

SOME SCIENTIFIC SUPERSTITIONS

A REVIEW BY "ORUX."

In the May number of the "Messenger of the Sacred Heart" appears a lengthy contribution under the heading "Some Scientific Superstitions; the author's initials—T. P. W.—alone are given. It is a pity that we could not reproduce the entire article and at the same time comment upon it; but even were I to have space at my disposal for such reproduction I doubt if the general reader would not find it rather dry reading. Except for a student of mathematics there is nothing so uninviting as problems in geometry, conic-sections, or trigonometry; so is it with philosophical theorems, especially when they are worked out with all the rigor of syllogistic exactness. So complete and conclusive is T. P. W.'s article that one scarcely knows how to summarize it. There are chains that cannot be divided without the utility of every link being destroyed. However, I will attempt to convey a fair idea of the subject as treated by this learned writer.

Before, however, touching upon the question which I find thus set before us, I must admit that the title of T. P. W.'s essay was the source of a great disappointment to me. I naturally expected that he was going to unfold for us a list of the superstitions that science engenders and to contrast and compare them with the matters of religious belief which the incredulous style superstitions. To my mind it was a splendid and deeply interesting subject, one in which I could revel with delight. Imagine my surprise when I discovered, on a careful perusal of the article, that the author was off on a very different track. In fact, I yet am unable to account for the title; still I am thankful for it, as it has suggested to me the idea of taking up that same question on some future occasion. It will be an easy and pleasant task to show that outside the pale of Christian teachings there is more superstition than the scientists are prepared to admit.

But to come back to the matter now in hand! It is thus our author investigates what science has to tell us of the origin of the universe, and what it has to offer in place of the sublimely simple statement in the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth."

I believe that the Haeckel theory, adopted more or less by Herbert Spencer, which is the most advanced Rationalism, suggests that the beginning of things is found in a "homogeneous nebular mass of matter, acted upon unequally by certain forces" and that by the continued operation of these forces upon this matter everything that is wrought into being.

But this theory postulates two things—viz., the "homogeneous mass of nebular matter" and the "certain forces" acting "unequally" upon it, and thus it postulates the very things whose origin we want to have explained. It is admittedly impossible that matter can be eternal, for it is of its very nature dependent and determined, and the element of anything determined is its contradiction in terms. Herbert Spencer when invited to explain matter and force admits that their origin is lost in the "unknowable" whatever that may mean, which is tantamount to "giving it up" altogether. No one else has bettered this explanation from a scientific point of view; there is no other hypothesis than God on the one side and the "unknowable" on the other. All that science has done is to shift its ground as far back as possible, but when pushed to the final ditch it can only say "Nescio," and the hypothesis of creation and the Creator is the only working hypothesis that stands upon a philosophical basis so far as the origin of things is concerned. Creation is classically defined as "Productio rei ex nihilo sui et subjecti"—that is, "production of a thing in the sense that before its production neither the thing itself existed nor did any subject matter exist from which the thing could be fashioned" (Driscoll). Christian philosophy teaches that there is in creation no causal connection between nothing and existence, but only a succession. Creation and a Creator are the necessary logical conclusions from the facts of the universe unless the actual existence of the universe is denied.

Science, therefore—"modern science" as people love to call it—is silent on the subject of creation. It lays hold, however, of the created universe in its earliest form and demands all that comes after as its own—all that comes after the "homogeneous mass of nebular matter" or "certain forces acting unequally" upon it. Let us see whether from these it can fairly claim to account for the universe and man.

We may freely admit that granted matter and certain forces (the nature of these forces not being defined) it is a very simple matter to account for the solar system, for all that we have to do is to postulate certain matter and such forces as are necessary to produce the system as it exists. And this is all that science does, except that it claims to possess a certain glimmering of certain laws under which these certain forces probably acted. Let us grant that science can, starting with the nebula, explain the earth before the

that the intellectual activities of man and his moral nature have to be explained.

After all, what is it that evolution is trying to explain? It is evidently the variety of species. But when we consider the matter of abstract ideas and the power to form them at once an abyss opens between man and all other animal creations. That abyss is still more enlarged by the difficulties arising from man's moral nature. These two alone indicate that the difference between man and the dumb animal is one of kind, not one of species. Consequently there may be varieties of animals and varieties of men; but not being of the same kind there can exist no varieties between them. And evolution says that the origin of species is to be found in the properties of protoplasm. Reproduction is a function of protoplasm. Let us now follow T. P. W. to the end, commencing with this quotation from Mr. Conn:—"It is a function of protoplasm and is, as yet, unintelligible to us."

The "Method of Evolution," p. 395.) Of protoplasm itself and its origin, "we know nothing except that, being a mechanism, it could never have been produced by purely chemical forces" (p. 395). In fact, naturalists know little or nothing about protoplasm at all, and, as Mr. Conn points out, all they do know is that solution of the secret of what is called evolution must be sought in that direction. Up to the present time no satisfactory results have been forthcoming and the champions of evolution are unable to give any explanation of the method of evolution except that the varieties of species result from some unknown properties of protoplasm.

This is the evolutionary hypothesis of to-day stripped of improved theory. This is the "modern science" which explains everything, "the street" thinks has destroyed the religion, "the facts underlying the beliefs which even fifteen years ago Herbert Spencer points out had 'assumed too much the nature of a creed,' and 'is now a gigantic 'load-stone' growth of superstition, fed by man's passions, which demand abolition of the court of judgment and seek to secure it by destroying the foundations of the law."

To resume the whole subject, I will quote, firstly, from the Holy Father's Encyclical "Providentissimus Deus," the following:—"It need not be pointed out how the nature of science, just as it is admirably adapted to show forth the glory of the Great Creator, provided it is taught as it should be, so if it be perversely imparted to the youthful intelligence, it may prove most fatal in destroying the principles of true philosophy, and in the corruption of morality."

Let us now see how the respective hypotheses stand with respect to the main problem of the universe and life. With regard to the origin of "matter" and "force" the Christian hypothesis is—"God the Creator." "I don't know anything about it." With regard to life the Christian hypothesis is—"God the Creator." Science again takes refuge in "the unknowable."

With regard to the world and its demizms, apart from man, the Christian hypothesis is—"God the Creator." Science invokes the "qualities of protoplasm" which it admits that it does not understand.

With regard to man's soul, the Christian hypothesis is—"God the Creator." Science again calls upon protoplasm and its "incomprehensible functions."

The author closes with this cutting paragraph:—"But the average man thinks—if we may use the word—that science has explained everything; that religion is enthroned on the ruined altars of religion and that there is no God! Truly the devil has an easy job of it in these days of enlightenment! In the days of real scholarship and real philosophic knowledge he had to work and work hard for one little 'iota' in a theological definition (ouolovolols); but nowadays he finds no difficulty in getting a man who styles himself 'Rev.' to mount a pulpit on Sunday and 'solve the great enigmas' by identifying God with 'Ether'—"What fools these mortals be!"

The following beautiful article was written by the Right Rev. Francis Bourne, D.D., Bishop of Southwark, and sent to the editor of the "Franciscan Annals." It is a paper of thoughtful and wise words on the luxurious tendencies of our days which Franciscan simplicity is called upon to battle against. The bishop who, by the way, is a member of the Third Order, says:—"The image of St. Francis, as we are accustomed to picture him, to our minds, is one clothed in simplicity. In his early life, before he gave his heart to God, he had followed 'all the fashions of the world.' He was clothed in Hivory, and delighted in its excitement. But when his conversion to the better life was complete, he seemed determined to reduce his use of the things of earth to the absolutely necessary point. He covered

himself in a coarse sack, his girdle was a rope, and he walked barefoot. Civilization had already brought with it complexity of habit. Luxuries became necessities, and the free action of the soul was hampered by artificial restraints. St. Francis was called to bring home to men, by the example of his own way of life, that, after all, life need not have such multiplied needs, and its real necessities are very few. The merest covering for body, the simplest food for nourishment, and the barest shelter from the air, these were sufficient for St. Francis, and he was content with them.

Simplicity was not a characteristic of the nineteenth century; it is not likely to be a distinguishing feature of the twentieth. Wants and needs multiply apace. Every game among the young expects a costume all its own; the different periods into which the day is divided claim each its own garb in grown-up life. Food is varied to an extent that was rivaled only in the days of the greatest extravagance of Pagan Rome. Men are restless, and will not 'bide long' in one place. The rich travel to the ends of the earth in search of new adventures and new excitement; the poorer must have their day excursions to relieve to some extent the tedium of their lives. Minds can no longer rest themselves on books which need continued thought, and illustrated papers and pictured magazines must be ever forthcoming to give some new thought and passing sensation to jaded brains. Every season must produce new novelties, new commodities, all adding to the complexity of life. These things are not evils in themselves, they are the outcome of the activity and the inventiveness which the Creator has given to men. And were our minds so evenly balanced and our wills so well controlled that we could see and enjoy them without fear of abuse, they would do us no harm, and we should welcome them, and lead a more peaceful life. It is a lowly, hidden mission, but a vocation peculiarly appropriate to those whom God has called to be in a special way the choicest and imitators of the Poor Man of Assisi.

On Easter Sunday evening last, Rev. Father Bennett, C.S.S.R., delivered a most powerful and practical sermon in St. James' Church, Spanish Place, London. His subject was the mission given by Christ to His followers to go forth, preach and teach all nations. After dwelling upon the special significance of that mission for the clergy, the reverend preacher came to the share the laity had in that tremendous work. Zeal for the salvation of souls is a duty imposed upon every Christian. In view of the fact that we, in Mont-real, are being treated to another of Father Younan's effective missions to Protestants, it seems to us opportune to give further publicity to the portion of Father Bennett's sermon which deals exactly with the work now being done by the Paulist Fathers, and by them suggested to the laity. It will be readily seen how applicable are the words of the great Redeemptorist preacher. Leaving aside all the introduction and first part of the sermon we come at once to that portion which suits our present circumstances. Father Bennett said:—"If they were to ask him (the rev. preacher) in what ways they, as lay people, could and ought to practise zeal for the salvation of souls it was hard to answer the question, because to answer it fully one would have to go through the whole list of a priest's duties. He could not think of a single priestly duty in which they could not have a great part. There was one form of zeal which they were all called upon to practise in a special manner in their daily lives, and that was prayer. They witnessed at the present time a most marvelous change in the religious disposition of their fellow-countrymen. They saw a movement amongst them towards Catholicity, towards Catholic doctrine, towards Catholic devotion, towards Catholic ideas, which could only be accounted for, through the action of God's holy grace. Truly, 'the finger of God is here.' When they saw this turning towards Catholicity on the part of many of their fellow-countrymen they could not afford to look on as though it was something of no interest, of no concern to them. He (the rev. preacher) would venture to sum up their duty as lay people towards their non-Catholic fellow-countrymen by saying that they were bound to pray for them, and they were bound to edify them, and they were bound to instruct them.

Prayer was one of the mysteries of God's providence in His dealings with men. It was a mystery of God that He required their prayers for the salvation of their own souls, but He should require to wait upon their prayers when it was a question of the salvation of the souls of others. But that was what God did. It was also their duty towards non-Catholics to edify them, to lead them to God by their own good example. There was no doubt the conversion of many who were now outside the visible fold of Christ, depended upon the good example given them by those within it. Not, of course, that the good example of itself could change any man's will to change his mind and heart, and convert him. No; but there was no doubt they did much to help, to facilitate the conversion of others when they lived before them lives worthy of their faith, and there

was no doubt Catholics placed serious obstacles in the way of the conversion of non-Catholics when they did not live lives according to the faith in which they believed. A Catholic who lived amongst those who were not Catholics was closely watched. There was something mysterious about him, and consciously or unconsciously non-Catholics expected him to live better than the common run of men. He (the rev. preacher) now came to their duty of instructing others in their faith, and he almost hoped they would be inclined to dispute it with him. They might say, "Now, at any rate, you are going to lecture us on your own duty." But he took special pleasure in insisting that it was their duty as Catholic lay people to instruct non-Catholics in their religion, and by that he certainly did not mean that they were to force their religion upon non-Catholics, that they were to parade it and draw attention to it. The more they had to deal with non-Catholics in this country the more they would find that what they rejected, what they refused to accept was never the Catholic faith or Catholic doctrine or practise; it was always some travesty, some distortion of Catholic truth, something that the Catholic Church would be the first to condemn. Their duty was not to argue and dispute, but the duty Catholics owed to the Church and to non-Catholics was to explain their faith to them. He (the rev. preacher) did not do that just as well as a priest, for his opportunities might be more frequent.

In all this, however, they must be alive to the dangers, and there were dangers, for if they were to know, if zeal was not acted in ignorance, if he had used the wrong word, and yet it might be the right word to use, the Apostle said they must be use unto sobriety, and so must they be diligent to sobriety. Let them always remember, when dealing with the Church of God, the churchless Church of God, and they must not in their folly or conceit act towards her as if she were not divine or the Church of God. They must always remember that the Church was not a compromise, as were the sects. She was not a compromise between truth and error, between light and darkness; she was the witness for God, established by Him, and they must never dream in their zeal that they could improve upon her, make her better than Christ made her. He (the rev. preacher) never forgot the instrument for His divine purpose that He made her. They could do nothing of the sort. Let them ever remember how sacred the Church of God must be to them. She was the bride of Christ—that was God's own word for a new and the bridegroom would never allow his bride to be insulted. They had been warned quite recently by the highest ecclesiastical authority in this country, and his warning had been confirmed by the highest ecclesiastical authority on this earth, of what was a danger for all of them.

They had been told that when they were dealing with the Church of God and the law of God there was no room for what was called Liberalism. He need not say he was not speaking of politics, about which he knew nothing, and it was a pity they had to use the same word. But there was such a thing as Liberalism in religion, and it consisted in making little of the truth which our Lord

and Saviour Jesus Christ came on earth to teach, passing it down, making it acceptable to all, so that it would give offence to no one. Liberal, it might be said, meant being generous and open-hearted, and surely it was good to be Liberal; but, in the name of common sense as well as justice, did it not depend upon whether that which they were liberal with belonged to them or not? If they gave him (the rev. preacher) charge of their money, and he gave it away to charities, or allowed people to take it, and some one said he was very generous and liberal, they would hardly know what moderate words to express their feelings about it. They would call robbery. Yet he would have as much right to be generous with their property as they had to be liberal with the truth which our Lord came on earth to teach.

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THE IRISH WITNESS AND CATHOLIC CHRONICLE

Saturday, May 11, 1891

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