

## THE SUPERIOR PERSON IN RELIGION.

BY THE REV. JOHN WATSON, D.D.

(IAN MACLAREN.)

There is a kind of humanist who is the crude result of modern criticism and abounds on every side, who does not deserve serious treatment, and towards whom patience is a doubtful virtue—the person, I mean, who is good enough to take an interest in Christianity, and allows himself to make polite references to its Founder. When one of this class assured a Christian minister that he regarded Jesus as the “first gentleman in human history,” he felt that he was dealing in a very courteous fashion with an official representative of an exploded superstition. Yet the minister was tempted to be angry at the insolence of the allusion, which was not original, till he remembered that this patronizing person was only singing with a somewhat imperfect ear one of the street songs of the literary quarter. It is not fair to charge even a literary parent with the sins of his children, and many of us cannot forget Mr. Matthew Arnold's poetry, so pure in spirit and so perfect in form, nor the service which he rendered to English society by his criticism of our material ideals, but there is no question that Arnold is responsible for the superior person in the sphere of religion.

The superior person, under the encouragement of second-rate literature, and with some borrowed capital from science, is so delighted with himself to-day, and has grown so arrogant, that he lords it before the public and threatens to browbeat faith. Mr. Arnold, as we all know, considered himself a typical humanist, who was doing his best to recreate the age of Pericles in this commercial middle-class England of ours, and although he was much hampered by his habit of mind as an Inspector of Schools, he may be taken with a grain of charity at his own value. When he stands at a street corner blowing a trumpet and declaring aloud his love for perfection, or when from lofty heights he lectures his fellow-countrymen upon their crass ideas, one feels that that kind of thing, harmless and delightful as it is at a time, can have no place within the sphere of Christian thought, because Christianity hates Phariseism—and there is no cant like that of the literary Pharisee—and because Christianity can never in any cir-

cumstances despise the people or count them a vulgar herd.

Between the spirit of that entertaining and excellently-written book, “Culture and Anarchy,” and the Gospels, there is a quite hopeless difference of standpoint, and yet Mr. Matthew Arnold in his great mission of elevating religion was good enough to explain the teaching of Jesus and evidently prided himself upon having discovered the “secret” of our Master. His criticism in provinces where he was more at home has not been by any means final, and his obliging contributions to theology have not left a permanent place upon that obdurate science. Old Testament scholars have treated his contributions to Hebrew criticism with an extraordinary want of reverence, and perhaps his only memorable feat in the region of dogma was his attempt to make the doctrine of the Holy Trinity plain to the meanest capacity by his notorious illustration of the three Lord Shaftesburys. Christians of the later Victorian period ought to be exceedingly grateful to Mr. Arnold because he took so much interest in our faith, and was at such pains to show the vein of gold which was hidden away in our sacred writings, and for the sake of that lovely poem, “East London,” we had forgiven his criticism, but what it is difficult to forgive is his creation of the superior person.

This person is quite ubiquitous, writing in magazines against the ethics of Christianity, discussing the most sacred doctrines of our faith in a newspaper correspondence, trying to capture social movements to the detriment of the Church, moving throughout society instilling doubt and gibing at evangelical religion, and dropping in, as it were, to the Church to tell her how to amend her creed, and on what terms they will extend their support. As if a Church which had denied her Lord and doctored her creed were worth joining or preserving. The tribe can be recognized by an appalling want of humour which enables its members to take themselves very seriously, by an affected indifference to human emotion, by a sustained priggishness of thought, by a virulent hatred against the evangelical element in Christianity, and by an exaggerated appreciation of all non-Christian