

## The Oxford Movement and Catholicism

**Scope:** The Oxford movement of the 1830s and 1840s tried to emphasize the supernatural as opposed to the political character of the Church of England. The defection of two of its most luminous members, Newman and Manning, to Roman Catholicism, damaged its reputation in the 1840s; however, the Oxford movement, like the evangelical revival, animated Christianity in many parts of Britain. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church, made up mainly of Irish immigrants and old “recusants,” newly leavened with a group of energetic converts, weathered a storm of prejudice and criticism as it created its own diocesan structure. British Christianity was also under intellectual pressure from scientific developments, especially Darwinian evolution, and from German methods of biblical criticism. Successive controversies in the mid-Victorian era indicated anxiety and doubt on the part of influential men; Thomas Huxley, a leading scientist, invented the term “agnosticism” to describe his own religious situation between faith and doubt.

### Outline

- I. The Oxford movement emphasized the catholic and supernatural aspects of Anglicanism.
  - A. Like the evangelical movement, with which it was contemporaneous, the Oxford movement focused on the importance of warmth and vitality in the individual’s relationship with God and Jesus.
  - B. It was culturally richer and less puritanical than the evangelical movement.
  - C. One of its hallmarks was an emphasis on the “beauty of holiness”—the idea that religious life should be beautified and that worship should take place in glorious surroundings.
  - D. While the evangelical movement preached the importance of the individual’s direct encounter with God, the Oxford movement saw the church itself as a crucial institution, responsible for mediating the relationship between God and the individual.
- II. Oxford University divines (the “Tractarians”) John Henry Newman, Richard Hurrell Froude, and John Keble, issued a series of tracts (the “Tracts for the Times,” 1833–1841) deploring the sleepiness of the Anglican church and its subservience to the state.
  - A. They opposed the Irish Church Temporalities Bill (1833) and the Catholic Emancipation legislation of 1829, whereby Catholics were

permitted to sit in Parliament, because it meant that political expediency, rather than divine truth, would affect the governance of the Church of England.

- B. They emphasized the concept of apostolic succession.
    1. Jesus had entrusted Saint Peter with the keys of the faith and charged him to create the church.
    2. Saint Peter had created bishops, and each new generation of bishops had passed on the succession from Jesus’s apostles.
  - C. John Henry Newman’s respect for the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers declined, while his appreciation for the early Church fathers (such as St. Augustine and St. Ambrose) increased.
  - D. Of the “Tracts for the Times,” Tract 90 was the most controversial; in it, Newman argued for the compatibility of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England with Catholic doctrine, despite their original anti-Catholic animus.
  - E. Newman tried to argue for Anglicanism as the *via media*, the middle way, between Catholic and Protestant errors.
- III. Newman’s intensive study of the Church fathers—he strongly believed that it was crucial to get the doctrines right to be a good Christian—led him toward Catholicism, and he converted in 1845. The Oxford movement then fell under a cloud.
- A. Henry Manning also became a Roman Catholic in 1851 after the Gorham Decision emphasized the Erastianism of the Anglican Church.
  - B. Some Anglicans were horrified by Catholic (and later, Jewish) emancipation because it meant that, conceivably, a Roman Catholic could become prime minister and would have the responsibility for appointing the Anglican bishops.
- IV. The other leaders of the Oxford movement remained ostentatiously loyal to the state church: Anglo-Catholicism—or “High Church,” as the Oxford movement came to be known—began to reach out to urban slum dwellers, with growing success toward 1900.
- A. The mid-Victorian era saw vigorous restoration of old churches and the building of many new ones.
    1. Between 1840 and 1876, the Anglicans built 1,700 new churches, mainly in the industrial towns, and restored about 7,000 more.
    2. Some of these churches were beautiful, in the neo-Gothic style.
  - B. The High Church emphasized display: elaborate decoration, sumptuous vestments, and ritual embellishments, such as choral music, candles, bells, and incense.
  - C. It de-emphasized preaching (which was so essential to the evangelical movement).

- V. The Roman Catholic Church in Britain gained recruits from Ireland and by conversion.
- A. Anti-Catholicism had a long post-Reformation history.
    1. To many Britons, Catholicism was synonymous with treason.
    2. The Catholicism of Queen Mary I and Guy Fawkes was remembered as cruel and repressive.
    3. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1559) was staple fare for Protestant children.
    4. Many Protestants believed that to be Roman Catholic implied allegiance to a foreign monarch.
  - B. Recusant families (those not attending Church of England services) included the Earls of Shrewsbury and the Dukes of Norfolk.
  - C. The Catholic population of Britain swelled rapidly after the Irish famine. East London, Glasgow, and the Lancashire textile towns developed Catholic ghettos.
  - D. Converts were a source of pleasure and concern to the Catholic bishops.
    1. Their intellectual adventurousness dismayed Cardinal Wiseman.
    2. St. George Mivart and George Tyrrell were both censured by the hierarchy.
    3. Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, written in answer to Charles Kingsley, who did not believe Newman had converted in good faith, was recognized as a masterpiece by Anglicans and Catholics alike.
  - E. The re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 led to an outburst of anti-popey.
    1. Prime Minister Lord John Russell protested against "papal aggression."
    2. Parliament legislated against Catholic use of Anglican titles.
  - F. Henry Manning succeeded Nicholas Wiseman as Archbishop of Westminster and became a hero to working-class people in London.
    1. He arbitrated the dockers' strike of 1889.
    2. Londoners lined the streets for his funeral in 1892.
- VI. New intellectual trends disturbed the Christian sense of assurance.
- A. Darwinian evolution challenged the biblical creation story and the uniqueness of humanity.
  - B. Critical methods of biblical study led to new ideas about the nature of Christianity; publication of *Essays and Reviews* set off a furor in 1861, including some heresy trials.
  - C. Thomas Huxley, a champion of Darwin, gave a name to agnosticism.
  - D. Growing numbers of Victorians (including George Eliot and Thomas Huxley) had become doubtful about Christianity, not only because of the Darwinian revolution and the new critical revelations about the Bible, but also for ethical reasons: When they reread the Old Testament, they were horrified by accounts of God's brutality.
    - E. As the British Empire increased its reach throughout the world, small numbers of Britons began to adapt to exotic religions.
- VII. The Church of England was shocked by the results of a survey in 1851 that tried to record who actually went to church and to which one.
- A. The church discovered that only about a quarter of the population went to its services, another quarter attended nonconformist or Catholic services, and half the people attended no services at all.
  - B. The church worked through the second half of the century to build new churches, train more ministers, and regain its central role in national life. Membership figures did rise, but intellectual challenges, particularly Darwinian biology and historical-critical methods, created new problems.
- Essential Reading:**
- E. Norman, *The English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century*.  
Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation*, chapters 12 and 13.
- Supplementary Reading:**
- Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome*.  
M. A. Crowther, *Church Embattled: Religious Controversy in Mid-Victorian England*.
- Questions to Consider:**
1. Why did comparatively few Oxford movement Anglicans follow Newman when he converted to Catholicism?
  2. How severe were the new intellectual challenges to conventional Christian belief in the mid-nineteenth century?