

# Comment

On 14 July 1833 John Keble preached on 'National Apostasy' at the assize service in the university church in Oxford. Newman, perhaps myth-makingly, established that date as the beginning of the Oxford Movement. In J. A. Froude's phrase, it was the 'Counter-Reformation' at long last, within the Church of England. The sermon itself was intended to stir up Anglican consciences against the will of the British government to suppress ten bishoprics in the Church of Ireland. The Church that had so long counted on the benevolent support of the State was now suddenly alarmed into fear of State control. Hurrell Froude, Newman's dearest friend, who died of consumption three years later, at the age of thirty-three, denounced what he called 'the gentleman heresy' – specifically, he meant the interested friendship of the Tory Party for the established Church. The 'Erastianism' of the Church made it a conservative force, and the word of the Lord had to be tailored to fit the Enlightenment rationalism of the average country squire. The 'Tracts for the Times', which began as popular leaflets but gradually turned into learned treatises, aimed at reawakening Catholic ecclesiology and spirituality. With all the ambiguities and absurdities that hindsight has discovered, the Oxford Movement plainly 'did reopen the Catholic sources of the Anglican tradition. For better and no doubt also for worse, Anglicanism has been irreversibly marked by the Oxford Movement.

The anniversary is being celebrated with reaffirmations of Catholicism, as well as by a good deal of Anglo-Catholic self-examination. In *Essays Catholic and Radical*, edited by Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams (Bowerdean Press, £12), the self-criticism is quite savage. In particular, the political blindspots of the Movement are ruthlessly exposed. Keble's sermon never questioned that the Catholic and Presbyterian Irish people should go on paying for the upkeep of Anglo-Irish bishops. Faced with having to pacify machine-breaking rioters in the village of Coln St Alwyn where he was curate, Keble found that they had put up a local Methodist lay-preacher to argue their case. Valerie Pitt's essay is a devastating critique of the Oxford Movement – "all that concerned them in the state of the nation was the welfare of the Church". In 1844, as she notes, when 'everybody' waited with bated breath for news from Newman's retreat at Littlemore, Engels published *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Cardinal Ratzinger – "it is of the essence of authority to be concrete" – is worried that ARCIC

leaves us in the dark about the relation between political and ecclesiastical authority in this sceptred isle (see *Insight*, March 1983). The former archbishop of Munich must certainly have a good deal of experience of how Church and State can work together harmoniously. It is perhaps not the most opportune moment to complain of Anglican vulnerability to Tory pressure. The 'influential lay Catholics' who want a certain priest out of CND and back in a parish – not, presumably, *their* parish – sound rather like latter-day proponents of 'the gentleman heresy'. The astonishing lack of political and diplomatic judgement revealed in the formal circular letter sent out by the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to the United Kingdom to members of the public who wrote to him about Mgr Bruce Kent *may* be an uncharacteristic aberration on the individual's part. It is more likely to afford a fair glimpse of the mind of an individual whose imponderable influence is usually well concealed. The individual's mind on these matters may even be quite typical of the Vatican diplomatic service all over the world. After all, although the rare priest who gets connected with leftish political campaigns soon faces the displeasure of his ecclesiastical superiors, the majority of the bishops in the Catholic Church are always pleased to grace great State occasions, juntas and all. For that matter, is the Anglican way of finding suitable bishops significantly less effective than the Vatican way?

Through Newman and others, of course, the Oxford Movement left its mark on the Roman Catholic Church – again, no doubt, for better and for worse. In the aftermath of ARCIC, we badly need criteria for establishing how deeply we hold the same faith. No one who has joined in worship, whether in an ancient cathedral or a country parish, can doubt the essential solidity of ordinary Anglican devotion. All the same, doctrine needs to be spelled out. One of the most welcome manifestations – manifestos – of the anniversary celebrations, then, is a new series of small books – 'Faith and the Future' – by theologians in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. It has got off to a good start with a remarkable essay on Christian ethics by David Brown – *Choices* (Basil Blackwell, £3.95 paperback). St Thomas Aquinas, he says (p 26), is "undoubtedly the greatest moral theologian the Church has ever produced". This reaffirmation of traditional theology deserves attention among Catholics who are not in communion with Canterbury. If this is the voice of the Oxford Movement today they could not treat it as the voice of a stranger.