

## The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons c. 597-c. 700. Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife

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Barbara Yorke

The publisher's blurb for Marilyn Dunn's new book claims that it is 'the first work on the subject to combine a historical approach with insights provided by ethnography and anthropology'. As is often the case with publisher's statements, this is something of an exaggeration. There are few early medieval historical works being written today, let alone those dealing with aspects of early medieval religion, that have not been influenced to a greater or lesser extent by anthropological and ethnographical approaches, and the impact of these disciplines on early medieval archaeology has been even more substantial. That is not to say that an overview of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons from a specific anthropological perspective is not welcome. Marilyn Dunn provides a stimulating reassessment that is also based firmly on archaeological and contemporary written sources and demonstrates wide reading in the secondary literature. Her résumés of the evidence for certain key topics are reasons in themselves for consulting the book. However, what makes her book particularly distinctive (as, to do it justice, the blurb goes on to explain) is that it approaches the subject through cognitive anthropology, is particularly concerned with how Christian discourses on death developed in response to traditional beliefs, and is convinced that the Justinianic plagues of the 6th and 7th centuries were a dominant factor in stimulating these changes.

The introductory chapter explains the book's viewpoint in greater detail. Cognitive anthropology is defined as a union between ethnography and cognitive science in order to uncover the common mental structures underpinning societies. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained. The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (1) is a key influence, as are various studies by Paul Whitehouse that explore differences between doctrinal religions such as Christianity and traditional 'imagistic' religions that are based on

sporadic, collective rituals. These broader insights provide valuable constructs against which to view the often elusive early medieval evidence. However, one also has to recognise, as Dunn does in her subsequent discussions, that some aspects of how religion and morality operate within a society will be culturally specific. One wonders therefore just how similar 20th-century Tikopia in the southern Pacific, one of the areas whose religious practices are called upon to provide parallels, was in all respects to 7th-century Anglo-Saxon England. One of the observations often made about the use of anthropological studies to illuminate the medieval past is that the evidence of distant peoples often seems to be preferred to that of peoples closer in date and time who might provide a more exact parallel. There are places in this book where greater use of evidence from the Anglo-Saxons' near neighbours, especially in Ireland, might have helped to take interpretation further forward.

In the second chapter Dunn looks in more detail at ideas about the soul and the treatment of the dead to reveal fundamental differences in approach between Christianity and non-Christian religions in late Roman and early medieval Europe. Christian concepts of one soul are contrasted with traditional ideas of dual souls and of death as a liminal period in which correct rituals had to be observed to enable the soul that remained with the body at death to move on without posing a threat to the living. The ways in which major Christian thinkers such as Augustine were led into developing concepts of purgatory and of prayers for the dead in response to traditional funerary practices and beliefs are explained clearly and cogently. The chapter ends with looking at key developments in these areas by Columbanus and other Irish who worked in Francia in the 6th and early 7th centuries.

Chapters three and six deal with the narrative of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. Inevitably much well-known ground has to be retold here, but the familiar story is presented clearly and engagingly. There is, for instance, a very effective discussion of how Wilfrid embedded traditional expectations of an Anglo-Saxon leader in his life as bishop of Northumbria. Rather surprisingly there is no use or reference in these chapters to Nicholas Higham's *The Convert Kings; Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (2) which, also drawing on anthropological perspectives, covers much the same ground on the political context of conversion (including a detailed discussion of the relevance of Frankish internal politics to the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons). Between these two chapters are two useful evaluations of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs in life and death that are to be particularly valued for their interdisciplinary approach, especially the attempt to relate the archaeological to the written evidence (though this is also one of the areas where greater use could have been made of Irish parallels). Archaeologists of the late 20th century are taken severely to task for their 'functionalist' approach to Anglo-Saxon burial customs. Perhaps not surprisingly, Dunn embraces the more recent work of a new generation of scholars, such as Sally Crawford, Sarah Semple and Howard Williams, who are attempting to put religion back into the interpretation of pre-Christian burial ritual. However, Dunn goes further than many would in downplaying the importance of burial ritual for proclaiming a family's status or claims to land, in addition to laying the dead to rest.

Dunn's interpretation of the written evidence for Anglo-Saxon paganism is strongly influenced by the work of Richard North, and should perhaps have come with more of a health warning as many of North's linguistic interpretations and readings of the literature in the light of possible Scandinavian parallels have been seen as highly controversial. It is disconcerting to read, for instance, apparently as accepted fact, that King Edwin introduced the cult of Woden into Northumbria shortly before his conversion. Bede, of course says nothing of the sort, and such an interpretation depends on the identification of hidden meanings in his text and language. In this section it would have been worth considering how far aspects of Romano-British religion might have influenced what is referred to as 'Anglo-Saxon paganism', especially in evidence coming from Northumbria where, at even the most generous estimate, Germanic immigrants must have been considerably outnumbered by the existing inhabitants.

Chapter seven looks beyond the initial conversion period to the stage of Christianization when adjustments were necessary on both sides as the new religion was absorbed into Anglo-Saxon society. Topics covered include the expectations of warriors, the role of women, infant baptism, the cult of saints and attitudes to death. Much use is made in elucidating the last two themes of the *Whitby Life of Pope Gregory the Great*

and the *Dialogues* that are attributed to the same pope. Following Francis Clark's proposal that the *Dialogues* were actually written around the 670s and are only in part genuine Gregorian material (3), Dunn promotes a case for this pseudo-Gregorian text having been compiled in Anglo-Saxon England, perhaps in one of the monasteries associated with Wilfrid. This interesting proposal needs more detailed discussion and support than she has so far been able to provide.(4) A brief final chapter summarises the conclusions presented in the book that are generally in line with other recent works in seeing acceptance of the major principles of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England by c.700, including its concepts of the afterlife and hence its burial rituals, but with survival or adaptation to many traditional beliefs and ritual practices continuing beneath the surface.

A recurrent theme in the book is the impact of the Justinianic plagues of the 6th and 7th centuries on both pagan and Christian rituals and attitudes to the dead and the afterlife. This epidemic, which is thought to have been bubonic plague, is first recorded in Egypt in 541 and spread rapidly through Europe with frequent recurrences until the middle of the 8th century. Bede's roll-call of Anglo-Saxon rulers and ecclesiastics who died in the outbreaks of the 660s and 680s is eloquent testimony to high mortality levels. Dunn draws attention to ideas widespread in medieval and other cultures of revenants (or vampires) spreading disease and how these could be combated by burial rituals, such as decapitation or removal of feet, which are often to be found in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. She argues that it was to meet heightened anxieties about death, and doubts about the effectiveness of Christianity in dealing with the dangerous dead at a time of plague, that led churchmen, especially in the insular world, to develop more elaborate ideas of purgatory and the efficacy of penance and prayers for the dead to ease souls into the Christian afterlife. As with the later Black Death, there are problems in discerning how far developments within a certain period (a couple of centuries in the case of the early Middle Ages) were directly a response to plague as opposed to meeting more general concerns about the transience of life at a time when death in battle or by disease would have been commonplace. Some of the attempts to relate a range of developments in burial ritual as reaction to plague seem to go rather too far. It is suggested, for instance (p. 95) that the development of ring-ditches around graves in Kentish cemeteries in the late 6th centuries was to provide a greater barrier between the living and dead because of a fear of revenants. The more usual interpretation is that they are an indicator of status, imitating prehistoric barrow burial, and this viewpoint receives some support in contemporary Irish written sources. It is also suggested that the burials around mound five in the Sutton Hoo elite cemetery were of people who had died of plague rather than, as is more generally interpreted, those who had been executed (p. 176). Dunn has not had the advantage of consulting Andrew Reynolds's recent book on execution sites which sets out detailed evidence for the latter interpretation.(5) The development of execution sites is one of the pieces of evidence to suggest that there were several different types of 'badness' or of unnatural death that required special burial rituals in the early middle ages to protect the living by outlawing such people from the community of the normal dead. 'Deviant' burials, including rites such as decapitation or weighing down the body with stones, have a long history in Europe that stretches back into the prehistoric past, suggesting that revenants were perceived as a recurring problem in a number of different circumstances, of which epidemic disease, of course, could have been one.

Discussion of such issues serves to illustrate how very difficult it can be to draw definite conclusions about the early medieval past when so many aspects are not fully recorded. Formation and examination of hypotheses, developed with the aid of observable patterns from other times and places, is the only way forward as Marilyn Dunn so effectively illustrates in her erudite, but sometimes controversial, contribution to the debates about the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons.

## Notes

1. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained. The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nicholas Higham, *The Convert Kings; Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1997).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*, (2 vols., Leiden, 1987).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. See also Marilyn Dunn. 'Reading the *Dialogues*', *Studia Patristica* 39 (2006), 355–61.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford, 2009).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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