

LOVE AND COMPASSION, THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Throughout his life, Charles Dickens was impelled by an awakened social conscience. Poverty, oppression, and ignorance were all around. It shocked Dickens to see the middle class of the England of his day turn its back and the churches be unwilling to see beyond their airy creeds. In his twenties, Dickens joined the only religious movement that seemed to him to make the quality of human life a central concern--Unitarianism. He said, "I have carried into effect an old idea of mine and have joined the Unitarians, who *would* do something for human improvement, if they could; and who practice Charity and Tolerance." Dickens did not remain a steady participant in church life for more than a few years, but Unitarian values were central to his faith for the rest of his life.

"Remember," Dickens wrote a few years later, "It is christianity TO DO GOOD always - even to those who do evil to us. It is christianity to love our neighbour as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them Do to us. It is christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts...."

In 1843 Dickens was an active and regular participant in the Unitarian Church in Little Portland Street in the West End of London. He was a close and lasting friend of the Rev. Edward Tagart, the minister, and participated with him in the memorial service for the great American Unitarian William Ellery Channing, who had died the year before. Dickens had visited with Channing in Boston, and shared Channing's vision of the dignity of human nature as the likeness of God.

It was in the fall of 1843, when Dickens was most absorbed by Unitarianism, that he penned his great story about the Christmas spirit, *A Christmas Carol*. Love and compassion, more than belief systems and creeds, are the true meaning of Christ and Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* remains a great statement of the Unitarian faith. The success of the story has ever since served to implant into Anglo-American culture a most Unitarian message about the spirit of Christmas.

The moral religion of Dickens also finds expression in the story of the moral teachings of Jesus which he wrote for his children, and in the great novels of the aroused conscience from *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) to *Hard Times* (1854). It also finds expression in personal participation in many social action projects, often led by other Unitarians. The evangelical Christian press of that day denounced the "spiritual poison" of

Dickens's Unitarianism, but the great novelist's faith was never shaken that at the core of true religion was human love and compassion, not orthodox creeds.

Ref: Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 12-13, passim; and other sources.

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