
No aspect of medieval piety pierces the Protestant heart quite so sharply as indulgences. They are the summation — or so it would seem — of all the superstition and venality that characterizes the yoke of medieval Catholicism which the Reformers cast down. Unfortunately, this perception is widely shared by modern scholars, who are often unsympathetic to a complex and wide-ranging phenomenon that they do not fully understand. Perhaps they can be forgiven, however, in light the fact that even in the Middle Ages there was no clear consensus as to how exactly indulgences functioned. That is why this collection of essays edited by R.N. Swanson deserves a warm welcome, for it offers fresh insight into the place of indulgences within the fabric of late medieval society, a society permeated with an immediate sense of the reality of divine grace and judgment. Indeed, one must concur with Swanson when he writes: “To see indulgences through the prism of twenty-first century materialism and incomprehension of the possibilities of faith, is to interpret them with a distorted sense of vision” (p. 9).

The essays in this volume cover a wide range of vantage points from which to examine indulgences, moving along both thematic and geographic lines. The book fittingly begins with an essay by Robert Shaffern on “The Medieval Theology of Indulgences.” He notes that, although bishops had been granting indulgences since the eleventh century, a theology of indulgences only began to take shape by the late twelfth century. It belonged to the pope alone to grant plenary indulgences, while bishops could bestow partial indulgences. Priests could impose penance as part of their sacramental office, but could not grant an indulgence. The preaching of indulgences, however, could even be carried out by a layman, precisely because pardons are matter of jurisdiction not orders as Thomas Aquinas commented. However much the theologians may have differed on some points (such as the effect of indulgences in purgatory) they agreed that the relaxation of the temporal penalty (poena) was only effective following a valid confession in which the guilt of sin (culpa) was absolved. Of course, such neat distinctions were not consistently observed among the pardoners. No pardon is so famous as the figure who comes down to us in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Alastair Minnis reads Chaucer’s pardoner to be a layman, or perhaps in minor orders; a “character who is either guilty, or with good reason suspected, of a wide and quite appalling range of moral shortcomings” (p. 178). Here is a pardon who strays far out of bounds as he claims the right to absolve sinners of their guilt (culpa), a prerogative strictly reserved for the priesthood. Chaucer’s pardoner would have been a literary construction based upon all of the worst abuses now rolled into one. That there were such abuses few denied, even as they might defend the larger system. For the Lollards, however, abuses or not, the whole system was corrupt from the start. Anne Hudson examines the Wycliffite position on indulgences and finds three leading ideas: “The assumed powers of the papacy and its subordinates, the asserted powers over sin and its punishment, and the venality of the transaction” (p. 198). Yet she notes that indulgences did not preoccupy Wyclif and the Lollards to the same extent as some other issues (e.g. clerical
wealth), perhaps because they would only have been adding their voices to a swelling chorus. What especially vexed the Lollards was the social injustice of indulgences; the poor could not afford them and the alms they might otherwise have received from the rich were diverted to the purchase of still more pardons.

Four essays deal with indulgences in specific locales. Giovanna Casagrande looks at the role of indulgences within the confraternities of late medieval Italy. She notes that Church officials had many good reasons to grant indulgences to the confraternities inasmuch as “they encouraged orthodox religious practices; aided the control and discipline of piety among the faithful; and secured the acknowledgement of, and respect for, ecclesiastical authority” (p. 41). Charles Caspers looks at indulgences in the Low Countries and notes, for instance, that the father of the Devotio Moderna, Geert Grote had vigorously objected to the indulgence sales associated with the building of the Utrecht cathedral; so much money that should have gone to the poor instead. A team of Czech scholars (Doležalová, Hrdina, Šmahel, Uhlíř) collaborated on the essay concerned with indulgences in Bohemia that traces the history well before, and then through, the Hussite movement. As for Jan Hus himself, the authors note that, unlike the nuanced critique of the Dominican Heinrich von Bitterfeld, Hus simplified the whole question as he focused on the perceived over-reliance on external acts. John Edwards examines medieval Spain, whose unique history had an effect on the role of purgatory and indulgences, on the one hand owing to the effort of the Reconquista, and on the other “the very centrality of Catholic Christianity to the sense of self-identity of so many Spaniards” (p. 147). Even as many in Europe were becoming disillusioned with indulgences by the end of the sixteenth century, by the time of King Philip’s death in 1598 indulgences in Spain had recovered the popularity they enjoyed in previous centuries.

Robert Swanson, in his essay, points out that, while it is common for indulgences to be discussed as though they all centered around money, the fact is that a good many depended upon prayer alone. The irony is, however, that because so many pardons were not cash transactions it can be difficult to form a precise picture of how they worked since they often lack solid documentary evidence. Lest we think that pardons can be reduced to merely external performance (ex opere operato), Swanson reminds us that, “to focus on prayers turns attention to devotion as the prime mover for indulgences. Pardons worked ex opere operantis, based on the moral status of the would-be recipient” (p. 216). Indeed, Swanson believes that modern scholars must not let monetary pardons be the sole focus of their inquiry into indulgences, lest they end up distorting the true picture of late medieval spirituality, which so often turned on prayer rather than money. Diana Webb examines the relationship between indulgences and pilgrimages and calls us to recognize the genuine devotion and spirituality of the pilgrim, who was not simply embarking on a journey to earn a reward. She notes that, “pilgrimage, in both its performance and its intentions, was, for the generality of pilgrims an intensely social exercise” (p. 272). And one finds with Margery Kempe, for example, that she will often record her own emotional response to a given relic or shrine while making no mention of the indulgence she would have received. Pilgrimage and crusade are quite similar in ways, and Norman Housley, in his essay on “Indulgences for Crusading,” notes at the outset that, “the most important point to make about crusade indulgences in this period is that a vast and far-reaching activity was involved, one