

RELATION OF UNITARIANS TO THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL.\*

J. S. Hale

I AM afraid that the tendency of our very freedom of thought, of our position as the advance guard of the advance in the inquiry of the church, throws us Unitarians into danger of narrowness. In the first place we have been told so long that we are not in the church, that our young folks might be excused if they said that the Church of Christ probably knew whether we were in it or not, that they were very well satisfied with the position in which they found themselves, and that if other people wanted to go on without us, they were welcome to do so. But that is only a petty, not to say childish way, of treating a great relation. For the Broad Church may include all narrow churches; though a narrow church of course cannot include the broad. We hold to all that the Catholic Church holds which does it any good, and we hold to a great deal more. We hold to all that gives to the Presbyterian churches their power, and we hold to a great deal more. We have no difficulty in acceding to all that is generous and hearty in the ritual of the Episcopal churches, and when they are ready to listen, we will teach them a great deal more. Our position with regard to the religion of the world, is not what I may almost call the pettifogging place, of those who are trying to pick out a few words of creed which they can make everybody agree to; it is — quite on the other hand — the position of those who know how to introduce Religion into all life, and how to find it everywhere. In the cathedral of the Greek Church, or in the Meeting-house of the Quaker, we are sure to find it; and there or here we ought to find ourselves at home.

The danger is, that when a narrow Evangelicism says to us, "We have nothing to do with you," we should say spitefully, "Nobody asked you, we are getting on very well alone." The Christian answer is the only true answer. Let who will say to us, "We have nothing to do with you," our answer is only the

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more earnest, "We have a great deal to do with you." We are in the church because we are God's children, redeemed by His Son. Nobody can gainsay that. We could not get out of it, if we would; and we would not, if we could.

A narrow bigot tells you sometimes, that Dr. Channing or Dr. Lowell was almost good enough to be called a Christian. You are tempted to say, in reply, that Dr. Stanley and Mr. Beecher and Bishop Simpson are almost as sensible as if they were Unitarians. Failing that extreme measure of good sense, you are tempted to pass by the literature of a people whose creed is not your creed,—to be indifferent to their worship, though you should find no worship else,—you are not afraid to let them know that your contempt for them is quite equal to theirs for you; and, as I said, to say, "If you excommunicate us from your communion, we will put you out of our thought and our society." When I was in college one of our number came into Park Street Church on the occasion of a protracted revival meeting, to see what was done there. In the regular course of the meeting a minister came into the pew where the young man sat, and leaning down, kindly asked him what was the state of his soul, and if he were in any anxiety about it. Startled and confused, without answering a question so tender and so central, he said, "Oh, I am a Unitarian." The natural implication would have been that Unitarians had no souls, nor any wish to save them; and I am afraid that was the view his kind friend carried away. But what he meant was, that because he was a Unitarian he thought his soul was secure; at all events, that it could not be saved by the processes he saw there. That answer, if he had made it, would have been legitimate and kind. But the other answer was to exclude himself from the tender care of the Church Universal, a care showing itself in a clumsy way, if you please, but none the less genuine. I am afraid that story illustrates a sort of intellectual conceit which has sometimes prevailed among us, a conceit which is as unchristian as it is unmanly. I remember the protest made against it by an accomplished and pure Christian woman, who said in a bitter epigram, that the Unitarians were willing to admit her into heaven as a fool, as if that were any kinder than to damn her to hell as a sinner.

Now all such intellectual conceit, and the notion that our little sect here in New England is to stand by itself, are just as petty as is any bigotry of Hard-Shell Baptists or Old-School Presbyterians. It is the church universal which is to win the victory over disease, and sin, and the fear of death. It is the church universal, the whole family of God, which is to make this world God's home, and part of His own kingdom. No separation, no bigotry, no exclusion, and no conceit will help that empire forward. No, and the great triumphs of to-day are the triumphs, of whatever form, which make one out of many. The Evangelical Alliance, so-called, was, in its fashion, feeling for it. Every Christian Union, whether it be a newspaper or a society, is a step towards it. Every genuine and generous book which forces its way outside the old dogmatic fortresses and circulates and is read among all the children of God, is a help that way.

The Roman Church, on the other hand, attempted to make such unity in the poor old fashion of uniformity. That failed. That was like all other efforts to force freemen. Of course it failed. Unity is not in unity of organization, but in unity of the spirit. A fire insurance report in London says that the couplings of the hose of the different engine companies of that city were of three or four different gauges and threads, so that you could never rely on screwing two lengths of hose together in an emergency. The same writer said that from one end of America to the other, there was not a length of hose which could not be screwed into another length if occasion came.

I do not vouch for the fact. Perhaps it cannot be authenticated. But let it serve as a parable, which might be true, of the way in which different meetings, churches, societies, fraternities, unions, associations of whatever name and whatever order, would combine if they had the unity of the spirit, in their work for a common cause against any common misfortune. It does not require any chief engineer to order them. It only requires mutual sympathy and respect to make all their several parts work in accord as one.

All this was forced home on my attention as I passed from city to city in Europe in my summer journey. It is hard to bear the conceit and self-gratulation of the average American traveller in other lands. It is a very dangerous habit which he falls into, if

he goes to a church, as if it were only a show, and supposes that, of course, he is the religious superior of the people who worship there. I know it is very hard to extenuate the absurdities which are absurd, or to apologize for the short-comings of other rituals. But if one goes to a cathedral, one must do his best to make the best of what he finds. And one always has to ask himself whether he did the best he could to find other ritual more simple, or worship more sincere. I have heard a hundred Americans say that the Roman Catholic service in the Madeleine in Paris was operative, and not devotional, for one who told me that he had searched for and found the hearty company of the French Liberal Protestants, who were worshipping with M. Coquerel in the obscure Hall of St. André in Cité d'Antin. Now I have certainly no quarrel with the man who joins in the worship at the Madeleine. Only this I have to say, that if it did not suit him, I do not know why he went to such a service again and again, instead of finding a place of worship and religious companionship in which he should be at home.

This time is the last time of all for the Liberal Religionists of the world to draw aside from Fellowship with the Church Universal. Grant that in the past, the closely organized sects, those with hard shells, and hard creeds, have looked askance at us, as very doubtful allies. In these days, when they find their old foundations shaken, and antagonists for whom they are not prepared, they are fain to rest behind the defences of the very allies whom but just now they spurned. To take the instance of which I spoke just now, the intelligent traveller in any city of Europe may, if he choose, find the Gospel of Liberty, Christianity in its freedom, illustrated and enforced in churches which are more and more recognized as the outworks of the church against Atheism and Nothingism. The Freest Religionist ought not ask for bolder or more inspiring words than he will hear from Stopford Brooke or from Stanley in London; from Coquerel in Paris; from Father Hyacinthe of the Liberal Catholics, or from any of the Unitarian pulpits in Geneva; from Reville and his companions, and from hundreds of broad churches in the low countries; from the pulpits of the men who are building the German Protestant Association through all the north of Germany; from Friedrich and the Old Catholic leaders there and in the South of Germany; or, if one is

to mention names, from Bracciforti in Milan, from Lange at Zurich, or, farther east, from our own brothers, the Unitarians of Hungary. Let a traveller only feel that he is not alone in God's world and must not try to be alone, that worship is not complete when it is the worship of a cell or of a cloister, but must be sometimes united worship, or what the Latin calls com-munion, — and he will find that the Church of Freedom in our day has planted the banner of Faith and Hope and Love in every land.

I suppose this New England habit may be natural enough, or easily accounted for. Our fathers were driven here, — from lands which were not too kind to them. No thanks to the Church of Rome that they came! No thanks to the Anglican Church! They came to a wilderness which was very rugged — and they made it blossom like the rose. No thanks to anybody for their success in doing so, — but to themselves! And now that it does blossom like the rose, — now that they have surrounded themselves, I do not say, merely, with every comfort of outward life — but with every help as well for the nobler culture and the spiritual longings of men, — now that in the desert that Kedar did inhabit, these churches have grown to rival the noblest of the old architecture, — so that the choicest work of the kilns of Munich and of London admits the light of heaven for our devotions, that the walls of these places of our meeting blaze with the glories of Byzantium and of Italy, — it is not so unnatural that men should say, “ We were exiled from them, — and we are willing to stay in our exile, we will let them alone, — with a masterly inactivity.” “ If they can do without us, we can do without them.”

But this is, after all, as if the hand should say to the foot, “ I have no need of thee,” or the foot to the hand, “ I have no need of thee.” The hand is tempted to say so. The foot is tempted to say so. But the moment either does say so, and acts on its declaration, it cuts off at the same time its vital connection with the head. And when the hand is cut off from the head, — it is lost!

None the less are our churches exposed to this temptation. They have wrought out, — thanks to their own zeal and to the martyrdom of the fathers, — what, I have no question, is the most perfect statement of Christian doctrine which has yet been given to men. Not in vain has the Holy Spirit for nineteen centuries

led generation after generation into all truth. And they are willing to apply this doctrine, — if only they may apply it at their own fireside. “We will open the eyes of our blind, and the ears of the deaf who live next door to us, and are there any poor in these streets, we will gladly preach good tidings to them. That is our place. For the rest of the world, do not ask us to carry them our religion!” I could name to you more than one man in our own pulpit who is willing to say this. Why, it is only to-day that my eye rested on what is substantially this statement, in the printed words of one of our own prophets. He is a prophet who disproves the old adage. He is not without honor, even in his own country and in his own home. I sit at his feet and am proud to say so. I listen to almost every word he speaks with joy and exultation. But not with joy nor with exultation did I find him saying, that the work of the Unitarian Church was to leaven, but “not to conquer.” “Not to conquer.” When I read those words I felt neither joy nor exultation. No! I remembered what I had read of that duty in an older book; and never has the lesson left me. I have been sometimes enveloped in clouds and murky darkness. But with the memories and promises of that older book, and with the present encouragement of the Living Spirit, it has seemed to me, sometimes, that I also have seen the clouds rolled back for a moment and the smoke dispersed, and clear against the heavens, I could see the form of one who rode upon a White Horse, whose name was the “Word of God.” Upon his person he bore the title, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” I have not observed in history that his victories were won when his followers sat comfortably in their homes. The language of the Revelation seems well chosen, — which says that they were armies which followed him, mounted on white horses also; not to enter into their rest, but to follow the “Word of God,” even if the “Word of God” made war. I do not believe that they are meant to make war as the leaven makes it in the dough. I believe they are to go forth “Conquering and to conquer.”

In those armies the Unitarian Church is enlisted; knowing no leader but “the Word of God.” It is so sure of that Leader that it knows that its mission is to go forth “conquering and to conquer.”

EDWARD E. HALE.