The Meaning of National Apostasy: A Note on Newman’s Apologia

John R. Griffin

The famous Oxford Movement in the mid-19th century in England was a religious revival which aimed at bringing forth what its proponents believed to be the hidden Catholicity of the Anglican Church. At that time, Anglicanism was the established religion in England, and enjoyed many privileges under the government. At the same time, there was already a secular movement of disestablishment designed to despoil the Church and enrich the government. But there was also, especially within the Oxford Movement, a sense that the Church ought to be disestablished for religious reasons—to reveal the apostolic Anglican tradition which was neither controlled by nor subject to the State. John Henry Cardinal Newman, before his conversion, subscribed to this view. In the article that follows, John R. Griffin explores Newman’s Apologia Pro Vita Sua in which he described the religious climate of the day and the reasons for his conversion. In particular, Griffin analyzes Newman’s claim that John Keble, in a sermon titled National Apostasy, originated the Oxford Movement, and gave Newman many of his own ideas about the apostolicity of the Anglican Church—ideas which retarded his conversion to Catholicism. Griffin’s argument reveals two things: Newman’s reliability as a commentator on religious affairs, which many scholars have denied, and the reasons for Newman’s long delay in leaving the Church of England.
and finally to formally join the Catholic Church. Anglicans have usually argued that the conversion was no more than sensitivity and a damaged ego. I will suggest different reasons.

I

The following Sunday, July 14th, Mr. Keble preached the assize sermon in the University pulpit. It was published under the title of National Apostasy. I have ever considered and kept the day as the start of the religious movement of 1833. [Newman, Apologia, 1921 ed., 56]

The object of this essay is to document the accuracy of Newman's Apologia remarks on John Keble as the “true and primary author” of the “religious movement” that we call the Oxford Movement and the importance of Keble’s sermon, National Apostasy, as the beginning of that revival. It might be noted that this essay does not claim for Keble the title of leader or central personality in the revival: the question of who was the leader or leading intellect can perhaps never be answered to general satisfaction. I maintain, however, that much, if not all, of Newman’s Anglican work depends on certain ideals derived from Keble and his sermon. As Newman remarked in 1836, “I have got all my best things from Keble.”

The accuracy of the Newman tribute to Keble’s sermon and his primary role in the Movement has been scored by several generations of scholars from Dean Burgon to the latest study on the Oxford Movement. The most recent biographer of Keble has suggested that not even Keble was aware of any particular importance to the sermon, the question of who was the leader or leading intellect can perhaps never be answered to general satisfaction. I maintain, however, that much, if not all, of Newman’s Anglican work depends on certain ideals derived from Keble and his sermon. As Newman remarked in 1836, “I have got all my best things from Keble.”

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The historians and Keble biographers who use the Newman remarks do so without analysis of the sermon and base their work on the assumptions about Keble that I hope to show are incorrect. For this group of scholars and for many of the first group (who deny the historical merit of the Apologia remarks), Keble is seen as completely unoriginal and his sermon a call for resistance to the emerging middle-class liberalism of the Whigs. According to this view, he was no more than a traditional church and king Tory who hated Whigs as much as his “tender spirit” would permit him to hate anyone, but was completely unoriginal in any of his ideas.

It might be useful, before turning to the sermon itself, to examine the witness provided by the two rigorous conservatives who knew Keble quite well during this period, John Taylor Coleridge and Dr. Thomas Arnold. Coleridge invoked the Newman remarks and then quickly passed over that period of Keble’s life:

We have long as a nation passed by Keble’s principles in these matters, and I am not about to uselessly re-agitate them, but I have made this particular mention of the Sermon, because out of the same feeling . . . arose that concerted and systematic course of action, of which the first-fruits were the celebrated Tracts.

Coleridge might have discussed the sermon if it were no more than a traditional Tory complaint against the Whigs and Liberalism, but as the personal advisor of Keble and the recipient of many of Keble’s most inflammatory letters, he knew that the sermon and the earliest installments of the Tracts for the Times were far from a traditional statement of high-church Toryism.

Dr. Thomas Arnold had also been a close friend of Keble up to the time of National Apostasy. (Keble was Matthew Arnold’s god-father.) Arnold had himself written on the pending crisis in the church-state alliance of 1833, and might have believed that National Apostasy was a direct attack on his widely circulated pamphlet on church reform, especially Arnold’s idea that the various Protestant churches in England should unite under the umbrella of one national church in order to secure state protection and prevent disestablishment. Arnold’s own pamphlet was much closer to the conservative tradition of which he professed himself a strong exponent. He wrote of Keble at this time:

. . . in Keble there is a melancholy instance how a good man may so degrade and destroy his Understanding that Fanaticism at last reacts upon his Heart and impairs his Charity. I cannot tell you how I have been pained by all that I have seen of Keble lately;—he seems to me on the edge of any atrocity . . . of what is commonly called the “Alliance between Church and State.” In that last Point I am far more orthodox according to the
Fanaticism, the conservatives agreed, was the last thing that was needed as the fate of the establishment was being discussed in Parliament.

Professor Kitson-Clark, in a satirical passage, remarked that the Tractarians only “toyed” with the idea of a separation between church and state. In what follows I will attempt to show that the idea of separation was the defining idea of the revival and that the first public statement of the means for separation belongs to Keble’s *National Apostasy*. Shortly after the sermon was printed Keble wrote to Newman of his new position in the Church and at Oxford and asked the question whether he ought perhaps to resign his position. He remarked that he did not think he should because he had given “public notice” of his attitude and plans. The “notice” of Keble’s new position was the sermon, and the question of resigning “what I have” was not rhetorical. Keble knew the strength of conservative traditions—that the alliance should be maintained at all costs—at Oxford and in the church at large. He had partly attacked those traditions in *National Apostasy* or at least the popular interpretation of those traditions, particularly as they affected the alliance of church and state. It has been remarked that Keble exhibited great courage in making his remarks in the presence of persons “representing the government,” but his greater courage was in facing his ecclesiastical audience and making the same comments. Keble and his friends knew that the greatest resistance to separation from the state would come from the traditional high-churchmen at Oxford. The “apostolic church” in England, however, could endure without the support of such erastian clergy and the government itself.

Keble answered his question by urging that churchmen do nothing in a political way to retard the process of separation and even spoliation, an idea made explicit by his use of the prophet Samuel as the model for beleaguered churchmen in 1833:

That [Samuel’s] combination of sweetness with firmness, of consideration with energy, which constitutes the temper of a perfect public man, was never perhaps so beautifully exemplified. He makes no secret of the bitter grief and dismay with which the desolution of his countrymen had filled him. He was prepared to resist it at all hazards, had he not received from God himself directions to give them their own way; protesting, however, in the most distinct and solemn tone, so as to throw the whole blame of what might ensue on their wilfullness. Having so protested, and found them obstinate, he does not therefore at once forsake their service; he continues discharging all the functions they had left him, with a true and loyal, though most heavy, heart. [*National Apostasy*, 44]

The passage is long, but I believe it is the best summary of the Tractarian or “apostolic” mind in 1833. Churchmen should protest when “church landmarks are being broken down,” because sacrilege was always a great evil; but having protested as a kind of witness against the evils of such a gesture—“in order to throw the whole blame of what might ensue” (revolution)—they should let the people “have their own way.”
Keble explicitly advised against political resistance or reprisals by churchmen towards the very end of the sermon:

As to those who, either by station or temper, feel themselves most deeply interested, they cannot be too careful in reminding themselves that one chief danger, in times of change and excitement, arises from their tendency to engross the whole mind. Public concerns, ecclesiastical or civil, will prove indeed ruinous to those who permit them to occupy all their care and thoughts, neglecting or undervaluing ordinary duties, more especially those of a devotional kind. [National Apostasy, 47]

The above passage is one reason for the confusion of readers about the sermon’s importance from Dean Burgon to the present writer. The idea of non-resistance to spoliation gestures from the state was, however, radical in its implication, for non-resistance, Keble believed, would certainly hasten up the process. National Apostasy had a still more positive message for churchmen. In that message we have an answer to the numerous critics of Keble and the Oxford Movement who have complained of their indifference to the ecclesiastical and social evils of the time. What seems (in the following passage) to have been no more than a pious commonplace was a fairly accurate remedy for the political bishops and non-resident clergy who dominated the church at that time. As Keble said:

After all, the surest way to uphold or restore our endangered Church will be for each of her anxious children, in his own place and station, to resign himself more thoroughly to his God and Saviour in those duties, public and private, which are not immediately affected by the emergencies of the moment; the daily and hourly duties . . . of piety, purity, charity, justice . . . by doing all as a Christian, to credit and advance the cause he has most at heart; and what is more, to draw down God’s blessing upon it. [National Apostasy, 46]

Keble knew of the “fox-hunting, trout-fishing . . . pluralist incumbents”17 in the Church of England, and his advice was directed at just that clerical caste of gentlemen that Froude and Newman stigmatized as representative of the “gentleman’s heresy.”18

The remarks were not made without the understanding that the clergy would be impoverished and lose its aristocratic status once the state had cast off the church. A positive attitude towards ecclesiastical poverty came to be one of the defining notes of the Keble group (“apostolical”); and yet at the very end of the sermon he reiterated the basic idea of the sermon in an optimistic way. The clergy would, in a spiritual way, triumph by directing all its attention to the “apostolic church in these realms.” The phrase “apostolic church” dates from the seventeenth century in particular, but Keble was looking back even further—to the Acts of the Apostles and the Christian ministry represented in the Acts.19 The first apostles were poor and worked as they performed their ministry, and because of their lower social status were beloved by the poor to whom they preached.

In summary, the sermon was different than what its critics and enthusiasts have suggested. There was little, from a political point of view, that might be called conservative in the whole of National Apostasy, and it is easy to understand the embarrassment of Coleridge and the contempt of Dr. Arnold at its ideology. Keble’s concluding message for the clergy was again a fit remedy for the various evils in the church and was the first Oxford expression of the anti-aristocratic intent of the revival. In 1833 the “quiet worldliness”20 of the clergy was one of the great scandals, and a breaking of the aristocratic hold on the church was an essential task. As Newman later wrote:

I wish to encourage Churchmen to look boldly at the possibility of the Church’s being made to dwell in the affections of the people at large. At present it is too much a Church for the Aristocracy + the poor through the Aristocracy.21

II

In this section I would like to document the early response of Newman to the sermon and account for the sudden ascendancy of Keble in the revival and to document from external sources my reading of National Apostasy as a quiescently radical document.

On a superficial level it should be noted that Newman and Froude began to call themselves “apostolics” only after the sermon was preached and printed. The title was a pledge of loyalty to the ideas in the sermon and used as a mark of distinction to the conservatives or “Zs” who opposed separation and ecclesiastical pov-
We might notice also that the sermon was frequently cited in the Tracts as “recommended reading” even after the Movement had changed in its original character.

Newman’s early response to Keble and his sermon is just what we find thirty years later in the Apologia. In July of 1833 he wrote to H. Froude, who was already intent on implementing the idea of separation, on Keble’s new attitude:

We may use Rose without making him our head; but a head we must have, such a one as we know will go all lengths, when the time comes. I have never till the last month or two thought Keble would go lengths; but I now hope he will. I think he is unchained . . . I think Keble and I quite agree in thinking that your agitation will not do good yet. Would not the Oath of Obedience be turned against us?22

Keble became the author that Newman said “we must have.” In less than a year after the sermon was delivered he wrote of its impact:

The first thing I heard on my return from abroad was, that on the next Sunday Keble was to preach the Assize Sermon. Since that time Oxford has been consistently the Champion of the Church, starting before the Dissenters, and, as the Bishop of London deprecated, “drawing blood first,” which, as times go, is remarkable.23

Keble, no less than Newman, was aware of his departure from the traditional approach to the church-state question of 1833. When Newman asked him about the practicability of his ideas, he responded:

I am much disposed to agree with you, that very few of our brothers are yet in the right position of mind for looking at this question; but I depend much on the illuminating power of a little wholesome spoliation.24

The revival aimed at providing for the church once the state had, in Froude’s words, “kicked us off,” and there is little wonder that the Oxford conservatives first asked and then demanded that the Tracts be stopped. There is another letter by Keble that supports the above reading of the sermon. On almost the eve of the sermon’s delivery Keble wrote to a friend:

I shall be speaking the thoughts of a very large body of the Clergy of England; who feeling daily that it becomes more and more questionable in point of duty and impossible in point of fact, that we should continue in the same relation we are at the present to the government of the country, are naturally looking round on all fragments of the Church Apostolic . . . all Church-men, who are not Erastians (I trust a very considerable party) will separate from the State, the schismatical body, remaining at such cost, in union with the State.25

Thus, the revival in its original form was not an attempt to bolster the alliance, and as the first public executor of its plan to separate from the state by not resisting the government’s gestures of spoliation, we might reconsider the charge against Keble’s originality.

The idea of separation from the state was not unique to Keble even in 1833. Froude had called for an overt program of radical agitation to obtain that end in the beginning of 1833. Newman had certainly thought about the question of the alliance at great length once non-Anglicans were admitted to Parliament. As early as 1831 he had feared that Liberal or Socinian bishops might be appointed as “a matter of course.”26 What was distinctive to Keble was the first public and Oxford expression of the idea of separation through non-resistance. The “passive” quality27 of the sermon and the early revival belong to the softening influence of Keble, his intent to achieve episcopal sanction for the program and to avoid scandal. It was this influence that kept the Movement from adopting the Froude platform of open agitation for the break with the government. More than once Froude had told Newman to “cut old Palmer loose”28 and “throw the Zs overboard,”29 gestures as alien to the Keble ethos as the efforts of the “Zs” to strengthen the alliance. Keble and Newman believed that once the alliance were broken the conservatives would be forced to join the apostolics, as men had to get into a lifeboat once the ship (the church of England) went down.30

Thomas Mozley described Keble as the “sun” of the “little world of Oxford”31 at the time of the Oxford Movement, and though Mozley was never aware of the ultimate secret or “conspiracy” (as Froude described its radical intent) of the religious revival, his comments are a measure of Keble’s place and reputation at Oxford. It was that place and reputation that persuaded Newman of the validity of the Keble solution to the crisis in the Church of England. Through the year 1840 Newman be-
lieved, with the “philosophy” of Keble before him, that there was a living apostolic tradition in England.

III

It is well to remember Newman’s description of Keble as the “author” of the revival and not its leader. Both Newman and Froude noticed Keble’s departure from the apostolic ranks, and in the years after 1836 he was attributing many of his own ideas on the separation of church and state to Hurrell Froude. Froude noticed his getting off “snugly” to his parish at Hursley—a giving in to what the early apostolicals believed was the central temptation of an established church, and with Froude’s death early in 1836, Newman was left as leader and the sole possessor of the central idea of separation from the state through the promulgation of catholic ideas.

I repeat an earlier assertion, however, that without the ideology of Keble’s National Apostasy, Newman’s Anglican life would have been shorter and very different. Early in the revival he described himself as no more than a “rhetorician” of Keble’s “philosophy.” The remarks are not merely consistent with his later comments in the Apologia, they are historically accurate. Early in the revival we find Newman trying to implement the ideas of National Apostasy. “We [the apostolicals] have no concern with politics,” he wrote as one of the defining notes of the apostolic platform. In other letters we find him trying to “wean” Froude “away from politics,” and one letter is an excellent summary of the Keble method:

I trust the Whigs and Radicals will reap their proper glory, and we but enjoy their fruit without committing ourselves.

Newman’s condemnation of Lamennais’ Affairs de Rome was not the simple response of a reactionary to a liberal as Brinton has suggested. The ideal of clerical agitation for however worthy a cause was alien to the apostolic ethos. The bonds to the state would fall off from their own deadness once a proper spirit (catholic) were stimulated in the church. There was no need for an assault on the existing forms of the church, for those forms would dissolve once the catholic spirit was sufficiently widespread. The great issue was to promulgate catholic ideals and catholic texts and demonstrate the catholic traditions of England; that would of itself break the hold of the state on the church.

As important as Keble’s politics were to Newman, the ministerial ideals of National Apostasy were possibly even more important. Keble’s mandate for the clergy to tend its duties and forsake politics was thematic to the first volume of the Tracts. Many of those Tracts were written expressly for the lower and middle classes, and the apostolicals were as hotly opposed to the aristocratic status of the clergy as the Westminster Review. The solution, however, to a moribund clergy and episcopacy was not to be found in the method and denunciations of Froude—“pampered aristocrats,” “resident gentlemen,” and “smug parsons”—but rather in the quiet dedication proposed by Keble. All the apostolicals were united in their ideal of making the church again into a “popular” institution, but again the first authoritative expression of that idea belongs to Keble.

IV

It would require a volume to present the influence of Keble upon the sum of Newman’s Anglican works. All of that work was based on the belief that there was a living apostolic tradition in England (“all churchmen who are not erastians” and “tens of thousands”) that had a strength quite independent of the state and upper-classes. Such a system was indeed “hidden behind the existing one,” but like a butterfly coming of age, it would grow and prosper once the links with the state were given up. Suffering, patience, and possibly martyrdom might be required to bring that tradition forth, and Keble with all the optimism at the end of his sermon had promised no more than that the tradition was there and that it would triumph through such virtues—and not through Toryism. What Newman discovered in the passing years was that there was no “hidden” apostolic church in England except in the folios of the Bodleian and that he was relying to an extreme degree on his own private judgment, the very idea that the Tractarians opposed, to determine what was Anglican “in the best sense.” Keble, incidently, sanctioned Private Judgment in the years after 1845 and it was that sanction, I believe, that kept him in the church of England: the laity, bishops, and the Prime Minister were simply wrong; but the center of Anglican orthodoxy rapidly narrowed to the parish at Hursley and only there.

There are many letters that reflect Newman’s increasing fear of becoming an innovator or a pope and doctor in a church of his own, charges that he heartily
denied when the revival was in its first year. The following was sent to Pusey in 1838:

And I do not think you enter into my solution, nor can any one. I have for several years been working against all sorts of opposition, and with hardly a friendly voice. Consider how few persons have said a word in favor of me. Do you think the thought never comes across me, that I am putting myself out of my place? What warrant have I for putting myself so forward against the world? Am I a bishop or professor, or in any station which gives me a right to speak?  

Such fears about the possible hubris of using one’s own judgment seem never to have occurred to either Keble or Pusey, though Pusey’s biographer H.P. Liddon once penned a cryptic note in his diary—“Who is loyal”? What mattered most to the remaining anglo-catholics, if we would interpret their actions from the highest motives, was the idea of giving a witness to catholic truths. When decisions went against them, Keble preached a sermon against that decision at Hursley and Pusey sent a letter of disclaimer to the Times or Guardian. Newman’s conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1845, while often interpreted as the work of a sensitive egotist, was simply a logical step and loyal gesture to the ideas of 1833. I believe without the precept and example of Keble before him that the move might have been earlier and perhaps that the Apologia would have been unnecessary.

Not only does this analysis enable one to understand why Newman—with the example of Keble before him—was so long in making his formal conversion to Rome, but also it shows conclusively that one can accept the historic value of the Apologia on the matter of Keble’s sermon as the beginning of the Oxford Movement. Many historians have disdained to accept the Apologia as a reliable source, either on Newman’s own mind or on the religious world of his day. To vindicate Newman in a matter so long and hotly disputed is to suggest the veracity of his entire presentation. Scholars ought to take his comments very seriously indeed.

Notes

1. Apologia Pro Vita Sua (Everyman ed., 1921), 41.
2. Letters and Correspondence of J. H. Newman, edited by Anne Mozley (2 vols.; 1891) II, 155; hereafter referred to as LC.
5. For Newman’s discussion of this see Letters and Diaries of J. H. Newman (1975) XXXVIII, 436.
6. Cf. The Autobiography of Isaac Williams (1892), 118: “About a year ago, when staying at Hursley, I remember John Keble saying, ‘I look upon my time with Newman and Pusey as a sort of parenthesis in my life; and I have now returned again to my old views such as I had before. At the time of the great Oxford Movement, when I used to go up to you at Oxford, Pusey and Newman were full of the wonderful progress and success of the movement—whereas I had always been taught that the truth must be unpopular and despised, and to make confession for it was all that one could do.’”
11. Peel and the Conservative Party (1865), 154.
12. LC, I, 441-2; see also J. Griffin, John Keble: Radical in Anglican Theological Review (1972).
In that year Keble wrote to Newman: “We are getting very uncomfortable both here—in the country (meaning by us the bigots—fanatics of the day) at the notion of Church-State going down without a word of protest from Oxford.” 

Correspondence Public, 1828-1836, Birmingham Oratory, Birmingham.

In The Oxford Movement, ed. E. Fairweather (Oxford, 1964); all references will be given in the text.

Westminster Review, XXI (1834), 75-6.


See the citations from the Acts of the Apostles with which National Apostasy ends, Fairweather ed., 47.


Ms. letter Newman to Rose (April 10, 1836) in H.J. Rose, 1836-1839, No. 113, Birmingham Oratory.

Ms. letter Newman to Froude (Aug. 1, 1833), Correspondence Public: hereafter called CP.

Ms. letter Newman to Froude (June 14, 1834), CP.

Ms. letter Keble to Newman (July, 1833), CP.

Ms. letter Keble to Holmes (July 10, 1833) in Keble Collection, No. 57; cited in John Keble: Radical, 173.

LC, I.


Ms. letter Froude to Newman (Nov. 17, 1833), CP.

LC, II.

LC, II.


LC, II, 152.

LC, II, 151.


LC, II, 152.

LC, II, 4.

LC, II, 74.

LC, I, 450.


See n. 40.


See n. 42.

Advertisement to National Apostasy in Fairweather, 49.


F.L. Cross’ phrase in The Oxford Movement and the Seventeenth Century (1933), 34.


Ms. letter Newman to Pusey (August 26, 1838) in Pusey, 1835-1838, Birmingham Oratory.

Liddon Diaries, XII (1869), no page numbers.