

## OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

### A FRENCH ANTI-CLERICAL CONGRESS.

A clerical congress at this time of the year is nothing uncommon in Britain and Canada, but such a thing as an anti-clerical congress will sound strange in the ears of Canadians. Of recent years, however, such meetings are common enough in Paris, and must have a *raison d'être*. One of these congresses closed its sessions here a few days ago, and I purpose to give in this letter some account of its doings, for the benefit of the readers of THE PRESBYTERIAN. The full name of the Society is "The Democratic Union of the Anti-Clerical Propaganda," which has for its chief object the abrogation of the Concordat—the name of the compact by which Napoleon, in 1802, connected the Church with the State—and the suppression of the "Budget des cultes," or annual sum paid for the maintenance of the clergy, which amounts to some ten million of dollars. But in addition to these primary objects, this meeting discusses annually many other subjects, such as the organization of lay *fetes* and ceremonies; the burial rites to be observed in the case of those who refuse to pass through the Church to the grave; liberty of meeting—should it be absolute or confined to the laity; and the questions of marriage and divorce. For the consideration of these and cognate topics there are committees, which, after deliberation in private, report to the open meeting for discussion and final decision. At the head of this congress is a distinguished senator—Victor Schoelcher, the emancipator of the negroes in the French colonies, and who is both wealthy and philanthropic. In his absence, the president's chair is generally occupied by a Miss Desraimes, who is said to be very rich, and who is certainly very strict in keeping order, as she rises on the slightest appearance of dissent from a speaker's sentiments, and insists on perfect silence. If the president in the Chamber of Deputies had even a share of the power to enforce order that she exercises over her audience, the House of Representatives would not be the bear-garden it usually is. Amongst the prominent names which figure on the committees of this congress, are those of M. Paul Bert and Allain-Targé, both Ministers in the late Gambetta Cabinet, and such well-known politicians as Messrs. Locroy, Naquet, Revillon, Barodet, etc., all members of the Extreme Left. There is also what is called a Committee of Honour, having as its presidents Victor Hugo, Garibaldi, and Louis Blanc; but these names are for ornament rather than practical use, as none of them ever attend, although they are doubtless in sympathy with the objects aimed at by the congress.

The members of the congress are a mixture of all classes of society, and as regards belief, range through all degrees from Free Thinkers to Atheists, including Positivists, Agnostics, Materialists, etc. The Free Thought groups amount to some eighty in number, with about 250 persons in each group, though I have seen it stated that there are several millions of such in France. Of course those who avow themselves Atheists are more limited in number, but these are the most positive of all in their beliefs, or rather want of belief, and the most despotic in their rule over consciences. They have an organ, the "Anti-Clerical," and a library containing such books as are regarded safe reading for their clubs, with catechisms of Free Thought, illustrated with caricatures of Scripture subjects, and priests in most equivocal attitudes and positions. Indeed, for that matter, much of the literature of Paris, recently, admirably serves the purpose of these gentlemen. The illustrated papers displayed on the fashionable boulevards, and in the shop windows on the outer boulevards, are simply disgusting—the greater number of the illustrations consisting of nude female figures and priests standing in the criminal's dock, with young children giving evidence against them in respect of abominable crimes—a case of too frequent occurrence, I am sorry to say, in French courts. And generally around these prints are congregated not only men, but boys, and even girls, receiving an education which is sure to bear fruit in some future stage in their history. The "Anti-Clerical" press is bringing out a "comic" life of Jesus, which is sold in the streets, and bawled out by the newsboys on the thoroughfares. The Rationalists, too, a more respectable class, publish a magazine called the "Sunday School," for the benefit of teach-

ers and scholars, from which all the miraculous facts of the Scriptures are excluded. At no previous period, perhaps, has licentious literature of all kinds been exhibited in Paris more openly and more boldly. Formerly works of this kind were sold secretly, but now there is no attempt at concealment. Everywhere, in open day, sheets containing the first pages of some filthy novel are thrust into your hands, and young lads, or even girls, may be induced to read and imbibe the poison which is fitted to develop sensual appetites, and even brutal instincts. In this way the people are reading in a single day more noxious literature than formerly in many years. "Our age," says a French journal, "seeks no longer its inspirations in the source of Christianity, but holds religion suspected. Among the humbler classes, it is supposed to be an instrument of tyranny. In the middle classes we see intoxication, not with alcohol, but with modern discoveries and inventions; nothing is believed in or sought beyond visible things. Nothing is thirsted for but earthly enjoyment, while Christian morals are supposed to be at most worthy only of ascetics and conventual life. The higher classes are terrified by the progress of the democracy, and doubt that Christianity can ever stop its expansion. Hence the almost universal withdrawal from creeds and Christian doctrines."

At last year's meeting of the Anti-Clerical Congress it was proposed to combat Christianity by "civil ceremonies," such as civil marriage, civil burial, civil baptism, civil communion, etc., and shortly after the papers contained accounts of a civil baptism by Henri Rochefort, a notorious Atheist, the Editor of the "Intransigeant," which has a very large circulation throughout the towns of France. He made a speech on the occasion, in which he said that if the priests gave the poison, Free Thinkers must give the antidote, and inculcate Atheism as early as Catholicism teaches its "follies." A citizen decked with scarlet favours in every button-hole then asked the sacramental questions of the "Godfathers and Godmothers," whose response was "Yes—Vive la République!" Each infant was then placed in Rochefort's arms, who kissed it on the forehead, and it was declared to have been civilly baptised.

One singular feature of these anti-clerical meetings is the fanaticism and exclusiveness which prevail. While denouncing the despotism of the priests, the speakers exhibit all the intolerance of inquisitors. M. Hirsch, the young Protestant evangelist referred to in some of my previous letters, had the courage to attend these meetings, both last year and this, and dared to controvert the doctrines enunciated; but he was received with a general howl from all parts of the room, and with such exclamations as "We advocate liberty, but no one has a right to the liberty of error;" or, "You invoke liberty of conscience, but we cannot have the liberty of folly;" "All religions are superstitious, and abuse public credulity; they are a lie," and so on.

The National Congress, as it was called, was closed by a great reunion at the Cirque Fernando on Sunday, when resolutions were passed inviting the Senate and Chamber of Deputies to take immediate steps for the abrogation of the Concordat; the total, unreserved and immediate suppression of the "Budget des cultes;" the restoration to the nation of the property of the congregations and of the clergy, as well as the buildings and other ecclesiastical establishments. Referring to a statement by one of the speakers, that the peasants are still attached to the connection between the Church and the State, and that the total suppression of the payment of the clergy would tend to provoke dissatisfaction with the Republic, and perhaps bring about a recurrence of the events of 1849, Miss Desraimes insisted that this was a mistake—that no hostility need be feared on the part of the *habitans* in the country—that the peasants are profoundly sceptical, and that as soon as the *cures* had lost the prestige they enjoy from their being functionaries of the State, they would lose all influence over the people. Even the women, she said, would accept their deliverance with joy, they having ever been the dupes and victims of the priests and monks. "If you wish to expel error and superstition," continued she, "call to your aid woman; give her her rights, make her your equal, for without that she will always rise against you, and shatter the reforms you seek to carry out."

At the banquet at the close, a toast to "God-hating" was drunk, which shows what a false idea these

people have regarding God, and makes one curious to ascertain the circumstances out of which their unbelief and Atheism have arisen. It is surely impossible that religion could have fallen into such odium as is here manifested, unless there had been grave shortcomings either in the teachers of religion as a class, or in the political sympathies avowed by them, or in both. "We find it impossible to believe," says a writer, commenting on this subject, "that Paganism could be passionately preferred to Christianity by a large proportion of the people of a great race and great country, if the teachers of Christianity had not mistaught and travestied it, and disfigured it by habitual association with mischievous allies. To the practical man, it is but certain that the evil popular odour in which Christianity appears to be in France, must be more or less due to the evil odour of the sentiments, words and actions of a great number of so-called Christians. If France has really revolted against Christ, it must be because Christ has been more or less generally belied by those who have felt and thought, and spoken and lived in His name." This is no doubt quite true, but there is something still wanting to explain the irreligious phenomena at present visible in the words and works of members of anti-clerical congresses in France. The passionate earnestness with which the author of the "Catechism of Free Thought" tries to impress the truth of his diabolical doctrines upon the mind of the reader for his own good, is something impossible to understand on any reasonable principles, and something quite different from the propagandist spirit manifested by the advocates of Atheism in Italy, Spain, or Germany, or indeed in any other country that I know of. He hesitates at no statement, however monstrous, however false, by which he can bring the clergy into odium, and along with them religion itself, and the very Scriptures of truth. As the writer already quoted more than hints, French Atheists appear to recognise with a sort of wild despair the extraordinary moral force of which Christianity disposes, and regard it as a personal rival with which they have to fight every inch of ground, and which they must conquer by any means at their disposal, fair or foul.

After all, it is, perhaps, but natural that a form of religion which gives its approbation to a pilgrimage in honour of a sacred tear of Jesus once sent to Allouagne (Pas de Calais) by Godfrey de Bouillon, from Jerusalem, in the twelfth century—which sends devotees to Lourdes and the Casa Santa of Loretto, should be assailed by the scandalous blasphemies of those who are hostile to religion of every description. Let us hope that the party—less obtrusive and less noisy—which fill the gap between pilgrims and pagans, may yet be able to save France from the sad fate which must otherwise befall her. Let Christ be lifted up as a crucified but risen Saviour, and men will then be drawn to Him out of their Atheism, Materialism, Fetichism, and immorality.

Paris, 12th April, 1882.

### OUR SABBATH SCHOOL WORK.

BY WALTER N. HOSSIE, BRANTFORD, ONT.

The following has been submitted to the Sabbath School Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, with a view to providing a system for the better organization, government, and extension of the Sabbath school work throughout this extensive Dominion. The Presbyterian Church in the United States has made large provision for the proper equipment of the Sabbath school, and so has the Methodist Church in Canada, and has also laid down a code of rules and constitution to bring all into methodical line. Many begin to think it quite time that our Church took a step beyond the theoretical committee work, although for the past two years much practical hard work has been done by the conveners, and a few members of the Committee, in providing courses of study and improving our library literature; but for want of organization few schools availed themselves of the admirable course of studies provided. It is, however, hoped that more have taken advantage of the selected books, catalogues of which may be had on application to Messrs. Campbell & Son, Toronto. We commend the document to the careful consideration of all interested in our Sabbath school work:—

#### THE SABBATH SCHOOL.

- I. The Sabbath school includes the session, mem-