

SPEECH

OF THE

REV. HENRY ALLON, D.D.,

AT A

PUBLIC MEETING

OF THE

SOCIETY FOR THE LIBERATION OF RELIGION FROM
STATE-PATRONAGE AND CONTROL,

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—It has not been from any lack of sympathy with the aims or the motives of the Liberation Society that this is the first time I have appeared on its platform on these great triennial occasions. From the time when, in early years, I first formed any definite opinions about ecclesiastical matters, I have been a voluntary pure and simple. The history of ecclesiastical establishments all the world over has produced the conviction that everywhere, with scarcely a qualification, they have been productive of evil; and now, after a lengthened observation of the operation of the Establishment in our own country, I am more deeply and broadly and intensely a voluntary than ever. But, then, every man “works in his own way,” and the Liberation Society, great as its services have been, is only one of the many agencies that are seeking Disestablishment in this country. I remember hearing with some sympathy at the jubilee of the London Missionary Society, Mr. Jay, of Bath, say, “A gracious Providence has mercifully denied me the gift of platform speaking;” and he added, with some significance, “What I have seen and observed during the course of a long life has made me thankful for the privation.” I have therefore been contented, in less conspicuous ways, to work for this great end; and I do not know that anything but the pertinacity of Mr. Carvell Williams, to whom this society owes so much, would have placed me in the very unpleasant position in which I find myself to-night.

One of the great difficulties that we encounter in this controversy is in producing the conviction that anything like religious principle is involved in it, or that in prosecuting it we can be influenced by any but the meanest motives. I scarcely like to suggest that the judgments of men are often shaped by their own moral characteristics; but the pertinacity and the malignity of these gross imputations almost preclude any other conclusion. A high-minded controversialist will always be capable of generous judgments concerning his opponent: however he may differ from him, and however it may be his duty to oppose him, he will never feel it difficult to give him credit for high intelligence, for perfect sincerity, and for religious motive. I do not disparage questions of expediency. They are to a large extent the science of the statesman; and in very momentous ways they affect both imperial and local interests. But this question of the relation of Churches of Jesus Christ to Civil Governments goes much deeper than questions of mere expediency. It touches very sacred things, it involves important religious principles, and it affects very powerfully both the Churches of Jesus Christ and the social life of a country at large. I can scarcely, therefore, acquit of reckless statement—hardly of wilful misrepresentation—those who represent the advocates of Disestablishment, as aiming to “destroy the Church.” One can only say, if that which we aim to destroy does enter in any essential way into their Church, it is scarcely worth the passion that it excites. Even the Pope has begun to discover that his temporal power is not essential to the exercise of his spiritual function. One ought not to have to repeat so often—that our contention as voluntaries has no respect to the character of churches as such; that it lies as much against the most Puritan of Presbyterian establishments as it does against the most sacerdotal of Anglican establishments. Our contention has exclusive reference to the political *nexus* which connects any Church of Jesus Christ with the civil Government of a country. The Church itself is complete and valid, altogether independent of the question of Disestablishment. Establishment does not make it the more a Church; Disestablishment would not make it less a Church. Some of us have come to the conclusion that the Establishment of a Church of Christ necessarily limits its spiritual prerogative and impairs its religious action. If, therefore, we differ either doctrinally or ecclesiastically from any Church, our controversy with that Church belongs altogether to a different sphere. We cannot, therefore, too frequently or too emphatically reiterate that our contention has no respect to the character of the Church that is established, but solely to the principle that connects it as a Church with the State.

Nor do I think that our political action is so utterly ungodly

as the pious exclamations of the ecclesiastical Mrs. Grundy would induce people to believe. The entire situation has been caused by political action. The Church itself has been created by Acts of Parliament; and students of the times of Henry VIII. and Elizabeth tell us not infrequently without great violence done to the wishes and feelings of the Church itself. Convocation in vain protested against the Act of Uniformity of Elizabeth, and against the appointment of some of her bishops. It was not the Church taking to itself the forms and powers of the State; it was the State violently subordinating the Church to a recognition of royal prerogative, and compelling it to submit itself to civil control. At every step in the history of this connection Parliament has determined its conditions. Parliament has been the Laban of this ecclesiastical Jacob, and has changed its wages more than seven times. Our simple contention is that the power that called the institution into existence is the only power that can dissolve it. We are not the first to make the appeal unto Cæsar; we simply ask that the thing which Cæsar has done shall be reversed, and that no Church shall be placed in the invidious and incongruous position which is incident and necessary to any Establishment. This is not a question to be settled by religious conferences, by pious addresses from the pulpit, or even by prayer-meetings. The waggoner may pray to Hercules, but Hercules will bid him help himself. We shall seek, and I trust do seek our ends, in a devout and religious spirit; but the Providence that helps men to their ends demands that they should make use of all reasonable and fitting means for their accomplishment.

We are asking nothing for ourselves. We do not ask that the presidents of our ecclesiastical assemblies shall take their seats side by side with the bishops in the House of Lords. We have no intention to ask Parliament for a grant to help us in our church building schemes. We have no wish to avail ourselves of tithes, or the imposition of church-rates, to support our ministers and our religious worship. We are not so enamoured of patronage as to desire that our ministers should be appointed to their offices by the Lord Chancellor, or even by private patronage; and certainly we have no wish to see them endowed with exclusive prerogative and function. We simply wish that no ministers of Jesus Christ shall be placed in a position so incongruous and invidious as this. We are not, therefore, greatly moved by the amenities in which weekly newspapers just now so continually indulge. In the *Guardian* newspaper last week, for example—a newspaper, let me say, conducted in the most honourable way, with very great ability, and striving ever to do justice as between church and church and man and man—a correspondent, a clergyman of Rugeley speaks of us as the “modern

representatives of Corah, Dathan, and Abiram," and he tells the British public, that if we be admitted to officiate at graves in the parochial churchyards, we shall be "schismatic functionaries"—whatever that may mean. Another clergyman in the same newspaper designates us as "sacrilegious robbers;" and he tells us it is not for purposes of burial that we are seeking to pass the Burials Bill, but that we may publicly humble the Church, and he says that for this purpose we are willing "to sacrifice common honesty and fairness to open hatred of the Church." Well, we have heard such things before. During the controversies of the last fifty years they have been characteristic; and a somewhat lengthened observation has led me to the conclusion that these "cultured gentlemen," who are such a great blessing to the parishes of the kingdom, have attained a bad pre-eminence in bad language. I say deliberately I do not know where I could look for so much coarse invective, and so much malignant misrepresentation as I find in some of the religious newspapers.

It is very singular that in the light of these great principles these gentlemen should speculate on the degree of our venality,—whether or not this Burials Bill will be a sufficient bribe to the Liberation Society, whether or not the advent to power of a Liberal Government, which we have largely contributed to place there, will encourage us to undue presumption. Already it is suggested that it would be very ungenerous of us to take advantage of the political necessities of the Liberal Party to insist upon our pound of flesh; and we are told that we should be very ungrateful if after the concession of the Burials Bill we are not satisfied—and if, like *Oliver Twist*, we audaciously ask for more. Now have these gentlemen any conception of what a religious principle is? Are they capable of giving any men credit for disinterested and conscientious advocacy; or do they really think us to be the sordid miscreants they represent, just bent upon getting anything that in the scramble of public affairs we can lay our hands upon? How often do we need to say that we have come to the conclusion, that it has come to be with us a deep religious conviction that the Church as established in this country is a very grave social wrong, disastrous to the Church established on the one hand, and in a thousand ways injurious to other Churches. I suppose it is morally certain that numerically it does not comprise half the religious population of the country, and yet, notwithstanding its prestige, notwithstanding its great wealth, notwithstanding its eminent learning, which Nonconformists are never slow to recognise, notwithstanding its high prerogative, it has been continually and steadily, and with increasing ratio, losing its hold upon the population of the land; so that in many parts of the kingdom it has come

to be a ridiculous minority. Even in the national Universities, in the senior wranglership at Cambridge—I am not so well acquainted with the first-class lists of Oxford—nearly two-thirds of the wranglers during the last eighteen or twenty years have been Non-conformists.

Then, again, throughout its history the Establishment has been uniformly inimical to all questions of public freedom and of national righteousness. The votes of the bishops on the Afghan and the Zulu Wars, and the suffrages of the clergy given to Lord Beaconsfield's Government in the pursuit of its iniquitous ends, are only the culmination of a long series of contentions on behalf of prerogative and against popular liberty. A national church should keep the national conscience; the national clergy should rebuke and restrain the unrighteousness of the civil government; bishops should surely speak fearlessly in the name of the Lord of Hosts. Now, notoriously the English Establishment, as such, has never done that; it has left that great function to be discharged by the Nonconformist churches of the land. Is there a single record on the Statute Book in England in which a victory for freedom, for philanthropy, for spiritual religion has been won by the Established Church or even led by it? I very much doubt it. Then is there any institution existing in England at this moment that is the cause of so much social dissension and so much religious bitterness? Is there any chasm so deep, so wide, and into which so many precious things have been cast, as that which the Establishment of this country makes? Does there exist among us any cause of difference and bitterness so great and so mischievous as this? Is there any equal cause of legislative embarrassment, of legal perplexity, of public scandal? Why, at the present moment our law-courts are reduced to a ridiculous imbecility through the squabbles of this schismatic Church. There is nothing like it in Christendom. Then national sanction has been given to priestly assumptions and sacerdotal arrogance which, in the Nonconformist Church of Rome, we can afford to laugh at, but which, sustained and endowed by the British nation, become matters of very serious and just complaint. Our fathers thought these incidental evils; a long experience has taught us that they belong to the very essence of Establishment. We have formulated these grievances into principles, the validity of which every generation and every experience confirms.

Is it likely that men who so think and so feel can be diverted from their contention by accidental circumstances? Is it likely that the concessions of a Burials Bill, or the accession of a Liberal Government to power, will very materially affect our controversy? Our cause is too Radical for the bribe of a Burials Bill, and it is

too broad to be precipitated by the accession of a Liberal Government. We have recognised the expediency and the philosophy of educating public opinion; we have set to work very earnestly to accomplish this, and we are vain enough to think that we have done something towards accomplishing it. We are not, I think, likely to be diverted either by cajolery or menace. The Burials Bill is simply one item of our claim—an incident of our progress—a progress beginning with the Toleration Act, and which, in its steady advance to perfect religious equality, has won scores of victories like this, and has simply been encouraged by its successes to press on to further achievements. From the beginning we have avowed our goal. It is the absolute "Liberation of Religion from State-Patronage and Control."

Now, if this be to constitute us political Dissenters—political Dissenters we are, and that of a very inveterate type. I am afraid we are dyed in the wool. And furthermore, I fear that we are shameless enough to glory in our position. I, for one, maintain that no social duty is higher or more obligatory than political function when it is exercised within its proper sphere. Not to discharge faithfully political functions in a question which, like this, belongs to the domain of politics, is to be, I think, recreant to one's country, false to conscience, and unfaithful to Jesus Christ. We have simply won victories as public opinion ripened; and we are not very desirous of victories until, as now in the case of the Burials Bill, public opinion is ripe. We have not shown ourselves very eager to avail ourselves of the political exigencies of the Liberal Party. We have not been very eager to snatch a chance vote. Again and again we have shown that in the presence of great national exigencies, we can subordinate our particular contention. The descendants of the men who stood by the seven bishops; the descendants of the men who more than once refused toleration for themselves rather than sacrifice the Protestantism of the nation, are hardly to be reproached with selfishness and time-serving, in seeking the great objects which we now have in view,—they are not likely to forget that they are Christians first and voluntaries afterwards. Lord Beaconsfield may make it his boast that he has "dished" the Dissenters; but whenever a Government like Lord Beaconsfield's comes into power, subordinates national righteousness, and compromises national honour, it will find English Dissenters in the forefront of its antagonists with singleness of purpose, and self-sacrificing spirit; and, it may be, as just now, rudely dispelling his very foolish dream. Were we the selfish and unscrupulous polemic that we are sometimes represented we might make corrupt bargains and accept bribes; but it is simply astonishing, after the experience of three centuries of English Nonconformity, that men

should thus calculate on our venality. The taint must be deeply engrained in their own souls. The Burials Bill is simply one item of our great claim for equity; and the Liberal Government that has come into power is but one means for the further advance and enlightenment of public opinion. We shall be very thankful for whatever sympathy and help it may render us. We shall not be greatly dismayed by its indifference, or even hostility. Our cause does not depend upon the Government that may happen to be in power. But it is well that the Liberal Government should know that while there may be national exigencies which may induce us, as before, to hold our special aims in abeyance, it would be quite another thing were we to find ourselves treated with gratuitous disregard; or our friends denied their just share in the Liberal programme of the future. We are not the Liberal party. We do not exact a selfish preference. But we do claim that in the programme of Liberal progress we shall have assigned to us the place which our numbers, and the popular acceptance of our principles may fairly claim.

I am very thankful to the Government for the prompt way in which they have taken up the Burials Question, and for its general character. I am especially thankful to Lord Selborne for the bold and lucid exposition of principles upon which he rests his measure. They, at least, exonerate us from the lack of "sweet reasonableness," such as Mr. Matthew Arnold so often charges us with, and they sufficiently expose the intolerance which has hitherto withheld this concession. If we were as selfish as we are represented to be, we should accept what we are likely to get in grateful and politic silence. This Bill gives us all that, as religious Non-conformists, we want. But we have never taken this ground; we have never fought the battle of liberty simply for the personal advantages of it. We have been found fighting side by side with the Roman Catholic, and side by side with the Jew; and I for one am prepared to fight side by side with the Infidel and the Atheist in all questions that compromise their civil rights as citizens. Now, I hold that, on Lord Selborne's own showing, the ground that he has taken is fatal to the restrictions of his Bill. If burial in the parochial churchyard be a civil right, then I hold that every citizen ought to be permitted to exercise that right without any violence done to his conscience. The right pertains to the Jew and the Atheist as much as to the Christian. "The legs of the lame are not equal," and the Government Bill appears to me to rest not upon any distinct principle, but upon a sheer expediency—the necessity of concession to men who can no longer be denied. So far I think it justifies the resistance to it of the Established clergy. If it were based upon a broad and intelligent principle of liberty,

it would necessarily include every citizen of the land. I, for one, therefore, am not afraid of being misunderstood when I contend that the clause restricting the service to a "Christian" service should be struck out of the Bill. Lord Selborne says that this is a Christian country legally. Well, the assertion carries either too much or too little. If it be legally a Christian country, in the strict sense of the term, it is a legal fiction; if it be a Christian country in the sense in which Lord Selborne intends it, it is more—it is a country Christian in an Episcopal form. I maintain, therefore, that there is no ground of principle upon which this limitation can be maintained, and I do hope that the Government will be wise enough and bold enough to remove this Bill from the ground of expediency, and base it upon the broad principle of religious liberty; that while they impose the severest prohibition against assault or insult to other men or creeds, they will in all other respects secure to men absolute liberty, which is the true condition of order.

We are accused of seeking the use of parochial churchyards, notwithstanding our refusal to pay church-rates; that is, that we want to have the use of that which we are unwilling to maintain. My answer to that is two-fold. First, in our cemeteries burial fees are found sufficient to yield very respectable profits, and I see no reason why they should not be as remunerative in churchyards as they are in cemeteries. Next, if this is not satisfactory, I say boldly, make the churchyards parochial property; let them be handed over to the overseers of the parish; let these have the control of interments and be responsible for their keeping, and, if needs be, levy for this purpose parochial rates in supplement of the fees. I venture to say that no Nonconformist will utter one word of objection to this. What we do object to is, that the churchyards should be under the control of an intolerant clergyman, and should be used in the interests of an exclusive Church.

We are further said to be indifferent to the bondage in which the clergyman himself has hitherto been held; that while we are contending for liberty for ourselves, liberty to bury whom we will and with what service we like—we are altogether indifferent to the position of the parochial clergyman who must bury all the parishioners who are brought to him, and with one service. To this I have two replies. First, the clergyman of a parish is—I use the term in no offensive way—strictly a Government official; he is placed there to minister to the parishioners as such, and he is bound by his very position to bury all who are brought to the churchyard. Clergymen cannot claim the prerogatives of a functionary and the liberties of a free man at the same time. We have purchased our liberty by the surrender of our prerogative. A parochial clergyman ought to be

and must be compelled to bury all parishioners. Another reply that I have to make is that the common service which is imposed upon the clergyman is not exactly of our imposition. It is the provision of the Act of Uniformity which was so eagerly and indecently passed in order to destroy us Dissenters. Now, it is rather too much to expect that we shall make this disability of the clergyman our own Nonconformist grievance. If the man is "hoist by his own petard" it is no fault of ours. If the Act of Uniformity has recoiled upon its enactors, we surely are not to be reflected upon. I do not know a more curious or instructive Nemesis in history than the history of the Act of Uniformity. It was intended, as we all know, to extinguish Dissenters; but the Toleration Act which followed the accession of William III. specifically relieved Dissenters from their disabilities, while it left the Act binding upon the Established clergy, that is, upon all who were not Dissenters. For instance, the Act of Uniformity prohibited public worship, save as conducted by an episcopally ordained clergyman. The Act of Toleration relieved Dissenters from this prohibition, it gave them liberty to observe their own forms of worship, but it left the Act of Uniformity binding upon all who were not Dissenters; so that to this day no one who is not an episcopally ordained clergyman can enter a pulpit of the Establishment. Her Majesty's chaplains in Scotland are schismatics in England, and are not permitted to minister in English pulpits. If the Apostle Paul could re-appear, he could not legally occupy a single pulpit of the Establishment. The Act of Uniformity again provided that no public worship should be conducted save according to the forms of the Book of Common Prayer. The Act of Toleration relieved Nonconformists from this obligation; but it left it still binding upon the clergy themselves. They had narrowed their own liberty, tightened the fetters upon their own limbs, that they might have the pleasure of destroying Nonconformists. Nonconformists escaped the destruction which uniformity of ritual purposed, but it remained obligatory upon the clergy; and to this day the rigid uniformity of the Episcopal service, which is very different from the "various uses" of that Service prior to the Act of Uniformity, remains the Nemesis of the wrong doing. The Burial Service is only part of that inheritance. History knows no more righteous retribution; and it is a little too much that clergymen should come puling to us about their fetters, and telling us that we are altogether indifferent to their great sufferings and making it a grievance, that while we may bury whom we will, and use what service we like, they are compelled to bury all parishioners with the "Office Appointed for the Burial of the Dead." And yet, I think, we are so far true to our principles that we should have no objection

for the conscience of the clergyman to be relieved. We are capable of "heaping these coals of fire upon his head." It is not pleasant to us to see any man's conscience wounded. I doubt whether there is a Nonconformist in the House of Commons who would not vote for such relief to the conscience of the clergyman if the rights of the laity could be equitably secured. But I hope there is not a Nonconformist who would vote for any such relief to the conscience of the clergyman, unless the parishioners were secured from his caprice and from his intolerance. With that security, I think we are so far true to our principles that we will join in any effort to relieve the clergyman from what must be a very painful obligation imposed upon him by the present Act. We will gladly help all to the liberties we seek for ourselves.

