

EASTERN ORTHODOXY AND THE ANGLICANS

by the Rev. Fr. Frederick Watson

Introduction

Eastern Orthodoxy is a worldwide faith confessed by close to three hundred million people from Ireland to India, from Sweden to the Sudan. This world presence should not be understood as culturally confined to Greeks and Slavs, because to do so would conceal the real nature of Orthodoxy that its adherents believe truly expresses the original faith of The Church.

Among those who confessed the Orthodox faith were those who lived in the first ten centuries in England. The native English Church at first developed in isolation from Rome under the influence Celtic missionaries and was centered on monasteries instead of bishoprics. But Orthodox Christianity was yet to come to England. England – the land of the Angles.

The famous story told by St. Bede the Venerable in the first volume of his *Ecclesiastical History*, tells of Pope Gregory the Great, before he held that office, first seeing “Angles” in the slave market of Rome.



Deacon Gregory (c.540-604) and the slaves. CHI Archives

The future pope, then a deacon, one day happened to see a group of Angle children for sale as slaves in the Roman market. As Bede tells the story, Gregory was struck by the unusual appearance of the slaves and asked about their background. When told they were called "*Angli*" (Angles), he replied with a Latin pun that translates well into English: "*Bene, nam et angelicam habent faciem, et tales angelorum in caelis decet esse coheredes*" ("It is well, for they have an angelic face, and such people ought to be co-heirs of the angels in heaven"). Hence comes the famous aphorism "*Non Angli, sed angeli*"– "They are not Angles, but **angels**." Supposedly, this encounter later inspired the Pope to

launch a mission to bring the Orthodox Christianity of the undivided church to their countrymen. That missionary was St. Augustine of Canterbury.

What St. Augustine of Canterbury brought to the Anglian shores in 595 A.D. was not *Roman* Christianity, as might be supposed. And what kind

of Christianity did Augustine bring when he arrived? Back to Bede: In the second book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede writes of the encounter of St. Augustine with King Ethelbert of Kent: Within therefore some days hereof the king came unto the island, and sitting in an open place, he bid Augustine with his fellows to come to commune with him therein. For he would not, by reason of an old superstition, suffer him to come unto him in any house, lest, if they were skilful in sorcery, they might the rather by surprise deceive him and prevail against him. But they came not armed with the force of the devil, but with the strength of God, carrying before them in place of a banner a cross of silver and the image of the Lord Savior painted in a table, and singing the litanies, prayed the Lord both for their own eternal salvation and that of the as well to whom and for whose sake they had come thither Chapter 15). It was *Orthodox* Christianity, complete with the Holy Cross, icons, and ectenia (litanies). Nothing can be more representative of Orthodox liturgy than these! Orthodox Christianity now encountered the Celtic Christianity that had flourished in England up to St. Augustine's arrival in 595 A.D.



St. Dunstan, (909-998),
Archbishop of Canterbury

Among those who were part of that early Celtic tradition or later carried on an early Orthodoxy was St Alban (3-4th Century), who stood up for his faith and suffered martyrdom. Also St Oswald, a king on earth, who overcame the enemy at Heavenfield (633) and restored Christianity to Northumbria. And St Cuthbert (died, 687), long famed as the Wonderworker of Britain, who struggled with the demons on his desolate island off the rugged, northern coasts. St. Guthlac (died, 714) was another desert-father in spirit, who lived in the marshes and lonely fenlands of Lincolnshire. St Swithin (died, 862), shone through his miracles, which came all from the Living God. St Edmund (died 869), the Royal Passion-Bearer, who, as Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, chose to suffer the anguish of death at the hands of non-believers rather than defend himself by the sword is another example. There was King Alfred (849-899), who not only saved his land from the heathen, but also greatly encouraged learning and monasticism at a time when they were all but dead. Also St Dunstan (909-988), who came forth from that most ancient of England's holy places, Glastonbury, at a time of the nation's greatest need, to be the holy Archpastor of his people and the

father of the spiritual flowering of England. And, of course, St. Bede the Venerable (died, 735), the writer of the history of the early spiritual molding of England, a righteous and a learned man.

The Orthodox Christianity of the Mediterranean world generally recognizes the date of 1054 A.D. as the year that *Roman* Christianity was established independently of the rest of the Orthodox world. It was about the same time (in English history the decisive date was 1066 A.D.) that a major change in how Christianity was practiced in England took place.

With the coming of the Normans, the harmony and unity of the old culture were forever lost. England, as was much of Western Europe, was divided into master and serf.

The Church was broken into clergy and laity. As the Norman barons spread Civil War, it affected the affairs of the Church as much as those of secular life. The Church lost its centrality in the life of the people. Many fled away from what became a capitulation to earthly government and societal divisions. They sought to find salvation in the mystical life of monasticism. The monks, the nuns, the hermits and lower clergy were drawn from the people. They came out of a society that had, for the most part, crushed and trodden them down. The spirit of Celtic/Orthodox England, already subdued by the Roman take-over at the Synod of Whitby in 664, was thus made slave to the feudal lords. It was forced to build castles and huge church constructions for the glory of kings and nobles. The great cathedrals were constructed in this era. Norwich Cathedral, for example, was begun in 1096 and was completed in 1145. Its final tower spire was added in 1480. These dates correspond with the dark era of Christian life in England. For many, these cathedrals represented human lust for power and earthly riches. Their spires groped heavenwards, towards the God that the people had known of old and could not find.

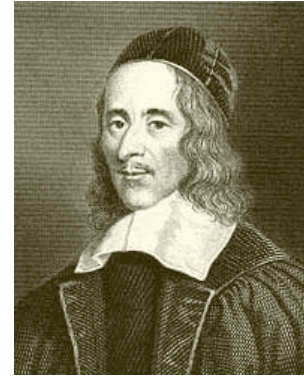


Richard Rolle of
Hampole
(1300-1349)

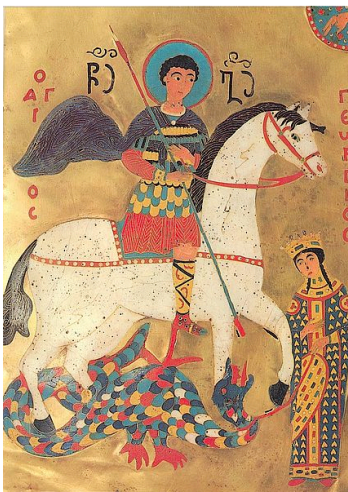
Only when the control that Rome held over governments, rulers and people began to fall apart in the 14th century did that which was truly English Christianity start to live once more. There appeared the great

mystical flowering of England, in Richard Rolle, in Mother Julian, in “The Cloud of Unknowing.” There was William Langland and his vision of Piers Ploughman. This allegorical poem written in the latter half of that century, is the narrator's intense quest for the true Christian life.

The next century would find the beginnings of what would be called the “Reformation” of the Church. Reforming is exactly what happened. The Roman church’s centrality of the bishop would be replaced with a new center, that of the King. In that age, true Christianity was to retreat into the heart of the people, into their vision for a restoration of the Holy Tradition of the Church. Shakespeare, who wrote at times of that vision and expressed in words the hopes of the people and the beauty that they cherished. It inspired also Thomas Traherne, who found “The Way to Blessedness.” It also nourished those kindly and sincere men, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, and fed the righteous of a whole nation.



George Herbert. (1593-1633) Anglican priest and poet



Cloisonné enamel icon of St. George from Georgia. Possibly 12th century.

Yet through all these years, even to today, there has been a continuity with earliest Orthodoxy in one symbolic personage who has universal appeal among the Anglicans: The Holy Great-Martyr George. A highly celebrated saint in both the Western and Eastern Christian churches, a large number of Patronages of Saint George exist throughout the world. St. George is the patron saint of England. His cross forms the national flag of England, and features within the Union Flag of the United Kingdom, and other national flags containing the Union Flag, such as those of Australia and New Zealand. Traces of the cult of Saint George in England pre-date the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century. And, by the fourteenth century the saint had been declared both the patron saint and the protector of the royal family.

Together with all the saints of the old times, the holy bishops and the kings and the martyrs, the holy abbots and abbesses as well as the humble cowherds, the hermits and the priests of the hundreds of local parishes and the faithful whom they serve – it is these faithful and true people who are heart of true Anglicanism, true angels. They are little known and for the most part, despised by the world. Their names we often do not even have. They fill the land of the Angels and that land's outreach of Christianity throughout the world with the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. They are the bearers of her true ancient and Orthodox spirit.

A Sampling of Subjects to be Covered in Future:

Orthodox Church and Anglican Church: Holy Orders;

Western Rite Orthodoxy and the Book of Common Prayer;

The English Church's Reformation and its Relationship with Orthodoxy