CHAPTER CVII

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION

To convey some impression of the character and type which religion has taken in America, and to estimate its influence as a moral and spiritual force, is an infinitely harder task than to sketch the salient ecclesiastical phenomena of the country. I approach it with the greatest diffidence, and do not profess to give anything more than the sifted result of answers to questions addressed to many competent observers belonging to various churches or to none.

An obviously important point to determine is the extent to which the external ministrations of religion are supplied to the people and used by them. This is a matter on which no trustworthy statistics seem attainable, but on which the visitor's own eyes leave him in little doubt. There are churches everywhere, and everywhere equally: in the cities and in the country, in the North and in the South, in the quiet nooks of New England, in the settlements which have sprung up along railroads in the West. It is only in the very roughest parts of the West, and especially in the region of mining camps, that they are wanting, and the want is but temporary, for "home missionary" societies are quickly in the field, and provide the ministrations of religion even to this migratory population. In many a town of moderate size one finds a church for every thousand inhabitants, as was the case with Dayton, in Ohio, which, when it had 40,000 people, had just forty churches.

Denominational rivalry has counted for something in the rapid creation of churches in the newly settled West and their multiplication everywhere else. Small churches are sometimes maintained out of pride when it would be better to let them be united with other congregations of the same body.

But the attendance is generally good. In cities of moderate size, as well as in small towns and country places, a stranger is told that the bulk of the native American population go to church at least once every Sunday. In the great cities the proportion of those who attend is far smaller, but whether or no as small as in English cities no one could tell me. One is much struck by the habit of church-going in the more settled parts of the Far West where the people, being new-comers, might be supposed to be less under the sway of habit and convention. California is an exception, and is the State supposed to be least affected by religious influences. But in the chief city of Oregon I found that a person, and especially a lady, who did not belong to some church and attend it pretty regularly, would be looked askance on. She need not actually lose caste, but the fact would excite surprise and regret; and her disquieted friends would put some pressure upon her to enrol herself as a church member.

The observance of the Sabbath as it was, or the Sunday as it is now more usually, called, furnishes another test. Although the strictness of Puritan practice has disappeared, even in New England, the American part of the rural population, especially in the South, refrains from amusement as well as from work.[1] It is otherwise with the Germans; and in some parts of the country their example has brought in laxity as

[1] An interesting summary of the laws for the observance of Sunday may be found in a paper read by Mr. Henry E. Young at the Third Annual Meeting of the American Bar Association (1880). These laws, which seem to exist in every State, are in many cases very strict, forbidding all labour, except works of necessity and mercy, and in many cases forbidding also travelling and nearly every kind of amusement. Vermont and South Carolina seem to go farthest in this direction. The former prescribes, under a fine of $2, that no one shall "visit from house to house, except from motives of humanity or charity, or travel from midnight of Saturday to midnight of Sunday, or hold or attend any ball or dance, or use any game, sport, or play, or resort to any house of entertainment for amusement or recreation."

In Indiana, where all labour and "engaging in one's usual avocation" are prohibited, it has been held by the Courts that "selling a cigar to one who has contracted the habit of smoking is a work of necessity."

South Carolina winds up a minute series of prohibitions by ordering all persons to apply themselves to the observance of the day by exercising themselves thereon in the duties of piety and true religion. It need hardly be said that these laws are practically obsolete, except so far as they forbid ordinary and unnecessary traffic and labour. To that extent they are supported by public sentiment, and are justified as being in the nature not so much of religious as of socially and economically useful regulations.

regards amusement. Such cities as Chicago, Cincinnati, New Orleans, and San Francisco have a Sunday quite unlike that of New England, and more resembling what one finds in Germany or France. Nowhere however does one see the shops open or ordinary work done. On many railroads there are few Sunday trains, and museums are in many cities closed. But in two respects the practice is more lax than in Great Britain. Most of the leading newspapers publish Sunday editions, which contain a great deal of general readable matter, stories, gossip, and so forth, over and above the news of the day; and in the great cities theatres are now open on Sunday evenings.[1]

The interest in theological questions is less keen than it was in New England a century ago, but keener than it has generally been in England since the days of the Commonwealth. A great deal of the ordinary reading of the average family has a religious tinge, being supplied in religious or semi-religious weekly and monthly magazines. In many parts of the West the old problems of predestination, reprobation, and election continue to be discussed by farmers and shopkeepers in their leisure moments with the old eagerness, and give a sombre tinge to their views of religion. The ordinary man knows the Bible better, and takes up an allusion to it more quickly than the ordinary Englishman, though perhaps not better than the ordinary Scotchman. Indeed I may say once for all that the native American in everything concerning theology reminds one much more of Scotland than of England, although in the general cast and turn of his mind he is far more English than Scotch. It is hard to state any general view as to the substance of pulpit teaching, because the differences between different denominations are marked; but on the whole the tendency has been, alike among Congregationalists, Baptists, Northern Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, for sermons to be less metaphysical and less markedly doctrinal than formerly, and to become either expository or else of a practical and hortatory character. This is less the case among the Presbyterians of the South, who are more stringently orthodox, and in

[1] One hears that it is now becoming the custom to make a week's engagement of an operatic or theatrical company — there are many traversing the country — begin on Sunday instead of, as formerly, on Monday night.

Boston, Philadelphia, and New York have opened their public libraries, museums, and art galleries on Sunday.

all respects more conservative than their brethren of the North. The discussion of the leading theological questions of the day, such as those of the authority of Scripture, the relation of natural science to the teachings of the Bible, the existence of rewards and punishments in a future state, goes on much as in England. Some of the leading reviews and magazines publish articles on these subjects, which are read more widely than corresponding articles in England, but do not, I think, absorb any more of the thought and attention of the average educated man and woman.

Whether scepticism makes any sensible advance either in affecting a larger number of minds, or in cutting more deeply at the roots of their belief in God and immortality, is a question which it is to-day extremely difficult for any one to answer even as regards his own country. There are many phenomena in every part of Europe which appear to indicate that it does advance; there are others which point in the opposite direction. Much more difficult, then, must it be for a stranger to express a positive opinion as regards America on this gravest of all subjects of inquiry. The conditions of England and America appear to me very similar, and whatever tendency prevails in either country is likely to prevail in the other. The mental habits of the people are the same; their fundamental religious conceptions are the same, except that those who prize a visible Church and bow to her authority are relatively fewer among American Protestants; their theological literature is the same. In discussing a theological question with an American one never feels that slight difference of point of view, or, so to speak, of mental atmosphere, which is sure to crop up in talking to a Frenchman or an Italian, or even to a German. Considerations of speculative argument, considerations of religious feeling, affect the two nations in the same way: the course of their religious history is not likely to diverge. If there be a difference at all in their present attitude, it is perhaps to be found in this, that whereas Americans are more frequently disposed to treat minor issues in a bold and free spirit, they are more apt to recoil from blank negation. As an American once said to me — they are apt to put serious views into familiar words — "We don't mind going a good way along the plank, but we like to stop short of the jump-off."

Whether pronounced theological unbelief, which has latterly been preached by lectures and pamphlets with a freedom unknown even thirty years ago, has made substantial progress among the thinking part of the working class is a question on which one hears the most opposite statements. I have seen statistics which purport to show that the proportion of members of Christian churches to the total population has risen in the Protestant churches from 1 in 14½ in A.D. 1800 to 1 in 5 in A.D. 1880; and which estimate the number of communicants in 1880 at 12,000,000, the total adult population in that year being taken at 25,000,000. So the census of churches of 1890 gives the number of church members or communicants at 20,000,000 out of an adult population which may be taken at 31,000,000. But one also hears many lamentations over the diminished attendance at city churches; and in ecclesiastical circles people say, just as they say in England, that the great problem is how to reach the masses. The most probable conclusion seems to be that while in cities like New York and Chicago the bulk of the humbler classes (except the Roman Catholics, who are largely recent immigrants) are practically heathen to the same extent as in London, or Liverpool, or Berlin, the proportion of working men who belong to some religious body is rather larger in towns under 30,000 than it is in the similar towns of Great Britain or Germany.

In the cultivated circles of the great cities one finds a good many people, as one does in England, who have virtually abandoned Christianity; and in most of the smaller cities there is said to be a knot of men who profess agnosticism, and sometimes have a meeting-place where secularist lectures are delivered. Fifty years ago the former class would have been fewer and more reserved; the latter would scarcely have existed. But the relaxation of the old strictness of orthodoxy has not diminished the zeal of the various churches, nor their hold upon their adherents, nor their attachment to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.

This zeal and attachment happily no longer show themselves in intolerance. Except in small places in the West or South, where aggressive scepticism would rouse displeasure and might affect a man's position in society, everybody is as free in America as in London to hold and express any views he pleases.

Within the churches themselves there is an unmistakable tendency to loosen the bonds of subscription required from clergymen. Prosecutions for heresy of course come before church courts, since no civil court would take cognizance of such matters unless when invoked by some one alleging that a church court had given a decision, or a church authority had taken an executive step, which prejudiced him in some civil right, and was unjust because violating an obligation contracted with him.[1] Such prosecutions are not uncommon, but the sympathy of the public is usually with the accused minister, and the latitude allowed to divergence from the old standards becomes constantly greater. At present it is in the Congregationalist church pretty much the same as in that church in England; in the Presbyterian church of the North, and among Baptists and Methodists, slightly less than in the unestablished Presbyterian churches of Scotland. Speaking generally, no (orthodox) church allows quite so much latitude either in doctrine or in ritual as recent decisions of the courts of law, beginning from the "Essays and Reviews" case, have allowed to the clergy of the Anglican Establishment in England; but I could not gather that the clergy of the various Protestant bodies feel themselves fettered, or that the free development of religious thought is seriously checked, except in the South, where orthodoxy is rigid, and forbids a clergyman to hold Mr. Darwin's views regarding the descent of man.[2] A pastor who begins to chafe under the formularies or liturgy of his denomination would be expected to leave the denomination and join some other in which he could feel more at home. He would not suffer socially by doing so, as an Anglican clergyman possibly might in the like case in England. In the Roman Catholic church there is, of course, no similar indulgence to a deviation from the ancient dogmatic standards; but there is a greater disposition to welcome the newer forms of learning and culture than one finds in England or Ireland, and what may be called a more pronounced democratic spirit. So among the younger Protestant clergy there has been of late years a

[1] Including the case in which a church court had disregarded its own regulations, or acted in violation of the plain principles of judicial procedure.

[2] Not long ago, a professor, not in the theological faculty, was removed from his chair in the University of South Carolina for holding Unitarian views.