



4-1995

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Guelzo, Allen C. "A Sufficiently Republica Church: George David Cummins and the Reformed Episcopalians in 1873." *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 69.2 (April 1995) 115-139.

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A Sufficiently Republican Church: George David Cummins and the Reformed Episcopalians in 1873

Abstract

In 1873 George David Cummins, the assistant bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Kentucky, rocked the complacency of the Protestant Episcopal Church by resigning his Kentucky episcopate and founding an entirely new Episcopal denomination, the Reformed Episcopal Church. Schismatic movements in American religion are hardly a novelty. Still, Cummins and his movement occupy a peculiar position in both the history of American religion and the cultural history of the Gilded Age. Unlike the wave of church schisms before the Civil War, the Reformed Episcopal schism of 1873 had no clear relation to sectional issues. And unlike the fundamentalist schisms of the early 1900s, it had no real connection to the great debate in American religion between conservatism and modernism. Instead, the story of George David Cummins hangs upon a ferocious struggle within the Episcopal Church about ritual, "romanism," and Episcopal identity - or, in other words, about symbol and culture in the Gilded Age. And in 1873, that cultural struggle was closely bound up with the fearful and unresolved questions posed by America's full integration into the great networks of international, industrial, and finance capitalism. Cummins and the Reformed Episcopal schism was, in miniature, part of the persistent conflict between the old antebellum republican ideals of public virtue and restraint and the new capitalist ethic of consumption which restructured American public culture in the Gilded Age. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

George David Cummins, Kentucky, Reformed Episcopal Church, Gilded Age

Disciplines

History | History of Religion | United States History

A SUFFICIENTLY REPUBLICAN CHURCH:
GEORGE DAVID CUMMINS
AND THE REFORMED EPISCOPALIANS IN 1873

Allen C. Guelzo

In 1873 George David Cummins, the assistant bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Kentucky, rocked the complacency of the Protestant Episcopal Church by resigning his Kentucky episcopate and founding an entirely new Episcopal denomination, the Reformed Episcopal Church. Schismatic movements in American religion are hardly a novelty. Still, Cummins and his movement occupy a peculiar position in both the history of American religion and the cultural history of the Gilded Age. Unlike the wave of church schisms before the Civil War, the Reformed Episcopal schism of 1873 had no clear relation to sectional issues. And unlike the fundamentalist schisms of the early 1900s, it had no real connection to the great debate in American religion between conservatism and modernism. Instead, the story of George David Cummins hangs upon a ferocious struggle within the Episcopal Church about ritual, "romanism," and Episcopal identity - or, in other words, about symbol and culture in the Gilded Age. And in 1873, that cultural struggle was closely bound up with the fearful and unresolved questions posed by America's full integration into the great networks of international, industrial, and finance capitalism. Cummins and the Reformed Episcopal schism was, in miniature, part of the persistent conflict between the old antebellum republican ideals of public virtue and restraint and the new capitalist ethic of consumption which restructured American public culture in the Gilded Age.

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As a deeply committed Protestant evangelical, George David Cummins's first and most obvious quarrel with his church turned on the growing power of the "catholic" revival among Anglicans and Episcopalians in England and America in the nineteenth century. The Episcopal Church, for most of the early decades of the nineteenth century, had been rejuvenated by a powerful Evangelical movement, beginning with the conversion of Alexander Viets Griswold of Massachusetts in 1811 and eventually expanding to include a network of Evangelical bishops, societies, and publications.¹ At its peak in 1844, Episcopal Evangelicalism may have counted as much as half the membership of the Episcopal Church as its own.² But in the 1840s, the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England, led by John Henry Newman and E.B. Pusey, began to win its first converts in the American Episcopal Church. In contrast to the Evangelicals, the Anglo-Catholics were devoted to reviving ancient "catholic" dogma and ritual and redeeming the Episcopal Church from its Protestantism. There never was any real hope for reconciling these two antagonistic theological systems, and from the 1860s onward, Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics turned the Episcopal Church into a battlefield.

It is possible to describe this quarrel simply in terms of the theological ideas at stake, and this has been done in sufficient detail by Dieter Voll, Paul A. Carter, Peter Toon, and a number of other

1 The Episcopal Church, despite the extraordinarily influential figure it cuts in American cultural history, has not been well served in its historiography. Many of the standard histories of the Episcopal Church - such as William W. Manross's *A History of the American Episcopal Church* (New York: Morehouse-Gorham, 1950) and Joseph Thayer Addison's *The Episcopal Church in the United States, 1789-1931* (New York: Charles Scribner's 1951) - are compromised by party spirit and affiliations in their treatment of the nineteenth-century Evangelicals. The best sources on the Evangelicals are E. Clowes Chorley's *Men and Movements in the American Episcopal Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1950) and Raymond W. Albright's *A History of the Protestant Episcopal Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1964). There is also a wealth of first-hand material on the Evangelicals in William Stevens Perry, *The History of the American Episcopal Church* (2 vols.; Boston, 1885), volume 2 and William B. Sprague, ed., *Annals of the American Pulpit* (8 vols.; New York, 1859), volume five.

2 Albright, *Protestant Episcopal Church*, 169.

Episcopal historians.³ But we will not understand why this quarrel acquired the bitterness it did if we fail to see that Evangelicalism and "Anglo-Catholicism" were, in turn, connected to two very different cultural systems in the Gilded Age. As Richard Carwardine, Daniel Walker Howe, and Charles G. Sellers have shown, "moderate Light" Protestant evangelicals closely identified themselves with the "political culture" of Whig republicanism.⁴ Evangelical Episcopalians were no exception to this identification. Both the lay and clerical leadership of the Evangelical Episcopalians fell in behind the Whig party and, in the 1850s, behind the Republicans; the leadership of the Whigs in the 1840s and the Republicans in the 1850s often found its way to the Evangelical Episcopalians.⁵ But in more than just party identity, the Evangelical Episcopalians matched Whig republicanism's vision of a united nation of independent small producers, devoted to virtuous simplicity, with their own religious culture of plain, undecorated churches, central pulpits (and diminished altars and baptismal fonts), and calls for pan-Protestant evangelical unity.

3 Dieter Voll, *Catholic Evangelicalism: The Acceptance of Evangelical Traditions by the Oxford Movement* (London: Dacre Press, 1963), 29-31, 75, 92, 127-31; Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology, 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 21-26; Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 114, 160-61; Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crises of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), 179-92; and G.R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London, 1908), 215-16.

4 Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3-18; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), chapter seven, and "The Evangelical Movement and Political Culture in the North during the Second Party System," in *Journal of American History* 77 (March 1991): 1216-39; Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 157-61.

5 Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 686; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 78-79; and Diana Butler, "Standing Against the Whirlwind: The Evangelical Party in the 19th Century Episcopal Church" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1991), 45-46, 267-70, 278-80, 302-310.

By contrast, Anglo-Catholicism wore on its surface a romantic rejection of "modern" individualism in favor of medieval churchmanship and "organic" community. But as it came to maturity after the Civil War, Anglo-Catholicism quickly revealed that its anti-modernism was a highly ambiguous affair. As Jackson Lears has shown, the sacred symbols of the Anglo-Catholics - the Gothic cathedrals designed by Ralph Adams Cram, the silver plate, the rich brocades of Anglo-Catholic vestments - were at the same time the ultimate symbols of Victorian affluence and the arrival of a global market economy at an apex of material comfort and acquisition. For the *nouveau riche* of the Gilded Age, Anglo-Catholicism became the cultural instrument by which the aggressive power of liberal capitalism could be reconciled with the uneasiness Americans felt in the face of that economy. Its pretend medievalism created a welcome embarrassment of ritual which assured its devotees of their connection with antiquity even as it indulged the temptations of modernism.⁶ Evangelical "rationality" had harnessed itself to a republican economy. Anglo-Catholicism, similarly, harnessed itself to the indulgence of the global market economy. And nowhere was the symbolic clash of the two heard more loudly than in the Episcopal Church.⁷

Ironically, George David Cummins was not a particularly likely participant in such a complicated struggle. Born on 11 December 1822 to an old Delaware family, Cummins had Episcopalianism in his family from his father's side. But his mother was partial to the Methodists, and when George David Cummins's Episcopalian father died during the boy's fourth year, his mother married a Baltimore Methodist preacher. At age fourteen, he was packed off to Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where in April 1839,

6 T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 161-99; see also W.S.F. Pickering, *Anglo-Catholicism: A Study in Religious Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1989) and Francis Penhale, *The Anglican Church Today: Catholics in Crisis* (London: Mowbrays, 1987), 50-58.

7 Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 111.

an evangelical revival swept through the college, and "it was at this time he gave his heart to God, and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, entering on a life of earnest love and faithful labor for Christ."⁸ On 2 March 1843 he was received into the "itinerant communion" of the Methodist Episcopal Church, under license from the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and began riding the Bladensburg (Maryland) circuit.

Cummins might well have been content to stay with the Methodist Episcopal Church. But in 1844 the unity and discipline of the Methodists was shattered by a disastrous debate within its General Conference over slavery. As the son of a slaveholder and a native and resident of slave states, Cummins had never betrayed any particular opposition to slavery.⁹ But the instability which the Methodist schism portended may have unsettled him in ways that the precise cause of the schism had not.¹⁰ That winter Cummins's mind began to gravitate back to the church of his fathers, and in March 1845, he returned to Delaware to present himself to Alfred Lee, the Evangelical Bishop of Delaware, as a candidate for orders in the Protestant Episcopal Church.¹¹

Cummins stayed under Alfred Lee's tutelage in Wilmington, Delaware, for six months. On 20 April 1845 Cummins was confirmed by Lee at St. Andrew's Church, Wilmington, and was ordained there as a deacon on 26 October. After serving his title as curate under the Evangelical firebrand Henry Van Dyke Johns of

8 Alexandrine M.B. Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins, D.D., First Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1878), 16.

9 Like most Whigs, Cummins opposed abolition but hoped to solve the slavery question through colonization. See David Brion Davis, "Reconsidering the Colonization Movement: Leonard Bacon and the Problem of Evil," *Intellectual History Newsletter* 14 (1992): 3-16. See Cummins's comments on the constitutional and moral legitimacy of slavery in *The African a Trust from God to the American* (Baltimore, 1861), 16, 18, 19, 20-21, 22; and for his support for colonization, see his biography of one of the Evangelical Episcopalian missionaries in Liberia, *The Life of Virginia Hale Hoffman* (Philadelphia, 1859).

10 The Methodist bishop and missionary William Taylor was in the same instructional class with Cummins in 1845 and noted that Cummins merely sent in "a notification of his withdrawal" from the Methodists; see William Taylor, *Story of My Life* (New York, 1896), 63.

11 Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins*, 23.

Christ Church, Baltimore, Cummins was called as rector of Christ Church, Norfolk (Virginia), and was ordained by Bishop Lee on 6 July 1847. In June 1853, the prestigious parish of St. James's, Richmond (Virginia) unanimously called him as rector. Then, in little more than a year, the vestry of Trinity Church, Washington, D.C., extended yet another unanimous call. Finally, in 1863 Cummins made his last parish change, moving to Chicago to become rector of his largest congregation yet, Trinity Church.

There was never any question during these years of parish ministry about Cummins's commitment to the Evangelical party or about his prowess as an Evangelical preacher. Benjamin Leacock, who would stand with Cummins in 1873, remembered Cummins as a "prince" in the pulpit: "He had no superior, if an equal in the P.E.C. His expositions of divine truth were simple and clear, and his earnest impassioned utterance was to me irresistible."¹² His preaching was one long reiteration of the Evangelical demand for change of heart, the dread of judgment for sin, the ever-present consciousness of sinfulness, and the need for redemption. The sinner, declared Cummins in 1865, "is to be saved by trust in the Good Shepherd, by simple reliance on the infinite sacrifice of Jesus - by committing his soul to Him who loved him and gave himself for him."¹³ This commitment, simple as it was in principle, was no "mere cold act of the intellect" or the "simple assent of the mind to certain propositions." It was simple only in its one object and one overwhelming result, "the whole being surrendered to another, the soul of the sinner committed to the Savior to be possessed, dwelt in, moulded and transformed by Him."¹⁴

But however much Cummins was an Evangelical, he also considered himself a thorough-going Episcopalian. The problem

12 Benjamin Leacock, *Personal Recollections Connected with the Reformed Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Reformed Episcopal Publication Society, 1964), 71-72.

13 Cummins, "Returning to the Fold," in Cummins's sermon manuscript book, which is in the possession of the Bishop Cummins Memorial Reformed Episcopal Church, Catonsville, Maryland.

14 Cummins, "Healing the Lunatic Child," in *Sermons By Bishop Cummins* (Philadelphia, 1884), 85.

which nagged at many other Evangelical Episcopalians was that the prescribed liturgy of the Episcopal Church often seemed to take back with one hand what the Evangelicals wanted to offer with the other. The Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* still held over from the 1500s a good deal of fairly un-Evangelical vocabulary - *priest*, *altar*, and *regeneration* in the baptismal order - and by the 1860s, a number of Evangelicals were clamoring either for revision or the freedom to dispense with parts of the liturgy which offended their Evangelical sensitivities. Cummins, however, offered no murmurs of dissent from the liturgy of the Episcopal Church. "I can use, and have ever used, the Prayer Book without conscientious scruples," Cummins declared in 1869.¹⁵ And, in harmony with the Whig preoccupation with national political union, he recommended the use of the Prayer Book as the great hope of national religious union. The task of Episcopalians, argued Cummins, ought to be "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."¹⁶ Just as "this union of states" was "blended into one country, all bearing one name, all sharing in common glory," so Cummins saw no reason why a Protestant Episcopacy could not achieve the same republican miracle among the many American denominations and sects.¹⁷

But the slow spread of Anglo-Catholicism in the Episcopal Church through the 1860s forced Cummins to look more closely at his loyalty to his church. There was no way Cummins could square either his Evangelical loyalties or his churchly loyalty to the Prayer Book with the ritualism of the Anglo-Catholics. "Superstition is its name," Cummins concluded, "A religion more of form than of spirit.

15 Cummins to G.T. Bedell, 14 May 1869 in Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins*, 347.

16 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.

17 Cummins, *The Christian, in time of National Peril, Trembling for the Ark of God: A Sermon Delivered on Thanksgiving Day in St. Peter's Church, Baltimore, November 29, 1860* (Baltimore, 1860), 18.

A religion that substitutes penance for penitence - that rends the garments and not the heart."¹⁸ Cummins was particularly fearful that Anglo-Catholicism's claim that the Episcopal Church possessed an exclusive apostolic succession, reserved only to the "catholic" succession of bishops, would alienate forever the broad spectrum of American evangelicalism which Cummins had hoped to unite under the Episcopal Church's banner. "The mightiest barrier today in the way of the reunion of the Protestant Churches," Cummins complained, "is the unchurching dogma which demands the submission of all other Christian bodies to its *jure divino* claim."¹⁹ But underlying these explicitly theological concerns was Cummins's fear that Anglo-Catholicism was a reckless abandonment of republican simplicity in favor of corrupt and luxurious consumption. This is "a luxurious age," Cummins warned, "an age that seeks to gratify the eye by elaborate ornament." That "same spirit craves a more ornate & showy ritual," and gaudy vestments and ceremonial was precisely what Anglo-Catholicism dealt in.²⁰

It took some time, however, before this realization drove Cummins to ecclesiastical battle. Cummins was by temperament a reconciler, a skill which he demonstrated on a national level at the Episcopal General Convention of 1865. The dioceses of the Confederate States had severed their connections with the General Convention after the outbreak of the Civil War, but with the end of the war, they pressed for reunion. Although he had deplored the southern secession and supported the northern war effort, it was Cummins who offered the resolution which welcomed the former Confederate dioceses back into the Church without penalty or punishment.²¹ The ensuing debate over his resolution was

18 Cummins, "Worship in Spirit and in Truth," in *Sermons By Bishop Cummins*, 60.

19 Cummins, "The True Unity of Christ's People - Many Folds but One Flock," in *ibid.*, 9-10.

20 Cummins, "The Simplicity that is in Christ," in sermon manuscript book.

21 *Journal of the Proceedings of the Bishops, Clergy, and Laity of the Protestant Episcopal Church . . . Assembled in a General Convention held in St. Andrew's Church, in the City of Philadelphia . . . in the Year of Our Lord 1865 (Boston, 1865)*, 38.



George David Cummins in 1875

Cummins's greatest moment, and he defended himself with a fiery eloquence which not only won the day for his motion but also won the admiration of the southern delegates. That admiration was not forgotten nine months later when Cummins was nominated for the assistant bishopric of Kentucky, and on 15 November 1866 Cummins was consecrated amid all the pomp that Louisville could summon.

The Episcopal diocese of Kentucky comprised only thirty-five parishes and missions and about 2400 communicants, with twenty-four full-time clergy in parochial or mission work.²² In terms of churchmanship, it leaned a fair way towards the old High

²² Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins*, 373.

Church party, though not without an important Evangelical presence; there was as yet no noticeable Anglo-Catholic faction. The Bishop of Kentucky, Benjamin Bosworth Smith, was an Evangelical, "a man of peace, gentle, tolerant, forbearing," who had been elected Kentucky's first bishop as long ago as 1832.²³ Smith had no more love for Anglo-Catholic ritual than Cummins, but he was enfeebled by age and his health was becoming unreliable (as it was, Benjamin Leacock remembered him as "always weak" and "indecisive").²⁴ Cummins's election as Smith's assistant was all the happier for the peace of the diocese because Cummins had actually been a compromise candidate, elected on the fourth ballot as the candidate least offensive to both High Churchmen and Evangelicals.²⁵

But in the spring of 1868, by Cummins's recollection, "a Ritualistic service was introduced for the first time into the Diocese of Kentucky, and the unspeakable trial was placed upon me of being compelled to discharge my official duty in visiting this church and taking part in its services."²⁶ That "unspeakable trial" drove Cummins to public denunciation. At confirmations, cornerstone-layings, and ordinations, Cummins began hammering away publicly at "the assaults" of Anglo-Catholic "superstition . . . as it seeks to defile the Reformed Church of Christ by the revival of medieval corruptions of doctrine and practice."²⁷ But at least through 1868, Cummins remained hopeful that, with the right doses of denunciation, Anglo-Catholicism could somehow be contained. No

23 Henry Codman Potter, *Reminiscences of Bishops and Archbishops* (New York, 1906), 10.

24 Leacock, *Personal Recollections*, 28.

25 Frances Keller Swinford and Rebecca Smith Lee, *The Great Elm Tree: Heritage of the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington* (Lexington: Faith House Press, 1969), 290.

26 Cummins, *Following the Light: A Statement of the Author's Experiences Resulting in a Change of Views Respecting the Prayer-Book of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and of the Reasons for Changing the Direction of Ministerial Labors in the Gospel of Christ* (Philadelphia, 1876), 8; see also Ross A. Foster, "The Origin and Development of the Reformed Episcopal Church in America, 1873-1973" (Ph.D. dissertation, Clarksville School of Theology, 1978), 127.

27 Cummins, *Old and New St. Paul's Church, Louisville: A Sermon Preached at the Re-Opening, September 4, 1873* (Louisville, 1873), 16.

matter what else went wrong, he continued to assure himself that Protestant Evangelicals "can . . . plant ourselves upon the Prayer Book as it is, for thus we can save any movement *Romeward* or *Greekward* by any changes in the Prayer Book."²⁸ Then, sometime before the end of 1868, even that ground sank from under him with the publication of Franklin Rising's *Are There Romantizing Germs in the Prayer Book?* Rising was the secretary of the American Church Missionary Society, and his sensational tract pointed to the usages of the Prayer Book itself as the Trojan horse of the Anglo-Catholics.²⁹ Rising's argument that Anglo-Catholicism arose not from sources outside the Church but from "Romanizing germs" left inside the Prayer Book since the sixteenth century at once explained to Cummins how the Anglo-Catholics had obtained such a hold, and so quickly, on the Protestant Episcopal Church. "I had watched the rise and spread of the Oxford tract movement until it had leavened, to a vast extent, the whole English-American Episcopal Churches," Cummins wrote in 1876, "but I firmly believed that this school was not a growth developing from seeds within the system, but a parasite fastening upon it from without and threatening its very life."³⁰ He could believe that no longer, and from 1868 onwards Cummins gradually swung further and further towards advocating a root-and-branch approach to both the Prayer Book and the canons of the Church.³¹

In the process he began losing friends. At first Cummins had enjoyed broad support from the diocese, including the powerful High-Church rector of Christ Church, Louisville, James Craik. But after 1868 Cummins began claiming exclusive control over appointments to new mission works and promptly began filling them exclusively with young Evangelicals. "Bishop Cummins, they

28 Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins*, 294, 300.

29 Rising, *Are There Romantizing Germs in the Prayer-Book?* (New York, 1868), 6ff; see also Foster, "Origin and Development of the Reformed Episcopal Church," 125 and Warren Platt, "The Reformed Episcopal Church," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 51 (September 1983): 246-47.

30 Cummins, *Following the Light*, 9.

31 *Journal of the Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1873), 41.

say, is stocking the diocese with radicals," warned one Kentucky layperson in December 1869 and "is himself anxious to revolutionize the diocese."³² On 2 January 1869 Craik confronted Cummins and accused him of partiality in his appointments; Cummins replied that he "would appoint the very persons he pleased" and strongly implied that "he was on one side and some of us on the other."³³ Craik accepted Cummins's challenge and moved to tie up the diocese's funding for the missions board. "The assistant Bp. of Ky. is not in good odor here," wrote one Kentucky clergyman to Bishop William Whittingham of Maryland, "His demands touch the pocket idol too much."³⁴ Then in 1872, when Bishop Smith finally retired and moved to Hoboken, New Jersey, the diocesan convention, at the prompting of James Craik, administered an irritant by refusing Smith's resignation as titular bishop and granting him permission to reside outside the diocese - all of which was plainly calculated to keep Cummins from succeeding him as Bishop of Kentucky. As one of the delegates unwisely said in the hearing of Cummins's wife, Alexandrine, "Ritualism would be dead in twenty-four hours if Bishop Cummins be allowed to exercise any power in the diocese."³⁵

It was evident by 1873 that Cummins was growing both more defiant and more desperate and that some sort of schismatic movement could be imminent. The occasion for that break came, ironically, in the midst of one of the most important ecumenical events in nineteenth-century America, the 1873 international convention of the Evangelical Alliance. The Alliance had been organized in London in 1846 by a wide cross-section of English Protestants intent upon "forming a confederation on the basis of the

32 Henry C. Lay to Bishop William Whittingham, 1 December 1869, Maryland Diocesan Archives, Baltimore, Maryland.

33 James Craik to John Cowan and Dr. George Cowan, 4 January 1869, quoted in Swinford and Lee, *The Great Elm Tree*, 300-301.

34 Rev. Ethan Allen to Bishop William Whittingham, 31 December 1869, Maryland Diocesan Archives.

35 *Forty-fourth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Diocese of Kentucky*, 27-28; Swinford and Lee, *The Great Elm Tree*, 310; Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins*, 404, 406.

great Evangelical principles held in common by them, which may afford opportunity to members of the Church of Christ cultivating brotherly love³⁶ Successive conferences in Paris (1856), Berlin (1857), Geneva (1861), and Amsterdam (1867) only grew bigger and better. At the close of the Amsterdam conference, Dr. Ireneus Prime, one of the American delegates, rose and invited the next conference to meet in New York City. And when it finally opened on 2 October 1873 in the cavernous assembly hall of New York City's Young Men's Christian Association, one of the featured speakers, scheduled to address the conference on 8 October on the subject of "Roman and Reformed Doctrines of Justification Contrasted," was the Assistant Bishop of Kentucky, George David Cummins.³⁷

Cummins's address was a fairly conventional summary of Roman Catholic and Protestant definitions of justification, and it was not for the sake of this somewhat pedestrian offering that Cummins caused a sensation. The sensation came later, on the very last day of the convention. In order to give living proof of his commitment to Evangelical unity, Cummins accepted the invitation of Dr. John Hall of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church to preside at the final communion service of the conference on 12 October. In the process of accepting, Cummins made no effort to notify the Episcopal Bishop of New York City, Horatio Potter, that he was about to perform any sacramental acts within Potter's jurisdiction. This was a serious oversight and certain to arouse Potter's ire since Potter was sympathetic to the Anglo-Catholics and had no love for Evangelicals. Only five years before, Potter had administered a humiliating public reprimand to the most prominent Evangelical rector in New York City, Stephen Tyng, Jr., when Potter learned that Tyng had had the temerity to preach in a Methodist church in northern New Jersey without his permission. It was unlikely that

³⁶ James Davis, *Historical Sketch of the Origin and Operations of the Evangelical Alliance* (London, 1874), 4.

³⁷ Cummins's address was reprinted in the convention proceedings, *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, 1874).

he would stand idly by and permit Cummins to invade his jurisdiction for what amounted to an even greater offense.

Cummins, however, was not the immediate target of Potter's wrath. Cummins's participation in the Alliance's closing communion had actually been preceded by a similar participation by the Archbishop of Canterbury's personal representative to the Alliance, the Dean of Canterbury, R. Payne Smith. On 5 October, a week before Cummins's communion at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, Smith had taken part in an ecumenical communion at the opening of the Alliance. One week later, on 13 October (the day after Cummins's communion), the letters column of the *New York Tribune* carried a direct slap at Dean Smith for daring to offer the sacrament to non-Episcopallians on non-Episcopalian territory. The letter was dated 6 October and was not written by Potter but by William George Tozer, a retired colonial bishop from British East Africa, who happened to be vacationing in New York City.³⁸ Tozer was one of the pioneers of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa, "that most Anglo-Catholic of societies," and his letter did not hesitate to complain that it was an egregious "breach of ecclesiastical order" for any "dignitary of the English Church . . . to officiate with ministers of various denominations in a communion service," especially when no one had thought to employ "the English and American Prayer Books" in the service.³⁹

Of course, a wandering bishop from Zanzibar was a highly improbable nominee for passing sentence on American affairs. Tozer's attack on the communion services was so slashing and so immediate that, in short order, the real attention shifted off Tozer and onto Bishop Potter. None of these suspicions were relieved by Potter's explanation of *how* the letter wound up in the hands of the *Tribune* - that it had fallen from Tozer's pocket onto a New York

38 George Herbert Wilson, *The History of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa* (London, 1936), 19, 30; Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 343.

39 "To the Rt. Rev. Dr. Potter, Bishop of New York," *New York Tribune*, 6 October 1873, in Clippings Book No. Four, Philadelphia Theological Seminary Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 23-24.

sidewalk where a *Tribune* reporter happened to pick it up.⁴⁰ To Cummins, who read Tozer's letter that Monday morning, it appeared immediately that there was yet another agenda under the cloak of the retired bishop's signature. Cummins had performed the same "breach of ecclesiastical order" as Dean Smith only the day before, and there was no way he could avoid the conclusion that Tozer had meant to hit him with the same stone. At once Cummins sat down and wrote a feverish reply to Tozer which appeared on Thursday, 16 October in the *Tribune*:

I too am a bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church On last Sunday afternoon, October 12th, I sat at the table of the Lord in the church of the Rev. Dr. John Hall, and partook of the Lord's Supper with him and Rev. Dr. Arnot of Edinburgh, and administered the cup to the elders of Dr. Hall's church. There is nothing in the "ecclesiastical order" or "discipline" of the Church of England, or of the Protestant Episcopal Church in this country, forbidding such an act of intercommunion among Christian people, who are one in faith and love, one in Christ their great head.⁴¹

The publication of Cummins's letter in the *Tribune* brought down a hail of abuse, printed and otherwise, onto Cummins's unrepentant head. "As far as is possible, we gladly draw a veil over the vast number of abusive letters which at that time filled the many columns of the daily papers," Alexandrine Cummins wrote five years later:

Other prominent clergymen of the Church of England had acted in like manner, and nothing was said about it, or at best, only a passing sentence of disapproval; but threatened trial - deposition from the Episcopate - and bitter words were only a part of what he endured for joining fellowship [with] believers around the Table of the Lord.⁴²

40 Benjamin Aycrigg, *Memotr of the Reformed Episcopal Church* (New York, 1880), 57, 100-101.

41 Cummins's reply to Tozer is reprinted in Cummins, *Memotr of George David Cummins*, 412-14; see also Annie Darling Price, *A History of the Formation and Growth of the Reformed Episcopal Church, 1873-1902* (Philadelphia, 1902), 92-93.

42 Cummins, *Memotr of George David Cummins*, 416; and "A Memorable Communion Service," in Leacock, *Personal Recollections*, Appendix, 13.

Nor was she indulging a mild paranoia. Louis Tschiffely, the rector of Grace Church in Louisville (one of the Anglo-Catholic parishes whose services had so galled Cummins during episcopal visits), gave the *Louisville Courier-Journal* his "candid opinion" that it might be necessary to talk of "presenting the Bishop for trial for breaking his consecration vows."⁴³

The savagery of these attacks, levelled at him in the public press, shook Cummins's self-confidence down to its foundations. It is entirely possible that Cummins had already come to the conclusion before the end of October that the only way left open to him was to lead some form of Evangelical secession from the Episcopal Church. What was certain was that his already weakened base of support in Kentucky was fatally compromised. By 10 November Cummins could put off some form of action no longer and sat down to address to Benjamin Bosworth Smith his last and most painful official letter, resigning the office that he had shared with Smith for seven years.⁴⁴ But along with his resignation, Cummins added a mysterious warning that he intended to "transfer my work and office to another sphere of labor." He would cease to be the assistant bishop of Kentucky, but he did not intend to cease being a bishop:

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 only⁴⁵

On 11 November, a day after writing his resignation letter, Cummins gratefully accepted the invitation of a New Jersey

43 Tschiffely, *Louisville Courter-Journal*, 15 November 1873; see also Swinford and Lee, *The Great Elm Tree*, 314.

44 "Louisville Dispatch," in *New York Times*, 15 November 1873, p. 7; and *Philadelphia Inqutrer*, 15 November 1873, p. 1.

45 Cummins's letter is variously reprinted in Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins*, 418-20; in Price, *History of the Reformed Eptscopal Church*, 100-102; in the *Philadelphia Inqutrer*, 17 November 1873, p.8; a formal printed copy of the letter, which may have been the way Cummins actually sent the letter to Smith, is pasted into the Leacock Miscellanies Book, p. 101, Philadelphia Theological Seminary Archives.



*Six of Seven Founders of the Reformed Episcopal Church
Left to Right: Charles Edward Cheney, Mason Gallagher,
William V. Feltwell, Marshall B. Smith,
George David Cummins, and R. H. Bourne*

associate, Marshall Smith (former rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Passaic) and boarded the train over to Passaic for a brief spell away from New York City.⁴⁶ There, in the company of Smith's father-in-law, Colonel Benjamin Aycrigg and another clergyman, Mason Gallagher, Cummins launched his plan for a new Episcopal Church. "We were simply spending together a social afternoon and evening," Aycrigg recalled, but none of them could stay for long off the subject of Cummins's future prospects. "I think that there was no definite beginning on this point, but that it grew imperceptibly," wrote Aycrigg in his *Memoirs*, but in short order it became the topic of consuming interest. It kept them up into the night and resumed

⁴⁶ Mason Gallagher, "Rev. Marshall Smith, D.D.," in *Episcopal Recorder*, 23 September 1882, p. 1.

the next morning after breakfast until at last by 10 o'clock on the morning of 13 November Cummins instructed Marshall Smith, "Take pen and paper and write as I dictate."⁴⁷

The document Cummins dictated to Smith, which became known as the "Call to Organize," announced that:

On Tuesday, the second Day of December, 1873, a meeting will be held in [the Young Men's Christian] Association Hall . . . in the City of New York . . . to organize an Episcopal Church on . . . a basis broad enough to embrace all who hold "the faith once delivered to the saints" as that faith is maintained by the Reformed Churches of Christendom; with no exclusive and unchristian dogmas toward Christian brethren who differ from them in their views of polity and Church order.⁴⁸

Cummins then took the noon train back to New York and in two days had page proofs of the "Call to Organize" back from the printer. On 16 November the final copies of the "Call to Organize" were printed in the form of mail circulars, and the first batch was put into the New York City mail on the morning of 17 November 1873.⁴⁹

The meeting convened as planned on the morning of 2 December 1873, despite rivers of slush from a winter snowstorm.⁵⁰ The rooms and parlors of the Association Hall were packed with clergymen, national newspaper reporters, and a chaos of onlookers.⁵¹ Cummins had no difficulty presenting a conventional Evangelical theological platform (known as the *Declaration of Principles*) and organizing his new secessionist group under a name which he had carefully chosen for its effect - the Reformed Episcopal Church. What is significant in his opening

47 Aycrigg, *Memoirs*, 112-13; see also Price, *History of the Reformed Episcopal Church*, 102-103, 284; and Leacock, *Personal Recollections*, 38.

48 Marshall Smith's handwritten original of the "Call to Organize" is in the Aycrigg Papers, as is a printer's proof of the "Call" with Cummins's pencilled corrections; the text of the "Call" is in Price, *History of the Reformed Episcopal Church*, 126, and Aycrigg, *Memoirs*, 113, and another copy of the printed "Call" is pasted into the Leacock Miscellanies Book, 102

49 Aycrigg, *Memoirs*, 108.

50 *New York Times*, 2 December 1873, p. 5.

51 "The Episcopal Schism," in *New York Tribune*, 3 December 1873, p. 3; "New Religious Movement," in *New York Times*, 3 December 1873, p. 8.

address to the Association Hall meeting was the way in which he chose to clothe his movement, not just in Evangelical theology but in republican rhetoric. "We have not met to destroy," Cummins announced, "but to restore," and the model for this restoration was the Episcopal Church of the early republic - of William White, the founding bishop of the Episcopal Church and the "Revolutionary fathers."⁵²

Ironically, Cummins offered the newly organized church no constitution or canons, and even more curiously, no revised Prayer Book (beyond the hopelessly impractical suggestion that his followers reprint the little-known 1785 "Proposed" Prayer Book, a liturgical artifact from the early days of the Protestant Episcopal Church). As Benjamin Leacock admitted, Cummins was a preacher, a man of "impetuousness," and not an organizer.⁵³ Fortunately for Cummins, there were too many deeply aggrieved Evangelical Episcopallians eager to take refuge under Cummins's wing for his lack of practical leadership to seem like a serious problem - at first. Even if Cummins's leadership seemed hazy, the purposes which this new movement promised to serve were not. The Reformed Episcopal Church would restore the "religion of the Revolutionary patriots" and the simplicity of Evangelical Whiggism which slaveholding Democrats had threatened in the 1850s and which the goatish greed of postbellum America had all but obliterated. The crime of the Episcopal Church (according to Mason Gallagher) was its collaboration with the "feudal" culture of Anglo-Catholicism; the glory of the Reformed Episcopal Church would be the resurrection of the "magnificent work of her great Revolutionary, American founders . . ." and the replacement of the Episcopal Church with a "sufficiently American" reformed Episcopallianism.⁵⁴ And, as if in confirmation of Cummins's

52 *Journal of the First General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, Held in The City of New York, December 2d, 1873* (New York, 1874), 7; "The Cummins Movement," in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 December 1873, p. 1.

53 Leacock, *Personal Recollections*, 49.

54 Gallagher, *An Open Letter to Bishop James S. Johnston, D.D., of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of Western Texas, concerning his address on Cahenslyism*

expectations, a steady stream of Episcopalian refugees swelled the ranks of the Reformed Episcopalians until by the 1890s they were doubling their numbers every five years.

However, within months of the founding of the Reformed Episcopal Church, this influx soon proved as much a bane as a blessing to Cummins's movement. Cummins blithely welcomed into the ranks of the Reformed Episcopalians old-line Evangelicals like Charles Edward Cheney of Christ Church in Chicago. Cheney considered himself "an Episcopalian of the Episcopalians" as well as an Evangelical, and he clearly looked upon the Reformed Episcopal Church as a sanctuary for Episcopalians rather than an experiment in Evangelical ecumenism. But Cummins also welcomed William Rufus Nicholson of Trinity Church in Newark, New Jersey, into the Reformed Episcopal ranks. Unlike Cheney, Nicholson's every instinct was to abandon Episcopalian distinctives and push the Reformed Episcopal Church closer to the model of Protestant fundamentalism. And to make matters worse, Cummins also welcomed nearly anyone else who had a grievance with Episcopal officialdom, including Samuel Fallows, a theological liberal, who hobnobbed equally with Theodore Roosevelt and Shailer Mathews.⁵⁵

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. At length, at the Fourteenth General Council in 1897, Nicholson and the fundamentalists won. The ground on which Nicholson won his

(Philadelphia, 1893), 3-4, 6, 7, 14.

55 On Cheney, see Rodney H. Longmire, "Charles Edward Cheney, Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church" (S.T.M. thesis, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 1965); on Nicholson, see *William Rufus Nicholson: Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1903), and on Nicholson's leadership in the emerging fundamentalist movement, see Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 149-60; on Fallows, see Alice K. Fallows, *Everybody's Bishop: The Life and Times of the Right Reverend Samuel Fallows, D.D.* (New York, 1927).

victory was, oddly enough, vestments - whether Reformed Episcopal clergy should be permitted the conventional but "popish" use of surplice, cassock, and scarf. At Nicholson's urging, the vestments were banned, and the Reformed Episcopalians were thus nailed irrevocably to the "simplicity" of evangelical republicanism.⁵⁶ But by the 1890s, the meaning of republicanism had grown so attenuated that even the republican rhetoric of the Civil War was becoming indecipherable. And so, just at the moment when the Episcopal Evangelicals won their greatest republican victory, they did so for reasons which a new generation, weaned on the post-Civil-War consumer culture, found incomprehensible. After 1897 numerical growth among the Reformed Episcopalians (whose effective parish attendance may have numbered as high as 40,000 in the 1890s) stalled and began a steady and virtually unrelieved decline.⁵⁷

Cummins did not live to witness the paralysis of his movement. As it was, the councils he presided over in 1874 and 1875 were already crackling with tension which he proved utterly unequal to resolving. On top of that, Cummins had assumed responsibility for organizing a new Reformed Episcopal parish in the heart of New York City. That, along with the incessant grind of travel and the strain of carrying the new church on his own shoulders, aggravated symptoms of heart disease, which had been present since his college days, and provoked at least one heart attack in the early spring of 1874. In an effort to lighten these burdens, Cummins left New York City and rented a stone cottage in the Baltimore suburb of Lutherville. But Cummins's burdens could not be relieved even by the country air of Lutherville. In June 1876, after fulfilling an emergency call in Baltimore, Cummins caught a mild cold, and then on 21 June he suffered the first in a new series of heart attacks. He lingered for four days, conscious but in "such suffering . . . as to

56 *Journal of the Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church held in First Church, New York City, Commencing Wednesday, June 9th, and ending Monday, June 14th, 1897* (Philadelphia, 1897), 87-88.

57 William Rufus Nicholson, *The Reformed Episcopal Church: Its Doctrines, Worship, and Work* (Philadelphia, 1881), 11.

require the unremitting services of those around him." By Monday morning 26 June his physician finally gave up hope, and in another hour and a quarter, Cummins was dead.⁵⁸

The failure and decline of the Reformed Episcopalians after Cummins's death and their lapse into a cranky blend of fundamentalism and liturgy have permitted onlookers who are distracted with far bigger movements in nineteenth-century American religion to dismiss them as only an interesting footnote to the theological struggle of liberalism, modernism, and fundamentalism. If those had been the only problems in nineteenth-century religion worth noticing, then that dismissal would be quite justifiable. George David Cummins, after all, showed only the dimmest sense that Darwinian evolution posed a problem to nineteenth-century Christianity. The difficulty with this dismissal is that liberalism and modernism were not the only issues being fought over in nineteenth-century American religion. And even they might be regarded as symptoms rather than causes of the stresses in American religion in the Gilded Age.⁵⁹ It is possible to see in the Reformed Episcopal schism, where liberalism and modernism had no active role to play, that many of the tensions plaguing American religion were emerging from a fundamental cultural struggle caused by the shift from the small-producer economy of the antebellum republic to the full-blown incorporation of the United States into the global market system of the later nineteenth century.⁶⁰

Take, for instance, the furious debate over vestments in the Reformed Episcopal Church in the years leading up to 1897. There

58 Cummins, *Memoir of George David Cummins*, 520, 522; see Leacock Clippings Book, 164-66, in Philadelphia Theological Seminary Archives, and Nicholson, in *Journal of the Proceedings of the Fourth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1876), 24.

59 Ann C. Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5-9, 39-47, 66.

60 James R. Moore, "Theodicy and Society: The Crisis of the Intelligentsia," in R. J. Helmstedter and B. Lightmen, eds., *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 154.

is no discernible connection with any of the fundamentalist-modernist debates of the early twentieth century, yet it consumed the attention of the Reformed Episcopalians in their early councils like no other issue. Looked at from the conventional perspective of the history of American theology, the debate is purely intramural - perhaps even meaningless when compared to the Darwinian controversies. But looked at from the perspective of culture, the contempt of the Reformed Episcopalians for ceremonial reveals a remarkably complex preoccupation with preserving the symbolic structures of "simple" republican religion and keeping the "luxuriousness" of the Gilded Age at bay.⁶¹ Or again the obsession of the early Reformed Episcopalians with the right of private judgement has only the most token connection with the fundamentalist-modernist debate. But if it is looked upon as a cultural construction, then it becomes easier to see it as a powerful weapon in establishing an easy relationship between a Protestant slogan and the tenets of classic eighteenth-century civic republicanism. Cummins's only use for Anglican ritual was theological rather than aesthetic or poetic, and this is a cultural statement; it means that he viewed ritual as possessing only the value of production (for inculcating the correct relationships and ideas) rather than the value of consumption (which is to be affected or to be displayed). Instead of being tangential to the "central" issues of liberalism, modernism, and fundamentalism, it may be that the Reformed Episcopal schism was addressing the cultural issues which underlay the later conflicts of the early twentieth century more directly than Gilded Age historians have been wont to suppose.

What Cummins and the Reformed Episcopalians missed (and this may well have been their downfall) was that the Anglo-Catholics were, in the broadest sense, not the *opponents* of Protestant Evangelicalism (as though they were two incompatibles which could

61 Allen C. Guelzo, "A Test of Identity: The Vestments Controversy in the Reformed Episcopal Church," in *Anglican and Episcopal History* 61 (September 1992): 303-304.

not survive without one killing the other) but *rivals*. Each was seeking, in the uncertain postwar decades of the 1860s and 1870s, to form a community of ideas, and each was laying claim to the true interpretation of American culture. Each advertised itself as an anti-modern movement. The Reformed Episcopalians resisted the tide of modernism by wishing themselves back to the simplicity of Whig republicanism. Anglo-Catholicism offered a much more ambiguous response. On the one hand, it struggled to reassure the faith of troubled Victorians by rejecting, through its medieval posturings and Gothic architecture, the intellectual doubts of Victorian culture. Yet, at the same time, it helped them to embrace that culture in a sumptuous display of status and wealth.

In the end, neither the Evangelicals nor the Anglo-Catholics were successful in halting the Napoleonic retreat of American religion to the margins of American culture. Anglo-Catholicism sought to escape modernism by escaping the trammels of reason. It could not, in the long run, successfully bear the full weight of defending the shrinking place occupied by religion in the Victorian world. But George David Cummins and his Reformed Episcopalians labored under an even heavier liability in that their suspicion of "Romish" garb and vessels set them on a collision course with the liberal culture of affluence. And what was even more befuddling to them, their loyalty to "rational" religion committed them to incessant arguments about the theology of the Prayer Book at just the moment when American churchgoers wanted only to consume its ethos. The very fact that Cummins chose to inaugurate his movement in December 1873, just when the transatlantic capital markets were sliding into the most serious depression they had yet experienced, meant that the markets took their own revenge on Cummins by depriving him of the financial support which his infant movement required.⁶² Cummins's movement did not turn out to be a great movement. But at a time when the last pockets of republican virtue

62 On the impact of the 1873 financial collapse on the establishment of the Reformed Episcopal Church, see Charles Edward Cheney, *Personal Reminiscences of the Founding of the Reformed Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1913), 9.

in America were being overwhelmed by the blandishments of the market economy, Cummins does represent one valiant little last stand for the old republican ideology. In so doing, he gave American Episcopalianism its last chance to prove itself a republican polity.