

**FINDING
A
LANGUAGE
AND OTHER TESTIMONIES**

FRANCIS TERRY



The Lindsey Press

FINDING A LANGUAGE
and other Testimonies
from the Newsletters of the
National Unitarian Fellowship

by Francis Terry



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Introductory Note

ON retiring from fifteen years editorship (1956-71) of the *Newsletters* of the National Unitarian Fellowship, I was asked to produce a collection of pieces which I had myself contributed during that period. Some of them were signed, some anonymous, and some printed over a pseudonym. In the following selection, I have in some instances altered the titles, but have retained the original dates.

The National Unitarian Fellowship is an autonomous society affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. It was founded in 1945 to meet the needs of people of Unitarian views or sympathies for whom (because of geographical isolation or other reasons) a system of localised church-fellowship was insufficient. Thus in writing for the *Newsletters* I was to some extent in the position of preaching to a congregation.

F. T.



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Nine Insights of Religion

1. *Religion of Heart and Life.* True religion is something which works in the depths of men's hearts and affects the spirit of their lives at every point. It cannot be summed up in a set of beliefs. But a description of it in terms of belief may help to indicate its nature.

2. *A Way of Faith.* Religion expresses our attitude towards what lies beyond the limits of our control and understanding. It is a venture of faith. As the scientist, in his quest, assumes that beyond the truths he knows there are larger truths which are worth his seeking, so religion seeks some greater good beyond our present experience.

3. *The Supreme Goodness.* In our religious quest we seek for what can be recognised as akin to the qualities which we acknowledge as good in ourselves, especially as seen in the simplest examples of kindness and the highest instances of self-sacrifice. This is the centre of our faith.

4. *The Over-riding Unity.* We recognise that our existence is subject to a principle of unity, which holds all things together in intelligible order, which demands consistency in our own lives, and which works through reason and sympathy to bring all lives into harmony.

5. *Absolute Values.* In the insight of religion mere size ceases to be significant. Actions are valued not for the amount of their ascertainable effect but only for their real quality and spirit and intent. No gift is larger than that of the widow who gave everything she had; no religious demonstration is greater than a secret prayer.

6. *Individual Responsibility.* Men are inescapably involved in the real truth about themselves, and no lies or evasions will ultimately succeed. The man whose life is evil will learn what evil is, and the man whose life is good will find what goodness is.

7. *The Partnership of Love.* There is a power of love which is beyond individual responsibility, and which, without destroying it, raises us above it. By it we find that we are not alone in our misdoings and their consequences, but that others are bearing them with us and for us. By it we find that our virtues are not personal achievements but gifts which we receive. By it we learn to bear the burden of the misdoings of others. By it we are lifted into a fellowship in which the triumphs of good are the common joy of all.

8. *The Ocean of Joy.* We have intimations that, when we have come to the end of all the sorts of goodness and beauty and love and happiness that can be imagined, we are still only at the beginning of the true happiness, which reaches immeasurably beyond; and yet we also feel that that true happiness, in its fullness, is never far from us, and that nothing but our own blindness prevents us from seeing its brightness shining through all our experience.

9. *The Universal Church.* We feel that, in our religion, we are sharing in something which lies at the root of human life itself, which has been the inspiration of all good behaviour, which is the true bond of human unity, and which reflects a principle of fellowship that extends beyond earth and time. Each man apprehends and expresses this faith in the terms available from his own experience and the traditions which he finds at hand (for instance, the Christian tradition, in the case of most people in this country). But it is a mistake to attach importance to the boundary-lines between one tradition and another: the true Church has no frontiers. (*March 1956*)

Moral Choice

WHAT are the grounds of our distinctions between right and wrong? A Chinese writer* has said that it is like telling fresh fish from stinking fish. That is to say, we recognise good actions as something we can assimilate and make part of ourselves, while in bad actions there is something repugnant, which we cannot swallow and could never digest. Or one might say that good actions are those in which we 'find ourselves'; they are like clothes, which become us; they embody what we really have it in us to be. Bad actions are those which estrange us from ourselves: there is something in us which would always repudiate them and wish to disclaim them.

Why, then, do we find difficulty in making the distinction? It is because we fail to understand all that is involved in the action and all that is involved in our own nature.

What is involved in an action? Not just its suitability to promote some particular purpose of ours, but all its natural and probable consequences, spreading out, and affecting a multitude of other people, known and unknown. And then there are the questions, 'What sort of world does such an action fit in with? What sort of world does it build up?' Lies and cruelty are out of place in a world of truth and kindness. Moral behaviour strengthens the foundations of a moral world. We are choosing what sort of a world we want. That is what is involved in an action.

What is involved in our own nature? Not just our present plans and immediate desires but the totality of our being. I have many sides to my nature, with interests reaching in all directions; my life has many phases, from childhood to age, and memory runs through them all: I realise myself by bringing all these into harmony. And I am not isolated: my reason

* Mencius.

and personality emerged out of contact with others, and apart from the fellowship of humanity I should be nothing. I can only be truly myself by taking my right part in that fellowship. That is what is involved in our own nature.

Thus in considering actions we are led to consider what sort of world we want, and in considering ourselves we are led to consider the whole of humanity. That is why our moral choices are not simply private but have public aspects, which we can discuss, and in which we have all a common interest.

(July 1957)

The Mystery of the Incarnation (for Christmas)

WHAT truth and value should Unitarians recognise in the orthodox Christian assertion that, in the newly-born infant Jesus, God had become human flesh and blood? We should probably all feel that we could not agree with orthodoxy when it applies this doctrine in ways which stress the difference between Jesus and other men and make his divinity a unique exception. Any truth which we can recognise in the doctrine must be one which applies in some sense to all men, and regards Jesus as an example or type. But what is this general truth which Jesus exemplifies? And, in particular, how can it be found in a mere baby?

Sometimes it seems as though we Unitarians find significance only in the active part of Jesus's life—the spirit of divine love expressed in terms of human living. We complain, for instance, that the creeds mention only the birth and death of Jesus, whereas it is what he said and did between birth and death that makes his life significant. That is a protest which needs to be made. And yet, when we have made it, is there not still something that remains to be said on the other side?

Infancy and death are significant because they illustrate the limitations which are characteristic of human flesh and blood; and the emphasis of the doctrine of the incarnation lies in the assertion that, for our sakes, God himself has accepted these limitations and become subject to them. 'The creator of the starry heavens became a baby wrapped in bands and laid in a manger; the source of all life died the death of a tortured criminal.' That is the mystery which the orthodox believer adores when he looks at a picture of Jesus in the manger, and sees there 'God with us'.

Do we totally reject this view? There is certainly a danger of exclusiveness, encouraging the arrogant claim that God is present in the Christian Church in a sense in which he is not present in any non-Christian spiritual tradition or fellowship: that we do reject. But do we not also feel that there is a truth in it, which was, indeed, more clearly seen in Jesus than it ever had been before, but cannot be confined to him, and, even without him, would remain true, in a universal sense, of the relationship of God to humanity?

One way of putting this truth is to say that whatever we do to people is done to God, who bears all that they bear, and that this applies most especially to what we do to helpless people. That is the teaching of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: when people appear before the King in his glory they find that they have already met him, as it were in disguise, in their dealings with fellow-men in misfortune. We may call this 'the unity of all Life'.

Another way is to ask what sort of place we should expect to arrive at as the goal of our spiritual pilgrimage. Do we envisage it as a place where all the sufferings and limitations have been left behind, as old, unhappy, far-off things, which served their purpose as a sort of moral gymnasium, and can now be forgotten by the blest spirits which have emerged into unrestricted and unshadowed expanses of joy? Or do we realise

that it is characteristic of the highest goodness to enter into sufferings and restrictions, and unite itself so fully with them that the tie can never be broken; so that as we rise nearer to the highest good we also necessarily come closer to all the limitations and hardships which have ever been endured?

These are necessarily imperfect attempts to express a mystery which stretches beyond our understanding. It is more easily expressed in symbolism and picture. Therefore we may still love the orthodox imagery, and learn from it, provided we also remain true to our mission to bear witness against the exclusiveness with which this imagery is traditionally infected.

(November 1958)

The Millennium *(for Christmas and New Year)*

THERE is a persistent longing in the human heart that history shall have a happy ending, and that the good possibilities of earthly life shall at last be fully realised. It is not enough that the world should be a place of heroic struggle, a 'vale of soul-making', a probationary ante-room to a 'better world' beyond: we wish the world itself to become, in the end, really and simply good—a happy and beautiful place to live in, without qualification or apology.

This longing has been expressed in different symbols at different times. The principal symbol, in Christian tradition, has been that of the 'millennium' (i.e. 'thousand years'), which was taken over from Jewish speculation: 'In six days God created the world; on the seventh he rested: but a thousand years are a day in God's sight: therefore the world will last for six thousand years of toil and labour; then will come one thousand years of Sabbath rest in the kingdom of the Messiah.' The early Christians did not regard this as the ultimate goal: in the end, Christ would hand all things over to his Father, that

God might be all in all; but they cherished the belief in an interim period, in which Christ would return to preside for a thousand years over a perfected earth. Though this belief is expressed in fantastic imagery, is it not true to something very deep in the human spirit? Do not our souls cry out that the world shall not pass away till earth and earthly life have 'made good', by attaining purer excellence than any that has yet been seen? That, surely is a right feeling and a good prayer. It is one of our strongest spiritual bulwarks against cynicism and despair.

One of the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah speaks of a renovated world—the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf with the lion, and a little child leading them: 'They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.' Owing to the terms in which it refers to the Messiah's coming, it has become associated with Christmas and the angels' prophecy of peace on earth.

In the pagan world there were similar, though less ardent, fancies. In December the festivities of the Saturnalia symbolised the ancient Golden Age, and there were prophecies of its return. Virgil, in 40 B.C., wrote a poem about a child whose birth should begin the restoration of the Golden Age; and this poem was later given a Christian interpretation. It was in the mind of an American Unitarian when he wrote in a Christmas hymn:

For lo! the days are hastening on,
By prophet-bards fore-told,
When, with the ever-circling years,
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.

As the 'ever-circling years' pass over from one to another, the same hopes return for what shall be at the end of the years. And so, in the bell-ringing section of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson's mind turned to old imagery of an expected coming of the Christ to introduce the final perfected phase of history:

Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace . . .
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Whatever our personal symbolism, may the substance of these hopes of an ultimate perfection of earthly life be with us all this coming Christmas and New Year. (*November 1959*)

Heaven

TO begin with, 'heaven' stands for the religious ideas suggested by the sky. It is a place from which human affairs can be seen as in a bird's-eye view or aerial photograph. A psalmist says: 'The Lord looketh from heaven; he beholdeth all the sons of men . . . he considereth all their works.' Virgil speaks of 'Jupiter looking down from outer space upon the sea with its flying sails, the level lands, the coast-lines, and the peoples of the wide world; thus he stood in the zenith of the sky'. It is 'the open' into which men come when they leave the cover of caves or buildings or woods; in oaths, they call upon it to see and witness their truth. As men journey through changing landscapes, heaven's eye is both upon the place they left and that to which they travel. Absent friends are still under the same sky; and so are both sides of every conflict. Voices and smoke drift upwards, and we imagine that similarly prayers and the unuttered feelings of the heart go up towards heaven. So we form a notion of a place, high, transparent and universal,

where everything is known in its truth and fullness, and all knowledge blends into one comprehensive view.

This notion provides us with an ideal point of reference, by which our own outlook is improved. By thinking of ourselves as living under the sight of heaven, and imagining how we may appear from there, we are increasingly freed from self-deception, partiality and the pressure of near-by moods and circumstances. In this way the notion of heaven becomes, like the sky, a source of light, by which we walk.

Walking by the light of heaven is itself an ascent upwards. It is a stiff climb, in which we constantly have to raise ourselves above passion and prejudice; and this involves not only lifting up our minds but making our whole lives more 'heavenly'. Thus the sky becomes the symbol of a higher sort of life, which we are seeking to reach. At each stage of the ascent, we obtain a wider view, and see how what seemed chaos becomes part of a design, and what seemed mere darkness becomes the shadow which gives shape to beauty. Thus we feel that we are moving towards harmony, and peace, and the fulfilment of all good. Heaven becomes the symbol of our heart's desire: and, since this is so, it seems no longer a strange place to which we are on pilgrimage, but the Homeland to which we exiles are returning. This sense of kinship in our hearts causes us to regard ourselves as in some sense the offspring of that which we seek, so that we cry out to 'Our Father in Outer Space'.

This sense of a home in the heavens cannot have a private or limited application: for the strongest impression that the sky makes upon us is that it is infinite and has no favourites. It has room in it for all the sorts of lives that can be lived on this earth, and on all other worlds, some perhaps immensely more happy than this, some immensely more tragic. And yet throughout there are basic similarities, and light travels from one part to another. And so we are carried forward to prospects of fullness

and richness and light, which go beyond the furthest reach of our imagination.

These are the notions which we get from a conspicuous feature of our environment as pondered upon through generations of human life and experience. Of course we must not bow down to any natural object: and so, we must not take any of these notions too rigidly. But, as hints and suggestions, they are surely wholesome. Perhaps, without superstition, we may even ask:

'What if Earth
Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?'
(September 1960)

Thoughts out of Many Hearts *(a short Advent Sermon)*

Simeon was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel. And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, he received him into his arms . . . and blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother: 'Behold, this child is set for the falling and rising up of many in Israel; and for a sign that is spoken against; yea, and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul; that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.'

(Luke ii, 25–28, 34 and 35)

THE story of Simeon is one of the poetic tales which has been used to supplement the absence of any real knowledge of the early days of Jesus. Apart from the legendary style of the story, scholars say that at that period babies were not brought into the temple in the manner described. But a legend may convey,

more subtly than plain fact, the atmosphere of the situation in which it originated.

Simeon himself typifies the spiritual hunger that was in the world. Everywhere, behind the official façade of priesthods and temples, were 'devout' persons 'looking for consolation'. In Israel, they were usually looking for some form of Messiah, and expressing their expectations in visions and prophecies, or forming sects and communities, like those who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Elsewhere, sensitive souls were finding a quiet background for personal religion in Stoic or Platonic philosophy, or expressing an other-worldly mysticism in little fellowships of Orphics and Gnostics. (We may read of them in Rudolf Bultmann's *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*—now available as a paperback.) There was much more religion of the heart than appeared on the surface.

In this situation, Jesus was going to cause 'the falling and rising up of many in Israel'—that is to say, a spiritual and historical crisis, involving drastic reversals of judgment. Much that had previously seemed central in Judaism (e.g. the maintenance of the Temple) was to become obsolete or subsidiary: hidden forces of individual inspiration and free spirituality were to bud out into great new growths. More generally, because of Jesus, human values have been transformed, and life has taken on a new significance, which puts past history in a different light and alters its meaning for us.

And Jesus was to do this, not by power or popularity or any sort of visible success but by being 'a sign that is spoken against'—by being misunderstood, despised and rejected, and thereby confronting men with a vital challenge. He shocked the Scribes and Pharisees till they got rid of him; he puzzled the apostles, who, at the last, abandoned him; Paul, the greatest convert, began by persecuting. And the process still goes on. That is why Jesus is still a living influence. He can still upset us.

Jesus cuts through the compromises by which men reach a comfortable adjustment with the world and insulate themselves from the challenge of truth. All settled traditions and institutions are, in part, devices for 'serving God and Mammon'. Though Judaism (the spiritual mother of Jesus and Christianity) was at odds with the world of the gentiles, it had its own worldliness, its vested interests, its pride and complacency. The impact of Jesus upon this was disruptive and disillusioning: the birth of Christianity was a tragedy for Judaism. And so Simeon says to Mary (symbolising the spiritual mother): 'Yea, and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul.' The same is true of Christianity itself: whenever it becomes a part of 'the world', traditional, influential, complacent, the challenge of Jesus cuts into it anew, breaking up and casting down. And this is as true for Unitarianism as for any other church.

But this seeming attack is for a positive purpose, to liberate and to raise up—'that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed'. Jesus had the effect of bringing to light the underlying realities of men's lives, exposing the shams, but also opening up hidden treasures, and bringing forth the seed of life. Primitive Christianity was due to the influence of Jesus; it was also an amalgam of ideals and aspirations from many sources—for it was the nature of Jesus' influence to elicit these enthusiasms and draw them together. In effect, it called each man to be uncompromisingly true to the best his soul could conceive, and to encourage and 'build up' his brethren in the same freedom of faith. In spite of all systems and orthodoxies, the New Testament still carries forward this vivifying influence of Jesus. Christianity is never fixed or finished; and each man, in saying what Jesus means to him, reveals the hidden thoughts of his heart.

(November 1960)

Sunset or Dawn

AS one year passes into another, we look up at the prospect before us and try to read the signs of the times. We see a sky streaked with red and swept by conflicting shades of grey and black. Is this the final sunset, in which darkness will come down upon all our lives and extinguish the hopes which lit them? Or is it the brightening dawn of all the good for which we have longed and waited, leading on to fuller daylight than our twilight experience can imagine? In our ears, too, is a murmur and bubbling of water. Are we on the edge of a whirlpool of destruction, in which all existence is swept into nothingness? Or are we near to the fountain of life, eternally brimming over with new achievements and fresh hopes? The signs can be read equally well in either sense.

We all live under the menace of atomic warfare, with the possibility that any year will see the end of civilisation, of human life, perhaps of the world itself, and with no prospect of the danger diminishing. If atomic disaster is avoided, we see the individual everywhere dwarfed by the huge scale of collective activities and scientific enterprises, exposed to new techniques of psychological control, and threatened with dehumanising manipulation of the central interests of personal life. But also this is the first time in which mankind all over the world has begun to function manifestly as one body, concerned with common problems and listening to the same voices: in these discussions, the principles appealed to are at least as high as at any other period, and there is no reason to believe that there is a larger admixture of hypocrisy than there has always been: men are aware, even if often ineffectively, of the respect due to human dignity, of the rights of the weak, and the needs of the poor: there are untapped resources of goodwill waiting to be brought into operation. This could be the beginning of a bright new phase of human life: it may even be necessary to pass

through dangers together in order to deepen our sense of common humanity.

This ambiguous sense of being faced with what may be either a sunset or a dawn is not peculiar to our own generation. It is a constant feature of human experience—at least during its most spiritually creative periods. It was characteristic of the prophetic phase of Jewish history, and of the 'dark ages' in which the foundations of European and Christian civilisation were laid down: and, in the New Testament, 'It is the last hour' alternates with 'All things have become new'. And the same ambiguity is found at the centre of each personal situation. The child foresees a future in which it will be deprived of security and the known joys of childhood and forced to enter a region of shadowy dangers; but it also sees before it the land of promise. As we go on from there, are we losing our youth or gaining maturity? At the end, will death be the final proof of the futility of existence, or will it reveal more fully the meaning of our life and bring us to a closer mode of union with what we have served and loved? The facts admit of either interpretation.

In this predicament we are helped by the experience of the past and by fellowship in the present. We can see how often the apparent sunset has proved to be a dawn of new good. We are offered the beliefs and traditions in which the resultant faith has been enshrined. And yet these aids to faith are not decisive or sufficient. There have been enough actual disasters in the past for us to know that there is no certainty that our fears will not be realised, and no limit to the possible dimensions of evil. Men cannot rest upon a transmitted faith, as though it were a set of facts which have been proved true once and for all. Every human situation is new and unprecedented to those who face it, and requires from each of them a new and creative act of personal faith. Only on these terms can there be living fellowship of faith. That seems to be a permanent characteristic of our situation as human beings.

We are not just looking on at a situation which takes an unchangeable character from events outside our control. We are part of the situation, and, even if we have little control over the physical events, as spiritual beings we determine the character and significance of the whole. Any set of events can constitute a sunset, even a long continuance of peace and prosperity, if men have ceased to expect the present to be outshone by some fuller light to come. And any set of events, however disastrous, even to the destruction of the world, can be a dawn, if it finds men walking by some light rising upon them from beyond disaster. The power which brings light into the world is working in us, as the core of our being. Men have pictured that power mythologically, as acting in the past: the earth was without form, and darkness was upon the face of the waters; and God said 'Let there be light', and the light dawned of the first day. And spiritual faith (whether we call it 'sonship to God' or by some other phrase) consists in that voice being now embodied in us and speaking through our lives. 'We are not of the night but of the day.'

(January 1962)

The Divine Republic

ONE thing which makes traditional religion seem old-fashioned and out of touch with reality is the language it uses about kings and kingdoms, and the notions which go with this—God laying down laws of nature for the universe and moral commandments for men, Christ reigning in the Church, religion consisting in loyal and obedient service of the Heavenly King. That may have seemed natural in the Ancient East. It is quite out of place in the modern world. We no longer expect fathers to be autocrats in their families. We no longer accept slavery as a normal institution. We no longer regard military discipline as a model for imitation. Chairman Mao and President Nkrumah, however intense the 'personality cult' that surrounds

them, do not exercise naked personal rule but act through some sort of governmental machinery and purport to express the corporate will of a party or a people. We have changed our whole approach to the organisation of society, and can hardly go on thinking of the overall organisation of the universe in terms which are out-dated by our own experience.

The world of nature, on a modern view of it, does not present the marks of strong autocratic rule. We do not think of stars and planets travelling in the exact courses which God prescribed for them, or animals acting according to instincts which God had specifically implanted. The world looks more like a place in which many modes of existence find opportunities to emerge and develop themselves on individual lines and make their own contribution to the total effect. Whatever over-riding control there is, that holds the whole together, it reminds us more of the basic provisions of a Constitution than of the detailed legislation of a government with an active programme and executive responsibility. If the Constitution implies a policy, it is of a very general nature, with little resemblance to the wilfulness of personal rule.

In our moral life, we recognise that it is a false simplification to describe all goodness in terms of obedience to commands. It is true that there are particular situations in which it is important that everyone should follow the same set of rules (such as the Highway Code) or should obey the directions of the man in charge. There are also occasions when we see only one line of conduct that satisfies our conscience, and may therefore feel for a while as though we were acting under orders—especially if we are faced by weighty opposition or criticism. But these are not the cases which show most typically what goodness is. Goodness, when its nature is fully displayed, discloses an element of individuality and personal judgment. We recognise that a good action is characteristic of the particular man who does it—an expression of his personal faith and style

of living. In doing a good act, a man may feel as though he were enacting a law rather than obeying one—casting his vote as to what sort of place he would wish the world to be. Indeed, Kant has declared that this legislative quality is the distinctive and essential characteristic of goodness: to act morally is to act on the principle which one would wish to see adopted as the universal law.

Our notions of specifically religious behaviour would often become more genuine and realistic if, instead of referring to personal loyalty and obedience as our model, we thought more in terms of the love and responsibility which a man feels towards his country. In thanksgiving, there is something spurious about language which implies that all the good things in our lives are the result of direct personal gifts of God. But a man may feel a rational gratitude to his country, which does not depend upon this conception of direct gifts: he realises that his gratitude is due primarily to a host of individuals, known and unknown, who, in various ways, have contributed to the advantages which a citizen now enjoys, and even to his own particular share of them; and yet this gratitude is genuinely unified by a sense of the spirit and ideals, and mutual sacrifice and service, which have held the country together. This is not a full or perfect model for our relationship to God (what one model can be sufficient?) but it seems at least more appropriate than the picture of the generous autocrat. So, too, our resignation to the will of God (which is an essential part of religion) would be more reasonable and purposive if, instead of thinking of ourselves as bowing to the decree of an infallible ruler, we said something like: 'This is part of the bad state that our country has got into; I must work patiently towards improvement, and endure maltreatment, rather than break out into faction or rebellion.' Public worship should not be a mass-petition or a parade of government-supporters, but more of a conference between fellow-citizens, in which they try to com-

bine their personal wishes into a common programme and find what are the desires on which they are most deeply in agreement. And the hopes which reach beyond the visible horizon of our lives are essentially social and point towards reconciliation and fuller union with one another.

The habit of associating the idea of God with outworn forms of political organisation has done much to discredit theistic belief, and thereby paralyse the religious spirit in the modern world. The men who reject belief in God are actually protesting, in many cases, against the 'kingly' image which they have been taught to regard as essential. That is why it is important to substitute imagery derived from more democratic forms of political organisation. But, while doing so, it is also important to recognise that political organisation is not the only source of religious imagery—perhaps never a satisfactory source, even at its best. Religion still, as always, has to use a great variety of imperfect analogies to express its sense of relationship with what is above us. It can still speak to us of the foundation which supports our existence, the reason which holds all things together, the kindness which has done so much for our good, the light by which we find our way, the witness of what we do and are, the sympathy which draws all lives into unity, the self-sacrifice by which evils have been overcome, the heart's desire to which our hopes reach out, the beauty which surprises us, our true self, the goal of our journey, the home to which we are returning from exile, the public spirit of the universe, the truth which we shall see when we have gone through the laundry, the reality to which we wake up out of our dreams and illusions. All these ideas are needed, and none are sufficient.

(July 1965)

Significance and Triviality

FOR some days I had been labouring under a mood of depression, in which, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, I could see no

enduring value in anything under the sun. The oppressions and injustices of history threw a shadow over everything. From such beginnings, what genuine good could come? Most comforts and pleasures were built upon unseen foundations of wickedness. The crusaders against evil were themselves corrupted by the situation around them, which, in the end, was made worse by the violence of their self-important wilfulness. Quiet men, who kept out of harm's way, were evading the challenge of life. Men who did small-scale good in their families or neighbourhoods were deluded in fancying that there could be separate patches of order and happiness in a world of chaos and tragedy. Holiness, if there was any to be found, consisted in unremitting and apparently ineffectual bearing of the sorrows of the world: it was not a way of life that appealed to me, or to anyone I knew, and any movements in that direction were usually mere gestures of self-deception or hypocrisy. Probably such moods have some physical origin. But that does not mean that one can ignore the aspects of reality which they reveal. For they probably act like colour-filters, or other photographic apparatus, which, by altering the range of sensitivity, bring into prominence features of the landscape which would otherwise not be noticed.

In this state of mind, I was in the Public Library with my wife, who pointed to a book which partly related to a place where we had both grown up. I got it out, and found it interesting. It was about Mrs. Thrale, who, in her first husband's life-time, had had Dr. Johnson staying for long periods at their house, and had then, in widowhood, scandalised everyone by marrying an Italian singing-master. I became immersed in the book, and, by bed-time, was brimming over with delight in what I had read.

But the characters and incidents which so delighted me were not of an admirable sort. Dr. Johnson himself had some very admirable characteristics, but these were not much seen in his rela-

tions with the Thrales: here he mostly showed himself a grotesque mixture of petulant bully, moralising toady, and slovenly ladies' man. Mr. Thrale was rich, conventional, dull, obstinate and self-indulgent. Mrs. Thrale had married him for money, behaved towards him with great propriety, bore him thirteen children (most of whom died), and very much disliked him and them. The incidents were mainly quarrels, which divided children from parents and friend from friend, and striking displays of self-will. The interest consisted largely in the moral confusions in which these people were involved. Most of them set up for a good deal of religion and principles, and, in letters or diaries, would solemnly analyse the moral issues confronting them and justify the line they felt obliged to take: and yet the line they took was often such a queer one—for instance, most dutifully ostracising a wealthy widow for marrying a poor man of good character but foreign origin, which whom she had fallen in love, although they had fully approved her earlier mercenary marriage to a man she disliked, and had silently tolerated his keeping a mistress. None of them was atrociously wicked—merely silly and selfish, and sometimes spiteful, with, no doubt, a good deal of day-to-day decency and kindness to keep things going. Any interest they took in public affairs was almost completely wrong-headed.

Why should this sort of thing be so immensely cheering? It broke the set of my thoughts, and diverted me with new interests. It relieved moral tension by giving me a holiday from my own standards. Because these people were shown in rather contemptible light, I was not overshadowed or put to shame by them. Perhaps I found the comparison flattering. But, taking full account of these cynical aspects, it remains true that I was interested in these people, that I sympathised with them and enjoyed their company. One is not interested in a mere nuisance, or flattered by comparing oneself with someone completely worthless. I had been switched into a situation

which renewed my perception of the delightfulness of human nature—the vitality, for instance, with which people keep bobbing up again, in spite of set-backs, and persist in being their own selves, however absurd, and not someone else. And the fact that, to restore my love of humanity, I had to be shown people behaving rather badly, was itself a part of the delightful absurdity.

The comic vision, no doubt, blinds us temporarily to many important aspects of reality, which should not be permanently ignored. Like depression, it is a colour-filter which alters our range of sensitivity: it cuts out some features, but brings into prominence other features, which might have been overlooked. We cannot be equally responsive to all aspects of reality at the same time. We need sometimes to be reminded that there is a place in the world for the ridiculous trivialities of life, its irregular variety, its resilient individuality. The universe would be poorer without them. ‘Surely,’ I thought as I finally got into bed, ‘if I can find such delight in these people, God must see far more of value in them—and, if in them, then in all of us.’
(November 1965)

The Journey

I AM often drawn to see how much of religion I can sum up in a single phrase. Of course, no phrase can be complete, but the attempt may help to bring some matters into a clearer light. A phrase that has recently appealed to me is that religion is a journey, taken in trust, towards an unknown destination.

That is a very old conception of religion. It looks back to the legend of Abram, called to leave home for a country he had not seen, and going in faith. It is the image used in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Consequently, it has a lot of old-fashioned associations, some of which we probably feel it necessary to discard.

But it also has associations which are modern and progressive—indeed, to speak of a journey and of progress is the same thing. It is very near to the idea of some modern theologians that, when you ‘de-mythologise’ Christianity, you find that the essence of the Gospel is that it offers men an open future—infinite opportunity to go forward towards what we really want. It also accords with the Unitarian refusal to be bound by fixed forms of doctrine: religion is a process of learning, and, while it is continuing, we cannot describe the perfect truth which we hope to find in the end.

The phrase also fits in with the idea that religion puts us in the position of children. We think of a small child as at the beginning of a journey into the unknown: it doesn't know what the world is like; it doesn't know what it will be like to be grown-up: in order to go forward, it needs a great deal of trust—trust that it is worth while to grow up, trust that it will be possible to do so, trust that help will be available. In time the child becomes a mature man or woman, at the end of its growth, and more or less at home in the world: but, in another dimension, the growth and the journey continue, and the vital trust of childhood becomes the religious trust of later years.

This trust must itself be growing and flexible, reaching out step by step into unknown territory. It trusts that to walk in honesty will bring us towards fuller truth, kindness towards larger fellowship, love of good towards enjoyment of good. It knows that, in all these matters, a great deal of growth and learning still lies before us. It therefore avoids total commitment to any cause or leader or doctrine, and remains open to the guidance and protection of God.
(May 1966)

Changing Seasons

THERE is a curious difficulty which we find in observing the changing seasons of the year. They ought, we feel, to be spread

out before us as a magnificent spectacle—Winter giving place to the first touch of Spring, the flowers blossoming, the trees bursting into leaf, Summer growing lush and ripening into Autumn, and the leaves falling again, to bring back the stark outlines of the wintry scene. And yet that spectacle constantly eludes us. We see it only by fits and starts. The seasons take us by surprise, and then are gone again, as if they had never been. The change itself seems to take place in the intervals when we are not looking. Not only can we not take in the gradualness of the process: we can never fully experience the contrasts it involves; we cannot have Summer and Winter both equally before us at the same time, and turn at will from one to the other, so as to compare them and feel their difference. We can use pictures; but they are not the real thing. Indeed, one can stand in front of a view, and look at a photograph which one has taken oneself at another time of year, and it is still hardly possible to accept the fact that they are both the same place, or to visualise one appearance giving way to the other.

The reason is that we ourselves are part of the process. Our bodies are adapted to the changing seasons, so that in Summer we expect heat, and feel a day to be chilly which in Winter would seem delightfully warm, and our internal clock is set to the pattern of a long day, while in Winter these adjustments will have been reversed. And our experience of the passing seasons cannot be separated from the rest of our experience of the passing of time, with all the events and changes which this involves: three months or six months ago, I was not the same person that I am now, because of what has been happening in the interval and the resultant changes of mood and interest and circumstances; and I do not know with what eyes and heart I shall look upon the coming seasons. I cannot detach myself from the present. It is the old image of a man carried downstream on a boat from which he cannot disembark.

The difficulty is therefore at the maximum in relation to the

seasons of our own lives. We feel that our lives should have significance as patterns in time, like well-shaped stories or musical compositions, in which promises are fulfilled, and themes are repeated and developed, and contrasting sections are brought within an over-riding unity. For this purpose we need to bring the different seasons of life into full view all at the same time, so that we can look from one to the other, and see the training of the child side by side with the resulting character of the man, the ardours of courtship in the same glance as the long fidelities of marriage, faults alongside of their atonement and forgiveness, experience with its fruits. We know that this is the only way in which the meaning and value of life could be fully manifested. It can, indeed, be indicated in a biography. But in our own lives we are always too closely tied to the present to see this over-all view. We cannot revivify the experiences of childhood because, in growing up, we have lost the sensibilities of childhood; and, for the future, even if we could foresee the events, we should not know what it would feel like to be an older person and encounter them. 'There is nothing which lives in time, which can embrace the whole space of its life at once; but what pertains to tomorrow, it has not yet laid hold of; what pertains to yesterday, it has already lost; and even in the life of today, we live only in the fluctuating and transitory moment' (Boethius: *Consolations of Philosophy*).

That is why men have so constantly realised that human life cannot find its significance within the succession of days and years that constitutes our present experience. To understand the purpose of our existence, and how far we attain that purpose or fall short of it, we have to look beyond time to eternity. The successive experiences and decisions of our day-to-day living are indeed the material of which our existence is made, apart from which we should be nothing at all. And within this successiveness we do get glimpses and intimations of the total significance—in memories and meditation, in sharing of sym-

pathy, in stories and poetry and music. But these intimations always fall short of actuality; they are reflections, not the real thing, expectations which are not yet fulfilled. 'For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I have been known' (1 Corinthians, 13).
(September 1966)

Solitariness and Meeting

AT the end of a recent article in *The Inquirer*, Dr. J. J. Goring contrasted A. N. Whitehead's definition, 'Religion is what a man does with his solitariness' with Martin Buber's affirmation, 'All real life is meeting'. The two points of view are there to be recognised. How do we unite them?

To begin with, one may say that 'Religious fellowship is recognition of other people's solitariness'. Surely that is the basis of all forms of ritual and corporate worship. In public prayer, each participant is standing, individually, in the presence of someone 'who sees in secret'. Each is applying the general words of confession, petition and praise in ways that are individual to himself, with personal details and depths of feeling which it would be embarrassing to reveal in normal conversation. Even in moments of shared emotional enthusiasm, each worshipper has the look of a man enclosed in his own rapture. There are shrines, or moments of silence, which are the publicly recognised occasions for purely private devotion. The private and the public aspects are united in the experience of being together in the presence of someone 'to whom all hearts are open', and though we cannot read the secrets of each other's lives, there is a common approach and comparable perspectives, as of men facing towards the same focus and goal.

Thus one may also say that 'Religion is preparation for a truer fellowship than has yet been experienced'. It is an

acknowledgment of the incompleteness of all actual meetings. No one has ever been aware of the whole of me, nor I of the whole of anyone else. I have not sufficient wisdom and charity to understand the whole range of anyone's life: it is inevitable that people should hide themselves from my gaze, and, if they tried to disclose everything, my eyes would be too dim to see all, and would distort even what they saw; and, reciprocally, it is inevitable that I should shrink from exposing myself, or even protect myself by false posturing. Moreover, I cannot fully show what I am, because I am incomplete, still undecided on many matters, and cannot declare myself fully without thereby pre-judging the issues that are still open and so hampering future possibilities; and I must in my turn respect the incompleteness of others, and refrain from meddling with growing buds. Accordingly our relationships have always a provisional character, drawing their reality from immediate needs and duties, but becoming vague and impalpable as they reach out beyond. Indeed, for most purposes, we surround ourselves with codes and conventions (often quite unconscious) having the function of protecting our privacy. And yet we long for fulfilment, and cannot find fulfilment in isolation, so that we reach forwards towards full, complete and universal fellowship, in which all shall meet in the clarity of perfect knowledge and understanding, when the secrets of all hearts are open. Religious fellowship is the recognition of this common goal, and a means of preparing ourselves for it.

This gives a double character to the relations of fellow-worshippers—on the one hand, immediate, practical and outgoing; on the other, sacramental, formal and reserved. If we are preparing for fuller forms of meeting to come, we must make a beginning by being willing for actual meetings here and now. If our faces are set towards ultimate perfect friendship, we should not set up obstacles of indifference, neglect and non-co-operation, which will hinder the growth of friend-

ship. And yet there is also need for reserve, for willingness to stand back, to avoid short-cuts, to take care not to intrude or force other people to protect themselves from our intrusion, to recognise that we stand in the presence of mystery. No congregation is perfect in these respects. Some are so immediately friendly that they become circumscribed by the limitations of a worldly clique or political party. Others are so formal that their comradeship seems merely symbolic. Success consists in the uniting of the two aspects. *(November 1966)*

Resurrection

A POEM by C. Day Lewis, which I cut out from a weekly, is called 'The House Where I was Born'. The poet writes of a photograph showing his father standing outside the Irish parsonage in which he was born. The family had moved to England before he reached an age which he can remember, and his mother had died four years later. He had no knowledge of the interior arrangements of the house, or of the human feelings and relationships of its inhabitants . . .

'Perhaps that is why so often I gaze
At your picture and try to divine
Through it the buried treasure, the lost life—
Reclaim what was yours, and mine.
I put up the curtains for them again
And light a fire in their grate:
I bring the young father and mother to lean above me,
Ignorant, loving, complete:
I ask the questions I never could ask them
Until it was too late.'

The world is full of such 'buried treasure'—things gone beyond the power of living memory to recall, but which our hearts can reach out to in sympathy, and wish to resuscitate.

In the end, all the things which men have ever cared for will be part of that 'Lost Life'. In fact, the poet is simply giving new expression to one of the oldest of themes. But it seems to me to be a true and touching expression of it.

Perhaps that is why, in seeking significance and fulfilment, men's faith has reached out not to bare survival but to Resurrection, to the raising up and bringing into the open of all the living treasure that has been buried by the passage of earthly time. That is the faith which, in our century, has inspired Stanley Spencer's paintings of this theme.

It is not an easy faith. A full and true raising of the past would confront us with so much that we would shrink from because it pains or shames or accuses us, or poses questions to which we have not found the answer. But perhaps the purpose of our lives is to be found in preparing for some such ultimate confrontation and reunion. *(March 1967)*

The Passive Part of Life

A CRITICISM that can well be made of Unitarian tradition is that it has been too preponderantly activist. It has enjoyed the support of progressive, successful, sometimes pushful, people, and has been influenced by their characteristics—a religion of reformers, busily putting the world to rights. It is indeed the responsibility of pushful people to see that their pushfulness is used for the public good. In that way, a great deal of good is done. And, since life itself is an activity, everyone, however restricted his opportunities, needs a religion that will enable him to act rightly. It may be, however, that, for some people, the emphasis on action has been excessive, constantly urging them to push and busy themselves more than their powers and opportunities permit, and unsettling them with a sense of futility and failure in consequence.

Beside actively solving problems, our life also has another aspect, in which we are the raw material of the problems which other people have to solve, and experience the results of their good or bad handling of them. We started life by experiencing how children are brought up, what sort of parents they have, what sort of homes, what schools, what good or bad influences from society around. We were born into a particular home, in a particular place, at a particular period. Of course we made our personal reactions to our circumstances—but within what narrow limits! All our skill consists in playing the cards which have been dealt to us. And as we go forward into adult life, we still go on experiencing what sort of world this is, and, within it, 'what man has made of man'—the accidents and hardships which can occur, the sort of help that is given, the justice or injustice that prevails, the pressures and the neglect. Life consists partly of opportunities for giving, and partly of occasions for receiving: the proportion between the two varies from person to person, and from one season of life to another.

These passive aspects of life are essential elements in the human situation—necessary in order that the world may be a significant place, with freedom and personal relationships and social responsibility and spiritual values. In order that activity may have any reality, it is necessary that there should be someone at the receiving end. When it is our turn to be at the receiving end, we are still part of the living structure of the world.

What goes on at the receiving end, as the scope for positive reactions becomes more and more narrowly limited? It is, in the nature of things, a mystery—like private prayer and unspoken meditation. At times it may be a mystery of tragedy or of degradation. And yet those who know most of spiritual things have told us that, beneath all other mysteries, is the divine mystery, God placing himself at the receiving end, bearing all the accidents, and enduring the neglects and the

pressures with us—so that those who suffer are still sharers in the life of God. But it is too easy to repeat this by rote. It is a very different and greater thing when one comes to find it in one's own experience.
(November 1967)

Providence

WHEN I was minister of a chapel in a small country town, I found that certain people (not of my own congregation) brought a lot of conventional piety into any conversation I had with them. If I said, across a counter, 'I'm sorry to hear your husband is unwell', the shopkeeper would reply, 'Well, we know that all things are sent us for our good'. If I then hoped he would soon be about again, she would answer that this was in wiser hands than ours. I suspected that such language was put on for my special benefit—though it might be that the lady was an enthusiast who would have testified in this fashion to all and sundry. In either case, I found it a little embarrassing, and hoped, in particular, that no young person was listening. What a misleading impression they might get of religion! And yet I also felt a certain envy. Though, to my ears, such language rang false, it did, in its own way, express the basic faith which, in my ministry, I was most concerned to promote. But, if I couldn't use the old simple language of traditional piety, what was left for me to say? I was abashed, and felt myself like one of those

Blind mouths, that scarce themselves know how to hold
A sheep-hook, or have learn'd aught else the least
That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs.

A sober beginning of faith might be found in the recognition that it is reasonable to allow ourselves as much importance as we are prepared to concede to others. What, after all, is the objection to a self-centred view, which looks at everything as designed for my good, to give me the support and challenges

and opportunities which I need in order to make a success of my life, and lead me on to the discovery and fulfilment of my heart's desire? Surely, the objection is simply that it leaves out other people. Apart from that, its defects are only those which are to be found in all large-scale views. It is too wide to give an immediate answer to practical and detailed problems. It is, rather, a plan of action and a faith: it doesn't provide prompt explanations of everything; but it shows the sort of explanations to look for, and assumes that they are somewhere to be found; it involves challenge and persistence; it points beyond the limits of the things we know. Taking it as such a large-scale view, it is extremely reasonable. It is a quest for coherence, starting with the facts which are nearest at hand, and trying to bring everything else into intelligible relationship. It does not abolish all difficulties: there is still the struggle with obstinate facts for which no explanation has yet been found, and still the arduous process of self-development by which we discover what is our true fulfilment, and heart's desire. But it has an over-all simplicity and coherence which seems almost to be a necessary part of reason itself.

The significant difficulties arise from the fact that there are other people. So how can we all be at the centre? If an event is to be explained as specially designed for my good, how can it also be specially designed for the other man's good? And what of the other man himself? Does he exist for my benefit? Or do I exist for his? It doesn't seem to fit.

The easy line of retreat is to say: 'We can't all be at the centre, so let's agree that the world is neutral: we can avoid disputes about the purpose of things by settling for a world that is empty of purpose.' That is the materialistic view which underlies science. We find it useful, but not satisfying.

To make satisfactory sense of our situation, we have to assume that it is significant and purposeful for everyone. This means expanding the self-centred view to one in which the

world is designed to give to everybody the support and challenges and opportunities which will lead to the fulfilment of his heart's desire, just as much as though the world and all the people in it were to be justified solely by the good it does to him, and the success which he finally attains. And this view has to include the fact that everybody is part of everybody else's world, and, to that extent, exists for his sake, that people can help one another and can harm one another, even to the cutting off of their hopes and opportunities, so that there seem to be none left. On this view, we have to think of our own bit of space and time as part of a vaster structure in which new hopes continually arise to take the place of those that are cut off, with new opportunities for reconciliation and overcoming evil with good. That is a faith which looks far out into the unknown. But some such faith is needed for any view which is to be rationally consistent with the sense of purpose and importance which we have in ourselves and the concern which we feel, at least partially and fitfully, for other people.*

These notions, in themselves, are large-scale and abstract. They only attain practical significance so far as they actually influence our behaviour, and particularly our relations with other people. A sense that God is looking after me can too easily cover a claim to be on a different footing from my neighbour. And therefore we need often to keep our distance, and acknowledge our remoteness from God. And yet also we can acknowledge that the remoteness is on our side, not God's. We should acknowledge that God is nearer to our neighbour than we, with our lack of appreciation of the man, can at present conceive. And, by the same principle, we are unable at present to conceive how near God is to ourselves. Only, at the root of our nature, there is something which can trust where it does not understand.
(January 1968)

* The classic example of a philosophy of this sort is that of Leibnitz.

Hooked on Growth?

'I DO not believe that industrial development to give all those poorest countries in Asia and Africa a standard of living equivalent to the middle-class American is possible, and I believe that those of us in the more fortunate countries may actually need to accept a serious cut in our material standards, in contrast to the golden future foretold by politicians of all parties.' That is how Dr. Kenneth Mellanby comes to his conclusion on the last page of his 1971 Essex Hall Lecture.

But can we face this prospect? All our national plans seem to be based on assumptions of growth and rising standards, depending upon them to maintain employment and co-operation. But growth never goes on for ever. Are we like addicts who have got themselves 'hooked'?

This may be the main practical significance of religion for the present age—to give us the inner resources to face drastic reassessment of values, and the neighbourliness to help one another through times of stringency. In the story of mankind, some people have lived in periods of expansion, others in times of recession, and all have had their own unique value, their place in the total pattern of existence. Religion brings us into fellowship with all souls, who were famous or obscure, lived long or short lives, in centres of civilisation or in primitive backwaters. All come at last to equality in the presence of infinity. In that fellowship we can accept our role in whatever chapter of history our lives are cast.

(July 1971)

Finding a Language

WHEN I was asked to contribute something of my own to this commemorative supplement,* I looked back in the files to see what had been my earliest contribution to a *Newsletter*. It was in January 1946. I started by writing about evolution and asking how mankind first became distinctively human. The decisive achievement had been the birth of language. That was the basis of every subsequent advance. How did it come about?

'No great step forward', I wrote, 'has ever been taken except after a long preparatory period of effort and groping and painful trial and error, on the part of a comparatively few people, who were intensely interested in activities which had, as yet, produced no useful results, and seemed futile and somewhat ridiculous to the majority of their contemporaries. And so, in those ancient days, picture a minority of people who had become fascinated by the attempt to express their thoughts and feelings and understand each other's experience, little groups of enthusiasts, grunting and cooing and gesticulating to each other, trying to break down the barriers and establish communication, and persisting in their uncouth efforts for generation after generation before ever the first clearly articulated word was spoken. How difficult it must have been to the practical flint-chippers of the day to see any point or purpose in these odd useless mouthings.'

I suggested that the National Unitarian Fellowship should consider itself as one of the groups that are continuing that quest: for still 'in the deep places of our hearts we remain isolated; soul cannot yet speak to soul, or spirit to spirit'.

It is curious how much religious life of the quarter-century since then has been concerned with questions of language—new

* In 1970 a special issue of the *Newsletter* was published to commemorate the first twenty-five years of the life of the National Unitarian Fellowship.

translations of the Bible, the Mass in English, 'you' for 'thou' in prayers, philosophic discussion of the significance of 'God-talk'. But what of our own part in all this? I think we can now be rather more precise than we could in 1946.

We live in a time when traditional religious language has ceased to be meaningful for most people. 'Soul', 'creation', 'providence', and 'heaven' suggest outworn notions, and have no agreed modern equivalents. 'Prayer' and 'praise' are nearly in the same category. So how shall we speak of the regions of our life to which such words as these referred? And how shall we speak so as to be intelligible to people around us, without demanding a previous course of indoctrination? These are the questions which face us today. (*March 1970*)

FRANCIS TERRY

Francis Terry was born in London with a solidly Unitarian family background, dating back on one side to seventeenth century General Baptists. At Balliol College, Oxford, where he was a scholar and exhibitioner, his tutor was the notable Liberal Christian philosopher, A. D. Lindsay. After ten years with a firm of solicitors in the City of London, Mr. Terry entered the Unitarian Ministry. He has been associated with the National Unitarian Fellowship since its inception, and had held its presidency before becoming editor of its *Newsletter*. He has also written extensively for *The Inquirer*, and for *Faith and Freedom*.

Twenty-five Pence