

The Religion of the Anglo-Saxons and its Influence on Literature and Different Aspects of Life

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the influence of the religion adopted by the old British Isles inhabitants on literature and many aspects of their life. Before discussing the religion of the Anglo-Saxons, I think it would be more convenient if we discuss the religion of the Celts and then of Romanized Britain. Long before the Roman took military interest in the British island (about 600BC.) the Celtic tribes settled in two waves of invasion: the Goidels (Gaels) who went west and north towards Ireland while the second invasion the Britons who settled in the fertile mid-plains.

There is nothing known about the religion of these barbarian tribesmen except what little can be deduced from the fairy folklore of Celts in Christian times. The most detailed account of old Celtic religion by a contemporary was written by Julius Caesar. The Celtic religion was known as the Druidian, they practiced magic and human sacrifice. It was a form of nature-worship. The priestly leaders (Druids) acted as prophets. They supervised the offering of sacrifices, and trained new priests, and this was the only form of education at that time. It was a religion of fear and priesthood and the Roman detested this power of the priesthood.

Keywords: Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Druids, priesthood, religion,

Religion of the Roman Britain

Caesar tried to invade Britain twice but failed, and finally it was conquered under the emperor Claudius in 43 AD .The legions were not faced with serious resistance only when they reached the edge of the Welsh mountains and northern moors .The Roman system was established in south and east Britain and the leading Britons, abandoning the habits of the free warriors, learned to take delight in Roman manners, language and art. (Burrow, 1982 p, 12)

As Christianity developed in the Empire, it spread to Britain by soldiers and then to Ireland. In contrast to Christianity of the dark and Middle Ages, the Empire put no shackles on philosophic thought or variety in religion and struck only at these organizations like Druidian and the Christian church which seemed to challenge into authority as a government. (Auerbach1953,p14)

Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire a hundred years before the withdrawal of the legions from Britain, but even so the new religion does not seem to have spread rapidly in the distant provinces.

However, there was enough of it to survive among the Welsh when every other Roman institution disappointed, because after the departure of the Roman generals and officials, the Christian missionaries alone did not desert the Britons in their days of trouble. (Crombie, 1957, p55)

The Anglo-Saxon period:

The decline of the Roman Empire in the 4th century A.D meant the end of Roman Britain .One by one the legions marched away from the island for duty elsewhere. This meant that the Britons were left to the mercy of less civilized invaders. Among these were the savage Picts from the north, and the Scots from the Northern Ireland .From the north came the Angels, Saxons and the Jutes. These German invaders set up various kingdoms throughout the country, in the course of the 6th century.

Thus, the Roman-British civilization was crushed out between two barbarians. The Saxon destroyed the city life, the Christian religion and the Latinized Celts away from their cities to the Welsh mountains and Cornish moors. (Crombie, 1957, p72)

The Roman left three things behind them: the traditional site of London, Christianity was the Romans' latest importation into Britain. When the military and political system departed from Britain, it never returned, but missionaries of the Christian religion kept coming and going from the Latinized continent to encourage the Welsh during the dark period.

In the days of trouble, the Christian faith got hold over the Welsh. The same process was repeated when the Saxons, newly Christianized, their turn were invaded by the heathen Danes and Normans.

The Pagan Anglo-Saxons

When the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain, they were yet semi-barbarous, and worshippers of Odin. The great Ocean, the cold winter, the thunder and the sun were their Gods. (Bloch, 1961, p88)

Their superstitions and religious beliefs were part of their daily lives .the deities are still remembered in our days of the week: Tuesday comes from /Tiu, or /Tiw, the Anglo-Saxon name for Tyr/ the Norse god of war. Tyr was one of the sons of Woden or Oden /the supreme deity after whom Wednesday is named. Similarly, Thursday originates from Thor/ the god of thunder. Friday is derived from Frigga/ the wife of Odin, representing love and beauty. (Heer, 1962, p88)

Although Anglo-Saxons were pagan and cruel, they possessed noble qualities too, they were faithful, honest and brave. Their religion was warriors' religion, a religion of people not overburdened with brains; it was a religion of barbarism with no elements in of further progress It did little for learning of art, it didn't preach humility, charity, or anything that was difficult.

The missionaries did not find it very difficult to convert them, as they brought with them clear and definite doctrines about hell. In contrast with these priest doctrines, the old religion only presented vague and poetical superstition about the next life. (Heer, 1962, p16)

The Christian Anglo-Saxon

The Anglo Saxons were converted to Christianity by missionary from the north and the south at once. However, the Welsh did not send any missionaries, because the still hated the Saxons too much to try to save their souls.

In 597, Pope Gregory sent Augustine to convert the heathen Anglo-Saxons. Augustine's success with Ethelbert king of Kent was the beginning of the rapid acceptance of the new faith. Augustine built a church at Canterbury, where later he became the first archbishop. Since then, the Archbishop of Canterbury had always been the leading churchman of England. (Curtius, 1953, p21)

During the next half century East Angelia was converted as well as Sussex, Wessex and Mercia. Edwin of north Umbria accepted the Roman Catholic religion through the influence of his wife. However, it did not spread there any much, at last it was converted

through the mission of Aiden (635) a generation after the landing of Augustine in Kent (597).

The Roman and the Celtic church

The church which Patrick (The patron Saint of Ireland, who was born in Britain toward the end of the Roman age) caused to triumph in Ireland developed after his death in a direction away from Rome. (Stahl, 1952, p33)

Though the Irish Christianity flourished in the midst of Irish society, it didn't change it as Anglo-Saxon Christianity changed Anglo-Saxon society. Its real life was romantic it was a group of hermits, who lived in remote spots, each lived in his own hut. The monks had many activities: They were scholars, artists, warriors and missionaries. The Irish monks revived knowledge of classical secular literature.

These were several differences between the Roman and Celtic church both in spirit and in organization. The Celtic church did not acknowledge the Pope as its head.

The Celtic had a date for Easter different from the Roman. The Celtic church did not require celibacy of their priests, the Celtic efforts (the man who rules the monks in an abbey) were more important than the Roman monks in church affairs.

For some time, there was serious rivalry between the two churches. Finally, in 664 Oswy-king of Northumbria summoned the Synod of Whitby and gave his own judgment in favor of the Pope. Some of the followers of the Irish church accepted the new order of things, and others retired back into the Celtic wilderness in the course of generations, Scotland, Wales, and the Ireland generally came into time with the rest of western Europe. (Curtius, 1953, p72)

This step towards centralization and unity of system and purpose in religious affairs throughout all the English kingdoms led the way towards political unity under a single king, ie. The administration of the church became a model for the administration of the state.

Churchmen became the chief advisers of kings because they were the only educated men, thus the new Roman ideas passed early from church to the state.

Tarsus:

The man who organized the English church and brought the monasteries and bishops under the authority of Canterbury was Tarus –the first remarkable man among the successors of Augustine. Canterbury only of Latin but of Greek. The spread of Roman

influence over the island from Canterbury carried with its church music, and the growth of ecclesiastical architecture.

As a result of Tarsus organization, the Parish system began slowly to appear first in one township, then in another until most of the island was supplied with Parish churches and Parish priests. (Vinaver, 1971, p82)

The Influence of Christianity

The change of religion was the first step forward of the English people in the path of civilization and the Christian conquest was the return of Mediterranean civilization in a new form and with a new message.

The English kings borrowed from this new civil service of the church, forms and policies fitted the need of the state. Christianity meant the return of learning to the island as well as the beginning of political and legal civilization based on the art of reading and writing in the Latin alphabet and also Christianity talked of strange matters to the Nordic mind, it taught charity, humanity, self-discipline, emphasis on spiritual things and on the soul, a great fear and a great hope about the next life, a submission of the freemen to the priest.(Chavtor,1945,p42)

It had great influence on old English society, it helped to unify the people ,it tied them more closely to the continent ,it taught them better manners and morals ,it gave them a whole new view of life to prepare themselves for the other life ,it introduced them to Latin ,which was not only the language of the church that the universal language of learning in the Christian world.(Heer,1962,p66)

Political and social Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Life.

The Jutes, the Angles and the Saxons were wandering, seafaring tribes. When they arrived in Britain, they were yet semi barbarous. They liked action and fighting and contests of physical strength. Nothing stirred their fancy more than a ship or a sword. In a noble the greatest virtue was loyalty even until death. They admired endurance which has remained a part of the English character.

Once settled in their new home, the Anglo-Saxons as they came to be called turned to the peaceful pursuits of agriculture and a more orderly society, in which the freeman was the unit, gradually evolved. The freemen or Ceorls were of two kinds, the landless and the landed. The landless Ceorl group was composed of the freemen who worked either in town or in the country for waged. The landed Ceorl had about 120 acres of land. The Ceorl enjoyed full political and economic rights. If a Ceorl prospered and came to control enough land, he might become a king. Above the Ceorls were the highest clans that consisted of the great blood nobles who were landowners

and followers of the king, or of persons related to the nobility by blood. Below the freemen were the slaves and the serfs. A small part of the population consisted of slaves, who were such by sale, by heredity, or by punishment for crime. The serf was personally free but was bound to the land and had to pay certain personal services, such as working the land of his lord and paying him a portion of his own crops. (Heer, 1962, p112)

The levels of Anglo-Saxon government came to include the king and the king's household; the Witan; the shire moot; and the hundred moot. The king ruled as a military leader, with the support of the army and the church. The king enforced those laws which were based on custom, and occasionally he legislated on new matters. The king's chamberlain, butler and other personal attendants aided and advised him especially in administrative matters, they acted as the highest law court, and chose the successor to the king. In this, however, they were limited by custom to members of the royal family. The shire moot, which met twice each year, was an assembly of all landowners and freemen of the shire. It functioned as a court, made local laws, collected taxes, and raised soldiers for the king. The hundred moot, a monthly court, was composed of the free land holders and nobles and of from four to six representatives of any township in the hundred. Both criminal and civil cases came before the moot or court. Death, fines, enslavement or outlawry were the usual punishments. (Burrow, 1982, p55)

The township was not like a modern town rather it was an agricultural community. The residents usually lived on each side of a long street or road. They had their own town meeting, at which they elected officials and passed local regulations. The borough probably was of military origin often it had a charter from the king or a noble, which confirmed certain privileges, one of the most important being the right to collect its own taxes and pay a sum to the king. When a place of this kind contained a cathedral, it was called a city.

Trials were by compurgation or ordeal. In compurgation the accused swore he was innocent, and relatives or friends swore to his trustworthiness. In criminal cases, ordeals were gradually used to determine guilt or innocence. The ordeals of the red-hot iron, hot water, and cold water were commonly used.

In the beginning, a simple principle of retribution- "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"- formed the basis of Old English ethics. But before long, cash compensation for personal injury, fixed by law, took vengeance out of private hands. The payments passed not between the individuals involved but from the family of the guilty to that of the injured. We see here how binding the ties of blood were thought to be by the first Englishmen. (Heer, 1962, p82)

Feasts, song, and drinking formed the most popular amusements. Plagues and epidemics were common. Food was plentiful in reason but lacked variety. The houses were built mainly of wood and had few conveniences. From the first, the German invaders shunned city life; and this feeling emphasized the importance of the village community.

The Language of the Anglo-Saxon Period Old English Language

The history of the English language in England begins with the settlement of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in Britain. The settlement attained significant proportions by the middle of the fifth century, though it may have been before then. These three Germanic tribes came from the northern Germanic plains near to the district which is now known as Schleswig-Holstein.

The Angles settled in the area extending northward from the Thames over the greater part of what is now England and the lowlands of Scotland. The Jutes settled in Kent, the Isle of Wight, and along part of the Hampshire coast while the Saxons settled in the rest of England south of the Thames except for the south-west, which was still held by the Celts. (Lewis, 1964, p48)

The invaders had to encounter varying degrees of hostility from the Celts, and for mutual protection various tribes combined to produce small kingdoms. The grouping of the tribes was not very permanent, since a vigorous ruler sometimes succeeded for a short time in uniting two or more kingdoms, but seven kingdoms can be distinguished as having a fairly stable existence, and these are described as the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy. They are Northumbria, East Anglia, Wessex, Sussex, Essex Mercia, and Kent. The relative importance of these kingdoms fluctuated. (Crombie, 1957, p121)

In the seventh century Northumbria enjoyed political supremacy as well as leadership in literature and learning. During the eighth century the leadership passed to Mercia, and in the ninth century it passed to Wessex.

In 830 all England acknowledged the over lordship of Egbert, king of Wessex, and under Alfred (871-899) Wessex enjoyed the leadership in learning that had once belonged to Northumbria. These historical facts have had their influence on the language.

The lack of political unity encouraged the existence of several dialects. The four main dialects represented by the texts which have come down to us from England before the Norman Conquest are: West Saxon, Kentish, Mexican and Northumbrian.

The political supremacy of Wessex during the ninth and tenth centuries and its comparative freedom from Scandinavian inroads had linguistic and literary consequences, since these conditions led to the preservation of many more manuscripts in this dialect than in any

other. Our knowledge of Old English is therefore derived mainly from West Saxon sources, whereas other dialects were more important in forming the basis of the English language of today. For though the Saxons were numerically superior to the Angles, the latter were influential enough to impose their name overall: The country is called England (OE. *Englond*). The nation English. (OE. *Englisc*. /*Engliscmon*) and the language (*Englisc* /*Englisc*). However, we might come across a question which inquires about the language or the languages that the settlers found on their arrival in Britain. The original population was Celtic, and the later Roman influence was not successful in making the native population learn Latin; and if it, to a certain extent, succeeded, it was then confined to the inhabitants of the towns.

And to avoid details, the English found on their arrival a population speaking a different language from their own. But this fact did not affect the language of the English, because the Britons, not exterminated, were rather absorbed by their Saxon conquerors. Their civilization and language vanished but the race remained. (Vinaver, 1971, p96)

There was nothing to induce the ruling class to learn the language of the inferior natives. And on the other hand, the Celts would have to learn it well. If the first generation did not learn good English, the second or third would.

To examine the language itself, we will see that many of the letters in Old English manuscripts differ in shape from their modern equivalents. To show this point briefly, we can consider three letters which have no single letter corresponding to them in Modern English. The letter (Ð) and (ð) are both used to present the sounds which are today spelt (th) occurring in the words (thin) and (then); the letter (æ) represented a sound nearly like the (ǣ) in the (southern English) pronunciation of (had). The occurrence of the horizontal lines above certain vowels indicates that they are to be pronounced long.

One thing about the old English language is that a large proportion of the words are recognizably the same words as those we use today, although nearly every word has undergone some change. For example, /rīce "kingdom" survives in *Bishopric*, and /gyltendum "offenders" is related to *guilt* /dæghwālī can includes the elements found in "daily", and /Soplic is made up of all archaic word "root". (Vinaver, 1971, p37)

The prepositions have changed in meaning quite considerably; (on) means "in" and "into" as well as "on" and (of) means "from". Changes in form have been more frequent than changes in meaning. Nearly every word in the Old English differs in form from its modern equivalent, and investigation shows that the difference is due in part to

changes in pronunciation and in part merely to changes in spelling: the (æ) and the (d) in *fæder* / represent different sounds from the (ǣ) and the (th) of "father", but the (f) of / *heofonum* represents the same sound as the (v) of "heaven". (Heer, 1962, p108)

There are differences in syntax. The chief points of syntactic interest in the Old English passage are in word-order.

Another characteristic of the Old English passage is the frequent occurrence of inflexional endings. For example, the word "our" occurs in three different forms *úre/ úrne /and úrum*, according to the case and number of the noun with which it agrees.

There are in English many loan-words from Latin, and in late Old English a few words were borrowed from Scandinavian and French, but in comparison with Modern English, Old English is remarkable for the small number of loan-words which its vocabulary includes. To make up for the shortage of words of foreign origin, the speakers of Old English showed great resourcefulness in adapting to new uses the store of words at their disposal. One way of doing this was by changing the meanings of existing words; another was by means of word-formation. (Clanchy, 1979, p23)

The various methods of enriching the language may be illustrated by examining the linguistic results of the conversion of the English to Christianity, which introduced many new ideas for which words had to be found, several words which were borrowed from Latin at this time have remained in the language to the present day and have become so familiar that we no longer think of them as loan-words.

For example "bishop" (OE *biscop* from Latin /*episcopus*), "monk" (OE *munuc* from Latin /*monachus*) and "priest" (OE *preost* from Latin /*presbyter*). Church, minister, devil, angel, apostle, disciple pope, archbishop, bishop, nun, shrine, chapter, and mass are also of the earliest loan-words belonging to this sphere. (Burrow, 1982, p66)

The adaptation of the meanings of native words may be illustrated by *bles* (OE *bletsian*/, originally meaning "to sprinkle with blood") *Easter* (OE *Eastron*/ originally a spring festival in honour of the pagan goddess of the dawn), and so forth. Word-formation was based upon both the native word-stock and Latin loan-words. To describe the scribes and rituals of the New Testament the Anglo-Saxons used the words *bōcerasand/* and *sundorhālgan*. The first word is derived from /*bōc* "book" by the addition of the common suffix (*ere*), and the second word is a compound of /*sundor* "apart" and/ *halga* /"raint", "holy one" related to the adjective *hālig/* "holy". Similar methods could be applied to loan-words. When *biscop/* was borrowed, other words were formed from it: (*biscolip*) *biscolptic/* "episcopal",

biscopscir/ "dioces" (area under a bishop's jurisdiction) and biscopian /"to confirm".

Just as in modern German, so in Old English grammatical gender was present. All nouns were placed into one of the three categories of masculine, feminine, and neuter, which were not primarily associated with sex. In Old English foot was masculine, hand feminine and eye neuter. Woman, queen and wife were synonymous in Old English, all three meaning "woman", but they were masculine, feminine and neuter respectively. Horse, sheep and maiden were all neuter. Earth "Mother Earth" was feminine, but moon was masculine. (Burrow, 1982, p 83)

Another characteristic of Old English is the existence of a special poetic vocabulary. The leisurely movement of Old English poetry, where a single idea was driven home by being expressed in several different ways, called for an extensive stock of synonyms or near synonyms. One way in which these were provided was using Kennings. A Kenning (as defined by Professor Kemp Malone) is a two term circumlocution for an ordinary noun, or the use of several words to express one or two. It might take the form of a compound like hronrād/ "sea" (literary "riding place of the whale"), or a phrase, like fugles wynn/ "feather" (literary bird's joy)

A single kenning could produce many variations. For example, once the description of a ship as a seahorse was accepted, any word meaning "sea" could be combined with any word meaning "horse" to provide a slightly different image. (Burrow, 1982, p93)

To express ideas of frequent occurrence in Old English poetry, such as "battle" or "sea" or "hero" there were therefore very many words available. It is misleading to call these words synonyms, because each word stressed a different aspect of the thing described. For example, a prince might be described by such words as ēpelweard/ "protector of his native land" or beaggiefa /"giver of rings", stressing his generosity, or beadorinc/ "warrior" stressing his valour. (Clanchy1979, p55)

Moreover, if we search for other near synonyms of the word "hero" or "prince" we can find in Beowulf alone at least 36 words. For "battle" or "fight" we have in Beowulf at least 12 synonyms. Beowulf has 17 expressions for the "sea" to which should be added 13 more from other poems. For "ship" or "boat" we have in Beowulf 11 words and in other poems at least 16 more words.

We should, of course, know that it is characteristic of primitive peoples that their languages are highly specialized, so that where we are contented with one generic word, they have several specific terms. Most of these words and terms were used only in poetry, and their existence was very useful to Anglo-Saxon poets when they had to

satisfy the exacting demands of alliteration. Alliteration has frequently been used as an ornament in English poetry of all periods, but in Old English it was structural and an essential part of the system of verification. (Crombie, 1957, p66)

The Old English poetic vocabulary has not had much permanent influence on the language, but the alliterative poetry which flourished in both Old English and Middle English may well be the origin of some of the alliterative phrases, such as "friend or /foe", "a labour of love" and "might and main", which are common in both rhetorical and colloquial language today.

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ديانة الانكلوساكسون وتأثيرها على الادب وجوانب مختلفه من الحياة

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المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف تأثير الدين الذي اعتنقه سكان الجزر البريطانية القدامى على الأدب والعديد من جوانب حياتهم. وقبل مناقشة دين الأنجلو ساكسون ، أعتقد أنه سيكون أكثر ملاءمة إذا ناقشنا دين الكلتيين ومن ثم بريطانيا الرومانية قبل ان يتولى الرومان الاهتمام العسكري بالجزيرة البريطانية (حوالي 600 قبل الميلاد) جاءت بعض القبائل السلطية في موجتين من الغزو: جويدل (جويلز) الذين ذهبوا غرباً وشمالاً باتجاه أيرلندا بينما الغزو الثاني لقبائل البرايوتون الذين استقروا في الوسط الخصب. السهول. ولا نعرف شيئاً تقريباً عن دين رجال القبائل البرابرة هؤلاء باستثناء القليل الذي يمكن استنتاجه من الموروث الشعبي الخيالي للكيلتس في العصر المسيحي. حيث ان روايه يوليوس قيصر كانت هي المعاصره و الأكثر تفصيلاً لدين الكيلتس القديم ، وكان الدين الكلتي يُعرف بالدرويديين ، وكانوا يمارسون السحر والتضحية البشرية ، وكان شكلاً من أشكال عبادة الطبيعة. لقد كان القادة الكهنوتيون (الدرويد) يتصرفون كأنبياء ، وأشرفوا على تقديم القرابين ، ودرّبوا كهنة جددًا ، وكان هذا هو الشكل الوحيد للتعليم في ذلك الوقت، وكان دين خوف وكهنوت ، وكان الرومان يكرهون هذه القوة من الكهنوت. الكلمات المفتاحيه: الانكلوساكسون، الكيلتس، الكويلس، الدرويدس، الكهنوت