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# A Peculiar People: The Renewal of Catholic Spirituality

The Reverend Kenneth Leech was speaker for the annual Harvey Lectures on the ETSS campus last March. Dr. Leech, who is race relations officer for the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England, spoke on the subject of the nineteenth century Oxford Movement within the Anglican Church. The series, entitled "Subversive Orthodoxy: The Oxford Movement and the Renewal of Christian Life Today," offered a three-part exposition on the history of the movement whose centennial we celebrate this year, the nature of the changes it produced within the Anglican tradition, and the impact it bears on our lives today.

One hundred fifty years ago a movement began which changed the face of the Anglican Communion, including many parts of it which even now are unaware of that movement. On the 14th of July, 1833, John Keble preached the Assize Sermon in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford. His subject was "National Apostacy," and his call was widely seen in England as a call for the spiritual freedom of the church. Two months later, the first of the tracts which gave the movement its name, "Tractarian," was published. The Oxford Movement had begun.

But very closely associated with the initial call for freedom was the call to corporate and personal holiness. The community of the church was to be not only a community independent of the secular power, but also a community characterized by holiness, seeking to realize holiness in its individual members. It was therefore a movement of spiritual renewal and not simply of ecclesiastical reform.

Later, as the movement spread into the new towns and into the slum districts of British cities, the call to holiness was allied with the response to the cry of the poor. Among some, though by no means all of the second generation of Anglo-Catholics, there grew up an organized campaigning movement for social justice. By the time that the theology of F. D. Maurice, a man with little sympathy for the Tractarians, had become fused with ritualism in the spirituality and practice of Thomas Hancock, Stewart Headlam, Charles Morrison and later Conrad Noel, there had been a shift towards a socialist vision of the world. These prophetic figures belonged to a later stage of the Oxford Movement, and it's arguable whether in terms of their theology and their social vision they should be seen as part of the original movement at all.

By the turn of the century, and beyond it into the

*Printed below is a transcription of the first lecture, "A Peculiar People: The Renewal of Catholic Spirituality." The author and any others who may encounter errors which seem unworthy of Dr. Leech's scholarship may attribute them to the imperfect faculties of the transcriber. It was particularly difficult to determine at times where a set of closing quotation marks should fall, and the editor apologizes for any over- or under-attribution given a particular source.*

*The Harvey Lectures are presented each year by the ETSS student association in memory of the Very Reverend T. Hudnall Harvey, dean of the Seminary from 1968-1972.*

1920's and '30's, the symbol of the Kingdom of God was being seen as central to the preaching and struggles of those who sought to relate the original vision of a holy people to the issues of a manifestly unholy world order.

In today's lecture, I want to consider the first of three themes which were of central importance at these various stages of the developing Oxford Movement, and to consider their consequences for spirituality and pastoral action today. I want to look at the need for a truly catholic, a *whole* spirituality, the quest for corporate and personal holiness which was so crucial to the early movement.

Let me stress three points in introduction:

First, my concern will not be antiquarian, and only marginally historical. Since the nineteenth century, the catholic tradition in Anglicanism has been damaged very severely by a backward-looking perspective, a "return" philosophy which seeks to find salvation by a rediscovery of the past. In my view, any movement based on such a backward-looking stance is doomed to fossilization—as Lot's wife discovered. And yet out of our old history, our new history must be made, and we need to learn from the wisdom as well as from the mistakes and follies of our ancestors.

Secondly, let me say that my only qualification for addressing you at all is that of a pastor and a priest who is committed both to the renewal of the spiritual life and to the struggle for social justice. I'm *not* an academic theologian. My entire ministry has been spent—apart from three years in theological college—in back street parishes, not in parishes which were of crucial importance in the developing life of the Oxford Movement. So I speak very much out of the background of a back street ministry mainly among poor people and voiceless people—much of it among

what Karl Marx referred to as the *lumpen prole* and about which he had no particularly kind and positive words to say.

There's no evidence that the slum priests of the Oxford Movement were in any way influenced by Marx's writings. Yet had it not been for these two very different movements of thought and action, both of them growing up in mid-nineteenth century Britain, the entire social and pastoral history of the districts in which I've served, and many others all over the world, would have been totally different.

So my concern in these lectures is to explore some of the ways in which the Oxford Movement and the revival of Christian life—the quest for holiness, the zeal for justice, the search for a catholic theology which is open to the insights of the modern world—can affect and guide our own spiritual journey and our pastoral action today.

What was the central thrust and direction of the Oxford Movement in terms of spirituality? Let me point to four areas which seem to me to be of crucial importance. First, the early Tractarians stressed the autonomy and spiritual freedom of the church. Only in this sense, certainly in no other, can they be seen as social radicals. Within a few generations, they had been absorbed into the cultural captivity of the establishment. But of the fierce anti-Erastianism of the founders of the movement there can surely be no doubt. They entirely rejected the view that the Church of England was a department of state, the religious arm of the civil power. They rejected the claim of the civil power to exercise authority over it. And the logical conclusion of their position was disestablishment.

The English church, they insisted against the prevailing wisdom of the day, was a spiritual community, part of a wider international catholic world, a community committed to certain definite beliefs. The main enemy they saw was not Protestantism but liberalism, the denial of revealed truth, the vague latitudinarianism expressed by that character in Thomas Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, who . . . said: "There's this to be said for the Church of England: A man can belong to the Church and bide in his cheerful old inn, and never trouble or worry his mind about doctrines at all." Against this, the Oxford Movement emphasized sound doctrine and the interdependence of theology and spirituality.

Secondly, they revived the centrality of Eucharistic worship, something which we now take for granted. Their spirituality was a social spirituality, a materialistic spirituality, one which drew on the resources of the imagination and the emotions which incorporated art and music and dramatic—often exotic—ritual. With St. John of Damascus in the iconoclastic con-

trivances of an earlier era, they would have been very proud to say: "I do not worship matter, but I worship the Creator of matter, who for my sake became Material, who vouchsafed to dwell in matter and through matter effected my salvation. I will not cease from reverencing matter, for it was through matter that my salvation came to pass."

And so the ritualists of the late nineteenth century built splendid baroque churches and introduced into them ritual and ceremonial which alarmed and horrified the restrained and sober Anglicans of their day. "My Lord!" exclaimed the chaplain to the then-Bishop of London after a visit to spy on what was going on at St. Alban's, Holbourn. "My Lord, I saw three men in green, and I do not think they will quickly be put down!"



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The recovery of the centrality of the Eucharist in the life and spirituality of the Anglican churches was the most dramatic and clearly visible achievement of the movement. The recognition of its social consequences and the development of a sacramentalist social theology belonged to a later generation.

Thirdly, the Oxford Movement pointed to the importance of personal holiness and the ascetical disciplines needed to sustain and nourish growth in holiness. Six years before Keble's sermon of 1833, his collection of poems, *The Christian Year*, had been published. This was followed in 1832 by William Palmer's *Origines Liturgicae*, which looked at early liturgy and Anglican worship. These two books have rightly been seen as the forerunners of the movement. Subsequent years saw an upsurge in concern with the deepening and nourishment of personal spirituality and personal devotion. Out of the Oxford Movement's concern with the interior life of Christian people came

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the retreat movement, the spread of sacramental confession, the renewed interest in spiritual direction, and a whole series of developments in this area.

Finally, the movement recovered the stress on a pastoral priesthood, a priesthood rooted in and committed to the neighborhood and its people. This renewal of a genuine parish ministry was crucial to the growth of Anglo-Catholicism in the urban centers of Britain. In particular, the ritualist slum priest, of whom Charles Lowder of St. Peter's, London Docks, was the epitome, embodied a combination of personal holiness and pastoral compassion which became the hallmark of the revival at its best.

However, having said that, it would indicate both historical error and moral dishonesty if we were to paint an entirely triumphalist and uncritically eulogistic picture of the Oxford Movement and its influence. Not everything that happened as a result of this revival was positive and wholesome. When Mr. Kensit, the founder of the Protestant Truth Society, commented, after visiting a well known Anglo-Catholic church in 1898, "They seemed a peculiar sort of people, very peculiar indeed!" he wasn't thinking of the description of the Church in the First Epistle of Peter. Even allowing for Mr. Kensit's higher than average ratio of intolerance and prejudice, there can be no doubt that there *was* a good deal that *was* very peculiar indeed, and even deranged, in the development of the catholic revival. Alongside the asceticism, the seriousness of purpose and the spiritual vision, there was a good deal that was immature, pathological, and unhealthy: a good deal that was destructive of the humanity and spiritual integrity of the movement. For example, the development of ritualism was often impulsive and insensitive, placing undue strains on an already puzzled and fearful church. A leader writer in *The Times* of London on October 18, 1866, wrote of a visit to St. Alban's, Holbourn, when eucharistic vestments had first been introduced:

Three of these personages, bedizened with green and gold and yellow, and covered with black stripes and crosses, stand with their backs to the congregation on the elevated steps at the east end of the church. The altar is overladen with gorgeous ornaments and illuminated at noonday with two great lighted candles. These gorgeous and flaunting dresses and odors and gesticulations have in them something almost revolting to an English stomach. To introduce these gilded ornaments would in any other profession be despicable childishness. Around the solemn realities of religion it is simply revolting to a reverent mind.

Given the state of Victorian religion and the entire post-Reformation history of England, it does seem clear that there was an extreme degree of pastoral insensitivity in the way in which ceremonial was introduced. Often it was imported and forced arrogantly and without any teaching on suspicious, fearful or hostile congregations. At the archbishop's hearings on incense in 1899, it was pointed out that doctrinal teaching had not kept pace with the introduction of ceremonials and ornaments. Very few people knew what it was all about. Moreover, as the concern with ceremonials at the expense of doctrine developed, there grew up an obsession with technique which has remained to this day. Father Gabriel Hevert of the Society of the Sacred Mission complained in 1932, "We have come to be dominated to a serious extent by a fetish of correctness." A young priest in the East End of London writing in 1953 says, "In the end, I fear most of all that 'catholic' just comes to mean a camp way of doing things." The fetish of correctness has not disappeared from among the heirs of the ritualists.

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Undoubtedly, too, there was a good deal in the movement which attracted the emotionally unstable and those seeking excitement; the history of the revival is full of flamboyant and bizarre characters. This dependence of public liturgy on private personality was not a healthy sign. Even more unhealthy and destructive was the high incidence of what can only be termed "clerical gynophobia," the confusion and turmoil about sexuality within Anglo-Catholicism which is not of recent origin, but goes far back into the history of the movement.

But worst of all, there were tendencies within the culture of Anglo-Catholicism in the late nineteenth century which encouraged and fostered an insulation from the real world. Engrossed within a world of liturgical minutiae, ecclesiastical paraphernalia, and defensive political schemings, Anglo-Catholics more and more came to inhabit an increasingly artificial and sectarian culture. George Orwell may have had this in mind when he described Anglo-Catholicism as



"the ecclesiastical equivalent of Trotskyism." Valerie Pitt, in a recent essay, has written scathingly of the Oxford Movement as "a case of cultural distortion . . . It is difficult to fathom," she says,

how a Movement nourished on William Law, George Herbert and the sober beauty of the *Book of Common Prayer* can have left this legacy of devotional bric-a-brac and the other debris cluttering Anglo-Catholic attics. But it is the most unfortunate of its legacies, for in fact the Movement forced the great grace of its devotion, its revival of spirituality, into the matrices of this fantasy life which was often tawdry, and is, very often, psychologically dangerous . . . The real fault is that the Tractarians unconsciously made religion a life substitute rather than a life revealer, not a way into the splendours of the visible world but a way out. That habit of mind is fixed in us still and ultimately it is destructive of religion itself.<sup>1</sup>

So the history of the catholic revival is not without its warts, its deranged aspects, its pathological features. And yet clearly there have been significant and formative insights, insights which are of permanent importance for Christian spirituality and Christian practice.

In the first place, this movement called for a renewed sense of the Church as a consecrated people, a community of faith. It called for a break with religion which merely baptised the dominant social order. It asserted the primacy of doctrine and spiritual theology. The rediscovery of the early fathers, and particularly of the Greek fathers, had important consequences in the development of an incarnational theology which, as expressed in the work of Westcott, Gore, Scott Holland and others, was to become a hallmark of Anglican thought for several generations. In the thought of these men, there was none of the division between sacred and secular, none of the nature-grace dualism, against which radical writers of the 1960's and the Second Vatican Council rightly inveighed. For them, reality *was* incarnational and sacramental. Theology and spirituality were one.

No task is more urgent today than the recovery of their wholeness of vision. Western theology is still depressingly imprisoned within the academic ghetto, cut off from pastoral practice and from the life of prayer. And no task is more urgent than the healing of that division between theology, spiritual growth, and the struggle for justice and peace in the world. The

Anglican tradition, which in its most creative periods has thought to hold together theological works, pastoral care and spiritual discipline, could play a very important role in this work of healing.

Secondly, the Oxford Movement was rooted in the experience of eucharistic worship. It was a liturgical movement, even if its rationale for liturgical innovation was often lacking in discernment. Although there was and is no guarantee that those who place a high stress on sacramental worship will make the connections with the social order, there was and is the potential within the liturgical experience for these connections to be established.

At the same time, I think it's important to recognize that there were major theological differences within the ranks of those who saw themselves as Anglo-Catholics. There was, for example, the world of difference between the sacramental theology of Canon Liddon and that of Stewart Headlam or Conrad Noel. Liddon, when it was suggested to him by a colleague of Stewart Headlam that the same Lord who was present in the sacrament was also present in the ballet and the music hall, in human art, music and entertainment, recoiled with horror, insisting that the whole aim of the sacrament was to enable people to ascend from the sensual world to the world of the supersensual—in Valerie Pitt's words, "a way not into the splendours of the visible world but a way out." For



Conrad Noel, on the other hand, the Eucharist was a prefiguring of a just society, a society marked by equality and sharing, and the means of nourishment for those committed to the establishment of such a society. Bread and wine taken in fellowship give a foretaste of that coming world—as a means by which we are nourished by his life and as a stirrup cup to battle. We need today to recover that dynamic and liberating sense of the Eucharist as a pilgrim festival, a festival which both prefigures the new world of God's justice and also provides us with the resources to enable the struggle for that world to be

1. Valerie Pitt, "The Oxford Movement: A Case of Cultural Distortion?" in *Essays Catholic and Radical*, ed. Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams (London, The Bowerdean Press, 1983), p. 223.

maintained and extended. "Those who assist at Holy Communion," wrote Stewart Headlam, "must be wholly communists." The eucharistic sharing must be extended beyond the sanctuary and into the world.

Thirdly, the Oxford Movement emphasized the personal holiness of its members, the need for a deep and growing interior life and the necessity of personal prayer. In other words, it stressed the necessity for a deep inner transformation. At its best, it was a religion of transformation, not of comfort, a religion which held out to men and women the possibility of a radical change. Keble didn't hesitate to use the language of the Greek fathers, the language of deification. He wrote: "The sacramental touch of the Church is the touch of Christ, and her system is *deificat disciplina*, a rule which in some sense makes men gods and the human divine. And all this depends on the verity of the incarnation."

In their return to the patristic age, the leaders of the Oxford Movement rediscovered that central dimension of orthodox theology which is enshrined in a phrase of the Athanasian Creed: "One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God." Manhood into God. The attainment of deified creaturehood was the aim of their spirituality. We need to rediscover that dimension today, to recover an incarnational mystical theology which holds out to men and women the hope of union with God.

I've argued at length elsewhere that it is in part the lack of such a deep inner spirituality offering transformation and self-transcendence which has driven much of the current spiritual revival outside of mainstream Christianity altogether. If there is one major criticism of Tractarian spirituality, it is that of excessive reserve, a moderation and willingness to settle for a relatively undemanding piety, a fear that, in Keble's words, we should "strive to wind ourselves too high / For sinful man beneath the sky."

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Maybe Keble was too nervous. Maybe many people were waiting to hear the promise of the desert father Abba Joseph: "If you will, you can become wholly flame." Certainly the critique of Tractarian spirituality by that early charismatic renewal movement, the Catholic Apostolic Church, the Irvingite Movement,

focused upon precisely this lack of fervor. One of the admirers of the Irvingite Movement was the Irish Bishop of Edinburgh, John Dowden, who complained of Keble's tradition, "There is not enough taking of Heaven by violence in its spirit of prayer."

Today in the aftermath of charismatic renewal and of the clear hunger for silence and solitude in many sections of the church, we need a renewed stress on the importance of contemplative prayer in the life of the church. For as Thomas Merton wrote at the end of his great work, *Contemplative Prayer*, "Without the contemplative orientation, religion is bound in the end to become an opiate." Today we should be in a better position than the Tractarians were to recognize that contemplative prayer is not a rare and highly advanced spiritual method beyond the reach of ordinary Christians, but is actually a way of prayer, of openness and listening to God which is available to most Christian people—if not all—and which needs simply to be awakened and guided. In the fourth century, confronted with a church which was increasingly compromised to the world, the desert fathers developed a life of solitude, communion and contemplation in the wastelands of Egypt and Syria. Today in the twentieth century, as the Constantinian Era grinds slowly to its close—in some places more slowly than others!—the contemplatives are returning from the desert to the cities to renew and deepen our Christian lives.

Finally, the Oxford Movement held out a vision of priesthood as a pastoral lifestyle, nourished by the inner spirit of sacrifice and communion with Christ, manifested in compassion for the poor and commitment to a parish community and neighborhood. The ritualist slum priests, while always a minority, were part of a movement which pioneered in the inner city districts of Britain a model of the priesthood which was to be of central importance there, and whose legacy remains to this day: the model of the priest, celibate or married, who *stayed there*. They saw pastoral priesthood not as a profession but as a vocation; not as a function, but as, in Austin Farrer's words, "a walking sacrament;" not as a job, but as a state of being. And in their priesthood we see a fusion of holiness, compassion, zeal for justice, and utter dedication.

Never was that combination more urgently needed than now when many clergy are burnt out through undernourishment and spiritual malnutrition; when in both Britain and America compassion is often seen as a form of weakness, and the poor as well-nigh criminal; when for many people spirituality is an escape from the cry for justice rather than a stimulus to respond to it; and when far too many clergy see

themselves as professional church-keepers for whom their neighborhood is merely an accidental background.

If we are to recover a spirituality which is truly catholic, according to wholeness, these four aims manifested in the catholic revival of the nineteenth century must become central to our search now. We need to see the Church as a peculiar people, a consecrated community, a visible sign of God's presence in and to the world, and a sign of contradiction to the principalities and powers. This must necessitate a break with the Constantinian tradition of a compromise church in a worldly state. We, too, need to see the Eucharist as the focus for a spirituality which is both earthy and awesome, materialistic and sanctifying, the social meal of a social God and the heart of our communion. We, too, need to see that a Gospel of liberation and sanctification calls for liberated and sanctified people, people of interior prayerfulness, people whose lives are hid with Christ in God; and that this means that guidance in the life of prayer must become a central part of the local church's task. We, too, need a recovery of that inner meaning of priesthood as the office which inwardly, ritually, and ascetically shares the dying and rising of Christ.

The Oxford Movement, for all its weaknesses, was a movement of spiritual renewal. For many of its early members, salvation was certainly seen as something

otherworldly. There is very little to suggest that the conditions of the urban poor, about which both the sanitary reformers and Engles were writing (at exactly the same time), ever entered into their consciousness; very little evidence that they ever related their theological work to the transformation of the social and political order. But a generation was to emerge in the later phases of the movement which did make those connections, and which saw that piety and justice were not alternatives but complementary. At the turn of the century, the Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev expressed the dilemma which was to preoccupy many western Christian minds as the century wound to its close, and which preoccupies many Christian minds now. Berdyaev wrote: "Christian piety all too often has seemed to be the withdrawal from the world and from men, a source of transcendent egoism, the unwillingness to share the suffering of the world and of men. It was not sufficiently infused with Christian love and mercy. It lacked human warmth."

The world has risen in protest against this form of piety as a refined form of egoism, an indifference to the world's sorrow. Against this protest, only a reborn piety can stand. Care for the life of another—material bodily care—is spiritual in essence. Bread for myself is a material question. Bread for my neighbor is a spiritual question.

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