

## THE DECADENCE OF DISSENT.

WE called attention a year or two ago to the statistics of the leading Nonconformist bodies in England, as illustrated by the reports of their annual meetings, which showed in nearly all cases a steady decrease in the number of members and of places of worship. The question has a practical importance in view of the aggressive tactics of the Liberation Society and its friends, the strength of whose case—*valeat quantum*—depends on the correctness of the allegation they are never tired of repeating as to the relative numbers of Church and Dissent. Since Mr. Horace Mann's so-called religious census of 1851, it has been the fashion with this party to represent the Established Church as comprising at the outside not more than half the population of the country; it is even suggested not more than a third. But to this misrepresentation, as it clearly is, there is a twofold reply. In the first place, the religious census of 1851, which was conducted not directly and under authority of the Act of Parliament, but by the arbitrary method of counting heads at the two principal services on a specified Sunday, was practically a farce. We are not imputing any dishonest intention to the registrar or, speaking generally, to the Nonconformist ministers concerned, though a good deal was certainly said at the time about the special machinery of various kinds employed to fill their chapels on that particular Sunday. It is manifest on the face of it that no reliance can be placed on statistics acquired in this arbitrary and casual manner. And it is not uncharitable to assume that a conviction of the uncertainty of the result, to say the least, has had something to do with the steady and successful resistance offered by the Nonconformist section of the Liberal party to the inclusion of a direct religious enumeration—which could alone be relied upon—in any subsequent census. But it is not only because the returns of the religious census of 1851 are felt to be unreliable that objections are raised by those immediately concerned to the employment of a safer process which might disclose a less favourable result. They can hardly fail to be also aware that, supposing the relative numbers of Church and Dissent had been what they are said to have been at that date, a census taken now would present all the more startling revelation of the change which has since occurred. For a change there assuredly has been, and one which, as we intimated just now, may be proved by statistics the Nonconformists cannot hesitate to accept; *habemus confitentem reum*. It is true indeed, that there are more than two hundred sects in England, with registered places of worship, but most of them are very small. The really important communities with their subdivisions may be counted on the fingers, and it was of these and their decaying condition that we spoke on a former occasion. The evidence then adduced has now been reinforced as regards what, although the most recent, is considerably the largest as well as the most important of these communities, and the facts put on record by its leading authorities, as well as their way of regarding them, are in more ways than one remarkable. There are five divisions of Wesleyanism, but the original body of Wesleyan Methodists includes over double the number of ministers and nearly double the number of members of all the rest put together. There are projects afloat for the reunion of some or all of these divided sections; but the inherent "dissidence of Dissent" has

hitherto proved an insuperable obstacle, and we were not surprised to find the Wesleyan organ complaining that the recent debate at Manchester on the reconciliation of the "New Connexion" with the mother community had an air of unreality about it. The New Connexion, moreover, is the smallest of these separate offshoots.

The debate referred to took place the other day at the annual session of the Wesleyan Conference at Manchester. The year's returns showed a gross falling off of 86 members. The total numbers according to this year's *Whitaker* are 437,028, and although the actual decrease is a very small one, this is most literally a case where *non progredi est regredi*, for a community of that size without acquiring any fresh recruits ought to make an appreciable annual increase of the population, instead of which it has diminished. And the diminution becomes still more conspicuous, if we turn from the statistics of membership to the ministerial record. *Whitaker* gives the number of ministers as 2,206, and on this number there is a gross decrease of 66-80 by death and 86 by retirement—and a net decrease of 87, the additions to the staff being only 29. It is clear, therefore, that there has somehow been a very considerable leakage. He and other speakers at the Conference appear to have undertaken to account or partly to account for it by two circumstances, both of which are unquestionably pertinent and in different ways significant. It will be worth while to say a word on each of them. Dr. Osborn himself referred to complaints which are constantly made of the shortcomings of both local preachers and class leaders. Local preachers are, we believe, considered laymen; they form a kind of intermediate grade through which all who wish to become ministers have to pass, though many, or rather a great majority, never advance beyond it. This at least may be inferred from the enumeration of 15,009 local or "lay preachers" as against 2,206 ordained ministers. An unfavourable verdict on local preachers reflects therefore indirectly on Wesleyan pulpit ministrations generally. But the strictures on "class leaders" are perhaps still more ominous of danger. The local "classes," consisting properly of about a dozen persons each, formed the most characteristic feature of John Wesley's new organization. They were his substitute for the Catholic confessional, and were held to provide for the due fulfillment of the Scriptural precept "Confess your faults one to another," the special object of these weekly class meetings being the mutual confession of sins. The classes are said to be widely falling into disuse; at all events, many Wesleyans of the younger generation decline to join a class, and there are no means of compelling them to do so as a *sine qua non* of membership. Now this silent decay of the class system is a much more serious outlook for the future of Wesleyanism than might at first sight appear. As we said before, it is the most original and distinctive characteristic of the whole organization, and experience shows that few institutions retain their pristine vigour, if they survive at all, when once they have shed their most distinctive element.

The other point dwelt on in explanation of this alarming leakage, was what one minister at the Conference termed the "unfair influence" exerted by the Church of England in many places, especially in the rural districts. What was probably meant, and is certainly true, is that the Church is far more active and efficient than in former days both in towns and villages, and it is notorious that

Dissent is always strongest where Church influence is feeblest. Wesleyan propagandism thrives on the sleepy inaction of a Church which was currently said to be "dying of dignity." A good deal of the dignity and almost all the sleepiness is gone since then; "the dull Pharisee" has found a new energy, and his rivals find themselves distanced in the race. In a parish actively worked they are likely to be nowhere, and hence the report on "Village Methodism" presented to the Conference draws a gloomy picture of the condition of the rural chapels, a great proportion of which appear to be in debt, while the ministerial staff, as we have seen, is neither abundant nor altogether satisfactory. A great many ex-ministers indeed are now ordained clergymen of the Church, but of that the report says nothing. The Baptist and Independent reports of the year agree with the Wesleyan in reproducing the sorrowful tale of former years about a constant diminution of their resources in men and money. And these are the two next largest sects. With such statistics and confessions before us the annual increase in the number of religious denominations in England, may be regarded with equanimity so far as its bearing on the Established Church is concerned. It is evidently not from her ranks that they are recruited. Dissent, is preying on its own vitals. It seems to be endowed with a power of almost infinite divisibility, while year by year its total forces are diminishing in an inverse ratio to the multiplication of the separate atoms.—*Saturday Review*.

## SARAH PHYLLIS MACAULAY.

The departure to the better land of this truly, saintly Churchwoman, calls for something more than a passing notice. Not alone the city of Kingston, but the Diocese of Ontario may be said to have lost in her their model Christian and best friend, to be long remembered for the good works and alms deeds which she did. This highly educated eldest daughter of a distinguished officer, Colonel Plomer Young, was born at Portsea, England, in 1810, and accompanied her father when he was sent out in 1837 to organize the troops engaged in quelling the rebellion. Col. Young took part in the so-called "Battle of the windmill" at Prescott, and subsequently was in charge of the staff at Kingston for some years. In 1853, his daughter became the second wife of the Hon. John Macaulay, and after a short married life of four years, was left a widow with her late husband's two children and a daughter of her own, who alone survives her. Ever since 1857, Mrs. Macaulay has devoted her life to the bringing up of these children and the service of Christ. With unstinted and gracious hospitality, she made her home in Kingston a home for the clergy, and during the meetings of Synod and of the frequent committees year by year, entertained Bishop and priests with a daily welcome. That proved how highly she esteemed the Church's officers and loved the Church. At the same time with open liberal hand she identified herself with every part of the Church's work in the diocese, and took a deep and practical interest in all that could promote its progress. Of course the light that shone round herself in her own parish was conspicuously bright, and with every charitable enterprise in Kingston her name has always been associated. With no narrow feelings Mrs. Macaulay was a warm and generous supporter of the Orphans' Home and the Society for the Relief of the Poor, irrespective of creed. She took part in every good work—diligent district-visiting, Sunday School teaching, collecting for missions, &c. In the midst of indefatigable devotion to all manner of Christian work it pleased God that she should meet with an accident two years ago, and since then she has been a patient sufferer confined to her house, preparing for the removal to a higher sphere of duty.