

CONSIDERATIONS ON CATHOLICISM

BY A PROTESTANT THEOLOGIAN.

CCLXXII.

Sacred Heart Review.

The "Republican" correspondent reproaches Rome that, notwithstanding her assumption of primacy over the Church, she has not even secured good morals, or anything even remotely resembling the kingdom of heaven on earth.

How does she compare with Protestantism? Was the Reformation, morally, an improvement upon her control?

We must not lay too much stress upon the high moral standard which, according to the emphatic testimony of the great French Jesuit Bourdaloue, was maintained by the Huguenots of the seventeenth century. A dissenting minority, closely watched by a hostile majority, has every incentive to live well, be they Calvinists, Jews, Jansenists, or Transylvanian Socinians. The vast throng of merely nominal Christians is naturally found in the sunshine of public favor.

How was it in Switzerland, where Calvinism gained the predominance, yet leaving 40 per cent. Catholic? Undoubtedly Calvin, unlike Luther, proposed a high moral standard, and it is probable that in the first enthusiasm of the new movement Geneva, at least, was exemplary in morals. Now, however, as the Swiss Calvinist Dr. Philip Schaff attests, the moral standard of the two religions is about the same.

Allowing for the ferocity which distinguished Scotland in the sixteenth century, there is no doubt that the Presbyterian Reformers were very solicitous for the moral elevation of the people at large, and that their efforts were not without result. Yet in view of the severely, I may fairly say savagely, legalistic methods they employed, we can not be surprised at the hideous array of hideous facts recorded by Chambers, and I believe by Buckle. In our time, unquestionably, Scotland is a land in which any one may find himself much at ease, and will meet with multitudes of eminently excellent people. Yet we must not forget that unchastity is far more prevalent than in Catholic Ireland; that there is a great deal of gross intemperance; and that, as to the frequency of crime, the "Spectator" has compared Catholic Bosnia with Presbyterian Edinburgh, much to the advantage of the former. True, crime especially concentrates itself in great cities.

Cotton Mather declares that New England was peopled by a sifted seed of grace gathered by God out of three kingdoms. Surely then she ought now to stand on a very high mount of moral excellence. Yet Colonel Higginson remarks that the influx of Catholic Irish has raised the standard of chastity. It may have lowered that of temperance, yet undoubtedly the former is the higher virtue. As to honorableness in business dealing, that has never been a distinguishing excellence of Puritanism. I need not speak of divorce, while the murder or unquiet children is too common to be urged against reception into church membership. Moreover, the confessional gives opportunities of dealing with individual conscience here which the pulpit does not.

The remark of the "Christian Register," quoted by the "Independent," that the growth of Catholicism in New England has in no way lessened the force of practical Christian living and aims, may be commended to the correspondent as proof that the coming in of Rome among us has at least not put farther off the kingdom of heaven on earth.

As to the severance of Germany from Rome we have the emphatic and repeated testimony of Luther himself, that it resulted in the precipitate ruin of national morality. Says he in one place, we are seven times worse; in another, we are ten times worse; in another, we are a hundred times worse than we were under the Pope. In other words, the collapse of German virtue is complete. Nor does he leave us in doubt as to the cause. When he argues with his disciples that they ought, by virtuousness and benevolence, to express their gratitude to God for the easy terms on which he has shown that they may be justified—rather at variance with St. Peter, who declares that "the righteous shall scarcely be saved"—he complains that they retort upon him: You have convinced us that God cares not very

much for love or good works. Very well; we will show that we are good Christians by being equally indifferent to them. And he declares that they are quite as good as their word. What a generation are we bringing up, says he, of thieves, robbers, liars, fornicators, adulterers, drunkards! He does not include murder, of which the Germans, like the English, have a great horror.

As to liberality, he signifies, that in the old Popish days, if they wanted money for a church, or school, or hospital, they had to be careful how they published their wants, or they were like to be smothered under the stream of contributions that would pour in upon them. "Now", shows he, there need be no fear of this. We may beg and beg, and begging is the end of it.

The native German honesty seems to have largely recovered itself as early as 1600, as Shakespeare bears witness, but to the old Catholic standard of liberality they have never returned. Lutheran and niggard are still almost equivalent terms until they come over to this more freetended land. One thing, however, I will say for them: they are more liberal to orphan-houses than to anything else, and their orphanages are admirably controlled.

Luther, whose inborn frankness of speech was often too much for policy, repeats, without contradicting it, the language held by the Saxon Protestants about the Reformers. Why could you not have let us alone? they complained. When we were in the Catholic Church, you know, we were living in piety and Christian brotherhood. You have taken from us all our old virtues, and what one good thing have you supplied to us in their stead? This was a question easier asked than answered. Like Dante, in the antechamber of Hell, he "stayed not, but gave a hasty glance, and passed on."

I believe that there can be no doubt of the perfect unity and steadfastness of Calvin's doctrinal convictions from the time of his leaving France till his death. Moreover, the contemptuous silence in which, for instance, the Catholic Dictionary passes over the foul charges made against his life by doubly apostate monks and frenzied Lutherans, I believe to be thoroughly warranted. As to Luther, there can be no doubt that he was invincibly devoted to his own antinomian theory of Justification, and that he would have been quite as ready to slap St. Paul in the face as to slap Melancthon—"colaphos tuli"—had the Apostle ventured to remind him that availing Faith is that which "worketh by love." As he wrote to Tetzel, it was not what the Dominican had said about Indulgences that caused the breach. "The child had quite another father."

Yet when we come to the rest of Luther's system, it is sometimes rather hard to put perfect faith in his sincerity. For instance, when he denounces the Mass as "an abomination and idolatry," which ought not to be tolerated, even for a little while, though the world should go to ruin over the refusal, we can not forget, that after he had definitely abolished the Mass in Wittenberg, he openly threatened to return to the elder religion, saying sarcastically to his frightened hearers: "After all, what harm will the Pope's Mass do you?"

Most of his people, as he himself owns (I am speaking only of Wittenberg), would have been perfectly ready to accept his suggestion of return, could they have any confidence that, after having landed them in hopeless entanglements, he would not have doubled back upon himself again.

Surely such a way of dealing does not argue a very great seriousness of belief. Nor can we easily take it as honest conviction when he declares that no consequences, however ruinous to Germany or to Christendom (his clear vision foresaw the Thirty Years' War), could justify any toleration, however restricted, of the religion which he himself had professed until he was nearly forty years old. He is ready to see more than half the population of his country swept away, as happened in fact, and to see Europe involved in throes of a mortal struggle of a hundred years, rather than so much as to consent that the monks and nuns still left in the monasteries should stay there for awhile, or that those who were content with Communion under one kind should be allowed to receive it until final order was taken. No: it was not their conscience that should determine, it was his, and this evidently a fictitious one. No one who knows Luther even moderately well, and knows how little, at heart, he cared for ceremonial mat-

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ters, can easily believe that he really identified the Gospel with single or double Communion. That he should have insisted on the liberty given to the Utraquists, is perfectly intelligible; but that he should have insisted on proscribing all those who did not care to become Utraquists, and should have really believed that the Gospel would perish wherever the Cup was not found, is purely incredible. We can believe it of a Hussite, or of a Covenanter, but it is too much to ask us to believe it of a man so free and easy in all matters of outward administration as Martin Luther. We might as well believe it of Henry Ward Beecher, whose strong religiosity and coarse morality remind us, in a lower range, of the Wittenberg Friar.

One thing we may perhaps admit: that Martin Luther had come at least to believe that the universe revolved around his throne of power, "seated in the sides of the North," and that the slightest relaxation of the requirement of absolute obedience to him, in the minutest particular, would be ruinous—at least to Martin Luther.

I think that it may be pleaded with considerable likelihood that Germany, even under Alexander VI., was not so far from the kingdom of heaven on earth as under the Pope of Wittenberg.

Charles C. Starbuck.
Andover, Mass.

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