

THE ENGLISH CHURCH

A FAILURE

AS A REFORMING AGENCY.

BY CHARLES WATTS.

THE Anglican Church is regarded as the representative of England's national religion and the exponent of the country's State-protected theology. It will, therefore, be interesting to consider the two following questions:—

1. What is the attitude of this institution towards the thought of the present time? 2. What value has it been as a reforming agency?

An impartial examination of the position of this ecclesiasticism will show that it is unchanged, and, in all probability, so it will remain so long as it is an Erastian or an Established Church. Under a Protestant name—which, however, many of its clergy do not acknowledge, professing to consider themselves a true branch of the Catholic Church, a claim which Rome contemptuously repudiates—the Establishment has retained the essential spirit of Popery. The consequence of this has been, of course, distraction and annoyance to the State, division to the Church, formality and “worldly-mindedness” to the clergy. Common sense stigmatises it as an absurdity when political leaders and secular judges are asked and compelled to administer the chief judicial and governmental functions and appointments of an ecclesiasticism with any other intention than that of promoting their own secular temporal interests. Of course, it is not denied that the Established Church has produced many eminent and learned men, and that she has occasionally attempted to deal with the great social questions of the day. Her failure, however, is an acknowledged fact. Possessing unexampled facilities for improving the social

condition of the people, with great wealth at her free command, with no powerful competitor in the field, she has wilfully neglected all these advantages.

So far as religion and thought are concerned, this Church is most incongruously and anomalously placed. She is like a man between two stools, clinging to a bending plank overhead. Such a very unreliable support for the Church, the only guarantee for its position, is the State. Let this plank give way—and it must be sawn asunder ere long—and the Church of England will lapse into chaotic confusion. Her inconsistency in this particular is manifest. Here we have a Church professedly based on a Divine faith; yet it has to rely for support upon the protection of the State. Were its assumed divinity a reality, Secular aid for its existence should be unnecessary. Besides, the functions of the two—the Church and the State—are very different: the one claims the right of spiritual direction; the business of the other is to concern itself with the secular affairs of society.

The Anglican Church is, moreover, equivocally placed with respect to her doctrines. She half receives the Reformation dogma of private interpretation of the Scriptures, and half rejects it by affirming that the true sense of Scripture is its interpretation by the Church. She thus professes to bow to reason, while, in fact, she denies its right. How painfully inconsistent is this with what should be the distinguishing feature in a body which calls itself Catholic, and which should, consequently, know its own mind! It has been said: "Ye cannot serve two masters: ye cannot serve God and Mammon." Alas for this dictum, however, the Church of England has ever been more remarkable for her solicitude to possess riches than for her "spiritual" devotion or regard for consistency! In this respect she is much inferior to the Church of Rome. The Romish Church, at least, does not play fast and loose with beliefs and dogmas. She finds herself opposed by the progressive march of intellect. Does she, therefore, "hark back"? Does she retract or explain away any of her previous utterances? No; but, on the contrary, she nails her colours to the mast, and refuses to move in obedience to what she terms misguided, erring reason. Her prelates,

assembled in Rome, proclaimed that "not only can faith and reason never be opposed, but they lend to each other a mutual support, since right reason demonstrates the foundations of faith, and, illuminated by its light, cultivates the science of Divine things; whereas faith liberates and defends reason from error, and enriches it with increased knowledge."

In the same resolute spirit of utter opposition to what science may reveal or a wider exegesis require, Rome says: "That interpretation of the sacred dogmas is perpetually to be retained which Holy Mother Church has once declared; neither ever at any time may that interpretation be departed from under the form or name of a higher understanding thereof." And at the end of the Decrees, given on the 18th of July, 1870, the prelates of this Church affirm that, "if any one presume to contradict this our definition—which may God avert—let him be accursed!"

All this is easily enough understood, however much we may and do condemn it. The Church of England, however, has neither the boldness of affirmation nor of denial. Should a heresy arise in its midst—as in the case of Bishop Colenso—the *odium theologicum* is bitterly aroused, the land is troubled with the dissensions of angry polemics, the ecclesiastical dignitaries and missionary societies appoint a new Bishop, but the Church has not power to remove the heretic from his office.

Again, certain State laws, such as Earl Beaconsfield's Public Worship Regulation Act, are directed against specified modes of conducting the public services of the Church. Certain zealous priests, or ministers, treat these with contempt, and the Church has to request the State to put a cumbrous machinery of justice into operation against the offenders. The peculiar spectacle is then presented of the civil power deciding as to what are religious necessities. Need we marvel that nobody really knows, or cares, what this strange body thinks, or what attitude it assumes with regard to modern thought? This, then, is the true state of affairs on this matter: the Church, as a Church, does not enter into the question, which is merely one of the individual opinions of ministers with respect to the higher thought of the age. Briefly stated, the clergy of the

Church of England may be ranked under three heads:—

1. The High Churchmen, who look upon science and Freethought with ill-concealed aversion. Clergymen of this class pander to credulity, and thrive upon the weakness of women and the uncontrolled emotions of men. Theatrical display enchants where reason fails to command.

2. The Evangelicals, who are at heart more intolerant than the Papacy. They seldom encourage modern scientific revelation, clinging to the old notion that the two standard revelations contain all that is necessary for man's salvation.

3. The Broad Churchmen, who are comparatively tolerant, liberal, and disposed to welcome all that the scientific method of investigation may reveal. These men are useful, because their principal deeds are secular. Their Church religion sits but loosely upon them. Their concern is to teach people how to live well as the best preparation to die happily. The Bishop of Manchester, Dean Stanley, and Dr. Colenso are noble types of this school.

As Freethinkers, we need not be apprehensive either of Conformity or Nonconformity. The latter, as Dr. Mac-lagan, the Bishop of Lichfield, observed in his charge to the clergy (early in 1880), is now more political than religious: the former is more religious than political in spirit, but its connection with the State—which is now tolerant perforce—deprives it of much of its original power to wound.

It will be a bright future wherein man the free and unfettered shall have cast off the swathing-bands of fetichism and ecclesiasticism, and shall have learned to rely solely upon human effort, and his own knowledge of his necessities and potentialities.

The assumption that the English Church is the national exponent of the religious thought of the age is entirely unsupported by facts. The union of the Church with the State is the main ground upon which the assertion is made. But only a slight reflection is necessary to demonstrate that such a connection cannot make the Church national, using that term in its proper sense. Before it can consistently deserve that designation it

must be shown that the Establishment represents the religious ideas and aspirations of the majority of the people of the United Kingdom. Such, however, is not the case, inasmuch as the bulk of the Protestants of Great Britain do not subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles, and will not be bound by the priestly dogmas of the Established Church. The religious faith of Christendom outside the domain of Roman Catholicism day by day grows broader and less inclined to be fettered by the creeds and ecclesiastical teachings of priests and councils. Even numerically the Church is behind its rival, Dissent. The Statistical Society, a few years ago, published figures showing that Dissenters were far more numerous than Churchmen; and a recent Parliamentary return states that in 7,369 English and Welsh parishes, having an aggregate population of 20,500,000, there were 11,267 churches and 14,000 chapels.

A great absurdity in connection with the claim set up for the English Church is that its devotees regard it as the depository of the only true religion. By them it is supposed to be the genuine article, bearing the Government stamp; while the various Dissenting faiths are condemned as spurious, being without the necessary authority. This is the view taken by the Rev. F. A. Grace, M.A., who has published a work entitled "Some Questions of the Church Catechism and Doctrines Involved, briefly Explained." from which the following extract is taken :—

"We have among us various sects and denominations who go by the general name of Dissenters : in what light are we to consider them?—*A.* As heretics; and in our Litany we expressly pray to be delivered from the sins of 'false doctrine, heresy, and schism.'

"Is, then, their worship a laudable service?—*A.* No; because they worship God according to their own evil and corrupt imaginations, and not according to his revealed will, and therefore their worship is idolatrous.

"Is Dissent a great sin?—*A.* Yes; it is in direct opposition to our duty towards God.

"Is it wicked, then, to enter a meeting-house at all?—*A.* Most assuredly, because, as was said above, it is a house where God is worshipped otherwise than he has commanded, and therefore it is not dedicated to his honour and glory."

After reading this exhibition of that charity which

thinketh no evil, can there be any doubt as to the harmony and loving kindness existing among the different religious denominations?

Associated with the English Church is a system of patronage, which acts injuriously alike upon the moral and the intellectual character of its exponents. From the eighteenth century to the present time the "spiritual pastors" have been too frequently selected for their office through favouritism rather than on account of their moral and intellectual ability. In addressing his clergymen, many of whom were said to be fox-hunters and excessive drinkers, Bishop Kenn thus described them:—

"Alas! alas! for your debauched courses! An holy calling and an unholy life! Spiritual persons, and yet live after the flesh! A clean garment, and an unclean heart! Servants of God, and yet slaves of sin! Reverend in your function, and yet shameful in your practice! A minister, and yet given to wine! A priest, and yet lascivious!

The reader will find these words in "Kenn's Expostulatoria; or, the Complaints of the Church of England." Although this description was penned during the last century, in many cases it is equally as applicable to-day. To an impartial observer, what appear to be the chief moving considerations on the part of those who desire to purchase Church livings? Are they not, apparently—does a particular living possess such attractions as a good fishing stream, a pleasant riding course, and a congregation composed of persons who are free from Scepticism, being contented to open their mouths and shut their eyes, and accept with implicit faith what their pastors tell them. Of course, it would be unfair to place all the clergy of the Church of England under this category. In this order, as among all bodies of men, are to be found those whose lives are strictly pure, earnest, and useful. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that throughout the rural districts the clergy are not remarkable for displaying that mental activity so desirable in those who essay to guide the conduct of others. Moreover, even as Church patronage is now bestowed, personal influence is much more potent than intellectual ability in the selection of occupants of pulpits. The

late Lord John Russell, in his "Essay on the English Constitution," puts this fact very clearly. He says :—

"In the Church the immense and valuable patronage of Government is uniformly bestowed on their political adherents. No talent, no learning, no piety, can advance the fortunes of a clergyman whose political opinions are adverse to those of the governing powers."

As a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit, neither can the impure patronage system foster ethical purity and general usefulness.

The Church of England is not only surrounded by impure conditions, but it is equally as significant that it has failed as a reforming agency. During the Church Congress held at Plymouth some years since, the *Times*, in a leading article, preferred the following severe indictment against thenational religion. It says :—

"As a fact, expressed in popular language, and understood by the people of this country, the 'Church,' or the 'Church of England,' was in favour of the alliance of Continental Absolutists against constitutional government ; it was against the amelioration of the criminal code, and in favour of the principles of vengeance and prevention as against that of reformation ; it was in favour of hanging for almost any offence a man is now fined for at the assizes ; it was in favour of the slave trade, and afterwards of slavery ; it was against the repeal of the Test and Corporations Act ; it was against Catholic emancipation ; it was against Parliamentary reform and municipal reform ; it was against the commutation of tithes, though it has since had to acknowledge the Act a great benefit ; it was against the repeal of the corn laws and the navigation laws ; it was against free trade generally ; it was against all education beyond the simplest elements."

Unfortunately, there are too many facts in history to justify this tremendous indictment. At one period the Church had every opportunity of proving its power and intention in the field of education. With vast wealth and influence it had for a long period the direction of the youthful mind. How did this religious institution use its advantages ? Simply by thrusting its theological doctrines upon the people, rather than teaching them the practical duties of life. So palpable was the failure of the Church as an educational medium that the State was at length compelled to intervene, and do what the Church had failed to accomplish. Unable to achieve

the work themselves, the members of this wealthiest of all religious establishments became the most determined opponents of those who were able and willing to promote the secular education of the people. From the time when Lord Brougham pleaded for a national scheme of education, to the present, when bigotry manifests itself on the Board Schools, it can be truly said that the policy of the Church has been to thwart all instruction not in accordance with its own narrow creeds and dogmas.

Similar antagonism has been offered by the Church to political reform. The bishops, with few exceptions, in the House of Lords are as adverse to real Liberal legislation in 1880 as they were in 1832. Macaulay, in the first volume of his *Essays*, says :—

“The Church of England continued to be for more than a hundred and fifty years the servile handmaid of Monarchy, the steady enemy of public liberty.”

Lecky, too, in his “*History of Rationalism in Europe*,” vol. ii., writes :—

“No other Church so uniformly betrayed and trampled on the liberties of her country.....she invariably cast her influence into the scale of tyranny.”

From these historical facts it is too evident that the English Church has failed in its duty as a progressive agent, and made itself a stumbling block to Liberal advancement. Indeed, the condition of our rural population affords ample proof of this. This portion of the people was for years directly indoctrinated with the Church's teachings; but with what results?—the lack of practical education and personal independence. It is only since secular instruction has supplanted theological teaching in our agricultural districts that self-reliance and united action among the labourers have commenced. The Anglican Church has really been tried and found wanting as a progressive institution; it must, therefore, no longer be relied upon, nor must we trust to its power, but rather seek that material unsacerdotal aid which is alone capable of adding dignity to man, and of conferring benefits upon mankind.

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