

no. 1 Aug. 1914

FELLOWSHIP.

A new magazine should be able to defend its right to exist. This it can do by showing that it is saying again, with some freshness of tone, what is so important that it cannot be said too often; or, still better, that it is saying something equally important which has not yet been said often enough. "Fellowship" claims its right to existence on both these scores. Its object is to extend the work for which the Free Religious Fellowship was founded three years ago, namely, the spread of the spirit and principles of free religion.

Since its aim is religious, "Fellowship" will emphasise certain truths which are not new, but are the common property of practically all religious bodies. It will assert the vital importance of these truths, and defend the religious conceptions of life against such conceptions as those of materialism, naturalism, or occultism. So much it will have in common with other religious papers.

Where it will part company with these other papers will be in asserting the principle of religious freedom. People commonly speak as if this principle had been finally established by the reformers of the sixteenth century. This is by no means the case. There is no Church in Christendom in which religion is not more or less bound by dogmatic formulæ which belong to the past, containing statements which for the present generation are either meaningless or untrue. Until these restrictions are removed, religion is not free, and has in it little or no power of healthy activity and development. The harm which is being done to the cause of religion by dogma is clearly enough shown by facts which the supporters of dogmatic religion are themselves the first to bewail—the secession from the Churches of many serious-minded and religious people, the decay of the intellectual prestige of the clergy, the growing reluctance of able and conscientious men to enter the ranks of the ministry, and, worst of all, the widespread suspicion of disingenuousness which attaches to the official utterances of religious bodies on religious and social problems.

The only remedy lies in allowing religion to regain the intellectual and moral vigour which come from breathing an atmosphere of freedom. The idea of dogmatic religion must be frankly abandoned. It is not enough, though it is necessary, to abandon specific dogmas, such as those relating to the Bible, the miraculous elements in Christianity, or the future state. The whole notion of dogma, of the possibility of achieving finality in the statement of religious truth, must be given up. Free religion will have doctrines, but no dogma. It will put forth tentative expressions of religious truth, but will make no claim to infallibility. It will recognise the profound and important truth of Bacon's saying, "In divinity, many things must be left abrupt." It will not pretend to know more than it does, or attempt to imprison the realities of spiritual experience within the rigid intellectual forms either of the past or of the present. "The only infallible guardian of truth," wrote the late Father Tyrrell, "is the spirit of truthfulness." The spirit of truthfulness and the spirit of dogma are eternally at war.

"Fellowship" does not exist, however, to carry on a work of destruction. That work is being sufficiently done elsewhere. It is the much more difficult, and infinitely more valuable, work of reconstruction, to which this magazine, like the Free Religious Fellowship, addresses itself. "Tell me about your faith," said Goethe, "I have doubts enough of my own." When the dogmatic idea of religion is given up, religion is seen to be a living thing, obeying the laws of change and growth which govern all life. If this is so, then the duty of religious people, and the function of religious bodies, is not to accept and pass on ready-made ideas, nor yet to be content with merely rejecting them; both courses are equally irrational. Religious ideas must pass through the test of actual experience. In the process, what is dead will drop away of itself, and what is living will emerge with a force and vividness which can only come from personal experience. In other words, religion is still in the making. The noble heritage of truth which comes to us from the experience of the past, expressed in the forms of the past, must not be wrapped in a napkin and buried safely in the earth. It must grow through change, and its growth can only be ensured by the exercise of our faculties of thought, feeling, and will. What has been said of education is no less true of religion—that the most valuable part of it is not what a man gets from others, but what he gets for himself.

"Fellowship" will endeavour to help this work of reconstruction by stimulating its readers to carry on the work for themselves. From month to month it will present religion in one or other of its aspects, as a matter worthy of constant and serious attention, to which neither mental nor moral energy should be grudged. A satisfying religion can come only to those who are prepared to "think clear, feel deep, bear fruit well." It is not for any who shirk the payment of this price. Religion is degraded by those who ask or offer it on easier terms.

"Fellowship" is the organ of the Free Religious Fellowship, not a substitute for the Fellowship, or an alternative to it. It is one of the fallacies of individualism to pretend that we can have religion without a Church. We can have it only in the same sense that we can have other human interests without corporate life—that is, not at all. In religion, as elsewhere, the individual is an abstraction. Solitary religion is practically a contradiction in terms. If religion is a vital interest, the Church, in some form or other, is a permanent necessity. The Free Religious Fellowship is a practical effort to supply the need of an organisation for the purposes of free religion. The name, "Fellowship," given to this magazine, is intended to call attention to the need of fellowship, as well as freedom, in religion. In existing Churches there is fellowship without freedom: outside these bodies, there is freedom without fellowship. In the interests of religion, the two things, freedom and fellowship, must be united. No doubt it is possible to conceive in the abstract an organisation more excellent than the Fellowship. Such organisations have often been planned on paper by isolated individuals imbued with some of the principles of free religion, but lacking its

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spirit. This building of castles in the air does no good, either to the builder or to anyone else. By weakening the will in its power to grapple with actualities, and by narrowing the range of human sympathies, it retards, instead of advancing, the cause of free religion. The Free Religious Fellowship is theoretically at a disadvantage when compared with ideal schemes of this sort. But it has this compensating advantage, that it is alive and capable of development, and is actually translating the ideal into terms of the actual. The translation is a good deal more prosaic than one could wish. But at its worst it is infinitely better than the best dream: at its best it touches the highest.

To sum up, "Fellowship" will stand for the following principles: (1) The need for a religious conception of life; (2) the need for religion to be freed from dogma; (3) the need for personal effort in the making of religion; (4) the need for religious organisation on a basis of freedom.

FELLOWSHIP NOTES.

After many delays, the Port Melbourne Sunday School has at last been started. The meeting-place for the present is a room in the Town Hall, kindly lent by the Mayor. In three Sundays the attendance has increased from six to fourteen, and there is good reason to expect a proportionate increase in the next few weeks.

Among books recently added to the Fellowship library are: Bridges' Poems; Eucken's "Can We Still be Christians?" Sturt's "Idea of a Free Church"; Kropotkin's "Mutual Aid."

The congratulations of the Fellowship go to Mr. Blackburn on the success of his candidature for the Essendon seat.

The Fellowship is losing two members in Mr. Manton and Miss Sutherland. Mr. Manton left for America and England last month, and will return early next year. Miss Sutherland leaves early in August, her destination being the Madison University (Wisconsin, U.S.A.). We hope Miss Sutherland will be as successful abroad as she has been at home, and that we shall welcome her back among us in a few years.

Members are reminded that the quarterly business meeting of the Fellowship takes place on Saturday, 8th August.

New members and others interested in the work of the Free Religious Fellowship may be glad to have the following list of its regular meetings:—

Sunday, at 11 and 7: Religious Services (conducted, unless when otherwise announced, by Rev. F. Sinclair).

At 3: Sunday School (at Port Melbourne Town Hall).

Monday, at 8: Circle for Study of English Literature (the author now being studied is Browning).

Saturday (alternate), at 6:30: "Fellowship" meetings.

All meetings, except the Sunday School, are held in rooms 13 and 14, Scourfield Chambers, 165 Collins-street.

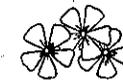
Communications should be addressed to the Hon. Secretary, Mr. G. Byrne, Scourfield Chambers, 165 Collins-street.

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MELBOURNE:

FRASER & JENKINSON, 343-5 QUEEN STREET.