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THE CHURCH IN ENGLAND BETWEEN THE DEATH OF BEDE AND THE DANISH INVASIONS

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I

UNTIL a few years ago, it was customary to assume that the pre-Conquest Church in England enjoyed two golden ages—between the arrival of Theodore of Tarsus and the death of Bede, and the age of St. Dunstan; and that from Bede's death until the Danish invasions, and from the death of Dunstan until the Norman Conquest, the Church stagnated and even declined. Justice has now been done to the last phase of the Anglo-Saxon Church. More tentatively it has been suggested that its shortcomings in the eighth and ninth centuries were less serious than had once been supposed. It is the purpose of this paper to question whether for the earlier period the process of rehabilitation has gone far enough.

To belittle the achievement of Archbishop Theodore and his associates and immediate successors would be foolish, but it is proper to point out that the task of Christianizing England was not to be completed within one generation or even two. It has recently been observed that

> the people of Essex relapsed into paganism during the pestilence of 664 . . . the conversion of Sussex did not begin until 680, and the Isle of Wight was heathen in 686. Cissa who succeeded Guthlac at Crowland in 714 was unbaptized only a few years earlier.[1]

[1] D. Whitelock, 'Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian', *Trans. R. Hist. Soc.*, 4th series, xxxi. 83–4.

In short, it was not until the first quarter of the eighth century was over that Christianity felt secure. Yet one hundred and thirty years after Bede's death, when the Danes came and conquered half the country, the evidence at our disposal shows that they were converted to Christianity with startling rapidity. This is true for both Northumbria and East Anglia.[1] Not only were the Danes converted, but within a short time they were providing dignitaries of the highest rank for the Church, including Oda of Canterbury and Oscytel of York. We hear of no formulated missionary activity in the Danelaw, and the machinery of ecclesiastical administration had been destroyed, yet the work of conversion was swiftly performed. It is hard to believe that it was carried out by the rank and file of a church either internally decayed or extinct as a result of violence.

It may plausibly be maintained that the effects of invasion have been exaggerated. Of the material destruction caused by the Danes there can be no doubt, and often the great monasteries, which were the principal casualties, did not recover for a long time. They suffered not so much because the Danes hated Christianity but because in them was concentrated a great proportion of the wealth of the land, much of it in easily portable forms, altar vessels of gold and silver, jewelled vestments and the like. The evidence of Asser and of the later biographers of the leaders of the tenth century reform movement makes it clear that at the beginning of the tenth century monasticism as a vital force was dead, even if in some places its external forms continued to be observed.[2]

For the historian of Christianity in England, the importance of this fact depends upon the view which he holds of the part that the monasteries played in the life of the Church in the period before the invasion. It is noteworthy that the sacking of a monastery was not by itself sufficient to extinguish a vigorous monastic life, and unless destruction was followed by a settlement upon the soil, the monastery might well revive. Lindisfarne, which suffered the first Danish onslaught in 793, recovered and enjoyed considerable

[1] D. Whitelock, 'The Conversion of the Eastern Danelaw', *Saga Book of the Viking Society*, xii. 159–76, and 'The Anglo-Saxon Attitude to the Scandinavian Invaders', *ibid.*, x. 75–100.

[2] D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, p. 695.

prosperity during part of the following century, and was not evacuated until 875.[1] Similarly at Canterbury, which saw more Danes than most places, St. Augustine's may have come nearer to the ideal of a monastic community than any other house in the south of England.[2] Glastonbury on the other hand suffered little, yet appears to have been moribund at the end of the century.[3] It has been remarked of the Danish raids and invasions at the end of the tenth and beginning of the following century that, though so widespread, they had remarkably little permanent effect upon the material prosperity of the monasteries.[4] How much of the extinction of monasticism at the end of the ninth century is attributable to the Danes, how much to internal degeneration is debatable. The fact remains; and it was clearly not due to the efforts of monastic communities that the Danelaw was made Christian. But to the near contemporary historians of this period, all monks writing for their brethren, the extinction of the great monasteries was the extinction of Christianity: the continued existence of smaller and less celebrated communities, often of secular clergy, and of local churches is a fact of which they take no account.

The stories of wholesale destruction told by the chroniclers probably give a misleading impression of what actually happened. Lindisfarne was abandoned in 875, not destroyed. There appears to have been no break in the succession of archbishops of York, and the church of Ripon was not destroyed until 948,[5] and then not by a pagan invader but by a Christian king of the West Saxons. A great deal must have depended upon chance, and the disposition of the army operating in a particular area at a particular time. All the Danes were not savages. On occasion they were deemed suitable allies for Christians, as when they joined with the Cornishmen in 838 [6] against Wessex, and they are occasionally to be found entering into some kind of treaty with the inhabitants of the area upon which they were based, as in East Anglia in 866 [7]. Before

[1] *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae*, ed. F. Arnold in *Symeonis Monachi Opera* (Rolls Series), i. 54 ff.

[2] Knowles, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

[3] *Vita Sancti Dunstani Auctore B*, ed. W. Stubbs, *Memorials of Saint Dunstan* (Rolls Series), p. 7.

[4] Knowles, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

[5] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, MS. D, a. 948.

[6] *Ibid.*, a. 835.

[7] *Ibid.*, a. 866.

ever they came as a grand army intent on conquest and settlement, they had come, in part as pirates, but also in part as traders.

The best account of the impact of a Danish army upon the native population comes in Abbo of Fleury's *Passion of St. Edmund*.[1] Though written a century after the events it recounts, it is based upon the account of an eye-witness, and therefore has a strong claim to credence. After describing the battle in which the king was killed, the author tells how the body was cut into small pieces and the head thrown into a thicket, 'so that the Christians, but few of whom were left alive, should not be able to commit it to decent burial'.[2] This barbarity was observed by one man.

> Accordingly when peace of some sort had been restored to the churches, the Christians began to emerge from their hiding-places. They pieced the body together without difficulty, and then united in great numbers to institute a search in every part of the wood's recesses, in the hope of reaching by hazard the spot where the head of the holy hero was lying.[3]

Aided by a miracle the head was discovered and joined to the body.

> And there they built over the grave a chapel of rude construction in which the body rested for many years, until the conflagration of war and the mighty storms of persecution were over, and the religious piety of the faithful began to revive, upon relief from the pressure of tribulation.[4]

Then, in 903, the body was removed to Bury, where there was built 'a church of immense size, with storeys admirably constructed of wood'.[5]

Nothing, in fact, could be easier than for the defeated native population to take refuge from the heathen army, and when it passed on to emerge once more and continue to live as though no catastrophe had intervened; the same kind of situation was repeated times without number in the villages of Italy and

[1] *Abbonis Floriacensis Passio Sancti Edmundi*, ed. T. Arnold, *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey* (Rolls Series), i. 3–25. It is also printed in *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, ed. Lord Francis Hervey, pp. 6–59, with a translation, from which I quote.

[2] *Ibid.*, c. xi.

[3] *Ibid.*, c. xii.

[4] *Ibid.*, c. xiv.

[5] *Ibid.*, c. xiv.

Normandy a few years ago. The East Anglian churches, though destroyed, could be rebuilt in a few weeks at most. Abbo's account of the Danes in East Anglia is probably true of other parts of the country which they ravaged. At Ely, for instance, eight members of the community returned after a few years.[1] The passage of a Danish army might be calamitous temporarily, but was not an irremediable catastrophe. And once the invaders turned to settlement they would no longer desire to exterminate their neighbours. It was thenceforward possible for the Christian population to convert their neighbours if they could, and if the will to do so was sufficiently strong. It can fairly be argued that if religious zeal had been lacking in the pre-Danish period then conversion might never have been achieved, or at least that it would have taken much longer to accomplish.

With this general consideration in mind it is proposed now to examine in more detail certain aspects of the history of the years after Bede's death.

II

The view that the church during this period was in decline rests upon a good deal of rather scattered evidence. Boniface's letter to Ethelbald of Mercia [2] and Bede's to Ecgberht of York [3] provide convincing testimony that the auguries for the future were unpromising. There is a lack of great personalities which contrasts strongly with the earlier period with its Theodore, Wilfrid, Aldhelm and Bede, and the later with Oda, Dunstan, Ethelwold and Oswald. A good deal has properly been made of the importance for the Church of the co-operation of kings, and there has been general agreement that Offa of Mercia, the most remarkable and important of them, was not motivated by benevolence towards it. The letters of Alcuin's later years paint a gloomy picture of England, bereft of its ancient dynasties and torn by internal dissensions, the metropolitan see itself preoccupied with its struggle to maintain its primacy.[4] In 808 Leo III wrote to Charlemagne deploring the hostility which obtained in the north

[1] *Liber Eliensis*, ed. D. J. Stewart, p. 83.

[2] *S. Bonifatii et Lullii Epistolae*, ed. M. Tangl, pp. 148–55.

[3] *Epistola Bedae ad Ecgbertum Episcopum*, ed. C. Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica*, i. 405–23.

[4] *Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, ii, e.g. pp. 189–92.

between King Eardwulf and his Archbishop Eanbald and in the south between King Cenwulf of Mercia and Archbishop Wulfred.[1] This southern dispute reached serious proportions, and even when Cenwulf was dead it appears that disputes between the archbishop of Canterbury and King Ecgberht of Wessex continued until a final reconciliation was achieved in 838.[2] Very soon after this the Danish attacks began, and within a short time all was confusion.

To moderate this view a number of general considerations may be urged. In the space of the one hundred and thirty years which intervened between the death of Bede and the arrival of the great army, there was sufficient time for a great deal to happen: it would be surprising if the history of any institution revealed a uniform course of development for so long. Within such a period retrogression and reform could alternate more than once, and to interpret the history of the whole in terms of evidence derived from a part is misleading. Yet of the documents in Haddan and Stubbs' *Councils* relating to the years between 770 and 870, more than one-third derive from Ethelheard's tenure of the archbishopric, a period of fourteen years. Both in Northumbria and in southern England this was a time of exceptional difficulty. In Northumbria king succeeded king in rapid succession, while in the south these years witnessed the dispute over the archbishopric of Lichfield, the expulsion of the archbishop of Canterbury from Kent, and the general disturbance which followed the death of Offa, who was succeeded after a short interval by a king whose blood-relationship to the old dynasty was slender and whose strength was correspondingly impaired. It is dangerous to assume that the conditions which obtained then are a faithful mirror of the whole period; the history of the northern province, to which we shall revert, is a salutary reminder of this.

The very greatness of Bede and a few others creates its own difficulties. The historian, finding no one of like calibre in later years, unconsciously forgets how exceptional such men are, and that they would have been remarkable in any age. Dunstan and Anselm alone of medieval archbishops of Canterbury can compare with Theodore of Tarsus, and it would be difficult to contest the primacy of Bede as historian throughout the middle ages. In

[1] *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, iii. 562–4.

[2] *Ibid.*, iii. 617–18.

their own time they stand head and shoulders above the rest, and that their successors were lesser men is in itself no reproach. Reading the *Lives of the Abbots*, an impressive picture emerges of Jarrow in Bede's time, notable in its strict observance of the Rule laid down for it, and for its cultural activities. But Bede's letter to Ecgberht testifies to the fact that Jarrow was exceptional even among Northumbrian monasteries. To generalize about the level of monastic observance on the evidence provided by a few houses is notoriously unsound, for extremes of virtue and vice can be found almost side by side. It was possible for scandal to arise at Coldingham during Cuthbert's lifetime,[1] and the inmates of Repton were later to be outraged by Guthlac's abstemiousness.[2] It is probable that from the beginning most monasteries were founded by laymen and housed only a few inmates, whose observance of any rule depended largely upon the personal piety of their owner. A later age would not have recognized many of them as monasteries.

Again, political confusion inimical to the welfare of the Church was by no means confined to Northumbria in the latter half of the eighth century. In 676, during the episcopate of Theodore himself, while a war was raging between Hlothere and Edric son of Ecgberht, Ethelred of Mercia overran Kent and profaned its churches and monasteries, so that Bishop Putta of Rochester took refuge with Sexulf of Mercia, and his successor Cwichelm would not stay.[3] After this, Caedwalla of Wessex attempted unsuccessfully to reduce the kingdom and ravaged it repeatedly. A period of anarchy ensued which was ended by Wihtraed, who succeeded in restoring order during his lifetime. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides ample evidence of internal dissensions in Wessex, and the life of St. Guthlac testifies to the fact that the Mercian kingship of Ethelbald and Offa was not achieved without bloodshed. And before leaving Bede, it may be mentioned that it is unfair to pass judgment upon the later period on the ground that it has left so few memorials of its activity. If Bede's contribution to our knowledge of the earlier phase of the Church is subtracted, precious little remains.

[1] Bede, *Hist. Eccles.*, iv. 23.

[2] Felix, *Vita Sancti Guthlaci Confessoris* (ed. W. de G. Birch, *Memorials of St. Guthlac*), p. 15.

[3] Bede, *Hist. Eccles.*, iv. 12.

Considerations of this kind breed doubts as to whether the golden age of Jarrow was in truth the golden age of the whole Church in England, and fittingly preface an attempt to examine more closely the evidence of subsequent decay. It may confidently be submitted that to write of the 'English Church' as an entity at this time is unprofitable. The churches of the conversion period were 'tribal' churches. In the eighth century there was no reason why the churches in England north and south of the Humber should develop on parallel lines. They had been drawn into a single organization by Theodore which lasted for seventy years, but there were always differences between northern and southern England which after the creation of a second metropolitan see at York in 735 became increasingly pronounced. For this reason it is proposed to deal first with the affairs of the Church in Northumbria and then to turn to Mercia and Wessex.

That the Northumbrian Church lost its vitality in the eighth century has been generally accepted; though the evidence is scanty, it appears at first sight to be conclusive. There is Bede's famous letter to Archbishop Ecgberht, enumerating the evils from which the Church suffered,[1] a letter of Pope Paul to King Eadbert asking him to restore three monasteries which he had violently seized from their abbot,[2] and lastly a series of gloomy letters from Alcuin to highly placed dignitaries in England.[3] That the evils which Bede denounced were very real when he wrote, cannot be doubted: but proof that they became worse in the years after his death is hard to find. In fact, conditions for co-operation between Church and State can hardly have been more favourable than during the years which followed, when Eadberht Eating was king and Ecgberht his brother archbishop of York.[4] But it was to this king that Pope Paul addressed his letter asking for the restitution of the three monasteries to their Abbot Forthred. In view of what is known of the king's masterful way of dealing with the bishop

[1] *Epistola ad Ecgbertum Episcopum*, ed. C. Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica*, i. 405–23.

[2] Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, iii. 394–5.

[3] E.g. to Osbert, 'Nam tempora tribulationis sunt ubique in terra nostra, fide recedente, veritate non fante, malicia crescente et arrogantia inter miserias se addente' (*Epist. Karol. Aevi*, ii. 179).

[4] D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian*, p. 87, and authorities cited in n. 3 on that page.

of Lindisfarne, his violence occasions no surprise, but to judge his action without knowing more facts about the monasteries concerned is risky. Eadberht's reputation as a friend of the Church is good. The year after the pope's letter he resigned his kingdom and withdrew into a monastery. It has been suggested that Bede himself would have approved of Eadberht's action, which was in accord with the policy of reducing the large number of monasteries in the kingdom which Bede advocated in his letter to the archbishop.[1] Ecgberht was certainly aware of the king's action and there is no suggestion that he disapproved of it. The pope had heard only part of the story, that told by the dispossessed abbot. His letter therefore cannot carry much weight in any process set in motion against King Eadberht.

The troubles which followed Eadberht's withdrawal from the world had less effect upon the Church than might have been anticipated. The succession of archbishops of York appears to have been at least adequate. The school of York continued to increase in fame for some years, and under Eadberht, Albert and finally Alcuin achieved its apogee as the acknowledged centre of learning and culture in western Europe. During the reign of Alchred (765–74), a Northumbrian synod sanctioned the mission of Willihad to the Frisians, evidence that missionary zeal had not yet evaporated.[2] Even among the ephemeral kings of these years one at least was found worthy of praise, Alfwold the pious and righteous ruler who was murdered in 788.[3] During his reign the papal legates visited Northumbria. Though they found a good deal to correct, they seem to have been well content with their reception, and themselves provided the explanation of the evils it was their mission to eradicate, 'because, as you know, since the time of Augustine, no Roman priest has been sent hither save ourselves'.[4]

A retrogression there probably had been during the early decades of the eighth century, but it was only temporary, and the sequel gave no cause for pessimism. Towards the end of the century Alcuin assumed the mantle of Jeremiah, and for him the beginning of that moral decline, which inevitably carried disaster

[1] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 160, n. 3.

[2] Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, iii. 433.

[3] *Historia Regum*, ed. Arnold in *Symeonis Monachi Opera*, ii. 52.

[4] Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, iii. 448.

in its train, began during the reign of Alfwold. Certainly the years between 758 and the restoration of King Eardwulf in 810 were marked by a series of political upheavals, and it may readily be admitted that such conditions made the task of the Church more difficult: it is less clear that the Church shared fully in Northumbria's decline as a political power. Alcuin castigated the king and his magnates in a famous letter written at a time when his emotions were violently disturbed by the news of the sack of Lindisfarne, but his letters to Wearmouth, Jarrow, Lindisfarne and York were admonitory rather than condemnatory.[1] He warned them against the dangers of excessive luxury in dress, gluttony and slothfulness, and emphasized the importance of teaching: but he did not accuse them of neglecting their duties nor of over-indulgence. Account must be taken of Alcuin's epistolary style: this manner of writing is typical of the man, and the same tones may be heard in his letters to all his correspondents, not only those in England—in his letters to Abbess Gisela of Chelles, Charlemagne's sister,[2] to Abbot Arnold,[3] and to the monks of Salzburg.[4]

With the return of Eardwulf from exile, political conditions improved once more. Lindisfarne recovered from the devastation of 793.[5] To Higbald *vir strenuus*, who died in 802, succeeded Ecgberht, Hethured, and then Egred. This bishop was a benefactor to his see, especially remembered for the fact that he translated the body of St. Cuthbert to Norham where he had rebuilt the church. He also built a church at Gainford. This is the man of whom we hear in another connection, writing to the archbishop of York to discuss a case of heresy which had occurred in his diocese.[6] The renewal of civil discord in the middle of the century, and the reappearance of kings who despoiled the church of its possessions, brought no termination to the succession of worthy bishops of the see. Egred died in 846, and nothing is recorded of his successor Eanberht, but his successor Eardulf, *vir magni meriti*,

[1] See, for example, his letters to Higbald, (in *Epist. Karol. Aevi*, iii. 181–4), and to Ecgberht (*ibid.*, 166–70).
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 40–2, 132–3.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 276–7.
[5] For Lindisfarne, see *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae*, ed. Arnold, *Symeonis Monachi Opera*, pp. 50–4.
[6] Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, iii. 615.

was praised for the pastoral solicitude he showed for the distant possessions of his see. This was the bishop who proved his devotion by cherishing and guarding the body of St. Cuthbert during its painful seven-year pilgrimage.

This summary account of the see and monastery of Lindisfarne may be supplemented by the story of its cell at Craike, situated some twelve miles from York. It is related in Ethelwulf's poem, *De Abbatibus*, dedicated to Ecgberht, bishop of Lindisfarne between 802 and 820, and covers the whole span of years between the reign of Aldfrith until the writer's own time.[1]

Its first abbot was a nobleman Eanmund who had been driven to follow the monastic life by Osred of Northumbria, the son of Aldfrith (*ob.* 705). Eanmund was a great benefactor to the monastery, which having received a teacher from Bishop Eadfrid of Lindisfarne soon became a model house.[2] More important for our immediate purpose than Eanmund were his successors, who all maintained his high standard. Eorpwine, 'vitae studiosus amator, sensibus et prudens, et cuncto strenuus actu', and his brother Aldwin,[3]

> Moribus hic verax et verbis omnibus exstat;
> Signifer est clarus, subjectos vocibus hortans,
> Ut sua vota pii trans aethera principes signent.

The fourth Abbot Sygbald built a chapel dedicated to the Virgin which he furnished with precious vessels. To him succeeded his brother Sigmund, a man remarkable for his secret charity to the poor.[4] When he died, Wulfsig the priest was reluctantly persuaded to assume the rule: he was a man devoted to ascetic practices, of great humility and piety.[5] Aethelwulf knew him well. During his time the cell prospered greatly.

The story of Craike bears out the impression derived from that of Lindisfarne. Both are supported by the letters of Abbot Lupus of St. Judoc to Wigmund and the community of York[6] which demonstrate that the reputation and library of that establishment

[1] Aethelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, ed. Arnold in *Symeonis Monachi Opera*, pp. 265–99.
[2] *Ibid.*, *c.* 7 (p. 273).
[3] *Ibid.*, *c.* 13 (pp. 280–1).
[4] *Ibid.*, *cc.* 14, 15 (pp. 281–3).
[5] *Ibid.*, *c.* 18 (p. 285).
[6] Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, iii. 634, 635.

was still considerable beyond the confines of England. It is interesting to note, moreover, that Ethelwulf's poem *De Abbatibus* was not his only composition. He wrote as well a poem on the English saints which has not survived. It has also been demonstrated comparatively recently that Northumbrian culture was not obliterated until late in the ninth century.[1] This confirms the impression that the church in Northumbria at the time when the Danes came was still vigorous, and that to speak of decline is to generalize rashly from the evidence of short periods within the hundred and thirty years which followed Bede's death.

Turning to southern England, the political scene in the eighth century is dominated by Ethelbald and Offa, kings of Mercia. Dr. Hunt recognized their generosity to the Church, but of Ethelbald he said that 'in spite of this liberality, which was perhaps evoked by a desire to do what was expected of a great king, his reign was injurious to the interests of religion', and of Offa, 'in spite of his liberality, Offa brought evil on the church'.[2] The correspondence of Boniface and the letter of Pope Zachary [3] demanding reforms prove that before the Synod of 747 there was much that needed correction, but such degeneration can scarcely have occurred in the short time which had elapsed since Bede wrote the last sections of the *Ecclesiastical History*. This may imply that the somewhat idyllic picture he paints there is overdrawn. On the other hand, such evidence as we have suggests that Archbishop Cuthbert made a vigorous effort to reform abuses. At the Synod of Clovesho all the bishops of the southern province were present except Eanfrith of Elmham, and the canons it promulgated covered every aspect of church life. An attempt was made to institute machinery for the enforcement of the canons; the bishops on returning to their dioceses were to instruct their clergy both secular and monastic in the decrees of the synod and order their observance; if they found anything amiss which they could not correct themselves it was to be referred to the archbishop in the provincial synod.[4] Two years later the king declared

[1] K. Sisam, 'Cynewulf and his Poetry', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xviii (1930), 305–7.

[2] W. Hunt, *A History of the English Church from its Foundation to the Norman Conquest*, pp. 230, 235.

[3] Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, iii. 360.

[4] For the Acts of the Council, see *ibid.*, pp. 362–76.

that churches and monasteries should be freed from all public burdens except for bridge-building and the defence of strongholds,[1] thus satisfying one of the most important of Boniface's charges against him.

How far the reforms of these years were implemented it is impossible to say, but the next information we have, a letter from Archbishop Cuthbert to Lull, written after Boniface's martyrdom in 754, shows that the practice of holding provincial synods for the discussion of ecclesiastical affairs was still maintained.[2] Perhaps the year 747 may be regarded as the first year of reform rather than a milestone on the road of progressive decline.

Ethelbald's successor, Offa, has suffered far more from modern historians than from writers nearer his own time. Alcuin's letters are markedly friendly in tone, in sharp contrast to those directed to the king and magnates of Northumbria and to the magnates of Kent. He clearly respected him, his wife Cynethryth and his son Ecgfrith, who appears to have been a model prince;[3] in a letter to Eanbald II of York he refers to Ceolmund, one of Offa's magnates and a frequent witness to his charters, as a mutual friend.[4] To Alcuin, the death of Offa was calamitous. It is of Offa in particular that he must have been thinking when in 797 he lamented 'Et vix aliquis modo . . . ex antiqua regum prosapia inventitur, et tanto incertioris sunt originis, quanto minoris sunt fortitudinis.'[5] Though he rebuked him for his personal vices, he was fully aware of the fact that they were more than balanced by the service he rendered to the Church in establishing and maintaining a firm peace favourable to its mission.[6] Offa's vices too must be regarded in the light of prevailing social conditions, as revealed in the Penitentials of Theodore and Ecgberht, rather than by twentieth-century standards. In his translation of Theodore's

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 386.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 391.

[3] In a letter to Offa he wrote of Ecgfrith, '. . . saluta . . . nobilissimum iuvenem, et diligenter eum in Dei erudi timore; et non pereat spes multorum in eo' (*Epist. Karol. Aevi*, ii. 148). To Ecgfrith he wrote, 'Disce . . . a patre auctoritatem, a matre pietatem; ab illo regere populum per iustitiam . . .' (*ibid.*, p. 105).

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 377; Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, iii. 534–6.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 192; *Councils*, iii. 509–10.

[6] To Osbert, a Mercian magnate, 'Merciorum admoneatis, ut moros bonos et modestos et castos diligenter observent, quos beatae memoriae Offa illis instituit' (*Epist. Karol. Aevi*, ii. 180).

Penitentials, Sir Henry Howorth omitted parts as being not fit to print.[1]

Apart from the letters of Alcuin, there is no evidence to show how Offa was regarded by his contemporaries. A century later Asser denigrated him in an indirect manner when he wrote that his daughter followed the tyrannical habits of the father, but this judgment must be received with reserve, for the marriage of Offa's daughter to Beorhtric of Mercia was the reason for the enforced exile of his hero's grandfather at the court of Charlemagne.[2] In the twelfth century William of Malmesbury found difficulty in making up his mind:

> When I consider the deeds of this person I am doubtful whether I should commend or censure. At one time in the same character, vices were so palliated by virtues, and at another virtues came in such quick succession upon vices, that it is difficult to determine how to characterize the changing Proteus.[3]

To counterbalance the munificence of Offa to St. Alban's, the chronicler waxed indignant at his spoliation of Malmesbury.

The act for which nearly all later historians have condemned Offa was the creation of the archbishopric of Lichfield, and the justice of this condemnation in view of prevailing conditions is dubious. Though largely inspired by political motives, it is by no means clear that it was necessarily detrimental to the Church. Gregory the Great had never intended Canterbury for the metropolitan dignity, but had adapted his plan to conform to the situation obtaining at the end of the sixth century. As that political situation changed, the suitability of Canterbury as the ecclesiastical centre of English Christianity became less apparent. The primacy of Kent was short-lived, and by its geographical position and economic importance it was destined to be the battle-ground for the rivalries of Wessex and Mercia. Internally it was divided, and at a time when co-operation between the lay and ecclesiastical powers was most desirable, to have the metropolitan see situated in that province which particularly resented the

[1] Printed as an appendix to H. Howorth, *The Golden Age of the Anglo-Saxon Church*.

[2] Asser, *De Rebus Gestis Aelfredi*, c. 14 (ed. W. H. Stevenson, pp. 13, 205).

[3] *Gesta Regum*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series), i. 84.

Mercian supremacy was bad for both. Mercia at this time enjoyed a firm peace, and it seemed as though hegemony had fallen to it for ever. The motives of the people of Kent who reacted against the change were probably as secular as those of Offa himself; their ideal was a Kentish archbishop for a Kentish kingdom. We know little about the manner in which the archbishopric of Lichfield was created, except that assent to it was secured in a stormy synod held in 787.[1] But it may be remarked that Alcuin makes no reference to it in his earlier letters, and later on, when the process was reversed, he shows no great interest. Throughout the dispute his concern is with the effect of the schism on the work of the Church, rather than with the wrong done to Canterbury. He desired the rights of Canterbury to be restored, but pleaded that Hygeberht of Lichfield might be allowed to retain his pallium so long as he lived.[2] It does not appear that he had been outraged by Offa's innovation. If Offa's action was evil, then the pope must be held to share the blame. In a letter to Cenwulf, Leo III pleaded that the creation of Lichfield had been agreed to by Hadrian in the belief that the English clergy were unanimous in wanting it.[3] But the Papal legates who had been in England in 786 had travelled all over England, and had had every opportunity of testing feeling in the country. Hadrian cannot have believed that there was no opposition to the plan: his acquiescence must therefore have been due either to his desire to remain on good terms with Offa at all costs, or because he thought the creation of a third archbishopric in itself desirable.

At all events Offa's action is not evidence of hostility to the Church, or of a cynical indifference to its interests, but of what he probably regarded as political necessity. The kings of Mercia were not the only rulers who found that the archbishopric of Canterbury presented a problem. The dispute between the Mercian kings and the archbishops reached its climax in the second decade of the ninth century, when for a considerable period Cenwulf prevented Archbishop Wulfred exercising his office.[4] But even after the Mercian supremacy had ended, Ecgberht of Wessex appears to have had difficulties with Wulfred, and reconciliation was not

[1] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a. 785.

[2] *Epist. Karol. Aevi*, ii. 189–91; *Councils*, iii. 518–20.

[3] *Epist. Karol. Aevi*, ii. 187–9; *Councils*, iii. 523–5.

[4] *Councils*, iii. 587–8.

finally achieved until 839.[1] The relations between kings and archbishops in these years were governed by the fact that the archbishop of Canterbury was a great figure in politics. To consider them simply as manifestations of a king's attitude to the Church is to oversimplify and to mislead. Offa's policy had been to incorporate the religious leadership of the country south of the Humber within the kingdom which enjoyed political hegemony: this policy was eventually carried out successfully by the kings of Wessex, by virtue of the fact that their political relations with the Kentish kingdom were more fortunate. The sequel proved salutary for both Church and State, and to condemn Offa as an enemy of the Church for trying to anticipate the course of events is hard.

I have dealt with this question at length, because it appears to be the principal count upon which the charge against Offa rests, and the reason why he has fared so badly at the hands of historians. It is not denied that the long-drawn-out dispute to which it gave rise was detrimental to the Church, but it does not prove that the whole fifty years of Offa's reign were a period of decline, or that Offa's attitude to the Church was purely cynical. It is even possible that the effects of the dispute over Lichfield have been exaggerated. There appears to have been a good deal of conciliar activity in the forty years after the synod of 786,[2] which itself may be regarded rather as evidence of a desire for a well-regulated Church as of a crying need for reform. Of the leaders of the Church during the last half of the eighth century we know little, but such as it is our information provides nothing scandalous. The number of Englishmen who wrote to Lull of Mainz shows the interest which continued to be taken in the German mission even after the death of Boniface. The church had not lapsed into insularity, and contacts with Rome and the continent were manifold. English bishops attended the Council of Frankfurt in 794.[3]

From the synod of Clovesho in 747 until Offa's death, it is reasonable to suppose that the most important factor in the history of English Christianity was the comparative peace which he imposed upon the country. Offa's death, coinciding with revolt in Kent, and followed soon by the accession of Cenwulf in Mercia and the return of Ecgberht to Wessex, created a new situation. Under Cenwulf, Mercia remained the most powerful of the

[1] *Councils*, iii. 617–18. [2] *Ibid.*, iii. 461, g. [3] *Ibid.*, iii. 481.

southern kingdoms, but his power was only a shadow of that of Offa, and at his death the Mercian supremacy was ended, a fact made clear by Ecgberht's victory at Ellandune in 825 and the temporary subjection of Mercia to Wessex. During these years, after a Mercian incursion into East Anglia, the bishoprics of Dunwich and Elmham were reunited once more 'as a result of the poverty of the sees',[1] though it is not clear whether this was directly due to the campaign or to more general causes. The second and third decades of the ninth century was a difficult time, when the quarrel between Wulfred and Cenwulf was most bitter and Wessex was supplanting Mercia. Even so, the picture is not entirely gloomy. Wulfred appears to have been an energetic churchman who not only reformed his own cathedral clergy but who presided over the important council of 816, attended by all the bishops of the southern province.[2]

During the last years of the period the situation improved. Though Mercia was eclipsed by Wessex, it was still a considerable power, and there is no reason to suppose that it was disturbed by civil war or suffered any considerable military defeat. Donations to monasteries and churches continued to be made, and conditions were not such as to impede the work of the clergy. That this was so, and that learning was kept alive, is proved by the fact that it was from western Mercia that King Alfred drew most of his helpers. In Wessex under Ecgberht and Ethelwulf was inaugurated that alliance of kings and churchmen which distinguished the dynasty for two hundred years and was of infinite value to both. Of Egbert's principal advisers, Helmstan of Winchester and Ealhstan of Sherborne, we know little. Ealhstan's military activities would not have commended him to a later age, yet despite them, and despite his part in the conspiracy which deprived Ethelwulf of his kingdom on his return from Rome and relegated him to Kent, Asser says that he faithfully discharged the duties of his see for fifty years.[3] William of Malmesbury speaks favourably of him and calls him 'happy in living for so long in the practice of good works',[4] and his praise is only modified by the fact that he seized Malmesbury for his own uses. That King Ethelwulf desired

[1] William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton (Rolls Series), p. 148.
[2] *Councils*, iii. 575 and 579–84. [3] *Op. cit.*, *c.* 28 (p. 23).
[4] *Gesta Pontificum*, p. 176.

anything more than the welfare of the church his piety and munificence to the church make it impossible to believe. With Swithun bishop of Winchester the ground beneath our feet is firm. He left a reputation for sanctity which far outlived him and was still great one hundred years later. In these years, when internal peace obtained and with Danish raids only sporadic, the Church had much to be grateful for.

It is not the purpose of this paper to pretend that all was well between 735 and 865, but to suggest that the period as a whole has been characterized by evidence drawn mostly from the middle years of Ethelbald's reign and from the early decades of the ninth century. Too much has been made of the so-called 'secularization' of monasteries, which have generally been regarded less from the standpoint of their own time than judged with the eyes of a Benedictine reformer of the tenth century ignorant of the character and history of many of the early foundations. During this period significant advances were made, and when there was retrogression it was less serious than is sometimes supposed. This is certainly true in the spheres of learning and the arts, our knowledge of which has been signally increased of late by the researches of Dr. Sisam, Dr. Kendrick and the late Sir Alfred Clapham.[1] Professor Stenton has remarked that the professions of obedience made in the ninth century by southern bishops to their archbishop, 'as a whole show a competence of expression which cannot easily be reconciled with King Alfred's complaint of the collapse of learning in the generation before his own'.[2] The number of learned men in England can never have been commensurate with their fame. Bede complained of the ignorance of the local clergy and for their use made translations of the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. At the Synod of Clovesho Pope Zachary's letters were read out, 'et in nostra quoque lingua apertius interpretata sunt'. Even at the end of the tenth century, when the church was in a healthier condition than ever before in its history, the upland clergy often knew no Latin. The vernacular homilies of Aelfric and the *Manual* of Byrhtnoth were destined to meet the needs of such men.

The century and a half with which this paper is concerned can boast no spectacular achievement and no outstanding figure.

[1] See Sisam, *op. cit.*; T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art*; and A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest.*

[2] *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 226.

Nevertheless, a good deal was done to consolidate the work of the saints of the conversion epoch. The number of local churches steadily increased; Egbert's Pontificale and the second chapter of the Council of 816 lay down the procedure to be followed in the consecration of churches. Although specific instances are hard to come by, we know that Egred of Lindisfarne built a church at Gainford and rebuilt that at Norham, and that Swithun left a great reputation as a builder of churches. The practice by which bishops made a profession of obedience to Canterbury before assuming their office reflects a closer-knit organization than had before obtained. This was reinforced by the numerous synods of the ninth century up to the time of invasion; to judge them solely by their surviving memorials, principally concerned with disputes over property, would be grossly unreal. Of the personnel of the higher clergy we know almost nothing, but such as it is our knowledge provides no reason to judge them harshly. Political conditions were, on the whole, more favourable to the Church than is sometimes assumed. The Danish invasion was a catastrophe and a challenge. By its disruption of the organization of the Church over much of England, the supply of clergy was endangered; by its destruction of the greatest of the monasteries, the most impressive monuments of Christianity were annihilated. But because by the third quarter of the ninth century Christianity was firmly rooted in the social order of England the challenge was answered, the conquerors rapidly converted, and a very real danger was not allowed to materialize. Much of the credit for this considerable achievement must surely be given to the men who had been engaged upon the work of the Church in the years before invasion.