

Voltaireianism Without Tears

VOLTAIRE. By Alfred Noyes. New York: Sheed & Ward. 1936. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ERNEST BOYD

SINCE his conversion to Catholicism Mr. Noyes has been busily engaged in proving—to his own satisfaction—that agnostics and atheists really do not mean what they say and that they unconsciously worship the Unknown God, thereby demonstrating His existence. Now he comes forward to prove that Voltaire was a deeply religious man who has been completely misunderstood by biased rationalists during the last hundred and fifty years. Mr. Noyes has so far convinced his publishers that they positively chortle at the prospect that “many a worthy Secularist will weep to lose one of the few great men in history he felt really sure of.” Here, I am afraid, the wish is father to the thought, for Mr. Noyes leaves Voltaire exactly where he always stood in the eyes of every intelligent reader of his work.

In order to soften the blow to that weeping Secularist, let me explain that Mr. Noyes is not the first person to quote Voltaire for religious propaganda purposes. As long ago as 1820 a volume was published in Paris with this explicit title: “Voltaire the Christian. Proofs drawn from his works, followed by religious and moral writings by the same author.” With the possible exception of a few street corner atheists, everybody knows that Voltaire believed in God, yet Mr. Noyes is constantly belaboring some mythical “atheistical” writer for denying that fact and twisting the evidence to suit his bias. That Mr. Noyes has a bias and can twist the evidence to suit it goes without saying, but he is apparently convinced that all preceding commentators on Voltaire were prejudiced and that he alone is impartial. However, I can assure the reader that many of the “revelations” which Mr. Noyes stresses as having been intentionally ignored or suppressed by wicked rationalists are to be found in other writers, who drew from them conclusions diametrically opposed to those of Mr. Noyes.

The most flagrant example of Mr. Noyes's method of argument is his discussion of Voltaire's poem on the earthquake at Lisbon, which has been regarded as a bitterly pessimistic commentary on the theory of a beneficent Deity. Mr. Noyes quotes Lord Morley as one of those who have deliberately conveyed this false impression of the poem and accuses him of omitting the closing lines because they conflicted with his interpretation. He then supplies the missing lines and triumphantly claims that they completely refute the nasty rationalists, the general insinuation being that Mr. Noyes

is the first person who has studied the poem as a whole and correctly read its true meaning. The truth, however, is that there has never been any plot to distort Voltaire's meaning by partial quotation. The lines in question are quoted in such obvious, standard biographies as those of Parton and Tallentyre. They appear in H. N. Brailsford's recent monograph in the Home University Library. Mr. Noyes devotes some eleven pages to proving his case against his predecessors, but fails to realize that they, not he, have understood the final gibe of those closing lines.

If there is one thing certain it is that Voltaire was strenuously opposed to all forms of organized religion, and particularly to the Roman Catholic Church. It is this elementary fact which puts the spe-



VOLTAIRE

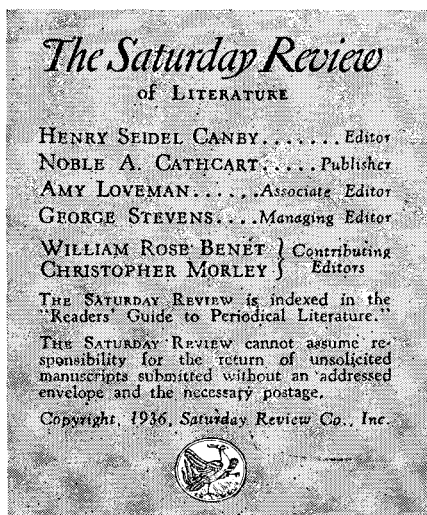
cial pleading of Mr. Noyes, the Catholic convert, in an ironical light. A Protestant today can, with a certain logic, claim that Voltaire was “as necessary to the well-being of Christendom as the Reformation,” but an admiration for Voltaire and Luther is hardly a *sine qua non* of orthodox Catholicism. In fact, as we all know, the Church's attitude towards both has been defined in no uncertain terms, and to this day the works of Voltaire are on the Index. Mr. Noyes, therefore, is in the absurd position of constantly berating free-thinkers for mistaking acts and statements of Voltaire as evidence of irreligion and anti-clericalism, because “a Catholic thinker would not thus be deceived.” Well, the Catholic thinkers of his own time were very much deceived and the Church still remains so, since it is entirely due to Catholic opposition that Voltaire's reputation has been blackened to pious believers.

The peculiar ability possessed by Catholic thinkers to interpret Voltaire is not very convincingly demonstrated by Mr. Noyes. He has tripped up Lord Mor-

ley and Tallentyre in minor errors of fact, Byron, Sainte-Beuve, and Lytton Strachey receive some sidewipes, as do the “halfwits of the literary and artistic world,” for misreading and misinterpreting Voltaire's writings and actions. His secretary, Wagnière, being a Huguenot is branded as wholly unreliable, whenever his statements interfere with the theories of Mr. Noyes. Everybody will admit that a vast fund of apocryphal and unsubstantiated rumor and gossip has come down to posterity, and Mr. Noyes sifts and disposes of some of it quite effectively, but he is too prone to discredit with vaguely abusive allusions those whose point of view is not his own. And it seems to me that the influence of his English Protestant background is often more apparent than his strictly Catholic orthodoxy.

Even so, however, he is driven to such evasions as quoting evidence, admitting “it does not satisfy a Catholic,” but that it “would not have satisfied Diderot, d'Alembert, d'Holbach, Grimm.” Why, one naturally asks, should a Catholic bring forward an argument which he himself regards as unsatisfactory? Nor is it exactly the best proof of Voltaire's Christian faith to admit “this was not Christianity in the full sense. His greatest difficulty was the central doctrine upon which the whole religion depends—the Divinity of Christ. . . . The doctrine of the Incarnation was, for the most part, inconceivable to him.” It is positively disingenuous to make as much as Mr. Noyes does of the fact that one Christmas at Cirey Voltaire listened to midnight Mass. Christmas music and church observances have long since ceased to be evidences of piety or the exclusive possession of those who literally believe. Otherwise, audiences for Handel's “Messiah” would be strictly limited.

Another of the devices employed by Mr. Noyes is to minimize the actual persecutions and exactions of the Church in Voltaire's time, and to speak of the “tenth-rate ecclesiastical exponents” of religion with which he had to deal. I do not know what then constituted a first-rate ecclesiastic, but the exponents of Christianity whom Voltaire confronted were powerful enough to refuse burial in consecrated ground to Adrienne Lecouvreur, because she was an actress, and to Voltaire because he would not recant. They were first-rate enough to celebrate as a festival the date of a massacre of Protestants at Toulouse, to break Jean Calas on the wheel and strangle him, to persecute Sirven, to behead the Chevalier de la Barre. This was the kind of religion with which Voltaire had to contend, so that it is hardly surprising, if rather naive, to conclude, as Mr. Noyes does, that he cannot be enclosed “in any religious formula,” and that he “found it easier to say what God is not, than what God is.” In a word, Voltaire was an agnostic Deist, so the weeping Secularist can safely dry his tears.



On Being Open-Minded

THE late G. K. Chesterton, in his forthcoming autobiography of which an extract appears on another page, says of his brilliant compatriot, H. G. Wells: "I think he thought that the object of opening the mind is simply opening the mind. Whereas I am incurably convinced that the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid." Mr. Chesterton's usual heterodoxy! Far from it, rather plain common sense which in theory at least there can be few to dispute. For surely everyone must be ready to admit that open-mindedness is without signal merit unless it leads to having a mind of one's own. To hold judgment flexible to persuasion is all very well but only if ultimately it is to be persuaded of something. Some virtue there is in intolerance—in a good, hearty closed-mindedness that sturdily refuses to hold truck with what seems bad, or unworthy, or merely peculiar, that, having made its decisions by open-minded observation of facts, has formed a standard of judgment which serves as a touchstone to merit. To be open-minded is a consummation devoutly to be striven for, but no more to be regarded as an absolute good than liberty which does not know how to stop short of license. It must have focus or it is nothing.

Part of the trouble with our civilization today is that it is too open-minded, too ready to lend countenance in life and literature to the wild and the visionary, the eccentric and the exaggerated. In a world which is watching—fortunately in America still from a distance—two philosophies of government at grips, each maintaining itself with similar tyranny, it behooves men to be open-minded of course, but it behooves them also to have a philosophy of their own. Otherwise they are as plants swaying in the breeze, blown now this way and now that, unable to oppose a stiff front to the buffets of excess. So much of our liberalism today is sentimental and emotional

rather than reasonable and reasoned that it all too often evaporates in unreason. One has only to look through the literature of the post-war years to see how many indignations, how many passions, indeed, have already been spent, how opinion, pliant to propaganda, has under the name of open-mindedness revoked judgments some of which at least were rooted in unchanging qualities. For though morals may alter with conventions, ethics still remain ethics and the rightness and wrongness of certain events are still to be gauged by the conscience of humanity. We have small patience, for instance, with those who, upholding the banner of open-mindedness, see no difference between the aggressor and the attacked in the late war, between the onus for the precipitation of the war and the responsibility for the deeper causes underlying it. If open-mindedness is to be shorn of its chiefest virtue, which is to serve as a basis for discrimination, then open-mindedness becomes merely an attitude of mind instead of a spring of conduct.

Take literature, again, for example. The very lifeblood of a vital literature is change and experiment, a becoming as well as a being. Any literature that is not expressing itself in the terms of its day and its place is stagnant or drying up. There is nothing better for letters than an attempt at new forms, at new themes, at new manners of presentation. And any group that is not hospitable toward honest experimentation is not worth its salt as a reading public. But to be open-minded to the new and the tentative is one thing, and to be open-minded to the bizarre or the sensational is another. If merely by reason of being novel or arresting a book is to lay claim to respectful attention, then all literature is rendered the poorer of standards of comparison. There is much written today that is not worth the paper it is printed on—we do not mean the light novel which, no matter how frothy, may at any rate serve its purpose as entertainment, and which at least makes no pretensions to being literature, but fiction and poetry and doctrinal matter that have nothing but an attempt to startle to recommend them. It may be charity but surely it is scarcely the part of those who have faith in literature to be open-minded toward them, and certainly in this case faith is a greater virtue than charity.

Open-mindedness which means detachment from dogma, an ability to examine the findings of the past in the light of the present, to modify opinion in accordance with changing knowledge, and an eager interest in what the moment has to offer, is the goal toward which enlightened sentiment in all fields is striving. But that it should be a constructive and active force the object of open-mindedness must be more than open-mindedness; "the object of open-

ing the mind," to repeat Mr. Chesterton's phrase, "is to shut it again on something solid." Whether in letters, or politics, or society open-mindedness only has value if it is based on an intolerance of what is dross. The open mind must shut within itself definite standards before it can itself have power.

The Vision of the Scholar

Twentieth century Cambridge and tercentennial Harvard, representative of the most liberal and progressive that American scholarship has to offer, affords an almost medieval spectacle in the assemblage of learned men gathered together to debate recent findings in their respective fields. Such a gathering of the pundits is not of our day where learning has come down from the high places to the simplifications of the daily press and the understanding of the man in the street but of that earlier time when scholars consorted with scholars and spoke in the language of erudition. And yet it is one of these very learned ones who has the imaginative instinct—and the poetic quality—which, like the child's or the poet's, endows the world of reality about him with the transforming light of the fairy tale. Here is Mr. Malinowski, the great anthropologist, talking of the city of New York:

The enormous yet elegant monsters blinking at me through their thousand starry eyes, breathing white steam, giants which crowded in fantastic clusters over the smooth waters of the river, stood before me; the living, dominating realities of this new culture. . . .

Thus should the scholars come to the people, and invest them with their vision.

Ten Years Ago

Henry Noble MacCracken reviewed Bertrand Russell's "Education and the Good Life" in *The Saturday Review* of September 11th, 1926. Summing up Bertrand Russell's character as presented in these essays Mr. MacCracken concluded that it was the "quality of good cheer in all his controversial writings," the "mixture of radicalism and good taste . . . imperturbable good temper amid situations and issues that would embitter anyone else" that gave "Russell his hold upon the young people." The reviewer did not agree with many of the author's opinions on philosophy, sociology, parenthood, or education. In this last connection, he pointed out that it was not so much the American system of education which Mr. Russell resented, but any system "by which the aim of a group, family, or nation controls and restricts the aims of the individual." "The American school and college," answered Mr. MacCracken, "is probably oversocialized; but it certainly affords a palæstra for the habit of getting along with one another."