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ART. I.—THE PRESENT RELATION OF THE IRISH CHURCH TO IRISH PROTESTANT DISSENT.

THE importance of the subject treated in this paper is evident from the result of the last census.

The prevalent opinion in England—an opinion which owes its formation to the industrious efforts of interested parties—is, that the Protestants of Ireland are a mere handful—some go so far as to say a troublesome handful; but most of those in England who speak or think on the matter at all, would be disposed to regard them as a handful hardly worth taking into account in any arrangements to be made for the future settlement of Ireland. It must, therefore, be of importance to ascertain at the present time what really are the forces of Protestantism in Ireland as to quantity and quality, and how, possibly, those forces may be utilized so that they may work in one direction.

According to the census returns of 1881, there were then in Ireland 635,670 members of the Church, 485,503 Presbyterians, 47,669 Methodists, 37,512 Protestants of "other denominations," 453 Jews, and only 1,144 who refused to describe themselves as belonging to any denomination, some of them doubtless being non-Christians, and some of them such as might call themselves "Christians unattached." Now the whole number of these added together amounts to the respectable total of 1,207,951, nearly one million and a quarter; and when it is remembered that a large proportion of the wealth, intelligence, and energy of the population is centred in these Protestants, and that the total amount of the Roman Catholics is some 3,950,000, then it must be conceded that the majority of the Roman Catholics is not so overwhelmingly great, and that the weight of the Protestants is not so utterly insignificant.

Indeed, there can be no doubt that if the Irish Protestants were homogeneous, if they presented one united front, their numbers and weight would tell with a force which no Government could disregard. That they do not form such an united body, that they are broken up into various sections, some of them very inconsiderable in point of numbers, is matter for regret, and at the same time matter for serious consideration as to how the evils of division may be minimized.

In the case of the Church of Ireland, there are some points connected with the statistics of the census which require explanation. There was a decrease, as compared with the census of 1871, of 32,000, or 4·8 per cent. This decrease was proportionately greater than that of the Presbyterian body, which lost 12,000 members, or 2·4 per cent., whilst the Methodist body actually scored an increase of 4,228, or 9·7 per cent. on their numbers.

Such decrease of the numbers of Irish Church people might well be regarded with apprehension, if it were not capable of explanation; but the explanation of the decrease is largely supplied by the increase of this Methodist body just referred to. It is to be carefully remembered that the increase of the Methodists has arisen, not from the secession of *bonâ fide* Church members, but rather from the secession of the Primitive Methodists, who were formerly loosely connected with the Church, and numbered with her members in the census returns. It is well known that efforts were made in the general Synod to arrive at a comprehension of the Primitive Methodist body, and that these efforts were nugatory, because of the impossibility of coming to terms such as would have been satisfactory to the Conference and safe for the Church; and the result was, that whilst some of the "Primitives" maintained their old position, or were absorbed into the Church, the far larger portion was absorbed into the Wesleyan body. When to this is added the fact that the last census was made during a reign of terror in Ireland, at a time when many of the landlords were breaking up their establishments, or carrying themselves and their establishments to safer quarters, the wonder is that the numbers of the Church of Ireland showed as favourably as they did.

There is another point to be considered.

A review of the figures will show, that whilst the total of Church members amounts in round numbers to 636,000, the total of Protestant Dissenters amounts to 572,000, that is to say, to considerably over half a million; and many will be disposed to say that is a very serious proportion, which no doubt it is. Nor will it do, by way of answer to this, to fall back on the statistics of English Dissent, at least so far as those

statistics are concerned with numbers. Granting that Dissenters speak truly when they say they form one-half the population of England, or that as others say, who are probably nearer the truth, they form one-third—it might still be said to the members of the Irish Church: "You were a comparatively small body, and so might have kept yourselves together better than we could; and you, moreover, were subject to that external pressure which has a tendency to render communities homogeneous." Moreover, "Two blacks never make one white, and it is a poor thing to make excuse for one's own defects by instancing the deficiencies of one's neighbours."

The real explanation of the large apparent proportion of Irish Protestant Dissenters is found in a fact which cannot be too well known or deeply pondered; and it is this, that whilst English Dissent is a real thing in the sense that English Dissenters are lapsed members of the English Church, Irish Dissent is altogether another thing, inasmuch as the great bulk of those Protestants in Ireland who are not members of the National Church were never at any time her members, but belong—even as their fathers belonged—to a Church imported from another country: a Church with laws, government, and constitution of its own.

We cannot regard the Presbyterian community in Ireland as a Dissenting community in the ordinary sense of the word. Practically, no doubt, the Presbyterians are Dissenters from some of the doctrines, and from the worship and discipline of the Church of Ireland; but historically they cannot be called "separatists," inasmuch as they never separated from our Church; but are the descendants of those who brought over their modes of religious thought and forms of church government from a country where Presbyterianism was the religion of the people at large, and where at this day it is the established religion.

In dealing, therefore, with the question of Irish Protestant Dissent, we must eliminate from the number of Dissenters—properly so called—the 485,670 who owe allegiance to the Presbyterian Church. These people were never members of the Irish Church. They form, as they have always formed, a distinct body. Whether they might at any time have been comprehended within our ranks is a question to which some have given an affirmative answer; but the student of the history of attempted comprehensions will be inclined to hesitate, and when he turns from general efforts to such as might have been made in this particular instance, he will acknowledge that the comprehension of Irish Presbyterians, as a body, would have been at the very least as difficult a matter as the comprehen-

sion of any other body of religionists who loved to have their own way and to walk in their own paths.

For the present, and for years to come, the sense of all that we have in common with our Presbyterian brethren, and the friendliness of feeling as well as the harmony of action which spring from such sense, must stand instead of any attempt at comprehension, which would be likely to do more harm than good.

Leaving out the Presbyterians, there is a remainder of Protestant Dissenters amounting to 86,778; and of these 47,000 are Wesleyan Methodists. Time was when these Wesleyans were not regarded as ordinary Dissenters. In Ireland, even more than in England, they clung to the traditions of their founder; and in the census of 1834 they were numbered in the return of Irish Churchmen. Now, however, according to the natural tendency of things, they have settled down into a "Church," and are undoubtedly to be regarded as dissenters from the Church of Ireland. It matters little that they have points in common with that Church, and that some of the words of our formularies linger in their services; for it is a common remark that differences between those who are nearly related are often most sharply accentuated and most difficult of accommodation.

And thus it appears that in the sense of *separatism* the amount of dissent in Ireland is inconsiderable, and bears no proportion to the amount of similar dissent in England. But though this is in itself an interesting and cheering fact, it must not be forgotten that the circumstances of Ireland and her Church are less tolerant of dissent than those of her English sister.

The act of disestablishment produced an effect which might easily have been predicted, but which for obvious reasons was not predicted by the prophets and promoters of the movement. On the contrary, these prophets prophesied "smooth things." They were fain to tell us that when once the Church was disestablished, the great barrier in the way of union among Irish Protestants would be taken away. It is hardly necessary to say that these prophecies have not been fulfilled, but that, as might have been expected, each community has settled down within its own lines, and the lines are harder and faster than ever. Each community considers itself to be as good as its neighbour, and, as is proper in Ireland, a great deal better!

And all around, overlapping both Churchmen and Protestant Dissenters, there is in Ireland a compact, homogeneous body, with a regularly organized hierarchy, welded together not only by the influence of religious tenets, but by the sense of real and fancied wrongs.

We are, I trust, far from that Erastianism which confounds a Church with an establishment, for surely "the life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment." Yet all the same, it is a fact that there is a certain amount of prestige which backs up an established Church in the face of overwhelming numbers: and it is also a fact that when such prestige is taken away, it must of necessity pass to those who possess the numbers. It is fast doing so in three-fourths of Ireland. Disestablishment has been the beginning of a revolution in State as well as in Church—meaning by State the whole body politic, the whole estate of the community, civil as well as religious.

In full view of these facts, it behoves those who believe that the Reformation had to do not only with the purifying of the Church, but with the cause of liberty and true progress, to consider how best the forces of Protestantism may be consolidated, and how a *modus vivendi* may be established amongst communities which, if united for practical purposes, would be respectable in point of numbers and influence.

There are, of course, two parties called on to consider this question—Dissenters on the one hand, and Churchmen on the other. We are principally concerned with the action of Churchmen, but may be pardoned if we open the subject by directing attention to a fact which anyone, be he Dissenter or not, may read, even though he run. It is obvious that if scattered forces are to act with efficiency, there must be some centre or rallying-point around which they may gather; and if, with reference to the present question, we ask, "What is that centre in Ireland?" surely the answer must be, "The Church, which has not only a legal but an historical claim to the title CHURCH OF IRELAND, and which outnumbers all other Protestant communities put together, including the Presbyterians."

This will appear still more evident if we have regard to the distribution of Protestants throughout the country. The Presbyterians, as a body, are mainly confined to the province of Ulster; out of Ulster they are nowhere. Of the 485,000 Presbyterians, over 466,000 are in Ulster; and even the Wesleyans, out of their 47,000, have upwards of 34,000 in that province. It is not so with the members of the Church. Of her 635,000, little more than half are in Ulster. She is powerfully represented in Dublin, and fairly well in Cork, and other large towns, as well as in numerous rural districts of the south. Candid Dissenters must confess, indeed, that in many districts Protestantism would be nowhere were it not for the Church, and that they themselves would be in danger of speedy absorption if they had none but themselves to fall back upon. Even as it is, the struggle against absorption is often hard. The

tendency of the larger body to absorb the smaller prevails in social as well as in physical things.

Dublin parish clergymen can testify to the enormous pressure brought to bear on their poor parishioners in Romish quarters of the city. Interest, intermarriages, and petty persecution are powerful agents; and it may well be asked, "If these things are done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry? If, in certain parts of the country, there are difficulties in the way of Irish Protestantism as a whole, how would those difficulties be enhanced if the contest had to be carried on by the minute section of Protestant Dissenters?" It is clear that the difficulties would soon become impossibilities. The recognition of the Irish Church as a centre is the recognition of a fact. People may shut their eyes to facts, but they remain all the same.

But this fact has to do with the Church of Ireland as well as with the communities of Dissenters; because if the Church of Ireland, having regard to her numbers, position, and claims, be the centre of Irish Protestantism, then the main impulse towards uniformity of feeling and action must come from her. And, all things considered, the difficulties in the way of such practical uniformity are by no means so great as they are in England. That strong political feeling which, if not the backbone, is at least one great support to dissent in England, has hardly any existence in Ireland. In Ireland, now, politics are reduced to two or three capital points, chief amongst which is the question of connection or non-connection with England; and whilst it may be asserted, generally, that the great majority of Irish Roman Catholics are more or less opposed to the union with England, it may also be asserted, with perfect truth, that the overwhelming majority of Irish Protestants are heart and soul in favour of that connection, which they believe to be necessary to their enjoyment of civil and religious liberty. Moreover, the question of disestablishment has been settled; and though it was never a very burning question with Irish Dissenters, still it no longer exists to give the smallest trouble to weak or wayward minds. The path is, therefore, to a large extent, cleared of obstacles; there is practically uniformity of political sentiment, and there is no question of privilege other than such as may arise from truth and purity and energy of action.

But from this the question arises, "How is the Church of Ireland to rise to the level of her responsibilities, and show herself to be indeed the centre and rallying-point for those who are not within her pale? How are those who are in camps of their own to be led to look on themselves as her allies, since

it is plain that the necessity of the case does not admit of hostile camps?"

The answer to this question is twofold: first, with reference to the dealings of Churchmen with Dissenters; and second, with reference to the duties of the Church towards Churchmen, and conversely of Churchmen towards the Church.

I. The adjustment of the relations of the Church with Dissent is, as we have already suggested, not to be effected by efforts at comprehension. Many schemes of comprehension have been floated, but their fatal defect has been that there was no finality about them. If we were to try to make the Church of Ireland or of England broad enough to include the various shades of opinion which surround them, we should soon have little left in either Church worth contending for. The effort does not lie in the direction of comprehension, but in the disposition to agree with Dissenters where we have grounds for agreement, and to regard their scruples with forbearance and respect—such forbearance and respect as we should like to have shown to ourselves.

Thackeray, long ago, gave us the natural history of the snob; and it is not too much to say that we have in Church matters suffered from what we may term ecclesiastical snobbishness. That man who, from the height of his own privilege, looks down on another less favoured than himself, calls him by derogatory names, or offends him by ill-timed patronage, is in all things a snob; and when he acts so in Church matters, an ecclesiastical snob. The best way of arriving at a *modus vivendi* is by beginning with points of agreement. When we have got so far as to see that there are important truths on which we are agreed, our own value for what we hold distinctively will teach us to treat with tenderness the scruples of others—scruples, in many instances, not taken up rashly, but the results of long tradition, early education, and constant association.

It may be very possible to trace up the causes of separation to what the Scotchman called "curstness," by which he meant "crabbedness;" but we may be sure of this—that there is no way so likely to increase crabbedness as by treating crabbed people with contempt. If we touch a man's pride and rouse his anger, we make argument and conviction impossible; nor are we in anywise called on to do so. Our Church has clearly and strongly laid down her own principles—as, for instance, in the preface to the Ordinal—but she pronounces no sentence of judgment on others; and she has worded her allusion to "foreign Churches" in such a way as to afford fair standing-ground to those who would include in the "foreign Churches" communities non-episcopal as well as episcopal.

The "social" difficulty is as great a bar in the way of harmony with the Dissenters as the controversial. No decent Dissenter would object to a Churchman holding fast to his own dogmas: what he might object to would be, as one has said, "holding his own dogmas in a doggish way."

II. Equally, if not more important, in the discharge of her responsibility towards those who differ from her, is the attitude of the Church towards those who agree with her; *i.e.*, her own members.

Is she to teach those members to sink their distinctive principles in the interests of peace, to quietly ignore, or yield, controverted points, and, in a sense which St. Paul never contemplated, "to become all things to all men, that by all means she may save some"? To this the answer must be a decided negative; the Church could do no such thing. All through she has been contending for what she has asserted to be true, and to sacrifice the truth would neither secure the respect of those who differ from her, nor deserve the blessing of God.

Already we have seen that the amount of what may be properly called Dissent in Ireland is small, and that those who ought really to be classed as separatists are between one-eighth and one-ninth of the Church population. But it must be confessed that the real weakness of the Irish Church is, that there is a good deal of what we may call "dissent in solution" among her members, or that at any rate there is not by any means enough of love for the distinctive principles of the Church—of love for the Church for her own sake; or, to put it more precisely, for her truth's sake.

There has been, no doubt, in the past generation a want of regular and careful training in the distinctive principles of the Church; and, as a direct consequence from this, there is a widely-prevailing disposition to ignore Church principles, and to regard the various denominations as being possessed of equal or even greater privileges than the Church. There is a sort of spurious liberality abroad which dignifies itself with the name "Catholic," but which is really in direct opposition to everything which deserves the name.

Such a state of feeling as this is altogether different from a sentiment of cordial goodwill towards our Dissenting brethren, as fellow-Christians, separated from us by important differences, but having, as we have, a love for the common Saviour. It is one thing to meet with manly courtesy those with whom we differ, and to co-operate with them in such works as admit of co-operation without a sacrifice of principle, and it is altogether another thing to go on asserting that there are no real principles at stake; which after all comes to no more than this—that those who make the disclaimer have themselves no

such principles, and are therefore unable to appreciate their value.

Indeed, it would seem to be an obvious truth that Churchmen must understand their own position before they can understand or adjust their relations to Dissenters. Dissenters, as a rule, understand their position; they are well grounded in their peculiar tenets; they never affect to make light of them; they are by no means ashamed of them. Thus if Churchmen claim for their Church that it is a centre and rallying-point for Protestantism in Ireland, the claim must rest not only on numbers and influence, but on truth, and those who profess it should value that truth, else how can they expect that Dissenters will value what they appear to undervalue? "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for the battle?"

It may, perhaps, be said that the plan of ascertaining our own position, consolidating our own forces, and appraising our own claims, though logical enough, is hardly likely to secure that *modus vivendi* which it is proposed to reach. To this the answer must be, we cannot help ourselves; we are bound to the due appreciation of our own principles; in this particular, necessity is laid upon us. If we are Churchmen because we were born so, or for political or social reasons, our Churchmanship is worth but little; but if we sincerely love our Church for her Scripturalness, her Catholicity, her order, her respect for pure and primitive antiquity, her struggles for the truth—then this enthusiasm with regard to our own Church, whilst it will surely make her stronger, will be no bar to friendly relations with other communities.

It will easily appear that the remarks above made can have little weight with those who regard Dissenters as altogether out of the pale of Church privilege, and dependent on those convenient but somewhat vague "uncovenanted mercies" of which we occasionally hear; nor with those who are disposed to ignore the differences which exist between the Church and Dissenters, and to regard those differences as of no consequence at all. But to those who are disposed to recognise rightful claims on both sides—to acknowledge the existence of a certain spiritual element—a principle of life under the forms of Dissent—and to regard the Church as a divinely-organized society, doing God's work in God's appointed way—then, no doubt, the Liberal-Conservative attitude of Churchmen—liberal towards those who differ from them, and conservative as to those principles which it is their privilege to hold—will go a long way towards securing a common sentiment and united action.

It may be well to indicate somewhat more in detail the position and duties of the Irish Church towards those who dissent from her, because the position and duties belong not only to her, but to other Churches also, which occupy a wider and more conspicuous field.

Dissenters may speak or think as they please, but there can be no doubt to any reasonable mind that the Church of Ireland is legally, historically, and practically the central reformed community in Ireland. Local differences, bitterness, and the spirit of proselytism apart, most Dissenters will be inclined to confess so much.

The Church will, then, best discharge her duties towards Dissenters by, first, a due and impartial consideration of the causes which led to Dissent, and the attitude which, in consequence, she is bound to assume towards Dissenters.

The Reformation was, all things considered, the most important event in the history of our religion—important in itself, but much more in its results, which in the course of three centuries have not been fully developed. The agitation produced by the mighty shock has not as yet fully subsided; rather, it has assumed a different form—perhaps a higher form—than at first. Boundary questions, political questions, knotty points of controversy—which were as often cut through with the sword as unravelled by argument—are now in abeyance; thought, opinions, principles—these are the things now struggling for full development.

At the time of the Reformation, the crisis was the culmination of forces which were long at work, and which were so violently repressed that when they did break forth they produced results which, though inevitable, were still to be deplored. Many flew off at a tangent from things associated with the old system, not because they were wrong in themselves, but simply because of their associations. The new liberty of thought too often degenerated into license, and the reaction from an enforced and unnatural cohesion was the sectarianism which has unhappily been exhibited in Protestantism.

The course of events which immediately followed the Reformation was not likely to counteract this unhappy tendency. Men did battle for the principles they adopted; and, from the fact that they did so, learned to love them, and handed them down to their children as a precious heritage, to be watched with jealous care, and defended with life and limb. Who would expect that men should lightly part with opinions for which they were ready to die? or who would say that if they had thus parted with them, the uniformity so obtained would not have been too dearly purchased by the sacrifice of honest

zeal and manly self-devotion? Truly then the salt would have lost its savour, and there would have been nothing left to season it withal. For ourselves, members of the Church of Ireland, let us remember that in dealing with Dissent we are dealing with the inevitable—with a state of things which has come to us by hereditary transmission; and therefore let us, in the spirit of Christian fair play, "look not on our own things, but on the things of others," hoping the while that time will rub off the angles of traditional scruples, and that such scruples, by losing much of their bitterness, will also lose much of their tendency to perpetuate sectarianism.

Nor, at the present time, having regard to England and Scotland, are we without indications of such a desirable consummation. There are movements now within the established Church of Scotland, and amongst some of the Nonconformist bodies in England, which point to modes of public worship, daily becoming more and more in unison with our own. Such indications may be isolated, but they are at least sufficient to show the direction in which public opinion is tending. In Ireland—possibly from that spirit of pugnacity which is supposed to be in the air—the indications are not so manifest; but to counterbalance this, there is a greater uniformity of political opinion amongst Irish Protestants.

The attitude of the Church, then, towards Dissenters, will be that of kindliness, and candid recognition of all that is good in themselves and their principles.

But the main duty of the Church of Ireland, and that which is calculated to produce the greatest effect, is towards her own members—to make good Churchmen of them, and to do nothing to produce Dissent. And the significance of the last words is altogether different from that which some might suppose them to imply. From the exigency of her position, the Irish Church has no temptation to those extremes, whether of doctrine or ceremony, which may possibly have tended to alienate some of the children of her English sister. The temptation of the Church of Ireland is in another direction.

The exhibition of Romanism in that large community—which, more than any other, exceeds in devotion to the papal system—has a decided tendency to deter Irish Churchmen from any line of procedure which might be supposed to lead in a Romeward direction. The danger is, lest in the strong effort to avoid Scylla, the Irish Church may drift towards Charybdis; lest in her anxiety to be clear of error, she may not lose some portion of the truth.

No doubt some who did not consider and make allowances for our position in Ireland, and who were prejudiced against us, have exaggerated our defects; no doubt our regard for the

decencies of public worship and the observance of the rubrics would compare not unfavourably with the case of many churches in England. But for all that, there is much to be done in bringing out a spirit of attachment to the Church as such—an attachment arising, not from the accident of birth or personal attachment to a reverend pastor, but from a due appreciation of the excellences of the Church, and a conviction that she holds the truth in a deeper, fuller, and broader measure than the communities by which she is surrounded. If all those who call themselves sons of the Church spent their efforts and their money in her service; if all devoted themselves, as some do, to the task of keeping their brethren within the pale; if some refrained from the attempt to produce a washed-out Plymouthism — which is neither fish, nor flesh, nor yet "gude red herring" — they would do much to strengthen their own Church, and win the real respect of those who differ from them.

It is something to say that the Church of Ireland is alive to a sense of her duty towards her own children. The various diocesan boards of education, which are in all parts of the country labouring to secure the education of the young in the principles of their Church, will doubtless, in time, succeed in leavening the minds of the rising generation with a real love for that Church, though there is still room for the hope that Churchmen may extend to those boards a larger measure of liberality, and enable them to carry on their work with more thoroughness and effect.

And thus, in discharging her duty towards her own, the Church will quietly, faithfully, and lovingly discharge a duty towards those who Dissent from her. There will be no harsh invective; no calling of names; no insulting affectation of superiority. There will only be a consolidation of force and a development of internal union; and there will be brought to bear on all who love the Lord Jesus, the instance of a Church whose members believe in their principles, and are neither afraid nor ashamed to avow them.

Then—it may be slowly, but in the end full surely—all true-hearted Dissenters will come to see that they, too, have some duties towards the Church of Ireland; and though one or two generations may regard those duties as involving no more than a general co-operation as against a common foe, after-generations may come to learn the lesson that the Church of Ireland in her protest against negations, as well as positive corruptions, has been fighting the battle of Catholic truth.

JOHN W. MURRAY.