

CT 101.

DISESTABLISHMENT OR REFORM.

BY

SIR GEORGE WILLIAM DENYS, BART.

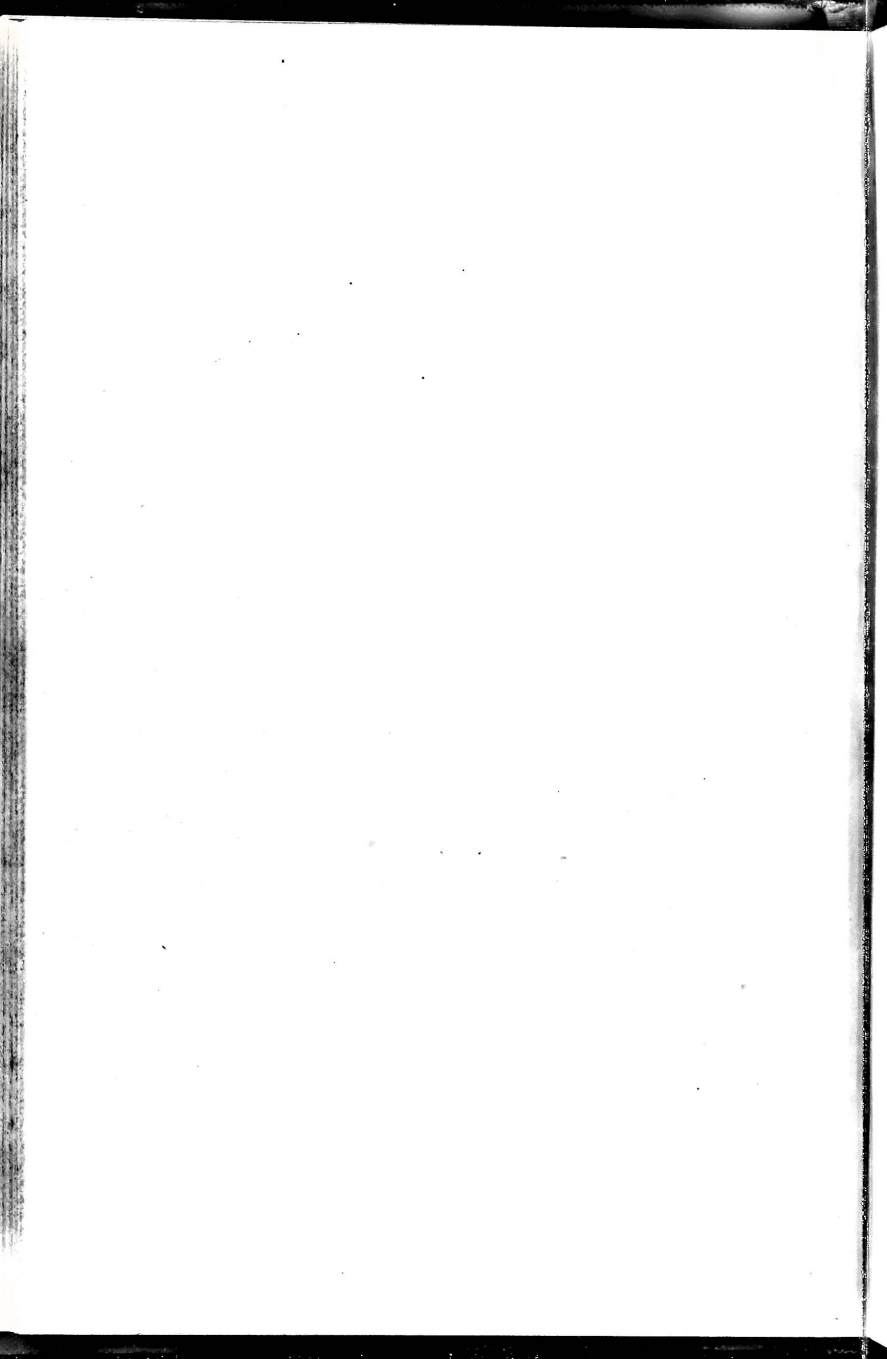


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DISESTABLISHMENT OR REFORM.

- Mr Bright's Speech at Birmingham.*
Problem of the World and the Church. J. Booth, C.B.
Longmans. Crown 8vo.
Rocks Ahead, or the Warnings of Cassandra. W.
R. Greg. Trübner.
The Nationalisation of the Established Church. Ed.
Maitland. *Westminster Review*, July 1874.

THE cry for Disestablishment becomes every day louder and more general.

“So schreiten auch die grossen Geschicken ihre Geister schon voran, und in dem Heute wandelt schon das Morgen.”*

It is a significant fact that a man so capable of reading the signs of the times as Mr Bright should have chosen this for the topic of his much-looked-for speech to his constituents at Birmingham on the eve of the present session.

Can we doubt, that before very long, the Established Church will be put on her trial, and the great question raised of Disestablishment or Reform?

It becomes all those therefore, who, like myself, are desirous to preserve what is valuable in the establishment to prepare for the coming struggle.

* “’Tis thus the ghosts of great events stride on before, and in to-day, to-morrow wanders.”—SCHILLER'S *Wallenstein*.
Usually Anglicised by—“Coming events cast their shadows before.”

Lamentable, indeed, would it be if the Established Church, with its vast organisation and means of usefulness, if only a proper direction were given to its powers, should end in merely adding one more to the sects already too numerous, and its great wealth be thus frittered away. Surely the Church is fated for something better than this. It is true that things cannot remain much longer as they are. The world, the intelligent part of it at least, is fast coming to the conclusion that the Church cannot go on much longer on its present dogmatic footing. The truths of science are gradually making their way, and the revelation conveyed in the divine order of the universe as interpreted by the men of science, is superseding that conveyed in the teaching of the men of old claiming to be supernaturally inspired. "Disguise the matter as we will," says Mr Booth, "it cannot be concealed that the Church, in any of its orthodox phases, is no longer in harmony with the age. Its teachings are altogether at variance with the teachings of science."*

Mr Bright, in the speech above referred to, said, "that the Church of England was out of harmony with the times we live in." He did not say that all or any of the other existing churches were more in harmony with the thoughts and wants of the age than is the Church of England. He was studiously reticent on this point.

He did not, as too many of his hearers were prepared to expect, "cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war," nor hint at a general division of the property of the Church; far from it, he said the country was not yet ripe to deal with the question.

Surely the Liberationists were a little premature in stating that Mr Bright had given the "coup de grace" to the Establishment.

On the other hand, his opponents could see nothing in the speech but signs of approaching mental decay in

* "Problem of the World and the Church," pp. 35, 36.

the speaker. To me, his mental vision is as clear and his intellect as bright as ever. His voice has the old ring, and when he does give the word, "to your tents, O Israel," to their tents Israel will go. The line of march will, however, not be exactly to the point aimed at by the Liberationists; minds, of the calibre of Mr Bright's, are rarely behind the thoughts of their age, the influence of the "Zeit Geist" is too strong for them. The Bishop of Lichfield thought that Mr Bright's speech hit but one real blot, and that was the intestine divisions of the clergy. The excellent bishop kindly hinting at several other blots himself; but I need hardly say that he is mistaken if he thinks that the reform of the abuses he points at will satisfy the wants of the age. The paring off a few superfluities, the healing of clerical squabbles, the better distribution of the Church funds, will as little satisfy the wants of the New Reformation as did the calling together of the States-General the wants of the French Revolution.

If Disestablishment is to be avoided, it will not be by the reforms the Bishop of Lichfield suggests. The "existing basis" will not be the starting point. I cannot doubt that there is, among what is called the "Broad Church," a large number of persons conforming to the Established Church, not because they entirely approve of its doctrines, but because it is the Established Church, and, like myself, feeling the want of worshipping somewhere, prefer to worship in the "old places"—who would be glad to join a third party in the Church, when it is found, that it is not Disestablishment that is aimed at, but only to reform the Church so as to accommodate it to the intelligence of the present times.

Now that the cry for "Disestablishment" is heard on all sides, it appears to me of great moment at once to take up our ground, and let it appear that "Disestablishment" is not the only alternative, but

that there is a third party, quite alive to the defects of the Church, and anxious to reform them ; but desirous at the same time to preserve what is valuable in it, and to whose standard reasonable people might resort.

That many of the clergy would gladly help to widen and reform the "present dogmatic basis," and many more gratefully accept the change when it comes, I feel sure. We must not conclude because they remain in the Church that they therefore approve of all its doctrines. Many of them committed themselves to their present position before they had any such opportunity of inquiry as would enable them to judge how much they were taking upon themselves. Many of them, as Mr Booth says, "would probably feel strongly that the old dogmatic system of the Church is no longer suited to the religious wants of the age, and desire nothing more than to let it fall quietly into disuse if only their over-zealous brethren in the Church would allow it do so."* They share possibly the confident belief of that large-minded man, the late Dean Milman, avowed in his "History of Latin Christianity" that the words of Christ, and His words alone—the primal and indefeasible truths of Christianity—shall not pass away." And what they have at heart is to hasten the blessed consummation when the simple creed of its great founder, The Love of God and the Love of Man, shall generally prevail.

When we find the Dean of Westminster prepared openly to give up the scriptural account of the creation, involving as it does the Fall of Man, which is the corner stone of the dogmatic system of the Church, can we doubt that a great change is at hand in the opinions of the more intelligent members of the Church ?

On the occasion of the sermon preached by the Dean on the admission of Sir Charles Lyell into Westminster Abbey,† it was hardly possible for a

* "Problem," &c., p. 39.

† See *Times*, March 1st.

preacher so straightforward and courageous to avoid grappling with the question of disagreement between the truths, of which the illustrious deceased was the chief instrument in clearly setting forth and establishing, and the account given in the Bible of the Creation and Fall of Man. After giving an outline of the doctrine established by Sir Charles Lyell, the Dean says, "there need be no question whether this doctrine agrees or not with the letter of the Bible; we do not expect it should." "It is now known that the vast epochs demanded by scientific observation are incompatible with the 6000 years of Mosaic chronology, and the six days of Mosaic creation. . . . Surely, he says, the view of the gradual preparation of the earth for mankind is grander than that which makes him coeval with the beasts which perish, and we ought to honour the archæologist who, by unhesitating, unrelenting research, revealed, in all its length and breadth, the genealogy and antiquity of man and of his habitation. To invest the pursuit of truth with the sanctity of a religious duty is the true reconciliation of religion and science." (*Vide Sermon as printed in Times.*)

Surely, when such opinions are openly avowed by one of the most respected dignitaries of our church, the time is come for a revision, not of the text of the scriptures, but of the substance of the Church's doctrine in the interests of truth.

It will, no doubt, be startling to many of the members of the Broad Church party who believe themselves prepared to accept, without qualification, the truths of science, and to give up whatever in the historical records of our religion is at variance with those truths, when they are asked to give up the "supernatural" in religion. It is very difficult to shake off the dogmatic trammels of a faith in which, from our childhood, we have been educated, however satisfied we may be that they are devoid of truth.

As the Templar says to Saladin, in Lessing's great play of "Nathan der Weise," Act iv., Scene 4 :

"Der Aberglaube in dem wir aufgewachsen verliert, auch wenn wir ihn verkennen, darum doch nicht seine Macht aber uns. Es sind nicht alle frei die ihre Ketten spotten." *

We have been so accustomed to accept as an article of faith, from our youth upwards, that what is called revealed religion is the only true religion, that we find it difficult to believe that we can part with what is supposed to be supernaturally revealed without giving up religion altogether. To use the words of the late illustrious deceased, quoted by the Dean in his sermon, "we have, in our bones, the chill of the contracted view of the past, in which, till now, we have been brought up."

We must not, however, suppose (says Mr Booth) that, if it should appear "that the received scheme of revealed religion is not founded in truth, religion is therefore banished from the world. The spiritual and permanent element of religion, apart from dogma—that which may be called the religion of nature—a feeling of reverence for something greater and better than ourselves, strengthening and sanctioning our feeling of duty, and capable, if well directed, of influencing our conduct for good more powerfully than any other agency, or, if perverted, of producing just the contrary effect—this will still remain, and being no longer incumbered with a creed which has ceased to be vital, will, for the great end of religion—the elevation and improvement of our nature and faculties—exert a higher and purer influence, in harmony, from time to time, with the intelligence and spirit of the age." (Problem, p. 14.)

* "The superstition in which we have been reared, even though we may have ceased to believe in it, does not thereby cease to have its power over us. Those are not all free who mock their chains."

These are brave words, but not more so than those spoken by David Page in his introduction to "Man, Where, Whence, and Whither," p. 24, he says—"Beliefs we may and must have ; but a belief to be changed with new and advancing knowledge impedes no progress, while a creed subscribed to as ultimate truth, and sworn to be defended, not only puts a bar to further research, but as a consequence throws the odium of distrust on all that may seem to oppose it. Even where such odium cannot deter, it annoys and irritates; hence the frequent unwillingness of men of science to come prominently forward with the avowal of their beliefs. It is time this delicacy were thrown aside, and theologians plainly told that the scepticism and infidelity—if scepticism and infidelity there be—lies all on their own side. There is no scepticism so offensive as that which doubts the facts of honest and careful observation ; no infidelity so gross as that which disbelieves the deductions of competent and unbiassed judgments. There can be no reverence more sacred than that which springs from a knowledge of God's workings in nature ; no religion more sincere than that which flows from the enlightened understanding of the methods and laws of the Creator. The more intimate our acquaintance with the works of God, the stronger our convictions of his power, wisdom, and goodness. The holiest beliefs are those founded on informed reason, all besides are little better than superstition and mechanical formality. It is of no use then when new questions like the present are mooted for certain minds to work themselves into a frenzy of 'Orthodoxy'—to savagely smear themselves with war paint and raise the old war-whoop of 'the Bible in danger.' These questions, whatever they may be, will be agitated and discussed, and men's convictions will ultimately take their hue from that which most commends itself to their understanding."

It is now eight years since Mr Page's work appeared,

and many men of science have in the mean time bravely responded to his challenge regardless of the "odium theologicum."* Mr Booth is one of them, and the proposition which he undertakes to establish in the "Problem of the World and the Church" is that our main business is with the world in which we find ourselves. That we are to devote the whole of our moral and intellectual powers to promoting the happiness and well-being of ourselves and our fellow-creatures here. That we have been placed in this world with everything to find out for ourselves, and that the history of the world from the beginning has been one of development and progress, from barbarism to civilization, and that this progress has been made by acting on the scientific principle of accepting nothing on authority—of questioning everything, and accepting it as true only on verification. If a future life be in store for us (and the author states the argument for this) there is, he contends, no sufficient grounds to suppose that what is calculated to promote our highest good in this life would be an unfitting preparation for the life to come. On the contrary, the most reasonable view of a future existence is one in which there would be a continuation and further development of all that is noblest, purest, and most conducive to real happiness in this life.

The Church's dogma of a Fall and Redemption, according to which countless millions of human beings have been brought into the world with no other prospect than that of endless unspeakable suffering, he maintains cannot be reconciled with the Church's belief in an all powerful and benevolent creator.

Our author would desire to see the Church established as a great organization for the spiritual elevation of the nation. Recognising it as a branch of the public service admirably adapted for promoting religion and morality, and with boundless wealth at its command, he laments, that it should not have taken its true

* "Problem of the World and the Church."

position of leader of the intelligence and piety of the nation, giving to the religious spirit a direction in harmony with the progress of knowledge, and at the same time acting as a mighty agency for promoting the education of the people. Unless it is prepared to establish itself upon some such footing as this, he sees no chance of the Church's escaping disestablishment, forming unhappily one sect more, and suffering its vast means of usefulness to be frittered away.

Although giving up the supernatural in religion as at variance with the intelligence of the present times, the author is not insensible to the inestimable value of the religious sentiment implanted within us. To cultivate and strengthen this sentiment he regards as one great purpose of a Church. Jesus Christ, he looks upon as the highest type of goodness and moral excellence the world has ever seen. His spiritual pre-eminence he deems to be beyond question, though his practical teaching was not unaffected by the imperfect knowledge of his age.

So with regard to the Bible, he fully acknowledges the deep religious feeling which breathes through the sacred volume, which gave the Hebrew prophets such an ascendancy over the hearts of their people, which still holds, and will go on to hold its sway over our hearts. But he sees nothing of a supernatural character in the inspiration of their writings, nothing that should induce us to accept the historical facts there recorded as infallibly true. The marks of human error with which they abound, make it, he says, as certain as any thing can be in this world, that the book in which they are contained did not proceed from the immediate inspiration of an Omniscient Being.

The work is full of a hopeful spirit for the future, and breathes a religious spirit throughout. The author must have thought long and deeply over it, "The World and the Church" will do well to take heed to its contents.

The title of Mr Maitland's article in the *Westminster Review*, at once proclaims its practical objects,* "*The Nationalization of the English Church.*" He treats the question, neither as a churchman nor as a Nonconformist, but simply as a member of the State. It is as a citizen, he says, that I see with regret an ancient and noble department of the State, endowed with vast wealth of resource, high prestige, magnificent organization, with every appliance for promoting in the highest degree the welfare of the whole nation, restricting its benefits to a moiety of the nation. That the Nonconformist should regard the Church as a grievance is, he says, natural and inevitable. They are unanimous in charging all the blame of the existing evils upon the connection of the Church with the State, and loudly call for its liberation from State control. Within the Church there are two parties, one party desiring to be separated from the State solely in order, apparently, to be free to return to the doctrine and practice of Rome, . . . the other party desiring to retain the State connection, but at the same time to obtain various degrees of relaxation in the conditions of membership.†

"For the simple unattached citizen who views things from a stand point at once practical and ideal . . . neither of these parties has lighted upon either the true grievance or the true remedy." He maintains that the true ground of objection to the Established Church is to the limitations placed by her upon opinion and expression, and that to the citizen, the desired end is only to be attained by applying afresh the principles of the Reformation, and completing that great movement by emancipating the Church from all its trammels. These trammels are not what the Nonconformist imagines, nor is the end that which the High Churchman desires. Those who come nearest to

* "*Westminster Review*," July 1874.

† *Do.*, p. 201.

the author's view, are the "Broad Church" party, whose views he formulates.

"While freedom is what, in the view of all the parties concerned, the Church requires; the freedom which alone the citizen can reasonably grant is not of the kind imagined by the other" (p. 202).

"It does not seem to have occurred to the Nonconformists, he says, while calling for the liberation of religion from State control, that it is not the religion, but the ecclesiastical organisation of the establishment which is really controlled by the State. The State has no interest whatever in narrowing the intellectual boundaries of the Church . . . The limitations under which the Church suffers are really self-imposed; and though they have the sanction of the State, and are enforced by the law, in common with the conditions of other corporate bodies . . . they were specified and insisted on by those whom we may consider as the officials of the department. The State, to which the reformation was originally due, would doubtless have acquiesced in complete freedom, but for the action of those churchmen whose influence was paramount, and who used it to arrest and subvert the movement" (p. 202).

"By demanding the separation of the Church from the State, while failing to object to the imposition of dogmatic limitations, the Nonconformists have betrayed their ignorance of the real significance of the reformation, as well as the point where the pressure really falls. Had they raised their voices in behalf of freedom of opinion and expression, and shewn by example their faith in the power of truth to win its way in a fair field, they might then indeed claim to be true children of the reformation, and worthy to aid in completing it by striving for the emancipation of the Church from its fetters. Not having this insight, they have subjected their own religion to precisely the same bondage" (p. 203).

“Having, however, by the part they have taken in promoting the School Board system, consented to, or rather insisted on, State interference on behalf of the education of the young, they have cut from under themselves the ground of their objection to the principle of a State Church. . . . For, rightly considered, what the school is to the youth, that the Church is, or ought to be, to maturity—the continual developer of the mind and spirit in a continually ascending progression as co-architects of the fabric of man” (p. 204).

“Our recent school legislation, in which University reform is included, is based on two broad principles. One, that the State, as a State, should provide facilities for the development of the faculties, moral, intellectual, and spiritual, of its members. The other, that it should not control the direction or limit the extent of that development.”

“Now as it is impossible to draw a line between the rudimentary education of the youth and the higher education of the adult, it is impossible consistently to call upon the State to provide the school, and at the same time forbid it to establish the Church. For what but a part of the higher or highest education of man is the teaching that an enlightened Church ought to afford” (p. 204).

“To be consistent, therefore, the Nonconformists should seek to aid in the liberation of religion from its dogmatic limitations; but instead of this the ‘Society for the Liberation of Religion’ proposes to appropriate the property of the Establishment to the endowment in perpetuity of the very system of dogma to which alone religion is really in bondage, ignoring the self-evident proposition that religion cannot be free when opinion is biassed and fettered. . . . Instead of calling upon the State ‘to exercise once more the power it wielded at the Reformation and itself to set “religion” free,’ abolishing the articles, tests, creeds,

and whatever else tends to fetter religion in the Establishment, they ask the State to do that which must inevitably tend to fasten the 'fetters upon religion ten-fold more firmly than before' (p. 210). For the experience of all dogmatic religious organizations proves how delusive would be any expectation that the Church when liberated from State control would reform itself."

"For the citizen, therefore," our author continues, "there is but one way of adapting the Church establishment to the national needs, and that is by freeing, not its organisation from State control but its formulas and teaching from all limitation by article, test, and creed, and whatever serves to make it an exclusive and sectarian body, so that the whole spiritual and intellectual life of the country may have room to develop freely within its pale without rebuke or dictation from any quarter whatever. . . . From the pulpits of such a Church no genuine student or thinker will be excluded, but will find welcome everywhere from congregations composed, not of the weaker brethren and women only but of men, men with brains and culture. . . . Thus reformed, amended, and enlarged, the Established Churches of Great Britain will be no exclusive corporations watched with jealous eyes of less favoured sects. Nonconformity will disappear, for there will be nothing to conform to; fanaticism, for there will be no dogma; intolerance and bigotry, for there will be no infallibility. . . . Lit by the clear light of the cultivated intellect, and watered by the pure river of the developed moral sense, the State will be free to grow into a veritable city of God, where there shall be no more curse of poverty or crime, no night of intolerant stupidity, but all shall know that which is good for all from the least to the greatest" (p. 213).

"In the meantime," says Mr Maitland, in conclusion (p. 213), "why should not a society be formed

having for its object and designation, the Nationalisation of the English Church?" It may be, as has been asserted, that such a reconstruction would have the effect of turning the Church out of the Establishment, but I rather incline to Mr Maitland's opinion, that it would give admission to that half of the Church which is now out of it. "The religion of a nation," says Mr W. R. Greg, in "Rocks Ahead" (p. 117), "ought to be the embodiment of its highest intelligence in the most solemn moments of that intelligence. It should be, if not the outcome, at least in harmony with the outcome of the deepest thoughts, the richest experience, the widest culture, the finest intuitions of the best and wisest minds that nation counts among its children."

"Now I allege," he says further on, "that in England the highest intelligence of the nation is not only not in harmony with the nation's creed but is directly at issue with it."

It would be easy to multiply indefinitely such statements. The truth of Mr Bright's dictum seems to stand confessed all round. How are we to escape the dilemma?

I see no escape from the present perplexities of the Church except by a thorough revision and reform of her formularies. How is this reform to be brought about? It cannot and never will be done from within the Establishment, the pressure must come from without, from the national will, loudly and clearly expressed, which must be left to the wisdom of Parliament to carry out. It was by the will of the nation, carried into effect by Parliament, that the Church of England was by law established; it is neither more nor less than an Act of Parliament Church, and what Parliament has made Parliament can unmake, with the same national sanction. It must, however, be confessed that the nation is not ripe for carrying out a reform such as we suggest, any more than it is for

carrying out the views of the Liberationists. There are two parties in our Church, neither of them having the courage to act consistently up to its principles. There is a Protestant party afraid to adopt unflinchingly the true Protestant principle of the right of private judgment and an unswerving loyalty to reason; and there is a Romanising party encouraged in its practices by the Romish complexion of the formularies but not having the courage to avow that it is Roman Catholic, the mixed character of our formularies being admirably adapted to perpetuate the confusion. We are essentially a Protestant nation, and the time is now come for completing the Reformation begun three centuries ago, but for the completion of which the world was not then ripe. In the interval the world has made wonderful advances in knowledge; and if religion is to retain its benign influence over our hearts it is necessary that the services of our Church should be brought into harmony with the wider and more enlightened views of the creation and the Divine government that characterise the present age.

The Legislature, by passing the Public Worship Act, has shown itself not indisposed to repress the extravagance of the Ritualistic priests, however inadequate may be the means to which it has had recourse. The action required would be mainly of the negative kind, the elimination from the formulas of the Church of whatever is inconsistent with the acknowledged scientific truths of the present day, and is calculated to give offence to those who are at once sincerely and reasonably religious. The religious spirit is by no means wanting, if only, without offence to the judgment, it could be aided by the warmth and elevation which are ever the accompaniments, and indeed I may almost say, the main end of social worship. The reorganisation of the Church's temporalities can be effected by Parliament with or without the consent of the clergy; but with religion itself, the State does not and never

ought to have pretended to have anything whatever to do. It does not pretend to dictate what the religion of the nation ought to be ; its business is solely in this respect to give effect to the will of the nation when once clearly expressed. With respect to doctrine and ritual, it is as futile to expect from an exclusively privileged ecclesiastical body a reform such as we have described, as it would be to expect it from the Council of the Vatican, and seeing that the nation is not yet ready for the change we advocate, we must have the patience to wait for it. The way to hasten so desirable an event is certainly not to give up the vast wealth of the Church to be scrambled for by the sects, which would practically result in the concurrent endowment of all, the effect of which would be not more freedom of opinion but more slavishness, for the clerical element in all the sects would be supreme, and with it farewell to liberty. Romanists, Ritualists, Evangelicals, or Dissenters, they are all alike in this respect. Our only hope is in the Broad Church party. I say, then, let the State keep what the State has got ; by keeping the strings of the purse it will best protect our religious liberties. The Church property, however great, will always be needed, and if rightly applied will be capable of conferring inestimable benefits not upon one sect only but upon the whole nation. We shall not have to wait long. In these days ideas, as well as things, move on at a wondrous pace. The process of bringing the minds of the people into conformity with the most enlightened intelligence of the age is going on with railway speed, and will be carried on by hosts of writers equal in earnestness, zeal, and ability to those quoted in this article, and those whose leases of life last to the end of the century will, I fully believe, have lived to see the "Nationalisation of the English Church," and the "Reformation" thus completed.
