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MARTIN WANGSGAARD JÜRGENSEN

## WHEN THE COIN LEFT THE HAND: DEVOTIONAL USE OF MONEY FOR OFFERINGS IN (LATE) MEDIEVAL NORTHERN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES

The ritual handling of money inside church buildings is a subject which is not only complicated, because it includes a number of diverse liturgical ceremonies or moments, rituals of a very private character as well as transactions with pronounced secular components. It is also unified in its nature; in that it comprises acts of devotion by devotees everywhere following a set of defined prescriptions for these performative rituals. At the heart of all the devotional practices lie the implications of an actual moment of exchange when the coin leaves the hand of the parishioner and enters into the hand of the priest, one of his helpers or is put upon or into altars, offering stocks, and alms boxes. Exactly that moment of exchange is fascinating to probe both for insights into how the individual medieval parishioner reacted to these offerings and also as to how the Church interacted with its communities on a parochial level. In this article I will consider this moment of exchange of coins and discuss it as it is found in late medieval church art, liturgical practice and historical sources, with emphasis on Northern Europe, and drawing visual examples primarily from medieval Denmark. The constant backdrop for all of this will be the moment when a coin was taken into the church and given away. More particularly what I am addressing here is this transaction of coins between laity and clergy as seen from inside the Church, from the perspective of how the system was supposed to work. Which is to say that very much of what will be discussed here is to be seen in the light of the pastoral care for the parishioners which priests and the Church as a whole were obliged to perform.

The way into the subject lies through visual representations of money in medieval churches and medieval religious art more generally. The reason for this is that certain paradoxes seem to become apparent when medieval images are compared with the devotional acts known to have taken place in the church where the painted or carved image stood, or into which context they fitted. And, as I hope to show, these paradoxes reward the attention paid to them, as they shed light on the ideas and pitfalls of this moment of exchange. That is the topic here.

### *1. Some remarks on showing coins and the love of money*

Generally speaking, by far the majority of medieval religious depictions of coins can be understood to express a negative attitude towards money, even though the Church throughout the medieval period embraced money and its use as



*Fig. 1* Judas Iscariot and his fat purse containing the 30 silver piece, painted in Belling Church 1496, on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.

instrumental in its work of making good its religious and pastoral services.<sup>1</sup> This duality persists throughout the history of Christianity and the Church. In medieval art coins are nevertheless mostly shown as moral tokens representing the evils of this world. The most iconic example in this context is of course the many images of Judas Iscariot clutching a fat purse containing the 30 silver pieces (*Fig. 1*). This biblical scene is depicted in churches throughout Christendom, for instance as we see Judas kneeling in front of Jesus during the Last Supper, painted in 1496 in Belling Church on the Danish island of Funen.<sup>2</sup> The image of Iscariot selling Christ for money is to the medieval understanding the nadir of human greed and depravity.<sup>3</sup> He is everything worldly and everything the god-fearing

<sup>1</sup> R. NAISMITH, *Turpe Lucrum? Wealth, Money and Coinage in the Millennial Church*, in: G.E.M. GASPER – S. H. GULLBEKK (eds.), *Money and the Church in Medieval Europe, 1000–1200. Practice, Morality and Thought* (Farnham 2015), pp. 17–37; S. H. GULLBEKK, *The Church and Money in Norway c. 1050–1250: Salvation and Monetisation*, in: G. E. M. GASPER – S. H. GULLBEKK (eds.), *Money and the Church in Medieval Europe, 1000–1200. Practice, Morality and Thought* (Farnham 2105), pp. 223–243.

<sup>2</sup> M. WANGSGAARD JÜRGENSEN – D. BURMEISTER (eds.), *Danmarks Kirker: Odense Amt* (Odense 2015), pp. 3060–3079.

<sup>3</sup> P. F. BAUM, *The Mediæval Legend of Judas Iscariot*, *PMLA: Journal of the Modern Language Association of America* 31:3, 1916, pp. 481–632; R. O'NEILL, *Judas and the Economics of Salvation in Medieval English Literature*, in: C. E. BERTOLET – R. EPSTEIN

man is not; a juxtaposition which is not least underscored by his final end through suicide. A conclusion to the narrative we also often find depicted, as for instance in a mural from around 1520 in Fanefjord Church on the island of Møn in Denmark, where an eager devil grasps his soul (*Fig. 2*).<sup>4</sup> The narrative of Judas is in other words a story about alienation from God and the mockery of his creation, a reading that the iconography of Judas further enhances through his often stark yellow clothing, his coarse, ugly face and red hair; all visual denominators meant to illustrate depravity to the medieval beholder and to expose him as the representative of all those who choose worldly riches over salvation.



*Fig. 2* The suicide of Judas, painted in Fanefjord Church  
ca 1520, Møn, Denmark. Photo by the author.

With the story of Judas in mind it can come as no surprise that visual church art in general expressed censure of money, or perhaps not so much of coins as such, as that which they symbolized. In the Danish church of Birkerød we find a gluttonous and greedy man clutching two purses, while a Devil stuffs so much wealth down the fat one's throat that he is gorged and defecates on himself (*Fig. 3*).<sup>5</sup> He is shown in the company of sinners being dragged into Hell, and the image more or less encapsulates the death sentence on the love of money – it led

(eds.), *Money, Commerce, and Economics in Late Medieval English Literature* (Cham 2018), pp. 11–30.

<sup>4</sup> C. A. JENSEN – V. HERMANSEN, *Danmarks Kirker: Præstø Amt* (Copenhagen 1933), pp. 1017–1022.

<sup>5</sup> *Danmarks Kirker: Frederiksborg Amt I–IV* (Copenhagen 1964–1975), pp. 928–938; O'NEILL 2018 (note 3).





*Fig. 3* On the far left the gluttonous, avaricious sinner being stuffed with money, painted *ca* 1325–50. Photo by the author.

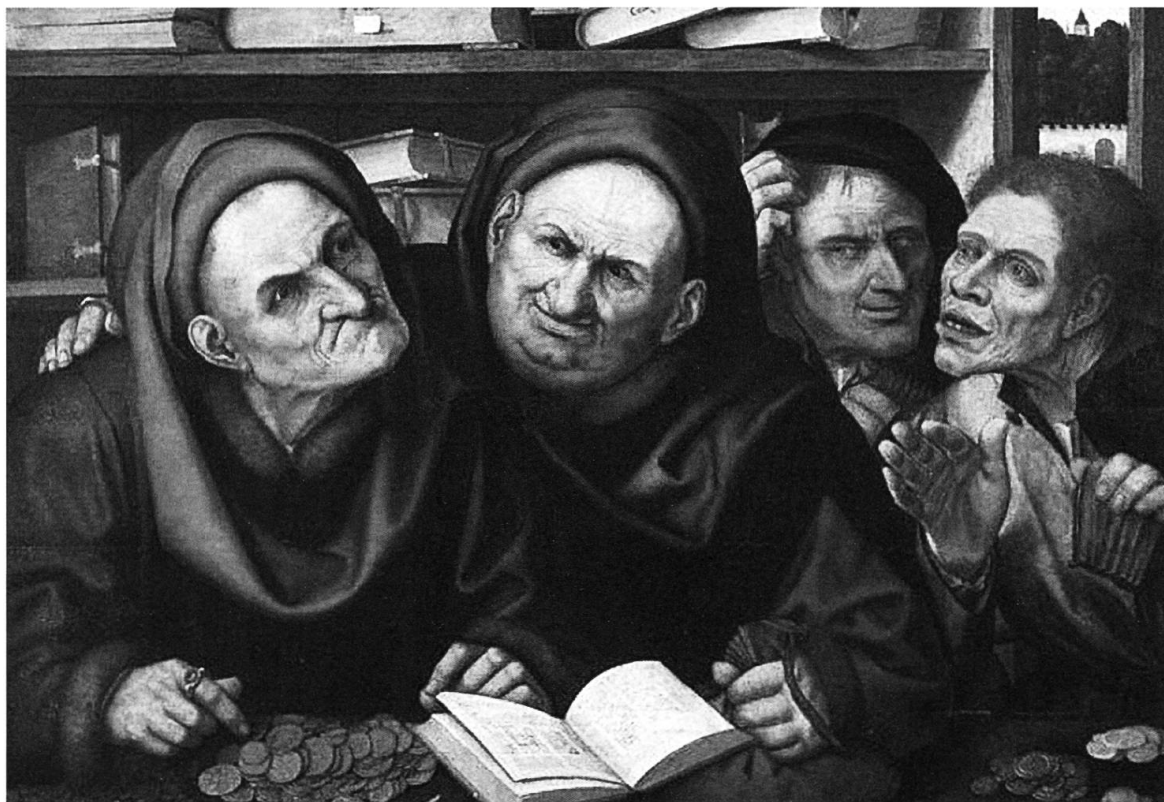
straight to damnation, and the eternal punishment awaiting those damned for their avarice is often the one depicted here; they are stuffed with red-hot coin. In fact, the impression of coins and riches as deeply tainted is strengthened by the fact that misers depicted on the church-walls will often be shown embracing the nude *Luxuria* – carnal lust.<sup>6</sup> Together this pair made up everything earthly and depraved. Coins and genitalia were consequently depicted side by side as symbols of this world and classed with sins of the lower body – stomach and groin – as seen in the widespread moral depictions of the man of deadly sins (*Fig. 4*); an image locating each mortal sin in the part of the body whence it originated.

Medieval as well as early modern religious art shows the handling and dealing with money as an act which transforms the human and makes him or her ugly as only sinners can be. In this moral universe the bodily corrupt yearn for riches, but money and wealth can also be understood to have an agency of their own, corrupting whoever is handling them too freely. We have only to think of the famous depictions of the tax collectors by Quentin Massys (*Fig. 5*), painted around 1510/20,

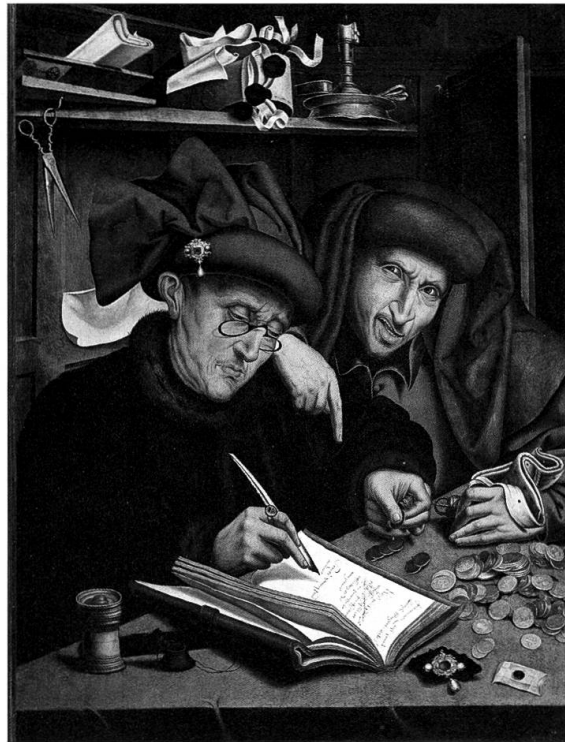
<sup>6</sup> A. KATZENELLENBOGEN, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art from Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto 1989, reprint).



*Fig. 4* The man of deadly sins, painted in Benestad Church  
ca 1520, Scania, Sweden. Photo by the author.



*Fig. 5* «Les usuriers», painted by Quentin Massys, 1510–20.  
Galleri Doria Pamphilj, Roma. Wikimedia commons.



*Fig. 6 «The Usurers (The Money Lenders)», painted by Marinus van Reymerswaele (ca 1490–ca 1567), ca 1540–60, Bridgeman images.*



*Fig. 7 «Man offering woman money», engraving by Agostino Veneziano, after Leonardo da Vinci, 1516. British Museum, London.*

or the similar motif painted about the same time by Marinus van Reymerswaele (*Fig. 6*).<sup>7</sup> Both painters indulged themselves several times in this religious genre motif, and clearly depict the moral deterioration contracted from handling coins as a physical phenomenon. This is completely in accordance with the medieval tradition. Dealing with money not only opened the door to avarice, it was also likened to a form of spiritual prostitution, in that those transacting with money were tainted similarly to those depicted as selling themselves – as we can see illustrated for instance on a print from the 1520s attributed to Agostino Veneziano and based on a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (*Fig. 7*). Sin was not only a spiritual sickness, in images it also became a physical feature, and money was apparently one of the easy gateways onto the road of the loss of self; a notion that among other things formed the basis for the mendicant orders, the Dominicans, the Franciscans and the Carmelites etc., spreading across Europe from the thirteenth century onwards.

A differently couched critique of the preoccupation with worldly riches, which probably was somewhat closer to home when depicted in churches, is the motif of the soldiers gambling over Christ's possessions at the foot of the cross. Here the men are so immersed in their worldliness that they fail to see what is happening on the cross above them. As an example, the altarpiece in the previously mentioned Bellinghe Church (*Fig. 8*) shows the depraved, red-nosed and gambling soldiers engaging in a fistfight beneath the crucified Savior. Another example is found in the famous depictions of the Seven Virtues and Vices, painted by Giotto di Bondone (1267–1337) around 1306, in the Cappella Scrovegni in Padua (*Fig. 9*). Here Caritas interestingly has discarded her money bags and instead offers her produce – the natural wealth and fruit of labour – to God or Christ. Money is here held up as a thing unnatural compared to the produce of the earth.

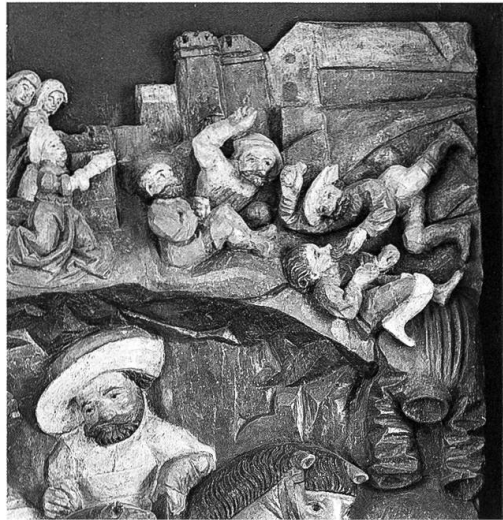
All of this of course had the intention of showing two kinds of human being, those who love Christ and those in love with the world. This distinction also we can find poignantly illustrated at Bellinghe, where the crucifixion is painted on the north wall of the nave (*Fig. 10*). Two groups stand beneath the cross; the group on the left is labelled by an inscribed scroll «Populus meus» – the people of Christ, that is, whereas the other group are soldiers, and their leader is designated as «Rex mundi». He is the king of this world and his cohort the blind, sinful ones unable to see whom they have nailed to the cross.

## *2. Money in the church building*

As can be gleaned from what has been stated so far, the attitude towards money and wealth within the Church was in a highly ambivalent state, oscillating between being perceived as mere practical objects of exchange and as dirty symbols of everything that did not belong in the House of God. And it can come as no surprise that the later attitude was prevalent in a culture closely adhering to Scripture

<sup>7</sup> L. SILVER, Massys and Money: The Tax Collectors Rediscovered, *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 7:2, 2015, pp. 1–24.





*Fig. 8* Soldiers fighting over Christ's possessions at the foot of the cross. Retable, Belling Church *ca* 1515–30, on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.



*Fig. 9* «Caritas», painted by Giotto *ca* 1306. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy. Photo by WikiCommons.

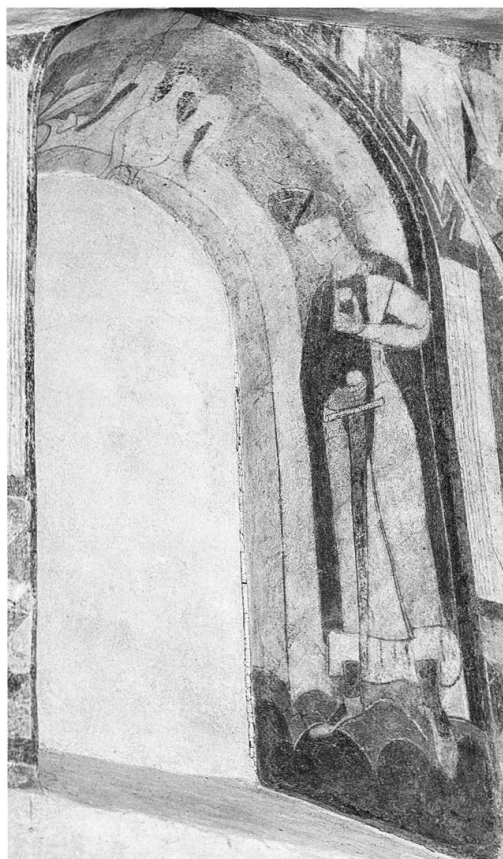


for moral guidance and find statements like: «For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows (Tim. 6:10).» However, no matter what stance the Church took towards money and secular riches the institution was embedded and operated in a steadily more monetarized society. Money simply was if not the only, then at least the most convenient mode of exchange by the twelfth century, and accordingly unavoidable and bound to influence ecclesiastical and pastoral thinking. The mundane concerns of everyday life intersected here with theological ideals and biblical rulings on purity, and this had tremendous consequences for the act of offering in church. It even, as we shall see shortly, at times led to a positive appraisal of coin as a metaphor for Christ.



*Fig. 10* The Crucifixion, painted in Belling Church 1496,  
on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.

Unsurprisingly when all this «dirty money» was to be handled in church it was done through ritualized actions serving both to avoid any charge of simony and ensure that the offering was accepted in the right spirit as well as to the



*Fig. 11* Nobleman presenting a coin to God, painted in Søndre Næra Church around 1200, on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.

right effect.<sup>8</sup> Such ritual moments were found at certain points in the liturgy of the Mass, most often The Offertory, or during private devotional ceremonies, when the act of giving was always accompanied by brief prayers of gratitude and acceptance.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless the suspicion of everything connected with money, and the known moral dangers of engaging too deeply in finance, sound throughout medieval art and culture with a surprising intensity. An intensity which at times can take us aback: when for instance we encounter it in rural parish churches, where the public for the images or motifs discussed here would have mostly been farmers and farmhands. Thus it would seem that such moral images, and the attitude towards money expressed in them, not only served as warnings but also addressed more fundamental problems concerning the very uneasy nature of the connection between money and man in the eyes of the Church, a theological

<sup>8</sup> S. HAMILTON, *Church and People in the Medieval West, 900–1200* (Florence 2013), pp. 64–105; J. H. LYNCH, *Simoniackal Entry into Religious Life from 1000 to 1260: A social, Economic, and Legal Study* (Columbus 1976), pp. 61–82.

<sup>9</sup> M. W. JÜRGENSEN, *Pious gifts: Coins and the Church Interior*, in: S. H. GULLBEKK – C. KILGER – H. ROLAND – S. KRISTENSEN (eds.), *Money and Religious Devotion in Medieval Northern Europe* (London and New York, forthcoming 2020).

view which Thomas Aquinas had prominently addressed in the «Question 84» of his *Summa Theologica*, written between 1265 and 1274.<sup>10</sup> The images in that sense become a form of utopian vision, showing the viewer what the world really looks like when one sees beneath the surface.

Yet, despite all the negative connotations of money, we may note that it became common some time during the eleventh century to sacrifice cash instead of valuables or produce, in church ceremonies and on the altar.<sup>11</sup> Thus, filthy lucre gradually came to be placed on the altar, the heart of the church building, as man's sacrifice to God. This means that all other forms of symbolic gift slowly lost their status in comparison to coins. The change is quite astounding, in the light of the camels that had to be swallowed in order to get there, and the development of course multiplied the theological tracts voicing objections and cautionary arguments such as Thomas Aquinas and others wrote. On a lighter note we find that around the same time that coins had their general introduction into church ritual, the literary genre of money-satire emerged, deriding the hunt for wealth and the power of money.<sup>12</sup> But despite warning tales and severe admonitions coin became a part of the practical, everyday life of the Church as an inevitable consequence of the increasing commercialization of society.<sup>13</sup>

A striking image of this positive sacrifice of money is found in Sønder Nærå Church, again on the island of Funen, where we see a nobleman represented (*Fig. 11*). Standing erect – not kneeling humbly – he holds his sword with the one hand to indicate his knightly status and willingness to fight for the Church. With the other hand he offers a coin to the Holy Spirit in the guise of a dove.<sup>14</sup> The image may depict an actual, local patron of the church at Sønder Nærå, but more likely it shows us an archetype of a male religious ideal.<sup>15</sup> The man we see is willing to sacrifice his two most valuable possessions – his wealth, represented by the coin, and his life, represented by the sword. He thus claims his place among the *populus meus* mentioned earlier. His offering is mirrored in the other side of the window, opposite him. We here find his feminine counterpart (*Fig. 12*): a woman with her hair hung loose, indicating her virginal status, and offering her chastity, represented through the lily of purity, to the Holy Spirit. She too offers her most precious possession – her sexuality and thereby also her fertility to Christ. And, indeed, the pair at Sønder Nærå were not only painted around 1200 by a workshop preoccupied with depictions of the «true» offering to God, they date from a period generally preoccupied with the ambition to define the

<sup>10</sup> T. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica* Part I–II («Pars Prima Secundae»), North Charleston 2012, p. 453.

<sup>11</sup> JÜRGENSEN 2020 (note 9).

<sup>12</sup> A. MURRAY, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1978), pp. 72–73.

<sup>13</sup> R. S. LOPEZ, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Cambridge 1971).

<sup>14</sup> *Danmarks Kirker: Odense Amt* (note 2), pp. 3865–3879.

<sup>15</sup> M. W. JÜRGENSEN, *Depictions of Violence in Late Romanesque Mural Paintings in Denmark*, in: C. S. JENSEN – S. BENNET – R. KOTECKI (eds.), *Christianity and War in Medieval East Central Europe and Scandinavia* (Kalamazoo, forthcoming 2020).



*Fig. 12* Noblewoman presenting her chastity (the lily) to God, painted in Sønder Nærå Church around 1200, on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.

good or proper offering and sacrifice.<sup>16</sup> The man presenting a coin at Sønder Nærå is thus only one mode of showing the good sacrifice, and we have to see it in context with other popular images or motifs around the same time. We may for instance, in the nearby church of Sanderum, look at the badly damaged sacrifice of Cain and Abel, also painted around 1200 (*Fig. 13*) and also placed in a window. Here, however, the offering is made not to a dove but instead to an angel.<sup>17</sup> The moral of the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1–18) is clear; two sacrifices are made, two men offer a part of their earthly goods to God, but only one offering is true because it is fully performed with a pure heart and true dedication. We can also turn to the nearby church of Fraugde and see how the same workshop there painted that terrifying and difficult biblical story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, along with a psychomachia in the chancel arch (*Fig. 14*).<sup>18</sup> Not only do we here see Abraham sacrificing his dearest, we see the victory of good over evil, both scenes

<sup>16</sup> JÜRGENSEN 2020 (note 15).

<sup>17</sup> Danmarks Kirker: Odense Amt (note 2), pp. 2931–2938.

<sup>18</sup> Danmarks Kirker: Odense Amt (note 2), pp. 3540–3547.



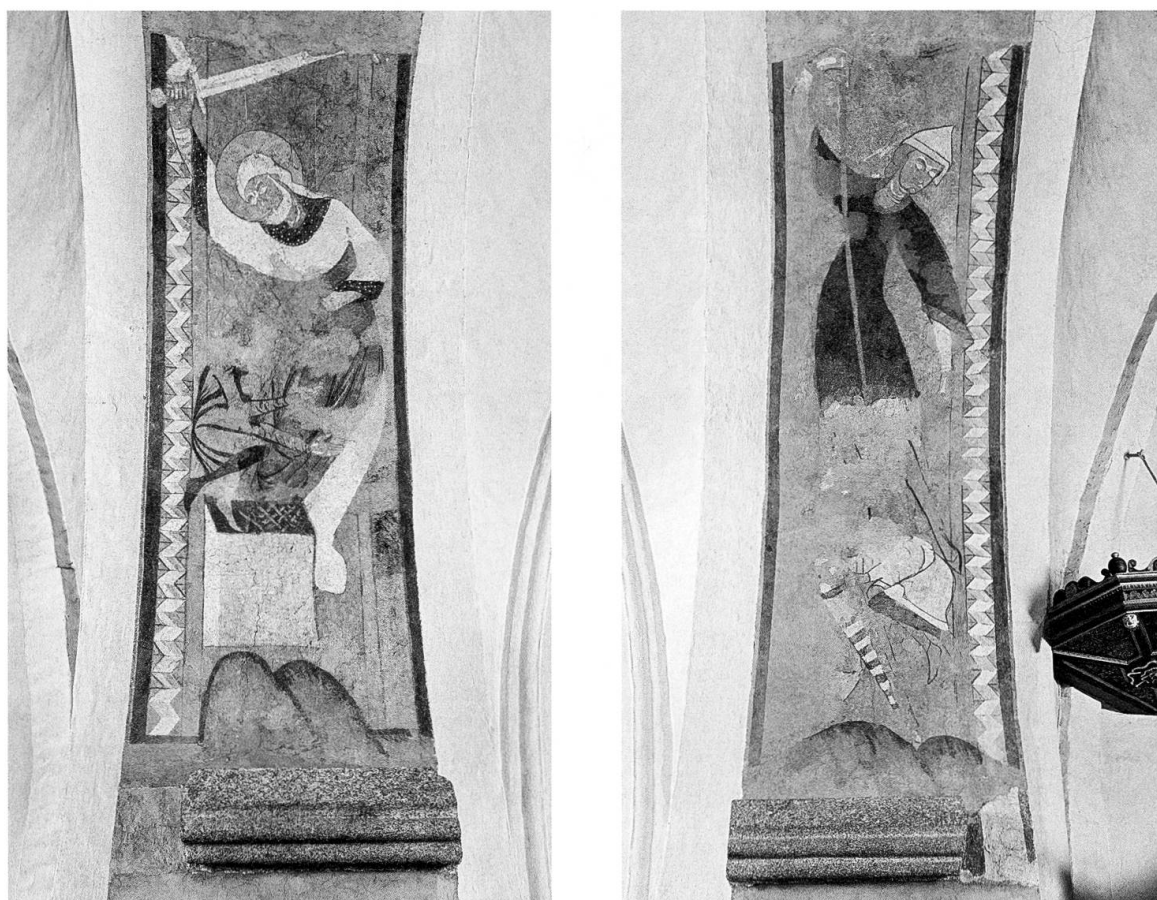


*Fig. 13* The sacrifice of Cain and Abel (fragment), painted in the north window of the chancel in Sanderum Church around 1200, on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.

clearly relating to the now lost crucifix or rood hanging in the chancel arch. We accordingly again find the willingness to give up everything connected with this world illustrated as a spiritual ideal; be it our possessions or life itself. The content communicated to the parishioners through such images is thereby a powerful message about the need to humbly and gladly pay tribute to God through the funnel of the Church. Images such as these were thereby setting the backdrop for the parishioners to perform their own small sacrifices in the church during the liturgy or other devotional activity. They explained why such sacrifices had to be made, and framed the context for the offerings by showing the templates on which the community should model itself.

What in our context is of particular interest is the coin at Sønder Nærå shown not as a negative thing, but as a fitting offering to God. First of all, it is, of course, noteworthy in its own right that the worldly riches of the man are symbolized by a coin and not some other indicator of wealth: jewelry for instance or a clod





*Fig. 14 Psychomachia in the chancel arch of Fraugde Church, painted around 1200, on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.*

of soil, indicating land, as we know it from other contemporary murals.<sup>19</sup> The coin we see here is thus somehow different from the other coins seen so far, and this basically has to do with the context in which the coin is presented, and first and foremost the acceptance of it as a proper gift. It is the transition from worldly object to good gift which is to occupy us through the rest of this article, emphasizing the transition from two angles: first, the coins as physical objects and then the spiritual implications of the transition. There are two strands in this: first, the implications for the Church in accepting the pelf as gift, and, secondly, the meaning or consequences for the donor who gives the money.

<sup>19</sup> U. HAASTRUP, *Stifterbilleder og deres ikonografi i danske 1100-tals fresker. Kong Niels og Dronning Margrete Fredkulla malet i Vå Kirke (1121–1122) og elleve andre kirker med stifterfigurer*, ICO Iconographisk Post. Nordisk tidskrift för bildtolkning – Nordic Review of Iconography 4, 2016, pp. 4–48.

### 3. Coins as donations

We can begin by examining how clergy accepted money as gifts or offerings and the way this could be explained from the perspective of the Church. Money, wealth and splendor were of course part of the secular world underpinning the Church institutions, and indeed wealth was also demonstrated or at least alluded to inside most church buildings. Yet all this worldly display was in every sense something that the Church was not. A basic problem here was the biblical, Pauline maxim of being in the world, not of the world. In that sense to accept money was a part of being in the world yet at the same time dangerously close to being of the world: at least this was the danger looming large when handling the offerings and alms of parishioners, pilgrims and everyone else who gave or donated money to their church institutions. The wealth thus accumulated had to be transformed from something of this world and into something spiritual. Or, one might say, from one economy to another. How this translation was accomplished we can begin to see by looking at the way the nature of coins and costly materials was perceived in general. Gold, silver and all other metals were, according for instance to Durandus and a host of other liturgical commentators throughout the Middle Ages, entrenched in this world, but the metal held a kernel of its divine heritage as a creation of God.<sup>20</sup> Thus, when metal was processed through fire it could be rinsed of its worldly contamination and shine in its true nature, thereby giving the beholder a glimpse of the beyond. Exactly as human clay, according to the Bible, was understood in the late Middle Ages to be rinsed in the fires of Purgatory, to emerge in its true shape after having been cleansed of all the worldly dirt clinging to the soul.

To use gold and silver for altar vessels and altar pieces was accordingly an evident way to show how worldly treasure could be transformed into spiritual wealth. Money could not in the same way be legally smelted into a new form, but by accepting it in the spirit of offering – never payment! – it could be translated into something out of this world, like gold and silver beaten and chased into fine art. Money was thereby channeled, remolded so to speak, into the sustained elaboration of the churches and their furnishings as well as the upkeep of the clergy. A process of translation or transformation which at times even was made visible, as when coins donated to make a new church bell were inlaid as reliefs on the very bell they had helped to finance. In that way the worldly dross could be turned into what was positive, displaying itself in its new, cleansed form as a bell. However, as has been said, money had to be translated into something new or good, not pile up in coffers, in order to attain spiritual value. In medieval culture building was one of the prime expressions of faith and accordingly, to put it bluntly, the attitude that developed during the period was that no church could be too large. To invest in church buildings, to build churches and donate money to the *fabrica* of the parish church was not only a way of taking care of the hereafter;

<sup>20</sup> See for instance Durandus: book 1, chapters 1 & 7, cited in M. W. JÜRGENSEN, Making the liturgy manifest: Objects and materials in late medieval church rites, in: S. CROIX – M. HEILSKOV (eds.), Materiality and Religious Practice in Medieval Denmark (Aarhus, forthcoming 2020).



*Fig. 15* «Earthly love», depicted *ca* 1525, in Dalum Church on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.

it was first and foremost pleasing to God because the renewal of a building each time took a little worldliness and transformed it into something spiritual. A large church testified to the piety of the donors, and it also bore witness to the pious ambition of the entire community (Warnke). No church could ever be perceived as a fully finished monument, since the labour of enlarging and embellishing, via the building, the transfer of earthly wealth held a spiritual reward in itself. Such undertakings would by the late Middle Ages of course be rewarded with indulgences, and this pertained even to small, rural parish churches, as we find in the papal letters granting such blessings, and while patrons and churchwardens doubtless envisioned a certain style or type of church at the outset, the building process itself was in principle never-ending. A further step would always be possible and worthwhile. If the nave were extended, a tower could be built. If the church had one porch, another could be added. Chapels might be built, or a plan to rebuild the entire church was perhaps launched. Thus, we regularly find evidence supporting the alteration of plans for large-scale building projects midway through or immediately after their completion. However, such construction work was always to be undertaken in a certain spirit of humility, since pride and worldly pleasure in splendor would reduce the entire project to a mockery that might easily be likened to the Tower of Babel, as for instance we know from France, where the collapse of the vaults in the cathedral of Beauvais was certainly seen in

this light.<sup>21</sup> Put otherwise, the risk was of falling in love with the physical aspect, the worldly aspect, of the Church, an error which grounded minds that should have striven to rise spiritually. This danger we find fittingly illustrated in a mural in Dalum Church (*Fig. 15*) *ca* 1525, yet again on the island of Funen, where a huge depiction of man is shown in the nave of the church, and he turns his back on the altar (and therefore on God) and, clearly aroused, caresses the building.<sup>22</sup>

A taxonomy of coins and offerings to the church therefore also developed during the twelfth century, when gold and silver were ranked as the highest forms of gifts. This is stressed poignantly by the twelfth-century theologian Honorius Augustodonensis.<sup>23</sup> Yet gold coins were, with all probability, outside the reach of ordinary parishioners, and accordingly to most of them merely an ideal to strive for. The reality was the myriads of pennies and loose cash left by the bulk of the laity. The importance of the universal use of all this copper coin for offerings is empirically attested in the large number of hoards found in medieval churches, especially in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Austria and Germany.<sup>24</sup> And, in fact, here the words of Augustine, rephrasing the Old Testament, were repeated again and again by the medieval liturgists concerned with offerings: «Whatever is given to God becomes sacred, but especially the oblation on the holy altar.» (*Voventur autem omnia, quae offeruntur Deo, maxime sancti altaris oblatio*).<sup>25</sup> Whatever was offered on the altar became sacred. This line of thinking shows how even modest pennies gained spiritual worth as an offering which by far superseded their limited value outside the church walls; a line of thinking which undoubtedly was fostered by among other things the biblical lesson of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41–44, Luke 21:1–4), when Jesus praises the poor widow for her humble offering in the temple and deprecates the lavish gifts of the rich. An influential instance is Pope Innocent III's pointing to the importance of this lesson in his writings on pastoral care.<sup>26</sup>

The positive understanding of coin as a symbol gradually came to reach beyond its mere presence as a gift. To return to Honorius Augustodonensis, he likens the Host to a coin in his explanation of the Mass: «[The Host], is shaped in the manner of a coin because Christ, the living bread, was sold for the price of coins

<sup>21</sup> A. TALLON, *An Architecture of Perfection*, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 72: 4, 2013, pp. 530–554.

<sup>22</sup> *Danmarks Kirker: Odense Amt* (note 2), pp. 2839–2841.

<sup>23</sup> J. P. MIGNE (ed.), *H. Augustodonensis: Gemma animae*, *Patrologia cursus completus: Series Latina* 172 (Paris 1844–1865), col. 553.

<sup>24</sup> K. BENDIXEN, *Middelaldermønter i de sidste 10 års danske kirkefund*, *Nordisk Numismatisk Årsskrift* 1972, pp. 49–70; J. S. JENSEN, *Penge i danske kirkeblokke*, *Nordisk Numismatisk Årsskrift* 1972, pp. 71–83; J. S. JENSEN, *Kirkegulvsmønter*, *Hikuin* 3, 1977, pp. 295–302; H. KLACKENBERG, *Moneta Nostra. Monetariseringen i medeltidens Sverige* (Lund 1992); S. H. GULLBEKK – A. SÆTTEM, *Norske myntfunn 1050–1319: Penger, kommunikasjon og fromhetskultur* (Oslo 2019).

<sup>25</sup> St. Augustine, *Epistle* 149, 16, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 1895–1923, vol. XLIV, p. 363.

<sup>26</sup> B. M. BOLTON, *Hearts not Purses? Pope Innocent III's Attitude to Social Welfare*, in: E. ALBA-HANAWALT – C. LINDBERG (eds.), *Through the Eye of a Needle* (Columbia 1994), pp. 123–145.





Fig. 16 The Collection of the Manna, painted in Belling Church 1496, on the Danish island of Funen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen.

and he himself is the true coin...» (*Qui panis ideo modum denarii formatur, quia Christus panis vivus pretio denariorum venditur, et ipse est verus denarius*).<sup>27</sup> Christ as the true coin is an evocative image, and Honorius goes on to explain the coins as offerings in the following words:

«And because, since people were not taking Communion, it was not necessary that so much bread should be made, it was established that it [the Eucharistic bread] should be made and formed in the form of a coin; and the people offer coins for the offering of flour, so they recognize that the Lord was betrayed for [coins]...» (*Et quia, populo non communicante, non erat necesse panem tam magnum fieri, statum est eum in modum denarii formari vel fieri, et ut populus pro oblatione farinae denarios offerent, pro quibus traditum Dominum cognoscerent*).<sup>28</sup>

The role of coins in the Passion is underscored here and the direct relation between the money offered and the Savior confirmed again. Durandus repeats Honorius coin metaphor in his exceedingly popular and long-lived *Rationale*, finished some time before 1286, by stating: «But the bread [the Host] is thus formed in the manner of a coin, first because the bread of life was betrayed for

<sup>27</sup> J. P. MIGNE (ed.), *H. Augustodunensis: Eucharistion, Patrologia cursus completus: Series Latina 172* (Paris 1844–1865), cols. 1256C–D.

<sup>28</sup> Augustodonensis, *Gemma* (note 23), col. 1052.



the sake of the coin, also because [the Host] ought to be given as a reward to those laboring in the vineyard [living faithfully].» (*Panis autem hic formatur in modum denarii, tum quia panis uite pro denariis traditus est, tum quia idem denarius in uinea laborantibus in premio dandus est...*).<sup>29</sup> Thereby the coin/Host analogy became a popular metaphor of the late medieval period, and tells us how profoundly imbedded coins had become in the devotional vocabulary and understanding of religious practices from the twelfth century and onwards.<sup>30</sup>

Worldly coinage could, then, buy temporal riches and sustenance, but spiritual sustenance could only come from the true coin – that is Christ and accordingly the Host. Again, an image in Bellinge Church provides an example (*Fig. 16*) where we find God letting the manna rain down on the people of Israel in the desert, an image which typologically was linked to Christ offering himself on the cross. Manna, according to late medieval iconographic convention, is often shown as hosts, and at Bellinge we see how the priest Elijah lifts one of the pieces of manna in a small, liturgical elevation, an image which is to find its iconographic opposite in the example of the greedy punished in Hell by having coins poured down their throat. The anti-type of the bread of life (shaped to look like a coin) is here introduced in the guise of worldly money, which well illustrates how thoroughly any offering in the church during both Mass and private devotion was entwined with notions of Christ offering himself on the cross, an offering repeated during every Mass. In that sense there was no limit to the benefits derived from offering to the Church, and as such offerings were held in the highest regard and, as we have seen, became part of the ongoing recreation of the church building, itself an echo of the heavenly home which it was supposed to call to the mind of congregation and visitor. But things are not so easy, once we shift our attention from the church as beneficiary to the parishioner or guest who gives the money.

#### 4. *The dangers of donating*

One continuous discourse within the devotional literature of both the Middle Ages and the early modern period was how to identify truly pious acts devoid of worldly or ulterior motives (Barker, Maus). As with all other pious acts, a certain suspicion as to the honesty or true feeling behind the deed or gesture could be voiced. In this discourse the ability to provide gifts or donations was only one means, in a plethora of possibilities, for contemplation and spiritual exercise. The methods behind such exercises were of less interest to the Church than the question as to whether donations were given out of love for the Church, and whether prayers were spoken honestly and openly, without profane motives.

<sup>29</sup> Durantii, 443; A. KUMLER, The multiplication of the species. Eucharistic morphology in the Middle Ages, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60, 2011, pp. 179–191.

<sup>30</sup> G. DINKOVA-BRUUN, Nummus falsus: The Perception of Counterfeit Money in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Century, in: G. E. M. GASPER – S. H. GULLBEKK (eds.), *Money and the Church in Medieval Europe, 1000–1200. Practice, Morality and Thought* (Farnham 2015), pp. 77–92.

This doubt can be illustrated with a mural from the first decades of the sixteenth century found in Keldby on Møn, showing the prayer of the rich and the poor man (*Fig. 17*), and echoing the previously discussed scene of Cain and Abel.<sup>31</sup> Both men are depicted kneeling with rosary in hand and eyes locked on the crucifix, while text bands capture their pious words. Nevertheless, only the pauper's prayer reaches Christ; the thoughts of the rich man are firmly tied to his earthly trappings, yet outwardly no difference between the prayers can be discerned. Nonetheless one of the men is clearly of this world, the other is not.

It was of pivotal importance that donations should be given without ulterior motives and solely for the love of God, and this remained the stance of the Church throughout the Middle Ages, even paradoxically during the late medieval period when the acquisition of indulgences seems to have challenged this notion to its limits. Both the direct and the indirect biblical calls must be kept in mind, beckoning all to leave behind their earthly goods and follow Christ: in the words of Matthew 19:21: «Jesus answered, «If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.» This call for apostolic asceticism was already during the Early Church slowly transforming into a symbolic donation of gifts, demonstrations of



*Fig. 17* The rich and the poor man's prayer, painted *ca* 1520.  
Keldby Church, Møn, Denmark. Photo by the author.

<sup>31</sup> Danmarks Kirker: Præstø Amt (note 4), pp. 962–967.

the willingness of each individual Christian to give up his or her possessions in complete dedication to God. To give was a way of expressing faith and commitment. At the same time the liturgical response of the priest to alms given in the church during the offertory was the blessing: «What you give here shall in the name of the Lord be returned to you a hundred-fold.» It clearly indicated reciprocity.<sup>32</sup> God received an offering while the donors received spiritual benefits in return.

In principle this would seem like an uncomplicated transaction, but danger loomed large in the seemingly simple exchange. An indication of the peril is first and foremost detected from the fact that a priest should never receive the offerings of the congregation directly in his own hand. Collection boxes were thus used as intermediary stations, and if possible, the celebrant should have an assistant to collect the monetary offerings.<sup>33</sup> To receive this money from the laity, although pleasing to God, was in other words endangering the priest's soul, because he was handling that which was most tempting. And in the same vein we may also note how rarely we actually see depictions of clergy accepting coins directly from lay people, compared to images of clergy giving alms. However, giving money also posed a danger to the laity due to the fact that one could come to expect this «hundred-fold» return as a benefit automatically accruing at the time of giving. This expectation we find illustrated in several medieval cautionary tales in which we learn of lay people reacting violently against statues, crucifixes, priests, and even the Eucharist, when that for which they had prayed did not come to pass.<sup>34</sup> The Church clearly faced a problem here which was never fully solved, unless by the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century who more or less abandoned altogether the connection between gift and divine reward – which however made it harder for Lutherans to induce the community to make offerings, as we gather from the huge number of sermons stressing the obligation of all Christians to do so. Nevertheless, it is perhaps not surprising that the laity should come to expect such direct cause and effect in the matter of offerings. Already the texts of the church fathers are full of references to metaphors of economic dealings, on which the above-mentioned likening of Christ to the true coin could be built. And it is easy to see how one could come to expect instant benefit from giving, especially in the light of the discourse of accuracy in the balancing of good and bad deeds, a discourse which the Church promoted with equal strength. The great fault lay in the misconception that one could barter with God, an error that the Church throughout the medieval period attempted to clarify through sermons, writings and pastoral care. Redemption was not bought by donating goods or money. When thinking in this way one was, so to speak, locked in the discourse of this world and a victim of the Devil, who used money and avarice as tools to turn souls away from God. The promise of wealth and plenty was the opposite of the promises Christ had made upon the cross, and therefore questionable in the eyes of Christ, and of the Church.

<sup>32</sup> JÜRGENSEN 2020 (note 9).

<sup>33</sup> JÜRGENSEN 2020 (note 9).

<sup>34</sup> See this theme expanded upon in M. CAMILLE, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge 1991).

Again and again, it was stressed that giving (*caritas*) was pleasing to God and the hallmark of true Christian behavior, but ultimately all gifts were futile because only one such counted, and that was the final gift of death. Christ had paid for humanity with his blood and his life in this world, and it was only by following his commitment that the laity could leave the desert world of terrestrial existence and return home to the City of God, the Heavenly Jerusalem. Yet giving money was important simply because it was one out of many small spiritual exercises that enabled a congregation to confirm their indifference to the world and allowed them to show that they were indeed preparing to sacrifice the whole. The ideas discussed here were, undoubtedly, much too subtle for a large part of the faithful, as well as many of the clergy serving in rural communities, but it was nevertheless thoughts such as these which made up the framework in which the church could allow itself to accept and deal with money.

### *5. When the coin leaves the hand*

The tension between good money and bad money, which I have tried to sketch out here, has many aspects, but a pivotal component in all of this is the moment when the coin changed hands inside the church. What is particularly fascinating about this moment is the urgency or need that the Church and its community felt in order to handle the transaction satisfactorily. Where in modern culture the act of giving alms might seem a fairly simple affair, the metaphysical connotations of this action were of a much more critical nature in the medieval and early modern period. A whole register of tensions and meanings arose from the act of taking secular wealth into the church building and handing it over to the parish priest or his helpers. From what has been said so far, it should be clear that worlds, if they did not collide, at least met in a dramatic fashion when this exchange took place. Conceptually within medieval Christendom the Eucharist was perceived as the primary encounter with Christ; it was the repeated encounter with the son of God offering himself to the community during each and every Mass.<sup>35</sup> The direction in this offering went from the divine, through the Church and into the world. The act of giving back to the Church, most often in the shape of small change, was in a sense a reversal of the Eucharist and reached something almost of a sacramental status; to give was simply the sign of the true Christian, as it was the foremost way of returning Christ's love. To give created a bond which went from this world, through the Church and on to Christ. This action not only tied community and church together, its empowered laity and clergy alike and facilitated an important channel to reach a sense of contact or transcendence within their worship, at a time when communion for most was an annual thing. Here the offering was of a different nature, as it activated the individual and gave agency to the donor in a way that the – in principle – passive reception of the Eucharist did not give.

<sup>35</sup> The meaning and cultural importance of the Eucharist can be found presented and unfolded in P. BROWE, *Die Elevation in der Messe*, *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* 9, 1929, pp. 20–66; P. BROWE, *Die Eucharistischen Wunder des Mittelalters* (Breslau 1938); P. BROWE, *Die häufige Kommunion im Mittelalter* (Münster 1938); M. RUBIN, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge 1991).



However, exactly like the transaction of the Host, the offering due to its conceptual importance also created severe tension as to why the coin was offered in the first place, how it was offered and not least how it was received. The proceedings had to be shielded through ritual, paradoxically both to shield those involved from misuse but also to guarantee that the offering, as an expression of the voice of the donor, was heard. As we have seen, much could go wrong or be understood in the wrong way, but – be it donations in connection with specific votive masses or the ordinary act of giving during the Offertory of Mass – liturgy had the role of translator, in a sense momentarily annulling the human factor in the transaction, purifying the offering, and translating the gift from one economy to another.

We can easily play down the role of offering even small coins as a prosaic and formulaic act required in worship, but by focusing on the surface of the exchange we miss the immense cultural importance affirmed during each and every one of such offerings, as it was in these moments that the world channeled and returned its love to Christ by negating, in principle, earthly wealth and translating it into a commitment to God and God's realm.

#### *6. Concluding remarks*

What I have attempted to show here is how the Church, conscious of its pastoral obligations, attempted to attune the minds of the parishioners not only to think about offerings, but to think about them in the right way, and how such offerings created a bond between themselves and Christ. Images from parish churches in small rural communities in Denmark and Europe at large provides us with a huge fonds of examples of how learned, theological ideas intersected with the daily life of the laity in ways that allow fascinating insights into the universe that was presented to parishioners in late medieval society.

To handle money was a part of the being in the world, but, at least in principle, the Church had to build an elaborate theological edifice in order to accommodate this practice without becoming entrenched in the secular economy. This, of course, was performed using methods devised in such a way that they reflected a world where money circulated. Not only was the Church pragmatic in its attitude to money, it was very subtle in how it designated and disseminated its views and ideas on material wealth in general and money in particular. One could say that the Church on one side put itself in an impossible situation where the theological ideals were bound to collide with the practices, drawn as they must be from the society surrounding them. Yet it is noteworthy how the Church kept up the struggle to establish metaphors which could stand against the understanding of money and wealth in society, and during the early sixteenth century the Church had been moving down a slippery slope in this endeavor through the high Middle Ages and was thereby wide open to the harsh critique of humanist circles which paved the way for such reformers as Jean Calvin and Martin Luther. The Protestants following on the heels of the reformers of the sixteenth century, however, created new problems and new attitudes, and the act of donating thus was no less of a charged act in the early modern period.



### *Abstract*

The ritual handling of money inside church buildings is the topic of this article. At the heart of all devotional practices employing secular wealth on some level lie the implications of an actual moment of exchange when the coin leaves the hand of the parishioner and enters into the hand of the Church. Exactly that moment of exchange is here probed for insights into how the individual medieval parishioner reacted to these offerings and also as to how the Church interacted with its communities on a parochial level. In this article I will consider this moment of exchange of coins and discuss it as it is found in late medieval church art, liturgical practice and historical sources, with emphasis on Northern Europe, and drawing visual examples primarily from medieval Denmark. The way into the subject lies through visual representations of money in medieval churches and medieval religious art more generally. Through this focus certain paradoxes become apparent when medieval images are compared with the devotional acts known to have taken place in the churches.

### *Zusammenfassung*

Dieser Aufsatz untersucht rituelle Handlungen mit Geld in Kirchen. Allen Opferhandlungen mit weltlichen Gütern liegt ein Tauschmoment zugrunde, in dem die Münze die Hand des Spenders verlässt und «in den Schoß der Kirche» einkehrt. Dieses Moment wurde im Hinblick darauf analysiert, in welchen Bezug sich der einzelne, mittelalterliche Kirchgänger zu solchen Spenden setzte, und wie die Kirche mit ihrer Gemeinde interagierte. Der Artikel untersucht das Tauschmoment anhand von Beispielen kirchlicher Kunst, liturgischer Praxis und historischer Quellen aus Nordeuropa, wobei die Bildbeispiele hauptsächlich aus dem mittelalterlichen Dänemark stammen. Zugang zu diesem Thema gewähren bildliche Darstellungen von Geld in mittelalterlichen Kirchen und religiöser Kunst im Allgemeinen. Durch den Vergleich solcher Bilder mit den bekannten Spendepraktiken in Kirchen werden einige Paradoxa erkennbar.

### *Résumé*

La manipulation rituelle de l'argent à l'intérieur des églises est le sujet de cet article. Au cœur de toutes les pratiques dévotionnelles liées à la richesse séculière se cache un moment d'échange réel où la pièce de monnaie quitte la main du paroissien pour rejoindre celle de l'Église. C'est précisément ce moment d'échange qui est ici analysé. Comment le paroissien médiéval se place face à ces offrandes et comment l'Église interagit avec ses communautés au niveau paroissial? En mettant l'accent sur l'Europe du Nord, grâce à des exemples visuels provenant principalement du Danemark médiéval, je souhaite revenir sur ce moment d'échange tel qu'il est perçu et décrit dans l'art ecclésiastique, la pratique liturgique et les sources historiques de la fin du Moyen Âge. Le sujet nous permet d'évoquer les représentations visuelles de la monnaie dans les

églises et l'art religieux médiéval en général. À travers ce prisme, et lorsque les images sont comparées aux actes de dévotion ayant lieu dans les églises, certains paradoxes se révèlent.

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