

“Why I became a Unitarian,”

BY

R. RODOLPH SUFFIELD.

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Why I became a Unitarian:

A DISCOURSE

BY THE

REV. R. RODOLPH SUFFIELD,

Of Reading, Berks;

DELIVERED IN THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL,
KENDAL,

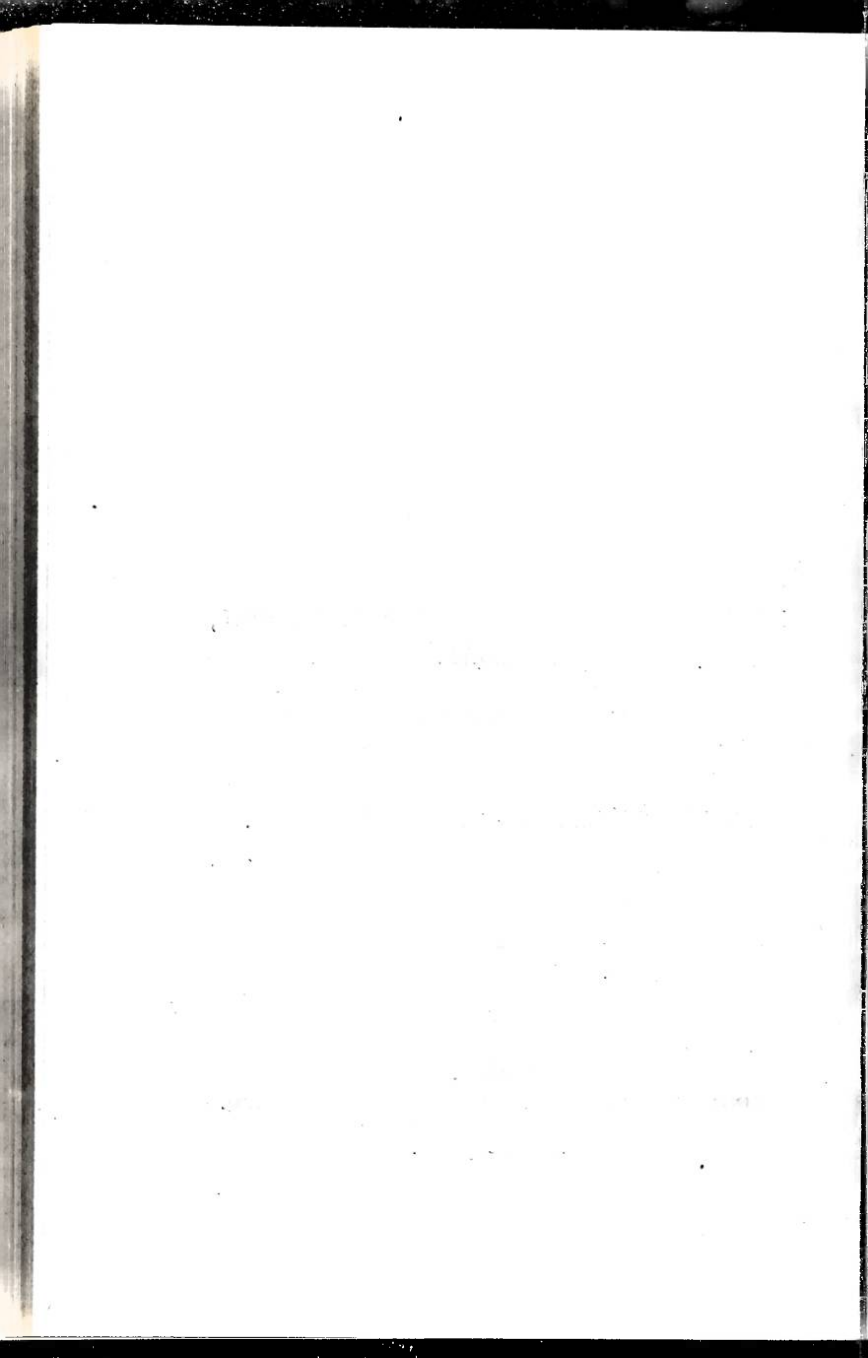
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“WHY I BECAME A UNITARIAN.”

“The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth ; for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John iv., 23, 24.

“WHY I became a Unitarian?” I will endeavour to reply to that question, as well as I can, in a single discourse. By the word Unitarian I designate a Theist in the line of the Hebrew and Christian tradition.

There are Evangelical Theists, Roman Catholic Theists, Mahomedan Theists ; there are Theists of various Sects, Religions, and Schools of Thought ; there are Poly-theists, Trinitarian Theists, Christian Theists.

Speaking accurately and philosophically, I am a Cosmic-Theist. *I am a Theist—i.e.* I believe that there is Divine Thought pervading and guiding the universe—that Divine Thought we call Theos—God.

I adore God, I revere God, I trust in God, the Supreme Power of the Universe ; I hope in God, the Supreme Beneficence ; I trustfully hold filial spiritual communion with God, the paternal, fostering soul of the universe. *Thus I am a Theist.*

I am a Cosmic Theist. The word *cosmic* is the adjective of the Greek word *cosmos*, which means the totality—the universal whole as a progressive unity. The word implies *an orderly progression* ; a combined, continuous unity—always growing, always one. Unity betwixt the past and the present. Unity under one thought, one law. Unity and growth—

oneness and development in the past, the present, and the future.

I am a Cosmic Theist. I adore God, the soul of this ever developing cosmos, the fostering spirit of this one ever growing totality to which we belong. Thus my religion is as universal as the universe.

But to descend from the universe to this little planet, and to the race of man, the richest in endowments upon this earth.

I believe in the unity of mankind—that all men, everywhere, are sons of God; *i.e.* are in spiritual communion with God, loved by God, cared for by God, and to be for ever cared for by God and loved by Him. Thus I believe in the unity between God and man. I believe in the unity between man and man. A unity, no sect, or church, or priesthood, or oppression, or anathema can destroy. I believe in the unity between God and nature—the unity between nature and man. I believe in the unity of all religions and sects and nationalities, for all are embraced in the bosom of universal humanity. I believe in the unity existing between the past and the present and the future—collectively and individually. Thus I believe in the one-ness, the unity of effects throughout the entire duration of each individual life, in this and in every future life; in the unity of action; the unity of cause and effect; that our actions, whether evil or good, foolish or wise, must ever, as part of the whole, necessarily effect our future. Thus I believe in the the unity of the law of retribution. Seeing everywhere the unity of the divine plans, the unity of the divine thought, I believe in the future development of this same unity of plan.

I can see God in His effects, in his mode of working, in the unity of his thought; but I cannot define, or explain, or understand God's nature, essence, or mode of being.

When I was a Roman Catholic I accepted, upon the authority of the Church, the creeds explaining God, and declaring that besides the Paternal Spirit, there are two other Gods, one called Jesus Christ, and the other called the Holy Ghost.

When, during the years 1868, 1869, and 1870, there arose the grave deliberation within the Roman Catholic Church as to where the infallible power exists—whether in the episcopate dispersed or collected—whether in all the faithful, or whether only in the Bishops combined with the Pope, or whether in the Pope alone—I gradually and reluctantly arrived at the conviction that infallibility does not exist anywhere amongst men. That all knowledge grows. That religious knowledge—that the knowledge of God's laws, like all other knowledge, grows—that growth greatly dependent upon our earnestness in the pursuit of knowledge.

That to make a creed and fix it as an unmovable law to bind successive generations of teachers and religionists, is a violation of the spiritual law of our being. That liberty in religion is as essential as liberty in science and in art—that it must grow like the flowers, with light, and warmth, and space.

Thus, as a Cosmic Theist, I perceived that I must worship God in isolation, unless I could find worshippers who accept liberty and growth as essential conditions of their union and co-operation.

The infallibility of the Bible was as clearly a fiction as the infallibility of the Pope.

The books of the Bible are valuable because they record not stagnation but growth—growth through many changing forms of error interwoven with all portions of that book.

To pervert the Bible into an immovable creed, would be to subvert truth and the nature of things. To pervert any great teacher into a final and infallible

teacher, would be to insult his memory—and from having been a blessed helper to degrade him into a perpetual obstructor.

I could be the loving and faithful disciple of Christ and of St. Paul in the spiritual truths they taught and illustrated, but not in the mistakes which they inherited or transmitted as men.

With such convictions, where could I find places of worship based on principles essentially true, and sure to contain numerous sympathetic souls? All the churches and sects, whether Roman, Anglican, Presbyterian, Wesleyan, Evangelical—not to name other smaller sects—impose upon their teachers conditions essentially opposed to the Divine law of growth. They require of them an interior reception of statements as to religions and morals; nay, also as to the origin of the world and of man, and command them to harmonise their teachings and devotions to statements in many ways erroneous. The people who attend such ministrations are in many cases formally committed to the profession of antiquated and sometimes injurious errors. When not formally committed, they are substantially committed by acquiescence under teachers bound, not only to the maintenance of errors, but a groundwork of faith essentially false, opposed to God's conspicuous plan in the order of nature.

When Milton had at length abandoned the popular religious views of his countrymen, he found no place of worship wherein he could honestly adore God, and feeling how odious is hypocrisy, above all things in religious matters, he worshipped in his own house. Must such be my alternative? Happily for myself not so. After Milton's death, chapels were founded at various times and places, wherein no conditions, no form of creed, was imposed on minister or congregation. The trust deeds of those chapels declared

them to exist "for the worship of God;" and sometimes the clause was added—"for the use of Protestant dissenters." No book, no creed, no teacher, no man being superadded to neutralise and violate the law of development, of growth. They could develop or deteriorate, they could progress, they could retrograde, they could perish. It was the law of nature, and therefore divine in essential principles. The congregations worshipping in these unfettered chapels, passed through many phases.

The most noticeable fact is that about 300 of them, whilst commencing as orthodox Trinitarian, gradually rose into Arianism, then semi-Arianism, then Socinianism, then Unitarianism. Thus I found existing in my country some 300 congregations, still quite unfettered, both as to minister and people; but at the present time holding, in different phases, the Unitarian Theology. Amongst them there were, I perceived, various opinions as to the person and office of Christ, as to the supernatural or natural position of Christ, of Christianity, of the Bible; but I found them for the most part loyally and gratefully pursuing the central truth of their origin and co-operation, as worshippers of God, free to follow their reason, their consciences, and the holy law of Cosmic growth. Therein I recognised little groups of worshippers amongst whom I could find a religious home.

My philosophic opinions as to cosmic growth, cosmic unity, cosmic law, cosmic Theism, might be only held by a few of those worshippers here and there, but I perceived that my own philosophic convictions harmonised with the essential principles on which those religious societies were founded.

But negation of error is a supremely important feature of truth, and I perceived that those religious societies, though free in origin and in existence, and as unfettered by creed now as ever—yet, for the time

being, were composed of worshippers whose negations were my own—and in consequence of the theology generally flourishing among them, and therefore guiding the free election of their minister, they were popularly called “Unitarian Chapels,” and their ministers, “Unitarian Ministers.” I perceived that whilst the word “Unitarian,” by popular parlance common to them all, covered many shades of divergence, yet there were negations of great importance beneficially and powerfully proclaimed by them all—the very promulgation by them of those negations of necessity emphasized great and universal truths. Their denial of the justice of the imposition of creeds on others, and on our successors, made them the brave defenders of mental liberty.

But even that great fundamental principle would not have justified me conscientiously or made me feel peacefully happy in sharing their worship, unless adequately sympathising with their negations—and their negations were my own. They denied the deity of Christ, they denied the personality of the Holy Ghost, and therefore they denied the Trinity. They denied the dogma of universal human corruption, of damnation in an eternal hell, of priestly castes, of priestly absolution, of sacramental efficacy. They denied the popular dogma of atonement by Christ's blood, and the scheme of redemption based upon that figment. Thus, their very negations constituted them the only consistent maintainers of the paternal character of God, and the fraternal equality of man. Their negation of creeds, as essential to God's favour, constituted them the special maintainers of the universal truth, that righteousness is the true test, that good men exist in all religions, that whilst opinions must vary in consequence of the various degrees of mental growth and knowledge, sincerity to erroneous convictions can exist in the most opposing sects—a

truly humane negation, and consequent truth; for persons guided by it, proclaim not merely tolerance toward those holding error, but perfect liberty, nay honour to them when sincere and otherwise good.

Lastly, though I saw many Unitarians according to the Bible and to Christ a position I deemed exaggerated and erroneous, yet even with them I perceived an essential bond of unity and agreement, inasmuch as they always claimed for conscience and reason the mental and moral supremacy over life and action. So I was not forced to suffer the spiritual disadvantages of religious isolation, for I could honestly and happily find amongst Unitarian worshippers a religious home, and the benefits of religious sympathy, and the consolations of collective religious worship. And during eleven years I have never regretted my choice. Religious fellowship is always a blessing to oneself, but it is moreover a benefit to others, to be enabled to invite their attention to communities of worshippers wherein the most philosophic and independent thinker can co-operate without an hypocrisy and without an equivocation—to chapels wherein children are taught moral and sacred lessons, but always in harmony with the highest attained truth—to chapels wherein the various epochs of life and of its close, are sanctified by acts of devotion not founded on the mythological or interwoven with the superstitious.

Let not susceptible and timid souls apprehend in a position so dignified and philosophic, a painful severance from all the hallowed associations and memories of the past. We believe in the evolution of religion, not in the destruction of its substance. The Unitarian Chapel is in the venerable line of the Christian tradition, and the halo of ancient pieties surround it.

Whilst appreciating the Sacred Books of other religions, we always read at our religious services from

the Sacred Books, Jewish and Christian, whence our higher faith has been evolved.

If we reject the patristic dogma of the Trinity, let it be remembered that the word Trinity nowhere exists in the Bible. That the only passage in the New Testament wherein it was taught (1 John v. 7) has been ignominiously cast out of the revised version as a deliberate fraud. If we reject the personality of the Holy Ghost, and declare that the "Holy Spirit" is an operation not a person, let it be remembered that the orthodox dogma is nowhere affirmed in our Sacred Books. If we reject the dogma of the deity of Christ, we therein follow Christ, his Apostles, and his mother, the declarations of his friends and of his enemies. Christ said, "To sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give;" "I come not to do my own will but the will of him that sent me,—I do nothing of myself;" "Of that day knoweth no man, nor the angels, neither the son, but my Father only;" "The Father is greater than I;" "I go to my God, and your God;" "Remove from me this cup, nevertheless not what I will but what Thou wilt;" "My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent me;" "I seek not my own glory, but I honour my Father." He was a baby, suckled and nursed, he was a little boy, was obedient to his parents, was taught and was scolded by them. He was tempted, he prayed to God, gave thanks to God, resigned himself to God, was obedient to God. He taught his disciples to pray to God, not even naming him. At the approach of death he exclaimed, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me." He would not even allow himself to be called "good," declaring that epithet to befit only God. His mother speaks of herself and Joseph her husband as his parents, his father and his mother. The revised version has, in obedience to ancient MSS., substituted "Father" for "Joseph," thus emphasizing

the relationship. All the language and actions directed to Jesus and adopted by him, harmonize with his position as the human born Messiah, never with the possibility of his being God. The conduct of his mother, brothers, disciples, and female friends after his death, do not bear a trace of any notion entertained that their deceased relative and friend was God. The first utterances of disciples proclaiming the new religion emphatically speak of Jesus as a "man approved of God." Let anyone read the speeches of St. Stephen, at his martyrdom, of St. Peter, at the first Pentecost, of St. Paul, at Athens, and judge whether it is credible that those men believed in the Deity of Christ, in atonement from hell by his blood, in the patristic and Evangelical scheme of redemption. Christ is spoken of as having been criminally "murdered." If that "murder" had not been committed, would mankind have been lost in hell? During the last 100 years, Unitarian scholars have been proving that the few stray passages adduced to suggest the Deity of Christ, disappear as evidential: some are spurious, some are mistranslations, some are perverted by punctuation, some have words changed or interpolated, some are merely Judaic expressions suitable to the Messiah, or Platonic expressions applied by the contemporaneous Jew Philo to any great man. Thus Dr. Doddridge declared that the text on which he rested the Deity of Christ, and which kept him from embracing the Unitarian Theology, was Rev. i, 11, wherein the expression, "I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last," is applied to Christ. In the revised version, the text drops out as spurious, it is only to be found in passages wherein God the Father is spoken of. In 1 Tim. iv. 8, "God," as applied to Christ, becomes "he who was manifested in the flesh." Acts xx, 28, "Church of God" becomes, in marginal reading, "Church of the Lord." Jude 4, "Denying the only Lord God," be-

comes "Denying our only Master." Jude 29, "To the only wise God our Saviour," becomes "To the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ be glory." Similarly such passages as Rom. ix. 5, Phil. ii. 6, lose in the revised version any evidential bearing upon the Deity of Christ. Unitarian scholarship has triumphed almost all along the line, and in a few more years, it will be found that the much abused Unitarian Theologians are correct in the matters not yet conceded. Already the word "atonement" drops out of the New Testament in its revision; and the passages alluding to the shedding of Christ's blood assume now an aspect not calculated to maintain the popular dogma.

Three hundred years ago it was thought shocking, when Luther denied to St. Paul the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and attributed it to Apollos. Now no scholar of note attributes that epistle to the Apostle; and most critics urge that "St. John's Gospel" was written, not by an Apostle, but as late as A.D. 135-150, probably by John of Ephesus.

If Christ's body had been (as some Unitarians in common with our orthodox brethren suppose) miraculously raised from the tomb and lifted up to heaven, it would no more prove his Deity, than when similar incidents were attributed to Elias and others; but it is deserving of notice that the revised version suggests that the very portions of the Gospel narrating Christ's ascension are spurious, are interpolations.

However, let us turn from technical controversies to the ever unfolding teaching of the universe and of humanity. Let us realise the great precepts of Christ, "the love of God and the love of man;" let us realise his thought that "our neighbour" is not merely our countryman or co-religionist, but our brother, man everywhere, whether Roman Catholic or Atheist, Moslem or Zulu, Buddhist or Evangelical, Unitarian or Brahmin, Agnostic or Jew. "Be good and do

good ;” “ advance human knowledge ;” “ promote human liberty ;” “ foster human happiness.”

Such great human principles I found in the front among the Unitarian free churches, and after eleven years I can still cordially repeat the expression I uttered regarding them when first I sought amidst their friendly fellowship the privileges of religious worship :—

After long and deep thought, study, prayer, and counsel, I decided that it would be impossible for me honestly to continue to act as a priest. The infallibility of the Pope, and, of the Scriptures, alike, I question, and the dogmas resting solely on either of those authorities, I am not able on that account to admit.

It is my desire to unite with others, and to assist them in the worship of God, and in the practice of the two-fold precepts of charity, unfettered by adhesion on either side, to anything, beyond those great fundamental principles as presented to us by Jesus Christ.

Having understood that those who are commonly called Unitarians, Free Christians, or Christian Theists, thus agree in the liberty inspired by self-diffidence, humility, and charity, to carry on the worship of God, without sectarian requirements or sectarian opposition ; that they possess a simple but not vulgar worship, a high standard of virtue, intelligence, and integrity ; and these after the Christian type, moulded by the Christian traditions, and edified by the sacred Scriptures ; holding the spirit taught by Jesus Christ, and the great thoughts by virtue of which he built up the ruins of the moral world ; and yet not enforcing the reception of complicated dogmas as a necessity, or accounting their rejection a crime : a communion of Christian worshippers, bound loosely together, and yet by the force of great principles enabled quietly to maintain their position, to exercise an influence elevating and not unimportant, and to present religion under an aspect which thoughtful men can accept without latent scepticism, and earnest men without the aberrations of superstition, or the abjectness of mental servitude to another—such approved itself to my judgment, and commended itself to my sympathy.

With those religionists possessing no creed but God and Liberty, Benevolence and Progress, you can think and learn and be mentally free, and yet enjoy the

blessings of religious communion with your fellowmen. Then religion will be a joy and not an anathema, an inspiration, not a bond. It will stimulate to all forms of human knowledge, to all the beneficence of human progress. It will enable you to realize that law is a growth, that right and wrong exist in the nature of things—that there is one supreme virtue—*the effort to promote happiness*; one supreme sin—*selfishness*. *Let the mythologies go—we will serve them no more*—we will rise out of sectarian creeds into humanity, and only be anxious during this short life to love and to serve others, and to strive to make them wiser and happier.—Amen.