

New Zealand Gazette

TWENTIETH YEAR OF PUBLICATION.

VOL. XX.—No. 43.

DUNEDIN: FRIDAY, AUGUST, 12, 1892.

PRICE 6D.

Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

AN article in the *Forum* for June, by President FRUITS OF THE William De Witt Hyde, of Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, gives us some curious information about the condition of the Protestant religion in the country districts of New England. The writer inquires as to whether a state of paganism is to be the final result. "Statistics," he says, "recently gathered by the Maine Bible Society, show that Waldo County, Maine, has 6,987 families, divided in religious preference as follows:—Adventist, 239; Baptist, 713; Christian, 159; Congregational, 691; Episcopal, 24; Free-will Baptist, 734; Methodist, 1,818; Roman Catholic, 136; Unitarian, 126; Universalist, 619; other denominations, 541; without preference, 1,046; not recorded, 141. "Of the total," he continues, "4,850 report themselves as not attending church. Oxford County contains 7,283 families, of which 4,577 report that they attend no church. The combined statistics of 15 counties show that of 133,445 families, 67,842 are not attendants upon any church." The writer explains that in the rural districts—of which Waldo County is an example—there are no strong, vigorous churches. The ministers, besides, though devoted and self-sacrificing, are inefficient, mistaken means of promoting religion are adopted, and the churches are in debt. "In addition to these natural difficulties, nearly every town has inherited its church quarrel or church scandal; the churches are engaged in rivalry with each other, or the members of a single church are divided against themselves." The writer gives the following as a typical case:—"In and about the village of X—there are between 800 and 1000 people. The religious opinions have always been pretty evenly divided between the Free-Will Baptist Congregational, Methodist, and Universalist denominations. For a time all worshipped together in a union church, hiring in turn a clergyman of each denomination. Thus, each month one portion of the congregation had its own theological taste satisfied, although, as one good lady remarked, "you could not tell which was which by the preaching." Sectarian ambition, caused first the Universalists, then the Methodists to withdraw; and alleged immoral conduct on the part of the Baptist clergyman compelled the separate organisation of a Congregational church. The latter were swindled by their first minister, who sold them the plans of their church at an exorbitant price. The Methodist church occasionally has a resident pastor, and some years it has none. The Baptist and Universalist churches are supplied by ministers who drive over on Sunday afternoons from neighbouring towns. The Congregationalist church has a student from the seminary three months in the summer. The strongest churches are the Universalist, with its membership of thirteen women and one man; and the Congregational, with its membership of twenty women and four men. There is hardly a representative man in any of these four churches, though the Masonic lodge gathers from this and neighbouring towns its hundred members." The writer, further, adduces the experience of a friend who went as a home missionary in a small town in Minnesota. "After a few months," he says, "spent in rivalry with Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Baptist brethren, who each had his little struggling church within a stone-throw of his own, he wrote back to his friends at the seminary that the only mission for any man out there was to go up and down the State, burning half the churches." We are given the following details. Our readers will perceive how fully they answer to Catholic predictions as to what Protestant doctrine must produce:—" (1) Excessive emphasis upon the transcendence as distinct from the immanence of God is the deeply buried and far-reaching root; extreme individualism is the decaying and unsightly trunk; superfluous sects are the gnarled and knotty branches; doctrinal abstractions are the dry and juiceless leaves; artificial and unreal sermons are the blighted and bitter fruit, which together constitute the tree which is now cumbering the ground of rural Christianity. (2) God is regarded as a Being who laid down certain laws, made certain covenants, drew up a certain plan of salvation, was a party to certain transactions, published certain books two or three thousand years ago.

(3) Each man feels especially commissioned to discover God's will both for himself and for everybody else; each man must experience the grace of God in the conscious movements of his own breast, and judge himself and everybody else by the standard which he therein discovers; each man must assent with his own intelligence to a comprehensive creed, and require every other intelligence to assent to the same creed; each man must go to Heaven his own way and make everybody else follow. Since it is practically impossible to have as many churches as individuals, the next best thing is to have as many as can either support themselves or get others to do it for them. (4) Having for its subject-matter the relations between a far-off God and the mysterious entity the soul of man, the theology taught in these churches lacks vitality and is incapable of development. The same abstract formal relations are true of all men, at all times, and under all circumstances." The writer goes on to propose a remedy for all this, but his plan seems pretty much that of one who would fulfil the folly condemned by our Blessed Lord, and patch old garments with new pieces or put new wine into old bottles. His conclusion is particularly notable—relating, as it does, to a country once the stronghold of fervent Evangelical Protestantism, but where now for many years a secular system of education has prevailed. "Whether paganism," he says, "shall take the vacant place, or there shall be planted there a broader, richer, nobler church, is the most serious spiritual problem that confronts American Christianity to-day."

NO, no; there is nothing curious in the matter. SURELY our festive friend must know that it is not incumbent on an editor who publishes a clipping in his paper to express a consciousness of its bearings on any particular case. We clipped that paragraph about the Canadian Trappists and the field-mice from another paper, and left its application to our readers. "Civis," as we see, has rather misapplied it. He wants us to explain why the rabbit-plague in New Zealand cannot be similarly cured. Did our "Civis" never attend a Sunday school? Has he, for example, never heard of the widow of Sarepta who was preferred before the many widows who were in Israel? Has he never heard of Naaman the Syrian? Many lepers were in Israel in his days, but he was cured—not they. Surely, even though it may need a stretch of the memory on his part, our "Civis" can recall so much as this, that he has somewhere or another heard. But if he asks us what is the difference that supernaturally exists between the waters of the Abana and the Pharpar and those of the Jordan, we confess we are unable to inform him. Our "Civis," besides, may, with another effort, recollect that to the working of miracles faith is necessary. "And he wrought not many miracles there because of their unbelief." And is there no difference between field-mice in Canada and rabbits in New Zealand? Were it proposed miraculously to destroy our rabbit, some Mr Cruncher, for instance, might protest. What would become of the rabbiters? What would be the effect on the agents who deal in rabbitkins, or, yet again, on the rabbit-tinners? We can fancy a whole chorus echoing Mr Cruncher's disgustful words, "What do you mean by flipping yourself down and praying agin me?" Decidedly there are two sides to the rabbit question. At any rate even our "Civis" must acknowledge that a community of Trappist monks, working hard with their own hands, and changing the wilderness into a garden, differ widely from the solitary squatter, who could not do a hard day's work to save his life, and who makes use of all his influence to preserve the wilderness in its pristine desolation. Possibly the rabbits are that threadbare entity, the blessing in disguise, and, by routing the monopolist they may eventually bring on the one thing needful, the *bona fide* settlement of the land, a matter that would soon make an end of them. As to the American blight, the codlin moth, and the Californian thistle, which our "Civis" also proposes for our mortification, he may consider them likewise in the light thrown upon the subject by the passages of Holy Scripture to which we have referred. If we make our festive friend acquainted, for the first time, with the existence of such passages, we are quite consoled for any suspicion of a want of faith on our part he may have entertained. Were he acquainted with those passages he could hardly be accountable for the stuff written by him. We hope we have made our explanation sufficiently clear.