

# UNITARIANISM

.....'A unique religious movement, distinctive in its freedom, its breadth of outlook, its focus on humanity, and its foundation of individualism?'

**JOHN  
HOSTLER**

# UNITARIANISM

John Hostler

The Hibbert Trust

*To the memory of  
Roger Thomas*

By the same author

*Leibniz's Moral Philosophy, Duckworth's*

# CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	vi
<i>Author's Preface</i>	vii
1. The Use of Reason	1
2. The Demand for Freedom	15
3. The Humanity of Christ	28
4. The Authority of Conscience	39
5. The Welfare of Man	51
6. The Autonomy of the Individual	63
7. The Importance of Unitarianism	73
<i>Appendix</i>	80
<i>For Further Reading</i>	84

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## FOREWORD

This book has been commissioned by the Hibbert Trust. The Trust seeks to promote the knowledge of 'Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form'. In view of the important part played by Unitarians in promoting this purpose the Trustees decided to sponsor a study of Unitarian thought in an historical perspective. As the author explains in the preface it was finally decided that the book should be written by one man rather than take the form of a symposium.

As with all the Trust's publications the author has been given complete freedom of action in writing the book and in no way is it to be considered as representing the views of the Trustees.

The Trustees are very appreciative of the thoroughness with which Dr. Hostler has fulfilled a difficult assignment.

*Stanley J. Kennett  
Chairman, Hibbert Trust*

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Some years ago I and many others were invited to contribute suggestions for a book on Unitarianism which was projected by the Hibbert Trust. We met to discuss it, and I was appointed to an Editorial Board which later produced a detailed report on the enterprise. So when I began to write this study I had already talked about it for a long time with others, gaining from them many useful hints and ideas which I have gratefully incorporated in these pages. But otherwise it is my own work: I have been allowed to treat the subject entirely as I pleased, and have felt completely free to accept or reject proffered advice and criticism. Accordingly the reader must bear in mind that this is not in any sense an 'official' publication endorsed by the Hibbert Trust or the Unitarian movement. It is simply one man's account and estimate of modern Unitarianism.

Therefore its scope is limited in a number of ways. I have dealt with Unitarian thought only as it exists in England, which is markedly different from the forms it takes in other countries. I have used the story of its development merely as an aid to understanding it, and so have not adhered to the standards of a proper history — for instance, there are many important events in its past which I have not mentioned at all. And I have said scarcely anything about the sociological aspects of the Unitarian movement, because I am interested primarily in its ideas and beliefs. These however I have wanted not just to expound but also to assess and criticise: my aim has been both to explain what

Unitarians believe today and to show why it deserves attention.

I can boast no formal qualifications for this task: I have held no official position in the Unitarian movement, for example, nor received any training in its ministry. I can claim only to have been an ordinary member of Unitarian churches over many years and to have participated in most of their activities; though now my contact with them is much less. Thus I have some first-hand acquaintance with everyday Unitarianism without being deeply committed to it. I hope that this background has enabled me to consider it from a position which is informed but still impartial; though religion is such a personal matter that all accounts of it must be subjective to some extent, and this one certainly reflects my own attitudes and interests.

I thank here the administrators of the Hibbert Trust for financial help and their interest in this production, in particular Mr Charles Beale who has been principally concerned with it; Dr. Sheila Crosskey and Dr. Tony Wrigley, my colleagues on the Editorial Board, who read through an early draft of this book and made many helpful suggestions for its improvement; the Rev. Brian Golland, who kindly saved me a great deal of labour by writing the appendix; and especially the Rev. Roger Thomas, now sadly deceased, who, besides acting as the chief administrator for this project, gave me the benefit of his scholarship in a great deal of useful information, and of his wisdom in sensible and sympathetic advice. My greatest debt is to my parents, whose constant interest in this work has been a great source of encouragement and whose example has greatly helped me to appreciate the real value of religion.

*Manchester 1981*

*John Hostler*

## 1. *THE USE OF REASON*

The name 'Unitarian', originally used in the seventeenth century to describe those who conceived God as a unity rather than a trinity, is claimed today by some fifteen thousand people in Britain. Most of them belong to small fellowships or congregations distributed widely throughout the country, the majority of which are represented at the annual meetings of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.<sup>1</sup> It is a comparatively small movement, and one that is dwindling slowly at present, suffering like most other denominations from the general decline in religious activity which has affected our society in recent decades. Probably many people have never even heard of Unitarianism, while others, not altogether wrongly, regard it as an obscure and slightly eccentric sect on the outer fringe of our national religious life.

But viewed from another perspective it is a movement of considerable interest and importance, entirely deserving full and sympathetic study. Unlike most other small sects it embodies a tradition of religious thought which has profoundly affected the whole development of Christianity in this country, and almost every denomination reveals in its beliefs or practice some imprint of Unitarian ideas. Its influence has been exceptionally widespread, and this is ultimately due to the fact that Unitarianism arose directly from the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The efforts of the first reformers in England initiated more than a hundred years of religious turmoil and disagreement, for not until the end of the seventeenth century was the

settlement achieved which has substantially endured ever since, with its fundamental distinction between the established Church of England on the one hand and the various groups of Dissenters or Nonconformists on the other. For several generations, therefore, the ideas of the early Protestants were the subject of heated public discussion and conflict, and it was during this troubled period that some of their more radical proponents gradually coalesced as the first recognisable group of Unitarians. The movement which they began slowly developed an increasingly distinct identity and eventually took its place as a separate Nonconformist church. But its development all the time proceeded through contact and conflict with other religious groups, both Dissenting and Anglican, and this process of interaction inevitably served to disseminate its basic ideas and principles.

Accordingly it would be wrong to suppose that all the ideas considered in this study are somehow the exclusive property of Unitarians. One can find countless instances during the past four centuries where prominent figures in other denominations have endorsed one or another of them, sometimes with considerable fervour and eloquence, though often in ignorance of their origin, and many of them have thus become part of the common heritage of the Christian churches. These wider perspectives are not mentioned much in this work, largely because the ideas can be examined most clearly in their native context: for Unitarians have been remarkably faithful to the original principles of their movement and have preserved them with relatively little corruption or modification. Still it should be borne in mind that they have a much wider currency, and indeed a greater significance, than their Unitarian name might suggest. Many of these ideas in fact originated with the first Protestants, and though they have been developed and updated they have not been radically altered. In studying Unitarianism one is effectively discussing the fundamental ideals of the Reformation as they are represented in the modern world.

It is well known that the Reformation brought about many important changes, by no means all of which were concerned with purely religious issues. When the Act of Supremacy was passed in 1534 to place Henry VIII at the head of the English Church, a significant part of its effect was to preclude foreign interference in political matters; and likewise the closure of the monasteries which commenced in the following year served to appropriate to the nation the great wealth which they had amassed. But such political and financial reforms, while obviously important in their way, were clearly peripheral and secondary to reform of religion. The primary concern of the Protestants was to correct and remove the many falsehoods and abuses which in their view had slowly corrupted the Roman Catholic Church, and to bring about a return to what they thought was the true doctrine and practice originally instituted by Christ himself. In this task they were inevitably guided by the Biblical record of Christ's life and teachings; and, in effect, they set about trying to purge the church of everything for which they could find no warrant in the Bible. So for example they introduced a new *Book of Common Prayer*, first instituted by the Act of Uniformity in 1549; and though some people felt that its ceremonies were still a long way away from the simple worship of the Apostles, none could deny that a number of unscriptural procedures had been removed — such as invoking the intercession of saints, which had grown to be an integral feature of Roman Catholicism.

With the advantage of hindsight we can see that their apparently straightforward and simple programme of revising religion to conform with the Bible had implications of vast significance, not even guessed at by the early reformers themselves. It implied no less than a complete change in the seat of religious authority and an associated shift in the relative status of faith and reason. Hitherto, the unquestioned authority in all matters had been the church, personified in the clergy and the Pope at their head; the ordinary Christian worshipper had been expected merely

to obey, to have unstinted faith in their decisions and teachings. But the Protestant reformers treated the pronouncements of the church as if they were subject to the authority of the Bible, and in so doing they implied that faith should be subjected to the guidance of reason.

To understand this change properly and to appreciate its full significance one has to have a clear conception of what faith is. The word itself is often used as if it were synonymous with belief, for we tend to speak quite indiscriminately of someone's 'faith' or 'religious belief' and mean the same thing in both cases; but for present purposes they must be distinguished from each other. 'Belief' can be used in a fairly natural sense to mean simply what a man thinks is true. For instance he may be said to believe that the government is leading the country along the path to ruin, and to believe that Christ died for his sins: in both cases what is meant is that he thinks the statement is true. Indeed, religious belief is often presented as a series of statements or propositions, formally drawn up in a creed which the members of a church may be required to profess. Beliefs in some such form are clearly important since they constitute one of the most obvious points of difference between the various religions and churches. Whether a man is a Christian or a Muslim, an Anglican or a Baptist, depends fundamentally on what he believes, since differences in practice usually follow from differences in belief. Because of this it could be said that every church is in a sense 'defined' by the beliefs of its members, inasmuch as they are the chief ground of distinction between one church and another. Here too the same is true of beliefs about other matters, such as politics. The Labour Party for example is defined by the beliefs of its members in exactly the same sense.

But there are at least two respects in which religious belief differs from belief about other matters. The first is that it cannot be proved. A man who contends that the government is inept can support his view with evidence in the form of balance-of-trade figures and the like, and

though his interpretation of them may not always pass unchallenged we accept in principle that they could prove him right or wrong: if he had enough facts and figures and could handle them correctly, he could establish a case so strong and conclusive that it would demand the agreement of every reasonable man. Unfortunately we do not always recognise that religious beliefs behave quite differently. They can of course be supported with evidence of a kind, in the form of quotations from the Bible, observations about man and his environment, and the like; but always counter-evidence can be produced from similar sources, which points with equal force towards an opposite conclusion. Always the argument falls short of conclusive certainty. This is not because the religious believer is somehow unable to marshal his evidence correctly, but because the evidence itself refuses to be organised in the way he would like: its nature is to be infinitely complex and varied and, at least when taken as a whole, to remain inherently ambiguous. Religion purports to give a meaning to life and therefore the evidence to be drawn upon is nothing less than the whole human situation. The totality of man's experience has a claim to be considered, and this is so endlessly diverse that it necessarily defies any simple interpretation and cannot be formed into any straightforward argument. In consequence, as Bezzant has rightly observed,

There is not, nor is there ever likely to be, any view of the meaning, purpose, value and destiny of human life, not even the view that it has none, that is not in a greater or less degree founded upon faith, for neither the negative nor the positive belief is demonstrable, i.e., capable of proof.<sup>2</sup>

The logical gap which inevitably remains between the inconclusive evidence and a religious belief must accordingly be crossed, as these words suggest, by a so-called 'leap of faith'. What this means is simply that the believer is ready to go on and treat his beliefs as true even though he acknowledges that they cannot literally be proved.



This is not such an irrational procedure as it may sound. The second distinctive feature of religious belief is that much of the evidence is private to the believer himself. Unlike a political conviction, for example, it is not chiefly to be supported by appeal to public facts and figures; on the contrary, much of its plausibility depends ultimately on the way it connects with the believer's own inward feelings, his cherished ideas, his values and his personal aspirations. These factors profoundly affect the way in which he sees the facts of his situation and the kind of interpretation he gives them, and therefore they must themselves be counted an integral part of his evidence. Indeed the case he makes out to justify his belief will rest fundamentally on an interaction between his spirit and character on the one hand and his knowledge and experience on the other. Accordingly there is what might be called a 'private factor' inescapably bound in with the grounds for religious belief. And this is not inappropriate, since in any case religion is not mainly concerned with outward and observable circumstances but rather with spiritual realities which of their very nature are not open to public inspection. One should not imagine that the religious believer wilfully goes beyond the strict implications of his evidence without any very good reason for so doing. He is engaged almost despite himself on a quest for meaning and understanding; he is driven along in this by the demands of his innermost being, and it is this relentless force which carries him across the logical gap and takes him beyond the limits of deductive proof.

This brief sketch of the nature of religious conviction reveals quite clearly the essential characteristics of faith. In the famous words of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 'faith is the foundation of our hopes, the means by which we know that unseen things are true.'<sup>3</sup> Augustine put the same idea more briefly still when he remarked that faith is 'believing what you do not see.'<sup>4</sup> These phrases effectively state the conclusion reached in this discussion. Most of our beliefs are about straightforward matters of fact and can be proved by appeal to public evidence. Religious beliefs are no

different in being beliefs, or convictions of the truth of certain statements: but they cannot be established in the same conclusive fashion, since the evidence for them is always inherently ambiguous and in any case includes a spiritual 'private factor'. The name of 'faith' is given to the act of heart and mind whereby a man takes himself beyond the strict implications of this evidence and deliberately commits himself to the truth of statements about the 'unseen things' with which religion is concerned.

Faith is therefore an essential ingredient in all truly religious belief. To adhere only to conclusions which can be logically demonstrated by public facts is not to enter the sphere of religion at all; as Thomas Browne once expressed it, 'to believe only possibilities is not faith, but mere philosophy.'<sup>5</sup> But this important truth has sometimes been perverted or exaggerated to the point of absurdity. Consider the notorious observation made by Tertullian, that 'Christ was buried, and rose again — this is certain because it is impossible.'<sup>6</sup> In coming to this strange conclusion he has evidently made an easy but disastrous mistake. Realising, like Browne, that a reasoned belief in 'possibilities' is insufficient, he has clearly supposed that real religion must require unreasoning acceptance of impossibilities instead; recognising that faith is necessary, he has assumed that it must also be sufficient, for he remarks elsewhere that in addition to the need for faith 'there is nothing else that we ought to believe.'<sup>7</sup> He was of course something of an eccentric in these views, and it must not be imagined that his hostility to reason was ever widely shared. But the orthodoxy of the church was only a more moderate version of his extreme position. The manifest importance of faith was enough to ensure that it received the chief emphasis for many centuries: Christians held that it alone could yield full knowledge of God and of the means of salvation, while reason could fulfil only the subordinate role of explaining and defending these intuitions; and philosophy was accordingly considered to be merely the 'handmaid' of theology. The consequences of this attitude

are evident in practices of the medieval church which we nowadays especially condemn. For example it was not thought important that many people could not understand the Latin in which her ceremonies were conducted because it was assumed that their faith could compensate for their lack of comprehension. By the same token those who questioned her teachings were subjected to punishment, not necessarily because their errors were thought to be culpable in themselves, but simply because their distrust of her authority betrayed a dangerous absence of faith.

Many of the changes introduced at the Reformation served to reduce this high premium on faith. Because of the new emphasis on the authority of scripture the Bible was translated into the vernacular, and the clergy were instructed to place a copy of it in every church 'for every man that will to look and read thereon'.<sup>8</sup> The rites and ceremonies in the new *Book of Common Prayer* were also conducted entirely in English, and contained passages of instruction in which the teachings of the church were explained to the worshipper and commented upon. By such means the layman was for the first time urged and encouraged to understand his religion and, by reading the Bible, to convince himself of the truth of the doctrines taught from the pulpit. All of this, however, presupposed the use of his reason: not of course to the extent of suggesting that it might alone discover the truths necessary for his salvation, but at least as far as treating it as a useful adjunct and accessory to his faith. And in the course of time this new emphasis on reasoning and judgment bore possibly unexpected fruit, for a complete reversal of roles occurred. Originally reason had served just to explain and defend the intuitions of faith, but eventually it was employed also to scrutinise and test their claim to truth: it was promoted to the position of supreme authority, and men started to reject doctrines of the church which they found intellectually obscure or doubtful.

Individual judgment and conscience came to acquire this exalted status chiefly during the middle decades of the

seventeenth century. During the Civil War, for instance, the followers of Cromwell publicly declared that none should be persuaded to accept their religious views except 'by sound doctrine, and the example of a good conversation'<sup>9</sup> — a resolution which manifestly acknowledges the supremacy of reason. Soon afterwards a group of thinkers known as the Cambridge Platonists did a great deal to develop this principle. They taught that the goal of life is a truly harmonious existence in which all a man's faculties are employed to their proper ends in concert together; that the highest of these is his reason, which they quaintly called 'the Candle of the Lord'; and that though the revelations of scripture and the spirit are not to be scorned, it must always be remembered that no valid doctrine can be inconsistent with knowledge or judgment. This last idea had the greatest impact. Men came to accept that all true revelations must harmonise with the conclusions of rational enquiry, and in this way the faculty of reason was employed to test the intuitions of faith. Towards the end of the century John Locke wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity* — a title which exactly sums up the spirit of his age and demonstrates how great had been the changes initiated at the Reformation.

But this new spirit also produced the great division between the Church of England and the Dissenters. In 1662 a new Act of Uniformity was passed and nearly a fifth of the incumbent Anglican clergy, the ancestors of Unitarianism among them, felt themselves obliged to leave their posts and take what other employment they could. In reading the Bible they had come to conclusions different from those reached by the councils of the church; in particular they believed that her organisation differed from that ordained in scripture and therefore they could not subscribe to all her doctrine and practice, as the Act demanded, without directly contradicting what they thought to be the truth. Their attitude of mind in this situation was clearly expressed by one of their number, Thomas Jacomb, in the last sermon he preached before leaving the church:

I censure none that differ from me, as though they displease God; but yet as to myself, should I do thus and thus, I should certainly violate the peace of my own conscience and offend God, which I must not do, no, not to secure my ministry, though that is, or ought to be, dearer to me than my very life

10

His belief in the sanctity of one's conscience and of one's own conviction of the truth was already widely held at that time, not only by the dissenting clergy but also by many of their colleagues who remained within the church. It is interesting to discover that it was still being proclaimed more than a century afterwards as a rallying-cry for Nonconformists:

Were the reasons for our dissent much fewer and weaker than they are, they would still be sufficient to justify it. We can be under no obligation from human authority, to any religious compliance, whether of greater or less importance, which in our consciences and judgments we do not approve — The supposition that we are thus obliged is contrary to reason and scripture, and to the allegiance we owe to Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Although happily it no longer needs to be so publicly advertised, this belief is still almost universally shared. Nowadays indeed it is not even confined to the Protestant tradition, for Vatican Council II also subscribed to it in the statement that 'all men are bound to seek the truth . . . and to embrace the truth they come to know' and the subsequent assertion that 'in all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully'.<sup>12</sup> Nor can one wonder that this is such a widespread belief. There can surely be few people today who would seriously maintain that one should refrain from denying a doctrine of the church which really appears upon inspection to be false.

This conviction has always been especially prominent in the thought of Unitarians. Of course they merely inherited it from the whole Nonconformist movement of which they formed a small part; one should remember too that few if any of the first dissenters can properly be counted among them. But from the time that they began to form a

recognisable group they consistently stressed this principle more than most others. They emphasised that every man has not only a right but even a duty to think for himself and to stand by the convictions of his conscience in all matters of religion. They affirmed continually the need to hold fast to truth — meaning not the truth as promulgated by a church, but the truth as discerned by the individual himself, examined and approved by his intelligence and reason. This has really been the central focus of their movement, the foundation upon which it has been constructed and the source from which all its other ideas have been derived.

Nowadays the principle has become almost a commonplace and is frequently accepted uncritically as if it were self-evidently sensible and correct. It therefore deserves at least a brief examination. Two of the many arguments in its favour will bear mentioning here. First, the earlier discussion showed that religious beliefs like any others involve the claim that a statement is true: but to assert the truth of a statement one has to have at least some understanding of what it means, and be able to give some indication of why it is supposed to be true; and both these conditions obviously demand the use of reason. The fact that the grounds of a religious conviction are rather unusual and may include the operation of faith does not exempt it from this necessity. One must not imagine that faith can supply a revelation of the truth which somehow cannot be brought under the scrutiny of reason: for as Bezzant remarks, 'whatever else it may be, it is not *revelation*'<sup>13</sup> — meaning that it is not a statement which is understood and accepted as true, but a mere jumble of words without sense. The use of reason in religion is absolutely indispensable because without it there would be no beliefs at all.

The principle being considered here maintains in addition to this that the revelations of faith must be actively tested by reason and rejected if serious doubt can be cast on them. This too is easily defended. In daily life we are constantly exhorting people to be reasonable, condemning their irrationality, and praising opinions and ideas if they

are expressed clearly and supported with sound arguments. We value these qualities simply because they are the essentials of constructive and useful communication between us, and so are important conditions of our being able to live together in society. Likewise we value truth and knowledge because they are intrinsically universal commodities, demanding agreement from everyone and thereby helping to bind us together in a true community. These things are all won for us by the use of reason, actively employed to clarify and explain, to examine and test arguments and to separate truth from falsehood. To limit its use is necessarily to denigrate a factor which is of tremendous value for our social life. As Stocks observed, 'an intuition which claims sacrosanctity and declines the test of reason is . . . a moral and social offence, a mere misnomer for blind prejudice and crass superstition.'<sup>14</sup> Any religious conviction, from whatever source it comes, must be examined by reason and rejected if it is found to be unintelligible, self-contradictory, or inconsistent with facts already known.

This is undeniably important and is obviously supported by considerations unquestionably true; but, like any good principle, it can always be misused. The chief danger seems to be that in practice it may lead to a peculiarly simple-minded form of religion. The emphasis upon comprehension and understanding can be mistaken for a demand that faith be absolutely clear and lucid, that all beliefs be expressed in precise and clearly-defined concepts which will be instantly intelligible to anyone who cares to examine them. But this requirement cannot be fulfilled. Religious conviction cannot be made to conform like this to the standard of a philosophical theory without at the same time losing its most distinctive characteristics. Religion usually involves the awareness of some force or being which people call divine, and this resists every attempt at definition: since there is something essentially infinite about it, it can never be entirely described in neatly limited concepts; and usually it can only be suggested or hinted at

in vague and shadowed notions, which may do scant justice to the believer's original experience and which others may still find hard to comprehend. It is surely not a culpable fault to be inarticulate like this. On the contrary, it is merely to acknowledge the existence of a facet of consciousness which is often of the greatest personal significance and which normally transcends the limited powers of self-expression which most people have at their command. One must recognise also that the cold light of reason may be ideal for discerning the truth, but it is by no means so good at warming the heart. A religion which is constructed to conform too closely with the demands of reason may cease to be one which has any real influence on the business of living, and its beliefs may become statements to be dispassionately considered and entertained by the intellect rather than convictions which can guide and sustain a man in all his experience. In short, it is easy to overestimate the importance of reason. Doing so yields a predominantly cerebral religion: a composite of ideas and maxims, perhaps admirably clear and soundly inferred, but lacking any emotional force in a man's life or claim on his moral conscience.

Sometimes the Unitarians have undoubtedly erred in this direction, perhaps as the inevitable price to be paid for emphasising so consistently the need to use one's reason. But clearly such an error should not be used to impugn their ideal. The original Reformation principle which lies at the heart of their religion does not in any way seek to exalt reason at the expense of faith, but merely to ensure that it plays a proper part. It prescribes that the two should work in harmony with each other, faith transcending the limits of observation to achieve an awareness of some divine reality which lies beyond and reason helping to articulate such intuitions and make them consistent with each other and the rest of one's experience. The goal is and always has been that they should complement each other's efforts and be equal partners in a common enterprise.

## NOTES

- 1 Further details of this body, and of the organisation of the Unitarian movement, are given in the appendix.
- 2 A.R. Vidler *et al.*, *Objections to Christian Belief* (Harmondsworth 1965) p.70
- 3 Epistle to the Hebrews, XI, v.1
- 4 S. Augustine, In Ioannis Evangel. Tract., XL §9
- 5 T. Browne, *Religio Medici*, I §48
- 6 Q. Tertullianus, *De Carne Christi*, c.5
- 7 Q. Tertullianus, *De Praescrip. Haeret.*, c.7
- 8 A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London 1967) p.187
- 9 *Agreement of the People* (1649) article 2
- 10 J.T. Wilkinson, *1662 and After* (London 1962) p.54
- 11 M. Towgood, *A Calm and Plain Answer . . .* (London 1772) p.58
- 12 Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965) §§1 and 3
- 13 A.R. Vidler *et al.*, *Objections to Christian Belief* (Harmondsworth 1965) p.87
- 14 J.L. Stocks, *Reason and Intuition* (London 1939) p.17

## 2. THE DEMAND FOR FREEDOM

The supremacy of reason is the most fundamental doctrine to have been inherited from the Reformation, but it has produced a number of other ideas which are equally significant. Chief among these is the principle of religious toleration. This too gradually acquired widespread popular assent during the turmoils and troubles of the seventeenth century, and likewise it has always been held dear by Unitarians.

It followed very naturally from emphasising the importance of scripture. From the very beginning of the Reformation the Protestants had seen this as one of the chief points of difference between themselves and the Roman Church: they thought that the Bible contained all the information and doctrine necessary for the salvation of a Christian, and denied the hitherto accepted notion that the spiritual guidance of the church was also indispensable. They denied furthermore that the pronouncements of Pope and Council were unchallengeable, for they were ready to criticise or reject these when they seemed to conflict with the statements of scripture. Thus they exalted the Bible to a position of supreme authority. It was they who translated it into the vernacular and made it available for all to consult, and their writings are usually packed with Biblical references and quotations used to refute or prove a point. The whole basis of their position is expressed in a famous and forceful passage of Chillingworth's:

The BIBLE, I say, The BIBLE only, is the Religion of Protestants! Whatsoever else they believe, besides It, and the plain, irrefragable, indubitable consequences of it, well may they hold as a matter of Opinion; but as matter of Faith and Religion, neither can they with coherence to their own grounds believe it themselves, nor require the belief of it of others, without most high and most Schismatical presumption.<sup>1</sup>

As his emphatic warnings suggest, it was already evident when he wrote in the early seventeenth century that the practice of many Protestants had been and still was quite inconsistent with their principles. Although they might find no scriptural warrant for a traditional doctrine or rite they were nevertheless ready to insist upon it and to enforce it on others if they could. More dangerously still, they differed about the interpretation of many passages in the Bible and consequently disagreed among themselves about some of the most cardinal points of Christian doctrine. With the advantage of hindsight we can see that this was virtually inevitable. Even a cursory reading of scripture reveals many passages whose meaning is ambiguous and many more which conflict or even contradict one another: there was bound to be dissension, and indeed it is almost surprising sometimes that Protestants agreed at all, so great is the scope for different interpretations. But still each man tended to insist on his own understanding of the Bible as if he had a warrant direct from God, regarding all who differed from him as deliberate perverters of the truth. And this climate of arrogance and intolerance naturally bred persecution. In 1553, for example, Calvin secured the execution of Servetus at Geneva despite the fact that his victim could quote evidence from the Bible to support his 'heretical' views with as much plausibility as he could for his own; while in England the doctrines of the established church were promulgated in its creeds and articles and penalties were imposed by law on those who attempted to reject them.

It seemed quite proper at the time to enforce theology in the courts like this because religion was generally thought

to have great political significance. Earlier, during the middle ages, every man had to hold the same religion as his sovereign or master — a principle subsequently expressed in the maxim *cuius regio eius religio* and one which was a natural corollary of that concept of the state which found its expression in the feudal system. It continued to exert a very strong influence during the Reformation period and even into the seventeenth century, when it took the form of supposing uniformity in religious belief and practice to be essential for political unity and stability. For instance this presumption is evident in the Act of Uniformity of 1549, where religious and political ends are coupled as 'the honour of God, and great quietness' which are both to be enhanced by the prescribed use of the new *Book of Common Prayer*. A relic of this same idea survives today in the dual role of the monarch as the political and religious head of the English people. Given this view, it clearly followed that any disagreement with the claims of the Church of England could properly be punished as a civil offence and a denial of the monarch's authority. Dissent from the national church was tantamount to political subversion or treason and particularly needed to be suppressed in those troubled and uncertain times.

But a slowly growing number of more radical thinkers began to call into question both the political and religious justification for such persecution, developing an increasingly convincing case for the necessity of toleration. Empirical evidence seemed to show that the existence of other religious bodies outside the national church would not necessarily imperil the peace and security of the country. As early as 1550 a 'Strangers' Church' had been set up in London with special dispensation from Edward VI, and though it had not survived for long it was an important precedent for the acceptance of other denominations. More convincing proof could be seen not far away in Holland. In the city of Amsterdam, as Spinoza described it in 1670,

. . . men of every nationality and religious persuasion live

together in perfect harmony . . . What church a man belongs to is of no concern to anyone, since it is of no importance in the eyes of the law; and there is no sect, however much disliked, whose members are not protected by the public authority and power of the magistrates — so long as they do no harm, pay their debts, and live decently.

And the city itself, 'enjoying the benefits of this liberty, flourishes internally and is the envy of every nation.'<sup>2</sup> The large number of Englishmen who had occasion to visit Holland around this time discovered that his picture was entirely accurate and so had it brought home to them forcefully that civil peace and prosperity could be maintained along with the coexistence of many diverse religious groups. More and more came to realise that the imposition of religious uniformity was not after all particularly essential for political stability. Besides it was becoming evident that uniformity was probably impossible to obtain. As James II ruefully observed, 'after all the frequent and pressing endeavours that were used in each of [the last four reigns] to reduce this kingdom to an exact conformity in religion, it is visible the success has not answered the design, and that the difficulty is invincible.'<sup>3</sup>

Other men argued at a more theoretical level that any involvement of the civil and political authorities in matters of religion must be inherently unjustifiable. Not all the Nonconformists were at variance with the Anglicans on this point: the Presbyterians for instance entirely agreed that the civil magistrate had both the right and the duty to suppress 'all blasphemies and heresies, . . . all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline,'<sup>4</sup> — though of course they disagreed as to what the 'corruptions and abuses' were. But others among the Dissenters argued for a total separation of Church and State. Thomas Helwys, who was largely responsible for introducing the Baptist movement in England, wrote as follows:

Our Lord the King is but an earthly King, and he hath no aucthority as a King but in earthly causes, and if the King's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all humane laws

made by the King, our Lord the King can require no more: for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves: the King shall not answere for it, neither may the King be judgd betwene God and Man. Let them be heretickes, Turcks, Jewes, or whatsoever, it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.<sup>5</sup>

Written at the very beginning of the seventeenth century this was one of the first clear denials of what had been hitherto an unquestioned association between civil and religious order. Its claim that they are in fact quite distinct was reiterated with increasing frequency thereafter and received its most complete and forceful presentation in John Locke's famous *Letters Concerning Toleration* of 1689 — though the passing of the Toleration Act in that very year reveals that by then it had ceased to be a particularly radical demand. By then indeed there was little justification left for denying it since its advocates had built up such a convincing case. In the passage quoted, for instance, Helwys rightly points out that a man's salvation can be the proper concern of no one but himself and that accordingly his religion must be regarded as an essentially private relationship with God in which the monarch or civil power can have no business to interfere. An alternative line of argument was derived from the fundamental principle that 'the Bible is the religion of Protestants', as Chillingworth had expressed it. Even the most intolerant of men could be persuaded by this to concede that a doctrine could not properly be enforced unless it was explicitly supported by scriptural evidence, a condition which immediately excepted several traditional orthodoxies. And the principle implied furthermore that the truth of religion was something which ought to be established chiefly by reading, instruction, and rational enquiry into the teachings of the Bible. If that were so it was evident that the use of force and punishments must be entirely inappropriate: the only permissible means of attempting to achieve uniformity could be calm argument and reasoned debate. Besides, men came to recognise that the ingredient of faith in religion

made toleration a necessity: of its very nature it implies a deliberate and willing commitment to the truth which must inevitably be stultified by any use of force. As a modern charter of toleration has expressed it, 'the exercise of religion consists before all else in those internal, voluntary, and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind.'<sup>6</sup>

All these considerations combined to bring about a gradual change in men's way of thinking and to convince them that absolute uniformity in religion was not after all of paramount importance. It was not actually until the Trinity Act of 1813 that most penalties were lifted from the Unitarians and others who denied the orthodox theology, but for a century or more before then the majority of Nonconformists had been able to worship as they chose without suffering substantial hardship. In effect the principle of toleration had been granted, that any use of force, persecution, punishment, sanctions or disabilities in order to secure people's adherence to a religious doctrine must be wrong. Today this is accepted almost as a commonplace, so far as religion is concerned — though evidently the same attitude is not adopted towards all other kinds of thought or conduct.

Unitarians of course have accepted and endorsed the idea of toleration no less than the members of other denominations. What makes them distinctive is that they have gone a good way beyond it and have embraced in addition the ideal of religious freedom. This notion concerns the relation between an individual and his church and means that he is completely free to hold his own opinions and beliefs; in particular, it implies that he is not required to subscribe to a creed or statement of doctrine, or any similar method of ensuring that all the members of a group have the same convictions. In short it prescribes absolute personal liberty in religion. As a principle it is first clearly encountered in 1719, when a conference of the London Nonconformist ministers was held at the Salters' Hall;

during the proceedings it was suggested that they should all adopt a common declaration of Christian doctrine, but so many of them refused to do this that the meeting served to split them into two distinct groups. The crucial fact about this incident is that those who refused to sign did not in fact have different theological convictions from the rest: their stand was rather over the question of subscription in itself, which they thought was contrary to the true nature of religion. These 'non-subscribers' were the first self-confessed exponents of religious freedom in England and their standpoint became that of the infant Unitarian movement. It made them a unique denomination. The Church of England, for example, required assent to the Apostles' Creed as a condition of baptism and confirmation and thereby also of participation in Holy Communion. Some of the Nonconformist churches had even more rigorous requirements: for instance an eighteenth century Baptist author maintained that 'in a regular and well-ordered Church of Christ, care is taken that none be admitted into it, but such as are judged truly gracious persons and of whom testimony is given of their becoming conversations.'<sup>7</sup> The Unitarians were — and are — almost alone in imposing no doctrinal conditions. Even the Society of Friends, or Quakers, who refuse to employ any creed or similar condition of membership, have been willing to authorise a statement of their common beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Only the Unitarians, it appears, have persistently refused to do even this.<sup>9</sup>

Their implacable opposition to any profession of faith may seem unreasonable at first sight. After all, what harm could there be in a group of people voluntarily declaring their religious beliefs, or even using such a declaration in the course of their worship? It is surely something which men naturally want to do and does not appear to offend against any principles of religion. The Unitarian would probably reply that his disagreement is not with the idea of a creed as such but with the use made of it by the members of a church. Consider these remarks from a document issued by the early Congregationalists:



And accordingly such a transaction [*viz.*, drawing up a creed] is to be looked upon but as a meet or fit medium or means whereby to express that, their common faith and salvation, and no way to be made use of as an imposition upon any: Whatever is of force or constraint in matters of this nature causeth them to degenerate from the name and nature of Confessions, and turns them from being Confessions of Faith into exactions and impositions of Faith.

And such common confessions of the Orthodox Faith, made in simplicity of heart by any such Body of Christians, with concord among themselves, ought to be entertained by all others that love the truth as it is in Jesus, with an answerable rejoicing . . .<sup>10</sup>

The beginning of this passage breathes the spirit of tolerance and magnanimity, and nothing more fair or reasonable could be imagined; but in its conclusion one can clearly discern the grounds of persecution (of which, it should be said, its authors were never guilty). For it implies that any man who does not accept the appended confession obviously does not 'love the truth as it is in Jesus': in other words his faith is not 'orthodox', he is not a true Christian, and therefore — the inference easily goes — he deserves little consideration in a Christian country. The slope from tolerant principles to intolerant practice is as slippery as that. As the founder of the first Unitarian church recorded rather bitterly:

That none could be saved, or admitted to future happiness, but such as believed the doctrine of the Trinity and of the Divinity of Christ; was another maxim laid down by christians, after they began to make articles of faith for others, and exercise a lordly power and dominion in the Church of Christ. And this caused all those, who assumed to themselves the name orthodox, to keep no measures of charity or common humanity with those who dissented from them on these points. For when men can bring themselves to look upon a fellow-creature as out of the favour of God on such accounts; they are too apt to take the matter out of his hands, and go before him in inflicting the punishment, they suppose to be deserved.<sup>11</sup>

So Unitarians feared that any profession of faith would

implicitly lend itself to this kind of misuse; and the history of the English churches clearly shows that their misgivings were not unjustified.

But it may be claimed that creeds nevertheless can be used properly for the purpose of giving a clear doctrinal identity to a church. When its members subscribe to a confession of faith they are merely advertising their beliefs and thereby not only making clear to themselves the points on which they all agree but also attracting into their ranks others who think likewise. So they are indeed; but at the same time they are excluding all who think differently. This additional consequence was acknowledged very slowly. The first Nonconformists who felt themselves obliged to leave the Church of England because they could not accept all her doctrine or practice soon set about producing their own statements of belief, and these in turn served to shut out others of a similarly tender conscience who disagreed with them. As these men then proclaimed their own views the process of exclusion occurred repeatedly, yielding a bewildering variety of denominations and sects. F.D. Maurice sadly recognised what had taken place:

Sectarianism has been the effect of the schemes which Protestants have adopted for the purpose of defining who have a right to be members of Christ's Church, and who have not; the loss of a distinct and common object of faith has been the effect of schemes which Protestants have adopted to ascertain who have and who have not the gift of faith, or the right to believe. They have sought to be wiser than God, and God has confounded their vanity.<sup>12</sup>

Only a few men had been able to discern what was happening at the time. In the seventeenth century for instance Richard Baxter had recognised the disastrous results of producing ever more detailed creeds and duly tried to reduce the essentials of belief to a minimum — in fact, to the Apostles' Creed for doctrine, the Lord's Prayer for worship, and the Ten Commandments for moral duty. But this was a rare attempt to make the church less exclusive. As a general rule men reacted to the situation by trying to

refine their creeds still further and make them even more precise, and in doing so they only compounded their divisions.

Nevertheless it may be thought that Unitarianism makes too much of these sad facts. Nowadays the situation is very different: most of the creeds and confessions in current use are very loosely framed and almost invite various interpretations, and the clergy do not often make much effort to ensure that everyone understands them in the same way; some, indeed, apparently think that this would be undesirable. Though promulgating detailed statements of doctrine, therefore, most churches actually allow considerable latitude for differences in belief. But this of course is further support for the Unitarian's case. He maintains that ultimately there are only two alternatives: either it is essential that all the members of a church should agree in their beliefs, in which case their creed should be made as full and precise as possible and all steps should be taken to secure a uniform understanding of its text; or it is not really necessary, in which case it would be better to dispense altogether with a statement of doctrine which can form an obstacle for those with a particularly scrupulous conscience. The latter view is the one that he has always held and present experience seems to indicate that many others are now coming to agree with it.

It will therefore not be amiss to observe here that it carries with it wide implications — far wider indeed than most Unitarians themselves are wont to recognise. To abandon all professions of doctrine as they have done inevitably demands an exceptional willingness to accept changes in belief. The traditional use of a creed is intimately linked with the notion that God has made an initial declaration of his truth, and that it is the business of the church to preach this revelation and to hand it on unchanged and uncorrupted from one generation to the next. This idea sustained the Christian community from its beginning and was also presupposed during the Reformation by the Protestants' desire to remove later interpolations and to

return to the original teachings of scripture. But this historical picture of revelation is wholly inconsistent with the ideal of religious freedom. Rejecting the use of creeds and confessions manifestly implies that God's message to man is not to be enshrined in such static formulae of belief but ought rather to be expressed in different ways by different people. It requires revelation to be thought of not as a written statement by God but as a spiritual insight by man; not as a public declaration made once for all, but as a private intuition which each man can properly understand and express in his own way in order to extract its full meaning within the context of his experience and concerns. Because of this it also requires the church to be conceived in a different way. The traditional view of its nature and function was like that of a repository of sacred truth: a community of people united in their knowledge and acceptance of the divine message, preserving it and proclaiming it to the world at large. Since the whole foundation of this model is the existence of an unchanging truth which can be treasured in this fashion, with the rejection of any creed it ceases to be a particularly credible idea. Therefore the demand for freedom in religion creates a need to discover some alternative basis on which the existence of the church can be justified — possibly a form of worship which all its members find sustaining, for example, or a commitment to service in the community, or an altogether more abstract ideal such as the pursuit of truth. Some such new bond must be found if its members are to be united in a real body and not be a mere congeries of individuals. The necessity for this is especially evident in the history of the Unitarian movement, where congregations have occasionally lost the vision of a common purpose — or have ceased to think it important — and have disintegrated as a result.

The Unitarian's demand for individual freedom thus leads to a radical reassessment of certain fundamentals of religion and effectively makes his outlook a rather distinctive one. Though he would not deny that statements of belief or doctrine may have a proper use as a valuable focus

for worship he nevertheless has an obvious justification for regarding them with distrust, for they have so often been treated as exclusive claims to the truth and have consequently divided churches and stultified religious growth. So he prefers to do without such dangerous commodities entirely. He has done away with a common creed as the foundation for his church and has relied instead on the spirit of mutual love and respect, trusting that this alone will suffice and claiming besides that it is the basis of a truly Christian community: for as Towgood once wrote, 'the spirit of Jesus Christ is catholic, tolerant, liberal, breathing universal love: its characteristics are mutual condescension, bearing with one another's different sentiments in religion, holding the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.'<sup>13</sup> The Unitarian has persistently maintained that such an attitude is all that is required. He has insisted that shared beliefs are not essential and that every member of a religious community ought to be completely free to hold and develop his own convictions. The result in practice has been a church in which differences of opinion and belief are expected and explicitly recognised, where the whole notion of doctrinal 'orthodoxy' has no meaning at all, and where uniformity has been supplanted by unanimity. It gives the denomination a unique character and appeal and at its best is a remarkable and admirable achievement.

- 11 T. Lindsey, *Historical View of . . . Unitarian Doctrine . . .* (London 1738) p.144
- 12 F.D. Maurice, *Theological Essays* (2nd.ed. Cambridge 1853) p.205
- 13 M. Towgood, *A Calm and Plain Answer . . .* (London 1772) p.16

#### NOTES

- 1 W. Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants . . .* (London 1638) VI, §56
- 2 B. de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Hamburgh 1670) c.20
- 3 *Declaration of Indulgence (1687)* preamble
- 4 *Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)* c.23, §3
- 5 T. Helwys, *A Short Declaration . . .* (1612) p.69
- 6 Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom (1965)* §3
- 7 J. Gill, *The Dissenters' Reasons . . .* (4th.ed. London 1760) p.10
- 8 *Society of Friends, Book of Christian Discipline . . .* (London 1883)
- 9 Cf. the disclaimer in the preface to: R.V. Holt (ed.), *A Free Religious Faith . . .* (London 1945)
- 10 *The Savoy Declaration of Faith (1658)* preface

### 3. THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

Reading and conversation soon reveal that even the members of denominations with a clearly defined doctrinal standpoint actually differ quite widely in their beliefs. No doubt this is inevitable, for complete uniformity could probably be achieved only by suppressing all independent thought and enquiry. In the Unitarian movement where individual speculation is positively encouraged the variety of beliefs is predictably much greater, and in this and the following chapters some of the more distinct views will be considered.

In the light of their great diversity today it must surely appear a paradoxical fact that the Unitarians were originally united as a body by their common acceptance of a particular theology. In this respect, as in their insistence on complete freedom in religion, they stood alone among the English churches. It is interesting to find that as late as 1870 they were still proudly conscious of this point of distinction: 'our grounds of separation from the Church are, as it is well known, theological alone; we are Nonconformists because we cannot conscientiously repeat its creeds or join in invoking Christ as God. The ordinary grounds of Dissent appear to us also narrow and unreasonable . . . .'<sup>1</sup> The mention of 'ordinary grounds' is a reference to the fact that all the other Nonconformist churches had divided from the Church of England mainly over questions of organisation, ceremonies and the like. None of them had seriously

wanted to query her theology, which is of course the traditional Christian account of God as a trinity comprising the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The very name of the Unitarians records the fact that they totally denied this trinitarian scheme. They maintained that God ought not to be conceived as a union of three persons but as a single person alone, a being wholly simple and indivisible in himself. Although it is no longer so widely held within their movement this still deserves to be considered as the classical Unitarian doctrine because it was the point on which they all initially agreed and the distinctive mark by which others recognised them. Moreover it has a long history, in fact dating back to the time of the Reformation itself. Its first exponent seems to have been Faustus Socinus, in the fifteenth century, who belonged to a group of freethinkers at Rakow in Poland and was the main author of the notorious *Racovian Catechism* which was published in 1605.<sup>2</sup> Despite the command of James I to destroy this book the seeds of Unitarianism — then called 'Socinianism' — were thereby sown in England, and in 1640 for example one John Bidle was imprisoned for trying to disseminate it further. Thereafter it slowly attracted more adherents and grew in popularity, though the first avowedly Unitarian church was not actually founded until the later eighteenth century.

The doctrine differs from traditional Christian theology in a number of ways which find a point of focus in the significance attributed to the person of Christ himself. The trinitarian views him primarily as the second person of the trinity, the divine Son, and thinks that he was actually God himself made incarnate in the body of a man,

so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God, and very Man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men.<sup>3</sup>

As these words make clear, the doctrine of the Atonement

is an inevitable and important corollary to that of the Incarnation. By contrast with this the Unitarian's picture of Christ is very different indeed. He denies first of all any kind of identification with God, who is to be conceived only as himself, a simple divine unity; and then he portrays Christ merely as an especially favoured and gifted man who was chosen to be God's messenger to mankind:

The great outline of [Christianity] is, that the universal parent of mankind commissioned Jesus Christ, to invite men to the practice of virtue, by the assurance of his mercy to the penitent, and of his purpose to raise to immortal life and happiness all the virtuous and the good, but to inflict an adequate punishment on the wicked. In proof of this he wrought many miracles, and after a public execution he rose again from the dead.<sup>4</sup>

These two passages provide an interesting and enlightening contrast. In particular they offer totally conflicting accounts of what kind of being Christ was. The former describes him as a mysterious and extraordinary union of divinity with humanity while the latter presumes that he was purely and simply a man.

Unitarians naturally believed that they had sound reasons for maintaining a theology so radically different from everyone else's. True to their Protestant heritage, they seem to have been influenced above all by the sheer lack of any convincing scriptural authority for the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. The clearest proof of it had always been the verse 'for there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one.'<sup>5</sup> But in 1516 Erasmus had left this out of his Greek text of the New Testament because it appeared a later interpolation. (Though he was forced to include it in subsequent editions, scholars have since come to agree with him and it has been omitted since the revision of 1881.) This and other emendations he suggested started the process of Biblical criticism, and increasingly the original texts were studied in detail, comparisons made between the Old and New Testaments, and doubts thereby thrown upon the authenticity or interpretation of significant passages. A

landmark in this activity was the publication in 1712 of *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* by Samuel Clarke, in which he gathered and collated all the relevant quotations he could find in the Bible. He revealed that although references are often made to each of the three persons they are nowhere clearly stated to form together one God, for that title in fact is usually applied to the Father alone. His book obviously made nonsense of the Church of England's claim that her teachings 'may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture',<sup>6</sup> and since most of it was a farrago of passages from the Bible its contents could scarcely be denied. A further important point which it showed was that most of the available evidence for the doctrine is to be found in the writings of Paul, whereas Christ himself is recorded as saying very little to confirm his presumed identity with God. So Unitarians, whose ambition it was to recreate the original religion of Jesus, felt that they were perfectly at liberty to reject the traditional theology. All the indications served to convince them that the doctrine of the Trinity had been developed after the lifetime of Jesus and grafted on to the original historical record.

Of course this was quite true. In fact it was first officially endorsed at the Council of Nicea in 325, and was adopted in order to end long years of complex and bitter argument. This had arisen inevitably from a fundamental inconsistency in the beliefs of the primitive church: 'Christianity began as a trinitarian religion with a unitarian theology. The question at issue in the age of the Fathers was whether the religion should transform the theology or the theology stifle the religion.'<sup>7</sup> In the event, the theology became trinitarian. But one may be forgiven for suggesting that this was not an ideal solution to the problem because the theology simultaneously became quite impossible to understand. How three beings can be one while yet remaining three is a question which has ever since challenged the most subtle intellects, but their ingenious explanations have never been truly valid or even clear. In fact, as Bezzant has sensibly recognised, it is necessarily an unintelligible doctrine since

it implies that each person in the trinity is 'an entity which is neither noun nor adjective'<sup>8</sup> — though there is no other kind of thing it could be. So this is a second reason for the Unitarians' opposition to it. Considered from a purely intellectual standpoint the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamentally incoherent and absurd, and therefore had to be rejected by people who laid great stress on clarity and rational consistency.

A third reason which acquired increasing significance for them concerns not so much the idea of the Trinity as the doctrine of the Atonement coupled with it. The outline of this is that the sins of men have alienated them from God and incurred his anger and punishment, which must be meted out fully as justice requires; and that Christ suffered this penalty due to man by his crucifixion, purchasing forgiveness by dying as a sacrifice for all mankind. This so-called 'penal' theory of atonement was a characteristic feature of Protestant theology, ultimately derived from the thought of Paul, who actually took the essentials of it from the Old Testament. For example *Leviticus XI* describes the ritual whereby the Jews symbolically transferred their sins on to a 'scape-goat' which was then driven out of their community; in a similar fashion Christ was thought to have borne the sins of men and suffered the death that was properly due to them. But while this image is intelligible by itself it becomes quite incoherent if Christ and his Father are united in one God. For on that assumption the person who dies as a sacrifice is in some sense at least the very same as the person who demands that the sacrifice be made. Unitarians took great delight in pointing out how silly this appeared:

The prominent feature of the scheme is, that the Deity himself, though he is the party offended, provides for this supposed satisfaction without the least interference from the offender! That is, in other words, the creditor, while he professes the most unbounded regard for the debtor, insists upon the payment of his claims without the least abatement; but in order to give this clashing view of things the appearance of consistency,

he condescends to furnish the means of payment himself, and in point of fact pays to himself, by his own property, what the debtor is represented to have paid by the provided supply, under the name of a surety! To call this a most palpable absurdity is to say the least of it: it is an absolute libel on the character of God, and carries with it its own refutation.<sup>9</sup>

And there are other difficulties besides. By presuming that the sacrifice must be paid as the price of forgiveness the doctrine portrays the Father as a deity with a scrupulous concern for the requirements of strict justice. Jesus however praised mercy and condemned the wish to exact 'an eye for an eye'. Evidently these moral attitudes conflict, and again if it is supposed that they are both held by one God the contradiction becomes intolerable. So it becomes clear that the doctrine of the Atonement is not after all a natural counterpart to that of the Trinity but is in fact logically opposed to it.

It cannot be denied that these criticisms are substantially irrefutable. Precisely because they are so cogent, perhaps, the men who first expressed them were very unpopular with the members of other churches. Indeed Jordan asserts that

the Unitarians were perhaps the most bitterly hated religious group in seventeenth century England. Their antecedents were Christian, and Unitarian thought appeared to the orthodox mind to be a malicious and blasphemous perversion of the sacred scriptures. They were regarded as unchristian, a sin which they magnified by seeking to identify themselves with the Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Happily this hostility died out in the course of time. The objections were so obviously sound that they could only be countered by removing the absurdities which they revealed, and therefore theologians set about trying to present the doctrine of the Trinity in new ways which would offer less scope for criticism or opposition. Thus the Unitarians' stance actually initiated a radical and beneficial revision of Christian theology which is nowadays gladly acknowledged.<sup>11</sup>

Unitarians themselves were led by all these reasonings to

insist from the beginning on the humanity of Christ. They denied absolutely the claim of traditional theology that he was really God incarnate and saw him instead as merely 'a man, appointed, anointed, beloved, honoured and exalted by God, above all other beings'.<sup>12</sup> But though this view was obviously defensible it was not without difficulties of its own. Chiefly it seemed to deprive Christ of all his religious significance, downgrading him to the level of the rest of us and so destroying his emotional impact and spiritual importance. Naturally this consequence was especially evident to other Christians. F.D. Maurice challenged Unitarians with it thus:

In the sad hours of your life, the recollection of that Man you read of in your childhood, the Man of Sorrows, the great sympathiser with human woes and sufferings, rises up before you, I know; it has a reality for you, then; you feel it to be not only beautiful, but true. In such moments, does it seem to you as if Christ were merely a person who, eighteen hundred years ago, made certain journeyings between Judaea and Galilee? Can such a recollection fill up the blank which some present grief, the loss of some actual friend, has made in your hearts?<sup>13</sup>

This was a real difficulty: the assertion of the humanity of Jesus looked as if it would undermine his special status. Unitarians found that they could prevent this only by undertaking a radical reassessment of humanity itself. In effect, they avoided diminishing the significance of Christ by vastly increasing the significance of man. The logic of their convictions brought them to think that the possession of human status is something wonderful and glorious, the occupation of a favoured position at the summit of creation and the enjoyment of a unique affinity with its Creator. For them to describe Jesus as a man was not something of a dismissal — as Maurice seemed to think — but a triumphant affirmation of his value and importance. Him indeed they considered as the highest example of the species, a supreme instance of what it means to be human: being a man consequently means nothing less than being able to be

like him, having a similar capacity for purity and goodness and greatness.

Of course they were not so simple-minded as to imagine that they could emulate the life of Christ with ease. They recognised like other Christians that it was the noblest ideal and one which possibly could not be realised more than once. But while admitting that he stood far above the level of other men they nevertheless insisted that his nature was essentially the same as theirs and accordingly evolved a more optimistic view of the human condition. This is evident for example in the way they revised the doctrine of Atonement. It was an axiom for them that the moral standards preached by Jesus are also those of the deity whose messenger he was and therefore they rejected entirely the picture of God as an exact judge demanding sacrifice. They replaced it with the conception of a loving Father who would unhesitatingly and freely forgive his children's natural wickednesses and who asked for no greater sacrifice than sincere repentance. The crucifixion of Jesus did not in their view purchase divine pardon but merely revealed men's tragic inability to comprehend and accept his message of unstinted love. Likewise they developed a new idea of sin. In traditional Christian thought it is conceived as a barrier which alienates man from God and creates a gulf so wide that only God can cross it, becoming incarnate and sharing human experience. Though they were not always aware of doing so, Unitarians repudiated this drastic notion. Within their scheme of beliefs sin could be understood only as misbehaviour or as disobedience to God's will, incurring no more than his disapproval or at most his anger. They could not see it in the way many Christians did as an intrinsic wickedness in man which could put him entirely outside the scope of divine love.

The chief points of classical Unitarianism can accordingly be stated briefly. It did away altogether with the idea of Christ as an incarnate God who had purchased salvation for men by his death, removing also the doctrines of the Trinity and Atonement and much of the current notion of sin. In

place of these it advanced two simple and complementary beliefs: that God is the Father of mankind; and that all men are his sons, and brothers to each other. It portrayed him as offering boundless love and forgiveness to all who would accept them, and Jesus as a teacher chosen to reveal his wishes and will. Its fundamental optimism was expressed in this brave message: that one should strive to be a worthy son of God and realise one's true potential of being like Christ.

Unitarians no longer hold these distinctive views as tenaciously and universally as they did at first. It is not that they would particularly want to repudiate them now but merely that they have moved on from the stage of conscious opposition to the established church and are simply not so interested in the interpretation of Christ. But their thinking still bears the imprint of these ideas which continue to exert a profound and pervasive influence despite the loss of their former popularity. A fairly simple example of this is the very noticeable fact that the prayers in Unitarian churches always lack the intercessionary formula 'through Jesus Christ our Lord', with which — or a similar phrase — those in other churches invariably conclude. For how could they pray to God 'through' Jesus if he is just a man like themselves? To do so would be quite nonsensical to them and would even hint at idolatry. Their convictions imply that if Christ enjoys an intimate communion with God, then so can every man, who needs no church, priest or other agent to intercede on his behalf. At a less obvious level there are rather more important disagreements with the thought of other Christians which have occasionally led to sad misunderstandings when they have not been adequately recognised. Possibly the most fundamental is about human nature. A strong tradition in Christianity has always taken a rather pessimistic view of this, seeing in the heart of man an innate tendency towards evil which almost irresistibly leads him into sin and opposition to the will of God. Some Christians have maintained that man is constitutionally unable to do what he knows to be right without the assist-

ance of divine grace and trust in the power of Christ. But Unitarians, by taking Christ himself as their paradigm of humanity, have inevitably ignored the possibility of such an inherent and fatal flaw in man's nature. In their view the hindrances and temptations in his way are not so great that he cannot overcome them by his own efforts, and they think that he has also a natural disposition towards goodness and truth which only needs the right climate in order to flower. The wrongdoing and wickedness of men can therefore be attributed only to bad upbringing and poor environment. It will be seen in a later chapter that this optimistic outlook on humanity still dominates Unitarian thought and keeps it distinct from the mainstream of Christian belief.

From about the beginning of the present century Unitarians have often expressed the distinctive character of their theology by describing it as 'the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus'.<sup>14</sup> Although historically untrue — since the religion of Jesus was of course Judaism — the phrase is quite a useful one. At least it emphasises that Christ has only been the object of their praise and admiration, never of their worship in the way he is for other Christians; and it reminds us that they developed this view of him in trying to rid the traditional picture of its unscriptural and unhistorical features. Their resulting vision of him as a great spiritual leader and moral teacher is undeniably much simpler and more comprehensible, and from a purely intellectual point of view has much to recommend it. But many Christians have found it somewhat lacking both in its religious force and in its fidelity to the facts of man's existence.

#### NOTES

- 1 The Inquirer, 18th June 1870
- 2 English translation by T. Rees (London 1818)
- 3 The 39 Articles, §2
- 4 J. Priestley, *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (Birmingham 1782) II, p.440
- 5 Epistle of John, V, v.7 (Authorised Version)
- 6 The 39 Articles, §8



- 7 L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London 1944) p.103
- 8 A.R. Vidler *et al.*, *Objections to Christian Belief* (Harmondsworth 1965) p.88
- 9 R. Mills, *Letter on the Satisfaction of Sin* (1828) *Unitarian Tracts VI*, p.16
- 10 W.K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration . . .* (Gloucester, Mass. 1932) III, p.208
- 11 L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London 1944) appx. 6
- 12 N. Lardner, *Letter on the Logos* (1730) *Unitarian Tracts IV*, p.35
- 13 F.D Maurice, *Theological Essays* (2nd.ed. Cambridge 1853) p.94
- 14 The source of this phrase is not definitely known, but it may have been suggested by A. Harnack's *What is Christianity?* (1899)

## 4. *THE AUTHORITY OF CONSCIENCE*

There were few English theologians during the eighteenth century who did not find themselves embroiled at some point in what has since been called 'the Unitarian debate' — discussing the Unitarians' criticisms of traditional Christian doctrine and modifying it to be proof against them. It was a long and difficult process because these doubts and objections were widely held. Many of the incumbent clergy had great sympathy with them; and they were shared also by many members of the universities, who were obliged at that time to subscribe to Anglican doctrines in order to receive degrees and hold fellowships. These men, in fact, were chiefly responsible for bringing matters to a head. Their doubts were so profound that in 1772 they laid a petition before Parliament asking for the requirement of subscription to be abolished. When this was denied and it became obvious that the teachings of the church would not be altered to accommodate their views, some of them felt that the only remaining course of action was to leave her communion altogether.

A new home was offered them by Theophilus Lindsey. He was a clergyman in Yorkshire who found that he agreed very much with their views, so in 1774 he resigned his post and moved to London where he opened in that year the first self-styled Unitarian Chapel. The members of his congregation were unusual in several ways. They all still thought of themselves as true and honest Christians but

denied what everyone else understood as Christianity. Their political beliefs likewise were as radical as their theology, being progressive and liberal, basically conforming with Whig principles. Many of them too had a university background and were highly educated 'intellectuals' with a strong bias towards rationalism in their religious thinking. And they had an exceptional interest in all the current advances in learning, above all in the field of science.

One who was typical in this respect — as in the others too — was Joseph Priestley, a good friend of Lindsey's. He had a high reputation among them as a theologian, based mainly on his books which argued the Unitarian case with great force and a wealth of Biblical evidence. At the same time however he was also a brilliant pioneer in chemistry, remembered today for his discovery of oxygen. In his own mind his scientific and theological enquiries were linked together as partners in a common intellectual endeavour. The one would yield knowledge of the creation, the other of its Creator: therefore, he presumed, they must ultimately harmonise and complement each other and any conflict between them could never be more than superficial. If a theological doctrine were to be contradicted by hard scientific fact it must duly be rejected as untrue. This remarkable attitude was shared by virtually all the Unitarians, though obviously none of them could rival his importance as a scientist. In fact it was an assumption which may well have dominated their thinking for a long while previously, for H.L. Short has suggested that it was the main cause of the division which had split the Salters' Hall conference back in 1719.<sup>1</sup> The problem then had been the challenge of the scientific revolution in the previous century: the physics expounded in Newton's *Principia* seemed to conflict at a number of points with traditional Christian beliefs and in some respects actually implied the virtually Unitarian doctrines accepted by Newton himself. Whether or not this had been the motivation of the non-subscribing ministers on that occasion, it certainly lay at the root of Priestley's thinking. He wholeheartedly set about incorporating clas-

sical physics into his theology, maintaining for instance that everything in the universe is wholly material and that all events result from immutable laws of cause and effect. Few of his fellow Unitarians agreed with him on these points, preferring to leave room for the existence of spirit and freewill, but they shared his willingness to assimilate all the discoveries of science. For they were convinced, like the Cambridge Platonists before them, that all truths are ultimately compatible and can only enhance our knowledge of God.

This attitude was to prove a great advantage to their movement in the following century, which was a period of great conflict between science and religion. The great work of Lyell on geology and that of Darwin on evolution combined to advance a startling and novel view of the world. They argued that it was immeasurably older than had been believed hitherto, only gradually acquiring its present form and contents, and that man had come into being in the same manner as any other species by an apparently unplanned and purposeless process of natural selection. In each of these particulars their view directly contradicted current opinion and the teachings of the church. These, based on the story in *Genesis*, stated that the world had been created in six days at a definite date in the past and that man had been made specially to be from the first the lord of all other creatures. Even in the later nineteenth century most ordinary people still believed the whole Bible to be quite literally true and therefore the theories of the scientists were inevitably greeted with almost universal hostility and disbelief. Only after several decades of fierce argument were they finally accepted, and during this long period of great conflict and bitterness the churches were riven by opposing factions and were often made to look ridiculous. But from most of this the Unitarians stood aloof. Their movement as a whole suffered very little from such dissension and perhaps many of them even found it hard to see why such acrimony had been aroused. For by then they had a well established tradition of accept-

ing and incorporating new knowledge in their thought and could see little reason to reject the revelations of science merely to preserve those of scripture.

Their detached attitude was much reinforced by the fact that in any case many of them no longer attached overriding significance to the evidence of the Bible. This was a very important new development in their religion, one that had begun to show itself only at the beginning of that century. At that time the general rationalism of earlier thought was giving way to a more emotional outlook, the authority of the head yielding to that of the heart; it was the period of romanticism in the arts and of evangelism in religion. The change was taking place partly as a reaction to the cold intellectualism of the previous age, but also as a way of coping with the advance of science. Its startling new discoveries shattered the old certainties and sense of security in the world: at such a time men naturally pay greater attention to their inward emotions and feelings, for these at least are certain and indubitable. This new atmosphere by itself would probably have been enough to change the Unitarians' way of thinking, but its effect was strengthened by their new feeling of greater freedom. It was just about this time that legislation began to remove the penalties which had threatened them since the seventeenth century. Accordingly they no longer felt that they were part of an oppressed minority, but rather came to see themselves as a coherent and flourishing denomination with its own place and role in the religious life of the country. The climate was ideal for development and they gladly took advantage of it.

The prophet and architect of the ensuing change was James Martineau, an eminent and influential figure in Victorian England. His ideas about religion appeared novel and exciting to many of his fellow Unitarians and soon attracted such a wide following among them that the movement threatened for a time to split apart, the traditionalist exponents of Priestley's way of thinking versus the modernist adherents of Martineau's. In retrospect however one can see that his views were not as new as they

seemed. They were in fact the natural culmination of themes which had always been present in Unitarian thought, and in some ways indeed were clearly foreshadowed in its classical doctrines. For much of its critique of Anglican teachings had relied fundamentally on considerations of morality — for example, Mills' condemnation of the Atonement as a 'libel on the character of God' quoted in the previous chapter. In this and similar objections Unitarian writers evidently presupposed that God is morally perfect. They assumed at the outset that the moral standards of his conduct must be the same as they would approve in their own, which seemed to them really to deserve admiration and praise. And this was not unreasonable or presumptuous of them, for anything else would mean that God was not truly worthy of their worship. Their attitude is expressed very well in J.S. Mill's defiant remark: 'I will call no being good who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures, and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.'<sup>2</sup> Unitarians had always had this kind of attitude, implicitly regarding the claims of moral truth as paramount. Now at last Martineau made it explicit, claiming that the emotional response and moral sensibility of the individual, not the statements of scripture, are the real touchstone of true religion.

He first argued for this principle in *The Rationale of Religious Enquiry* of 1836, where he spoke of 'reason' as the source of revelation. This was perhaps an unfortunate word to choose because it can be understood in different senses and could easily mislead his readers. One notion of using reason has been put like this: 'I will believe nothing that I cannot understand, and I understand only what conforms to the acknowledged rules of logic and can be explained to anyone of normal intelligence.'<sup>3</sup> Although this is intended as a deliberate caricature it is actually uncomfortably close to the attitude of many Unitarians. Something very like it at least can often be found in Priestley's thinking, for example, and in the rationalistic approach of many of his contem-

poraries. But when Martineau wrote of 'reason' he did not mean this at all. His use of the word is much closer to that of Coleridge, for instance — from whom in fact he may have borrowed it, for the poet was associated with the Unitarians for many years and at one time contemplated becoming a minister among them. Coleridge had insisted that the two intellectual faculties which he called 'reason' and 'understanding' are fundamentally quite different: the latter meant to him the process of discursive thought, of deduction and analysis and argument; but the former signified an activity far less purely intellectual, one more comprehensive in its scope: a kind of deliberation which also involves emotion and intuition and feeling. This was more or less how Martineau understood it too. In his vocabulary it meant the faculty of mind which makes a man aware of fundamental realities and gives him knowledge of the most profound truths, but is not exclusively conscious or even intellectual — something more like insight than thinking. He believed that it is especially active in the sphere of moral knowledge. When a man feels the promptings of conscience, he argued, he has the feeling that his freedom is limited, that as it were he owes it to something outside himself to do his duty despite any inclinations to the contrary. In such a feeling he is evidently made aware of something greater and more important than his own wishes; he encounters something which has absolute value and authority, and which makes an uncompromising demand for his allegiance. Martineau accordingly saw this kind of intuition as the locus of man's acquaintance with the divine. The insights of conscience provide us with indubitable revelations of truth and goodness and consequently must be treated as the primary source of all religious knowledge.

His argument is obviously quite similar to that advanced a few years earlier by Schliermacher, who had maintained that the real foundation of religion is simply man's inescapable 'feeling of dependence'; in fact the chief difference between them is that Martineau relies on a higher and more rational mental phenomenon than this rather primitive

emotion. Unitarians therefore, under his influence, were already quite familiar with such theories by the time that the work of German theologians began to have a widespread impact on English thought. Then, about the mid-century, serious doubts began to arise in other churches about the authority of scripture. In addition to the growing scientific evidence that the Bible is historically inaccurate they had to take into account also the arguments of Strauss, for example, who had claimed in his *Leben Jesu* of 1835 that the Gospels are predominantly a mythical or symbolic interpretation of Jesus, not even originally intended as an accurate record of his life. Such considerations seemed increasingly cogent to a number of English theologians who were thereby led to make a drastic re-evaluation of scriptural authority. They came to suggest that the Bible should not be treated with superstitious reverence or be presumed infallible but that the reader should feel free to doubt it or criticise it where he saw fit. Of course they assumed that 'when interpreted like any other book, by the same rules of evidence and the same canons of criticism, the Bible will still remain unlike any other book'.<sup>4</sup> They were sure that its unique authority would inevitably impress itself on the reader and convince him of its title to be considered 'the word of God', not in the sense of being literally true in every line, but rather in offering him an unparalleled revelation of all-important truths. In other words they acknowledged that one could ask why it should be revered, and asserted that the answer would be found by an unprejudiced reading of its contents.

In fact their 'new' approach was merely an extension of the principle of intelligent enquiry in religion that had always been a part of the Protestant tradition, which is why this period of change is sometimes called 'the second Reformation'. As in the first one too, Unitarians were in the forefront of many developments. Under Martineau's influence they had already anticipated its estimate of scripture, and this in turn led to other changes in the character of their thinking. They became much less dogmatic and

evangelistic, for example. In the time of Priestley's ascendancy they had naturally been very self-conscious about their beliefs, partly because their movement was still in its infancy then and also because their views were very obviously different from those of other Nonconformists. Some of them had been very concerned to emphasise the uniqueness of their position and had even wanted to try and win further converts to it. But now these temptations were greatly diminished. They did not want to spend any more time and effort in proving that their understanding of the Bible was correct, simply because they no longer had much interest in arguing about the Bible at all; it had entirely lost its former status in their eyes. Their disagreements with other Christians accordingly were now less often straightforward conflicts about the truth or falsehood of specific doctrines: increasingly they became instead differences in approach and method, revealing contrasting perspectives on the problems of religion. Unitarians also lost much of their taste for discussing the niceties of theology, which had been rather the fashion of the previous century. Now they put their energies into the more constructive task of developing what might be called a 'moral religion' — a system of beliefs based upon the intuitions of divinity in conscience and specially concerned with issues of value and behaviour.

As time went on it became apparent that this was actually much less closely related to Christianity. Whereas their classical doctrines had been based on criticism and rejection of Anglican teachings, these new beliefs were not so parasitic, being more independently conceived altogether. This was evident first in the fact that Unitarians ceased to attach any overwhelming significance to Christ. They had earlier rejected his title to divinity but had nevertheless continued to regard him as uniquely important, a spiritual leader entirely without parallel or rival. Now however this was questioned. That his life and message deserve respect and emulation, that they have a great claim to the attention of all, was not denied; but it began to be suggested that perhaps they were not unique in these respects. Again this

was the result of Martineau's teaching. In accord with his stress on the evidence of conscience Unitarians started to read the Gospel narratives with a close and critical eye for the moral values endorsed therein, and this forced them to recognise that some of the most characteristic doctrines of Christ actually have close parallels in the lives or works of other thinkers and sages. Therefore, if he was to be revered, mere logic demanded that others whose ideas were similar to his should also receive some measure of the honour. In this way the basis of Unitarian beliefs began to broaden out. The process was accelerated by Estlin Carpenter, who in 1878 initiated a series of public lectures about the ideas of other religions, especially those of the East. It was a bold and pioneering step to take at a time when even educated Christians knew nothing of Buddhism or Islam and when the study of 'comparative religion' had scarcely been dreamt of; but it must not be thought that Carpenter wanted in some enlightened fashion to promote inter-racial sympathy and understanding, or to begin an ecumenical movement. His intention was solely to fertilise Christianity. Martineau's thought again implied the validity of this ambition. If indeed it is conscience rather than scripture which functions as the source of religious knowledge, every person in every land must be in a position to contribute something to the common stock of truth. That a man's perspective is coloured or refracted by the beliefs and traditions of his country must not mislead us into thinking that he actually sees a different God, for ultimately all visions are of the same divine reality and all truths are compatible. So Carpenter hoped that the study of other religions would illuminate different facets of their common subject and in this way help Christians to transcend the limitations imposed on their outlook by upbringing and contemporary culture. He perhaps overestimated the extent to which one can really penetrate to the heart of a religion other than one's own, but it was nevertheless a novel venture and proved immediately popular. So great was its influence indeed that by the end of the century many

Unitarians had ceased to attach any overriding importance either to the Bible or to the teachings of Christ. They were trying by then to build an altogether less denominational religion, one that would incorporate and harmonise the fundamental truths and insights variously expressed in the doctrines of many faiths.

Thus in the space of little more than a hundred years Unitarianism had changed completely, beginning primarily as criticism of traditional theology but maturing to independent and original thought. In many ways this development was both inspired and guided by Martineau, who is therefore properly regarded as one of the most important figures in its history. But the influence of his ideas did not prove wholly beneficial. It admittedly led the Unitarians on from the level of mere opposition to the established church, but in doing so it also deprived them of the basis for their sense of corporate identity. Their classical doctrines had formed a clear and distinct theological position; and though they had sometimes held it in a regrettably partisan spirit, at least they had thus been bound together in a very conscious fashion. Now this bond was lost. Martineau's own work was predominantly in the philosophy or theory of religion, and his writing was more about how beliefs should be arrived at than about what actually should be believed. Carpenter's eclectic approach was certainly novel and interesting, but it could all too easily lead to nothing more than a vague kind of pantheism. So nothing comparable was offered to replace the clear and cogent theology developed by Priestley and his contemporaries. The conclusions that could be derived from the intuitions of moral conscience were seldom much more than everyday maxims of conduct or commonplace praise of beauty and goodness. Moreover — as one might expect — they were not obviously different from the moral convictions of everyone else. One's moral code is so much the product of education that it is always in a large measure held in common by those reared in the same culture: the standards and values endorsed by Unitarians were therefore predictably much the same as those of

other Christians too. In some respects it was undoubtedly a good thing that the divisions which had initially existed between them should thus be diminished, but at the same time it meant that the Unitarians' beliefs were now much less distinctive.

They also became much less uniform. This too resulted directly from Martineau's teaching and has proved to be its most profound and lasting consequence. The insights of conscience are indeed unquestionable in their authority, as he pointed out, but this is simply because they are necessarily private. What a man is told by his inmost heart is something that only he can hear and which may be largely incommunicable to other people: it is for this reason that he alone can interpret and articulate the message and no one else can deny his account of what was said. By making this kind of revelation the basis of religion Martineau inevitably introduced an attitude of extreme individualism. Every man was now invited to be the author of his own faith, solely responsible for the development and expression of its doctrines, and alone able to judge how far he lived up to its requirements. Accordingly the traditional Unitarian demand for religious freedom also received much greater emphasis at this time, for only by abandoning entirely the notion of a common creed could each man be at liberty to formulate his own. Possibly Martineau himself assumed that the truths revealed by conscience would actually turn out to be fairly standard and that everyone would in the end find that they subscribed to the same beliefs. But if so, events proved him wrong. Whether the differences lay mainly in content or in presentation, the views of Unitarians now began to show more individual diversity, and this steadily increased until by the end of the century they were very various indeed. There was no longer any common, coherent doctrine; instead there was just a group of people each of whom was engaged in his own personal quest for truth, sharing only the atmosphere of free enquiry. Thus Unitarianism lost its previously clear outline. It became multiform, comprising several distinct lines of thought,

each of which was being pursued in a different direction.

One can argue that this was merely the extreme development of a tendency towards individualism which has always been present in the Protestant outlook, but nevertheless it was not altogether desirable. The Unitarian movement did not immediately break up in accord with the fragmentation of its thought, but that was due to Martineau's leadership and also to the fact that there were still ideals and goals common to all its members. Many of them in fact welcomed their growing diversity with delight. It seemed to them that the freedom which had been merely inchoate in Priestley's time was at last fully realised, for each was now allowed and encouraged to work out his own religion for himself. Especially for those with an original mind and a taste for this endeavour, it was an almost intoxicating situation. But it also meant that their movement no longer had any apparent centre or doctrinal identity, and as time has gone on this has proved to be a rather dangerous result.

**NOTES:**

- 1 H.L. Short, *Dissent and the Community* (London 1962) p.16
- 2 J.S. Mill, *Examination of Hamilton's Philosophy* (5th.ed. London 1878) p.129
- 3 H.R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London 1952) p.14
- 4 B. Jowett, in *Essays and Reviews* (4th.ed. London 1861) p.375

## 5. *THE WELFARE OF MAN*

Unitarianism in the later nineteenth century was in many ways a somewhat strange phenomenon. The ideas advanced by Martineau had taken firm root by then and had already yielded a wide variety of beliefs, yet at the same time the movement itself was still strong and flourishing. Why did it remain so coherent, despite its inner diversity? We can point to a number of reasons by way of explanation — the common belief in reason, for instance, or the shared love of freedom. But these appear most clearly in retrospect. To the Unitarians of the time two other factors would probably have been more obvious: that they had a common and fairly standard form of worship, and that they were all concerned for the welfare of mankind.

The manner of worship had actually served to unify their movement from the very beginning. The members of Lindsey's congregation used a version of the *Book of Common Prayer* which had been revised by Samuel Clarke in conformity with his 'scripture-doctrine' of the Trinity. This practice made it clear that they still thought of themselves as loyal Christians who had been forced out of the established church by her mistaken theology; and some of them even seem to have cherished vague hopes of staging a 'take-over', or at least of building up a new national church, like the old one except in doctrine. So they were quite happy to borrow her rites and institutions where this was feasible. Their mimicry of the Church of England empha-

sised their uniqueness further, for they were in consequence the only group of Dissenters who used a detailed liturgy. In their version of *Common Prayer*, as in the original, the service was printed in its entirety, and the congregation read the prayers and responses together. This procedure was totally opposed to the traditions of Nonconformity, which had been in part a rebellion against just this kind of regimentation and uniformity in worship — so thoroughgoing, in fact, that the first Baptists had even refused to sing hymns in unison! It had been based on the conviction that true acts of worship depended on the Holy Spirit speaking 'through' the individual and should therefore be as spontaneous and voluntary as possible in order to give inspiration full rein. Thus the prayers were invented by the minister as he went along, responding to the promptings of the Spirit in extempore fashion; this is still done today, of course. But the Unitarians stressed their origins as an offshoot of the established church by rejecting this practice and retaining a detailed written liturgy. It is an aspect of their conduct which accords ill with their demand for freedom and their dislike of creeds; in that context indeed it even appears contradictory. Probably it is best explained by supposing that their demand for rationality was even stronger. Certainly the practice of extempore praying often produced long and incoherent ramblings which would have been distasteful to people who laid such emphasis on reasoned thought and clear expression.

But liturgies — or 'orders of worship' as they were known — continued in quite general use until only a few years ago, which is surely rather surprising. When the movement was in its infancy all the members had much the same beliefs and it was natural therefore for them to use a prescribed form of worship. Before long however they began to differ markedly, and then the most logical step would have been to do away with liturgies as they had with creeds. But instead they merely re-wrote them to be less specific and constricting in points of theology and doctrine. Those which Martineau produced, for example, have a noticeably

diminished emphasis on Christ and the ideas of classical Unitarianism; and later, in Carpenter's time, non-Biblical lessons were introduced and much less use was made of Christian phraseology and concepts. Furthermore, points on which people were likely to disagree were tactfully avoided. From Victorian times, therefore, the typical Unitarian service has been remarkably vague about doctrine. It has normally comprised a series of prayers and hymns of the most general devotional character and a sermon on some topic of common interest, usually with a moral bias. Contentious theological issues are seldom mentioned; and the rite of Communion, which implicitly raises several of them, is now a very rare occurrence though originally it was celebrated regularly. Such expedients have proved very successful in coping with the immediate problem. They have certainly made it possible for people with widely differing convictions to worship in the same congregation, and in this way they have been an important means of holding the movement together. But one may feel that the unity purchased in this way is rather spurious, relying more upon the ignorance of divisions than on the consciousness of real agreement. There must be many a Unitarian who is never fully aware of how far his theological beliefs differ from those of his neighbour in church, simply because the worship in which they are both involved carefully avoids those issues which might make it obvious. And with the disuse of liturgies today this is even more likely, since the service now demands less communal activity of the worshippers and so gives them less cause to be conscious of each other.

In a peculiar fashion, the issues on which they do agree have actually tended to lie altogether outside the context of formal church worship. Certainly this is true of the most substantial and obvious bond between them, their common desire to promote the welfare of man. This has not always been their primary concern. In the time of Priestley for instance they were much more preoccupied with questions of theology, and though they held charitable ideals as a



matter of principle they did no more about them than the average Christian. But Martineau's influence changed this like so many other things. It made them far less zealous in disputing interpretations of scripture and Christian teaching, and as they worried less about the being and attributes of God they did so more about the state and condition of man. Though this in itself did not much distinguish them, the way they acted on it did. The other Nonconformists generally worked at a political level, involving themselves very much in the movement for progressive legislation; as Lord Russell remarked, 'I know the Dissenters, they carried the Reform Bill; they carried the abolition of slavery; they carried free trade; and they'll carry the abolition of Church Rates.'<sup>1</sup> But his observation was scarcely true of Unitarians. Admittedly they supported the otherwise unpopular Chartist movement at the beginning of the century, and one or two of them rose to positions of eminence in Parliament, but otherwise they were not much involved in such efforts for large-scale reform.

Their endeavours were more at a personal and individual level. The two central notions of classical Unitarianism, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, together adumbrated a community in which men would live together in fraternal love, guided by the demands of morality and obedience to divine will. This was what they now set out to achieve. They stressed increasingly that it was not a merely utopian conception but an ideal to be made actual and concrete, requiring a social gospel that was as challenging in its own way as anything in more traditional Christian teaching. For it could not be realised by a purely external revolution: it would have to change men internally as well. The aim was nothing less than 'the moral transformation of the world, by means of the transformation of individuals.'<sup>2</sup> Accordingly they attempted to change men's hearts rather than their dwelling or working conditions, believing that the moral dimension was of the first importance. They tried to bring each man to a consciousness of his obligations as a

true son of God. They sought to get him to make Christ the model for his life: to strive for purity and goodness in all his personal conduct, and to work in every possible way to turn society into a real 'kingdom of God' on earth.

Religion itself was therefore the most obvious means of achieving this end, since precisely this sort of moral self-improvement was the main theme of worship in their churches. In this connection the traditions of their movement proved an indubitable advantage. Many groups of Dissenters had originally considered themselves the 'elect' of God: they were the people to whom the Holy Spirit spoke directly, and thereby distinguished them as 'saints' from the mass of mankind. This belief had naturally made them anxious to mark and preserve the distinction between themselves and others, which accounts in part for their use of special creeds and professions of faith and stringent conditions of membership. Although these had been a little relaxed by this time there still remained a somewhat inward-looking attitude and a desire to preserve their identity. But the Unitarians, with their Anglican background and pretensions to be a new national church, had been entirely catholic from the outset. Their churches were always open to all comers and they wanted everyone to feel free to join their movement and their worship. During the Victorian era, when their ambition for social amelioration was most intense, they duly emphasised this 'open door' policy even more, and set about founding new congregations and building new churches wherever the opportunity allowed.

Another outlet for their growing social concern during the period was the foundation of 'domestic missions'. These were conceived almost as an alternative to normal congregations and attempted to reach the poor and the working-class for whom membership of a 'proper' church would not have been attractive or practicable. The original model for them was actually an American institution, but many were started in this country, situated mainly in the depressed and industrial areas of towns or large conurbations; some were funded by prosperous congregations,

others by the movement as a whole. They were rather different from the missions set up by other denominations in that they were not intended to spread religious belief or win converts: that would have been out of keeping with the general lack of interest in theology among Unitarians. Neither did they distribute assistance or largesse, for this was believed to destroy the recipient's initiative and thus obstruct progress towards the goal of moral improvement. Instead they sought primarily to foster self-help and self-reliance among the population, mainly providing people with advice and encouragement. In effect the missionaries were some of the first social workers. Since many social problems then were largely due to ignorance they also increasingly assumed the role of educators. This was a topic in which the Nonconformists generally had always had a great interest because the conditions of religious subscription debarred them from the established universities, and they had accordingly started a number of colleges of their own which taught a wide range of subjects. One of these was Warrington Academy, where Priestley was a tutor for many years; but apart from this the Unitarians were not much involved in providing university-level instruction. Their missions operated at the opposite end of the scale, teaching basic literacy and numeracy to the people at large. Some of them soon built up quite extensive courses of elementary education and continued to do much valuable work in this field until the state assumed responsibility for it.

Concern for the welfare of humanity was thus one of the most significant aspects of Unitarianism for much of the nineteenth century. In the present one it has assumed even greater prominence and has at the same time detached itself somewhat from theological presuppositions to become a largely autonomous interest. Because of this it really deserves to be ranked alongside the theology of Priestley and the philosophy of Martineau as a third main variety of Unitarian thought. These days a growing number of people within the movement describe themselves as

humanists, and make their chief interest the welfare and advancement of mankind rather than the worship and glorification of God.

It is certainly an important new development, though like earlier ones it has arisen naturally from previous thinking. Martineau taught that the divine truth and will were to be discovered by listening to conscience, as it were by looking within oneself rather than among the pages of scripture. Accordingly there is a sense in which he could say that God dwells in the heart of every man — which he expressed in the memorable dictum, 'the Incarnation is true, not of Christ exclusively, but of Man universally and of God everlastingly'.<sup>3</sup> This notion leads directly to a scheme of beliefs which might properly be called 'religious humanism'. It means that God is to be found not in heaven but in oneself and others. Since every man thus carries a spark of divinity within him, all are intrinsically important and valuable, and each possesses immeasurable potential for good. And this in turn implies some of the great themes of humanism: equality, justice, respect for all, the value of education, and the like. These ideals were therefore subscribed to by many in Martineau's day, enshrined within the framework of their religious beliefs. One of the earliest steps from this kind of view towards a more secular variety of humanism was in fact taken by a Unitarian minister, W.J. Fox. He found that his interests were increasingly directed away from the predominantly theocentric focus of traditional church worship towards an exclusive concern with humanity alone. So in 1834 he dissociated his chapel from the movement and re-established it independently. He later became eminent as one of the greatest social reformers of the time; while the chapel, later re-named The South Place Ethical Society, eventually joined the Ethical Union from which the modern Humanist Association in Britain has grown. Thus one of its most prominent apologists has acknowledged the Unitarians — whom he calls 'the spear-head of the Dissenters' — as one of the more important sources of his own movement.<sup>4</sup>

Hence one cannot be surprised that it is winning so many adherents among them, for in many ways the two movements are closely alike. Indeed the intellectual atmosphere in them is virtually identical. Humanists insist that the use of reason is all-important, since truth cannot be discovered without it, and they maintain that its authority must always be supreme and overriding. Likewise they think that a measure of scepticism is good and healthy, that no subject or doctrine is, or ought to be, exempt from questioning and examination. For them, as for Unitarians, beliefs should properly be held in 'the spirit of open-minded certainty'.<sup>5</sup> The same mental climate has naturally produced remarkably similar fruit. Humanism, like Unitarianism, is not a cut-and-dried, monolithic body of doctrine, but comprises a number of fairly distinct strands of thought; it too is constantly developing further, and possibly contains an even greater variety of opinions. A further obvious similarity is its moral outlook. This is perhaps the real core of humanism, which is almost built on the conviction that man must consciously take upon his own shoulders the responsibility for the conduct and condition of his life. It confronts him with the challenge of being the artificer of his own existence: it says that he has within himself the power and purpose necessary to realise his ideals, to make himself, and to help others to be, a good and worthwhile person; and it maintains that he alone is ultimately accountable for what he is and becomes. This is very much like the moral creed of Unitarianism. Exactly these virtues of self-improvement and self-reliance were the basis of the ideal of 'Christian citizenship' that was preached continually from Unitarian pulpits in Victorian times, and for the hearers they formed the foundation of an ethic which was, like the humanist's today, both personal and social at once. This similarity in moral teaching itself derives from a more profound agreement. Humanists and Unitarians share the same presuppositions about the nature of man and the same attitude of trust and optimism towards it. They both think that all human beings have a natural disposition to

goodness and an innate potential for great achievements; they presume that wickedness and misdeeds are the result of poor circumstances or bad upbringing and cannot be attributed to some intrinsic fount of evil in the human heart. In a previous chapter it was pointed out that this view of humanity, tantamount to a denial of the notion of original sin, was always one of the Unitarians' most distinctive beliefs: it is mainly because of this that they are almost alone among Christian denominations today in desiring to associate themselves so much with the humanist movement.

But these similarities and areas of agreement must not be allowed to obscure the fact that modern secular humanism is in some ways radically opposed to the traditions of Unitarianism. Above all, of course, it is built on atheism. The humanist denies absolutely that there is a God and rejects entirely the idea of any divine or supernatural being. It is precisely this conviction which gives validity to his message. He urges man to accept full responsibility for his life just because he denies that there is anyone else to accept it, and exhorts him to fashion it by his own efforts because he believes there is neither God nor Devil to help or hinder him in doing so. The whole philosophy of humanism is thus worked out in response to the challenge involved in adopting the atheist's outlook. In this respect therefore it directly contradicts the basis of Unitarianism. Certainly Unitarians have always been ready to alter or refashion their ideas of God, and have duly arrived at a conception of the deity which is in some ways quite unlike that which dominated traditional Christian theology. The notion expressed in the remark of Martineau's quoted earlier obviously represents a significant move away from the idea of God as an 'other-worldly' being and is therefore rightly regarded as a step in the direction of humanism. But it is only a step. In their account of human nature Unitarians have still insisted that there is within it an aspect or feature which is not merely human, which transcends the limits of empirical examination and points beyond the range of

everyday experience to another and greater dimension of being. It is exactly this that the humanist wants to deny. So really he sees man's situation in quite a different perspective; Blackham is perfectly right when he says that 'humanism is the permanent alternative to religion, an essentially different way of taking and tackling human life in the world.'<sup>6</sup> No matter how many similarities there may be in their intellectual and moral attitudes there must remain this vast and fundamental difference between them.

Therefore one has to be rather cautious in evaluating this third phase in the development of Unitarianism. Many of the men and women in the movement who declare their allegiance to humanism at present would probably repudiate the foregoing account of it since they do not apparently share its confident presumption of atheism. On the contrary, they often trust in some encompassing power, far greater than the sum total of purely human abilities; or they are convinced that there is a vital spiritual force, associated with and evoked by truth and beauty and goodness: however they describe it, they still believe in something that can properly be called divine, essentially outside the domain of scientific knowledge. Why then do they call themselves humanists? In part it may be simply because of a broad sympathy with the aims and purposes of the humanist movement, especially perhaps its involvement in social and political reform to which Unitarianism as a whole has not been much committed. A deeper reason is probably that many of them are uncomfortable using the accustomed language of religion. They may well feel that their intuitions of divinity cannot be expressed accurately in the usual talk of 'God', which for instance implies the notion of a personal being which possibly they do not accept. So they prefer to use a more secular vocabulary. But really these people are still in the camp of religion, and it would be more exact to call them 'humanitarians' instead of 'humanists'. They are actually continuing the current of thought that was started by Martineau, not fundamentally opposing it.

But undoubtedly there are others within the movement,

as yet only a small minority, whose beliefs approximate much more closely to truly secular humanism. 'God' is not just a word which has misleading associations for them, but one which has no valid meaning at all. It is impossible however to assess their significance, for though their position has been foreshadowed in Unitarian thinking for more than a century it has only very recently gained these adherents. At present they are the source of some tension within the movement, chiefly because they naturally tend to join fellowships where there are others with similar views, and avoid congregations where more traditional ideas hold sway: thus the dialogue between the two groups is very restricted and little is being done to mitigate the differences which certainly exist. But it seems unlikely that this situation can last indefinitely. Given the basic assumptions of these humanists, their continued presence within the movement must always be a potential source of conflict so long as the majority of its members regard it as a religious organisation; so probably they will eventually become established as a distinct and separate group, or Unitarianism as a whole will become a more secular movement.

The present state of affairs, although in these respects uncertain, does show very clearly that Unitarianism is still developing in much the same manner as before. It has always been particularly responsive to contemporary currents of thought, and in being influenced like this by the philosophy of humanism it is merely showing the effects of our modern secular and scientific outlook. One should realise also that this sensitivity to new ideas has helped the Unitarian movement often to anticipate more general changes in the mainstream of Christian thought: its protest against trinitarian theology, for example, was followed by a major revision of traditional doctrines; and it had borne the impact of Martineau's philosophy before the other English churches were affected by similar ideas of German thinkers. It remains to be seen whether these most recent

developments likewise herald a widespread shift towards secularism.

#### NOTES

- 1 H.S. Skeats & C.S. Miall, *History of the Free Churches . . .* (London 1891) p.597
- 2 J.E. Carpenter (ed) *Freedom and Truth . . .* (London 1925) p.56
- 3 J. Martineau, *Essays . . .* (London 1890) II, p.443
- 4 H.J. Blackham, *Humanism* (Harmondsworth 1968) p.130
- 5 R.V. Holt (ed) *A Free Religious Faith . . .* (London 1945) p.12
- 6 H.J. Blackham, *Humanism* (Harmondsworth 1968) p.9

## 6. *THE AUTONOMY OF THE INDIVIDUAL*

The development of Unitarian thought considered in the previous chapters has been a process of progressive assimilation rather than one of successive replacement. As each new set of ideas has come to the fore and gained popularity it has not usually displaced or destroyed its predecessor but has merely incorporated and preserved it with relatively little alteration. Consequently one finds that each of the three phases is currently represented in Unitarianism today. Doubts about the doctrine of the Trinity still bring many people into the movement, as they brought Priestley and his contemporaries; the intuitions of the moral conscience are valued now as highly as they were in Martineau's time; and concern for the welfare of man is clearly as prominent as ever. That these themes have been treated here in an historical perspective must not be taken to imply that they have become redundant or outmoded, for they are still very widely believed and coexist side by side in modern Unitarianism.

This state of affairs is not as surprising as it might seem at first. The mere fact that these ideas have become prominent and popular at different times does not mean that there is any logical inconsistency or opposition between them, and on closer inspection they are seen actually to complement and support each other to a considerable degree. The doctrine of the Trinity is denied because its consequences offend the intuitions of moral conscience; the intuitions of conscience are revered in

order to sanctify the desire to promote human welfare; and human welfare presupposes the notion of a 'brotherhood of man' which is derived from denying the Trinity. In this way the three themes of Unitarianism can all be combined in an impressively consistent fashion. It is tempting to suggest that this is possible because they are really no more than three forms of the same belief. It could be said that a simple faith in the importance of mankind lies at the root of each of them, and that the history we have been considering is in fact the story of this one idea as it was articulated in successive contexts of thought: first, of scripture-based theology; then, of inward feeling and romantic sensibility; and now, of secular and scientific empiricism.

This picture undoubtedly oversimplifies a complex network of ideas and glosses over the very significant differences between the three beliefs and the considerable extent to which each of them is valid by itself. But it has just enough plausibility to demonstrate that Unitarianism has always placed its most fundamental emphasis on humanity. Since the very beginning it has tended to be more interested in man than in God. It has said less about the divine nature than about the human, less about the duties owed to God than about the obligations due to men; it has preached the value and enjoyment of this life and this world rather than the next. This consistent emphasis on mankind is one very important reason why it has remained a coherent movement during the past two centuries, and why one can legitimately regard it as a single current of belief despite the wide variety of ideas to be found within it.

Another feature of Unitarianism which has helped both to unify and to preserve it is its insistence on personal freedom of belief. It can be counted a more significant factor inasmuch as it is more distinctive; for concern about the needs of humanity has never been exclusive to Unitarians, but for a long time they were almost alone in prizing individual liberty of thought and judgment. And it is still a very noticeable characteristic of their movement. The newcomer cannot attend a Unitarian church or

fellowship more than a few times without being struck by the great diversity of ideas and breadth of outlook involved in its worship: he is evidently among people who expect variety and change in belief as a matter of course, and whose religious life is designed to accommodate them.

Freedom is also a more significant feature of the movement in that it has more extensive and more fundamental implications. To be concerned for the welfare of humanity is to make a straightforward commitment to a set of values which are familiar and widely shared, but to demand liberty of belief is implicitly to subscribe to a distinctive conception of religion itself, a particular way of understanding man's religious activity. This underlying model of religion is presupposed by much of Unitarian thought and practice, and indeed by the Protestant tradition as a whole; but since Unitarians themselves are seldom consciously aware of accepting it, a short discussion of it here will not be amiss.

It introduces again the themes of the first chapter where it was pointed out that religious beliefs are necessarily held by faith: in other words they cannot be reached by logical deduction from observed facts, but only by going beyond the scope of such 'mere philosophy' to convictions which in a strict sense are unprovable. It was shown at the time that this is not a wilful or facetious procedure, but something which the believer is driven to do almost despite himself by the inner demands of his spirit. The conviction is drawn out of him by his experience: it is a response, evoked in his soul by his situation and predicament. The recognition of faith in these terms as a factor necessary to religion has been seen as the most crucial event of the Reformation:

It was the discovery that unless Jesus Christ attests Himself to the soul in whom His Word has been made living and powerful by the Holy Spirit, the Christian religion cannot begin to live. In consequence, the Reformers taught that, the believer being face to face with God, his convictions are reached by responsible decision, in the spontaneous act of faith. They are the Spirit-prompted response of his mind and heart to the

Word. They are convictions which God leaves him no option but to hold.<sup>1</sup>

This author's traditionally Christian vocabulary should not blind one to the general validity of the principle he describes here, for actually it is true *mutatis mutandis* of every scheme of beliefs which adequately fulfils the role of religion. For instance the humanist likewise finds that his convictions result from an interaction between his character and experience which takes him beyond the limits of mere deduction, though naturally enough he calls this not 'an act of faith' but 'a vital response to the world'.<sup>2</sup> The psychological process however is in both cases virtually the same.

Because it is primarily a matter of responding or reacting to experience in such a fashion, religion demands a kind of believing which is subjectively quite distinctive. It is not a matter of dispassionately inspecting the public evidence and just 'reading off' what it plainly tells us, which is the rather passive way in which we come to most of our convictions. The evidence for religious belief, if considered as a whole, appears far too various and ambiguous to permit such a procedure: there is no evident message, no obvious meaning to be discerned in it. The believer himself has to give it a meaning. He has to put an interpretation on it and construe it in such a way that it comes to 'make sense' for him; this is a much more active process altogether than merely acknowledging what the evidence says. In this respect there are interesting similarities with aesthetic judgment and evaluation. Some things that can be said about a work of art are matters of plain fact — for example, that it has a certain form or dates from a given period. Other comments about it are expressions of purely subjective opinion, as when people declare that they find it amusing or thrilling. But between these two extremes there lies the area of true aesthetic appreciation, in which objective features of the work and subjective reactions to them are combined to form an interpretation, an understanding and assessment of the artist's enterprise. In some

ways religious beliefs are rather like this. When a man affirms that he believes in a loving God he is not talking about the presence of yet another public object in the universe; neither is he putting into words a mere emotional feeling of security in the world or of hope for the future. What he is doing is declaring his interpretation of existence, saying that his experience of life only makes sense when it is understood as betraying the activity of a powerful and benevolent deity. A further point of similarity is that both types of belief are often consciously arrived at in response to some experience. The work of art impinges on the critic and claims his attention, challenging him to react to it and to estimate its meaning and significance. So too the events in a man's life may confront him with great questions of why and wherefore which insistently demand to be answered. If he cannot silence or ignore them they will eventually draw from him that interpretation of existence which, arising from the interplay between the outward facts and his inner self, harmonises best with both.

His inward nature or personality plays an essential role in this process. In the guise of his emotional constitution or his spiritual needs it forms one half of the interaction, and is moreover the motivating force which drives him beyond the limits of logic and into the realm of religious conviction. It is the inherent 'private factor' that was mentioned before. And because it is necessarily involved in the matter, a man's religious beliefs are largely immune to denial. His interpretation of existence cannot be denied or disproved by anyone else, within wide limits at least, because what is important is how things make sense to him; that they do not make sense in the same way to another is theoretically irrelevant, showing only that the other man is a different type of person with a different experience of life. So if one man conceives of God as a loving father while another thinks of him as a stern judge, it is not really sensible to ask which view is the 'right' one since that notion does not properly apply in this kind of case. If it must be used at all one may well have to say that they are both right, if each

belief makes equally good sense in the context of experience and personality which produced it. To quite a large extent people see different and even conflicting meanings in life — as they do in some works of art — and one has to acknowledge that their interpretations may well be equally valid if each is considered sympathetically in its native perspective.

Obviously this consequence is extremely important. It means that every man's religion, insofar as it is the product of private factors such as emotions and aspirations, is thus far beyond challenge by others. No one else can properly condemn it as 'wrong' or 'false'; the most that can be said is that it makes no sense or has no appeal to other people. In short every man is autonomous in the realm of religion — his own master, his own authority, answerable in the end only to the demands imposed by his own integrity.

This vitally important and fundamental principle has been presupposed by the Protestant tradition from its beginnings. Though the first Protestants themselves were clearly unaware of it, and frequently contradicted it in their behaviour, it is implied by their reliance on the authority of scripture. For the Bible is so ambiguous on many crucial points and so reticent on others that a man's reading of it is bound to be determined to a great extent by his spiritual needs: these naturally lead him to give greater weight to some passages and less to others, for example. So if two men read it with care and yet come to different conclusions about what it says — as history shows they often will — the principle of its authority does not permit one view to be rejected as 'wrong'; still less does it allow its author to be executed. So long as they have equal scriptural warrant both interpretations must be regarded as 'right', even though there may be logical conflict or contradiction between them. This paradox is inescapably involved in the whole Protestant outlook. Evidently it took a long time to recognise and many were persecuted before it was fully acknowledged, but eventually toleration came to prevail. And this of course is the only possible attitude which

Protestantism allows. Its presupposition of individual autonomy means that religion is something which must arise from within a man and cannot be imposed on him from without. The use of force and penalties may succeed in getting him to repeat the same phrases and use the same rituals as others, but clearly this is not helping him to understand existence as they do. Anything but complete toleration is therefore quite nonsensical.

Unitarians however have accorded rather more respect to the notion of personal autonomy than most others. One instance of this is the strong streak of individualism which has always been so prominent in their thinking and which has produced the great variety of beliefs which can now be found in their movement. Indeed, diversity has especially appealed to them. People are very obviously different from each other, the differences between them at birth often being accentuated by later differences in upbringing and situation. Because of this their spiritual needs and aspirations are not all the same, still less their experience of life, and in consequence they are bound to have different religious convictions. Each man's interpretation of existence is an account of how he sees it from his own standpoint, and that point of view is not the same as anyone else's. Therefore everyone is in a specially privileged position, potentially able to discern truths which are not visible to others; each man's view of the divine is unique, a particular revelation granted to him alone.

In the context of these ideas the Unitarians' demand for freedom in religion makes perfect sense. They have deliberately resisted the use of creeds and ready-made statements of belief in order to give everyone the opportunity to make his own. They have not wanted to reduce people's convictions to a sort of lowest common denominator of revelation, a list of the rather general truths which they all believe. On the contrary they have been anxious to preserve and even emphasise the differences and variations between them, thinking that these are especially important, for they reflect the differences in individual



viewpoints and so permit a more comprehensive grasp of the truth. After all, when something is seen from many angles a much more accurate and inclusive view of it is obtained than can be had from only one perspective. So Unitarians stress that no man's beliefs, no matter how adequate to his own needs, can pretend to be the whole truth: his vision is necessarily limited to his own standpoint, and requires to be supplemented and complemented by the convictions of others. They regard diversity in religion as a positive benefit and advantage, the only means of achieving a full and complete understanding of life.

Their distrust of creeds not only provides the opportunity for this to come about but actively promotes its occurrence. Because there is no professed statement to tell a man what he believes he is forced to find it out for himself: he has to search his heart and mind to discover the truths he knows most surely, framing his beliefs and building up his own religion. The responsibility for doing this unavoidably rests on him alone. The aim however is not that he should reach a final statement of his views, an unalterable profession of his faith by which he should abide thereafter. For as he grows older his interpretation of life is bound to alter: he has new experiences and discovers new truths, and possibly his spiritual needs also change. The ideal therefore is a continuing development, an unceasing process of reformulation and revision, unending progress and growth. The man whose religious beliefs at fifty are different from what they were at fifteen is not inconstant or inconsistent; he is merely maturing as a whole person, and allowing his interpretation of life to keep pace with his enlarging knowledge of it.

Unitarianism is therefore necessarily bound to oppose any form of dogmatism or finality. Its presuppositions militate not only against any statement of belief which pretends to be universal but also against any which lays claim to be ultimate or unchanging. As Mellone expressed its attitude:

Formerly the sources of religion were not only separated from human life, but regarded as being outside the utmost range of humanity, and were found in infallible persons and infallible books; but now the sources of religion are sought for in human life itself. The presentation of religion is now subject to all the uncertainties that belong to life, with its multitudinous variety, its illimitable possibilities, its unscaled heights and unsounded depths. Here in this manifold of human life, and here alone, are we to find our answer to the continual cry of the human heart, 'show us the Father'.<sup>3</sup>

On this basis any attempt to achieve a final account of belief must fail. Human life is too varied and too constantly changing to allow it to be done: it would be to build the house of religion on a foundation of sand. Experience can serve as a sure support only for a temporary and individual statement of belief, one validly derived from a man's personal knowledge.

The principle of individual autonomy therefore implies that religion itself has to be understood in a certain way. It cannot be seen as a matter of some finally revealed truth which is to be enshrined and passed on from one generation to the next. Rather it must be conceived as a quest for the meaning of existence, a yearning to understand the predicament of man in his world. This can only be undertaken in an individual capacity: every man must accept sole responsibility for the conduct of his enquiry and he enjoys unchallengeable authority in the course of it. His view of things is necessarily partial and incomplete and the most he can hope for is a limited recognition of the truth. There is no final answer: always there is more to be learnt and more to be discovered, and beliefs can be valid only for the present time. The Unitarian movement is a bold and consistent endeavour to realise in practice this conception of religion, an attempt to create an intellectual environment in which free and responsible individuals can progress towards truth and understanding with mutual friendship and encouragement.

## NOTES

- 1 H.R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London 1952) p.6
- 2 H.J. Blackham, *Humanism* (Harmondsworth 1968) p.18
- 3 J.E. Carpenter (ed) *Freedom and Truth . . .* (London 1925) p.48

## 7. *THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITARIANISM*

When the history of Unitarian thought is surveyed as a whole, one of the most striking and obvious things to be revealed is the way in which it has always held fast to the Protestant outlook. In presuming the autonomy of every individual and in emphasising accordingly the importance of rationality, toleration and freedom, it has preserved and made explicit the most basic presuppositions of the Reformation: for these ideas were implied from the first by the criticisms of Roman Catholicism and they alone can offer a logical justification for the attitude of the reformers. Unitarianism has enshrined their conception of religion and elucidated their assumptions; it has moreover developed them to a high degree and has perhaps adhered to them rather more consistently than Christian thought in general. In short, it can be described as nothing less than a particularly radical form of Protestantism.

This view of it explains why it has always remained on the fringe of English Christianity, for the extremist is condemned by definition never to be part of the majority. It has been from the start something of a radical protest against the common view, for its initial separation from the Church of England was made because her doctrines did not appear sufficiently close to scripture — in other words, not sufficiently Protestant. And having once adopted this extreme position, its desire always to go further in working out its basic ideas has retained it there ever since. However its radical attitude has also been the secret of its extensive

influence. Many religious sects with unusual or atypical ideas had very little influence on the mainstream of thought, since they were treated as being merely odd or eccentric. But Unitarianism could not be ignored like this. Because it was evidently an exaggeration of ideas accepted by other Christians too, they could not dismiss its doctrines without implicitly jeopardising their own. In consequence the Unitarian movement has exerted a degree of influence quite out of proportion to its numerically small size. In its criticisms of the doctrine of the Atonement, for example, or in its interest in Eastern religions, it has anticipated similar widespread developments in Christian thinking and can plausibly be regarded as partly the cause of them.

Its embodiment of radical Protestantism has also contributed to its influence in another way. The emphasis on the use of reason which was implicit in the programme of the Reformation has always appealed especially to Unitarians, who have consciously tried to abide by it more than most. In consequence their thinking has tended to be peculiarly clear and cogent. Works of Unitarian theology and apologetics, for instance, often have an almost philosophical tone about them — a calm and rather detached discussion of the subject, admirably clear and convincingly reasoned; and the same is true, though naturally to a lesser degree, of many sermons to be heard in Unitarian churches. Certainly there is little of the emotionalism or 'revivalist' atmosphere which is enjoyed by some other religious groups: the appeal is predominantly to the mind rather than the heart. Although this attitude has sometimes led them too far into the deadness and generality of mere rationalism, it has undoubtedly been an advantage to their movement in making their ideas particularly clear and comprehensible. An impartial comparison reveals very clearly that there is little of the 'mystery' or obscurity that attaches to many doctrines in traditional Christian theology; by contrast, Unitarian beliefs appear very simple and straightforward and easy to understand. This must inevitably make them more im-

mediately attractive to the layman or to the newcomer to religious belief.

Unitarians have always been proudly conscious of these qualities of clarity and rationality, and have sometimes been tempted to picture themselves in a rather smug way as apostles of religious enlightenment. But it is possible to argue that they were making too much of something which is really not so important. F.D. Maurice at least thought so:

The question at issue between us is not that at all, not whether [the Unitarians] are good reasoners and I am a bad one, but what Gospel they have to bring to mankind, what light they have to throw on all the questionings and yearnings of the human spirit, what they can show has been done for the deliverance of our race and of its members, what hope they can give us of that which shall yet be done.<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly he has a valid point. Religious belief must ultimately be judged as religion, which means assessing its interpretation of existence and evaluating the meaning it sees in life and the truths it recognises about man's situation.

When Unitarianism is considered in this perspective it initially appears rather unpromising, for in fact it has relatively little to offer in the way of a detailed understanding of man's situation. Individual Unitarians of course have developed interpretations of life satisfying to themselves, but the movement as a whole has no very sophisticated theology — nothing to compare with the teachings of more traditional Christianity on creation, sin, redemption and the like. Indeed only in its classical doctrines did it have anything of this sort, and then only of a sketchy and amateur kind. The reason for this apparent shortcoming is simply that since the time of Martineau the movement has not had much interest in the task of elucidating the meaning of life. The focus of its concern has lain elsewhere: in Christianity as a way of life rather than a set of doctrines about it, in religion as something to be practised rather than believed. And this has required no detailed theology. Unitarians have generally assumed that all the necessary

duties and virtues are clearly described in the Bible, or can be discerned easily in the intuitions of moral conscience: the difficulty is not one of discovering what to do but of finding the strength and courage to do it. This is not to say that the business of thinking about religion has held no interest for them, for the use of the mind has obviously been much emphasised; but their thinking has generally been directed mainly to practical ends and they have shown little inclination to investigate or discuss problems of doctrine for their own sake. A minimum of theory and a maximum of practice has more usually been the goal, in a wholehearted commitment to the welfare of mankind.

But this straightforward and practical concern is itself the root of what is possibly Unitarianism's gravest problem: to discover a rationale for the church, an adequate role for the community of believers. The fundamental tendency towards individualism, in this respect as in some others, calls into question the function of the movement and the purpose of its corporate existence. For a life of practical virtue and charity is something which a man can attempt quite well by himself: if his duties are already clear and obvious he needs no priest to tell him what to do, he does not have to be instructed in a body of doctrine, or be initiated into a spiritual élite: so what benefit will he gain from belonging to a church?

This question has always been at least an implicit difficulty for Unitarians. Some of them surely have failed to find an answer to it altogether and have consequently remained outside the movement, for presumably there are many people who call themselves Unitarians but who seldom go to any church or fellowship, finding that they can live their religious lives quite happily in isolation — enjoying the ultimate in individual autonomy, as it were. And those who do attend communal worship are undoubtedly led to do so by a variety of motives. Certainly there are several different functions that it can fulfil, which seem to have predominated at different times. For instance the movement in its earliest days existed primarily for the

worship of God, for it was then conceived as a variant of the Anglican communion and its members met together chiefly for common prayer and participation in the sacraments. Later, when its concern was more in the sphere of morality, many of them came simply to be strengthened and inspired, to be exhorted from the pulpit towards the achievement of virtue and the performance of duty. Both of these motives still weigh very much with many Unitarians who come to church both to worship and to be refreshed. But another factor which they would probably mention now is the unique intellectual climate of their movement. This seems to be especially important for many and has most likely acquired its significance as their certainty and assurance have diminished and their desire to question and explore has grown. For it must be acknowledged that the person who wants really to think about his religion and to work out his answers to its problems will often find that a Unitarian congregation or fellowship is the ideal environment in which to conduct his search. There he will find that he is forced to think about what he believes by the absence of any answers already 'on offer', any ready-made beliefs for him to accept. He will enjoy an atmosphere of liberty in which enquiry is welcomed and change gladly recognised. He may also be stimulated in worship or conversation by a dazzling variety of intellectual influences, a vast range of religious and secular ideas among which those of traditional Christianity may have only a minor role. And most importantly, he will have the company of others much the same as himself: mostly thoughtful and independent-minded people, likewise engaged in developing their own answers to the questions of life's meaning.

At one time, not so long ago, these features of the Unitarian movement made it a unique haven for such questing spirits. But now there is a more widespread atmosphere of doubt, a more common readiness to question, which is bringing about great changes in the religious situation in Britain. The differences between the various denominations are being lessened with the growth

of ecumenism, and within most of them a much greater diversity of belief is tolerated and perhaps even encouraged. The old emphasis on orthodoxy and uniformity is yielding to a more open and experimental attitude. The ordinary Christian who now wants to question his beliefs may well feel that he is quite free to do so and in some cases he may even find himself in the company of like-minded people. So the Unitarian movement is no longer so special or unique; as has happened several times before, the other denominations are gradually coming to a position in which for a long time it was a solitary pioneer. And this development threatens its continued existence. Only by maintaining a distinct identity can it have a role that will sustain it, a part that will help it to endure. As H.L. Short has wisely observed, 'a church must not only preach to its already converted members a doctrine which they consider true; it must have an effective place in the wider world. It must have some contemporary relevance, some function in the social order, some contribution to make to the intellectual life of the time.'<sup>2</sup> Unitarianism must therefore create a new role for itself if it is to continue as a living and vital movement. It has got to discover a future place in English religion as distinctive and important as that which it has occupied in the past, for if it does not it will inevitably be redundant. Of course one cannot predict what solution it will find to this problem. The most that can be said here is that its long tradition of flexibility and readiness to change will stand it in good stead in this latest crisis as it has in earlier ones.

But this difficulty is at the moment no more than a cloud looming on the horizon, and it would be wrong to end this study on too pessimistic a note. At present Unitarianism is still a unique religious movement, distinctive in its freedom, its breadth of outlook, its focus on humanity, and its foundation of individualism. For the person who wants to be told the answers to life's greatest questions it probably has few attractions; but for the person who wants to find them out himself, it undoubtedly has many.

#### NOTES

- 1 F.D. Maurice, *Theological Essays* (2nd ed. Cambridge 1853) preface
- 2 H.L. Short, *Dissent and the Community* (London 1962) p.32

# APPENDIX

by Brian Golland

## **The Unitarian movement in the twentieth century**

There are estimated to be about 15,000 Unitarians in the British Isles and Commonwealth (Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) today and about 150,000 in the United States and Canada, where the Unitarians have merged with the Universalists. There are movements in Romania (largely Transylvania) where organised Unitarianism began with the Diet of Torda under the Unitarian Prince Sigismund in 1568; Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Western Germany, and an indigenous group of churches in the Khasi Hills of Assam, India. The total membership of these groups is probably about 20,000.

## **Unitarians in the United Kingdom**

In Great Britain churches are organised in a General Assembly, founded in 1928 as the result of the merger of two previous organisations.

Its headquarters are in Essex Street, Strand, London. Its members are churches and fellowships, all independently governed, but joined in voluntary association for mutual help and encouragement. The Assembly is in close association with a sister movement in Ireland — the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church — which has 32 congregations in the six counties and two in the Republic.

There are about 250 congregations and fellowships in the

United Kingdom, four of them in Scotland and 30 in Wales — many of the latter being Welsh-speaking. In England the biggest concentrations of churches lie in Lancashire, the Midlands and the London area.

## **The British General Assembly**

The London headquarters of the British General Assembly occupies a building on the site of the first avowedly Unitarian church opened by Theophilus Lindsey in 1774.

It has a permanent staff under a General Secretary who is responsible for the administration of the Assembly and for co-ordination of the denominational committees representing the various branches of the Assembly's work.

Headquarters acts as a link between the various member churches of the Assembly and provides advice and assistance, technical, legal and financial. Its assets consist of income from Trust Funds, investments, the lease of property and subscriptions and donations from members. From its funds it makes grants towards ministerial stipends and to the programmes sponsored by the departmental committees.

The Assembly meets once a year for the transaction of business and for conference, in London and other major cities of the United Kingdom. General resolutions carried are not binding on individual members of the association and are often directed where matters of public interest are concerned to Government ministers.

Individual churches all have a congregational form of government but vary greatly in structure and membership rules: none of them, however, requires a statement of religious belief or acceptance of creed as a basis for membership.

Churches are represented by delegates at the annual meetings of the General Assembly and groups of churches form 16 District Associations, each of which appoints a representative to a Council, which between Annual Meetings is responsible for the affairs of the General Assembly.

### **Member churches**

As might be expected, worship services differ considerably according to the inclination of ministers and congregations and, sometimes, the type of building which houses them.

Many of the latter date from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; others are Victorian Gothic, often reminiscent of the parish churches with which they sometimes vied in the hey-day of Nonconformity at the end of the nineteenth century. There are also a number of modern buildings, mostly post-war.

Marriage and christening ceremonies sometimes take the traditional form, though variations are common and the latter are usually regarded as dedication services in which the parents acknowledge their responsibilities for their children's spiritual and material welfare.

Some churches have occasional celebrations of communion usually regarded as commemorative of the crucifixion and other self-sacrificial acts.

### **The ministry**

The movement employs professional ministers, full and part time. In Great Britain they are trained for the most part at the Unitarian College, Manchester, an independent foundation, but closely linked with and supported by the denomination; and Manchester College, Oxford, an undenominational institution supplying courses in arts and theology. This too is in practice largely governed and supported by Unitarians.

Some churches are in charge of lay pastors — recognised by the Assembly as such and there are national and regional Lay Preachers' Associations whose members are regularly engaged in supplementing the work of the professional ministry.

### **Publications**

The Lindsey Press is managed by the denomination and publishes works of scholarship and propaganda, mainly by Unitarian authors; it is based in the Essex Hall headquar-

ters which also houses a Bookshop which stocks general literature in addition to a selection of Lindsey Press publications.

There are two periodicals sponsored by the movement — *The Inquirer* (fortnightly) a newspaper of Unitarian news, comment and opinion and *The Unitarian* (monthly).

### **Inter-church links**

The General Assembly is an associate member of the British Council of Churches, a member group of the International Association for Religious Freedom and a member of the World Congress of Faiths.

It maintains close links with the Unitarian Universalist Association of America and with the Unitarian and other liberal religious movements on the European continent.

The Assembly maintains an information department at Headquarters, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, Strand, London WC2R 3HY, whence more detailed information can be obtained.

# FOR FURTHER READING

This is not a bibliography of works cited in the text and notes, but a list of books which may be interesting to readers who want to learn more about Unitarianism.

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