In addition to worship, religion is an important way through which people can express both their culture and the differences between it and other cultures. The story of this period is how, in the former Roman province of Britannia the people both indigenous and invader turned settler, gradually accepted the claims of one religion-Christianity and allowed it to form the structure of their everyday lives. Sources for the period are scarce and as Barbara Yorke points out when outlining the types of evidence that are available that it is inadequate as not all classes of society nor areas of the country are equally represented.[1] She also notes that the evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries that coincides with the collapse of the Roman Empire and its turbulent aftermath has been the subject of many radically different interpretations by historians.[2]

It is important to realise that the process of Britain becoming a Christian country was slow, as it was everywhere, and it allowed for a certain degree of assimilation of the pagan practices it replaced. A good example of this is Easter, which is a Spring festival celebrated on a date determined by Biblical chronology. The etymology of the word Easter, however, comes from the Germanic pagan goddess of fertility, Eostre, whose festival of rebirth and renewal with its symbols of hares and eggs was also celebrated in the spring. Another point to bear in mind when considering this long process of Christianisation is the fundamental difference between the pagan religions and Christianity, which A.D. Nock termed as "natural" and "prophetic" forms of religions.[3] "Natural religion" is a way of seeking to control the essential forces and events of everyday life by using perceived good forces such as gods and idols to counter the bad forces such as disease and natural disasters. "Prophetic religion" is more cerebral focused upon achieving eternal salvation for an individual's soul by faith and following a moral code. How would someone know they needed salvation if they hadn't been taught it and that a specific moral code was attached? With only a small supply of adequately formed missionaries it can be no surprise that progress was slow and that eventually the catalyst for change would be the conversion of different kings or rulers in the small kingdoms that were a feature of the British Isles in the early Middle Ages after the close of the Roman era.

Fourth and Fifth Centuries

In AD313 the emperor Constantine granted freedom of conscience and freedom of worship to all religions including Christianity through the Edict of Milan and although Constantine himself appeared to espouse Christianity he was only baptized on his deathbed in AD337. With a multicultural army and from AD315 an official coinage engraved with a Christian symbol such as the Chi-roh, Christianity spread to all corners of the Empire including its northern outpost of Britannia. In AD314, when Constantine consulted the French bishops at Arles over the Donatist affair[it] is recorded that three bishops from the diocese of Britannia were also present. In AD380 Theodosius decreed Christianity was to be the state religion of the Empire. But huge areas of the known world were not under the control of the Romans and the British Isles were only partially under Roman control. In the North, Hadrian's Wall formed the most northerly frontier of the Empire and to the West across the sea lay Ireland.

It is perhaps ironic that Christianity emerged as the major religion in the Western Empire when that empire was in its death throes. Imperial politics, tensions with the Eastern (later known as the Byzantine) empire, barbarian incursions from the Huns and the Goths all weakened the power, size and ability of the imperial army to defend the empire and ensure its economic security. In turn this led to civil wars between its different factions. In AD476 the imperial insignia was sent to Constantinople and the Western Empire formally ended. Britain however, had already left the Empire - an early casualty of its demise. However, in its case, it was fellow indigenous

[1] Yorke, Barbara, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain 600-800* (Longman 2006) Introduction

[2] Ibid.

[3] See Yorke Chapter 2

tribes mainly the Picts and the Scotti [4] who lived beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, who made forays into its territory which gradually increased in number and seriousness.[5] Towards the end of the century there were also incursions by Germanic Saxon tribes. The disruption the raids caused to the local economy were compounded by the increasingly high costs of defence that became necessary, but couldn't be met and the ever growing ripples from the internal politics within the Empire which sent Roman Britain into a terminal decline and by AD410 there was very little left of what had made Britain part of the Roman Empire and according to Zosimus its remaining citizens declared their independence from the Empire in order to deal with attacking "barbarians" themselves.[6]

A lack of contemporary written sources makes it difficult to put together a comprehensive picture of Christianity in Britain between the ending of Roman rule and the coming of Augustine in AD597. It is further complicated by the fragmentation of society into small, devolved kingdoms each with their own particular situation which determined their readiness to accept or reject Christian teaching if it were offered to them. What can be definitively known is that there was a shrine at Verulamiam (modern day St Albans) to the British martyr St Alban. It was well enough known for the bishop of Auxerre to meet the British bishops there in AD429 when on a mission from Pope Celestine, to counteract the Pelagian heresy which had taken root amongst some Romano-British elite.[7] This seemingly minor nugget of information, however, does indicate that in parts of post-Roman Britain there was still contact with Christian practice on the continent and that in Western Britain a form of episcopacy survived the chaos of the times, which Henig feels gave the people there a sense of security and continuity that was otherwise missing.[8] [9] Another important source of information about the continuity of Christianity and its message in Western Britain comes from the *Confessions of St Patrick* who was captured by Irish raiders somewhere on Britain's West Coast during the fifth century and the document is dated to the mid fifth century.[10]

> *My name is Patrick. My father was Calpornius. He was a deacon; his father was Potitus, a priest, who lived at Bannavem Taburniae. His home was near there, and that is where I was taken prisoner. I was about sixteen at the time. At that time, I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity in Ireland, along with thousands of others. We deserved this, because we had gone away from God, and did not keep his commandments. We would not listen to our priests, who advised us about how we could be saved.*[11]

Finally, there is a document *The Ruin of Britain* written by a sixth century monk Gildas. [12] Little is known of him, but his work is mostly a denigration of the surviving secular priesthood as opposed to the Religious. His description of their shortcomings such as being married is however echoed by accounts of what was happening in Gaul as the Empire collapsed.

It was a different picture in Eastern Britain and there is no evidence to suggest that any form of organised Christianity survived the end of Roman rule. Excavations in York and London have found nothing to suggest the two major episcopal Sees had survived and there are no contemporary writings such as that of St Patrick. It was also the area that was settled by the

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[4] The Picts or painted people from the Scottish Highlands. The Scotti came from Ireland.

[5] Fleming, Robin, *Britain After Rome. The Fall and Rise 400-1070* (London, Penguin 2011) 23-25.

[6] Yorke, ibid. 35

[7] Fleming, op.cit., 124; Yorke, op.cit., 116-7.

[8] Henig, Martin, "Religion in Roman Britain" *in* Gilley S. and Sheils W.J., *A History of Religion in Britain* (Oxford, Blackwell 1994) 23

[9] Fleming, op.cit., 126-7

[10] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Confessio (accessed 02.02.2024

[11] Confession of St Patrick ch 1 https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english (accessed 02.02.2024)

[12] Winterbottom, Michael, Ed. and trans., *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works* (London: Phillimore, 1978)

Germanic Anglo-Saxon peoples who had no experience of Christianity. It was this state of affairs that led Pope Gregory in AD597 to send St Augustine and his companions erroneously believing that whole of Britain was in need of intensive missionary activity.

Sixth – Eighth Centuries

Probably the most important influence on the spread of Christianity in post Roman Britain were the Religious who lived communally under monastic discipline but went out preaching teaching and bringing the sacraments to the laity. There was a difference however, between those who were the successors of the Romano-British church and those who arrived in Canterbury in AD 597. These differences would reach a climax in AD664 with the calling of the Synod of Whitby to harmonise the two traditions. In the main, the people in the west would experience their priests and monks travelling around teaching, preaching and offering them the sacraments but also travelling to holy places often sited at the edges of their territory. Islands, in particular, were favourite retreats such as Iona and Lindisfarne. The purpose of these travels was to have a spiritual experience, possibly related to penitential rites and making atonement for perceived sins by means of self- denial alongside a painful experience. In Ireland, Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo has been a place of pilgrimage since the C5th and on the last Saturday in July thousands still gather to pray while climbing the 764m high mountain often walking barefoot in order to attend Mass in the summit chapel. Traditionally, pilgrims would perform rounding rituals, in which they prayed while walking sunwise around features on the mountain including a group of three Bronze Age burial cairns known as Reilig Mhuire (Mary's graveyard). A C7th document A Life of Samson' tells of a c6th peregrinus or as Elizabeth Rees says "'a pilgrim for the love of God." It describes Samson's classical education and formation in Wales and his travels in the Southwest of England and Brittany, his time as a bishop and his times of solitude as a hermit. In many ways his story is echoed in Bede's biography of St Cuthbert the C8th monk and bishop and Rees claims that the practice of the monastic life as seen in the western area had changed very little in the two centuries separating Samson and Cuthbert.[13]

Religious such as Augustine and his group of missionaries came from an Order that followed the Rule of St Benedict, which was drawn up in AD529 and inspired a whole movement of monastic reform on the continent. In England it also spread rapidly due to the work of Augustine and his fellow monks evangelising the country. After the AD664 Synod of Whitby the Rule was also adopted in most of the English houses founded by the Celtic monks, though its spread was limited in the so-called Celtic Fringe. Its basic precept *ora et laboris* (prayer and work) laid down what Benedict felt was the ideal way of life for a monk in both his abbey and other situations such as travelling. Each community was envisaged by Benedict to be a family under an Abbot (from the Aramaic *abba* the term Jesus used when addressing his Father) and each foundation was independent though belonging to the wider confederation viz. the wider family. The daily life of the monk revolved around the eight canonical hours of prayer interspersed with work; spiritual reading; meals and sleep. The Rule is one of the most important written works from medieval times embodying as it did a written Constitution and the rule of law. Benedictine monasteries were also 'democratic' entities in a very undemocratic world.

The British Christianity of the early medieval period was not an entity in itself as some modern writers have tried to paint it.[14] It was strongly influenced by the Christianity practised in Southern Gaul, which was easily reached by the seafaring Romano-British people. There were shared characteristics such as the use of Latin for as its sacred language with the Christianity practised in Rome, which Pope Gregory 1st was keen to make the universal practice (see below) but there were differences also and it was not a one- way process in aligning the two practices. Diarmaid McCullagh in his History of Christianity instances the use of Tariff Books by the Romano-British priests arguing that there was a fundamental difference in the teachings about Grace. Whilst the

[13] Rees, Elizabeth; *Early Christianity in Southwest England* (Oxbow Books Kindle edition 2020) ch 4.

[14] A term often used is Celtic Christianity, but this does not correspond in any way to the modern-day practice of "Celtic Christianity".

continental school followed St Augustine of Hippo which embraced predestination the Romano-British school believed sin could be atoned for by the means of penance and put together a scale of which penance was suitable for what sin; the so-called "Tariffs of forgiveness". This led people to attend confession regularly and laid the basis of the Catholic sacrament of Reconciliation as the continental school moved away from Augustinian teaching on this matter. The major difference between the two forms of Christianity was the dating of Easter. This was solved at the Synod of Whitby in AD664 when King Oswiu of Northumbria ruled in favour of the continental calendar rather the 84-year cycle used by the Romano- British School. However, it took until AD768 before the question was fully resolved when churches in Wales accepted the continental calendar. This was not the only contentious matter- there were questions on differences in baptismal practice, on the liturgy and style of tonsuring for monks.

It would seem that Pope Gregory I had completely misunderstood the situation in Britain. Tradition tells that a monk called Augustine brought Christianity back to Britain in AD 597. It states that Pope Gregory l was struck by the beauty of some fair-haired English slaves that he saw for sale in the market in Rome one day and, on asking where they came from, he was told they were '*Angli*'. He is said to have responded with the pun*: non Angli sed angeli* ('not Angles, but angels'), and this encounter inspired him to send Augustine to convert the heathen Angli to Christianity. On arriving in Britain, Augustine enjoyed an early success when King Ethelbert of Kent agreed to embrace the religion, along with thousands of his subjects, who were baptised en masse on Christmas Day in AD597. What is not said is that Ethelbert's wife was already a Christian and even had brought her own chaplain with her when she left Francia. Her chapel was used by Augustine as his mission Headquarters, and it is quite likely Augustine deliberately started his mission in Kent because of the links to the Christian Frankish court. As Augustine and his friends slowly moved up the country founding or refounding the ancient Sees he appointed Benedictines as bishops with priories of monks attached to them. McCullagh argues that neither the pope nor Augustine had a real understanding of the history and traditions of the church in Britain, and that their ideas were 200 years out of date. It could be that Pope Gregory had an eschatological purpose in sending Augustine to reconvert Britain and that was his belief that the Second Coming was near at hand but could not be achieved until the whole world had been Christianised including its northernmost outpost.[15] Gregory's instructions to Augustine recommended that pagan shrines should be made over to Christian usage as quickly as possible and that, given none in the party could speak the local language, interpreters should be found amongst the Frankish people whose land they would travel through. Both Gregory and Augustine thought he was arriving in a land still organised as it had been under Roman rule, with London and York as provincial capitals and smaller sub-provinces ruled by governors, supported by judicial and administrative officials. All it would take was to install archbishops in each metropolitan capital with the authority to appoint further bishops in each province, thus creating a network of religious authority alongside the secular administration that would quickly convert Britain's erring population back to Christianity. The reality was scenes of urban decay; some remnants of Christianity mixed in with pagan rituals and a thriving Romano- British Christianity in the western half of Britain who were suspicious that Augustine and his mission would swallow them in its train. To help Augustine he was given the Pallium (a liturgical item) by Gregory to signify Papal authority – a practice which successive popes extended to each new archbishop until Theodore was chosen as Archbishop by the Pope in AD669 and his authority was accepted throughout Britannia.[16] It took a century to establish the monopoly of Romanised Christianity throughout the different kingdoms of old Britannia. It was helped by the fact that there were close links with the Kingdom of Francia across the channel which under the Christian Merovingian dynasty had become the most powerful rulers in Europe. There was also some allowance made to enable pagan rituals to be Christianised such as filling graves with possessions of the

[15] McCullagh, D., *The History of Christianity* (Kindle Edition) Part 3 Ch 10

[16] McCullagh, D., ibid.

deceased. But without a doubt the Anglo-Saxon kings were the most important element in the conversion process. For if a king converted, his household and people would follow suit. Likewise, if a pagan king inherited a kingdom, the household would return to pagan practice. For example, King Oswui, when deciding which road to take his kingdom at the Synod of Whitby was persuaded by Bishop Wilfred's argument that St Peter would have more sway in heaven than St Columba, for Peter had been given the keys of the kingdom by Christ himself.[17]

The main source for this period is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In it he describes a single race called the English with a special identity that was based on their loyalty to Rome. McCullagh considers the Englishness described by Bede to "be one of the most lasting and unexpected consequences of Augustine's mission."[18] McCullagh also points out that ecclesiastical unity under Roman obedience came before political union as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms slowly united under one Overlord – the house of Wessex. McCullagh makes this claim by referring to two episcopal Councils in 673 and 679 that made decisions for the whole Church in the different kingdoms. The first at Hertford began to draw up a single written law for the church to operate under. The second at Hatfield gave the assent to use of the Filioque clause of the Nicene creed. McCullagh sums up this period as

> *No one could accuse the English Church of being provincial. Because it maintained a loyalty to Rome, untypical in the rest of Europe, that sense of difference enhanced a precocious belief among the English in their special destiny among their neighbours, both in the same islands and among the people of Europe. Thanks to Bede, and to the leadership of Archbishop Theodore, they could see themselves as a coveted people like ancient Israel, a beacon for the Christian world.*[19]

Ninth - Eleventh Centuries

At the beginning of the C9th, the West Saxons in Southwest England defeated the House of Mercia and became de facto kings of England up to the boundaries with Northumbria and East Anglia. There were two clear reasons why this happened, firstly, the mineral resources of Cornwall which they had recently conquered and secondly, the King of Wessex Egbert had the foresight to determine inheritance and succession by agreement rather than war. Using bloodshed to conquer new land was a weakness in the earlier system of succession as many good men lost their lives.

But in AD789, there was an ominous incursion of three Viking ships on Dorset's coast whose men killed the King's reeve who had been sent to accompany them to the King's court. The number of raids soon increased and in AD793 Lindisfarne was plundered followed Jarrow in AD794 and Iona in AD795. It was a generation later however in AD835 that the Vikings became a major threat to the country for the next thirty years. There were several reasons for their incursions, among them the fact that as the populations of Norway and Denmark increased it became harder to make a reasonable living at home. Additionally, tales of fertile land and monasteries full of valuable plunder presented an opportunity to make a better life for themselves in Western Europe and Britain. The first area to fall to the Vikings was in AD867 followed by East Anglia in AD869 where they murdered the king Edmund later venerated as a martyr. In AD871 Alfred (later called the Great) succeeded to the throne of Wessex and fought several battles against the Vikings to save his kingdom. One tactic he used was to build a network of public strongholds throughout Wessex

[17] Yorke op. Cit. chapter 2.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

with which he was able to defend the area. Many of these later grew into towns which were thriving by the late tenth century through a mixture of being trading centres, fortresses and centres of Christian worship.

The Danes had left a huge legacy of damage, some of it irreparable. In total, three Kingdoms were destroyed; dioceses were disrupted; many monasteries plundered and destroyed with the loss of many charters and legal documents, which were held in the monastic libraries. Many of the religious were slaughtered or left destitute during the raids and pastoral care of the people dwindled due to lack of priests. The Danes were also masters of the eastern and northeastern areas of the country which became known as Danelaw. As the Danes were pagan it meant at least half of the country needed to be rechristianised and the lost learning somehow replaced. It fell to Alfred's successors to reconquer Danelaw and establish a national kingdom instead of a divided country. It was AD954 before it was accomplished under King Edgar, the great- great- grandson of Alfred. As well as achieving peace Edgar also introduced a programme of monastic reform. The Danes had almost destroyed true Benedictine monasticism with many abbeys great and small destroyed and what was left had adopted a more secular lifestyle with Minster priests living in their own homes with wives and children. With no indigenous model to follow, Edgar looked to the continent, in particular Francia and the descendants of Charlemagne who were also reforming their monastic houses. Edgar had the help of three great churchmen to help him, who were all later canonised; Dunstan who reformed Glastonbury, Aethelwold who reformed Abingdon both in the AD940's and Oswald who reformed Westbury on Trym. By the AD960's Dunstan was installed in Canterbury, Aethelwold in Winchester and Oswald in Worcester and by the beginning of the new century fifty houses had been refounded. The reforms were very much influenced by what was happening on the continent under Charlemagne's successors with enhanced ritual and more enhanced daily routine. Around AD970 all the traditions were combined one rule *the Regularis Concordia* which all houses had to follow. Although the king was the chief promoter of the reformation it had once more become a socially acceptable act for the wealthy to found a monastery. Aethelwold, in particular left his mark by translating Benedict's Rule into Old English from the Latin and creating cathedral churches which were also monasteries run by a prior and monks rather than the secular Dean and Canons. Both Dunstan and Oswald were as zealous as Aethelwold in in founding and refounding Benedictine houses and all three followed Alfred in promoting the use of the vernacular in their spiritual writings.

In C11th Europe pilgrimage was promoted as a way of finding holiness particularly to Compostela, where St James was said to rest. Many great churches were built as stages on a pilgrimage route and England too followed the trend. The oldest pilgrimage documented is the Via Francigena which ran Canterbury to Rome then onwards to Apulia where it was possible to board boats to the Holy Land. At least one Archbishop of Canterbury Sigeric documented his journey along the route as he went to Rome to collect his pallium in AD 990.[20] Pilgrimage dictated the architecture of pilgrimage way churches. As could be seen at Ely, there was a long-vaulted nave taking the pilgrim on a journey to the distant high altar, The altar was surrounded by a passageway or ambulatory which led the pilgrim back to the entrance, so a complete circuit of the church was made.[21]

By the C11th England and Wales were beginning to change and Europe too was in a state of flux. Up to this time the main way of gaining wealth and power was by warfare, which allowed plunder to be collected both monetary and human in the guise of slaves. A new and more settled way of life was possible as the wave of invasions from pagan peoples began gradually to slow as they

[20] https://caminoways.com/history-via-francigena (accessed 21/04/2024)

[21] McCullagh, D., Op cit 337

were gradually Christianised. However, the new system was not experienced as a deliverance for most people; instead, it led to be ways of exploitation as the nobility turned to the land for producing their wealth.[22] Many new villages appeared in order to house the workers who were reduced to serfdom. Farmers became the property of their masters obligated to work on a new and intensive manner of farming. This meant the Church was no longer under the headship of monarchs and nobility and the remaining Minster churches gradually disappeared. Instead, the church spread its pastoral care across a dense network of manorial villages. The ideal village had its own church built by the local thegn who employed the priest and from where pastoral care could be directed to everyone although subject to the needs of the Lord of the manor, his family and his tenants.[23] Its boundaries were such that its parish priest could walk to them within one to two hours.[24] Knowing the boundaries was very important for several reasons: it helped avoid disputes over ownership; it determined who could be buried in the graveyard and who should pay the Tithe for the upkeep of the priest and buildings. To reinforce the knowledge of boundaries a tradition grew up of "beating the bounds." Rooted in pagan and Roman tradition, it was another example of how the church took over the unchristian and made it Christian. Towns too began to appear to cater for a much larger population and larger economy. Many developed from the old Minster centres and were characterised by markets and traders, craftsmen and their guilds and numerous churches.

Although late Anglo-Saxon life was more settled, and warfare was conducted on a more professional footing than in the worst days of the Viking incursions, there were two major invasions of Britain in the C11th. The first started with raids from Denmark under the leadership of Swein and the King Ethelred paid him off each time. However, in 1013 Swein decided to invade much to the delight of the people of Danish origin who had suffered under Ethelred including attempts of Genocide. Swein died a year later, and his son Cnut was proclaimed king by the army in England. In 1016 Cnut became king of all England. He embraced kingship with enthusiasm including Christianity. As well as issuing laws he founded monasteries and went on pilgrimage to Rome. He died childless leaving several possible successors; the one who finally ascended the throne in 1042 was Edward younger son of Ethelred. Canonised as Edward the Confessor he set up new instruments of local government headed by sheriffs who were personal representatives of the king in a particular county. He also had a clerical staff of priests to help with the administration headed by the chief clerk whose office developed into that of Chancellor- a position later held by Thomas Beckett and Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. Edward was regarded as a very pious king, and his greatest achievement was the rebuilding of Westminster Abbey- the most ambitious building project seen in England. England was far behind the continent in terms of architecture, but Edward had spent many years in exile there and so called upon Norman architects to design his new church which even by continental standards was innovative and magnificent – a worthy House of God and where Edward would be buried soon after its completion. As John Blair says it was ironic that the last great monument of the Anglo-Saxon era was mainly a product of Norman culture.[25]

Edward died childless and with him the Anglo-Saxon era. It seems quite sad that much of the history of this period has disappeared, whether through its deliberate destruction of books and manuscripts, or through the intense building project of the Normans or is maybe still hidden in the ground. For many decades this period was called the Dark Ages because there was little left

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[22] McCullagh, D., Op. cit. 368

[23] Blair, John, *The Anglo Saxons: A Short Introduction* (Oxford ebook 1984) 69.

[24] McCullagh op. cit. 368

[25] Blair, op. cit. 69

to shed any light on how people lived and their worship. As more has been found, the better we can appreciate the achievements of the times and the role Christianity played in it.

Dr Margaret Turnham

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