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THE

RADICAL DIFFERENCE

BETWEEN

LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY AND ORTHODOXY.

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C

S Y N O P S I S.

Introduction. The importance of true intellectual conceptions. Sophism and danger in the current saying, "It makes no difference what a man believes, so that he does right." Unitarians attach vital importance to Right Doctrine, although they have no formal creed.

Authority in Religion. Analogy of the law courts. The Supreme Court, or court of final appeal. Three great divisions of Christendom, in answer to the question, What is the source of authority? 1. The Roman Catholic—believes in Reason and in the Bible; but his final authority is the Church. 2. The Evangelical Protestant—believes in the Church and in Reason; but his "Supreme Court" is the Bible. 3. The Liberal Christian—believes in the Bible and in the Church; but his final authority is "God speaking in the Reason." Definition of Reason includes the moral and spiritual faculties. "The consensus of the competent." Analogy of astronomy. "God's Scripture is the world, and his Son, mankind."

"The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose." — ARTICLE I. of the *By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association*.

THE RADICAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY AND ORTHODOXY.

IN the present undertaking of a series of evening discourses, my associate and myself have two purposes. The first is to impress upon the members of our own church and congregation more definitely the things commonly believed among us in their vital meaning ; and the second purpose is to meet inquirers, of whom there is an increasing number, including doubters and critics, and give them an opportunity to hear the principles which Unitarians maintain and the truths they trust, as well as to make known to them the communications of divine things which the Unitarian looks to for the inspiration of his life. In one sense, indeed, all the preaching from this pulpit is doctrinal, for preaching is only teaching, and teaching is only “doctrine” written large. The instruction and exhortations of this place all spring from certain convictions concerning God and man, and duty and destiny, deeply cherished by the speakers, who could not stand here an instant without the conviction of mighty, upholding truths, living words of God, from which they try to give messages and of which they try to be witnesses. But occasions come when we should present these truths in definite contrasts, and describe them in and through their opposites. All knowledge is simply classification,

and classes are known only in differences. We think the hour and times ripe for declaring anew and strongly the radical distinctions in the point of view and in the methods of spiritual apprehension between what is known as Orthodoxy and Liberal Christianity. We would note these differences with earnest charity, and with a constant sense of the fact that Christlike lives spring up everywhere, under every creed, from a deep subsoil of the unwritten grace of God. This fact, however, when rightly analyzed, we think, does not at all lessen the importance of having a right belief. True intellectual conceptions are of immense importance, and historically affect whole civilizations. Individuals may be better or worse than their apparent creeds; but their creeds, so far as they really express convictions, almost always color life and character, and immediately affect all action. And here let us spend a moment upon that cant speech which is sometimes still heard in the mouths of our own Unitarian people, that "it makes no difference what a man believes, so that he does right." There is a sophism and a danger in such words. The phrase came into vogue probably from the vast amount of unconscious "make-believe" that there is in the religious world. For when creeds are made standards of religious union one man may take his creed at second-hand, may call it his without really understanding or appropriating it, while another man may be without any such formal profession; yet both of these men may be "doing right,"—leading what are called good lives. And judging superficially, an observer might say it makes no difference what they believe, nor what their creeds are or are not. But it would be easy to show that each of these men has, at least with reference to conduct, some under-convictions and roots of confidence, some real beliefs, which vastly concern his own life and other people's. We

do not say it makes no difference what a farmer believes about soils, or what a sailor believes about navigation, for we know what he really believes he does and acts upon ; the crop or the voyage is profoundly affected by that belief.

The Hindu people, the most religious portion of them, believe that this material world is an illusion, a mere dream ; and acting upon this real belief, take no sort nor manner of interest in the beauty and order of Nature, and cultivate no physical sciences. What we call science is impossible with that prior conviction of all visible things being mere dream stuff. This erroneous philosophy of India has made an immense difference in the civilization of half of Asia. Torquemada, in Spain, believed in common with his age that God hated and punished a heretic everlasting ; and his belief, being real, profoundly affected his action. "He thought he did right" by torturing and burning thousands of his fellow-beings. That he did not really do right let history declare, which holds his name almost in execration. Let it then be remembered that Unitarians, men and women who are such from conviction, attach vital importance to right thinking and to true doctrine, although as a denomination they have no formal creed. And if you ask why Unitarians have discredited formal creeds, the answer is, Because of the abuse made of them ; because a creed that is made authoritative seems to us to arrest human thought, and to shut out the living and progressive revelations of Truth. But right belief, and growing into more and more perfect statement of it, we deem to be a duty of the highest order. It is therefore we, and not Orthodox Christians, who are pressing the question of belief,—we, and not they, who push intellectual activity ; and we think it is of God's inspiration that our church exists to vindicate

the deeper truth and larger methods of his grace, in order that they, as well as we, may live diviner lives.

Let us now note as sharply as we can that radical difference between Liberal Christianity and Orthodoxy which is brought out by the question of Authority. This is the question the answer to which constitutes the fundamental divisions of Christianity. What is your authority? is a common query even in every-day affairs where men's judgments and conduct are at issue. For example, how am I to spell a certain word? My friend and I differ. I say, Let us consult the dictionary; and I lay hold on my Webster. But, says he, I consider Worcester the authority in spelling. A third person might say, Consult the Century Dictionary; that, without doubt, is the highest authority we now have about words, either in spelling or definition. Now, unless we can agree upon one authority as final or better than others, we must agree to disagree. Take another example. If a man has a controversy at law, say about a boundary and some supposed trespass, the parties first appear in a justice court. Then, perhaps, the case is appealed to a higher court, and again to the supreme court of the State, and again, when the subject-matter is momentous, the case may reach the Supreme Court of the United States. That is the final authority in all law questions, beyond which there is no appeal. All litigants agree to it, and its answer settles permanently the principles of national law and interpretation of statutes. So in religion the special questions asked about special doctrines are all secondary to the great main question — about authority. What is your court of final appeal? Where do you go for your final word and guidance, among conflicts and differing testimonies and experiences? Let us carefully note the answers given, and I think we shall see how fundamental are the differences — how distinctly they

throw the thinkers into great divisions or classes. There are three cited authorities or sources of light which men can consider when the question arises, religion-wise, as to what they shall think and do. One is the average consciousness, the ordinary intelligence, the personal sense of truth or error, of right or wrong, or the average moral sense. Another source of light is called Revelation, especially as it is contained in elect experiences and records. Another source of authority is some body of men who by superior wisdom or traditions are deemed qualified as interpreters,— a corporation, so to speak, who hold in trust all the possible solutions and answers. Shortly, we may describe them as Reason, the Bible, the Church; and let us bring up to these the three actual divisions of Christendom,— the Roman Catholic, the Evangelical Protestant, and the Liberal Christian.

You will please note that all of them believe in and use all these means, but differ in the rank assigned to each. The Roman Catholic believes in all three of these sources of knowledge. He uses Reason,— he appeals to it in himself and in other men. He also believes in the Bible, and appeals to that for a large part of what he thinks and does and believes. But above all he believes in the Church as a divine oracle, a miraculously constituted authority. The consistent Roman Catholic stands firmly and unfalteringly upon the Church and its representative decisions for final truth. The Church for the Catholic interprets the Bible, and continues the direct revelation of the truth. The Church is above Reason, either of the individual or of collective humanity. The Roman Church through its institutions declares what its members shall do and say, and even what they shall think on matters of faith or knowledge. The Greek Church belongs to this same class, though separate ecclesiastically, because in the same way

the authority about any doctrine is with the Church. And we may say the Episcopal communion also,—that portion which really believes in the apostolic succession and its authority, may be classed with the Roman Catholic; as a matter of fact the strictest Episcopalianists are, by the logic of their High Church doctrines, often carried over to the Roman Catholic fold.

Let us now turn to Evangelical Protestantism. Here again we may say all three of the authorities we have named are believed in, for the Protestant reasons and takes the reasoning of others. He believes also in the higher collective wisdom of the Church as an organized institution, and in the traditions it adopts, or the symbols or creeds it ordains; but his final authority, his supreme court of appeal, is the Bible and the word of God there contained, which is to him infallible for all spiritual and moral truth. Protestants are, indeed, divided into many sects, according to the interpretation which is put upon Scripture, or the emphasis of some doctrines, or form or method of Church government; but they unite in declaring the Bible to be finally authoritative. For example, the Calvinist claims that the Bible teaches election and predestination; the Arminian claims that the Bible teaches free grace offered to all; and the Seventh-Day Adventist finds the perpetual ordinance of the Saturday-Sabbath there; but what really unites them all in one body, as contrasted with Roman Catholics, is that they declare the Bible to be really and finally their authority. What they differ about is only the interpretation; but they intend to believe and obey whatever the Bible says. Suppose the doctrine of everlasting punishment is in court. The Evangelical Protestant accepts it simply and only because he thinks he finds it in the Bible. Many Evangelical believers admit that Reason and Conscience protest

against it, but the protest is sternly put down, and is called a temptation of the Devil. Doctrines like the trinity, or vicarious atonement, or the miraculous conception, or second advent, are generally believed, when believed by Protestants, on the authority of the Bible over the Reason and Conscience which may seem to testify against them.

So much for the classification of Catholic and Evangelical Protestants. You are now prepared, I trust, by the lines already indicated, to anticipate the Liberal Christian position. Like the others, the Liberal Christian accepts all three authorities ; but he takes up the remaining possible position, as to which is, if not final and supremely authoritative, at least the highest authority, and progressively final in the history of our race.

The Unitarian receives the Bible and the Church,— the former as a historical monument of immense value, the greatest religious literature on earth. He values each as a depositary of truth and holiness, but he holds neither of them to be infallible nor authoritative in any sense of finality. The supreme court of the Liberal Christian is Reason ; not, I beg you to consider, not any man's and every man's reasoning ; not anything that may chance to come into a man's head, nor even what is called the understanding or logical faculty in man ; not the reason of Asia or Europe, but Reason in universal humanity. We use the word Reason in a high and generic sense,— for the cumulative consciousness, thought, conscience, and the continuity of spiritual apprehension in man, in men, in human nature. And in order to convey more fully what we mean, we prefer to say that our supreme court, our final authority, is the voice of God speaking in and through the Reason as its perpetual tabernacle. We regard as the ground of all truth the perpetual covenant of light and life from God to man. By Reason we mean no less than that.

It is the totality of human capacity to discover and receive divine truth, and to receive its testimony down to the present hour. If you ask whose Reason, and how the decisions are made up and become authoritative, I answer that the selection is all the while going on, and the answers are being registered in the truths that survive and nourish the race.

You will see then how the Unitarian will measure and interpret any alleged doctrine, as, for example, of everlasting punishment. The authority of the Church, though it be so august as the Roman Catholic with century-laden traditions, is not final. Nor the authority of the Bible, even did that unquestionably testify to everlasting punishment, which we do not think it does ; but were the doctrine of eternal doom written on every page, the Unitarian would still carry it to the court of higher appeal, — to the Reason and Conscience of humanity, to the voice of God speaking there, for a better interpretation of the facts of sin and penalty, of human freedom and divine holiness and love. To the Second Adventist, with his doctrine of a world catastrophe prophesied in Scripture, the Unitarian again answers with an appeal to higher authority. God, he says, has written his thought into rocks and stars, into science as well as into ancient philosophies and experiences ; and his majesty is in the progressive growth of ages ; and the prophecies of his methods in years to come are seen in his method for ages past. Reason, the collective thought and measure in universal humanity, the accumulation of revised intelligence of the present age, is the court of appeal, the highest we know. Take the doctrine of the second advent there, and how speedily it is “dismissed with costs.” It does not belong to the order of Nature and God’s methods, as revealed to the living world. The Unitarian’s higher authority thus

meets and disposes of numberless phases of false or half-true doctrine, and enables him fearlessly to carry to the Bible itself the critical inquiries which qualify and classify its books and writers and literary form and contents.

I wish I might convey to my hearers my own profound sense of the majestic authority, as from the very presence of a revealing God, which seems to me the possession of a believer who clearly apprehends the principles I have just stated. For when we appeal to Reason, that total consciousness of the highest and best gifts of God, we are really believing in God as living, and are realizing that in him we live and move and have our being. There is a phrase that is much used to express this, "the consensus of the competent." It means that for every sphere of knowledge or endeavor there are best names and noblest experiences, to whom others learn to look up and trust. Such men are the world's great masters, and they are gladly looked to and called authorities. Using the word in a free sense, authority is everywhere about us,—the authority of intelligence, of the artistic sense, of the physician in disease, the engineer in a construction, the pilot in a harbor, the statesman in a national crisis, the great soldier in time of war. There is an authority of character. The mere word or look of some men carries a greater weight than that of hundreds of inferior intelligence. But we never think of appealing to such authority as final or infallible, or class it above Reason, the result of some sixth sense. Rather do we exalt Reason when we clothe its servants with authority of this kind. We recognize that there are leaders and guides in intellectual and spiritual truth, but they bring us that truth from the infinite Source of truth, who speaks in the language of their Reason and of ours. The message and the witness of truth is thus progressive, ever growing and added to from the eternal

word of God. Just as the first star-gazer saw the same stars and planets in the night sky that we do, so the truths of man's nature and destiny have forever overarched our race. As the first astronomers knew in part and prophesied in part, so some truths of the divine nature and human duty were known from the earliest day, and other truths are forecast even in their errors. As the early astronomers made observations under the limitations of their senses, and theorized provisionally, so the early worshippers held crude and imperfect conceptions and made grave mistakes. But the eternal Truth has lived on, and the word of God, pressing into human moulds, lives to-day, the Light which lightens every man who comes into the world. The formula which Unitarians would speak and place in contrast to all partial creeds and less noble authority is these words, a phrase of Rowland Williams, a leading divine of the Broad Church of England: "We believe in God, whose Scripture is the world, and whose Son is mankind."

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