

Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith

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The volume's stated aim is to investigate the influence of Christian theology and religious beliefs on Anglo-Saxon society. In doing so Foxhall Forbes endeavours to show the wider population's engagement with Christian theology, which has usually been regarded as the preserve of the educated elite. This view reflects the sources which have survived from Anglo-Saxon England, all of which represent the views of educated, and therefore literate, members of society. Attempting to excavate the beliefs of the majority, who left no written trace of their inner lives, consequently poses a variety of challenges for the historian. Scholarship of the Late Antique World is a generation ahead in this regard, following the influential work of Peter Brown and Robert Markus, among others, who have judiciously assessed the impact of Christianity on Roman society.⁽¹⁾ Understanding the Late Roman populace's engagement with Christianity is made easier by the fact that contemporary writers, especially critics of the new religion, frequently lampooned its success amongst the uneducated. Origen preserved the claim of the Roman intellectual, Celsus, that the only people Christian teachers wished to convert were 'the foolish, dishonourable, and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children'.⁽²⁾ Intended as criticism, this reveals the capacity of nascent Christianity to attract followers from all sections of society. More complex theological developments – such as Christology and Trinitarian theology – come later, but the fundamental appeal of the Christian belief system lies in its promise of salvation for all the baptised.

In assessing the impact of Christian theology on Anglo-Saxon society, Foxhall Forbes presents the book in five chapters, modelled on the Apostles' Creed, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the fundamentals of Christian faith. The first chapter, 'I Believe in One God', serves as both introduction and chapter one. It begins by outlining the chronological scope of the book, the Anglo-Saxon period from the eighth to the 11th centuries, and discussing the type of source material and evidence that will be the focus of the study. This is followed by an account of the historiography of early medieval belief, and the changes in religious belief and practice over the period covered by the book. The third section presents a synthesis of debates on the role of the church in Anglo-Saxon society, with a clear focus on how the faith was taught, and a discussion of the 'minster hypothesis'. The variety in church practices amongst the Anglo-Saxons, both geographically and temporally, is asserted. And the importance of 'pagan' survivals in this period is diminished, as she argues that clerical opposition to holy wells and other such locations of popular devotion

was because such sites were outside clerical control rather than throwbacks to ancient beliefs.

Chapter two, 'Creator of All Things, Visible and Invisible', begins with a very useful discussion of the Anglo-Saxon distinction between visible and invisible creation. Section two is concerned with depictions of angels and demons in medieval texts, accounts of individuals' interactions with invisible creation, and the role of prayers and remedies in Anglo-Saxon medicine. This section also includes an interesting discussion of the physical landscape and evidence from place-names, which are examined in an attempt to assess the beliefs of the non-literate members of society. She argues for a link between landscapes and hagiographies and suggests that 'literate culture and local naming practices were not always separated by a huge gulf' (p. 95). Section three discusses the visual representation of angels, the link between angels and rituals in the church, and the textual history of the circulation of visionary accounts in Anglo-Saxon England. This chapter argues for a close relationship between 'secular' poetry and religious literate culture, and suggests that heroic poems, such as *The Battle of Maldon*, were used along with homilies to communicate Christian beliefs.

Chapter three, 'And He Will Come Again to Judge the Living and the Dead', is concerned with the influence of Christian ideas of the Last Judgement on law codes, judicial thought and attitudes to penance. She points out the difficulty of determining whether legislators or the authors of penitentials believed they were setting down penalties for offences against God or against the king, or even if such distinctions were really made (p. 133). Much attention is given to the laws relating to mercy and punishment, the swearing of oaths – especially the potential implications at the Last Judgement of swearing a false oath – and the use of ordeals. There is an extensive section on Archbishop Wulfstan of York, justly treated on his own because his surviving corpus is so extensive, which is one of the best parts of the book. This includes an interesting discussion of his attitude to the use of ordeals and provides a very useful table on his injunctions forbidding oaths and ordeals on days and seasons of feasting and fasting (table 3.3). The chapter concludes with the view that the legal system had been heavily influenced by Christian belief in this period.

Chapter four, 'The Communion of Saints and the Forgiveness of Sins', outlines Anglo-Saxon beliefs concerning the Last Judgement and purgatory. The post mortem fate of the soul is, unsurprisingly, a concern for many in this period, and evidence for the views of both religious and laity is presented. Letters sent by those in the religious life to each other asking for masses or prayers reflects this concern, along with the role of religious houses in prayer and commemoration. These institutions were important locations of commemoration for both religious and laity, as revealed in their records of donations. Charters similarly reveal lay attitudes to the afterlife and the fate of the soul, and the records of guilds often show a concern for the soul and for burial. The variety of these bequests and memorials are outlined in detail. This is followed by a discussion of leases and the frequent appearance of saints in their sanction clauses. Foxhall Forbes argues that the evidence from Anglo-Saxon texts reveals a widely accepted belief in a purgatorial interim as a destination for souls, and for the important role of religious communities in producing texts that discussed the interim and the afterlife. She suggests it is unknown 'how far down the social and religious scale such ideas were clearly understood', but the evidence suggests 'these beliefs were not utterly confined to aristocratic and monastic circles' (p. 263).

Chapter five, 'The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting', discusses the evidence for Anglo-Saxon burial practices, with a particular focus on archaeology. She suggests a dissonance between theological beliefs and actual burial practice, noting that Augustine of Hippo's assurance that the life lived was of more significance to the fate of the soul than where a body was buried, appears to have been often ignored by the Anglo-Saxons. She observes a movement from field cemeteries to church yards over the course of the Anglo-Saxon Age, and suggests that religious communities were an attractive location for bodies to await the final judgement (p. 278). This is followed by an interesting discussion of exclusion from ecclesiastical graveyards, which concludes that such exclusions may better reflect societal mores rather than theological beliefs. Suicide is also considered in this context. Various stories are described which are seen to reveal the correlation between the fate of bodies in tombs and God's judgement on the individuals' lives. She concludes with an assessment of the difficulty in determining whether beliefs about the body and soul,

and their continued association post mortem, were official or orthodox, or unofficial or unorthodox (p. 327). The volume concludes with a short epilogue which asserts the need to read texts from Anglo-Saxon England in the light of theology and argues for the influence of theology on Anglo-Saxon society.

The book is learned, well researched, and covers a very broad range of material easily justifying the chronological limits outlined at the outset. The text is very clean across its 300-plus pages, and well produced. The volume also makes a concerted effort to fulfil Ashgate's remit for *Studies in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* of bringing academic work to a wider audience than just the academy. Foxhall Forbes frequently situates the themes of the book via analogies with modern examples (some of which grate a little), almost certainly with this broader audience in mind. The extent to which the book fulfils its stated aim of investigating the influence of Christian theology and religious beliefs on Anglo-Saxon society is the litmus test for a volume of this sort. At every turn, Foxhall Forbes is constrained by the limitations of the evidence, the vast majority of which reflects the views of a very small sample of elite society. Despite this challenge, she makes an admirable effort to mine our scant resources and her use of archaeology and place-name evidence, alongside the historian's more traditional repertoire, is inventive and produces thought-provoking results.

In attempting to discover the beliefs of the non-elite members of society, this reader was concerned that the wider population were not given enough credit, however. At times a seemingly arbitrary distinction between the beliefs taught in monastic schools and those presented to the laity was introduced, for example in relation to the threat posed by demons (pp. 82–3). In addition comments such as these were troubling:

Since penance looks ultimately to the salvation of the soul at Judgement Day, its focus is the next world even though penitential actions have to take place in this world. To many people, this must have seemed incomprehensibly remote (p. 130).

This demonstrates once again that the concern for the fate of the soul was not confined to theologians and scholars, or even only to monastic communities, but that the message had filtered through at least as far as the people who came together to form the guilds, perhaps the middling and lower sorts of thegns (p. 248).

The greater range of evidence from the Late Roman World reveals the capacity of Christianity to appeal to all orders of society, irrespective of rank, social status or gender. Indeed, the hope of eternal salvation offered to all is a significant factor in its ultimate success as a world religion. Such concerns aside, it is clear that Foxhall Forbes breaks new ground in considering the widespread Anglo-Saxon population's engagement with Christian beliefs and practices as this changed and developed from the eighth to 11th centuries. It is hoped her efforts will encourage others to do likewise.

Notes

1. For example, Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2003); R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge 1990). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, book 3, c. 49, tr. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, 1965), p. 162. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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