

H-Net Reviews

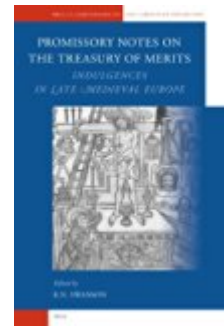
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert N. Swanson. *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition Series. Leiden: Brill, 2006. xii + 360 p. \$142.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15287-8.

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Medieval Strategies for Eternity

Indulgences—gaining remission for some amount of time to be spent in purgatory through donations or specific actions—are often a puzzle to the modern mind. The most common contemporary association with indulgences is with Reformation-era criticism. Martin Luther's attack on the indulgence preached by Johann Tetzel is seen as the origin of the eventual split between the Catholic and Protestant churches, and a fundamental tenet of the Reformation itself. A great deal of subsequent scholarship has leaned towards promoting “the idea that right-thinking people were effectively waiting for Luther to appear and push down a thoroughly rotten edifice” (p. 279). This collection of thirteen essays, which had its origins in a 2001 session at the International Medieval Studies Congress in Kalamazoo, aims to rectify that attitude by exploring the key role of indulgences in medieval piety. The authors focus on specific geographical areas (such as Spain or the Low Countries) or themes (such as confraternities or Lollard criticisms). While England may seem to be represented more frequently than other countries, this collection offers an excellent broad introduction to the complexities of indulgence theory and practice in medieval Europe and lays the groundwork for further detailed explorations.

Beginning with a discussion of the theological aspects of indulgences, and ending with an examination of Luther's developing position, the authors demonstrate how “indulgences fed into and fed off many of the central practical and devotional aspects of late medieval spiritu-

ality” (p. 5). The introduction and first chapter provide a good general discussion that would be useful in an undergraduate class on late medieval religion or the Reformation, while other chapters would work well as readings dealing with more specific aspects of indulgences in the Middle Ages. Several authors specifically position their work in this volume as a preliminary investigation of a topic worthy of further research, and working on previously unexplored facets of indulgences is a key theme throughout the essays. Giovanna Casagrande takes a very well-studied topic, late medieval Italian confraternities, and goes in a new direction; namely, the ways confraternities were “strengthened, supported and enhanced by indulgences” (p. 53). Charles Caspers provides a study of the underexplored importance of indulgences in the everyday life of parishioners in the Low Countries. John Edwards describes the similarities and differences between indulgences elsewhere in Europe and indulgences in Spain, where constant fundraising for the Reconquista combined with the centrality of Catholic Christianity to Spanish self-identification to encourage indulgence sales and create a focus on diminishing one's stay in Purgatory.

One of the most important contributions this volume makes, reiterated in numerous essays, is to show how indulgences were tied to “the whole gamut of medieval life and charitable activity, from funding hospitals to repairing roads and bridges; from helping lepers to collect the funds to buy a place in a leprosarium, to aiding the vic-

tims of Turkish piracy to pay their ransoms, or victims of business failure to pay their debts” (p. 6). While the indulgences used for the construction of St. Peter’s are the most infamous example, several authors discuss the use of indulgences as fundraisers for more local building and church repair projects. Caspers notes that indulgences “played a role in the construction, alteration or rebuilding of a number, if not most, of the important church buildings in the Low Countries” (p. 72). Eva Doležalová, Jan Hrdina, František Šmahel, and Zdeněk Uhlíř, whose main focus is pre-Hussite and Hussite criticism of indulgences in Bohemia and Moravia, also observe how important the funds collected were for building projects in those regions.

To start the collection, Robert Shaffern traces changes in the academic and theological understanding of indulgences, and how this differed from popular interpretations. From vague origins in the early Middle Ages, the theology of indulgences gradually became more clearly defined, particularly as indulgences became more widespread in conjunction with the Crusades. Professional academics became interested in interpreting indulgences somewhat after the fact, as bishops and popes had been granting them and Christians had sought to acquire them. By the end of the period under study, indulgences had become something calculable; immense work was put into figuring out how many days or years a particular devotional act or donation to a charitable cause was worth. This focus on the numerical value of indulgences has often been pointed to as an example of late medieval gullibility or an excessively mercantile attitude towards faith. Shaffern fills in the biblical and patristic background for this approach. Robert N. Swanson notes the “nonchalance about the totals and their calculation” present in late medieval devotional indulgences, and suggests it might “reflect sophistication rather than gullibility” (p. 228); since only God could truly calculate how much pardon a person had earned, focusing on actual earned numbers was pointless.

Swanson’s examination of devotional indulgences in late medieval England looks at another little-explored facet of indulgences: those gained through prayer rather than payment. After analyzing the role these “bead pardons” played in medieval English spiritual life, Swanson expresses hope for further work on the subject focused on continental Europe. This aspect of medieval indulgences has been underexplored by historians, falling under the shadow of indulgences for payment and pardoners’ misdeeds. The most famous example, Chaucer’s Pardoner on pilgrimage, is examined by Alastair Minnis,

who investigates how a medieval audience would have perceived this fictional character in light of contemporary criticisms of pardoners and their practices.

Criticism and corruption thread their way through the main themes of many of the essays. While the contributors do not see the Reformation as a foregone conclusion, growing criticism of the indulgence system in the late fifteenth century is evident from their research. Misappropriation of funds—for example, the infamous dike indulgence in the Low Countries—or the actions of fraudulent pardoners led to ongoing mistrust. Diana Webb, in her essay, “Pardons and Pilgrims,” notes that what people thought they were purchasing with an indulgence was not necessarily the official interpretation. This gap was complicated by the forgery of indulgences, most notably an ongoing series of forgeries detailing supposed papal indulgences for people making the pilgrimage to Rome. Anne Hudson sees three distinct areas of indulgence criticism in the thought of John Wycliffe and his followers: “the assumed power of the papacy and its subordinates, the asserted powers over sin and its punishment, and the venality of the transaction” (p. 198).

The final three essays focus on the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Norman Housley looks at indulgences specifically earmarked for crusades. The late Middle Ages saw popes constantly preaching crusade, in particular against the Turks. At the same time, there was no practical mechanism for actually carrying out a crusade. In spite of this, Raimund Peraudi and other indulgence preachers worked extensively in Germany and the Low Countries, campaigning tirelessly to “reconcile the special circumstances of a crusade bull being preached with the quotidian pattern of the Church’s penitential procedures” (p. 288). Falk Eisermann also discusses Peraudi in his essay, “The Indulgence as Media Event: Developments in Communication through Broad-sides in the Fifteenth Century.” Eisermann focuses on the extent to which indulgence campaigns produced printed material, creating a structure for the transmission of ideas through print, which was later adapted for Reformation purposes.

In the concluding essay, David Bagchi evaluates Luther’s developing position vis-à-vis indulgences. His main argument asserts a complex process of development in Luther’s thought, rather than a sudden radical break with traditional Catholicism, so that many of Luther’s criticisms in his writings on indulgences prior to 1517 match contemporary evaluations by Cajetan and the faculty of the University of Paris. In two appendices, Bagchi compares the Ninety-Five Theses and these earlier writ-

ings of Luther. Of particular interest is a treatise Luther wrote specifically on the theme of indulgences, and apparently sent to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz along with the theses.

In the conclusion of his essay, Bagchi neatly sums up one of the main reasons why this collection breaks such

new ground in the study of indulgences. After Luther, indulgences became a touchpoint. Reformers criticized them as a way of demonstrating their Protestant identities, while Catholics defended them for the same reason. For both sides, the crucial role of indulgences in late medieval religion and society became very distant.

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