

A Few Points Concerning the Oxford Movement  
A View of the Oxford Movement

I. Its Origin.

At the end of Chapter I. of his "Apologia pro vita sua" <sup>[1833]</sup> John Henry Newman says: "The following Sunday, July 14<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Keble preached the Assize Sermon in the University Pulpit. It was published under the title of 'National Apostasy'. I have ever considered it and kept the day, as the start of the religious movement of 1833."

This sermon is no. VI. in a volume entitled 'Sermons, Academical & Occasional', by the Rev. John Keble, M.A., Vicar of Hurley, late Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, the preface to which is dated Hurley, Oct. 21, 1847. I have read it in the second edition published the following year in Oxford (John Henry Parker).

The text of the sermon was 1 Sam. xii. 23. "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 & the right way."

Keble begins by regarding the demand of the Jews for a king as the 'first overt act, which began the downfall of the Jewish nation' & points to it as 'a perpetual warning to all nations, as well as to all individual Christians, who having accepted God for their King, allow themselves to be meanly subjected to him, & think they should be happier if they were free, & more like the rest of the world'.

¶ answer

He then proceeds to ask two questions

- (1) "What are the symptoms, by which one may judge most fairly, whether or no a nation, as such, is becoming alienated from God & Christ?"
- (2) And what are the particular duties of sincere Christians, whose lot is cast by Divine Providence in a time of such dire calamity?

He takes the conduct of the Jews in asking for a king as



furnish an ample illustration of the first point: The behaviour of Samuel, then and afterwards, supplies as perfect a pattern of the second, as can well be expected from human nature.

1. The case is at least possible, of a nation, having for centuries acknowledged, as an essential part of its theory of government, that, as a Christian nation, she is also a part of Christ's Church & bound, in all her legislation & policy, by the fundamental rules of that Church - the case is, I say, conceivable, of a government & people, so constituted, deliberately throwing off the restraint, which in many respects such a principle would impose on them, nay, disavowing the principle itself; and that, as the plea, that other states, as flourishing & more so in regard of wealth & dominion, do well enough without it? ..... men not impressed with religious principle attribute their ill & success in life - the hard times they have to struggle with, - to anything rather than their own ill-desert; and the institutions of the country, ecclesiastical & civil, are always at hand to bear the blame of whatever seems to be going amiss ---- the impatient patrons of innovation are surprised, at finding themselves rebuked on religious grounds? ..... we are responsible for the meaning & temper in which we deal with His Holy Church, established among us for the salvation of our souls.

Keble then goes on to direct attention to one or two more "omens & tokens of an apostate mind in a nation" The first symptom is the growing indifference, in which men indulge themselves, to other men's religious sentiments - the spirit which leads men ---- to congratulate one another on the supposed decay of what they call an exclusive system.

He goes on back whether "the fashionable liberality of this

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" generation be not ascribable, in a great measure, to the same  
temper which led the Jews voluntarily best about degrading  
themselves to level with the idolatrous Gentiles? And, if it be  
true any where, that such enactments enforced on the Legislature  
by public opinion, is Apostasy to hard a word to describe  
the temper of that nation?

This expresses the reaction of Keble & those who thought  
with him to the success of the <sup>political</sup> reform movement which produced  
the Parliamentary reform of 1832 & which used that event as  
the opportunity for further reforms which included, so  
it seemed, laying violent hands on the Church.

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Another symptom he describes as "a growing disinclination  
on the part of those bound by Voluntary Oaths, & whatever reminds  
them of their obligation, a growing disposition to explain it all  
away" - which is his method, apparently, of saying that  
persons taking office in or under institutions which  
they have sworn to uphold are using their position  
to effect radical changes in those institutions.

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He speaks of "impudence under pastoral  
authority" & "disrespect to the successors of the apostles, as  
such," as "an unquestionable symptom of unfaithfulness to Him,  
who gave them their Commission at first, & has pledged  
Himself to be with them for ever" & suggests that the nation  
stands convicted in His sight of a direct disavowal of  
His sovereignty.

He speaks of Saul "fearing the people & obeying their  
voice", of his first step in apostasy as "an intrusion on  
the sacrificial office" & "as the last & greatest of his crimes,"  
"persecuting David, whom he well knew to bear God's special  
Commission".



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So an apostate nation's 'will probably begin in infringement on Apostolical Rights' (reducing the number of Irish bishoprics); 'she will end in persecuting the true Church'.

II. How may a man best reconcile his allegiance to God & his Church with his duty to his Country, that country, which now, by the supposition, is fast becoming hostile to the Church, & cannot therefore long be the friend of God?

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He describes Samuel Atkins. 'That combination of sweetness with firmness, of consideration with energy, which constitutes the temper of a perfect public man, was never perhaps so beautifully exemplified.' — although opposed to the people & making his protest & finding them obstinate, "he does not therefore at once forsake their service, he continues discharging all the functions they had left him, with a true & loyal, though most heavy, heart" (~~last part~~). "God forbid that I should sin against Nehemiah ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way."

He applies this to the <sup>Apostolical</sup> Church — 'I mean, of course, the laity, as well as the clergy in their three orders, — the whole body of Christians united, according to the will of Jesus Christ, under the successors of the apostles.'

The Church would have to be constant in intercession which would prepare the Church & Churchmen for

Remonstrance. He ~~points~~ lays emphasis on the responsibility which rests on laymen, particularly those who handle the machinery of change & have great power in forming & modifying public opinion. "We have ill

learned the lessons of our Church if we permit our patriotism to decay, together with the protecting care of the State. "No

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powers that be are ordained of God' whether they foster the true Church or not. Submission & order are still duties.

The next paragraph is worth quoting in full.

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"After all, the surest way to uphold or restore an endangered Church, will be for each of her anxious Children, in his own place and station, to resign himself more thoroughly to his God & Saviour in those duties, public & private, which are not immediately affected by the emergencies of the moment; the daily & hourly duties, I mean of piety, purity, charity, justice. It will be a consolation understood by every thoughtful Churchman, that let his occupation be, apparently never so remote from such great interests, it is in his power, by doing all as a Christian, to credit & advance the cause he has most at heart; and what is more, to draw down God's blessing upon it. This ought to be felt, for example, as one motive more to exact punctuality in those duties, personal & official, which the return of an Assize week offers to our practice; one reason more for veracity in witnesses, fairness in pleaders, strict impartiality, self-command & patience, in those on whom decisions depend; & from an awful sense of God's presence in all. An Apostle once did not disdain to urge good conduct upon his proselytes of lowest condition, upon the ground, that, so doing, they would adorn & recommend the doctrine of God our Saviour. (Tit. 2<sup>nd</sup>). Surely, then, it will be no unworthy principle, if any man be more circumspect in his behaviour, more watchful & fearful of himself, more earnest in his petitions for spiritual aid, from a dread of disparaging the holy name of the highest Church, in her hour of peril, by his own personal fault or negligence.



As to those who, either by habit or temper, feel themselves most deeply interested, they cannot be too careful in reminding themselves, that one chief danger, in times of change & excitement, arises from their tendency to engross the whole mind. Public concerns, ecclesiastical or civil, will prove indeed ruinous to those, who permit them to occupy all their care & thoughts, neglecting or undervaluing ordinary duties, more especially those of a devotional kind.

Keble concluded his sermon with a confident expression of ultimate victory - "No true Churchman has the encouragement of being 'calmly soberly demonstrably sure, that, sooner or later, his will be the winning side'" & with "as did the Holy apostles themselves who welcomed the first persecution in the words of the Psalmist - ac. 4<sup>25-28</sup> <sup>quoting</sup> from Psalms 2. why do the heathen rage... &c. ---  
--- "For to do whatsoever Thy hand & Thy counsel determined before to be done".

I have quoted largely from this historic sermon because it is much more than a convenient landmark from which to date the beginning of the Oxford Movement. It expresses the ideas & the spirit that gave the movement its real power of appeal to Englishmen. In saying this I do not forget those developments which have laid the movement open to criticism - and very just criticism - not least the very point that Keble makes so emphatically in this sermon, namely, the deliberate evasion of solemn promises, e.g., the promise to follow the order of public worship prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer made with no intention of keeping it. Keble



at any rate was never guilty of this. He was always a Prayerbook Churchman. He had a strong sense of the absolute supremacy of spiritual values. He felt that there was a Divinely authorized standard of Conduct to which the Church & Churchmen must bear witness steadfastly by word & deed. He declared that the Church would justify itself to God & man in so far as each of her anxious children devoted <sup>himself</sup> ~~himself~~ to the daily & hourly duties of piety, purity, charity, justice;

Let us now look at the circumstances which led Keble to utter his protest against what he regarded as the dangerous tendencies of the times in which he lived.

The date 1833 is significant. I have already mentioned the great Reform of 1832 which was secured after a long & fierce struggle. The passing of the Bill was welcomed by the country generally with great demonstrations of rejoicing, but to many it was the occasion of equally great fears & apprehensions. We can understand something today of the dread of revolution which hangs like a cloud over many minds for there are many parallels between those days & our own, and likewise many contrasts.

There had been a great war. & a reconstruction of Europe. Vast & rapid economic change had been going on which had completely altered the structure of society. The war had left an aftermath of debt & distress and depression.



The abuses of the ~~old~~ ~~the~~ unreformed Parliament made it the most obvious point of attack for the <sup>new</sup> ~~reform~~ humanitarian movement. The government of England was mainly in the hands of a group of landowning families who regarded office & authority as their private property. But they had to face the demand of a new group - the moneyed men, the merchant princes & captains of industry, to a share in the control of public affairs. There was also the new class of wage-earners who were neglected & unrepresented & suffered under economic & political oppression.

without going into details <sup>I must mention</sup> ~~it can be seen I must remind~~ you that the great step from mediæval to modern England taken during the 16th. century was not nearly so great as that which England took during the half century preceding the Reform Bill, namely, the step from an agricultural to an industrial society, the transfer of power from the landed to the capitalistic interest. The landed interest had an intimate connection with the Church such as the capitalistic interest did not have & it is more than a coincidence that the political weakening of the landed interest and the accession to power of the moneyed interest is also contemporaneous with a series of attacks upon the Church & its privileges, for the Church had associated itself with the position & privileges of the landed interest, & when the prestige of that interest was shown away the Church suffered accordingly.



The ~~economic~~ revolution was accompanied, in fact it made possible, an alarmingly rapid increase of population, the phenomenon that prompted Malthus to write his essay. Between 1700 & 1750 the population, it is estimated, had increased 17 percent - a healthy rate of increase; between 1750 & 1800 the population multiplied by 76 percent - between 1800 & 1850 the urban population doubled ~~itself~~ itself.

And this increased population was a new race, without traditions or time-worn institutions. The fear it inspired checked reform for years & this fear was one ~~main~~ <sup>real</sup> cause of the Oxford movement. Its sole criterion of social standing was wealth - moneyed wealth, & many of its prominent members were self-made men, nobodies yesterday, moneyed men today. And as this new population had no share in the political life of the country & no part in the existing political institutions its members had no respect for <sup>the</sup> political leaders & no reverence for the British Constitution which ignored their existence. The pressure of war burdens fell upon them, but they had no voice in the voting of taxes. The iniquitous Corn Laws shut many foreign markets to the Capitalist producer & starved the worker by keeping up the price of bread - almost his sole article of diet - at a famine figure & swell the rents of parasitic landed interest & fatten the tithe of the Church. Thus the new artisan class and its captains, the new moneyed men, suffered a serious economic grievance which drove them into organized opposition to the



landed interest that held the government of the country entirely in its hands. Consequently there was a bitter feeling against the Church which was so intimately bound up with the landed interest. There was a rapidly increasing class of persons of substantial means & respectable educational attainments who were shut out from the political power they had the right & the ability to exercise. At any rate this was their point of view.

The menace of this new class & its ideas to the established institutions of the country was increased by the fact that the industrial revolution had taught men the value & the method of organisation & of organisation on a large scale that was beyond the experience & capacity of the old manual worker or the man on the land. The Church had to face an organised opposition & in 1833 this opposition had scored a tremendous political triumph & was making full use of it.

We must also observe the growth of the systematic ideas & policy known as 'Laissez-faire' which demanded complete liberty for every individual to pursue his own interests unfettered by state restrictions. This idea of liberty penetrated down to the lower strata of society & stirred up longings in all classes <sup>longings</sup> which had no small share in <sup>making</sup> ~~helping forward~~ the Reform agitation effective. This insistence on an individualistic point of view & the emphasis laid on the economic motive of self-interest, together with the enormous economic development that was going on, pushed economic interests into prominence & so we have men occupying a new point of view, the economic standpoint, from which the material well-being



of the nation appeared as the end to be attained. "Take  
 Care of the wealth of a nation & the power will take care of  
 itself." Give every individual the best possible chance  
 to develop his faculties to the utmost, & the whole nation  
 generally will of necessity benefit thereby, & thus "The  
 greatest good of the greatest number" will be attained. <sup>Laissez</sup>  
 faire implied that individual selfishness would produce  
 collective happiness, a doctrine not yet dead. Hence  
 privileges & restrictions were to be removed, especially those of  
 class or rank or station & any that could claim only  
 the 'divine right of prescription', a divine right that  
 had ceased to be recognized. We can imagine how repellent  
 all misdevelopment <sup>must</sup> have been to those who thought  
 like him. This formula, "The greatest good of the greatest  
 number," brings to notice the political thinker who  
 took the most prominent part in shaping the ideas &  
 aims of the reforming party. Jeremy Bentham was the chief  
 apostle of utilitarianism, that system of thought which judged  
 all things by their alleged practical utility.