

John Bird Sumner in Parliament

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John Bird Sumner (1780-1862) who was Bishop of Chester 1828-48 and Archbishop of Canterbury from 1848-62 appears to have been early influenced in his evangelical convictions. His mother Hannah Bird¹ was a first cousin of William Wilberforce and it seems probable that his father, the Revd Robert Sumner who was Vicar of Kenilworth was also a man of evangelical conviction.² John Bird was a student at King's College Cambridge during the years of Charles Simeon's ascendancy and it is hard to imagine that he did not attend Simeon's sermon and study classes in those years.³

Sumner was appointed Bishop of Chester in 1828⁴ where he continued until his elevation to the Archbishopric of Canterbury twenty years later.⁵ He remained primate until his death in 1862 thus completing a Parliamentary career which spanned the middle years of the nineteenth century. This was an era in which industrial development continued to burgeon and in which the population rose correspondingly very rapidly. Needless to say it brought to the fore, and to the attention of Parliament, many attendant economic and social problems. The years of Sumner's episcopate were also an era of profound change and upheaval for the churches. A number of significant issues with which the established Church had to grapple also entered the courts of Parliamentary debate during his tenure of office.

Sumner's Significance

There has been no biography of John Bird Sumner primarily because, being a modest man, he appears to have destroyed his private papers⁶; largely for this reason he has been much overlooked as a churchman and leader. Sumner was a gifted academic who in his younger days produced a number of scholarly and pastoral books, the most significant being *Apostolic*

- 1 See for example her correspondence with William Wilberforce (Bodleian Library M. S. Wilberforce C3 folio 127).
- 2 See A. R. Ashwell, *Life of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce* Vol. 1, pp 82-83.
- 3 Sumner was at King's College as an undergraduate from 1797-1800 during the first two of these years Charles Simeon was Dean of the College.
- 4 *The Record*, 19 September 1828; *Times* (London), 18 September 1828.
- 5 See *Times*, (London), 11 March 1848; *Record*, 13 April 1848.
- 6 Information confirmed by a letter from Mr C. Sumner dated 30th June 1986.

Preaching Considered (1815) and *A Treatise on the Records of Creation* (2 volumes, 1816). The latter was a serious attempt to grapple with social theory in the light of biblical principles.

In his years as Bishop of Chester Sumner proved to be both an outstanding pastor and a gifted administrator who grappled effectively with a huge diocese which included the Lancashire cotton towns and the sprawling conurbations of Liverpool and Manchester. In the early years of the nineteenth century the Church of England generally had not been awake to the problems associated with the rapidly increasing industrial population. Everywhere there was a desperate need for new church buildings and increased accommodation. Sumner energetically set about the task of making good this lack. In 1839 he gave details of church building which had taken place in Chester diocese since he had become its bishop. In all he had consecrated 161 churches with 20,047 sittings in Cheshire and 99,037 sittings in Lancashire. The ultimate tribute was paid to his labours by Sir Robert Peel who declared in a speech to the House of Commons in May 1843:

. . . It would not be just were I not to express in strong terms, my admiration of the conduct of the Bishop of Chester, who has effected so much improvement in that diocese which has the good fortune to be under his charge, and to witness his example. It is impossible for any man to read the charge of the Bishop of Chester, and the documents which accompanied it, without entertaining sentiments of the deepest respect for the venerable prelate.¹

Commenting on Sumner's elevation to Canterbury the *Guardian* newspaper described Sumner as 'the most prominent advocate of evangelical views'² Nevertheless his archbishopate was marked by mild and statesmanlike policies. In all respects Sumner proved himself the right man for what proved to be fourteen years of crisis for the Church. One of his first acts was to consecrate Renn Hampden as Bishop of Hereford when almost all his colleagues on the bench had expressed their opposition to his appointment. This was immediately followed by the Gorham Controversy in which Henry Phillpotts, Bishop of Exeter, refused to institute George Cornelius Gorham to a living in his diocese because of his views on baptismal regeneration. The case, which was even discussed in Parliament, proved in the end a triumph for the evangelical and low church cause and resulted in a further secession of Anglican clerics to the Roman Church. In 1850 the way was opened for the restoration of the Roman Catholic episcopal hierarchy in England, to be greeted by a nationwide storm of protest. This was followed by lengthy debates over proposals to revive the Upper House of Convocation as a final court of appeal in doctrinal matters. The close of Sumner's primacy was marked by struggles over the Burial Laws and Church rates and by the publication of two controversial books,

1 *Hansard*, Vol. LXVIII 5 May 1843.

2 *The Guardian*, 19 February 1848.

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and an all-Anglican volume entitled *Essays and Reviews* in 1860. Both created considerable doubts about the inspiration and reliability of scripture among clergy and laity alike.

Sumner devoted a good deal of his Parliamentary energies to several of these major national issues. Most notably, he took a prominent part in the debates on the Church rates question and contributed speeches on the Burial bills and also spoke out strongly against the Bill to revive Convocations.

In the years before John Bird Sumner's elevation to the episcopal bench 'evangelicals' had, through the influence of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, been able to achieve a Parliamentary reputation for effective social concern.¹ At the time of Sumner's consecration there was no comparable tradition in the Upper House. Although just a few years earlier there had been two other evangelical appointments to the episcopal bench in Henry Ryder to Gloucester and John's own younger brother Charles to Llandaff. However during his thirty four years as a Parliamentarian Sumner was able to bring a gracious but incisive Christian perspective to bear on many important social, political and moral issues. In this he was to find a forceful ally in Anthony Ashley who on becoming the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury in 1851 left the Commons and took his seat in the Upper House.

In addition to his evangelical religious convictions Sumner's Parliamentary debating was also influenced to some extent by his Tory allegiance as well as by his taste for 'laissez faire' political economic theory. In particular Sumner endorsed the writing of social economists such as John Stuart Mill and Thomas Malthus.

As a younger man Sumner embraced the views of Malthus that the expanding economy would always be able to sustain the level of population of a developing nation which inhabited it. Malthus worked on the assumption that if a nation's population proceeded unchecked for any length of time it would surpass the capacity of the land to sustain it. Famine and death would follow allowing the remainder to survive. In his volumes entitled *Treatise on the Records of the Creation* which he produced in 1816 whilst an assistant master at Eton College, Sumner openly endorsed Malthus' position. Indeed A. M. C. Waterman has argued that Sumner consciously sought to convert those views into an ideology² with a Christian basis.

As Malthus understood it, increased population inevitably led to competition for land and the strongest and most powerful were thus able to become private owners of land whilst the majority became poor. In his *Treatise* Sumner argued for the inevitability of inequality and the existence of the poor.

1 See for example E. M. Howse, *Saints in Politics*.

2 A. M. C. Waterman, 'The Ideological Alliance of Political Economy and Christian Theology 1798-1833' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 1983), p 231.

Sumner saw in Malthus' view an expression of the Christian belief that God would provide for and sustain his creation, but he also shared the concern of some of Malthus' critics who were repelled at the thought of 'positive checks' on population growth brought by famine, war and epidemics. Sumner fully endorsed the divine command and human instinct to multiply but he nevertheless urged that such 'preventative checks' were not necessary provided people were prudent and recognised their obligation to provide for their own before starting a family. Sumner even went so far as to suggest that the poor should be discouraged from marrying before the age of twenty five. Along with a new generation optimistic after the French Wars, Sumner felt that greater economic and technological progress would enable the nation to sustain its increasing population. Sumner believed that the expanding population would be a stimulus to the poorer section of society to fulfil their obligation to work with added commitment to ensure that they were adequately clothed and fed.

Sumner, like many of his contemporaries, therefore justified the existence of poverty. As he saw it, it was a necessary class distinction determined by God and confirmed by natural law. 'Poverty,' he wrote, 'is often honourable and comfortable'. Again 'Poverty is the natural lot of many, in a well-constituted society, but is necessary, that a society may be well-constituted.'¹

Sumner drew a distinction between 'natural' poverty and 'indigence', an extreme of poverty most frequently in his view brought about by causes such as intemperance, marrying too soon and lack of foresight. Such poverty is the punishment which the moral government of God inflicts on thoughtlessness and extravagance. Sumner was hopeful that the newly conceived schemes for lower education sponsored by the National Society would counteract the recklessness of certain sections of the poor. His pronounced Arminian emphasis upon freedom of the will and individual choice leading to both spiritual and temporal improvement found correspondence at this point.

It is part of the thesis of this article that in a great deal of Sumner's Parliamentary debating and influence he was motivated both by his firm evangelical convictions and on occasions by his 'laissez faire' economic theories.

As a member of the Upper House Sumner showed himself to be one who took his Parliamentary duties seriously. He seems to have been present whenever his other commitments allowed. For example in 1847, his penultimate year as the Bishop of a very large industrial diocese, Sumner still found time to be present in the House on fifteen out of a total of ninety-three days of Parliamentary debate. His speeches reveal a considered approach based on careful preparation. Sumner was present in the House for all the major religious and social debates which took place during his episcopate. He addressed the House on fifty two separate occasions. Some of his speeches,

1 *Treatise on Creation*, II p 92.

particularly those which related to issues with political and religious implications, were lengthy and forcefully argued. With two or three possible exceptions, all of Sumner's speeches were on issues which were overtly related to the Church or the Christian faith.

Sumner and Major Social and Political Issues

Sumner took his seat making the necessary oaths and declaration on the 9 February 1829.¹ He was thus able to make his maiden speech during the *Catholic Emancipation Bill* which was introduced into the House in April. On this particular issue Sumner showed himself to be of moderate views. Part of the reason for this may well have been the situation in his own diocese of Chester which had great concentrations of Roman Catholics particularly in Lancashire together with clusters of Irish immigrants in the Liverpool and Manchester areas. This seems the most plausible explanation for his taking the opposite view to his younger brother Charles and his distinguished University tutor and mentor, Charles Simeon of Cambridge.² Sumner saw the nub of the issue clearly and wrote as follows to the Duke of Wellington: 'the safety of the whole measure depends very much upon the presumption that the papal cause is a declining cause and *will* become so more and more.'³ Had Sumner foreseen the coming rapid rise of Roman Catholicism he may not have been so ready to support the measure. However, like others, he clearly saw that the situation in Ireland where more than ninety per cent of the population were Roman Catholics necessitated the right to elect Roman Catholic members to Parliament. Sumner did not feel that a Roman Catholic Prime Minister would be an insurmountable problem and recommended that in such an eventuality the ecclesiastical functions of the office be put into a commission.⁴

1832 saw the introduction of the *Great Reform Bill* and although Sumner was present for the debates he did not, himself, make a speech. When Lord Grey's Bill was first brought to the House most of the Bishops voted against it. However, public opinion fuelled by the radical press turned strongly against the bench with the result that some of the more sensitive prelates changed sides. Sumner was among their number and voted for the second reading which was carried in the House of Lords on 13 April 1832.

Two years later a significant piece of social legislation came before the house in the shape of the New Poor Law Bill. Up until 1834 it had been the practice for individuals who were unemployed or receiving low wages to receive money or supplementary payments from the local magistrates. This procedure led to unsatisfactory side-effects. It meant that in some cases

1 *Hansard*, 9 February 1829.

2 See G. H. Sumner, *Life of C. R. Sumner* p 158 and W. Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of Rev. Charles Simeon* (Hatchard, 1848), p 443. Simeon expressed grave misgivings about the bill.

3 O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* (A. & C. Black, 1966), Part 1, p 10.

4 *Ibid.*, Part II p 18.

employers tended to keep wages at low levels knowing that the parish would supplement them. Secondly it encouraged laziness on the part of some labourers who made little effort to find work, knowing that the parish would provide for them.

Sumner had been a member of the Poor Law Commission which had been sitting since 1832. He accepted the conclusion of the Scottish economist, Adam Smith who asserted that man would labour if the individual satisfaction was adequate. For Sumner such satisfaction for the majority of labourers came in the form of a crude materialistic 'love of gain'.

Earlier Sumner had been optimistic that the expanding economy of the post war years would provide the necessary motivation for the labouring classes. As things turned out, depression set in, bread prices were high and many farm workers resorted to rickburning and rioting under the guise of Captain Swing.¹ By 1826 when he produced his *Evidence of Christianity*, Sumner was beginning to take a very different view that 'only the gentle beauties of faith' could provide relief and dignity to 'the lowest stations'. Sumner was particularly dismayed by the rioting and machine smashing by unemployed handloom weavers in several parts of his own diocese. All this caused him to support a bill which led to the Workhouse becoming the heartless horror of Victorian England. *The New Poor Law* required that no able-bodied person was to receive relief except in a Workhouse. The country was divided into 600 new Poor Law Unions which ignored the familiar parish basis altogether. Thus many unemployed found themselves not only prisoners in strange new environs but also cut off from the familiar local community.

Although Sumner did not speak during the debate in the House it is clear that his stature as a member of the Poor Law Commission made his informal expressions of support for the Bill an influential factor. Mr. N. W. Senior later wrote of Bishop Sumner's role as follows: 'I do not believe that we could have . . . carried the bill, as it was carried, through the House of Lords, if . . . the late Bishop Sumner had not supported us.'²

The next major piece of social legislation followed a decade later with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Soloway commented of it: 'Not since the Reform Bill of 1832 had nearly the entire bench been so involved in a non-ecclesiastical piece of legislation.'³ Sumner and seven Tory Bishops joined with all the whig prelates in supporting the motion. A number of reasons persuaded Sumner in favour of the bill. As a political economist he was still convinced of 'laissez faire' and believed the market should be allowed to find its own level. Like many of the clergy of his industrial

1 See N. Gash, 'The Rural Unrest in England in 1830 with Special Reference to Berkshire' (Unpublished B.Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1934).

2 A. R. Blomfield, *A Memoir of Bishop Blomfield* Vol. I, p 204.

3 R. Soloway, *Prelates and People 1783-1852* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1969), p 222

diocese, Sumner was sure that the bill was in the best interests of the poor. He also saw the importance of the church siding with a popular opinion which was so obviously rooted in social justice. E. Roy Moore comments on Sumner's position that 'he had fully come to the conclusion that if the Church was to become credible in the eyes of the working classes, the physical and social conditions of the poor must be improved, and the Church not only be seen to be sympathetic but also active in their welfare.'¹

One other important area of social concern with which Sumner interested himself was the question of divorce reform. Up until the 1850s the dissolution of marriage was only possible by private act of Parliament. In 1850 a Royal Commission on the marriage law was set up and recommended changes which were embodied in Lord Cranworth's Divorce Bill of 1857. The Bill aimed to make divorce more easily attainable and contained a clause to allow the injured wife or husband the right to a divorce.

There was disagreement in the Church about the rightness of divorce. Some bishops held to the sacramental view that marriage was absolutely indissoluble. Others argued that divorce was permissible on the ground of adultery, the so-called Matthean exception clause (Matt. 19:9). Sumner was among their number. In his speech Sumner began by speaking of the danger of increased facilities ending in 'gross laxity of morals'.² Sumner appealed to the 'Divine Law' and went on to say: 'No one . . . could deny that, according to the general tenor of that law, marriage once contracted, was designed to be indissoluble, saving for one cause – a cause which destroyed the purpose and intent of marriage, the cause of unfaithfulness.'³ Sumner 'did not see how they could refuse this liberty to an injured wife or husband'. He regretted however that 'the bill did not stop there'. He was deeply unhappy that the guilty parties who had broken an existing marriage could form a new legal union. He roundly declared that:

they would best consult the interests of morality and the comforts of social life if in legislating on this delicate subject they adhered closely to the principle which scripture had laid down. On these grounds, while he voted for the second reading of the Bill, he must oppose in committee the clause which permitted the guilty parties to be united in legal marriage.⁴

In the Committee stage a week later Sumner was forthright against allowing the guilty parties to remarry:

I can neither reconcile it to reason nor to the Divine Command, which is the only safe and proper guide. My Lords, I think that we could hardly furnish a man who desired to possess his neighbour's wife with a more persuasive argument than this clause supplies. I

1 E. R. Moore, *John Bird Sumner, Bishop of Chester 1828-48* (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Manchester, 1976), p 203.

2 *Hansard* Vol. CXLV, 19 May 1857.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

think we could scarcely place a woman dissatisfied with her present lot, in a state of greater temptation, than by consenting to this clause.¹

Sumner proposed instead an amendment to the effect that only the not-guilty party (the 'party on whose petition the marriage shall have been dissolved') should be legally entitled to remarry. His amendment was carried by a slim majority but subsequently reversed by a further amendment put by the Lord Chancellor. Later in July of the same year when the *Adulterers Second Marriage Bill* was before the house the proposal was made that such couples who had had a civil ceremony should have 'some sort of religious service afterwards provided a clergyman could be found whose conscience wouldn't be offended by the ceremony'. Sumner's evangelical commitment to scriptural authority made him unequivocal in his opposition. 'Such persons', he declared, 'should be satisfied with a civil contract'² He continued: 'It was true charity hopeth all things; but it passed the bounds of charity to pronounce ex Cathedra, the Divine approval of a marriage which had its origin in guilty passion, and was brought about by a heinous crime.'³

Sumner and Ecclesiastical Issues

Despite taking a prominent part in a number of key social debates as has been indicated, Sumner devoted most of his Parliamentary speeches to Church and Church related issues. Indeed he spoke on more than thirty such separate bills. His Church-related speeches fall into three main categories: temporalities, doctrine and worship and relationships with other faiths.

Being the bishop of a large diocese with an obvious gift for administration Sumner was always ready to exercise concern for the Church's material assets. During the course of the *Pluralities Bill* in March 1832 Sumner challenged Lord King to be specific as to those bishops he claimed were pluralists.⁴ In the following year the same peer introduced a *Bill for Correcting the Misappropriation of Queen Anne's Bounty*. In his remarks he contended that Church dignitaries were using the money from the Bounty for purposes other than were intended, namely augmenting poor livings. Sumner rose to his feet because he understood a petition complaining about abuses in Chester diocese was being prepared. He stated 'that if ever that petition was presented to their Lordships, he would be perfectly ready to show that it was full of the grossest mis-statements and the greatest ignorance of the subject for which it related.'⁴

1 Ibid.

2 *Hansard*, Vol. CXLVI, 2 July 1857.

3 Ibid.

4 *Hansard*, Vol. XI, 23 March 1832.

5 Ibid. Vol. XVI, 12 March 1833.

These same two issues both came before the Upper House eighteen years later in the form of the *Ecclesiastical Commission Bill* and the *Benefices in Plurality Bill*. Sumner who had now been elevated to the primacy, spoke at some length on both issues.

By 1850 the Church Commissioners were dealing with very large sums of money far in excess of those of 1832. The *Ecclesiastical Commission Bill* therefore decided to appoint three permanent full-time commissioners to manage the church's estates and monies. Sumner spoke strongly in favour of this proposal. In his view, according to the *Hansard* report,

it is essential that there should be some responsible officers directly and distinctly charged with the administration of such important affairs, and of such large funds, so that the country might have some large guarantee for the due execution of the one and the due application of the other,¹

Sumner also took the occasion to defend himself and his fellow bishops against accusations that commissioners' money had gone to the purpose of building bishops' palaces: 'episcopal members of the Commission have not been as was supposed, selfish administrators of the means which a great sacrifice on the part of the church has placed in their hands'.²

Later in the summer of the same year the *Pluralities Bill* came before the house with the proposal to abolish pluralities *in toto*. Sumner, however, proposed an amendment which provided that an incumbent could hold two benefices in plurality provided that they were 'within three miles of one another by the nearest road, and the annual value of one of which does not exceed £100'. Sumner's thinking was manifestly motivated by his pastoral concerns for the poorly paid clergy. As far as he was concerned it was a basic principle that 'whenever the income of a living was sufficient to support the incumbent, that living was entitled to his services'. Having said that 'their Lordships must regret that the large majority of clergymen were so inadequately remunerated'.³ Sumner was saddened by the fact that they were now debating 'about a trifling pittance of £100 a year'.⁴

In 1851 Sumner made speeches in two further bills both of which concerned Church temporalities and on both occasions he demonstrated the same concern for the well-being of the Clergy. During the second reading of the *Tithes Assessment and Rent Charges Bill* Sumner expressed his strong feelings against 'the very marked injustices in the rent assessments of the clergy'. He pointed out that some clergy who lived in large rectories had much lower incomes than some who lived in more modest accommodation'. In Sumner's view the clergy complained with great reason that no exception was allowed them on account of the personal services which they performed in the local community.

1 Ibid. CVIII, 11 February 1850.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. Vol. CXII, p 1238.

4 Ibid.

Sumner was very critical of the *Episcopal and Capitular Estates Management Bill* which sought to give the lessees of Church property the right of perpetual renewal. In his view this amounted to possession and might well work to deprive the Church of income which it needed. Sumner had 'great reservations' about the bill but felt strongly that 'the management of Church property might be improved'. Sumner later withdrew his opposition to the second reading of the bill after assurance was given that every aspect of the Bill would be scrutinised in the committee stage.

Sumner did not again contribute to any discussion in the House on Church temporalities until February 1860 when Viscount Dungannon inquired whether any Bill was proposed to be in the present session under the sanction of the episcopal bench to amend the laws on Glebe and Glebe houses.¹ Sumner replied that he had been discussing the matter with his brethren and hoped to be able to introduce a bill shortly. Nothing appears to have been done and Viscount Dungannon again raised the matter in February 1861 inquiring what proposals were in hand regarding the dilapidation of Glebe houses. Sumner replied that there was a general wish among the clergy to see this matter settled but there were strongly held differences of opinion and he could not foresee the possibility of introducing legislation in the immediate future.²

By the middle of the nineteenth century there was a general clamour that the Church of England should create an open public forum for debate such as was provided by the Methodist Conferences or the Annual Assembly of the Baptist Union. Many churchmen had been deeply troubled by George Gorham's successful appeal on a doctrinal matter to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Seal which was a secular court. To the Tractarians in particular this was subjecting the 'divine society' to the judgement of unholy men. As they and their sympathisers saw it, the Church should be free to govern itself.

Prompted by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and others³ on the episcopal bench an attempt was made in the Spring of 1851 to revive the custom of allowing the Convocations of York and Canterbury formally to discuss matters of business. Up until this point the two Convocations met but purely as a matter of form. No business could be conducted without the Crown's consent and this had not been given at any time in the previous 135 years.⁴

When Convocation met on 4 February 1851 Bishop Samuel Wilberforce supported by the bishops of London and Exeter presented a petition urging that some business might be discussed. At this point the Queen's Advocate declared his motion to be illegal and cited the statute of Henry VIII which prohibited Convocation doing business without the express command of the Crown.

1 *Hansard*, Vol. CLVI, 10 February 1860.

2 *Ibid.* Vol. CVXI, 5 February 1861.

3 Wilberforce, *Life of Samuel Wilberforce* Vol. 2, p 136.

4 *Ibid.*

However in July of the same year Lord Redesdale introduced a *Bill for the Revival of Convocations* urging that 'the present state of affairs demanded that the Church provide an open public forum for debate.'¹ He maintained that the Church of England was the only religious community in the Empire to be denied this advantage of public debate and discussion. Sumner was moved to speak out strongly against the bill. He felt that 'the assembling of Convocation with active powers would tend to increase discord in the Church'. Sumner also felt that 'the nature of the business to be discussed would be "controversial" and that there would be pleas of 'the liturgy requires revision' or the 'rubrics are inconsistent'. He continued: 'If more were attempted, the doctrine of the Prayer Book were touched, even with the slightest hand, a flame would be lighted up from one end of the country to the other.'

Sumner admitted that Convocation was a very influential body for a hundred years after the Reformation. Nevertheless he asserted that 'it is a mistake to suppose that we owe to that assembly the constitution and fabric of our Church'.² He pointed out that since 1717 no government had seen fit to advise the sovereign to recall Convocation. Regarding the Free Churches, Sumner argued that they could meet, deliberate and resolve in conference, without causing a national discussion because 'they are not involved in the constitutions of the country'.

In all this Sumner showed himself to be a mild and statesmanlike primate. With hindsight and the bitter wranglings which were later to follow over ritualism and Prayer Book revision one can see the wisdom of Sumner's attitudes. However despite his personal convictions Sumner showed himself to be magnanimous and when in 1852 Lord Derby felt obliged to advise the Queen to allow Convocation to both meet and discuss business he made no attempt to hinder the proceedings. The necessary arrangements were therefore made which enabled the Southern Province to meet in Convocation in 1854 and the Northern in 1861.

Sumner also concerned himself with the Church overseas. He made brief speeches on several issues relating to Anglican developments in the Empire. In May 1852 he moved the second reading of the *Colonial Bishops Bill* which allowed Colonial bishops to officiate outside their diocese when invited to do so.³ In July 1853 Sumner introduced the *Colonial Church Regulation Bill* which aimed to some extent to help the overseas provinces of the Church of England to become self-governing. The bill provided for the Colonial dioceses to set up assemblies of clergy and laity to frame regulations and exercise discipline with the proviso that 'no alteration be made in the formularies and articles of our Church'. Sumner spoke of the importance of the Church overseas being able to determine its own affairs and of laymen in particular having 'a considerable share in the

1 *Hansard*, Vol. CXVIII, p 518, July 1851.

2 *Ibid.*, Vol. CXVIII, p 525.

3 *Ibid.*, Vol. CXXI, 4 May 1852.

administration of its affairs.¹ John Sumner also took an interest in a number of bills which were concerned with the Church of England's relationship with the free churches. He spoke in two debates on the Burial Bills which proposed to allow dissenters the right to have their own pastor to officiate at a funeral service in the parish churchyard and also addressed the House on the Church rates question. In both debates Sumner showed himself to be cautiously in favour of maintaining the status quo. He voted against the *Church Rates Abolition Bill* but earlier he had stated:

I am by no means of the opinion that Church rates should remain as they are, I believe I speak the opinion of those around me when I say we should gladly welcome any proposal which would be likely to settle this difficult question.²

Sumner also spoke during the debate on the *Endowed Schools Bill* which sought to allow children of dissenters to enjoy the benefit of endowed schools commonly known as King Edward's Schools. He urged that dissenters' children should be allowed the opportunities afforded by such schools but with the safeguard that no change should be made in their doctrine, teaching, religious instruction and government.³

On other wider social matters Sumner was more forthright. In April 1852 following various outbreaks of cholera Lord Shaftesbury moved a resolution 'that the Sanitary State of the Metropolis required the immediate interposition of Her Majesty's Government.'⁴ Sumner rose to his feet in support. 'It would be impossible', he said, 'not to admire the philanthropy of the noble earl'⁵ The Archbishop went on to inform the house of the correctness of the Earl of Shaftesbury's assertion in regard to the Lambeth area which immediately surrounded his palace. In July 1857 Sumner spoke in strong support of the *Bill to Prevent the Sale of Obscene Books*. In the course of the debate it was stated that the Society for the Suppression of Vice under whose prompting Lord Campbell had proposed the Bill had successfully prosecuted a hundred and fifty four persons for the publication of indecent literature. Sumner tendered his thanks to Lord Campbell and those who had made exertions in this cause. Like all Victorian evangelicals, Sumner also emerged as keen defender of the Sabbath day as a time for rest and worship. In May 1860 he spoke forcibly against widening the scope of Sunday trading in the debate on the *Selling and Hawking Goods on Sunday Bill*.

In the summer of 1858 Sumner addressed the House in the third reading of the *Government of India Bill* and showed himself to be remarkably in advance of the thinking of his age. He held to the principle that 'India must

1 Ibid., Vol. CXXIX, July 1853.

2 Ibid., Vol. CLI, 2 July 1858.

3 Ibid., Vol. CXX, January 1860.

4 Ibid., Vol. CXX, 29 April 1852.

5 Ibid.

be governed in India and not from England.' He also expressed the view that the Government must not use force to 'overthrow the false religion with which unhappily, we have to deal, or to establish that which we know to be true'.¹ He went on to insist that 'no distinction of caste be any longer recognised by the Government' and that 'the British administration should have no part with the rites and customs of an idolatrous religion'.²

Throughout his Parliamentary career Sumner's views continued to bear the stamp of his evangelical churchmanship and liberal social and economic theories. On matters of religious principle and doctrine he was generally conservative with a tendency to maintain the status quo. This is well illustrated by his cautious attitude to an issue like divorce and re-marriage, church rates and the Burial Bills. On the other hand in matters of social or economic concern and in matters relating to politics Sumner was often liberal and on occasions in advance of his generation. This is seen for example in his position on the Catholic Emancipation Bill which came right at the beginning of his time in the house and again in the views which he expressed towards the end of his career in the 1858 *Government of India Bill*.

Throughout his years as a Bishop at Chester and then as Primate, Sumner contributed to the *Record*, a firmly protestant weekly newspaper which devoted much energy to opposing rationalism and Romanism. For the most part Sumner was strongly commended by the paper for his work in Parliament. When he died the *Record* spoke of 'the high consideration in which he was held in the House of Lords' 'where he spoke always with dignified simplicity, always to the purpose, and always with effect.'³

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1 *Ibid.*, Vol. CLI, July 1858.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *The Record*, 8 September 1862.