

Liberal Catholic Journalism: the Saturday Review, 1855-1865

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The Saturday Review has always been recognised as one of the major exponents of mid-Victorian opinion. It might indeed appear that, after the most exhaustive analysis of the contributions to the Review during this first decade of its existence made by M.M. Bevington,<sup>1</sup> there is little more to be said on this particular subject. Nevertheless it seems to me that there is one aspect that will bear further examination. For it was the stated purpose of the Review's founder, A. J. Beresford-Hope, that it should play a part in the attempt that was then being made to reconcile Catholic principles with the dominant Liberal ethos of the day - a matter that was of far more than merely local significance, being part of the intellectual development of Europe as a whole.<sup>2</sup> It is my hope, therefore, to provide a contribution, albeit a negative one, to the understanding of that most elusive of concepts, Liberal Catholicism.

Beresford-Hope was himself a most interesting character, being one of those extravagantly eccentric personalities of which nineteenth century English landed society was so prolific. He had received the customary education of that class, having attended Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge. His family background, however, was not in fact one of country landowners but of international merchant bankers, as firmly established in Holland as in England. Beresford-Hope always maintained that it was this inherited 'foreignism of temperament' that enabled him to approach religious controversies free from the limitations that restricted the thinking of so many of his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

He was in particular convinced that the Church of England must be regarded as part of the Universal Catholic Church. As such, however, he believed that it suffered from two grave disabilities, both of which were the results of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In the first place, it had then become an isolated national Church, cut off from the rest of Christendom, although,

as Beresford-Hope pointed out, it was in fact rapidly losing this quality of isolation as the English people spread themselves widely through the world. Secondly, during the fifteen-thirties, because of political and dynastic necessities, it had been forced to adopt much from the Lutheran religion of the German Protestant states, which it had never succeeded in completely discarding. As a result, Beresford-Hope saw the essential need of the time as the protection and reassertion of the Catholic element in the Church of England.<sup>4</sup>

Beresford-Hope's Catholic sympathies were strengthened by the fact that, like so many undergraduates of his day, he had fallen under the spell of Newman. He never made any secret of his admiration for the leaders and the principles of the Oxford Movement, and in consequence became identified with that Movement. It is of interest to note that it was at his wedding with Lady Mildred Cecil in 1842 that Lord Robert Cecil, the future Prime Minister, then a precocious boy of 12, first heard the term 'Puseyite' used in denigration of his new brother-in-law.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his hero-worship for Newman, Beresford-Hope was still not prepared to follow his example and secede to Rome. Although he was ready to acknowledge that the Roman Catholic Church possessed far more of the qualities of a truly Universal Church than did the Anglican Church, he nevertheless disapproved strongly of what he maintained were the popular superstitions and corruption that had been introduced into that Church by the Papacy. He believed that it would be first necessary to eliminate these before there could be a reunion between the two Churches, in his view the best possible solution for the present difficulties. Until this was achieved, it was vital to prevent the victory of the ultra-Protestant faction within the Church of England. He set out, therefore, with the declared intention of 'summoning the High Church party for the crucial battle for Anglo-Catholicism now arraying'.<sup>6</sup>

Beresford-Hope was a man of strong political ambitions as well as pronounced religious views, and he believed that he would further these by becoming a recognised leader of the High Church party.<sup>7</sup> He had stood for Maidstone during the general election of 1847 as an independent Conservative, free from any party ties, mainly because he had disapproved of the method by which Sir Robert Peel had carried

the repeal of the Corn Laws through Parliament. In the following years, however, he gradually established the habit of voting with the so-called Peelites, the group of Conservatives who remained loyal to Peel after the break-up of his Party in 1846, and which included men like Gladstone and Sidney Herbert who shared his religious views. It was not surprising when in 1850 he was invited to contribute to the Morning Chronicle, the mouth-piece of that group of politicians, and which had won for itself the reputation of being "the only daily paper which has not flown against Christianity!"

<sup>8</sup> Between 1850 and 1853 he was to contribute under the pseudonym of D.C.L. a series of Letters on Church Matters, which made that paper into a platform for his strong Anglo-Catholic views, and which did much to identify in the public mind the Peelites with the Puseyites.<sup>9</sup>

Beresford-Hope's alliance with the leaders of the Peelites was consolidated during the most important religious controversy over the Papal Aggression crisis which took place in 1850-1851. This was the result of the attempt by Pius IX to restore the Catholic hierarchy into England. In response the Whig Government then in office, apparently abandoning its traditional policy of toleration, proposed to impose harsh penalties through its Ecclesiastical Titles Act against anyone attempting to implement this measure. On the other hand, the Peelites, almost alone amongst the politicians, argued that the Roman Catholic Church like any other religious body had the right to deal with its spiritual organization in any way it wished. They saw the Ecclesiastical Titles Act as a clear warning of the great danger implicit in the erastian control claimed by the State over religious matters. As a result they argued that all Churches, including the Church of England, should be granted their freedom.

This was the point that Beresford-Hope constantly urged on the readers of the Morning Chronicle. In particular he stressed that the Church of England should now be released from the burdens of its establishment. What he was now demanding for it was, to use his own words,

that only true, consistent and rational religious liberty which allows to all denominations liberty of self-development within the bounds of order and morality - to Dissenters and not only to Dissenters, but to the Church of England - a liberty neither abated in the one instance from a hyper-critical regard to the 'interests' of 'the Establishment', nor arrogantly refused on the ground of freedom and the status of 'the Establishment' not being compatible.<sup>10</sup>

It was in this way that Beresford-Hope approached the conception of 'religious liberty', the belief in 'a free Church within a free State', which was so important a part of the Liberalism of the nineteenth century.

Beresford-Hope, however, was to find that his opposition to the Ecclesiastical Titles Act was to prove, temporarily at least, politically disastrous for him. The spirit of 'No Popery' was now too strong amongst the electorate for his arguments to be effective. As a result he failed to secure his re-election to Parliament in the general election of 1852. The following year he stopped contributing his Letters on Church Matters to the Morning Chronicle, which had done much to keep him in the public eye, and he retired to his family estate, where he had the care of his step-father, Viscount Beresford, of Peninsular War fame.<sup>11</sup> On the death of the Viscount two years later, Beresford-Hope was to resume his active interest in contemporary affairs. It was now that he decided to establish a new journal which he hoped would prove to be

a paper not bound to any party, but written by a combination of Peelite Conservatives and moderate Liberals, and to be mouthpiece of the middle moderate opinions of thoughtful and educated supporters.<sup>12</sup>

This paper was to be the Saturday Review.

Beresford-Hope chose as his first editor John Douglas Cook. Cook had been the editor of the Morning Chronicle, with which, as we have seen, Beresford-Hope had been closely associated. He must, therefore accept some responsibility for the financial collapse of that paper which occurred in 1854. He was now to prove that he was a journalist of genius. There is no doubt that it was his work that made the Review the finest and most successful periodical of its day. He was particularly skilful in his choice of contributors, bringing into its service men of the greatest literary talent, such as H.S. Maine, Goldwin Smith, Fitzjames Stephens and, for a time, Lord Robert Cecil.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time it cannot be denied that Beresford-Hope's belief that the pages of the Saturday Review could serve as a common platform for both High Church and Liberal principles were by no means fulfilled. It was once said that Cook, who, like the majority of his contributors, was strongly Liberal in his views, could only manage to preserve his

partnership with his proprietor "by keeping the paper as much as possible out of theological controversies", the last thing that Beresford-Hope wanted.<sup>14</sup> In the end, therefore, the history of the Review during its first ten years is one of failure to achieve the hoped-for reconciliation between Anglo-Catholicism and Liberalism. To understand why this happened it will be necessary to examine in what ways the Review's conception of Liberalism affected its attitude towards religious matters, especially towards the Church of England.

The Saturday Review took it for granted that national opinion in England was essentially Liberal in tendency.<sup>15</sup> It nevertheless acknowledged that it had considerable difficulty in defining exactly the meaning of this term. When it attempted to do so early in its history, it was first forced to eliminate all the popular slogans whose continued use now seriously distorted the understanding of its contemporary significance. To talk in 1855 about 'free trade' in this connection, for example, had no more relevance than references to 'the Glorious Revolution'. 'Electoral and social reform' were also now principles over which there was no longer any unanimity amongst those who called themselves Liberals.<sup>16</sup> When the Review sought a more positive definition, however, it could only suggest that Liberalism was primarily an attitude of mind, the readiness to test all intellectual matters by the use of reason rather than by reliance on authority, whether this be secular or ecclesiastical,<sup>17</sup> "the judgement of the common sense of the educated part of the World."<sup>18</sup> For this reason, the Review believed that the best way of identifying a Liberal in the eighteen-fifties was by his support of a foreign policy aimed at the promotion of that sort of constitutional government abroad which alone could create the sort of conditions under which such freedom of thought was possible.<sup>19</sup> It saw as its great enemies both the authoritarian states of Europe and also the new Democracy, whose success it believed would result in the worst tyranny of all, that of an illiterate majority over an educated minority.<sup>20</sup> The Saturday Review believed Liberalism, therefore, as the creed of what we have learned today to describe as 'open' societies, in contrast to those 'closed' ones which prohibited any manifestation of freedom either physical or intellectual.

It followed as a necessary deduction from this belief that for the Review the best social institutions were those which allowed their

members complete freedom to apply their own judgement to the ever changing circumstances in which they lived. It was for this reason that it had the greatest respect for the Established Church of England of all religious communities. For

in the interests of Liberalism, of progress, of intellect and sense (to put religious considerations aside).... the Church of England ... admits of infinite variety of practice and tolerates great difference of opinion ... it is as comprehensive and liberal a religion as the world has ever seen.<sup>21</sup>

The Review believed that this was the result of the generally high standard of its clergy, who were in the main "the fairest, best educated and most elastic of the religious profession!"<sup>22</sup> Above all, they did not form a caste with its own values and principles, set aside from the rest of the community. The English clergy were in the main educated in the same institutions as their social equals, they did not suffer from the considerable disadvantages resulting from an imposed celibacy, the majority of them received a decent living from their benefices and they had a close link with the neighbouring gentry through the wide-spread system of lay patronage.<sup>23</sup> There was consequently little dislike for the parson in English society, and certainly no incentive for the clergy to seek to improve their status by imposing their authority over the laity in matters of opinion. It was this that convinced the Review that the Church of England was essentially different in nature from other religious communities with more authoritarian natures.

The Review believed, nevertheless, that there was one great danger threatening the Anglican Church. This was the possibility that it might by its intellectual failure alienate the educated class of the country. It was this fear that forged the strongest link between the typical contributor to the Review and the Anglo-Catholic party within the Church, for it had little doubt that the great proportion of Anglican learning was concentrated within this latter group. On the other hand, the Review saw the Evangelical party within the Church as being formed from "the semi-informed, semi-educated, semi-religious portion of the population".<sup>24</sup> The Review was especially dismayed by the intellectual quality of the men appointed by Palmerston on the advice of his son-in-law, Lord Shaftesbury, from members of that school to senior positions in the Church during the early stage

of his long premiership after 1855. It characterised these as "sectarian, bigoted and persecuting", "with no taste, little self-denial and hardly more learning than is required for speaking grammatical English".<sup>25</sup> In its opinion, these new Evangelical bishops did not have the largeness of sympathy and comprehensive-ness of mind necessary in an age when revived religion had broken forth in various and sometimes eccentric forms. They are not on the level of the age in part of knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

The Review had no doubt indeed that these ill-conceived appointments had resulted in serious political consequences, and that in making them Palmerston had misjudged the opinions of the middle-class electorate. It believed in particular that Palmerston's surprising loss of popularity in 1858, leading to his parliamentary defeat was caused by the revulsion felt for them:

there are very few thoughtful persons who did not feel that the late Premier's administration of ecclesiastical patronage was a proof of his personal unfitness for the highest office. Drs. Bickersteth and Villiers really cost Lord Palmerston his premiership.<sup>27</sup>

The Review was convinced that if by some mischance such men won a dominating influence within the Anglican Church, and especially if this meant the expulsion or withdrawal of the Anglo-Catholics, then that Church could no longer expect the confidence and support of the educated layman.

It was this belief of the Saturday Review that the presence of the Anglo-Catholics within the Church of England provided the best guarantee that it would remain the Church of the intellect and intelligence of the country that did much to promote the alliance between that school of religious thought and the Liberalism which it represented. The developments of the eighteen-sixties, however, were to emphasize that this alliance depended on the admiration of the Review for the personal calibre of the Anglo-Catholics and not on its approval of the principles which they represented. This was made clear in two of the major religious controversies of these years: in the first place, by the revival of an extreme Liberal theology as shown in the publication of Essays and Reviews, and secondly, over the all-important issue of church establishment.

The appearance of Essays and Reviews in 1860, with the consequent long series of cases through the various church courts, brought into

the open the wide difference which separated Liberals and High Churchmen over the permissible extent of toleration of opinion in the Church. The Saturday Review was forced to recognise that many Anglo-Catholics would in the last resort prove as intolerant in their attitude to some of the intellectual developments of the age as any other orthodox Churchmen. For Essays and Reviews made it necessary for Anglo-Catholics to make clear the limits to the freedom of thought that they were prepared to allow members of the Church of England. It placed the Review in an especially difficult position because it had always eulogised their toleration in such matters. It is easy to trace in its pages the dilemma faced by those of its contributors who, on the one hand, wished to maintain their own very well-publicised principles, but who on the other, knew that its proprietor, Beresford-Hope, had instructed the editorial staff not to express any support for the Essayists. This dilemma was, indeed, to bring about the resignation of some of its most brilliant authors between 1861 and 1863, at the cost of its high standard of literary excellence.<sup>28</sup>

It was not until March 2nd, 1861, that the Review saw fit to make its first comment on the issue, and then, as it admitted itself, with the greatest hesitation. It would have much preferred to leave the whole matter to "the good sense and honest feeling of the English people."<sup>29</sup> While it recognised that the publication of Essays and Reviews was bound to give offence to orthodox Churchmen, it was nevertheless concerned how much the controversy proved that

the clergy of the Church of England require to be much more thoroughly educated and placed more on a level with the progress of theological discussions and opinions in an active minded age ... it showed their deep ignorance of what had been going on in the last half-century.<sup>30</sup>

As High Churchmen began to take a more extreme position against the Essayists, the Review was itself forced to modify its denigration of the capabilities of the English clergy in order that it might get more into accord with the well-known prejudices of Beresford-Hope. In May 1861 it was congratulating its readers that "the Church of England is, as all Churches must be, a little behind the age in a good many things. We rather like to fall across something behind the age".<sup>31</sup> It was nevertheless clearly far from happy about the need to compromise over its own principles in this matter, and its satisfaction was obvious



when the issue was finally resolved in 1864. It could maintain then that it had never in fact been more than a storm in a teacup, which however had done the Church considerable harm. With the treatment of Jowett in particular in its mind, it could express its hope that we have nearly arrived at the conclusion of that period of small persecutions... during which the Church has probably lost much ground in the affections and the beliefs of the more educated classes.<sup>32</sup>

The controversy over church establishment was the second issue that was in the eighteen sixties to bring the principles of the Saturday Review in conflict with those of the Anglo-Catholics. As we have seen, the Churchmen had clearly lost by this time their confidence in the close link between Church and State. They no longer believed in the vital necessity of the Established Church acting as the conscience of the community. They were much more aware of the danger to the spiritual nature of that Church from the erastian control of the secular State. As a result, they were now demanding that full religious liberty should be given to all ecclesiastical bodies, including the Church of England.

On the other hand the Saturday Review was to show strangely little sympathy with those who doubted the value of church establishment. It was certainly true that it had no hesitation in proclaiming its enthusiastic support for religious toleration of the non-Anglican institutions. It was ready, for example, to describe the Roman Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 as "the most generous and most politic of laws enacted in the statute book".<sup>33</sup> Again, it did not disguise its scorn for that type of uneducated mentality which became so easily the victim of 'No-Popery' scares, because of its purely emotional fear of Roman Catholicism. Even in 1860, it could still recall with satisfaction the ignominious downfall of Lord John Russell in 1852 due to his attempt to make capital out of this fear by his Ecclesiastical Titles Act.<sup>34</sup> It reserved its most bitter contempt, however, for the recurring attempts to abolish the Roman Catholic training college at Maynooth in Ireland. This was "an annual craze," "a playing at Parliament", "a real insult to the intelligence of the country". It was one of its main charges against Disraeli as a party leader, that while he had too much sense to believe in such nonsense, he was not above taking advantage of it for political reasons, and that he had too little straightforwardness

to vote according to his convictions.<sup>35</sup> It was for this reason that the Review could never accept the sincerity behind Disraeli's sustained campaign between 1861 and 1864 to restore the Conservative Party under his leadership as the traditional defender of the Church of England. It was convinced that he was merely using the Church as a ladder to Downing Street, and went on to comment that

when the defence of the Church of England reposes in the hands of the author of Tancred it would be a very stiff man who would not laugh and a very silly man who would do more than laugh.<sup>36</sup>

The Saturday Review thus had no sympathy with those who wished to restore the Established Church to the privileged position it had held before the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and Catholic Emancipation. On the other hand, it had no intention to support any measure that would strengthen the power of the non-Anglican bodies, in particular by ending the establishment of the Anglican Church. It refused to do so on the grounds that the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, the Dissenting sects on the other, were so alien in nature to the English mind that their success would do much to turn the educated classes against all religion. It found especially distasteful the spiritual intolerance of Roman Catholicism and the intellectual inadequacy of Protestant Dissent. This last, it argued, owed its origin to nothing more than the accidental quarrels of the seventeenth century, and it only remained in existence in the nineteenth century because of local social jealousies and enmities, particularly that felt for the parson by the lower classes in the country districts. If these were ended, then English Dissent would soon vanish as 'the light of argument' was brought to bear on its tenets. It was obvious that this could never be the religion of an educated man.<sup>37</sup>

It was for these reasons that Saturday Review completely rejected the conception of 'religious liberty' as being inapplicable to English conditions, even though many of the leading Anglo-Catholics were strongly endorsing it. It could see no justification for what it described as 'free trade in religion',<sup>38</sup> the inevitable result of which it believed would be the disestablishment of the Anglican Church and the triumph of 'the Conventical as well as the Pope', which it had no doubt would prove disastrous for civilized life in England.<sup>39</sup>

The issue of church establishment was also to do much to shape the attitude of the Saturday Review towards Gladstone.

This was a matter of especial significance since Gladstone was the essential middle term, so to speak, between Anglo-Catholicism and political Liberalism. On the one hand, he was a leading member of the Peelites, the political group which had won the support of High Churchmen like Beresford-Hope. He had in particular made it very clear during the controversy over Papal Aggression in 1851 how strongly he now believed in the principle of 'religious liberty' for the Church of England as well as for the other religious bodies in the community. In doing so, he had also shown how fundamentally he had changed his views from those he had held during the eighteen thirties, when his equally powerful defence of the traditional principles of 'the Constitution in Church and State' had made him 'the last hope of the stern, unbending Tories'. But on the other hand, during the eighteen fifties, Gladstone's political ambition made it necessary that he should rejoin as soon as possible one or other of the two major parties. For a number of reasons he was to find it impossible to become a member of the revived Conservative Party under Lord Derby. His political future lay therefore with the Liberals. And it was in his tortuous advance to the leadership of that Party in the years before 1868, that in order to retain the support of High Churchmen, he had to prove to their satisfaction that Liberalism and Catholic principles were in no way incompatible. This was all the more essential after he had become Member of Parliament for Oxford University in 1847, the most clerically dominated constituency in England. He was constantly forced to justify himself to a most knowledgeable and highly critical electorate. The whole controversy came to a head in 1865 when Gladstone made it known that under certain circumstances he would be prepared to recognize the need to ~~disestablish~~ the Church of England in Ireland. It was this above all which ensured his defeat at Oxford in that year.

The Saturday Review was to find itself in a difficult position with regard to Gladstone during this period. Like most of its contemporaries, it had immense respect for his intellectual stature and political ability. It believed that it was the combination of these two qualities that alone had made possible the Oxford University Reform Act of 1854. This it considered the greatest triumph of the High Church Liberalism of the eighteen fifties, because it had done much

The issue of church establishment had brought into prominence the conflict between the principle of 'religious liberty' and the belief in the Established Church as an instrument of that social order and authority which alone made a Liberal way of life possible. The Review was also convinced that the activity of politicians like Gladstone was the result of political expediency rather than of religious principles. Not even the great admiration that it felt for the Anglo-Catholics personally could bridge the gap which now existed between them.

Lord Robert Cecil, indeed, argues that any attempt to do so would in fact be a sign of divine madness. As he told the readers of the Quarterly Review in 1865:

just as in ruder times, insanity was looked upon as the mark of the protection of heaven, so in these days the simultaneous belief in two or three inconsistent sets of opinion is held by many to be the sure sign of a peculiar conscientiousness...

An alliance between the Church and Liberalism can never be permanently the dream of more than a few very eccentric minds.<sup>44</sup>

It was certainly true that the Liberal Catholicism of the latter part of the nineteenth century was very different from that which was born as the result of the disintegration of the Conservative Party in 1846. It is indeed hard to tell whether representatives of this older generation were more shocked and dismayed by the theological principles of Lux Mundi or the social radicalism of the Christian Socialist Union, both of which were to appear in the same year 1889.

1. M.M. Bevington, The Saturday Review, 1855-1865: Representative Educated Opinion in Victorian England. New York, 1941
2. H.W. & I. Law, The Book of the Beresford-Hopes. London 1930. P. 214
3. Ibid. PP. 130-132, 143
4. [A.J. Beresford-Hope], Letters on Church Matters by D.C.L. 11 pts. in 4 vols. London, 1851-1854. II, pp. 211-213
5. Lady G. Cecil, Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury. 4 vols. London, 1924-1932. I, p. 24
6. Law, Book of the Beresford-Hopes Pp. 147-148
7. Ibid. P. 213
8. Ibid. Pp 147-148
9. Bevington, The Saturday Review. Pp. 10-15
10. [Beresford-Hope], Letters on Church Matters. I. p. 149
11. Law, Book of the Beresford-Hopes. Pp. 148, 223
12. Ibid. P. 214
13. Bevington, The Saturday Review, PP. 16-20
14. Ibid. P. 35
15. Saturday Review. XII (1861), p. 83
16. Ibid. I (1855), p. 156
17. Ibid. XVII (1864), p. 527
18. Ibid. XIX (1865), p. 162
19. Ibid. I (1855), p. 157
20. Ibid. XI (1861), p. 326
21. Ibid. IX (1860), p. 399
22. Ibid. P. 305
23. Ibid. XVII (1864), p. 527
24. Ibid. II (1856), p. 713

25. Ibid. X (1860), P. 659: II (1856), p. 713
26. Ibid. XI (1861), p. 286
27. Ibid. V (1858), p. 366
28. Bevington, The Saturday Review, Pp. 32-33
29. Saturday Review. XI (1861), p. 221
30. Ibid. P. 446
31. Ibid. P. 286
32. Ibid. XIX (1865), p. 218
33. Ibid. IX (1860), p. 69
34. Ibid. P. 109
35. Ibid. I. (1855), p. 485
36. Ibid. XVII (1864), p. 129
37. Ibid. XIV (1862), p. 672
38. Ibid. IX (1860), p. 569
39. Ibid. P. 305
40. Ibid. XX (1865), pp. 33-34
41. Ibid. P. 35
42. Ibid. P. 96
43. Ibid. P. 95
44. Quarterly Review, CXVIII (1865), pp. 212-213