

Devotion by Donation: the Alms-Giving and Religious Foundations of Henry III

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This paper will address a number of ways in which King Henry III of England displayed his piety. Although a far from comprehensive study of the subject, this examination of some of the king's most visible displays of charity and patronage permits some understanding of Henry's personal religion. In this paper, I will argue that Henry identified strongly with the values of the thirteenth-century mendicant orders, and that it was this influence that resulted in Henry's religious patronage being directed so significantly towards the poor and the sick.

Thirteenth-century writers rarely discussed Henry III's piety, thus the commentaries that do appear on this topic are worthy of attention. In Matthew Paris's *Chronica Maiora*, the most extensive chronicle of Henry's reign, Henry receives explicit praise for only one incident – the arrival of the Holy Blood relic at Westminster Abbey. Paris described Henry as *princeps Christianissimus*, the most Christian prince, after the king had spent the night fasting, and had then, wearing pauper's clothes, carried the relic from St Paul's Cathedral to Westminster.¹ Otherwise, Paris seldom praised Henry, and was frequently critical of his weakness and anger, his demands for money and his dealings with the papacy. Paris acknowledged the king's generous almsgiving, but offered little or no commendation for his charity.

The annals from the Cistercian Waverley Abbey record that in 1249 Henry, having heard rumours of the impending Day of Judgement, proceeded to spend the night in vigilance, 'praying with great fear and devotion.'² The same chronicle reported Henry's pilgrimage to the shrine of St Edmund of Abingdon at Pontigny, motivated by 'love and devotion.'³ The anti-royalist Waverley, thus recognised the sincerity of the king's behaviour and belief, but like

Matthew Paris, refrained from making any judgement, either positive or negative, about his piety or his character.⁴

These two anecdotes aside, most, if not all references to Henry's piety appear only in obituaries. That from Tewkesbury Abbey, mistakenly written nine years early, praised Henry unreservedly, for both his political actions and his piety, citing in particular his almsgiving and his charity to orphans and widows.⁵ The Furness chronicle praised his piety, but also suggested that throughout Henry's life there was 'each day ... plentiful peace and joy', conveniently forgetting the on-going baronial disputes and the bloody civil war.⁶ Osney Abbey praised him for loving the 'beautiful house of God', more than 'all other kings who had gone before him'.⁷ This was rich praise for Henry, particularly considering that this tribute was followed by an observation of his love for foreigners above all English men – a none-too-subtle indication of where the abbey's loyalties lay in the war between the English-born barons and the king.⁸

Among modern historians, opinions about the nature of Henry's piety vary greatly. Hilda Johnstone pronounced the king to be docile, 'impressionable and impulsive'.⁹ Suzanne Lewis describes it as 'wide-ranging, capricious and shallow'.¹⁰ Margaret Howell argues that his piety was 'expressed in conventional ways'.¹¹ By contrast, others have suggested that Henry was 'well-known' for his devotion, and even, according to Paul Webster, England's 'most pious medieval king'.¹² Michael Penman compared Henry favourably to the kings of Scotland, arguing that the Scots appeared 'conventional' alongside Henry.¹³ David Carpenter equates Henry's piety with that of his contemporary, King Louis IX of France. Louis was later canonised as Saint Louis, and was widely revered for his religious devotion. Carpenter contends, however, that Henry failed to fully discharge 'his obligations as a Christian king'.¹⁴ Carpenter argues elsewhere that the 'scale and forms' of his religious observance were variable.¹⁵

Unfortunately, no complete study of Henry's piety has yet been published. Recent historiography has focussed on the particular topics of Henry feeding the poor; his rebuilding of Westminster Abbey and the associated connection with Edward the Confessor; the acquisition of the holy blood relic for the abbey; and his conduct towards the Jewish community.¹⁶ One area which has yet to be studied in depth is Henry's relationship with the mendicant orders, and by examining the outward

expression of his piety, this paper will demonstrate how he identified with the ideals of the Franciscan Order in particular. In addition, it will also address the extent to which Henry was exceptional amongst his peers, particularly Louis IX and Simon de Montfort; aside from Carpenter's study of the meetings of Henry and Louis, little work has yet been done to compare Henry with his contemporaries.

Of course, being certain of Henry's own ideas regarding his faith and beliefs is impossible. Piety itself - reverence or obedience to God - is difficult to judge based solely on the performance of religious gestures. This is particularly true for a man who was constantly accompanied by an entourage, whose every gesture was subject to scrutiny, and who was, by dint of his birth, a role model. He had expectations to fulfil, traditions to continue, and all his actions were loaded with potential political repercussions.

Henry was crowned in 1216, aged nine, in the immediate aftermath of Magna Carta. The later presence of his, and his queen's, foreign relations was a source of much discontent amongst some of the English-born magnates, culminating in civil war and the death of Henry's brother-in-law, and leader of his opponents, Simon de Montfort. Henry also spent decades attempting to regain the French lands lost by his father, before finally conceding a treaty with Louis IX in 1259. Henry was thus often in need of political support, but also needed the spiritual support accessible through religious devotion and benefactions.

Michael Prestwich has suggested that thirteenth-century writers, although familiar with the ideals of kingly behaviour, 'found character hard to describe'.¹⁷ It is therefore necessary to look further than the descriptions of Henry in contemporary texts. Comparing the language used about his peers may offer a more realistic view of his reputation. The most useful comparator is Louis IX. Louis and Henry both came to the throne as minors; were of a similar age - Louis slightly younger; their reigns were almost contemporaneous; and their wives were sisters. Through the anointing that formed part of the coronation ceremonies in both England and France, the kings of these countries were recognised as 'vicars of Christ'.¹⁸ Although this designation gave them no ecclesiastical authority, and they remained members of the laity, it did confer a spiritual dignity not enjoyed by other temporal rulers in their lands.¹⁹

Matthew Paris was unreserved in his admiration for Louis, frequently calling him the ‘most devout’, the ‘most pious’ and the ‘most Christian’ king, as well as praising his conduct, his moderation and his wisdom.²⁰ Likewise, the Waverley annals praise the French king’s character, and his motive for joining the crusade (something that Henry promised, but failed, to do) and echo Paris’s words, describing Louis as the ‘most Christian’, and ‘illustrious’ king.²¹

The Melrose chronicle, which had little to say about Henry’s death except to state, oddly, that he had ruled ‘peacefully and tranquilly’, also described Louis as the ‘most pious’ king.²² This particular chronicle is especially significant for the devotion shown to Simon de Montfort. Henry’s death merited only one sentence, and the scribe was scathing about the queen, blaming her for the discord between the barons and the king.²³ The summary of Simon de Montfort’s life, however, extended to several pages, lauding his general conduct and his ascetic lifestyle. The earl wore a hair-shirt at all times, was temperate in his diet, frugal with his clothing, and, for a time, abstained from sexual relations with his wife.²⁴ There is no evidence to suggest that Henry ever adopted such practices; in this regard, de Montfort is far more comparable to Louis IX. The Waverley annals also lamented de Montfort far more than Henry. By their account, at the time of the earl’s burial after his death at the Battle of Evesham, thunder and lightning appeared and the ‘sun was darkened throughout the land’.²⁵ The same chronicle described Simon’s wife, Henry’s sister Eleanor, as the ‘most sincere lover of our house’.²⁶

The most exceptional aspect of Henry’s charity was his feeding of the poor, mostly in London and but also elsewhere in his kingdom.²⁷ This practice was equated with ‘nourishing the mystical body of Christ’, as well as harvesting prayers for salvation.²⁸ As well as providing charity to his subjects, Henry was simultaneously serving Christ through his charitable actions. In addition, he was undoubtedly thinking of his own salvation – something that is evident in his charity and patronage throughout his reign. Ministrations to the poor, sick and leprous was one of the fundamental teachings of Saint Francis, and Henry’s almsgiving is highly redolent of this Franciscan ideal. The contemporary notion of creating a ‘heaven on earth’ was one that Louis adopted within his court, and Henry appears to have attempted to achieve something similar

within the halls of his palaces.²⁹ While the practice itself was not unusual for a medieval king, the vast numbers were extraordinary.

In 1242, 50,000 poor were fed for the soul of Henry's sister Isabella, Holy Roman Empress, who died childless in her late twenties; in 1260, 20,000 were fed in honour of the soul of Henry's half-brother Aymer, bishop of Valence; in 1245, 10,000 were fed after the death of the king's father-in-law, the count of Provence.³⁰ Also honoured in this manner were Kings Richard and John, and Henry's sister Joan, queen of Scotland, who like Isabella had died at a young age, and for whom both halls at Westminster Palace were filled with paupers.³¹ These numbers sound unrealistic – even in London, finding 10,000 paupers may have been a challenge – but it is probable that the money provided would have been spent over a number of consecutive days in order to fulfil Henry's instructions.³²

Besides commemorating the dead, Henry also sought protection through this almsgiving for his own, and his family's, health and souls, on occasions ordering in advance for money to be sent to towns such as York, London and Canterbury, for paupers to be fed on the day of the king's arrival.³³ Even when visiting the French king and his family, Henry did not neglect his duty to the poor, being celebrated by the Parisians for his generosity towards them.³⁴ Henry also used these occasions to venerate saints; the halls at Westminster were filled with paupers for the celebration of the translation of the body of Saint Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey. This was repeated in subsequent years on the saint's feast day. The Confessor's wife, Edith, was also commemorated on several occasions, for example in 1243, when 10,000 paupers were fed in her name.³⁵

This type of almsgiving was, as Sally Dixon-Smith has convincingly argued, an important part of kingship.³⁶ The poor had a role to play; almsgiving led to spiritual reward, not only for Henry himself, but also for his kingdom, in the form of peace and harmony. The greater the numbers, the greater the expense, but the greater the reward from God. Louis IX and Henry's son Edward both provided food and alms for the poor, just as they would have been expected to, as did both Henry's and Louis' queens.³⁷ There is no evidence, however, that either Louis or Edward ever fed such vast congregations at once. Edward possibly fed more paupers each year than Henry, but these were more frequent

occasions with smaller numbers.³⁸ Nicholas Vincent suggests that Henry had a ‘love of grand public ceremony, all the better if it could be combined with pious acts’.³⁹ Filling the halls of the royal palaces with large groups of paupers fulfilled Henry’s ideal – not for him the random, anonymous charitable acts undertaken by Louis.⁴⁰

Henry’s belief in the importance of this form of charity was made explicit in the imagery in his palace halls. One favourite illustration was of the parable of Dives and Lazarus.⁴¹ The rich man, Dives, refused to give food from his table to the pauper, Lazarus, who was covered in sores. Lazarus lay outside the house, his sores being licked at by a dog. Upon their deaths, Dives descended to hell, while Lazarus was lifted to heaven.⁴² Another favourite image was of Saint Edward the Confessor giving a ring to a poor stranger begging for charity, who later revealed himself as St John the Evangelist.⁴³ Both of these representations of charity depict the spiritual necessity of almsgiving. Henry adopted St Francis’ instructions to his disciples, and duly gave the poor their ‘inheritance and right’ in the form of alms.⁴⁴ The monetary cost of this charity, and of the palaces in which it was given, may have been excessive, but this was a simple means by which Henry could achieve spiritual reward.

Henry was not always present at these great feedings, and there is no evidence to suggest that he personally fed the poor and the sick, as Louis IX was known to have done. He did not, however, shun those less fortunate than himself, and is known to have washed the feet of phenomenal numbers of paupers. This ritual of foot washing, the *mandatum* or maundy, formed part of the ideal of monastic life, being specified in Lanfranc’s eleventh-century *Constitutions*.⁴⁵ For monks, this ritual represented a gesture of hospitality, but also evoked Christ’s washing of the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. The practice was not new in the thirteenth century, but the first English king known for sure to have performed the rite was Henry’s father, King John.⁴⁶ Henry adopted this new form of veneration of the poor and ensured that it became a regular aspect of his almsgiving.

On Maundy Thursday in 1237, Henry washed the feet of 200 poor, and provided them with tunics and shoes. From the middle of the 1240s onwards, Henry frequently ordered the provision of shoes for the poor several times a year, particularly at Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. In 1245, 332 pairs of shoes were ordered, of different size or quality –

some were to be of the value of 5 ½ pence, others at 5 pence, and the remainder at 4 ½ pence.⁴⁷ In 1254, prior to his arrival at Canterbury at Christmas, Henry ordered the purchase of 150 pairs of shoes, of various sizes.⁴⁸ The maundy was performed also by Henry's immediate family. In 1255, 71 tunics were ordered for the queen's Maundy, and later the same year, a further 150 tunics were made when the king and queen performed the maundy together.⁴⁹ In 1247, 15 tunics were requested to be distributed when Henry's son, Edward, performed the maundy – he would have been just eight years old at the time. The scale of Henry's maundy is exceptional; one of Louis's hagiographers recorded how the French king would wash and kiss the feet of thirteen paupers on Maundy Thursday.⁵⁰ Henry evidently surpassed this figure by a long way.

As providing food represented a form of feeding Christ, washing the feet of the poor represented ministering to Christ with humility. This contact with the poor is further evidence of Henry's associating himself with Franciscan ideals – the First Rule of the Friars Minor ordered that friars should 'rejoice' when amongst the 'poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers...'⁵¹ The chancery enrolments refer to those poor sometimes as *pauperes*, and on other occasions as *fratres* – the appellation of paupers as brothers suggests a perceived affinity between the lay poor and the original followers of St Francis who vowed to live in poverty.

Whether the recipients of Henry's maundy were simply paupers, or were also sick or infirm, is not made clear from the chancery records, but some of them may have been inmates of hospitals or leper-houses. In a conversation recorded between Louis and his biographer Jean de Joinville, Louis praised Henry's habit of washing and kissing the feet of lepers, and suggested Joinville should follow the example of the English king.⁵² Louis may have witnessed this himself at Saint Omer. The two kings spent time together there in 1260, and during his stay Henry washed the feet of 321 *fratres*, or paupers.⁵³ This number may well have included lepers, as a leper-house had existed in the town since the previous century.⁵⁴

Henry's concern for the poor and sick arose from a belief in their representation of Christ, and these acts demonstrate his devotion to the body of Christ. Paradoxically, it also reflects his own role as Christ's

anointed on earth, a part of which role was the duty to care for others, and which found parallels in the ideals of Franciscan charity. This appears to have been practised to an extent unequalled by his peers, even Louis, who by comparison in this regard emerges as far more 'conventional' of the two kings.

In Henry's religious patronage, too, it is possible to see the influence of the mendicant orders. Both the Franciscan and Dominican houses were frequent recipients of his patronage, receiving grants of land, building material, wine, money and liturgical items. The chancery rolls show far more gifts to the Franciscans than to the Dominicans, despite the king criticising a particular Franciscan whose talent for sermons had been diminished by the 'anxieties of questing' for benefactions.⁵⁵ The Franciscans were not always willing to accept gifts from the king however, on one occasion refusing an offering due to it being the 'fruit of his extortions'.⁵⁶ Henry's personal religion may have been made manifest in his patronage, but it was perhaps less evident in his methods of fund-raising. The king's desire to keep the friars close extended to providing rooms for them within his palaces, potentially allowing them a great deal of influence over his decision making, both political and religious.⁵⁷

The majority of Henry's patronage towards the friars was directed to those in towns with royal connections, such as London, Winchester, Reading and Northampton. Henry also favoured the friars in Gloucester, where the king had been crowned as a nine-year old, and those at Canterbury. This patronage included gifts of firewood and timber; land, building materials and permission to build; money payments; and offerings of clothes and food. Henry's favoured town, however, for all orders of friars, was Oxford. The Franciscans at Oxford were allowed to extend and enclose their land, on the condition that the king was granted free transit 'at every coming', suggesting that Henry was accustomed to being a frequent visitor there.⁵⁸ The Augustinian friars were granted land in Oxford in 1268, by the king's gift, and further gifts of timber and money to facilitate the building of their house there in the subsequent years until Henry's death.⁵⁹ The Sack Friars were supported by Henry from the time of their arrival in London in 1257; the king granted them land in Oxford, Lincoln and Worcester, and contributed to their general chapter in 1272.⁶⁰

Henry founded remarkably few new religious institutions; considering his long reign, his piety and the wide and rapid spread of the mendicant orders, it might be expected that he would have created more establishments than he did in order to secure his soul's salvation. The only foundations that can be unquestionably attributed to Henry are two hospitals, one at Oxford, the other at Ospringe in Kent. Hospital foundations were consistent with Henry's almsgiving and concern for the sick, and these institutions remained important to Henry throughout his reign.⁶¹

The lands at Ospringe had historically been held in demesne by Henry II and King John, and John was known to have stayed there.⁶² Henry III, as king, granted the lands to Hubert de Burgh, justiciar of England, in 1225, when he also conferred upon de Burgh the earldom of Kent. After the death of de Burgh's, to whom Henry had been close, the lands reverted to the crown, and the king subsequently transferred them to the trustees of his wife-to-be, Eleanor of Provence, to be included in her dower lands. Although only a small settlement approximately 10 miles west of Canterbury, Ospringe's close proximity to the main route between London and Canterbury would have allowed it to benefit from the travels of important visitors. None of the chancery records relating to this hospital were made while Henry was either at, or near, Ospringe, however the building apparently had a *Camera Regis*, suggesting its use at some point as a royal hostelry.⁶³

The hospital itself, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, was founded in 1235, the same year as his marriage, perhaps as an act of charity to mark his happiness in securing for himself a suitable queen. Between 1240 and 1252 the hospital is referred to six times as either the king's hospital (*hospitali regis*) or as 'our' hospital (*hospitali nostri*). It is possible that Eleanor's connection to the land prompted her to suggest some of the gifts, although no reference to her is found within these records. Henry evidently maintained a very close interest in the hospital; grants were not made solely by petition of the warden when Henry travelled to the county, as was certainly the case for certain smaller establishments elsewhere.

There was a clear connection between the hospital at Ospringe and Henry's other foundation, the hospital of St John without the East Gate, at Oxford, which was founded at around the same time as the Ospringe

hospital. Many grants were made simultaneously to both hospitals. In 1253, Henry appointed William de Kilkenny, archdeacon of Coventry and royal clerk, as keeper of both hospitals.⁶⁴ Henry travelled to Oxford frequently; the hospital's location in a royal town ensured that it fared well, and was more generously endowed than Ospringe. The king's interest in both hospitals was constant – gifts, liberties and exemptions were offered throughout Henry's reign.

The king's patronage was not limited to these two hospitals. The chancery records include hundreds of records of financial and material support for hospitals and leper-houses in both England and Gascony, as well as letters of protection for lepers to be allowed to beg for alms, and regular monetary payments for the long-term maintenance of named individuals in hospitals and leper-houses. In this regard, Henry was very much following in the tradition of his predecessors, as well as fulfilling his Christian duty.⁶⁵

Henry's greatest recipient of religious patronage, however, was the Benedictine Westminster Abbey. Although not a new foundation, Henry financed much of its rebuilding, following many years of royal neglect. The reconstructed church housed the new shrine of Edward the Confessor, commissioned by Henry, and the Holy Blood relic, gifted to Henry in 1247 by the patriarch of Jerusalem, in the hope of English support in the Holy Land.⁶⁶ The motive behind Henry's involvement with the abbey is not clear, and does not fit easily into the wider pattern of the king's patronage. David Carpenter and Suzanne Lewis have both suggested that the abbot of Westminster was responsible for at least some of the initiative behind the rebuilding.⁶⁷ Henry's first gift to the abbey was made at a time when he was in dire need of support following the loss of two of his closest advisors. Richard de Berkyng, abbot during the early stages of Henry's interest in the abbey, may have comprehended the king's political difficulty and offered the assistance and backing of the abbey in return for investment. De Berkyng was to later be appointed as a royal envoy and a 'baron' of the exchequer. Richard le Gras, the prior of Westminster's daughter house at Hurley, in Berkshire, was commissioned by Henry to negotiate the king's marriage to Eleanor. It was following the royal nuptials that Henry began to venerate Edward the Confessor – and le Gras was appointed Bishop of Evesham.⁶⁸

It is not possible, however, to identify a definite reason for Henry's attachment to the saint.⁶⁹ Margaret Howell suggests that Henry's adoption of Edward as a role model reflects his perception of the 'exalted character of his own office as king'.⁷⁰ It is probable that Henry was influenced by his advisors to adopt Edward as role model.⁷¹ Edward's reputation was one of piety, and of 'consensual' and 'sacral' kingship - ideals that Henry aspired to in the face of his own rebellious barons - and this association offered Henry an element of 'moral authority' over those who disagreed with his way of ruling.⁷² The association of this grand project with his own kingship is no doubt fundamental to understanding Henry's interest; in need of assistance throughout his reign, he sought spiritual support from the confessor saint consistently. From the late 1230s onwards, Henry was almost always at Westminster for the anniversary of Edward's death, and also named his first son after this saint.⁷³ This association with the saint, as with the patronage of the abbey itself, began at the point in Henry's reign at which he began to face real political opposition.

There is an inextricable link between Henry's kingship and the long-running rebuilding of Westminster. Henry gave detailed instructions for the architecture and the decoration of the abbey - he directed huge sums of money to the project, and evidently expected the abbey to be striking and built to his own specifications.⁷⁴ In return for his patronage, Henry received political support from the monks and the abbot, located in close proximity to his own palace at Westminster; enjoyed the prestige of association with a site of a Holy Relic; and hoped to reap the reward of spiritual guidance from the confessor saint. It is debatable whether or not, without his difficulties, Henry would have taken such an interest, and it is the political climate that most likely encouraged this interest. In this context, despite Henry's genuine belief in the power of the confessor saint, it is possible to understand why Henry digressed from his usual pattern of patronage. The necessity of maintaining the authority of the crown in a turbulent atmosphere surpassed the king's desire to aid the poor and the sick.

It was perhaps the money and attention lavished on Westminster Abbey that prevented Henry from founding a new Cistercian abbey. Although conventional in his patronage of friars and hospitals, in this matter Henry proved himself exceptional amongst his peers. The

Cistercian order, founded at the very end of the eleventh century, was favoured by aristocracy and royalty through to the end of the thirteenth century. Richard the Lionheart founded Bonport, in Normandy; the abbey of Beaulieu in Hampshire was founded by King John, although only completed by Henry after John's death.⁷⁵ Louis IX founded Royaumont, near Paris, in honour of his father, and was also devoted to the abbey of Chaalis, a twelfth-century royal foundation.⁷⁶ Louis' brother Charles founded two Cistercian houses in his kingdom of Sicily.⁷⁷ Henry's brother Richard, founded Hailes Abbey, in Gloucestershire, and Richard's son founded the abbey of Rewley in Oxford. Henry's own son, as Edward I, founded Vale Royal in Cheshire.⁷⁸

Henry remained generous to his father's foundation at Beaulieu, and this may have been his chosen burial place before his focus switched to Westminster Abbey. He did briefly claim to have founded Netley, a daughter-house of Beaulieu, but it had in fact been created by the estate of Henry's former advisor, Peter des Roches, following instructions made before his death.⁷⁹ Analysis of Henry's gifts to the house in its early years indicates that these were funded from the vacant bishopric of Winchester, rather than being taken from Henry's own resources – his apparent generosity actually cost him nothing.⁸⁰ Matthew Paris noted that when the king of France asked the Cistercians for prayers, Henry demanded wool from them.⁸¹

The reasons for Henry's lack of interest are not clear, although they may stem from the same political situation that prompted his interest in Westminster.⁸² Founding an abbey would have been a hugely expensive undertaking, requiring a significant amount of land, and Henry's difficulties, at home and abroad, as well as his commitments to Westminster, probably precluded such an investment. Some Cistercians were critical of Henry's expenditure elsewhere whilst he attempted to profit from the wealth of the order – the Waverley annals record his failed attempt to 'extort' money from the order.⁸³ But Henry's decision may also have been influenced by his personal piety. His almsgiving, his maundy and his hospital foundations provided direct assistance to society's less fortunate members – in a manner that worked towards his own salvation far more cost-effectively than finding the funds required for a new abbey. The Cistercians, however, did not care for the sick outside their own order, offering instead only intercessory

prayers. Henry seems to have preferred to direct his funds to institutions that offered tangible relief rather than spiritual succour.

This preference is reflected in the nature of the only religious house founded by Henry. The *Domus Conversorum*, in London, was a house for Jewish converts, founded early in Henry's reign. This was an unusual type of house; although not the first of its kind, this was the only high-status foundation. After conversion, and the consequent forfeit of property by the crown, converts were provided with food and shelter in the same manner as the sick and poor in the king's hospitals, with the addition of a weekly stipend.⁸⁴ This continued for the whole of their lives – some converts remained there for the birth of their children and grand-children. In addition to the *Domus*, Henry also provided corrodies for some converts in monasteries close to their homes – although monasteries were not always happy about this arrangement, particularly as Henry's promised funds were not always forthcoming.

This concern for converted Jews strongly suggests further influence from the mendicant orders. Prior to Henry's reign, conversion had not been encouraged at all – under King John there was actually a 'positive disincentive', with the threatened confiscation of possessions by the crown.⁸⁵ Historically, Christian rulers had had a duty to protect their Jewish subjects. St Augustine taught that their presence would be necessary at the end of days, when they would convert to Christianity.⁸⁶ A particular strand of Franciscan thought believed that a new age was imminent, and that the conversion of Jews would precede the coming of this age.⁸⁷ Henry was thus facilitating this advent. The anecdote cited earlier, of Henry's vigil while anticipating Judgement Day, suggests that he shared this eschatological belief. The Dominican Order was also instrumental in the conversion of Jews to Christianity. They frequently chose locations in or near Jewish quarters for their houses, and were charged, by Henry, with preaching sermons to Jews, promoting the benefits of the Christian faith.⁸⁸

Henry's treatment of the Jews set him apart from his contemporaries. The king attempted to restore security in Jewish communities after the rebellions in his father's reign, and did not enforce the policy set at the Fourth Lateran Council, that all Jews should wear a distinguishing badge.⁸⁹ Years before the Jews began to face real pressure from Henry's exorbitant taxation, he founded the *Domus*

Conversorum to provide for converts, particularly widows and orphans.⁹⁰ In 1255, Henry freed the Jews of Lincoln after an accusation of ritual murder, and then ‘sold’ their protection to his brother, Richard.⁹¹ There is no suggestion that Henry inflicted violence upon Jews, as did his opponent, Simon de Montfort, who offered Jewish women the choice of ‘baptism or death’.⁹² Louis IX apparently could not bear even to look at Jews; in 1240 he put the Talmud, the Jewish law book, on trial, and ordered all copies to be burnt after a guilty verdict was announced.⁹³ By contrast, Henry, despite imposing difficult financial demands on the Jews, took seriously his position as their protector, including safeguarding them against the bishops of England.⁹⁴

This paper has only been able to address a few aspects of Henry’s piety – there is still scope for substantial study in this area. What is clear, however, is that the thirteenth-century writers who praised Henry did so with sincerity, despite any other shortcomings they may have attributed to him. Those who praised Louis IX and Simon de Montfort more effusively than they did Henry, nevertheless did not doubt the king’s piety. Modern historians who have addressed individual aspects of Henry’s religious practice, and who have labelled his piety as ‘shallow’ or ‘conventional’, however, have perhaps underrated his piety, and the ways in which he made his convictions manifest.

The difficulties of Henry’s reign have for too long overshadowed his personal religion. Much of Henry’s behaviour genuinely reflects mendicant teachings, particularly of the Franciscan order. The king proved himself exceptional by feeding, and performing the maundy, for so many paupers, thereby showing his reverence for the body of Christ. His support for the Franciscans, Dominicans and other mendicant orders further emphasises this aspect of Henry’s piety. Louis’ affinity with the friars has long been recognised; he has been described as a monk *manqué*, and was once tempted to renounce his kingship for the mendicant life, but Henry may have surpassed the French king in this regard.⁹⁵ His choices of patronage – particularly the hospital foundations – display a clear wish to provide relief for the poor and the sick, in preference to founding a new house for an already wealthy monastic order. The salvation of Henry’s soul, and of those of his family, was secured through Henry’s identification with the teachings of Saint Francis and his emulation of the ministrations of Jesus Christ.

Notes

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- 1 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, 7 vols. (London, Longman, 1872), iv, 641.
 - 2 *Annales Monastici*, ed. by Henry Richards Luard (London, Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864), ii, 341-2.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, 346.
 - 4 Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England* (London, Routledge, 1974), p. 414.
 - 5 D. A. Carpenter, *The Reign of Henry III* (London, Hambledon Press, 1996), p. 260.
 - 6 *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, ed. by Richard Howlett, (London, Longman etc, 1885), p. 563. '*...fuitque in Anglia omnibus diebus vitae ejus abundantia pacis atque laetitiae.*'
 - 7 *Annales Monastici*, iv, p. 254.
 - 8 Gransden, pp. 430-1.
 - 9 Hilda Johnstone, 'Poor-Relief in the Royal Households of Thirteenth Century England', *Speculum*, 4/2 (1929): 149-67 (153).
 - 10 Suzanne Lewis, 'Henry III and the Gothic Rebuilding of Westminster Abbey: the Problematics of Context', *Traditio*, Vol. 50 (1995): 129-72 (146).
 - 11 Margaret Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 85.
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