A Test of Identity: The Vestments Controversy in the Reformed Episcopal Church

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Abstract
The religious culture of Anglicanism has, since the beginning of the 19th century, developed an extraordinarily rich and eclectic texture of liturgical symbol. The fact that symbol and ritual do bear such a weight of meaning for Anglicans suggests, in turn, that the savage conflict of evangelical and anglo-catholic in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the 1840s through the 1870s over vestments, relics, decorations, and even altar flowers, existed on more than the level of bad feelings or party crankiness. As it is, the very savagery of that conflict in those decades, along with its failure to achieve resolution until the evangelicals had actually seceded to form the Reformed Episcopal Church under Bishop George David Cummins, indicates that evangelicals and anglo-catholics were carrying on no small-scale, intramural disagreement. But more than that, the deliberate choice of vestments, chalices, postures, and altars as the evangelicals' chief grounds of contention actually heightens rather than (as some have suggested) trivializes the meaning of the evangelical/anglo-catholic struggle in America. [excerpt]

Keywords
Reformed Episcopal Church, vestments, George David Cummins, religious identity

Disciplines
History | History of Religion | Social History | United States History
of men. By telling the old story in provocative new ways, she clipped strands in the web of patriarchy that had been spun in (and by) her inherited cultural language. It is for this reason that she, and women like her, deserve a larger place in contemporary accounts of the history of feminist ideology.

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Allen C. Guelzo

The religious culture of Anglicanism has, since the beginning of the 19th century, developed an extraordinarily rich and eclectic texture of liturgical symbol. The fact that symbol and ritual do bear such a weight of meaning for Anglicans suggests, in turn, that the savage conflict of evangelical and anglo-catholic in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the 1840s through the 1870s over vestments, relics, decorations, and even altar flowers, existed on more than the level of bad feelings or party crankiness. As it is, the very savagery of that conflict in those decades, along with its failure to achieve resolution until the evangelicals had actually seceded to form the Reformed Episcopal Church under Bishop George David Cummins, indicates that evangelicals and anglo-catholics were carrying on no small-scale, intramural disagreement. But more than that, the deliberate choice of vestments, chalices, postures, and altars as the evangelicals’ chief grounds of contention actually heightens rather than (as some have suggested) trivializes the meaning of the evangelical/anglo-catholic struggle in America.

The evangelical hostility to vestments in particular aligns them with what Daniel Walker Howe has called the “political culture” of pre-industrial republican Whiggery; while by contrast (as Jackson Lears has shown), the anglo-catholic defense of ritual vestments dramatically aligned them with the mass material culture of late Victorian society.¹

Even though the Anglo-Catholics advocated themselves as a medieval, anti-modernist movement, there were (as Lears has demonstrated) numerous such "anti-modern" movements in Victorian culture whose real purpose was, ironically, to accommodate uneasy bourgeois consciences to the frightening new world of industrial capitalism. Ironically, the Reformed Episcopalians, once they had organized and separated themselves from the Episcopal Church under the leadership of Bishop George David Cummins, also found themselves trapped in the nets of symbolism as they struggled to assert their own raison d'être as a movement. The evangelical Episcopalians who founded the Reformed Episcopal Church in 1873 were not sure whether they were supposed to preserve the old evangelical Episcopalians, or to move over toward the newly-nascent forms of Protestant fundamentalism and accommodate themselves to that culture, rather than the Episcopal culture they had left behind. And in typically Episcopal fashion, they chose to subsume that struggle for identity, as they had done in the old church, under the cultural symbolism of dress.

The vestments controversy among the Reformed Episcopalians actually has roots stretching as far back as the English Reformation itself, and a brief review of that ancestry will be useful for understanding how vestments became an issue all over again for Anglicans in the 1800s. Although the beginnings of the English reformation can rather roughly be dated from the late 1530s, when Thomas Cromwell and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer began to introduce the first English-language Protestant services into English use, it was not until 1549, in the first Book of Common Prayer, that any attempt was made to extend the principles of reform to the dress of the newly Protestantized clergy.


Even then, the 1549 specifications were not a very adventurous effort at reform. Not until 1559, when Queen Elizabeth I finally laid down the injunctions which fixed the Church of England as a Protestant and reformed Church, did the medieval vestments really disappear from discussion and the new ecclesiastical legislation make it clear that church dress was to be limited to "the cope in the administration of the Lord's Supper, and the surplice in all other ministrations." In the diocese of London, the standing rule laid down on episcopal visitations was even simpler: "to use only a surplice in the service time." By 1564, the use of the cope had been clearly limited only to "the ministration of the holy communion in cathedral and collegiate churches," while in every other circumstance, the standing rule was "to use no copes but surplices... with a silke hoode in the quyer" for university graduates and "typpets of saracenet." The intent of this form of Anglican dress—surplice, tippet, hood and square (or "Canterbury") cap—was to present a form of clerical dress which was as nearly religiously neutral as possible. However, English puritans from the 1570's onwards balked at the wearing of


"Interpretation and Further Considerations," in Documentary Annals of the Reformed Church of England, ed. Cardwell (Oxford: At the University Press, 1839), volume one, 204; compare also the "Ornaments Rubric" with the parallel specification in 1559 that "all archbishops and bishops, and all other that be called or admitted into vocation ecclesiastical use and wear such seemly habits, garments, and such square caps, as were most commonly and orderly received in the latter year of the reign of King Edward the Sixth," in "Queen Elizabeth's Injunctions Concerning both the Clergy and Laity" in Cardwell, Annals, volume one, 193.


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even these vestments on the grounds that they resembled too much the “popish” past, and it took a good deal of persuasion and sometimes a great deal of coercion to get them to conform. Persuasion, in this case, took the form of two considerations, both of which would have long innings in the vestment controversies of the 19th century. John Whitgift, a Cambridge puritan who later became one of Elizabeth’s archbishops, argued that the attempt to tar the new Anglican vestments with the old Popish brush was absurd; even if it was true that the medieval catalog of vestments had included the surplice or the cap, that proved nothing about the intentions with which Protestant Anglicans were now wearing them. “When they were a sign of the popish priesthood, then were they evil even as the thing was which they signified,” Whitgift wrote, “but now they be tokens and the signs of the ministers of the Word of God which are good, and therefore also they be good.”


Hooker thus transformed the question of vestments from a theological context to the context of political identity. And he made this even clearer when he accused the puritans of opposing the surplice, not from any real convictions about its evil, but because it was merely English, and in their eyes too provincial and home-grown when compared to the prevailing ecclesiastical fashions in the Geneva of John Calvin or the Strasbourg of Martin Bucer. “The greatest matter awhile contended for was the wearing of the cap and surplice,” Hooker wrote in 1590, “by men who . . . now were universally bent even against all orders and laws wherein this Church in unconformable to the platform of Geneva.”

And perhaps in confirmation of Hooker’s suspicious, the overthrow of royal government in the 1640s, and with it the abolition of the Church of England, saw both Anglican usages and Anglican vestments disappear from view together. Ironically, the latitudinarians who came to power in the restored church in the 1680s finished what the puritans began, for the latitudinarians wished to turn their backs on the Hookers and Whig gifts and assimilate themselves to a more “natural” style of dress to match their more “natural” style of religion. To that end, the predominant style of Anglican dress from the 1720s onward was simplistic and largely black. The fashionable clergy of the age of Johnson and Hogarth (and Wesley and Whitefield) preferred the plain cassock and, instead of the surplice, a black don’s gown, open at the front and white bands at the throat. Powdered wigs and tricorn hats replaced the pointed caps, and bishops donned aprons, breeches, gaiters, and shovel hats for all but their formal portraits.

Since American Episcopalianism was planted during this very period of black-gown minimalism, the standard Protestant Episcopal dress from 1789 onwards reflected the same pattern of cassock-and-gown. The earliest surviving portrait of George David Cummins, drawn during his days as rector of Trinity Church, Washington, shows him dressed in cassock and an open-front don’s gown, with a pair of


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On those terms, as Richard Hooker observed, to balk at the use of vestments might actually suggest something rather more sinister in one’s attitudes toward worship. That which inwardly each man should be, the Church outwardly ought to testify. And therefore the duties of our religion which are seen must be such as that affection which is unseen ought to be. Signs must resemble the things they signify. If religion bear the greatest sway in our hearts, our outward religious duties must shew it as far as the Church hath outward ability. To solemn actions of royalty and justice their suitable ornaments are a beauty. Are they only in religion a stain? The wise man, which feared God from his heart, and honoured the service that was done unto him, could not mention so much the garments of holiness but with effectual significant of most singular reverence and love. Were it not better that the love which men bear to God should make the least things that are employed in his service amiable, than that their overscrupulous dislike of so mean a thing as a vestment should from the very service of God withdraw their hearts and affections?

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white preaching bands at the throat. It was, therefore, easy for many of Cummins's contemporaries, who had grown up in the Episcopal church scarcely knowing anything else, to assume that this status quo enjoyed a quasi-official position as the proper dress of American Episcopalians. James A. Latane (rector of Trinity Church, Staunton, Virginia from 1855 till 1870 and St. Matthew's Church, Wheeling, West Virginia from 1870 till 1874, and later a bishop in the Reformed Episcopal Church) recalled, "When I first remember, the surplice was almost unknown in the Diocese of Virginia . . . in few of the Dioceses was it universally worn, and in none, I think, was it used in the pulpit." Even in high-church Connecticut, the surplice "was worn to read the service and then the minister changed it for a black gown to preach his sermon—frequently passing down the whole length of the Church to get to the robing or Vestry-room in the [church] porch."

All this changed with the appearance of the ritualists (the truculent phase of anglo-catholicism was comparatively indifferent to the question of vestments) in England and America in the 1830's and 1840's. In their efforts to restore the public image of the Anglican parson as the successor to the apostles, they revived any and all vestments which would seem to give testimony to their continuity with catholic order. "Come with me to the City of Baltimore," exclaimed one outraged evangelical, "We will enter the Protestant Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin—significant name surely—situated on Orchard Street."

The Rev. Dr. Batterson, of Philadelphia, preaches the sermon, arrayed in a crimson cassock and white surplice, with a doctor's purple band which is fastened with a brooch of diamonds. Ater the reading of the lesson the altar is "censed" by Rev. Mr. Perry, who wears a handsome white cope, upon the back of which is embroidered a beautiful sunburst. After the offertory, clergy and choristers march down the middle aisle, and make the circuit of the church . . . with two acolytes in red surplices and zucchetas; nine little girls dressed in white and wearing long white veils, choristers with banners, acolytes, clergy . . . No comment is necessary upon such a performance as this in a Protestant (!) Church, but . . . it may be interesting to particularly note the color of some of the vestments in this instance, comparing it with the common evangelical interpretation of Revelation xvii, where the same color figures conspicuously.

In the process of achieving this "performance," anglo-catholics began by reviving the most basic step beyond the cassock, which in this case was the surplice. In so doing, the ritualists meant only to use the rectoration of the surplice (which was, after all, the dress of the reformation rather than the middle ages they so adored) as a stepping-stone toward the re-introduction of other, more "catholic," vestments like the alb, chasuble, amice, maniple, and eucharistic stole. But the surplice had been so long out of common use that it was lumped in with all the others as a ritualistic tool, and so the surplice became the object of heated assault by evangelicals. The Earl of Shaftesbury, the prince of evangelical Anglican laypeople in the mid-1800's, articulated what was originally a common evangelical contempt when he told a public meeting in 1850 that "I would rather worship with Lydia on the banks of the river than with a hundred surpliced priests in the gorgeous temple of St. Barnabas."

In time, as the battleground between ritualists and evangelicals in England shifted to eucharistic vestments, the surplice and preaching scarf gradually crept back in as the dress of evangelical Anglicans. But in the United States, evangelical Episcopalians were much less willing to embrace even the surplice. To the extent that ritual encodes cultural meaning, anglo-catholic ritualism in its celebration of silver plate and rich brocades was the perfect mode for representing the arrival of industrial capitalism at its apex of material

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12See the engraving of Cummins in William Stevens Perry, The Episcopate in America: Sketches Biographical and Bibliographical (New York, 1895), and in Alexandrine Cummins, Memoir of George David Cummins, First Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church (Philadelphia: E. Claxton, 1878).


15James M. Gray, The Romemard Drift of the Protestant Episcopal Church (Boston, 1857), 3-4.

16Mayo, History of Ecclesiastical Dress, 103-104.
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comfort and acquisition in the 19th century. The sacred objects of
the anglo-catholics—like Ralph Adams Cram’s Gothic cathedrals—
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ment of Victorian material affluence; and they offered augst con-
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capitalism without requiring august pewholders to repudiate it in
the name of evangelical or whiggish simplicity. 17 By contrast, the
evangelical contempt for “catholic” ceremonial represents more than
mere paranoid anti-Catholic nativism; the obsession with “simplicity”
(which is to say, with the pre-industrial ethic of production rather
than post-industrial consumption) established an easy linkage with
the political culture of republican whiggery—and indeed Episcopan
elsewhere rose and fell almost exactly with the Whig Party. It is
no wonder, on those terms, that the evangelicals (and later on,
the Reformed Episcopalians) hammered away so relentlessly at
the disjuncture between the anglo-catholics and the “religion of
the Revolutionary patriots.” 18 “Is your own communion sufficiently
American” demanded Mason Gallagher, one of the founding clerics
of the Reformed Episcopal Church? He answered his question himself
with sentiments which could have lifted effortlessly from Henry Clay:

"The claim of Divine Right of your Episcopate has no substantial basis,
is cognate to the asserted Divine Right of Kings, and has no proper
place in this land, or age, and is therefore thoroughly unAmerican." 19
Consequently, evangelical Episcopalians looked upon ritual vestments,
not just as creeping Romanism, but as a betrayal of civic republicanism
into the hands of a religious divine right. "In its origin, its history,
and its association, it is to my mind clearly and distinctively a sacrificial
vestment," James A. Latane declared. When evangelicals like Latane
withdrew from the Episcopal Church to form the Reformed Episcopal
Church, it could only be a matter of time before some Reformed
Episcopalians began to call for the canonical prohibition of not only
the surplice, but even the episcopal rochet and chimere. 20

That call actually came within a day of the founding of the
Reformed Episcopal Church on December 2, 1873, and from no one
less than George David Cummins, the founding bishop of the
Reformed Episcopalians. 21 On December 3, 1873 when Cummins
met for the first time with the newly-designated executive committee
of the Reformed Episcopal Church, one of the first suggestions he
made was to lay aside his rochet and chimere and revert to the use of

17Lears, No Place of Grace, 30ff.
18Invoking the “revolutionary Patriots” was one of Cummins’s most well-worked devices,
since it helped demonstrate the cultural distance which separated the Anglo-Catholics from
the civic republican tradition which the Whigs and the Evangelicals together promoted. During
his career in both the Episcopal Church and the Reformed Episcopal Church, Cummins
stuck many of the usual Whig postures on black colonization, progress, and above all, on
national reconciliation, since his most celebrated moment in the history of the Episcopal
Church (apart from leaving it) was his motion on the floor of the 1865 General Convention
to receive the delegates of the Confederate Episcopal dioceses back into communion with
the national church (see Journal of the Proceedings of the Bishops, Clergy, and Laymen 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, 38). For Cummins’s invocation of
Whig political culture and the “revolutionary Patriots” motif against the Anglo-Catholics, see
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: John
D. Toy, 1860); Cummins’s “Address” in the Journal of the First General Council of the Reformed
Episcopal Church, Held in the City of New York, December 2nd, 1873 (New York: Edward
O. Jenkins, 1874), and the text of Cummins sermon to a meeting in Peoria, Illinois, in
December, 1873, as preserved in the Leacock Miscellany Book [112], Archives of the
Reformed Episcopal Church, Philadelphia Theological Seminary.

19Mason Gallagher, An Open Letter to Bishop James S. Johnston, D.D., of the Protestant
Episcopal Diocese of Western Texas, concerning his address on Caledonianism (Philadelphia:
James M. Armstrong, 1893), 3-4, 6, 7, 14; Henry Clay, although born the son of a Baptist
preacher, was baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church by the Evangelical bishop of
Kentucky, Benjamin Bosworth Smith, who was also Cummins’s immediate ecclesiastical
superior when Cummins was assistant bishop of Kentucky in 1870 (see Robert V. Remini,

20Latane, Plea for Settlement, 4.

21The most useful, but unfortunately far from thorough, accounts of the founding of the
Reformed Episcopal Church can be found in E. Clohesy Chorley, Men and Movements in
the American Episcopal Church (1950) and Raymond F. Albright, A History of the Protestant
Episcopal Church (1964). Another particularly intriguing analysis of the significance of the
Reformed Episcopalians can be found in Paul A. Carter, The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded
Age (1972) and in Carter’s article, “The Reformed Episcopal Schism of 1873: An Ecumenical
Perspective” in HMPEC 33 (September 1964). Warren Platt has also recently dealt with the
Reformed Episcopalians in two essays in HMPEC/Anglican and Episcopal History, "The
Reformed Episcopal Church: The Origins and Early Development of Its Ideological
Expression” (1983) and “Ecumenism and the Reformed Episcopal Church: An Analysis of Its
Development from the late Nineteenth Century Until 1947” (1988). However, neither Carter nor
Platt based their work on Reformed Episcopal archival or manuscript materials, or on much
more than the handful of Reformed Episcopal imprints which achieved large circulation in
the 1880’s and 1890’s.
comfort and acquisition in the 19th century. The sacred objects of the anglo-catholics—like Ralph Adams Cram’s Gothic cathedrals—titillated wealthy urban elites with the dim religious light of romantic awe, even at the same time as these objects were the literal embodiment of Victorian material affluence; and they offered august converts to Episcopalianism the enjoyment of the fruits of industrial capitalism without requiring Augustus pewholders to repudiate it in the name of evangelical or whiggish simplicity. By contrast, the evangelical contempt for “catholic” ceremonial represents more than mere paranoid anti-Catholic nativism; the obsession with “simplicity” (which is to say, with the pre-industrial ethic of production rather than post-industrial consumption) established an easy linkage with the political culture of republican whiggery—and indeed Episcopalian evangelicalism rose and fell almost exactly with the Whig Party. It is no wonder, on those terms, that the evangelicals (and later on, the Reformed Episcopalians) hammered away so relentlessly at the disjuncture between the anglo-catholics and the “religion of the Revolutionary patriots.” Is your own communion sufficiently American demanded Mason Gallagher, one of the founding clergy of the Reformed Episcopal Church? He answered his question himself with sentiments which could have lifted effortlessly from Henry Clay:

“The claim of Divine Right of your Episcopate has no substantial basis, is cognate to the asserted Divine Right of Kings, and has no proper place in this land, or age, and is therefore thoroughly unAmerican.” Consequently, evangelical Episcopalian looked upon ritual vestments, not just as creeping Romanism, but as a betrayal of civic republican into the hands of a religious divine right. “In its origin, its history, and its association, it is to my mind clearly and distinctively a sacrificial vestment,” James A. Latane declared. When evangelicals like Latane withdrew from the Episcopal Church to form the Reformed Episcopal Church, it could only be a matter of time before some Reformed Episcopalians began to call for the canonical prohibition of not only the surplice, but even the episcopal rochet and chimeres.

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19Mason Gallagher, An Open Letter to Bishop James S. Johnston, D.D., of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of Western Texas, concerning his address on Cenesthesia (Philadelphia: James M. Armstrong, 1893), 3-4, 6, 7, 14; Henry Clay, although born the son of a Baptist preacher, was baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church by the Evangelical bishop of Kentucky; Benjamin Bosworth Smith, who was also Cummins’s immediate ecclesiastical superior when Cummins was assistant bishop of Kentucky in 1888 (see Robert V. Remini, Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union, New York: Norton, 1991, 696).

20Latane, Plea for Settlement, 4.

21The most useful, but unfortunately far from thorough, accounts of the founding of the Reformed Episcopal Church can be found in E. Clowes Chorley, Men and Movements in the American Episcopal Church (1950) and Raymond F. Albright, A History of the Protestant Episcopal Church (1964). Another particularly intriguing analysis of the significance of the Reformed Episcopalians can be found in Paul A. Carter, The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age (1972) and in Carter’s article, “The Reformed Episcopal Schism of 1873: An Ecumenical Perspective” in HMPEC 33 (September 1964). Warren Platt has also recently dealt with the Reformed Episcopalians in two essays in HMPEC/ Anglican and Episcopal History, “The Reformed Episcopal Church: The Origins and Early Development of Its Ideological Expression” (1983) and “Ecumenism and the Reformed Episcopal Church: An Analysis of Its Development from the late Nineteenth Century Until 1947” (1988). However, neither Carter nor Platt based their work on Reformed Episcopal archival or manuscript materials, or on much more than the handful of Reformed Episcopal imprints which achieved large circulation in the 1880’s and 1890’s.
cassock and gown. Benjamin Leacock, one of Cummins’s associates, remembered that

the subject of using vestments, other than the black gown, was brought up by the Bishop. He had previously spoken to me on the subject of the episcopal robes, and had expressed his decided disapprobation of their use. He now asked the opinion of the Committee. One after another gave his opinion, and the judgment was unanimous against the use of the robes. The Bishop expressed himself as greatly satisfied with the result. He gave it as his opinion, that the use of these robes had a most unspiritualizing influence upon their wearers—that their effect was to separate and make them conspicuous, and thus to engender self-importance, pride, and arrogancy.

It is worth noting, however, that Cummins’s decision was far from a typically “puritan” reaction: it was based on the perceived inadvisability of wearing rochet and chimere, rather than on doctrinal principle. He did not imply, as Leacock wished he had, that the episcopal vestments were “sacerdotal” in nature or symbolism. And Cummins’s personal indifference to the question was demonstrated a week later as Cummins was about to depart for Chicago to consecrate Charles Edward Cheney as the second bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church.

Cheney was the rector of Christ Church, Chicago, and the center of one of the great evangelical cause célèbres of the 1860’s and 1870’s. Cheney had been deposed from the Episcopalian priesthood in 1871, ostensibly for deleting the declaration of “regeneration” from the baptismal office; but his deposition was as much a punishment for being an evangelical thorn in the side of Henry John Whitehouse, the bishop of Illinois, as for committing a breach of prayerbook order. As a product of the upper-crust diocese of Western New York, Cheney continued to wear his cassock, surplice, and scarf, even on the day in 1871 when Whitehouse deposed him from the priesthood, and

Christ Church loyally lined up behind Cheney and refused to dismiss him as rector, he continued to wear his vestments as one way of demonstrating that he was still upholding the principles of the Episcopal Church as he had always known them. Cheney was fully as much an evangelical as any of the evangelical refugees who formed the Reformed Episcopal Church, and fully as much an old-style New York Whig (part of his conflict with Bishop Whitehouse arose from Whitehouse’s Copperhead sympathies during the Civil War). But in Cheney’s case, the use of surplice, cassock, and stole was his notion of simplicity; and to have cast the vestments aside would, Cheney feared, have been tantamount to conceding the truth of Whitehouse’s attack on him and conceding that he was no Episcopalian. When Cheney learned of Cummins’s intention to dispose of his robes (Cummins had, in fact, already given the bulky rochet and chimere, which in Victorian fashion were sewn together as a single garment, to his wife to take apart) and perform the consecration in cassock and gown, he anxiously cabled Cummins. “Bring your robes with you.” Cummins cabled back, “They are taken to pieces.” Cheney replied just as quickly, “Bring them as they are,” for as Cheney explained later,

By donning the distinctive habit of a bishop, [Cummins] would proclaim that he had not merely “transferred his work and office to another sphere,” but had inaugurated a church that in outward things was widely different from the usages of the Evangelical Episcopalians whom he had claimed that he and we represented. So deep and strong was the sentiment that it threatened a schism in my own parish. Cummins had proposed to abandon the rochet and chimere to avoid having a bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church look, over mighty; on the other hand, he had never intended, by that action to make Reformed Episcopal bishops seem like anything less than bishops, and he was alarmed that the absence of the robes might somehow sabotage Cheney’s consecration. “Bishop Cummins informed us that Mr. Cheney was very desirous that he should wear his robes,” Leacock remembered, “His reasons were that [Cheney’s]

22Cummins appears to have used his rochet and chimere, which he received at his consecration in 1866, only sparingly in Kentucky (see Frances Keller Swinford and Rebecca Smith Lee, The Great Elm Tree: Heritage of the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington, Lexington, KY: Faith House Press, 1969, 311).

23Leacock, “Personal Recollection of the Reformed Episcopal Church,” typescript copy, 55, in Archives of the Reformed Episcopal Church, Philadelphia Theological Seminary.

24Cheney, The Surplice and the Bishop’s Robes (n.p., 1895), 16, in Archives of the Reformed Episcopal Church, Philadelphia Theological Seminary.
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There were others, however, who would have been only too happy to have buried robes, chimeres, and surplices once and for all with Cummins. After Cummins's sudden death in 1876, the Reformed Episcopalians quickly thrashed themselves into a protracted civil war between those who believed that the purposes of evangelical reform had been satisfied simply by the organization of the Reformed Episcopal Church (and who, like Cheney, sought to maintain as much as possible of their old Episcopal identity) and those who looked upon the organizing of the Reformed Episcopal Church as merely the beginning of reform. The leaders of this second group included William Rufus Nicholson (the former rector of St. Paul's Church, Boston, who was already developing into one of the first doyens of American fundamentalism), Benjamin Leacock, and James Latane. Nicholson, for instance, pressed for radical revisions in the prayerbook, such as a "Dedication of Infants" service to supplement infant baptism and the elimination of the petition and take not thy Holy Spirit from us (which flew in the face of Nicholson's attachment to dispensationalism, a popular fundamentalist form of eschatology which taught that the Holy Spirit could not be "taken" from Christians "in this age"). And hardly had death taken Cummins off the scene when the contention between Cheney, on the one hand and Nicholson, Latane, and Leacock on the other, turned to the business of vestments, both as a trial of strength and as a means of settling the identity and purpose of the Reformed Episcopal Church.

Benjamin Leacock had never made any secret to Bishop Cummins of his dislike for episcopal vestments, nor of his conviction that the surplice was a badge of the episcopal identity he hoped would be suppressed in order to allow the Reformed Episcopalians to become one with the background of American Protestantism. The surplice, explained Leacock,

draws a line of very decided and offensive demarcation between ourselves and the Protestant bodies about us. Offer the ministers of the different bodies what else we will, and there is at once sympathy and affiliation. Show them our Articles and they approve of them; hand them our Declaration of Principles, and they will thank God for the vindication of His truth: give them the Prayer Book, and they will use it with satisfaction; ask them to put on the black gown, and they do without hesitation; but offer them the episcopal robes, and the same must be said of the surplice, and they will fling them from them with scorn and would to God our Church had done so at the first.

But this kind of argument, when stripped of its rhetorical flourishes, was really urging Reformed Episcopalians to re-construct rather than reform their ecclesiastical identity, and if it was put as nakedly as Leacock did in his Personal Recollections, it would frighten off more Episcopalians than it would attract. For that reason, Leacock—aided by William Rufus Nicholson and James A. Latane—sought to persuade Reformed Episcopalians to ban the surplice from the Reformed Episcopal Church, not because it was too Episcopalian, but because

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28Alexandrine Cummins, Memoir of George David Cummins, 262.
29Journal of the Proceedings of the Fourth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, held in Emmanuel Church, Ottawa, Canada, Commencing Wednesday, July 12, and ending Monday, July 17, 1876 (Philadelphia: James A. Moore, 1876), 34, 68, 70-71.
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[The ritualists'] errors had begun to exert their pernicious influence on the Church. Consciously or unconsciously, the evil leaven was working. The result was ritualism. Very simple, very innocent at first. Flowers, glories, postures, chanting, waferbread, surplises, that was all. But doctrine was back of it. It always has been so. We hide our eyes to the fact but history is against us.31

Others, like Nicholson and Latane, were even less indirect. For Nicholson, the surplice was not merely associated with ritualism—it embodied ritualism, and was “the sacerdotal garment.” “If anything has ever been established in the settled regard of the people,” wrote Charles W. Quick, the editor of the *Episcopal Recorder*, “it is this, that the surplice, whenever and wherever seen, indicates the claim and discharge of sacerdotal functions, on the part of the person wearing it.”32

But the issue was by no means “settled” in the minds of Reformed Episcopalians as Quick wanted to believe. In addition to Cheney’s argument for the rochet, chimere, surplice, and scarf as the visible proofs of the Reformed Episcopal Church’s continuity with the larger Anglican world, other voices expressed fear for the damage such contention could wreak upon the still-wobbly Reformed Episcopal movement, and they argued that the issue of whether one should wear certain vestments or not was simply indifferent so long as evangelical doctrine was being preached. William Cooper suggested that

The matter in our judgment had better be left to the discretion of individual ministers and congregations. It is at best a nonessential. No worse pastor will, for such a trifle, hazard the peace of his parish.33

One of Cummins’s early lay associates, Colonel Benjamin Aycrigg, dismissed the guilt-by-association rhetoric of Leacock and Nicholson. “As I understand the matter,” Aycrigg wrote in 1876 in reply to Quick, “the Surplice is not ‘a linen rage of popery,’ nor ‘a Babylonish garment’ . . . it does not ‘indicate the claim and discharge of sacerdotal functions,’ except of late years by the Tractarians who, in like manner, have put a ritualistic construction on Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. On the contrary, the Surplice is used exclusively by Protestants.”34

The most eloquent appeal on behalf of the wearers of the surplice came from Peter F. Stevens, in his address to the Twelfth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church in 1889. Stevens, like Aycrigg, had no personal interest in the surplice or bishop’s robes, but he defended the users of them on the grounds of Luther’s old argument, the freedom of the Christian:

What matter whether a garment be white or black, if only Christ is preached, what matter whether a few words more or less, in or out of the Prayer Book be used, if God is worshipped in spirit and in truth, what matter where a man was born if the truth as it is in Jesus be his guide and aim—where Christ is truly preached, and His truth truly rules, there is the Church, and there are our brethren. In the positive prescriptions of our Canons we have uniformity enough to make and mark us one and the same Church; let us preserve unimpaired the liberty granted by those same Canons.35

But arguments from liberty fell on deaf ears when addressed to men like Nicholson, Leacock, and Latane. “We cannot let it alone, because it will not let us alone,” Latane replied, “It is one of a number of badges and symbols of a false system of worship and doctrine which has a wonderful power of propagandism.” And so, for the first quarter-century of the Reformed Episcopal Church’s life, the successive Reformed Episcopal General Councils were increasingly pockmarked by acrimonious debates (which were hurriedly expunged from the

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public record) and personal infighting (much of which went on in the anonymity of cloakrooms and church vestibules).

Cheney naturally became the lightning rod to which most of the antivestment electricity was attracted. In 1874, he was forcibly prevailed upon not to wear his rochet and chimere while preaching the opening sermon at the Second General Council. In 1875, he successfully faced down an attempt to include “vestment” among a list of “direct or symbolic teachings . . . of a sacerdotal character” to be banned by the Reformed Episcopal canons. In July of 1876, he narrowly escaped a resolution of censure from the Fourth General Council for performing confirmations and other episcopal acts in his episcopal robes. Cheney had tried to placate his detractors by voluntarily putting the robes by at William Rufus Nicholson’s consecration as a Reformed Episcopal bishop the previous February, and by giving free rein to his assistants in Chicago to wear what they wished. But nothing Cheney did or did not do satisfied the enemies of the vestments, and at length the question finally exploded into a ferocious public battle in 1897 on the floor of the Fifteenth General Council.

The prelude to the 1897 confrontation occurred during the winter of 1894-1895 in a shower of brilliant polemical fireworks staged by Latane and Cheney on the pages of the Episcopal Recorder. Latane opened his attack on the surplice in the Episcopal Recorder on October 25, 1894, declaring that “there is no Church in Christendom . . . in which the surplice, or white linen vestments, of any kind, are used in the services of the Church, except in Churches where the idea of priest and sacrifice prevail.” As proof of this association, Latane insisted that, since the surplice “was almost unknown” in his experience in Virginia until it was introduced by the anglo-catholics, its introduction could have no other purpose but for it to act as the handmaiden to Romanism. “Its use in this country steadily advanced with the doctrine of a priesthood in the ministry, a sacrifice in the Lord’s Supper, and altars in the churches.” Furthermore, he added, “there is no authority in the Word of God for the use of special vestments of any kind in the worship and service of the Church of Christ”—how could their use have anything other than sinister purposes? Far better for Cheney to surrender the “sacrificial surplice” and meet him on “the common ground of the black gown only.”

Cheney, stung by Latane’s thinly veiled accusation that the use of the surplice was a Trojan horse for ritualism, volleyed back a reply to the Recorder, which appeared on November 15th. In it, Cheney hotly asserted that “the surplice alone was never considered a badge of the priestly office . . . the minister who makes himself a sacrificing priest is never satisfied with that garment as a sign of this sacerdotal claim.” Cheney also appealed to the identity of the Reformed Episcopal Church as an Episcopalian movement. Bishop Cummins “had pledged himself to make this Church the representative of the ‘old and true Protestant Episcopalians’ . . .” Any attempt by Latane to strip away the surplice was also an attempt to strip the Reformed Episcopal Church of its true identity as an Episcopal Church, and of any rationale for its continued existence. “I beg you, my dear brethren of the clergy and laity, to remember that the only ground for our existence as a church lies in the fact that there was a pressing need, not for another Presbyterian Church—not for another Baptist Church—not for another Methodist Church—but for another Protestant Episcopal Church,” Cheney told his synodical council in Chicago in 1884. “The moment we cease to emphasize those peculiarities which make us Episcopalians, that moment we acknowledge that we have no right whatever to exist.” Now, Cheney argued, the introduction of Latane’s black-gown-only proposal would actually be fully as much an “innovation,” in terms of the history of the Episcopal Church, as the vestments introduced for their part by the ritualists. What made one innovation purer than another?

It was now Latane’s turn to be stung. Finding that Cheney had neatly turned the tables of “innovation” on him, Latane rounded on

34Leacock, “Personal Recollections,” 58.
36Latane, Plea for the Settlement, 5.
37Ibid., 7.
38Cheney, The Surplice and the Bishop’s Robes, 7.
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testant Episcopal Church," Cheney told his synodal council in
Chicago in 1884. "The moment we cease to emphasize those
peculiarities which make us Episcopalians, that moment we
acknowledge that we have no right whatever to exist." 41 Now, Cheney
argued, the introduction of Latane's black-gown-only proposal would
actually be fully as much an "innovation," in terms of the history of the
Episcopal Church, as the vestments introduced for their part by the
ritualists. What made one innovation purer than another?

It was now Latane's turn to be stung. Finding that Cheney had
neatly turned the tables of "innovation" on him, Latane rounded on

38 Leacock, "Personal Recollections," 58.


40 Latane, Pole for the Settlement, 5.

41 Cheney, The Surplice and the Bishop's Robes, 7.

42 Cheney, "Loyalty to the Reformed Episcopal Church," in 1884-5 Yearbook and Calendar
   of the Reformed Episcopal Church (Philadelphia: Reformed Episcopal Publication Society,
   1885), 19.
Cheney's argument that the surplice was "the badge of an Episcopal ministry." But, Latane inquired, "of what sort of an Episcopal is it the badge?" And answering, Latane happily conceded that he had none of Cheney's interest in maintaining any ties to the Epsicopal past, since "the surplice is the badge of exactly that form of Episcopacy which the Reformed Episcopal Church has renounced and forsaken." Nor did Latane propose to let Cheney hide behind a plea for "liberty." "Does he not know," Latane wrote angrily, "that the cry of 'Christian liberty' in such a connection is utterly misleading, and that it is just the cry with which every Romanizing priest in the old Protestant Episcopal Church seeks to defend his introduction into that Church of some Romish service or ceremony or symbol of vestment?" On those terms, Latane brazenly inquired, what could be the purpose of Cheney's request "allowing him to wear in his mother's house old Mrs. Roma's petticoats" unless it was to put "old Mrs. Roma ... in charge of the whole establishment."

It was in an atmosphere thick with such flammable remarks that the Fifteenth General Council met in First Church, New York, in June of 1897. It had been assumed from the beginning that this Council would witness the final showdown on the vestments question, and the assumption was not disappointed. In the very first afternoon session on 9 June, a resolution on vestments was introduced by the Presiding Bishop Thomas W. Campbell, bishop of the Canadian Reformed Episcopal synod since 1891. Although Campbell himself disliked the wearing of the surplice, his resolution called for tolerance of the gown, surplice, and scarf, and the use of the rochet for bishops. Latane, however, at once proposed a conflicting resolution, calling for the outright abolition of all but the black gown except—and this was to be a sop thrown to Cheney—in parishes where the old vestments were still being worn. The debate over the resolutions worked its way through committees and over dinner tables for two days, until the council, voting by orders, defeated Campbell's tolerance resolution. Then (with a difference of only six votes among the clergy) the council upheld Latane's abolition resolution.43

Cheney, up till this point, had deliberately taken no part in the debate. But he now rose and asked for the floor to read a general letter to the presiding bishop. What he read aloud was a thundering indictment, not only of the abolition resolution, but indirectly of everything the Reformed Episcopal Church had become in the twenty-one years that had passed since the death of George David Cummins. "The final vote," Cheney declared, "I believe to be a fatal blow at all Christian liberty in the Reformed Episcopal Church." But worse, "it is a deliberate violation of the solemn pledge given by Bishop Cummins to his co-adjutors in the founding of the Church." Thus, Cheney announced, "we ... distinctly depart from the customs of 'the old and true Protestant Episcopalians'" and "say that the 'old paths' ... to which Bishop Cummins declared that we returned, are paths leading directly to Rome." On those grounds, Cheney could not "with good conscience hold any office in the gift of a Council which I am convinced has 'laid the axe at the root' of all Christian liberty in this Church." And as Latane looked on stonily, Cheney submitted his resignation from all Council committees "and from any other place which I may hold by the authority of the General Council."44

The wonder was that Cheney simply didn't leave the Reformed Episcopal Church altogether. But Cheney had put too much into the church to leave it now; and it was a very good question to where, at age sixty-one, he could now expect to go. Instead, he stayed on at Christ Church as a Reformed Episcopal bishop, defiantly wearing his rochet and chimere up until his death in 1916. Others felt no such restraints: Presiding Bishop Campbell left the Reformed Episcopal Church in disgust before the end of the year, as did two of Cheney's assistants, Frederick Walton and William Fairley. But

43Ibid., 96.
44Ibid., 87.

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43See the newspaper reports of these debates, which reported the speeches on the issue of vestments in greater fullness than the Council Journal did: New York Sun, 11 and 12 June, 1887; New York Evening Sun, 11 June 1897; New York Herald, 11 June 1897; New York Main and Express, 11 June 1897; New York Times, 12 June 1897.
44Journal of the Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church held in First Church, New York City, Commencing Wednesday 9 June, and ending Monday, 14 June 1897 (Philadelphia: Reformed Episcopal Publication Society, 1897), 87-88.
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46*Journal of the Proceedings of the Fifteenth General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church held in First Church, New York City, Commencing Wednesday 9 June, and ending Monday, 14 June 1897* (Philadelphia: Reformed Episcopal Publication Society, 1897), 87-88.
worse than the loss of individuals, the 1897 “black-gown” resolution symbolized the closure of the original spirit of the Reformed Episcopal Church, and dealt the public reputation of the Reformed Episcopal Church a blow from which it never fully recovered. “You know how I feel about the new rubrics on candles, altar, etc.” wrote one embittered Reformed Episcopal layman to his bishop in 1930:

In my opinion these things are harmless. They mean nothing to me, but if they would bring people into the churches, I would fill the churches with them. . . . We split our Church in half once on the surplice question which was not worth five minutes consideration. We have never recovered from that catastrophe. 47

Reformed Episcopal membership statistics only too well supported this complaint, as communicant membership in the Church stalled and then faltered after 1897. In 1878, when the first records of communicant membership were gathered by the General Council, the Reformed Episcopal Church had included 5808 communicants (and after only five years of growth in the teeth of an international market depression); by 1889, that figure had almost doubled to 9283 communicants, and in 1894, communicant membership stood at 10,665. But the events of 1897 chilled all further hope of growth. Membership stalled at the 10,000 mark until 1912; it then blipped upwards to just over 11,000 from 1915 till 1921, and then settled into a long, slow slide. 48

The vestments controversy thus heralded the quiet descent of the Reformed Episcopalians into an ecclesiastical conundrum where they would always be too obviously Episcopalian to satisfy most non-Episcopalians and too stridently anti-Episcopal in thought, word, and dress ever to be able to persuade significant numbers of Episcopalians to join it. The Episcopal Recorder admitted as early as 1881 that “it is evident that social position is an important factor in the problem of the growth of the R. E. Churc,” and it became more and more of a


48These statistics are drawn from the reports made by the various synods (dioceses) of the Reformed Episcopal Church to the triennial General Councils of the Reformed Episcopal Church in 1897, 1900, 1903, 1906, 1909, 1912, 1915, 1918, and 1921 (Archives of the Reformed Episcopal Church, Philadelphia Theological Seminary).

problem as the church slipped into an antique brand of declassé Episcopalianism. 49 “Who, in our church, has made a success,” wailed William Russell Collins, one of Cheney’s successors in Chicago, in 1928. “A few in the first generation . . . had a few years of success . . . [but] they all ended in failure, and they were our best educated, most scholarly, most influential and commanding men.” Collins did not lavish any approval on the noisy and aggressive band of fundamentalist boosters whom he saw coming up through the thinning Reformed Episcopal ranks. “Succeeding them, our most relatively successful men have been our crudest, of small education, crude manners, and the vocabulary of the peasantry . . . and among these not a single scholarly man nor a well-trained Episcopalian.” 50 Some of the men who had founded the Reformed Episcopal Church had seen this coming more than thirty years before. “I have my doubts whether our movement now amounts to much, either in England or in this Country,” Marshall B. Smith, one of the founding clergymen of the Reformed Episcopal Church, wrote sadly to Aycrigg. “The radicals have destroyed its symmetry and the whims of the theologians have broken the helm.” 51

Of course, the “radicals” had their own notion of symmetry. Abandoning distinctively Episcopal vestments was a proclamation of the abandonment of a distinctively Episcopal identity, and that, in the minds of Nicholson, Leacock, and Latane, meant that the Reformed Episcopalians were now in a better position to act in ecumenical unity with other evangelical denominations. It also proclaimed the Reformed Episcopal repudiation of a religious culture predicated on material visibility. To the extent that 19th-century evangelicals were prey to a republican whig gnosticism which shunned the use of the visible artifacts of industrial society, the wearing of plain black gowns in plain undecorated churches was a proclamation of loyalty to the old political culture of republicanism. In neither


51Smith to Benjamin Aycrigg, 27 July 1880, in Aycrigg Papers, Archives of the Reformed Episcopal Church.
worse than the loss of individuals, the 1897 "black-gown" resolution symbolized the closure of the original spirit of the Reformed Episcopal Church, and dealt the public reputation of the Reformed Episcopal Church a blow from which it never fully recovered. "You know how I feel about the new rubrics on candles, altar, etc." wrote one embittered Reformed Episcopal layman to his bishop in 1930:

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51 Smith to Benjamin Ayerigg, 27 July 1880, in Ayerigg Papers, Archives of the Reformed Episcopal Church.
case, however, were the Reformed Episcopalians a remarkable success story. The new world of industrial capitalism passed them by; and they became a lower-class version of Episcopalianism, larded with a fundamentalism which proved both unattractive and incompatible with the use of a 16th-century prayerbook. Their various ecumenical endeavors, up through the 1920's, yielded not a single ecumenical accomplishment, while the campaign against vestments wrecked the bridge of memory which connected the Reformed Episcopalians to the Episcopal Church. After 1897 and the cresting of the vestments controversy, the Reformed Episcopal Church, which its founders had looked upon as the great ecumenical, republican and evangelical hope, went into a slow, steady decline which the Reformed Episcopalians have never been able successfully to reverse.

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The Colonial Anglican Episcopate
A Historiographical Review

Frederick V. Mills, Sr.

The subject of a colonial Anglican episcopate for America has received attention from numerous authors in the twentieth century.¹ In this brief and representative overview of the subject, the works of writers both American and British who treat this issue are examined. There are those who view it as a part of the larger framework of the Anglo-American world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From both sides of the Atlantic there are other scholars who examine either the Anglican or the dissenter part of the story. Then there are a few writer who examine this subject within the context of a particular colony or colonies in mainland America. Although the lengths of these treatments vary considerably, the forms used most frequently are the monograph, the biography, the essay, and the chapter-length account, but a few use only paragraph-length statements. The resulting variety of views on this question expressed over a significant period of time by a diverse group of authors adds to the inherent attraction of this topic within the field of early Anglo-American history. It is natural that an examination of the historiography of this subject should come to focus on the question: How important a factor was the controversy over a colonial episcopate, especially between 1763 and 1775, in the coming of the American Revolution?

¹For works on this subject prior to 1900, it is well to begin with William S. Perry's The Episcopate in America (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1895) and William Nelson's The Controversy over the Proposition for an American Episcopate 1757-1774, A Bibliography (Pater-