

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE NEED OF SINCERITY IN RELIGIOUS LIFE.

The Rev. Joseph Henry Crooker, pastor of the Unitarian Church at Ann Arbor, publishes a powerful plea for sincerity¹ addressed to his brother clergymen of other denominations in which he sets forth most urgently and almost anxiously the arguments for honesty in the pulpit. No one can deny that he is right, especially when the statement is abstractly made:

"Creeds are made to prevent changes of faith. Doctrines are formulated to be maintained, not to be set aside. Those who believe in religious progress do not make creeds."

Thus, the man who takes a pledge to defend a creed is expected not to grow; and there can be no doubt that the establishment of creeds excludes freedom, and opens no doors to free inquiry. The confession was made to be believed, and was looked upon as a finality. Mr. Crooker says:

"When I ask an Episcopal clergyman to give me something that describes the faiths and forms of his church, he hands me the Prayer Book. When I attend his church, I have a right to expect that he will preach the doctrine of the Trinity, the miraculous birth of Jesus, the blood atonement, the resurrection of the body, and the damnation of unbelievers, because these things are taught in that Prayer Book."

"The world has a right to expect that he will obey his ordination vow. If he does not, he is as immoral as the man who sends me goods unlike the samples from which I made my order. But a position equally immoral is implied by language often heard: If you have a new truth, say it, no matter about the Prayer Book. But I say: Be loyal to the Prayer Book as long as you use it. If you have a new truth, then lay down the Prayer Book and go where you can proclaim it in freedom and with honor."

Mr. Crooker pleads as follows:

"Insincerity is the poison that destroys all moral and spiritual life. It is not necessary that we have similar beliefs, but it is necessary that we have honest beliefs honorably espoused. I plead for co-operation among all religious bodies, but neither indifference nor insincerity is the pathway to that goal. I rejoice in religious progress, but only in a progress that is open, manly, ethically consistent."

We hope that Mr. Crooker's *Plea for Sincerity* will be heeded among his brethren both within and without the Unitarian fold; but we would suggest that

¹ *A Plea for Sincerity in Religious Thought*. By Rev. Joseph Crooker. Boston: American Unitarian Association. Pages, 28.

the policy of the *Outlook*, criticised by Mr. Crooker, which lays down another course is for that reason not quite so far wrong as Mr. Crooker believes. The *Outlook* made the following statements :

"We say, therefore, to every liberal minister in a conservative church, Stay where you are, and preach the truth as God gives you to see the truth, without fear, without favor. . . . We advise the Presbyterian to remain in the church in which he has been brought up, and preach the freedom of faith for which his Puritan ancestry were willing to lay down their lives." (*Outlook*, Feb. 5, 1898, p. 315.)

Further, it seems to me that Mr. Crooker misinterprets the intention of creed-makers. Creeds are not meant to stop growth but to direct it and lay down general principles according to which it should take place. We do not deny that narrow creeds will have a narrowing tendency, but we cannot accept the proposition that creeds were made for the purpose of crippling the mind.

If the question were, Shall a man join a church the doctrines of which he finds unbelievable? Mr. Crooker is *absolutely right*; but the practical case as a rule is such that a young man with a fervid belief in the truth of a special church studies theology, ascends the pulpit, and becomes a clergyman, before his mind has perfectly matured, and now he does not at once reject the doctrines of his church, but begins to see them in a new light. There are no Episcopalian or Presbyterian clergymen, so far as I know, who believe in the positive falsity of their church doctrines; but there are a great number who feel themselves urged to put a new interpretation upon the old creeds. Few of them see that the new interpretation will finally change the whole fabric of their belief; or, if they do, they do not feel called upon to decide at once questions which the future will bring up and which may be decided by later generations.

Like Mr. Crooker, we look upon sincerity as the basis of all virtue; for without sincerity virtues are merely shining vices. But for that reason we have ourselves pleaded after due consideration of the difficulties of the case that when a clergyman sees his doctrines in a new light he should not rashly leave his church, but stay and wait until he is required to leave.

An important argument which seems to speak in favor of this course consists in the fact that this is the road progress travels. The church is not the only institution which grows; the church is that institution which is most conservative and grows most slowly, frequently lagging behind the times; but the same laws of life and development apply to the schools, to the courts, and to the life of the nation in general. The judge on the bench is frequently confronted with an antiquated law and it is easy enough, from the standpoint of the rigid believer in law, to enforce the law; taking comfort in the idea that if it be bad it will be abolished. The consciences of men vary in this line, and the fate of the individual in the case under consideration has also a claim to be considered. Shall the judge, when he sees the legal conditions in a new light, have a man hanged in order to induce the people to abolish an antiquated law? Whatever judges in special cases may think about it, the fact has been that progress was accomplished sometimes through the abolition of antiquated laws, but mostly by new interpretations of the old laws.

Let us bear in mind that the most progressive nations are at the same time the most conservative. Their progress consists not in tearing down the traditional forms whenever new truth begins to dawn on mankind, but in modifying them and adapting them slowly. The truth is that progress, since time immemorial, has not been by abrogation, but by gradual change; and the question rarely comes up

before the individual conscience in that bluntness for which Mr. Crooker's *Plea for Sincerity* is the proper answer.

We have discussed the problem in an editorial¹ in *The Monist*, and it is not impossible that the writer in the *Outlook* has read it. Being bent upon explaining the nature of progress and the way in which mankind and human institutions grow, we have perhaps not insisted enough upon the fact that although we advise a liberal man to remain in the church even though he may outgrow the current interpretation of the dogmas, we do not mean thereby to foster insincerity, and in this respect we hail Mr. Crooker's *Plea for Sincerity in Religious Thought* as a splendid companion article, and hope that it will contribute its share toward the abolition of the burdens on the consciences of the clergy which pledge them to defend some special antiquated dogma, while the living present (as we suggested) would simply demand that they be pledged to the service of the truth, to speak the truth, and to live the truth.

When the ideals of liberty and brotherhood first dawned upon the French and when they saw that outrageous suppression permeated their institutions, they overthrew the government, abrogated the entire order of things and started life from the beginning. How differently did the English behave. They proceeded more considerately and slowly without a sudden rupture with the past, and in the long run they succeeded better. Evolution is better than revolution.

The various churches are of an historical growth, and there is no need of undoing the work of past ages. Freedom of conscience can most easily be introduced without enslaving the conscience of the representatives of a special church by a frank confession that the dogmas of the church are not the formulation of absolute truth, but historical documents of the evolution of the Church in its conception of the truth. There is no need of tampering with the various confessions; let them stand as they are, for they are witnesses as to what our ancestors believed to be absolutely true. But the fact that a certain confession of faith was moved and carried by a majority of the bishops of the Christian church, assembled at Nice, more than fifteen centuries ago, is no reason that at present, with fifteen centuries of progress and so much more light in our comprehension of the truth, we should be bound to formulate our religious truths in the same words.

We must remember that we are now living in a time of transition. We hope that the ordination vows will be either entirely abolished or so modified that the conscience of a progressive man will not be oppressed; and Mr. Crooker's *Plea for Sincerity* will help to open the eyes of those conservative leaders who do not see the situation in the same light.

LEGISLATIVE REFORM.

To the Editor of The Open Court:

Mr. Bonney's brief article in the September *Open Court* entitled "A Basis for Reform" pleases me exceedingly. It seems very strange that the people of this country have allowed their legislative bodies to remain practically in the same condition that they were in over a hundred years ago.

Last winter there was published a work entitled *Democracy*, written by Prof. Jas. H. Hyslop of Columbia University, which book I perused with deep interest

I wrote a letter to Professor Hyslop in which I detailed a plan for the creation

¹ "The Clergy's Duty of Allegiance to Dogma and the Struggle between World-Conceptions." *The Monist*. Vol. II, No. 2, pages 278-286.