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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

A lady who writes in a recent number of the *Nineteenth Century*, replying to Mr. Mallock's articles, speaks as follows:—"Of course, if religion alone produced morality, or even if it alone has rewarded morality's special sacrifices and efforts, we may justly expect that, on the decline of religion and the wearing out of inherited religious habits of thought, we shall lose all our chances of continuing a virtue-loving or a morally discriminating race. Again, if religion has had a greater share than any other agency in the institution and vindication of moral restraints, we, of course, miss the greater part of the force of those restraints in losing religious belief." And then she asks: "But is this so?" Well, we very firmly hold it to be so. We shall not, however, now enter into any argument on the subject; we shall simply quote the following passages as especially pregnant and confirmatory of our views, from a notice of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which we find in the October number of the *Dublin Review*.—"The first fact which appears from the official statements is the deplorable primacy of Italy in deeds of blood. From a comparative table of the number of the homicidal convictions in the different European States during the year 1875, it results that in Italy they exceeded those of England, for instance, sixteen times in proportion to population. To pass from comparative to absolute numbers, it may be added that to the year of 1878, Zanardelli assigns about 4,000 homicides and 20,000 injuries by wounds—4,000 killed and 20,000 wounded! It is like the slaughter of a regular battlefield. Our horror is increased when we examine the sub-division into classes of these offences, and note the large proportion of parricides, fratricides, infanticides, and murders of husbands and wives. Now, this great increase in crime, which is equally true of other moral offences besides those of murder, has been progressive, and dates from the revolutionary rule in Italy, which was to introduce a new order of things and bring light, civilisation, and true morality to a people barbarized under the yoke of preceding governments and degraded by superstition. New maxims and new institutions were to take the place of those Christian maxims which had hitherto constituted the basis of public morality, and of those numerous institutions, ecclesiastical or animated by the spirit of Christianity, which had so powerfully helped to maintain it. This system has been steadily carried out since the date of its inauguration, twenty years ago, which must be considered as ample time for ascertaining its practical results; and what have these been? A continually ascending scale of crime, the progressive deepening of a corrupt and cankerous wound in the bosom of society, appalling the very Liberals themselves, and a brand of shame imprinted on the face of Italy in sight of all civilized nations. It is hard to conceive how any sober-minded person can fail to deduce the legitimate consequences as regards the merits of the Liberalistic régime. There must surely be some radical vice in a system which bears such fruits. Let us pass over the miserable exhaustion of the country through maladministration, which might be indulgently laid to the charge of the signal incapacity of those men whom this party have unfortunately selected for public offices; let us not stop to inquire whether in matters of political economy Liberalism be not a system ruinous to the material prosperity of the people, there is no denying, at least, that in proportion to the diffusion of its principles and the multiplication of its institutions has been the increase of vice and of crime amongst the population."

JOHN BRIGHT
ON
EDUCATION.

ANOTHER wise man has spoken on the subject of education, and by his speech we are again informed of the all-importance of providing a religious education for our children. Mr. Bright, in a word, was present on October 31st at a soiree given by the Mayor of Birmingham to the Primary School teachers of the city in question, and he delivered an address on the occasion that is full of instruction. Our concern at present, however, is only with those portions of his speech that bear upon the importance of religious

teaching, and of them the first runs as follows:—"It has always been a subject, not of wonder, but of grief, that I have been compelled to believe that there is hardly any effort—so great effort—in any direction with so little result as the effort that is made by the ministers and teachers of religion. I have read a rather curious explanation of this from a great American divine. He said that as people get older there is an ossification of the outward man, a hardness and boniness that grows, and unless great care is taken and religion be pursued from youth there is a great fear that the spiritual man also becomes ossified, and the result is generally that, as ministers of religion have to speak mainly to and teach adults, they have a material that is not plastic and upon which they can make little impression. I think there is hardly anything more to be lamented, to feel more sorrowful about, than the knowledge that many men should work hard as ministers of religion and produce so little effect upon those among whom they minister. I heard another minister once say that he found in his experience that very many persons who had not had any special regard to religion by the time they became thirty years of age found it extremely difficult for the religious sentiment to be created in their minds at a later period of life. I will not dispute that, I will not argue about it. I will not affirm it to be true; but I will say that the teachers in your schools are in an entirely different position. They have a plastic material on which they are able to impress their minds and their sentiments, and there is no doubt whatever that, though that plastic material may be moved and worked and impressed for evil as well as for good, seeing that, I hope, the great mass of the teachers in all our schools tend infinitely more to good than evil, we may expect that they may make an impression of lasting benefit upon the young minds with which they constantly come in contact." From this, then, we may gather the folly of those who believe that religion is necessary for men's well-being and happiness, and who yet consent to shut out from its influences during the whole period in which they are liable to become subject to them the children they are interested in. The "plastic material" of which Mr. Bright speaks must necessarily accept the impression of at least the greater importance of that secularism in pursuit of which by far the greater portion of its time is spent, and, even in those instances where it might be attempted to make up for the godlessness of the schools by a few hours' of religious instruction given elsewhere, the season of "ossification," "hardness and boniness" would set in upon a soil well prepared to receive its influences. Again, Mr. Bright spoke of the influence exercised over the minds of children by the example of their teachers, and this is very important. He said: "But what I want to say, and I will not take up your time many moments, is that I think with regard to teachers they have two entirely different branches of labour; they have that of instructing their pupils from books, and they have that of instructing them from their own conduct and their own manner. You want to teach a child—I must say it is better than book-learning—you want to teach a child to be gentle; not the gentleness that is weakness, for there is a perfect gentleness which is combined with great force. (Hear, hear.) You want humanity—humanity to animals is one point. (Hear, hear.) If I were a teacher of a school, I would make it a very important part of my business to impress every boy and girl with the right of his or her being kind to all animals. Well, then, there is the quality of unselfishness. There is much selfishness in families. Selfishness in families is the cause of misery and the cause of great injustice. Unselfishness and a love of justice, these are qualities which come, if you offer them, to the child's or the young person's mind with a special invitation; their very nature is such that they cannot receive them except with liking and approbation, and I have no doubt that it is possible for the teachers in the elementary schools in Birmingham during the next 10 years or so, during which they will have two or three generations of children under their care—it is possible for them so to impress their minds on these subjects that, twenty years hence, it will be seen and felt over the whole of the town that there is an improvement in these respects in the general population. (Applause.) Now, these are things which I think it behoves the teachers of these schools to bear in mind. They cannot possibly have too high a sense of the responsibilities of their position and of their duties. (Hear, hear.)" What is here said concerning gentleness, humanity, unselfishness, and a love of justice, may be said, with equal force at least, touching