Erskine May, Vol. III, Chapter XIV, pp. 209-222

Progress of the Church: Tithes

State of the Church, to 1800

While these various contentions were raging between the church and other religious bodies, important changes were in progress in the church, and in the religious condition of the people. The church was growing in spiritual influence and temporal resources. Dissent was making advances still more remarkable.

For many years after the accession of George III. the church continued her even course, with little change of condition or circumstances.(1) She was enjoying a tranquil, and apparently prosperous, existence. Favoured by the state and society: threatened by no visible dangers: dominant over [210] Catholics and dissenters; and fearing no assaults upon her power or privileges, she was contented with the dignified security of a national establishment. The more learned churchmen devoted themselves to classical erudition and scholastic theology: the parochial clergy to an easy, but generally decorous, performance of their accustomed duties. The discipline of the church was facile and indulgent. Pluralities and non-residence were freely permitted, the ease of the clergy being more regarded than the spiritual welfare of the people. The parson farmed, hunted, shot the squire's partridges, drank his port wine, joined in the friendly rubber, and frankly entered into all the enjoyments of a country life. He was a kind and hearty man; and if he had the means, his charity was open-handed. Ready at the call of those who sought religious consolation, he was not earnest in searching out the spiritual needs of his flock. Zeal was not expected of him: society was not yet prepared to exact it.

While ease and inaction characterised the church, a great change was coming over the religious and social condition of the people. The religious movement, commenced by Wesley and Whitefield,(2) was spreading widely among the middle and humbler classes. An age of spiritual lethargy was passing away; and a period of religious emotion, zeal, and activity commencing. At the same time, the population of the country was attaining an extraordinary and unprecedented development. The church was ill prepared to meet these new conditions of society Her clergy were slow to [211] perceive them; and when pressed by the exigencies of the time, they could not suddenly assume the character of missionaries. It was a new calling, for which their training and habits unfitted them; and they had to cope with unexampled difficulties. A new society was growing up around them, with startling suddenness. A country village often rose, as if by magic, into a populous town: a town was swollen into a huge city. Artisans from the loom, the forge, and the mine were peopling the lone valley and the moor. How was the church at once to embrace a populous and strange community in her ministrations? The parish church would not hold them if they were willing to come: the parochial clergy were unequal in number and in means, to visit them in their own homes. Spoliation and neglect had doomed a large proportion of the clergy to poverty; and neither the state nor society had yet come to their aid. If there were shortcomings on their part, they were shared by the state, and the laity. There was no organisation to meet the pressure of local wants, while population was outgrowing the ordinary agencies of the church. The field which was becoming too wide for her, was entered upon by dissent; and hitherto it has proved too wide for both.(3)

Advance of Dissent

[212] In dealing with rude and industrial populations, the clergy laboured under many

disadvantages compared with other sects,—particularly the Methodists,—by whom they were environed. However earnest in their calling, they were too much above working men in rank and education, to gain their easy confidence. They were gentlemen, generally allied to county families, trained at the universities, and mingling in refined society. They read the services of the church with grave propriety, and preached scholarlike discourses without emphasis or passion. Their well-bred calmness and good taste ministered little to religious excitement. But hard by the village church, a Methodist carpenter or blacksmith would address his humble flock with passionate devotion. He was one of themselves, spoke their rough dialect, used their wonted phrases; and having been himself converted to Methodism, described his own experience and consolations. Who can wonder that numbers forsook the decorous monotony of the church service for the fervid prayers and moving exhortations of the Methodist? Among the more enlightened population of towns, the clergy had formidable rivals in a higher class of nonconformist ministers, who attracted congregations, not only by doctrines congenial to their faith and sentiments, but by a more impassioned eloquence, greater warmth and earnestness, a plainer language, and closer relations with their flocks. Again, in the visitation of the sick, dissent had greater resources than the church. Its ministers were more familiar with their habits and [213] religious feelings; were admitted with greater freedom to their homes; and were assisted by an active lay agency, which the church was slow to imitate.

Social causes further contributed to the progress of dissent. Many were not unwilling to escape from the presence of their superiors in station. Farmers and shopkeepers were greater men in the meeting-house, than under the shadow of the pulpit and the squire's pew. Working men were glad to be free, for one day in the week, from the eye of the master. It was a comfort to be conscious of independence, and to enjoy their devotions,—like their sports,—among themselves, without restraint or embarrassment. Even their homely dress tempted them from the church; as rags shut out a lower grade from public worship altogether.

In Wales, there was yet another inducement to dissent. Like the Irish at the Reformation, the people were ignorant of the language in which the services of the church were too often performed. In many parishes, the English liturgy was read, and English sermons preached to Welshmen. Even religious consolations were ministered with difficulty, in the only language familiar to the people. Addressed by nonconformist teachers in their own tongue, numbers were soon won over. Doctrines and ceremonies were as nothing compared with an intelligible devotion. They followed Welshmen, rather than dissenters: but found themselves out of communion with the church.

[214] From these combined causes,—religious and social,—dissent marched onwards. The church lost numbers from her fold; and failed to embrace multitudes among the growing population, beyond her ministrations. But she was never forsaken by the rank, wealth, intellect, and influence of the country; and the poor remained her uncontested heritage. Nobles, and proprietors of the soil, were her zealous disciples and champions: the professions, —the first merchants and employers of labour, continued faithful. English society held fast to her. Aspirants to respectability frequented her services. The less opulent of the middle classes, and the industrial population, thronged the meeting-house: men who grew rich and prosperous forsook it for the church.

Regeneration of the Church

It was not until early in the present century, that the rulers and clergy of the church were awakened to a sense of their responsibilities, under these new conditions of society and religious feeling. Startled by the outburst of infidelity in France, and disquieted by the encroachments of dissent,—they at length discovered that the church had a new mission before her. More zeal was needed by her ministers; better discipline and organisation in her government; new resources in her establishment. The means she had must be developed; and the cooperation of the state and laity must be invoked, to combat the difficulties by which she

was surrounded. The church of the sixteenth century must be adapted to the population and needs of the nineteenth.

[215] The first efforts made for the regeneration of the church were not very vigorous, but they were in the right direction. In 1803, measures were passed to restrain clerical farming, to enforce the residence of incumbents, and to encourage the building of churches. Fifteen years later, a comprehensive scheme was devised for the building and endowment of churches in populous places. The disproportion between the means of the church and the growing population was becoming more and more evident; and in 1818 provision was made by Parliament for a systematic extension of church accommodation. Relying mainly upon local liberality, Parliament added contributions from the public revenue, in aid of the building and endowment of additional churches.(4) Further encouragement was also given by the remission of duties upon building materials.(5)

The work of church extension was undertaken with exemplary zeal. The piety of our ancestors, who had raised churches in every village throughout the land, was emulated by the laity, in the present century, who provided for the spiritual needs of their own time. New churches [216] arose everywhere among a growing and prosperous population; parishes were divided; and endowments found for thousands of additional clergy.(6)

The poorer clergy have also received much welcome assistance from augmentations of the fund known as Queen Anne's Bounty.(7) Nor is it unworthy of remark, that the general opulence of the country has contributed, in another form, to the poorer benefices. Large numbers of clergy have added their private resources to the scant endowments of their cures; and with a noble spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice, have dedicated their lives and fortunes to the service of the church.

Revenues of the Church

While the exertions of the church were thus encouraged by public and private liberality, the legislature was devising means for developing the existing resources of the establishment. Its revenues were large, but ill administered, and unequally distributed. Notwithstanding the spoliations of the sixteenth century, the net revenues [217] amounted to £3,490,497; of which £435,046 was appropriated by the bishops and other dignitaries; while many incumbents derived a scanty pittance from the ample patrimony of the church. Sound policy, and the interests of the church herself, demanded an improved management and distribution of this great income; and in 1835 a commission was constituted, which, in five successive reports, recommended numerous ecclesiastical reforms. In 1836, the ecclesiastical commissioners were incorporated, with power to prepare schemes for carrying these recommendations into effect. Many reforms in the church establishment were afterwards sanctioned by Parliament. The boundaries of the several dioceses were revised: the sees of Gloucester and Bristol were consolidated, and the new sees of Manchester and Ripon created: the episcopal revenues and patronage were re-adjusted.(8) The establishments of cathedral and collegiate churches were reduced, and their revenues appropriated to the relief of spiritual destitution. And the surplus revenues of the church, accruing from all these reforms, have since been applied, under the authority of the commissioners, to the augmentation of small livings, and other purposes designed to increase the efficiency of the church.(9) At the same [218] time pluralities were more effectually restrained, and residence enforced, among the clergy.

In extending her ministrations to a growing. community, the church has further been assisted from other sources. Several charitable societies have largely contributed to this good work, (10) and private munificence,—in an age not less remarkable for its pious charity than for its opulence,—has nobly supported the zeal and devotion of the clergy.

Tithes

The principal revenues of the church, however, were derived from tithes; and these continued to be collected by the clergy, according to ancient usage, 'in kind.' The parson was entitled to the farmer's tenth wheat-sheaf, his tenth pig, and his tenth sack of potatoes! This primitive custom of the Jews was wholly unsuited to a civilised age. It was vexatious to the farmer, discouraging to agriculture, and invidious to the clergy. A large proportion of the land was tithe-free; and tithes were often the property of lay impropriators: yet the [219] church sustained all the odium of an antiquated and anomalous law. The evil had long been acknowledged. Prior to the Acts of Elizabeth restraining alienations of church property,(11) landowners had purchased exemption from tithes by the transfer of lands to the church; and in many parishes a particular custom prevailed, known as a *modus*, by which payment of tithes in kind had been commuted. The Long Parliament had designed a more general commutation. Adam Smith and Paley had pointed out the injurious operation of tithes; and the latter had recommended their conversion into corn-rents. This suggestion having been carried out in some local inclosure bills, Mr. Pitt submitted to the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1791, the propriety of its general adoption: but unfortunately for the interests of the church, his wise counsels were not accepted. It was not for more than forty years afterwards, that Parliament perceived the necessity of a general measure of commutation. In 1833 and 1834, Lord Althorp submitted imperfect schemes for consideration; and in 1835, Sir Robert Peel proposed a measure to facilitate voluntary commutation, which was obviously inadequate. But in 1836, a measure, more comprehensive, was framed by Lord Melbourne's government, and accepted by Parliament. It provided for the general [220] commutation of tithes into a rent-charge upon the land, payable in money, but varying according to the average price of corn, for seven preceding years. Voluntary agreements upon this principle were first encouraged; and where none were made, a compulsory commutation was effected by commissioners appointed for that purpose. The success of this statesmanlike measure was complete. In fifteen years, the entire commutation of tithes was accomplished in nearly every parish in England and Wales. (12) To no measure, since the Reformation, has the church owed so much peace and security. All disputes between the clergy and their parishioners, in relation to tithes, were averted; while their rights, identified with those of the lay-impropriators, were secured immutably upon the land itself.

Continued Zeal of the Church

Throughout the progress of these various measures the church was gaining strength and influence, by her own spiritual renovation. While the judicious policy of the legislature had relieved her from many causes of jealousy and ill-will, and added to her temporal resources, she displayed a zeal and activity worthy of her high calling and destinies. Her clergy,—earnest, intellectual, and accomplished,—have kept pace with the advancing enlightenment of their age. They have laboured, [221] with all their means and influence, in the education of the people; and have joined heartily with laymen in promoting, by secular agencies, the cultivation and moral welfare of society. At one time there seemed danger of further schisms, springing from controversies which had been fruitful of evil at the Reformation. The high church party leaning, as of old, to the imposing ceremonial of Catholic worship, aroused the apprehensions of those who perceived in every symbol of the Romish church, a revival of her errors and superstitions. But the extravagance of some of the clergy was happily tempered by the moderation of others, and by the general good sense and judgment of the laity, and schism was averted. Another schism, arising out of the Gorham controversy, was threatened by members of the evangelical, or low church party, but was no less happily averted. The fold of the church has been found wide enough to embrace many diversities of doctrine and ceremony. The convictions, doubts, and predilections of the sixteenth century still prevail, with many of later growth: but enlightened churchmen, without absolute identity of opinion, have been proud to acknowledge the same religious communion,—just as citizens, divided

into political parties, are yet loyal and patriotic members of one state. And if the founders of the reformed church erred in prescribing too strait a uniformity, the wisest of her rulers, in an age of active thought and free discussion, have generally shown a tolerant and cautious spirit in dealing with theological controversies. The ecclesiastical courts have also, striven [222] to give breadth to her articles and liturgy. Never was comprehension more politic. The time has come, when any serious schism might bring ruin on the church.

Footnotes.

1. Supra, p. 82.
2. Supra, p. 85.
3. It is computed that on the census Sunday, 1851, 5,288,294 persons able to attend religious worship once at least, were wholly absent. And it has been reckoned that in Southwark 68 per cent. of the population attend no place of worship whatever; in Sheffield, 62; in Oldham, 61½. In thirty-four great towns, embracing a population of 3,993,467, no less than 2,197,388, or 52½ per cent., are said to attend no places of worship.—Dr. Hume' s Ev. before Lords' Com. on Church Rates, 1859, Q. 1290-1300.
4. Church Building Act 1818, 58 Geo. III. c. 46; 3 Geo. IV. c. 72, etc. One million was voted in 1813, and £500,000 in 1824. Exchequer bill loans to about the same amount were also made.—Porter's Progress, 619.
5. In 1837 these remissions had amounted to £170,561; and from 1837 to 1845, to £165,778.—Parl. Papers, 1838, No. 325; 1845, No. 322.
6. Between 1801 and 1831 about 500 churches were built at an expense of £3,000,000. In twenty years, from 1831 to 1851, more than two thousand new churches were erected at an expense exceeding £6,000,000. In this whole period of fifty years 2,529 churches were built at an expense of £9,087,000, of which £1,663,429, were contributed from public funds, and £7,423,571, from private benefactions.—Census, 1851, Religious Worship, p. xxxix; see also Lords' Debate, May 11th, 1854.—Hans. Deb., 3rd Ser., cxxxiii. 153. Between 1801 and 1858, it appears that 3,160 churches had been built at an expense of £11,000,000—Lords' Report on Spiritual Destitution, 1858; Cotton's Ev., Q. 141.
7. 2 and 3 Anne c. 11; 1 Geo. I. st. 2., c. 10; 45 Geo. III. c. 84; 1 and 2 Will. IV c.45, etc. From 1809 to 1820, the governors of Queen Anne's bounty distributed no less than £1,000,000 to the poorer clergy. From April 5th, 1831, to Dec. 31st. 1835, they disbursed £687,342. From 1850 to 1860 inclusive, they distributed £2,502,747.
8. Originally the sees of St. Asaph and Bangor were also united; but the 10 and 11 Vict. c. 108, which constituted the bishopric of Manchester, repealed the provisions concerning the union of these sees.
9. In 1860, no less than 1,388 benefices and districts had been augmented and endowed out of the common fund of the commissioners, to the extent of £98,900 a year; to which had been added land and tithe rent-charge amounting to £9,600 a year.—14th Report of Commissioners, p. 5.
10. In twenty-five years the Church Pastoral Aid Society raised and expended £715,624, by which 1015 parishes were aided. In twenty-four years the Additional Curates Society raised and expended £531,110. In thirty-three years the Church Building Society expended £680,233, which was met by a further expenditure, on the part of the public, of £4,451,405.—Reports of these Societies for 1861. Independently of diocesan and other local societies, the aggregate funds of religious societies connected with the church amounted, in 1851, to upwards of £400,000 a year, of which £250,000 was applied to foreign missions.—Census of 1851, Religious Worship, p. xli.
11. 1 Eliz. c. 19; 13 Eliz. c.10.
12. In Feb. 1851, the commissioners reported that 'the great work of commutation is substantially achieved.'—1851, No. 1325. In 1852, they speak of formal difficulties in

about one hundred cases. 1852, No. 1447.

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