The Pre-Reformation Landscape


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I. The Map is Not the Territory

One of the most seductive representations of the late medieval religious landscape is not English, but Burgundian. Rogier van der Weyden’s *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*, completed around 1450, models the social world as imagined by the late medieval clergy. The image was produced in the southern Flemish city of Tournai, at the behest of Jean Chevrot, the city’s bishop between 1436-1460. Chevrot was one of the key advisers of Duke Philip the Good, under whom Burgundy achieved its greatest cultural and economic prosperity.\(^1\) The *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* was executed by Rogier and his studio for Chevrot’s episcopal chapel.\(^2\) We can guess that when the bishop regarded the image, he enjoyed the pleasing surety of orthodox liturgical and devotional praxis given visual manifestation and material confirmation. The painting’s aim is, after all, to embody Catholic orthodoxy: to celebrate the mediating role between heaven and earth of the bishop himself and the clergy of whom he is the foremost local representative.

On the left panel, we are shown baptism, confirmation (administered by Chevrot himself) and confession, conducted in public, as was the custom in

\(^1\) On Philip the Good see Vaughn 2010. On the cultural significance of Chevrot, see Nash, 2008.

\(^2\) Van der Weyden, or Rogier de la Pasture to give him his familial name, was himself born in Tournai, now a city in the French speaking region of Belgium, probably in 1400, and in the *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* there is a kind of home-coming, because the artist had spent most of his career as the official civic painter of the city of Brussels. He returned to Tournai perhaps as the most famous and most copied artist in Europe. See Kemperdick and Sander 2009, 75-94.
the medieval church; on the right panel, marriage, holy orders (again administered by Chevrot) and last rights; and, pre-eminently, in the central

![Image](image_url)

Figure x. Rogier van der Weyden and studio. *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*. 1445-50. Oil on oak panel, 200 x 97 cm (central panel), 119 x 63 cm (side panel, each) Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

diagram, the consecration of the Eucharist, the social contract between man and God – captured in the priest’s gesture of *elevatio*, bringing the lower and upper worlds into union. And lest we forget what that contract means, we are presented in the foreground with a crucifixion scene which could have been meditated into being by any pious reader of the myriad narrative lives of Christ which circulated in Europe from the fourteenth century. The anachronistic
costuming reminds us that the Eucharist is not, or is not only, an act of commemoration, but is, rather, an act of instantiation: Christ redeems us; here, now.

But we forget at our peril that the Seven Sacraments triptych is also an argument. It is an argument for the salvific centrality of the sacraments themselves, and therefore of the pastoral and ecclesiastical structures which scaffold their distribution to the laity. It is less the embodiment of orthodoxy than its articulation or assertion. Members of the laity, of a particularly bourgeois flavour, are represented in the painting as passive recipients or as pious consumers of devotional verities: an earnest contemplative, crossing between mundane and visionary realities, clasps the Virgin’s hand; a huddled penitent awaits her turn to confess; a maid weeps into a handkerchief. This is what orthodoxy brings into being: I, we, make society possible, thinks the spectating Bishop Chevrot.

But the vision of his pastoral role before which Chevrot genuflected in his private chapel is an institutional one, and as with any institutional vision, its relation to social realities is tenuous. And yet, historiography of the late medieval Church is too often seduced by narratives of hegemonic dominance or crisis. ‘In the late quarter of the fourteenth century,’ says Gerald Harriss, ‘the English Church faced a multiple crisis of authority’ (Harriss 2005, 352). There is a glamour, is there not, in narratives of crisis? Historical crises necessitate explanation, and historians offer a service of thicket-clearing, clarifying and explaining (away?) their complex causes and effects. As Harriss says of the Church,

Schism in the papacy, talk in parliament of disendowment, and the emergence of heresy at both learned and popular levels threatened its structure and faith, so firmly
established in the preceding century. Traditionally the Church had identified with the priesthood, as the essential mediators of divine grace through the sacraments, with the laity in a subordinate and passive role. The thirteenth century had seen this consolidated and extended. The formulation of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the obligation of annual confession and communion for the laity, and the drive to enforce clerical celibacy reinforced the status of the clergy as a sacred and separate order. They were set new standards of morals and learning through the surveillance of archdeacons, visitations, and church courts, while the friars began the evangelization of the urban laity. The apparatus of centralization extended hierarchical control from the papacy down through the dioceses, and in the universities scholastic theology provided greater intellectual coherence in the synthesis of faith and reason propounded by Thomism.

But, says Harriss, ‘the integrated character thus given to Western Catholicism began to dissolve in the fourteenth century’ (Harriss 2005, 352).

The issue here is not with the substance of Harriss’s description of late medieval religious culture, with which few medievalists would disagree, but with its *emplotment*. As in Van der Weyden’s image, its main witness is the Church itself: it takes for granted the Church’s own view of the verticality of its relationship with lay culture. Here, in sophisticated form, is the hegemonic Church: a monolithic transnational corporation driven to ‘consolidate’ and ‘extend’ its ‘surveillance’ (notably, of its own clergy, as well as the laity). But, as with Van der Weyden’s triptych, we forget that the Church’s image of itself is precisely that, an image; the map is not the territory, in other words. As Harriss himself asserts, from the later half of the fourteenth century ‘the Church could no longer be equated with the priesthood and an exclusively Latinized culture. It had to accommodate the laity and the vernacular, but to
what extent it could do so while preserving its control of the faith was problematic’ (Harriss 2005, 353).

II. The Refrain of Reform

In England, as in much of Europe, it is tempting to suggest that the greatest challenge posed to the Church prior to the Reformation was probably the Black Death. Reaching England in 1348, it devastated the clergy as much as the general population. What are crises if not the suspension of normative frameworks of meaning: events defy interpretation, producing ‘morbid symptoms’ (as Antonio Gramsci might put it), which trouble culture until they can be neutralised hermeneutically, incorporated once again into the narratives with which ruling polities maintain their authority. For example, the recent financial crisis momentarily suspended the mass credibility of free market capitalism until the financial sectors of Western societies found a way of explaining away the negative implications of the crisis for their over-arching vision of the world, regardless of its material impact on huge portions of their populations. With a devastated clergy at the parochial level, the English Church too had to contend with a potentially catastrophic challenge to the integrity of its institutions.

But it is precisely because the medieval Church was in fact a highly diffuse and localised institution, in which doctrinal coherence and administrative stability could only ever be an aspiration, that events of the fourteenth century should be understood only as the latest ‘crisis’ to face the clergy. Indeed, the refrain of ‘reform’ had arguably accompanied the Church since its incorporation of Roman political culture and it is the leitmotif of late
medieval Christianity. As an institution that reified the exemplarity of Christ as its *raison d’être*, the Church’s deviation from his example meant that devotional and institutional ‘traditions’ would be celebrated, if not fetishised, ahead of any kind of novelty. But reformism was arguably also a response to a collapse of confidence among lay communities in sacerdotal authority, as well as to the challenges posed by growing regnal and mercantile self-assertiveness in the later Middle Ages. This collapse is expressed in a widespread anti-clerical backlash, often among clerics themselves (from Robert Mannyng and William Langland in the fourteenth century to John Skelton a hundred years later), but it is less pointedly suggested in ecclesiastical anxiety about the definition of doctrinal ‘orthodoxy’, which in many respects becomes a fixation for the Church’s sense of its own institutional and bureaucratic disarray.

Such anxiety underpinned the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which has traditionally been historicised as a watershed in the pastoral care of lay Christians. Described by Eamon Duffy as ‘the highpoint of the medieval papacy’s involvement with and promotion of the best reforming energies in the Church at large’, Lateran IV encapsulated the reformist vigour and political ambition of its pope, Innocent III (Duffy 2006, 148). ‘In so many ways,’ says Dairmuid MacCulloch, ‘Innocent represents the culmination of the age of reform which [began] in Cluny’ (MacCulloch 2009, 404). For Duffy, ‘orthodoxy was one of Innocent’s major preoccupations’. If one might question Duffy’s characterisation of the impetus for Lateran IV’s reformism – ‘the wealth and worldliness of many Churchmen and the embedding of the Church in the heart of the European establishment produced waves of revulsion in the
devout, which often spun off into heresy’ (Duffy 2006, 149)³ – it cannot be doubted that the articulation of orthodoxy was seen by Innocent as extending both the pastoral and political authority of the Church. For MacCulloch, Lateran IV ‘embodied the Gregorian aim of imposing regulated holiness on the laity and ensuring uniformity in both belief and devotional practice’ (MacCulloch 2009, 405). The Council gave legislative imprimatur to the pastoral activities of the new mendicant orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, and established an instrument of orthodoxy in which the Dominicans, in particular, would play a critical role, as MacCulloch points out: ‘in order to ensure uniformity of belief among the faithful, the Lateran Council created procedures for inquisitions to try heretics’ (ibid., 409).

One of the consequences of Lateran IV has been supposed to concern the liberalisation, if not democratisation, of piety. The Council legislated into being a profusion of new devotional and liturgical practices, such as the localised propagation of, for example, saints’ cults (Vauchez 1997); it tolerated, and in places promoted, women as religious auctors (Newman 1985 and 1995; Elliot 2004); and the Church became more willing to license new forms of mendicant evangelism or, indeed, lay collectivity, as represented in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the Modern Devout (Van Engen 2008). The vernacular was to be used to propagate religious ideas; visual art was to be used to instruct lay people, and drama assumed a new para-liturgical role. Rather than initiating a period of democratisation, it might be better to describe the Council as trying to articulate, as Berndt Hamm puts it, ‘a

³ Compare with Diarmaid MacCulloch: “A more complex and positive response to dynamic popular movements” - those groups described by Duffy as having “spun off into heresy” - “emerged at the end of the twelfth century, although in the end it allied itself and indeed helped to structure [the] “formation of a persecuting society.”” MacCulloch 2009, 401.
standardising, authoritative, regulating and legitimizing focal point’ in the concept of orthodoxy itself – and in this the figure of the heretic would play a critical role (Hamm 2004, 3). The later medieval Church needed to respond with energy and creativity to the challenges of maintaining its prestige and political significance in a context where its auctoritas was increasingly undermined. But the Church’s institutional and catechetical ‘creativity’ arose particularly in response to the recognition that the Cathar heresy – which had emerged in the south of France in the twelfth century and rejected the sacerdotal authority of the Church – was as much the product of doctrinal confusion, pastoral indifference and ecclesiastical fragmentation.

The period from Lateran IV onwards represents the Church’s attempt to define ‘orthodoxy’, in what Hamm has characterised as a process of ‘normative centering’. As much a bureaucratic exercise as anything else – precisely because it issues in legislative discourses which presume their own efficacy regardless of their actual impact – the elaboration of orthodox doctrine became a barometer of the success or otherwise of institutional reform. The reformist mentality was expressed in the elaborate array of liturgical and devotional practices, which assumed ever greater complexity after Lateran IV. Such practices gave structure to everyday life. In England, where there were around 9000 parishes at the turn of the fifteenth century, a variation on the Roman Rite of the Church had been in use since the eleventh century, although the origins and general coherence of what became known as the Sarum rite (after the diocese of Salisbury in which it was assumed to have originated) is questionable before the fourteenth century (Pfaff 2009). However, by the fifteenth century, many parishes in England had
implemented the Sarum rite, which had become an extraordinarily elaborate, ‘multimedia’ expression of the liturgy. The Mass grew to incorporate highly ritualistic and musical elements and many pastoral manuals were produced, such as The Lay Folks’ Mass Book, to help lay people understand the ceremonies of the liturgy. As Robert Swanson has suggested, the Mass Book provided ‘a lay liturgy in counterpoint with, and directed by, that of the celebrant’ (Swanson 1999, 184). Time, too, was legislated by the Church, which had long ago mapped its liturgical celebrations onto the sequence of the seasons, and in doing so had absorbed pre-Christian religious rituals into its own normative practices (Duffy 2005, 37-52). The liturgical year began with the feast of Advent, four weeks before Christmas, followed by Epiphany (January), the Purification of the Virgin (February), and the Annunciation (March). These fixed feasts made of the year a theatre of Christ’s incarnation. They were accompanied by saints’ feasts across the year (which further proliferated after Lateran IV). But the central ritual portion of the year, of course, surrounded the moveable feast of Easter, which marked the death and resurrection of Christ. In the temporal logic of the liturgical year, cosmic time, which stretched from the sin of Adam to the birth of Christ, was concentrated in the historical life of Christ, which in turn completed and fulfilled time itself in the singular event of Christ’s death. In atoning for Adam’s sin, Christ abolished death and redeemed history. In order to mark the significance of Easter, Christians too were encouraged to atone: Ash Wednesday, the Wednesday before the Sunday which was itself forty days before Easter, reminded Christians of their mortality, and their culpability in Christ’s death. Lent, a period of abstinence and penance, stretched from Ash
Wednesday until Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday was preceded by the most ritually intense period of the Christian calendar, Holy Week, beginning on Palm Sunday, which marked Christ’s entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of the sequence of events that would culminate in his Passion. The provisions of Lateran IV dictated that, in order to save their souls, Christians must confess and receive communion once a year, and it is likely, thanks to its highly public, collaborative and performative nature, that most did so at Easter time. Easter Sunday was succeeded by the feast of the Ascension, forty days later, marking Christ’s bodily ascent into heaven. The week leading up to the Ascension had its own accompanying rituals, the minor Rogation Days, in which fields, livestock, streets and towns were blessed and ritual processions professing the litany of the saints were performed. ‘Blessings’, as Derek Rivard reminds us, ‘represent the active negotiation’ of the relationship between penitent, the priest, and the divine, ‘mingling speech, song, gesture, and motion to affirm a contractual relationship that provided divine protection and sacred power in exchange for human worship, veneration, and moral probity’ (Rivard 2009, 292). Such practices may have married the clergy to the community, but we must not assume that the marriage was a happy one, and vernacular literature, from anti-clerical doggerel to Langland’s Piers Plowman, rehearse resentment toward parish priests. Ten days after the Ascension, Christians marked Pentecost, which commemorated the descent of the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Apostles and the beginning of their evangelical mission. In 1264, again as a consequence of the provisions of Lateran IV, another feast was inaugurated eleven days after Pentecost. Corpus Christi, inspired by the visions of Juliana of Liege, celebrated the Eucharist as the body of Christ, and
hence was a very public articulation of the recently formalised doctrine of transubstantiation. Given that the ‘sacring’ of the Host was generally hidden from the congregation’s view behind the church’s Rood Screen, Corpus Christi enabled the public adoration of the Eucharist, typically in an elaborate procession. But it was also an assertion of ideology: of the church’s singular authority over the *cura animarum*, or care of souls. By the fifteenth century, in towns and cities such as York and Chester, the feast of Corpus Christi was accompanied by the extraordinarily complex sequence of biblical Cycle or Mystery Plays, which dramatised Christian history, from Creation to Last Judgement. The logistics of the Cycle Plays are staggering, with sometimes over a dozen plays performed repeatedly on pageant wagons by members of the community on a route, in the case of York, that began outside the city and traversed most of its major public spaces. Audiences were free to move between performances at will, and the performance of particular plays at specific sites heightened their symbolic intensity (for example, the Entry into Jerusalem at the gates of the city, or the Crucifixion or Last Judgement at the Shambles or Pavement). While the plays served as dramatic representations of biblical narratives, as their textual and performative complexity increased, they provided opportunities for the expression of any range of civic and political concerns, made all the more dynamic because these plays spoke directly to urban experience (Beckwith 2001; King 2006). Business, again in York, boomed when the plays were performed, with all sectors of the economy, from hostels and taverns to prostitutes, benefitting from the influx of ‘pious’ spectators.

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4 The landmark study of Corpus Christi is Rubin 1991.
If the requirement to undertake confession and receive the Eucharist once a year pales by comparison with the more stringent penitential demands of nineteenth century Catholicism, the centrality of the Church to the lives of medieval communities should not be underestimated. As a site, a community’s church fulfilled a range of functions, facilitating market days, acting as a court, or supporting the development of guilds and religious fraternities. Such organisations, typically aligned with a particular profession and dedicated to a local saint or the Virgin, played an important role after the Black Death, given the scarcity of trained priests (Duffy 2005, 141-53); indeed, by end of the fifteenth century there may have been around 30,000 of them in England. This posed a challenge to the independence from lay influence of the parish, as the economic benefits which accrued from association with fraternities allowed for the upkeep, renovation and extension of churches. Indeed, in larger conurbations, parishes were regularly in competition with one another for lay and fraternity attention, attracting parishioners with more potent tokens of holiness, such as relics, or by accommodating, as in Bishop’s Lynn, Norwich and myriad other cities, anchorholds, where enclosed holy men and women enhanced the sanctity of the parish church by offering spiritual advice to lay people. As an expression of the success of the ‘affective piety’ promoted by the Church, which we will discuss below, a number of cults sponsored by lay organisation emerged in the fifteenth century, dedicated variously to the Five Wounds of Christ, or to the Holy Name.

Monasteries and friaries too competed for lay investment. Monastic houses served as hospitals and fulfilled various other charitable functions. As
with the parish church, donations to such houses helped donors accrue spiritual 'capital'. But monasteries, with their control over land, their legal muscle and economic power, bred resentment in many English communities. The Benedictines aroused particular suspicion, with their alleged corruption and deviation from their rule such that Henry V instigated an investigation of their houses. The tensions between the regular clergy and their king which boiled over into the Henrician Reformation were not new; indeed, the Dissolution could likely not have taken place without some ambivalence or passivity regarding the fate of religious houses within lay communities. The anti-clericalism of Chaucer and Langland, or of poems such as ‘Of Thes Frer Mynours’ or ‘Thou That Sellest the Worde of God’ (Dean 1996) captures resentment, but it also expresses the confidence of lay culture in contesting the religious authority of the Church:

Men may se by thair contynaunce
That thai are men of grete penaunce,
And also that thair sustynaunce
Simple is and wayke.
I have lyved now fourty yers,
And fatter men about the neres
Yit sawe I never than are these frers,
In contreys ther thai rayke.
Meteles so megre are thai made,
And penaunce so puttes ham doun,
That ichone is an hors-lade
When he shall trusse of toun (Dean 1996).
The poet of ‘Preste, Ne Monke, Ne Yit Chanoun’ expresses the material resentments of lay people who struggled to sustain themselves while the clergy, and the friars in particular, grew fat on their piety.

Resentment could be expressed in other ways too. As Robert Swanson puts it, ‘failure to bow at certain points in the mass, or to honor a consecrated Host in procession, were not merely signs of disrespect; they were considered signs of unorthodoxy, hinting at Lollardy’ (Swanson 1999, 179). According to Duffy, ‘holding up of the hands and the more or less audible recitation of elevation prayers at the sacring was a gesture expected of everyone: refusal or omission was a frequent cause of the detection of Lollards. And the refusal of such gestures might be held to exclude one from the human community, since they excluded one from the church, as when Thomas Halfaker denounced a group of his Buckinghamshire neighbours because “coming to church, and especially at the elevation time, [they] would say no prayers, but did sit mum (as he termed it) like beasts”’ (Duffy 2005, 119). While regularly perceived, both by contemporaries and historians, as evidence of heresy, the refusal to participate in the liturgy should act as a corrective to any notion of the medieval laity as passively devout. From dissatisfaction with individual priests, to questions of the credibility or otherwise of the claims of the Church, the temptation to imagine an ‘Age of Faith’ must be resisted at all costs. As well as providing an explanation of individuals’ place in the cosmos and in history, Christianity provided a vocabulary for everyday experience which did

5 ‘Medieval belief already incorporates their possibility as part of its skeptical self-affliction’, according to Justice 2008, 18. Scholarship, including work by Reynolds 1991, Flanagan 2009, Arnold 2005, and Kim 2013, is challenging the long-held view of the medieval world as a credulous ‘Age of Faith’, which has complex implications for the ways in which the European Reformations are historicised.
not necessitate reflection on the credibility or otherwise of doctrinal or liturgical ideas: participation in religious practices need not, for many lay people, have meant acceptance. As the late anthropologist Roy Rappaport put it, ‘liturgical orders are public, and participation in them constitutes a public acceptance of a public order, regardless of the private state of belief. Acceptance is, thus, a fundamental social act, and forms the basis of public social orders. But acceptance is not belief, nor does it even imply belief. Whereas acceptance is an outward act, belief is an inward state, knowable subjectively, if at all’ (Rappaport 1999, 396).

In many respects, Lateran IV and succeeding pastoral initiatives had as their goal not the suppression of heresy, but of apathy. The license to teach in the vernacular, to develop forms of dramatic exposition of religious ideas and narrative, and to involve lay people in the liturgical performance of faith was designed precisely to re-engage ordinary people in the life of the Church. But by the fourteenth century, the complexity of medieval theology rivaled the abstractions of modern physics, and liturgy, while pragmatic, was undergirded by religious ideas to which the laity were given little access. Hence, the development of theologies that sponsored devotional practices rooted in the humanity of Christ. Lay Christians were encouraged to meditate on the physical suffering of Christ, and the compassio of his mother, family and followers. Such theologies encouraged ‘affective piety’: they sought to evince, on the part of viewers, readers or listeners – whether enclosed or secular religious, professional theologians, or lay people – emotive identification with Christ, his mother or other holy surrogate. Contemplative religious practices, formerly the privilege of the regular clergy, were increasingly appropriated
outside the cloister and an array of literatures emerged to cultivate lay practices of meditation.

Pre-eminent in England in the fourteenth century were the writings of the Yorkshire hermit Richard Rolle (d. 1349). Around 400 manuscripts of Rolle’s writings survive and the authorship of The Prick of Conscience was long attributed to him. Rolle’s writings range from commentaries on the Psalms, letters to nuns and fellow recluses, to accounts of his mystical experiences. His Meditation on the Passion captures precisely the emotionalism and vivid pictorialism of affective devotion:

A, Lord þi sorwe, why were it not my deth? Now þei lede the forþe nakyd os a worm, the turmentoures abowtyn þe and armede kny3ts; þe prees of þe peple was wonderly strong, þei hurled þe and haryed þe so schamefully, þei spurned þe with here feet, os thou hadde been a dogge. I se in my soule how reufully þou gost: þi body is so blody, so rowed and so bledderyd; þi crowne is so kene, þat sytteth on þi hed; þi heere mevyth with the wynde, clemyd with þe blood; þi lovely face so wan and so bolnyd with bofetynge and with betynge, with spyttynge, with spowtynge; the blood ran therewith, þat grysyth in my sy3t; so lothly and so wlatsome the Jues han the mad, that a mysel art thou lyckere than a clene man. The cros is so hevy, so hye and so stark, that þei hangyd on þi bare bac trossyd so harde (Allen 1931, 21).

Rolle’s extraordinary prose prioritises imagination as a tool of prayerful contemplation, thus internalising the narrative and ritual elements of the liturgy in a reconstruction of the Passion. Rolle’s most important successors were the Carthusian Nicholas Love (d. 1423/4) and the Augustinian Walter Hilton (d. 1396). The writings of Love and Hilton capture the devotional trends of the century preceding the English Reformations. Like Rolle, their fixation with the
psychology of religious experience prefigures the highly individuated spirituality that would be a mark of Protestantism.

Love was the Prior of Mount Grace Charterhouse in the early decades of the fifteenth century and his is the most important English adaptation of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi* (authored by the fourteenth-century radical Franciscan Jacobus de Sancto Geminiano). Initially a translation for use by Carthusian novices and lay-brothers, the text was quickly found in noble and gentry reading circles with connections to the Carthusian and Brigittine houses of Mount Grace and Syon (Falls 2013; Perry 2013). The text was printed, in a variety of folio, recto and sextodecimo editions, by Caxton in 1484 and 1490, and was reprinted by Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson in 1494, by Pynson in 1506, and again by de Worde in 1507, 1517, 1525, and 1530. Interestingly, the text was not reprinted again in England after 1530, although the pseudo-Bonaventuran *vita* provides the template for Carthusian John Fewterer’s *Myrrour of Glasse* (1533). The folio editions of Love’s *Mirror* contain twenty-five illustrations of the life and Passion of Christ; as Lotte Hellinga has commented, ‘the illustrated version in print offered an advantage over most of the manuscripts of Nicholas Love’s translation, and also over the Latin original text, both in manuscript and print’ (Hellinga 1997, 146). The affective immediacy that Love’s text was designed to stimulate is thus not just characteristic of

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6 Töth and Falvay (2014) overturn definitively its traditional attribution to Johannes de Caulibus. On the pseudo-Bonaventuran tradition in English, see the AHRC-funded Geographies of Orthodoxy project: http://www.qub.ac.uk/geographies-of-orthodoxy
7 STC 3259.
8 STC 3260
9 STC 3261
10 STC 3262
11 STC 3263
12 STC 3263.5, 3264, 3266, 3267.
fifteenth-century devotionalism, but is at a material high point in its early
sixteenth-century circulation.

Hilton was initially a canon lawyer, before joining the Augustinian
house at Thurgarton. His two most renowned texts *The Scale of Perfection*
and *Of Mixed Life*, frame and respond to the dominant trajectories of later
medieval spirituality. The *Scale* is a contemplative manual, designed to assist
enclosed, intellectual religious in the development of their meditative regimes
(the text is dedicated to a female solitary). The book was inevitably attractive
to Carthusian readers. The Carthusians saw themselves as the spiritual elite
of the monastic orders and lived a frugal and solitary life dedicated to
contemplation of God. They had a particular interest in texts describing or
atomising mystical experience. Just under half of the manuscripts of *The
Scale*’s first book derive from the second half of the fifteenth century and two
manuscripts post-date 1500 (Sargent 2005, 77). And again, there are a
significant number of prints from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth
centuries. If the *Scale* is a work for use by the spiritually elite, then *Of Mixed
Life* pre-empts the devotional appetites of the fifteenth-century laity. In it,
Hilton tell his noble addressee, ‘Þou 3ernist gretli to serue oure lord bi goostl
occupacioun al holli, wiþoute lettynge or trobolynge of worldeli busynesse’
(Ogilvie-Thompson 1986, 7) but advises instead that he emulate the biblical
examples of Mary and Martha, adumbrating both the contemplative and active

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13 The *Scale* is printed by de Worde in 1494 (STC 14042), 1519 (STC 14043.5), 1525 (STC
14044) and 1533 (STC 14045); and by one “Iulyan Notary” in 1507 (STC 14043). STC 14042-
45 interpolate *Of Mixed Life (Vita Mixta)* as the assumed third book of the *Scale*. The *Mixed
Life* also appears in a 1494 printing of *Kalendre of the newe legende of Englannde* (STC
4602). See Powell 2011. Manuscript copies of *Mixed Life* are found in the possession of
enclosed women during the early decades of the sixteenth century. See Hutchinson 1995.
lives in a third form of pious practice appropriate to lay people, the mixed life. Hilton admits in the *Mixed Life* a concern for a burgeoning appetite not just for religious literature but for the imitation of clerical practices amongst the laity: this was an abiding preoccupation of devotional culture in the century after Hilton’s death and a plethora of religious texts were produced to answer to it. Texts written with the laity in mind, such as *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*, *The Pore Caitif, A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, *Jacob’s Well*, *Dives and Pauper* or *Eight Ghostly Dwelling Places*, produced, it is assumed, an appetite among lay people for religious speculation. In turn, texts written for the consumption of enclosed religious, priests, or for instruction of the professional clergy began to ‘leak’ out of their institutional reading communities from the late fourteenth century onwards. The mechanics of this process are understood poorly: it is likely that noble and gentry sponsors of religious institutions received in exchange for their patronage religious texts in the vernacular, which they in turn circulated, copied and recompiled within their own affinities (in urban centres, this process was led by pious mercantile elites). Gestures designed to demonstrate the piety of a given patron had as an interesting side-effect the development of canons of literary taste, with particular texts, such as *The Pricke of Conscience*, various writings by or attributed to Rolle or Hilton, and myriad pastoral texts clustering in their production and distribution around lay reading communities. The possession of books, particularly religious books, quickly became a marker of social status. Often, such texts would be read with the assistance of a spiritual advisor, or the text would incorporate, as a meta-literary device (typically in the form of an address from a mentor to a young devotee, a contrivance
initially of use in communication between religious houses), a ‘textual advisor’, whose role was to structure and frame the reading process. A range of penitential and devotional works are printed by de Worde: in 1492-3, *The Chastising of God’s Children* and in 1497 *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, in addition to Love’s *Mirror* and Hilton’s *Scale*. Caxton and Pynson print texts that address practical devotional matters, such as *The Art and Craft of Dying*, the *Ars Moriendi*, and *The Dyetary of Gostly Helthe*, as well as more christological materials, such as the enormously popular *The Fifteen Oes* (in 1491), and *The Seven Sheddings of the Blood of Jesus Christ* (in 1500, discussed in Powell 2011, 527-29). ‘The overwhelmingly traditional and orthodox character of the religious literature printed before 1530 did not mean it was of one sort’, says Eamon Duffy, and printers dictated and responded to readerly demand by covering the gamut of fifteenth-century tastes (Duffy 2005, 78). Mirk’s *Festial*, a collection of sermons from the 1380s, was printed by Caxton in 1483, who ‘made it a best-seller’ according to Susan Powell (Powell 2011, 533). The *Festial* was often accompanied by Pecham’s syllabus (an influential set of thirteenth century prescriptions dedicated to the pastoral education both of the laity and a dysfunctional clergy) in the form of the *Quattuor sermones*. Pecham’s influence echoes across the Reformation, underpinning pro-Reformation texts such as *The Ten Articles* (1536), the *Institution of a Christen Man* (1537) and *The Necessary Doctrine* (1543). According to Susan Wabuda, ‘Thomas Cromwell’s reliance upon Peckham’s [sic] standards is particularly remarkable in the First Royal Injunctions of 1536, and his Second Royal Injunctions of 1538’ (Wabuda 2002, 37). The

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14 STC 5056 and STC 13609 respectively.
circulation, re-combination, and appropriation of explicitly orthodox Catholic
texts amongst proto- and fully-fledged Protestant readers should chastise any
acceptance of the notion that late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century
literature represents a culture in decline. Rather, the fifteenth century is
marked, says Vincent Gillespie, by the ‘multiple vernacular theologies’ that
‘were emerging to cater for the needs and abilities of an increasingly diverse
range of religious competencies’ (Gillespie 2012, 176). As in the past, central
to these theologies was the refrain of reform itself, whether of the Church or
the individual Christian.

III. From Vernacular Theologies to the ‘English Heresy’

The pastoral innovations that followed Lateran IV may have sponsored an
explosion in liturgy, drama and vernacular religious writing (from pastoralia,
guides to contemplation, religious poetry, and manuals for mystical ascent),
but they also inspired academic theologians to re-assess the bases of
doctrine. The efforts of reformers to put their own house in order were
arguably jeopardised by the liberties the Church had allowed historically to the
universities (Leff 1968; Kerby-Fulton 2006, 1-11). It is no accident in an
atmosphere of reformist ‘centering’ that academic theology and philosophy, at
first in Paris, but then later in Oxford, should come under ecclesiastical
scrutiny. One wonders what the history of later medieval English Christianity,
and the English Reformation itself, would look like had the ideas of theologian
John Wyclif (d. 1384) not escaped the cloisters of Oxford University. That
Wyclif and his followers came to perceive in his theology pragmatic ethical
and political implications, albeit with no little help from aristocratic patrons who
sought to curtail the political and economic reach of the English Church, is expressive of the larger reformist impulse that had been legislated into existence by the Church itself (Bose 2010, 276-282; Walsham 2014, 244-246).

If the Lambeth Constitutions of Archbishop Pecham issued in 1281 open the English chapter of ecclesiastical and pastoral reform, then by the beginning of the fifteenth century, the anxiety sown by Wycliffite thought and propagated by his ecclesiastically-defined ‘successors’, the Lollards, caused the English Church, in one influential narrative, to bring its reformist project to a close (Watson 1995). Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions, applied to the University of Oxford in 1407 and extended to every diocese in the land in 1409, curtailed speculative theology in Oxford (university provosts were to monitor carefully the orthodoxy of the curriculum) and required that preachers were licensed and regulated by bishops. The Constitutions prevented priests from criticising the ecclesiastical hierarchy in sermons to the laity; and, of especial significance, they banned the propagation of pastoral literature in English without permission; likewise, translations of the Bible, which had begun to circulate in high-status manuscripts among high-status readers – including, ironically, Archbishop Arundel himself – were prohibited. And yet, it has been hard for scholars to assess the significance of the Constitutions without succumbing to the vertiginous influence of the Reformation-to-come. In his account of the Oxford Translation Debate of 1401 and after, in which many of the issues later addressed by the Constitutions are discussed, Nicholas Watson characterises the academic Richard Ullerston’s defence of vernacular translation as follows:
Ullerston’s defense helps us see the Constitutions as they must have been seen by numbers of moderates, who did not accept that the fight against heresy justified reversing the great program of education whose foundations had been laid at Lateran IV two centuries earlier and built on by Pecham and others ever since. From the viewpoint of this (ill-defined and little-studied) group, the Constitutions must have seemed a huge mistake, a setting back of the clock two hundred years: a premature Counter-Reformation (Watson 1995, 846. Emphasis mine.)

Here the Constitutions are understood as both the annulment of the pastoral initiatives of Pecham and Lateran IV and somehow prefigurative of the Council of Trent (which itself is implicitly caricatured in terms of retrenchment). According to Michael Sargent, such an account promotes an ‘Hegelian epistemology, treating historical periods, religious movements, and national identities as if they were ideal essences’ (Sargent 2011, 56). Rather, says Sargent, ‘it is the very idea that there is an impersonal, external, objective history, according to which things may be said to be ‘premature’ – before (or after) their time’ (61) that must be contested. Thanks to the periodising temptations to which Watson’s essay succumbs, the Constitutions are allowed to inaugurate a cultural and literary ‘year zero’:

It was evidently an inadvertent side effect of the Constitutions to help precipitate this creation of a canon of theological writing by simply sealing it up, making it so hard for later writers to contribute further to this literature that it is fair to say that original theological writing in English was, for a century, almost extinct (Watson 1995, 835).
For all the brilliance and influence of Watson’s argument, its conclusions have been vigorously contested. Indeed, the material evidence of the circulation of religious writing among lay readers in the fifteenth century stands as the most compelling indictment of the narrative of decay he presents (Sargent 2005, 74-78 and 2008). It is significant, for example, that the texts Watson collates as representative of the boom in fourteenth-century pastoral and catechetical writing circulate for the most part in fifteenth-century manuscripts and printed books. Indeed, Pecham’s Lambeth Constitutions find themselves repackaged throughout the fifteenth century, issuing in the compendia *Disce Mori* and the *Ignorancia Sacerdotum* (I have already noted their importance for Cromwellian reform). If Watson’s account of the fifteenth century necessitates an explicit model of cultural decline, advocates of more ‘positive’ histories of medieval religion demonstrate their own susceptibility to periodising models which serve to marginalise the Middle Ages when they characterise pastoral reform as the ‘democratisation’ of later medieval religious culture (Duffy 2005). Rather than democratisation, we might be better to call this process, in an admittedly clumsy term, ‘lay clericalisation’, as lay people – often women (Erler 2002) – sought to emulate the devotional practices of enclosed religious. The explosive popularity of *Horae*, Books of Hours, from the end of the fifteenth century testifies to the collision of popular taste and technologies capable of satisfying demand (Duffy 2006).

But not all texts participated passively in the devotionalism promoted by the pastoralia. A number of key works emerge both to challenge and push

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15 See essays in Gillespie and Ghosh 2011; Johnson and Westphall 2013; and Corbellini 2013, as well as Kerby-Fulton 2006
beyond the theological goals of orthodox catechesis, among them *Dives and Pauper* and the *Lanterne of Li3ht*. William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (1360s-1390s) is the most important literary response to pastoral initiatives of the later medieval English Church and illustrates, to devastating effect, the continuing inadequacy of ecclesiastical provision for lay people. A hortatory dream-vision and personification allegory, *Piers Plowman* is exasperated by the Church’s abdication of its responsibility to the ‘lewd’ laity. Satirical and apocalyptical in equal measure and committed to narrative failure at every turn (the poem’s various episodes, such as the marriage of Conscience to Lady Mede, the Pilgrimage to Truth or the Ploughing of the Half-Acre are never completed), *Piers Plowman* generates a loose confederacy of imitations in the fifteenth century, before its extraordinarily challenging allegorical poetics lose their transmissibility in the mid-fifteenth century (Simpson 2002, 328-33). That said, the figure of the ploughman is deployed in Lollard tracts, including *Jack Upland*, the *Omnis plantacio*, the *Epistola Santanae ad Cleros*, *The Praier and Complaynte of the Ploweman* and orthodox texts, such as *A Lytte Geste how the plowman lerned his Paternoster*, which was printed by de Worde in 1510 (Hudson 1988, 452; Rodman Jones 2011, 85-101). It is significant, for example, that *Piers* was not printed until after the Reformation, when its rhetoric was revivified by Robert Crowley (in 1550; see Simpson 2002, 368-70; Rodman Jones 2011, 116-132). Crowley, like John Bale before him and his contemporary John Foxe, recruited Langland as a proto-Protestant *avant la lettre*.

**IV. The seductions of heterodoxy**
But Langland, of course, was not a Protestant; and neither was he a Wycliffite. For a brief period, from the 1370s until the 1420s, Wycliffism articulated a coherent and robust assault on formulations of orthodox authority. There is good reason to suspect, with Paul Strohm, that ‘Lollardy’, the term applied to the popular off-shoots of Wycliffism, was as much a bogey-man invented by the Lancastrian regime as a coherent movement with long-lasting influence: as Strohm asks, ‘was the Lollard a genuine threat or a political pawn, agent of destabilising challenge, or a hapless threat of self-legitimizing Lancastrian discourse?’ (Strohm 1998, 33). Not mumblers, as traditionally assumed, but botherers, gabblers, criers, whose ‘obstreperous vocality’, says Andrew Cole (Cole 2008, 160-61), could never, according to their opponents, issue in coherence, the Lollards were placed ‘at a discursive disadvantage at the outset’ (36), serving as stooges who legitimated the usurpation of the effete Richard II by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke in 1399.16

Under Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, the legislation *De heretico comburendo* (1401) aligned heresy with sedition and authorised the immolation of those who refused to recant (among the first on the pyre was Norfolk visionary Margery Kempe’s parish priest, William Sawtre). The legislation would be cited approvingly by Sir Thomas More over a century later. Indeed, it might be said that under Henry IV, and particularly his son Henry V, the legislative lineaments of the Act of Supremacy were being drawn: in arguing for heresy not as a defect of belief, but as an act of ideological enunciation that threatened the body politic, the Lancastrians set the stage for Henry Tudor’s

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16 ‘What remains in question […] is whether the term lollard has ever had sufficiently stable and objective content to warrant its use as a neutral, descriptive term in modern historiography’ (Bose and Hornbeck 2011, 3).
appropriation of ecclesiastical authority to himself. ‘In all but name,’ remarks Jeremy Catto, ‘more than a century before the title could be used, Henry V had begun to act as the supreme governor of the Church of England’ (Catto 1985, 115). If irony can be prospective, then in this instance it is particularly appropriate to Henry V, whose ambition was to be paragon and protector of Catholic orthodoxy. Here, he perhaps emulated Sigismund, Holy Roman Emperor and host of the Council of Constance (1414-18), the most important ecclesiastical gathering of the fifteenth century:

The Council of Constance described its mission as the reform of the church ‘in head and members’ and recommended a return to the apostolic simplicity and missionary zeal of the early church. It also addressed the problem of burgeoning heresy, retrospectively condemning Wyclif, and trying and executing the Bohemian Jan Hus as an alleged disciple of the arch-heresiarch. Although many of the reforms agreed at these councils were either ignored or watered down in Europe as a whole, the intellectual and cultural impact on the English church should not be underestimated. Henry V became the figurehead and the inspiration for an English church that speedily acquired new confidence and a new sense of direction and purpose (Gillespie 2012, 165).

That sense of direction and purpose, led by Arundel’s successor Henry Chichele and propagated by a number of ‘ecclesiastical humanist’ bishops from the 1420s onwards, seems to have side-stepped the Arundelian prohibitions regarding devotional writing in the vernacular. ‘Far from eschewing

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17 See also Gillespie 2012, 163-65.
18 Henry established the Carthusian house of Sheen and the Brigittine house of Syon in 1414-15.
19 See also Gillespie 2011.
vernacular theology’ says Vincent Gillespie, ‘writers of Chicièl’s generation created for it a whole new high-style register, seeking to reclaim the vernacular for orthodoxy, and to make it fit for precise and nuanced theological thought, just as Ullerston has said they should do in his defence of translation at the Oxford debate’ (Gillespie 2011, 35-36). These included John Audelay (d. 1426) and Reginald Pecock (d. c. 1459). Pecock was an energetic reformist, but his career is a story of hermeneutic tragedy. His writings, tempered by a humanistic commitment to ‘resoun’, sought to undercut the theological bases of Wycliffite theology but, as a consequence of political manoeuvres against Pecock and what was claimed to be his denial of key tenets of orthodox doctrine, he was charged with heresy and was forced to abjure his writings and indeed burn his books at St Paul’s Cross (Gillespie 2012, 176).21

‘Is Wycliffism better understood as a dialect of reformist thought that was eventually hereticated?’ (that is, criminalised) ask Mistooni Bose and Patrick Hornbeck (Bose and Hornbeck 2011, 3). The answer must be yes. While Wycliffite and Lollard dissenters of the fifteenth century were doctrinally at odds with ecclesiastical orthodoxy, especially on issues of sacramentality and ecclesiastical hierarchy, they were a product of the centuries of pastoral and theological reform we have already discussed. The effect of back-projecting the sectarianism of post-Reformation religious strife has been to divide sharply Wycliffite dissent from a broad, vital and heterogeneous culture of later medieval religious speculation (Marshall 2011). Certainly, Lollard anti-sacerdotalism must have appealed to pious individuals and groups tired of the

21 See also Scase 1995 and Campbell 2010.
socially divisive materialism of the performance of piety in later medieval English communities (Marks 2004). Likewise, the dubious capabilities of their parish priests, widespread corruption of mendicants, or the bullying of the monasteries or the ecclesiastical courts, among other offices of the clergy, must have fuelled Christians’ search for alternative forms of religious practice (Lutton 2006). But Lollard books for Lollard readers are an exception when examined in relation to a majority of ‘grey area’ (Hudson 1988, 390-445) fifteenth-century codices that promiscuously commingle ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’ texts. Indeed, many avowedly Wycliffite codices were owned by assiduously orthodox readers, such as the Carthusians and Brigittines (Catto 1999). Furthermore, there are hardly any Lollard or Wycliffite texts which post-date 1440 (Hudson 1988, 451). The argument for the tacit ‘secularisation’ of Wycliffite devotion – that it withdraws from the marketplace into the ‘privy’ and ‘secret’ places of the home, and thus disappears from the documentary record (Jurkowski 2011, 275) – draws its legitimacy from inquisitorial records that deride ‘scoles of heresie’ led, most threateningly, by women (see, for example, the ‘Confession of Hawisia Moone of Loddon, 1430’ in Hudson 1997). It also ignores the extent to which orthodox devotional texts recommended the same practices. Hence, it ‘it is hard to construct a coherent picture of late fifteenth-century Lollardy’, according to the leading scholar of the movement, Anne Hudson (Hudson 1998, 459). The persistence of Lollards in Kent, where there are identifiable communities from the late fifteenth century until they are suppressed in 1511-12, is arguably an exception that proves the rule (Lutton 2006, 152-71). But the resurgence in the prosecution of heresy in the 1490s demands explanation. It is tempting to
suggest that Henry VII simply appropriated the strategies of his royal namesakes and predecessors and used the rooting out of heresy as a means of tightening his authority on both ecclesiastical and civil society after the Wars of the Roses. The persecutions continued under Henry VIII. Particularly active was John Longland, Bishop of Lincoln, who acted against Lollard clergy and their followers in Amersham, Buckingham, Newbury, Berkshire, and Burford (Hudson 1988, 464-72).22 There were trials in London, Coventry, Hereford, and throughout Kent. Burnings of those branded Lollards followed, but most of those accused of heresy recanted. Is it clear, as Anne Hudson claims ‘that there were a substantial number of Lollards, or at least of men and women who at some stage had shown sympathy with Lollard causes and teachings’ (Hudson 1988, 466) in late fifteenth-century England? There is throughout the closing chapter of Hudson’s magisterial The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History on late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century religious dissent a willful, if not wishful, yearning to compensate imaginatively for the gaps in surviving evidence: to conjure from the exceedingly small (but individually significant) groups of surviving Lollards a tradition of religious non-conformism that irrigates the flowering of Protestantism. In the scholarship that has followed Hudson’s groundbreaking work, texts have been obliged to play a critical role: indeed, if rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation was the ‘litmus-test’ in trials of heretics, possession of books, and in particular, the Book, the Bible in English, has long been held to demonstrate the survival of Lollardy. The famous case of

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22 Bernard (2012, 209-11, 220-21) reminds us that Longland’s activities are conveyed to us by the not-disinterested John Foxe.
London merchant Richard Hunne, who died in 1514 under mysterious circumstances in the Lollards’ Tower of St Paul’s, exemplifies the susceptibility both of contemporary polemicists and historians to this narrative. It seems that Hunne was an agitator who took umbrage, in particular, at the Church’s claims upon his purse. He was posthumously declared a heretic on the basis of books he was said to possess:

Most damningly, he possessed a Wycliffite Bible. But did he realise its heretical nature? Was possession of a Wycliffite Bible necessarily evidence that its owners believed in heresies: were Henry VI and Richard III therefore heretics? Was the Bible’s previous owner, Thomas Downes, an heretic? Yet in his will he left money for torches to burn in honour of the blessed sacrament and for 100 pounds of wax to burn before the crucifix, asking to be buried before the image of the Virgin in his parish church (Bernard 2012, 219).

It is evident that what we should now probably call the Middle English Bible – rather than, as it is traditionally labeled, the Wycliffite Bible – was in fact categorically orthodox (Poleg 2013). Possession of the Bible speaks to the broad appetite among lay readers for ownership of religious texts. The pre-Reformation English Church may have prohibited the ownership of the Middle English Bible by certain estates, but it also acknowledged that readers might and did have access to it. Contrary to Nicholas Watson’s claim, for example, that Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ was written ‘to provide the substitute of devout meditation for the increasingly widespread (and by now suspect) lay practice of Bible study’ (Watson 1995, 853), the Mirror in fact readily admits that readers might consult the scriptures. ‘We passen ouer at þis tyme,’ says Love of his account of the woman Samaritan
from John 4, ‘for als miche as it is opun & pleynly writen in þe gospel of Jon’ (Sargent 2005, 94). Rather, the Mirror is representative of the fifteenth-century view that vernacular religious writing should supplement and expand on Biblical materials, itself an assertion of confidence in the theoretical and theological capabilities of the vernacular. As Love puts it, in Caxton’s version of his Proheme:

> Wherfore we mown to styrynge of deuocyo[n] ymagyne and thynke dyuerse wordes and dedes of hym and other that we finde not wreton to that so that it be not ageynst the byleue as Saynte Gregore and other doctours sayen /that holy wryte maye be expowned and understode in dyuerse maners and to dyuerse purposes/ Soo that it be not ageynst the byleue or goog maners. And so what tyme or in what place that thys book is wreton that thus dyde or thus spake our lord Jesus or other that ben spoken of. and it maye not be preued by holy wryte or gronded in expresse sayenges of hooly doctours. hyt shalle be taken none otherwyse than as a deuoute medytacyon that hyt myght so be spoken or done (STC 3260, 5).

Love legitimises the fictional expansion on Christ’s life as it is presented in the Gospels precisely in terms of the accumulative, accretive traditions of orthodox commentary and exegesis. As Kantik Ghosh puts it, ‘the biblical text is used as the occasion for an affective and theoretical literary creativity which implicitly denies the Wycliffite disjunction of divine text and human hermeneutics. Instead the Mirror in effect insists on the univocity, the continuity of the Divine Word and the human through a constant violation of what Vincent Gillespie calls “the decorum of textual boundaries”’ (Ghosh 1991, 153). For Love, and later for Sir Thomas More, the Wycliffite (or Lutheran) addiction to the literal word represents a diminishment of human capacity. It declares a desultory preference for the theology – thoroughly
Augustinian, of course – of the Fall as opposed to that of the Redemption, as represented by the exemplarity of Christ's life. The ‘resurgence’ of heresy was, for More, simply a case of history repeating itself. After all, as Richard Rex comments, ‘Thomas More never encountered “the Reformation”: history had not yet bestowed that appellation on the crisis in which he lived’ (Rex 2011, 97). Heresy, says More in *A Confutation to Tyndale’s Answer* (1532), is a ‘poysoned adder […] lyeng and lurkyng amonge the drye fruteless fagottes [that] catcheth good folke by the fyngers, and so hangeth on theyr handes wyth the poyson styng’. A key word here is ‘fruteless’: heresy’s commitment is to the sterile literal word, from which the participation of human imagination has been banned. Wycliffite or Lutheran hermeneutics were perceived by More, as they had been by Nicholas Love, as no kind of hermeneutics at all; they represented, fundamentally, the repudiation of the role of human perception in understanding the plenitude of God’s creation (Simpson 2007). By contrast, we might assume that More has in mind an antonym, ‘fructuose’, used in myriad devotional tracts across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but especially central to Nicholas Love’s *Mirror*, which since the 1450s had been considered the ‘official’ textual response of Lollardy (Sargent 2005). Indeed, More proceeds to outline a canon of fifteenth-century devotional reading that speaks to the continuing ‘fructuoseness’ of such writing: he counsels that ‘the people vnlerned’, in addition to ‘prayour’ and ‘good medytacyon’, should read,

*suche englysshe bookes as most may norysshe and encrease deuocyon. Of whyche kynde is Bonaunture of the lyfe of Cryste, Gerson of the folowyng of Cryste, and the deuote contemplatuyue booke of Scala perfectionis wyth such other lyke / then in the lernynge what may well be answered vnto heretykes* (More 1977, 37).
Here are invoked those two most significant figures in fifteenth-century English religious writing: Love ("Bonaunture of the lyfe of Cryste") and Hilton ("Scala perfectionis"), scrupulous moderator of contemplative theology; as well as one of the century’s most important texts, the *Imitatio Christi*, attributed to Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris and guardian of visionary *discretio*, but now thought to have been authored by Thomas à Kempis. More’s evocation of these writers should problematise any account of sixteenth-century writing in terms of naive periodising schemes of representing the past in terms of continuity or change, because neither ‘past’ ‘present’, nor ‘future’ can be so simplistically conceived (Summit 2000, 121-2). Periodisation may divide, but tragically for Thomas More, the past also does not simply ‘continue’ unproblematically, as twentieth-century theologian and bishop Charles Gore would have it: ‘there is, after all, a faith which has been held *semper, ubique, ab omnibus* in such sense that what fragments of the Christian body have not held it hardly count in the total effect’ (Gore 1907, 213). Such an attitude is precisely the basis of More’s dismissive circumscription of religious dissent, and the reason why he fatally misread the political circumstances within which attitudes to religious orthodoxy were changing.

The purpose of the devout imagining espoused by Love and commended by More is careful, penitential self-examination. Love asserts that it is only with ‘clennesse of conscience’ that his readers might begin to achieve, through ‘deuoute imaginacioun’, the affective identification with

23 Discussed in Kelly and Perry 2014.
Christ's sufferings which will enable their own awakening from sin. His text’s overriding objective is the recognition of culpability on the reader’s part: the reader should feel and recognise her sinful complicity in Christ’s death. From ‘inwarde affeccione’ will ‘come many deuout felynges & stirynges [...] neuer supposede before’ (Sargent 2005, 160).

The systematic inquisition of the self permeates devotional and contemplative texts prior to the Reformation (Bryan 2008). ‘And therfore whoso wil travayle in this werk,’ says the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, ‘lat him first clense his concience; and sithen, when he hath done that in him is lawefuly, lat him dispose him booldly bot meekly therto. And lat him think that he hath ful longe ben holden therfro; for this is that werk in the whiche a soule schuld travaile alle his liiftyme, thof he had never sinnid deedly’ (Gallacher 1997, 58). In language which pre-empts Love’s Proheme, in which Christ’s life is offered to his readers as a mirror, the Cloud-Author asserts,

Goddes worde, outher wretyn or spokyn, is licnid to a mirour. Goostly, the ighe of thi soule is thi reson; thi conscience is thi visage goostly. And right as thou seest that yif a foule spot be in thi bodily visage, the ighe of the same visage may not see that spotte, ne wite wher it is, withouten a myrour or a teching of another than itself: right so it is goostly. Withouten redyng or heryng of Godes worde, it is inpossible to mans understandyng that a soule is bleendid in custom of synne schuld see the foule spot in his concyence (64).

Elsewhere, in a characteristically brilliant image, Walter Hilton admonishes his reader to ‘ransake’ her conscience:

Yif thou wolt witen thanne yif thi soule be reformed to the image of God or noo, bi that that I have seid thou maist have an entré. Ransake thyn owen conscience and loke what thi wille is, for thereinne stondeth al. Yif it be turned from al deedli synne, that
thou woldest for nothynge wityngeli and wilfulli breke the comaundement of God, and
for that thou hast mysdoon here before agens his biddynge, thou haste beschreven
mekeli, with ful herte to leve it and with sorwe that thou dedest it, I seie thanne sikirli
that thi soule is reformed in feith to the likenesse of God (Bestul 2000, 39).

Here, again, is the refrain of reform, now applied to the individual soul. The
structured scrutiny of the self accompanies contemplative and pastoral writing
alike, and speaks not to ‘democratisation’ but perhaps to the privatisation of
piety in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which religious books played a
key role. This is witnessed to in wills, such as that of Cecily Neville, Duchess
of York, who died in 1495:

I geve to my dovghter Brigitte the boke of the Legenda avrea in velem a boke | of the
life of Kateryn of Sene a boke of saint Matilde […] Also, I geve to my | dovghter Anne
Priores of Sion a boke of Bonaventvre and Hilton in the same in Englishe | and a boke
of the Revelacions of Saint Bvrgitte […] Also I geve to Sir John | Blotte a gospell boke
a pistill covered with ledder (Spedding 2010).

Neville’s will lists the late fifteenth-century best-sellers: Love, Hilton, but also
the Legende Aurea, printed in an English translation by Caxton in 1483 (STC
24873). Most significantly, Cecily reveals her penchant for exemplars of
female piety: Catherine of Siena, whose Dialogo was translated into Middle
English at Syon in the first half of the fifteenth century as The Orcherd of Syon
and printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1519 (STC 4815); the Revelations of St
Bridget, who was the patron of the Brigittine Order at Syon; and a life of
Mechtild of Hackeborn (presumably the Book of Ghostly Grace; Armstrong
1983).
Neville seemed to lack the evangelising zeal of her cousin, Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, and mother to Henry VII. Beaufort confounds historians’ efforts to divide piety from humanism in later medieval England: in many respects, she is a recipient and proponent of the ‘ecclesiastical humanism’ which coalesced in the middle decades of the fifteenth century. In addition to establishing the Cambridge colleges of St John’s and Christ’s, Beaufort translated *The Mirror of Gold for the Sinful Soul* and, most significantly, the fourth book of the *Imitatio Christi*, of Thomas à Kempis (completed with William Atkinson). Both texts were printed for Beaufort by Pynson in 1506 (STC 6894.5) and 1504 (STC 23955) respectively, the last printer whose work she sponsored. Her commitment to the most austere orders of English monasticism – she visited Sheen and Syon in 1504 by papal license – fed her patronage of Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde; both printed *The Fifteen Oes*, attributed to Bridget of Sweden, and de Worde was commissioned to produce a print of Hilton’s *Scale* in 1494. The texts Beaufort used to inform her piety stressed both the accessibility and the mundanity of the lives of the saints and Christ. The *Imitatio Christi*, in particular, was the product of the devotional pragmatism associated with the Modern Devout, but again it ‘was primarily concerned with interior reform’ (Von Habsburg 2011, 25).

V. ‘Stryf among cristis disciplis’: periodising religious change

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24 Her translation is assessed by Dremmer 2012.
When, months before her death, Lady Margaret attended the coronation of her grandson, Henry VIII, she must have felt assured that the project to which she and the ecclesiastical establishment had been dedicated in the fifteenth century, the elaboration of lay and clerical reform, had all but been completed, making England the apotheosis of Catholic orthodoxy. That Henry would initiate the process by which the material and theological fabric of her religious world would be undone must have been unthinkable. But she could not, of course, think the future into being. Neither can we. And yet, the historiography of the English Reformation has consistently sought to historicise medieval English religion in relation to the Reformation-to-come. This has too often involved scholars in powerful gestures of retroactive identification, as sectarian apologists of various persuasions have found in the period what Michael Sargent has recently termed ‘harbingers of their own post-medieval mentalities’. As John van Engen has stated, ‘we maintain discrete epochs by wearing interpretive blinkers’:

  Few eras have suffered from this as much as fifteenth-century Europe, caught in the Catholic/Protestant polemic from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries no less than in the medieval/modern, scholastic/humanist disputes. The fifteenth century as a distinct epoch, a Europe with multiple and sometimes contradictory options, not merely autumnal or traditional or devotional or indeed humanist or pre-reforming (whatever truths those rubrics may also capture), steeped in inheritances yet productive of innovations—this historians are only beginning to imagine (Van Engen 2008, 260).

Our problem has its roots in the simultaneous ripeness and rhetorical consistency of the language deployed by orthodox and heterodox writers alike. For example, the description of the Church by one group of fifteenth-
century Wycliffites chimes seductively with later Protestant attacks, from Bale to Foxe. The *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, as the text has come to be known, sought to persuade parliamentarians to challenge the authority of the Church in language that seems to prefigure that of Protestant reformers:

> Qwan þe chirche of Yngelond began to dote in temperalte aftir hir stemodir þe grete chirche of Rome, and chirches were slayne be appropriacion to diuerse placys, feyth, hope and charite begunne for to fle out of our chirche (Hudson 1997, 24).

How prescient, for an earlier generation of historians, that this text should be pinned to Westminster Hall,26 the first public salvo in an attack on the Church that would culminate in the nailing of Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* to the doors of Wittenberg cathedral (the historiographical logic is that repetition legitimates).27 It is precisely as a consequence of the muddied terrain of reformist rhetoric that it is so difficult to disentangle the specificities of Reformation ‘innovation’ from a fifteenth-century appetite for novel and diverse modes of religious literature and practice. Consequently, it has proven too easy for historians to absorb and reproduce the rhetoric of reform, whether in its mild, anti-clerical or anti-papal registers. ‘I have become painfully aware,’ says Alexandra Walsham, in a recent article, ‘of the extent to which I am both a product and a prisoner of the historiographical and epistemological trends I […] describe’ (Walsham 2014, 241-42).

> How, as Walsham asks, are we to ‘conceptualize and explain religious change in medieval and early modern Europe without perpetuating distorting

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26 The nailing of the *Twelve Conclusions* to the doors of Westminster Hall in 1395 is reported in Roger Dymmok’s *Liber contra duodecim errores et hereses Lollardum*. See Hudson (1997: 150-51).

27 The historicity of this event remains in question.
paradigms inherited from the very era of the past that is the subject of our study?’ (ibid., 241). We must admit that change is identified only in retrospect and only because recognising it does cultural work for us, now. As Kathleen Davis has recently argued: ‘Periodization [...] does not refer to a mere back-description that divides history into segments, but to a fundamental political technique – a way to moderate, divide, and regulate – always rendering its services now’ (Davis 2008, 5).28 In his magisterial and controversial Reform and Cultural Revolution, James Simpson has argued compellingly for the retrenchment of the reformist strategies of fifteenth-century writing under the Henrician Reformation:

the main features of “medieval” cultural practice turn out to be as follows: a sense of long and continuous histories; and accretive reception of texts, where the historicity of the reader receiving the old text is not at all suppressed; clearly demarcated and unresolved generic, stylistic, and/or discursive divisions within texts; and, above all, an affirmation of human initiative, whether in politics or theology.

By contrast, Simpson characterises the sixteenth century as a ‘cultural revolution’, which demanded ‘both repudiation of the old order and a vigorous affirmation of novelty’, all in the service of a ‘newly conceived transcendence of power’ (Simpson 2002, 558-59). Other contributions to this volume will affirm, contest and problematise such views. It is worth noting, with Thomas Betteridge, that books published after the death of Henry VIII ‘can be seen as returning to the norms of Simpson’s fourteenth- and fifteenth-century reformist literature’ (Betteridge 2005, 92-3). Might it be that, even as he seeks to turn the tables on traditional scholarly accounts of the fate of medieval culture,

28 See also Marshall 2012, 1-3.
Simpson succumbs to the continuing dominance of Reformation conceptions of history? As Brian Cummings has noted, ‘since the primal act of Reformation historiography, John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* of 1563, the Reformation has acted as an icon of historical change, subjecting circumstance to an overriding narrative of inevitable and salutary revolution’ (Cummings 1999, 822).

We might be wise, then, to resist tropes of continuity, rupture, or revolution, which do little but serve historiographies of triumph, for one or another religious constituency. Perhaps we would be better to attend precisely to ‘circumstance’: to those moments when fifteenth and sixteenth-century writers reflected on the religious tensions of their own times without capitulating to narratives of supersession. Among the twenty seven items in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 23, a devotional compilation made in London in the first half of the fifteenth century, there is a unique sermon, named in a rubricated title ‘Vos estis ciues sanctorum’. An allegorical sermon describing the fractious state of the contemporary English Church in terms of a besieged city, the sermon envisages the resolution of sectarian dissent as follows:

> Now moste we lerne to belde a3en þis cite. And among þese cetesynis to make a fynial vnite. In Cristis tyme þer was a stryf among cristis disciplis . but crist pesid hem. And taw3t a lessoun how his chirche shulde be reconsilid wtouten ende.\(^{29}\)

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\(^{29}\) The sermon appears fols. 61r–70r, with this passage appearing on fol. 68r. The sermon is edited in a modern English translation by Lahey et al. 2013: 285-300. The sermon is discussed in Kelly and Perry 2011, 362-380 and 2013, 215-238. A detailed codicological account of the manuscript can be accessed on the Geographies of Orthodoxy website: [http://www.qub.ac.uk/geographies-of-orthodoxy/resources/?section=manuscript&id=73](http://www.qub.ac.uk/geographies-of-orthodoxy/resources/?section=manuscript&id=73)
Division between ‘orthodox’ and dissenting religious positions is compared to ‘stryf among cristis disciplis’. But in order for the city to be rebuilt, there must be a ‘fynial vnite’, in which religious difference will ‘be reconsilid wtouten ende’. The sermon’s ethics may be rooted in the scriptural past, but its assessment of the present depends on a conceptualisation of the future patterned on hope. That such hope is never fulfilled should not be a concern for literary historians. Rather, it is our task to scrutinise such moments of enunciation and to note, not mourn or celebrate, their consequences and implications.

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