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SPEECH

OF THE

RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P.,

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS, MAY 16, 1873,

ON

MR. MIALL'S MOTION

FOR THE DISESTABLISHMENT AND DISENDOWMENT OF
THE CHURCH.

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Mr. GLADSTONE: Sir, I rise at this early period to claim the attention of the House for a short time, not because I have ventured to take into my own hands the decision how long the House shall think proper to discuss a question which is undoubtedly of the greatest importance, and which presents a most copious supply of matter for consideration, but because I do not desire that there should be even the slightest appearance of delay or hesitation on the part of the Government in declaring the course they mean to take with respect to the motion of my hon. friend—a motion on which he has spoken out with the utmost plainness the purposes which he has in view; indeed, with so much plainness that I think it leaves us nothing to regret, except the fact that, as his motion happens to be made, by no fault of his, as an amendment of the original motion that the Speaker should leave the Chair, we have not an opportunity of giving it that direct Aye or No which we should have been able to do if he had happened to move it upon a day allotted to independent members. I think great interest attaches to the facts which have been stated by my hon. friend the member for Edinburgh. No man has more laboriously considered the statistics of the religious condition of Scotland, and I hope he will not think I undervalue them if I forbear to notice them upon the present occasion. But I pass them by for a reason of which I think he will feel the force—that we all know very well this question will not be decided by a reference to the specialities of the case of Scotland, but rather by a reference to those general conditions on

which my hon. friend the member for Bradford founded himself in the course of his argument. With respect to my hon. friend the member for Bradford himself, I have often had the pleasure of hearing him. I am always certain to find in his speeches great ability, careful examination and research, and evidence palpable of goodwill towards all men. (Hear, hear.) Let us consider what the motion of my hon. friend is. He invites us to assert five propositions. The first is, that the Establishment by law of the Churches of England and Scotland involves a violation of religious equality; the second is, that it deprives those Churches of the right of self-government; the third is, that it imposes on Parliament duties which it is not qualified to discharge; the fourth is, that it is hurtful to the religious and political interests of the community; and the fifth is, that, therefore, they ought no longer to be maintained. I am not prepared to adopt these propositions. I feel it impossible to discuss them in the manner in which they ought to be discussed. They are propositions with an enormous sweep and volume, on which he has entered at some length, but not at a length nearly sufficient to do justice to the vast importance and immense complications of the matters involved. They have been, and may be again, the subject of lengthy and comprehensive speeches. They may occupy for months and years, at some period or other, the attention of this House; but I do not think that we are qualified at this moment, any more than we are disposed, to attempt to deal with them in a manner which their importance and difficulty would demand. My hon. friend has stated one side of the case. He founded himself not on a violation of religious equality, but upon the sufferings of the Church of England itself, upon the difficulties that it undergoes, upon the hopeless helplessness of its condition, upon the proposition which he asserts that there are but few members of the Church of England who will not admit that if she were disassociated from the State she would be relieved from many disadvantages.

Well, all members of the Church of England are perfectly sensible that there are many difficulties in the conduct of her government, and many difficulties in the prosecution of her work, in the condition in which she now stands. But my hon. friend must not overlook the fact that those conditions are not to be got rid of by the course he recommends. My hon. friend says it is sometimes argued that the established condition of the Church of England is highly favourable to Free

Thought, and he points triumphantly to Ireland, and asks, Is thought less free in Ireland at this moment than it was before Disestablishment? Now, I am not going to recant anything which I have said on the subject of the Irish Church Disestablishment, but I am bound to say, if my hon. friend challenges me to say—in reference to the present condition of that Church, whether there is not more freedom for religious thought in the Disestablished Church in Ireland—I willingly accept the challenge, and declare, that she is less free than she was before. (Great cheering from the Opposition.) I earnestly hope that the dangers the Irish Church is encountering or provoking may pass away; but I must honestly confess that if, as an individual member of the Church of England, more than as a Minister, my honourable friend thinks to lure me out of the condition in which I find myself in the Established Church by pointing out the felicity or tranquillity our brethren in Ireland are at this moment enjoying (laughter), I entirely differ from him, and I would rather remain where I am. This is a question which cannot be disposed of by banter. (Renewed cheering.) I do not deny that there is much to discourage and facilitate a movement like this of my hon. friend. In the first place, he represents a large body of opinions in the country. In former times the differences of the Nonconformists from the Church of England turned mainly upon discipline. They have now gone deeper. My hon. friend is accustomed to represent, I believe with truth, the position of the Nonconformists as one resting upon the conviction that Establishment itself is essentially injurious to religion, and that, therefore, the establishment of their own religion, were it to be taken as it is, would be just as objectionable and as offensive in their eyes as the Establishment of the Church of England. (Hear, hear.) In the next place, I do not deny that the disturbances and distractions of the Church of England excite dissensions of this kind. They are disturbances and distractions which probably we all view with deep regret. (Hear, hear.) Differences, however, are not confined to the Church of England. Christianity is at this moment passing through a most fiery trial. The faith and conscience of men are now awakened with regard to questions of religion in a manner of which perhaps there is no example for several centuries past. Before we conclude, on account of the present differences, to adopt the remedy offered by my hon. friend, we must require much more careful, much more searching, proofs that such differences could be composed by the method he

propounds. We have in this country a number of Non-conforming bodies, which, although considerable in themselves, are yet of limited extent as religious communities, and I must say that most of these Non-conforming bodies appear to me to exercise the principles and powers of self-government with very considerable success. They have, I admit, avoided many controversies which in larger Churches in the world are rife, and they appear to attain in no inconsiderable measure the great ends of religious activity and religious peace. But it will not do for my hon. friend, even if that admission is made, to draw from it the conclusion that the same state of things would prevail were you to take a great historical and National Church like the Church of England and place it in the condition of a private religious community. (Cheers.) I would illustrate what I mean by a reference to the forms of government in Europe. You take the case of Switzerland, a small isolated country, and you find that there has been no difficulty whatever in discharging almost all important purposes of government for centuries under a Republican form of government. When, however, you go into the great countries of Europe and there supplant and overthrow the ancient forms of government the effect is altogether different. (Opposition cheers.) My hon. friend has, I admit, other allies. He has allies in a sense of religious indifference, which, at any rate upon the continent of Europe, greatly tends to widen the chasm existing between religious and civil offences, and yet more powerful allies than all, and what I must call the violent assertions of ecclesiastical prerogative, which have been singularly and painfully characteristic of the present age, which have produced and will produce vehement reaction on the part of the human mind and intellect, and which are undoubtedly tending on a large scale, in the opinion of the civilised world, to sever religious and civil affairs. Having made these admissions, and in no niggardly spirit, I still must contend that the proposition of my hon. friend is a proposition which we are not prepared to adopt; and that, if we were prepared to adopt it, it would be attended by results from which the courage even of my hon. friend himself would shrink. (Cheers and laughter.) If my hon. friend were to induce the House of Commons to adopt his motion, what does he think would be the sentiment of the country to-morrow morning! (Cheers.) What would be the condition of the Parliament which had affirmed his proposal? As my hon. friend says, it is undoubtedly he constituencies which have to decide whether the Church of England is to

remain an Established Church or not. But what does my hon. friend think would be their decision? Some time ago, when he made a somewhat similar motion to this, I ventured to point out to him that there were no signs of public concurrence in the views which he recommended, and that statement of mine has frequently been described as a challenge. My hon. friend has given no sanguine account of what he himself believes to be the state of feeling in the country. When the views he has urged have been urged with attention in different parts of the country, the mode of their acceptance has, to say the least of it, been very equivocal. If we are to look at the local indications which from time to time and from year to year are afforded by popular feeling, can we say that they tend to inspire us with the conviction that the opinions advocated by my hon. friend are spreading? And if we are to suppose that an election were to occur upon this question I can but say that for my own part I believe that the people of England, not of one party or of another, but the people of England in the broadest sense of the word, would return to Parliament a still smaller number of members inclined to entertain the question of the disestablishment of the English Church than is even to be found in the Parliament addressed by my hon. friend to-night. (Cheers.) I think my hon. friend, like many of us, has been misled by what happened in the case of the Irish Church. I venture to say now, as I ventured to say then, that the two cases were distinguished broadly, vitally, and essentially upon every point without exception upon which they could be brought into comparison. (Cheers.)

My hon. friend has not spoken to-night of the numbers composing the Church of England. That subject has been one of much dispute. I am extremely sorry that we have not been able to agree among ourselves upon a mode of ascertaining the truth upon this matter by a certain test. (Cheers.) We have had an account taken of the attendances on a certain day. That account is a very important one, but it is very far from supplying a conclusive test. For my hon. friend must recollect that it is part of the case of the Established Church, as a National Church, to carry in her train a number of persons chained to her by far looser ties than those which bind members to unestablished communities. Therefore, the measure of her following cannot be accurately determined by ascertaining the number of worshippers on one particular day. Those who argue the cause of the Establishment will tell you, and with force and truth, that it

is possible to do so. The immediate fruit of her labours in this direction must be necessarily very small, but that is no reason why they should be totally lost sight of. I will not go the length of saying that the register of marriages supplies an accurate and absolute test, or that it even supplies a better test than the attendance, but one may be very usefully employed to correct the other, and if on the one hand it be more than the truth that 78 per cent. of the population are members of the Established Church, it is probably far less than the truth to say that one-half is the true proportion. (Opposition cheers.) Making full allowance for the state of opinion in Wales and particular portions of England, my conviction is that a very considerable majority of the people of this country are by some tie or another attached to the opinions of the Church of England. (Cheers.) I said that my hon. friend had been misled by what occurred in reference to the Irish Church. And first I will throw the responsibility upon hon. gentlemen opposite. When the case of the Church of Ireland was discussed, many who sat in this House, and many of great weight, dignity, and importance—many Bishops on the bench, and many great authorities—insisted that the case of the two Churches was the same—that it was perfectly impossible to destroy the Irish Church without in common consistency and propriety proceeding to destroy the Church of England. My hon. friend was no doubt to a certain extent taken in by those assurances. He interpreted them as promises on the part of the gentlemen who used them that they would be his allies in destroying the English Church. But he finds now that there is no one of those persons—commoner or peer, layman or clergyman—who used that argument in the controversy with respect to the Irish Church who is not a most resolute opponent of my hon. friend with regard to his proposition respecting the English Church. Besides that, I admit that in the very fact of the external resemblance of the two Churches there was something in the destruction of the one likely, at any rate, to induce attack upon the other. That I admit ; but here again my hon. friend has been misled. The apparent similarity of the cases could not long conceal their essential differences, and I believe that, as factitious and momentary causes have given the movement so well represented by my hon. friend something of a temporary character, he will find himself in no inconsiderable degree deserted—a desertion of which we shall see increasing evidence from time to time. (Cheers.) Sir, my hon. friend does not

deny that it is only a small minority in this House that he represents ; and with the fairness of mind which he possesses, and from which nothing; I believe, could possibly draw him aside, I do not think he would urge that that minority in this House would be increased in number if it were in our power to take the judgment of the country upon this great subject. (Hear, hear.) And that judgment of the country he himself must admit to be the final standard of action. (Hear, hear.) It would not be possible, Sir, within the limits of a moderate speech to give any sort of tolerable picture of the true state of the case ; but I must enter a protest against the general character of the representation of my hon. friend when he speaks of the hopelessness and helplessness of the Church of England. I shall not adopt the language of exaggeration. I do not mean to say that the Church of England is not seriously hampered in her work. Her connexion with the State, which is a part of her lot, and which has brought her many advantages in former times, and has been an almost vital incident of her condition, must necessarily bring its disadvantages too. But my hon. friend has represented the dark side of the picture, and the dark side alone. If the speech of my hon. friend contained upon the whole a just description of the Church of England, what a lamentable picture she would present to the eyes of impartial observers ! Where, Sir, are we to find impartial observers ? Not easily, perhaps, among ourselves, because feeling and affection profoundly enter into the discussion of this question, and prevent us from judging with that perfectly dispassionate calmness which we should ourselves desire. But abroad we may sometimes find those who, with accurate knowledge of the condition of this country, and especially of its religious condition, unite discrimination and perfect impartiality of feeling. Now the House is usually alarmed at the production of a printed book, but there is no occasion for such alarm now. I am about to read some passages from the work of a very eminent man—Dr. Döllinger—whom for many years I have had the privilege of calling my friend—one who is thoroughly acquainted with the religious condition of this country, and than whom no one has a deeper sympathy with English institutions in general. I shall read from a work published by his authority in this country, entitled *Lectures on the Reunion of the Churches*. I shall not read all he says about the Church of England, first because it is too long, and next

because my hon. friend has supplied us with most of what could be said about her calamities and wounds and sores (a laugh); but I will read what he says on the other side—not garbled passages, but such as convey a fair and just impression of his views. Dr. Döllinger says:—

“It may still be said with truth that no Church is so national, so deeply rooted in popular affection, so bound up with the institutions and manners of the country, or so powerful in its influence on national character. During the last forty years it has extended its range, besides strengthening itself internally, by the foundation of numerous colonial bishoprics in all parts of the globe. It possesses a rich theological literature, inferior only to the German in extent and depth, and an excellent translation of the Bible, a masterpiece of style and more accurate than the Lutheran. . . . But what I should estimate most highly is the fact that the cold, dull indifferentism, which on the Continent has spread like a deadly mildew over all degrees of society, has no place in the British Isles. To whatever extent scepticism may have advanced among the younger generation, on the whole the Englishman takes an active part in Church interests and questions, and that unnatural hostility and division between laity and clergy produced by Ultramontaniam in Catholic countries is quite unknown there. . . . What has been accomplished during the last thirty years by the energy and generosity of religious Englishmen, set in motion and guided by the Church, in the way of popular education and Church building, far exceeds what has been done in any other country. (Cheers.) Attendance at religious worship on Sundays is not, as in France, the exception, but the rule, with the higher and middle classes. The Church Congress at Nottingham in October last (1871), in which 16 bishops and some 3,000 clergymen and laymen of the most various ranks and classes took part, presented an enviable spectacle to other nations. The weightiest religious questions of the day, and the special events and difficulties in the Anglican Church, were discussed with a dignity and thoroughness which suggests to every German the tacit inquiry whether anything of the kind would be possible with us.” (Cheers.)

Now, Sir, whatever may be said of hopeless helplessness, whatever may be said of the loss of self-government, whatever may be said of the difficulty of obtaining from Parliament the measures necessary for the religious development and expansion of the Church, I should think that those who know how to estimate moral as well as legal forces should remember how much the people of this country are governed through voluntary, and not through merely coercive and

authoritative, agencies. Those who can measure the real work which has thus been described by Dr. Döllinger will be disposed to think that while, even upon the propositions of my hon. friend, some admissions may be made to him, his candour would compel him to allow that from every one of those propositions he is bound to make the largest deductions. Sir, my hon. friend will not deny the great part the Church of England has played in the past history of this country. It is all very well to complain of the Church—and I might, perhaps, complain of the particular course that some of its leading members may have taken upon this question—but the Church of England has not only been a part of the history of this country, but a part so vital, entering so profoundly into the entire life and action of the country, that the severing of the two would leave nothing behind but a bleeding and lacerated mass. (Cheers.) Take the Church of England out of the History of England, and the History of England becomes a chaos, without order, without life, and without meaning. (Renewed cheers.) My hon. friend will not say that the question he proposes to us, if it was not a question of the past, is a question of the present, If it be a question of the future I will not say. But this I will say—that if it be, it is a question of the future which, with reference to us, is indefinitely remote. If I were to adopt the conclusions of my hon. friend, which I do not, I should ask myself in what way I should—as one not wholly unpractised in the framing of measures for this House—endeavour to embody them in an Act of Parliament, and certainly I should have no courage to face the question. I once made a computation of what sort of allowance of property should be made to the Church of England if we were to disestablish her upon the same rules of equity and liberality with respect to property which we adopted in the case of the Irish Church, and I made out that between life incomes, private endowments, and the value of fabrics and advowsons, something like £90,000,000 sterling would have to be given in this process of disestablishment to the ministers, members, and patrons of the Church of England. (Hear, hear.) That is a very staggering kind of arrangement to make in supplying the young lady with a fortune and turning her out in life to begin the world. (Laughter.) And undoubtedly the spectacle of a Voluntary Society in the position of the Church of England, altogether independent of the State, and with money available for her purposes that can be roughly described,

or even possibly estimated, by figures like these, does present to the mind rather puzzling problems, so that prudent men, moderate men, and on my own behalf, Sir, I will say—elderly men, may venture to doubt whether they are called upon by any imperative sense of duty to join in such a crusade, even though led by my hon. friend, filling the part of Peter the Hermit. (Cheers and laughter.) Sir, I invite the House distinctly and decisively to refuse their assent to the motion of my hon. friend, because it is a motion the conclusions of which are alike at variance with the practical wishes and desires, the intelligent opinions, and the religious convictions of a large majority of the people of England.

The right hon. gentleman resumed his seat amid loud cheers from the Opposition benches.

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