'What does your university believe?' Like a family or a university, a Unitarian congregation is a group with a vigorous and meaningful life of its own based not upon shared beliefs but upon shared concerns of a different sort. Certainly anyone making a close study of any one of these forms of human organization could discover beliefs which might be said to be implicit in its outlook and procedures. But however exactly this might be done, to spell such beliefs out and make them binding would be to thwart the possibilities of further growth and progress.

So the question, 'What does your church believe?' has no meaning in a Unitarian context. The real question is, 'What does your church do?', or 'What is your church for?'

In the answers to questions like these lies the justification for a Unitarian congregation's existence.

At root, the function of the church is fourfold. It exists for worship, for education, for fellowship and for outreach. These basic elements of its being cannot be separated into isolated compartments. They flow over one into another, but for purposes of description, lines of division can be drawn.

The word 'worship', as was mentioned in a previous chapter, is a contracted form of 'worth-ship' and means a reverence for worth. The more worthy a man feels the object of his worship to be, the fuller and deeper the reverence, till worship finds its most complete form when it is directed towards whatever it is that for this person or group of people is felt to be of supreme worth. Less worthy objects of worship are usually valued for some usefulness they are felt to have for the worshipper. In other words, such worship is basically self-centred. Under this heading could be placed such common objects of worship as wealth and material possessions, power and fame. The more worthy objects are worshipped for their own sake, irrespective of their usefulness to the worshipper. He gives himself in service to them, rather than expecting to bring them into service to himself.

Such objects of worship have often been supernatural in form, and have most frequently been symbolized as a god or gods. In fact, the usual dictionary definitions of worship make this association. As a consequence, there has been a reaction against the word on the part of many people whose concept of reality does not include supernatural divine beings.

The same is true of the word prayer. It is possible to say (in the words of Coleridge) that 'prayer is the effort to live in the spirit of the whole'. Such a view of prayer is more common in the world's religious traditions than most people imagine, but none the less it is not the most common one, and where alternative definitions might include such a one as 'asking a personal God for a personal favour', it is easy to see why many people react against a word like this.

Irrespective of whether words like 'worship' and 'prayer' are used or not, the activity they describe is a central concern of the church. A Unitarian minister who made a careful study of the nature of worship wrote nearly forty years ago: 'It can still be claimed for the public worship of the church that it offers the one incomparable privilege and opportunity for the all-comprehending expression of the life of man.'[12]

This expression can take many forms, but it is essentially an act of celebration. To quote the same writer again: 'Historically, the worship of man is most accurately characterized not as intellectual or moral but as festal.'

The church service, which is the congregation's central

regular activity, represents an attempt to give form and substance to worship. It is essentially a celebration of values deep with meaning in the life of man, and the specific elements in the service are symbolic of this. They cannot be taken simply at their face value. A church service has been aptly compared to such an occasion as a wedding anniversary. The husband and wife go out together to dinner to celebrate. The dinner is more than simply an eating of food, just as a Christmas or birthday gift is more than a piece of merchandise. It is a symbolic act which brings into focus their consciousness and appreciation of their common life together, compounded as it is of shared memories, sentiments, explorations, hopes and endeavours. The outward observance expresses, deepens and strengthens their common life together.

In just the same way a church service, whatever its specific form, expresses not simply the shared life of two persons but the shared life of the entire congregation, with the memories, sentiments and aspirations that bind it together in one common life from generation to generation. If the service does not do this, then it becomes a perfunctory formality, or else a titillation of some passing or entertaining curiosity on the part of those gathered together. In either case, it degenerates into a show.

The variety of outlook and experience to be found within any Unitarian congregation poses real problems for the creation of an act of worship in which all can join with full integrity. It can be achieved only through an openness on the part of all concerned to many forms of expression, with no assumption of the finality of any of them. No one will find the form of expression on any given occasion precisely the one which he would have used to express his personal response in worship, though more often than is sometimes realized the participant feels that words or

some other form have been given to something he wanted to express for himself but did not know how.

The worship of a group of people who know, understand and respect each other always embodies values which are not there for the individual in isolation. Such values can be destroyed by the exaggerated individualism which, here as elsewhere, is the enemy of community. The freedom and integrity of the individual cannot be preserved through an attempt on his part to make the group observance into something which is just as he personally would have designed it. This is an impossible demand, for it could be met only by over-riding the wishes of someone else. The solution lies in the cultivation of a flexibility which can accept alternative forms of expression for what is, at root, the same underlying response to life. It involves also a recognition on the part of each individual that his own personal way of expressing this religious response, though not necessarily included in the group observance, is always respected. The situation thus differs completely from that in a church where a stereotyped service inherited from the past is imposed upon those present without regard for the way they actually feel.

Alfred North Whitehead laid his finger on the truth when he wrote: 'That religion is strong which in its rituals and modes of thought evokes an apprehension of the commanding vision.'[13] This vision will always take different forms for different people, but where there is a genuine spirit of mutual acceptance, it is the group experience growing and flowering in combination with individual diversities that will determine its outward expression. It cannot be imposed. It can only grow. Where it does grow, no words or forms will be sacrosanct. It will be a matter of finding the most natural, realistic, beautiful and effective forms of expression into which all can enter as

whole-heartedly as possible to 'evoke an apprehension of the commanding vision'.

That nature of the group will determine which forms of worship are most appropriate. One factor is age. The forms of worship most effective for small children will in general be considerably more informal, spontaneous and less influenced by historical continuity than the forms for adults. Where children are involved together with adults in one service there has to be a greater emphasis upon movement, colour and dramatic forms to allow for the children's more limited span of concentration.

A second governing factor is that of size. The smaller the group, the more informal and spontaneous the observance, though even for the individual alone there are recognized forms and procedures that have been tested and passed down from the past. These can be of real help to worship at a personal level as long as (and only as long as) they make a definite connection with realities known and felt in personal experience.

The larger the group becomes, the larger the dependence upon structure and form, and the more important it is that these be ordered in harmony and beauty. The same is true in any type of artistic appreciation: the larger the number of people involved, the greater the need for structure in the proceedings, so that they have a beauty of their own. It is not for nothing that the expression *Order* of Service is used; in a world which is radically disordered, a religious service is one occasion on which we can rediscover the beauties inherent in order and harmony. This is only another way of saying that there is an effort to live in the spirit of the whole, and that this whole is an ordered whole. Worship is the response to it with heart and soul and mind and strength, bringing the entire congregation together in one united act.

Education, as the second major function of the congregation, has obvious points of continuity with its worship. In both there is an exploration of reality. The emphasis in worship, however, lies upon celebration, aspiration, reality and commitment. In education the dominant notes are inquiry, investigation, interpretation of experience and discussion of ideas.

Organized religion has had a long association with education. In fact, there have been times and places where the only systems of formal education in existence were entirely under ecclesiastical auspices. Down to the present day the interest of religious bodies in public systems of education has continued, though it has often taken the form of pressure to secure the teaching of specific theological doctrines in the schools, either directly or by implication.

Unitarians have resisted such pressure to use public education as a vehicle for indoctrination. Not only does this inhibit the flowering of personal religion out of a direct response to experienced realities; it also fosters in the public mind a truncated picture of what religion is. Systems of 'religious education' have usually taken the form of instruction in the history, mythology, rituals and ethics of specific forms of organized religion. The view has thus been popularized that religion is concerned with a particular class of subjects in which a person may or may not be interested, rather than an overall response to life in which every person is inextricably involved.

Moreover, the traditional approach to religious education fosters the view that there is one correct and assured set of answers to life's basic problems, in the acceptance of which a person can find complete and lasting security. But time has a way of eroding such dogmatic certainty, and a more realistic approach to religious education will

accept uncertainty and insecurity as perennial features of the human condition. People have to be helped to live in a world of change; a world, moreover, in which many interpretations of reality and of man's place in it will continue to co-exist side by side. Religious education has to help equip those it touches to live in the world as it is, and the world as it is contains uncertainty, change, and rival systems of thought.

Each person has to accept the responsibility for charting his own course through such a world, notwithstanding the help he may get in such a setting as that of a Unitarian congregation. It would be foolish for any system of religious education to set out to ignore the existence of organized traditions of public religion, but they make their presence felt so effectively that the greater danger is that religion will come to be thought of as an aspect of life limited to the channels they have marked out. Unitarian religious education, while by no means ignoring history, biography and traditional ways of thinking, bases itself squarely upon a first-hand personal encounter with life, which is going to be different for each individual.

Religion for the individual is his response to what he has thus far learned of life. Religious education will provide opportunities for further learning, and will help each person clarify and interpret his experience of life. It will provide a vehicle by means of which different interpretations can be compared and discussed, both the interpretations of those involved in the discussion and the interpretations which have been handed down from various sources in the past. Lastly, it will provide a setting in which the social dimensions of religion can be experienced and explored.

There will therefore be no attempt at indoctrination, but rather a full and free examination of the questions posed by man's experience of the adventure of living.

This examination will include an attempt to ascertain the extent of man's real knowledge about the nature of things. The whole of this exploration will be undertaken not only in a spirit of scientific inquiry, but also with that spirit of wonder which according to Socrates is the beginning of wisdom. It will search for an understanding of personal relationships between human beings. It will examine the varied interpretations of life that have been handed down through the world's great religions. All these form part of a meaningful system of religious education, and all gain in scope and value through being undertaken within the community life of the congregation.

This shared enterprise of the congregation also enables the individual to find the perspective within which to place the other influences brought to bear upon him. The inherited beliefs and example of his family or neighbourhood or nation, the impact of the mass media of modern communication, beliefs and value-systems inculcated through organized systems of public education; all these have to be evaluated by any person who wants to form a real religion of his own. Within the congregation there is the free atmosphere in which this can take place, as traditional ideas are weighed, moral issues discussed and value-systems forged out of a genuine response to the facts of life-experience.

The congregation is not normally the only group in which values are formed in this way. The natural unit which usually enters into the community of congregational life is that of the family. The role of the church is to build upon and place within a broader setting the exploration into beliefs and values which is always going on in a family where fundamental questions about life are asked. If there is no such discussion in a family, it is not for lack of opportunity. The questions come up in a steady

stream from all children who have not been inhibited from asking them. In trying to come to grips with questions the children raise, parents find that they and the children are learning together, and each from one another. It is not simply a matter of passing on accumulated wisdom from one generation to the next. In fact, it is surprising how often parents find they have not clarified their own thinking until they are pressed for answers by their children.

Within the congregation, as in the family, educational activities embrace all ages. No one is too young or too old, too learned or too cut off from his fellows. None the less, the most appropriate ways of expressing this in practice will vary from one person to another, and most obviously the procedures suitable for adults will differ from those suitable for children.

There have been people who have taken issue with the whole procedure of involving children within the framework of congregational life in this way, because the children are being brought; they are not yet in the position of making a free decision of their own. Some people, in fact, claim that they will give their children no religious education. Let the child wait, they say, until he has reached an age when he can make rational choices of his own, and then let him choose his religion for himself.

At first sight such an attitude seems very liberal and unbiased, but in fact it is completely unrealistic. It is just not possible for a parent to give his child no religious education at all. He may refuse to let the child go anywhere near a church; he may even try to censor his reading. But what he cannot avoid is the influence of the things said and done every day in the home, the values by which the adults in that home actually live, their giving or not giving of themselves to what is felt to be of worth (in other words, their worship). Actions speak louder than words.

Attitudes do not have to be conveyed through conventional religious or moral teachings. They are picked up unconsciously, and all parents are teachers of religion whether they like it or not.

The same is true of influences outside the home. These, in their varying ways and degrees, all contribute to the child's religious education. Their contribution may reinforce that of the home or may run counter to it. But it is inescapable, and the only responsible way of handling the situation is to work consciously to help the child develop the knowledge, attitudes and values which go into the making of a religion of his own. This is a process in which a free and undogmatic congregation can be of enormous help.

The process begins at birth. Religious education is a lifelong enterprise. The first few years of a child's life illustrate more vividly than any others how inextricably religion is interwoven with the whole of life. At the outset, the child lacks all the apparatus of verbal communication, yet he is continually responding to the setting in which he finds himself, absorbing the atmosphere of love and security — or their absence. His earliest years are normally spent almost exclusively at home, and here the influence of the home is at a maximum. The role of the congregation at this point is indirect: it helps the parents frame a meaningful religion of their own, which will include an understanding of the basic life-demands of the tiny child.

From the age of about three years the church can become involved more directly, though the main channel through which it communicates with the child is still the home. In an organized setting at the church, for a short time each week, a child can explore with others of his own age the mystery of unfolding life and knowledge, and build relationships with other people. Most of the people involved in the planning and running of this side of the child's educa-

tional programme will be parents themselves. It is a co-operative enterprise, but one in which the congregation as a whole feels involved.

As the child grows older and his horizons broaden, the formal educational programme at the church explores not only his own shared wonderings and relationships, but also the whole panorama of man's response to life, past and present, that has gone under the name of religion. From stories and myths, biography and dramatic re-enactments, children explore ideas about life and its meaning and begin to articulate their own value-systems. But the home still stands in a paramount position in helping children form authentic and religiously defensible value-systems. The home and church have to continue in close co-operation, particularly in view of the shallow conventional value-systems bombarding children as well as adults in modern society. If the genuine values of love, goodwill, tolerance, justice and peace are to become effective realities rather than catchwords and slogans, there have to be places where their meaning is explored in a free and practical way. The home and the church are such places, and they have to work together. It is not easy to be a nonconformist, and anyone who challenges the conventional values of society in the name of something higher stands in need of all the support he can get. Adults do, and even more, children do.

Unitarians have a centuries-long tradition of creative nonconformity. Within the congregation and within the homes associated with the congregation the young person struggling to become an authentic individual in a world which sets no premium upon such authenticity can receive his encouragement and support.

Home and church interact, therefore, at each age-level. Even for older children who can have a vigorous and

productive community life of their own at the church, the religious influences of the home are important. The parents can help by developing and expressing their own values, and by participating in study and discussion at the church to reach a fuller understanding of the patterns of their children's religious growth. No clear line of division can be drawn between their involvement as parents and their involvement as adults in their own right; the two are intimately connected. In just the same way each demands reading, study, discussion, questioning, listening to presentations of ideas and concerns, and continuous practice in the art of living itself. Children's education and adult education are closely interwoven.

IX

MORE FUNCTIONS OF A UNITARIAN CONGREGATION

THE educational activities of the congregation overlap considerably with its work in providing a deeply-felt sense of fellowship. The various groups which form an important part of the life of a larger congregation, and in a small fellowship may include the entire membership, have a dual function to perform. They enable the individual participant to bring his mind to bear upon significant subject-matter through shared study and discussion. But they also bring him into close and meaningful contact with other personalities through shared fellowship.

In all such groups there is discussion of ideas and of shared reading, of personal experiences and reflection upon those experiences, of common problems in ethics at a personal and social level, together with a multitude of other concerns. The atmosphere is completely different from that of a public lecture which has drawn together an audience of individuals standing in no felt relationship to one another. There the communication, apart perhaps from a few questions at the end, is as much a one-way process as a television talk. In groups gathered within a congregation, communication flows in many directions, both at a verbal level and at non-verbal levels.

Anyone who becomes involved in the life of such person-to-person groups soon discovers that his own ideas, feelings, hopes and frustrations are by no means as peculiar to himself as he might have thought they were. He finds himself

in a fellowship where people are free to express their authentic thoughts and feelings without fear of heresy or embarrassment. The same process, at much less of a personal level, can take place within the church service, where what is read and said from the pulpit can expose and explore the common dilemmas faced by everyone.

It is this experience more than any other which leads people to say, as so many people do say after finding their way to a Unitarian church or fellowship: 'I feel that I have come home at last'. No remark could better illustrate the process by which someone becomes a Unitarian. There is no sudden 'conversion' through which he claims to have become a new and different person. Instead, he has discovered where, being the person he really is, he belongs. He has come home.

Home, despite the erosion of the word's meaning in recent years, describes a condition created by human beings holding a community of concern, whether those human beings make up a family or some wider fellowship like that of an effectively functioning church. The homelessness felt by so many people in today's world shows that they have found no such community of concern. But a church, if it surmounts the exaggerated individualism which effectively shuts out any sense of true community, can provide it. Any church which is vital and alive can provide it, but in churches which are based upon creed and dogma a great many people will feel that it is provided at too high a cost. The cost is that of losing to some extent one's own authenticity as an individual, unless he is fortunate enough to find that for him the creeds and dogmas do in fact strike home in such a way as to offer a wholly convincing interpretation of his own personal experience of life.

Such a discovery is not a frequent one nowadays. There

are too many features of modern knowledge and of everyday experience which most people find impossible to reconcile with the positions proclaimed in traditional forms of dogmatic theology. Where a person is sincerely trying to find words to express his own reflections upon life and his response to its everyday demands, he is likely to reject the traditional schemes, not out of perversity or laziness, certainly not out of any desire to conform with the neighbours, but because those theological teachings simply do not express what he believes to be true. A person in that position often feels himself forced to make a choice between finding the warmth of human fellowship in a group based upon largely unacceptable creeds and being an outsider in the cold with his own personal beliefs based on scientific knowledge and intellectual freedom. He is torn inwardly. Often the emotional and aesthetic sides of his personality are brought into conflict with the intellectual side. But in Unitarianism he can escape the dilemma, for fellowship is not made conditional upon the acceptance of anything against which his intellect rebels.

Respect for the individual's full integrity as a person is one of the four major areas of a Unitarian congregation's concern. But it is more than respect. It is appreciation, sympathy, friendship, love. It is a reaching out to help each member and to be helped by each member. Concern for the individual in all aspects of his being must be a part of the life of the church, and it will be expressed to some extent through all parts of the life of the church. Even in functions which seem to be purely routine and administrative, the personal factor will still be present. In fact, no small part of the role of religion in the contemporary world is to keep the sense of personal relationship alive amid the routines of administration.

Fellowship between human beings grows naturally and

cannot be forced, though specious substitutes that have caused the decline in respectability of words like 'togetherness' can be forced. It is easy to establish conditions under which people are manipulated into relationships that on the surface look like the expression of a deep fellow-feeling. Political and commercial vested interests are often highly skilled in the use of such methods, and churches are by no means immune to the temptation to use them. Even those who have been manipulated in this way may believe the relationship to be real. Yet they are produced artificially by set procedures, and do not grow naturally out of the integrity of individual personalities.

The effects of such a stimulus are like those of drugs or alcohol. For a while there is usually a sense of well-being, but it does not last. The deeper roots from which such a sense can draw sustenance are lacking, and force-feeding destroys the plant's vitality. Where there is real respect for individual integrity this sort of manipulation into superficial forms of fellowship is ruled out.

The temptation to employ it becomes more seductive because it seems to offer a short-cut to an apparently desirable goal. A real sense of fellowship in a group develops slowly, as people grow to know and trust each other. Even then, it will develop at a different pace for different people. It will never be spread evenly over an entire congregation — a fact which can give rise to the allegation that there are 'cliques'. Such allegations are never justified where it is open for any person coming into the fellowship to gravitate towards the centre. It is justified only where there are arbitrary attempts to exclude people, and there is something questionable, to say the least, about any form of fellowship which is exclusive in this way.

But some people exclude themselves, initially at any rate, and deliberately choose to remain on the periphery of the

congregation's life. They may be newcomers or visitors, who have come to observe and judge, as part of the process of deciding for themselves whether this is a group in which they want to become fully involved and committed members. Such persons are always welcome on their own terms. One of the results of the absence of artificial stimulants to fellowship is that they are not embarrassed by any attempt to push them further or faster than they themselves wish to move. They may quickly decide to come in more fully; they may take a very long time to reach a decision; they may discover that they have, after all, made a mistake and that they really belong somewhere else. The initiative is theirs. Once they show that they want to become part of the fellowship, then the fellowship is wide open to them with a positive welcome.

But the core of the congregation, without which there would be no congregation, consists of people who have committed themselves fully and wholeheartedly to this enterprise of a free fellowship in search of life's highest values, and who find it satisfying to all sides of their personality. Together they build in a practical way their response to the call uttered by one of the greatest of nineteenth-century Unitarians, Theodore Parker: 'Let us have a church for the whole man: truth for the mind, good works for the hands, love for the heart.'

The work of the hands, equal in importance to the work of mind and heart, expresses the fourth of the major functions of a congregation. This is its outreach: practical activity in the life of the world beyond its own doors. Never in the history of Unitarianism has there been a cloistered church, looking upon itself primarily as a haven of refuge from the troubles of the world. Wherever they have existed, Unitarian churches have been heavily involved in the affairs of the wider community.

The long-continued dialogue with the forces of social reform has been a feature of Unitarian history, but its practical outcome has taken many different forms. Each of these has represented an attempt to clarify and put to work the social principles for which the church stands: love, human brotherhood, justice, universal inclusiveness, the dignity of man.

The church's outreach is dependent largely upon the effective operation of its function in education, for only principles which are well understood can be intelligently applied in practice. Otherwise actions which are supposedly based upon principle may be only a rationalized expression of narrow self-interest. Such self-interest has difficulty in masking itself when subjected to the searching scrutiny of free discussion.

Again, examination and discussion of the way in which the church's principles are to be expressed in practice helps in the emergence of a realistic pattern of activity clearly expressing those principles, rather than a disconnected series of activities guided simply by sudden enthusiasms of the moment. Such sudden enthusiasms can result in a complete loss of perspective, so that the congregation's energies are deflected into channels which do not properly represent its major concerns and may not even, in the long run, help in the reaching of its objectives. Furthermore, reacting to situations as they arise makes it almost impossible to take the initiative rather than simply waiting for someone else's initiative. Under these circumstances, it is easy to gain the unhelpful reputation of always being negative.

Careful evaluation of the congregation's basic principles as they relate to the life of man in community is therefore essential. So too is an examination and understanding

of the social setting within which the congregation has to work. Given these, effective outreach is possible.

It can take several forms. The first and basic action of the congregation is through its members acting as individuals. Out of the interaction of ideas and personalities within the church arises a process of character formation both for adults and for children. This does not proceed by way of rules and commandments, which impede the free flowering of each unique personality, but rather by producing an atmosphere within which each person may be helped towards the development of a character which can make responsible decisions in personal and social relationships. A character which is built from the inside does not need the outside buttressing of commandments.

An objective study of the record of Unitarianism (and there have been many) will show that such characters have in fact been developed. Large numbers of individual persons have illustrated it in their own lives; behind them and reinforcing them lay the corporate life of the church. The practical outflow of such character development has not only been at the level of one-to-one relationships with other people, but also, on a wider scale, through actions directed towards society at large or certain segments of it. The concerns developed within the congregation have led individual members out into an involvement in social service and social action.

These two types of activity are similar and usually interrelated, but they are quite distinct one from the other. Social service accepts, in general, the existing framework of society and sets out within that framework to assist persons or groups of persons who for one reason or another are in need of help. Social action, on the other hand, sets out to help those in need by altering the whole framework of society, by abolishing existing social or economic practices, replacing them with new ones and framing laws to enforce them.

A hypothetical example will make the distinction clear. Where slavery is an accepted institution within a particular society, social service might take the form of individual action to help individual slaves, or the organization of a Slaves Protection Society to take care of slaves too old or weak to work any longer. It might provide educational and cultural opportunities for slaves, urge humane treatment of them and generally try to improve their condition. No one could say that such an effort would not do a great deal of good and add perceptibly to the sum of human happiness. But social action would take issue with the institution of slavery itself, and work to abolish it.

There will always be a need for social service. However good or bad a social order may be, there will always be persons within it in circumstances of special need, who can be helped by their fellows. Sometimes that help can best be given on a person-to-person basis, sometimes it is better to band together in an organization to do it. Large numbers of voluntary societies exist for the purpose of doing such work. Churches usually regard it as a natural part of their own life too.

Unitarians have had a distinguished record in this field, so much so that the story of what was done in the past presents a perpetual challenge to Unitarians in the present. But seldom have they rested content with this form of outreach alone. Usually social action has been an equally important undertaking, and this has inevitably carried both individuals and congregations into far more controversial areas. Criticism of the existing social, economic or political order is always bound to arouse widespread resentment from those who are, on the whole, satisfied with things as they are.

Movements for reform during the past few centuries have almost always had Unitarians working prominently in them, often spearheading the movement. The list of such activities is quite a spectacular one. The abolition of slavery and of discriminatory practices against racial or religious minorities; the establishment of civil and political liberties; reform of national and local governments; extension of the franchise; the establishment of comprehensive systems of public education; improvement of working conditions in industry; reform of the treatment of criminals and those suffering from mental or physical illness; promotion of international understanding and peace: these are some of the more outstanding examples.

Such issues provided themes for innumerable sermons and discussions in the churches, but usually the practical work of social outreach was carried on by individual Unitarians, not necessarily announcing themselves as such. But although the churches did not identify themselves in launching and leading campaigns, the enemies of progress and reform knew where the seed was sown. Unitarianism was always tarred with whatever the current term of abuse might be — during the French Revolution, for example, Unitarians were denounced as Jacobins — while more than one Unitarian church in eighteenth-century England was sacked by the mob and burned to the ground, often with the tacit approval of the authorities. The same sort of thing is happening today in some places in the southern United States.

The taking of a public stand in the name of congregations as a whole has become a more frequent practice in recent years. In view of the intense activities of individuals in the past and the fact that they drew upon the church for inspiration and support, it might seem surprising that this did not happen earlier. Certainly the processes of study,

discussion and sharing of concerns which lead to the development of a reasoned individual conscience on social issues can be expected to produce a group conscience of the same sort.

But two factors counted heavily on the other side. The first was the desire of concerned Unitarians to work closely with all who shared their concern, no matter what their religious motivation. To fly a denominational flag as they went into action might provoke unnecessary divisions by raising irrelevant issues, so where they worked as part of a group they preferred it to be one in which people of every persuasion could work together for a common goal. This argument is still a powerful one. From the point of view of getting things done, organizations which can bring everyone sharing a concern together are to be preferred to separate organizations set up on the basis of religious or other divisions. What a church can do is to pioneer the way in fields where there are no existing organizations, handing over the work to a community-wide organization as soon as possible. Furthermore, where a matter of public concern calls for as many voices as possible to be heard, the voices of individuals can be supplemented by that of the church as a whole, which in some circles at any rate will command respect on account of the principles the church is assumed to represent.

But if the church is to speak, it must be able to do so with one voice. This means that there has to be a general consensus within the congregation on the point at issue. The second reason why individual action was preferred in the past was that social action by the church as a whole is liable to collide with the principle of individual freedom and responsibility, upon which Unitarians have laid such stress. Action in the name of the group has somehow to be reconciled with the basis of that group as a creedless congregation — and 'creedless' covers social and political

creeds as well as theological ones. No one must be made to feel that his freedom of belief and action is being violated, and even where there is a consensus in the congregation there is seldom complete unanimity. How is corporate action to be undertaken consistently with the rights of a dissenting minority?

In the past, action in the name of the congregation as a whole was frequently checked or halted as it came up against this obstacle. This happened in all aspects of the congregational life: worship, education and fellowship as well as outreach. Dissent by individuals or small but vocal minorities has had the effect of altering or inhibiting policies and practices acceptable to the majority. But the issues encountered in the field of social action often tend to arouse stronger feelings than those encountered elsewhere.

Basically, the question is once again that of the responsible exercise of individualism in such a way that it does not damage the community. It should be understood and made clear that declarations or actions reflecting a consensus in the congregation do not in any sense limit the right of an individual to dissent. Such a right is fundamental in a fellowship based upon the principle of unity in diversity. Furthermore the dissenter should be freely able to make the attempt to change the consensus by rational argument. Often enough in the past the minority point of view in one generation has become the majority point of view in the next. But given these safeguards and opportunities, the dissenter should not try to thwart the open expression of an existing broad consensus within the congregation on matters of current concern.

On the other hand, the majority, however overwhelming, has responsibilities as well. It has to assess the number of

dissenters and the importance of the issue to them. It has to balance against this the importance of the issue to the congregation as a whole and to society at large. Finally it has to weigh both its own position and that of the dissenters in the light of the basic principles of the church. Where such a position is obviously in conflict with the church's principles it can scarcely have a claim to be taken too seriously. An individual may, in the exercise of his freedom to choose his own standpoint in religion, come up with a declaration that he disbelieves heartily in the brotherhood of man and that he prefers to hate his neighbour. But this gives him no right to expect that the actions of the group as a whole will in any way be guided by his views. In the free fellowship, there are no grounds for his excommunication, however odd his opinions may seem. But if the spirit of the congregation is inclusive enough to include him, its very inclusiveness must of necessity exclude his exclusiveness.

In practice, social issues often arise where the logical application of religious principle is far from obvious. Where this is so, and there is considerable divergence of opinion within the congregation, the role of the church is best confined to study and discussion in order to clarify the issues and equip individual members to take action on their own initiative. The same policy is called for where taking a definite stand calls for specialized technical knowledge which the congregation as a whole does not possess and cannot easily gain.

But situations also arise more frequently than some people would be prepared to admit where fundamental principles such as reverence for life, love and justice can be clearly invoked and leave no doubt in the minds of most members of a Unitarian congregation as to the ethically preferable course of action. In such situations a church

has not only the right but the obligation to make its views known in an attempt to influence the society surrounding it. The fact that its views may be unpopular is irrelevant.

It may be that there is only a narrow path, to be trodden with care, between a cowardly silence and a foolish babbling. But for the voice of calm reason there will always sooner or later be a hearing, and if a Unitarian congregation can gain the reputation of speaking with such a voice, it will continue to exercise, as Unitarian congregations have so often done in the past, an influence disproportionate to the size of its membership.

Outreach therefore ranks along with worship, education and fellowship as an indispensable function of the congregation as such. Wherever these four aspects of congregational life are all effectively present and interacting, there the congregation is alive and provides a balanced community life for its members. To this a Unitarian congregation adds a broad inclusiveness, a questioning and undogmatic spirit and an attempt to take constant account of man's developing knowledge. Such a combination will be found in few other places, and vindicates the existence of Unitarianism as a form of religious organization.

X

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT GOD

SIGNIFICANTLY absent from the list of functions of a Unitarian congregation is the laying down of specific requirements in theological or philosophical belief. 'The Church which says: "We Agree to Differ" ' was the title given to an article on Unitarianism in a mass-circulation newspaper. But acceptance of the right to differ in belief does not, as must be apparent from the preceding chapters, mean that beliefs are unimportant to a Unitarian. They are so important to him that he must reserve the right to frame his own.

Anyone who has understood this basic fact restrains his impulse to ask the sort of question he would ask of most churches: 'What do Unitarians believe?' But if he is wise enough not to throw up his hands at this point and go away shaking his head, he will shift to a more promising line of inquiry. 'Well, then, what do you personally, as an individual Unitarian, believe?' The question is a fair one and demands an answer.

Inevitably this means becoming more personal. 'One' or 'they' or 'we' have to give place to 'I'. But changing to the first person singular and saying 'I believe . . . ' does not solve all the problems. It only diminishes them. Two major difficulties remain which cannot be wholly removed.

The first is that no person who is really alive holds fast to a system of unchanging beliefs year after year. At any given time, there will be beliefs of which he is utterly convinced, others of which he feels reasonably assured,

others still which he is beginning to question, and some which he is testing tentatively, to see what validity they might have. Each day will bring at least some minor or subtle alteration to his structure of belief, according to the ways in which he responds to the impact of new ideas, experiences and persons.

Stating his beliefs, or writing them down, is therefore very much like taking a photograph. The photograph shows a person as he was and where he was at a specific time. By the time it has been printed and is ready to be shown to other people it is already slightly out of date. After a while it becomes more radically out of date, which is why a new passport with a new photograph is called for in less than a decade.

Only those who deny the possibility of growing wiser as you grow older will want to attach any finality to their present beliefs. But it takes some people a long time to see this. Obviously it rules out creeds, for a creed is an attempt to pretend that religious beliefs need never change. But to repudiate formal creeds does not necessarily provide a sufficient safeguard against the adoption of an informal one as an easy short-cut in thought and conversation, despite the growing gap which must always appear between this creed and the real beliefs of the person holding it as modified by his growing life-experiences.

CEM Joad once made the following remarkable confession (remarkable because he was a professional philosopher, whose everyday work might have been assumed to force him to a continuous rethinking of his beliefs):

> The many words I wrote and said were not the expression of a mind engaged in thinking things out afresh, but of a mind which was living on the deposit of thought that it had laid down in the past. I was stirring and re-applying, but not adding to the old material. In fact I was like a *rentier* living on the income derived from the capital his ancestors had accumulated, for it is as his ancestor that the middle-aged man of forty is entitled to regard the young man of twenty who formed his mind.[14]

To state the danger is at least one step towards avoiding it. No one would ban photography because photographs show the past, not the present. Similarly no one should be deterred from stating his beliefs because his own thinking will have moved on from the position described by the time people read what he has written. We need a healthy respect for what time can do without being intimidated by it. Moreover, the process of writing down personal beliefs can hardly fail to be a rewarding one, if only to the writer, for this is one of the most effective methods of clarifying them.

The second major problem is that it is quite artificial to separate beliefs from the life of which they form part. Beliefs are not independent entities in their own right; they are simply descriptions of the way in which a person operates at the level we are accustomed to call 'believing'. Whatever can be set down in words as a belief is the outcome of intellectual processes which have been going on in combination with all the other processes that go to make up a human life. These all belong together. To isolate the element of belief must give a distorted impression of what religion means in someone's life.

We can enjoy apples without knowing what tree they were picked from, or even in what part of the world it grew. But can thoughts be appreciated thus, apart from the personality of the thinker? The more remote that personality becomes, the more likely it is that the thought will be distorted, even by those who think they are agreeing with it. They are using the same words to symbolize very different mental processes going on in themselves.

There are, of course, words of wisdom which are anonymous, but usually these have been passed down from generation to generation only because at all times there have been people who have found them the most natural way of expressing what they themselves believe as a matter of first-hand response to life. They are then not really anonymous; they have a multiple authorship. Otherwise they deteriorate into semi-magical incantations, devoid of any connection with the personal life-experience of those who use them.

The fact is that to expound any beliefs about life is in a very real sense to expound the life of the believer. The beliefs express themselves not only in words but in style of life. This is another reason for quarrelling with creeds that come ready-made, allegedly detached from the real life of anyone and yet equally applicable to the real life of everyone. They stand in the same relationship to personal beliefs as a mummified body does to a living human being (which is not to say that they are totally useless: Egyptologists have learned a great deal from mummies).

The only beliefs with fullness of meaning are those in which life and thought are interwoven. Though there have been people who devoted their entire lives to the working out of a system of ideas to explain everything, as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and Hegel did, they haven't really provided the answer for me, because they explained everything as they saw it, whereas I have to explain everything, if I get so venturesome, as I see it. Even if I resist this and decide that I will accept a ready-made system, I still have to choose between the various ready-made systems that I could conceivably adopt. So there is no escape from a personal grappling with the issues, unless I shut my eyes and use a pin, which is in effect what some people do. But their attempt is fore-

doomed, for you can't really accept the beliefs of Plato or Jesus or Confucius without living the life of Plato or Jesus or Confucius.

A statement of personal beliefs ought therefore to be very largely an exercise in autobiography. But no one can ever write down his whole life, and even to begin lies beyond the scope of a book like this. This being so, any account of personal beliefs is no more than a weather-vane pointing to the wind.

With these limitations in mind, I shall try to give a fair answer to a fair question: 'What do you, as an individual Unitarian, believe?' The answer has to be in words, and this too is a restriction, for many other avenues of communication would be valuable if they were open. I could point out the things I do, my way of life, the sort of things I feel it worth while spending money on, the sort of people I associate most closely with, the sort of priorities I establish upon my time. Or again, I could tell a story, act a play, sing a song, paint a picture. All these are valid ways of answering the question: 'What do you believe?'

Other responses are possible, too. Silence is one, as the Buddha demonstrated. Losing your temper is another. Laughing is another. The same belief can be expressed sometimes by verbal definition, sometimes by acting out, sometimes by silence, sometimes by an art form, sometimes by crying and sometimes by laughing.

But here we are restricted to words. 'Words are wise men's counters,' wrote Thomas Hobbes. 'They do but reckon by them; but they are the money of fools.' To a reckoning by words as counters, or symbols, or pictures we now proceed.

Here am I, a human being, an infinitesimal unit in the caravan of humanity which has covered the course between birth and death in years gone by and will continue to do so

in years to come, an infinitesimal unit even among those who are sharing this transient experience we call living at the present moment. Here am I on this speck of a planet amid unimaginable vastnesses extending through galaxies upon galaxies with distances measured in millions of light-years. Here am I, sustained in being by the equally unimaginably intricate interworking of millions upon millions of electrons which make up my physical being and everything I encounter through my senses. Here am I asking what it is all about. That is what I am really asking when I ask what I believe.

If complete and final answers are in the nature of the case ruled out I can still paint word-pictures and say 'It's as though reality as I encounter and experience it were like this.' The pictures will be crude, but they are the best I can draw. In the mystery plays of the Middle Ages figures with names like Justice or Hope or Virtue walked around on the stage, attempting to give a dramatic representation of at least some of the more important aspects of life as it was then understood. The enterprise of stating what I believe is something like the presentation of such a play.

It is at this point that I encounter the picture called God, or the gods. You will present me with this picture in the singular or the plural according to whether you believe that the supremely important aspects of being all ultimately hang together as parts of one basic unity, or whether you feel that they are separate from one another and at least to some extent discordant. Is your experience of life one of unity and harmony or one of multiplicity and chaos? Probably both. Sometimes your experience seems to point one way, sometimes the other. Sometimes, indeed, you feel torn both ways at once. That is why so many religions have tried to combine unity with multi-

plicity in their pictures of what gives ultimate meaning to things. In Christianity you have not only the doctrine of the Trinity, which tries to combine unity and plurality; you also have a whole pantheon of angels, devils and glorified saints, each one the patron of some aspect of our life-experience, good or ill. In Hinduism, where unity is stressed more strongly perhaps than in any other of the great historical religions, multiplicity breaks out all over the place, continually and exuberantly. In strictly monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam, you find an absolute multiplicity between Creator and creation, the many converging back to but not merging into the One. Conversely in religions like those of ancient Greece or Babylon, where gods were many, there still emerged a King of the Gods, a Supreme Ruler, imposing his unity over the conflict-riven scheme of things.

All this is part of my background of thought, as it is part of the background of anyone living in our day. I can't pretend that no such pictures have been drawn in the past as I struggle for my own reply to the question: 'Do you believe in God?'

Somewhere in the back of my mind are the crude drawings of the cavemen of millennia ago. Somewhere, too, are the simple stories told by African Bushmen or South Sea Islanders before their outlook upon life was corrupted by merchants and missionaries. There are the lives of men like Jeremiah and Jesus. There is the remote logic-chopping of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. There is the practical mysticism of Francis of Assisi or Meister Eckhart or Albert Schweitzer. There is the aggressive militant theology of Mohammed and Cromwell, of Kaiser Wilhelm II or John Foster Dulles. There are the mathematical rhapsodies of Pythagoras and Spinoza, Alfred North Whitehead and Samuel Alexander. There is the all-

embracing All of Hinduism and Buddhism. There is the Ground of Being of Paul Tillich and John Robinson. There is the theology I myself was taught in my childhood. And there is the simple response of the untheologically-inclined man who at a moment of great emotional stress can find no more meaningful expression to convey his feelings than 'My God!'

All these and others, together with all that they imply, lie somewhere in the background in my response when the question of God is raised. I don't feel obliged to place any one of them in some favoured position, though I naturally respond more positively to the expressions of those whose experience of life and reflection upon life come closest to my own. But none the less, if someone asks me whether I believe in God, I know that he has taken his stand on one or other of these positions. He has arrived, I have to accept, at some fairly precise idea of what the question means before he puts it to me. How he arrived at this idea might be discussed, for there is all the difference in the world between the work of the creative artist who sets out to express on canvas his interpretation of what is there and the work of the hack who simply makes copies of other people's pictures, or does his painting by numbers.

All this too has to be in my mind if someone asks me if I believe in God. What can I reply? Yes? No? Sometimes? Partly? None of these answers seems to fit the situation. I can only question and question. What is it that you are asking me? Just exactly how does believing in God differ from disbelieving in God? Are there outward and visible evidences to show clearly the difference between belief and disbelief? How would I know whether what I believe in is properly to be called God or not? Suppose I feel, let us say, what Wordsworth described as:

A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

If I feel this, how can I go on to claim that the object of such feelings is the God whose nature and activities are described in such detail in Christian theology? Of course I can't. I recall with distaste how dogmatists have tried to claim men like Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein as believers because they testified that they also had had similar experiences to the one Wordsworth described.

I too have had feelings of the same sort. I suppose most people have. I have felt myself caught up in an order and harmony underlying the whole scheme of things and expressing itself in incomparable beauty. Is this believing in God? I don't know. According to some people it is; according to other people it isn't. I don't really see how the words can matter too much.

I am not afraid of using the word God, though I use it sparingly. But when I do use it, I am using the language of poetry and metaphor and mythology, not the language of logic and science.

Many people find this sort of answer very unsatisfactory. I am accused of not giving a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. The questioner is sure that if asked 'Do you believe in God?' he can answer simply 'Yes' (or 'No'), and he doesn't see why I can't do the same. I am not playing the game according to his rules. His rules are that you start with a sharply-defined definition of what you mean by 'God' and then you proceed to debate whether any reality exists conforming to the definition. If you say "yes", then you are labelled a theist. If you say 'no', you are labelled an atheist—a term which has been

applied to such a miscellaneous company as Bertrand Russell, Spinoza, Socrates, Confucius and the early Christians. If you take the third option of the Gallup poll and say 'Don't know', you are labelled an agnostic. This is a term many young people today have applied to themselves, but it still means that you are playing the same old theological game.

It can be an exciting game, though not a very productive one, as long as you are content to move around within the closed circle set by the definition. But if you argue that it is arbitrary to start with a definition, that you should start with whatever experience you may have of the nature of things before you begin to interpret it in definitions, then the game is over.

To take an example of a different sort, I may be asked: 'Do you believe in unicorns?' If we begin with a definition of a unicorn as a horse with a horn on its forehead, I simply answer 'No', and the game is over. But it's much more realistic to explore how the idea of a unicorn actually arose out of early travellers' descriptions of a rhinoceros, in which case I may say that if this is what you mean by a unicorn then the answer has to be 'Yes', though I am not thereby committing myself to a belief in all the folklore that has grown up around the unicorn. Life is seldom so simple that quick, straightforward answers can be given to seemingly straightforward questions.

The definitions which have traditionally laid down the terms under which theological discussions may take place have not been entirely arbitrary. They arose out of the demands of men thousands of years ago for explanations of the way things are or sanctions for human conduct. God was regarded as a cause, or a lawgiver, or both. When the Norsemen heard the sound of thunder, they said it was made by their god Thor. When the ancient inhabitants of

Italy saw one of their volcanoes erupt, they said that this was the work of the god Vulcan. When the Hebrews in Old Testament times framed their codes of law they said that these were dictated by their god Yahweh. As time went by this view of the ultimate nature of things became more sophisticated. In Aristotle's thought God is the first cause before all other causes, so that if you begin with any object or event whatsoever and keep on asking 'Why?' long enough you finally end up with God. This same idea was incorporated into the scientific thought of the earlier part of the modern era, till Laplace came out with his famous remark that he had no need of that hypothesis. Since that time God no longer serves as a cause or explanation in the thinking of scientifically-trained persons. Introducing him into the discussion does not add anything that would otherwise be absent. But force of habit still maintains ways of thinking and speaking about God which properly belong to the period before this became so. That is why debate in these areas so often becomes sterile and unrewarding.

For my part, I want to come back to first-hand experience. It was, after all, from first-hand experience that the people of the ancient world drew for their concepts, obsolete though these have now become. Let me contemplate the galaxies in the vastnesses of space, the miracle of new life in the springtime, the soughing of the wind in the pine trees, the surge of the wave on a rocky coast, the sense of oneness in some inscrutable sense with all these and with my fellow-men; the sense of wonder and love, the call for justice and peace, the aspiration toward beauty and wholeness. To all these I seek to respond. Call them aspects of God and I won't quarrel. I do it sometimes myself. Personify God pictorially and I won't quarrel. I do it sometimes myself. I hope that at the level of feeling and

vital response to life, though not of philosophy or science, I can be in full accord, say, with those ancient Hebrews who wrote the 19th or 104th Psalms. But if you find this sort of terminology a barrier, then I won't quarrel with that either. Other words, other symbols, other pictures can represent the same realities, and I will be just as happy to use them instead. We all need to vary our pictures and words and symbols from time to time, lest we become too closely wedded to any of them.

So the discussion comes full circle. Any words we use or refrain from using when talking about the basic realities of existence, including the word God, are only crude pictures. We respond to what really lies behind those pictures not so much by our way of talking as by our way of living. James Martineau, the leading Unitarian philosopher of a century ago, put it thus: 'Every man's highest, nameless though it be, is his living God; while, oftener than we can tell, the being on whom he seems to call, whose history he learned in the catechism, of whom he hears at church . . . is his dead God.' Martineau knew whose God was dead long before all the recent ferment on this subject; before Nietzsche too, for that matter.

'Do you live by the highest you know?' is then a more realistic and productive question than 'Do you believe in God?' Quite obviously the answer admits of degrees. It is not a matter of yes or no but to what extent. Returning to theistic terminology, God is affirmed or denied in the whole of a person's orientation towards life, the values by which he lives — though this again can be a somewhat artificial way of putting it, since no one is continually referring back consciously to values as he lives his life.

But the values implicit in a man's way of life tell you more about his beliefs than his theological declarations. The highest is ultimately nameless. It does not have to be

conjured into being by pronouncing a magic word. That is what I believe about God.

Before moving on to other areas of concern, a footnote on the subject of prayer may be added. Obviously my idea of prayer hangs on my beliefs about God. Many traditional and conventional ideas have to be left behind. Certainly prayer does not mean telephoning an order to the proprietor of a cosmic department store. Certainly it does not mean grovelling and imploring before a magnified medieval monarch or oriental sultan. The terminology of obsequious flattery or begging and beseeching is obviously out of place.

Prayer then becomes for me, to repeat Coleridge's definition, the effort to live in the spirit of the whole. You aspire to relate yourself to the highest, to recognize and realize your oneness with the real nature of things — the ground of being, if you like — whether in solitary communion with the natural world from electrons to galaxies or linked together in a human fellowship. Nor is this some isolated, detached aspect of life. The Benedictine monks chose well when they took as their motto *Laborare est orare:* To work is to pray. Not that all work is prayer. Some is sheer drudgery. But I believe that the work of the artist or the craftsman or anyone who works lovingly in any field of labour is prayer in the truest sense of the word.

Prayer in words has to capture and express something of this. It is by no means easy. We grope, hesitate, and relapse into silence, which is often so much more articulate than words.

These then are some of the things I as a Unitarian believe about the aspects of life traditionally associated with the words God and prayer. I have done no more than draw a sketch-map of a very complicated terrain, but for me at any rate it has validity as a guide to further exploration.

XI

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT MAN

'WHAT is man?' The question lies close to the central focus of philosophical and religious speculation, and always has done. Each generation has to answer it for itself. In fact, each person has to do so, not forgetting that he who asks the question is himself a man, so that asking what he believes about man entails asking what he can believe about himself.

From one point of view man is insignificant. Whenever I watch a city sink below as a jet airliner swoops upward in the dramatic way they do, this sense of the insignificance of man and his works bears in powerfully upon me. Below are human beings crawling around like insects, till finally the individual becomes invisible, and only patterns of lines show the rows of tiny boxes, each the home of some unknown family, with its own joys and sorrows, problems and concerns. An ancient Hebrew prophet caught the feeling exactly when he wrote:

> It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
> And its inhabitants are as grasshoppers.

Yet this experience of looking down from a jet airliner is incomplete if I ever forget that my vantage-point is itself a triumph of human ingenuity. Men designed and made it, as they also design and make the giant telescopes which open up the immensities of space and make man feel even more insignificant.

There has always been an oscillation between the sense

of man's grandeur and unique importance in the scheme of things and the sense of his utter worthlessness and impotence. Alexander Pope expressed it memorably in his description of man:

> With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
> With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
> He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
> In doubt to deem himself a God, or beast . . .
> Created half to rise and half to fall;
> Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
> Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled;
> The glory, jest and riddle of the world!

Here is a classic illustration of the holding of opposites in tension within a unifying circle. Too often, however, the attempt has been made to break the unity and to deny the essential reality of one or other aspect of human nature. Either there is a sorting out of mankind into two categories — the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the sheep and the goats, the saints and the sinners — or else mankind as a whole is regarded as one-sidedly great or puny, good or bad.

One of the perennial issues in religion has been expressed in such questions as: 'Is human nature good or evil?' A short answer is usually expected, such as the one given in the Westminster Confession, the foundation document of the Presbyterian churches. There it is asserted that 'we are utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil.' Unitarians have usually been in conscious reaction against such a view as this, and have very often over-reacted by swinging the pendulum the opposite way.

This is not quite such an unrealistic attitude as many people, appalled by the stupidity and brutality which can as easily be illustrated in the present as in the past, tend

to assume. It was well expressed many centuries ago by the Chinese philosopher Mencius, who told of a mountain which was once clothed with trees and beautiful vegetation. But along came men with saws and axes, who logged it off, burnt it over, and then, when the new growth began to appear, pastured goats all over it. So the mountain now appears stripped and bare. Many people think this to be its natural condition, and find it hard to believe that it was once beautifully wooded. Just so, said Mencius, is human nature. Men are naturally good, but their character is ruined to such an extent by the pernicious influences which have been brought to bear upon them since their earliest childhood that you would often find this very hard to believe.

If I am asked what I believe about man, I have to answer that I find myself immeasurably closer to the view of Mencius than to that of the Westminster Confession. Yet I am uneasy in letting the matter rest there, for I feel that once again I have been boxed in by the way the question is usually posed. Is human nature good or evil? How can I answer? Good? Evil? Half and half? Basically good, but badly corrupted in practice? If so, why, and by whom? All these answers seem a little unrealistic. I could say, and do, that human nature is neither good nor evil. Human nature just is. If I stopped there I could be accused of evading the question, which is precisely what I am doing, and for the reason that I don't think it is the right question. But what is the right question?

To begin with, we have to look at man as he is, not as ideally he might be. The influences, individual and social, to which he has been exposed all his life cannot be extracted from this picture. In fact, they are of enormous importance for each one of us. They indicate the relationships

by which a human being is defined. The last chapter described man's relationships in one dimension, that in which he responds to the stars above and the earth beneath, out of whose elements his physical being is formed.

These relationships, though often we ignore them, are the same for all of us. But it is far otherwise with our relationships in the other dimension. in which we respond to the living beings around us, and in particular to our fellow-men. This relationship is summed up in the phrase 'the brotherhood of man', a basic fact of existence, even though brothers often act towards one another in ways that are far from loving.

The living of my life, in a physical sense, is a continuous process of incorporating new molecules into the ever-changing pattern which constitutes my identity. The new molecules replace others which are continually being lost, so that elements that were once part of my body (or rather, of me in a physical sense, for my body is not a detachable possession in the way my house is) are now part of new organized systems of many kinds in many parts of the world.

In precisely the same way, the living of my life in what may be called a spiritual sense is a continuous process of incorporating new relationships into the ever-changing pattern which constitutes my identity. Just as in a physical sense the quality of living is enhanced first by the incorporation into my body of those beneficial elements which make for the best possible functioning of the whole, and then by an adequate exercising of the whole, so too in a spiritual sense the quality of living is enhanced by a multiplication and exercise of my positive relationships to the cosmos as a whole, to the world of living things, and to my fellow-men. If this process ceases in either the physical or the spiritual dimension, then I am no longer really alive.

'The individual is a fact of existence insofar as he steps into a living relation with other individuals,' wrote Martin Buber. 'Man is made man by it.'[15] To put the same idea more simply, but not necessarily more comprehensibly, to live is to love. The person who is not loving is to that extent not living.

This gives quite a different point of departure in reply to the question 'What is man?' from the one traditional in the religious thinking of the western world. There it is customary to begin with a model of a man, supposed to be representative, and usually defined as an immortal soul temporarily housed in a mortal body. Or sometimes there is a tripartite division of a man into body, mind and spirit. You then proceed to argue about the way in which those very different entities are linked to one another, how the overall combination establishes communication with other combinations of the same sort, and so on.

To me, these questions seem unreal. We do not, in the natural course of events, feel it necessary to tie ourselves in knots trying to work out how the mind acts upon the body, or how the soul is reunited with the body in the traditional Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In practice, we are much more concerned with the question of how this 'I', whatever it is, conducts itself in the world, and with how we establish rich and meaningful relationships with one another. So for me a man is defined by his relationships and undefined by his lack of relationships. This being called 'I', 'me', 'myself', is not to be best understood as an assemblage of 'my body' plus 'my mind' plus 'my soul', but rather as the point of intersection of the innumerable relationships by which 'I' am defined.

A relationship in the full sense is not simply a matter of proximity; it is a positive response. In traditional terminology, it is not just understanding that 'neighbour' means by definition someone close to you; it is loving your neighbour as yourself. This point is well illustrated by the way in which Jesus responded when asked by a lawyer for a definition of what he meant by 'neighbour'. He told the story of the Samaritan who rescued the man beaten up by brigands. The relationship came alive.

If a person stands at the point of intersection of many such relationships, that person I call a success. If there are very few such relationships I call him a failure. This is quite different of course from the conventional usage, where we call someone a success if he has succeeded in cornering for himself a significant proportion of the earth's material resources or the title to them. I mean success in being a man, skill in the art of living. This is a matter of degree. Some are more skilled than others. No one is an absolute and complete failure, for this would mean his complete non-existence. Furthermore, there is always the possibility of progress, as a person defines himself more strongly by means of an enlarging number of positive relationships. It would be possible to construct a scale, which has complete non-existence at one end but is capable of infinite extension at the other.

If this makes any sense at all, then it makes nonsense of the question, 'Is human nature good or bad?' It would be like asking, 'Is water hot or cold?' And just as water can cool off or warm up, so can human nature make progress or disintegrate. If it disintegrates, then to that extent a man is so much the less a man, which is not quite the way it is with water cooling off.

So I conclude that the real question to be asked is not 'Is human nature good or bad?', but rather 'How many positive relationships, both in the vertical and in the horizontal dimensions, converge in this person?'

One further point is important. There are experiments in chemistry where under certain conditions a crystal dropped into a solution can induce the crystallization of many others. In the same way a person who is skilled in the art of living, who is a success, not only stands at the point where many positive relationships intersect; he also induces their intersection at other points as well, and thus strengthens the living or loving of others. It is this possibility that holds out hope for human society as well as the human individual, in days when such hope comes far from easily.

This approach to human nature and conduct demands a fresh and creative response to each new person and each new situation. It therefore stands at the other end of the spectrum from that strict observance of rules and commandments, supposed to cover all possibilities, in which the carrying out of 'religious duties' has often been thought to consist. The basic objection to such commandments is that they place a straitjacket upon a man's freedom to respond creatively to the uniqueness of each situation in which he finds himself, and instead sort life out into prescribed categories within each of which there is a stereotyped response. The same objections arise as with creeds at an intellectual level. But like creeds, commandments are not totally useless. They can be regarded as maxims expressing some sort of consensus as to the best procedures in very generalized situations. Carry them further than this and they choke the individual's growth and development.

We move now to another subject which is inescapably part of any consideration of man. The life of each individual has a beginning in time and it has an end in time. Birth and death are both occasions of profound religious significance. Naturally enough, when Unitarianism is

under discussion, sooner or later someone asks, 'What do Unitarians believe happens to a person after death?' Seldom, in my experience, am I asked, 'What do Unitarians believe happened to a person before birth?' But this question about what follows death is perennial. When I am faced with it I have first to make the preliminary remarks about the sharing of common beliefs not being one of the characteristics of Unitarians. Then I go on to say that I don't think there can be any subject on which there is a wider spread of opinion among Unitarians than this. But, at the cost of over-simplification, there are at least four major categories into which the Unitarian views I have encountered can be sorted.

Firstly, there are those who believe in a personal continuity of some sort after death, perhaps expressing themselves in terms of the traditional idea of the immortality of the soul. As to whether this immortality extends back before birth as well as after death, as to whether it extends to animals as well as humans, there could be further subdivisions, but I don't think any Unitarians believe in the traditional heaven with harps and thrones, nor in the traditional hell with flames and fiends.

Secondly, there are those who believe in reincarnation, a succession of rebirths, though there could be further subdivisions as to what it is that is reborn and in what way it is continuous with what went before. Such a view can be held alone or in combination with the Hindu or Buddhist idea of an ultimate escape from the wheel of rebirth.

Thirdly, there are those who look at the physical fact of death by analogy with the dying of a fire. The fire burns right out, leaving only ashes. Nothing continues. New fires may be kindled, but not from those ashes. The answer as to what follows death so far as the individual is concerned is: Nothing.

Fourthly, there are those whose favourite comparison would be not with fire but with water. Life is like the falling of a raindrop through the air. Death is like its falling into the sea and becoming part of the ocean. It has gone irrevocably as an individual entity, yet it survives as part of the ocean.

I suppose I ought to add a fifth category: those who say that they have no idea of what might or might not follow death, that there seems to be no way of arriving at any well-grounded belief on such matters, and that in any case it is the living of this life that counts. If it is well lived, then whatever conceivably might or might not follow can be very well left to itself. I suspect that most Unitarians, whether they hold one of the other views or not, would accept most of this as a supplement to their particular beliefs.

But here we are not asking what Unitarians believe in general. We are asking what I believe in particular. You will by now be surprised if I don't preface this with a protest against too strict a classification, but having said that, I should add that in broad terms I would place myself in the drop of water and the ocean category.

Individual immortality as an everlasting personal continuity in time I can't even understand, much less believe in. It would be fair to add that I have had a continuing though not systematic or time-absorbing interest in the field of psychical research. There are some people who believe that individual survival in some sense beyond physical death can be experimentally demonstrated, though everyone agrees that there is also a lot of fraud and quackery practised. A number of Unitarians are actively involved in this work. I am interested, but thus far haven't been interested enough to give it a very high priority on my time. So any opinions I have come to are

highly tentative, but for what they are worth, here they are. First, as I understand the evidence, survival beyond death of something that can be called an individual personality is neither proved nor disproved. There are experimental facts pointing that way, but alternative hypotheses to account for them are also possible. And second, I don't know of any conceivable demonstration which could even theoretically prove immortality, that is, continuity for ever and ever. Survival in some form for a limited period for some individuals, yes, possibly, but for what purpose, to what end? I don't know, and haven't really been interested enough to try to find out.

The same applies to the evidence alleged in favour of the idea of reincarnation. It is a possible theory, but as to what it is that is reincarnated, in what sense it is the same being if it carries none of the marks we usually associate with personal continuity (such as memory), I don't know, and once again, other concerns have always seemed more pressing.

So if, to put it pointedly, you ask me where you and I will be in a hundred years' time, or what we will be in a hundred years' time, I shall have to say that this intersection of relationships which constitutes myself will have largely dispersed. Not perhaps completely. As long as people perform the plays of Shakespeare or Sophocles, or read the works of Confucius or Plato, or respond actively to the life of Christ or Buddha, the web of relationships which once constituted those persons still persists in some ways. I don't delude myself that I am ever going to find myself in the particular class of persons I have mentioned but they simply illustrate in a striking and outstanding way what can in some measure be true of all of us.

This has been called by some people immortality of influence. It depends, of course, not on your everlasting-

ness or mine, but upon the continuity of humanity. This has worked quite reliably until now. But its future is questionable. We are told by scientific experts that the stock of nuclear weapons we have ingeniously made and collected would, if they were all detonated (which after all is what they are constructed for) put an end to all life on this planet above the level of reptiles, perhaps above the level of fish. If you ask me what I believe about this, then I have to reply that we must make our plans as though it won't happen, we must pull our weight in whatever efforts we can to try to ensure that it won't happen, but that we are not being fully realistic unless we have come to terms with the possibility that it might happen. What if it did? Would this make a meaningless mockery of everything we do and think and are now? Would it destroy irrevocably the value of all that has been achieved in the course of human evolution down to the present?

Actually this is only putting in dramatic form a dilemma which has always been with us. For even if we are wise enough not to exterminate ourselves during the next half-century, which seems very doubtful as you look around the world, it still remains true that there will come a time, even after millions of years, when the earth will no longer be habitable by life as we know it. If all your meanings depend upon an everlasting future, this too, however remote, stands as the ultimate destination.

For my part, I would want to dissociate myself from all philosophies which make the meaningfulness of life depend upon fulfilment in the future, whether upon this earth or in some imagined realms beyond it.

> Men's curiosity searches past and future
> And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time is an occupation for the saint —

> No occupation either, but something given
> And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
> Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.[16]

The point of intersection of the timeless with time is where we stand, and to call the apprehension of it an occupation for the saint is simply another way of saying that it is *the* religious undertaking. I believe that. And the fact that I believe it is the reason why I am comparatively unconcerned with these questions of before birth or after death, because these are questions which are limited to the time dimension. They can be measured in direction, distance or composition. They belong to the realm of scientific inquiry. What I am more concerned with is the difference of quality, the intersection of quality with quantity. If religion is skill in living it is a skill which utilizes a man's awareness of and participation in what I might call the dimension of depth in life, which intersects with the dimension of length as measured out in time.

The achievement of this particular quality in life is *the* religious undertaking. It is not achieved by detaching oneself from those aspects of life which are measured out in time. It is not a withdrawal from what has sometimes been called in a derogatory tone 'the things of this world' and of course it is not a withdrawal from human relationships. It is a full participation in these with a heightened quality which comes from a sense that the real values on which one rests one's life cannot be undermined or destroyed by happenings in time.

As usual, when we are dealing with the more fundamental things in life, words fail us. I am perpetually suspicious of the man who has pat answers all neatly packaged in words to the basic questions of religion and life. The package may look very pretty, but too often there's

nothing inside it, or what is inside turns out to be a worthless bauble. But since we are limited at this point to words in an effort to communicate, let me try to sum up if I can what I have been saying.

There is a certain timeless quality to life which is the realm of meanings, the realm of religion. It is, to use the classical terminology, the eternal life, or Nirvana. It has been sought by some, radically misunderstood by many, achieved only partially and only by a few. It is open to all of us, in however small a degree, if we begin to search in the right place. And where is the right place? It takes as its point of departure the acceptance of our relatedness to all that is, to cosmos and microcosm, universe and man, God and Nature, wise man and fool, saint and sinner, the world, the flesh and the devil. Beginning from there it proceeds to a positive realization of what it means to live with all these and more — that is, what it means to live in love.

The contemplation and the practice of matters like these constitute for me the realm of religion. I am not saying that religion should not embrace many other activities as well, but I am saying that without these particular activities it isn't religion for me. They provide a substratum, a foundation, for the processes of everyday living. We make no conscious deliberate attempt to spend all our lives in such activities, but without them life becomes a humdrum routine varied by superficial titillations and excitements until the whole business is closed by death.

XII

QUESTIONS AND APPRAISAL

What remains to be said? In one sense, just about everything. Religion is life, and life is not to be captured in words. But as an outline of what being a Unitarian means to me, what has been written will have to stand, with one or two additions.

Firstly, it may be objected that in my statement of personal beliefs I have said nothing about Jesus or the Bible. I could reply that this is because they do not occupy the same central place in my concerns as the subjects discussed in the preceding two chapters. None the less, I recognize that there are many people in whose concerns they are central, so I should at least state my position.

We will never arrive at any realistic appraisal either of Jesus or of the Bible without some awareness of the place and times to which they belong. Jesus lived almost two thousand years ago in a part of the world where to this day the ways of life and thought are very different from our own. This was even more so in his day, so much so that it is only by dint of great effort on our part that we can enter even imaginatively into the frame of reference of the people of that period. A Unitarian who devoted years to such an effort expressed it thus:

> We are carried into a world where nature is plastic, and shapes itself obediently beneath superior powers; where the very rock can roll through the wilderness to yield a draught for thirsty travellers, where man

> can walk upon the water and multiply the loaves, and God can fill the sky with portents and commotions of impending change; where the possibilities of humanity are unlimited, and common speech assumes that the dead may rise and live and move among their fellows, may cross the centuries and descend from heaven, or reappear out of an unknown grave, to meet and talk beside the Son of God; where angels band themselves in celestial escort or in legions of defence, or demons that have swarmed from the abyss are constantly seeking fresh abodes in hapless men; where powers and principalities contend from height to depth; where the inarticulate utterance of enthusiasm seems to the listener to be the Spirit's speech; where the skies open and the language of heaven is heard; where, in short, science is not, and imagination reigns supreme, and brings forth from its treasure-house things noble and lovely, but withal things monstrous and grotesque.[17]

One of the features of the thought of the ancient world was that persons who stood out markedly from the usual run of human beings and made a powerful impact upon those among whom they moved were likely to be thought of as superhuman in some sense. A miraculous birth might be attributed to them, as it was attributed, for example, to Zoroaster and Confucius, Plato and Gautama the Buddha. Legends grew up profusely around them, and in some cases these legends were incorporated by later devotees into a great myth.

The Christian myth, as outlined in chapter VI, says much about Christ but little about Jesus. The practising Christian of the present day, who lives in the myth and finds that it gives meaning to his experience and aspirations, makes Christ the symbol of something real in his own life. Personally, I use other symbols for what is real in my life, and while acknowledging the grandeur of the traditional myth and the works of art and imagination it has produced.

I find that it does not interpret my own life-experience any more adequately than the myths of the Greeks or the Norsemen. But I have neither the right nor the wish to deny the significance of such symbolism to others.

I do have the right, however, to insist that when we turn from myth to history, we use the normal standards of historical judgment. The records of the life and teaching of Jesus are to be studied in the same way as any other similar records. From such a study it appears that Jesus was a man of obscure origins who for a very few years assumed the traditional Hebrew role of the prophet. He had a tremendous impact upon a small number of persons who became his devoted followers and a lesser but still very significant impact upon many others who gathered to hear him speak. He was at length arrested by the authorities as a disturber of the peace and put to death by the unspeakably cruel Roman method of crucifixion.

His teaching consisted of two parts. First, he called those who heard him to turn from evil ways of life and prepare themselves for an impending catastrophe which would otherwise catch them unawares, as in the days of Noah's flood. And second, he recalled them from an ever-increasing emphasis upon rules and regulations as a guide to conduct to an emphasis simply upon love. To be loving, he asserted, is to do what God requires of you.

The sparseness and unreliability of the records make it difficult to go much further than this. Many documents which circulated among the early Christians were almost entirely the product of the imagination of those who wrote them. The only records with any real claim to validity are those now incorporated into the New Testament. But it has to be remembered that the earliest of these was written a quarter of a century after the death of Jesus, and by someone who was not among his immediate circle

of followers. As time went by and other records appeared the elements of miracle and fantasy multiplied, showing clearly the growth of legend. But where there are inconsistencies in the recording of events it is not easy to say which document has the best claim to be accepted.

To these difficulties it must be added that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, while all the earliest records are in Greek. Like most Oriental speakers he loved flowery and rhetorical figures of speech, as shown by the fact that most of his teaching was in parables. However accurate the memory of those who heard him, he wrote nothing himself, and any possible writings preceding the ones which have survived must have been copied and recopied, with accretions and errors creeping in as a result.

Under these circumstances, it is absurd to speak as though Jesus had been accompanied by someone with a tape-recorder, or taking down what he said in shorthand. Even in the modern age, with such aids to accuracy of reporting, disputes as to what someone really said are by no means unknown. But arguments based upon the incredible assumption that we have the exact words uttered by Jesus still flourish. For example, it has been argued that Jesus said he was God, and that either you have to accept that he was telling the truth or else call him a liar and impostor. Such an argument squeezes the last drop of literalness out of the language of poetic imagery. It ignores the long time-gap between utterance and record, and the fallibility of memory. It ignores the influence of the writer's personal interpretation of what Jesus said. It ignores the loss of meaning involved in translation from Aramaic into Greek and subsequently into English. It transplants isolated remarks from their original setting among personalities and events and thought-patterns in an ancient period in the Middle East into a new setting amid

personalities and thought-patterns of our own day, and it assumes that their significance will not be damaged in the process.

I find such arguments a frustrating waste of time. After allowing for the limitations of his place and era, for which no man can fairly be held responsible, Jesus seems to me to have been a powerful and compelling personality proclaiming the perennial religious theme of love. But I see no reason for saying that he stood out beyond all others, either before or after, in making this contribution to human life and understanding. The evidence for such an assertion is altogether inadequate. Furthermore, I believe that comparisons as to who stands highest among the guides to fullness of life are entirely out of place. All have made their contribution. Some people respond more readily to the impact of one personality, real or idealized, some to another. The personality matters less than the response to life he illustrates.

With regard to the Bible, similar considerations apply. The usual question is 'Do you believe the Bible?' How do I answer that? The Bible is a collection of many documents by different hands written over a long period of time in the distant past. The exact number of documents included varies according to whether the Bible in question is the one authorized by Jews, by Protestants or by Catholics. Whichever collection is referred to, I am bound to say: 'Yes, there are some things to be found in the Bible which I do believe; there are others which I don't believe, and there are others again which are so remote from anything I even take into consideration that I have never had occasion to ask myself whether I believe them or not.'

Somehow this seldom seems to satisfy the person asking the question. He accuses me of picking and choosing, in a way he would not do if I said I believed some assertions,

disbelieved some and disregarded many in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Actually, the person who professes to believe everything in the Bible picks and chooses in just the same way, though the basis of his preference is different. You can even buy 'red-letter editions' of the Bible in which the passages so chosen are printed in red.

Within the Bible are documents like the *Book of Job* and the *Psalms* which to me contain much of deep religious import. But there are also large sections which contain nothing of religious import at all, however interesting some of them may be as records of ancient folklore, political intrigue or military stuggle. I have to do my choosing, as I would in any other literature, on the basis of what speaks to me personally.

I should reiterate that, very explicitly in these latter pages, but implicitly in all I have written, this is a personal statement. I speak for myself. Not all Unitarians would agree with me. Some would attach greater importance to Jesus and the Bible than I do, some less. Some would differ sharply from some of my views on God and man. Some would quarrel with my basic interpretation of Unitarianism.

Nevertheless, I am a Unitarian, and a Unitarian minister. I don't think I am an unrepresentative example of either. I think that in general terms what I have written speaks for many other Unitarians besides myself.

In fact, I would go further. There are a great many people who do not call themselves Unitarians who would find themselves in general agreement with the positions expressed here. Most people in the western world today do not hold the traditional Christian view, whatever lip-service may be paid to it on special occasions. Many are Unitarians without knowing it, and to admit that this is

so may be the first step towards establishing a real integrity of religious life.

That is the way it was for me. I well remember the hour's conversation I had with the first Unitarian I had ever, to my knowledge, met. A few months earlier I had heard about Unitarianism for the first time. I had found what I heard interesting, and had subsequently read a good deal of Unitarian literature. Now I had reached the point of talking it over with the nearest Unitarian minister. After a long discussion I asked, 'And how do I become a Unitarian?'

The answer was unexpected. 'You don't have to *become* a Unitarian,' he said; 'You *are* one.' While I had been plying him with questions about Unitarianism, he had been quietly sizing me up, noting the position I had reached in my attitudes and questionings. He knew that I was a Unitarian before I did.

I felt rather deflated by his reply. I had expected to hear about processes of initiation through which I would have to go before I had the right to call myself a Unitarian. But as time went by the realization dawned upon me that there had in fact been a process of initiation, but I had already completed it by the time I came to ask the question. I had been a Unitarian without knowing it. The only change was that now I knew it. This meant that I could honestly acknowledge the religious position to which I had worked my way, give it a name and discover a community of like-minded people whose questions and doubts and affirmations and positive response to life were to strengthen and support me in my own.

Becoming a Unitarian may sound easy. But it is not easy in fact. There is no great difficulty for most people, in these days, in leaving behind traditional dogmas. But rejection of these does not make one a Unitarian. It is

much more difficult to cultivate a liberal, tolerant attitude and within this to develop a positive and constructive response to life. In fact, it is a never-ending process. No one dare claim that he has finally reached his destination. The whole of life is a process of growth.

In spite of four hundred years of Unitarian history, the future is never secure. Unitarianism is well described as a movement, but it can move in any one of a number of directions. As a perceptive comment in a Canadian religious journal put it: 'It could, as some of its leaders believe, become a strong new moral force in space-age life. Or it could fall into a shapeless mass embracing more and more people who believe less and less.'[18]

In a movement where so much depends so obviously upon individual acceptance of responsibility the alternatives become more starkly apparent. The past is full of examples of failures, as well as of outstanding achievements. Principles have not been consistently upheld by Unitarians any more than by adherents of other forms of religion. We are all of us very human, and this fact should induce a proper sense of humility. Boastful propaganda wins a fleeting and fickle response, but where love of people is combined with love of truth, beauty and justice there will always be those who find their way gratefully into the fellowship.

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