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The Ecclesiastical and Monastic Reform in England during the Tenth Century

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Abstract

What king Alfred the Great attempted in the ninth century, that is to bring to life the church was only a small step for the spiritual needs of the Anglo-Saxon people. Time, enthusiasm and generations passed, and it seems that comfortable and full of pleasures life was taken up gain in most of the monastic and church places. The emergence of people like St. Hierarchs Dunstan, Ethelwold and Oswald is clearly a sign of God's mercy to a nation with a perishing soul, being far from Him. They grew up in monastic communities full of spiritual desolation, thirsting for a true Christian life. Their ascent to the church hierarchy, where they began the work of revitalizing the people spiritual life, was possible only when a king like Edgar who was also concerned about the same thing ascended the throne of the kingdom. The three fathers took the best from the past and from other nations, planted on the already barren land of England, watered it with much prayer and love and made it bear fruit in unfavourable time. The second half of the tenth century brought a happy conjunction between secular power and the Church in England.

Keywords

History of Universal Church, Anglo-Saxon, tenth century, Church, reform, *Regularis Concordia*.

What Alfred the Great attempted in the ninth century, that is to bring to life the church was only a small step for the spiritual needs of the Anglo-Saxon people. Time, enthusiasm and generations passed, and it seems that comfortable and full of pleasures life was taken up again in most of the monastic and church places. The decay of clergy and monks brought a diminution of the church place in the life of ordinary people.

Although the garment was a nice one, with many mansions and monasteries, Christian living within them degraded from one generation to another. The British had no tutors or fathers as those in previous centuries. In 890 Pope Formosus rebuked the bishops of England: “the sinful pagan rituals have sprouted again in your side”¹.

During the spiritual drought of the first half of the tenth century, although most monasteries were only a shadow of the past and there were no people who would take the heavy cross of monks, there were some fools; how else could we call those who wanted to serve God with all their lives, in a time when almost everybody served their own pleasures? The emergence of people like St. Hierarchs Dunstan, Ethelwold and Oswald is clearly a sign of God’s mercy to a nation with a perishing soul, being far from Him. They grew up in monastic communities full of spiritual desolation, thirsting for a true Christian life. Their ascent to the church hierarchy, where they began the work of revitalizing the people spiritual life, was possible only when a king who was also concerned about the same thing ascended to the throne of the kingdom.

Once Edgar became king, St. Dunstan’s life experienced a rapid ascent. On the advice of the Archbishop of Canterbury, King will entrust him the Diocese of Worcester, and later that of London². In 960, Dunstan was appointed archbishop of Canterbury, becoming Edgar’s most important adviser. “I have in my hand the sword of Constantine; you hold that of Peter” wrote King Edgar. “Let us join our rights hands sword to sword, so that the sanctuary of God may be cleansed”³. Although erected on the

¹ William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1970, p. 44.

² David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1963, p. 39.

³ Vladimir Moss, *The Monastic Revival of Tenth - Century England*, <http://www.orthodoxchristianbooks.com/books>

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highest step of the hierarchs, the saint remained full of humility: “he constantly had God in his mind; any good deeds he did, he put them to God and not to him, with a heart full of humility”⁴. The life of St. Dunstan flowed between nights of prayer and vigil and days of government with justice and with much alms to the poor⁵. The chronicle says that “one of Dunstan’s habits, while he stayed in Canterbury was to go at night in holy places, accompanied only by a faithful companion, and there he offered sacrifices to God - repentance and a broken heart”⁶.

Wulfstan, St. Ethelwold’s biographer, recounts the vision that the bishop had in his youth. Ethelwold stood by the shore and saw a boat coming full of fish, especially eels.

“And when I silently considered the meaning of this vision which I saw, I suddenly heard a voice calling me by my own name, and saying to me: Ethelwold, this command has been sent to you by God from heaven: Call forth those fish, with the ship that you perceived is filled, and bring it about by your prayers that they may be men, just as they were before.”⁷

And Ethelwold began to pray with tears for it, as the fish come out of the eternal sleep of death and from the filth of this world.

In 963 King Edgar appointed Bishop of Worcester, giving him the freedom to make order in this ward. From the position of bishop, Ethelwold implemented all his thoughts and desires since he was abbot. He is lead author of the most important ecclesiastical ordinances of this century, *Regularis Concordia*. The bishop confessed that his life goal was to bring the church to the flowering days of Bede’s time⁸. St. Ethelwold saw the success of King Edgar to unify the kingdom as the fulfilment of unity the historian was talking about in his works, and it is now time for the hierarchy to do the same with the spiritual life of the people.

⁴ Eadmer of Canterbury, *Lives and Miracles of Saints Oda, Dunstan and Oswald*, edited and translated by Andrew J. Turner and Bernard J. Muir, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 125.

⁵ Vladimir Moss, *Lives of the British Saints*, <http://www.orthodoxchristianbooks.com/books>, p. 100.

⁶ Eadmer of Canterbury, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁷ Vladimir Moss, *The Monastic Revival of Tenth - Century England*, <http://www.orthodoxchristianbooks.com/books>, p. 100.

⁸ Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600-900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 18.

Taken under the wing of the Bishop of York, a kinship to his, Oswald became one of the most promising monks of the kingdom, which will make King Edgar, at the urging of Archbishop Dunstan, to offer Oswald the Diocese of Worcester, when it became vacant⁹. In Oswald's written life it is shown the appreciation he enjoyed by the head of the Church of England: "he increased in all virtues and grace so not only Dunstan loved with great love but others too."¹⁰ As bishop, Oswald imitated heavily on St. Ethelwold, gathering around the Episcopal cathedral a strong community of monks, which gradually replaced the "degraded, debased and avid" clergy¹¹. A few years later he receives the care of Diocese of York.

The youngest of the three reformer hierarchs, Oswald died the last of them being worn on the loving arms of the people. Truly among the three most loved was Oswald, the meek and merciful Bishop. In him the English really saw a father who constantly looked after their needs.

The success of reform in England was ensured primarily by the unity of thought and work of church leaders and laity. They all understand that before any change renewal of the soul was needed primarily. The king's initiative and his continued support, not only moral but also material, given to the reformer bishops was clearly to be a *sine qua non* for the renewal movement from the tenth century¹².

Unfortunately, the English did not find the model at Rome like in the early centuries. In the tenth century the papacy passed through a serious crisis. Disgusted with the news that he always received from Rome, St. Dunstan boldly accused it of corruption in the issue of marriages and divorces¹³. But if it were only so... what English have they said, being great lovers of all that was holy and going on pilgrimages to Rome in a constant flow¹⁴, about the decay of church people, in a century where the Marozia family and its loyal Popes dominated church? On the other hand, it is great wonder that, hearing and seeing what the popes of Rome and their

⁹ *St. Oswald of Worcester: Life and Influence*, editat de Nicholas Brooks și Catherine Cubitt, Leicester University Press, Londra, 1996, p. 8.

¹⁰ Eadmer of Canterbury, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

¹¹ *St. Oswald of Worcester: Life and Influence*, p. 13.

¹² Douglas Dales, *Dunstan: Saint and Stateman*, James Clarke & co, Cambridge, 2013, p. XII.

¹³ Douglas Dales, *op. cit.*, p. XII.

¹⁴ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, p. 412.

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men were doing, the monks in France still believed in Christ's Church and longed for a clean living. Cluny, Fleury, Ghent are places that have started to spread fresh air into the Western church. From France, Benedictine monastic ideal easily penetrated in England, Italy and Spain.

“In that time the clergy was corrupt and the canons, along with parish priests, indulged fleshly passions. Wanting to repair this evil... Dunstan got power from the king to drive the canonists who did not want to live in purity out of the churches they ruled and to bring monks in their place.”¹⁵

People changed, society and the times were different. Although full of love for British saints, the three hierarchs will choose another way to serve God. The zeal of the early centuries gone, now all is done with much effort. The communities had to be constrained; otherwise the monks could easily fall into the worldly, as had happened so many times in the past. In these tough times it seems that the only one that worked was the strict order of Benedictine monasteries. The three bishops would break from the distant past when the monk was a man with a special gift, given entirely to God's service. They brought the Western discipline and the zeal of an improved life, which was a model of salvation for the monks¹⁶. Returning to the past, but aware of the infirmities of the present, the theologians re-discovered especially St. Gregory the Dialogist's writings, that holy pope who brought the Anglo-Saxons to Christ and gave them the ordinances of a Christian life.

St. Dunstan was the mind who conceived the monastic reform and Ethelwold was the first and most zealous of the bishops, who put it into effect. They were continuously supported by King Edgar, who gave them all the power to do the needful for church renewal.

The hierarchs began with the construction and repair of churches and cathedrals, monasteries were founded, they have set up parish churches in cities like London or Winchester¹⁷. Dunstan "raised building for the needs of the church... both within the city walls and in every village in archdiocese... or has repaired those destroyed. He was attentive to all the churches in Britain and neighbouring islands."¹⁸ A medieval chronicler ex-

¹⁵ Eadmer of Canterbury, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁶ David Knowles, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ Douglas Dales, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

¹⁸ Eadmer of Canterbury, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

presses very plastic the relationship between church (especially her head) and people: “The root of these blessings of God was Dunstan. The plant grows from him to Edgar, and from the king stretched to all the people.”¹⁹

The king endowed with land and other possessions his new founded monasteries and helped the existing ones to recover²⁰. Having as foundation the strict order of St. Benedict, the monastic life flourished during the three bishops, most monasteries following closely the French model of Fleury and Ghent. The Divine Liturgy was the centre of a monk’s daily life. He had time for prayer, reading the Psalter, singing, but also for loneliness and obedience (most monks were engaged in intellectual work - study, manuscripts, mission, but also with some manual work)²¹.

Beyond the reform practical work of the three hierarchs, there was a scripting support. It was called *Regularis Concorida or The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation* and it was written by St. Ethelwold, Dunstan’s right hand and strongest supporter in the reform of monasticism. This text wanted achievement of uniformity in Anglo-Saxon monastic life, haunted in those times of chaos, disorder and decay. To have a Christian society, it should be cleaned the top of it. The three hierarchs began their work from the heart of the church. They understood that too great diversity and individuality of monasteries had given rise to places of perdition. The upsurge of the first centuries had changed, and now those who lived in the monastic community took advantage of the good name of ancestors and the freedom which they had given dwellers in times in which we lived really only for God²². King Edgar was the one who permanently encouraged the introduction of the same rule in all the monasteries in England, to a greater uniformity and discipline required after decades of disorder and decay²³.

At the council of Winchester in 966 Bishop Ethelwold presented his work entitled *Regularis Concordia*, which aimed straightening the monastic life in England. This was added to the established Benedictine order supplementing it, especially by receiving more power being a church syn-

¹⁹ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum – The Deeds of the Bishops of England*, translated by David Preest, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2002, p. 20.

²⁰ David Knowles, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²² Sarah Foot, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²³ *Edgar, King of the English, 959-975: New Interpretations*, editat de Donald Scragg, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2008, p. 211.

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od rule²⁴. There are numerous testimonies of this *Concordia* penetration in monasteries in southern England and then in other areas.

Concordia has the Benedictine rule as spring, but it will not simply be a copy of it; it framed the rules of life in an Anglo-Saxon context. The Benedictine Rule was reactivated in the west by St. Benedict of Aniane, a Visigoth monk who tried to revive monasticism by Eastern model in the Carolingian period. Having no success, then St. Benedict proposed the order of St. Benedict, as something easier and so more suited to the Western soul²⁵. It was very successful. From France it arrived in England, and in the tenth century it was brought in attention, and nidated in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The monasticism was seen as a rough way of Christian living, with little caresses. This restriction came after at least a century and a half when monasteries born opulence, luxury and pleasures. On the other hand, the order of St. Benedict did not require daily Communion of monks. Neither *Concordia* makes it an obligation, but urges monks to frequent Communion. It seems that this ordinance has its local spring - St. Bede's writings²⁶. The monks who could not attend services had to read Psalter and hours²⁷.

Another specific note of *Concordia* is the relation between king and church. Unlike continental West, where the role of the king was a rather small one, as nobility appointed or banished bishops and abbots, in Albion the king was recognized as protector and master of the monasteries. His relationship with the church was well established, with the involvement of both sides. The church mentioned him at every service, as protector and ruler, and this memorial done every at every St. Altar created a real sense of national unity²⁸.

Different from Western Europe is providing bishop election for cathedrals which had a community of monks from among those monks. He remained in the congregation, living as a monk, and putting him at the head of the diocese ensure stability and continuity for the monks of the cathedral. St. Dunstan will be the one who most supported the independent posi-

²⁴ *Comptus Rolls of the obedientiaries of St. Swithun's priory, Winchester*, Simpkin & co, Londra, 1892, p. 173.

²⁵ Douglas Dales, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

²⁶ David Knowles, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

²⁷ Richard W. Pfaff, *The Liturgy in Medieval England – A History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 79.

²⁸ David Knowles, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

tion of the bishops, taking as a basis the rule established by St. Gregory the Great in sending Augustine to England and mentioned by Venerable Bede in several writings²⁹. In time most bishops would be elected from among monks and will get to be part of witan - the country parliament, along with the most important abbots³⁰. The monk-bishop must have spiritual integrity; he was head of the church, schools and local missions, being a link between king and church³¹. Dunstan's purpose to support the independent positions of the bishops was preventing the church from being just a secular institution linked completely to the state and primarily involved in politics, as was until his times³².

The bishop and the priest in general have a great responsibility to the people and one of the faces of shepherding was the sermon. Especially in the ninth century the sermons will become a very important part of the services, perhaps because a good part of the most famous British bishops of that time were great orators. There were preserved several collections of sermons, grouped on feasts, saints or other topics of general interest³³.

Besides renewing monastic life in England, the three hierarchs, but first Archbishop Dunstan encouraged missionary work outside the kingdom. Thus in that period many monks or missionaries-bishops left England, targeting mainly Scandinavia, where they initiated or supported existing missions and churches³⁴.

During this period the English translation of various religious writings takes a boost to. Monasteries are true religious and secular education centres and copying of manuscripts, both in Latin and in the local language³⁵. Thus, of the twenty-nine Anglo-Saxon Psalters from the pre-Norman period kept in the world museums, much is written in Old English³⁶. Most of the post-reform theological writings have a continental influence, especially from the monastery of Fleury. The Englishmen begin to give up their

²⁹ *Idem*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³¹ Douglas Dales, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³ *A Social History of England – 900-1200*, editat de Julia Crick și Elisabeth van Houts, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1963, p. 271.

³⁴ David Knowles, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

³⁵ Douglas Dales, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

³⁶ Mechthild Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 17.

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national ethos, increasingly taking French style and ideas. But concerning the service books, although the majority were brought from France and they had holy services for Franc saints there were added references, songs or services for local saints too³⁷.

From church the reform radiated toward secular sphere, penetrated it, influenced it, and put the seal through the change begun by the three hierarchs and their supporters, primarily in people's lives. For his support, Edgar was called the friend of the monks³⁸, by having an essential role in the success of the nation's spiritual revival. As long as King Edgar lived, the three hierarchs had quiet times and they could complete their work, each in the place where he was placed by God, but together, renewing the church as a whole. In this period England become a multinational Orthodox state, where three Christian or mostly Christian peoples lived: Anglo-Saxons, Celts and Danes, whose influence stretched already toward the northern peoples, the Norwegians and Swedes (through the missionary work)³⁹. Edgar made the monarch to become of great importance in people's lives and the church. One author noted that in the tenth century more and more icons of the Saviour on the throne - King of Kings appear which strengthened the king's place and made the earthly kingdom to be seen as a mirror of the heavens⁴⁰.

The king was not only the father of the people, but also the benefactor of the church, especially of the monasteries. He supported the educational work of monastic places. The relationship between church and state reinforced during King Edgar, led to the flourishing of a Christian vision of society, which very much resembled Byzantine symphony. The King was leaning on the advice and power in all his bishops, who were mostly appointed directly by the monarch, and who received important functions in the witan or as judges⁴¹. *Regularis Concordia* established a close relationship between God, king and church. The King protected the church and monks and clergy prayed for the salvation of his soul⁴².

³⁷ David N. Dumville, *Liturgy and the Ecclesiastical History of Late Anglo-Saxon England*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1999, p. 41.

³⁸ Henry Royston Loyn, *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England, 500-1087*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1984, p. XV.

³⁹ Vladimir Moss, *The Monastic Revival of Tenth - Century England*.

⁴⁰ Douglas Dales, *op. cit.*, p. XII.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² Vladimir Moss, *The Fall of the Orthodox England. The Spiritual Roots of the Norman Conquest, 1043-1087*, 2007, p. 17.

Edgar and his successors will equip bishops and dioceses with significant wealth (primarily land, and other material values), which will ensure the life of the church for several generations, as long as hierarchs will remain men of God and Church servants.

The separation between state and church is visible only in the next century, when conflicts will break out because of the too great interference of the king in Church life. But now we are talking about a quiet age when state and Church are intertwined, clergy and nobility had a common vision. What was built in the tenth century will operate many hundreds of years to come, namely a society in which the role of the Church was extremely important⁴³.

Figures compiled by historians also talk of the Church reviving in the tenth century: to a population of a million and half British, there were about 10,000 churches and chapels, 35 monasteries of monks and 9 of nuns (with around 1,000 monks)⁴⁴. Of course the situation is numerically and qualitatively unfavourable to that before the Viking invasion, but in these difficult conditions the more are to be appreciated the efforts of bishops and Christian kings. Edgar and his direct descendants restored and founded no less than 40 monasteries, communities formed by monks schooled in Abingdon and Winchester (the most famous theological school in the kingdom)⁴⁵.

Beyond the numbers are countless miracles recorded in the chronicles and lives of saints, proving the Anglo-Saxons constant love for God. A special place in the hearts of Englishmen had Theotokos, who escaped the people from troubles on several occasions. Among these miracles, one of the most popular took place in the year 994, when on the Nativity of Our Lady, celebrated by the islanders in a particular way, the Virgin saved London from complete destruction by Vikings⁴⁶.

If until the tenth century Liturgy suffers many insular (Irish, Welsh) and continental (Roman) influences, after reform the service became uniform. In museums and libraries there are a large number of hieratikons, proof of the special concern of the reformer hierarchs to equip every church and

⁴³ Douglas Dales, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Fr. Andrew Phillips, *Orthodox Christianity and the Old English Church*, www.orthodoxengland.org.uk, p. 21.

⁴⁵ *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 volumes*, vol. I, 1907-1921, p. 14.

⁴⁶ Fr. Andrew Phillips, *Orthodox Christianity and the Old English Church*, www.orthodoxengland.org.uk, p. 21.

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monastery with the necessary service books⁴⁷. The reformer urged parish priests to follow the order of religious services held in monasteries. Of these, there were mandatory the great feasts and those of the most important saints (St. Gregory Dialogue and St. Augustine, his disciple with a special place), the Sunday service and the seven daily hours, which were considered to be more suitable for laymen⁴⁸.

The three fathers took the best from the past and from other nations, planted on the already barren land of England, watered it with much prayer and love and made it bear fruit in unfavourable time. The second half of the tenth century brought a happy conjunction between secular power and the Church. It will reach its peak during King Edgar, who protected and supported the hierarchs' plans to renew the church⁴⁹. God gave the people both a king with love for the Church and some bishops who have put their life for its service. And the result was a breath, and a strengthened before the new sufferings of the Anglo-Saxon people in the eleventh century.

⁴⁷ M. Bradford Bedingfield, *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2006, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Richard W. Pfaff, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁴⁹ H. R. Loyn, *The English Church, 940-1154*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2014.