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REPORT
OF THE
Committee
OF

THE UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

FOR PROTECTING THE CIVIL RIGHTS OF UNITARIANS,

TO THE GENERAL MEETING,

Held at the London Tavern 26th May, 1820.

The Committee, in resigning the trust with which they have been invested, must beg leave to refer in many points to the explanation of their views, and the detail of the commencement of their labours, contained in the Report which they felt themselves called upon to make to the last General Meeting, although that meeting took place very early after their appointment.

The subject which then occupied their principal attention has continued to form the leading topic for their consideration. They refer to the application made during the last Parliament for relief on the subject of the Marriage Law, as it particularly affects Unitarian Christians.

In their first Report the Committee stated fully the result of their inquiries into the nature and origin of the grievance complained of, and the grounds on which they relied, as sanctioning their endeavours to remove that grievance, and as likely, in their opinion, to convince the Legislature of the strict justice of the claim intended to be made on its favourable consideration.

The difficulty which then pressed mainly on the Committee was the nature of the relief which they ought to seek. Three plans were before them, and met with their several classes of supporters. The first was, that of an endeavour to obtain for Dissenters in general, an entire release from any sort of compulsive conformity to the Established Church, restoring the Marriage Contract to its original simple civil form, proceeding only for due regulation and record, but leaving every sect to add such religious service, if any, as should seem to it proper or expedient. The second was, that of allowing each sect the free celebration of the Marriage Ceremony according to its own form, but still treating it as a religious ordinance, and insisting on its registration in the Parochial Church, on the certificate of competent persons who had attended the celebration. The third was, that of making as little alteration as possible in forms and customs which had so long been established, and seemed likely to be guarded with a jealous eye, as important at any rate for civil purposes. According to this plan it was suggested, that the present ceremony consisted of two parts, one merely civil, the other devotional, which might be easily separated; that to the performance of the ceremony itself, considering it as a matter of mere civil regulation, there need be no reasonable objection, provided the parties were relieved

from joining in the devotional part of the service. This plan, it was contended, would do no violence to existing institutions and prejudices, it would alter nothing, but would be completely effected by the simple permission of the Legislature to perform and register the Marriages of Dissenters on the simple use (on the request of the parties) of that part of the service only which contains the mutual plighting, and is purely civil, thus putting an end at once to the conformity which Dissenters are now compelled to give to the religious services of the Church, from which the laws sanction their separation.

These several plans were taken into the cool and deliberate consideration of the Committee, and after weighing all their comparative advantages, they came to the unanimous determination, that the last plan, as embodied in a bill drawn out by Mr. Richmond, one of their body, to whom they feel themselves under the highest obligations for his active and able assistance, afforded the nearest approach towards the removal of the hardships now imposed by the ceremonies of the Marriage, which could be reasonably expected. The Committee duly appreciated the feelings of those who would desire a complete separation of the Marriage Contract from the place and officers of the Established Church; but they were convinced that objections might be raised to such a proposal which would altogether defeat the hopes they entertained of a virtual relief from the chief, if not the whole, of the difficulties which existed.

On coming to this determination, no time was lost in putting it into execution. Mr. Smith, at the request of the Committee, undertook the introduction of the proposed Bill, which was accordingly read a first time, with no opposition and little observation. But difficulties arose in a quarter from which it was least expected. The Body of Protestant Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations, who had already had occasion to consider the same subject, having requested an interview with the Committee, it was discovered that they had contemplated seeking the most extended plan of relief, and that they were averse to the Committee's proposed application as likely, in their opinion, to prejudice what was considered by them a more desirable object.

The Committee being requested to postpone, at any rate, the further progress of their Bill, and having heard the arguments urged in support of the proposition, again took the whole subject into full consideration, and the result was the following unanimous Resolution:

"That the Committee receive with the highest respect the application of the Protestant Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations, who have so strong a claim upon their attention and deference on account of their profession, their character, and their uniform and zealous support of the sacred cause of Religious Liberty, and that it is therefore with great reluctance and unfeigned concern that the Committee feel themselves compelled, by a faithful regard to the interests of their constituents, to declare that they cannot comply with the wish of the Ministers;

"In the first place, because the Unitarians stand in a different situation from other Dissenters in regard to the present Marriage Service, and are much more seriously aggrieved in point of conscience;

"In the second place, because the Ministers have not yet laid down any plan of proceeding, and the Committee know not what will be the provisions of their proposed Bill;

"In the third place, because there seems to be a fair prospect of success in the present measure, whereas it is the opinion of the Committee that

a Bill drawn up on more speculative principles would not only fail of success, but even, by rousing general opposition, endanger any other plan of redress, however moderate;

“And, in the fourth place, because the Bill now about to be presented to Parliament appears to the Committee to secure every object contemplated by the Ministers themselves, inasmuch as it does in effect, reduce the Marriage Service to a mere form of publishing and registering a civil contract, every thing of the nature of religious worship being excluded, while, at the same time, it provides for the security of Dissenters and of society against irregular Marriages, imposes no onerous charge and responsibility on Dissenting Ministers, and guarantees the important objects of regular registration and legal proof of the marriage contract;

“But that, whether the present Bill be carried or not, the Committee will be always happy to co-operate with the Ministers of the Three Denominations in any practicable measure for the advancement of religious liberty, and the promotion of the civil rights of Protestant Dissenters, in this or any other particular.”

The Bill was then urged on as far as the late period of the session, and the delay which this interference had occasioned, would allow. It was read a second time without opposition; but on the motion for its commitment, though no objection upon the merits of the question was raised in argument against it, it was found too late for any hope that the Bill could, under any circumstances, then pass, and it was therefore reluctantly dropped.

The short session which succeeded in the latter end of the last year, furnished no opportunity for reviving the measure; but the Committee have taken active steps for bringing the Bill once more before the consideration of the Legislature under the present Parliament. Their last act has been the appointment of a Deputation to wait on Mr. Smith and request his immediate revival of the subject; and the Committee can only hope that that success may attend their efforts, or those of their successors, which they are well convinced the justice of their cause fully merits.

There are several other matters to which the attention of the Committee has been directed during the year.

Some of the cases brought before them affected the general rights of Dissenters, and were therefore, in pursuance of the general rule which the Committee have laid down for themselves, conformably with the spirit of this Association, referred to those institutions to which they more properly belong; but the Committee are happy to have had it in their power, in several cases which were within their peculiar province, to give effectual assistance and protection.

[The Report, as read to the General Meeting, enters at considerable length into the particulars of three cases to which the attention of the Committee had been called. They have, however, in the discretion given them by the Meeting, considered it best not to print that part, inasmuch as it might make disclosures prejudicial to the interests of the parties concerned, as well as create obstacles in the way of desirable arrangements. The Report concludes as follows:—]

The List of Subscribers and Congregations now connected with the Association, will shew, the Committee are happy to add, a considerable increase in the numbers and means of this Institution, and though they have not the pleasure of seeing realized, in its full extent, the hope

expressed in their former Report, that ere this they should have to enrol within it by far the greater part of the existing bodies of Unitarians in the kingdom, they have ample reason to be satisfied with the progress made in the short period which has elapsed, and good grounds for trusting that the Society will continue to meet the support which, in their opinion, it deserves and is entitled to expect.

At the General Meeting held as above-mentioned,

It was Resolved,

That the Report of the Committee read by the Secretary, be received and that the same, together with the Rules of the Association and a List of the Congregational and individual Subscribers, be printed and circulated in the discretion of the Committee.

RULES OF THE ASSOCIATION.

1. This Society shall be denominated "The Unitarian Association for the Protection of the Civil Rights of Unitarians."

2. The Association shall consist of individual subscribers, and of the representatives of congregations making an annual contribution.

3. The qualification of individuals, as members of this Association, shall be an annual subscription of not less than 10s. 6d., or a donation of not less than 5l. 5s.

4. Every congregation contributing annually not less than one guinea, shall be at liberty to send two representative members. Officiating ministers of congregations shall be eligible as representatives.

5. An Annual General Meeting of the Association shall be holden on the Thursday in the Whitsun week.

6. A Committee, consisting of ten persons, resident in or near London, shall be chosen at the Annual Meeting, to transact the business of the Association, of whom four, viz. those who shall have given the least attendance at Committee Meetings, shall be ineligible for one year.

7. A Treasurer and Secretary shall also be chosen at the Annual Meeting, who shall be added to the Committee. The Treasurer shall receive subscriptions, and make all necessary disbursements on account of the Association; and the Secretary record its minutes, conduct its correspondence, and summon Committee and General Meetings.

8. In all meetings of the Committee, the presence of five members shall be necessary for proceeding to business.

9. All subscriptions shall be paid in advance, and be considered as due on the 1st of January in each year. And no person shall be allowed to vote at an Annual Meeting until his subscription for the current year be paid.

10. The above Rules shall not be altered except by two-thirds of the members present at a General Meeting. Any alteration intended to be proposed to the Society, must be first notified to the Committee at one of its meetings.

Congregations united to the Association.

	Minister.	£.	s.	d.
Alnwick	Rev. W. Probert	1	1	0
Bessels Green	Matthew Harding	1	1	0
Birmingham (Old Meeting)	R. Kell and S. W. Browne	2	2	0
Boston	D. W. Jones	1	1	0
Bridport (Fellowship Fund)	T. Howe	5	5	0
Brighton	Dr. Morell	1	1	0
Bristol (Lewin's Mead)	J. Rowe and L. Carpenter, LL.D.	1	1	0
Caermarthen	J. Evans	1	1	0
Chichester	J. Fullagar	1	1	0
Colchester	J. Meek	1	1	0
Collumpton	J. Davis	1	1	0
Crediton	J. P. Hinton	1	1	0
Ditto, donation		1	1	0
Deptford	William Moon	1	1	0
Ditchling	— Acdon	1	1	0
Dorchester	L. Lewis	1	1	0
Dover	Benjamin Marten	1	1	0
Elland	J. Beattie	1	1	0
Exeter (George's Meeting)	J. Manning and W. Hincks	2	0	0
Falmouth, Mr. R. A. Philp		1	1	0
Framlingham	S. S. Toms	1	1	0
Gloucester	Theophilus Browne	1	1	0
Godalming, donation,	John Ellis and T. Moor	1	1	0
Hackney (Gravel-Pit)	R. Aspland	2	2	0
Lancaster	— Lamport	2	0	0
Leicester	C. Berry	2	0	0
Lincoln	James Hawkes	5	5	0
Liverpool (Renshaw Street)	G. Harris	2	2	0
Ditto (Paradise Street)	J. Yates	1	1	0
Ditto (Cross-Hall Street)		1	1	0
Lutton	James Smith	1	1	0
Lynn (Norfolk)	B. Treleaven	1	1	0
Maidstone	Abraham Harris	1	1	0
Manchester (Moseley Street)	— Hawkes	1	1	0
Moreton Hampstead	J. Smethurst	1	1	0
Newport (Isle of Wight)	William Stevens	1	1	0
Norwich (Fellowship Fund)	Thomas Madge	3	3	0
Nottingham	J. Tayler	2	2	0
Palgrave	Ch. Valentine	1	1	0
Parliament Court, London	W. J. Fox	1	1	0
Portsmouth	Russell Scott	1	1	0
Plymouth	Israel Worsley	5	5	0
Reading	J. B. Smith	1	1	0
Rossendale (Newchurch)	John Ashworth	1	1	0
Sheffield	N. Philipps, D.D.	2	2	0
Shrewsbury	G. Case	2	0	0
Sidmouth	Edmund Butcher	1	1	0
Soham		1	1	0
Swansea (Fellowship Fund)	R. Awbrey	1	1	0
Taunton	J. L. Renner and H. Davies	1	1	0
Tavistock	W. Evans	1	1	0
Tenterden	L. Holden	2	2	0
Ditto, donation		3	0	0
Thomas's St., Southwark	Dr. T. Rees	1	1	0
Thorne and Staniforth	G. Gaskell	3	15	6
Warwick (Fellowship Fund)	W. Field	1	1	0
Wisbeach Congregation	N. Walker	1	1	0
Wolverhampton, J. Pearson, Esq.		1	1	0
Worship Street, London	James Gilchrist	1	1	0
Yeovil (Fellowship Fund)	T. S. Smith, M.D.	2	2	0
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	£.	s.	d.	£.	s.	d.
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Amory, W., Esq., Ditto				1	1	0
Arundel, Mr. John	0	10	0			
Aspland, Rev. Robert, Hackney				0	10	6
Astley, Rev. Richard, Halifax				0	10	6
Blake, Rev. W., Crewkerne				1	0	0
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Butcher, Rev. Edmund, Sidmouth				0	10	6
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