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Frances Knight

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CHAPTER I

Interpreting the nineteenth-century Church

During the period from about 1800 to 1870 the Church of England underwent a transformation more rapid, dramatic and enduring than any which it had experienced since the Reformation. The process of change was complex and in certain respects ambiguous, but the most significant adjustment was that which took place in the relationship between Church and State. The Church moved from a uniquely privileged relationship with the State, in which it was closely bound up with the political and legal system, to being one denomination, albeit still the most powerful one and still formally and legally Established, among several in a society in which it appeared that half of those who professed any form of religious allegiance expressed a preference for a non-Anglican variety. This modification in Church–State relations was accompanied by the de-Anglicanisation of English institutions, starting at the heart of the Establishment with the admission of Protestant dissenters to Parliament on equal terms with Anglicans in 1828, and then spreading outwards to the municipal corporations, the universities and the grammar schools.

The relationship between Church and people shifted for a diverse variety of reasons, which included the drift of population to the towns, agitation from disgruntled Nonconformists, the clergy's changing perception of themselves, and the intervention of parliamentarians and Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The parish clergy moved from a *de facto* supervisory role within the boundaries of each parish (symbolised by the huge numbers who sat on the magistrates' bench) to a more limited and strictly ecclesiastical role directed towards a discrete clientele, with the rest of the population regarded as either abandoned to Nonconformity, or in the case of the 'unchurched masses', perceived as the legitimate targets for missionary activity. The attitude to the poor itself underwent a significant re-definition. At the beginning of the century attempts to church the unchurched were centred on the provision of

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[More information](#)

additional free seats, and were channelled through organisations like the Incorporated Church Building Society, as well as through local endeavours. It was a remnant of the idea that a seat should be available in his parish church for every subject of the realm. Later, when this was perceived as no longer possible or even appropriate, there began a clerically-orchestrated campaign to sift and distinguish between the degrees of commitment of those who showed some interest in the Church. This resulted in a narrowing of the definition of who was and who was not an Anglican.¹

The Church of England responded to the upheavals of the nineteenth century by trying to make itself more effective. One way in which it did this was through the policies pursued by the Ecclesiastical Commission, a Church-State endeavour that made a significant impact on the pattern of clerical life. Another response came in the form of a spiritual revival, which manifested itself in various shades of Evangelical, Orthodox and Tractarian churchmanship. This spiritual revival had two major though largely unintended effects. The first was to drive a firmer wedge between the 'spiritual elite' in the Church (of whatever theological complexion) and the supposedly ungodly world outside. The second was to bring church people into new conflicts with one another, typified by the rise of party hostility and internecine feuding which characterised the period. For Evangelical, Orthodox and Anglo-Catholic protagonists, an even greater enemy was to emerge from within the bosom of the Church. In a highly symbolic episode following the controversy over *Essays and Reviews*, a work of liberal Anglican theology published in 1860, representatives of all three parties united to turn their collective fire on the liberals of the Broad Church.

Although the Church in the nineteenth century can be justly described as in a state of profound and lasting transition, in other important ways it remained distinctly the same institution as in the

¹ The term 'Anglican' in this study has been adopted for the sake of convenience and clarity as a simple description of adherence to the Church of England. It should be remembered, however, that it was a slippery term in the nineteenth century, and it was not widely used by lay church people to describe themselves (they preferred the term 'churchman'). The word gained controversial 'High Church' connotations, which caused it to fall from favour in Evangelical usage, whilst the Tractarians themselves used it pejoratively to describe 'high and dry' orthodoxy. See Peter Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship 1760–1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 39–41; J. Robert Wright, 'Anglicanism, *Ecclesia Anglicana*, and Anglican: An essay on terminology' in Stephen Sykes and John Booty (eds.), *The Study of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1988) pp. 424–9 and Paul Avis, 'What is "Anglicanism"?' in the same volume, pp. 405–24.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interpreting the nineteenth-century church*

3

past. The adoption of the terminology of the 'long eighteenth century', which interprets the period as lasting from the Toleration Act (1689) until the 1830s, continues to be popular with scholars.² The thesis could be adapted and pushed further to suggest that in some respects the Church of England remained little changed until the 1860s. It continued to command considerable support from lay people, who remained willing to donate large amounts of their money, and in some cases their time and skill, to maintaining and extending its fabric. These people continued to live with a view of the world that was recognisably Christian, their spirituality shaped by a high view of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and by a profound sense of the changes and chances of the present world, which caused them to dwell much on the importance of preparation for a holy death.

In the attitudes and circumstances of the clergy there may also be discerned clear continuities with the preceding period. The vast majority continued to be graduates of Oxford or Cambridge, which meant that they shared the common culture and aspirations of the genteel classes, even if they sometimes lacked the financial resources (from their clerical incomes at least) to match them. Indeed, amongst the lower clergy, the curates and the holders of small benefices, there remained a degree of poverty that continued to cause hardship, despite the endeavours of the Queen Anne's Bounty and the various pieces of legislation which aimed to regulate curates' stipends. The necessity continued of mitigating financial hardship by recourse to pluralism of one sort or another, though the legislation passed in 1838 and 1850 gradually phased it out. But the important word is gradually. As existing interests were always respected, the effects of the legislation, significant though they were, were not fully felt until 1870. If pluralism and non-residence remained relatively common, however, it should not be assumed that they necessarily led to poor standards of attention to

² For a recent and comprehensive account of the Church of England in the eighteenth century see John Walsh and Stephen Taylor, 'Introduction: the Church and Anglicanism in the "long" eighteenth century' in John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (eds.), *The Church of England c. 1689–c. 1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 1–64. The other essays in this volume provide an invaluable synthesis of recent research on the period. Other important works which emphasise the centrality of Anglicanism in the 'long' eighteenth century are J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert Hole, *Pulpit, Politics and Public Order in England 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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[More information](#)

duty. As in the eighteenth century, many of the rural clergy lived but a short distance from their parishes, and were quite as effective as they would have been if they had been technically resident. Indeed, they were perhaps less likely to subside into idleness if they had more rather than fewer souls in their care. The ideal of a fully-resident clergy, which was a cherished ambition of ‘reformers’ like Bishops Blomfield and Kaye, remained difficult to put into practice. It was clumsy attempts to make it a reality which placed new and largely unconsidered financial burdens on the whole ecclesiastical structure. Amongst the higher clergy – the bishops, archdeacons, rural deans and incumbents of the prominent parishes – there may be observed the same general spirit of conscientiousness and caution, and the desire to promote unity and avoid controversy, which was a feature of the eighteenth-century Church. Until the 1860s the churchmanship of those in authority in the Church of England was often reminiscent of the High Church Orthodoxy that was firmly rooted in the previous century, and which made senior churchmen distrustful of Evangelicals on the one hand and Tractarians on the other.³

It will be argued in this book that the period from about 1800 to about 1870 was a complicated time in which the Church of England was simultaneously in a state both of transition and of continuity with the past. The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which some of these transitions and continuities were expressed at the grass-roots of Anglicanism, as the Church was forced to redefine itself as a denomination. In the past twenty years a growing number of articles and pamphlets have investigated aspects of local religion, and a number of full-scale studies have been completed, though few have found their way into print. The pioneer in the field was James Obelkevich’s *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875* (1976), a social history of religion in a relatively small part of Lincolnshire which, drawing on Marx and Feuerbach, aimed to do justice to the broad spectrum of religious phenomena from magic and superstition to the activities of the Anglicans. Albion M. Urdank’s *Religion and Society in a Cotswold Vale: Nailsworth, Gloucestershire 1780–1865* (1990) provided an

³ See the writings of Peter Nockles for an account of the Orthodox. For example, ‘Continuity and change in Anglican High churchmanship in Britain 1792–1850’ (University of Oxford DPhil., 1982); ‘The Oxford Movement: historical background 1780–1833’ in Geoffrey Rowell (ed.), *Tradition Renewed: The Oxford Movement Conference Papers* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1986) pp. 24–50; ‘Church parties in the pre-Tractarian Church of England 1750–1833: the “Orthodox” – some problems of definition and identity’ in Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *The Church of England* pp. 334–59; and *The Oxford Movement in Context*.

immensely detailed socio-economic history of a centre of Evangelical Nonconformity, which also highlighted the Church of England in a state of weakness. Staithes, another community in which the Church was weak, was the subject of David Clark's *Between Pulpit and Pew: Folk Religion in a North Yorkshire Fishing Village* (1982). At the time of writing a version of Mark Smith's 1987 Oxford DPhil. thesis 'Religion in industrial society: the case of Oldham and Saddleworth 1780–1865' is due to be published by Oxford University Press. This will provide a valuable urban foil to these rural studies.

Amongst the articles and pamphlets that provide local studies of Anglicanism, the best of which are extremely illuminating and suggestive, there has been a tendency (often the result of pressure on space) for the material to be presented in purely parochial terms, with little sense of contextual significance, or for it to be shaped by what appears to be a predetermined interpretative framework. That is to say the authors concentrate on parishes in which the theological complexion is already regarded as clear.⁴ The effect, perhaps an unintentional one, is to simplify the understanding of the underlying religious geography of nineteenth-century Anglicanism, and also to focus on an overtly clerical conception of the past, in which the religious life of a community is seen as having been reshaped by the arrival of one or two clergy whose role is interpreted as having been fundamentally different from that of their predecessors. A consequence of this has been to produce an impression of conflicting ecclesiastical ideologies – Tractarian on the one hand and Evangelical on the other – battling for the souls of Anglican parishioners. Amidst the sound and fury created by the conflicting ideologies, there has been a tendency for other approaches to be overshadowed. The question of the way in which the reform movement made an impact on parish life, insofar as it has been studied at all, has tended to be conceived in narrowly liturgical and ecclesiological terms, 'parish life' being understood as a shorthand for the way in which services were conducted in parish churches. As a result

⁴ See, for example, the earlier work of Nigel Yates, 'Leeds and the Oxford Movement: a study of "High Church" activity in the rural deaneries of Allerton, Armley, Headingley and Whitkirk in the diocese of Ripon 1836–1934', *Thoresby Society Publications* 55: 121 (Leeds, 1975); *The Oxford Movement and Parish Life: St Saviour's, Leeds, 1839–1929*, Borthwick Papers 48 (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1975); also, Peter G. Cobb, *The Oxford Movement in Nineteenth Century Bristol* (Bristol: Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, 1988); E.P. Hennock, 'The Anglo-Catholics and church extension in Victorian Brighton' in M. J. Kitch (ed.), *Studies in Sussex Church History* (London: Leopard's Head Press, 1981).

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[More information](#)

something is known about how the externals of worship changed, but very little about the underlying texture of religious belief.

The brief sketch of some of the central themes in Anglican historiography that follows helps to place the present study in context. It is intended to give substance to the claim that Anglicanism at the grass-roots has been neglected, whilst providing an introduction to some of the larger questions that will be discussed as the study proceeds. Four contrasting approaches will be considered, each of which has made a distinctive contribution to an understanding of the period – although they should not be seen as in any sense exhaustive. The first and most widespread is the analysis in terms of party ideologies, the significance of which in local studies has already been touched upon. It is an approach that completely dominated the subject until the 1960s, and which still persists in places. The second is an analysis in terms of institutional revival, the third of clerical revival, and the last a view which sets the subject in terms of the Anglican struggle with Nonconformity.

Although Peter Nockles has pointed out that the first historians of Tractarianism were its hostile detractors rather than its hagiographers,⁵ the conventions which have shaped the study of nineteenth-century Anglican history have been determined to a large extent by the influence of High Church historians in the Tractarian mould. By the early years of the twentieth century Anglo-Catholicism, albeit in a watered down form, had emerged as the predominant culture within Anglicanism, and this contributed to maintaining its historiographical ascendancy. The emergence of a victorious Anglo-Catholicism from the ferment of Victorian Anglicanism (at least until Anglo-Catholicism's decline after the Second World War), seems to have led to a tendency to see it as having miraculously revived the Church in the 1830s and 1840s. Pre-eminent among the early generation of Anglo-Catholic historians was R. W. Church, whose book *The Oxford Movement: Twelve Years, 1833–1845* first appeared in 1891, and, having assumed the status of a classic, was reprinted with an introduction by Geoffrey Best as recently as 1970. Best described the book as 'reliable, accurate and fair on almost all matters of fact and most of opinion',⁶ which is itself evidence of the continuing influence of the underlying thesis.

⁵ Nockles, *Oxford Movement in Context* pp. 1–2. For a comprehensive discussion of Tractarian historiography see pp. 1–24.

⁶ R. W. Church, *The Oxford Movement: Twelve Years 1833–1845*, ed. G. F. A. Best (Chicago: Classics of British Historical Literature Edition, 1970), p. xvii.

It was R. W. Church's contention that in 1833 the Church and clerical life had sunk into worldliness and torpor, though not, as sometimes portrayed by its more hostile detractors, into vice and depravity. From the outset he was concerned with matters of party affiliation, an obsession which has continued. He divided the clergy of the early 1830s into three categories: the Orthodox churchmen whom he parodied as high and dry 'teachers of mere morality at their best, allies and servants of the world at their worst'; the Evangelicals, characterised as having succumbed to superficiality and now on very easy terms with the world; and finally the independent and liberal thinkers, who were at home with neither of the other parties, and who criticised both.⁷ This jumble of theological opinions was in itself regarded as unedifying, and in a world turned upside down by the Reform Bill and the effects of Benthamite utilitarianism, R. W. Church described John Keble delivering his Assize sermon on 14 July 1833. The sermon was redolent with accusations of national apostasy, and with warnings of the dangers of the Church being despoiled by the State and trampled on by the people. Taking their cue from Newman himself, who had remarked in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) that he had 'ever considered and kept the day as the start of the religious movement of 1833',⁸ the Tractarian historians adopted 1833 as the year when modern church history began.

Inspired by the memory of their first leaders, the early Tractarian historians set out to give an account of the way in which, galvanised by Keble's Assize sermon, a small band of Oxford dons had attempted to inject some fight into a Church in danger from a Whig government bent on stripping it of its temporal and spiritual authority. J. H. Overton put it thus: 'The national feeling, long pent-up, depressed, despondent, had at length obtained freedom to pour forth; and the effect was amazing. The Church suddenly came to life.'⁹ Repackaged for popular consumption by the faithful, the mass-circulation histories written by Overton, Church, C. P. S. Clarke, S. L. Ollard and others sometimes subsided into ripping narratives in celebration of their heroes. The reader is repeatedly reminded of the saintliness of Keble, the scholarly austerity of Edward Bouverie Pusey, the boyish flamboyance of Richard Hurrell Froude, all set against the central motif of the

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–18.

⁸ J. H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Maisie Ward, Spiritual Masters Edition (London: Sheed & Ward, 1984) p. 23.

⁹ J. H. Overton, *The English Church in the Nineteenth Century (1800–1833)* (London, 1894) p. 14.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

personal crisis of John Henry Newman. The filtering of the events through the eyes of a handful of Oxford men had the effect of beguiling the reader into a sense of intimacy and participation as the plot unfolded, as in this extract from Ollard's history:

Froude stretched out his long length on Newman's sofa, and broke in upon one of Palmer's judicious harangues about bishops and archbishops and such like with, 'I don't see why we should disguise from ourselves that our object is to dictate to the clergy of this country, and I for one do not want any one else to get on the box.'¹⁰

The disarming frankness conveyed here, and the distinctive atmosphere of late night discussions in dons' rooms, is invoked in a way never quite equalled by historians outside the Anglo-Catholic tradition, whose heroes tend to be depicted as operating more in the public than in the private domain, against a less finely embroidered backcloth. The publication of the *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, (1978–81), which provide an almost day by day account of the development of his thought, and the progress of the Oxford Movement (welcome though this is) has only increased this sense of the magnification of the importance of individual Tractarians, and the reader's feeling of being a privileged witness to the gradually unravelling story.¹¹ Whilst it is appropriate for those who wish to study the Movement as intellectual history to focus more or less exclusively on key individuals, it is certainly a less fruitful approach for those who are interested in its social, spiritual, organisational or political aspects. Despite the plethora of publications, there are still aspects of the Oxford Movement that remain unexplored.

Tractarian historians made an early attempt to write the history of the nineteenth-century Church, but by the beginning of the twentieth century Evangelicals were also offering their distinctive interpretation, though they never produced histories in the same quantity as the Anglo-Catholics. The most influential book was G. R. Balleine's *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*, which first appeared in 1908 and went through five editions, the last of which was published in 1951. Balleine clearly intended to educate and inspire his fellow Evangelicals by providing a compelling account of the development of the party, and the book was laced with what are sometimes rather

¹⁰ S. L. Ollard, *A Short History of the Oxford Movement* (first edition 1915; reprinted London: Faith Press, 1969), p. 45.

¹¹ I. Ker and T. Gornall, (eds.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, 5 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–81).

fanciful descriptions of the degenerate condition of the non-Evangelical clergy, the dilapidated state of their church buildings and their total neglect of worship. (One of Balleine's more eccentric claims was that there were no evening services of any kind whatever before the Evangelical revival.)¹² The High Church Orthodoxy that predated Tractarianism was almost completely ignored in this study, except in one reference to a hostile pamphlet written by Thomas Sikes.¹³ Balleine dealt with the Tractarians by on the one hand emphasising the significance of Newman's Evangelical roots, and on the other the disloyalty to the Church of England of those who converted to Rome. But Balleine's intention was to publicise Evangelicalism rather than Tractarianism, and his book contained none of the innuendo or manufactured outrage of Walter Walsh's mass-circulation horror story, *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement* (1897).

As recently as 1988, Balleine's mantle was self-consciously assumed by Kenneth Hylson-Smith in his *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734–1984*. Hylson-Smith described Balleine's book as 'excellent', and claimed that his own work was a replacement and updating of it.¹⁴ Certainly his approach to the subject was similar to that adopted by Balleine eighty years earlier; they both began with Wesley, and focused thereafter on eminent Evangelical personalities, including William Grimshaw, William Romaine, John Newton, the Venns, Henry Ryder, Charles Simeon, William Wilberforce, Edward Bickersteth, Francis Close, the Sumners and J. C. Ryle. Both writers regarded the abolition of slavery in 1833 as the great moment of Evangelical triumph, after which they admitted that the movement suffered internal fragmentation, and began to turn its attention to less ambitious, more parochial concerns, and to attempting to defend Protestant Christianity from the incursions of an aberrant Anglo-Catholicism. The approach gives credence to a point made by John Kent, that the intention of historians in the tradition of Balleine and Hylson-Smith (including L. G. Elliott-Binns, J. S. Reynolds, J. C. Pollock and Michael Hennell) was to bring Evangelicalism into the foreground of the Victorian picture, to emphasise its theological loyalty to Luther and Calvin, to show its positive contribution to social questions, and to work out for Evangelicalism a

¹² G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (first edition, 1908; reprinted London: Church Book Room Press, 1951) p. 191.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁴ Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734–1984* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) p. viii.

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[More information](#)

pedigree as distinguished as that of Anglo-Catholicism, with the Wesleys, the Venns, Simeon and Ryle held in the same sort of regard as Newman, Keble, Pusey and Gore.¹⁵ In recent years the study of Evangelicalism has become considerably more sophisticated. It has been subject to some new and much needed scrutiny from a variety of standpoints, including David Bebbington's *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989), Boyd Hilton's *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought: 1785–1865* (1988) and John Wolfe's *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain 1829–1860* (1991).

The older, general histories of the Church, published in the 1960s and 1970s, continue to exert a considerable influence on Anglican historiography. They too pay considerable attention to party themes, and the portrait that emerges is of a Church dominated by senior clergy and politicians. This approach may be detected in one of the most readable and therefore most widely read works on the period, Owen Chadwick's two-volume study *The Victorian Church* (1966 and 1970), and in Edward Norman's *Church and Society in England 1770–1970* (1976). The thesis is also clearly stated in M. A. Crowther's *The Church Embattled: Religious Controversy in Mid-Victorian England* (1970) and in the collection of essays edited by Anthony Symondson, *The Victorian Crisis of Faith* (1970).

It is only since the late 1950s that historians with a less explicit interest in party questions have turned their attention to the Church of England. Not surprisingly, they have been less easily persuaded by the scenario of a grand spiritual battle between the forces of Tractarianism on the one hand and Evangelicalism on the other, and they have begun to investigate the other influences which were shaping the Church at this period. A number of scholars explored what may be termed the Church's 'institutional' revival. Prominent among the most significant contributions were Olive Brose's *Church and Parliament: The Reshaping of the Church of England 1828–1860* (1959), Geoffrey Best's *Temporal Pillars: Queen Anne's Bounty, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and the Church of England* (1964) and K. A. Thompson's *Bureaucracy and Church Reform: The Organizational Response of the Church of England to Social Change 1800–1965* (1970). The thread uniting these three books was their stress that the reform which the Church underwent from the 1830s onwards was part of a wider, utilitarian, government-sponsored movement to

¹⁵ John Kent, *The Unacceptable Face: The Modern Church in the Eyes of the Historian* (London: SCM Press, 1987) pp. 85–6.