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# Notes and Comments

## JOHN MEDLEY ON IRISH CHURCH DISESTABLISHMENT: AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER

SOME time ago, in this journal, I tried to show how one of the great Canadian Anglican churchmen of the last century had represented the liberal church-state theory typical of the newer Anglo-Catholicism, in contrast to the older "high and dry" churchmanship.<sup>1</sup> I have recently found a letter from Medley to W. E. Gladstone on the projected disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, which sheds some light on Medley's standpoint.<sup>2</sup> My purpose here is simply to present that letter with brief introductory notes.

### I

The context of the letter is Gladstone's campaign for Irish Church disestablishment. Early in 1865 Gladstone began to work for the abolition of Anglican privileges in Ireland, in the hope of improved relations between the British government and the Roman Catholic majority of the Irish people. On 13 February he wrote to Sir Robert Phillimore: "I would treat the Irish church, as a religious body, with the same respect and consideration as the church of England, and would apply to it the same liberal policy as regards its freedom of action. But I am not loyal to it as an establishment."<sup>3</sup> After a period of discreet exploration, he overthrew the Disraeli ministry and won the general election of 1868 on a platform of disestablishment and partial disendowment of the Church of Ireland—a platform which he implemented the next year against strong conservative and ecclesiastical opposition.

Gladstone's biographer notes the contrast between this victorious policy and his opposition to financial reform of the Irish Church in 1835–1836. "What is extraordinary in the career of this far-shining and dominant character of his age, is not a development of specific opinions on dogma, or ordinance, on article or sacrament, but the fact that with a steadfast tread he marched along the high anglican road to the summits of that liberalism which it was the original object of the new anglicans to resist

1. "A Tractarian Patriarch: John Medley of Fredericton," *CJT*, 6 (1960), 15–24.

2. The letter, dated at Fredericton, 15 April 1869, is preserved in the British Museum, Add. MS. 44,420 (Gladstone Papers, Vol. 335), fol. 120–123.

3. John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (New York, 1903), II, 141. Cf. Gladstone's letter of 16 April 1865 to his eldest son, W. H. Gladstone (*ibid.*, p. 159f.). For Pusey's commendation of Gladstone's work for the freedom of the English Church, cf. H. P. Liddon, *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey*, IV (London, 1898), 199f.

and overthrow."<sup>4</sup> I suggest that this apparently paradoxical statement discloses the secret of Gladstone's development. As Morley himself notes, the English "catholic revival" was essentially a religious movement, clearly distinct from the continental "catholic counter-revolution" with which it is often too closely linked.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Gladstone's passage from the still rather conservative churchmanship of *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1838) to his mature policy is intimately associated with the clarification of Tractarian thinking under the pressure of events from 1833 onwards. If Keble's "National Apostasy" sermon of 14 July 1833 is still reminiscent of the "Throne-and-Altar" polemics of Queen Anne's time,<sup>6</sup> the Anglo-Catholics soon dissociated their claim for the spiritual authority of the church from the least reliance on state support. Medley's letter is interesting as an expression of this independent churchmanship in the light of a realistic appraisal of the Irish and Canadian scenes.

## II

MY DEAR SIR,

Having read, not without indignation, the accusations of "sacrilegious robbery["], "petty larceny", & even "murder", hurled against you by some who ought to know better than to make use of such violent and unchristian expressions, it seems to me the duty of every one who has the happiness of knowing you, to assure you, as I now take the liberty of doing, of my full belief in the righteousness & justice of your measure in respect to the Irish Church. I rejoice to see that one just & liberal opponent has been able to give credit for pure intentions & honourable motives.<sup>7</sup> Were the Irish character at all like the American, I should be as sanguine as you appear to be, of the good that the Irish Church itself may derive from the result. But the line which the great body of the nobility & the Bishops are taking is not very reassuring. Still, I trust that the House of Lords may be induced not to reject the Bill.<sup>8</sup> Our Church in N. Brunswick is, in one respect, in the same position with the Irish, that it forms a small fraction of the population, & that the Irish & French are a majority of our people. And if our's were a dominant Church, with large absentee landed proprietors, & the evil could not be remedied, we should be an[n]exed to the United States in a year.<sup>9</sup> Unhappily, I never yet knew *one* Irishman from the North of Ireland, who had any notion of the Church but as a State engine framed for the purpose of paying him to be a Protestant: nor have I ever known one such person, who was willing charitably to allow to R. Catholics due credit for the immense exertions they make to maintain their own religion, unaided by foreign help.

I think the success of your scheme will, under Providence do us all good, & shake us into a little selfreliance.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps scarcely right for me to intrude upon your time, when such important interests daily & hourly press upon you. But if the sincere expression of the convictions of one mind, not mixed up

4. Morley, *op. cit.*, I, 153.

5. *Ibid.*, 159.

6. Cf. Owen Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (London, 1960), 33.

7. I have no evidence for the identity of this opponent.

8. Cf. Morley, *op. cit.*, II, 266ff.

9. A note in Gladstone's hand, dated 9 May 1869, directs that the last two sentences should be sent to Lord Granville, then Colonial Secretary, for his information.

10. Cf. E. R. Fairweather, *art. cit.*, 22f.

with the political questions of the day, may be of the smallest comfort to you, & the little rill may trickle towards the same course with the full river, my word shall not be withheld; & I feel assured that you will kindly excuse what is kindly intended.

Believe me

My dear Sir

With great esteem & respect

Yours very faithfully

JOHN FREDERICTON

EUGENE R. FAIRWEATHER

Trinity College  
Toronto

CONTRIBUTIONS to this new section of the journal will be welcomed from our readers. Exegetical or historical notes, brief expositions, comments on published articles, etc., are solicited.