AN INNOVATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY THEOLOGICAL TRAINING: THE LICHFIELD PROBATIONERS’ SCHEME

JOHN TOMLINSON

1. The context

As the established church with a national mission seeking to provide clergy for every part of the country the Church of England was facing major deployment problems by 1870. The ecclesiastical reforms of the 1830s and 1840s had gone some way to meet the spiritual needs of a developing nation, and many new parishes were created and new churches were built in the burgeoning industrial towns. However, the investment of the church, its power and its ethos, were still largely centred on the countryside. Some rural parishes with small populations of five hundred or so were far richer than large urban parishes with ten thousand or more people. Generally, the Church of England was stronger in the south and weaker in the north, where industrialisation had had the greatest impact.

The provision of ordinands was symptomatic of the challenges facing the Church of England. Until the 1880s the number of ordinands was increasing, reaching an historic peak in 1886 when 814 deacons were ordained. Nevertheless, astute observers remarked that as the numbers were not keeping pace with the increase in population the number of ordinands was actually declining in relative terms. After 1886 this decline was in absolute terms. Furthermore, there was always a concern that deployment in the urban areas was where the decline was most apparent. The Church of England was not providing enough clergy to maintain its position in the community, except in some small towns and rural districts.

Other denominations were facing similar problems. In some urban and industrial areas the non-conformist churches had established a

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strong position, partly because of the absence of the Anglicans. However, it is debateable how much impact they had on the large working class populations. By the end of the nineteenth century the non-conformists were experiencing some decline. The Roman Catholic Church was to grow through the century and for some years into the twentieth century, benefiting from Irish immigration and its re-establishment as a viable denomination in the 1850s.

In the Church of England there were other developments apart from the relative and absolute decline in the number of ordinands. Although there have always been Anglican clergy from a wide range of social backgrounds, there was a significant shift in the later nineteenth century to ordinands from a lower social status. For a century or so, from 1750 to 1850, the clergy as a group had enjoyed an elevation in their social position. In many cases, if not in most, ordinands had achieved a degree, which was a reflection of their social standing as much as of their intelligence. The universities, dominated by Anglican clergy, provided the church with a steady flow of suitable men from the higher social strata. Such a system reached its peak in the 1820s and 1830s when the vast majority of ordinands were graduates. Bishop Samuel Butler of Lichfield (1836-40), a notable reformer of the public school system in England, insisted that “all candidates should at least be AB of one of our English universities (Durham included) or if of T[inity] C[ollege] D[ublin] that they shall have been born of English parents”.

He lived at a time when such an elitist policy was possible. However, in the succeeding decades the supply of graduate ordinands was increasingly insufficient to meet the needs of the growing church within a faster growing population, which was becoming better educated.

Other professions, which were increasing in size and importance in society, held attractions for young men. The expanding civil and military service, schools and universities, and the ever growing need for managers in industry and commerce had a crucial affect on the number and type of men willing to be ordained. At the same time,

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