

RUNAWAY RELIGIOUS IN
MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

c. 1240–1540

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about runaway religious. It is about those men and women who had taken vows to lead the religious life as monks, canons, friars or nuns and who without dispensation left that life and returned to the world. In doing so they usually abandoned the religious habit, the outward sign of their inner commitment. They had 'climbed over the wall', if only metaphorically. Some were like Peter Dene, who did in fact climb over the wall at St Augustine's, Canterbury, with the assistance of a local rector.¹ Others simply walked out through gates, seldom secured during the day and frequently providing easy egress at night. The physical restraints against flight were few and scarcely ever insuperable. More imposing were the moral restraints of vows and conscience and, in some cases, fear of punishment, that rose wall-like around the individual religious. When the feeling of personal dissatisfaction and unhappiness became particularly intense, a religious might climb over these walls.

The vows taken, whether explicitly or implicitly, bound the religious for life with virtually no possibility of dispensation – even Pope Innocent III said he did not have the power! – until the 1390s, when honourable withdrawal became possible but only for some men. That a religious might feel entrapped should not surprise the modern reader. Likewise, that such entrapment might lead to flight should not seem novel to us. Yet in the world of Christian Europe in the middle ages, society viewed such an action as a cause of acute public scandal and the church saw it as a peril to the runaway's soul. Excommunication and efforts to seek the runaway's return logically followed.

The runaway religious must be firmly distinguished from others who abandoned commitments made before God and who might

¹ See below, pp. 34–41.

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appear similar to runaways. The cleric, especially one in major orders, who left his clerical state was in a radically different canonical situation, for, unlike the religious, he had never taken formal vows to lead a clerical life: he entered the clerical life and was then subject to the positive, man-made laws of the church binding clerics, which laws he violated by abandoning the clerical state. Similarly, obligations were taken by those entering the married state, which, it might be argued, resembled those taken by a religious and the abandonment of a marriage by one of the parties closely paralleled the abandonment of the religious life. Despite superficial similarities, there were substantial differences in these two cases: the married state was entered into by a contract made by two consenting parties *coram deo*. The abandonment of a marriage constituted the violation of this contract. Religious, on the other hand, did not enter into a contract with God but freely (*sponte*) promised God to live the religious life. The abandonment of this promise (*votum*) constituted the nature of the deed attributed to the men and women encountered in these pages. Further, the runaway religious must be distinguished from the wandering monk, who, while not having abandoned the religious life, wandered from monastery to monastery as, in Hugh Lawrence's phrase, 'the professional guest'.² These *gyrovagi* were vehemently condemned by St Benedict and can be seen in various guises until the twelfth century, but by the period here under review they had largely disappeared from the scene and are not the subjects of this study.³

Runaway religious, although never a sizeable percentage of professed religious, were recognizable figures in the ecclesiastical landscape of medieval Europe and can be seen, sometimes in vivid detail, in England in the three hundred years before the dissolution of the religious houses by Henry VIII. It is this 300-year period that is here under study. The *termini* – c. 1240 and 1540 – require comment. The *terminus ad quem* marks the year of the dissolution of the last religious houses. With the surrender of Holy Cross Abbey, Waltham (Essex), on 23 March 1540 the long history of religious communities in England came to an end. The *terminus a quo* might appear somewhat arbitrary, and, indeed, in some sense it

² C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* (2nd edn; London, 1989), p. 27.

³ The classic description is in Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (7th edn; London, 1934), chap. 8.

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is. It is clearly not the beginning: to begin in the beginning one would have to go back to the monasteries established by Augustine at Canterbury in 597 and Aidan at Lindisfarne in 635. The year 1240, then, is admittedly arbitrary, but not wholly so. Before that date there are, indeed, references to runaway religious, but from c. 1240 the evidence is of such a nature that we can go beyond the anecdotal and proceed to analysis. From this time written records survive in richer abundance. The bishops' registers begin to appear in the thirteenth century. The acts of Lincoln diocese, the largest in size and population, were registered as early as c. 1215 and those of York, the second largest diocese, from 1225. Others followed: in the 1250s the dioceses of Coventry and Lichfield, Exeter and Rochester; in the 1260s the dioceses of Bath and Wells, Norwich, Winchester and Worcester; and before the century's end all the other dioceses of England – including the great sees of Canterbury, London and Durham. Registers for Ely diocese survive from the early fourteenth century, although earlier registers were kept, and the surviving evidence from the Welsh church is unfortunately exiguous.⁴ The long, unrivalled series of central government records also begins to appear at this time, particularly the records of the royal chancery and courts. In addition, the work of a hundred years, initially under the aegis of the Public Record Office (London) and now of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, has made the papal registers accessible in calendar form for Great Britain and Ireland from the pontificate of Innocent III (1198–1216) into the sixteenth century. These three *fontes principales* are supplemented for this period by records of religious orders and reports of visitations of houses as well as by chronicles of individual monasteries.

In addition, by the 1240s almost all the religious orders were now in England. The last to come were the friars. Gilbert de Fresney and twelve other Dominicans landed at Dover in early August 1221, and by the end of the 1240s there were twenty-four houses of the Black Friars from as far north as Carlisle and Newcastle upon Tyne to as far south as Exeter and Canterbury.⁵ The Franciscans were at Canterbury, London and Oxford in 1224

⁴ David M. Smith, *Guide to Bishops' Registers of England and Wales* (London, 1981), p. vii.

⁵ William A. Hinnebusch, *The Early English Friars Preachers* (Rome, 1951), pp. 494–5; KH, pp. 213–14.

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and in the next twenty years established thirty-four houses. It was in the 1240s that the other two orders of mendicant friars came to England: the Carmelites were at Aylesford (Kent) in 1242 and by the decade's end at five other places, while the Austin friars, the smallest of the mendicant orders, arrived at Clare (Suffolk) in the last years of this decade. Thus, from the 1240s the full roster of religious orders can be seen in England, excepting only the Bridgettine nuns, who were to come to Twickenham (Middlesex) in 1415.

Moreover, the appearance in 1234 of the greatest medieval collection of canon law, the Decretals of Gregory IX, provides a clear milestone, its promulgation a *maximum momentum* in the history of the church. The papal bull *Rex pacificus* promulgated this systematic, authentic, universal, exclusive collection of law. The canon law for the Western church was now, in a sense, fixed: it was no longer necessary to consult disparate collections of papal decrees and conciliar canons, for they were at hand in this new collection. The Decretals of Gregory IX – as, indeed, the law for religious which this collection contained – would be added to by subsequent popes, yet these were but additions to the definitive text. It was to remain the principal text of canon law until 1918.

To begin this study *c.* 1240 should not imply that the abandonment of the religious life was a phenomenon of more striking significance from then than it had been in previous centuries. Near the dawn of Western monasticism the straying monk can be seen. When John Cassian, from his monastic experiences in the East and in Gaul, wrote his Institutes (417–18), he recognized that a monk, like a slave, might try to slip away from his monastery at night under cover of darkness.⁶ In the life of St Benedict, attributed to St Gregory the Great (590–604), we see at Subiaco the monk who was led away from his prayers by the devil.⁷ The *locus classicus* is in the rule itself, where we see the straying monk who left his community: he is to be received back, taking the lowest place among the monks, even to a third time but not beyond. The rule distinguished him from the monk expelled for bad conduct, although the returning *eiectus* was to be treated in the same way as

⁶ *Instituta* 4. 6 (PL 49. 159).

⁷ 'Nunquid non aspicitis quis est qui istum monachum foras trahit?' (*Dialoga* 2. 4; PL 66. 142). For the authorship see Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues* (2 vols.; Leiden, 1987).

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the returning runaway. The words used to describe the latter are instructive: he was a monk who left through his own fault ('frater qui proprio uitio egreditur').⁸ This passage was to be read aloud to generations and generations of monks, many of whom would commit it to memory. Influential commentaries on the rule glossed this passage. The monastic capitulary of Aachen (817), associated with Benedict Aniane, decreed that monks wishing to take flight be sent to another monastery.⁹ (Canonists would later call this *exsilium*.) Likewise, Smaragdus, later in that century, quoted approvingly those who would require a monastery to seek out its runaways and who would forbid other monasteries to take them in, for, it was said, if no one takes them in, they will feel compelled to return to their own monastery.¹⁰ Here, then, are the two elements which were to remain consistent in the long history of monasticism: (1) the runaway who had committed a grave misdeed by his flight and (2) the insistence that he be received back.

The monastic literature was supplemented by conciliar and papal decrees and the teaching of canonists. From the time of Gratian's *Decretum* the runaway religious appears as a figure whose conduct was considered criminal and who was subject to ecclesiastical penalties, which in the form of excommunication became automatic from 1298.¹¹ Forbidden by monastic rules and by canon law from abandoning the religious life, the runaway religious was clearly seen as a deviant person in medieval society, a violator of vows and a scandal to the faithful. Yet Dante encountered two such nuns in paradise.¹²

England was no exception to the general experience of other lands where religious became deviant and sought release from the religious life through flight. Two great tenth-century monastic reformers, Dunstan and Ethelwold, were themselves ordained with

⁸ Cap. 29 (Rudolph Hanslik, ed., *Benedicti regula* (rev. edn; *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum*, Vienna, vol. 75, 1977), pp. 93–4).

⁹ J. Semmler, ed., 'Legislatio Aquisgranensis', *CCM* 1. 524.

¹⁰ A. Spannagel and P. Engelbert, eds., *Smaragdi abbatis expositio in regulam sancti Benedicti* (*CCM* 8, 1974), pp. 233–4. In an extremely severe interpretation of monastic stability Pope Gregory II wrote to St Boniface in 726 that, in the event of a contagious disease or plague, monks not yet afflicted were not free to flee: 'we declare this to be the height of folly; for no one can escape from the hand of God' (*The Letters of Saint Boniface* (tr. Ephraim Emerton; New York, 1940), p. 55).

¹¹ See chap. 1 for further elaboration of the canon law. For a useful summary see J. Bouché, 'Apostasie de religion', *Dictionnaire de droit canonique* 1. 564–74.

¹² *Paradiso*, canto 3.

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a priest who was to abandon the monk's habit 'and ended his life amid the stinking of luxury'.¹³ Anglo-Saxon law dealt with the fugitive religious. The bishops in synodal canons (1008) decreed that runaway monks and nuns, if found, should return and that their monasteries should receive them, imposing suitable punishment.¹⁴ Not long thereafter, King Cnut threatened such offenders with banishment from the realm.¹⁵ St Dunstan features, albeit posthumously, in the tale of a late eleventh-century incident at Christ Church, Canterbury. At that time Edward, archdeacon of London, responded to an inner calling and entered that monastery, where he soon became secretary. Fervour, however, gave way to torpor, and correction was not cheerfully accepted. Flight by night was Brother Edward's response to his situation. The night of his planned departure, he stopped at Dunstan's tomb to ask the saint's permission. As he then proceeded to leave, his way was blocked by a severe-looking monk, who bade him return to the tomb and pray again. Dissatisfied with Edward's reaction, the monk revealed himself as St Dunstan and said, 'You shall never leave with my permission, but you shall remain here and die here.'¹⁶

By the time St Anselm came to Canterbury as archbishop (1093), he was already familiar with the problem. In one well-known instance, a fugitive monk of Christ Church, Canterbury, came to Bec, where Abbot Anselm received him kindly, and, when the monk repented and asked to be reconciled with his community, Anselm sent him back accompanied by a most affecting letter on his behalf.¹⁷ In England, as archbishop, Anselm encountered two royal princesses at Wilton Abbey, whose attachment to the religious life was much in question. In 1094, he required Matilda,

¹³ Wulfstan of Winchester, *The Life of St Aethelwold* (eds. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom; Oxford, 1991), chap. 8 (pp. 12–13).

¹⁴ V Ethelred 5–6 (*Councils and Synods* 1. 1. pp. 347–8); for an English translation see *English Historical Documents* 1. 406.

¹⁵ II Cnut 4a.1 (F. Liebermann, ed., *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (3 vols.; Halle, 1903–16), p. 310).

¹⁶ Eadmer, 'Vita S. Dunstani', *Memorials of St Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury* (ed. William Stubbs; RS, 1874), pp. 241–5. For a revisionist approach to the tenth-century monastic reforms see Antonia Gransden, 'Traditionalism and Continuity during the Last Century of Anglo-Saxon Monasticism', *JEH* 40 (1989) 159–207.

¹⁷ Ep. 40. The text is in F. S. Schmitt, ed., *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia* (6 vols.; Edinburgh, 1946–51) 3. 285–7. For an English translation see Walter Frohlich, tr., *The Letters of St Anselm of Canterbury* (2 vols.; Kalamazoo, 1990–3) 1. 322–4.

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daughter of King Malcom III of Scotland, to return to her abbey, where she had worn the religious habit.¹⁸ Nearly a decade later, when Henry I wished to marry Matilda, Anselm endorsed the expected decision which he had left to the English bishops: since she had neither read her profession nor been blessed by a bishop, she was free to marry the king. A ceremony followed, at which Anselm himself officiated. It was as controversial then as now.¹⁹ He had perhaps greater success with Gunhilda, the daughter of the last Anglo-Saxon king: she had left Wilton Abbey to be the wife or mistress of a great northern baron. Although you have never read profession or been blessed by a bishop, he wrote, you have privately and publicly worn the nun's habit and have affirmed to all those who saw you that you were dedicated to God. 'It is impossible to be saved unless you return.' And return she apparently did.²⁰

In incidents such as these, perhaps not so dramatic nor involving such high-born persons, and in other fleeting references runaway religious appear in the surviving records of the next centuries. A few examples may be cited. Theobald, one of Anselm's successors (1139–61) in the see of Canterbury, concerned himself with what should happen to returning runaways, and his response resonates with the familiar prescriptions of the rule.²¹ Under Becket's successor at Canterbury, Richard de Dover (1174–84), we catch the glimpse of the abbot of Tewkesbury (Gloucestershire) being advised to take back one of his monks.²² A lay brother of the Cistercian abbey of Garendon (Leicestershire) was said to be fugitive, no later than 1202.²³ At about the same time, Alice Clement can be seen in royal and ecclesiastical courts, attempting to establish that she had never been a nun of Ankerwyke nunnery (Buckinghamshire), could not be a fugitive and could legally

¹⁸ Ep. 177 (Schmitt 3. 60–1; Frohlich 2. 91–2).

¹⁹ Eadmer's *History of Recent Events in England: Historia novorum in Anglia* (tr. Geoffrey Bosanquet; London, 1964), pp. 126–31. See Sally Vaughn, *Anselm of Bec and Robert of Meulan* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 223–5, and R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 260–2.

²⁰ Epp. 168, 169 (Schmitt 4. 43–50; Frohlich 2. 64–74). See Southern, pp. 262–4.

²¹ Avrom Saltman, *Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London, 1956), no. 31; text is also in *Lit. Cant.* 3. 354–5.

²² C. R. Cheney and B. E. A. Jones, eds., *English Episcopal Acta 11, Canterbury, 1162–1190* (London, 1986), no. 214.

²³ *VCH, Leics.* 2. 6.

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inherit from her father.²⁴ From such incidents and anecdotes a bridge stretches across the first half of the thirteenth century and deposits us where detail is richer and analysis more possible. *Pontem transeamus*.

²⁴ The case first surfaced in the mid-1180s and was not settled until 1221 (see Elizabeth Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 102–10).