

The Episcopate of
Benjamin Tredwell Onderdonk,
IV Bishop of New York

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History 3
January 8, 1970

INTRODUCTION

The first half of the eighteenth century was a period of transition, adjustment, expansion and experimentation in the United States. These characteristics affected the whole of the nation, including its religions. The Episcopal Church was no exception. This period in the Church's history is often pictured in terms of missionary expansion and the opening up of the West. Events were taking place, however, in the East which would have far-reaching consequences in the total history of the Church.

The Episcopal Church was having what might today be called a "crisis of identity." It had been set free from the Church of England, but it had no model to examine in order to see what an autonomous member of the "Anglican Communion," as it later came to be known, should be. It was not only in a search to discover its mission; it had to struggle to determine its character. One man who played a large part in both of these tasks was the IV Bishop of New York, Benjamin Tredwell Onderdonk. As head of the most influential diocese in the American Church, Bishop Onderdonk was in a position to offer leadership to the Church as it examined itself and its role. In addition, he had within his jurisdiction a large rugged and unsettled area with conditions similar to those in the West, as well as a large urban area confronting the Church with problems of the poor, the immigrants and the working classes. The variety of opportunities and difficulties before

him was unique.

Most of what has previously been written about Bishop Onderdonk is concerned with his trial and suspension. It is not the intention of this author to recover the same ground except in summary fashion. The scope of this paper, rather, is to examine the work and thought of Bishop Onderdonk in order to understand how he confronted the problems facing the Church at the time and what conclusions he drew from his work as to the nature and purpose of the Church.

Benjamin Treadwell Onderdonk was born in the City of New York on July 15, 1791, two years after both the United States and the Protestant Episcopal Church in that nation came into being. His father, Dr. John Onderdonk, a prominent physician and staunch Episcopalian in that city, was later to serve an extended term, from 1801 to 1832, on the vestry of Trinity Parish.

Benjamin began his studies at Columbia College at the age of 15. Upon graduation in 1809 he went to study for ordination with John Henry Hobart, the assistant minister at Trinity, soon to become the third Bishop of New York. Onderdonk was ordained to the diaconate at St. Paul's Chapel on August 2, 1812, and worked under Bishop Hobart at Trinity. The following year he married Elizabeth Moscrop. Little is recorded about their marriage; however, she was the mother of his five children and survived her husband. In 1814 he was named assistant minister at Trinity. Bishop Hobart ordained him to the priesthood in Trinity Church, Newark, New Jersey, on July 26, 1815, eleven days after his twenty-fourth birthday.

Onderdonk's diligence as a pastor and his skill as a preacher soon won him a leading place among New York churchmen. He served as secretary to the diocesan convention from 1816 to 1830, secretary to

the House of Bishops in 1817, and was made a delegate to the General Convention four times in succession. He donated his vast knowledge of the operations of the Church to the newly created General Theological Seminary, becoming its first Professor of the Nature, Ministry and Polity of the Church, a post he retained until his death, forty years later.

During this period of his life, Onderdonk gained the admiration and respect of many of his associates. Dr. William Berrian, the rector of Trinity Church, had known him since college and included, in 1847, a sketch of Onderdonk's character in his history of the parish:

"In his very youth he was grave, sedate and thoughtful, to a degree which is seldom seen; correct in his principles; pure in heart, and unspotted in life.... And when he at length entered upon the exercise of his office, it was with such a devout temper of mind, such a conscientious view of his duties, and such a fixed determination to discharge them as within the range of my observation, at least, has never been surpassed.... He was not only indefatigable in the performance of his public duties, but most assiduous, and faithful as a pastor, going about continually doing good, and especially among the sick and the needy, the afflicted and distressed.... I was constantly among the people, where he was held in the utmost respect and affection.... They are witnesses with me how holily and unblamedly he behaved himself among us."1

On September 12, 1830, Bishop Hobart died in Auburn, New York. The Diocesan Convention met a few weeks later at Trinity Church in New York City with the assigned task of electing a new bishop. There was little doubt whom it would choose. On October 8, 1830, Benjamin T. Onderdonk was elected on the first ballot by an overwhelming concurrence

of both orders. By a motion the vote was made unanimous. The Bishop-elect was notified and accepted the call that afternoon.²

Onderdonk was the logical person to follow John Henry Hobart as Bishop of New York. The Presiding Bishop, William White, later revealed that Hobart had hoped that Onderdonk would be his successor.³

On Friday, November 26, 1830, Bishop White, together with Bishops Thomas Brownell of Connecticut and Henry Ustick Onderdonk, the assistant Bishop of Pennsylvania and brother of the candidate, consecrated Onderdonk and instituted him as IV Bishop of New York. In his sermon on that occasion the Bishop of Connecticut outlined the role of the Christian minister and then addressed the candidate:

"To you, my Reverend Brother, I trust I need add no exhortations concerning the nature of your holy office, or in the interesting relations in which it places you. The observations which have already been made upon the dignity and importance of the Christian Ministry, and the qualifications required for the faithful performance of its duties, have long been familiar to your mind; and your reflections of the office to which you are now consecrated, will not have failed to give emphasis and force to the admonishment of the Apostle ... 'Take heed to the Ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it.'"⁴

The task before Bishop Onderdonk in 1830 was immense. The Diocese of New York encompassed the entire state, —about 50,000 square miles— a vast part of which was still unsettled. There were 140 clergy and 182 congregations scattered throughout the state, and Bishop Onderdonk's life, like that of virtually all the bishops of his

time, was necessarily a test of endurance in struggling over the rough terrain to reach the small and remote congregations committed to his charge. There was great potential for the Church during that part of its history, but only if men could be found willing and able to go into these regions to preach the Gospel. "I must renew, as a subject of deep lamentation," Bishop Hobart had said in his last address to the Diocese at the Convention of 1829, "the insufficient supply of clergymen."⁵ The new Bishop of New York realized from the first the nature and scope of his task. In his first Diocesan Convention address he stressed his two main and related concerns, which the published journal saw need to italicize: "education for the ministry and missionary operations."⁶ Providing these continued as his chief objectives throughout his active episcopate.

Recruitment and education for the ministry were essential if the Church was to accomplish its mission. As we have seen, Bishop Onderdonk was already involved directly in the education process at General Seminary, although as the demands of the episcopacy increased, we later find one student at the Seminary lamenting that the Bishop's classes were neither "very frequent nor very regular."⁷ Yet the statistics provide impressive evidence of the success of his campaign to recruit priests for the Church. From 140 clergy in 1830 the list grew to 249 in 1838 before the Diocese was divided. The following year he reported 52 candidates for Holy Orders, with 21 of them studying at General Seminary.

His stress on education was not only directed toward preparing men for the ministry. He saw education as an essential Christian task. In one address he stated his belief that "it is unnatural to sever man's intellectual and moral from his spiritual part."⁸ He was an active supporter of the national and diocesan level Sunday School Union, the New York Bible and Prayer Book Society, the Tract Society, and other educational arms of the Church. In addition, he was a trustee of Columbia College and the Visitor of St. Paul's College in College Park, Queens. In 1837 he lauded Columbia and the new Geneva College for promoting education "against the tendency of the age. They are both colleges exerting a most happy influence on the prosperity of our primitive Catholic Church."⁹

To Bishop Onderdonk education was one part of the larger concern of mission. The City of New York provided one of the most obvious areas in which to exercise that concern. During the first part of the nineteenth century the city had grown up rapidly. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the rising importance of New York as a major transportation and commercial center had led to an influx of immigrants and poor people among the expanded working classes. In 1831 Bishop Onderdonk oversaw the creation of the City Mission Society and appointed Benjamin C. Cutler as the first city missionary for those whom he noted were "totally unable to provide themselves with the ministrations of religion."¹⁰ He was particularly concerned with impoverished and

lower class Irish and English immigrants who were members of the Anglican Communion. Under the normal system of renting pews which then prevailed throughout the Church in America, these people were unable to go to normal Sunday services even if they had a desire to do so. The first goal of the new City Mission Society, therefore, was to establish a center of worship which would be open with no pews to transients, migrants and the poor of the city. On November 19, 1831, Bishop Onderdonk consecrated the Mission Church of the Holy Evangelists. Shortly thereafter he spoke of the necessity of this church, pointing to the poor families of the city who

"have heretofore been in great danger of being lost to their Church, and even to religion generally, by want of proper provision for their attendance at our place of worship. That want is now happily supplied. The Mission Church is opened to all without money and without price."¹¹

The need for "voluntary support" parishes continued an important priority throughout his tenure.¹²

Bishop Onderdonk's involvement with city mission continued throughout his active episcopate. Two years after Holy Evangelists was opened, a second missionary, Lot Jones, was appointed, and a second parish, Epiphany, was started. In 1832 he underlined the importance of mission to the French immigrants, laying the cornerstone for the new building of the Church du St. Esprit.¹³ At the Convention of the Diocese in 1837 he spoke of the needs of the

increasing number of Germans in the city,¹⁴ and in 1839 he appointed a Negro deacon, Isaiah G. DeGrass, to be in charge of a mission station for Blacks in Jamaica, Newton and Flushing, Queens.¹⁵ And in 1844 he consecrated the "Floating Church of our Savior" to go from dock to dock in New York Harbor, with clergy holding services for seamen in port.

Bishop Onderdonk undertook his responsibility for the Church outside the city faithfully. His visitation schedule throughout his diocese was an arduous one. In 1833 he reported traveling 3,000 miles "to almost every extremity of the State,"¹⁶ and five years later the figure was up to 5,000 miles.¹⁷ But he was concerned with more than statistics; he sought to make his visitations worthwhile, and he made it his practice to wait an hour after services in the vestry rooms of parishes in order to meet with any clergy or laymen who might wish to speak with him.¹⁸ Under his administration the Diocese of New York increased in membership. By 1838 it was too large for one bishop to handle, and, acting on a new provision of the General Convention, New York became the first diocese to be split into two separate jurisdictions. William H. DeLancey was elected the first Bishop of Western New York, while Bishop Onderdonk continued to oversee the rest of the state.

During his tenure as Bishop of New York, Dr. Onderdonk oversaw the introduction into the American Church of the Oxford Movement. The

resulting controversy split the Church violently, and that strife came to focus on Onderdonk. Onderdonk became a symbol to both sides, and the history of the Oxford Movement in America finds its climax in the history of his life.

From the beginning, Onderdonk had been associated with the High Church teachings of his mentor and predecessor, John Henry Hobart. The subject of his first address as Bishop of New York, later published as a pamphlet, was "The character of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in its prominent distinctive features, considered in reference to its duties, thence resulting." In this speech he outlined the unique marks of the Episcopal Church as being the "establishment and maintenance of standards of faith; the conducting of public worship according to a prescribed form, and the episcopal constitution of the ministry."¹⁹ He defended in that address the doctrine behind the episcopal ministry as the major factor "which so broadly distinguishes us from the sects around us."²⁰ The reference to Protestant groups, here and elsewhere in his writings, as "sects" was not calculated to win approval from the Low Churchmen. He continued to support the principles of Hobart, although, in comparing the two men, one later commentator observed that "Onderdonk clung tenaciously to 'apostolic order' but lacked the Evangelical fervor. Ecclesiastical order overshadowed Evangelical truth."²¹

Bishop Onderdonk saw the Episcopal Church as the bastion of Catholic faith and order. Reviewing the religious scene in America in one of his addresses which stressed the need for the Episcopal Church's role in education, he noted:

"From the system of the Gospel as maintained and set forth in the standards of our Church, there is not a sect or denomination around us which does not depart in some essential particular."22

He further stressed the importance of the Apostolic Ministry:

"The Ministry has deposited with it, by the Divine Head of the Church, authority and power in matters which the word of God has joined in essential union with a state of favor with him in this world and the next."23

In 1833 John Keble preached a sermon on "National Apostasy," and the Oxford Movement" was on. That same year John Henry Newman published the first of 90 Tracts for the Times which came to stir violent debate on both sides of the Atlantic. The initial reaction to the Tractarians in America was mild. Unlike the situation in England, much groundwork for the Catholic revival had already been laid by the High Church bishops, such as Bishops Seabury, White (in his later days), Hobart, Dehon and Ravenscroft. But as people began to discuss the Tracts, particularly Tract 90, fears of Romanism soon spread. When the Tracts were finally published in America in 1839 strong voices of dissent were raised. Again unlike the experience in England, however, the Tracts received strong support from several bishops, and Bishop

Onderdonk was among the most enthusiastic of the supporters. In his address to the Diocese in 1841 he delivered a fierce attack on Protestantism which he viewed as

"riven to its center with internal dissension; covering with its name every variety of schism, and every bold and wicked innovation of heresy; forming an unholy alliance with the veriest infidelity; beguiling unstable souls with the show of unity, by adopting the watch-words of Protestant liberty, the glorious privilege of private judgment, and anathema on the corruptions of popery, wasting its energies on internal strife, arraying its votaries in deadly feud against each other, and thus strengthening the hands, and ministering to the triumphs of the mighty papal power which it would cripple and subdue. . . . we must remember that protestant is but a negative term. It implies no principle but that of dissent." ²⁴

In the same address he praised the "Oxford Divines" and the Tracts for seeing that "the evangelical system. . . is not characterized as mere protestantism, but as scriptural and primitive catholicity." ²⁵ He urged the clergy to study this concept "with their most serious attention," ²⁶ and recommended the Tracts, especially for their "spiritual views," to the laity. ²⁷

In a sermon on Christian Unity, delivered at the matriculation of students at the General Seminary in 1840, Bishop Onderdonk gave a further outline of his theological position. He spoke of the oneness of the Church founded by Christ as essential to its nature and defined the essential elements of the Church:

"These characteristics. . . , it appears from Holy Scripture, understood according to that best rule for interpreting it, the Catholic principles and usages of the first Christians, are its ministry, sacraments and worship." ²⁸

The one Church "is an outward and visible society"²⁹ which, through the services and the sacraments, properly administered by the ordained clergy, brings "the spiritual and eternal blessings of redemption."³⁰ The Church on earth must have government by bishops, the successors of the Apostles, which, from the beginning, was considered essential to its very being, and communion with him, acknowledgement of his pastoral superiority, and submission to his legitimate authority, inseparable from true religion."³¹ The Episcopal Church in the United States is a "branch of the Catholic Church"³² which existed from the beginning. Christian unity can only be found in the Catholic Church, by all accepting its baptism, worship and episcopal authority and by holding firm to "the great Catholic principles" of the historic faith. This sermon contains one of the clearest recitations of Bishop Onderdonk's theological position. Despising both Romanism and Protestantism, he saw the Episcopal Church as the guardian of the one true Catholic Church of God.

Bishop Onderdonk's views, together with his support of the Tracts, made him the object of suspicion, wrath and fear throughout Low Church circles. The Reverend James Milnor, the Rector of St. George's Church, New York City, in a letter to Bishop McIlvaine of Ohio on the support given to "this dangerous system" from Oxford, bemoaned that

"In our diocese, the bishop expresses his entire approval of its doctrines. In answer to a clergyman who said that he could go half way with the authors of the tracts, the bishop told him to read and study them more attentively, and he would be prepared, like himself, to go the whole. He inquires of all the candidates for orders, whether they have read them; and if not, urges them to do so." ³³

In the same letter, Dr. Milnor recounts the success of the tracts at the General Seminary and the inability of some of the remaining evangelical bishops to effectively oppose them. Looking toward the immediate future, he writes that "my fears grow still more serious, and my only confidence is, that 'when the enemy cometh in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him.' " ³⁴

Much of Bishop Onderdonk's involvement with the Oxford Movement and the rising protests against him derived from his connection with the General Seminary. Clarence Walworth was a student at the Seminary during this time. He later became a Roman Catholic priest, and in 1895 wrote down his remniscences of the period in a book entitled The Oxford Movement; or Glimpses of Life in an Anglican Seminary.

Although this book must be read with a critical eye, Walworth preserves some valuable impressions of life at the General Seminary and the people involved in the struggles of the period. He views Bishop Onderdonk in the 1840's as "a high churchman of the highest type. He was a fearless and tenacious polemic and strongly inclined in favor of the Oxford Movement." ³⁵ Yet, according to Walworth, Onderdonk could not properly be called a Tractarian. He was, rather, one of the "via media men but

strongly inclined to so much of Catholicism as the Anglican bridge would hold." Having an Anglican sense of compromise, the Bishop sought "to keep the 'boys' of the diocese in order, and not let them break things or disturb the diocese."³⁶ Yet Walworth concedes that he was a "fearless, ready-witted and sagacious man,"³⁷ and that "all the tractarian students in the institution recognized him as a protector"; his nature, however, made him "no great favorite at our seminary."³⁸ Bishop Onderdonk was at least no great favorite with the Low Church benefactor of the Seminary John Pintard. In a letter to his daughter he called him "the satellite of Bishop Hobart, whose bigotry he follows without his talents."³⁹

Bishop Onderdonk is usually regarded by latter day commentators as being one of the "older-fashioned doctrinal High Churchmen," as one puts it, who were "not ritualistic."⁴⁰ Were this so, he would probably not have been put in the center of the storm of controversy. As we have suggested, his doctrinal views were more advanced than Hobart's. His strong support for the Tracts and the contempt he expressed for Protestantism put him among the more radical voices of the Oxford Movement in America. But, further, he also paid considerable attention to the outward and visible signs of belief. His annual reports to the Diocese of New York contain frequent mention of the liturgical and architectural forms of worship he had observed during the past year. In 1836 he visited St. John's Church, Medina, which

had recently been completed. He commended it as "one of the chastest and best proportioned Gothic churches in the Diocese." He particularly admired the centrality of the altar, with the pulpit placed on the left side instead of its more usual place above the altar. "The effect of this," he told the Convention, "is the very proper one of presenting the altar as the chief place in the church and the pulpit as subsidiary to it -- a plan every way preferable to the so common one of making the altar a mere appendage to the desk."⁴¹ He enthusiastically approved the cross on top of the spire at both this church and one in Geddes, New York, as indicating "its sacred purpose, and as symbolizing the holy faith in which that worship is conducted."⁴² In 1839 he voiced his approval of such ritualistic structures as permanent fonts and credence tables.⁴³ Two years later he gave a glowing account of a service of Holy Communion at All Saints' Church, New York City, where the congregation remained at the end of the service and knelt while the remaining elements of the Eucharist were consumed:

"I have never witnessed a more appropriate and solemn observance of a rule often disregarded, and often observed with a mournful absence of the reverence with which the Church would rightly and piously invest every thing connected with the holy mysteries of the altar."⁴⁴

Bishop Onderdonk recommended the Oxford Tracts because they treated well "The reverence due to sacred things and sacred places," a reverence he had tried to inculcate in his laity throughout his episcopate. From the beginning he had been concerned with the financial stability of

the churches. To him this represented a theological, and not simply economic, principle. After St. Peter's Chapel, New York City, was consecrated in 1832 he expressed his desire to see the chapel remain a place of worship even after a larger church was built. It had been consecrated and, thus, set aside for a holy purpose forever. It should be neither turned over to secular use nor sold.⁴⁵ He raised this issue several times, and in 1837 he delivered a solemn warning, underscored in the journal of the convention, that church buildings "are not to be used for any other purposes than those of a holy and religious character."

Reverence, order, and proper worship were themes which the Bishop emphasized repeatedly. God and His Church were not to be taken lightly. Men show their love for and honor of God not only in their thought but in their actions. Mission to those in need, education, and worship were all a part of necessary Christian action. Along with mission and education he encouraged greater frequency in public worship and, most particularly, greater frequency in the celebration of the Eucharist. In 1842 All Saints' Church had a Eucharist on Ascension Day for the first time in its history. The Bishop praised this action, not only "because of its obvious propriety in itself," but also because of "its connection with the very desirable measure of increasing the number of occasions on which the Lord's Supper is statedly celebrated."⁴⁶ In the same year he rejoiced at the decision to celebrate the Eucharist

during the commencement ceremonies at the General Seminary. "It is delightful," he said, "to see the growing attachment of the age to Catholic principles and feelings."⁴⁷ By the following year he was able to report an overall increase in the number of services of Holy Communion throughout the Diocese, the service being held at least once a month in most places.⁴⁸ These words and feelings are not those of a "high and dry" solely contemplative High Churchman, but of one who was beginning to understand the consequences of the Oxford Tracts in relation to the life and worship of the Church.

Bishop Onderdonk's words and thoughts were not given expression in a vacuum. The Diocese of New York was the largest and, in many ways, the most important one in the American Church. The fact that the strongest support for the Oxford Movement in America was coming from the leader of this diocese did not please the Low Churchmen at all. They were ready to challenge; they but needed a strong enough issue. In 1843 their want was supplied.

Arthur Carey was a young graduate of the General Theological Seminary who presented himself in that year for ordination to the diaconate before Bishop Onderdonk. Carey was a brilliant student who had been greatly influenced by the Oxford Tracts. He was a candidate for holy orders from St. Peter's, New York City, but when he applied for the required recommendation from that parish, the Low Church Rector, the Rev. Dr. Hugh Smith, refused to give it, asserting

his inability to swear that Carey "had never written, taught or held anything contrary to the doctrine or discipline of the Protestant Episcopal Church."⁴⁹ The Rev. William Berrian, the Rector of Trinity Church, gladly took Carey in and signed the necessary testimonials. Dr. Smith, together with the Rev. Dr. Henry Anthon of St. Mark's, issued a formal protest against the ordination. Amid the charges and counter-charges Bishop Onderdonk agreed to hold a special examination of the candidate before eight priests, including Drs. Smith and Anthon. Carey proved to be acceptable to all but the two protesters. On July 2, 1843, the ordination began at St. Stephen's in the city. When the Bishop got to the proper point in the service, Smith and Anthon, vested and coming out into the aisle, protested against Carey's views which they held, were "in close alliance with the errors of the Church of Rome."⁵⁰ Bishop Onderdonk, replying that he had already investigated the charges and found that there were no grounds for refusing to ordain the candidate, proceeded with the service as the two protesting priests left the church. Bishop Onderdonk, recalled Clarence Walworth who was present, "could not have gone through with his part with more admirable tact and dignity."⁵¹

The ordination did not end the controversy; instead it became a springboard for far more heated and angered debate. Pamphlets and tracts abounded. Bishop Meade of Virginia wrote to Dr. Milnor:

"We have reached a fearful crisis in the Church. I had not supposed it possible that Romanism had so far regained its power among us, as recent events in your city and the language of some of our religious papers would indicate. A general and distressing contest throughout our whole church, in England and America, seems now inevitable.... Our next General Convention can scarcely avoid some agitation on the questions involved."52

Bishop Onderdonk stood firm behind his cause. In his convention address of 1843 a subtle attempt to protest against the Bishop's actions was roundly defeated,⁵³ and Onderdonk went on to condemn "the violent hostility to the true Catholic evangelical system."⁵⁴ "Wicked attempts are making without," he noted, "to rend us assunder by jealousies.... To meet these, be we all as one man."⁵⁵

As Bishop Meade had predicted, the events in New York did affect the tenor of the General Convention of 1844 meeting in Philadelphia. Although an attempt to condemn the Oxford Theology failed, an investigation into the General Seminary was begun. Perhaps more significant, however, was the passage of a canon on the trial of bishops, allowing three bishops to present another bishop for trial for "any crime or immorality, for heresy, or for violation of the constitution or canons of his diocese or of the general Church."⁵⁶

Rumors had been spreading around the Church of the improper conduct of Bishop Onderdonk in his personal life. Beginning in 1843 the Rev. James C. Richmond, known to some, including his own brother, as

"Crazy Richmond"⁵⁷ had been outwardly accusing the Bishop of immoral conduct. He purported to have evidence of Bishop Onderdonk petting several women and performing acts "of the grossest indecency. . . . No lady," he maintained, "is safe from the grossest, most palpable, and almost open insult. -- If he is not admonished, he must blow up."⁵⁸ He vowed to go to the General Convention in 1844 "to overthrow the Bishop of New York."⁵⁹

The Diocese of South Carolina presented a memorial to the General Convention asking investigation of the charges. Bishops Meade of Virginia, Otey of Tennessee, and Elliott of Georgia -- all three Low Churchmen -- went to New York to investigate the evidence. Less than a month after the new canon on the trial of bishops had been passed, these three bishops signed a presentment of Bishop Onderdonk for trial on charges of "immorality and impurity."⁶⁰

On December 10, 1844, the court convened in St. John's Chapel, New York City. To all nine charges brought before him, Bishop Onderdonk uttered the same plea: "not guilty."⁶¹ A string of witnesses was brought forward. For each charge made there was only one witness. Each purported incident had taken place from seven to two years before the canon under which he was tried was passed. The testimony of the witnesses was strikingly uncorroborated by either further events (in each case the Bishop was invited back into the homes of the women he was

supposed to have so insulted) or additional witnesses to the alleged actions. No charges were made of Bishop Onderdonk having committed adultery. The events were alleged to have taken place in rather public places, such as the back of an open carriage. One key witness testified that during a half hour ride (which only covered one mile) Bishop Onderdonk rested his hand on her naked bosom for the duration of the journey as he engaged in a long conversation with a passenger in the front seat. When questioned about her reaction when the Bishop made his advances, she replied, "I was tempted to leap from the carriage." Yet she refused to utter even a protest to the Bishop for fear of being heard by the people in the front seat.⁶² Bishop Onderdonk was apparently a gregarious man whose mannerisms, though well-intentioned, could often be mistaken for impropriety. "I have seen on the part of the Bishop," wrote his good friend Bishop Whittingham, "so much familiarity and coarseness of manner, if you choose -- that I know well how he could give ground for wrong accusation."⁶³ But these mannerisms did not constitute immorality.

On January 2, 1845, the Bishops made their decision. Bishop Onderdonk was found guilty by a vote of 11 to 6 on five counts alleging that the Bishop had touched a woman with impure intentions and one count of being "under the influence of, and improperly excited by, vinous or spirituous liquors." All the Evangelical Bishops, along with Bishop Hopkins of Vermont and Brownell of Connecticut, voted to condemn him.

The rest of the High Church bishops voted for acquittal. That the issue of churchmanship was a large factor is impossible to deny. A campaign against the High Church bishops was in progress, and Bishop Onderdonk's trial was a key part of that campaign. The Evangelical victory in this trial and in the resignation of Benjamin's brother Henry Ustick Onderdonk, were seen as the beginning of a full-scale purge. Dr. Henry Anthon's exuberant letter a month later to Bishop Hopkins clearly expressed this desire. Speaking of Bishops Doane and Whittingham, he wrote: "What shall we say of New Jersey and Maryland? Thorns and thistles will yet spring up in their path."⁶⁴ The spirit of the times is well caught in a letter to the Churchman, a New York Episcopal newspaper, of January 18, 1845. Signing himself "Anti-Puseyite," the writer condemns the Tractarianism and "popish errors" advocated by Bishop Hopkins and suggests that "he ought surely to be presented for trial on the charge of heresy, or, if that will not hold, for immorality."⁶⁵

The part of the Church most hurt by the trial was the Diocese of New York. Most of the Evangelical bishops had sought to depose Bishop Onderdonk and be rid of him for good. The High Church bishops were in a dilemma: they were being forced to levy a penalty on a man they considered not guilty. Two possibilities, other than deposition, were open to them: admonition or suspension. On the first ballot all six who had voted for acquittal asked that Bishop Onderdonk, in the words of Bishop Doane, "receive the lightest admonition contemplated by the Canon."⁶⁶

By the third ballot, however, it became evident that they would have to vote for suspension in order to save him from the graver penalty of deposition. On January 3, 1845, the Presiding Bishop, Philander Chase, signed the order suspending Benjamin Tredwell Onderdonk "from the office of a Bishop in the Church of God, and from all the functions of the sacred ministry."⁶⁷ No limit was set on the length of the suspension. New York was without a bishop and without the power to elect a successor. Making matters worse for the Bishop and his reputation, the court had the proceedings of the trial published.

Bishop Onderdonk consistently proclaimed his innocence of any wrong-doing, and his friends were ever willing to support him in his claim. The Diocese of New York and the General Seminary refused to take any actions which would indicate their agreement with the verdict of the trial. The Bishop published "A Statement of Facts and Circumstances" in the early months of 1845 in which he declared before God that "my original plea of not guilty is here solemnly renewed."⁶⁸ He was interested in securing additional evidence of his innocence -- he obtained, for example, testimony from the driver of a carriage in which one of the incidents was alleged to have taken place and who had not known of the trial while it was taking place.⁶⁹ In October of 1847 he wrote to the House of Bishops asking them to remove his suspension.⁷⁰ This was rejected by a committee of five bishops, four of whom had originally voted him guilty.⁷¹ The Diocese of New York kept trying to

get the suspension removed through memorials to the General Convention but met with no success. Some of New York's problems were solved, however, when the General Convention allowed them to elect a "provisional bishop" in 1850.⁷²

Bishop Onderdonk, a saddened and defeated man, spent the rest of his life mostly withdrawn from the events and issues of the day. Most of his time was spent in his library in study. He declined most invitations and, for the most part, left his home only to make his daily pilgrimage to the Church of the Annunciation to pray. As the Church Journal of May 1, 1861, noted in an obituary:

"Often have we thus met him on his churchward way, walking with a downcast look, as if unwilling to attract attention, and saluting only those who spoke first to him; but then the salute was returned by him with a genial warmth, tinged with sadness, which went at once to the heart."⁷³

From all accounts, he refused to allow bitterness to overtake him. As the same obituary notice put it, Bishop Onderdonk

"never suffered himself to speak of those who had been his chiefest and bitterest opponents, except in language of kindness and Christian charity. He...[did] more than this: he had often earnestly rebuked those of his friends who, in his presence, spoke otherwise."⁷⁴

He continued to stand behind the principles for which he had long fought. When some laymen tried to work for his restoration through the civil courts, Bishop Onderdonk refused to go along with their scheme, which may well have succeeded, on the grounds that the Church's decisions

should not be placed subject to review by the civil authority.⁷⁵ He continued to teach his views to "a few earnest-minded and fearless students" of the General Seminary who "followed him into retirement, to receive his godly counsel and instruction concerning the 'nature, ministry and polity of the Church. '"⁷⁵

In 1861 he developed heavy congestion in his chest which, in February, according to the Church Journal, became an "accumulation of water on the heart."⁷⁶ On April 26 the Rev. Francis Vinton visited him and read the "Office of the Visitation of the Sick," including a prayer for "a sick person when there appeareth but little hope of recovery." After confessing his faith, Bishop Onderdonk told Dr. Vinton that "of the crimes of which I have been accused and for which I have been condemned, my conscience acquits me, in the sight of God."⁷⁷ Two days later his close friend, the Rev. Samuel Seabury, "administered to him the Blessed Sacrament." ⁷⁸ On Tuesday morning, April 30, 1861, Bishop Onderdonk died. The funeral service was held on May 7 in Trinity Church which was packed with crowds "that filled the church and overflowed into the church-yard, and into the public streets" of the city.⁷⁹ The funeral sermon was preached by Dr. Seabury who used for his text John 5:35 -- "He was a burning and a shining light, and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light. "

In Trinity Church, New York, there is a cenotaph constructed in memory of Bishop Onderdonk. It is a statue of him lying in state with folded hands and dressed in Eucharistic vestments and a mitre. His face is stern yet resigned. Entwined about his feet there is a snake.

Benjamin Onderdonk had a unique role in the history of the American Episcopal Church. Theologically, he formed a link between the Hobartian High Churchmen and the adherents to the later Oxford Movement. A tutee of Bishop Hobart, he, in turn, became the tutor of men who were to make up the Anglo-Catholic movement in the latter half of the century. As a pastor he worked in both the rugged, unsettled areas in the west and yet was among the first to try to deal with problems of urban areas on the foothold of industrialization. He was a leader in helping the Episcopal Church to consider its role and mission in the United States. His devotion, his zeal, and ability to forgive his persecutors provide a model for all Christians.

FOOTNOTES

1. William Berrian, An Historical Sketch of Trinity Church, New York, (N. Y. : Stanford and Swords), 1847, pp. 314-15.
2. Journal of the Convention of the Diocese of New York, (N. Y. : varied publishers), 1830, p. 75. (Convention Journals will hereinafter be designated J. C. N. Y., followed by the appropriate year).
3. William White, "Address," appended to Thomas C. Brownell, A Sermon Preached in St. John's Chapel, New York on the twenty-sixth day of November, MDCCCXXX, at the Consecration of the Right Reverend Benjamin T. Onderdonk, D. D., Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of New-York, (N. Y. : Protestant Episcopal Press), 1830, p. 27.
4. Brownell, A Sermon Preached in St. John's Chapel, p. 23.
5. J. C. N. Y., 1829, p. 20.
6. J. C. N. Y., 1831, p. 34.
7. Clarence E. Walworth, The Oxford Movement; or Glimpses of Life in an Anglican Seminary, (N. Y. : The Catholic Book Exchange), 1895, p. 5.
8. J. C. N. Y., 1840, p. 42.
9. J. C. N. Y., 1837, p. 42.
10. J. C. N. Y., 1831, p. 33.
11. J. C. N. Y., 1832, p. 5.
12. J. C. N. Y., 1836, p. 49.
13. J. C. N. Y., 1832, p. 9.
14. J. C. N. Y., 1837, p. 33.
15. J. C. N. Y., 1838, p. 32.
16. J. C. N. Y., 1833, p. 7.
17. J. C. N. Y., 1838, p. 20.

18. J. C. N. Y. , 1837, p. 25.
19. Benjamin T. Onderdonk, The Character of the Protestant Episcopal Church in its Prominent Distinctive Features considered in reference to its Duties Thence Resulting in a Primary Charge to the Clergy of the Diocese of New-York , (N. Y. : Protestant Episcopal Press), 1831, p. 4.
20. Ibid. , p. 17.
21. E. Clowes Chorley, "Benjamin Tredwell Onderdonk, Fourth Bishop of New York," in The Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church, vol. IX:1; March, 1940, p. 9. This comment appears to be Chorley's code expression for what he calls the "early Catholics" whom he places in a different category than the "Hobart Men." See, for example, his Men and Movements in the American Episcopal Church, (N. Y.:C. Scribner's Sons), 1946, p. 228.
22. J. C. N. Y. , 1838, pp. 45-46.
23. J. C. N. Y. , 1839, p. 18.
24. J. C. N. Y. , 1841, pp. 80-81.
25. Ibid. , p. 82.
26. Ibid. , p. 84.
27. Ibid. , p. 85.
28. Benjamin T. Onderdonk, Christian Unity: A Sermon Preached at the Matriculation of Students of the General Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States on the Evening of Advent, Sunday, Nov. 29th, 1840, in St. Peter's Church, New-York, (N. Y. : "Printed at 96 Nassau Street"), 1840, p. 9.
29. Ibid. , p. 8.
30. Ibid. , p. 7.
31. Ibid. , p. 10.
32. Ibid. , p. 13.
33. John S. Stone, A Memoir of the Life of James Milnor, (N. Y. : American Tract Society), 1848, pp. 543-44.

34. Ibid., p. 544.
35. Walworth, The Oxford Movement, p. 5.
36. Ibid., p. 42.
37. Ibid., p. 125.
38. Ibid., p. 120.
39. John Pintard, Letters IV, 90; quoted in Powel Mills Dawley, The Story of the General Theological Seminary, (N. Y. : Oxford Press), 1969, p. 138.
40. Chorley, Men and Movements, p. 167.
41. J. C. N. Y., 1836, p. 40.
42. Ibid., p. 41.
43. J. C. N. Y., 1839, pp. 44-45.
44. J. C. N. Y., 1841, p. 57. In a footnote on the same page the use of the "best and purest" bread available and of silver vessels for the Holy Communion--both tokens of respect for the Sacrament--is commended.
45. J. C. N. Y., 1832, p. 7.
46. J. C. N. Y., 1842, p. 56.
47. Ibid., p. 59.
48. J. C. N. Y., 1843, p. 87.
49. Chorley, Men and Movements, p. 207.
50. Hugh Smith and Henry Anthon, The True Issue for the True Churchman, (N. Y. : Harper Brothers), 1843, p. 35.
51. Walworth, The Oxford Movement, p. 54.
52. Stone, James Milnor, pp. 566-57.
53. J. C. N. Y., 1843, pp. 36-37.

54. Ibid. , p. 70.
55. Ibid. , p. 50.
56. J. C. N. Y. , pp. 30-31.
57. Walworth, The Oxford Movement, p. 81.
58. James C. Richmond, The Conspiracy Against the Late Bishop of New York Unravelled by one of the Conspirators, (N. Y. : James C. Richmond), 1845, p. 5.
59. Ibid. , p. 11.
60. The Proceedings of the Court Convened Under the Third Canon of 1844, in the City of New York, on Tuesday, December 10, 1844, for the Trial of the Right Rev. Benjamin T. Onderdonk, D. D., Bishop of New York; on a Presentment Made by the Bishops of Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia, (Philadelphia: George S. Appleton), 1845, p. 6.
61. Ibid. , p. 8.
62. Ibid. , pp. 44-46.
63. William Francis Brand, Life of William Rollinson Whittingham, 2 vols. (N. Y. : E and J. B. Young), 1883, I 359.
64. Ibid. , I 361.
65. The Churchman, January 18, 1845. In the Onderdonk Papers, G. T. S. Collection.
66. Proceedings, p. 332.
67. Ibid. , p. 330.
68. Benjamin T. Onderdonk, A Statement of Facts and Circumstances Connected with the Recent Trial of the Bishop of New-York, (N. Y. : H. M. Onderdonk), 1845, p. 30.
69. Letter to George B. Andrews, June 5, 1846, in the Onderdonk Papers , G. T. S. Collection.

70. "A New York Churchman," Obsequies and Obituary Notices of the Late Right Reverend Benjamin Tredwell Onderdonk, D.D., Bishop of New-York, and other Documents, (N. Y. : H. B. Price), 1862, pp. 96-97.
71. Ibid. , p. 100.
72. The Rev. Mayhew Wainwright was chosen for this post in 1852, but died within a short time. The Rev. Horatio Potter replaced him as provisional bishop in 1854.
73. Obsequies and Obituary Notices, p. 23.
74. Ibid. , p. 24.
75. Ibid. , p. 20.
76. Ibid. , p. 24.
77. Ibid. , p. 190.
78. New York Express , May 8, 1861, in Obsequies and Obituary Notices, p. 29.
79. Ibid.

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(His addresses to the conventions of the Diocese of New York constitute the major source of information on the life and thought of Bishop Onderdonk. The myriad pamphlets catalogued under his name are, by and large, in reference to his trial and suspension. Most of these pamphlets --not listed in the bibliography--may be found in the General Theological Seminary Library in a volume entitled Onderdonk Miscellanies. Only those referred to in this paper or particularly noteworthy are listed below.)

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