

The Monastic Quality of Anglicanism

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C. DAVID BURT, EDITOR

ONE has to wonder just how anti-monastic Caroline England really was. The semi-monastic community at Little Gidding, though it did not survive the death of its founder, Nicholas Ferrar, was peacefully tolerated if not admired by many. And John Bramhall, 17th century Archbishop of Armagh, admitted that covetousness was a “great oar in the boat” of the reform, “and that sundry of the principal actors had a greater aim at the goods of the Church than at the good of the Church.... I do not see why monasteries might not agree well enough with reformed devotion.” (Bramhall 118-120) Another Caroline divine, Herbert Thorndike, is less reticent. “It is certainly a blot on the Reformation when we profess that we are without monastic life.” (Thorndike 571)

The BCP continued the basic monastic pattern of the Eucharist and the divine office as the principal public forms of worship. (Though it has to be said that the Eucharist was celebrated less frequently than some of the Caroline divines desired.) Anglicanism has been unique in this respect. Continental Catholicism developed a devotional pattern centered around the Eucharist, with extra-liturgical devotions such as the rosary and benediction filling the spiritual needs of most of the laity. The office was, in most places, considered the business of the clergy and religious, and the fact that it, in its full canonical form, could only be recited in Latin meant that it tended to disappear from popular use except in some forms of a “Little Office.” Continental Protestantism, which celebrated the Eucharist infrequently, developed a truncated form of the Eucharist (Lutheranism) or a more informal worship service, retaining some elements of the office. (Mudge 507)

Daily celebration of Mattins and Evensong (in the non-parochial structures of the church, at any rate, such as schools, colleges, Chapels Royal, and of course cathedrals) is fully documented from the late 17th century onwards. (Guiver 116) And statistics indicate that the daily celebration of the hours in many parishes continued independently of the Oxford Movement (which nonetheless did much to restore the hours to prominence after the late 18th-century hiatus). (Guiver 120-2). Anglicans have been a people of the Office. This, of itself, does much to explain the “monastic” quality of Anglicanism.

To have retained Mattins and Evensong would have been, in itself, no more than most Christians, both monastic and non-monastic, would have expected in the early patristic era – an era quite familiar and appreciated by the Caroline divines. The fourth century Egyptian monks had two main synaxes during the day just as the 4th century cathedrals had morning and evening prayer which were attended by the laity as well as the clergy. But Cranmer seems intuitively to have understood something of the distinction between “monastic” prayer and “cathedral” prayer, and seems to have opted, to a significant degree, for the “monastic.” Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that Cranmer’s love for the Bible led him naturally into a more monastic understanding of the hours and the use of Scripture in the hours. Just as the “monastic” understanding of liturgical prayer in early monasticism was to emphasize listening to, and being formed by, the words of Scripture rather than singing and speaking them primarily in an attitude of praise, so too, Cranmer believed that the Bible was the living word of God and that if “his fellow countrymen could be induced to read the word of God, or, if illiterate, to hear it read, it would in course of time make its way into their hearts.” (Neill 54) While Luther rejected the hours as an “officium”, a “work”, and therefore unnecessary because of justification by faith, the BCP retrieved the “monastic” quality of the hours. (Bradshaw 39) Basically, Cranmer and the

Caroline divines expected the people to be “monastic” in their liturgical outlook. And, for the most part, it “took.”

This is not to say that the “cathedral” approach to liturgical prayer was not also present in Anglican cathedrals, parishes, schools, and so on, or that the “monastic” approach has always been predominant in Anglican history. But an English tendency to be “balanced” (or “restrained”, some might say) along with the basic “monastic” spirituality built into the BCP have prevented Mattins and Evensong from becoming too heavily “cathedral.” The monastic preference for listening to Scripture rather than merely using select portions of it in the liturgy is demonstrated in the Caroline church’s interest in writing, reading, and delivering sermons, an indication of the attentive interest on the part of 17th century Anglicans in the meaning and value of the words of Scripture. And while the Carolines did not go as far as the Puritans would have liked in stripping their churches of ornament and their liturgies of ceremony, there was nonetheless a pronounced element of restraint and simplicity in 17th century Anglicanism – as though the Carolines shied from anything purely “outward-looking” or external (which the “cathedral” office can sometimes seem to be).

But I think this balance is not merely English: it is Benedictine. The Rule of St. Benedict (RB) breathes an air of balance, moderation, discretion, and does so in the liturgical context for the sake of cultivating a reflective spirit of prayer.

The Carolines also aimed at a balance in their theology. They, like the 14th century English mystics (Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, *The Cloud of Unknowing*), sought a balance between the extremes of a theological straitjacket for the spirit and sentimentality divorced from doctrine. (Richard Rolle might be a bit too highly charged emotionally to be in quite the same company.) True piety with sound learning was the ideal. The more pastorally-minded of the Carolines (Donne, Herbert, Taylor, Ken, Andrewes) can be as affectively drawn to the humanity of Jesus as was St. Bernard or Julian of Norwich. But, it has to be said, sound learning tends to rule among the Carolines, in part because much of their theological focus was directly back to the fathers; in other words, back to the pre-Bernardine age, which meant jumping over, to some extent, the affectivity of Bernardine and post-Bernardine spirituality. (Thornton “Carolines” 432)

The 17th century was also an era of order in religious practice. This meant not only the order of the liturgical hours but also the order of other aspects of daily life in the context of spirituality. Prayers were composed for everyday occasions: on waking, dressing, grace before meals, on starting a journey. This practice of prayers for the daily activities of life finds a counterpart in certain periods of monastic history and endures in some monastic communities to this day. As the RB strives to cultivate an habitual sense of the presence of God in alternating periods of prayer and work, so does the BCP. (Thornton “Carolines” 433)

Much of the affective spirituality of the English 17th century was expressed as poetry, which is a means of expressing affectivity in an ordered way. In considering how this quality relates to Benedictine monasticism, one cannot help thinking of Newman’s assigning to St. Benedict the badge of poetry as distinguished from St. Dominic the scientific and St. Ignatius of Loyola the practical. (Newman 236) One thinks also of the primarily monastic influence behind the poetic liturgical literature of the Carolingian era. (Leclercq, *Love of Learning* 236 ff.)

Reference to the creative, poetic use of language in liturgy brings us to another characteristic of Caroline spirituality. Language and piety were inseparable for the Carolines (as, evidently, for the Carolingians and the 14th century English mystics). Early monastics were not, judging by their writing styles and lack of comment about the beauty of language, concerned about poetic language in their liturgy or in Scripture. The Carolingians, the Cistercians, the 14th century English mystics, and the Carolines were very interested in the beauty of language. I suspect this difference has something to do with literacy. Common to oral cultures is the attribution of an almost magical, talismanic potency to the spoken word because of the fact that it is spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. (Ong 32) Since illiteracy was significant among early monastics, the compelling force and power of Scripture must have been due – aside to the fact that it is God’s word – to simply hearing it spoken (whether from memory or read by the literate monks) in the synaxes. In primarily literate contexts, however, where there is also an awareness of the importance of Scripture in daily reading and in the liturgy, the compelling force and power of Scripture – aside from the fact that it is God’s word – needs to be experienced in some way other than listening to it being read. Rendering it in language that is compelling

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because of its beauty and rhythm was the answer. Regardless of how archaic the language of the earlier versions of the BCP and the King James Bible may seem to us, it obviously appealed to a spiritual yearning in the lives of the 17th century English. The Bible was read, and the offices were prayed. The number of editions of the Bible published after 1580, when books were relatively inexpensive enough to be in the hands of ordinary people, is astonishing. (Neill 129-30) And the English Bible did more than anything to encourage literacy among the 17th-century populace. (Thornton “Carolines” 434-5)

Cranmer’s use of language – not simply that it was in the vernacular but that it was powerful in rhythm and cadence and beauty – was one way of achieving his desire to involve all the people of the Church in its spiritual life, not as onlookers but as active participants. So too, the RB is designed for a predominantly lay, i.e., non-clerical, community. Cranmer expected more from the laity than a passive, uncomprehending presence. He reposed great confidence in the laity, and expected a great deal from ordinary people. (Neill 54). We know that his effort to involve further participation in the Eucharist by insisting that two or three people receive the Holy Communion with the presider met with much resistance. (Wall 278) But the documentation of attendance at daily Mattins and Evensong attests to the fact that his expectations were not everywhere and always disappointed. While involvement in the religious life on the part of the lower socio-economic classes is difficult to ascertain, we do know that the lay intelligentsia (Mary Astell, Robert Boyle, Margaret Godolphin, Mary Caning, Lady Ranelagh, to name but a few) certainly played a leading part in 17th century religious life. (Thornton, *English*, 241)

Other common elements between the BCP and the RB: Both point to the ideal of contemplative recollection. Jeremy Taylor’s “I would rather your prayer be often than long” (Thornton, *English*, 258) puts us in mind of RB’s “prayer should...be short and pure” (RB 20:4) as well as the whole spirit of RB. Both Caroline and Benedictine spirituality inculcate a distinct strain of (to use Julian of Norwich’s term) “homeliness” – a warm, tolerant, human devotion based on loving persuasion rather than fiery oratory. Anglicanism is more at home with the Benedictine image of the Church as a supportive family than with, for instance, the militia image of the Jesuits. The BCP and Caroline spirituality presupposed a stable community: a common office, empirical guidance within the family, rubrics relating to residential qualifications for marriage and burial, John Donne’s emphasis on the Word being preached “in a settled church” (Thornton, *English*, 258) are elements evocative of Benedictine stability.

After Trent, the tendency in Catholicism was to separate moral and ascetic theology, so that two distinct “sciences” of preparing souls for heaven emerged, the one occupied with the question of the legality or illegality of human acts, and the other concerned with spiritual progress and holiness. (Thornton, *English*, 241) While such a distinction is part of the contemporary Catholic landscape, Benedictine monasticism has nonetheless always tended towards the notion that conventual life, with its daily observances, is in itself a means of spiritual direction and moral instruction. (Leclercq “Spiritual Direction” 28) Similarly, Caroline direction placed more emphasis on recollection in daily life than on particular techniques of formal prayer, and Caroline casuistry was not concerned with formal “self-examination” prior to sacramental confession but with the practical art of making moral decisions during daily life, training the conscience to be used in habitual recollection. (Thornton, *English*, 240-1)

As to differences between the BCP and monasticism, the obvious difference is that the BCP does not ask for vows of obedience, stability, and conversion of life. Still, the BCP and Caroline spirituality fostered an approach to living the Christian life which encouraged Anglicans to live significant elements of these vows in their everyday lives.

Another difference is that the RB provides for the election of a superior from among the members of the monastic community. While Cranmer might have expected much from the laity, he and the English government did not expect them to be able to vote on who would be their rectors, vicars, bishops, and so on.

Election brings up another major difference as well as a possible defect of Anglicanism. Men and women ideally become monks because they perceive in the monastic manner of life a spirituality that they feel called to. But not everyone is at home with monastic spirituality; not everyone, then, should be expected to be at home with the monastic ethos of the BCP. Cranmer, however, wanted an entire people to fit into a certain spiritual mold. While the ethos of 17th century England might have been sufficiently homogeneous and

sufficiently “monastic” to sustain Caroline spirituality for a time, what would the ethos of, say, an Episcopalian parish in modern California be? It is interesting to note that another recent book, Stephen Sykes’ *The Study of Anglicanism*, makes no reference to the monastic or Benedictine influences in Anglicanism. Has contemporary Anglicanism outgrown its monastic ethos? If so, what is its ethos?

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