

THE LITERARY DIGEST

September 27, 1913

AN ENGLISH VIEW OF RELIGIOUS AMERICA

THE OPPORTUNITY to see ourselves as others see us is a frequent one with Americans, as evidenced in the numerous books by visitors from other lands and in their newspaper interviews; but to see ourselves in our "religious life," as is the expression of an English clergyman in *The Christian World* (London), is to experience a new sensation. No reasonable man, says the writer, will "dogmatize hastily" about such a matter as "religious life in America," for in this, as in other particulars, the size of the country must be taken into account. In passing from one State to another he finds the differences in the population so striking that they "would seem to indicate the presence of another race." On his way across the ocean, for instance, he met an American woman who assured him that "American men never went to church," while an Episcopal clergyman in Philadelphia, denying this statement, "boldly affirmed that religion was still the most powerful agency in American life," and added that "the haven of New England has entered into the life of the whole continent." Speaking from his own observation, the visiting writer notes as "very remarkable the zest and eagerness with which the young American confronts life." He is impressed with the college women, teachers and students, who act as waitresses during the summer at such a place as Chautauqua. Also in his book of discoveries is the type he calls "the Educated Porter," a Cornell man studying architecture and working his way through college as a railroad-station porter. This man the writer finds to be "one of the most splendid representatives of democratic manhood" he has ever met; yet side by side with this energy and zest in living, he finds a corresponding deficiency in the "absence of the spirit of brooding and contemplative leisure," and he goes on to show that:

"One result of this is that Christianity in America is divided into two camps. The one is orthodox. Its orthodoxy is apt to degenerate into the senile attachment to the letter of Scripture. I heard one man of this school say that he never read anything but the Bible, and he thanked God for being able to confine his attention to the one Book. There is a lack of mental breadth, of intellectual enlightenment, about the members of this school

RELIGIOUS AMERICA

which is a little disheartening to one who is in agreement with them on the central matters but knows only too well that this is not the way to win the battle for Christ. The other school seems to have sacrificed almost everything which makes Christianity distinct from a temporary philosophy. Its members have the bad habit of preaching eugenics or sociology in place of the Gospel. They appear to be afraid of the great epistles and the nobler passages of the Gospels, and are apt to speak in terms which would suggest that there was nothing distinctive in Christianity which can make it an absolute and universal faith. They have become afraid of the historian and the natural scientist. Unless they are careful they will prove to have sold the pass to the enemy from an unmanly and needless timidity. What the American thinker needs is a thorough drenching with a genuine skepticism. He is already skeptical about religion. But his infantile belief in education, in mechanics, in science, in everything which seems to be translatable into material profit, is pathetically amusing to a reflective Englishman. He needs to ask questions about the value of these things. He must learn to be dubious about the very things whose virtues are trumpeted in his ears day after day."

That America is "not entirely without her brooding spirit," he tells us, however, may be learned from a visit to some of her famous cemeteries, which he describes, in referring to the cemeteries of Arlington and of Concord, as "these homes of her mighty dead." It is in her thinkers, her dreamers, her lovers of the beautiful that America is great, he points out, and remarks, "some day she will know this." Meanwhile, attending Trinity Church at Boston, where Phillips Brooks preached, he carries away this impression of a present-day sermon:

"The sermon that I heard was certainly not inspired by the memory of Brooks, but it was strangely suggestive, for the preacher indicated plainly enough that sense of disappointment with the civilization of this great land which is felt and expressed by the best and bravest men of the time. He sees that Carlyle's prophecy is coming true. Here, in the New World, the problems which the Old World has known for so long are being discovered once more. Poverty by the side of wealth, a justifiable disbelief in the honesty and disinterestedness of those who make the laws, a consequent anarchy which has its real roots in the immoral nihilism of the rich and powerful. America has for many years enjoyed the fruits of civilization and freedom. Secular education has had its way. The school-teachers have been abroad in the land for decades. And the result is that America literally cries aloud for the justice, the pity, the love of man for man, which find their most glorious expression in the Cross of Christ."