

From the Dublin Review.

DID THE ANGLICAN CHURCH REFORM HERSELF?

Hitherto it has been generally believed that the reformation in England was the work of the civil power, which ousted the old Church, and intruded a new Church by act of Parliament: and truly, when we read that the actual governors of the Church were changed, the bishops in possession being rejected, and new men put in their places; that the public worship of the church was changed, the sacrifice of the mass being abolished, and another service substituted for it; and that the acknowledged doctrines of the church were changed, many of its former tenets and practices being condemned, and new articles of religion promulgated; when, in a word, we behold bishops, worship, doctrine, all swept away, and little remaining of the old establishment but the bare walls of the religious edifices which it had raised and consecrated; we do not see how it is possible for reasonable men to come to any other conclusion. Lately, however, a new light has burst upon us from Oxford, to dispel the darkness which covered the ecclesiastical transactions of former times,—we mean those of the reigns of Henry, the meek reformer, of Edward his theological child, and of Elizabeth, his immaculate daughter. To these distinguished characters, it now appears, that much injury has been done by history, as it has been hitherto written. They may, indeed have filled their own coffers and the purses of their flatterers with ecclesiastical plunder—(that is not denied; but placed in this new light, they stand forth to our view, the two first as nursing fathers, the latter as a nursing mother, to the church of their time: they are represented as aiding her efforts with their secular influence, and respecting her spiritual independence. Instead of reforming her by force, as we have been led to suppose, they only enabled her to reform herself: so that the English church of Protestant times is the very same with the English church of Catholic times; exactly, says Dr. Hook, “as a man who has washed his face in the morning, remains the same man as he was before he had washed.” Hence it follows that the church of the Augustines, the Anselms, the Grossetests, still rears her venerable front among us: she has never been ousted of her original seat, never replaced by another: she experienced nothing more than the renovation of washing, under the pious sway of the monarchs whom we have mentioned. She had been, indeed, a true daughter of the scarlet lady of Babylon,—a daughter as deeply steeped in iniquity as ‘the foul, filthy, old withered harlot,’ her Roman mother; but she profited by the opportunity,—cast off her garments of defilement, plunged into the lavatory of the Reformation, and then came forth to the world, robed in truth and holiness, the pure and Apostolic church now established by law in this country!

We must own, that to us, Catholics, professing that faith which was formerly professed here, and priding ourselves on

our legitimate descent from that ancient Church, this tale appears marvellously strange. We can look upon it in no other light than as a theological novel, composed after the model of those historical novels, in which a few grains of truth lie concealed in the midst of immense mass of fiction. It forms, however, a very important part of the creed promulgated by the new teachers at Oxford, men of whom we are wishful to speak with respect,—honoring them as we do, for their industry and piety, their candid and fearless disclosure of their sentiments, and their undisguised advocacy of certain ancient doctrines and practices, in preference to the fancies of more modern speculatists. We must, however, be allowed to suspect that they still retain some relics of that anti-Catholic leaven which Protestant education is careful to deposit in the infant mind; that they still cherish prepossessions, which, though they may permit the inquirer to see clearly on certain subjects, create a mist before his eyes, if he turn them in another direction. Of this we do not complain; it was to be expected; it arises from the position which they occupy: for, the more they approximate on some points to the Catholic creed, the more it is necessary for them to recede from it in others.—their doctrine has already earned for them the imputation of popery: the more reason then have they to labor in support of their credit for orthodoxy.

It is admitted by all parties that at the commencement of the Reformation there was a church in England which had existed here ever since the first conversion of the inhabitants to christianity. Was that church a living branch of the true apostolic church of Christ, or not? They reply without hesitation that she was; and, be it observed, they are compelled so to reply, for without such admission, what would become of their alleged claim to apostolical succession? Without it “how could the Anglican bishops of the present day shew that by ordination they derive their mission from the apostles and our Lord?” Without it “how can every bishop, priest, and deacon, trace his own spiritual descent from Saint Peter and Saint Paul?” If you reject that church the chain is broken,—you may go back to your female head, Elizabeth, or to her father, Henry; but there you stop—a chasm of fifteen hundred years opens between you and the apostles.

But how, the reader will perhaps ask, could that unreformed church be a living branch of the true church of Christ? Did she not teach doctrines which the present church condemns as errors in faith? Did she not practice a worship which the present church pronounces superstitious and idolatrous? Did she not prosecute, excommunicate, and deliver for punishment to the civil magistrate, the professors of opinions which the present church has sanctioned in her articles of religion, and which she binds all her ministers to subscribe and to uphold? Is it possible that two societies, of which, one is so opposed to the other in matters of the highest import, can be each the true church of Christ? Yes, exclaim the Oxford theologians, both

are the very same church, but in a different state; the present church in a state of comparative purity, the ancient church deeply immersed in error, yet not so deeply as to cease to be a part of the true apostolic church.

This they pretend to show by 3 reasons: 1st—“No one can prove certainly, or even probably, that those errors were universally held by the ancient bishops and clergy, or that they were viewed by them as matters of faith, and not of probability,” though every one knows that they condemned men to the stake for disbelieving them.—2nd—“Admitting that many of the British bishops were formerly infected with errors in matters of faith, yet this alone does not prove them heretics; for many illustrious fathers and doctors have erred on particular points.” 3d—“Even supposing that some of these prelates were pertinaciously erroneous and actually heretical, yet as those heretics were not publicly known to be such, nor excommunicated and deposed when they acted, they had the power of conveying mission to their orthodox successors.”—(Oxford Tracts; iv. p. 10.) How far such reasons may satisfactorily solve the enigma, we leave to the judgment of our readers; but will venture to express a hope, that some share of that indulgence which is so liberally vouchsafed to our fathers, may also be extended to us, their Catholic descendants. We believe as they did; we worship as they did; we obey the same head whom they obeyed. Do not we then belong to the true Church as well as they? Oh, no, is instantly replied; their case is very different from yours. They lived before the questions in dispute had been fully discussed, you live after the discussion; they were in error, but through ignorance; you are in error, and through obstinacy; they were excusable, and therefore remained in the church; you are inexcusable, and therefore a dead branch, lopped off from the parent vine. “To call you Catholics, would be a profanation of that holy name; and to do so knowingly, would be highly sinful, and come under the condemnation of them that call evil good, and good evil.”

Well, be it so. Instead of wasting our time on matters of mere opinion, we proceed to matters of fact. It is admitted by both parties, although on different grounds, that there was established in England before the Reformation, a true, Catholic, and apostolic church. Now there is established in England a Protestant church. We are aware that our opponents reject with scorn the word “Protestant.” “Our church,” say they, claims to be reformed, not Protestant; and it repudiates any fellowship with the mixed multitude which crowds together, whether at home or abroad, under a mere political banner.” But we must be allowed to speak a language intelligible to our readers, whom no special pleading will ever convince that that church is not Protestant, the head of which, by the law of the country, must be a Protestant. How then, we ask, happens it that the Church of England of former days was Catholic, and the church of England of the present day is Protestant? Because we are told the church reformed herself. “In the reign

of Henry VIII. the yoke of Roman dominion became intolerable, and the bishops and clergy of all England and Ireland determined that the Roman patriarch had no jurisdiction in these realms; and declining any further submission to that prelate, concurred in the several acts of the civil power by which his usurped jurisdiction was rendered illegal and extinguished.—The jurisdiction of the Roman see was therefore lawfully, rightly, and canonically abolished in the reign of Henry VIII., and was as perfectly extinct as if it had never existed: having been formally abolished by the church, it needed to be canonically created, before it could be in any way permissible.” (Palmer, Antiq. i. 204-5.) “In the sixteenth century the Church of England withdrew the jurisdiction which she had for a time delegated to the bishop of Rome, and resuming her original liberties, reformed abuses, &c.” Nothing can be more vexatiously tantalizing, than the easy, off-hand manner in which Mr. Palmer throws out extraordinary statements without a hint of the sources from which he derives his information. What made the yoke of Roman dominion more intolerable during the reign of Henry than it had been in former reigns? We know of no cause but the refusal of Clement to divorce the king from his wife.

Where did Mr. Palmer learn the important but hitherto unknown fact, that the exercise of the papal supremacy in England was in virtue of powers already delegated by the English to the Roman Church? We cannot say; unless perhaps the original documents are preserved in the archives of the submarine church of Peinnanzabuloe, to which we have not access. Unacquainted therefore with his authorities, we shall venture to compare his statements with official records the authenticity of which has never been questioned.

After an admirable summary of the history of the abolition of the papal supremacy in England, and the recognition of the supremacy of Henry VIII, the writer continues:

Such was the result of the Reformation during the reign of Henry VIII. The papal supremacy, under the name of an intolerable tyranny, was suppressed, and a still more intolerable tyranny, under the name of the king's supremacy, was established. Not only the powers formerly exercised by the pope, but the authority acknowledged to be inherent in the bishops under the papal sway, was claimed by Henry. On all these transactions the founders of the new school at Oxford look with a very indulgent eye. From their representations we should be led to conclude, that the English Church, aware of innumerable abuses with which it was deluged, assembled in council, debated every matter coolly and dispassionately, and with free and unbiassed voice resolved on the measures which we know, were adopted. The Church took the initiative, the state followed; the clergy prescribed the measure of reform, and the civil power hastened to lend its aid to the clergy. But this is a false and flattering portrait. The clergy resisted from the first—they were with difficulty brought to make qualified concessions; from the benefit of such qualifications they were excluded by the omnipotence of parliament; and at last found themselves under the necessity of complying with the will of their new head, or submitting to the knife of the executioner. Few among them had the moral courage to choose the second part of the alternative.

[To be continued.]