



They became Unitarians

Published by
Unitarian Information
1-6 Essex Street, London W.C.2

Introduction

The four contributors to this symposium—a musician, a minister, a doctor and a professional man, active in public relations—have this in common—

They became Unitarians.

How this happened they related in a series of articles which appeared in *The Inquirer* during June and July 1966. By arrangement with the Rev. A. B. Downing, M.A., B.D. (Editor), they are published now in pamphlet form in the hope that they may help men and women who are in quest of a faith that makes sense of life and helps in daily living.

For information regarding your nearest Unitarian Church write to Publicity Department, 1-6 Essex Street, Strand, London W.C.2.

They became Unitarians

1.

The Rev. Richard Hall of Newton Abbot entered the Unitarian ministry last year after a distinguished career (which still continues) in music—as a teacher, performer and composer. He was up in London only recently to supervise a B.B.C. recording of his Third Symphony. A highly sensitive man in religion as well as art—indeed for him religion and art are coupled inseparably like Juno's swans.



Richard Hall

THAT little-known and even less understood seer, Jacob Boehme, said: "The Christendom that is in Babel striveth about the manner how men ought to serve God and to glorify Him; also, how they are to know Him and what He is in His Essence and Will. And it is preached positively that whosoever is not one and the same with them that so preach in every particular of knowledge and opinion, is no Christian but a heretic."

Boehme also asserted that the "true Christian . . . hath no strife or contention with any man about religion" and it is from this standpoint that I should

like to take up my threads as an approach to Unitarianism: not with the aim of imposing my particular thought about religion on anyone; but in the hope that what *one* person may have experienced may be of value to *another*, who, like myself, is an undaunted lifelong seeker after such truth—not the whole—as is available to mankind, knowing that we "know in part and prophesy in part".

It was not until very recent years that I became really aware of my own answer to the question of the well-known poster "Are you a Unitarian without knowing it?". I discovered (without even having heard of the poster) that I had always been so, though perhaps only to the extent of holding what is generally known as the "Adoptionist" view that the Spirit of God descended on Jesus at his Baptism. But I also felt—and still do so feel—that this can happen to anyone, sufficiently receptive, in any period of history: and that such a "Baptism" can be the result of contact with any force or circumstance which might be said to trigger off such an over-shadowing—and this goes for the spoken word, literature, music, art, architecture and the rest of the influences to which all are subject, as a matter of course.

My first intimation that things are not what they seem on the surface, to the normal *unextended* sensory apparatus, came at the age of about nine, when I got to know Rev. J. Tyssul Davis, who happened at that time to be minister of St. Saviourgate Chapel in York, and who also lived, as I did, in the same village in that neighbourhood. He took me into his study one evening and let me peer through his microscope. I have never forgotten this experience, not merely because he thought it

worth while to bother with a child in this way, but because it revealed another "world" and I realized as a result that, from now on, one could never accept or assert hard and fast conceptions about anything that were inadequately based and on a superficial view of the fundament of things. Here was a realm to be explored. But then, is not religion concerned with the adventure into the unknown "within" in man himself; with the journey inwards by which we attempt to make contact with and to fathom the nature of God, of man and of existence; and to see if any of it can be found to make sense?

I kept these thoughts to myself for years because I was "fixed" in the firmly traditional main-stream background of the State Church and later on came to be strongly influenced by (what a dear friend is wont to call) the "Anglo-Carboic" section, then more exotic than it is today.

The conditioning resulting from such a stultifying environment had far-reaching effects. It produced a complete state of bondage of thought against which a violent reaction became almost inevitable, sooner or later. The ineptitude and professional incompetence of some of the advice received in the confessional during these years took much longer to undo than to absorb; and the process of undoing (a painful one) led to an ever-expanding devotion to and experience of modern psychological knowledge and techniques, especially those of Jung, which have been invaluable all along the line. Although these things led, at first, to an almost complete repudiation of spiritual reality, one made the discovery, gradually, that one had only thrown out the man-made conceptions and the absurdities of the creedmongers in fact, but *not* the deep and richly endowed inner reality itself. Wordsworth's familiar phrase "Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie thy soul's immensity" touches on this experience that I find so hard to describe.

If this inner journey is to have significance, then, it seems to need the right *milieu*. But also it must be above the confines of the merely sectarian. I can only think of it in terms of the *universal*. Anything that suggests an approach to Reality which is weighted at the start, either as asserting something or,

in the negative form, as denying it, seems to me sadly out of date and inadequate to meet present-day needs.

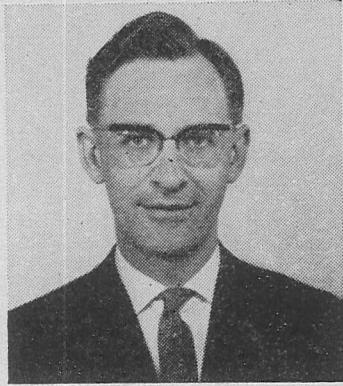
All of this was brought to a head for me by reading Dr. C. F. Potter's *The Lost Years of Jesus revealed*, which gives his conclusions and reflections on the Qumran Scrolls. This led me to question the "authority" of the numerous so-called Councils of Churches, both Ancient and Modern, which do not (I quote) "consider that one who follows Jesus and tries to live up to his teachings is a real Christian unless he also believes that Jesus was God" (p. 142). The great majority of ordinary people do, in fact, see no truth in a *mechanical* view of what is called Divinity. On the other hand, many (and I am one of them) would not wish to deny the divinity in any man. I accept, as did William Law in his later writings, a positive evolutionary view of the final destiny of man as expressed in the formula much used by other Liberal Christians the world over: "that all God's sons shall one day reach His feet, however far they stray." And, moreover, I am fully aware of the implications of this affirmation. It certainly contrasts violently with the sentiments of the so-called Athanasian Creed!

Thus it comes about that I am committed to a non-dogmatic view of both God and man and the mutual relationship between them, which could be described, with some justice, as either Theistic-Humanist or Humanistic-Theist, according to where the emphasis is placed.

At the moment I must leave it at that! But like that which the microscope revealed, here is a whole realm of possibilities about which little is known except through an inductive process of devotion and an extension of the inner senses; with this I would also couple the Act of Worship: to express man's response to the profound sense of the Mystery of this Inner Realm.

After all is said, I am persuaded that even the intuitive faculty has its logic, and Unitarianism does not need to stultify this nor to confine to an arid, barren or half-baked intellectualism, sadly out of touch with the Life of the Spirit (and indeed the Spirit of the times) as worked out in daily living.

Dr. Anthony White is a young medical man who joined the Unitarian movement a few years ago, and is now Chairman of The Strand Unitarian Church, London.



Dr. Anthony White

WELL, I suppose I took to heresy rather young. I can recall being puzzled at Church of England Sunday school by that sad hymn: "There is a green hill far away . . ." It is of course a crystal clear exposition of the central Christian tradition. But why did Jesus have to die to make us good? And how did it work? And why were some people still bad? And why? . . . ? As a boy I was always taking things apart to see how they worked. The insides

of clocks thrilled me! My questions about Jesus and God received convincing answers neither at school nor from a succession of vicars.

Arriving in due time at what the Church of England calls with splendid optimism "years of discretion" I declined the offer to receive confirmation because I found myself believing less rather than more. This at first was a source of sadness to my mother but after all I was only fourteen and my views would no doubt change in time! No-one compelled me. At school my growing fascination with science was accompanied by admiration for such scientific figures at Galileo who stood

up for the truth as they saw it. Answers to problems in religion seeming so often more ingenious than convincing, I passed through a stage of atheism consuming the works of Huxley and Haldane and others of like mind. I soon found, however, that they were not immune from by-passing difficult questions either. It became clear in time that there was "more in heaven and earth than was dreamed of" in their philosophy.

As I read and thought I began to suspect that there was some underlying truth in what religion was about, but that it was well and truly buried under much debris of many ages. The fire of scientific criticism was needed but it was not in the Church or at least I had not found it there. Searching and sifting I began to clarify my own position and doing so found my attitudes at increasing variance with those of the brands of Christianity then known to me.

My father understood all this better than I then realized. He said one day he thought I must really be "some sort of Unitarian". He seemed to remember that there *used* to be a Unitarian Church in . . . perhaps it was still there . . . Oddly enough it still was there. In it I found about eight people, two of whom were the choir. The organ suffered from very advanced asthma. None of this mattered because for the first time in my life I heard from the pulpit a religious view which made sense, did not avoid difficult questions, acknowledged the place of doubt and scientific inquiry. The preacher's words came so close to my own thinking at that time that I felt I knew what he would say next. It was a great experience. To find a layman with so profound an understanding of theology struck me then as remarkable. I now realize that it is more than remarkable: it is rare in a minister or layman. Gradually that God whom the Church had seemed to be hiding somewhere became discernible, less human because no longer made in the image of man, less sentimental yet less petty too, more real and more glorious.

This process of understanding then begun continues and will never be complete. This is to me one of the great gifts of the Unitarian way to those who find it (and you do have to look pretty hard unless you were as fortunate as I was!); that it discards neat formulations of "truth" which stand unchanged for ever, in favour of unfolding realizations. Ideally it is a church which guides and sustains many kinds of people on varying paths to enlightenment and who are at different points on their own particular journeys. Little wonder therefore that a young writer of a letter in *The Inquirer* spoke of a minister as speaking as it were "in a strange language". What a pity that the comment was made accusingly—this is a most essential state of affairs on occasion. It matters not so long as he spoke with meaning to other hearers at far different points on their differing spiritual paths. Herein lies true tolerance.

The Unitarian attitude to tolerance I value greatly and especially so in its attitude to the other religions of the world whose adherents are now so often our neighbours and working colleagues. In the course of time truths hidden within the traditional dogmas of Christianity have become clearer to me and I can see that many of those who belong to other churches are at least as much members of a spiritual church universal as we are. This applies to members of other faiths, Judaism and Islam especially, whom I have known well. At the same time I have found Unitarians who seem unable to comprehend this fully and whose attitude seems to be not too far separated from the scientific humanism outside religion altogether save in lacking the rigour of science in large measure. This to me is as great, and as understandable, a misconception as the doctrine of the Trinity, for both make God in the image of Man in their own way. True tolerance of such diversity is difficult for all concerned and I have come to see that the attempt to bridge very wide gaps within a community numerically small is one of the hardest tasks that the Unitarian Church has set itself. It

can only be done if tolerance is constructive rather than destructive. By this I mean that it is necessary to provide meaningfulness in the activity of the church for several points of view rather than to produce a compromise which offends none and inspires none. This is as true in the environment of worship as it is in theological content and I confess I find myself missing the artistry of the Church of England and the Catholic tradition.

True tolerance demands sufficient respect for the insight and enthusiasms of those with whom one disagrees to wish never to deny them the fullest possible expression of their faith. One of the least satisfactory aspects of the Unitarian Church for me is that the result of trying to produce a compromise can have the effect of filleting worship lest use of certain terms or ideas should offend those for whom they have currently no meaning. This compromise usually contains too much which is unacceptable to those who can accept very little, denies to those who are seeking more the occasion for finding it and denies to those who want to express more the vehicle for doing so. I believe this to be important because the Unitarian doctrine concerning faith and grace (if I may use traditional words) is that grace is not a perpetual state of euphoria consequent on having been "saved" but rather realignment resulting from glimpses of insight which are at best occasional. While these can occur outside a church as much as within it is the job of the church to make us sensitive to them when they are presented. Thus can conscience be sensitized and new ethics be forged for new situations.

Why do I remain a Unitarian? Becoming one was exciting, continuing is a source of both joy and irritation! For me it is a faith which is relevant to and has, I dare to hope, some influence upon living—in medicine, in personal and business relationships, politics, art and fields yet unexplored. I remain a Unitarian because in the words of Luther "I can do no other".

After twenty years in the Baptist ministry, for which he was trained at the Rawdon College in Leeds, The Rev. Lionel Reed became minister of the Unitarian church at Leigh in 1959 and is now at Brookfield Church, Gorton. He is the secretary of the Unitarian Peace Fellowship.



Rev. Lionel O. Reed

IN accordance with the Editor's gentle suggestion and my own inclination, this article is to be personal. I begin with an incident in my own life.

One wintry Sunday evening, when I was about eighteen, I went to a non-conformist chapel not far from my home. It was a plain unadorned sort of place and the service was of the simplest. I cannot recall what hymns we sang, nor can I clearly remember what the preacher said. What I do

know is that through those hymns and that sermon and the whole atmosphere of faith, hope and love, which was created by those ardent people who had gathered for worship, a faith in a loving God was born in me that gave meaning and purpose to my life—a faith which has endured through all the difficult years until now.

I discovered that night that religion at its best means fellowship with God and fellowship with all who seek Him and active goodwill toward all God's creatures.

That experience created within me a confident faith in God and the accompanying conviction that life is not "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" but an unfolding story of divine action within human life. More personally still it gave me confidence in myself and in my possibilities for good. This was not merely self-confidence, for it arose from the knowledge that although in myself I remained morally and spiritually fragile, I had resources beyond my own, as a plant rooted in the rich earth.

This spiritual encounter did something else for me: it gave me the sense of belonging to my fellows. Since all men whether they know it or not, belong to God, it follows we all belong to one another in Him. I began, also, to feel a special affinity with all sincere seekers after truth of all faiths or of none.

You ask "What has this to do with your joining the Unitarians?" The answer is "Everything". For when Unitarians are true to their genius they base faith upon a spiritual encounter and not upon a fixed creed, so in joining the Unitarian household of faith I was coming home.

I believe that a creed is of value if used positively as the expression of a living faith, but deadly if used negatively as a gag to prevent freedom of expression. But the encounter, not the creed, is the spring of faith.

In resigning from the ministry of one of the main-stream denominations and becoming a Unitarian minister I did not feel that I was abandoning Christianity. Indeed it seemed to me that the Unitarians were more loyal than most to the basic teaching of Jesus.

They taught, as he did, that the essence of religion is love; love to God and love to man. The Christian, they proclaimed, is not necessarily a man who accepts all the doctrines which have grown up around Jesus over the years; he is a man who takes Jesus seriously and tries to live in his spirit. The Unitarian Christian, I discovered, is not committed to a belief in

any of the historic creeds but to Christ's way of life—the way of faith, hope and love. For him the Prophet Micah expressed the heart of religion when he wrote “What doth the Lord require of thee but to be justly to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.”

I was drawn to Unitarianism because it said, in effect, that what matters most in religion is not how many things you believe but how deeply you believe the one central thing—that religion is loving God and your neighbour. I found, however, that Unitarians did not undervalue private prayer or public worship, or religious fellowship or the devotional reading of the Bible. But they thought of them as a means to an end, namely, that we might love more perfectly.

I was attracted to the Unitarian view of man, which seemed nearer to that of Jesus than the orthodox one. I had reacted strongly against the dogma that all men are by nature guilty, lost and helpless and utterly indisposed to goodness, truth and love to God, and that outside a comparatively narrow circle all was darkness and death. The Unitarians took a different view. What they taught was in harmony with the attitude of Jesus, who in his ministry always assumed that there was something within his hearers which could respond to his teaching. Jesus appealed to reason, conscience and to those spiritual intuitions which are within us all—learned and unlearned, black and white, Christian and non-Christian, primitive and civilized. They were not so unrealistic as not to recognize that men are often guilty of deliberately choosing evil instead of good with calamitous results, but Unitarians I found did not call upon men to despise themselves and to deny the presence of goodness within their souls. They told them to believe in their own moral and spiritual possibilities and to trace their innate goodness to its source in God, since we overcome sin not by brooding upon our weakness but by the positive choice of good knowing that in choosing good we are true to ourselves—our real selves—and to God.

I discovered it was quite wrong to say, as some had said, that Unitarians had nothing to say to the penitent sinner, for I

found that Unitarians believe as deeply as the orthodox that the divine restoration is as much a fact of experience as sin itself, even though they repudiate the need for an atoning sacrifice. It became increasingly clear that Unitarian conceptions were in harmony with the teaching of Jesus and my own experience.

Another thing which drew me to the Unitarians was their willingness to welcome truth from whatever quarter it comes. It is true that Unitarian Christians have an overwhelming reverence for Jesus and gladly call him “Master” for he has made a terrific impact upon their lives. As for the Bible, it is for most Unitarians the book from which they draw most of their spiritual nourishment. Nevertheless the Unitarians believe the Spirit of God is free and unconfined:

*Never was to chosen race
That unstinted tide confined;*

and again:

*We thank Thee, too, that other stars
O'er other lands have shone,
To guide the stumbling feet of those
who toward Thee struggle on.*

Most Unitarians have been able to combine a warm devotion to Jesus Christ with the glad recognition that the Spirit God is not bound but moves freely in the lives of consenting men and women of all faiths and of none.

For these reasons I am happy to belong to the Unitarian household of faith and I am proud to serve in its stated Ministry.

I believe that Unitarians have much to give, not only in the way of religious teaching but in spiritual fellowship within a believing and worshipping community—where each member is encouraged:

*“To seek the truth what e'er it be
To follow it where'er it leads;
To turn to facts our dreams of good,
And coin our lives in loving deeds.”*

Mr. G. A. Colbran, writes of the spiritual process by which he became a member of the Wandsworth Unitarian Church in London. He is a businessman engaged in publicity and public relations work, but he writes as a religious individualist for he feels that it is as such that he is welcome in the fellowship of Unitarians.



G. A. Colbran

WHEN I was a boy of twelve, I found myself about to lead the choir in procession down the centre aisle. It all began when the vicar canvassed the school for choral recruits. Ginger Moore and I, being vocally well-endowed, had been pressed into service. We seemed to make the grade at rehearsals, and on the occasion of our first public appearance I was given the honour of leading the procession. I was too shy to refuse.

Ginger Moore, the coward, failed to show up, and I found myself attired in what was not to me a manly raiment—a kind of white frock over a long black cassock that hid my shoes (cleaned only that morning) and rustled as I moved. I was required to bear a tall polished pole with a brass device at the top. I could see, to my dismay, that a coterie of boys from the school had turned out for the occasion, and were gathered in glee along the pews.

Goaded into motion from behind, I started on the gauntlet-run down the aisle at such a brisk pace that fierce whippers to

slow down came from the older ones at the back, but I practically broke into a gallop to get the ordeal over. We reached our places in record time, apart from stragglers.

The mantle of leadership was taken from me, and I faded back into secular darkness.

I grew into a solidly rational fellow, with a fondness for science. Like Descartes, I thought my existence into a proposition in logic. Like Hume, I reasoned myself into a cipher. I grappled with the Greeks, and chanted empiricism. Ethics became a branch of economics, and Locke and Hume, Mill and Marx, Hegel and Kant became my companions, some in my choral procession, others mocking from the pews, while the organ sounded a perpetual dominant seventh.

The Self was nothing but that which does not change in a changing world, and this changing world but a mirrored form of our woefully limited knowledge. And so on.

Nevertheless things could be thought out. Didn't the scientists show us how? Look—you move this here and lo! that goes round over there. Mass, length and time. The inverse square law. This is truth, for it can be demonstrated. Verification in sense experience, providing the temperature is constant. All that is needed at last is the basic law according to which the universe works. I began to look for this law in the philosophy of mathematics, beginning, like a child, with the number one. It turned out that when I cut one in half it made itself into two. If you took it away you had to put it somewhere. Then I discovered the square root of what I had left as I disposed of it. It had four dimensions like a relativistic weather-cock, with the wind always blowing into minus-nothing.

I walked in this abstract road with new companions. Coldly precise men who talked in equations. I began to think in equations. What is the simplest equational form? Why an equation? I succeeded in evolving a logical principle that in one context bore a strong likeness to an abstruse equation in

quantum theory. It was terribly simple, demonstrably true (to me), and it turned the universe inside out. Unfortunately it left me on the outside, a dreadfully lonely place to be.

Surely, I thought, all this logical legerdemain, simple as it is, produces only a statement of structure. There must be a law that is simpler yet. Beyond simplicity in terms, is there an equation that is indifferent to its terms?

Using my p's and q's, I managed to turn the universe back as it was. But it was not the same place for me, and I went about heavy laden and alone.

In a grimy London street I came upon a man putting up a notice outside a small church. It said that Jesus was a man. Did I agree with that? I was asked. I said I did, but I had never known before that there was a Christian church that allowed such a belief. I went into the church, and walked again down the aisle, and sat in a pew.

My burden did not drop from me like the ancient mariner's albatross. I sat and listened to sane words without metaphysical dogma. And then the terms dissolved into the equation, and I saw that the simplest law is not to be found through quantitative knowledge, but at the heart of understanding. The structure of reason is such that ultimate truth recedes like the horizon before the advance of science, but like the horizon it is always left behind, and the seeker is always standing on it and facing away from it. The universe is made so, and the human mind is so constructed. The simplest law is therefore beyond the understanding not because it is out of our reach, but because it is with

us always. Such a law is richly unfulfilled in the concept of relativity, and finds its eternal qualifying in evolution. We see things in a new light as we think we are knowing more, for this law is in the reason that unites all our faith and hope deep in the understanding. It is implicit in the paradoxes of Buddhism, but explicit in the Christian ethic. For Jesus was a man who knew and tried to teach this law, not as an abstruse pre-scientific axiom, but in its implications for human conduct. Just as in theoretical physics it is in action that all magnitude is manifest, so do our thoughts and behaviour determine for us the quality of our universe. It is the supremely simple law, this law of Jesus, the law that has no terms in its equation.

No man can grasp its simplicity, unless he can look into his own understanding and come face to face with that which is perfect.

Thus did reason teach me as I sat in the church, among people, as I was to discover, whose only accepted dogma is freedom to think for one's self.

How odd that I, the rationalist, should think myself back into a Christian Church. But there is nothing odd in the thought that theoretical physics and pure abstract reasoning might prove to be a steadfast ally for a future faith. A great scientist, Albert Einstein, has said that science without religion is lame, and that religion without science is blind. In the words of Sir Alistair Hardy, F.R.S., another scientist and a Unitarian as well, "What might mankind not do if he used the tools of modern science with the faith and inspiration of the cathedral builders?"

Production: Arthur Peacock
Press Relations Officer
10m 1966

THE INQUIRER

For news

about Unitarians and
their Churches in Britain
and beyond

For comment

and opinion by writers
of liberal outlook

For articles and features

about religion and life
to-day

Editor:

The Rev. A. B. Downing, M.A., B.D.

EVERY SATURDAY Price 6d.

from your newsagent or £1 19s. per annum
post free, from

**14 GORDON SQUARE
LONDON W.C.1**

Telephone No. EUSton 7554