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THE OXFORD MOVEMENT

By David Phillips

It is likely that we will see a growing interest in the Oxford Movement in the wake of proposals by Roman Catholics to declare one of its founders a saint.

The early part of the 19th century was a period of great social change in Europe and the role of the Church was being weakened and threatened. However, some reform was necessary and parliament took the lead. In 1833 a Bill was passed to abolish two archbishoprics and eight bishoprics in Ireland. Whilst the decision was reasonable not least because of the problems in Ireland it was for some the straw which broke the camels back.

There were those who believed this was unwarranted interference by the state in the affairs of the Church and demonstrated the weakness of the Church. John Keble responded with a sermon in the University Church in Oxford entitled 'national apostacy' and he found support from three other Oxford men in particular - John Henry Newman, Hurrell Froude and William Palmer. In September 1833 these men began to publish Tracts which were referred to as The Oxford Tracts giving rise to the later name "The Oxford Movement".

It is said that the chief concern of the Oxford men was the dignity of the Church and they argued in the Tracts that it was sacrilege for non-Church bodies to lay hands on the Church. They also had a strong aversion to the emerging liberalism and a desire for personal holiness. In these things they would have found sympathisers amongst Evangelicals but this was not all that surfaced in the Tracts.

At the time 'High Church' referred to those who had a high regard for the Church and its ways including establishment and its Protestantism. Thus High Churchmen were split in their response to the new movement. Some warmed to what was said about the nature and dignity of the Church whilst others saw that it would lead to disestablishment and indeed to some Roman practices at least. The impact of the movement was such that the old distinction of 'high church' was largely lost and the term came to be associated with the Tractarians. The authorities in Oxford also distanced themselves from the Tracts and from any association of the name with the university.

Historians will sometimes say that Evangelicals were slow to respond or even ill equipped to do so, but this is clearly not the case. The robustly evangelical newspaper The Record (later to become The Church of England Newspaper) commented on a letter sent by the Oxford men to the Archbishop of Canterbury and then later on the early Tracts in its December issues of 1833.

We must confess the surprise was extreme and the sorrow poignant with which we read the tracts of the Apostolical Society at Oxford, extracts from which appeared in our last number. Had we not read them with our own eyes, it would have been difficult to persuade us that such effusions could have escaped, at any time, from the pen of Protestant clergymen...

The Record attacks the Oxford men on apostolic succession not because Evangelicals rejected the idea but because the Oxford men were touting the Roman view of succession. As a Protestant Church the Church of England, cannot nor would it wish to claim such succession and to do so was sheer folly. They also state that the Tracts talk of clergymen "conveying the sacrifice", being "intrusted with the keys of heaven and hell" and being "intrusted with the awful and mysterious gift of making the bread and wine Christ's body and blood".

The editorial describes all these as melancholy and wicked Popish delusions.

Thus right from the outset Evangelicals, or at least some of them, saw the errors and responded to them, a fact that is not always recognised.

Shortly afterwards Hurrell Froude, one of the original four died and his 'theological remains' were published in 1838. These showed unequivocally his opposition to the Protestant Reformation and his empathy for Medieval Catholicism. This seems to have woken others up to the real heart of the Tractarians who were becoming increasingly critical of the Church of England and idealistic regarding the Church of Rome.

In 1841 Newman published his famous Tract 90 attempting to argue that the Articles, if properly understood, support Roman Catholic doctrine. Newman himself seems to have eventually recognised that his arguments were wrong because he left for Rome but others continued and still continue to argue the same points. I recall one clergyman arguing that his belief in purgatory was acceptable because the Articles denounce 'the Romish doctrine of purgatory' and that was not his doctrine. Eventually this perverse sort of reasoning had to be resolved and evangelicals found that they had to resort to law to do so.

Evangelicals at the time, as today, were adamant that they were the legitimate Anglicans, the true heirs of the Reformed Church of England. The case of George Gorham therefore shook the movement to its roots. Bishop Philpotts of Exeter despised Evangelicals and when a Patron attempted to present Gorham to a living in the Diocese the Bishop argued and then set out to prove that Gorham did not hold to the doctrine of the Church on baptismal regeneration. This was serious because no evangelical believed in baptismal regeneration and nor did they believe that it was the doctrine of the church. If Gorham was rejected on this basis then all evangelicals could find themselves driven out. An appeal was therefore launched but the Bishop's decision was initially upheld. Evangelicals however contested the issue right to the Privy Council where they won.

For Anglo-Catholics this demonstrated the problem of establishment that a secular court, as they saw it, had the final say. For Evangelicals it was a reminder that within the Church hierarchy they were weak and often opposed whilst they had much stronger support amongst the laity, and particularly in parliament. More importantly it demonstrated that men like Philpotts could not be trusted to read the Articles and Prayer Book in its plain historical meaning, revisionism had begun.

From an early stage Tractarianism was manifest in Ritualism and they founded the Church Union to promote their cause. In 1865 Evangelicals responded by forming the Church Association which from the outset had amongst its aims the goal of clarifying the law on ritual and doctrine. Thus a series of test cases were fought which mostly, though certainly not in every detail, upheld the Evangelical view.

This ought to have settled matters, but of course it did not. The Ritualists still refused to abide by the law. The obvious thing would have been for Bishops to remove such clergy from office but the Bishops generally declined to do this. This failure to discipline has plagued the Church of England down to the present and has encouraged all manner of practices and beliefs to flourish unchecked.

The problem therefore for Evangelicals was what to do next and this led to division amongst them. The Church Association believed it must fight on and so they took the matters to the courts. The fact was that the law forbade certain practices and the Ritualists were doing them. Therefore the courts instructed the Ritualists to stop and they did not. If the law was to be upheld then there had to be a final recourse when people refused to obey it and thus some clergy were imprisoned.

But many Evangelicals either did not like this approach either because they did not like taking the matter to court in this way or because they feared the outcome. Thus J.C. Ryle in particular encouraged the creation of a new body, The Protestant Churchmen's Alliance, which absorbed the earlier Protestant Association. The Alliance also fought ritualism but not to the lengths the Association did. The Alliance merged eventually into the National Church League and thus was finally reunited with the Association in 1950 when both became Church Society.

With the benefit of hindsight it is possible to see that the fears of many were realised because the imprisonments led to a swing in public opinion in favour of the Ritualists. At the same time the Association, as a primarily lay organisation, tried to do what the Bishops failed to do, which was preserve discipline as a mark of the Church.

Today many of the practices that were opposed by our evangelical forebears are common within the Church of England and are even found, sometimes unwittingly, in evangelical churches.

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