

MODULE CODE: HPHI5911/6911

From Desert Myths to Sheep Tales:
THE CISTERCIANS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

ASSESSMENT TYPE: essay (50%) COMPONENT WEIGHTING: 50%

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ASSESSMENT 2; Write one essay of 2500 words

Option 5 topic: *When and why did the Cistercians decline?*

Submission date limit: by 23.59 on 13 January 2023

Synopsis

As the assignment question is non-specific as regards nationality, we are probably considering a chain of events emerging across Europe rather than a single reason. However, in regard to the British perspective, Anglicanism, The Act of Supremacy in 1534, and confirmation of the schism with Rome, declaring Henry to be the Supreme Head of the Church of England, are certainly a major factors. In essence, though, monastic establishments were the symbolic outcome of the evolution of the Catholic Church and an anathema to opposing doctrines. Sequestration of the monastic holdings could therefore be considered as legitimate collateral damage and concomitant with Dissolution processes. Alternatively of course it might be conjectured that the high standard of land management and business acumen were seen as a golden opportunity for acquisition during the European Reformation upheavals.

Early fissures . . . decline in lay brotherhood

It could be said that much of the success associated with Cistercian economics was the result in no small way to the labours of the 'conversi', otherwise known as the 'lay brothers'. Whilst the canonical hours were a major duty of the fully ordained brotherhood, the increasingly important feature of the Cistercian agrarian success lay in the hands of those labourers recruited from outside. Essentially, many of these would have normally been part of the manorial production system and seasonal routine. Decline in this system with alternative arrangements as peasant leaseholding offered opportunities other than the archaic previous serfdom for the peasantry. In any case, the Black Death of the fourteenth century had an effect of decimating the labour pool so critically important to the economy both inside and outside the monastery walls, offering those who did not succumb to the disease the additional advantage of scarcity value in terms of employability. The nexus between landowner and labouring class was in effect tipped in favour of the latter: their value as productive assets. . . what a personnel department might term as 'human capital' had if anything increased substantially. Massive levels of mortality across Europe due to recurring outbreaks of the plague had therefore had great repercussions throughout all spheres of activity so that by the turn of the fifteenth century to sixteenth the population of England had been reduced to around half of that a century earlier. The twelfth century genesis of the Cistercian movement was therefore a different world to that of the early 1500's by which time the religious landscape had also evolved to their ultimate disadvantage, particularly in Tudor England.

Religious controversies, 'Reformation', and the consequences of Henry 8th's tyranny

It could also be argued that the fate of the Cistercian Order in England and Wales resulted from the actions of two rather different men: Martin Luther, a German monk, professor and religious reformer; and Henry 8th, in his youth a handsome, charismatic Tudor prince, but in his middle age a belligerent and most probably increasingly paranoid tyrant, responsible for the deaths of many subjects in aspects of horrendous cruelty. Crucially, the motives of these figures could be regarded as

essentially quite different. Whilst the Lutheran stance was mainly tied up with religious ethics and discontent with the Catholic establishment, Henry's motivation could be viewed as personal, megalomaniacal and insidious. For example, in Protestant Germany, whilst poor relief welfare might be subsidized by closure of monasteries, in England, this would have been exacerbated, as relief as alms were traditionally aligned to monastic foundations, and the English Dissolution offered no immediate benefit to Henry's poorest subjects. Primarily, the complete disestablishment of the English monastic environment arose partly as a consequence of the Papal refusal to grant Henry a divorce from his Spanish wife, Catherine, understandably so. An increasingly frustrated Henry therefore played a devastating masterstroke by assuming the role of Head of Church and State, ostensibly promulgating a Protestant cause in opposition to Roman Catholicism and further encouraging his closest advisors such as highly ambitious Thomas Cromwell (if he ever needed it) to continue their zeal with renewed vigour to close down completely the Cistercian houses and appropriate the accumulated institutional wealth and land in favour of the crown and those associated with Henry who similarly viewed the Cistercian model of success with envy. With typical importance to the letter of the law, this had been achieved by way of two Acts of Parliament: the Act of Suppression of 1536, abolishing the smaller institutions with less than £200 yearly income (although not insubstantial for the period), followed by the second Act three years on when the larger houses were destroyed.

As opposed to Henry's covetous English power-politics, Luther's message was increasingly transnationally doctrinal, principally. A succinct, if not picturesque, quotation from Euan Cameron's monumental 'European Reformation' could encapsulate the core elemental message:

'Luther's dogmatic attacks on the foundations of the medieval church matured like cuckoos' eggs in the humanist nest. Learned coteries in the cities of Franconia, northern Switzerland, Alsace and Swabia took up and discussed the ideas of the notorious Augustinian. Civic preachers, often themselves humanists, found audiences receptive if they preached 'the Scriptures' with the same cutting edge that Luther had given them' [1]

In no small way this approach had polarised attitudes, particularly in consequence of the Catholicism which had spawned the marketing of indulgences to those of Luther's pastoral care who had concluded that it was a good insurance gambit to

succumb to the notion that it was possible to purchase a sort of 'passage to Paradise' through the local church and in this way obtain some kind of guarantee of salvation at the stroke of a quill.

The later Continental dimension

The following centuries on the continent of Europe were to see further dramatic ill feeling. Protestantism had gathered pace, and with the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) its legitimacy was reconfirmed. There was thus no retreat from reformed views on religious doctrinal affairs and reformist critiques on the power and influence of the Roman Church. And as a kind of German equivalent of the manoeuvrings of Henry some two hundred years before, the mid eighteenth century also saw the church brought under the control of government with the Emperor Joseph II at its head. Here again the question of property ownership seemed to play a major role in the process:

'A plan was formed at this period for the general secularization of monastic and other ecclesiastical property for the profit of the Catholic Governments in Germany. This was part of a general plan for a redistribution of territory. Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia had taken the initiative and had won over England and France to his idea. The opposition of Maria Theresa, of the Prince Bishop of Mainz, and of Pope Benedict XIV caused the project to fail. The Holy See kept the diplomacy of Prussia in check for some years. To counteract the action of Rome on public sentiment, the partisans of secularization encouraged in Germany the spread of those philosophical errors — Materialism and Rationalism — which were then gaining ground in France . . . With this view they succeeded in withdrawing the universities from Roman influence. [2]

The attitude expressed above in relation to 'philosophical errors' is of course written from the contemporary Catholic perspective of the present time. In any case, the position was complex as the Catholic establishment was almost guaranteed to react to the numerous attacks. 'Counter Reformation' in the form of hard-line inquisitorial actions emerged of which the Spanish Inquisition is probably the most infamous. And the Catholic European regime was far from defunct if it could intervene in scientific study and advancement and cause a figure of such eloquence as Galileo

Galilei to renounce the theories of Copernicus. In point of fact, monasticism was far from defunct in Spain as a consequence of another charismatic actor in the religious arena: the work of Ignatius Loyola, who took on a role of extracting monasticism out of the walled-in environment into the external world but with the additional intention or vow of overt obedience to the Papal authority as well as the established poverty, chastity and obedience. It could be commented that Loyola was a kind of mirror image of Luther, where the Papal authority could be brought down to earth in the Jesuit ministry to the common people and seen as a tangible force to reunite and educate under the umbrella of Catholicism rather than Lutheranism.

Nevertheless, If the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century could be described as fundamentally doctrinal in their origin, then what was to come in the eighteenth was equally adverse to the monastic system which had been born of a medieval renaissance but which found itself in a world which had undergone a cultural and artistic 'Renaissance', civil wars, and now towards the close of the 1700's a total social revolution in France which would eventually play itself out in the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte's geopolitical adventures and campaigning later in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. In this questionable 'brave new world' of French hegemonistic ambition, we also see a cultural shift towards enlightenment via state educational systems in opposition to ecclesiastic establishments. The prospect of closure, reopening, further closure of religious foundations across Europe was in any case a dismal prospect for any constructive future in the sphere of education particularly in the aftermath of the Revolution. Napoleon's formidable administrative abilities would result in the complete reorganisation of legal and educational systems, which was probably long overdue in the light of scientific advancements which really began to influence most areas of life in the 19th century along with the gathering pace of the Industrial Revolution .

Did the Cistercians really decline? Was there reinvention or reorientation?

The Assignment question, on further examination, might be too pessimistic. Firstly, the question of relevance of an institution born of the society existing a thousand years ago in a pre-industrial age largely underdeveloped in knowledge-based study and education having expectation to thrive over that period of dramatic change is perhaps optimistic to say the least without some means of adaptation. So in reality it is probably no surprise that the Cistercian movement might at the very least undergo some kind of transformation in order to survive the 19th century. Secondly, the history of the attacks across Europe on the monastic orders reads like a bewildering and chaotic series of steps and counter-steps which on the ground must have appeared as almost illogical and random, with exceptions allowed for little or no reasoning. However, the situation of abolition seems to have been inconsistent. Suppression and confiscation in, for example, Germany was not exactly repeated in the same manner and time on the other side of the Alps. Thirdly, whilst we can say that the Cistercians in their native country of France certainly suffered a setback in the Napoleonic post-revolutionary years, their original spectre of austerity was to re-emerge out of the rubble of the pan-European onslaught in Normandy at the Abbey of La Trappe, with the establishing of the Trappist order. The 'Trappists' therefore took on, ostensibly, the mantle of the 'strict observance' idealism at the Cistercian genesis, later expanding internationally as a kind of historical reenactment of the Cîteaux breakaway fraternity of the eleventh century.

Postlude

Although history can hardly repeat itself exactly, as a retrospective exercise and personal view, the history of the Cistercian Order throws up some disturbing parallels

with more recent events. It is difficult, for example, not to eliminate the parallel of a Stalinist regime when looking at the actions of Henry. Furthermore, the grim outrage of religious or cultural persecution at various times in European history erupts again to reach crisis point at the commencement of the Second World War with the totally deluded ideology of the Third Reich, also extremely adept on the issue of sequestration of (largely middle-class Jewish) assets. But perhaps the most ironic aspect of the Cistercian historiography is that their rejection from outside the abbey walls as part of a Catholic establishment arose in part due to their perceived wealth in contrast to the principles proffered in the original ethical tract, *Exordium Parvum*, which along with other foundational texts sought to project an image of a brotherhood largely averse to the prospect of wealth creation. Whether fortuitous or not, the suppression of monastic institutions gave birth to a reformed Trappist regime which although not perhaps as successful and ubiquitous as the original Cistercian breakaway movement, has besides all that has befallen the ideas and principles managed again to take on an international character, but of course with additional scope for development in the Americas, a scenario totally unknown in the earlier first millennium centuries. Furthermore, a recent survey of Cistercian monasteries refounded in the nineteenth century and twentieth also revealed a relatively small residual Cistercian occupation of European sites. Now known as the Cistercian Order or Cistercians of the Common Observance (O.Cist.), in distinction from the Trappist lists, from the stance of the public, the original 'Order' seems to continue as though there had never been any hiatus or disturbance. But of course the extent of ruination of the former numerous monastic sites in the UK, all still too visible, presents a troubling reminder of how an institution can be suppressed by the power of the state authority.

[3]

Notes

1 *Op. cit.* P 107

2 <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/> *Suppression of Monasteries in Continental Europe*

3 'List of Cistercian Abbeys' via Wikipedia (accessed 26 Dec 2022)

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