



46: Tracts and Tractarians

The eighteenth century had not been a good time for the Church of England. On the face of it, the Church was privileged, established, and secure. But its security had led to complacency. Although the rural communities were well provided with churches, the new industrial towns and cities were not. Dioceses were too few and too large; and preferment, or even securing a 'living' was dependent upon finding an influential patron, like Lady Catherine de Bourgh in 'Pride and Prejudice'.

So there was a large floating population of unbeneficed clergy. Some might be virtually unemployable; but among them were men like John Wesley and George Whitefield, gifted preachers who in practice, if not in theory, broke away from the Church of England altogether.

'High Church' and 'Low Church' had rather different meanings from what the terms have since come to mean. There was little difference in the practice of worship.

The 'High Churchmen' took a rigid stand on the status and privileges of the Church of England as the Established Church, and steadfastly resisted all attempts to water this down.

The 'Low Churchmen' on the other hand were open to contacts on specific causes with the 'Protestant Dissenters' (though not of course the Roman Catholics). They were prepared to co-operate in such causes as the 'Religious Tract Society' (publishing evangelical literature, particularly for upper- and middle-class households).

This led to the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society and, as is well known, to the Anti-Slavery movement. The prime movers in the abolition of slavery were a group of what we would now call Evangelical Churchmen, derisively termed, by the High Church Reverend Sidney Smith, 'The Clapham Sect'. They were well off, lived austere lives, and were motivated by a high degree of moral earnestness. They were cruelly satirised by, among others, Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins for being deeply caring for the welfare of those far off but shutting their eyes to poverty and distress nearer home.

The moral earnestness of the 'Low Churchmen' did eventually have its effect. Dioceses were reorganised and new Bishoprics created, St Albans among them; some new churches were built or rebuilt, including St Mary's. And, eventually, eyes were turned to the position of the Established Church itself, particularly its anomalous status in Ireland, where the vast

majority of the population, both Catholic and Protestant, did not belong to it.

The suggestion that the State might interfere with the rights and working of the Church led John Keble (1792 - 1866) to utter a public warning against 'National Apostasy'. He and other like-minded churchmen, among them John Henry Newman (1801 - 90) combined to issue a series of 'Tracts for the Times'. These were pamphlets upon topics related to the position of the Church as an institution not of human origin, based upon acts of Parliament, but founded by God and in a spiritual relationship with him.

The fanatical anti-Catholicism of the 18th Century had died down; after the French Revolution many Royalist French Catholics had sought refuge in England and been permitted to practise their religion. Improved transport allowed increased numbers to travel abroad and come into contact with Catholic culture and worship. Further, the Romantic Revival in arts and letters led to an increased interest in things mediaeval, including the Catholic church. Among the intellectuals of the Church of England, there was a desire to recover the aesthetics of Catholic worship.

This movement produced a strong reaction, particularly when Newman felt himself intellectually compelled to leave the Church of England and convert to Rome. Others followed him. Some of those who remained in the Established church were tactless in introducing changes in worship to what they believed to be authentic Catholic practice, over the furious protests of their parishioners. Some were intellectually dishonest as regards their vows of canonical obedience. But many did much good in the run-down slum parishes in which they served. The colour and drama they brought to their worship spoke to their congregations, as earnest Evangelical sermons could not. The case must not be over-stated.

An unfortunate result of the controversy was that the Church of England became polarised. The Low Churchmen, or Evangelicals, became in some respects closer to the Protestant Nonconformists than to their own Church, while the Ritualists, or Anglo-Catholics, were always looking over their shoulder at Rome. Discipline and cohesion in the Church was permanently damaged.

The Church of England, then, is part of the Catholic Church. It is Protestant, in that it does not accept the '*magisterium*' or ruling power of the Pope. At its best, it flies on two wings, one Catholic, one Protestant; when one wing becomes weaker it flies less well, and to fly at all it depends on a firm, strong centre to hold it together.