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The Plain Cathedrals
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I often visit religious buildings and sacred sites when I travel. On a recent trip to England, I toured the cathedrals at Canterbury and Durham. Canterbury Cathedral has been the premiere cathedral of the English church since the 12th century and the center of the Anglican Church since its founding in the 16th century. Durham may be the most picturesque cathedral in Britain; situated atop a hill in a bend on the river Wear, it dominates the surrounding countryside.

The exterior of each cathedral impresses the viewer with its majesty and the imperial character of its architecture. But upon entering, one is struck with a sense of emptiness. The interiors are quite plain, emphasizing the soaring architecture, but seemingly without further decoration. This is because the present decoration of these buildings results from the transformation of English Christianity from Catholic to Protestant.

The cathedrals of Canterbury and Durham were built about the same time. The present Canterbury cathedral was erected between 1067 and 1077. Durham's cathedral was begun in 1093 and completed over the next 40 years. Both cathedrals formed the center of a monastery and both contain the tomb of a saint. They, thus, became important pilgrimage destinations. St. Thomas Beckett lies at Canterbury and St. Cuthbert at Durham.

As monastery, pilgrimage center, bishop's seat and place of worship for the community, each cathedral received a great deal of decoration in the decades and centuries after their construction. Their current plainness is not reflective of their early history.

While we know little about these cathedrals' furnishings, a comparison with cathedrals that still retain their medieval character is suggestive. The basilicas of Italy, for example, remain ornate. The walls and ceilings of the older basilicas in Rome, for example, are decorated with statuary, carvings and paintings; the Bergamo basilica is covered with paintings and woven tapestries, while the interior of Venice's St. Mark's Basilica is covered with gold mosaics from floor to ceiling. All of these cathedrals have extensive collections of silver and gold candlesticks, offering plates and other liturgical items --often encrusted with valuable jewels.

While it is unlikely there was much gold artwork at Canterbury and Durham, it is likely that they had many paintings, statuary and tapestries, along with many valuable liturgical utensils. In Durham, there are a few shadowy remains of artistic scenes on the wall, indicating it was once covered with large, colorful murals. So, rather than being plain and empty in their early centuries, the Cathedrals of Canterbury and Durham were crowded with artistic and religious items serving the needs of the cathedrals' varied constituencies.

So, how did these cathedrals become so plain?

In the 1520s, King Henry VIII could not get an heir, and so he asked the Pope to annul his marriage so that he could (hopefully) marry a more fertile woman. The Pope refused. In response, Henry withdrew his country from the Catholic Church in 1534 and created the Church of England, with himself as head. By 1536, Henry realized the enormous wealth the church controlled and began to appropriate it for the crown. In 1538, he ordered St. Thomas' shrine in Canterbury destroyed and its vast hoard of treasure and gifts confiscated. In 1539, both Canterbury and Durham monasteries, and their cathedrals, were closed. The cathedrals were reestablished in 1541.

Henry's actions began the despoliation of the two cathedrals and, by the end of the 16th century, most of their medieval furnishings were gone. Anything that remained at Durham into the 17th century was destroyed in 1650 when the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell used the cathedral as a prison for 3,000 Scottish soldiers. Other cathedrals and monasteries across England and Wales were treated similarly.

Although the treatment of these monasteries and cathedrals in Henry's time, and afterward, was essentially looting, the resulting plain look of the cathedrals fit well with the growing influence of Puritan theology in the now-Protestant Church of England. Puritans desired to "purify" the English church of what they considered to be the mistakes inherited from the Catholic Church. One of these mistakes was the widespread use of art in places of worship, which made them seem "idolatrous," the Puritans believed. So, once the cathedrals and churches became plain, they were left that way until modern times.