

“Deepened By The Study of the Fathers”: The Oxford Movement, Dr. Pusey and Patristic Scholarship*

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I

The one-hundredth anniversary of the death of E. B. Pusey, observed in 1982, and the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Oxford (or “Tractarian”) Movement, in 1983, have provided occasions for re-evaluation of the character and influence of that Movement, and its principal leaders, John Keble, John Henry Newman, and Edward Bouverie Pusey. The beginning of the Movement is usually dated from Keble’s Assize Sermon, “On National Apostasy”, preached in St. Mary’s Church, Oxford, on July 14th, 1833, a protest against proposals then before the British Parliament for the suppression of redundant Irish bishoprics. The preacher saw in those proposals a grave threat to the spiritual integrity and independence of the Church of England. That protest marked the beginning of a powerful movement for reform, which was to affect profoundly the theology and devotional practice of the Church of England, with implications for every aspect of religious and cultural life throughout the English speaking world.

Thus, the Movement began in a moment of political crisis, calling into question the long-standing relation between the State and the Established Church; but, as Owen Chadwick has remarked, “the power of the Movement’s religious ideas sprang from somewhere deeper in men’s souls and minds than their contemporary ideas of ecclesiastical expediency”.¹ Questions about the nature and *locus* of spiritual authority moved the Oxford reformers to a close examination of the Christian past, as exemplified particularly in the older tradition of the Church of England, and in the more universal tradition of the primitive, undivided Church, upon which the En-

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1. O. Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (Stanford, California, 1960), p. 14.

glish tradition appeared to depend. They appealed to the English divines of the seventeenth century, still much revered by the "High Church" party, and discovered that those divines, in turn, appealed constantly to the Fathers of the ancient Catholic Church.² Thus, Edward Pusey, in his last years, summed up the direction of the Movement: "We taught what we inherited from those before us, deepened by the study of the Fathers, to whom the Church of England sent us."³

It was the hope of the Tractarians that the study of the Fathers would serve to revive, as Keble put it, "more of the system and spirit of the apostolical age", recalling the Church of England to its true foundations, and to renewed spiritual integrity.

New truths, he said, in the proper sense of the word, we neither can nor wish to arrive at. But the monuments of antiquity may disclose to our devout perusal much that will be to this age new, because it has been mislaid or forgotten, and we may attain to a light and clearness, which we now dream not of, in our comprehension of the faith and discipline of Christ.⁴

There had always been in the Church of England, particularly among the inheritors of the old "High Church" tradition, scholars who studied the Fathers, and regarded them as carrying authority. But there were many others who shared the opinion of Dean Gaisford of Christ Church — a distinguished and liberal classical scholar — who is said to have passed the folios of the Fathers in Christ Church Library with the comment that they were "sad rubbish".⁵ And in the curriculum of studies in the British universities, in the 1820's and 1830's, the study of Christian antiquity was only just beginning to find a place.⁶

2. John Keble, for instance, editing the great treatise of Richard Hooker on *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, found one of the chief merits of the work in the attention it drew "to the primitive, apostolical Church, as the ark of refuge divinely provided for the faithful" (*Works of Richard Hooker*, 2 ed., Oxford, 1841, Vol. I, p. cviii).

3. From Pusey's speech to the English Church Union, London, 1874, quoted by H. P. Liddon, *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey* (London, 1893), Vol. IV, p. 277.

4. John Keble, quoted in O. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

5. The story is told by T. Mozley, *Reminiscences Chiefly of Oriiel College and the Oxford Movement* (2 vols., Boston, 1882), Vol. I, p. 357. Referring to Gaisford's support for an edition of Plotinus, Mozley remarks: "The classics were everything in those days, and the great scholars would then rather enlarge the circle of the classics than leave an opening for early Christian theology". Cf. also the comment of G. Faber, *Oxford Apostles* (2 ed., London, 1936), p. 341: "To the typical Oxford scholar of that day. . . the Fathers were like dead mutton".

6. Cf. Pusey's letter to Dr. Tholuck, May 24, 1930, on theological studies in England, reproduced in Liddon, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-248.

Among the Tractarian leaders, themselves new to patristic studies, works of the Fathers came to be regarded as great instruments of religious reform, measures of orthodoxy, and a vast armoury of weapons in religious controversy. The ancient texts, which, as Tom Mozley (Newman's brother-in-law) remarks, had "long been the lumber of old libraries",⁷ were now sought out and highly valued, not just as monuments of a by-gone age, but as witnesses to vital religious truth. And under Tractarian auspices, as the Movement's influence extended, patristic studies came to be a common element in the training of ordination candidates, especially in the diocesan theological colleges, which began to appear before the middle of the century. At Chichester, for instance, the first of those colleges, founded in 1839, with the Tractarian, Charles Marriott, as its first Principal, the curriculum included the daily reading of patristic texts.⁸

All this renewed interest in patristic studies inevitably suggested the desirability of making the ancient texts more readily available to English readers, a need which the Tractarians sought to satisfy by the publication of the *Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, conceived in 1836, under the editorship of Keble, Newman and Pusey (with Charles Marriott taking Newman's place after 1844), and destined to include forty-eight volumes of translated texts, issued between 1838 and 1885, beginning with Pusey's remarkably successful and enduring "revision" of William Watts' translation of Augustine's *Confessions*.⁹ The *Library* was, of course, selective, and concentrated its attention upon Post-Nicene Fathers, especially Chrysostom, Augustine, Athanasius, and Gregory the Great.¹⁰ Pusey's 1838 Plan of the Work states the further intention that "the originals of the works translated shall be printed . . . if this shall

7. *Op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 39.

8. Cf. S.C. Carpenter, *Church and People 1789-1889* (London, 1959), pp. 269-70.

9. The primary source of information on the *Library of the Fathers* is H. P. Liddon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, ch. xviii. For details as to contents, translators, authors of prefaces, etc., see his convenient list, pp. 445-47. On this subject, see also my paper, "'Devout Perusal': The Tractarian Revival of Patristic Studies", to appear in the Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference of Patristic Studies (Oxford, 1983), and R. W. Pfaff, "The Library of the Fathers: The Tractarians as Patristic Translators", *Studies in Philology*, LXX, 3, July, 1973, 329-344. I am grateful to Prof. Pfaff for sending me a copy of his thorough and very useful article.

10. As Pfaff remarks (*op. cit.*, p. 343), the *Library* is a collection of works "by only twelve fathers (or thirteen including the fragments of the shadowy Pacian) with over three-quarters of the forty-eight volumes devoted to just four authors."

appear desirable",¹¹ but this difficult and expensive aspect of the scheme proceeded much more slowly than the translations, and produced only a few editions of enduring worth.

While Keble and Newman were joint editors with Pusey, and all made significant contributions to the *Library*, it was destined to become Pusey's "particular child and, indeed, to be supported almost single-handedly by him in his later years."¹² It was Pusey who wrote the Plan of the Work, and the general *apologia* for it, in the Preface to the first volume. He sold his Arabic library to rescue the project from financial disaster,¹³ and from the beginning to the end, he was chiefly responsible for guiding its policies and furthering the task.

For the Movement, the *Library* served as a "steadying influence", says Canon Liddon (himself a contributor to the series); "it made thoughtful adherents of the Movement feel that the Fathers were behind them, and with the Fathers that ancient undivided Church, whom the Fathers represented".¹⁴ It served also as a vehicle for the spread of the Tractarian cause. As early as 1836, Pusey mentioned to Newman that he would "like to stipulate for a certain number of copies free, that we might be able to make presents to institutions, e.g., Durham, New York, King's College, etc."¹⁵ That this "missionary" intention was at least in part fulfilled is suggested by the fact that the first five volumes of the series in the library of King's College, Windsor (now Halifax) came there as a gift from John Keble.

Certainly, revived interest in the Fathers, furthered and encouraged by Pusey and his colleagues, spread far beyond Tractarian circles, and in the latter half of the century major contributions were made by scholars who had little sympathy with that Movement,¹⁶ and other series of translations, more systematically organized and more efficiently presented, competed with, and largely replaced the *Library of the Fathers*.¹⁷ But the *Library* was the pioneering work, and "the result of the enterprise was influential far beyond the immediate currents of the Oxford Movement."¹⁸

11. On this aspect of the programme, cf. Pfaff, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-37.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

13. Cf. Liddon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 207.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 434.

15. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 422, and Pfaff, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

16. One thinks, for instance, of Bishop Lightfoot, of Durham, whose edition of the Apostolic Fathers was hailed by Adolf von Harnack as the greatest patristic monograph of the century; cf. L. E. Elliott-Binns, *Religion in the Victorian Era* (2 ed., London, 1946), p. 309.

17. For the later series, see R. W. Pfaff, "Anglo-American Patristic Translations 1866-1900", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXVIII (1977), 39-55.

18. R. W. Pfaff, "Library of the Fathers", p. 344.

II

Behind the phenomenon of the *Library of the Fathers* lies the spirit of Dr. Pusey. It may be that, as Richard Pfaff remarks, Pusey was "originally the least patristic-minded of the three great Oxford leaders".¹⁹ There is, however, some little evidence of his early interest in the Fathers,²⁰ and certainly by 1838 he had become intimately familiar with Augustine at least, as the notes to his version of the *Confessions* attest. The course of Pusey's intellectual biography has recently become a matter of controversy, and H. C. G. Matthew, in an article entitled "Edward Bouverie Pusey: From Scholar to Tractarian", deplores his decline from the liberal scholarship of his early years, "to what was really a curious sort of statesmanship". He argues that if Pusey had maintained his interest in "German scholarship, theology and methodology. . . it is not fanciful to think that he could have developed into one of the seminal intellects of Victorian Britain".²¹

But the hypothesis of Pusey as a young liberal seems far-fetched, and the evidence of his early associations with German scholarship seems, in fact, to point in the opposite direction. If, indeed, there were liberal tendencies in the young Pusey — for which the evidence seems to be very scanty — they were quickly eradicated by his first-hand encounters with "German rationalism". He made visits to Gottingen, Berlin and Bonn in 1825 and 1826, in order to inform himself about German biblical criticism, and to become competent in oriental languages. One finds him immediately deploring Professor Eichhorn's lectures on the Books of Moses, for their "total insensibility to the real religious import of the narrative".²² But he did make friendships in Germany, which continued into later life, and it is significant that all those friends were scholars engaged in anti-rationalist polemic and promoting a kind of pietist revival.

During the first visit, he met E. W. Hengstenberg (Professor in Berlin, 1826-69), who later visited him in Oxford, and "for whom he retained a warm affection throughout life",²³ whose *Evangelische*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

20. For instance, in Germany, in November, 1826, Pusey was buying texts of the Fathers (also of Plotinus) and sending them home to Newman (Liddon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 102).

21. H. C. G. Matthew, "Edward Bouverie Pusey: From Scholar to Tractarian", *Journal of Theological Studies*, N. S., XXXII (1981), 101-124, p. 101. See also the criticism of Matthew's argument by L. Frappel, "'Science' in the Service of Orthodoxy: The Early Intellectual development of E. B. Pusey", in P. Butler, ed., *Pusey Rediscovered* (London, 1983), pp. 1-33.

22. Liddon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 73.

23. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 86.

Kirchenzeitung was the spearhead of the pietist revival of the 1820's and 1830's. Another friend was the great Church Historian, J. A. W. Neander (Berlin, 1813-50), who was lecturing on "The Characteristics of the Apostolic Age", and "Introduction to the Fathers", with whom also Pusey corresponded in later life,²⁴ and whose famous dictum, "The heart makes the theologian", was a characteristic anti-rationalist slogan. Still another lifetime friend was F. A. G. Tholuck (Halle, 1826-84), whom Pusey had previously met in Oxford, and who kept him informed of the horrors perpetrated by David Strauss and other theologians of a rationalistic tendency.²⁵ Perhaps most important of all was F. D. Schleiermacher (Berlin, 1800-34), whose lectures on "Principles of Practical Theology" deeply impressed Pusey, who referred to him as "that great man, who, whatever be the errors of his system, has done more than any other (some very few perhaps excepted) for the restoration of religious belief in Germany".²⁶ Of permanent significance for Pusey's thought was Schleiermacher's methodological maxim, that "the endeavour to introduce philosophical systems into theology is generally at variance with a correct interpretation of scripture".²⁷

Out of Pusey's German associations came his first book, published in 1828, entitled *An Historical Enquiry into the Probable Causes of the Rationalist Character lately Predominant in the Theology of Germany*. To the author's acute embarrassment, the work was taken by some to be a defense of rationalism, which was far from his intention. His German friends had moved him to write the book as a response to H. J. Rose's too sweeping condemnation of all German theology, which had appeared in German translation in 1826. Pusey deplored rationalism quite as deeply as Rose had done, but, as he later explained to Rose, they "differed about the causes and extent of it, not, for a moment, as to its perniciousness and shallowness."²⁸

24. In a letter to Pusey, in November, 1841, Neander refers to "the relations in which you stood to me here, and the Christian communion between us, which, as I trust, cannot be lessened by some theological differences"; quoted in Liddon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 85.

25. Tholuck visited Pusey in Oxford in the Spring of 1835. After his return to Germany, he wrote to Pusey about the publication of the *Life of Jesus*, by "Strauss of Tubingen", "A tutor of the Hegelian School" (The letter is quoted in Liddon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 323). Pusey had met Hegel in Berlin (*Ibid.*, p. 158), but it seems that he never commented upon the meeting, nor upon Hegel's philosophy.

26. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 82, quoting from Pusey's *Theology of Germany*.

27. Liddon says that Pusey learned this maxim from a lecture by Schleiermacher in Berlin, and repeated it "more than once in conversation even in the last year of his life" (*op. cit.* Vol. I, p. 84).

28. Quoted in Liddon, Vol. I, p. 177.

Clearly, Pusey's attention to "German scholarship, theology and methodology" cannot be taken as evidence of liberal tendencies; it served, rather, to deepen and confirm the strongly orthodox and pietistic frame of mind which was to characterize his whole career. Here already was the same Pusey who years later would denounce the rationalism of *Essays and Reviews*, remarking that they "contain nothing with which those acquainted with the writings of unbelievers in Germany have not been familiar these thirty years."²⁹

Characteristic of Pusey's thought, and, indeed, of Tractarian thought in general, was the conviction that critical reason must always be subordinated to moral and religious ends;³⁰ and in that conviction they were surely in accord with some, at least, of the "seminal thinkers" of their age — unless one would exclude from that category such as Schleiermacher, and Coleridge, the "English Schleiermacher", in whom Carlyle professed to see the procreation of a "spectral Puseyism".³¹ Just how much Pusey and his colleagues learned from Coleridge is difficult to measure. Newman once claimed, in his old age, that neither he, nor Froude, nor Pusey, nor Keble ever "read a word of Coleridge", but that is demonstrably false;³² and, indeed, it is impossible to imagine that Pusey and his colleagues were entirely unfamiliar with the works of that influential thinker who, according to the same Newman, "made trial of his age, and succeeded in interesting its genius in the cause of Catholic truth."³³

John Stuart Mill, speaking of the intellectual climate of the time in England, remarks that every thinking man was in philosophy either a Benthamite, belonging to the school of progress, or a Coleridgean "who upheld and expressed the wisdom contained in the sacred

29. Letter to the *Guardian*, March 6, 1861, quoted in Liddon, Vol. IV, p. 41.

30. In his *Collegiate and Professorial Teaching* (1854), Pusey refers on this point to Bishop Butler: "The intellect, as Bishop Butler pointed out, has its trials as well as the moral powers of man. . . . In our time, men continually do not seem to have a notion that the intellect, too, must be subdued to God" (quoted in Liddon, Vol. III, p. 390).

31. T. Carlyle, *Life of Stirling*, pp. 61-62, quoted by H. L. Stewart, *A Century of Anglo-Catholicism* (London and Toronto, 1929), p. 66.

32. Cf. L. E. Elliott-Binns, *op. cit.* p. 105; also the comment by H. L. Stewart (*op. cit.*, p. 66): "Newman protested in his old age that he had never read a line of Coleridge (Cf. however, *Letters*, II, p. 39), and that the similarities in their writings were only coincidence. But Newman's biographer has shown that this protest came from a lapse of memory (Ward, *Life of Newman*, I, p. 58), and the extent to which the philosopher-poet laid a speculative basis for 'Puseyism' is obvious enough".

33. *Apologia pro vita sua*, p. 107, quoted by Elliott-Binns, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

traditions of the race".³⁴ Whether directly influenced by Coleridge or not, Pusey and his friends clearly belonged to the latter school, and it was a tendency of thought which Pusey found confirmed, rather than otherwise, by his associations with German scholarship. Indeed, Tractarianism should be seen, not as an isolated phenomenon, but within the broad context of a movement of anti-rationalism, or neo-pietism, widespread in early nineteenth century Europe; a movement which in Protestant Germany (largely through the influence of Pusey's special friends) involved a revival of pietism and Lutheran orthodoxy, and in France, and in Catholic Germany, as well as in England, inspired a new religious interest in Christian antiquity, marked by several large series of French and German translations of the Fathers, more or less contemporary with the *Oxford Library of the Fathers*.³⁵

III

Seen against such a background, Pusey's explanation of the value of patristic studies, in his Preface to the first volume of the *Library* (1838), contains no surprises. The aim of these studies is to be strongly practical, and knowledge of the Fathers is to serve as a potent instrument of religious reform.

Catholic antiquity, rightly and devotionally studied, is calculated . . . to provide a haven for those weary of modern questionings, to fill up Christian belief to its full height and depth, where we (amid what we give out for *practical* statements of it because they are *un*doctrinal) have often contented us with a mere skeleton.³⁶

To be sure, the doctrine of the Fathers will not be readily accessible to all, because the ancient authors represent a way of thinking contrary to the conventions of modern times; but perhaps it is those conventions which should be called into question.

It may be, for instance, that systems of interpretation, which are now almost universally abandoned, are true, however foreign they may be to our notions, or though to us, being foreign, they must at first needs seem fanciful. It is a vulgar and common-place prejudice which would measure everything by its own habits of

34. J. S. Mill. *Dissertations*, I, p. 393, quoted by Stewart, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67. On Coleridge's influence, see also my paper, "'Devout Perusal'" (*supra*, n. 9), esp. n. 23.

35. For those translations (between 1928 and 1880) see my note 28, in "'Devout Perusal'".

36. *Library of the Fathers*, Vol. I, Preface, p. xviii.

mind, and condemn that as fanciful to which it is unaccustomed, simply because it, confined and contracted by treading its own matter-of-fact round, cannot expand itself to receive it, or has no power to assimilate it to its own previous notions or adapt them to it.³⁷

The profit to be drawn will depend upon "the habits of mind of those who enter with affection upon this study", and "the end with which it is to be pursued".

The end is not discovery of new truth, for new truth there is none in the Gospel; not any criticism of their own Church, this were irreverent and ungrateful; not to see with their own eyes, for they will come to see with their own eyes, but not by making this their object; not to compare ancient and modern systems, and adopt the one or the other, or amalgamate both, taking what seems to them truth; this were to subject the truth of God, and the authority which He has placed over them, to their own private judgment; it is not criticism of any sort, not even knowledge in itself, but to understand and appreciate better and realize more thoroughly the estate to which God has called them.³⁸

The effect of a study of the Fathers, rightly undertaken, would be to restore a deeper study of Scripture, a more faithful fulfilment of Scripture duty, a perception of Scripture duty and obligation, where we now see none, and higher duties, where we see only lower, and the privilege of having higher duty, where we think chiefly of the privilege of our unrestrained state.³⁹

Pusey's recommendations clearly reflect his own attitudes towards scholarship. Always thorough and conscientious, he was certainly not disinterested; his studies were always undertaken to meet some perceived need of the Church, and to defend the cause of traditional orthodoxy against the inroads of liberal rationalism. And although he was a highly competent philologist, working to provide more adequate texts of the Fathers "where desirable", he (and his fellow-Tractarians) set very limited value upon such labours, and shared little of the passion for textual criticism which would later produce the great series of critical editions, beginning with the "Vienna Corpus" of the Latin Fathers in 1866. Typical of the Tractarian standpoint is the remark of Charles Marriott, that the utmost that critical scholarship can do is to prepare a correct text "for the

37. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

38. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

39. *Ibid.*, p. xix.

reading of the spiritual eye".⁴⁰ Their chief concern was with the modern religious value of the Fathers as authoritative witnesses to the faith of the primitive, undivided Church; for, said Pusey, "the knowledge of the Fathers, the near successors of the Apostles", must be preferred "to that of these latter times", just as "the waters near the fountain" must be preferred to "the troubled estuary rolled backward and forward by the varying tide of human opinion, and rendered brackish by the continual contact with the bitter waters of this world".⁴¹

The Oxford Movement, despite the traumatic experience of the defection of Newman and others to the Church of Rome, and despite the persistent opposition of many of the bishops, was remarkably successful in the conversion of the Church of England and its tributaries throughout the world. That success was in large measure due to the steadfastness of Pusey, as the most obvious leader of the Movement for nearly half a century. Through controversy and persecution, Pusey remained constant. As G. Battiscombe remarks, he was

completely unshaken, because he found the seat of authority not in the Bishops but in the faith and practice of the Primitive, undivided Church. If Pusey was on the side of Primitive doctrine and the Bishops were against it, he was serenely confident that it was not Pusey who was in the wrong. As he knew very much more about the Primitive Church than did all the Bishops on the Bench put together his position was almost unassailable.⁴²

Yet, for all its apparent security, Pusey's position was vulnerable, by virtue of the absence of any reasoned apologetic. He held and promoted what he understood to be the doctrine of the Fathers in a purely dogmatic form, and abhorred any suggestion of criticism as rationalistic infidelity. Ever true to the maxim learned from Schliermacher, that "the endeavour to introduce philosophical systems into theology is generally at variance with a correct interpretation of Scripture", he was oblivious to the philosophical foundations and character of patristic thought; it must stand upon authority alone, and allegiance to it was simply a moral question.⁴³

40. Quoted by Elliott-Binns, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

41. *Library of the Fathers*, Vol. I, Preface, p. v.

42. G. Battiscombe, *John Keble. A Study in Limitations* (London, 1963), p. 238.

43. Cf. the comments of O. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 59: "Pusey believed that the monster which he termed 'rationalism' was always due to a failure in morals"; and (p. 61): "It is not likely that any sound Christian thinking will again lose that integral connexion between faith and the conscience, that essential link between religious propositions and moral judgements, which is one contribution of the Oxford Movement to English thought."

There was therefore no ground of mediation between the traditional doctrine and the positions of the rationalist critics, only a choice, as Pusey saw it, according to one's faith or one's lack of it. Because of its purely dogmatic character, the neo-pietism of Pusey and his Tractarian colleagues, like the pietist revival of Pusey's German friends, could not withstand indefinitely the rising tide of liberal criticism. For Tractarianism, the break came almost within Pusey's own lifetime. With the work of Charles Gore and his fellow-essayists in *Lux Mundi* (1889), there began to appear that shifting compromise between dogmatic authority and liberal criticism which was to shape the "liberal Catholicism" of latter-day Tractarians.

Still, despite its philosophical — and therefore theological — inadequacy and vulnerability, the Tractarian revival of patristic studies had brought the writings and the doctrines of the Fathers into such prominence that they could never thereafter be quite forgotten or ignored.

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