

**MEDIEVAL STUDIES, NO. 1. THE  
MONASTIC LEGEND. THE HIGH  
ANCESTRY OF PURITANISM. THE TRUTH  
ABOUT THE MONASTERIES. RELIGIOUS  
EDUCATION BEFORE THE REFORMATION**

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ONE SHILLING NET.

# Medieval Studies

By

G. G. Coulton, M.A.

No. 1.

## The Monastic Legend

A criticism of Abbot Gasquet's "Henry VIII and the English Monasteries."

UNIVERSITY OF  
CALIFORNIA

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# Medieval Studies

BY

G. G. COULTON, M.A.

THESE essays, mostly reprinted from the Reviews, are intended to defend the moderate Anglican position against the misrepresentations of writers who disparage modern civilization in comparison with a purely imaginary and unhistorical idea of medieval life.

The Author attempts to show how much is lost, even from the purely picturesque point of view, by thus sacrificing plain truth to false sentiment; for we shall never see the great men of the past in their full greatness until we realize the difficulties under which they lived and worked. Although the Studies are necessarily controversial to this extent, they are written *entirely from orthodox pre-reformation sources*, no others being quoted except here and there in corroboration of facts already established: since the curse of Church history is the too frequent habit of writing from second-hand or partisan documents.

As the plan of these pamphlets renders it impossible to give a crowd of references which would only weary the general reader, the Author is glad to give a definite guarantee of his good faith by offering four pages in each pamphlet to any competent critic who will undertake to convict him of serious error. If his statements are inaccurate, he thus undertakes to supply their refutation at his own expense. He has already made a similar offer in vain to many Romanist controversialists, including all the writers for the Catholic Truth society; and he now repeats the offer, in order to enable the general reader to realize how strongly Anglicanism is supported on many important points by the most incontrovertible medieval testimony.

UNIVERSITY OF  
CALIFORNIA

## The Monastic Legend.

"To manipulate ancient writings, to edit history in one's own favour, did not appear criminal [in the "Ages of Faith"] if the end in view were otherwise just and good."

Dr. W. BARRY (*Papal Monarchy*, p. 133).



HE very thoroughness of the Reformation is, in one sense, its weakness. Modern morals are already so far removed from the medieval, that Anglicans are ready to disbelieve the most undoubted scandals of the past; and modern tolerance listens candidly to the misrepresentations of writers whose shrift in pre-reformation days would have been short. In the face of opponents who devote their lives not only to exposing the real faults and foibles of the Reformers, but also to raking up scandal against them from the most tainted sources, one is driven sometimes to the pertinent retort that, even if all these things were true, matters were incomparably worse in the "Ages of Faith."<sup>1</sup> But the very strength of this argument from the point of view of historical truth makes it very difficult of use in modern society; just as, in good company, the very grossness of a man's defects may save him from the obvious retort which would crush him at once among his own class. Thus, the modern Romanist controversialist finds a real protection, for a time at least, in the very unsavouriness of certain chapters of medieval Church History. Abbot Gasquet—I name him as the most brilliant writer on the particular subject with which I propose to deal—has argued for the last twenty years, with very considerable show of historical apparatus, that the Dissolution of the Monasteries was an act of unredeemed iniquity, and that the blood of these innocent men is still on our heads. Many students who are convinced of the contrary have yet been reluctant to enter upon a somewhat invidious discussion; and, meanwhile, the Abbot has found his strongest ally in the comparative decency of modern society. That which, before the Reformation, was proclaimed daily without reserve—by sinners with wanton laughter, and by saints with bitter tears—is too shocking to be lightly believed by men who know what their own clergy have been for generations past, and who have never seen

1. I have pointed this out more fully in an article on "Catholicism and Morals" in the *Independent Review* of June, 1905, in answer to an attack of Dr. W. Barry's which shows either great ignorance of medieval life, or strange blindness to the lessons of history.

the monastic system at work except under the safeguards afforded by modern laws and modern publicity. If we may believe a certain section of the Press, Abbot Gasquet has been lecturing in America with conspicuous success on the innocence of the medieval monks and the sin of their suppression. He is apparently about to repeat these lectures in England: it is, therefore, time to abandon the attitude of distant scepticism, and to look closely into arguments which, if sound, would call for an act of national repentance.

Six years ago, in going through a course of Roman apologetics, I came upon Abbot Gasquet's book. It struck me from the first page as extraordinarily inconsistent with original documents; and one point specially arrested my attention. The Abbot claims that "anything like general immorality was altogether unknown among the Religious of England. This much is clearly proved by the testimony of the acts of Episcopal visitations . . ."<sup>1</sup> I read this with some surprise: for I knew a little of English visitation acts, and they seemed to me to point clearly to the opposite conclusion. It was necessary, therefore, to make sure first of all which were the documents to which he appealed in support of a statement which, if correct, might almost have spared him the trouble of writing all the rest of his book. I therefore expressed my doubts by letter to him, pointing out that his mere general reference to "the Episcopal Registers" or "the Acts of Episcopal Visitation" was no reference at all; and begging him therefore to supply this grave omission by letter. To save him trouble, and for the sake of a clear understanding, I enclosed a list of the score of volumes containing Episcopal Visitations which I knew to be accessible to the general student, requesting him to initial those upon which he could rely as supporting his statement, and to draw his pen through those for which he could not answer from personal study. At the receipt of my letter, he was unfortunately under doctor's orders; but when I repeated my request six months later his answer was final. It amounted to a confession that he had forgotten the very names of the books on which he had professed to base the most sweeping and vital statement, perhaps, in his whole history.<sup>2</sup> His book had, indeed, surprised me at first by the easy familiarity which it claimed *en bloc* with documents so bulky, and so laborious to study, as the Episcopal Registers: all the greater, therefore, was my surprise to find him now pleading that, without much search among his notes, he could not even *name* such of these twenty volumes as he had studied and could safely appeal to. In this embarrassment, I was driven to make what I could out of the Abbot's footnotes. I found that the Episcopal Acts are, in fact, quoted somewhat sparingly—far less freely than

1. I. 38. My quotations are from the 3rd edition, 1888.

2. I have these letters by me, and will gladly print them with the Abbot's leave.



many other books of infinitely less historical value. Some of the references, being to volumes still unprinted, are difficult to verify; but, fortunately, by far the most important are to books which, though still in MS. when he wrote, have since been printed. These are, firstly, the Exeter Registers, to which one very confident appeal is made, though apparently at second-hand; and secondly, the Norwich Visitations of Bishop Nicke, to which he thrice appeals for confirmation of some of his most sweeping statements.<sup>1</sup> This simplifies the problem a good deal. In the days when the learned Abbot did know which Registers he had or had not read, he appealed specially to the records of Exeter and Norwich, as proving (1) the methods of visitation, (2) the fact that there was "nothing like general immorality" in the monasteries, (3) that, for any grave breach of the Rule, punishment was stern and unsparing, such as the instance which he quotes in full from a York Register.<sup>2</sup> Here, then, is a plain issue, which I will test first by Nicke, from whose "two valuable volumes" he claims support in the most emphatic words. "Nothing like general immorality" is, of course, a somewhat vague plea: we find, for instance, an earnest and learned Roman Catholic apologist in France congratulating himself that the Thirteenth Century Visitations of Rouen show no more than thirty-three unchaste nuns out of a total of 373, or nine per cent.<sup>3</sup> Abbot Gasquet, however, has evidently a far higher ideal of monastic chastity; for he claims that the registers give us a picture very different from that of Henry's visitation, which, after all, accused only about six per cent. of immorality.<sup>4</sup> Yet, on Nicke's first visitation of his diocese, in 1514, he found not only six, but *very nearly seven per cent.* of his Religious accused by their fellow monks or nuns of immorality. The arguments which fill nine-tenths of the Abbot's two bulky volumes are meant to prove that the reports of Henry VIII's commissioners are too bad to be credible. In the course of these arguments he appeals confidently to the support of certain episcopal visitations, still in manuscript, but well-known to himself. When these are printed, it transpires that they yield a statistical result even less favourable than Henry VIII's!<sup>5</sup> And the most inexplicable error is still to come. We are twice referred emphatically to Nicke

1. Of the six Exeter volumes only the least important had been published when Dr. Gasquet wrote.

2. I 36 note, 334 note: cf. 355.

3. E. du Ménil, in Soc. des Antiq. de Normandie, 1847, p. 125.

4. I, 352, where I suppose the Abbot's "many thousands" cannot possibly mean less than 4,000. Assuming only that figure, the 250 cases reported give us 6.25 per cent. The numbers in Nicke are 332 monks and nuns, with twenty-two cases of immorality, i.e. 6.9 per cent. Besides these, one is reported as apostate, and another as vagabond; if, as we may almost certainly assume, these two might also be added to the rest, they would bring the percentage to a little over seven.

5. The later visits show considerably less; but they are many obvious reasons why a first visit should show a worse record than others. After all, Henry's also was a first visit.

for proof that grave faults were vigorously punished.<sup>1</sup> Yet, (to take one grave fault only) Nicke found thirty-five monks or nuns reported incontinent by their fellows. In fifteen, at least, of these cases, either a child had been born, or Nicke's injunctions show that he held the charge to be founded. Yet he records *only two* punishments; though in one other case, which was already ancient history, we hear that the prior himself had "corrected" it at the time. Of the two punishments recorded, one was inflicted upon an unchaste nun, and runs as follows: "The Lord Bishop . . . enjoined on the Lady Agnes Smyth that she should sit for a whole month below all the other nuns, and should repeat during that period the whole Psalter seven times over." The other offender was the Prior of Walsingham, who had habitually embezzled moneys, stolen jewels and plate from the treasury, committed manslaughter on a peasant, and exalted John Smyth's wife to a quasi-official position as his helpmate. The Bishop ordered the summary dismissal of Mrs. Smyth, and within six weeks he had prevailed upon the prior to resign his office, *under assurance of "a competent annual pension" for the rest of his life.* Again, the Prior of Yarmouth complains to Nicke against the system of banishing "incurable" monks to the smaller priories, where they spent their days in dicing and indiscipline.<sup>2</sup> There are several complaints against drunken monks, but none are punished—indeed Dr. Rashdall has pointed out that drunkenness was not recognised as a punishable offence by the medieval Oxford statutes. The gravest peculations and betrayals of trust are recorded without punishment. An excellent case is that of Wyndham in 1514. The late abbot had peculated; the present abbot had not rendered his accounts. The prior had broken open a chest and abstracted documents without the abbot's leave; had tried to kill two fellow-monks with a sword; had thrown a stone at another in the abbot's presence; had not been to confession for nine months. When threatened with my Lord Bishop's displeasure, he had said: "tell my Lord both and my Ladie, for I care nott"; the sting of which lay no doubt in the fact that Nicke's own morals were in evil repute among his contemporaries. The night services were often neglected, the choice books and ornaments were out of repair: other books had been stolen. There was no schoolmaster. Some monks had broken the cloister bounds. One was a drunkard, had openly denied the Resurrection of the Dead, absented himself from matins, and was suspected of adultery. Another's cell was frequented by "suspected women," two married, and two of the widow's daughters at the abbey dairy. Another was grievously suspected of adultery. One of the confessors had broken the seal of confession, and the prior complained that

1. I. 36 note, 334 note.

2. pp. 197, 265. *Cellulas* is an obvious slip of the scribe's or editor's for *cellas*.

his attempt at reform had caused the monks to "blaspheme his name in public places without the monastery." This would seem a sufficiently heavy bill of offences for a community of eleven monks; I here subjoin, word for word, all the notice the Bishop takes of it. "The Lord Bishop enjoined *that henceforth no layman should be admitted to any office within the aforesaid abbey until he had first pledged himself to keep faithfully the secrets of the abbey.* He further enjoined that he (the abbot) should elect another monk in the prior's place within a month. After which injunctions and the aforesaid evidence taken, my Lord concluded his visitation for this time." I must beg the reader to note the words I have italicized, for I shall recur to them. In the meantime I only wish to point out how these MS. volumes, when printed, contradict Dr. Gasquet flatly by showing an impunity almost incredible to modern readers; yet, as I am ready to prove, if necessary, *absolutely normal in the Middle Ages.*

So much for Nicke's evidence: now for that of the Exeter Registers. Dr. Gasquet argues, with an emphasis which may seem even exaggerated, that the Black Death of 1349 dealt a blow to the monasteries, materially and morally, from which they had not yet recovered at the Dissolution (1.7.) In choosing therefore the first twenty-one years (1327—48) of the Register of Bishop Grandisson, perhaps the greatest of all the medieval bishops of Exeter, I am choosing a field which ought to be eminently favourable to Dr. Gasquet. How far this is so, the reader may judge from the history of three monasteries which I find extracted in my notes.

(1) ST. JAMES' PRIORY, near Exeter. In 1334 (p. 279) the prior of this house, William de Bittendene, is stigmatized as "oftentimes convicted of embezzlement and fornication, and lately refusing to allow himself to be visited . . . pretending himself exempt," in spite of documentary evidence to the contrary. The priory was waste, the church in ruins, and divine service had ceased. The Bishop excommunicated him and tried to sequester the revenues of his priory. In 1335 he was "wandering about the country, having let loose the reins of honesty and utterly cast away the modesty of his monastic profession," and the Bishop therefore writes sadly to the prior of the parent house of St. Martin "Would that you would send some good man to rule the said house: for this person fears neither God nor man, which is a blot upon the honour of monasticism and justly offends God's majesty." In 1338, however, William was still prior, and the Bishop wrote of his past "enormously dissolute life" without implying any present amendment. Next year we find him again as prior, and noted among the clergy who have not paid the last tax to the Pope. There is no record of his being deposed. (pp. 71, 279, 289, 305, 745, 883.)

(2) TAVISTOCK ABBEY. In 1328 Grandisson wrote to the Pope,