

Bishops and Religious 1897-1914

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Introduction

THE REVIVAL OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES among Anglicans from the 1840s onwards was a process fraught with controversies. Bishops were placed from the beginning at the heart of these conflicts and so their actions are an integral part of the history of Anglican Religious Life. Yet they are often viewed as simply reactive, grudgingly coming to accept the revival and doing little to encourage seriously its energies and achievements. The bishops are portrayed by some historical narratives as the great obstacle with which heroic Religious battled for acceptance. After all, it was nearly a hundred years before communities in the Church of England gained official recognition in 1935 with the creation of the Advisory Council. However, the evolving relationship of communities and bishops was much more complex and nuanced. Nothing illustrates this more than the debates at the Lambeth Conferences of 1897 and 1908, which reveal an appreciation and support for Religious Life among bishops far more understanding and concerned than many contemporary Religious might have believed. To understand the episcopal-Religious relationship among Anglicans, it would seem worth reconsidering these forgotten debates.

It is true, however, that the original context of this relationship was one of much mutual hostility and suspicion. Many bishops in the 1840s and 1850s regarded communities as a threat to what was then considered orthodox and acceptable to most Anglicans. The traditions of Religious Life were associated closely with Roman Catholicism, the deep-seated fear of which—as much political as theological—dominated much of the early reaction to the revival. In addition, some founders of communities and their supporters were seen (sometimes accurately) as uncompromising and maverick, a threat to the discipline of the Church and episcopal authority. Being linked to rebelliousness and ecclesiastical lawlessness was an image hard for Religious to dispel. Bishops thoughtful enough to look deeper appreciated the apostolic and biblical routes of community life. They saw too the great service communities could render to the Church, especially in answering the urgency of the social and pastoral challenges presented by rapid population growth and industrialization. Yet even these more sympathetic bishops were anxious, as shown in contemporary debates, about the status of Religious vows. Were they equivalent to marriage or ordination vows? If the vows did not have such status, then they should not be called vows. If they did, however, they were indissoluble. In an age when marriages could only be dissolved by an Act of Parliament, the comings and goings of vowed members in the early communities could consequently be viewed as a scandal. The bishops' anxieties were not therefore all trivial considerations or based upon prejudice.

After several decades, the active hostility to communities had been tempered to some extent, although the atmosphere of mistrust was still strong. This underlying change had come about for several reasons. There was a growing respect, instead and outside the Church, for the solid achievements of sisterhoods in particular, whether it be in nursing or education or other social projects. The sheer numbers of vocations also signaled even to the most hostile of

bishops that this revival was a long-term presence in the Church and not a mere passing fashion or enthusiasm. At the same time, a new generation of bishops influenced by the Oxford Movement were more positive in their theology towards the idea of Religious Life. As more priests had embraced the vowed life, bishops were perhaps more prepared to listen to the arguments of male Religious than they had been of the early women founders. On the other side too, Religious communities saw the value of cooperation with bishops and the benefits formal recognition of their call would bring both to attracting vocations and exercising their ministries. Whilst remaining nervous about episcopal interference, Religious had come to realize that they needed bishops. These were the ingredients of a slowly improving relationship.

Sources of controversy

Yet significant problems remained. By the 1890s, bishops, in many parts of the Anglican Communion as well as Britain, were disturbed and perplexed by controversies surrounding Religious communities in their dioceses. One major anxiety was that they were being placed in the middle of arguments over property. Individuals who joined communities were sometimes wealthy, bringing buildings and land as well as cash. If such an individual decided to leave at a later date, the ownership of any such property or assets became a matter of conflict. At this stage, the diocesan bishop might be asked to intervene. Yet rarely had he had input into the community's legal arrangements, nor did the community's constitution necessarily set out his duties. Sorting through the claims and counterclaims of such disputes took up much time and the bishop could be put into a difficult and unresolvable situation, as both parties expected the bishop to protect their interests. Understandably, bishops wished to insist upon firm legal guidelines for community's assets *before* such disputes arose.

In Britain especially, they were also worried about the press. Popular 'tabloid' journalism had its beginnings in the 1880s and 1890s, as the effects of the 1870 Education Act contributed to wider levels of literacy among the population. Altercations within the Church were one of the obvious subjects for such newspapers, whilst eccentric Religious had provided headlines since the early days of the revival—from the ecclesiastical adventures of Father Ignatius to the ladies of Mayfair parading veils and other Religious paraphernalia as mere fashion accessories. But by the 1890s, something far more damaging was being reported: bitter law suits over property, lurid allegations of immorality in institutions run by Religious, and public pronouncements from some Religious defying the authority of bishops.¹ At the 1897 Lambeth Conference, Randall Davidson, then Bishop of Winchester, noted how 'evil' could grow side by side with good, and, whilst praising communities' 'revolutionary work', warned of a 'growing independence or lawlessness on the part of some ...'. He went on to refer explicitly to the daily press within the previous six months to illustrate his argument.² Bad publicity was not then a marginal concern.

To other bishops, the main difficulty was the actions of community chaplains and the worship in community chapels. These were sometimes at the forefront of what was then termed 'advanced ritual', but which to some was pseudo-Papist superstition, defying the regulations of the Church and promoting unsound doctrine. As the Bishop of Grahamstown in South Africa would put it at the 1897 Conference, 'Undisciplined devotion, however piously it may be intended, is too often a source of practical pervading heresy in the Church ... ' Devotions to the Virgin Mary was his main example. This issue of worship was becoming more significant as the number of priests under Religious vows was growing with the advent of men's

¹ One prominent example was the altercation between the Sisters of the Church and the Archbishop of Canterbury in the mid-1890s.

² For this and all quotations from the 1897 Lambeth Conference debates, see the papers at Lambeth Palace Library, LC38 pp129-186.

communities. A bishop might engineer the removal of a chaplain from a sisterhood, but had less leeway with respect to an ordained male Religious who defied his wishes in matters such as ceremonial.

Finally, all these issues had now become inter-Provincial as many communities had houses in more than one country. To many bishops, this was no longer a matter for diocesan guidelines, of individual bishops reaching accommodations with Religious in their diocese, but rather an issue requiring regulation applying throughout the Anglican Communion.

All these points prompted calls for the subject of Religious communities to be debated at the 1897 Lambeth Conference and it was placed on the agenda. This created an ambivalent reaction amongst the communities' themselves. On the one hand, there was a sense of acute apprehension about possible 'regulations' which the bishops might propose and then ask each Province to pass into their canon law. Yet on the other, the very fact of the debate was a sign of how important Religious communities had become amongst Anglicans, and the Conference might produce the formal recognition from the Church which had for so long been withheld. Such recognition would be a protection against unsympathetic bishops, and provide procedures by which communities and their work could be safeguarded against hostile interference.

Communities began to organize a contribution to the forthcoming debate, led by the SSJE (Cowley) fathers, who consulted amongst women superiors as well as men.³ Father F W Puller SSJE had written a paper in August 1893 for an internal Chapter discussion in his community when he wished to oppose a motion which would have given the Bishop of Oxford the inherent right to be the Bishop Visitor to SSJE. This paper gave a sketch of the development of jurisdiction in communities from the earliest centuries of Christianity. His conclusions were that bishops may have visitational jurisdiction only by free grant of a Religious community, and that any Religious superior has jurisdiction from freely given vows *not* from the Church. Religious Life, he believed, was insufficiently understood among the English episcopate to allow communities to be subject without reservation to bishops appointed by a Prime Minister. An Anglican bishop might act destructively of a community with none of the opportunity for any redress or appeal to a higher authority, as there was in the Roman Catholic Church where the Pope could intervene. This influential paper was reprinted with a new preface by Puller, dated 2 July 1897, to coincide with the Lambeth Conference, and it became the possible basis on which Anglican Religious might negotiate with the bishops if any regulations were proposed.

The debate at Lambeth 1897

The Lambeth Conference met in July 1897. The procedural structure was for an initial morning plenary session on a subject, the discussion being open to all participants. If this produced sufficient grounds for a deeper consideration, the bishops would then elect a committee to consider the subject. This committee would hold around six meetings over the next week, sometimes dividing itself into subgroups for various aspects if that was judged appropriate. A small subcommittee would draft a report, pulling together the views and ideas expressed in the committee's deliberations. The agreed report would then be submitted to another plenary session of all the bishops, which would then decide if a resolution of the whole conference should be passed.

The initial plenary session on Religious communities at the 1897 Conference was held on 6 July, and revealed amongst those who spoke a support for Religious Life that would have heartened communities had they been present. The Bishop of Oxford (the historian William Stubbs) opened the discussion by remarking that he had never had any 'serious trouble' with Religious, only 'a few anxieties'. He raised the issues already outlined: property, vows and

³ For example, papers in the SSB archive document consultation with Reverend Mother SSB.

dispensation, a bishop's relations to a community in his diocese, Visitors, spheres of authority between bishop and superior. To consider all these, he moved there be a committee formed to report to the final plenary session. One significant remark he made was that an 'inquisitorial power' should not be lodged in the hands of any diocesan bishop with respect to private devotion. The Bishop of Wakefield, after generously praising the establishment of communities, echoed this point, remarking that liberty was need as well as law. He added: 'Women can not work with constant interference.'

Other contributions were equally sympathetic. The Bishop of Bloemfontein spoke movingly of how laity had asked him to found communities so that the 'devoted life' was 'set forth amongst us'. The Bishop of St Andrews suggested that a conference of Religious should be arranged to discuss any proposed regulation, as he did not want ill-feeling produced amongst communities. The Bishop of London added that most of the problems with communities arose from 'our predecessors' being 'too grudging and unsympathetic'. The Bishop of Calcutta praised the diversity of Religious Life.

There were a few voices less approving. The Bishop of Ely worried that communities might grow too powerful and 'overshadow' the Church: he felt the Archbishops and the Lambeth conference must have the power to dissolve communities. The Bishop of Grahamstown was firm that there could be no recognition without 'submission to order'. He stressed the need to force communities to have regular leadership elections: 'The heads of communities are so often worn out by the toil and anxiety of the work, that they may get incapable without knowing that they are so themselves ...'

However, the general tone was of praise and support for Religious Life. The contribution which stands out, however, as one reads the debate a century later, came from Charles Grafton, Bishop of Fond du Lac in the USA, the only bishop present who had been a member of a community.⁴ He made three important points. First, he believed Religious Life was a vocation and should be treated as such. Second, it did not belong, as priesthood did, to the corporate life of the Church, but instead belonged 'to the economy of the Holy Ghost'. Obedience to a Religious superior was a voluntary action of love, not the result of the legislative action of the Church. Unlike 'the fixity of ministerial orders' then, he believed the work of the Holy Ghost in the call of Religious Life manifested itself in a variety of different forms. Bishops had to trust this call to have a corrective power in itself. Third, he reminded the Conference that in Religious, bishops were dealing with 'special devotional temperaments' that could be 'personally emotional' about small matters of worship. A high-handed approach would not therefore be advisable. He went on to echo the arguments put forward in Father Puller's paper, and concluded by suggesting bishops should regulate communities only in relation to property, financial donations and in insisting on communities' having sound government.

The plenary session appointed a committee of twenty-one bishops to produce a report, on both communities and deaconesses. The committee included Stubbs of Oxford and Creighton of London (both church historians), Davidson of Winchester, with bishops from New Zealand (1), Korea (1), USA (5), South Africa (2), Australia (2), and Canada (1). The secretary was Bishop James Randall of Reading.

The committee's report

The committee's report to the plenary session on 22 July 1897, began with an expression of thankfulness for the revival of the Religious Life and for the communities willingness for closer relations with the Episcopate. The bishops desired a 'reasonable freedom of organization and development' for communities. This liberty should be regulated to 'ensure

⁴ Grafton had been an early member of SSJE and a founder of the American Province of the Society.

the maintenance of the Faith, and the order and discipline of the Church, together with a due recognition of family claims and the rights of individual members of a Community.’ The report outlined the problem issues as: vows and dispensation from them, the licensing of priests in communities, and the powers and procedures of Visitation. The need for property to be demonstrated as legally held was paramount, and the report suggested that episcopal recognition of a community could follow once this was established. The Conference plenary passed Resolution 11 of that Conference commending the committee’s report, and in Resolution 12 asked the committee for a fuller report within the year.

The continuing committee was without the twelve members from countries outside Great Britain, and so was reduced to nine in total. It decided to consult representatives of the communities in Britain, most notably at a meeting at Cowley, Oxford, on 12 January 1898. This was chaired by Bishop Stubbs and attended by Charles Gore CR and four SSJE fathers. Women’s communities were represented by several Wardens rather than any Reverend Mother Superiors. A report was produced later in 1898, which unequivocally recommended mutual recognition. Communities were to acknowledge the authority of the episcopate, whilst bishops would recognize community life as justified by the ‘authority of scripture and primitive custom’. However, the consultation group was dominated by SSJE fathers; and these Religious appear to have been on the opposite side of the internal SSJE debate of 1893 and did not advocate the principles of Father Puller’s paper. The resulting proposals therefore agreed that a community’s Visitor was to be the diocesan bishop of the mother-house. (If he were not willing, then the appointment would reside with the Province’s Archbishop.) The Visitor was to ensure the community’s constitution was approved by a standing committee of bishops, and that it was observed. The diocesan bishop would licence clergy for community chapels. The constitution had to include reference to the supreme position of the Church of England’s doctrine and discipline, a proper Governing Body, and provision for release from vows, for worship and for the disposal of property.

The 1898 report was sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury but it was not published as the second part of the Conference’s commission on deaconesses had not been written. Momentum was also lost because of the deaths of several key members of the committee, particularly Stubbs and Creighton. Davidson of Winchester took over as chair, but by September 1901, the Secretary was writing to him saying there were now only six active members of the committee left.⁵ Eventually, the incomplete report was published in 1902 but no action followed, either by the bishops or the convocations and the matter was dropped. One reason was that Davidson succeeded as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1903 and was preoccupied by other matters.

For the communities, the delay changed everything. The first decade of the twentieth century was not only a time of growth in numbers and increased confidence for them, but also one in which more diverse currents of thought and practice emerged more strongly. No longer would the cautious approach of SSJE be acceptable to an increasingly confident wing of the Church that might be termed ‘Anglo-Papalist’, to which several communities now attached themselves. By some, this was nicknamed the ‘Back to Baroque’ movement. The aim of its advocates was reunion with Roman Catholicism, but rather than converting individually (as Rome preferred), they would stay Anglican and work to make Anglicanism mirror the Roman Church so closely that *corporate* reunion would be achieved. Ritual and doctrine had therefore to be adopted and copied from existing Roman Catholic practice and catechesis: whether it be the Latin canon of the Mass or the Roman Catholic dogma on the Virgin Mary. The only disagreement with Rome came over the validity of Anglican orders, but the ‘Anglo-Papalists’

⁵ Bishop Randall of Reading to Bishop Davidson of Winchester, 14 September 1901, Davidson Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, Vol 73 (1901), pp171-172. Seven members of the committee were left, but the Bishop of Lincoln had apparently not attended any meetings nor would do so in the future.

were convinced this difference would be overcome once their mission was complete. Among Anglican Religious, the Benedictines of Caldey Island led the way. Some 'Anglo-Papalist' communities would eventually become Roman Catholics, including most of the Caldey Island monks and the first community of Benedictine nuns resident at West Malling. However, they were replaced by others, whilst many communities became split between 'Prayer Book Catholics' and 'Anglo-Papalists'. The latter became then a significant voice amongst Anglican Religious in the coming decades. Their position undermined any possibility of unanimity among Anglican Religious, for the idea of 'regulation' by bishops who did not share their 'Roman' outlook was impossible.

As the 1908 Lambeth Conference approached, the issue of regulation of Religious communities surfaced once more. On 11 July 1908, at a plenary of the Conference, the bishops resolved (Resolution 7) to circulate the 1898 report and asked Provinces to reply to the Archbishop of Canterbury by 31 July 1910. There is no contribution recorded which was critical of Religious Life in this session. Through 1909 and 1910, agreement trickled in to Lambeth from Scottish, Australian, US, and South African bishops. Only in the USA was there any attempt at creating a canon on Religious Life—an episode beyond the scope of this essay. In the Church of England, the evangelical Bishop Edmund Knox of Manchester blocked any action in the convocation of York Province, presumably because he could not bear to concede even a nominal acceptance of Religious Life by discussing the matter. With no recognition or regulation possible in the northern Province, the Archbishop of Canterbury decided it was best to leave the matter alone in his Province. In 1914, the First World War broke out and other priorities overtook the Church. The issue could not be returned to until the 1920s when the debate had to begin afresh in different circumstances.

Conclusion

Both bishops and communities might appear to have missed an opportunity in the prevarications of the period 1898-1914. Yet the changes in Religious Life would have happened regardless. Had the 1898 regulations been adopted, especially the clauses about adherence to specific interpretations of Anglican doctrine, the communities and individual Religious who adopted an Anglo-Papalist outlook would have had to act outside these rules. This in turn would have maintained the image of Religious as 'lawless' and 'rebellious' and given support to the minority of bishops who were opposed to Religious Life in principle. It would also have meant an unavoidable and damaging split in the ranks of communities, with factions for and against the regulations.

In the event, the Anglo-Papalists in communities in the Church of England maintained a veto on any acceptance of 'regulation', as the other communities feared any split among Religious. Attempts in the 1920s and a further discussion at the 1930 Lambeth Conference came to nothing. Agreement when it did come in the Church of England was voluntary via the Advisory Council, set up in 1935, and which has worked well. Later, the impact of the Second Vatican Council among Roman Catholics and the development of ecumenism have made many of the disputes of the early twentieth century redundant. In retrospect therefore, the lack of agreement on regulation in the pre-1914 period has proved advantageous to Religious Life. The opportunity that was missed was to produce guidelines on a Communion-wide basis. When regulation and/or voluntary agreement has been reached, it has differed from province to province. However, as most communities have set up a provincial structure when they have become international, this has not been as disruptive as it might have been.

The importance of the pre-1914 debates is therefore not in their failure to produce regulation, but in their intrinsic recognition of Religious Life among Anglicans as integral to the Church and its mission. Instead of illustrating hostility, the 1897 debates reveal strong support for Religious Life. Those bishops who may have been opposed remained mostly silent,

perhaps an acknowledgement that their arguments would no longer command general episcopal support. This was a remarkable change from the position a generation previously. It is easy to allow the documented narratives of some bishops' conflicts with Religious communities to mask the underlying trend in late Victorian Anglicanism for approval of Religious Life. The contemporary Lambeth Conference debates suggest the arguments over its significance to the Church were won earlier than is sometimes supposed.

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