

Oxford's Attitude to Dissenters, 1646-1946.

A CONVICTION that, wherever else Nonconformity might gain a footing, Oxford ought to be "preserved free from the Infection of unsound and seditious Principles", persisted among university-bred Anglicans from the Restoration until the nineteenth century. In this may be found the explanation of the special degree of dislike and hardship experienced by Dissenters in the city and its continuance long after conditions had become more tolerable in other towns. The history of Nonconformity in Oxford during the three centuries after its introduction in 1646 may indeed be summarised by saying that only during the first fourteen years was anything like a fair field granted until, after roughly two centuries, genuine toleration was finally achieved in the last hundred years. Quakers, who were roughly handled even during the Puritan regime, got off to an even less promising start.

The fourteen formative years were those between the surrender of the city to the Parliamentary forces in 1646 and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, when first the soldiery and later a strong government kept the ring, particularly against the university. Free from the organised interference, those who had come to believe in "gathered churches", and much besides that was counted revolutionary, were able to expound their beliefs to such as would listen. As might be expected, the latter were always a minority in a city where beautiful churches spoke to the eye of the dignity of the ancient ways of worship and able and learned divines presented the dominant orthodoxy in its most attractive form.

Religious toleration, although not all-embracing in practice, was at least an ideal of the Cromwellian period and was achieved in a measure not to be equalled again for many a long day. In contrast with the conventicle-hunting and harrying of Dissenters in Stuart Oxford is the fact that in Puritan Oxford a large group of "Episcopalians" met regularly for private worship, using the Anglican form of service. Dr. John Owen, the Dean of Christ Church, himself an Independent, refused to interfere with them although they met "over against his own door".¹ Public

¹ Register of the Visitors of the University. (Camden Society, ed. Burrows), p. xlii.

use of the Book of Common Prayer was indeed forbidden and Presbyterian preachers occupied the pulpits of the city churches. But it is to be remembered that Presbyterians were simply the Puritan section of the national church, now temporarily triumphant.² At this date they were not Nonconformists. They looked with an intolerant eye on separatists and only with reluctance resigned themselves to the idea of becoming a "sect" after 1662.

After the Restoration the hostility of the university was the constant factor in the lives of generations of Oxford Nonconformists. The dice were loaded against them individually, and as religious groups so long as the town was almost wholly dependent economically upon the university. That economic power was consistently used against them. Their lot was best when relations between town and gown were worst. Thus, although during the latter half of the seventeenth century they suffered a good deal of official persecution (actively promoted by such Vice-Chancellors as Dr. Peter Mews), there does not appear to have been any general feeling of ill-will towards them among their fellow-citizens. For almost the whole of the century city and university were at variance not only on domestic issues but in their political outlook. In the Civil War the townspeople were for Parliament, the university for the king. Academic Oxford in later years witnessed with resentment the election by the burgesses of a succession of Whig Members of Parliament, and held aloof when the mayor and corporation lavished hospitality on the Duke of Monmouth in 1680.

A gradual change occurred after the re-modelling of the corporation by Charles II in 1684. The city lost its Whig complexion and by the turn of the century a common Toryism formed a bond between the two bodies. In the eighteenth century the city was content with a role that was little better than subservience to its neighbour and the old feud, which represented its fight for self-respect, was in abeyance. In the mood of servility to superiors characteristic of so much of the century, townspeople aped the manners and prejudices of their betters, including a rooted aversion to Dissenters. They joined with undergraduates to form the mobs that wrecked the Presbyterian, Quaker, and Baptist meeting-houses in 1715 and in the daily life of the city their ignorant prejudice found expression in vulgar abuse. As a young man Dr. E. B. Underhill (1813-1901), afterwards secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, was "hooted about the street as a Methodist and a saint".³ The Journal of

² *History of the Plots . . . of Presbyterians*, H. Foulis (1674), p. 15. See also *Religion and Learning*, O. M. Griffiths.

³ *Proceedings*, New Road Chapel Centenary (1883), p. 34.

Thomas Story (1670-1742), a Quaker, and the Journal of John Wesley, both describing visits to Oxford in the eighteenth century, show how stony was the ground. It is not surprising that the number of Nonconformists dwindled to a mere handful in the middle years. Only the stout-hearted with firmly-grounded convictions could survive in this atmosphere.

Undergraduate high spirits found an outlet in attendance at meeting-houses to disturb and ridicule simple men and women in their worship—a habit that persisted for 150 years. Sometimes the rowdyism was malicious, but very often it appears to have been no more than the buffoonery of parties of young men on the spree going to laugh at the manifest peculiarity of people who did not behave as everyone else did. In either case it was a sore trial to the victims. The long silences of the Quakers often baffled tormentors as Story noted in connection with his visits to the meeting-house in St. Giles' in 1715 and 1735.⁴ Another restraining influence was the fear of conversion! Thus, later, in the century, some of the Fellows of a college who had been in the habit of attending the Sunday evening lectures at the Dissenting Chapel in St. Peter-le-Bailey parish (now New Road Baptist Church) suddenly agreed to give up the practice "because it so materially impaired the gaiety of the evening".⁵ Eventually the university forbade its members to attend.

More serious than undergraduate levity and unruliness was the deliberate stirring up of mob passions of which Dr. Edward Tatham, Rector of Lincoln College, gave an example in 1792. From the university pulpit he attacked Dissenters in general, and those in Oxford in particular, for their alleged error and "enthusiasm" in religion, immorality and disaffection to the government. He repeated the sermon before the corporation at the city church and, although advised that the rabble were taking it as a hint, preached it in various churches on successive Sundays.⁶ Yet even incitement of this kind was not so deadly in its effects as the power of the university to prevent Nonconformists from earning a living. Tradesmen were too dependent on the colleges to dare to offend by giving employment, even if they had a mind to do so. Strangers had little prospect of successful settlement. James Hinton, the Baptist minister in the city from 1787 to 1823, lamented that the children of his people had to go elsewhere when they reached manhood because they could find no suitable employment in their native city.⁷ Another aspect of the same general policy was the prohibition (by the

⁴ Story's *Journal*, pp. 474, 715.

⁵ *Life of the Rev. J. Hinton*, p. 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 168.

insertion of a special clause in agreements), of the sale of any university ground for meeting-houses.⁸ The coming of the railways in 1844 and 1851 respectively made the first breach in this position of economic dominance, for their employees, independent of local good-will for a livelihood, constituted a new element in the population. One senses the relief of the Baptist Sunday School workers in the Osney district at this new development. When they reported in 1863 that there was need for a new school building, they stated: "The population is a peculiarly promising field of Christian work. It is composed largely of railway servants. They are more intelligent than a rural people, having been brought from various parts of the country, and having seen much of men and things. They are more independent than a village people, and than many in towns in religious matters, being free from the dominion of both landlords and customers".⁹

Some of the results of university opposition have been indicated. What were the causes of such profound antipathy? Oxford's function as one of the two great national seminaries of the Church of England goes far towards providing an explanation. As in earlier times, its principal task in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and for a great part of the nineteenth was to train men for holy orders. It was committed to the honourable duty of providing, in the words of its ancient Bidding Prayer, "a due supply of persons qualified to serve God in Church and State". The order of priority is significant. While some of Oxford's sons entered the world of affairs or served in offices of State, a far greater number passed from the "pleasant groves of Academe" to rectories and vicarages up and down the country. The university itself was predominantly clerical in outlook. Until comparatively recent years Heads of Houses were with few exceptions ecclesiastics. At most colleges the holding of Fellowships was confined by the founder's statutes to those in orders. When election preceded ordination, as was sometimes the case, it was necessary for the new Fellow to be ordained within a specified time or forfeit his place.

For generations after the Restoration, the university's attitude to Nonconformity was coloured by recollection of the latter's associations with the Great Rebellion and the Interregnum—a period of bitter memories for university Royalists who had suffered a purge, extending even to the college servants, at the hands of the Parliamentary Visitors. The fact that Laud in his

⁸ J. J. Moore, *Nonconformity in Oxford*, p. 6.

⁹ New Road Chapel Sunday School Society Centenary Booklet (1913), p. 36.

heyday,¹⁰ a few years earlier, had harassed unmercifully those in the university of an opposite school of thought theologically was naturally forgotten. During these years of upheaval, which Anthony Wood, the seventeenth century Oxford historian, commonly referred to as the "broken times", the ecclesiastical courts that had formerly enforced discipline in church affairs and insisted on attendance at the parish church, were in abeyance. This state of affairs favoured the growth of the "sects", that is to say the Independents (now known as Congregationalists), and Anabaptists (Baptists), who denied the ancient parochial tradition and held that true churches consisted of believers "gathered" out of the world. The Quakers (Friends) also flourished.

By the conservative-minded the very existence of the sects was felt to be one of the many evil outcomes of a period of ill-discipline in which wild fanatics were thought to have wilfully overthrown the settled order in Church and State. The sects were regarded as schismatical and, illogically, were felt to be tainted with militarism because it was the Cromwellian army that believed in liberty of conscience and saw that it was respected. During the Commonwealth both Episcopalians and Presbyterians regarded religious toleration as a hateful innovation that enabled schism to flourish and display itself in ever new forms.

Besides a general aversion on these grounds, the university had other and more immediate causes for dislike and fear of the new religious developments. During the Interregnum the whole conception of its functions in relation to the Church was called in question.

One of the first of its basic assumptions to be challenged was the belief that academic training was an indispensable qualification for the ministry. It had been accepted as self-evident that the graduate, duly ordained, had a prescriptive right to the pulpit, but now "humane learning" was regarded by many as a hindrance rather than a qualification. It is hard, in our times, to realise the horror (mingled with professional jealousy in the case of the universities), aroused by the spectacle of tailors, cobblers and tanners ascending the pulpit to preach. Wood speaks severely of those who "cherished up ignorance by suffering and encouraging pragmatics, who had never seen a College, sacrilegiously to abuse pulpits; by which intimating to the people that a cobbler's or taylor's stall was as good a nursery for a divine as either Universitie".¹¹ In Oxford itself the soldiery, in 1646, dared "to thrust themselves into the public Schools, and there, in the place of Lecturers, speak to the Scholars against

¹⁰ Register of the Visitors (Burrows), pp. xxiv-xxx.

¹¹ Wood's *Life and Times* (ed. Clark). Vol. 1, p. 292.

humane learning, and challenge the most learned of them to prove their Calling from Christ".¹²

Although Presbyterians detested these practices and would gladly have suppressed them had they dared, Anglicans on returning to power reserved for them some of their most bitter reproaches on the ground that by supporting rebellion they had opened the flood-gates to abuses. Thus Wood observed: "But let the restless Presbyterians be thanked for the original of all these Evils and others that followed".¹³ With feigned charitableness, the author of "An Expedient or a sure and easy way of Reducing all Dissenters to . . . Obedience", wrote (about 1675): "The Independents or Phanatiques, owe their being to the foregoing Sect, [Presbyterian] and if they wildly fancy a barne as good as a Church, or a Graduate not so learned as a Cobbler, with other odde extravagancies (the halfe of which no man can recount), let us not be more rigorous than the Pope, who only lookt upon them that came to Rome to convert him as mad; and I think neither S. Peter, nor his pretended Successors have lockt Bedlam out of Heaven".¹⁴

But the attack on theological learning, originally inspired by a belief that proficiency in such knowledge was advantageous only to careerists and formalists, was developed until it appeared to threaten the universities themselves. There were suggestions that college lands should be alienated. The position, as seen by Wood, was as follows:—

"Tis well knowne that the Universities of this land have had their beginnings to noe other end but to propagate religion and good manners and supply the nation with persons chiefly professing the three famous faculties of Divinity, Law and Phisick. But in these late times when the dregs of the people grew wiser then their teachers, and pretended to have received revelations, visions, inspirations, and I know not what, and, therefore, above all religion ordinarily profest, nothing could satisfy their insatiable desires but aiming at an utter subversion of them, church and schooles, or those places they thought might put a curb to their proceedings. Intelligent men knew and saw very well that it was their intent to rout up all and to ruine those things that smelt of an Academy, never rejoicing more than when they could trample on the gowne and bring humane learning and arts into disgrace.¹⁵

The universities were abused as "nurseries of wickedness, the nests of mutton tuggers, the dens of formall droanes". Presbyterians and Independents (who formed the two major sections at Oxford University during the Commonwealth), generally speaking opposed this tendency, but some extremists among the Baptists and probably the whole Quaker movement were

¹² Wood's *Athenae Oxonienses* (Vol. 2, 1692 edition), p. 740.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Wood 617. Bodleian Library.

¹⁵ Wood's *Life and Times*, Vol. 1, p. 292.

in the van of the attack. Vavasor Powell, a well-known Baptist who evangelised Wales, is said to have uttered a tirade from the pulpit of All Saints' Church in 1657, and Oxford "Anabaptists, Quakers and such like unstable people" declaimed against the universities in their conventicles. They were thought to be "backed by force of armes or else some authority".¹⁶

Actually the assault came to nothing, for the universities had powerful friends, and, at Oxford, learning flourished to a greater degree than in the succeeding Caroline age. Not unnaturally, however, the university bore a grudge against, and continued to be suspicious of, those whom it regarded as opponents of learning. Although Baptists always remained alive to the danger of an unconverted ministry, however brilliant its scholarship, they modified their views on the subject of a trained ministry at an early date. In 1689, when the Toleration Act enabled them to meet openly again after years of persecution, the Particular (i.e. Calvinistic) Baptists held their first General Assembly in London which was attended by a representative from Oxford.¹⁷ At this Assembly it was agreed that ministers were entitled to an adequate maintenance and attention was drawn to the desirability of the education in classics and Hebrew of ministerial students. In the latter connection the Assembly was thinking in terms of Dissenting academies rather than of the universities from which Nonconformists had long been excluded. For generations, certainly to the end of the eighteenth century, the Friends maintained a very stiff attitude towards the universities. Oxford, to Thomas Story, was "one of the filthy Fountains of their Religion and Learning, from whence the whole Land is poisoned and undone".¹⁸

In Oxford, as elsewhere, the first care of the Royalists upon their return in 1660 was to restore institutions to the old footing as nearly as possible, to put down innovations, and to secure themselves against any repetition of the late upheaval. The mayor and burgesses, who during the interval had refused to take the oath to observe the privileges of the university, were speedily brought to due obedience. Steps were taken to break down the considerable influence of the Presbyterians.¹⁹

Bearing in mind the events of the Commonwealth, it is not surprising that the new religious groups should have been singled out for special attention. The safety of the State was considered inseparable from that of the established church. In fact, religious

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 293.

¹⁷ Narrative of the Proceedings of the General Assembly, 1689. Regent's Park College, Library.

¹⁸ Story's *Journal*, p. 474.

¹⁹ Wood's *Life*, pp. 360, 370.

and political considerations went hand in hand in the policy pursued against the "sectaries". In their ranks locally was a sprinkling of old soldiers and some who seem to have been republicans. Another factor that weighed heavily at Oxford was the feeling that it was particularly important to maintain the integrity of a seat of learning. So Clarendon, in 1662, instructed the Vice-Chancellor to take action against the Quakers "since it would be of very ill example that we should not be able to root them out of an University".²⁰

Except in the case of the Quakers, doctrinal differences at this date were less important as causes of contention than questions of church order and politics. Heterodoxy could be forgiven in a man provided he were otherwise acceptable. An amusing illustration of this is provided by an incident in the career of John Tombes, one-time lecturer of St. Martin's, Carfax, and vicar of Leominster. Tombes developed Baptist views and organised a church at Bewdley but conformed in a lay capacity at the Restoration. "In 1664 he was present at the Oxford Act, and there in the Vespers he did modestly challenge to maintain against any person certain Anabaptistical Tenents, but none there did think it then convenient to grapple with him, and the rather for this reason that he had made those matters his study for more than 30 years, and that none ever before, went beyond him".²¹ Nearly 130 years later, Hinton in a dispute with Dr. Tatham, could describe himself as varying little from the Church of England on doctrinal points.²²

Fear that Dissenters might seek by force to subvert the established order in Church and State had ceased to be a serious factor in the situation by the beginning of the eighteenth century. After 1714 and the accession of George the First, which was welcomed with relief by Nonconformists, the possibility could definitely be ruled out. Presbyterianism was a visibly declining force and had long been out of the running as a rival to the Anglican Church. In the circumstances it might be supposed that there would be some abatement of rancour. Actually there was, if anything, an intensification as one may gather from many passages in the diary of Thomas Hearne, the Oxford Non-juror, which breathe a spirit of unyielding malice. Nonconformists were no longer feared as possible insurrectionaries; they were hated as political opponents and despised as socially inferior.

Party passions ran high during the early decades of the century—and the university and the small group of Oxford Dissenters were at opposite poles politically. The latter supported

²⁰ *Victoria History of Oxfordshire*, Vol. 2, p. 49.

²¹ *Athenae* (1692 ed.), p. 410.

²² *Hinton's Life*, p. 342.

the Whigs on whom they felt they could rely for the maintenance of the toleration so hardly gained. Their "insolent loyalty" to the House of Hanover during the first two reigns was particularly odious to the university, which was almost solidly Jacobite, and they were made to suffer for it. When the third George ascended the throne in 1760 and forsook the Whigs, the university wholeheartedly espoused the Hanoverian cause and indeed became noted for an exaggerated loyalty to the reigning monarch. Unity of sentiment in this respect may have had some effect in assuaging bitterness for a brief period, as will be noted later, but the Dissenters were quickly put in the wrong again. It is truly ironical that by 1792 university notabilities were accusing them of disloyalty. The wheel had come full circle. They were charged with Jacobinism—that is enthusiasm for the principles that has led to the French Revolution—and once again suffered mob violence.²³

One of the most objectional features of Dissent in the eyes of its adversaries was the fact that it was held to be ungentlemanly. This, and its democratic tendency, an authoritarian and snobbish society found it hard to forgive. Not only were its adherents drawn mainly from the ranks of small tradesmen and artisans, but its ministry (largely recruited from the same source), lacked academic training. Taunts on this account were flung at them by the very people who denied them access to the universities. Dr. Tatham gravely informed the citizens of Oxford that an academic education was as necessary to the exercise of the ministry as an apprenticeship to the exercise of a trade.

An accusation often levelled against Dissenters and Methodists during the latter half of the eighteenth century was that of "enthusiasm", by which was meant religious extravagance. This can be dismissed out of hand. In practice it was no more than a term of abuse employed against those who took their religion seriously.

Although it is clear that Dissenters, as a particularly unwelcome minority, were made to feel the displeasure of the all-powerful university, it would be wrong to suppose that academic Oxford was at all times and in all cases, ungenerous and oppressive in its dealings with them as individuals. One gains the impression that relationships were on a slightly easier footing between roughly 1770 and 1790. Of the two deacons of the New Road congregation, one, Thomas Newman, was cook and manciple of St. John's College, and the other, Thomas Pasco, a druggist in High Street, had a university clientele. The number of Nonconformists was now so small—there could scarcely have been a score when they were at their lowest ebb in mid-century

²³ Hinton, pp. 259, 349.

—that they were probably regarded as too insignificant for severity. They were still very much under observation as is shown by veiled references to individuals in a lampoon of 1755 but they were looked upon merely as figures of fun.²⁴

One restraining influence upon the university, eventually, was its own innate conservatism. Custom and usage meant much in Oxford. Oddity (such as separation from the established church might then be deemed), gained as it were a prescriptive right to recognition by its very continuance. This applied to families as well as to the Dissenting group as a whole. In much the same way, traits that irritate when displayed in youth make a man a "character" in old age. Thus one generation of Non-conformists could pass on to the next what it had itself received, but any attempt at proselytism was severely condemned.²⁵ Not unnaturally the lay leaders of the little community were reluctant to do anything that would arouse resentment. When a real forward movement was begun (about 1790), under the active leadership of James Hinton, the new minister, the university immediately took offence.

As one would expect in an English community, character and solid worth often won the respect even of antagonists. This was true at all periods. One can instance the tribute in the *Athenae* to the blind Presbyterian preacher, John Troughton (1637?-81), and the fact that two Anglican clergymen risked reproach by attending the funeral of Josiah Woodcock, another Presbyterian minister, at All Saints' Church in 1709.²⁶ Towards the end of his life, Thomas Nichols, a noted Oxford Quaker (1735), by his personal qualities overcame general prejudice.²⁷ Hinton himself, conciliatory but firm in his dealings with the university, ultimately gained its respect.

There were probably always a few men big enough to rise above the prevailing pettiness of outlook. An illustration of this is provided by an incident in the career of Samuel Collingwood, Independent member of Hinton's church, which consisted of Baptists and Independents. Collingwood became Printer to the University (itself a sign of the changing attitude), and collaborated with Charles, Earl Stanhope from 1805 onwards in introducing new methods of printing, including stereotyping, at the Press.²⁸ The anecdote related concerning him reflects credit on the Vice-Chancellor of the day. "One Monday morning he visited the Vice-Chancellor on business, as was his

²⁴ *The Spy or Pasquin at Oxford*.

²⁵ Hinton, p. 108.

²⁶ Hearne's *Collections* (Oxford Hist. Soc.), Vol. 2, p. 217.

²⁷ Story, p. 715.

²⁸ *Collectanea* III. (Oxford Hist. Soc.).

custom. The Vice-Chancellor was standing by his fire-place and said to him :

"Oh, Mr. Collingwood! Do you know I have had a lot of letters about you?"

"Have you, Mr. Vice-Chancellor? What is their subject?"

"Oh, they say you are a Dissenter and it is not right for the University to employ you."

"Well, and what have you done about it?"

"Done! What I always do in such cases—I threw them all into the fire."²⁹

Both Collingwood and his Vice-Chancellor were rather exceptional and their professional association provided an opportunity for personal intercourse that was also exceptional as between dons and Dissenters. Nevertheless times were changing for the better in at least one important respect. The university ceased to interfere openly with Dissenters' activities, preferring to hold itself aloof while remaining coldly hostile. The aged Rector of Lincoln College was one of the last to interfere actively. As workmen were building a new Methodist chapel in New Inn Hall Street (the building which stands behind the present Wesley Memorial Church), he ordered them to cease their labours, saying "it was monstrous to build so large a Chapel in Oxford!" What is more the men complied until they were ordered by the builder to resume work. When the Chapel was opened in February 1818, a Proctor appeared at the evening service and walked down the aisle to survey the congregation and ensure that no undergraduates were present.³⁰

Throughout the long Oxford controversy with Dissenters pride and prejudice had been given full play, but one element of bitterness (that aroused by profound differences in theology) had for the most part been absent. This too was added in the nineteenth century when the Tractarian movement took its rise within the university. From the start it was apparent that the cleavage between Tractarian and Nonconformist views was fundamental. Local Nonconformists, who had hitherto avoided polemical theology, now entered into the public debate believing truth itself to be at stake. Their leaders were Dr. Benjamin Godwin, Minister of New Road Baptist Church (1837-45), and the Rev. Eliezer Jones of George Street Congregational Church (1840-44). Dr. Godwin published two tracts, "Apostolic Marks of the True Church" (1842), and "An Examination of the Principles and Tendencies of Dr. Pusey's Sermon on the Eucharist" (1843). The "Examination" is an able and temperate exposition of the points at issue and of the Evangelical position that can still be read with interest. In particular, the

²⁹ *Proceedings*, New Road Centenary, p. 32.

³⁰ Moore, *Nonconformity in Oxford*, p. 27.

writer deplored the spirit of haughty superiority and the lack of Christian charity exhibited by many of the early followers of the Oxford Movement towards others, whatever their love, faith and zeal, who were outside its ranks or those of the Roman Church. This he contrasted with the apostolic benediction on "all who in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's".

The impact of the Movement, which eventually revitalised the Church of England, began to be felt immediately in Oxford parishes in a renewal of religious life. A somewhat grudging testimony to the activity of the parish clergy is contained in the report of the New Road Sunday School Society for 1846. One paragraph reads: "How strange and peculiar are the times in which we are permitted to live. Our fathers during the last sixty years lived in the midst of a pleasure-seeking, slothful, and careless clergy who were indifferent to the moral and spiritual condition of the young and rising race, but a different spirit is now abroad".³¹ The absence of enthusiasm apparent in this comment was due to the fact that economic pressure, in the form of both threats and inducements, was brought to bear on parents to persuade them to transfer their children from the Baptist schools to the parochial schools. Complaints on this score were repeated from time to time during the next twenty years.³²

Censures from high places were still the portion of Nonconformists. Samuel Wilberforce, a great bishop who wrought a transformation in the Oxford diocese (1845-69), went so far as to say in one of his charges that the "three great obstacles to the work of the Church were, first, the public house; secondly, bad cottages; and thirdly, the presence and progress of Dissent".³³ In his Bampton lectures in 1861, John Sandford, Archdeacon of Coventry, stated that "Dissent has wrought and is working vast and extensive evil, and imperilling to a painful extent the faith and the loyalty and the moral and religious life of our people".³⁴

But neither the snubs of prelates nor the cold-shoulder of the university could prevent the steady progress of the various Oxford Nonconformist groups in the nineteenth century. The genius of the place was against them but the spirit of the age was with them. Whereas in 1800, when the Quaker cause had almost died out, there were but two meeting-houses in constant use in the city—those of the Methodists and the Dissenters—by 1846 the number had increased to seven. An Oxford directory of that date lists the following additional churches:—Baptist, Commercial Road; Primitive Methodist, Bull Street; Wesleyan

³¹ Society's Centenary Booklet (1913), p. 9.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 22.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Centenary, St. Clement's; and Independent (Congregational), George Street.³⁵ Summertown Congregational Church had just come into being. Scarcely less important was the existence of three schools in which the children of Nonconformists could be educated. Both the Baptists and the Congregationalists were responsible for the running of what were described as "public schools", the former in Penson's Gardens and the latter at Summertown. A Wesleyan school for boys had been built in what was then known as Bulwark Alley in 1831 and was now under the headmastership of John Walker Sixsmith. It continued to serve many generations of Oxford boys until its very useful career came to an end in 1928.

The ancient feud between the university and Nonconformists gradually died away during the remaining years of the century. This is probably to be ascribed to the growth of a liberal party in the university after 1845, caused by a reaction from the Oxford Movement, and to the progressive secularisation of the university and its studies as the various measures of university reform took effect. The University Reform Act of 1854, which abolished religious tests for matriculation and the B.A. degree, enabled Nonconformists to enter the university, but they were still debarred from the M.A. degree and election to fellowships.

During the 'sixties vigorous efforts were made to complete the reform by abolishing all religious tests, and it is pleasant to record that a group of Oxford men, including Benjamin Jowett of Balliol, Professor Goldwin Smith and the later Viscount Bryce, were active in their advocacy of this measure. The main obstacle was the feeling of many that it was the duty of Oxford, in a changing world, to maintain a standard of orthodoxy. Support for this view came from an unexpected quarter. When John Henry Newman was asked for his views on a project for establishing a Roman Catholic College in Oxford, he wrote (1863):—"I have personally a great dislike to mixed education in se. I love Oxford too well to wish its dogmatism destroyed, though it be a Protestant dogmatism. I had rather it was dogmatic on an error than not dogmatic at all. At present I had rather that it excluded us from dogmatism, than admitted us, from liberalism. Dogmatism is not so common in these days that we can dispense with any one of its witnesses. Oxford has been a break-water against latitudinarianism; I don't wish to have part in letting the ocean in".³⁶ Nevertheless, when the University Tests Abolition Bill came before the Lords in 1871, most of the bishops present gave it their support and the measure was carried. Religious tests for all degrees (other than Divinity) were abolished,

³⁵ Hunt & Co.'s City of Oxford Directory.

³⁶ *A History of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford*, p. 464.

and Nonconformists were admitted to lay fellowships, and a share in the government of the university. Fellowships and headships of Houses were freed from clerical restrictions in the majority of cases, in 1882.

The immediate result of the opening of the university was as disappointing and humiliating as it was unexpected. Sons of Nonconformists often achieved academic distinction, but many drifted away not only from Nonconformity, but from Christianity itself. Concern at this development was felt within the university as well as without. At an early date Professor Thomas Hill Green expressed to Dr. R. W. Dale his belief that the young men should be followed to the university in order that their religious life and principles might be maintained.³⁷ This view was pressed by other university men and the eventual outcome was the removal of Spring Hill College from Birmingham and its establishment as Mansfield College at Oxford. Congregationalists subscribed £50,000 to achieve this end. The inauguration of Mansfield, the first Free Church college in Oxford, in 1889, was a notable event. Dr. Jowett described the event as a great festival of union and reconciliation, adding: "We may be divided into different sects—I would rather say into different families—but it does not follow that there is anything wrong in the division, or that there should be any feeling of enmity entertained by different bodies towards one another".

Unitarians, following the example of the Congregationalists, transferred Manchester College from Gordon Square, London, to Oxford in 1889. The college buildings were completed and opened four years later. A chaplaincy to Presbyterians, again admitted to the university in which they had once been such a force, was founded in 1908. The university showed its interest both in this and the subsequent erection of St. Columba's Presbyterian Church, Alfred Street (opened 1915). The same good-will was shown towards Baptists when Regent's Park College was transferred from London, largely through the instrumentality of its Principal, the late Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson, himself an Oxford man. The Board of Theology passed a resolution assuring the college of a welcome. A site in St. Giles' had been secured in 1927, but building did not begin until 1938, and the present portion of the college was completed in 1940. Another sign of the changed outlook was the election in 1936 of Dr. Wheeler Robinson as Chairman of the Board of the Faculty of Theology—the first Free Churchman to hold the office.³⁸

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³⁷ *History of the Free Churches*, H. S. Skeats and C. S. Miall, p. 683.

³⁸ *H. Wheeler Robinson: A Memoir*, by E. A. Payne, p. 87.