

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL
INTRODUCTION

The Church of England as it now exists is the most enigmatic and baffling of the national institutions. It is the very embodiment of paradox. Theoretically it is the Church of the English nation; actually its effective membership is claimed by no more than a petty fraction of the citizens. It is a reformed Church, but it refuses fellowship with all other reformed churches, with the partial exception of the Church of Sweden. It is at once the most authoritative, and the least disciplined of all Protestant churches, the proudest in corporate pretension, the feeblest in corporate power. With all this, the Church of England has been illustrated by a great succession of scholars, statesmen, thinkers, pastors, and saints; and, though it can no longer pretend to embrace within its membership the entire community of English Christians, it does still include a larger variety of social and intellectual types than any other denomination in the country. Indeed, it is not excessive to say that it is accepted, for widely differing reasons, by "all sorts and conditions of men", and draws to itself a measure of general respect which is curiously contrasted with the self-belittlement which is not rarely audible within its membership. Alike in its paradoxical aspect, and in its spiritual vitality, the Church of England presents a fascinating problem to the student of Christianity. As

the oldest and most interesting of the national institutions, it appeals irresistibly to the considering English citizen.

The enigmatic character of the modern Church of England is, perhaps, explicable by the conditions under which it has come to be what it is. Race and geography have counted for much; the character of the original conversion and the course of the national history have counted for much more. The influence of individuals and the effect of continental movements have had their place, an important place, in the process. Some consideration of these shaping forces must precede any serviceable study of the existing institution.

The conquerors of Britain in the sixth and seventh centuries of the Christian era were of Teuton stock, and in their new surroundings they preserved with remarkable tenacity many of the social and political features of their homelands. It seems to be probable that the conquered Britons survived far more generally than once was thought, and no doubt they told potently on their conquerors. The modern Englishman has a mixed ancestry. He is a Teuton with a difference.

Whatever effect the racial type of the English may have had on the Christianity which they accepted was emphasized by the fact that the ecclesiastical development proceeded in the comparative freedom from external influences which is implicit in the fact of insularity. It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of this factor in the life of the English people, and in the shaping of their religion. Local peculiarities were able to survive behind the protecting barrier of the seas, which, without that protection, had certainly perished. The very aspect of the country attests the preserving power of insularity. Why does England possess such amazing wealth of parish churches scattered throughout the country in un-walled towns and open villages? It is mainly because the

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island kingdom escaped the ravages of continental warfare, and could in unparalleled degree find security apart from fortifications. Racial individualism, which in Germany hindered the growth of nationality, became, in England, the very principle of national independence. In later times, when the strong repressive domination of the medieval Church had been shattered, this racial individualism took the morbid form of fissiparous sectarianism. This circumstance also left its mark on the Church of England.

The effects of race and habitat on English religion must needs be matters of speculation rather than of assured knowledge, but when we consider the circumstances in which the English people received Christianity, and seek to trace the consequences which followed from them, we enter the well-mapped territory of historical record.

In two respects the Conversion of the English was exceptional. It was the result of missionary efforts directed from abroad: and its process and character have been better recorded than in any comparable instance. The names and achievements of the founders of Christianity in the provinces of the Roman Empire are for the most part unknown. They were not professed evangelists, but men and women who spread their religion incidentally and unconsciously as they "went about their lawful occasions". From time to time they stand out to view in the lurid glare of persecution, but for the most part they only survive in their work. It is not possible to assign precise dates and occasions to the achievements by which the great transition from paganism to Christianity was effected. When the barbarians from beyond the Rhine poured into the Roman provinces, they found themselves everywhere confronted by a strongly organized Christian Church. It was far otherwise with the Conversion of the English. British

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Christianity appears to have had little influence over the pagan invaders. Whether the surviving British population amidst which the victorious English settled was numerous, and whether it was generally Christian, cannot be certainly ascertained. What appears indisputable is, that contact with it left English paganism intact. The dark period which links the age of Gildas with the age of Bede, during which the English established themselves in Britain, cannot have witnessed any effective missionary efforts on the part of the British Church, for, when the curtain rises on the Heptarchy in the pages of Bede's *History*, the English are apparently ignorant of Christianity, and firmly attached to their ancestral paganism. The Christian religion is brought to them by the accredited representatives of foreign churches.

Christianity had a less impeded course in Britain than elsewhere, for it brought the spiritual message to the English with a relatively small admixture of irrelevant attractions. There were in the partially Romanized island comparatively few cities which might in Britain, as in Gaul, have become citadels of Christian civilization in the social confusion of barbarian conquest. The earliest English Church was a rural church. This fact is indicated by the choice of the sees of the bishops. "They were in many cases selected in full agreement with the German instinct of avoiding cities; and planted in villages which served as a nucleus for the later towns."¹

It has been the singular good fortune of the Church of England to have had the record of its foundation preserved by a native writer of outstanding merit. "Alone among the historians of his age", is the judgment of the late Professor E. W. Watson on the Venerable Bede, "he had the statesmanship to know what was of permanent importance, and the skill to record it clearly and fully."²

¹ V. Stubbs, *Constitutional History*, vol. I, ch. vii.

² V. Bede, edited by A. H. Thompson, p. 59, Oxford, 1935.

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No other Church possesses so vivid, trustworthy, and copious a record of its origins. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Race* is enriched by narratives which have taken rank among the choicest treasures of the Christian Church.

Two features of the Conversion must be noted as having affected lastingly the later development of English Christianity—the predominance of Monasticism, and the close connexion with the Roman Papacy.

“The conversion of England”, writes Stubbs, “was accomplished principally, if not wholly, by monks either of the Roman or of the Irish school; and thus the monastic institution was not, as among the earlier converted nations, an innovation which rooted its claims for reverence on the sanctity or asceticism of its professors; it was coeval with Christianity itself; it was the herald of the Gospel to kings and people, and added the right of gratitude to that of religious respect and superstitious awe. Hence the system occupied in England and in the countries converted by English missionaries a position more really honourable and better maintained than elsewhere.”¹

The monkish missionaries came from two churches, widely disparate in discipline and temper. Very early in the history of the newly founded English Church the issue of its religious allegiance had to be determined. Would Ireland or Rome “call the tune” for England? Most happily for the Church of England that issue was decided at the Synod of Whitby (A.D. 664) in favour of Rome. English Christianity was rescued from the spiritual incoherence and ecclesiastical confusion which finally befell the Church of Ireland, and was brought into the main stream of European religious and cultural development as part of the Papal Dominion.

¹ *V. Historical Introductions to the Rolls Series*, by William Stubbs, collected and edited by Arthur Hassall, p. 366.

The predominance of Monasticism held the Church of England very closely to the continent and to the Papacy since it was on the continent that the great Monastic Orders had their governing centres, and since these Orders depended on the Papacy both for their independence of diocesan control and for the maintenance of their domestic discipline. Inevitably they became the mainstays of Papal Power within the nation. When, therefore, the direct political association with the continent was severed by the loss of the overseas dominions of the English monarch; and when, at a later period, the island kingdom entered on the Hundred Years' War with France, the monasteries, by virtue of their close relations with the continent and with the Papacy, were brought into a position of grave practical difficulty. Their interests were no longer identical with those of the nation, and might (as actually happened during the French War) even be apparently antagonistic. During the "Babylonian Captivity" (A.D. 1305–1376) the Popes, living at Avignon, had become almost confessedly the obedient tools of French policy. It followed inevitably that the close connexion of the monasteries with the Papacy seemed to stamp on them an anti-patriotic character. They were in spite of themselves immersed in the odium which attached to the Papacy in English eyes. At the Dissolution in the sixteenth century the English monasteries were unable to offer any considerable or effective resistance to the king because they had long before fallen out of accord with the national feeling which the king embodied. The monks were notoriously subjects of a power with which the nation was in conflict.

Apart from its direct effect on the monasteries, which it exploited and helped to ruin, the influence of the Papacy on the Church in England, throughout the Middle Ages, can hardly be overstated. Rome touched England

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at many points. It was closely interwoven with foreign politics: it affected potently the conflict with the monarchy out of which the parliamentary system was developed: it enhanced, while it resisted, the power of the monarchy; and, finally, it provided the occasion for revolt, and in some sense determined its character. Nor did the revolt make an end of Papal influence, though it revolutionized its method. Among the major forces which have determined the development of the Church of England since the Reformation none can take a greater place than that of the controversy which still continues between the apologists of the Church of England and the protagonists of the ever-waxing pretensions of the Roman Popes. Domestic dissidence and ecclesiastical isolation have been by-products of the controversy with the Papacy.

The key to a right understanding of the modern Church of England lies in a just appreciation of the unique character of the English Reformation. The general movement in Western Christendom which in the sixteenth century transformed the Renaissance into the Reformation throughout a great part of Christendom was coloured by the history of the various communities which together constituted the spiritual dominion of the Roman Popes. No two countries were quite alike. In every one the great experience was locally determined.

In England the monarchy played a decisive part. The royal supremacy is the distinctive feature of the English Establishment. Historically it has a twofold character. On the one hand, it involved the repudiation of external authority, the breach with the Papacy: on the other hand, it secured the subjection of the Church to the State within the nation. Both in its external aspect, as the triumph of national independence, and in its internal aspect, as the effective subordination of the Church to the State, the royal supremacy was deeply rooted in the past.

The pre-Norman English Church was disfigured by many abuses, the consequences of pagan habit, of insularity, and of invasion, but its loyalty to Rome never wavered. The Norman Conquest brought in its train a religious reformation. William the Conqueror had the moral support of the Pope's blessing when he invaded England, and he brought with him, not merely the articulated feudalism of Normandy, but also the ascetic ecclesiasticism of Cluny. Alongside the masterful monarch stood his friend and mentor, the hardly less masterful archbishop. By the combined action of these two remarkable men, William and Lanfranc, the English Church was transformed, its lack of discipline was corrected, its standards of ecclesiastical duty were raised, and it was carried out of its perilous insular individualism into the main stream of European religion. One feature, however, distinguished England from the continent—the strength of the monarchy. Under the strong hand of its kings, England enjoyed a measure of internal order greater than could elsewhere be found. The power of the English monarch made possible an attitude of independence towards the Papacy which was unparalleled, and became part of the national tradition.

The medieval English king was closely held to the Pope, for not only was he, as a member of the Catholic Church, subject to the Vicar of Christ, but also, as a sovereign, he could not wisely ignore the supreme head of the spirituality within his realm, nor leave out of count in his foreign policy so potent an international force as the Papacy. The king's attitude towards the Pope varied with his situation. When his interest coincided with that of the nation, he was defiant: when it conflicted, he was yielding. The financial requirements of both authorities were increasing, for the king's government, as it became better organized and more efficient, was ever more costly; and his wars at frequent intervals compelled him to

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embark on vast extraordinary expenditures, and the Popes, alike as Heads of the Church organizing crusades against infidels and heretics, and despatching missionaries to the pagans, and as local rulers governing, waging war, and pursuing secular policies, required immense revenues. A *modus vivendi* was discovered in this community of financial need. The English hierarchy found itself between the hammer of royal taxation and the anvil of Papal extortion. At the close of the Middle Ages the king's authority over the Church of England was in the temporal sphere effectively supreme, although the claims of the Papacy were formally uncontested, and its financial exactions condoned. The subjection of the national hierarchy was complete. Thus the ground had been prepared in England for the formulation of the royal supremacy and its effective expression by Henry VIII. The English hierarchy was already habituated to subjection before it was called upon officially to accept it. Erastianism had long been the atmosphere of England, when the storm of the Reformation broke on the Church.

Moreover, the Papacy at the end of the fifteenth century had so largely lost authority in Christendom that, when urgent need for the exercise of authority had suddenly emerged, it found itself practically powerless. The Popes had alienated the general conscience of Christendom, and broken up that unity of religious opinion which for so many generations had sustained their authority. The Papacy was at the lowest point of its fortunes when its authority was most directly challenged. In Germany, and throughout Christendom, its prestige had been irreparably damaged by the scandals of the Renaissance Pontiffs. Luther had publicly burned the Pope's bull amid popular enthusiasm in 1520, and the mercenaries of Charles V had horrified Christendom by the sack of Rome in 1527 before Henry VIII wrested

from the reluctant and panic-stricken Convocations the recognition of his supreme headship in 1531. The rapid and easy course of the religious revolution in England is only intelligible when it is seen in the context of European history.

The enfeebled Papacy was confronted in England by a monarchy which had become beyond all precedent powerful. The wealth and influence of the sovereign had been greatly increased by the union of the Houses of York and Lancaster, and by the numerous forfeitures which the Wars of the Roses had occasioned. "In fact treason was more profitable to Henry VII than any other branch of his revenue." The feudal nobility, which had mostly perished, on the stricken fields of civil war or by the headsman's axe, was replaced by a new nobility which possessed neither its social influence nor its hereditary independence. The hierarchy of officials, as well secular as ecclesiastical, was largely composed of the king's personal attendants. The Tudor Court was the centre of the national system in a sense and measure which had never been the case in earlier times. The effect was favourable to the process of religious change.

The ecclesiastics who surrounded the throne of Henry VII and Henry VIII, and sanctioned with their presence and authority the acts of both those monarchs, invested royalty with a spiritual influence in the minds of the people which could not be disintegrated from it, or resumed when the Kings changed their religious principles, and dismissed their spiritual ministers.¹

Thus the royal supremacy was no strange interruption of the normal movement of national history, but the natural outcome of the history itself.

It was, indeed, the distinctive method of the English Reformation to avoid the appearance of innovation, and

¹ V. Brewer, *The Reign of Henry VIII*, I, 69.