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# Professor Robert Swanson MA, PhD, FSA, FRHistS

Professor of Medieval History

**Department of History (/schools/historycultures/departments/history/index.aspx)**

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## About

I studied for a degree in History at Cambridge University, graduating in 1972. I then stayed at Cambridge for his doctoral research, on the activities of European universities in the crisis caused by the division in the papacy between 1378 and 1417. I have been at Birmingham since October 1979.

## Biography

In 1975 he was appointed Assistant Archivist at the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research in York, moving to Birmingham as Lecturer in Medieval History in 1979. In 2001 he became Professor of Medieval Ecclesiastical History, and in 2005 Professor of Medieval History. In 2003 he was awarded the title of Guest Professor at Renmin University of China (Beijing), and at Tianjin Normal University, and in 2010 was made Guest Professor at Wuhan University. He has also lectured elsewhere in China. He held a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Senior Research Fellowship in 2005-6, part of which overlapped with a Membership at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. In Spring 2010 he was a Fellow at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina.

His initial research interests on papal and university history were broadened and transformed by contact with the ecclesiastical archives at York, which stimulated his investigations of the role of the church in late medieval English society (c.1350 to the Reformation). This developed further at Birmingham, to become a major area of teaching; it remains a significant element in his work, leading (for instance) to his work on parishes and parochial incomes, and his investigation of the role of indulgences in late medieval English religion. The social aspect of church history is complemented by an interest in the history of medieval spirituality, which expands beyond England to the rest of western Europe. This interest is primarily reflected in his book on *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-c.1515 (1995).* (1995).

Robert Swanson has been an active member of the Ecclesiastical History Society for several years, as committee member and office holder. He was President of the Society for 2007-8. Since 2007 he has been President of the British sub-commission of the Commission internationale d'histoire et d'etudes du christianisme (the international umbrella body for ecclesiastical history). From 1994 to 2001 he was editor of *Studies in Church History, overseeing the publication of eight volumes of the series*, overseeing the publication of eight volumes of the series.

## Teaching

### Undergraduate

**Second year**

- Optional Unit: Literacy and Literate Culture in Medieval Europe
- Medieval Societies: Persecuting Societies? Christians and Others, c.1050-1321

**Third year**

- Special Subject: The English Church in the Reign of Henry VIII

### Postgraduate

- Palaeography
- Contributions to the **MA in the History of Christianity (/students/courses/postgraduate/taught/history/history-christianity.aspx)**, **MA in Reformation and Early Modern Studies (/students/courses/postgraduate/taught/history/reformation-early-mod-studies.aspx)**, MA in Medieval History and MA in West Midlands History

## Postgraduate supervision

Robert Swanson is happy to discuss postgraduate research possibilities across the range of ecclesiastical history from the fourteenth (in certain areas from the twelfth) to the early sixteenth centuries, with particular emphasis on England in the period after 1350. Listed below are areas in which his current and past research students have worked:

- Editions of records of ecclesiastical history, for example bishops' registers.
- Monastic history.
- Lives and careers of medieval clergy.
- Aspects of intellectual history, especially in relation to spiritual development and the social and institutional status of the church.
- Relations between England and the papacy.

## Research

Having completed a major and substantial volume on indulgences in pre-Reformation England in 2007 (see below), current work is moving increasingly towards a major investigation of the parish in pre-Reformation England, and expanding the analysis of the role of the church as a social and economic force.

### Past research

My doctoral research examined the contribution made by universities to the European debates provoked by the double election to the papacy in 1378, and the subsequent search for reunion through to 1417. That generated my first book, and a series of articles; it remains an interest, but not a prominent one. Work on the English church has provided the basis for other books and articles, on aspects ranging from clerical careers to receipts at shrines, from the incomes of bishops to the value of benefices. This work has always been heavily archival, its range reflected in the volume of translated and edited sources, *Catholic England* (1993).

Often research and publication are a way of getting something out of my system, exemplified in the volume on *The Twelfth Century Renaissance* (1999), which arose immediately from an Option course taught at Birmingham, but ultimately from an unresolved interest sparked as an undergraduate, which had niggled away for many years before being eventually worked out. My most recent major project, now completed, has been an examination of indulgences in pre-Reformation. This has generated several publications, including the edited volume of essays by an international group of scholars, *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe* (2006), the work culminating in the major monograph, *Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise?* (2007).

## Publications

- Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise? (2007)
- (editor) Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe (2006)
- The Twelfth Century Renaissance (1999)
- Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-c.1515 (1995)
- (editor) Catholic England: Religion, Faith, and Observance before the Reformation (1993)
- Church and Society in Late Medieval England (1989)
- Universities, Academics, and the Great Schism (1979)
- Editor for *Studies in Church History*, vols. 32-39 (1996-2004)

## Expertise

Medieval church c.1100-1500, with particular reference to England

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