

**THE FORWARD MOVEMENT
IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT
AS INTERPRETED BY
UNITARIANS. FIVE LECTURES**

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The Forward Movement in Religious Thought as Interpreted by Unitarians. Five Lectures by
Brooke Herford

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BROOKE HERFORD

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**The Forward Movement in
Religious Thought**
as interpreted by
Unitarians

FIVE LECTURES

BY

BROOKE HERFORD, D.D.

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THESE LECTURES—WHICH WERE DELIVERED AS THE AUTHOR'S
PART IN A GENERAL COURSE OF SIMULTANEOUS LECTURES ON
THE SAME SUBJECTS GIVEN IN THE UNITARIAN CHURCHES
THROUGHOUT LONDON—ARE PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF
SOME WHO HEARD THEM.

LONDON, APRIL, 1895.

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INTRODUCTORY.

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF UNITARIANISM.

UNITARIANISM has been a good deal spoken of, of late, but not many people seem to know what it really is. Many have an idea that it is a dreadful kind of infidelity, to be shunned as wicked and dangerous. Yet they know that in public life Unitarians are among the most respected and reliable men; and certainly some of those who have stood before the world as Unitarians—such ministers as Dr. Channing, John Hamilton Thom, and Dr. Martineau, such writers as Oliver Wendell Holmes, the poet H. W. Longfellow, the eminent physiologist Dr. W. B. Carpenter, and his equally eminent sister, Mary Carpenter—have been of a deeply thoughtful and religious spirit. So the question is beginning to be widely asked:

What is Unitarianism?

The briefest answer is, that it is that form of Christianity which holds to the primitive faith in the simple Unity of God,—that *God* is One, not a Trinity; and which looks upon *Jesus Christ* as the greatest and holiest of Teachers, but not God. Around this great central position have commonly grouped themselves

some other beliefs of hardly less importance. Thus Unitarians regard *Man* as the child of God—not “fallen” and totally depraved, but only slowly rising; *Salvation*, as deliverance from sin, including everything that heals and helps man towards goodness and God; *Heaven* and *Hell*—not separate worlds, but what men make of their own lives, both in this world and the world to come, while in no world can man ever go beyond the love and goodness of God. Unitarians, also, while reverencing the *Bible* as the text-book of religion, have always regarded it (and in this they no longer stand alone, for the more thoughtful scholars in all Churches are now taking much the same ground) as the records of God’s gradual revelation of his truth and will,—but human records, to be studied with perfect freedom in order to distinguish the Divine from the merely human.

This is the common position of Unitarians. This is their general way of looking at the subject of religion. But while there is quite as much agreement among them as among the members of any other group of churches,

Unitarians have no Formal Creed.

They do not shape these beliefs into any set authoritative form which must be accepted either by churches or individuals, but urge upon all to think for themselves, and leave their churches entirely open to the reception of new truth.

A question often asked is,

When and how did Unitarianism arise?

In reality, it would be more historically correct to speak of *the rise* of “Trinitarianism.” Because that was the thing which rose, while Unitarianism was what was there before. Unitarianism is as old as the Hebrew Lawgiver

who said: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."¹ Christian Unitarianism is as old as Christ, who simply reaffirmed that grand truth, only with a tenderer light upon the thought of that One Infinite Being. Christ's own teaching was simply that of *One God, our Heavenly Father*, for keeping to which we have got the name Unitarians. And the Christianity which the Apostles preached was still the same: One Almighty God; and Jesus Christ, not a God to be worshipped, but a divinely-prepared teacher to be loved and followed. But then gradually came the change. The gospel went forth among heathen peoples. These were quite used to the idea of gods descending to earth in the form of men. So it came quite naturally to them to think that this great Christ must have been such a god, though at first they regarded him as only a created and subordinate god. Once exalted into God, at all, however, the tendency was to exalt him towards equality with the Supreme Deity. Then, by a similar tendency, the "Holy Spirit"—really, the Divine influence, God Himself working in man's heart—came also to be thought of as a distinct Divine person. And so the spirit of abstruse speculation took men further and further from the simplicity of Christ until at last—but it was not until three hundred years after Christ—a Trinitarian Creed was arrived at, and finally proclaimed as the authoritative religion of the Christian Church. This was the rise of Trinitarianism.

And yet it must not be thought that the older, *original* Christianity gave in without long and repeated struggle. From the first there were those who resisted these tendencies to make Christ into a God, and especially the later attempt to make him equal to the Supreme Being. Best known of these are the *Arians*, who in the fourth century constituted nearly half Christendom, and who for centuries after, though declared heretics, still

¹ *Deut.*, vi. 4; the Revised Version, in the margin.