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Anglican Brotherhoods and Urban Social Work

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Throughout its history, the Anglican Church had acknowledged an obligation to promote missionary work among the poor and destitute of Britain's urban population. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the need for a renewed and dedicated effort, especially in cities such as London, became alarmingly apparent. Made aware of its apathy by the writings of Booth, Rowntree, and the socialists, the Church of England began to formulate new approaches to eradicate the social, economic, and educational ills created by urban industrialism. One solution, supported by some leading churchmen, argued that religious brotherhoods, located in the sprawling cities, might provide the organization, manpower, and spiritual resources needed. Moreover, these clerics could appeal to earlier writings and precedents to support their goal: the establishment of groups of Christians who would work as urban missionaries.

Early in the century, some Tractarians recognized the utility of brotherhoods. Hurrell Froude, for example, argued for the foundation of communities of celibate clerics in England's cities. He maintained that 'colleges of unmarried priests would be the cheapest possible way of providing for the spiritual want of a large population . . .'¹ According to Edward Pusey, unmarried clerics living a communal life might provide the balm to soothe the harshness of urban life. Commenting on Froude's proposal, Pusey believed that 'it seems to me the only one, if anything is to be done for our large towns . . .'² Dedicated not only to a life of prayer, Pusey's brotherhoods would become actively involved in ministering to and working among the urban poor. Although Newman's writings on brotherhoods lack the practical emphasis of some of his Oxford contemporaries, he believed that brotherhoods might protect the Church from apathy and indifference. In his remarks on the history of Benedictine monasticism, Newman maintained that if anyone studied that tradition, ' . . . he will see how much was gained to Christianity in purity, as well as unity, by that monastic system . . .'³

With the exception of Pusey's sisterhoods, the equation of religious brotherhoods with active social work remained a pious ideal. The Settlement House Movement, however, eventually fleshed out some of the hopes and dreams of the Oxford theologians. Motivated by a religious spirit and Christian philanthropy, the Movement was originally nondenominational in creed. The individual responsible for

the foundation of the first Settlement House was Samuel Barnett, an East End clergyman. In November 1883, he presented a paper at St. John's College, Oxford, and suggested that university men should establish communal settlements in the slums. Here, they could assist the poor and needy by providing them with moral and spiritual leadership. Barnett wanted to foster

education and the means of recreation and enjoyment for the people of the poorer districts and other great cities, to inquire into the condition of the poor, and to advance plans calculated to promote their welfare.⁴

The response to Barnett's Oxford paper was enthusiastic, and in 1884 Toynbee Hall was founded in the cleric's parish of St. Jude's, Whitechapel. The Movement mixed idealism with pragmatism.

Toynbee Hall and the other settlements which followed it were experiments in religious and social action conducted by people who accepted a responsibility as Christians and gentlemen to live for a time among the urban working classes.⁵

Although rescue work among youth and education programmes became the two important apostates of Toynbee Hall, 'the residents would also cooperate with surrounding clergy, and they would be active in charitable activities, clubs, local government, and university expansion teaching.'⁶ Consequently, one maxim animated the goal of the Settlement House Movement: 'the idea of the classes working together for the good of the commonwealth and the need for the privileged people of the nation to directly involve themselves in the lives of the poor.'⁷ The paternalism of the Settlement House phenomenon soon evolved into a programme, similar to that of the Tractarians, which encouraged the establishment of religious brotherhoods dedicated to social work.

By the 1890s, numerous organizations and agencies associated with the Church of England were engaged in urban missionary work. Several philanthropic societies, active in rescue work, temperance, and activities for youth, organized themselves into agencies such as the Waifs and Strays Society, White Cross League, and Houses of Mercy. Local parishes supported parochial groups, such as the Guild of St. Alban and Church Men's Society, which promoted prayer and social work. By 1889, however, new approaches and programmes were necessary to bring Christianity to the poor of cities, and the Convocation of Canterbury responded to the challenge. In April 1888, the Bishop of Rochester, A. W. Thorold, proposed a resolution which called for the appointment of a Committee of both Houses

to consider and report as to any new organization that might be found to be required for enabling the Church to reach those classes of the population which were now . . . outside religious ministrations.⁷

Chaired by the Bishop of London, Frederick Temple, the Committee completed its work on 20 June 1889. The report recognized 'the admitted urgency of the need for effort,' and noted that in recent history Convocation had addressed the 'unsatisfactory state of the great masses of the population, especially in large Towns.'⁸ The Committee also emphasized 'the reality and extent of the existing spiritual need' and stated 'that exceptional efforts are required if the Church of England is to cope with the social, moral, and religious problems which have arisen . . .' Increasing population and

the vast aggregations of the people who are flocking in ever-increasing multitudes to towns in which the poorest and most densely crowded districts are often active centres of temptation and immorality.⁹

Admitting that the parochial system was ineffective and then reviewing several possible solutions, the Committee strongly recommended the following:

Establishing under Episcopal sanction and control in our large towns Brotherhoods of Clergy living together, bound during such residence to celibacy, receiving nothing beyond their board and lodging, and pledged to render their services at the bidding of their Warden, whatever asked for by Incumbents.

The report dismissed suggestions that brotherhoods were Roman Catholic and urged 'that the time is now fully ripe for such an experiment to be tried.'¹⁰ Three resolutions were also appended to the committee report: the Upper House 'can, with advantage, avail herself of the voluntary self-devotion of Brotherhoods, both Clerical and Lay'; dispensable vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience were optional; and brotherhoods must work in 'strict subordination to the authority of the Bishop of each Diocese . . . and only on the invitation and under the sanction of the Parochial Clergy.'¹¹ The report and resolutions were then sent to the Lower House.

On 5 July, Archdeacon Frederic William Farrar moved that the Lower House adopt the first resolution of the Upper House which endorsed the principle of clerical and lay brotherhoods. Farrar argued that the 'working class form . . . the backbone of the entire nation, and to a great extent they have become alienated from the ordinances of religion.'¹² Working under the aegis of the local vicar, these fraternities would perform valuable work among the destitute. 'And consider . . . what priceless work might be done among the young by members of Brotherhoods,' he continued, 'trained and set apart for that mission, and more capable of fulfilling it than most of the parochial clergy are or can be.'¹³ Other speakers recognized the wisdom in Archdeacon Farrar's remarks and spoke in favour of the

resolution, which was carried *nemine contradicente*. Debate on the report and the other resolutions was postponed until the next meeting.

In February 1890, the Lower House considered the other two resolutions concerning brotherhoods. Archdeacon Farrar introduced the motion which dealt with the 'dispensable vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience.' Farrar related how he had become an object of scorn and ridicule because of his support for the resolution. The press, he told the House, had accused him of scheming to introduce Roman practices into the Anglican Church. Farrar then defended his position and argued that brotherhoods should not be understood as monasteries: 'I say again that the Brothers of these Brotherhoods will live lives in every important respect wholly and absolutely different from those of the monks.'¹⁴ Moreover, he continued, 'their lives will be active, not contemplative; public, not secluded; enlivened by genial and natural intercourse with all sorts and conditions of men, not shut in by narrow walls.' Vows would be optional and dispensations possible. The Archdeacon's arguments convinced the House that the resolution did not intend to re-introduce Roman Catholic monasticism into England, but sought to create the machinery to confront the glaring evils of urban life. After some lengthy discussion concerning the wording of the resolution and several unsuccessful amendments which sought to disassociate it from rhetoric of traditional monasticism, the lower House approved the original resolution on 13 February 1890.

Again, Archdeacon Farrar introduced the third resolution of the Upper House of Convocation which dealt with the relationship of brotherhoods to the diocesan bishop and the local clergy. Unlike the discussion on vows, this resolution did not excite any emotions or prejudices. According to Farrar, 'this Resolution was meant to safeguard two existing institutions, and to secure that these Brotherhoods should not interfere with Episcopal authority or parochial jurisdiction.'¹⁵ 'Any Brotherhood which had the power to obtrude itself into a diocese against the will of the Bishop,' he pointed out, 'might be a source of great evil.' This resolution passed the House easily. At this point, the Dean of Windsor, Randall Davidson, introduced an additional resolution: 'That a wide elasticity is desirable as to the rules and system of such Brotherhoods as may be formed in several diocese.' Since urban brotherhoods were an experiment and innovation, only after several years would strengths and weaknesses surface. This amendment was adopted, and with the other three resolutions, was sent to the Upper House of Convocation.

In the Upper House, Bishop Temple enthusiastically supported the resolutions. Temple claimed that in his diocese 'the clergy want very large assistance, and they want the assistance of men who will be willing to give such assistance.'¹⁶ 'We want a number of men who

would do a great deal of voluntary work,' he continued, 'to meet the enormous amount of practical heathenism that is to be found in the poorer parts of the great towns.' Another member agreed with Temple's position and stated that 'Brotherhoods will be of immense value not merely in the poorest and most degraded neighbourhoods, but in those which are occupied by very respectable working men.'¹⁷ The first resolution passed quickly. The House then accepted the resolution which dealt with the rôle of bishops and clergy with slight modification in terminology, but the next resolution was drastically altered. The words *vows* and *dispensation* were eliminated. The House substituted 'lifelong engagements to the life and work of the community' and recommended that the resolution should note that 'such engagements be subject . . . to release by the Bishop of the diocese in which the Brotherhood is established.'¹⁸ After the House approved a new resolution which gave bishops the power to approve or reject the constitution of any brotherhood in his diocese, the House passed the remaining resolutions of the Lower House on 4 February 1891. Brotherhoods could now become an effective instrument in the fabric of urban life.

In spite of tradition, precedents, and the support of Convocation, brotherhoods did not dot the map of London. Several reasons explain why the dreams of Farrar and Temple failed to materialize. In the first place, other groups, based on the Toynbee Hall model, captured the imagination of idealists who wanted to work in the slums. The Church of England, Roman Catholics, the Salvation Army, and the Nonconformists founded denominational settlements in London's overcrowded and impoverished areas. By 1900, for example, there were approximately twenty-seven settlements in London. Secondly, the resolutions passed by Convocation still appeared to many as relics of Roman Catholic monasticism. The evangelical press and associations sarcastically labelled these proposed brotherhoods as 'monkeries.' Finally, the social consciousness of the state began to dwarf the efforts of religion. Programmes in education, sanitation, and insurance schemes began to accelerate; the rôle of the Church in the complex field of social welfare became an anachronism.

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NOTES

- 1 Quoted in L. Guiney, *Hurrell Froude* (London: Methuen, 1904), p.122.
- 2 Quoted in H. Liddon, *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans Green Co., 1893), p.38.
- 3 J.H. Newman, *Historical Sketches*, vol. 2, (London: Longmans Green Co., 1906), p.102.
- 4 H.O. Barnett, *Canon Barnett, His Life, Work and Friends* (London: J. Murray, 1908), p.311.

- 5 K.S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Class in Victorian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p.143.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.146.
- 7 'Joint Committee Of Both Houses On Organizations To Reach Classes Now Outside Religious Ministrations,' 1889.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.1.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.2.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.11.
- 12 *The Chronicle of Convocation, Lower House, 1889* (London: National Society's Depository, 1889), p.235.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.239.
- 14 *The Chronicle of Convocation, Lower House, 1890*, p.24.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.61.
- 16 *The Chronicle of Convocation, Upper House, 1891*, p.46.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.52.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.53.