

A REPLY TO THE "PROOF OF THE DIVINE ORIGIN AND TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY."

(BY Y.)

[The editor in regretting he has not space for the whole of this admirable essay, accepts the entire responsibility for its condensation. The parts left out are more or less necessary to the continuity of the argument, and if there is any break in the sense it must be ascribed to the abbreviation which has been forced upon us. The paper was delivered at the Wanganui Freethought Association by one of its members in reply to an address by a Christian.]

The author of "Christianity before Christ" says: "The most important lesson deducible from all the religions systems commemorated in history is that all religious conceptions—whether in the shape of doctrine, precept, prophecy, prayer, religious devotion, or a belief in miracles—are a spontaneous outgrowth of the moral and religious elements of the human mind. To assign them to a higher origin is to ignore the development of modern science and insult the highest intelligence of the age." And I believe we can nowhere find this law of mental evolution more fully and scientifically explained than in "The Course of Positive Philosophy," by M. Auguste Comte. This brilliant French writer, who has been styled the Bacon of the Nineteenth Century, set forth that the intelligence of mankind passes successively through three distinct stages—the supernatural, the metaphysical, and the positive. The first he considers the lowest, or infantile, state of human society; the second, or metaphysical stage, he represents to be reject all supernatural interpositions, to bring in the idea of abstract forces, and to personify them under the one agency of Nature; and the third, or positive period, precludes all search into causes by applying itself to known phenomena, by ascertaining their relations and laws, and so to classify and generalize them. And the outcome of the recognition of this principle of intellectual progress is the important and interesting question, "What relation does Christianity bear to the ever advancing thought of mankind?" "Men's thoughts broaden with the widening of the sun," says Tennyson, and so what has been called Christianity at one period in modern history has not been acknowledged as such at another. Indeed, I experience no small difficulty to clearly define what Christianity really is. If I consider it as an ethical system which teaches the pursuit of justice, love, and truth, I am at once confronted with the fact that these virtues were enjoined and practised more or less in all ages, and must continue to exist, I believe, when Christianity takes its place with the many supernatural systems which preceded it. And if I refer to the many creeds and confessions into which the ecclesiastical world is divided to ascertain what Christianity really is, then I am perfectly bewildered, and there appears no standard of appeal whereby to decide the truth.

It is quite possible that, now-a-days, Christian evidence lecturers do not clench their arguments by reference to the Bible. Yet we certainly might have been told whether or not Christianity had its beginning at the so-called Fall of Man; that in consequence of this transgression man was cursed and a Redeemer was necessary and promised; that this Deliverer should be the offspring of the woman—that he should bruise the serpent's head and that it should bruise his heel; that holy men of old prophesied in every age concerning him the Saviour; that the long succession of the sacrificial rites of the Jews were the types, or antetypes, of the one great sacrifice on Mount Calvary, by which the grand scheme was accomplished which reconciled God and man. It would be uncharitable to suppose that the lecturer only thought these beliefs belonged to the sermon, which is protected by the pulpit and unsafe to advance where free discussion is allowed. He did not, however, once mention these essential particulars to prove the divine origin and truth of Christianity, and in like manner he steered clear of the doctrines of the incarnation, atonement, justification by faith, &c., with the simple assertion that it was not necessary to prove their truth! The result was that he proved nothing, except this—that language is sometimes meant to hide your meaning and not to express it. It was urged throughout that man is a free agent. My answer to this is short, simple, and conclusive—Man cannot be other than God intended him to be, and therefore cannot be free, that is, without control. It was urged that all religious service has for its object the reconciliation of God and man. Here it was assumed that Christianity effected this. But with it there is attached a most palpable contradiction. If, through the death of Christ, all sinners were reconciled to God, is it not unreasonable to suppose that there exists a future state of punishment? How can the reconciliation have taken place if, in what is called the great and final Judgment Day, God is to say, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

It was urged as a proof of the divine origin and truth of Christianity that it is the only religion which is founded on miracles. Of course, this must be so, if Christianity is from the beginning. But I do not admit this assumption, although I should feel sorry for the foundation of Christianity if I did. Why, instead of it being true that Christianity is the only religion which is founded on miracles, the fact is that all religions have been instituted upon the alleged truth of mystery, miracle, and prophecy.

"It is the priest's strong chain
And support of the divinity."

Moses, Elijah, and Elisha are said to have performed miracles, and whilst the Jews have never disputed the miracles said to have been performed by Jesus, they have none the less rejected the claims set forth for his divinity. In regard to miracles, I think the utilitarian argument has far more force in it than any other method adopted

for their rejection. The question should be, not can miracles be proved possible, but of what use are they? There is nothing gained by reading and believing that, once upon a time, 5000 people were fed with five loaves and two small fishes, whilst now there are thousands in the world dying of slow and actual starvation. Mr. Holyoake says the English Poor Law Commissioners would make a king of the man who could perform that miracle now. And they might, I think, if they can find him. But let us for a moment or two examine the assertion that Christianity is the only religion which is founded on miracles. There is historic proof that all the miraculous incidents related in the history of Jesus Christ as a proof of his divinity were related long previously in connection with the religion and philosophy of ancient India. Owing to the difficulties attached to, and our European ignorance of, the Asiatic languages, it is only within a comparatively recent period that we have learnt anything at all reliable concerning Oriental religions. And competent authorities assert that the more that is ascertained the more certain appears the fact that both Judaism and Christianity originated in India. Take the story of the serpent, for instance, and the origin of evil. Mr. Kersey Graves quotes the very highest authorities in exposition of the serpent tradition. He points out that Chrishna, of India, is represented on some very ancient sculptures and stone monuments, with his heel on the head of a serpent. And, also, that 1200 years before the Christian era Chrishna was held to be really God incarnate, and there appears such a great resemblance between the Hindoo life of Chrishna and the New Testament life of Christ, that some able critics have in consequence doubted whether Jesus Christ is a historic character. More especially as Essene Buddhism existed among the Jews. In his very interesting and instructive work, Mr. Graves gives no less than 346 historical parallels in the recorded lives of Chrishna and Christ. It is related of Chrishna that he performed miracles—healed the sick, cured lepers, restored the deaf the dumb and the blind, raised the dead, and cast out devils. In fact, the history of all ancient Oriental religions entirely destroys the claims for the supernatural origin of Christianity. It is the one common thing throughout them all to relate the miraculous birth of their Gods, of their advent being foretold to the world by inspired prophets, and of their having, at last, retired to heaven. . . . Then we were invited to consider the ethical value of Christianity; that Jesus "spoke as never man spoke before." Is it not absolutely ridiculous that Jesus was the first who, by precept and example, taught the principles of charity, of compassion, of fraternal feelings. Why Strauss tells, and history confirms the assertion, that "five centuries before the Christian era, Buddhism had already inculcated gentleness and compassion, not only towards men but towards all living creatures. Among the Jews themselves, the Rabbi Hillel had already taught, a generation before Christ, that the commandment of loving one's neighbour as one's self, constituted the very essence of the law. To assist even our enemies was a maxim of the Stoics in Jesus' time. And but one generation later, although without doubt independently of him, and strictly in keeping with the principles of the Stoic school, Epictetus called all men brothers, "inasmuch as all were the children of God." It appears to me that the moral teachings of Jesus are mostly rendered impracticable through extremism. The Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, seems to me far more cogent and practical than the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest beauty of the latter being poetical. Yet I might quote sayings from the teachings of Buddha, Confucius, and the Greek and Roman sages of antiquity equal to anything Jesus is reported to have said in this respect.

[TO BE CONCLUDED.]

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF AMERICA

The Rev. Father Gleeson, of San Francisco is reported in 'The Catholic Citizen' to have spoken as follows:—

"The public school system has lost to the Catholic Church 180,000,000 of souls! . . . A large majority of Catholic children educated in the public schools have drifted into indifferentism, if not into infidelity, and that is what they desire. Those Catholics, then, with this knowledge staring them full in the face, who send their children to the public schools, with their own good schools at their doors, are traitors to their Church and a dishonor to the faith which they profess. . . . We have Catholics now-a-days who are ever trying to pare down the objectionable points of our faith. They love to be called Liberal Catholics; they are forever trying to explain away what non-Catholics most object to.—Theoretically speaking they believe in miracles, but shrug their shoulders when you ask them to believe the miracle of Lourdes. Veneration of relics, the doctrine of indulgences, and of purgatory they rarely allude to. They never want to hear a sermon on exclusive salvation. They would not be seen wearing a scapular, and don't know how to say the beads. They have no devotion to the saints, and don't care to know even the meaning of devotion to the Sacred Heart. If the Pope sounds a note of warning to any people, they say he is meddling in politics. If the Archbishop disapproves of a Society, or condemns an abuse, those very Liberal Catholics shake their very Liberal heads, and say they don't see anything wrong in it. The Church is not progressive enough for them."

This is strong testimony to the value of secular education, and an unanswerable reason against State endowments to the sects.

"Don't tell me 'you won't,'" said an Elmira father to his little daughter of six summers. "Well, but papa," said the artless little one, "what shall I say when I mean I won't?"