



## Oxford movement: Religious movement in Literature

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### Abstract

One only Way to life:  
One faith, deliver'd once for all;  
One holy Band, endow 'd with Heaven's high call;  
One earnest, endless strife:

This is the Church, the Eternal framed of old.

These lines from a poem by John Keble give us some help to answer the question as to what the Oxford movement was about. This Movement was, fundamentally, religious in nature, and one of its aims was to rehabilitate the dignity of the Church and to deliver it from the grasp of secular authority. It is also called Tractarian movement.

The early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. was a period of great social change in Europe and the role the church was being wrecked and threatened.

But that was only one of the manifold issues which the Movement dealt with. Some other issues may also be mentioned here. One of them was the growing strength of Liberalism in religion and politics. The protagonists of this movement came forward to combat tooth and nail all such Liberalism as appeared in the Church as Latitudinarianism.

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### Introduction

It is a movement of high church members of the Church of England which developed in the Anglo catholic The Oxford Movement had nothing to do with politics, but it favoured Conservatism or Toryism. To the philosophy of conservatism the Oxford leaders were much indebted." Further, the Movement was opposed to rationalism in matters concerned with the Church. The Victorian age witnessed a rapid and tremendous expansion of physical science and even more than in the eighteenth century (the age of prose and reason) there was a temptation in the nineteenth to put religion to the test of rational scientific examination. T. H. Huxley, for instance, became an agnostic after failing to be convinced to the truth of Christianity, considered rationally and scientifically. The Oxford movement stressed the absurdity of examining the Church in the light of reason. The Oxford men put special emphasis on faith as something super rational. "The main-spring of the Oxford Movement," observes Hugh Walker "was the dread of rationalism." According to the same critic, the "problem" for Newman (the chief force of the Movement) "was how to check the growth of rationalism as he saw it in England."

### Anti-Rationalism

This aggressive anti-rationalism manifested itself in the Oxford men's affirmation of the miracles associated with the history of the ancient church and numerous saints. The people, influenced by science in their age, were already finding it too hard to give credence to the numerous Scriptural miracles, and the Oxford men were adding new ones which had never been

seriously believed except perhaps by the very orthodox Roman Catholics. This flagrant anti-rationalism, certainly out of tune with the times, naturally alienated many otherwise sympathetic people.

### Anti-Erastianism

But the fundamental factor which sparked off the Movement and which was taken cognizance of and condemned by almost all the 'brethren' was the increasing interference of secular authority in the affairs of the Church. All of them were at daggers drawn with Erastianism (the control of the Church by the State). The chief aim of the Oxford movement, in the words of one of its protagonists, was to convince the people that "the Church was more than a merely human institution; that it had privileges, sacraments, and a ministry, ordained by Christ." Moody and Lovett observe in this connexion: "Newman and his friends wished also to defend the Church, in view of its divine character, against the interference of the state, which was disposed to reform it along with Parliament and other institutions, curtailing its powers and revenues." Thus the Oxford movement stood for Anti-Erastianism.

### The history of the movement

These were the most important points which shaped the Oxford movement. But the "brethren" were by no means a united lot. A brief survey of the history of this Movement will show this.

Newman was the soul of the Movement. But, generally, the name of John Keble is mentioned as the man who started the Movement. In July 1833 Keble preached a sermon at Oxford

before the judges of assize, on national apostasy and against the Erastian and Latitudinarian tendencies of the day. His speech formally inaugurated the Movement, and even Newman accepted Keble as its "true and primary author." But it must be noted that Keble only provided the spark; the fuel had already been piling for long. Keble was a quiet, simple, and modest man not of much literary pretension, but known for his anonymous book of sacred poems, *The Christian Year*, published in 1827. According to Hugh Walker, "there is nothing great in his life or in his works." Anyway, he is the accepted pioneer of the Oxford movement.

Keble's sermon was followed by the generation of intense feeling in like-minded men of Oxford. They included Newman, Froude, Pusey and many more. Their concerted action crystallised in the publication of *Tracts for the Times*, the first of which came in September 1833. It was entitled *Thought on the Ministerial Commission*, respectfully addressed to the Clergy. The publication of the tracts continued till 1841 with contributions from many hands. However, Newman who wrote some twenty-nine of them was, as Hugh Walker puts it "the soul of the Tracts." None approached him in the clarity of thought as well as of expression.

The avowed aim of the Tracts was to create public opinion in favour of "the privileges of the Church and against Popery and Dissent." However, slowly and steadily the trend of thought as expressed in the Tracts showed evidence of moving towards the Church of Rome and away from the Church of England. Things came to a head if the famous (rather notorious) Tract XC, which came from Newman's pen. In it Newman showed his Romish tendency by taking upon him the task of arguing that the thirty-nine Articles were in no way opposed to the Council of Trent. In other words, he was making plea for the Church of Rome and undermining a universally accepted Anglican view. This tract created a tremendous commotion. All the Anglican bishops condemned it vociferously. Newman's conversion was complete after he had read articles by Wiseman, the able leader of the English Roman Catholics.

The general hostility which Newman provoked made it impossible for him to continue staying at Oxford. So he took refuge at Littlemore. He resigned his ecclesiastical living at Oxford in September 1843 and joined lay communion. Some of his ardent followers also joined him at Littlemore.

Meanwhile, W. G. Ward, an ebullient and energetic follower of Newman, published what W. H. Hutton calls "a heavy and exasperating book"-*The Idea of a Christian Church*. Ward openly favoured the Roman Church pointing to what he described as the "most joyful, most wonderful, most unexpected sight! We find the whole cycle of Roman doctrine gradually possessing members of English churchmen." It was a very provocative book. The scandalised members of the University at a convocation held on February 13, 1845 withdrew from Ward the degrees of B. A. and M. A. The book had a wide influence but it is poor literature. Well did Jenkyns. The Master of Balliol, tell Ward: "Well, Ward, your book is like yourself; fat, awkward, and ungainly."

Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism was formally complete when on October 9, 1845 he became a member of the Church of Rome. Later, in 1879, the Pope made him a

cardinal. But after 1845 the Oxford movement spread beyond Oxford. The "brethren" were no longer perfectly united. Some like Ward accepted Roman Catholicism, but others like Pusey continued their work staying within the Anglican fold.

### **The literary aspect of the movement**

The Oxford movement was basically a religious movement. Directly, it had nothing to do with literature. However, the numerous writings which it threw up had some repercussion on contemporary literary taste and style. Previously also, divines (such as Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, and Tillotson), had exerted some influence on literature even when they had written on purely religious themes. W. H. Hutton maintains in this context: "The Oxford movement certainly belongs to the history of English religion more definitely than to the history of English literature; but it had great influence, outside its own definite members on the literary taste of its age." But out of the whole mass of the literature the Movement gave rise to, we can pick out as good literature only a handful of poems and Apologia, which is, in Hugh Walker's words, "eminently and emphatically literature." As for the rest of the works, they are biblical abiblia.

Back in Oxford, however, the defenders of the Anglican flame had profited greatly from their dalliance with the medieval past. Their ignorance of medieval thought and subsequent overemphasis on the societal and administrative aspects of the medieval Church actually worked to their advantage. One only needs to look at the legacy of the Oxford Movement to see how this has been borne out. In terms of its intellectual thought, the movement was almost a complete failure. Its remaining practitioners soon retracted their claims to catholicity and began instead to stress the uniqueness of the Anglican Church, its doctrinal and ecclesiological differences from the Church of Rome. The liberalising trends of secular governments could not be thwarted, and by the end of the nineteenth century, it appeared that the Tractarian battle with modernism had been decisively lost. What the Oxford Movement had achieved, though, was the inculcation of certain medieval customs and devotional practices which had hitherto been rejected, even by high churchmen, as superstitious or 'papistical'. The speed with which the tactile attributes of the medieval Church were absorbed into Anglican Church practice was astonishing. By the late nineteenth century, the wearing of vestments, the administering of sacraments, and luxurious decorative elements were common sights in many Anglican churches. Despite some critical voices, these developments had been accepted without irrevocably dividing the Church. The notion that this could have occurred before the Oxford Movement is impossible to substantiate.

The Oxford Movement coincided exactly with the monastic revival in France, the restoration of many cathedrals and parish churches and a renewal of parish life under the influence of saintly or otherwise inspired priests. This is one reason why I cannot isolate the Oxford Movement from the general cultural feeling in the air in the early nineteenth century.

The Anglican and Catholic Churches were theologically as different as they ever had been, but in terms of their practice, they had never looked more similar. While the changes

therefore appear to be superficial, they served an important function in enabling the Anglican Church to reclaim its medieval heritage. The Oxford Movement helped to redraw the lines of continuity between what it considered to be two variants of the same institution, and in doing so, had wrested England's medieval past from the arms of the Catholics.

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