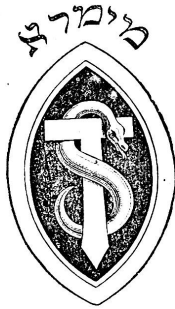


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RELIGIOUS IGNORANCE.



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RELIGIOUS IGNORANCE.

A Great deal is continually being said and written about the duty of instructing the poor and providing for the spiritual wants of the working classes. Night schools, Sunday schools, Bible classes, and periodicals of all kinds are set on foot for the benefit of the ignorant poor, but nothing is ever said or written about the expediency of instructing the *educated* classes, who, upon the subject of religion, are frequently as ill-informed, if not quite so ignorant, as the "common people" to whose religious improvement they sometimes devote themselves with edifying zeal, recklessly guiding them to the brink of that capacious ditch destined to receive the blind and their leaders.

He would be a public benefactor who would undertake the delicate and difficult task of instructing those who, for thirty years or more, have imagined themselves well acquainted with the Bible, the church, and religious truth generally, but who, when weighed in the balance of first rudiments, are found wanting. Those who have enjoyed the inestimable advantage of not having been brought up under the auspices of any particular sect, are quite amazed, not merely at the ignorance which prevails among religious people about the only book they seem to care for, but at their unwillingness to admit their ignorance and their disinclination to listen to their superiors in learning and piety. For instance, people will talk with glib assurance about "the apocryphal books," just as if they knew what the word apocrypha means,

and which the apocryphal books really are. Ask what they mean, and you will be readily informed that they (the apocryphal books) are the "spurious writings" which were expunged from the Canon as uninspired and therefore valueless. Ask if they are acquainted with the apocryphal books of the *New Testament*; you will find that they have never heard of them, and that they do not *wish* to hear of them, being abundantly satisfied with the four Gospels in their Testament, and certain of their truth. Venture still further, and tell them that an apocryphal book does not mean one that is false, but merely one of which the author is hidden or unknown, and that therefore many of the books which have been retained in the Canon are quite as apocryphal as those that have been rejected, for that neither Jew nor Gentile can tell who wrote them: you will not be encouraged to proceed; your listeners do not want to hear any more; they see you want to "shake their faith" in—no matter what, provided they believe it.

Great allowance must be made for them. A mind nurtured in error, entangled with superstition and clogged by conceit can no more accept a simple truth than an enfeebled stomach can digest a heavy meal. A long preparation is necessary before we can sufficiently divest ourselves of our previous prejudices to take in anything at variance with them. Few people can, as Madame Swetchine pertinently observes, "bear the *weight* of an entire truth," and still fewer have the humility to become "little children," even for Christ's sake. The excessive ignorance of the educated classes in reference to religious matters must be encountered to be realised. Ignorance, when acknowledged, may be overcome; but ignorance combined with conceit is likely to become invincible. S. Paul accounts for the blindness of the Jews when "Moses is read," by saying that "the veil is upon their heart," but how thick a veil must be upon the

heart of Christians when Jesus is read ; for what words can be more intelligible than those attributed to the simple and sensible teacher of Gallilee, "Except ye be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Where are the Christians who think those words at all applicable to themselves, who think *they* need conversion, or who are humble enough to see that *they* are the very people whom Christ would have placed with the Pharisees among the "little children" in the infant school? It is only the "common people" round the corner who want taking in hand, instructing and converting ; *they* indeed should become "little children" and join a Bible class : but the gentlefolks at the manor, like the Pharisees at the Synagogue, are safe on the pinnacle of their self-sufficiency, giving thanks to God that they are "not as other men," misinformed, unenlightened, credulous, irrational ; *they* have got hold of the real thing, and can go on their way, rejoicing that "wisdom is justified of her children ;" not indeed that they know what those words mean or that they might be more accurately rendered. Not even an angel from heaven could persuade such people that they have anything to learn concerning what they call Bible truth.

It by no means detracts from the merit of the discourses attributed to Jesus, to be told that it was generally the lower orders, "the common people" who "heard him gladly," and the Pharisees who despised him. The Pharisees of old, like the orthodox of today, were full of their own notions, their own traditions, their own doctrines, customs, ceremonies, and self-complacency. The carpenter's son should have joined *them*, attended their Bible class, and accepted their exposition of God's word, instead of striking out a path for himself.

It was precisely the educated Pharisee who had not the wit to see that a man might deviate materially

from the path of orthodoxy and yet be a son of wisdom and a worthy inheritor of one of the "many mansions" of the Father's house. They were far too narrow-minded and ceremonial to appreciate such an unconventional character as Christ, who set times and seasons, forms and ceremonies at naught, praying and preaching when and where he chose, and eating and drinking with those whom the Pharisees would have scorned to salute in the market-place; but wisdom was "justified of her children."

To instruct the ignorant, unruly children of the supine poor, is a most irksome and unthankful task, but to enlighten the cultivated members of fashionable congregations would be an incomparably more difficult and disheartening undertaking, for their pastors have laboured so sedulously to keep them in error that they are almost incapable of giving truth a hearing.

"Wisdom," says the worldly-wise writer of Ecclesiastes, "is good *with an inheritance*," but of course if folly bring in a larger income wisdom may go to the wall, and as "the inheritance" in traditional Christianity is unfortunately contingent upon the due promulgation of numerous time-honoured errors called truths, the poor pastor must either uphold them or forfeit his bread and butter.

A fair proportion of the clergy, including even dissenters, are extremely well-informed upon many religious and biblical matters; they know for instance, that the book of Ecclesiastes just quoted, is, in the legitimate sense of the word, apocryphal; and that Solomon, its reputed author, is the very last man likely to have written it. Many of them believe in Noah's Ark just as little as Catholic priests do in the liquifaction of the blood of S. Januarius. They *preach* indeed to their hearers, but are careful not to *teach* them anything which might open their eyes and set them thinking; they know too well what the

effect of thinking has been in their own case to run any risk with their seat-holders!

Those who combine dense ignorance with extreme conceit—a combination very often met with among the “Lord’s people” in country towns—are beyond the reach of sound instruction, and must be given up as too “wise in their own conceits” to be taught anything at variance with them; but those who are unaware of their own ignorance, who really do not know how very little knowledge they possess, and who are designedly kept in leading strings by those who watch for their souls “as they that must give account,” and who guard them with tender solicitude against the baneful influence of inquiry and common sense; *those* are the people so sincerely to be pitied, and how to get at them is the great difficulty. Hemmed in by prejudice, early impressions, superstitious fears, and vigilant relatives, their intellect has never fair play, for they never venture to think for themselves.

Some time ago a sermon was preached by a curate one Sunday morning in a London church, the rector being absent. The text selected was unfortunately “There are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water and the blood.” In the evening of the same day the rector preached from the same text.

Alluding to the new translation of the Bible then contemplated, he said, “the words I have taken for my text must certainly go, as they are of no earlier date than the sixteenth century.” Now if all religious guides would frankly impart the knowledge they have obtained as did that rector, now a distinguished but sorely censured Broad-churchman, we should less frequently have to deplore the ignorance of the people and the insincerity of the clergy. Of course, many of the parsons know perfectly well upon what a very uncertain foundation the whole

fabric called Christianity really rests, and what childish notions are afloat concerning the meaning of the curious and interesting collection of oriental books they get their living by "expounding," according to those childish notions. They must follow in the footsteps of those who preceded them and keep repeating the same platitudes, as feast after feast of the ecclesiastical year comes round. Those clergymen are not upon a bed of roses; their position, not merely before God but even in their own eyes, makes them wince. Time was when they firmly believed in the inspiration of the Bible and could preach from a spurious text with zeal and unction; *that* was the time when they knew very little and thought still less. Subsequent research and reflection have convinced them of the purely human origin of the whole of it; a discovery which enhances rather than diminishes their appreciation of it, but which materially interferes with their theological views, and places them in a most unenviable position in regard to their flock. Too old to embrace any other profession and with probably several children to educate, they must stay where they are and console themselves with the hope that they are more sinned against than sinning. No help can come from the clergy taken as a body; justifiable adherence to loaves and fishes silences the few who *could* speak out if they dared, and unjustifiable ignorance and arrogance silences the many who give themselves no trouble to ascertain truth, who are too proud to profit by the literary labours of others; or, if by some chance they hit upon such a fact for example, as the culpable substitution of the word "scapegoat" for the "Azazel" of the original, Lev. xvi. 8, they are too weak to bear the weight of it—for it *is* heavy! Well might the grave and sensible Channing write, "An Established Church is the grave of intellect," and well might Cobbett ask "Is it worth one pound?" remarks wrung from

those who "meditate upon these things" and would gladly make their "profiting appear to all" so that "wisdom might be justified of her children;" but how is it to be done?

The Scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, no hope is to be expected from the clergy, the wise among them are—and mean to continue—wise for *themselves* as Solomon says, suffering fools "gladly" as S. Paul did, and dispensing the weekly portion of milk and water to deluded hearers who esteem themselves highly privileged to be allowed to pay for it!

When Jesus preached the famous sermon attributed to him, not a single conversion is reported to have taken place—it was so far a failure; but when the contemptible coward Peter delivered *his* involved and clumsy discourse, we are required to believe that 3,000 souls were added to the Church; and "as it was in the days of the Son of Man, so it is now." Fools have rushed in where angels fear to tread, contemptible cowards are sitting in brave old Moses' seat, and "the end," alas, "is not by-and-by."

Humble students whose pecuniary position is fortunately uninfluenced by the free expression of their opinions, dare to doubt whether Hebrew really was the language in which the Old Testament was originally written, whether it really is of such early date as is commonly supposed, and whether we are justified in assuming that ancient Jews were so much more trustworthy than modern Jews;—but religious people, who never study at all, have no such doubts—*they* know all about the authorship, language, date, translation, and meaning of every word in the volume. *They* have the light of faith, the wisdom which is "not of this world," while the poor student is an infidel, whose wisdom "is folly before God." Impossible to convince them that their appreciation of the Bible would in no wise be diminished by a better acquaintance with its history. Useless to tell them

that neither Moses nor Jesus ever said a word about the duty of reading the Bible, and that, as it has not pleased God to preserve one single letter of the originals of either Old or New Testament, but has suffered the entire collection of the so-called Holy Scriptures to disappear from the face of the earth, it does not seem probable that *He* thought them necessary to salvation; they have made up their minds that they *are* necessary to salvation, and most cheerfully do they contribute towards the nine thousand pounds which are annually spent in England for the furtherance of the spread of the Word of God among nations who have not yet had the privilege of possessing the Blessed Book. Not until people are brought to understand that they could love and adore God as fervently and serve their neighbour as zealously, without believing in a collection of oriental fables, which have no more claim to be called the Word of God than any other allegorical or astronomical tales—not until they can be persuaded that many who have long ago abandoned all belief in the inspiration of the Bible are nevertheless as devoted to the practice of prayer as themselves—have quite as lively a hope in the immortality of the soul, and whose conduct to their neighbour is characterised by a far more comprehensive and exalted charity than their own—not until then will their minds be able to bear the weight of those truths which have been so long withheld from them, and not until then shall we realise the full force and practical application of those suggestive words, “Wisdom is justified of her children.”