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Benedictine Monasticism and the Secular World: An Historical Perspective

What is Benedictine monasticism?

Benedictine monasticism developed in the early middle age and by the Carolingian period (9th-first half of the 10th c.) became the most dominant model of monasticism in the West. Although, there was no Benedictine order as such, until the nineteenth century (only so-called congregations since the late middle ages), individual Benedictine communities across Europe continued their existence for centuries (some until now) . Benedictine monasticism also produced major innovations in the monastic organisation the shape of Cluny Abbey and its daughters in the 10th century and then the development of Cistercian movement leading to the creation of the first religious order across the Latin Christendom by the mid-12th c.

Benedictine communities followed the same rule, attributed to St Benedict of Nursia (composed in the 6th c.). It contains 72 chapters and stipulated that monks must observe poverty, chastity and obedience, their day was organised around the attendance of 8 church services each day. However, the Rule is not itself a complete set of guidelines for running a monastery, and the practical details were often supplemented in sets of monastic customs/customaries: it was these above all which distinguished the different strands of Benedictine monasticism from one another (for example Cistercians from 'traditional' Benedictines) and even individual communities from each other.

Continuity

Medieval monastery, especially one that belonged to Benedictine tradition was built on the concept of *stabilitas*, the monks forever bound to their community. Even more so, monastery was an institution that was design to transcend an individual life, free from constrains of inheritance. The development of the economic basis of the monastery could be made with a very long view and this is particularly true for the Cistercians who had far greater control over their economic life than traditional Benedictines. At least in theory a monastery was to continue into perpetuity. This also means that monastic community transcended time in another way – it was the community of living and the dead and the former had an obligation towards the latter and this chain of obligation was renewed with each generation. The most striking manifestation of it are monastic necrologies – a type of calendars in which names of

the deceased monks were entered under the date and month (but not year) in order that their deaths are remembered and commemorated. The names of brethren and especially abbots were added cumulatively and sometimes the same necrology could contain names centuries apart and they are listed together with the liturgical time which is cyclical and not linear. Continuity does not mean lack of change, far from that. In fact, adaptability is one of the key characteristic of successful monastic model, as the Cistercians have shown. Tradition understood as accumulated set of practices, customs and procedures was the key to the Benedictine identity. It 'had grown through the centuries and was observed alongside the Rule, had its own intrinsic value.'¹

Continuity means that a strong structure of institution, tradition and ideology (religious observance) that binds generations of monks together can sustain more temporary difficulties such as bad abbots. And bad abbots could mean a lot of things - ineffective administrators, corrupt leaders syphoning off income or selling property, or disinterested in their pastoral duties towards the community, personally un-pious and treating the office for the personal advancement only. A very useful guide to what constituted good monastic leadership and what characterised 'good abbots' are the so-called 'Gesta Abbatum' (for example that at St Albans written in 1390s by Thomas Walsingham). Another chronicle of that type was created by a monk of Westminster Abbey, John Flete, who rose through the ranks to become the prior in 1457. He wrote a history of the abbey combining different genealogical genres. Flete's work contains four sections – the foundation story of Westminster, copies of the key charters, a list of relics kept in the abbey and indulgences attached to them and deeds of abbots up to the year 1386. Akin to many other types of chronicles of this period, the alleged origins of Westminster Abbey are very illustrious going back to the year 184 when King Lucius founded the abbey which was destroyed during the Diocletian persecution and re-founded in the early seventh century by King Sebert.² In texts of this type the rule of subsequent abbots created a narrative spine for the institutional history, very much for internal consumption . 'Bad abbots' were rarely openly criticized in such texts, it is more commonly done by omission (even complete), brief entry and veiled allusions. It was important to remember past abbots, there was also a strong sense of learning from the past, from following good examples. They were text meant to teach and to inspire attachment to the community and tradition. According to the medieval understanding of time, the golden age, the good times had happened in the past (specifically at the time of the Church of the Apostles) and with the passage of time

¹ Ludo J.R. Milis, *Angelic Monks and Earthly men. Monasticism and its Meaning to Medieval Society* (Woodbridge: the Boydell Press, 1992), p. 113

² *The History of Westminster Abbey by John Flete*, ed. J. Armitage Robinson (Cambridge, 1909).

corruption creeps in. Therefore to reform something (and reform was almost a constant feature of monasticism at the institutional level) was to return to the perfect state in the past and not to introduce any innovations. The concept of 'innovation, novelty' was a negative one.

And returning to the problem of what may bring a crisis to a monastery, other common problems that might befall on a monastery were economic crisis, deep conflicts with the surroundings or even war and associated destruction forcing dispersal of the community, and loss of property. In such cases, often the narratives of overcoming past difficulties, how the community defended itself and rebuilt, usually with a divine intervention, often stressing importance of some figures (could be patrons, important supporters etc.) were an important resource.

The concept of change

If continuity is so important, what does the concept of change mean in the medieval monastic context? Change can be accepted only if it can be accommodated within the tradition, made part of tradition. As James Clark described it in relation to the Benedictines in England: 'To enter the monastic life in the fourteenth, fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries in spiritual terms may have meant the same as it had in the High Middle Ages or even earlier, but in many of its daily essentials it would have been a wholly different experience. Everything from the process of admission and training to the physical space of the monastery and even the notion of the common life itself had undergone fundamental change. [...] [and it] was [...] rather the product of a conscious process of reform'.³ A good example of it is the role of higher education in the later middle ages within the Benedictine and Cistercian monasticism. The study, meaning greater theological knowledge in order to deepen spiritual practice and observance is of course part of the Rule of St Benedict. Study was always part of the training of monastic novices. Preservation of knowledge, especially copying of the manuscripts, establishing of libraries were always part of the monastic practice. But the emergence of the universities at the end of the twelfth century introduced a very different approach to studying and knowledge. The organised structure of the Cistercian order facilitated more numerous Cistercian monks studying already in the 13th c. (in Paris by the middle of the century) and the white monks (Benedictine) joined this trend a few decades later. Unlike for mendicant friars, the contemplative nature of Benedictine tradition meant that the benefit for the home communities was more important than the value of advancing academic career and controlling

³ James G. Clark, 'The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England', in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), p. 10-11.

theological chairs at various universities. The presence of university educated monks in the late medieval Benedictine and Cistercian communities changed them very significantly, but it was a change that can be accommodated and absorbed within the tradition:

- Arrivals of more books and private book collections into the monasteries
- Need for more private space
- Change of internal hierarchy (monks with degrees gain more seniority)
- Degree or even doctorate becomes particularly desirable in abbots
- For English Benedictines it was also return to large-scale book/manuscript copying (v. characteristic of the earlier period) . At the end of 14th c. c. many of the oldest Benedictine communities – Christ Church Canterbury, Bury St Edmunds, Durham, St Albans and Worcester were almost self-sufficient in books and at St Albans there was even a new purpose-built scriptorium not just for the monks but for the professional copyist and illuminators employed. Durham Priory employed foreign book-binders.⁴ English Benedictine houses were also early adopters of printing, likewise Cistercians on the continent.

Change and how to cope with it was something that pre-occupied monastic communities a great deal as well as important external authorities such as papacy. They developed a strong discourse of going back to the roots to accommodate many new inventions. However, the most important manifestation of the fundamentally unchanging mission of monks, their role of intercessors created a permanent circle between the community and the outside world.

The circle of reciprocity

Medieval monasteries existed, and Benedictines are the most classic example of that, primarily as intercessors. Monks were, to put it crudely, the professionals of prayers. Their role gave them an opportunity, more than anybody else to have their souls saved, but they had also specific duty, an obligation to pray on behalf of others to aid their salvation. And because monasteries were meant to exist in perpetuity, that obligation was to be upheld even if centuries passed since the death of the lay benefactors for whom the monks promised to pray. Technically, the prayers of the monks were meant to aid the entire Christendom, but in particular the person or persons who founded the monastery and their descendent and people who gave land and property to the monastery (in the early middle ages it could be also child-oblates.). A gift to a monastery was a good deed in itself, a way to establish a long-term relationship with the abbey and to secure a share of prayers. In case of Cluny Abbey and its dependant monastic communities it created an unsustainable burden because the

⁴ Clarck, , 'The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation', p. 23.

commemoration was individual, whilst Cistercians 'rationalised' it as collective prayers for all the benefactors of the order performed once each year in September.

Relationship between Benedictine communities and their patrons and benefactors was always based on reciprocity. This does not mean that the prayers were simply bought, but rather they were a result of complex web of exchange in which goods of one kind (material) were exchange for another (spiritual). The relationship between patrons, benefactors and 'their' monastery was not a one-off, but intended to last for centuries renewed in subsequent generations by new donation, confirmations (we continue to be happy that this part of our patrimony is in the hands of the monastery). Some Benedictine houses provided schools for the children of the laity. Located within the precinct, the almonry schools became a significant feature of the late medieval English Benedictine communities. Some communities also acted as guardians of children of their patrons. For example in 1530 Lord Lisle handed over his stepson to live in the household of the Abbot of Reading to be educated in both Latin and French.⁵

In return for material gifts monasteries, gave prayers and many other forms of liturgical commemorations, burials within the bounds of the monastery (seen as spiritually highly beneficial) were formalized by the so-called confraternity/fraternity agreement, a type of association into lay people could enter into with a monastic community. Since the early middle ages 'The spiritual counter-gifts by the religious in return for aristocratic generosity were different in kind and could consist of admittance to the monastic community, often on the deathbed, burial in the monastery's cemetery, participation in the fruits of the monks' works of mercy, eternal commemoration through prayers, the yearly celebration of anniversaries, and/or masses for the souls of the deceased. From the eighth century onward, the religious counter-gift also took the form of a formal establishment of a prayer bond or the bestowal of the monks' *fraternitas* to an individual donor or to groups of special benefactors.'⁶ A very important tool of intercession and commemoration associated with the confraternities were the *libri vitae* (literarily 'books of life'). A very good example from the English Benedictine context is The Durham *Liber Vitae*, a complex manuscript which originated in the mid-ninth-century as a list of several hundred names of persons associated with a Northumbrian church, . Around 1100 there was addition of a list of monks of Durham Cathedral Priory, continued until the 16th c. In addition, 1,688 names of lay people were

⁵ Clark, 'the Religious Orders', pp. 24-25.

⁶ Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld, 'Looking for Common Ground: from Monastic *Fraternitas* to Lay Confraternity in the South Low Countries in the Tenth to Twelfth Centuries', in *Religious and Laity in Western Europe 1000-1400: Interaction, Negotation and Power*, ed. Emilia Jamroziak and Janet Burton (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 290-291.

added between c. 1300 and the Dissolution of Durham Cathedral Priory in 1539. Majority of names were entered on behalf of living person.⁷ Durham Priory's *Liber Vitae* copy was made a prestigious book with decoration akin to expensive prayer book as it was important physical object. A 1593 antiquarian description of Durham cathedral ('The Rites of Durham') states that the book was displayed on the high altar.⁸

Such books were customarily place on the altar during the mass and thus the power of the ritual was directly benefiting the souls of the people whose names were written there. How the liturgical commemoration looked like in a late-medieval Benedictine house we know for example from the *Ordinal and Customary* of St Mary's Abbey in York.⁹

The monasteries were some of the most important repositories of memory in the medieval world, in the sense of institutional memory (the foundation narrative, chronicles and establishment of extensive archives), but also for and about the lay people. The space of monastic cloister and the church although under the monastic observance was also a space in which various visual elements would remind the monks about their lay friends – burial and tombs, coats of arms and liturgical objects commissioned and donated by their benefactors. For example the monastic church of Malmesbury Abbey was full of coats of arms of their illustrious benefactors – Beauchamps, the Barkeley, the Despencers and Hungerfords.¹⁰

Similarly, St Mary Graces Abbey in East Smithfield, a post-Black Death foundation housed a large number of tombs with effigies and brasses and his ranking aristocrat connected with the royal court who were buried in the close proximity of the high altar and in the surrounding chapels.¹¹ And that relationship always transcended death because its focus was on the afterlife. Sometimes patrons were able to exert significant influence on the appearance of the monastic church and establish it as their necropolis. When the patronage of Tewkesbury Abbey was inherited by Despencer family from the Clare family in the early 14th c. they have made it their family mausoleum, with the lavish tombs, depictions of coats of arms on the stained glass and architectural element. The *Founders' and Benefactors' Book of Tewkesbury Abbey* includes images of the abbey's patrons from the Clare, Despenser, and Neville families with their coats of arms and lists of their tombs, chantry chapels established by them, and

⁷ Lynda Rollason, 'The Late Medieval non-Monastic Entries in the Durham *Liber Vitae*', in *The Durham Liber Vitae and its Context*, ed. David Rollason et al. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 127-128.

⁸ *The Rites of Durham being a description or brief declaration of all the ancient monuments, rites, & customs*, ed. J.T. Fowler, Surtees Society, vol. 107 (Durham: Andrews, 1903), pp. 16-17.

⁹ Janet Burton, 'Commemoration in a Yorkshire Context', in *The Durham Liber Vitae*, pp. 227-229.

¹⁰ Clark, 'The Religious Orders', p. 32.

¹¹ Emilia Jamrozak, 'St Mary Graces: a Cistercian House in the Late Medieval London', in *The Use and Abuse of Sacred Places in late Medieval Towns*, ed. P. Trio and M. De Smet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), pp. 153-164.

small bequests such as vestments and liturgical vessels. The transition of the patronal rights to the crown is symbolized by the coat of arms of Edward, son of Henry IV. Some of the figures depicted in the manuscript hold models of churches symbolizing bequests and patronage rights. By the sixteenth century these three families were no longer patrons of the abbey, yet the community wanted to preserve their genealogies as they were closely linked with the institutional one.¹²

Conclusion

There are some parallels to the modern world that are too easy to make, but they are ultimately false. The social utility of monasticism – hospitals, care of the poor and such like, did exist, but their significance was for the medieval society on the religious (especially transcendental level) not societal level (social utility of monks and nuns is a post-enlightenment development). Similarly, it is tempting to see monastic tripartite division of time into work-study/prayer-rest as some kind of predecessor of the work-life-balance, but again, it is built on completely different understating of the purpose of life and the relationship between human being and the supernatural/divine. On the other hand, I would suggest that more useful concept to consider and ‘think with’ are continuity or even perpetuity and the relationship of reciprocity as a system that can be perpetuated for a benefit of all the participants as long as they share the same conviction of the value that it produces. Finally, medieval monasteries remind us about the importance of memory, how do we remember and why and what use is of the information that we preserve.

Further Reading

Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld, *Do ut des: gift giving, memoria and conflict management in the medieval Law Countries* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2007)

Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain 1000-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Joan Greatrex, *The English Benedictine cathedral priories: rule and practice, c. 1270-c.1420* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe 1090-1500*. (London: Routledge, 2013)

Julian M. Luxford, *The art and architecture of English Benedictine monasteries, 1300-1540: a patronage history* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005)

¹² Emilia Jamroziak, ‘Genealogy in the Monastic Chronicles in England’, in *Broken Lines. Genealogical Literature in Medieval Britain, and France*, ed. R. Radulescu and E. D. Kennedy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp. 101-120