

AGNOSTICISM IN THE PULPIT.

BY THE EDITOR.

AGNOSTICISM is the most fashionable and popular philosophy of to-day, and though it came as an enemy to religion, it has gradually crept into the pulpit, and may now be regarded as the most redoubtable stronghold of dogmatism, or rather of the dogmatic interpretation of traditional belief. The founders of agnosticism, Professor Huxley as well as Mr. Spencer, were antagonistic to the Church, and claiming that Church doctrines referred to subjects lying beyond the ken of human experience, protested against the right to prescribe a definite belief. It is but consistent, however, to expect the agnostic to take his own medicine. Since no one can know, everybody, the Church too, has a right to believe whatever may be deemed worthy of belief on mere preference and without evidence. Thus the dogmatist feels firmly entrenched in his old position, and agnosticism has more and more become a welcome ally to dogmatism. We have an instance of this alliance in Rev. Frank Crane's eulogy of "The Cohesive Power of Ignorance" which he has set forth with that extraordinary force for which he has become famous as a pulpiteer at Chicago, as well as in other cities of our country.

Mr. Crane's view is quite typical for a great number of the clergy, but we do not think that this attitude is wholesome, nor that it will really prove helpful to the Churches.

Agnosticism is not a constructive power, but a dissolvent. It acts gradually like a slow poison, occasionally as an anodyne, but always with benumbing influence, and so it comes to destroy the vital power of the mind which it invades.

We need not deny the many truths contained in Mr. Crane's article. We know very well the charms of haziness, the mystifying power of vague notions, the awe of the ignorant when stultified by

things that lie beyond their comprehension.* But for that reason ignorance will never prove a wholesome and constructive force to be welcomed as an important and powerful factor in the upbuilding of social or ecclesiastical ideals. The power of campaign phrases in the free silver movement, and also the clamor for the protection of home industries by a high tariff etc., is not due to the ignorance of the masses or to the haziness of the propositions of campaign orators, but finds a ready explanation in the business interest of certain classes to which an appeal is made. The people who hope for profit by free silver or by protection applaud the orator for his promises, not for his arguments. Agitators of any kind do not appeal to the intellect but to the will, and the will is satisfied to have the logical mistakes covered over by empty declamations, and bold assertions are under these conditions gladly accepted as self-evident truths. It is not the lack of logic, not the presence of ignorance which lends power to these vague phrases, but the personal interest, the egotism, the greed, or other passions which are thereby directly aroused.

It is claimed by Mr. Crane that those armies are most efficient which "move with machine-like precision," those in which "each soldier understands nothing save to obey," suggesting that intelligence is rather a hindrance to victory than a help. This is an error which strategists have overcome since the time of Frederick the Great. The Prussian tradition established by this philosopher on the throne, is based upon the very opposite principle. A soldier is not requested to obey blindly but is expected to judge for himself, and this principle is what made the Prussian army so successful. While in other armies any officer would have been liable to court-martial if he did not implicitly obey a definite command given him, Frederick the Great and all his successors, would do the very opposite and court-martialled any officer or even a private soldier if he acted in strict obedience to orders when the conditions under which the orders were given had changed. It is true that the highest in rank is always responsible for the whole military division under his command, and he must be obeyed. In so far obedience is indispensable, but the highest in command is not expected to be an unthinking obedience machine, but a thinking man responsible for his conduct, and this principle extends to the private soldier, if he serves as sentinel or on picket duty. He is responsible and under definite conditions he is expected to act against impracticable orders.

* See, e. g., the author's article "The Importance of Clearness and the Charm of Haziness" in *The Open Court*, Vol. V, No. 27.

There is no need of historical examples. I will only add that military critics express this broader interpretation of a soldier's obedience in the Prussian army as transforming a machine into a living organism. The machine represents the theory of implicit obedience; while the organism, a kind of living machine, represents an organized body where independent judgment is used by every center and sub-center, all being subservient to a common and general purpose rendering it possible that all the organs act in concert.

Summing up the case, we could say that ignorance is the most serious drawback to an army, while intelligence renders it most efficient, and thus Mr. Crane's argument fails to prove his contention.

The proverb "familiarity breeds contempt" seems to support the evidence that the better we are acquainted with a man, the less we respect him, but such is not the case. If we become acquainted with the great features of a great man, we will admire him the more. If we find out his foibles, or his all too human frailties, we may come to the conclusion that he is not a great man, but in that case familiarity does not breed contempt, but only helps us to discover the truth.

By the bye, the proverb does *not* mean that a perfect acquaintance with persons makes us despise them. The connotation of familiarity means a familiar or intimate relation of a superior to the people in his charge. An officer who carouses and drinks with private soldiers will naturally lose his authority, and this is the sense which the proverb means to convey.

The idea in Schiller's "Veiled Statue at Sais" is not that truth becomes hideous or contemptible if we become familiar with it, but, as Schiller himself says, that truth will not be wholesome if we reach it through guilt, and it stands to reason that we are not ripe for a truth that has not been attained in the natural course of our intellectual development. Schiller does not mean to say that truth is hurtful; indeed he has said the very opposite elsewhere. He merely states that our determination to have truth at any price will be disastrous if we insist on having it without being duly prepared for its reception.

The idea that the main problems of religion, especially the questions as to the nature and existence of God, the soul, and the immortality of the soul, are beyond the ken of man, has become very popular and is regarded among many people as almost axiomatic. It is the superstition of the day and is spreading like a blight. We believe that this agnostic view is a most injurious error which must

be overcome in order to assure a healthy further development of mankind.*

We do not deny that there is a certain truth in agnosticism, but it is different from the favorite tenets of the agnostic. It is true that many problems are as yet unsolved, but they are not for that reason unsolvable. Much is unknown but nothing is unknowable. Certain things may be unknowable under certain conditions, but only the self-contradictory, only the absurd, is absolutely unknowable. The problems which are unsolvable are illegitimate problems. If we find a problem that can not be solved, we may be sure that it is wrongly stated and belongs to the category of sham problems. All knowledge is a description of facts and comprehension is due to a correct formulation of groups of facts so that the applicability of the law pervading all becomes apparent. All facts that come within the range of our experience are classifiable and thus they are subject to comprehension.

There is nothing that theoretically considered would be incomprehensible, for absolutely incomprehensible facts would be such as would not be subject to universal law and would not conform to the general world-order. As to the laws themselves we find them to be an orderly whole, a system of which the one is a mere modification under certain conditions of all the rest, and the whole is permeated by an intrinsic sameness reflected in the necessary orderliness of mathematics, of geometry, of algebra, of logic. Obviously there is something wrong with our notion of science when we think it leads to nescience, and with our religion if it is built on ignorance.

Mr. Crane claims that the Egyptian priesthood owed its long authority and power over the popular mind to the mysteries of their religion and the esoteric darkness of the people, and he thinks the same is true of Brahmanism, Buddhism, Mahomedanism, etc., but a closer acquaintance with the history of Egyptian and other faiths proves that this is not the case. The heart of the Egyptian was hungry for comfort in death and the tribulations of life and he found what he sought in the story of Osiris, the god who had become man and lived among the people as a man, subject to the same fate as they themselves. Osiris lived among them and went down to the world of the dead, preparing the place for all others who would descend to the same place, and thus he became their saviour who

* We have published our views on the subject in a booklet entitled *Kant and Spencer*, which contains a criticism of the philosophical foundation of agnosticism.

would assure the immortality of his devotees on condition that they would keep his commandments, and on the day of judgment be found just in their actions and pure in their hearts.

There is not one among all the religions which is built upon ignorance, but all of them are based upon the aspirations of the human heart which develop naturally and inevitably in any human society. Different religions express their religious faith and their hopes differently, some more clearly than others, some only vaguely, but the kernel of every one of them incorporates positive experiences and a certain amount of conviction; the essential part of them is always some positive faith; it is never negative, never ignorance, never an absence of knowledge.

It is true that the vast realms of the unknown stretch before us and they are much larger than the area of facts which have been illumined by the light of cognition, but we must bear in mind that knowledge possesses the quality of being universal. Thus the rays of comprehension extend into the unknown regions of the most inaccessible domains of the world. The fabric of the universe is not chaotic, but reveals a definite plan and so by having a little portion of the world well understood we are in the possession of a key which will unlock doors containing mysterious revelations of the most distant spheres.

The awe which man feels when facing this omnipresent order, and not our ignorance as to the constitution of the cosmos, has produced the conception of God, and though, at first, man merely divined the order of the universe and expressed his conception of it only in symbols before he could thoroughly grasp and understand it, it is not the unknown nor the not yet known of the deity that pervades the world in all its phases, but it is the obviously known and undoubtedly true which makes man bow in worship together with others who feel the same spell of religious devotion. Man's ignorance will never produce religious sentiments that will build up and edify the soul. From the realms of ignorance bigotry has risen, fanaticism and all the host of aberrations, but not the ideals of true religion.

Our limitations are indispensable because all corporeal beings are limited in space and time, but in spite of all limitations, the soul is capable of reaching out into the vast regions of the unknown universe, and it is characteristic of all mentality that the mind comprehends in every particular case the general and universal law. This characteristic feature of mind, of reason, of spirit, makes man Godlike and renders possible his sentiments of moral and religious

aspirations. This feature of rationality, too, is the factor that produces science.

It is not true that science, criticism, and knowledge "puffeth up" that it "enlargeth but isolates the soul." Science "puffeth up" only if it be pseudo-science, or if it be void of other human or humane sentiments such as kindness and proper regard for others. It is true enough that science alone without sentiment or sympathy for others is like a tinkling cymbal, and a mere intellectual comprehension of the universe will forever remain insufficient. But a lack of science will not make up for these deficiencies. We can expect no help from ignorance. Lovingkindness is needed to fill the gap in our hearts. Love inspires respect for everything good, holy and noble, but not ignorance. There is no virtue in ignorance, nor is there any redeeming feature in ignorance. Ignorance is not the mother of devotion but of superstition.