

## News Department.

From Papers by R. M. S. Asia, July 31.

## HOUSE OF LORDS.

## RELIGIOUS WORSHIP BILL.\*

The *Earl of Shaftesbury* said he had felt it hopeless to join the committee after the noble earl had expressed sentiments which, if carried to their full extent, must have issued in the revival of the Conventicle Act, and he declined even to look at the names, lest he should be obliged to make comments upon them that might be somewhat invidious. He denied that he wished the laity to supersede the clergy. By his proposal the laity would remain in the same condition as before with respect to the ministration of religious rites, and the clergy would also remain precisely in the same state in respect to ecclesiastical discipline and to the authority of the Bishops. No doubt the law was obsolete in large towns when public opinion prevented its enforcement, but not so in the poor cottage and poor village. And after the discussion, it was no longer possible that the law should remain obsolete. "Now, I think there must be something very decided in the present proposition, otherwise we should have no such a marked movement on the part of the Episcopal bench on the subject, or have the leader of the Conservative party come down here and lay on the table a bill, and do everything in his power to sustain the demands of those who wish to retain the present restrictions in all their vigour. This question has sunk deep into the heart of the country, and the minds of the people are made up on it. Whether the house accept my bill now or reject it, I feel that eventually its passing is as sure as the rising and setting of the sun, and my only hope and prayer is, that the bill may be passed without further agitation. All the various arguments connected with the subject have already been so fully laid before your lordships that it is unnecessary for me to repeat them. The principle of my measure is very simple, namely, that every man has a perfect right to worship God when and how he pleases within his own house, and to call his friends and neighbours together to join in worship and in hearing the Word of God read. That is not only every man's right, but his positive duty, unless it can be shown that the public safety or public morality will be endangered, and then the statute law may step in and check that great Christian privilege."

The noble earl proceeded to object to the new bill as entirely a new Church discipline bill. Having read the first clause, he asked "Why should licensed curates be named? By far the greater number of the curates to whom the measure would apply are not licensed. (The Bishop of Oxford dissented.) He believed that the reverse of what the right rev. prelate intimated was the fact. ("Hear," and a laugh.) But, even if it be not so, why are the curates without licence ignored? Is it not the fact that the Bishop has far greater authority over the licensed curate than over one that has no licence?"

The *Bishop of London*—Just the reverse.

The *Earl of Shaftesbury*—Can the incumbent dismiss a licensed curate?

The *Bishop of London*—No.

The *Earl of Shaftesbury*—Can the Bishop dismiss a licensed curate?

The *Bishop of London*—Yes.

The *Earl of Shaftesbury*—The right rev. prelate says it is the reverse of what I have stated. I asked him if an incumbent could dismiss a licensed curate; and the answer was, "No." I asked then, can a Bishop dismiss a licensed curate; and the answer was, "Yes."

The *Bishop of London*—I may state that an incumbent can dismiss a licensed curate, subject to an appeal to the Bishop; and that the Bishop can dismiss a licensed curate, subject to an appeal to the Archbishop; but that he has entire control of the unlicensed curate.

The *Earl of Shaftesbury*—My object was to show that greater power is retained over the unlicensed than over the licensed curate. But be that as it may, let me proceed to observe that this bill goes on to settle a moot point between incumbents and the Bishops. In many instances, incumbents invite friends of their own to preach in their pulpits, and occasionally this right is disputed by the Bishops; but here power is positively given to the Bishops to prohibit the exercise of that right, a power which they do not at present possess. Now, let us see what are the powers exercised by this bill over the laity. It is provided that the act shall not apply to "any readers, visitors, or other lay per-

(\* Concluded from last week.)

sons within his own private house or elsewhere, within such parish, who shall act with the sanction and authority of such incumbent, or licensed curate, or the Bishop of the diocese." Here the laity are to demand the right of worship in their own private dwellings, and the question is now limited entirely on the subject of private worship, because it will be found, on examination of the acts, that any laymen may register any place for worship at the quarter sessions without declaring that he is a Dissenter. If he register according to the Registration Act of 1852, he must declare that he is a Protestant Dissenter, and the denomination to which he belongs; but if he register at the quarter sessions, it is enough if he state that the place is to be used for Protestant worship. The whole question, therefore, is one of having worship in our private dwellings; but look at the restrictions under which this is placed by the bill before us. The layman is to go as a suppliant to the incumbent, the licensed curate, or the Bishop of the diocese, and they have power to refuse the application. Then, if the application is granted, they have power to revoke it, and they may also impose conditions on the applicant. They may insist, for instance, on the use of certain prayers, and a particular description of service. I must say I have never known such an attempt as this to bring the whole body of the laity under the control of the clergy. The people of England are warmly attached to the Church, but they will not submit to this—that no man shall be allowed to have worship in his own house, with his friends and neighbours, unless he can get the consent of the incumbent, or the Bishop, or the licensed curate, and submit to such conditions as they may impose. Now, all this is for the purpose of maintaining the parochial system. I believe the rigidity of such rules as these has done more, and will do more, to drive hundreds from the Church, and to keep thousands from coming into the Church, than almost any regulation you can impose.

The bill absolutely ignores Dissenters, who, no doubt, desired to have their places of public worship recognised; "but we and the Dissenters agree together on this point—that we shall have our private dwelling-houses free for worship, and that we will not go to any party whatever for permission, be he priest or prelate. The second clause of this bill provides that no penalty shall be imposed in respect of the use of prayer at the opening or closing of meetings held for any religious or charitable purpose. I ask your lordships whether, in the history of legislation, such a privilege was ever granted by statute? It is not only the great and solemn privilege, but the duty, of Christians to enter upon no undertaking without imploring the blessing of God in prayer; but we are now asked to incorporate in the statute law of the realm a bill drawn by a Bishop, which permits us the privilege of opening and closing with prayer any meetings having a religious object. My lords, I protest against this permission. (Cheers from the Ministerial side.) The noble earl (Derby) says this clause was introduced to meet my case; but, so far from meeting my case, this provision completely kills it. I wish to know why prayer should be allowed only at the opening and closing of these meetings? Why should it not be permitted during the progress of such meetings? This clause, I must remind your lordships, will put an end altogether to the operations of the London City Mission. That society has held during the past year nearly 30,000 meetings, which were of a purely devotional character, commencing with prayer and singing, continuing with prayer and reading of the Word, and closing with prayer. These meetings, therefore, will be altogether interdicted by the clause to which I have directed attention. Now, was this intended? If not, why was the clause that gave liberty for occasional meetings struck out of the bill?"

The *Earl of Derby*—I rise to order. The noble earl is perfectly at liberty to comment upon the bill as it stands, but I think he is not entitled to state before your lordships what took place in the committee, or to comment upon those proceedings.

The *Earl of Shaftesbury*—I have gained what I want. I have shown that the noble earl and the right rev. prelates are afraid of having the facts disclosed. The services held by the agents of the London City Mission are as completely religious services as can well be held in any church or chapel, and I must express my regret that that society, notwithstanding the good it has accomplished, has never received that countenance from the Bishop of the Diocese which it might have anticipated. On the contrary, I believe the right rev. prelate is extremely hostile to the London City Mission, and I therefore regard with much suspicion this clause, which was introduced

into the bill by the committee of which he was a member, for it is obvious that, if the clause be brought into operation, it will extinguish altogether the efforts of the City Mission. That the present bill should pass this house seems inconceivable; that it should pass the House of Commons is absolutely impossible." They sent up a bill giving full relief to Churchmen and Dissenters. Will you return them a bill which gives a really hateful relief to Churchmen, and absolutely ignores the very existence of the Nonconformists? You will bring on a collision between the two houses; and the more so as the change will have been effected by the active hostility of the Episcopal bench. I have urged this question under the full and solemn conviction that the provisions of my bill would conduce to the diffusion of Christianity throughout our large towns and populous districts, and not a little to the real interests and extension of the Church of England. We are living in times of great excitement, much growing unbelief, a growing spirit of Nonconformity, and much peril. Remember the warnings of the Registrar-General. He tells you of 5,000,000 human beings in this Christian land who are under no religious teaching or influence whatever. It is an increasing, and not a decreasing number. It is to no purpose, he tells you—and most truly—to build churches, had you even the money to do so. You need the living agents to go among the people to stir them, teach them, persuade them, evangelise them. You will never invite these millions by tightening the reins of an ecclesiastical system; for, unless our Church be enabled to act as a missionary Church, and fairly compete with all other denominations, she will be lost, and that very speedily. I trust that this bill may be rejected, and my own passed into a law; but, if it be not so, I pledge myself never to desist from the work. My noble friend behind me laughs. I dare say I may appear perfectly ridiculous in his eyes, but I have been guided by what I conceive to be right, and I pledge myself never to desist from the work. (Cheers.) Should my life be spared to another session I will reproduce the same measure, with the most ample conviction that the blessing of Almighty God will rest on the endeavour. I now beg to move that the bill be read a second time this day three months.

The *Archbishop of Canterbury*—It seems incumbent upon me to say a few words in consequence of what has fallen from the noble earl, who appears to think that no one who has at heart the interests of true religion could be adverse to the bill which he introduced into the house. I can, however, state, in one sentence, the reason why I could not support that bill. Simply, my lords, because I have subscribed the Articles of the Church, in which I hold so prominent a position that I certainly ought not to set the example of contradicting its Articles. The 23rd Article of our Church pronounces that no man ought to take on himself the office of public preaching, or of ministering sacraments in the congregation, until he be lawfully called thereto. Now, if I rightly understand my noble friend's bill, it was to give to every one the liberty of public preaching and of ministering in the congregation, with no other call than that of his own conscience. My lords, there are great differences of opinion as to what constitutes a lawful call. But among the various denominations of Christians I hardly know of two who do not hold that some authority is needful to justify public ministrations, who hold it to be enough that a man is satisfied in his own mind that he ought to be so employed. Therefore it is, my lords, that I have found myself unable to support my noble friend in a measure which I know he himself thinks both right and salutary. It is with regret that I do not support him. I honour the noble earl for his zeal in the cause of religion, for the disinterestedness with which he devotes his life and talents to the benefit of his fellow-subject; but I cannot help thinking that in the present case, his zeal for religious freedom has misled him, carried him too far, and even in the opposite direction. For, to propose a measure which is inconsistent with the principles of others, and then to accuse them of obstructing religion because they can't support that measure, is a species of persecution which I am sure, in any other case, where his feelings were unbiassed, he would be the first to condemn. My lord, if I might venture to advise, it would be that both bills should be withdrawn, both that of the noble earl, and that which has been substituted for it, which I confess appears to me open to many of the objections which have been urged against it. Let the law stand as it has stood hitherto, since it is found so hard to mend it. The law has never done much harm. I have never heard of more than one conviction under it, and that took place thirty years, or more, ago. The discussion has done this