

Erskine May, Vol. III, Chapter XIV, pp. 222-235

Progress of Dissent

Such having been the progress of the church, what have been the advances of dissent? We have seen how wide a field lay open to the labours of pious men. A struggle had to be maintained between religion and heathenism in a Christian land; and in this struggle dissenters long bore the foremost part. They were at once preachers and missionaries. Their work prospered, and in combating ignorance and sin, they grew into formidable rivals of the church. The old schisms of the Reformation had never lost their vitality. There had been persecution enough to alienate and provoke nonconformists: but not enough to repress them. And when they started on a new career, in the last century, they enjoyed toleration. The doctrines for which many had formerly suffered, were now freely preached, and found crowds of new disciples. At the same time, freedom of worship and discussion favoured the growth of other diversities of faith, ceremonial, and discipline.

Statistics of Dissent

The later history of dissent,—of its rapid growth and development,—its marvellous activity and resources,—is to be read in its statistics. The church in extending her ministrations had been aided by the state; and by the liberality of her wealthy flocks. Dissent received no succour or encouragement from the state; and its disciples were generally drawn from the less opulent classes of [223] society. Yet what has it done for the religious instruction of the people? In 1801, the Wesleyans had 825 chapels or places of worship: in 1851, they had the extraordinary number of 11,007, with sittings for 2,194,298 persons! The original connection alone numbered 1,034 ministers, and upwards of 13,000 lay or local preachers. In 1801, the Independents had 914 chapels: in 1851, they had 3,244, with sittings for 1,067,760 members. In 1801, the Baptists had 652 places of worship: in 1851, they had 2,789, with sittings for 752,346. And numerous other religious denominations swelled the ranks of Protestant dissent.

The Roman Catholics,—forming a comparatively small body,—have yet increased of late years in numbers and activity. Their chapels grew from 346 in 1824, to 574 in 1851, with accommodation for 186,111 persons. Between 1841 and 1853 their religious houses were multiplied from 17 to 88; and their priests from 557 to 875. Their flocks have naturally been enlarged by considerable numbers of Irish and foreigners who have settled, with their increasing families, in the metropolis and other large towns.

For the population of England and Wales, amounting in 1851 to 17,927,609, there were 34,467 places of worship, of which 14,077 belonged to the church of England. Accommodation was provided for 9,467,738 persons, of whom 4,922,412 were in the establishment. On the 30th of March, 4,428,338 attended morning service, of whom 2,371,732 were members of the [224] church.(1) Hence it has been computed that there were 7,646,948 members of the establishment habitually attending religious worship; and 4,466,266 nominal members rarely, if ever, attending the services of their church. These two classes united, formed about 67 per cent. of the population. The same computation reckoned 2,264,324 Wesleyans, and 610,786 Roman Catholics.(2) The clergy of the established church numbered 17,320: ministers of other communions, 6,405.

Relations of the Church to Dissent

So vast an increase of dissent has seriously compromised the position of the church, as a

national establishment. Nearly one-third of the present generation have grown up out of her communion. But her power is yet dominant. She holds her proud position in the state and society: she commands the parochial organisation of the country: she has the largest share in the education of the people;(3) and she has long been straining every nerve to extend her influence. The traditions and sentiment of the nation are on her side. And while she comprises a united body of faithful members, dissenters are divided into [225] upwards of one hundred different sects, or congregations, without sympathy or cohesion, and differing in doctrines, polity, and forms of worship. Sects, not bound by subscription to any articles of faith, have been rent asunder by schisms. The Wesleyans have been broken up into nine divisions:(4) the Baptists into five.(5) These discordant elements of dissent have often been united in opposition to the church, for the redress of grievances common to them all. But every act of toleration and justice, on the part of the state, has tended to dissolve the combination. The odium of bad laws weighed heavily upon the church; and her position has been strengthened by the reversal of a mistaken policy. Nor has the church just cause of apprehension from any general sentiment of hostility on the part of Protestant nonconformists. Numbers frequent her services, and are still married at her altars.(6) The Wesleyans, dwelling just outside her gates, are friends and neighbours, rather than adversaries. The most formidable and aggressive of her opponents are the Independents. With them the 'voluntary principle' in religion is a primary article of faith. They condemn all church establishments; and the Church of England is the foremost example to be denounced and assailed.

[226] Whatever the future destinies of the church, the gravest reflections arise out of the later development of the Reformation. The church was then united to the state. Her convocation, originally dependent, has since lost all but a nominal place in the ecclesiastical polity of the realm. And what have become the component parts of the legislature which directs the government, discipline, revenues,—nay even the doctrines, of the church? The Commons, who have attained a dominant authority, are representatives of England,—one-third nonconformists,—of Presbyterian Scotland,—and of Catholic Ireland. In the union of church and state no such anomaly had been foreseen; yet has it been the natural consequence of the Reformation,—followed by the consolidation of these realms, and the inevitable recognition of religious liberty in a free state.

However painful the history of religious schisms and conflicts, they have not been without countervailing uses. They have extended religious instruction; and favoured political liberty. If the church and dissenters, united, have been unequal to meet the spiritual needs of this populous land,—what could the church, alone and unaided, have accomplished? Even if the resources of dissent had been placed in her hands, rivalry would have been wanting, which has stimulated the zeal of both. Liberty owes much to schism. It brought down the high prerogatives of the Tudors and Stuarts; and in later times, has been a powerful auxiliary in many popular movements. [227] The undivided power of the church, united to that of the crown and aristocracy, might have proved too strong for the people. But while she was weakened by dissent, a popular party was growing up, opposed to the close political organisation with which she was associated. This party was naturally joined by dissenters; and they fought side by side in the long struggle for civil and religious liberty.

Footnotes.

1. Census of Great Britain, 1851, Religious Worship. The progressive increase of dissent is curiously illustrated by a return of temporary and permanent places of worship registered. in decennial periods.—Parl. Paper, 1853, No. 156.
2. Dr. Hume's Ev. before Lords. Com. on Church Rates, 1859. Q 1291, and map. Independents and Baptists together are set down as $9\frac{3}{4}$ per cent., and other sects $6\frac{3}{4}$ on the population.
3. In 1860 she received about 77 per cent. of the education grant from the Privy Council;

and of 1,549,312 pupils in day-schools, she had no less than 1,187,086; while of Sunday-school pupils, dissenters had a majority of 200,000.—Rep. of Education Com., 1861, p. 593, 594; Bishop of London's Charge, 1862. p. 35.

4. The Original Connexion, New Connexion, Primitive Methodists, Bible Christians, Wesleyan Methodist Association, Independent Methodists, Wesleyan Reformers, Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, and Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.
5. General, Particular, Seventh-day, Scotch, New Connexion General.
6. Eighty per cent. of all marriages are celebrated by the church.—Rep. of Registrar-Gen., 1862, p. viii.

The 'Papal Agression'

The church and dissenters, generally opposed on political questions affecting religion, have been prompt to make common cause against the church of Rome. The same strong spirit of Protestantism which united them in resistance to James II. and his House, has since brought them together on other occasions. Dissenters, while seeking justice for themselves, had been no friends to Catholic emancipation; and were far more hostile than churchmen to the endowment of Maynooth.(1) And in 1851, they joined the church in resenting an aggressive movement of the Pope, which was felt to be an insult to the Protestant people of England.

For some time irritation had been growing, in the popular mind, against the church of Rome. The activity of the priesthood was everywhere apparent. Chapels were built, and religious houses founded.(2) A Catholic cathedral was erected in London. Sisters of mercy, in monastic robes, offended the eyes of Protestants. Tales of secret proselytism abounded. No family was believed to be safe from the designs of priests and Jesuits. Protestant heiresses had [228] taken the veil, and endowed convents: wives of Protestant nobles and gentlemen had secretly renounced the faith in which their marriage vows were given: fathers, at the point of death, had disinherited their own flesh and blood, to satisfy the extortion of confessors. Young men at Oxford, in training for the church, had been perverted to Romanism. At the same time, in the church herself, the tractarian, or high church clergy, were reverting to ceremonies associated with that faith; and several had been gained over to the church of Rome. While Protestants, alarmed by these symptoms, were disposed to overestimate their significance, the ultramontane party among the Catholics, encouraged by a trifling and illusory success, conceived the extravagant design of reclaiming Protestant England to the fold of the Catholic church.

Restoration of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy

In September 1850, Pope Pius IX., persuaded that the time had come for asserting his ancient pretensions within this realm, published a brief, providing for the ecclesiastical government of England. Hitherto the church of Rome in England had been superintended by eight vicars apostolic: but now the Pope, considering the 'already large number of Catholics,' and 'how the hindrances which stood in the way of the spreading of the Catholic faith are daily being removed,' saw fit to establish 'the ordinary form of episcopal rule in that kingdom;' and accordingly divided the country into one metropolitan, and twelve episcopal sees. And to his archbishop and bishops he gave 'all the rights and privileges which the Catholic [229] archbishops and bishops, in other states, have and use, according to the common ordinances of the sacred canons and apostolic constitutions.' Nor did the brief omit to state that the object of this change was 'the well-being and advancement of Catholicity throughout England.'(3)

This was followed by a pastoral of Cardinal Wiseman, on his appointment as Archbishop of Westminster, exulting in the supposed pastoral triumph of his church. 'Your beloved country,' said he, 'has received a place among the fair churches which, normally constituted, form the splendid aggregate of Catholic communion: Catholic England has been restored to its orbit in the ecclesiastical firmament, from which its light had long vanished, and begins now anew its

course of regularly adjusted action round the centre of unity, the source of jurisdiction, of light, and of vigour.'(4)

The enthronisation of the new bishops was celebrated with great pomp; and exultant sermons were preached on the revival of the Catholic church. In one of these, Dr. Newman,—himself a recent convert,—declared that 'the people of England, who for so many years had been separated from the see of Rome, are about, of their own will, to be added to the holy church.'

Popular Indignation

No acts or language could have wounded more deeply the traditional susceptibilities of the English people. For three hundred years the papal supremacy had been renounced, and the [230] Romish faith held in abhorrence. Even diplomatic relations with the sovereign of the Roman States,—as a temporal prince,—had until lately been forbidden.(5) And now the Pope had assumed to parcel out the realm into Romish bishoprics; and to embrace the whole community in his jurisdiction. Never, since the Popish plot, had the nation been so stirred with wrath and indignation. Early in November, Lord John Russell, the Premier, increased the public excitement by a letter to the Bishop of Durham, denouncing the 'aggression of the Pope as insolent and insidious,' and associating it with the practices of the tractarian clergy of the Church of England. Clergy and laity, churchmen and dissenters, vied with one another in resentful demonstrations; and in the bonfires of the 5th of November,—hitherto the sport of children,—the obnoxious effigies of the Pope and Cardinal Wiseman were immolated, amidst the execrations of the multitude. No one could doubt the Protestantism of England. Calm observers saw in these demonstrations ample proof that the papal pretensions, however insolent, were wholly innocuous; and Cardinal Wiseman, perceiving that in his over-confidence he had mistaken the temper of the people, sought to moderate their anger by a conciliatory address. The ambitious episcopate now assumed the modest proportions of an arrangement for the spiritual care of a small body of Roman Catholics.

[231] Meanwhile, the government and a vast majority of the people were determined that the papal aggression should be repelled; but how? If general scorn and indignation could repel an insult, it had already been amply repelled: but action was expected on the part of the state; and how was it to be taken? Had the laws of England been violated? The Catholic Relief Act of 1829 forbade the assumption of any titles belonging to the bishops of the Church of England and Ireland: but the titles of these new bishops being taken from places not appropriated by existing sees, their assumption was not illegal. Statutes, indeed, were still in force prohibiting the introduction of papal bulls or letters into this country.(6) But they had long since fallen into disuse; and such communications had been suffered to circulate, without molestation, as natural incidents to the internal discipline of the church of Rome. To prosecute Cardinal Wiseman for such an offence would have been an act of impotent vengeance. Safe from punishment, he would have courted martyrdom. The Queen's supremacy in all matters, ecclesiastical and temporal, was undoubted: but had it been invaded? When England professed the Catholic faith, the jurisdiction of the Pope had often conflicted with that of the crown. Both were concerned in the government of the same church: but now the spiritual supremacy of the crown was exercised over the church of England [232] only. Roman Catholics,—in common with all other subjects not in communion with the church,—enjoyed full toleration in their religious worship; and it was an essential part of their faith and polity to acknowledge the spiritual authority of the Pope. Could legal restraints, then, be imposed upon the internal government of the church of Rome, without an infraction of religious toleration? True, the papal brief, in form and language, assumed a jurisdiction over the whole realm; and Cardinal Wiseman had said of himself, 'We govern, and shall continue to govern, the counties of Middlesex, Hertford, and Essex.' But was this more than an application of the immutable forms of the church of Rome to altered circumstances? In governing Roman Catholics, did the Pope wrest from the Queen any part of her ecclesiastical supremacy?

The Ecclesiastical Titles Bill

Such were the difficulties of the case; and ministers endeavoured to solve them by legislation. Drawing a broad distinction between the spiritual jurisdiction of the Pope over the members of his church, and an assumption of sovereignty over the realm, they proposed to interdict all ecclesiastical titles derived from places in the United Kingdom. Let the Catholics, they argued, be governed by their own bishops: let the Pope freely appoint them: leave entire liberty to Catholic worship and polity, but reserve to the civil government of this country alone, the right to create territorial titles. Upon this principle a bill was introduced into the House of Commons by Lord John Russell. The titles assumed by [233] the Catholic bishops were prohibited: the brief or rescript creating them was declared unlawful: the acts of persons bearing them were void; and gifts or religious endowments acquired by them, forfeited to the crown. These latter provisions were subsequently omitted by ministers; and the measure was confined to the prohibition of territorial titles. It was shown that in no country in Europe,—whether Catholic or Protestant,—would the Pope be suffered to exercise such an authority, without the consent of the state; and it was not fit that England alone should submit to his encroachments upon the civil power. But as the bill proceeded, the difficulties of legislation accumulated. The bill embraced Ireland, where such titles had been permitted, without objection, since the Relief Act of 1829. It would, therefore, withdraw a privilege already conceded to Roman Catholics, and disturb that great settlement. Yet, as the measure was founded upon the necessity of protecting the sovereignty of the crown, no part of the realm could be excepted from its operation. And thus, for the sake of repelling an aggression upon Protestant England, Catholic Ireland was visited with this new prohibition.

The bill encountered objections, the most opposite and contradictory. On one side, it was condemned as a violation of religious liberty. The Catholics, it was said, were everywhere governed by bishops, to whom districts were assigned, universally known as dioceses, and distinguished by some [234] local designation. To interfere with the internal polity of the church of Rome was to reverse the policy of toleration, and might eventually lead to the revival of penal laws. If there was insolence in the traditional language of the Court of Rome, let it be repelled by a royal proclamation, or by addresses from both Houses, maintaining Her Majesty's undoubted prerogatives: but let not Parliament renew its warfare with religious liberty. On the other hand, it was urged that the encroachments of the church of Rome upon the temporal power demanded a more stringent measure than that proposed,—severer penalties, and securities more effectual.

These opposite views increased the embarrassments of the government, and imperilled the success of the measure. For a time ministers received the support of large majorities who,—differing upon some points,—were yet agreed upon the necessity of a legislative condemnation of the recent measures of the church of Rome. But on the report of the bill, amendments were proposed, by Sir F. Thesiger, to increase the stringency of its provisions. They declared illegal, not only the particular brief, but all similar briefs; extended to every person the power of prosecuting for offences, with the consent of the attorney-general; and made the introduction of bulls or rescripts a penal offence.

Such stringency went far beyond the purpose of ministers, and they resisted the amendments: but a considerable number of members,—chiefly Roman Catholics,—hoping that ministers, if overborne by the opposition, would abandon the hill, retired from [235] the House and left ministers in a minority. The amendments, however, were accepted, and the bill was ultimately passed.(7)

It was a protest against an act of the Pope which had outraged the feelings of the people of England: but as a legislative measure, it was a dead letter. The church of Rome receded not a step from her position; and Cardinal Wiseman and the Catholic bishops,—as well in England as in Ireland,—continued to bear, without molestation, the titles conferred upon them by the

Pope. The excitement of the people, and acrimonious discussions in Parliament, revived animosities which recent legislation had tended to moderate: yet these events were not unfruitful of good. They dispelled the wild visions of the ultramontane party: checked the tractarian movement in the Church of England; and demonstrated the sound and faithful Protestantism of the people. Nor had the ultramontane party any cause of gratulation, in their apparent triumph over the state. They had given grave offence to the foremost champions of the Catholic cause: their conduct was deplored by the laity of their own church; and they had increased the repugnance of the people to a faith which they had scarcely yet learned to tolerate.

Footnotes.

1. See infra, p. 270.
2. See supra, p. 223.
3. Papal Brief, Sept. 30th, 1850; Ann. Reg., 1850, App. 405.
4. Pastoral, Oct. 7th, 1850; Ann. Reg., 1850, App. 411.
5. In 1848 an Act was passed, with some difficulty, to allow diplomatic relations with the sovereign of the Roman States.—11 and 12 Vict. c. 108.
6. In 1846, that part of the 13th Eliz. which attached the penalties of treason to this offence had been repealed, but the law continued in force.
7. Ecclesiastical Titles Act 1851, 14 and 15 Vict. c.60. [And see Supplementary Chapter.]

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