

BISHOP HOADLY: A PLEA IN MITIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Hoadly, Bishop of Winchester 1734-1761, has been attacked as a neglectful, absentee political prelate. The facts of the accusations are tested and the assumptions challenged, with reference to his register in the Hampshire Record Office and to one remarkable instance of his scrupulous fairness in his duties as Visitor of Trinity College, Oxford.

It is not claimed that he can be acquitted on all the charges levelled against him, but that there are serious reasons why mitigating factors should be allowed to soften the traditional judgement of his character and record.

BISHOP HOADLY: A PLEA IN MITIGATION

Benjamin Hoadly was Bishop of Winchester from 1734 to 1761, one of the more notorious and long-lived occupants of the see. Charles Richard Sumner held it for a longer time, from 1828 to 1869, but his reputation as 'the last of the great prince-bishops' remains untarnished. Hoadly, on the other hand, has found few friends. Canon Bussby, in a very temperate account (1979, 171-2), quotes the opinion of the contemporary Roman Catholic Bishop Milner that 'both living and dying he had undermined the church of which he was a prelate', as well as the letter in which Hoadly invited Walpole to move him from Salisbury to Winchester; otherwise Hoadly is criticised for his absence from the diocese and for his 'minimising theology'. More swingeing criticism is to be read in Church historians such as S C Carpenter (1959, 132), W Sparrow Simpson (1932, 175) or J H Overton and F Relton (1906, 14, 18-20). Secular historians have described him as 'a sycophant' (Owen 1974, 155) and 'the originator of latitudinarianism' (Jarrett 1965, 356 n1). In the *Victoria County History of Hampshire* (1903 2 98) J C Cox records the conventional wisdom that

he 'was far more of a vehement controversialist of the extreme latitudinarian and political school than a diocesan administrator. The value that he set upon the office that he held can be judged from the fact that during the six years that he held the bishopric of Bangor and drew its emoluments the diocese never once saw him, and it is supposed to have been the same with Hereford. . . He much neglected his diocese, and died in 1761 at the age of eighty-five.' More temperately, Canon G G Perry in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (1891, 27, 20) after a not unsympathetic account of his controversial career, concludes, 'As a bishop, he was certainly negligent in the performance of his duties'.

It is not difficult to see how this unfavourable verdict came about. Church historians have been heavily influenced by the Oxford Movement, which was bitterly hostile to the Whigs as erastian politicians who misused control of the Church for political motives; secular historians reflect the twentieth-century distaste for the aristocratic society of the eighteenth-century and the network of patronage which held it together. The Tractarian ideal of a bishop was far removed from the actual standards of the vast majority of eighteenth-century bishops, which survived to a remarkable degree until late in the nineteenth-century (Chadwick 1970, 328 ff).

Hoadly had risen to the bench of bishops because of his controversial writings, and had moved from Bangor to Hereford to Salisbury and finally to Winchester, in the quest for more agreeable working conditions and a larger income. He was a pluralist, a nepotist, and an absentee. The Winchester diocese, still virtually wholly rural, stretched from Southwark to the Channel Islands, covering the whole of Surrey and Hampshire. Hoadly could have chosen to live in Winchester or



Fig 1. Benjamin Hoadly, Bishop of Winchester 1734–1761.

Farnham, but preferred to remain in Winchester House at Chelsea. This has naturally fuelled the charges of neglect. But the really grievous charge against him was that in his earliest years as Bishop of Bangor he had preached a controversial sermon which had led to the suppression of Convocation, the representative assembly of the clergy, thereby cementing the Parliamentary control of the Church which so outraged Keble and his disciples. Worse still, he had crossed swords with the celebrated non-juror, William Law, in terms which left him exposed to the charge of Socinianism, the rejection of traditional teaching on the divinity of Christ.

THE CHARGES

However, to show the animus of his accusers does not necessarily secure an acquittal, and it is unlikely that complete exoneration could be sought. The most that justice should demand is that mitigating circumstances should be fully taken into account, and more recent historians have been much less severe on Hoadly than their self-confident predecessors were. The 'charges' may be formulated as follows: (i) that he was a mere political prelate; (ii) that he never visited his diocese of Bangor (in the case of Hereford it is mere supposition); (iii) that he was to blame for the suppression of Convocation; (iv) that he neglected his episcopal duties.

The strategy of the defence will be to enquire how far the facts are accurately established, and how far the charges themselves are misconceived in terms of the eighteenth, as opposed to the nineteenth, century. Moreover, since the writing of history is a reflection of the values of the period in which it is written, it will be necessary to comment upon the criteria which the late twentieth century might wish to apply in Hoadly's case. Finally, one detailed instance will be cited to suggest that the received verdict ought to be at least partly reconsidered.

A POLITICAL PRELATE

That Hoadly was a political prelate is

scarcely open to dispute. In the eighteenth century, politics and religion were still enmeshed, despite a widespread belief in enlightenment, which deprecated undue enthusiasm in either sphere. A revolution had just been achieved in the name of civil liberty and the Protestant religion, during the course of which a substantial number of clergy had found themselves in a moral dilemma. Part of their High-Church doctrine was the duty of obedience to the anointed King, as God's representative in society, and providentially Head (more accurately, Supreme Governor) of the English Church. But James II had been a Papist, and to make matters worse the Stuarts were thought to be hand-in-glove with Louis XIV of France, the archetype of royal despots; and in order to secure their own form of the faith the Stuarts had tried to undermine the legal safeguards of the Church as well as to subvert the constitutional balance of the State. Autocratic Tory bishops like Trelawny of Bristol did not relish being put on trial because they refused to subvert the Church whose welfare had been entrusted to them. Trelawny supported the Revolution and died Bishop of Winchester as his reward (he was translated to Exeter in 1689 and to Winchester in 1707, where he died in 1721). Hoadly, too, supported the Revolution Settlement, and he too died Bishop of Winchester as his reward. Why then the difference? True, he had never been put on trial for his liberty, only attacked for his opinions. True, he curried favour with the Crown and the Whig party, and published controversial pamphlets on matters political as well as religious. Lacking the aristocratic background increasingly needed to secure preferment in the Church (his father having been a country parson who later became a schoolmaster), he was dependent on what patronage he could secure – that of a rich widow, Mrs Howland, who made him rector of Streatham in 1710, of the Duke of Bedford, and finally of the Crown, which made him a bishop in 1715. The Hanoverian Settlement consolidated the gains of the Revolution, and those who attacked it were widely accused of treason – Bishop Atterbury of Rochester, for

example, was condemned in his absence for his Jacobite sympathies (he was deprived of his see and banished in 1723; Bennett 1975) – and, had the Rebellions of 1715 and 1745 been successful, then Protestants would have had to face once more the dilemma of resisting the established King in the name of religious truth and political liberty, or of betraying their Protestant principles in the interests of principles concerned with institutions rather than fundamental religious truth. The first charge does seem to be profoundly misconceived. It is, of course, true that bishops no longer held a majority of seats in the Lords, but it would have been folly for any eighteenth-century politician, faced with the need to make bishops, to people the Lords with his opponents: rival politicians might not be so scrupulous. Moreover, bishops in many parts of the country were great magnates with duties of social leadership, and it would be folly to put so much influence into the hands of opponents. Archbishop Herring of York organised resistance to the 1745 Rebellion: would a Tory archbishop have been so reliable? That politics should not enter into episcopal appointments is a twentieth-century contention, and one which even today it would be hard to sustain, for the preferment of conspicuously non-political clerics could in itself be construed as a political stance seeking to ensure that the established Church spoke with a politically neutral voice, as if such a thing were even possible.

AN ABSENTEE

That Hoadly never visited his diocese of Bangor was disproved fifty years ago, by Norman Sykes, who produced evidence that Hoadly, unable to travel to Wales overland, went there by sea in the summer of 1719 (Sykes 1934). The prime reason for the neglect was Hoadly's lifelong lameness, which not only made it impossible for him to ride a horse (a necessity in eighteenth-century conditions leading to the evolution of the curious dress of bishops – gaiters and apron – which survived into modern times) but also made it difficult

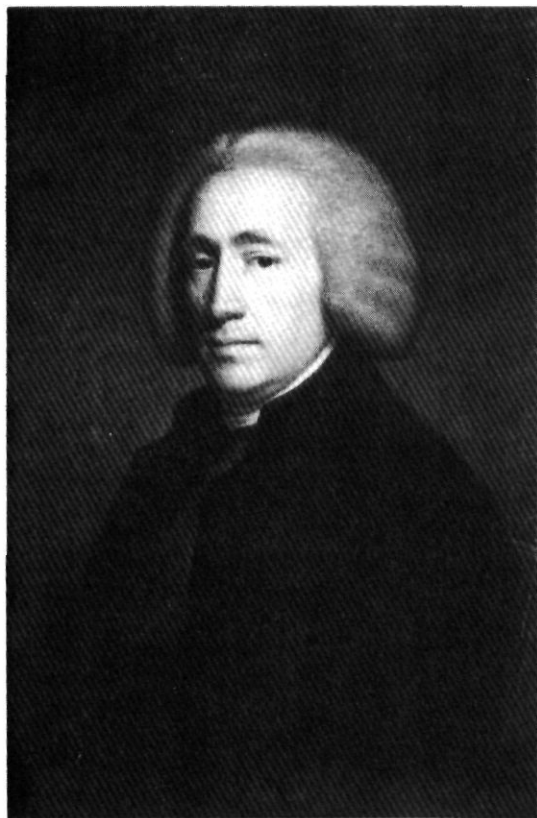


Fig 2. Brownlow North, Bishop of Winchester 1781–1820.

for him to preach and probably also accounts for the extremely bloated physical appearance in his portraits which his traducers have assumed was the very physiognomy of greed. Sykes reasonably asserts that such an incapacity disqualified him from a bishopric and that he should have been content with a deanery; but deans are not members of the House of Lords. A further difficulty must be allowed for: Bangor was scarcely a rich diocese, and neither was Hereford. Hoadly was also rector of St Peter the Poor, Broad Street, London, from 1704, and rector of Streatham from 1710. Though he cannot be expected to have managed these two parishes in person, he did reside at Streatham when the Tory star was in the ascendant from 1710 to 1714,

relinquished St Peter's on appointment to Hereford in 1721 and Streatham when he was made Bishop of Salisbury in 1727. The Welsh bishopric plainly provided only a fraction of his income. Reprehensible as all this was to appear to Victorian churchmen, the remedy for the situation was not found until the dawn of Victoria's reign, in the wholesale reforms of the Church which were undertaken by the government – the Whig government! – of Lord Melbourne. On this charge, the accused must surely escape. The fact that the situation ever could arise is an aspect of a widespread failure of the English Church to reform its administration as effectively as it had reformed its doctrines.

CONVOCATION

On the third charge, the suppression of Convocation, the evidence has been thoroughly discussed in several places by Dr Sykes, who shows (1934, 290 ff; 1959, 36–67, 160–161) that the situation was far more complicated and deep-seated than a mere single sermon could produce. A more recent consideration of the controversy with Law by H D Rack (1975, 275–291) also suggests that Hoadly was not quite as misguided as might be assumed. Indeed Dr Sykes seems to have modified his own views quite considerably over the years. This is not the place for technical discussions covered much more adequately elsewhere, but merely to draw attention to some issues which might be more charitably judged in the 1980s than in the 1890s, or indeed in the thick of the controversies over the Hanoverian Settlement. In the first place, Hoadly was uncompromisingly Protestant: he placed great emphasis on inward, personal religion, and he made the New Testament the primary source of religious authority. Thus he conflicted with all the corporatist ideas of the non-jurors and subsequently of the Tractarians, who read the New Testament not with an attempt at a clear judgement unaffected by later developments, but under the influence of medieval Christendom and at the very least the record

of the first four centuries. It is arguable that neither position is very helpful: the New Testament itself has been shown by Protestant scholars such as Harnack and Leitzmann to be much more the product of the early Church than Hoadly would have liked, and the entire subsequent record of the Church warns Christians to beware of making dogma out of opinion, fashion or received wisdom, however pious and sincere. Secondly, Hoadly was grappling with issues which have never yet found an entirely satisfactory solution, and which continue to exercise Christian people in the modern world. He was trying to establish the relationship between the Church as a body of believers and the State as a wider though still limited body of citizens. His solution was weighted heavily toward a voluntary basis for association, within a Church establishment constituted by civil authority for motives of social stability. In other words he anticipated very exactly the twentieth-century solution to the age-old problem. In the early eighteenth century it seemed impossible to find a middle way between the traditional unitary system of Church and State, with the coercive power of the state made available for the enforcement of unity in worship, opinion and morals, and the completely individualistic society of the dissenters. The latter had naturally received an impetus through the Revolution and the writings of John Locke. However, it did not appear to Hoadly and the other latitudinarian bishops of the time self-evident that a society which permitted dissent should not also retain an established Church, but he did argue that the state had the overall responsibility for the well-being of society, and hence it followed that churchmen could not claim to be above the law of the land. The uproar which his sermon produced clinched the intention of the government to dispense with Convocation, a move increasingly probable since the Restoration. To say that Hoadly was entirely to blame would be untrue – his sermon was the occasion, not the real cause. Neither is it true to say that Convocation remained entirely suppressed until the nineteenth-century – Dr Sykes (1959, 54) shows that it met and debated



Fig 3. Charles Richard Sumner, Bishop of Winchester 1827–1869.

in 1741, by which time the practical drawbacks of its absence had become apparent (but not so apparent that regular sessions were resumed).

Perhaps the chequered history of the revived Convocation, Church Assembly and General Synod suggest that our established church does not marry well with notions of voluntarism and autonomy: but at least Hoadly was amongst those to notice that an established church cannot expect to have its cake and eat it. Any who are sceptical about the virtues of the modern sectarian kind of Anglicanism must face the same problems from the other side of the argument; but at least they will not condemn those who, like Hoadly, saw little value in duplicating institutions so long as the state chose to preserve the establishment.

The charge of 'Socinianism' has already been partly answered by the reference to Hoadly's principles of authority. He sought to

confine the argument to the evidence supplied by the New Testament, unaffected by later traditions. This has never been felt adequate by the Catholic Church, and nineteenth-century Protestant scholarship increasingly recognised its difficulties. To try to reconstruct the Christology of the New Testament has been a burning theological issue since the time of Schweitzer, and the conclusions which may be drawn from that study have not all been reductionist (Hodgson 1956, 1, 17). Perhaps Hoadly ought not to be seriously considered as a theologian when so many greater men were extant, and nobody has ever argued that he was conspicuously original, rather that he pressed current ideas to an extreme. But it would be fair to insist that his writings seek to preserve a sound and cautious position within what was the orthodox Protestant tradition, and that any criticism his opponents made stemmed from extreme views of their own. Hoadly was a controversialist, and rather an effective one.

A BAD BISHOP?

So we finally come to the real charge, that he was a bad bishop, and here it is not easy to be lenient. That a man so seriously afflicted should have been entrusted with duties which physically he could barely undertake was not a favourable starting-point: but the late twentieth century, so concerned for the welfare of the handicapped, should beware of endorsing too easily Dr Sykes's robust criticism (1934, 261–2). True, it is one thing for a man to become old and feeble and still to remain in office – Brownlow North's eyesight plainly deteriorated seriously towards the end of his episcopate, and Wilberforce (Fig 4) was in poor health during much of his short administration – and another thing for a seriously handicapped person to undertake such duties. If Hoadly was to be a bishop, he should not have been Bishop of Bangor, says Dr Sykes: but by the eighteenth-century scheme of things, Bangor was a small preferment, a kind of episcopal curacy, whose duties were not onerous nor the emoluments substantial. Transla-

tion to better things would be earned by loyalty nearer home, namely at Westminster and in the press. There were no suffragan bishops, but it was quite acceptable to commission other bishops to perform one's ordinations and confirmations, and any priest or chancellor could be commissioned to perform institutions and inductions. By the usual standards of eighteenth-century episcopal care, Hoadly was worse than most, because he could not get about his diocese; but he would not have been expected to live there, and the only time for visiting it was the summer months when Parliament was in recess and all the aristocracy returned to their estates. The usual view of a bishop was as a Londoner and as a man of ecclesiastical business.

HOADLY AT WINCHESTER

This view is borne out by the very scanty records of Hoadly's career at Winchester. Much of the administration of the diocese went on without needing his active presence, and most of the rest could be done by correspondence. Archdeacons visited the clergy (though Hoadly was not neglecting his own visitations in the 1740s), presentations to livings were largely in the hands of lay patrons, ordinations could take place wherever the bishop preferred. In Hoadly's case, ordinations were conducted at least twice a year in the Grosvenor Chapel, London, or in the chapel of the bishop's palace at Chelsea, up to 1752. Indeed, in the years 1742–1747, the Register records 41 ordination services, an average of five per annum, but the total is inflated by the practice of ordaining deacons and priests on separate days – a few candidates passing into deacons' and priests' Orders on successive days, and thence into the parochial cure for which they were obviously destined, and by several instances of 'special ordination' for individual candidates, sometimes on behalf of other bishops. Hoadly was clearly an obliging person so long as his health lasted. From 1751 most of his work was

being discharged by commissaries, which is not surprising since he was by then 75 years of age – having been 58 years old when translated to the see in 1734. Bishops in the eighteenth-century did not retire – one of the first bishops to avail himself of the facilities to do so under the Act of 1869 was Sumner (Fig 3), who outlived his successor on a pension bigger than the salary of later bishops. Otherwise, the registers are full of secular notices like the renewal of leases, the appointments of gamekeepers, bailiffs, custodians of Alresford Pond and the like; such items are not found in later registers, but by the nineteenth-century registrars had conformed to the bishops' more spiritual concept of office and concealed the concern about their own fees which is also regularly featured in Hoadly's register (on Microfilm 159, HRO). On the other hand, Hoadly was as ready as other bishops to oblige his own family: he promoted his son John to be rector of Alresford 'valued at £400' and also rector of St Mary, Southampton 'valued at £600' (Register, 30 May 1743). Alresford was (and is) in the gift of the Bishops of Winchester, but Southampton was in the gift of the executors of Archbishop Wake. However, a similar appointment was made by a Tory bishop, Brownlow North (Fig 2; promoted by his half-brother, the Prime Minister Lord North, to Lichfield in 1771, Worcester in 1774 and to Winchester in 1781, where he remained until his death in 1820, in his 99th year): he gave these appointments to his nephew, the Earl of Guildford, together with the lucrative sinecure Mastership of St Cross (Ward 1831, 515) – and the latter scandal was one of those which prompted Trollope to write his first successful novel, *The Warden*. If a practice can be so widely accepted that even Samuel Wilberforce, who held the see from 1869 to 1873, could make his son Basil rector of Southampton (Act Book VII, 168, HRO) as he had previously collated him to an Oxford living when governing that diocese as 'the remodeller of the episcopate', it seems unjust to blame one and not blame all. However, Hoadly was conspicuous and persistent in this respect. His son John was also made Chancellor of the diocese, and his

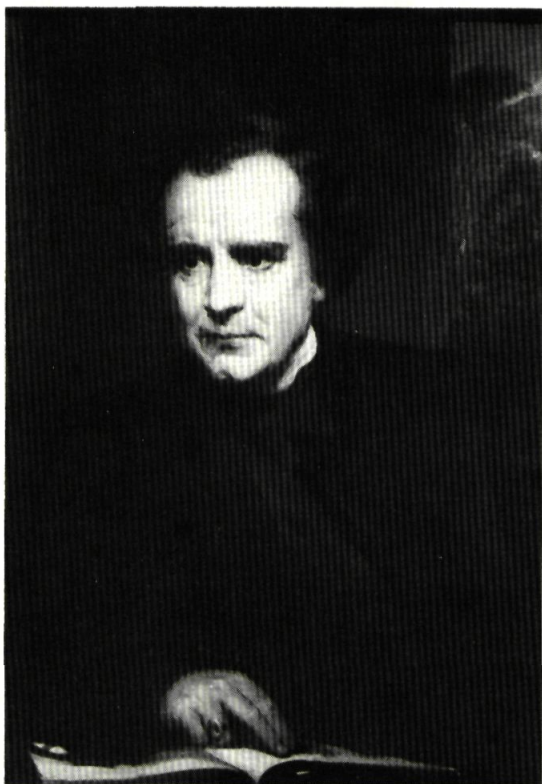


Fig 4. Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Winchester
1869–1873.

medical son Benjamin was made Registrar, as well as Clerk of Taunton Castle.

HOADLY AND OXFORD

But to show that Hoadly was only worse than a low average may not be enough. Was he a mere place-seeker, or was he a man with some integrity, entitled to plead that sincerity mattered more than anything else in a Christian? One piece of evidence may be added to the known fact that, although he wished to be lenient towards dissenters, he did not believe one could ignore the demands of the law, when he made Prebendary John Jackson of Salisbury sign the Thirty-nine Articles on taking up his appointment (DNB 27 20). One of Hoadly's functions was to act as

Visitor to five Oxford colleges, a position which could be regarded as a mere formality, but which in reality frequently required its occupant to adjudicate in disciplinary affairs and to interpret the statutes under which the colleges were governed (Pugh 1978, 170–87). If it is the mark of an honest man to be willing to change his mind and not to be afraid to admit it, Hoadly deserves much more than the grudging praise it has been possible to offer so far. When he became Bishop of Winchester he found himself called on to decide whether the statutes required Fellows of Trinity to graduate only in Divinity or allowed them to take up other studies. The new broom saw no need to make a clean sweep:

'I take this first opportunity to assure yourself and all the Fellows of your College, that it is a particular satisfaction to me to find my own judgement perfectly agreeing with your kind inclination towards so worthy a member of your Society. I very readily comply with your Request: & grant Mr Hughes the same indulgence and Dispensation which my Predecessor did: & this to continue till I shall be convinc'd I have done wrong, & that we all have gone upon mistaken Principles: that is, as I believe, through my whole life.'

The legal opinions he had sought convinced him that as Visitor he could vary the letter of the statute so long as the object was to enlarge, rather than contradict, the Founder's intentions, which he believed were meant to ensure an adequate number of priests among the Fellows (Trinity College, Oxford, Register 'Episc Winton', 26, 12 November 1734).

SECOND THOUGHTS

However, this happy accord was not to last. Nearly twenty years later, in 1751, Hoadly was approached with a similar case and came to a different conclusion. A new case gave him the opportunity to review the whole issue *ab initio*.

'I have now all the necessary Instructions for this purpose. I have the Statutes of the College before me. I have a full account of the Opinions of some of the greatest Lawyers, both Civilians and

Others, and the Grounds of those Opinions. . . . You have been so good as to let me know all the past Instances of any Importance towards my satisfaction; and to add some of your own thoughts in support of the aforesaid Opinions. . . .’

It would thus be possible to pronounce not only in the present case, but definitively about the power of Visitors and the duty of Fellows to study in Arts and Divinity. The judgement runs to some twenty-five pages, and enters minutely into the precise meaning of the words of the Statutes, both Latin and their English translations. As a good Whig, he expressed doubts about the Dispensing power of the Visitor, which he declared to be strictly limited in the Founder’s words to the ability to relax the time-limit within which Priest’s Orders must be taken. To dispense from the taking of Orders altogether would be a violation of the Founder’s intentions, but when urgent reasons such as illness or absence on College business could be shown, the Fellow could be dispensed from the time limit, although only whilst the disability continued. The Founder, as a free agent, was entitled to found a College for whatever purpose he pleased, and its members could not cavil at his conditions. His plain intention was to promote the study of Divinity, and his Fellows were to proceed to their MA and DD with all due diligence as the condition of eating the Founder’s bread. Numerous arguments were examined which had been advanced to show that higher degrees in other faculties might be substituted, but these were rejected after minute examination. As with theology, so with the Statutes – Hoadly went back to the foundation documents and interpreted them not in the light of history but of common sense and of internal consistency.

‘I heartily join in the wish of many that the Founder had thought fit to make such allowance, and had not expressed himself so strongly as to leave no room for his Ordinary and Visitor to make it, without forfeiting the Title given him by the Founder himself, of being the Conservator of the observance of his Statutes.’

Of the three precedents which were alleged, two had been in the troubled times following the Civil War, and without proper record of the reasons for such indulgence, even if the principle of custom or precedent ought to have any weight against the strict and explicit instructions of the Founder. The third case was

‘within the knowledge both of the present members of the Society and of the present Visitor. I have no blame to lay upon him, or upon any one but myself, in his case . . . I did not take time to consider what I ought to have then examined into, as I have now done. This I can attribute to nothing but my haste to comply with what the College seemed to desire; and my regard to the Great Men of the Law . . . as well as to the judgement of my immediate predecessor. But this precedent can have no weight with me, because I now plainly see my Error and the ground of it, and am truly sensible that it was a wrong and ill-grounded behaviour on my part to assume a power of Dispensing, which plainly appears to me to have been never thought of by the Founder . . . I am very sorry for the sake of the Worthy Gentleman concerned that I ever gave any Opinion before, which might justly encourage him to hope for the Indulgence he asked. . . . There may soon come another who may think and judge in a different way from me. All that I can pretend to, is, to judge for myself, and because you have already my former Opinion in your keeping, I the rather intreat that you and the Society will suffer these papers to be lodged in your Registry, as containing the reasons of my having entirely altered that Opinion. To which I shall only add that, with regard to these reasons, my only desire is *Valeant quantum valere possunt*. . . .’

(The original of this judgement is in Trinity College register, dated 27 April 1751, and a copy exists in HRO, Box E/8/D).

In fact the reasons prevailed as long as the statutes went unreformed, that is, for over a hundred years, when as a result of University Reform the restrictions were removed. It may appear to us rather unfortunate that Hoadly did not enquire into the conditions prevailing in the sixteenth-century, when the statutes were made in Mary’s reign, and hence deduce a change in religious outlook. He did offer

some comments on the reasons for Restoration relaxation of the strict conditions, as an abnormality now over. But such a line of argument would have been inconsistent with the principles he had followed in his theological controversies – of seeking the truth in the earliest documents, and then abiding by what he found. If such principles had at first made for advancement, this had not been uniformly the case, and by the last decades of his long life he was man enough to admit that he had sometimes been wrong. The comprehensiveness of his apology does not seem to fit in with the conventional view of his arrogant self-advancement. Rather it suggests a man of honour and some integrity who could

go along with the standards of his day a little too readily, but in the last analysis would not refuse to apply what he individually believed to be right. Winchester might have had a physically more active bishop and it was not impossible to find sound Whigs of greater learning, diligence and piety. But perhaps at least we may conclude that Hoadly was by no means the most scandalous bishop conceivable in the circumstances of his time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Illustrations are used by courtesy of Dr and Mrs John Taylor; the photography is by Peter Jacobs.

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This paper is published with the aid of a grant from the King Alfred's College Research Fund.

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