Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2 Article 1

11-11-2011

The Adoption of Christianity by the Irish and Anglo-Saxons: The Creation of Two Different Christian Societies

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Recommended Citation
Martz, Thomas (2011) "The Adoption of Christianity by the Irish and Anglo-Saxons: The Creation of Two Different Christian Societies," *Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 1.
Available at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/caaurj/vol2/iss1/1

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During the third century BCE, the Celtic empire reached its maximum expansion, stretching across the European continent. Driven to Ireland by Germanic tribes and the escalating Roman Empire, the Irish tribes became isolated from the mainland while the Roman Empire continued to expand to the edges of England. Eventually, the Anglo-Saxons supplanted the Roman culture when the Germanic tribes began their European dispersion. Even though Roman Christianity dominated the continent, the Irish and Anglo-Saxon clans practiced pagan religions. As a result, the Irish and Anglo-Saxons were visited by Roman missionaries trying to spread the Christian faith. The process of Christianization took on a very different form between the two groups: while the more centralized Anglo-Saxon society adopted Roman customs along with Christian tenets, the Irish clan structure was less conducive to the adaptation to Roman life. The adoption of Christianity was unique in Ireland because some followed the lead of St. Patrick in mixing Christian beliefs with local custom. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxons found it more politically and economically expedient to adopt Roman customs as presented by St. Augustine. In the end, it was the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Roman Christianity that incorporated the British Isles within the religious, political, and economic structures of European Christendom.

Unlike in England where the Roman and Germanic societies overlapped in a brief transitional period, Rome never occupied Ireland; therefore, no lingering connection between the Romans and the Irish developed. This situation did not change as the Irish settled in Ireland. Since the Irish used a tribal based organizational system, the Celtic state as a whole was not unified. Having sporadic clans rather than an integrated society limited the technological advances of the civilization as well as restricted the people to local trade consisting mainly of agriculture (Joyce 1912, 24). Ships and land vehicles were rudimentary at best. Consequently, Roman Britons and the rest of the continent rarely came into contact with the Irish people, constraining the Britons' understanding of the Irish culture. Furthermore, each tribe would have had its own traditions and variations of the pagan religion based on the cultural history of their specific clan even though the Irish people shared some common elements such as language. These widespread differences among the Irish populace only complicated the Britons' comprehension of Irish culture and religion.

The Roman pontiff, hearing of the Irish "heathens," sent the bishop Palladius to convert them. Although he followed his orders from Rome, Palladius had little success. Many scholars believe that he had no desire to travel to Ireland, and that his Christian doctrine did not correlate well with the tribes' ideals (Stephen 1909, 113). Palladius first arrived at Leinster around 431 CE, but the hostile men he encountered granted him only a few converts. He would have experienced an unorganized, almost chaotic culture (Lawless 2004, 33). Figureheads such as kings did not play a vital role in the society as individual

tribes controlled the different regions of Ireland. Rather, the Irish used a chiefdom based system of scattered homesteads with few structured settlements, making it difficult for Palladius to penetrate his ideas into an area. In many tribes, Druid priests would gain clout until they had as much power as the chieftains. These powerful opponents of the missionaries would suffer the most if the culture converted to Christianity. From a position of authority, the Druid priests would have suddenly found themselves segregated from the core of society (Freeman 2004, 79). Often, Christian missionaries faced death threats and the possibility of kidnapping from the druids in order to prevent them from spreading the new religion.

The sociopolitical systems of the Irish eventually led Palladius to leave Ireland because he had made little progress in his mission and could not assimilate into the foreign culture. Even with several failed attempts at converting the Irish, Pope Celestine believed that Ireland still needed to repent their pagan ways. In another attempt to complete his mission, he sent Patrick to the island in 433 CE. Patrick had an advantage over other missionaries with the same objectives. As a boy, he grew up in Britain as an affluent Roman citizen until slave traders kidnapped him and sold him to Ireland. Unlike most Britons, Patrick found himself immersed in the Irish culture. For six years, Patrick lived in Ireland working as a shepherd where he learned the Irish language and customs. He eventually escaped the island and returned home where he studied theology. Believing in divine communication, a dream told him to return to Ireland to convert the barbaric people who enslaved him (Lester 2005, 129). When he returned to Ireland, his ability to speak in the native tongue helped him immensely. He quickly assimilated into the culture and appeared more as a friend than an outsider. Arriving on the island, Patrick met a family who generously invited him into their home (Joyce 1912, 47). While he often forged connections and friendships among the Irish, Patrick had to travel to each chief and preach the Christian doctrine, hoping they would comply with its teachings. If they did not, he would often adjust his teaching to echo pagan traditions until a tribe converted voluntarily. Patrick focused on the quantity of converts rather than the quality or complete comprehension of the Roman style teachings (Thompson 1999, 151). While it may seem unconventional, he would quickly convert as many people as possible and leave trusted members of his clergy to baptize the rest.

Since few missionaries had the skills or knowledge that Patrick encompassed, regions would relapse back into pagan traditions, often negating any conversions he obtained. Yet, even after these relapses, Christian influences would remain in the pagan faiths. As a result, the Irish eventually created a distinctive form of Christianity that did not follow the Roman model. They modified baptism procedures and aligned important events such as Easter with pagan festivals rather than the Roman established date. The Irish people even

developed a different organizational setup for the church instead of adopting the one the Romans used. The bishops resided at the head of the church in Rome, but in Ireland they became less important than the monasteries' abbots (Olsen 2003, 132).

As Patrick went through a town, he built churches and schools so that the Irish would have a place to worship and learn (D'Alton 2008, ¶6). Over time, the schools taught writing and the faith to several generations, making the religion a cornerstone of the society. At the same time, however, they reinforced the distinctive Irish-Christian practices that had developed in their culture. Existing beyond Roman control, the Irish church continued to perform unorthodox Christian practices for two-hundred years, eventually fostering their own missionaries. Irish missionaries, under the lead of Columba, settled in Iona off the coast of Scotland. Since many of the Irish missionaries were hermits, they had little impact on the Anglo-Saxons but still began missions along the western coast. Gregory the Great, in contrast, led an active Roman campaign to convert the Anglo-Saxons starting in the south-eastern tip of England.

Gregory started the Roman mission in the late sixth century CE by attempting to convert lower class citizens and slaves, hoping that the faith would spread by word of mouth among the people. Gregory wanted to take young, Anglo-Saxon, male slaves, train them as priests, and then send them back to their homes to teach Christianity (Guericke 1870, 9). After working with the lower classes, however, a new, more efficient opportunity presented itself to Gregory. As Bede recounts in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Æthelberht, the king of Kent married princess Bertha, the daughter of a French monarch. Æthelberht was a pagan, but his wife was a practicing Christian. Having heard this news, Gregory quickly sent a band of missionaries to Kent led by Augustine. At the time, Æthelberht had the most influence in the Anglo-Saxon world as the leader of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy.

The heptarchy divided Anglo-Saxon England into seven distinct regions. Before the heptarchy, each region housed different tribes and had their own cultural differences much like Ireland (Evans 1901, 142). Although the separate areas started as an informal grouping of tribes, they eventually consolidated into sub-kingdoms. Seven different kings ruled the individual regions, each stemming from a separate line of royal lineage. At any point in time, one province would rise to power over the other six and become the supreme state. This structure helped to unify the country. As a result, the missionaries faced little resistance in England because the Anglo-Saxons did not have a people like the Druids at the core of their society; only the royal family ruled.

Hence, when Augustine converted Æthelberht to Christianity, the faith spread across England through political influence instead of the direct work of missionaries. Starting with those closest to the king, chiefs and councilors

followed Æthelberht's example in order to stay in good political standing. Also, Æthelberht expanded his political influence outside the borders of the heptarchy into the wealthy countries of the continent by converting. Æthelberht's conversion immediately put him in good favor with his wife's father, the king of France (Guericke 1870, 10). In addition to opening trade blocs with France, other countries' leaders had a new respect for Æthelberht because his citizens no longer resided on the outside of the Christendom.

After targeting kings, the Christian missionaries travelled across England targeting the other classes, such as the merchants. Seeing the changes the faith brought to trade and the Anglo-Saxon culture, the Anglo-Saxon merchants had an incentive to convert when they realized the economic benefits Christianity offered. As part of the Roman Christendom, they gained access to other countries' buyers and sellers on the continent. England already had established trade routes and many links to the continent through the English Channel. Besides the trade of slaves, the Anglo-Saxons traded a variety of materials from pottery and precious metals to cloth and agriculture (Blair 2005, 99). The economy grew as monasteries became involved in trade because the religious centers became common trading posts.

In comparison to the Anglo-Saxon economy, the Irish economy dealt mainly with agriculture and weapons (D'Alton 2008, ¶3). If the Irish people had a strong economy, they may have seen a need for the monasteries as trade centers and would have wanted to utilize the faith's connection to the mainland. The location of Ireland, however, made international trade a long journey, so most business remained local. Merchants from Ireland would have had to sail around England or land in England, travel across the country, and set sail again to cross the English Channel. In addition, the tribal system could not develop bustling urban centers where foreign merchants could land. When the church came to Ireland, the Irish citizens did not utilize the ties to the Christendom, resulting in stagnant trade levels for several years after Patrick made his appearance. Even when the Anglo-Saxon leader of Northumbria, King Oswald, trusted the Irish missionary, Aidan, to spread the faith, Oswald maintained power and expanded his influence across England. He took a more realistic approach to the faith, much like king Æthelberht, and used Christianity for increased trade and political clout (Hunt 1906, 157).

Several of the Anglo-Saxon citizens noticed that the Christianity had become a powerful institution not only among the people of England, but among the known world as a result of trade and the conversion of political figureheads. People looking to gain social standing would enter the ranks of the church. A steady and safe career, these citizens lived comfortably on required tithes. Numerous open positions presented themselves to the populace when the *gesith*, or noble landowner, in a rural town would build a church for his own private use,

spreading the faith across the country as he did so (Thurston 2008, ¶16). These smaller churches did not exist in Irish Ireland because of the political structure of clans. To join the clergy the people would have had to become a monk or missionary. Monks required a life in isolation while missionaries often traveled away from home into foreign countries where they would construct monasteries and practice their version of the faith. When the Irish built their monasteries in England; however, they built them away from the Anglo-Saxon society in places such as Iona or Lindisfarne (D'Alton 2008, ¶8). The distance limited the potential extension of the Irish religion.

Both the Irish and Anglo-Saxons would design towns around the churches as they gained prominence within society. When the Anglo-Saxons invaded Britain, they effectively destroyed most of the religious institutions founded in England. Some of these institutions, though, survived on the fringes of Anglo-Saxon settlements. Roman cities and other infrastructure eventually regained use in England when Anglo-Saxon towns formed around the shells of long forgotten Roman buildings (Russo 1998, 107). St. Martin's church was one such institution that regained use. Located on the Eastern side of the capital city Canterbury, Æthelberht's wife would regularly practice her religion in the old church. The town of Canterbury became one of the first reconstructed towns when the Christian see entered the region. Archeological evidence indicates increased levels of trade since more artifacts of trade trace to the seventh century than during the pre-Christian settlement. Canterbury developed into a royal and ecclesiastical center, which became a safe haven for a large, productive population (Russo 1998, 108). Where the population grew, so did the number of converts. Linking the developing urban centers, Roman roads became secure trades routes across the empire, and ports developed along the Southern part of the Isle where routes ended.

The Irish never had such infrastructures in place, and they had no Christian influences in their society prior to the Roman missionaries. As a result, the churches and schools built by Patrick and other missionaries used simple architecture of the time and did not compare to the Roman temples left scattered throughout England. The familiarity of Roman influences would have swayed the Anglo-Saxons to accept the Roman form of Christianity rather than the Irish institution.

To fuel the growing towns and economy of the Anglo-Saxons, when the Holy See entered Kent, they brought with them an advanced cultural infrastructure from Rome. The introduction of currency supplanted the barter system, starting with the gold *thrymsas* (Russo 1998, 108). Not only did Æthelberht want to promote his faith to the other kingdoms of the heptarchy, but the coins created a common link between the regions. This again shows the direct and strong relationship between the Anglo-Saxon economy and the church.

Subordinate kings and merchants using the specie would have needed monasteries as mints to meet the growing demand for the wealth, spreading the Roman faith across the country (Russo 1998, 108). Eventually, silver *sceattas* phased out the gold denomination so that the currency could accommodate international trade. Unlike the Anglo-Saxons, the Irish used bartering until the middle of the eight century when they finally adopted minted coin for use in trade. Again, the Irish overlooked Christianity's constructive influences to create a powerful and developed society which limited the Irish faith's dispersion in England.

As the faith spread throughout England and the Anglo-Saxons became an important participant in the Roman Christendom through their increased trade, language and writing became important assets for the society. Augustine, like Patrick, built monasteries and school that developed a system of writing for the Anglo-Saxons based on Latin characters. The Germanic people eventually created their own alphabet and language from these schools. The Anglo-Saxons, compared to the Irish, however, employed their writing for different uses. We have no copies of law codes or charters from the Irish, but we know that most of the Anglo-Saxons writings were legal documents, archives, and sermons (Leith 1997, 20). The Irish seemed to have left writing to the monks who simply recorded history, copied gospels and transcribed the occasional narrative. In addition, the Irish language would have remained limited to regional use because the Irish did not trade globally. Æthelberht used the new Anglo-Saxons language for the first written laws of a Germanic people, thereby firmly establishing the guidelines for a stable society. Having a written language also allowed for enforceable contracts which became an asset in trade and long distance messaging.

Even without the law code, the Anglo-Saxons had a strict hierarchy in place within their society which included slaves, peasants, proprietors (merchants or farmers), aristocracy, and royalty. The upper class Anglo-Saxons promoted the faith because they recognized the political advantages of a church linked to a wealthy capital city (Southey 1848, 32). When encouraging the lower classes to adopt the faith, the land owners and aristocracy preached that the working class should accept servitude. The Bible contains several references to such an idea, and the Anglo-Saxons used them as literal examples. They hoped to keep docile servants and a peaceful society compared to their violent past. Preaching these ideas, the faith spread quickly and became a popular message among upper tier of society who held great influence.

The Irish, alternatively, did not did not have tiered society, nor did they adopt one when Christianity infiltrated Ireland. Their social structure contained only three main groups, the workers, the chiefs, and the druids. The chief was often the best warrior among the tribe and used force or violence to keep workers in check. The rulers would have no reason to adopt a doctrine based on trust and

servitude. As a result, the Irish church structure had little appeal for the Anglo-Saxon kings or aristocracy.

Eventually, as the Irish missionaries entered England, the Roman church realized the Irish church had become an independent sect, obeying its own regulations. One of the last assignments Augustine received included unifying the new Anglo-Saxon church in the east with the Irish church along the west (Colgrave 1969, 290). Roman Christianity advocates unity in its practices and qualifies itself as a worldwide religion. Since the two dioceses employed some different traditions, Augustine did not want the faith spreading across England to appear disjointed. In an attempt to hedge against any loss of trust in the faith, he called a meeting between the two ecclesiastical communities. At the conference, Augustine set guidelines for three main issues: the date of Easter, the administering of baptism, and evangelizing (Clifford 2008, ¶10). While the Irish and Anglo-Saxons could not come to an agreement, the conference showed a movement towards a needed homogeneity between all the churches under the Roman pontiff so that the faith would remain strong for the new converts (and so that Rome could remain in control). Otherwise, Christianity would appear like the pagan faiths it supplanted.

Christianity looked very different in medieval Ireland and England. Because of the Irish's particular means of adopting Christianity, and the work of missionaries such as Patrick, the Irish developed a unique division of the Roman church that blended pagan and Christian customs. Ireland was hesitant to adopt the structure of Roman Christendom. While the Anglo-Saxons could have converted to the Irish church, the effort of Roman missionaries brought England into a position of political power and wealth. By converting to the Roman model of the faith, the Anglo-Saxons created trade routes to the continent and reinforced cultural infrastructures. Had the Anglo-Saxons adopted the Irish form of the religion, England might have remained a disconnected, poor state.

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