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# Religious History of the United Kingdom

## Abstract

*This paper deals with the religious history and the development of the religion of the United Kingdom. Throughout history, the United Kingdom was influenced by a number of different factors which resulted in various changes in religion itself. Such changes had an important role in shaping the society of the United Kingdom as we know it today. Paying attention to the significance of religion, the main aim of this paper is to show the way religion in the United Kingdom changed through the years, but also to emphasize its importance in the life of an individual.*

**Keywords:** United Kingdom, England, religion, history

## Introduction

Today, religion is of major importance in the life of an individual living in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In the past, this area was prone to many different historical and social influences and changes, which resulted in religious changes and changes in the way religion was perceived. Today, the society of the United Kingdom is among the most secularised in the world; therefore, it includes a large number of different beliefs among the population. However, this was not always the case. Religious beginnings of England itself trace back to Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs, they continue through arrival of Christianity in Britain and Protestant Reformation to as we know it today.

The first chapter provides an explanation of the religious beginnings of the United Kingdom, emphasizing the influence and importance of Anglo-Saxon paganism and their polytheistic beliefs. The second chapter deals with analysing English Reformation, its importance, its causes and consequences, but also the rulers that are considered of crucial importance for this period. This section is followed by an examination of the monarch's role in the religious aspect of the United Kingdom, where the paper will deal with explaining the monarch's duties in contemporary British society. In short, this paper will intend to demonstrate the importance of social and historical changes in shaping the religion of the United Kingdom as it is known today.

## Anglo-Saxon Paganism

### General information

According to Wednesbury Shire source, the concept of Anglo-Saxon Paganism or Anglo-Saxon Heathenry refers to the ancient pagan religions of the tribes that moved to today's England in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The same source puts emphasis on the fact that it is a polytheistic religion, meaning that the followers believe in many Gods and Goddesses (Anglo-Saxon Heathenry). Bračko, as well, indicates that "First used in the ancient times and civilizations, the primary instance of which may be accredited to Ancient Romans, the term 'Pagan' was used for people that rejected the belief in one specific God and instead laid their belief into multiple Gods and/or Goddesses"(2020: 1). According to Wikiwand, Anglo-Saxon paganism was believed and practiced by Anglo-Saxons between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century, or to be more precise, during the period of Early Medieval England. Pagan beliefs and practices were introduced to Britain by the Anglo-Saxon migration in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but they remained dominant until the Christianisation of its kingdoms in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. Wikiwand puts emphasis on Woden, who was, with Thunor and Tiw, the most prominent and important deity (Anglo-Saxon Paganism). Chaney, also, indicates that Woden was of crucial importance when talking about genealogies: "The importance of Woden for both is proverbial. The genealogies of the royal houses of Kent, Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia, Bernicia, Deira, and Lindsey all record the descent of their kings from Woden" (1960: 200). When mentioning deities, it is of importance to notice the similarities with Scandinavian or Nordic paganism, with Thor and Odin being present in both of these beliefs. Along with the deities, Anglo-Saxon paganism included belief in other supernatural entities, such as elves and dragons, but also included the ideas of magic and witchcraft. Furthermore, their cultic practice revolved around sacrifice of inanimate objects and animals in order to demonstrate their devotion, usually at religious festivals that were held all year round (Anglo-Saxon Paganism).

Even today, paganism is practiced by different people, some of them belonging to Wicca, or Pagan Witchcraft groups. The origins of Wicca date to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when people started practicing diverse rituals and traditions related to the Ancient era. Today, most of the followers of this religion are led by pantheism, animism, polytheism, respect towards nature and self, ritual practices, personal experience, magic, ethics, and pluralism (Bračko, 2020: 3-4). According to the same author, it is of major importance to state that even though it has changed from the past to the contemporary spirituality as it is seen today, paganism has never stopped celebrating and focusing on nature and cosmic forces; therefore, people following this idea have never stopped living by ethical and moral principles, respecting themselves, but also respecting the nature and other people as well (2020: 5).

## Paganism in *Beowulf*

Pagan influences can be seen in Old English literature, with the most well-known example being *Beowulf*, an Old English epic poem. According to Britannica, *Beowulf* is a heroic poem which deals with the events of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and even though its exact year of origin is unknown, it is believed to have been written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It consists of two parts, with the first one being set in Denmark, where Beowulf, a prince of the Geats, arrives to save Hrothgar's kingdom from Grendel, an evil monster. The second part follows Beowulf's succession to the kingship and another battle, this time with a fire-breathing dragon, in which he dies (*Beowulf*). Bračko emphasizes that even though there are Christian elements in this story, it is still a largely pagan story, as it deals with a hero with supernatural strength who battles monsters in order to protect the people, loyalty of a soldier to the lord, emphasis of one's origin and ancestry, revenge, courtesy, and heroic courage (2020: 11). He is illustrated as a brave and strong hero, but as an altruistic figure as well: "There was no one else like him alive. / In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth, / high-born and powerful" (Beowulf-poet, 196-198). Grendel, the monster, is said to be the most prominent pagan element:

"Most of the Pagan elements are accredited to the idea of what Norse Paganism was, an example of which is Grendel, who is called both a demon and a monster, and is presented in an evil manner. Beowulf is on a quest to defeat Grendel in order to protect the people since Grendel is a demonic creature and a Pagan figure who opposes Christian values and ideals." (Bračko, 2020: 11-12)

Along with the mentioned elements, it is of importance to mention the concept of *wyrd* as a pagan element. *Wyrd* is a concept of predetermination, or to

be more precise, the belief that something is destined to happen, and it is expressed in *Beowulf* multiple times: "Beowulf is also a man who holds the Pagan values of *Wyrd* and puts his life and the life of others in the hands of fate" (Bračko, 2020: 12). On the other hand, Weil emphasizes that some critics see the concept of *wyrd* as something restrictive and "thus as implicitly contradicting the New Testament notion of free will: because they see *Beowulf* as an early example of Anglo-Saxon Christian poetry, they tend to label the references to *wyrd* as vestiges of an outworn creed" (1989: 102). From the example of *Beowulf*, one is able to notice a variety of different pagan elements, from dragons and monsters to heroic characteristics of the hero himself, which is the evidence that paganism has undeniably left an important influence not only on literature, but on art in general as well.

## The English Reformation

### Henry VIII

With the arrival of Christianity in Britain in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the Church of England was established, and after Rome stopped governing the country in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons was undertaken by St. Augustine, a monk (Church of England). During the period before the Reformation itself, the English church experienced periods of advancement and of decline, and was influenced by British, Celtic, and Roman forces. The period of the English Reformation started with Henry VIII, and the causes of it were of political origins. Namely, in 1509, Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon. At the beginning, their marriage was a happy one, but the chances of Catherine bearing a male successor were very slim. In order to preserve his dynasty on the throne, Henry VIII needed to marry Anne Boleyn and divorce Catherine of Aragon, but the Pope refused to approve of the divorce. The king decided to separate the Church in England from Catholic Rome and to give himself the role of the head of the Church of England to grant his own marriage annulment (Cartwright, 2020). According to Cartwright, the Reformation escalated in 1536 with the abolishment of Catholic monasteries, since he considered them no longer relevant, as "they were full of corrupt and immoral monks and nuns, and they did not help the poor as much as their wealth indicated they should" (2020).

### Edward VI

Furthermore, Henry VIII was succeeded by Edward VI of England, who was son of Henry and his third wife Jane Seymour. According to Cartwright, Edward VI continued

the Reformation, but introduced more radical changes the society had not seen yet. Namely, in 1547 and 1549 *Book of Homilies* and the new *Book of Common Prayer* were issued and caused a radical departure from Catholicism, when the idea of transubstantiation was rejected. Edward VI was the first person to introduce the term 'Protestantism' and it came into widespread use. Along with the rejection of transubstantiation, iconography and murals were removed from churches, the language of services was English, not Latin, the altars were replaced by communion tables, the worship of saints was discouraged, and the priests were permitted to marry (2020).

## Mary I

According to the same source, since Edward VI died of tuberculosis at a very young age, he was succeeded by his half-sister Mary I of England. Even though Edward VI had protestant beliefs, Mary I was a Catholic and tried to reverse the Reformation. With the First Act of Repeal in 1553, Mary I managed to reverse all the legislation concerning religious matters, including the Act of Supremacy, meaning the Pope was, once again, the head of the Church of England. Mary I was also known as 'Bloody Mary', and the nickname was formed according to "the 287 Protestant martyrs who were burned at the stake during her reign" (Cartwright, 2020). During her reign, many people feared England would become a part of the Spanish Empire, since Mary I was proposed to the Catholic Prince Philip of Spain.

## Elizabeth I

Following the death of Mary I, Elizabeth I was the next successor to the throne. Cartwright states that as she was a Protestant, she had an idea of returning the Church of England to the state it was in during the reign of Edward VI. However, both Protestants and Catholics were dissatisfied with the fact that Elizabeth had a more neutral approach which appealed to the indifferent majority. During her reign, there were two external threats to Protestantism, and they were Mary, Queen Scots, and Philip II of Spain: "...Mary had fled Scotland and had a claim to the English throne as she was the granddaughter of Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII. Philip II was the most powerful Catholic ruler in Europe and seemed intent on expanding the Spanish Empire" (Cartwright, 2020). The English Reformation is considered to have ended with the end of the reign of Elizabeth I.

## Contemporary aspect

According to "The Queen, the Church and other faiths", today, the Sovereign of the United Kingdom holds

the title of "Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England", which dates back to the period of Henry VIII's reign, who initially held the title "Defender of the Faith". The importance of religion in today's United Kingdom can be seen during many events, but largely through the Coronation of the new monarch, during which the Sovereign is anointed with holy oil by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Sovereign, then, takes an oath in which maintaining and preserving the settlement of the Church of England are promised. Moreover, "General Synod" highlights that on the advice of the Prime Minister, the Sovereign appoints the Archbishops, Bishops and Deans of the Church of England, who are obliged to swear an oath of allegiance, as well as the deacons and the parish priests. Furthermore, General Synod, which serves as a replacement of the Church Assembly, is the national assembly of the Church of England whose role is considering legislation, that is subject to Parliamentary veto and receives Royal Assent, but it also plays a key role in formulating new forms of worship and approving the annual budget for the work of the Church. It is essential to state that the General Synod is elected every five years and meets twice a year in London or York. On the other hand, "The Queen, the Church and other faiths" indicates that the Church of Scotland is a Presbyterian church, meaning the Sovereign does not have the title of the Supreme Governor, because according to their beliefs, only Jesus Christ is a King and Head of the Church from their point of view. The Church of Scotland is self-governing, and the Sovereign, when attending Church services, does it as an ordinary member, not as a Sovereign. Furthermore, it is managed by kirk sessions, presbyteries, and by the General Assembly which meets each May in Edinburgh.

Alongside Christianity, according to the same source, it is of significance to stress that Queen Elizabeth II accepted other religions as well and celebrated religious diversity and tolerance. With the titles of the Head of State and Head of Commonwealth, one of the Sovereign's roles includes respecting other faiths and promoting forbearance in Britain, which is, today, a multi-cultural and a multi-faith society. With the contemporary United Kingdom being a multi-faith society, the Sovereign should make everyone feel included and feel like they belong there, and this is why Queen Elizabeth II's Christmas and Commonwealth Day messages are very crucial. The Queen's emphasis on the importance of religious diversity was visible in Her Majesty's Christmas and Commonwealth Day messages, which addressed religious diversity and tolerance. In accordance with "The Queen and the Church", on these significant days, every person in the United Kingdom, no matter what their religion or race is, should feel included and welcome, and such gestures by

the Sovereign can mean a lot to the general public. It is also crucial to mention Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. Namely, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh attended a multi-faith reception at Lambeth Palace, when the Queen stressed faith as a major role in the identities of millions of people, encouraging their development of sense of belonging and religious identities. This largely showcases the importance of religion in the United Kingdom, but also puts an emphasis on different religions and multi-faith society. This proves the claim that the important role of the Sovereign is undeniable in the religious aspect, emphasizing that everyone is equally important and that every religion is significant.

## Conclusion

The United Kingdom has undergone a wide spectrum of transformations in the religious aspect through the past, which have resulted in forming the country as it is known today. These memorable events have shaped the country, but also the people and their beliefs as well. By investigating religious history and events, such as the concepts of Anglo-Saxon Paganism and the English Reformation, one can say that events like these have left an immense influence on the United Kingdom and its nation. The significant influence of the past can be seen in Old English literature as well, including *Beowulf*, where pagan elements remain of crucial importance for the epic poem itself. In conclusion, by exploring the religious history of the United Kingdom, one might gain not only a better understanding of the factors that shaped the nation and their culture, but a better understanding of its today's state as well.

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