

**AUTHENTIC REPORT OF
THE DISCUSSION ON THE
UNITARIAN
CONTROVERSY**

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Authentic Report of the Discussion on the Unitarian Controversy by John Scott Porter & Daniel Bagot

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JOHN SCOTT PORTER & DANIEL BAGOT

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AUTHENTIC REPORT
OF THE
DISCUSSION
ON THE
UNITARIAN CONTROVERSY

BETWEEN THE
REV. JOHN SCOTT PORTER
AND
THE REV. DANIEL BAGOT, M. A.

Held on April 14, 1834, and three following Days;

IN THE MEETING-HOUSE

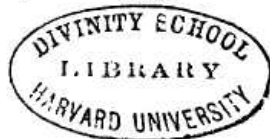
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UNITARIAN DISCUSSION.

THIS Discussion, which has excited so much public interest for some time back, commenced on Monday, the 14th April, 1834, at half-past 10 o'clock. MICHAEL ANDREWS, Esq. of Ardoyne, and CONWAY RICHARD DOBBS, Esq. of Acton, were chairmen on the occasion.

The following is a statement of the Propositions which constituted the Subject of Discussion on each side, of the Standard of Reference, and the Rules by which the business was conducted.

STANDARD OF REFERENCE.

The Word of God contained in the books of the Old and New Testament, which are received into the Authorised Version, admitting them all to be canonical. The correctness or incorrectness of passages marked as spurious in Griesbach's last edition, and the translation or signification of any particular words or passages, to be open to question and legitimate criticism. The divine authority of Scripture to be admitted on both sides. And all quotations to be given in chapter and verse, according to the divisions of the Authorised Translation in common use.

Mr. J. S. Porter's Propositions :

1. There is one self-existent God, the Father : who is God alone ; to the entire exclusion of the alleged Proper Deity of the Word.
2. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is (even in his highest capacity, nature, or condition) a Created Being, deriving his existence, wisdom, power, and authority from the Father ; and inferior to him in these and all other attributes.

Mr. Bagot's Propositions :

1. There is one God, Jehovah, who is God only, to the entire exclusion of the alleged godhead of every creature.
2. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Mediator, is the Word made flesh, perfect God and perfect man ; possessing, as the Word, the same eternity, knowledge, power, authority, prerogatives, and godhead with the Father, and one with him in all attributes.

REGULATIONS.

1. The discussion to commence on MONDAY, the 14th of April, and to continue for that and the three following days.
2. The discussion to continue for four hours each day :—the time, on the first day, to be divided into two equal portions, and each to give a statement and proof of the affirmative propositions on his side.
3. It is to be determined, by lot, on the first day of discussion, who is to open the debate.

4. On each of the two following days, the speakers are to address the meeting forty minutes alternately, a pause of ten minutes being allowed between each address, during which any question may be asked in explanation of what the last speaker had said. The person who closes one day's discussion is to commence on the following.

5. The discussion to be held in Belfast, in the most suitable place that can be obtained.

6. Two Chairmen to preside each day, one chosen by each party, with power to put a preemptory stop to any thing disorderly, and of excluding from the place of meeting any one who transgresses the rules.

7. Each day's meeting to commence at eleven o'clock, except the first, which is to commence at half-past ten, to allow the Chairmen to make any necessary explanations; and any time lost during any day's discussion, to be added to the regular period of closing the business of the day.

8. Admission to be by tickets, for which the sum of 4s. each shall be charged, and which shall admit to the entire discussion. In case of any room remaining, tickets for one day's discussion, at 1s. 6d. each shall be sold; but not before the Saturday preceding. The money received to be expended in defraying the necessary expense; and, if not sufficient for that purpose, each shall be liable for one half the sum deficient.

9. No signs of approbation or disapprobation to be allowed; and no person whatever to be permitted to address the meeting, except the speakers or the Chairmen, to a point of order; and no person to interrupt, in any way, the speakers; but each may have a friend to assist him in looking for references and marking them.

10. One Reporter to be employed, who shall be admonished and expected to do equal justice to both parties in the discussion, and his expenses to be defrayed out of the produce of the sale of tickets. Each speaker to write out a full report of his own speeches from the Reporter's notes; which, when approved by the other party, shall be jointly published; but neither to be allowed to introduce any new matter, nor to suppress any argument actually adduced, nor any statement actually advanced; and each to consider himself pledged not to sanction the publication of a report of any one side of the discussion unaccompanied by the other.

11. On the fourth day of discussion each speaker to make one speech of forty minutes' length; an adjournment for half an hour then to take place, after which each shall be allowed to make a closing speech of one hour, the report of which shall supersede the appendix formerly proposed.

12. The tickets to be equally divided between Mr. BAGOT and Mr. PORTER, and to be sold at the price above stated; each to account for the number of tickets received, but to be at liberty to give away twenty tickets for the entire meeting to his personal friends.

13. The execution of the above arrangements, and of all minor regulations, to be intrusted to Messrs. John Campbell and John Marshall, who may call in a third party, by mutual agreement, in case of any difference of opinion.

We agree to the foregoing.

DANIEL BAGOT.
J. SCOTT PORTER.



FIRST DAY.

MR. PORTER.—LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, It has fallen to my lot to address you first on this occasion; and without any formal preface, I proceed at once to the business which has brought us together this day.

You are aware that the present controversy has arisen in consequence of a notice which my reverend opponent caused to be inserted in the *Northern Whig* of Monday, January 26, 1834; which was to this effect:

THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY.—The Rev. Daniel Bagot, it will be seen, by an advertisement, has published an abstract of controversial sermons, lately preached by him in this town. He has requested us to suggest to the Unitarians, that they should publish a similar tract, in the same form, containing, concisely, their arguments in reply to his abstract. We readily do this; and we would have added, had Mr. Bagot not got so soon before the public, that both tracts should have been stitched together, and sold at a very low price. As journalists, we have nothing to do with either party; but, as we wish that truth should predominate, on whatever side it may be, we would readily concur in any fair proposition which might tend to settle the great questions at issue.

Having the honour and happiness to be a Minister of the Gospel of that persuasion to which this invitation was publicly addressed, it appeared to me that I could not, with propriety, omit taking notice of the challenge in some way or other. Had I allowed it to pass disregarded, I should not only have treated with disrespect an intimation proceeding from a gentleman, whose bland deportment and controversial candour I have always most readily acknowledged; but I should likewise have given occasion to any who might be so disposed, to insinuate that the Unitarian Ministers of this town—though sufficiently open and sufficiently eager to propound their doctrines, when no direct attack upon them was to be apprehended—shrunk away from avowing and defending their opinions, when they would necessarily be contrasted with tenets of an opposite description; and I have no doubt whatever, the inference would have been drawn, and pointedly stated, that this reluctance proceeded from a secret consciousness that our principles would not bear the light of open discussion. I could not, in conscience and in honour, give ground for these suspicions. Convinced, as I am most firmly, that the tenets which I have embraced, are the solemn truths of the Gospel, firmly built on the solid foundation of Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone,—I dare not allow them, by any remissness or indolence on my part, to receive a wound. This would have been to abandon my post in the time of danger—to turn my back upon the standard of Christ, at the moment when the tide of battle rolled on directly against it. Convinced, besides, as I am, by the study of history, and by what little I have learned

of mental changes, that in an enlightened age, and with increasing facilities for public instruction, free, open discussion cannot but conduce to the discovery and extension of truth, I felt myself bound to accept the proposal of Mr. Bagot in some form or other; for I cannot doubt that the means of religious information are so plentifully diffused by a benignant Providence, that if men could only be induced to employ them, the result must be the progress of truth: and it is as a means of rousing men to think, to inquire, to weigh evidence, and judge for themselves, that I deem discussion and controversy mainly valuable.

But while, for these reasons, I thought myself bound to take some notice of Mr. Bagot's proposal, other considerations, of no small weight, as they seemed to me, rendered it expedient to accept his invitation in the precise terms in which it was conveyed. Had I simply accepted his challenge, and published a pamphlet in reply to his *Abstract*, it did appear to me, as it has appeared to all of every side of the question with whom I have since conversed, that I should have done so at a decided disadvantage. For, you must all be perfectly aware, that while persons of Unitarian sentiments feel, in general, little or no objection to read productions in which their tenets are impugned, there exists in the minds of a considerable number of the opposite persuasion a very great reluctance to peruse tracts in opposition to their own views. Had Mr. Bagot, indeed, delayed the publication of his tract until it could have been issued in conjunction with a reply of the kind suggested, so that both might have been circulated together, and so that every person who obtained the one must, of necessity, have procured the other at the same time, I should have been most happy to embrace the opportunity of carrying on the controversy with one whose temper and candour, as displayed in the only discourse I had ever heard him preach, had made upon me a most favourable impression. But, this opportunity not being allowed me, I thought it would have been a mere waste of time and trouble to publish a separate tract; which I very well knew would never make its way into the hands of those, whose opinions and views I was, as will readily be conceived, most desirous of combating. Acting under this impression, which every thing that has since occurred has only tended to deepen, I published a letter in the *Northern Whig* of Thursday, January 23; in which, after stating the reasons which induced me to decline taking the step which he suggested, I went on to say—

If, however, Mr. Bagot is desirous of circulating the facts and arguments, on both sides of the question, fairly among the public, both Unitarian and Trinitarian,—I, as an individual, propose to him two methods of doing so, either of which will answer the purpose.

I am ready to publish a series of Essays on the Doctrine of the Trinity, from his pen, in the new series of *The Bible Christian*; inserting, at the same time, illustrative comments; and subjecting both him and his antagonist, whoever he may be, to the conditions specified by the former conductors in reply to his note.—Or, if he prefer it, I am willing to meet him in Belfast, in an amicable discussion on the subject; time, place, and other preliminaries, to be settled by friends mutually chosen: the only stipulation on which I insist being, that an authentic report of the entire debate shall be prepared, and published at our joint expense.

Mr. Bagot declined assenting to my first proposal,—the publication of a series of essays in the *Bible Christian*; but accepted my second,—a *viva voce* debate: and terms and preliminaries having been subsequently settled, we appear before you this day, to urge the leading arguments for our respective views of the Christian Doctrine. And I can safely say, for myself, that while I come forward with a heartfelt sense, both of the truth and the importance of that doctrine which I stand here this day to advocate,—I come forward, likewise, with perfect charity, nay, with real cordiality, not only for the bulk of those persons who differ from my views, but for my reverend opponent in particular; and giving him entire credit for the same feelings that actuate myself, I shall endeavour, and I hope successfully, to avoid every expression that could possibly give him offence, or sound unkindly in his ears. It is needless to say, that I shall endeavour to discuss the serious and important question on which we are at issue, with calmness and seriousness of mind. I shall not certainly consider myself precluded from expressing warmly, what I feel strongly, respecting the unscriptural character and tendency of the doctrine which I impugn; for I will not sacrifice my paramount regard to the interests of divine truth out of deference to him, or affected complaisance to any one. But ridicule, misrepresentation, and invective, I shall studiously avoid. The subject is too weighty to be made the groundwork of a jest, even when it is most completely misunderstood; and the religious convictions of an honest mind, even when most erroneous, are with me a matter too sacred to be treated with levity.

After these introductory remarks, I proceed to make my observations upon the Standard of Reference and upon the Propositions, which you will find given at large in the handbill, that has been widely circulated.

You will observe, that we have agreed to argue on the basis of the "*Word of God, contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which are received into the Authorised Version, admitting them all to be canonical.*" In the propriety of adopting this standard, I beg it may be distinctly understood by all persons and parties, that I do most entirely and cordially concur. Indeed no Unitarian could consistently or conscientiously argue the question upon any other basis. Let it be understood with the same distinctness, that if I had presumed to defend our common doctrines with any other weapons, my fellow Unitarians would have disowned my procedure, and exclaimed against me, as guilty of betraying the good cause which I have undertaken to maintain, into the hands of the opponents. For it is on Scriptural grounds that we have embraced our characteristic doctrine. We are Unitarians solely and simply because we can find no doctrine but Unitarianism in the Bible; which is our rule of faith and only accredited standard. So far from rejecting the testimony of divine revelation on this or any subject, we bow to it with entire reverence; and are ready at any moment to repudiate our present views, if they can be shown to be inconsistent with the divine record. Nor was there ever a more unfounded accusation, than that which was frequently preferred against us in former

times,—and is sometimes even yet covertly insinuated,—that we undervalue the weight, or despise the authority of the Sacred Volume. We rank it in our estimation far above the imaginations of the human understanding, whether as floating idle in the careless mind, or as embodied in creeds and articles and doctrinal liturgies of human device. Nor have any writers been more successful in vindicating revelation from the objections, and defending it against the assaults of infidels, than those of the Unitarian school: witness the venerable names of LARDNER and of PRIESTLEY; not to mention many others, of great and deserved though inferior celebrity.

Again. My reverend antagonist and myself have agreed to avail ourselves of all the aid that can be furnished to us, by "*legitimate criticism*." Criticism is the art or science which teaches how an author's real meaning may be gathered from the expressions which he employs. The term, therefore, though harsh to the ears of many, as conveying the notion of too close an approach to the employment of human reason, denotes nothing but that which must be employed by any person who, in any way whatsoever, attempts to understand the Sacred Writings. "*Legitimate*" criticism is criticism of a fair and lawful kind: not rash, nor fanciful, nor arbitrary; but based on sound principles, and conducted with caution and circumspection. Surely the man who refuses to investigate the meaning of the Word of God in this manner, is unworthy of the treasures of grace and wisdom which they contain. We may safely pronounce, that unless it be by accident, he never will attain to them.

It will be in the recollection of such among you as paid attention to the newspaper correspondence which took place between Mr. Bagot and myself, before preliminaries were finally agreed on, previous to the present discussion, that, in one of his letters, he stated that the only standard on which he proposed to carry on the discussion, is "*the Authorised Version of the Scriptures, admitting the genuineness, authenticity, and divine authority of all and every part of the books; allowing, however, criticisms upon the phraseology, considered as a translation of a book compiled from the best manuscripts.*" And he made it a condition that I should publicly state, before any farther arrangements were made, "*whether any particular passages, and what, were excepted by me from the above description.*" You will recollect that I demurred to the first part of this proposition; i. e. the admission of the genuineness, authenticity, and divine authority of all and every part of the books contained in the Authorised Version. I did so under an imperious sense of duty; and I am satisfied there is not a regularly educated clergyman, of any sect or church in Christendom, who would not have refused to make the admission thus required of me. For common purposes, the Authorised Version serves well enough. I am not acquainted with any version of the Scriptures, in any language, which does not contain enough of the divine spirit of the original, to make the docile reader wise unto salvation; and for this reason, and because it is the translation to which our ears have been accustomed from childhood, and with which our religious impressions are most strongly associated, I am in the habit of using the Authorised Version in public; and generally, but not ex-