

Present position and prospects of the English Church

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PRESENT POSITION AND PROSPECTS OF THE ENGLISH CHURCH.

I have been asked by the Editor of this Review to write an account of the present state of things in the Church of England. It must of necessity be confined to the Church of England, and must therefore exclude the Churches in the British Colonies and in the United States, and that for two reasons. First, I have no means—and unfortunately most residents in England are in the same position as myself—of obtaining a competent acquaintance with the condition of those bodies; and next, the Church of England is to the Churches in communion with her (that of the United States, possibly, excepted), as Paris used to be to France. That is to say she is the heart of the whole Anglican Communion, and her pulsations are felt to the utmost extremities of the body corporate. In noting her condition, therefore, we shall approximate pretty closely to the condition of all her branches.

It is only fair to explain that, in as much as for many years I have kept aloof from all parties and organizations of a party character in the Church of England, and have attempted to pursue an independent course, what I have to say will take a different line from that likely to be taken by members of those parties or organizations, and it may possibly also be questioned by many individuals who like myself, are thinking for themselves. I may be giving an impartial account of the events which have occurred since I last essayed to perform a similar task. Or I may be tempted—and many will doubtless think that I have yielded to the temptation—to play the part of the “candid friend”, that is to say to comment with very little fairness, and a good deal of prejudice, on the events which have been passing before my eyes, and on the persons who

have helped to bring them about. My readers must judge for themselves which supposition is the more likely of the two. I can only say that I have been for more than 50 years an interested, and more or less intelligent spectator of the career of the Church to which I belong, and that I have done my best, according to my capacity, be it great or small, to form an impartial opinion on the condition of things within her pale.

I can remember many ecclesiastical *crises* in the course of my experience;—many moments of thrilling interest. One of my earliest recollections is the crop of secessions to Rome which followed that of Archdeacon, afterwards Cardinal, Manning in 1851, which robbed the congregation to which I then belonged of an earnest and faithful priest, and which seemed to shake the Church of England to its foundations. Yet I do not believe that our Church has ever, in my recollection, passed through a more interesting, and in some ways a more important, phase of her life than the one through which she is now passing. The Tractarian movement has now spent its force, and the Church of England is settling on its lees. New forces are ready to develop within her, but they have hardly yet taken shape. Competent leaders are wanting to direct the action of these new forces. “The hour is come”, but *not* “the man”. The currents of thought among us at present are tentative rather than definite, extremist rather than calm or philosophical. In some quarters there is a disposition to dwell too much on minute points, and to ignore the larger issues of theology or philosophy. As a writer in the *Times* has lately put it, the theologians of the Church of England are too much occupied with *minutiæ* such as these “to have leisure for thinking out the great problems of human thought—the problems of theology in the proper sense”. “North of the Tweed”, as the writer justly adds, “it is otherwise.” But he might have added that *some* men south of the Tweed, notably Principal Fairbairn and the late R. W. Dale, have busied themselves with theology in its larger aspects, as it affects human thought and conduct.

These men are, however, not members of the Church of England, but belong to the Nonconformist body. One great movement is now going on, however, among us, to which I have more than once directed the attention of your readers in former papers in this Review—the movement for adapting the relations of

Church and State in England to the changed conditions of modern times. This movement, though it may perhaps have to lament the absence among us of competent leaders, has the advantage of having aroused the interest of men of all parties in the Church, and is thereby delivered from the evil of party spirit.

The *personnel* of the Church has changed, and—if my age does not incline me too much to be the *laudator temporis acti*—has deteriorated not a little during the last fifty years. The great leaders of thought in all parties have passed away—men such as Pusey, Keble, Newman, Manning, Maurice, Kingsley, Stanley, Jowett, and other men of mark whose memory is still green among us. Smaller men have taken their place. We miss the guidance of such leaders in many ways, and the Church is the poorer for the loss of them. But most of all do we suffer from the loss of the great ecclesiastical statesmen of the past—men such as Wilberforce, Tait, Thomson, Magee, who, though they doubtless made their mistakes, impressed the influence of their capacity, foresight, and knowledge of men and things upon the progress of the Church in their day. One such man alone remains to us. Happily for the Church, he has been raised to the Primacy. Trained in the school of Archbishop Tait, and associated in the closest relations with the two succeeding Archbishops, Archbishop Davidson brings to his great task a breadth of view and a wealth of experience which no other man in our communion can even approach. And we may hope that his tenure of the high position to which he has been raised will be productive of many benefits to the English Church. Never in her history has she needed wise and capable guidance from those in high quarters more than she does just now. Seldom, one may perhaps venture to say, has she found in positions of authority so few men capable of giving it.

The movement in our Church identified with the volume of Essays which appeared under the name of *Lux Mundi* holds the most prominent position in the public eye at the present moment. It originated at Oxford, and arose in the bosom of the Tractarian party. Its aim was a reconciliation of the somewhat formal and reactionary views of the Tractarians with modern thought. Whether the reconciliation pro-

ceeds on sound lines, whether, in fact, it is possible to reconcile looking back with looking forward, whether mediævalism and modern progress can mingle any more than oil and water, is a question I will not attempt to discuss. Certain it is that an effort has been made to combine elements which may or may not be essentially distinct, and that it has attained no small amount of popularity. The age is tolerant of novelties, especially if, as in the present case, they are rendered attractive by persuasiveness and brilliancy. I cannot, however, myself believe that the reconciliation is destined to succeed. Mediæval ceremonial may attract for a while that class of persons which is charmed with the grotesque anachronism of a Passion Play performed before an assembly of ladies and gentlemen provided with Cook's excursion tickets. But that the ideas of a priesthood which found support, and were even exceedingly useful, in days of ignorance and social chaos, can long coexist with the highly developed life of the twentieth century seems about as impossible as any thing can be. We may therefore venture to prophecy that this movement will prove to be no more than a dissolving view. Arising out of the visions of the past, it will speedily be absorbed into the combinations of the future. In the mean time it may be performing an useful office as the solvent of the tendency toward hard and crystallized dogma which has come down to us from the days of the scholastic philosophy, and which needs to be transmuted into the less systematic but more useful forms which life in the twentieth century requires.

What is called the "High Church" party, of whatever sections it may be said to consist, is by far the most powerful of all the parties into which the clergy of our Church are divided. It owes that position to the learning and deep piety of the Tractarian leaders and to their appeal to ancient Church tradition, an appeal supported by the authority of the leaders of the English Reformation. The "Evangelical", or "Low Church" party, which held the most commanding position among our clergy half a century ago, has, like its "High Church" rival, undergone some remarkable modifications. Its younger members are abandoning the deference which was once shown to the teaching of Luther and Calvin, and the Fathers of the English Reformation. In doctrine, therefore,

they have of late been approximating to the Broad Church, or to the old-fashioned Anglican party. In ritual they have to a great extent relinquished the attitude of the "Evangelical" party half a century back, and are settling down into the position occupied by the moderate Anglican of that period. The "Broad Church" party has been undergoing similar changes. The moderate "Broad Churchman" has approximated to the doctrines and practices of his moderate High and Low Church brethren, and the "Broad Church" doctrines of half a century ago have very largely permeated the whole Church of England at the present time, especially among the laity. But, as is usual among Englishmen, the changes which are slowly taking place in our midst are only very imperfectly understood by those who are affected by them. And thus it happens that while the extreme sections, whether "High", "Low" or "Broad", are well organized and supplied with powerful and influential organs in the Church press, the great central body of opinion within the Church, comprising as it does a majority of her clergy, and nine-tenths of her devout and attached laity, is at present without organization, and without adequate representation in the Church Press, is unaccustomed to concerted action, and utterly unaware of its preponderating strength. The faces of those who compose this great central body, instead of being turned towards each other, are looking wistfully back in the direction of the party from which they have emerged. They count, therefore, for much less than they might do, and may hereafter do, in determining the policy of the English Church. The present strained relations between clergy and laity on the ritual question, again, may affect the eventual condition of things very materially. But at present it is premature to forecast the direction in which the Church will be impelled by the latent forces within her pale.

It would be impossible to pass over the question of Biblical criticism, which has assumed vast prominence in every Church in Christendom. It has had an immense effect, both in uniting and dividing men's minds. So far, among ourselves at least, the unifying effects have been the most visible. It has, as the *Lux Mundi* movement shews, brought an influential High Church section into touch with an influential section of the Broad Church

party, and it has also attracted the sympathy of a considerable number of the moderate "Evangelicals". The *Lux Mundi* section of the High Church party has however confined its expressions of approval to the latest phase of German criticism as applied to the Old Testament. But when those principles have been applied, as they naturally would be, to the New Testament, the members of the *Lux Mundi* school (I use the phrase for want of a better) have manifested decided disapproval and even alarm. Some of them will very probably reconsider the attitude they have assumed toward the Old Testament. Others will be impelled forward toward the freer criticism of the New. As for the old fashioned disciples of the Tractarian school, they are dimly conscious of something amiss in the teaching of their new allies in criticism and theology. But many of them have had their attention so exclusively fixed on the revival of mediæval ritual and doctrine that they have devoted very little attention to the serious consequences to the faith of the Church which this new departure may bring in its train. It may, and I believe will, eventually be found that the question of Biblical Criticism will break up the High Church party, and will produce new combinations within the bosom of our Church. It may even attract the more Evangelical among the Nonconformists toward the Church. As to the recent pronouncements by men of extreme "Broad" Church proclivities among us in regard to the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, they are crude in themselves, have evidently not been well considered, and their publication has been marked in some instances by an apologetic and hesitating tone. They are disowned by the great mass of Churchmen, whether clerical or lay. And there are unequivocal signs that the expression of such views by men holding preferment in the Church of England does not even conciliate the support of those of the English laity who are sceptics, Agnostics, or indifferentists. It is felt by such men that the clergy of the Church who hold opinions similar to theirs, are bound, in common honesty, to resign their positions in the Church. The demand recently made that no obligations should be imposed on public teachers of religion which are not equally imposed on private individuals has not been supported by the English public. And indeed it is difficult to understand how the

Christian Church can continue to exist if those whose duty it is to teach its doctrines are allowed to say anything and everything they please. But there will, we may be sure, be no prosecutions. Rightly or wrongly, public opinion in England will not admit of suppression of free speech by law. The most unreasonable latitude among the clergy will find defenders, if any attempt be made to silence a preacher by legal process. But that public opinion will ultimately impose salutary restraints upon those who claim to be altogether free from them, is about as certain anything can be.

The question of ritual has entered into a new phase, since the presentation to the Archbishop of a declaration signed by 4000 of the clergy calling themselves Moderate High Churchmen. I am writing much too soon after the presentation of this document to be able to estimate its probable effects, and I may have to ask permission to add a few supplementary words on this point at the end of this paper. What appears certain is, that the party of innovation in ritual have at last awakened to the conviction, forced upon them by unmistakeable evidence, that they have altogether failed to carry with them, as they had been led to believe they were doing, either the laity of their own Church, or the nation at large, and that if they would avert some grave disaster, both to themselves and the Church, they must emphatically dissociate themselves from the small but active Romanizing section whose policy and practices have produced such wide-spread dissatisfaction and suspicion. I may add here, for the information of my Continental readers, that there is no reason to expect any considerable secession from the ranks of our clergy, in case the Romanizing innovations are definitely put down among us. *Some* secessions there will undoubtedly be. But they will be but the removal of an inconvenient excrescence on our Church life. Its removal will not benefit the Church of Rome nor be a source of weakness to ourselves. On the contrary, it will be a real and lasting relief to the Church of England. Some Continental newspapers lately reported that *seventy* priests had left our Church in consequence of the removal of Mr Middleton Evans from the charge of St Michael's Shoreditch. The fact was that seventy members of *his congregation* seceded, which is a very different thing. If there should be secessions

among the clergy, their number will not amount to seventy, or anything like it. And among the seceders there will not be a single man of mark. They will all be, to use a phrase once used by the late Bishop Thirlwall, of no more value than the ciphers to the right of the decimal point. They will be men whose views on ecclesiastical matters have been formed on the narrowest of grounds, and in the absence of almost all necessary information. And many of those who have been “led away by their dissimulation”, will find themselves compelled to reconsider their position, and as “sadder and wiser men”, will “awake the morrow morn” after the English Church and nation has resolved to permit their ineptitudes no longer. I will add, lest these words should be misinterpreted, that they refer only to those who have introduced distinctively Roman doctrines and practices into their teaching and services. I have no wish to pronounce a decision upon points admittedly doubtful. Such questions ought to be left, and, I may venture to hope, will eventually be left, to the judgement of the lawful authority. Individual clergy have been allowed a free hand far too long. No other country but this would allow liberty to degenerate into licence to the extent that England has done. Two remarks I may make, since there seems a good deal of misapprehension on the subject to which they relate. The first is, that a decision prohibiting a particular ceremony does not necessarily prohibit the teaching of the doctrine symbolized by that ceremony, so long as that doctrine is taught simply a private opinion of the teacher. Next, the High Church party seem too often to have forgotten that the ceremonial they have been so determined to introduce symbolizes, or is very widely regarded as symbolizing, doctrines which the Church of England has intentionally left open. They are accustomed to claim toleration for the ritual which is to their taste, and to denounce what they call the “Protestant” intolerance of those who dislike it. The intolerance is really on their side, so far as they claim to express in ritual, doctrines to which the Catholic Church has refused to commit herself. The embodying the private opinions of the individual priest in the worship of the congregation is a clear infringement of the rights of the worshippers.

A few words may be added on the relations between the

Church and Nonconformity. The Tractarian movement has unquestionably strengthened the Church at the expense of the Nonconformists, and this fact accounts for a good deal of the hostility felt by the latter for the High Church party. When the Tractarian movement commenced in 1833, Nonconformity was victorious and aggressive. That movement, by reviving the belief in the visible Church, by laying great stress on her unity, and by denouncing the spirit of schism, destroyed the ascendancy of Nonconformity, and has restored to the National Church her predominance. But a great change has come over religious thought during the last seventy years. The high Calvinistic doctrines to which Nonconformity was then committed have completely disappeared. The "dissidence of Dissent" is no longer magnified as a virtue, it is deplored as a source of overlapping and weakness. Dissent is organizing and uniting; while the attempt to identify the Church with one particular party is disorganizing and disuniting her. Consequently Dissent is beginning to recover itself, and its hostility to the Church increases in proportion to the predominance among her clergy of "advanced" High Church ideas. The recent agitation against the Education Act is a sign of a recrudescence of the old but for some time diminishing ill-feeling against the National Church which no true friend to her can note without concern.

On the other hand the progress of the movement for revising the relations between Church and State, and for giving to the former a measure of self-government, is materially strengthening the position of the Church. I need not enter into detail on what I have so often stated in the pages of this Review, that the Tudor settlement of the relations of Church and State had always left something to be desired, and that it has become altogether incompatible with political and ecclesiastical conditions in England in the present era. The meeting in July, for the first time, of a Council of the whole Church of England, laity as well as clergy, is too recent for one to venture to draw conclusions from it, save to remark on the masterly yet thoroughly impartial way in which the deliberations were managed by the Archbishop. A less capable man would have endeavoured to force his own views on the members, or at least to repress as far as possible the expression of opinions which were distasteful to him. The Archbishop is far too wise

not to see that the day is past when Mrs Partington's mop can be used to stay the progress of the waters of the Atlantic. That policy, in the twentieth century, can only be fatal to Mrs Partington herself, and the persons who may happen to be behind her. So the Archbishop set himself to remove all difficulties in the way of the free expression of opinion, to obtain as speedily as possible a decision on certain controverted points, and to reserve the final settlement of the question for more mature consideration. The consequence of his admirable guidance has been that the proceedings passed off without the slightest friction, and the way has been dexterously cleared for further progress.

The subject of the foreign relations of the English Church is a question which I have been asked not to leave altogether untouched. The negotiations of a certain section among us with the Papacy have, I rejoice to say, been broken off. It is useless to attempt to come to terms with Rome as long as she holds fast to the Tridentine decrees and the doctrine of Papal Infallibility. Our relations with the Eastern Church have steadily grown more cordial, though of course it is premature at present to attempt anything approaching to formal union. Our relations with the Old Catholics are not, I regret to state, what they once were, and what one could desire that they should be. Certain influences which were working in this country to keep English Churchmen and Old Catholics apart have however now ceased to operate, and the ignorance among us of the actual condition and prospects of Old Catholicism is gradually disappearing. But the cold fit which supervened on the intense interest felt in England in the controversies following the promulgation of the Vatican decrees has not entirely passed away. There is certainly more interest taken in Old Catholicism here than there was ten years ago. But it is, I am afraid, of a languid kind, nor do I clearly see at present what influences are likely to stimulate it. The fact that the Englishman is an unimaginative being, and is incapable of understanding a state of things of which he has had no personal experience, accounts for a good deal of this indifference, and so does the fact that since the Reformation the Church of England has been isolated from all other Churches. There seems nothing else to be done but to wait God's own

good time, and meanwhile to take every opportunity of forming and cementing such personal friendships as may tend to bring about more cordial relations. The Congress which, as I understand, is to be held next year in Switzerland will, I trust, be the inauguration of a new and brighter era in the relations of the Anglican and Old Catholic Churches.

This sketch of the present position of affairs in our Church has, I am afraid, run to a great length. And yet fewer words would hardly do justice to the crisis through which we are passing. Indeed, to give an adequate idea of the facts would require a far larger space than I could hope to find placed at my disposal. I have done what I could to "make darkness visible". I trust what has been said, may arouse some interest, and throw at least a little light on what is taking place here at the present time.

Abington, Cambridge, July 14, 1903.

J. J. LIAS.
