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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Evangelicals and Tractarians: then and now

PETER TOON

In 1967 and in 1977 evangelical Anglicans held national conferences at Keele and Nottingham. On each occasion a statement was issued: *Keele '67* and *Nottingham '77*. There were basically contemporary confessions of faith and practice. In 1978 Anglo-Catholics held a national conference at Loughborough but this produced no statement. It is hoped that such a document will be produced by a follow-up conference projected for the future.

According to John Henry Newman, who moved from evangelicalism to Tractarianism to Roman Catholicism, the Tractarian Movement began on 14 July 1833 when his friend John Keble preached the assize sermon in the university pulpit of Oxford. It was published as *National Apostasy*. Probably it is more accurate to state that Tractarianism began when Newman began to write and distribute the *Tracts for the Times* in September 1833. It represented a development (or some would say, corruption) of traditional high-church principles and doctrines.

The dating of the origin of evangelicalism is more difficult. Some would want to trace it to the Reformation of the sixteenth century but it is more realistic to trace it to the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. In this revival we have the beginnings of the parish (as opposed to itinerant) ministries of clergy of evangelical convictions—William Romaine of London, for example. Therefore, when Tractarianism appeared in the English Church, evangelicalism was producing a third generation of clergy and laity. Not a few of the leading Tractarians had enjoyed an evangelical upbringing.¹

It is an interesting question as to whether it may be claimed that Tractarianism is the true or the logical climax of Anglican evangelicalism. Certainly Prime Minister Gladstone believed that evangelicalism found its fulfilment in Anglo-Catholicism.² Elsewhere I have argued that this is a mistaken view and that, while there are certainly connections between the warm piety of evangelicals and the devotion of the early Tractarians, there is no logical or spiritual development from the one to the other. Rather, those evangelicals who became Tractarians changed (rather than developed) their theology and spirituality.³

Both movements had great achievements in the Victorian era and at the centre of each was a deep love for the Saviour, expressed in

different forms. Not only did Tractarians create new societies (e.g. the Church Union) and new educational institutions (e. g. the Woodard Schools); they also influenced older church societies such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. More importantly, perhaps, they made an impact upon the Anglican Communion. Changes in ritual, architecture and parish worship and practice can be traced directly to the influence of Tractarians and their writings. From them also comes that undefinable 'Catholic ethos'. Evangelicals likewise created new societies (e.g. Church Pastoral Aid Society) and built new colleges and schools (e.g. at Cheltenham). They also continued their support for the older Church Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. Yet, unlike Tractarians, it cannot be said of them that they made a general impact upon the Anglican Communion—unless it can be shown that the zeal for evangelism was caught from, or taught by, them.

In general the evangelicals of the late nineteenth century would have agreed with Bishop Moule when, referring to the rise of Tractarianism, he wrote:

With all readiness I admit that this epoch and its results brought contributions of good to English Christianity. An exaggeration is sometimes used to correct its opposite, and the extreme prominence given by the Tractarians to the sacraments and to the corporate idea and to the greatness of worship, had a work to do in that way and did it. But this cannot overcome in me the conviction that the root principles of the Oxford Movement were widely other than those of the Reformation, and out of scale with the authentic theology of the Scriptures. I do not wonder that from nearly the first the new teaching was regarded with suspicion and that earnest efforts were made to counteract it.⁴

What these 'root principles' were, will become obvious as we proceed.

The two schools of theology and churchmanship came into open and serious conflict from 1838. From that time until the present day there has been rivalry, opposition or controversy—sometimes intense and sometimes mild—between them. In the last decade, especially, a friendly tone has characterized relationships, even though below the surface there are still suspicions and fears. Now, as in the Victorian period, neither the evangelicals nor the Anglo-Catholics are a homogeneous school or party; each has its conservatives, moderates and radicals, a fact obvious to those who attended the Nottingham and Loughborough conferences.

In this essay it is my intention to comment on three points: the controversies in which the two schools have been engaged, the possible middle-way between the two schools that has been proposed, and the present scene.

Controversy

In my book, *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (Marshall Morgan and Scott: 1979), I examine significant

doctrinal areas over which the two schools were divided in the Victorian period. These were:

- 1) The relationship of the Bible and tradition, especially the role of tradition as a guide to the interpretation of the Bible.
- 2) The doctrine of justification and its relation to baptism and sanctification.
- 3) The nature of the church, especially the question of the priority of the visible or invisible aspect.
- 4) The validity of non-episcopal ordination to the presbyterate.
- 5) The relation of regeneration to the sacrament of baptism.
- 6) The presence of Christ in the eucharist.

Later doctrinal controversies were concerned with the 'sacrifice of the eucharist' and the nature of priesthood. Then, of course, there were the famous ritualistic controversies and lawsuits in which five Tractarian clergy preferred to go to prison rather than obey the law and give up their 'Catholic' practices.⁵ The evangelicals and Protestants finally over-reached themselves in the celebrated case of the Bishop of Lincoln in 1890. These controversies and their implications have recently been described by James Bentley in *Ritualism and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Oxford University Press: 1978).

Happily, the ritualistic controversies are a thing of the past. However, the gut reactions of Protestants which pursued Tractarian clergy to prison last century still surface today. Examples may be found regularly in the pages of the *English Churchman*, especially in the 'letters to the editor' columns. On the other side, the hard-line 'Catholic' position is still found in some churches of the diocese of London where, because of dissatisfaction with the new services of Holy Communion, the new Roman Mass is used instead.

Evangelicals have changed their attitudes in many matters since Victorian times. They now have weekly communions, gowned choirs, preach in surplices, are ordained wearing stoles (and sometimes wear vestments in parishes) and happily subscribe to buy a pastoral staff for a man who has been elected a bishop. All these would have been unthinkable a century ago. Anglo-Catholics (often under the influence of the charismatic movement) often now have Bible studies and prayer meetings, activities they traditionally associated with 'low churchmen'.

Returning to doctrinal matters, it will be recalled that in 1836 a common enemy, 'liberalism', brought the small groups of Tractarians and evangelicals in Oxford together. They opposed the appointment of R. D. Hampden as the Regius Professor of Divinity, for they believed he could not honestly subscribe to the basic dogma of the Creeds.⁶ Later in the century, they joined hands again to oppose the impact of German Higher Criticism.⁷ In recent years the same common enemy has brought them together again. Opposition to such publications as *Honest to God* and *The Myth of God Incarnate*, and

the theological thinking behind them, has been a uniting factor. So also have been aspects of ecumenism (e.g. the Anglican-Methodist Proposals) and moral and social matters (e.g. government legislation on divorce, abortion and pornography).

However, this unity against common foes and for traditional dogma and morality does not include agreement on other doctrinal matters. While we are grateful to writers such as Eric Mascall for their defence of orthodoxy, we must also recognize that in vital areas of doctrine—salvation, church, ministry and sacraments—there are still the old divisions, even if some of them have been minimized and others have been dressed in new clothing. Sometimes these differences do not appear to be significant or important today because it is possible to escape from serious discussion of them in the present ecclesiastical and theological climate.

Yet, as Newman pointed out in his brilliant *Lectures on Justification* (1838), the whole approach to the fundamental doctrine of justification is different for evangelicals and Tractarians. For evangelicals, justification by faith is primary. Justification is seen as an objective act of God who declares in heaven that the believing sinner is righteous *in* Christ, the righteous one. The subjective work of God begins with regeneration, the implantation of the Spirit in the soul of the believing sinner. For Tractarians, justification and regeneration (sanctification) are united specifically through the sacrament of baptism. In baptism, God places his Spirit within the sinner and, on the basis of this holy presence, God forgives and justifies the sinner who looks to God in trust and love. This doctrine of justification is not seriously discussed today for, if it were, these basically different approaches (which even Hans Küng cannot reconcile in his book on *Justification*) would emerge again offering their separate rationales.

Then on the subject of the inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, a matter on which the early Tractarians and evangelicals truly agreed, there are different approaches discernible today. Since the time of Charles Gore, most Anglo-Catholics have been ready to accept much of the higher criticism of the Bible; and while their view of Scripture is always a 'high one' in comparison with liberals, it is in fact a 'low one' as compared with that of evangelicals, who in general are still ready to affirm that the Bible is infallible in matter of faith and conduct.

With reference to the doctrines of church, ministry and sacraments, many of the old positions have not been abandoned. Anglo-Catholics are still either opposed to, or hesitant about, the proposition that a non-episcopally ordained minister is a true minister; and evangelical clergy are still insistent that their Presbyterian, Baptist and Lutheran colleagues are truly ministers of Christ. Even if there is a growing together in new understanding of the eucharist (e.g. the

whole idea of *anamnesis* developed in the Anglican-RC Statement), there appears to be little change in the last decade in practice and ceremonial surrounding the eucharist in the churches, except perhaps that Benediction is less popular than it was and a Parish Eucharist is becoming the central Sunday service for some evangelicals.

The steam generated by the discussion of the ordination of women to the priesthood should not hide the fact that on this matter neither school can find a common mind. A minority of Anglo-Catholics and a significant minority of evangelicals are in favour of this innovation, a surprising fact when it is remembered that both schools claim to be Bible-based and one claims to be also tradition-based.

In the early Victorian period it was not significant that Tractarians and evangelicals both held firmly to the infallibility of the Bible and the truth of the Creeds. Most churchmen were of this mind at that time. So their areas of disagreement appeared to be more significant than many of us would judge them to be today. Nevertheless, these areas of disagreement did concern 'root principles' or doctrines, and my contention is that in these areas there has been little progress towards a common mind. Perhaps it is the nature of this particular case that there can never be a common mind unless both schools cease to be what they in fact claim to be! Today it is significant that evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics do hold to the truth of the Nicene Creed and so the points of difference seem to be less important. Nevertheless they are real.

A middle way

It would appear that the ecclesiastical, sacramental and soteriological views of Anglo-Catholics and evangelicals are irreconcilable. Nevertheless, there are those who believe that each school has precious insights into the mystery of Christ and so both should be encouraged for the good of the whole church. This philosophy appeared to inform not only the addresses of the archbishops at the Nottingham and Loughborough conferences, but also the addresses of participants of each school. The two schools should agree to differ.

Another approach is to assert that each school exaggerates aspects of the truth of Jesus and to propose a middle way. From about 1840, when Tractarianism was beginning to look like an exaggerated form of high churchmanship and when evangelicalism was becoming high-line in its Protestantism, a new churchmanship began to emerge. This attempted to fuse the best insights of the high-church and evangelical schools for the good of the church and for the cessation of harsh controversy. The proposers were called evangelical high-churchmen if they came from a high-church background or high-church evangelicals if they came from an evangelical background. For this position I have much sympathy and now I must describe in

what way it arose.

The context was the bitterness generated by the *Tracts for the Times*, especially the notorious *Tract 90* and the replies to them from Protestant evangelicals. In particular the *Record* newspaper was particularly virulent in its attacks upon the 'Puseyites'. The primary sources for information concerning this new *via media* are the following: the editorial policy of the *Church of England Quarterly Review* and *The Churchman*, the publications and correspondence of G. S. Faber and C. P. Golightly, and, to a lesser extent, the management and editorship of the Parker Society.⁸

The first number of the *Church of England Quarterly Review* in January 1837 declared that it would fight the 'triple alliance of infidelity, liberalism and papistry' on old high-church principles. In practice this meant opposition also to Tractarianism, for in January 1839 the editor declared that 'it is to Tradition . . . that a party in Oxford would in these days direct the Church as a rival to the Word of God . . .' In January 1840 a new editor took over and a new title appeared to join others of recent creation, 'Puseyite' and 'Tractarian' for example. It was 'evangelical high-churchman' and was invented by Henry Christmas, the new editor, who was also the librarian of Sion College on the Embankment, London. It was his claim that only evangelical high-churchmen who looked to Scripture, the Fathers and the Reformers could give a satisfactory answer to Tractarians. Then in January 1841, in a review of G. S. Faber's *The Primitive Doctrine of Regeneration* (1840), Christmas wrote of 'the full possibility of preaching a doctrine gloriously Evangelical whilst holding a discipline nobly apostolic.' In the October issue of that same year he claimed rather optimistically that 'one by one the sounder-minded are drawing together: the *Record* on the one hand and the *Tracts for the Times* on the other are losing their adherents.' The editorial writer in the *Record* responded in these words: 'Evangelical Churchmen we know there are, and many, too, we are glad to say. But of such an heterogeneous race as Evangelical High-churchmen we know nothing; nor can we believe that such do really exist.' (24 August 1840)

Henry Christmas was also connected with the new and enlarged series of *The Churchman* from January 1841. G. S. Faber was a regular contributor, sending from Durham a series of 'Provincial Letters' which were later published under the same title. In a letter dated 6 March 1841 Faber told C. P. Golightly, who lived in Oxford, why he was writing for the magazine:

Their views correspond with my own, or rather, which is much better, with the Church of England: that is to say, holding a just medium between Tractarianism and what, for the want of a better name, I have been wont to call Ultra-Protestantism. If I wished to designate our principle perhaps I could not do it better than by the name of Evangelical High-Churchmanship; though I will fairly confess that my own High-Churchmanship stops with a full historical conviction of the

aboriginal appointment of Episcopal Ecclesiastical Polity, but yet without samarianising every Reformed Church which from its local infelicity was organised unepiscopally.⁹

On the management committee of *The Churchman* were both traditional high-churchmen and evangelicals. In December 1841, Christmas stated what were the views which would be expounded in the magazine:

Those of the Church of England—not as expounded by the 'Tracts for the Times' still less as understood by the Calvinistic divines who still remain in the communion of our Church;¹⁰ but as taught in her own Liturgy—as elucidated by Hooker and Bramhall and Hammond and Hall and Sanderson . . . and Waterland . . . ; in a word, our views are those of Evangelical High Churchmen. We acknowledge the supremacy of Scripture, the great doctrines of the Atonement and Justification by Faith only; while we hold the personal Episcopal Apostolic Succession, the truth of our Baptismal, Visitation and Burial Services and the right of the Church to decree rites and ceremonies and to decide in controversies of faith.

It is worth adding here that William Goode, the leading evangelical divine, published, with a long commendatory foreword, the treatises of Bishop Sanderson and Dr Thomas Jackson on the doctrine of the church in 1843. The editorial writer in the *Record* was now taking this *via media* more seriously, and on 27 February 1843 he asserted that 'Evangelical High-Churchman' meant 'Protestant Papist'. For the staunch 'Recordite' evangelical Protestants, this new group of men were traitors to the cause of the Reformation.

Perhaps the most diligent opponent of Tractarianism in Oxford was C. P. Golightly, who had once considered working with Newman. He described himself as 'neither a High Churchman nor a Low Churchman but simply a Protestant and a true son of the Church of England.'¹¹ His position was very much the same as Henry Christmas and G. S. Faber, and the large collection of letters he received and now deposited in Lambeth Palace Library make fascinating reading. He awaits a student who will evaluate his work as a life-long opponent of Tractarianism and as a promoter of such schemes as the Martyrs' Memorial in Oxford.

Neither Faber nor Golightly were actively engaged in the work of the Parker Society but both heartily supported it and subscribed to the volumes. Henry Christmas was involved and he edited the *Works* of Bale and Ridley. This society is often called an evangelical society but, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, while it was predominantly evangelical it was supported by and had on its council and among its editors men who may be called either high-churchmen or evangelical high-churchmen.¹²

So this *via media* was born in times of controversy. As far as I can tell it never attracted great numbers of people and died a premature death. However, in the Church of England since the 1840s have been individuals here and there whose position could well be described as either high-church evangelical or evangelical high-

churchman. At the present time I can think of a good number of younger evangelical clergy whom I would describe as high-church evangelicals but I know only a few whom I could call evangelical high-churchmen. This is because those Anglo-Catholics with whom one engages in dialogue are usually firmly committed to those doctrines and practices which the first evangelical high-churchmen found unacceptable (e.g. auricular confession and justification through baptism). And it seems that the old-fashioned type of high-churchman (exemplified by Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford and Christopher Wordsworth, Bishop of Lincoln, in the late Victorian period) is now very hard to find. The fact of the matter, then, is that Anglo-Catholics cannot become evangelical high-churchmen without ceasing to be Anglo-Catholics but evangelicals can become high-church evangelicals while remaining as evangelicals. The latter remain firmly committed to the centrality of the gospel in the life of the church but also maintain a high view of the historical ministry, the traditions, the liturgy and the sacraments of the church. If this analysis is correct then we are brought back to the possibility of the position stated at the beginning of this section: the philosophy that there is good in both evangelicalism and Anglo-Catholicism, and both should be encouraged for the good of the church. The alternative position for evangelicals is to say that on many points in the doctrines of church, ministry, sacraments and salvation the Anglo-Catholics are wrong and need to be put right! If such an attitude were adopted by evangelicals, then they would be duty-bound to engage in discussion with Anglo-Catholics to persuade them to give up their basic principles and to adopt instead those of the old high-churchmen or those of evangelical high-churchmen.

The present scene

Despite the boost supplied by the Loughborough Conference, Anglo-Catholicism is now weaker than it has ever been before. Whether Easter 1978 will have been the beginning of renewal and growth, time only will tell. Rather than attempting to predict the future, I shall comment briefly on the reasons for the demise of Anglo-Catholicism over the last few decades.¹³

First of all, the liturgical changes in the Church of Rome since Vatican II have been an unstabling influence. What seemed to be as a fixed solid rock of worship has now become as unstable sand. There is no longer a bright lighthouse by which to plot a safe liturgical course. Secondly, there has been a questioning of authority at several levels. Young people are not so impressed with the appeal to history, to tradition, to the Fathers and so on. Anglo-Catholic societies in universities are not nearly as big as the Christian Unions. Then, in theology, the questioning of traditional orthodoxy has had an un-

settling effect—*Soundings, Honest to God, Objections to Christian Belief, The True Wilderness* and *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Thirdly, the impact of the Parish Communion movement and the new services, especially Series 2 and 3 Holy Communion, has had the effect of diminishing the ceremonial of the 'Mass'. The same process has also been helped by the desire of parishioners for more congregational participation in services. The priest has been brought nearer to the people and the people nearer to the chancel. Fourthly, not a few of those who would have been devoted traditional Anglo-Catholics have become 'Catholic charismatics', and though much of the outward form of the 'Mass' has been kept, the whole ethos of it has been changed. Finally, while the social sciences have pointed out how important for human beings is symbolism, ceremonial and ritual, the younger generations in the decades since World War II have not been as appreciative of ritual as were their parents. (It is interesting to note that in the USA not a few college young people from fundamentalistic churches are being attracted by the ritual of Episcopalian and [Greek] Orthodox worship.)

In contrast, evangelicalism is now stronger and more self-confident than at any time this century. Its theological colleges are full, its suburban and country parishes are thriving (regrettably this cannot be said in the inner city) and it has a reasonable proportion of the higher clergy and members of the General Synod. Yet, with the general decline in church attendance, it is numerically less powerful than it was in mid-Victorian days.

Having commented on the demise of Anglo-Catholicism, I shall briefly comment on the growth of evangelicalism. Major factors helping this growth in the last thirty years have been the following: the Billy Graham Crusades which, though initially supported by few Anglicans, did have an important impact on Anglicanism; the efficient youth organisations which are found in most evangelical churches; the Christian Unions in universities and colleges, so often closely allied with Anglican evangelical churches; the young clergy trained at the evangelical colleges, which were being filled by former members of Christian Unions; the leadership of John Stott and others in the formation of the Eclectics, the organizing of the Keele Conference etc.; and the general barrenness of 'radical' theology. It is probably no accident that the growth of evangelicalism in the Church of England has occurred at a time when evangelicalism has become powerful in the USA (but not in the Episcopal Church) and genuinely may be called 'big-business'.

To define an evangelical in either 1879 or 1979 is not easy. The definition provided by Bishop Ryle in his *Knots Untied*, or by John Stott in his *What is an Evangelical?* (1978), are not sufficiently comprehensive to cover all who would call themselves evangelical. Central to the evangelical ethos is the gospel of Christ, the personal

fellowship with God in Christ, and a belief in the final authority of the Scriptures. In 1870 Henry Venn wrote:

Those who know them [Evangelicals] best regard the term 'party' as a misnomer. There is very little disposition to adopt common plans, each follows his own convictions. There is little deference to leaders, they rely upon internal guidance: accessions to the body are not made by joining a party but by embracing principles.¹⁴

The last point is important. What makes an evangelical is primarily the way in which he or she experiences the gospel and obeys Christ. Because this is so, and the Spirit like the wind is unpredictable (John 3), there is no safe way of predicting the future of Evangelicalism.

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NOTES

- 1 Cf. for example the Wilberforce and Manning families described by David Newsom, *Parting of Friends* (John Murray : 1966).
- 2 W. E. Gladstone, *Gleaning of Past Years, 1843-1879* (1879), vii, pp 232-5.
- 3 See the 'Conclusion' to P. Toon, *Evangelical Theology, 1833-1856* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott : 1979).
- 4 H. C. G. Moule, *The Evangelical School in the Church of England* (1901), pp 31-2.
- 5 For the case of one of the five, James Bell Cox, and his treatment by Bishop Ryle of Liverpool, see P. Toon & M. J. Smout, *J. C. Ryle* (James Clarke : 1976), chapter 3.
- 6 Dean Church, *The Oxford Movement, 1833-1845* (1891) chapter 9.
- 7 See further M. A. Crowther, *Church Embattled: Religious Controversy in Mid-Victorian England* (David & Charles : 1970) chapters 1 & 2.
- 8 For Faber and Golightly, see the *Dict. Nat. Biog.* There are no modern studies of them.
- 9 Lambeth Palace MS 1805, folio 229.
- 10 His reference to the Calvinists is basically, I think, a reference to the influence of Scottish Calvinists in English Anglican evangelicalism. In particular, the Haldane family was very influential and Alexander Haldane was the major power behind the *Record* newspaper, which represented right-wing Protestantism.
- 11 Golightly, *Facts and Documents* (1859), p 11.
- 12 P. Toon, 'The Parker Society', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* Vol. XLVI, No. 3, September 1977.
- 13 See further A. Wilkinson, 'Requiem for Anglican Catholicism', *Theology* Vol. 81, No. 679, January 1978.
- 14 *Christian Observer* (September 1870).