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052154517X - Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England: Assaults, Volume II

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

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I

THE ASSAULT ON THE EIGHTEENTH
CENTURY

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Tractarianism as Assault

‘People say to me, that it is but a dream to suppose that Christianity should regain the organic power in human society which once it possessed. I cannot help that; I never said it could. I am not a politician; I am proposing no measures, but exposing a fallacy, and resisting a pretence. Let Benthamism reign, if men have no aspirations; but ... do not attempt by philosophy what once was done by religion. The ascendancy of Faith may be impracticable, but the reign of Knowledge is incomprehensible. The problem for statesmen of this age is how to educate the masses, and literature and science cannot give the solution.’ Rev. J. H. Newman *The Tamworth Reading-Room addressed to the Editor of The Times by Catholicus* February 1841 in C. F. Harrold (ed.) *J. H. Newman Essays and Sketches* 1848 vol. ii p. 203.

‘Do you think ... Satan ... is so unskillful in his craft as to ask you openly and plainly to join him in his warfare against the Truth? No; he offers you baits to tempt you. He promises you civil liberty; he promises you equality; he promises you trade and wealth; he promises you a remission of taxes; he promises you reform. This is the way in which he conceals from you the kind of work to which he is putting you; he tempts you to rail against your rulers and superiors; he does so himself, and induces you to imitate him; or he promises you illumination – he offers you knowledge, science, philosophy, enlargement of mind. He scoffs at times gone by; he scoffs at every institution which reveres them. He prompts you what to say, and then listens to you, and praises you, and encourages you. He bids you mount aloft. He shows you how to become as gods. Then he laughs and jokes with you, and gets intimate with you; he takes your hand, and gets his fingers between yours, and grasps them, and then you are his.’ Rev. J. H. Newman *Tract 83* (1838) in *Tracts for the Times* vol. v 1833–41 pp. 13–14.

‘Men of cultivated minds consider great divines or great philosophers merely in an intellectual point of view, and think they have a right to be admitted to their familiarity, when they meet them. They have no objection to exclusiveness, when talent and education, or again when wealth and station, are made the tickets of admission; but they are very much disgusted when they find the exclusiveness conducted on quite another principle ... A man, for instance ... may go a great way in Catholic opinions, and will be allowed to say and do what would be considered monstrous in another, if he does but conform himself to the existing state of things, adopt the tone of the world, take his place in the social body, and become an integral member and a breathing and living portion and a contented servant of things which perish. But if he will not put an establishment or a philosophy in the place of the Church, if he will not do homage to talent as such, or wealth as such, or official eminence as such, then he is out of joint with the age, and not only his words, but his look and his air are like a pail of cold water thrown over every man of the world whom he meets.’ Rev. J. H. Newman *The Works of the Late J. W. Davison* in *The British Critic* and *Quarterly Theological Review* 1842 p. 369.

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In England the assault on Christianity began with the Renaissance. The earliest assault, however, was uncertain and inconsequential, and had no support from the political power. The collapse of the political power in the 1640s supplied an opportunity which could not be taken, and it was not until Deism, Arianism and Socinianism had shown the way that the assault began to gain ground.

In the eighteenth century the assault stimulated an extensive literature of resistance. At the end of the century, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, resistance was fertilized and confused by transcendentalism, a feudalizing and mediaevalizing reaction, and the Romantic belief that religion and poetry were natural and connected facets of human activity. All of these were of first importance for the formation of the Victorian intelligentsia poetically and aesthetically, and in history, politics and religion, but all of them were affirmative and sentimental and lacked that feel for the jugular which could have turned affirmation into attack, sentiment into negativity and Anglican confidence in a confessional state into an aggressive demand for a Christian restoration once the confessional state had been subverted.

Tractarianism was such a demand. The Tractarians were children of betrayal and defeat, looked back more in anger than with a view to understanding and conducted a vigorous search for scapegoats. Through a tightly knit group of male friends and by mobilizing Oxford's youth, they developed as aggressive a belligerence as Socialism and Marxism were to develop in mobilizing youth in English universities in the 1930s, arousing suspicion not only because of what they were against but also because they spoke to each other and to God in a special way and bore distinctive and objectionable emblems – emblems of secrecy, self-discipline and self-recognition through which the new Samurai dedicated themselves to bringing the nation back to Christianity as surely as Wells's new Samurai were to be dedicated to keeping them apart.

Tractarian thought began from the belief not only that the eigh-

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teenth century had been a disaster but also that France had been the scene of the disaster. This was the Tractarian view of 1830 as well as of 1789. It was also the view of De Maistre and Chateaubriand and had been Burke's leading assumption in the 1790s.

Burke's writings in the 1790s were an attack, made before they had prevailed, on almost all the assumptions that dominate public discussion in the modern world. The attack was made from mixed motives in a political context but is not for that reason less useful in demonstrating that what has been held up for conservation by even the most Conservative of thinkers since Burke has been the Jacobinism that Burke attacked, and that Burke's importance for present purposes lies not in his counter-revolutionary politics but in the fact that it was he who made the most striking statement of the religious problem which forms the subject of Parts I and IV.

Burke, though a defender of the Anglican Establishment, was Irish and a Whig, and presented Christianity as a European religion. In conceptualizing a crisis, he explained that Christianity's existence had become a political problem, that its survival could not be assumed and that in face of the 'atheism' which the Jacobins wished to establish throughout Europe, the differences between the Churches were insignificant.

Burke remained a Whig even after 1789 and continued to praise Whig liberty and the revolution of 1688; in defending the ancien régime he was led into affirming of Christianity what he had affirmed of religion in writing *A Vindication of Natural Society*, of Roman Catholicism in writing about Ireland and of Islam and Hinduism in writing about India – that it was crucial to it. Having come to demand a British effort to re-establish Christianity in France, he so far transcended Anglican assumptions as to make Pitt's central duty the use of force to ensure its re-establishment in Europe.

Like Burke the Tractarians were enemies of the Jacobins. But they were not defenders of the aristocratic polity. They were critics of 1688 and believed that, though Protestantism had weakened the Church of England, it had been Rationalistic Liberalism which had brought it down. Until the late 1830s their overriding aim was to restore it and in emphasizing its 'Catholic' character and the 'Catholic' content of its formularies, to contrast it with the corruptions of Trent and the threat which Roman Catholicism presented to Christianity.

The central target for attack was not, nevertheless, Rome but the exaggerated respect which 'the present age' felt for the 'powers and capacities of the human mind'. What the Tractarians feared was what

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The Assault on the Eighteenth Century

Burke had feared, though they feared it in a Coleridgean or even a Lamennaisian rather than a Burkean fashion – that the popular imagination was being liberated from Christian control and creating an anarchy of religions as the ‘reveries of philosophers’ became the ‘object ... of belief and ... ground of practice ... among the millions’. It was to this problem that the Tractarians addressed their minds and the fears and enmities it involved which were used to justify their counter-revolution.

These fears and enmities were present in all the leading Tractarians. Keble had them along with the tone he achieved in *The Christian Year*. Pusey had them once he had become part of the Tractarian triumvirate; Newman had them throughout. Ward and Froude were temperamentally acerbic, and Ward had a Benthamite component as well as a romantic one. Hugh James Rose was neither a don, nor strictly speaking a Tractarian. But it was Rose who first gave them polemical expression.

I

Rose had a Jacobite ancestry, was six years older than Newman, and died seven years before Newman’s conversion. His father was a clergyman and schoolmaster in Sussex, and, since his own health was poor, Rose was educated at his father’s school. In 1813 he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he failed to get a Fellowship. In 1818 he was ordained and married and in 1821 became Vicar of Horsham. Having moved to Hadleigh in 1830 and to Fairstead in 1834, he remained there until becoming Principal of King’s College, London, a couple of years before his death at the age of forty-three in 1838.

Rose preached two series of sermons in Cambridge, where his influence was compared with Simeon’s, and was persuaded by van Mildert to spend 1834 as Professor of Divinity at Durham. As first editor of the revived *British Magazine* from 1832 to 1836, he was an effective journalist, and as Vicar of Hadleigh was host at the unsuccessful meeting from which the Tractarian conspiracy derived some of its reputation. Beginning with attacks on Bentham and Cobbett in the 1820s, he kept up a stream of high-quality polemic which included *The State of the Protestant Religion in Germany*, *Brief Remarks on the Disposition Towards Christianity Generated by Prevailing Opinions and Pursuits* and the long criticism of St Simonianism that he printed as a preface to *The Gospel: An Abiding System* in 1832.

Rose had a Tractarian conception of the need for an Anglican

divinity, a patristic scholarship and a Christian journalism, and in company with his brother, Henry, laid the foundations for the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana*. He intuited, however, an ambiguity in Newman's attitude to Rome and a lukewarmness in his attitude to the Church of England. Rose's 'Catholicism' was Anglican and, even at its most polemical, thought of itself, or rather of 'the English', as opposed to 'extremes'.

What Rose attacked was the spread of Infidelity in England and on the Continent, not only outside the Churches but also inside them. Just as the reverse side of Palmer's *Church of Christ* was Palmer's criticism of Thomas Arnold and Liberal Anglicanism, so Rose's positive works were matched by criticism of Milman, the slide from Protestantism through pietism to disbelief and Semler's 'theory of accommodation' which was 'the most formidable weapon ever devised for the destruction of Christianity'.

The State of Protestant Religion in Germany was an attack on German theology. The introduction to *The Gospel: An Abiding System* was an attack on French Sociology.

Rose's discussion of St Simonianism led to two separate conclusions. On the one hand that the movement's conduct and 'some of its opinions' were absurd. On the other, that respectful attention should be given to its 'wide and philosophical views', the 'plausibility' of many of its observations about history and its refusal to 'acquiesce in a state of society that was almost entirely godless'.

Rose agreed that 'gaining power over others' had been the moral and social principle of antiquity, that mediaeval Christianity had made a political reality of the gospel of love and that there was 'very much of truth' in the view that Liberalism had done a good work in knocking down the 'wrecks of old systems' since the Reformation. He argued, however, that the Liberalism of 1789 had degenerated and would have to be destroyed if selfishness and self-interest were to be replaced, that social solidarity required an 'absorbing passion' to 'take men out of themselves' and that the Christian version of 'absorbing passion' was better than the St Simonian version.

As Rose saw it, St Simonianism was a secularized version of Christianity, recognizing in the gospel of love the Christian contribution to human progress and teaching a necessary mistrust of both the profit-motive and the hereditary principle. His criticism was that St Simonianism was merely a higher version of the doctrine of human perfectability and had failed to understand that it was only by looking

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'beyond the grave' that men would be able to move towards the requisite cohesion on earth.

Where *The State of the Protestant Religion* gave a view of Germany and *The Gospel: An Abiding System* a view of France, *Brief Remarks* and the *Cambridge Sermons* that Rose published in 1831 gave a view of English thought as a symptom of England's deterioration.

Brief Remarks praised the revival of learning which had preceded the English Reformation and the 'elevating' and 'immortal' literature which had been produced as a consequence. It specified the Restoration as the point at which 'learning' had been 'brought down' and 'coffee-house ... deism' as a symbol of the obsession with material progress and the recession in the 'knowledge of man' which were the leading defects of the modern intellect.

Rose did not disparage the intellect; he argued simply that man's 'intellectual frame' depended on his 'moral frame' and would only develop properly when religion was made the ... paramount object of ... education'. 'The only mark of progress in the species ... was to be found in God's dealings with mankind', and what mattered, therefore, was not the 'results obtainable by intellectual effort' but the 'discipline derived from them' and God's promise that men would know Him when 'the universe should have crumbled into dust and all its knowledge should have ... been forgotten'.

To some extent Rose's polemic was a conventional High-Church polemic, addressing itself to the threats by which Anglicanism was confronted in the 1820s but involving a High-Church identification between learning and ecclesiastical Christianity. By comparison Froude's polemic was bitter.

II

Much of Froude's¹ writing, though written by 1835, remained private until Newman, Keble and Mozley published the four volumes of his *Remains* in 1838/9. When read then and later in the light of *Tracts for the Times* (especially Tracts 80, 87, 89 and 90), it became obvious that there had been a conspiracy, that in Froude the Church of England

¹ Rev. Richard Hurrell Froude (1803–36). Educ. Eton and Oriel College, Oxford. Fellow of Oriel College 1826–30. Author of contributions to *Tracts for the Times* and J. Keble, J. H. Newman and J. B. Morley (ed.) *Remains of the Late Reverend Richard Hurrell Froude* 4 vols. 1838–9; L. I. Guiney (ed.) *Hurrell Froude: Memoranda and Comments* 1904.

had been harbouring a viper, and that the poison he had been spreading consisted of an attack on the Reformation, on historic and contemporary Anglicanism and on the 'Union of Church and State'. Froude had obviously hated the Whigs who 'by degrees' had taken up 'all the filth that had been secreted in the fermentation of human thought'. He had also admired the Nonjurors, had turned against the Noetics whom he might have been expected to admire, and had praised a gallery of heroes from Pole to van Mildert for reasons which looked only dubiously Protestant. In the political changes which had taken place between 1828 and 1832 he had seen an intrusion by the State into the affairs of the Church, a provocation to 'civil war', and the prelude to a future in which 'Independents ... Socinians ... Jews ... Unbelievers ... Latitudinarians and Dissenters' would replace the Church of England in the 'councils of the nation'.

Froude did not necessarily mean everything that he wrote or said. He certainly hated Milton and 'adored' Charles I. He may well have wished to 'explode' the 'Protestant fancy' that 'the priest must be a gentleman' and may even have convinced himself that 'in a Protestant church the parson ... preached the prayers ... and worshipped the congregation'. It is probable that he did not really 'hope' that the 'March of Mind in France' might prove a 'bloody one' or that a 'flogging' might be thought 'the most sensible qualification for the franchise'. He certainly said so, however, and was the author of the historic remark, which gave great offence when printed after his death, that the Reformation had been a 'badly set ... limb' which would have to be 'broken again in order to be righted'.

In many of his essays Froude criticized Rationalism as a method of interpreting the Bible and sketched the Orthodox method that should be used instead. Thomas Arnold was singled out for claiming to distinguish 'essential' from 'inessential' aspects of the Bible, for dismissing Hooker and Jeremy Taylor and for agreeing with 'half the Protestant world before him' that 'honest and sensible men' could never be in doubt about the 'methods' through which God's revelation should be interpreted.

Froude turned Arnold on his head, arguing that Arnold's method could as easily be used, if Pascal and Bishop Butler were to be followed, in defence of orthodoxy as against it, and since there *were* essentials of belief, that the important question was how doctrines which were 'human theories' could be distinguished from doctrines which were not. His answer was that there was a 'middle road' between submission

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to Trent and Protestantism's insistence on Biblical Infallibility, and that this would be found in the infallibility of the Apostles and the decisions and declarations through which the early Councils had interpreted it.

Froude's central assumption was that supernatural knowledge superseded human knowledge and that an assault would be needed if supernatural knowledge was to be reasserted against the inroads which Rationalism had made in the previous quarter of a millennium. Rationalism was an assertion of human traditions and a diminution of divine traditions, and the assault on it was central because it had destroyed the belief that ecclesiastical knowledge and authority were as potent as secular knowledge and authority.

Froude's *Essay on Rationalism* pursued three lines of attack. It attacked the tendency to 'divest Scripture of its apparent meaning' when 'its apparent meaning' was unintelligible to men's 'natural faculties'. It attacked the assumption that man's natural faculties could 'recognise and explain the action of the Holy Spirit' without external assistance in doing so. And it attacked the belief that the efficacy of the Sacraments 'belonged to them through their natural tendency'. These attacks led to a disparagement of the sermon by contrast with the Eucharist and of reasoning by contrast with faith, and to an assertion of the impossibility of achieving knowledge of God without first having acted upon it.

In describing Reason's rôle in relation to revelation, Froude pitched his case low. He was in no doubt that 'faith' had to be protected from Experience, that Reason had to arbitrate between them and that theologians were no more confined to the facts than Newtonian astronomers were confined to what they saw in the sky. It was Reason's business to decide whether a proposed revelation that was 'contrary to Experience' was 'real' and not only was a 'Bible Christian' who 'rejected all sources of instruction but the Bible' an 'absurdity' but Reason's agent was the Church's 'inward and spiritual character' which preserved its continuity with the Apostles and alone protected it against prevailing respectability.

Like Rose, Froude died young and did not develop his positions systematically. Though it is likely, it is not certain that he would have joined the Roman Church if he had been alive at the time of Newman's conversion. What is certain is that he regarded a national Church as

likely to be a Church without a discipline, that he regarded a Church without a discipline as the worst of all Churches, and that he would have preferred a Church to be disestablished if establishment made discipline impossible. In *Thomas à Becket* – his longest work – he emphasized the clerical character of the discipline he envisaged and the autonomous character of the authority on which it would be based. If he had survived into the 1840s, these preferences, along with a long-standing preference for ‘obedience’ over ‘enquiry’, would have been as influential with Newman as they had been even before the Mediterranean tour which he, Froude, his father, Archdeacon Froude, and Newman made together in order to restore Froude’s health in the winter of 1832.

Having started as a pupil of Keble, Froude became one of the most offensive of Newman’s allies. He was not, however, Newman’s only offensive ally. Ward was at least as offensive; it was Ward’s success in drawing lines between 1841 and 1845 that was responsible for the disintegration of Tractarianism and the parting of the ways between Canterbury and Rome.

III

Ward¹ was more than ten years younger than Newman and began adult life as a Broad Church Utilitarian. For some years he was an admirer of Whately and Arnold, and was sceptical about the Tracts until, as a young Fellow of Balliol, he fell under the spell in the mid-1830s. Having turned, he turned sharply, feeding on Froude’s *Remains* and writing, before he preceded Newman into the Roman Church, two Romanizing pamphlets, a series of Romanizing articles in *The British Critic*, and a book *The Ideal of a Christian Church* for which he was censured by the Convocation of the University of Oxford in 1845.

In outline *The Ideal* resembled Palmer’s *Church of Christ*. *The Church of Christ*, however, was an Anglican book and Palmer remained an Anglican throughout his life. *The Ideal* was only dubiously Anglican. It had been started as an answer to the attack which Palmer

¹ William George Ward (1812–82). Educ. Winchester and Christ Church, Oxford. Fellow of Balliol College 1834–45. Renounced Anglican orders, married and converted to Roman Catholicism 1845. Author of *A Few Words in Support of Tract 90* 1841, *A Few More Words in Support of Tract 90* 1841, *The Ideal of a Christian Church Considered in Comparison with Existing Practice* 1844.