

65542

THE
CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE SOCIETY:
ITS
PROFESSED PRINCIPLES AND ACTUAL POLICY.

I NTEREST in the career of this promising though hitherto disappointing institution prompted a visit to Willis's Rooms on Friday afternoon, June 5, when the third anniversary was being celebrated. Whether "celebrated" is the happiest term or not, may be decided after acquaintance with what follows. In the circular which accompanied the request for our subscription, the Christian Evidence Society declares (after enumerating the various aggressive efforts of heterodox propagandists) that it is their object to "stem the tide of scepticism." They "hold that difficulties must be met by fair argument, and doubts removed by candid explanations. They desire, too, to meet the bolder and more aggressive propagation of infidelity, to confront its champions, and refute their arguments; to rescue inquiring minds from being misled by objections—essentially old, capable of refutation, and oft refuted, which nevertheless, if unchallenged in their new forms, may be thought unanswerable because unanswered." A most laudable object, would to Heaven they would carry it out! and it was to hear the Society's own report of its warfare that our visit was paid.

There were about 150 persons present, of whom perhaps two-thirds were ladies, and a large proportion of the remainder clergymen, as might perhaps be expected, seeing that the speakers comprised the Archbishop of York, Bishop of London (in the chair), Bishop of Gloucester, Bishop of Oxford, besides lesser dignitaries of the Church. Prayers were read from a small book, having no special reference to the work of the Society. The report was lengthy; commonplace at first, it grew chilly as it proceeded, until it left us decidedly dull. For, after reviewing the year's work, the opposition to which was characterised as "only feeble," and planning out schemes to come, the dismal truth had to be spoken, that Christians had not rushed to the defence of the "faith once delivered" with the hoped-for energy: the sinews of war were failing, the funds are dreadfully low. The receipts had been 1,493*l.*; expenditure, 1,480*l.*; leaving a balance of 13*l.* only "to stem the tide of scepticism." Worse remained behind, the loss of large benefactors; and there would not have been even a balance at all, had not pressure of circumstances forced them to sell out one-fourth of their reserve fund. We were much relieved to hear, after this, that some of the members have offered special prayers on the evening of the last day in each month, in private, for the benefit of the Society; and though at present the answer had not been all that might be expected from a "prayer-answering God," we were all earnestly requested to do likewise, since this mode of raising subscriptions had been "specially sanctioned by his Grace the Archbishop of York," who yawned heartily during the whole of the report.

The Bishop of London struck the uppermost chord in the hearts of all present by deploring, in his least cheerful manner, "that society is saturated with infidelity from the highest grade to the lowest," that men are satisfied to live according to the dictates "of

their own evil hearts." The masses, he confessed, do not attend church, and he believed that the extent of passive unbelief is more harmful than active infidelity. Still, he thought that this infidelity is not deeper to-day than formerly, but more multiform, as they are now attacked at once by the coarse objections of Paine, and by the keen criticism of Strauss and others. His lordship favoured us with a long catalogue of various phases of modern unbelief, which he summed up in one word, "Egotism," that is the root of all heresy to-day. He considered that Christians had been too full of apology and defence of late, and advised the taking of higher ground in future, stating boldly that *they believe* would perhaps have a better effect with the people than mere argument. He did not add that assertion was better than proof, when proof is wanting. The Bishop effectually damped our not over lively spirits, but there was possibly a special providence in the fact that very few could hear a word of his very badly read address. He concluded with a feeble apology for the existence of the Society, "whose work is so valuable, but the results of which," said his lordship, "will only be known—hereafter."

The Chairman stated that a "good deal of the infidelity of the day arose from ignorance, and hence the necessity of a society like the Christian Evidence Society, which met the Infidel on his own ground, and showed by lectures, pamphlets, and tracts that Christians were in the right." Surely the Bishop of London forgot the facts of the case. It is true that ignorance breeds superstition, a state of mind largely traded on by priests of all denominations; but the so-called infidelity of the present day, which the Christian Evidence Society does not attempt to touch, is the result of the increasing amount of intelligence in all classes, leading to the examination of the grounds on which certain facts are said to rest, and

thereby the said facts are proved to have no existence.

It is to be feared that the clergy comprising the Christian Evidence Society are hardly so scrupulous in their statements as their profession should make them. Had the Bishop said that without the support of the ignorant and superstitious such societies as the Christian Evidence Society could not be kept alive, he would indeed have uttered a great truth.

To ignore, as the Christian Evidence Society has hitherto done, such challenges as that by Judge Strange or Mr Thomas Scott, seems proof that they fear to meet such writers. At any rate they ignore them wholly; as yet the Society has shrunk from "confronting the champions" of free thought, and, like Falstaff, shows its bravery only by big words. Or are, perhaps, these gentlemen so ignorant and obscure as to be quite beneath their notice?

It is to be hoped that a steady persistence by these gentlemen, and a host of others like them, in the work of laying bare the immense assumptions and assertions of the orthodox, may at last force this Society to give some public reply to their various pamphlets.

The Archbishop of York is a better specimen of the Church Militant than his brother of London, and as he shook himself together it was evident there was to be a serious deliverance. After paying the conventional compliment to "My Lord Bishop" for the magnificent oration from the chair, His Grace reluctantly declared he could not share the Bishop's hope that infidelity is decreasing. With great emphasis he assured us it is increasing every day. We were taken to Germany and France, and back to England, in proof of the terrible encroachment of the great army of sceptics, and were told how an astronomer had given a detailed explanation of the movements of the planetary bodies to one who, astounded, said to the

man of Science, "Why, you have never even mentioned the name of God!" "Sir," said the philosopher, "there is no need of such an hypothesis." His Grace also believes that the *appearance* of one who believes is quite as effectual as an argument, which met with the approbation of many around him. However potent for good the sight of a live Archbishop or Bishop may be, and we do not doubt it in the least, it seems hardly probable that an exhibition of lecturers or even the lectures themselves, will effect much towards the Society's object—"the refutation of arguments which may be thought unanswerable because unanswered." He deprecates evidential discourses and arguments in the pulpit, which might cause many to doubt who did not doubt before, but advises special lectures in suitable places, although he rightly added that "Christianity is just as true to-day as ever it was." Children ought not to be taught the proofs of Christianity, nor to reason upon its facts, but this sentiment was strongly opposed by several succeeding speakers. His Grace grew boisterously eloquent with acknowledged borrowed illustrations and quotations upon "the intellectual side of the Trinity," treating us to a little sermon suitable to the Calendar. But sadness followed with the words "there have been works published this year which are as hard to answer as any that have ever appeared." He gave no signs of any intention to reply to them himself, and deliberately pooh-poohed a suggestion of the report, offered as an incitement to further subscriptions, that the Society should publish some works, after the pattern of Butler's 'Analogy,' carefully reasoned out, which shall claim the attention and dispose of the objections of the cultured sceptic, who will not trouble himself with their small publications. The Archbishop said they must let this alone: "you cannot do it properly, you must not become a publishing society, leave that to the S.P.C.K. and continue as you are doing." With

an excuse for himself and Right Reverend Brethren, that they could not be of much use to the cause, having so little time at command, His Grace concluded with an earnest appeal for—not arguments, but funds, and left the hall. The Rev. W. Arthur, Wesleyan Minister, followed with an able speech of a few minutes, in which he demolished Comte with consummate ease in five sentences and a half. He held that a child's mind soon expands, delighting in argument and reason [this unlucky oversight of the Creator], could only be remedied by instilling into it early the glorious principles of the Christian doctrine. Dr Jobson, Wesleyan, cheerfully objected to be classed as a Nonconformist, since he would willingly sign the Thirty-nine Articles. He agreed with the last speaker that "the children should not be left to Satan," and after saying nothing for another five minutes, sat down. Dr J. H. Gladstone announced himself as a man of Science. "Some of us, or rather two or three of the few who are known as men of Science, are supposed to be unbelievers!" A slander against which he vehemently protested, for though one or two (*e.g.*, Huxley, Tyndall, Carpenter, and such like scientists) may not be "with us" in all points, they are but units compared with the great company "of us," who reconcile fact and faith. This gentleman apparently forgot he was not lecturing to his class of youths, but at length, after sundry "scientific" sneers at men who pretend to know more than himself, the well-prepared performance closed. Thus far we heard nothing about the victories won, or schemes of future operations; we were lost in contemplation of the in-flowing "tide of scepticism." The Bishop of Gloucester is given to plain speaking, especially when advising how to dispose of an inconvenient opponent, so we looked for light. His lordship had charge of a resolution embodying a proposal to publish the big books, previously discouraged by the

Archbishop. With great ingenuity, more worthy of the bar than the bench, his lordship found a way to support the Society without coming into conflict with His Grace, by dwelling upon the word "further;" that is, the Society will not publish, but only "further" the publication of the two works, one of which is to be upon the Gospels, and the other upon the Miracles. An author of great eminence has undertaken one of these already. The speaker dealt with many topics, but managed to omit the interesting question, lost sight of by all speakers, "What has been done to 'refute the arguments' of the many scholars of eminence who have pointedly challenged the Society?" The Bishop read extracts from the most recently published work of this kind, to show us how terribly infidel in character our first writers are becoming. But not one word of reply, not a sign of "refutation" or "stemming the tide." He also lamented that his time is so fully occupied, or *he* might—(no, he did not say that.) He showed how Butler of the 'Analogy' is useless to-day, and so of the rest. The brightest gem of his speech was when he announced, in seductive tones, that the Christian Evidence Society has plenty of room,—room for men of genius to work for her, room for money to pay the men of genius, and in sad need of the prayers of all who, like their lordships, could not supply anything else.

Others followed, but it was a weary wail throughout. The principles of the Society seem to flourish in an inverse ratio to their efforts to propagate them. They were a more powerful force in their first days than now in their third year. Their confessions of failure, whether in gaining respect, sympathy, adherents, or money, are of more worth to the opponents they ignore than to the cause they profess to support. They challenge, but do not fight; they argue, but do not reason; they see

the gauntlet, but look another way; they profess to be bold, but accept the taunt of cowardice. It is their *principle* "to meet difficulties with fair argument, and remove doubts by candid explanations;" it is their *policy* to meet the doubter with exploded arguments, and that not sufficing, either press him into their own army or dismiss him confirmed in his doubt. Their apparent advance, when closely observed and challenged, proves to be a strategic movement culminating in retreat. Three years of patient effort to arouse these apologists to their duty of answering the persistent attacks of men abler and more consistent than themselves, have proved the impossibility of galvanising a moribund body into active life. The deepest conviction of impartial minds upon leaving the meeting was that the Christian Evidence Society has, at great expense, done little else than furnish evidence of the weakness of the cause it defends, a conviction which, "however capable of refutation," if not removed by "candid explanations," will assuredly "be thought unanswerable because unanswered."

