



## CURRENT COMMENT

On Sunday, the 15th ult., the Church of St. Mary's, Moorfields, of which we spoke last week, was again filled with worshippers from the Anglican Church of St. Michael's, Shoreditch. The Tablet, of February 21, says there were certainly more people than on the previous Sunday. On the following Monday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings the special services arranged for non-Catholics were largely attended. Up to the present fifty persons from the former congregation of St. Michael's have come and definitely asked to be instructed with a view to being received into the Catholic Church. Many of these, of course, will bring children with them, and the latter know their catechism so well that they have very little to learn."

The High Church and Ritualistic papers are full of editorials and correspondences on this subject, and it is amusing to read their protestation that they are Catholics, coupled with their definite statements as to their use of private judgment in the question at issue. The Guardian says in its first leading article: "The principal point on which Mr. Evans came into conflict with the Bishop was the invocation of the Saints. He claimed the right not only to teach that Invocation is a legitimate element in private devotions, but to introduce it into the public worship of the Church. Legally, his case was a hopeless one, but so much importance did he attach to the practice that, rather than allow his congregation to be deprived of this spiritual privilege, he was willing to resign his benefice. How far he felt the practice to be in itself absolutely essential to the religious life of his people, and how far he was actuated by the desire to maintain it as a Catholic custom which a National Church has no right to abandon, we are unable to say. We suspect, however, that with him and some of his sympathizers the latter reason is stronger than the former; but, be that as it may, Mr. Evans made a definite claim for the recognition of the practice in the Church of England, and that claim is supported by some who are very far from endorsing his course of action." These last words show that the Guardian leans towards the Invocation of the Saints as a part of public worship.

The Church Times once more affirms its critical attitude toward the Anglican Episcopate. "Correspondents accuse us of unfairness to the Bishop of London. There are some, indeed, who rebuke us for presuming to criticize him at all. For them we have a short answer. We shall not so far depart from our traditions as to treat any Bishop of Christendom as above criticism, nor shall we pander to party spirit by passing over in one Bishop what we should treat sharply in another. Rather, because we are sure that the Bishop means well, we have criticized him the more unsparingly." This curious version of Catholic obedience, according to Mr. Athelstan Riley, who writes to the same paper, is based on historical precedent, which, of course, he claims with as little proof as his assertion is sweeping. "If we are to resist Bishops successfully," he says, "when they exceed or abuse their authority, as Catholics in all ages have resisted them, surely we should render the most scrupulous obedience when they exercise their

authority lawfully." Of this lawfulness, on Mr. Riley's view, the flock, not the shepherd, is the proper judge. His position is summed up in the following words: "To priests who call on us to be Catholics outside the Church of England, and to Bishops who bid us be Protestants within, we have but one answer to give. Gently, but most firmly, we say, as Catholics we and our children have lived within the Church of England; as Catholics, please God, we will die." The Anglicans under instruction at St. Mary's, Moorfields, have a keener sense of humor than Mr. Athelstan Riley.

An article by Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, the famous evolutionist, in the March "Fortnightly Review," has been deemed sufficiently important to be cabled, in substance, across the Atlantic. The eminent writer's subject is "Man's Place in the Universe," and his contention is, first, that the earth of our solar system is the physical centre of the universe; and secondly, that the supreme end and purpose of this vast universe was the production and development of a living soul in the perishable body of man." This does away, at one stroke, with the objection too common among superficial sceptics. Supposing, without any warrant, however, as we shall see, that the universe is infinite in extent, they are pleased to point out the unreasonableness of believing that the Creator of all this unimaginable vastness of suns and systems should have any special interest in so pitiful a creature as man, a degraded or imperfectly developed inhabitant of one of the smaller planets attached to a third or fifth rate sun, while that God should have selected this obscure globe for a scene so tremendous and so necessarily unique as the sacrifice of His own Son in order to save a portion of these miserable sinners from the natural consequences of their sins, is, in their view, a crowning absurdity, too incredible to be believed by any rational being.

Here the cable despatch says, whether quoting or not Dr. Wallace's words, we cannot tell: "It must be confessed that the theologians have had no adequate reply to this rude attack, while many of them, having felt their position to be untenable, have renounced the idea of a special revelation and a supreme Saviour for the exclusive benefit of so minute and insignificant a speck in this immense universe." Veritable men of straw must these theologians be who cannot give an adequate reply to so threadbare an objection. The sceptics who make it are careful never to read the only philosophic replies, those given over and over again by Catholic philosophers, and so, in their blind ignorance, they crow over the inadequate replies timidly uttered by the small fry of non-Catholic thought. The first and most obvious answer cuts the ground from under the whole objection by denying the infinity of the universe. Even if our telescopes revealed an ever-widening universe—which, as Dr. Wallace tells us, they do not—we should not, therefore, conclude that the universe has an infinite magnitude, simply because no material thing can be infinite. Infinite, according to the etymological meaning of the word is that which has no limits. But all material substances, that is to say, all bodies, whether solids, fluids or gases, must have limits. We may call them unlimited because they are so vast that we are unable to assign their limits, but they cannot be really unlimited; just as we may speak of "infinite number" and

"infinite space," although it is absurd for any one but an obfuscated disciple of Kant to think that number and space do or can exist without limit. No doubt imaginary space and ideal numbers may be conceived as unlimited, but we know very well all the while that we are dealing in imaginary, not real quantities. The universe, on the contrary, is a real and therefore a definite quantity. Even if it were a decillion times larger than we know it now, the very fact that we attempt to measure it shows that it is measurable.

To be sure this line of reasoning, which is elementary among Catholic philosophers, will not approve itself to the followers of Locke, the chief originator of the loose English understanding of the word "infinite." He maintains that we have no positive idea of anything infinite; we have only, he pretends, a negative idea of something greater than aught we can conceive. In other words, for Locke the infinite is merely the indefinite. But, being a nominalist, he mistakes words for ideas. The word "infinite" has a negative form, it means that which is not finite; therefore he argues the idea expressed by "infinite" is also purely negative. Locke's conclusion is false, for it is based on the false major premise, "All ideas expressed by negative words are negative." On the contrary, there are many negative words which express thoroughly positive ideas. Thus, when we speak of a public official who, during fifty years of service, never failed in his duty, we bestow upon him praise of the most positive kind. Tennyson's "wearing the white flower of a blameless life" shows how beautifully positive is the idea of deserving no blame. "Incorruptible," "undefiled," "inviolate," are specimens of a large class of negative words expressing very positive ideas. Yes, we have a clear idea of infinitude; but precisely because we have a clear idea of it, we cannot apply it, except by metaphor or hyperbole, to any other existing being than God.

It may be urged, however, that, although the universe be not really infinite, does not its vast size overawe us and make us deem this earth too insignificant for the unique tragedy of our Lord's death? By no means. We repeat what we said lately in refuting a similar difficulty of Mr. Mallock's: size is no criterion of greatness in the thing that is big. Doubtless size does attest the greatness of the Creator of that big thing, His infinite power, His boundless resources; but mere size is no proof that the big thing is deserving of especial reverence; otherwise we should worship giants, whales and elephants. Adaptation to intellectual and moral ends is a far better test of greatness, and in this respect astronomers have no facts on which to base the supposition that any other planet is comparable to our earth, and anthropologists have every reason to believe that man is still the only bodily being capable of intellectual and moral perfection.

Understanding, then, the word "infinite"—which Dr. Wallace uses in the ordinary loose way of inaccurate contemporary thought—to mean "indefinite," when applied to stars or any other created beings, we proceed to give the evidence he adduces, from a great body of new facts and observations within the last quarter of a century, that the earth's position in the material universe is special and probably unique. He first asks are the stars infinite in number? He points out

that with every increase in the power of telescopes until recent years there has been a proportionate increase in the number of stars visible. There are about two hundred thousand stars between the first and ninth magnitudes, the number at each lesser magnitude being about three times that of the next higher. Now, if this rate of increase continued down to the seventeenth magnitude, there would be about fourteen hundred millions visible in the best modern telescopes. Telescopic observations and photographic charts show nothing approaching this number. The latest estimate does not exceed a hundred million; that is to say, it is fourteen times less than what we expected. As telescopic instruments reach farther and farther into space, they find a continuous diminution in the number of stars, thus indicating an approach to the outer limits of the stellar universe. Dr. Wallace next considers the most striking proof of the limits of the universe, which is derived from an analysis of the laws of light. He quotes Professor Newcomb and other physicists who affirm that if the number of stars were infinite their combined light would be fully equal to the sun at midday, whereas starlight is only one-fortieth of moonlight. This proof, when taken in connection with telescopic research, Dr. Wallace regards as altogether conclusive of the limited extent of the stellar universe.

Dr. Wallace then goes on to discuss in elaborate, fascinating, and easily intelligible details the distribution of stars in space, the latest knowledge of their movements, and finally the position in the universe of our solar system. His conclusions are:

"The results so far reached by astronomers as a direct logical conclusion from the whole mass of facts accumulated by means of the powerful instruments of research which have given us the new astronomy, are that our sun is one of the central orbs of a globular star cluster, and that this star cluster occupies nearly the central position in each plane of the Milky Way. But I am not aware that any writer has taken the next step and, combining these two conclusions, has stated definitely that our sun is thus shown to occupy a position near, if not actually at the centre of the whole visible universe, and therefore in all probability in the centre of the whole material universe.

"This conclusion is no doubt a startling one and all kinds of objections will be made against it, yet I am not acquainted with any great inductive result of modern science that has been arrived at so gradually, so legitimately, by means of so vast a mass of precise measurement and observation and by such wholly unprejudiced workers.

"It may not be proved with minute accuracy as regards the actual mathematical centre. This is not of the least importance. But that it is substantially correct there seems to be no good reason to doubt, and I therefore hold it right and proper to have it so stated and provisionally accepted until further accumulation of evidence may show to what extent it requires modification."

Finally Dr. Wallace, having laid his foundation broad and firm, erects upon it the structure he has been preparing so carefully—"Man's Place in the Universe"; in other words, our position in the solar system itself as regards adaptability for organic life. "Here, too," he writes, "I am

not aware that all the facts have been sufficiently considered, yet they are facts that indicate our position in this respect to be as central and as unique as that of the sun in the stellar universe."

Without following him through all the cogent arguments by which he disproves the adaptability of the other planets to the development of organic life and the higher forms of intellectuality, we may be allowed to quote this pregnant passage:—

"The writers on this subject usually have been content to show that certain planets may possibly be now in a condition to support life not dissimilar to those on earth, but they have never adequately considered the precedent question could such life have been originated and developed upon these planets?"

This, Dr. Wallace considers, is the real crux of the problem, and he believes that full consideration of the required conditions will satisfy us that no other planet can fulfil them.

As to the materialistic and unphilosophic objection about the want of proportion between the creation of so vast a universe and the production and development of man, Dr. Wallace asks if there is any such want of proportion, and replies that there can be no such thing as want of proportion if the end to be reached were a great and worthy one, and if the particular mode of attaining that end were the best or perhaps even the only possible one.

His final conclusion is:—

"The startling facts that we are in the centre of a cluster of suns, and that the cluster is situated not only precisely in the plane of the Milky Way, but also centrally in that plane, can hardly now be looked upon as chance coincidences."

And he adds wisely: "Those thinkers may be right who, holding that the universe is a manifestation of mind, and that the orderly development of living souls supplies an adequate reason why such a universe should have been called into existence, believe that we ourselves are its sole and sufficient result and that nowhere else than near the central portion in the universe which we occupy could the result have been attained."

When we reflect over Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace's high place in the realm of biology, when we remember how he began almost fifty years ago as an evolutionist, coordinate with, not subordinate to, Darwin, and how he afterwards took up with spiritual ideas, we feel that this luminous pronouncement of his green old age—he is now in his 82nd year—must have a most beneficial effect in dispelling many of the cloudy and unsubstantial, but specious, objections against the fitness of the Christian revelation. His facts will impress a generation that does most of its thinking with the imagination instead of the intellect.

While regretting, with all the parishioners of St. Mary's, Father Guillet's departure for Duluth, we gladly welcome the new pastor, Father Cahill. Although he cannot hope to eclipse his predecessor's success in conciliating rival nationalities, he has the natural advantage of being himself a representative of both the English-speaking and the French-speaking elements, since he is Irish on his father's side and French-Canadian on his mother's. Those who knew him when he was assistant pastor some years ago are sure that he will win his way to the reverential affection of all his flock.