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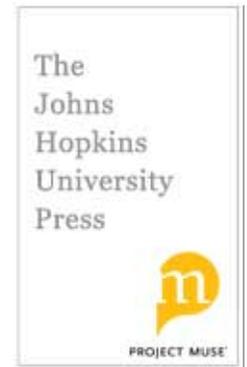
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*Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith* by Helen Foxhall Forbes (review)

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(Review)

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Helen Foxhall Forbes. *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. xvi + 394. £85.00 (\$154.95). ISBN 978-1-4094-2371-3 (hbk).

Readers of Helen Foxhall Forbes's engrossing monograph will quickly discover that two features set it apart from most other studies of early medieval religion. One is the book's structure. Instead of developing a single unifying argument, the author proposes several distinct approaches to the interpretation of textual and material evidence, which are illustrated with a selection of case studies in the opening chapters; subsequent chapters reinforce those approaches with additional case studies. Each chapter bears a title adapted from the Nicene Creed (e.g., "I Believe in One God"), which artfully identifies the topic of the chapter while keeping the reader alert to a key point of the book, namely that institutionally sanctioned "Christian beliefs" are not coterminous with "the beliefs of Christians," which include all beliefs that ordinary Christians held to be compatible with their Christianity (10). Each chapter thus portrays "how far theological debate and discussion might have affected the personal perspectives of Christian Anglo-Saxons" in one area of belief (61).

Second, this book admirably refuses to be constrained by a single disciplinary discourse. The author foregrounds the influence that theology and social change exerted over one another (10) and situates her project at the intersection of ecclesiastical, cultural, and social history, yet she succeeds in addressing a broader audience, encompassing medievalists of all disciplines, especially of literary and intellectual history. *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England* deserves to be reviewed elsewhere from the viewpoint of a social or cultural historian, but in the present forum, I will focus on elements of this study that will be most stimulating and useful to specialists in medieval literature.

Chapter 1, entitled "I Believe in One God," treats the subject of belief itself and the factors that limit our access to the beliefs of medieval Christians. As an antidote to the well-worn and reductive opposition between institutional and popular belief, Foxhall Forbes foregrounds the "pastoral dialogue, which on one side comprises the ways that preachers and teachers dealt with the challenges of conveying what was necessary for salvation to their congregations, and on the other how those people responded to what they were taught" (3). She surveys the types of textual and material evidence pertinent to early medieval Christian belief, and under the section heading "Learning the Faith in Anglo-Saxon England," she scrutinizes various means of support for dispensing Christian instruction to the laity, including ecclesiastical infrastructure, the training of priests, availability of books, and Christian rituals.

Much of the primary source evidence that Foxhall Forbes adduces in the first chapter will be familiar to Anglo-Saxonists; what is valuable and original in this chapter is how the author deploys familiar texts to underpin the interpretive strategies that will reappear throughout the book. For instance, in 746 CE, Pope Zacharias wrote a scolding letter to the Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface, who

by then had become archbishop of Mainz. Boniface had deemed it suitable to rebaptize people after their priest grossly mispronounced the Latin words of the trinitarian formula in the baptismal rite; Zacharias, however, insisted that poor Latinity alone could not invalidate the baptism, and consequently, rebaptism constituted an egregious violation of sacramental theology. This exchange between two high-ranking ecclesiastics “highlight[s] both the multiplicity of beliefs and the rather random nature of what was, or was not, determined to be acceptable in any given local context” (19). Moreover, Boniface’s side of the exchange with Zacharias has not survived, which should caution us about how firmly we can establish the nature of “official” Christian teaching in this period:

If the letter from Pope Zacharias had not survived, and instead a manuscript preserved a letter from Boniface instructing that rebaptism was necessary in such cases of priestly incompetence in Latin, modern scholars might assume that Boniface’s letter represented the belief of “the Church,” since Boniface was the local figure of authority and by 746, he was also archbishop and papal legate. (20)

This and other case studies have been carefully selected to counteract our tendency to reduce “belief” to two categories: things that the church compelled Christians to believe and things that the church condemned as pagan. Many beliefs and practices were neither Christian nor pagan but secular; in the early Anglo-Saxon period, even the burial of the dead occurred outside the bounds of religious ritual (59–60). The priests and bishops who tended to the needs of Christian communities often disagreed over which behaviors and beliefs demanded censure; the typical priest had less education than a bishop, and hence less knowledge of Christian teachings, but variation might just as likely occur horizontally, as some local priests were rigorists and others were not (13). It “is questionable how useful the concept of ‘the Church’ even is in this period, given that for most people the experience of religion and belief was profoundly local or regional, and based in small communities” (17).

The interpretive principles that Foxhall Forbes introduces in chapter 1 are sustained in subsequent chapters, each of which brings a diverse body of evidence to bear upon a circumscribed area of Christian belief. Chapter 2, entitled “Creator of All Things, Visible and Invisible,” first examines how the categories of *visibilia* and *invisibilia* made their way into the Creed, then demonstrates how the Anglo-Saxons understood invisible creatures (primarily angels and demons) to intervene in the visible realms of daily existence. Foxhall Forbes argues convincingly that texts about angels and demons were intended less to disseminate correct doctrine about invisible creatures per se, and more to concretize abstract ideas that were useful in pastoral care (120). Chapter 3, “And He Will Come Again to Judge the Living and the Dead,” uses texts that are concerned with judgment in the present life (law codes, penitential manuals, and both prescriptive and narrative texts concerned with oaths, ordeals, and capital punishment) as an entrée into Anglo-Saxon beliefs about the judgment of human souls in the afterlife. While remaining

sensitive to the fact that the relationship among secular law, pastoral care, and theological doctrine was evolving throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, Foxhall Forbes has selected case studies that “illustrate precisely the importance and effects of theological discussion in the secular world of law and order, and especially the significance of abstract theological ideas in conjunction with religion as lived experience” (131).

Chapter 4, “The Communion of Saints and the Forgiveness of Sins,” first demonstrates that Anglo-Saxon Christians commonly believed in a “purgatorial interim” where the souls of the dead suffered to purify them of their sins in advance of the universal Last Judgment. There follows a lengthy discussion of charters granting land to religious communities in exchange for perpetual prayers and liturgies benefiting the donors’ souls: these support Foxhall Forbes’s claim that purgatory was not just something that the Anglo-Saxons told stories about, but also something that they believed their own souls would experience after death, and believed it so strongly that they were willing to alienate family property in order to reduce the duration of their suffering in purgatory. Finally, Chapter 5, “The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting,” examines Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward the treatment of the human body after death, including the questions of whether the treatment of the body could influence the fate of the soul that had departed from it and, conversely, whether the soul’s condition in the afterworld might be revealed through unusual occurrences involving the dead body or the grave site. Against the backdrop of conflicting patristic opinions on these matters, Foxhall Forbes analyzes texts concerned with the anointing of the sick and viaticum, funerary rituals, exclusion from burial in consecrated ground, and the status of suicides, as well as archaeological evidence for the location of burials and their enrichment with grave goods.

Even though *Heaven and Earth* examines areas of Anglo-Saxon culture that I have studied at length, every section of the book opened my eyes to new texts and new perspectives. Specialists in Anglo-Saxon literature will learn much from Foxhall Forbes’s detailed analysis of liturgical texts, episcopal professions of belief, penitentials, charters, and wills, which are rarely integrated into literary-historical research; moreover, her treatment of Anglo-Saxon rituals, social networks, and attitudes toward death and the afterlife are germane to our understanding of these elements in Old English poetry. The bibliography of secondary sources is diverse, thorough, and up-to-date; by the time I finished reading, I had compiled a list of several dozen items (many published since 2005) that were new to me and pertinent to my research or teaching. I plan to assign chapters of *Heaven and Earth* to graduate students, both in seminars and in preparation for comprehensive exams, as it will model responsible and nuanced textual analysis while strengthening their grasp on the fundamentals of early medieval Christian belief and practice (e.g., angels, purgatory, sacramental confession, trial by ordeal, almsgiving, and the resurrection of the body).

The shortcomings that I can identify in the substance of Foxhall Forbes’s book are fairly inconsequential. The pace of the argumentation and the density of

primary source quotations fluctuate between breezy and ponderous (as in the extended examination of the writings of Archbishop Wulfstan, pp. 172–200), suggesting that some of the densest (and most original) sections might have benefited from publication as stand-alone essays. Chapter 5 arrives at the conclusion that “the body’s fate” at the Last Judgment “was determined by the soul and not by the body itself” (328), although the author has omitted from consideration a substantial group of well-known Old English homilies and poems that depict the soul ascribing to the body all responsibility for good and bad deeds undertaken during life. And while Foxhall Forbes is right to observe that Augustine of Hippo’s opinions on the condition of the soul in the afterlife were neither uncontested nor universally available in Anglo-Saxon England, I believe she overestimates the availability and influence of his *De civitate Dei* when she concludes that it “was very widely known, copied and cited” (268). These are all minor criticisms, however, and the only feature of *Heaven and Earth* that actually disappoints me is its poor copy-editing, which has left the pages peppered with errors in spelling, concord, and formatting, as well as a handful of more substantial errors in quotations and citations.

Nonetheless, these small shortcomings pale in comparison with what Foxhall Forbes has achieved in this study. *Heaven and Earth* is clearly written and thoroughly documented, making it accessible and useful to medievalists across the disciplines. At the same time, specialists will find it to be an enjoyable and stimulating read: it is refreshing to encounter a book that takes medieval piety seriously and bravely embraces its complexity and internal contradictions.

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Jerram Barrs. ***Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature and the Arts***. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013. Pp. 208. \$17.99. ISBN 978-1-4335-3597-0.

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that a student of Francis Schaeffer has published a book of reflections on Christianity, literature, and the arts. Jerram Barrs worked at L’Abri Fellowship in England for almost two decades and has taught at Covenant Theological Seminary for more than two decades, and his recent book *Echoes of Eden* draws from a lifetime of thinking about the relationship between Christianity and culture. And when, in a three-page catalogue of praises by eleven notable thinkers in this field, Tim Keller describes this book as “the most accessible, readable, and yet theologically robust work on Christianity and the arts that you will be able to find” (1), expectations are high. Barrs is interested in seeing God and humans as creative artists, so he begins his book by examining the doctrine of creation, which affirms the goodness of the created world. Barrs looks at four