

**THE PEOPLE OF GOD: AN  
INQUIRY INTO CHRISTIAN  
ORIGINS. IN TWO VOLUMES,  
VOL. II: THE CHURCH**

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H. F. Hamilton

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**H. F. HAMILTON**

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# THE PEOPLE OF GOD

AN INQUIRY INTO CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

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VOLUME II

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## PREFACE

EVERY Anglican who reflects upon his position finds himself placed in some difficulty. On the one hand, he sees that his Church, almost alone among the reformed communions, has retained a ministry which reaches back behind the Reformation and joins hands with the Church of the earliest centuries. It is not simply a type of ministry or a form of government which has been retained; it is a principle of authorization or ordination of ministers—that none may undertake the duties of the ministry, except they be ordained by those whom the Church for centuries and centuries has regarded as alone competent to ordain, i.e. the age-long and world-wide succession of Bishops. Here is this succession of Bishops reaching back through the centuries—a time-honoured continuity to which no other organization of any kind can show an equal. And if this chain is once broken, if this principle is once thrown overboard by allowing a generation to grow up without episcopal ordination of clergy, the continuity is gone for ever and cannot be recovered. For this reason every one must feel that a thing which has come down to us out of a past so remote, which has been sanctioned and hallowed by the practice of the entire Church for so many centuries, ought not to be lightly tossed aside. We must first make quite sure that it has done the work intended of it and that it is now no more than an encumbrance.

On the other hand, this adhesion to the ancient ministry though it is not the only obstacle, yet forms a serious barrier to Christian unity. It is, of course, quite true that every step we take towards the Protestant Churches takes us farther away from our Greek and Roman brethren. But one cannot help feeling that Christian divisions are nowhere more grievous or unnatural than they are between Anglicans and Nonconformists. For after all, these men are of the

same blood and the same stock ; they think the same thoughts and have the same political and social ideals ; by nature we belong to them in religion as in other matters. As these divisions were the last to be opened, so they must be the first to be healed ; and when they are closed, reunion with Rome and the Churches of the East may come within the sphere of practical possibilities.

This situation is perhaps more keenly felt in the newer countries, where men are more conscious of the future than of the past. And one thing seems clear. In the new lands at least, the religious life of the future will refuse to be confined to so many parallel but separate channels. When the next great religious inspiration comes, it will sweep away all the barriers of sand, and Christian life will find its unity by rising above and submerging the old distinctions. What, then, of Episcopacy ? Is it, too, an unnatural barrier of sand which cannot be demolished too soon ? Or is it part of the bed-rock which keeps the stream in its true course and prevents it from being lost in arid deserts, or from dissipating its force in stagnant marshes and shallows ?

A united Christendom alone can rise to the unique opportunities which the heathen world now presents and meet the crying social evils of our western civilization. Reunion is indeed the most imperative need of the time. And any man or any body of men who are guilty of obstructing that consummation by selfish considerations alone incur a serious responsibility.

To us Anglicans, then, there comes home with special emphasis the duty of thinking out our position clearly and conscientiously. We have no right to make jettison of our ancient ministry at the demand of an uninformed popular opinion ; but on the other hand, other Christians have a right to ask of us that, if we maintain our position, we should make clear the grounds on which we do so.

The prospect of agreement may appear in some respects discouraging ; but, on the other hand, there has never been less prejudice, less sense of estrangement, and less blind adhesion to sectional and denominational forms, than there is at the present moment. The representative scholars of



almost every Christian body have learned to trust each other in many other departments of theology, and to respect each other's opinions on this vexed subject of the ministry. No doubt, there are some people who think they know all about this question and have closed their minds to any further consideration of it; but there are others, and these surely the great majority, who are conscious of a need of further light and do not think that the last word has been said on either side; although every one must, of course, pending further discussion, take up some practical attitude in the matter. And there are theologians in every denomination whose love to Christ is so great, and whose devotion to the truth is so earnest, that they would not hesitate to sacrifice their private interests, if they saw reason to think that the practical attitude which they have hitherto adopted ought to be changed. It is with this body of conscientious and devoted thinkers that the hope of reunion lies. If they are once unanimous on one side or the other, it will not be long before others will follow them. And in the meanwhile the average layman will do well to await their guidance.

The present work, then, is offered simply as a contribution to a discussion which has flagged of late, but which needs to be revived.

Only one word more remains to be said here. I question whether those who have not read at least Chapters VI and VIII of Volume I will quite realize the point of view from which Chapter I of this Volume is written.

HAROLD HAMILTON.



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