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NOTES AND COMMENTS.

Progress or Retrogression?

It is extremely gratifying to us sometimes to note the signs of liberal progress that often manifest themselves. Certainly, on the whole, one cannot but admit that the world of thought and rational inquiry has wonderfully enlarged since the Modern Savior, the Printing Press, has brought down to the level of the masses the means of acquiring knowledge that formerly were only within the reach of the wealthy classes. But the question confronts us to-day, in the field of Rationalism, just as it does the missionary in the field of Religion, Have not the forces opposed to us made even greater progress than have those that are in our favor? The great cities of the world show some striking facts in this line of thought. The churches of the British metropolis can show substantial gains since, early in the century, the population of London numbered but a million and a half; but to-day its population amounts to nearly six millions, and comparatively the churches have gone back nearly fifty per cent. The same thing is true of New York, Chicago, and nearly every large city in Christendom. We may say with truth, that three-fourths of the people of these cities are practically pagans, who never see the inside of a church, and know nothing whatever of the theological subtleties that give mental pabulum and spiritual excitement to so many of their fellows. The question forces itself on us, Are these practical pagans any nearer true Rationalism than the more active-minded religionists? We are inclined to think that the mental indolence that leads them to leave all active work to men with more brain-energy than themselves, is a worse factor to deal with than the activity of the religious bigot. We may imagine that, because people do not go to church, they are mentally free, but this is only an assumption; the real fact being, we believe, that the vast mass of the people are so densely ignorant that they not only have no opinions of their own, either on religious or political subjects, but that they are liable to have their passions excited at a moment's notice by the loud-mouthed sectarians in either field. The schoolmaster, indeed, has hardly yet got his sword sharpened for attacking the giant Ignorance that stands in his path; and until he is able to deal some effective blows, the masses must necessarily be victimized by the false ideas that have hitherto enslaved them. They probably have heard a few rumbling sounds from the distant battle-field, but to us it is evident that the only men who are likely to understand the meaning of the struggle, or to reap the full advantage of it, are those who take an active share

in it. The rest are dummies, who certainly in the long run may accept the benefits conferred upon them by the work and sacrifice of others, but who in the meantime neither appreciate that work and sacrifice, nor are willing to help it by even the slightest effort.

Hell Among the Presbyterians and Catholics.

A curious question crops up in this connection as to how far the modern ideas have penetrated the masses of the Catholic Church. Undoubtedly they must have done so to produce such cases as those of Mr. McCabe and the late Prof. St. George Mivart. But the bulk of the laity are evidently as pious and densely superstitious as ever, and it is probable that for every man who leaves the Roman Catholic Church for Rationalism a hundred are added to her ranks. The Catholic population of England has increased immensely during the past half-century; and Canada and the United States are not far behind in the reckoning. The eastern townships of our own province of Ontario, at one time mainly Scotch, are now largely French Catholic, two or three almost wholly so. It may be thought that the faith of the Catholic laity is being undermined, but there is not much evidence in favor of such an idea. The Catholic papers we see point very solidly to a different conclusion. There are probably as many atheists among the Catholic priesthood as there ever were, and as many irreligious indifferents among the laity; but it is clear that the faith of the mass, and their servile obedience to the hierarchy, are not at all disturbed. Some people profess to believe that "the bottom has been knocked out of hell;" but, though hell was supposed to be bottomless, and consequently non-existent, it is a fact that not only Catholics, but a large majority of Protestants, still believe in a physical hell of fire and brimstone. The very best and most learned men in the Presbyterian Church object to the doctrine of Infant Damnation because of the evident cruelty and injustice of consigning innocent infants to eternal torments; but where is the sense of such an objection if there is no place for the infliction of eternal torture? It is abundantly clear that the humane and pious Presbyterians fully believe in the existence of hell and in the justice of eternal torture for adults, or they would see the stupidity of objecting to infant punishment. That the Catholics fully believe in hell-fire, and that the priests make a big revenue out of the laity's fear of it, are unquestionable facts. People would not pay for masses for the dead if they did not believe there was a hell which the masses would save their friends from falling into. Here is a placard which appears on a board in a prominent place in the Cemetery of Cote des Neiges, Montreal, the leading city of the Dominion.