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HOLY CHURCH, THE SIMPLE SOUL AND THE LITERARY
ARTICULATION OF AN ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY:
THE EVIDENCE OF LATER MIDDLE ENGLISH TEXTS.

To deny the unlearned, caught up in moral and ritual practice, all powers of reflection on what governed their earthly lives and eternal fates is, in my view, to empty them of a piece of their humanity. To deny learned churchmen any compassionate insight into the earthly dilemmas of their subject peoples is to rule out in advance any measure of the virtue expected of those entrusted with souls.

John Van Engen, 'The Future of Medieval Church History'

Bethan Arwen Williams

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ABSTRACT

Through an historical and literary-critical approach to the analysis of a range of extant vernacular writings from the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth centuries, this thesis aims to characterise certain aspects of the existence, workings and complexities of an orthodox, literary mainstream religious sensibility in later mediaeval England. The arguments this thesis propounds stem from a basic premise that acknowledges the presence of an undoubted mediaeval Christian faith in England in the later Middle Ages and, particularly, in the Middle English works under discussion. The texts that will be used to provide illustrative examples of this sensibility range from anonymous lyrics and *pastoralia* such as *Handlyng Synne*, *The Lay Folk's Catechism* and *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* through to more contemplative works such as the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, texts written for female religious, the treatises of Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich and, finally, Nicholas Love's spiritual guide *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.

Textual evidence will be used to illustrate the shortcomings of a critical approach that tacitly denies the existence of a sincere mediaeval Christian faith and certain modern academic interpretations of mediaeval orthodox religious beliefs and practices will be challenged. A freshly nuanced approach to the consideration of Middle English devotional texts will be put forward in place of existing interpretations that either see the authors of such works enthusiastically endorsing an oppressive ecclesiastical regime through their writing, or conclude that a seeming adherence to orthodox beliefs is a mask for the articulation of radical, anti-

establishment beliefs. Working with a definition of Holy Church that allows for it to be conterminously understood as an institution endowed with the received authority of its founder, Christ, and also as an organisation run by an all too fallible clerical hierarchy, critical discussion of texts will centre upon their articulation of an orthodox approach to spirituality that is, perhaps, surprising in its latitude. This thesis also aims to show how such binary categorisations as public and private, institutional and individual, do not offer a fair representation of the complex relationships that might be seen to have existed between a man/woman and Holy Church; how, while playing an elementary, foundational role in orthodox religious practices, the Church did not, even within its own self-prescribed boundaries, discourage the development of direct, personal and prayerful relationships with God and Christ.

I Bethan Arwen Williams, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 85 400 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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I was admitted as a research student in September, 2001, and as a candidate for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in September 2001; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2001 and 2006.

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ABBREVIATIONS

E.E.T.S.	<i>Early English Text Society</i>
J.E.G.P.	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
M.E.D.	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
O.E.D.	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>

NOTES ON PRESENTATION

Square brackets either side of a lower case letter (for example, [b]) have been used at the start of quotations that are contained within a sentence to indicate that, in its original form, the letter concerned was a capital.

In quotations from Middle English texts, the symbol .´ has been used to represent the *punctus elevatus*.

INTRODUCTION

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, England was a place of immense social, political, intellectual and religious upheaval. This was the time of the Black Death, the Peasants' Revolt, the overthrowing of a legitimate Plantagenet heir by his Lancastrian cousins, the rise of literacy among the middle and upper classes and the birth, spread and, arguably inevitable, suppression by the ecclesiastical authorities of the 'English heresy' popularly referred to as Lollardy. As such it is a period that has been studied extensively by academics across the board and continues to yield new areas for research and debate in areas as diverse as gender studies and ecclesiastical and literary history. This thesis, advancing its own claims against – or perhaps more appropriately alongside – such an undeniable backdrop of instability and change – aims to employ an historical and literary-critical approach to a carefully directed analysis of a range of later Middle English vernacular writings. Certain aspects of the existence, workings and complexities of an orthodox, literary, mainstream religious sensibility will be foregrounded through the close examination of didactic manuals, poetry, sermons, and works that might best be categorised as extra-liturgical, private and devotional.

This research has, from the outset, been informed by the knowledge that there are too many celebrated instances of ecclesiastical abuses of power and privilege for the mediaeval institution of the Church to be viewed as a wholly true and faithful witness to Christ. Certainly it would seem that for every poor Parson there was an unscrupulous Pardoner or selfish, power-hungry priest, and it would be equally fruitless to try to deny that there were not occasions when clerics and religious, as

well as the laity, sought, through their association with and undertaking of orthodox Christian devotional acts, to further their own careers or social standing rather than ensuring the salvation of their immortal souls. To acknowledge this is not, however, to deny that it is possible to find written and non-textual evidence of honestly-held mainstream Christian belief at this time,¹ since people have the capacity to be simultaneously sincere and hypocritical in their beliefs and actions. Evidence of a universal mediaeval belief in the *post mortem* judgment of the soul by God as found in art, literature and wills, for example, helps to counter any sense that religious observation was merely a social convention and a useful front for the display of wealth, power, learning and the control of the general populace.

Indeed, there is a need to accept that, in mediaeval England, there was a fundamental, collective, belief in Christianity – in God the Father and Christ His Son – that underpinned society in a way that, six hundred years later, can be difficult to comprehend outside the immediate circles of church or theological college.² In an article that highlights the differences between Mankind's comprehension of the world in the Middle Ages and a twentieth-century perception, or even lack of perception, of the existence of any organic or preternatural bedrock of life and humanity, Terry Eagleton writes simply, yet astutely, about his generalised

¹ G. Duby, for example, in *The Age of the Cathedrals; Art and Society 980-1420*, tr. E. Le Vieux and B. Thompson (London: Croom Helm, 1981) sees the building of the great cathedrals of Europe and a general flowering of religious art in the later Middle Ages as an instance of Christian piety:

In the new Christianity laymen were no longer mute uncomprehending witnesses of the liturgy as their fathers had been. Everyone... practiced their faith as well as they were able. Helping to create art was precisely one of the ways open to them.... Works of art more than ever answered a religious purpose. (p. 222)

² This 'problem' is addressed in Jan Van Engen's article, 'The Future of Medieval Church History' *Church History* 71 (2002) 492-523. Van Engen notes that critical attitudes towards the mediaeval Church have changed from one that imagines 'the fabric of medieval Christendom as a single weave' to one that 'construe[s] as authentic only those peoples or practices regarded as in resistance, the "pagan" or "popular" or "visionary" or heretical'. Both stances, Van Engen contends are 'equally as single-minded, and equally distorting'. (p. 493)

understanding of a theoretical, philosophical and religious mediaeval 'world-view'.³

He says:

The most obvious name for a foundation which is the ground, cause, and end of itself is God. God is Spinoza's self-causing Cause. For Thomas Aquinas, God is not a foundation in the sense of an ontological bedrock: he is not an entity, a rational principle, an impersonal force or a person in the sense that Al Gore is arguably one. God and the universe do not add up to two. He is a foundation in the sense that he is the condition for there being anything whatsoever, the answer to the question of why there is anything at all, rather than just nothing. But the theological claim is that there is a way of relating to this 'foundation' which appears to kick it away, and that this is what is meant by living well, or the life of grace. Our utter dependency on God is for Judaeo-Christian theology the source of our freedom, not an infringement of it. If God lies at the source of my identity, then he is the ground of my autonomy too. To acknowledge our groundedness, which is known to theology as faith, is exactly what allows us to be free-standing, self-fashioning subjects in the first place.⁴

Citing Thomas Aquinas and his premise that God, as the founder of the universe, is 'the condition for there being anything whatsoever' and the answer to the question of 'why there is anything at all', Eagleton uses the stance of this mediaeval Doctor of the Church to throw the modern doubt-filled theories of 'foundationalists, antifoundationalists, hybrids of the two... [and] those who have no definite view on the question'⁵ into sharp relief. Later in the article, he contrasts the stability of meaning found in a time when the voice of St Thomas represented an accepted norm with a more modern, ultimately less satisfactory equivalent of such a 'self-grounding ground': communism.⁶ While in certain respects this brief sidestep into the murky world of literary theory is tangential to the central tenets of the argument that will form the backbone of this thesis, it is, on another level, highly relevant. Eagleton

³ T. Eagleton, 'God, The Universe, Art, and Communism' *New Literary History* 32 (2001), 23-32.

⁴ Eagleton, p. 26.

⁵ Eagleton, p. 23.

⁶ Eagleton, p. 32.

uses the words of St Thomas to be representative of what he sees as a generally endorsed point of view in the later Middle Ages. He accepts that there was a sincere belief in the reality of God's existence at this time, an admission that other modern academics are not always as willing or able to make as they work to reject 'the lazy dreams of firm foundations, of the theological-metaphysical guarantors and arbiters'⁷ and offer in their place analyses focused upon cold socio-political interpretations of texts and the religious tenets that they endorse.

This thesis is especially concerned with the Middle English literary manifestation of what Eagleton refers to as the theological claim 'that there is a way of relating to this "foundation"' of God through faith and as such involves the acceptance of a premise that, despite the likely influence of external factors (the need to be seen to endorse the ecclesiastical *status quo* at a time when heresy was a real threat to ecclesiastical and secular authority, for example) orthodox fourteenth- and fifteenth-century didactic and devotional vernacular texts were written, in accordance with mainstream religious thought of the time, to *help* the individual seeking a Christian salvation. Moreover, the religious sensibilities articulated in such texts will be seen to show that, contrary to the belief of academics such as Moira Fitzgibbons and Nicholas Watson, literary exhortations to orthodox religious belief and practice ought not to be immediately equated with the religious oppression of the laity and a determination to create and enforce a passive lay dependence upon the Church. Neither should they be taken as clear evidence of the existence of a

⁷ G. Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 119. Steiner, on the same page, invites his readers to recognise that the 'distant fathers (who never were) have left us' leaving the modern academic with a 'universe of games in which semiotic structures and their messages are boundless'. Such an argument cannot, however, be applied easily to the study of mediaeval texts produced in an age of Christian belief.

tyrannical clerical hierarchy and the textual expression of a jealously guarded ecclesiastical awareness of the power afforded the Church through its custodianship of the sacraments.

Since it will be argued in this thesis that textual evidence suggests that, far from fostering an obligation of passive lay dependence upon the Church, later Middle English works, in their articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility, actually encouraged the simultaneous and complementary development of public, corporate worship and private religious devotions, it is important to establish what, for the purpose of this research, is meant by the term 'Holy Church'. This thesis posits the case for a threefold definition of an idiom that, in its emotive appropriation of the word 'holy', can often be difficult to use in an objective manner. In the following chapters the term is understood to be applicable to a definition of the eternal, heavenly communion of saints. It is also, appropriately, the body founded by Christ to be His representative on earth after His Resurrection and Ascension. As a result of this interpretation, the very essence of the institution of Holy Church will be understood to have been endowed with a sacred duty to help effect the salvation of all humanity, as well as possessing a divine authority that cannot ever be undermined entirely by any abuse of its rites and practices or open attacks upon the very nature of its existence. Given their centrality to any understanding of mediaeval, orthodox religious belief this definition of Holy Church has also been extended to include the doctrines and dogmas of this institution and, in particular, the sacraments, that, one hundred years after the Fourth Lateran Council, had come

to be seen as integral parts of orthodox faith.⁸ Finally, in its day-to-day guise, as experienced by the laity in towns across England, and as presided over by all too fallible men and women, Holy Church is understood to be an organisation that, despite being founded upon unimpeachable tenets, does, on occasion fail to discharge its spiritual obligations satisfactorily. It is the second of these definitions – the premise that the institution of Holy Church and its basic, fundamental tenets are essentially inviolable – that is perhaps most relevant to the subsequent discussion of Middle English devotional texts since it allows for the expression in these writings (in spite of, or alongside external social or ecclesiastical influences) of ideologically unimpeachable orthodox religious thought and, by so doing, invites a critical consideration of the intended effect on, or response to, such a work by a pious mediaeval reader – the ‘simple soul’ of this thesis’ title.

Through the consideration of a later mediaeval orthodox religious sensibility that rejects a binary opposition of public and private, individual and institution, this thesis will aim to show how such categorisations do not do justice to the complex relationships that the texts under discussion can be seen to have encouraged to exist between a man/woman and the orthodox teachings of the Church. Attention will be drawn to the idea that textual analysis of a range of works can show that the institution of Holy Church, while playing a central, grounding role in the spiritual lives of the faithful, did not, even within its own self-defined boundaries, intrinsically seek to discourage or prevent the development of personal, meditative

⁸ I am indebted to P. H. Barnum for this useful term (employed repeatedly in the following chapters) which she uses in her introduction to *Dives and Pauper* (London: E.E.T.S., 1976) to define an orthodox later mediaeval acceptance of beliefs and practices which, although strictly speaking the work of men, had nevertheless come to be seen as the ideological embodiment of grace-endowed religious doctrine. Barnum, p. x.

and prayerful relationships between the individual soul and God. Since this research is concerned with the uncovering and categorising of a mainstream religious sensibility that is articulated in later mediaeval vernacular religious texts, references to heterodoxy (especially Lollardy) will only occur insofar as the presence – or present threat – of heresy might be seen to have impinged upon the consciousness of a particular writer.

Given that a religious sensibility is, by its very nature, difficult to treat as a discrete entity, the structure of this work is necessarily fluid, with arguments being advanced across the boundaries usually set by chapters. While not formally divided in such a way, this thesis falls naturally into two halves, each of which is then further subdivided into chapters. The first half can be seen to focus upon the existence and literary representation of a relationship between the institution of Holy Church and the individual soul: the influence of the former upon the latter and the manner in which the layman or woman was able to use the central tenets of the Church – especially the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist – as a springboard for the development of a direct, intensely personal relationship with God. The first chapter, ‘Literary Responses to the Fourth Lateran Council’ will consider the English Archbishopial and Episcopal response to the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council and the production of *pastoralia* intended to help clergy and laity alike to fulfil their spiritual obligations. In so doing, and with reference to texts such as the *Speculum Christiani*, *Handlyng Synne*, *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*, *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book* and Myrc’s *Instructions for Parish Priests*, there will also be an introduction of the important idea that, contrary to certain modern strands of critical thought, there

existed a complementariness rather than opposition between institutional religion and private, individual devotional practices.

Chapter II, 'Personal Accountability and Received Authority: The Textual Articulation of Some Orthodox Mediaeval Religious Ideals', will build upon the premise established in Chapter I. It will argue for the existence and literary articulation of a general (in the sense of popular and universal), yet profound, mediaeval understanding and acceptance of orthodox belief in the spiritual efficacy of the doctrines of the Church. A belief in the ultimate incorruptibility of the doctrines and rites of Holy Church – despite an awareness that the actual reality of experience might fall short of this ideal – will be illustrated by a selection of lyrics, while *The Parson's Tale* will be used in conjunction with a consideration of an orthodox mediaeval understanding of the concept of grace and the related perception that all clerical 'power' and 'authority' lies, ultimately, in the gift of God: clergy are merely conduits for His grace. The discussion will then turn to one of the most obvious manifestations of a situation in which a priest acts as a channel for the grace of God: the sacrament of penance and its representation in texts such as the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, *Piers Plowman* and *Jacob's Well*.

The third and fourth chapters are both concerned with lay understanding of and participation in the celebration of Mass. Chapter III, '*Pacientes Vincunt?* Eucharistic Devotion and the Literary Representation of the Humanity of Christ' will examine literary portrayals of Christ's humanity in order to gain an understanding of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century responses to His Incarnation and suffering as a man. This, in turn, will lead to a discussion of the occasional modern academic

tendency to place too great an emphasis upon Christ's humanity, an argument that will be shown to lead to the articulation of a curious belief that, by enduring human death, Christ not only redeemed Mankind, but also glorified humanity *for its own sake*. The chapter closes with an examination of the poem *Pearl* and its representation of Christ in heaven, post-Ascension, as the Lamb of God: glorious and triumphant yet still bearing the scars He won on earth.

Chapter IV, 'A Genuine Beatific Vision or an Ecclesiastical P.R. Coup? The Evidence of Middle English Responses to the Elevation of the Host' continues where the third chapter ended, opening with more discussion of *Pearl*, Eucharistic piety and the historian Miri Rubin's presentation of the consecrated Host as something essentially unstable, controlled and disseminated by an elite few more for their own temporal benefit than because of any desire to praise and serve God. The chapter as a whole looks at aspects of orthodox mediaeval lay devotion often thought to be problematic, namely the infrequency of lay communion and the power that the clerical privilege of celebration might be thought to have given a priest over his congregation. The fourteenth-century text, *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, will then be used as an illustration to move the discussion forward to a consideration of the fact that, in addition to being a public, corporate and communal rite, the Mass is an essentially private and personal experience for those present, one that, building upon orthodox, ecclesiastically sanctioned foundations, allows for spiritual growth and a deepening understanding of the love that God and Christ showed and continued to show for humanity. The elevation of the Host and the spiritual efficacy of the concept of 'ghostly' or 'spiritual' communion will also be discussed with reference

to lyrics, Lydgate's *Virtues of the Mass*, *Pearl*, Margery Kempe and Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.

Chapter V marks the beginning of the second half of this thesis which, seeking to build upon thoughts and ideas established in the previous chapters, is concerned with extra-liturgical textual responses to orthodox religious ideas. The final three chapters will show how even certain texts that, in their concern with personal, interiorised acts of devotion make little mention of sacramental, institutional worship, should not be considered as being *contra* such forms of worship. Instead, literary evidence will be used to show how it is possible to see that these more private writings build upon the knowledge and spiritual insight offered by an ecclesiastical, sacramental foundation that has its roots in the English Archiepiscopal and Episcopal response to the Fourth Lateran Council. The fifth chapter, 'Religious Works for the Orthodox: The Marriage of Institutional and Private Religious Practices in Texts' follows on from the closing section of chapter four by considering Sarah Beckwith's and Caroline Walker Bynum's attitudes towards later mediaeval devotion to the Host. This discussion leads on to an assessment of John Audelay and the articulation in his verse of the type of orthodox, private response to a public, institutionally sanctioned event such as the celebration of Mass, before Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* and *Mixed Life* and the anonymous *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* are presented for debate as examples of texts that in seeking to show their readers how, practically, to lead private, spiritually fulfilling lives articulate clearly an orthodox religious sensibility that sees the foundations for

personal religious practices in an acceptance and belief in the received authority of the central tenets of a post-Lateran IV Church.

Chapter VI, “‘Vernacular Theology’ and its Relationship with the Received Authority of the Mediaeval Institution of Holy Church’, having established the strengths and weaknesses of Nicholas Watson’s term ‘vernacular theology’ and its use in the critical examination of a broad range of Middle English devotional texts, will build upon the discussions of the previous chapter, by examining the articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility in works often considered ‘mystic’, as well as books written to be read by female religious (a classification that was often equated, in terms of intellectual and devotional capabilities as being on a par with a devout, literate layman). The ‘mystic’ texts that are focused upon include *The Cloud of Unknowing* as well as works by Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich. *The Chastising of God’s Children*, *The Mirror of Our Lady* and *The Orchard of Syon*, all of which were written for the spiritual edification of religious sisters will be considered for their expression of a need to combine private prayer and meditation with obligations to participate in the daily round of sung services.

Finally, Chapter VII, ‘Honest Nourishment for the Soul or an Example of Orthodox Oppression of Lay Religious Sensibility? A Critical Reconsideration of Nicholas Love’s *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*’ will offer an extended analysis of an early fifteenth-century text that, partly because of its association with the fanatically anti-heretical Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, has been the subject of much recent critical debate. Analyses and interpretations of Nicholas Love’s text by Nicholas Watson, James Simpson and

Kantik Ghosh will be discussed and reviewed in the light of the arguments advanced in previous chapters. Contrary to the opinions offered by Watson in particular, this thesis sees Love's work as a rather good example of a text that, through its active promotion of obedience to the institution of Holy Church alongside its encouragement of the personal, private spiritual development of its readers articulates an orthodox religious sensibility that exists in its own right and not as a response to the threat of heterodoxy or the expression of a desire to adhere to the status quo.

In seeking to characterise some of the complex workings of the literary expression of an orthodox mainstream religious sensibility in England in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, this thesis aims to offer a new approach to the academic study and reception of a wide range of texts. If, ultimately, the following chapters raise more questions than they answer – in terms of a subsequent need for the re-evaluation of, specifically, other texts and, more generally, the established interpretations of popular mediaeval piety – it is because they are opening the door to a new approach to the critical appreciation of Middle English devotional literature rather than offering the definitive analysis of a loosely-definable textual tradition. They are addressing a pressing need in modern academe to rehabilitate the reputation of – and respect for – orthodox mediaeval religious beliefs and practices.

CHAPTER IENGLISH LITERARY RESPONSES TO THE FOURTH LATERAN
COUNCIL

‘For withouten halikirke nis na saule hele’

(The Lay Folk’s Catechism)

In 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome, decrees were passed that can be seen to have had a lasting impact upon the doctrine taught by the institution of Holy Church and, subsequently, upon modern critical interpretations of the make-up of orthodox mediaeval religious sensibilities. At this convocation, presided over by Pope Innocent III, delegates from across Europe agreed, amongst other things, that the doctrine of transubstantiation, which although accepted in some quarters, had also been the source of fierce debate and controversy in the twelfth century,¹ should be enshrined as dogma. Equally as pertinent for this study of the literary articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility, it was also at this meeting that over one and a half thousand Church patriarchs, bishops, abbots and envoys established the statutes which made it compulsory for every Christian to confess his or her sins to their parish priest at least once a year. By so doing, they placed an onus of obedience not only on the laity, but also upon the local clergy responsible for overseeing the implementation of such edicts. As Jacques le Goff observes in *The Birth of Purgatory*:

This established, generalized, and extended a practice toward which Christianity had been moving for at least a century. Everyone was

¹ J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, The Growth of Medieval Theology 600-1300*. The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine, 5 vols, III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) for a detailed account of the events that led to the enshrining of the doctrine of transubstantiation as dogma. See also G. Macy, *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period: A Study of the Salvific Function of the Sacrament according to the Theologians c. 1080- c. 1220* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), and G. Macy, ‘The Dogma of Transubstantiation in the Middle Ages’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994), 11-41.

required to examine his conscience: the soul was thus plumbed and new depths, and introspective practices previously limited to clerics, especially monks, were now extended to laymen.²

Viewed in such a light, the Fourth Lateran Council can be seen as the setting for the formal adoption of a set of tenets that were already tentatively in existence, with the aim of furthering, through education and, in some instances, reform, the universal Christian cause of Holy Church: the fulfilment of God's will and salvation of all souls.

The first Canon which, although concerned with transubstantiation, also established the '[e]xposition of the Catholic Faith', appears to enjoin equal obedience to the received authority of Holy Church from layman and cleric alike. Likewise, if the laity are the intended 'targets' of the twenty-first canon which, famously opening in Latin with the words, '[o]mnis utriusque sexus',³

commands every Christian who has reached the years of discretion to confess all his, or her, sins at least once a year to his, or her, own (i.e. parish) priest...⁴

then there is an unvoiced assumption that the said parish priests will be suitably qualified to hear confessions, impose appropriate penances and pronounce absolution. Canons fourteen to seventeen, which can be glossed as being '[a]gainst the irregularities of the clergy', reinforce this idea, as does the sixth canon which decrees that '[p]rovincial councils must be held annually for the

² J. Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, tr. A. Goldhammer (London: Scolar Press, 1984), p. 216.

³ The opening of the twenty-first decree of the Fourth Lateran Council reads as follows:
 Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis, postquam ad annos discretionis pervenerit omnia sua solus peccata confiteatur fideliter, saltem semel in anno proprio sacerdoti, et iniunctam sibi poenitentiam studeat pro viribus adimplere suscipiens reverenter ad minua in pascha eucharistiae sacramentum...

Cited from the *Conciliorum ecumenicorum decreta*, ed. J. Albergio et al., 3rd edn (Bologna, 1973) p. 245 and quoted in F. Kemmler, 'Exempla' in *Context: A Historical and Critical Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's 'Handlyng Synne'* (Tübingen: Narr, 1984), p. 30.

⁴ *The Catholic Encyclopedia* online: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09018a.htm, accessed on 13/09/2004.

reform of morals, especially those of the clergy'.⁵ The princes of the established Roman Church, while convinced that its apostolic, Christ-ordained heritage affords it – and through grace, them – the highest spiritual authority possible in this transient world, would also appear to have recognised the practical difficulties of administering such a vast body effectively. The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council might thus be said to have provided a framework for lay and ecclesiastical reform which was intended to move each Christian soul, as well as the corporate body of Christianity, Holy Church, closer to God.

The impact of the 1215 edicts was far-reaching and it is necessary that any attempt to examine the literary articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility that is founded on an acceptance of the received authority of the Church considers the role played by bishops and their parish priests in the interpretation and promulgation of the various canons. This chapter will seek to illustrate how, in texts such as Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* and Gaytryge's *The Lay Folk's Catechism*, writers working in a post Lateran IV environment sought to encourage clerics and those in their cure to adopt these newly approved beliefs and practices not only because obedience was a necessary accomplishment in all walks of life in the Middle Ages, but because the spiritual worth of the Lateran edicts was recognised and encouraged by leading churchmen in England. Study of these works will also help to provide a body of textual evidence that can be used to support the claims that this thesis makes for the existence of a recognisable literary expression of an orthodox mediaeval religious sensibility.

⁵ *The Catholic Encyclopedia* online: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09018a.htm, accessed on 13/09/2004.

In *The English Church in the Late Fourteenth Century*, a book which contains valuable accounts of the efforts made by English prelates to educate the clergy in their diocese and, in turn, their parishioners, W.A. Pantin comments that:

the marked taste for mystical literature among the more devout laity of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries presupposes a thorough grounding in dogmatic and moral instruction, through the pulpit and the confessional as well as through reading. Such a state of affairs would have been impossible with a completely disorganized and ignorant clergy and laity, and, it represents the final outcome, on however limited a scale, of what Innocent III and the bishops had been working for.⁶

While pious lay taste in devotional, meditative literature is more properly the subject of the later chapters of this thesis, the idea that a desire for an intensely personal, private, relationship with God was a natural, complementary development for a literate laity that had received a 'thorough grounding in dogmatic and moral instruction' from the Church is one that shall be addressed over the following pages. Indeed, it is an idea that will be seen to underpin all subsequent arguments put forward in this thesis. Pantin puts forward a strong case that the English bishops of the thirteenth century actively encouraged the implementation of the Great Council's decrees, doing much to combat the disorganisation and ignorance of, especially, their rural clergy.⁷ Citing early examples such as Alexander of Stavensby, Bishop of Lichfield, Walter Cantilupe, Bishop of Hereford and the towering figure of Bishop Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln, all of whom had dealt with the implications of the 1215

⁶ W.A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 191.

⁷ For an extended discussion of this subject see also, L.E. Boyle, *Pastoral Care, Clerical Education and Canon Law 1200-1400* (London: Varorium Reprints, 1981) and L.E. Boyle, 'The Summa for Confessors as a Genre and its Religious Intent', in C. Trinkhaus and H. Oberman, (eds), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 126-30; L.E. Boyle, 'The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology', in T. Heffernan (ed.), *The Popular Literature of Medieval England* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, c. 1985), pp. 30-43.

edicts in the constitutions of their own synods,⁸ he then moves to a consideration of Episcopal responses that came later in the thirteenth century. In 1287 Bishop Quivil of Exeter issued a ‘*Summula* or treatise, of which all priests were to possess a copy’, which teaches the priest himself what he ought to know *vis à vis* the Ten Commandments, the articles of faith and the sacraments, and also explains the pastoral obligations he has, especially with regard to the sacrament of penance, to his parishioners.⁹ Finally Pantin considers John Pecham, Archbishop of Canterbury, whose Lambeth Constitutions of the Provincial Council of 1281 would, in the next century, through the *Injunctions* of the Archbishop of York, John de Thoresby and his authorisation of their translation into English by the monk John Gaytryge, become the basis for *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*.¹⁰ In such a way he acknowledges the role played by all these prelates, and the influence that their work had upon lay and clerical understanding of what, in practical, orthodox terms, it meant to be a Christian in the later Middle Ages. He notes that

these bishops not only sketched out regulations and programmes of instruction for parish priests in their constitutions, but they also sent round tracts (for instance on confession) for priests to copy out and keep and learn by heart; and it is these Episcopal tracts that are the ancestors of [the] fourteenth century ‘manual’ literature...¹¹

What becomes clear from the evidence of Episcopal attempts at reform as documented by Pantin and others is that essays were made to subject the less well

⁸ Pantin, p. 192.

⁹ Pantin, p. 194.

¹⁰ C. Fraser, ‘The Religious Instruction of the Laity in Late Medieval England with Particular Reference to the Sacrament of the Eucharist’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1995), neatly summarises the intended aims of the Pechamite reforms:

Perhaps the culmination of the process of reform in England was the issue of Archbishop Pecham’s constitutions at the council of Lambeth in 1281. Pecham laid down a basic teaching syllabus that was more extensive than previous ones, including the Fourteen Articles of Faith, the Decalogue, the Seven Works of Mercy, the Seven Vices, the Seven Virtues and the Seven Sacraments. These basic tenets of the faith were to be expounded to the laity four times a year in the vernacular. (pp. 22-3)

¹¹ Pantin, p. 194.

educated clergy – in reality those who ministered to poor, isolated, rural communities – to a sustained, centrally supported movement that sought, simultaneously, to educate them and also to fulfil apostolic obligations to further and protect the spiritual welfare of all men and women.

This sketching in of a background history of thirteenth-century ecclesiastical reform, helps to provide a setting against which fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century vernacular, instructional religious literature, sometimes referred to as *pastoralia*, may be examined. Unsurprisingly, the first written responses to the Fourth Lateran Council and the Lambeth Constitutions were aimed principally at the clergy whose task it would be to implement the reforms and were written in Latin, the *lingua franca* of mediaeval Europe. One such educatory text, known as the *Speculum Christiani*,¹² was composed during the fourteenth century in response to the reforms that have been described briefly above, and became – to judge from the extant number of manuscripts – extremely popular. The work exists in several macaronic and one completely English form (written later, towards the middle of the fifteenth century), and consists of a series of ‘tables’ that discuss, with reference to patristic sources such as Ambrose, Origen and Augustine as well as the more modern authorities of Grosseteste and Pecham, such fundamental, universally espoused tenets of orthodox mediaeval Christianity as the Decalogue, the seven works of mercy and the seven deadly sins. The *Speculum Christiani* is mentioned here specifically because, towards the end of the text, there is a short yet well-informed consideration of the proper duties of curates, priests and professed religious.

¹² *Speculum Christiani*, ed. G. Holmstedt (London: E.E.T.S., 1933). See Holmstedt’s introduction for a detailed account of the many surviving complete and incomplete manuscripts of this work. His introduction opens with the rather bold claim that one may question ‘whether, among the many religious works composed in the fourteenth century, there were any more popular’. (p. xv)

Quoting from the works of Robert Grosseteste, the author of the *Speculum Christiani* restates the obligations of curates¹³ in no uncertain terms:

Lincolniensis: Opus cure pastoralis non solum consistit in sacramentorum administracione & in horarum canonicarum dictione & missarum celebracione, sed eciam in ueraci doctrina ueritatis uite & uiciorum terrifica dampnacione, in uiciosorum, cum necesse est, dura | & imperiosa corr[e]pcione & rigida castigacione. Consistit in super pas[t]ione esuriencium, in potacione [sitiencium] & cooperacione nudorum, in suscepcione hospitem, in uisitacione infirmorum & incarceratorum & maxime propriorum parochianorum, quorum sunt bona temporalia ecclesiastica; quarum operacionum exemplis instruendus est populus.¹⁴

Or, as taken from the later English MS. Harley 6580:

Lincolniensis: The dede of charge of curates es not oonly in mynistracion of sacraments and in seynges of houres and syngynge of masses, bot also in verrey doctrine of truth of lyfe and in ferful dampnacion of vices and in herde correpcion of viciouse men and scharpe and streyte chastysmente when it es need. Also the werke of curates es in fedyng of hungry, in drynke zeuyng to thursty, in coueryng of naked men, in herberyng of pore gestes, in visitacion of seke men and of prisoners and moste of her oune paryschenges, whose temperalle gudes ben of the chyrch. Be ensample of suche werkes the peple awe3 to be taught, et cetera.¹⁵

The phrase '[b]e ensample of suche werkes' is especially important since, following a passage that insists upon the curate's 'dede of charge' including the active celebration – again by example – of the 'verrey doctrine of truth of lyfe', it illustrates how Episcopal reforms were intended to ensure that men who had vowed to serve God were better able to fulfil their obligations to Him, to the benefit of their own souls and those in their charge. Such an example indicates the way in which ecclesiastical reformers sought to uphold the divinely instituted 'received authority' of the Church and the corresponding need for ordained ministry to serve God to the best of their abilities: membership of the priesthood,

¹³ Perhaps those who, on account of their lowly status, were most likely to be deficient in education and subsequently in need of practical as well as spiritual guidance.

¹⁴ *Speculum Christiani*, pp. 173 & 175, ll. 27-31 & 1-6 (from Brit. Mus. MS. Lansdowne 344).

¹⁵ *Speculum Christiani*, pp. 172 & 173, ll. 33-6 & 1-7.

however minor, came with a great obligation to serve and help save others for God's sake.

As the text of the *Speculum Christiani*, with its Latin, macaronic and finally English versions shows, as time passed, *pastoralia* written in English were produced for the edification of clerics and laymen.¹⁶ Although distinguished by their titles, *Speculum Sacerdotale* – essentially a collection of sermons – and Myrc's *Instructions for Parish Priests* being, for example, designed for a different reader from the person who might own *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, there is a natural overlap of content. Both are covered by Pantin's descriptive tag of "manual" literature'; both devote a considerable amount of time to the discussion of Mankind's propensity to sin and, correspondingly, the individual's need to repent and seek salvation through genuine repentance and an acknowledgment of a soul's need for the saving grace that only Christ can offer. It is to a consideration of more examples from such a loosely defined, yet easily identifiable, genre that this dissertation now turns in a consideration of Middle English texts written for those (priests and laity) who might, unlike scholars at the great universities, reasonably have been expected to need guidance in key areas of orthodox religious theory and practice.

Taken in chronological order, one of the earlier texts that can be considered a vernacular response to both the Lateran Council and Archbishop Pecham's Lambeth Constitutions is Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*, written

¹⁶ For an overview of some of these vernacular texts see G.H. Russell, 'Vernacular Instruction of the Laity in The Later Middle Ages in England: Some Texts and Notes', *Journal of Religious History* 2 (1962-3) 98-119. V. Gillespie discusses the *Speculum Christiani*, its structure and intended readers/ audience in, 'Doctrina and Predicacio: The Design and Function of Some Pastoral Manuals' *Leeds Studies in English* 11 (1980) 36-50. See especially 38-43.

in 1303.¹⁷ In the prologue, the text is presented to its readers as a translation of the Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Pechiez*, produced to help in the fight for the salvation of the souls of those whose ignorance of Latin earns them the soubriquet of ‘lewed men’. Mannyng, aware of the human love of gossip and idle stories, writes:

For lewed men y vndyr toke
 On englyssh tonge to make þys boke,
 For many beyn of swyche manere
 Þat talys & rymys wyle bleþly here
 Yn gamys, yn festys, & at þe ale,
 Loue men to lestene trotouale, (*idle chatter*)
 Þat may falle ofte to velanye
 To dedly synne or outhur folye.¹⁸

What comes after is an orthodox, *exempla*-strewn, run-through of the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins and the seven sacraments (with an additional section dedicated to sacrilege). Sullens, in her introduction to the Gilbertine’s work, comments that the structure of *Handlyng Synne* ‘followed a scheme that was approved by the reforming bishops, including essential doctrine and homiletic passages illustrated by tales’.¹⁹ The text itself reveals the author’s preoccupation with the spiritual welfare of his readers and is an articulation of the belief that it is through faith in the belief system advocated by the Church that an individual will have the best opportunity to be touched by the grace of God.²⁰ With reference to the sacrament of penance, for example, he writes:

Noþeles þey mote be shreuyn

¹⁷ R. Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. I. Sullens (Binghampton, New York, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983). For an in-depth study of the provenance, background and literary construction of *Handlyng Synne* see Kemmler (1984).

¹⁸ Mannyng, ll. 43-50.

¹⁹ Mannyng, p. xvii.

²⁰ K. Greenspan, ‘Lessons for the Priest, Lessons for the People: Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s Audiences for *Handlyng Synne*’, *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 (2004), 109-21. Greenspan discusses Mannyng’s attempts to educate his clerical and lay readership through the use of exempla that can be highly critical of the clergy – while still of relevance to a lay audience – but which never, ultimately, aim to undermine lay trust in the spiritual efficacy of the received authority of Church doctrine.

Ȝif ȝyfte of grace shal be ȝeuyn.²¹

The desire to direct the sinful towards the grace of God through recourse to orthodox religious practices that forms the backbone of *Handlyng Synne* can be understood to be an active response to the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council. Dotted throughout the text are a wide range of *exempla* that both comfort and terrify in their accounts of the punishments that await the damned – as with the proud woman forced to wear a burning wheel upon her head – and the story of how a sinful soul is rescued through the prayers and altar-offerings of a good priest.²² The former story is of especial interest since, in his account of the torments suffered by the very corporeal soul of a lady who had succumbed to the temptation of vanity, Mannyng is able to play with his readers' expectations of what they might *hope* to experience in heaven with the reality of the pains that the unrepentant and ungodly will *definitely* suffer in hell. He writes:

Come foure deuelys þat faste gun blowe;
Wyp hem þey broghte a brennyng wheyl,
þat on here hed was set ychedeyl.
þys wheyl þat was set on here heued
Brende here al þat noght was leued.
Eft she ros whan she was brent
And hadde þe same turment,
And brende right as she dede before.²³

The *exemplum* is a pointed and surely deliberately grim parody of scenes (such as those found at the close of *The Prick of Conscience* or *Pearl*) that depict the joys experienced by those blessed souls who have entered the Courts of Heaven: no celestial coronet or martyr's crown awaited a woman too preoccupied by the selfish and transitory pleasures of the world to consider the fate that would await her after death. Instead, she is forced to wear the 'brennyng wheyl' of sins that

²¹ Mannyng, ll. 35-6.

²² Mannyng, ll. 3241-348 and ll. 10325-390.

²³ Mannyng, ll. 3274-81.

she was too selfish to notice and repent of during her earthly life. Here, in a manual concerned with the spiritual education of its readership and the salvation of souls through faith in Christ, His teachings and His Church, men and women are encouraged to remember their true calling as God's children by being able to recognise – and subsequently avoid – the mortal dangers into which others have fallen. Not only does the account of the woman's fate serve as a warning to people who might have been in danger of sinning in a similar manner, it also allows Mannyng, through the considered use of allusive words and imagery and his deliberate inverting of *post mortem* expectations, to credit his readers with the possession of a finely developed literary and religious sensibility. In a work which, according to the *mores* of its time, evinces a real concern with the best manner of 'handling sin' and escaping perdition – by practising orthodox Christianity – Mannyng reinforces his point by telling a story that illustrates clearly both the reality of the punishment of sin and the ease with which such a fate might be avoided.

Certainly it might be argued that Mannyng employs such a technique to encourage his readers to look more closely at the conduct and content of their own lives and to reform them accordingly. Without making demands upon them that it might be impossible for them to fulfil, this work, in no less a way than a later, more ostensibly private devotional work such as the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, seeks to show how all aspects of each person's earthly life have a corresponding spiritual dimension to them. *Handlyng Synne* is a text that delivers the received truths of a mainstream mediaeval Christianity in a way that makes the message that they contain both important and personal. The possibility that such *exempla* as that of the woman tormented by the 'brennyng

weyl' encouraged, flattered and warned the first readers of this work about their need, within the framework of orthodox religious belief, to take personal responsibility for their spiritual welfare ought to have an important bearing upon twenty-first-century academic considerations of later mediaeval religious sensibilities in England. To view the *exempla* of *Handlyng Synne* in this light focuses attention upon the extent to which religion and life were, in theory at least, inseparable elements of the same whole, while revealing the complexity of the relationship that, in the quest for forgiveness, redemption and salvation, might be understood to have existed between individual and ecclesiastical institution.

However, because Robert Mannyng's text offers quite such an enthusiastically orthodox approach to salvation, it is perhaps important to note that, if determined, an academic would have little difficulty compiling textual evidence that *could* be used to show the author's determined subjugation of the laity to an unquestioning acceptance of an inflexible system of religious belief supported by the institution of Holy Church. A section such as '*Here bygnyþ sacrylege*', which follows an extended examination of the seven deadly sins, opens with an injunction not to forget the importance of Holy Church:

3yt mowe we weyl nat werche
 3yf we forgete holy cherche.
 Holy cherche oure modyr dere,
 Of here shul we telle 3ow here,
 How men synne & on what wyse
 Azens þat falþ to here fraunchyse.²⁴

Mannyng's choice of words is conventional yet revealing in its very conformity. The use of the word 'fraunchyse', perhaps more often associated with social, legal and parliamentary concepts of rights and privileges may initially seem to

²⁴ Mannyng, ll. 8591-6.

contrast quite sharply with the more immediately traditional, determinedly intimate presentation of Holy Church as 'oure modyr dere'. However, Middle English definitions of the word 'fraunchyse' also include references to 'nobility of character' as well as 'generosity' and 'magnanimity' of spirit.²⁵ While a cursory glance might suggest that Mannyng has created a rather awkward juxtaposition of ideas – the individual care and forgiving love of a mother sitting uncomfortably next to the representation of the institution of Holy Church as an organisation concerned with the quasi-legal rights and privileges of its membership – there is perhaps less of a diametrically opposed, irreconcilable difference between these seemingly disparate descriptions of the church than might initially be thought. Both meanings suggest a relationship between the individual soul and Holy Church in which the former is subject to the authority of the latter. From the links his words evoke with the Scriptural 'honour thy father and mother'²⁶ and even with the proclamation of laws passed in London which, filtered through many intermediaries, affected the lives of all English men and women, Mannyng would appear to be showing that the Christian soul exists within a pre-established parental and social framework that is necessarily and naturally founded upon bases that are prescriptive and directive.²⁷ That the author of *Handlyng Synne* is happy to assert this status quo is not so surprising, if, as seems reasonable, he might be said to have faith in the ontological bedrock of a theocentric world.²⁸ The idea that there is such a bedrock is tacitly acknowledged

²⁵ The *M.E.D.* offers several definitions of the term 'fraunchyse' including, in addition to those already cited in the main body of the text, the acknowledgment that it was understood to mean 'a special right or privilege', 'the total body of rights and privileges claimed by (a) a people or nation; (b) the church'.

²⁶ Exodus 20. 12.

²⁷ Cf. Eagleton, p. 26. This thesis argues that Mannyng works from the premise which accepts God as the foundation of all things.

²⁸ Literature such as *Handlyng Synne* is also, at the same time as it supports and encourages the endorsement and articulation of a particular belief system, involved in the formation of a new,

by Mannyng's use of the word 'fraunchyse', since one of its first definitions in the *Middle English Dictionary* is, 'spiritual freedom; esp., the privileged state of Adam and Eve before the Fall'.²⁹ Thus 'fraunchyse' is both the means by which the reader of *Handlyng Synne* might avoid the snares of sin and the reward that he or she might hope to obtain after death for their faith in Christ's love and God's mercy. Mannyng seems to use the word 'fraunchyse' to help his readers to understand that the rather paradoxical idea that 'freedom of action...freedom to do as one pleases' can only be obtained by acknowledging the rights and privileges of Christ and, by extension, those of the institution of Holy Church, an establishment that He endowed with grace and (vicarious) temporal spiritual authority. His use of the word 'fraunchyse' in context with 'oure modyr dere', with all their attendant layers of meaning, calls to mind the famous reconciliation scene towards the end of *Piers Plowman*³⁰ where Will sees Truth and Mercy embrace and Peace and Righteousness kiss when, in anticipation of Christ's Resurrection, they realise that 'inpossible is no thing to Hym that is almyghty'.³¹ Both Mannyng and Langland agree that the God who sent His Son to die for the Redemption of Mankind was capable, through His Church on earth and through the faith and hope of each individual Christian soul, of inverting human expectations and making the impossible possible. The works of Langland and Mannyng also reveal an authorial expectation that readers will be able to hold this slippery, often difficult concept in remembrance when faced with daily challenges of how best to live a Christian life.

constantly evolving status quo in which the clearly articulated tenets of Holy Church are validated by the personal response of the individual seeking salvation.

²⁹ *M.E.D.* Definition 1 of 'fraunchyse'.

³⁰ W. Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995).

³¹ Langland, Passus XVIII, l. 421.

By acknowledging the divine authority of the Church and drawing attention to a need for the faithful to recognise the salvific opportunities offered by institutional, sacramental worship, Mannyng is not advocating an acceptance of and justification for the abuses of ecclesiastical power. He is pleading the case that the Church, God's church, Christ's body on earth, is there to assist in the redemption of the sinful just as an authoritative body, whether state or mother, also bears responsibility for the continued well-being of her subjects and children. The justice offered by the 'fraunchyse' of Holy Church, is an outcome of the acceptance of post-Lateran IV ecclesiastical authority in conjunction with a willingness to use the Church's teachings as a basis for the development of an inner spiritual life. Referring once more to complementary textual evidence from *Piers Plowman*, it is interesting to note how Langland presents the institution of Holy Church as part of the 'ful trie' tree of charity which, here, might be taken to mean orthodox Christianity, as defined in the broadest, most encompassing manner:

Mercy is the more therof; the myddul stok is ruthe;
 The leves ben lele wordes, the lawe of Holy Chirche;
 The blosmes beth buxom speche and benigne lokynge;
 Pacience hatte the pure tree, and poore simple of herte,
 And so thourgh God and goode men groweth the fruyt
 Charite.³²

The laws and words of Holy Church that make up the leaves of the tree are described as 'lele' (faithful), a portrayal that might be seen to gesture unambiguously towards the Church's responsibility, as Christ's representative on Earth, to save the sinful, as well as articulating an accepted later mediaeval view of the received authority of the Church. It would not, perhaps, be stretching Langland's analogy too far to argue that just as leaves are necessary to a tree for

³² Langland, Passus XVI, ll. 5-9.

its survival, so too is the institution of Holy Church a vital component of mediaeval Christianity because of its essential involvement with the salvation of souls. However, Langland's description of the tree of charity also describes 'buxom speche', 'rute' and '[p]aciencie' as being constituent members of the whole organism. Although these are traits, characteristics and attitudes which may be taught by Holy Church, they can only be practised by those who truly believe in their spiritual importance. While orthodox texts of the later Middle Ages, such as *Handlyng Synne* and *Piers Plowman*, will not unnaturally draw attention to the important role undertaken by the institution of Holy Church on behalf of God and Christ, they also recognise that the authority of the Church can only be effective if it reaches men and women whose souls are already responsive to God's calling. *Piers Plowman* in particular makes it clear that obedience to Holy Church is a necessary part of spiritual life, even though the corruption of individual ministers makes this a far from easy thing to do.

In theory at least, Mannyng's Holy Church offers a comparatively simple route to salvation: allowance is even made for humanity's regrettable habit of falling back into a previously renounced sin. As Kate Greenspan comments in her article on *Handlyng Synne*:

Mannyng's famous tolerance manifests itself in his clear expectation that neither the lay nor the clerical audience will be free of sin. He expects only that they try to "handle" their failings.³³

In the section concerned with the '*sacrament of þe autere*' Mannyng records:

3yf þou whan þyn housel shalt take,
 Be yn wyl þy synne to forsake,
 For euremore yn steadfast hert,
 Þogh þou after synne sone & smert,
 3yt god takþ hyt nat so gret grym,
 As 3yf þou yn tresun receyuedest hym.³⁴

³³ Greenspan, p. 110.

God, he says, will judge less harshly a man who receives communion determined ‘yn wyl’ to forsake sin – even if he is unable to keep his promise – than he will the man who accepts ‘yn tresun’ the body of Christ.³⁵ The use of the word ‘tresun’, with its unavoidable and explicit association with unnatural and ‘unkind’ acts against a legitimate (royal) regime reiterates the fact that such behaviour is a direct affront to the ‘fraunchyse’ of Holy Church and with this, an insult to God.³⁶ ‘Tresun’ is an emotive, frightening word which, in the fourteenth century must surely have been associated with horrific images from Tyburn and whispered stories of imprisonment and worse. Mannyng’s use of it is a reminder not only of the extent to which there was a blurring of boundaries between the religious and secular worlds, but also of the fact that each soul, even if not entirely aware of the exact nature of his or her own state of grace, could hardly fail to be ignorant of whether a person could be at risk of committing treason when he or she approached the sacrament of the altar.³⁷

Through the carefully controlled use of words such as ‘fraunchyse’, ‘tresun’ and also ‘wyl’, Mannyng shows his readers that the relationship that might be forged between a Christian soul, Holy Church and God involves the active participation of all three elements. It is often easy, or even convenient, to

³⁴ Mannyng, ll. 10261-6.

³⁵ One of the exemplary tales in *Handlyng Synne* concerns a virtuous parish priest who, through the grace of God, is able to see the true nature of people as they approach him to receive communion. While some of them have faces that shine with a dazzling light, there are many more whose visages are blackened, swollen or pitted by disease. Mannyng, ll. 10166-256.

³⁶ If nothing else, Mannyng’s words point to the existence of an orthodox religious sensibility that can be seen to be an independent, discrete entity, rather than a beleaguered Church’s response to the later fourteenth-century heterodox threat posed by the Lollards.

³⁷ Cf. *Mankind*, in J.Q. Adams (ed.), *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1924) pp. 304-24. This is a point made memorably by Mercy in the otherwise unremarkable later Middle English play *Mankind*. Faced with a despairing *Mankind*, Mercy reminds the sinner of the boundlessness of God’s mercy, before adding the following *caveat*: ‘Synne not in hope of mercy! That ys a crime notary;/ To trust ouermoche in a prince, yt ys not expedient’. (ll. 838-9)

overlook the fact that mediaeval, Western-European Christianity is founded upon a belief in free will and self-determination: it was Adam's choice to eat the apple, Christ's decision to offer Himself for the redemption of Mankind, Mary's conscious utterance 'be it unto me according to thy word', and the responsibility of *every soul* to recall the words uttered by God to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after they had sinned against Him:

*Memento, homo, quod cinis es,
et in cinerem reverteris.*
"Thynk man", he says, "askes er-tow now,
And in to askes again turn sal-tow.
Pan es a man noght elles to say
Bot askes and pouder, erthe and clay;
Of þis suld ilk man here haf mynde
And knawe þe wrechednes of mans kynde,
Pat may be sene, als I shewe can,
In al þe partys of þe lyfe of man."³⁸

This extract, taken from the fourteenth century text, *The Pricke of Conscience*, with its insistence upon the 'wrechednes of mans kynde', reminds its readers of their own mortality and of the brevity and baseness of human life – of the fact that, despite being fashioned in the image of God, men and women are but 'askes and pouder, erthe and clay'. The *memento mori* of such words allows for an extension of the explicit reflection upon human mortality into a more allusive consideration of every soul's need for salvation. These words are surely intended to encourage the individual reader to confess his/ her sins and to turn to Christ, thus emphasising the personal nature of the relationship that existed between God and Man. Even when explaining the importance of the sacrament of confirmation (which could only be administered by a bishop), Mannyng stresses

³⁸ R. Rolle, *The Prick of Conscience (Stimulus Conscientiae) A Northumbrian Poem by Richard Rolle de Hampole*, ed. R. Morris (Berlin: A. Asher, 1863).

the importance of the human 'wyl'. The section, which naturally follows from that of 'Crystendom' opens with the following lines:

The secunde sacrament y vnderstonde
 Ys graunted of þe byssshop honde.
 Men calle hyt conyrmacoun:
 A sykernes neuer more vndoun
 Wyþ no lawe ne wyþ no skyle
 But 3yf 3eself algate wyle.³⁹

Confirmation bestows upon the candidate the 'sykernes' of belonging to Holy Church and thus, by being signed and sealed with the sign of the Cross, of being one of Christ's children. It is a 'sykernes' which, significantly, can be 'neuer more vndoun' unless the individual concerned so wills it: '3eself algate wyle'. The very public declaration of faith that confirmation involves is, as befits a sacrament, the outward show of what is actually an occasion for the establishment of an intimate union between the soul and God.

If the place of Holy Church in the religious lives of the laity of the later Middle Ages is, broadly speaking, accepted as fact,⁴⁰ then it becomes possible to see how institutional worship is an essential basis for private prayer and an intimate relationship with both God and Jesus. Mannyng, in an indirect referral to the results of Lateran Council IV, is quick to condemn those priests who, through their ignorance of the efficacy of the Mass, put souls in peril not through any innate wickedness, but through ignorance:

Þat prest y blame ouer al þyng

³⁹ Mannyng, ll. 9795-800.

⁴⁰ See E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp.328-31 and P. Heath, 'Urban Piety in the Later Middle Ages: The Evidence of Hull Wills', in R.B. Dobson (ed.), *Church, Politics and Patronage* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), pp. 209-29. As these studies show, the bequests made by the laity to churches in the later Middle Ages reveal – however much the purity of motive of the donor might be questioned – that, as an institution, the Church occupied an important place in the consciousness of orthodox men and women. See also C. Burgess, 'Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary evidence Reconsidered' in M. Hicks (ed.), *Profit Piety and the Professions in Later Medieval England* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990), pp. 14-33.

þat wyþ oute skyle letteþ to syng,
 For many a soule myght be saued
 Wyþ þe messe þat he haþ leued.⁴¹

Handlyng Synne can thus be seen to be a text that shows the spiritual necessity of orthodox religious practice while making it clear that the received authority of the Church is only of benefit to those who believe in its efficacy and divine provenance – sacraments, for example, are quite worthless if they are treated as no more than a set of motions to be gone through for the sake of convention or convenience. By so doing, the text recognises both the received authority of Holy Church and the reality of the fact that there will always be those who believe, albeit erroneously, that they can cheat God.

In *Handlyng Synne*, Robert Mannyng presents his readers with a handbook that guides them through such essential tenets of mediaeval Christianity as the seven deadly sins and the seven sacraments. Another slightly later example of this kind of orthodox manual is the text known as *The Lay Folk's Catechism*. This work has recently been the subject of a detailed critical analysis that, in stressing the prominent position afforded to personal responses to Church doctrines and practices, seeks to redefine *The Lay Folk's Catechism* as a brave attempt to break free from the restrictive and spiritually limiting confines of ecclesiastical power. In her chapter in *The Vernacular Spirit*, 'Disruptive simplicity: Gaytryge's translation of Archbishop Thoresby's *Injunctions*',⁴² Moira Fitzgibbons argues that the text that is generally known today as *The Lay Folk's Catechism* is a subversive, anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment tract that aims to free its lay readers from the oppressive and restrictive dictates of an

⁴¹ Mannyng, ll. 1031-4.

⁴² M. Fitzgibbons, 'Disruptive simplicity: Gaytryge's translation of Archbishop Thoresby's *Injunctions*', in R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, D. Robertson and N. Warren (eds) *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp 39-58.

ecclesiastic institution that had little interest in the spiritual welfare of the laity and merely sought to protect its own material interests.⁴³ Having described how the Archbishop of York, John Thoresby, ordered his *Injunctions*, (a Latin ‘check-list’ of articles of essential tenets of faith, which all clergy were to be expected to know and to teach to souls in their cure), to be translated into English by the monk John Gaytryge, Fitzgibbons writes that:

Even as Gaytryge complies with the archbishop’s request for a simply written text, he situates Christian precepts within a new context, which transforms their meaning. The *Catechism* never directly challenges the goals set forth by Thoresby, but it does carve out a space from which laypeople could question clerical authority while still thinking of themselves as good Christians. In so doing, the *Catechism* demonstrates that even seemingly rudimentary texts merit a place in the body of literature that Nicholas Watson has called “vernacular theology” – works written in English in the later Middle Ages, that engage with a broad range of religious issues in sophisticated and subversive ways. In fact, I would argue that simple works like this translation deserve our particular attention: They prove palatable to fourteenth-century ecclesiastical leaders at the same time that they advocate a new form of spiritual authority for laypeople.⁴⁴

In this passage Fitzgibbons makes some rather bold claims for *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*, which she presents as a work that, despite its surface compliance with Thoresby’s request for a ‘simply written text’ to educate the laity, ‘carves out a space from which laypeople could question clerical authority while still thinking of themselves as good Christians’. Despite an early acknowledgment in her article of the importance of recalling Pantin’s advice that – ‘fourteenth-

⁴³ See also A. Hudson, ‘A New Look at *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*’ *Viator* 10 (1985) 243-58 for a meticulous reassessment of what she describes as the ‘critical commonplace [of observing] that there are two versions of the work... one orthodox and the other a Lollard revision’. (p. 243) Gillespie (1980), considers Gaytryge’s translation of Thoresby’s *Injunctions*, commenting that there is evidence to suggest that, in at least one instance, Gaytryge’s catechism may have been used as a ‘framework for personal private meditation and as a prelude to confession’, (p.46) a phrase that indicates an acceptance of *The Lay Folk’s Catechism* as a work that sought to educate from within the boundaries of orthodoxy.

⁴⁴ Fitzgibbons, p. 41.

century men cannot be neatly divided into radicals and reactionaries'⁴⁵ – as her article progresses it becomes clear that Fitzgibbons, like Nicholas Watson,⁴⁶ appears to view later fourteenth- and fifteenth-century religious life in England in terms of a perpetual power-struggle between a self-serving, power-hungry ecclesiastical elite and a genuinely devout, God fearing, perhaps even proto-Protestant section of the laity. Such phrases from the extract quoted in full above as 'never directly challenges the goals set forth by Thoresby', 'question clerical authority' and 'engage with a broad range of religious issues in sophisticated and subversive ways' set the tone for the remainder of an article which seeks to prove that

...the archbishop [Thoresby] does not promote education for its own sake, or even exclusively for the sake of laypeople's salvation. Instead, he uses it as a means of controlling his flock.⁴⁷

Moreover, Fitzgibbons describes the Archbishop as being the possessor of an 'essentially restrictive conception of spiritual instruction',⁴⁸ and a man who is concerned with imparting a limited amount of religious knowledge to the laity only in order to increase their dependence upon the institution of Holy Church. She then adds that Thoresby's response to the problem of a poorly educated clergy and a restless, questioning laity is the provision of

a program of indoctrination centered around the basic tenets of Christianity and facilitated by the distribution of the translated *Catechism*. At least once a week, Thoresby declares in his prologue, each priest should instruct his parishioners in such precepts as the articles of the faith, the Ten Commandments, the virtues and the sacraments.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Fitzgibbons, p. 42, quoting from Pantin, p. 211.

⁴⁶ See Chapters VI and VII for a discussion of Watson's interpretation of vernacular devotional texts by, amongst others, Julian of Norwich and Nicholas Love.

⁴⁷ Fitzgibbons, p. 43

⁴⁸ Fitzgibbons, p. 43.

⁴⁹ Fitzgibbons, p. 45.

The rather unfortunate equation of ‘the basic tenets of Christianity’ as they were understood and accepted by mainstream mediaeval Christians with ‘a program of indoctrination’ that was used to establish and maintain control over their spiritual development (and, indirectly, their everyday lives) reveals Fitzgibbons’ propensity to equate organised religion with the subjugation and exploitation of a more or less captive laity who would not want to risk social exclusion or spiritual damnation by not conforming to an accepted ecclesiastical status quo.

This point of view does not, however, accord well with the clearly articulated aims of *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*. Fitzgibbons’ assertions sit uneasily with Gaytryge’s protestation that

Oure fadir *the* Ercebishop, *that* god almighten saue,
 That als saint Paule sais of Iesu crist,
 – Paulus ad Thimotheum *secundo* ca°. –
 Will that al men be saufe *and* knawe god almighten...⁵⁰

Here Thoresby is presented as a ‘fadir’ to his people and one worthy of their prayers for his personal concern with the salvation of their souls. While it is all too easy to argue that such a prefatory declaration of the devoted pastoral care for ‘al men’ shown by York’s Archbishop is merely perfunctory lip service to the man who commissioned the production of this text, to accept such a definition unquestioningly is to risk overlooking the fact that these words might express a sincerely held belief. The institution of Holy Church administered throughout the ages by a succession of men, some more devout and capable than others, was a body founded to continue Christ’s earthly ministry. As such, its ministers might be seen to have been given the responsibility of ensuring that ‘al men be saufe *and* knawe god almighten’. *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*, by offering

⁵⁰ *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*, ed. T. F. Simmons and H. E. Nolloth, (London, E.E.T.S., 1901), ll. 40-4.

its readers the opportunity to learn about ‘the basic tenets of Christianity’, encouraging them to come to ‘knewe god almighten’ and to develop a relationship with Him through His commandments and the received authority of His Church, as accepted at the time, is aiming to help guide men and women towards salvation.

In the continuing search for interpretations of mediaeval texts which rest comfortably with twenty-first century concepts of self-definition and self-authorisation, modern academics must be careful not to disregard the stated intentions of the original author or distort the premises from which he or she worked because of the enormous shifts in the priorities of English culture that have occurred since the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. When Gaytryge writes that ‘[o]ure fadir *the* Ercebishop... Will that al men be saufe *and* knewe god almighten’ before he launches into the catechism proper he *could* merely be repeating a well-worn, little considered formula, but it is important to remember that this phrase could also be interpreted as an accurate reflection of the prevalent views of the time. Fitzgibbons posits the belief that ‘neither the goal of universal salvation nor the possibility of knowing God emerge as concerns in the archbishop’s writings’.⁵¹ However, this polarised view of Thoresby’s aims and intentions is unduly critical of his motivation for writing the *Injunctions*. While it is true that mediaeval bishops were king-makers and warriors (Thoresby himself is known to have accompanied Edward III into France with an impressive entourage⁵²) who concerned themselves with politics and life at the royal court, there seems little reason to doubt that, in line with the

⁵¹ Fitzgibbons, p. 49.

⁵² *Lay Folk’s Catechism*:

[Thoresby] is set down fourteenth from the Prince of Wales, and is said to have been followed by a retinue of 1 Banneret, 2 Knyghts, 30 Esquiers, 30 Archers on Horseback, and 36 Archers on foot, – 99 in all. (p. xiii)

rest of the population of England at the time – and despite whatever personal failings they might have had – they did believe in the death and Resurrection of Christ and the reality of *post mortem* judgment: a judgment that would certainly include a consideration of how well a priest had discharged his pastoral obligations. When Fitzgibbons castigates Thoresby's original Latin *Injunctions*, because it 'does not encourage free-floating exchange among the various levels of teachers and learners' and because it stipulates that 'priests should adopt a firmly paternalistic attitude toward their parishioners'⁵³ she privileges, rather anachronistically, a modern liberal interpretation of Christianity against an orthodox fourteenth-century understanding of the need for personal faith to be bolstered by reference to truths then perceived to be irrefutable. Judged by the standards of his time, Thoresby's ambition to 'render some ideas perfectly plain – namely, that ignorance is "intolerable" and that a "healthy penance" awaits the disobedient',⁵⁴ is hardly exceptional. It shows his commitment to the reforms that had been implemented by the Fourth Lateran Council and a determination to ensure that, in his province at least, the received authority of Holy Church would be taught to all people in order to fulfil the Church's obligation to help effect their salvation. Despite the limitations and difficulties attendant upon ensuring that such a complex scheme was put into practice *per magnam gloriam Dei*, to suggest, as does Fitzgibbons, that 'the archbishop manifests a desire to use translation as a means of "containment"' which Gaytryge's translation 'consistently undercuts' is to overstate the case both for the originality and subversive nature of Gaytryge's work and the calculated oppressiveness and

⁵³ Fitzgibbons, pp. 44-5 & 45.

⁵⁴ Fitzgibbons, p. 47.

authoritarian stance of Thoresby.⁵⁵ The argument propounded by Moira Fitzgibbons rests upon an assumption that *The Lay Folk's Catechism* is an essentially, if covertly, anti-authoritarian, rebellious text. It is important, however, to ask whether Gaytryge's text does actually contain any evidence of subversion or whether it is simply a translation that, in seeking to be of greatest use to its readers, offers a fuller interpretation and representation of what might reasonably be expected from a 'simple soul', than its more pithy Latin source.

As has already been shown, it is possible to see in the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council the desire to promote a Europe-wide raising of the standard of clerical and lay Christian knowledge. If this premise is not rejected completely, then it becomes less easy to see in *The Lay Folk's Catechism* the socially and intellectually radical, anti-authoritarian, ideologies that the twenty-first-century academic might argue it embodies. Fitzgibbons declares in an eloquent and strongly worded passage that:

In linking vernacular instruction with the capacity to know God, Gaytryge not only reveals his willingness to adapt the *Injunctions* to suit his own interests, but also provides laypeople with a basis for using religious information in similarly individualistic ways. If they possess the ability to gain knowledge of God – indeed, if an archbishop considers them duty-bound to do so – why should laypeople feel compelled to accept without question the interpretations of priests? Although Gaytryge himself never disparages clerical authority, throughout the *Catechism* he insistently links learning the fundamentals of the faith to the attainment of more profound knowledge. Within this context, priests function not as the indispensable mediators and disciplinarians envisioned by Thoresby, but as facilitators of the all-important bond between the individual believer and God.⁵⁶

There is, perhaps, a certain irony in the fact that while it is Gaytryge who apparently 'reveals his willingness to adapt the *Injunctions* to suit his own ends'

⁵⁵ Fitzgibbons, p. 47.

⁵⁶ Fitzgibbons, p. 49.

this is a statement that may more properly be levelled at Fitzgibbons herself. The assertion that in Gaytryge's work 'priests function not as the indispensable mediators and disciplinarians envisioned by Thoresby, but as facilitators of the all-important bond between the individual believer and God' is presented as a new and challenging idea. Such a statement could, perhaps, be more properly understood as an articulation of a mainstream, orthodox mediaeval religious status quo. Writing about Gaytryge's provision of a text that can be used by the laity as a 'basis for using religious information in similarly individualistic ways', Fitzgibbons reveals a preoccupation with the 'individual' that risks losing sight of the fact that ecclesiastical attempts to instruct the general populace ought not automatically to be seen as evidence of a determination to control the spiritual lives of lay men and women.

Working from just such a premise, however, Fitzgibbons argues that, contrary to the expressed wishes of Thoresby, *The Lay Folk's Catechism* is a work which will allow the laity to grow in knowledge and love of their God *without* the unnecessary involvement of the clergy. This is despite the fact that as a monk of the Abbey of St Mary in York, John Gaytryge might reasonably be considered to be more *en rapport* with the self-styled 'indispensable mediators and disciplinarians' than those who will benefit from his translation into their own language of Thoresby's *Injunctions*. Evidence from *The Lay Folk's Catechism* itself suggests that not only were both Thoresby and Gaytryge aware of the potential failings of the clergy (it was in part for this reason that the *Injunctions* and the *Catechism* were written), but that they believed that ordained

men had a responsibility to assist their parishioners. Gaytryge, drawing upon Thoresby's opening sentences to the *Injunctions*,⁵⁷ writes:

And forthi that mikill folke now in *this* world
 Ne is nocht wele ynogh lered to knawe god almighten,
 Ne loue *him*, ne *serue* him als thai suld do,
 Als thaire dedis ofte sithe openly shewes,
 In grete peril of thaim to lyue and to sawle,
 And *perauenture* *the* defaitor in thaim,
 That has thaire saules to kepe, and suld teche thame,
 Als *prelates*, *parsons*, *vikers*, and *prestes*
 That er halden be dette for to lere thame – .⁵⁸

By admitting to the fact that there are 'prelates, parsons, vikers, and prestes' who have not fulfilled their obligations to teach others to 'knewe god almighten', Gaytryge acknowledges the necessity of this work. Nevertheless he can hardly be said to be trying to break down the system from within. On the contrary, the opening section of *The Lay Folk's Catechism* is optimistic in tenor, confident that the 'grete peril... to lyue and sawle' that currently afflicts the 'mikill folke now in *this* world' who do not know, love or serve God as they ought, can begin to be diminished since weekly religious instruction in English will afford them the opportunity to come to know what 'god almighten' expects from His people:

And namely thas underloutes that to him langes,
 Has treted and ordained for *commune profet*

Thurgh the consaile of his clergie,
 That ilkane that vndir him has keypyng of saules,
 Openly on Inglis opon sononndaies
 Teche and *preche* thaim, that thai haue cure of,
 The lawe and the lore to knawe god-all-mighten... .⁵⁹

The above quotation describes how clergy of even the most minor rank are to teach and preach to those in their cure of 'the lawe and the lore to knawe god-all-mighten' every Sunday. Moira Fitzgibbons makes much of Gaytryge's use of the

⁵⁷ *Lay Folk's Catechism*, p. 4. 'Christianæ legis observantiis' etc.

⁵⁸ *Lay Folk's Catechism*, ll. 33-41.

⁵⁹ *Lay Folk's Catechism*, ll. 45-51.

word ‘open’ in this passage, which she views as an example of the monk’s ‘willingness to recast his source’s ideas’ in an innovative way:

To Thoresby, “openness” constitutes the intended result of the *Catechism*: By means of a plainly written text, the laity will achieve a clear understanding of their religion. For his part, Gaytryge uses “openly” to describe the *process* of presenting Christian principles. His prologue injects an element of flexibility into religious instruction. Depending upon his predilections, a priest could interpret the passage not simply as a mandate to employ an accessible style, but as a license to speak in a candid or expansive manner.⁶⁰

She differentiates between Thoresby and Gaytryge’s use of the words ‘openness’ and ‘openly’, seeing in the former merely the desire for a clear – unambiguous – transmission of a set of beliefs which ought to be accepted unquestioningly by the text’s recipients. By contrast, Fitzgibbons sees Gaytryge as an author who employs the word ‘openly’ to suggest that his work offers a more flexible, less prescriptive approach and attitude towards the teaching of Christianity.⁶¹ This interpretation of both the *Injunctions* and *The Lay Folk’s Catechism* fails to take due consideration of the received authority of the orthodox religious premises upon which they can be understood to have been founded. There is a sense in which, however unintentionally, Fitzgibbons’ article reveals a tendency to distrust mainstream mediaeval Christian beliefs that leads to a curiously anachronistic interpretation of a Middle English text which is more concerned with a modern preoccupation with the right of the self to assert its individualism, than with what the work is actually trying to say. While *The Lay Folk’s Catechism* may reveal the existence of a certain latitude in the practice and understanding of fundamental orthodox Christian tenets, it does not do so (nor

⁶⁰ Fitzgibbons, p. 48.

⁶¹ Cf. Chapter VII’s discussion of Kantik Ghosh’s examination of Nicholas Love’s use of the word ‘open’ in K. Ghosh, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ in The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Ghosh argues that ‘open’ was a word with known Lollard associations and that, by his employment of it, Nicholas Love was trying to re-appropriate it for use in an orthodox lexicon.

does it aim so to do) at the expense of its articulation of a mainstream religious sensibility that respects the fundamental rites and beliefs of the institution of Holy Church.

In an eagerness to show that Gaytryge's Englishing and expansion of the *Injunctions* represent a dramatic shift in motivation from Thoresby's desire to impose an 'intended result' through his commission, to Gaytryge's propensity to 'describe the *process* of presenting Christian principles', Fitzgibbons states that Don John's prologue 'injects an element of flexibility into religious instruction'. In making such a point, Fitzgibbons argues that the brief, matter-of-fact formulation of the Latin *Injunctions* represents a deliberate attempt to control and constrain lay religious understanding of Christianity, fostering an unhealthy dependency on Holy Church. No allowance is made for the possibility that Thoresby's intentions were founded upon a practical, pious wish to act as a true spiritual shepherd to his provincial flock. Even accepting that the institution of Holy Church in the later Middle Ages was aware of its own power and importance – and used its position in society for less than godly ends – there seems to be something unnecessarily awkward about refusing to believe that an establishment understood to be premised upon the need for Mankind to be helped towards salvation by a temporal body that represented Christ could actually be concerned with the spiritual welfare of its congregation.

By writing of Gaytryge's injection of 'an element of flexibility' into the *Injunctions* Fitzgibbons posits *The Lay Folk's Catechism* as a text that opens doors to its readers that she believes were closed by Thoresby's prescriptive, proscriptive work. However, as can be seen in works such as *Handlyng Synne*, *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, and works by John

Myrc (also Mirk), an acceptance of the received authority of the Church never removed from each soul the necessity of possessing and developing a strong sense of personal accountability to God for one's actions. As will be stressed repeatedly throughout the course of this thesis, it is possible that the 'all-important bond between the individual believer and God' has, in the Middle Ages at least, its foundations in the doctrines and sacraments of Holy Church – sacraments which, by their very nature are predicated on, and, especially obviously so in the case of the Eucharist, encourage the development of an 'all-important bond' between the soul and God.

Thus, although it is true that, as opposed to a narrowly literalistic translation, *The Lay Folk's Catechism* is more a 'very wide expansion of the original text evidently for the sake of fuller explanation and clearer understanding by the lay-folk',⁶² that this is the case does not justify equating expansion with re-interpretation or even subversion. It is possible to illustrate this point by comparing the treatment of the same doctrinal point or sacramental theme by the author of the *Injunctions* and the translator who produced *The Lay Folk's Catechism*. For example, Thoresby's assertion concerning the sixth article of faith is that:

Sextus est credere sanctam ecclesiam catholicam et sanctorum communicationem, quæ consistit in congregatione et communione fidelium, et sacramentis ecclesiæ et aliis quibus communicat ecclesia Christiana, ita quod extra istam ecclesiam non est salus.⁶³

In his versified, loose translation, Gaytryge writes:

The sext point is, *that* halikirk our modir
Is hali and allane thurgh-out the world,
That is communing and felawred of al cristen folk,
That *communes* to-gedir in the sacrementz

⁶² *Lay Folk's Catechism*, p. xvii.

⁶³ *Lay Folk's Catechism*, ll. 42-5.

And in othir hali thinges that falles til halikirk,
In forgyfnes of synnes, and hele of thair saules,
For withouten halikirke nis na saule hele.⁶⁴

Both, having given a broad and inclusive definition of the Church that refers to that institution as ‘sanctam’ or ‘hali’, make the point that ‘ita quod extra istam ecclesiam non est salus’ or ‘withouten halikirke nis na saule hele’. The passages appear to contain no discrepancies of thought or ideology. Such clear textual evidence goes some way towards undercutting Fitzgibbons’ claim that Gaytryge repeatedly works against the premises of Thoresby’s *Injunctions* in order to free men and women from the restrictions that, as she proposes, the latter work would seek to impose upon them. Fitzgibbons’ insistence that Gaytryge covertly turns his back upon a judgmental, cold-hearted, reward-and-punishment-centred Church of the original *Injunctions* does not, from this example, find support in either Thoresby’s or Gaytryge’s text, as both would seem to recognise the important positive role that the Church had to play in the lives of all men and women. While it is possible to take issue with Thoresby’s and Gaytryge’s belief in the spiritual efficacy of orthodox religion because of a personally held belief that the system itself is innately flawed, it is another matter to argue that Thoresby seeks only to uphold unwarranted privileges of clergy, while Gaytryge strives to show that ‘eternal bliss is achieved not solely through the Church’s largesse, but also through active, personal efforts to know God.’⁶⁵ This approach, while recognising that the *Catechism* ‘thoroughly renders the basic precepts set forth in the *Injunctions*’⁶⁶ sees Gaytryge’s text as one that imbued its first readers with a sense of personal obligation to God that extended beyond mere

⁶⁴ *Lay Folk’s Catechism*, ll. 99-105.

⁶⁵ Fitzgibbons, p. 53. A statement that posits itself as being new and startling but which is actually merely the articulation of an orthodox religious belief.

⁶⁶ Fitzgibbons, p. 54.

observance of ecclesiastical rites. It would be difficult to disagree with Fitzgibbons' belief that the *Lay Folk's Catechism* encourages such personal spiritual growth. What is much harder to accept are her beliefs that the *Injunctions* are concerned 'neither [with] the goal of universal salvation nor the possibility of knowing God'.⁶⁷

As is clear from the extract quoted above from the *Lay Folk's Catechism*, Gaytryge is prepared to celebrate the inclusive and universal nature of the institution of the Church, drawing upon Thoresby's own description of the institution in the *Injunctions* and establishing the relevance and necessity of its presence in the lives of individual believers. That Gaytryge does bulk out the elegant yet rather epigrammatic style of the Archbishop of York is incontestable, but this should not automatically be viewed as a subversive act of revision, if not outright rejection, of Thoresby's ideas and all that they might be said to represent in terms of clerical attitudes towards orthodox lay religious devotion. On the contrary, it is possible to see how Gaytryge's expansion of the Latin original allows him to elucidate the sense of the *Injunctions* more clearly. For example, the sentence in the *Injunctions* about the Eucharist is:

Eucharistia est vivum corpus Christi: et illud, si digne sumatur, sumentis proficit ad vitam æternam, si indigne sumatur ædificat ad gehennam.⁶⁸

In *The Lay Folk's Catechism* this has been expanded to become:

The ferthe is the sacrament of the auter,
 Cristes owen bodi in likeness of brede,
 Als hale as he toke it of that blessed maiden;
 Whilk ilk man *and* woman, that of eld is,
 Aught forto resceyve anes in the yhere,
 That is at sai, at paskes, als hali kirke uses,
 When thai er clensted of syn thurgh penance,

⁶⁷ Fitzgibbons, p. 49.

⁶⁸ *Lay Folk's Catechism*, ll. 178-80.

Of payne of doing out of hali kirke.
 Bot if thai forbere it be skilwise cause,
 That aught to be knawen to thaim that sal gif it,
 For he that takes it worthily, takes his salvation,
 And who-so unworthily, takes his dampnation.⁶⁹

As in *Handlyng Synne*, the Eucharist offers an occasion for a soul to glimpse salvation or sentence himself to damnation. The sacrament of the altar allows laity and clergy alike to consider the state of their relationship with God and thus draw nearer to Him. Despite the obvious expansion and inclusion of extra detail in *The Lay Folk's Catechism*, there appears to be little of any significant difference between the *Injunctions* and the *Catechism*.⁷⁰ Both propound the view that the sacrament of the Eucharist helps lead the faithful believer to eternal life if taken reverently – that is, in a state of grace – and, unsurprisingly, take an equally orthodox stance with regard to the substance and accidents of the communion bread. Fitzgibbons is, therefore, perhaps too keen to promote a view of the Latinate mediaeval Church that accords better with more modern concepts of anti-authoritarian self-determination, when she writes that:

the *Catechism* offers laypeople a more substantial reward than does the *Injunctions*; instead of merely learning material in order to avoid punishment, Gaytryge's audience can work toward reclaiming the closeness with God lost at the Fall.⁷¹

Her belief that an 'audience can work toward reclaiming the closeness with God lost at the Fall' because Gaytryge makes free use of the considerable license available to a mediaeval translator to undermine the *Injunctions*, reflects a misplaced determination to privilege independent lay worship over a somewhat demonised ecclesiastical regime. Fitzgibbons' approach to the *Injunctions* is premised upon a belief that it is a text that exists principally to teach obedience to

⁶⁹ *Lay Folk's Catechism*, ll. 314-27.

⁷⁰ Gaytryge's text differs from Thoresby's not in essence but in its explicit placing of the Eucharist within a framework of lay experience.

⁷¹ Fitzgibbons, p. 50.

the Church by instilling fear of divine wrath into the hearts of those who might be tempted to question or even oppose any of that institution's central tenets. Her insistence that it is a text that demands that its readers learn the carefully vetted material it contains 'in order to avoid punishment' and that – in contrast to Gaytryge's work – it might be said to be active in its discouragement of the development by an individual of a personal, extra-liturgical, extra-sacramental (and, by implication, extra-institutional) relationship with God, reveals a preoccupation with presenting the central tenets of Holy Church as essentially restrictive and self-serving.

Through the adoption of such a stance, Fitzgibbons fails to acknowledge a quite legitimate, orthodox religious claim that can be made on behalf of the *Injunctions*: the fact that within the established remits of the time at which it was written, it can be understood to be a book whose teaching of the received authority of the Church is meant to help in the dissemination and comprehension of religious *donnés* that were believed to be of vital spiritual importance to all Christian men and women. When considering a text such as the *Injunctions* it is important to remember that it is part of a wider tradition of orthodox didactic works and that its production reflects a real Archiepiscopal concern with the health of the souls of all men and women in a particular province. Fitzgibbons' belief that the *Injunctions* is a text about reward and punishment is, to a certain extent, accurate, since it is concerned with the role played by Holy Church in the salvation of an individual's soul. However, by reducing the *Injunctions* to a text that is more concerned with lay obedience to ecclesiastical dictates than with spiritual education, Fitzgibbons' argument fails to consider some of the complexities of mainstream mediaeval religious beliefs and practices. Her

arguments do not recognise the fact that there was a real need in England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries for practical spiritual guides such as that written by Thoresby: neither is there any countenancing of the fact that the work might have been a sincere effort to teach an often less than well educated local clergy how best to serve God.

This thesis would support the argument that Gaytryge's more loquacious style of writing and his habit of expanding upon Thoresby's original in his translation ought not to be seen as evidence that he is turning his back upon the beliefs championed in the *Injunctions* or offering his readers a deeply subversive anti-establishment work. His drawing out of Thoresby's dictates concerning the seven works of mercy and the three theological and four cardinal virtues, for example, shows how knowledge and understanding of these central tenets of orthodox Christian faith complement private acts of devotion. The closing lines of the *Catechism* illustrate this point:

And for to gif yhou better will for to kun tham,
 Our fadir the ercebisshop grauntes of his *grace*
 Fourti daies of *pardon* til al that kunnes tham,
 Or dos thair gode diligence for to kun tham,
 And ratifies als-so that other men gifes,
 So mikel couaites he the hele of yhour saules,
 For if ye kunnandly know this ilk sex thinges
 Thurgh thaim sal ye kun knawe god almighten,
 Wham, als saint Iohn saies in his godspel,
 Conandly for to knawe swilk als he is,
 It is endeles life *and* lastand blisse,
 To whilk blisse he bring us[, *that bought us*]. amen.⁷²

Not only will knowledge of 'this ilk sex thinges' that have been the subject of the *Catechism* lead to the reward of a forty day indulgence but, more importantly, they will form the basis of the way through which the individual will come to know God, through Whose grace and mercy they might hope to come to

⁷² *Lay Folk's Catechism*, ll. 565-76.

experience 'endeles life *and* lastand blisse'. *The Lay Folk's Catechism*, far from seeking to pit the laity against the clergy, offers all people the opportunity to grow closer to God through a knowledge of Him that is grounded in the fundamental tenets of Holy Church, expounded in the *Injunctions* and made more accessible to a greater number of people by Gaytryge's work. Both texts, in their articulation of a prevalent, accepted orthodox religious sensibility, can be seen to be encouraging their readers to seek a greater understanding of their spiritual obligations as Christians and to develop a closer personal relationship with their Creator and Redeemer.

Another text from the same educatory 'manual genre' as *Handlyng Synne* and *The Lay Folk's Catechism* is *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*. It too is a text that works from an understanding and acceptance of the received authority of Holy Church: offering a vernacular articulation of what, arguably, is a later mediaeval orthodox religious sensibility. As its title suggests, this text is less a catalogue of fundamental Christian tenets such as the Ten Commandments than *Handlyng Synne* or even *The Lay Folk's Catechism*. It restricts itself to a consideration of what, because of its explicit link with the body of Christ, is often considered to be the central sacrament of the seven: the Eucharist. Like *The Lay Folk's Catechism*, this work is a translation – this time of an Anglo-Norman work composed by the elusive Dan Jeremy, 'a deuote mon & a religyus'.⁷³ The earliest and best of the manuscripts of this work is the B Text, which has been dated to c.1375.⁷⁴ Besides the B Text, written on the eve of the religious upheavals that would spread from the views of Wycliffe, his followers and those who were,

⁷³ *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, ed. T. Simmons (London: E.E.T.S., 1879), Text B, l. 19. All following quotations, unless otherwise stated, come from Text B.

⁷⁴ *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, p. lxvii.

perhaps erroneously, thought to be his disciples,⁷⁵ there is also the F Text, which would seem to have been copied c.1450. While critics of mediaeval organised religion might suggest that the reason for the continued manufacture of copies of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* was that they helped maintain the status quo of lay subjugation to ecclesiastical authority, it remains necessary to examine such a text on its own merits, remembering that, despite instances of heresy and iconoclasm in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, mainstream orthodox Christianity, as taught by the institution of Holy Church still found strong, widespread support among the populace.⁷⁶

The Lay Folk's Mass Book demonstrates clearly how it was possible and even spiritually valuable to show a secular readership that the clergy-led rite of the Mass provided the lay congregation member not only with the sight of much pomp and ceremony, but, more importantly, with the opportunity for inward reflection and the development of a close relationship with God. It is a clear example of the vernacular articulation of the type of later mediaeval orthodox piety with which this thesis is concerned. The reader is encouraged to remember the spiritual benefits that are accrued by the simple act of attending devoutly to the celebration of Mass:

& to alle þat heres it, soul hele,
 helpe & grace & al kyns wele;
 and to alle þate we haue *in* mynde,

⁷⁵ Not all those who became grouped together under the generic heading 'Lollards' were also 'Wycliffites', although all the reformers/heretics did share some ideology. For a short introduction to examples of the differences that existed between Wycliffe's views on the sacrament of the Eucharist and those endorsed by the 'Lollards' and their followers see A. Hudson, 'The Mouse in the Pyx: Popular Heresy in the Eucharist' *Trivium* 26 (1991) 40-53.

⁷⁶ A. Brown in *Church and Society in England 1000-1500* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) offers the observation that:

By the later Middle Ages the complaints of lay people at priestly inadequacy are heard more frequently. Whether these complaints amount to widespread 'anticlericalism' is open to doubt. Too often the term has been used to cover a disparate variety of complaints, some of which had been actively elicited by the Church hierarchy... Such complaints were perhaps not so much 'anti-' as 'pro-clerical' – parishioners apparently anxious to enforce standards set by the Church hierarchy, including the obligation to preach. (pp. 96-7)

sib [*or fre*]mde bi ony kynde,
 go[*d lo*]rd graunt hom for þis messe
 of alle hore synnes forgyfnesse;
 And rest & pese þat lastis ay
 to cristen soules passed away;
 and til vs alle þi socoure sende,
 & bring vs to ioy *with-ouen* ende. Amen.⁷⁷

The importance of ‘soul hele’ in an age of sudden death and apprehension about the inevitability of *post mortem* judgment, coupled with an awareness of the great need for divine ‘forgyfnesse’ and ‘socoure’, helps to highlight the attraction that orthodox religious practices might have had for the laity. It is also important to remember that there was a social element to public, communal worship in the later Middle Ages that reinforced bonds of Christian fellowship between neighbours, between the sexes and all representatives of the (nominally) three estates of Man as well as between the living and the faithful departed.⁷⁸ Here again, all are included – ‘til vs alle’ – in the belief that salvation, and joy in heaven, will come to the faithful. Far from being presented as an occasion organised and controlled by the clergy that requires the attendance of the laity, but does not expect more from them than their silent acquiescence to the authority of the priesthood – an implicit lay acknowledgment that the salvation of their souls is largely dependent upon the intercessory, mediatory role of the clergy – the emphasis of this passage is the opportunities for the forgiveness of sins that God offers through attendance at and to the Mass.⁷⁹ The rhyming of ‘þis messe’ with ‘forgyfnesse’ helps to make explicit the spiritual benefits that those present and attentive at Mass might hope to enjoy, while the full lines ‘go[*d lo*]rd

⁷⁷ *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, ll.106-14.

⁷⁸ For an extended discussion of this idea see J. Bossy, ‘Blood and Baptism: Kinship, Community and Christianity in Western Europe from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries’, *Studies in Church History* 10 (1973), 129-43 and J. Bossy, ‘The Mass as Social Institution, 1200-1700’, *Past and Present* 100 (1983) 29-61.

⁷⁹ See Chapters III and IV for a more extended consideration of the opportunities afforded by attendance at Mass for the development of a personal relationship with God.

graunt hom for þis messe/ of alle hore synnes forgyfnesse' reminds the readers that the sacramental heart of the Mass – the celebration of the Eucharist – is, despite sacerdotal involvement, divinely instituted and dependent for its efficacy upon the freely given grace of the 'go[d lo]rd'.⁸⁰ That this sacrament is of common spiritual importance to all men and women and that this was recognised by the author of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* can be seen by his use of universal and inclusive language. He talks of Mass being beneficial to the souls of 'alle þat heres it' and 'alle þate we haue *in mynde*', of forgiveness being offered for 'alle hore synnes' and closes with a supplication to God that He will 'vs alle þi socoure sende'. The cumulative effect of the repetition of 'alle' is, perhaps unexpectedly, not a marked growth in awareness of the vulnerability of the sacrament to misuse by those who might seek to exploit their ecclesiastical authority to control and oppress, but an appreciation of a later mediaeval religious sensibility that was able to see the permeation of God's love for His world and all Mankind in the ritual re-enactment of the immolation of His Son. Like *The Lay Folk's Catechism*, this is a text that tries to show how the essential doctrines of the ideologically unimpeachable institution of Holy Church were to be understood to provide a thorough ground from which, through their unconditional, yet not un-thoughtful, acceptance, the individual can move forwards in his/her personal journey towards God and forgiveness.

The Mass, in *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, is also shown to be an occasion where sacerdotal ritual and personal contemplation of God and Christ come together in a complementary and spiritually beneficial manner. The reader is instructed:

⁸⁰ This is a concept that will be addressed more directly in Chapter II.

Loke pater-noster þou be sayande,
I-whils þo preste is priuey prayande;
þo prest wil after in þat place
Remow him a litel space,
To he come to þo auter myddis.
stande vp þou, als men þe biddis,
hert & body & ilk a dele,
take gode kepe & here him wele,
þen he bygynnes per omnia,
And sithen sursum corda.
At þo ende [he] sayes sanctus thryese,
In excelsis he neuens twyese.
Als fast als euer þat he has done,
Loke þat þou be redy sone,
And saye þese wordis with stille steuen
Priuely to god of heuen.⁸¹

While the celebrant is busy with preparations for the consecration of the Host, the part of the service in which the Son of God, Christ, will become actually present in the form of bread, men and women should be saying the Lord's Prayer individually. As this is a prayer which Jesus taught His disciples, a prayer that addresses God directly and is concerned with the essentials of human and Christian life, it plays an important role in the personal devotions of the orthodox faithful. As post-Lateran IV texts such as *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* show, all people were expected to know the Lord's Prayer – and its use can be seen as an example of the Church encouraging the laity to grow closer to God through private prayer. Although it is probably quite true that the '**per omnia/ And sithen sursum corda**' as well as the '**sanctus thryese**' and '**[i]n excelsis**' of a said or sung Eucharist would not be completely, or even partially understood, word for word, by the laity (or even a congregation of female religious), it should not, perhaps, be thought that such demonstrations of priestly learning, left the congregations excluded and unmoved. Likewise, for the many who were

⁸¹ *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, ll. 298-313. The bold type, in accordance with E.E.T.S. style guidelines, indicates the use of red in the original manuscript.

prepared to accept as legitimate the apostolic authority of the clergy endorsed and reinforced by the decisions made at the Fourth Lateran Council, it would appear unlikely that orisons, said '[p]riuely to god of heuen' in His earthly house as His ministers prepared to receive Him in their hands, would (or should) be viewed as ecclesiastical attempts to keep the laity at a distance from their Redeemer.⁸²

Through the power of prayer, within the framework of the sacramental rituals of the established Church articulated in *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, it seems clear that men and women were expected and encouraged to realise that they were able to petition God and offer Him their contrite, fearful souls in hope of forgiveness and salvation. It is thus possible to see in *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, the expression of an authoritative, ecclesiastical, orthodox concern with the spiritual benefits that the Mass offered the laity. The possibilities for salvation offered to each man and woman by the New Covenant of freely given body and blood are foregrounded in the service of Mass. Far from preventing the laity from accessing God, the celebration of the Eucharist, as laid out in texts such as *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, allows for personal interaction with Christ the Redeemer in an inclusive, supportive ecclesiastical framework.

That there was a responsibility on the part of the clergy to ensure that there was an adherence to the dictates of Holy Church should not, therefore, be confused immediately with what could be perceived as ecclesiastical attempts to subdue and oppress the individuality and thus spiritual integrity of lay devotions. John Myrc, in his *Instructions for Parish Priests*,⁸³ makes it clear that it is the job of the parish priest to ensure that his people do not behave disrespectfully in

⁸² See Chapters III and IV.

⁸³ J. Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. E. Peacock, rev. edn (London: E.E.T.S., 1902).

church and are not ignorant of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the doctrine of transubstantiation etc:

But teche hem alle to leue sadde,
 Pat hyt þat ys in þe awter made,
 Hyt ys verre goddess blode
 That he schedde on þe rode.
 3et þow moste teche hem mare
 Pat whenne þey doth to chyrche fare,
 Þenne bydde hem leue here mony wordes,
 Here ydel speche, and nyce bordes,
 And put away alle vanyte,
 And say here *pater noster* & here aue.⁸⁴

The whole tenor of the *Instructions for Parish Priests* seems to be founded upon its expression of the hope that better educated clergy will more readily be able to attend to the needs of their parishioners, to the spiritual benefit of all concerned. It is thus a good example of a didactic vernacular articulation of later mediaeval mainstream orthodox religious beliefs and practices. The orthodox reverence to the consecrated Host that would appear to be endorsed in lines such as

And whenne they here the belle ryng
 To that holy sakeryng,
 Teche hem knele downe boþe 3onge & olde
 And boþe here hondes vp to holde...⁸⁵

suggests a quite genuine desire to see *all* respond appropriately to the 'holy sakeryng' for its own sake – because it marked the moment at which Christ became present bodily in the church. In the same way, while the priest might have the authority, through 'god almi3ti ffader & Son & holy gost' to perform the ritual of excommunication, the fact that he curses first 'al *them* that broken the pece of holy chirch'⁸⁶ should not be understood automatically as an action that is illustrative of the selfish, power-hungry mediaeval church. The 'pece' of

⁸⁴ Myrc, ll. 260-9.

⁸⁵ Myrc, ll. 284-7.

⁸⁶ Myrc, ll. 684 & 685-6.

Holy Church, represented the state of the relationship that, post Crucifixion and Resurrection might be said to have existed between Man and God: to break that peace is, above all, to turn one's back on the new covenant Christ forged with His own blood and to be disobedient to Him who died to save the sinful. To acknowledge this is not to deny that there are occasions when orthodox texts criticise corrupt lay and clerical practices (it is surely their duty to do so), but merely to draw attention to the fact that it is possible to highlight faults in the practical undertaking of a system of beliefs based upon pragmatic and doctrinal, ecclesiastical received authority without necessarily seeking to reform or reject the essential components of this faith.

Thus the practicalities of such easily open-to-abuse issues as, for example, the importance of the paying of tithes are dealt with in the *Instructions for Parish Priests* in a detached and professional manner which, while stern, is not unreasonable. Myrc writes of the dire spiritual consequences that will face

all thilk that for wrath or for hate of eny person or vicary *propor* tithinges with holden, or destroyen with hem self or with her bestes, or beren away, and all þat consenten thereto in herinyng of the person or of þe vicary or her *proketours*...⁸⁷

By describing the withholding of tithes as being a manifestation of the deadly sin of wrath, Myrc shows how such an action is a sin against God who works through His Church and its ministers. Indeed, the withholding of what is rightfully due is an unkind (unnatural) and ungrateful act that upsets the balance of the closely bound relationship that exists between God, Holy Church, humanity in general, and the individual believer. Although it would be theologically unsound to suggest that God in any way relied upon or needed the Church or Mankind to be complete, there is a sense in which this text recognises

⁸⁷ Myrc, ll. 690-5.

that God's capacity for love was enriched by the creation of Adam and Eve and the subsequent sacrifice of His Son for them and their descendents.⁸⁸ To turn one's back upon the Church which, after His Ascension, came to be seen as Christ's physical representation on earth, was to reject God's love and His offer of forgiveness and salvation.

It is to prevent such a situation occurring that Myrc wrote his *Instructions for Parish Priests*: a book that, by assisting in the spiritual education of the clergy aims to improve the lot of the laity in their cure. The extended exposition of the Ten Commandments, which gives examples of the manner in which each of the commandments might be broken, finds John Myrc attempting to show that the everyday life of each man, woman and child is not something that is remote and distant from God. When Myrc asks his readers to demand of themselves whether they have 'stolen any þynge./ Or ben at any robberyge',⁸⁹ he is reminding them that any action which is unfair or unkind to another person shows scant regard either for the commandments of God or His Son. As He cares for them, so should their actions be informed by a sense of what is due to Him who created and redeemed them. It is the role of the priest to guide the laity through the difficulties of sacramental worship – from the necessity of infant baptism, to the self-examination called for by confession – and to an attempt to prepare the faithful for the, at least visual, reception of the Host. Such a model ideal of orthodox Christian life and worship in the early fifteenth century shows that there was a sense in which both layman and cleric knew that their first duty was to serve God, and that to serve Him they must respect the authority of the Church

⁸⁸ Cf. Langland, *Passus I*, 'For Truthe telleth that love is triacle of hevene... For hevene myghte nat holden it, so was it hevye of hymselfe,/ Til it hadde of the erthe eten his fille... Forthi is love ledere of the Lordes folk of hevene'. (ll. 148, 153-4 & 159)

⁸⁹ Myrc, ll. 1049-50.

and also serve each other. The priest must not be slipshod when he celebrates Mass – if he forgets things, he must begin again, or at least at a suitable earlier point in the liturgy:

3ef hyt be-falle, as god hyt scylde,
 þat þow of wyt be so wylde,
 þat bred or wyn be a-way,
 Consecracyone when þou scholdest say;
 3ef þe be-falle þat ylke cas,
 Ley bred on þy corporas,
 And þaz þow forth I-passet be,
 Be-gynne a-gayn “qui pridie.”⁹⁰

Reverence is due not only to God, Who is omniscient and would know if a consecration had been improperly performed but also to all those present at the service. Myrc’s orthodox response is indicative of the tone and general approach of his text as a whole. His *Instructions for Parish Priests* is a book that illustrates a later response to the Lateran and Pechamite reforms, a response that upholds the accepted doctrines of the Church because of a belief in their veracity and spiritual importance. Like the other texts that have been discussed in this section, the *Speculum Christiani*, *Handlyng Synne*, *The Lay Folk’s Catechism*, *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book* and the *Instructions for Parish Priests* can provide literary evidence of the efforts made, from 1215 onwards, to educate both priests and laity in tenets perceived to be fundamental to orthodox Christianity, *not* primarily in order to assert more confidently the power – temporal and spiritual – of the Church, but in order that the Church might fulfil more successfully the mission for which it had been established by Christ: the salvation of the souls of all men and women.

While texts assigned to the *pastoralia* genre can, because of their very nature as didactic works concerned with the transmission of ecclesiastically

⁹⁰ Myrc, ll. 1895-1903.

sanctioned ideas, be vulnerable to charges that their real intention is to preserve a status quo in which an ecclesiastical hierarchy is rather too bound up with earthly preoccupations with power and influence, it has been the aim of this chapter to show that such accusations are not always justified. On a theoretical level at least, it is possible to see how such texts articulated and advocated an approach to religious beliefs and devotional practices that shows quite how complex, and thoughtful, the teaching of mediaeval orthodox Christianity can be.

CHAPTER IIPERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND RECEIVED AUTHORITY: THE
TEXTUAL ARTICULATION OF SOME ORTHODOX MEDIAEVAL
RELIGIOUS IDEALS

‘Go out of deedly synne by holy confessioun, & contricioun of herte, &
satisfaccioun, & wiþ an holy purpose neuermore so to offende’

(The Orcherd of Syon)

The previous chapter closed with an affirmation of the fact that it is possible to believe in the sincerity and honest religious conviction of the reforming bishops and the men they employed to write the manuals that would instruct clergy, and subsequently laity, alike. To argue that these works attempted to combine obedience to Holy Church in conjunction with an awareness of the need for individual spiritual growth is not to accept unquestioningly that this is what always happened nor that there was never any abuse of ecclesiastical authority. However, such an analysis acknowledges that texts like *Handlyng Synne*, *The Lay Folk’s Catechism* and *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book* might best be understood as idealised literary expressions of an orthodox religious sensibility. Certainly, it would be pointless to try to deny the existence of widespread corruption and ignorance – both lay and clerical – in later mediaeval England. This chapter, which will consider the concept, expounded in the general introduction to this thesis, that it is possible to define Holy Church as an establishment whose central tenets are, because believed to have been instituted by Christ Himself, ultimately inviolable, begins with an examination of selected lyrics which articulate an orthodox religious standpoint in conjunction with the desire to counter ecclesiastic corruption.

Mediaeval religious satire, especially that directed against the mendicant orders, paints a picture of greedy, lascivious, poorly educated and immoral friars

who drew the vulnerable towards sin and even perdition. Anonymous, often semi-humorous, poems recount the manifold wickedness of men who led the faithful into temptation:

Freers, freers, wo ye be!
 ministri malorum,
 For many a mannës soule brynge ye
 ad penas infernorum.¹

With its lilting rhythm and simple rhyme scheme it is tempting to dismiss such a verse as a foible produced merely for entertainment's sake, with the offences described softened by familiarity into verses that bear more than a passing resemblance to vaudeville song: pointed criticism which, nevertheless is unlikely to prove socially or politically corrosive. The catalogue of wrongs done by the 'ministri malorum' lays at the friars' feet the usual charges of adultery and simony, while they are also accused (because of their involvement with counterfeiting money) of treason. It is a song that predicts and indeed expects a unified response from its reader or audience in the form of a resounding acceptance of the closing malediction:

Therefore yll moweth thei thee,
 falsi deceptores.
 Fader first in trinité,
 Filius atque flamen,
 All one God and persones thre,
 Omnes dicant 'Amen'.²

However, while the friars are cursed roundly for their corruption and dereliction of duty, there is no sense that this is a poem that expresses heterodox, anti-establishment views even though the closing curse could be interpreted as an expression of a desire for reform: the expression of a wish to return to an age of apostolic purity in the conducting of Church affairs. A weeding out of the 'falsi

¹ *Late Medieval English Lyrics and Carols 1200-1400*, ed. T.G. Duncan (London: Penguin, 2000), 'Freers, freers, wo ye be!', pp. 170-1, ll. 1-4.

² *Late Medieval English Lyrics*, p. 171, ll. 39-44.

deceptores' would not only benefit the Church, but would improve the spiritual welfare of the laity.³ As in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the laxity and active evil-doing of the clergy (specifically friars) is seen to threaten and undermine the foundations of the institution of Holy Church while not diminishing in any real sense the God-given value of the beliefs and rituals of that establishment. *Piers Plowman* closes with Holy Church in disarray and a bloodied, yet undaunted Conscience setting off on a pilgrimage in search of Piers and the truth that can be found in Him. The forces of Antichrist have breached the defences of Unitee (Holy Church), Contrition has forgotten to weep over sins committed and even Clergie proves unequal to challenging the attackers:

Conscience cryede, 'Helpe, Clergie, or ellis I falle
Through inparfite preestes and prelates of Holy Chirche!
Freres herden hym crye, and comen hym to helpe –
Ac for thei kouthe noght wel hir craft, Conscience forsook
hem.'⁴

It is the 'inparfite preestes and prelates' and friars that 'kouthe noght wel hir craft' who, through their incompetence and corruption, open the floodgates to sin and the devil. Under such pressure, the truth preached by Holy Church becomes distanced and obscured, but remains whole in its veracity and application to Mankind. What links the short poem 'Freers, freers, wo ye be!' with Langland's much more complex work is an awareness that it is perhaps the human administration of the Church that is at fault in late mediaeval England rather than the received authority of the institution itself. It is important to state this idea clearly since its acknowledgment allows for the recognition of a need, as discussed in the previous chapter, for some ecclesiastical reforms in the later

³ As successors to the first apostles, all clergy bear a responsibility to act on behalf of God and Christ to help effect the salvation of the souls of Men. It stands to reason that they are unable to do this if they have forgotten their vows, leaving the laity without proper spiritual guidance.

⁴ Langland, *Passus XX*, ll. 228-31.

Middle Ages that did not involve a turning away from orthodoxy but were efforts to reinvigorate and rejuvenate an existing ecclesiastical structure.

Such an example of popular poetry as 'Freers, freers, wo ye be!', which is concerned with the misdemeanours and flagrant abuses of privilege by local religious, appears to dwell more often upon an errant friar's sins of the flesh than it does upon any latter-day perceived injustice inherent to the laity in orthodox, Christian worship. It is one of the contentions of this thesis that the divisions drawn by some critics today between mediaeval clergy and laity, between those who celebrated Mass and heard confessions and those who submitted to the authority of the Church and received communion perhaps only once or twice a year, are not as apparent in texts from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries as might be thought. As this chapter aims to illustrate, obedience to the doctrines of the institution of the Church and the observance of sacramental rites neither prohibited the lay man or woman from forming a direct and intimate relationship, through Christ, with God nor, as critics such as Nicholas Watson and Miri Rubin would argue (and as will be addressed in later chapters), did orthodox mediaeval Christianity exist primarily to privilege a religious and secular social elite at the expense of the general populace. What is acknowledged, however, is the presence of a worldliness and perhaps even a world-weariness in many of the poems that are concerned with the sins of those who profess the word of God, which could be used to suggest that, in the later, Middle Ages, some aspects of the practical realities of institutional religion had become debased and thus devalued in the eyes of the laity, even while the religious purity of the founding tenets of orders such as the Franciscans and, more generally, Holy Church, were not called into doubt. There is a sense in

which the satirical disappointment expressed by a poem like ‘Freers, freers, wo ye be!’ or even *Piers Plowman*, helps to highlight the author’s ultimate faith in the received authority of the Church despite its betrayal by selfish and unscrupulous religious.

Another literary example of a disappointment with the failure of religious to uphold their vows can be found in the lyric, ‘Ther was a frier of order gray’.⁵ ‘*Inducas, inducas, / In temptacionibus*’ is the blasphemous refrain of this poem which, playing upon the words of the Lord’s Prayer – an essential part of private and public devotion⁶ – describes the education in seduction (under cover of music lessons) of a nun by a Franciscan. Despite the immediately noticeable presence of a cynical, detached narratorial attitude towards such a seemingly commonplace scandal, there is still something quite shocking about the manner in which Christ’s words have been distorted and used to echo the guilty frenzy of illicit sexual love. Man’s capacity to corrupt all that is good and dedicated to God is apparent in this sordid, humorously told, account – a story that, through its casual word-play, illustrates the reader’s assumed familiarity with the Lord’s Prayer and by extension his/her awareness of its spiritual importance and the place that it ought to occupy in the devotional lives of all people. The poem does not undermine the Lord’s Prayer itself: that is not its aim or intention,⁷ but it does highlight the effect that the sinning of those who were believed to have dedicated their lives to the service of God could have upon those who lead an active or

⁵ *Late Medieval English Lyrics*, ‘Ther was a frier of order gray’, pp. 171-2.

⁶ Repeatedly, in a text such as *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book*, the lay reader is encouraged to say the Pater Noster or Ave at moments when the priest is engaged in a part of the celebration of the Eucharist that requires no general public response from the congregation, or when he or she is unable to find original words for private prayers.

⁷ An interesting similar example to this occurs in Langland, *Passus V*, l. 342, where Gluttony is described as having ‘pissed a potel in a *Paternoster*-while’. The shocking juxtaposition of ‘pissed’ and ‘*Paternoster*’ emphasises the grossness of Gluttony’s actions and his lack of religious sensibility and Christian devotion even as it does not cast a doubt upon the value and worth of the Lord’s Prayer itself.

‘mixed’ (as opposed to contemplative) life. The respect due to a man or woman who was known to have chosen to turn his/ her back on the transient pleasures offered by the world for love of God was unlikely to survive such a breach of trust intact. While licentious, self-indulgent or even cruel behaviour from the clergy ought not to shake the faith of the laity in the institution of Holy Church, it would be surprising if it did not have an effect upon their perception of it (a rotten government may not undermine a general faith in democracy and the workings of the parliamentary system, but it does cast aspersions upon the suitability of its ministers to perform their duties). The breaking of holy vows through acts of lechery, avarice or ignorance might engender feelings of betrayal and exploitation, without necessarily being accompanied by a denial of the spiritual benefits of orthodox forms of worship. The repeated ‘*Inducas, inducas, / In temptacionibus*’ is, however unintentionally,⁸ an alarm-call to sinful monks, nuns and clergy of all types and ranks to remember that they have promised to serve Christ and act according to His wishes – to assist Holy Church in the salvation of the sinful through prayer, contemplation and a life of charity. The poem as a whole is a reminder of the discrepancy that existed between how things ought to be and how, on occasion, in reality, they were.

The poem, ‘As I went on Yol Day’⁹ reveals a possibly surprising complexity of thought and expression in what appears, initially, to be a fairly commonplace treatment of the stock theme of clerical abuse of social position. Recounting the somewhat unorthodox experiences of a young woman who

⁸ By this I mean that I believe the primary aim of this poem is quite simply to amuse and titillate. To acknowledge this is not to deny the other, deeper meanings that I have assigned to it, but is to be aware that these were not perhaps the foremost concerns of the author.

⁹ *Medieval English Lyrics 1200-1400*, ed. T.G. Duncan (London: Penguin, 1995), ‘As I went on Yol Day’ pp. 175-6.

attends a Solemn Mass and procession on Christmas Day, the poem ends with the following two verses:

Jankin at the *Agnus*
 berëth the pax-brede,
 he twinkelëd, but said nought,
 and on myn foot he trede.
Kyriëläyson.

Benedicamus Domino,
 Crist fro shame me shilde;
Deo gratias therto –
 alas, I go with childe!
*Kyriëläyson.*¹⁰

Here the clerk Jankin, who had previously sung and read the Epistle so beautifully and ‘twinkelëd’ as he carried the pax for the laity to kiss, has seduced the poem’s narrator with the inevitable end result. The repeated ‘[k]yriëläyson’ serves to highlight the girl’s awareness of the plight of her own situation while also reminding the reader – or audience – that this example of concupiscence was begun by a clerk during a service in which the general rejoicing at the Incarnation of Christ would naturally call forth the distinction between His perfect manhood and the need for all other descendants of Adam and Eve to cry *Kyrie eleison* (‘Lord have mercy upon us’). The knowledge that this seduction took place on a day which should have been devoted to a celebration of the Virgin Birth only compounds the gravity of the sinful, sacrilegious nature of Jankin’s sexual exploits. A man who ought to have been bearing, with suitable reverence, the *pax*, a symbol of God’s redeeming love to the congregation and physical substitute for the non-oral reception of the Eucharist,¹¹ offers under cover of this rite an all too easily accepted invitation to sin. This behaviour alone,

¹⁰ *Medieval English Lyrics*, p. 176, ll. 29-38. Interestingly, this lyric is also used by Eamon Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars* as evidence of the fact that a church, as the central gathering place of a community, ‘had many functions not envisaged by the rubrics’. Duffy, p. 12.

¹¹ Bossy (1983), Fraser, p. 173.

‘and on myn foot he trede’, is itself an example of the sacrilege condemned by Robert Mannyng of Brunne in *Handlyng Synne*:

Clerk wyþ skyle shuld be pryue
 And nat yn cherche of wrdes fre,
 Ne dysturble men wyþ hys rage,
 For hyt ys called al sacrylage.
 Kepe þy body yn cherche fro synne,
 Þy members & þy wyt wyþ ynne,
 Specyayly þy þoght & þy syght,
 Pan may þy preyer be made al ryght.¹²

Jankin, gifted by God with a melodious voice and pleasing appearance, misuses his talents in a gross way. The rather obvious, yet seemingly necessary advice from Robert Mannyng to ‘[k]epe þy body yn cherche fro synne/ Þy members & þy wyt wyþ ynne’, would certainly not appear to have been attended to by ‘jolly’ Jankin and, through his behaviour, he not only condemns himself, but also precipitates a fall for the poem’s narrator. Despite the apparent resignation of the words of the girl who is left pregnant and facing ruin – the conventional ‘alas’ and ‘Crist fro shame me shilde’, her recognition that she allowed herself to be seduced by Jankin’s pleasing appearance and must bear the consequences – this is a poem that forces its reader to confront the deeper implications of her story.

The simultaneous progression of Mass and seduction along with the use of liturgical words and phrases (*Kyriëlleÿson*, *Benedicamus Domino*, *Deo Gratias* etc) that mark the progression of events, allows a perverted parallelism to develop between the sight, touch and consumption of the elements (in this instance represented by the *pax*) and the initial sight, subsequent touch and ultimate consummation of Jankin and the narrator’s affair. The poem shows that the sacrament of the Eucharist, as made manifest in the ritual of the Mass, whilst inviolate in itself, can do little to prevent the determined sinning of laity and

¹² Mannyng, ll. 8905-12.

cleric alike. God's gift to humanity of free will – *liber arbitrium* – allows each man or woman to choose to turn away from sin and develop a close relationship with God or to follow the urgings of the world, the flesh and the devil.¹³ In this instance, lust has blinded the eyes of a man and woman at the very moment at which they might have hoped to establish, build and renew an intensely personal relationship with Christ their Redeemer and it is telling that there is no verse in the work that 'corresponds' with the liturgical moment of the elevation of the Host. While offering a criticism of the immorality of Jankin and his mistress, this poem also shows that it is the behaviour of men and women which violates the sanctity of the Mass: their refusal, or inability, to respond to the rite and the opportunity it affords them to consider the state of their relationship with God does not affect the innate sanctity of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Real Presence is, by its very absence from this poem, shown to be held in too great a reverence to be included in literature that might be said to push against any usual boundaries of taste and decency.

As the poems discussed in the previous pages were intended to illustrate, clerical abuse of position or the deliberate committing of sacrilegious acts might reveal the all too human fallibilities of those who claimed to act as ministers to Holy Church, but they do not seek to undermine the ecclesiastical institution *per se*. There is a world of difference between the invective of, for example, a Lollard who, in seeking to purge the Church of sin, wishes to do away with clergy, intercessory prayers to the saints, iconography and the doctrine of transubstantiation and an orthodox attack upon clerical abuses of privilege and

¹³ This fundamental tenet is stressed time after time in texts ranging from, for example, *The Prick of Conscience* to *Piers Plowman*.

power that stops far short of doctrinal revision.¹⁴ Chaucer here is a classic, if obvious, example of an author who, through his depiction of clergy and religious in *The Canterbury Tales* reveals his knowledge of a gap between the clerical ideal embodied by his parson and the more common reality – as exemplified by his self-absorbed monk and prioress and the utterly corrupt pardoner – of the individual encountered in church or chapel. As the tales draw to a close, it is through his depiction of the Parson and the tale that this humble man of God tells, that it becomes possible to gain an insight into a form of religious worship that, taught by a hierarchical institution governed by doctrines and rites, offers a framework of support for the individual sinner/believer that fosters a sense of spiritual growth and development at the same time as it installs in priests with charge, their own obligations to their flock.

Chaucer's exemplary 'PERSON OF A TOUN' is described by the narrator as a man of compassion, learning and integrity; one who recognised the responsibilities of his office:

For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;
And shame it is, if a preest take keep,
A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.¹⁵

In these four lines, there is both acceptance of the spiritual authority ('on whom we truste') that is wielded by ordained ministers and an awareness of the responsibilities that come with this religious office: '[a]nd shame it is, if a preest take keep,/ A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep'.¹⁶ It is clear from Chaucer's

¹⁴ For a good, general introduction to the heterodoxy that burgeoned in England in the later fourteenth century, see R. Rex. *The Lollards* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

¹⁵ G. Chaucer, *General Prologue*, in L.D. Benson (gen. ed.) *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 23-36. Chaucer, *General Prologue*, ll. 501-504.

¹⁶ Cf. H.G. Pfander, 'Some Medieval Manuals of Religious Instruction in England and Observations of Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*' *J.E.P.G.* 35 (1936), 243-58. Pfander discusses the

text that long after the Fourth Lateran Council and despite the best efforts of reforming bishops there were still priests who neglected or were unable to fulfil their pastoral obligations. Certainly it is telling that one of the first reasons that Chaucer the narrator gives for declaring that the parson is the best priest that he has ever known is because he is not interested in worldly preferment but, instead, ‘Cristes loore and his apostles twelve/ He taughte; but first he folwed it hymselfe’ – truly a good shepherd.¹⁷

Later, when the Parson comes to tell his tale, if it is unexpected – within the framing context of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole – that it takes the form of a treatise on penance rather than a story or even a fable, its focus on the need for an individual to feel genuine remorse for his/ her trespasses is entirely in keeping with the idealised character of the Parson. His ‘tale’, which is perhaps best considered as a spiritual ‘self-help’ manual for the laity, addresses Mankind’s need to repent of sins committed and turn to Christ in the hope of forgiveness and salvation.¹⁸ Although the grace and mercy of God can never exactly be ‘bought’ by Mankind, orthodox mediaeval Christianity held that there was a sense in which it was possible to move closer to Christ through the renunciation of wickedness and an acknowledgment of one’s debt to Him. Such an action was understood to move the faithful spiritually closer to the celestial Jerusalem in which all hoped to dwell after death. Articulating this belief, Chaucer’s parson says:

...therefore repentant folk, that stynte for to synne and forlete synne
er that synne forlete hem, hooly chirche holdeth hem siker of hire
savacioun./ And he that synneth and verrailly repenteth hym in his

manner in which *The Parson’s Tale* can be seen to come out of a tradition of didactic manuals that themselves were the result of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council.

¹⁷ Chaucer, *General Prologue*, ll. 527-8.

¹⁸ Chaucer, *The Parson’s Tale*, pp. 287-327.

laste, hooly chirche yet hopeth his savacioun, by the grete mercy of
oure Lord Jhesu Crist, for his repentaunce; but taak the siker wey.¹⁹

The Parson's Tale, when stripped to its essentials, is an extended discourse upon this theme, one that also endorses the need for individuals to act in a manner that shows a personal commitment to God through adherence to the received authority of Holy Church. The formal process of repentance for sins committed, as found in a later-mediaeval orthodox understanding of the sacrament of penance, involves the interaction of God, the sinner and a cleric. Here it is said that Holy Church holds those who repent of past offences and turn away from sin 'siker of hire savacioun'. Thus, compressed into less than a line of prose, is an account of the extraordinarily complex nature of penance, a sacrament which, alongside the Eucharist, is sometimes viewed almost entirely in terms of ecclesiastical attempts to control and subdue a restless, questioning laity.²⁰

In order to begin a re-evaluation, supported by textual analysis, of this understanding of a later mediaeval interpretation of the sacrament of penance, it is necessary to attempt to comprehend the complex theological concept of grace, since it is through an appreciation of this divine gift that a fuller understanding of mediaeval responses to orthodox worship (and especially the Church's endorsement of the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist) can be attained. Frequently glossed simply as the '[u]nmerited favour of God',²¹ grace may be 'actual' or 'sanctifying' and frequently it would appear that, to those not trained

¹⁹ Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale*, ll. 92-3.

²⁰ Cf. T. Tentler, 'The Summa for Confessors as an Instrument of Social Control', in C. Trinkhaus and H. Oberman (eds), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), pp. 103-26. Also, J. Shaw, 'The Influence of Canonical and Episcopal Reform on Popular Books of Instruction', in T. Heffernan (ed.), *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, c. 1985), pp. 44-60.

²¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ed. H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 5th edn (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964).

as theologians, both types of grace may be present at once. In a definition that lasts for over forty pages, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* begins by saying that

Grace (*gratia, Charis*), in general is a supernatural gift of God to intellectual creatures (men, angels) for their eternal salvation, whether the latter be furthered and attained through salutary acts or a state of holiness.²²

Distinguishing between ‘actual’ and ‘sanctifying’ grace, this definition continues:

Actual grace derives its name, *actual*, from the Latin *actualis* (*ad actum*), for it is granted by God for the performance of salutary acts and is present and disappears with the action itself. Its opposite, therefore, is not *possible* grace, which is without usefulness or importance, but *habitual* [*sanctifying*] grace, which causes a state of holiness, so that the mutual relations between these two kinds of grace are the relation between *action* and *state*, not those between *actuality* and *potentiality*.²³

Thus, while ‘actual’ grace might attend the moment at which a repentant man or woman, having already gone through the processes of contrition and confession, undertakes to make satisfaction for a sin, the forgiveness of that sin by God is wholly within the remit of ‘sanctifying’ grace. When the priest says ‘*absolve te...*’ he may absolve in his own right as a priest, but not in his own right as a man: he is acting as a conduit through which God’s will and grace might flow.

Although the priest who hears confessions bears an enormous responsibility upon his shoulders – it is his task to ensure that people understand the nature of their sins and have a sincere wish to repent, as well as deciding upon just and fair penances – the forgiveness he offers he offers in Another’s name, and on His

²² *The Catholic Encyclopedia* online: www.newadvent.org/cathen/06689x.htm, accessed 21/10/2004.

The *M.E.D.* offers a full description of mediaeval definitions of this concept, beginning with:

1. (a) God’s grace, God’s gift or favour making men or angels fit for heaven, forgiveness; (b) help from God for a particular moral purpose; (c) a special token of God’s favour, miracle, charism; a supernatural gift or power; (d) a virtue implanted or stimulated by grace; esp., one of the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost; (e) as an attribute of God: goodness, mercy etc.

²³ *The Catholic Encyclopedia* online: www.newadvent.org/cathen/06689x.htm, accessed, 21/10/2004.

behalf. In *Dives and Pauper*, when Dives asks Pauper why men, who have been told only ever to bow the knee to God, ‘knelyn wyt bothe knees to þe preist in shryfte’, he receives the response:

Meen offryn nought to þe preist but only to God, as I seyde ferst, be þe hond of þe preist, for þe preist is Godys minstre, ordeynynd to reseyuyn thyng þat is offryd to God...²⁴

As ‘Godys minstre’ a priest is ‘ordeynynd to reseyuyn thyng þat is offryd to God’ and thus reverence shown to the individual cleric is an illustration of devotion to God. In this brief extract, the author of *Dives and Pauper* can be seen to present his readers with a clearly articulated orthodox definition of how the mechanics of the sacrament of penance ‘work’. His explanation recognises that it is easy for the sacrament of penance to be misunderstood (it is a rite that, on face value, places great power in the hands of the confessor) at the same time as he upholds its intrinsic spiritual worth. As Chaucer’s Parson illustrates through his penitential tale, ecclesiastical authority rests upon God’s endorsement, through Christ, of the institution of Holy Church and its *modus operandi*: it never supersedes God’s direct, personal concern for and with each soul in His care. Put more simply, the efficacy of any and each sacrament is dependent upon the state of the relationship that exists between God and the believer.

Returning now to a closer consideration of *The Parson’s Tale*, it is possible to see how Chaucer uses the voice of his paragon of a cleric to articulate accounts of the seven deadly sins to illustrate the nature of the salvific, beneficial, grace-full interaction that ought to and could exist between God, Holy Church and individual lay man or woman. An appropriate example of this

²⁴ *Dives and Pauper*, Part 1, p. 109-10, ll. 10-13.

manifestation of an orthodox religious sensibility is found in the section from the tale concerned with the sin of lechery. Here the reader learns:

Now lat us speke thane of thilke stynkyng synne of Lecherie that men clepe avowtrie of wedded folk; that is to seyn, if that oon of hem be wedded, or elles bothe... Certes, the brekyng of this sacrament is an horrible thing. It was maked of God hymself in paradys, and confermed by Jhesu Crist, as witnesseth Seint Matthew in the gospel: "A man shal lete fader and mooder and taken hym to his wif, and they shullen be two in o flessch." This sacrament bitokeneth the knyttyng togidre of Crist and of hooly chirche.²⁵

This extract illustrates clearly the different levels and layers that comprise an effective obeisance to the will of God. The committing of adultery is an 'horrible thing' because it is the breaking of a sacrament which symbolises the joining together of Christ with His Bride, Holy Church. Matrimony is, quite literally, a state ordained by God, confirmed by His Son and recorded by St Matthew. *The Parson's Tale*, as the previous extract illustrates, is overtly homiletic in tone. As such it is accessible to the members of all levels of society on the pilgrimage²⁶ and can thus, more generally, be said to speak to Everyman. In *The Parson's Tale* Holy Church is shown to have an important role to play in the spiritual life of each man and woman as it is effectively a tangible reminder on earth of God, His Word and how best He might be served. On a practical level, the Church is also a body that is capable of offering advice on how best salvation might be obtained. Chaucer's parson does not show the Church to be doing this at the expense of any personal relationship between an individual soul and God. Neither does he attempt to undermine the authority of the established Church by turning his back upon the doctrine it endorses. As a sacrament, marriage should be afforded the respect it deserves as a union which is a symbolic representation

²⁵Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale*, ll. 839-42.

²⁶ Although, given how *The Parson's Tale* leads up to Chaucer's *Retracciouns*, there is a certain justification for asking whether, by this point in *The Canterbury Tales*, the framing device of a pilgrimage and a socially diverse group of pilgrims has been allowed to slide away.

of Christ's binding together of earth and heaven. As something 'maked of God hymself' it cannot be denied without directly opposing the revealed will of God – as understood by an acceptance of the received authority of Holy Church in fourteenth-century England.

Just as *The Canterbury Tales* as an entity illustrates the extent to which, despite evidence of hypocrisy and outright foul play, mediaeval life in England was bound together by an awareness of God – the setting of *The Canterbury Tales* within the context of a pilgrimage may be a masterstroke in terms of the use of a literary device, but its effectiveness is also dependent upon its verisimilitude – so too does *The Parson's Tale* offer an extended reflection upon the gap that exists between the life led by men and women and the ideal of a life of apostolic charity that, in reality, few – even amongst the religious – actually achieved. The auxiliary, even necessary, role of the Church in the saving of souls should not be (and certainly was not) underestimated, even though it would be pointless to pretend that there were not administrators of Holy Church who did not seek to consolidate the temporal power of the Church through the 'judicial' use of what was tantamount to spiritual blackmail.²⁷ What also should not be overlooked is the remembrance of an orthodox awareness that the professed power and authority of the office bearers of the established church existed only because God had willed, through Christ, that it be so: the apostolic authority that they claimed linked them with St Peter and through him, with Christ.

It is in this way that *The Parson's Tale* exhibits a recognition of the need for, and existence of, a certain latitude in orthodoxy: an awareness that the

²⁷ Cf. M. Rubin. *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Rubin notes that:

Communion was only to be received in the parish of domicile where people were known and only in a state of reconciliation with the church, and after the proper payment of tithes. (pp. 148-9)

adherence to a form of worship that makes use of sacraments to aid devotion and deepen a lay understanding of God's love for Man and His plans for Mankind, does not remove from the laity all their sense of the need to develop a personal relationship with God. Neither does it afford the cleric the right to view himself as anything more than an individual striving to ensure that, through his actions and attitudes towards others, God's will is done in earth. The mediaeval acceptance of a hierarchical, divinely ordained ecclesiastic order applies even to the Pope, Christ's Vicar on earth:

The Pope calleth hymself servant of the servantz of God; but for as muche as the estaat of hooly chirche ne myghte nat han be, ne the commune profit myghte nat han be kept, ne pees and rest in erthe, but if God hadde ordeyned that som men hadde hyer degree and som men lower,/ therfore was sovereyntee ordeyned, to kepe and mayntene and deffenden hire underlynges or hire subgetz in resoun, as ferforth as it lith in hire power, and nat to destroyen hem ne confounde.²⁸

Such a passage is revealing in that while it supports the *status quo* of hierarchy (both within the remit of the Church and also in more secular circles) in terms of the necessity of having men to rule and men to obey orders for the common good of the world and Mankind, what is shown here is far from blind obedience to authority. The Parson is quick to point out that those in office are duty bound to 'kepe and mayntene and deffenden hire underlynges' and must not 'destroyen hem ne confounde'. Viewed in such a light, the role of those who work on behalf of Holy Church is one that requires a selfless interest in the spiritual welfare of others. It is equally a role that is rendered null and void if the priest breaks faith with the people (and by extension, with God). A corrupt or ignorant priest might administer the sacraments²⁹ but, in so doing, as is made clear by works such as

²⁸ Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale*, ll. 772-3.

²⁹ Tentler (1974):

the *Speculum Christiani* and Myrc's *Instructions for Parish Priests*, he would be failing in his duties and thus jeopardising the spiritual health of his own soul. The author of the *Speculum Christiani*, citing St Paul, believes:

Prestes *that* goueren wel muste ben had in double worschipe, temperally and gostly. The prestes muste be had most in worschipe *that* trauellen in worde *and* in doctrine.³⁰

However, he also draws the reader's attention to the fact that not all clergy live up to this ideal:

Foure maners or kyndes be founden of presthode. Fyrste kynde felowes glotony. Secunde kynde swes lechory. Therde kynde swes couetyse or veynglorye. Fourte kynde of presteȝ feloweȝ ryghtwysnes. Kyng Dary slough presteȝ of glotony *that* priuely and thefly stolen a-way sacrificieȝ be smale dores. Thei seyden ther god ete hem. Danyel dampnede preste[s] of lychory *that*, flaterynge with fals vnpunyschente, couetede to oppresse Susan doghter of Israel. The erthe has swolwede be veniance of god prestes of couetyse or veynglory: Dathan and Abiron *that*, profecyenge of her awen spiryte *and* disseuyng the peple of god wolden be a-boue al other. And thei purposed and laboured to a-rette to hem-selfe worschyp *and* grace be veynglory.³¹

While these examples show a clear understanding of the potential failings of mediaeval priests, they can hardly be said to be subversive or anti-establishment in tone. Rather, they are clear examples of the fate that will await those who neglect their vows and abuse their vocation. The potential for, and reality of, a betrayal of trust that can be found in the practical implementation of an orthodox mediaeval system of religious beliefs and requirements ought not to be thought to result in a justification for any – lay or ordained – to turn their backs upon the

[i]f a priest is ordained and has jurisdiction he may validly hear confessions and absolve from sins. He may be ignorant. He may even be immoral. But if he holds the key of power he may forgive sins. (pp. 109-10)

For Tentler, this status quo is a sign of one of the great weaknesses of the mediaeval Church. However, this point of view, while possibly reflecting a too common situation in the later Middle Ages, fails to take into consideration the fact that, to the orthodox faithful, a corrupt priest could not, ultimately, stand in the way of God's grace touching the contrite and fearful souls of true believers.

³⁰ *Speculum Christiani*, p. 174, ll. 27-30.

³¹ *Speculum Christiani*, pp. 174 & 176, ll. 34-6 & 1-10.

established church – or even for any desire upon their part to do so. As the now defaced, once elaborate and costly pulpits, frontals and Rood screens in parish churches and cathedrals across England and the extant wills of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries consistently show,³² there was a steady stream of bequests to churches at this time, some of which, by laws of average, must have been in the cure of less than diligent and effective priests. Such a supposition is intended to show that there must have been a sense in which members of the congregation felt that there was spiritual benefit to be had from participation in orthodox religious practices.

Another example of a more obviously didactic text than *The Parson's Tale* that is also concerned with the articulation and dissemination of an orthodox religious sensibility, is the *Speculum Sacerdotale*. Surviving in a single manuscript that has been dated to circa 1425³³ it is, like Mirk's *Festial*, a book that provides a series of addresses for parish clergy to use at Christmas, Easter, Ascension and at all the major holy days. The editor, Weatherly, observes that:

The subject matter treated in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* may be divided into three groups: narratives, exposition of church ritual and observance, and instruction as to the theory and practice of penance.³⁴

While 'narratives' and 'exposition of church ritual and observance' are illustrated throughout the course of the book, 'instruction as to the theory and practice of penance' is afforded separate treatment in the twenty-second and twenty-third chapters. Here clergymen are presented with comprehensive advice on the role of priests as regards the sacrament of penance: how and when to offer

³² See Burgess, and Heath (1984).

³³ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, ed. E. Weatherly (London: E.E.T.S., 1936). In the opening paragraph of his introduction (p. xv), Weatherly notes that the manuscript that survives would not appear to be the original of this work and thus it may be assumed that the original text was composed before this date.

³⁴ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. xxi.

absolution and what absolution requires from priest and sinner. Tempered with an understanding of the innate weakness of Man, priests are nevertheless exhorted to grant absolution only when the sinner has confessed fully and revealed a true contrition of heart. The authority and responsibility of a priest who hears confession is made apparent in lines such as:

Therefore yche synful man, let him putte hym alle to-geder in the dome and pouste of the preste and kepe no-thing vnschewid but be redy in alle poyntis for to doo and *perfourme* as he woll consayle hym for the redempcion of his sowle and for euitacion of euerlastyng depe.³⁵

Such language is direct, unequivocal and brilliantly revealing of a relationship that often exposes itself to accusations (sometimes justified) of manipulation and exploitation. When the sinful man or, implicitly, woman, is encouraged to ‘putte hym alle to-geder in the dome and pouste of the preste’, to reveal all sins, hide nothing and lay bare his or her soul in order to submit to whatever chastisement the priest might see fit to impose, it is not difficult to see how such a directive could be viewed as an articulation of the Church’s attempt to reinforce lay dependence upon the intermediary powers of the ordained ministry. An interpretation of this nature, which sees in the use of ‘dome’ and ‘pouste’ (‘judgment’ and ‘power’) an aggressive ecclesiastical approach to pastoral care, does not give adequate consideration to the eventual aim of the employment of ‘dome’ and ‘pouste’: the redemption of the soul and the avoidance of ‘euerlastyng depe’.³⁶ The reality of a belief in *post mortem* judgment, of the time when each and every soul would be called to account for good and bad deeds

³⁵ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 66, ll. 9-13.

³⁶ Goff’s views on mediaeval understanding of the concept of purgatory are useful here. He argues that the creation of a ‘third place’ allowed for hope *in extremis* and is the reason why death-bed scenes of conversion and repentance are dramatic at this time: a soul that has led a truly dissolute or sinful life may, whilst ineligible for a fast-track entrance to heaven, at least hope to escape the pains of hell after the exhibition of real contrition and confession. Goff, p. 306.

does not legitimise any abuse of clerical authority, but it does explain an urgency that would call for the use of such a clear-cut, uncompromising vocabulary. The institution of Holy Church would be failing in its obligations to Christ and God were it to cease its struggle to save souls. Put more starkly, did the establishment of Holy Church and its ministers, as Christ's vicars on earth, not have an obligation to ensure that Christ's sacrifice had not been made in vain?

When the author of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* writes that the sinner should be 'redy in alle poyntis for to doo and perfourme' all penances imposed by the confessor, he is writing from the point of view of one who believes that by so doing a person's sins will be forgiven by God and that he or she should not despair of ever going to heaven. The possible bitterness and difficulty of set penances could thus be seen as light when compared to the torments believed to await the damned. Although faith in the efficacy of the sacrament of penance demanded much from layman and cleric alike, the provision of hope and the potential it offered for the strengthening of the relationship between God and Man should not be ignored and is one that is foregrounded in texts from this time. The individual must conduct a rigorous self-examination and remember that it is 'ful perelous'³⁷ to postpone the doing of penance (for fear that one might die before being able to complete the penitential process), while the cleric must differentiate between greater and lesser sins, imposing penances that are neither too lenient nor unduly severe:

And thus may a discrete preste lerne how that he may tempure penaunces as is made mencion here in this tretise.³⁸

³⁷ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 64, l. 6. The authority cited for this belief is St Augustine.

³⁸ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 80, ll. 30-2.

It was extremely important that a priest did not set penances which, because of their undue severity, might drive the penitent towards the sinful state of despair with the end result that a soul, far from being reconciled to God, moved further away from His love and mercy. As an example, the author suggests that a repentant sodomite should, despite the deeply unnatural nature of his crime, be

as faire tretid and as lizt penaunce [shal] be enioyned to *him* as he had done but fornicacion or a-vowtri for drede of desperacion.³⁹

This extract shows clearly that those who heard confessions were expected to be actively aware of the role that they played in helping to fulfil Holy Church's obligations to act as Christ's representative on earth, drawing all people away from sin and death to eternal life in God the Father. The exemplary moderation and compassion for sinful Mankind evident in this extract is also worthy of note. It articulates the existence of a mediaeval religious standpoint that recognised the need for orthodox religious practices to be tempered with Christ-like mercy and compassion.

In an earlier chapter of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* devoted to the Feast of St Peter, the reader learns that after the apostle had raised the son of Theophilus from the dead:

[And] they made a glorious chirche, and in the myddis of the chirche they sete an hye chayer, and in that they sette and inhyed Peter that he myght be seen and herd of alle *maner* of men, the whiche he vsid vii. yere. And thyder come yche man for to here the worde of God. And they offred there vnto *him* seke men vnnumerable, of whome Peter hadde hye pitee and prayed for hem that they alle were hole. And siche vertue and myzt schewid the Holy Gost ther in Petur that alle men, bothe lasse and more, gloriously confessed here God.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly for an orthodox work, this passage uses the treatment of St Peter to teach all those who hear or read it that honour and reverence is due to

³⁹ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 78, ll. 2-4.

⁴⁰ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 31, ll. 32-7 & p. 32, ll. 1-4.

ordained men of God, to those who minister in His name: ‘and in that they sette and inhyed Peter that he myght be seen and herd of alle maner of men’. The saint appears in public in this manner for seven years, during which time he is moved with compassion to heal many of the sick that are brought to him. By so doing, he strengthens the faith of the congregations to the point where ‘alle men, bothe lasse and more, gloriously confessed here God’. These final words are important, as they show that the result of the miracles performed by Peter was not a veneration of the saint himself but a realisation of God’s goodness made manifest, through His Grace, in His servant Peter. As is also written, ‘siche vertue and myzt schewid the Holy Gost ther in Peter’ – an unequivocal phrase that shows an understanding of the way in which God’s grace can be seen to be mediated through the clergy.

The relationship between God and His church-founding apostle is considered further just a few lines later when the reader is offered a translation of Christ’s words to Peter:

I shall yeve to the the keys of hevене; *scilicet*, what-so-euer thou byndist in erthe it shall be bonden and holdyn in hevене, and what-so-euer thou schalt lowse in erthe it shall be lowsid eke in hevене.⁴¹

Within the context of the sacrament of penance, this dictate would seem to imply that when forgiveness is pronounced and absolution given, the cleric and the penitent may be sure that this ‘agreement’ will be honoured by God. In this way the clergy are shown to have an important and powerful role to play in effecting and facilitating the reconciliation of God and His creatures. Nevertheless, this position of trust and authority is not self-governing or self-authorising, because it owes its existence to the will of Christ: ‘I shall yeve to the the keys of hevене’.

⁴¹ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 32, ll. 8-11.

Interestingly, what seems most apparent in this translation from the Gospels into Middle English, is the manner in which Christ's desire to help Mankind shines forth in His words. As it appears in this text, He offers the keys of heaven to Peter so that the saint might establish an institution that offers hope of salvation to all men and women.

Ministers of Holy Church bore upon their shoulders a responsibility to guide people towards Christ that, in the orthodox Church in England in the later Middle Ages at least, allowed for a quite literal application to ecclesiastical practices of Christ's words to Peter. Failure to adhere to the established mores of the institution of Holy Church could result in exclusion from rites and thus, in a real way, from the heart of a local community.⁴² The author of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* closes his sermon for the Feast of St Peter with sentences that reiterate once more the important role that the clergy undertake on behalf of St Peter and thus, ultimately of God Himself:

And therefore ye ben bounden to come to vs that ben the vikers of God and of Seynt Peter here in erthe for to schryve you and to schewe youre synnes and to forsake hem. And so ye owen to be asoylid of vs as God hath ordeyned and so by fulfilling of *your* penaunce to be reconsilyd *with* youre God, that ye mowe by ordynaunce of God after youre asoylyng in erthe be a-soylid in hevене.⁴³

Although this extract, with its stark 'therefore ye be bounden to come to vs' must have reminded the first auditors of the right of clerics to question them about all aspects of their lives – and to pronounce judgment upon them for the sins they were obliged to confess, this is also a passage that articulates an understanding that the actions of a priest were (theoretically) reflections of the will of God and not merely an example of one human pronouncing judgment on another.

⁴² Bossy (1983) draws attention to the place that the Mass occupied at the heart of the community in pre-Reformation society.

⁴³ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 33, ll. 31-7.

In ‘fulfilling of *your* penance’ the sinner will be ‘reconsilyd *with* youre God’ through ‘your’ contrition and His grace. The authoritative voices of St Peter and his successors speak directly to the individual in this passage, reminding him or her that obedience to the clergy, who are the ‘vikers of God’ will lead to the desired goal of reconciliation with God and thus forgiveness of sins and redemption of the soul. By its very nature as a sacrament penance, with all its necessary physical acts of oral confession and the priestly imposition of satisfactory prayers and deeds, is ultimately a comprehensible manifestation of the intangible grace that Christians believe God is always ready to bestow upon Mankind. To admit this is not to undermine or judge as extraneous the role of the clergy in late mediaeval Christianity. In order to do God’s work, priests were expected to encourage the penitent, sinful man and woman, while, quite literally, putting the fear of God and His judgment into the unrighteous:

For as the evel men are to be made dredynge *and* a-gaste, ri3t so the good men are to be comfortid.⁴⁴

Contrary to a certain vaguely-defined post-Reformation viewpoint, which finds in the sacrament of penance a wholly corrupt system whereby God’s forgiveness can be bought, a manual such as the *Speculum Sacerdotale* makes it clear that penance was intended to provide hope and comfort to the faithful. Recognising the unpredictability of life, allowance is made for times when ‘penance of herte may turne to saluacion of a man *without* confession of mouþe’, that is, ‘in tyme of nede and in point of dep’.⁴⁵ At other times, oral confession is seen as an essential part of devotional life, an opportunity for men and women to accept the

⁴⁴ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 72, ll. 12-14. As the earlier quotation from the *Speculum Sacerdotale* has already illustrated, priests were expected to temper justice with mercy when imposing penance for sins committed. They would be failing in their sacred duty if, through ordering that the penitent carry out a too difficult act of penance, he or she falls instead into the deadly sin of despair.

⁴⁵ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 63, ll. 16-17.

divinely-sanctioned chastisement, encouragement and forgiveness offered by the institution of Holy Church. The author of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* also recognises that the types of penances that could be imposed by a priest varied greatly:

And therefore ȝif thou wolt make satisfaccion to God by prayinge, pilgrimage, hospitalite, almes, wakyng, fastyng, alle siche other, in the firste thou moste make the clene þrouȝ confession and contricion and afterwarde to kepe the clene þat þou no more be fouled.⁴⁶

What is of special interest in this passage is the inclusion of such terms as ‘hospitalite’ and ‘almes’. Their presence, alongside the more private fleshly and spiritual mortifications of ‘wakyng’, ‘fastyng’ and ‘prayinge’, makes it clear that penance could involve performing charitable deeds that benefited the whole community. Here, yet again, is an articulation of a type of mediaeval religious sensibility that combined personal commitment to God, His Son and Holy Church – and thus to one’s neighbour, community and local clergy – into an organic, indivisible whole.

Examined from such a stance, from an understanding that the mainstream Church of later mediaeval England was, however flawed, not an innately bad thing, orthodox belief in the spiritual efficacy of the received authority of the sacrament of penance ought not only to be discussed with reference to theories concerning lay ignorance and oppression and clerical authority and the misuse of power. The relationship between layman, cleric and God as encountered through literary descriptions of the sacrament of penance would seem to put responsibilities and obligations upon all the parties concerned and it would

⁴⁶ *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 73, ll. 28-32. What is of special interest in this passage is that it makes explicit reference to the type of penances that could be imposed by priests. As the inclusion of ‘hospitalite’ and ‘almes’ makes clear, penance could involve performing charitable deeds that benefited the whole community, thus showing the extent to which Christianity pervaded everyday life in the later Middle Ages.

appear that a later mediaeval understanding of the nature and purpose of clerical and ecclesiastical authority as defined by the author of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* is actually quite simple. By virtue of his position as an heir to Peter, each priest occupies an elevated position as an earthly representative of Christ. However, while this position may afford him certain privileges – such as respect and reverence in his own community – it also demands from him certain commitments, in dealing properly and conscientiously with, for example, confessions. Above all, it is clear that the priest must recognise that, however good or virtuous he might be himself, as a sinful man who is himself in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness, he can never be anything more than a channel for God’s grace.

In *Piers Plowman*, a poem that calls for personal and institutional reformation within the boundaries of orthodoxy, Piers’ angry tearing of the pardon in Passus VII reminds the reader that it is only God who really has the power to bestow forgiveness through freely giving of His grace. The Ploughman’s rebuttal of the priest’s rather dismissive interpretation of the lines from the Athanasian Creed:

‘Peter!’ quod the preest thoo, ‘I kan no pardon fynde
But “Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule,”
And “Do yvel and have yvel, and hope thou noon oother
That after thi deeth day the devel shal have thi soule!”⁴⁷

could perhaps be seen as an attempt to show Christ/Piers reasserting the incontrovertible fact that it is only God who can truly forgive the sinful. Langland, it is the contention of this thesis, is not a heterodox writer, but he is a man who has come to recognise the difficulties that exist in trying to square the original, divinely ordained foundation of Holy Church with the realities of its

⁴⁷ Langland, Passus VII, ll. 111-14.

less than perfect record: of reconciling the perfection of Christ's sacrifice with, at the close of the poem, the fracturing and near destruction of the temporal institution of the Church.⁴⁸ One example of this discrepancy is recorded later in the same passus as the tearing of the pardon scene. Here Piers declares that:

Now hath the Pope power pardon to graunte
 The peple, withouten penaunce to pasen into [joye];
 This is oure bileve, as lettred men us techeth:
Quodcumque ligaveris super terram erit ligatum et in celis...
 And so I leve leelly (Lordes forbode ellis!)
 That pardon and penaunce and preieres doon save
 Soules that have synned seven sithes dedly.
 Ac to trust to thise triennals – trewely, me thynkyth
 It is noht so siker for the soule, certes, as is Dowel.⁴⁹

Although there is a temptation to view 'Lordes forbode ellis!' in a rather cynical light, customary as it is to see the mediaeval church as a proper target for anti-establishment attack, this is perhaps not the case here. The lines, '[t]hat pardon and penaunce and preieres doon save/ Soules that have synned seven sithes dedly' are sober enough. What is being objected to is the attitude of those who believe that they can purchase with gold that which was bought, once and for all, with the blood of the Son of God. The sacraments of penance and the Eucharist – especially with the increasingly popular requiem and obit Masses of the later Middle Ages – are not in themselves spiritually inefficacious, but Langland, through his poem, reminds his readers that each man and woman must, personally, bear the responsibility for their own sins against God. It is for this reason that Piers exhorts the assembled crowd:

... crie God mercy,
 And Marie his modor be oure meene bitweene,
 That God gyve us grace here, er we go hennes.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Langland, Passus XX, passim.

⁴⁹ Langland, Passus VII, ll. 174-83. It seems important to note that the phrase 'withouten penaunce' in line 175 might be taken to refer to purgatory, rather than the sacrament of penance itself.

⁵⁰ Langland, Passus VII, ll. 196-8.

As has been seen in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, priests cannot follow in the footsteps of the first evangelising apostles and call men and women to repentance if those whom they have come to help to turn away from sin towards the salvation offered by Christ refuse to admit their sins.

If Langland, who was probably in minor orders himself, seeks to criticise the institution of Holy Church in its entirety and the received authority of some of its doctrines, through the course of *Piers Plowman*, then he is equally, if not more, critical of the individuals who make up the rank and file of corrupt clerics. The laity fare little better. Obvious abuses of power are abhorred but, as the closing passus show, the attack on Unity comes not, it might be argued, because of anything innately wrong with her doctrines and ideologies – *Piers Plowman* contains no veiled or outright suggestions to abolish the episcopate or review the use of sacraments – but because of the all too recognisably human weaknesses of those semi-allegorical figures who serve her. At one moment of crisis, Conscience cries out:

‘... Help, Clergie, or ellis I falle
Thorough inparfite preestes and prelates of Holy Chirche!’⁵¹

It is the ‘inparfite’ preists and prelates who oversee the administration of the temporal institution of Holy Church who, through their incomplete understanding of, or inability to abide by, the fundamental, divinely authorised and thus incorruptible tenets of the Church, have the potential to lead others into error. The ending, as has already been shown, reminds the reader of the need for each and every man and woman to remember their own spiritual obligations to turn away from and resist evil. Conscience must endeavour to protect himself

⁵¹ Langland, Passus XX, ll. 228-9.

against things that are not as they might first appear – he should refuse, for example, to accept the softer penance and the flattering words of a corrupt friar. By so doing, Conscience is not denying the benefits that may be accrued from a knowledge of the justifiable doctrinal theories and genuine devotional aids offered by Holy Church. Langland, in a manner that is entirely compatible with orthodox thought, seeks to combine his awareness of the fact that every individual is, in the broadest possible manner, a member of a society whose *mores* – however tenuously – were founded upon Christian tenets, with a realisation that each person must, through self-examination and acknowledgment of sin, be prepared to seek a personal relationship with God and His Son.⁵²

This way of thinking about the relationship of mutual benefit and obligation that can be seen to exist between laity and clergy, in the undertaking of the sacrament of penance, finds further articulation in the text known as *Jacob's Well*,⁵³ a treatise on sin and penitence that was probably written in the first quarter of the fifteenth century.⁵⁴ A work that follows in the footsteps of *Handlyng Synne* and Dan Michel's *The Azenbite of Inwyt*, *Jacob's Well* is a manual that, in ninety-five chapters, aims to instruct its readers on how to clear from the well of the soul the slime and ooze of sin so that it might be filled with the clear water of grace. Wholly orthodox in tone and content and issuing sound maledictions against those who are perceived to be heretics and unbelievers, *Jacob's Well* does not support an administration of the institution of Holy Church that is corrupt or negligent in its duty of proper pastoral care and spiritual

⁵² This important concept will be the subject of much extensive discussion in the following chapters.

⁵³ *Jacob's Well*, ed. J. Brandeis, Part 1 (London: E.E.T.S., 1900).

⁵⁴ *Jacob's Well*, p. xiii.

guidance and is not above criticising those men of Holy Church who would seek to serve themselves, not God, through their ministry:

¶ And alle þey bene accursed þat receyvin & holdyn pluralyte of cherclys, hauyng cure of soule, but 3if it be by dyspensacyoun of þe court of Rome. Ex *Constitutionibus* Rading, *capitulo primo*.

¶ And alle opyn gouelerys [usurers] arn accursed; & alle þat opynly vsyn symonye. Ex *constitutionibus* oxon, Radyng, & Peckham; & *extravagantes de vsuris*.⁵⁵

The text as a whole emphasises the importance of respecting Holy Church as an ideological concept inspired by the Word of God and, in a more pragmatic way, by refraining from stealing from or generally committing sacrilege in Church properties. This work acknowledges the essential role played in the sacrament of penance by the free will of each man and woman. It exhibits an awareness of the important role played by the Church in its role as an educator while maintaining that it can only ever be a personal decision to renounce sin and turn to God. In the tenth chapter, explicit reference is made to the role played by ‘The ‘Scoop of Penance’ and its Handle, Satisfaction’⁵⁶ in the clearing away of sin from the well of a soul that truly repents its sins:

A scope is deep & hool, to resceyue watyr; so þi penaunce muste be depe, to receyue watyr of contricyoun in-to þin herte, þat, depe in þin herte, þou sorwe for þi curs. þi scope of þi penaunce muste ben hool, wyth an hole purpose, neuere to trespacyn azen in þat curs.⁵⁷

The author of *Jacob's Well* shows that, while it may be true that the institution of the Church in the later Middle Ages believed that it understood *how* the faithful ought to respond to the challenges and obligations of the Christian life, this stance was premised upon an acceptance of the fact that each soul would face

⁵⁵ *Jacob's Well*, p. 18, ll. 10-16.

⁵⁶ *Jacob's Well*, p. 65. This is the explanatory title he gives to the tenth chapter.

⁵⁷ *Jacob's Well*, p. 65, ll. 4-8.

individual judgment from God: the sacrament of penance can only be valid if contrition for 'þi curs' comes from 'depe in þin herte'.

Jacob's Well is a text that expresses the belief that each person is answerable before God for his/ her actions. It is, perhaps, this open commitment to the need for personal integrity that is most noticeable about this work. Certainly this stance is reflected in the fact that the author's malediction upon heretics and unbelievers ought not be thought to make him a man who would seek to preserve a corrupt and oppressive status quo. However, this in turn does not prevent an approach to Christian religious practices in general and the sacrament of the Eucharist in particular from being strictly orthodox. He writes:

Also we schewyn acursyd alle þo þat beleuyn nozt on þe sacrament of þe awtere to be goddys flesh & his blood in lyknesse of breed & wyn; & alle þat beleue nozt in þe opere sacramentys of holy church, & in þe articles of oure feyth, as þe church of Rome beleuyth, & as holy cherche beleuyth & techyth.⁵⁸

What the author of *Jacob's Well* demands from his readers is a firm faith in the doctrines and sacramental rites of the institution of Holy Church: in an acknowledgment, for example, of the reality of transubstantiation of the Host at the celebration of the Eucharist and the spiritual efficacy of institutional worship. Nevertheless, mere obedience to these dictates is shown, throughout the course of *Jacob's Well*, to be quite worthless without a personal undertaking and commitment to God. Those filled with sin, as already mentioned:

nedyth, in gostly labour, to scopyn out þis corrupte watyr of curs, wyth þe scoope of penauns. A scope is deep & hool, to reseuyue watyr; so þi penaunce muste be depe, to reseuyue watyr of contricyoun in-to þin herte, þat, depe in þin herte, þou sorwe for þi curs.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Jacob's Well*, p. 19, ll. 1-5.

⁵⁹ *Jacob's Well*, p. 65, ll. 2-6.

The remedies of confession and satisfaction are as nothing without genuine contrition that comes more from ‘sorwe of wretthyng my god’ than that which comes solely from a ‘dreed of helle’.⁶⁰ Holy Church’s ministrations can only help those men and women who do recognise their own corruption and their soul’s need to receive the ‘watyr of contricyoun’. In the same way, penitential almsgiving must be undertaken in conjunction with the intention to sin no more – not merely to atone for a sin – and in the knowledge that simple, sincere prayer can be more valuable and efficacious than the physical forms of penance such as fasting and the giving of alms, however worthy those acts of contrition are in themselves.⁶¹

As has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, the sacrament of penance was intended to bring hope and comfort to sinful individuals. Despite the authoritarian stance of an orthodox work such as *Jacob’s Well*, which emphasises the need to confess regularly and be obedient to the doctrines and ministers of Holy Church, a reader of the text gains little sense that orthodox religious practices in general – and the practice of the sacrament of penance in particular – were intended to obstruct the establishment of lay desires to foster personal relationships with God. Equally pertinent is the fact that, based upon the survival of such textual evidence, it would appear that a large proportion of the laity found the existing ecclesiastical establishment, for all its flaws, a valuable aid to devotion and thus something that helped them on their quest for salvation. When in his article ‘Image and History’ in Alexander and Binski’s *The Age of Chivalry* J. Denton notes that the commands to strip churches and altars of their

⁶⁰ *Jacob’s Well*, p. 177, ll. 1-2. These words are taken from an account of the damnation of a man who had appeared to be truly contrite but whose repentance had been based more upon a desire to escape punishment than it had been upon remorse for committing acts that were offensive in the sight of God.

⁶¹ *Jacob’s Well*, pp. 188-91.

'popery' in the sixteenth century did not often come from the people themselves, he is acknowledging that personal spiritual satisfaction might be assumed to have been gained through faith in the sacraments and a traditional, structured form of worship:

Through to the early sixteenth century sacred figures were still being paid for, erected and beautified; roods and image bearing lofts were still being constructed. Few of the 'books' of the unlearned' would be cast into the flames at the instigation of the people themselves. The commands came from above.⁶²

For every celebrated instance of ecclesiastical defiance and open heresy at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries, for every burning of an image or denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation, there were many who still sought and found spiritual worth in Holy Church and its doctrines. Through a consideration of texts such as, *Jacob's Well*, the *Speculum Sacerdotale* and *Handlyng Synne* as well as references to *Piers Plowman* and anonymous lyrics of the time, it has been the aim of this chapter to reinforce further the concept that it is possible to find in such Middle English texts the articulation of a type of mediaeval orthodox Christianity that believed in the spiritual efficacy of the doctrines of the institution of Holy Church at the same time as it recognised both faults in that establishment's administration and a corresponding need for lay men and women to accept and assume responsibility for their own sins and, to a certain extent (one that still recognises the essential importance of remaining faithful to the received authority of Holy Church), their own salvation. As accounts concerned in particular with the sacrament of penance have shown, sacramental rites neither gave the priest unlimited power to do with the soul in

⁶² J. Denton, 'Image and History', in J. Alexander and P. Binski (eds), *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England* (London: Wiedenfield and Nicolson, 1987) pp. 20-5. Denton, p. 23. Cf. Duffy, pp. 476-7.

his cure as he will, nor did it absolve that soul from a need to examine itself and endeavour to improve its relationship with God through genuine contrition and personal devotion. The grace of God, it was acknowledged, remained in His gift alone and it is with this in mind that it now seems appropriate to broaden this consideration of grace and the penance to include a more detailed discussion of what is perhaps viewed as the most important – and also most contentious – sacrament of the seven and the rite at the heart of the orthodox Christian worship in the later Middle Ages: the celebration of Mass and the individual's response to the sacrament of the Eucharist.

CHAPTER III*PACIENTES VINCUNT?* EUCHARISTIC DEVOTION AND THE LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

‘For als he died in sekenesse of our manhede
 Als he ras thurgh strenthe of his godhead.’

(The Lay Folk’s Catechism)

As the ‘central sacrament’ and that without which all other sacraments would not exist, the Eucharist came to occupy an increasingly important, if not always stable, place in late mediaeval English religious beliefs and practices. John Bossy, in his influential article ‘The Mass as a Social Institution 1200-1700’, writes of what he describes as the ‘full public, sung mass’ that it

...was the central public ritual of the Latin church from the thirteenth century to the Reformation and of the Roman Catholic church thereafter.¹

Not only did it occupy a central place in the collective religious consciousness of later mediaeval England, but it was ‘universally felt by orthodox opinion, both skilled and unskilled, to have the character of a powerful work’: it was a part of later mediaeval religious life that seems to have possessed a genuine spiritual resonance for all members of Christian society.² From a more overtly and enthusiastically Catholic stand-point, Eamon Duffy begins the chapter he has devoted in *The Stripping of the Altars* to a consideration of pre-Reformation attitudes towards and understandings of the Mass with the statement that:

The liturgy lay at the heart of medieval religion, and the Mass lay at the heart of the liturgy. In the Mass the redemption of the world, wrought on Good Friday once and for all, was renewed and made fruitful for all who believed. Christ himself, immolated on the altar of the cross, became present on the altar of the parish church, body, soul and divinity, and his blood flowed once again, to nourish and renew Church and world.³

¹ Bossy (1983), pp. 32 & 33.

² Bossy (1983), p. 33.

³ Duffy, p. 91.

Duffy's language reveals his concern with projecting a view of the practice and reception of later mediaeval orthodox Christianity in England in which the institution of the Church can be seen to offer all faithful men and women the opportunity to be 'renewed' through its celebration of a rite that made the redeeming sacrifice of Christ 'fruitful for all who believed'. Building upon this idea of the spiritual efficacy of the Mass, the following two chapters will consider how textual evidence from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can show how possible lay responses to literary accounts of Christ's Passion in tandem with an individual's attendance at the Mass and, especially, their reaction to the sight of the consecrated Host, reveal a (possibly surprisingly) high degree of personal spiritual awareness and religious sophistication which, itself might be seen to be in part, at least, the result of the educational reforms of the Fourth Lateran Council, Pecham and others.⁴

Similarly concerned with mediaeval responses to the sacrament of the Eucharist and the attendant celebration of the Mass is Craig Fraser's work, which explores the relationships that might be said to have existed between 'patterns of individual meditative piety and the public devotions of the liturgy of the mass'.

In later mediaeval England, according to Fraser:

The eucharist emerges as being central in the shaping of [lay religious] sensibilities, central to the lay understanding of the basics of the faith, and therefore, as a central and vital force for lay devotion.⁵

⁴ This approach will also highlight the importance of literature as an active agency for the support and dissemination of a mainstream religious orthodoxy in later mediaeval England. The texts cited in this chapter are both product and producer (they are indicative of a cultural consciousness that they themselves have played an active part in shaping) of the religious sensibilities with which this thesis as a whole is concerned.

⁵ Fraser, p. 6 & p. 61.

It is the concept of the celebration of Mass together with a corresponding devotion to the Eucharist as a ‘central and vital force for lay devotion’ that, with the aid of an examination of what might, in this context, be termed ‘Eucharistic literature’, will form the basis for the following discussion: a discussion that, examining the literary articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility *vis à vis* the Mass and the Eucharist, necessarily involves engaging with and, on occasion, requalifying alternative academic points of view which, in recent years, have held such sway that they might almost be said to have become something of an orthodoxy in their own right. Returning, however, at this moment, to a straightforward consideration of the mechanics of mediaeval celebration of the Mass, it is important to remember that Jaroslav Pelikan hardly overstates the case when, writing about the theological developments of the Middle Ages, he says that:

...the proper celebration of the Eucharist and the proper understanding of it lay at the center of the Christian faith. Among all the actions of the church, the Mass was “the supreme sacrament.” Nothing else, not even the episcopacy or the sacrament of chrism, could be compared with the body and blood of the Savior in importance.⁶

Citing from Odo of Cluny’s *Conferences*, Pelikan continues:

“the holy mystery of the Lord’s body” was the greatest of all the benefits granted to mankind, “because the entire salvation of the world consists in this mystery.”⁷

The point he makes so clearly is that, in its re-enactment of Christ’s immolation, subsequent Resurrection and His attendant redemption of Mankind, the sacrament of the Eucharist was a natural focal point for orthodox, Christian,

⁶ Pelikan (1978), p. 185.

⁷ Pelikan (1978), p. 185. Duffy, p. 108, notes that it was generally believed that all the sacraments ‘took their meaning and power from the blood of Christ’.

liturgically-based worship in the Middle Ages. In *The Powers of the Holy*,⁸ Lynn Staley and David Aers echo Pelikan's description of the Eucharist as the central tenet of mediaeval Christianity:

The humiliated, tortured, whipped, nailed-down, pierced, dying but life-giving body of Christ, the very body literally present in the eucharist – this body became the dominant icon of the late medieval church and the devotion it cultivated and authorized.⁹

The universality of the sacrament of the Eucharist and the received authority of Holy Church, which demanded belief in the Real Presence of Christ – ‘the very body literally present’ – in the elements, can surely be seen to have been of great spiritual importance to all men and women even as, at the same time, their response to it altered and shaped the mediaeval Church.

What was the manner in which the laity understood this ‘dominant icon’ and what, within the parameters set by the Church, was the ‘devotion it cultivated and authorized’? Orthodox belief taught that, through the priest's re-enactment of Christ's offering of His body to His disciples at the Last Supper, He became actually present in the church or chapel, manifesting Himself in a way that bridged the gap between the events that occurred in Jerusalem over one thousand years earlier – and their irrevocable, eternal consequences – and the continued need of mediaeval men and women for Christ's grace. Although His atoning sacrifice is complete, God's plan for the world is not – Man can still choose to turn his back upon Christ. It is for this reason, to use an overtly literary example, that William Langland in *Piers Plowman* has Christ say:

For I that am lord of lif, love is my drynke,
And for that drynke today, I deide upon erthe.
I fought so, me thursteth yet, for mannes soule sake;
May no drynke me moiste, ne my thurst slake,

⁸ D. Aers and L. Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996).

⁹Aers and Staley, p. 17.

Til the vendage falle in the vale of Josaphat,
 That I drynke right ripe must, *resureccio mortuorum*.
 And thanne shal I come as a kyng, crouned, with aungeles,
 And have out of helle alle mennes soules.¹⁰

Having died for love, Christ still languishes, thirsty, in a similar way to that through which the sacrament of the Eucharist reminds each faithful soul both of the salvation bought for it and of the thirst that remains in Mankind to break through from a world of signs and echoes, to experience the reality of His presence. The thirst of Christ can only finally be slaked when the Day of the Last Judgment comes, when He shall ‘come as a kyng, crouned, with aungeles,/ And have out of helle alle mennes soules’. In its focus upon love and the universality of the New Covenant between Man and God that was forged when Christ ‘faught so’ and ‘deide upon erthe’, Langland highlights not only the boundless nature of Christ’s love for Mankind but also draws attention to the essentially (yet perhaps sometimes overlooked) optimistic message of mediaeval Christianity: that Christ can save ‘alle mennes soules’. There can be a temptation, when looking back from the very different society of the twenty-first century, to lose sight of this underlying optimism, clouded as it can be by an undeniable, yet possibly misunderstood, emphasis upon sin, penance and the necessity of carrying out one’s devotions in accordance with the commands of an often fractured, far from perfect temporal institution of Holy Church. As can be shown time and time again, however, in literature and other evidence from this era, the fallen and doubting take comfort from their faith and a hope of salvation remains, despite

¹⁰Langland, Passus XVIII, ll. 366-73. For an interesting analysis of Langland’s use of Christ’s thirst on the cross see H. Wirtjes’ chapter ‘Piers Plowman B. xviii. 371: ‘right ripe must’, in M. Stokes and T.L. Burton (eds), *Medieval Literature and Antiquities: Studies in Honour of Basil Cottle* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1987), pp. 133-43.

an individual's awareness of the crushing nature of his or her own sins.¹¹ While, for example, the macabre tombs that depict, in graphic detail, the effects of decay upon the human body clearly draw their inspiration from a *contemptus mundi* school of religious sensibility, they are, paradoxically, also beacons of hope that remind the viewer that, just as 'uch gresse mot grow of graynes dede',¹² so too will a corrupt body be transformed on the day of the Last Judgment.¹³ Even John Audelay's famous poem,¹⁴ with its desperate, haunting, macaronic opening couplet, 'Lade, helpe! Ihesu, merce!! *Timor mortis conturbat me*'¹⁵ and its subjective consideration of the wretchedness of the human condition concludes each of its stanzas with the line '*Passio Christi conforta me*' ('The Passion of Christ, comfort me'). While Audelay can write, '[o]f myselve no þyng I se,/ Saue filþ, vnclennes, vile stynkyng'¹⁶ and worries about what will happen to him after his death, his very composition of this poem suggests that he has faith in the redemptive powers of Christ's Passion.

While it is impossible, in any age, to separate religious ideologies and practices from the *mores* and economic and political concerns of the society that adheres to these beliefs, it is important not to allow such an historical understanding to over-rationalise – and thus to marginalise, if not to deny – a

¹¹ It is telling, for example, that deathbed renunciations of worldly misdeeds are valid in the sight of God, although Christians are exhorted consistently not to delay confessing any sins that they may have committed: certainly, they are enjoined never to put God's mercy to the test. Julian of Norwich, with her famous insistence that 'all shall be well' offers a similar representation of Christ's desire to save all people as that illustrated by the quotation from Langland discussed above.

¹² *Pearl*, in J.J. Anderson (ed.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (London: Everyman, 1996), pp. 1-46. *Pearl*, l. 31.

¹³ For a brief, yet informative introduction to mediaeval attitudes towards death, with reference to 'cadaver-tombs', see M. Aston, 'Death', in R. Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 202-28.

¹⁴ J. Audelay, *The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. E.K. Whiting (London: E.E.T.S., 1931).

¹⁵ Audelay, pp. 211-2, Poem 51, '*Timor mortis conturbat me*', ll.1-2.

¹⁶ Audelay, Poem 51, ll. 20-1.

manifestation of faith that can appear remote and quite alien to secularised, liberal, academic twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinking. Miri Rubin's book *Corpus Christi* has a tendency to present later mediaeval English belief in the sacrament of the Eucharist in such a way that it sounds less like faith in the redemptive powers of Christ – as celebrated through the rites of His Church – and more like the reasoned adherence to an ideology that rewards those who are best able to control and manipulate the responses of those around them to a set of symbols that have come to be endowed with certain accepted and valued qualities. She writes:

The eucharist provided an axis around which worlds revolved; in it were bound order and hierarchy, inducements towards conformity and promises of reward in health, prosperity, tranquillity.¹⁷

Rubin presents the sacrament of the Eucharist as an 'axis' established less by the will of God, through Christ (the source of the 'received authority' that can be understood to have informed the decrees passed by the Fourth Lateran Council and been implemented in England by bishops and priests), and more as a curiously powerful, yet ambiguous and slippery centre-point, ripe for control and exploitation by the most powerful – often ministers who could claim to be acting on behalf of Holy Church, but also, especially after the rise in popularity of the feast of Corpus Christi and the rites that grew from its celebration, prominent members of the laity. She views the sacrament of the altar as a humanly constructed concept whose meaning can only ever be defined incompletely¹⁸ and

¹⁷ Rubin (1991), p. 348.

¹⁸ Rubin (1991). She writes of her approach to the study of Eucharistic piety in the later Middle Ages:

The institutions of the church, [were well positioned] to suggest and often to impose particular practices and ideas about the eucharist, and by extension about virtue, authority and hierarchy. But I will show that these powerful institutional privileges could determine and fix only some of its meanings. (p. 11)

one which possesses ‘gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions’¹⁹ that can be used by dominant members of mediaeval society to establish their particular interpretation of the spiritual benefits and privileges contained in the Eucharist. Understated, yet still present in her use of the phrase ‘inducements towards conformity’ is the idea that, far from being an experience that allows and encourages Man to draw close to God, the socially constructed sacrament of the Eucharist is rooted in the earth-bound, self-serving desires and aspirations of a ruling ecclesiastical, political and urban bourgeois elite. The rewards of ‘health, prosperity, [and] tranquillity’ that Rubin describes as being built round this ‘axis’ seem to be grounded in temporal, materialistic aspirations that, ultimately, have little to do with fear or love of God, an acknowledged desire for the forgiveness of sins and the chance to experience eternal life in heaven after death.

Writing about the growth of fraternities established in the name of *Corpus Christi*, as well as a more general lay involvement with and interest in Eucharistic devotion Rubin notes:

Corpus Christi was becoming part of the ritual rhythm of the year, its liturgy assimilated, the tasks of its celebration allocated, its hymns learnt, its images considered and thought out. As its meanings, possibilities and associations within the symbolic system were recognised and interpreted, it developed into a living feast. Its eucharistic currency was becoming recognised, realised, and thus negotiable, communicable, and most strikingly – exchangeable for *power*.²⁰

At the heart of *Corpus Christi* is an exposition of the sacred and secular temporal power-games that Rubin believes were brokered behind an unimpeachable front of devotion to the Body of Christ. Rubin’s use of the word ‘currency’ seems particularly apposite to her argument as it reinforces her understanding of the

¹⁹ Rubin (1991), p. 9.

²⁰ Rubin (1991), p. 212.

Eucharist as a concept that was traded like a market commodity. Nevertheless, despite evidence of occasions when, despite ostensible appearances to the contrary, genuine piety was hardly the motivating factor in a gesture of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, Rubin's entirely convincing arguments in *Corpus Christi* about the ability and propensity of men and women to act selfishly (particularly in their quest for power, status and authority) are curiously limited in other significant respects. They are undercut by their propensity not to allow for the singular ability of men and women to be simultaneously and quite genuinely hypocritical or inconsistent in their thoughts and actions – using wealth and status to buy a share in the temporal authority which undoubtedly surrounded the Eucharist – and sincere in their belief in the ultimate immutability and incorruptibility, necessity and efficacy of a sacrament understood not only to have been instituted by Christ Himself but also one that contained His very flesh and blood. By contrast, working critically with the acceptance of such a premise allows for the fact that modern academic consideration of possible lay and even clerical responses to the Mass and the sacrament of the Eucharist ought to take into account the predisposition of those alive at the end of the fourteenth and start of the fifteenth centuries to believe not only in God, but also in the real spiritual importance and efficacy of His Church and its sacraments.

An important part of any new examination of orthodox responses to the celebration of Mass – one of the aims of this and the following chapter – also involves looking again at modern interpretations of later mediaeval representations of and reactions to what might be thought of as a 'mainstream' understanding of the humanity of Christ. One of the less immediately obvious, yet important ways in which the de-mystification and rationalisation of

Christianity²¹ occurs in modern, critical considerations of mediaeval (primarily lay) attitudes towards the Eucharist is to be found in academic works that focus upon the Middle English literary representation and, by extension, hoped for/expected reader reception of a particular interpretation of Christ's humanity and especially His suffering on the cross as the Man of Sorrows. The spread of 'affective' devotion from the eleventh century fostered an increasingly emotional form of worship through which men and women were encouraged to contemplate the horrific realities of Christ's Passion and the evidence this supplied of His great love for Mankind.²²

One poem from the many written in this style in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries²³ serves as an example of how a literary articulation of the death of Christ might be supposed to encourage spiritually fruitful self-examination and contemplation in its reader: increasing his/ her understanding of the enormity of Christ's sacrifice and a sharp sense of their own unworthiness to be the recipient of the redemption He won for them through His death:

Whan Ich se on rode
 Jhesu mi lemman,
 And beside Him stonde
 Marie an Johan,
 And His rig y-swongen,
 And His side y-stongen,
 For the love of man,

²¹ By which is meant a more anthropological approach to the study of later Middle English devotional texts and the society in which they were produced and a corresponding tendency to define religious sensibilities in terms of the socio-political, economic and personal needs of a particular individual or society as a whole. Such an academic stance, while valuable, can sometimes run the risk of marginalising the faith of its subjects: rejecting the obvious in favour of what is claimed to be the carefully hidden or unconsciously suppressed.

²² For an introduction to Anselm's groundbreaking doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ and His subsequent redemption of the world see Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. B. Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For a condensed account of Anselm's interpretation of Christ's humanity see the fourth chapter in T. Weinardy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 39-53.

²³R. Woolf, in *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 33, describes this lyric as 'perhaps the most successful of the very early passion poems' and sees its influence in much later works.

Wel ow Ich to wepen
 And sinnës forleten,
 Yif Ich of lovë can,
 Yif Ich of lovë can,
 Yif Ich of lovë can.²⁴

The harshness and progressive effect of the use of the descriptive verbs, ‘y-swongen’ and ‘y-stongen’ emphasise, in a cumulative manner, the reality of Jesus’ suffering and plead, through their depiction of His Passion, for the reader’s repentance – so that His sacrifice might not have been made in vain. Christ’s Incarnation is, from the eleventh century onwards, not only understood to have enabled Him to redeem Mankind, but also, through the common bond of humanity forged on the Cross at Calvary, to have allowed men and women to have compassion for His suffering as a *man* while still being filled with awe and unquantifiable gratitude for the fact that the Son of God (and God in His own right) should deign to undertake to suffer in humanity’s form for humanity’s sake. The poet makes a nice distinction between the incontrovertible facts of Christ’s crucifixion as taken from the Gospels themselves – His agony, the presence of His mother and the Beloved Disciple – and the poem’s narrator’s lack of certainty about his ability to respond appropriately. His use of the line ‘[w]el ow Ich to wepen’ and his repetition of ‘[y]if Ich of lovë can’ suggest a desire and personal sense of obligation to be moved by the sight of Christ’s suffering that is coupled with a tentative articulation of a fear of his own inability to react as his heart and soul tell him he ought. Christ’s death and Resurrection reopened the gates of heaven to Adam’s children, but, as mediaeval Christians

²⁴*Medieval English Lyrics*, ‘Whan ich se on rode’, p. 119.

such as the author of this poem appears to have understood well, only to those who acknowledged their own sinfulness and need for forgiveness.²⁵

Other poems and treatises, which are even more graphic in their accounts of Christ's suffering, still aim to move their readers to this point – a watershed-like moment where they are so overwhelmed by His actions that, having acknowledged their sin, they absorb themselves in contemplation of Him. Suffering and bloodshed lose their point if they are dwelt upon for their own sake and, while there are examples in mediaeval hagiography, literature and especially art that would seem to come close to crossing this boundary,²⁶ there is also a mainstream, more moderate school of affective devotion that is, perhaps, a more representative reflection of orthodox later mediaeval devotional attitudes and religious sensibilities.²⁷ The affective power of such works rests in the careful combination of a description of the physical suffering of Christ with the recognition, however allusive or understated this might be, that His death at Calvary marked not the end, but the beginning of life. This can be seen from a

²⁵ D. Despres in *Ghostly Sights: Visual Meditation in Late-Medieval Literature* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1989) also discusses this poem and how its Franciscan meditation on Christ's humanity

enabled the penitent, educated or uneducated, male or female, to experience the Passion personally and to scrutinize his or her individual response. (pp. 6-7)

²⁶ Mediaeval female mystics and saints were particularly likely to dwell upon the humanity of Christ (often as it presented itself to them through the medium of the Host) in particularly 'fleshly' ways. See Bynum (1987) *passim* and, for an introduction to this area of study, A. Vauchez, 'Eucharistic Devotion and Mystical Union in Late-Medieval Female Saints', in D.E. Bornstein (ed.), *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, c. 1993), pp. 237-42.

²⁷ The establishment, within the boundaries of orthodox religious devotional practices of such later mediaeval feasts as 'The Five Wounds', 'The Crown of Thorns' and even 'The Compassion of the Virgin' reveal the extent to which affective devotion and compassion had become an important and integral part of Christian piety. However, as R.W. Pfaff shows in *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), *passim* (but especially Chapters IV, V and VII) there was a lay and ecclesiastic devotion to the perceived spiritual efficacy of these services that suggests an awareness of the importance of remembering to link Christ's suffering with the salvation and redemption of Man that He bought through His passion and death. For an account of the development of the changing meaning of and responses to pictorial representations of Christ's passion in the later Middle Ages, see H.N.B. Ridderbos, 'The Man of Sorrows: Pictorial Images and Metaphorical Statements', in A.A. MacDonald and H.N.B. Ridderbos (eds), *The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late-Medieval Culture* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), pp. 143-82.

work such as ‘Whyt was hys naked brest’, a poem that describes Christ’s Passion in vivid terms and which provides the reader with a memorable vignette of the horrors of violent death. Interestingly, Christ is not mentioned by name, or even by one of His many titles in this work. The assumption that He is the subject of this highly affective poem reveals much about the assumed knowledge and religious sensibilities of the readership for which this verse was composed, while the fact that the death being described is that of a man who was also the Son of God makes the scene being described yet more pitiable:

Whyt was hys naked brest
 and red of blod hys side,
 Bleyk was His fair andléd *(face)*
 his woundes dep and wide,
 And hys armes y-streight,
 hey upon the rode;
 On fif stedes on His body
 the stremës ran o blode.²⁸

The poem emphasises Christ’s suffering on the cross in starkly unambiguous and immediate terms that allow the reader to move beyond the straightforward consideration of Christ’s agony towards a more complex contemplation of that which He bought with His death. Plunging the reader into a highly visual account of Christ’s crucifixion, the poem opens with a description of His breast which, exposed and vulnerable in its nakedness, is white and might reasonably be supposed to stand out clearly against the unbending, unfeeling framing woodwork of the rood. There is a shocking contrast between its pale innocence and the red streams of blood that the cruelty and unkindness of men, with their nails and spears, have caused to run down His body. The wounds from which the blood flow are themselves described in emotive terms as being ‘dep and wide’, a phrase that suggests both the magnitude of Christ’s suffering and the

²⁸ *Medieval English Lyrics*, ‘Whyt was hys naked brest’, pp. 118-19.

unfathomable and capacious depths of His love for all humanity.²⁹ The mechanics of the verse itself – the poet’s use of the words ‘dep’, ‘wid’ and ‘hey’ – present the reader with a tremendous imaginative opportunity to meditate upon the enormity of Christ’s sacrifice through the placing of His suffering within a three-dimensioned universal (‘stedes’ referring more usually to places on a map) context. In addition, it is interesting to note that, while death by crucifixion necessarily involves the stretching out of the prisoner’s arms, here the poet uses his description of how Christ’s arms were ‘y-streight/ hey upon the rode’ not only to add another affective detail of verisimilitude to his depiction of Christ’s agony, but also to suggest that, with the straightness of His limbs and their height on the cross – Christ seems to tower above the narrator – He gestures towards His ultimate triumph over death.³⁰ The emotive focus and affective heart of this poem is clearly upon the broken, bleeding body of Christ, His bruised face and wounded side. However, such attention to the physicalities of His suffering ought not to be presumed to lead to an assumption that the torments of the flesh and blood of Christ are being considered in isolation from the reason *why* Christ suffered and the benefits His death bought to all men and women. Christ’s humanity was of such great importance to mediaeval Christians because it was through the suffering of muscle and sinew that God chose to redeem Mankind, bringing about victory through seeming defeat and using the frailty of human

²⁹Cf. C.W. Bynum, ‘The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages’, *Church History* 71 (2002), 685-714:

It is worth remembering in this connection that fifteenth-century devotions to the heart and wound of Jesus sometimes relate it not to eucharist but to baptism and penance, and that the pressing out of Christ’s blood (even in the image of the winepress) is often not associated with sacramental feeding at all but rather with the need to drain every drop in expiation for the sins of the world. (p. 714, footnote 90)

³⁰ It might also be said that the imagery alluded to by this language draws upon earlier, pre-Anselm, mediaeval depictions of Christ as *Christus Miles*. The most famous example of this genre being the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* in which Christ mounts the Cross like a young warrior keen to do battle and, at the description of the Deposition of the Cross, is portrayed as resting after battle.

flesh (the very source of humanity's fall from grace) to be the means by which the chasm that existed between God and His creation, after Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, was bridged. This poem is indicative of the existence of a type of later mediaeval orthodox spirituality that recognised the importance of meditating upon Christ's humanity even as it stopped short of venerating God's body *because* of its very fleshliness. By so doing, it provides the evidence necessary to rebut an idea put forward by Caroline Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, that:

Christ's fast in the garden and his sacrifice on the cross were spoken of less as part of a cosmic drama in which hell was forced to vomit forth the indigestible bread of Christ than as moments of terrible suffering that gave significance to all human experience because the man who suffered was God.³¹

In 'Whyt was hys naked brest' there is an unrelenting focus upon the physical nature of Christ's Passion that, because of its immediacy, gives it an almost uncomfortable emotional and spiritual intensity. Bringing with him or her a knowledge of what led to the event being depicted taking place, the Christian reader is forced to confront the reality of his or her complicity in Christ's death. The graphic depiction of Jesus' suffering as a human can be seen to be illustrative of the depth of His love for Mankind, but hardly as something that '[gives] significance to all human experience'. Christ, as the faithful believed, did not die to justify the existence and reality of the human race – He did not need to do so – but to redeem them from spiritual exile and reconcile them with God. While 'human experience' could be used in the service of God in the Middle Ages,³² to argue that Christ's death gave so great a 'significance' to

³¹ Bynum (1987), p. 32.

³² As a range of mediaeval texts, from Walter Hilton's *The Mixed Life* to *Piers Plowman* and the anonymous *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* make clear.

humanity for its own sake is to give a weight to mortal ‘experience’ that, in its foregrounding of the needs and claims of the individual person, leaves little room (or need) for the saving grace bought by Christ’s death.

Another Middle English lyric, in which Christ Himself is the narrator, serves to illustrate the distinctions that can be made over this point – the need to recall the actual physical suffering of Christ for the sins of Mankind, without losing sight of the ultimate aim of His actions: the spiritual redemption of His Father’s creation – rather neatly.³³ Instead of focusing upon the purely physical aspects of Christ’s Passion, it concentrates upon the motivation that lay behind His sacrifice – love:

Love me slow,
And love me drow,
 And love me leyde on berë,
Love is my pes,
For love I ches
 Man to byen derë.³⁴

Christ describes himself as having been slain, the use of the word ‘slow’ alerting the reader to the fact that His death was savage and, by implication, unjust. Images of bloodshed and warfare might also be said to hover just behind the initially romantic depiction of Love laying Christ on His bier, as the scene recalls one of the darker aspects of courtly tradition: the commonplace of death by contest in battle or tournament.³⁵ Despite these allusions, however, the tenor of the verse as a whole is not one of violence, or even bodily pain and suffering but of the redemption of Mankind as expressed in the lines, ‘[f]or love I ches/ Man to byen derë’. This poem is an example of a mediaeval literary ability to articulate, simultaneously, concepts of suffering and joy, thus offering a certain insight into

³³ *Medieval English Lyrics*, ‘Love me broughte’, p. 99.

³⁴ *Medieval English Lyrics*, ‘Love me broughte’, ll. 7-12.

³⁵ The courtly allusiveness of this poem is also noted by Woolf, pp. 168-9.

a mainstream religious sensibility of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Such a bringing together of the opposing and often contradictory ideas and emotions that are at the heart of the relationship between Christ and those whom He redeemed can also be found in a lyric from Douglas Gray's collection of mediaeval devotional verse.³⁶ 'Allas! Allas! Wel yvel y sped' captures a sense of the sinner's simultaneous nearness to and distance from Christ – a feeling that might surely have been especially heightened by the visual stimulus provided by, for example, the sight of the Host or a picture of the Crucifixion:³⁷

Allas! allas! wel yvel y sped!
 For synne Jesu fro me ys fled,
 That lyvely fere.
 At my dore he standes al one,
 And kallys 'Undo!' with reuful mone,
 On this manere:

'Undo, my lef, my dowve dere!
 Undo! Wy stond y stekyn out here?
 Ik am thi make!
 Lo, my heved and myne lockys
 Ar al bywevyd wyth bloody dropys
 For thine sake.'³⁸

It is Man's sin that made Christ's sacrifice – He is 'al bywevyd wyth bloody dropys' for 'thine sake' – necessary and that still divides humanity from Christ, even though He continues to stand at the entrance to lost, sinful hearts, pleading to be let in. The poem presents Christ as a lover eager to be united with the soul of His beloved 'lef' and 'dowve dere' but prevented from so doing by a

³⁶ *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*, ed. D. Gray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

³⁷ For an account of the Christocentric nature of church decorations see Duffy, pp. 157-8. Duffy also comments that representations of the wounded Christ in the Eucharist are 'emphatically an image of forgiveness and grace, not judgment' (p. 109) Despres describes how '[I]ike visual meditation, poetry necessarily incarnates ideas or feelings that are difficult to express' (p. 96) and quotes from V. A. Kolve's *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984):

words become pictures, pictures give birth to words. In the Middle Ages, to be an audience to an image (whether verbal or visual) implied activity, not passivity. It called one to thought, to feeling, to meditation. (p. 30)

³⁸ *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*, No. 41, p. 39 This poem is also discussed in Woolf, p. 51.

resolutely closed door.³⁹ Himself an object worthy of compassion, Christ speaks directly to the narrator of the poem, reminding him that He suffered for his sake. The poet's use of 'thine' balances and contrasts the earlier use of 'my' in 'my heved and myne lockys' to draw attention to the fact that Christ's sacrifice was undertaken for the redemption of fallen humanity and ought to be sufficient to move men and women to turn to Him. The reality of the situation, as understood by the narrator of the verse was that Christ was still being denied admittance to souls He had died to save and that there was a real need for people to be reminded of the division that sin erected between each person and their Redeemer.⁴⁰

It is important that the nuances of such complex thoughts are considered by scholars working on vernacular Christian devotional, educational and penitential texts from this period as to do so can only help to create a more balanced understanding of the religious sensibilities of a time in which belief in God, was such an integral part of life and death. These examples of Middle English literature have been chosen because they illustrate, albeit briefly, some of the ways in which the Passion of Christ – the time at which His Incarnation was most obvious and integral to His mission to redeem His Father's creation – was ultimately as much about hope and salvation as it was about blood and pain. Graphic depictions in prose and verse of Christ's suffering can be seen to play an important role in focusing the mind and heart of the individual upon his/ her

³⁹ Compare with the lyric 'In the vaile of restles mynd' (*Medieval English Lyrics*, pp. 100-4) in which Christ says, repeatedly '*Quia amore langueo*' – 'because I languish for love' (from The Song of Songs), revealing His continuing love for a humanity that still scorns and wounds Him.

⁴⁰ Cf. Revelations 3. 20:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

The poem also seems to articulate a reversal of Luke 11. 9 ('knock, and it shall be opened unto you'). Here it is Christ knocking at the door of a sinner's heart – a powerful image that would demand an equally strong response from the Christian reader.

sinfulness and undeniable complicity in Christ's death and encouraging an active, personal response to such thoughts. As such, these works might be seen to offer their readers chastisement – pushing each reader to bear some level of personal responsibility for Christ's suffering – while gesturing to the hope of salvation that came out of Jesus' death.

Moving now to a consideration of possible mediaeval responses to the humanity of Christ that are explicitly situated within the framework of the orthodox liturgy, *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* describes the instance during the Mass when the sacring bell is rung to announce Christ's bodily presence. The text suggests to its readers that, at this moment, they should kneel and hold up their hands to their Redeemer:

knelande holde vp bothe þi handes,
 And so þo leuacioun þou be-halde,
 for þat is he þat iudas salde,
 and sithen was scourged and don on rode,
 and for mankynde þere shad his blode,
 and dyed & ros and went to heuen,
 and 3it shal come to deme vs euen.⁴¹

The scourging and crucifixion are presented to the laity and, it might be ventured, were understood by them, in terms that show the Passion as a heartbreaking, yet necessary act.⁴² A lifetime of religious meditation and contemplation is explained here in two lines – 'and for mankynde þere shad his blode,/ and dyed & ros and went to heuen' – which, in their bold statement of the

⁴¹ *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, ll. 405-11.

⁴² The lyric 'Christ maketh to man a fair present' (*Medieval English Lyrics*, p. 132-3) describes Christ's immolation in deeply affective terms: 'Lovë, love, whi doest thou so?/ Love, thou brekest myn herte a-two' (ll. 33-4), while also acknowledging that 'Wrong is went/ The devel is schent,/ Crist thurgh the might of thee'. (ll. 18-20) The 'fair present' of Christ's love calls to mind the divine grace that only He can bestow and the fact that Man's anguish at the death of God must turn to joy at His Resurrection and the hope it brings of universal salvation.

events of Christ's life, recall the words of the Apostle's Creed.⁴³ The brevity and simplicity of this description should not be taken as an indication that the laity was expected merely to accept such a dictate without dwelling upon the spiritual enormities contained therein and then respond with the appropriate number of taught half-hearted prayers and ritualised, perhaps less than sincere, acts of contrition such as almsgiving (that did not really affect the penitent's purse) or pilgrimages (that were more like holidays). On the contrary, such brevity can be taken to mean that those for whom this book was intended were so aware of Christ's dual nature – of His being equally and at the same time the Man of Sorrows and our Judge Eternal – that a bald statement like 'and dyed & ros and went to heuen', when read in conjunction with the visual stimulus of the celebration of Mass, that public, communal re-enactment of His self-offering, might provide enough of a catalyst for further, deeper reflection and devotion without the need to be any more explicit. It is almost as if the cumulative effect of the repetition of the word 'and' at the beginning of the four lines that encapsulate Christ's trial, Passion, death, Resurrection and His return to earth on Last Judgment Day is to force the reader into a private consideration of how he or she is affected by or concerned with these events. The movement from a description of what happened to Christ – His death and Resurrection 'for mankynde' – to the statement that He 'shal come to deme vs euen' appears, within the context of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, calculated to ensure that the universal nature of Christ's sacrifice for all Mankind requires a uniquely personal response from each of 'vs'. Attendance at Mass in late fourteenth-century

⁴³ The importance of the Apostle's Creed, a public declaration of private belief, in later mediaeval religious practices should not be overlooked as knowledge of the articles of faith it contained was required by the statutes of the Fourth Lateran Council. See, for example, the section on the examination of a penitent in the articles of faith in Myrc, ll. 811-48.

England can be seen to be both a public declaration of an individual's membership of the Christian Church and an occasion that, through sacramental worship, encourages the growth, in the individual, of a private sense of God's love for His creatures and their corresponding obligations to Him and His Son. The Mass is a rite during which, as Holy Church taught, belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist meant that He became actually, physically present in the Church. It was an opportunity for the faithful to experience His presence in a context that highlighted both their need for His saving grace and an awareness of the gap that existed between His perfection and their sinful natures. Christ's humanity – His voluntary suffering as a man for the redemption of all people – emphasises, even in His triumph over human sin and death, the transience of earthly life and the importance of securing redemption.

While bitter lamentation over the necessity of Christ's suffering for the sake of each man and woman was, undoubtedly, a central part of piety in the later Middle Ages,⁴⁴ there would appear to be a sense in which some modern academic assessments of mediaeval responses to the body and blood of Christ, be they encountered through the sight or reception of the Eucharist or a more private or contemplative reflection focus so exclusively upon the physicalities of Christ's humanity that, inadvertently perhaps, the wider picture of His victory over sin and death becomes subsumed within an all too familiar human, temporal concern with the self. Caroline Walker Bynum, in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* discusses, with especial reference to mediaeval female mystics, but also with allusion to the mediaeval populace more generally, the idea that, as a food ritual in which the

⁴⁴Aside from the artistic representations of Christ's agony that were to be found on altar-pieces, frescoes and in illuminations, literary depictions of Christ's Passion occur in popular poetry, in miracle plays and openly didactic literature like Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* as well as in the works of mystic writers such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.

faithful ate their Man-God, the Eucharist encouraged the glorification of humanity through Christ:

Late medieval theology itself, of course, provided the basic equation; food equals body. It taught that, at the central moment of Christian ritual, the moment of consecration, God became food-that-is-body. The moment then re-capitulates both the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. In becoming flesh, God takes on humanity, and that humanity saves, not by being, but by being broken. The food on the altar was thus for all Christians a symbol both of assimilation and of rending. To eat was to consume, to take in, to become God. Eating was a horribly audacious act. Yet it was only by bleeding, by being torn and rent, by dying, that God's body redeemed humanity. To become that body by eating was therefore to bleed and to save – to lift one's own physicality into suffering and into glory.⁴⁵

Earlier in her book she has written that:

To eat God was *imitatio crucis*. That which one ate was the physicality of the God-man. If the flesh was sweet as well as bitter, that was because all our humanness, including our fleshliness, was redeemed in the fact of the Incarnation. If the agony was also ecstasy, it was because our very hunger is union with Christ's limitless suffering, which is also limitless love.⁴⁶

Taken together, both quotations reveal the critic's preoccupation with interpretations of the humanity of Christ and the effect that knowledge and understanding of His bodily presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist might be seen to have had upon mediaeval Christians. Despite the clear progression of ideas in her argument, Walker Bynum's premise, 'that humanity saves, not by being, but by being broken' and that, through the *imitatio crucis* nature of the sacrament of the Eucharist, to 'become that body by eating was therefore to bleed and to save – to lift one's own physicality into suffering and glory', is not always entirely convincing. Christ's humanity saves 'by being broken' precisely because He was the one man untainted by the sin of Adam – that Christ's flesh was the weapon with which He defeated Satan does not mean that He exalted in His

⁴⁵ Bynum (1987), pp. 250-1.

⁴⁶ Bynum (1987), p. 67.

human body: that this body was without sin renders the magnitude of His sacrifice and the horrors of His death more marvellous but it does not necessarily lead to an automatic, generic glorification of human physicality. While *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* contains examples of women whose experience of the Eucharist was very ‘fleshly’,⁴⁷ the extreme nature of their reactions makes it hard for their accounts to be taken as a mean for the response to the Eucharist of the faithful who accepted the received authority of Holy Church and believed in the Real Presence of Christ’s body in the hands of the celebrating priest. It is telling that a work produced for orthodox lay consumption such as *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, in its account of the life and death on earth of the Son of God, draws attention to the reasons *why* Christ suffered and how one ought to respond to Him rather than dwelling upon His suffering for its own sake. The opening paragraphs for Friday’s reading in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, for example, are concerned with their reader’s understanding of Christ’s voluntary, real suffering as a man:

¶ Bot þefore here azeynus fort haue trewe ymaginacion & inwarde compassion of þe peynes & þe passion of oure lorde | Jesu verrey god & man. ´ we shole vnderstande þat as his wil was to suffer þe hardest deþ & most sorouful peynes, for þe redempcion of mankynde. ´ so by þe self wille he suspendet in al his passione þe vse [of] þe miht of þe godhead fro þe infirmite of þe [*] manhede, nomore taking of [þat miht] for þe tyme. ´ þen haþ anoþer tendere & delicate man, onely after þe kynde of manne.⁴⁸

The horrors of ‘þe hardest deþ & most sorouful peynes’ are not to be sidelined or understood as being less than real because Christ was also ‘oure lorde’ and the Son of God. They are to be considered within the context of the wider understanding of how such pain and sorrow was necessary for ‘þe redempcion of

⁴⁷ Catherine of Siena being one of the most famous examples.

⁴⁸ N. Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. M. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), p. 159, ll. 15-22.

mankynde'. This is the same message that is articulated in the lyrics discussed earlier in this chapter and in works such as the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* and Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, works that will be examined in later chapters.

To rearticulate a point of view that, if obvious, is also prone to be overlooked, while the humanity of Christ, especially His ability to suffer, was the focus of much affective devotion in the later Middle Ages, it is important to remember that mediaeval Christians believed that the suffering He bore was for a definite purpose – the redemption of Mankind – it was never an end in itself. Neither, it might be contended, was Christ's adoption of a human form intended as a glorification of fleshliness; it was, on the contrary, a veiling of His divinity. Sarah Beckwith, in *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, comments that, after the theological works of St Anselm and others:

Incarnation becomes the salvific centre of a story which now highlights the relationship of individual man to God, a relationship given new hope, vigour and importance through humanity. It is Christ as the human *imago dei* who can restore the hopeless figures of corporeality in the fallen state... The union of God and man in Christ affirms the union of soul and flesh, spirit and matter, in humanity. Furthermore it allows one to be a bridgeway to the other.⁴⁹

The idea of Christ's body as a place at which and through which the soul and the flesh, as well as spirit and matter could be brought together before God matches Caroline Walker Bynum's belief that:

...late medieval asceticism was an effort to plumb and to realize all the possibilities of the flesh. It was a profound expression of the doctrine of the Incarnation: the doctrine that Christ, by becoming human, saves *all* that the human being is.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ S. Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 47.

⁵⁰ Bynum (1987), p. 294.

Both critics draw attention to their perceptions of a noticeable late-mediaeval preoccupation in devotion with the humanity of Christ. Within the setting of the Mass, Christ, under the veil of the sacrament of the Eucharist, was believed by the orthodox faithful to be present in the church both as Victim and Redeemer. Thus, while there is nothing theologically inaccurate in the phrase ‘Christ, by becoming human, saves *all* that the human being is’, it does perhaps suggest too great a concern with ‘the possibilities of the flesh’. This concern, in its eagerness to see in Christ’s humanity the legitimisation of the salvation of humanity almost on its own terms, that is, by saving what it means to be human, Christ not only secures forgiveness for Adam’s sin, but positively accepts the frailty of Man as an integral part of each man and woman, does not make enough of an allowance for what might arguably be thought of as a more natural, less contrived orthodox fourteenth- or fifteenth-century understanding of the nature of Christ, especially as experienced through the Eucharist and discussed, for example, in the ‘Treatise on the Sacrament’ at the end of *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*:

For he þat in him self rising fro deþ shalle neuer dye. 3it by his
blessede hooste in his mistery suffreþ eft for vs. For als oft as we
offer to him þe hooste of his passion. so oft we maken new to vs his
passion to oure vnbyndyng fro sinne.⁵¹

What Love draws attention to here, with reference to the re-enactment of Christ’s oblation through the celebration of Mass, is the fact that, by offering to Him ‘þe hooste of his passion’ the faithful, while in no way belittling the pain He bore at Calvary, are recalling what that suffering and Christ’s ultimate triumph over death achieved: ‘oure vnbyndyng fro sinne’.

This thesis would also contend that it is important to be aware of the difference that exists between Walker Bynum’s opinions, expressed in *Holy*

⁵¹ Love (2004), p. 235, ll. 1-5.

Feast, Holy Fast and, for example, the *Pearl*-poet's depiction of the Lamb of God as a symbolic interpretation of the second person of the Trinity whose wounds are badges of honour in heaven. Walker Bynum notes that:

As the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries wore on, theologians came to place the saving moment of Christian history in the Crucifixion rather than the Incarnation or Resurrection; visionaries saw Christ in the elevated host or chalice not as a regal lord, lavishly robed priest, or warrior against Satan, but as crucified man...⁵²

It is the case that several mediaeval works of art exist that depict the so-called 'mystic wine-press', where blood from the crucified Christ runs directly into an upheld chalice,⁵³ an image that accords well with Walker Bynum's description of the Eucharistic Christ as the 'crucified man'. However, mainstream orthodox beliefs also held that it was through the grace of God that the faithful were not able to see the broken, bleeding body of Christ in the communion wafer.⁵⁴ Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* explains why this is the case:

3yf þou se hyt nat wyþ bodily syght,
 Þy soule wyþ ynne shal beleue hyt ryght.
 And 3yf þou fele no sauour,
 But rightly wyne & brede of floure,
 Þat ys þe wisdom of goddess ordynaunce,
 For to saue vs alle fro þys chaunce.
 For 3yf hyt fyl as flesshe to take,
 Wlate we shuld and hyt forsake.⁵⁵ (*Sick in the stomach*)

The sacrament of the Eucharist is, as described here, yet another example of God's awareness of the limitations and weaknesses of men and women and their need for His grace: despite their ability to torture and kill His Son, they are not able to face the reality of His broken body unless it is 'hidden', through grace, by the accidents of bread and wine. Equally, the veiling of the barbarity of human

⁵² Bynum (1987), p. 252.

⁵³ Duffy, p. 253.

⁵⁴ Bynum (2002), p. 687, footnote 8, directs her reader to a list of books that discuss the tradition of this belief, which has its roots in the writings of St Ambrose.

⁵⁵ Mannyng, ll. 9983-90.

sacrifice serves to reinforce the concept of a sacrament as an outward, physical manifestation of God's gift of an inner grace.⁵⁶

The instructive early fourteenth-century manual, *Handlyng Synne*, amongst many *exempla*, also contains a version of the traditional story in which a lack of faith in the sacrament of the Eucharist is punished by sight of the sacrifice that takes place on the altar and, suitably chastened, the horrified unbeliever returns to the fold of orthodox belief (while the wafer resumes its usual benign appearance):

Hym þoghte þe prest broght on þe pateyn
 Morselles of þe chyld al newe sleyn,
 And bedde hym a morsel of þe flesshe
 Wyþ al þe blode þer on al fresshe.
 Þan gan he crye wyþ loud steuene,
 "Mercy, goddes sone of heuene!
 Þe bred þat y sagh on þe auter lye,
 Hyt is þy body, y se wyþ ye."⁵⁷

The deliberately vile account of the sacrifice of a child and the distribution of '[m]orselles' of his newly dismembered body is used to reinforce orthodox belief in the necessity and spiritual efficacy of the sacrament of the Eucharist while also reminding the pious readers of *Handlyng Synne* of the bloody way in which their redemption was bought. Interestingly, the acknowledgment of a certain squeamishness surrounding the reality of the flesh and blood that constitute the consecrated elements would suggest that there was an awareness in later mediaeval mainstream Christian devotion of the dangers of cultivating a rather grotesque concern with the broken, bleeding body of Christ that could distract

⁵⁶ See also the first chapter of D. Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2004), pp. 1-28. Aers discusses mediaeval theological arguments concerning the sacrament of the Eucharist in some detail, dwelling particularly upon the difficulties that surrounded the conscious veiling of the unpalatable – yet theologically necessary – corporality of the consecrated elements. Aers (2004), pp. 10-11.

⁵⁷ Mannyng, ll. 10065-71.

attention away from the ultimately more profound beliefs and ideologies embedded in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The sinful man's cry of 'Mercy, goddes sone of heuene' is one that ought to be on the lips of all who gaze on the Host as all, however devout, will struggle to comprehend the magnitude of Christ's love for Man shown by His sacrifice. The prose of 'A shorte tretes of þe heist and moste worþi sacrament of cristes blessedde body & þe merueiles þerof' with which *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* concludes is, therefore, worthy of consideration in this context as it contains an account of the Eucharist being used by God for the correction of 'vnthrifty þouhtes' (a questioning of the reality of transubstantiation that is, erroneously, premised upon a belief that his own sinfulness will prevent the miraculous transformation of the elements into the very body and blood of Christ) and illustrates the power and real importance of the position that this sacrament occupied in mainstream mediaeval religious belief:

And so hauyng [in my mynde] sech vnthrifty þouhtes, when it came to þe tyme of the fraction. & as þe vse is I hade broken þe hooste in tweyn. anone fresh blode ranne out þerof, & þat part þat I held in my hande was turnede into flesh & alle ouerę wete with þe rede blode.

And þerwiþ I seyng þis. was alle astonede and abashedde, and welnere out of my witte, & so as forlostede þe counsele of alle reson. alle þat I helde in my handes I lete falle done in to þe chalice.⁵⁸

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy things about this vignette of a man who was 'astonede and abashedde' and all but driven mad by his experience of a miraculously bleeding Host is that, as the lines 'and as þe vse is I hade broken þe hooste in tweyn' and 'alle þat I helde in my handes I lete falle done in to þe chalice' makes clear, he himself is an ordained priest. This extract illustrates how the sacrament of the altar could be as real and awe-full for the clergy as it seems

⁵⁸ Love (2004), p. 231, ll. 36-42 & p. 232, ll. 1-4.

to have been for their congregations. The ‘fresh blode’ that runs from the Host and over the hands of the priest is a reminder of Christ’s suffering humanity and His agony on the Cross, even as it might be seen to allude to Mankind’s guilt – quite literally, the human race has God’s blood on its hands – and its corresponding need for divine grace and forgiveness. The priest’s horrified response to the blood is an appropriately orthodox rejoinder as well as an eloquent reminder of the power with which the sacrament of the Eucharist was imbued in the later Middle Ages. The incident as a whole is of interest as it attests to the existence of a mediaeval religious sensibility that was aware of the spiritual depth and complexity of ideas that accompanied the celebration of the Mass and the consecration of the elements. Christ’s body is central both to the sacrament of the Eucharist and the salvation of Mankind – something that an orthodox text such as *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* illustrates clearly.

When considering mediaeval attitudes towards and understanding of the humanity of Christ, it is always important to remember the well known theological commonplace which held that, while Christ’s desire for the redemption of humanity would not be completed until the end of time, His sacrifice was completed when He died on Calvary. As a passing priest tells a prostrate and lachrymose Margery Kempe, ‘Damsel, Ihesu is ded long sithyn’.⁵⁹ To accept this is not to diminish the agony of His Passion or the enormity of what His death achieved but, by pointing out that the events of Good Friday are an historical fact, the priest is merely re-affirming an acknowledgment of the magnitude of Jesus’ offering of Himself and the salvation it brought. The wounds

⁵⁹ M. Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S.B. Meech and H.E. Allen (London: E.E.T.S., 1940), p. 148, ll. 11-12.

of Christ are, in a very real sense, saving, but, for Him, post-Resurrection and post-Ascension, they are no longer endured, but borne as marks of honour and as symbols of His Passion. Importantly – as will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter – mediaeval understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist can be seen to couple an awareness of the time-bound death of Christ on Calvary and what His sacrifice was understood to have achieved, with Christ’s continuing sorrow for the fallen world and those men and women who are still lost to Him, and the glimpse that the Host offers to the faithful of His incorruptible heavenly body. The Dreamer in the fourteenth-century poem *Pearl*, in a passage that is almost comic in its depiction of his stupidity, tells how he saw the Lamb of God:

Best was he, blythest, and moste to pryse,
That ever I herde of speche spent;
So worthy whyt wern wedes hys,
His lokes simple, himself so gent.
Bot a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse
Anende hys hert, thurgh hyde torente;
Of his quyte side his blod outsprent.
Alas, thought I, who did that spyt?
Ani breste for bale aght haf forbrent
Er he therto hade had delyt.

The Lombe delyt non lyst to wene;
Thagh he were hurt and wounde hade,
In his sembelaunt was never sene,
So wern his glentes glorious glade.⁶⁰

While the Dreamer is shocked by the admittedly startling juxtaposition of ‘lokes simple, himself so gent’ with ‘a wounde ful wyde’, there is the suspicion that the reader or auditor of these verses is expected to be able to see the mistakes the Dreamer makes. This sense of audience/reader superiority is apparent throughout *Pearl*⁶¹ and especially here in the marvellously un-self-aware lines ‘Alas, thought

⁶⁰ *Pearl*, ll. 1131-44.

⁶¹ Another example occurs earlier when he first fails to understand how the Pearl-Maiden, whom he last knew as his infant daughter, can be a queen in heaven. He then confuses her spotlessness with the peerless position of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I, who did that spyt?’ and ‘The Lombe delyt non lyst to wene;/ Thagh he were hurt and wounde hade’. The latter of these extracts is particularly important when considered in the light of Beckwith and Walker Bynum’s views on mediaeval approaches to the humanity of Christ. In *Pearl*, a poem with an ending that contains explicitly Eucharistic allusions, the figure of Christ is far more complex than can be suggested by the phrase the ‘crucified man’. The *Pearl*-poet’s Van-Eyckian portrayal of Him⁶² comes in a poem that is deeply concerned with the need to recognise that not only are there are certain boundaries between this earthly world and the eternal reality of God’s kingdom – ‘[f]or uch gresse mot grow of graynes dede’⁶³ – but that human understanding of the divine is necessarily rooted in concepts with which men and women can relate and which God chooses to reveal to them in such a way. Thus the Pearl-maiden rebukes the Dreamer for saying that:

Thou says thou trawes me in this dene,
Because thou may wyth yyen me se...⁶⁴

The recognition implicit here that nothing is impossible to God can, arguably, be related conversely to an orthodox lay and ecclesiastical understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Allowing that there was a widespread mediaeval belief in what might be termed the ‘everyday miracle’ of transubstantiation, it can seem somewhat limiting to see only Christ’s humanity, His shattered, earthly body in this sacrament. *Pearl* closes with the following stanza:

To pay the Prince other sete saghte
Hit is ful ethe to the god Krystyin;
For I haf founden hym, bothe day and naghte,
A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin.

⁶² Jan Van Eyck’s 1432 masterpiece, The Ghent Altarpiece, contains a central panel (underneath pictures of the Virgin, Christ and St John the Baptist) that depicts the heavenly adoration of the triumphant Lamb.

⁶³ *Pearl*, l. 31.

⁶⁴ *Pearl*, ll. 295-6.

Over this hyul this lote I laghte,
 For pyty of my perle enclyin,
 And sythen to God I hit bytaghte
 In Krystes dere blessing and myn,
 That in the forme of bred and wyn
 The preste uus schewes uch a daye.
 He gef uus to be his homly hyne
 And precious perles unto his pay.
 Amen. Amen.⁶⁵

The Dreamer's description of the Prince '[t]hat in the forme of bred and wyn/ The preste uus schewes uch a daye' is one not of a broken, bleeding man, but of a 'God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin'. These closing lines present the reader with an intimate portrait of the relationship that can exist between Saviour and sinner within the parameters of orthodox mediaeval Christian faith that includes belief in the sacrament of the Eucharist and transubstantiation of the elements. As humanity's Redeemer, Christ is a prince and lord, but His own humanity also allows Him to be approached, 'day and naghte' as a friend who can understand what it is like to be a man in this world. It is not only the simultaneous existence of Christ as 'flesh and spirit, God and man, image and exempla, sign and signified'⁶⁶ that is being discussed here in *Pearl*, but also Everyman's reaction to this '*theologia cordis*'.⁶⁷ At the close of this poem, the boundaries of orthodox religion, as prescribed by Holy Church and carried out in the practice of sacramental worship, are to provide an instructive and helpful support-structure from which the Dreamer – now woken from his vision and facing once more the difficult realities of life in mediaeval England – can continue to foster his desire to return to the Celestial Jerusalem, while, in the same process, growing closer, through faith and love, to God. The poem, while not ostensibly concerned with the practical application of the received authority of Holy Church, can be seen as

⁶⁵ *Pearl*, ll. 1201-12.

⁶⁶ Beckwith (1993), p. 50.

⁶⁷ Beckwith (1993), p. 50.

following in the footsteps of the authors of the post-Lateran IV *pastoralia* discussed in chapters I and II.

Pearl can be seen to end in a way that stresses an interrelationship between Christ's humanity and His redemption of Mankind as well as private devotions and sacramental worship. The Dreamer's personal experience of God can be heightened and refreshed by the sight of the consecrated Host. Through a deeply personal, direct interaction with the preternatural, an event which, as alluded to already, culminates in a sight of the celestial Jerusalem (a place where pain, loss and human suffering have been translated into joy) and the triumphant procession of the Lamb that takes place there, the dreamer is reconciled to the doctrines of Christian faith as taught to him by Holy Church. The reference in the closing stanza to the 'bred and wyn' that the 'preste uus schewes' refers quite explicitly to the fact that actual lay communion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was relatively infrequent. As Craig Fraser observes, 'the mass is perhaps the natural focus of attention for the Christian who seeks interiorised and meditative religious experiences'⁶⁸ even though it is a rite that is dependent for its celebration upon the presence and leadership of ordained priests (priests who, as has already been shown, are themselves subject to an authority far greater than their own). A Middle English sermon,⁶⁹ also referred to by Fraser, makes a similar point saying:

perfore Cr̄iste bidde: us to aske oure iche dayes brede todaye; þatt is to sey, we shall desire to be fed iche daye w̄ith brede of bodily fode, [and] w̄ith brede of þe Sacrament, resceyvynge it goostely as prestes resceyue it bodily.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Fraser, p. 34.

⁶⁹ *Middle English Sermons* ed. W.O. Ross (London: E.E.T.S., 1940).

⁷⁰ *Middle English Sermons*, p. 52. Cf. Fraser, p. 187.

The inference of this extract is that, as it is sanctified by Christ, the ghostly reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist is as spiritually effective as its actual physical ingestion by the celebrating priest. Although a distinction is preserved between the laity and the clergy in their different experiences of the Eucharist, both are presented as worthy in the eyes of Christ, suggesting once more that orthodox religious practices of the later Middle Ages required a personal commitment from each person to God that transcended earthly boundaries of, for example, 'lay' and 'cleric' and appearing to suppose that a lay reader would be aware of the almost equal spiritual responsibility borne by both estates.

Despite the presence of what could be viewed as a barrier to lay participation in the liturgical – and by extension, spiritual – life of the Church, the guarding of what might be termed 'Eucharistic privileges' by a jealous and fearful clergy, there is no sense that *Pearl's* narrator feels restricted in spiritual growth or even alienated from Holy Church and the God presented by that institution, because his or her daily communion with the Eucharist is visual and entirely 'ghostly' as opposed to the actual physical consumption of the consecrated elements. The author of *Pearl* has used his consummate skill and artistry to create an extraordinarily beautiful and complex work of literature that offers an insight into what might reasonably be understood to be a later mediaeval mainstream, orthodox, religious sensibility – a sensibility that combines personal experience of God with an awareness that everyday life as a Christian involves considered, emotionally and intellectually engaged participation in meaningful sacramental worship which, in its turn, will bring the individual closer to spiritual union with God in this life. *Pearl* closes with an endorsement of Eucharistic piety that, in its focus on the Host, is an illustration

of the existence of a mediaeval religious spirituality recorded in vernacular literature that shows how orthodox worship could be seen to be a foundation for, as well as the means of enriching, a personal experience of God.

Through its articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility that recognises the importance and spiritual worth of sacramental worship *Pearl* offers its readers the opportunity – outwith the immediate setting of the Mass – to reflect upon the extraordinary opportunity that the daily celebration of the Eucharist gives the individual to experience the presence of God. It is to a closer consideration of lay responses to the consecration of the elements and the elevation of the Host that discussion will turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

A GENUINE BEATIFIC VISION OR AN ECCLESIASTICAL P.R. COUP? THE EVIDENCE OF MIDDLE ENGLISH RESPONSES TO THE ELEVATION OF THE HOST

‘... in the forme of bred and wyn’

(*Pearl*)

The previous chapter closed by drawing critical attention to the expression in *Pearl* of an unambiguously positive and deeply personal lay response to the celebration of Mass and the poem’s articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility that posits Eucharistic piety and the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament as the natural reactions of a soul that understood and believed in the fundamental tenets of mediaeval orthodox Christian faith. This approach is certainly not one with which all modern academics would agree. While this chapter will consider lay responses to the sight of the elevated Host in some detail, using Middle English textual evidence to support a theory of complementariness and causal link between public, institutional, sacramental religious practices and more private, interiorised devotions, it will also attempt to rebut some of the arguments put forward by scholars unwilling to give due credence to the existence and significance of sincere (even if not always orthodox) religious sensibilities in later mediaeval England.

Miri Rubin, for example, picks up on the paradoxes and ambiguities that surround human understanding of the consecrated Host and the ultimate inability of even the greatest artists of any age to capture its essence in word or paint. Unlike the more sympathetic New Historicists,¹ Rubin finds the potential for conflict and an

¹ C. Gallagher and S. Greenblatt, in *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) recognise that ‘eucharistic piety is not only at the heart of abstruse theological doctrine

exploitation of the weak and ignorant in her consideration of mediaeval attitudes towards the sacrament of the Eucharist. She asserts that:

It is the simplicity and naïveté of the eucharistic symbol, white, round, fragile, which left so ample a space for inscription and superimposition onto this dangerous and seemingly clean slate.²

For Rubin, the Host is, as suggested by her use of the phrases ‘so ample a space for inscription and superimposition’ and ‘seemingly clean slate’, a blank sheet of paper upon which those with the sharpest pens and most enduring ink may dictate to others a more or less subjective interpretation of this unfixed, apparently unfixable, sacrament. This representation of the Eucharist as something quite unstable, that was disseminated and controlled by an elite few, does not allow for the fact that, to any orthodox Christian in the later Middle Ages, the essence of a sacrament (like that of the institution of Holy Church itself) could not ever *really* be tampered with by any man or woman. By describing the physicality of the Host – it is ‘white, round and fragile’ – in terms calculated to draw attention to its perceived ‘simplicity and naïveté’, Rubin shows a determination not to credit an orthodox mediaeval understanding of the nature of the sacrament of the Eucharist with any real spiritual worth. On the contrary, she sees a danger in the Host that, ironically, she has created herself by disallowing a consideration of the presence and influence of genuine

but also of popular religion’ in the later Middle Ages. (p. 94) They refer to an altar-piece painted by Joos van Gent which depicts Christ acting as celebrant at His own Mass – the Host being depicted as a powerful enigma that can scarcely be captured by even the finest of painters – describing how ‘the Roman Catholic Mass is not an institutional interpretation or ritualized recollection of the Last Supper; it *is* the Last Supper’. (p. 78) S. Lipton, however, in “‘The Sweet Lean of His Head’: Writing about Looking at the Crucifix in the High Middle Ages’ *Speculum* 80 (2005) 1172-1208, talks of

the peculiar ability of art to say two things at the same time: to condense “God” and “man” – which in spoken language cannot be uttered in the same breath, and in written language can at best be hyphenated – within a single image. (p. 1202)

² M. Rubin, ‘The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities’ in D. Aers (ed.), *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 43-64. Rubin (1992), p. 52.

religious sentiment connected to the celebration of the Eucharist to enter into her study of this area of mediaeval devotion. This representation of the Host as an ambiguous, dangerous, deceptively fragile and cunningly simple symbol is only really viable if the received authority of the mediaeval Church is rejected and it is also accepted that the Host itself is *not* the physical manifestation of a sacramental promise from God. By disregarding any real spiritual worth, or divine participation in the celebration of the Eucharist in England in the later Middle Ages, Rubin is able to imbue the sacrament with a fully articulated temporal power which does not sit comfortably with evidence, textual and otherwise, that gestures towards a real lay and ecclesiastical attachment to the sacrament of the altar.³

It is significant that Rubin takes issue with the very appearance of the ‘eucharistic symbol’, seeing in its simultaneously displayed blankness and openness not a gateway or an opportunity for communion with God or even an example of God’s continuing care and love for His creation – the accidents of bread and wine softening for the faithful the awful reality of the sacrificed flesh and blood that lie hidden beneath – but an illustration of the essential nothingness of what might be considered less a ‘symbol’ and more a cipher whose meaning lies entirely in the hands of others. While James Megivern comments on Berengar of Tours’ inability to accept ‘[t]he possibility of a sign that actually contains the reality it signifies’,⁴ several centuries later, despite evidence for the widespread acceptance of the

³ In addition to the analysis of textual evidence in this chapter see Duffy (pp. 91-130), for an account of lay involvement with and response to the celebration of Mass in pre-Reformation England.

⁴ J. Megivern, *Concomitance and Communion: A Study in Eucharistic Doctrine and Practice* (Freibourg: The University Press, 1963). For an account of the academic, theological debates that surrounded a mediaeval appreciation of the consecration of the elements, the exact moment at which transubstantiation might be understood to have taken place (and the subsequent legitimacy of venerating the Host) see V.L. Kennedy, ‘The Moment of Consecration and the Elevation of the Host’, *Medieval Studies* 6 (1944) 115-64.

received authority of post-Fourth Lateran Council Church doctrine, Rubin still seems determined to champion Berengar's lost cause. By so doing she neglects to consider one of the more obvious, wholly positive, outcomes of the canon that enshrined the doctrine of transubstantiation as dogma: the opportunities it afforded for the laity to experience being in the presence of God while still on earth.

It becomes clear that a distinction can be made between Rubin's comprehension of the Eucharist as a primarily 'man-made', institutional concept and the idea, supported by this thesis, that an orthodox later mediaeval understanding of the sacraments held that, however they might be misinterpreted and/or abused by laity and clergy alike, they still retained, in the eyes of the majority of clergy and laity, their essential, God-given grace. The Incarnation of Christ, the slaughter of God's Son and His subsequent routing of death itself are central tenets of Christianity that were often ultimately unfathomable to even the greatest of mediaeval theologians and most faithful of believers. Each sacrament, in the dependence it has upon an individual's response to God's grace for its ultimate spiritual effectiveness, shows itself to be a system that loses all meaning and worth if the faith that underpins its efficacy is denied. This distinction is perhaps of especial importance when dealing with the modern critical analysis of mediaeval religious beliefs and practices. The sacrament of the Eucharist ought not to be thought of purely in terms of clerical distribution – or withholding – of God's grace and a less than fully comprehending reception of it by the vast majority of the laity.

Miri Rubin's rather scathing analysis of Eucharistic piety includes the expression of a belief that, in the later Middle Ages:

The Church came to occupy a central role by offering a language for this complex *societas christiana*. It achieved this by insisting on the exclusive right of the clergy to mediate the grace of redemption, the shared Creator and Saviour, to dispense of supernatural power through rituals performed by its clergy alone.⁵

While her view that the institution of Holy Church chose to posit itself as the only true and authoritative source, in this world, of Christianity is an accurate observation (it reflects the continued efforts of generations of scholars and religious to define what it meant to be a Christian through both positive affirmation of faith and the exclusion and/or suppression of dissenting voices⁶), there is a misleading quality to Rubin's insistence on 'the exclusive right of the clergy to mediate the grace of redemption' and 'to dispense of supernatural power'. As has been shown previously, during a consideration of some possible later mediaeval orthodox attitudes towards, and understanding of, the sacrament of penance, such an approach fails to make allowance for the adherence to an orthodox belief in God and His institution of Holy Church by clergy and laity alike. Rubin's standpoint presupposes a critical denial of any real 'supernatural power' or of the value of belief, thus cutting the modern academic off from a consideration of mediaeval sacramental Eucharistic worship that acknowledges the rite as an occasion that provided an opportunity for a coming together of earthly and heavenly.⁷ The difficulties innate in quantifying or even explaining the faith of another or others – especially when attempting so to do across hundreds of years – are only complicated by certain twentieth and twenty-first

⁵ Rubin (1992), p. 46.

⁶ Cf. Bynum (2002), p. 685. One also thinks here of Berengar who was forced to abjure his controversial interpretation of the Eucharist. Also included should be Cathars, Lollards, Hussites as well as Jews and Moslems: all those who either openly defied the 'truth' offered by Holy Church, or who sought to alter and 'improve' her *modus operandi*.

⁷ One manner in which this concern might be seen to have manifested itself is in the evidence that exists proving the later mediaeval obsession with requiem and obit Masses. See Fraser, pp. 120-1 and Bossy (1983), p. 37.

century tendencies to disallow interpretations that rest upon the acceptance of Holy Church's claim to be the recipient and also disseminator of 'received authority' from God.⁸

For Miri Rubin mediaeval Christianity is not often primarily about the forgiveness of sins and the eternal salvation of the soul, rather it is immediately concerned with the social, economic and political control of a fourteenth-century 'here and now': salvation, forgiveness and heaven appear almost like market commodities to be controlled by the powerful and brokered carefully to the general (and generally unsuspecting) public. *Corpus Christi* closes with a generic statement that underlines Rubin's sustained interest in a relationship between power, authority and sacramentality that allows little room for any acknowledgment of genuine piety and spirituality in orthodox celebration of the Mass and the veneration of the sacrament of the Eucharist:

So in the orthodox teaching, in vernacular preaching, in story and tale, in magic as in civic ceremonial, the eucharist was used and reused, determined and applied. Those who possessed power and authority could articulate the symbol through their own positions most forcefully.⁹

The Eucharist is thus seen as a malleable and impressionable symbol, as a sign that could be 'articulated' most clearly by those with the most influence. It could, Rubin argues (refusing to consider that there is a level at which – at least to the faithful – the innate and incorruptible sanctity of the sacrament could never really be debased

⁸ See J. Van Engen, 'The Future of Medieval Church History', *Church History* 71 (2002), 492-525.

Van Engen also acknowledges this:

[w]hat historians seek in all the evidence left behind by medieval churches and churchmen are the social and political interests they manifest, not so much their hierarchical or religious programs. Those items belong, it is assumed, largely to the past; political interests, by contrast, are a human constant. In this way the medieval church ceases to be an historical abstraction, its religion conceived rather as wholly bound up with social needs and aspirations in all their fullness and locality, its churches a primary facilitator of ambition and expression in Early Europe. (p. 497)

⁹ Rubin (1991), pp. 348-9.

in such a manner), be ‘used and reused, determined and applied’ by the strongest and most influential members of a later mediaeval society. She writes:

In the confusion between metaphor and metonymy, between the likening and the symbolising reading of Christ’s body, lay the possibility to claim the power inherent in the sacramental mediation, and the harmony of the body of God. The mystical body had become so public, so exposed, so much a locus of desire and power, that it was a sort of public good, which patricians hastened to appropriate, at least on occasions which they controlled.¹⁰

At the heart of mediaeval, Eucharistic devotion, she argues, lay not a thirst for God, but ‘the possibility to claim the power inherent in the sacramental mediation’. Writing that the Eucharist was something that people ‘hastened to appropriate’ whenever they had the chance to do so, further compounds the sense that the received authority of sacramental devotion to the body of Christ was, in the later Middle Ages, principally something that was used as a front for more selfish concerns.

Thus, for Rubin, the ‘supreme sacrament’ of the Church – the most tangible reminder that there might be of Christ’s continued interest in the souls of Mankind – contains no real spark of divinity. The Mass itself is presented as a theatre against which backdrop the liturgy of the Church can be played out by the cynical for the ‘benefit’ of the credulous:

In all the sacrament came to symbolise the essence of the sacerdotal office, particularly after the implications of the doctrine of transubstantiation were realised... The mass was thus designed by theologians and liturgists to do just that: to sustain the claim that the little white disc over which the consecration was said was thus transformed into the body of Christ which could occasionally be received into the human body through communion.¹¹

¹⁰ Rubin (1991), p. 270.

¹¹ Rubin (1992), p. 47.

Here is no sense that the sacrament of the Eucharist was instituted by Christ at the Last Supper – something that even the most staunch Wycliffite would acknowledge¹² – but only the idea that it was something to be ‘sustained’ through the efforts of the clergy in order to reinforce their mediatory spiritual role, and thus retain an effective, entirely temporal, control over the laity: an idea that is itself open to challenge (or at least amendment) in the light of ideas put forward in the opening chapters of this thesis. The suggestion, implicit in the above quotation, is that the celebrants knew that ‘the little white disc over which the consecration was said’ remained a ‘little white disc’ in defiance of the bells that were rung, the candles that were raised and the thuribles that were arced through the air in order to announce the real, bodily presence of Christ. When this argument is compared with the somewhat different textual evidence supplied by an ‘untitled sermon on the Eucharist’¹³ in BL MS Arundel 279, it is difficult not to find something rather strained in such a determinedly, if retrospectively, anti-establishment stance. Quoted at length by Craig Fraser, this extract would appear to be written for all people – lay and ordained – as, in its orthodox, universal, explanation of the sacrament of the Eucharist, it focuses primarily upon the rite’s dependence upon the grace of God and Christ for its spiritual efficacy:

Ryght so þe wordy [sic] þt þe preste sayth by þe vertu and might 3evyn to tham of god sodenly the substaunce of brede is changyd into þe substaunce of Cristys body, ffor þe preste sayth þe woordys of þe sacrament. And whan þe laste worde is sayde, sodenly Ihesu Criste hiest preste changyth the substance of þt was brede into substance of hys body. And thus maiste yu knowe by trewe feyth how þe body of Criste is

¹² While Wycliffe denied the physicality of the Real Presence in the consecrated elements, he still professed to believe that the body of Christ was actually present. See A. Kenny, *Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 87-90.

¹³ Fraser, p. 101.

in þe sacramente. The preste is a minister and an instrument, and Criste god and man changyþ and comityþ one substaunce into an nother substaunce and thow₃ this passyþ þi resoun, 3et it passyþ not þi feyth.¹⁴

The mystery of the sacrament is explained here in as clear a manner as ever it can be, with the repeated use of the word ‘sodenly’ suggesting the extent to which faith alone can begin to understand something that leaves logical human reason far behind. Likewise the assertion that it is Christ the ‘h^yest preste’ who is responsible for the transformation of the elements draws attention to an orthodox belief in the workings of grace. In the light of such textual evidence, it is hard to be wholly convinced by Rubin’s dismissive account of a sacrament that occupied so important a place in later mediaeval English Christianity. By seeking to rationalise later mediaeval religious devotional practices through focus upon their impact upon the socio-political make-up of English society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Rubin’s argument often sidelines genuine religious faith to an extent that seems to find little real support from orthodox textual evidence from the time.

One of the most frequently cited reasons for the perception of the Eucharist being an almost exclusively sacerdotal affair is that lay communion in the later Middle Ages was increasingly infrequent.¹⁵ Allied to the rarity of lay ingestion of the consecrated Host (the chalice had been withdrawn from the laity in the thirteenth century) was the fact that the increasingly ornate nature of church architecture was resulting in the effective separation of nave and chancel – with elaborate rood screens obscuring the priest and his acolytes as they performed sacred rites. For

¹⁴ BL MS Arundel 279, fol. 4^v. Cited by Fraser, p. 102.

¹⁵ Communion in the late fourteenth century was often only a once or twice yearly event for the average man and woman. As Duffy points out, Margery Kempe and Lady Margaret Beaufort’s more frequent reception was unusual. Duffy, p. 93.

Rubin, the daily celebration of the Mass by ordained priests is yet another example of the established Church's self-aggrandisement and its pernicious control of a carefully fostered sense of lay spirituality:

...this regular priestly celebration was used as an argument for infrequent communion by the laity, inasmuch as the priest communicated daily for all Christians. Thus, the priest was separated from lay custom, creating a link of dependence, as he was increasingly presented as Christ's mouthpiece for the laity. Conversely, there was an assimilation of Christ the priest into the officiating priest.¹⁶

There are two discrete yet obviously related ideas expressed in this extract from *Corpus Christi* which, while entirely consistent with Rubin's approach towards mediaeval sacramentality, do not perhaps offer as complete and definitive an analysis of lay and ecclesiastical understanding of the Eucharist as might initially be thought. By writing 'the priest was separated from lay custom, creating a link of dependence, as he was increasingly presented as Christ's mouthpiece for the laity', Rubin reveals a failure to make allowance for an awareness that, as representatives for Christ and channels for His grace, a great responsibility rested upon the shoulders of clerics. As the opening lines from Myrc's *Instructions for Parish Priests* illustrate clearly, the ordained were perceived to have a sacred duty to fulfil in their ministry, the failure of which could end in tragedy for priest and parishioner alike:

God seyth hym self, as wryten we fynde,
That whenne þe blynde ledeth þe blynde,
In to þe dyche þey fallen boo,
For þey ne sen whare by to go.¹⁷

¹⁶ Rubin (1991), p.50.

¹⁷ Myrc, ll. 1-4.

It was in order to attempt to avoid this that Myrc, following in the footsteps of many others, wrote his handbook, a work that is a clear example of the genuine concern shown by the orthodox establishment regarding the importance of having a properly educated clergy at all levels in the Church hierarchy.

It also seems that Rubin's technically accurate statement that 'the priest communicated daily for all Christians' is rather narrow, consciously anti-clerical and unnecessarily limiting in its depiction of the priest's role in the celebration of the Eucharist. The moment of the Elevation of the Host might surely be seen to have been one of great spiritual importance for the laity, a time at which, however fleetingly glimpsed and obscure the sight, God in Christ, in a prefiguring of the Second Coming, was present on earth. Craig Fraser believes that 'the elevation became a central and crucial moment' for the laity, because it was a time at which the faithful

asserted their membership of the Christian community by declaring their belief in the reality of Christ's presence revealed to them at that moment.¹⁸

He also argues that 'the physical reception of the body of Christ contained in the sacrament was not sufficient to receive the benefits of the mass',¹⁹ a statement that suggests that a genuine, heartfelt response to the sight of the elevated Host can be at least as – if not more than – spiritually efficacious as the actual physical ingestion of the consecrated elements. Fraser also draws attention to the fact that one of the most important, yet often overlooked, aspects of orthodox piety in the fourteenth and

¹⁸ Fraser, p. 240.

¹⁹ Fraser, p. 227. See also pp. 119-21 of his thesis for a discussion of Thomas Aquinas' differentiation between the substance and essence of the sacrament of the Eucharist and of the fact that not all who eat the wafer will truly be able to say that they have received the body of Christ

fifteenth centuries is the onus it places upon a personal response and commitment to God.

MS Pepys 2125 contains an early fifteenth-century text written to advise a layman on how best he might hear and participate in the celebration of Mass entitled ‘A Meditacion How a Man Shal Gouverne Hym in the Tyme þat He Heeryth His Masse’. It opens with a description of the sacrament of the Eucharist that emphasises the personal relationship that the celebration of the Mass reinforces between each faithful soul and their Redeemer. As the following extract shows, the author has also tried to incorporate a sense of the magnitude of the time-bound and eternal truths that lie at the heart of the Eucharist into his account of ‘how a man shal governe hym in the tyme þat he heeryth his masse’:

Owre swete lord ihesu crist whanne he wolde part owte of þis worlde bycause þt he cam forto bye synners. And he knewe wel þt þei were zolden to his passion shulde synne azenst the pleasure of his fader & þen sholde þei loose her redempcion. He delyured to holichurche þe sacrament of his swete blessed body & of his precious blood forto be offred to his swete ffader in memorie & mynde of his pitous passion & of his glorious resurreccione and of his holy ascencione in remission of her synnes þt bileeuen on hym to þe day of Dome.²⁰

The sacrament of ‘his swete blessed body & of his precious blood’ knits together the actions of the past – Adam’s fall from grace and the resultant need for atonement to be made for his sin by the Son of God – with the immediate reception (actual or spiritual) of His body, and by so doing, recalls not only Christ’s ‘pitous passion’ on Calvary, but also ‘his glorious resurreccione and... his holy ascencione’. Unsurprisingly, a consideration of Christ’s suffering for the sake of Mankind leads to a more personal reflection upon the mediating role that Christ effects between

²⁰Fraser, Appendix, Item 2, ‘A Meditacion How a Man Shal Gouverne Hym in the Tyme þat He Heeryth His Masse’. Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2125, fol. 97^r, ll. 12-23.

sinful humanity and His Father. The thoughts of the reader are thus moved beyond the ‘here-and-now’ of Christ’s presence in the sacrament towards a consideration of His return to earth at the end of time for Last Judgment Day, a time when all who have believed in Him might hope for ‘remission of her synnes’ and salvation. When, having described the appropriate behaviour for a layman throughout the service, the author turns his attention to the moment of the elevation of the Host and the priest’s intoning of the *Agnus Dei*, he presents it not as one that requires nothing more from the layman than a passively obedient, suitably awed response to the performance of a sacramental rite, but as an opportunity to engage actively with a living, present divinity:

At þe furste Agnus dei þenk & cry mercy vnto god þt þu hast synned in þe seuen dedly synnes. At þe secunde Agnus dei cry god mercy þt þu hast nat fulfilled his ten comaundementes. At þe þridde Agnus dei þenk & pray þt he 3eue þe pes of þe holigost wt his seuen graces at her coming out how & in what maner & 3iftes. Also þenk þat swete ihesu hap delyted to be þis precious sacrament forto ioyne & knytte þe to hym as þe lymes & þe membris to her hed, forto iustify hem þt ben in erthe & forto delyuere hem þt beþ in purgatorie. And forto þanke god þe feder for hem þt beþ taken to his blisse... And bileue þu trewly þt þu art howselyd gostely þow þu receyue hym nat seyngly.²¹

Not only does this passage introduce the concept of a spiritually effective ‘gostely’ communion – a subject that will be considered in greater detail over the following pages – it also takes pains to highlight the tremendous opportunity that the celebration of the Eucharist afforded pious, orthodox Christians in the later Middle Ages to reflect upon the shortcomings of their own lives while still encountering the love and mercy of Christ. During the threefold singing or saying of the *Agnus Dei* the individual believer is exhorted to beseech God’s mercy for sins committed and

²¹ Fraser, Appendix, MS Pepys 2125, fol. 97^r, ll. 189-201 & 204-6.

commandments broken and to give thanks for graces and gifts received from the Holy Spirit. When accompanied by a genuine, personal repentance, the public rite of the sacrament of the Eucharist can be seen to fulfil an important spiritual role for the individual. The sins of Mankind can be washed clean by the saving body and blood of Jesus present on the altar – a process which in turn, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, can lead to a reunification of God with His people: ‘þenk þat swete ihesu haþ delyted to be þis precious sacrament forto ioyne & knytte þe to hym as þe lymes & þe membris to her hed’. By referring to how the celebration of a Mass can ease the sufferings of souls in purgatory while it can also act as a thanks offering to God for the happiness of those souls that have passed to heaven, the author of the text found in MS Pepys 2125 demonstrates an eagerness to show how spiritually important and efficacious lay attendance at, and experience of, the sacrament of the Eucharist could be even when the sacrament was received ‘gostely’ through the sight of the elements and not ‘seyngly’ by the actual ingestion of the consecrated Host.²²

Contrasting with such an hopeful interpretation, Rubin’s grudging admission that the sight of the Eucharist offered hope to the faithful, and her acceptance of the fact that ‘the story of sacramental mediation which allowed contact with God through a mere gaze, could never be a sad one’,²³ comes with an unarticulated, yet still present, whisper of scepticism. The implication would appear to be that, to those willing to suspend disbelief, the ‘story’ of the Eucharist could provide an illusory

²² Fraser makes the important point that ingestion of the elements was ‘not... the only valid mode of reception of the spiritual and physical benefits of the mass.’ He argues that such a stance would have undermined traditional later mediaeval attitudes towards the power of the Mass to ease the pain of souls in torment:

if this were the case then the efficacy of the sacrament for the whole Christian community... would have been undermined. How could a mass be beneficial to those not physically present if the physical consumption of the elements was the only effective mode of reception? (p. 187)

²³ Rubin (1991), p.162.

source of hope and spiritual comfort, the use of the word ‘story’ suggesting that mediaeval Christian faith was not a real and important part of the quotidian lives of all men, women and children in the Middle Ages. Rubin’s tendency to undermine any sense of a quite genuine lay and ecclesiastical belief in the spiritual efficacy of the sacrament of the Eucharist is also voiced more clearly much earlier in her book, *Corpus Christi*, when, writing about the Elevation of the Host and its accompanying rituals of light and sound, she observes that:

The now present Christ was raised in the hands of the priest for all to see, a focus for prayer, address, exchange, the culmination of sacramental promise. The moment of the elevation was marked by special illumination, incense and the ringing of bells; all attention was directed at the little white shape in which salvation resided.²⁴

The use of the phrase ‘little white shape in which salvation resided’ hardly conveys the awe, love and fear that the sight of the Host might be supposed to raise in the heart of an orthodox sinner. In a quite literal sense, to the faithful members of the institution of Holy Church, salvation, in the form of the bodily presence of Christ, did reside in the consecrated wafer. For those who believed, the ‘little white shape’ was no more and no less than a tangible physical manifestation of the darkened glass that separates the signs and symbols of this life from the realities of the eternal life to come. James Megivern, in a study that includes a consideration of the theological justification for withdrawing the chalice from the laity in the thirteenth century because of the development of a theory of concomitance (the reality of the existence of both the body and blood of Christ under the species of the consecrated Host) advances the argument that the Host – as opposed to the chalice – offered an ideal

²⁴ Rubin (1992), p. 50.

medium through which the real, sacramental presence of Christ might be approached:

... as an object to be looked at and adored, the species of bread had a distinct advantage. It could be made into attractive form, stamped with an image of Christ or the Cross, and encased in precious holders for display, all of which helped the pious imagination to see Christ present much as He had been in Bethlehem, merely reduced to somewhat smaller dimensions.²⁵

Megivern allows himself a certain gently amused dig at the determination of the ‘pious imagination’ to see, and rather as if through the wrong end of a telescope, the corporal form of Jesus Christ in the elevated Host. Nevertheless, his words also acknowledge the practical way in which the Church’s promotion of orthodox sacramental devotion – through the production of ‘attractive’ Hosts stamped with images of Christ and the keeping of the consecrated wafer in elaborate and costly pyxes and monstrances – encouraged genuine religious devotion through the creation of a scenario where, because of the widespread and compulsory promulgation of the dogma of transubstantiation, each individual believer who saw the Host (especially when it was handled so reverently) could feel him or herself in the presence of Christ.

In *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book*, the spiritual importance that was attached to the individual’s mere *presence* at the celebration of Mass where the elements were consecrated and the Host elevated is highlighted:

Loke pater-noster þou be sayande,
to þo chalice he be saynande:
þen tyme is nere of sacring,
A litel belle men oyse to ryng.
þen shal þou do reuerence

²⁵ Megivern, p. 45. For a discussion of concomitance and the withdrawing of the chalice from the laity, see Megivern, p. 42.

to ihesu crist awen presence,
 þat may lese alle baleful bandes;
 knelande holde vp bothe þi handes,
 And so þo leuacioun þou be-halde,
 For þat is he þat iudas salde,
 and sithen was scourged & don on rode,
 and for mankynde þere shad his blode,
 and dyed & ros & went to heuen,
 and 3it shal come to deme vs euen,
 Ilk mon aftur he has done,
 þat same es he þou lokes opone.²⁶

At the moment of the consecration, when the sacring bell is rung, the readers of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* are told: 'þen shal þou do reuerence/ to ihesu crist awen presence'. The command 'þen shal þou do reuerence' might at first be understood as a none-too-subtle example of an effort to enforce awareness of ecclesiastical, spiritual authority onto a lay readership. However, the viability and relevance of such an argument as this is undercut by the immediacy of the assertion that the 'reuerence' will be to 'ihesu crist awen presence'. Far from dominating the performance of this rite, the mediatory and, as some would argue, controlling presence of a priest is noticeable principally on account of its absence from this description of what happens. Instead, it is the saving presence of Christ that is foregrounded in the simple verse of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*. His role as Mankind's Redeemer is explained by the phrase 'þat may lese alle baleful bandes', a line which, while reinforcing the power of Christ, also appeals to the believer's personal sense of unworthiness and need for divine forgiveness. The simplicity of the language used in this account of the Elevation of the Host reinforces the idea that, for all the attendant pomp and ceremony of the Mass, for the sound of ringing bells, the sweet scent of incense and the soft sheen of silken vestments, the

²⁶ *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, ll. 398-414.

sacrament of the Eucharist remains in essence a private promise of love, forgiveness and ultimate redemption between God and each faithful soul.²⁷ The author is quite explicit in his statement of belief that ‘Þat same es he þou lokes opone’ in the Host is the man who was betrayed by Judas and the Son of God who suffered death for Mankind’s sake. As a result of the opportunities afforded by the Mass for such a promise to be made, the public arena of the celebration of the Mass is transformed into something infinitely more precious – a place where, far from being kept at a distance from their God, the laity is present at a time when it is impossible not to encounter their Redeemer at quarters that, to those aware of un-confessed sins, might have seemed uncomfortably close.

While Holy Church held that only ordained clerics might consecrate the Host, a status quo which could not help but emphasise the importance of the sacerdotal involvement with sacramental worship, it does not follow that the orthodox requirement of an ordained priest to consecrate elements was, in fact, to the exclusion or spiritual detriment of the laity. *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book* shows that the moment at which the Host was held aloft for all to see was a time for intensely personal prayer and supplication:

for-þi I rede *with* gode entent
 þat þou biholde þis sacrament.
 Swilk *prayer*e þen þou make,
 als likes best þe to take.
 sundry men prayes sere,
 Ilk mon on his best manere.
 Short *prayer*e shulde be *with-uten* drede,
 And *þer-with* pater-noster & þo crede.²⁸

²⁷ Lipton makes the point that ‘the process of looking was far from passive’ and that contemplation of a crucifix ‘required care and effort on the part of the viewer’. (p. 1200)

²⁸ *Lay Folk’s Mass Book*, ll. 416-23.

What matters, it would seem, was not who had consecrated the bread and wine, but what, through God's grace, these elements had become. Interestingly, whilst the sacrament of the Eucharist can be spoken of as symbolising the extent of mediaeval clerical control over the laity, here the faithful are being encouraged to see that an acceptance of the dogmas of Holy Church can lead to freedom to grow spiritually. Sight of the elevated Host leading to prayer 'als likes best þe to take' and 'on his best manere' as well as the more traditional 'pater-noster & þo crede' seem equally acceptable to the orthodox sensibilities of the author of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*. Such phrases suggest that there was, in the later Middle Ages, an understanding that personal, private and public, hierarchical and ecclesiastical devotions could work in tandem with and not in opposition to each other. Miri Rubin, writing in *Corpus Christi* observes that:

A mental concentration on the eucharist during elevation with attention to future redemption could bring one into a state of charity. Still, there was the danger that people might obviate parochial and clerical authority in adopting the practice of spiritual communion.²⁹

However, far from obviating 'parochial and clerical authority in adopting the practice of spiritual communion', attendance at and participation in the celebration of Mass, as described in *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, is shown to have the potential to heighten the spiritual experiences of a layman or woman without necessarily leading to thoughts of dissent or even heresy.

Roughly contemporary to *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* is the poem *Pearl*. As has already been considered, this self-consciously artistic, highly complex poem combines personal religious experience with adherence to the practices of Holy

²⁹ Rubin (1991), p. 150.

Church. Illustrating the latitude available within the ‘confines’ of mainstream, orthodox religion, *Pearl* is a work in which a deeply personal, direct interaction with the preternatural is linked to the sacramental rites of Holy Church: the sacrament of the Eucharist is presented as an actual physical reminder of Christ’s saving humanity and as a more abstract emblem of God’s promise of eternal life to those who come to Him through His Son. At the close of the poem the poet broadens out the previously rather specific experiences of the Dreamer until it is Everyman speaking and Everyman being addressed:

Over this hyul this lote I laghte,
 For pyty of my perle enclyin,
 And sythen to God I hit bytaghte
 In Krystes dere blessing and myn,
 That in the forme of bred and wyn
 The preste uus schewes uch a daye.
 He gef uus to be his homly hyne
 And precious perles unto his pay.
 Amen. Amen.³⁰

The focus of the poem moves from the apparently personal ‘*I laghte/ For pyty of my perle enclyin*’ to the universal and communal ‘*that in the forme of bred and wyn/ The preste uus schewes uch a daye*’. The personal vision of the dreamer that has been the impetus for the entire poem carries a message for all men and women who struggle to reconcile knowledge of doctrine with faith:³¹ Looking back over the events of the previous verses from this vantage point, it becomes increasingly possible to read in the Dreamer’s quest to find his lost pearl/daughter an analogy for a sinner seeking reconciliation with God for his or her sinful but repentant soul. The daily sight at Mass of the consecrated elements, of Christ, as described in these

³⁰ *Pearl*, ll. 1205-12.

³¹ The Dreamer remarks memorably in the opening stanza group of *Pearl* that: ‘Thagh kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned/ My wreched wylle in wo ay wraghte.’ (ll. 55-6)

closing lines, is thus a reminder both of the necessary gap that exists between the temporal, transient world and the eternal spiritual truth of life in heaven and of the reality of Christ's continuing presence on earth and His love for humanity. The closing lines also offer implicit advice to the reader, reminding him/ her gently that spiritual comfort is to be found in the orthodox religious devotions of the establishment of the Church.

Thus in *Pearl*, as in *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, the sight of the elevated Host offers the faithful an opportunity to offer prayers to God in the presence of His Son – a spiritually enriching experience that it would seem somewhat contrived to dismiss merely as an ecclesiastical attempt to restrict and control the devotions of the laity by denying them frequent physical communion. As G.I.C. Snoek, in *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist*, is ready to acknowledge:

The awareness of Christ's presence was intensified by the solemn upward gaze directed at the Host, a precursor of the end of a Christian life: to see God himself.³²

By viewing the elevation of the Host, the sight of 'God himself' as a 'precursor of the end of a Christian life' Snoek suggests that this was a moment that offered the faithful an extraordinary opportunity to reflect upon Christ's sacrifice, one's own personal unworthiness and the great hope that He might be seen to offer to those who love Him. Certainly, such a view would be in accord with Fraser's argument that lack of actual physical reception of the Host ought not to be viewed as an indication that the laity were denied full spiritual participation in the celebration of Mass. Fraser cites the closing lines of an appendix to Simmons' edition of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*:

³² G.I.C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 55.

Preye we to God wiþ good entent þat we mowne to his pleasaunce
receyue þe sacramente.³³

The reference to God's 'pleasaunce' articulates once more a real sense that there was a mediaeval understanding that the spiritual benefits of the sacrament of the Eucharist are ultimately dependent upon the grace and mercy of God. Fraser takes this idea one stage further, arguing that:

...as the treatise does not anticipate lay reception it seems that the author regards lay participation in the mass as a valid channel of grace in itself or perhaps even an alternative form of reception.³⁴

Lay participation in the Mass in the later Middle Ages in England is seen to have been presented, by this text, as an occasion that enabled all people to receive God's grace. David Aers, in *Sanctifying Signs*, refers to the sermons of the fourteenth-century Bishop of Rochester, Thomas Brinton, and the work of John Lydgate, both of which refer explicitly to the benefits or 'meeds' of attendance at the Mass:

Amongst the laity in late medieval England, communion was habitually rare: normally (and mandatorily) once a year. But gazing devoutly at the body of Christ under the appearance of bread was at the center of the Mass and carried with it a range of rewards which were widely taught. For example, taking Bishop Brinton's list, from a sermon of 1376: the necessities of the day's food; forgiveness of light speech and oaths; eyesight not diminishing; freedom from aging during Mass, steps to and from Mass being counted by angels. Lydgate's list adds favourable winds for sailing and safe childbirth, but the basic list of privileges for devout gazing at the present body of Christ was standard.³⁵

What this brief summary takes as a given in its recitation of the rather earthly, tangible advantages to be gained by attendance at Mass is that those present will in fact be 'gazing devoutly' upon the elevated Host rather than merely going through a

³³ *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, Appendix III, 'Here sueþ a precieuse mater. how a man schal make hym cleer and perfite clene before þe resseyuyng of þe sacramente of þe auter', pp. 122-6.

³⁴ Fraser, p. 158.

³⁵ Aers (2004), p. 31.

set of ritualistic empty gestures. Although it can still be difficult to understand the extraordinary power that was attributed to the Host by devout Christians in the later Middle Ages, it is important to remember that their reverence was based upon belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation. The fact that God *was* actually present in church or chapel during the celebration of Mass, must surely have made it seem less than strange to suppose that those present might be protected from danger and sin that day.

It is perhaps from these more or less lofty precepts that a less sophisticated, yet equally sincere, belief in the powers of protection afforded by the sight of the Host can be seen to have developed. Some of the claims made about the miraculous properties of the Host and the protection that it can afford those who view it reverently veer dangerously into the realms of superstition and provided the Lollards with easy targets for their attacks upon the established Church.³⁶ However, one orthodox yet well considered and spiritually mature lyric from the later Middle Ages, provides an exception:

O Jesu, lorde, wellcum thou be,
 In forme of brede as y the se;
 O Jesu, for thy holy name,
 Schelde me thys day from sorro and schame,
 And lete me lyfe in trewth and ryght,
 Before my dethe hafe hosyll and schryfte;
 O Jesu, as thou were of a mayden borne,
 Let me never be forlorne;
 And let me never for no syne
 Lese the blysse that thou art in.³⁷

³⁶ See Duffy (p. 100) for an extract from Balliol MS 354 (from *Songs, Carols and Other Miscellaneous Poems from the Balliol MS 354, Richard Hill's Commonplace Book* ed. R. Dyboski (London: E.E.T.S., 1908)) that enumerates the benefits of attending Mass and seeing the consecrated Host. They include protection from blindness and falling and forgiveness of venial sins such as gossiping and swearing.

³⁷ *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*, No. 53d, pp. 54-5.

The inference of the second line, '[i]n forme of brede as y the se' is that this lyrical reflection has been prompted by the sight of the Host rather than actual ingestion of the elements. The requests made of Christ are that He shield His subject 'thys day from sorro and schame' and prevent him or her from dying an unprepared death: unconfessed and without having received the *viaticum*. Here the tone is reverent and supplicatory, an underlying fear of abandonment by God apparent in the plea to let the narrator 'never be forlorne'. What is also of particular interest in this lyric is its demonstration of the poet's ability to articulate an orthodox religious sensibility that gainsays the idea that the laity felt cut off from their God by sacraments that were administered by priests. The poet refers to three of the seven sacraments – penance, communion and the last rites – all of which are presented as aspects of the personal relationship that exists between the poem's subject, an Everyman 'me', and Christ who is both a 'lorde' and a friend (cf. *Pearl*). Sacraments occupy an important part in the internal spiritual life described by this poem precisely, it would seem, because, of the closeness that they help to establish between Man and God. The thrice repeated vocative, 'O Jesu', draws attention to what the author of the poem sees as the immediacy of God's presence in 'forme of brede'. Through the opportunity afforded by sacramental devotion, the narrator also appeals to Christ to be present and active in his everyday life, helping him to live 'in trewth and ryght' and remaining with him at all times. The central fears of the poem – of risking a place in heaven with Christ because of sins committed on earth – are addressed, if not entirely resolved, by a direct appeal to Christ as He appears to the faithful under the form of bread and wine.

Another, much more substantial, text that offers an articulation of the importance attached by the laity to the mere sight of the sacrament of the altar because of the fact that Christ's presence on earth was guaranteed at the moment of consecration and elevation is *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*. It contains the following prayer, which refers to attendance at Mass, and is not specifically focused upon the moment of the elevation of the Host. The prayer addresses Christ directly and is concerned with the possibilities of what might happen to an individual once Mass is over and he or she is removed from the safety of the consecrated ground of the church and the immediate presence of God:

Jhesu, my king, I pray to þe,
 bow doun þin eren of pyte,
 And here my prayer *in* þis place.
 gode lord, for þi holi grace
 for me & alle þate here ere,
 þat þou vs kepe fro akyns were,
 þat may byfalle on ony way,
 In our dedes do to day,
 wheþer we tyde, or be goande,
 lyg, or sitt, or if we stande;
 what sodan chaunce þat comes vs tille,
 oþerwayse þen were oure wille,
 we *praye* þis messe vs stande *in* stede
 of shrift, & als of housel-brede.
 And, ihesu, for þi woundes fyue,
 Wys vs þo waye of rightwis lyue. Amen.³⁸

This prayer begins with a direct appeal to Christ's mercy from the supplicant in the lines, 'Jhesu, *my* king, *I* pray to *þe*,/ bow doun *þin* eren of pyte' (italics mine), a form of wording that suggests an immediacy and intimacy to the relationship between God and humanity. It is attendance at Mass that has brought the 'I' of the prayer to the state where the individual is able to articulate his/ her spiritual needs in such a

³⁸ *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, ll. 584-99.

coherent manner. Certainly, the all encompassing nature of the lines that ask Christ to safeguard those who have been present at the celebration of the Mass, ‘wheþer we tyde, or be goande,/ lyg, or sitt, or if we stande’, helps to underscore the importance of what is being asked for at the same time as it refers to an understood need for Christ to be present in all aspects of Everyman’s life. What is also worthy of consideration is the fact that this oration also begs that, in the event that, despite such prayers, ill does befall those present at the Mass, attendance at this holy rite will stand in lieu of ‘shrift’ and of ‘housel-brede’. The sacrament of the altar is important because it provided an opportunity for men and women to reflect upon the nature of their relationship with God and, subsequently, through a combination of contrition, grace and love move closer to Him. Evidence for the level of intimacy in the relationship between Jesus – Who still continues to be lauded as a ‘king’ and ‘lord’ and, like a monarch, has been entreated to bow down His ear out of pity for the sake of Mankind – and the Everyman figure can be found in the closing couplet of the prayer: ‘And, ihesu, for þi woundes fyue,/ Wys vs þo waye of rightwis lyue’. The direct appeal to Christ and the explicit mention of the five wounds of His Passion focuses attention on an unbreakable link that was formed between God and Man when the veil in the temple was ripped in two and He died. It is through the ‘woundes fyue’ of Christ that Man and He are brought together: He through compassion for, and an understanding of, the frailties of Man, and Man through a deep sense of guilt, unworthiness and gratitude. Such a reference might also serve to remind modern academics that it is possible to see in *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book* the articulation of a type of orthodox devotional sensibility that shows how the laity

could become actively involved with the sacramental worship endorsed by the institution of Holy Church. The prayer for protection in daily life can be seen to show how, encouraged by the opportunities afforded them by Holy Church's adherence to divinely countenanced sacraments, the laity were able to petition God directly.³⁹

The importance attached by the laity to the sight of the consecrated Host in later mediaeval England can be adduced not only by textual evidence, but also from extant physical confirmation of significant lay devotion to sacramental worship. Religious art and architectural ornamentation from cathedrals and also parish churches that escaped the iconoclasm of reformers in both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be used to offer support to an ideological stance that recognises the importance of Holy Church and her doctrines and dogmas in the later Middle Ages.⁴⁰ The encomiastic orthodox religious attitudes displayed in a verse from the *Minor Poems of the Vernon MS* might thus be seen to be reflected in – and by – or be themselves a literary manifestation of, religious paintings, carvings or stained glass. The verse itself reads as follows:

I þe honoure wiþ al my miht,
 In fourme of Bred as I þe se;
 Lord, þat in þat ladi briht,
 In Marie Mon bi-came for me,
 Þi fflesch, þi blod is swete siht,
 Þi Sacrament honoured to be,
 Of Bred and Wyn wiþ word i-diht;

³⁹ For a useful, if somewhat outdated consideration of Middle English elevation prayers, see Russell Hope Robbins's article, 'Elevation Prayers in Middle English Verse', *Modern Philology* 40 (1942) 131-46.

⁴⁰ The growth of the cult of Corpus Christi and the increasing number of Corpus Christi fraternities in later mediaeval England are also testimony to the extent to which the orthodox laity were involved with veneration of the Blessed Sacrament. See, for example, M. Rubin, 'Corpus Christi Fraternities and Late Medieval Piety', *Studies in Church History* 23 (1986) 97-109.

Almihti lord, I lecue in þe.⁴¹

Although the expressions of conventional piety found in the above lines might make this poem appear rather unremarkable, the slightly pat formula of expression ought not to obscure or undermine the fact that an important discussion of a belief in the sacrament of the Eucharist is taking place. In addition to an orthodox belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation and an acceptance of the role played by the clergy in the consecrating of the elements – the sacrament of bread and wine is ‘wiþ word i-diht’ – what is also being expressed is a strong personal faith in the opportunity that the Eucharist affords the ‘I’ of the poem to come into close contact with Christ both as God and as man. Jesus, the ‘[a]lmihti lord’ is to be honoured and believed in with all the ‘miht’ that can be mustered. It is perhaps symptomatic of the Christian sensibility in which this verse is steeped that these declarations might implicitly be understood to refer to both the Ten Commandments and Christ’s two great commandments: fundamental tenets of mediaeval Christianity that make clear Man’s obligation to honour and love God and each other. The explicit reference in the poem to the ‘fflesch’ and ‘blod’ of the Incarnate Christ is a reminder of the extent of His love for humanity, offering in turn an unvoiced, yet still present, comparison with humanity’s treatment of Him, and the benefits He won for all Mankind, for each individual soul, by His death. Thus the poem can be seen to explore the existence of a personal relationship between ‘I’ and ‘þe’ that is able to find a new level of expression through the sight of the elevated Host.

The spiritual importance attached to sight rather than physical reception of the Host in the later Middle Ages in England is perhaps unsurprising given that, for

⁴¹ *Minor Poems of the Vernon MS*, ed. C. Horstmann (London: E.E.T.S., 1892-1901).

most ordinary people, experience of the latter was often an annual event whereas God's body could be gazed upon reverently and adored by the eyes of the faithful everyday.⁴² Ann Nichols, in *Seeable Signs: The Iconography of the Seven Sacraments, 1350-1544*, comments upon the peculiarities of the English ecclesiastical artistic tradition of the time which focused more upon the depiction of the elevation of the Host than the actual reception of the consecrated elements. Her wide-ranging, exhaustively researched work, which includes individual consideration of literary and, more specifically, artistic representation of each of the sacraments in turn, draws attention to the differences between English and continental Eucharistic iconography of the same time:

In contrast to the range of eucharistic subjects found in Continental seven-sacrament series, English iconography overwhelmingly preferred the elevation of the mass. It is the only subject preserved in glass and predominates in the font reliefs. Communion is a minor tradition, found only in four font reliefs; extra-liturgical adoration occurs in only one font as an eighth scene. The iconography of the elevation had been established early in the illumination of *Te Igitur* pages of missals and sacramentaries. The typical composition situated the priest at a lateral altar on one end of which stood a demi-veiled chalice. The Priest elevated the host while a kneeling cleric held a consecration torch in one hand, his other being sometimes raised in a gesture of adoration. He might also lift the chasuble to ease the restriction on the priest's arms as he elevated the host.⁴³

The relative scarcity of artistic depictions of lay communion from this period – quite probably a reflection of the fact that it was an infrequent occurrence at this time – highlights the significance attached to the elevation of the Host. As has been illustrated above, spiritual value would appear to have been attached to the mere

⁴² See Bynum (2002), p. 686, footnote 6 for a useful bibliography of works by art historians working on 'visuality' and the rise of spiritual communion in the Middle Ages.

⁴³ A. Nichols, *Seeable Signs: The Iconography of the Seven Sacraments 1350-1544* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), pp. 251-2.

sight of the Host precisely because it offered, in the veiled glimpse it provided of the transcended body of Christ, a prefiguring of the Beatific Vision. Priests, while a necessary part of sacramental worship become, rightly, relegated to the background as attention is focused upon the Host itself. Nichols' portrayal of how the priest's arms are raised above him as he holds aloft the Host, in addition to the depiction of the deacon's gestures of adoration and his raising of the celebrant's chasuble, come together to create the description of a scene in which the very contours of the drawing, carving or illustration – the curve of men's arms and the falling lines of the clergymen's vestments – seem designed, like the poem from the Vernon MS quoted above, to direct all attention towards the Host and the divine yet corporal substance that lies beneath the accidents of the elements. Both poem and artwork are, at heart, concerned with conveying the reality of God's presence on earth at that moment and the spiritual opportunity that this occasion afforded the laity.

An extreme, yet still relevant example of the sense of being in the presence of God that could be attached by the laity to the sight of the Host itself can be found in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Margery, who, despite being accused of heresy on more than one occasion, is at heart thoroughly orthodox, if unconventional and extreme, in her religious beliefs and practices,⁴⁴ describes an occasion when, as she believes, God uses her presence at Mass and attention to the moment of the elevation to communicate with her personally and directly:

⁴⁴ Despres writes of her that:

Margery was examined in her "articles of faith" both in Leicester and in York and proved that her religious views were entirely orthodox. It was the way she chose to profess her beliefs themselves, that caused the consternation described throughout her *Book*. Ultimately, without intentionally diminishing loyalty to the church, her *Book* insists on the superior claim of 'god upon the individual soul to that of any human institution. (p. 76)

On a day as þis creatur was heryng hir Messe, a 3ong man and a good prest heldyng up þe Sacrament in hys handys ouyr hys hed, þe Sacrament schok & flekeryd to & fro as a dowe flekeryth wyth hir wengys. &, whan he held up þe chalys wyth þe precyows Sacrament, þe chalys mevyd to & fro as it xuld a fallyn owt hys handys. Whan þe Sacre was don, þis creatur had gret merueyle of þe steryng & mevyng of þe blyssed Sacrament, desiring to se mor Sacreys & lokyng yf it wold don so a-3en. Þan seyð owyr Lord Ihesu to þe creatur, “Þow xalt no mor sen it in þis maner, þerfor thank God þat þow hast seyn. My dowtyr Bryde, say me neuyr in þis wyse.”⁴⁵

While it can sometimes be difficult to see past the egotism that is an intrinsic part of Margery’s spiritual autobiography, it is clear that, for the middle-class Norfolk woman at least, the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist opened a channel between human and divine that allowed God/ Christ to ‘speak’ to her. By describing the Host as shaking and fluttering to and fro like a dove, Margery would appear to be alluding to the presence of the Holy Ghost and might also be said to be conveying her understanding of the innate holiness of the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood to her readers. Given Margery’s tendency to exaggerate and embellish, it is perhaps not stretching a point too far to wonder if the fluttering of the Host not only alludes to the wings of a dove (so often used to represent the third member of the Trinity) but suggests Christ’s eagerness for spiritual union with the soul of His beloved, Margery. Certainly, her story is an *exemplum* of the existence of a religious sensibility that saw belief in an orthodox understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist as something that could open the doors to a direct, highly personal, encounter with God.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Kempe, p. 47, ll. 15-27.

⁴⁶ It is perhaps worth noting at this point that Margery’s response to the celebration of the Eucharist – her belief that it afforded her another opportunity to commune with God (whether spiritually or through the actual physical reception of the elements) – is, however extreme, completely orthodox in

Further examples of how a devout (literate) individual might expect to respond to the sight of the elevation of the Host are to be found in John Lydgate's early fifteenth-century poem, 'The Virtues of the Mass'.⁴⁷ Lydgate describes how at the moment of the 'Secrete and the Preface', the celebrant's private prayer and the preparation for the consecration of the elements, '[a]ngellys reioyse *with lawde, honour, and glory*' since '[f]rom the heunly court by grace they ar sent...Al our prayers deuowtly to report/ To hym that syt aboute the firmament'.⁴⁸ The emphasis is clearly upon God's presence at the Mass, rather than the status of the priests who do his bidding in celebrating the Eucharist. Thus the verses concerned with the elevation of the Host itself, although not displaying any striking poetic devices, are important because they articulate the intensity of personal devotion and supplication that could take place within a liturgical context. As such, 'The Virtues of the Mass' might be seen to be a poem that shows a depth of lay response to the sacrament of the Eucharist which provides the modern critic with another important textual example of the existence of an orthodox religious sensibility that sees a complementariness in personal and public forms of religious devotion. Since Lydgate writes in the vernacular, his work would seem to be composed with a predominantly lay readership in mind. However the messages conveyed by his poetry are universal in their application and could be judged of equal relevance to layman and cleric alike. Consider the following verse:

With all your myght, and in your best intent,

substance and perhaps a lay echo of the type of piety encountered in *The Orchard of Syon*, the Middle English translation of Katherine of Siena's spiritual autobiography.

⁴⁷ 'The Virtues of the Mass', in J. Lydgate, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. H.N. MacCracken, Part 1 (London: E.E.T.S., 1911), pp. 87-115

⁴⁸ Lydgate, 'The Virtues of the Mass', v. 37, ll. 291-5.

Awayteth aftyr the consecracion,
 At lyftyng vp of the holy sacrament
 Seythe “*Iesu, mercy!*” *with* hooly affeccion,
 Or seythe som other parfyte oryson,
 Lyke as ye haue in custom deuoutly,
 Or elles seythe thys *compilacion*
 Whyche here ys wrete in ordyr by and by.⁴⁹

Lydgate’s use of the word ‘intent’ suggests that the real catalyst for effective sacramental worship is not the presence of a priest, be he virtuous or corrupt, but the active engagement of the heart and mind of the believer with the reality of Christ’s presence on earth – ‘*Iesu, mercy!*’ is the real heart of the verse and the message that Lydgate is using his poetry to convey to his readers. Although, as a monk, Lydgate himself was a member of an academic elite, his polite use of ‘your’ in ‘[w]ith all *your* myght, and in *your* best intent’ appears genuinely universal and not a patronising sop to placate the laity. It recalls the second stanza of the prologue to ‘The Virtues of the Mass’ in which, inviting his readers to reflect upon the merits attached to attendance at the Mass, he writes:

Furst, *with your* eyen *verray* contemplatyfe,
 Calleth to mynde, of hole affeccion,
 Howe the masse here in thys *present* lyfe
 Of gostly gladnesse ys chyef dirreccioun,
 To haue memory of *Crystes* passioun,
 As doctors remember in theyr doctrine,
 Geyne gostly sekenesses oure restauaracioun,
 Our bawme, our tryacle, our helthe, our medycyne.⁵⁰

The Mass, through its recollection of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, offers ‘gostly gladnesse’ and spiritual healing. If the celebrants are clergy working as God’s apothecaries, then the Church, their store-house, is stocked with ‘bawme’, ‘tryacle’, ‘helthe’ and ‘medycyne’ that comes from the Trinity and, as the repetition of ‘our’

⁴⁹ Lydgate, ‘The Virtues of the Mass’, v. 40, ll. 313-20.

⁵⁰ Lydgate, ‘The Virtues of the Mass’, v.2, ll. 9-16.

makes clear, is intended for the use of all. Lydgate, as Gaytryge before him, seeks to show the benefits to be accrued by a deeper lay understanding of the symbolism and significance of the Mass. He directs his readers towards a greater comprehension of a public, clerically led rite that might yet be seen to be of enormous personal importance to devout men and women.

This coming together of personal and public, institutional and spontaneously affective behaviour is seen quite clearly in verses that follow Lydgate's description of the elevation itself. In this 'lytyll prayer', which would seem to have been composed by John Lydgate as part of his fulfilment of a set penance,⁵¹ the monk of Bury concentrates upon the opportunity that the spectacle of the Mass affords for private prayer. The first stanza of this prayer makes it quite clear that Lydgate's orthodox acceptance of the doctrine of transubstantiation allows him to present the moment of the elevation in strikingly personal terms:

Hayle, holy iesu, oure helthe oure goostly foode,
 Hayle, blyssyd lord, here in forme of brede,
 Hayle, for mankynde offryd on the roode,
 For oure Redempcion *with* thy blood made reede,
 Stung to the hert *with* a speres heede:
 Now, gracious Iesu, for thy woundys fyue,
 Graunt of thy mercy, to-forne or I be dede,
 Clene hosyll and schryft, whyle I am here alyue.⁵²

Lydgate's repetition of 'oure', especially when used in conjunction with 'thy' in the line 'For oure Redempcion *with* thy blood made reede' emphasises the inclusiveness of the Mass and the opportunity that the liturgy offered for laity and clerics alike to

⁵¹ Cf. Henry of Lancaster, *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines*, ed. E.J. Arnold, Anglo-Norman Text Society No. 2. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1940. Reprinted 1967: Johnson Reprint Corporation, London and New York), also believed to have been written in order to fulfil penance imposed by a confessor for a youth filled with less than its due amount of piety and sobriety.

⁵² Lydgate, 'The Virtues of the Mass', 'v. 41, ll. 321-8.

consider Christ's atoning sacrifice while actually in His presence. Jesus, as 'here in forme of brede' is both Christ triumphant, '[h]ayle, blyssyd lord' and Christ of the cross, the man who was pierced 'to the hert *with* a speres heede'. The sight of the elevated Host calls both these aspects of Christ to Lydgate's mind, showing in turn how gazing upon the consecrated elements can be seen to encourage reflection upon the greatness of God's love for Everyman and sinful men and women's proper response to His generosity. In another work by Lydgate, the *Merita Missae*, the reader learns that, in memory of the 'sorow and wo' that Christ suffered for Man's sake, the sight of the Host ought to move those who behold it to tears:

And 3if thyne hert be good & kynde,
 This loue thoue haue alle-waye in mynde.
 And 3if men the ypocryte calle,
 Lat watyr owt of thyn eyine falle;
 For lasser loue schall none bee,
 Thoue wepe for hym that wepte for the.⁵³

The situation described in this extract has been prepared for by the liturgy of the Mass itself and the individual's corresponding awareness of the real presence of Christ and the saving, grace-giving properties present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This extract is important to a general understanding of an orthodox religious sensibility in the later Middle Ages as it shows how personal a response could be called forth from the sight of the Host. By asking for tears of compassion and repentance from the eyes of the members of the congregation, Lydgate is encouraging people to identify with Christ's suffering and, in so doing, incorporate His Passion into their own lives. It is also possible to see how this spiritual exercise, which must naturally also consider Christ's Resurrection and Ascension, could

⁵³ Lydgate, *Missa Merita* in *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, Appendix V, p. 148-54, ll. 107-12.

encourage the faithful to believe more fervently in Him and His love for each person. As Lydgate's verses, quoted above, would suggest, sacerdotal 'staging' of the Mass and the relative infrequency of lay communion did not prevent, and was never intended to prevent, the existence and development of an intimate relationship between God and Man that found spiritual benefit in the sight of the Eucharist.

In her chapter, 'The Bread of Heaven: Foretaste or Foresight?' from *An Iconography of Heaven*⁵⁴ Ann Eljenholm Nichols, using the evidence of mediaeval English art, literature and illuminations to support her theories, considers the nature of the communion that might be understood to take place between Man and God during the Mass – a coming together that is effected principally by the sight of the consecrated Host, and which she believes offers the faithful a 'foresight' of the Beatific Vision. Her focus upon the 'iconography' of the times, the later Middle Ages, leads her to make a connection between the highly visual representations of communion and elevation that she has encountered in her research:

...the iconography of communion and elevation are identical in their emphasis upon vision, a uniformity that may well reflect a connection between the elevation and non-sacramental communion, traditionally known as spiritual communion. Though sacramental communion in England was generally restricted for the laity to Easter and for religious to a limited number of feasts, all could communicate daily in spiritual communion... vernacular texts make it clear that the people believed it equivalent to sacramental communion...⁵⁵

Later in the same article, Nichols cites such texts as *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* and *The Manner and Mede of the Mass* in support of her argument that 'vernacular texts

⁵⁴ A. E. Nichols, 'The Bread of Heaven: Foretaste or Foresight', in C. Davidson (ed.), *The Iconography of Heaven*. Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series, 21 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), pp. 40-68.

⁵⁵ Nichols (1994), p. 46.

make it clear that the people believed [spiritual communion] equivalent to sacramental communion'. She writes:

To judge from these vernacular texts, it would seem that the communion rite proper had disappeared altogether. In the *Lay Folks Mass Book* [sic], following an elaborate section on the rite of the pax, the text moves immediately to the priest's ablutions; the communion rite is ignored. In *The Maner and Mede of the Mass*, although the text does refer to the priest's communion, it does so only perfunctorily: "Whon he hap vsted [communicated], he walkeþ riht/ To Lauatorie." Similarly, in *Merita Missae*, though there is a reference to the priest's communion, the text turns immediately to the medes, the prayers connected with the benefits of hearing Mass.⁵⁶

While the glossing over, or even total omission, of an account of the celebrant's actual ingestion of the consecrated elements in these vernacular works could perhaps be seen as evidence of a determined effort to remind the laity of the division that existed between layman and ordained minister, it is clear that Nichols does not subscribe to this view. Instead she suggests that this cursory treatment of the priest's communion, allied to a textual focus on the ghostly benefits to be accrued from spiritual communion, indicates that there was an understanding that it was the opportunity, through sacramental grace, for a personal experience of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that lay at the heart of the mediaeval celebration of the Eucharist.

Nichols' highlighting of the importance of the visual in later mediaeval Eucharistic devotions provides ballast to the arguments being propounded in this thesis with the support of examples of later Middle English religious literature. It is possible to see how Nichols' examination of mediaeval English Eucharistic piety focuses upon the individual opportunities for experiencing God that sight of the Host

⁵⁶ Nichols (1994), p. 48.

offered to the lay congregation. *De sacramento*, the ‘Treatise on the Sacrament’ with which *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, that bastion of later mediaeval orthodox Christian thought, concludes, draws the entire ‘*speculum vite christi*’ to a close with:

...a shorte deuoute praier to him & his blessedde body in þe sacrament of þe awtere, þe which oweþ to be seide in presence of þat holy sacrament at þe messe with inwarde deuocion.⁵⁷

The prayer is to be said, ‘with inwarde deuocion’, ‘in [the] presence’ of the sacrament of the altar, directions that illustrate just how important a moment the consecration and elevation of the Host was held to be in orthodox religious thought. When Love talks of offering a prayer to Christ in the presence of His own body it is the sight of the elevated Host to which he is referring. The prayer that follows is addressed directly to the ‘holiest bodye of oure lorde Jesu criste þat art nowe | soþefastly contynede here in þis moste excellent sacrament’.⁵⁸ Its repeated use of ‘I’ and ‘þe’ reinforce the sense that the sight of the elevated Host provides a visual stimulus to prompt the faithful to address prayers to a Redeemer they know (with all the surety of faith) to be present with them:

I knowlech þe my lorde god wiþ my mouþe. I loue þe wiþ alle myne herte, & I desire þe with alle þe inwarde affeccion of my soule. I beseke þe swete Jesu, þat þou vouch safe of þine soueryne gudenes, þis day so benyngly & graciously to visite my seke soule...⁵⁹

Beside the implicit allusion to the first of Christ’s great commandments, it is hard not to see in the ‘I knowlech’, ‘I desire’ and ‘I beseke’ an illustration of the opportunity that the public celebration of a sacramental rite, within a liturgical

⁵⁷ Love (2004), p. 238, ll. 6-9.

⁵⁸ Love (2004), p. 238, ll. 10-12.

⁵⁹ Love (2004), p. 238, ll. 12-16.

setting, was believed to offer the individual searching for the healing of a ‘seke soule’ by the ‘soueryne gudenens’ of God. The concept of the *sight* of the sacrament of the Eucharist as being a physic for the soul is, perhaps, not as feeble a substitution for actual physical reception as might at first be thought. Nichols herself writes that:

Sight also works on two levels, for the eyes of the flesh perceive only an elevated Host, whereas the eye of the soul perceives Christ and so has a fore-sight of the eternal vision... In heaven humankind will feed on the sight of God’s face, on the bread of angels. Since the bread of angels is their sight of the Second Person of the Trinity, and since the Eucharist at the elevation of the Mass is the bread of angels, it follows that the sight of the Eucharist in some ways prefigures that ultimate vision.⁶⁰

Nichols’ language suggests that, as a prefiguring of ‘that ultimate vision’ that awaits the faithful in heaven (cf. *Pearl*) – which vision might also be understood as a mystic communion with the Godhead – the sight of the elevated Host ought not to be seen simply as an inferior substitute to actual ingestion of the elements. To illustrate her point, she quotes an extract from the early fifteenth century text, *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*,⁶¹ written for the nuns of Syon Abbey, in which the readers are being encouraged to think about the line from the Lord’s Prayer, ‘*panem nostrum quotidianum*’ (‘give us this day our daily bread’) in terms of spiritual communion:

Except for a priest, *panem nostrum quotidianum* necessarily meant spiritual communion, and the phrase was so interpreted in commentaries on the *Pater Noster*: “And gyue vs suche faythe, & charyte, and deuocyon in our soules that therby we may receyue euery day the brede of thy holy sacramente of the aulter, that is lorde Iesu thy selfe... though we receyue yt not euery day *with our bodely mouthes*.”⁶²

What this brief extract from *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* reveals is an open expression of an orthodox religious sensibility that, while obedient to the doctrines

⁶⁰ Nichols (1994), p. 45.

⁶¹ *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, ed. J.H. Blunt (London: E.E.T.S., 1873).

⁶² Nichols (1994), pp. 46-7, italics hers, quotation from *The Myroure*, p. 75, ll. 18-23.

of Holy Church, shows how it is possible for personal spiritual growth and love and devotion to God to grow within the parameters defined by an institution that believed both in its divinely ordained authority and in its mission to continue Christ's work. The nuns are asked to pray to God that, of His grace, He will give them 'suche faythe, & charyte, and deuocyon' in their souls that they do, in effect, 'receyue euery day' the sacrament of the altar 'that is lorde Iesu thy selfe'.⁶³ This prayer is echoed in the closing appeal to the lay readers of *The Mirror of the Blessed*

Life of Jesus Christ:

Oo þou swettest manna, Angeles mete, O þou moste liking gostly drinke.' bringe in to myne inwarde mouth þat honyswete taste of þine helefulle presence. Kyndle in me þe feruour of þine charite, qwench in me alle maner vices, shede in to me þe plente of virtues, encrese in me þe ziftes of graces, & 3if me hele of body & soule, to þi plesinge. Mye god, I beseke þe þat þou wille so graciously bowe þe, & fro þi hye heuen nowe come done to me, þat I knittede & ioynede to þe, be made one spirite with þe.⁶⁴

The words, despite, or perhaps even because of their familiarity of tone and language, merit a closer examination than might be thought necessary for such a straightforward supplication to God. Love, in offering his readers an illustration of a possible, orthodox, personal response to the celebration of Mass and the sight of the elevated Host, creates an imagined scenario in which the lay Mass-goer may give, simultaneously, both active and passive responses to the 'swettest manna' of the Host. It is interesting to observe how the authoritative, direct, command-like phrases of '[k]yndle in me', 'qwench in me', 'shede in to me', 'encrese in me' and '3if me'

⁶³ Fraser comments upon the petition '*panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie*':

[it] naturally afforded opportunities for teaching about the eucharist. The commentary on the *Pater Noster* in Dan Michael's translation of the *Somme le Roi*, the *Azenbite of Inwyt* (c. 1340), uses this petition to focus on the eucharist: the bread that the faithful ask for in this petition is the bread of Christ's flesh which was blessed by Mary and fried in the pan of the Cross. (p. 52)

⁶⁴ Love (2004), p. 238, ll. 24-31.

are all, in fact, indicators of Love's attempt to show his readers how dependent they are upon God for His bestowal of grace and His forgiveness of sins. The 'I', 'me' and 'myne' that appear, initially, to dominate the text can be seen to be utterly reliant for their definition of what it might mean to be 'me' upon their relationship with the 'þou', 'þe' and 'þine' of God. Love's depiction of the moment at which the Host is being adored stresses both Man's trust in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist – as expressed in the line, 'I beseke þe þat þou wille so graciously bowe þe, & fro þi hye heuen nowe come done to me' – and his or her personal awareness of an orthodox spiritual truth that recognises that each soul is completely dependent upon the self-sacrificing love and boundless grace of God for its redemption and salvation. This prayer, to be made in the presence of the sacrament of the altar, views spiritual reception of the consecrated elements as being no less beneficial and efficacious than their actual physical ingestion. The 'honswete taste' of the 'helefulle presence' of Christ in the 'inwarde mouth' of the believer is capable of ensuring that the individual be knitted and joined to God, through Christ, and made 'one spirit' with Him.⁶⁵

For Nichols too, the withholding of actual, physical communion from the laity or female religious does not form a significant barrier to their real participation in the Mass. Citing mediaeval theories concerning the mechanics of sight which, having been delineated, are then given a spiritual application, she observes that:

⁶⁵ There is, of course, an alternative argument – more properly addressed in the second half of this thesis – that would see in Love's writing of such a prayer less an attempt to show how many opportunities that the celebration of Mass and the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament offered the laity to develop a personal relationship with God while remaining obedient members of Holy Church and more an illustration of that institution's determination to keep their congregations in check.

...if real physical contact is effected through vision, if the sight of the elevated host is also a moment of intense spiritual experience, if to gaze “with all your myght” to use Lydgate’s phrase, can actually effect union with Christ, then we must allow that even the phrase “devotional gaze” is too pallid to describe the spiritual experience depicted... In this intense spiritual vision, one in which the eyes of the mind move beyond the accidents of sense, the worshippers have in some very real sense a preview of heaven when the blessed see the essence of God intuitively face to face.⁶⁶

The Real Presence of God in the Host at such a public, organised, ritual as the Mass is thus seen to endow non-clerical responses to, and participation in, this sacramental rite with a grace that comes not from the celebrant, but from God in heaven. The intensely private experience of the Father and the Son that Nichols describes as being the result of the ‘devotional gaze’ that is directed towards the Host is effected by divine will and an human, deeply personal, active response to God’s calling. Indeed, the worshippers who ‘have in some very real sense a preview of heaven’ when they behold the consecrated Host do so because the ritual of the Mass, despite being a ceremony that, by its nature, consistently foregrounds the role of the clergy, is also one of the sacramental rites of the mediaeval Church that encourages self-reflection and a growth of understanding of the magnitude of God’s love for the world and its people. The unchanging form and symbolism of the Mass creates an orthodox, doctrinally solid ground that the faithful – lay and ordained – can use to help in a manifestation of personal faith.

This approach to an understanding of possible orthodox responses to predominantly lay experiences of the sacrament of the Eucharist is, perhaps unsurprisingly, one that finds little support in the work of Caroline Walker Bynum. Although Bynum acknowledges the important place that the sight of the consecrated

⁶⁶ Nichols (1994), p. 52.

Host occupied in the religious consciousness of the laity and, especially, women, she does not believe that this importance is the result of orthodox belief, but rather that it is founded upon a desire to sidestep ecclesiastical, sacerdotal authority. She writes:

In an atmosphere where confessors and religious superiors controlled access to the eucharist and stressed scrupulous and awe-filled preparation, recipients naturally approached the elements in a spiritually and psychologically heightened state. When, after mumbling inaudibly, the priest suddenly and to the accompaniment of incense and bells raised on high a thin, shimmering wafer of unleavened bread embossed with the image of Christ, it is small wonder that the pious sometimes “saw” Jesus... Denied the cup or even the host by ecclesiastical regulation, many of the devout thought, when they at least obtained release from their inner distress and longing, that the comfort of Christ was in their mouths or hearts immediately – without the priest’s enabling hands or words.⁶⁷

Whereas Nichols argues that the sight of the Host offered the faithful a glimpse of the Beatific Vision and uses textual evidence to support the theory that a ‘ghostly’ communion based upon sight was as efficacious as actual physical communion since ‘real physical contact is effected through vision’,⁶⁸ Walker’s understanding of this widely-held mediaeval belief is more combative and anti-authoritarian. Focusing upon the restrictions that the Church placed upon the laity – ‘[d]enied the cup or even the host by ecclesiastical regulation’ – she advances the theory that with their senses overwhelmed and confused by the sights, sounds and smells that accompanied the elevation, their longing for some form of union with Christ was too great to be satisfied by sight alone and they sidestepped the authority of the celebrant and the Church, finding ‘that the comfort of Christ was in their mouths or hearts immediately – without the priest’s enabling hands or words’. Such an analysis, while appealing to those seeking to privilege the individual over the institution, does not

⁶⁷ Bynum (1987), p. 59.

⁶⁸ Nichols (1994), p. 52.

give adequate consideration to the important role that that institution has played in fostering spiritual communion and, more generally, the religious sensibilities of the laity. It fails to recognise the possibility that real attempts at ecclesiastical reform, coupled with a sincere belief in God, the inevitability of *post mortem* judgment and an awareness of the extent of Christ's love of, and suffering for, humanity, produced a kind of orthodox religious sensibility which, reflected in and sustained by the art and literature of the time, shows how the sacrament of the Eucharist can be considered as a rite which, by the grace of God working through the celebrant of the Mass, allowed for the development of a close relationship between each individual soul and its triune Creator and Redeemer. The following chapter, taking as its starting point the institutional yet also intensely private and personal experience of God at the moment of the elevation of the Host, will examine extra-liturgical Middle English poems and essays that articulate a mainstream religious sensibility and illustrate the existence of an orthodox spiritual latitude in England in the later Middle Ages.

CHAPTER VRELIGIOUS WORKS FOR THE ORTHODOX: THE MARRIAGE OF
INSTITUTIONAL AND PRIVATE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN TEXTS

‘whateuer þou do þenk upon þe worschip and þe drede of God’

(Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God)

The examination of elevation prayers from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as well as a consideration of practical instructions from texts such as *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book* have given some insight into the reverence in which the sacrament of the Eucharist was held by the laity; what they understood the Host to be and the spiritual benefits that they believed could be gained by the sight, if not actual physical reception, of the consecrated elements. The climax of the Mass, the moment of the elevation of the Host could, it has been argued, be seen to be a point at which orthodox public, corporate worship and orthodox private discourse between the individual and his or her Redeemer and God coalesce. Likewise, it has been intimated that, in their response to the sacrament of the altar, lay men and women built upon – as opposed to turned their backs towards – the tenets taught them by a post-Fourth Lateran Council, post-Pechamite, Church in England. That this is not a view that has been universally espoused by the academic community in recent years can be seen from the writings of critics such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Sarah Beckwith.

In *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, Bynum offers the view that, during the later Middle Ages, there was an increasingly individual and ‘idiosyncratic’ approach to Christian worship, an attitude that was especially apparent in the manner in which men and women sought to experience a personal relationship with Christ. Although devotional attention still focused upon His Body and its salvific,

redemptive qualities, it was no longer confined to the liturgically defined moments described in Chapter IV:

Devotion to God's body was also at least partly cut loose from a corporate setting. Not only did reception itself frequently occur after mass; the believer sometimes encountered the flesh and blood through private vision as well, at the moment of elevation or even completely apart from the liturgy.¹

Bynum acknowledges the continued importance of the 'corporate setting', but sees in accounts of 'private vision as well [as] at the moment of elevation' a turning away from liturgy and sacramentality towards a direct, un-mediated discourse with Christ. It is clear that 'private vision' is presented here as something that occurs almost despite the attempts of Holy Church to control and stage-manage the dissemination of Christ's body through the sacrament of the Eucharist. Take, for example, Margery Kempe's account of the time when she received communion privately. Margery, typically describing herself in the third person, tells how 'sche had so hy *contemplacyon* & so meche dalyawns of owr Lord' that:

sche cryed what tyme sche schulde ben howselyd as 3yf hir sowle & hir body xulde a partyd a-sundyr, so þat tweyn men heldyn hir in her arms tyl hir cryng was cesyd, for sche myth not beryn þe habundawns of lofe þat sche felt in þe *precyows Sacrament*, which sche stedfastly beleuyd was very God & Man in þe forme of breed.²

Whereas this thesis supports an interpretation of this incident that sees Margery's experiencing of 'þe habundanwns of lofe' as something that came out of and was actively sustained by her faith in the established beliefs of the institution of Holy Church, others see Margery's pointed declaration that she believed the consecrated Host was 'very God & Man in þe forme of breed' as perhaps no more than a necessary, self-preserving gesture of obedience to an ecclesiastical

¹ Bynum (1987), p. 68.

² Kempe, p. 138, ll. 29-35.

hierarchy still alert to the reality of heretical challenges to the orthodox status quo.³ Such a view, while allowing for the extraordinary opportunity that the elevation of the Host provided for men and women to experience the presence of God, sees in this personal encounter a certain distancing from, or even rejection of, the guiding (oppressive?) presence and involvement of priests and liturgical practice. That Christ's body could be encountered at a moment 'completely apart from the liturgy' is presented by Bynum as further evidence that the sacramental rites of the Mass were, in the later Middle Ages, increasingly viewed as unnecessary, perhaps even distracting, peripherals to lay devotions.

Sarah Beckwith in *Christ's Body* offers a similar approach to that adopted by Bynum, arguing that the Host was an area of intense social and spiritual struggle in the later Middle Ages – that, against the backdrop of a rite controlled and exploited by individual priests and, more generally, Holy Church, the laity fought to appropriate Christ's body for themselves. Writing about what she perceives as the site of a sometimes bitter clash, Beckwith links lay perception of the Host (Christ's body) with lay interest in a self-authorising relationship with the Son of God:

Thus we must look at Christ's body not simply as a social and communal rite, but as the site of a momentous and historically significant process of internalisation, of social control through the very formation of identity.⁴

While she acknowledges later in her work that the 'opposition of personal devotion and communal rite' may have been overstated in academic considerations of late mediaeval devotions, Beckwith still sees the celebration of

³ See N. Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics', in D. Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 539-65.

Watson finds a discrepancy between Margery's seeming conservatism and the 'strikingly idiosyncratic' nature of her work. (pp. 562-4)

⁴ Beckwith (1993), p. 41.

the Eucharist as a rite which, through its exclusively sacerdotal nature, might almost have acted as a catalyst for men and women of the later Middle Ages to look to themselves (the process of 'internalisation' to which Beckwith refers) when seeking a relationship, through meditation upon His body, with Christ. To know Christ however, one must first know oneself in relation to Him. Increasingly, the train of thought implies, 'internalisation' would presume self-knowledge and spiritual thirst without recourse to an authoritative external institution such as Holy Church. A powerful socio-political as well as religious symbol in the later Middle Ages, Christ's body – as present in the sacrament of the altar – is viewed by Beckwith as something that could function simultaneously as an 'intimate experience' and a 'public resource', because it is in the 'tension and interrelationship of public cult and private devotion that crucifixion piety is best understood.'⁵ It is revealing of Beckwith's critical stance that she chooses to foreground the 'tension' that might be seen to exist between 'public cult and private devotion' as opposed to the 'interrelationship' between the two.⁶ She presents Christ's body, the very medium through which humanity was saved from eternal death and separation from God as a means through which devout mediaeval men and women might loosen the doctrinal, sacramental and social ties that bind them closely to the institution of the Church in favour of a more truly personal, because more self-directed, experience of God.

Beckwith links mediaeval devotion to Christ's body to the simultaneous support and undermining of sacramentalism:

Christ's body in late medieval crucifixion piety and passion imagery is just as much about the undoing of sacramentalism as it is its extension. The object of ritual cohesion, but also the resource of

⁵ Beckwith (1993), p. 75.

⁶ Also worthy of note is the fact that, whereas 'interrelationship' may exist without the presence of 'tension', the latter is, by necessity, dependent upon the former for its existence.

specific disciplinary practices, it refers to the collectivity and to new forms of individualism and it can use one to validate the other, even as one actually undermines the other.⁷

Christ's body becomes a locus for change, for the possibility of affirmation of belief in Him and rejection of the very system that promoted, through the sacrament of the Eucharist and Passion iconography, devotion to His flesh and blood. For Beckwith, the newly fostered 'individualism' of the later Middle Ages undermines and supersedes the authoritative, hierarchical *modus operandi* of the institution of Holy Church, which had used the sacrament of the Eucharist to justify ecclesiastical power:

Christ's body underpins the sacramental system by functioning as the central sacrament – the eucharist – and the only one that is definitely attached to clerical power, and by providing in the theory of incarnation and redemption the doctrinal support for sacramental symbols.⁸

To expound this argument still further, instead of providing a bedrock upon which a more intimate relationship might be founded, the accepted post-Lateran IV decrees of Holy Church are more like stumbling-blocks which, through an insistence upon the ecclesiastical institution's right to mediate between God and Man, force the thoughtful believer towards their rejection in favour of a more literal, less symbolic faith. Such a faith, disseminated in part through the private reading of affective texts that consider Christ's earthly life and death, could foster a spiritual link between His suffering and sinners' meditation upon His Passion for their sake that would be quite independent from and not in need of the support of Holy Church. In short, Beckwith sees tension and fracture in later

⁷ Beckwith (1993), p. 76

⁸ Beckwith (1993), p. 76. It is important to note that Beckwith's argument, despite advocating an approach to mediaeval Christianity that concentrates upon perceived tensions and conflicts between the individual believer and the institution of Holy Church, does appear to acknowledge the existence of a genuine Christian faith in the hearts of men and women of the later Middle Ages.

mediaeval lay responses to orthodox, liturgical forms of worship. It is one of the aims of this thesis to requalify this claim, using textual evidence from extra-liturgical devotional texts such as poems, treatises and reflective meditations⁹ to show that to encourage the individual's development of an interiorised spiritual life was not to reject the received authority of Holy Church.

An untitled poem by John Audelay, the Shropshire monk known to have still been living in 1426,¹⁰ illustrates the point that there was no obligation for men and women whose private prayer had progressed beyond the standard *Pater nosters*, *Aves* and blessings to reject the orthodox teaching and faith in which they had grown. Audelay, donning the persona of Christ, writes:

Be viij vertu is hole prayere;
 Dyssyre *and* aske of me ryztwesly;
 Biselfe þou schalt be messangere,
 And do þi message dewoutly,
 And þou plesust me more speciali,
 Þen þaz my moder *and* sayntis alle
 Praydyn in heuen on hy fore þe,
 For þou ast fre choyse to ryse or falle,
 Bop þou may.
 3if þou fall, aryse anon,
 And call to me *with* contricion,
 Þen my moder *and* sayntis vchon
 Wil fore þe pray.¹¹

While the immediacy of this poem and the directness of Christ's address, '[d]yssyre *and* aske of me ryztwesly/ Biselfe þou schalt be messangere', suggest the possibility of a universally applicable, direct, unmediated relationship between Redeemer and suppliant, this is not at the expense of orthodox attitudes towards the intercessory powers of the saints and, especially, the Blessed Virgin

⁹ The existence of such a diverse group of texts being, in itself, indicative of the range and scope of works that might be seen to articulate an orthodox religious sensibility.

¹⁰ Whiting, in her introduction to *The Poems of John Audelay*, acknowledges that little is known about the life of this monk and poet, although he does, pointedly, refer to his blindness (and later deafness) in his work and seems particularly preoccupied with thoughts of his own sinfulness. See Audelay, pp. xiv-xvi.

¹¹ Audelay, Poem 3, pp. 46-9, ll. 25-37.

Mary. Audelay's verse, written in the vernacular and thus accessible to a literate lay-audience, reinforces the mainstream view that each soul must, albeit with help and guidance from Holy Church, make its own confession and plead for mercy before God. The doctrine of free will, explained through Christ's reminder to the reader or auditor that 'þou ast fre choyse to ryse or falle' is hardly *contra* to the teachings of Holy Church. Neither should the validity of this 'fre choyse' be undermined through association with an institution which, despite its instances of abuse of power and authority, was believed by most to be founded by divine authority upon tenets dictated by Christ Himself. Audelay closes this stanza by attesting that the saints and the Queen of Heaven herself will pray for the soul that repents fully and sincerely of its sins and asks mercy of Christ. By so doing he shows how, because of its belief in the intercessory powers of saints, angels and especially the Blessed Virgin Mary, the institution of Holy Church furnishes the repentant with a spiritual comfort that is, in a wholly positive way, dependent upon the individual's knowledge of the basic tenets of the orthodox Catholic faith.

The poet's emphasis upon the intercessory power of saints provides evidence that, despite composing a poem that focuses specifically upon Christian beliefs and actions that are not dependent upon the mediating involvement of priests,¹² Audelay does not entertain any obviously heterodox concepts. While only Christ can truly redeem humanity, saints are worthy of *dulia* (veneration as

¹² The poem also contains Christ's commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself and, to '[I]oue me *in hert ouer al þyng*' (l. 39) as well as Audelay's own rejoinder to heed the words of Christ, repent and amend one's way of life. Such exhortations, whilst enshrined in the very fabric of Holy Church, do not require the direct intervention and involvement of priests or sacerdotal ritual. They do however suggest a knowledge of the basic tenets of Post-Lateran IV orthodox Christianity. They call to mind, for example, both the *Speculum Christiani*'s discussion of Christ's commandments to love God and each other, and the twentieth chapter of the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* which is concerned with the conformation of 'þi wille to Godis wil in alle maner þinges, bodeliche and gostliche'. *Contemplations*, p. 27, ll. 66-7.

opposed to worship) because of their witness to Him during their lives. After their death, through their prayers, they are effective intercessors for the faithful at the court of heaven. Audelay's bringing together of independent and structured, ecclesiastically orchestrated worship and his use in this poem of the word 'contricion' is also worthy of note. Carrying with it as it does overtly sacramental connotations, his giving of such a word to Christ in the line 'call to me *with contricion*' suggests a knowing combination of the personal, internal and spontaneous with a more measured consideration of the processes that formal contrition might take. In line with orthodox teaching, a sinner's contrition, if genuine, will result, through grace, in God's forgiveness of sins.¹³ Although Audelay does not allude directly to the sacrament of penance, or even to the necessity of following official Church doctrine, neither does he suggest that to do so would be misguided.

On the contrary, his familiar use of the term 'contricion' implies that the poet would naturally place personal repentance within the traditional framework offered by the established Church. This attitude towards the complementary nature of personal devotion and the influence and input of Holy Church is seen even more clearly in another poem by Audelay which, in accordance with the canonical hours, charts the Passion of Christ. Having described how Christ suffered hour by hour to redeem Mankind, the poem ends by linking personal devotion to the Man of Sorrows who is '*our solacion*'¹⁴ with the salvific benefits of the ritualised repetition of these hours and a full confession of sins to a priest. Audelay moves from a fairly straightforward narrative consideration of the

¹³ See Chapter II.

¹⁴ Audelay, Poem 14, pp. 101-4, l. 76.

Crucifixion and of the sinner's response to Christ's immolation for his sake to a more complicated stance encompassing the private and corporate:

He þat þese ours wil say *with deuocion*
 In reuerens *and* worchip of Crist passion,
 And schryve him clen to a prest *with contric[i]on*,
 God He grauntis him of His grace ful remysson
 Of al his trespase.
 Þen ioyful may 3e be
 Ayens þe day þat 3e schul dye
 To haue grace *and* merce,
 In heuen for euer a place.¹⁵

Again, there is an emphasis upon personal responsibility – '[h]e þat þese ours wil say *with deuocion*' – which while orthodox, still allows the reader a certain freedom to contemplate Christ's Passion and its immediate personal relevance to him or her. Also to be noted is Audelay's clearly articulated understanding of the finer details of absolution: confession to a priest is a necessary part of the penitential process (involving a 'public' admission of sins and offences), but the power of forgiveness rests with God alone – 'God He grauntis him of His grace ful remysson/ Of al his trespase'. Through his poetry, Audelay endorses a kind of practical piety that marries institutional, sacramental worship with a meditative devotion in poetic form based upon the affective contemplation of Christ's Passion. The verse is explicitly concerned with the reality of human sin, *post mortem* judgment and the pressing need for 'grace *and* merce'. At the same time as he can be seen if not to defend (because it is not under attack) then at least to endorse the received authority of the Church, Audelay not only articulates the hopes and fears of his readers, but directs them towards an orthodox spiritual response to, and treatment of, their concerns that will actually

¹⁵ Audelay, Poem 14, ll. 82-90.

help them learn more about themselves – their existence as creatures of God and their pressing, personal need for redemption and salvation.

What also becomes apparent from a wider reading of Audelay's works is the fact that, whilst not afraid of criticising those ministers who bring the name of Holy Church into disrepute,¹⁶ and even more eager to communicate, in terms that leave no room for ambiguity, the importance of establishing a direct and completely honest relationship with God, Audelay uses the sacramental, canonical and liturgical beliefs and practices of Holy Church as a foundation and continual point of reference for more independent, private devotions. For Audelay the '*fides catholyca*' is a faith in which institution and individual work together in order to serve God and be saved. He writes about this in the following poem which begins with an account of the spiritual importance of the promises made at baptism:

Þis foreward furst we mad at þe fontston,
 To-fore owre fader fayþfel þat followed vs in fay,
 To forsake Syr Sathanas his werkus euerychon,
 And become Cristen men, to byleue in God veray,
 And kepe His comawndmentis kyndly nyzt and day.
 Þer we were croysid in a crysum with a carful krye;
 To þis couenant was callud to wytnes, Y say,
 Oure godfars, oure godmoders, to stond þer vs by;
 When we myzt not speke,
 Þer þai answered fore vs,
 In þe name of Ihesus,
 Al þre with one woys;
 Þis bond we schuld nozt breke.¹⁷

Through his description of the sacrament of baptism, Audelay shows how this rite, although performed by priests and godparents on behalf of an infant, marks

¹⁶ There is also textual evidence that reveals Audelay's awareness of the dangers and difficulties attendant upon any criticism of the established Church in a post-Wycliffe, post-Arundel and even post-Oldcastle era. He is careful to state that, in Poem 11, for example, there will be 'no redemc[i]on' for 'heretekis and renegatis þat vncriston be'. Audelay, Poem 11, pp. 82-94, l. 299 & l. 296.

¹⁷ Audelay, Poem 2, pp. 10-46, ll. 14-26.

the moment at which each individual's life becomes inextricably linked to that of God, its Creator and Redeemer. The formality of this 'covenant', which publicly proclaims the rejection of Satan and the turning to Christ, the promise 'to become Cristen men, to byleue *in* God veray' adds a gravity to the event that befits its great significance as the moment at which Holy Church welcomes a new member. The three godparents, who 'answered fore vs./ In þe name of Ihesus' when the soul could not speak for itself are quite literally 'sponsors', men and women who, believing in the spiritual efficacy of the sacraments of Holy Church themselves, introduce a new-born child to the hope of redemption and salvation offered in God's name by such an institution.¹⁸ However, Audelay's verse also sounds a warning note: the covenant sealed with oaths and chrism is a personal one between each soul and God, one which 'we schuld noȝt breke' because to do so would be to reject both Christ and His Church and thus lose the opportunity to be saved from spiritual death.¹⁹ Audelay, himself a monk, sees the assistance that Holy Church's teachings offer to people without their having to abrogate a sense of personal accountability to God. His verses reflect the conviction that a believer might, in tandem with a general participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, meditate on Christ's redeeming sacrifice when alone, at times and in places best suited to his or her spiritual needs.

¹⁸ For an account of the importance of baptism see also *Book to a Mother*, ed. A.J. McCarthy, *Studies in English Mystics 1* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981), p. 42. Here too there is a focus upon the bond (or covenant) that is made between the child and God when he or she is signed with the cross and anointed with chrism. Cf. also *þe Lyfe of Soule*, p. 13, in which there is a discussion of how the outwardly visible sacramental tokens of infant baptism represent the inner blessing and covenant that this rite confers, through the grace of God, upon the child being presented.

¹⁹ This stanza also shows the 'communal' nature of mediaeval orthodox Christianity. Baptism is a far from exclusively clerical rite – the pivotal role of godparents at this ceremony showing how the laity were actively involved in ensuring that children would grow up aware of Christ and His redeeming works. Writing about baptism in later mediaeval Europe, Bossy stresses the important social bonds that were forged and strengthened by a rite that established the claims of spiritual kinship. Bossy (1983), pp. 132-6.

A later stanza, explicitly anti-Lollard in content – ‘[I]ef þou me, a loller his dedis þay wyl hym deme’²⁰ – also sees that Holy Church is the only way for sinful souls to approach God to ask His forgiveness. While such openly dogmatic and prescriptive writing can appear to more modern sensibilities as restrictive and threatening in its endorsement of a particular type of orthodox mediaeval Christianity, it is important not to confuse clearly delineated doctrines and the observance of fundamental devotional practices with an interpretation of the mediaeval Church that is unable to see beyond that institution’s determination to stamp out the heresy that challenged some of its core beliefs and practices in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. By accepting that the prospect of salvation and the unavoidably linked fear of damnation were real concerns to lay and religious men and women in the later Middle Ages, it becomes possible to see in works such as the poetry of John Audelay the articulation of a complex, intelligent and proactive response to the demands of orthodox religious worship.

Despite criticisms of obvious corruption and dereliction of duty by the clergy in the second poem of Whiting’s edition of his works, Audelay stresses the vital importance of adhering to the Christian faith as taught by the institution of Holy Church. This articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility does not seem to warrant an unduly sceptical modern critical reception: Audelay’s poems can be seen to exhibit a real, if often somewhat verbose and convoluted, concern with the state of grace of his soul and, by extension, the souls of his readers. His endorsement of orthodox religious practices ought not only to be defined with reference to political expediency and the undoubted need – genuinely believed in, or assumed for the sake of necessity – to be seen to conform. By drawing

²⁰ Audelay, Poem 2, l. 677.

attention to the gulf that can exist between belief in Christ and living a truly Christian life, Audelay sounds an alarm call for personal reform that does not seek to change the central tenets of orthodox religion, but hopes to highlight the disparity between the reality of the religious status quo of the early fifteenth century and how things ought to be. He writes:

I pray 3ou *serys pur* charyte
 When 3e han red þis treuly
 Þen redis þis passion
 What Cryst sofyrd fore sinful men.
 Here schul 3e here a treu lessoun,
 Hou fayþ *and* charyte away is gon;
Multis diebus iam peractis,
Nulla fides est in pactis; } *Videte.*
Mel in ore verbis lactis,
Fel in corde, fraus in factis. } *Cauete.*²¹

Audelay continues his poem by explaining what the Latin means in English – ‘Mone days now a-gone/ Fayþ ne couenant is þer non...’ and then turns his attention towards showing how such a situation might be rectified, how the institution of the Church might be reinvigorated (currently God’s law, as disseminated by the Church has been ‘turnyd vp-so-doun’ and there is no ‘trew corexion’²²) and the individual turn once more away from sin, through following the ‘treu lessoun’ taught in his verse. As with many of Audelay’s poems, this work is concerned with the individual’s need for genuine repentance of sins and amendment of life to be made before death approaches. Audelay reminds his readers of the fact that earthly problems of war, hunger and natural disaster are really man-made, because they are tangible reminders of God’s anger at His creation’s selfishness and greed. The rather horrible allusions to the ‘*confucion/*

²¹ Audelay, Poem 12, pp. 94-7. This macaronic stanza precedes the main body of the work and provides a synopsis of one of the main themes of this poem.

²² Audelay, Poem 12, l. 7 & l. 10.

Ful ryȝtwysly²³ and perpetual damnation that will be the lot of those who do not do God's bidding, or behave with compassion and consideration towards their fellow men and women, brings the poem to a dramatic and tense climax only relieved by Audelay's short, sharp exposition of how easily such a fate can be avoided:

Schryue ȝoue clene *with contrition*,
And make true satisfaccion,
 Þen blessed ȝe be.²⁴

The monk's articulation of a faith in the spiritual efficacy of true contrition, confession and satisfaction, coupled with his concern that men and women undertake this act of repentance while they can and for love of God and the neighbours whom they have wronged, illustrates Audelay's own orthodox religious attitudes: his determination to highlight all people's need for repentance and forgiveness from God, his understanding that Christianity as a religion cannot be separated from everyday life and, importantly, his belief that the tenets of Holy Church exist to enable and encourage the spiritual growth of the faithful. His poems are a fine example of the existence and complexity of an orthodox religious sensibility in Middle English literature that recognises the importance of combining the practices of institutional and private religious devotions.

By the close of the fourteenth century, there was, in addition to the continued requirement for catechetical texts, a burgeoning demand for devotional works that took the reader beyond the basics of a knowledge of their faith. Such works, which include Walter Hilton's *The Mixed Life* and *The Scale of Perfection* and the anonymous *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, are concerned with describing how their readers might, while not withdrawing

²³ Audelay, Poem 12, ll. 40-1.

²⁴ Audelay, Poem 12, ll. 58-60.

from the world, hope to live a godly and devout life. These mainstream devotional texts were written according to an orthodox religious sensibility with an orthodox readership in mind. They are of particular interest because they use their faith in and obedience to the doctrines and decrees of the institution of Holy Church to provide a foundation and continued point of spiritual reference for men and women who also wish to engage in religious devotions that can appear, initially, to be so private as to be quite detached from the more open, communal rites of the established Church.

In the first book of the Augustinian canon Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*, the reader is reminded, on more than one occasion, that even when embarking upon a path that will involve grappling with increasingly abstract, meditative devotion, it is still important to remember and respect the institution of Holy Church. After a chapter spent denouncing the dissembling meekness of heretics who, in truth, are filled with devilish pride, Hilton tells his readers that:

Secunde thyng which thee bihoveth for to have is a siker trowth in articles of the feith and the sacraments of Holi Chirche, trowand hem stidefastli with al the wille of thyn herte. And though thu feele ony stiryng in thyn herte agens ony of hem bi suggestion of the enemye, for to putte thee in doute and in dweer of hem, be thu stidefast and not to mykil have drede of sich stirynges ne of the feelyng of hem, but forsake thyn owen witte withoute disputyng or ransakyng of hem, and sette thi feith generali in the feith of Holi Chirche, and charge not the stiryng of thyn herte whiche, as thee thenkith, is contrarie therto. For that stiryng that thu felist is not thi feith, but the feith of holi Chirche is thi feith, though thou neither see it ne fele it.²⁵

For Hilton the faith of a true believer is inextricably bound to the 'articles of the feith and the sacraments of Holi Chirche' which contain a 'siker trowth'. He detects the presence of the devil in any 'stiryng' of the heart contrary to the recognition of such a faith and advises his readers to be steadfast in their

²⁵ W. Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, 2 vols, ed. Thomas H. Bestul (Kalamazoo: T.E.A.M.S., 2000), Book 1, ll. 533-41.

resistance to his tempting. Holy Church is presented as a bedrock upon which all faith, even that of contemplatives whose daily regimes appear to leave little room for the formalities of mediaeval Christianity as defined by Holy Church, is founded. By writing ‘the feith of holi Chirche is thi feith, though thou neither see it ne fele it’ Hilton, it can be argued, is not trying to impose limits upon the spiritual lives of his readers; rather he is drawing attention to the fact that, whether or not the individual is conscious of it, because the institution of Holy Church is the custodian of the revealed truths of Christianity, it is impossible to separate Christian faith from faith in the truth as taught by the Church.²⁶ Hilton, like the other writers whose works will be discussed, is concerned with an understanding of Holy Church that is based upon a sincere belief in the unimpeachable nature of its central tenets. His work is uncomplicated by the realities of orthodox religious experiences that might, on occasion, not be quite as pure in spirit and intention. Such a stance allows his work to transcend, for example, local difficulties in the practice of mediaeval orthodox religious beliefs and practices and consequently to concentrate upon those things that he understood to comprise the essentials of Christian devotion, including a fundamental belief in the spiritual worth and efficacy of the doctrines of the Church. It is clear that, while Hilton does not seek to restrain the ultimate spiritual aspirations of those who read his book and, although he devotes much space to an exploration of the practicalities of an intimately personal exercise in

²⁶ For example, a text like *The Cloud of Unknowing* (which will be considered in more detail in the next chapter), with its pseudo-Dionysian rejection of the material and ‘like’ to describe God, still depends for its effectiveness upon a reader’s understanding of those very things and upon the fact that the reader is ready to move beyond – rather than reject – the rites and doctrines of the established church. There is also a sense in which even the most resolutely heretical/ dissenting voices of the later Middle Ages are still, even through their rejection of its doctrines, linked to Holy Church by that very rejection: revolution and reform must, of necessity, be built on knowledge and an understanding of the status quo.

spiritual self-assessment, he does look to ground the devotions of his reader, however spiritually advanced he or she might be in terms of more abstract devotional contemplation, in the doctrines and practices of Holy Church.

Towards the close of the first book of *The Scale of Perfection*, consolidating the sense and substance of what he had written earlier, Hilton uses his understanding of the temptations that face all men and women to reinforce this work's articulation of an orthodox religious stance vis à vis the spiritual efficacy of the doctrines and practices of Holy Church:

Sum men [the devil] tempteth bi gosteli synnes maliciously, as of mystrowynge of the articles of the feith or of the sacrament of Goddis bodi, also dispeir or blasphemye in oure Lord or in ony of His seyntis, or lothyng of here lif, or bittirnesse and unskilful hevynesse, or to mykil drede of himself or of here bodi, yif thei putten hem hooli to Goddis service.²⁷

He never underestimates the skill and determination of a diabolical opposition that would seek to corrupt human souls. However, there is a sense in the above quotation that it is not impossible to withstand such assaults and, moreover, that it is the responsibility of each man and woman to stand firm against 'gosteli synnes' seeking comfort – in the sense of consolation– from the not insubstantial support offered by Holy Church. It might even be argued that what Hilton is warning his readers against in this extract is not so much the power of the devil, rather it is the truly awful consequences of turning one's back upon religious orthodoxy taught by the Church. A 'mystrowynge of the articles of the feith or of the sacrament of Goddis bodi' cannot be dismissed lightly – to Hilton such a 'mystrowynge' is a breaking of the bond that, through His sacrifice, Christ made with Mankind. The argument that underpins *The Scale of Perfection* is based upon an understanding that Holy Church and the personal faith of the believer

²⁷ Hilton (2000), Book 1, ll. 975-9.

support, encourage and enrich each other in their quest for the forgiveness of sins and a growth in love for God made manifest by devotion to Him, as well as through living one's life in a state of grace and charity. By describing attacks upon an individual's faith in the doctrines of the church as being the work of the devil, Hilton's adherence to a later mediaeval orthodox interpretation of the Christian faith is foregrounded in an unambiguous and positive manner. To doubt the Creed, the Decalogue or the veiled grace of the sacraments is to succumb to the temptations of the devil: it is to isolate oneself from the light of grace, hope and love offered freely by God and His Son and made accessible to all through the teachings of an institution founded by Christ. The lost, despairing soul belongs to the man or woman who has become separated from the communal hope of redemption and salvation that is what, on behalf of God, the mediaeval orthodox Church offers to the faithful.

As the author of the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, a text that will be examined more closely towards the close of this chapter, points out, while perfect love of God can only occur after death, when He will be seen face to face, '[b]ut for as much as we may not come to our desire, but we begin somewhat to love him here in his life'.²⁸ The importance of beginning 'somewhat to love him here' is what occupies both Walter Hilton in *The Scale of Perfection*, the anonymous author of the *Contemplations* and indeed all mediaeval writers who are concerned with the spiritual welfare of their readers – whether their argument is biased either more towards orthodox or, indeed, heterodox points of view. What is immediately noticeable about the texts that are being discussed in this section is that they are works that make a conscious effort to combine two

²⁸ *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, ed. M. Connolly (Oxford: E.E.T.S., 1993), p. 25, ll. 94-5.

aspects of mediaeval religious devotion that can sometimes appear to be in opposition with each other. They both encourage the development of an interior spiritual life in their readers, through offering guidance on prayer and contemplation, while not neglecting to offer practical and helpful advice to each reader *vis à vis* how to conduct all aspects of his or her life (including the undertaking of daily duties) in a manner that will please God. Although Hilton does believe that the contemplative, solitary life is most pleasing to God and profitable to the health of the soul, this does not prevent him, especially in *The Mixed Life*, from showing how it is still possible (and, indeed, an obligation) to serve God even in the midst of a possibly very worldly existence. In *The Mixed Life*, Hilton stresses the importance of balancing one's obligations to God with the fulfilment of responsibilities towards family and other dependents. Having reminded his readers that it would be uncharitable to devote time to one's family or community at the expense of prayer and contemplation, or vice versa, Hilton counsels his readers in the following manner:

Pou schalt meedele þe werkes of actif liyf wiþ goostli werkes of lif
 conte[m]platif, and þanne doost þou weel.²⁹

The crucial words here are 'meedele' and the phrase 'þanne doost þou weel' because they draw attention to the fact that Hilton would appear to be writing for a reader or audience that must learn to keep all aspects of the 'mixed' life in balance. Good deeds, performed 'in trouþe bi charite',³⁰ are thus shown to be as acceptable to God as the hours that a devout individual might chose to spend alone in prayer and meditation. What is of paramount importance is the manner in which these Christian obligations are discharged: Hilton implies that God will

²⁹ W. Hilton, *Walter Hilton's Mixed Life Edited From Lambeth Palace MS 472*, ed. S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson. *Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies*, 92 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1986), p. 10, ll. 101-2.

³⁰ Hilton (1986), p. 5, l. 1.

be able to tell the difference between the prayers and actions of a truly devout individual and one who is more self-indulgent in the undertaking of spiritual duties.

Even in *The Scale of Perfection*, a work that appears more exclusively contemplative in tone and content, Hilton is able to acknowledge that the undertaking of good deeds and charitable acts can be spiritually valuable:

Also a gode man in worldly staat, for love of God maketh chirchis and chapels, habbeies, hospitals, and othere good deedis of merci. He schal have his mede in the blisse of hevene, not for the deede hitself, but for the good wil and the charité that he hadde of the gifte of God for to doo thoo gode deedes.³¹

It is the ‘good wil and the charité’ that have motivated a man or woman to do such things which, independent of the exact nature of the acts themselves, will call down the grace of God. Hilton’s use of the phrase ‘other good deedis of merci’, while unremarkable in its implied reference to acts of charity such as the clothing of the naked and the burial of the dead,³² is also a subtle, yet significant, reminder of the real spiritual importance of such acts. Though, as is acknowledged in *Piers Plowman*, good deeds alone cannot effect the salvation of a soul,³³ the recognition of this does not remove from the individual a

³¹ Hilton (2000), Book 1, ll. 1885-8.

³² While a determined sceptic from the fourteenth or twenty-first century may find little that is truly charitable in the endowment and/or embellishment of churches, chapels and abbeys, it ought to be accepted that, even when the orthodox Church in the later Middle Ages was coming under sharp attack from Lollards who sought its disendowment, there was a generally held orthodox belief that the provision of a suitable place where God might be worshipped and others might seek salvation and comfort from Him was as important an act of charity as the giving of alms to ease the physical pains of poverty and sickness. Both types of act, whether ordered by the individual concerned or undertaken on his/ her behalf by concerned family members, were believed to help ease the passage of a soul through purgatory.

³³ One interpretation of the famous ‘Tearing of the Pardon’ scene in Passus VII is that Piers rejects it because he recognises that it does not allow for the forgiveness of sins and the grace and mercy of God. Elsewhere in *Piers Plowman* the reader learns that even the righteous man sins seven times a day. This being the case, the pardon, ‘But “Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule,”/ And “Do yvel and have yvel, and hope thow noon oother/ That after thi deeth day the devel shal have thi soule!”’ (Langland, Passus VII, ll. 112-14), would seem to condemn all men to suffer the pains of hell after death, thus rendering Christ’s redemptive immolation both unnecessary and ineffectual.

responsibility to love one's neighbour as oneself. Indeed, it is an awareness of this basic Christian requirement that can be found in many manuals of religious instruction and also in sermons. One such sermon, thought to have been written in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, which is concerned with the necessity of showing 'kyndenes' to Christ (because of the love He showed for Mankind when He suffered death), reminds its readers or listeners that it is possible to demonstrate love of Christ by ministering to one's fellow man. The author of the sermons presents the seven works of mercy as Christian obligations – acts which will be recalled by God on Last Judgment Day. One example shows how, in the later Middle Ages, it was possible to produce an orthodox religious text that combined obedience to and faith in the dictates and doctrines of the institution of Holy Church with an articulation of how important it was for each individual to consider the state of grace in which his/ her soul might be thought to exist. The sermon, after an opening that explains that its aim is to illustrate how best to show gratitude to Christ for His self-sacrifice (combined with a discussion on the importance of the sacrament of penance), and which rather curiously takes as its opening gambit Judas' words to the chief priests,³⁴ continues with the following appeal to the congregation:

Petosly also beseche [God] of forzeuenes, in þat þat þou haste not fulfilled þe vij werkes of *mercy*, of þe wiche God shall arayn vs of straytely at þe Day of Dome. *And euer here-aftur* be in vill to amende þe. Þe werkes of *mercy* ben þese: zeve mete to þe houngre; zeve drynke to þe thursty; clothe þe naked *and* nedye; vysytte þe seke; comforte folke in prysone; *and* reseve straungers; *and* berye þe dede. 3iff þou do þus, þan þou makeþ þe a grownde of keendnesse, where-to God zeue þe grace.³⁵

³⁴ The sermon is headed by the words from Matthew 26. 15, 'What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you?', a phrase that perhaps could be seen to highlight the unkindness and self-interestedness of Man at the same time as its callousness acts as an irresistible counterpoint to the popular representation of Christ as the Lamb of God: meek, obedient, pure and a sacrificial victim.

³⁵ *Middle English Sermons*, Sermon 7, p. 32, ll. 31-40.

It is this message – namely that by helping others one serves Christ – that Hilton would appear anxious to convey to his readers. At the same time as he/she ministers to ‘folke’ and ‘straungers’, a soul motivated by ‘good wil and the charité that he hadde of the gifte of God’ grows closer to Him (God and Christ) because, through a combination of love for Him and a selfless consideration of the needs of others, it moves away from dependence upon earthly things towards a state of mind and belief that seeks and finds comfort only through faith in the redemptive power of Christ’s self-sacrifice and the ultimate mercy of God.

By contrast, those who perform good deeds for the sake of vanity or in order that they might enhance or consolidate further their earthly status will, as Jesus told His disciples, receive their reward here on earth. The motivation of each individual, even when known only to God, is thus of tremendous importance to orthodox mediaeval writers, as is acknowledged memorably in the opening Passus of *Piers Plowman*:

For James the gentile jugged in hise bokes
 That feith withouten feet is [feblere] than nought,
 And as deed as a dorenail but if the dedes folwe:
Fides sine operibus mortua est...
 ‘Forthi chastite withouten charite worth cheyned in helle;
 It is as lewed as a lampe that no light is inne.’³⁶

Langland’s allusion to the General Epistle of James³⁷ is an unambiguous rejoinder that faith without works is ‘as deed as a dorenail’ – just as a pious or devout act performed without ‘charite’ is as worthless as a lamp that dispenses no light. This argument is also present in the roughly contemporary *Pe Lyfe of*

³⁶ Langland, Passus 1, ll. 185-9. The quotation perhaps also draws upon I Corinthians, chapter 13, which opens with the famous verse: ‘Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.’

³⁷ See the second chapter of the Epistle General of James for an account of the worthlessness of faith without works.

Soule, which draws upon James' words, '[r]iȝt as a body is ded wipouten spirigt, riȝt feiþ and beleue is ded wipouten good werkes'³⁸ and concludes:

And I see wele þat no man schal be saued but he leue his synne,
noþer for þe grete mercy of God, ne for þe beleue þat a man haþ in
God, ne for his cristenyng, but if he haue goode werkes.³⁹

While there is a danger that, despite its orthodox credentials⁴⁰ this attitude might be seen as dangerously Pelagian in its approach to the doctrine of salvation, study of the context of the extract from *Pe Lyfe of Soule* makes it possible to discount the idea that the author of this text is in any way trying to undermine or disregard the importance of God's grace through a heterodox focus upon the spiritual importance of good works. On the contrary, the passages from *Piers Plowman* and *Pe Lyfe of Soule* can be seen as thoroughly orthodox. Faith without works is worthless because it involves the failure to understand (or is possibly even a more conscious rejection of) Christ's commandments to love God before all other things and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Despite critics who would downplay the ability, or even desire, of Holy Church to assist sincerely in the spiritual education of the laity, it is important to remember that it was through the post-Lateran IV, post-Lambeth, teachings of the Church that they came to a knowledge of the fundamental tenets of Christianity as expounded in *pastoralia*. Both *Piers Plowman* and *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, in their consideration of the relationship between faith and good works, can be seen to build upon an orthodox premise that views the performance of good works as an extension of

³⁸ *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, ed. H. Moon, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 75 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1978) p. 8, ll. 7-8.

³⁹ *Lyfe of Soule*, p. 10, ll. 8-11.

⁴⁰ In her endnote to the extract from the General Epistle of James in *Pe Lyfe of Soule*, the editor remarks that:

the author here asserts that faith and good works are necessary for without works, faith is dead. References to this are found frequently in St Augustine, St Thomas, and certainly all scholastics stress that faith is the beginning, with it is also given charity... and faith without charity is dead. (p. 82)

religious devotion into all aspects of the individual's life, because they are true examples of *caritas*.

The performance of good deeds, whether those deeds benefit the temporal Church or not, involves a close examination of the motivation and intentions of the man or woman who professed to be acting out of love for God and humanity. Hilton, in *The Scale of Perfection*, takes pains to make it clear to his readers that self-serving religious hypocrites and glory-seekers will not reap any spiritual rewards from their actions:

A good man for the love of God he fasteth, he waketh, gooth on pilgrimage, and forsaketh the likynge of the world soothfasteli in his herte withoutin feynynge. Hee schal have his meede in the blisse of hevne. An ypocrite for veynglories of himself dooth the same deedis and receyveth his meede heere.⁴¹

Yet again practices endorsed by Holy Church are shown to be spiritually effective only when the individual believer, layman or cleric, practises such things with true humility and a genuine devotion to God. It is by endeavours such as forsaking the world, if not literally, then 'soothfasteli in his herte' for the love of God, that a man (or woman) might hope, through God's grace, to benefit spiritually from such actions. Later in the same chapter, to highlight the difference between genuine piety and the mere semblance of devotion by those who would cover their heads in sackcloth and ashes in order to gain the opprobrium of those around them, Hilton records that:

Anothir man for vanité of himself and worschipe and praisynge of the world and his owene name dooth the same good deedis and hath his meede heere.⁴²

His words remind the faithful that all their thoughts and actions, their private prayers and even the conduct of the secular aspects of their daily lives, ought to

⁴¹ Hilton (2000), Book 1, ll. 1878-81.

⁴² Hilton (2000), Book 1, ll. 1888-90.

be grounded in an awareness of the presence and power of God. It is noticeable that both the above quotations from Hilton draw attention, through their repeated use of the phrase 'receyveth/ hath his meede here', to the need for each man and woman to consider the motivation for their actions very carefully.

Hilton reminds his readers that this life is a preparation for the life that is to come and that all need to store up for themselves treasures in heaven through earthly acts of charity. As the author of the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* expresses it:

He þat biginneþ alle þing in þe name of God, he biginneþ it in þe worschip of God. Loue þan so stedfastliche almighty God þat whateuer þou schalt do þenk ferst in þe worschipe and drede of God...⁴³

The closing words, 'þat whateuer þou schalt do þenk ferst in þe worschipe and drede of God', are as unambiguous as they might be thought to be impossible to fulfil. To 'þenk ferst in þe worschipe and drede of God' is the duty of all men and women, lay or religious and is as difficult to undertake for both parties.⁴⁴ A book such as the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, which would appear to be intended for a devout, lay readership, takes care to show that whilst all people owe God their love and obeisance, not all are called, or are able, to serve Him in a like manner. That some are able to turn their backs upon worldly affairs and devote themselves entirely to a contemplative life is, quite naturally (according to the *mores* of the time), lauded as exemplary: the book as a whole, however, is concerned with a more general consideration of the debt owed by humanity to Christ. By closing with a short meditation on Christ's Passion, the author of the *Contemplations* brings the attention of the reader squarely back to

⁴³ *Contemplations*, p. 19, l. 12-15.

⁴⁴ As the extract previously quoted (*Contemplations*, p. 40, ll. 34-4) makes clear, lords, ladies, or simple folk might have as steadfast a faith and stable a heart as a member of an enclosed religious order.

the unshakeable bedrock upon which mediaeval Christianity rested – the simple fact that, by dying on the cross at Calvary, the fully human, fully divine Son of God effected a reconciliation between Creator and created.

The relatively brief description of the suffering of Christ at the hands of ‘mony wicked men’, with its affective depictions of the torture of his ‘derworpi’ limbs and the sorrow of His Mother at such a cruel sight, leads into a passage in which the sinful soul is invited to reflect upon its own grievous shortcomings and the contrast between the ‘reward’ that such a soul might expect to receive and the possibility of salvation that Christ’s sacrifice makes very real: ‘[þ]ou woldest not take me into dampnacion þer ofte y haue deserued’.⁴⁵ Such meditation is then presumed to highlight the individual’s awareness of his or her need for the mercy and grace of God:

God of þi grete merci haue merci on me. Y wot wel, Lord, al þat y haue comeþ onliche of þe. Y wot wel wiþoute þe noþing may | be but my sinne and wrecchednes whiche comeþ al of me. Wherefore, Lord, wiþ meke herte y biseche þi grace; do not [to] me as y haue serued, but aftur þi grete merci.⁴⁶

The whole tenor of this section, which continues in like vein for another fifty or so lines, can be summarised succinctly, yet also eloquently, by His own words, ‘wiþoute þe noþing may | be but my sinne’, which illustrate clearly the absolute nature of the relationship (even if men and women chose to ignore the reality of its presence) between Everyman and God. Perhaps the most significant thing about such an acknowledgment is that it transcends any contemporary socio-political and ecclesiastical upheavals. The phrase ‘do not [to] me as y haue

⁴⁵ *Contemplations*, p. 42, l. 24 & p. 43, ll. 66-7.

⁴⁶ *Contemplations*, p. 43, ll. 81-5.

serued, but aftur þi grete merci' recalls both the words of Psalm 25⁴⁷ and, in a less concrete way, the entire office of the Mass with its focus upon Christ's sacrifice and humanity's need for His mercy and forgiveness. It would seem that the author writes for men and women who place the personal bond between sinner and Redeemer at the heart of religious practices informed and supported by an acceptance of and obedience to orthodox mediaeval Christianity.

That this was an approach that was widely appreciated by the original readers of the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* perhaps finds support in the number of manuscripts of this text known to be in existence today. This text illustrates how it is possible to live a prayerful, spiritually-engaged life: one in which private, deeply personal devotions and acts of worship are informed and supported by the individual's experience and understanding of the received authority of the central tenets of orthodox mediaeval Christianity. Another facet of this text that needs to be explored – in conjunction with an analysis of the complementariness of the institutional and the private – is its acceptance (and its encouragement of all readers and auditors to accept) that not all people are called, neither are they able, to serve God through an extreme form of contemplative devotion that involves a complete withdrawal from the world. Indeed, the author of the *Contemplations* stresses that there are degrees of divine love that, if less exclusive, are more readily attainable to men and women attempting to live a 'mixed life': importantly efforts made by such individuals are to be understood to be truly valued by the God Who, seeing and knowing all things, appreciates the efforts and possible sacrifices that such individuals will have made in their efforts to move closer to Him.

⁴⁷ The seventh verse of Psalm 25 (which is concerned with the psalmist's need for forgiveness and his trust in God's mercy) is, 'Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness' sake'.

As mentioned already, the treatise opens with a succinct, yet affective, account of Christ's Passion and, perhaps more importantly, of the reason why God's Son had to die on behalf of Mankind.⁴⁸ The use of the active verbs 'loue' and 'desire' in the extract below give a clear verbal sign that the *Contemplations* is a text that cannot be read passively, but is one that requires an emotional, spiritual and intellectual response from its readers:

3if God of his grete goodnes loued þus man, yeuinge ouer þis wyt and resoun and al oþer þing þat him nedep, kindeliche man scholde nigt and day wit al his wittis loue him, and feruentliche desire to conne loue suche a goode God, þat alle þing made, alle þing yeuiþ and susteineþ.⁴⁹

Here in four lines is a description of how God should be loved by Man – 'nigt and day wit al his wittis' – and also of why it is so essential to love Him – because it is He who 'alle þing made, alle þing yeuiþ and susteineþ'. As the author of this text makes quite clear, it is ultimately through the grace of God, since all things lie within His power, that the faithful might hope to be saved and come to know His love. The *Contemplations* is a very practical, straightforward book which, even though it draws upon a tradition of contemplative devotion to God that demanded the complete abandonment of one's secular life in order to feel, in Rollean terms, the burning fire of divine love,⁵⁰ appears to be grounded in a desire to show how such extreme examples of service and dedication can be

⁴⁸ The *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* is a work that is framed by accounts of Christ's Passion. This use of a literary device to reinforce the reader's understanding of the fact that it is the death and Resurrection of the Son of God that lies right at the heart of the Christian faith, can also be seen to illustrate the author's real concern with the spiritual welfare of his readers.

⁴⁹ *Contemplations*, p. 5, ll. 19-23.

⁵⁰ The second chapter of the *Contemplations*, for example, is entitled 'How holi men were sumtyme visited wit gostliche swetnesse in þe loue of God' and opens with a discussion of how long ago men had gone and lived in the desert, surviving on roots and grass, so fervent were they in their love for Him. *Contemplations*, pp. 5-8.

adapted and modified in order to help all people experience the love of God in their lives on a new and deeper level:

I wol nat counsaile þe to liue as þei dude, for þou maist bi oþer maner liuinge come to þe loue of God, as þou schalt see afturward.⁵¹

What ‘þou schalt see afturward’ is then summarised, as the text draws to a close, in a chapter that focuses upon the need for men and women to persevere in their devotions while continuing to live in the secular world:

Y sey not þou schalt fle bodili from þe world or from þi wordeli goodis for þes ben principal ocasionis, but I counsele þe in herte and in wil þat þou fle al suche vanities, for þay þou be a lord or a laidi, housbond-man or wif, þou maist haue as stable an herte and wil as some religious þat sitteþ in þe cloister. But soþ it is þar þe moste seker wey is to fle as religious don; but for alle mowe not be men or women of religion, þerfore of eche degree in þe world God haþ ichose his seruantis.⁵²

The conventional recognition, also endorsed by writers such as Walter Hilton and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, that the most perfect form of earthly life was that which belonged to the professed contemplative, is accepted by the creator of the *Contemplations*. However, in the acknowledgment that ‘þay þou be a lord or a laidi, housbond-man or wif, þou maist haue as stable an herte and wil as some religious þat sitteþ in þe cloister’, it is possible to see that a real concern of this text is to address the spiritual needs of the laity in a practical, encouraging and inclusive manner. Indeed, one of the most important things about the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* is that it is an hopeful text. It offers to furnish willing souls – ‘such men and women, of þat good wil and of þat holi desir’⁵³ – with means by which they might, through understanding Him more, loving Him more and serving Him more through their daily prayer and conduct, grow in faith and surety that God will not abandon them at the hour

⁵¹ *Contemplations*, p. 5, ll. 8-10.

⁵² *Contemplations*, p. 40, ll. 34-41.

⁵³ *Contemplations*, p. 5, l. 27.

of their death. The text also shows how spiritual support and guidance can be found in the orthodox teachings and practices of the institution of Holy Church.

Having established in Chapter I *why* ‘eche man’ should wish to love God, the second chapter of the *Contemplations* concerns itself with explaining that it is possible to love Him and to live a devout and good life without feeling obliged to withdraw to the desert or live on a diet of ‘gras and rotes’. Steering a determinedly practical course that reveals a certain understanding of the frailties of the human condition, the author describes how the ‘holi fadres’ of times gone by were, through the grace of God, visited with an experience of the sweetness of Christ’s love that is now all but unimaginable in England because ‘unnepis schul we finde [there] now a sad contemplative man or woman’.⁵⁴ If it might be said that one of the aims of the *Contemplations* is to assist those who ‘feruentliche and loweliche’ desire to experience such sweetness, it is also true that this text recognises that such an end can only be achieved through the grace of God in addition to no small amount of hard work and dedication and, most importantly of all, in the grounding of such hopes and expectations in the fundamental tenets of the institution of Holy Church. Having written about the degrees of love experienced by those who lived a ‘high’ contemplative life, the author informs his readers that such heights can only be reached by building upon a foundation of orthodox religious beliefs and practices:

But ferst it is needful to þe þat þou haue oþer þre degres of loue, þat þe same holi men wrot in here tretis, whiche be nat of so hie degree as þo þat be rehersed before. Þe ferst degre of þis ys whan a man or woman holdeþ þe hestis of God, and kepuþ him out of dedely sinne, and is stable in þe feiþ of holi cherche. Also whan a man wolde nat for any erpeliche þing wraþ God, but trewliche stondeþ in his degre

⁵⁴ *Contemplations*, p. 6, ll. 49-50.

weþer he be religious or seculer. In þis manere eche man bihoueþ to loue his God þat wol be saued.⁵⁵

What is noticeable about this passage is the manner in which the responsibility of the individual to keep ‘þe hestis of God’ and ‘ouut of dedely sinne’ is a state of consciousness and of bearing, the awareness and undertaking of which can be helped by the actual, temporal and, especially, the ideological, orthodox institution of Holy Church.⁵⁶ The subtle, scarcely articulated link between ‘þe hestis of God’ and an individual being ‘stable in þe feiþ of holi cherche’ is also worthy of note because it reinforces an understanding, prevalent in many later mediaeval private devotional texts, that the ‘hestis’ of God are present in the rites and beliefs of Holy Church. It is for this reason that the *Contemplations* condemn those who would, in their pride and folly, consider themselves above the jurisdiction of Holy Church and attempt to pry into mysteries that pass human understanding:

...what man ymagineþ upon hie maters þat ben gostliche, which passe alle erþeliche mannis wit, as upon þe feiþ of holi chirche or suche oþer þat nedep not to specifie at þis time, þat man haþ greuous þouztis and perlous.⁵⁷

Real personal faith in the commonly held, universally authorised rites and beliefs of the Church – especially the spiritual worth and efficacy of the sacraments – provide a solid ground of orthodox religious understanding from which a devout individual can develop further his or her relationship with God and Christ. This deepening and broadening of faith and Christian love which, with its emphasis

⁵⁵ *Contemplations*, p. 7, ll. 62-9.

⁵⁶ The *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* is a text which expects its readers to know their own social position and especially to be aware of the increased responsibilities that come with wealth, power and privilege. Thus, that the reader is told that he ought to ‘stand ‘in his degre weþer he be religious or seculer’ ought, perhaps, to be taken as a reference to the various responsibilities and obligations of the separate estates and not as any implied attempt to keep the layman ‘in his place’.

⁵⁷ *Contemplations*, p. 34, ll. 61-5.

upon acts of contemplative prayer and devotion undertaken in private, might appear to involve a rejection of more obviously corporate acts of worship, can actually be seen more as a natural extension and development of orthodox devotional practices. As discussed in Chapter IV of this thesis, for example, the moment at which the consecrated Host is raised aloft in the hands of the officiating priest in order that all might venerate the Real Presence of Christ, is simultaneously a very public experience and highly private encounter with Jesus.

There is a strong sense that the *Contemplations*' injunction that 'whateuer þou do þenk upon þe worschip and þe drede of God'⁵⁸ can be applied in equal measure to the individual believer and to the ecclesiastical institution charged by God, according to orthodox understanding, with helping to turn the souls of the sinful from their erring ways towards Christ and the spiritual redemption offered by Him. The author of the *Contemplations* appears concerned to show his readers that there exists – or ought to exist – a concord between an individual's faith in Christ as manifested in the form of a quite public belief in, and obedience to, the received authority embedded in the doctrines and dogmas of the institution of Holy Church and the more private aspects of personal devotion that are considered in some detail in this text. The *Contemplations*, in articulating an orthodox religious sensibility, does not privilege the institution over the individual nor vice versa but, working within the established boundaries of the institution of Holy Church, shows the availability of orthodox spiritual latitude to devout members of the laity in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. When discussing how best to put oneself in a position to receive God's grace, for

⁵⁸ *Contemplations*, p. 18, ll. 33-4.

example, the author writes, in a chapter entitled ‘Here þou hast what profit is in preier and how þou schalt preie’, that:

Preier and ensauple of good leuing ben most spedful to gete grace and to drawe men to þe love of God, and putep away þe false suggestions of þe deuyel and stabliþ man inn al goodness...Preiour also is, as y rede, a souereyn helpe to þy soule, counfort and solas to þi good angel, turment and peyne to þe deuil, acceptable service to God, parfit ioye, sad hope, and gostliche helpe wiþoute corrupcion.⁵⁹

Prayer is both a balm and comfort at all times, especially in times of need, and a defence against the forces of evil. It is also part of an ‘ensauple of good leuing’ that, through an awareness of the need to remember the presence of God (and the redemptive sacrifice of His Son) in all daily tasks and in all interactions with other people, shows how men and women might live a devout life without withdrawing formally from the active world.

This drawing together of a personal commitment to follow Christ within an established framework of ecclesiastical sacramental and liturgical practice and Lateran IV doctrine can, by its very nature, be difficult to describe – the ultimate dependency of both for their spiritual efficacy upon the grace of God and the sincerity and faith of each believer makes even the most public act of, for example, contrition, an intensely private experience between penitent and God. What a text such as the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, as well as the poems of John Audelay and the writings of Walter Hilton articulate clearly, is a belief in the value and importance of the doctrines of the institution of Holy Church and the role that this belief system ought to (and did) play in the lives of all those seeking salvation. While the works themselves are quite different in form and content, they all stress the importance of using the rites and beliefs of

⁵⁹ *Contemplations*, p. 29, ll. 1-4 & 13-16.

Holy Church as an essential starting point for the development of a more interiorised devotion to God and Christ.

The following chapter will continue to examine textual evidence for the existence of a complementariness of beliefs and devotional practices sanctioned and encouraged by Holy Church and deeply personal religious experiences that can, initially, appear utterly divorced from institutional dogma. Focusing at first upon the works of authors whose writings are often considered ‘mystic’ or ‘contemplative’ in tone and substance, Chapter VI will discuss the underlying bedrock of orthodox religious thought that informs the works of Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Finally, texts written for female religious – *The Chastising of God’s Children*, *The Myroure of Oure Lady* and *The Orchard of Syon* – will be examined for the extent to which they articulate a religious sensibility which stresses the importance of balancing a duty to perform religious observances in tandem with preparation for private prayer, meditation and encounters with the divine.

CHAPTER VI

‘VERNACULAR THEOLOGY’ AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE RECEIVED AUTHORITY OF THE MEDIAEVAL INSTITUTION OF HOLY CHURCH

‘Sey what men seye wil, & lat þe proof witness. & þerfore lift up þin hert *with a blynde steryng of loue*’

(The Cloud of Unknowing)

In his influential article ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409’¹ Nicholas Watson explains his use of the term ‘vernacular theology’ to describe religious texts written in English in the later Middle Ages:

My use of the term in preference to any of the range of alternatives – “popular,” “didactic,” “devotional,” “pastoral,” “mystical,” or “affective,” writing, for example – has several interrelated aims. First, it makes possible the comparative discussion of various kinds of vernacular writing that tend to be studied in isolation or in groupings that are sometimes artificial... Second, the word “theology” focuses our attention on the specifically intellectual content of vernacular religious texts that are often treated with condescension (especially in relation to Latin texts), encouraging reflection on the kinds of religious information available to vernacular readers without obliging us to insist on the simplicity or crudity of that information: that is, the term is an attempt to distance scholarship from its habitual adherence to a clerical, Latinate perspective in its dealings with these texts. Third, the term is intended to focus attention on the cultural-linguistic environment in which religious writing happens and to act as a counterweight to the aura of otherworldliness that often surrounds terms like “devotional,” or indeed “spirituality” itself.²

As the length of the quotation shows, the concept of ‘vernacular theology’ is, despite initially seeming self-evident and simple, rather complex: it has implications not only for any understanding of the composition, but also the consumption, of later Middle English religious writings. It is a term that invites the modern academic to look with a fresh gaze upon a diverse and important

¹ N. Watson, ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Debate and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409’, *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 822-64.

² Watson (1995), footnote 4, pp. 823-4.

group of texts. Watson declares that he has chosen to use this term in the first instance because 'it makes possible the comparative discussion of various kinds of vernacular writing that tend to be studied in isolation', secondly because 'the word "theology" focuses our attention on the specifically intellectual content of vernacular religious texts' and finally because 'the term is intended to focus attention on the cultural-linguistic environment in which religious writing happens'. Vernacular theology is thus a term that is intended to enhance the study and understanding of a wide range of texts. Through the universality of its application to primary sources in Middle English that are concerned, in whatever way, with the relationship that a reader has or might hope to have with his or her Creator and Redeemer, the term 'vernacular theology' is something of a catch-all that refuses to adhere to previously defined, almost canonical, often inaccurate, literary boundaries such as 'mystic', 'affective', 'devotional' or even 'Lollard'. In seeking to define the relationship that mediaeval men and women sought to build with God, expressed in poems, prayers, treatises and sermons, 'vernacular theology' is offered by Watson as a flexible and more serviceable term than those used previously: it can be applied equally to works that discuss direct, 'mystic' relationships with God or those that, more overt in their orthodoxy, consider the more or less direct intervention of the Church in the opening and maintaining of any dialogue between individual sinner and redeeming Deity. Equally, it is a term which is presented by Watson as one that allows the critic to ground the study of texts in the socio-political and religious contexts whence they came while remaining at an objective (because not obliged to believe in the faith that informs and supports these texts) distance from the sincere articulation of mediaeval faith that is found in these works.

In his chapter on 'The Middle English Mystics' for *The Cambridge History of Medieval Literature*,³ Watson declares his intention to reintegrate the literary output of writers such as Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Margery Kempe into the broader canon of mediaeval vernacular religious prose. It is his contention that the works of these writers have been marginalised by the manner in which they have traditionally been studied; by the fact that, as he sees it 'the academic *study* of mystical theology has never been definitively detached from its practice',⁴ and that, as such, the texts concerned have not always been studied critically and objectively. Rather, Watson argues, in some instances, and as a result of focusing academic attention on the spiritual benefits that the study of a text might afford men and women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "'Experience" itself has been dehistoricized and the mystics granted honorary membership of the present.'⁵ Thus, the vernacular theology of, for example, Julian of Norwich, a woman whose work has been championed and claimed as their own by both Catholics and Anglicans, has been presented as transcendent, because understood by modern Christians to be divinely inspired, and thus free from the distractions of any influence of the social, political and religious climate in which she worked. While it is possible and, as this thesis would argue, even desirable, to give due credence to the professed faith of authors of devotional texts, there must also be agreement with Nicholas Watson's view, since the intellectual gesture of acknowledging and respecting the faith of another ought

³ N. Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics', in D. Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 539-65.

⁴ Watson (1999), p. 540. He cites as particular early twentieth-century examples the Anglican scholars William Inge and Evelyn Underhill and the Catholics Friedrich von Hügel and Cuthbert Butler.

⁵ Watson (1999), p. 540.

never to require the twenty-first-century critic's general acquiescence or wholehearted agreement with the Christian beliefs to which a text such as the *Revelations of Love* adheres. To accept that, however flawed, there *was* a genuine belief in God in England in the later Middle Ages does not prohibit a comparative study of the complex relationship that can be shown to have existed between faith, politics and society.

In 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*'⁶ Watson argues persuasively that the accepted dates for Julian's composition of the Short and Long Texts of the *Revelation* ought to be reconsidered in the light of internal textual evidence that suggests an extraordinary awareness of the potential dangers of writing a work of 'vernacular theology' at a time when to do so was to expose oneself to the risk of accusations of, if not heresy itself, at least of a tendency to subvert the authority of the institution of the Church. Watson sees in the Short Text's concern with an orthodox belief in the place that images might have in Christian worship a desire to protect the work, and its emphasis upon a direct unmediated encounter through Christ with God, from possible charges of Lollardy:

Reflecting on her desire to see Christ's Passion with her bodily eyes, Julian states:

Me thought I wolde haue bene that tyme with Mary Mawdeleyne and with othere that were Crystes loverse, that I myght have sene bodylye the passion of oure lorde that he sufferede for me, that I myght have sufferede with hym as othere dyd that lovyd him – *notwithstandyng* that I levyd *sadlye alle the peynes of Cryste as halye kyrke schewys and techys, and also the payntyngys of crucyfexes that er made be the grace of God aftere the techyng* of haly kyrke to the lyknes of Crystes passyon, als farfurthe as man ys witte maye reche. *Nouztwithstondyng alle this trewe beleve, I desyrede a*

⁶ N. Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Speculum* 68 (1993), 637-83.

bodylye syght whereyn y myght have more knowynge of
bodelye paynes of oure lorde oure savyoure, and of the
compassion of oure ladye... (39.11-24, italics mine).

Other passages in this chapter seem designed to reassure readers of the spiritual propriety of Julian's attitudes before her vision, and the one italicised here is no exception, having apparently been written to indicate her orthodoxy.⁷

The explicit mention of the '*payntyngys of crucyfexes that er made be the grace of God aftere the techynge of haly kyrke to the lyknes of Crystes passyon*' reveals Julian's concern to present her private visions of Christ's Passion as an extension of orthodox – less exclusive although still grace-full – meditation upon a pictorial representation of Christ's agony on the Cross. It is thus important to recall that the catalyst for her visions would seem to have been the crucifix held before her fading eyes by a priest.⁸ She is careful to stress that she desires 'bodylye syght' of the Lord not because, Thomas-like, she doubted the '*trewelye beleve*' of Holy Church, but in order that she might understand more fully the suffering experienced by Jesus and His Mother at this time. Thus Julian effects a graceful conciliation of personal wishes and desires with the upholding of ecclesiastically sanctioned received truths. That this passage is not found in the Long Text is seen by Colledge and Walsh as a sign that, by the time this extended, revised account of Julian's visions was ready for public dissemination, Lollardy had been so effectively quashed by ecclesiastical and temporal

⁷ Watson (1993), p. 659.

⁸ Julian of Norwich, *A Book of Showings*, ed. E. Colledge and J. Walsh, 2 vols (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978). Julian writes, '[t]he persone sette the crosse before my face, and sayde: Dow3tter, I have brought the the ymage of thy savyoure; loke there oponn *and* comforthe the pere with in reverence of hym that dyede for the *and* me' (Short Text, vol. 1, p. 208, ll. 25-8). Later, she remarks of her experience at this time, 'Alle that was beside the crosse was huglye to me, as 3yf it hadde bene mykylle occupyede with fendys' (Short Text, vol 1, p. 209, ll. 36-7), a representation that draws attention to the complexity of Julian's vision. Her own awareness of the layers of meaning of her vision can be seen to inform her choice of words: not only does the actual crucifix that was held before her appear as a beacon, surrounded by darkness and hellish things, it acts as a pointer to the reality of Christ's Passion and the fact that no-one can hope to escape from the 'fendys' without putting all their trust in Him.

authorities that there was no need for Julian to declare her allegiance to Holy Church in such a public way.⁹ Ever aware of the socio-political and religious climate in which her work was composed, Julian is understood to be careful to ensure that a text which, as she repeatedly stresses, has been written by a ‘simple creature’ for the spiritual benefit of her ‘evene cristene’, will not fall foul of public censure.

To acknowledge this is not, according to Watson, to diminish in any way the sense that the *Revelation of Love*, especially the post-1388 Long Text, was a ‘deeply audacious revelation of all aspects of the relationship between the triune Godhead and humanity’.¹⁰ Indeed, in ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England’, published two years after his piece on the composition of the *Revelation of Love*, Watson posits the case that despite the not-insubstantial obstacles that faced Julian as a female visionary alive at a time of great political and religious upheaval (a time that marked a transition period from the great flowering of the production of works of vernacular theology in the latter half of the fourteenth-century to the more timid, derivative compositions of a post-Arundelian era), she produced a radical, anti-authoritarian text:

Julian addresses her book to all Christians and speaks of herself, not as an authoritative recipient of grace, but as a “simple creature that cowed no letter”... who, as such, can act as a representative for everyone... This gesture ameliorates suspicions that she is usurping a clerical role, but does so only by dissolving the hierarchic distinction between cleric and non-cleric on which the Oxford debate was based and substituting for it one between God and humankind in general... In the intricate logic of Julian’s *Revelation*, truth is...widely available... Despite its gesture of obedience to Holy Church, the *Revelation* is in clear opposition to the hierarchic model of Christian society developed by the Oxford conservatives and articulated in less theoretical terms in the Constitutions [of 1409].¹¹

⁹ Cited by Watson (1993), p. 660. Arguing for a new dating of Julian’s Short and Long Texts, Watson finds this an ‘unhelpful’ explanation.

¹⁰ Watson (1993), p. 672.

¹¹ Watson (1995), p. 851

This bold claim deserves closer examination. While the idea that 'the *Revelation* is in clear opposition to the hierarchic model of Christian society developed by the Oxford conservatives' is presented in a very positive light in this article (opposition to Arundel being seen perhaps as the only option for any religious writer of integrity) questions remain as to whether this *is* actually what the text might be said to do – indeed, *if* this is what Julian herself intended. By breaking down the perceived barriers understood to have existed between Latinate clergy and 'illiterate' laity, by speaking clearly and forcibly to all men and women of the universality and accessibility of God's love for His creatures, Julian, despite an ostensible bowing of the knee is, Watson argues, shown to rebel against the stifling, deeply restrictive mandates of the established Church. He argues that Thomas Arundel's aim was to ensure that 'Pecham's *minimum* necessary for the laity to know if they are to be saved has been redefined as the *maximum* they may hear, read, or even discuss',¹² and sees in Julian's work a rejection of religious orthodoxy: a refutation that manifests itself in a concern with an interiorised form of religious devotion (one not dissimilar from the *devotio moderna*, then sweeping across the Netherlands) and a determination to offer readers the opportunity to focus upon Christ, God and Mankind's relationship with the Trinity without unnecessary ecclesiastical intervention and mediation.

It is the contention of this thesis that Watson's approach is perhaps too exclusive in its over-privileging of the socio-political concerns that might naturally affect a work of reflective, devotional literature in any age. While studying texts in this way enables academics to contextualise works in a manner

¹² Watson (1995), p. 828. This is an idea which will be considered *passim* and at greater length in the next chapter which will focus upon *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and modern critical reactions to a text that enjoyed great popularity in the later Middle Ages.

that allows for a more informed understanding of them in relation to the times in which they were written, this need not be achieved at the expense of a proper consideration of the stated aims and intentions of the works themselves. Returning specifically to a discussion of the *Revelation of Love*, the question might be raised as to what extent the pursuit of an argument that seeks to posit Julian as a rebellious figure can be productive: whether, in fact, Julian's concern to be seen to conform with orthodox modes of thought might, aside from issues of self-preservation, also be because she herself did not seek to offer to her 'evene cristene' an alternative approach to salvation than that which was taught by an English Church actively engaged in the dissemination of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council. It might be conjectured that she hoped her own experiences, with their account of the suffering of Christ, and God's endless love for His creatures, might be of spiritual benefit to Everyman (himself of course an orthodox figure).

A clear example of the difference that critical approaches can make to the understanding of a work can be seen through the reconsideration of the forty-fifth chapter (Revelation XIV) of the Long Text of the *Revelation*. Ostensibly a chapter about God's right to judge His creatures ('God demyth vs vpon oure kyndely substance'¹³) Julian turns this topic into a celebration of God's 'owne high endlesse loue'. She explains her conviction that the two natures of Man, his 'kyndely substance' that is 'evyr kepte one in [God], hole and safe' and his 'channgeable sensualyte' which, in as much as it is 'hard and grevous' needs to receive the grace and forgiveness of God, will be 'acordyd and oonyd' even

¹³ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, p. 486, l. 1.

while each 'shall be knowen both in hevyn *without* ende'.¹⁴ In this chapter, Julian attempts to address issues that have been puzzling her, principally the seeming incompatibility of God's boundless love and forgiveness with the 'dome' of Holy Church that emphasises the need for men and women to acknowledge and lament their sins:

And therefore by this dome me thought that me behovyth nedys to know my selfe a sinner. And by the same dome I vnderstode / that sinners be sometyme worthy blame and wrath, and theyse two culde I nott see in god. And therefore my desyer was more than I can or may telle, for the higher dome god shewed hym selfe in the same tyme, and therfore (m)e behovyd nedys to take it. And the lower dome was lernyd me before tyme in holy chyrche, and therefore I myght nott by no weye leue the lower dome.

Then was thus my desyer, that I myght se in god in what manner that the dome of holy chyrch here in erth is tru in his syght, and howe it longyth to me verily to knowe it, where by they myght both be savyd, so as it ware wurschypfulle to god and ryght wey to me.¹⁵

In his reference to this passage and Julian's 'daring' treatment of theological concerns such as universalism, Watson writes:

...L's greatly expanded exposition of revelation 13 (chapters 27-40) owes much of its theological daring (especially its implied universalism) to the fact that Julian is preparing to ask openly, in the digression, how it is that the "heyer dome" of her revelation and the "lower dome" of the church's teaching on sin can both be true.¹⁶

Although there can be no gainsaying Watson's statement that Julian questions the seeming incompatibility of the two judgments, there is a certain inconsistency in his argument. It would seem that, in her posing of such a question, Watson represents Julian as challenging the authority of an institution that repeatedly places obstacles (for example, sin, charges of lack of compliance

¹⁴ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, pp. 486-9, *passim*. Julian's insistence upon the ultimate place in heaven for both body and soul is, in many ways, no more than a re-iteration of the closing lines of the Apostle's Creed. What makes her approach to salvation so distinctive is that she appears to use this faith not so much as to provide comfort for herself or her readers for their own sakes, but in order that she might draw yet more attention to the magnanimity of God and His all encompassing love for all Mankind and the entirety of each individual.

¹⁵ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, pp. 487-8, ll. 19-30.

¹⁶ Watson (1993), p. 677.

with rules and statutes, dependence upon ordained clergy) between each Christian and God. There is no suggestion from Watson that Julian’s desire to find an answer to her puzzlement starts from a premise that seeks to reconcile existing differences and reaffirm the indissoluble bonds that tie God, Man and Holy Church to each other through Christ; rather, it is proposed that, albeit obliquely, she is choosing to undermine ecclesiastical authority through the privileging of personal experience of divine love and grace against the oppressive and restrictive spiritual manifesto of Holy Church. A close examination of the content of chapter forty-five, however, does not produce conclusive evidence that this is necessarily the only plausible interpretation of Julian’s attitude towards religious orthodoxy.

It might be argued instead that Julian, aware of the importance to all Christians of her visions and equally conscious of the exceptional grace of God in allowing her to experience such things, is asking for the explanation of a seeming contradiction – not for the complete abandonment of a belief system that she has found to contain spiritual truths that are difficult to reconcile to each other (cf. *Pearl*). In her own words, she has asked that:

I myght se in god in what manner that the dome of holy chyrch here
in erth is tru in his syght, and howe it longyth to me verily to knowe
it.

This is a request that, in its concern with the essential, eternal truths upon which Holy Church is founded and her willingness ‘verily to knowe’ how to respect and respond to them, can be seen as a sign of Julian’s desire to reconcile those things that are apparently diametrically opposed to each other. Although her request does not receive as full an answer as Julian might have hoped for – she

writes, ‘I nee had no nother answeere but a mervelous example of a lorde and of a seruannt’¹⁷ – she accepts that:

For alle hevynly thynges and alle erthely thynges that long to hevyn be comprehendyd in theyse ij domys. And the more knowing and vnderstondyng by the gracious ledyng of the holy gost that we haue of these ij domes, the more we shalle see and knowe oure felynges. And evyr the more that we see them, the more kindly by grace we shall long to be fulfylld of endlesse joy and blysse, for we be made ther to.¹⁸

In her declaration that ‘alle hevynly thynges and alle erthely thynges that long to hevyn’ are to be understood from the standpoint of the truths embodied by the ‘ij domys’, Julian shows an awareness of the fact that the central tenets, the received truths, of Holy Church and the never-ending, unconditional love of God for His creatures ought to be seen as mutually compatible and, in ultimately coming from God Himself, as inherently good. The distinction between the ‘heyer dome’ of Julian’s ‘showings’ and the ‘lower dome’ of Church doctrine is not necessarily as simple and straightforwardly anti-establishment as Watson’s article seeks to make it appear. It could, in fact, gesture towards evidence that Julian’s text, despite its many dazzlingly original features, articulates an essentially mainstream orthodox religious sensibility. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, in the footnotes to their edition of *A Book of Showings*, compare Julian’s use of the terms ‘heyer’ and ‘lower’ in her thirteenth revelation to the opening passage of the thirtieth chapter of the Long Text which contains the following lines:

He gaue vnderstondyng of ij parties. That one party is oure saviour and oure saluacyon. Thys blessyd parte is opyn, clere, feyer and light and plentuousse, for alle mankynde that is of good wylle and that shall be is comprehendyd in this part. *Here to we be bounde of God and*

¹⁷ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, p. 488, ll. 31-2. Julian did not receive a straightforward answer to her question, more a parable-like exemplar.

¹⁸ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, p. 488-9, ll. 34-40.

*drawyn and connceylyd and lernyd inwardly by the / holy gost, and outward by holy chyrch in the same grace [italics mine].*¹⁹

It is the ‘same grace’ that informs both a private, inward binding of the soul to God through the secret workings of the Holy Ghost and the more public declarations of faith and commitment made by individuals under the guidance of Holy Church. Colledge and Walsh point out that ‘no more than “outward” and “inward” are “higher” and “lower” to be equiparated with modern usages implying “superior” and “inferior”’.²⁰ On the contrary, given Julian’s propensity for the promotion of what might best be described as an organic, cosmic harmony, they serve to reinforce the sense that, although it is often difficult to reconcile seemingly disparate aspects of Christianity, it is in failing to attempt to do so that there is a danger that the boundless love, grace and mercy of the Trinity are undermined or simply misunderstood.

In a later chapter of the *Revelation*, one that occurs after Julian’s account of the servant and his master, there is another consideration of the themes of love and sin. Here the greater, however incomplete, understanding of the workings of God brought about by that vision enable Julian to declare joyfully:

For we shalle verily see in hevyn *without ende þat* we haue grievously synned in this lyfe; and not *withstondyng* this we shalle verily see that we were nevyr hurt in his loue, nor we were nevyr the lesse of pryce in his syght. And by the assey of this falling we shalle haue an high and a mervelous knowing of loue in god *without ende*; for hard and mervelous is that loue which may nott nor wyll not be broken for trespas.²¹

Her understanding of the concept of *felix culpa* is not limited to a celebration of Adam’s fall from grace because the expulsion from Eden paved the way for the coming of Christ and His Blessed Mother, but, crucially, because the contrast

¹⁹ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, p. 414, ll. 1-7.

²⁰ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, footnote 23, p. 488.

²¹ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, p. 603, ll. 22-7.

between Man's state after the Fall and before his subsequent redemption by the Son of God (a situation that is applicable to each individual soul before it commits itself to Christ), serves to reinforce God's love for His creation: 'by the assey of this falling we shalle haue an high and a mervelous knowing of loue of god *without* ende'. Although all people will have 'grievously synned' during their life on earth, sin in no way diminishes God's love for Mankind. What it does do is prompt self-examination and an outpouring of love towards the Trinity for all aspects of its creation, redemption of, and continual concern with, humanity. In an early chapter of both the Short and Long Texts, Julian wrote of God's showing to her of the whole world as a 'little thing, the quantitie of an haselnott' which 'lasteth and ever shall, for god loueth it; and so hath all thing being by the loue of God'.²² Such an all-encompassing view of God's love, which, as has just been shown, can redeem the painful realities of sin, illustrates yet more clearly the aspects of Julian's spirituality that make it seem unlikely that, despite probable awareness of the restrictions placed upon her as a female mystic writing vernacular treatises at a difficult and dangerous time for the composition of such works, her *Revelation* actively seeks to turn its back upon the institution of Holy Church (an institution whose tutelage she acknowledges anyway as being an essential component of the foundation of her Christian faith).

It would seem that through linking Holy Church quite explicitly with Christ, Julian establishes a relationship between two discrete yet intimately concerned parties that makes it difficult to discern how she could, or would, ever encourage people to be as determinedly autonomous – in terms of inculcating a desire in her

²² Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, pp. 299-300, I. 9 & II. 15-16.

readers to overthrow the yoke of ecclesiastical hierarchy – in their spirituality as Watson has implied is the case. Even though it would be naïve to suppose that Julian was unaware of the difficulties that faced the established Church in the closing quarter of the fourteenth century, or that, with her manifest good sense,²³ she would have been blind to any noticeable misuses of ecclesiastical power, recognition of this does not provide grounds for linking her visions with a latent desire to turn her back upon all forms of ecclesiastical authority. Julian herself writes, as if in answer to this very question:

And nott *withstondyng* all this, I sawe and vnderstode in oure lordys menyng that we may nott in this lyfe kepe vs fro synne alle holy, in full clenesse as we shall be in hevyn. But we may wele by grace kepe vs fro the synnes which wolde lede vs to endlesse payne, as holy chyrch techyth vs, and eschewe veyall resonably vppe oure myght.²⁴

The teachings of the institution of Holy Church help, through the gift of grace, to steer the unwary away from those sins that ‘wolde lede vs to endlesse payne’. What is important here is Julian’s understanding that, because they are informed by grace, the tenets of the Church are seen as part of God’s plan for Mankind, as another opportunity for Him to demonstrate His love for each man and woman.

An equally telling aspect of Julian’s relationship with Holy Church is found in her repeated equating of this institution with Christ Himself:

The moder may geue her chylde sucke hyr mylke, but oure precious moder Jhesu, he may fede vs / wyth hym selfe, and doth full curtesly and full tendyrly *with* the blessyd sacrament, that is precious fode of very lyfe; and *with* all the swete sacraments he systeynyth vs full mercifully and graciously, and so ment he in theyse blessyd wordys, where he seyde: I it am that holy chyrch prechyth the and techyth the. That is to sey: All the helth and the lyfe of sacramentys, alle þe vertu

²³ Possibly the clearest example of this sensible nature is to be found, not in the *Revelation* itself, but in *The Book of Margery Kempe* where, amid pages of extreme religious ‘enthusiasm’, Julian’s calm voice rings out in Margery’s description of her visit to ‘an ankres... whych hyte Dame Ielyan’. Kempe, p. 42, ll. 8-9.

²⁴ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, pp. 550-1, ll. 56-60.

and þe grace of my worde, alle the goodnesse that is ordeynyd in holy chyrch to the, I it am.²⁵

By recording Christ's words to her, Julian anchors the authority of Holy Church firmly with the Son of God and thus, by extension, with God the Father. Her reference both to Him and to the sacrament of the Eucharist points towards an understanding of the importance of sacramental worship as instituted by the Church: Christ feeds the faithful with 'the blessyd sacrament, that is precious fode of very lyfe'. Given the nature of the *Revelation* as a whole – its concern with redemption, salvation and the eternal nature of divine love – it would not seem too far-fetched to suggest that Julian, recognising the sustaining and grace-giving qualities of the Eucharist (and indeed of all the sacraments), would not turn away from an institution that offered the opportunity to be 'fed' with such 'swete sacraments', especially as Christ Himself has unequivocally told her that 'alle the goodnesse that is ordeynyd in holy chyrch to the, I it am.'²⁶

The relationship between Christ and the sacraments of the Church is made clear at the very beginning of the *Revelation* when, having received the last rites, Julian resolutely sets her eyes upon the crucifix that the priest is holding up to her gaze. Later, she describes how she was unwilling to look up to heaven – turning her glance away from the crucifix – because, as she says to Christ, 'thou art my hevyn'.²⁷ Such a response, which might initially seem contrary to orthodox Christian thought, can also be read in a more complementary light. Julian's proper awareness of the fact that 'no man cometh unto the Father, but by

²⁵ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, pp. 596-7, ll. 30-7.

²⁶ If determined to find in Julian's work a more or less disguised antipathy towards the hierarchic establishment of Holy Church, it might be possible to discover it in the potentially slippery 'alle the goodnesse that is ordeynyd in holy chyrch', a phrase that could be taken to imply that there are aspects of Holy Church that, subject to the rule of Man, are less certainly divinely ordained and supported. Such considerations, although important in their own right, ought not to be allowed to distract too much attention away from what would appear to be Julian's real belief in the spiritual importance and pedagogic duties of Holy Church.

²⁷ Julian, Long Text, vol. 2, p. 371, l. 11.

me'²⁸ explains her reluctance to turn, or appear to turn, from Him, even if such a transferral was simply from the Son to the Father.²⁹

Julian writes as a woman who has already wholly given her heart to God. However, while it may appear clear to her readers that she does not necessarily require the *pastoralia* that offered more or less structured comfort, exhortations, guidance and hope to their readers, her character, or at least such of it as can be gleaned from her self-effacing prose, does not appear to be that of a woman who would have been dismissive of the diurnal rituals prescribed by Holy Church. Such a standpoint would, for example, be contrary to her clearly expounded belief in the bond that exists between Christ and His Church: to deny the latter would be to cut oneself off from the former. Despite the obvious expediencies of writing in a style that would not provoke the unwelcome attention or censure of ecclesiastical watchdogs, it does not seem likely that Julian included reference to Holy Church in her work merely as a sop. Instead, it can be seen that she follows in the tradition of writers such as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Richard Rolle, men whose texts, while intensely private and concerned with the spiritual growth of the individual soul, also assume (*The Cloud*) or actively encourage (Rolle's *Meditation B* and *Ego Dormio*) obedience to the received authority of the institution of Holy Church.

In *Ego Dormio*, Rolle explains his concept of the three degrees of spiritual love to his reader. The first of these degrees involves obedience to Holy Church:

²⁸ John 14. 6. Julian writes:

I had levyr a bene in that payne tulle domys say than haue come to hevyn other wyse than by hym. For I wyst wele that he that bounde me so sore, he shuld vnbynd me whan he wolde. (Long Text, vol. 2, p. 371, ll. 12-14)

²⁹ A more extreme example of this refusal, or perhaps even inability, to respond with the same love, warmth and trust to the more abstract figure of God the Father as opposed to His Son, Christ, can be found in *The Book of Margery Kempe* where Margery does not receive God's offer of marriage with the joy that might be expected since she prefers the more, to her, obvious (and, because more physical, more easily understandable) attractions of Christ. Kempe, p. 86, ll. 9-24.

The first degre of loue is when a man holdeth þe ten commandement³, and kepeth hym fro þe vij deedly synns, and is stabli in þe trouth of holy chirch...³⁰

Just as in *The Form of Living* Rolle has described how divine love is the root of all things, including the sacraments and that ‘[t]routh may be withouten loue, bot hit may nat helpe withouten hit’,³¹ here the ‘trouth’ of Holy Church is presented as being informed by the authority of God because of His love for Mankind. All men and women must strive to attain this degree of love because:

This degre of loue behoueth every man haue þat wil be saued, for no man may cum to heuyn bot he loue God and his neghbore.³²

While for Rolle and the intended recipient of his text there is an obvious desire to progress beyond a consideration of these rudiments of orthodox mediaeval Christianity, he does not suggest that obedience to the institution of Holy Church is an unnecessary irrelevance. Neither does he argue that its rites ought only to be performed perfunctorily, for the sake of being seen to conform to a dominant socio-political ecclesiastical status quo. Even in the midst of an extended meditation upon the Passion of Christ that works systematically through a series of pious similes (and is obviously intended for sustained private contemplation and meditation), Rolle reminds his reader of the spiritual support that the institution of the Church, through its doctrines and sacraments, offers the faithful:

And yit, lord, swet Ihesu, þy body is lyk to þe nette, for as a nette is ful of holys, so is þy body ful of woundes... Cache me, lord, in to þe nette of þy mercy þat is holy chirche, and kep me þat I neuyr brek out

³⁰R. Rolle, *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, ed. S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson (London: E.E.T.S., 1988), *Ego Dormio*, pp. 26-33, ll. 68-70. The second and third degrees of life are increasingly contemplative in nature.

³¹Rolle (1988), *The Form of Living*, pp. 1-25. Rolle notes in this treatise that:

Loue is a vertue þat is þe reghrest affeccioun of mannes soule. Trouth may be withouten loue, bot hit may nat helpe withouten hit. Loue is perfeccioun of letters, vertu of prophecie, froyt of trouth, heel of sacrement³, stabilynge of witte and conyng, riches of pouer men, lyf of deiynge men. (ll. 646-51)

³²Rolle (1988), *Ego Dormio*, ll. 72-3.

of þe bondis of charite. Cache me, swet Ihesu, in þe net of þy
 comaundementis, þat neuyr syn haue me | out of þe close of þy
 vertues. Pater noster. Aue, etcetera.³³

By describing Holy Church as the ‘nette of þy mercy’, Rolle re-affirms the bonds that exist between Christ and the Church that is both His bride and the constant witness to His earthly ministry and redemptive death. Rolle might also be thought to be alluding to Christ’s choosing of the fishermen Simon, Andrew and James to be His disciples and ‘fishers of men’ with his use of the image of the ‘nette’. His closing of each vernacular, affective and reflective section in *Meditation B* with an exhortation to pray in the familiar Latin words of the *Pater noster* and *Ave Maria* also implies a desire to link personal, meditatively-led devotions with the more formal, ecclesiastically supported petitions to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary that are so often referred to in texts such as *The Lay Folk’s Mass Book*.

In another work, *The Commandment*, Rolle exhorts his reader to search for Christ by turning his/her back upon worldly concerns and looking for Him in His Church:

So behoueth þe do if þou wil fynd hym: sek inwardly in trouth and hope and charity of holy chirche, castynge out al syn and hatynge hit in al þi hert, for þat holdeth hym fro þe and letteth þe þat þou may nat fynd hym.³⁴

Interestingly, the usual trio of faith, hope and love/charity has been replaced by that of ‘trouth and hope and charity of holy chirche’, the use of the word ‘trouth’ instead of faith suggesting that it is upon the ‘truthful’ foundations of Holy

³³ Rolle (1988), *Meditation B*, pp. 69-83, ll. 210-11 & 216-20.

³⁴ Rolle (1988), *The Commandment*, pp. 34-9, ll. 93-6.

Church that faith ought to be built.³⁵ That this is what Rolle believed also finds support in lines from *Meditation B* where he writes:

In bileue fest me to þe, swet Ihesu, þat neuer il lore ne errour ne heresy turne me fro my beleue; and graunt me, swete Ihesu, þat my beleue be in mesure, nat to large, belevynge þat shold nat be beleued, ne to strait, leuyng þat shold be beleued, and, swet, Ihesu, make me to beleue in to al þe sacre|mentes of holy chirche and al þe ordinaunces, and trist to God of my saluacioun.³⁶

In effect, as this extract shows, Rolle is inviting his reader to ask for help in being a good Christian while simultaneously showing where that help might be found: that is, in true, considered belief in Christ, in belief in Holy Church (and all its 'sacre|mentes' and 'ordinaunces') and, by extension, in a belief that God will have mercy upon the souls of the faithful departed.

After such an examination of his works, it seems unsurprising that Watson, in his chapter on 'The Middle English Mystics' for *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* should write that there is a 'real sense in which Rolle fits the pattern of conservatism and pragmatism which our model of English spirituality presupposes',³⁷ because it is possible to find in his writings a rather simplistic theological stance which works within an 'inherited doctrine of blessedness too conservative to contemplate a theory of union [with the Godhead]'.³⁸ Through his focussing upon the Passion of Christ and his foregrounding of the spiritual concepts of *fervor*, *dulcor* and *canor*, Rolle avoids theological abstruseness but can still be seen as a pioneer of extra-liturgical vernacular instruction in the first half of the fourteenth century. Less certainly

³⁵ A view of Holy Church that accords well with the tripartite definition established in the introduction to this thesis.

³⁶ Rolle (1988), *Meditation B*, ll. 97-102.

³⁷ Watson (1999), p. 549.

³⁸ Watson (1999), p. 549. In itself however, this inability to contemplate spiritual union with the Godhead might be seen, considering evidence from Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, as an example of the manner in which Rolle's works are also illustrative of a type of later mediaeval mainstream religious sensibility.

quantifiable is the extent to which, as Watson has claimed, Rolle sought to free his English-reading audiences from the restrictive, oppressive presence in their lives of Holy Church. In Rolle's insistence that, once sins have been forgiven, the Christian soul should move away from a focus upon contrition and penance towards an all encompassing consideration of the love of God, Watson sees an opportunity for the devout to turn their backs upon the received authority of Holy Church. He writes:

Yet there is also a sense in which the very breadth of [Rolle's] appeal has a tendency to bring out the radical potential latent in pastoral theology's pedagogical programme, which cannot but risk emancipating people from dependence on ecclesiastical structures by letting them take responsibility for their own souls.³⁹

While Watson talks of the 'radical potential' in Rolle's work which 'cannot but risk emancipating people from dependence on ecclesiastical structures', evidence from the texts themselves, as quoted above, suggests that Richard Rolle neither saw the institution of Holy Church as an oppressive organisation nor one from which people might need to be 'emancipated'. As he was writing before the use of the vernacular became heavily embroiled in controversy as a result of Wycliffe and the Lollard movement, it would seem possible to infer that Rolle's references to Holy Church are included because he believed that all men and women require and believe in the spiritual help and hope offered by such an organisation: Rolle presents the Church as the essential foundation of Christian knowledge and belief from which various greater or lesser athletic acts of meditation and contemplation might be undertaken.

It is perhaps unsurprising however that an institution perceived to be as elitist as the Church is also singled out for especial censure by Watson, since his

³⁹ Watson (1999), p. 549.

argument is centred upon a belief that the employment of the mother tongue by 'mystics' to address their audiences was born not simply out of practicality but as part of a radical and rebellious attempt at a 'wholesale democratizing of the spiritual life'.⁴⁰ Writing about Rolle's relationship with the Church, Watson offers the observation that:

Indeed, although Rolle is unimpeachably orthodox in his formal relation to the Church, it is hard to deny that this is his goal: to proclaim an ambitious spiritual attitude which belongs less to the ecclesiastical institution than to the desert, that inner space where the soul sits in solitude before God, a member not of the corrupt Church militant but of the triumphant Church singing before the throne in heaven.⁴¹

Rolle, Watson argues, while appearing 'unimpeachably orthodox', has actually turned his back on the 'corrupt Church militant' and, as a member of 'the triumphant Church' sings his songs of praise directly to God. Such an analysis, which is belied by the evidence of Rolle's works, fails to acknowledge that, in his quest to move his readers closer to God, Rolle actually builds upon, rather than rejects, the received authority of fourteenth-century orthodox Christian doctrine and practice.

Watson's discussion of the anonymously composed *Cloud of Unknowing* also deserves reassessment. Watson believes that the *Cloud* author thought 'his vernacular readers are *better* able to strip themselves naked for a direct encounter with God than the learned with their thick mental swaddlings of formal theology.'⁴² That the *Cloud*-author himself would have agreed unequivocally with this seems rather questionable. It assumes that he sought to pit his own work against the 'thick mental swaddlings of formal theology' sanctioned by the established Church. While it is true that the author does write of the individual's

⁴⁰ Watson (1999), p. 550.

⁴¹ Watson (1999), p. 550.

⁴² Watson (1999), p. 553.

need to lay aside a sense of selfhood and never cease from lifting up his/her heart ‘with a blynde steryng of loue’⁴³ that is stripped of the trappings of formal theology and religious practice, he also devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of Holy Church which implies that, far from rejecting the teachings of this institution, he sees it as a necessary ground of true Christian faith. It is towards those people who, through their learning, seek to turn away from the received authority of the Church that he sends a clear message of disapproval:

Somme þer ben þat, þof al þei be not disceyued wip þis errour as it is sette here, 3it for pride & corioste of kyndely witte & latterly kunnyng leuip þe comoun doctrine & þe counsel of Holy Chirche. & þees, with alle here fautours, lenyn ouermoche to þeire owne knowyng. & for þei were neuer grounded in þis meek blynde felyng & virtuous leuyng, þerfore þei | deserue to haue a fals felyng, feynid & wrouzt by þe goostly enmye; in so moche þat at þe last þei brestyn up & blasphemyn alle þe seyntes, sacraments, statutes & ordenaunces of Holy Chirche.⁴⁴

The idea that people might ‘lenyn ouermoche to þeire owne knowyng’ (confusing spiritual pride for mystical experience) is one that would appear to concern the *Cloud*-author and is thus one that places his text firmly within an orthodox tradition – a tradition that, while demanding obedience to certain fundamental tenets, *does* encourage personal spiritual growth.

Reaching the same conclusion as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, albeit having approached the same problems and concerns from a rather different standpoint, is the anonymous creator of *The Chastising of God’s Children*.⁴⁵ This text, written for a female religious between 1373 (after the death of Bridget of Sweden) and 1408 (before the official publication of Arundel’s Constitutions),

⁴³ *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, ed. P. Hodgson (London: E.E.T.S., 1944), p. 81, ll. 16-17.

⁴⁴ *Cloud* (1944), p. 104, ll. 4-12.

⁴⁵ *The Chastising of God’s Children and The Treatise of Perfection of the Sons of God*, ed. J. Bazire & E. Colledge (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957).

was, like the *Cloud*, copied and read by the laity in no small numbers.⁴⁶ A deeply conservative work, *The Chastising* is concerned with four major areas of theological and devotional concern that reflect a more practical, less obviously rarefied pedagogic attitude than that found in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Neatly summarised by Bazire and Colledge, they are:

- a) the recognition and combat of heresy, b) the repression of ‘enthusiasm’, c) the ‘discerning of spirits’ and d) the claims of the liturgy against private devotions.⁴⁷

What the author sets out to do in order to fulfil the tasks with which he has charged himself is to remind his readers repeatedly that they must ‘watch and pray’ (*vigilate et orate*) at all times, standing firm against both diabolic and heavenly temptations – the overarching, unifying theme of the entire book – and seeking spiritual comfort in the doctrines and practices of the Church. While he does not disallow the possibility that a soul might quite genuinely experience ‘*þe presence of oure lord iesu crist*’, it is clear that such an occurrence, if truly the work of God’s grace, will not be as a result of ‘her own merites’ – neither will it be in opposition to, or a replacement for, belief in and obedience to the dictates of the institution of Holy Church.⁴⁸

The eleventh chapter of *The Chastising* is devoted to an unambiguous account of the mistakenness of those who suppose that they can commune directly with God, without participating in or paying heed to any orthodox practices. It is prefaced by a synopsis that describes:

⁴⁶ *The Chastising*. The editors posit the theory that the text was probably composed shortly after 1382 (p. 37) and, later in their introduction, cite the existence of external evidence proving that, although written for a specific nun, *The Chastising* enjoyed an audience that stretched far beyond the convent walls of its original recipient. (p. 78) It is worth remembering, however, that, in its focus upon the daily round of services, the text is of more direct relevance and concern to religious than all but the most devout laity.

⁴⁷ *The Chastising*, p. 47.

⁴⁸ *The Chastising*, p. 105, l. 5 & 8. The whole of the third chapter (pp. 105-8) of *The Chastising of God’s Children* is concerned with this theme.

Hou sum oþer men wenen þat þei haue fredom of spirit, and þat þei bien ooned to god wiþoute any meane, wherfor þei seie bien bounde to no lawes of hooli chirche, and þei bien discharged of al maner wirchynges, and of al outward uertues.⁴⁹

Over the following pages, the reader is offered a more detailed account of the behaviour of those who feel ‘bounde to no lawes of hooli chirche’, those who hold themselves to be opposed to some of the fundamental tenets of the Church:

Many mo I miȝt shewe to make ȝou be war of hem, as of sum þat now holden plainli, / and nat ȝit opinli, but priueli for drede, aȝens confessions and fastynges, aȝens worshipping of ymages, and shortly, as men seien, aȝens al states and degrees and þe lawe and þe ordynunce of hooli chirche.⁵⁰

The unmistakable inference is that while those endorsing such a devotional stance might believe that ‘þei bien þe holiest men þat lyuen’,⁵¹ their certainty is misplaced because they are turning their backs upon those things that ought to provide the very foundation for their faith. As if to illustrate this point further, the author later uses his description of a ‘goode visioun of a soule’ to reinforce the idea that a genuine, private super- or extra-liturgical religious devotion to God and Christ can only really proceed from a knowledge of and credence in the foundational bedrock of faith provided by Holy Church:

Þe secunde tokene to knowe a goode visioun of a soule, þat he be nat disceyued, is whanne þat þe soule þat seep þat visioun felip hym fulfilled or rauyshed or chaufed and heet wiþ a goostli swetnesse or sauour in þe loue of God. Þis inward charite and / swetnesse of loue þe deuel may nat ȝiue, for no man ne deuel ȝeueþ nat þat he haþ nat, as I seide bifore. Þerfor in þis it may be soopli concluded þat it is (god) þat so wirchþ in a mans soule, and þanne namlli, if a mans soule be þanne strengþed in þe ful feip of hooli chirche, wiþ obedience and hooli mekenesse to þe heedis and ordynaunce of hooli chirche.⁵²

⁴⁹ *The Chastising*, p. 138, ll. 9-12.

⁵⁰ *The Chastising*, p. 145, ll. 4-8.

⁵¹ *The Chastising*, p. 139, l. 9.

⁵² *The Chastising*, p. 178, ll. 15-24.

Here the author shows a direct link between the 'inward charite and / swetnesse of loue' that is the result of a 'goode visioun' and 'obedience and hooli mekenesse to þe heedis and ordynaunce of hooli chirche', with the latter strengthening the soul and preparing it for the reception of such burning, divine love.

In accord with this, the most effective defences against 'wikid spirites' are highly orthodox, mainstream religious practices. The author writes:

Al- / so anoþer remedie is and special azens wikid spirites to þenke on þe passion of crist, wiþ crossing upon þe forhed and brest; and sum do principalli wiþ þe token of thau, and seien: In *nomine iesu signo me thau*. And wiþ oþer blissyngges sum seien a uerse that is in þe ympne *cultor dei memento*... Also þis hooli name *iesus*, whanne it is clepid to oure help, it is to us a gracious lizt to liztne us in derknesse of oure soule. It is also a mete fulfilling us wiþ grete goostli sauours, and it is medicine to us to heale al oure soores.⁵³

The singing of hymns and the ritual act of crossing oneself are both actions that involve the individual's connecting with an orthodox tradition of Christianity that, in cloister and private home, was continuing, despite the presence of Lollardy, to play an important part in religious devotional practices in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in England.⁵⁴ The extract quoted above certainly supports the belief that such gestures have a real spiritual power: they are a practical means by which every man or woman (lay or professed) can defend themselves against evil. The reference to thinking 'on þe passion of crist' and the more or less casual allusion in this passage to the cultic and increasingly

⁵³ *The Chastising*, p. 202, ll. 12-24.

⁵⁴ Brown, discussing the type of devotions that might take place in a private household in later mediaeval England also stresses the importance of not presuming that such occurrences automatically indicate the presence of heterodox thought:

In late medieval England, gatherings in private to absorb religious teaching are usually associated with Lollard heretics... but they were perhaps a wider phenomenon... The 'godly household' existed long before Puritanism, and by the later Middle Ages it existed across the social spectrum. (pp. 102-3)

popular later Middle Ages devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus⁵⁵ are also examples of how the development of extra-liturgical, private devotions were promoted in tandem with continued obedience to the received authority of the Church. Although, as will be discussed below, *The Chastising of God's Children* is a text that can seem unsympathetic to modern critical analysis (especially when compared with the warmth of Julian's prose, or even the stirring, lyrical quality of Rolle's works) because of its sustained foregrounding of the claims of liturgy in the devotional regime of the nun for whom it was written, it would be unhelpful and too simplistic to see the work's continuing references to the importance of the offices of Holy Church as evidence of the author's principal desire to maintain a religious status quo in which the majority of the populace – including the original, intended convent audience – are deliberately poorly educated about the workings of Christianity, and obedient to a largely incomprehensible round of daily Offices.

The author of *The Chastising of God's Children* states clearly that the recitation of Latin texts, however little understood, is of spiritual benefit and pleasing to God if undertaken with true humility, obedience and a genuine desire to serve Him:

If 3ee wil aske hou 3e shuln preie deuoutli in preer / whiche 3e vndirstonde nat, I answere 3ou þerto and seie þat for þe uertu of þe wordis and 3oure lownesse and obeisaunce to holi chirche, wiþ a feruent desire upward to god aftir 3oure entent, þou3 3e vndirstonde no word 3e seie, it may be to 3ou more medeful, and more acceptable

⁵⁵ Pfaff, in the conclusion to *New Liturgical Feasts* also believes that:

‘Spirituality’ is too often considered to be virtually synonymous with private devotion, and to be divorced from what goes on in church. If in the case of the Holy Name popular devotion (especially the devotion of that admittedly rather unrepresentative figure, the Lady Margaret) helped to bring about liturgical celebration, it is equally time that the various considerations of ecclesiastical politics responsible for observance of the Visitation led to a genuine enrichment of what may be regarded as the soundest type of Marian devotion... (p. 132)

to god þanne grete deuocioun þat 3e wene 3e haue in oþer preuy
deuociouns.⁵⁶

Here there is an obvious privileging of the corporate and liturgical over the personal and 'enthusiastic', and a sense that what is of the utmost importance is that those reciting the words in their service books are aware of their innate 'uertu' and utter them devoutly because they do possess a 'feruent desire' to communicate – and to experience communion with – God. At the heart of this extract, and indeed the text as a whole, is a concern with human trust in the Triune Godhead: how such trust is best expressed in religious devotion and how it can be maintained in the face of sometimes difficult, perhaps seemingly overwhelming, temptations. For the author of *The Chastising of God's Children*, this trust is to be made manifest by unquestioning obedience to the institution of the Church. His unhesitating directness in the promotion of this stance can, in its repeated insistence upon the claims of liturgical observation over more private, abstract devotions, make this work appear oppressive and dictatorial in manner. Compared with both *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* and *The Orchard of Syon*,⁵⁷ *The Chastising*, especially as a text understood to have been written before the enforcement of anti-heresy legislation made it advisable for all but the most well connected not to be seen to advocate vernacular access to Scripture or services, seems curiously, perhaps overly, concerned with articulating the need to remember that lack of comprehension of Latin services does not diminish the spiritual value of reciting them with genuine devotion in praise of God.

Nevertheless, while the author's lack of endorsement of the use of English translations with Latin service books reflects his desire to preserve the purity, as

⁵⁶ *The Chastising*, pp. 221-2, ll. 29-06.

⁵⁷ Both texts, which will be discussed in more detail over the following pages, were produced for the spiritual edification of the nuns of Syon Abbey.

he sees it, of the Latin rites, his willingness to write at some length, in English, about his beliefs and concerns suggests that he is not simply trying to suppress any religious autonomy in his original, intended audience. He can (albeit in a rather unyielding, heavy-handed manner) be seen to be hoping to urge his readers to adopt the practices he endorses because of their spiritual benefit. That he has written at all implies a willingness to engage with his readers on important spiritual issues. However prescriptive his work may be it is important to understand that he is writing for those who might be presumed already to possess a highly developed sense of their own spirituality and who might therefore be in need of the check that *The Chastising* could supply to possibly misguided acts of private religious devotion.⁵⁸ This understanding, in conjunction with the text’s obvious concern with the attainment of grace and salvation by its readers, helps to mitigate any sense that this work is primarily concerned with preserving spiritual ignorance and fostering uninformed dependence upon participation in the rites of Holy Church.

Ultimately, *The Chastising of God’s Children* is a work of devotional literature that, despite its best efforts, appears rather sombre and gloomy in tone because of its focus upon the temptations that face a human soul during its earthly life. The repeated instruction, ‘*vigilate et orate*’, intended no doubt to comfort and reassure (as well as being a spiritual alarm call), also reinforces a sense of spiritual isolation and vulnerability in the reader that is perhaps not addressed adequately by referral to the benefits of attendance at the various divine offices of the day. This is an area that is handled more openly and, as a

⁵⁸ As Bazire and Colledge point out in their introduction to *The Chastising*, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* makes precisely the same point in the fifty-sixth chapter of his work, a chapter which sees him ‘inveighing against those who claim the private inspiration of the Holy Spirit as their authority for setting aside the law of the Church’. (p.53)

result, with better effect, in *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*. This work, also written for a religious audience, offers a rather different approach to orthodox devotion from *The Chastising*. While the prologue of *The Myroure* recognises that the sisters ‘ought to be doughtres of commaundement by meke & redy obedience to the byddynges of god, and of youre reule’,⁵⁹ it also judges that it is not possible to expect the nuns to fulfil their vows properly if they do not understand exactly what it is that they are doing, and why their actions are of such spiritual importance for them and those for whom they pray:

How shall ye then condewly shewe by outwarde praysyng the excellent hyghnes and worthynes of the moste blyssed heuenly quene, oure reuerente lady, as yt is full fayre expressed in al youre holy seruyce: but yf ye haue fyrste sight therof by inwarde vnderstandinge.⁶⁰

What follows is an attempt to reconcile aspects of religious devotion that, if not quite divorced, are perceived not to work as closely in tandem with each other as they ought in order to be as spiritually efficacious as possible. Unsurprisingly, given that *The Myroure* was written for an order of sisters who were associated closely with the overtly devout and decidedly orthodox Lancastrian monarchy (Syon Abbey had been founded by Henry V), this rapprochement will be seen to involve the encouragement of a greater understanding of the orthodox liturgical *status quo* rather than any decisive break with tradition.⁶¹

The fostering of ‘inwarde vnderstandinge’ is to be achieved by increasing the sisters’ knowledge and understanding of ‘holy seruyce’ rather than by any alteration to the services themselves. They – the services – are acknowledged to

⁵⁹ *The Myroure*, p. 2, ll. 4-6.

⁶⁰ *The Myroure*, p. 2, ll. 25-9.

⁶¹ It is necessary however, to remember the special, privileged position occupied by the well connected, royally protected nuns of Syon Abbey *vis à vis* their ownership of texts that, if found in the possession of others, could lead to accusations of heresy. The author makes specific reference to the possible use of vernacular Bibles for the reading of psalms ‘if ye haue lysence therto’. *The Myroure*, p. 3.

be the ideal medium through which devotion to the Blessed Virgin might be ‘full fayre expressed’ and, as in *The Chastising of God’s Children*, there is no suggestion that they are anything other than an essential part of the spiritual duties of a religious sister. What *The Myroure* aims to do is to deepen the individual’s spiritual responses to the daily round of divine services by enabling her to follow them with greater understanding and thus gain greater spiritual benefit from them. This text is a religious, as opposed to lay, version of the *pastoralia* with which the early sections of this thesis were concerned. Writing for a readership for whom the fundamental tenets of orthodox Christianity were, presumably, so well known and understood as to need no mention, *The Myroure* concentrates instead upon explaining the services:

But forasmoche as many of you, though ye can singe and rede, yet ye can not se what the meanyng ys : therefore to the onely worship and praynsyng of oure lorde Iesu chryste and of hys moste mercyfull mother oure lady and to the gostly comferte and profyte of youre soules I haue drawn youre legende and all youre seruyce in to Englyshe, that ye shulde se by the vnderstondyng therof, how worthy and holy praynsyng of oure glorious Lady is contente therin, & the more deuoutely and knowingly singe yt & rede yt and say yt to her worship. ¶ And in many places where the nakyd letter is thoughe yt be set in englyshe, ys not easy for some simple soules to vnderstonde; I expounde yt and declare yt more openly, other before the letter, or after or else fourthewyth together.⁶²

Whereas in the more cautious *Chastising* the reader is urged to accept the importance of reciting the various services devoutly even if she does not understand the exact substance of what it is that is being said, here great emphasis is placed upon ‘the vnderstondyng’ of the services and the open explanation of more difficult concepts: ‘I expounde yt and declare yt more openly’. If *The Myroure* as a whole can not be taken as a representative example of a prevalent attitude towards the level of understanding of the liturgy that

⁶² *The Myroure*, p. 2, ll. 29-35 & p. 3, ll. 1-8.

might be expected of a lay (if primarily religious) congregation, it does at least serve as an illustration of the existence at this time of an orthodox religious sensibility that sought – while not aiming to break down a highly developed ecclesiastical framework – to show how it was possible to use and develop the existing status quo for the ‘gostly comferte and profyte of... soules’. Once more, through this text, it is possible to see a clear example of a mediaeval preoccupation with making plain the ability of the rites and liturgies of the institution of the Church to be of personal spiritual benefit to *all* who attended them.

Even *The Orchard of Syon*, a deeply meditative text based upon the *Dialogue* of Katherine of Siena, contains a recognition that there is a spiritual efficacy in the devout attendance at and participation in the Divine Service to which the sisters are bound by vows of obedience (in itself a manifestation of the individual’s personal desire to serve God) to take heed. Dom James’ translation of the Italian work retains Katherine’s account of how a soul ought to respond to a ‘special visitacioun’ from God by putting aside whatever form of ‘vocal preyer’ with which she might have been concerned:

But anoon as sche perceyueþ her soule touched wiþ my special visitacioun, sche schulde leue vocal preyer and turne þerto.⁶³

As this sentence makes clear, if it is apparent that a soul is being stirred with devotion that comes directly from God Himself, then it is appropriate for that soul to withdraw into itself and that ‘special visitacioun’. Nevertheless, such an experience, however valuable in itself, is not to be considered as a valid reason for neglecting or omitting to fulfil one’s duties with regard to ‘vocal preyer’, since it is through this repetitive, perhaps seemingly mundane medium, that a

⁶³*The Orchard of Syon*, ed. P. Hodgson & G. Liegey (London: E.E.T.S., 1966), p. 150, ll. 8-9.

soul is brought ‘to perfeccioun’. The reader is to be made to understand that office prayers are an integral and vital part of religious life:

And whanne mentale visitacioun is wiþdrawe, þanne to turne azein to vocale preyer if sche wil, and make an eende of siche psalms and pater noster þat sche purposide for to seye. And if sche haue no tyme, sche schulde not charge it ne be heuy þerfore in soule, but if it be dyuyne seruice, the whiche boþe clerkis and religiouse ben bownde for to seye. And if þei seye it not, þei offende, for vnto þe eende of her deef þei ben bownde þerto, if þei ben in hele. & if þei weren touched by special visitacioun in dewe tymes and houris whanne þei schulden seye her dyuyne seruise, þei schulden purueye anopir tyme, ouþir afore or aftir, for to seye her dyuyn seruise, so þat it be not left vnseid þat schulde be seid of dewte.⁶⁴

Here a distinction is even made between extra-liturgical ‘vocal’ acts of devotion that take the form of the private recitation of the Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer and the saying aloud of these same words as part of ‘dyuyne seruice’ which ‘boþe clerkis and religiouse ben bownde for to seye’. The categorical statement of belief that ‘þei offende’ God who do not fulfil this duty grounds *The Orchard of Syon* in a tradition of orthodox spirituality that values the rites and rituals of the institution of Holy Church at the same time as it encourages the individual to develop a personal, extra-liturgical relationship with God and His Son.

Thus, if it is a ‘dewte’ to say ‘dyuyn seruise’, it is also an obligation that should be discharged with a true sense of Christian devotion (one that would even satisfy the rather exacting author of *The Chastising of God’s Children*) because it is a necessary part of the individual’s approach to a deeper, less liturgy-centred, albeit liturgically-grounded, love and understanding of God:

Sich vocale praier, yseid as it is afore rehersed, bryngeþ a soule to perfeccioun, and þerfore vocale preyer schulde not be left. And þanne wiþ exercise and perseueraunce, þe swetnes of preier schal be taastid in truþe, and also þe blessed goostly mete of þe body of my soopfast sone, as it is rehersed.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Orchard*, p. 150, ll. 9-20.

⁶⁵ *Orchard*, p. 150, ll. 21-5.

What is particularly worthy of note about this extract is the author’s use of the word ‘rehersid’/‘rehersyd’ to reinforce the point that is being made about the necessity and spiritual efficacy of ‘vocale praier’. Not only has this point of view been ‘rehersid’ in that the importance of this mode of devotion has already been divulged and explained but, by so doing, justification is given for the continued ‘rehearsal’ of such prayers in the shape of their regular, formal and devout recitation.⁶⁶ Through perseverance in the recitation of such spiritual exercises an individual soul can, according to the words of this text, be brought to a state of ‘perfeccioun’ and a fit condition to taste the spiritual ‘truþe’ of God’s redeeming love. Importantly, this elevated state of spiritual enlightenment is presented as an organic offshoot from the discipline of ‘vocale praier’, with the result that those fortunate enough to experience such a close encounter with divine grace ought to be more inclined than before to fulfil their devotional obligations. In a far more sophisticated – perhaps because less overtly pedagogic and liturgical – manner than *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* and certainly than the rather restricting *The Chastising of God’s Children*, *The Orchard of Syon* endeavours to place its emphasis upon pious reflection and personal spiritual development firmly within an orthodox framework that acknowledges the importance and benefits of the rites and doctrines of the institution of Holy Church. Even in a text concerned predominantly with the cultivation of a personal and private religious sensibility, it is possible to see a commitment to the approved status quo that recognises the importance of ‘vocale praier’ and articulates an appreciation of the worth of orthodox religious practices. The above quotation is a clear illustration of the

⁶⁶ The *M.E.D.* defines the verb ‘rehearsen’ in several ways, including ‘[t]o impart (information), teach (sth.), explain, point out’, ‘[t]o repeat... reiterate; also, reveal (a secret), repeat, divulge; (b) to recall (sth.), hark back to’ and, importantly, ‘[t]o recite (prayers, items in an agreement, etc.); read out (a formal petition, a lesson or lection); declare (sth.) formally’.

author’s desire to show how the deeply personal experience of God and His Son that is the desire of all devout souls is one that will be effected not by the rejection of the celebration of daily services or the sacraments, but through the exploitation of the opportunity that they provide to draw nearer to Him.

Both the devotional and meditative texts that barely refer to the diurnal rites and practices of the established Church and the books written for sisters that focus so extensively upon the individual’s responsibility to attend to one’s Office Duties with real devotion, despite their numerous divergences, articulate an orthodox approach to Christian worship in the later Middle Ages. Their differences of approach and content do not, ultimately detract from the fact that, in each instance, the reader is presented with a text that aims to foster the individual’s desire to form an intimate spiritual relationship with God at the same time as it supports and reinforces a belief in the spiritual necessity and efficacy of the institution of the Church. The following chapter will continue to focus upon the literary articulation of an orthodox interpretation of the best – or perhaps, more accurately, the most appropriate – relationship that a reader ought to foster between him/herself, Holy Church and God. Moving firmly back to the consideration of a text that was composed specifically for lay consumption, as opposed to one written for religious that also enjoyed circulation amongst the laity, the next chapter will offer a critical re-evaluation of Nicholas Love’s *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. Although not concerned with the recitation of divine Offices, nor with the more abstract reaches of mystic contemplation of the Godhead, Love’s text is linked to these works by its explicit anchoring of personal meditative and imaginative religious experiences in a fundamental belief in the central tenets of Holy Church.

CHAPTER VII

HONEST NOURISHMENT FOR THE SOUL OR AN EXAMPLE OF
ORTHODOX OPPRESSION OF LAY RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY? A
CRITICAL RECONSIDERATION OF NICHOLAS LOVE'S *THE MIRROR OF
THE BLESSED LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST*

‘...childryn hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of lyzte doctrine & not with
sadde mete of grete clargye & of h[ye] contemplacion.’

(The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ)

In contrast to the preceding chapters, which have used a range of texts to illustrate and substantiate the argument they advance, the following pages will focus exclusively on an analysis of one of the most important and influential vernacular works produced in England in the early fifteenth century. In his introduction to the latest edition of this work Michael Sargent describes it as

the most important literary version of the life of Christ in English before modern times. In fact, to judge by the number of surviving manuscripts and early prints, it was one of the most well-read books in late-medieval England... On the other hand, the *Mirror* identified itself so well with pre-Reformation religious values that since that time, it has nearly disappeared from sight.¹

Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* is a translation, with some additions and amendments, of Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.² In certain manuscripts, the text is accompanied by a memorandum by the ultra-conservative Archbishop Arundel that sanctions the dissemination of this work ‘*ad fidelium edificacionem, & hereticorum siue lollardorum confutationem*’³ This has led to it being considered by some modern academics less as a work of devotional literature that exists in its own right as a spiritual aid for its readers and more as an example of fifteenth-century ecclesiastical propaganda whose primary interest lies in its illustration of an uncompromising

¹ Love (2004), p. ix.

² Love (2004), p. ix.

³ ‘For the edification of the faithful and the confutation of Lollard heretics’. Love (2004), p. 7, ll. 19-20.

orthodox response to the threat of heterodoxy. This is an approach to the understanding of this text that will be challenged in this chapter. Textual evidence from *The Mirror* will be used to support the argument that it is actually a work which is part of an established, if loosely definable, tradition of Middle English devotional texts that articulates a complex, orthodox religious sensibility. Its expression of an obvious respect for the authority of the institution of Holy Church, balanced by a correspondingly fiercely anti-heretical stance and defence of the sacraments, especially that of the Eucharist, will be shown to belong to an organic tradition of lay and clerical spirituality that deserves (alongside a consideration of the text's inevitable involvement with socio-political and religious problems that were at the root of religious unrest in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries) independent critical recognition.

The Mirror opens with a *Proem* in which Love explains to his readers what he has set out to do in this work. Describing how it is that men and women shall be kept from sin and wickedness by following the good example, in word and deed, set by the Son of God and recorded for humanity's benefit in Scripture and, later, in the devout compositions of holy men, he discusses the relevance of his work for all men and women:

Wherefore nowe boþe men & women & euery Age & euery dignite of
this worlde is stirid to hope of euery lastyng lyfe. And for þis hope &
to þis entent wiþ holi writte also bene wryten diuerse bokes & trettes
of | devoute men not onelich to clerkes in latyne, but also in Englyshe
to lewde men & women & hem þat bene of simple vndirstondyng.⁴

This passage articulates Love's belief in the universality of the message of hope and consolation offered by Christian texts, a sense that has already been firmly established by the Biblical quotation from Romans with which the *Proem* opens,

⁴ Love (2004), p. 10.

'Quecumque scripta sunt ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt vt per pacienciam & consolacionem scripturar[um] spem habeamus'.⁵ Everyman can be 'stirid to hope of euery lastyng lyfe' through the study of a work which, even if its authority is at one remove from that of the Scriptures themselves (and even if, ironically, one reason for its composition has been to forestall lay demands for access to a vernacular Bible), still teaches the principal tenets of medieval Christian faith, thus offering its readers an opportunity, through extended affective meditation and 'devout imaginings', to grow spiritually and thus move closer to Christ, their Redeemer. While there may be some modern critical objections to *The Mirror's* seeming barracking of any lay, vernacular access to levels of more abstract, God-centred theological musings – a charge levelled against Love because he urges his readers to accept, without question, that the doctrines of the Church are true – it is important to remember that Love's work does, positively, seek to broaden the spiritual experience and deepen the faith of those who encounter it. Although he encourages his readers not to question those things that he presents as unimpeachable truths, there is a flexibility to his work that is often overlooked or even denied. A good example of this latitude is found in his referral of men and women who wish to lead a more contemplative life to the works of Walter Hilton:

who so wole more pleynly [be] enfourmed & tauht in english tonge. lette him loke þe tretees þat þe worþi clerk & holi lyuere Maister Walter Hilton þe Chanon of Thurgarton wrote in english by grete grace & hye discrecion. & he schal fynde þere as I leue a sufficient scole & a trew of alle þees.⁶

⁵ Love (2004), p. 9. Romans 15. 4, the translation of which reads 'For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope'.

⁶ Love (2004), p. 122, ll. 38-42.

While still orthodox themselves, Hilton's *Mixed Life* and *The Scale of Perfection* are works that place heavy devotional obligations upon their readers and encourage them to develop a complex, interiorised spirituality through recourse to obedience to Holy Church, private prayers and personal considerations of what constitutes a good Christian life. By referring his readers to such texts, Love hardly seems to be trying to limit and control the spiritual growth of his readers.

This, however, is exactly the opinion advanced by Nicholas Watson in 'Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God'.⁷ Watson's objections to *The Mirror* are centred upon his perception that Love, in accordance with the wishes of Archbishop Thomas Arundel, has written a work that is oppressive and patronising in its insistence that the proper contemplation for the laity is the *human* nature of Christ and not any type of reflection upon His status as the Son of God, or indeed any more abstract consideration of His divinity. Offering his own interpretation of Love's attitude towards his readers, Watson posits the case that the Carthusian sets out his belief in the *Proem* that:

Simple people need 'mylke of lyghte doctryne', not 'sadde mete of grete clargye and of hye contemplation' such as is offered by direct exposure to Scripture. For them, contemplation of Christ's human nature, not his divine one, is 'more liking, more spedefull and more sykere', for such people are incapable of abstraction or reflection on spiritual, not carnal, truths...⁸

It is clear even from the few words he uses to describe his understanding of Love's position *vis à vis* his readers, 'such people are incapable of abstraction or reflection on spiritual, not carnal, truths', that Watson has cast Love in the role of keeper of a religious orthodoxy and, by implication, an ecclesiastical hierarchy that, it has been the aim of this thesis to illustrate, literature from this

⁷ Watson (1997).

⁸ Watson (1997), pp. 94-5.

time repeatedly shows did not exist in so absolute a form. Watson presents Love as a man conscious of his own power, as one aware of the authority vested in him by virtue of his holding the office of priest, but hardly credits him with any knowledge or understanding of the very real spiritual obligations of which an educated and devout man might reasonably (especially in the light of textual evidence considered in Chapters I and II) be expected to have knowledge. Watson also presents Love as a man who, far from seeking to nourish God's children in order for them to grow and develop, aims to stop their questioning mouths and stultify their minds with pap:

Love presents his *Mirror* not only as a means of spiritual and intellectual education but as a bastion *against* such education. To learn its lesson, the reader must emulate the passivity of the infant, receiving nourishment from a clerical writer who retains full control over what he dispenses and how he dispenses it.⁹

According to this description, not only does Love retain 'full control over what he dispenses and how he dispenses it', he also insists that his readers ingest the contents of his work unquestioningly. The implication behind the phrase 'not only as a means of spiritual and intellectual education but as a bastion *against* such education' is that *The Mirror* has been designed as a model to be learned, giving the lay readers the illusion that their reading has enriched them spiritually whilst actually reinforcing their dependence upon the Church and the services offered by religious such as Love himself. In addition to the logical impossibility of Love ever succeeding in retaining 'full control' over the content and reception of his text, this seems a rather extraordinary claim to make about a work that, following a Franciscan tradition, actively encourages its readers to imagine themselves present at many of the most important episodes in Jesus' earthly life

⁹ Watson (1997), p. 95.

(especially His birth, His ministry and His Passion) and offers advice as to how such devout imaginings might help increase the reader's understanding of Christ or Mary – how all their actions were informed by a desire to love and serve God – or how a consideration of a particular scene might affect an individual's conduct in daily life, his or her relationship with other people and an increased awareness of the demands and obligations of living a devout life.

A good, contained, example of this occurs in the section concerned with Christ's Nativity. Here, a beautiful, if apocryphal, account of the virgin birth, Mary's love for her child and the desire of the animals in the stable to warm Him with their breath, leads to an expression of the belief that

we most wiþ him & wiþ his modere loue.´ poverte, mekenes & bodily penance os he gaf vs ensaumple of alle þese here in [h]is birþe & first comyng in to þis world.¹⁰

Such a scene, which explicitly and unmistakably presents Christ's life as a pattern to be used as a day to day guide by Everyman – it was with 'poverte, mekenes & bodily penance os he gaf vs ensaumple' – reinforces a direct link between events that occurred in Holy Land (and were recorded in Holy Scripture) and the lives of the men and women who first looked at a copy of Love's manuscript or heard it read to them.¹¹ Love's text points its readers towards a *modus vivendi* that requires a whole-hearted commitment to live a life that follows in the footsteps of Christ. Such a life, while involving belief in and obedience to the doctrines and practices of Holy Church, is one that cannot be reduced to a level of passive response to ecclesiastical dictates because it involves making a conscious decision to live according to the example offered

¹⁰ Love (2004), p. 39, ll. 7-10.

¹¹ Cf. Despres' interpretation of mediaeval devotional texts which is premised upon their articulation of a central strand of Franciscan spirituality that encourages active participation in the meditative experience of the life of Christ. Despres, *passim*.

by Christ. It is thus hard to square this evidence with Watson's view that 'the reader must emulate the passivity of the infant' when reading *The Mirror* since, as such an example from the work suggests, Love might reasonably have been supposed to encourage the very opposite in responses from readers of his text.

Returning once more to a consideration of the very beginning of *The Mirror*, it is possible to find in Love's writing an absolute statement about the spiritual benefits that his book has to offer the devout reader:

Lo here grete comfort & gostly profite in deuoute contemplacion
of cristes blessedde lif.

Wherefore þou þar coueytest to fele treuly þe fruyt of þis boke.´
þou most with all þi þought & alle þin entent, in þat manere make þe
in þi soule present to þoo þinges þat bene here written seyð or done of
oure lord Jesu, & þat bisily, likyngly & abydyngly, as þei þou hardest
hem with þi bodily eres, or sey þaim with þin eyen don.´ puttynge
away for þe tyme, & leuyng alle oþer occupacions & bisynesses.¹²

Here Love states quite clearly that the result of the 'deuoute contemplacion' of Christ's life will be 'grete comfort and gostly profite', something that Watson all but denies that *The Mirror* can offer its readers. This extract speaks of the need for those who seek 'comfort & gostly profite' to participate actively in the devotional exercises with which a careful reading of *The Mirror* presents them. It is with 'all þi þought & alle þin entent' that each person is to put aside the selfish concerns of fallen humanity in order to concentrate upon experiencing various events in Christ's life, 'as þei þou hardest hem with þi bodily eres, or sey þaim with þin eyen don'. Only by such efforts will it be possible to see how much Christ loved and still loves humanity and how it behoves all men and women to be aware of His self-sacrificing, redemptive love and to respond to it as best they can.

¹² Love (2004), p. 12, ll. 38-42 & p. 13, ll. 1-5.

Examined from this standpoint, *The Mirror* can be seen to be a work that depends for its spiritual effectiveness upon a robust, interactive response from readers with a real desire to obtain salvation for their immortal soul, and a genuine faith in Christ as the One by Whom they might be redeemed. It is certainly a text that cautions its readers against valuing external participation in the ‘obseruance & customes’ of the institution of Holy Church at the expense, or even in place, of a true commitment to God and the teachings of the Church Fathers:

Neuerles honeste & bodily clenness is gude, so þat it dispose not to veyn glorye or curiosite, or lechery or opere synnes, & so bene gude customes þat bene grondet vpon reson fort be kept, bot þe biddynges of god & þe ordynance of souereynes in holi chirch, bene muche more fort charge. Wherefor in þis point errene many cristien men & specialy religiouse, þat chargen more bodily obseruance & customes, þouh þei dispose to no virtue, & oft bene aʒeynus reson.¹³

As discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis, textual evidence reinforces the view that the outward observance of orthodox religious beliefs and practices can only be spiritually efficacious if more tangible evidence of devotion (such as the undertaking of a penance or the giving of alms) is accompanied by a genuine, personal commitment to undertake such a task out of love for God. Love frames this articulation of a need for outward acts of piety to be matched by interior devotion with an account of Christ’s rebuking of the self-satisfied Pharisees who cared more about ‘washing withoutforþe & bodily clenness.’ þen vertuese of þe soule withinforþ & gostly clenness’.¹⁴ By so doing, he reminds his readers that it is Christ whose laws they will be breaking if they allow themselves to succumb to ‘veyn glorye or curiosite’. This episode is also a clear illustration of how to be a Christian is to respond actively and appropriately to God’s commandment

¹³ Love (2004), p. 110, ll. 39-42 & p. 111, ll. 1-4.

¹⁴ Love (2004), p. 109, ll. 20-1.

‘touching charite, mekenes, pacience, deuoucion in praiere, discrete abstinence & opere vertues.’

Certainly there is little that is ‘passive’ in the modern, more derogatory¹⁵ sense of the word in this fifteenth-century account of what ought to constitute the behaviour and attitudes of a truly committed Christian in the later Middle Ages. If the reader of *The Mirror* is expected to respond passively to Nicholas Love’s text, then he or she is passive in the same way that Christ behaved passively when He allowed Himself to be apprehended and falsely condemned to death. The essence of Christ’s passivity lies in the conscious decision He made to suffer pain and death on behalf of humanity. Through actively seeking to bear in their daily lives, for love of Christ, the heavy load of ‘charite, mekenes, pacience, deuoucion in praiere’,¹⁶ a layman or woman undertakes to lead a ‘passive’ existence that is far from spiritually poor or overwhelmed by the continuous, interfering presence of an oppressive Church. While *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* does demand a passive response from its readers, it is a passivity that calls for courage and conviction in prayer and daily life and, in obedience to the received authority of the established Church, the active subjugation of human will, not a feeling that all spiritual responsibility can be safely abrogated to the Church. Explicit delivery of this message occurs, amongst other places, in a passage in the section of *The Mirror*, intended to be read on a Thursday, which recounts the four times that Jesus wept when He was

¹⁵ Despite its etymological links to the Latin verb *patior* (to suffer, bear) the modern word ‘passive’ seems, increasingly, to have come to imply a certain weakness of character – think, for example of the very negative connotations of the term passive in the term ‘passive-aggressive’ – or, at least, gesture towards an individual’s inability to defend his or her rights effectively. This understanding contrasts sharply with a mediaeval understanding of Christ’s passive acceptance of His arrest and subsequent execution as described in many lyrics and, famously in *Piers Plowman*, which makes use of the Latin tag ‘*pacientes vincunt*’. Langland, *Passus XV*, l. 597.

¹⁶ Love (2004), p. 111, ll. 5-6.

on earth. The reader learns that the last time Christ wept was during His Passion when ‘he wept þe gret trespasse & malice of man’ because He knew that, while His self-sacrifice was sufficient for the redemption of all men and women, only those who turned to Him with a contrite heart could, in fact, hope for the forgiveness of their sins and the salvation of their soul:

For he sauh þat his passion was sufficient for redempcion of alle men, bot neuerlese it toke not effecte of profite in alle, for not in repropuede & harde hertes & obstinate to do penance [*] þat wole not forþinke & amende hem of hir sinnes.¹⁷

It is through the amendment of ‘harde hertes’ – the sinner’s understanding of and repentance for all that he or she has done that is contrary to the will of God – that men and women might receive, through grace, forgiveness and redemption.¹⁸ As discussed at length in Chapter II, there are many examples of Middle English literature that articulated an understanding of the sacrament of penance that recognised that it could only be spiritually effective if, at its heart, lay a deeply private interaction between the soul of the penitent and God. By including this episode in *The Mirror*, Love is able to satisfy the demands of a figure such as Arundel, who could see in Christ’s calling of the sinful to ‘do penance’ an upholding of the received authority of the sacraments of the fifteenth-century Church. Love offers his audience/readership the opportunity to engage with Christ on a level that transcends historical time and, if far from discounting or rejecting the doctrines and tenets of the Church, establishes quite clearly the necessity for a personal extra-liturgical, extra-sacramental commitment to Christ

¹⁷ Love (2004), p. 140, ll. 19-22.

¹⁸ Despres, writing specifically about *Piers Plowman*, but recognising the more general application of her words to Franciscan *vitae Christi*, observes that:

The dreamer [or reader] must envision, and hence experience or participate in, these [Gospel] scenes to attain the grace necessary for his conversion. Most important of all, he must feel the shame and sorrow of the Crucifixion for which he is personally responsible on account of his sin. (p. 141)

– and the living of a Christian life – to lie at the centre of the faith of each man and woman.

The Mirror is a text that uses the opportunities provided by the meditative episodes that form its backbone to link institutional religious practice and private acts of devotion in a complementary, mutually beneficial manner. Centring his discussion upon, for example, an account of Christ's Epiphany, Love uses his exposition (and embellishment) of an event from Scripture to reinforce his articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility that is complex and sophisticated. Love opens the chapter with a reminder to his reader that 'þere is none feste þat hæþ so miche diuerse seruice in holy chirch longyng þerto, as þis fest hæþ'.¹⁹ What follows is a list of reasons why the Feast of Epiphany, while no more worthy than any other holy day, is 'specialy & proprely þe feste of holi chirch of trewe cristen men'²⁰ because it is a commemoration of the time when Jesus was first revealed to Jews (the shepherds) and Gentiles (the kings), the latter of which became the spiritual forefathers of all orthodox Christian souls. Love also informs his reader that as well as being the day the Church remembers the performance of Christ's first miracle at the wedding at Cana and His feeding of the five thousand it also marks the remembrance of Christ's baptism:

¶ Þe seconde þinge þat was done þis day touching holi chirch, is, þat she was þis day gostly weddet to crist & treuly knyht to him, by þe baptisme þat he toke þis day xxix zere aftur complete. For in þe baptisme bene soules weddet to crist, & þe congregacion of cristen soules is cleped holi chirch, þat by baptisme is washen & made clene of þe filþe of synne, & cloþed new in vertues.²¹

By describing how the Church was 'gostly weddet to crist & treuly knyht to him' on this occasion, Love offers an exemplary, orthodox, symbolic interpretation of

¹⁹ Love (2004), p. 43, ll. 22-3.

²⁰ Love (2004), p. 44, ll. 1-2.

²¹ Love (2004), p. 44, ll. 3-9.

the events that took place by the River Jordan which gives justification for the spiritual authority of the institution of Holy Church. At the same time he reminds his readers that as members of the ‘congregacion of cristen soules’ that constitutes Holy Church they also participate (individually and collectively) in this mystical union. The personal and corporate are united in the description Love gives of the Church in its entirety and the individual soul being washed ‘& made clene of þe filþe of synne & cloþed new in vertues’ and ‘weddet to crist’ by the sacrament of baptism.²²

Having given due consideration to the reasons why the Feast of Christ’s Epiphany is marked with such ‘gret mirþe & solempnite’²³ in fifteenth-century England, Love then declares his intention to turn to a more meditative consideration of the Visitation of the Wisemen:

Bot for als mich as principally & most specialy þe solempnite of þis day, stant in þe mynde of þe first. þat is þe wirchepyng of þe kynges, & hir offryng to Jesu. þefore speke we forþermore of þe contemplacion hereof, leuyng þe remmant at þis tyme.²⁴

Love’s words remind his readers that it is the revealing of Christ to the world – as represented by the kings’ worship of Him – that is the foundation for ecclesiastical celebrations. The effect of this move from liturgical and symbolic commemoration of the Epiphany to affective, imaginative meditation on the events recorded by Scripture (‘[a]nd so ymagine we & set we oure mynde & our þouht as we were present in þe place [þ]ere þis was done at Bethleem’²⁵), is the creation of a sense of immediacy and personal connection with this episode in Christ’s life. There is an inclusiveness to Love’s language, his use of terms such

²² Cf. Chapter V and its discussion of Audelay’s representation of the importance of baptism in his verse.

²³ Love (2004), p. 44, l. 23.

²⁴ Love (2004), p. 44, ll. 24-8.

²⁵ Love (2004), p. 44, ll. 29-30.

as ‘oure lord’ and his injunction that ‘we mowe þenk’, that draws the reader into the emotional and spiritual heart of the scene he is describing. Love’s depiction of the Kings’ arrival at the place where Christ had been born is particularly affecting. It describes the simple faith in Christ of powerful educated men whose response to Him ought surely to be a pattern for the response of all:

Lord god how gret & how sadde was here feiþ & byleue, þat sich a litel child so simple cloped, fonden with so pore a modere in so abiecte a place withoute cumpanye, withoute meyny & without al worldly array shold be verrey god & lord of al þe world. & napeles þei byleued soþefastly boþe two. Þis was a gret gudenes of oure lord ordeynnyng sech forledars & sech bygynnars of oure byleue, & so it behoued to be.²⁶

Such a passage, with its emphasis upon the ‘sadde’ faith and belief of the Magi in the power and divinity of a child who they found to be the son of a poor mother, simply clothed and dwelling in ‘so abiecte a place’ recalls Love’s declaration at the very beginning of *The Mirror* that his work will focus upon the earthly life of Christ rather than contemplating more abstract mysteries of the Godhead.

Love writes a little later that God gave Mary ‘special confort to speke more homely to hem [the kings], because þat þei representeden holi chirch’.²⁷ The simplicity of the phrase belies the importance of its implications in this circumstance. By inviting his readers to experience, imaginatively, humanity’s response to the first sight of its human Redeemer through an account of Christ’s Epiphany, and by repeatedly asserting that the kings represent the Church ‘þat was þan to come of þe Gentiles’²⁸ Love encourages each individual who believes in Christ to consider him/herself as a representative of Holy Church in their own right. Through careful reading of Love’s text it becomes clear that it is faith in

²⁶ Love (2004), p. 44, ll. 40-2 & p. 45, ll. 1-5.

²⁷ Love (2004), p. 45, ll. 22-3.

²⁸ Love (2004), p. 45, ll. 23-4.

Christ as the world's Redeemer that ultimately lies at the centre of *The Mirror's* definition of Holy Church. The text articulates an orthodox religious sensibility that makes use of an accepted framework of theological and liturgical thought to promote an active, personal response to an account of the life of Christ. As such it is difficult, even when taking into consideration the high-handed remarks like, '[w]hat þat þees þre 3iftes offred of þese kynges bytoken... is sufficiantly & fully writen in many oþer places, wherefore we passen ouer alle þat here',²⁹ with which *The Mirror* is peppered, to see Love's work as anything other than a text which aims to help the reader to progress on a personal spiritual journey that will, by the grace of God, lead to salvation.

While passages in *The Mirror* have been included specifically to counter heretical Lollard attacks upon the established Church – the authority of the priesthood and the sanctity of the sacraments insist upon the absolute necessity of respecting the received authority of and participating in the rites of Holy Church – they do not do so in a manner that is detrimental to an individual's relationship with Christ and through Him, God. Love's careful explanation of the validity of oral confession focuses upon the sinful soul's need to reconcile itself to Christ the Son of Man as well as Christ the Son of God and makes clear that, despite the necessary involvement of a priest, the confession made to him is only truly valid if accompanied by genuine, personal feelings of contrition and acts of restoration:

And for als miche as nowe in þe newe lawe what tyme þat we sinnen dedely, we offenden him not onely after his godhead, bot also after his manhede þat he bouht vs with, fro synne & gostly dep, þerfore vs behouep to shewe to þe preste by worde, þat we haue offendet him as man, as we shewen to him by repentance in herte, þat we haue

²⁹ Love (2004), p. 46, ll. 7-10. Comments which, in themselves, do not actually discourage interested parties from looking at these works.

offendet him as god, þat is to sey at þe leste by dedely sinne. For þerby onely we be departede fro him & vnkyndly lessen þe grete benefice þat he 3afe vs in his manehde.³⁰

To detractors of Love's text it might appear that he is attempting to equate those who are ordained priests (and thus licensed to hear confessions) with Christ in the line 'shewe to þe preste by worde, þat we haue offendet him as man', in order to consolidate and justify the authority of the clergy over the laity. However, it is also possible to see these words as yet another example of how *The Mirror*, by allowing lay perceptions of Christ the man to transcend time while remaining rooted in the events that took place in the Holy Land in the first century A.D., offers its readers the opportunity to learn how to approach Him as a brother through their address to the priest. Far from seeking merely to counter 'þe fals opinyon of lollardes þat shrift of mouþe is not nedeful' because he is duty-bound to defend the practices of the Church in England, Love shows how the act of confession can further lay comprehension of the sacrifice that Christ made for each person. By addressing Christ the Son of Man through the person of the priest, the penitent is reminded that any offence against a fellow creature is an offence against God and, perhaps even more importantly, that it was through the Son's Incarnation as a man that He effected the redemption of God's people.

An awareness of the humanity of Christ formed through a recognition of the suffering from hunger, thirst, pain and death (as illustrated by episodes from *The Mirror*) that He endured during His time on earth reminds each man and woman of the magnitude of their own sins and the greatness of Christ's love for them, at the same time as it draws them closer to Him through a shared experience of the

³⁰ Love (2004), p. 91, ll. 10-22.

sorrows and evils of earthly life. Having described Christ's scourging and humiliation, Love recounts how He was then sentenced to death and the 'olde purple mantele' removed so that He stood naked before His tormentors:

Now with inwarde compassion beholde him here in maner as I seide
before onelich after þe manhede, so passing faire a 3onge manne,
most innocent & most louely in þat maner alle to rent, & wondet, &
alle bloody nakede...³¹

While Love asks the reader to behold Christ 'onelich after þe manhede' it seems clear that, as with the discussion of Middle English Passion lyrics in Chapter III, the affective, emotional power found in this pitiable description depends for its effectiveness upon the reader's understanding that Christ, while fully human, was also always the divine Son of God who had chosen to offer Himself for the redemption of humanity. It is for this very reason that Love can write a few paragraphs later:

Nowe if þou take gude hede to alle þat haþ bene done to oure lorde
Jesu, & alle þat he haþ suffrede, at matyne tyme & pryme & tierce, in
to þis tyme. 'shale it not be sene to þe as matire of grete compassion
of his grete passion & sorow? Soþely I trowe 3is.³²

The 'grete compassion' for which Love asks is surely informed not only by a sympathetic awareness of the suffering of another human being, but by knowledge that this man, Jesus, although innocent Himself, bore the guilt of every man, woman and child. By asking his readers to focus their devotions upon Christ, as opposed to God, Love is not actually trying to thwart lay desires to develop a relationship with God because he wants to foster the laity's dependence upon the mediating powers of the Church, but rather because, like Julian of Norwich before him, his text as a whole draws attention to the fact that it is, ultimately, only through Christ that the soul may come to God. By referring

³¹ Love (2004), p. 171, ll. 1-4.

³² Love (2004), p. 172, ll. 14-18.

specifically to the canonical hours, ‘matyne tyme & pryme & tierce’, that commemorate times when Christ suffered, Love gives his readers a practical way to recall the sacrifice that Jesus made for their sake and reminds them that, even in the midst of everyday life, their thoughts ought to be turned in prayer and meditation to Him.

Love presents the role of the priest hearing a confession as being that of an enabling, almost catalytic, figure whose task it is to foster an awareness of free will and responsibility for one’s actions in the man or woman who is confessing (while also acting as a conduit through which the grace of God’s forgiveness of the faithful might flow). Confession is a sacramental rite for which the ‘diuerse ymaginacions’³³ of *The Mirror* are complementary and preparatory. *The Mirror*, by its very nature as a vernacular devotional text, encourages its readers to use the guidance of the institution of the Church in order to further their own private, extra-liturgical, extra-catechetical relationship with God. As such, it is difficult to dismiss Love’s text as one that seeks only to oppress the spiritual development of its readers through the imposition of a very limiting set of intellectual boundaries. Although it is a work that aims to provide a controlled response to lay demands for access to a vernacular Bible by offering an edited account of its own, and is also a text that cautions its readers against attempting to wrestle with more abstract theological concepts, *The Mirror* is not, in essence, a negative, restrictive work. Through its complementary promotion of personal spiritual growth and obedience to the doctrines of Holy Church, Love’s work, like, for example, the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, shows how there could be a genuinely productive relationship between individual believer and an

³³ Love (2004), p. 10, l. 31.

ecclesiastical establishment that preached doctrines and beliefs that were understood, ultimately, to be based upon the unimpeachable authority of Christ.

The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ is a text that seeks to help its readers grow closer to Christ through guided periods of sustained meditation upon Him and all that He did during His life and ministry in the world. That attention in this work is focused primarily upon contemplation of God the Son as opposed to God the Father is explained and justified by a current running throughout *The Mirror* that reminds the reader that there can be nothing more worthy of contemplation than the life of Christ, since it was by His life and death on earth that He redeemed Mankind. For example, Love draws special attention to the spiritual importance of meditation upon the life of Christ when *The Mirror* reaches the point in the story of Christ's life where, set a little apart from His disciples, He prays in the garden at Gethsemane for Himself. The reader is reminded of the fact that, while on so many previous occasions, He had prayed 'for vs as oure aduoket', it is now the individual's turn to offer thoughts, hopes and tears to God because of the love His Son showed for humanity. Love's narrator says:

Bot here abide we a litel while, & take we hede with a deuout mynde of þis wonderfulle dede of oure lord Jesu, soþely worþi to be hade in inwarde sorouffulle compassion.³⁴

This general instruction to think on 'þis wonderfulle dede of oure lord Jesu' is then expanded more fully in the paragraph that follows:

For lo nowe he praieþ to þe fadere meekly, & þat for him self.´ as we rede þat he haþ oft before praiede, bot þan for vs as oure aduoket. Wherefore skilfully we shulde be stirede | to inwarde compassion, & wondere here.´ of the lowest mekenes of þe moste perfite obedience & of þe vnspekable charite of god shewede to vs, & first of þis moste profonde mekenes, considering him þat is verrey god euen with þe

³⁴ Love (2004), p. 161, ll. 17-19.

fadere almighty, & so lowely praying as a noþere commune man of þe people.³⁵

Love draws his readers' attention to the contrast between Christ's right to be acknowledged as 'verrey god euen with þe fadere almighty' and His 'lowely praying as a noþere commune man'. Through His example, all men and women witness perfect obedience to God's will and 'vnspekable charite' combined in one person: the life of Christ is shown to be the pattern for the conduct of all human lives, while simultaneously rising above all other lives in its perfection and its literal interpretation of the commandment to 'love god ouer al thinges... [and to] love our euen-cristen als we do oure selven'.³⁶ *The Mirror's* concern with offering spiritual comfort to its readers in a form that, with its emphasis upon people and events as opposed to abstract, theological concepts, might readily be understood by them, need not be viewed automatically as a calculated attempt by Love to control or repress the devotional experiences of his readership.³⁷ By writing that 'we shulde be stired | to inwarde compassion, & wondere here', when reflecting upon Christ's long vigil in Gethsemane, Love invites his readers to share in an experience of Christ's suffering. This affective passage reminds the reader of the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice and, by so doing, encourages spiritually beneficial self-examination.

This, however, is an understanding of *The Mirror* which Watson, since he views Love's focus upon Christ's earthly life as an attempt to limit lay accessibility to His divinity and, by implicit association, to prevent a greater lay

³⁵ Love (2004), p. 161, ll. 20-8.

³⁶ *Lay Folk's Catechism*, ll. 260-1.

³⁷ Interestingly, the second chapter of the First Epistle General of Peter – which speaks of Christ as the chief cornerstone of salvation – also contains the verses, 'As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: / If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious.' (I Peter, 2. 2-3) It is the 'sincere milk of the word' of Christ with which Love is nourishing his readers. By such an action he is enabling them to grow in an understanding of God's love and graciousness in sending His Son to die for Mankind.

understanding of the workings of God the Father (thus preserving His mysteriousness and ensuring a continued need for the mediating skills of the clergy) is unable to support. Referring to an argument put forward by David Aers, Watson suggests that:

The suffering identification with Christ central to most forms of meditation on Christ's life and death regularly worked in the way Love would have it working, confining devout women and laypeople to a mode of abjection which, far from being empowering, was deliberately cultivated by religious and sometimes secular authorities in order to perpetuate the hierarchic model of Church and society that kept them in power. By inviting people to think of themselves as crucified with Christ and thus giving sufficient poverty a symbolic richness that made it tolerable, the Church cut them off from access to the socially radical Christ of the Sermon on the Mount.³⁸

Watson's words present a persuasive argument: it is not difficult – especially in light of a more general knowledge of the undoubted failings of the mediaeval Church to put its founding doctrines into practice – to see how a text that encouraged its readers to identify with the meek, passive suffering of Christ *could* be used to endorse a social hierarchy that was heavily biased in favour of the Church. Nevertheless, as the use of the word *could* was intended to imply, this thesis offers a rather different interpretation of Love's work; it sees *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* as a text that is part of a literary tradition that stretches back to the first written responses to the outcome of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Thus, while it would be impossible to deny that Arundel's Constitutions of 1409 (which, amongst other things forbade the

³⁸ Watson (1997), p. 98. Sarah Beckwith posits a similar view in her book, *Christ's Body*, when she writes:

The incarnation of Christ then becomes a means of social and linguistic condescension, a model not so much of ascent as of descent. And this model of descent seems intent on limiting the creative damage that the hybridising figure of Christ in its blurring and movement of categories might be in danger of introducing into social relations. (p. 65)

She too sees an attempt to portray Christ – or more specifically the humanity of Christ – in such a way that He is far from the dangerous social reactionary who overturned the tables of the traders and moneylenders in the temple and is, instead, the scorned, suffering yet always patient and obedient Man of Sorrows.

unlicensed ownership of vernacular Bibles and placed restrictions upon the content of work that could be circulated freely)³⁹ aimed to ‘perpetuate the hierarchic model of Church’ by stamping out heresy and insisting upon the observance of a proper distinction between the second and third estates, it is questionable as to whether ‘devout women and laypeople’ were ever confined to quite such a ‘mode of abjection’ in their devotions as Watson suggests was the case. In the chapter for Thursday Love, having described Jesus’ raising from the dead of a small girl, emphasises the spiritual importance of the institution of Holy Church as a living witness to Christ:

Dis is þe processe of þe gospel, after þe vnderstandyng of þe letter. In þe which we mowe gostly vnderstonde first þar as oure lord god þan reised bodiliy þe douhter at þe praiere & by þe feiþ of þe fadere. so he reiseþ nowe oft siþes gostly dede soules by sinne to life of grace, þorh þe preching & preyinge of holi men, & þe feiþ of holi chirch.⁴⁰

This episode illustrates Love’s commitment to the ecclesiastical *status quo* and his endorsement of Holy Church as an establishment, founded by Christ, through which Man might receive the grace of God. *The Mirror* also articulates an entirely orthodox faith in the ability, again through grace, of the prayers and sermons of ‘holi men’ to move souls away from eternal death towards eternal life. Importantly, it also makes explicit a spiritually beneficial link between the private, affective meditation upon one or another episode in Christ’s life by a devout man or woman and his or her continued need for the help and guidance offered to all by the institution of Holy Church. Through respect for the divinely instituted tenets of the Church, through sacramental worship, through self-examination and through the mercy of God’s grace, Christ’s saving from death of one child is made yet more relevant and meaningful to those alive in the early

³⁹ For a brief outline of the content of Arundel’s Constitutions, see Watson (1995), 827-30.

⁴⁰ Love (2004), p. 124, ll. 35-40.

fifteenth century who believed and trusted that He might save them as well. Love uses Christ's miracle to illustrate the supreme importance of having faith in the power of prayer and the grace of God. He effectively asks his readers to identify their faith in Christ with a belief in the spiritual efficacy of the institution He founded, thus reinforcing his articulation of an orthodox acceptance of the received authority of Holy Church and the demands that this establishment had the right to make of its members.

Watson repeatedly asserts that one of the principal faults of *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* is an insistence upon its own 'permanence and formal authority'⁴¹ that effectively prevents its readers from using it as a handbook with which the individual might progress to new levels of theological sophistication. He contrasts *The Mirror* with texts such as *The Prickyng of Love* and *Pore Caitif*, works that he believes:

see their authority over the reader as *temporary*, necessary only as long as specific processes of education are in progress, after which they can be replaced by internalised images of Christ himself.⁴²

Whereas *The Prickyng* and *Pore Caitif* lead their readers to a state where they are able to think for themselves, *The Mirror*, by insisting that its readers follow in the footsteps of St Cecelia who 'bare alwey þe gospel of criste hidde in her breste',⁴³ is deemed to have placed its readers on a never ending treadmill of dependency upon its own and, ultimately, Holy Church's authority.⁴⁴ Almost as if in predicted response to such criticism Love, towards the end of *The Mirror*, writes:

⁴¹ Watson (1997), p. 111.

⁴² Watson (1997), p. 111.

⁴³ Love (2004), p. 11, ll. 24-5.

⁴⁴ Watson's interpretation of the institution of Holy Church is somewhat different from that being advanced by this thesis. Certainly his arguments do not support an understanding of the Church that is informed by a consideration of the existence of a sincere mediaeval faith in the divine provenance of the received authority of Holy Church

First he shewede his godenes in þat his feruent loue wolde not suffer hese belouede disciples longe erre & be sorye. Soþely he is a trewe frende, a comfortable felawe, & a benynge lorde. For loo he ioyneþ & felaweþ him to hem homely, he askeþ þe cause of hir sorowe & heuynes, gudely, & he expowneþ þe scriptures to hem wisely.´ & enflawmeþ hir hertes gostly, consuming alle þe rust of misbyleue.

Þus he doþ with vs euery day gostly. For what tyme we bene in any perplexite, ouereleide with heuynes or slouth.´ & we speke & comune to gedir of Jesu.´ anone he comeþ to vs, confortyng vs & lihtynyng oure hertes & enflawmyng in to þe loue of him.⁴⁵

Love tells his readers that just as Christ loved His disciples and would not allow them to suffer, but sought to remedy their pain, so too will He comfort those alive in the fifteenth century. The Scripture-based account of Christ's actions with which *The Mirror* provides its readers offers them a pattern upon which they can base their understanding of Him, but is not intended to be a substitute or replacement for prayer to (and spiritual communion with) the Son of God. The sentence, '[f]or what tyme we bene in any perplexite, ouerleide with heuynes or slouth.´ & we speke & comune to gedir of Jesu.´ *anone he comeþ to vs*' (italics mine) shows that *The Mirror* hopes to encourage men and women to enter into a faith-based dialogue with their Redeemer that, while informed by textual knowledge of the life of Jesus, moves beyond the straightforward contemplation of His earthly ministry and death towards assisting the development of an intensely personal, individual, relationship with Christ. It seems reasonable to suggest that such a bond could only be based upon a more substantial understanding of Christ's love for humanity than would be expected from a text that sought to restrict its readers to the occupation of a position where they were only very passive, barely responsive recipients of bowdlerised Gospel stories and thus that Watson's argument is thus not supported by evidence from *The Mirror* itself.

⁴⁵ Love (2004), p. 202, ll. 2-13.

Love openly discusses the aim of a work like *The Mirror* when, having described Gospel accounts of Christ's behaviour towards His disciples, he informs the reader that '[þ]us he [Christ] doþ euery day with vs gostly'. Christ is no longer here on earth physically, but His presence can still be felt and His commandments obeyed by those faithful men and women prepared to learn from Him:

¶ Þus he doþ euery day with vs gostly. For he wolde be byden of vs to duelle with vs & drawen with feruent desires, deuout praieres & holi meditaciones, & þerfore as he haþ tauht vs, *It behouep euere to praye, & not faile*, bot þat we take in mynde þe werkes of pyte & hospitalite, & how it sufficeþ not to rede or here þe wordes & þe biddynge of god.´ bot þei bene performede in dede, as we mowe here of more pleynty be enformede in þe Omelye of seynt *Gregory* vpon þis gospel.⁴⁶

As this extract makes plain, *The Mirror* is a text that seeks to make its readers aware both of Christ's love for them – '[f]or he wolde be byden of vs to duelle with vs' – and of their need of Him – '& þerfore as he haþ tauht vs, *It behouep euere to praye, & not faile*'. The entirely orthodox suggestion that 'it sufficeþ not to rede or here þe wordes & þe biddynge of God' without putting the ideas contained therein into practice also suggests that those who read *The Mirror* are expected to be personal witnesses to 'the Word' in their daily working and devotional lives.⁴⁷ However, despite the presence of such evidence, *The Mirror* is, Watson implies, a work that deliberately attempts to fashion the responses of its readers in such a way that, while they might believe that they are charting unknown waters of personal devotion and spiritual development, they are actually following routes that have been prescribed and carefully chosen by those seeking to protect and maintain the hierarchy of established religion. *The*

⁴⁶ Love, (2004), p. 203, ll. 9-16.

⁴⁷ Cf. texts discussed in Chapter V.

Mirror is ‘the dominant institutional answer’⁴⁸ to religious and linguistic questions that were raised by the discussion, in the vernacular, of Christ’s humanity and, as already mentioned, Watson contrasts it with a work such as *Pore Caitif*.

While *The Mirror* is a text that ‘[induces] in the reader a state of permanent dependence on the Church and its ministers’⁴⁹ *Pore Caitif*, Watson argues, encourages an autonomous spiritual response from those who read it:

Once the truths found in *Pore Caitif* are written in the heart, the reader is no longer a child learning the ABC, but a clerk, finding her or his own way to heaven.⁵⁰

This is an interpretation of *Pore Caitif* that, however accurate or justified, makes assumptions about *The Mirror* that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged. While it is true that such spiritual pathways as are offered by *The Mirror* are clearly and carefully structured, their avowed aims to assist the readers of this work in their spiritual journey towards forgiveness and salvation are worthy of a consideration by modern academics that is not innately distrustful of mediaeval expressions of orthodox devotional beliefs and practices. Watson contrasts *The Mirror* with texts such as *Pore Caitif* and *A Book to a Mother*, works that he believes offer a more personal, less institutionalised – and thus better – approach to Christian devotion. Regardless of whether these texts are as distanced from orthodox mainstream religious beliefs and practices as Watson argues that they are, a presentation of *The Mirror* as nothing more than a piece of ecclesiastical propaganda is misplaced. Love’s text deserves to be considered in a more positive light, one that appreciates its articulation of a religious sensibility that stressed the necessity not only of believing in the received authority of Holy

⁴⁸ Watson (1997), p. 93.

⁴⁹ Watson (1997), p. 108.

⁵⁰ Watson (1997), p. 109.

Church, but in balancing such an orthodox display of faith with more private, pro-active interiorised forms of devotion. Love will argue fiercely against Lollards who say ‘falsly þat it is ynowh generaly to euery man, fort shryue him onely in his herte, to godde’⁵¹ and he actively defends the role of the clergy to whom God has given the power to forgive sins in His name. That he does so does not prevent *The Mirror* from being a book that encourages its readers to learn from its accounts of Christ’s life and death. When writing about Christ’s fasting in the wilderness, for example, Love uses his account of Christ’s denial of His human desires and His submission of His human will to that of His Father, to give His readers ‘ensaumple of many gret vertues’ that, if adopted, will help them grow spiritually:

¶ Nowe 3iue we here gude entente to oure lorde Jesu.´ specialy & to hees dedes. For here he techē vs & 3iueþ vs ensaumple of many gret vertues. As in þat þat he here is solitarie, & fastēþ & preyēþ, & wakeþ, & lyþ & slepeþ vp on þe erþe... In þe whiche processe bene touched foure þinges, þat longen specialy to gostly exercise & vertuese lyuyng, & [þat] wondurfully [helpen] eche oþere togedere, þat is to sey, Solitary being, Fastyng, Prayer, & Penance of þe body, by þe which we mowe come best to þat noble vertue þat is clenness of herte, þe which clenness we oweþ souereynly to desire in als mich as it is most nedeful to vs...⁵²

Love describes how meditation upon Christ’s forty days in the desert – His abstinence and His prayer – provides a wonderful pattern for the pious individual seeking that which is most desirable and most necessary to him or her, personal ‘clenness of herte’ and this passage, while concerned with ‘Penance of þe body’, can hardly be said to be encouraging a passive acceptance of the sacrament of penance. By asking them to give ‘gude entente’ to Christ’s deeds, Love’s text, as on other occasions in *The Mirror*, uses Gospel stories as a

⁵¹ Love (2004), p. 133, ll. 5-6.

⁵² Love (2004), p. 69, ll. 10-20.

practical means by which readers can be helped to consider the nature of their relationship with Christ (and perhaps the difference between how it is and how it ought to be). This extract is, without being sentimental or patronising, immensely moving in its account of Christ's experiences as a man. Importantly, it also illustrates that *The Mirror* is a text that, through focusing upon accounts of Christ's earthly life, seeks to empower its readers to follow in His footsteps and thus, by God's grace, attain salvation.

In his contribution to The Oxford English Literary History series, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, James Simpson argues for a reading of *The Mirror* that, despite viewing it as an initially rather repressive and prescriptive text, does find opportunity and encouragement for spiritual growth in Love's carefully constructed Gospel-based meditation on the life of Christ. He describes the text as:

a work that apparently seeks to repress novelty in both theology and society. Closer inspection reveals, however, an unexpectedly liberal reading practice, and an implicit invitation to transgress the bounds that the work apparently wishes to preserve.⁵³

The ostensibly repressive nature of *The Mirror*, as illustrated by its eagerness to conform to a mode of vernacular devotional instruction with which even Arundel himself could not take exception fronts a work that, while still conservative in form and presentation, also contains liberal, even radical ideas concerning the nature of the relationship that can exist, within the boundaries set by the self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy, between Man and – through Christ – God:

The sense of possibility in this text proffers new horizons to its imagined textual community. The Gospel text becomes an imaginative field in which lay readers can themselves participate, by

⁵³ Simpson, p. 434.

virtue of the historical foreshortening of which the imagination is capable.⁵⁴

Love's willingness to use Scripture as a source that, once conveyed to his readers, becomes an 'imaginative field' upon which they can establish living monuments to their own spiritual and devotional experiences (which are in turn an emotional response to the text with which they have been presented), is, for Simpson, an example of how far the writer is prepared to offer 'an implicit invitation to transgress the bounds that the work apparently wishes to preserve'. By inviting his readers to meditate upon key episodes in Christ's life, Love, Simpson argues, is actually encouraging them to think and feel in a way that, while informed by knowledge of mainstream catechism, is essentially independent and private. Simpson's acknowledgment of the 'sense of possibility' that *The Mirror* offers its readers is to be welcomed as an approach that credits Love's text with a more subtly nuanced understanding of lay spirituality than that allowed by Nicholas Watson. Simpson views Love's appropriation and interpretation of Scriptural texts not solely as an illustration of his (Love's) desire to control and restrict lay access to Gospel accounts of Christ's life, but as an example of his willingness not to tie Scripture 'within a lexical straightjacket'.⁵⁵ The most important messages of the Gospels are highlighted, developed and explained rather than hidden by the 'historical foreshortening'

⁵⁴ Simpson, p. 437.

⁵⁵ Simpson, p. 436. As Simpson points out in the ninth chapter of his work ('The Biblical'), it was actually the early, evangelising 'proto-Protestants' who were to insist upon *sola scriptura* and the sanctity of the *actual* text of the Bible. While *The Mirror* was written in part as an orthodox response to lay demands for access to vernacular copies of the Scriptures it is also part of a tradition of affective, meditative writing that uses the authority of scriptural writings as a means by which the faith of the individual might be encouraged to grow. This separates *The Mirror* from the *sola scriptura* tradition of theological thought that might be said to have leaned more towards an understanding of faith that was justified by scripture. As such, when Simpson writes of Love's desire not to tie Scripture within a 'lexical straightjacket' he is referring to the fact that Love's harmonisation of the Gospels shows his willingness to use, edit and adapt the Bible in a way that could never be countenanced by a more protestant author.

that Love's writing encourages since, by the reader's imagining of his or her presence at key scenes in the life of Christ, His life becomes more immediate and their response to Him and His sacrifice more personal and urgent. It demands of them a response that is neither passive nor simple and childlike in its consideration of the relationship between God and humanity. When introducing the chapter in which he will tell of the Ascension of the Lord, Love issues his readers with a spiritual alarm call:

TOUCHING þe wondurfull Ascension of oure lorde Jesu, þou þat herest or redest þis, if þou wolt fele þe swetnes þerof. I wole þat þou be wakely & qwikke in þi soule, so ferforþ. þat if euer here before as it was bydene þe, þou madest þe by deuout ymaginacion as present to hees wordes & dedes. now þou do miche more with alle þi miht, for þis solempnite passeþ alle oþer...⁵⁶

There is a palpable excitement to these lines that conveys something of the fervent, orthodox, Christian belief that informs *The Mirror*. Love's use of such words and phrases as 'wondurfull Ascension', 'fele þe swetnes', 'alle þi miht' and 'þis solempnite passeþ alle oþer' illustrates a desire to emphasise the supreme importance of the event that is about to be described. His command that a reader be 'wakely & qwikke' of soul as he or she reads the pages that follow underlines the existence in *The Mirror* of a real concern with the spiritual welfare of those for whom it was produced and a desire to foster a personal spiritual awakening in each and every reader.

In the light of such evidence it seems strange that Watson persists in presenting Love as a figure who claims an authority for his voice, 'that of the Church' that he then uses, through his focus upon the humanity of Christ, to preserve in the laity an unnecessary dependence upon Holy Church:

⁵⁶ Love (2004), p. 210, ll. 5-10.

Love ignores any consideration of his own worth, assuming his clerical status is sufficient to mark his authority over his audience. From the viewpoint of this notional audience, his voice is that of the Church, the body of Christ on earth, and so is close to being the voice of God.⁵⁷

While '[c]lerics can use God's flesh as a ladder to ascend to heaven, learning to meditate on the mysteries of the divinity', for the unlettered laity, 'God is accessible only in the incarnate form in which he appears in the beautifully cadenced prose of the *Mirror*'.⁵⁸ The premise for such an analysis rests, perhaps, with Watson's determinedly negative assessment of those passages in which Nicholas Love offers guidance to his readers on how to (or what to) think about theological concepts such as the Trinity:

What tyme þou herest or þenkest of þe trinyte or of þe godhead or of gostly creatours as angeles & souls þe wech þou maist not se with þi bodily eye in hire proper kynde, nor fele with þi bodily witte. study not to fer in þat matere occupy not þi wit þerwiþ als þou woldest vnderstande it, by kindly reson, for it wil not be while we be in þis buystes body lyuyng here in erþe. And þerfore when þou herest any sich þinge in byleue þat passeþ þi kyndly reson, trowe soþfastly þat it is soþ as holy chirch techeþ & go no ferþer.⁵⁹

Although the commands to 'study not to fer in þat matere' and to 'trowe soþfastly þat it is soþ as holy chirch techeþ' initially serve to reinforce Watson's view that *The Mirror* is a text that actively encourages a passive, unthinking, subjugated response to Church-led Christianity, closer examination of this passage and the chapter from which it has been taken reveals a somewhat different picture.

By advising every man and woman who has heard 'any sich þinge in byleue þat passeþ þi kyndly reson' to believe the explanations offered to him or her by Holy Church, Love does not place a definite ceiling upon the devotional

⁵⁷ Watson (1997), p. 97.

⁵⁸ Watson (1997), p. 97.

⁵⁹ Love (2004), p. 23, l. 31-9.

aspirations of those who might be reading *The Mirror*, even though he does remind his hypothetical readers that if there are theological matters that pass their collective, or individual, 'kyndly reson' (the idea that there were matters of faith that would confound even the most intellectual, pious, highly educated minds being an accepted and respected theological stance) then it is to the Church that they should turn for an authoritative response to their doubts and questions; 'it is soþ as holy chirch techep'. Watson's claim that *The Mirror* seeks to maintain a unity of Christian truth by 'inducing in the reader a state of permanent dependence on the church and its ministers'⁶⁰ misses the point in its determination to categorise all aspects of the Church as oppressive and self-serving. His argument is unable to countenance, on any level, the possibility that *The Mirror* is another textual example of the existence and articulation of a genuine belief in divinely instituted, unimpeachable doctrines and tenets of Holy Church. Such an interpretation of *The Mirror* ignores the stated, benign intentions of Love's prose and fails to appreciate that this text, which emphasises the importance of an individual's response to and relationship with Christ, offers its readers spiritual comfort through recourse to individual and corporate membership of an ecclesiastical establishment that, as discussed earlier, is ultimately and primarily concerned with bearing witness to Christ's earthly ministry and redemptive sacrifice and helping effect the salvation of all souls.

Aware of the difficult times in which he was living, Love can be seen to encourage his readers to learn to separate knowledge of wickedness in the lives of members of the clergy from the inviolate religious truths that they preach and the divinely instituted ecclesiastical practices that they teach. By so doing he is

⁶⁰ Watson (1997), p. 108.

not only offering an orthodox rebuttal to Lollard claims that the sanctity of a sacrament was voided by the involvement in its practice of a corrupt cleric, but is also reminding his readers of the reality of life in a fallen world and the difference between the frailty and hypocrisies of Man and the received spiritual truths of mainstream mediaeval Christianity:

And þen after oure lord Jesus sharply reprehended þe pride,
þe ypocrisye, þe coueitise & oþer wikked condicions of hem, &
specialy of þe scribes & þe pharisees, seying to hem in þees wordes,
Wo to ȝowe scribes & Pharisees, þat louen worldly wirchipes in
many maneres, & so forþ of oþer vices.

Neuerles þerwiþ he bad þe peple, þat þei sholde kepe & fulfille alle
hir teching[e].⁶¹ bot þat þei shold not folowe hir werkes & yuel
lyuyng.⁶¹

Although Love demands an obedience to the institution of Holy Church that would undoubtedly, on occasion, have involved bending the knee to corrupt ecclesiastical officials, it is ‘hir teching[e]’ that he urges people to respect since, presuming that the religious concerned were not heterodox in thought, they were following in apostolic footsteps by spreading the Word of God (as revealed by Christ) and helping effect the salvation of souls. Love credits his readers with the ability to distinguish between a false priest and the verity of his words about Christ and even, difficult as it must surely have been in certain instances, to respect the fundamental tenets of the institution of Holy Church.

The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ is not, therefore, a text unaware of the potential tensions and ambiguities with which it presents its reader, despite its decidedly unambiguous approach to the need for each man and woman to acknowledge publicly their membership of and belief in the Christian faith as taught and upheld by Holy Church. What has become the subject of recent critical debate is the extent to which *The Mirror* is successful in its

⁶¹ Love (2004), p. 142, ll. 14-21.

attempt to combine elements of private and public religious devotion and personal obedience to God and His institution of Holy Church. Watson is unable to find anything of real spiritual worth in a text that he views as essentially oppressive and restricting, while James Simpson has indicated that he believes *The Mirror* offers its readers a good opportunity for personal, spiritual development despite the initially intimidating, strong-arm presence of an ostentatious display of orthodox loyalty to Holy Church. This thesis would argue for an appraisal of *The Mirror* that acknowledges Love's defence of the conservative ecclesiastical *status quo* in England while recognising that the text also promotes a mode of personal Christian devotion that is far from illiberal or patronisingly simplistic. Importantly, this approach sees the text's articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility as evidence of Love's concern with the development of the spiritual lives of his readers. To understand this better, it is helpful to return to a consideration of the very beginning of *The Mirror*, where, in the *Proem*, Love explains the spiritual importance of a text that recounts the life of Christ:

¶ Ande more ouer þer is no synne or wikkednesse, bot that [he] schal want it & be kept fro [it] þe whiche byholdeþ inwardly & loueþ & foloweþ þe wordes & þe dedis of that man in whome goddes sone 3aff himself to vs in to ensauple of gode leuyng. Wherefore nowe boþe men & women & euery Age & euery dignite of this world is stirid to hope of euery lastyng lyfe. Ande for þis hope & to þis entent with holi writte also bene wryten diuerse bokes & trettes of | deuoute men not onelich to clerkes in latyne, but also in Englyshe to lewde men & women & hem þat bene of symple vndirstondyng.⁶²

To love, follow and inwardly behold 'þe wordes & þe dedis of that man in whome goddes sone 3aff himself to vs in to ensauple of gode leuyng' is to keep oneself from sin and wickedness and to be 'stirid to hope of euery lastyng

⁶² Love (2004), p. 9, ll. 29-31 & p. 11, ll. 1-7.

lyfe'. By writing of a desire to transmit this Gospel message to 'lewde men & women' as well, famously, to those that he describes as being 'of symple vndirstondyng', Love draws attention to the universal relevance and importance of his text. He presents *The Mirror* as a book full of potential and opportunity, a work that encourages its readers to exercise their pious and affective imaginations in order that they might know and love Christ more dearly and thus become more sure of His love for them and His saving grace. It is a work of devotional literature that effectively combines respect for and obedience to the status quo of Holy Church with a seemingly straightforward and uncomplicated concern with the personal spiritual development of a pious orthodox individual. This is an interpretation of *The Mirror* that emphasises the text's membership of a loosely definable tradition of Middle English devotional writing that articulates a complex and sophisticated orthodox religious sensibility.

Offering an interpretation of *The Mirror* which is, ultimately, at variance with that offered above, Kantik Ghosh, in *The Wycliffite Heresy*, gives a close analysis of the manner in which Nicholas Love's textual counter-attack tried and ultimately failed to protect the orthodox Church from heterodox attack. Ghosh's study of *The Mirror* centres upon what he perceives to be Love's concern with coordinating the transmission of an authoritative, vernacular work to a lay readership while simultaneously ensuring that, in fact, all authoritative discourse was located outside the text 'in the interpretations dictated or 'determined' by the Church'.⁶³ While not overtly hostile to Love's text, Ghosh's presentation of the work is such that *The Mirror* appears as a tense, somewhat strained book: one

⁶³ Ghosh, p. 152. The full sentence reads:

As opposed to the Wycliffite insistence on scripture as a text which demands, indeed dictates, its own special and unique hermeneutics, and the associated interest in establishing a correct biblical text which must not be violated, Love's translation seeks to locate authority in a discourse outside the text, in the interpretations dictated or 'determined' by the Church.

that constantly struggles to present a united, consistent, ideological front in the face of compelling arguments from an heterodox opposition. This carefully researched approach to *The Mirror* illustrates the extent to which Love has had to strike what Ghosh sees as an almost impossible balance in his work – providing an independently trustworthy and spiritually beneficial text whilst simultaneously recognising his work’s subservience to and dependence upon the greater authority of the embattled, temporal institution of Holy Church. The following pages will consider Ghosh’s view that *The Mirror* is ultimately compromised by its own brief as well as offering an independent, somewhat different, approach to the text: one that sees Love’s work as coming from a tradition of affective meditation on Christ’s Passion which, whilst entirely orthodox, is not dependent upon the refutation of heresy for its main motivating force or focus of attention.

Ghosh believes that Love attempts to defend the practical and doctrinal stance of the orthodox Church through the ‘polemical and combative’ use of words that had ‘assumed prominence in the “Lollard sect vocabulary”’.⁶⁴ He suggests that Love, through his deployment of a term such as ‘open’ – a word that was used frequently in heterodox circles to draw attention to the ‘direct access to a divine intention informing a scriptural text which offers to its readers meanings of an unmediated clarity’⁶⁵ – intends to strike at the heart of heresy, re-appropriating this term for orthodox use and exposing essential flaws in Lollard arguments. One of Ghosh’s many examples of Love’s use of this technique is taken from his description of Eucharistic miracles as being “‘opune prefe of pe

⁶⁴ Ghosh, p. 165.

⁶⁵ Ghosh, p. 160.

grete vertue þerof”⁶⁶ By arguing that the spiritual virtues of the Eucharist are proved ‘openly’ by miracles that occur in connection with its celebration, Love is shown to challenge the Lollard attackers of sacramental worship. The implication of his words, following Ghosh’s argument, is that just as Lollard readers might draw attention to the manner in which a scriptural text offered ‘meanings of unmediated clarity’ to its readers, so too does the light (of grace and authority) of God shine brightly and directly through His sacraments to His people.⁶⁷ By extension of this idea, the institution of Holy Church itself is an ‘open’ establishment that, as this thesis has endeavoured to show, allows men and women the opportunity to engage actively with Christ their Redeemer while being supported by a body whose doctrines and dogmas were principally intended to comfort, guide and encourage.

It is perhaps worth noting at this moment that further evidence that the word ‘open’ was used in the most unapologetically orthodox of circles is to be found in the text *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* written for the sisters of Syon Abbey. It was, as *The Myroure* makes clear, one of the principal duties of the nuns of this Bridgettine Foundation to sing the daily Office of Our Lady. In the First Prologue to this work, during a passage that is advising its readers how best to use the vernacular guide to the various liturgical services that makes up the majority of this text, the author writes:

The thyarde thyng that the holy gooste shewyth in the sayde wordes,
Is the maner how ye shall prayse oure mooste reuerende and glorious
Lady, and that ys, openly, mekely, and deuoutly. For openly ye

⁶⁶ Ghosh, p. 161.

⁶⁷ Although orthodox sacramental worship necessarily involves the presence and participation of ordained priests, what Love is highlighting here is the fact that, as discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, sacraments are only of spiritual value if they contain the grace of God – thus what might appear to be a process that is more concerned with the preservation of the different social estates is actually a real opportunity for all men and women to experience God in their lives ‘directly’.

oughte to prayse her and dystynctely, that other folke may vnderstonde your praysyng to theyr edyfycacyon, & therefore he sayeth they haue shewyd. For a thing that is shewyd, is made open to other folks knowledge...⁶⁸

As this extract shows, the liturgy-centred Marian devotion of a group of sisters is expected, through its own openness and through the meekness and devoutness of the nuns themselves, to help other people to come to a more informed understanding of the role the Blessed Virgin Mary in later mediaeval orthodox religious devotions. Importantly, considering the nature of the broader discussion of this chapter, it is from within the clearly delineated, conformist, and ecclesiastically approved boundaries of the convent walls that the ‘edyfycacyon’ of the sisters themselves and, presumably, the laity (the ‘other folke’) can take place. Both Nicholas Love and the author of *The Myroure of Oure Lady* are concerned with presenting their work as being ‘open’ in the sense of perfectly intelligible, educatory and spiritually beneficial to all who read them because it is their aim to stir their readers to a ‘deuoute meditacion’ and devotion that leads simple (or, indeed, all) souls to ‘þe loue of god & desire of heuenly þinges’ that is the proper concern of Everyman. The texts might also be considered to aim to help their readers and auditors to become more personally aware of what it really means to consider oneself a Christian.

Ghosh also draws attention to Love’s use of the word ‘reason’, a term that was ‘put to an ambiguous and highly polemical use in Lollard hermeneutic discourse’.⁶⁹ Discussing Love’s desire to counter Lollard appropriation of and reliance upon this term Ghosh offers his opinion that:

⁶⁸ *The Myroure*, p. 6. ll. 4-12.

⁶⁹ Ghosh, p. 161.

The *Mirror* is... pervasively, almost obsessively, concerned either to justify its own biblical *lectio* as rational, or to defend its transcendence of 'reason'.⁷⁰

An example of what Ghosh sees as the rather uncomfortable pairing of a justification of *The Mirror*'s 'own biblical *lectio* as rational' with an awareness of the necessity for reason to be transcended in certain instances of orthodox worship is not difficult to find. In a section that describes Christ's instigation of the sacrament of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, Love writes of the disciples' response to the consecration of the elements and their witnessing of the mystery of transubstantiation:

Bot what mannus reson or witte miht comprehende þis at þat tyme? Sopely none. And þerfore þe trewe apostles at þat tyme laften alle hir bodily reson & witte, & restede onely in trewe beleue to hir lordes wordes as it is seide before, saue Judas þat was reprovede for his falshede & misbeleue, & þerfore he receyued þat blessed sacrament in to his dampnacion.⁷¹

Just as the apostles 'laften alle hir bodily reson & witte & restede onely in trewe beleue to hir lordes wordes', men and women in the early fifteenth century are being exhorted to show their own 'trewe beleue [in] hir lordes wordes' by accepting the received authority of the institution of Holy Church. What Ghosh draws attention to is the seeming paradox at the heart of *The Mirror*: its premise that the laity must be reasonable in their acceptance of all that a text that claims scriptural and ecclesiastical authority has to teach them, while, through the 'transcendence of "reason"', being equally prepared to acknowledge the limitations of the faculty of reason in any consideration of divine truths that are mediated through a system of sacramental worship.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ghosh, p. 161.

⁷¹ Love (2004), p. 151, ll. 13-18.

⁷² What must be remembered, however, is that the usage of the term 'reason' ought not to be considered only within the confines of a discussion about *The Mirror* and its response to the threat of heterodoxy. By its very nature, religious belief ultimately requires a 'leap of faith' from

In such a way, however, and even if only to deny its capability to explain fully divine mysteries that are beyond the powers of human comprehension, Ghosh argues that Love attempts to square the circle and reclaim 'reason' for the orthodox camp. The difficulties inherent in such a task are considered further by Ghosh, when he comments that:

In mediating to a vernacular audience a familiar text with its own, associated, modes of reading in a political context critical of received notions of text and authority, Love shows himself to be caught between two worlds: one insisting on the identity of the authority of scripture and that of the ecclesiastical establishment, the other emphasising the disjunction between the two.⁷³

Not only does Love's text bear the responsibility of mediating Holy Scripture to the lay masses but, Ghosh argues, by so doing, it runs the risk of undermining the authority it seeks to protect, thus 'emphasising the disjunction' between the aims and actual achievements of the text. The extracts quoted above suggest that Ghosh recognises the magnitude of Love's efforts even while he feels compelled to highlight the seeming contradictions inherent in the task the author of *The Mirror* has undertaken. In a departure from the interpretation of the text proposed by Watson, Ghosh, like Simpson, finds unexpected and possibly even unintentional windows of opportunity for the practice of self-authorized religious devotions in Love's prose. By its very nature as an educatory work, *The Mirror* equips its readers with an understanding of the basic principles of Christianity and thus, despite repeated calls throughout the work to be obedient to Holy Church, encourages them to develop a spiritual life that is not as closely prescribed by the Church as that institution, as understood by Ghosh (if not this

the individual that involves an acceptance of the preternatural that cannot be entirely explained, or justified, by reason alone.

⁷³ Ghosh, pp. 171-2.

thesis), might like.⁷⁴ Despite his recognition that *The Mirror* sought to engage actively with and provide answers to the questions raised by Lollard writers and preachers in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Ghosh is finally of the opinion that Love's response to the Lollards is appropriate but insubstantial.⁷⁵ He writes that, for modern critics, the real interest in a text such as *The Mirror* lies in its failure to fulfil its self appointed task: in the recognition of the fact that, as he interprets it, *The Mirror's* orthodox stance is undermined by Love's ineffective attempt to preserve and protect the hierarchic status quo of the Church. *The Mirror*, he says,

bears witness to orthodox recognition of an important Lollard achievement: the breaking down of the barrier between an enclosed academic milieu with its own rules and conventions of written communication, and a wider, comparatively unlearned world of lay devotion.⁷⁶

Notwithstanding the rather oppositional, binary manner in which he chooses to express his conclusions, there is an extent to which Ghosh's analysis of *The Mirror* is accurate. Not only did the rise of Lollardy necessitate that questions posed by the heretics be answered by the defenders of orthodox religious practices, but the very nature of such debates brought both sides of the argument into the public arena.⁷⁷ The steady increase of literacy levels amongst the laity

⁷⁴ Cf. A. Hudson, 'Laicus Litteratus: The Paradox of Lollardy', in P. Biller and A. Hudson (eds), *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 222-36. See especially p. 234.

⁷⁵ Sarah Beckwith in *Christ's Body* also believes that *The Mirror* undermines the very premise it is supporting. Writing with regard to her concern with the representation of Christ's body in the text Beckwith observes that:

Love's text, though authorized primarily to mitigate anti-clericalism and preference for the vernacular, had conceded the strength of some of its opponents' arguments in the very act of translation and authorization. (p. 70)

It seems, according to Ghosh and Beckwith, that Love's position as defender of the orthodox status quo prevents him from addressing the challenges of his opponents without damaging his own argument – which in turn implies that there are fundamental flaws to the orthodox premise.

⁷⁶ Ghosh, p. 173.

⁷⁷ One thinks of textual examples from both sides of the struggle that were intended for public consumption (*The Mirror* for example and Lollard texts such as *The Lanterne of Light*) as well as

and the demand, even amongst the orthodox, for more opportunity to develop an extra-liturgical personal relationship with God the Father and, more especially, God the Son, ensured that there was a ready market for a text such as *The Mirror*. Equally, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, with its careful balance of private devotion and reminders of the folly of heretics and the necessity of remaining obedient to the institution of Holy Church, is a clear example of the ‘orthodox recognition’ that heresy had to be countered and that, at the very least, the ‘enclosed academic milieu’ sought to find a compromise with the ‘comparatively unlearned world of lay devotion’ that was pressing for admittance to its sanctuary and demanding access to vernacular Scripture. However, during such a discussion it is also important to remember that lay demands to be admitted to what Ghosh describes as the ‘enclosed academic milieu’ of the Church are not necessarily the same as heretical demands for the disendowment, or even disestablishment, of that Church. Notwithstanding the recognition of the socio-religious tensions of the time and the resultant pressures under which Love must have found himself when compiling his work, *The Mirror* is also a text that exists in its own right as a work of vernacular theology, written for the edification and spiritual enrichment of the laity.

Ghosh draws his argument towards its conclusion by stating that:

The *Mirroure* [thus] articulates a hesitant and uncertain response to the ideological implications of the modes of textual presentation favoured by the Lollards. As I have argued, this uncertainty has its roots in Love’s fundamentally ambiguous conceptualisation of the nature of valid scriptural authority.⁷⁸

It is at this point that his understanding of *The Mirror* becomes fully crystallised and it is here too that it becomes less possible to be convinced by Ghosh’s

the evidence that would have been available to those who had attended or heard accounts of the trials of suspected heretics.

⁷⁸ Ghosh, p. 173.

critical understanding of the text. His belief that *The Mirror* ‘articulates a hesitant and uncertain response’ to Lollard texts and textual authority because of Love’s ‘fundamentally ambiguous conceptualisation of the nature of valid scriptural authority’ seems overstated. To reduce the status of Love’s work to that of a less than successful ‘response’ to a perceived threat to the orthodox status quo is to overlook the equally pertinent fact that it is possible to see in *The Mirror* an articulation of a mainstream religious sensibility that is built upon orthodox foundations that include a sincere and devout belief in the doctrines of the institution of the Church.⁷⁹ It is to allow a modern academic preoccupation with the layering of socio-political issues on to any interpretation of a later mediaeval devotional text – the focusing upon one particular aspect of a work’s place and importance in the society in which and for which it was composed, for example – to overwhelm other approaches to the text that are less determinedly dismissive of its honest concern with the spiritual welfare of its readers. *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* is a work that confounds many of its twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics as it is a text that, despite being so obviously rooted in a particular time, is not, perhaps, as cripplingly limited by various difficult issues – like the need to defend the orthodox Church against heterodox assault – as might be thought. To argue thus is not to push for a reading of *The Mirror* that, dwelling upon its religious content, sees the text as a piece of literature whose spirituality transcends the boundaries of time and place and thus renders discussion of the time and place in which a work was produced as largely irrelevant. Such an approach does, however, ask that modern critics

⁷⁹ An articulation that, judging by the extant number of manuscripts and early printed editions of this work (as mentioned at the opening of this chapter) was obviously tremendously popular and thus, it might reasonably be adduced from such evidence, one that was considered worthy to be read.

recognise that the transcendence of human arguments by a text such as *The Mirror* would have been possible for the many men and women who were its first readers and who did not, perhaps, find it impossible to reconcile personal spiritual development with obedience to Holy Church.

The Mirror encourages its readers to develop an internalised form of devotion to Christ that influences their daily life in a constructive manner at the same time as it does not diminish their respect and understanding of and need for the spiritual ballast provided by the institution of Holy Church. An understanding of the ecclesiastical establishment, as found in Love's text, acknowledges that at the centre of the Church are not the wills of men and women, but eternal, God-given truths about the Christian faith and, above all, an articulation of God's love for humanity. *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* is a supreme example of a text that, in its articulation of an orthodox religious sensibility, offers its readers the opportunity to use the central tenets of faith – as prescribed and understood by a post-Lateran IV Church – as a foundation and continual point of reference for their development of a private, personal and less formally directed relationship with their Redeemer.

CONCLUSION

There is a sense in which, by closing with a chapter devoted entirely to a critical examination and reconsideration of Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, the argument put forward by this thesis might be said to have come full circle and returned to the very point from which it began. Love's text is, as has already been said, a supreme example of a work which articulates an orthodox religious sensibility that supports and defends a belief in the necessity and spiritual efficacy of the central dictates and practices of a post-Lateran IV Church while also encouraging its readers to use their responses to the teachings and practices of that Church as a springboard for complementary, interiorised religious devotions. With its feet planted firmly in a tradition that accepted the received authority of Holy Church, *The Mirror* encourages its readers to examine their own conduct and beliefs in the light of their knowledge of Christ's earthly life, His suffering for their sin and His ultimate victory over death. Like the *pastoralia* discussed at length in the opening chapter, Love's text shows how acceptance of the beliefs that had been enshrined in religious law at the Fourth Lateran Council does not abrogate an individual's responsibility for his or her own spiritual welfare, neither does it prevent a soul from seeking the type of personal relationship with Christ more akin to that described in the works of, for example, Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich.

In its use of Middle English devotional literature to prove the existence of an orthodox religious sensibility, this thesis has drawn attention to the complexity and sophistication both of the ideas articulated in such works and of the responses that

they might reasonably be supposed to have hoped for from their original readers. Chapter I, through its extended consideration of written English responses to the decrees passed at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, shows that texts such as *Speculum Christiani* and *Handlyng Synne* encourage their readers (whether lay or religious) to accept and have faith in the doctrines of Holy Church because of a sincere belief that therein lay the most sure path towards salvation. This is an argument that also informs the defence, later in the chapter, of *The Lay Folk's Catechism* as an orthodox work of literature that expands and builds upon the epigrammatic instructions of Thoresby's *Intentions*, but can hardly be said to attempt to undermine or contest the substance of the Archbishop's work. On the contrary, Gaytryge's work celebrates the inclusive and universal nature of the institution of Holy Church and establishes the relevance and necessity of its presence in the life of each individual believer. Indeed, as subsequent discussion of *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* reveals, Chapter I shows that it is possible to see how *pastoralia*, be they concerned specifically with helping a layperson understand and respond to the celebration of Mass, or with a more general consideration of catechetical matters, aim to promote in their readers an understanding of the fundamental tenets of orthodox Christianity that will actually help them to develop a closer, spiritually richer relationship with Christ and God.

Chapter II continues this consideration of the individual's involvement with, and response to, key aspects of orthodox religious practices. It takes as its unifying theme the existence and textual articulation of an understanding of the fact that since Holy Church is an institution founded by Christ (and thus imbued with His

authority) its central tenets are ultimately unimpeachable. Anonymous lyrics which berate the corrupt behaviour of friars highlight the Church's vulnerability to attack, but do not, it is argued, call for a rejection of any belief in the essential spiritual efficacy of its practices. In their turn *The Parson's Tale*, *Speculum Sacerdotale* and *Jacob's Well*, while containing differences in subject matter and manner of expression, all exhibit an awareness of the reciprocal nature of the relationship that exists in theory and ought to exist in practice between an individual and the Church. By foregrounding the need for men and women to adhere to the dictates of Holy Church – especially when seeking forgiveness for sin – while simultaneously reminding them that the active spiritual power of this organisation rests not in the hands of its priests, but those of God, these works help give ballast to one of the main arguments supported by this thesis. They provide evidence for the claim that there was a general, orthodox understanding that the more obvious trappings of obedience to and faith in the rites and practices of the Church would actually be of little spiritual worth if their undertaking were not informed by the knowledge that they were mechanisms that facilitated a bridging of the gap between the human soul and God.

The need to remember that Middle English devotional texts are informed by the sincere religious convictions of their authors is one that has implications for the analysis of works that focus upon the literary representation of the humanity of Christ – especially His Passion – in Chapter III. Lyrics that describe His suffering are shown to be powerful examples of the literary articulation of a religious sensibility that encourages the faithful to respond directly to the agony He endured

for their sake, while depending for their very affectiveness (and effectiveness) upon the reader's belief in His subsequent Resurrection. This chapter challenges a modern focus upon mediaeval literary representations of Christ the Man of Sorrows that fails to recognise that such depictions of Jesus are intended to move the reader through pity and remorse to hope of salvation. As the discussion of *Pearl* with which this chapter ends illustrates, the wounded Lamb of God now reigns in heaven. While He still bears the scars of His Passion, He no longer feels their pain. The *Pearl*-poet is explicit in the expression of a belief that it is in this form that Christ, under the accidents of bread and wine, is shown to the faithful at the moment of the elevation of the Host. Once more, a text is seen to articulate an approach to Christianity that sees Holy Church and the individual working together, the one dependent upon and supporting the other as both seek salvation and God's mercy for the 'Everyman' that is a single soul.

The following chapter, Chapter IV, in its focus upon orthodox responses to the sight of the elevation of the Host, uses the evidence provided by a poem like *Pearl*, in addition to that furnished by *pastoralia* and other treatises, to show how orthodox Middle English texts repeatedly emphasise the enormous spiritual benefits and opportunities that the sight of the Blessed Sacrament offers a faithful soul. Far from being the rite that some modern critics have come to view as nothing more than the means by which the institution of the Church sought to reinforce its real temporal authority, the celebration of the Mass by and for people who believed in the transubstantiation of the elements and the Real Presence of Christ can be seen to offer clergy and laity alike the extraordinary chance to address Christ directly. The

vernacular texts discussed in this chapter repeatedly draw attention not to the intermediary role of the celebrant and the infrequency of actual lay reception of the consecrated wafer, but to the reality of spiritual communion and the importance of responding appropriately to the sight of the Host. Certainly the withholding of actual physical communion is shown not to form a significant barrier to participation in the Mass. Equally, as Chapter V also shows, textual evidence supporting and encouraging spiritual communion does not turn its back upon the received authority of Holy Church by lifting personal experience of Christ out of the immediate context of the Mass, but builds upon the sure spiritual foundations provided by that institution.

The final three chapters of this thesis look at extra-liturgical texts that, it is argued (despite some academic opposition), can also be seen to articulate support for a religious sensibility that finds a complementariness to orthodox, institutional beliefs and practices and more private, interiorised religious devotions. Chapter V concentrates upon the existence of the literary expression of this idea in the poems of John Audelay, the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* and the works of Walter Hilton. Critical analysis of these works shows how they consistently emphasise the opportunities that belief in and practice of the central tenets of Holy Church afford a devout soul to establish and develop a rich and spiritually rewarding interiorised devotional life. These texts offer practical spiritual advice to their readers that reveals their own indebtedness to and acceptance of the received authority of post-Lateran IV ecclesiastical beliefs and practices.

That it is possible to find proof of such an orthodox religious sensibility in even the most unlikely of vernacular texts is one of the principal concerns of Chapter VI. The works of Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle, as well as the anonymously composed *Cloud of Unknowing*, are very different in form and content from the texts that have been discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis. Nevertheless, despite being less obviously concerned with the expression of unconditional support for the central beliefs and practices of Holy Church, close reading of these works shows that they do not, in fact, reject the authority of that institution. What they offer is a chance for an individual to progress to a new level of inner devotional practice from *within* a tradition of orthodox worship. This chapter closes with a discussion of the content of a selection of texts written for female religious that considers how they (with more or less success) articulate a religious sensibility for their, initially at least, enclosed audiences that seeks to find a balance between the canonical obligations of convent life and the individual soul's desire for personal discourse with God. Once more, vernacular devotional texts provide the modern academic with evidence of the existence of an orthodox mediaeval religious sensibility that is unapologetic in its support for the institution of Holy Church and which sees that establishment as the provider of a firm foundation from which sincere personal piety might flourish.

Given that these are the conclusions to which the study of a wide range of Middle English texts might be seen to have led, that the final chapter should consider one of the most famous works of later mediaeval vernacular devotional literature, Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, is perhaps not surprising. It would be impossible for this thesis, which has endeavoured to

characterise the workings and complexities of an orthodox, literary, mainstream religious sensibility, not to look at a text that announces its allegiance to Holy Church at the same time as it declares its intention to provide spiritual nourishment for the individual soul. Chapter VII rebuts the fierce criticism of academics who insist that *The Mirror* is merely a narrow, oppressive, ecclesiastically-endorsed response to the threat of heterodoxy. Evidence from the work itself is used to support the claim that it is a work of vernacular theology that exists in its own right as a product of a well established religious and literary tradition that recognises the positive role that Holy Church plays in the private devotional life of the individual.

In the light of the conclusions that each chapter has drawn about the texts under consideration therein, this thesis offers a simple yet effective approach to the analysis of Middle English spiritual writings that results in a newly insightful understanding of the orthodox religious sensibility that they express. By allowing the texts to speak for themselves, and by accepting that Holy Church ought not to be viewed only as a temporal institution, but as a repository for and distributor of the received authority of Christ, it has been possible to offer a freshly nuanced approach to the research of literary expressions of and contributions to mainstream mediaeval Christian faith and practice in post-Lateran IV England.

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