

# ASPECTS OF MODERN UNITARIANISM

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THE LINDSEY PRESS  
5 ESSEX STREET, STRAND, LONDON, W.C. 2  
1922

## CHAPTER VI

### JESUS.

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#### (1.) *Importance of subject.*

THERE are three considerations which lend particular significance to the subject of this essay at this time; (1) there is probably more general misunderstanding and ignorance in regard to Unitarian teaching in this matter than on any other point; (2) it is a matter on which Unitarians differ very definitely from the commonly professed creed of Christianity; (3) the "Modern Churchmen" in their Conference at Cambridge in 1921 have expressed a prevailing view in somewhat conservative and ambiguous language which, in spite of disclaimers, is essentially in agreement with the Unitarian faith.

### JESUS

#### (2.) *The Unitarian attitude.*

It must be understood, however, at the outset that in regard to the person and the work of Jesus there is no official or unofficial Unitarian dogma that must be accepted by all who profess and call themselves Unitarians. It is of the very essence of Unitarianism that creeds are necessarily provisional and inadequate statements of truth, and that they require constant restatement. It is an ignorant travesty of Unitarianism to imagine that it has no creeds. Whoever has a faith must express it in a creed. Unitarianism is peculiar only in that it declines final and unalterable creeds. Moreover its fellowship is not based on credal agreement, but on spiritual and intellectual sympathy and liberty. As Unitarians we assert the reasonableness, as we achieve the practice, of religious fellowship, co-operation and common worship without demanding or even expecting precise intellectual agreement. There is, nevertheless, a generally prevailing and characteristic attitude of Unitarians to Jesus and his work which we share in common, but which we should all decline to embody in a creed by which to limit or define our membership.

#### (3.) *The divinity of Jesus in his humanity and goodness.*

It has not infrequently been said to me by new-

comers amongst us—drawn from all sections of the Christian Church as well as from outside—that one of the things that drew them to our fellowship was the fact that amongst us they learned more about Jesus as a real teacher, influence, and divinely potent personality, than they had done elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> That testimony in itself should be sufficient, if it were generally known, to contradict the absurd and ignorant idea that we Unitarians are people “who don’t believe in Jesus” or who “deny the divinity of Jesus.” But it is also commonly said of us: “Oh, they may believe that Jesus lived, but they think of him merely as a good man, one among many others.” Now words which in themselves are not false can often express what is utterly misleading by reason of their emphasis and the manner in which they are spoken. When Jesus himself rebuked the ruler who addressed him as “Good Master,” telling him that one alone is good, namely, God, it is surprising that the belief in Jesus as a good man should be lightly spoken of by anyone. Goodness is not so cheap that we can afford to

<sup>1</sup> This kind of thing has been said to a number of Unitarian ministers by converts from other denominations. I quote the following from a letter written to me by the Editor of this volume: “This has also been said to me. I doubted the sincerity of the remark until a friend who had been an orthodox believer told me that we spoke of the parables and teachings of Jesus, while orthodox preachers kept hammering away at old catch-texts.”

speak of it in terms like “merely”; and a belief founded in fact on the outstanding goodness of Jesus does not deserve to be dismissed as a futile heresy. This is perhaps one of the most striking admissions of the Modern Churchmen in the Girton Conference of 1921. They there impressively asserted their conviction that Jesus was absolutely, completely and fully human, and that his divinity was his perfect humanity. The Rev. H. D. A. Major in his editorial survey of the Conference Papers published in *The Modern Churchman* for September, 1921, sums up the matter in the astonishing sentence—“Perfect humanity is Deity under human conditions.” Leaving aside the inexcusable misuse of the word “Deity” which characterizes this, as well as other utterances of the Modern Churchmen, we get here the unqualified assertion of the essential Unitarian faith—that perfect human goodness is divine. In other words, the good man is a revelation of God: an incarnation of the divine spirit. To call him God under human conditions is a confusion of thought only possible to those who cannot escape from the peculiar dualism of historic Christian theology. God is not absent from any part of the universe, and consequently there is divinity everywhere; God *is* not the part or fragment but the whole substance of Goodness, Truth and Beauty. Jesus is not God; God is not Jesus; but Jesus is divine, and the glory of the light of the

knowledge of God shines in the face of Jesus. If you can find a man good without qualification, and learn from him the secret of goodness, you will not be far from God, who alone is the source and substance of the Good. We believe that Jesus was a good man—without that treacherously misleading “merely,” and that he was good because the spirit of God dwelt abundantly in him. We hail him as revealer and prophet of God because he was good, and because he taught in language of unsurpassed simplicity, and in a life of unsurpassed sincerity and consistency, the way of goodness.

(4.) *The implications of discipleship.*

We hold that discipleship to Jesus does not primarily demand, much less consist in, the awarding to him of titles of honour. The highest honour a man can attain to is the honour of goodness—to become in actuality what he is potentially, a son of God by reason of his fidelity to the spirit of God expressed in love. Discipleship means assimilating the spirit, and applying the principles of the teaching;<sup>1</sup> not the use of modes

<sup>1</sup> The following is from a small booklet written by myself for the guidance and instruction of my Church Membership Classes: “Unitarians hold various opinions as to Jesus, but they are commonly agreed in placing emphasis on the importance of his teaching. They maintain that Christianity should be the religion of Jesus—the religion which he taught

of address which may be emotionally exciting or satisfying, while they are not necessarily expressive of moral and spiritual homage at all. Jesus in his lifetime disliked this sort of thing intensely, if we may judge from his words. I have already referred to his disinclination to be called even “Good Master.” But he also said: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”<sup>1</sup> “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the

and lived—and not a religion about ‘Christ,’ making him a mystical mediator between God and the soul. They reverence him as a great prophet and seer, a fearless religious reformer, and a wonderful revealer of the truth concerning man’s relation to God and his fellow men. They desire to be known as disciples of Jesus, not as worshippers of Christ.” Unitarians understand the essence of the teaching of Jesus to be that twofold application of the principle of love which the Master himself declared to be the substance of Law and Prophecy: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, and Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. From these twin commandments Jesus explicitly develops (1) the Fatherhood of God—not limited to a race, or a colour, but absolutely universal; (2) the Brotherhood of Man—similarly universal; (3) the supreme value of the human personality; (4) the necessity of conscious co-operation and unlimited fellowship in a sect transcending, and all uniting society called “The Kingdom of God” for the true development and perfection of human personality. The real application of these principles, pervaded by the supreme principle of Love, is the only hope for the salvation of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7<sup>21</sup>.

things which I say ? ”<sup>1</sup> “ He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me.”<sup>2</sup> We believe that the essence of Jesus’ greatness as the revealer and prophet of God was the very fact that he claimed the loyalty of men and won their love not for himself primarily, but for God.<sup>3</sup> We most honour Jesus when we devote ourselves in his spirit to the worship of God and the service of man.

The test of discipleship which we as Unitarians and Religious Liberals demand therefore is not outward, but inward. It is quite an easy matter to call Jesus Lord, and Christ, and God, and yet to stand idly by while the brothers of Jesus are nailed to their crosses of persecution and injustice. He who has the love of God and the love of man in his heart, and manifests his love in life is a true disciple of Jesus, though he may never bow at the name, nor accept any of the officially sanctioned theories concerning the relation of Jesus to God. These theories are nothing but draperies and

<sup>1</sup> Luke 6<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> John 14<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Once again the Modern Churchmen are in agreement with us. “ Jesus did not claim Divinity for himself ” are the words of the Very Rev. Hastings Rashdall. Even more specifically the Rev. R. G. Parsons says “ Jesus lived and died not in order to prove himself both human and divine, but in order to bear witness to the truth, and to bring in the kingdom; not to glorify himself, but to glorify the Father.” See *The Modern Churchman*, September, 1921.

ornaments, which we must accept, or reject, or modify as the canons of reason and cultivated good taste determine for us. Some may find in the elaborate draperies of the Athanasian Creed, or in the gorgeous ornaments of Roman Catholic ritual, an aid to discipleship. If so, let them use it—but let them beware lest it become a substitute instead of a symbol for the reality of discipleship. We do not find it helpful. For us there are already enough mysteries in life and religion—mysteries of God, and not of human art. We find it a hindrance, not a help, to superinduce upon God’s mysteries our own verbal or material mysteries of unintelligibility. “ A man’s life, of any worth is a continual allegory, and very few eyes can see the mystery of his life.”<sup>1</sup>

The profound *human* mystery of Jesus, the Son of Man, calling over the centuries to his brothers and sisters to tread with him the way of life: drawing them by his influence, appealing to them in his teaching to enter into the same filial relation with God that he had realized—that for us is enough. It is not the way we talk about this great fact of Christian experience, but the measure in which we respond to the summons and accept the challenge, that represents our fidelity. If we are wanting in our response to the call to the divine life, so eloquently personal in Jesus, no

<sup>1</sup> Keats. Quoted from Robert Bridges, *The Spirit of Man*, p. 128.

amount of words steeped in an ancient piety or authorized by an ancient orthodoxy, will make good the defect. If we are strenuously and faithfully trying to respond, the ways in which we interpret our experience and visualize our call are matters which not merely *may* but *must* be left to us individually to express.

(5.) *Jesus the exemplar, not the object of religious devotion.*

The distinction between what is generally regarded as "orthodox" Christianity and Unitarianism was clearly brought out some years ago by the late Principal P. T. Forsyth, when he declared, in effect, that Christianity had nothing to do with the religion of Jesus, because it was a religion about Jesus. Jesus, on this view, is God: to be worshipped and adored—and it is not for us to attempt to pry into the mystery of his relation, as a member of the Trinity, with God the Father.

According to this point of view, and this dictum concerning the person of Jesus, Unitarianism is not Christian, because it is a religion which starts with man and seeks to detect in the highest humanity the revelation of God, and because it claims Jesus as the great exemplar of spiritual religion by virtue of the truth he taught and the man he was. It claims him as a man who worshipped the Father in spirit and in truth.

who loved and served his fellow men, and who thus stands out as the prophet of the eternal, the divine teacher and exemplar of true religion. The religion we seek to cultivate for ourselves, and to proclaim in its redeeming power, is not a mystery cult about Jesus, but the religion of Jesus, in the vital faith and experience of which he lived and died.

(6.) *The witness of the New Testament: influence of Paul.*

The common objection to this attitude to Jesus, which proclaims him as the great revealer and teacher of the essential things of religion, the great human captain and divine prophet, is that it contradicts statements made about him by New Testament writers, claims alleged to have been uttered by himself, and the approved theology and tradition of the Christian Churches. It must now suffice if I refer briefly to the New Testament records, and deal with the objection arising therefrom to this interpretation of Jesus in terms of a full and glorious humanity *which is divine*.

Anyone who really wishes to form an intelligent, as well as a purely imaginative, idea of Jesus should equip himself for the task of deciphering the books of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Textual and

<sup>1</sup> The literature on this subject is vast. The following books, all published by the Lindsey Press, will, however, put

what is perhaps unfortunately styled "the higher" criticism, have put at the disposal of every one the information which is indispensable to a better appreciation and understanding of what these documents are, and what they tell us, than was possible to the credulity which accepted everything in the Bible as the "*ipsissima verba*" of God himself. The New Testament is a set of documents compiled long after the death of Jesus when already Christians were gathering together into the Church. The oldest documents are not the gospels in the form in which we have them, but some at least of the Pauline epistles. Now Paul never set himself the task of writing the biography of Jesus—or an account of the teaching of Jesus. He seized upon what he heard about the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, and made this the nucleus for the religion, of which he was the ardent and impassioned Apostle, of the heavenly Christ. His imagination had been fired by a vision, into the nature of which it is quite unnecessary here to inquire. He was a man deeply versed in Jewish law, tradition and expectation, and he shared the common hope for any reader in possession of the necessary information with which to form intelligent judgments: J. Estlin Carpenter, *The First Three Gospels: their Origin and Relations*; S. H. Mellone, *The New Testament and Modern Life*; A. Hall, *Jesus and Christianity in the Twentieth Century*; H. McLachlan, *The New Testament in the Light of Modern Knowledge*.

the coming of the Anointed One of God—Messiah, or Christ. On the basis of what Paul heard from Christians and saw of them, he identified Jesus with this expected Messiah, and began preaching his doctrine of the Christ. Paul's "Christ" or "Christ Jesus" bears a similar relation to Jesus of Nazareth to that subsisting between Socrates, the Athenian philosopher, and the Socrates who was the mouthpiece of Plato's ever-developing philosophy in the dialogues.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Did Jesus himself claim to be "the Christ," or accept the title from his contemporaries? James Martineau's able plea in *The Seal of Authority in Religion* that Jesus did not accept it has never been really refuted. The following is quoted from Book iv. ch. ii. "It is one thing, however, to admit his belief in a reign of truth and righteousness as a promise made 'to the Fathers,' and now approaching its fulfilment; it is quite another to affirm that in his own person he claimed to realize it as its Prince and Head. That this also is universally assumed is not surprising, seeing that the synoptists assure us that it was so, and tell it as if it were an attested fact and not a later inference. Yet they add (what surely is not without significance), 'He strictly charged his disciples and commanded them to tell no man that he was the Christ' (Luke 9<sup>21</sup>, Matthew 16<sup>20</sup>). If the disciples had only kept that injunction instead of spending their lives in reversing it, Christendom, I am tempted to think, might have possessed a purer record of genuine revelation, instead of a mixed text of divine truth and false apocalypse. For, the first deforming mask, the first robe of hopeless disguise, under which the real personality of Jesus of Nazareth disappeared from sight, were placed upon him by this very doctrine which was *not* to go forth—that he was the Messiah. It has corrupted the interpretation of the Old Testament, and degraded

The gospels as we have them now show every sign of having been moulded very largely by the Pauline theology. All scholars are agreed that whatever early material lies behind and is partly embodied in the gospels, they are overlaid with the editorial addition and reinterpretation of a later generation. The stories of the life, teaching and death of Jesus which are what we call the four gospels were produced in their existing form under the conviction that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Christ expectation. They are not so much

the sublimest religious literature of the ancient world into a book of magic and a tissue of riddles. It has spoiled the very composition of the New Testament, and, both in its letters and narratives, has made the highest influence ever shed upon humanity subservient to the proof of untenable positions and the establishment of unreal relations. Knowing as we do, that Messiah was but the figure of an Israelitish dream, what matters it to us English Gentiles to-day whether its shadowy features were more or less recalled to mind by acts and words of the Galilean prophet? Tell us only, we are apt to cry, the things he really said and did: and how far they fitted in with your lost ideal may be left untold, as belonging to *your* life and not to *his*. Yet, however natural this thought may be to us, when we grow impatient of the strange evidence which the demons and the prophets are said to give to his Messiahship, it is hasty and inconsiderate. For, had it not been for this Jewish conception of him, we should probably have had no life of him at all. It is chiefly in this primitive school of disciples, gathered in the upper chamber at Jerusalem, that the interest felt in him was essentially personal, and hung around his image in the past, and watched his steps, and listened for the echoes of his words, to detect under his dis-

histories, as persuasive pamphlets, setting out to prove Jesus was indeed the Christ. Mark begins with the pregnant and challenging assertion: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The Fourth Gospel is even more explicitly persuasive. "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name."

guise the traces of what he was and was to be. In the larger gospel of Paul . . . the biography of Jesus, the traits of his mind, the story of his ministry, play no part at all. . . . That we have memoirs of Jesus at all we owe to the very theory about him which has so much coloured and distorted them; and we must accept the inevitable human condition, and patiently strip off the disfiguring folds of contemporary thought, and gain what glimpses we can of the pure reality within." But see on this whole question also J. Estlin Carpenter's *First Three Gospels*, especially ch. i. §4; ch. ii. ch. viii. §4. It seems clear that whether Jesus accepted the title Messiah or not, he did not accept it or claim it in the sense in which orthodox Christian tradition has thrust it upon him. He may have solemnly accepted the spiritual call of what was then denominated Messiahship—a call to sacrifice and service and death for the sake of God's kingdom; but he did not claim "Christhood" as a metaphysical entity, the possession of which marked him off as a being separate from man. He remained the Servant, the worshipper as well as the Son of God; because his sonship was not a peculiar privilege or isolated relationship between himself and God, but was the true relationship for all men to God.