

# THE RELIGION



When the great gift/curse descended upon the land many believed it was the end of times. So many were struck down by the plagues and yet miracles abounded as well. The existing religious structures and communities all but collapsed as their leaders died in vast numbers. New religions sprang up to replace them and unorthodox views gathered many followers as the old ways were abandoned. Still the churches, mosques and synagogues had always gathered the cleverest thinkers and created the most educated members of their societies and it is at these same regions centres that the most organised of the new religions are based.

The collapse of the large institutionalised religions has not diminished the credulity of the average person. People still believe that there are powers beyond understanding that can influence the physical world. For the common people the powers of the saints or local spirits are real and visible around them. Many priests follow armies to war or find service with a royal household. Others serve their flock and yet others take up arms to defend their brothers and sisters or serve as they will, as clerks or advisors, as farmers and labourers as brewers and bakers.

There are many powerful priest and abbots who hold sway over large tracts of land and wield considerable temporal power. They remain the most learned and thoughtful and are often found in the law courts and serving powerful leaders as advisors and administrators. The religious orders still employ two in ten of all workers directly. Many military units will be supplied and controlled by spiritual organisations.

However, where before these churches may have worked together, there is great rivalry as each order strives to prove that it is the best. Some collapse in internal rivalry and some grow strong enough to protect what they have, and look to grow their congregations. Wise lords would do well to take advisors from many different sources and play them against each other. Some monasteries have become little more than counting houses and others have dispersed their monks to wander the land and preach at whoever will listen.

Priests, cardinals, abbots, bishops, monks, friars all abound and many have large retinues and are as proud as any hereditary lord. Others take pride in living on what the gods will give to them and wear cast off clothes and beg in the streets.

So what do people actually believe?

When your immortal soul is at stake you had best choose wisely, and there are several well-known paths to take.

## THE TWO REPUBLICS OF THE SAINTS: CANTERBURY AND YORK



Without guidance from any central authority the two archbishoprics of England rapidly diverged from each other. Supported by different temporal powers in their squabbles, politics as much as theology has slowly exaggerated their differences.

The Northern Republic put much of its wealth into the monasteries and retained a great deal of its land. They maintain their own households and troops.

It is said that all the land between Durham and Carlisle belongs to St. Benedict, technically subservient to the secular canons headed by a dean of each cathedral city, but in practice the cathedrals hold no sway beyond the city walls and the monasteries hire companies of armed men ostensibly for the purpose of protecting church lands from the scots, but in truth for the oppression of the natives.

Famous bogeymen from this de facto theocratic state within a state include Abbot Hardred of Calder Abbey, the 'Bloody monks' of Holmcultram Abbey and so forth. Few know what gods are really worshiped in these northern monasteries, and easy accusations abound.

The See of Canterbury by contrast is much more diverse – many monasteries have been dissolved out of a fear that the south might fall prey to monastic expansionism from the north, although some remain (notably in East Anglia), and even villages have monks who are given a stipend to pray for the souls of the wealthy in chantries. Many of their traditions would be familiar to the old religion but they would be appalled by the changes. Saints, Roman and Greek gods have taken the place of any supreme God.

Equally as strong, as the clergy of the two Sees, are the independent ministers, who whilst technically in the pay of guilds, landed nobles and the like, maintain a high degree of intellectual independence, not least because preaching is a lucrative profession in and of itself.



## SCHOLASTIC HUMANISM

“God may have no further use for ministers, but Lord or pauper, man has not. We cannot know if heaven is Republic of Saints as some claim, but it is only those who live a virtuous life will find out.”

Popularised by John Colet (family motto 'Semper Erectus'), dean of St Paul's and sponsored by the Worshipful Company of Mercers, Colet popularized a form of faith that is humanist, quasi rationalist and proto protestant.

Colet gives a (real) sermon in 1512 condemning priestly living: devilish pride, carnal concupiscence, worldly covetousness, and worldly occupations. Yet this is not yet (nor will be) Protestantism, but has a resonant message amongst the merchant class who wish to be considered 'respectable'.

The main failing of this particular philosophy is preference for inferred rather than observed logic, and in truth, its lack of a sense of the bawdy fun of the English.



## CELESTIALISM

In contrast is the mysticism of the 'Celestial Order'. Championed by Thomas More, it is the default theology of any person who can be bothered to think about religion beyond a few self-serving prayers to St George. Vastly popular in Europe, it sees the supernatural world as an ordered flow to and from heaven itself, and divides the universe along strict astrological and alchemical taxonomies – from the bodily humors to the weather, everything has its place.

The planets send 'emanations' down to earth, and through the intercession of the saints, humanity can send prayers upward. Fierce schisms abound as to which saint is aligned with which planet – is St George ruled by Mars or Jupiter? On such trifles fist fights have been started. With such a rich and vivid theology, it is popular with quacks and con men whether they have religious titles or not, as well as seekers after 'alchemical truth'.

A similar, albeit, better dressed and more poetic version of 'The Celestial Order' is the current faith of the Ottomans and the Moors, although no European would consider the two equivalent.



## WAR IN HEAVEN

Priestly conflict between the many factions does spill out into armed violence from time to time, but the fault lines that trigger such events show where religious power truly lies.

**Relics:** with the saints moving center stage in the religious drama, their relics have reached a fever pitch of popularity. Relics mean huge income from pilgrimage, and a steady flow of miracles (both real and imagined). Of course the medieval urge to plunder, steal and fake other people's' relics has likewise hit unprecedented levels.

**Confession:** even before Henry VIII rejected confession outright, the relationship between this sacrament and the English is expedient and often contemptuous on both sides. Most people who could afford it preferred to confess to wandering friars and horse trade a price for the absolution of their sins rather than entrust their darkest secrets to the local parish priest, whose instruction on the matter was simplistic and often went unread.

Both humanists with their earnest search for virtue and celestalists seeking to monopolise income from indulgences have stakes in breaking the system, whilst the pardoners themselves (often skilled, merciful and independent minded freelancers) are realising that they face a serious threat.

**Women:** church patriarchy is under threat. A woman who has visions is halfway to becoming a saint, but it still seems easier for a woman to take up arms than speak from a pulpit, but maybe the time is right to change that...

## PAGANISM

Many of the denizens of the countryside have reverted to a version of earlier beliefs that were never wholly abandoned. Within towns and cities however, talk of Jack in the Green and giants will make you the butt of an educated man's sarcasm, but even lords and ladies like to wassail and open their halls to mummers, Morris men and hobby horse troupes.

All know it is wise to mark the seasons, leave out a saucer of milk for passing ghosts and to beware the spirits that live in the twisted tree.

Paganism can act as a refuge from the power of the churches; weddings solemnized by a blacksmith, and local funeral rituals abound wherever the parish priest lacks the trust of the people. But a strong thread of native paganism invades the British churches themselves, what could be better for business but to take a local legend and simply name its protagonist a saint? With no central authority to authenticate and sanction, Wales in particular is once again a land of a thousand saints.

