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IS CHRISTIANITY A SUCCESS ?

BY ANNIE BESANT.

SOME time ago it was publicly stated that the Japanese authorities had sent over some trustworthy agents to report on the condition of Christendom, with a view of instituting Christianity in Japan if it proved satisfactory in the lands in which it prevailed. The report was unfavorable: it was stated that there were more dishonesty, more drunkenness, more poverty, more misery, in Christian countries than were found in Japan, and judging the trees by their fruits, the Japanese religion proved to be the better of the two.

For eighteen hundred years Christianity has been preached; for fifteen hundred years Christianity has wielded supreme power. It came to the world with tremendous claims. Founded by an incarnate God; protected by his abiding presence; inspired by a Divine Spirit; what greater advantages could be possessed by any religion? What has it done? Has it been a success? A survey of the world will be the best answer.

In its earliest days it appealed to the ignorant and the superstitious, finding its readiest disciples among the most childish-minded of the populace. "Not many wise men after the flesh are called" (1 Cor. i., 26); "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matt. xi., 25). Spreading among the ignorant, it gathered numerous adherents, until at last, in a strife for empire, the number of the Christians made them politically important, and Constantine embraced their creed to win them to his side in the struggle. The ignorance which was the birthmark of the religion now spread its blighting influence over the whole Roman empire: the schools, built by Roman emperors for the training of the young, fell into the hands of the clergy, and monkish fables and silly traditions of saints were gabbled in the rooms that had resounded to the wisdom of Greece and Rome, to the dialectics of Socrates, to the philosophy of

Epicurus, Aristotle and Lucretius. Darker and darker became the ignorance, until in the ninth century not even a priest in England could translate Latin, nor one priest in a thousand in Spain could write an ordinary letter; until at the end of the tenth century scarce a person in Rome knew the elements of letters (see "Europe during the Middle Ages", Hallam, ed. of 1869, pp. 595, 596). When in that same tenth century a little light of knowledge began to glimmer, the fire was lighted by Mahommedan hands in Moorish Spain, and spread thence slowly, against every effort of the Church to quench it, over Christendom. Never did a religion do more to foster ignorance, more to destroy learning, than has been done by the Church of Christ.

Take again, glancing over history, the fashion in which Christian nations have ever dealt with savage tribes. Charlemagne Christianised the Saxons with fire and sword, breaking them into the obedience of the Church. The Spaniards Christianised the Peruvians in similar fashion, turning the happy flowery land of the Sun into a slave-filled shambles. The English have Christianised Indians and Africans, Maories and Australians, in good old historic manner by murder and fraud and theft. Look where we will at the treatment experienced by the savage at Christian hands, and we find ever the same old story—cruelty that sickens, treachery that disgusts, brutality that appals.

Studying Christianity in the lands in which it has ruled for centuries, the indictment against it but grows longer and heavier. Slavery in Christendom has been the most cruel and hopeless that the world has known. Hear the passionate cry of Charles Dickens, himself a Christian: "Judaism, the Greek and Roman times, Mahommedanism, all recognised the rights of nature in their slaves. Christianity is the only faith whose professors have violated and destroyed those rights" (*Household Words*, vol. xiv., p. 137). Persecution also in Christendom has been more ruthless, more bloody, more refined in cruelty, than in lands subject to any other form of faith.

And look at Christendom now. Not a Christian country in which drunkenness and prostitution do not pollute the streets, the "Reformed Christian" countries bearing away the palm for widespread intoxication. Not a Christian country in which poverty does not gripe great masses of the people, or in which diseases that grow out of bad feeding and bad

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sanitation do not hold high festival. Between the nations that worship "one Father" and "one Lord Jesus Christ", bitter jealousy, hot suspicion, breaking out from time to time in war, and evidenced always by huge arrays of armed men, bringing the burden of poverty and the curse of prostitution on every land they guard.

More condemnatory still, perhaps, of Christianity is the fact that these great social evils are regarded as necessary and inevitable. Prostitution is accepted and is legislated for; no attempts are made to radically cure poverty, only charity is called in to alleviate it; morality in national policy is openly scoffed at by the Christian press. Those who seek to abolish poverty, to realise the brotherhood of man, to bring about the submission of international disputes to an International Court of Law, are derided as dreamers when they are not denounced as revolutionaries.

Is Christianity a success? The state of Christendom proves it to be the ghastliest failure the world has ever known: prodigal in its promises, superb in its claims, it is a pitiable breakdown in the lands in which it is supreme.

Can we, by looking at the doctrines of Christianity, find any reason for this widespread failure? It seems to me that any impartial judgment of its doctrines would result in expectancy of just such a result as has historically accrued.

● In the first place the whole scheme of Christianity was originally based on the expectation of Christ's speedy return. He himself declares: "The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father, with his angels, and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matt. xvi., 27, 28). The words are as explicit as words can be, and can only be got rid of by most irrational twisting of them. Again, after describing the darkening of the sun and moon and the coming of the "Son of man" "with power and great glory", Jesus proceeds: "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away [!]. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. . . . Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of man cometh" (Matt. xxiv., 29, 30; 34—36; 44).

These precise declarations of Christ were answered by the faith of the early Church. Not to needlessly multiply quotations, I may note 1 Cor. xv., 51, 52: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we [mark the *we*] shall be changed." Again: "This we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive, and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent them that are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. iv., 15—17). Jude declared that those he addressed were living "in the last time", pointing to the mockers among them (Jude, 17—19); and the pledge, "Surely I come quickly" (Rev. xxii., 20) closes the canon of Scripture.

From a religion which looked for the speedy destruction of the world, no moralising of the world could be expected. The "strangers and pilgrims", whose "citizenship was in heaven" had no time to spare for the improvement of the earth they despised. To be "saved" was the one thing needful, and little cared they for the world which was so soon to be "burned up".

Even after the prophecy of Christ had been proved false, the belief in his speedy return still remained, and Hallam tells us that "in the tenth century an opinion prevailed everywhere that the end of the world was approaching. Many charters begin with these words: 'As the world is now drawing to its close'" ("Middle Ages," p. 599). The result of this faith was that fields were left untilled, all the concerns of life were neglected, and famine punished those who were foolish enough to look for the return of a dead man.

On this basis of a speedy return of Jesus was built up an ascetic, impracticable morality, one utterly unfitted for a society intended to endure. The non-resistance of evil taught by Christ, the submission to forceful theft and unlimited borrowing (Matt. v., 39—42), were doctrines which, permanently practised, would render society impossible. The avoidance of marriage taught by Christ (Matt. xix., 12), and Paul (1 Cor. vii., 7, 8; 28; 32—34; 37—40),

would have in a short time depopulated the Church; a point of great importance if the Church was to endure for centuries, but not of the slightest moment if Christ was to return before the generation then living passed away.

Out of this magnification of celibacy grew one of the most corrupting influences of Christianity. Monasteries and nunneries were everywhere accompanied by the foulest licence of manners, and "unmarried" priests kept "house-keepers" who were admittedly wives in all but legal status. The corruption of the "religious" naturally extended to the "worldly", while the degraded position assigned to women by Christianity led to their still further degradation at the hands of the superior sex. In Christendom the brothel took the place of the harem, and women sacrificed to men's passions did not receive from the Christian even the protection, shelter, food and clothing which were freely given by the Oriental and the Turk. The doctrine of vicarious sacrifice was thoroughly carried out with regard to women, and the degradation and pollution of one class bought for another its safely guarded home.

The doctrine of non-resistance alluded to above, further tended to injure Society, by the aid it gave to tyrants and the discouragement it threw on manly self-assertion against wrong. Taught, as Christians were, that they were bound to render obedience to "the higher powers", on the ground that "the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. xiii., 1), they naturally regarded rebellion against a tyrant as treason to their God. In view of the speedy return of Jesus, the meek submission of Christians to earthly tyranny was a matter of small moment; but when this temporary and unimportant submission became the permanent duty of whole nations, the mischievous influence of Christianity on political institutions was very speedily manifested. Tyrants lent all their aid to its propagation, for it rendered their subjects nerveless and submissive. Thus Mosheim tells us of Charlemagne that he fought against the Saxons to "engage them to embrace the Christian religion", hoping that their conversion would "induce them to submit more tamely to the government of the Franks" ("Eccles. History", p. 170).

* The sanctification of poverty was another of the curses brought by Christianity. "Blessed be ye poor; for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. . . . But woe unto you that are

rich : for ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full ! for ye shall hunger " (Luke vi., 20, 21 ; 24, 25). The people were bribed into quiescence under poverty by promises of reward in a future life, and when beggars grew clamorous the parable of Dives and Lazarus smoothed them back into passivity. Like other Eastern fanatics Jesus denounced the mere possession of wealth as a crime : " A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God " (Matt. xix., 23, 24). This apotheosis of poverty led to the begging friars who swarmed over Europe like locusts, and the Church utilised the teachings of its God to sweep into its own coffers the perilous wealth which might otherwise have damned men's souls.

Thus in the doctrines of Christianity we find the seeds of the worst curses of Christendom, prostitution, tyranny, pauperism. Originally intended to last for a few years, it has endured for centuries. Originally intended for a small Jewish sect, it has become a world-wide creed. The false morality, the false sociology, which would have been comparatively harmless restricted within the narrow circle for which they were intended, have become world-poisoning, spread beyond their original limits of time and race ; and the relatively harmless fanaticism of a band of Jewish zealots has become the curse of modern civilisation.

• The rougher and more brutal side of Christianity has resulted from the acceptance by the Church of the Jewish Old Testament. Growing out of Judaism as it did ; with a Jew for its God ; with Jews for its founders ; with Jerusalem for metropolis ; it is not surprising that the Jewish Scriptures were received as sacred and inspired.

When we read that slavery has been co-existent with Christianity, we remember that it was commanded in the Old Testament and was sanctioned in the New. When we read of the thousands done to death for religious heresy, by the Inquisition in France, Spain, and Italy, by the governments of Germany, Switzerland, England, Scotland, Ireland, the United States ; we remember the bloody commands of Jahveh, the massacres of Moses and Joshua, the social ostracism decreed by, and the bloodthirsty rejoicings over vengeance of, " John the Divine ". When we sicken over the stories of the Crusades ; of the bloody wars waged

by Christians ; of the shocking revenge taken by English Christians after the Indian Mutiny ; of the cruel stamping out of aboriginal populations by Christian settlers ; we remember the tale of God's "chosen people", of their ravaging whole regions with sword and fire, of the brutal cry : "The Lord is a man of war ; the Lord of hosts is his name". When we read of diseases decimating populations ; of physicians punished as magicians ; of processions of saints' images and relics to avert the Divine wrath ; we remember that both in the Old and New Testaments disease is represented as the scourge of God ; that a king was punished because he sought physicians instead of Jahveh ; that Christians are to heal the sick by laying on of hands and anointing with oil, not by science and curative drugs. And so we come to recognise that man's ignorance has been perpetuated, man's brutality fostered, man's progress retarded, by the very agency which claimed to elevate, to purify, to moralise him.

General immorality has been still further increased by the Christian doctrine of the vicarious atonement made by Jesus Christ. His outrageous doctrine that the repentant sinner caused more joy in heaven than the "just persons" has been the fruitful mother of crime. The granting of indulgences was a perfectly logical deduction from the teaching of Jesus, and the Pope who pardoned crime to the son of the Church but followed in the steps of Paul, who declared that salvation was by faith without works. The story of the dying thief, to whom Jesus promised immediate Paradise, bore fruit in hundreds of death-bed repentances ; criminals, when death was inevitable and when the power to sin had gone, "repented", received absolution, and were sealed for heaven. Even now the most brutal of murderers is "washed in the blood of the lamb" between his sentence and his execution, and poses as a dying saint in the columns of the Christian press. In fact the surest way to heaven is *via* the gallows, for time is always given to the murderer to make his "peace with God", and he is given no opportunity of starting a new quarrel.

Verily Christianity is condemned by its failure. Its God, its heaven, its hell, all fail as motives to good conduct. The policeman influences the thief more than God does ; worldly prosperity is a surer bait than heaven ; the gaol is a more efficacious threat than hell. The wrath of

God can be escaped by sheltering behind Jesus; whereas the policeman is not so easily thrown off the track. Heaven can be won by a prayer when earth is lost; hell escaped by a prayer when successful fraud has secured worldly comfort. Christianity is the nursing mother of social evil, for it winks at all oppression by the wealthy, and condones every crime in the believer.

The new creed which is arising in the place of Christianity gains a hearing very largely because of the failure of the religion which it is seeking to destroy. Instead of meeting poverty with a benediction, it regards it as a curse to be abolished by better social arrangements. Disease to it is not the scourge of God, but the scourge of dirt and ignorance, to be broken by cleanliness and knowledge. Sin to it is not an object of divine wrath, but a subject for human skill, to be cured by healthy environment.

The new creed proclaims that morality is as binding on man as on woman. That woman was not created for man, to be the slave of his passions, but that each sex has equal rights, equal liberties, equal duties. It declares that prostitution is not a necessity, but a crime; that the prostitute is no viler than the man who consorts with her; that prostitution may be put an end to by the economic independence of women, and by early marriage conjoined with parental prudence.

The new creed enjoins on all the duty of labor. It points out that so long as some are idle, so long must others do more than their fair portion of work; that over-leisure for the few means over-labor for the many. It admits no right of idleness in any; no right of support by others without fair equivalent given in exchange, save for children, sick, and aged. It claims for all equality of education, equality of comfort, equality of opportunity. It recognises neither privilege nor disability. To its all-embracing charity no man, no woman, is "common or unclean".

The new creed declares against all divisions of classes; knows nothing of "masters" and "servants"; nothing of "upper" and "lower" ranks of society. Without God in heaven, it is without master on earth, and to it the common good is the supreme law.

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