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OUR
LIBERAL MOVEMENT

IN THEOLOGY

CHIEFLY AS SHOWN IN RECOLLECTIONS OF THE
HISTORY OF UNITARIANISM IN
NEW ENGLAND

BEING

A CLOSING COURSE OF LECTURES GIVEN IN THE
HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL



BY

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SECOND EDITION

A. 3231. B. Kofelmann, 1894.

BOSTON
ROBERTS BROTHERS

1883

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE following correspondence sufficiently explains the circumstances which have led to the publication of this volume:—

DIVINITY SCHOOL, HARVARD UNIVERSITY,
CAMBRIDGE, May 10, 1882.

DEAR SIR,— We, the undersigned, wishing to possess the Lectures on the “Liberal Movement in Theology,” recently delivered before the Divinity School of Harvard University, in a more permanent form, express our earnest desire for the publication of the same.

Very truly yours,

H. PRICE COLLIER,

JOHN A. TUNIS,

CHARLES F. RUSSELL,

Committee for the School.

CAMBRIDGE, May 14, 1882.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,— Your very kind letter gives me the opportunity, which I am delighted to embrace, of leaving with you a memento of the four years I have passed, most agreeably, in connection with this School.

Trusting that you may all have the privilege of doing your share in that noble and most interesting work, of which I have attempted to trace some of the antecedents and conditions, I am, with the sincerest regard,

Your friend,

J. H. ALLEN.

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UNIVERSITY PRESS:
JOHN WILSON AND SON, CAMBRIDGE.

These circumstances will explain, if they do not justify, a more personal tone in these Lectures than would belong to a purely historical or critical review. In fact, the value of the volume, if it has any, turns mainly on its being, in good part, made up of reminiscences and personal testimony. It is, besides, in some sense the final link in a series, of which "Hebrew Men and Times" makes the first, and the third, under the title "The Middle Age," is now in press.

I will only add, that some passages may perhaps be recognized as having appeared here and there in print. In particular, most of the article on Unitarianism in a pamphlet entitled "Three Phases of Modern Theology" has been included here; and the Lecture on "The Gospel of Liberalism" is substantially the same with the Address to the Alumni of this School delivered in 1880.

By the kindness of Dr. Hedge I am permitted to add in the form of an Appendix, with some revision and addition by his hand, his recent Memorial Address on Bellows and Emerson.

HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL,
CAMBRIDGE, June 10, 1882.

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OUR
LIBERAL MOVEMENT IN THEOLOGY.

I.
ANTECEDENTS.

THERE are two ways of looking at any form of religious thought that appears in history. One is, to see it as a fixed type of opinion; the other is, to see it as a phase in the development of religious truth. One sees it in the distinct outline it has taken in creed or symbol, as set forth by its recognized interpreters; the other sees it as one stage of a movement that began long before there was any record of it, and will continue so long as men think at all seriously on religious things.

The former way has been much more common. It corresponds with the *absolute* temper in which religious opinion has generally been held, and with that aim at absolute truth, and the faultless statement of it, which men have thought their highest duty. What is naturally fluent, and by the very laws of thought must change continually as the bearings of all our knowledge change, men have continually endeavored to fix in rigid forms that could not be altered or lost.

So we find the history of religious thought chiefly made up of the recital of creeds, with the story of the controversies that have grown out of them, or else have been reconciled in them. It is even taken for granted that every religious movement must perforce express itself in such a creed. To this day the question is asked, "What do Unitarians believe?"—just as if that question were at all relevant, as touching the movement which the various phases of Unitarian opinion represent. Unitarians themselves, in entire good faith, are trying to this day to find some statement or form of declaration broad enough to include them all, and precise enough to mean something when it has cancelled all they differ in; while in equal good faith they assure the world that no one is to be held responsible for that or any other statement that can be made.

Now it is not quite satisfactory to say, as many do, that Unitarians simply guard, with more than common jealousy, their right as Protestants to private judgment: in other words, that they are not only "Unitarian" Christians, but also "Liberal" Christians. This has never been felt fairly to meet the case. Inquirers think they have a right to expect more; believers feel they have a right to assume more. And many attempts have been made to state the Unitarian position with authority. But when we come to examine these attempts we are apt to be struck with two things: first, that they have a certain apologetic tone, as if the main point were not to say frankly just what the writer himself thinks, but rather to show that Unitarians are pretty good Christians

after all,—in short, to come as near the popular creed as may be without quite hitting it; and secondly, that they are mostly made up of details, or brief formulas of religious phraseology, or points of Bible-interpretation,—notoriously wide apart from the opinions of many who rate themselves as Unitarians, and who stand in general esteem as well as anybody among them.

I have spoken of one way of looking at the matter,—that which we may call the sectarian or dogmatic way. The other is what, for distinction, we may call the scientific way: that, namely, which we take as students of the laws of thought, or of religious development in a broad sense. In other words, it is the history of a Movement we are to study, not the attitude of a Sect.

Not that Unitarianism has generally been true in thought to what it is in fact. It is much easier to figure itself as a sect than as a movement away from all sects,—from a dogmatic towards a purely scientific conception of religious truth. But this latter view is that which we shall have to take, if we would do any justice to its history.

In particular it is necessary, to explain the many inconsistencies in that history. I do not say, to apologize for them. I have not the least intention of saying a word in apology. I may perhaps have to speak of a good many things as a critic, but certainly not as an apologist. In a very near and special sense Unitarianism is my birthright, which it would be dishonorable as well as painful to disown. As to that, I am entirely content with the position in which