

Established Religion in England - historical review

Medieval Religion

Following the Norman Conquest, England was governed under Feudalism, an essentially authoritarian, top down system of government where everyone was subject to a lord, to whom they had to give allegiance and to whom they were obligated. Everyone's conduct was therefore subject to the will of his lord, and transgressions had severe consequences.

The Pope claimed the same rights over the king, and although this was often contested, the sanctions of excommunication were severe - individuals became social outcasts, unable to transact normal business, while a king's whole country might suffer from the suspension of its normal religious activities, as in the time of King John.

Religion therefore was not a matter of personal conviction, decided after individual thought and reflection, but like the rest of the feudal system it was a given, a fact of life that could not be rejected, but had to be accommodated. The church controlled the moral side of life and used sanctions and methods of enforcement comparable with those of the civil powers. Consequently the modern conceptual divide between sacred and secular did not exist.

The ordinary people must have been fairly ignorant concerning the religion in which they were brought up, because most religious were similarly ignorant. This was not regarded as important, since the outlook was that their "betters" would know these things and that was enough. Anyone who showed any interest in religion was encouraged to enter the church (an attitude still widespread in the C of E in the 1960s), and there were many levels of clergy - including bellringers.

The main objective of pre-Reformation religion was to build and maintain harmonious communities "in love and charity with their neighbours", and created lay guilds - such as for young people, or mothers - to that end. Church institutions provided social welfare for the poor and sick. It was the priests' job to save the people from hell and shorten purgatory by their prayers and masses. The people's needs were met through confession, sermons, shrines and miracles arising from pilgrimages to the relics of saints. Physical objects were wrapped in myths which made them apparently efficacious. Much of this success must have been fortuitous but the objects also became enablers of faith in their efficacy that was apparently rewarded.

The C15 and early C16 was a time of remarkable religious piety expressed in giving by ordinary people on a large scale, mainly to contribute to the improvement of their parish churches and their contents, and to found Chantries and other religious charities. It seems to have very largely absorbed the entire contemporary economic surplus. The motivation was ostensibly religious, but in reality was at least as much concerned with asserting the wealth and status of the community, expressing the intense rivalry between neighbouring villages and parishes within towns. Many church towers and their original, often very large and loud, bells date from this period, and the motive for their construction was for the purposes of celebration, by the community for what would now be called secular reasons, at least as much as for the many church saints' day feasts (which were in any case combined with secular rejoicing), as well as being, so it was believed, a means to drive away plague and thunderstorms.

Although such giving was voluntary, the Church's threat of hell, and of purgatory, was powerfully coercive. This encouraged people to give gifts to the church, in the hope of evading hell and or of shortening time in Purgatory and this led to a one-sided transfer of property and land from civil society to the church. By the early C16 this had been going on for hundreds of years, over-enriching the church, and resulting in churchmen living sometimes pampered, indolent and immoral lives.

The Reformation

After 1350 the web of feudal obligations had been unravelling. The rigid ties of feudalism were giving way to a more mercantile outlook, with wage labour and markets for goods becoming more important relative to land than had formerly been the case. The Reformation introduced the doctrine that the state religion was a matter to be determined by the country's ruler, which was convenient for Henry VIII, who needed a divorce. That so many of the "better sort" of people were keen to gain from the suppression of religious houses, suggests that the balance between the wealth of the church and of civil society was recognised as out of balance, suggesting that Henry's divorce was solely a trigger that released a process that was inevitable, sooner or later.

The Reformation did not introduce religious freedom. Outward conformity was what was required, which discourages personal faith. In terms of power, the Pope was replaced by the king as the governor of the church. The political hostility to England from the Pope, and hence from Catholic states such as Spain, encouraged Queen Elizabeth to keep a tight hold on the religious beliefs of her subjects, which was achieved through a mild form of Protestant church as a means to unite the population and promote state doctrine and propaganda. Church festivals were reduced in number, but new festivals, such as the date of the accession of the sovereign, were created in support of State over the church. These festivals were celebrated by ringing church bells high and loudly, as festivals always had been. (Calling people to services continued to require only the chiming of a single bell.)

The changes in worship introduced by the Reformation and removal of rich wall painting, shrines, images and other artefacts that people related to extinguished almost overnight the intense pre-Reformation religious piety and giving. Most people became indifferent to religion, not least because the services were now austere and wordy, and their content cerebral (what you intellectually believe rather than what you do), leaving ordinary people with very little to capture their emotions.

Bells were largely left alone in the C16, because most reformers did not consider them religiously important, thus revealing their primarily secular function. The continuing need for powerful emotional engagement which the state religion failed to satisfy probably explains why the powerfully emotive sound of church bells rung high became so important to the people of England - as listeners - in the late C16 and C17. The Doppler effects that vary the note of a rung bells as they move grasp the emotions in a way that static musical instruments (including bells) never do.

Churches had always been used for all kinds of secular as well as for religious purposes because all except the chancel was maintained by the parishioners. The lack of enthusiastic religious commitment after the Reformation allowed the secular uses of the church - normally the only large public building in the parish - to become relatively more important, and Elizabethan principles of local government through local gentry resulted in the vestry,

composed of local landowners, largely determining what happened to churches, and the activities within them. Their enthusiasm for bellringing explains why the religiously redundant bells were retained and augmented rather than being sold off for church repairs.

Seventeenth Century religious conflict, and Eighteenth century complacency.

In the C17, the crypto-Catholicism of the Stuart kings polarised the differences between those who wanted the more radical Calvinist form of Protestantism and those inclined towards a more Catholic form worship. Both sides sought to use the state to compel their opponents to their point of view, leading to the Civil War. The Restoration saw the Calvinist wing separate from the state church, leading ultimately to the rise of Nonconformity, and religious toleration (except for Catholics) after 1688 following almost a century of religious conflict. Apart from zealots who thought them superstitious, attitudes to bells, being seen as essentially secular, had been largely unaffected.

These trends made the established church less ideological in the C18, and the higher classes were increasingly sceptical and conformed out of custom. West Gallery choirs singing metrical psalms were introduced at the end of the C17, competing with the more participatory Dissenter worship, and churches were made more comfortable. But the emotional poverty of the established religion following the Reformation would not be fully addressed until the C19 Anglo-Catholic revival reintroduced images and ceremony and reconnected the Church of England emotionally with the common people. Meanwhile, religious enthusiasm - based more on inner personal faith rather than emotional engagement - was largely confined to the various groups of Dissenters, and, later, the Methodists.

The C19 Anglo-Catholic Revival

From the 1830s the Oxford Movement (Tractarians) regarded the Church of England of their time as being in a poor state, with declining church attendance. Non-conformist churches had been expanding successfully, especially in the towns, where population growth was rapid because of industrialisation. Catholic emancipation (1829) presented a new threat to Church of England attendance. Tractarians saw the answer as being a return to what they believed to have been the religious practices of the medieval church, in churches remodelled to suit those practices, combined with a strong paternalistic desire to "improve" the moral habits of all parishioners, whether churchgoers or not. Much of what they believed and did was historically mistaken, but in the expanding towns and cities they built churches that did draw in and meet the social needs of many of the urban poor. They were hostile to what they regarded as the secular use of church buildings, and remodelled them in ways that made general social uses impossible, so that Church halls had to be built. The effect was to make churches into exclusively religious buildings, unsuitable for any other purpose, and the church building was largely divorced from its previous position as a building for the whole community. By 1914, this movement had caused the majority of parishes to adopt, to a greater or lesser extent, some form of Anglo-Catholic practice. One consequence was Belfry Reform, which from 1870 brought bellringing increasingly under strong clergy control, made it ringing before church services, sought that all ringing should be method ringing, and that every tower with bells should have its own band of church going bellringers.

Church of England decline

The Church's enthusiastic support of the blood bath of the Great War led to a strong post-war

backlash against religion and the Church lost much of its authority, and congregations declined. This trend intensified after the Second World War, though the silence of the war time ringing ban resulted in a resurgence of bellringing. In the 1960s the culture of deference to social superiors came to an end, and the "Honest to God" debate revealed church leaders that did not believe in God. New forms of worship were introduced in the 1960s and 70s in attempt to become more "relevant". The more successful churches emphasised personal faith and religious experience, and formed house groups that allowed lay participation. Such churches generally had little time for historical forms of worship and the associated equipment such as organs and bells. Some traditional styles of Church of England practice - Anglo-Catholics and Conservative Evangelicals –sharply declined, as people went elsewhere in response to accommodations by the church to contemporary secular norms. Church attendance by people who were nominal in their religion declined as they increasingly questioned its relevance. This has left many churches with aging and declining congregations, ill-equipped to reverse the decline, and with the looming prospect of church closures on a large scale.

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