



Unitarianism and Humanism

John H. Dietrich

I AM to discuss Unitarianism and Humanism, although I shall devote practically all of my time to a discussion of Humanism. (I have related these two subjects because Humanism is a form of religion, or perhaps I should say a form of religious emphasis which is growing up largely within the bounds of the Unitarian fellowship.) I shall speak of Unitarianism only as the natural soil for the growth of this new emphasis, for it is mostly within the Unitarian fold that we hear about Humanists. In fact just as we have Fundamentalists and Modernists in the Protestant churches, so in the Unitarian movement we have these days considerable discussion between Theists and Humanists, the only difference being that in our fellowship we have the highest regard for one another's views and differ with perfect sympathy and understanding. (The very basis of our fellowship is freedom of conviction and utterance, so there is no question of the right to preach either of these forms of doctrine from a Unitarian pulpit.)

I

What is this distinction between Theism and Humanism? Perhaps I can make it plain by a couple of defini-

tions. Cardinal Newman in his Grammar of Assent says: "By religion I mean the knowledge of God and of our duties toward him." That is Theism. It is putting first a study of God and the necessity of performing our duties toward him. By changing a couple of words in that definition, I can tell you my conception of Humanism. Let me put it this way: "By religion I mean the knowledge of man and our duties toward him." That is Humanism. It does not deny the right to believe in God and learn what you can about that which we designate as God, but it places faith in man, a knowledge of man, and our duties toward one another first. It is principally a shifting of emphasis in religion from God to man. It makes the prime task of religion not the contemplation of the eternal, the worship of the most high, the withdrawal from this world that one may better commune with God; but rather the contemplation of the conditions of human life, the reverence for the worth of human life, and the entering into the world in order that by human effort human life may be improved. In short, the task of Humanism is to unfold the personality of men and women, to fit and qualify them for the best use of their natural powers, and the fullest enjoyment of the natural world and the human society around them. It conceives of religion as spiritual enthusiasm directed toward the enrichment of the individual life and the improvement of the social order.

(This is the only religion that can ultimately save, this religion of faith in man. And this does not exclude a faith in God.) It is really the same thing as faith in God; for, whatever God may be, it is quite clear that he can manifest himself only through man's consciousness, and that we shall get more and more knowledge of him only by believing that our highest impulses are

his manifestations, tempered by our capacity to receive them. I am convinced that what the world needs more than anything else today is a recognition of this saving fact. It is not in the following of what we ourselves honestly think and feel that we shall find salvation. For, if there be a God, his manifestations must be continuous—to this and every generation just as surely as to any generation preceding this. And if there be not a God, it makes no difference—there is man just the same with his insatiable craving for something better than he has yet known, with his ineradicable feeling that his true nature, toward which he must forever strive, is greater and nobler than the poor showing that he makes of his life at the present time. Now this is a virile and a bracing faith, and it is the faith that saves, as no other faith ever has saved or can save. Why? Because salvation can mean nothing else than obtaining the highest and best for man—and that is the supreme object of Humanism. Humanism includes every faith, and every part of a faith, that ministers to this end. The urgent need of today is for this great faith to be blazoned abroad.

II

Before speaking of its relation to Unitarianism and the fundamental facts of its faith, I must say a word about the sources of its knowledge and the method of study adopted by this form of religion. In this respect Humanism does not recognize the existence of any supernatural. It adopts a purely naturalistic conception of the universe. That is, it does not believe that there is any personal being outside of this universe who controls and governs it, and who may do so even in violation of natural law. Instead, it believes that everything comes within the domain of cause and effect, that every-

thing is the result of a well-established order. And this principle it applies to the human order as well as to the natural order, and believes that every action in each person's life, as well as every fresh unfolding of the vast panorama of history, is the result of human antecedents and explainable by human causes. Now these constant laws are the conditions which determine human life, and therefore the knowledge of these laws, in order that man may conform to them or resist them as the case may be, is the foremost condition for the enrichment and improvement of human life, both the individual and group life. Therefore it adopts the purely scientific method of observation and deduction in its study of the facts of human experience, which is the basis for our knowledge and of our hope. And this use of the scientific method in religion is in direct contradiction to the traditional method which has prevailed in the past. Formerly men began with a theory. They then made observations and experiments and the best man was the one who could show how his observations fitted neatly into the theory. For instance, the chemist had a theory of the constitution of matter, and he made experiments in order to show that the theory was true. The most distinguished chemist was the chemist who could most effectively handle observations in the interest of his theory. But according to the scientific method, the chemist begins, not with a theory, but with the observation of facts, and then postulates a theory to fit these facts. He makes experiments, not in order to confirm a theory but in order to correct it, because he knows that no theory of anything is wholly true; and the way to find out more truth is to make more observations and to correct the theory where it proves to be in disagreement with the facts. You see the difference? I insist upon this because no man is ready to

go forward these days without the adoption of this scientific method. Formerly, if a fact did not fit into the theory, it was generally thought there was something wrong with the fact, but now if a man observes a fact which does not fit into the theory, he knows that it is the theory and not the fact that has to be changed.

Very well. We—I am going to say we from now on because I belong to this group—we believe that this is as true of religion as it is of other realms of thought, and we base our theories upon the experiments, or the experience, of life. Formerly, men postulated a certain theory of God and of man and then ordered man's life to fit in with that preconceived theory, but we study the facts of human life and experience and form such theories as these facts suggest, even though it means discarding all the consecrated theories of the past. In other words, we build our religious ideals, methods and hopes entirely upon the demonstrable facts of human nature. We begin with facts of human experience and find in them a demonstration of how human beings react to certain circumstances. We go to the naturalist and accept what he has discovered concerning the origin of man. We go to the biologist and learn what he has found out concerning the physical basis of life. We go to the physiologist and understand what he knows about the functions of our bodily organs. We go to the psychologist for instruction about the intricate nature and workings of the mind—about the evolution of conscience, the scope of imagination, the power of sentiment, the authority of reason. We go to the historian and learn what humanity has achieved, tracing the onward steps of civilization—the growth of law, literature, art, government, commerce, science, religion. We go to the educator and discover how the intellect and the emotions are trained and unfolded. We go to the

sociologist and watch the creative methods by which defectives are improved and so-called criminals reformed. We go to the student of comparative religion and learn the development of religious aspiration and study the forms in which it sought to express itself. We gather all these facts from the widest circle of experience, and in the light of these facts we affirm that man is the outcome of nature's highest creative impulse—a being, imperfect but improvable, with native capacity for the discovery of truth, for moral development, for religious feeling, and for the outgrowth of evil—and we seek to build a religion which will bring about these desirable results. We accept these truths concerning human nature as the basis and starting point of our religious doctrines and methods. We see man a very imperfect being, who has stumbled on through ignorance and waywardness, sorrow and superstition to higher civilization and nobler character, and we hope to speed up his development by changing his stumbling on through ignorance to a direct approach through scientific knowledge.

III

I must be brief in regard to the relationship between Unitarianism and Humanism in order to have time for some discussion of the fundamental tenets of this faith. In the first place, Unitarianism offered opportunity for the enunciation of Humanism by virtue of its underlying principle of spiritual freedom, by its insistence upon intellectual integrity rather than upon intellectual uniformity, by its offer of religious fellowship to every one of moral purpose without regard to his theological beliefs. But this is not the important thing. The real reason why Unitarianism was the natural soil for the growth of Humanism is the fact that Unitarianism was

a revolt against orthodox Christianity in the interest of the worth and dignity of human nature and the sanctity of human life. The real origin of Unitarianism is to be found in the revolutionary interpretation of human nature which was taught by Channing and his colleagues. Previous to the revolt of Unitarianism the Christian church looked upon men as almost entirely worthless, of no more value than the worm which crawls in the dust. It was taught that man was conceived and born in sin, totally depraved, doomed to eternal torment, from which he could be saved, not by any merit of his own, but only by the saving grace of God. This horrible doctrine was preached in its crudest form in New England by Jonathan Edwards and his cohorts, and it was into this New England of a hundred years ago, with no loftier conception of human nature and human destiny than this, that there came the revolutionary ideas of Channing and other men of noble mind. "Every human being," said Channing in his discourse on Slavery, "has in him the germ of the idea of God; and to unfold this is the end of his existence. Every human being has in his breast the elements of that divine everlasting law—of duty; and to unfold, revere, obey this, is the very purpose for which life is given. Every human being has the idea of what is meant by truth. Every human being has affections, which may be purified and expanded into a sublime love." "Such," says Channing, "is our nature. These are the capacities which distinguish us from the animals. These are the things which make it possible for every man to be regarded as a being of infinite worth and sanctity." And it was the pronouncement of this doctrine in contrast with the doctrine of human degradation as held by New England Calvinism that formed the basis of Unitarian thought.

It is only a step from this thought to another which forms the basis of Humanism; namely, that man not only is of worth but of supreme worth, (that he is an end and not a means.) In other words, Humanism is merely an expansion and a more rigorous application of the fundamental principle of Unitarianism. Indeed, Channing announced this logical conclusion, but it has not been fully preached by the majority of Unitarians. Directly following the words which I have just quoted, he says, "Such a being was plainly made for an end in himself. He is a person, not a being. He is an end, not a mere instrument or means. He was made for his own virtue and happiness, and not for the virtue and happiness of another. It is to degrade him from his rank in the universe to make him a means and not an end." And this doctrine which Channing preached one hundred years ago is seized upon by certain followers of Channing today and made the basis of a religion.

IV

Without going into detail regarding a number of things connected with Humanism, I want to speak in general outline of a few fundamental beliefs upon which the whole structure is built. And the first of these is the one I have just mentioned—the doctrine that man is an end and not a means toward something else, not a mere instrument to some other end unrelated to himself; and that therefore all men must treat themselves and all others never merely as means, but as ends in themselves; and while this may not be an entirely new doctrine, it is one that is constantly ignored in every relation of life.

In the natural world, life is constantly being used as a means to the purposes of other animals' lives; and

human beings in their conduct show something of that same principle. The slave-holder uses human lives for his own profits. The unscrupulous employer who overworks women and children is using them as means to his end. The white slaver and libertine are using human beings as mere means. So is the man who unjustly builds up a reputation upon the work of other people or rises to power at their expense. All the age-long brutalities in history, all the cruelties and foul play of the present time are but the examples of some human beings using others as means to carry out their purposes and desires. And this is what makes war not only horrible but inexcusable—it is the gathering up of millions of men by kings who have alliances to maintain, or governments who have financial interests to protect, and hurling them into battle, without asking their consent and for the sake of no cause with which they can have the slightest connection. In fact, treating people as only means to our ends is very common, so common that most people do it even in the trivial affairs of every-day life. It might be interesting for you to analyze your relations with other people and see to what extent you are treating them as means toward your own ends.

But being common does not make it right; and in protest we believe in the dignity of man on his own account, and in preserving all the values which make for the enrichment of human life. Insofar as that dignity was recognized by the old religions, it was made a borrowed affair, an emanation from the dignity of the creator of the universe. This idea was in keeping with other ancient beliefs. In the Middle Ages an individual counted only by virtue of the grandeur of the rank above him. The serf could be great only in the greatness of his landlord. He amounted to something according as he contributed to the splendor of the owner

of the estate; and his landlord in turn found reason for being in the grandeur of the overlord to whom he was vassal. This overlord looked up to the nobleman above himself until the emperor was reached, and then the pope, and beyond the pope, God. The ethics of the whole feudal system rested on this idea of serf, vassal, lord, each in his station finding his glory in the glory of his superior. This mediaeval conception of a descending glory still rules the religious thinking of most people, whether they are conscious of it or not. The Catholic church is indeed aware of it and says so frankly. The Protestant churches are not always conscious of the fact, but they nevertheless repeat the formulas based on the conception that whatever dignity there is to human life is a reflection from the supreme dignity of the King of Kings, and that man's part is to serve him and receive his care. Even Channing rested his idea of the dignity of man upon the thought that he had within him the germ of the idea of God. And so they all find their inspiration, not in being men but in being subjects or children of God. But our idea of the glory of humanity is not based upon any reflected glory. We see man as the highest product of the creative process, we know of nothing above or beyond him, the highest things of which we can dream are but the products of his own mind, and so the supreme object of our allegiance is human life. The same thing is true in regard to the purpose of life. The old religions make the glory of God the chief end of man, and all effort is directed toward his glorification, because man is only a means toward the fulfillment of God's purpose. But we believe that the chief end of man is to serve man, that man is in himself an end, and that the chief purpose in life is to create and preserve those things which give an ever-deepening value to human life. And so Humanism

at the very start declares human life to be the thing of supreme worth in the universe, insofar as our knowledge goes; and recognizes nothing which commands a higher allegiance. It regards man as an end and not a means for carrying out the purposes of a superior being; and so seeks to preserve and develop everything of human value.

V

The second fundamental tenet of Humanism is our faith in the possibility of improving human life. As we look out over the world, we are impressed with the pain and suffering, the poverty and misery, the hatred and strife, the ignorance and squalor, and the hundred and one things which afflict humanity and rob it of its right to life and happiness; and as Humanists we have faith that these conditions can be overcome, that a new order can be introduced which shall bring peace and security and happiness to the whole of mankind. Here is a world blundering and bruising itself, wasting its superb resources, weakened and impoverished by disunion and strife, and we believe that in its place can be built a world more uniformly sunny and joyous, a world united and skilfully organized, a world free from illusions and superstitions, a world proud of its developed strength and wisdom and creativeness. We behold multitudes of pale, dull-eyed folk condemned to stunted minds and coarse tastes; and we believe in a possible transformation of these into Ruskin's "full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted creatures."

This is indeed a faith that should put fire into the bones of every man who loves his kind. What else in all the world is worth while if only an era of individual and social righteousness can be established upon earth, and life can be made desirable to the whole of man-

kind? It was this faith that gave volume and power to early Christianity. It was not the pathetic tale of the life of Jesus, nor the tragic story of his death; no, nor the innocent myth of his triumphant resurrection, that fired those early Christians with passionate enthusiasm. It was their grand faith in "the kingdom of God" which these men saw in prospect, and for the realization of which they endured every kind of hardship and suffering. And it is this faith that will give volume and power to our Unitarian movement, and it is this faith that will conquer the world if only we carry it to the world in such form as to make men despise things as they are and passionately long for things as they should be.

In the present restless and disturbed conditions of the world, no faith less than this can conquer humanity. Man will not now listen to the petty plans of the ordinary religionist, with his fantastic scheme of salvation in an unknown world hereafter. He must have instilled into his heart the greatest, the biggest, the noblest thing that man can conceive—nothing less than a perfect society, an ideal fellowship, an era of perfect justice can satisfy and win him. It is not necessary that he actually hope to witness its establishment; it is enough that he can think of it, that he can believe in its coming, that he can work for it with his brain and his hands. You remember the dying words of the young revolutionist, condemned to death in Russia, "Though we die we have bright hopes." He did not ask to see the nobler social and political order that he believed was to come; it was enough for him that he believed and that he could give his life for it. And so should we think of this grander order, this universal society, this commonwealth of man, which the heart and mind unite in demanding as the result of the toils and struggles of

all the generations of men. Cannot we also cry, "Though we die we have bright hopes," and go forth in life with strength and courage, because we have faith that the world is moving toward this goal, and we can give our lives for it?

And this grand faith, which must be the strength of humanity, the popular religion has not given us, and apparently has no aim of giving us. Its dream of a perfect social order has its accomplishment somewhere else, and has no relation whatever to this actual order in which we now live. In fact, it has given a kind of sanction to the order of society as it now exists, and feels slight impulse to create a new one. Therefore must come with passion and with enthusiasm our Humanistic religion—not preaching acquiescence and submission to the present order, but holding up in contrast to what we see about us an era in which reigns perfect peace, perfect justice, and perfect good will—and declaring unto men that in this idea alone is there any sacredness and authority; and that every sacrifice made in its interest is a noble act, and that everything done to deter its progress is an eternal wrong. This is the faith that the world needs today. It does not need an ecclesiastical religion, it does not need more priests and prayers and holy books, it does not need literary essays on academic subjects; but it does need the never-ending voice of the prophet going up and down the land, crying, not as of old, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," but "Prepare ye the way of mankind, and make its way straight."

VI

The third fundamental doctrine underlying Humanism is a belief in the essential unity of mankind, and the necessity of bringing men to a consciousness of this

unity if the better world is ever to be established.) Everywhere we turn today we meet racial antagonisms, national jealousies, class struggles, religious prejudices, individual hatreds; and it is not strange that the majority of men have no thought of human solidarity, no ideal of world unity. But, in spite of this, we dare to believe that there flows through the whole human race, from the lowest to the highest, one life and one blood, and that man's salvation depends upon a recognition of this human solidarity. Either we must find that underlying unity and march on together to that common ideal and purpose, or mankind is hopelessly doomed. And so whether or not we are brothers because we have a common father, we are brothers because we have a common life and a common interest; and it is this common life and this common interest which man must be brought to realize.

So while others continue to preach creed and class and caste and the many things which drive men apart, we have faith to believe that men and nations can come to live for the good of humanity, as well as for their own good and welfare. We have faith to believe that men and nations can learn how to cooperate for the sake of the common good of all mankind, that there will emerge at length one common objective goal toward which all mankind will strive: namely, the establishment of a commonwealth of man, which shall be built upon the principle of good will and service to humanity. We have faith to believe that in the consciousness of this unity lies the only road toward a better world, and personally I believe that in the practice of this brotherhood lies the only path to human survival. And in the light of this faith it becomes our duty to proclaim, only in a far deeper sense, the cry of the French revolutionist, "Be my brother or die."

VII

4 (The fourth and last tenet of Humanism that I shall mention is faith in man—belief that the power to realize these great ideals lies in man himself.) In other words, we have an abounding faith in humanity, and in its ability to create this better world. Whatever faith in God may mean to other people, there is no question that it means to us simply faith in man and his ability to accomplish what he sets out to do. For we have reached a point in our development where we realize that the character of our human society is not controlled by blind forces nor by conscious forces outside of humanity. The kind of world we live in depends not upon some God outside of man, but upon man himself; or, if we choose to put it that way, upon the God that dwells in humanity. It matters not which way you put it, the responsibility clearly rests upon man. In other words, the character of man's life on this planet depends not upon divine intervention nor upon prayer; but upon what we ourselves are and what we ourselves do. This does not mean that a rational conception of God is ruled out of life; it simply means that the emphasis is changed, and with that emphasis is changed the responsibility and duty of man.

Let me make this perfectly clear to you. This faith of ours that the vision of that perfect society which we behold depends upon ourselves for realization is the most revolutionary thought that has ever been introduced into the religious world. (We do not believe in that friendly providence, which the other religious sects feel sure will establish the kingdom of God, whether we desire it or not. We have no thought of a miracle-working God as taught by the popular religions, who

will intervene at the critical moment, ignore all the stupidities and blunders of mankind, and without any regard for natural law, establish his kingdom. Neither can we believe any longer in some supreme cosmic principle that is working inevitably along the lines of progress towards the better era, regardless of what man does or fails to do. In fact, we believe that such faith is a menace to the world, insofar as it teaches men to depend upon God for what they should do themselves.) The trust that most people have in some outside power that will surely establish the kingdom of heaven upon earth, apart from humanity, must be driven utterly from the minds of men if progress in this direction is ever to be achieved. Let men hold their ideas of God if they will, but we must insist that whatever God does he does through men and not for men. To some people this reversal of thought is tremendously humbling, but to me it is inexpressibly inspiring. For what does it mean? It means simply this—that the better order of things, which for centuries men believed God was to produce for us in another world, we are ourselves to produce in this world. The other view places all the responsibility for failure on God or providence or some cosmic principle. Our view places it where it belongs, on man himself. If there is ever to be established an era of peace and justice and good will, we insist that it depends upon ourselves—upon what we are and what we do. We hear clearly the command, “You yourselves must do the good which you desire.”

And we answer this command with a dynamic faith in man and in his power to be and to do everything that is needed. We say to the world, “Behold what man has achieved in the past. Every institution that exists in the world—educational, social, religious, political—has been thought out and then wrought out by this

creature which we call man. All the truth and justice and social order that we know today is the product of man's effort.” And when we contemplate the stupendous achievements of the past century, we are forced to believe that there is a kind of omnipotence in human nature, the possibilities of which we have not yet begun to dream, and to cry with Swinburne, “Glory to Man in the Highest, for Man is the Master of Things.” Man's ability to be and to do is limited only by the degree of his faith in his powers to achieve. It is not faith in dogmas and creeds that the world demands today, it is faith in oneself and in one's fellows. If the world at large had that faith, we could indeed remove mountains, even the mountains that stand in the way of human betterment. We talk about the dangers of a lack of faith in God, but it is not important whether or not a man believes in God; the real danger lies in the denial, not of God but of the fact that an ideal justice can conquer the world and that men can and will do the good. Our failures to achieve progress toward this better world in the past have been chiefly due to the fact that we have all been inclined to place the responsibility for things as they are on providence or God or nature, instead of realizing that we ourselves are to blame; and a great advance in this direction will be made just as soon as men are honest enough and brave enough to assume the responsibility which clearly belongs to them, and resolutely set themselves to righting the wrongs that exist, and removing the obstacles that keep us from realizing a better society.

Men and women, do you realize what this faith of ours means? It means that we, I mean humanity, are responsible for the present miserable condition of this world; it means that we are responsible for the millions of lives that were snuffed out in the great war; it means

that we are responsible for the hundreds of thousands who are starving in Europe today; it means that we are responsible for the millions of people who suffer for the lack of employment at this time; it means that we are responsible for every undesirable feature of our civilization; and that we are responsible for the future condition of society. The life of humanity at least on this planet rests in our hands. We can choose the path that we will follow, and we can follow the path that we choose, if we really so desire. We can make this world what we will. We hold the keys to the future in our own hands. If there is ever to be a better order of human society it will depend upon us and upon no one else. Think of the awful responsibility this places upon our shoulders; and in the light of this responsibility how can we keep on dallying with petty manners in religion—reading bibles, mumbling prayers, throwing ourselves in the arms of Jesus.

This is the basis of the faith which we call Humanism, and this indeed is the religious need of the world, and I pray that our Unitarian churches shall ring not only with all the old-time enthusiasm of our fathers, but also with the modern-time spirit, which needs only their lofty devotion and willing sacrifice to fulfill the world's new sturdy saving summons, "Thou must do the justice that thou cravest." In the light of such a faith it becomes our supreme duty in this world to hold before the gaze of men the vision of a perfect social order, to preach the absolute necessity of the practice of human brotherhood, to hold aloft as the supreme object of our allegiance human life itself, and to turn the thoughts of men from the altars of the departed gods to the tasks which lie about them, and to help them realize that the destiny of human life on this planet rests in their hands; for, once we transfer men's efforts

from seeking help from heaven, whence no help comes, to a firm and confident reliance upon themselves, the progress of humanity toward an era of peace and happiness is assured.

(In fact, I am assured that there is no possible future for religion except as it broadens itself out into this Humanistic position.) All real progress is brought about by the application of the spirit of Humanism, by a real and living faith in the power of man to achieve, and a consecrated devotion to the ends of human life. Every advance in freedom and self-development is a result of the application of this spirit; but in the past it has been applied by men of science and of industry, and not by religion. It is right that men of science and industry should be at the back of all efforts of progress; but religion should be there also, and should be the inspiring force; and religion would be there if it were the religion of Humanism.