

THE TRUE AGE OF AUSTERITY

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The true age of austerity in England was the century between 1150 and 1250, when the regular clergy reached maximum numbers. According to Dom David Knowles (1896-1974), who was a monk as well as Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, the total number of men and women who dedicated themselves voluntarily to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience probably reached a total of 17,500 by 1348, at a time when the population of the country as a whole did not exceed three million.¹ These included Black Monks and White, Black Canons and White, Black Friars and Grey, and numerous other minor religious Orders, living in a total of around 700 houses.

Probably the most austere of all the Orders were the Cistercians or White Monks, founded in the early 12th century as a reaction from what they considered to be the laxity displayed by the older Black Monks, or Benedictines (especially those belonging to the Cluniac family). The Cistercians deliberately sought out the more remote and wild places, often in the North of England, as the splendid ruins at Fountains Abbey and Rievaulx in Yorkshire, and Furness Abbey in Cumbria demonstrate. It is interesting that there was something of a North-South divide here, since the largest Black Monk houses were at Canterbury, Gloucester, Westminster, Ely and Reading.

In theory the Black Monks had always followed the Rule of their founder St Benedict (c.480-547); and he had prescribed a strict regime (though originally intended as less severe than the life of the hermit); but in practice, many no longer kept to his Rule. Cluniac monasteries were particularly famous, or notorious, for their magnificence and the elaborate nature of their ceremonies. From their beginning, the Cistercians proposed a return to the letter of St Benedict's Rule, indeed they went beyond it in a number of respects, insisting on strict claustration, a very limited diet and manual labour. Cistercian houses were characterised by having a large number of *conversi* (or lay brothers), who worked as field hands and in various trades, enabling the choir monks to concentrate on prayer and other religious exercises. The family of Cîteaux also had an entirely different form of government from that of Cluny: whereas Cluny was a kind of monarchy, Cîteaux was more like a federation, where power was shared by the abbots of Cîteaux, La Ferté, Pontigny, Clairvaux, and Morimond (all in France).

In the age of austerity the Cistercians supplanted the Cluniacs as the chief religious influence in Roman Catholic Europe, and they enjoyed explosive growth.

¹ This entire article owes much to Knowles's *Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge University Press, 3 vols, 1948-59).

By the year 1152 there were 54 Cistercian houses in England and by the end of the 13th century, there were around 500 in Europe. The growth was chiefly fuelled by new foundations; but was assisted by the adherence of several other Orders which affiliated to Cîteaux, among them the congregations of Savigny and Obazine (1147). Other Orders, like the Premonstratensian Canons and the Gilbertines, took the White Monks as models for their own organisation.

The age of austerity did not last. Indeed it was over so relatively quickly as to make us wonder whether any age of austerity can endure, even if it is voluntarily adopted as a matter of individual conscience, rather than imposed as a matter of political convenience. The truth of this has been obscured, in England, by Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s, which has Protestants and Catholics, and Romantics, too protective of English monasticism ever since. The question, as to whether the monasteries, like the Roman Empire, declined before they fell, or whether they killed off, was still the subject of partisan debate in the early 20th century, in which Cardinal Gasquet (1846-1929) and G.C.Coulton (1858-1947) were vigorous participants.

Knowles's view was that the monastic reputation for austerity, even in the case of the Cistercian monasteries, had been lost by the end of the 13th century; and his view, based as it was on a moderate attitude and a wealth of learning, seems to hold sway even now.

To start with the index of sanctity, in St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Cîteaux had a figure of trans-European fame, a man who preached the Crusade, arbitrated in disputes between rival Popes, helped to found the Order of Templars and was ultimately named as a Doctor of the Church; but there were no more no more monastic saints after him. Saints were now to be found in the wider Church, while in the 14th century the English episcopate was drawn from clergy who had previously been administrators or diplomats. Likewise the monks never had missionary work as one of their goals – contrast St Francis, who tried to convert the Sultan in Egypt, but who was never a monk.

It was not just spirituality that was lacking. Knowles showed that, long before the Protestant Reformation, there was widespread relaxation of the strict rules of monastic existence, amongst Black Monks and White. Significantly, he relied on the records of visitations conducted by men who were friends of the abbeys, concerned to reform them from within. What they found was a common and endemic failure to adhere to the kind of austerity which the founders of the monasteries had expected and hoped would last. Increasingly, monks were allowed a more varied diet, including meat; they were paid wages, in the form of clothes money; spice-money; dividends and customary payments; money for work and services; and they were permitted to wander outside the cloister, while strangers were allowed to come within it. They were also allowed 'recreation', time in which to associate with others, and private rooms within the monastery, where they could entertain guests, sometimes including women.

The decline from austerity is also evident in the 'Constitutions' of Pope Benedict XII (1334-42). Benedict had been a Cistercian, but as Pope he felt obliged to issue new codes for the Black Monks and the Augustinian Canons as well as his own Order; and, when he did, there was 'no question of a return to primitive observance or the letter of the Rule'. He accepted that it was impossible to turn back the tide, and satisfied himself with insisting that standards should be relaxed no further.

Why this decline? In the main it was not due to a shortage of recruits. The monastic population was reduced by around half by the Black Death of 1348; but this was not a terminal blow. Nor was discipline significantly affected by the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) and the resultant dissolution of the so-called 'Alien Priories' (the daughter houses of French monasteries in England) in the reign of Henry V (1413-22). The Great Schism in the Papacy between 1378-1417 did have a temporary effect on discipline within the Cistercian Order; but relations between the English houses and the mother house of Cîteaux were restored in 1409.

The biggest factor was social and economic. Between 1150 and 1350, despite all the external and internal warfare we are so familiar with, the population grew, England became more wealthy and the economy diversified. The 13th century was an age of high-farming, but the English also became major players in the production of wool and woollen cloth in Europe. Though England remained an economic pygmy compared to the city-states of Italy, this growth – to which the monks ironically made an important contribution – was bound to affect monastic life. Like it or not, the monasteries became rich and those in charge had to choose how to spend their income. It was more or less inevitable that they would choose to spend some of it, even a little, on themselves. Economic change also had a specific effect on the Cistercians, because it removed the need for *conversi*. These had almost entirely disappeared by 1400, and this abolished one of the main differences between White Monks and Black.

Only the Carthusians rejected the comfort which increased material wealth seems to have rendered inevitable. They withdrew almost altogether from the World, and even from the cloister, into their individual cells, as can be seen at Mount Grace Priory in Yorkshire; but they were never numerous in England – perhaps 100 monks in half a dozen houses at the time of the Dissolution. The majority of monks chose the path of accommodation.

There was another economic factor at work. It required a great deal of land to found a Benedictine or Cistercian monastery; and by 1200 the supply was drying up. This came at a time when patrons and benefactors were finding other uses for their wealth. The early 13th century saw the foundation of the two main Orders of Friars by St Francis and St Dominic, both of which grew explosively, here and on the Continent. Within a century of their foundation, there were 200 friaries in England, and 5,000 friars: it was far cheaper to found and fund a friary than a monastery, as well as being more fashionable. Moreover, the Friars played a leading role in the new Universities at Oxford and Cambridge, which started to assume their modern

form in the 13th century. The three oldest colleges, University, Balliol and Merton all date from the second half of that period.

The monasteries now ceased to be great centres of learning, as they had been in the age of Bede ((672-735) and St Dunstan (909-998) and as they still arguably were during the 12th century 'Renaissance.' The monks did not ignore the Universities; but their role there was much less important than that played by the Friars. They were students rather than teachers; and throughout the entire Middle Ages, there were only three colleges founded at Oxford on monastic initiative. Only a small minority of monks ever attended; and it was in any event clear that there was insoluble conflict between monastic and academic life. Too often, University life proved a distraction from, rather than an enrichment of, the life of the cloister; and higher education tended to act as a solvent of discipline.

Fashions changed, in spirituality as in church architectures. Very few new monasteries were founded after 1250; but in the 14th century, English benefactors were founding chantries and chantry chapels in large numbers. This coincided with the development and growing popularity of the idea that it was possible to mitigate the pains suffered by the soul in Purgatory, by paying others to offer up intercessory prayers, and to say or sing mass. This was not what monks were primarily there to do. They had been endowed to offer up a ceaseless round of worship for all mankind - in the case of the Cistercians in remote places - whereas chantries were more tailored to individuals, and were often more local. Situated in a parish church or in a cathedral, they could also be established more cheaply.

The charge that late medieval English monasticism was at best 'lukewarm' in spiritual terms is supported by a study of the relatively few men and women who have become known as the English mystics. Richard Rolle (c1290-1349), the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hinton (d. 1396), Dame Julian of Norwich (1342-c1420) and Margery Kempe (c.1373-after 1438) were not monks or nuns - at least not conventional ones. It is also significant that when Henry V, who was entirely orthodox decided to found three new monasteries at Isleworth, Syon and Sheen in the early 15th century, he went abroad to find men and women of a sufficiently austere way of life, seeking assistance from the Bridgettines in Sweden and the Celestines in France. Sheen was admittedly Carthusian; but as we have seen the Carthusians were organised very differently, by this time, from other religious Orders.

The tendency to decline from the high ideals of their founders affected all the religious orders - monks, canons and friars alike. The Franciscan and Dominican Friars were founded in the early decades of the 13th century, but by the late 14th they had already become butts of Chaucer's satire, along with the monks. (*The Canterbury Tales* spares only the humble parish priest). Indeed by this date, there were other more trenchant critics, notably John Wycliffe (c.1320-1384), sometime Master of Balliol College Oxford, who condemned monasticism as a whole on theological grounds. However, he and his Lollard followers played no appreciable part in bringing about its end, since his doctrines were successfully rooted out of Oxford in

the years following his death, and the Lollards ceased to have a voice in respectable society following the crushing of Sir John Oldcastle's revolt in 1414.

In the 15th century there is even more evidence that the vogue for renouncing the world, which had fuelled monastic expansion, had largely passed. Patrons still wanted men with an austere way of life; but they did not especially want men to renounce the world altogether. Intellectually, the world had passed the monasteries by. Able men went into law or became bishops or academics or royal administrators, rather than monks, priors and abbots. The monasteries still had great libraries, but their books were increasingly irrelevant to lay people. They were no longer the only centres of book production; and although some monasteries contained schools, this was the exception and not the rule. An increasingly literate laity, hungry for learning and education for its children, found other places and other ways of satisfying its appetite.

The men who founded the Cistercian monasteries doubtless thought they were building an institution which would last until the next Millennium. Similar illusions have been entertained by Communists, National Socialists and other kinds of religious fundamentalists in our own times; but the truth seems to be that all attempts to build the perfect society are doomed, because mankind is constantly changing. As Heraclitus said 'no man steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man'. Who would lay bets on any age of austerity lasting very long?

Perhaps the most interesting question is why the medieval Church was unable to reform itself, at least in England. Intervention might have come from various internal sources – the abbots, a general chapter of the Order, the Papacy, the episcopate, or the monarchy. Above all, the Cistercians should have been capable of reforming themselves, because in their great days they enjoyed the benefit of a written constitution, the *Carta Caritatis*, originally drawn up by the Englishman St Stephen Harding (d. 1134).

When the time came, all of these mechanisms failed. The abbots were no longer the men their predecessors had been. They lacked distinction and by the late Middle Ages, neither they nor their chapters showed any appetite or aptitude for self-criticism, let alone reform. In fact, they usually wanted to water down any proposals for meaningful change. There is evidence that from time to time, externally appointed visitors of various kinds took their task seriously; but Knowles thought that they were too reluctant to impose effective sanctions (such as the removal of individuals responsible for internal discipline). As for the Papacy, we have seen that Benedict XII was ultimately prepared to accept the decline which he found, in the hope of drawing a line in the sand. In the 15th century the English bishops were more interested and involved in worldly affairs, and less involved in spiritual matters than they had been in the century or two after the Norman Conquest.

Knowles concluded that attempts at reform only really worked when there was a 'great abbot supported by the monarch', with both determined to make a real

change, as in the 1360s when Abbot Thomas de la Mare of St Albans was asked by Edward III to reform around half a dozen Benedictine houses (out of a total of several hundred). This formula could also have worked in the 1420s, when Henry V became concerned about the condition of the monasteries, in particular the Black Monks. He convened a general chapter in 1421, reminded the assembled dignitaries that their houses had been endowed because the founders had valued prayer offered up by men who adhered to an austere and regular life, and urged them to return to the original observance of St Benedict's Rule. A committee was set up and recommended certain reforms – to diet, dress, claustral observance, 'luxury' and so on; but the leaders of the Black Monks watered the articles down. Henry V died the following year and had no time to pursue the matter. Thus even his proposals met the same fate as many other attempts at 'self-regulation'. His initial ideas were 'challenged, criticised and softened down, till the resulting legislation took a form that did little to change existing conditions'.

Thus the English monasteries ignored the call to change their ways and went on in their old lax way, before going down in those two great waves of destruction which were once known to every English schoolboy.