

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Oxford Blues

In the year that we are commemorating the union of England with Scotland in 1707 and the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, not many people will be remembering that it was six hundred years ago (on 28th November 1407 to be exact) that the Archbishop of Canterbury convened a provincial synod in Oxford with the express intention of bringing order and discipline to the University. He had promised to do this a decade earlier, but politics intervened and it was not until 1407 that he was able to keep his word. Some of the canons passed at that synod were to have a long life; indeed, the stipulation that no-one was to preach in future without a licence is still in force in the Church of England today. Another canon that made its mark was the one which forbade the translation of the Bible into English. It was still very much in evidence more than a century later, when William Tyndale vainly sought permission to do just that and had to flee the country in order to fulfil his ambition. The synod was not entirely negative though—one of its more interesting demands was that preachers were to speak simply, in ways that their congregations could understand. Alas, that canon seems to have been a dead letter from the start!

The effects of the 1407 synod on the University of Oxford were far-reaching. It is obvious from the content of the canons that its main purpose was to root out Lollardy, the movement which had grown out of the teaching of John Wycliffe. Wycliffe himself had left the city twenty-five years before and was long dead by the time the synod met, but his influence was strong and spreading. The Bible had been translated into English not once but twice, and all over England there were people meeting privately to study it and test whether Wycliffe's criticisms of the medieval church were valid. Many laymen were convinced that he had been right and there was a real possibility that they might gain the upper hand in the country as a whole. To stop this, the church authorities needed to act swiftly and decisively. They installed a system of regular surveillance of the teaching and conduct of the members of the University which was designed to ensure that no more new ideas would creep

in to disturb the normal course of education. It was so successful that a hundred years later, it was not in Oxford but in Cambridge, where there had been no Lollardy and which therefore had escaped the ban, that the Reformation first took root. Students of that period can even detect a certain career pattern among the leading Reformers—for the most part, it seems that they were educated at Cambridge, made their name in London and were burnt at the stake in Oxford, which gives some idea of where the two universities stood in relation to the winds of change which were blowing at that time.

In spite of all that however, there can be no doubt that Oxford was, and remains, one of the world's leading intellectual centres. Its graduates have gone out to rule not only Britain but the world and its books are famous wherever the English language is spoken. It is also the home of *Wonderland*, *Narnia* and *Middle Earth*, a side which appeals to trans-Atlantic visitors even more than the University's scholarly achievements and makes it the unchallenged capital of fantasy. Perhaps it is not surprising that Oxford men and women tend to blend these two qualities in ways which seem natural to them but often bemuse those who have had the misfortune to have been educated elsewhere. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Durham and Tony Blair are all very different people, but when they are seen in their Oxford colours, they look very much alike—impressive and articulate in what they say, but on another plane to the rest of us and ultimately unfathomable.

Of course, Oxford has not been without its critics, who appear on the scene from time to time. The Wicked Queen (Margaret Thatcher) and the ring-wraiths of Mordor (Gordon Brown and his chums?) tend to bring alien notions into the university community, such as a belief in value for money or in equal opportunities for all. Vulgarity of this kind is quickly and universally dismissed by the local establishment—no honorary degrees for them—but in spite of everything, the challenge of the outside world keeps reappearing. In recent years it has taken the form of a full-scale review of the university's operations, which has revealed a complex web of privilege and inefficiency that has accumulated over the centuries and that resists even the most determined would-be reformers.

Evangelical Christians have always been outsiders to this world, perhaps because they tend to be practically-minded and are not interested in fantasy.

When a group of them wanted to build a church in the mid-nineteenth century to commemorate the Reformation-era martyrs, they were curtly told that Oxford already had more than enough churches (which is true) and so they had to be content with a monument instead. Later in the century Evangelicals were able to set up a theological college, named after John Wycliffe himself, but it has been a somewhat lonely voice in a city dominated by high church colleges and interests. The struggle to survive in such an atmosphere has certainly had its good side, as one can see by comparing Wycliffe Hall with its sister college in Cambridge, which has never managed to stand out as genuinely distinctive. To be fair, Ridley Hall has produced a number of outstanding Evangelical leaders, but this has been due mainly to the fact that they ignored the place when they were there and learned their theology from the strong city churches and places like Tyndale House. In Evangelical terms, Wycliffe has been more isolated, and perhaps in consequence, it has been more central to the lives of its students, who bear the stamp of the college in a way that their Ridley counterparts generally do not.

Over the years Wycliffe has articulated its Evangelicalism very clearly, but it is in Oxford, and along with the impressive noises, there came that deep unfathomability which is so characteristic of the place. What exactly did the college mean by 'Evangelical'? This has always been much harder to define, as students have discovered. Lured by assurances that their views would be respected, conservative Evangelicals went to Wycliffe only to discover that once they got there they were subjected to a form of discrimination occasionally bordering on persecution. Complaints about this produced defensive reactions and reassurances that all views were welcome, but the reality remained the same. But now the winds of change are blowing through Oxford, and Wycliffe has not been left untouched. When the opportunity came to appoint a new principal, the council decided to choose a man with many years of experience in parish ministry and in the structures of the church. Considering that Wycliffe exists primarily to train such people, this may not seem very surprising, but in Oxford such logical connections are not as obvious as they might appear elsewhere.

The council chose an outsider who has come in with a brief to shake the place up, and those who have been shaken understandably do not like it. Things have already gone so far that three former principals have written what has

become an open letter, demanding his dismissal. Anywhere else, such interference would be regarded as inappropriate at best, but in Middle Earth it is normal for people to come back from the dead and claim enhanced authority, so why should Oxford be any different? In the eyes of the Three Unwise Men, a good principal should be pleasant, diplomatic and broad in his sympathies, with a distinctly intellectual tinge. To them, writing books merely for the sake of writing books is a good thing, whereas goal-oriented tasking is simply vulgar. It has even been suggested that Wycliffe might be turning into another Oak Hill, of all things!

In Oxford terms, that has to be the ultimate put-down, but it is worth pausing a moment to reflect on what such a comparison really means. In the early 1990s Oak Hill stood out among Evangelical colleges as the one which had not yet been fully ‘normalised’ in an open Evangelical sort of way. Things were certainly progressing in that direction, but the place still had some catching up to do. But just as it seemed that victory was at hand, the college council appointed a new principal whose brief was to bring it back to its Evangelical roots. It took David Peterson several years to achieve that goal, but now that he is leaving it is clear that the college has been transformed. The nice people who ran it into the ground are nowhere to be seen. Instead there is growth, both in quantity but also—and ultimately more importantly—in quality. Oak Hill graduates are men of substance who will change the Church of England, which may be one reason why some bishops are reported not to want them in their dioceses. This is the direction in which Richard Turnbull intends to take Wycliffe Hall. It will take time and it will be costly. If he succeeds, the Three Unwise Men will have a great deal more to complain about, as will disgruntled former members of staff. But if Oak Hill is any guide, ten years down the road Wycliffe will be a changed institution, with students fired up for the ministry which they are called to exercise and a corporate culture which reflects the substance and not merely the forms of Evangelical faith.

How will all this go down in Oxford and in the wider church? This is very hard to say. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the Archbishop of Canterbury and/or the General Synod will be tempted to repeat the events of 1407 in a modernised form. A commission may be appointed which will ‘recommend’ that Wycliffe and Oak Hill should no longer be recognised as places suitable for the training of Anglican ordinands. Pressure groups like

Fulcrum (not to mention WATCH and Changing Attitude) may start a surveillance campaign, with regular reports in The Guardian, putting pressure on people like the Bishop of Liverpool (the chairman of the Wycliffe Hall council) to bring them back into line. Faced with this kind of challenge, we know that it will be only by the grace of God that Dr. Turnbull will stand firm and make the changes which are needed if the college he runs is to fulfil the task for which its founders designed it. We wish him well and pray that far from retreating, the new broom at Wycliffe may soon extend to other colleges as well, with effects not unlike those which have already transformed Oak Hill to the praise and glory of the Sovereign Lord of us all.

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