

# ENGLISH CHURCH HISTORY

## A HISTORIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

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Since the Angevin era, there have been two main periods of scholarship in the history of the Christian Church in England. Contemporary accounts and those immediately after the events, as documented by the chroniclers, very widely from populist narratives to more stringent examinations of the events complete with evidence to support the conclusions. Hagiography was particularly popular at the time, and continues to this day, allowing a study of history through the life of a single person. After a long gap during which there was little interest in Church history, the nineteenth century saw a rebirth in awareness of the importance of Church history within various contexts. Large, descriptive works detailing the day-to-day lives of monastics and as interested in theology as much as anything have given way to more specialized works concentrating upon the rôle of the Church within society, politics and the nation, and the Church as a source of intellectual and humanist growth. Modern studies have concentrated upon these specializations and for the first time have considered questions such as the rôle of women within the Church. These studies, while not great in number, are asking new questions regarding the Medieval Church and bringing new relevance to the subject.

Arguably the first historians of the Medieval Church in England were the chroniclers. While they varied in methodology, modern scholars can glean a great deal from their works. It is debatable whether or not these scholars would have had access to the works of Herodotus and Thucydides as the texts from these ancient historians were lost to scholars of Western Europe with the fall of Rome and were only beginning to be rediscovered in the period. However, the two techniques employed by these ancients can be seen in the Chroniclers. Some, such as Richard of Devizes and Walter Map, are very much in the style of Herodotus. They are written with a light touch and

are interspersed with retellings of legends and with author commentary. However, both do appear to attempt to accurately record the history of their time and if the modern scholar reads them critically, they can shed a great deal of light onto the subject. Authors such as Roger of Hoveden wrote much more in the style of Thucydides. De Hoveden clearly tried to write as clear and as full an account as possible and included copious amounts of evidence to back up his own words. He was conscious of writing a history and the title of his major work *The Annals, comprising The History of England and of Other Countries of Europe from AD 732 to AD 1201* reflects this emphasis.

From the beginnings of the Church, an important method of recording Church history was the practice of hagiography. Hagiography is the study and analysis of the lives of the Saints and their worship. This practice has continued to this day. In the years following the Angevin period, these saints' lives would be gathered up into collections such as the *Sanctilogium Angliæ* of John of Tynemouth from the fourteenth century, which was revised as *Nova Legenda Angliæ* of John Capgrave in the mid-fifteenth century<sup>1</sup>. To modern scholars, they can be useful as they give insight not only into the theological questions and beliefs of the time, but also into the people most esteemed by the Church. However, these early hagiographies must be read very carefully, and their contents should never be taken at face value, as the authors were not only undoubtedly pious men (or keen to appear pious to the Church authorities) but were writing in a time when the worship of saints was particularly fervent. Similarly, hagiographies from the sixteenth century were written with a distinct purpose in mind: to aid in the

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<sup>1</sup> Delehaye, Hippolyte, "Hagiography", *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2003, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07106b.htm>>

theological and political arguments with the Protestants of the Reformation.

The writing of hagiography in England tapered off after the sixteenth century as the Anglican Church took control and it was not until the nineteenth century that scholars once again looked at the lives of the Saints. Particularly pertinent to Angevin Church history are the hagiographies of Saint Thomas Becket. Descriptions of the life of this English saint were written in the centuries after his death, including one work attributed to Alexander Barclay in 1520<sup>2</sup>, but it was in 1859 that John Moore S.J. wrote the most influential hagiography of Becket<sup>3</sup>. Now there are multiple descriptions and analyses of Becket's life, including one written by Dom David Knowles. Other saints have not been ignored in the regrowth of interest in their lives. For instance, Professor Sir Richard Southern wrote a masterly work on Saint Anselm, and this book shows what can be achieved through studying the saints. Through analysis of the person and of his life and interactions, Southern is able to extrapolate and glean a good deal about the nature of clerical scholarship and intellectual thought in the eleventh century.

In the period between the Protestant Reformation and the latter part of the nineteenth century, there was a lull in the study of the Medieval Church. Many scholars focused instead upon the theological questions of the time, and analyzed theology in relation to philosophical theories about God. Perhaps the thinkers of the Enlightenment believed that such matters were no longer of any interest? Their focus was on the complex interactions between God and man, not between church and state.

One method of writing Church history is to take the comprehensive, descriptive approach. When scholars began to again approach Medieval Church history in the nineteenth century, there was a dearth of information about the period and about the activities and interactions of the Church at the time. Scholars began to work to redress this

lack and produced not only hagiographies but also extensive works on the general state of the Church at the time. This tradition of comprehensiveness continued though to the latter half of the twentieth century and is exemplified by Dom David Knowles' major work *The Monastic Order in England* originally published in 1940 and revised and updated in 1963. David Knowles (1896-1974) was a Benedictine monk, scholar and Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge who, between the early 1920s and 1974 did a great deal to advance scholarship in the field of the Medieval Church in general and monasticism in particular. *The Monastic Order in England* is a very large and very detailed book. It emphasizes the process of monastic expansion into England and the details of the lives of the monks, while providing some idea of place of English monasticism within the context of the Western European church. The book is written in a "history as narrative" style, telling the story of English monasticism and is highly regarded. However, while Dom Knowles makes some cogent points, there is less analysis in this work, just as there tends to be less analysis in other comprehensive or descriptive texts, and sometimes the minutiae overwhelms the core of the meaning.

Much of the study of English Church history has been within the context of general Church history. Certainly Dom Knowles' work discusses the Angevin Church in relation to the wider Catholic Church and in relation to Catholic theology. The English Church in the twelfth century was under similar pressures to the Church in other European nations, and as subject to the authority of the Pope, was ruled by the same power. Sir Richard Southern's work, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* published in 1990 also makes this emphasis although substitutes discussion of theology for analysis of the intellectual power of the Church. Giles Constable's work *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (1996) similarly considers the English Church as part of the greater Church in general, but focuses upon the reformation movement within the Church during the period. However, unlike the comprehensive texts, both

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<sup>2</sup> Cox, Michael, *The Oxford Chronology of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Hurston, Thurbert, "St. Thomas Becket", *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2003, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14676a.htm>>.

Southern and Constable pick their information carefully. They do not include as many fine details, but are far more analytical. Their works have far stronger theses, and the evidence is set forth carefully to back up their suppositions. This shift in emphasis from the Church as a monolith in Knowles to the Church as a dynamic and ever-changing institution as shown in Southern and Constable is significant. Indeed, while remaining within the context of the greater church, these two authors seem to show that the Church was rather a multitude of smaller institutions collected beneath the leadership of one variably powerful head.

Sir Richard Southern also spearheaded a new focus for the study of Church history. While Knowles clearly began from a point of faith and, working under certain assumptions, saw the narrative history of the Church as an end in itself, Southern used study of the Medieval Church as a springboard for his investigation and analysis of the realities of medieval thought, faith and nascent humanism. A professor of medieval history at the University of Oxford in England, Southern is acknowledged by most historians as one of the most important scholars of the Middle Ages. His first work, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953), is a seminal work into the changes, intellectual and political, occurring in early Medieval Europe. Southern's work on the social and intellectual aspects of the medieval church has been continued by scholars such as Janet Burton who, in *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000–1300* focuses upon the Church as a community within a community, and in particular reassesses the rôle of women in the medieval Church.

A further focus for histories of the English Church have been the analysis of the place of the Church in the history and politics of England, and the development of concepts of Englishness. This has proven to be popular with English scholars since the Second World War, as they reassessed the position of England in the world and from whence the nation had arisen. Historians such as Professor Robert Bartlett of St Andrew's University with *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225* (2000) and Richard Mortimer and his work *Angevin England, 1154–1258* (1994) are still considering the rôle the Church had to play in this national birth. Both consider the Church within the framework of the politics of the time, and tend to ignore the theological and internal aspects of Church history.

In the last fifty years there has been a great revival in the study of the English Church in the Medieval period. This revival has been spurred by scholars such as David Knowles and Sir Richard Southern who, despite using different methods and focusing upon different aspects of the Church, have shown that such study can have both modern relevance and can be as rigorously accomplished as any other history. The trend has shifted from a focus upon the minutiae of church life as a unique institution to a conception of the place of the church within the greater society and a specialization upon specific aspects of the Church. This has included more analysis of the rôle of the Church in Medieval society that may bring further insight into the rôle of institutions within the modern world, and as a method of study is particularly satisfying.

## **Bibliography**

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