

## BISHOP GEORGE DAVID CUMMINS: CONTEXT AND VISION

A lecture delivered at the 57<sup>th</sup> General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church held in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2023 by the Most Revd John Fenwick DD, Bishop Primus of the Free Church of England.<sup>1</sup>

### A word of caution

It is natural when looking at an historical figure to want to assess him by the criteria of our own day. More simplistically, there is a natural desire to know whether he was a ‘good guy’ or a ‘bad guy’. That’s not as simple as it sounds.

For example, George Whitefield, whom most members of the REC would no doubt consider one of the good guys, worked to overcome the colony of Georgia’s ban on slavery, and had slaves at the orphanage on his plantation.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, in the 1750s the future King George III (whom Americans might be inclined to think of as one of the bad guys!) wrote an essay *against* the practice of slavery; ‘Slavery is equally repugnant to the Civil law as to the Law of Nature.’<sup>3</sup> I use that example because many of the events we are going to be looking at took place in the 1860s. Those were difficult years for the United States – the years of the Civil War. I shall try and deal sensitively with them where they impinge on our story, but forgive me if, as a foreigner, I say things or use historical terms which you find offensive.

My main point is that human beings are seldom simply either ‘good guys’ or ‘bad guys’. All idols have feet of clay. We need to remember that in looking at George David Cummins.

### A pioneer

Within the global history of Anglicanism, we Reformed Episcopalians hold a special place. Since the 1970s many defections from Anglican jurisdictions have taken place. The early ones were occasioned by the ordination of women; the more recent ones by same-sex issues. The common declared issue of *principle* is the desire to be true to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. Today, claiming that principle, the Global South is separating from the See of Canterbury and GAFCON is sponsoring new jurisdictions in places like New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom.

But nothing remotely like that was happening in the 1870s. George Cummins was the first ever Anglican bishop to leave his post *intentionally to form a new Anglican community* outside the official Communion. We are marking a unique anniversary.

Cummins was in fact only the third bishop voluntarily to leave what we would now call the Anglican Communion.<sup>4</sup> The previous two were John Gordon of Galloway (in Scotland) who joined the Roman Catholic

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to record my thanks to Deacon Vic Broberg at the Reformed Episcopal Seminary in Philadelphia and the Revd James R. Wilkinson, Historiographer of the Diocese of Kentucky, for their assistance in the preparation of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: the life and times of the great evangelist of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival*, London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1971, vol.2, p.368. ‘George Whitefield’s troubled relationship to race and slavery’ by Thomas S. Kidd, January 6, 2015. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2015-01/george-whitefield-s-troubled-relationship-race-and-slavery>. Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Andrew Roberts, *George III: The Life and Reign of Britain’s Most Misunderstood Monarch*, London, Penguin Random House, 2021, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> The Non-Jurors, of course, left *involuntarily*, deprived of their offices in 1689, and John Colenso of Natal was deposed and excommunicated by Archbishop Gray of Cape Town in 1866.

Church at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Levi Ives of North Carolina who did the same in 1852.<sup>5</sup> Cummins' situation was obviously different from both of them. He left in order to build. He was a pioneer.

For that reason alone he deserves to be studied and better known.

And the tradition he brought into existence – the Reformed Episcopal family of Churches – has, under God, been preserved for 150 years without any of the international support and resources that are being mobilised for the benefit of others today. On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1873 the Reformed Episcopal Church began with six presbyters and nineteen laity. And the man whose Call they answered and around whom they gathered, was a Bishop in the Church of God, George David Cummins.

Despite his historical significance, Cummins is little known and comes across as a rather one-dimensional figure, a narrow-minded Protestant agitator who left when he couldn't get his own way. In this lecture I hope to flesh him out a little and explore the context and vision that led to the events of 150 years ago.

First, I shall try and give a general overview of his life and ministry, noting some of the broader influences on him, before going on to look in more detail at some specific sources of influence. In the second half I shall focus in on the factors that precipitated his formation of the REC and what happened to some elements of the original vision.

And it is a privilege to do so in a place that Cummins himself knew. From 21<sup>st</sup> November to 17<sup>th</sup> December 1875 Bishop Cummins was here in Charleston, preaching to what the Journal describes as 'colored congregations' and ordaining two 'freedmen' as Deacons. This city and the work here were very precious to him.

### **A General Overview of his life and ministry**

On 7<sup>th</sup> August 1862 George Cummins and his wife Alexandrine arrived in my Diocese in England.<sup>6</sup> They had sailed from New York, leaving the children with their grandparents, and docked at Liverpool. Cummins wrote home, 'It was raining very hard, but we must expect such weather in England, and we find the people are very indifferent to it.'<sup>7</sup>

On the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1862 they boarded a train and headed for Scotland. Why Scotland? Because that is where his paternal ancestors came from.<sup>8</sup> Cummins is a Scottish name. The Cummins clan was once the most powerful family in 13th-century Scotland, until they were defeated in civil war by their rival to the Scottish throne, Robert the Bruce. There is one small hint that Cummins was proud of his Scottish ancestry. On the cover of the first edition of Alexandrine Cummins' *Memoirs* of her husband is what seems to have been his badge. This takes the form of a sheaf of wheat with two crosiers crossed in saltire behind it. In heraldry the sheaf – called a Garb – is a characteristic feature of the Cummins family.

On its way to Scotland, the train passed through Lancashire. At one point they were about 12 miles from the mill town of Tottington where a Free Church of England congregation had already been worshipping for 9 years.

In Edinburgh they based themselves in two rooms at the Alma Hotel before taking lodgings. One of their visitors saw a family likeness in one of the photographs they showed him, which suggests the Cumminses had not been in the United States for many generations.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Colonial Church Chronicle*, (January 1874), p.16; Lewis Wright, 'Anglo-Catholicism in Antebellum North Carolina: Levi Silliman Ives and the Society of the Holy Cross', online at <http://anglicanhistory.org/essays/ives.pdf>. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The only life of Cummins published so far is Alexandrine Macomb Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins: First Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church*, Philadelphia, E. Claxton, 1878. A new biography is long overdue.

<sup>7</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.159.

<sup>8</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.13.

George himself had been born in Smyrna, Delaware in 1822. His father was wealthy and (to get an awkward fact out of the way) 'a large slave-holder', though he set them all free before his death.<sup>9</sup> Cummins himself, by the way, explicitly states that he is not a slaveholder.<sup>10</sup> His father's family was Episcopalian; it would be interesting to know if they been Episcopalian while living in Scotland as the Scottish Episcopal Church suffered under penal legislation until 1792. His mother's family was of English Episcopal stock, though drawn into Methodism by the ministry of Bishop Francis Asbury; Cummins' maternal grandfather was a Methodist preacher.<sup>11</sup> Cummins' father died when his son was only three, and his mother married a Methodist preacher; it was therefore inevitable that the young Cummins grew up in the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was educated at Dickinson College, where, at the age of 16, he experienced conversion.<sup>12</sup> As a young man he felt a call to the ministry and in 1843 became an itinerant preacher 'preaching by day from tree stumps and fence rails and sleeping by night in the rain and heat, throughout eastern Maryland and northern Virginia'.<sup>13</sup> In 1845, however, he re-joined the Protestant Episcopal Church, was confirmed, and ordained Deacon on 26<sup>th</sup> October of that year.<sup>14</sup> Cummins was a committed Episcopalian, deeply attached to liturgical worship. He was ordained priest in July 1847 and held a number of parochial appointments in Virginia, Washington (where he lived in a house opposite the Capitol), Baltimore and Chicago, being loved for his deep pastoral concern and his clear and moving preaching ministry.

It was while at Baltimore that he and Mrs Cummins made the visit to Scotland that I began with. The Civil War had been raging for over a year and it seems a strange time to leave the children for several months. The original intention had been to go on to Germany and sail up the Rhine to Switzerland, then returning via Paris. In the event Mrs Cummins' health was not up to this, so they remained in Edinburgh until November. During that time Cummins visited clergy from several traditions, from the Bishop of Edinburgh to the Free Church of Scotland. He explored Edinburgh and surrounding places, often on his own, and was fascinated by Highlanders in kilts and by Egyptian mummies in a museum. One of the places he visited was the Rosslyn Chapel, now made famous in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

From the newspapers they followed the progress of the War at home, and were concerned that at times their letters were not reaching their children as the Confederate Army had disrupted deliveries.

Shortly after their return to the States, in 1863 Cummins became rector of Trinity Church, Chicago, where he came into contact with the rector of Christ Church in that city, Charles Edward Cheney. Cheney had built up his congregation from humble beginnings and was a stalwart Evangelical. Uncomfortable, like most Anglican Evangelicals, with the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration, he had quietly ceased to use the word when conducting the baptism service. Reported to his bishop, Cheney was tried in the Church courts and formally deposed in 1871 (though the validity of the deposition was not upheld by the State Court). In practice this meant little, for he remained at Christ Church and continued to minister there with the support of his congregation. For Cummins, however, this treatment of his former neighbour was unjust and unsettling. Equally unsettling was the apparent silence of the Evangelical bishops in the face of the persecution of a fellow

---

<sup>9</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.14.

<sup>10</sup> *The African a Trust from God to the American: A Sermon Delivered on the Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer, in St. Peter's Church, Baltimore, January 4, 1861*, Baltimore: Printed by J.D. Toy, 1861.

<sup>11</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.496.

<sup>12</sup> Towards the end of his life he attributed this to Dr John Price Durbin, the college President, (Cummins, *Memoir*, p.423; for a biography of Durbin see <https://www.biblicalcyclopedia.com/D/durbin-john-price-dd.html>; [https://gardnerlibrary.org/sites/default/files/H2\\_John\\_Durbin.pdf](https://gardnerlibrary.org/sites/default/files/H2_John_Durbin.pdf)).

<sup>13</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, *For the Union of Evangelical Christendom: The Irony of the Reformed Episcopalians*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, p.90.

<sup>14</sup> Guelzo suggests that the split within the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery might have been a contributory factor to his decision to return to the Church of his birth. *Ibid.*

Evangelical for believing what they too believed. It was to add to his growing sense that the Protestant Episcopal Church was beyond rescue.

### **The General Convention of PECUSA 1865<sup>15</sup>**

Two years after moving to Chicago, Cummins was elected a Delegate from the Diocese of Illinois to the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church held in Philadelphia in October 1865. This seems to have been his first Convention. He was not a delegate in 1859 or 1862. Interestingly, he was involved in its proceedings from the opening session on 4<sup>th</sup> October, nominating the Revd George Randall of Diocese of Massachusetts as Secretary of the House of Clerical and Lay Deputies. He also moved a motion permitting 'Clergymen of the United Church of England and Ireland, and of the British Colonies, also of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, who may be sojourning in this city', to be admitted to sittings of the Convention (presumably as observers) together with Professors and Students of the General Theological Seminary.

Cummins was clearly not afraid to stand up and speak. It was, however, his intervention on the re-admission of the representatives of the Confederate States that seems to have impressed people. The Civil War had formally ended on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1865. What was to be done about the Dioceses in the Confederacy? Cummins moved the resolution:

*That this House offers its profound gratitude to God that we have among us our brethren, the Clerical and Lay Deputies from the Dioceses of Texas, North Carolina, and Tennessee, and that we recognize their presence in our midst as a token and pledge of the future and entire restoration of the union of the Church throughout the length and breadth of the land.<sup>16</sup>*

In his speech Cummins said that it had been the glory of the Church that she had been the last to break the ecclesiastical bonds of the Union and therefore should be the first to restore the bonds: 'let her gather them up and weave them into a chain of love never to be broken'.<sup>17</sup>

There was an attempt to have the resolution laid on the table (i.e. not taken) but that was defeated and the resolution was adopted. Cummins' speech would have gone down well with Hopkins (Presiding Bishop 1865-1868) who invited the Southern Bishops and delegates to take their seats. As Presiding Bishop he had always called their names at votes in the House of Bishops.<sup>18</sup>

The Convention lasted several days and dealt with a great deal of business from considering the removal of the *filioque* from the Nicene Creed to expressing approval of Gray's deposition of Colenso in South Africa for teaching false doctrine.<sup>19</sup> The details need not concern us here. It is, however, important to note that, through

---

<sup>15</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, Boston, William A. Hall, 1865; [https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1865\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1865_GC_Journal.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1865, p.38.

<sup>17</sup> For a description see Cummins, *Memoir*, p.238f.

<sup>18</sup> The return of the bishops from Confederate States may have been made easier by the fact that in 1861, Hopkins had written a controversial pamphlet, 'The Bible View of Slavery', in which he criticized abolitionists and declared that no scriptural basis for ending slavery existed. The pamphlet was seen as Hopkins' attempt to justify slavery based on the Bible. He argued that slavery was not a sin per se. Rather, Hopkins argued that slavery was an institution that was objectionable and should be abrogated by agreement, not by war (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/clementsead/umich-wcl-M-2316hop?view=text>).

<sup>19</sup> The House of Bishops *express their hearty admiration of the courage, firmness, and devoted love of the truth of the Gospel as this Church has received the same, which has been manifested by the Right Rev. ROBERT GRAY, Bishop of Capetown and Metropolitan of South Africa, and the Bishops who assembled with him, in dealing with the sad defection from the Christian doctrine, by which one of the Bishops of that province had become notorious, and have declared their thanks to these right reverend brethren for the noble stand made by them against heretical and false doctrine; (Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1865, p.152f).*

the Convention and by other means, Cummins was well informed of what was going on elsewhere in the Christian world.

Not only that, but Cummins' own account of the Convention shows him dining with several bishops, including Hopkins the Presiding Bishop.<sup>20</sup> He seems to have been perfectly comfortable moving in such circles.

There is one theme at the 1865 Convention that almost certainly chimed with Cummins' own convictions. The Bishop of Montreal and Metropolitan of Canada, the Most Revd Frances Fulford, preached at the opening service and addressed the Convention on the second day. Among other things he spoke of the possibility of a forthcoming council of bishops (which later took place as the first Lambeth Conference in 1867):

*I could wish to see in that council representatives of all the reformed Churches throughout the world to bear our testimony, in opposition to the false catholicity of Rome and all other gainsayers, that we are maintaining the true principles of the Catholic Church as it is in Jesus Christ.*<sup>21</sup>

Here was the senior bishop of the Church of England in Canada (as it then was) expressing the wish that the forthcoming council in London be composed, not just of Anglican bishops, but of 'representatives of all the reformed Churches throughout the world'. What, as we shall see, became Cummins' convictions, were widely shared at the highest levels in the Anglican Communion. Cummins was appointed to serve on a committee to respond to the Metropolitan of Canada's address, which would have given him further opportunity to reflect on these themes.<sup>22</sup>

## Second Visit to Europe

On 19<sup>th</sup> May 1866 the Cummins family sailed from Boston to Liverpool intending to spend a year in Europe. The hope was that a sea voyage and residence abroad would benefit Mrs Cummins' health, give Dr Cummins some rest, and be of advantage to their children.

On arrival they spent a day in Chester 'that quaint old city' then went to Leamington in Warwickshire (central England – in Bishop Paul Hunt's Diocese) where they spent some weeks. Leamington (which is mentioned in Domesday Book) was developed as a spa town in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and it is possible that the Cummins family stayed there so that Mrs Cummins could take the waters and perhaps other treatments.

Leamington seems to have done Mrs Cummins good, for from there the family moved to London, then to Paris 'where two months and a half were most agreeably spent'.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.240.

<sup>21</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1865, p.37. Interestingly, in his address Fulford used the phrase, 'declarations of principles' – a phrase which Cummins was to adopt in 1873.

<sup>22</sup> Three years later, at the 1868 General Convention, Cummins heard Bishop Alfred Lee of Delaware, in his sermon, declare: "A bright vision has oft risen before my mind of a Church pure and primitive, combining the early organization, zeal and love, with the freshness, energy and progressiveness of the times--gathering from past ages experience, wisdom, and liturgic treasures, while discarding utterly all corrupt additions and cleansing the temple from all profane intrusions--conservative without being narrow and bigoted--liberal without being lax a true interpreter of holy writ, and yet referring all men not to her own interpretations, but to the living oracles--rebuking with power, worldliness and wickedness, sympathizing with all that is good and heaven-born--a rallying point for those who are weary of sectarian strife, a candlestick of the Lord, whose radiance should illumine our cities and forests, our mountains and plains. Is such an ideal never to be realized? Is it but a dream and cloud picture?" (*Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, Hartford, 1869;

([https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1868\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1868_GC_Journal.pdf))

<sup>23</sup> Cummins, *Memoirs*, p.244f.

What did they do there? Alexandrine had a brother there.<sup>24</sup> For at least part of the time Cummins took charge of the American Chapel in Paris while the Rector took a vacation.<sup>25</sup> It may also be relevant (as we shall see shortly) that the headquarters of the Evangelical Alliance in France was in Paris.

While the Cummins were in Paris, on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1866 George was elected Assistant Bishop of Kentucky – which we shall come back to below. He was notified by telegram and numerous letters of congratulation, and sent his letters of acceptance from Paris on 15<sup>th</sup> July.

It might be expected that he would return immediately to the States. Not a bit of it. From France the Cummins return to the United Kingdom where '[t]he months of August and September, and part of October were passed most pleasantly in various parts of England'.<sup>26</sup> One of the places they stayed at was Sudbrook Park, near Richmond on Thames (to the west of London). There was a hydrotherapy clinic there from the 1840s to the 1860s, which may have been the reason. Charles Darwin was a client there in 1860. Not until mid-October did they return to America.

### *The European influence?*

Let's pause there a moment and ask what effect these prolonged experiences of Scotland, England and Europe had on him. Surprisingly, there seems to be little or no reference to it at all. In his letters home from Scotland there were descriptions of what he had seen. He clearly loved the natural world, but his comments otherwise are quite matter of fact. He described the Free Church of Scotland hall as 'beautiful' and Roslyn Chapel as 'richly carved', but there is no sense of his religious emotions being stirred. There is no 'I have seen Notre Dame de Paris, that great monument to popery' or 'I have seen the magnificent cathedrals of England, raised by our forebears to the glory of God'.

He enjoyed singing hymns around the piano with his family but disapproved of frivolous entertainment. There is no reference to him attending concerts; in fact, little evidence of an aesthetic side to him at all. That could be highly significant.

Archibald Tait was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1868 to 1882 – overlapping with most of Cummins' episcopate. It has been said of Tait that he 'did not really understand Anglo-Catholicism. ... [He] could not fathom a religious outlook that used ceremony and colour to approach the mystical'.<sup>27</sup> What was true of Tait, a former Presbyterian, seems also to have been true of Cummins, a former Methodist. Warm-hearted devotion to the person of Jesus, the piety of revivalist preaching, Cummins could understand; piety engendered by 'the beauty of holiness' expressed physically in ornamentation and gesture he could not relate to.

It has also been said of Archbishop Tait that 'he would have grasped that Anglo-Catholicism involved the repudiation of much of the Reformation and of Protestantism (which Tait viewed as God-inspired deliverance from Roman error) ...'.<sup>28</sup> That was exactly Cummins' view, and I make the comparison with Tait to show that Cummins was not a lone eccentric; his views (and his limitations) were shared at the very top of the Anglican world.

### **Cummins as Bishop**

The Diocese of Kentucky was formed in 1829, 37 years after Kentucky became a state. On 31st October 1832 Benjamin Boswell Smith (aged 38) was consecrated by William White to be its first bishop. At the time of Bishop

---

<sup>24</sup> In 1862 Cummins told his children he had received a letter 'from your Uncle T\_\_ inviting us to stay with them in Paris'

<sup>25</sup> Cummins, *Memoirs*, p.248.

<sup>26</sup> Cummins, *Memoirs*, p.261.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Beaken, Review of John Witheridge, *In the Shadow of Death: A Life of Archibald Campbell Tait, Archbishop of Canterbury*, James Clark and Co., 2021, in *New Directions*, (September 2022), p.28.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Beaken, *op. cit.*, in *New Directions*, (September 2022), p.28.

Smith's election there were in the Diocese just seven officiating Presbyters, six Candidates for Orders, seven organized Parishes, three buildings for public worship, three more in prospect, and a little over two hundred communicants.<sup>29</sup>

By 1866 Smith was 72 and requested an assistant with right of succession. The Diocese had Evangelicals and High Churchmen. Cummins was a compromise candidate acceptable to both. Kentucky had been a border state, a slave state that did not secede from the Union and Cummins' conciliatory attitude towards the South no doubt also made him acceptable.

His post was Assistant Bishop of the Diocese of Kentucky.<sup>30</sup> That suggests a support role, undertaking tasks that the Diocesan delegated to him – a sort of episcopal curate. In fact, the Diocese of Kentucky is described in its official history as being 'for several years ... without the full services of a bishop' by the time Cummins arrived.<sup>31</sup> Bishop Boswell Smith was by now elderly and increasingly infirm. In addition, he became Presiding Bishop of PECUSA in 1868 on the death of Hopkins, and spent nearly all his time in the East, only visiting the Diocese once a year for the annual convention. The official Diocesan history states:

*Since his arrival, Cummins had been, in effect, the acting Bishop of the Diocese, and he was, as a matter of fact, assuming all of the duties of a diocesan.*<sup>32</sup>

He threw himself into his work. At the end of his first six months he had visited all but three of the thirty five parishes and missions in the Diocese. His ministry included consecrating Churches. I haven't checked this out, but there are probably Churches operating today in the Diocese of Lexington in The Episcopal Church that were consecrated by our first Presiding Bishop.

From the triennial reports for the Diocese of Kentucky, published in the Journals of the PECUSA Convention,<sup>33</sup> it is possible to get a glimpse of Cummins' ministry by abstracting the figures for the years 1869 to 1873, the years when he had been to all intents and purposes in sole charge:

- 25 candidates for Holy Orders had been admitted.
- 8 deacons had been ordained, but at least 10 had been received or transferred into the Diocese.
- 6 presbyters had been ordained, but at least 33 had been received or transferred in.
- 3,179 infants and 844 adults had been baptised and there had been 2,414 people confirmed.
- The Diocese was maintaining several schools, two orphanages and a seminary.
- Annual income had risen from \$89,000 in 1869 to \$130,000 in 1871.
- By 1871 6 parishes had been organised and 6 more admitted into union with the Convention (no figures are given for 1874).

---

<sup>29</sup> *The Life and Ministry of Benjamin Bosworth Smith, First Bishop of Kentucky: A Memorial Discourse Delivered before the Fifty-sixth Annual Council of the Diocese of Kentucky, on the 24th Day of September, A.D., 1884, in Christ Church, Louisville.* By Alfred Lee, Louisville, John P. Morton, 1884. <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/bbsmith/memorial1884.html>

<sup>30</sup> The text of his Letters of Orders is printed in the Journal of the General Convention 1868, p.552f.

<sup>31</sup> Frances Keller Swinford and Rebecca Smith Lee, *The Great Elm Tree: Heritage of the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington*, Lexington, Faith House Press, 1969, p.293. The original Diocese of Kentucky was later divided into Lexington and Kentucky.

<sup>32</sup> Swinford & Lee, *The Great Elm Tree*, p.298.

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1871\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1871_GC_Journal.pdf);  
[https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1874\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1874_GC_Journal.pdf) . The figures are not presented in exactly the same way in the two Journals, so can only be approximate in some areas.

The impression is of a Diocese which is planting churches and institutions, to which ordained men are attracted to serve and which is producing a steady stream of home-grown candidates for ordination. Much of the credit for that must go to Bishop Cummins. All this is worth stressing because it is a reminder that Cummins was actually an experienced bishop, not a wet-behind-the-ears episcopal curate.

One consequence of his being the only active bishop in the Diocese, however, was that, when parishes start to 'go Ritualist' Cummins could not avoid having to minister there. He couldn't ask Boswell Smith to go to them, while he restricted himself to parishes that he found more congenial. The Ritualist issue was not one that he could avoid.

### **Wider awareness**

Beyond the Diocese Cummins attended meetings of the General Convention in 1868 and 1871 and sat in the House of Bishops. This would have brought him a further awareness of international developments. Indeed, he was invited to attend what was to be known as the First Lambeth Conference in London in 1867, but declined as it was too soon after his consecration.<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, at the 1871 General Convention Cummins and his brother bishops received a report on 'the ferment taking place in the Roman Catholic Church'.

The report warned of 'the patient, far-sighted, and deep-laid plans of the Roman Court ... to establish an ecclesiastical dominion more absolute and comprehensive than was ever before aimed at, even in the Middle Ages'. The proof of this was the promulgation of *Pastor Aeternus*, the decree of the First Vatican Council in 1870, setting out, among other things, the doctrine of papal infallibility. Happily, however, the report continued, the promulgation of Papal infallibility has had positive effects:

*[T]he dogma has aroused a theological and religious resistance still more unexpected. The example of the learned Dollinger has been followed by many others. The principles set forth in the declaration published at Munich, with signatures of thirty leading theologians, and some of the first civilians of Germany, have already spread wherever the German tongue is spoken, and have enlisted the warmest interest elsewhere, especially in Italy and Hungary. It is probable that, sooner or later, the reforming ecclesiastics and laity of both these countries will openly espouse this movement. It already has their deepest sympathy. Alike in Germany and in Italy; it proposes the thorough reformation of the Latin Church, upon principles which are substantially analogous to those of the Anglican Reformation. So far as relates to discipline, and to civil status, it is yet more closely conformed to ideas of which our own Church is, or has been till very lately, the only practical illustration. [In other words, this reform movement was independent of the State, unlike the English situation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.] The specific reforms already proposed include the free circulation and study of the Scriptures, the use in worship of the vulgar tongue, the revival of an elective Episcopate, the synodical government of dioceses and provinces, the organic participation of the laity in both lay administration of ecclesiastical property, the abolition of the worship of the saints and of images and relics, the revision of the cultus of the Virgin, the abolition of compulsory clerical celibacy and of enforced confession, and, in short, very much the same programme which we have heretofore reported as that of the Italian reformers. At a meeting of the German leaders, lately held at Heidelberg, it seems to have been generally agreed that an entire separation from a Papacy claiming infallibility was inevitable.*

*A general Congress of the Alt-Katholiken, or Catholic Reformers, has been held in Munich within the past few days. The official invitation for this Congress declared that 'the reform movement within the bosom*

---

<sup>34</sup> Alan M.G. Stephenson, *The First Lambeth Conference 1867*, London, SPCK, 1967, p.197. Several other bishops gave the same reason for non-attendance. I am grateful to the Revd Wyatt Boutwell for drawing this to my attention.



*of the Catholic Church makes continual progress;' that 'everywhere the desire of restoring the Church to its primitive spirit is manifested.'*<sup>35</sup>

This, of course, was the beginning of the Old Catholic movement – initially a protest against the doctrine of papal infallibility. The House of Bishops in 1871 placed on record its earnest sympathy with the movement and agreed to send the Bishop of Maryland to Europe to investigate the situation first hand and report back.<sup>36</sup>

We know today that the Old Catholic movement turned out to be very small, but in the early 1870s there was a real expectation that a second Reformation might be about to take place. The programme of the reform – retaining episcopacy, while allowing vernacular worship and lay participation – was one that looked very Anglican. So much so that the Anglican world as a whole hailed the Old Catholic movement with excitement. The 1878 Lambeth Conference (the first one after the secessions) welcomed them warmly:

*The fact that a solemn protest is raised in so many Churches and Christian communities throughout the world against the usurpations of the See of Rome, and against the novel doctrines promulgated by its authority, is a subject of thankfulness to Almighty God.'*<sup>37</sup>

By 1888 the next Lambeth Conference was explicit in its hopes for Bishop Reinkens and his people: 'For ourselves we regard it as a duty to promote friendly relations with the Old Catholics of Germany ... in thankfulness to God, who has strengthened them to suffer for the truth ....'<sup>38</sup>

So, in the early 1870s Cummins would have been, like most other Anglicans, excited at the coming into being of new communities who had thrown off the Roman yoke. His anti-Catholic views (in this sense) were totally mainstream.

We shall return to the Old Catholics below.

## **Influences**

Having sketched something of Cummins' career and experiences within the Protestant Episcopal Church, we turn now to look at three significant sources of influence on him: Methodism as experienced in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Alliance and William Augustus Muhlenberg.

## **Methodism**

When Cummins was born in 1822 John Wesley had only been dead for forty years.

---

<sup>35</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1871*, p.560ff;

[https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1871\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1871_GC_Journal.pdf);

<sup>36</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1871*, p.356. On 4<sup>th</sup> October 1871: *The Bishop of Albany moved that the following minute be entered on the Journals of this House : We, the Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, having our attention called to the published report of the proceedings of the Alt-Catholic Congress, recently assembled in Munich, put on record the expression of our earnest sympathy with the heroic struggle for religious liberty now making by the members of that Congress; and of our anxious hope and fervent prayers that God may give them counsel and might to maintain and carry out the determination to "reject all dogmas set up under" any Pope, "in contradiction to the teaching of the primitive Church," and "to hold fast to the old Catholic faith," as it was by the Apostles delivered to the Saints. The motion was adopted. The Bishop of Pennsylvania offered the following resolution: Resolved, That in the judgment of this House it is highly desirable that the Rt. Rev. the Bishop of Maryland should visit Europe for the purpose of ascertaining the state and condition of the various reformatory Church measures recently inaugurated there, in Germany and Italy, and that he present the results of his observations to the House of Bishops, at his own convenience. Which was adopted unanimously. Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1871,*

<sup>37</sup> *The Five Lambeth Conferences*, London, SPCK, 1920, p.94.

<sup>38</sup> *The Five Lambeth Conferences*, p.163.

In September 1784 in Bristol, John Wesley had ordained Thomas Coke as ‘Superintendent’ of the Methodists in the former American colonies. (Two months before the consecration of Seabury in Aberdeen.) Coke sailed to America and on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1784 ordained Francis Asbury as a Superintendent. Three years later the American Methodist Conference formally adopted the title of ‘bishop’ instead of ‘superintendent’. The bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church derive their succession from Coke and Asbury.

These two had been dead for less than six years at the time of Cummins’ birth. He was in touching distance of the first generation of American Methodists. Asbury, as we have seen, had been instrumental in the conversion of his mother’s family.

Early Methodism at this time was characterised by revivals and Camp Meetings. Scattered communities were served by Circuit Rider preachers, usually laymen. Methodism was also much influenced by the Second Great Awakening – a nationwide wave of revivals, from 1790 to 1840, in which many came to a personal experience of salvation. The ethos was that of warm, Christ-centred devotion, with simple worship and preaching directed to the heart.

### *Matthew Simpson*

We now need to introduce a Methodist whose name appears in the Journal of the General Council and the Year Book of the Free Church of England to the present day.

Matthew Simpson (1811-1884) was baptized as an infant by Bishop Francis Asbury. He was ordained in 1837 by Robert Richford Roberts (1778 – 1843), who himself had been ordained, both Deacon and Elder, by Bishop Asbury.<sup>39</sup>

Simpson was elected a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in May 1852. He was active in the Evangelical Alliance (about which we shall hear more below), attending the Alliance meeting in Berlin in 1857, having also visited Britain and Ireland. It was Simpson who preached at Abraham Lincoln’s funeral. He visited Europe again in 1870 and attended the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in England. He and Cummins clearly knew each other well.

On 31<sup>st</sup> May 1876 (approximately a month before the death of Cummins) the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting in Baltimore, resolved that it was desirable that a conference should be called representing all the diversified bodies of Methodists that has sprung up throughout the world.<sup>40</sup> The conference eventually took place in London in 1881, with Matthew Simpson preaching the opening sermon.<sup>41</sup> Simpson stated that he believed that the diversity among the churches might lead to more being won for Christ and cited recent ‘Pan-Anglican’ and ‘Pan-Presbyterian’ congresses as foreshadowing an Oecumenical Protestant Conference, when ... the world shall see that evangelical Christians are one in heart and one in effort’.<sup>42</sup> Those are all themes that, as we have begun to see, resonated deeply with Cummins.

---

<sup>39</sup> Roberts was elected Bishop in 1816.

<sup>40</sup> *Proceedings of the Oecumenical Methodist Conference held in City Road Chapel, London, September 1881*, Hamilton, S.G. Stone, 1882, p.v. The original resolution of the MEC in 1876 explicitly states Arminian theology as one of the distinguishing features of Methodists.

<sup>41</sup> Attributed the success of Methodism to the ‘From its earliest history it recognised as Christians all who loved and honoured the Lord Jesus Christ. Neither its altars nor its pulpits have ever been closed against Christians or Christian ministers by canons either of brass or of parchment’. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/47099941>. *Proceedings of the Oecumenical Methodist Conference held in City Road Chapel, London, September 1881*, Hamilton, S.G. Stone, 1882, pp.1-20.

<sup>42</sup> *Proceedings, 1881*, p.17f.

So, from Methodism Cummins acquired not just a deep commitment to simple, Christ-centred faith and worship, but also a longing for the overcoming of divisions between Christians – and the need to do something about it.

### The Evangelical Alliance

This brings us to one of the greatest influences on Cummins.

We have already seen the Metropolitan of Canada calling for ‘representatives of all the reformed Churches throughout the world’ to take part in a conference to give expression to their essential unity. We have just seen the longing among many Methodists for their movement to unite, following the many divisions that took place in the years after Wesley’s death.

The longing for unity was widespread. On both sides of the Atlantic there were calls for Christians – and Evangelicals in particular – to overcome their divisions and unite. In 1838 Samuel Schmucker, Professor of Theology at the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg, published *A Fraternal Appeal to the American Churches* in which he advocated ‘Catholic Union on Apostolic Principles’.<sup>43</sup> In it he proposed full recognition of membership and ministries between the different denominations. In Edinburgh in 1843, at a bicentenary celebration of the Westminster Assembly, there was a call for ‘an evangelical and catholic union in England’ and it was claimed that the ‘principles of catholic union’ were recognised in the Westminster Confession.<sup>44</sup> So much did the question of unity dominate that conference that it was followed up by the publication in 1846 of *Essays on Christian Union*. One of the essays advocated admitting members of other Churches to the Lord’s Supper – a practice that would help crystallise the formation of the Reformed Episcopal Church, as will be seen. Further publications and conferences around this time also addressed the question of Christian unity, the details of which need not be explored here. One significant outcome of this activity was the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in August 1846, with the British branch taking shape from the following October.<sup>45</sup> Founding membership of EA was limited to those who had been at the London Conference (of 1846) ‘of whom none were slaveholders’. The movement was organised into seven regions, including France.<sup>46</sup>

The first international conference of the Evangelical Alliance outside the British Isles was held in Paris in 1855. It closed with a united service of Holy Communion using seven different languages. There was a conference in Geneva in 1861, which again, included a united Communion service. It was normal Evangelical Alliance practice.

In 1847 the Alliance launched a magazine, which was published monthly up until 1898. It ‘carried news from different parts of the world about evangelical activity and especially about mission. ... The theme of Christian unity received considerable coverage.’<sup>47</sup> The name of the magazine was *Evangelical Christendom*.<sup>48</sup> If you are thinking that name sounds familiar, it is because Cummins used it in his letter of resignation – he was transferring his work and office to a communion that would be a basis ‘for the union of all Evangelical Christendom’.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Ian Randall and David Hilborn, *One Body in Christ: The History and Significance of the Evangelical Alliance*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2001, p.30f.

<sup>44</sup> Randall & Hilborn, *One Body*, p.33. The free use of the word ‘catholic’ is perhaps surprising. It did not, of course, include ‘popery’ and ‘puseyism’ which were regularly attacked, but it does show a desire to appropriate the word.

<sup>45</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.45ff.

<sup>46</sup> Adolphe Monod of the French Reformed Church, Professor of Theology at the Montauban University, at the 1846 conference spoke of an *esprit vraiment oecumenique* thought to be the first recorded use of the word ecumenical to denote a positive attitude to the superseding of national and confessional differences.

<sup>47</sup> Randall & Hilborn, *One Body in Christ*, p.69.

<sup>48</sup> Randall & Hilborn, *One Body in Christ*, p.68.

<sup>49</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.420.

Given his deep commitment to the cause, I think it is highly likely that Cummins was in contact with members of the Evangelical Alliance on his visits to the United Kingdom. The Alliance has no archivist and I have not been able to consult their archives.

He must also have been in touch with Evangelical Churchmen. The struggle against Ritualism was deep and bitter. In 1865 (the year before Cummins' second visit) the Church Association (the precursor of the present-day Church Society) was founded 'To uphold the principles and order of the United Church of England and Ireland, and to counteract the efforts now being made to assimilate her services to those of the Church of Rome.' I strongly suspect that references to Cummins will be found in the archives of the Evangelical Alliance and other Evangelical movements in the UK. There is a research project there for someone.

### **William Augustus Muhlenberg 1796-1877<sup>50</sup>**

We come now to a third major influence on Cummins, one whose influence can be seen in our Declaration of Principles – William Augustus Muhlenberg.

The Muhlenbergs were a prominent ecclesiastical dynasty. William's great grandfather had come to the British Colonies from Germany in 1742 to work among German and Swedish Lutherans. One of 'patriarch' Muhlenberg's sons, Peter, was ordained presbyter in England together with William White. The young William Muhlenberg was ordained deacon on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1817 to serve at Christ Church, Philadelphia, as chaplain to Bishop White. He was ordained priest on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1820.

From early in his ministry Christian unity was a major preoccupation that was to last until the end of his life. In 1835 Muhlenberg wrote *Hints on Catholic Union*<sup>51</sup>. The keynote is Christ's words, 'that they all might be one ... that the world might believe' (John 17:21). In it Muhlenberg argued for unity in doctrine, in ministry (to be episcopal) and in worship.

His vision was of an 'Evangelical Catholicism' that would marry the fervour of Evangelical faith to catholic Church order. For a few years he produced a journal called *The Evangelical Catholic*. In it he defended his chosen nomenclature: 'we believe in Christianity, not as an abstraction, but as an institution – a divine institution, adapted to all mankind in all ages; in other words, the Catholic Church. This we declare in calling ourselves Catholics'<sup>52</sup>. The word 'Catholic', he conceded, had become identified with Rome: 'Speak of *Catholics*, and not one in a hundred would suppose you mean any others than members of the Roman Church. If we will have the name, and surrender it we can not, we must qualify it, we must explain it ... therefore we style ourselves Gospel, that is *Evangelical Catholics*'<sup>53</sup>. This, for Muhlenberg, was the distinguishing mark of the episcopal communion he believed in – 'we go at once to the Gospel, and assert ourselves Gospel (i.e. Evangelical) Catholics'<sup>54</sup>. Moreover, it was a concept with a long and distinguished history. This, argued Muhlenberg is what the Reformers were, Gospel Catholics, helping the Catholic Church discover its Gospel roots.

In 1843 Muhlenberg visited England for the first time and met both Newman and Pusey and was initially much influenced by them: 'for some three years, I might have been classed among the Puseyites.'<sup>55</sup> However, as Muhlenberg reflected more on the thinking of the Oxford Movement, and particularly on Newman's Doctrine of Development, he began to see 'that its logical results were Romanism'.<sup>56</sup> Alarmed at the direction the

---

<sup>50</sup> See Anne Ayres, *The Life and Work of William Augustus Muhlenberg, DD*, New York, Thomas Whittaker, 1894.

<sup>51</sup> New York, Protestant Episcopal Press, 1836.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Ayres, *Muhlenberg*, p.238.

<sup>53</sup> Ayres, *op.cit.*, p.242.

<sup>54</sup> Ayres, *op.cit.*, p.240.

<sup>55</sup> Ayres, *op.cit.*, p.173. See the present writer's *Anglican Ecclesiology and the Gospel*, pp.9-18 for details of Muhlenberg's visit to England and its influence on his thinking.

<sup>56</sup> Ayres, *op.cit.*, p.173

Tractarian movement was taking, Muhlenberg therefore ‘flew back, not to rest on the pier of High Churchism, from which this bridge of Puseyism springs, but on the solid rock of Evangelical truth, as published by the Reformers.’<sup>57</sup>

But for Muhlenberg, the ‘solid rock of Evangelical truth’ did not have to be expressed in a starkly Protestant ecclesiastical culture. He had learned from the Tractarians a positive appreciation of ‘the beauty of holiness’. At the Church of the Holy Communion in New York, of which he was Rector from 1844 to 1877, ‘Muhlenberg introduced weekly communion services, organized a sisterhood for social service, put away his preaching gown in favor of exclusive use of the surplice, and erected an altar with crosses, candles, flowers and incense’<sup>58</sup>.

But Muhlenberg’s Catholicism differed in one fundamental respect from that of the growing Anglo-Catholic movement. His complaint against the High Church bishops was that a narrow interpretation of the Protestant Episcopal Church’s canons denied non-episcopalians access to the riches of Gospel Catholicism in its episcopal and liturgical fullness. Seventeen years after his *Hints on Catholic Union*, in October 1853, Muhlenberg sought to put his vision of Christian unity into effect by, along with a number of other presbyters, presenting a Memorial to the House of Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church<sup>59</sup>. The Memorial drew the bishops’ attention to ‘the divided and distracted state of American Protestant Christianity, ... the consolidated forces of Romanism, ... and ignorance’. The Protestant Episcopal Church as presently constituted ‘is not sufficient to the great purposes [of addressing these issues and dispensing the Gospel to the nation]<sup>60</sup>. The 1853 Memorial sought to achieve this by making three basic recommendations:

1. That ‘a wider door must be opened for admission to the Gospel ministry’ by making episcopal ordination available to men ‘among the other bodies of Christians around us, who would gladly receive ordination at your hands, could they obtain it without that entire surrender which would now be required of them, of all the liberty in public worship to which they have been accustomed ...’<sup>61</sup>
2. The easing of the requirements of conformity to the Book of Common Prayer to prevent the Protestant Episcopal Church ‘reject[ing] all laborers but those of one peculiar type’.<sup>62</sup>
3. That the bishops give the lead in achieving ‘greater concert of action among Protestant Christians than any which yet exists’<sup>63</sup>

Muhlenberg was proposing that men might be episcopally ordained while remaining in their existing denomination, and able to use parts of the Prayer Book without being committed to unvarying use of the whole. In mid 19<sup>th</sup> century North America the High Church bishops were ‘aghast at Muhlenberg’s proposals’ – ‘How could it have entered into the mind of man to conceive of such a thing?’ protested one<sup>64</sup>. Extending the blessings of episcopacy to those who were not prepared to submit to its discipline was unthinkable. The official 1856 response to the Memorial loosened some of the restrictions on liturgical usage, and set up a Commission on Christian Unity, but nothing came of the latter.

---

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Guelzo, *For the Union.*, p.62.

<sup>59</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1865*, p.216 ([https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1853\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1853_GC_Journal.pdf)). The full text of the Memorial can be found on p.181ff of the *Journal*, and, together with a wide range of documentation and the official response, in Alonzo Potter (ed.), *Memorial Papers: The Memorial, with Circular and Questions of the Episcopal Committee...*, Philadelphia, E.Butler & Co., 1857.

<sup>60</sup> Text in Ayres, *Muhlenberg*, p.266.

<sup>61</sup> Ayres, *op.cit.*, p.265.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Ayres, *op.cit.*, p.267..

<sup>64</sup> Guelzo, *op.cit.*, p.64.

Forgotten as it is today, the Muhlenberg Memorial was nevertheless formative in the coming into being of the Reformed Episcopal Church for two principal reasons. Firstly, it raised the possibility of an episcopal Church becoming the nucleus around which other Churches might unite. Secondly, the Memorial was accompanied by a brief doctrinal test which would be taken up a generation later. Muhlenberg had followed up the Memorial with a range of pamphlets expanding its themes. Some of these concentrated on loosening the canonical regulations concerning worship.<sup>65</sup> In another – ‘An Exposition of the Memorial’, published in November 1854 – he proposed that ‘when promising opportunities occur for admitting men to Holy Orders who would desire to receive them without being obliged to relinquish all their existing ecclesiastical relations, let them be ordained on conditions like the following’:

1. *That they declare their belief in the Holy Scriptures as the word of God, in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, in the divine Institution of the two sacraments, and in the ‘doctrines of grace’ substantially as they are set forth in the Thirty-Nine Articles..*<sup>66</sup>

This text, as we all recognise, was to form the starting point for the Declaration of Principles which Cummins drafted in preparation for the founding of the Reformed Episcopal Church.

It was also to be required that they use items such as the Creeds, Lord’s Prayer and Gloria, and make a report to the bishop once every three years.

So, the textual influence is clear, but what was the relationship between Muhlenberg and Cummins? How confident can we be about the degree of direct influence?

Alexandrine Cummins tells us that Muhlenberg ‘had been a friend of the bishop’s for many years’ by 1873.<sup>67</sup> They were certainly both involved in the Evangelical Alliance; Muhlenberg actually spoke at the 1873 meeting in Cummins’ defence following his participation in a Communion service with Presbyterians.<sup>68</sup> Once Cummins had resigned from PECUSA, significantly, it was to Muhlenberg that he turned. Alexandrine Cummins also tells us that, when her husband was residing in New York following his resignation, ‘at such a crisis he sought advice from a man so much older and of such marked wisdom’ and saw Muhlenberg ‘frequently’.<sup>69</sup> There was obviously an urgency about these meetings, for on at least one occasion Muhlenberg called to see Cummins late at night.

The account of Benjamin Leacock, one of the founding presbyters of the REC, agrees with this and gives us a little more detail:

*As soon as the Doctor heard of the Bishop’s resignation, he called on him and manifested the greatest interest. He placed his library at his disposal and begged him to come and see him, assuring him that he would be always ready to assist him with his counsel, and in all ways in his powers. This information [says Leacock] I had from the Bishop.*<sup>70</sup>

Even so, at the end of the day, Muhlenberg could not support Cummins’ act of separation. Having devoted his life to the cause of Christian unity, he could not support an initiative that further split the Church. Muhlenberg wrote to Cummins:

---

<sup>65</sup> For example, *What the Memorialists Want: A Letter to the Rt Rev Bishop Otley, Chairman of the Commission*, New York, R. Craighead, 1854.

<sup>66</sup> ‘An Exposition of the Memorial’ (November 1854), in Ann Ayres (ed.), *Evangelical Catholic Papers: A Collection of Essays, Letters and Tractates from the Writings of Rev. William Augustus Muhlenberg*, New York, Thomas Whittaker, 1875, p.140f.

<sup>67</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.445.

<sup>68</sup> Anne Ayers, *Muhlenberg*, p.458.

<sup>69</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.445.

<sup>70</sup> *Memoirs of Benjamin B. Leacock DD, a founder of the REC*, October 1883, p.52.

*I cannot see whither your present move can move but towards the founding of another Church. This, as yet, I fear to think of, though it may be what the providence of God designs.<sup>71</sup>*

Leacock believed that this was not the only reason that Muhlenberg could not support Cummins. He believed that Cummins acted too soon in forming the REC and that it would have been preferable to wait until a network of sympathetic groups had been brought into existence.

*In the meanwhile the work of revising and organizing would be going on. Assistance in this direction had already been offered him, especially from one quarter – a man venerated and of unbounded influence in the Protestant Episcopal Church. His sympathy and quiet assistance to the movement, although he might never have given it his open adhesion, was worth a host. Others would have followed ....<sup>72</sup>*

*[Muhlenberg] was a man in years and of sound judgement. He was widely known, honored and trusted. His name anywhere, in or out of the Church, was a power. He was a friend and an ally worth having. Bishop Cummins knew it. But unfortunately, he did not use him, and in not using him, he lost him. When the Call appeared, Dr Muhlenberg drew off. ... Many as deeply interested as he, did the same. They recognised at once the rashness of the course determined on.<sup>73</sup>*

*There was not a shadow of a hope that Dr Muhlenberg would identify himself with us ....<sup>74</sup>*

Cummins, it seems, failed to read the signs and was so convinced that he was putting into effect Muhlenberg's vision that he tried to call for Muhlenberg's election as a bishop at the inauguration of the REC, but Muhlenberg was not there and the matter was hastily dropped.<sup>75</sup>

Even so, it is clear that in the early days at least, the REC quoted Muhlenberg as a justification for their actions. So much so, that the Doctor had to publicly dissociate himself from them:

*When in the early days of the new organisation, presuming upon his sympathy with their church principles, ... they indirectly claimed him as of their party, - allusions to this effect appearing more than once in print – he felt constrained to disclaim all connection with them, as publicly as the contrary had been implied. 'I have constantly maintained that [his grievances] could have been relieved by another than the sad alternative which he has adopted'. 'I deplore his secession. I lament his forming another denomination so much identified with himself. It is not an earnest religious movement, not to be mentioned alongside Luther's or Wesley's or that of the Old Catholics'.<sup>76</sup>*

Outsiders could, however, see the similarity. Aycrigg quotes an article by the Revd Dr J. Cotton Smith, speaking of a movement in the 1860s:

*It was the purpose ... to embody ... in an organisation, the views and principles of ... Dr Muhlenberg, and to maintain both the Catholic and Evangelical elements in the Church. Had this effort been successful, it is not too much to claim that the organization of the R.E.C. would never have taken place.<sup>77</sup>*

---

<sup>71</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.446.

<sup>72</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.43.

<sup>73</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.52.

<sup>74</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.51.

<sup>75</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.51.

<sup>76</sup> Ayers, *Muhlenberg*, p.460f.

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin Aycrigg, *Memoirs of the Reformed Episcopal Church and of the Protestant Episcopal Church with contemporary reports respecting these and the Church of England*, (fifth edition) (approved by Bishop Cummins and the Council) New York, printed for the author by Edward O. Jenkins, 1880, p.204.

In other words, if an organisation embodying Muhlenberg's Evangelical Catholicism had come into existence in the 1860s, there would have been no need for the REC to be formed.

So, although Muhlenberg himself repudiated the movement, it is clear that many in the founding generation, though they don't seem to have used the term 'Evangelical Catholicism' much, nevertheless drew a great deal of their inspiration from him.

And when Muhlenberg died, the Fifth General Council (meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1877 – a year after Cummins' death) passed a resolution:

*Whereas, The Rev. William Augustus Muhlenberg, D.D., of the Protestant Episcopal Church, the life-long advocate of Christian union, and an exemplar of the holy life that springs from a union with Jesus, has entered into the rest that remaineth for the people of God; therefore,*

*Resolved, By the Reformed Episcopal Church in General Council assembled, that a life so pure, a faith so unfeigned, and a love for God's people of every name so unchanging, is by us placed on record as worthy of perpetual remembrance.<sup>78</sup>*

### **Triggers for action**

We have looked at some of the context and influences on George Cummins. His personal faith was rooted in the Second Great Awakening. Methodism nurtured his Christ-centred piety and taught him the simple faith of the frontiers, intense, personal and devoid of 'churchy' externals. This faith made it natural for him to join the Evangelical Alliance whose very *raison d'être* at that time was the union of Evangelical Christendom. There were many other voices calling for the same. Here in the United States Muhlenberg devoted most of his life to the vision of Evangelical Catholicism and believed the Protestant Episcopal Church should be actively promoting the union of separated brethren. Internationally, Anglican bishops and Methodists were all calling for the overcoming of divisions.

This urgent call for all who named the name of Christ to overcome their historic divisions and find a way to express their fundamental unity was the background to Cummins' ministry. He was not a lone voice or eccentric. He was totally mainstream in believing passionately in this cause.

He was also totally mainstream in believing the Church of Rome to be deeply in error and in his opposition to those who sought to introduce Romish errors (made visible by the introduction of Romish ceremonial) into the Church of England and her American daughter.

He began his episcopal ministry as a convinced Anglican, comfortable with the Episcopal Church and her Prayer Book. So, what happened to change this?

### **'Romanising Germs'**

Up until 1868 Cummins' appreciation of the Book of Common Prayer had been strongly positive. For Cummins the Prayer Book was not just a blessing to PECUSA, but was one of the tools by which the unity of Protestants could come about. The task of Episcopalians, he argued in 1861, ought to be

---

<sup>78</sup> *Journal of the Fifth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1877*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1877, p.64.



*to exhibit the adaptation of the Prayer Book to be the manual of worship for all the confessions which divide the Protestant Christian family and thus to be a bond of union and communion in one visible Church of the living God.*<sup>79</sup>

This is an important point: like other elements the Prayer Book had a role to play in bringing about his vision of Christian unity. His sermon on the subject, re-published several times was entitled: 'The Prayer Book – A Basis for Unity'.<sup>80</sup>

According to Cummins' own account, his confidence in the Prayer Book and its unifying potential was knocked away by a publication by Franklin S. Rising, secretary of the American Missionary Society of PECUSA, which Cummins read in 1868.<sup>81</sup>

Rising (who was drowned in a steamboat collision on the Ohio River in December 1868<sup>82</sup>) defined 'Romanising germs' as 'certain seminal doctrines, which, being implanted and taking root, in due time spring up and bear Romanism as their fruit'.<sup>83</sup> Rising described three such germs in the Prayer Book –

- a. the fact that the Bible is not the sole rule of faith (as evidence for which he cites the fact that the Apocrypha, the Homilies, the Canons and the Church Fathers have a degree of authority for Anglicans);
- b. the ministry is an exclusive priesthood with supernatural powers (as evidence for which he cites the use of the word 'priest' and the formula at ordination – 'Receive the Holy Ghost ...');
- c. that the sacraments, when administered by this priesthood are of singular efficacy (as evidence for which he cites the use of the word 'regenerate' in the Baptismal Office, kneeling at Communion, and the denial solely of a 'corporeal' presence in the elements as stated in the Black Rubric'.

A central argument in Rising's pamphlet is the belief that the English Reformation was incomplete. The progression to a pure godly liturgy had been cut short by the premature death of King Edward VI and the compromises of Elizabeth I.

An element in this view of history is the belief that at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the people of England knew themselves to be in darkness, groaning under the papal yoke, longing to be set free by the forces of Protestantism. In fact, recent studies have shown that the English Church on the eve of the Reformation was healthy and enjoyed the support of most of the population.<sup>84</sup> The Reformation in England was essentially a top-down process, forced on a largely unwilling population by an authoritarian and autocratic leadership in a way that no American would tolerate in his own country.

Today, Rising's points look surprisingly modest. However, they rocked Cummins to the core. Hitherto he had 'firmly believed that [the Ritualist] school was not a growth developing from seeds within the system, but a parasite fastening upon it from without and threatening its very life'.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Cummins. *The Claims of the Prayer Book Upon Protestant Christendom., A Sermon preached at the Anniversary of the Bishop White Prayer Book Society* (Philadelphia, 1861), 31, 33.

<sup>80</sup> <https://archive.org/details/prayerbookbasiso00cummm/page/13/mode/1up?view=theater>

<sup>81</sup> An abridged version can be found in Vaughan, *History of the Free Church of England*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Free Church of England Publications Committee, 1994, pp.157-170.

<sup>82</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.305.

<sup>83</sup> Vaughan, *op.cit.*, p.158.

<sup>84</sup> A major study that triggered this reappraisal is Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400 to c.1580*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1992.

<sup>85</sup> Letter of Bishop Cummins to Cheney, 1875, in Vaughan, *History of the Free Church of England* (1<sup>st</sup> edn.), Bath, 1936, pp.176-186. The quotation is from p.178.

There is no time here to analyse Cummins' reaction in detail. Briefly, in his own words, 'a mighty change came over my views of the Prayer Book'.<sup>86</sup> He accepted Rising's thesis that 'the Reformation in the Church of England was never perfected', with the result that the Romanising germs had never been totally removed, indeed, some had been re-introduced at the various revisions of the book. He realised with a profound shock that his *own* acceptance of Prayer Book teaching on baptismal regeneration, a human priesthood, the real presence and apostolic succession 'in the sense in which Evangelical men received them', involved 'denying the plain literal meaning of the words, and giving them an interpretation utterly unwarranted'.<sup>87</sup> In other words, it was *his* interpretation that was wrong. The Ritualists, 'if remonstrated with, ... could answer that they stood upon the Prayer Book, that the plain, literal meaning of the words of that book were on their side ...'.<sup>88</sup>

That being the case, Cummins (and others) sought to get the words changed, and brought petitions for Prayer Book revision to the General Conventions of 1868 and 1871. At the latter the House of Bishops resolved that it was not expedient to consider the petitions further. As Cummins said, 'The door was closed in our faces, The hope of relief was utterly lost. ... The burden was indeed intolerable'.<sup>89</sup>

There is much more that could be said, but a major motivation in Cummins' founding of the Reformed Episcopal Church was to create a context in which the Prayer Book could be revised in a way that Cummins believed would complete the work of the Reformers. If Rising was correct, the Prayer Book had to be amended because in its present state it was an obstacle to Christian unity. Cummins' address to those present on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1873 (the inaugural meeting) occupies twelve pages of the printed Journal; ten of those pages are a history of Prayer Book revision, in England and America.<sup>90</sup> Two years later, when their revision was complete, he felt he could 'claim the revised Prayer-book as a most important step towards the union of Protestant Christians'.<sup>91</sup> Note the ultimate goal – not good liturgy in itself, but as a facilitator for Christian unity.

More widely, from his reading of Rising's tract in 1868, Cummins developed what the official history of the Diocese of Kentucky calls an 'obsession' with combatting ritualism in all its forms.<sup>92</sup> We can't go in to all the details, but the balance of his ministry seems to have shifted from the Diocese to speaking at Evangelical societies and gatherings, becoming ever more outspoken against encroaching Ritualism. Some of these engagements took place in other bishops' Dioceses, which eroded their sympathy with him and at times produced outright hostility. Even in Kentucky he lost the support of people who previously had sympathised with him.

There are small signs of his withdrawal from the wider episcopal fellowship. In the early years after his own episcopal ordination he acted as a co-consecrator at the episcopal ordination of two new bishops,<sup>93</sup> but does not seem to have done so after 1868, perhaps because he could no longer comfortably participate in a service where the words 'Receive the Holy Ghost ...' were spoken over the candidate.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Vaughan, *History* (1936), p.182.

<sup>87</sup> Vaughan, *History* (1936), p.178.

<sup>88</sup> Vaughan, *History* (1936), p.181.

<sup>89</sup> Vaughan, *History* (1936), p.183.

<sup>90</sup> *Journal of the First General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, Dec. 2<sup>nd</sup> 1873*, New York, Edward O. Jenkins, 1874, pp.9-20.

<sup>91</sup> Vaughan, *History* (1936), p.185.

<sup>92</sup> Swinford and Lee, *Great Elm Tree*, p.302.

<sup>93</sup> William Armitage on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1866 in Detroit and of John Young on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1867 in Trinity Church, New York (*Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1868*, Appendix, pp. 553,555; [https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1868\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1868_GC_Journal.pdf)).

<sup>94</sup> Though he presumably used the formula himself at the ordination of priests.

So, 1868 seems to have been a tipping point in Cummins' thinking and priorities. However, it is important to stress again that he was not a lone voice or an eccentric. He was an experienced bishop. His views on biblical orthodoxy, on the urgent need for Christian unity, on fear of the growing power of Rome and support for those who protested against it, were all totally mainstream – both within the Anglican family and beyond.

Christian leaders of all denominations were crying out that something needed to be done. But only one bishop was prepared actually to do something.

It was the conviction that stemming the tide of Ritualist influence, which was hindering Christian unity, could not be achieved in PECUSA that was a powerful factor in his forming of the REC. But he knew that in 1871, when attempts at Prayer Book revision at the General Convention failed, and yet still did not act. Why not? The answer is found in the most unlikely of places.

### **The Old Catholic catalyst**

As early as 1870, Cummins had discussed the formation of a new Episcopal Church with a gathering of about thirty-five clergy. There was one crucial constraining factor:

*The great difficulty in the way was the necessity (as they believed) for three bishops to legally organize and establish a new Episcopal Church.<sup>95</sup>*

Why three bishops? The Council of Nicaea in 325, as well as agreeing the first form of what we now know as the Nicene Creed, also passed canons regulating aspects of Church life. The fourth of these stated:

*It is by all means desirable that a bishop should be appointed (καθίστασθαι) by all the bishops of the province. But if this is difficult because of some pressing necessity or the length of the journey involved, let at least three come together and perform the ordination (τὴν χειροτονίαν ποιεῖσθαι) ....<sup>96</sup>*

The concern of the canon was the collegiate nature of the episcopate in each province, rather than the absolute necessity of three bishops for a valid consecration (as if a critical mass were needed). In general, however, the rule of three was followed in East and West and consecrations by fewer than three could be viewed as less secure.

This had a particular relevance in the Church in the newly independent colonies. As is well known, Samuel Seabury of Connecticut was consecrated by Scottish bishops in 1784. There were, however, misgivings about Scottish Orders; men ordained in Scotland were not allowed to take up incumbencies in England until as late as 1864.<sup>97</sup>

These misgivings about Scottish Orders were felt even here in America.

At the third General Convention of the PECUSA in 1789, the delegates from Massachusetts and Rhode Island had requested the consecration of a bishop for them, noting that there were now three bishops in North America competent to act, two of the English line and one of the Scots line.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.398f.

<sup>96</sup> Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London, Sheed & Ward, 1990, p.7f.

<sup>97</sup> Frederick Goldie, *A Short History of the Episcopal Church in Scotland*, Edinburgh, St Andrew Press, 1976, p.89f. The legislation permitting this was The Episcopal Church (Scotland) Act 1864.

<sup>98</sup> *Journal of the General Convention 1789*, p.53f. *That a complete order of Bishops, derived as well under the English as the Scots line of Episcopacy, doth now subsist within the United States of America, [naming them], resolved, That the said three Bishops are fully competent to every proper act and duty of the episcopal office and character in these United States, as well in respect to the consecration of other Bishops, and the ordering of Priests and Deacons, as for the government of the church, according to such rules, canons and institutions, as now are, or hereafter may be duly made*

But the Convention did not feel that two bishops of English consecration and one of Scottish consecration were fully competent. So, it was not until a third bishop in the English succession, James Maddison (consecrated in 1790), was present that the American bishops felt able to proceed to ordain a bishop themselves – Thomas Claggett - on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1792, with Seabury as a fourth and supernumerary bishop.

Cummins would have known this. He was also aware of another, more recent, situation in which the validity of an episcopal consecration was called into question.

At the 1865 General Convention (at which Cummins was present as a delegate from Illinois) the House of Bishops informed the House of Deputies:

*That this House is satisfied that the Rev. Richard Hooker Wilmer, D.D., has been validly consecrated to the office of a Bishop, having been elected to the exercise of that office in the vacant Diocese of Alabama; and that, without examination of the circumstances occasioning certain canonical irregularities in the election and consecration, and expressly declaring that its present action shall never be construed or accepted as a precedent, this House hereby accepts the Right Rev. Dr. Wilmer as Bishop of Alabama, and consents to his episcopate as such ....<sup>99</sup>*

Wilmer had been elected Bishop of Alabama in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the *Confederate* States of America in October 1861. Because the PECCSA constitution and canons (by which the election would have been confirmed) had not yet been ratified, the bishops of Tennessee and North Carolina refused to take part in the consecration. The only Diocesan bishops available and prepared to act as consecrators were the frail and elderly Bishop Richard Meade of Virginia (who died a few days later) and Bishop Stephen Elliott of Georgia. The Assistant Bishop of Virginia had to act as the third ordaining bishop on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1862. Cummins actually spoke for half an hour on accepting Wilmer, at the end of which ‘some were in tears’ and the vote for acceptance was unanimous.<sup>100</sup>

Cummins was therefore well aware – from ancient canon, from the founding events of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and from recent history – that an episcopal ordination performed by fewer than three bishops or with canonical irregularities, could be open to challenge as to its validity – hence the lack of action in 1870. That such factors dissuaded him from acting, apparently for several years, is significant. It suggests both that he took the historic norms seriously and that, if he were to ‘establish a new Episcopal Church’, he wanted the consecration of its bishops to be indisputably valid. He therefore believed that he could not proceed unless two more bishops joined him.

The events of 11<sup>th</sup> August 1873 changed all that. As Alexandrine Cummins put it in her Memoirs,

*This difficulty was soon entirely removed, when the ‘Old Catholics’ of Europe were fully recognised by Episcopal Churches, although they had had but one excommunicated Jansenist bishop to consecrate Dr Reinkens, the first bishop of their church, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August, 1873.<sup>101</sup>*

On that day had taken place an event which electrified the Christian world. Herman Heykamp, the Bishop of Deventer in the Netherlands (the sole surviving bishop in the Utrecht succession), consecrated Josef Reinkens

---

*and ordained by the Church in that case.*

[https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1789\\_GC\\_Journal.pdf](https://www.episcopalarchives.org/sites/default/files/publications/1789_GC_Journal.pdf)

<sup>99</sup> *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1865, p.45.*

<sup>100</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.240.

<sup>101</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.399. This precedent was clearly viewed as critical; it is repeated in Annie Darling Price, *A History of the Formation and Growth of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1873-1902*, Philadelphia, James M. Armstrong, 1902, p.86f.

as bishop for the Old Catholics of Germany.<sup>102</sup> Rome judged all consecrations by Utrecht bishops as illicit and deplorable, but did not deny their validity. In fact, the Utrecht succession had on several occasions depended on consecration by a single bishop and plenty of precedents of the acceptance of the validity of such consecrations, in both East and West, had been adduced to prove their validity.<sup>103</sup>

Let's pause there a moment to remind ourselves of the context.

We saw earlier how in the 1860s the Roman Catholic Church was going through a period of turmoil, which had culminated in the promulgation of *Pastor Aeternus*, the decree on papal infallibility and the reaction against it. We saw, too, how the Anglican world was tracking these developments. Closer to home, Muhlenberg was aware of the debates.<sup>104</sup> In 1843, 1855 and 1872 Muhlenberg visited England and continental Europe and would have seen first-hand the local situations. Indeed, in London in 1872 he met Bishop William Whittingham of Maryland *en route* to attend the Congress of dissident Catholics at Cologne at which the name 'Old Catholic' was officially adopted.<sup>105</sup>

Cummins was aware of all this. His letter of resignation to Boswell Smith shows that the Old Catholics were on his mind.

Now the Old Catholics gave him the precedent he needed to act.

Here were groups of people leaving the Church of Rome in protest against its increasingly extreme teaching and now being provided with a bishop - *by a single bishop consecration* - to enable them to continue to live as episcopal communities. Why should not a parallel situation be possible in the United States? If groups of people were to withdraw from PECUSA in protest at *its* 'extreme teaching', why should they not be allowed to continue as episcopal communities under the oversight of bishops in the historic succession?

The widespread acceptance of the validity of Reinkens' consecration had shown Cummins that he did not need to persuade other bishops to join him in forming a new community.<sup>106</sup> One bishop was sufficient.

What would have happened if Reinkens had not been consecrated amidst so much publicity? Would Cummins have dared to found the REC and ordain a bishop alone? Such questions are, of course, unanswerable, but it can be confidently said that the rise of the Old Catholic movement was a factor (and a highly significant factor) in the coming into existence of the Reformed Episcopal Church.

---

<sup>102</sup> C.B. Moss, *The Old Catholic Movement: Its Origins and History*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) London, SPCK, 1964, p.242. A second bishop, Caspar Johannes Rinkel, was also ordained for Haarlem. His Orders and those of Reinkens were accepted as valid (but illicit) by Rome.

<sup>103</sup> For examples see John Mason Neale, *A History of the so-called Jansenist Church of Holland*, Oxford, John Henry and James Parker, 1858, p.264f.

<sup>104</sup> His biography explicitly says that to the end of his life he did not pass by 'any new publication worth reading on the subjects dearest to his heart' (Ayers, *Muhlenberg*, p.379).

<sup>105</sup> Ayers, *Muhlenberg*, p.448; Thomas Albert Howard, *The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Dollinger, and the Quandary of the Modern Age*, Oxford, University Press, 2017, p.185; Moss, *Old Catholic Movement*, p.238. Two Church of England bishops and twenty two Anglican priests also attended. Bishops of the Church of England and PECUSA regularly attended the formative Old Catholic Congresses. Kerfoot of Pittsburg, one of Cummins' consecrators, attended the Bonn Conference in 1874 (Moss, *Old Catholic Movement*, p.261; Howard, *Pope and Professor*, p.200).

<sup>106</sup> Like many others at the time, the 1878 Lambeth Conference saw great hope in the secessions from the Roman Catholic Church: 'The fact that a solemn protest is raised in so many Churches and Christian communities throughout the world against the usurpations of the See of Rome, and against the novel doctrines promulgated by its authority, is a subject of thankfulness to Almighty God', *The Five Lambeth Conferences*, p.94. By 1888 the next Lambeth Conference was explicit in its hopes for Bishop Reinkens and his people: 'For ourselves we regard it as a duty to promote friendly relations with the Old Catholics of Germany ... in thankfulness to God, who has strengthened them to suffer for the truth ....' (*op.cit.* p.163.)

That was certainly the opinion of others. Following his consecration on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1873, Cheney was hailed in the press as ‘a second Reinkens’, indicating that others beside Cummins could see the parallels between the new movement and the Old Catholics. Indeed, Roman Catholic commentators seem to have referred to it as ‘Old Catholicism in the Episcopal Church’.<sup>107</sup> To some the parallels were obvious. Theodore Wirgam, Archdeacon of Port Elizabeth in South Africa, a strong Anglo-Catholic, could see that:

*[Cummins] took the ‘Old Catholic’ movement in Germany as his model, and determined to found what he called a ‘Reformed Episcopal Church’ to do the work against the sacerdotalism and sacramentalism of the American Church which Dr Dollinger was attempting to do against the Church of Rome.*<sup>108</sup>

Interestingly, the Reformed Episcopalians retained an interest in Reinkens even after Cummins’ death. The Journal of the 1877 General Council contains an appendix claiming that Reinkens’ view on apostolic succession and the nature of the Church were the same as those of Archbishop Cranmer and Bishop Cummins.<sup>109</sup>

The same Journal also contains in an appendix a quotation from a letter written by the Revd Marshall B. Smith (one of the founding presbyters) to Bishop Stevens of Pennsylvania<sup>110</sup> arguing that Cheney’s Orders had higher claims to recognition than that of the ‘Old Catholics’ since, unlike some of the Utrecht bishops, Cummins had not been deposed or excommunicated.<sup>111</sup>

So, what had Cummins taken from Reinkens’ episcopal ordination? Firstly, despite protestations to the contrary, it shows that he took seriously the concept of the validity of Orders in historic succession. He had hesitated to act before 1873 because he believed that an episcopal church whose Orders derived from himself alone would not be taken seriously. That would seem to indicate an awareness of ‘catholic’ norms and a desire to conform to them. Only after Reinkens did he realise he could go it alone.

Secondly, the events in Utrecht reminded Cummins and others that consecration by a single bishop was valid. This would be acted upon by some of his successors – for example, the REC General Council deemed that it would be sufficient simply to send *one* bishop (Edward Cridge) to England in 1876 to perform episcopal ordinations there.

An examination or essay title for future candidates for ordination might be: ‘The Reformed Episcopal Church owes its existence to the Old Catholic Movement. Discuss.’ And, as we have seen, there is a lot to discuss. Indeed, we are not finished with the Old Catholics yet.

### ***The final tipping point***

What finally prompted Cummins to take decisive action was the issue of Christian Unity. In October 1873 the Evangelical Alliance met in the YMCA hall in New York, against the backdrop of widespread longing for unity referred to earlier. On the wall behind the platform were the words: *Unum Corpus Sumus in Christo* (We are One Body in Christ).<sup>112</sup> One of the speakers even compared the meeting favourably to the recent Vatican

---

<sup>107</sup> *Colonial Church Chronicle*, May 1874, p.189.

<sup>108</sup> A Theodore Wirgman, *Foreign Protestantism within the Church of England*, London, Catholic Literature Association, 1911, p.231.

<sup>109</sup> Journal of the Fifth General Council, 1877, Appendix, p.51f  
<http://www.rechurch.org/documents/GCJournals/GCREC05.pdf>

<sup>110</sup> Journal of the Fifth General Council, 1877, Appendix, p.52f  
<http://www.rechurch.org/documents/GCJournals/GCREC05.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> The same appendix also quotes an article in the *Daily Express* (by Liddon?) *the ‘Cumminsite’ orders are valid in point of form.*

<sup>112</sup> *History, Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance: Held in New York, October 2-12, 1873*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1874, p.6.

Council!<sup>113</sup> The opening address by Presbyterian William Adams argued that ‘those present exhibited “a real unity of faith and life” and a commitment to the “holy catholic church and the communion of saints”.’<sup>114</sup> Another Presbyterian, Charles Hodge, ‘a strong proponent of Reformed theology’ stressed ‘the importance of belief in the Apostles’ Creed and the doctrinal decisions of the first six Ecumenical Councils concerning the nature of Christ’.<sup>115</sup> Cummins addressed the meeting and also stressed unity: ‘United to Christ by a saving faith, I am one with every other believer’.<sup>116</sup> It was clear that the Evangelical Alliance was thus conscious of its own catholicity, both in denominational and geographical terms.

It was also aware of the other great new movement taking place. The Old Catholic Churches had met in congress in Constance, Switzerland, from 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> September, just two weeks before the meeting of the Evangelical Alliance, and, surprising though it may seem to us, sent a letter of greetings, signed by Bishop Reinkens and others, to the Conference.<sup>117</sup>

In the letter from the Old Catholic Congress the signatories stated that ‘We hope and strive for the restoration of the unity of the Christian Church’.<sup>118</sup> Among their reforms to achieve that end,

*We have quietly abandoned the abuses of the adoration of saints, especially the exaggerated devotion to the Virgin Mary, and the indulgences. We have done away with the abuses of scapularies, medals and suchlike. The payment of money for the reading of masses and public prayers, etc., has been given up.*<sup>119</sup>

All of this would have been music to Cummins’ ears. Here were Catholics repudiating the kind of practices that Ritualists were trying to introduce into the Episcopal Church.

In his introduction to the letter, the Revd Professor Philip Schaff of New York (who had visited Europe on behalf of the Alliance), said:

*The Old Catholic movement has, by the recent election of a bishop and the adoption of a synodical constitution, passed the stage of a mere experiment, and assumed the character of a regular Church organisation ... with the avowed desire to reform Romanism and with the aim, if possible, of a reunion of divided Christendom on the basis of the Scriptures and the unanimous tradition of the primitive Church.*<sup>120</sup>

Note the main features – elect a bishop, adopt a synodical constitution, flee from Romanism – and you have created a Church organisation with the potential for the reunion of divided Christendom. It is almost a blueprint for what Cummins did approximately seven weeks later on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1873.

There was, in fact, more, though we have not time to look at it. Papers on ‘The Vatican Council and the Old Catholic Movement’ and the progress of the movement in Switzerland were delivered at the meeting.<sup>121</sup>

---

[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=j8ZMAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=j8ZMAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>113</sup> *History, Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance*, p.8.

<sup>114</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.144.

<sup>115</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.145. This shows an interesting parallel with a section of the Theological Statement of the Anglican Church in North America: ‘Concerning the seven Councils of the undivided Church, we affirm the teaching of the first four Councils and the Christological clarifications of the fifth, sixth and seventh Councils, in so far as they are agreeable to the Holy Scriptures’ (<http://www.anglicanchurch.net/index.php/main/Theology/>). Accessed 3 January 2019.

<sup>116</sup> *History, Essays, Orations*, pp.467-474. The quotation is from p.474. Also quoted in Aycrigg, *Memoirs*, p.98.

<sup>117</sup> *History, Essays, Orations*, p.485ff.

<sup>118</sup> *History, Essays, Orations*, p.488.

<sup>119</sup> *History, Essays, Orations*, p.489.

<sup>120</sup> *History, Essays, Orations*, p.485.

<sup>121</sup> *History, Essays, Orations*, p.30. At the closing session the President of the Assembly, Dr Woolsey, included in his remarks:

This international gathering included the Very Reverend Robert Payne Smith, Dean of Canterbury, bearing a letter of greeting from his Archbishop (Archibald Tait). On Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> October Payne Smith assisted at a celebration of Holy Communion at Madison Square Presbyterian Church and himself received the Sacrament from the pastor, Dr William Adams.<sup>122</sup> As we saw earlier, united Communion services were a regular feature of Evangelical Alliance Conferences. No doubt encouraged by this example, Cummins himself accepted the invitation of Dr John Hall of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church to do the same the following Sunday. Cummins joined Hall and William Arnot of the Free Church of Scotland at the Communion Table and himself administered the cup, with a great sense that the service was a foretaste of 'that eternal union in the House not made with hands'.<sup>123</sup> Cummins was not alone in feeling the emotion of the occasion. Arnot recorded,

*I confess to a thrill of joy as I received the cup from his hands – a symptom of approaches of disciples to each other through or over the ridiculous barriers that have been set up, and have kept brothers from embracing for ages ....*<sup>124</sup>

The following day the *New York Tribune* carried a letter from William Tozer, retired Missionary Bishop of Zanzibar, to Horatio Potter, Bishop of New York, attacking Payne Smith's involvement in the Presbyterian Communion Service on 5<sup>th</sup> October. Appalled, Cummins wrote to the *Tribune*. In his letter he denied emphatically that either the Dean of Canterbury or himself had violated Church order. Cummins' letter 'brought down a hail of abuse, printed and otherwise, onto Cummins' unrepentant head'<sup>125</sup>. Words like 'apostate', 'perjurer' and 'fallen bishop' were used. There were calls for him to be tried. It was difficult to see how he could again minister with authority in Kentucky.

Muhlenberg supported Payne Smith and Cummins. He was one of the appointed speakers at the Conference, but abandoned his published subject to speak on 'The Lord's Supper in relation to Christian Union'. In it he argued for special united acts of Holy Communion of a 'pre-ecclesiastical' nature – marked by the simplicity of the apostolic age and blessed by the Holy Spirit. There was nothing in Scripture or the laws of PECUSA, Muhlenberg asserted, to forbid what Payne-Smith and Cummins had done. On the contrary, he concluded, 'intercommunion among Christians, to be exercised on their own private judgement, is one of their inalienable rights'<sup>126</sup>.

Extremely welcome though Muhlenberg's support no doubt was, it did little to ease Cummins' situation. Over the next two weeks he consulted with colleagues. By the end of October he had decided that he could not return to his diocese. As we saw earlier, he spent a great deal of time talking to Muhlenberg. Finally, on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1873, he wrote to Boswell Smith, his Diocesan and the Presiding Bishop:

---

*The remarkable communication from the 'Old Catholics' that was presented to us shows that there are those beyond the bounds of 'Protestantism' who, although widely differing from us, recognise the same common Saviour and have a sympathy with us. ... For such Christians, who differ so widely from us, and yet in their Christian life are one with us, we will open the door of our hearts; we will not drive them from our assemblies. (History, Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, p.44).*

<sup>122</sup> Payne Smith, a noted orientalist, had spent the years 1847-1853 in Edinburgh and so had lived in a country where Presbyterianism was the Established Church. Described as a 'moderate Evangelical', he was appointed Regius Professor of Divinity in 1865 and offered the Deanery of Canterbury by Prime Minister William Gladstone in 1871. His entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography mentions his attendance at the Evangelical Alliance meeting in New York (ODNB, online).

<sup>123</sup> The service is described in Cummins, *Memoir*, p.414f.

<sup>124</sup> A. Fleming (ed.), *Autobiography of the Rev. William Arnot and memoir*, London, James Nisbet & Co., (1877), p.464. 1873 was actually Arnot's third visit to America; his two elder sons were in business there.

<sup>125</sup> Guelzo, *For the Union*, p.133.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Ayres, *Muhlenberg*, p.458.



*Right Reverend and Dear Bishop: Under a solemn sense of duty, and in the fear of God, I have to tell you that I am about to retire from the work in which I have been engaged for the last seven years in the Diocese of Kentucky, and thus to sever the relations which have existed so happily and harmoniously between us during that time...<sup>127</sup>*

Cummins' chief reasons for this decision were both negative and positive. The negatives were twofold: first the conviction that there was no possibility that the 'system of error, now prevailing so extensively' would be eradicated by the Church authorities, and, secondly, the impossible position in which the reaction to his involvement in the Presbyterian Eucharist had placed him. His solution, however, was a positive one, not simply to retire, but to try and build (as an alternative to the Episcopal Church) the kind of united Christian community that so many claimed to be longing for and of which he had so recently experienced a foretaste at the Evangelical Alliance meeting. The moment had come to make the longings of many a reality:

*I therefore leave the Communion in which I have laboured in the sacred ministry for over twenty-eight years, and transfer my work and office to another sphere of labour. I have an earnest hope and confidence that a basis for the union of all Evangelical Christendom can be found in a communion which shall retain or restore a primitive Episcopacy and a pure scriptural liturgy, with a fidelity to the doctrine of justification by faith alone....<sup>128</sup>*

Fresh from the Evangelical Alliance Conference and committed to its vision (articulated by Muhlenberg and other speakers), Cummins had every reason to believe that he was not just responding to Anglican calls but catching the spirit of the moment more widely. And, in the context of this most Protestant of gatherings, he had learned from the Old Catholics how to organise such a communion.

### **The Fulfilment of the Vision?**

I am not going to rehearse the details of the meeting that created the Reformed Episcopal Church on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1873. Instead, I want to continue to explore some of the themes that led up to our formation. Cummins died suddenly and unexpectedly on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1876.<sup>129</sup> He had led the Reformed Episcopal Church for just two and a half years. How far had his vision been achieved?

In the limited time available I want to concentrate on just three areas, plus a few general points. The areas are: liturgical revision, Christian unity and episcopacy.

#### ***Liturgical Revision***

I am not going to say very much about this as the story of liturgical provision in the Reformed Episcopal family is a lecture series in its own right. Just some brief points:

1. It is clear from the Journals that many hours were spent on discussing alterations to the Prayer Book. Simply reading the accounts one gets the impression that it was tedious and soul-destroying.
2. The discussions highlight the fact that there was no agreement among the early leadership about a settled identity. Should only minimal changes be made to correct perceived errors, or should a radical reworking be undertaken? In modern terminology, much of the debate was about how Anglican the new Church should be. Was it acceptable to keep Lent, or was that a 'Catholic' observance? Is it acceptable to refer to the Prayer of St Chrysostom by that name? No, they decided, and called it A

---

<sup>127</sup> The full text is in Cummins, *Memoir*, pp.418-420.

<sup>128</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.420.

<sup>129</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.520ff.

*General Supplication*.<sup>130</sup> And so on. The direction of travel was most definitely towards a de-Anglicanisation of the Church.

3. A subset of that debate was the issue of vesture. This tore the first generation apart. Here Cummins was at his least Anglican and subsequent generations could therefore cite him in defence of their position. Instead of normal Anglican vesture he argued strongly for the black gown.<sup>131</sup> Distinctive bishops' robes, he argued, bred pride, but, illogically, 'he suggested a narrow binding of velvet on the front of the black gown of a bishop'<sup>132</sup> which of course introduces a distinction and defeats the point of his objection. The issue is of course still a live one: to what extent should we Reformed Episcopalians look like the rest of the Anglican family? In the UK, for example, we define ourselves against those (in the GAFCON-sponsored Anglican Mission in England, for example) who seldom wear any distinct vesture at all.
4. [Can I make a plea for some help here? No photograph of Cummins in rochet and chimere appears to exist. There is, in fact, a theory that they were deliberately destroyed. The Diocese of Kentucky had such a picture, but it was stolen. Somewhere in this country such a picture must still exist – in journals at the time of his consecration, in the archives of TEC, the diocese of Kentucky, the federal archives, perhaps in the possession of his descendants. Can I please urge someone to track it down?]
5. Overall, the methodology was predominantly negative.<sup>133</sup> There was little constructive liturgical composition; there was no return to ancient sources; liturgical reform was simply cutting out words or phrases that could, however remotely, potentially be 'Romanising germs'. That was not unique. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century Liturgical Movement introduced the far superior methodology of going back to the sources and building up good liturgy from there, the dominant approach was removal not creation. Ironically, in all this, the driving force seems to be the dislikes of the *revisers*; there does not seem to be any evidence of asking other churches what liturgy (if any) would entice them into this new expression of Christian unity.
6. One final point in this section – Cummins had famously published a sermon praising the Prayer Book in 1867. Comparing that with the liturgical revisions in the early REC, it is instructive to note what he did *not* repudiate. He did not repudiate, for example, the fact that 'the theology of the Prayer Book ... is not Lutheranism, nor Calvinism, nor Arminianism; but better than all, it embraces all that is precious and of vital truth in each of these systems, yet committing itself to none; and a disciple of each of these schools may find in it that which gives "rest to his soul"'.<sup>134</sup> Sadly, not all his successors (on both sides of the Atlantic) have shared his breadth of vision.

### **Christian Unity**

But what of the other major element – the dominant element – in Cummins' vision: Christian unity? Cummins at the summing up of his address to the inaugural meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1873 had said: 'We regard our

---

<sup>130</sup> *Journal of the Second General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1874*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1874, p.32.

<sup>131</sup> A.M. Cummins, *Bishop George D. Cummins, first Bishop and Founder of the Reformed Episcopal Church on Ecclesiastical Vestments*, 1890.

<sup>132</sup> Aycrigg, *Memoirs*, p.258. Cummins was prepared to use episcopal robes for the sake of tender consciences – at the consecration of Cheney, for example and in Canada.

<sup>133</sup> There were some positive enhancements – e.g, the addition of seasonal Sentences of Scripture at Morning and Evening Prayer (*Journal of the Second General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1874*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1874, p.15).

<sup>134</sup> 'Bishop Cummins' Sermon In Defence of the Prayer Book', in *Four Documents*, Philadelphia, M'Calla & Stavely, 1874, p.25f.

movement only as a step towards the closer union of all Evangelical Christendom. For this we shall labor and pray.<sup>135</sup>

On the evening of the day on which he consecrated Cheney (14<sup>th</sup> December 1873) Cummins preached on 'The Unity of the Church', taking John 17:21-25 as his text.<sup>136</sup> This really was his driving motivation.

What happened to further that? How successful was it? (Here, because these lectures are about Bishop Cummins, I am restricting the timescale to his time as Presiding Bishop and immediately after.)

Two broad areas may be considered: the development of an ecumenical rationale, and ecumenical gestures and contacts. (Noting in passing that the word 'ecumenical' is used here as a modern shorthand. It hardly existed with its modern meaning in the 1870s.)

### **An Ecumenical Rationale**

At the second General Council of the REC held from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> May 1874, Christian unity formed the theme of Bishop Cheney's sermon. This was only six months after the inauguration of the REC and no doubt he had discussed his topic with Cummins. The sermon is entitled *The Evangelical Ideal of an Organic and Visible Church*.<sup>137</sup> In it he bemoans the state of the Church:

*How rent and torn by conflicts of opinion is the existing Church of Christ! How separated into camps hostile to each others' teaching, and jealous of each others' progress! How does the subtle venom of controversy poison the pure fountains of brotherly love!*

*[W]e only aim, in any external and organic society of Christians, to comprehend the largest number possible of those already members of Christ by faith.*

So, the vision of gathering separated Christians together is still there. But what should that look like?

There are, says Cheney, 'certain essential characteristics which all Evangelical believers concur in regarding as necessary to a visible Church of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

(a) *recognition of no authority as co-ordinate with the written Word of God.* He is especially critical of tradition, which he asserts is 'least worthy of our trust'.

(b) *making the preaching of the Gospel superior to every other ordinance.* There is a contradiction here. Cheney condemns Tradition as the words of men, but rejoices that God uses the words of men when it comes to preaching. He does not explore 'other ordinances' beyond a brief mention of baptism; there is no mention of the Eucharist at all.

(c) *manifesting the spirit of Christian love.* He quotes "By this shall *all men* know that ye are my disciples, that ye love one another." Interestingly, there is a plea for the tolerance of a degree of permitted diversity: *The same divine truth will be more or less colored by the individual peculiarities of him who holds it. The same light from heaven must pass through the colored windows of differing intellectual apprehension. Christ-like love will lead the Church to large charity for individual perceptions of even essential truth. Still more will the ideal Church deal tenderly with moral difficulties, in which the conscience is involved.*

---

<sup>135</sup> *Journal of the First General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1873*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1874, p.22. <http://www.rechurch.org/documents/GCJournals/GCREC01.pdf>

<sup>136</sup> <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/rec/cummins/primitive1874.html>

<sup>137</sup> *Journal of the Second General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1874*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1874, Appendix, pp.1-21.

That, to modern ears, sounds promising. Christians can be equally faithful to the light of divine truth without having to agree on all matters. Diversity is acceptable if held in Christ-like love.

Cheney then asks the question *What has the Reformed Episcopal Church done to approach this Ideal?* His answer is twofold, but negative: an attack on Apostolic Succession and an attack on a sacerdotal character of the presbyterate.

As he draws to a conclusion, Cheney show how important the recent Evangelical Alliance experience was in the genesis of the REC:

*And lastly, have we, in this reform within the Church, made any approach to that spirit of love which is the essential element of the Evangelical ideal? It would be strange, indeed, if we had not. ... Strange would it be if this Church we love were not radiant with the sunlight of Christian charity. It was born amidst the warmth, and radiance, and summer gladness of the Evangelical Alliance.*

Cheney ends his sermon with a rallying cry: *From the far echoes of Patmos there comes a voice like to that of the Son of Man, —" Behold I have set before thee an open door and no man can shut it."*

But there is no hint of what things might look like beyond the door. What is absent is any strategy at all for creating 'the Organic and Visible Church' of his title. Are members of other denominations to be invited to become members of the REC? Are they to be given the historic episcopate which is 'ancient and desirable'? If it is 'desirable' surely other Christian communities should aspire to acquire it? To such questions neither Cummins nor Cheney seem to have any answers.

### ***Ecumenical gestures and contacts***

But the fact that Cummins clearly had no thought-out strategy for achieving 'the union of Evangelical Christendom' does not mean that there was no progress on this front. On the contrary, there were a number of 'gestures' that gave expression to this desire.

### ***Participation in episcopal ordinations***

Earlier we looked briefly at Matthew Simpson, the Methodist bishop, and fervent worker for Christian unity. Cheney's consecration was inevitable hasty; Cummins had more time to plan the second one that he performed - that of William Nicholson in February 1876. He invited Simpson to join in the laying on of hands and exulted in this expression of Christian unity. (It means that those of use in the RE succession can trace a tactile succession back to John Wesley.) Two Presbyterian ministers also took part. Six months later, at the 4<sup>th</sup> General Council meeting held in Ottawa, Methodist bishop Albert Carman, together with ministers of the Wesleyan Methodist and Presbyterian Churches took part in the consecration of Cridge and Fallows. It is highly likely that the invitations had been issued by Cummins prior to his death and Cheney and Nicholson felt they had to honour them. The next episcopal ordination was that of Thomas Huband Gregg for the newly-founded Reformed Episcopal Church in the United Kingdom on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1877. On that occasion the Revd Dr Joseph Holdich of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and for many years Corresponding Secretary of the American Bible Society, took part.<sup>138</sup> After that, involvement of members of other denominations seemed to have died out, on both sides of the Atlantic, until the 1920s when invitations began to be issued to Moravian bishops.

### ***Attendance by representatives of other Churches at meetings of the General Council***

---

<sup>138</sup> Appendix, p.63. <http://www.rechurch.org/documents/GCJournals/GCREC05.pdf>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e4472037a27d41763152ccf/t/5fac594df8f3f141903bc07b/1605130578634/4+Riding+lancaster+Circuit+in+1822.pdf>

The early momentum was also maintained by invitations to other churches to send representatives to meetings of General Council. The records show a number of these in the early years. I give one as a representative example.

On Friday 14<sup>th</sup> May 1875 the Revd Alexander R. Thompson, Corresponding Delegate of the Reformed Church of America (a descendant of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands), addressed the General Council.<sup>139</sup> He began his long address by referring to Bishop Cummins' participation in the Holy Communion service at the Evangelical Alliance which aroused their initial interest.

Thompson then drew attention to the interchange between members of the Church of England and the Reformed Church of Holland at such gatherings as the Synod of Dort and to the fact that the Mayflower had sailed from a Dutch port.

*We tread in the footsteps of the fathers, you to complete the Reformation of the Church, which they left incomplete, and we to cheer and help you in it.*

The Dutch clearly felt that they had completed the Reformation; the Anglicans need encouraging to finish theirs!

Interestingly, Thompson bemoans the fact that members of the Reformed Church have joined episcopal churches and 'have been passed along and up, until their parents and friends have lost all sight of them in the mazes of sacerdotalism and sacramentarianism.' Clearly, a younger generation brought up Dutch Reformed found High Church Anglicanism more attractive than the Church of their fathers. Thompson welcomes the fact that an episcopal church now exists that people can join without discrediting the church in which they were born and nurtured. ('If they must go, then at least let them go to the REC'.) In conclusion he hailed the REC as 'a free liturgical church' and exhorted them not to be discouraged by difficulties, for Christ 'never lays men on his anvil for nothing; never puts them on the bars of his furnace for nothing.'

Cummins made a fulsome reply which gives an insight into his thinking.<sup>140</sup> He spoke of the struggles of the Reformed Church of Holland as 'part of the common heritage of all Evangelical Christendom.' He gave examples of instances where, in the early days of the colonies, Episcopalians and Dutch Reformed had borrowed each other's buildings. Then he regretted the 'unchurching dogma' of apostolic succession, but rejoiced that:

*We have overleaped these long years of estrangement, of separation, and have gone back to that golden age of Christian brotherhood and intercommunion. We firmly believe that this Reformed Episcopal Church is such a Church as essentially the Edwardean Reformers would have bequeathed to us had they been permitted to complete their work. ...*

*Therefore, we believe that this Church of ours is a work in behalf of Christian Union, a step, at least, towards bringing into closer fellowship all the Churches of Protestant Christendom.*

At what was to be his last General Council, Cummins was still inspired by this vision of unity.

Beyond meetings of the General Council, it is clear that, to the end of his life, Cummins worked actively to promote contact with other Protestant Churches. In the autumn of 1874 he confirmed six candidates in a private church led by a Congregational Minister who was using the REC Prayer Book. He also preached in Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian Churches. In Baltimore he spoke in the Masonic Temple. In Brooklyn in April 1874 a Moravian presbyter was among the clergy who assisted him. He continued to preach in Congregational, Methodist Episcopal, American Reformed, Lutheran, French Protestant and Presbyterian

---

<sup>139</sup> *Journal of the Third General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1875*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1875, p.26ff

<sup>140</sup> *Journal of the Third General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1875*, pp.30-32.

Churches in both the United States and Canada in the final year of his life.<sup>141</sup> His final episcopal engagement was on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1876 when he preached twice at Bethany Independent Methodist Episcopal Church, Baltimore. Eight days later he was dead.

The reports of Cummins' fellow bishops paint a very different picture. Bishop Cheney's report for 1875-6 records him receiving two ministers from the Methodist Episcopal Church but does not record him preaching in any Church other than those of the Reformed Episcopal Church.<sup>142</sup> Neither had Bishop Nicholson in the months since his consecration.

There is some evidence that the young REC attracted recruits from outside the Anglican fold. In September 1874 Cummins ordained a Methodist deacon as a presbyter for ministry in New Brunswick, Canada.<sup>143</sup>

Whole congregations could come over. At the 1875 the General Council received a report in favour of the admission of St Stephen's Evangelical Lutheran Church (where is not stated) and admitted the church into union.<sup>144</sup>

In 1876 the sermon was preached by Bishop Nicholson.<sup>145</sup> His theme was priesthood. It is an interesting sermon, but contains nothing about Christian unity.

The reality is that the ecumenical vision did not outlast the lifetime of Cummins himself. As we have seen, the REC fell into arguments about how 'Anglican' it was to be. Guelzo says of Cummins' immediate successors:

*All three of these men - Cheney, Nicholson, Fallows - were consecrated as Reformed Episcopal bishops by Cummins; none of them shared much more than a pittance of common vision with each other; each of them proceeded to tear the others to pieces.*<sup>146</sup>

Such a dynamic was hardly likely to attract others.

### **The failure to establish an ecclesiology**

In summing up this section, let us return to briefly to the question that we raised earlier. The rhetoric of Christian unity was heart-warming and, for Cummins at least, totally sincere. But what was it to look like? How was it to be achieved?

Nobody seems to have had any ideas. Leacock wrote of the REC being at 'the head of a sisterhood of Evangelical churches'.<sup>147</sup> But what does that mean? It seems to be little more than the REC playing a leading role in a loose federation of denominations, very much like the Evangelical Alliance.

It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that something that might be considered consistent with Cummins' vision took place.

---

<sup>141</sup> Report of Bishop Cummins compiled from papers provided by his family, in *Journal of the Fourth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1876*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1876, p.20ff

<sup>142</sup> *Journal of the Fourth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1876*, , pp.23-26.

<sup>143</sup> *Journal of the Third General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1875*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1875, p.22ff. The following details are from Bishop Cummins' report.

<sup>144</sup> *Journal of the Third General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1875*, p.20.

<sup>145</sup> *Journal of the Fourth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1876*, Appendix, pp.1-27 (<http://www.rechurch.org/documents/GCJournals/GCREC04.pdf>).

<sup>146</sup> Guelzo, 'A Sufficiently Republican Church: George David Cummins and the Reformed Episcopalians in 1873', in *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 69.2 (April 1995), p.134. Guelzo is actually incorrect in stating that Fallows was consecrated by Cummins.

<sup>147</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.6.

The first actual union of episcopal and non-episcopal Churches was the Church of South India. This union of Anglican, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Methodist Churches took place in 1947, the year that India achieved independence from Britain. The basis of union was the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. With regard to the ministry, all existing clergy were recognised, but all subsequent ordinations were to be episcopal. This is a model that would have been consistent with Cummins' position, though there does not seem to have been any evidence that he contemplated anything like it.

There are, in fact, two occasions when the REC has acted as Cummins might have wished. In the course of its history it has attracted two pre-existing Christian communities and fully absorbed them into its episcopal structures. Historically, the first of these was the Free Church of England which had existed as an organised body since 1863 with a ministry composed of men from various Protestant non-episcopal denominations and disaffected Church of England clergy. The REC gave the historic episcopate to this body in 1876 and finally united with it in 1927. We talk of it as a union of equals, but the structures of the united denomination (the present-day FCE) are essentially those of the REC. The second example is the joining of the Croatian Reformed Church which had existed since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and which was brought into the RE family in fulfilment of the vision of the late Bishop Royal Grote.

Should we be looking for other candidates?

### **Episcopacy**

Part of the problem in thinking about how to unite Churches was the dilemma that Cummins found himself in with regard to episcopacy. His hesitancy about acting until the Old Catholics gave him the necessary precedent suggests that he wanted an unimpeachable episcopate. He had, however, spent so much energy attacking what he believed to be mistaken understandings of the episcopal office, that he had nothing *positive* to say about it to commend it to other churches.

Twentieth century unity discussions have. There are many examples to choose from (the World Council of Churches *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* has been highly significant, for example) but I want to take an Anglican example that might be more relevant to ourselves.

### **Growing into Union**

In 1969 in the UK a unity scheme between the Church of England and the Methodist Church (an episcopal church with a non-episcopal church) was defeated in the Church Assembly (the forerunner to General Synod). In the aftermath two leading Anglo-Catholics, Graham Leonard (later bishop of London) and Eric Mascall joined with two leading Evangelicals, Jim Packer and Colin Buchanan to produce a study called *Growing into Union*.<sup>148</sup>

In it they argue that, in any unity scheme it is important to get the position of the bishop right first. The bishop can not be a bolt-on to a structure contrived on another basis. They acknowledged in modern contexts that many of the functions of the Apostles still have an abiding place in the Church and are appropriately exercised by bishops. The authors of *Growing Into Union* were able to agree that:

*The bishop, in idea, exhibits all the main continuing ministerial functions – all, that is, that were not personal to the Apostles – concentrated in himself.*<sup>149</sup>

This raises the question of the *authority* that lies behind the emergence of the office of bishop. The four authors locate this in the Gospel itself:

---

<sup>148</sup> C.O. Buchanan, E.L. Mascall, J.I. Packer, Graham Leonard, *Growing into Union*, London, SPCK, 1970.

<sup>149</sup> *Growing into Union*, p.75.

*The important question is not whether there was an unbroken succession of ordinations stemming from the Apostles throughout the Church, but what is the meaning of the development whereby within two centuries the single bishop, maintaining an episcopal succession in his own see, became (so far as we know) a universal Christian institution. The answer seems to be that the institution was shaped by the gospel itself .... It was the pressure of gospel truth concerning Christ and his work that caused the Church to feel for the need for episcopal office once the uniquely comprehensive and authoritative oversight of the Apostles had ceased, and caused the development of the office to be accepted without demur (so far as we know) everywhere.<sup>150</sup>*

This approach provides a solution to an issue that exercised early generations of our tradition - do bishops exist by Divine right (*iure divino*) or human (*iure humano*)?<sup>151</sup> By avoiding this polarising question, the *Growing Into Union* approach enables the relationship of episcopacy to the Gospel to be stated. In a more recent publication Packer poses the question thus:

*Is this setup [i.e. episcopacy] biblical? If you mean, is it mandated or exemplified in the Bible, the answer is no, although its ancestry and reflection of the ministry performed by the apostles and their deputies, as we see it in the Pastoral Epistles in particular, is clear.<sup>152</sup>*

Packer goes further, however, with a second question:

*But if you mean, does it [episcopacy] express New Testament principles and priorities regarding the local church's life, and does it meet the New Testament requirement that everything in the church be geared for edification, then the answer is surely yes, and the incidence of bad bishops from time to time does not invalidate that answer.<sup>153</sup>*

This is an important point, and, like the *Growing Into Union* position, places episcopacy on even firmer foundations than simply the presumed tactile succession: it reflects, serves and is shaped by the Gospel itself.

Nor does believing that the episcopate emerged out a pluriform situation (as the New Testament evidence suggests) mean that it is contrary to the will of God. Bishop Lightfoot concluded his magisterial study of the origins of the Christian ministry:

*If the preceding investigation be substantially correct, the three-fold ministry can be traced to Apostolic direction; and short of an express statement we can possess no better assurance of a divine appointment or at least a divine sanction.<sup>154</sup>*

In recent decades the term *plene esse* (fullness of being) has been coined.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, Colin Buchanan is prepared to go further: 'Rightly structured and rightly deployed, episcopal ministry might well claim to be of

---

<sup>150</sup> *Growing Into Union*, p.75.

<sup>151</sup> For a brief introduction to this debate see Richard A. Norris, 'Episcopacy' in Stephen Sykes and John Booty (eds.), *The Study of Anglicanism*, London, SPCK, 1988, pp.296-309. Muhlenberg believed that whether episcopacy was *iure divino*, or of high antiquity or expediency 'matters not – we are sincerely Episcopalians' (Suggestions for the formation of an Evangelical Catholic Union ' (1870), in Muhlenberg, *Evangelical Catholic Papers*, p.448).

<sup>152</sup> J.I. Packer, *Taking God Seriously: Vital Things We Need To Know*, Nottingham, IVP, 2013, p.97.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* Packer reaffirmed the conviction regarding episcopacy that he signed up to in *Growing Into Union* in his later monograph *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (in J.I. Packer and N.T. Wright, *Anglican Evangelical Identity: Yesterday and Today*, London, Latimer Trust, 2008, p.28).

<sup>154</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry*, London, Macmillan, 1901, p.133. Lightfoot affirms that the Apostle John was probably responsible for the development in Asia Minor (*The Christian Ministry*, pp.31, 40, 82).

<sup>155</sup> See Kenneth Carey (ed.), *The Historic Episcopate in the Fullness of the Church*, Westminster, Dacre Press, 1954. The ACNA's Theological Statement echoes this: 'We confess the godly historic Episcopate as an inherent part of the apostolic faith and practice, and therefore as integral to the *fullness* and unity of the Body of Christ' (<http://www.anglicanchurch.net/index.php/main/Theology/> emphasis added).



the *optime esse* [best form of being] of the Church.<sup>156</sup> This is in effect the position implied in the Declaration of Principles' description of episcopacy as 'desirable' – it is good in itself, the best form of Church structuring (since it reflects Gospel priorities), and therefore to be acquired where not already possessed.

Such a positive, eirenic approach stemming from Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics would not have been possible in Cummins' time.

### **Primitive Episcopacy**

So what did Cummins have to say about episcopacy?

At the episcopal ordination of Cheney on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1873 Cummins preached a sermon entitled 'Primitive Episcopacy', the purpose of which was to 'carefully declare in what estimation the Office of a Bishop is held in this branch of Christ's visible Church'.<sup>157</sup> After ranging widely over Church history he concludes:

*This is the Episcopacy to which we adhere, not of Divine right or direct Apostolic institution, but a Primitive Episcopacy, the development of the practice and custom of the Apostles, the Episcopacy of Polycarp and Ignatius ....*<sup>158</sup>

The statement is more than a little surprising. The model for the ministry of oversight in the Reformed Episcopal Church is not, after all, one drawn directly from Scripture, but is that of the immediate post-Apostolic generation. Furthermore, the statement begins to unravel very quickly.

Cummins says that '*the Episcopacy to which we adhere is, not of ... direct Apostolic institution*', but earlier in his sermon, he actually quotes a tradition that 'St John, after his return from Patmos, appointed bishops in the different churches about Ephesus'.<sup>159</sup> Cummins tries to minimise its significance: 'If this be true,' he continues, 'it proves that up to that date Bishops were not existing in the churches of Asia Minor'. In fact, most people would (and have) drawn an entirely different emphasis: 'If this be true, it proves that from that date bishops existed in the churches of Asia Minor by direct Apostolic institution'. This obviously would not support Cummins' position and he rather lamely falls back on: 'St John certainly makes no mention of it in his inspired writing'.

What is more, Cummins is prepared to say that 'The Presbyterate, or office of a Presbyter, is of undisputed Apostolic origin'.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, 'we have seen, from clear testimony of Holy Scripture, that the Apostles themselves established and sanctioned the office of the Deacon and the office of the Presbyter in the churches under their care'.<sup>161</sup> He also says in the same sermon, 'This office of Presbyter bore another title in the Apostolic Church, viz., that of *Episcopos*, or Bishop ... [T]he two names ... in the New Testament designate the one and the same office'.<sup>162</sup>

On Cummins' own logic, you could just as accurately say that the Apostles instituted the office of bishop, from which the presbyterate emerged, as the other way around. He is correct, of course, that there is no direct Apostolic command in the New Testament documents definitively separating the two aspects of the original

---

<sup>156</sup> C.O. Buchanan, *Is the Church of England Biblical?*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998, p.325. C.f. Ryle: 'Do they think Episcopacy the best form of Church government? So do I', (*Knots Untied: being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion from an Evangelical Standpoint*, (condensed and revised by C. Sydney Carter), London, James Clarke & Co, 1959, p.115).

<sup>157</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', in Vaughan, *History* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), p.132. Page references are to the Vaughan edition. The text, with appendices, can be found at <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/rec/cummins/primitive1874.html>.

<sup>158</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', p.155f.

<sup>159</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', p.140.

<sup>160</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', p.135.

<sup>161</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', p.137.

<sup>162</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', p.137.

hybrid ministry, and on that basis he (and many others) argued against the episcopate as a separate Order. However, he does not deny, indeed he affirms more than once, that the ministry from which both the presbyterate and episcopate derive is of direct Apostolic institution.

Interestingly, this is close to the situation described in the First Epistle of Clement of Rome.

*Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry.<sup>163</sup>*

The First Epistle of Clement is generally accepted to have been written about AD 95. It is probably the earliest Christian document outside the canonical New Testament writings – and it states that bishops were appointed by the Apostles and instructed to perpetuate their ministry. In his review of the patristic evidence, Cummins ignores it.

### **Ignatius of Antioch**

Instead, Cummins holds up the episcopate of Ignatius of Antioch as our model as Reformed Episcopalians. What does that give us? Ignatius wrote a series of letters while on his way to Rome to be martyred. The letters are dated about 110 to 115 AD. Let me give you a few brief quotations of what he says about bishops.

*Smyrnaeans 9 - It is well to reverence both God and the bishop. He who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; he who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop, does [in reality] serve the devil.*

*Ephesians 3 - For even Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, is the [manifested] will of the Father; as also bishops, settled everywhere to the utmost bounds [of the earth], are so by the will of Jesus Christ.*

*Ephesians 4 - Wherefore it is fitting that you should run together in accordance with the will of your bishop, which thing also you do. For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp.<sup>164</sup>*

*Magnesians 7 - As therefore the Lord did nothing without the Father, being united to Him, neither by Himself nor by the apostles, so neither do anything without the bishop and presbyters.*

*Trallians 3 - In like manner, let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and the bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and the presbyters as the Sanhedrin of God, and assembly of the apostles. Apart from these, there is no Church.*

*Philadelphians 4 - Take heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to [show forth] the unity of His blood; one altar; as there is one bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants:*

Ignatius even states that the pre-eminence to be given to bishops is a direct command of the Holy Spirit:

*Philadelphians 7 - when I was among you, I cried, I spoke with a loud voice: Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery and deacons. Now, some suspected me of having spoken thus, as knowing beforehand*

---

<sup>163</sup> 1 Clement 44.

<sup>164</sup> Translated by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0105.htm>>.

*the division caused by some among you. But He is my witness, for whose sake I am in bonds, that I got no intelligence from any man. But the Spirit proclaimed these words: Do nothing without the bishop ....;*

So how does Cummins deal with Ignatius' teaching on the value of the bishop?

*Such passages show no more than that he valued the office as a security for discipline and harmony in the Church, although he may have used language regarding it in which we, in a less ignorant day, could not acquiesce.<sup>165</sup>*

That last phrase – 'we, in a less ignorant day' - is extremely telling; it reveals that Cummins saw himself to be living in an enlightened age, while that of the early second century was an ignorant one. This is Cummins the liberal American. It seems that to him language about obeying your bishop belonged to the Old World of kings and subjects which the American Revolution had banished from these shores. And yet the irony is that Ignatius' generation contained people who had known the Apostles – or people whose lives had overlapped with people who had. There is a tradition that Ignatius himself was the little boy whom Jesus set in the midst when his disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. He almost certainly wasn't, but it was chronologically possible; they were that close. And the language, the culture, the social norms of the age of Ignatius were also those of the Gospels. Yet, from the perspective of the post-Enlightenment American republic the age of the Apostles was a 'ignorant age', and Cummins fails to see the contradiction in his world view.

We might also note in passing how Ignatius brings together both bishop and Eucharist:

*Smyrnaeans 8 - See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it.*

Cummins appealed to Ignatius and Polycarp because they represented what he saw as 'the true, simple, Episcopacy of the Second Century, the period immediately succeeding the decease of the Apostles of the Lord.'<sup>166</sup> That period was indeed simple in the sense that it had none of the features that Cummins associated with Ritualism – Gothic architecture, elaborate vestments, ornate church furniture; and in that it perhaps resonated with the physical simplicity of Cummins' frontiersman Methodism – but its understanding of the meaning of the episcopal ministry is, as we have seen, rich, profound, eucharistic and Spirit-affirmed. And that is Cummins' dilemma – if you go back to the earliest sources they do not in fact support the minimalist concept of the bishop as a mere elected functionary – one of the presbyters appointed to a few extra responsibilities. On the contrary, you find the bishop as the lynchpin of each local Christian community, and the role believed to be of direct apostolic institution. Cummins does not engage with this, and justifies not doing so by dismissing it as the product of an 'ignorant age'.

### **Some concluding remarks**

#### **Cummins the man**

I warned at the beginning against the temptation to decide whether someone was a 'good guy' or a 'bad guy', but think it would be wrong not to mention something of Cummins' personal character.

Assessments of him are generally very positive. 'He was honesty itself', affirmed Leacock.<sup>167</sup> When attacked, he absorbed the criticism and did not retaliate. 'I never heard from him a word of complaint,' testified Aycrigg,

---

<sup>165</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', p.141.

<sup>166</sup> 'Primitive Episcopacy', p.142.

<sup>167</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.41.

‘Bishop Cummins was one of the mildest and most gentle of men, with the slightest appearance of egotism, and of wonderful self-control under trying circumstances’.<sup>168</sup>

The most serious criticisms relate to his leadership capabilities. In the experience of Colonel Aycrigg, ‘Bishop Cummins was no leader’.<sup>169</sup> He was not a good judge of character. He accepted people in good faith, and was often let down by them. Leacock, who threw in his lot with him, nevertheless thought he was rash and in danger of being used by ‘ecclesiastical adventurers’<sup>170</sup>

But even those who profoundly disagreed with him could respect him. The Anglo-Catholic Archdeacon Theodore Wirgman of Port Elizabeth in South Africa, who had no sympathy with Cummins’ theological views, nevertheless considered him to have had

*much more scholarship and learning than Bishop Ryle and the usual type of ‘militant Protestant’ clergy in England. He never descended to the depths of controversial vulgarity and profanity which characterised the extreme members of his school of thought in England. He was an honest, and in many respects, an able man .....<sup>171</sup>*

Following his sudden death, the following resolution was passed at the 1876 General Council:

*That in the sweetness of his character, his great humility, his Christlike meekness and gentleness, his untiring patience, his purity of life and integrity of purpose, Bishop Cummins has left to the Church and to the world a bright example, of which the memory should be preserved and cherished as a sacred treasure.<sup>172</sup>*

## Motivation

As we have seen Cummins’ overriding motivation was Christian unity – Cummins believed so passionately in the need for all who put their trust in Christ to be united, that *anything* that stood in the way of that was to be removed. It is in that light that we need to see his attacks on Apostolic Succession.

He had no problem with the succession *per se* – he spoke positively about the connection it gave the American church with the Mother Church in England; he recorded his own numbering in the American succession – 81; one of his first acts was to perpetuate that succession, and he did not do so until he could be confident that any consecration performed by him would be recognised as valid. But where the succession was understood as the *sole* pipeline of grace since Apostolic times, the sole guarantor of valid sacraments and access to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, without which the ministries of godly men were devoid of blessing, then he attacked it mercilessly. To outsiders this gave the appearance of hypocritical inconsistency, and it is quite possible that it was accusations of this that prompted his sermon at what was to be his final General Council in 1875 with page after page of denunciation and no treatment at all of the benefits and blessings that the historic succession might bestow on a Church.

The same is true of his approach to Prayer Book revision. If the Anglo-Catholic interpretation of the text was correct, and that was excluding those not episcopally ordained, then the text must be amended.

---

<sup>168</sup> Aycrigg, *Memoirs*, pp.267, 275.

<sup>169</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.71.

<sup>170</sup> Leacock, *Memoirs*, p.41.

<sup>171</sup> Wirgman, *Foreign Protestantism*, p.231.

<sup>172</sup> *Journal of the Fourth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1876*, p.62. Nicholson says similar things in his sermon (Appendix, p.26).

That illustrates one of the ironies of the situation. It could be said that Cummins fought Catholicism for the sake of catholicity. For him the ‘catholicisers’ were actually hindering the unity of the Holy Catholic Church. And therefore they had to be resisted.

So let us, his heirs, hear his words at the inaugural meeting 150 years ago:

*But in God alone is all our trust. In a consciousness of loyalty to Christ is our only confidence. In entire dependence upon the Holy Spirit is our only hope. If the work we inaugurate today be of men, may it come to naught. If it be of God, may He grant us more abundantly the Holy Ghost and wisdom to make us “valiant for the truth,” strong to labor and faithful in every duty, and “rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer shame for His name”.*<sup>173</sup>

And his deathbed message to us, the Reformed Episcopalians:

*Tell them to go forward and do a grand work.*<sup>174</sup>

## Conclusion

In the 1960s and 70s there was a British comedy duo called Morecambe and Wise – a bit like Laurel and Hardy. Their shows were so famous that many big names (serious actors and musicians) appeared on them. One of these was the famous American composer and conductor Andre Previn. In the sketch he did with them (which can be watched online) Eric Morecambe is supposed to be playing Grieg’s piano concerto. Andre Previn conducts the orchestral introduction (with a full orchestra) then points his baton at Morecambe who tinkles some little tune. Previn looks at him aghast and says, ‘You are playing all the wrong notes!’ Morecambe grabs Previn by the lapels and says, ‘I am playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order.’

That in a sense could be said of George David Cummins. With hindsight we can say that he played *most* of the right notes, but, because of his own formation and the circumstances of the day, not necessarily in the right order. The challenge to us, his successors, is to take those notes, add some more that Cummins missed, and play them in the right order.

+ John Fenwick

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benjamin Aycrigg, *Memoirs of the Reformed Episcopal Church and of the Protestant Episcopal Church with contemporary reports respecting these and the Church of England*, (fifth edition) (approved by Bishop Cummins and the Council) New York, printed for the author by Edward O. Jenkins, 1880.

Anne Ayers, *The Life and Work of William Augustus Muhlenberg*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1880.

C.O. Buchanan, E.L. Mascal, J.I. Packer, Graham Leonard, *Growing into Union*, London, SPCK, 1970.

C.O. Buchanan, *Is the Church of England Biblical?*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998.

Kenneth Carey (ed.), *The Historic Episcopate in the Fullness of the Church*, Westminster, Dacre Press, 1954.

Joseph Blount Cheshire, *The Church in the Confederate States: A History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States*, New York, London, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912.

---

<sup>173</sup> *Journal of the First General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1873*, Philadelphia, James A. Moore, 1874, p.7.  
<http://www.rechurch.org/documents/GCJournals/GCREC01.pdf>

<sup>174</sup> Cummins, *Memoir*, p.520.

- Alexandrine Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins, First Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church*, New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1878.
- A.M. Cummins, *Bishop George D. Cummins, first Bishop and Founder of the Reformed Episcopal Church on Ecclesiastical Vestments*, 1890, (<http://www.trecus.net/downloads/vest.pdf>).
- Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: the life and times of the great evangelist of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival*, London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1971.
- Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400 to c.1580*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1992.
- John Fenwick, *Anglican Ecclesiology and the Gospel: The Renewing of a Vision*, Newport Beach, Anglican House Media, 2016.
- John Fenwick, *The Free Church of England: Introduction to an Evangelical Catholic Tradition*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Setubal, Teneo, 2020.
- Frederick Goldie, *A Short History of the Episcopal Church in Scotland*, Edinburgh, St Andrew Press, 1976.
- Allen C. Guelzo, *For the Union of Evangelical Christendom: The Irony of the Reformed Episcopalians*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.
- Allen C. Guelzo, 'A Sufficiently Republican Church: George David Cummins and the Reformed Episcopalians in 1873', in *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 69.2 (April 1995), 115-139.
- History, Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance: Held in New York, October 2-12, 1873*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1874. [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=j8ZMAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gb\\_s\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=j8ZMAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gb_s_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).
- Thomas Albert Howard, *The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Dollinger, and the Quandary of the Modern Age*, Oxford, University Press, 2017.
- The Five Lambeth Conferences*, London, SPCK, 1920.
- Benjamin Leacock, *Memoirs of Benjamin B. Leacock DD, a founder of the REC, October 1883 (typescript in Reformed Episcopal Seminary archives)*.
- J.B. Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry*, London, Macmillan, 1901.
- C.B. Moss, *The Old Catholic Movement*, London, SPCK (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) 1964.
- John Mason Neale, *A History of the so-called Jansenist Church of Holland*, Oxford, John Henry and James Parker, 1858.
- J.I. Packer and N.T. Wright, *Anglican Evangelical Identity: Yesterday and Today*, London, Latimer Trust, 2008.
- J.I. Packer, *Taking God Seriously: Vital Things We Need To Know*, Nottingham, IVP, 2013.
- Annie Darling Price, *A History of the Formation and Growth of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1873-1902*, Philadelphia, James M. Armstrong, 1902.
- Ian Randall & David Hilborn, *One Body in Christ: The History and Significance of the Evangelical Alliance*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2001.

Andrew Roberts, *George III: The Life and Reign of Britain's Most Misunderstood Monarch*, London, Penguin Random House, 2021.

John Charles Ryle, *Knots Untied: being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion from an Evangelical Standpoint*, (condensed and revised by C. Sydney Carter), London, James Clarke & Co, 1959.

Alan M.G. Stephenson, *The First Lambeth Conference 1867*, London, SPCK, 1967.

Frances Keller Swinford and Rebecca Smith Lee, *The Great Elm Tree: Heritage of the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington*, Lexington, Faith House Press, 1969.

Stephen Sykes and John Booty (eds.), *The Study of Anglicanism*, London, SPCK, 1988.

Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London, Sheed & Ward, 1990.

A. Theodore Wirgman, *Foreign Protestantism within the Church of England: The Story of an Alien Theology and its Present Outcome*, London, The Catholic Literature Association, 1911.