THE VALUE OF ETHICAL CULT.

COMMENT ON MONCURE D. CONWAY'S ARTICLE "ETHICAL CULTURE VERSUS ETHICAL CULT."

BY J. CLEVELAND HALL.

Mr. Moncure D. Conway has emancipated himself from many things. The knowledge that his emancipation has never had the assistance of any "underground railway,"—but 'has, on the contrary, been at times an openly hard-fought battle,—makes the product of his freedom always interesting.

His article on "Ethical Culture versus Ethical Cult," in the February Open Court, is, as usual, not lacking in this element. It is interesting,—from the Standard Dictionary definitions on through the "pottery" of Paul to the conclusion that Ethical Culture must destroy Ethical Cult in order to establish its era.

But some primal thoughts are ignored in the rapid scintillating passes of the intellectual rapier, which are proper to interpose openly as a shield, or to even wear as a secret armor against such an antagonist.

In the first place, that all men are born free and equal, although acceptable to Mr. Conway, is not an axiom. If it were so, certainly, the inspiration of a whirling dervish, or of a cataleptic trance medium, or of a savage medicine-man intoxicated on a decoction of roots and herbs, would be equal to the inspiration of Mr. Conway himself. But it is not true. There is no equality in intellect, intelligence, or inspiration. That Herr Most may be inspired, and inspired by God, aye, by a good God, may be maintained; but from even Mr. Conway's position regarding ethics, his inspiration is not a proper thing to be at large, and spread its infection in a community.

In the second place, when a rose is mentioned, there does not rise to the mind's vision a wild, untamed, pink collection of five
flat petals surrounding a brown cluster of awkward looking stamens; but a large, full-blown, richly colored, heavily perfumed product of "culture."

How futile and inapt would be an attack on the claimed supremacy of the rose in the flower kingdom, based entirely on the evident inferiority of an ill-selected specimen of the wild rose.

There was,—unquestionably,—a time in the history of Christianity when the Bible was a flat, immovable, arid waste; a place for heated conflicts and controversies; an arena, where in the hot glare of passion men played battledore and shuttlecock with Biblical texts,—"fought to win the prize, and sailed through bloody seas." In such times,—and to-day in backwoods counties where such times still persist,—a militant Church meant a militant God; the Old Testament was the equal of the New Testament in authority over human conduct and human thought; and Jehovah ordering His people to massacre the Amorites was accepted as being as much a revelation of what God was, as was the Father whose affection is recorded in the Gospels. The "But I say unto you,"—of the Christ,—receives no attention in such times, and among people where "culture" is wanting.

It is not indicative of a breadth of knowledge of the modern Christian pulpit to assume that from it men speak to-day who accept the Bible as a dead-level book, and who do not know the difference between the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane.

Perhaps, where neither "culture" nor the "cult" have penetrated, a so-called,—still called,—Christianity exists, such as Mr. Conway has for his "windmill" antagonist, such as men of his rugged honesty of purpose—from Marcus Aurelius to Robert Ingersoll,—have always denounced as "obstinate," uncultured, and a libel against Divinity. But had the writer of "Ethical Culture versus Ethical Cult" a regular sitting, or even an occasional seat, in the pew of any one of the representative churches in any American city, he would not have opened himself to the charge of being ignorant that Christianity has entered another phase,—even as has every other department of human endeavor to uplift humanity. No more certain is it that human thought has burst the bonds of Greek Philosophy, human Science left far behind Alchemy and Astrology, and human Art outstripped the crude drawings in Egyptian tombs or Roman catacombs, than that Christianity has left scholasticism forever, has spurned a "Praise God Barebones" nomenclature, and has emerged from that protracted spell in its chrysalis
of darkness, when it deserved its Antonines, its Mohammds, its Voltares, its Ingersolls, and its Conways.

In the third place: Mr. Conway can have no greater love for human freedom than He who said "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more." But, until "marrying and giving in marriage" is transferred from this naughty world, "for the hardness of your hearts," Moses, and all other law givers among men will hedge men about with statutes; not because the Bible says so, but because men have found it to be better so. The lion ought to lie down with the lamb,—at his side, not inside; but so long as he prefers having the lamb inside, so long are fences, and barns, and armed shepherds necessary. This is true whether the lions and the lambs are animals or men.

With Mr. Conway's main conclusion, that ethical culture, meaning by that the virtues of human life put into practise, is more important than ethical cult, meaning by that ecclesiasticism, I find no fault. Although, of course, not having attained the freedom which he possesses, I still think that ethical cult still has, and will continue for a long time to have, its raison d'être in the "constitution of man."