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Erastianism : Past and Present.

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IN an extremely interesting article in a volume of essays, "English Religion in the Seventeenth Century," Canon Hensley Henson explains the origin and something of the development of Erastianism. The main original question with which Erastus was concerned was "whether any person ought, because of his having committed a sin, or of his living an impure life, to be prohibited from the use and participation of the Sacraments with his fellow-Christians, provided he wished to partake with them? . . . "Whether any command or any example can be produced from the Scriptures requiring or intimating that such persons should be excluded from the Sacraments?"¹

By-and-by the controversy was to touch the English Church and, in course of time, to become acute. Words and ideas quickly vary in their meanings, and the Erastian controversy in England was on more general grounds than in the first instance. The epithet "Erastian" was hurled at any who maintained the authority of the State over things religious.

Unhappily there is always in men, even the most religious, a desire to advance their own ends, and to make use of any convenient instrument which comes to hand for the attainment of that object. The result is that a time-serving spirit arises, and if the civil power is likely to support the religious cause in hand, no servility or flattery is too great to be lavished upon it. But if, on the other hand, the State is unlikely to be favourable, the freedom of the Church from civil control is loudly voiced.

The same tendencies are not absent from religious thought to-day, and the near future bids fair to show us a repetition of the Erastian controversy. The law legalizing marriage with a

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

deceased wife's sister, and the subsequent admission or refusal of admission of the parties involved to the Holy Communion, and the divorce and education questions, are likely to revive the old controversy in an acute form. Without passing any opinion upon these, it may be interesting to take brief note of occasions in the past illustrating the attitude of the Church towards the State. The last idea in the mind of the writer is to make an exhaustive inquiry into this interesting question.

Under such a strong personality as Henry VIII. there was much excuse for the Church in allowing the more spiritual conception of its position to be overborne. But the almost cringing subjection of Church to State was predominant for long after Henry's death. Aylmer, an Elizabethan Bishop, *e.g.*, could speak of the surplice as the livery of the Queen's servants, and even Hooker in his defence of the Church Polity took essentially Erastian ground.

When James I. ascended the throne, a bold bid was made for his support by the rising and rapidly increasing Puritans. The Millenary Petition was presented to him when on his way to London, and high hopes were entertained that his favour would be won. King James's mind, however, was dominated by an unconquerable idea of his own importance. He stoutly maintained the Divine Right of Kings in general and of himself in particular, and two inevitable conclusions from this were at once apparent. First, that the Church must make a claim at least as weighty for herself, and secondly, that if she was to remain in the King's favour, she must admit his claim with all its implications. She was not loath to accept both these conclusions. The discussion of the former is entirely out of line with our inquiry, but the extent to which she admitted the latter is to the point.¹ Beginning with flattery and smooth words, she ended at last by contracting a positively unholy alliance with

¹ At the time of the Hampton Court Conference, Archbishop Whitgift declared that the King "spoke undoubtedly by the special aid of God's Spirit. Bancroft protested on his knee that his heart melted with joy," and acknowledged to God, "as a singular mercy, the gift of such a King as, he thought, had never been seen since our Saviour's time" (Soames, "Elizabethan History," pp. 550, 551).

the State, and it was reserved for that party in the Church, far removed from the ecclesiastical position of the Caroline divines and their successors, to free the Church from her deplorable position. In general it appears that the High Churchman, despite his exalted views of episcopacy, was the Erastian and the Latitudinarian rather the reverse. This, however, is not to say that the latter was entirely free from the taint. By no means.

Early in King James's reign Convocation met and drew up a book of Canons. Dean (afterwards Bishop) Overall was the editor and the Canons were embodied in a curious volume entitled "Bishop Overall's Convocation Book." The King was very apprehensive of these deliberations, and though the Canons never had his assent, and therefore were never legally binding, they give a valuable indication of the course of theological thought at the time. James's anxiety lest his prerogative should be impugned was quite unfounded, for the Bishops and clergy admitted all he wished. The concluding words of Canon V. concede to the King all the power he, in his most inflated moments, would have asked. The Canon runs as follows :

"There was only this want to the full accomplishment of such Church Government as was settled among the Jews, that during the Apostles' times, and for a long season afterwards, it wanted Christian magistrates to supply the rooms of Moses, King David, King Solomon, and the rest of their worthy successors. . . . Christians of particular congregations to be directed by their immediate pastors, pastors to be ruled by their Bishops, Bishops to be advised by their Archbishops, and the Archbishops, with all the rest, both of the clergy and laity, to be ruled and governed by their godly Kings and sovereign Princes."¹

Having reached this stage, retreat was impossible and advance unavoidable. And advance, if such it can be called, was vigorously made in the next reign by Archbishop Laud.

Charles I. shared his father's idea of the royal authority, but in his case it was untempered by any common sense. The predominant party in the Church, however, had not the least hesitation in humouring him to an unlimited extent. On the recommendation of Laud, then a prebendary, a prayer was

¹ "Convocation Book," Anglo-Catholic Library, p. 141.

introduced into the Coronation Service conceding to the King superlative spiritual power. It ran as follows: "Let him obtain favour for the people, like Aaron in the Tabernacle, Elisha in the waters, Zacharias in the temple; *give him Peter's key of discipline, and Paul's doctrine.*" "This," says Collier, "sounds extremely high for the regale, and might serve very well for the consecration of a patriarch."¹ Nor was this with Laud mere words and nothing more. He was quite prepared to put it into effect. We shall not trouble to recall his doings in particular, but the summary of his policy may be fairly stated thus:

"In the view of Laud there seemed to be no right, save the divine right of kings. With this he was ever ready to assail both the liberties of the State and of the Church. Against the Church in particular he wielded the Royal prerogative in such a fashion as to make the ecclesiastical government of his day more completely Erastian than it had been in the time of Henry VIII. In none of his measures were the clergy consulted. They were simply ordered to carry out the Royal will."²

Under the control of Bishops of this way of thinking, worse was bound to follow. If the King, as King, had this remarkable authority, where could a halt be called? Suppose he were of notoriously evil character, would the advocates of this kind of royal authority over the Church pursue their policy to the end? Their conduct was soon to be put to the test, for with the accession of Charles II. they were supplied with a monarch of just this character. The King, whose moral character was a byword and a laughing-stock, was fawned upon by the Church as a whole. Pious Jeremy Taylor had his misgivings, but he was in a distinct minority. Even he appears to have been of the opinion that a Bishop could only remonstrate with an immoral Prince, and if the latter persisted in desiring the Holy Communion his request must be granted. Few, however, shared even these timid misgivings. A quotation from Evelyn's "Diary" illustrates strikingly the feebleness of the Church and her slavery to Erastian ideas:

¹ "Church History," viii., 7.

² Perry, "History of the English Church," vol. ii., pp. 414, 415.

"1684. *Easter Day*.—The Bishop of Rochester preached before the King, after which His Majesty, accompanied with three of his natural sons, the Dukes of Northumberland, Richmond, and St. Albans (sons of Portsmouth, Cleveland, and Nelly), went up to the altar, the three boys entering before the King within the rails, at the right hand, and three Bishops on the left: London (who officiated), Durham, and Rochester, with the Sub-dean, Dr. Holder. The King, kneeling before the altar, making his offering, the Bishops first received and then His Majesty; after which he retired to a canopied seat on the right side. Note, there was perfume burnt before the office began."¹

The next case which calls for examination is that of the non-jurors. It is not easy to criticize them, for the excellence of their characters and the sacrifices they made for conscience' sake would seem, and in many ways rightly so, to shield them from condemnation. Moreover, their leaders, Sancroft and Ken, had already shown, by their attitude towards James II., that passive obedience to the Sovereign had its limits, and that, strong though their royalist proclivities might be, they were not prepared to let the royal heel rest upon their necks. But it seems impossible to acquit them of the charge of Erastianism. Indeed, the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings is bound to issue ultimately in this view of the relation between Church and State.

After their secession from the Church, because they could not conscientiously swear allegiance to King William III., both by their words and acts they testified that loyalty to the King (James II.) was an essential to the claim to catholicity. The more rigid of them, headed by Sancroft, refused Communion with those among their late brethren who had incurred the sin of compliance, and, in order to facilitate the return of the offenders, they drew up "a regular form of admission 'into the true and Catholic remnant of the Britannick Churches.'"²

In his "History of the English Church" (p. 238), Mr. W. H. Hutton maintains that the non-jurors "insisted on the independence of the Church of any power on earth in the exercise of her purely spiritual power and authority." If so, their actions

¹ Quoted by Canon Henson, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

² *Vide* Abbey and Overton, "English Church in the Eighteenth Century," p. 39 and footnote.

certainly belied their words ; for, on p. 240 of the same volume, we read that Bishop Lloyd was determined to perpetuate the schism, so at his direction "Hickes, the deprived Dean of Worcester, was sent over to S. Germain to ask James" (the dethroned King) "to nominate two Bishops." Harder still is it to recognize the correctness of this estimate of these good men from the following fact :

"Dr. George Hickes, the deprived Dean of Worcester, who was regarded as the head of the non-juring clergy, being lately dead (1716), the publication of his papers revealed the intentions of his party respecting the Church whenever the Stuart line should be restored. They held that all the conforming clergy were schismatic, and pronounced the invalidity of Orders conferred by Bishops made by usurping monarchs; consequently all baptisms performed by these schismatic divines were deemed to be illegal; and it was resolved that neither the one nor the other should be acknowledged, until the parties had received fresh ordination or fresh baptism from the hands of their own part of the Church, which had never bowed the knee to Baal."¹

If this is not unadulterated Erastianism, we may well ask what is ?

The very low-water mark of Erastianism in the Church was reached in 1673. So far from the Holy Communion being the highest spiritual privilege of the faithful, the Test Act degraded it to a kind of password to office—"By a single or an annual Communion a man who in every respect dissented from the Church could qualify himself for office."² And, so far from this monstrous and scandalous measure being repudiated by the Bishops in general, for generations they clung to it as the very shield and protection of the Church till the repeal of the Act in 1828. This was not effected by the assistance of the High Church party—quite the reverse, for as a party they were pledged to the old ideas. "Our happy constitution in Church and State" was a veritable war-cry of the High Churchmen. To our forefathers "a High Churchman meant one who was the strongest supporter of Church and State ; and so, indeed, he *was*, as a matter of fact. None supported the established

¹ Bishop Monk's "Life of Bentley," vol. i., p. 426. Quoted by Archbishop Whateley in "Kingdom of Christ."

² Hutton, "History of the English Church," p. 258.

constitution more ably and consistently than the High Churchmen."¹

When Bishop Longley (1836) did homage to King William on his appointment to the See of Ripon, as he rose from his knees the King addressed these shocking words to him: "Bishop of Ripon, I charge you before Almighty God that you never by word or deed give encouragement to those — Whigs, who would upset the Church of England."² This was not merely the vulgar expression of the coarse King's mind, but so deeply had Erastianism taken hold of the Church, that the general opinion would have been on the King's side. Individual High Churchmen certainly had nobler ideals for the Church, but as a body they were distinctly behindhand in this respect, even as late as the early nineteenth century.

The conclusion we arrive at from these brief glances into the somewhat distant past is that the Church, as a whole, was strongly tainted with Erastianism. No party was entirely free, but of all parties that which exhibited the evil in its most aggravated form was the High Church party. Beyond all question, in many cases the idea of royal authority over the Church was sincerely believed and a real question of conscience, but it seems equally beyond question that sometimes the actuating motive was of a lower order, and simply the advancement of the Church in the nation or of one particular party in the Church.

Coming more nearly to our own time, one would imagine from reading the writings and hearing the expressions of the High Anglican leaders of to-day (who claim, wrongly one thinks, to be the spiritual descendants of the High Churchmen of a century and more ago) that *they* were the champions of the most spiritual conception of the Church and her authority. The scorn they heap upon the idea that secular courts are to be allowed any jurisdiction over her, the way they exhaust language in describing their contempt for those who uphold the

¹ Overton, "The English Church in the Nineteenth Century," p. 25.

² Quoted by Bishop Boyd Carpenter, "History of the Church of England," p. 425.

legality of Privy Council judgments, would lead one to believe that if ever there was a party untainted with Erastianism here we have it.

Commenting upon the effect of Privy Council judgments upon the Church, Canon Knox Little makes a strange remark: "The other part of the Western Church was enriched by the secession of devoted and able men who, from want of patience and taking the full measure of things, concluded too hastily that the Church of England was wholly Erastian."¹ Now, the impression created by these words is surely this, that these "devoted and able men" and the party to which they belonged were strongly averse from an appeal to the Courts. Such is entirely the reverse of the truth.

Here we must note, in passing, that in such an action there is nothing essentially Erastian at all. It is the office of the Privy Council not to make laws for the Church, but, as a court of experts, to decide what is the meaning and true interpretation of the already existing formularies and laws. But since the High Anglican says it is Erastian to make such an appeal, let us judge him from his own words and acts. The astonishing result to which we are driven from such an inquiry is that no party has been so active as his in advocating the appeal to the law. One or two illustrations must suffice, but they can be easily multiplied. The Annual Report of the E.C.U. (1861) referred thus to the suit of Bishop of Salisbury *v.* Williams: "A suit, after the most mature deliberation, has been commenced by the Bishop of Salisbury. The Council commend him and *his sacred cause* to the prayers and good offices of the Union."

Again, when "three aggrieved" ones prosecuted Professor Jowett (1863) for heresy in the Oxford Chancellor's Court, the *Church Review*, the official organ of the E.C.U., commented thus on the action of the prosecutors: "Dark will be the gloom which obscures the horizon of England's Church when there shall not be found among her sons any who will have the moral courage to bring before the courts to which they may be

¹ "Conflict of Ideals in the English Church," p. 55.

amenable those who are engaged in poisoning the streams of religious knowledge at their very fountain head." Once more: At a meeting of the Worcester branch of the E.C.U., held in November, 1866, the then president, in explaining the objects of the Society, said: "The desire of the Union is to defend the Ritual Law of the Church of England. . . . The only method of ascertaining it must be found in the Courts of Law. Hence arises the necessity for legal investigation."¹

It seems, then, that "devoted and able men" who, "enriched by" their "secession" the "other part of the Western Church," had their righteous feelings outraged, not by appeals to secular courts, for they and their kind were the most active in this direction, but because those appeals did not result as they had hoped. Moreover, they "concluded" that "the Church of England was wholly Erastian" because the courts did not support them as often as they could have wished. Strange arguing this!

There is a type of small boy, not a good or popular type, who suggests a game of cricket to his companions. He insists on going in first, and, on doing so, gets out first ball. He flings the bat on the ground and declares he will play no more. He abuses the bat, the ball, the game, the ground—everything but himself. This is something like the behaviour of the "devoted and able men" to whom we have referred.

In a sense, Erastianism is dead to-day, but there are manifest signs of a revival in its dead bones. Just at present the most frequent use to which the term is put is that of a convenient missile to fling at the head of an opponent who upholds Privy Council judgments, or who believes that the decision of Parliament regarding marriage with a deceased wife's sister is not contrary to the teaching of Christianity. The flinger of the missile would do well to look at the escutcheon of his own party, for this brief inquiry shows that no party in the Church is marked so definitely with the bar sinister of Erastianism as is the High Anglican.

¹ These references are taken from "Ecclesiastical Prosecutions," by Walter Walsh, pp. 2, 6, 7.