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THE
CHURCHMAN

FEBRUARY, 1890.

ART. I.—PROSECUTIONS FOR RITUAL OBSERVANCES.

THE Ritual struggle carried on during the last forty years has been one involving vast and important issues. It has been no mere controversy as to the meaning of a rubric or the outside form of public worship; but doctrines, which concern the central truths of Christianity, have virtually and confessedly been at stake. But granting this, yet there are many whose minds are troubled at the prosecutions so pertinaciously carried on. They ask whether law courts are the right place of appeal, and lawsuits the right weapons wherewith to settle our ritual controversies. Even those who at first were inclined to acquiesce in these legal proceedings now ask, What has been the result? Are we any nearer to reunion at home? Has any general consensus been reached? Are our "unhappy divisions" lessened and is our charity increased? And if the dispute only grows hotter, and peace is more remote, and the Church's work continually hindered by Christian energy being directed into legal channels, then they ask wearily, When are these prosecutions to cease? Even at an early date the warning was given that they were likely to end in disappointment. The late Sir Joseph Napier, of whose personal sentiments there can be no doubt, and who was engaged as counsel in the Bennett case, says: "These prosecutions are rather mischievous than useful. They embitter controversy on subjects mysterious, if not awful, and with which angry controversy should not be associated. I incline to think it safer and wiser not to interfere with liberty of opinion."¹ In the same interesting volume there is a letter of the present Bishop of Winchester, in which, with reference

¹ "Lectures, etc., of the late Sir J. Napier, Lord Chancellor of Ireland." Dublin, 1888, p. 89.

to the Public Worship Act, he says that Sir Joseph expressed to him his apprehension that that Act would turn the Church Militant into a Church Litigant.¹ And what has been the event? The mind of the Church has been called away from its proper field of duty, and the strength of one portion of her children given, not to the earnest doing of their own work, but to the endeavour to compel others to desist from what they hold to be legal and within their corporate rights.

In words we all grant that compulsion must fail, or if it seem to succeed, that it suppresses liberty of thought only to bring in moral ruin. It did not succeed against Christianity either when employed by the lawyers of the Jewish Sanhedrim or by the despotic might of the pagan emperors of Rome. It did prevail when wielded by professing Christians against the new ways of the Reformers, but only to degrade Spain and destroy faith and morality in France. The Church of Rome is wiser now. As has been well said: "It has discovered by force of circumstances that martyrdom, and not coercion, is the most efficacious road to the propagation of the faith, and one Father Damien will make more converts than a thousand priests."² So one prisoner shut up in Lancaster Gaol will make more Ritualists than a thousand decrees of the law courts will send in the opposite direction. And the reason is obvious. Decrees of law courts appeal to no moral faculty. They scarcely affect the intellect; for the wisest summing-up of the most experienced judge does not prevent the losing litigant from trying his chance on an appeal. They are not expected to influence the conscience. Criminal judges have to deal with sinners in every stage of progress towards ruin; they do not feel it to be their duty to convert them, and if they were to try they would scarcely succeed. That duty belongs to the chaplain of the gaol and other directly Christian agents. But if there be any suspicion of persecution, or even of interference with a man's rights, the sympathy of the public is not with the attacking party, but with the party attacked. Coercion does not succeed. Nay, more, it ought not to succeed. Freedom of opinion, freedom of thought and of action are precious privileges, for which our nation has struggled bravely and endured patiently. And they have done this because they believe that they lead on, in the long-run, to truth, and to a higher moral and spiritual state than is possible when men are not free. And any attempt at suppression leads to a reaction, in which men not only condemn those who interfere with their neighbours' proceedings, but seek for reasons to excuse or even justify them.

¹ "Letters, etc., of the late Sir J. Napier, Lord Chancellor of Ireland." Dublin, 1888, pp. 6, 14.

Letter of Rev. Mr. Swayne in *Guardian*, Nov. 20, 1889.

The right appeal in all moral and religious questions is not to the law courts, but to the good sense and enlightened conscience of the thoughtful and religious people of our land. And they, by a slow but sure process, will give their decision. Not necessarily a right one; for they may not have been well instructed, and they certainly will be influenced by their feelings and affections. They will judge by what they see and hear as regards the conduct of the opposing parties—those who are most fair and tolerant; those who work most diligently and in the most loving spirit; those who show most self-denial and are most careful for the good of others—these, and such as these, will in the end win the approbation of those whose good opinion is of real value. Lawsuits will count not for, but against those who bring them. “By their fruits ye shall know them;” and where the fruits are ritual prosecutions the general opinion will be that the trees that bear them must be of a thorny kind.

The great mistake made in all such matters, and in controversy generally, is to think only of the few extreme men on either side. But between them is the great quiet party, who form the bulk of the clergy, and who wish, whatever may be their theological tenets, to do their duty and obey the laws of their Church. All these men are open to argument, and are, as a rule, well acquainted with Holy Scripture, and study more or less, reading, perhaps, too exclusively serial literature, and influenced probably in their judgment too much by newspapers; but valuing, nevertheless, and fairly well acquainted with, the great writers of our Church—Hooker, Barrow, Butler, Pearson, and the like; and they wish to be fair and candid, and are so, as a rule. And the mass of such men are repelled by ritual prosecutions and resent them. The combatants may like the excitement of the fray; they dislike it. If any section of the Church gets the reputation of being narrow-minded and intolerant to others it will find itself shunned, and its influence will decline. Litigation is always an evil, and generally a misfortune; and a society the main work of which is litigation, will work the sure decay of the principles professed by those who make use of such unworthy weapons, and of the party which they are supposed to represent.

Foolish these suits undeniably are, and fatal to the wishes of those who promote them. But if this were all, we might be content with regretting that good men should give themselves up to such unwise proceedings. But there is a far more serious question; for are not such prosecutions contrary to the whole spirit of Christianity? If there were a single sentence in which our Lord seemed ever to give encouragement to lawsuits, it would long ago have been detected, and triumphantly brought

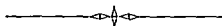
forward as a proof that Christianity is untrue. On the contrary, He bids us not to judge or condemn; and what is it that leads to prosecutions but the condemning of certain practices so strongly as to determine to stop them by force? The attempt will fail; but besides this it is contrary to the command of our Master. His new command is that we love one another; and probably of all St. Paul's teaching there is no assertion more generally ignored, and that stands more completely apart from the words and actions of many professing Christians, than that charity is more precious and more important than faith. "Now abideth these three, faith, hope, charity; but the greatest of these is charity." Our Church has very strongly paraphrased this doctrine in the collect for Quinquagesima Sunday, in which she not only calls "charity the bond of peace and of all virtues," but declares that "whosoever liveth without charity is counted dead before God." If this be the meaning of St. Paul's eulogy of love, all Churchmen should labour for peace, and grant readily to others that freedom of opinion which they claim for themselves.

But, the retort is made, if this be so, what will become of our rights? But this complaint belongs to the same class as the objection made to Christ's teaching, that society would be impossible if His commands were literally acted upon. But surely real Christians should endeavour to keep Christ's commands, and leave to those who are Christians in name only this battling for what they are pleased to call their rights. St. Paul tells us that even when we are personally injured we had better "take wrong, and suffer ourselves to be defrauded." There is a great power in this gentleness, and it will generally prove more influential to protect us than readiness to avenge wrongs. But these prosecutions are not to resist wrongs done to us, but are got up by a central society, using the names of "aggrieved parishioners," to settle matters of opinion. And by the obloquy that necessarily follows upon such proceedings, they further the progress of the very views and practices which they endeavour to stop.

If there must be prosecutions, and I dare say there always will be plenty, let them, at least, be honest, carried on by the persons who give their names, and therefore only bringing obloquy and loss on individuals. But let Christian men refuse to foster them. Let them mourn over them, and endeavour to soothe all angry feelings, and labour for these things "which make for peace." And then there would be the chance that quieter and more gentle methods might succeed, not certainly in reducing all things to the standard of one school of thought, but to a consensus as to what are the reasonable limits of the ritual sanctioned by our Church, as regards less or more; and as

to the few cases in which these limits are not observed, the proper persons to provide a remedy are the Bishops, as being the appointed rulers of the Church; and they, too, would deal most successfully with the clergy if they chiefly, and at all events in the first place, used their fatherly influence, and trusted to peaceful and kindly methods. But when a private society endeavours to exercise episcopal functions, and to keep the clergy, and even Bishops, in order, they will find that they have taken upon them a task which is beyond their power, and in which they must inevitably fail.

R. PAYNE SMITH.



ART. II.—ROBERT BROWNING.

ROBERT BROWNING is dead! The news from Venice announcing that, on December 12, 1889, the illustrious poet had passed away, has come with a painful shock to very many of his admirers throughout the whole English-speaking world. It is not easy to conceive of modern English literature without him; but it is so, and it is only too certain that he has left us to join the ranks of the "Immortals"—the kings and princes of song.

To treat at all adequately of Browning's life-work would be to treat of the whole history of English poetry for the last fifty years; all that is even attempted here is briefly to sketch the chief characteristics of the imperishable verse which Browning has bequeathed to us—surely a priceless possession!—and set down a few words as to the specially religious thought of some of them.

But first we are confronted at the outset by the objection which Browning's poetry has always been liable to—that of the poet's obscurity; nor is it easy to proceed unless we have said a brief word on this head. The charge is an old one, dating ever since the publication of "Sordello" in 1840, and reiterated *ad nauseam* ever since. There was some apparent excuse for the charge in the case of this poem, for the thought and the situation are of an extraordinarily complex character, being busied with the "development of a soul" throughout. But Browning is really the reverse of obscure. His thought is rugged, it is true, and often expressed in rugged verse; but (as Mr. Swinburne has so admirably shown) it is the intensity of light the poet throws on a subject that dazzles us; the matter in hand is "dark with excess of light," and, moreover, the poet's method of treatment, essentially dramatic in nature, has caused no small difficulty to his readers. "He is too brilliant and subtle," says