

A Search After Truth

By GEORGE W. JULIAN

[This frank revelation of the development of his religious views from his youth through the years of his long and active career, was written by the Hon. George W. Julian, at Santa Fe, New Mexico near the end of 1887. It was published in the January, 1888, issue of the *Unitarian Review* (XXIX, pp. 48-57). It is here reprinted because of its sincerity, interest and value. It gives a rare insight into a more or less hidden phase of the life of an able and aggressive public man.]

The personal experience of every thinking man and woman in wrestling with theological doubts and difficulties must always possess a certain human interest; and this interest, for obvious reasons, is rapidly extending. Through the amazing advance of knowledge and free thought within the past forty years, non-conformity in religion has been made easy. The number of those who are turning away from tradition and custom and casting about them for opinions of their own is manifestly on the increase; and they may possibly find entertainment, if not instruction, in the story of earlier seekers after the truth, who labored under far less favored conditions. It is in the light of these considerations that I have prepared the following brief chapter of facts in real life, written with the most unreserved frankness and fidelity of detail.

In the somewhat rude pioneer community¹ in which I was born and spent my early life, religion appeared to be the chief and all-absorbing concern. The people generally were very poor, lived in log cabins and were exposed to great trials and hardships; and to the eye of worldly prudence it would have seemed that their prime mission was an early escape from the thralldom of poverty and privation through some vigorous and judicious efforts steadily directed to that end. But they regarded the salvation of their souls in the world to come as the paramount consideration. Religion was not so much a struggle for heaven as a scuffle to escape hell. The dominant form of faith was Methodism. It was not, however, the comparatively educated and conservative Methodism of to-day, but the primitive, volcanic sort, which found fit expression

¹ Centreville, Indiana.

in old-fashioned revivals, camp-meetings and a remorseless administration of the terrors of the law. A few of the preachers of that day still survive, but the last representative man among them whom I knew personally died recently in Indianapolis. The most formidable character among them was "Father Havens," a man of decided force and great physical as well as moral courage. He was a very downright and rather quaint sort of person, and sometimes indulged in a graphic bluntness of speech, which was generally remembered and quoted. An example of this was his saying that the town of Greenfield was "the worst place between hell and the Wabash."

Methodism, however, was somewhat checkmated by a considerable Quaker element, with which I was identified; and the situation was still further modified, and sometimes made rather picturesque, through an occasional irruption into the neighborhood of an old Universalist preacher, then well known in Eastern Indiana, and soundly hated by all orthodox people. His name was Jonathan Kidwell. He was a man almost wholly without education, but possessed [of] a broad and vigorous grasp of mind, a natural lover of controversy, and a perfect master of invective. He was several years the editor of a religious periodical published in Union County in that state; and he anticipated, by more than a quarter of a century, the views of the radical Unitarians and Free Religionists of to-day. There was also among us a guerilla force of Free Thinkers, who were pretty active in their profane operations, and made the general state of affairs still more miscellaneous.

It was through the agency of this latter class that some "infidel" books fell in my way at the age of about fifteen; and an eccentric old farmer in the neighborhood, named Louis Hosier, a man of integrity and strong common sense, used frequently to ask me to read to him from some of these books, which he owned. This was the beginning of my experience in this direction, which I prolonged for several years, reading Paine's theological works, Volney's *Ruins*, Frances Wright's Lectures, Hume's Essays, Rousseau's *Treatise on Education*, etc. I was quite captivated by these books; and there was a tone of audacity about some of them which charmed me, while it chimed in with my decided dislike of Orthodoxy, as taught and illustrated around me.

As I approached my manhood, however, my interest in the purely destructive and negative arguments of my favor-

ite authors considerably declined. They were splendid in their way; but, as I came to take a more serious view of life, they failed to meet the natural craving of the heart for some sort of spiritual light and consolation. They landed me nowhere, and I gradually became more and more dissatisfied in mind. I used to have many conversations with my venerated friend, Samuel I. Hoshour, on religious subjects. He was a leading preacher in the Christian or Campbellite church; and his perfect sincerity and real friendship for me would have pointed the way out of my doubt and denials, if any such way had then been possible. At his instance, I read books on the other side, several of which he kindly furnished me, such as *Watson's Apology for the Bible*, *Simpson's Plea for Religion*, *Nelson on Infidelity*, *Leslie's Short Method with the Deists*, *Faber on Infidelity*, and *Butler's Analogy*. Theological questions continued to interest me for years following, and finally received an entirely new treatment through a circumstance which was purely accidental.

Forty-four years ago [1843] I stepped into the law office of a friend in Centreville; and, finding a volume of Dr. Channing's² Works on his table, I happened to open it at the beginning of his famous sermon delivered at the ordination of Jared Sparks, at Baltimore, in 1819, on the distinguishing opinions of Unitarian Christians. I found my eyes strangely fastened on the pages as I proceeded, and read it to the end with the most absorbing interest. It was a new revelation, and at once breathed into me a new life. I had no faith in the leading dogmas of orthodox Christianity, as I then understood them, while my skeptical reading had become dreary and unsatisfying; but here was a form of faith which appealed to my reason, while it held fast to all that is spiritually beautiful and inspiring in the teachings of the New Testament. It treated the doctrines of the Trinity, Total Depravity, Vicarious Atonement, Election and Reprobation, and the Plenary Inspiration of the Bible, which the Deistical writers of the last century combated so vigorously, as, in fact, revolting corruptions and deformities of the pure and simple gospel proclaimed by Christ and his apostles. I was inexpressibly delighted. I felt like one coming out of a fearful darkness into the full light of day. I borrowed the six volumes of Dr. Channing, and read them

² William Ellery Channing (1780-1842). Most noted of the early Unitarian clergymen.

through with rapt attention; and the power of his ennobling thoughts and beautiful spirit which I then experienced has in some measure attended me ever since. I subscribed for the *Christian Inquirer*, the *Christian Register*, and the *Christian Examiner*, then the three leading organs of American Unitarianism, and received from Boston a large supply of tracts for missionary use. I corresponded with Mr. Perkins, then pastor of the Unitarian society in Cincinnati, who sent me a further supply. I read the New Testament through repeatedly in the light of my new views, and found a beauty and fascination in its words which I had never realized before. For a time it seemed to me I had mistaken my calling, and that I ought to become a missionary of my new faith; but this feeling was not enduring, and gradually gave place to more secular and imperative demands.

The influence of Dr. Channing over my political opinions was not less remarkable. By touching my moral sensibilities at this vernal season of my life, he prepared me for the service in which I afterwards engaged in with so much zeal. His anti-slavery tracts and addresses set me to thinking, and roused within me a spirit and purpose kindred to his own. Hostility to slavery was henceforward to be the controlling principle of my politics, and some of his sentences at once took strong hold upon my memory. "The grand doctrine that every human being should have the means of self-culture, of progress in knowledge and virtue, of health, comfort, and happiness, of exercising the powers and affections of a man,—this is slowly taking its place as the highest social truth." These words have been my constant companions. They have been a ceaseless trumpet-call to battle against oppression and inequality, whether taking the undisguised form of chattel-slavery, or that organized cupidity which makes labor the helpless drudge of capital, or that system of agricultural serfdom which rests upon the unrestricted monopoly of the soil.

As time wore on, my interest in theological questions steadily increased. I regretted this, because I felt that it was incompatible with my position as a practical man of the world, who had a living to make by my profession; but my espousal of Unitarianism had given a new direction and impulse to my thoughts, and awakened inquiries which seemed to demand an answer. As already stated, I had embraced the new faith

as a glad surprise and a precious consolation. Its blended rationalism and piety captivated my understanding and heart. The thunderbolts it forged against Calvinism delighted me. Its method of escape from the old dogmas of tradition and superstition was charming. But I was then a conservative Unitarian, believing that, while the Bible is not a revelation, in the orthodox sense, it is the *record* of a revelation, and that, although errors and corruptions have crept into it, imposing upon men the duty of discriminating between the spurious and the genuine, yet that its divine authority is to be accepted as our rule of faith and practice. Thus defined, Unitarianism provided a curiosity which it did not satisfy, and suggested questions to which I could find no sufficient answer. Upon what principle was I to distinguish the pure gold of gospel truth from the dross of superstition and error? If the Scriptures, or any discoverable portion of them, must be accepted as inspired, what is the nature and degree of that inspiration? and wherein does it differ from the inspiration of highly gifted men in their best moods, who have claimed no special divine guidance in their utterances? What was I to make of the prophecies? Some of these, as I found, were written after the events which they pretended to foretell; but did *any* of the Jewish prophets possess any miraculous power to read the future? If not what *was* their power? The miracles perplexed me. I pondered Carlyle's question: "On what ground shall one that can make iron swim come and declare that therefore he can teach religion?" As a believer in the unchangeableness of natural laws, how *could* I believe in the miracles? And if I rejected the story of the raising of Lazarus, and other accounts of the supernatural, how could I accept the divine authority of the record thus shown to be untrustworthy? The *Christian Examiner*, an able scholarly periodical, dealt with these questions, but in such a way as to excite doubt rather than satisfy inquiry. I was hungry for light; and, when Lucretia Mott paid me a visit in the year 1847, I frankly told her of my theological troubles, and asked her to aid me by any suggestions she might be able to offer. I was charmed by her sweet Quaker face, the tender and winning tones of her voice, and the perfect rest she seemed to find in her reliance upon the "Inner Light," in dealing with theological difficulties. But my desire for some logical solution of my troublesome questions was not satisfied, and I so wrote her not long after her return home.

Her friendly interest in me and her evident sympathy with my earnest craving for the truth led her to confer with her friends, Dr. Furness, of Philadelphia, and Rev. W. H. Channing, as to my state of mind.³

In a long and most interesting letter, she reported their suggestions, recommending that I read Palfrey's *Lectures on the Old Testament*, Mr. Norton's works on the Prophecies and on the Genuineness and Authority of the Gospels, De Wette's Introduction to the Old Testament, translated by Theodore Parker, etc. In the paper enclosed from Dr. Furness, he says: "If your friend would read the prophecies in a Quaker spirit and philosophy, he would catch a glimpse of their true character. He would see that those men were the fiery reformers of their day, men who regarded every clear intuition of their consciences as a direct word from the Lord," and "that their inspiration was the same in kind with the inspiration of all truth and goodness and wisdom." Mrs. Mott sent me a bundle of pamphlets, including Theodore Parker's famous sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," which she particularly commended, as she also did the Life of Joseph Blanco White; and she repeated her own views, which I quote:—

Now that skepticism of the theology of the schools has become somewhat a duty, Free Thinkers may go to the other extreme, and fail to award to the Scriptures all the beautiful and blessed instruction they contain. I have for years accustomed myself to read and examine them as nearly as I would any other book, as early education and veneration would permit. I have now no difficulty in deciding upon the human and ignorant origin of such facts as conflict with the known and eternal laws of Deity in the physical creation, be the claim to the miraculous ever so strong. Still less, if possible, do I waver, when any violation of the Divine and Eternal law of right, such as murder in any of its forms, slavery in any of its degrees, and priestcraft in its various shapes, as palmed upon the religious world, is declared to be "Thus saith the Lord."

I was thus pretty well supplied with able counsel, and pointed to some of the best attainable sources of knowledge at that time. But I felt disappointed. I had not found what I wanted. I could understand Mrs. Mott's rejection of "the human and ignorant origin" of portions of the Scriptures, but this did not explain to me how I could certainly determine the

³ William Henry Furness (1802-1896). Unitarian pastor in Philadelphia. William Henry Channing (1810-1884). Nephew of William Ellery Channing. Unitarian preacher in Boston and Rochester. After 1854, he lived most of the time in England, serving as Unitarian pastor in Liverpool for a period. He was an ardent abolitionist.

superhuman and divine origin of other portions. It became painfully evident that I could find no immediate deliverance from my anxious doubts and questionings. If I entered upon the study of the voluminous works recommended, which I determined to do, I should have little time for anything else, and might, after all, fail in my purpose. I was not a theologian by profession, and had my own work to do, of a very different sort; while it was not a matter of life and death that I should exactly or thoroughly understand the debatable problems I was pondering.

I therefore accepted the necessity of the case as well as I could, still holding on to my conservative Unitarianism as the best thing I could do, but as a sort of provisional faith, the real foundations of which I hoped in some way to ascertain at some future time. I went about my daily business, but with an unappeased interest in theological problems; and it was more than a dozen years later before I found myself logically compelled, as a finality, to surrender every form and quality of supernaturalism, and to take my stand with the radical wing of the Unitarian body, and such independent thinkers as agreed with it, in demanding absolute freedom of thought. I had been most anxious to reach a different conclusion. I had earnestly sought the blessing of mental repose in a divinely authenticated faith, but I could not purchase that blessing at the cost of my understanding. I became convinced of the natural origin of Christianity, because I found it impossible to believe in the supernatural. I reached this final theological landing after much mental anxiety, a good deal of reading, and by a train of thought which yielded me no intellectual peace till I allowed it to have its way. My reason compelled me to agree with Mrs. Child,⁴ that "the idea that Christianity is a special revelation, made up all at once, and entirely by itself, is as irrational as to suppose that the world was made in six days. Christianity was a *growth*. The past flowed into the present, and left much of its deposit; and even so will the present pass into the future. There is a perpetual process of evolution in things of the *mind*, as well as in the forms of matter." My Unitarian experience during the years I was struggling to be satisfied with my semi-orthodox faith in some respects strikingly resembled that of Harriet Martineau, as de-

⁴ Lydia Maria (Francis) Child (1802-1842). Noted antislavery writer and reformer of Boston.

tailed in her charming Autobiography; but I did not follow her into Positivism, and the disbelief in a future life. I did not abjure religion altogether, because one of its accepted foundations gave way; while, in bravely facing the great duties and trials of life, I gradually found strength and tranquility of mind. During the long years of the anti-slavery conflict, I found that, just in proportion as I gave my heart unselfishly to the work, the doctrinal doubts and anxieties that had so troubled me faded away, and seemed unworthy of a man who loved his neighbor and believed in the brotherhood of his race. My whole moral nature was lifted up by sincere consecration to my grand task; and I realized at last that "with the heart man believeth unto righteousness," that "the tree of knowledge is not that of life," and that the only safe "plan of salvation" is that of personal duty and endeavor.

Such, very briefly told, is the story of my search after truth. If I have not found just what I sought, I have sincerely endeavored to preserve the love of truth, without which even truth itself degenerates into a sham and a lie. Should the final result of my search seem empty, because wanting in the spiritual rest and solace which the heart longs for through a faith supernaturally attested, I answer that the question for every sincere inquirer to consider is, not what is solacing, but what is true, and that whoever subordinates his love of truth to anything else in the universe is disloyal to the Author of truth, and out of accord with the creation of which he forms a part. I believe, with a famous writer of our Revolutionary era, that "it is necessary to the happiness of man that he be mentally faithful to himself," and that the most deplorable form of infidelity that now scourges society is unfaithfulness to honest convictions.

As regards my early devotion to Unitarianism as a sect, a wider acquaintance with books, and forty odd years of active life and practical contact with men of all opinions, have somewhat modified my views and tempered my zeal; but, as a powerful and heroic protest against false dogmas, and a great stride towards the inevitable goal of Free Thought, I honor it, and thank it, more than words can express. Nor am I left without religious faith and hope. For reasons which satisfy my understanding without any support from supernaturalism, I am a Theist. I believe in personal immortality on the strength

of the human affections, and because I cannot believe that the unappeasable hunger of the soul for so priceless a blessing was implanted to be ungratified and mocked. I believe in the simple humanity of Jesus, and the renovating and ever-unfolding power of his life and teachings in lifting humanity to higher and yet higher conditions. While I accept these ideas as rational and satisfying, I am not a scoffer at any form of faith, because I believe all forms are the product of causes from which they have inevitably been evolved, and that this continuing process of evolution will at last give the world a perfect religion, as the outcome and counterpart of a perfect humanity. I do not, therefore, believe in the gospel of human despair, and that the work of creation is an abortion, but that "all we have willed or hoped or dreamed of Good shall exist,—not its semblance, but itself."