

**UNITARIANS AND
THE
FUTURE, PP. 7-71**

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Unitarians and the Future, pp. 7-71 by Mrs. Humphry Ward

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Gift of
E. D. Sunderland
8-11-48

NOTE.

EARLY in 1892, the Council of the BRITISH AND FOREIGN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION adopted a scheme for the delivery and subsequent publication of a Lecture dealing with some aspect of the history and development of Christianity, viewed from the standpoint of liberal and progressive thought.

The first Lecture of the series was delivered in 1893, by the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, who took for his subject 'The development of Theology as illustrated in English Poetry from 1780 to 1830.' The second Lecture, by Mrs. Humphry Ward, was delivered at Essex Hall on Tuesday, June 19th, 1894, and is now issued to the public in the hope that it may assist in promoting the cause of true religion.

8-14-48 WES

UNITARIANS AND THE FUTURE

WHAT is the place of that form of English religious belief known as 'Unitarianism' in the religious present—and what are the developments which may be hoped from it in the future?

In trying to answer these questions, I have endeavoured to put together and give shape to some long inchoate thoughts of my own on the future of the new Christian teaching now so active among us, whether in the organised form it takes in Unitarianism, or as it exists in the thoughts and lives of thousands who have no hereditary or avowed connection with the Unitarian body. In so doing, I must ask you to let me approach the

whole problem as one not born and bred in Unitarianism, and personally unwilling to assume any name other than the name of Christian,—a member simply of that large public to whom the problems of religious thought and expression are still vitally interesting, and for whom, amid all modern perplexities and distractions, the old needs are as urgent, the old yearnings as masterful as they were for our fathers. Here, on the one side, is a religious body, claiming to possess a faith wherewith science and history may join hands, encumbered by no outworn forms, dogmatic or ceremonial, and dignified both in England and America by some of the most illustrious names in modern literature and speculation. There, on the other side, is our manifold English society, with its ferments of knowledge and philosophy; living, by virtue mainly of certain physical discoveries, a life more intense, crowded with a more rapid phantasmagoria of experience

than was ever possible before; throwing into all it touches—its religion, its reforms, its amusements—a passion, sometimes lovely, sometimes unlovely, but in any case different in kind from anything known to the days of Miss Austen; asking itself all possible questions, admitting all conceivable answers, and distinguished broadly by three characteristics,—two of them fulfilling, the other disconcerting the eagerest hopes and dreams of eighteenth century philosophy—its enormously heightened appreciation of the value of the individual life, as expressed in the social movements of the century, its scientific temper, and its keen interest in Christianity. What are the real relations between the two—the religion and the society? What place has the organised system of faith and practice known as Unitarianism, in this modern world—what prospects also has it in the future to which we feel ourselves tending?

Let us look a little more closely into the matter. First, what is really meant by Unitarianism? Next, what are the needs and conditions of our modern life, outside of Unitarianism proper, which seem to promise it most support, to which, if it is to make large growth, it must, consciously or unconsciously, adapt itself?

It was a saying of Goethe's—I quote Mr. Baily Saunders' translation,—that 'on the appearance of anything new, the mass of people ask: What is the use of it? And they are not wrong. For it is only through the use of anything that the world perceives its virtue.' What, then, has been the *use* of Unitarianism?

If we run over the most familiar facts of its history, we shall find a religious fellowship—hardly even now a religious body in the ordinary sense—developing in England out of Presbyterianism, in America out of the Congregationalists; with us, tracing its philosophical ances-

try to Priestley, and its earliest practical foundation to the gentle and fearless Theophilus Lindsey, a clergyman of the Church of England; while in the United States it owed to the life and genius of Channing that first creative impulse which out of the *débris* of a Liberalised Calvinism built up a strong and growing church. The Arian or Socinian 'poison,' which, according to the Commonwealth divine, Dr. Owen, had left not 'a city, a town, and scarce a village in England' untouched, in 1655,—in other words, the free spirit of doctrinal speculation roused by the Renaissance—found in the 'open trusts' of the English Presbyterians, as they existed after the Toleration Act, an instrument to its hand. There are many Unitarian congregations in this country which have developed by steady growth, without conscious shock or severance, and influenced only by the pressure of surrounding knowledge on the minds of

minister and congregation, out of the Presbyterian meeting-house of the seventeenth century ; and in Plymouth, Massachusetts, the chief Unitarian Church of the city is the lineal descendant of the Congregationalist Church of the Pilgrim Fathers.

The development of thought which has led thus gradually to a division of organisation between the parent stocks and their Unitarian offspring is not a little curious. Heretical opinion on the subject of the Trinity in the various shapes it took in the sixteenth century represented the most thorough-going of all contemporary appeals to the Bible as against authority. It was one of the natural results of that wide ferment of mind produced by the diffusion of the vernacular Scriptures. The Anti-Trinitarian heretics of Tudor times, took their stand passionately on *the written word*, declaring that 'the Apostles teach Christ to be man only.' In the last century,