The Oxford Movement

Faith and Obedience in a Tumultuous and Shifting World

John Henry Newman did not immediately love Oxford. He arrived in 1817, a serious sixteen year old on scholarship to Trinity College. He largely abstained from the alcohol that sloshed through his college. His clothes attracted guffaws from more fashionable classmates. No one at first seemed able to tell him which books he should be reading. Even the weather proved oppressive. But in time he found his feet. A close friendship with John William Bowden, a studious fellow first-year, eased his loneliness and social isolation. His appealingly strict tutor, Thomas Short, encouraged intellectual ambition.1

The wine-soaked antics of Newman's fellow students proved that the old culture of rowdiness—one that both Butler and Johnson would have recognized from their undergraduate experiences decades earlier—refused to evaporate at the first heat of reform. The attempts to impose order often carried an air of desperation. Oriel College tried to ban wine. Undergraduates were to enjoy tea instead. Trinity adopted a particularly stern line during Newman's time. “There are lamentations in every corner of the increased rigour,” Newman reported to his mother; “it is laughable, but it is delightful, to hear the groans of the oppressed.” But his sympathies did not rest exclusively with the forces of order. In 1819 he and Bowden surreptitiously published a student magazine, The Undergraduate. It crackled with indignation at the senior members of the university, whose ideal of discipline was “the sulky homage of the sneering undergraduate.” After six weekly issues, word somehow leaked of Newman's responsibility and the young men promptly abandoned their “impudence.” This mild rebellion surprised his fellow students (many refused to credit it) and it appears, superficially, even more unexpected in hindsight from a man who a decade later became the university’s leading apostle of submission to authority. Two basic principles connects this burst of youthful assertion to his mature convictions: those in the office of leadership must obey the obligations of beneficence and paternal kindness laid down by Christ and codified by the early church; and, obedience could only truly exist in a community bound together by affection and common moral purpose. The teenage Newman did not object to university officials exercising authority. He condemned them for abandoning it for “reverence by arbitrary rule.” His seniors confused obedience

1 Ker, John Henry Newman, pp. 6–11.
for obsequiousness.\textsuperscript{2} Eleven years later he reviled the eighteenth-century church and its dealing with Methodists in identical terms. “Man craves an object of veneration: and if not supplied with those which God has appointed, he will take what offers,” he warned.\textsuperscript{3} This lesson defined his own teaching. Hurrell Froude’s younger brother James became a sharp critic of the Oxford Movement, but this never diminished his admiration for the care Newman took with students. “He was never condescending with us [undergraduates], never didactic or authoritative,” the younger Froude remembered; “but what he said carried conviction along with it.”\textsuperscript{4}

Newman’s advancement into the senior ranks of the university almost never happened. Overworked but underprepared, he made a disastrous showing in his final exams in both mathematics and classics. Faith allowed him to weather this calamity. “The glory of religion is seen in affliction,” he explained to his aunt. Those who long to love God “exult in undergoing trials and passing through the flames of calamity, for they trust and expect to come forth purified and refined, with the dross of human corruption purged away.” With few other prospects, he decided to compete for an Oriel College fellowship, although with no expectation of success. Despite the odds, he won election to the fellowship. “I thought I should have need of long patience,” he concluded, attributing this “complete…deliverance” with ostentatious humility to “God and God alone.”\textsuperscript{5}

The relationships he forged in the Oriel common room transformed his life. The men he met there could have burrowed into their academic specialties or concentrated exclusively on the parochial concerns of the college. Instead they all engaged deeply with national affairs—and this would tear them apart.

\textbf{National Apostasy}

Newman dated the start of the Oxford Movement to July 14, 1833. On that Sunday John Keble delivered an impassioned sermon before a large congregation in St. Mary’s. He responded furiously to a planned reform of the established

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\item \textsuperscript{3} Newman, “Memoir of the Countess of Huntingdon,” p. 282.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Froude, “Reminiscences of the High Church Revival,” p. 164.
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