

GS373

With J. F. S.'s kind regards.



How and Why I am a Unitarian.

A LECTURE

BY

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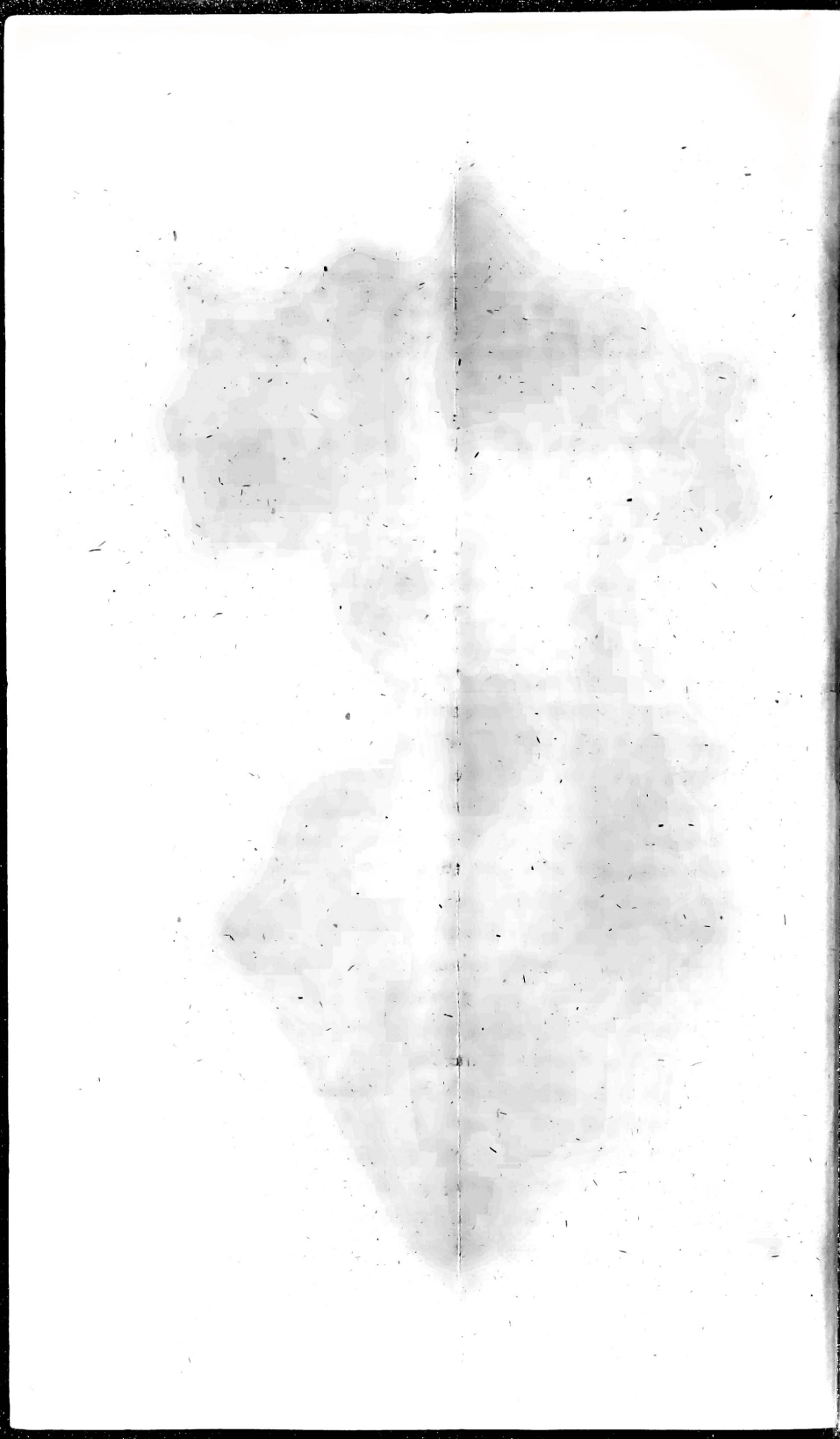
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How and Why I am a Unitarian.

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A question very analogous to that we have to consider to-night is, How and Why am I a Christian? The two questions are alike in several respects. It is exceedingly rare that any number of thoughtful persons agree in their definition of what Christianity is. The name Christian is an old historic name of very wide and very various significance. It can be borne by religious people of very dissimilar, or even of opposite, theological and moral tendencies. It follows from the compass of the name Christian, that men call themselves Christians for reasons as various as the senses in which they appropriate the name. Those amongst them who are not charitably disposed, deny to the larger number of their would-be brothers the right to use the distinction. The charitable confess amongst themselves that no definition of Christianity, and no classification of the only valid reasons for professing it ought to be attempted. Our reasons for being Christians are very personal as well as our definition of what constitutes a Christian. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that not a few minds prefer greatly to answer the question, How and Why am I a Christian? not directly and explicitly, but indirectly and implicitly. They prefer not to define Christianity or to formulate the reasons of their ad-

herence to it: a reply to the question more congenial to their ideas and feelings would be found by an examination of some of the living elements of Christianity and of their own spiritual necessities. They would thus avoid much unprofitable and repulsive historical and dogmatic discussion, while at the same time they would probably come much nearer the real heart and true import of the question.

The question proposed by my lecture, How and Why I am a Unitarian? appears to me to be in precisely the same case. We most of us know many senses in which we are not Unitarians. Some people are Unitarians because the Bible they think teaches Unitarianism: but certainly I should be a Unitarian if the Bible had been an earlier edition of Calvin's *Institutes*. Some people are Unitarians because they hold that the doctrine of the Divine Unity is the doctrine of the standing or falling church; yet I am of those who were I a Manichean or Zoroastrian on this head, should still class myself with the bearers of the Unitarian name. Like the word Christian, it is a historic name with no precise dogmatic import, but on the contrary of a wide popular meaning, including amongst its bearers men of very unlike, often of opposite, feelings and views on very important topics. I will ask you, therefore, to permit me to deal indirectly and implicitly with the question before us rather than by the method of strict definition and formal proof. This method will, I believe, enable us to come upon what are to many amongst us the really valid reasons for belonging to churches which are commonly described as Unitarian.

The substance of the answer to the question before us which I have to return to-night is this: As a religious man I stand in great need of certain assistance from religious association; this assistance is refused by the churches which are founded upon authority, but is at least to some extent

supplied by the Unitarian or Free Churches which acknowledge no higher authority than the individual reason and conscience.

A man's religion is that which he most sacredly loves and seeks: his profoundest desires, his best and most invincible tendencies, the deepest springs of his best feelings, constitute his religion. Now, some amongst us cannot overcome, and dare not now attempt to overcome, the deep desire to come into the right relation and attitude towards all that is not ourselves—God, Man, Nature; to use and cultivate fully all that is ourselves—the powers of our nature; and to fulfil the duties that arise from our constitution and our relation to things beyond ourselves. The religious association that will help us to attain this attitude towards what is without and to use and perfect what is within, is an association that feeds and sustains our religious life: it will be our church, even if it renders but imperfect help. On the other hand, the association that throws itself in the way of our deep longing in these respects comes into collision with our religion, retards and hinders what we count the highest and holiest attainment.

Let me explain a little more fully the nature of this deep religious necessity.

Our acquaintance with Nature is at present comparatively slight; but it is sufficient to call forth admiration, wonder, and gladness, mingled with fear and reserve. Our attitude towards her must be one of reverent enquiry; at present we cannot look upon all her ways with satisfaction. At times we could almost worship her, but not infrequently we are tempted to curse her. Now and here she is a loving mother to her children; but then and there she is a cruel step-mother. We know her at present as a being half-divine and half-demonic. Our attitude towards her is a mixture of confidence and dread, while we wait to

know more. The church that condemns this attitude by authority, in some form or other, not showing us why we ought to abandon it, cannot help us. We know that we *must* respect Nature and study her assiduously ; and we ask for aid to maintain, in the face of strong temptation to the contrary, this attitude of respect and enquiry, until fuller knowledge may exhaust the revelation and sanction a new attitude.

Our knowledge of Man shares the imperfection of our knowledge of Nature. Great questions upon which ancient churches had formal and final dogmas have of late been reopened, and many of them answered anew, and in the very teeth of the received authoritative answers. I refer to such enquiries as those into the origin of man, the unity of mankind, the mental, moral, and religious endowments of the various races of mankind, the history of religious and of moral ideas. The attitude we feel bound to take up in reference to Man with such questions as these still open, is one of profound interest mingled with reserve and eager enquiry. Not only shall we feel unable to attach any value to an authoritative dictum as to man's history and nature, but we shall feel compelled to reject any one-sided theory which will not consider all the facts known, and any final dogma which will not acknowledge that we are at present but just commencing an acquaintance with the facts. How could a church assist us in one of the profoundest instincts of our hearts—to study mankind, if she opposed that study, either by laying down a theory which rendered it unnecessary, or by condemning some of the established conclusions of science?

Just as our present knowledge of Nature and of Man is deficient, so our faith in God waits for completion and greater strength. At present our faith is sufficient to produce adoration and trust, but it stands in great need of accessions

both to its fulness and vigour. Our theology is our most precious treasure, but its jewels are yet uncut and its gold is uncoined. We feel rich in possession of it, and would die rather than resign it, yet we cannot define it. Our attitude towards God is that of profound reverence and trust, which does not preclude but rather commands earnest enquiry. How could that church assist us religiously that requires the acceptance of final views of the nature and character of God ?

Let us now turn for a moment to those duties that arise from the possession of personal endowments and the relation we sustain to God and Nature and each other. They give rise to great religious necessities which the true church ought to satisfy to some degree.

As men we are endowed with powers of thought and feeling, and the means of using them for ourselves and others have been put within our reach. These are all talents that must be employed and not left to lie idle.

If we take the intellect, we may observe that one of the deepest rooted and most ineradicable sins of our nature is love of ease, which shows itself especially in our dislike of hard and continuous thinking. Another sin is often associated with this of intellectual idleness: it is the sin of indulging ourselves in pleasant theories and beliefs: a fatal facility in acquiring and tenacity in holding notions that make us happy, with the corresponding slowness to receive any idea that is unpleasant. These two sins together are the evil genius of the intellect: they are the fruitful source of moral and mental ruin in innumerable cases. And the man who is at all alive to the strength of the temptation that will assail him from this quarter earnestly seeks help from those who are stronger and more faithful to the God who gave them reason than he himself is. He seeks a church that will drive him to think when thought is

wearisome and when it leads to painful results. His church must be no bulwark of authority for the faint-hearted who are afraid of thought, no retreat for the weary who are tired of thought, and least of all a castle of indolence for the idle who will not think.

The culture of our emotions is not of less importance than the culture of our intellects. Our emotions branch off into several directions. They are directed towards our fellow creatures who can appreciate and return them, towards objects of beauty and grandeur, or towards what is right and noble in conduct. Now, whether they take the form of affection, or conscience, or taste, they are in all cases great endowments capable of wide and fruitful culture. All three forms are essential parts of our nature, neither of them can remain in neglect without serious injury to our character and manhood. Whenever one of them has been allowed to usurp the place of the rest, individuals and society have greatly suffered. Conscience must not frown down the love of beauty; the love of beauty must not proceed to sacrifice the sanctity and chastity of affection; nor may affection disregard the rights of conscience and pleasures of taste. They are all instincts and powers which the reverent man will fear to slight; they all deliver a revelation of higher things when their language is understood; their development is the growth of the individual and the wealth of society. But it is hard to keep the balance between such closely allied powers quite true; and here, as everywhere, the root-evil of idleness bears poisonous fruit. Who will help us to train and cultivate our emotions with wisdom and due care? The church that will recognise some of them only, that will condemn others, and destroy the harmony between them by over-estimating more, is not the church we need. Within ourselves there is enough of this unwisdom: we seek those who will help us to get rid of it.

These powers of intellect and feeling have been put into the hands of creatures who can use them for their own and other's good. We have endowments, and we must apply them. This application of them is attended with great difficulty. It is a difficult matter to know what is good for ourselves and others; and when we know, it is difficult to do. All about us we see men pursuing wrong courses of action. Much of the benevolent conduct of men is weak, twisted, whimsical; it lacks rationality and thorough usefulness. Still more is our conduct when directed to our own interests devoid of reasonableness and adaptation: we are ignorant of what we really want; we are led by impulse or by custom: our manners and habits, our pursuits and occupations, our acquaintance and friends, are largely determined by accident and whim. We call aloud to the wise and strong for help to assist us in attaining right, rational, and noble conduct. Our church must be composed of souls that have at least some help to render in this our need.

We now turn from a brief review of some of the necessities which a church must satisfy to some extent if it can be a church to us, to enquire which of the churches around us meets our wants. Now, there is one vital distinction which will divide the whole of the churches around us into two separate classes, and leave us free to disregard the well nigh innumerable minor distinctions amongst them. This distinction is that of authority or private judgment; and it gives us two groups of churches; on the one hand, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Protestant Churches, and, on the other, the Undogmatic Free Churches. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Protestants are alike in this, that they fall back as their last resource upon some authority outside the individual reason and conscience, either upon a church or a book. The Undogmatic Free Churches, whether called Unitarian, Free Christian, Theistic, or by no name at

all, agree in this, that higher than any authority without is the living, personal judge within. Neglecting the less fundamental differences that distinguish them, this common characteristic of Rome and the Reformed Churches justifies us in classifying them all together so far as regards the requirements we put upon our church.

All these churches of authority at some stage or other obstruct enquiry and growth by the introduction of some authoritative and final doctrine or model : here it may be a creed, there a book ; here a canonised saint, there a religious founder ; but the difference of form makes no essential difference in the reality : an authoritative dogma limits enquiry, and an authoritative life limits personal and social development. The holiest necessity of our nature is to enquire in all directions until our intellect is satisfied ; to cultivate and train all our faculties and emotions without restraint until they find their true rest in perfection and full activity ; and to pursue any course of conduct whatsoever that our reason and conscience may command. But these churches meet us at some critical point of our intellectual enquiries with dogmas and theories which have ultimately no other claim to be received than the supposed infallibility of their propounders. So far from assisting us to maintain perfect loyalty to reason and intelligence, and aiding us to overcome the besetting sins of idleness and selfish wilfulness in thinking, they either forbid the exercise of the intellect upon all subjects, or they concede its unavoidable demands suspiciously and grudgingly. Not less do they impose restraints upon the full and free development of human nature. Their ideal of humanity was conceived in an uncultivated and decrepid age : it lacks essential elements of a full, rounded manhood ; many excrescences and deformities cling to it. Their ideal of society is equally imperfect, their kingdom of heaven becoming every age less adapted for re-

velation upon the earth. Through all history the social and political instincts of the best citizen have met with obstructiveness rather than assistance from these churches. They have assiduously cultivated some of the virtues of the good citizen, such as submission to authority, contentment under suffering, but upon other and still more essential virtues, such as independence, resistance to injustice, love of enquiry, they have put their bann. And some of the vices that have weakened society, such as improvidence, uncharitableness, untruthfulness, have been sometimes indirectly fostered at others openly sanctioned as divine. This authoritative and final model of manhood and society is commonly imposed by these churches either as the infallible teaching or the perfect model of life granted to men at the commencement of our era.

Having an ideal of man and society that descends from the remote past when both men and society were in important respects unlike what they now are, it can hardly be expected of these churches that they should be able either to wisely direct or morally strengthen the conduct of the individual who is seeking counsel and support. They do not really know what in our day is the one thing needful; nor if they knew would their theory of human nature permit them to supply the real strength and motive that are required. The lives that have been formed, and the conduct that has been directed by them, have not been of the type that we can to-day pronounce exemplary. The lives of priests and ecclesiastics may be taken as indicative of the real nature and tendency of ecclesiastical character and aims. These lives are devoted enough, but the devotion is to wrong objects, and is not distinguished for its sanity and fair, strong manliness. The course of conduct and prevailing characteristics of the chosen saints of all these churches have been deformed more or less by inhuman

other-worldliness, and want of clear intellectual sanity and vigour. The lives of St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, Luther, Calvin, John Wesley, cannot be considered as model and complete lives by those who know how great Heathen have lived and what Shakespeare and Goethe have taught. They are the lives of saints protesting against nature rather than conforming to her highest requirements. The work they accomplished needed to be done, but their fitness to do it rendered them unfit to become models of human character. Their time was out of joint, and they were born to set it right : but their ability to do this made them more unfit than a Hamlet to represent human nature generally. Without doubt in a sick and despairing age, their course of conduct and character had great charms for the hopeless ; yet we have more and stronger faith than to believe that the wants of a diseased period of human life are the normal wants of mankind, or that the regimen of sick men should be adopted as the law of their lives by those who are whole. *Memento mori* is for some few a needful sermon, but the greater and more general need of men is to hear the admonition, *Memento vivere !*

An enquirer for a church who brings with him such demands as we have been considering, will not, therefore, find his church in this first class of authoritative communities. He will find that they have determined for him another attitude towards nature, man, and God, than that which he holds to be the only true and reverent one ; that they have laid their bann upon conduct and pursuits which are to him essential parts of his religion ; that they present commands for his obedience and examples for his imitation which he must deem to lack authority, and to be either useless or injurious. Turning his face from Catholicism and Orthodox Protestantism, he will come to the few Free Undogmatic Churches that are around him, with the hope

of finding there help amidst his struggles after a higher life. Not that amongst the millions who belong nominally to these churches of authority, there are not thousands who are seeking just what he seeks : this he is happy to believe, and thankful to know personally some of them. It is the legitimate and prevailing tendency and influence of the churches only which he must pronounce opposed to what he thinks is best and holiest.

The Undogmatic Free Churches to which we now turn, have this characteristic in common, that they acknowledge no external authority as entitled to command the opinions or the conduct of others. They propose to no one any final and unalterable views of nature, man, and God ; they set up no absolute ideal of manhood, which all men everywhere, and in all ages, are to acknowledge as divine. They do not map out with unalterable lines the course of any man's pilgrimage to heaven. They know nothing of eternal plans and schemes of salvation. They rather hold that the beginning of salvation and holiness is in the individual's practical recognition of the responsibility that is laid upon him to think for himself, to shape his own conduct, and to cultivate any power God has given him. On this point they all speak with fervour and give no uncertain sound ; but on the great mass of philosophical and theological dogmas their opinion is divided and uncertain. They urge upon men by precept and personal influence that their holiest duty is to think, and to think earnestly and manfully ; to make the best use they can of any faculty they possess, training it to its highest perfection ; and to live a life as far removed from an ignoble and selfish worldliness as from the pursuit of irrational and useless projects.

On minor points these churches differ greatly amongst themselves. They have no common name. They are called Unitarian, Free Christian, Theistic ; and some of

them have no name at all. In most cases the name is not a dogmatic description, but merely a convenient and customary appellation. This, I take it, is the case with the name Unitarian. Our chapels are called Unitarian Chapels, and our ministers Unitarian Ministers, not because we care particularly whether Trinitarian arithmetic is correct or incorrect. We found our separation from orthodox Christianity upon a principle and not upon a dogma, that principle being independence of external authority.

Again, these churches have no organisation which unites them into one ecclesiastical body. They are the most purely congregational of all congregational churches. There is not even a common association that unites them all. This leaves each separate congregation absolutely free to pursue its own line of thought, and to develop its own type of character, and follow its own tendencies to action.

They differ in still more important respects. The position which they assign to the Bible amongst books, and to Jesus Christ amongst men, are very various. While they agree in ascribing superiority to the Bible and to Jesus only to the extent to which their reason is convinced, the measure of this superiority is of a very varying scale. Some would rank the Bible above all literatures, while others put but a low value upon some of its books, and would not place any of them highest in human literature. So, too, with respect to Jesus. His character and work are very variously estimated. To not a few He is a son of God as no other man has been, while there are others who consider Him as but one amongst other greatest religious leaders.

Not less undogmatic are these churches with respect to theology proper, or the doctrine of God. They have no formulated statement of their faith on this great article. Each enquirer is left free to form his own ideas of God.

If his tendencies are towards a pure theism, he will find fellow believers ; if he shrinks from ascribing human attributes to the Infinite, he will find that he is by no means alone. And whether his religious associates agree with him in his theology or not, they will urge him to be true to his own light and proclivities.

Based upon this great principle of free unfettered enquiry, these churches also leave their members free to cultivate their own powers as they deem wise, and to put forth their energies in whatever direction and to whatever purpose they think useful. The influences of these free societies may feed the springs of character and activity, but they do not force the streams to flow in any prescribed channels. Special ecclesiastical work is not cut out for their members as the only or chief work of God. They do not recognise the distinction between the church and the congregation, and they dare not call any human avocation or pursuit unholy and profane. They wish to enable men to do with all the might of religious fervour whatsoever their hands find to do. All days are holy days, all work is worship, all earnest effort is prayer and praise, every service of our kind is a consecrated ministry, every legitimate act of nature is an act of grace. Thus members of these congregations are left as free to act for themselves as to think for themselves ; they may form their own ideal of manhood as well as their own theology ; they may choose any spot on God's earth as their field of labour, and cultivate it with what means and in what manner they think best. Their religious associates do not command them *what* to do, but simply to do what they do *well*.

Based upon this great principle of individual freedom and responsibility, and possessing this practical breadth and divergency of ideas and aims, these churches appear to me to present religious association in a form which may

be made really and truly helpful. A small number of souls possessed with the deep religious desire to stand right with God, nature, their fellow creatures, and themselves, will not be hindered by the constitution of such free associations ; and the one religious bond that binds them together supplies the positive force which will make them mutually helpful. The mere fact of association upon such a basis gives immense strength to each member of it. The moment I know that those with whom I meet are possessed with the same sacred open-minded desire as myself to stand right with themselves and God, my own desire has acquired a vast accession of strength and support. The connexion with a society of men who are seeking the good and the true sustains us amidst the temptations of life. And these societies not only admit but seek out earnest and fearless preachers of whatever truth has been laid upon their hearts as genuine and of worth. If a man has anything to say, and can say it plainly, he will be not only patiently but gladly heard. Thus the simple but powerful elements of all helpful association are to be found in these churches : they have the sympathy of the like-minded and the animating and enlightening word of the speaker. These elements were the only essential conditions of that little church in Galilee, of another later at Mecca, and of one earlier than either on the banks of the Ganges. While the churches of Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, were simple associations of like-minded men with a speaker at their head, they were living sources of strength and inspiration to their members ; when they had hardened into ecclesiastical organisations, they became the source of bondage and weakness. Their simplicity was their strength. So is it with these Free Congregations. They have no organisation beyond the simplest arrangement for securing a chapel and the few services connected with it. The whole influence for good

of the association is to come from the simple source of personal communion and alliance in devotional acts and holy desires, and the exhortation of a brother man.

It seems to me that these societies contain constitutionally neither too much nor too little to render the assistance which we have seen to be requisite. Of course I know well that many of them fall miserably short of what they ought to be. Some of them are untrue to the name they bear and the very principles upon which they are founded. But the fault lies in the particular exceptions themselves, not in the principles upon which they were established ; and the generality of them are, I believe, in fact, as well as in name, vehicles of vast moral and religious assistance to those who are connected with them. And, what is of great importance, these churches are so constituted, that they are capable of adaptation to new needs and of indefinite improvement. They can be made whatever the members who compose them desire to make them. Everything about them is flexible and expansive. Their past history has been one of steady but continuous change and progress. They have gone on to find out gradually the depth and compass of their great fundamental principle of personal freedom and responsibility ; they have gone on gradually to widen their conceptions of man's true attitude towards the great facts and mysteries around him ; they have gone on gradually to learn that in conduct sanctity is allied to sanity, that human righteousness is a sweet and noble reasonableness, that one mission of the Messiah was to cast out the legions of irrational and whimsical demons that twisted the minds and perplexed the imaginations of religious people.

Here or nowhere, it appears to me, we have the lost church restored. In the middle ages men fabled that God's church had been lost—sunk into the depths of the sea, vanished from the worldly eye within the gloom

of impenetrable forests. The spiritual ear could indeed be surprised by the long lost sounds of holy hymns and chants coming up from mid ocean or stealing from the depths of holy woods ; but to the outward worldly eye, the sacred edifice was lost. Personally, I must confess, that that fable has long been truth to me. The outward church of God has been lost. But for the inward ear of the spiritual man there is still audible here and there, far away from ecclesiastical splendour and carnality, the sweet tones of bell and organ and choir, telling us that still the house of God is with us, that wherever two or three are gathered together in His name, He is in the midst of them to bless them. Only He cannot be with any of us unless we are true to ourselves and the light He has given us !



