

Trinity College Cambridge
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**A (VERY BRIEF) HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY
IN BRITAIN IN 7 OBJECTS**

**The Anglo-Catholic Movement
John Keble's spectacles**

1 Samuel 12: 14–24 1 Peter 2: 1–9

Bishop Geoffrey Rowell

*'As for me God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you;
but I will teach you the good and the right way.'* (1 Samuel 12.25)

On 22 July 1833, John Keble, Fellow of Oriel College, and Professor of Poetry, took this text for his sermon in the University Church at Oxford before the judges of Assize. It was, as some noticed subsequently, Bastille Day, and the political background of the last few years was nervousness about revolution in England as in France (Charles X had been overthrown in 1830), the Reform Bill of 1832, Catholic Emancipation, and a cholera epidemic. Whig reform was in the air, and the catalyst of Keble's sermon was Government proposals to abolish bishoprics in the established Church of Ireland. This, in the eyes of John Keble, a High Churchman of the older school, shaped by his country parson father, both as a pastor, and in his pattern of Prayer Book devotion, was scandalous – the state interfering with the apostolic ministry of the church. Another, younger, Fellow of Oriel, John Henry Newman, was just back from a travels in Sicily. There he had nearly died of typhoid, saw this deliverance providentially as God sparing him for a great work, and likewise saw Keble's Sermon as a providential sign of a calling to rally the Church of England to a new awareness of its apostolic identity.

If the political reforms of the previous years can be read as significant stages in the dismantling of an Anglican confessional state, they were also challenges to the Church as to its own identity. In the *Tracts for the Times*, which were launched not long afterwards, Newman challenged his fellow clergy – 'On what ground do you stand, O presbyter of the Church of England?' Was it on the Erastian grounds of state recognition, or was it on the 'foundation of the apostles and prophets'? Was the ministry of the church a convenient, congregational arrangement, or something divinely instituted and given, so that bishops were the successors of the apostles? Were the sacraments of the church mere memorials? Was baptism a naming ceremony, or a new and supernatural birth – a being born again by water and the Spirit? Was the Eucharist a mere remembrance of Christ's death, or the divinely appointed means in which Christ fed his people with his own life, enabling them by that sacramental grace to be transfigured into his likeness, and to become the saints, whom we commemorate today?

Newman and Keble were joined by others, notably Edward Pusey, a brilliant Hebrew and Syriac scholar, who had spent time in Germany and had become alarmed by the undermining of traditional faith by the acids of critical scepticism. The short *Tracts* became longer treatises. The Fathers of the Early Church, whom Thomas Gaisford, Dean of Christ Church, had dismissed as 'sad rubbish', were studied and published, for the Fathers embodied the tradition of the church, drawing out the meaning of Scripture. The great Anglican seventeenth-century divines were also published in a series called 'The Library of Anglo-Catholic theology' – by which was meant the English Catholic theological tradition, not a compendium of liturgical ceremonial. The Tractarians, as they were called, were concerned to recall the Church of England to its catholic roots, its continuity with the early centuries of the Church, to recognise that continuity both in liturgy and church order. The Church of England did not begin with Henry VIII, but was a reformed Catholicism, with its roots back to Bede and Augustine of Canterbury, and beyond them to the faith of the undivided Church of the early centuries. Keble edited the great Anglican theologian of the sixteenth century, Richard Hooker. Newman in a series of lectures defended the Church of England as a *Via Media* between the Church of Rome (which had added dogmas of its own to the faith once delivered to the saints) and popular Protestantism, which in effect made every man his own pope, the heresy of private judgement.

Keble was a poet. His *Christian Year*, published in 1827, became the widest selling book of poetry in the 19th century. Based on the Prayer Book offices and lessons, when it first came out some thought Keble was a Methodist, but Keble saw poetry, and indeed, spirituality as cathartic, shaping and disciplining of the feelings and the imagination. The world was a sacramental universe to be revered as God's creation.

*Two worlds are ours,
'Tis only sin, forbids us to descry,
The mystic heaven and earth within,
Plain as the sea and sky.*

*Thou who hast given me eyes to see,
And love this sight so fair,
Give me a heart to find out Thee
And read Thee everywhere.*

It is the pure in heart who see God, and so growth in grace and holiness and the disciplines of the spiritual life go hand in hand with the knowledge of God.

*Blest are the pure in heart,
For they shall see our God,
The secret of the Lord is theirs,
Their soul is Christ's abode.*

Penitence is part of the Christian life, and Keble quietly urged the practice of sacramental confession, as did Edward Pusey. Pusey was also instrumental in the encouragement and founding of Anglican religious communities. Keble, Newman and Pusey, and the whole Oxford Movement, were concerned that the Eucharist should once again be central to the worship of the Church of England, for this sacrament, instituted by Christ himself, was the place where He was present to his people, and, as Keble said in a powerful phrase, 'wherever Christ was there He was to be adored.' Casual, sloppy attitudes to services, need to be replaced by reverence, awe and wonder. Churches were not preaching boxes – though the Tractarians were great preachers – but shrines. The Romanticism of the age, led to church-building and restoration, not least in the initially undergraduate enthusiasms of the Camden Society here in Cambridge, of which Francis Close, an ardent opponent of the Oxford Movement and a populist anti-Catholic, said that whereas Popery was inculcated intellectually at Oxford, it was inculcated aesthetically at Cambridge.

Victorian Church-building, made possible by increased wealth, and many lay supporters of the Oxford Movement, and the mission needs of the church in expending cities, led to an explosion of church buildings designed by talented architects such as William Butterfield, George Street, John Loughborough Pearson and many others. When Butterfield designed the Chapel at Keble College (the memorial to John Keble who had died in 1866), he wanted it to set forth in design, image and symbol the providential pattern of God's dealing with his people. The pews faced east, and not like the monastic tradition of college chapels; the altar was the focus; and above the altar a great mosaic of Christ in glory. It was the worship of heaven into which we were to be drawn. As a Lincolnshire labourer said to Edward King, the great pastoral bishop of Lincoln, and the first bishop to wear a mitre since the Reformation, – 'Sir, I see yours is a yon side religion.'

The energy for mission which flowed out of the Oxford Movement found expression not only in Keble's exemplary pastoral work in his Hampshire country parish of Hursley, but in the labours and social concern of the slum priests in the East End of London and in industrial cities elsewhere. They knew, as it was once said, that 'you cannot believe in the incarnation and not be concerned about drains.' Dull, drab services, were replaced by colour, and vestments, and processions. Bells and incense, gesture and richness of symbol, moved the successors of the first Tractarians into new places. Anglo-Catholicism became identified with its ritual and ceremonial expression, but underlying it all was a conviction of the fundamental Catholic identity of the Church of England – a reformed Catholicism it is true, but in the end Catholic. As the English settled overseas, so the influence of the Oxford Movement spread into colonial churches, in bishops and synods, and rich eucharistic worship from Papua New Guinea to southern Africa. At home prosecutions of ritualist clergy led to imprisonments; and the martyrs of ritualism in the end won out by leading to the long process of liturgical revision in the Church of England. It also contributed to the search for Christian unity with the great churches of East and West. When John Henry Newman became a Roman Catholic in 1845, Pusey wrote that he had been transplanted to another part of the Lord's vineyard, and who could know what would be the result of one so shaped by his Anglican upbringing becoming a Catholic.

Today Newman is recognised as one of the greatest theological minds of the 19th century, and most of his creative writing was done when he was still an Anglican. John Mason Neale, a Cambridge man, pioneered ecumenical relations with the churches of the East, and by his translation of many Eastern hymns (particularly Easter ones) gave Anglican hymnody a window into the Eastern tradition.

Catholic Anglicans stand and stood for a Christian faith revealed in the Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic creeds and the rich tradition of the Church. Christianity, as Newman said, was a revelation, but that is not to deny that it is also a mystery – God, as Archbishop Robert Runcie once said, ‘cannot be packed into the capsules of concepts.’ Theology was therefore inseparable from prayer and spirituality, dogma must always have a permeable edge to mystery and adoration was the heart of worship, which was always ‘with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.’ The Oxford Movement was once described as a revolution by tradition – a rediscovery of the richness of a faith once delivered to the saints, a sacramental universe, an incarnational faith and a spirituality of transfiguration in which the grace of God over and over again creates what John Keble called ‘speaking lives’ in which men and women glimpse something of the glory of God – the saints for which we give thanks to God today.