

Matthew Arnold and the Bicentenary of 1862.

THE controversy which stirred the English religious world nearly ninety years ago is now almost forgotten, but it seems to have had an influence on Matthew Arnold, and especially on his relations with Nonconformity, which gives it an added claim to attention. In October 1861, the Congregational Union, meeting in Birmingham, decided that in the following year they would commemorate the bicentenary of the ejection of two thousand clergy from their livings under the Act of Uniformity. A conference of Nonconformists was accordingly held in London, and plans were made. The Evangelical Alliance, whose membership was drawn from the Church of England as well as from the Free Churches, would only promise support on condition that no controversial application should be made, but the Nonconformists could not agree to this impossible situation. The Church of England was alarmed, and in Birmingham it made the first move with a lecture in the Town Hall on the Church and the Liberation Society by an Anglican minister, the Rev. Joseph Bardsley. He was followed by Dr. J. C. Miller, Rector of Birmingham, whose lecture was entitled, "Churchmen and Dissenters: their Relations as affected by the proposed Bicentenary Commemoration." His attitude was that of the Evangelical Alliance, and the lecture was afterwards printed.

Feeling now ran high on both sides. The local Bicentenary Committee approached the Rev. R. W. Dale, the great Congregationalist leader and minister of Carr's Lane, Birmingham, and Dale, agreed to lecture for them. He spoke in the Town Hall, which "was thronged from end to end . . . men stood packed in a solid mass . . . the very embrasures in the windows of the deep gallery facing the platform were filled to overflowing; even then many hundreds were turned away from the doors, so deeply had the controversy stirred and agitated the town."¹ The tone of the lecture² was temperate but firm. After an historical survey, Dale dealt with the charge that modern Dissenters had no right

¹ Sir A. W. W. Dale *The Life of R. W. Dale of Birmingham* (1898), pp. 166-7.

² R. W. Dale, *Churchmen and Dissenters. A lecture delivered at Birmingham, 1862.*

to commemorate these Nonconformists of 1662. They were not commemorated, he said, on the ground of identical faith, but because of their heroism; because their action had helped to secure religious liberty; and because many Nonconformist congregations took their origin from them. Moreover, nineteenth century Dissenters did share many of the principles which led these men to leave the Establishment. As a contrast, Dale pointed to contemporary Anglican clergy of all parties, many of whom he maintained, preached, or acted on, principles which their conscience could not approve. He defended so-called "political" Dissenters; and finally he affirmed his desire for unity between all Churches, which ought not to be broken by frank criticism: "Religious fellowship between Christians belonging to different Churches is not merely a pleasant luxury, it is an important aid to religious knowledge and spiritual growth . . . it is a means of grace." Dale's lecture spread the controversy over the whole country. The meeting broke up in wild enthusiasm, and afterwards "in pamphlet form [the lecture] ran through edition after edition, and made its way into all parts of the country. The religious newspapers on all sides took note of it; friends and foes alike combined to make it known."³

In Birmingham the dispute continued, both between the Church and the Nonconformists and within the Church itself, where the different parties attacked each other with Dale's words. For many weeks the newspapers were crowded with letters reflecting every facet of the dispute. Sir Culling Eardley, Chairman of the Evangelical Alliance, spent several days trying to make terms between the antagonists, but without success. Dr. Miller had withdrawn from the presidency of the Bible Society, and Dale could not now be moved. He continued to take part in the Commemoration, lecturing at Chester, where Joseph Bardsley replied, and at Kidderminster, where his opponent was Dr. Charles Wordsworth, Bishop of St. Andrews. He also gave a course of lectures on "Nonconformity in 1662 and 1862," and spoke at a mass meeting in St. James' Hall, London, as well as at many demonstrations in various parts of the country.

The leading journals took an interest in the controversy. The *Edinburgh Review*,⁴ in a survey of some Anglican publications on the subject, mentioned the preparations being made by the Nonconformists. It supported the Anglican contention that the Nonconformists had little in common with the ejected clergy and ought not to stir up dead disputes. "This retrospect" said the *Edinburgh*, "ought to be one of humiliation to all parties,

³ *Life of R. W. Dale*, p. 175. The British Museum copy of Dale's lecture bears on its cover the words "sixth thousand."

⁴ "Clerical Subscription," *Edinburgh Review*, April, 1862.

rather than of self-gratulation to any." The Tory *Quarterly Review* published a hostile article⁵ stating that the Dissenters were staging the Bicentenary to support their dying cause. The Commemoration, according to this journal, was dangerous and exaggerated, "distinctly announced as the commencement of a great political agitation." In May, 1863, *Fraser's Magazine* published an article, "The Future of the National Church," which, though it does not mention the Bicentenary, was probably written with it in mind. The writer sounds a warning: "let prudent Churchmen . . . before it is too late, enlarge the boundaries of the Church." This counsel is the opposite of that proffered by the *Quarterly Review*, which thought that if Dissenters were admitted into the Church of England, unbelievers would follow, and the Church be destroyed. Of the weeklies, the *Spectator* mentioned the Bicentenary,⁶ stating very fairly the Dissenters' case against the Establishment. Of the Act of Uniformity it says "Never in English history has an indictment been more solemnly drawn up against liberty of conscience or more pitilessly carried out." Yet it thinks Puritanism is dying out, and gives Arnold's reason: "Puritanism is inflexible and unchanging, or it is not . . . it rests upon one faculty of the soul," while "Christianity was based on a living truth, and nothing here will less preserve or restore it." This is very close to Arnold's teaching, and we know from his letters that he was a regular reader of the *Spectator*. The *Examiner*⁷ reported the celebration of the Bicentenary, which was held on St. Bartholomew's Day, 24th August, 1862; it also reviewed sympathetically the documents prepared by the Bicentenary Committee. In the opinion of this paper more good than harm was likely to come of the celebration; but it reminded Nonconformists that they themselves persecuted when in power. The *Times*⁸ devoted a good deal of space to the matter, giving full reports of meetings and lectures. On the eve of the Bicentenary it carried a leading article on the subject; it was in sympathy with the commemoration, and understood the Nonconformist claim to be celebrating, not the views of the ejected, but their action: "a hearty sympathy for the sufferings of the expelled clergy, a deep admiration for their heroism, and a qualified respect for their opinions and their cause." We are indebted to the *Times* for a report of the service held at the Weigh House Chapel in London on August 24th, at which the Congregational leader, Dr. Binney preached. The report says that the sermon "was listened to throughout with very marked attention, and

⁵ "The Bicentenary," *Quarterly Review*, July-Oct., 1862.

⁶ "Modern Puritanism," *Spectator*, Oct. 25, 1862.

⁷ 30th Aug., 1862.

⁸ v. especially 23rd and 25th Aug., 1862.

appeared to make a profound impression on the vast congregation." The High Church *Guardian* gave full and frequent accounts of the many Bicentenary meetings,⁹ one of which has an interesting connection with Matthew Arnold; this was the meeting at which the Evangelical John Charles Ryle, later first Bishop of Liverpool, entreated Churchmen not to believe all the Dissenters said, comparing them with the fox who lost his tail and wanted all other foxes to cut theirs off. Arnold was later to use the same fable in the preface to *Culture and Anarchy*.

Today the whole controversy seems remote and tinged with a bitterness now happily gone; but for the student of Matthew Arnold it has great interest. We have no direct evidence that he knew of these events; but the press comments mentioned above were taken from periodicals that he would be likely to see,¹⁰ and it is hardly likely that, with his knowledge of other religious disputes, he remained ignorant of this one. The nearest thing we have to evidence is Arnold's reference to Dale, many years later, in his lecture on the Church of England.¹¹ In this lecture he calls Dr. Dale "a brilliant pugilist," and continues, "He has his arena down at Birmingham . . . and then from time to time he comes up to the metropolis, to London, and gives a public exhibition of his skill. And a very powerful performance it often is." We cannot be sure that the Bicentenary lectures were in Arnold's mind when he said this, though it was the agitation of 1862 that launched Dale on his "pugilistic" career.

Dale charged the Evangelical clergy with compromising their conscience, and one of the strongest arguments of the Nonconformists was that the ejected clergy of 1662 had been more honest and courageous than their nineteenth century counterparts. In the preface to *St. Paul and Protestantism* Arnold strongly defends the Evangelicals, and it looks as though the Bicentenary charges were in his mind. He does not think that the future lies with the Evangelicals, but he supports their action in staying within the Establishment: "The Evangelical party in the Church of England," he says, "we must always, certainly, have a disposition to treat with forbearance inasmuch as this party has so strongly loved what is indeed the most lovable of all things—religion." They have avoided becoming "political Dissenters"; they have "avoided that unblessed mixture of politics and religion by which

⁹ v. especially 26th Feb., 12th March, 26th March, 6th April, 14th May, 11th June, 18th June, 23rd July, 20th Aug. Arnold said of the *Guardian*: "It is a paper I like, and generally read."

¹⁰ Much valuable research remains to be done on the Nonconformist periodicals in connection with the Bicentenary.

¹¹ Published in *Macmillan's Magazine*, April 1876, and afterwards included in *Last Essays on Church and Religion*.

both . . . are spoilt." They have not added unsound action to unsound opinions; they have maintained contact with the main current of national life and retained the possibility of development, staying within a church which has a Catholic as well as an Evangelical heritage, and thus avoiding the narrowness of Non-conformity.

The whole question of separation from a Church was in Arnold's mind when he wrote *St. Paul and Protestantism*; he held that separation for what seemed to him "matters of opinion" was morally indefensible. Religion aims at moral practice, edification; the bandying about of opinions should be left to specialists. The claim made here is that the Bicentenary of 1862 probably had its effect on Arnold, influencing his attitude to Dissent but not, unhappily, in the direction of greater understanding. Matthew Arnold might have been kinder towards those who "separated for opinions" if he had realised how they said,

"We dare not call every child regenerate that can but have god-fathers. . . . We dare not refuse [the Sacrament] to good men who think that to receive it kneeling would be to show idolatrous reverence for the material symbols . . . we dare not, at the burial of every wicked man that is not baptised, excommunicate, or a self-murderer, solemnly pronounce that God 'hath taken to himself the soul of this our dear brother'." ¹²

The Tercentenary of the Ejection is now on the horizon. If it is celebrated it is not likely to cause such strife as the commemoration of 1862, yet the issues of that old controversy are by no means dead. The question of establishment, for example, is now very much discussed, and the different denominations, while drawing closer together and working for the reunion of Christendom, are at the same time each re-discovering what is of value in its own tradition. The past twenty years have seen, on the one hand the advance of Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England, and on the other the reinterpretation of Calvinism by such theologians as Karl Barth, with a consequent return to vigorous orthodoxy within the Reformed tradition.

It is not likely that any of this would have pleased Matthew Arnold, to whom religion was "morality touched with emotion"; but he would surely have welcomed that change in Nonconformity which was perhaps hastened by his influence: the bringing of the Free Churches into "the main stream of the national life," so that throughout our land they stand on an equality with the establishment, and are "the Church of the Philistines" no longer.

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¹² R. W. Dale, *Nonconformity in 1662 and 1862*, a lecture delivered on 6th May, 1862.