THE RELIGION OF ROSA BONHEUR.

BY THEODORE STANTON.

The religious beliefs of Rosa Bonheur were unquestionably moulded by the religion of the Saint Simonians, both directly and through her father, Raymond Bonheur, who, himself an artist, was an earnest member of this transcendentalist sect.

It is through his letters, four of which I have been able to discover in the Saint Simonian archives in the Arsenal Library, that the noble and generous character of Raymond Bonheur comes out strongly and in its true light. No sooner had he become a Saint Simonian and believed that he had found on earth the peace of soul and mind so earnestly desired than he longs to share his supreme happiness with his friends, and thereupon displays a characteristic tenderness of sentiment by turning first to his old teacher at Bordeaux, Pierre Lacour. The printed letterhead reads: "St. Simonian Religion," and the letter is dated "Paris, March 1, 1831." It begins as follows, to his "dear and former master":

"I little ever imagined that I, moved by a religious sentiment, would address myself to you. But, unknown to you, I received from you other benefits than those of learning the arts of painting and drawing—arts to-day so poor and unreligious. You will pardon my confidence, my hope, that I may be able to give you something in exchange for your lessons, and as it was due to you that I turned my back on the dangerous doctrines of Boulanger and company, I like to believe that you will at least permit me to thank you and proclaim the wisdom of your course."

The writer then goes on, in a closely-written, four-page, commercial-size sheet, to develop the doctrines of Saint Simonianism, the aim being to convert Lacour; and the wordy and rather wandering epistle ends with this postscriptum: "You may communicate this letter to the members of the Philanthropic Society, of which
I have the honor to be a corresponding member, bearing in mind the purpose of the letter and overlooking its shortcomings."

On the same day and on the same large-size paper he writes another letter, this time six pages in length, addressed to a former fellow pupil of Lacour. He tells how he was converted to Saint Simonianism and paints a dark picture of the society of the time, "where neither kings nor presidents, congresses nor ministers, depties nor journals, nobody, either of the Right or the Left, knows what remedy to propose." He then continues:

"Like you, my dear Durand, and with the greatest energy, I have cried in the desert—cries of imprecation and sorrow against a blind power which seems cruelly to conduct everything into the yawning mouth of fatality, the fiend of ruin and destruction, which tears us to pieces all the more unmercifully because we are generous and tender! I revolted and strongly protested against every belief except that of my own individual conscience. But consolation could I find nowhere. I was in a state of despairing scepticism, when a friendly voice having directed my attention to the doctrines of Saint Simon, I soon found my hopes the more thoroughly realized because, at first, I was wrong in thinking myself deceived at the reunions in counting on the sympathies of those who acted on impulses like my own. Well, my dear friend, I read much, I meditated long on the works explaining the doctrine, and I attended lectures on the subject. One evening I argued with all my force against everything which appeared to me utopian or visionary, or anarchical, or Jesuitical; for it seemed to me that I saw on all sides contradictory tendencies. But I finally came to recognize that the apparent confusion emanated from myself. I perceived it in the strongest opponent of the doctrine, who, like myself, in the end honestly surrendered."

This letter is signed "James Raimond Bonheur," being the only instance I have found of Raymond Bonheur using the name James. Later he spelled Raymond with an é.

In a fourth letter from Ménilmontant Raymond Bonheur refers to "this society which is dissolved by individualism," and thus disposes of the criticism that the Saint Simonians were intolerant: "Scepticism, doubt, can alone tolerate. To tolerate is to abandon, to be indifferent. The man who loves virtue, can he tolerate brigandage?"

The language of Raymond Bonheur's letters written from Ménilmontant is not always clear. But this was peculiar to the writings of the whole sect, the printed and spoken speech of the Father
being especially so; in which respect they again resembled our own transcendentalists. Both these French and New England illuminati had an exasperating way of twisting words away from their ordinary meaning. Curiously enough, this same defect stands out glaringly in many of the letters of Rosa Bonheur, where it is often impossible to guess what she means. A friend once showed her one of her letters and asked her what an obscure passage signified, when she replied: "In the first place, I can't read it, and even if I could, I probably would not know now what I was driving at then. In fact, perhaps I did not know even then!" But probably it is too much to attribute this singularity to Saint Simonian influence, which, however, manifested itself frequently throughout her life and remained with her to the end.

On November 13, 1897, about a year and a half before her death, Rosa Bonheur wrote as follows from By to her friend Venancio Deslandes of Lisbon:

"I have the honor to hold the same views as Mme. George Sand concerning the brief sojourn we make in this world, and, though I never enjoyed the personal acquaintance of, nor saw, this genius, I have read with pleasure the extract herewith enclosed. It was copied out by a distinguished woman well known in the world of art and a friend of one of my men-friends to whom she sent it from New York. Please read it."

The extract referred to above is stated by the copyist to be taken from "an exquisite philosophical book by George Sand," and is a rather remarkable presentation of the novelist's belief in reincarnation; remarkable inasmuch as it anticipates in form much of what is taught to-day by the accredited leaders of theosophy. The salient passage of the extract is the following:

"We are allowed by reason and we are bidden by the heart to count on a series of progressive existences proportioned to our good desires. And certainly the first of all our legitimate aspirations, since it is noble, is to find in this future life the faculty of recollecting in a certain measure our previous lives. It would not be very agreeable to trace back all our pains and sorrows in detail. Even in the present life, such a remembrance would be a nightmare. But the luminous points, the salutary trials wherein we have triumphed, would be a reward, and the celestial crown would be the embracing of our friends and their recognizing us in their turn."

Another proof that such was Rosa Bonheur's acknowledged view of the future life is furnished in these lines sent me by Henri Cain:
“Rosa was always glad to have my brother and me bring her books. She read rather advanced ones. I am interested in occultism and she shared my interest. The doctrine must not be confounded, however, with modern spiritualism or magnetism. The occultism which held our attention was a philosophical form of the conception of the migration of souls, of the survival of the spirit in us after death. Towards the end of her life, Rosa Bonheur gave much thought to these questions and read all she could find on the subject. She began with volumes of Figuier and Flammarion, and did not hesitate to tackle more solid works, if I may so express myself; treatises that went into the details of the whole complex question. Though she may have had a leaning toward spiritualism, I can affirm only that she believed thoroughly in our occult theory.”

It should be pointed out that many of these ideas, such, for example, as that of the migration of the soul, are found in the metaphysical speculations of the Saint Simonians, where Rosa Bonheur probably first made their acquaintance.

All her friends agree in the essential facts which show that Rosa Bonheur was a free thinker in the right acceptance of the term. In proof of this assertion I may give these further attestations from some of those who knew her best and longest.

Alexandre Jacob has said to me:

“Of religion, Rosa Bonheur rarely spoke. She was not a member of the Church, never attended mass and probably inherited from her father her thoroughly independent attitude toward catholicism. Yet, while so little attached to ordinary religious observance, she was punctilious as regards the rites of marriage, baptism and burial, and when her friend Nathalie Micas died, she was careful to have performed all the Church requires from the devout.”

Louis Passy has said to me, and I noted down his statement in his presence:

“As regards Rosa Bonheur’s religious convictions, my opinion is that she was an agnostic. I do not think she ever gave her mind to an examination of those questions. She worked from morning till night, and had no time to study such serious matters. Why, even when on visits, she was sketching all the time. This is my view of the religious mentality of Rosa Bonheur.”

Princess Stirbey has written me:

“To hear Rosa Bonheur talk, some people would have considered her an enemy of religion. She certainly did fulminate against many tenets of catholicism, criticising the Church with frankness and at the same time with a popular coloring of expression and
vigor that one would have expected rather in a man. And yet, when Nathalie Micas died, she consented to all the funeral rites being celebrated without a single omission, and was herself present at the whole of them both at the church near By and at the Père Lachaise cemetery, in Paris, where Nathalie was buried. During all this sad day I was with Rosa, who, amid her sobs, kept repeating: 'What will become of me?' She was quite prostrated by the blow, but yet remained devout."

In a conversation with Prince Georges Stirbey, I made these notes while with him:

"When Mlle. Micas died, Rosa Bonheur suffered great grief. It was as if she had been struck by a thunderbolt. She was so upset by her great loss that she could not work. The cruel blow awakened in her thoughts of religion. One day she turned suddenly on me and put this question:

"'Do you believe in a future life? The thought has troubled me a great deal of late. My spirit is refractory to all ideas of the life to come, and the immortality of the soul. I do not understand these things; but my heart seems to tell me that I will see again my Nathalie.'"

"And as I talked with her, I saw that she had a certain sense of religion. Hers was the religion of the artists who see God everywhere and in all nature. But if you spoke to her of complex dogmas, she was no longer able to follow you. It was her heart rather than her mind which governed her in these matters."

In a letter written in April, 1867, to Paul Chardin, occurs this passage: "To my mind, my good Rapin, death does not exist. It is a transformation in the physical as in the moral world." M. Chardin makes the following comment thereon:

"It is quite true that Rosa Bonheur was not a practising Catholic, and her religious ideas were, I think, very vague. But it is certain from this letter that she believed in the immortality of the soul, that she held that there is another life and that there is a moral transformation of the spiritual part of our being tending toward perfection."

Rosa Bonheur's pantheistic conception of the unknown was well expressed in these words of Tennyson, which she warmly approved when they were translated to her by a dear friend: "It is inconceivable that the whole universe was merely created for us who live in this third-rate planet of a third-rate sun." Nor was she one of those "persons who are afraid of holy water while they are living and of the devil when they are dying."