



John Foster

KEBLE ADDRESS

1979

AN ADDRESS
delivered on Friday 13 July 1979 by

John Foster

to commemorate the anniversary of

JOHN KEBLE'S

Sermon at the Assizes 1833



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Australian Church Union: Melbourne Branch

*This address was delivered by
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TONIGHT we commemorate the Assizes Sermon of John Keble, as marking the inauguration of the Oxford Movement and the renewal of Catholic doctrine in the Church of England. It is unfortunate - but characteristic - that it should have been preached in defence of the indefensible Irish bishoprics. Like most of the other leading spirits of the Movement, Keble was a deeply conservative man. He had opposed Catholic Emancipation; he had opposed the Reform Bill of 1832; and when he praised the Tractarian Gladstone as 'the one great and good public man of the age', that was an opinion formed when Gladstone still appeared to all the world as the rising hope of the stern, unbending Tories.

Fortunately for the Church, the Catholic movement outgrew the exclusively conservative associations of its origins. Ritualist priests took their Gospel to the East End slums. A new generation, led by Charles Gore and Scott Holland, discovered a generous social vision at the heart of their Catholic faith. And there was never a shortage of striking individualists and men of eccentric courage - priests like Stewart Headlam, who stood bail for Oscar Wilde, and scandalised the Victorian episcopate by interpreting the Magnificat as a Christian warrant for social revolution. With such priests as these the Church was clearly more than the Tory party at prayer.

We have cause to be thankful for the rich and radical diversity in which the inheritors of the Oxford Movement expressed their faith. But we ought not to ignore the context in which it arose. Keble and his friends fundamentally rejected the liberal temper which they saw increasingly in operation around them in theology, in politics, and in society. Not only the Church, they believed, but the foundations of belief itself were under attack from a liberal attitude of mind which, extended to its logical conclusion, would run out into the arid wastelands of secularism.

Philip Pusey's hymn of 1840 captures the mood precisely.

See round thine ark the hungry billows curling;
See how thy foes their banners are unfurling:
Lord, while their darts envenomed they are hurling,
Thou canst preserve us.

Philip Pusey's embattled ghetto mentality, or F.W. Faber's fantastic yearnings for the crown of martyrdom, now appear as the ludicrous excesses of an over-heated ecclesiastical imagination. The Church was not despoiled, though its ancient privileges were whittled away, first in response to dissenting grievances and then, increasingly, in the name of liberal principle.

When the University of Oxford was reformed in the 1850s and thrown open to all denominations, Keble was, as usual, to be found in the ranks of the opposition. 'It is not so much Dissent that I fear,' he wrote to Coleridge, 'nor even Rationalism, but it is the complete secularisation of men's minds there, it is the worldly and irreligious air which is poisoning the place.' The complete secularisation of men's minds - this was the fear, often sensed rather than articulated, which haunted the mind of the Oxford Movement.

In a sense they were right. And nowhere did this become more obvious than in the field of education, that delicate area of public policy where the claims of the Church and liberal society most dangerously conflicted. For Keble, equally at home in his Oxford college and in the village school at Hursley, the right and duty of the Church to conduct the education of its children was axiomatic. But that assumption came more and more to be challenged. In England, as in this country, control of the schools and the place of religion in them was a subject more bitterly contested than any other question touching relations between the Church and the State. In both cases the outcome was essentially the same. The Church of England failed to

develop a coherent policy concerning Christian education; and the rapid and vast expansion of the modern school system tilted the scales decisively against denominational, and even religious, teaching.

In the great education debates of the 1870s in this Diocese both Bishop Perry and Bishop Moorhouse forthrightly denounced the principle of secular education. 'Choose which you will have,' Bishop Moorhouse thundered in the Synod in 1879, 'a religious or a secular education. You cannot have both. If you sow secularism you will reap irreverence and immorality; if you sow folly, you reap misery.' The Church chose folly: for the Tractarian bishop was unable to overcome the instincts of a Protestant laity, who nursed a constant fear that the Roman Church might secure an undue advantage from state-subsidised religious teaching. And the Education Department proceeded to purge the name of the Supreme Being from the pages of its conscientiously secular textbooks.

After a hundred years of secularism, is the time now opportune to reconsider the responsibility of the Church in the matter of religious education?

When a child is baptised the Church explicitly accepts the task of teaching him the Christian faith. Without exaggeration, one might therefore speak of the right of a child, acquired in baptism by the promise of the Church, to a Christian education. How that education should be imparted, and what form it should take - these are difficult and controversial matters. But I suspect there would be few in the Church Union who would agree that, as a general rule, teaching in Sunday Schools and confirmation classes sufficiently meets the catechetical obligations of the Church. Nor is religious instruction in government schools conspicuously successful. But what other provision does the Church make to fulfil its promises to the child?

Certainly there is an impressive array of grammar

schools bearing the name of the Church of England. And, one might suppose, in such schools the life and faith of the Church is actively nurtured and propagated. But quite apart from a widespread cynicism about the accuracy of that supposition, the grammar schools are clearly inadequate to meet the needs - or correspond to the means - of all Anglican families. Does their chief importance to the Church lie simply in the fact that they remind us, by their very existence, that the Church does believe in the possibility of Christian schools? How else, after all, could we justify maintaining them? And, if this is true, it is perhaps worth considering how their purposes might be more effectively - and more widely - met.

Other lines of development also suggest themselves. Over the last decade several Christian community schools, often heavily dependent on Roman Catholic support, have sprung into existence. In some parishes Anglican parents send their children to the Catholic parish school. The anti-Romanism which, more than any other single factor, caused the triumph of secular education a century ago, has been largely dispelled, and the state itself now supports the education of children in Church schools. In these changed circumstances, should the Anglican Church explore the possibility of participating fully in the Catholic school system?

Anglican answers to the problem of Christian education will not be easy. They will certainly not be uniform. Is the idea of Christian schooling objectionably sectarian? Is it socially responsible? Is it any longer within the means of a diminishing Church? Can it be effective in its primary objective of forming Christians? Where are the teachers to come from? And, for that matter, who would be the pupils?

Bishop Grant concluded his address at this commemoration last year by stating that the Church is always in danger -

more often from within than without. In the debate about catechetics, and in Christian education generally, this is clearly the case. We have to steer our ship between the Scylla of a narrow sectarianism on the one hand, and the Charybdis of a pervasive and insistent secularism on the other. In this dilemma we may take heart from the faith that informed John Keble's (otherwise undistinguished) poem 'Catechism':

Oh! say not, dream not, heavenly notes
To childish ears are vain,
That the young mind at random floats,
And cannot reach the strain.

Was not our Lord a little child,
Taught by degrees to pray,
By father dear and mother mild
Instructed day by day?

Yet is He near us, to survey
These bright and ordered files,
Like spring-flowers in their best array,
All silence and all smiles.

Save that each little voice in turn
Some glorious truth proclaims,
What sages would have died to learn,
Now taught by cottage dames.

Cottage dames are now in conspicuously short supply; but we do not doubt that the Lord of the Church will raise up new servants in their ministry, and that the glorious truth will continue to be proclaimed.