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# Unitarianism and its failure to save the masses

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Unitarianism <sup>and</sup> the Masses.

W. D. Woodward. '86

## Unitarianism, and Its Failure to Save the Masses.

The history of Unitarianism is a history of doctrine. It is essentially controversial, intellectual. No grand sweep of battle on geographical planes, no conquering armies subduing countries and kingdoms to the claims of Pope or Emperor, no heroism of field preaching before mad mobs of ignorant country bores, no marvelous transformations of human character from depths of sin to heights of holiness by the instantaneous sin-convicting, soul-transforming power of the "Holy Ghost sent down from Heaven" — none of

these things characterize the rise and growth of the Unitarian movement in this country.

In this movement the field of battle is the field of intellect, the king of the forces is Reason, the banner is inscribed, "Liberty of Thought," the weapons of warfare are bayonets of logic, and the outcome appears to be somewhat of the culture of this world, crystal-like in edge and coldness, with a mixture of humanitarianism giving color and tone.

Naturally, therefore, from such battle array we would expect to find victories in the realm of ideas, of liberalizing thought rather than in startling figures of territorial acquisition set forth by church extension societies and missionary secretaries. This, in fact, is one

of the claims strenuously urged by the Unitarians themselves, and a prominent writer among them says substantially that: "Unitarians have to content themselves with the belief that there are many of Unitarian sentiments in the so-called evangelical churches".

Taking these facts into consideration it may not seem so strange to us, as it otherwise would, that no real "Unitarian Church History" has been published. Histories of Methodism, Congregationalism, Catholicism and other isms abound, but we have to content ourselves with an examination of the unfolding of its doctrine if we would trace its history. American Unitarianism is of comparatively recent date, but the way had been preparing therefor a long time.

To obtain, therefore, some clear idea of the movement, we must glance backward to the earlier history of the Christian Church. Men of anti-Trinitarian bent were found at this early period, and fierce discussions occurred from time to time. Some of these wars of words have passed into history and are known as the monarchian or Sabellian, the Arian and other controversies. On a Unitarian basis all of these rested. From their standpoint these disbelievers in the deity of Christ deemed the whole question a corruption of the pure gospel by philosophic speculation, and sought as the essence of Christianity the practical religion taught by Jesus Christ of love to God and man.

Tracing the spread of these early heretical doctrines we find

that they penetrated under a more or less organized form into the various European countries. of France, Switzerland, Transylvania, Poland, Italy, Germany and England. . . . In the latter country quite a broad denomination has arisen springing originally from Calvinistic Presbyterians.

This is mostly congregational in Church government. . . .

Unitarianism has not been without its martyrs also. In 1326 Adam Duff was burned alive near Dublin for his denial of the trinity. A namesake of our African bishop, - Wm. Taylor, was put to death in 1422. In 1527 Ludwig Hetszer suffered martyrdom. John Valentine said, as he laid his head on the block in 1566, "Many have suffered for the glo-

ry of the Son, but none have died  
for the supremacy of the Father.  
- Hundreds of others were put to  
death. In Scotland the latest  
execution for blasphemy against  
the trinity occurred when Thomas  
Aikenside was hanged near Edin-  
burgh in 1696. In the time  
of the Reformation Calvin, Melan-  
thon and others frequently speak  
of the power which this heresy  
had gained in their time. Socinus  
and Servetus were the prominent  
Anti-Trinitarians of that period.

Servetus was especially bold,  
saying to his opposers, "Your  
trinity is a product of subtlety  
and madness. The Gospels know  
nothing of it. The old Fathers  
are strangers to this vain dis-  
tinction. It is from the school of  
Greek Sophists that you, Athanasius

prince of tri-theists, have borrowed it." -- Servetus is, perhaps, the best known martyr to the cause, being burned at the stake in 1553 under the sanction of Calvin and the Genevan council.

We have noticed the previous points for their bearing upon the subsequent rise of Unitarianism in this country for this distinctive title did not appear until this century. As Chamber's Encyclopedia says, Unitarianism is "a name applied generally to all who maintain that God exists in one person only, and specially to a small Christian sect of recent times, whose distinguishing tenet is the unity as opposed to the trinity of the Godhead."

Let us now glance briefly at the rise and spread of Unitarianism in this country. A most excellent chapter on this subject is found in a memoir of "Ezra Stiles Gannett, Unitarian minister in Boston 1824-1871, by his son, Wm. C. Gannett.

With him "we will glance back, and trace with some detail the gradual change that had come over religious thought in the old homesteads of the Puritans. It was the slow, embryonic growth of a hundred and fifty years that was at last emerging to recognition and a name." The "Mayflower" band and the settlers around Massachusetts Bay had made the State a sort of temple, inviting the eternal to reign over them. "Their state assembly was likewise a church council. The vo-

ters. were all church members, only voters because members, only citizens because saints." "The meeting house was supported like the school, and before the school or anything else by public tax; and attendance was enforced by a five shillings fine for absence." Sunday ruled the week. "The minister was the chief man in town, and next to him the deacons. And members, ministers, Bible, church and State - all represented the purest Calvinism." "They had come in voluntary exile from their native land to worship God in freedom it is true, but in their own way. So Antiroumians, Anabaptists, Quakers, &c. suffered exile from these exiles." But not long after the first fathers passed away this sternness began to relax.

The ordinances first crumbled, and in the doctrines much smoothing of sharp outlines took place.

Then came the great awakening under Whitefield, and Edwards, reaping a great harvest, led the churches back to strict Calvinism again.

But now it was found that there had somehow crept into the churches that dreadful bugbear - Arminianism. "Yes, a word of far deeper horror had been pronounced, - Socinianism. About this time Edwards writes, "Within seven years the dangerous doctrines have made vastly more progress than ever before in the same space." The term Arminianism seems at this time to have covered whatever doctrines were not in accord with strict Calvinism.

With all of these increasing differences of opinion, no division in the church was as yet dreamed of but merely a tacit recognition of the two parties consciously diverging from one another. Even the Calvinists divided, a pair forming the "Hopkintonian" circle who maintained the old creed, yet differed as to its interpretation.

Events now hastened to a culmination in the Orthodox church. Johnathan Mayhew of West Church Boston, and Dr. Gay of Yfingham became recognized leaders of the liberal party. King's chapel, Boston, Episcopalian, was the first to bear the reproach of Unitarianism, which, under the leadership of James Freeman, expunged from the book of common prayer all reference to the Trinity and worship

of Christ. About the same time from London there came across the sea the works of such prominent Unitarian teachers as Lindsey, Belsham and others. Priestley, Low Paine, the Universalist Murray's works were all tending more and more to stimulate the ardor of the Liberals, and cause a few rupture in the old church. In 1805 Henry Ware, known to be Arminian, suspected of being Arian, was placed in the chair of Professor of Divinity at Harvard, that Harvard founded by the fathers "for Christ and the Church." Since this time that University has been under Unitarian control.

Liberal clubs and periodicals now began to appear. Orthodoxy was not slow in replying, and a fierce war of words ensued.

A crisis was at hand. Up to this time Unitarians had refused to bear this title. Now by force of circumstances it was forced upon them, and they were accused of mutilating the New Testament, of being systematic hypocrites, of being unworthy of Christian fellowship.

A champion appears now, a forman worthy of his steel, who from this time took such a conspicuous position in Unitarian circles as to be recognized as their leader. Wm. Ellery Channing, now thirty-five years of age came to the front as defender of the new faith.

He was born at New York, N. Y., in 1780, and "was doubtless one of the most talented, eloquent, and able seekers of the truth whom the times saw. Combining with a rich intellectual nature an

aspiration for holy living, he lifted the Unitarians into something of life. He was very liberal, a great seer-bater, and would fellowship with anyone who would manifest by the life that he aimed for a high, noble, and holy life."

Channing's type of doctrine appears in many of his sermons. It differs mainly from evangelical truth in the following particulars:

1. The Bible can be interpreted to men only by reason.
2. That there is but one God, even the Father, and that in God there is ~~no~~ unity of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
3. That Jesus is as distinct from the One God as ourselves, that His mission and office were divine, not Himself.

4. That punishment is corrective only, not retributive. . . . .

In other points Channing was conservative, differing not far from ordinary evangelical teaching. When we look at the extremes of the liberal party of later years, and especially of the present time, we find Channing to be tolerably near the old Orthodoxy in the majority of cases. . . . .

The Unitarians now became somewhat settled, and acquired a distinct recognition as a sect.

But when human thought takes to itself wings, and flies on the pinions of pure reason, it becomes dazzled by the brightness of the truth shining before it, and rushing blindly on, falls headlong at last in the gulf of its own self-sufficiency. Leaving the

faith of the Bible, it cannot fly  
to God. ... So here liberal thought  
was not content with the new  
departures of Channing, but  
must scale yet higher peaks  
of reasoning. - So rapidly and  
recklessly did this go on, that  
even Unitarians were alarmed,  
and came themselves to divide.

Free inquiry next merged into  
Transcendentalism. The ideal-  
ism of the great European philoso-  
phers lent much aid.

In 1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson and  
his flock were separated, and Abner  
Kneeland started his company of  
Freethinkers, and began to publish the  
"Investigator" - ... Soon a bold  
voice startled even the Unitarians  
themselves. Theodore Parker  
proclaimed the rites and doc-  
trines of the New Testament to

be transient, and fading. While  
Parker honored to some extent the  
Bible, Jesus, and Christianity, his  
tendency was to disunite them from  
any other than a philosophical  
relation to man. On the  
whole the transcendental move-  
ment seems to have been a return  
from sensualism to idealism.  
"In Theology" they dispensed with  
mediation in order to claim for  
the soul access direct to the Father.

In all this struggle of ideas,  
as shown us in the above sketch,  
we find the conflict more mental  
than spiritual. This fact of it-  
self would be strong evidence that  
such battle would interest the ed-  
ucated, and cultured rather than  
the common people and the masses  
generally. To note a further

reason why such theological overturnings and philosophical upheavings should have little influence upon the radical change of the masses, we will look at a brief creed of English Unitarians, which is a tolerably fair exposur of the average Unitarian thought of the times.

1. There is one God, one single person who is God, the sole Creator, and Sovereign Lord of all things.
2. The holy Jesus was a man of the Jewish nation, the servant of this God, highly honored and distinguished by him.
3. The Spirit or Holy Spirit was not a person, or intelligent being, but only the extraordinary gift of God, first to our Lord, Jesus Christ himself in his lifetime and afterwards to the apostles,

and many of the first Christians,  
to empower them to preach, and  
propagate the Gospel with  
success.

- Any ism is not successful  
because it is an ism, a mode  
of human opinion, but in  
proportion to the vitality it has,  
the truth it contains. Whether  
men know it or not the thing  
they are hungry for is the Truth,  
and without they will starve, spi-  
ritually speaking.

Christianity is not an ism,  
it is the Truth. Unitarianism  
contains truth, doubts, as well  
as untruth. - Whatever life it  
does contain must come from the  
truth it has, and this must be  
the same truth which exists in  
all denominations springing from  
Christianity, - the Church.

Truth, moreover, is vital for the individual in proportion as it enters into his heart and comes forth in his life, and truth to do this must be Divine. Hence every belief which belays in any degree the Deity of truth as shown in Him who declared, "I am the Truth", or which limits the Divinity and God-hood of Him who affirmed, "I am the Life", by so much makes powerless that Christ who is to be formed in us "the hope of glory".

Consequently to such a degree will an is holding more or less definitely such a belief be life-less, and unable to lift men who are dead in trespasses and sins to a renewed life in Jesus. For even if some Unitarians allow Christ to be the

Saviour of the world but yet  
make Him less than God, our  
salvation does not bring us to God,  
- we are only half-saved.

If the Holy Ghost be only an  
influence, our Comforter has not  
yet come, and instead of be-  
ing in communion with  
our Father in Heaven, we are  
left orphans.

But the world of today needs and  
will only turn from sin at the  
voice of the great God who can  
say "I will not leave you com-  
fortless, I will come to you."

No man can say this, but  
Jesus, - and He has spoken it  
from the bosom of the Father.

The masses can be drawn only  
by the heartstrings with bands of  
love; not by the fine codices  
of logic and intellectual weaving.

Unitarianism is too indefinite  
for everyday wants. True, some  
will always like to chase will-  
o-the-wisps, and here is a delight-  
ful meadow full of them.

But for us more profitable  
fields "are white already to  
harvest."

Boston, May, 1856.

Wm. D. Woodward.