

existing state of the law in regard to the liberty of religious worship, and the expediency of relaxing or dispensing with the provisions of an act passed in the first year of King William and Queen Mary, chap. 18. I feel considerable difficulty in approaching this subject, not only because it is one with which I am not very conversant, but because the object of my noble friend appears to be to afford increased facility for religious worship. It is impossible not to be convinced of the entire earnestness and sincerity of my noble friend; but while my noble friend displays such earnestness and zeal, I think he allows that zeal occasionally to outrun his discretion, and to induce in him a readiness to remove whatever may stand in the way of the object which he has in view, without sufficiently considering the consequences which may result. My noble friend, in fact, possessing all the spirit of chivalry, is equally prepared to ride at a giant or windmill, if either should stand in his way. I must say, I think that, upon the

last occasion, my noble friend has shown an over-eagerness in carrying out his purpose, and that he has endeavoured to induce your lordships to adopt, somewhat hastily, a measure which you have not yet had time to consider. The measure passed through the other house of Parliament without one single discussion upon one single stage. I believe that, in that house, every stage was taken after twelve o'clock at night. In this house it was both read a second time and committed *pro forma*, and it was not until we arrived at the report that we had any discussion upon the principle of the bill, and upon that discussion my noble friend had a majority of one. There cannot be a better proof of the want of consideration with which the measure passed through the other house, than in fact in regard to its two leading provisions there is at this moment in progress in that house a bill which is directly contradictory of the present measure. The object of my noble friend's bill is twofold; first, to relieve Dissenters of the necessity of having their places of worship registered; and secondly, to enable Protestants of all denominations to carry on public worship in any unlicensed place in the presence of more than twenty persons. To accomplish the first object my noble friend at once removes the necessity for licensing and registration; but, at the same time that he is doing that, the Dissenters themselves are pressing themselves through Parliament a bill for the purpose, not of abolishing, but of regulating those very licences and registrations which this bill proposes absolutely to dispense with. I was unable to collect from the discussion of the other evening that any hardship whatever was inflicted by the existing law; and I think that the arguments of my noble friend upon this point were completely answered by the right rev. prelate [the Bishop of Oxford], because it is clear that the law only applies to meetings held for the purpose of religious worship exclusively, and not to meetings at which religious worship may be incidentally introduced. The law, however, whatever it may be, is one to which all persons are amenable upon the information of a common informer; and I venture to say no common informer ever yet appeared for the purpose of interfering with meetings of this description. What they may hereafter attempt, encouraged by my noble friend, I will not pretend to say. But, asks the noble duke opposite (the Duke of Argyll), 'How can you defend the maintenance of a law upon your statute-book which you dare not enforce?' I must say that I think that is rather begging the question; because the law is on the statute-book, and there may be cases in which it might act as an effectual check to practices which ought not to be encouraged, and in which it would be very desirable to bring it into operation. I certainly can see no practical or real grievance under the existing system, and I contend that you ought to enquire into the effects of the law, into its actual operation, the evil which it produces, and the good which it prevents, before you come to the summary conclusion at which my noble friend has arrived, and determine to sweep away all restrictions, and leave no protection for that which is undoubtedly the intention of the law to defend. I speak, my lords, as a member of the Church of England, and I say that it is not the doctrine or principle of that Church that any of her members, in any place, with or without authority, should use the services of the Church, should publicly pray, should publicly preach, should conduct the devotions of the public, and usurp to themselves that which the whole of England has, with the sanction of the State, confided to authorised interpreters who hold a higher commission as messengers of the Word of God. Is the house prepared to sanction the doctrine that in the Church of England every man, be he lay or clerical, has a right to take

upon himself the exercise of those functions which are placed in the hands of men specially set apart for that purpose?

I am aware that in this metropolis, in many manufacturing towns, and in other places where the population has greatly increased, the functions of the clergy cannot be exercised to the full and proper extent; that they can neither have a personal acquaintance with, or knowledge of, their parishioners; that they cannot bring them to their parish church, or visit them in the exercise of their duty as ministers of the Gospel; therefore it is most desirable that the clergy should have the assistance of pious laymen, and I am satisfied that the clergy in every district would thankfully and gratefully accept such assistance. I think, however, it is most important that the laity assisting should be really the assistants of the clergy, not a self-set-up class, every man of whom may do that which seemeth right in his own eyes, but a body acting with the authority and by the consent of the clergyman of the parish and the Bishop of the diocese. There can be no doubt that in many parishes the parochial system cannot be so well carried out as in others; but the evils which now exist are slight in comparison with those which would arise from the promiscuous administration of the rites of religion and promiscuous preaching, which would be the consequence of the removal of all restrictions, and which will introduce into country parishes and small districts, where the connection between the clergyman and his flock is of a more intimate character, a new element of discord, in addition to those which unhappily already exist. Although I am one who would not advocate that a clergyman should give grievous offence to his simple-minded congregation by the introduction of needless forms and ceremonies, I am not prepared to fall into the cant language and exaggerated expressions of those who desire to see all forms and ceremonies set aside, contrary to the apostolic doctrine that all things should be done decently and in order, and who set up their own theoretical opinions against those who are the faithful ministers of the Word of God, and the appropriate teachers and spiritual pastors of the people. Although my noble friend may have in this bill preserved the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Bishops, and have prevented the unauthorised travelling about from one parish to another, he has given encouragement to any over-zealous person, possessing either High or Low Church opinions, to come into a parish to complain of the conduct of the clergyman, to muster around him a body of followers, and, without let, hindrance, or control, to set up a rival house of prayer—not for the purpose of assisting a minister, but bearding and thwarting him in the discharge of his duty. I do not say that the law requires no amendment; I am not prepared to say whether it does or not, or whether the terms of the existing statute may not be too severe; but I think we ought to pause before, upon the mere assumption of the existence of particular grievances, we remove all restrictions, and, by so doing, declare that the clergy are entitled to more respect and deference than laymen. I do not come forward on this occasion from any wish to continue restrictions on religious liberty, or to put difficulties in the way of dealing with the great mass of ignorance and vice which unfortunately exists in large towns, but because I would not sweep away at one blow all differences, between the clergy and laity, or abrogate the functions of that most important body, the parochial clergy.

Earl Granville, with respect to the proposition of referring the bill to a select committee, I should be very glad if my noble friend would concur in that course, under the assurance that the select committee is not meant as an obstruction or delay in the way of the measure, but for the purpose of *bona fide* investigation. If on the other hand, my noble friend thinks it more judicious to persevere in now pressing the bill forward, I shall vote with him on the simple ground that, though no very great question of religious liberty is involved in the question, yet the existing law is one which some of the most respectable and most religious persons in the community are daily in the habit of breaking. Such a state of things brings into disrepute our statute-book, and encourages a notion among more ignorant persons, that it is not so very important a matter to observe the laws of the country.

Lord Congleton supported the bill, and expressed his surprise that the bench of Bishops had not before this themselves taken up the question.

Lord Berners observed that when the noble mover of the present bill strained the existing law and described it as applying to cases it was never intended to apply to, and when the right reverend bench considered that the bill in its present shape would interfere

with Church discipline and all the parochial arrangements of the land, he thought it was the bounden duty of their lordships to pause before they allowed a measure of so much importance to pass without due and serious consideration.

The Bishop of Oxford, in reply to what had fallen from the noble lord (Congleton), explained that, in voting to refer the bill to a select committee, he did so without the least idea of defeating, but with the *bona fide* intention of ascertaining how far relief might be afforded for certain things in respect to which he thought relief was wanted. He pledged himself to give the fairest and most candid consideration to the question, and he had not the least wish to stop any of the present religious meetings now held. What he wished was, that whether or not occasional but regular religious worship was conducted, it should be notified whether it was conducted in opposition to, or in communion with the Established Church.

The Earl of Shaftesbury, in replying to the objections urged against the measure, said—"I will first answer the question put to me as to how I know that these 25,000 meetings I spoke of were illegal. I found those meetings to be all of one and the same character, and, with regard to the London City Mission meetings, I know the character of them to be devotional from beginning to end. My lords, till I brought this question forward, I was not aware of the extent to which the present law is used for purposes of intimidation. I have been quite astonished at the extent to which this intimidation is applied, and to find that it had extended even to some of our parochial clergy. I have received a letter from one of the best of our parochial clergy in London, telling me what he had been doing, and that he has been doing it daily with fear and trembling. I must appeal to the common justice of those peers who heard my speech the other evening, or who had read the bill, whether they think the noble earl is justified in the declaration he has made to-night, that my object is to supersede the parochial clergy, to give power to laymen to administer the sacraments, and to take upon them the discharge of any of the sacerdotal duties? How does my bill in any way affect the parochial clergy, or give to any layman the power of administering the sacraments, either of Baptism or the Lord's Supper, or set up any kind of rivalry whatever to the clergy of the Church of England? The sole object of my bill is to repeal the section of a particular act which prohibits more than twenty persons above the inmates of a household from assembling for purposes of public worship. Nothing in the bill will enable laymen to do that which they are not fully able to do now, nor will it give them an atom more of power to trespass on the ecclesiastical functions of the clergy than they possess at this moment. I must say my noble friend really pushed his argument so far when he declared that nothing should be said or done in the way of worship but by an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, that I should expect his next step would be to call for the revival of the Conventicle Act. I desire to see everything connected with the worship of God done in decency and in order. My whole life has been spent in obedience to that apostolical injunction. I have laboured, with God's blessing, to advance to the utmost of my power the interests of the Church of England; and I believe that in no way can you better advance the interests of that Church than by enabling her laymen to labour for the enlightenment of the masses of the people, for the more you evangelise the people the greater will be their attachment to the Church of England. From the highest to the lowest of the people of this country there is the strongest attachment to what they call their 'mother Church,' and it will be the fault of that Church if she act the part of a stepmother, instead of feeding the people with her life-blood, and so alienate the people from her affections. I feel it my duty to resist this committee. This is a subject which your lordships are fully competent to discuss in committee in the ordinary way. As I have said, the bill promotes liberty of worship, but it raises no sort of rivalry to the clergymen of the Church of England, nor have I the least apprehension that preaching-places will be established in opposition to them. If such a result take place in any one instance, that will arise, probably, because the minister of the district has not given the support which he ought to give to the efforts made for feeding the people with that instruction which is thought essential to their welfare."

The Earl of Derby said the noble earl had stated that the bill would not give to any layman power which he did not now possess. But if he was not mistaken,