

Current Topics

An Agnostic's Queries

A Christchurch correspondent has forwarded to us a list of questions—nine, no less—which had been submitted to him by an Agnostic or Rationalist acquaintance. We do not hold ourselves, of course, under any obligation to answer questions merely because they have been asked—we naturally wish to have some reasonable assurance that the questions are asked with a sincere desire for enlightenment and some reasonable ground for supposing that our answering them is calculated to do good. In the present case the questioner has quite evidently made up his mind on the whole subject. He does, indeed, profess to be open to conviction; but the character of the questions, and still more the emphatic comments by which they are accompanied, make it clear that he is so in much the same sense as the old Scotchwoman who declared that 'she was open to conviction, but she would like to see the man that would convince her.' The questions, moreover, cover a fairly wide range; and to answer them all at all fully would take more space than we feel justified in giving to alleged difficulties which are, with one or two exceptions, nothing more than crude repetitions of the very shallow objections of Ingersoll and his school, and which have little interest for the vast majority of our readers. However, out of courtesy to our correspondent, we make a compromise. We will take the questions in order, and answer the first three, which may fairly be taken to have been regarded by the questioner as the most important, and the answers to which will furnish a sufficient indication of the truth or otherwise of his statements and of the general value of the arguments suggested by his queries. We may remark in passing that one has only to read the questions, together with the dogmatic but almost invariably inaccurate assertions, to see at once that the questioner's reading on the subject has been wholly one-sided, and that it has been—to put it in the mildest possible terms—anything but deep.

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Question 1.—'If Christianity is a religion founded by the man known as Christ, how is it that the chief ceremonials of that Christianity, namely, Holy Communion, baptism, etc., are found to have been practiced by so-called heathens long before the Christian era? Even the word Sunday is a relic of the old days of sun-worship.'

Answer.—Of the three statements here made, the first two are—so far as the Catholic doctrine and practice regarding Holy Communion and Baptism are concerned—wholly untrue; and the third is wholly irrelevant. At the outset we may point out that even if there were discovered to be a certain amount of similarity between the Christian rites and those of Paganism it would not necessarily follow that the one was borrowed from the other. It is absurd to suggest that every resemblance necessarily implies connection or imitation, or to contend that if the same usage is found in any two places in the world, the one place must have derived it from the other. It so happens, however, that the religious practices or ceremonials of the pre-Christian heathen do not furnish anything that can honestly be regarded as affording even the most distant parallel to Holy Communion and Baptism, as these are believed and practised in the Catholic Church, the mother Church of Christendom, embracing the vast majority of those who name the Christian name. Holy Communion is the reception by the faithful, one by one, of the Body of our Lord, as a means of spiritual sustenance, and of bringing the human nature into direct and intimate union with the Divine. It has been sought to find a heathen parallel in the celebration of funeral feasts in honor of the dead, which admittedly dates back to very early times. The dead, in the region beyond the tomb, were thought to derive both pleasure and advantage from these offerings. Feasts were held at stated seasons; and the food brought by the guests was meant

for the use of the departed. The milk and wine were poured out on the earth around the tomb, while the solid food was passed in to the corpse through a hole in the tomb. What sane and unbiassed man can suggest that there is here anything approaching 'communion' in the Christian sense; or that, either in their matter or in their purpose, there is the faintest parallel between the two practices. It is true that in the early Christian Church the custom grew up of holding an *Agape* or love feast, which in some respects resembled the funeral feasts of the heathen. Little feasts were held, to which each of the guests contributed his share; and at an early period the companies so assembled probably undertook the burial of deceased members. The meal, as understood by the Christians, was a real supper, which followed the Communion; but in its nature and essence it was quite distinct from the Eucharistic celebration. The Councils of Laodicea (363) and of Carthage (397) imposed stringent restrictions on the holding of the *agape*; and between the sixth and eighth centuries it disappeared altogether from the churches. So also with the alleged parallels to the rite of baptism. The symbolism of exterior washing to indicate interior purification was so natural and expressive as to suggest itself instinctively, without any example being necessary. The use of lustral water is found among the Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Hindus, and others. The symbolism of the sacrament instituted by Christ was not new; but its aim and purpose, and the significance and efficacy which He attached to it made it wholly distinct from all other rites. The one feature which the purifications of the heathen and the practice of baptism had in common was the use of water. To declare, on that account, that the two practices were parallel, would be as reasonable as to assert that, because the Bacchanalian mysteries were celebrated with an initiation through drinking wine out of a cup, the Bacchanalian orgies were identical with the celebration of the Eucharist!

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We have discussed the Agnostic questioner's statement from the point of view of common intelligence, and of the facts. We are able to confirm our contention by appeal to an authority which the most agnostic of Agnostics must respect, and which is certainly not partial towards historic Christianity. We refer to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, latest edition. The article on 'Sacrament' is contributed by Mr. F. C. Conybeare, one of the most prominent Rationalists in England. His statement regarding the origin of Holy Communion and Baptism is quite explicit and decisive. We quote as follows: 'That baptism is called the Seal and Illumination in the 2nd century has been set down to the influence of the pagan mysteries; but as a matter of fact the former term is a metaphor from military discipline, and the idea conveyed in the latter that *gnosis* or imparting of divine love is an illumining of the soul is found both in the Old and New Testaments. As a thousand passages in the earlier (Christian) apologists attest, they viewed the pagan mysteries with horror and detestation. That catechumens could not participate in the *agape* or love feast (of which in this epoch the Eucharist was merely an episode) does not give to those feasts the character of a Greek mystery. The uncircumcised proselyte was similarly excluded from the Paschal meal on which the Eucharist was largely modelled, even though it may not have been in any way a continuation of the same. *Baptism and the agape took their rise in Palestine, and in their origin certainly owed little or nothing to outside influences.*' Again, in the article on 'Baptism,' the same *Encyclopædia* writer remarks: 'It is not to be supposed that the Christians borrowed from these (the heathen) or from any Gentile source any essential features of their baptismal rites.' We presume that the Christchurch sceptic will not dispute the authority of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*; and its explicit statements may, therefore, be fairly considered as definitely disposing of the first two statements in his question.

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The questioner's further statement that 'the word Sunday is a relic of the old days of sun-worship' is

Bird and Jansen

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