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0521379504 - Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215-c. 1515 - R. N. Swanson

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This is the first one-volume survey in English of religion and devotion in Europe between the fourth and fifth Lateran Councils. Intended primarily as a student textbook, it provides essential background for a proper appreciation of medieval western society.

Avoiding the history of institutional structures, the book concentrates on the spirituality which the medieval church sought to promulgate and control. After an outline of the basic beliefs of catholicism in the period, there follows a series of thematic chapters which detail and analyse the nature and significance of various manifestations of religious concern. Underlying the discussion are basic questions about the format of medieval religious experience, ranging from the nature of authority to the relationship between priests and laity, and how far it is actually possible to talk of a monolithic catholicism. The book also responds to recent historiographical debates, about whether there was a divorce between 'élite' and 'popular' religion, whether medieval catholicism was deep rooted or superficial, and the relationship between catholicism and other Christianities and non-Christian faiths.

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R. N. SWANSON

University of Birmingham



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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1995

First published 1995

Reprinted 1997

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library**Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Swanson, R. N. (Robert N.)

Religion and devotion in Europe, c. 1215-c. 1515 / R. N. Swanson.

p. cm - (Cambridge medieval textbooks)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 37076 0 (hard). - ISBN 0 521 37950 4 (pbk.)

1. Europe - Church history - 600-1500. 2. Europe - Religious life and customs. 3. Religion and culture - Europe - History.

4. Europe - Religion. 5. Church history - Middle ages, 600-1500.

I. Title. II. Series.

BR735.S93 1995

274'.05-dc20 94-35211 CIP

ISBN 0 521 37076 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 37950 4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press

0521379504 - Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215-c. 1515 - R. N. Swanson

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PREFACE

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To cover 300 years in the religious history of the whole of catholic Europe in one volume has proved a daunting task. The aim in writing has been precisely to provide a textbook, a general survey of religion and devotion. The obvious terminal events for any analysis of late medieval Christianity are arguably major turning points in the history of the medieval church: the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and the Reformation. The first poses no problems. However, to avoid entanglement in the debate about the outbreak of the Reformation, I have deliberately ended the discussion slightly before the problems of the Lutheran challenge became apparent, at the opening of the Fifth Lateran Council in 1512. As well as making the project more manageable, that date provides something like a convenient symmetry to the overall perspective.

The book is intended as an outline survey. Many of the specific instances cited reflect the focus of my other work in being drawn from England; but I hope that I have maintained sufficient balance to provide a fully European perspective. Since many of the texts used in England also had a continental circulation, the seeming English emphasis is in some cases merely illusory. As most readers will probably be best acquainted with England, a bias in that direction may also be excusable. However, I would certainly not claim that English experience was normative for all of catholic Europe, and I trust that that is evident in the chapters. I have tried to assume an ignorance of Christianity among readers; but also sought not to be patronising. As the cultural baggage of Christianity becomes increasingly a thing of the past, it is necessary to start from a relatively basic

level if the volume is to be of any real and general utility (readers who already feel sufficiently catechised may therefore be tempted to skip chapter 2). At the same time, religion has to be set against a wider social context. In its totality, that cannot be done here; at least, not in detail. I have obviously alluded to the background where appropriate, and sought to illustrate how it affects the religious developments (or was affected by them) when necessary. The format is intentionally thematic, which inevitably entails some duplication in the description of historical circumstances. Where that occurs, I hope that it does not appear as padding – nor too repetitious.

As the book is primarily intended to serve as an outline, even as an introduction, I have deliberately eschewed extensive footnoting. For someone who actually enjoys writing footnotes, this has frequently been frustrating. However, to give full referencing would have made the text immeasurably longer, and also required acknowledgement of and involvement in debates which are beyond the book's main concerns. The outcome would have been a very different volume: much more daunting to construct and, I suspect, to read. Incomplete and seemingly random and inconsistent noting I personally find infuriating and unsatisfactory; but footnotes cannot be completely excluded. As a policy, therefore, references are provided only for cross-references, for quotations, or when individual historians are directly mentioned or alluded to. I may have slipped occasionally, but that is the policy. Often I rely on citations made by others; where a quotation's original language is not English, I have silently translated for inclusion in the text.

A book such as this cannot be exhaustive. Life is too short to deal with all the material fully, especially as the presses continue to produce books and articles which would make valuable contributions. A halt must be called somewhere, and arbitrarily. A glance around the publishers' book-stalls at the Kalamazoo congress in May 1993 – when I foolishly thought I had almost finished – produced an extensive list of possible additional material which had not yet reached this side of the Atlantic (some because it is still in press), and which would improve the coverage even if not necessarily expanding the argument. I am conscious of the amount of reading which could still be done, of the nuances which could be added; but I hope that such deficiencies are not too obvious in the final work. Needless to say, any remaining imperfections are solely my fault and responsibility.

Research these days progresses in a series of fits and stops. The first draft of the text was completed over three years ago, but then had to be set aside as the changing burdens of university life made other demands. The interval was, as such gaps tend to be, beneficial: the final version is

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massively altered and massively improved. I am grateful to Bill Davies of the Press for his forbearance with a delivery date which constantly receded into the future: I hope he feels the wait was worthwhile. Almost every library I have visited over the past few years has contributed to the contents. Necessarily, I have relied primarily on the University Library at Birmingham, which has had to put up with a constant flurry of recalls and inter-library loan requests; borrowing rights at Cambridge University Library also proved invaluable. Colleagues, friends, and students, too numerous to mention, have stimulated my thoughts – perhaps unwittingly – and all contributed to the final format. They may recognise specific debts: I am afraid that after all this time, and all the rewriting, my ability to identify them has become rather blurred. Christopher Brooke's comments on what I hoped was the final draft provoked some last-minute emendations (and gave the opportunity for further additions and nuancing). The whole text has benefited greatly from the assiduous criticism of Heather Swanson, who as ever has forced me to rethink and clarify my ideas and expression . . . and cut out excessive references to Margery Kempe. Authors usually acknowledge a spouse for emotional support and carrying an unfair share of domestic responsibilities. My debts certainly fall under that umbrella; but to be married, in addition, to a historian who can judge a book from the joint perspectives of reader and teacher is an incalculable bonus. There are, accordingly, no prizes for guessing the identity of the dedicatee.