J.S.M. Ward, ‘Bishop at Large’: ‘Orthodox Catholicism’ and Church History in Interwar Britain

ABSTRACT

The colourful ecclesiastical underworld of the modern ‘bishops at large’ documented by Peter Anson is easily ridiculed. With tiny congregations and afflicted by constant schism and reunion, their imposing titles, elaborate rituals and grand doctrinal disputes are seen as delusions of grandeur or veils for outright fraud. But closer examination of what attracted individuals to episcopal status in the first place suggests the deeper implications of a movement often dismissed as superficial farce. Esoteric theologies and a ‘living heritage’ of ritual and worship were important aspects that are acknowledged but not explored in Anson’s treatment. The example of Father John Ward, the Masonic historian and Christian mystic consecrated Archbishop of Olivet in the ‘Western Orthodox Catholic Church’ in the mid-1940s, suggests the particular attractions of church heritage to the modern episcopi vagantes.

BIOGRAPHY

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Irregular bishops without established sees or ordinary diocesan responsibilities—free, in effect, to ‘wander at large’ among the faithful—have long been a feature of Western ecclesiastical life. In the first centuries after Christ, such figures were simply bishops ‘dispossessed of jurisdiction, though not of orders, on account of heresy or schism, or moral offences.’ The modern ‘bishops at large’ or episcopi vagantes are also bishops with no fixed jurisdiction, but their story is ‘one of the strangest and most fantastic religious movements to be found in the erratic ‘goings on’ of the ecclesiastical underworld.’ This more controversial breed of ‘wandering bishops,’ colourful eccentrics and schismatics at the margins of modern organised religion, has proliferated in the United States and to a lesser extent Britain since the 1860s and 1870s.

Driven by a religious calling or more worldly motives, modern episcopi vagantes—many of them lapsed Catholics or disgruntled Anglicans—have sought out ordinations and consecrations within disputed or obscure lines of episcopal succession. They have claimed to be rightful bishops because they possess valid Orders, having been formally consecrated according to legitimate rites and ceremonies that (they insist) stretch back along a line to Church Fathers and early bishops in the various Christian traditions. Consecration at the hands of a bishop according to correct rites and in a continuous line of a valid episcopal succession is the bedrock of their sense of legitimacy. The common pattern has been readily described by critics:

In almost every case the leaders of these multiple movements have been at pains to obtain episcopal consecration, from sources often remote and seldom wholly unquestionable, which they hoped would be indisputable. Having obtained episcopal character they proceeded to found a ‘Church’ based upon it, and their own particular version of what true Catholic orthodoxy is. In this way, so the visionary hope takes shape in the minds of these dreamers, their Church will become the centre and foundation upon which the unity of Christ’s Church could be re-built.

Of the several hundred such bishops active in Britain and the United States between the 1860s and the 1950s, most had only tiny numbers of followers, practiced their rites in rented churches, were constantly at odds with each other, and were generally ridiculed by mainstream opinion. But they took themselves very seriously. At the heart of their ministry often lay a desire—one that could be quite sincere—to administer holy offices under a notion of catholic universality, yet independently of organisational or doctrinal control. The primates, patriarchs, archbishops, bishops and monsignors of this ‘underworld’ have thus been an irritant to the recognised churches of the religious mainstream. They are usually dismissed as deluded and self-important eccentrics, with little substance beyond their rich vestments and fragrant rituals. A memorandum prepared for the Archbishop of Canterbury during the 1930s (when the problem was beginning to trouble many Anglicans) encapsulates this view of the ‘bishops at large’:

A man is included in this group when he has been, or claims to have been, consecrated as a bishop in some irregular or clandestine manner; or, even if he has been regularly consecrated, when, because he has been excommunicated by the church which consecrated him, or for some other reason, he is not in communion with any well-known see; or when the total number of those in communion with him is very small, so that the church appears to exist for the sake of the bishop rather than the bishop for the sake of the church. These are not exact definitions...[but] it can be maintained that the “episcopi vagantes”... have no real excuse for their position; that though some of them are, or have been, quite sincere, they have for the most part been in some way mentally abnormal; and that the movements which they represent are of no value to the Christian cause, while in some cases they are extremely injurious to it.

**LINES OF SUCCESSION**

Historically, the modern episcopi vagantes sprang up ‘like mushrooms’ in Europe and North America in the decades after the 1860s. Most can be traced through a half-dozen major lines of succession, headed by independent-minded Orthodox Catholic and ‘Old Catholic’ schismatics active in the late nineteenth century;

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3 Ibid.
5 Anson, “Foreword” in *Bishops at Large*, 21.
Anson singles out Jules Ferette, René Vilatte, Vernon Herford, and Arnold Harris Mathew. Anson’s *Bishops at Large* published by Faber in 1964, evidently the only major scholarly book on the wandering bishops in Britain, presents a very detailed but wryly unsympathetic picture: a colourful group of preposterous cranks and misfits, united only by their desire for worldly status and their attempts to gain esteem by high-sounding titles and elaborate postures. Take René Vilatte: a Frenchman, a lapsed Catholic, who spent time in French Canada and then as a lay missionary among Belgian immigrants on the shores of Lake Michigan. In 1885 he was ordained a priest for this work by an Old Catholic bishop in Switzerland, and then in 1892 was raised to the episcopate by Bishop Alvarez of a breakaway Catholic sect in Goa, India and Ceylon that had split off from Rome in 1888. Alvarez and Vilatte both claimed their consecrations were performed under the legitimate authority and direct instructions of the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Patriarch, Ignatius Peter III of Antioch. The consecration of Vilatte in the 1892 ceremony at Colombo as ‘Archbishop for the West,’ they maintained, had occurred under the explicit instructions of a Patriarchal Bull of Ignatius Peter III issued from his palace at the monastery of Mardin and dated December 29, 1891 (a claim firmly dismissed by Ignatius Peter’s successors). Vilatte returned to the United States to establish the American Catholic Church (Western Orthodox) in Illinois, and subsequently consecrated a number of other bishops in the so-called ‘Vilatte succession.’ One of them was Archbishop Lloyd, who in turn consecrated Archbishop Sibley as his representative in the United Kingdom. After over two decades of effort in America, Vilatte resigned as Archbishop of the American Catholic Church and returned to France where he was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1925, four years before his death from heart failure.

![Figure 1](image-url): Clergy associated with the Vilatte succession, date and location unknown. Archbishops Lloyd and Sibley are centre and centre-left respectively. (Abbey Museum of Art and Archaeology: Photograph Album 2: 4 WB 2/1)

The careers of Vilatte, Lloyd, Sibley and dozens like them is detailed in Anson’s extraordinary book. But like most commentaries dealing with the modern ‘wandering bishops,’ Anson concentrates on the external qualities of the irregular bishops (their love of ritual, imposing titles, elaborate vestments etc., all of which make for easy ridicule) rather than any private motivations and aspirations that are either not considered or not taken seriously. Among today’s ‘bishops at large,’ on the other hand, doubtless there are many such as Lewis Keizer that see themselves as ‘Apostles of a New Spirituality.’ Many of his predecessors, according to Keizer, were ‘as diverse and talented as the original Apostles of Jesus. They searched for the Divine Mysteries of the Master that had long ago been lost to gentile Christianity. They delved deeply into the Western Mystery Tradition that had been driven underground by the Church, and they made pilgrimage to other religions and traditions of the East and Near East.’

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6 For Vilatte, see Anson, *Bishops at Large*, 91-129. Churches of the Vilatte succession are described in Anson (252-322), including Ward’s Confraternity of the Kingdom of Christ (282-292).

There seems little middle ground between Anson’s straight-faced mockery and the un-reflective, self-important boosterism of today’s ‘bishops at large’ like Keizer. A closer look at the worldly and spiritual biographies of certain individual members of this ‘ecclesiastical underworld’ might shed some further light on the subject. This closer look would be both more sympathetic and more critical, to accommodate for the failings in the existing treatments of the topic. What sort of ministry did they offer? What sort of preaching and doctrine did they favour? How did they imagine their audience, and their relationship with that audience? If, as Anson admits, quite a number of the modern ‘bishops at large’ were not malicious frauds (and were, rather, sincere purveyors of eccentric theologies, often with an esoteric significance) then what really lies behind the high titles, rituals and pageantry?

**THE CATHOLICATE OF THE WEST**

Hugh George de Willmott Newman is probably the best known and most colourful of the modern British *episcopi vagantes*. Newman was the central figure in the so-called ‘Catholicate of the West’ (an attempt to unify the various lines of succession in the late 1940s) and seems to epitomise the self-important eccentricity of the modern ‘bishops at large.’ A London-born bicycle salesman and secretary of the National Association of Cycle Traders and Repairers, Newman was ordained a priest by James McFall of the Old Catholic Church in Ireland in 1938.

Newman’s ordination coincided with a public statement issued in December that year by Mar Ignatius Ephrem I (the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch, located at Homs after fleeing Antioch and the Turks in 1920). The statement warned:

> that there are in the United States of America and in some countries of Europe, particularly in England, a number of schismatic bodies which have come into existence after direct expulsion from official Christian communities and have devised for themselves a common creed and system of jurisdiction of their own invention. To deceive Christians of the West being a chief objective of the schismatic bodies they take advantage of their great distance from the East and from time to time make public statements claiming without truth to derive their origin and apostolic succession from some ancient Apostolic Church of the East, the attractive rites and ceremonies of which they adopt and with which they claim to have a relationship.

London groups that claimed lines of succession through René Vilatte were specifically condemned in the statement. The Patriarch concluded: ‘We find it necessary to announce to all whom it may concern that we deny any and every relation whatsoever with these schismatic bodies and repudiate them and their claims absolutely. Furthermore, our Church forbids any and every relationship and above all intercommunion with all and any of these schismatic sects and warns the public that their statements and pretensions…are altogether without truth.’

8 In response, at the so-called Council of London in October 1943, a group of leading *episcopi vagantes*, representing the Ancient British Church, the British Orthodox Catholic Church, the Apostolic Episcopal Church, the Old Catholic Orthodox Church, the Order of Holy Wisdom and the Order of Antioch took a dramatic step. They formally declared the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church to be in schism, and that their own western half was therefore fully autonomous and would be re-constituted as ‘The Western Orthodox Catholic Church.’ ‘To the objective observer,’ Anson comments, ‘the so-called Council of London and its Acts are of the stuff that dreams are reminiscent of, an Arabian Nights tale. For none of the prelates who took part in its brief sessions could claim jurisdiction over more than perhaps a dozen followers, and some of the Churches had only a paper existence.’

9 In this context, Newman was consecrated a Bishop in 1943 by W. B. Crow, the biologist, occultist and Theosophist who had taken the title Mar Basilius Abdullah III at the head of the new unified Western Orthodox Catholic Church. Newman was raised to the episcopate under the title Mar Georgius, Archbishop and Metropolitan of Glastonbury (the ‘Occidental Jerusalem’) and Catholicos of the West. Crow and Newman had been consecrated in Jules Ferrete’s line of succession, but as the new Archbishop or Patriarch of Glastonbury Newman had bigger ideas. ‘The present Ferrete succession is extremely active,’ wrote Rev. Henry Brandreth in a memo to the 1948 Lambeth Conference. ‘The leader of this activity is H. G. de Willmott Newman (otherwise known as ‘Mar Georgius I, Patriarch of Glastonbury’). Newman has conceived the idea of uniting all the various

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episcopi vagantes in England under himself, and for this purpose has received conditional re-consecration from bishops of all other successions, whom, in turn, he re-consecrates. Since his own consecration in 1944 he has consecrated, or re-consecrated, some fifteen men.10

One of these was John Sebastian Marlow Ward, who in August 1945 was consecrated by Newman as his ‘Archbishop of Olivet.’ Ward was a noted scholar of Freemasonry and the occult, and director of a small but innovative antiquities museum in New Barnet, north London. He was also the head of his own ‘Orthodox Catholic’ order, the Confraternity of the Kingdom of Christ. A closer look at Ward’s case helps to prise open some of the deeper motives underpinning the public eccentricities of the modern episcopi vagantes.

**LIFE AND CAREER OF J. S. M. WARD**

When one follower, Peter Strong, met Father John Ward for the first time in the early 1940s, he encountered a striking figure. Along with the ‘penetrating intensity and clearness of his bright blue eyes…[which] seemed to sum up my soul in one passing glance,’ Strong was struck by Ward’s flamboyant costume and general sense of ‘other-worldliness.’ The Reverend Father favoured an old red cassock, the Confraternity’s badge of a crucifix in the colours of St George surmounted by a golden crown ‘pinned crookedly to his left breast’. ‘I concluded, very correctly,’ Strong later wrote, ‘that he never thought about his appearance – his life was in his mind, and he could discuss any subject with clarity and ease, as I discovered later.’11

Ward had enjoyed a conventional Anglican childhood in west London and studied history at Cambridge between 1905 and 1908. After marrying his cousin Caroline Lanchester that year, Ward continued the collecting interests of his youth while teaching history at various grammar schools, resulting in a 1912 book on ornamental brasses and the beginnings of a huge personal collection of cultural artefacts and historical curiosities. A year later, in 1913, Ward experienced the first of many anomalous ‘psychic’ episodes that increasingly came to dominate his life and outlook. As he explained in two books, *Gone West* and *A Subaltern in Spirit Land*, Ward felt he had received spirit messages from dead relatives while in a state of trance, explaining life after death and the spiritual reality of the afterlife.12 These transcendent insights provided the essential framework for the re-interpretation of Christian theology that marked his later career. In the shorter term, however, these accounts were broadly typical of the wave of popular spiritualism that emerged in response to the carnage of the Western Front.

A teaching post in Burma between 1914 and 1916 saw Ward continue to deepen his Masonic and antiquarian interests. Items of Tibetan sculpture he secured from antique dealers at that time are now held in the National Museums collection in Liverpool as excellent examples of archaic Hindu art.13 His Masonic enthusiasms, meanwhile, resulted in an entry on secret societies for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and dozens of articles and books during the 1920s. His *Freemasonry and the Ancient Gods* and *The Sign Language of the Mysteries*, in particular, promoted Ward’s view that Freemasonry was a direct survival of prehistoric initiation rites: an interpretation that incensed more sober-minded Masonic historians.14

As his first marriage broke down, Ward developed a close companionship with schoolteacher Jessie Page, a strong-willed spinster who shared his deep esoteric interests. Both were convinced that the ordinary dream state provided access to the psychic realm of the ‘astral plane’ and beyond, and in fact their own dreams seemed to offer a strange interlocking narrative of mysterious symbols and portents. They were married in 1927 (the year

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10 Lambeth Palace Library, Douglas Papers: Vol. 4, ff. 66-97: Report: ‘Lambeth Conference 1948: Report (Draft for 10/12/47) on Subject III [Formerly Subject II (a)] II Relations between the Anglican Churches and Foreign Churches (including a report of Episcopi Vagantes’ Prepared by the Church of England’ [L.C. [Subject II 9a]] C.16]. Appendix II: ‘Memorandum on Episcopi Vagantes’ by the Rev. H. R. T. Brandreth. [61, f. 97]. As Anson comments, ‘it is improbable that any bishop during the past nineteen centuries has been re-consecrated so many times as Hugh George de Willmott Newman.’ *Bishops at Large*, 452.
13 Personal communication from Emma Martin, Head of Ethnology, National Museums Liverpool, April 13, 2010.
after Carrie’s death), and in 1929 experienced a sequence of long, complex dreams that revealed to them a kind of ‘mixed monastery,’ where men and women followed a life of prayer, worship and spiritual labours. In their own account, the visions resolved into a clear warning ‘that the end of this Age was approaching, that the Civilisation of the West was doomed, and that before its final collapse Christ would come in judgment, not to destroy the physical world, but to end the Age and give a new Revelation which would serve as the spiritual foundation of the Age and Civilisation to follow.’\textsuperscript{15} They were charged, in other words, to prepare a community of the faithful—a ‘Kingdom of the Wise’—to receive the return of Christ the King.

The Wards were profoundly moved by these extraordinary revelations. Henceforth their life together was dedicated absolutely to the daily labours of ‘the work,’ as they called their spiritual mission. Ward resigned his position as an economic analyst at the Federation of British Industries, and with seven others who were also convinced by Ward’s philosophy and urgent entreaties, he and Jessie set about the practical business of establishing the earthly counterpart of the abbey seen in their visions. They purchased a large Victorian mansion, Hadley Hall, at Park Road New Barnet, where Father Ward, as he now termed himself, wrote lectures and pamphlets explaining their mission and its basic theology, designed ordinances for their worship, developed an appropriate liturgy and order of service, and set about the practical business of maintaining their Abbey as a self-sustaining enterprise. A medieval tithe barn was salvaged from a site in Kent and re-erected beside Hadley Hall as the Abbey’s church. Around this nucleus, Ward established his remarkable museum, the Abbey Folk Park, assembled from his burgeoning collections of prehistoric, classical and medieval antiquities. As the civilisation of the west crumbled away, Ward’s museum promised the relics they had gathered together in New Barnet would endure as a living record of achievement and progress for the ages to come. Quite literally, his museum was intended as an ‘ark’ for the time of England’s collapse and fall: Ward’s apocalyptic mission, and the mystical theology that underpinned it, provided the Folk Park’s \textit{raison d’être}.\textsuperscript{16}

On Whitsunday in 1934, the Confraternity of the Kingdom of Christ issued the most urgent statement of their religious calling. It declared:

\begin{quote}
Our Civilisation is based on Christianity, and although Christianity needs re-stating to fit it for the New Age, there is only ONE WHO can truly and accurately re-state it, and He is the FOUNDER of CHRISTIANITY HIMSELF.

Certain premonitions and advance information can be given through those who are Preparing the Way for the Coming of Christ to Earth, so that the new re-statement shall not appear too startling, but the final and complete work can only be done by the Founder, CHRIST THE KING.

We must face the fact that when Christ comes He comes to Judgment; to condemn both individuals and Nations, and even Social Systems, and that He will inevitably come to that Nation which is least unworthy of his condemnation and therefore the most suitable for the relaunching of His new revelation. For which reason we must make England, so far as we can, a fit country for Him to come to and DWELL IN and one where He can TEACH the New Revelation most effectively.

THE CONFRATERNITY OF THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST has been called into existence to do this work, and its task includes the preservation of such material relics of the past as will serve as a nucleus for the Civilisation to come.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

The occasion of Whitsunday—the English feast day of the Pentecost—had been carefully chosen for the publication of this urgent religious entreaty. Father Ward was proclaiming a renewal of the Christian message that had first been delivered by the Holy Spirit to the Apostles gathered at Jerusalem as described in Acts II, 2-4: ‘Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like the rushing of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire, divided among them and resting on each one. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Christian precedent and authority was important to Ward. Just as the announcement in Jerusalem had been followed by the baptism of thousands and the formation of the first Christian community, so too was Ward’s pentecostal declaration intended to initiate a wholesale re-organisation of spiritual life both in the individual and the nation at large. No longer merely a spirit medium, or an unconventional scholar of the occult, John Ward had assumed the mantle of a religious prophet.

\textbf{ANGLICAN EMBRACE}

\textsuperscript{15} The Confraternity of the Kingdom of Christ. What it stands for and how it came into existence (pamphlet, London, n.d.) 15.
\textsuperscript{17} The Confraternity of the Kingdom of Christ, Its message to the Nation and to the Individual (London: W.H. Rickinson & Son, 1934), 6-7.
Ward’s Confraternity initially sought a relationship with the Anglican Church. In mid-1930 Ward met the Bishop of St Albans, Michael Furse, to explain his new community. Canon W. A. Wigram, a close confidant of Ward’s and an authority on the Eastern Churches, also vouched for Ward and his community in a long letter to Furse ‘assuring me that they were all right,’ as Furse later put it. Despite private misgivings about Ward’s claims to mystical enlightenment, the bishop consequently asked Wigram if he would be prepared to supervise them as an officiating chaplain. This was a request that is likely to have been made by Ward and the community in the first instance, as their ranks contained no clergymen in holy orders. Wigram was happy to oblige, but felt ‘that he was away so much that he thought [Furse] should [be] safe in licensing the Vicar of the parish as Chaplain that he might celebrate [for them] at least once a week.’

Furse personally dedicated the reconstructed tithe barn as the Confraternity’s chapel in February 1931, expressing ‘the hope that it would become, so to say, ‘a lighthouse in the spiritual life of the district’. He also licensed the Rev. R. S. Phillips, vicar of St. James’, New Barnet, to perform the office of chaplain to Ward’s Confraternity. Thereafter, the Rev. Mr. Phillips duly ministered weekly services for the Hadley Hall members and the small religious school they had established. In Furse’s view, ‘at [the Confraternity’s] request I dedicated the chapel on the distinct understanding that it should be used only by members of the Community. The vicar of the parish celebrated there from time to time, and did what he could for them.’

But even Ward’s most devout followers would acknowledge that his teaching and basic theology strayed greatly from Anglican orthodoxy, despite the nominal affiliation with St Albans. Between May and July 1934, for example, Ward delivered a programme of fortnightly public lectures in the Abbey’s schoolroom on ‘The Decline and Fall of Christendom,’ subtitled ‘The Writing on the Wall.’ His text has not survived, but their titles suggested their general tone clearly enough. On May 12th, he spoke of ‘The Death Throes of the Christian Faith,’ followed by ‘The Disintegration of the Political Fabric and the Advance of Asia.’ The impending economic collapse of the western system was treated next, as was ‘The Decay of the British Nation.’ The series climaxed in early July with an address on ‘The Man of Destiny: Christ or Antichrist.’ As word of the Abbey meetings and their unorthodox subject matter spread, it was perhaps only a matter of time before Ward and St Albans came into conflict.

By December 1934, Furse had decided that his tacit encouragement of Ward’s Abbey would continue no longer. ‘I made it clear in my letters to Mr. Ward,’ he later informed the Archbishop of Canterbury, ‘that the Chapel was for the Community and for a School that they were running,’ and not for public services. In March, Furse advised Ward’s group ‘that if they wished to have an official connection with the Church of England it would be advisable for them to have a Visitor and draw up a proper Constitution: this they agreed to, and proceeded to draw up a Constitution. It seemed to me in many respects very unsatisfactory.’

Matters came to a head late in 1934 and early the following year. Ward corresponded in late November regarding a successor to Mr. Phillips, who had resigned his living at St. James’ to undertake missionary work in the north. This communication coincided with a rash of letters from various people drawing Furse’s attention to the Confraternity’s publications and its use of the Chapel for public services. According to Furse, this was clear evidence of duplicity on Ward’s part. ‘I was entirely unaware until then,’ he wrote, ‘that the public were being admitted to the Chapel, and that Mr. Ward and his friends were using it as a centre from which to preach their message.’ The relationship deteriorated sharply as the Bishop responded to Ward’s request that a new chaplain be appointed:

…I replied that I now gathered that the general public were being admitted to the Chapel, this had never been my intention, and I had made it clear in my letters that the Chapel was only to be used for the Community and the School. I then got rather an angry letter from Mr. Ward suggesting that I had known this all along, and that I had raised no objection to it and frankly saying that he was called by Christ the King for this work and that he must obey that call.

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19 Anson, Bishops at Large, 285.
20 Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies Library, DSA 1/14/5 Act Books, 1923-1939, f.170.
21 cited in Anson, Bishops at Large, 285 note 2.
22 “Programme of Lectures,” printed bill c. 1934, copy held in Abbey Museum of Art and Archaeology Library.
After consulting legal and ecclesiastical opinion, Furse replied to the effect that Ward ‘had no authority from me to minister the Word,’ concluding (as he reported later that month to the Archbishop of Canterbury) with an explicit statement:

…and then I added these words ‘If, as it appears from your letter, you wish to continue to do this (that is to say, minister the word to the general public) you will, of course, be at liberty to do so. But in that case I cannot see my way to license one of my clergy to be Chaplain. For if I do so I shall be allowing the public to infer that the message which you give has my approval and authority. And therefore it seems that the only course open to me is to refuse to license a clergyman as Chaplain for your Community Chapel, and in that case I shall have to ask you to make it clear to the public generally that no one has my authority for ministering the Word or Sacraments in your Chapel.’

Ward’s indignant response ran to twenty-three closely typed pages, which unfortunately have not been retained in the diocesan archives to provide Ward’s view of matters. It is clear, even relying on Furse’s account, that the relationship had soured: ‘at the present moment he is in extremely bad temper with me and thinks I have treated him abominably; amongst other things he is particularly annoyed because I addressed him as ‘Mr.’ Ward…’

Ward’s indignation ran deeper than this. Furse was essentially withdrawing the only measure of legitimacy the Confraternity enjoyed as a formal religious organization. It appears from the circumstantial evidence that Ward felt that both the nature of his calling and his intentions for the Confraternity’s chapel were perfectly plain to Furse from the outset and thus had his blessing. But the Bishop was resolute. As he advised the Archbishop, ‘so long as Mr. Ward takes the line that he can and will minister the word in his Chapel and admit, indeed, invite, the general public to go there, without any authority from me as Bishop of the Diocese, I cannot see how I can recognise the Community.’ He summarised his position somewhat ruefully: ‘I always felt that Mr. Ward was a bit of a crank, and perhaps I ought to have adopted the easier course from the beginning of refusing to have anything to do with him, but it did seem a bit difficult to do that after what Wigram told me about him and his ideas generally.’

Perhaps the split was inevitable; but certainly it was not something Ward hoped and worked for. As the relationship with St Albans deteriorated, and the veneer of Anglican recognition peeled away, the Confraternity of the Kingdom of Christ found themselves adrift without institutional affiliation. In the eyes of the world, and so too, it appears, in the eyes of their Father Superior, official recognition within an established religious hierarchy was necessary to confer legitimacy upon their small and marginal order. In this context, Ward embraced the ‘Orthodox Catholicism’ of an episcopus vagans in the Vilatte succession, John Churchill Sibley, and thereby joined the ranks of the ‘bishops at large.’

**WARD’S ORTHODOX CATHOLICISM**

Significantly, Ward only turned to Sibley and the Vilatte succession when other attempts to secure episcopal legitimacy were frustrated. In September 1935, after the break with St Albans, Ward was ordained deacon and priest in the Autonomous African Universal Church by its Primate, Mar Kwamin. He was consecrated a bishop by the same within a week, and by the end of the month had loftily informed St Albans ‘that he and his Confraternity had severed all relations with the Established Church.’ When doubt was cast over the legitimacy of Mar Kwamin’s investiture and authority to conduct his office in England, however, Father Ward visited Archbishop Sibley to clarify the validity of his consecration. It was at this point that the link with Sibley and the Vilatte succession was established; Ward later recalled he ‘took to him at once.’ Sibley had been ordained in 1924 by Vilatte’s successor, Archbishop Lloyd, and later consecrated as ‘Metropolitan of the American Catholic Church for the British Empire.’ He returned to England in late 1929, and established a branch of Vilatte’s church as The Orthodox Catholic Church in England. Anson considered Sibley a ‘religious confidence trickster’ on a par with Vilatte; Ward, on the other hand, remembered him as ‘one of the most saintly men I ever knew.’

Their first meeting resulted in an offer. To remove any doubt in the matter, Ward would be re-ordained and re-consecrated at Sibley’s own hand. The Confraternity would be registered as part of the Orthodox Catholic Church in England. Both men were thus advantaged by the relationship: Ward and his followers would gain the

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24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 276.
institutional affiliation that they evidently desired, and Sibley would substantially increase his Church, ‘which until then,’ Anson commented, ‘had got little further than its Metropolitan’s writing paper, and had made no visible advance within the British Empire.’ Accordingly, in early October, Sibley arrived at Park Road in full regalia and was welcomed by the simple hospitality of the Abbey. Over the two days that followed Ward and his brethren were formally welcomed into Sibley’s Orthodox Catholic Church in England. On October 5th, after their church was re-dedicated, Ward was baptized and re-confirmed, ordained Deacon and, finally, ‘solemnly admitted to the Sacred Office of the Priesthood’ by the authority of Archbishop Sibley’s hand and seal. In further ceremonies the following day, Ward was ‘solemnly consecrated as a Bishop in the Church of God’ and commissioned as its Chancellor of the Province (England). The ceremony was performed before many witnesses,’ Ward later wrote, ‘and the Roman Rite was used in this and in all previous ceremonies [of the Church], because it is well known in the West and acknowledged by all authorities to be valid both in its Intention and in its Form.’

Ward explained his conversion to the Orthodox Catholic cause, after his Abbey had ‘for five years…struggled to remain in communion with the Anglican Church,’ in his brief history of the church published in 1944. His account encapsulated his personal antipathy to the Bishop of St. Albans, his anger at the latter’s refusal to renew the chapel’s license, and his forceful denial of the legitimacy of the Established Church itself.

The [Anglican] attack on the work of the Abbey being based on the declaration that the Rev. Father [i.e. Ward] had no authority to ‘Minister the Word’ led the latter to study carefully the whole question of the validity of Anglican Orders and therefore the right of an Anglican Bishop to make such a claim, and the result of his investigation was to convince him that the attitude of the Western and Eastern Churches was right, and that in the ecclesiastical sense the Anglican Church has no valid orders, and therefore no Priests and no Bishops, and that the gentleman who calls himself a Bishop is only a layman given the name of Bishop by Act of Parliament, and appointed by the State like any other State Official.

Archbishop Sibley died on December 15th 1938, after being confined to St Luke’s Hospital, Chelsea. His body was brought to New Barnet, where it lay in state at the Abbey for four days while a requiem mass was prepared and celebrated. Ward was immediately elected his successor by the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Catholic Church in England (in effect, the members of Ward’s Confraternity) meeting at the Abbey on the day Sibley was buried. The certificate of election was witnessed by the Synod Secretary, Colin Chamberlain, Jessie Ward, and another Orthodox Catholic Church priest, Fr. William Martin Andrew, and announced Father Ward’s new title: Archbishop Metropolitan of the Orthodox Catholic Church in the British Empire.

Another meeting of the Synod held on August 11th 1945 elected Ward to the ‘Archiepiscopal See of Olivet, which is hereby constituted as the Primateal See of the Orthodox Catholic Church in England.’ This latter election was part of Mar Georgius’ decision to unify the major strands of the episcopi vagantes in England, and merge several distinct and competing Orthodox Catholic churches. The Catholicate’s journal, the Orthodox Catholic Review, reported on the historic event with suitable gusto.

A notable episode in Church history took place recently, when, as a consequence of reunion effected between The Old Catholic Orthodox Church, The Ancient British Church, The Independent Catholic Church, and the British Orthodox Catholic Church, THE WESTERN ORTHODOX CATHOLIC CHURCH was formally constituted by a Deed of Declaration and erected by His Holiness the Prince-Patriarch Basilius Abdullah III of Antioch into THE CATHOLICATE OF THE WEST, under a Catholicos whose chair was established at Glastonbury in Somerset, thereby elevating that hallowed and historic little town to the rank and dignity of premier Orthodox Catholic See of Western Christendom. A complex process of mutual ordination followed, as Mar Georgius consolidated this merger by securing and re-confirming the various lines of succession bound up in the various churches now affiliated to his ‘Catholicate of the West.’ This effort appears to have been driven by Georgius’ desire to establish a regular hierarchy of the Orthodox Catholic movement in the United Kingdom, unified in allegiance to the ‘Occidental Jerusalem,’ Glastonbury.

28 Anson, Bishops at Large, 286.
29 J. S. M. Ward: The Orthodox Catholic Church in England, Showing its History and the Validity of its Orders (New Barnet: The Abbey of Christ the King, 1944), 39.
30 Ibid., 38.
31 The various certificates of ordination, consecration, and election are held in the archives of the Abbey of Christ the King; copies are held in the Abbey Museum Library.
32 “A Notable Episode in Church History” Orthodox Catholic Review 1: 1 (April 1944) 1-2.
Ward was thus consecrated for a third time by the Patriarch of Glastonbury at the Abbey Church on August 25, 1945. Newman’s *Orthodox Catholic Review* recorded the occasion for posterity under the heading ‘‘RECENT UNIFICATIONS: Two Churches Affiliate to the Catholicate: Consecrations in the Abbey.’ For the first time, Ward’s independent *ecclesia*—erected entirely upon the fact of his ordination and consecration at Sibley’s hand into the Vilatte succession—was welcomed into a broader fellowship and unity with other Orthodox Catholic bodies. As the *OCR* reported:

The Orthodox Catholic Church in England and The Evangelical Church of India were solemnly received into union with The Catholicate of the West as autocephalous Rites by His Beatitude the Catholicos Mar Georgius on Saturday, the 25\textsuperscript{th} August, in The Cathedral and Abbey Church of Christ the King, Park Road, New Barnet, Herts.

On the same occasion, His Beatitude assisted by His Grace John, Lord Archbishop of Olivet and Primate of The Orthodox Catholic Church in England, and Mar Johannus, Lord Bishop of S. Marylebone, consecrated sub conditione The Right Rev. James Charles Ryan D. D., Lord Bishop of North Madras, Primate of the Evangelical Church of India, whose previous consecration had been in the Armenian Uniate and Anglican lines. Then, Mar Georgius, assisted by Bishop Ryan and Mar Johannus, consecrated sub conditione the Archbishop of Olivet (The Most Rev. John Sebastian Marlow Ward, M. A., D. D.) whose previous consecration had been in the Syrian-Malabar line derived from the late Archbishop Vilatte. This accomplished, Archbishop Ward, assisted by Bishop Ryan, consecrated sub conditione both Mar Georgius and Mar Johannus.

The object of these conditional consecrations was in all cases to vest further lines of Apostolic Succession in the Consecrands, and not to impute any doubt as to their existing episcopal status.

Dozens of photographs were taken of the ceremonies, which concluded with Ward’s solemn enthronement as Archbishop of Olivet by Mar Georgius, as verification that correct form and procedure had been followed.

![Figure 2: J. S. M. Ward is consecrated *sub conditione* by Mar Georgius I at the Abbey Church, New Barnet, August 1948. (Abbey Museum of Art and Archaeology: Photograph Album 1, John Ward: 3 WC 3/17)](image)

For Ward, this step was more than a naïve attempt to ‘guarantee’ the lines of succession, an objective usually given as Newman’s motive. It was, in fact, the first major alteration to the constitutional basis of Ward’s Confraternity and his ‘Orthodox Catholic Church in England’ as a whole. It had the re-assuring effect of welcoming his Confraternity and Church into a broader communion without compromising his independence and autonomy. The ceremonies of August 25\textsuperscript{th} at the Abbey were considered by the Confraternity as, in effect, an ‘act of union.’ They meant that his Orthodox Catholic Church in England had been ‘received into full communion with the Catholicate of the West under Mar Georgius Catholicos,’ even as the latter reciprocated by

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33 *Orthodox Catholic Review* 1:10 (June-August 1945) 43.
recognising Ward’s church ‘as a lawfully constituted autocephalous and autonomous Rite or Branch of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church having valid orders mission and jurisdiction...’.34

THE UTILITY OF ORTHODOX CATHOLICISM

What did Ward seek in his embrace of Orthodox Catholicism? Why was it necessary for his synthesis of Spiritualism, eastern transcendentalism, Primitive Christianity and visionary adventism to be expressed in a formal religious affiliation, with all its paraphernalia of ritual, tradition, titles and the like? We might find the answer on several levels, and in so doing better grasp the motives of one episcopus vagans beyond the generic explanations of eccentricity, pompousness or mental instability.

Most superficially, Orthodox Catholicism provided an institutional connection for the Confraternity, and the fact that Ward sought this connection so swiftly after the rift with St Albans indicates the importance of external recognition to him. Following the Confraternity’s embrace of Orthodox Catholicism, moreover, Ward’s interpretations of Christian doctrine became more elaborate and pronounced. Perhaps liberated from the need for discretion within the Anglican fold, and fired by a zeal born of his personal revelations, his synthesised theology was more stridently expressed after the break with St Albans in 1935. In writings and sermons at the Abbey, Ward espoused a Primitive Christianity that upheld the literal truth of scriptural miracles: the Divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection and so on. ‘Any denomination,’ he wrote in his The Psychic Powers of Christ, ‘which repudiates the Virgin Birth and the physical Resurrection of Our Lord, and by implication, therefore, denies that He was God Incarnate, will cease to be a living branch either of the Catholic Church in its widest sense or indeed of anything which can be regarded as Christianity at all.’35

Ward’s interpretation of the explicit teachings of Christ, the Apostles, and the various apocryphal texts of the primitive Christian church in the first centuries C. E. was conjoined to his own experience of spirit communication and mystical revelation. In his The Psychic Powers of Christ metaphysical ‘laws’ such as those of materialization, levitation and transportation and evidence of out-of-body and near-death experiences were marshalled as confirmation of the literal truth of the biblical accounts. His theology emphasized received authority in the traditions of Primitive Christianity, yet endorsed the freedom of an individualized spiritual progress. The doctrine of Reincarnation, for example, permitted Ward and his followers to deny the traditional Roman Catholic emphasis on eternal damnation. Non-belief, doubt or dissent did not condemn a person to hellfire: ‘Life on earth may be short, but every soul is immortal;’ he averred. ‘[T]he drama of life is not ended when the curtain rings down on an agnostic; one chapter has closed in the Book of Life—and that is all.’36

Once their content was no longer answerable to Anglican orthodoxy, Ward’s addresses and sermons in services at the Abbey Church after 1935 dealt explicitly with matters of reincarnation and the afterlife, scriptural miracles (following themes developed in his book The Psychic Powers of Christ), and biblical and personal prophecies of impending cataclysm. The first in a series of Sunday evening sermons delivered in early 1936, for example, was titled ‘Life After Death’ and took the text from Ecclesiastes: ‘Or ever the silver cord be loosed.’ The Barnet Press reported that Father Ward ‘proceeded to show that this was not a mere poetic phrase, but referred to a real fact in the process which we call death—the freeing of the soul from the encumbrance of the physical body.’37 Another evening service in June that year saw Ward take as his text the passage in Revelations ix, 3: ‘And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth.’ Ward was particularly impressed by the passage comparing the locusts as ‘like unto horses prepared unto battle,’ with tails like scorpions and ‘breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle.’38 His interpretation of this prophecy, reported in the local newspapers, reflected the apocalyptic trends of international events.

Father Ward suggested that...St. John had a vision of an attack by aeroplanes using poison gas and screened by a smoke screen. He pointed out that the locusts were like no locust that ever crawled upon this earth, and that, on the other hand, a man who had seen a vision of an aeroplane 1,900 years before they were invented would have to make use of similes to describe what he had seen.

34 Untitled exercise book dated after c.1947 held in archives of the Confraternity of Christ the King, Caboolture, Australia; copy in Abbey Museum Library.
36 Ibid., 12.
38 Revelations IX, 7-10.
The text lent itself neatly to a characteristically fervent discussion of the ‘signs of the times’ and the impending apocalypse. ‘Father Ward,’ the report continued, ‘then went on to show the devastating effect of modern air war, its barbarity, and its peculiarly destructive effects upon civilization, such as the great cities, illustrating much of what he said by recent events in Abyssinia. He pointed out that we had reached our present terrible crisis largely because all nations had repudiated the very basis on which our civilization was built, namely, the Christian faith.’

Later sermons in this vein that year dwelt on a series of biblical prophecies ‘which he considered had already been fulfilled, or were in the process of fulfilment, and which indicated the coming of a great war—a war likely to shake civilisation.’ The return of the Jewish nation to Palestine featured prominently, as did reflections on modern parallels with the apocalyptic visions of scripture. In the final sermon in the series, in mid-July, Ward reflected on the likelihood of the British Empire’s salvation in the impending catastrophe. Rarely was his mission to England and the West so clearly spelt out. Pointing out that ‘civilisations rise and fall, that they have their spring, summer, autumn and winter,’ Ward pointed to history and the collapse of Roman authority to confirm that ‘there was always some country or area which survived the general collapse and became a sort of haven of refuge from whence the light of civilization was once more diffused among the surrounding nations.’ Illuminated in the brilliant light of stained glass, standing at his ornate pulpit, the animated Reverend Father warmed to his theme, which many of his regular attendees surely found a familiar one:

In the threatened collapse of Western civilization, why should not Great Britain play the same part as Byzantium played when Rome fell?...If, however, she was to perform this important function, she must put her own house into order. There were many sides to the problem: there was the problem of defence; the problem of the preservation of examples of the art and literature of the age which was passing, but above all there was the need for a revival of the spiritual life of the country. For years Britain had been turning away from Christ and Christianity. Unless she turned back to the faith of her fathers she would certainly not be deemed worthy by God to serve as the basis of the new civilization which was destined to rise out of the wreckage of this mechanical age.

**A LIVING HERITAGE OF FAITH**

Orthodox Catholicism offered Ward a distinctive ecclesiastical authority, a position of status from which he could develop his unique interpretive and prophetic role. Previously, in the Confraternity’s alignment with Anglicanism, Ward was not ordained and therefore could only ‘preach’ in a lay sense. As Furse made quite clear, he could not ‘minister the Word.’ His status as an ordained priest (and better still, as a consecrated bishop) within Orthodox Catholicism, on the other hand, provided Ward with the institutional standing to interpret the corpus of Christian belief, ritual and worship as he understood it. He was able to interpret freely a rich, evocative Christian heritage with a doctrinal freedom denied in the faith traditions of mainstream Christianity, whether Anglican, Catholic or Orthodox.

In blunt terms, Orthodox Catholicism legitimised his ministry; but it simplifies matters to suggest that (in a manner alleged to be typical of the modern *episcopi vagantes* in general) he simply desired a public vehicle for his private hobby-horses. What is distinctive about Ward’s stance is his appropriation (via his status as a ‘bishop at large’) of a community of belief rooted in doctrinal heritage and tradition visibly expressed in the relics, artworks, icons and illuminated glass of his atmospheric chapel. Ward’s religious outlook was infused with a lively, ‘big picture’ antiquarianism that saw in the dramas and patterns of human history one continuous revelation of a cosmic truth that could be understood in human spiritual terms as a vast cycle of incarnation and reincarnation. The fall of Rome, for example, was to Ward not the result of military decline and political corruption, but rather the inevitable result of a mass exodus of ‘highly-evolved’ beings from the mortal sphere. ‘What actually was taking place,’ he wrote in one manifesto for the Confraternity, ‘was that vast numbers of souls were reaching the end of their series of journeys through earth-life, having evolved sufficiently highly on this plane. When they died these departed to higher spheres of work, leaving their places to be filled by cruder, younger, and more savage souls...represented in the historical accounts by the barbarian hordes...’

In the first instance, then, Orthodox Catholicism appealed to his sense of historical drama. Ward took seriously the claims of Orthodox Catholicism to be an historic *rapprochement* between Christianity’s two great warring factions: ‘the Orthodox Catholic Church in itself,’ he wrote, ‘marks the reunion of the Eastern and Western

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39 Barnet Press, “Bible Prophecy and Air Raids” June 20, 1936.
41 Barnet Press, “Can This Civilisation Be Saved?” July 18, 1936.
Churches, which mutually excommunicated each other in the 11th century, since when Christendom has been divided into camps.43 Such grand rhetoric was not unusual among the modern irregular bishops, but Ward took the utility of history in the service of faith, worship and revelation much further. With his tithe barn transformed into the vivid symbol of a reconstituted ‘line of succession’ back to a medieval purity of worship, where the highly formalised ritualism and devotion of his Abbey and its Folk Park evoked the past as a living heritage of faith, Ward was an historian in bishops’ clothing. He would have agreed with Dr. J. J. Overbeck, an early champion of Orthodox Catholicism in the British context, who insisted upon the inherently historical character of Christian faith and observance.

Christianity is a historical product, and not simply a philosophical system. Hence the uppermost importance of Tradition, which, properly understood, is only another name for History. Thus our Historical or Traditional Christianity sprang from incontestable facts, far beyond the reach and beyond the cavil of our fashionable critics. If we will be Christians, we must take Christianity as a hard and stubborn fact, such as History, uncorrupted History, has handed down to us, and not as a soft, workable, and kneadable dough, from which the skilful hand of the workman or modeler can shape any fancy of his brain.44

Within this sense of Christianity as a ‘hard and stubborn fact’ lay Ward’s preference for anachronistic practices such as the veneration of relics and the invocation of saints and angels, understood in his schema as highly evolved beings returning to the mortal plane, as agents of spiritual enlightenment. Orthodox Catholicism offered itself to Ward as a religious vehicle that was necessarily flexible in matters of formal doctrine, but was charged with a sense of history and a living heritage of faith.

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43 Ward, The Orthodox Catholic Church in England, 3-4.