

The Oxford Movement and the Six Points of Ceremonial

Introduction

It is generally accepted that what came to be called The Oxford Movement began soon after Oxford University's Professor of Poetry, John Keble, preached the Assize Sermon, entitled 'National Apostasy', in the University Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on Sunday, 14th July 1833. The sermon was prompted by the British government's interference in church affairs, particularly attempts by Parliament to suppress ten Irish bishoprics. His concern was that if Irish bishops could be abolished by Parliament, was it not likely that English bishops would go next? Keble and his fellow protagonists were also disturbed by a general decay of the church and loss of moral fibre in its members. Also at issue were the words of the creed, 'I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church'. This concept of a united church had been sadly diminished by the rapid decline of Protestantism into numerous sects and denominations. Keble declared that England had for centuries been acknowledged as a Christian nation. Logically this meant that its lawmakers and its people should be bound by the laws of Christ's church. If public opinion was calling for action in defiance of those laws, then the nation was apostate. The reform leaders were passionately loyal to the church, were heavily influenced by its patristic writings, and attracted to the ritual and style of its mediæval worship. They also emphasised many points of communion between different branches of the Church, branches that recognised the doctrine of the Apostolic Succession. These ideas were promoted, between 1833 and 1841, in 95 publications, called *Tracts for the Times*, which gave the Oxford group its other name of the Tractarian Movement. The primary aim was to reassert the independence of the Church of England from the apparatus of State and maintain the authority of the *Book of Common Prayer*. By the end of the nineteenth century many churches had adopted ritualistic styles of worship, and by 1901, despite legalistic restrictions, there were 393 parish churches in England that used incense and in 71 the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. The Oxford reformers established a set of criteria whereby churches could be adjudged to have returned to the styles of worship that were common before the Protestant Reformation. These became known as the Six Points of Ceremonial, and comprised:

- ❖ adopting an eastwards position at the Holy Eucharist;
- ❖ consecrating and administering wafers or unleavened bread;
- ❖ having lighted candles on the altar (or gradine);
- ❖ including incense in the ceremonial;
- ❖ using a mixed chalice, prepared ceremonially; and
- ❖ wearing full Eucharistic vestments.

Adopting an eastwards position at the Holy Eucharist

The debate about the direction to face when offering public worship, and, to a lesser extent, private prayer, has its roots in antiquity, based on the importance of sun worship in ancient Egyptian and Roman history. The concept of the seven-day week was an amalgamation of Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian and Jewish influences. It was argued that the change for Christians to Sunday worship from the Jewish Sabbath was associated in both iconographic and literal terms with *Sol Invictus*, and that that the Day of the Sun could easily have been adopted as the day for the worship of Christ. Jews, from the time of the construction of the Temple, prayed towards Jerusalem. The influence of the Sun cult on early Christian worship provided Christians with a new orientation for prayer. Irenaeus reported that the Ebionites continued to adhere to the practice of praying toward Jerusalem as if it were the house of God. Clement of Alexandria explained that prayers are offered while looking toward sunrise

in the East because the Orient represents the birth of light that dispels the darkness of the night, and because of the orientation of the ancient temples. For Origen the East symbolised the soul that looked to the source of light. Others urged Christians to pray looking toward the East to remind themselves of God's paradise and/or of Christ's coming. The *Book of Common Prayer*, from its first edition in 1549, contained a rubric requiring the priest to turn to the altar, yet no indication was given as to which direction the priest should face. However, in the time of the Caroline Divines and the Stuarts there was much bitter contention on the subject. It seems likely that the north-end position was dictated by the perceived need for members of the congregation to see the actions of the priest, so as to avoid claims of mystery and secrecy.

Consecrating and administering wafers or unleavened bread

The ritual use of unleavened bread goes back to the earliest of Old Testament times. It has been argued that Christ celebrated what has erroneously been called the first Mass at the Last Supper and employed the symbolism of the Feast of the Passover, including the use of unleavened bread. Over time, connections with the Jewish Passover meal reduced, and the symbolic need for unleavened bread declined. In the early centuries the breaking of bread as part of regular family or group worship was slowly replaced by celebrations of the Eucharist in liturgical and sacramental forms. It seems likely that conventionally baked bread, as generally eaten in the family meal, would have been used. By the eighth century the Roman Mass began to have precedence over other forms of service in most of the Western church. However, the early Gelasian Sacramentary was slow in giving way. From this latter formulary comes a sense of the otherworldly value of the sacramental offering. In order that no crumb of what was perceived as Christ's actual Body should be lost, the clergy re-adopted the use of individual hosts of unleavened bread. These were usually contained in a ciborium, the paten was used merely as a chalice cover. Arguments were advanced that unleavened bread was often associated with the rooting out of sin, but, historically, it comprised that which was baked without time to rise. It indicated a preparedness to leave Egypt and thus it was symbolic of readiness to do the will of God.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, there was much reaction against what was seen as the superstition and mystery that surrounded the Mass, resulting in its essentially sacrificial character being denied. Anything contained within the Eucharistic liturgy that had Popish or Romish overtones was dismissed as unnecessary. Individual hosts of unleavened bread came within this category so had been discontinued.

Having lighted candles on the altar

The tradition of using candles or oil or wax lights in corporate worship has a very ancient pedigree. It was argued that, like incense and scented water, lights were commonly used in pagan worship and in the rites paid to the dead but, from the earliest pages of the Bible, lights have been associated with God. Within the book called Exodus, man began seeing God as a source of light, and the use of lights became an integral part of Jewish worship. The first Jewish Temple was almost certainly equipped with ceremonial lights, for which the menorah was fashioned. Early Christians shunned the use of lights in worship because of their popularity in honouring pagan deities. Early church leaders spoke openly about their disdain for candles and light. In the early centuries, many Romans worshipped the Egyptian goddess Isis and her temple was lit day and night with lamps. Despite Christ claiming to be the Light of the World, early Christian leaders resisted the adoption of any artefact seen to have pagan symbolism. In the third century Tertullian is said to have argued against the necessity of lights that, 'encroached upon the daylight'. Despite these sundry protestations many Christians adopted pagan ways and illuminated the darkness in celebration of their new

religion. Finally, by the fourth century, at the behest of Saint Jerome, candle lighting became an integral part of the church's liturgy. Church authorities became quite stringent about candle usage at this time and put forth guidelines on candles and their functions for the various church services. A new symbolism about candles and flames emerged to coincide with the church's beliefs. Primarily the focus was on beeswax: the wax symbolised the virgin mother; the wick signified the soul of Jesus Christ and the flame represented the Divinity that absorbed and dominated both. In the fifth century Pope Gelasius established the Feast of Candlemass, a day in which all of the church's candles for the year ahead were blessed. This Feast did not come into common practice until the eleventh century.

The views of the Protestant Reformers on the use of candles in church were somewhat mixed. Luther argued, using Biblical authority, that candles were acceptable, yet in September 1538, injunctions were issued for the abolition of numerous religious holidays and festivals and it became an offence for church visitors to light candles in front of religious shrines or altars, except those burning before the Reserved Sacrament on the high altar. The law became more exacting when, in July 1547, those who governed England in the name of the boy-king Edward VI, decreed the abolition of all lights and candles in churches except for one on the High Altar. Thus matters stayed until the latter reformers of the mid-nineteenth century suggested a return to earlier usage.

Including incense in the ceremonial

The use of incense in the ancient world was common, especially in religious rites where it was used to keep away demons. Herodotus recorded that it was popular among the Assyrians, Babylonians and Egyptians. In Judaism, incense was included in the thanksgiving offerings of oil, rain, fruits and wine. The Lord instructed Moses to build a golden altar for the burning of incense, which was placed in front of the veil over the entrance of the meeting tent, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Incense was burned on the altar in atonement for the sins of the people and its use was associated with priesthood. Perhaps the most significant Old Testament reference is when God tells Malachi that incense offered in his name was a pure offering.

The only references to incense in the Gospels are: as one of the gifts brought to the child Jesus by the Magi, and in the angelic annunciation to Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth would conceive a son. Incense is mentioned in the Epistle to the Hebrews in a reference to ancient Jewish Temple worship, and four times in the Apocalypse.

It is not known exactly when the use of incense was introduced into Eucharistic worship or other liturgical rites. At the time of the early Church the Jews continued to use incense in their own Temple ceremonial, so it may be safe to conclude that the Christians would have adapted its usage for their own rituals. It has been suggested that in the Eastern, Christian churches its use probably began before the fifth century. The liturgies of Sts James and Mark, which in their present form date from those times, both refer to the use of incense. A Roman rite of the seventh century mentions that it was used in the procession of the bishop to the altar on Good Friday. Its use at the Gospel of the Mass appears very early and it was employed at the Offertory, and in the Gradual procession, in the eleventh century and at the Introit in the twelfth. It was also used at the singing of Benedictus and Magnificat in the canonical Hours and was used, from the fourteenth century, at the Elevation during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

The liturgical use of incense was seen by the Protestant Reformers as Popish and superstitious and thus not to be tolerated. A tale was told that, in 1528, after the establishment of Protestantism in Bern Cathedral in Switzerland, the sacristan arrived on the Feast of Saint Vincent, to open the gates, to light the tapers, to prepare the incense, and to set all in order on the altar. Alas, neither priest nor worshippers attended, and Matins was not

sung in the cathedral that morning. It was not until the promptings of the Oxford Reformers that incense was re-introduced into Anglican worship.

Using a mixed chalice

Wine has been associated with the worship of God since early times. The book called Genesis reports that Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought forth bread and wine, and he was the priest of the most high God. Down the ages wine has played a major role in Jewish culture. Within its ritual, each Sabbath begins with a blessing, chanted over a cup of wine, which the whole family then shares. Specific amounts of wine must also be drunk at the Feast of the Passover, at weddings and at circumcisions. Christ, who referred to himself as The Vine, used wine in the institution of the Eucharistic sacrament on the eve of his crucifixion but there is no scriptural evidence that he added any water. It has been common liturgical practice since early Christian centuries to add water to the wine in the chalice at the Eucharist, creating the so-called mixed-chalice, although it is difficult to determine the origins of this. It has been suggested that a mixed chalice has been common practice in both the Eastern and Western churches since the earliest times, although it was not used in the Armenian Church. Saint Cyprian of Carthage spoke of the doctrinal importance of the mixed chalice and his abhorrence of the use of water without wine at the Mass. He claimed that he saw an analogy between the mixed chalice and a union of Christ with his faithful people.

At Session XXII of the Council of Trent in 1562 it was dogmatically decreed that the chalice should contain wine mingled with water, following the original usage and of the issuing of blood and water from Christ's side upon the cross. Protestant Reformers took the view that the absence of scriptural authenticity for a mixed chalice meant, in their eyes, that it was another piece of unnecessary Popish symbolism.

Wearing full Eucharistic vestments

Special clothing has always been a method of differentiating individuals within society. In the early days of Judaism, a priesthood of God was established, and a distinctive form of dress was appointed. God dictated to Moses the garments to be worn by Aaron in his duties as God's first priest. Aaron's garments comprised: a breast-piece, an ephod, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban and a sash. The breast-piece was designed to contain 12 precious stones, one representing, and engraved with, the name of each of the Tribes of Israel, and a pouch for the Urim and Thummim.

Jewish leaders in first century Palestine still wore distinctive dress and it has been suggested that Jesus may have adopted the customs of his culture, eg the wearing of a fringed prayer shawl. The emerging Christian church saw itself as the inheritor of earlier Judaism and assumed some of its terminology, practices and traditions. The concept of a Christian priesthood soon evolved and this inevitably led to the necessity for suitable forms of clerical dress, no doubt initially based on those used in the Temple.

It has been further suggested that there was a significant development in priestly dress after Constantine established the church across the Roman Empire. Bishops gained a new authority, assumed a rank equivalent to the magistracy, and adopted a style of dress commensurate with their new status. Common dress within the empire comprised a tunic, worn without a girdle. Senators wore distinctively coloured sashes over their tunics, signifying their position and status: the clergy followed these local customs. It is thought that priests wore the sash over their shoulders, hanging down equally on either side and deacons wore it over the left shoulder and tied at the right hip. An overcoat, shaped like a poncho, was worn in cold weather and became the model for the chasuble.

The Protestant Reformers attempted to eliminate the Mass because they saw it as sacrificial, priest-oriented and superstitious. They might, equally, have abolished all

Eucharistic vesture associated with this sacrament. Even though vestments were not in themselves essential to the celebration, they had for centuries been uniquely connected with it. The Calvinists and Zwinglians entirely eliminated the Mass, and Mass vestments, and wore in their services the same attire seen in secular life. By contrast, the Lutherans were not so logical. They rejected celibacy and the three degrees of Holy orders. They also rejected the cincture, the symbol of chastity, as well as the stole, the insignia of higher clerical orders, but they retained the alb and surplice, and the chasuble, for celebrations of the Holy Communion.

The first post-Reformation English prayer book instructed clergy, when celebrating the Holy Communion, to wear a plain white alb, and a chasuble or cope. However, this book did not satisfy the extreme leanings of some reformers, and its first revision forbade the wearing of vestments; a cassock and surplice alone were permitted. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the 1559 Prayer Book attempted to reflect a balance between Protestant and Catholic minded Anglicans. It restored the use of the traditional Eucharistic vestments of the alb and chasuble or cope. Despite this injunction, cassock and surplice became the standard vesture worn by Anglican clergy for all services of divine worship for the next three centuries. The Restoration Prayer Book of 1662 makes no reference to clerical wear in the Order of Holy Communion. However, in the Ordinal, in the Making of Deacons and the Ordination of Priests, there is an introductory rubric that those presenting themselves shall be decently habited.

Conclusion

While some thought that it was led by romantics, undoubtedly the Oxford Movement had a profound effect on Church life in the Anglican Communion. So many of its features that are accepted as normal to-day, such as clean and beautiful churches, reverent worship, sacred music, a devotional liturgy with ordered ceremonial, the Holy Eucharist as the principal service of worship on Sundays, daily Masses and the observation of saints' and holy days, all stem from the teaching of those devout Oxford dons and their adherents, all of which followed from an observance of their fundamental six points. Those many members of the Anglican church throughout the world who are allowed to worship God in dignified solemnity and in the beauty of holiness, owe a deep debt of gratitude to those few men of vision, piety and perseverance.

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