

Unitarianism and Freedom of Thought

By

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As Presented and Amended

by

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July 21, 2024

[Editor's note: This sermon was originally delivered by Rev. John H. Dietrich before the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis on May 26, 1918. It has been redacted for brevity, clarity, and minor changes to some outdated language. Sadly, I have entirely eliminated the first five pages of Dietrich's excellent history of Unitarianism, including his sections on its ancient Christian origins, along with its origins in Europe and America, and some of its many historic figures. It is among the best histories on the matter I have read, and I was prepared to omit everything that came after it until I read everything that came after it and realized, to my dismay, it would be Dietrich's history that had to go. Instead, I will present Part I of his sermon at another time in order to go immediately to Part II, which contains the heart of his timely, timeless, and inspiring message, beginning with his section entitled, The Origin of Unitarianism. TE]

The Origin of Unitarianism

And now I wish to note again what I have already hinted, namely: that it is not an accident that Unitarianism should spring into being in the modern world coincidentally with the great movements of liberty in France and England and America. Wherever you have liberty in education, there you have the raw materials out of which to make the free-forward-looker in religious thought in life. Out of these movements towards liberty and education sprang three principles which gave birth to Unitarianism: the development of freedom, which gave rise to the growth of scholarship, which in turn gave birth to a new conscience.

Humanity at last had come to a time in its history when it asserted its rights to be free; not only to cast off the fetters that hampered the body, not only to dethrone the despots who limited its political activity, but to think in the realm of religion, to believe it more honorable to God even to think than to cringe and be afraid in his presence, to believe it more honorable to use the reason with which we are endowed than to permit it to be stultified by authority. As a result of this freedom there was a new interest taken in the study of the problems of the universe. The critical faculty was developed. Men¹ began to

¹ Although I personally use the word "humanity" rather than "men" or "man," I also accept that during Dietrich's time the latter, along with the neutralized use of the pronoun "he," were used properly in reference to all men, both male and female men. Given its prominence in Dietrich's writings, I have decided to mostly leave it as originally written, along with this footnoted explanation of his intention. "Man" is another word for "humanity," and has only recently been understood to refer exclusively to men who are male, by some. Another example of its universal use is *Genesis* 1:27; "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." According to this verse, man is male and female; there are male and female men. Of course, the use and meaning of words change over time, but we should not disregard the wisdom of the past, nor condemn its use of language, simply because it does not comply with today's use and definitions.

realize that the teachings of the churches were foolishness when measured in the light of scientific investigation. With the study of the universe came the establishment of natural law and the breakdown of the supernatural, upon which the doctrines of the churches were based. As a result of this there was a reawakening of the conscience of mankind, a demand for justice. According to the teachings of the creeds, justice and right were a different thing in heaven from what they were here on earth, the idea being that there was a God in heaven who had a right to do anything, even though it contradicted the idea of human righteousness; but with the new study and criticism men demanded that goodness on earth should be goodness in heaven also, that God should at least be as just and good as we expect men to be. And that was enough to revolutionize the theology of the world; for the picture of the character of God as contained in the old theologies is horribly unjust as judged by human standards.

As soon therefore as the civilized world became free, there was a new expansion of the right to think; a new expansion of the right to study and investigate, that is, a new scholarship; there was a new expansion of conscience, the insistent demand for justice; and out of these, characterized by these, having these for its very soul and body, came Unitarianism. For Unitarianism is for the express purpose of meeting the demand for freedom and scholarship and justice in religion. Unlike any other movement with which I am acquainted, it is based upon one great principle, not that of ecclesiastic authority as in Romanism, not that of doctrinal uniformity as in Protestantism, but the principle of absolute mental and spiritual liberty. In all the history of Unitarianism no man has ever been denied admission because of any belief or lack of belief. Neither has anyone ever been asked to subscribe to any formula. Unitarianism simply asserts the principle that every person, white or black, rich or poor, educated or ignorant, gentile or Jew, Christian or Pagan, orthodox or heterodox, theist or atheist, is entitled to worship as one sees fit and yet enjoy the right of religious association; It insists that everyone has a right to enter into religious fellowship without being obliged to recognize the authority of certain officers or documents. It establishes among the almost infinite variety of churches one where a man may follow truth to its uttermost bounds, and speak the truth as he finds it to the uttermost consequences, and be responsible not to any outside authority of any kind, either ecclesiastical or biblical, but only to his own conscience. It maintains an institution wherein a welcome is given to every man, honest, sincere, consecrated to the truth, whatever prophet he may follow, whatever scripture he may read, by whatever name he may call his god, in whatever language he may speak his prayers, and whatever doctrine he may formulate the truth which he may chance to find. To sum it all up, Unitarianism does not establish any particular ritual, does not insist upon any particular statement of belief, does not wish to build up any particular institution, does not lay down any particular road to salvation; but brings to men and women the great abiding truth of all the ages that the essence of religion is not the support of any institution, however sacred that institution may claim to be, not the acceptance of any creed, however authoritative that creed may appear, not obedient to the words of any prophet, no matter how inspired that prophet may have been; but that the essence of religion is simply life. Our mission is to demonstrate to the world that nothing is so sacred as truth, that nothing is so divine as freedom, that nothing has any authority but reason and conscience.

It must be remembered, 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, and of discovering reality, of seeing things as they are, of understanding the universe in which we are compelled to live; for we believe that 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 certain preordained conclusions that have been settled for them. Freedom then for the sake of finding the truth, that is the fundamental principle of Unitarianism. That is why no minister of the Unitarian association is asked to subscribe to a 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 in 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, because to deny the teacher the right to teach the truth as he sees it is to rob themselves of the opportunity to learn the truth. The very foundation stone of the Unitarian faith is the belief that truth should be taken for authority and not authority for truth. The only thing to which intellectually a free Unitarian can afford to bow is ascertained and demonstrated truth.

Growth in Unitarianism

In view of what I have just said, it must be evident that no man can speak authoritatively of the doctrines of Unitarianism, and Unitarianism cannot be judged by the teachings of any individual society, because each society has the perfect right to formulate for itself any creed it 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. "New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth; they must upward still and onward who would keep abreast of truth." These words by our own dear Mr. Lowell come as near expressing the very heart of Unitarianism as anything I know. For Unitarianism is an attitude of mind, rather than a form of doctrine. It is that receptive 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. Therefore no one becomes or ceases to be a Unitarian because of any belief or opinion he may hold. He only becomes a Unitarian when he has the proper attitude of mind toward truth, and ceases to be one when he loses this attitude, no matter how much he believes or disbelieves.

As a result of this attempt to keep abreast of the times, Unitarianism has taken wonderful strides since its beginning. At first it was scarcely different from any orthodoxy except that it denied the doctrine of the Trinity and insisted upon the humanity of Jesus, while today it has in most quarters become purely rationalistic. In this remarkable evolution it has passed through three distinct periods of thought and method according to one of its best historians: the first from 1800 to 1835 was formative, mainly influenced by English philosophy, semi-supernatural, imperfectly rationalistic, devoted to philanthropy and practical Christianity. Dr. Channing was its distinguished exponent. The second from 1835

to 1885 was profoundly influenced by German idealism, was increasingly rationalistic, though its theology was largely flavored with mysticism. Its purpose was set forth by its general counsel and the words, "To encourage the scientific study of theology and to increase fellowship in the spirit." The leaders of this were Emerson with his idealism, and Theodore Parker with his practical application of religion. The third period, beginning about 1885, has been one of almost pure rationalism, the recognition of universal religion, entire acceptance of the scientific method and ideas, an attempt to translate religion into ethics, and an application of these ethics to the social life. It has been marked by harmony and unity to a degree perhaps found in no other religious body, by steady growth in the number of societies, and by a widening fellowship with all other progressive phases of modern religion. During this period the influence of Emerson has become dominant, modified by the scientific preaching of learned men who have found their guides in Darwin and Spencer.

General principles

Now just because of the freedom which we have enjoyed, because of our ability to develop naturally without restraint, we have come to stand for certain definite general principles, of which I want to speak. These are principles upon which practically all Unitarians are agreed, and which form the very foundation of every Unitarian church. They are scholarship, democracy, and humanity. The Unitarian church is the Church of the world's scientific scholarship, it is the Church of the purest democracy, it is the Church of humanity.

When I say that it is the Church of the world scholarship, I mean that all the free scholarship of the world in every department of knowledge is looking our way. Practically all the great scholars of the world are liberal men. One who cares simply for the truth must stand with us. We are the one church that is not afraid of the scientific investigations of the world. Modern science has ever been in direct and bitter conflict with the organized powers of religion. The churches have fought every teaching of science and have surrendered and accepted its conclusions only when they were absolutely compelled to. But we accept the scientific method as the proper method of finding the truth, and we accept the results of scientific investigation as basis for our teachings. The moment anything is demonstrated to be true, we not only submit as the other churches must, but we welcome it, for we have planted ourselves firmly on this ground, namely: that the truth is the only sacred thing in the universe. A human mistake is not sacred, and we cannot reverence it no matter how old it may be, no matter how moss-grown with tradition, no matter how many men have associated it with holy things; but we believe that every scientific truth, as soon as verified, is to be freely and gladly accepted as a new science in the eternal Bible. So we are fitted to assume the religious leadership of the world's intellectual leaders.

And then we are the church of the world's democracy, because we are the most democratic church in the world. There is a strange thing about the people of this country. They boast that they are free from emperors and kings, that they do not want any titles, any nobles or lords superior to them. They claim equality, liberty, freedom in every direction, and boast of their declaration of independence. And yet the majority of them seem to love royalty and nobles and titles in the religious world; they seemed to desire to surrender their personality and freedom, and place themselves in the hands of overlords, people who shall do their thinking for them and dictate to them what they shall do. Now the Unitarian is the

one church of complete democracy, and one would think that in a great democracy like this the democratic principle in religion would be appreciated; one would like to think that in a time like this when we are crying that we are through with kings and emperors and nobles, that we would also cry that we are through with bishops and popes and priests. The Unitarian polity is that of the purest democracy; In fact, the Unitarian church with its freedom of thought and consideration for the individual opinion is simply democracy applied to religion. It is merely the principle of democracy, of freedom, of self-government applied to the religious life as well as to the political.

The other great characteristic of Unitarianism is that in a very profound and far-reaching sense it is the church of humanity, the church of this world. For 1500 years the Christian church has been almost exclusively other-worldly, that is, interested in another world, and has treated this world with contempt. It has looked with scorn upon all the things that pertain to this present life. Man has been looked upon as a fallen being, morally and intellectually incapacitated. And the one great object of the church has been to save him from the results of this fall and fit him for life in another world after death. It has never expected or tried to improve this world. The predominating idea has been that things are growing worse and worse, that there were to be all kinds of disasters and troubles until by and by the whole thing would collapse, which would be the end of all things here and the beginning of all things somewhere else. But we believe, in fact we know, that the human race has not fallen. We believe in humanity, in its integrity, in its general purpose. We believe that it is mankind who has made this old world worthwhile, and that it is his efforts that will improve it in the future. The old idea was that the world was growing old and hastening to its decay. We believe that the sun is just rising and that it is only now shining upon the high places of the earth, that the human race has only begun its magnificent work, that so far we are only civilized in spots, that real civilization is ahead of us. The human race has overcome many of the obstacles of life and it looks forward with hope to removing those which remain. Perfect civilization lures us on as an ideal, as something yet to be attained; and we believe that the human race itself is competent to bring this ideal down out of the clouds and build it on rock foundations here on earth. We believe that man is able to wipe out the vice and crime, the ignorance, the poverty, the disease; and that he will. There is not one of these things which he is not able to subdue and leave behind. And this little band of Unitarians is the promise of just that kind of this-world-religion; a religion that believes in humanity and in progress.

Conclusion

And, men and women, I believe that in this kind of religion lies the hope of the world. The fact that I stand on this platform from week to week and proclaim this message tells you this, for if I did not believe it, I would immediately hand you my resignation and turn in the direction in which I thought the hope of this world did lie. I believe that in our way lies the religious hope of the world just as surely as in democracy lies the hope of the political and social world. The alliance of the great democratic nations today against the autocracy of the Central Powers means nothing less than the higher civilization against the lower. It is the battle of man for the opportunity to be a man—free, intelligent, self-supporting and self-respecting. Just as truly is our Unitarianism the cause of mankind. It is civilization and religion against defeatism and barbarism. It is freedom, faith and hope against bondage

doubt and despair. It is the struggle of man for an opportunity in the religious world to be a man—free, intelligent, self-supporting and self-respecting. One who knows this and is not loyal to it is a traitor to the highest interest of mankind.

I appeal to every one of you who knows anything of the cost of our Unitarian faith, who has any just estimates of its value to the world today, who has any clear appreciation of the relation which it bears to the future and the world, to take your stand on the side of freedom, intelligence and humanity, the three great principles upon which Unitarianism is built, to be loyal to these ideals and to do what you can to bring them to the attention of all mankind; for in this kind of religion lies the hope of the world.