The Papacy and the Historian V: Popes and Monks

Eric John

Gregory the Great is important because he was born to the purple of what was left of the classical world—he was related to both Symmachi and Anici, to Symmachus and Boethius—but used the position his status gave him to further the cause of the revolutionary and subversive elements of christian society, the hippies of his day, the monks. The Rome of his day was the apex of a wedge-shaped territory extending from the Adriatic, near Ravenna, to the Mediterranean, at Ostia. This, like all Italy, was supposed to be part of the Byzantine Empire. To the north, what is now Tuscany and Lombardy were ruled by the Lombards who were bitter enemies of the Byzantines, who could afford to maintain an unremitting hostility to them, and of the papacy, which could not. The so-called exarchate of Ravenna, of which Rome and its environs, the so-called duchy of Rome, were a part, was the object of a policy of covetous nibbling by the Lombards. The exarchate was Byzantine in that it recognised the sovereignity of the eastern emperor, who appointed the exarch, but in practice it had to be self-supporting. Inevitably the bishop of Rome played a greater and greater part in all this and the duchy of Rome at least was often in practice ruled by the pope of the day insofar as it was ruled at all.

The ruler of Rome had always had some responsibility for feeding the population : before Gregory became pope in 590 the Tiber overflowed its banks and inundated the city's granaries. Plague had followed in the wake of the flood and carried off Pope Paschal I, Gregory's predecessor. Rome was full of refugees from the Lombards, Gregory himself estimated there were 3,000 destitute nuns alone in Rome and appealed for help in feeding them. He was naturally involved in Lombard and Byzantine politics and it is obvious from his correspondence that he still looked at the christian world as an entity spread around the Mediterranean : he did not think in terms of eastern or western as his successors were one day to do. In many ways his perspectives were traditional and classical : he certainly initiated the conversion of the English but to judge by his correspondence this hardly amounted to a policy and certainly did not occupy much of his time or attention. The consequences of these things were important. In particular it is easy to see now that the persistent civil and political tasks the situation in and around Rome imposed on the

papacy meant that what Gregory undertook as an emergency became permanent tasks, and in such chances and contingencies the papal state had its birth. But Gregory's monasticism is more important than all this.

The monastic movement is Egyptian in origin and inspiration. So far as it had a single founder that founder was St Anthony: it was put on the map by St Athanasius, who, turned out of his see by an Arian establishment, was prepared to trust his person and fortunes to a load of unwashed drop-outs in the remoter parts of the Nile Valley. They succoured him and he established the movement of these holy hippies towards respectability by his life of Anthony. That life was turned into Latin by Bishop Evagrius and had a remarkable effect in Gaul in particular. By the end of the fourth century Gaul had produced its own Anthony in the person of St Martin. Martin's spirituality was 'apocalyptic and puritanical, and it cut across the lines of the *civitates*. In a word it was un-Roman'. To quote Professor Wallace-Hadrill, who goes on to say: 'it was perpetuated in a biography of startling merit. The *Vita Martini* of Sulpicius, with its image of the fearless pastor, glorying in *rusticitas* yet not in the least politically inept, is the foundation-stone of the art of ecclesiastical biography in France'. The *civitas* had always been the centre of *romanitas,* the location of schools, baths, markets, assemblies, and meeting places where the best people exhibited their claim to be city slickers and political powers of the first order. Naturally with the advent of the Christian empire, the better *civitates* acquired bishops, chairs, and basilicas. This kind of Christian élite was not surprisingly in many ways visibly the heir of the Roman establishment and the willing guardian of classical values. In the fifth century the virtues of this kind of Catholic bishop were embodied in the person of St Germanus, bishop of Auxerre: a Roman provincial nobleman whose military capacities played an important part in making him a bishop. It has been suggested (by Mrs Chadwick) that the official life of Germanus was a deliberate counterblast to Sulpicius Severus' life of Martin. Certainly the two works must have appealed to very different publics.

The monks were frequently critics of *romanitas*. They cared nothing for the classical tradition, and their reaction to city life was to flee it. They stood uncompromisingly for the superiority of country life and country pursuits. They were, it is important to realise, basically a movement of lay people: even though some of them became bishops (after all Germanus was a military man without a clerical background when he was pushed into the clerical state). It was to this very un-roman, and in Rome at any rate, very unpopular, tradition that Gregory adhered. He used his patrimony to found a Roman monastery and his influence to give monasticism a respectability and a direction it had hitherto lacked. He summed up all this in his inspired promotion of the cult of an unknown monk called Benedict.

St Benedict has enjoyed a preposterously embroidered career in triumphalist historiography. In Victorian and Edwardian England

and Willhelmine Germany a career and a set of policies were invented for him, as audacious in their fabrication as any medieval saint's life. Benedict was the man who introduced Roman *gravitas* and stability into monasticism. He provided, in his *Rule,* a blue print of Roman order that Gregory the great 'wove into the fabric of the canon-law'. An English monk went so far as to suggest on the strength of some feeble allusions to Roman legal texts—that Benedict's *Rule* was officially inspired as part of the same programme that produced Justinian's *Corpus.* Benedict died about half a century before Gregory became pope. But Gregory with a vision of that Empire on which the sun would never set which at once proved he was a man of foresight and a saint even Protestants could respect, converted the English. Naturally he found right-minded men, full of order and stability, in his Roman monastery, which was naturally Benedictine, because only Benedictine monks were ordered stable and canonical. He sent them off to be archbishops of Canterbury, bishops of London, and to properly dish the Irish. The Irish were holy, unwashed of course, anarchic, though charming, and wouldn't at all do. They did not understand about order and stability and instead of having bishops with sees in cities like ordered and stable Romans, they had monasteries of ferocious austerity, in which bishops were kept for essential liturgical purposes but (unless they also happened to be abbots) without, *horribile dictu,* powers of jurisdiction, chairs, or basilicas. Their unwashed enthusiasm led them to be missionaries and they had started to convert the English having first established a monastery of the wrong kind at Iona and converted the original Scots (i.e. Irish conquerors of the Glasgow area, the kingdom of Dalriada). Worse they celebrated easter on the wrong weekend and they had started to convert the Gaulish Church from order and stability to Celtic anarchy, etc. This last was the work of one Columbanus, whose writings are in fact the source of most of the traditional picture of Irish monasticism though they give little real warrant for that picture. Columbanus even advanced as far as Milan and founded a monastery at Bobbio. No wonder alarm and crisis raged in Rome but Gregory knew the answer (order and stability, etc.) and with all the skill of Bismarck in a tiara he dished the Irish by converting the English. This picture, though far from dead and still enshrined in the clotted pages of the late Christopher Dawson, is nonetheless pretty well entirely without foundation.

St Benedict himself is virtually the creation of Gregory the Great. All we know of him is what Gregory tells us in his *Dialogues*—his foundation of Monte Cassino having in the intervening half century since Benedict's death been destroyed by the Lombards. It has recently been pointed out just how very much of Gregory there is in the 'biography'. The characters have allegorical names, not real names, and the things they do are much more readily understood as types of spiritual activity proper to monks than real antics of real people. Dom Henry Wansborough's arguments have been subjected to some criticism but his central argument seems to stand : even his

critics concede that Scholastica is more likely to have been a type of contemplation than a flesh and blood sister. Of course there was a real monk, who may well have been called Benedict, because Benedict by his day was a name as well as a soubriquet—there was a contemporary Pope Benedict. There is no doubt he founded Monte Cassino or that he wrote the Rule that bears his name. But Gregory presented him as the model he wanted monks to follow.

The *Rule* is now largely accepted as derivative from the more obscure *Rule of the Master,* which dates from about 500, some thirty years earlier than the famous *Rule.* Benedict produced a masterly *précis* of the earlier Rule, which seems never to have been actually employed in a real monastery. There are very significant differences however. The Master's Rule is still that of a lay community: the monastery is assumed to have a chapel for the Office but mass may be said in it only very occasionally and on precisely defined days. The monks will normally go to the parish church. The *Rule* of Benedict has taken a very important step towards moving the monks into the clergy. His monks—and his *Rule* was meant for use by real monks in a real community, Monte Cassino—do not use the parish church, they have a chapel without restrictions on its use. It is true that no prescriptions for community masses are made in the *Rule,* that was hardly yet a task proper for monks to undertake but what was envisaged was an autonomous spiritual community, subject, no doubt, to the local bishop, but facing the bishop as a corporate body with corporate solidarity. The bishop had become an external authority, and I think one could have guessed at the time that before long attempts would be made to exclude the bishop altogether. This is why the *Rule* is important.

It seems to have been the Irish who grasped how much more suitable the monastery was than the city-based diocese for the ordering of the Christian life in this world. The Irish, of course, had no cities and so could not have organised traditional dioceses anyway, a fact many ecclesiastical historians still seem not to have noticed. The monastery, usually associated with a tribal kingdom, acted as a citadel where monks could enjoy the strength a communal organisation gave, where the essential task of training the clergy for succeeding generations could be undertaken. Of course not all Irish monasteries were spiritual and cultural centres of the first rank—or even the third rank—but some were. The most famous Irish monk of the period was Columbanus who planted the kind of monasticism he was used to in south west Gaul and northern Italy; even the Lombards respected Columbanus. Columbanus, in a famous letter to Gregory the Great, criticised the local bishops for, amongst other things, not keeping easter as he did. It is on this that the picture of Columbanus the Irish anarchist is based and—since much of the traditional picture of early Irish monasticism is based on the traditional picture of Columbanus— it matters that this reading of the letter is a very distorted one. If you read the letter as a whole it is evident that Columbanus is not on the defensive, answering complaints made to the Pope. He is noting the

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local bishop's inadequacy for office, their unchaste and profligate lives—there is plenty of contemporary evidence that the diocesan bishops in the *civitates* turned into cathedral cities were as decadent as they were high born—and he plainly expects the Pope to agree with him. We have no record of Gregory's reply but his voluminous correspondence suggests he would have been in agreement with Columbanus.

The point is that Columbanus and Gregory shared the same kind of analysis of the nature of their world and its shortcomings. They both saw that *Romanitas* was in a state of enduring decay and that the inheritance of the Christian Empire, a city-based episcopate staffed by the great land-owning families of the neighbourhood, was totally incapable of meeting the needs of the day. This was now a society based on the countryside, town life still existed (and was more important than was thought a generation ago) but it did not amount to what Rome had meant by *urbanitas* : it could not sustain the cultural, educational, or even physical, needs of men of the day. What was wanted was an institution based on the countryside, the monastery. What is more these monasteries needed virtual spiritual independence from the local, very aristocratic, and usually hostile bishops. In 628 Gregory's successor, another monk, Honorius I, gave Columbanus's successor as abbot of Bobbio the first known papal privilege exempting the monastery from the power of the bishop. Such privileges, which were reserved for the really important monasteries, and were never broadcast wholesale (and the criteria of importance were more than mere wealth and great social connexions) became an important support for the new kind of monasticism.

I say new kind of monasticism, although, of course, it arose out of the hotch-potch of what had become a 'traditional' institution by now. The new monasticism was very much less of a lay institution. Columbanus's monasteries, as Gregory the Great's, were cradles for bishops, and bishops, on the whole, of a different and more considerable stature. The monastic tradition was of some form of gaggle of hermits. The original monasticism was that of independent hermits living in proximity—'a monk, that is a solitary' as Jerome put it. Columbanus, Gregory and Benedict were at one in rejecting independent hermits as the *basic* form of monasticism, though they were allowed a place in the margins of the monastic life. The new monasticism was a communal monasticism, holding its property in common, and subject to a paternal, in the last resort, authoritarian abbot. The abbot, however, was supposed to be chosen on merit, not to emerge from the family of the original founder. This intrusion of the family into the monastery was now very widespread, in Celtic as well as Romanogermanic lands. Of the first eight successors of Columba at Iona, we know that seven were relatives of the Saint : for all we know so was the eighth. The ambience of the new monasticism was a communal life, the acceptance of all the difficulties attendant upon living with the same people for years, cultivating a proper fraternal affection and a due humility and submission to the community's authority—which

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in some cases meant united resistance to hostile outsiders. The first Life of St Wilfrid illustrates the difficulties of the new monasticism very well.

It is for this kind of life that Benedict's *Rule* served as a normative document. It was informed by clear principles, derived in part from tradition, but not hesitating to innovate and clearly envisaging a real community bound by a paternal constitution, and functioning as an entity. This is the spirit that informed Gregory the Great's monastic policy too, although we know that he did not adopt Benedict's *Rule* for his own Roman monastery and there is thus no foundation for the view that Augustine of Canterbury and his companions were Benedictine monks. Columbanus wrote his own *Regulae,* but in spite of its title it is not a set of rules but a discursive discussion of the monastic life. It envisages essentially the kind of balanced communal asceticism that Benedict legislated for. I pointed out some years ago the obvious resemblance in feeling and intention between these *Regulae* and the *Rule.* This was received with some scepticism at the time so I may be forgiven for feeling satisfaction that it has now been shown that Columbanus actually quotes from the *Rule* : he wrote with the *Rule* in front of him. It is in fact monks of his connexion who turned the *Rule* from a literary curiosity into one of the basic documents of the religious life. It was in Columbanus's monasteries that the *Rule* was first adopted as the norm and bequeathed to Carolingian Francia, where for the first time it became the only legal form of monasticism (in 817 at the synod of Aachen).

Naturally there was a limit to how far the Church could go against the wishes of the ruling élite of the time; but the new monasticism did have some success in making that élite give some ground at important points. The new sort of bishop was still high-born—medieval monasticism from beginning to end was always an upper-class institution—but he had undergone a pretty strict indoctrination over many years in a closed, intimate, and self-conscious community. Sufficient of them have left evidence that they conducted themselves very differently from their predecessors and many of their contemporaries. This was noticed and resented. In effect what the new monasticism, and particularly Gregory the Great's espousal of its principles, meant was that the élitism of this fantastically élitist society was tempered by the creation of special status for the clergy. Of similar social origins to their fellows their new kind of education and outlook gave them a solidarity, on occasion a solidarity against their wealthy, powerful, sometimes royal kinsfolk, that spilled over from the monastery that nurtured this status-based independence, into the general world of politics.

Inevitably this was resented. It is evident that there was a power-struggle amongst the Roman clergy starting from Gregory the Great's day between the 'new' party and the traditionalists that lasted for thirty years. The first life of Gregory the Great records a miracle of Gregory, who, it is alleged, came back from the dead to kick his successor, Sabinian, to death. Sabinian had expelled the monks from the

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high places of the curia to which Gregory had promoted them. Monk and secular suceeded more or less in turn, with consequent expulsions and promotions until the time of Honorius I, the most ardent and persistent of the monk popes since Gregory's death. Honorius's doctrinal involvement in the heresy of the Three Chapters was a heaven-sent opportunity to the traditional party : it seems improbable that what he actually said would have occasioned the condemnations it met with without the *odium theologicum* the new clericalism created. The gathering of the clergy completely into a clerical status group who could generally be relied upon to act as clerics not as members of powerful kinship groups was not finally achieved, of course, until the so-called Gregorian reformation. It may be pointed out in passing that such a view of the clergy, such an insistence on separation from the ordinary ties of social life, was the creation of a special need in a special time, and that in particular it was made to create distance between the clergy and their families when the Church could not avoid choosing its leading clergymen from the very top of the ruling group. It marks a stage in the life of the new Chosen People but nothing suggests it need be retained if the circumstances of social life change in ways that make such a clerical status group a hindrance not an aid.

Given the fragments of evidence we have to rely on and the fact that contemporary hagiography usually seeks to gloss over tensions rather than underline them, inevitably many of the consequences of this can only be guessed at. The tensions and their nature are, of course, indubitable. They cannot be concealed in letters for example and the correspondence of Gregory the Great is important here, so too is that of the monk missionary Boniface a hundred years or so later, whose antipathy to some of his episcopal colleagues such as Milo of Trier is very clear. In between comes Eddius's *Life* of Wilfrid, which is unusual for a work of hagiography in that it does reveal something of the whys and wherefores of these tensions and the kind of cliff-hanging career even so great a man as Wilfrid enjoyed. But nonetheless the consequences are there and they can be seen.

First of all it is clear that monasticism, new style, went with missionary work. It is a condemnation of the traditionalists that their view of the traditions they inherited, their difficulty in disentangling the Rome of Peter from the Rome of Augustus, made the idea of converting the barbarians anathema. Even when the Germanic invaders were anxious for conversion and were quite accidentally converted to Arianism, one feels the Catholic establishment found the fact of their heresy a good excuse for holding aloof. But Columbanus, Gregory and their disciples were prepared to do missionary work both at the level of converting pure pagans, as with the Anglo-Saxons, and at the level of deepening the often purely nominal Christianity of the Gaulish countryside. With the brilliant and original study by Mr D. H. Green, *The Carolingian Lord,* something of how this was done can at last be seen. We cannot assign responsibility exactly to the men

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who executed the policies but we can be certain that Gregory the Great and monks he patronised played important roles.

What is in question is the creation of a new religious vocabulary for the Germanic vernaculars. As it happened the early period of the English Church's history is crucial. The process certainly began here; the essentials of the solutions to the problems were propounded in this time and place, and then the results conveyed by the Anglo-Saxon missionaries to what is now Western Germany. These early church-men needed to choose words for God, Lord, disciple, apostle, and so on, from languages that had no trace of such concepts. In effect there were two areas of the languages that could be used, the area of military terminology and the area of family talk. Unhesitatingly they chose—and it is certain that Gregory the Great played an important part in making the choice—the military sphere. This was very much against the traditions of *Romanitas*: imperial Christianity had toler-ated the military dimension to society but only just. The new church-men saw, certainly correctly, that it was much less dangerous to take the word for God from the language of military command. Up to a point they had biblical precedent: St Paul occasionally used military metaphors. Up to a point it was simply a matter of making the new religion intelligible to the Germanic converts: with a cultural and social background derived from the *comitatus,* the sworn military band, the Old Testament was obviously much easier to understand than the New. To take a single example, this was a world in which the ultimate protection of the individual was the blood feud, or threat of it, waged by the kin. But a killing within the family had no social solution, indeed the Merovingian family feuds were an important cause of the fall of the Merovingian polity in Gaul. Inter-family feuds were dreaded and guarded against without any nudging from mis-sionaries but not unnaturally the story of Cain and Abel seems to have early caught the new Christians' imaginations.

What Gregory and his monks gambled on was being able to take the sting out of the military implications of the early theological vocabulary they had utilised, and it speaks much for the soundness of the thinking that underlay the religious sociology of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons and so on, that they very largely succeeded in making these words—*dryhten* the original English word for a lord and military leader, but after the first generation of the conversion the normal word for God (except in archaising poetry), will serve as example—into purely theological terms. On the other side is the care with which any term that had connexions with ideas of the family was eschewed. Gregory and the new churchmen did not share St Augustine's illusions about the naturalness of the family. They knew that if there was ever to be a real Church order, a real Christian liberty, a real openness to change and development, the power of the family had to be overcome. This was a world in which the family determined much. One's career, one's prospects, one's social position, in the last resort on which side of the subsistence line one lived, were determined by one's family. For the Church the property

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upon which monasteries could be founded and kept going depended on the kinship groups and their readiness to part with capital. Up to a point the new Christians were after all a new ruling class : family groups who had combined with one another and very greatly and very rapidly improved their social position by taking over sections of the Roman world. There was a lot that could be painlessly spared. But left to themselves, if they were prepared to relinquish capital, they did not like to relinquish power. The new churchmen thrived on devices to reduce and if possible eliminate this residual family control of lands once granted. This was why this small, powerful, but limited élite group saw to it that the vernacular language of theology carried no smack of family life or kinship institutions. The famous slogan of the late fifties, the family that prays together stays together, would have drawn some acidulated comments from Gregory the Great.

Drawing some very provisional implications from all this, the changing position of Rome, the move from the city of Augustus to the city of Peter, has something to tell us about the nature of the new chosen people. Like the first Israel they have to wander in the desert but not a physical desert this time, this time it is the desert of status seeking and social groups. The new Israel has no geographical coherence, it is a people in the midst of peoples but can never be quite at home in the social structure whatever it is. To live within a social structure but to some degree to be necessarily alienated from it—and some degree of organised alienation is an essential element of the Christian condition—means it is necessary to take particular note of what the ruling class is up to. Minority groups at odds with the ruling group who have no resources of their own or do not provide them from what is available have a long and continuing history of exploitation and misery. In Gregory the Great's day there was genuine goodwill as an available resource and the power to legitimate robber bands into respectable political entities. It seems to follow—at least it does to me—that one of the permanent characteristics of the new chosen people is a need to keep a very wary eye on the social structure of the society they happen to find themselves living in. It is therefore imperative for Christians to take very seriously a means of criticising society such as that of Marx : Christians cannot ever afford to get this sort of thing wrong. We need to know what is happening to the ruling class because at some point we shall find ourselves involved more or less uncomfortably in its fortunes. We are however inhibited from using the Machiavellian techniques, or the social engineering ideology, so popular today, because for us any society that has not *justitita* is a great robbery. This is inconvenient in the short run but not in the long run because social engineering is nothing more than a metaphor and machiavellianism never works. Gregory the Great operated in a world without mass media, with communications working at a snail's pace, but he contributed very greatly to producing a few communities of like-minded men, who operating within the power élite of his day, made very slow changes that still affect our attitudes in some things to this day.

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