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Episcopal Culture in Late Anglo-Saxon England

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Author:
Mary F. Giandrea
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John Blair

Bishops, in theory the central figures in the Anglo-Saxon Church, have received polarized, and sometimes unbalanced, treatment from its historians. Reacting against the assumption?drawn uncritically from universal models?that they necessarily ran everything, recent writers (this reviewer included) have stressed both the rootedness of organization, endowment, and activity in monastic institutions (in the broadest sense), rather than episcopal ones, and the oddly shadowy and marginal appearance of bishops in many of our sources. The driving impulse behind Mary Frances Giandrea's interesting and well-written book is to put bishops back where?in her view?they belong, at the heart of late Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical life. She does this eloquently and to an extent convincingly, drawing on a wide knowledge both of the sources and of the ramifying recent literature on governance, pastoral care, liturgy, books, lordship, and landholding. Much of the ground is relatively familiar, but it has never previously been covered in quite this way. Where her conclusions may be questioned, it is often in areas so bereft of sources as to leave open a wide range of reasonable variation. Her central achievement is her demonstration, through synthesis of so much copious if indirect data, that bishops did, in fact, have a major and distinctive role going beyond the surface message of the sources.

Chapter 1, on Anglo-Norman historical writing and its impact on all later scholarship, clears the ground for

the rest of the book by asserting the need to assess late Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics from the sparse and laconic sources produced before 1066, rather than the seductively voluble historical narratives written thereafter. Despite some tendency to throw out all the babies with the bathwater (and surely less than total fairness to William of Malmesbury as a reporter?) this remains a valid and necessary point, even if much less revolutionary now than a generation back.

Giandrea is at her best in chapter 2, on `Royal service and ideology', and chapter 3, on `Cathedral culture'. The debt of the first of these to the late Patrick Wormald is obvious and fully acknowledged, but it achieves a broader and more balanced synthesis than did any of his published works. Sensible points are made about the compatibility of monasticism with governance and politics in Church and state, and the ability of strict-living monastic bishops to engage with the culture of the court. Just as (in a Reform milieu) the Rule was all-embracing, so the monk-bishop could preserve the holiness of his life and the safety of his soul while wielding power in the world; just as churchmen cheerfully involved themselves in secular punishment, so secular activities such as meetings of the witan could have a strongly liturgical tinge. This provides background to, and makes sense of, the Wulfstanian ideology of an integrated Christian polity. `Cathedral culture' is explored through surviving books, and the recent scholarship which has made them so much more comprehensible. It is argued?rather optimistically but possibly correctly?that rules for canons were widely available in England. The point that priestly and monastic liturgical and spiritual aims were more convergent and compatible than Æthelwold's polemic admitted is well and convincingly made. An optimistic view of the availability of pastoral and exegetical works is also taken, and it is questioned whether Leofric's library at Exeter was really so exceptional. Thus `a synthesis of the best of the old and the new was indeed a hallmark of the Anglo-Saxon Church, beginning with Alfred and ending with the appointment of the Lotharingians by Edward the Confessor' (p .97). Pastoral care?which has been very intensively discussed in the last few years?is reviewed afresh in chapter 4, with a similar tendency towards a maximalist view of episcopal involvement in, and direction of, local ecclesiastical life. While one might not necessarily agree with all of this, it is within the acceptable range of interpretation and is very well handled.

Chapters 5 (`Episcopal wealth'), and 6 (`Community and authority') continue the synthetic approach, but perhaps with rather less freshness of perception and rather more re-treading of familiar ground. There is a useful analysis of the (widely disparate) wealth of the various sees, and it is observed that while bishops were not notably impoverished in comparison with monastic and clerical magnates, the wealth of their sees had very largely been acquired in earlier centuries. That is clearly true, but it might have been contextualized as part of the generally lavish endowment of the pre-Viking Church and its communities, at levels never to be reached again. Late-Anglo-Saxon kings did indeed make gifts to bishops, sees (and minsters), but?with the striking exception of the major Benedictine houses?the context was nothing remotely like the `culture of giving' that had existed in the late-seventh and eighth centuries. It would also have been useful to distinguish more clearly in principle?impossible though it often is in specific cases?between gifts to (individuals who were, among other things) bishops, gifts to sees, and gifts to religious communities that happened also to be the seats of bishops. One particular form of eleventh-century patronage that could have been more sharply delineated is the giving of expropriated minsters to royal clerks of whom some (but far from all) later became bishops and gave the minsters to their sees: for instance Congresbury and Banwell to Giso, Bampton to Leofric, Bosham to Osbern.

In a book so full of useful factual data, it is unfortunate that the index is a little erratic (partly, it seems, because of some change in pagination after the first proofs): on p. 144, for instance, every one of the several names in the footnotes is wrongly indexed. Users will generally find the name they want, but then sometimes face a frustrating hunt.

There are two areas of broad interpretation where the balance of Giandrea's treatment might be questioned. One is a tendency, in criticizing alternative views, to equate suspecting that the late-Anglo-Saxon Church was administratively undeveloped with taking the cue from Anglo-Norman writers that it had slipped into `moral and pastoral decay'. Rejecting the second position does not necessitate rejecting the first. It will probably never be possible to choose definitively between Giandrea's maximalist view of formal episcopal intervention in such matters as parochial life, and the arguably over-minimalist view that I and others have

put forward. But even if the latter were in fact correct, that need in no way detract from her vivid evocation of a religious culture that was spiritually and pastorally vigorous, and drew on a rich and established vernacular tradition that Ælfric merely had to consolidate. Relations between people?and indeed enduring organizational forms?can be sustained in ways that are socially embedded rather than administratively formal, as other aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture illustrate.

This insistence on more structural coherence than the sources show us seems to be one underlying reason for the second problem: an excessive urge to play down the impact of the Norman Conquest. It is obviously true that differences between documentary and narrative traditions can lead to an exaggeration of contrasts, and that a great deal was changing anyway in the second half of the eleventh century. These facts do not inherently undermine the proposition that Edward the Confessor's England was oddly isolated from some Continental developments and that the Conquest speeded up engagement with them. (All this, of course, applies not just to the Church but to several aspects of the Conquest: the debate about the origins of castles is a case in point.) We surely have to associate Anglo-Norman conciliar activity with what had been happening in Normandy, and elsewhere in France, before 1066 much more than with anything that had been happening in England; to put so much emphasis on the delay of reform from the late 1060s to the 1070s, and to revive the shaky arguments for an established Anglo-Saxon tradition of administrative archdeacons, verges on special pleading.

A book so enthusiastically and vigorously argued is bound to prompt some disagreement. As well as being a useful addition to the specialist literature, this is a concise and effective synthesis of much recent work that is not easily accessible to students and general readers. Although not intended as a textbook it would actually make a very good one, and the publishers should be encouraged to re-issue it as a paperback.

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