
Helen Foxhall Forbes. *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith.* Studies in Early Medieval Britain. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, xvi + 394 pp., 2 illustr., £ 85.00.

When studying Anglo-Saxon Christianity, past research mainly focussed on crucial historical periods, such as the Christianization or the Benedictine Reform, and on theological concerns reflected in the writings of the leading religious ecclesiastics. Only recently, the ‘daily life’ in a parish (where it existed) and the practicalities of pastoral care in the whole Anglo-Saxon period have begun to be explored in more detail (by, for example, John Blair, Katie Cubitt, Sarah Foot or Francesca Tinti), thus opening our eyes to religious concerns of the ‘common lay Christian’.

Based on a meticulous examination of a massive amount of textual, pictorial and material evidence, Foxhall Forbes tries to link these perspectives by focussing on the meeting point between theology and the ‘real life’ contexts in which it operated. A series of case studies attempt to examine how ideas and concerns of theological discussion filtered from their monastic or episcopal contexts through to other sections of society or even into a wider public consciousness, including “where possible those who could not read” (xx). Foxhall Forbes is thus interested in the personal perspectives of Christian Anglo-Saxons (61), the ‘theology’ and beliefs of Anglo-Saxon individuals, in particular that of lay men and women.

For this study, it is important to bear in mind that Anglo-Saxon theology differs greatly from the preceding patristic tradition as well as the subsequent scholastic tradition, not only for theological reasons, but also because of the changing nature of papal authority. Before papacy was more actively seeking to mandate beliefs from the eleventh century onwards, official beliefs were not universally identified or, as in the case of sacramental theology, had not yet been fully explored. Before the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, theology is often characterized by a strong pastoral focus. In Anglo-Saxon authors such as Ælfric

and Wulfstan, theological topics are often set down as they applied to their congregations and are thus rather of a catechetical or exegetical than a doctrinal nature.

For her examination of how theology was communicated and how communities or individuals responded to this in Anglo-Saxon England, Foxhall Forbes primarily examines a wealth of theological-catechetical, liturgical, legal and medical texts (all of which are meticulously collected from the manuscripts), but her evidence also includes pictorial representations in manuscripts and stone sculpture as well as archaeological and linguistic evidence such as place names.

Generally, very little is known about theological knowledge of lay people apart from the basic benchmark that priests were supposed to teach their congregations the Creed and the *Pater Noster*, as emphasized in the canons of numerous councils, among them Clovesho 747, and similarly found in Ælfric or Wulfstan (1, 41, 48, 82 etc.). The key ideas which were considered to be most essential for the laity seem to have been, firstly, the idea of one God in three parts (God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost) and, secondly, the idea of life after death and resurrection at Judgment Day (encompassing promises of the immortality of the soul and of salvation for all those baptized). Only this second aspect, however, is investigated in this book.

Chapter 1, “I believe in one God” (1–61), serves as an introduction to the methodology of the book and to the intricacies and constraints of the surviving evidence, considering how this evidence relates to ‘popular’ belief and culture (10) and setting out the institutional contexts in which Christian beliefs were communicated to the Anglo-Saxons. Foxhall Forbes rightly limits her studies to the period from the eighth to the eleventh century, i.e. from the time when much of England was christianized to the Anglo-Norman realm, when ecclesiastical structures and interests also saw a significant change.

In Chapter 2, “Creator of All Things, Visible and Invisible” (63–127), the diverse roles of spiritual beings, in particular angels and devils, in the daily lives of Christian Anglo-Saxons are investigated by a close examination of a wide variety of sources, predominantly liturgical and hagiographical, but also legal and medical texts. As is typical of the interdisciplinary approach of the book, this material is supplemented by evidence for the “reification” (101–125) of angels and devils in illustrations (as in the Harley Psalter) or stone representations, and also for “angelic” place names (99–101). These sources attest that angels and devils were central in many pastoral contexts and rituals, such as baptism (as a release from devils), medical treatment, the struggle at death or, more generally, as guardian angels. Angels indeed seem to have been “ubiquitous” (127) in the daily lives of the Anglo-Saxons, and Foxhall Forbes – dismissing influence from pre-Christian settings – interprets this as reflecting the fact that ‘official’ belief

accorded angels (and demons) clear and critical roles in salvation history, which were played out on an individual basis with regard to individual souls. In particular, she considers the inclusion of invisible spirits in legal texts a “sharp reminder of how angels and devils infiltrated almost every aspect of life and death of Christian Anglo-Saxons” (xxx).

Chapter 3, “And He Will Come Again to Judge the Living and the Dead” (129–200), discusses the interrelation of theology and the law by studying, for example, in how far canon law or, more generally, theological ideas about mercy and judgment influenced the process of secular law-making or how they shaped the ways how ordeals or penalties such as capital punishment may have been understood by a wider audience. One important aspect in this chapter, which is mainly based on textual sources (Alfred, Boethius; a separate chapter is dedicated to Archbishop Wulfstan of York, 172–193), is to investigate if/which principles of penitential theology were borrowed into secular law. Specific cases discussed here are oaths (and perjury) and ordeals as “means of proof” (150–172). The often inconclusive evidence is particularly intriguing for ordeals because, even though there are nine manuscripts (six of them pontificals) which contain rituals for ordeals (163), there is not a single documented case where an ordeal was used.

Chapter 4, “The Communion of Saints and the Forgiveness of Sins” (201–264), focuses on social reflexes of eschatology and lists evidence reflecting concerns for the fate of the soul. The importance attached to commemoration and prayer for the deceased is evinced in memorial records of all kinds (*Libri vitae*, lists of names in gospelbooks or other manuscripts, epigraphic inscriptions on stone sculpture) and in liturgical documents with formulae for commemoration masses. To this, Foxhall Forbes also adds the ritualised almsgiving in charters or wills, trying to show how formulaic demands, e.g. in phrases such as “for the redemption of our soul and for the hope of eternal salvation”, were adapted to the specific circumstances of a beneficiary. The much debated concept of purgatory in early medieval times is investigated through the gift-giving practices of Anglo-Saxon men and women; these are seen as evidence of how theological beliefs about the afterlife had filtered through to lay people attempting to ensure that “after their deaths their souls could not languish in purgatorial suffering, unaided and unremembered” (220). While the names in memorial books are undeniably a testament to a strong desire for commemoration, it is doubtful how much of this reflects concrete ideas of a theology of purgatory (as Foxhall Forbes claims in a critical discussion of Le Goff’s claim that ‘purgatory’ as an idea was not born out until the beginning of the twelfth century; 203–205) and not rather a much more profane wish by individuals to ensure that their names would be remembered.

Chapter 5, “The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting” (265–328) investigates textual, mainly legal, evidence and also archaeological material for

the concept of Christian burial. This saw a significant change with the introduction of consecrated cemeteries in the late ninth or early tenth century, which also meant that exclusion from sacred space became possible (here discussed in relation to perjury and suicide; 155–158 etc., 300–308). Chapters 4 and 5 show how tightly theological factors are bound up with social and cultural values and how much practices such as memorial records and burial in consecrated ground or the rites of the sick and dying may indeed have been informed by theological concepts, but were accepted by the laity not for their theology, but out of a desire for social inclusion.

In her basically historical, but also genuinely interdisciplinary study, Foxhall Forbes has studied almost every kind of surviving evidence from Anglo-Saxon England – and her mastery of Old English as well as Latin sources and their contexts, their transmission history and their complications is indeed impressive. Except for some poetry (which, however, might have made the belief of at least some Anglo-Saxon individuals tangible), most of the Old English and Latin textual evidence of the Anglo-Saxon period is taken into consideration and discussed at some point in the book on the basis of a critical assessment of the established and most recent literature (the bibliography spans over 49 pages; 335–384).

It is a pity, though, that most of this material, and virtually all of the original Old English and Latin material, is relegated to a plethora of altogether 1498(!) footnotes. This is probably also due to its publication in the series “Studies in Early Medieval Britain”, which is designed as a “forum for interdisciplinary collaboration between historians, archaeologists, philologists, literary and cultural scholars”. In particular, it seeks to reach its public by “avoiding inaccessible jargon” (see Foreword by Joanna Story; 11). This concept, however, does not do the book a favour, since the sources are not allowed to speak for themselves. As all original source texts are placed in the footnotes, we only find the odd quote in Modern English translation in the main text, which is mainly an academic discussion or even a narrative re-telling of the sources, be they narrative or documentary, pictorial or archaeological (there are only two illustrations in the book). This makes these very informed accounts at times somewhat tiresome to read.

Another factor making the book hard to digest is related to problems of text structure. The alert reader of this review will perhaps have stumbled over the forced, even absurd, chapter headings, which are modelled on the Apostles’ Creed, but which have little or even no (Chapter 1) connection to the discussions found in the respective chapters. Theologians will most certainly wince at this violation of the Creed (which, after all, has led to schisms in the history of Christianity). Since the internal chapter headings are also of little help, the book may be best approached by its indices (385–398; crucial terms such as Creed or

Pater Noster are, however, missing), in particular because the choice of case studies is somewhat eclectic. One wonders, for example, why the sign of the cross (symbolizing Christ's death and resurrection and thus the salvation of all baptized), undoubtedly the central symbol of Christianity since Antiquity, is not granted a separate chapter. It is surely the most ubiquitous theological symbol in Anglo-Saxon England and had a fundamental impact on the daily life of the Anglo-Saxons, as evinced by a multitude of narrative, liturgical and documentary texts (also testifying to its importance as a gesture) as well as by material objects like, for example, pectoral or stone crosses.

One also wonders whether some of the evidence is not taken too much at face value. Similar to the interpretation of boundary descriptions in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* it has recently been proposed for charters and wills that the descriptions given there might serve the function of securing or even appropriating land. In particular, it has been argued that recorded bequests may represent a continuation of earlier agreements rather than donations made by individuals in their own right (see p. 251 for a discussion of such proposals). This may cast doubt on Foxhall Forbes' arguments that these donations primarily reflect a concern for the fate of the soul (or might even be early instances of buying release from purgatory). Similarly, for place-name evidence, the possibility of (later) folk-etymology, as usual with toponyms, is not considered.

The most general issue, however, is if it is ever possible to explore "how theological debate and discussion affected the personal perspectives of Christian Anglo-Saxons" (61), in particular if we may ever be able to access aspects of belief, i.e. the personal interiority of Anglo-Saxon individuals, through the kind of sources surviving from Anglo-Saxon England (on the author's scarce use of poetry, see above). Undoubtedly, Foxhall Forbes has raised interesting questions and broken new ground by scrutinizing the material we have, and she has thus indeed been able to show the workings of early medieval theology in its social and cultural contexts. The book is, however, not a study of 'theology' in its narrow sense. If we accept that theology is understood as a theology of the church's practice rather than a theology of the church's doctrine, Foxhall Forbes's material demonstrates that written theological discussion (which is, however, only sporadically cited) was significant in shaping Anglo-Saxon practices. Her study thus reveals the interplay between theology/belief and social and cultural factors by not only describing how theological ideas shaped the rites around, for instance, birth and death, but by also showing that beliefs which may have initially owed more to social or cultural factors came to be incorporated in religious contexts and were given theological justification and interpretations. All in all, this book shows that pastoral theology cannot be detached from the world in which it operates, and it is one of the principal ideas of Foxhall Forbes that this is not a

one-way road, but that “theology responds to changing beliefs and ideas as much as it may help to drive change in society or social practice, as in the case of law” (333).

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