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Some Chapters in the History of the Early English Church.

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VI.—Monasticism.

THE life of Bede leads naturally enough to a consideration of two tendencies which mark the history of the Western Church during the time that the English nation was being converted and the English Church was being organized ; for to both of these tendencies Bede's life contributed a good deal. From the fifth to the seventh or eighth century Western Christendom had been moving in two directions, which were not altogether unconnected, or, perhaps we should say, towards two points which to a large extent might be reached by travelling along one and the same road : it had been becoming more distinctly monastic in spirit and organization, and it had been steadily developing into a vast monarchy. The influence of Bede told quite decidedly in furthering both these movements. By precept and example he showed how salutary and how happy the monastic life could be ; and by precept and example he taught that the one safe centre of Church order and discipline was Rome. And the two movements aided one another. The Popes supported monasteries, even when they came into conflict with regular ecclesiastical organizations, and the monasteries naturally enough supported the claims of the Popes who favoured them.

It is not difficult to criticize monasticism. There is much in it which is not only contrary to modern ideas of what is good for the individual and for society, but which is at variance with human nature itself. It takes men away from those who have a claim upon their sympathy and services, and it prevents them from fulfilling the ordinary obligations of man to his fellow-men. It directly opposes some of the strongest among the original emotions of human nature—the affection between husband and wife and between parent and child. In the place of these

natural duties and relationships it substitutes a number of artificial duties and relationships, the transgression or neglect of which constitutes equally artificial offences. For the bracing atmosphere of the outside world it substitutes that of a hot-house, which may possibly be more pure, but is certainly more enervating.

All this, and a good deal more, is true. Nevertheless, monasticism must have substantial advantages to set against these real and manifest defects. It is not to be supposed that a system which is so ancient and which still survives, which has arisen in religions of such very different character, and has spread so widely in each of them, and which, in spite of monstrous and notorious failures, has been so persistently re-newed, is unable to show that it answers to some elements in human nature, and can do some real good to mankind. A mode of life that has been tested by such very different kinds of men through so many centuries, and still survives and flourishes, cannot be merely a gigantic blunder. It must offer something that many human beings crave. We may go further than that, and say that, as a matter of fact, it offers to gratify at one and the same time two apparently opposed cravings, one of which is often very powerful, while the other always is so. These two are: aspirations for self-sacrifice and love of self. The monk and the nun were self-sacrificing, for they surrendered all those things which to most of us make life worth living—wealth, rank, fame, the joys of family life, and the inclinations of one's own will. But this manifest and far-reaching self-sacrifice, which often involved long and violent struggles for its accomplishment, was in reality self-seeking. It was often, if not commonly, thoroughly selfish in motive and in aim. The monk and the nun entered the monastery in order to escape distraction and temptation in this life, and in order to secure eternal happiness in the life to come. It is no sufficient answer to this to say that the selfishness that leads people to enter a monastery is not worse than the selfishness which prevails among those who remain outside: religious selfishness is cer-

tainly more subtle, and is probably harder to cure. Selfishness is bad wherever it is exhibited, and it is not easy to balance one kind against another. It is more easy to see that a monk is not necessarily a bad citizen because he retires from the discharge of ordinary social duties. That depends upon the condition of the society from which he retires. In an age in which the selfishness of ordinary men is exhibited in bestial sensualism, pitiless greed, and ruthless oppression of the weak, a striking example of vigorous self-control in all these things is an immense gain to society, and those who set such example may be rendering as great a service as the soldier who fights its battles or the trader who supplies its needs. Granted that the example would be all the more fruitful if it were exhibited in the world outside rather than in the seclusion of the convent, yet it is better that it should be manifested in the convent than not at all. Monks and nuns represent not the highest life that is attainable by human beings, but a life which, among other uses, may at least serve as an emphatic protest against some of the worst features that disfigure and defile the outside world.

But, however we may strike the balance between the merits and demerits of monasticism—whether we regard it as a good thing which human frailty has almost invariably depraved, or as a system which is radically wrong in principle, and only accidentally, under exceptional conditions, produces good results—it must always be reckoned as one of those influences which have taken a leading part in shaping the history of Christianity and of civilization. And it is not of Christian origin. Like Orientalism and Hellenism, it has come in from the outside, and, having been admitted into the Christian Church, and been greatly modified by it, has in turn had a great effect upon Christian thought and organization.

In considering monasticism as we find it in Britain after the conversion of the English, we may pass over the three stages through which it commonly passed elsewhere. These were : the *hermit* period, of solitaries living entirely apart in the desert ; the *laura* period, of hermits' cells grouped round the cell of someone

who had a reputation for special sanctity and spiritual wisdom; and the *monastery* period, in which buildings, with a definite plan in accordance with definite regulations, are substituted for the unorganized group of separate dwellings.[1] The monastic system which existed in Britain before the coming of Augustine and the system which he brought with him from Rome had each of them already reached the third of these periods, and we need not ask when and where and to what extent it had passed through the other two. Our knowledge of both these types of monasticism is very incomplete. From the biographies of different saints we learn a good deal about the one,[2] and from scattered notices in Bede we learn something of both, and he tells us that in his time the period of decline and corruption had already begun. Augustine and his companions had come from a monastery founded by Gregory the Great in Rome, and it is likely enough that the Pope had drawn up the rule under which the monks lived. This is perhaps implied in the letter of his successor, Honorius, to Archbishop Honorius, June, 634 (Bede, *H. E.*, ii. 18), in which he speaks of the Archbishop's love in following *magistri et capitis sui sancti Gregorii regulam*. But we do not know any particulars of this rule, or whether it differed materially from other monastic rules, especially whether it was very different from the Benedictine rule which eventually succeeded it. The Benedictine rule in the end superseded, not only whatever rule Augustine may have brought with him to England, but also the Scottish rule of St. Columba, which was afterwards brought from Iona to various centres in Northumbria and elsewhere. We may believe that, as in the case of the struggle between the rule of Benedict and the rule of Columban on the Continent, the victory of the former was a survival of the fittest.

Authorities are not agreed as to who it was that introduced

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[1] Kirsopp Lake, "The Early Days of Monasticism on Mount Athos," pp. 4 *et seq.*; Lingard, "The Anglo-Saxon Church," i., pp. 147 *et seq.*

[2] See, *e.g.*, "Vitæ Sanctorum Hiberniæ," edited by Charles Plummer, especially vol. i., pp. cxi-cxxix, and "Adamnani Vita S. Columbæ," edited by J. T. Fowler, pp. xxxvi-lvi.

the Benedictine system into England. Some say that this was due to Wilfrid, who had been brought up under the Scottish system at Lindisfarne, but had seen the superiority of the other rule in his travels on the Continent, and especially at Rome. Others attribute it to Benedict Biscop, who travelled to Lyons with Wilfrid in 653, and went on to Rome without him. In his five pilgrimages to the tombs of the Apostles he must often have stayed in Benedictine monasteries. Others, again, attribute the introduction to Augustine himself—an hypothesis which assumes that the monastery on the Cælian from which he came had a rule which was essentially that of Benedict. There is yet another view—that the true Benedictine rule never existed in England at all until the revival of monasticism under Dunstan. The only fact that is of much importance is that it was this rule which ultimately prevailed in England, as on the Continent.

The increase of monasteries had been enormous. It is said that the names of 1,481, founded before A.D. 814, are known. The number of those whose names are not known must be very large. We have some idea of the increase in England from a statement that is made by Bede in his famous letter to Bishop Egbert of York. Having pointed out (§ 7) that there are many villages in out-of-the-way places which for many years have never been visited by a Bishop, he suggested that the King of Northumbria, Ceolwulf, should be asked to co-operate in increasing the number of Bishops. There is, however, this difficulty (§ 9) : that " by means of the foolish donations of former Kings, it is no easy matter to find a vacant place for the foundation of an episcopal see "; for all the suitable places are already in the possession of some monastery or other. Bede therefore advises that the Great Council, with the Archbishop and the King, should decree that one of the monasteries be made an episcopal see ; and he thinks that the monks would consent to this if they were allowed to elect the Bishop either from their own body or from persons in the diocese.[1] If funds should be

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[1] We have an instance of this policy being adopted in the case of the Abbey of St. Martin at Tours. Pope Hadrian I. in 786 granted permission

wanted for the maintenance of the bishopric, then he trusts that the revenues of some of the less satisfactory monasteries may be taken for this purpose.

In connection with this last suggestion, Bede makes known to us a monstrous abuse of the principle of monastic foundations. The abuse became possible through what may be regarded as an evasion of one of the chief rules in monastic discipline. The three primary duties of the monk were obedience, chastity, and poverty. In course of time it was argued that the poverty of the individual did not involve the poverty of the corporation. Although each member of the community was unable to call even a sandal his own, yet the community as a whole might be rich in buildings, lands, and any kind of endowment. Private property was forbidden, but corporate property might be acquired to any extent. This, of course, opened the door to indefinite relaxation of the rigours of monastic discipline, especially when study and teaching and the practice of various arts had taken the place of manual labour as the proper occupation of a monk. But the evils consequent upon the abandonment of the rule of poverty did not end there. A door was opened for the foundation of sham monasteries. Land granted for the foundation of a monastery was secured as the property of the monastery in perpetuity. Persons of influence obtained grants of land on the plea that they were about to found a monastery, bribed the King to grant them a charter (which was confirmed by ecclesiastical and civil authority), and then founded what they called a monastery, but what was really a home for dissolute persons. This abuse, Bede says, was very common; instances of it were frequent—so much so that it was difficult to find land for discharged soldiers and other deserving persons. And the abuse was not confined to one sex : there were convents of sham nuns as well as of sham monks. For this evil there is only one remedy—expulsion from the boundaries of the Church

to the Abbot and brethren to elect a Bishop of their own, who was to have jurisdiction over the territory held by the monastery, and was to be wholly independent of the Metropolitan of Tours. The latter was to have no authority over the priests of the monastery and no right to officiate in it.

by episcopal authority, which, however, is not easy to get, for there is a good deal of episcopal connivance in the matter.[1] Thus, while the property of some of the genuine monasteries in which discipline had become very lax was to be taken for the maintenance of additional bishoprics, the sham monasteries were to be simply abolished, and their lands set free for any good purpose, ecclesiastical or civil. In these suggestions of Bede we have a remarkable anticipation of the treatment of the monastic houses under Henry VIII., as it was planned by Wolsey, rather than as it was carried out by Cromwell.

Bede has been criticized for suggesting that the monastery that was chosen by the Council as an episcopal see should be allowed to elect one of their own monks, or someone in the diocese, to fill the see. Would it not have been better to allow them to elect the best man, wherever he was to be found? No doubt; but we must remember that Bede's object is to anticipate and overcome possible opposition. The monks would be less likely to oppose the erection of an episcopal see in their monas-tery if it was suggested to them that they themselves might fill it—and, indeed, were expected to fill it—with someone who was well known to them. They were not bound to look farther and elect an eminent stranger. Yet Bede may have been prejudiced in the matter. The founder of his own monastery, Benedict Biscop, was very much opposed to the policy of bringing an outsider from one monastic house to rule a house in which he was a stranger. Ceolfrid, before starting on the journey to Rome which he did not live to accomplish, charged the brethren to " choose one of the more efficient of their own number as their father." Such precedents (and they did not stand alone) would seem to Bede to be decisive. But the success of Theodore of Tarsus as Archbishop of Canterbury was a precedent for a more liberal policy. He, however, had the advantages of coming from the East, from the home of the great Apostle of the Gentiles, and of having been consecrated

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[1] This seems to mean that the King was not the only person who took bribes in this nefarious business.

for his difficult post by the Bishop of Rome himself. Bede may have thought that so unique a combination of favourable conditions could not be a precedent for the appointment of an outsider.

These abuses were not the only thing which led to the temporary extinction of the Benedictines in England before the end of the ninth century. Monks were originally laymen who desired to fly from the temptations of the world. They required priests to minister to them. But becoming a monk was a different thing from taking Orders. When, however, monks worked as missionaries, as was the case in England, it was found very advantageous that they should be ordained. This innovation divided monks into two classes, clerics and laymen, and the clerics regarded themselves as superior to the laymen. The proportion of clerics gradually increased, and they became a college of canons separate from the true monks, though continuing to live side by side with them. They were intermediate between the monks and the secular clergy outside. They lived together under rule, and so far were like the monks; but, unlike the monks, and like the secular clergy, they mixed rather freely with the world. In some cases the monastic rule was formally abandoned, and the position of *canonici*[1] was adopted, with the consent of the whole body; and they called themselves monks or canons, just as they pleased. There is little doubt that this revolution took place in England as well as on the Continent, for somewhat later we find Alfred and Dunstan labouring to restore the monastic rule in its integrity.

[1] See Stubbs, "Constitutional History," i., pp. 222 *et seq.* He quotes from the Legatine Councils of A.D. 787: *Ut episcopi diligenti cura provideant quo omnes canonici sui canonice vivant et monachi seu monachæ regulariter conversentur;* and he remarks that this is the first time that the word *canon* occurs in an English document.

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