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UNITY THROUGH RELIGION

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(Extracts from a broadcast talk given in 1949.)

UNITARIANISM is a world-wide religion aiming at a world task. It seeks to bring the peoples of the world into co-operation and friendship. Unitarians are concerned with establishing a universally acceptable religious belief which will stimulate co-operation for mutual good. They seek a world commonwealth of peoples.

Unitarianism is not the only religion which, for its ultimate aim, has the establishment of a world community. But Unitarians differ from the majority of Christians. They do not believe that that world community can be achieved only when all people "believe in Jesus Christ", that is, believe that Jesus saved mankind by his death and that he was the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. They believe that such beliefs belong rather to the sphere of doctrine, to man's theorizing about the ultimate sources and ends of his existence. They find the essentials of religion to be a simple belief in a Universe with purpose, God; in love, the severest taskmaster in the world; in a society in which there is freedom to think and men regard using that freedom as their duty. "The Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of Man" is the simplest summary of Unitarianism.

Many political associations regard the achievement of this aim of a world community as purely a matter of political and economic organisation. Unitarians cannot agree. Though they would be the last persons to deny that the world community can be introduced without careful study of its economic and political form they assert that religious belief is necessary if the community is to function in the interests of all its members. Community, whether it be on a world scale or a church scale requires as well as attention to economic factors, a common belief in the purposes for which the comunity exists and a faith that these purposes can be achieved. Religion can supply that belief and that faith. "Indeed", say Unitarians, "religion and life are one". We can live a better life only by being religious and we can foster our religion only by living it.

RELIGIOUS UNITY

If then a religious unity is necessary before a world community can be achieved, we must ask ourselves how are we to get religious unity? Is it to come about through the co-operation of the main world religions and the sects within them? Or must it be necessary first to establish one universal form of religion?

Unitarians for various reasons, would, I think, oppose this latter idea.

A universal religion could be made by bringing together the elements of many religions to form a composite religion. In the same was as a universal language like Esperanto was made by drawing on several languages and combining the elements thus derived into a logical structure. A universal religion could be made by developing a religious form superior to those at present existing, superior in that it would more truthfully reflect the author of existence and the purpose for existence. Or it could be produced by forcing all peoples to accept one of the existing forms as the one, true, religion.

Churches such as the Roman Catholic have for centuries asserted that they are the one, true church, and all must accept their way to salvation. But they have met with ever-increasing failure. As long as there is freedom of

thought there will be many approaches to God as Unitarians well know, for behind them is a long struggle for religious freedom.

To suppose that a religion could evolve, superior in form to all those at present existing without contact between the main religions of the world is putting the clerical waggon before the donkey. Such a religion may evolve after the creation of a world community but certainly it could not before.

What then of the first possibility, the creation of a synthetic religion? This is idle speculation. The traditional religions are incorporated in the various social structures in which they flourish. They could no more be displaced by a synthetic religion than the world languages could be displaced by a synthetic language lacking in national and cultural associations.

It appears then, that we must reconcile ourselves to the continuance of much diversity in religious belief.   Our problem is not to find out how to convert Mohammedans to Christianity or Buddhists to Judaism, but to find how the followers of these various religions can appreciate each other and work together for a world community.

TOLERANCE NECESSARY

The answer given to this question at a recent Unitarian conference, was that there are sufficient spiritual and ethical beliefs common to the main world religions to permit followers of these religions to work together. It would be necessary, and this is the difficult proviso, for the followers of each religion to be tolerant towards the forms of worship and theological beliefs of other religions.

Each of the main religions has a belief in God, in a power beyond man which has ordained a purpose in existence. Each has arrived to a greater or lesser extent at an appreciation of love and brotherhood. One of the greatest facts of the world is that at different ages and in different social and economic circumstances, the great prophets of all religions have proclaimed the unity of the human race, a purposeful universe and a sublime belief in love and brotherhood.   Over the centuries the Jew Jesus, and middle-class Brahprincely Buddha, the proletarian min Ghandi reach welcoming hands. They aspired to transcend class and nation and create a community where man "could walk humbly with his God".

The churches which came into existence as a result of the prophets' inspiration have split into many groups most of which regard their interpretation of their particular prophets teaching and their evaluation of his nature as the only correct one.   Trinitarian Christians refuse to admit Unitarian Christians as "Christians" for they define a Christian as one who believes in the divinity of Christ and we certainly do not.   Not at least, in any different sense for that in which every man and woman is divine.   Yet regarded historically, the Unitarian is a Christian church.   We simply reject much of the doctrine held by Trinitarians for we consider it unwarranted.   It seems to us that Jesus certainly did not regard himself as the second person in a three-part godhead but the bulk of the Christian church claims him to be just that.   The important points are that although we disagree on much, we do agree on many things and we can co-operate providing that we can be humble about our beliefs, (for after all we might be wrong), and tolerant toward the beliefs of others (for after all they might be right).

Such tolerance would permit religious groups to co-operate in establishing a world community. Our task is to practise tolerance within our own group and towards other groups.   To seek co-operation and in all ways, to spread the ideas of a tolerant and religious world community.