

# THE WEEK.

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## CONTENTS OF CURRENT NUMBER.

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES—	PAGE
The Evolution of American Christianity .....	G. J. Low, 67
The Irish Crisis .....	Goldwin Smith, 69
The Irish Question in the United States .....	B. 69
The Death of Amy Robsart .....	70
Consequences of Cornwallis's Surrender (Selected) .....	71
<b>TOPICS OF THE WEEK—</b>	
Death of the Hon. Adam Crooks .....	72
The Contest for the Mayoralty .....	72
Preservation of Our Forests .....	73
The Senate and Civil Service Reform .....	73
The Presidential Succession .....	72
Failure of Prohibition in Iowa .....	72
Boycotting in the States .....	72
A Recoil from Mr. Gladstone's Project .....	73
An Important Feature of the Elections .....	73
<b>NOTES</b> .....	73
<b>POETRY—</b>	
Translation of a Greek Ballad .....	74
<b>OUR LIBRARY TABLE</b> .....	74
<b>CORRESPONDENCE</b> .....	77
<b>MUSIC</b> .....	77
<b>LITERARY GOSSIP</b> .....	78

## THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY.

CHRISTIANITY in America—its present condition, its drift and tendency, its probable future—is a subject well worthy the attention not only of the religious man, but of the student of social science. However sceptical one's opinions may be, it cannot be denied that Christianity is, and will be for some time to come at any rate, a most important factor in all the affairs of the people of this continent. Any scheme of moral, political, or social philosophy in which Christianity is ignored, however well it might perchance suit some future age, is for all present purposes defective and impracticable. And this remains true, whatever relations Christianity may bear to the State; whether upheld, or tolerated, or repudiated by the powers that be. The student of the times then must needs be gravely interested in the question, What is the probable outcome of all these cross-currents of thought in American Christianity?

By this term we mean the aggregate of all those various organizations, more or less isolated from one another, existing on this continent, and called "Churches," "Denominations," "Sects," or "Heresies," according to individual bias. The sum of all these, as the modern presentment of the religion of Jesus Christ, is what we denominate American Christianity. To what is this Christianity verging? What are the indications whereby we can prognosticate its future evolution?

That it is in a state of transition all must admit. No Christian, whatever may be his "creed," desires or expects that, say in fifty years from now, all the "denominations" at present existing on this continent (there are some five hundred, it is said,) will still be flourishing, *plus* several more which will be invented in the meantime. Every believer in Revelation looks for a better state of things than that. The zealous and sanguine adherent of any particular denomination expects that his views will ultimately prevail. The philosopher, it may be, sees in these divisions evidences of a disintegration that must eventually produce collapse. But no one, believer or unbeliever, conceives of the present mixed state of Christianity as final or permanent: it cannot exist forever as it is. What, then, is its drift? Is it emerging from chaos to order, or is it undergoing the process of decomposition and decay?

Unsatisfactory and shifting as the present state of Christianity in America may be, still it is just the state that might have been anticipated. It is the natural outcome of the peculiar circumstances under which this continent has been peopled. Men of every nation under heaven—certainly every Christian nation—have found a home here, and have brought with them the seeds of their own national species and varieties of religion, which have all taken root and grown; and besides in this fertile soil other indigenous varieties have sprung up. The active, restless, inventive American mind has not been content with foreign importations even in religion: and so the accumulated varieties of foreign "cults" have been augmented by genuine American ones. The late M. About, in his very clever *brochure*, "The Roman Question," thus wittily described the American character: "By the time he is twenty-five years of age, an American has tried his hand at a dozen different trades, made four fortunes and at least one bankruptcy, held a political office, gone through a campaign, had a lawsuit, established a new religious sect, killed half-a-dozen men with his revolver, and conquered an island." It is not to be wondered at—it is due partly to the American

character and partly to uncontrollable circumstances—if there has been such a tendency to multiply religious sects: if, for instance, in the city of Chicago we find a McArthur among the Baptists, a Swing among the Presbyterians, a Thomas among the Methodists, and a Cheney among the Episcopalians, each "starting a new religious sect" of his own, and if the whole of this western continent has become a happy hunting-ground for all sorts of theological Nimrods. American Christianity in its present stage appears nebulous and chaotic: and yet scarcely so; for it will not answer Mr. Herbert Spencer's definition of such a state; it is neither coherent nor homogeneous. Rather it is a sort of conglomerate, displaying the results of all the forces of heat and cold, denudation and deposit.

What, then, is its drift and tendency to-day? Can we see indications to tell us what the next formation is likely to be? Shall we mark a still further process of disintegration, to be closed, perhaps, with a glacial epoch of blank unbelief; or are there signs of a development into a better order of things?

The American mind, active and given to experiment, is at the same time eminently practical. If any scheme fail to produce the good results anticipated, it is quickly abandoned for another. Hence, such a problem as the one before us is likely to be much more speedily solved in America than in countries which are hampered in their progress by old traditions and race prejudices. American Christianity has tried the experiment of Individualism and Sectarianism till, one would think, it had reached its utmost possible limit. He must be an ingenious man, indeed, who can discover grounds on which to "establish a new religious sect" to-day. The practical American sees that this sectarianism is, after all, ruinous to the common cause; it brings Christianity itself into disrepute; it confirms, not to say creates, unbelief; it causes enormous dissipation of energy; it is productive of rivalry, envy, disparagement of each other's motives and practices, and every form of un-charity. In short, all the evils of Partyism in Politics are multiplied infinitely by the various "Parties" of Christianity. We might, then, expect to find a reaction against this partyism; and so we do. One of the greatest forces now observable in American Christian thought is a longing for consolidation and unity. "Organic Union" is a cry of the present day; and though men may differ as to how it is to be brought about, still the cry for its imperative necessity is waxing louder and louder. It was raised some time ago, but at first feebly. The Reports of the Annual Meetings of the Evangelical Alliance show how that cry has been gradually increasing in intensity. Formerly, at such meetings, it was the fashion for the speakers of different "denominations" to congratulate one another on the sectarianism of Protestants as a good thing. There used to be much talk about the "many regiments in one army." But that talk is almost silenced nowadays. The report of the Alliance Meeting in Montreal in 1874 marks an interesting stage in this evolution of Christian thought. Some few voices, indeed, were heard applauding the present state of things; but the stronger thinkers raised the tone which has since reverberated, louder and louder, of dissatisfaction at the divided state of Christendom, and of a longing for organic union. The most pronounced of these speakers was Rev. Dr. Grant, Principal of Queen's College. His paper, whose very caption ("The Church of Canada—Can such a thing be?") was striking, showed that this deep and clear thinker was not only abreast but ahead of the then times.

In Canada practical effect has been given to this cry by the organic union of the aforesaid *dissecta membra* of the Presbyterians and Methodists respectively.

Two very remarkable contributions have of late appeared in American magazines, written from very different points of view and by authors of very different "creeds": one entitled "The Idea of God," in the *Atlantic Monthly* of last November, by Mr. John Fiske, a Unitarian; the other in the *Century Magazine*, also of November, by a Presbyterian, Professor Charles Shields, of Princeton, which is entitled "The United Churches of the United States." Starting from very different points, and with very different aims, yet each contributes his quota toward the solution of our problem. Professor Shields comes out boldly for Organic Unity, its absolute necessity. He condemns the perpetuation of dead issues by the preservation of old national churches—such as the Dutch Reformed Church, the German Reformed Church, etc.—on this continent, where old-world nationalities are becoming fused in one homogeneous race.