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DO WE NEED A NEW OXFORD MOVEMENT?

By David Phillips

This summer's Lambeth Conference hardly provided a flood of news stories for the media as attempts were made to avoid controversy. However, some comments, which were reported, came from Cardinal Walter Casper, the Vatican's top man on Christian Unity, who suggested that Anglicanism needs 'a new Oxford Movement'. This could have been a mischievous remark because some of the leaders and followers of the old Oxford Movement ended up going to Rome but more likely it was a gentle rebuke because of Rome's conviction that the ordination of women and encouragement of homosexuality have undermined decades of discussion on unity.

Also in the background lies the accusation that Protestantism is fundamentally flawed and that the liberalism, which now seems to have so many Protestant denominations by the throat, is the inevitable offspring of Protestantism. Since some may give weight to his suggestion it is important to consider the issues raised.

It is important to understand the Oxford Movement not, as is sometimes alleged, because we want to fight the 19th century battles all over again, but because that movement has so shaped modern day Anglicanism around the globe. Moreover, faced by the threat of liberalism Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics do unite on some tactical issues and some wish to paper over the cracks in order to take this further. But also, so many Evangelicals now seem ignorant of why our evangelical forebears fought the battles they did.

We face an odd situation in the Church of England in that genuine Anglo-Catholicism seems to be at its weakest point in a century and a half with many actively considering going to Rome, yet at the same time the influence of the movement in ritualism has never been greater and even infects Evangelicalism. It is important therefore to understand what is at stake.

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