

## IN SUPPORT OF THE AFFIRMATION BILL

delivered by William Ewart Gladstone, on April 26, 1883

Now, let us try and get at the heart of the argument, which, after all, is not a very complex, although I must say it is historically, and from every point of view, an extremely interesting matter. The business of every man in controversy is to try to find out what is the main and governing contention of his adversary. Sir, I have labored to find that out, and I think I have probably found it: I hope so. As I read it, the governing contention is this -- that the main question for the state is not what religion a man professes, but whether he professes some religion or none. I was in hopes of receiving some confirmatory testimony from the other side. I might dispense with proofs, but I will give them. The right honorable gentleman who led the opposition to this bill said that this was not a question of difference of religion, but that it was a question between religion and irreligion -- between religion and the absence of all religion -- and clearly the basis of the right honorable gentleman's speech was not that we were to tolerate any belief, but that we were not to tolerate no belief. I mean by tolerating to admit, to recognize, to legislate for the purpose of permitting entrance into the House of Commons. My honorable friend, the Member for Finsbury, in an able speech, still more clearly expressed similar views. He referred to the ancient controversies as all very well; they touched, he said, excrescences, and not the vital substance. Now, sir, I want to examine what is the vital substance, and what are the excrescences. He went further than this and used a most apt, appropriate, expressive, and still more significant phrase. He said: "Yes; it is true you admit religions some of which may go near the precipice; but now you ask us to go over it." Gentlemen opposite cheered loudly when that was said by the honorable gentleman behind me. They will not give me a single cheer now. They suspect I am quoting this with some evil intent. The question is, am I quoting them fairly? Or is it the fact that some gentlemen have not sufficiently and fairly considered their relation to the present bill, except that they mean to oppose whatever proceeds from the government? But my honorable friend has considered very well what he said when he used the remarkable simile about the precipice. I wish to see what is the value of this main and principal contention -- this doctrine of the precipice -- this question between religion and irreligion, between some belief which is to be tolerated, and no belief which cannot be tolerated -- that is to say, so far as it relates to admission into this House. The honorable and learned gentleman, the Member for Launceston, held exactly the same language. He adopted a phrase which had fallen from the honorable Member for Portsmouth which he thought had been unfairly applied; and he said he wished that there should be some form of belief and some recognition of belief -- something of what is called in philosophical discussion recognition of the supernatural. That, I believe, is a phrase which goes as near to what honorable gentlemen opposite mean as anything can. It is the recognition of the existence, at any rate, of the supernatural that is wanted. That is the main contention of the party opposite; and what I want to know is, whether that

contention -- that proposition -- offers us a good solid standing ground for legislation. Whatever test is applied -- the test of the Constitution, the test of civil and political freedom, or, above all, the test of religion, and of reverence for religious conviction -- I do not hesitate to say that, confidently as I support this bill, there is no ground upon which I support it with so much confidence as because of what I think is the utter hollowness and falseness of the argument that is expressed in the words I have just cited, and in the idea that is at the bottom of those words, and the danger of making them the basis of constitutional action.

Sir, what does this contention do? In the first place, it evidently violates civil freedom to this extent -- that, in the words of Lord Lyndhurst -- which are as wide as anything that any gentleman on this side could desire -- there is to be a total divorce between the question of religious differences and the question of civil privilege and power; that there is to be no test whatever applied to a man with respect to the exercise of civil functions, except the test of civil capacity, and a fulfillment of civil conditions. Those were the words of Lord Lyndhurst -- those are the words on which we stand. It is now proposed to depart from this position, and to say that a certain class of persons, perhaps a very narrow class -- I do not argue that now -- because it is said to have no religion is to be excepted, and alone excepted, from the operation of that great and broad principle. In my opinion, it is in the highest degree irrational to lay down a broad principle of that kind, and after granting 99/100ths of all, it means to stop short, in order to make an invidious exclusion of the exceedingly limited number of persons who may possibly be affected by, and concerned in, its application.

Honorable gentlemen will, perhaps, be startled when I make my next objection to the contention of the opponents of the bill. It is that it is highly disparaging to Christianity. They invite us to do that which, as a legislature, we ought never to do -- namely, to travel over theological ground, and, having taken us upon that ground, what is it that they tell us? They tell us that you may go any length you please in the denial of religion, provided only you do not reject the name of the Deity. They tear religion -- if I may say so -- in shreds, and they set aside one particular shred of it, with which nothing will ever induce them to part. They divide religion into the dispensable and the indispensable -- I am not speaking now of the cases of those who declare, or who are admitted under special laws, and I am not speaking of Jews or any of those who make declarations -- I am speaking of those for whom no provision is made, except the provision of the oath, let that be clearly understood -- they divide, I say, religion into what can be dispensed with and what cannot be dispensed with, and then they find that Christianity can be dispensed with. I am not willing, sir, that Christianity, if an appeal is made to us as a Christian legislature, should stand in any rank lower than that which is indispensable. Let me illustrate what I mean. Supposing a commander has to dispatch a small body of men for the purpose of some difficult and important undertaking. They are to go without baggage and without appliances. Everything they take they must carry on

their backs. They have to dispense with all luxuries and all comforts, and to take with them only that which is essential. That is precisely the same course which you ask us to take in drawing us upon theological ground. You require us to distinguish between superfluities and necessities, and you say in regard to Christianity, "Oh, that is one of the superfluities -- that is one of the excrescences, that has nothing to do with the vital substance -- the great and solemn name of the Deity -- which is indispensable." The adoption of such a proposition as that -- and it is at the very root of your contention -- seems to me to be in the highest degree disparaging to the Christian faith. I pass to another point. The honorable Member for Finsbury made a reference to Mr. O'Connell, whom he stated that he knew well. I will not say, sir, that I had as much personal knowledge of Mr. O'Connell as my honorable friend may have had, though I did know something of him personally, as well as politically; but, when I was a very young man, in the second year of my sitting in Parliament -- in the old House which was burned down half a century ago -- I heard a speech from Mr. O'Connell, which, although at that time I was bound by party allegiance to receive with misgiving and distrust anything he said, made a deep impression upon me, and by which I think I have ever since been guided. It is to be found, not in Hansard, but in the record which, for a few years, was more copious even than Hansard, and which went under the name of *The Mirror of Parliament*. On the eighteenth of February, 1834, Mr. O'Connell used these words in a speech on the Law of Libel; and I echo every word my honorable friend said with regard to the deep religious convictions and the religious consistency of that remarkable man -- he used, sir, these words:

When I see in this country the law allowing men to dispute the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Divinity of the Redeemer, I really think, if I had no other reason, I should be justified in saying that there is nothing beyond that which should be considered worth quarreling for, or which ought to be made the subject of penal restrictions.

I am convinced that upon every religious, as well as upon every political ground, the true and the wise course is not to deal out religious liberty by halves, by quarters, and by fractions; but to deal it out entire, and to leave no distinction between man and man on the ground of religious differences from one end of the land to the other.

But, sir, I go a little further in endeavoring to test and to probe this great religious contention of the "precipice," which has been put forward, amidst fervent cheers from honorable gentlemen opposite, by my honorable friend behind me; and I want to know, is your religious distinction a real distinction at all? I will, for the sake of argument, and for no other purpose whatever, go with you on this dangerous ground of splitting religion into slices, and I ask you: "Where will you draw the line?" You draw it at the point where the abstract denial of God is severed from abstract admission of the Deity. My proposition is that your line is worthless.

There is much on your side of the line which is just as objectionable as the atheism on the other side. If you call on us to draw these distinctions, let them be rational distinctions. I do not say let them be Christian distinctions; but let them be rational distinctions. I can understand one rational distinction, that you should frame the oath in such a way that its terms should recognize, not merely the acknowledgment of the existence of the Deity, but the providence of the Deity, and man's responsibility to the Deity, and in such a way as to indicate the knowledge in a man's own mind that he must answer to the Deity for what he does, and is able to do. But is that your present rule? No, sir. You know well that from ancient times there have been sects and schools that have admitted in the abstract, just as freely as the Christian admits, the existence of a Deity, but who have held that, though Deity exists, yet of practical relations between Him and man there can be none. Many Members of this House will recollect, perhaps, the noble and majestic lines -- for such they are -- of the Latin poet --

*Omnis enim per se divom natura necessesst,  
immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur;  
semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe,  
nam privata dolore omni, privata periclis,  
ipsa suis pollens opibus, nil indiga nostri,  
nec bene promeritis capitur necque tangitur ira.*

Book II, De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things) by Lucretius.

"For it is essential to the very nature of deity that it should enjoy immortal existence in utter tranquillity, aloof and detached from our affairs. It is free from all pain and peril, strong in its own resources, exempt from any need of us, indifferent to our merits and immune from anger." Trans., Ronald Latham, The Penguin Classics.

"Divinity exists" -- as these, I must say, magnificent words set forth -- "in remote, inaccessible recesses of which we know nothing; but with us it has no dealing, with us it has no relation." Sir, I have purposely gone back to ancient times, because the discussion is less invidious than the discussion of modern schools of opinion. But, sir, I do not hesitate to say that the specific evil, the specific form of irreligion, with which in educated society in this country you have to contend, and with respect to which you ought to be on your guard, is not blank atheism. That is a rare form of opinion, and it is seldom met with. But what is frequently met with are those various forms of opinion which teach us that whatever there be beyond the visible scene, whatever there be beyond this short span of life, you know and can know nothing of it, and that it is a visionary and a bootless undertaking to endeavor to establish relations with it. That is the specific mischief of the age; but that mischief you do not attempt to touch. Nay, more; you glory in the state of the law that now prevails. All differences of religion you wish to tolerate. You wish to allow everybody to enter your chamber who admits the existence of Deity. You would

seek to admit Voltaire. That is a specimen of your toleration. But Voltaire was not a taciturn foe of Christianity. He was the author of that painful and awful phrase that goes to the heart of every Christian -- and goes, I believe, to the heart of many a man professing religion who is not a Christian -- *écrasez l'infame*. Voltaire was a believer in God; he would not have had the slightest difficulty in taking the oath; and you are working up the country to something like a crusade on this question; endeavoring to strengthen in the minds of the people the false notion that you have got a real test, a real safeguard; that Christianity is still generally safe, with certain unavoidable exceptions, under the protecting aegis of the oath within the walls of this chamber. And it is for that you are entering on a great religious war! I hold, then, that this contention of our opponents is disparaging to religion; it is idle; and it is also highly irrational. For if you are to have a religious test at all of the kind that you contemplate -- the test of theism, which the honorable Member of Portsmouth frankly said he wished to adopt -- it ought to be a test of a well-ascertained theism; not a mere abstract idea dwelling in the air, and in the clouds, but a practical recognition of a Divine Governing Power, which will some day call all of us to account for every thought we conceive, and for every word we utter.

I fear I have detained the House for a long time. But after all that has been said, and after the flood of accusations and invective that has been poured out, I have thought it right at great length and very seriously to show that, at all events, whether we be beaten or not, we do not decline the battle, and that we are not going to allow it to be said that the interests of religion are put in peril, and that they are to find their defenders only on the opposite side of the House. That sincere and conscientious defenders of those interests are to be found there I do not question at this moment; but I so contend with my whole heart and soul that the interests of religion, as well as the interests of civil liberty, are concerned in the passage of this measure. My reasons, sir, for the passing of the bill may be summed up in a few words. If I were asked to put a construction on this oath as it stands, I probably should give it a higher meaning than most gentlemen opposite. It is my opinion, as far as I can presume to form one, that the oath has in it a very large flavor of Christianity. I am well aware that the doctrine of my honorable and learned friend, the Attorney General, is that there are other forms of positive attestation, recognized by other systems of religion, which may enable the oath to be taken by the removal of the words "So help me God," and the substitution of some other words, or some symbolical act, involving the idea of Deity, and responsibility to the Deity. But I think we ought to estimate the real character of this oath according to the intention of the legislature. The oath does not consist of spoken words alone. The spoken words are accompanied by the corroborative act of kissing the Book. What is the meaning of that? According to the intention of the legislature, I certainly should say that that act is an import of the acceptance of the Divine revelation. There have been other forms in other countries. I believe in Scotland the form is still maintained of holding up the right hand instead of kissing the Book. In Spain the form is, I believe, that of kissing the Cross. In Italy, I think, at one



time, the form was that of laying the hand on the Gospel. All these different forms meant, according to the original intention, an acceptance of Christianity. But you do not yourselves venture to say that the law could be applied in the sense. A law of this kind is like a coin spick-and-span, brand-new from the mint, carrying upon it its edges in all their sharpness and freshness; but it wears down in passing from hand to hand, and, though there is a residuum, yet the distinctive features disappear. Whatever my opinion may be as to the original vitality of the oath, I think there is very little difference of opinion as to what it has now become. It has become, as my honorable friend says, a theistic test. It is taken as no more than a theistic test. It does, as I think, involve a reference to Christianity. But while this is my personal opinion, it is not recognized by authority, and at any rate, does not prevail in practice; for some gentlemen in the other House of Parliament, if not in this also, have written works against the Christian religion, and yet have taken the oath. But, undoubtedly, it is not good for any of us to force this test so flavored, or even if not so flavored, upon men who cannot take it with a full and a cordial acceptance. It is bad -- it is demoralizing to do so. It is all very well to say, "Oh, yet; but it is their responsibility." That is not, in my view, a satisfactory answer. A seat in this House is to the ordinary Englishman in early life, or, perhaps, in middle and mature life, when he has reached a position of distinction in his career, the highest prize of his ambition. But if you place between him and that prize not only the necessity of conforming to certain civil conditions, but the adoption of certain religious words, and if these words are not justly measured to the condition of his conscience and of his convictions, you give him an inducement -- nay, I do not go too far when I say you offer him a bribe to tamper with those convictions -- to do violence to his conscience in order that he may not be stigmatized by being shut out from what is held to be the noblest privilege of the English citizen -- that of representing his fellow citizens in Parliament. And, therefore, I say that, besides our duty to vindicate the principle of civil and religious liberty, which totally detaches religious controversy from the enjoyment of civil rights, it is most important that the House should consider the moral effect of this test. It is, as the honorable Member for Portsmouth is neither more nor less than right in saying, a purely theistic test. Viewed as a theistic test, it embraces no acknowledgment of Providence, of Divine Government, of responsibility, or of retribution. It involves nothing but a bare and abstract admission -- a form void of all practical meaning and concern. This is not a wholesome, but an unwholesome, lesson. Yet more. I own that although I am now, perhaps, going to injure myself by bringing the name of Mr. Bradlaugh into this controversy, I am strongly of opinion that the present controversy should come to a close. I have no fear of atheism in this House. Truth is the expression of the Divine mind; and however little our feeble vision may be able to discern the means by which God will provide for its preservation, we may leave the matter in His hands, and we may be quite sure that a firm and courageous application of every principle of justice and of equity is the best method we can adopt for the preservation and influence of truth. I must painfully record my opinion that grave injury has been done to religion in many minds -- not in

instructed minds, but in those which are ill-instructed or partially instructed, which have a large claim on our consideration --in consequence of steps which have unhappily, been taken. Great mischief has been done in many minds through the resistance offered to the man elected by the constituency of Northampton, which a portion of the community believe to be unjust. When they see the profession of religion and the interests of religion ostensibly associated with what they are deeply convinced is injustice, they are led to questions about religion itself, which they see to be associated with in justice. Unbelief attracts a sympathy which it would not otherwise enjoy; and the upshot is to impair those convictions and that religious faith, the loss of which I believe to be the most inexpressible calamity which can fall either upon a man or upon a nation.