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**Disraeli and Gladstone in the 1840s:  
The Influence of the Oxford Movement on Young  
England and the Board of Trade**

BRAD FAUGHT

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Each knew his place – king, peasant, peer or priest – The greater  
owned connexion with the least; From rank to rank the generous  
feeling ran and linked society as man to man.<sup>1</sup>

As the chief exemplars of Victorian conservatism and liberalism, Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone stand as the twin towers of nineteenth-century British politics. Since their deaths, respectively a little more and a little less than a century ago, neither man has suffered for lack of historiographical monuments.

One area, though, that has not received very much historical scrutiny is the way in which the Oxford Movement greatly influenced the two as young men.<sup>2</sup> Gladstone's deep religiosity, the guiding feature of his life, was the product of a youthful evangelicalism<sup>3</sup> mixed with a later-in-life Tractarianism.<sup>4</sup> Disraeli, as is well-known, was baptized into the Church of England on his thirteenth birthday, thus rejecting the more obvious features of his Jewish heritage. Of course, in spiritual terms Disraeli wore his Anglicanism lightly, in stark contrast to Gladstone's agonizing journey within the national church. But this intersection did yield to the two budding politicians a shared interest in the Oxford Movement's defence of the church. Each man interpreted the Movement in different ways, just as each one's apprehension of the state of the Church of England in the 1830s and 40s differed. The advent of modernity was a thing to be both

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welcomed and feared. The Oxford Movement generally took the latter stance, as did Disraeli and Gladstone. For the purposes of this study, it is the influence of the Movement on the political and social thinking of each man in the 1840s which provides the focus. In Disraeli's case, its expression is found in his novels *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845), and in Gladstone's, in his two books on church-state relations.

Disraeli was the leading figure in Young England, a group of disaffected Parliamentary Conservatives under Peel in the 1840s. Culturally, medievalism's presence in Victorian Britain marked out the boundaries of Young England.<sup>5</sup> Medievalism manifested itself in various ways, the chief one being for our purposes the resurrection of the idea of organicism. The Gothic revival in architecture led by A. W. Pugin<sup>6</sup> and Gilbert Scott,<sup>7</sup> and, later, William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement, were expressions of the anti-industrialism and anti-modernism characteristic of medievalism. Likewise, the writings of Walter Scott, Coleridge and Southey, as well as others, helped to give medievalism a prominent place in the consciousness of many Victorians. But it was the organic idea of society embodied by medievalism that most animated Disraeli and his colleagues.

Young England's brand of romantic Toryism was grounded in a deep reverence for the past which found expression in a philosophy of history controlled by the organic idea. As Young England's leading light Disraeli gave expression to this idea by constructing his novels as paradigms of "modern medievalism." The organic nature of medieval society, in which church and state were closely entwined, corresponded with Disraeli's belief in the social efficacy of the contemporary church as, in the words of Richard Levine, society's "model and guide."<sup>8</sup> A reinvigorated church, sure of its pedigree and mission, would provide the social anchor for nineteenth-century British society: ". . . it is by the Church . . . by the Church alone that I see any chance of regenerating the national character," writes Disraeli in *Coningsby*.<sup>9</sup> The church was the moral storehouse of the unchanging Law, the dialectical expression of Hebraeo-Christianity, which embodied the idea of "being and becoming" in history. This idea powered Disraeli's belief in providentialism and his parallel rejection of the cyclical view of history.

Disraeli acknowledged no difference between the interests of the church and those of the people: "The estate of the Church is the estate of the people, so long as the Church is governed on its real principles."<sup>10</sup> The qualification is undoubtedly reflective of the Oxford Movement's

insistence on a pure and apostolic church, untainted by the ties to the state “which tend to its danger and degradation.”<sup>11</sup> Tractarian influence on Disraeli and his youthful band was deep and Blake is not exaggerating when he says that “Young England was the Oxford movement translated by Cambridge from religion into politics.”<sup>12</sup> But Disraeli’s political acuity was such that this translation was in accord with both his own restrained religiosity and that of the greater part of the English population. No popery! (a suspicion that the Tractarians were closet Roman Catholics was of course the popularly-held belief) had to be assiduously maintained if the Young Englanders were to have any practical political effect. Though moving in the world of the Oxford Movement, Disraeli was not of it. As Smythe perceptively and humorously observed: “Dizzy’s attachment to moderate Oxfordism is something like Bonaparte’s to moderate Moham-medanism.”<sup>13</sup>

Frederick Faber, an early disciple of Newman’s, became something of a spiritual adviser to the Young Englanders. Faber was handsome, articulate, extremely devout, poetic, and a bit dreamy. He was theocratic in ecclesiastical outlook which fit his increasingly Catholic spirituality. And he was an unabashed restorationist when it came to the “old England” of perceived organic unity.

Faber<sup>14</sup> epitomized for Disraeli the “younger priests . . . men whose souls are awake to the high mission which they have to fulfil, and which their predecessors so neglected; there is, I think, a rising feeling in the community, that parliamentary intercourse in matters ecclesiastical has not tended either to the spiritual or the material elevation of the humbler orders.”<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, Disraeli fictionalized Faber in *Sybil* as Aubrey St. Lys, vicar of Mowbray. St. Lys is a cleric whose heart has been greatly moved by the poverty and social upheavals caused by the Industrial Revolution and has come among the “hundred thousand heathens” of Mowbray “to preach `the Unknown God.’”<sup>16</sup> He disputes with the factory-owning Lord Marney, the unappealing brother of Disraeli’s protagonist, Charles Egremont, over the wages and living standards of the labouring classes: “how they contrive to live is to me marvellous.”<sup>17</sup> An unresponsive and frivolous aristocracy is taken to task by St. Lys, as the inherent gravity of noblesse oblige should be obvious to any responsible member of that order. But he saves his greatest incredulity and denunciation for the church. “The church deserted the people,” he says,

and from that moment the church has been in danger, and the people degraded. Formerly religion undertook to satisfy the noble wants of human nature, and by its festivals relieved the weariness of toil. The day of rest was consecrated, if not always to elevated thoughts, at least to sweet and noble sentiments. The church convened to its solemnities, under its splendid and almost celestial roofs, amid the finest monuments of art that human hands have raised, the whole Christian population; for there, in the presence of God, all were brethren. It shared equally among all its prayer, its incense, and its music; its sacred instructions, and the highest enjoyments that the arts could afford.<sup>18</sup>

St. Lys is no self-satisfied, girthy prebendary. He is out to lighten the load of the working man and woman by offering them a church that is moved at least as much by their plight as it is by the requirements of high society. As Egremont says of him: “St. Lys thinks it is duty to enter all societies. That is the reason why he goes to Mowbray Castle, as well as to the squalid courts and cellars of the town. He takes care that those who are clad in purple and fine linen shall know the state of their neighbours.”<sup>19</sup>

St. Lys also embodies the verities of Disraeli’s organic view of history by commenting extensively on the Jewish and Christian traditions.<sup>20</sup> It is their melding together which, in Disraeli’s estimation, has given English society its normative modes of civilized interaction. It is religion which is the fount from which flows all that nourishes civil society and therefore Hebraeo-Christianity is bedrock and not shifting shale. As part of that Disraelian bedrock Levine observes, “the Middle Ages and the Roman Catholic Church become but segments . . .”<sup>21</sup> If that be true then the Church of England, according to Disraeli, is freed from obeisance to Rome because the latter did not invent “forms and ceremonies” but inherited them from the prophets. “Was Moses then not a churchmen? And Aaron, was he not a high priest? Ay! greater than any pope or prelate, whether he be at Rome or Lambeth.”<sup>22</sup>

For Disraeli, social problems could only be solved by a rejuvenated aristocracy acting on the eternal principles laid down by the traditions of Hebraeo-Christianity. Leaders of the people could only spring from their exalted ranks. The “New Generation” would confront the “Two Nations.” In Harry Coningsby and Edith Millbank we see this high view of the aristocracy exemplified. In their marriage at the end of the novel Disraeli unites religion with aristocracy and asks: “[w]ill they maintain in august

assemblies and high places the great truths which, in study and in solitude, they have embraced?”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, in *Sybil* the union of Charles Egremont and Sybil Gerard symbolizes the larger union between the separated peoples of England necessary to alleviate their grossest disparities. Can England resurrect community in the face of “modern society [which] acknowledges no neighbour[?]” Can the rich and poor, “[t]wo nations . . . inhabitants of separate planets,”<sup>24</sup> be drawn into one? Yes, Disraeli thinks they can, but only if the aristocracy recognizes its divine purpose in providing responsible leadership for the rest of society. And the vanguard of such a regenerated aristocracy are its youth, the “trustees of Posterity.”<sup>25</sup> And the members of Young England are these trustees.

Young England briefly captured the imagination of the country and in the process made popular the more inaccessible, and necessarily more religious, message of the Oxford Movement. *Coningsby* and *Sybil* were the two main reasons for this popularity.<sup>26</sup> “Young England, like Tractarianism . . . was the reaction of a defeated class to a sense of its own defeat – a sort of nostalgic escape from the disagreeable present to the agreeable but imaginary past.”<sup>27</sup> The two novels spoke powerfully to this desire for an idealized past transplanted to an equally ideally receptive present. But none of the Young Englanders, like the Tractarians (with the possible exception of Hurrell Froude!), *really* thought that the supposed splendour of medieval times was going to miraculously reappear in early-Victorian England. What they wanted was to assert the necessity of a public recognition of their agenda for church-based social reform – an agenda that categorically rejected the utilitarian tone of the age.

If we have suggested some of the areas where Disraeli and Young England intersected with the Oxford Movement, what of Gladstone, perhaps the prototypical “political Tractarian,” during his time at the Board of Trade? At Peel’s highly persuasive invitation<sup>28</sup> Gladstone arrived at the Board of Trade as its vice-president in 1841. His election to the Commons as M.P. for Newark in 1832 had heralded the arrival of a bright new light amongst the Conservatives (their “rising hope,” as Macaulay would later write) and throughout the 1830s Gladstone had held a couple of junior portfolios. Constantly engaged by questions of church and state, these years had also seen Gladstone publish two books on the subject.<sup>29</sup> “Gladstone,” in a familiar refrain, “was always in need of causes to which he could fully commit himself.”<sup>30</sup>

As is well-known, for the duration of Gladstone’s as yet brief Parlia-

mentary career he had been a protectionist. He continued to be so in 1841 and campaigned on the necessity of retaining the Corn Laws.<sup>31</sup> Peel, buffeted by the conflicting intra-party pressures of commercial interests and landed wealth, was gradually coming to the logical conclusion that Free Trade and the Corn Laws were incompatible. In the meantime, however, he maintained an intermediate position between the “Scylla of ultra-protection and the Charybdis of total repeal.”<sup>32</sup> The organic nature of society that the all-embracing Corn Laws represented was, as we earlier saw in our discussion of Disraeli, the historic ground upon which rested the Tory party, and Peel was not yet ready to abandon it. As a youth Gladstone had shared the precepts of the organic view, of which stern opposition to the reform bill and a lively defence of the Corn Laws were a part. And he carried these Liverpool, Eton, and Oxford views with him into Parliament where they sustained him through until at least the end of the 1830s. They were crystallized in *The State in its Relations with the Church* in which Gladstone defined the state as an “organic body” where individuals were “constituents of the active power of that life . . . the state is the self-governing energy of the nation made objective.”<sup>33</sup>

The nature of Gladstone’s interest in this “organic body,” or, more broadly speaking, social questions often has been the province of those who seek to understand his motivations for his well-known “rescue work” among London’s prostitutes. Gladstone’s engagement with the great city’s “fallen” women was in part brought about by a financial inheritance that was in want of an uplifting outlet. And Colin Matthew has written perceptively about Gladstone’s psycho-sexual tensions which were apparently soothed by his nocturnal peregrinations amongst the denizens of London’s districts of ill-repute.<sup>34</sup> But, it may be argued, this most notable of Gladstonian good works offers only a very superficial view of his commitment to ameliorating the social needs of Victorian society.<sup>35</sup>

The organicism of which Gladstone wrote so assuredly in his first book, *State and Church*, was much the same as that written about by Disraeli in his novels. The assumption that a revitalized church could act as society’s main regenerative agent is a shared one, as is the idea that the church has a grave responsibility to act in such a capacity. Gladstone’s belief in a unified society was one that he never surrendered<sup>36</sup> and it intersected with Disraeli’s promulgation of the same. Both men saw the state, in Aristotelian fashion, as a moral actor.

Gladstone argued for the recognition of the state’s moral agency

flowing from its inherent conscience.<sup>37</sup> His exalted view of the state was articulated thus: “. . . the highest duty and highest interest of a body politic alike tend to place it in close relations of cooperation with the church of Christ.”<sup>38</sup> The relationship between politics and religion is necessary, argues Gladstone, “because it is the office of the State in its personality to evolve the social life of man.” Religion’s job is to tutor the state in its function as law-giver and, by extension, also those to whom the law is being given. The state’s telos is religious, Gladstone continues, in that “religion is directly necessary to the right employment of the energies of the State as a State.”<sup>39</sup> In practical terms, such a teleology meant that “Benefit Societies” (here, Gladstone is referring to hospitals, poor houses, and other forms of social relief) usually “solemnise all their meetings with public and common worship,”<sup>40</sup> so as to demonstrate the centrality of religion to the social life of the nation.

In Gladstone’s second book this idea is further elaborated. If, as Perry Butler observes, Gladstone’s first book was written in order “to vindicate the idea of a National Church established by law . . .,”<sup>41</sup> then *Church Principles Considered in their Results* gave the idea corporeal form. In it, Gladstone makes the assumption that “a national Church is the centre of the national life of a country.”<sup>42</sup> As the Tractarians were finding out, such an assumption bore little relation to reality, but Gladstone forged ahead anyhow. He makes the claim that the church is responsible “for the social condition at large,” and by doing so offers a glimpse of his considered view on social questions. Gladstone’s private beneficence intersected with what he thought to be the proper end of the unity of church and state in this regard. He had earlier attributed in part to the state “the foundation of our moral habits, our modes of thought, and the state of the affections,”<sup>43</sup> and the church, as its tutor, was the natural conveyor of these standards. Accordingly, it was the unified society which provided the best hope of social regeneration. And in this conviction Gladstone and Disraeli did not vary. They shared a belief in the necessity of Christianizing the nation.

Nevertheless, by the time Gladstone took up the vice-presidency of the Board of Trade he had modified his intellectual commitment to the “organic” position. He had come to recognize the impossibility of his ideal view being realized in England. As he wrote, the “conditions of the age upon which it has pleased God to cast my lot” were such that “[s]hould England nationally repudiate the Catholic Church, it is not, I apprehend,

by Parliamentary evangelisation that she can be recalled to a sense of her duty because what is done in Parliament must be evolution of its own recognized laws & constitutive ideas . . ." Gladstone reminded himself that "the direct mission of Christianity is to the individual heart, not to the mixed bodies by which the affairs of vast human combinations are directed."<sup>44</sup> He would, therefore, act in concert with Peel and party, even though neither one impressed him as being truly concerned about the future of the English church in the same dogmatic and clerical way that he was. But he would use Peel's government as a "testing ground"<sup>45</sup> for his theory – and the theory failed.

How then are we to assess the impact the Oxford Movement had on their lives and politics in the 1840s? For Disraeli, the Oxford Movement embodied much that he championed in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*: medievalism, the "old" faith, organicism, a preference for the virtues of rural life, a Church of England cleansed of its erastian compromises, and so on. Yet he never for a moment considered himself a Tractarian, and he certainly never attempted to think through fully the abstractions of the Tractarians' theory of society. Gladstone, on the other hand, was too practical, too caught up in the daily task of setting and carrying out government policy, to be captured by the romance of the Oxford Movement. To him, the Movement was deadly serious, its leaders were fighting for the soul of English religion. He read their books and tracts and pamphlets,<sup>46</sup> participated in the "Engagement," and *State and Church* owed not a little to the influence of Newman and Pusey. But the religious certitude demanded by Newman and those who followed him to Rome (such as Frederick Faber) was alien to Gladstone's intellect and spirituality. Christianity was the "fixed point"<sup>47</sup> for Gladstone, but human fallibility "disinclined him to accept as ultimate any human authority, papal or episcopal."<sup>48</sup> For the more extreme Tractarians, such a stance was incompatible with the logical conclusions of their ecclesiology. But for Gladstone, it safeguarded his membership in the Church of England.

While the Movement helped Gladstone clarify the historical lineage of the English church, it obscured the means by which a growing industrial and pluralist state could be governed. It seemed to have a somewhat different effect on Disraeli, though, confirming in his mind the socially salvific role of the church, and giving force to his romantic prose. In the end, it would seem fair to say that while both Gladstone and Disraeli were, in different ways, defenders of the church the Oxford Movement's com-

plex influence on them in the 1840s contributed to each of them espousing social, economic, and political views that in sum were closer together than if apprehended separately. Nevertheless, no one would say of Gladstone what Russell Kirk has said of Disraeli, that “he succeeded in diverting the torrent of progress into the canal of tradition.”<sup>49</sup>

### *Endnotes*

1. Lord John Manners quoted in Daniel R. Schwarz, *Disraeli's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 82.
2. E.g., this line of enquiry was totally ignored by D.C. Somervell in *Disraeli and Gladstone: A Duo-Biographical Sketch* (London: Jarrolds, 1925).
3. See Peter J. Jagger, *Gladstone The Making of a Christian Politician: The Personal Religious Life and Development of William Ewart Gladstone 1809-1832* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1991).
4. See Perry Butler, *Gladstone: Church, State and Tractarianism: A Study of His Rideas and Attitudes, 1809-1859* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
5. For an excellent study of medievalism see Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln, NB: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970).
6. See Phoebe Stanton, *Pugin* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).
7. David Cole, *The Work of Sir Gilbert Scott* (London: Architectural Press, 1980).
8. Richard A. Levine, *Benjamin Disraeli* (New York: Twayne, 1968), 100.
9. Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby, Or the New Generation*, ed. Thom Braun (Markham, ON: Penguin, 1983), 378.
10. Disraeli, *Coningsby*, 377.
11. Disraeli, *Coningsby*, 376.
12. Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (London: Methuen, 1969), 171.
13. Quoted in Charles Whibley, *Lord John Manners and His Friends* (London: W. Blackwood, 1925), 153.
14. Ronald Chapman, *Father Faber* (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), 45.

15. Disraeli, *Coningsby*, 378.
16. Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, Or the Two Nations*, ed. Sheila M. Smith (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 107.
17. Disraeli, *Sybil*, 109.
18. Disraeli, *Sybil*, 110-11.
19. Disraeli, *Sybil*, 150.
20. See Disraeli, *Sybil*, 111-12.
21. Levine, *Benjamin Disraeli*, 109.
22. Disraeli, *Sybil*, 112.
23. Disraeli, *Coningsby*, 495.
24. Disraeli, *Sybil*, 64-66.
25. Disraeli, *Sybil*, 422.
26. *Young England*, a weekly, ran from January to April 1845. It was published in London by Henry George. None of the Young Englanders were involved, and given the coverage they were receiving in the mainstream press Smythe, at least, thought a special journal to be "absurd" (*Benjamin Disraeli Letters* [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982-1989], 4:161, footnote #1).
27. Blake, *Disraeli*, 171.
28. "I think we shall be very strong in the House of Commons," Peel told Gladstone, "if . . . you will accept the post of Vice-President of the Board of Trade, and conduct the business of that Department in the House of Commons with Lord Ripon as President. I consider it an office of the highest importance, and you will have my unbounded confidence in it" (quoted in F.E. Hyde, *Mr. Gladstone at the Board of Trade* [London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1934], 3).
29. *The State in its Relations with the Church* (London: J. Murray, 1838); and *Church Principles considered in their Results* (London: J. Murray, 1840).
30. E.J. Feuchtwanger, *Gladstone*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 14.
31. Philip Magnus, *Gladstone* (London: J. Murray, 1954), 57.
32. Hyde, *Mr. Gladstone*, 32.
33. *The State in Its Relations with the Church*, 4th ed. (London: J. Murray, 1841), 1:77-78 (hereafter, *State and Church*).

34. H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1874* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 89-95.
35. Interestingly, Gladstone's "rescue work" was initially part of the social service he performed in accordance with the requirements of "the Engagement," a lay Tractarian brotherhood he helped organize in 1844 on the advice of Keble (Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1874*, 90). As Gladstone noted in his diary early in 1845: "Worked on the contemplated applic[atio]n of the Engagement to myself: which may God guide and prosper" (M.R.D. Foot, ed., *Gladstone Diaries* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968], v. iii, 435-6).
36. See Richard J. Helmstadter, "Conscience and Politics: Gladstone's First Book," *The Gladstonian Turn of Mind*, ed. Bruce L. Kinzer (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1985), 3-42.
37. *State and Church*, 1:86-87.
38. *State and Church*, 1:4.
39. *State and Church*, 1:93.
40. *State and Church*, 1:97.
41. Butler, *Gladstone: Church, State and Tractarianism*, 79.
42. *Church Principles Considered in their Results* (London: J. Murray, 1840), 374.
43. *State and Church*, 1:86.
44. *Gladstone Diaries*, v. iii, 9 May 1841.
45. Butler, *Gladstone*, 93.
46. Volumes ii and iii of *The Gladstone Diaries* contain numerous references to having "read Newman" or "read Pusey."
47. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809-1874*, 1.
48. Agatha Ramm, "Gladstone's Religion," *The Historical Journal* 28, No. 2 (1985): 330.
49. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot* 7th rev. ed. (Chicago: Regnery Books, 1986), 279.