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978-0-521-88120-3 - Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise?

R. N. Swanson

Excerpt

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Late in 1404 Colchester's Holy Cross hospital embarked on a fund-raising campaign. Like any charitable enterprise, it issued a publicity circular, appealing for donations.¹ It also sought celebrity sponsorship, from the bishops assembled at Parliament at Coventry that September. Produced in English, the circular detailed the good works of the hospital in accommodating and sustaining poor people. It also recounted the hospital's foundation by the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine, after her return from her archaeological expedition to Jerusalem in 670 to recover the True Cross and her gift of assorted relics, and notes a later visit by Thomas Becket.² The document ends by detailing a miracle of 1401, when thieves stole the portion of the Cross given by the Empress, and its reliquary. Pursued, they threw reliquary and contents into a pond, where they floated despite the weight of the gold.

This rather scrappy document offers a way into many aspects of medieval English spiritual life: its circulation in the vernacular, its miracle tale, its foundation myth for the hospital, its very construction as a publicity document. For a book about indulgences, its significance lies in the involvement of the two archbishops and eighteen of the nineteen bishops of England and Wales (the omitted diocese is Winchester: William of Wykeham died in September 1404).³ To encourage donations, each of them conceded an indulgence – 'xl dayes of pardon' – to anyone making donations when visiting the hospital, each time they did so. (The total is actually given as 840 days, so Winchester was expected to be included.)

In the seventeenth century the antiquary who then owned the piece could not resist adding a comment: 'The latter part of this indulgence

¹ BL, Stowe ch. 603. The text of the episcopal grant (lacking the narrative segment, suggesting that the document possibly existed in two versions) is in Morant, *History and Antiquities of Colchester*, Appendix, no. XV.

² This is all fiction. Helena actually died in the fourth century. Becket's visit is dated to 1200, although he was murdered in 1170.

³ The bishop of Carlisle's name is given as John; it should have been William Strickland.

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abounds with monstrous anachronisms. But it is to be remembered that the beginning of the XVth century was an age of worse than Egyptian darkness.' His second sentence probably applied as much to the papistry of the pardon as to the fiction of the history, for no decent seventeenth-century English Protestant would tolerate Purgatory and its adjuncts. Nor, indeed, would many of their successors. Since Luther's assault of 1517, indulgences have generally had a bad name. They were, after all, one of the prime abuses of medieval catholicism; Luther's attack lit the pyre of Reformation.

Even so, the continental furore over indulgences had few echoes in Henry VIII's England. Indulgences did indeed disappear, but among the seismic shocks of religious change under the second Tudor their disappearance hardly registers. They disappear alongside the other accoutrements of medieval catholicism, with remarkably little fuss. They just go. That silence resounds in later analyses of the English Reformation. Despite their potential as ammunition against the corruptions of medieval catholicism, indulgences are effectively ignored in A. G. Dickens's highly influential book, *The English Reformation*,⁴ and equally disregarded in other works in this vein. Recent revisionist reinterpretations of events have been almost equally reticent. True, J. J. Scarisbrick asserts that 'The English were keen on indulgences', but treats them solely as evidence of relations with the papacy, as papal grants.⁵ Eamon Duffy integrates them into his monumental reconstruction of England's late medieval 'traditional religion', but they are not a prominent element.⁶ The main 'revisionist' synthesis, by Christopher Haigh, marginalises indulgences with the assertion that they 'did not play a big part in English religion'.⁷ The most recent comprehensive history of the English (or, in its title, British) Reformation ignores them in its index.⁸ The brief assessment in the text remains negative, that 'No amount of historical enthusiasm for late medieval piety will quite erase the sense that the Church manipulated this spiritual calculus [for accruing merit in the afterlife] in its use of indulgences. Its objectives were often worthy . . . [but] the explicit claims to . . . [offer amounts] of remission less so.'⁹

⁴ Indulgences are mentioned in the index, but if followed up the references are extremely cursory.

⁵ Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 58–9.

⁶ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*; they appear chiefly in the discussion of protective prayers in ch. 8.

⁷ Haigh, *English Reformations*, 70.

⁸ Heal, *Reformation in Britain and Ireland*. To be fair, there is some discussion (see next note), but indulgences are treated essentially as an aspect of Purgatory's role in pre-Reformation religion.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 105. Heal refers to 'explicit claims to a number of days of remission', but her comments clearly apply to all amounts. As with other commentators, her remarks are also directed against the purchasing of indulgences with money, ignoring the devotional packages.

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Why, then, this book, on a topic so authoritatively dismissed? Because, in fact, indulgences were significant in English pre-Reformation religion; the English were indeed keen on them. It will be impossible to rehabilitate indulgences in what follows – and that is not the intention – but they do merit more attention than they have received. They must be included in any full picture of late medieval England's 'traditional religion'. In any understanding of how medieval catholicism was driven by the search for what John Bossy has evocatively called the 'social miracle', indulgences must be allowed their rightful place.¹⁰ This book aims to establish what that was.

If, as is being argued, indulgences were important, their neglect in previous historiography is extraordinary. Yet it is true that the available writing in English is very limited. Indeed, there is no monograph precisely on the history of English indulgences; on indulgences in general the main English text remains Henry Charles Lea's tendentious discussion in Volume III of his *History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences*, published back in 1896; for medieval indulgences there are the three volumes by Nikolaus Paulus, first issued in 1922–3 and recently republished.¹¹ Most writing about indulgences in England has been confined to articles; the only extensive analysis is of the financial repercussions of papal indulgence grants in William E. Lunt's study of financial relations between England and the papacy in the later middle ages.¹² Even that is selective in its coverage: it deals only with pardons which contributed to papal coffers; it ignores grants to religious orders and institutions which had financial side-effects, notably through the marketing of confraternity, and the numerous minor indulgences for which the papacy received only the administrative fees from processing the petition and subsequent grant. Of the articles, most are antiquarian, several specifically on printed indulgences as an aspect of the early history of printing (a concern which has also produced two notable, if slim, volumes).¹³ Predictably, much discussion surrounds some of the literary depictions: Chaucer's Pardoner has stimulated extensive commentary (with decreasing attention to his ecclesiastical role and increasing dissection of

¹⁰ Bossy, *Christianity in the West*. 'The social miracle' is his title for ch. 4 (57–75), on fraternity and charity. Indulgences are treated as an aspect of the penitential system at 54–6.

¹¹ Lea, *History of Confession*; Paulus, *Geschichte*. See also Paulus, *Indulgences as a Social Factor*.

¹² Lunt, *Financial Relations, 1327–1534*, chs. 9–12.

¹³ See the articles by Rhodes in his *Studies*. Flora Lewis combines bibliography with analysis of indulgences in "'Garnished with glorious titles'", 577–90. New discoveries of printed pardons are reported in bibliographical journals; see e.g. Swanson, 'Caxton's indulgence', 195–201. The volumes are Needham, *Printer and the Pardoner*; Cameron, *Pardoner and his Pardons* – this reproduces several early printed English indulgences, with little commentary or argument.

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his sexuality);¹⁴ while as ‘the most notorious crux in the entire poem’ the ‘pardon scene’ in *Piers Plowman* (which clearly relates to indulgences even if the pardon proffered is not actually one) has been extensively and repeatedly analysed.¹⁵ Surprisingly, the recent revival of scholarly interest in the late medieval church and religious life, especially in lay devotionism, has rarely paid much attention to indulgences. Even so, their potential was shown in Nicholas Orme’s regional discussions of south-western pardons, and in Roy Haines’s essay on indulgences as a form of social insurance.¹⁶

Much more can be said about indulgences in pre-Reformation England. This book says some of it, but it cannot say everything. The chronological coverage extends from c.1300 to 1547. The terminal date is unavoidably set by the extinction of indulgences in the reformed Henrician church. Their abrogation in fact occurred in the mid-1530s, but the subsequent decade requires consideration as a transitional phase, when charitable and spiritual practices and choices had to come to terms with their disappearance. The starting date is chosen more arbitrarily, yet has its practical and theoretical justifications. Practically, most of the available sources appear after 1300, although earlier material is not rare. As the main outlines of the pre-1300 evolutions have recently been sketched by Nicholas Vincent,¹⁷ that is a further reason for not looking at earlier centuries. On the theoretical level, the nature and understanding of indulgences arguably changed significantly in the mid-1300s, with the formulation of the doctrine of the Treasury of Merits; to examine the preceding stages and the processes of change in depth would push the book beyond what is feasible for a single volume – although evolutions and examples from before 1300 cannot be completely avoided.¹⁸ These may appear weak validations for the periodisation adopted here, but they will have to suffice.

Before proceeding, some clarification of language may be appropriate. ‘Pardon’ and ‘indulgence’ are throughout treated as synonymous. There is some ambiguity in usage, as ‘pardon’ can refer either to an amount of satisfaction docked off what was due in Purgatory, or to a document or jurisdictional act; but context should indicate which sense fits the occasion.

¹⁴ Much of the material on the Pardoner’s sexuality is cited, with his own slant on the issues, in Minnis, ‘Chaucer and the queering eunuch’, 107–28. For the fuller picture of the Pardoner, see now Minnis, ‘Construction of Chaucer’s Pardoner’, 169–95.

¹⁵ E.g. Frank, ‘Pardon scene’, 317–31; see also the survey in Alford, ‘Design of the poem’, 41–4 (quotation at 42).

¹⁶ Orme, ‘Indulgences in Exeter’; Orme, ‘Indulgences in medieval Cornwall’, 149–70; Haines, *Ecclesia Anglicana*, 183–91.

¹⁷ Vincent, ‘Some pardoners’ tales’, 23–58.

¹⁸ See now Shaffern, ‘Medieval theology of indulgences’, 11–36; below, ch. 1.

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A greater problem arises with the people who distributed the pardons. Although there may be technical distinctions,¹⁹ the sources do not maintain them, so ‘pardoners’ and ‘questors’ are used interchangeably as the main terms – partly to avoid monotony.²⁰ ‘Chuller’ (a dialect word) and ‘proctor’ are also sometimes used (but the latter, as ‘representative’, does not always apply to pardoners), with the more general terms of ‘agent’ and ‘collector’.

The book opens by establishing parameters and background, examining what ‘indulgences’ were ‘officially’ perceived to be, how they were meant to operate, and the main evolutions over time. Chapter 2 surveys the different categories of indulgences, and begins to comment on the varied source materials which provide relevant information. That concern with sources, and how they affect the questions asked and answers received, continues in chapter 3. With such preliminaries completed, the emphasis can switch to analysis of the contribution made by indulgences and the indulgence business to the religious, social, and cultural history of late medieval England.

Chapter 4 focusses on the mechanics of the indulgence trade, looking at how pardons were obtained, marketed, and publicised. Among other things, this includes an examination of the impacts of printing on indulgences, and of indulgences on the early printing industry in England. The concern with marketing addresses issues largely from the standpoint of the causes and institutions which marketed indulgences; with chapter 5 the perspective changes, to the people at the heart of the indulgence business as distributors, the pardoners. Chaucer’s portrait of his Pardoner, reinforced by later dramatic satires, provides a stereotype of the medieval indulgence seller, and underpins the presumption that indulgences were a corrupting force in medieval catholicism. This chapter looks more closely at those pardoners: not just the literary creations, but the real sellers, in so far as they can be identified, to assess whether reality matched the stereotype. Beyond the authorised legitimate pardoners, it takes a first look at the ‘black economy’ surrounding indulgences (the main discussion of which occurs later, in chapter 9).

Chapter 6 turns to a category of pardons which has hitherto been almost completely ignored. A fixation on the financial side of indulgences has diverted attention from those acquired through prayers and other purely devotional activities. These devotional pardons are considered in some detail, seeking to redress the balance and so create a fuller picture of how indulgences fitted into pre-Reformation England’s spiritual life. Only with

¹⁹ P. 131.

²⁰ Cf. John Trevisa’s comment of c.1385, ‘But now cherles [=chullers] and pardoneres beep i-cleped questores’: Lumby, *Polychronicon*, IV:49.

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the integration of that spiritual element is it possible to appreciate the full extent of their range and impact.

Although widespread, pardons were not unproblematic. Even among theologians – or especially among theologians – they were not accepted without question. How they fitted into the doctrinal construct of medieval catholicism, whether they were a good or bad thing, was much debated across Europe. England shared in those debates, especially as Wycliffite criticism developed after 1370. These active theoretical debates are covered in chapter 7, which also traces how elements of the academic controversies and discussions escaped the scholarly milieu to gain wider audiences via ‘vernacular theology’.

Chapter 8 seeks to assess issues of reception and receptivity, by turning attention to the people who actually obtained pardons and trying to assess the overall appreciation of pardons in English society. Some of the assessment is based on financial records, to trace the fortunes of individual pardons over time, on the assumption that this does reflect appeal and popularity. Individual responses are also traced, through personal statements and family records.

The widespread preconception that medieval indulgences were a financial scam demands some examination of indulgences as a factor in the English economy, considered in chapter 9. In addition to offering a guess at the overall scale of the trade, the chapter considers its wider ramifications as money not merely moved from place to place within England, but was also taken overseas. Besides examining the legitimate side of the business, the chapter also considers the contribution of indulgences to the shadowy world of fraud, deceit, and forgery, where honest beliefs were exploited for purely personal gain.

The general approach in all of these chapters is thematic, each dealing with a particular aspect of the role of indulgences in late medieval England. For their demise in the Henrician Reformation, a more chronological approach is used: here narrative is as important as analysis. Indulgences were one victim of the religious transformations of the 1530s, but they did not go quietly. Chapter 10 focusses precisely on the reign of Henry VIII. At first indulgences seemed secure under a firmly catholic king. However, as reform took hold, as Purgatory and papal power were both challenged, indulgences were undermined, and overthrown. The process of demolition must be considered, but was not straightforward. The repercussions of the loss of indulgences must also be suggested: how it impacted on spirituality, on charitable activity, on social relations.

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Even this brief prospectus should show that indulgences had a lively and eventful history in late medieval England. They were firmly integrated into many aspects of contemporary social and religious life, and were for many reasons an important element in economic life. They have been sidelined for too long. This book aims to ensure that they are at last given their due – and on the whole positive – recognition.

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CHAPTER I

Doctrine and development

Indulgences are mentioned only briefly in the latest version of the Roman Catholic catechism. In language which distils centuries of theological thought, an indulgence is defined as

a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints . . . An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favour of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments due for sins. Thus the Church does not want simply to come to the aid of these Christians, but also to spur them to works of devotion, penance and charity.¹

As it stands, this definition would have been fully accepted among medieval catholics, despite the changes in practice decreed at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Responding to Protestant attacks, and aiming to reform catholicism, the Council fathers firmly pruned back the luxurious and exuberant growth of indulgences in the late middle ages.² Legislation by Pius V in 1567 completed the process.³ The current understanding of indulgences – whether in catholic doctrine or historiographical tradition – as a specific and quantified relaxation of penance and purgatorial pains may, however, be overly rigid for medieval practices. Before those can be examined, something must be said of the medieval appreciations.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1471, 1478 (see also the summary at §1498). All of §1471–9 are headed ‘Indulgences’. For commentary, see Hellwig, ‘Penance and reconciliation’, 284–5.

² For the relevant decrees, Tanner, *Decrees*, 11:670, 731–2, 796–7.

³ Lea, *History of Confession*, 111:424 – although the changes were not implemented immediately.

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They may have been much broader than current ones,⁴ with indulgences as precisely defined being only one of a range of spiritual privileges which required little differentiation. Perhaps any act of forgiveness or setting aside of sin counted, drawing on the old Latin sense of ‘indulgence’ as remission of a debt or burden. This is certainly suggested in the English version of Guillaume de Deguileville’s *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, where something like a vernacular creed includes among its clauses ‘þe indulgence of sinne bi cristenynge and penaunce’.⁵ Equally significant is the use of the term in contexts which suggest that it carried a much wider meaning than its now limited link with Purgatory and relief of souls. Writing in the 1390s, for instance, the Carmelite Richard Maidstone referred to ‘the indulgence which is contained in every bull under the clause, *nulli igitur*’ – the standard final clause of most papal privileges, for whatever purpose, invoking the anger of God and SS Peter and Paul on all who contravened its import.⁶

The usage here and elsewhere suggests that ‘indulgence’ might be a very loose term in the pre-Reformation period, and so must be appreciated loosely here. ‘Indulgemus’ is ubiquitous as the verb in papal grants of privileges, including the right to choose a confessor to grant plenary absolution at death.⁷ Indulgences as relaxations of enjoined penance (the penance imposed by a priest during the confessional process), whether plenary or partial, must be set among the gamut of spiritual privileges available in late medieval England, many of them dispensed using very similar machinery. The laxities in usage mean that no rigid barrier separates ‘indulgences proper’ from the other spiritual benefits on offer. People often treated these as equivalent, for example making no significant distinction between ‘pardon’ and ‘brotherhood’.⁸ If the elision did not trouble those who sought the privileges, there is no reason to impose rigid artificial distinctions here. That does not mean that ‘indulgences proper’ were not identified as a specific type of spiritual benefit; just that not every ‘indulgence’ fell under that heading.

Precisely when the very word, ‘indulgence’, became the term in general use specifically for authorised relaxations of penance is not clear, but it must

⁴ For current theory and practice, Gherardini, ‘Indulgenza: teologia e storia’, 81–6, 88–9; *Enchiridion indulgentiarum*.

⁵ Henry, *Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode*, 1:45.

⁶ Edden, ‘Debate between Maidstone and Ashwardby’, 105.

⁷ See usage in Tangl, *Päpstliche Kanzleiordnungen*, 307, 309–10, 313, 330, 333–6, 338–45, 348, 351, 354–6.

⁸ Pp. 400, 412.

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have been during the thirteenth century. Necessarily, the English word only appears rather later.⁹ However, the word remained unofficial: 'pardon' was generally used (in the Latin form of '*venia*'), while grants by popes and prelates retained the formula of 'relaxation of enjoined penance'. It is these relaxations, offered through the exercise of spiritual jurisdiction, which are the unifying core of all discussions of medieval indulgences, as the central and constant element surrounded by a mass of varied accretions.

When, how, and why indulgences came into existence is still not entirely clear. While they have a prehistory, the first real signs of what later evolved into full-blown indulgences are generally associated with the mid to late eleventh century, with Christian military endeavours against Islam, and with the promise of salvation to those who died in defence of the faith. Pope Urban II's uncertain promise in 1095 to those who joined what has become known as the First Crusade was – or was subsequently interpreted to be – the first dramatic assertion of the papacy's right to grant plenary indulgences (but without actually using that terminology).¹⁰ Later transposed from the tie to crusading, and more widely distributed, grants of plenary remission of sins became a strong current in the mainstream of late medieval indulgences.

The remission offered to crusaders in 1095, and the notion of the crusade indulgence as it developed over the twelfth century, was, however, something of an aberration at the time. More usual, and recorded in some numbers in twelfth-century England, were smaller grants by bishops of remission of enjoined penance, which provided a template for most later indulgences.¹¹ These fit into a different context, of the customary processes for dealing with sin and penance before 1200, which need some attention.

Sin and penance were central to medieval catholicism. Sin divorced the sinner from God, and disrupted the Christian community. Penance would heal those breaches and restore the ties. In particular, it restored the link with God which would secure eternal salvation: penance was 'a preventive act, designed to protect Christians from the consequences of their sinful mortal life in their immortal life'.¹² The process of penance was complex, but a central requirement was satisfaction, the performance of a physical

⁹ For early usage, from c.1370, see Kurath and Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v.

¹⁰ For the prehistory, Paulus, *Geschichte*, 1:1–28. For the crusading indulgence, and varied interpretations of the promise of 1095, Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader*, 146–53; Mayer, *Crusades*, 23–36, 293–5; Riley-Smith, *First Crusade*, 27–9; Bull, *Knightly Piety*, 166–71.

¹¹ For indulgences in twelfth-century England, Vincent, 'Some pardoners' tales', 36–40, 43–6.

¹² Hamilton, *Practice of Penance*, 2.