

How was religious life changed by the monastic movements in the 12th century?

The religious life of the early Middle Ages was divided neatly in two, between the regular and secular forms of clergy. On the latter's side were the whole of the clergy dealing with public spirituality - priests, archdeacons, bishops and archbishops. Their dealings washed over the monastic communities most of the time, just as the monastic communities strived not to involve themselves in society. Monks were literally cloistered away from the world, and consequently the changes in monastic practice which reached England in the first half of the twelfth century had only a thin effect directly on the general religious life of the country

What makes it more difficult to judge the true impact of new monasticism in this period is that almost all the accounts of it were written by monks themselves, and of these monks, most chroniclers were Benedictines. Thus the accounts we have emphasize the importance of the cloister in society as a whole. The idea of monasticism was also not invented in the twelfth century, but was already recognised as forming a distinct part within the wider church structure. By the end of Henry I's reign, successive policies of royal endowment had already created a great number of abbeys in England, many of whom had substantial land-holding.

The rise of the new forms and orders of monasticism in the shape of the houses of Trion and Savigny, the Carthusians and most importantly the Cistercians, served to upset this existing and opulent structure. The black monasteries, who had by the twelfth century become huge land-owning corporations, seemed to have been interwoven into the more secular clergy - they also seemed integrated into the general feudal structure in that they provided knight-service for the king, received tithes and owned monopolies on mills etc. In contrast, the white monks' emphasis on simplicity and purity of life injected added spirituality into the image of monasticism, and as such helped to increase still further the profile of monks as spiritual guides. Certainly, William of Malmesbury - a black monk - spoke of the Cistercians by saying 'To sum up all the things which are or can be said of them, the Cistercians at the present day are models for all monks, a mirror for the diligent, a spur to the indolent.'¹

Clearly these developments did make an impact on the world outside the cloister, such in the middle of the twelfth century there was an enormous increase in the numbers of people who became monks. Cistercian monasteries in particular sprouted at astonishing rates, an example being that of Fountains, which merely 18 years after her own foundation could count twelve daughter-houses, including one as far afield as Norway². There are several possible factors for this, the first being that the disturbances of King Stephen's reign - which coincided with the greatest growth in monastic numbers - forced otherwise ordinary peasants into the cloister since their lands had been destroyed or pillaged. A second is that times of growing economic prosperity and agricultural expansion always lead to some people being unable to cope with the increased demands of the rat-race.³ Yet these are merely two factors in a revival of spirituality across the country, contemporaneous with the arrival of the white monks. The Chronicles of the period are dashed with miraculous occurrences and strange portents, especially the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The phenomenon of William the boy-martyr of Norwich and his almost immediate canonisation shows also the democracy of this spiritual urge. That it was at this moment that the Cistercians arrived cannot have failed to impress the local populations, as described in a narrative on the coming of the Cistercians, which says 'The story spread far and wide that men of

¹ *English Historical Documents* volume 2 no.118

² Knowles *The Monastic Order in England* p.248

³ Mayr-Harting, lecture 6 Nov 1998

outstanding holiness and perfect religion had come from a far land; that they converse with angels in their dwelling; and that by their virtues they had glorified the monastic name. Many therefore were moved to emulate them by joining the company whose hearts had been touched by God.⁴ William of Malmesbury was even able to record that 'In this time began the Cistercian Order, which is now both believed and asserted to be "the surest road to heaven"'⁵

Undoubtedly this process was also helped through secular reasons. Of these, one was the regional concentration of new monasteries primarily on the north of England, where there were very few existing institutions;⁶ a second was the wealth which the Order accumulated from new entrants, which facilitated the foundation of new houses.

Black monks remained at the heart of monastic life, and with their huge estates had contact with a far greater number of people. They also continued to receive great sums in terms of endowments and donations, as well as new members. It is to the black monks that we must chiefly look for the development of medicine and the infirmaries of Benedictine communities were much more widely used than those of their Cistercian counter-parts. Indeed, many Benedictine abbeys became places of pilgrimage, for sick people to visit saints' relics and the infirmaries simultaneously. A prime example of this is Reading abbey, where many sick people came in order to receive the miraculous healing by touching relics, while also receiving indulgences for their pilgrimage. Thus one of the effects of the Benedictines on religious life of this period is in the development of a cult of saints. Thus Henry II's pilgrimages included the tomb of St Edmund at Bury St Edmunds, while Becket's tomb at Canterbury quickly became the most famous English shrine. Benedictine indulgences also relied on the intercession of particular saints, and 'miracles' regularly occurred at their monasteries, which only served to increase the spiritual urges of the masses.

A different form of monasticism to either of these also emerged in the East, in the shape of the fighting orders of the Templars and Hospitallers, who rapidly became extremely popular with the lay nobility of Europe as a whole, since they offered knights the chance to become monks without having to abandon physical activity and talents for mounted warfare. The influence of these Orders on English society at large was not great, however, outside the Crusading community: their temporal power in England increased mostly towards the end of the twelfth century and into the thirteenth.

However, the early twelfth-century fashion of purity amongst regular monks became a victim of its own success. Both Cistercians and Benedictines ran into the problem of popularity, inasmuch that the influx of money, land and personnel into their orders meant that their original principle of isolation was increasingly untenable. Abbeys increasingly became sizeable institutions requiring lay assistance in agriculture and trade. With increasing numbers of lay assistants, the spiritual ideals especially of the white monks were gradually debased, and they especially acquired a reputation for avarice in terms of acquisition of land. The list of benefactions to the abbey of Rievaulx, for example, shows that enormous land went their way, a fact which made them no longer an isolated community, but rather the centre of an extremely important economic unit. The note that 'Walter Engelram gave us 30 acres of land in Heslerton, and pasture for 1000

⁴ *English Historical Documents* vol.2 no.116

⁵ *ibid.* no.118

⁶ Knowles *The Monastic Order in England* p.229: 'If in 1130 a line had been drawn across England from the mouth of the Welland to the estuary of the Mersey, the district to the north of it would have been found to contain only five abbeys, the cathedral priory of Durham and two or three smaller houses.'

sheep.⁷ shows the key importance of monasteries now in the fields of agriculture and the wool trade, quite apart from their religious significance.

The pre-eminence of monks in the secular clergy also saw challenges in the twelfth century. Although the Conquest had seen a succession of Norman monks brought over to hold high positions inside the English church, this trend seemed to be diminishing as the twelfth century wore on. Despite their growing power and prestige, there were only two Cistercians who came to prominence in the secular English church, being Richard abbot of Fountains, companion of the papal legate Alberic of Ostia, and Henry Murdac, archbishop of York. Instead, a growing movement to invest secular clerks appeared, dating back to the reign of Stephen, as John of Salisbury records: 'On the death of Robert, bishop of London, Pope Eugenius ordered the clergy of the city to elect within three months a man honest, learned and adorned with the religious habit. But they...obtained a papal letter in interpretation of this new clause, namely that not only monks and canons-regular, but also those who are commonly called secular clerks might be regarded as *adorned with the religious habit*.'⁸ Since monasteries were losing their monopoly on literacy and scholarship, the necessity to appoint monks as bishops was decreasing. Since clerks were increasingly becoming involved in the king's affairs, and English religious life was not as backward relative to the Continent as it had been in 1066, the need to involve monks in public life was fading. This was at the same time that hostility to monasteries was increasing. The search for papal privileges relieving monasteries of obligations to their diocesans hardly endeared them to the secular Church. Neither did the ruthless expansion of abbatial land at the expense of local parish churches.

In conclusion, the rise of new discipline in the form of the new monastic orders fell away equally quickly. Although monks still served as a spiritual ideal, the abbeys they lived in became too large and too wealthy to permanently mark a change in the way religious life operated in the twelfth century. This was also now an age when becoming a regular monk was now only one of several ways to demonstrate religious convictions. Pilgrimages to holy shrines brought indulgences, as did fighting on Crusade. For younger sons of the upper classes, the new fighting monks in the shape of the Templars and Hospitallers were yet another option to attempt to redeem sins. The religious life of the twelfth century was extremely active, and although there were around 200 abbeys in England by 1200, a growing prejudice against monastic land-practice served to cause a distinct division between monks as spiritual examples, and abbeys as wealthy and arrogant institutions.

⁷ *English Historical Documents* vol.2 no.115

⁸ *English Historical Documents* vol.2 no.114p