

## STABILITY OF THE GREAT RELIGIOUS SECTS.

ANY one who will take the pains to study the voluminous results of the recent Census of the Churches may find in them a satisfactory answer to many interesting and important questions. The inquiry was quite an exhaustive one, and was, of course, meant to be strictly impartial and accurate. The power and resources of the Government were available to make it so, and it is a matter of no little public concern that what private enterprise would not undertake and could not, perhaps, successfully conduct, was made a feature of the Eleventh Census. No time, trouble, or expense was spared to make it what it should be.

Those who have not given special attention to the number and character of the divisions of religion in the United States will be astonished at the array of denominations, or religious bodies, which the Census presents. It would seem that the one hundred and forty or more distinct titles must embrace all the varieties of faith that the world has produced. But it is not so. Mohammedanism, one of the great religions of the East, is not represented. General Webb had not begun his missionary work for Islam among us when the list was made up, nor had the muezzin's call been heard in Union Square, in New York city. These are later developments, and must, with other like phenomena, be left to the next decennial census, if, indeed, they do not disappear in the mean time. In a decade many changes occur. Some denominations are lost entirely from the religious firmament, and new ones come into view. Within a few years a body known as Sandemanians has become extinct, and quite a number of the denominations now claiming a place in the general list are in a state of decay. Most of the communistic societies are declining in membership, or are so small as to be utterly insignificant. The Shakers have lost more than 25 per cent of the members they reported in 1875, and six of the eight societies which are classified as communistic average only 120 members each.

A thorough examination of the list shows that the array of denominational titles is far more formidable than the array of denomi-

national forces. Ten thousand members do not, all will admit, make a very respectable denomination as to numbers. Scattered among the fifty States and Territories they would be entirely lost in the mass of people. The name and character of their Church would be known only to a few hundred outside their own communion, unless there were something extraordinary in their principles or practices. As a matter of fact they are generally confined to particular States or sections, and therefore have only a local sphere of work and influence. Of denominations reporting less than 10,000 members there are no fewer than 76, or considerably more than half of the entire list. These 76 denominations have an average of less than 2,400 members each, and combined do not exceed 179,000. Not one of them is of any special importance. They are mere fragments, and if all were to disappear entirely as separate sects, nothing would be lost that is really valuable. They are chips off Methodism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, and other well-known bodies, and help to swell the list of divisions for which Christianity is often reproached, while they contribute but slightly to its strength. I would not say, however, that they serve no useful purpose. In many cases they have split off from larger bodies because they embrace an element divisive in spirit and troublesome. There are men who become leaders of factions, and ultimately of divisions, because their idiosyncracies or personal ambitions make them irrepressible disturbers such as influential denominations are generally glad to get rid of. When they go, they are apt to take with them those who would be troublesome if left behind. Some of these little sects, therefore, make it possible for the larger ecclesiastical bodies to enjoy a measure of peace which they could not otherwise have. I do not mean to condemn all the smaller sects. Not a few of them are constituted of noble men who are following their conscience at no small personal sacrifice, oblivious of any responsibility for schism. They elevate minor points of belief—more often questions of polity or discipline—to the plane of principle, and stand like heroes for them. No one would feel like ridiculing the score or so of Reformed Presbyterians who, on account of a difference of the most microscopic character, keep themselves separate from other Reformed Presbyterians, although they are so scattered that they cannot even maintain an organized church. They defend their minute points of difference as sturdily as the martyrs of the primitive church resisted the efforts of pagan governments to rob them of their faith.

Probably the worst case of division is that of the Mennonites. They are a very worthy people, pure-hearted, simple-minded, devoted to the cause of religion as they understand it. They have been coming to this country from Europe at intervals, for two centuries, because of persecution. They fled from oppression in Germany in the seventeenth century, and from cruelty in Russia in the nineteenth century. They are not numerous in this country, having less, all told, than 42,000 members; but they are divided into no fewer than twelve branches. It is not to be presumed that they are all troublesome spirits. I do not know that they have had any bitter ecclesiastical quarrels, and yet they are not one denomination, but twelve. Perhaps the fires of persecution they have gone through have developed among them a tenacious spirit. Their differences can hardly be called theological in any case. They are mostly disciplinary, and it is really their conservative and liberal tendencies which divide them. The paramount question with them is what practices should be prohibited and what allowed; and what degree of faithfulness to the minor duties of religion and to the old customs should be insisted upon. Thus the three branches of Amish Mennonites may be distinguished as severely strict, moderately strict, and less strict in the enforcement of discipline. The Mennonite divisions are in no sense divisions of faith. In matters of faith they are substantially one.

And this leads me to say that while the term "warring sects" may still fairly be applied to some, at least, of our numerous religious bodies, the "battle of the creeds" was fought out years ago, and the combatants have retired from the field. It is a very striking fact that controversy no longer rages around the questions of the human will, the sovereignty of God, the federal headship of Adam, the decrees and other doctrines over which Calvinistic and Arminian doctors and professors were wont to contend with right good will, and which used to be the subjects of profound and polemic discourses from the pulpit. No preacher would think now of entertaining his hearers with the errors of the Arminian system, or the horrors of the Calvinistic. It can hardly be said that flocks are now distinguished as Calvinistic and Arminian as they once were. Presbyterian sermons suit Methodist congregations, and Methodist sermons are regarded as splendidly orthodox by Presbyterian congregations. Not many years ago a Methodist was examined for admission into a denomination of Calvinistic antecedents. When asked what he thought about the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, he said he held that they

ought to persevere, and his answer was not unsatisfactory. A candidate for ordination before a presbytery, in the long ago, did not get along so well with his examiners. When asked by the Moderator the not unprecedented question, "Well, brother, are you willing to be damned for the glory of God?"—his irreverent reply was, "No, sir; but I am willing that you should be." It is needless to say he never entered the ministry. The religious thought of the time does not run along the lines of the Westminster and Belgic Confessions, or the Thirty-nine Articles. These symbols are not despised. They are held in veneration; but nobody would hasten to do battle for them as they were defended when they represented the living faith of the Churches. In England and Scotland the Presbyterian bodies have either relaxed the formula of subscription to the Confession, adopted a statement declaratory of the sense in which the Confession is received, or prepared a new creed. The Presbyterian Church in this country does not care to revise its ancient standard, because it cannot do so satisfactorily. It would rather have a short new creed when the time comes to formulate such an evangelical statement of doctrine as will be acceptable to all the Reformed Churches. The Apostles' Creed and that of the Evangelical Alliance seem to be regarded as full enough and definite enough for modern use.

I am sure to be asked why, if the Westminster Confession is not held as it once was, Professor Briggs should have been brought to trial. If that famous heresy case, which based its complaint on the Church standards, does not indicate a battle over the Confession, what does it indicate? I answer, in the first place, that this case was denominational, and not interdenominational. When I speak of the battle of the creeds, I mean a conflict between denominations, not a contest within denominational lines to ascertain what is and what is not contrary to the confessional standard. In the second place, Professor Briggs, the accused, contended that what was true in the complaint against him involved no violation of the Confession. In short, it was a trial to determine whether certain views of the Bible may or may not be tolerated; and when such a trial is prosecuted, it must, of course, be prosecuted on the basis of the Confession. It is a time, in all the Evangelical Churches, of theological discussion over theories of Biblical inspiration. The results of the Higher Criticism have made such discussion inevitable. They have disturbed more or less the accepted traditions as to the authorship, unity, and date of composition of certain books of the Old Testament; and the doctors

of the denominations are considering what changes in theories of inspiration are necessary in order to adjust theology to such results as biblical research may be said to have fairly established. *Between the Evangelical denominations there is, as I have already said, no confessional controversy, and in fact no controversy of any kind.* In saying this I do not forget the minor differences which exist between them, nor that the difference between Baptist and Pedobaptist bodies has not yet been reconciled. There are questions concerning baptism upon which agreement has not been reached, but they are not made a matter of controversy as they used to be. There is an agreement to disagree, and there is no such exchange of hostilities as the memory of men now living can recall.

The question naturally arises whether this cessation of confessional controversy is not one of several signs that indicate a decay in the faith of the Churches. There is no question of more vital importance than this. That faith is the life of Christianity. As a system of religion it is a matter of little concern what forms of polity and ceremonial it assumes, or how it manifests its outward life. These may change, and do change, according to environment and the varying needs of successive ages. But it is of supreme moment that its faith should not grow cold or give place to doubt. By a vital faith I mean that faith which accepts the Bible as the word of God, Jesus Christ as the son of God and Saviour of the world, the Gospels with their record of supernatural events, the Bible statement of the nature of sin and of the conditions of salvation, and such doctrines as the existence and character of God, the immortality of the soul, and the efficacy of prayer. Is faith in what have been called the verities of religion still dominant in the Churches?

There are men who are asking this question, sincerely desirous to ascertain the truth. The question, of course, implies a degree of doubt or uncertainty. The activity of the Churches in all good works is not wholly convincing. It is a secular age, and its influence has touched religion. The commercial spirit, they say, is in the Churches. They covet wealth, and bow down to wealthy men; they make much of the mere machinery of organization; they build costly edifices, become luxurious, and serve as a sort of social exchange. The fact that they are, in these modern days, fountains of benevolence, alleviating distress, caring for orphans, the infirm, the sick, and the destitute; elevating the lower classes, sympathizing with the unfortunate, and endeavoring to reform, civilize, and enlighten wherever the op-

portunity offers, does not fully satisfy the questioning observer that these benevolent works spring from faith in the supernatural elements of religion.

I have been for years an anxious inquirer as to the spiritual state and power of the Evangelical Churches. I have used every opportunity to inform myself whether the unquestioned broadening of the stream of Christian benevolence, the increased activity of the Churches in humane works, their wonderful development in financial strength, are the outcome of spiritual life, or a substitute for it; the expression of a love for mankind kindled in souls conscious of the divine love and mercy, or a philanthropy mistaken for religion. I believe there are many influential church members who have more of the philanthropic than of the devotional spirit; that there is a still larger class of persons who believe that the one important service the church performs lies in what it does as a social institution, making men less selfish and ignorant, less vicious and idle, and therefore better members of society and better citizens.

My observation convinces me that there is, making all allowances, not less faith in the church, but more; not a feeble, but a stronger spiritual life. There is a series of facts going to confirm this conclusion.

First, while theology—especially Calvinistic theology—has undergone many changes in the past half-century or more, as indicated by the fact that it has generally outgrown or grown away from the old confessions, the result has not affected faith in the great fundamentals of Christianity. I do not believe that the time has ever been, since the Advent, when the divine mission and nature of Jesus Christ were so fully recognized as now. The belief in him as son of God and equal with God was never stronger or clearer. Old definitions of the Trinity may not be regarded as fully satisfactory; the Athanasian Creed is too mechanical and mathematical to voice the deep feeling of the Church of to-day; but Christ, the centre of the Christian faith, is honored in doctrine, in worship, in thought, in life, as the Creator of all things, the Redeemer of all men, and the Lord and Master of heaven and earth. It is not Strauss's *Life of Christ*, or Renan's, which men ask for; but Farrar's, Geikie's,—works which recognize his divinity and give full credit to the supernatural in his life. And yet, as criticism or literature, the French and German works might claim great merit. That Christianity which makes so much of Christ and his work for men cannot be regarded as weak in its faith.



Second, the Scriptures have not lost their place in the Church, nor their attraction for the masses of church members. When the evolution controversy began, not so many years ago, it seemed to many that if the hypothesis were accepted the Scriptures must be discredited. We have seen the end of that controversy, and everybody knows that faith in the Scriptures as the Word of God has not been disturbed. The results of the Higher Criticism seem to many at present equally threatening, but Professor Briggs, who may be taken as a fair representative of the new school of criticism, declares that his faith in the Bible as a revelation of God and as a record of supernatural events is not shaken, but rather confirmed, and that the Higher Criticism does not disturb and cannot disturb the historic and spiritual elements of the great Book. It is a fact that the Bible was never so widely and systematically studied, and so thoroughly taught, as now.

Third, if the faith of the Church were weakened, it would affect the pulpit. We should find a change in the character of its utterances. We should have rationalistic instead of spiritual preaching. Like people like priest; or like priest like people. Take it either way, and any such condition of faith as we have under consideration must infallibly show itself in the pulpit. That it does not show itself in the pulpit to any large degree, and is not characteristic of the preaching of the times, must be the conclusion of every one who is a close observer or will make himself such.

Fourth, if there were any considerable loss of faith in Christianity as a supernatural religion, it would, it seems to me, inevitably affect the cause of foreign missions. Charity begins at home. Those who believe that religion is summed up in good deeds to fellow-men would object to the sending of missionaries to convert the Chinese, Japanese, and Hindus from one faith to another. They would regard it as a waste of men and money. They might favor missions to savages to civilize them; but the tendency would be to confine their efforts to the fields which our own country offers. The benevolent impulses of Unitarianism spend themselves almost wholly in the United States. When, some years ago, they sent a missionary to Japan, it was not to antagonize the faith of the natives, but to emphasize the points of agreement between the two religions, and to show how they could be, so to speak, dovetailed together. While it is a fact that the old doctrine that all the heathen are doomed to everlasting punishment is not now generally held, the motive of Christian missions has not changed.

"Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," is the command in obedience to which missionaries go out, and the motive is to teach men the way of salvation, reveal to them a higher life, and show them how to become spiritual Christians. Statistics prove that this cause was never nearer to the heart of the Church than now, and that there is a steady increase in the means and men devoted to it.

Fifth, the idea that simple benevolence and helpfulness to men are the soul of religion is the idea for which Unitarianism may be said chiefly to exist. Evangelical Christians hold that the spring of this idea is faith in the supernatural elements of the Gospel; that works of charity and helpfulness to mankind are the natural fruitage of a consecrated spiritual life. It is true that Unitarianism has largely lost this faith; but it is also true that Unitarianism is but a small division of Protestantism and is not at all vigorous in growth. Under the increasing dominance of Rationalism the faith of Channing has paled almost into negation, and its chief concern is with the moral, mental, and temporal affairs of men. It is wealthy, it is benevolent; but its benevolent work is not broader or deeper or more vigorously prosecuted than that of Evangelical Christianity. Where Evangelical Churches send hundreds of missionaries to carry the light of the Gospel to the benighted of other lands, the Unitarians scarcely support one. The splendid work being done in the name of home missions in this country in the name of Christ and for civilization is being done most persistently and effectively by the Evangelical Churches. It is they who go to the rude mining-camps, to the straggling places in the wilderness, among the rough pioneers, into the slums of the great cities, and try to win souls for the Master. The Unitarians have a larger love for their fellow-man, and they study more thoroughly, perhaps, than their Evangelical brethren, those sociological questions which relate to his material well-being, with the object of elevating him. We are not surprised, therefore, to find the Unitarian engaged in the excellent work which College Settlements are doing in our great cities. But without manifesting one whit less zeal for these important interests, the Evangelical Christian goes further: he seeks to reform and uplift by implanting the spiritual germ of a new life, of which a wide Christian charity is the natural expression.

If the type of Christianity represented by Unitarianism were increasing very rapidly, the Unitarian body would naturally be the first to show it. It does not show it. Having nearly half the entire



strength accredited to the non-Evangelical division of Protestantism, it returns less than 68,000 members, though its basis of membership is of the most liberal description. With the results of the Census before us we are enabled to ascertain how the non-Evangelical element of Protestantism compares with the Evangelical. The former has in organizations or churches 828, and in members, 133,000, in round numbers; the latter, 152,100 organizations and 13,870,000 members. In this classification, however, some denominations which were regarded in former years as non-Evangelical are counted as Evangelical. The Christians, or Christian Connection, are one of these, and the Universalists another. There can be no question that the former are properly so classified; but, so far as I know, the Universalists have never been put in the Evangelical list before. The reason for doing so now I cannot give here; but I believe that the classification is justified.

The body of Christianity in the United States is massed in certain denominations, or rather denominational groups. A hundred years ago the prominent denominations were Baptist, Catholic, Congregational, Friends, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed. These bodies still constitute the chief part of the Christian forces, with some changes in their relative positions. The Catholic group is numerically in the forefront, the Methodist is second, the Baptist third, the Presbyterian fourth, the Lutheran fifth, the Episcopal sixth, and the Congregational, which has no branches, seventh. Phenomenal cases of growth are those of the Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Lutheran groups, the first and last chiefly by immigration. The increase of the Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Congregational denominations has been large, but more gradual.

What changes are to be looked for in the next fifty years? There can be no doubt that the denominations mentioned in the preceding paragraph will continue practically to constitute the Christian forces of the country. They are distinct types, each with its own peculiar points of strength and power of self-propagation. Denominations are growing toward one another, and one thing certain to come is consolidation of branches of the same denominational name. Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans will reduce their divisions, and greatly increase their power and influence by unification.

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## A RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS OF A NEW ENGLAND TOWN.

MIDDLEBORO, a part of Plymouth County, is, in area, perhaps the largest town in Massachusetts. It is "the kingdom of Namasquet" in the early chronicles. One of the elder daughters of Plymouth, the names of its people those of the best families of the Old Colony, it is a fair type of the better class of New England towns. As such, I offer a brief study in its religious and social history.

For the first half century of its life the town had no place of worship. Sundays, through a forest which is still the most sombre on this coast, with eyes alert for treacherous braves of the Black Sachem, Tispaquin, the people took their way to Plymouth meeting. One day in the summer of 1675 that forest covered their flight,—the day that King Philip fell upon their village and burned it to the ground. When they returned to the ruins of the mill and the thirty houses, they were led by a Pilgrim divine. The present year is the second centennial anniversary of the founding of the First Church of Christ in Middleboro, and the ordination of a minister for the town. Well into the second century of its existence, that church was without rival or serious division. Not unthreatened, however, was its unity; not without prophecy of the later unhappy divisions. In 1745, Mistress Morton, down whose chimney the voice of the Lord used to be heard, was inspired to mount her chair, and take the road for Plymouth to hear, first Whitefield, and then a famous New-Light preacher. The latter sent her back to spread the leaven of discontent, and to put up a schismatic meeting-house across the road from the First Church of Christ. However, something like a catholic character was exhibited by the Puritan church in New England, in its appropriation and assimilation of the chaotic elements of the Great Revival, and the First Church was soon able to take again into its embrace the schismatics across the road, and to continue the Church of Middleboro.

Early in this century the society had grown to such strength that it was able to build the meeting-house which now stands on the green. Daniel Webster, riding by, used to raise his whip, point to