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Diocesan Revival in the Church of England, c. 1800-1870, The

Anglican Theological Review, Summer 2001 by Morris, Jeremy

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Arthur Burns's masterly account of one of the main aspects of nineteenth-century Church reform has got to be among the best half-dozen books to appear on the history of the modern Church of England in the last two decades. Not since Geoffrey Best's monumental 1964 book on the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, Temporal Pillars, has a historian come to grips so well with the institutional and administrative history of the modern Church. The breadth and depth of material covered here is simply breathtaking—some 700 episcopal and archidiaconal charges, a prosopographical survey of over 300 archdeacons, a considerable amount of manuscript source material, all in addition to a fearsome list of published primary and secondary sources. As with Best's book, it is simply inconceivable that historians of the modern Church of England will be able to work in the future without a copy of Burns's text to hand.
If the execution is thorough and immense, the analysis presented in the book is remarkably simple. Contrary to the impression of Tractarian-inspired historiography, the reform of the diocesan machinery of the Church of England was not predominantly the outcome of Tractarian "renewal." Samuel Wilberforce, the High Church bishop of Winchester and Oxford, conventionally described as the pioneer of diocesan reorganization, was as much a follower as a forerunner of a trend. In fact, Burns demonstrates decisively, virtually all of the leading features of diocesan reorganization and revival in the nineteenth century either predated the Oxford Movement, or can be attributed directly to non-Tractarian, reforming impulses in the Church. Foremost amongst these reforming impulses was the work of the "Orthodox High Church," the strand of Anglican belief and practice that Peter Nockles has shown to have thrived throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and against which the Tractarians consciously reacted.

As Burns shows, diocesan reform really began in the eighteenth century, albeit in dispersed and piecemeal ways, with early efforts to develop and improve episcopal visitations, to extend the responsibilities of archdeacons, and to revive the office of rural dean. By the 1830s, on the eve of the Oxford Movement, these early reforming moves had become much more extensive and systematic. The publication in 1835 of the "manifesto" of the revival of rural deans, William Dansey's Horae decanicae rurales, marked, not the initiation of a movement, but recognition of its existence already across the dioceses of England and Wales. These developments in the reform and administration of the major diocesan "officers" of the Church-bishops, archdeacons, and rural deans were paralleled by the development of diocesan record-keeping and statistics, by the foundation of new diocesan societies, by attempts to reform the archaic disciplinary structure of the Church, by moves towards the creation of new dioceses and sees, and by the later appearance of diocesan representative bodies, including above all ruridecanal chapters and conferences, and diocesan assemblies. By 1870, Burns concludes, "the Anglican diocese was equipped with an effective structure binding the parochial clergy (and to some extent churchgoing laity) more tightly into the institution" (p. 260).

A number of leading features of Burns's account are worth highlighting. I have already indicated the prominence of the "Orthodox High Church," a description popularized in recent years by historians concerned to demonstrate the continuing influence of a High Church Anglicanism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that shared much with Tractarianism, but also was significantly different from it. The designation "Orthodox" here, in a wider context, is perhaps rather misleading, but it has become common currency in Anglican church history and is intended to contrast with the Latitudinarian position that the Tractarians alleged was typical of the perceived laxity of the eighteenth-century Church. A second feature is the way in which the diocesan revival (which Burns, incidentally, capitalizes as "the Diocesan Revival") became to some degree self-generating, as "diocesan consciousness" developed and fuelled further institutional change. This rather imprecise concept, "diocesan consciousness," is nevertheless rooted by Burns in the general history of nineteenth-century Britain, with its development of local politics and community-consciousness. A third feature is the concept of "legitimation," drawn from social science, but used here to identify the way in which reforming clergy tended to appeal, not to the "efficient," utilitarian ethos Geoffrey Best assumed to be typical of the Ecclesiastical Commission, but to Church tradition, and so to a particular historical interpretation of the English Church. Despite the social-scientific provenance of the concept, it is actually used here in a flexible, historically sensitive way, and usefully advances our understanding of the rhetoric of Victorian church reform.