

## **Bishops in the Political Community of England, 1213-1272**

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The bishops in 13th-century England have often received individual historiographical attention as key figures; the likes of Stephen Langton and Peter des Roches as major political actors, or Robert Grosseteste and John Pecham as intellectuals and ecclesiastical administrators. As a cohort, the bishops were also collectively significant both in church and state, in a century which has recently been identified by Katherine Harvey as the highpoint of freedom of elections to their positions – although that freedom did not mean eliminate influence from their appointments, or jockeying for position. The political activity of the cohort, limited to those of its members who governed English dioceses between 1213 and 1272, is the focus of attention for this book by S. T. Ambler, developed from a doctoral thesis of 2012. The period was certainly tumultuous, moving from King John's submission to Pope Innocent III and the subsequent Magna Carta crisis, through the minority of Henry III, and then into the fraught and tempestuous decades of his majority, culminating in the challenge of Simon de Montfort and the constitutional experiments of 1258–63, with the subsequent descent into civil war and its immediate aftermath. As a stretch it is much-studied; as the era of Magna Carta and the 'birth of Parliament' it has its own mythology in Whiggish and popular versions of English history.

The studies of individual bishops have examined their specific roles in these events, but Ambler seeks a more collective history, to work out how the bishops participated in the evolutions as a group (although, with the vagaries of sources, individuals still loom large), to redress what she sees as an imbalance in the existing historiography of the period and its crises. That, for her, has concentrated too much on laymen, paying too little attention to the religious leaders and depicting 'a political order in which ... [the bishops] could expect only a walk-on part' (p. 1). By looking at these prelates, and their ideological and practical interventions as churchmen in these political transformations, she seeks 'to recast the world of thirteenth-century English politics', arguing that when it came to enforcement of Magna Carta as defence of the revolutionary programme in 1265, 'This world was not democratic, but theocratic' (p. 1). As things evolve, the theocracy and the theology behind it – particularly the concern with latent sin inherent in rulership and the exercise of spiritual jurisdiction to control potentially sinful political action – becomes the spine of the analysis.

The shape of her argument is sketched out in the introduction, receiving more detailed development in the succeeding eight chapters. (The book actually concludes with a short epilogue which sets the English experience in comparative European context, building on contrasts between England and Europe occasionally mentioned earlier in the volume, and also assessing similarities with Scottish experience in the 1290s.) Structurally, these chapters fall into two very separate groups, even though they develop broadly as a chronological sequence. The first four are essentially contextualisation and scene-setting, each with its own thematic focus. Being centred on the period from 1213 to the mid-1250s, they serve to some extent as a prelude to the more coherent and unified treatment of the crisis which erupted in 1258, and its subsequent working out, addressed in the last four chapters.

The thematic concern of the book's first half is evident in the chapter titles themselves, each developing a specific element in the argument. The first, 'Bishops and the political community', provides background on the bishops as a cohort – necessarily somewhat generalised – and their overall positioning within the contemporary social and political structure. While stressing a sense of common identity and common purpose, their differences are not ignored. While treating them as a distinct group, Ambler is at pains to stress their continued links with the laity, and with their own spiritual subjects. They constituted their own 'episcopal community' (p. 24), but were also part of the national political community by virtue of their landholding and links with kings, government, and nobility. While functioning as background, this chapter also provides a second step in the overall introduction. Its final pages (pp. 30–1) turn attention to the intellectual links between the bishops and lay magnates, and offer an initial nod to what eventually becomes the book's prime concern, the bishops' role during the Montfortian ascendancy.

That chapter two should deal with 'Kingship and royal power in political thought' seems a logical enough next stage. However, this is not a broad discussion or analysis of theories of kingship in 13th-century England. The focus is on the practical drama of kingship, as divinely-instituted but always human, with a natural tendency to injustice and tyranny. The bishops saw it as their role to offer rebuke and advice to temper those tendencies. To demonstrate their willingness to do so in the specific English context of 1213–72, Ambler turns to Stephen Langton and Robert Grosseteste (with the latter dominant, because of the greater availability of sources). While differing in detail, perhaps even in perspective and perceptions of their roles, they shared a generally conservative understanding of kingship as part of a natural and divine order which could not be overturned: kings were there to rule by right, but rightly; they could be admonished, even disobeyed, but not resisted or forcibly deprived of their power and authority.

The analysis here is penetrating; the comparing and contrasting of the two bishops produces a coherent and thought-provoking argument. However, how it actually fits into the book's evolving argument is not set out as clearly and firmly as might be hoped. The rationale for the analytical depth is that the bishops (perhaps specifically these two, but maybe all) were 'men of action ... at the heart of the political community' (p. 37). That, though, begins to expose a tension in Ambler's basic approach: what of all the other bishops not considered here, and who may not have thought like Langton and Grosseteste? Peter des Roches was also a man of action, certainly at the heart of events, and possibly with his own sense of the status and powers of a king. The tempered kingship advocated by Langton and Grosseteste was at heart a question of defining the boundaries of royal power; but in the real world each bishop had to reach his own conclusions about where they lay, and so, ultimately, which side he would be on in any crisis.

The consideration of the tempering of royal authority moves from theory to practice in chapter three, and its examination of 'Bishops as peacemakers'. Here narrative plays a larger role, with a focus on the bishops using their moral authority individually and collectively to promote reconciliation when a king appeared to exceed the acceptable limits of his power and sink into wilful modes of governance. Structured with a focus on Langton's participation in the lifting of King John's excommunication in 1213, and Edmund of Abingdon's actions (in association with other bishops) to bring Henry III back to the paths of good government in 1234, this places the bishops as intermediaries between king and subjects, 'central to the balance of the political community in thirteenth-century England', with a 'profound commitment to their

irenic obligations' (p. 81). Peace-making is shaped as the elimination of royal sin, but not as bluntly aggressive resistance to the exercise of royal power. Again, the argument is cogent, and well made; but made slide over disconcerting elements. After all, in 1234 the real baddy, the focus of hostility, was not just Henry III, but his leading minister, Peter des Roches, bishop of Winchester. Bishops could evidently disrupt peace as well as make it.

Finally, in this half, the fourth chapter tackles the sense of the episcopate as a cohort capable of standing up for itself, with an examination of 'Episcopal unity and royal power'. Again there is a focus on episodes, chiefly from the 1250s (but including comparison with the 1220s), and with a particular emphasis to the selection which may skew – and certainly shapes – the analysis. The chapter's concern is not with the totality of royal power, but more specifically with episcopal reactions to royal demands for finance to support major, but contentious, overseas initiatives – an expedition to the Holy Land, and the project for Henry III's son Edmund to become king of Sicily. Here the bishops were perhaps caught off-guard, both enterprises having papal blessing and supported by mandates ordering clerical contribution. Resistance to the king would also be resistance to the pope, but it was the king with whom the bishops had to deal directly. Ambler here sees the bishops working much more effectively in concert, their unity reinforced by their common interest with the lay barons in limiting royal demands. However, as she acknowledges, their unity and solidarity was not assured: their reaction to the royal demands may have 'forged [them] into a genuine unit, with a vigorous corporate identity' (p. 98); but it remained a fragile unity.

These early chapters work function largely as stand-alone units, discrete fragments which add up to a depiction of the English episcopate as politically active, anxious about the quality and morality of governance, and concerned to defend their own and the church's roles and place within the political order. As such they constitute a prologue to the second half of the book, in which chapters five to seven deal with the extended struggle over regime change from 1258 to 1265, with chapter eight as a coda. Here the book's character changes significantly, into a detailed analytical assessment of the bishops and their role in the extended crisis.

This begins with a general consideration in Chapter five of 'The English bishops and the Revolution of 1258'. Whether revolution or coup (both terms are applied), the events of 1258 posed a major challenge to the bishops as pastoral politicians; most did not support the reformists. Some did, and events cracked whatever unity the bishops may have had beforehand: the divisions between 'Montfortians and royalists' provide the meat for chapter six. Here a shift in emphasis is suggested, from the episcopate as a cohort to concentration on the supporters of Montfort and his programme. That certainly occurs in chapter seven, with its main focus the activities of bishops involved in 'Justifying the Montfortian regime'. This is the book's longest chapter (pp. 147–83), with a much more traditional narrative shape. That is reflected in the identification of two separate phases in the process – perhaps brought together in the one chapter only because the second is too short to stand alone. The first centres on the Mise of Amiens, the judgement derived from the arbitration of Louis IX of France between Montfortians and royalists in 1264, and the subsequent negotiations with the papal legate Gui Foulquois. The second segment exploits evidence provided by the *Song of Lewes* and considers the Parliament of 1265. That Parliament was the culmination of the Montfortian revolution, but depended for its effectiveness on control of Henry III and his heir. Edward's escape gave the royalists a leader; Montfort's defeat and death at Evesham in August 1265 overturned hopes and exposed his episcopal supporters to retribution. The 12 pages (pp. 184–96) of chapter eight consider 'The aftermath of the Battle of Evesham', ending the commentary on the bishops' participation in these political vicissitudes with an examination of the funeral sermon delivered for John Gervase, bishop of Winchester, by Eudes de Chateauroux at the papal court following the bishop's death there in 1268.

Treating politics as an aspect of episcopal pastoral care and the oversight of the latent sinfulness of rulership – in the century of the wider 'pastoral revolution' – Ambler offers an innovative reading of English politics during a dramatic period. Her emphasis on the place of spiritual sanctions in the enforcement of political decisions and agreements may appear quirky to those more used to the (literal) cut and thrust of the period;

but deserves to be taken seriously. The book provides a forceful reminder of the tensions between ideals and realities, theory and practice, common good and unbridled wilfulness, which were as much factors in 13th-century political life as naked ambition and the search for power. Whether Ambler makes her case as effectively as she might may be less certain. Part of the reason for this lies in the book's structure, with its divide which becomes obvious at the transition from chapter four to chapter five. The two halves are not neatly soldered together, and to some extent exist independently. There is also some vagueness in the appeal to ideas of 'political community', when what that might have meant at the time is left imprecise. Collectively, the bishops certainly were part of the political elite, but how far that elite constituted a single 'community' is not fully articulated. Indeed, how far the bishops themselves constituted a specific community of their own, united by goals, attitudes, and interests, is also left somewhat vague. As is often acknowledged, there were tensions and divisions among them; while the existence of a single national political community is inherently challenged by the recurrent political disruption across the period as a whole. Despite Ambler's regular assertions of a unified episcopal stance, that unity often appears a mirage, a temporary coming-together in response to events, rather than a programmatic partisan position. That does not mean that there was no unity in conceptualisations of their role as pastoral politicians, and Ambler is certainly strong on setting out the pastoral approach to the maintenance of political balance and order, both in theory and practice; but individual bishops' personal interpretations of what that role entailed and required clearly did differ. One problem here is that, while bishops may have been 'men of action', the scene is dominated by the most active (or perhaps the most partisan) among them. Several make little more than walk-on appearances, some may have been almost entirely inactive. That inactivity may have been as much and as valid a response to their situation and reflection of political judgement (as well as comment on their relations with their brother bishops) as any active participation in the contemporary turmoils; but it is much more challenging to interpret, and usually cannot be.

Combining their functions as ecclesiastical prelates and landed magnates, their roles and status both spiritual and temporal, the bishops were hybrids within the English political structure. Hybridity is inherently challenging, often perplexing and disconcerting. As a novel analysis of the integration of politics with religious ideas (or vice versa) this investigation of these hybrids is itself something of a hybrid book, seeking to maintain the balance between its ecclesiastical and political spheres, while attempting to unite them. It may not quite succeed, possibly because 'the political community' as a national conceit adds a variable which disrupts the balance. However, even if not totally successful it offers a stimulating and provocative interpretation and approach which merits serious attention not only for the book's specific analysis of 13th-century England, but as a model for applications more widely across succeeding centuries, during which England's bishops continued to be a significant influence, and were often active and important participants, in national political life.

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