



An Exceedingly Brief Introduction

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For a more detailed introduction to the Broad Church, please see my book, *The Broad Church: A Biography of a Movement* (New York: Lexington Books, 2003).

What Was It?

The term “Broad Church” appears to have originated in a humorous remark by Arthur Clough at Oxford in the late 1840s and was subsequently introduced into public circulation in an article titled “The Gorham Controversy,” published in the *Edinburgh Review* of July 1850. A. P. Stanley, the author of the article and a friend of Clough’s, noted that the Church “is, by the very conditions of its being, not High, or Low, but Broad.” Three years later, an article on “Church Parties” by W. J. Conybeare, also published in the *Edinburgh*, described the Broad Church as one of three *parties* of the Church of England that, along with the Low and High Church, “have always existed, under different phases, and with more or less of life.”

On the eve of the publication of *Essays and Reviews* (1860), F. D. Maurice remarked, “I do not know well what the Broad Church is. I always took it to be a fiction of Conybeare’s.” Indeed, if it is a “party,” then it is the most incongruous of fictions, but if—as Stanley’s observation suggests—it is a movement of minds that have in common a profound awareness that the unity of the Church is not based upon similitude of opinion but, rather, upon agreement in the universal truths of the Christian faith, then Maurice himself must be accorded a high place of honor in the Broad Church. One of the earliest and best descriptions of the Broad Church as a movement is by the American editor of *Essays and Reviews*, F. H. Hedge, who, in August of 1860, identified the characteristics of the Broad Church as “breadth and freedom of view, and earnest spirit of inquiry and resolute criticism, joined to a reverent regard for ecclesiastical tradition and the common faith of mankind.”

Why Was It?

If the Church is by definition broad, why—one might ask—was it ever thought necessary for there to be a Broad Church movement? First, we should note that the Broad Church was not an organised movement. It did not originate, as did the Methodists in the 1730s or the Tractarians in the 1830s, as a community intent on reform. Perhaps, the very fact that Broad Churchmen are characterised as having “breadth and freedom of view” suggests to us that the movement could never have begun in any way other than as it did—that is, as individual teachers who bravely took up the task to tear down divisive walls of dogma, to act as mediators between partisans, and as defenders of clergy oppressed by partisan rivalry. Second, as Conybeare observed, such Christians have always been a part of the Church of Christ. Their public teaching and actions constitute a movement only when partisanship becomes the order of the day. Only then, when the public expression of broad ideas is accounted for on the grounds of unbelief or a lack of courage in convictions, is the time ripe for the appearance of a Broad Church movement.

Where Was It?

Surely, partisan rivalry is as widespread as organised religion itself. Moreover, no Christian church has been without its group of members noted for their moderation in interpreting their church’s distinctive tenets. How is it, then, that the Broad Church was a movement only of the Church of England?

The answer to this question is to be found in the distinctive *idea* of the Church of England. Its development as a church was nothing less than the development of a polity embracing the nation itself, a nation that was being pulled under by the opposing currents of Trent and Geneva. Not even the wisest men in England, including Cranmer, Jewel, Hooker, and Taylor, could prevent the nation from tearing itself apart, but they established an ecclesiastical constitution and tradition which was sufficiently strong to endure the test of civil war and reunite the strife-wearied nation. The polity of the Church of England demanded *of its members* agreement upon essentials, and *of its teachers* submission upon non-essentials. It provided for liberty and breadth in opinion in order to assure unity in practice. As Dean Stanley stated, “by the very conditions of its being,” the Church of England is neither High nor Low, but Broad.

When Was It?

In a sense, as Conybeare suggested, the Anglican communion has always included members with Broad Church ideas. John Tulloch, in his *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century* (1872), noted that the philosophical and theological issues that attracted the attention of the Cambridge Platonists in the 1640s-60s were “very much the questions still discussed under the name of Broad-Churchism.” It is not too far fetched to say that the Broad Church goes back as far as Erasmus’s days at Cambridge. Even so, as an historical *movement*, what is generally understood as the “Broad Church” is confined to the Victorian period.

Who Was It?

Was the Broad Church movement a clerical movement only, or did it also involve the laity? In other words, were all “Broad Churchmen” *church* men (i.e., clergy) or even church *men* (i.e., privileged)? The answer to this question is—as H. R. Haweis is fond of saying in his book *The Broad Church* (1901)—“Yes and No.” *Yes*, a Broad Churchman is a clergyman, and *No*, the Broad Church movement was not furthered only by clergy. In fact, the movement found its mainspring in the publications of a layman, Samuel T. Coleridge, and increasingly found its voice in the expressions of educated lay members, such as Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and the brothers Macmillan.

Queen Victoria is, perhaps, the only woman of the nineteenth century of whom we can confidently claim that she materially contributed to the advancement of Broad Churchmen. Women novelists and social critics of the Victorian period—such as George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Geraldine Jewsbury, and Florence Nightingale—undoubtedly had an impact upon Anglican thinkers, but their contribution to theological and ecclesiastical discussion was largely indirect and unacknowledged. When their contribution was direct, it is almost by accident that any evidence of it is extant. For example, that Augustus W. Hare preached sermons written by his wife, Maria, when he himself was too busy to compose is known to us by a single passing reference in a private letter that survived and was published after its author’s death. Thus, we are left to imagine the compound influence of mothers, sisters, and daughters upon the Broad Church movement. Even so, though their role was behind the scenes, we would be remiss to lose sight of their contribution.