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WHEN DID THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND BEGIN?

By David Phillips

I received recently an e-mail from someone in which they stated that the Church of England was begun by Henry VIII. This is quite a common assertion and has even been made in radio interviews to undermine the Church. But regardless of the political point-scoring is it a reasonable assertion and if not when did the Church of England begin?

Earliest Christianity

As the gospel spread through the Roman empire so Christians found their way to the British Isles. However, we know little of this progress and the earliest clear reference to Christianity in these islands is by Tertullian in AD208. When the Diocletian persecutions swept the empire one of those caught up in it was Alban who was famously martyred in AD303. The Church in Britain was able to send three Bishops, plus others, to the Council of Arles called by the Emperor Constantine in AD304. The fact that the British church had such Bishops is worth keeping in mind for some of what follows, particularly in relation to the mission of Augustine. There was clearly a Church in these islands, recognised by the rest of the churches, but we could not really call it the Church of England.

After the Romans

The Romans withdrew their last legions in AD407 but left behind a strong Romano-British culture and Christian Church. The first British theologian of note was Pelagius, who died in AD420 and was described by Jerome as 'a big fat dog from Albion, bloated with Scotch Porridge'. Our Articles of Religion now condemn the heresy of Pelagianism.

During the 5th century, Picts, Jutes, Angles, Saxons and Frisians all settled in Britain. Some had been recruited as mercenaries by the British but then turned on their employers. Others were migrants or would be conquerors. These various tribes posed a serious threat to the British and to the Church because these Anglo-Saxons were pagan. The tide was held back by the victory of the Battle of Badon (attributed by some to Arthur), but it could not last.

A Church destroyed

The later, English, historian, Bede is in no doubt that the British failed:

Among other unspeakable crimes, recorded with sorrow by their own historian Gildas, they added this - that they never preached the Faith to the Saxons who dwelt among them.

This is a telling comment and worth reflecting on for today. The British Church, according to Bede, failed to evangelise those foreigners who settled amongst them. When the Anglo-Saxons gained superiority the British and their faith were driven to the margins.

But Bede, also comments:

But God in his goodness did not utterly abandon the people whom he had chosen, for he remembered them, and sent this nation more worthy preachers of truth to bring them the Faith.

The resulting Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (generally seven) endured from AD500 to AD850, which is as long as from the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 to today.

Augustine of Canterbury

The evangelisation of the English was multi-faceted but one of the key figures was Augustine, first Archbishop of Canterbury. His arrival is a genuine contender for the title of the beginning of the

Church of England. In 1997 the 1400th anniversary of this event was portrayed by many as the start, and the letters from Pope Gregory to Augustine refer to 'the Church of the English'.

However, Augustine should not get all the credit. The British had finally woken up to their failures and had embarked on an evangelistic crusade amongst their neighbours and oppressors. Some historians (David Streater in a previous Cross†Way article cited the Roman writer Montalambert) assert that the main evangelistic work amongst the English was done by Celtic (British) monks. This was going to be significant because Celtic and Roman practices were different. Thus there was not one church, nor one nation, nor one use.

Whitby

The problems over different practices came to a head in Northumbria where the King found that he and his wife celebrated Easter on different days, one having accepted Roman practice and the other British. The King therefore summoned the famous Synod of Whitby to resolve the issues.

A wonderful note on the gentle ecumenical discussions of the Synod can be found in Bede who records the pro-Roman Wilfried saying before his opponents:

'The only people who are stupid enough to disagree with the whole world are these Scots and their obstinate adherents the Picts and Britons, who inhabit only a portion of these two islands in the remote ocean.'

Which rather put them in their place.

The arguments could not be resolved from Scripture, and little attempt was made to do so, therefore both sides appealed to other authority. What apparently impressed the King was the claims of the Roman See for the authority of Peter (an ominous sign of folly to come) and so Northumbria adopted the Roman customs. The nations of Essex and Mercia followed not long afterwards though the British by and large did not and many of their churchmen retreated from Anglo-Saxon lands in the aftermath of the Synod.

In theory at least from Whitby onwards there was one 'use' in the English Church, but not one organization.

Hertford

The next candidate is the Synod of Hertford in AD673. It was Theodore of Tarsus, a reluctant Archbishop sent from Rome who set about uniting the church. He travelled the kingdoms meeting the various Bishops and eventually convened the Synod at which all the Anglo-Saxon Bishops and other leading churchmen were present or represented. The Canons of the Synod are hardly exciting but they did mark the adoption of a standardised canonical system. Theodore was in no doubt that his authority as Archbishop derived from the See of Rome.

It is therefore possible to argue that the Church of England owes its institutional origins to Theodore and Hertford, and still there was not one nation.

England

When did England begin? Again, there appears to be little unanimity on this. We could argue that it was when the Anglo-Saxons won ascendancy, but they remained divided and often quarrelling nations. Egbert (802-839) tried to unite the kingdoms by the sword but it was not really until a common enemy arose that the English united.

The sack of Lindisfarne in 793 announced the next wave of invaders, the Danes. Over the next century they threatened to do to the English what the latter had done to the British. The man who

stopped them is often listed as the first King of England and our only King to be called 'Great' - Alfred. The Norsemen (known to later generations as Vikings) were not utterly defeated (and in time were fully integrated into the mixed stock of the English nation - we even had Danish kings for a while). What Alfred had done was stop the English being wiped out.

Nevertheless, and despite his greatness, Alfred was not really king of all England, that honour goes to Athelstan (AD939) because it was he who, by conquering Northumbria, reigned over what we would recognise as England today.

We could mention the Normans, but their conquest led primarily to Norman rule, the people remained largely English.

Henry

There then passes a long, and very eventful period during which the Church of England continued as a recognisable structure and England pretty much as a single nation.

Thus we come to where we started, Henry VIII. What Henry did was finally break the power of the Bishops of Rome over the English Church. It was a power that had grown and caused no end of conflict over the years. Although Henry's motives were far from laudable by the grace of God it worked for good.

Therefore we could make a case for Henry beginning the Church of England, but it would be a weak case. All it meant was that the Church no longer accepted the rule of a foreign power, its structure did not otherwise change. Indeed the very Act passed, the Act of Supremacy (1537), makes clear reference to the Church of England as an already existing institution:

Albeit the king's Majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England.

In a later reference we read of '*the Church of England, called Anglicans Ecclesia*'.

If we consider Henry the originator then by the same reckoning the Church of England ceased to exist during the reign of Mary and only began again with Elizabeth.

Conclusion

I suppose what we ought to do is hold a phone-in to see what the majority think. However, since we don't want you to inundate the phone lines at Dean Wace House, the next best thing is if I tell you my view. You are free to disagree with it, and no doubt will.

By the time of the Synod of Hertford the English nations were in existence and could be considered, in view of their close ties and despite occasional conflict, to be the land of the English, or Eng-land. This Synod achieved what the earlier Synod of Whitby had failed to do, ensure some degree of unity of organisation and practice. Therefore, albeit tentatively, my vote for the beginning of the Church of England goes to ... the Synod of Hertford, AD673.

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