

OXFORD AND THE PRE-RAPHAELITES
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NATURE AND SYMBOL¹

Oxford Movement: Context of Religion

Historians of Victorian England generally speak of a positive attitude towards the country's religious fervor and the Church of England's continued existence.² However, the theologians of the epoch were frightened and distressed at the apparent widespread lack of faith and destruction of religious principles. Owen Chadwick's analysis of the Evangelical and Oxford Movements which revitalized the Church of England during the Victorian Era is an accurate one.³ The Evangelical Movement helped to lay the groundwork for the Oxford Movement by rekindling the flame of personal religion and developing new patterns of pastoral work. The influence of the Oxford Movement continues today in the Church of England.⁴

Begun as a clerical revolt which sought internal revaluation within the Church of England, the Oxford Movement was also a reaction to other elements in English society during the 1830's. Its political cause, the Emancipation Act of 1829, abolished the anti-Catholic oaths imposed in previous statutes defining the qualifications for membership in the legislature and public offices; it tolerated the religious practices of Roman Catholics, and granted civil liberties to the Protestant dissenters. The Oxford Movement opposed the spirit of liberalism released by the American and French Revolutions, and the "Erastianism"⁵ which it felt was widespread in the Church of England.

The Oxford Movement confronted the political, social and religious crises of the time. The horror of the French Revolution (causing people to look back favorably upon the stability and order of ages past), the development of the Romantic Movement in literature, and the Latitudinarian teachings of the Oxford scholars were important influences in the Movement's evolution. Its major limitation was the clerical domination (formed from Keble's Oxford circle) which restricted the development of personal appeal among the populace.

The Oxford Movement integrated principles inherited from seventeenth-century High Anglicanism⁶ with those from the contemporary Romantic Movement. As the basis of the authority and correctness of their actions and their Church, the Oxford scholars retained the principle of one catholic church and apostolic succession. From the Romantic Movement, they extracted respect for the unsophisticated; reverence for the sublime; and esteem for the poetic and the mystical.