

ART. III.—CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

“ORGANIZED Christianity has probably done more to retard the ideals that were its Founder’s than any other agency whatever.” Such is the verdict of a not undistinguished literary man who has devoted a small volume to the subject of religion. And however indisposed we may be to endorse the criticism, we can hardly blind ourselves to the element of truth which underlies it. The Christianity of Christ and the Christianity of Christendom are certainly not quite identical.

For instance, a very competent observer thus describes the condition of religion in the Greek Church: “Intercourse with God is achieved through the cult of a mystery, and by means of hundreds of efficacious formulas, small and great, signs, pictures, and consecrated acts, which, if punctiliously and submissively observed, communicate Divine grace and prepare the Christian for eternal life. Doctrine as such is, for the most part, something unknown; if it appears at all, it is only in the form of liturgical aphorisms. For 99 per cent. of these Christians religion exists only as a ceremonious ritual, in which it is externalized. . . . Over the vast area of Greek and Oriental Christendom religion has been almost stifled by ritualism. It is not that religion has sacrificed its essential elements. No! it has entered an entirely different plane; it has descended to the level where religion may be described as a cult and nothing but a cult.”

If we turn from this picture of the Eastern Church to Western Christendom, we find the Roman Church continuing in that path of fatal error originally entered when she took a pagan empire as model for the organization of a spiritual kingdom—a kingdom, according to its Founder, “not of this world.” The great Church of the West, in every age, has made an idol of power, and dragged the everlasting principles of righteousness and truth and love at the chariot wheels of expediency and ambition. Even our own generation has seen the Papal Curia prostituting its enormous opportunities, falsifying history, defending the indefensible, and concocting new articles of faith, while it crushes the saving spirit of inquiry and of reform, however reasonably embodied.

But neither of these Churches of East or West is our present subject. Let us come at once to our own Church of England. What signs are to be seen here of the fulfilment of that great mission committed to the Christian Church in

every land—the mission of keeping the original Christian spirit free and effective amid the stifling influences of organization and the dissipating influences of development ?

Two points upon the surface suggest hope. In the first place, Canterbury is happily free from the fatal spell which keeps Rome for ever dreaming of earthly sovereignty. In the next place, circumstances fortunately prevented England from resisting the resistless wave of the Reformation, as Russia and Italy and Spain did, to their plain and obvious loss. But there is a reverse side to this shield. These benefits have been expensive. The free play of thought and learning, especially of little learning and of hasty thought, have left very awkward issues. We may not be unprincipled, we may not be obscurantist ; but we have many faults and sins to lament and, if it may be, to remedy. We, too, as well as Rome and Russia, have in past days persecuted people for their opinions, and we reap the fruits in “the dissidence of dissent.” Even to-day we quarrel among ourselves, and add to the confusion of Christendom by putting our party before our Church, and our Church before our Christianity, after the manner of those sorry politicians who forget their patriotism. We have not checked our exuberant individualism, and in the resolve not to submit to what we think unauthorized authority we have grown impatient of any authority at all. There are those among us who remain enamoured of a medievalism which they mistake for catholicity. They prefer the smoke of their will-worship to the virtue of obedience and the blessing of peace. Others, with a curious blindness, have no eyes but for the Puritan traces remaining in our formularies, and on this narrow basis they would erect a system to prove Protestant a greater name than Catholic. Some, too, there seem to be who forget that liberty may degenerate into license while they play fast and loose with really fundamental truth.

Now, such mistakes undoubtedly tend to obscure that witness which the English Church should be continually bearing to the paramount importance of essential Christianity. Though, indeed, we are not tied and bound, as is the Roman Church, to a system of spiritual absolutism which every page of history convicts of falsehood ; though we have not remained, like the Eastern Church, precisely where we were a thousand years ago ; though our formularies specifically acknowledge the errancy of Churches ; though our theology and our popular religion are daily growing more Christocentric, we still persist in paying an enormous price for the movement among us of life and thought in the hard coin of our “unhappy divisions.”

Thirty years ago a great German doctor of theology thus

diagnosed our plight: "The most painful disease of the English Church," he wrote, "is the internal rivalry and antagonism of parties and systems, and the harassing uncertainty for clergy and laity which results. The divergence of views between different parties in this Church is greater than any which separates it from the Greek and Latin Churches, if the three are judged by their formal standards." Since Dr. Dollinger penned those words a generation has passed, and some amelioration in the symptoms may be thankfully allowed. But how far are we still from a Christian management of our differences! How far even from loyalty to the old rule of unity in essentials, liberty in what is doubtful, charity in all!

Could not all parties make a more determined effort, at least, after a larger measure of "goodwill"? Might not the Catholic party more entirely eschew that attitude of arrogant assumption which is at once the cheapest and unworthiest of Roman imitations? Surely, too, it might be more careful, when trying to define what is Catholic, to slur neither the *semper* nor the *omnibus* of the Vincentian rule! And then the Evangelicals: have they always studiously recollected that wise counsel of a prophet of their own "to give to every portion of God's Word its full and proper force, without considering what scheme it favours, or whose system it is likely to advance"? Have they shown the sympathy one might have hoped with Charles Simeon's energetic wish "that names and parties were buried in eternal oblivion"? Alas! the prophet's insight is not entailed upon his sons, and the living principles of a leader degenerate too easily into the shibboleths of his school.

And what of those whom neither of these two groups include, though many of them have been content to learn from both? The leaven of Maurice and Kingsley and Robertson, of Lightfoot and Westcott, has not lost its savour, though it seldom becomes loudly articulate, and owns no weekly newspaper. Every good man is said to be subject to the defects of his qualities; if so, *a fortiori* every school of men. The true mission of this section of the Church of England is to influence the rest, to share its culture with the Evangelical, and to temper with its principles of reason the blind worship of traditional authority. In that mission it can only succeed by following the example of its most distinguished men, and "seeking not its own." If Broad Churchmen form a party even out of their non-partisanship, they do despite to the spirit which justifies their existence, and belie the principles which constitute their strength. Let them accept a humbler rôle, as far greater as it is more Christlike. They are

commonly credited with a measure of brains. Let these be used not needlessly to accentuate divergence, but to discover points of contact, and particularly to make more common ground of that higher intellectual standpoint from which differences in abstruse dogma and intricate ceremonial cease to be regarded as matters of life and death. Above all, let them magnify the Spirit, neither offensively parading nor cowardly concealing the holy liberty He brings, and ever following unflinchingly "all truth" into which He only—the Spirit of the living God—is the promised and the all-sufficient Guide.

I have lately come across these words, spoken some thirty years ago by Kesub Chunder Sen, a member of the reformed Brahmin body: "To be a Christian, then, is to be Christlike. Christianity means becoming like Christ, not acceptance of Christ as a proposition or as an outward representation, but spiritual conformity with the life and character of Christ. And what is Christ? By Christ I understand One who said, 'Thy will be done'; and when I talk of Christ I talk of that spirit of loyalty to God, of absolute determinedness and preparedness to say at all times and in all circumstances, 'Thy will be done, not mine. . . .' Allow me, my friends, to say that England is not yet a Christian nation."

If now we turn from the Indian Brahmin's criticism of the Nation to the late Bishop of London's recent criticism of the Church, the parallelism is, to say the least, significant. Here is one of Bishop Mandell Creighton's last appeals: "I wish I could say that the Church had been doing its best to teach aright the English people. Unfortunately, it has only been reproducing in its own quarrels the temper that prevails. Just in the point where an example was most needed it has not been given. The Church has adopted the methods of politics. It has presented the appearance of parties contending against one another. It has injured its spiritual influence by descending to trivial disputes. It has not shown the English people a higher spirit or a better way. Instead of trying to educate the popular temper, the Church has adopted it, and has set before the public eye the familiar spectacle of bodies of Englishmen desperately determined to have their own way by every means in their power."

Is there not indeed a sadly significant agreement between the Brahmin and the Bishop? The one points to unself-will as the leading virtue of the Christianity of Christ, the other singles out the lack of it as the most baneful defect of the English Church. "I would beseech you," concludes Bishop Creighton, "to think of this in the presence of God, and to remember that if the Church fails to set forth to the

world a higher spirit than the world can produce it fails altogether."

Now is not that precisely the point? By some means or other this *higher spirit than the world can produce* is not the distinguishing trait of the representative Churches of Christendom, however it may honourably distinguish some individual members in all of them. Yet who can read his New Testament and not be absolutely sure that to produce that higher spirit, and to infect mankind with that higher spirit, was the precise object for which the Church of Christ was founded and Christianity given to the world? Christendom, in fact, has been so "cumbered about many things" these centuries past that she has too seldom chosen the "better part," and too often forgotten the "one thing needful." The Christianity of Christ and His Apostles, who "turned the world upside down," was exhibited as a moral and spiritual power quick and strong to change the heart and mould the life. The Christianity of Christendom in later ages appears rather as a system elaborated to meet the requirements of the logical intellect, the supposed needs of some past historical crisis, or even the ambitious desires of some ecclesiastical hierarchy. Thus the essential Christ-Spirit has become so hampered and obscured as to be rarely effective and often impossible to recognise.

Instead of remembering the Master's warning, "The words that I speak, they are Spirit and they are Life," and treating His doctrine accordingly, the Church seems to have treated it as though it were body rather than Spirit, and not living but dead. And so it has been buried—buried with pomp and circumstance, no doubt, with much outward show of reverence, with ceremonies which allow something of the actual form to be traced, even with costly spices and elaborate embalming, yet buried so truly that if you look in the latest modern dictionary¹ you will read thus: "Christianity—Conformity to the teaching of Christ in life and conduct. (Rare.)" In a few years time—one more generation, perhaps, at the present rate of retrogression—we shall no doubt read, instead of "rare," obsolete.

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¹ "The Century Dictionary."

