

RELIGION

IN THE

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

OR AN ACCOUNT OF THE

Origin, Progress, Relations to the State, and Present Condition

OF THE

EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN THE UNITED STATES.

WITH

NOTICES OF THE UNEVANGELICAL DENOMINATIONS.

BY THE

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ing into something like importance, which would be the probable result of their being persecuted. Were the Shakers to appear in some European countries, a very different, and, in my opinion, a far less prudent course might be followed. Accustomed to meddle with everything, even with conscience itself, their governments would probably interfere under the plea of saving the children from being brought up in such delusion. But we prefer letting them alone, under the conviction that, all things considered, it is better to do so, and with the hope that the light that surrounds them, and with which they must come into contact in their intercourse with the world, will in God's own time reach their souls. To interfere with those parental ties, and that consequent responsibility which God himself has established, must always be a difficult and dangerous task even for the best and wisest of governments.

The Mormons. The annals of modern times furnish few more remarkable examples of cunning in the leaders, and delusion in their dupes, than is presented by what is called Mormonism. An ignorant but ambitious person of the name of Joseph Smith, jun., residing in the west of the State of New York, pretends that an angel appeared to him in 1827, and told him where he would find a stone box, containing certain golden plates, with a revelation from heaven inscribed on them. Four years after this, the plates having of course been found as described, the impostor set about the writing out of this revelation, and pretended, with the aid of a pair of stone spectacles found also in the box, to read it off to a man of the name of Harris, and afterwards to one called Cowdery, these acting as his amanuenses. The "prophet," as he is now called, took care, of course, that neither of them, nor any one else, should see the plates, the part of the room he occupied having been partitioned off from where they sat by a blanket. After three years spent in concocting this new revelation, the book at last was completed, and published as a 12mo volume of 588 pages at Palmyra, in the State of New York. It is commonly called the Mormon's Bible, but more properly *The Book of Mormon*, and is divided into fifteen books or parts, each purporting to be written by the author whose name it bears. These profess to give the history of about a thousand years from the time of Zedekiah, king of Judah, to

A.D. 420. The whole work professes to be an abridgment by one Moroni, the last of the Nephites, of the seed of Israel, from the records of his people. Not to trouble the reader with details respecting this absurdest of all pretended revelations from heaven, we need only say that it undertakes "to trace the history of the aborigines of the American continent, in all their apostacies, pilgrimages, trials, adventures, and wars, from the time of their leaving Jerusalem, in the reign of Zedekiah, under one Lehi, down to their final disaster, near the hill Camorah, in the State of New York, where Smith found his golden plates, and in that final contest, according to the prophet Moroni, about 230,000 were slain in battle, and he alone escaped to tell the tale."¹

But the *Book of Mormon*, which they do not consider so much in the light of a substitute for the holy scriptures, as of a supplement to them, does not contain all Joseph Smith's revelations; a 12mo volume of about 250 pages, called *the Book of Covenants and Revelations*, and filled with the silliest things imaginable, of all sorts, has been added to it by way of supplement. Thoroughly to comprehend the whole system, however, one must read Mr. Parley P. Pratt's "Voice of Warning," for he is an oracle among the Mormons, and also the newspaper which they publish as an organ for the dissemination of their doctrines. We may add, that aided by his wonderful spectacles, Smith is making a new translation of the Bible, although quite unacquainted with Hebrew and Greek!

The publication of his own Bible in 1830, may be considered as the starting point of the sect. For some years he made but few converts; but having removed to Kirtland in Ohio he was there joined by Sidney Rigdon, formerly a heterodox Baptist preacher, who had been preparing the way for Mormonism by propagating certain doctrines of his own, and being a much better informed man than Smith, it is chiefly under his plastic hand that the religious economy of the sect has been formed. From Ohio they began to remove, in 1834, to Jackson county, in Missouri, where they were to have their "mount Zion," the capital and centre of their great empire. The people of Mis

¹ Turner's "Mormonism in all Ages," published at New York, and to be had at Wiley and Putnam, booksellers, London.

souri, a few years after, compelled them to leave it, upon which they went to Illinois, and there they are now building the city of Nauvoo, on the left bank of the Mississippi, and have been flocking to the spot ever since, until their numbers amounted to 10,000. Smith and Rigdon are still their chief prophets. For a while they had many to sympathise with them on account of the severity with which they had been supposed to be treated in Missouri; but so much has lately come to light in proof of the inordinate ambition, and vile character and conduct of their leaders, who want to found a kind of empire in the West, that their speedy annihilation as a sect seems now inevitable. One dupe after another is leaving them, and exposing the abominations of the fraternity and its chiefs. Smith and some others seem now marked out as objects on which the laws of the land must soon inflict summary justice. Their leaders are evidently atrocious impostors, who have deceived a great many weak-minded but well-meaning persons, by holding out to them promises of great temporal advantage. "Joe Smith," as he is commonly called, will soon find that America is not another Arabia, nor he another Mahomet; his hope of founding a vast empire in the western hemisphere must soon vanish.

To conclude, the Mormons are a body of ignorant dupes, collected from almost all parts of the United States, and also from the British islands. A full exposition of the wickedness of their leaders has lately been made by a John C. Bennet, formerly a major-general in the "Legion of Nauvoo," and an important man among them.

CHAPTER X.

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE STATE OF THEOLOGICAL OPINION IN AMERICA.

HAVING concluded these notices of the various denominations—evangelical and non-evangelical—in the United States, I would now make a few remarks on the past history and present state of theological opinion in that country. Fully and philosophically treated, this could not fail to interest sincere inquirers after truth in all countries, but it would require not a chapter but a volume, and would hardly be consistent with the nature of this work. We must leave such a discussion to another time, and probably to other hands, and shall now merely touch on a few general topics.

I. Let us first mark some of the causes and influences to which this diversity of religious doctrines may be traced. The chief of these are:

1. Difference of origin and ancestry. This we have already noticed, but must now again refer to it.

Had the whole territory of the United States been originally settled by one class of men, holding one system of religious opinions, more uniformity of doctrine might reasonably have been looked for. But what philosophical inquirer, knowing the different origins of New England, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and New York, would expect that the mere federal union of States that differ so much in their original inhabitants, could ever bring them all to complete religious uniformity? Let us but look at the number of different religious bodies—different, I mean, in their origin—to be found in these and the other States of the Union. (1.) The New England Congregational churches, formed by emigrant Puritans, and down to the epoch of the Revolution sympathising strongly with all the changes of opinion among the English dissenters. (2.) The Presbyterian Church in its larger and smaller branches, very much of Scotch and Irish origin, and still aiming at an imitation of the Church of Scotland

as their pattern. (3.) The Episcopal Church, an offshoot from the Church of England, dreading, and almost scorning, to borrow ideas from any quarter save its parent church. (4.) The Dutch Reformed Church, which long received its ministers from Holland, and still glories in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Decrees of the Synod of Dort. (5.) The Lutherans, the Reformed, and other German churches who preserve their old nationality, both by being still organised as distinct communions, and by the constant emigration of ministers and people from their original fatherland. Now, why should we expect to see all these fused and amalgamated in the United States more than in Europe?

2. Mark, too, that none of their ministers can extend any such *direct* influence over other churches than their own, as might make the exercise of brotherly love pass into close intimacy and final amalgamation. Each of them has its own colleges and theological seminaries; each its own weekly, monthly, or quarterly periodicals; and some of them may almost be said to have an independent religious literature, edited and published by their own responsible agents. All this is counterbalanced only by many ministers of different denominations receiving their classical and scientific education at the same institutions, preparatory to their more strictly professional studies.

3. The freedom allowed in the United States to all sorts of inquiry and discussion, necessarily leads to a diversity of opinion, which is seen not only in there being different denominations, but different opinions also in the same denomination. Perhaps there is not a single ecclesiastical convention in which there are not two parties at least, whose different views lead sometimes to discussions keenly maintained, yet turning generally upon points which, however interesting, are confessedly not of fundamental importance. On what may be called vital or essential points there is little disputation, just because there is much harmony in all the evangelical communions. Nor could it well be otherwise, seeing that in doctrine and practice they all take the Bible as their inspired and sole authoritative guide.

4. Nor must we forget that what may be called provincial peculiarities necessarily lead so far to diversities of religious sentiment. A true eastern man from Connecticut, and a true

western man, born and brought up on the banks of the Ohio, can hardly be expected to speculate alike on dubious points in theology, any more than on many other subjects. So, also, are the inhabitants of the north and south distinguished from each other by peculiarities fully as marked as those that distinguish the northern from the southern inhabitants of Great Britain.

II. Yet it is not difficult to draw a line between the various unevangelical sects on the one hand, and those that may be classed together as evangelical denominations on the other. The chief of the former, as we have said, are the Roman Catholics, Unitarians, Christians, Universalists, Hicksite Quakers, Swedenborgians, Tunkers or Dunkers, Jews, Shakers, and so on down to the Mormons, beginning with the sect that has buried the truth amid a heap of corruptions of heathenish origin, and ending with the grossest of all the delusions that Satanic malignity or human ambition ever sought to propagate. Now, it will be observed that, with the exception of the two first, these sects have few elements of stability. Their ministers are almost all men of little learning, and that little is almost all concentrated in specious endeavours to maintain their tenets, by perverting the scriptures, by appealing to the prejudice of their hearers, and by misrepresenting and ridiculing the doctrines of opponents who meet their subtle arguments with the plain declarations of scripture, as well as with unanswerable arguments drawn from sound reason. The congregations of the Universalists and Christians—both which are Unitarian Baptists, and the most numerous of the unevangelical sects next to the Roman Catholics—are far from large, except in some of the largest cities and towns in New England, and they often last but a few years, disappearing almost entirely before the extension of the evangelical communions. At times a religious revival almost annihilates, in the course of a few weeks, the attempts made by some Universalist preacher to form a society of that sect, at places where the faithful herald of the gospel has lifted up a standard for truth. And as none of the unevangelical bodies, not even the Roman Catholics absolutely, can debar their members from attending the preaching of evangelical ministers when they come into their neighbourhood, they present no insurmountable barrier to the advance of truth.

A better and more intimate acquaintance with the state of society in the United States than foreigners can well possess, seems necessary to account for the number, variety, and numerical magnitude of some of our unevangelical sects, and thus to abate the surprise which these may occasion to many of our readers. Nevertheless, to a certain extent, this may be brought within the comprehension even of those who have never seen the country. First, then, be it observed that not only can a far larger proportion of the white inhabitants of the United States read than is to be found in almost any other country, but they actually *do* read and pursue the acquisition of knowledge in almost every possible way. Novelty, accordingly, has always great attractions for them. Next, with the exception perhaps of Scotland, in no other country is there so little work done on the Lord's day; not only does the law require, but the disposition of the people enforces this; and as they are not at all of a character that would incline them to spend the day at home in idleness, they naturally take advantage of the opportunities within reach of attending public meetings, and listening to what may be said there. And religion being a subject to which they attach more or less importance almost universally, it is what they most like to hear discussed on the Sabbath. Thirdly, where there is no evangelical preaching, vast numbers, particularly of such as have no decided religious convictions, will resort to a Universalist, or even to an infidel preacher, if one is announced in their neighbourhood, rather than go no where at all. No doubt, curiosity leads them thither first, and perhaps for long afterwards. Fourthly, absolute religious liberty being the principle of the government, the people may everywhere have what preaching they please, if they can find, and choose to be at the expense of maintaining it; and accordingly, they who dislike faithful evangelical preaching, often combine to form a congregation where some heterodox preacher may hold forth doctrines more acceptable to them. Congregations so formed, especially in cities and large towns, may last for years, or even become in some sense permanent, but in by far the greater number of cases they disappear, part of their members removing to some other place, and others becoming converts to the orthodox creed of the surrounding evangelical churches.

Thus it will be perceived that the unevangelical sects in the United States are mainly composed of persons who, in other countries, would remain stupidly indifferent to religion, spending their Sabbaths in employments or amusements wholly secular. Even this may be thought better by some than that they should "give heed to doctrines of devils," upon the principle that no religion is better than a false one. This may be true in many cases but hardly in all. Experience proves, I think, very decidedly in America, that persons that occupy their minds with the subject of religion, even when they doubt the truth or embrace positive error, are more accessible to the faithful preaching of the gospel, than others that are sunk in stupid indifference and infidelity. The forms of error in that country have, with one exception, no element of stability—no vigorous dogmatism or permanent fascinations to oppose to the solid orthodoxy of evangelical preaching. The one exception is Romanism, which presents a sort of *mosaic* of truth and error, so artfully combined as to exert a charm over the minds of those who have once received it, which it is almost impossible to dispute.

Next to Romanism, Unitarianism is of all forms of error that assume the title of Christian, the most stable. Its professors are chiefly to be found in the eastern parts of Massachusetts, but as those, as well as other parts of New England, are constantly sending out emigrants to the new settlements, small knots of persons with Unitarian leanings may be found in the middle, southern, and western States. Still, this dispersion of Unitarianism, and its sprouting up at various points, not in Massachusetts, has rather the appearance than the reality of increase. It may be more than doubted, whether it be not positively declining at Boston and the vicinity. Except that it by no means prevails in the same proportion, it is very much in America what Rationalism is in Protestant Europe—a disease caught by the church from the epidemic scepticism of the eighteenth century—a scepticism which is now in both hemispheres taking the form of a mystical pantheism. The career of Unitarianism, which one of its advocates calls not a "religion but a fashion,"¹ as a sect or party, is manifestly drawing to a

¹ The Rev Mr Bronson.

close; and such, I rather think, is the impression of its most intelligent and eminent leaders. It seems to be given up as incapable of diffusion, and the thirty years experience it has had of a separate organisation confirms to my mind this conclusion, though others may think differently. At all events, no one who is well informed with regard to the present aspect of things in America, can claim for Unitarianism much vigour or any greater positive increase than that of the natural increase of the population within its pale; and it may be doubted how far it is increasing even so much as that.

A certain amount of moral influence for good may fairly be attributed to some of the unevangelical sects, but this can hardly be said of those Universalists, and they comprise nearly the whole, who deny a future judgment and all punishment beyond this life; while as for the Atheists, Deists, and Socialists of every hue, it is hardly slander to say, that their influence upon society is positively mischievous.

As for the Shakers, Mormons, and other such agglomerations, they may be accounted for, I apprehend, on two principles. First, the blinding nature of human depravity, which makes men prefer anything, however absurd, that looks like religion, and suits their fancies, to retaining, or rather to obtaining, the true knowledge of God. Next, these bodies always hold out some temporal good—some economical advantage, which, far more than any religious consideration, tempts persons to enter them. One would suppose, for example, that a religion which, like that of the Shakers, makes the sinfulness of marriage a fundamental principle, and obliges married proselytes to live single, could never find followers. Yet as persons sometimes tire of the marriage tie, or rather of those with whom it has bound them as husband and wife, so some may be found willing, even by becoming Shakers, to rid themselves of a burden that feels grievous to them. So, also, in the separation of children from their parents, and the entire breaking up of the family relationships, weak people may always be found ready to snatch at any opportunity of ridding themselves of parental responsibility, by shifting it upon other shoulders. This despicable and unmanly selfishness may be regarded as the main foundation of Fourierism and all other forms of Socialism.