

The church crisis and the Oxford movement

Autor(en): **Cruttwell, C.T.**

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THE CHURCH CRISIS

AND THE

OXFORD MOVEMENT.

The present state of the religious problem within the Church of England cannot fail to arouse the strongest interest among all competent observers. Never, perhaps, since the Reformation settlement have the divergent forces within her bosom risen to the surface with more menacing activity. Never has the ideal of comprehensiveness which forms the basis of that settlement been more severely tried. The three historic lines of thought known as High, Low, and Broad, with their respective affinities for Catholicism, Protestantism and Rationalism, are not only full of vigour, but of vigour that is distinctly aggressive. The Broad Church section, strong in Biblical criticism and scientific method, confines its energy to the realm of thought, and stands almost entirely aloof from the arena of popular contention. But within its chosen sphere it is eminently controversial, and is in fact moving with irresistible steps towards the accomplishment of a spiritual revolution, of which the most momentous result will probably be a change of attitude on the part of English Christians towards the Sacred Scriptures. The Low Church or Puritan section, strong as it is in wealth, numbers and Parliamentary favour, and closely allied with the still powerful anti-Roman prejudice, has nevertheless lost much of its former hold on the nation's spiritual life: and in spite of the genuine zeal for religion which animates its successive attacks upon the Ritualistic clergy, there seems little likelihood of its regaining its influence over deeply thinking minds.

The High Church section, which claims above all to represent the continuity of the pre-Reformation and post-Reformation Church as an unbroken part of the Church Catholic, is the one upon which the attention of observers both in and out of England is mainly fixed. The self-sacrificing devotion of many of its clergy, the originality and force of character of its leaders, the intense loyalty of its lay supporters, the profound impression made on the public by its fearless stand for the Church's supernatural authority, have combined to invest it with an extraordinary interest for all who appreciate the eternal conflict between the spiritual society of Christ and the world.

Moreover this section is the one, and apparently the only one, that is rapidly increasing in numbers. It is supposed not without reason to have the sympathy of a considerable majority among the Bishops: both the present and the late Prime Minister have, to say the least, abstained from condemning it: while its organ, the English Church Union, counts a membership of nearly 40,000, distributed through every diocese.

Yet this party, so earnest, so devoted, and so successful, is regarded by an immense number not only of Churchmen, but of Nonconformists and indifferent spectators, with the deepest aversion and dread. It is stigmatised as disloyal to the Church of England, unfaithful to her Liturgy, and bent on forcing her ceremonial into conformity with that of Rome. And so uncompromising is the hostility evoked, that the more violent partisans do not hesitate to declare that nothing will satisfy them short of the expulsion of the Ritualistic Clergy from the Church of England.

It must be remembered that Anglicanism contains in solution two opposing elements, represented roughly by the Prayer-Book and the Thirty-nine Articles. The former is mainly Catholic, being compiled to a great extent from the old service-books. The latter are distinctly Protestant in tone; and though bound up with the Prayer-Book, use a different dialect and breathe a different theological atmosphere. It is difficult for the extreme section on either side to adopt *ex animo* the language of both these formularies. The one seeks to emasculate the plain doctrine of the Prayer-Book on Baptismal Regeneration, Absolution and Holy Orders: the other attempts by forced and unnatural interpretation to eliminate Calvinistic views from the Articles.

It seems impossible for the two parties to sympathise with each other's aims.

In order to appreciate the embittered state of opinion which now prevails, it is necessary to go back for a considerable period. The origin of it is to be sought for in the great Oxford Movement of 1833, that brilliant revival of Church life, which took its rise in the Common Room of Oriel College, and spread with extraordinary rapidity through the length and breadth of the land. The fact of such a revival may well be accounted for by the natural reaction after a long period of Evangelical ascendancy, during which the more dignified and historic factor in Anglicanism, which had been consigned to comparative obscurity, had time to prepare for reappearance. The entire history of the post-Reformation Church exhibits a recurrent succession of such phases; each period of Protestant predominance giving way with more or less regularity to a Catholic reaction, coloured now by Patristic erudition, now by contemporary scholarship, but always firmly opposed to the encroachments of Rome.

Mr Walsh in his *Secret History of the Oxford Movement*, as well as in his more recent work, seeks to prove that the first authors of the movement started with the design of assimilating the English Church to that of Rome. Every impartial judge must confess that he has failed. The original contemporary documents make it clear that their first object was to revive and bring into effective prominence that appeal to Antiquity, and especially to the Fathers, to which the Reformed Church of England had deliberately committed herself. This object was alike paramount with Keble, Pusey, and Newman, though each may have entertained different ideas as to the method of its application.

To Keble the evenly-balanced sobriety of the Church's ideal of devotion constituted a powerful claim upon the heart and imagination. Resting on a firm basis of primitive tradition, retaining all in the older system that could be proved to be Scriptural, welcoming sound learning, and giving reason its due, the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England was a far wider and grander thing than the Evangelicalism of the period imagined. It supplied an intellectual basis for piety, and offered a ground of authority more stable than Biblical texts

interpreted by individual experience. Such was Keble's position. Nothing could be further from it than any approximation to the Roman obedience, or any adoption of specially Roman doctrine.

With Newman, as he himself informs us, the motive that wrought upon him was the desire to stem the rising tide of Liberalism. His acute intellect discerned clearly the quarter from which religion had most to fear. It was the inroad of liberal ideas, threatening, as it did, to leave no room for the supernatural in man's life, that impelled him to seek a principle sufficiently strong to counteract it. The principle lay ready to hand in the Catholic Church, which every Churchman claimed to hold as an article of the faith. In vindicating for the Anglican system the fulness of Catholic authority, he did not at first experience any misgiving whatever as to the soundness of his argument. The fluctuations of his judgment, which he expressed from time to time to his familiar friends with unguarded candour, have been construed to imply the disingenuous suppression of an already formed conviction in favour of Rome. But this interpretation of his conduct will not be accepted by those who study the subject without prejudice. It is clear that the decision at which after the severest struggle and at the cost of almost all his early friendships he at length arrived, was as genuinely the result of a continuous process of dialectic, as it was also the inevitable consequence of the prepossession with which he started viz. the quest of an infallible guide.

Pusey's mind was more theological than Keble's, less self-centred and less logical than Newman's, but strong in its grasp of first principles. Pusey began with the conviction that the English Church was beyond dispute Catholic, and carried it successfully through a series of difficult conflicts, in which, if he himself had felt any misgivings of its truth, he could never have persevered. The weight of convictions so unflinchingly held was enhanced by the learning on which they reposed. He was emphatically a leader of men, endued with unyielding tenacity of purpose, considerable acuteness in negotiation, and no little insight into affairs. He was therefore able to approach the question from a less abstract point of view than Newman, and to assume at the outset much of what Newman felt obliged to prove. But of him it is as true as of the other two leaders

that no idea of innovating in doctrine or ceremonial entered into his plan. He aimed at restoring dogmas or rites that were part of the heritage of the Church but had been forgotten through disuse, and so when reintroduced, caused alarm as novelties. But he defended every position he advocated with a catena of authorities recognised by the Church's formularies, and however men might distrust his tendencies, few were able to disprove his arguments.

These three men stand prominently forth as the Triumvirate of the Catholic Revival. There are other honoured names, such as William Palmer, Isaac Williams, Hurrell Froude, Henry Wilberforce, Herbert Oakley and W. G. Ward. But though these men influenced the progress of the Movement by their personal characters and by their writings in the Tracts for the Times, none of them succeeded in impressing his personality upon the Church at large. The public, whether friends or foes, are practically unanimous in tracing the consequences of the Oxford Movement to Keble, Newman and Pusey, and in declaring its subsequent developments to be the inevitable result of their views. They differ entirely in their estimate of the tendency of these developments, but they agree in ascribing them to the same cause.

The English temperament is conspicuous among advanced nations for its indifference to matters of pure thought. Even in Theology, a teacher may promulgate what are regarded as unsound views without shocking the public conscience. There is a sort of tacit admission that every man has a right to his own opinion. But as soon as an opinion is translated into practice, the case is altered. The writer or preacher at once becomes the object of the most watchful attention. Let him introduce any practice that seems in the remotest degree to imply recognition of the Roman primacy, or to approximate to Roman ceremonial, and he will provoke immediate and bitter antagonism. This is what has happened to the disciples of the Oxford Movement. Nothing can be more untrue than to assert that its authors countenanced those excesses in ritual which have involved the Church of England in its present conflict. To Keble and Newman simplicity of ceremonial was not only in itself congenial, but it was their invariable practice. They abstained from all innovation, beyond what was necessary for

ordinary reverence; and they appear to have taken little interest in the growing desire for an ornate ritual. The same may be said of Pusey in his earlier days. But his prolonged life and continuous connexion with the Ritual Controversy from its rise in 1850 till his own death more than thirty years later, necessarily caused a modification of his original attitude. With him purity of Catholic doctrine was the main object to vindicate. So long as there existed any doubt whether or not the Church possessed this, all questions of ceremonial were beside the mark. It would be time to consider the fitting outward expression of doctrinal truths as soon as those truths were generally and indisputably recognised. Hence he deprecated forms of ritual which he believed to be lawful, on the ground that they were out of place in a Church that was undergoing chastisement. As early as 1841 the question of the Ornaments Rubric was brought to his notice by his friend Oakley, when Pusey took up the above position, from which, however, he was gradually driven by the progress of events. It was from no love of ritual in itself, but from a conviction that those who practised it were the true champions of the Anglo-Catholic cause, that he allowed himself to be identified with what is known as the extreme section.

In this he only repeated the experience of most other leaders of reform. Several times in our Church's History has the cry of alarm been raised against the High Church party. There have never been wanting voices to attack the Prayer-Book for its Romish tendencies. It was therefore no new thing for the bold assertor of the Church's continuity to be committed to developments which he did not foresee. The real point of importance is this: Is the present Puritan reaction justified in ascribing to the Oxford Movement a tendency unknown to the earlier High-Church developments? Is it true that Ritualism is the logical outcome of Pusey's principles? And is it true that Ritualism is Rome in disguise, or hardly in disguise? Is the anger, the dread, with which it is regarded by Protestants, justified?

At first sight Ritualism and the Oxford leaders seem far removed from each other. The most damaging charge against the former is that of lawlessness, the refusal to submit to any existing authority. Every man seems to do that which is right

in his own eyes or in those of his congregation. If the Bishop, or the Province of Bishops, or the two Archbishops, expound the Church's Law in a certain way, the Ritualists decline to accept their exposition as binding. When reminded of their oath of obedience, they reply that what they promised was Canonical obedience, that is to say, obedience subject to conformity with the Canons of the Western Church. When required to submit to the highest Ecclesiastical Court, they decline to acknowledge its jurisdiction on the ground of its being a secular tribunal without spiritual authority. When confronted with the question, What then will you obey? they find it difficult to give a satisfactory answer. They profess the utmost willingness to obey the voice of the Church Catholic, if only they can be sure that they hear it. But in the existing entanglement of Church and State jurisdiction, they declare that it cannot be heard. The only logical result of their position appears to be the reconstitution of the Church of England on the basis of Disestablishment. And this as a body they are by no means prepared to accept.

Their opponents taunt them with the desire to retain the liberty which their present position allows, rather than incur the certainty of a far more stringent discipline under other conditions. This view of their conduct is, however, far from just. As a body the Ritualists are dissatisfied with the law, but they are not fairly described as lawless. The accredited English method of improving the law is to obey it under protest while agitating for its reform. Nevertheless it is recognised that under some circumstances disobedience, with acceptance of the penalty, is justifiable, as being the only path to the goal.

Judged from this stand-point the three Oxford leaders stand beyond reproach. Against Keble no such charge has ever even been hinted at. Newman, under very trying circumstances, submitted to his Bishop, when requested to discontinue the Tracts for the Times. Pusey with whom Bishop Wilberforce had remonstrated on account of some doubtful practices, desired to have the case tried in the Ecclesiastical Courts, and offered himself to bear the expense of the proceedings. It is evident that no encouragement was given by the example of these men to any refusal to obey the law.

Nevertheless it must be admitted that the principles they

advocated involve the consequences which have ensued. If they did not in so many words set themselves to de-Protestantize the Church, they made no secret that this was the object of their endeavour. The authority, the single authority, on which they ultimately relied, was the voice of the Catholic Church, speaking continuously through the Fathers and the Canons, and conveyed to successive generations of the faithful by properly constituted Synods. It is true they did not probe the question of obedience to its foundation. The claim of the State-establishment upon the clergy was not denied by them. The compromise of the Reformation was not directly attacked. But the exclusiveness of the ecclesiastical authority in spiritual things was consistently and powerfully maintained. And when once clearly grasped and carried into the realm of practice, this doctrine was sure to manifest its aggressive properties. It was the Church *in* England as distinct from the Church *of* England, and, still more, from the nation of England, with which they were concerned. It was as Catholic not as National, that the Church of England had power to decree rites and ceremonies, and to retain those before in use.

It will be seen, therefore, that to the question, Are the Oxford leaders ultimately responsible for Ritualism? the answer is in the affirmative. No doubt this answer is highly distasteful to many moderate High Churchmen, to whom the Oxford Movement implies a revival but not a new departure. Nevertheless, the general concurrence of friends and foes in such a judgment, forms a strong *prima facie* ground for accepting it, and it appears likely to hold its ground.

The second question, Is Ritualism at bottom Romanism? is far more difficult to answer, because it concerns a matter of opinion and not of fact. It cannot be denied that those who declare that it is so have many excuses for their allegation. To begin with, the greatest Roman Catholic prelates have always strenuously asserted it. Their attitude towards it is and has been: Let it alone: it will bring grist to our mill. One need but refer to well-known utterances of Cardinals Wiseman, Manning and Vaughan. Then again, the recurrent secessions to the Roman Communion, though they attract less attention than formerly, are *pro tanto* an argument of some weight. But, naturally, the most telling evidence in that direction is the

progressive assimilation of the Communion office to the Mass, the doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice for the quick and dead, the inculcation of habitual Confession, and the introduction of divers specially Roman types of service.

Against these considerations are to be set the reiterated denial of the Ritualistic leaders and organs of any approach to allowing either the Papal claims, or any of Rome's modern doctrinal developments: the fact that with so many courteous invitations to proceed to Rome, comparatively few, and those mostly persons of slight importance, care to accept the challenge: and chiefest of all, the evidence of our Church's authoritative documents to prove that there was no intention of cutting her adrift from the Churches of Western Christendom, whose ceremonial, where she did not expressly repudiate it, she might justly be assumed to approve. No doubt there are many devout Ritualists who would be glad to see the Papacy recognized as the Head of Western Christendom, and perhaps also as the final Court of Appeal. But there is not a particle of evidence to prove that the party in general has any such views, or that they would be likely, if introduced, to be accepted.

Their acceptance would, no doubt, wreck the party. But so long as a definite line remains drawn between what is Roman because Catholic, and what is Roman because Papal, and the Ritualists as a body do not overstep it, there seems no sufficient ground for the extreme measures recommended by the Puritans. The Bishops have just issued a very weighty appeal to the Clergy, aimed of course more especially at the recalcitrant minority. Let this be given time to work. It is most undesirable to invoke the aid of Parliament to strengthen Episcopal powers. A vast and difficult problem, the problem of the Oxford Movement, is slowly working itself out. If this is to be solved without breaking the Church asunder, patience is essential. Is it too much to expect that zealous Protestants will give the Bishops time? If so, things may yet settle down, and the two sides agree to endure each other.

The peril more immediately to be dreaded seems to the writer to be neither the secession of the Ritualists to Rome, nor the Romanizing of the Church of England, but the loss to that Church of her unique tolerance and comprehensiveness, which has in his opinion been the chief ground of her influence

over lay minds. The present tension of opinion cannot continue for ever. Debates and Conferences only reveal more plainly what controversy and prosecutions had revealed before, that the differences which divide Churchmen are not superficial, that agreement is not possible, and that unless each side will accord to the other a legitimate place with scope for development within the Establishment, the question of the Establishment will have to be reconsidered at no distant date. To expel the spiritual descendants of the Oxford leaders from its communion would be to make the Church of England poorer indeed. She might retain her solid learning, her scientific scholarship, her cultured good sense, her masculine piety, and, in the mission field, her Evangelistic zeal. But where would be her influence over those spirits which, fundamentally religious yet attracted by pleasure, society, letters or art, need a priesthood at once austere and refined, sympathetic and authoritative?

It is in the consciousness of aloofness, of detachment from the secular aspect of things, that a large class of men and a majority of women, find what they crave for in their spiritual guide. This has ever been the dominant characteristic of the true sacerdotalist. It was displayed in an extraordinary degree by the great men of the Movement, by Froude, Newman, Pusey, Manning. It is seen in a different form in some of the Presbyterian Churches. If the Church of England, in her desire to purge herself of uncongenial excesses, were to sacrifice this indispensable element in a living spiritual community, she would lose what it would be hard to replace, and would be renouncing her claim to be the Church of the Nation.

C. T. CRUTTWELL.
