

ARTICLE IX.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL SITUATION IN SCOTLAND.

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I CANNOT deny so reasonable and natural a request as that I should say something of the ecclesiastical situation in Scotland at this time. The House of Lords has given a decision which may in some senses be said to have created a church crisis in Scotland. But I wish to say I should not have done so of my own wish or initiative. I am no ecclesiastic, and have no more remote wish than to be thought such. I am not writing to give ecclesiastical points,—though, even in our multitude of wisdoms, that might not be difficult,—but simply to render the situation somewhat more intelligible to those readers of the *BIBLIOTHECA SACRA* who are remote from the local scenes and understandings of the case. I shall endeavor to write so temperately as to offer no just cause of offense to any church or party, consistently with faithfulness to fact and conscientious conviction.

The facts of the case are soon told. The Union of the Free and the United Presbyterian churches in Scotland was effected in 1900. Both churches took their temporalities with them into the Union. They were supposed to take the like principles with them also, though that could not very well be. For the United Presbyterian Church had not held—nor professed to hold—the Establishment principle, which—as laid down by the House of Lords—was an integral part of the position of the Disruption fathers. Not the whole Free Church, however, went into the Union. Whilst the overwhelming ma-

majority went over into the United Free Church, a small section elected to remain as the Free Church, and to represent the Free Church of Disruption times. For the Church of Disruption times—the church of Chalmers, Candlish, Guthrie, and Cunningham—held precisely what this small, nonconforming section hold. These fathers left the Establishment because they did not consider it, as it then existed, to be a pure or ideal Establishment. But they had not broken with the principle, and the Establishment has long had ceded to it the things for which they contended.

No effort, unfortunately, was made by the United Free Church to conciliate this section, or come to terms by offering them any reasonable proportionate share in the property. They were few,—not thirty ministers amongst them,—and it seems to have been taken for granted that they would not make costly appeal to the House of Lords. To take this for granted was not very justifiable, for many of the appeals to the Lords are very unexpectedly taken, and, besides, are, when taken, oftener successful than is altogether creditable to the Scottish Court of Session. I am saying nothing of the extreme harshness with which this minority church was treated by the United Free Church. Enough to say that an Appeal to the House of Lords became necessary for them, and, in making it, they claimed, in terms of ordinary Trust Law, the whole property belonging to the Free Church proper as it had existed anterior to the Union. Twice the case was heard in the House of Lords, and, at close of the second hearing, the judges—by five to two—declared the minority church to be the rightful or legal Free Church, and held that the United Free Church must relinquish the property that had been held by the Free Church, amounting to a few millions. It was a most startling decision, —not for any demonstrable injustice in terms of law, but for

the magnitude of the losses involved. Technical law could not well decree otherwise, and the risks were known. But, on broad grounds of equity, it must readily be granted to have been a hard case for the United Free Church; hard for the old Free Church that, in uniting with a sister church,—and an estimable one,—she should have forfeited the dowry she brought with her into the Union. But the Lords held she had lost her churchly identity by uniting with a church that did not hold the same principles on matters like the Establishment principle and predestination. The Lords—as became their forensic position—refused to go into doctrinal disputations, or do other than deal with the technical question of the property held by the church under the Law of Trusts. The original principles or articles of agreement having been, in what their lordships considered fundamental principles, departed from, the property was declared to have been forfeited. Of course, the fact is—after the event—universally recognized to have been already existent that there was no proviso providing for the majority, or two-thirds, taking the property with them, in the event of change of doctrinal position. The lack of some such proviso has brought it about that, in law and in fact, in constitution and in creed, the “Wee Frees”—as the minority church is popularly termed here—have been declared by the highest legal tribunal in the land to be the true “Frees.” Numberless attempts have been made to show that what is called the “spiritual independence” of the church has been invaded or interfered with. But these have been so often shown to be futile and absurd that I simply pass them over. Nothing is more certain than that, had the property not been so great,—so great as to be burdensome to the victorious minority,—nothing would have been heard of the decision. Yet, however insignificant the property might have been, the principles of

judgment would have been quite the same. The decision testifies how strongly the responsible judges of the House of Lords held by the principle *Fiat justitia, ruat coelum*. Well they must have known what their overturning the verdict of the Scottish Court would mean, yet they did not flinch.

All this, however, does not lessen one's sense of the calamitous nature of the decision for the United Free Church,—a church great in all respects whatsoever. The responsibility must in fairness be said to rest on the ecclesiastical leadership that voluntarily led her into the trouble, rather than on the Lords, who simply performed an imposed duty of extreme difficulty. To the United Free Church it is naturally—and truly—an appalling situation, but perhaps more care and wisdom might have been expended on how the calamity was to be borne. At any rate, her spiritual greatness was in risk here. One can hardly choose but wonder how the spirit and temper of her present would compare with the silent heroism and the grand spirit of sacrifice that irradiated the calamitous issues following in the wake of 1843. That example constituted a spiritual heritage so affecting and sublime that its emulation would more than compensate the loss of any number of millions of property. One can deeply sympathize with the United Free Church in losses felt in manner most poignant and severe, and yet feel, when the floodgates of ill-advised speech, raillery, vituperation, and threatening have been opened all over the land, misgivings as to whether the grandeur of silent heroism and sacrifice had not better have been allowed more freely to fall on the countrymen of Carlyle. "Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule." "Nay, in thy own mean perplexities, do thou but *hold*

thy tongue for one day: on the morrow, how much clearer are thy purposes and duties; what wreck and rubbish have those mute workmen within thee swept away, when intrusive noises were shut out!" "The great silent men," again 'tis said, "scattered here and there, each in his department; silently thinking, silently working, whom no morning newspaper makes mention of! They are the salt of the earth." Strong churches—no less than strong men—should know that "the 'talent of silence' is our fundamental one," whether in work or in defeat and calamity. The want of such continence in speech has been lowering to the tone of religious life in this country for many days and weeks past. Scotland has, it must in justice be owned, owed more to her great secular press, for balance and steadiness at this time, than to any other agency.

Great allowances must be made for the United Free Church, which has lost, through its old "Free" section, so very much. Very noble was that church's history, many and great were her virtues. No church excelled her in evangelistic zeal or in missionary spirit, and none equaled her—as I wrote in the *BIBLIOTHECA SACRA* years ago, and, being no blind partisan, will now repeat,—in the spirit of theological appreciation and cultivation.

The question has been raised as to the bearing of the decision on the Church of Scotland (the Established Church) in wide or general form. What effect it may have no one can forecast, but it does not seem as though there were any great likelihood or necessity that it should have any particular effect upon it. The Church of Scotland has for many years wisely put a rational and liberal interpretation,—as Assembly discussions would suffice to show,—on the act of subscription to the Westminster Confession. She has made it universally felt and recognized that she asks subscription in the only rea-

sonable way open to enlightened men to-day, as merely indicating a general adhesion to all the essential articles of the faith once delivered to the saints. Perhaps her attitude is best illustrated by being compared with that of the small and now victorious Free Church. That church holds the same Confession as the Establishment; yet how many have been willing to sign the Confession on the reasonable and ethically feasible understanding of the Establishment who would not feel able to do so on the more crass and literal exaction of the Free Church. No doubt, there are forms of expression or modes of conception on minor matters in the Confession which do not make the same appeal to the thought of men to-day which they did to earlier times. But the same thing is true of Scripture itself. Not even the latter takes, in every phrase or phase, the like hold on the life and thought of this generation that it did on earlier times. Only crude literalists, or the bond-slaves of formal logic, find it necessary on this account to set aside adhesion either to Scripture or to Confession.

Discussions as to Confessional relaxation have recently taken place in the Established Assembly with, it must be said, no great wealth either of reason or of result. The life and thought of the church have, practically, been long dead to the points histrionically harped upon. Strange that never a single voice should have been raised to remind the church that, whilst nibbling at these "beggarly elements" of the past, she has been both blind and deaf to the loud-sounding calls of the present—to the vast masses of new truth—scientific, historic, metaphysical, psychological, ethical, æsthetic, sociological—waiting to be absorbed and assimilated, and related to her thought and theology. This illustrates her best in name of theological progress—a "best" which seems to know nothing more inspiring than Confessional channels! Of my own views of creed subscription I say nothing here.

The Church of Scotland enjoys spiritual independence in the matters of creedal interpretation already referred to. Indeed, her leaders boast her to be the freest church in Christendom. In a large measure this is true, but such a mode of stating the case seems rather sweeping and absolute. Certainly she is wholly free from State interference in her creedal interpretations and in the working of her splendid endowed territorial system, whereby—in parishes old and new—religious ordinances are brought within reach of all in every corner of the land. No church could be freer in her working in such desirable ways. Still, her freedom is not so absolute as might be thought, in every respect. In hardly more than a solitary instance does she have anything to do with the appointing of her official teachers of theology in the various divinity halls. Some of these appointments are vested in political patronage, and others are determined by mixed bodies connected with the universities, but not responsible to the church. I abstain from all remark as to the working of this system: it is necessary to say that it is naturally held to argue, not theological freedom, but lack of theological spirit, on the part of the church. Can we blame those who so regard it?

How a way may be found out of the *impasse* remains to be seen, after the conferences between the two churches have taken place. For the present, one duty appertaining to the United Free Church seems very clear—to believe, in her dark and cloudy day, that, in some ways unforeseen and unknown, these sad calamities will turn to her greater spiritual good and *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. Which of our churches has no need to purge out the leaven of pharisaism and self-complacency? Which of them stands without need to humble itself under the mighty hand of God, that, from the dust of self-abasement, He may raise to new power and strength?

“Our fathers’ sins were manifold,
And ours no less we own,
Yet wondrously from age to age
Thy goodness hath been shown.”

The Free Church—the small victorious church—deserves her own measure of praise. She has suffered, has waited, has endured, has fought—not ignobly—and won. Hers is now a splendid opportunity; but whether she will do as well in churchly growth and theological expansiveness as she has in ecclesiastical warfare, seems extremely doubtful. She appears to lack progressiveness in theological character and elasticity of churchly practice. But for these cramping limitations, it is easily conceivable how her opportunity might have been used in a way to astonish the country. We shall hope higher things of her, in any case, than merely to prove a reactionary church.

Sundry suggestions have been put forward towards reunion of all the scattered fragments of Scottish Presbyterianism, but these have been generally received as inopportune and impracticable. The unity, if compassed, would be of very formal and mechanical character; and of what great spiritual worth could such unity be? Such a manufactured unity, visible and external, need not at all realize the ideal of our Lord in his final prayer for unity in the bonds of peace, truth, and charity. Not that the visible organization of the spiritual community can ever be other than matter of serious importance, but that our very sense of the importance of unity, in the external sense, may easily betray us, as it has often betrayed others, into ill-considered and wrongful attempts at its realization. Ideal unity—and the saying will carry universal assent—can never be advanced by unworthy compromises, unwise concessions, or unspiritual ends, in them that unite, but must be

furthered rather by supreme care and regard for the interests of spiritual Christianity, for the maintenance of a catholic and irenic spirit, and for the possession of broad and universal charity. Such furtherance of unity need wait on no issues, no events, but may manifest itself as a present spiritual unity underlying our sorrowful antagonisms, miserable partisanships, and unhappy divisions. It can draw us nearer in spirit to the vast multitudes of true believers in the most diverse communions—in all churches at home and abroad—Established and Nonconformist alike—and in Roman Catholic, in Greek, and other eastern communities. But this cosmopolitan spirit—this exalted and heavenly frame of mind—can spring from communion with no lower source than “the Divine Mind” itself, “in which,” to use words of Dante, “is kindled the love that turns it, and the virtue that showers it down.”

“Che la mente divina, in che s'accende
L'amor che il volge, e la virtu ch'el piove.”¹

¹ *Paradiso*, xxvii. 110.