

# The Oxford Movement

Last month's article was on Cardinal Newman, who was canonised by Pope Francis on 13 October. It was impossible to write about him without mentioning his leading role in the Oxford Movement while he was still a priest in the Church of England, and so that led me to promise to write about the Movement in more detail this month. It began in 1833, when Newman issued the first in a series of publications called Tracts for the Times. Several Tracts, written by various authors on a range of doctrinal and theological topics, were published before the series ended in 1841, and from this comes the alternative name for the Movement as a whole: although commonly called the Oxford Movement, in recognition of the central role played by Oxford scholars, it is also known as the Tractarian Movement.

The purpose of the Movement was to restore within the Church of England the High Church ideals of the seventeenth century in order to remedy what some felt to be too much liberalism in the church and too much 'plainness' in worship. More immediately, however, it was prompted by the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 and the moves to reduce the revenues of the Church of Ireland (the Irish Temporalities Bill, 1833). It was feared that, with the country now allowing Roman Catholicism to be practised without penalty, people would be attracted to its colourful ritual and emotional appeal, whilst the Irish Bill was taken to be symptomatic of a tendency in the Whig government to look at ways in which the wealth and power of the Church of England might in future be undermined, as was already happening in Ireland. In response to this seemingly hostile environment a number of scholars — quickly recognised as leaders of a Movement — put forward the case that the Church of England, with its tradition of Apostolic Succession and a formal liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer, was one of the three branches of the historic catholic church, along with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. They went on to argue from this that worship should become more formal and that traditional practices from before the Reformation should be restored, with the aim of giving the liturgy greater dignity and a more powerful emotional symbolism. This turned out to be one of the most widespread influences of the Oxford Movement because it is thanks to its practices — despite considerable hostility at the time from many bishops — that we have the rich vestments and ceremonial found in cathedrals and many churches, as well as the centrality of the Eucharist and the frequency of its celebration.

It was also thanks to the Oxford Movement that religious communities were established in the Church of England for the first time since the Reformation. In addition, arising from their looking back to the earlier church, the Movement produced a multi-volume translation of the writings of the Church Fathers. This was begun in 1836 by John Keble, John Newman and Philip Pusey, and was followed soon after by a Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology.

But if this all sounds a bit 'churchy' and learned, it is also important to remember that it was the Oxford Movement that took the lead in ministering to the poor in the slums of the Industrial Revolution. The slum Settlements of the Oxford Movement were amongst its greatest achievements, putting the rest of the Church of England to shame for not quickly enough redirecting its resources in the light of dramatic social and demographic changes.

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