

THE PALIMPSEST

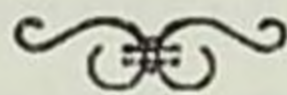
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English Origins

In the second quarter of the sixteenth century, under Henry VIII and Edward VI, by a series of acts by King, Parliament, and Convocation, the Church of England renounced all connection with the "Bishop of Rome" and asserted its independence as a branch of the Church on equal footing with any and all others. In the tumultuous times of the Reformation, similar actions were taken in other nations, notably in the Scandinavian monarchies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The likenesses and the differences between what was done in England and what was done elsewhere have their importance, but cannot be discussed here. The official quarrel between the Church of England and that of Rome was originally stated in terms of organization, not of doctrine.

In the years 1553 to 1558, in the troubled reign of Queen Mary, the English nation was temporarily and uneasily reconciled with Rome. In the subsequent reign of Elizabeth the connection was again broken and has not been renewed.

Those responsible for the separation of the Church of England from the Church of Rome held, as their successors still hold, that the Church of England did not have its beginning in the sixteenth century, but was initiated in the fourth or perhaps even the third century when the first missionaries appeared in Britain. The Church in Britain had remained independent until the early thirteenth century, when shortsighted monarchs, notably King John, had bargained away that independence for dubious temporary advantages. The acts of these monarchs had never been fully accepted by the English people, either clerical or lay, and had been partly repudiated from time to time before the definitive acts of the 1500's.

Officially, the Church of England held and taught that its history was continuous, that its orders came in unbroken line from the Apostles, and that it had a claim to represent the historic Church shared by none of its rivals in the British Isles. The Church of England was a "Church"; the other groups were "sects." Expediency led to a modification of this absolute position in practice; but it was the official "party line," and it influenced profoundly the conduct of the Churchmen who came to the colonies, of the group that organized the Episcopal Church, and of those who carried on that Church.

During the eighteenth century, the zeal with which this position was asserted diminished, par-

ticularly on the part of bishops in England, who were often of the "Low Church," which tended to minimize the claim of uniqueness by the Church of England. During the same period, the hold of the dissenting groups on their membership grew weaker. Among all English Christian bodies there was a tendency to accept the proposition that all sensible people were of the same religion and that sensible people never talked about their religion.

But the official teaching of the Church was by no means wholly forgotten, especially by the lower clergy, whose relations with their bishops were often strained. And a curious variation of the proposition that sensible people were of the same religion was presently to appear in the Methodist Movement, which insisted that sensible people should talk a great deal about their religion.

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American Variations

Officially, as the King's Church, the Church of England accompanied His Majesty's flag to all parts of the world. Along with that flag, the Church came to the thirteen colonies, and in many of them had an exceedingly thin time. In some of them, owing to various quirks of charters and the strength given by them to local prejudices, the King's Church was for a time declared illegal. And, in spite of some genuinely earnest efforts, finding their most efficient expression in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, the Church of England had little firm hold in more than two or three of the thirteen colonies before the Revolutionary War swept away all official English ties. There had been no Anglican bishop in colonial America.

Whether the former members of the Church of England in America could create a new Church that should to some degree maintain the Anglican tradition was a moot question. Many former Churchmen had grave doubts in the matter. Some openly proclaimed the conviction that the task was hopeless. But in 1789 a moderately sized group of not too discouraged persons organized the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States

of America, and started out on what was to be, rightly viewed, another of the triumphs of hope over experience that on occasion appear to delight the student of history. Bishop Samuel Seabury of Connecticut was consecrated in 1784, in Scotland; Bishops William White of Pennsylvania and Samuel Provoost of New York were consecrated in England three years later. In 1790 Bishop James Madison of Virginia also received his consecration in England. The first bishop to be consecrated on American soil was Thomas J. Claggett of Maryland (1792).

The state of religion in the new nation of approximately four millions of Americans, although somewhat dubious, was far from desperate. Only a minority professed allegiance to any church. Some intellectuals pooh-poohed historical Christianity as outworn superstition. The different Protestant bodies were organizing on a national basis and were soon to lose any special privileges they had known in colonial times. Support from abroad had largely been alienated or cast off. The various denominations stood as voluntary associations dependent on themselves for survival. Roman Catholics numbered about thirty thousand communicants, with a high concentration in Maryland. America's Jewish community could show six or seven synagogues in 1790. To live, the churches must win quickly an increasing number of adult adherents from the unchurched.

Such adult members Protestantism began to win rapidly in the nineteenth century. The technique was the revival, evangelism by preachers and lay workers, well convinced, after the fashion of the Wesleys, that all Christians had the same vital message which must be talked about as much as possible. By preaching this message, the churches could win converts, and by means of religious exercises hold and make them practicing Christians.

The message of the revivalists, of necessity simple and designed to effect prompt decisions in those who heard it, centered in the Atonement. All men, said the evangelists, were sinful and doomed to disaster in this world and damnation in the next. No man could be saved from his sins and the woe they entailed except by his acceptance of Christ as his personal Savior. The man who trusted in his own personal good conduct to deliver him was as certainly damned as he who wallowed blindly in his sin defiant of temporal and eternal consequences.

The technique and the message worked; by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Protestantism had stamped itself firmly on America, and had made its standards of conduct and belief the professed standards of millions.

Those who wonder how Episcopalians with a High Church tradition accepted revivalism need to remember that the Wesleys were High Churchmen. Like the Wesleys, Episcopal clergy in the

early nineteenth century in America were of the "High Church" group. Confronted, as the Wesleys never were, by the danger that the "sects" might swallow up the "Church," Episcopalians, both clerical and lay, grew uneasy. The devout among them felt that their Church in a peculiar fashion preserved the historic Church, and that a sense of historical tradition was necessary to Christians. Furthermore, Episcopalians possessed and felt a devotion to the traditional service of the *Prayer Book*, which most considered hardly inferior to the Bible. As a practical manifestation of the worth of historic Churchmanship, the liturgy of the Church was indispensable. Even more indispensable was the Holy Communion, the "Sacrament," for which the devout Christian prepared himself regularly and carefully, and from which he received strength to meet the stress of life and the fear of death. Only in their own Church did Episcopalians find these comforts.

This feeling, though many who held it were not free from snobbishness and narrowness, was not in itself snobbish or narrow. Perhaps the majority of Protestants tended to discount the value of tradition, of ordered service, and of sacramental practices. They had developed substitutes which for the time being served adequately.

By 1825 the leaders of the Episcopal Church were committed to a re-emphasis of their historic teaching of the uniqueness of that Church, an em-

phasis soon generally accepted. Episcopalians now strove to appeal in a special fashion to those unsympathetic to the general Protestant teaching.

Two developments from this change of position immediately assumed importance. First, the vigorous revived appeal of High Churchmanship brought an increased membership and a stronger morale. The Episcopal Church gained confidence and prestige. In 1835 its General Convention planned a more active and widespread missionary program, and chose its first missionary bishops for the Northwest and the Southwest.

Second, within the Church a party referring to itself as "Evangelical" felt grave concern that in breaking away from the general Protestant position the Episcopal Church might lose its hold on the great doctrine of Justification by Faith. As a sort of corollary, the Evangelicals, though quite High Church in their teaching, held that, properly disciplined, a modified form of evangelism was quite consonant with Episcopalianism.

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