

DECLINE OF AMERICAN UNITARIANISM.

The rise of Theodore Parker into prominence marked an era of deep significance in the history of the Unitarian body on this continent. Prior to that date, the discussions with New England orthodoxy, the personal opinions and influence of Channing and his conferees, and the still remaining volume of religious experience that had survived through all the theological aberrations of the preceding generation or two, had given to American Unitarianism a large increase of both positiveness and unity. But with Parker appeared the beginnings of a divergence which has gradually divided the denomination into two main sections, widely unlike in belief, and largely antagonistic in spirit and in tendency. The first, and unhappily now much the smaller of these sections, still held to many of the doctrines of the Gospel, so far as this was possible in conjunction with its denial or questioning of the divinity of Christ. It still received and revered the Scriptures, enforced spiritual obligations, recognized the authority and worth of the Church—still believed, in a word, in religion, in the biblical sense of that term.

The other section, under the leadership of Parker, gradually developed wider and wider antagonism with most that orthodoxy regards as essential to the Christian faith. Loose notions of inspiration came in, with their natural consequence in the practical rejection of some portions of the Bible, and in weakening the supreme authoritativeness which belongs to the whole Bible as a divine Book. While the language of Christianity was largely retained, the real meaning of its most sacred terms, such as atonement and regeneration, was gradually reduced and exhaled, until they meant almost nothing to those who still professed in some sense to receive them. It was a popular trick in discourses and elsewhere, to quote from Confucius and Plato, as if they were of equal authority with Christ. By degrees the name Unitarian came less and less to represent anything distinctively Christian, and even before the death of its brilliant but erratic leader, Unitarianism of this type had not only parted company with orthodoxy once for all, but had even severed itself in almost everything but the name, from that better Unitarianism

to which we have referred, and to whose most spiritual representatives we can, as orthodox men, refer only in terms of deepest respect.

This downward movement is painful to contemplate. Unitarians of the Parker type, as they swung away from their original position, have sought affiliations with almost every wild notion that has taken root in our prolific soil. For awhile they cultivated an intimacy with the older type of Universalism, albeit this still adhered to the belief that Jesus was a divine Saviour. Then it struck hands with the Restorationists, and maintained the dogma that all men will be brought back to holiness, if not here, then hereafter—if not through Christ, then through their own resources. It established fellowship with the Positive Religionists, and began to count Christianity a natural faith—one of the two great religions discovered by Freeman Clarke. It developed affinities with the pantheistic philosophy, and with scientific materialism, and rejoiced in a conception of evolution, which practically retired God as a Being from the universe which He had made. And at last we find one of its conventions hesitating about the passage of a resolution declaring belief in a personal God to be an essential article of religion. Wider and wider have these latitudinarian and destructive tendencies become, weaker and weaker have been the doctrinal affirmations, more and more indeterminate the theological position, until now no man can safely define the term Unitarian, or definitely describe the tenets, convictions, experiences of the incongruous body that bears it.

It is quite apparent that the only hope of what we have characterized as the better, more spiritual type of Unitarianism in this country, lies in the drawing of more distinct lines between it and this wildly erratic and dangerous section. There can be but little affinity between parties so opposite, as there can be no communion between Parkerism and evangelical Christianity. Is there a personal God, or no? Is the Bible an inspired Book, or no? Are the great doctrines of providence and of moral government realities, or no? Was Christ the one peerless Teacher and Example for mankind, or no? Do His teachings comprehend and sum up the religious beliefs obligatory upon men, or no? In a word, is Christianity in any