

Bx
9842

C5

UC-NRLF

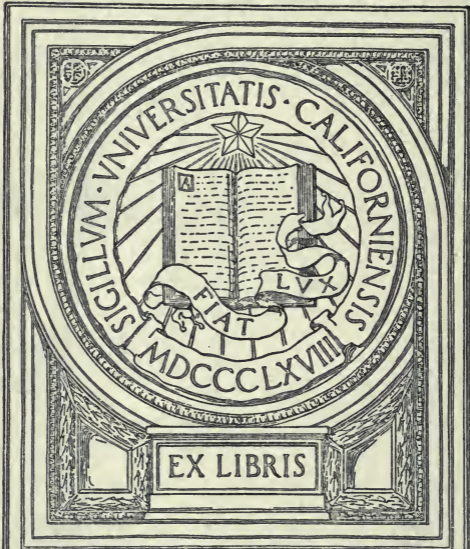


\$B 141 817

Y0134728

GIFT OF

Felix Flügel



EX LIBRIS

PRICE, 10 CENTS.

0
THE INDEX TRACTS.

No. 15.

Meigel.

The Battle of Syracuse.

TWO ESSAYS

BY

REV. JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE, D.D.

AND

FRANCIS ELLINGWOOD ABBOT.

Ewald Meigel.
1880.

[From THE INDEX of May 13th and 20th, 1875.]

BOSTON:
THE INDEX ASSOCIATION.

1875.

.logilte

Flügel

BX 9842

C5

On a Recent Definition of Christianity.

AN ESSAY READ BEFORE A PRIVATE CLUB IN BOSTON,
FEBRUARY 15, 1875.

BY REV. JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE, D.D.

In THE INDEX for Sept. 24, 1874, is the following statement by the editor, Francis E. Abbot. He declares:—

“1. That the true definition of Christianity is the first point to be determined, and that the *consensus* of all organized Christian bodies, more particularly Orthodox Christian bodies, ought to determine it. That is, Christianity should be conceded to be what the great Christian Church as a whole declares it to be,—the conflicting views of the dissenting, small minority of “heretics” not being entitled, on any just ground, to be taken as the definition of it.

“2. That, defined by this *consensus* of the Church, as a whole, Christianity rests on the principle of Authority, and consists in the system of faith and practice known from the beginning as Orthodoxy.

“3. That, notwithstanding all that is noble and beautiful in it, this Christian system has steadily opposed all mental and spiritual freedom which has not first submitted to its own authority; and therefore, by the inherent necessity of its nature, it has been one continuous crime against some of the most precious rights and interests of mankind.”

M306460

On this statement I propose to make a few criticisms.

I. OUGHT OUR FAITH IN CHRISTIANITY TO DEPEND ON A DEFINITION?

Mr. Abbot says that the first point to be determined is "the true definition of Christianity." He does not complete his sentence; but we may assume that he means that this is the first point to be determined in order to decide whether or not we shall take sides *with* Christianity or *against* it. If this is his meaning, we think that he lays altogether too much stress on the value of a definition. There are many things which we know perfectly well, which we find it hard to define. It is difficult to define the feudal system, but we know very well what it was. We also can determine, without much difficulty, whether the influence of the feudal system was, on the whole, good or evil. If we were called upon to decide whether we approved the feudal system, whether we would support it or oppose it, the main point to be settled would *not* be to find a satisfactory definition. That would do very well for an abstract student; but in order to answer the practical question, "Shall we support the feudal system, or oppose it?" the first thing to be determined is this, "Is this method of organizing society a good one?"

In like manner we may say that whether we can define Christianity or not, we know very well what it is. A good definition may be a very good thing for speculative purposes; but the practical question in regard to Christianity is whether, on the whole, it is useful to society, or pernicious. If we believe that the influence of the churches, Catholic and Protestant, is in the main evil; that they tend to demoralize society; to confound right and wrong; to make men more worldly, sensual, and devilish—then we ought to oppose Christianity. But if we think that the churches, on the whole, tend to lift up society, to encourage education, to help benevolent institutions, to promote civilization, then we ought to cleave to them loyally. It is the thing itself, not what definition we may give it, which is most important. A more ingenious man than Mr. Abbot may arrive tomorrow at a more satisfactory definition than his; or he himself may revise his own present definition, and so find Christianity to be a good thing, after all, and not a bad one. If, in consequence of the definition he now offers us, we abandon Christianity to-day; if

we sell the churches, disband the congregations, give up public worship, and treat the Sunday like any other day; a new definition might make it necessary, to-morrow, to rebuild them all, and at some expense and with some difficulty recommence our Christian operations.

II. MR. ABBOT'S FORMER AND PRESENT DEFINITIONS OF CHRISTIANITY.

This is not altogether an imaginary supposition. At the Unitarian Conference held at Syracuse, in October, 1866, Mr. Abbot presented a definition of Christianity, quite different from that which he now holds. It was as follows, proposed by him as a substitute for the Preamble and first article of the Constitution, and so intended to make an essential part of the organic law. We may properly presume, then, that it was not proposed by him without careful consideration:—

“WHEREAS, The object of Christianity is the universal diffusion of love, righteousness, and truth; and the attainment of this object depends, under God, upon individual and collective Christian activity; and collective Christian activity, to be efficient, must be thoroughly organized; and

“WHEREAS, Perfect freedom of thought, which is at once the right and the duty of every human being, always leads to diversity of opinion, and is therefore hindered by common creeds or statements of faith; and

“WHEREAS, The only reconciliation of the duties of collective Christian activity and individual freedom of thought lies in an efficient organization for practical Christian work, based rather on unity of spirit than on uniformity of belief:

“ARTICLE I.—Therefore the churches here assembled, disregarding all sectarian or theological differences, and offering a cordial fellowship to all who will join with them in Christian work, unite themselves in a common body, to be known as THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF UNITARIAN AND INDEPENDENT CHURCHES.”

At this time, it is clear, he had no objection to the Christian name, for he introduces it five times. He defines “the object of Christianity to be the universal diffusion of love, righteousness, and truth,” a definition which the great majority of Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, Orthodox and Liberal, would readily accept. His second proposition con-

cerns the means of accomplishing this object,—and here also the great majority of all Christian churches would agree with him. “The attainment of this object depends, under God, upon individual and collective Christian activity.” His third proposition would also be acceptable to all those Christians, at least, who believe in the importance of churches. “Collective Christian activity to be efficient must be thoroughly organized.”

This was the definition of Christianity given by Mr. Abbot a few years ago. He has now changed his mind. He now does *not* consider the object of Christianity to be “the universal diffusion of love, righteousness, and truth”; but instead, to destroy all mental and moral freedom by setting up personal authority over the human mind. Far from believing—as he did in 1866—that this “universal diffusion of love, righteousness, and truth” could only be accomplished by *Christian* activity, he now believes that it can only be accomplished by “anti-Christian” activity.

But Christianity itself in 1875 cannot have altered very materially from what it was in 1866. It has now the same merits, in the main, that it had then; it had then the same faults which it has now. The difference then is only in Mr. Abbot’s mind. He has hit on a new definition. His former definition made of Christianity the great and almost the only motive power by which humanity can be elevated and improved; his present definition makes of it the great foe of human progress.

Hardly can our friend, in this short time, have discovered so many evils, which before were unnoticed by him, as to change him from the friend of Christianity to its foe. He has told us, indeed, that the course taken by the Syracuse Convention, in rejecting his amendment, and that similar proceedings on the part of the Unitarian Conferences, have satisfied him that he had little to expect from Christian churches. But certainly the action of a small denominational Conference does not furnish a sufficient basis for a deduction for or against so large a fact as the Christian religion. It cannot be any new observation of its real nature which has reversed his action; it is the discovery of a better definition. It would seem, therefore, a very serious mistake to base our Christianity, or anti-Christianity, on a definition, or on any purely logical process. It is to be settled, not by any deductive process, but by an induction from

observed facts. This, surely, is the scientific method, which for a practical question is much better than the metaphysical one. We feel like applying here what Mr. Emerson has somewhere said, "If we could have any security against moods! If the profoundest prophet could be holden to his words, and the hearer who is ready to sell all and join the crusade could have any security that to-morrow his prophet shall not unsay his testimony! But the Truth sits veiled there on the bench, and never interposes an adamant syllable; and the most sincere and revolutionary doctrine, put as if the ark of God was to be carried forward some furlongs and planted there for the succor of the world, shall in a few weeks be coldly set aside, by the same speaker, as morbid. '*I thought I was right, but I was not,*' and the same immeasurable credulity demanded for new audacities."

III. SHALL WE ACCEPT A DEFINITION OF CHRISTIANITY ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH?

In deciding whether a religion is good or bad, to be adopted or rejected, the chief ground of action is, therefore, hardly to be found in a definition. We should rather observe the facts, and see whether an induction from those facts shows the spirit and influence of the system to be good or otherwise. To this point we shall presently return. But now let us examine Mr. Abbot's present definition of Christianity, and notice some of its consequences.

"The *consensus* of all organized Christian bodies, more particularly Orthodox Christian bodies, ought to determine it. That is, Christianity should be conceded to be what the great Christian Church, as a whole, declares it to be."

That is to say, in deciding a question of fact, we are told by Mr. Abbot that we are not to exercise our own reason, but to submit to the authority of the majority. He opposes Christianity because "it rests on the principle of authority," and then he accepts the authority of the majority as determining what is fact and what is truth. He renounces his own private judgment, and accepts the decision of the Church, with the humility of an ultramontane Catholic. In 1866, after having been a student and a preacher of Christianity during many years, his belief was that Christianity was a good thing; that it was not Orthodoxy, but a religion of love, truth, and righteousness. He now gives up this belief in def-

erence to the opinions of a majority; he accepts blindly what the majority declares Christianity to be, though his own studies had brought him to an opposite conclusion. And all this he does, and recommends others to do, in the interest of Free Religion and spiritual liberty.

The majority of a church may have a right to decide what the belief of *that majority* is concerning Christianity. But Christianity itself is larger than all its denominations, all its churches, and all their creeds. It is a great system of thought and life which has existed during eighteen centuries; which has taken on and put off again many forms; which has adopted and relinquished many methods; which has created a remarkable civilization; which has united most of the great races of mankind into a common brotherhood of social and political life. To allow such a system to be defined authoritatively for us without appeal by the majority of its believers at any one period would be like accepting as a final statement concerning the hydrography of a great river the opinions of the sailors who happen to be navigating its stream. Christians do not make Christianity; Christianity makes Christians. They bear not the root; the root bears them.

This new dogma of Free Religion, which consists in accepting the authority of a majority in forming our opinions concerning a faith, would, of course, overthrow and discard all that Protestantism has accomplished by its principle of private judgment.

If the consent of the organized Church should be decisive as to what Christianity is, Martin Luther, instead of reforming the Christian Church, should have gone outside of Christianity. If he had done this, the Protestant Reformation would never have arrived,—which, if it has done nothing else, has, at least, enabled our brother Abbot to express his opinions without being burnt for doing so.

If the opinion of the majority determines what Christianity is, then Christianity is a different religion in different periods. In one century the Arians constituted the majority in the Church; *then* Christianity was an Arian religion, and the Church doctrine of the Trinity made no part of it. Until Protestantism arrived, the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome constituted an essential part of Christianity. If Protestants ever become the majority, it will cease to do so.

IV. THE REAL MEANING OF AUTHORITY IN CHRISTIANITY.

But perhaps Mr. Abbot may say that the only essential thing in Christianity which has always remained the same is the *principle of authority*—especially the authority of Jesus Christ,—and that this authority has always enslaved the human mind.

But if this be so, we would ask how it is that the human mind has been most free, and made its most successful attainments just when the Christian religion has prevailed. Outside of Christendom there is no science, art, literature, philosophy, to which any students would go to-day for instruction. If, at one time, Christians went to Mohammedan schools for instruction, we must inquire whether, strictly speaking, Islam is not a Christian heresy, an outside sect of Christendom. And why have all Mohammedan countries ceased to be sources of knowledge for mankind, while Christian countries are always advancing? If Christianity be mental slavery, why, we ask again, does mental freedom only thrive where Christianity is the prevailing religion?

And is it true that “the system of faith and practice known from the beginning as Orthodoxy” has always been the same? The history of doctrines shows that every doctrine now held in the Church as Orthodox, has at one time been regarded as heretical,—such as the doctrines of the Trinity, of the atonement, of total depravity, of the papal supremacy, of the mass, of the literal inspiration of the Bible. If this, therefore, be Christianity, there is no such thing as one permanent Christianity; but Christianity has been one thing in one century, and a wholly different thing in another. But in seeking a definition of a religion we must find something which will define it throughout *its whole* history. This definition therefore must be incorrect.

Is, then, the essence of Christianity “*person-worship*”? So our friend seems to assert in one of his paragraphs. He seems to say that the slavery of the human mind has resulted from making the authority of Jesus Christ supreme over faith. No doubt the authority of Jesus, as an inspired teacher, makes a part of the creed of Christendom. He is accepted by all Christians not only as a teacher, but also a master. But so far from this authority of Christ producing spiritual slavery, it is, when rightly apprehended, a service which is perfect freedom, and is a source of mental and moral progress.

For we must distinguish between two kinds of authority,—of which the one enslaves, and the other emancipates. One is the authority of the letter, the other of the spirit. To repeat *words* on the authority of another; to accept a creed, whether we understand it or not; to receive and repeat blindly a verbal statement,—that is mental slavery. But to catch the inspiration of another's spirit; to feed our minds by the sight of the truth which he has seen before; to take him as guide, leader, teacher, master,—this is one method by which the human mind is set free. Every earnest seeker for truth has some such masters. Some take Shakspeare, Bacon, Plato, Socrates for their masters. Others take Channing, Parker, Emerson, Carlyle, Goethe, Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Tyndall, Huxley. If they follow these masters blindly, accepting all they say without examination, they are finally belittled and enslaved by them. They repeat by rote Emerson's sayings, and become his parrots. They may do the same with the sayings of Christ. Or they may go to these masters for inspiration and guidance, not blindly, but with an intelligent faith. They may say, "They have helped us wonderfully in the past, and therefore we trust in them. We go to their words with expectation and confidence—a confidence justified by our past experience. We read their books in faith, and that faith helps us to better insight."

Does it make any difference that Christians assume Christ to be an infallible teacher, while other masters are supposed to be fallible? Practically it makes no difference. We go to Emerson; to Plato, to any teacher, for *truth*, not for error. We go to them for knowledge. If what they say seems to us obscure, self-contradictory, or false, we let it alone, and read on till we can find something which we *can* understand and believe. When we stop to criticise and find fault, we lose our teacher, and cease to be disciples. So long as we are learning truth from them, we continue in the attitude of faith. We believe all we can; as to what we cannot believe, we wait and consider. If we relinquish this attitude for a moment, in that moment we cease to be learners, and become critics.

All Christians, in studying the teachings of Jesus, are in this attitude. They are looking for truth, not for falsehood and error. They are not blindly accepting his statements, but they are studying them to find what they mean. If they find something

they cannot understand, they wait till they *can* understand it. As it is impossible for the human mind to hold at the same time two propositions which are seen to be contradictory, we are just as much obliged to suspend our opinion in reading the words of Jesus as we are in reading those of Socrates. If what Jesus says in one place seems inconsistent with what we have learned from him elsewhere, or what we have learned in other ways, then we are compelled, by the law of our mind, to suspend our judgment till we are able either to reconcile the two opinions, or to decide between them. Not a single body of Christians teaches that we are blindly to accept and repeat the *words* of Jesus without seeing their reasonableness. Paul said that the *letter* of the New Testament killed, and that only its spirit gave life. We must always remember, too, that, admitting this authority of Christ to be a part of Christianity, the Church has held to entirely different methods of discovering its deliverances. Catholics say, "You must go to the Church to find what Christ teaches." Protestants say, "You must go to the Bible;" but then they claim that each man's judgment is to decide what the Bible teaches, and that according to the analogy of faith. All mystics, like the Swedenborgians and Quakers, say that Christ speaks to each man's soul through the spirit, and whatever each man sees to be true *is* true to him. Even Dr. Newman, the Catholic, has recently shown that a distinct declaration of the infallible pope will not be accepted by many Catholics till they have satisfied themselves that he was under no bad influence in giving it,—which leaves a broad margin for individual freedom.

The principle of authority, after all these reductions, would scarcely seem to amount to more than this: that Christ is an inexhaustible source of divine truth to the soul. *What that truth* is, must be decided by finding that which satisfies the reason, conscience, and heart. And this is the way in which we judge all truth to be true.

The essential thing in a religion, and the only essential thing, is that which was in it in the beginning, in its source and fountain, and which has continued in it ever since. The papacy does not belong to the essence of Christianity; for that did not appear until the Middle Ages. Orthodoxy in doctrine does not belong to the essence of Christianity, for that was unknown at first, and is not to be found in the earliest sources. The only essential points which

remain, which were in the religion at first, and have continued in it ever since, are faith in Jesus as the Christ the Son of God, and the practical purpose of attaining that love to God and love to man of which he is the Mediator.

Perhaps, on some other occasion, I shall endeavor to show that this faith is not only not inconsistent with truth and freedom, but is the best source of both to mankind. No doubt vast numbers of Christians have been the slaves of a literal dogmatism. But it is so in all systems,—in science, art, philosophy. The majority of disciples, in all these, swear by the words of the Master, instead of penetrating his spirit. This is not the fault of Christianity, but of the human mind, in its imperfect development.

The Battle of Ideas at Syracuse.

AN ESSAY READ BEFORE A PRIVATE CLUB IN BOSTON,
APRIL 26, 1875.

BY FRANCIS E. ABBOT.

The candid and catholic-spirited paper read at the February meeting of this Club by Dr. Clarke, "On a Recent Definition of Christianity," furnishes the most appropriate and timely topic on which I could address you this afternoon; and, without attempting to consider in detail the various points he raised, I would nevertheless ask your kindly attention to some further thought upon the same general subject—certainly the most important one which presents itself to students of modern religious tendencies.

DEFINITIONS.

Quoting a passage from THE INDEX which emphasized the importance of a "true definition of Christianity," Dr. Clarke understood me to assume that "this is the first point to be determined in order to decide whether or not we shall take sides *with* Christianity or *against* it." It is quite immaterial now whether the passage quoted was well or ill phrased; very likely the meaning he found in it might be naturally gathered from it, though such was not the meaning I intended. But I am glad to agree with him that our relations to Christianity cannot wisely be determined by a regard for mere words

or forms of statement, since I do not lay the chief emphasis on any formula. It is the thing itself, and not the name, that is supremely important. Notwithstanding, I believe that the truth of our thoughts about things depends to a very large extent upon the exactness of the language we use concerning them; and if we cannot use names exactly, I more than doubt whether we know things correctly. When a teacher, in response to a question about the lesson, is told by his pupil, "I know the answer, but I cannot express myself," it would be a very foolish teacher who should be satisfied that the pupil really knew the answer as it ought to be known. Inexact, confused language is always, I believe, the result of inexact, confused thought; that is, of imperfect knowledge. Hence I believe it to be of the greatest consequence to possess an exact and truthful definition of Christianity—not at all for the sake of the definition as a mere string of words, but for the sake of the exact knowledge of the thing itself which it implies. To borrow Dr. Clarke's illustration, the man who could not tell exactly what the Feudal system was would be in no condition to decide whether he ought to uphold it or oppose it,—in no condition to decide whether that method of organizing society was a good or a bad one. He should know exactly what it was that he was going to uphold or oppose; and if he did know exactly, he could tell exactly. Men most often act, it is true, on very insufficient knowledge; but that is precisely the reason why they so often commit frightful mistakes. Whoever wants to act wisely must seek to know exactly; and whoever is determined to know exactly will soon discover the importance of exact definitions.

Let me, then, plead "not guilty" to the charge of over-valuing definitions for their own sake: it is only for the sake of the things they stand for that I value them at all. It is our *ideas* of the things that must determine our voluntary relations with them, and definitions are merely the symbols or verbal expressions of ideas. I am pleased, therefore, to be able to agree so heartily as I do with Dr. Clarke, when he says: "It is the thing itself, not what definition we may give it, which is most important." Yet it still remains true that wrong definitions are misrepresentations of things, and misrepresentations of things often lead us into the gravest and most disastrous practical mistakes in life. "What is it?"—is a ques-

tion that must precede the other—"What shall I do with it?" And to answer the question is to give a definition.

CHANGING DEFINITIONS.

Experience, then, will eventually control and shape the definitions that men adopt. Definitions must change as things change, on the one hand, and as men's knowledge of them changes, on the other hand. When Dr. Clarke refers, so pointedly and with so much emphasis, to what he calls my own "former and present definitions of Christianity,"—when he conveys the implication that, since "Christianity itself in 1875 cannot have altered very materially from what it was in 1866," and since "the difference is only in Mr. Abbot's mind," therefore I may hit to-morrow on a new definition, and deny all that I now maintain, I think you will pardon me for dwelling a little on the reasons of the change he truly points out; especially as these reasons so vitally concern great and growing movements of thought in which we are all deeply interested, in one way or in another.

In the first place, I must in all seriousness disown proprietorship of any sort in what Dr. Clarke designates as "Mr. Abbot's former and present definitions of Christianity." I am not aware of having at any time "hit on a new definition," whether it was really a hit or a miss. I was born and educated among Unitarians; I was admitted to the Unitarian ministry before Unitarianism had any organized sectarian existence, and before any of its organizations had authority to represent its churches in any general ecclesiastical manner. There was no denominational creed, and nothing that even looked like one in those days; there were plenty of individual statements of belief, many of them published by the American Unitarian Association, which, however, is a voluntary association of individuals, and not of churches. These individual statements were mostly conservative, but they committed only their authors; and every man was free to make and publish his own, without being liable to have it compared with any "Preamble" test of denominational Orthodoxy.

At the Autumnal Convention in Springfield, in 1863, the radicals seemed to be decidedly in the ascendant; the convention was not a delegate one, but attended by whosoever chose to go; and the buoyant, expansive sentiment of the occasion, all in favor of

unlimited mental freedom and of unrestricted spiritual fellowship, shed a beautiful light in advance on the ministerial path on which I was just entering. Mr. Frothingham was the most admired and applauded of the speakers, and represented the prevailing spirit of the meeting; in fact, his brilliant success at Springfield gave the alarm to the conservative managers, and was, I believe, one of the reasons why that was the last Autumnal Convention ever held on the old non-ecclesiastical plan.

Now the definition of Christianity which Dr. Clarke alludes to as my "former definition" was in substance one of those which I had simply inherited: namely, "Christianity is a spirit and life, not a creed." I supposed that "the right of free inquiry" was unchallenged and uncurtailed; that every Unitarian would unhesitatingly concede it for others and affirm it for himself; that every Unitarian organization would be not only willing, but eager, to make it the very first plank of their platform. On this acknowledged and jealously-guarded principle I supposed that all Unitarians to a man stood with one accord; and that, this being what the conservative wing cherished as dearly as did the radical wing, both wings would also unite on the principle that "Christianity is a spirit and life, not a creed." These two principles I had always heard emphasized as distinctive of Unitarian Christianity; and I took them for granted by simple inheritance, until my own reflection led me to affirm them by independent conviction. The definition of Christianity as "a spirit and life, not a creed," was certainly no invention of mine; I do not know to this day who first invented it, but I know I received it second-hand, and afterwards affirmed it with intelligent conviction as a grand spiritual truth to which my very soul assented as divine.

With these views I was delighted with the proposal to "organize the Liberal Church of America," out of which ultimately grew the National Conference of Unitarian and other Christian Churches. That wording of the call, I feel very confident, was contained in the first circular I received on the subject, though I have lost this and have never seen it since. "The Liberal Church of America!" What a magnificent idea! How it fired enthusiasm! How eager it made me to go myself, and to have my Dover church represented at the first convention at New York, in April, 1865! It was a great and noble con-

vention that then assembled. It opened splendidly in the overwhelming rejection by the delegates, Dr. Bellows at their head, of the proposition by Mr. A. A. Low to adopt a stiff Unitarian creed. Then came the discussion, cut off summarily by the "previous question," on the famous Preamble, which contained an explicit avowal of faith in the Lordship and Kingship of Jesus Christ, but not a word on the "unlimited right of free inquiry" and "Christianity a spirit and life, not a creed." That Preamble was adopted without any adequate discussion of the profound issues involved in such action. Dr. Bellows, however, declared that enough had been done for the first year, and that "the Broad Church question must be postponed till next year." That more than half-promise partly consoled me for bitter disappointment at the adoption of that creed-like Preamble: one chance still remained to fulfil the professions that had brought at least one obscure country minister to New York.

In 1866 came the Syracuse Conference. A substitute for the adopted Preamble was offered which affirmed three things: first, that "the object of Christianity is the universal diffusion of Love, Righteousness, and Truth," which is only a paraphrase of the familiar principle that "Christianity is a spirit and life, not a creed"; secondly, that "perfect freedom of thought is at once the right and duty of every human being," which is only a paraphrase of the familiar principle of the "unlimited right of free inquiry"; and, thirdly, that the basis of organization should be "unity of spirit rather than uniformity of belief." This, I thought, was the very essence of genuine Unitarian Christianity, the cornerstone of "the Liberal Church of America"; and I saw no reason why a Unitarian Christian Conference could not plant itself on this grand spiritual foundation. It was indeed the fork of the road, where two possible futures, wide as the poles apart in their religious character, opened before the most advanced, cultured, and intelligent, though one of the smallest, of all the Christian denominations. One branch of the road led to the camp of the old creed-bound sects, with a compact ecclesiastical organization that would slowly and insensibly tighten its grasp on every member and set an impassable limit to spiritual freedom. The other branch of the road led to the great host of those who were seeking in isolation to explore Truth's untried fields, with a free and hospitable fel-

lowship that should welcome every truth-lover, and be an inspiration, a help, and a friend in his lonely search for ideal excellence.

Nay, more than this. Not only did the Unitarian denomination come to the turning-point of its own destiny, as a small but influential company of religious liberals; but CHRISTIANITY ITSELF WAS BROUGHT TO THE CRUCIAL TEST, in the decision that must be made between the principles of those two Preambles, the old and the new. Could it, as here represented by the intellectual and spiritual vanguard of its forces, reconcile itself to that absolute liberty of thought and speech which is the soul of science, of civilization, of modern progress in all its aspects; or must it, by the inherent law of its own innermost being, sacrifice this vital principle in order to keep flying the banner of the Lordship and Kingship of Jesus Christ? Here for the first time (I think also for the last time) was a clean issue made between the first of persons and the first of ideas; and as its choice was, so should its future be. If it could only prove itself compatible with modern progress by boldly taking the lead of it, and pledging itself to perfect spiritual freedom (which, depend upon it, the world will have at any and every cost), then Christianity would indeed demonstrate its own imperishability, its own capacity of developing into Free Religion without the name. But if not, then the sceptre must pass out of its hand; it must fade slowly away before a successor greater than itself; it must make room for the religion of perfect freedom and universal fellowship; it must die, that Humanity might live. Christianity itself, I say, was brought to the crucial test in the issue made between those two Preambles; for if the Christianity of the freest of all Christian sects could not reconcile itself with perfect freedom, of course the Christianity of no other Christian body could do it. It was a great historic moment, and history will yet recognize its vast and as yet wholly unappreciated importance.

These, and no smaller or meaner ones, were the issues decided that bright October day in Samuel J. May's church in Syracuse. Never again, I believe in my very soul, will the conditions recur when that decision can be reconsidered.

The evening before the Conference met, I went to the Secretary, Rev. E. E. Hale, notified him of my intention to bring up this question, and asked when it could be considered. He named the second day of

the only two days of the session; to which I of course offered no objection. But that same night I had several hundred copies of the "proposed substitute" for the Preamble printed, and the next morning had them distributed throughout the pews, to prevent beforehand any parliamentary suffocation of the movement in the business committee; for I was determined, if possible, to have that great question fairly and fully discussed by the Conference, and not choked off as it had been at New York. The attempt was successful. Finding that the distribution of the printed "substitutes" had brought the matter prominently before the whole convention, and that it could not be suppressed, Dr. F. H. Hedge took the bull by the horns, and moved that the question be taken up at once. This was done, and a whole day was spent in the discussion. Dr. Bellows rallied his hosts at noon, and late in the afternoon had won the victory. The new Preamble, with its old Unitarian principles of unlimited free inquiry and a purely spiritual Christianity, was rejected.

The most influential man in winning that victory, next perhaps to Dr. Bellows, was James Freeman Clarke. He said then that the Lordship of Jesus could not be taken out of the Preamble, *once being in it*; that, if the new Preamble had been first offered the previous year at New York, he thought it would have been adopted; but that, if adopted now, it would look like hauling down the Christian flag, and he could not vote for that. These arguments, more than all others, I believe, decided the mind of the Conference; and the new Preamble was voted down by a two-thirds vote. To one, at least, of that Assembly, when the night came, it was night indeed; the very sun of Unitarianism, the one great principle of Channing, the one glorious inspiration of Parker, the divine idea of *perfect spiritual freedom*, had set for it forever. I never went to bed a sadder man.

But for the adverse vote of that day, there would have been no Free Religious Association, and no INDEX. Out of that apparent defeat the principles of perfect spiritual freedom and universal spiritual fellowship emerged unconquered, notwithstanding. They lived in too many hearts to be thus summarily extinguished. The Syracuse Conference might have secured the long-continued attachment of these many hearts by a different vote; but it spurned liberty in Christ's name, and one by one they began to leave. I, at least, should in all probability have

lived and died a Unitarian Christian minister, and Dr. Clarke would never have written his not unkindly comments on my "change of definition." But I was taught by events; I got the first lessons of my anti-Christian education at Syracuse, and from Dr. Clarke.

When the smoke of the battle was over, I began to ponder intensely the real causes of that strange defeat. Why should Unitarians, in solemn council assembled, reject the ancient principles that had given the Unitarian name all its glory—the "unlimited right of free inquiry," and "Christianity a spirit and life, not a creed"? The answer was long in coming; but later events gave added lessons, and it came. At last I saw that I had no reason to wonder, still less to be displeased, at the action of that Conference. The members were most excellent and honest men—none better anywhere; they had doubtless voted under the influence of the highest motives; I must look deeper than to any personal causes for the true solution of the problem. I found it in the very nature of Christianity; Dr. Clarke showed me where. When this assemblage of Unitarian Christians were brought face to face with the alternatives, either to vote down the principles of perfect freedom and a purely impersonal Christianity, or else to "haul down the Christian flag" and seemingly deny their allegiance to their personal Lord, and Savior, and King, they could not, *as Christians*, do otherwise than they did. As thinkers, as men, they would have voted for freedom; as Christians, they could only vote for Christianity.

To Christianity, therefore, must I credit this point-blank rejection of liberty at Syracuse; and so, because I love liberty better than Christ, Dr. Clarke taught me the anti-Christianity which he now tries in vain to unteach. He has taught me himself that my "former definition" of Christianity, which I inherited from my early Unitarian education, is a false one; he himself helped to prove it false at Syracuse. Giving up that, therefore, I did not sit down to invent a new one; but, in the light of experience and Dr. Clarke's involuntary tuitions, I have learned that history only repeated itself at Syracuse—that the Church has always and everywhere voted the same way, *against freedom in the name of its own Lord*; though never, I suppose, was the issue between freedom and Christianity made so clean as then. Such uniform action must have its cause in the very nature of the Christian religion. It is the Church,

therefore, the universal Church of Christendom, that holds the secret of Christianity; and from the Church, therefore, I have simply taken the definition that it gives.

When, consequently, Dr. Clarke tells me, in his own fraternal way, that I once made a new definition of Christianity at Syracuse, that I make another new one to-day, and that I may yet make a third new one to-morrow, my answer is merely this: That at Syracuse I substantially *adopted* one of the definitions which Unitarianism itself invented a half-century ago; that to-day I substantially *adopt* the definition which the whole Christian Church has been making in the past two thousand years; and that, in the controversy between the new definition made by Unitarianism and the old definition made by the Church Universal, I now think the Church right where I once thought Unitarianism right. I have not, therefore, introduced a new one at all, and the ancient controversy respecting Christianity between Unitarianism and Orthodoxy is simply revived. The only difference is that Radicalism to-day holds that in this controversy touching the essence of Christianity Orthodoxy has the best of the argument; for the reason that Dr. Clarke and his friends, in order to remain Christian, were forced to surrender the liberal definition of Christianity at Syracuse, and plant themselves on the essence of the Orthodox definition as the only tenable Christian ground. Unitarian Christianity gave testimony against itself that day, and deprived Radicalism of all opportunity to defend it further.

What does this all prove? That I "changed my definition," and have changed my principles thereby? Not at all. But that the same principles of perfect spiritual freedom and universal spiritual fellowship for which I pleaded at Syracuse, with all the earnestness of intense conviction, in that name of Unitarianism which I inherited from my fathers, I still plead for to-day, but in the new name of Free Religion. Unitarianism itself has changed its principles, not I. It began with ideas it has been obliged to renounce by its own authoritative, collective voice, in order to save its Christian connection and name; and it can never rectify its great mistake except by repealing its present Preamble, and coming forward to Free Religion. The golden opportunity of identifying Christianity with Free Religion has been lost forever; and nothing now remains but either to side with Orthodoxy as essential Christianity, or to side

with unlimited freedom and fellowship as essential Free Religion. It has made this issue itself; it has made its own children anti-Christian, as the only way to maintain fealty to the principles it taught them itself to stand for. Between fidelity to ideas and fidelity to names they have been forced by Unitarianism to choose; and therein consists all the "change" that Dr. Clarke can prove against me.

ACCEPTING DEFINITIONS ON AUTHORITY.

But Dr. Clarke considers that I submit to the very principle of authority which I disown, when I consent to take the definition of Christianity offered by the Church itself as the only true one. This is not a point that need detain us long. The question is simply as to the competency of witnesses. The principle of freedom requires no man to determine questions of fact by appealing to his own consciousness; and what Christianity is is nothing but a question of fact. Whose testimony as to the fact is most trustworthy?

I find the Church Universal speaking out of its own experience and history of nearly nineteen centuries, and declaring that Orthodoxy is that Christian religion of which itself has been from the beginning the only custodian and natural exponent. I find the Unitarian denomination speaking out of its own brief life and career of some fifty years, and declaring that the Christian religion is its own transformed and modernized faith; that the ancient Orthodoxy of which it is itself only a recent offshoot is a mere corruption of the primal gospel; and that the great bulk of the Christian world, with its hundreds of millions of believers, is really in dense ignorance of its own religion! Dr. Clarke thinks one witness the more credible, and I the other; that is all the difference. Neither he nor I do more in this matter than accept the testimony of the best witness to a mere matter of fact. There is no "submission to authority" here in any sense that either of us objects to. What Christianity is, is only a question of fact; what authority it possesses, is more than a mere question of fact. Dr. Clarke holds that it does possess a vital authority over the intellect, the conscience, the will, the heart; and this no Radical can admit, certainly as he explains it.

THE "AUTHORITY" OF CHRISTIANITY.

What is the kind and degree of authority which Dr. Clarke claims for Christianity? He says that it "practically makes no difference" that "Christians

assume Christ to be an infallible teacher, while other masters are supposed to be fallible." He says that we go to any teacher "for truth, not for error"; and, if we find what seems to us false, we skip it, and do not venture to criticise it. "When we stop to criticise," he says, "we lose our teacher, and cease to be disciples. . . . All Christians, in studying the teachings of Jesus, are in this attitude. They are looking for truth, not for falsehood and error," etc. And this, he thinks, is the way in which Radicals themselves receive the words of Socrates, Plato, Parker, Emerson. It surely needs little knowledge of Radicals to correct this misapprehension. Such mental submissiveness in the spirit of faith, such reverential assumption of unmixed truth, such total absence of critical discrimination, is possible to no one but a Christian. Imagination of a peculiarly vivacious kind is required to attribute these Christian characteristics to the habitual free-thinker; and any religion which claims authority of this sort is irreconcilable with the Radicalism that understands itself.

ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY.

That Dr. Clarke is far more near to Orthodoxy than he seems to suspect, must occur to every clear-thoughted reader of these explicit words: "The essential thing in a religion, and the only essential thing, is that which was in it in the beginning in its source and fountain, and which has continued in it ever since. . . . The only essential points which remain [in Christianity], which were in the religion at first and have continued in it ever since, are *faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God*; and the practical purpose of attaining that love to God and love to man of which he is the *Mediator*."

This tells us in few words the whole story of the Syracuse Conference, and explains fully Dr. Clarke's speech and vote on that occasion. Here we have *fealty to the Christ*, and the attainment of love to God and man *through his mediation*, set forth as the only essentials of Christianity; but not a word about spiritual freedom or a spiritual Christianity independent of the personal Jesus. Now these essentials are indeed the foundation and essence of Orthodox Christianity, whose whole dogmatic and ecclesiastical system is built up out of the logical sequences of which these things are merely the premises. The great principles which Unitarianism early advocated, and which gave it all its greatness as distinguished from

Orthodoxy, are completely thrown overboard by Dr. Clarke in his present statement of the essentials of Christianity; they were thrown overboard by the denomination at Syracuse; they have been abandoned to those who loved them enough to follow their fortunes in the outside world. Now, with profound esteem and admiration for Dr. Clarke, whose genial character wins all sympathy and disarms all personal criticism, I must not omit to point out that he himself, in the definition he now gives of essential Christianity, proves that I am right in identifying it substantially with Orthodoxy, and in opposing it openly as the only way of adhering faithfully to the *perfect spiritual freedom and spiritual, impersonal religion* which collective Unitarianism, by solemn official action, discarded forever at Syracuse. To all intents and purposes he justifies my "present definition" by his own, and justifies my anti-Christianity by still pushing aside, in the name of Christianity, the great ideas which imperatively command me to obedience in the name of Free Religion.

THE INDEX,

A WEEKLY JOURNAL

DEVOTED TO

FREE RELIGION.

PUBLISHED BY

THE INDEX ASSOCIATION,

AT

NO. 1 TREMONT PLACE, BOSTON.

Editor: FRANCIS ELLINGWOOD ABBOT.

Associate Editor: ABRAM WALTER STEVENS.

Editorial Contributors: O. B. FROTHINGHAM, New York City; W. J. POTTER, New Bedford, Mass.; W. H. SPENCER, Sparta, Wis.; R. P. HALLOWELL, Boston, Mass.; Mrs. E. D. CHENEY, Jamaica Plain, Mass.; F. W. NEWMAN, England; CHARLES VOYSEY, England; GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE, England.

Every liberal should subscribe for THE INDEX, as the best popular exponent of Religious Liberalism. Every Christian minister, and every thinking church-member, should subscribe for it, as the clearest, most candid, and most scholarly expositor of the differences between Free Thought and Evangelical Christianity, and as the best means of becoming well informed of the arguments and the movements which the Church will have to meet in the future. Almost every number contains a discourse or leading article, which alone is worth the price of one year's subscription.

Mr. CHARLES DARWIN, author of *The Origin of Species*, says, in a letter to the editor not originally intended for publication, but subsequently authorized to be used: "I have now read 'TRUTHS FOR THE TIMES,' and I admire them from my inmost heart; and I agree to almost every word."

Prof. MAX MUELLER, of Oxford, England, in a letter to the Editor published in THE INDEX for January 4, 1873, says: "That the want of a journal entirely devoted to Religion in the widest sense of the word should be felt in America—that such a journal should have been started and so powerfully supported by the best minds of your country,—is a good sign of the times. There is no such journal in England, France, or Germany, though the number of so-called religious or theological periodicals is, as you know, very large." And later still: "I read the numbers of your INDEX with increasing interest."

Send \$3.00 for one year, or 75 cents for three months on trial. Address THE INDEX, No. 1 Tremont Place, Boston.

THE INDEX

BY THE EDITOR

1881

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

THE INDEX

RETURN TO the circulation desk of any
University of California Library
or to the
NORTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
Bldg. 400, Richmond Field Station
University of California
Richmond, CA 94804-4698

ALL BOOKS MAY BE RECALLED AFTER 7 DAYS

- 2-month loans may be renewed by calling
(510) 642-6753
 - 1-year loans may be recharged by bringing
books to NRLF
 - Renewals and recharges may be made 4
days prior to due date.
-

DUE AS STAMPED BELOW

SENT ON ILL

SEP 20 1999

U. C. BERKELEY

YC134728



