

Who Are These Unitarians?

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As Redacted by

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There are two ways of looking at any religious thought as it appears in history ... One is a study of a fixed type of thought or creed and the influence it has had upon the minds of men; The other is a study of an attitude of mind or principle as it has worked itself out in the various conditions of social life. The former has been the more common ... It is even taken for granted that every religious movement must perforce express itself in such a creed. So to this day the question is asked, "What do Unitarians believe?" ... a movement based upon a principle which by its very nature precludes any fixed doctrine or opinion, and which makes the question, "What do Unitarians believe?" entirely irrelevant. In other words, it is the history of a movement based upon a certain principle, and not the history of a sect based upon a certain opinion. And when we come to study it in this way, we find that Unitarianism is simply an organized form in religion of the attitude of mind which has come to be called "liberal," an organized form of the forward-looking mind as opposed to the backward-looking mind, of the progressing mind as opposed to the static mind ...

Someone has well said that the liberal, unlike the conservative or the doctrinaire radical, never places [group or party¹] loyalty above loyalty to the truth. This is [as] true of the liberal in religion as well as in other fields of thought; he places loyalty to truth above loyalty to creed or to sect; he knows, therefore, that creeds are subject to constant change and sects to continual variation. He seeks always to systemize such views as may be held by the best authorities at any given time, but he regards them as evolutionary and fluid. He contemplates nothing as final. Liberal religion, therefore, is a progressive movement; and herein lies the difference between us and other religious bodies. Protestants in general assert and enforce a creed which is presented as a final statement of truth which one must believe to be saved. We place our emphasis upon a method of discovery; being always on the lookout for larger and clearer views of truth and duty. What seems essential to us is not any transient form of opinion, but the method of truth-finding which makes progress continuous. Christians defend the faith once delivered to the Saints; but we earnestly listen to living voices for the revelation of a still more glorious gospel. Dogmatists decry innovations and stand guard on the ancient walls built around the teachings of a Luther, a Calvin, or a Wesley; but liberals, discarding the rusty armor and leaving behind crumbling traditions, keep in the open field and on the march, feeling that no one is so safe and so strong as [one] who is in pursuit of the truth. We move forever onward, not because we lack appreciation of past worthies and olden symbols, not because we are disturbed by doubt and distracted by uncertainty; but because we have confidence in man's ability to discover

¹ Originally, "esprit d'corps."

the truth, and also because we have confidence in the leadership of truth under whose banner we march.

Men of this type of mind are to be found in every part of the world and at every period of history, and wherever they have been found in one place in sufficient numbers, they have organized themselves into some kind of a religious organization. These organizations have been known by different names in different countries, although in most countries they are known as Unitarian; especially is this true in Great Britain and America. Now this name is more or less of an accident, it came as the result of a particular incident in the history of this movement. About [250]² years ago, the particular problem over which liberals and conservatives in religion were in controversy was the problem of the Trinity. The liberals refused to believe in the threefold personality of God which involved the deity of Jesus, and insisted upon the unity of God which carried with it the belief in the pure humanity of Jesus; and these came to be known as Unitarians in distinction from Trinitarians, and they have carried with them ever since the name of this particular controversy. Therefore, the name is very inadequate to express the idea of the Unitarian movement. And this, I trust, you will get clearly in mind; they were Unitarians and rejected the dogma of the Trinity because they were liberals and placed themselves under the command of reason and accepted the modern discoveries of science and history. Their disbelief in the Trinitarian formula was merely incidental to their attitude toward all problems of the time; but because of the heated controversy over the Trinitarian formula, they gladly took the name of Unitarians, and in spite of the constant agitation on the part of many to change it to one with a more adequate connotation, they hold that name to this day ...³

The New England colonists were largely Congregationalists... of the purely Calvinistic type. [But] there were more liberal types of Congregationalists as represented by the Pilgrims, who brought to America the parting injunction of their minister, John Robinson, that there was "more likely to break forth from God's word," and a number of churches were organized by them. These flourished because the whole colonial atmosphere was that of freedom, and it could not be kept out of religious thought. And so, free from restraints of dogmatic creeds and tests, the New England Congregational churches were hospitable to inquiry and progress. Thus, by imperceptible degrees, changes of opinion came; and at the beginning of the 19th century, one congregation after another began to declare for freer thought. In these, disbelief in the dogma of the Trinity became more and more pronounced. In 1815, controversy between William Ellery Channing and Samuel Worcester resulted in open rupture between the Trinitarian and the Unitarian Congregationalists. For ten years the controversy waxed hot, lines of separation were drawn, and men and churches took

² It was approximately "150" years ago when Dietrich originally delivered this sermon in 1926.

³ The term was expanded to "Unitarian Universalism" in 1961 with the establishment of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

sides. It was Dr. Channing who became known as the leader of this new Reformation and whose preaching of it was so fervent that about half the churches in Massachusetts became Unitarian ... Thus, the ancient parishes, each originally co-extensive with the town, were divided; and in many New England towns the oldest church became and is today in faith and fellowship Unitarian.

... The Unitarian leaders would gladly have stayed in the fellowship of Congregationalism if they had been granted sufficient freedom to hold their own opinions and to keep pace with the growing knowledge. The necessity of separation was enforced by applying to them certain doctrines as test of church membership ... Their attitude was simply that of the right of individual opinion within a religious fellowship. But they believed in this right enough to propagate it, and so for purely missionary purposes they gathered in Boston and formed the American Unitarian Association [in 1825]. This organization is without ecclesiastical authority whatever. It is simply an association of free and independent churches for purely missionary purposes, using annual contributions from the churches and income from the trust funds ... for publishing books and tracts, sustaining missionaries in new fields, aiding feeble churches, and planting new ones.

... These churches are absolutely free in doctrine and polity, so that they vary considerably; each church in its belief and in its practice being determined largely by the training which it has received from the pulpit. Some ... cling to the theological interpretation of human experience while others have adopted a purely scientific attitude toward life; some are ardently theistic while others are enthusiastically humanistic. The denomination is rich in literature, having gathered within its fold most of the writers in America, especially in the realm of history and poetry. It carries on its rolls also an overwhelming proportion of the distinguished men and women of this country when one realizes the comparative smallness of the denomination ... As someone has said, "considered as a lump it is very small, but considered as leaven, it is vast and omnipresent. As an organism, it is feeble; as an influence, it is irresistible."

... There are hundreds of noted names in other countries, such as John Milton, Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke in England, who have been identified with the Unitarian movement; And there are hundreds of others in this country who are entirely Unitarian in belief, such as, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Edison; but I shall mention only those who have been formally connected with Unitarian churches.

First there have been five Presidents of the United states—John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore and William Howard Taft; and in connection with them an army of great statesman such as John C. Calhoun, Hannibal Hamlin, Daniel Webster, Thomas Pickering, Edward Everett, Charles Sumner, Fisher Ames ... and a host of others; in addition there have been three Unitarian Chief Justices of the Federal Supreme Court—John Marshall, Joseph Story, and Mr. Taft. Practically all the great poets of literary character of

this country have been Unitarians—Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Holmes, Emerson ... Thoreau, [among others]. All the leading historians—Bancroft, Motley, Prescott, Sparks, Palfrey, Parkman and Fisk, were Unitarians. The educators like Horace Mann, Peter Cooper, Ezra Cornell, David Starr Jordan, and every President of Harvard University from 1810 down to the present day;⁴ and the noted presidents of dozens of universities in this land. Great scientists like Agassiz, Pierce, Bowditch, and Draper were all Unitarians. Practically all the women who have attained national eminence have been Unitarians—Margaret Fuller, Lydia Child, Lucretia Mott, Helen Hunt Jackson, Mrs. Livermore, Dorothea Dix, Julia Ward Howe, Charlotte Cushman, Maria Mitchell, Elizabeth Katy Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Susan B. Anthony. And among the few supremely great preachers of America—Channing and Parker, Starr King and Robert Collyer ... When you remember that our membership comprises about one two-thousandths of the population of the United States—that only about one in every two-thousand people in this country is a Unitarian—the proportion of notable names in our fellowship is remarkable⁵ ...

... I told you a few moments ago that the conspicuous leader in the great controversy which resulted in the founding of American Unitarianism with Dr. Channing. Not only does he stand out as one of the most eloquent preachers of all time, but it was he who gave utterance to the principle upon which Unitarianism was founded in those strenuous days of religious controversy in this country ... For the spirit of William Ellery Channing, the principle which above all else he held dear and always called the “sublime idea,” the principle which I might say has caused Unitarianism to [even] outgrow Channing’s theology, became at once and has forever been the foundation stone of Unitarianism—I speak of the principle of religious freedom.

... He revered nothing more than the mind that was free. With passionate earnestness, he would cry, “I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not content itself with an hereditary faith, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which is not imprisoned in itself or in a sect. I call that mind free which does not cower to human opinion, which respects itself too much to be the slave or the tool of the many or of the few, which guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world.” He insisted that if a man would be free, he must be steadily reaching out after new truth ... “For myself,” he said, “I wish to be regarded as belonging, not to a sect, but to the community of free minds, of lovers of truth. I desire to escape the narrow walls of a particular church, and to live under the open sky, in the broad light, looking far and wide, seeing with my own eyes, hearing with my own ears and following truth meekly, but resolutely, however arduous or solitary be the path in which it leads.” He believed, therefore, in a church which

⁴ This remained true until 1953 at the end of James B. Conant’s twenty-year tenure as Harvard’s last Unitarian President.

⁵ Although estimates vary, this percentage is even less today than it was in 1926.

should be wide enough to embrace all sincere men and women, regardless of their religious beliefs.

... To Channing, ... Unitarianism is ... something far more than a denominational title, a sectarian form of organization, or an exact system of theology. Underneath all the surface battles against ecclesiastical forms and doctrinal errors which fill the pages of our history there is this one fundamental message of religious freedom—the advocacy and defense of which has constituted within itself all of our distinctive message in the past, and will ever continue to be our message in the future, at least until its acceptance by the religious world as a whole.

... Unlike any other movement in religion with which I am acquainted, our movement is based, not on the principle of ecclesiastical authority as in the Catholic Church, nor on the principle of doctrinal uniformity as in the Protestant church, but on this principle of liberty of worship and of thought. In all the history of Unitarianism, no [person] has ever been denied admission because of any belief or lack of belief, neither has anyone ever been asked to prescribe to any theological or philosophical formula. Unitarianism simply asserts that any[one], white or black, rich or poor, ignorant or educated, Jew or Gentile, bond or free, Christian or Pagan, orthodox or heterodox, theist or atheist, is entitled to think as he sees fit and yet not be denied the right of religious fellowship⁶ ...

Of course, I do not mean to say that all individuals in the Unitarian church believe this. There are some who think of Unitarianism as a type of thought ... and that, in order to be a Unitarian, one must conform to this type of thought. These are people who happen to be in the Unitarian church, not because they are liberals ... but because they were born in Unitarian families or became identified with Unitarian churches through some social chance ... But those of us who are liberals and who know something about the origin and history of Unitarianism ... know that these people are ... not Unitarians. They ... became identified with Unitarianism by some mistake. On the other hand, there are many people who are real liberals in the orthodox churches, who ought to be in Unitarian churches. I myself was reared and trained in an orthodox church, but I always believed in the kind of religious fellowship which I have just outlined as the principle upon which Unitarianism based, and because I insisted upon having this kind of a church in an orthodox denomination, I was ejected from the ministry, and just as water finds its natural level, so I found myself settled in the Unitarian ministry.

It must be understood, of course that this liberty for which we stand is not liberty merely for the sake of liberty; but liberty for the sake of finding the truth, of discovering reality, of seeing things as they are, of understanding the universe in which we are obliged to live; for

⁶ It should be noted that calling even for the inclusion of atheists within our religious congregations remains incredibly forward thinking to this day.

we believe that the people will be more likely to find the truth if they are free to search for it than if they are threatened or frightened, or if they are compelled to come to some preordained conclusions that have been settled for them. Freedom then for the sake of finding the truth—this is the fundamental principle of Unitarianism. That is why no minister of the Unitarian fellowship is asked to subscribe to any doctrine, theological or philosophical. When a man applies for a position in the ministry of the Unitarian association, they are not interested in his beliefs, but in his ability, his earnestness, and his consecration to the truth. They do not ask him what he thinks, but can he think. And that is why each Unitarian society guarantees its minister absolute freedom of thought and expression ... The very foundation stone of the Unitarian faith is the belief that truth should be taken as authority and not authority as truth.

In view of all that I have now said, it must be evident that Unitarianism cannot be viewed historically from the standpoint of a type of thought and that no [one] can speak authoritatively of the doctrines of Unitarianism; and Unitarianism cannot be judged by the teaching of any individual society, because each society has the perfect right to formulate for itself any creative desires, to practice any ritual it pleases, and to establish any policy it sees fit. And yet there is a remarkable unanimity of opinion among Unitarians in general, in spite of this freedom. Of course, the interpretation which Unitarians place upon the great problems of existence is constantly changing, because Unitarianism accepts as truth the demonstrated facts of science; and a religion which tries to keep abreast of science is constantly on the march. Therefore, the Unitarians of today teach very different things and emphasize very different problems from those of a generation ago ... For Unitarianism is an attitude of mind rather than a form of doctrine. It is that respective attitude of mind which throws itself open to all progress in human thought with only one aim—the discovery of that which is real and true.

... And this leads me to the conclusion that there was never such need of our Unitarian movement as there is today. If religion is to endure, not as a survival of ancient custom, but as a living force in the development of society, it must be freed from the superstitions which are today strangling its very life; it must be interpreted anew in terms of work and not of worship, in terms of life and not of belief, in terms of service among men and not of service before an altar, in terms of inward spiritual freedom and not of outward ecclesiastical authority ... We are needed today as never before—and no fear of denominationalism, no sentimental love of church unity, no “mush of concession,” as Emerson phrased it, must be allowed to turn us from the task which is this day laid upon our shoulders. We must proclaim to [people] everywhere that here in our Unitarianism fold is a place where they may follow truth to its uttermost bounds and still enjoy the privilege of religious fellowship; all we ask is that they come with open minds, with loving hearts, with helping hands, and with the spirit of goodwill.