

Tractarians and the 'Condition of England': The Social and Political Thought of the Oxford Movement

Review Number: 644

Publish date: Thursday, 31 January, 2008

Author: S. A. Skinner

ISBN: 9780199273232

Date of Publication: 2004

Price: £68.00

Pages: 340pp.

Publisher: Clarendon Press

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Frank Turner

The Tractarian Movement, led by John Henry Newman, John Keble and Edward Bouverie Pusey, in its articulation of a radical vision of High Churchmanship in the era of reform, shook and stirred the spiritual and ecclesiastical life of the Church of England during the 1830s and 1840s and its influence continued during the rise of mid and late Victorian Anglo-Catholicism and ritualism. It commenced in 1833 with the publication of *Tracts for the Times* and for all practical purposes concluded in 1845 with the secession of Newman and others from the English church into the Roman Catholic Church. Further conversions followed the Gorham Judgement of 1850.

From the standpoint of professional historical writing and critical analysis, the Tractarian Movement became, for over a century, the unfortunate victim of its own hagiography. During the 19th century virtually all discussions of the history of the movement originated in contemporary religious polemics seeking to influence present-day religious life. The first substantial statement of Tractarian history came from the pen of William Palmer, whose *Narrative of Events Connected with the Publication of the Tracts for the Times, with Reflections on Existing Tendencies to Romanism, and on the Present Duties and Prospects of Members of the Church* of 1843, served to distance previously supportive High Churchmen (by then seen to have become dangerously Romanish) from the movement. Two decades later, Newman himself produced the single most influential historical document in the form of his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, first published in 1864 and republished throughout his lifetime and ever since. Newman's volume shaped the history of the movement to his own ends and addressed his contemporary situation in the English Roman Catholic Church. This work furnished the template for all later Victorian treatments of the movement, especially H. P. Liddon's *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey* (4 volumes, 1893-7), as well as Anne Mozley's volume of Newman's correspondence while in the Church of England and the volume of *Correspondence of John Henry Newman with John Keble and Others* (1917) published from the Birmingham Oratory. The later editors of the 30-volume edition of *The Letters and Correspondence of John Henry Newman* similarly looked to the *Apologia* as furnishing the interpretive template of Newman's Anglican years and more generally of the history of the Tractarian Movement. Virtually all of the vast literature published in the early 1930s for the centenary of the movement similarly drew upon the *Apologia*. With the exception of a few notable historians, most importantly David Newsome and Peter Nockles, the influence of Newman's *Apologia* as an interpretive template continued deep into the late 20th century and served to excuse lethargic

biographers from actually delving into the vast body of manuscripts, newspapers and journalistic materials recounting the Tractarian Movement.

Into this vacuum of serious historical analysis have stepped two young historians. The first is Colin Barr with his excellent *Paul Cullen, John Henry Newman, and the Catholic University of Ireland, 1845-1865* (University of Notre Dame Press), which appeared in 2003. The second is S. A. Skinner, whose path-breaking book is here under review. Both scholars deserve mention because, unlike most of their forebears, they have done extensive and labour-intensive research in a broad range of sources. They have aided the slow and often much opposed introduction of critical historical study into Tractarian history and Newman studies.

Skinner's *Tractarians and the 'Condition of England'* is a work of exemplary research and revisionist analysis. His research has carried him into a broad range of manuscript sources that have received only marginal use in the past. Moreover, unlike any previous Tractarian historian, Skinner has made extensive use of the *British Critic*, the journal that served as the major Tractarian publication from late 1838 to late 1843. He has also delved extensively into the novels of William Gresley and Francis Edward Paget (Tractarian sympathisers whose books portrayed the contemporary clerical world, most particularly in the countryside). Skinner's exploration of both sets of printed materials illustrates the manner in which remarkably rich historical sources stand readily available on library shelves for the taking by the imaginative and industrious historian. In particular, the *British Critic* is not a rare publication. It is to be found in many major research libraries and its contributors have long been identified. Historians of the Tractarian Movement have all too rarely taken the initiative to read it. Skinner, in this book and in an excellent previously published 1999 article from the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (which might usefully have been incorporated into his present book), has carefully and fulsomely analysed the *British Critic*, thus producing a major new contribution to our understanding of the Tractarian enterprise.

By exploring in depth the pages of the *British Critic* and the novels of Gresley and Paget, Skinner introduces Tractarian supporters who have often been ignored or studied only in relationship to the traditional triad of leaders. The single most important person to emerge from this exploration is Thomas Mozley, a major contributor and Newman's brother-in-law. Previously Mozley has been familiar to historians from his frequently maligned *Reminiscences* (1882), written in his old age, and from the radical Tractarian articles he recruited as editor of the *British Critic* between 1841 and its demise in 1843. Skinner, however, has discovered a younger, more engaged Tractarian journalist writing passionately on numerous social issues. He redirects our attention away from the question of whether particular Tractarians will or will not convert to Roman Catholicism. Indeed, that traditional emphasis has misdirected much analysis of the movement. There is good reason to believe that few Tractarians really seriously considered converting until a series of exogenous events transformed the religious landscape from late 1844 through to 1845. By avoiding the issue of the conversions, Skinner actually allows us to think through the ideas that the Tractarians sought to set forth concerning social and political questions. In other words, he recognises that there was a Tractarian Movement with its own sets of goals and outlooks and that the conversions were only one historical moment in a much larger movement, many of whose sympathisers did not convert to Rome.

Skinner's chief argument countering the general, if not unanimous, opinion of previous scholarship is that the Tractarians were genuinely concerned with the social questions confronting early Victorian England. In general historians, myself included, have concentrated on Tractarian theology and ecclesiology. Skinner persuasively insists that there was a real social dimension to the Tractarian body of thought and that much of it flowed directly from their theology and ecclesiology. He carefully notes the social settings in which the various Tractarian writers, almost all of whom were clergy, operated. Wherever their careers took them they found themselves confronting the poverty and social insecurity that touched so much of the English population. Furthermore, Skinner demonstrates that very significant portions of the *British Critic* and the novels he examines addressed social questions. Indeed, the Tractarians clearly saw the social conditions of the day as flowing from the same forces of modernity that they believed endangered the life and standing of the Church of England.

Possibly the strongest chapter in the book examines the Tractarian view of the relationship of church and state, again largely through analysis of generally ignored articles in the *British Critic*. Skinner provides a brilliant analysis of the contorted views of the Tractarians in regard to Erastianism. He leads the reader to grasp more clearly and deeply than any other historian why the Tractarians had so many doubts regarding the contemporary connection of the church with the state. In their radical High Churchmanship they claimed the standing and authority of the church derived from Apostolical Succession rather than from the accident of Erastian establishment. The growing religious pluralism of English political and parliamentary life had led them to take that stance whereby they gave the Church of England what they regarded as a unique claim to be the only true church in the land. They deeply believed in the priority of the church to the state and the absolute necessity that the former influence the moral vision of the latter. Keble especially argued that the legitimacy of the state flowed from its Christian character. That is to say, he and other Tractarian commentators sought to envision the state as dependent on the church. In effect, according to Skinner, these writers attempted 'to scale new heights of clerical sovereignty on the question of establishment' (p. 110). This effort resulted in nothing less than a vision of 'Tractarian Theocracy' (p. 116). While, according to these standards, the Tractarians viewed the contemporary relationship as thoroughly unsatisfactory, they were not ready except in a few excitable moments to break the relationship. The rhetoric of their arguments did not result in action. After the secessions of 1845 and the early 1850s following the Gorham Judgement the remaining Tractarians reconciled themselves to establishment under the assumption that 'National establishment constituted the state's proper recognition of its dependence on the guidance of the church' (p. 138).

Skinner's most original discovery regarding the Tractarian vision of society is the emphasis they placed on the parish as a social unit, an outlook that flows directly from Tractarian clericalism and their emphasis on pastoral duty. The Tractarians may have argued for the power of Apostolical Succession, but they never placed much faith in bishops. Rather they placed their faith in individual clergy working in parishes, a viewpoint that for a writer such as Henry Wilberforce amounted to insistence on the parish as 'the instrument of clerical sovereignty' (p. 150). This emphasis on the parish also followed from their religious exclusiveness and their contempt for dissenters.

What is most surprising in this parish vision is what Skinner presents as Tractarian populism. The Tractarians deeply disliked pew rents and entertained an almost democratic vision of the sacred liturgical space that emphasised equality of persons in the eyes of God. Skinner goes so far as to assert that 'The case against "the pew system" was in fact the most emphatic and extensive element in Tractarian ecclesiology.' (p. 168) He notes that Thomas Mozley's *British Critic* article on the subject was one of the longest ever printed in the journal. Similarly Francis Edward Paget polemicised against the pew system in several of his novels, as did Gresley: 'The abolition of the pew system was intended to unite' the various classes, 'in Christian fellowship as an antithesis to the divisions of the temporal world' (p. 183). The emphasis on the parish flowed from conviction and also from experience. Skinner points to the direct parish experience of all his various protagonists. In this respect, it is important to recall that though the Tractarians aimed for a vision of a Church Catholic, virtually all of them worked within the confines of very small landscapes -

Oxford Colleges, parishes and monastic settings. None of them ever really contemplated or experienced a large organisation. The narrowness of their vision in practice flowed from both conviction and circumstance.

Skinner makes the very interesting point that the pastoral code of the Tractarians self-consciously sought to avoid commercial means of raising money to support the parish. They looked to the collection plate rather than to church bazaars or festivals, which were used by evangelicals. They also disliked the large national reform societies that transcended parish boundaries. They insisted upon organisations that presupposed Church of England membership. Tractarian critics saw the introduction of the offertory collection plate as no less of a popish intrusion on the service of the prayer book than the introduction of auricular confessions.

While Skinner makes a strong and convincing case for the broad concern of Tractarian writers in the social questions of the age, he very wisely does not seek to argue for any particular originality on their part. The actual social and political ideas of the Tractarians tended to lie in this broad spectrum of conservative, paternal views of society. However, for them, these ideas came from their theology not from any participation in wider theoretical foundations - the medievalism of Carlyle, for example, had its roots in the St. Simonian binary opposition of critical and organic ages. Rather for the Tractarians the ideas flowed from a much more straightforward idealisation of the Middle Ages and their general dislike, bordering in some cases on hatred, toward the Reformation. Still, even in their passionate critique, for example, of the Reformation and their 'nostalgia for the ecclesiastical and especially monastic beneficence it was held to have effaced,' they embraced 'the stable of anti-commercial sentiment' of their era (p. 204). Their particular outlook also led them to 'the distinct conviction that social ills were, ultimately, unamenable to purely legislative remedies,' an outlook 'reinforced by a wider rejection of the state's usurpation of duties and capacities which were supposedly hitherto the province of the church'(p. 222). Furthermore, they rejected political economy, with Francis Edward Paget in *The Warden of Berkingholt; or, Rich and Poor* (1843) insisting 'on the absolute irreconcilability of political economy and Christianity' (p. 225). In large measure this flowed from the association of political economy with the Whigs and the Tractarian view of Whig policy being anti-church and hence anti-Christian. Like other conservative, paternalistic critics the Tractarians deplored the New Poor Law because of its association with political economy, administrative centralisation and the workhouse, all of which embodied what one *British Critic* writer termed 'the selfish idea' (p. 231). The journalists among the Tractarians deplored the New Poor Law; the novelists illustrated its evils in their narratives. The Tractarian alternative was 'a vigorous promotion of the machinery of the parish, and of the duties of the rich to furnish alms under the auspices of the church' (p. 239). In this respect they were major advocates of personal, private charity. They rejected the devices of secular civil society.

The Tractarians, in their clerical populism, embraced a vision of spiritual equality, a scriptural view of the blessedness of the state of poverty and a paternalism rooted in their rejection of Whig policies. Skinner specifically rejects the view that the Tractarians were interested only or even foremost in social control. He urges historians 'to take seriously the transcendent Christian conviction that man's temporal span was a mere interlude before the eternity for which the church was to prepare him' (p. 288). He contends that the 'insistence that the suffering poor and the covetous rich would be duly rewarded in real places called heaven and hell' was a 'fundamental faith' that 'underwrote every syllable that tractarians directed to the condition of English question' (p. 288). In this respect, without ever making his theoretical outlook explicit, Skinner clearly believes that religion and religious outlooks are an autonomous realm of human behavior and not meta-phenomena to be reduced to something else.

Without disagreeing on the autonomy of religion and religious life, one might wish that Skinner had given more attention to the economic lives of his protagonists. Their professional and economic well-being was deeply intertwined in the economic structures of the English church. Pusey and Keble did not leave for Rome and hence retained very generous sources of ecclesiastical income, an Oxford Regius Professorship and a well-endowed benefice. To recognise the self-interest of clergy in the strength and prosperity of the parish system is not to doubt their sincerity, but to face a major ecclesiastical social fact. One might also wish that Skinner had more fully recognised not only the passion of Tractarian social criticism, but their no less passionate critique and criticism of Dissenters, evangelicals in general and the Whigs. In this respect, their criticism of the Whigs often flowed from a critique of their non-Anglican Christian supporters. These

are minor questions posed by a book rich and rewarding in prodigious research, convincing analysis and revisionist insight. It is to be hoped that this book and its author will have an important and ongoing impact on the history of Victorian religious life.

Other reviews:

oxford scholarship

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199273232.001.0001/acprof-9780199273232> [2]

oxford journals

<http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXIII/500/235.full> [3]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/644>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/3618>

[2] <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199273232.001.0001/acprof-9780199273232>

[3] <http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXIII/500/235.full>