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LAY SPIRITUALITY IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

THESIS

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In fourteenth-century England, a form of lay spirituality emerged, influenced by the writings and example of the famous mystics, both English and continental, of that period, but much affected by other developments as well. Against the background of socio-economic and political change, the emergence of lay spirituality is examined, with particular emphasis upon continuity and change within the church, the religious instruction of the age, and the spirituality of the English mystics. Finally, the sole surviving written record of lay spirituality of the period, The Book of Margery Kempe, is investigated, along with its author, Margery Kempe - pilgrim, visionary, and aspiring mystic.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SPIRITUALITY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

> Here begins a short treatise and a comforting one for sinful wretches, in which they may have great solace and comfort for themselves, and understand the high and unspeakable mercy of our sovereign Saviour Jesus Christ - whose name be worshipped and magnified without end - who now in our days deigns to exercise his nobility and his goodness to us unworthy ones. All the works of our Saviour are for our example and instruction, and what grace that he works in any creature is our profit, if lack of charity be not our hindrance.
>
> And therefore, by the leave of our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, to the magnifying of his holy name, Jesus, this little treatise shall treat in part of his wonderful works, how mercifully, how benignly, and how charitably he moved and stirred a sinful wretch to his love....[1]

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[1] The Book of Margery Kempe, tr. B.A. Windeatt (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 33.

So begins The Book of Margery Kempe, the only known written record of late fourteenth-century English lay spirituality. While that century is better known for plagues and wars, for political upheaval and social violence, out of a disastrous and chaotic era emerged the giants of English spirituality - the mystics - whose works are recognized still as among the greatest ever written on the subject of Christian mysticism. Out of that age, also, came Margery Kempe - devout laywoman and self-styled mystic.

The Book of Margery Kempe is significant as the first English autobiography. If Margery's Book cannot qualify as an inspirational piece of mystical writing, it certainly does deserve merit as the vivid, heartfelt memoir of an individual, one who took her Christianity very personally, and who evidently possessed enough self-awareness to see to it that her experiences were recorded for posterity. In fact, Margery and her autobiography, atypical though both appear, exemplify profound changes in English society, changes for which the late fourteenth century is frequently cited as the dawn of modern society.

That Margery's Book was written at all holds significance for the development of the individual. Furthermore, it was written in English, not in the French of the ruling class, not in the Latin of the Church and of the educated. In this respect The Book of Margery Kempe holds a place

among the important vernacular literature of the age. The fourteenth century produced William Langland, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the anonymous Pearl poet, who created immortal literature in their native language, forging a link between the ancient Anglo-Saxon literary tradition of the west of England and the Norman romantic tradition of the east, and the writers whose names are so much more familiar to modern readers, names such as Shakespeare, Spenser, Keats, and Housman.[2] Indeed, in the introduction to his edition of Pearl, Sir Israel Gollancz avowed that "'Pearl' stands on the very threshold of modern English poetry."[3]

Margery Kempe's life heralded the dawn of a coming age in other ways as well. Unlike the great majority of the English people, Margery hailed from a town, the prosperous town of Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn). She represented an increasingly important class in English society, the free town dweller, self-employed and relatively prosperous. Finally, Margery was accused on several occasions of connections with a group which did indeed prove to be a harbinger of coming events, the heretical Lollards.

The church had spent the previous century stamping out heresy, centralizing its power, and attempting to regulate methods of religious instruction and practice; however,

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2 Pearl, edited by Sir Israel Gollancz (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966), pp. xi-xiii.

3 Ibid., p. xiii.

as much as the church was striving to maintain, if not strengthen, its position, currents were in motion which eventually would sweep away its universal hold on western Christendom. In England in particular, the effects of the rise of nationalism and individualism on the church and on its people can be discerned, from the Statute of Mortmain on through to the writings of the mystics and would-be mystics, who practiced a highly individualized Christianity. While Margery was an oddity and her Book unique, both have much to say about the emergence of lay spirituality in late medieval England, a spirituality which reflected the great changes taking place - in the social, economic, and political spheres as well as within the church itself.

A few statistics can help sketch a vivid outline of the changing world of fourteenth-century England. The population on the eve of the Black Death in 1348 has been estimated at 3,700,000; by the late 1370s, the plague had cut down that number to 2,200,000.[4] As May McKisack succinctly observes:

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4 Ackerman, Robert W., Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature (New York: Random House, Inc., 1966), p. 27. Ackerman relies on the work of J.C. Russell for his figures. See May McKisack, The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 313; she comments that Russell's estimate could be much too low. Compare Maurice H. Keen, England in the Later Middle Ages: A Political History (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1973), p. 171n.

> From a modern standpoint, fourteenth-century England may look very sparsely populated. Yet almost every rural community known to us today was already in existence; and many which were flourishing then have since disappeared.[5]

The distribution of England's populace among these communities is significant; over ninety percent of the population lived in villages. At the same time, there was a dramatic rise in the urban free population by the end of the fourteenth century. And while the overwhelming majority of the people was illiterate, dependent on the parish priest for enlightenment, the new townspeople were becoming increasingly literate, increasingly in need of more individualized religion, and increasingly more vocal about those needs. The outstanding socio-historical events of fourteenth-century England reveal and reflect the emergence of a changing society, as well as the emergence of an individual spirituality. These critical events can be briefly identified: the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, the Peasants' Revolt, and the Lollard heresy.

England's centuries-old conflict with France was reignited in 1337 when King Edward III claimed the French throne. The war itself was intermittent, and fought mostly

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5 McKisack, May, The Fourteenth Century, p. 313.

in France; its significance here is the effect it had on what McKisack termed the "national psychology." The victories of Edward III inflamed national pride. McKisack also noted that the "knightly classes" had to acknowledge the part played by the common men "who wielded the longbows" in these victories.[6] The reverse side of that national pride was the Francophobia which the war engendered, and which dominated English foreign policy for centuries. We see it reflected in Langland's depiction of the Devil as a French knight, "'a proud pryker of Fraunce.'"[7]

The greatest destroyer was not war but pestilence, the Black Death. The staggering loss of population caused by the plague led to labor shortages and wage increases that alarmed employers and landlords and resulted in suppressive legislation designed to force laborers to work for set wages and, significantly, for their own lords. This attempt to hold the villein populace in bondage met with widespread resistance from people who were beginning to grasp their opportunity for freedom.

Just as the Black Death caused a dramatic decrease in the size of England's population, it also led to a significant change in its geographic and socio-economic distribution. Before the onset of the plague, about half

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6 Ibid., p. 150.

7 Ibid., p. 151.

of the populace lived in some kind of bondage. The severe labor shortage resulting from the Black Death allowed villeins to leave their servitude and to find freedom in the towns. Distinctions between freeman and villein were increasingly difficult to make throughout the period, although historians have labored long over the differences in their legal, economic, and social status. What remains significant is that together these two social classes comprised ninety-seven percent of the population. The nobility accounted for only one percent, while the religious class made up about two percent.[8]

The social unrest that began to express itself in the wake of the Black Death was fueled by resentment against a series of poll taxes, and exploded in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The peasants marched to London to meet King Richard II, and demanded the abolition of serfdom and of the poll taxes, and the substition of rent for services.[9] The king, very coolly for his fifteen years of age, agreed to the demands, and the rebels left. The king's promises were revoked, and the Revolt died out within a few months, not having accomplished any of its aims.

The immediate cause of the Peasants' Revolt might have been taxes, but there was another significant factor

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8 Ackerman, pp. 27-29.

9 Hay, Denys, Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (New York: Longman, 1966, 1987), p. 37.

in its fomentation. That was the rise of anticlerical preachers, clearly to be seen in the person of John Ball, a leader of the Revolt, who "claimed to be a priest," but who "expressed anticlerical and egalitarian sentiments."[10] This anticlerical feeling evolved in some quarters into the heresy of Lollardy.

The Lollards were inspired by, although never actually led by, an Oxford scholar named John Wyclif. Wyclif challenged the pope's position as head of the Church, and exalted secular over clerical authority. The secular powers in England did not object to these ideas necessarily, but Wyclif's position against transubstantiation, coupled with the Peasants' Revolt, finally forced his censure. Wyclif and the Lollards argued against the transubstantiation of bread and wine at the Eucharist into the actual body and blood of Christ, and thus threatened the very foundations of the power and authority of the priesthood. Only an ordained priest could perform this mystic sacrament; if there were no transubstatiation, then the priest's role was not vital. Another Wycliffite and Lollard stand which threatened the Church's position was the belief that the Bible should be accessible to Englishmen in their own language. Although Wyclif most likely did not actually translate the English Bibles which appeared before the

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10 Ibid., p. 37.

close of the fourteenth century, he certainly inspired them.[11]

Important as these developments were, neither the Peasants' Revolt nor Lollardy resulted in massive upheaval during the fourteenth or even the fifteenth century, nor were they universally endorsed; William Langland, in fact, criticized both in Piers Plowman. The Peasants' Revolt did not develop into political or social revolution, and their rise in status would be slow; Lollardy did not lead promptly to fundamental religious change, and Reformation would not occur for more than another century. Even though the undercurrents of change are clearly to be discerned, this was a society just beginning to recognize itself as a nation, a society unaware of its political potential, a society whose members, for all their complaining, still sought salvation within the arms of Mother Church.

The growth of a truly English literature, the first glimmerings of a Protestant Christianity, and the personal freedom of large numbers of a hitherto bound population certainly can be traced to the fourteenth century. What cannot be found, however, is any sense among Englishmen that they were witnessing the dawn of a new age. Most reaction to the aftermath of the plague was indeed reactionary. Wyclif left his legacy with the Lollards,

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[11] McKisack, p. 523.

but his influence and theirs remained unappreciated for more than a century. And dwellers on the "sceptered isle" awaited another bard than Chaucer to put their feelings of nationalism and Englishness into poetry.

For all the extraordinary events and developments of their age, life for the masses of fourteenth-century Englishmen continued to present itself as that same old struggle for survival which it always had been. And Wyclif and Lollardy notwithstanding, the masses remained true to their catholic Christianity. As May McKisack stated in The Fourteenth Century:

> ...the hold of traditional catholicism on the minds and spirits of ordinary Englishmen was as strong at the end of the fourteenth, as in any earlier century. Few can have recognized, what we must recognize, that its defences had been breached.[12]

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[12] Ibid., p. 311.

CHAPTER 2

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE CHURCH

If fourteenth-century England can be described as a land of continuity and change, the same certainly can be said of the English church in that period. While the church continued to regulate the lives of the people to a remarkable degree, and Englishmen lived out their lives by the cycle of the sacraments, nevertheless the church in this era continuously confronted change from without as well as from within, from the secular authorities, from the laity, and from her own ranks.

The evolution of Christian Europe had resulted in the phenomenon of a universal church - with the pope at its head and with Latin as its unifying language - dealing with members who were coming increasingly to identify themselves not just as Christians, but as people of different nations, whose common Christianity and whose common allegiance to the pope did not necessarily make them brothers politically. England, in particular, had always enjoyed a certain insularity and independence in the church, and her growing nationalism in the fourteenth century helped lead to momentous change in the relations of church and state.

In England in the Later Middle Ages, Maurice Keen declared:

> the period from the end of the thirteenth to the end of the fifteenth century...witnessed developments whose cumulative consequence was to establish, by gradual degrees, an effective royal supremacy in the English church long before that supremacy was legally enforced by Henry VIII.[1]

While the spiritual authority of the pope remained unchallenged (except by the Lollards, whom the state duly persecuted), in reality he had to depend upon the whims of the English kings, who could choose to enforce or ignore his policies. The major conflicts between church and state - between pope and king - from the late thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, and the legislation resulting from these conflicts, demonstrate the growth of royal supremacy in the English church.[2]

The first issue was that of clerical taxation; after substantial conflict it was effectively solved by Edward I, much to the advantage of the king. The thirteenth-century

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1 Keen, Maurice H., England in the Later Middle Ages: A Political History (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1973), p. 202.

2 See Keen, pp. 203-218.

popes had become accustomed to taxing the incomes of the clergy. The English kings had not objected to this practice; in fact, they usually received a generous portion of these taxes. As a result, the king had come to expect that the church should help him out in time of need. When war started with France in 1294, Edward I turned to the church for financial assistance. He called together the bishops and clergy to make his request, with the threat of removing his protection if they refused.

When this happened several times in England, and then in France under Philip IV, Pope Boniface VIII answered with the bull Clericis Laicos in 1296. This bull:

> was a trenchant restatement of the independent sovereignty of the pope over all that regarded the affairs of the clergy, and forbade ecclesiastics to contribute in any way to taxes imposed by the secular authorities, on pain of excommunication, unless the pope had given them leave to do so.[3]

Edward put the clergy to the test, and withdrew his protection from those who refused to pay what he asked. Although the archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Winchesley, made a stand against Edward and in support of the bull, he eventually

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[3] Ibid., p. 205.

had to admit that he could not force others to stand with him. And most did not. Fortunately for the archbishop, Boniface issued a new bull, Etsi de Statu, stating that Clericis Laicos was void in case of an emergency. This clause enabled the English clergy to comply with Edward's demands without having to violate a papal bull. The victory was clearly Edward's; he had shown that the English clergy could not oppose him, even with the pope's support.

Clerical taxation was a settled issue by the beginning of the fourteenth century; a lengthier and more difficult conflict between pope and king involved papal provisions. Although the pope could claim the right to provide appointees to all ecclesiastical benefices, until the latter part of the thirteenth century, popes made provision only to those benefices reserved to them. After that time, however, the popes began to reserve more and more benefices for themselves, and papal provision became a larger and larger issue.

Provision became an important subject of conflict, and ultimately of legislation, for several reasons. First, while it enlarged the sphere of the pope's influence, it proved even more important financially. When a benefice was filled by papal provision, its revenues for the time it was vacant as well as for the first year after provision was made were due to the pope. These built-in taxes, called

"annates," were a very valuable source of income to the pope.

The second point of contention involving papal provision was its disruption of the practice of ecclesiastical patronage. It did not interfere with lay patronage to any great extent, except with that of the king, who considered it his right to provide to a benefice in a vacant bishopric. The advantage in this circumstance went to the king, because English custom held that cases involving the right of provision to benefices should be tried in lay courts. Those who were hurt most by papal provision were the bishops and other ecclesiastical patrons, who found opportunities to exercise their patronage increasingly curtailed.

Other objections to papal provision echoed the emerging nationalistic interests of England. Archbishop Romeyn of York, writing in the 1290s, promoted the idea that the English church should meet the needs of Englishmen. An even stronger complaint sprang from the financial rewards of provision: English money was leaving the country. This was especially significant during the time of the Avignon popes. Was English money going to the French king, by way of his puppet pope? Here is a clear example of English nationalism outweighing any feelings of universal Christian brotherhood!

Parliament had made moves against the system as early as 1307, and the growing number of papal provisions in

the first half of the century fueled the flame of Parliamentary protest still more. New provisions claimed in the wake of the Black Death finally set the blaze, and the first legislation against the papal privilege, the Statute of Provisors, was issued in 1351. The statute:

> ordained that henceforth elections to bishoprics and in collegiate churches should be free, and that clerical patrons should enjoy the free exercise of their rights of presentation. If any reservation or provision from the court of Rome interfered with these rights and processes, the king would present to the office or benefice himself...The effect of the statute was thus to impose the responsibility for defending the English church against provision on the king...[4]

The Statute of Praemunire of 1353 reinforced the king's position by prohibiting cases within the jurisdiction of the king's courts from being taken abroad.

In actual practice, these statutes reflected more the attitudes of the Commons in Parliament than those of the king, whose duty it was to enforce them. The English monarch most often found it in his interest to cooperate with the pope, who persisted in his system of provisions,

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[4] Ibid., p. 211.

and who generally provided nominees of the king. The statutes became an effective occasional tool for dealing with a difficult pope. The Great Schism in the papacy, with popes at Avignon and at Rome both claiming the crown of St. Peter, lasted from 1378 to 1417, and the weakness of the papacy in this period improved the king's position immensely. The Schism played a large part in furthering the cause of those who objected to papal provision, and helped bring about the demise of alien provisions in England in the fifteenth century.[5] Though provision was not ended, by then the king was employing it to his own advantage, and his supremacy in the English church was becoming more and more secure.

The third major conflict between church and state in the fourteenth century concerned church endowments, and again, the crown won the victory. Maurice Keen stated that "the most revolutionary step in the sixteenth century reformation was the dissolution of the monasteries. This too was foreshadowed...in the late Middle Ages."[6] For centuries critics within the church, including such notable and saintly figures as Peter Damian and Bernard of Clairvaux, had derided clerical wealth and had called for a return to observance of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience;

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[5] Ibid., p. 213.

[6] Ibid., p. 214.

this had been the cornerstone of the monastic reform movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The thirteenth century produced a new kind of religious order, the mendicants, whose dedication to the poverty of Christ brought forth grave questions within the church on the meaning of apostolic poverty, and whose presence in town and countryside helped keep the issue of church wealth before the people. The friars who followed the ways of St. Francis fought among themselves, even before his death, over the limits of religious poverty; their internal conflict, which eventually involved the pope himself, brought to the fore the larger issue of church endowments.

In England, this question had been dealt with in 1279 with Edward I's Statute of Mortmain. The statute, which ruled that no one could give land to the church without the king's permission, reflected concern over the "dead hand" of the church: since the church never married, died, or left heirs, land given to it remained forever in its possession, and any production or income generated from such land was therefore forever lost to lay lords. The Statute of Mortmain signified both the strengthening of royal supremacy in the church, and the weakening of the perception of the sanctity of religious property.

Loss of respect for the rights of property held by the church was demonstrated vividly by the dissolution of the Order of Templars, a very wealthy and renowned

crusading order. The Templars became the target of King Philip IV of France, who succeeded in obtaining their dissolution in 1312 by Pope Clement V, the puppet of Philip and the first of the Avignonese popes. This French power play aided the English monarch in that Templar lands were in the king's hands during investigation of the charges against them, and some remained there. Of even greater significance, however, was the impact of this dissolution on the attitudes of the people. In his deeply religious allegorical poem, The Vision of Piers Plowman, William Langland foresaw further dissolution:

> Both rich and religious that rood they honour
> That on groats is engraven and on gold nobles.
> For covetousness of that cross men of Holy Church
> Shall turn as Templars did: the time approacheth
> fast.[7]

Growing English nationalism helped account for another action against church property, first taken in 1295, when Edward I confiscated the lands of alien priories. Although the lands were eventually restored, seizure of such property by the English crown recurred throughout the fourteenth

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7 The Vision of Piers Plowman, B Text, Passus XV, lines 506-509; quoted in Keen, p. 215.

century. The matter culminated in the denization of the larger priories, and the permanent royal confiscation of the others, by the early fifteenth century. While it is true that the possessions of the alien priories and of the Templars were turned over largely to religious rather than lay interests, the idea of dissolution had at least been introduced. Furthermore, the demise of the alien priories reiterated, as had the issues of clerical taxation and papal provision, the conviction that the purpose of the church in England was to serve the people of England, and reflected the suspicion of foreigners and the awareness of national identity that marked England in the later Middle Ages. The negative association of disendowment with Lollardy which developed in the very late fourteenth century, an association which effectively ended promotion of disendowment after Oldcastle's revolt in 1414, prevented further measures to that end. Yet it must be remembered that the idea was there for a time, long before the Reformation.

It is worthwhile to quote from Maurice Keen's final words on the subject of church and state, as it speaks very well to the condition of popular thought and religion in late medieval England. Stating that the kings could not have accomplished what they did in their relationship with the church without the support of the lay members of parliament, Keen wrote:

> The kings took advantage of the groundswell of popular feeling in the background, anti-alien, anti-papal, and anti-clerical; they did not create it. If the English church was becoming recognizably a national church in the centuries before the reformation, it was because the people at large (without much precision in their ideas) wished it to do so, rather than as a result of conscious and premeditated royal policy.[8]

This anti-clerical attitude is well documented, and clearly expounded by the great orthodox social commentators of the age, Langland and Chaucer, as well as by questionable preachers and heretical scholars, such as John Ball and John Wyclif. In order to discover upon what grounds they and others based their complaints, it is necessary to look at conditions within the fourteenth-century church, especially at the controversies and conflicts which were bringing change, and at the ways the Church devised to deal with its problems. As with the points of conflict between church and state, these controversies evolved largely from events and developments in the thirteenth century.

The most important developments in the church in the thirteenth century, at least in their effect upon lay religion, were the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and the

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8 Keen, p. 219.

emergence of the mendicant orders, and their influence went hand-in-hand. The decrees of the Council called for more active instruction in Christian doctrine and more preaching on the part of the clergy. The mendicants answered the needs addressed by the Lateran Council in a way that other clerics had not been able to do; they also brought with them much friction within the church. Just as St. Francis' friars brought out into the open questions concerning apostolic poverty and church endowment, so did they present problems involving the rights and duties of parish priests. The major points at issue in the struggles between the mendicants and the priests, and those which most directly affected the laity, involved the rights to hear confession and pronounce penance, and to preach.

In 12th Century Europe: An Interpretive Essay, Sidney R. Packard asserted that "The Roman Church has lived on the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council..., with superb consistency, from that day to this."[9] Of the seventy-one canons issued by the Council, those dealing with confession and the doctrine of transubstantiation were most significant for the laity. As Packard declared, these canons "not only put enormous emphasis upon the authority of the clergy but really delivered every Christian completely into the

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[9] Packard, Sidney R. 12th Century Europe: An Interpretive Essay (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), p. 107.

hands of the Church."[10] They also demonstrate the enormous concern for the quality of religious instruction which grew throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as there arose a new kind of Christian, urban and literate.

The Fourth Lateran Council set a program which resulted in far-reaching changes in the church and in lay religion. In decrying the sorry state of education among her priests, in calling for annual confession and annual partaking of the eucharist, in formally announcing the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Council placed a heavy emphasis on the role of the priest, and at the same time paved the way for a new kind of cleric to fulfill his role. The Franciscans and Dominicans served very well as confessors and preachers, and enjoyed the protection of the pope. They also earned scathing criticism from all sides.

At the source of much of the friction was the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council known as _Omnis utriusque sexus_:

> requiring annual confession to the parish priest; the responsibility and machinery for the hearing of confessions, on which so much spiritual and moral welfare depended, was a topic that preoccupied the fourteenth-century church...The seculars were confident

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10 Ibid.

that they had divine right and responsibility on their side; the friars were confident that they had superior technical training.[11]

The friars were generally better educated than the parish priests. Although castigated for making penance too easy, for selling indulgences, and for growing "fat with begging," the friars were "the greatest preachers of the age." Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that "It was the mendicants who took the lead in answering Wyclif's academic challenge to catholic orthodoxy."[12] For all their faults, the friars answered a real need in the church for ministering to the laity. And it is well to remember that one of their most energetic critics, William Langland, was himself (as far as is known) a cleric in minor orders. The friars probably threatened his livelihood!

Just as the conflicts between church and state over the issues of clerical taxation, papal provision, and church endowment reflected unrest among the laity concerning religion, and a growing sense of English nationalism, and resulted in legislation which increased the power of the king in church affairs, so did struggles within the church

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11 Pantin, W.A., The English Church in the Fourteenth Century (London: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 125.

12 Keen, pp. 223 and 224.

reflect concern with the quality of the religion which reached the people, and so did they further reveal a changing laity, whose new needs called for new measures. The tremendous growth of the mendicant orders was at least partly due to their ability to deliver religious instruction as mandated by the Fourth Lateran Council, to a people becoming increasingly urban and literate.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

The long-term results of the decrees of the Lateran Council of 1215, and of the emergence of the friars, upon lay religion are most clearly seen in the manuals of instruction written for priests, and in the great surge of preaching, in the fourteenth century. The manuals and the sermons reveal the pastoral teaching of the church to its flock, and the vocational instruction of the parochial clergy. They also reveal trends in religious thought and practice which led to further changes in lay religion in late medieval England.

The manuals for priests provided a continuation of thirteenth-century religious instruction which had been carried out through legislation handed down by bishops in the form of synodal constitutions.[1] These constitutions established regulations on confession and penance, and instructed priests on what to teach their parishioners, generally including "the ten commandments, the seven sins, the seven sacraments, and the creed...."[2]

[1] Pantin, W.A., The English Church in the Fourteenth Century (London: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 192-218.

[2] Ibid., p. 192.

Probably the most important piece of such legislation was issued by Archbishop Pecham of Canterbury, in 1281; it became the standard such work for all of England, and was employed as late as 1357 by Archbishop Thoresby of York for his famous Lay-Folk's Catechism.

When the bishops issued these regulations, they also sent out tracts for the priests to use. From these tracts evolved the writing of manuals, and in the fourteenth century, persons other than bishops began to issue guidelines for parish priests. The first and most important was the Oculus Sacerdotis, attributed to William of Pagula, and written c.1320-1328.

William of Pagula and his work are significant in a number of ways, not least for its influence on subsequent manuals. He apears to have been a parish priest himself, and the only one known to have written a manual for his colleagues.[3] William was the first manual writer to employ:

> local English legislation, such as the constitutions of the thirteenth-century papal legates and Archbishops of Canterbury, as well as the general law of the Church, the Decretum, the Decretals, and so on.[4]

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[3] Ibid., p. 218.

[4] Ibid., p. 196.

William was also a canonist, who was able to combine "a mastery of canon law with a genuine interest in pastoral theology and a desire to improve the cure of souls...."[5] Future manual writers were to rely very heavily upon William's work; it even shows up in a treatise known as the *Judica me*, by the mystic Richard Rolle.[6]

The *Oculus Sacerdotis* was comprised of three parts. Part I was a manual dealing with confession and penance. Special advice is given for dealing with drunkards:

> And the priest ought to inquire of the penitent, if he was drunk, how he got drunk, whether perchance because he did not know the power of the wine, or because of guests, or because of an exceeding thirst coming upon him....[7]

Part II contained a program of instruction, describing what the priest should teach the laity, including doctrine such as the sacraments, the vices and virtues, and the commandments, as well as providing more pragmatic guidelines; for example, for lay baptism in an emergency. Part III

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5 Ibid., p. 196.

6 Ibid., p. 197.

7 Ibid.

provided more detailed instructions on the administration of the seven sacraments.

Numerous manuals followed the Oculus Sacerdotis, building upon its foundation, stressing fundamentally the same principles, and still echoing the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council. The Cilium Oculi, author and date unknown, was intended as an addendum to the Oculus Sacerdotis, enlarging upon such topics as mass, tithe-paying, and excommunication. This manual included a detailed discussion of preaching, covering "who should preach, and to whom, what should be preached, at what time and place, and for what reason."[8]

The Regimen Animarum employed the Oculus Sacerdotis extensively. It also was divided into three parts. Part I discussed the duties of parish priests, with a revealing passage on getting parishioners to pay tithes:

> And what if it is not the practice to pay tithes on certain things, when by law they ought to pay tithe? Say that then one should proceed according to law, but on account of the discord which can arise between a curate and his parishioners, this ought to be done cautiously and discreetly, and this can be done in two ways:

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[8] Ibid., p. 202.

> In the first way, thus: the curate ought to speak in a friendly way to his parishioners: 'My very dear sons, because this or that ought to pay tithes, and because this is not the practice among you, I counsel you that you choose two or three good and faithful men from among you, to come in my company before the ecclesiastical ordinaries, to have a discussion at my own expense, and I will be a faithful helper in your business and mine, because by no means do I desire your loss in temporal things, but I desire the salvation of your souls.' This first method works well in many dissensions which occur between very good curates and their parishioners who are also very good, or even middling good...But where there are middling good curates and middling bad parishioners, nay even very bad ones, then this first method is no good....[9]

Part II covered religious instruction, incorporating Part II of the <u>Oculus Sacerdotis</u>. Part III, also following the <u>Oculus Sacerdotis</u>, dealt with the seven sacraments. The <u>Memoriale Presbiterorum</u> was a confessors' manual; its three sections dealt with, in order, instruction for and interrogation of the penitent, a list of penances required

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9 Ibid., pp. 203-204.

by church law for certain sins, and information on restitution.

The Lay-Folk's Catechism was written by John Thoresby, Archbishop of York, who had a monk by the name of John Gaytrick render it into English verse. The "catechism" (so called even though it did not follow a question and answer format) discussed:

> "the fourteen articles of belief, the ten commandments, the seven sacraments, the seven works of mercy, seven virtues and the seven sins; to encourage its popularization, an indulgence of forty days was offered to those who learnt it by heart.[10]

The Archbishop of Canterbury issued a similar work for his diocese in 1361; thus, by the latter part of the fourteenth century all of England had a form of catechism, outlining the fundamentals of faith to be taught to every Christian in the kingdom.

The Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, John de Burgo, has been credited with the writing of the Pupilla Oculi in 1385. This work represents the culmination of the art of writing manuals of instruction for priests, again building upon the Oculus Sacerdotis, but improving

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10 Ibid., p. 212.

upon it. The existence of numerous manuscript copies attests to its popularity.

At the very end of the century, a prior named John Mirk wrote several treatises for priests. His Instructions for Parish Priests, written in verse form, corresponded roughly to the Oculus Sacerdotis in arrangement and content. By far its largest section was devoted to confession. Mirk's Manuale Sacerdotis, in Latin, dealt with the responsibilities of priests. It expounded the virtues of the humble priest over the vices of the worldly priest, and addressed such topics as the priest's clothing, daily life, food and table manners, and how the priest should spend his evening hours, as well as discussing the saying of mass and hearing of confession. Of the good priest, Mirk said:

> ...The priest of God, whose soul is in his hands always, knows that he is hired to celebrate every day...therefore he disposes himself to live soberly as to himself, justly as to the master he serves and piously towards God....The priest also lives justly, when he renders to each man what is his due. To his master indeed he renders what is his due, when in return for the salary which he receives from him, he pays back spiritual commodities; not only by celebrating everyday for him one single Mass, but also in other spiritual

> services, as for instance the seven penitential psalms, the fifteen gradual psalms, devout litanies, offices of the dead, and other like spiritual things.[11]

Mirk's Festiall is a collection of sermons, but does include an enlightening section "on how to deal with tiresome laymen who ask the priest difficult questions about the liturgy of Holy Week, in the hope of putting him to shame."[12]

In the last paragraph of his chapter on manuals for priests, W.A. Pantin reflects upon the significance of these manuals in an important passage:

> We can see many serious-minded men at work, trying hard to educate and improve the parish clergy. They knew well the need for such work, the ignorance and slackness and worse that had to be fought against; whatever other failings the men of that age had, complacency was not one of them, as we can tell from the contemporary sermon literature...what was needed was a systematic training and formation of the clergy ...and that solution was not to be reached until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.[13]

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[11] Ibid., pp. 215-216.

[12] Ibid., p. 217.

[13] Ibid., p. 218.

The fourteenth century produced another kind of religious literature, which affected the laity even more directly than did the priests' manuals, as it was written for the laity as well as for priests. This literature was written in the vernacular, often in verse form, and was the religious writer's answer to the popular romance.[14] The work of this kind most familiar to the modern student of English literature is <u>Handling Sin</u>, written by Robert Mannyng in 1303. This very long poem is basically a translation of an Anglo-Norman poem entitled <u>Manuel des peches</u>, written c.1260. Mannyng's version dealt with the commandments, the seven sins, the sacraments, and confession. <u>Handling Sin</u> is evidently more appreciated now than it was in the fourteenth century, as only four manuscript copies exist.[15] Mannyng explained why he wrote the poem:

> For ignorant (lewd) men I undertook
> To write this book in the English tongue.
> For many are of such a nature,
> That they will gladly listen to tales and rimes;
> At games, at feasts, and at ale,
> Men love to listen to idle talk:
> And this may often lead to villainous acts,

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14 Ibid., p. 221.

15 Ibid., pp. 224-225.

To deadly sin, or to some other folly;

For such men have I written this rime

In order that they will spend their time well,

And learn something from it,

That will cause them to leave off their foul way of life.[16]

The Somme le Roi was an earlier and much more popular work. Originally written in 1279, in French prose, the Somme le Roi was frequently translated. Probably the best-known translation is the Azenbite of Inwit, or "Remorse of Conscience," which is in the Kentish dialect. The subjects are familiar: the ten commandments, the Creed, the seven sins.

It is interesting that probably the single most popular piece of vernacular religious writing of this type, which exists in more than one hundred manuscript copies, dealt not with the usual principles of faith, but with "the wretchedness of man's state and of the world, and with the four last things: Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven."[17] This is The Prick of Conscience, a poem written in the middle of the fourteenth century. Once attributed to

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16 Ackerman, Robert W., Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature (New York: Random House, 1966), p. xvii.

17 Pantin, p. 230.

Richard Rolle, the authorship is in fact unknown. A striking testimony to this poem's popularity is that its depiction of the Last Judgment is illustrated in a stained-glass window in All Saints' Church in York.[18]

The Desert of Religion is an allegorical poem composed c.1400. The desert in this poem is in fact a northern English forest, and represents the religious life. W.A. Pantin describes the elaborate allegorical style of the author as presenting a virtual forest of allegorical trees, representing such subjects as the vices and virtues; moreover, it is "a very symmetrical forest, more like an avenue or a pleached alley!"[19]

Finally, discussion of the realm of didactic literature would be incomplete without mention of William Langland's religious allegory, Piers Plowman. Especially pertinent to the consideration of subjects covered in religious instruction is the passage in which the seven deadly sins make their confession. The personifications of Greed, Gluttony, and company drive home the church's lessons, and at the same time paint a vivid picture of the fourteenth-century world. Langland manages also to criticize the worldliness of the clergy, and especially of the friars, while he describes the confessions of the sins:

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 235.

The Confession of Wrath

...'I am Wrath,' quoth he; 'I once was a friar,
And the convent-gardener, to graft young shoots.
On 'limiters' and 'lectors' such lies I engrafted,
They bore leaves of low-speech, great lords for to
please,
And then blossomed abroad, to hear shrifts in bowers,
Till there fell this fruit - that folk would far rather
Show shrifts unto them, than be shriven by priests.

Now that priests have perceived how friars claim
part,
These prebend'ries preach, and deprave the friars.
Then friars find fault, as the folk bear witness,
And preach to the people in places around;
I, Wrath, with them rove, and teach them to rail.
Thus clerks of the church one another contemn
Till both are but beggars, and live by their begging,
Or else all are rich, and go riding about.
I, Wrath, never rest, but rove evermore,
And follow these false ones; for such is my grace.

My aunt is a nun, and an abbess to boot;
She sooner would swoon than once suffer a pain.
I was cook in her kitchen, the convent I served

For many a month; and with monks have I stayed;
Made pottage for the prioress, and other poor dames.
Their broth was to backbite - 'dame Joan is a bastard'-
'Dame Clarice, a knight's girl, a cuckold's her sire'-
'Dame Parnel's a priest's wench, a prioress never;
She childed in cherry-time, the chapter all know it.'

Their worts I commingled with wicked words,
Till 'liar!' and 'liar!' leapt forth from their
lips,
And each hit the other just under the cheek;
They had dealt many deaths, had daggers been
near![20]

Notwithstanding the popularity and volume of religious literature which was produced in fourteenth-century England, its reading was limited; a more direct and profound influence upon the laity and its religious beliefs was exercised from the pulpit (or the street corner). G.R. Owst made the case in Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England that homiletic and didactic literature served as primers in the education of the laity in late medieval England, and that it was this literature which would "become the true

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20 Langland, William, The Vision of Piers the Plowman, tr. W.W. Skeat (London: Alexander Moring Ltd., 1905), pp. 71-73.

literature of a people, to whom Reformation was to mean more than Renaissance..."[21] Owst proposed that it was the preachers, especially the early friars, who made the creation of this "native literature" possible. He spoke of the "recluses, canons, monks and others" who were its authors, and who employed the sermon material of the preachers in their works. He went on to say:

> As the outstanding figure of this movement, if for no other reason, Richard Rolle, the hermit of Hampole, deserves the title bestowed on him by Horstmann, that of 'the true Father of English Literature.'[22]

Thus, while the homilies and didactic poems were used to bring home the religious instruction made paramount by the reforms of the thirteenth and earlier centuries, their very development as the first great English vernacular literature owed its origins to the tradition of preaching.

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[21] Owst, Gerald R., Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: a Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966), p. 9.

[22] Ibid., p. 7. The writings of Richard Rolle belong to the realm of mystical literature, and are discussed in Chapter 5.

W.A. Pantin characterized the fourteenth century as "perhaps the classic age of preaching in medieval England."[23] It may have helped create a nation's literature, but more relevant to the present subject, it profoundly affected the church and the religion of the laity in the later Middle Ages. In Pantin's words:

> Almost all the points dealt with in the manuals and poems that we have been considering, the analyses of virtues and vices, of the commandments and the Lord's Prayer, the denunciations of social abuses, and all the material of satire and complaint that we find in Chaucer or Langland or the political poems, can be paralleled in the sermons of the day.[24]

It must, however, be emphasized that the great revival of preaching in the fourteenth century was an urban phenomenon. In earlier times, most notably the twelfth century, the church had actually discouraged uncontrolled preaching as a dangerous practice in the wrong hands. The Waldenses and Cathars had produced effective popular preachers who threatened the orthodox hierarchy. The church eventually resorted to drastic measures in its effort to

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23 Pantin, p. 236.

24 Ibid., p. 238.

silence those whom it feared were misinterpreting scripture and spreading erroneous doctrine. Yet, the most effective weapon the church wielded against dangerous, heretical preachers proved to be the very one which brought on the revival of preaching in the fourteenth century. That weapon was, of course, the friar who wandered from town to town. The mendicant orders built the first churches designed for the purpose, "where the nave was a spacious preaching house."[25] The friars ministered to the growing urban laity, who were being educated upon the homiletic literature which echoed the messages of the sermons.

As Owst and Pantin agreed, the manuals of instruction for parish priests, the other vernacular religious literature, and the sermons of the fourteenth century all dwelt upon the same subject matter, and each derived from, contributed to, and reinforced the messages of the others. That subject matter is of course central to the question of lay spirituality. Though vernacular religious literature and preaching played a significant part in late medieval religion, and would probably play an even greater part in the coming Reformation, their influence was confined almost exclusively to the urban laity. For the typical English layman of the fourteenth century, who dwelt in a village on a manor, by far the greatest influence upon his religion came from

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25 Ibid., p. 236.

his parish priest. The parish priest administered the sacraments, instructed his flock on the commandments and the vices and virtues, and taught them the Pater Noster, the Hail Mary, and the Apostle's Creed. The priest represented the church, and made possible the soul's journey to Heaven. The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council, the bishops' constitutions, and the manuals of instruction all emphasized the crucial role of parish priests. They also revealed great concern over the condition of the priesthood.

The later medieval parish clergy can be divided into three classes: those who held benefices but who did not reside in them or were pluralists, those who did reside in their parishes, and those who worked for a salary in another's benefice. Within these groups there could be a great deal of stratification - as W.A. Pantin said of the non-residents and pluralists:

> They ranged from what canon law called 'sublime and literate persons,' and important and wealthy officials like William of Wykeham or Hugo Pellegrini, down to quite humble people who subsisted on a couple of minute benefices.[26]

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26 Ibid., p. 28. Pantin presents an excellent discussion of the medieval benefice system in Ch. III of his book.

William of Pagula and Chaucer's "poor parson" belonged to the second class. By far the greatest number of parish priests, however, fell into the third category, those who worked for someone else, who lived on a miserable salary, and who were known as vicars. John Mirk, in his manual for priests, assumed that his readers belonged to this third group.

Just as the typical parish priest held no benefice, he also had little education. The lack of any systematic training for priests resulted in much variance in their learning and their abilities. Ignorance and incompetence in the priesthood was a favorite subject of critics, and many of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council, the bishops' synodal constitutions, and the manuals of instruction were aimed at solving these problems.

For all the concern shown by the Church for the education of its parish priests, the actual requirements for ordination were very broad and vague. According to Ackerman, "In general, it was stipulated that the candidate must have demonstrated his fitness in morals and learning."[27] The cornerstone of English education was the urban grammar school, which revolved around the teaching of Latin grammar and some classic medieval works. There were no grammar schools in rural England. Those who desired an education

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27 Ackerman, p. 43.

had to rely on a patron to send them to school, as William Langland evidently did; if a hopeful student did not have family wealth or a patron, his education had to come from a local priest (or from home).

Those fortunate enough to attend university were snapped up for positions in the expanding civil and ecclesiastical bureaucracies. Few indeed were the parish priests with any considerable formal education who actually resided and worked in their parishes. Much more typical must have been the aspiring young priest described by H.S. Bennett in Life on the English Manor, who began his career as servant to the parish priest, who noted the boy's enthusiasm and taught him some Latin. For most, a university education was impossible (and even that presented what we would consider to be, in Bennett's words, "a very narrow education"). For the great majority of parish priests, "a moderate ability to read and construe the Latin of the service books, and a knowledge of the Church services, gained by years of experience, was all their stock in trade."[28] In considering the miserable educational opportunities available to the parish clergy, and their rampant ignorance and incompetence, it must be remembered that William Langland was a member of this class of unbeneficed clergy!

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28 Bennett, H.S., Life on the English Manor: a Study of Peasant Conditions 1150-1400 (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1937), pp. 326-327.

Considering the level of his own education, and the lack of any education in letters on the part of his parishioners, the religious instruction the priest provided was "largely on the plane of simple dogma."[29] Aided by the manuals of instruction written for him, the decrees of church councils, the dictates of his bishop, and his own understanding of church doctrine, the priest set about teaching his flock the basic tenets of Christian belief.[30]

Every Christian was expected to know at least the Pater Noster, the Hail Mary, and the Apostle's Creed. Parents were responsible for teaching these to their children; it was the duty of the priest, during confession, to have the parishioner recite them, and to ensure that he learn them if he could not recite them. Every priest was to preach periodically on these elementary points of Christian belief. The English proclivity to employ rhyme as an aide to learning, seen in numerous religious treatises, extended to the Hail Mary and the Apostle's Creed. Rhymed versions of both appeared in John Mirk's Instructions for Parish Priests.[31] The layman, who could not understand Latin,

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29 Ackerman, p. 52.

30 The ensuing discussion owes much to Ackerman, pp. 90-101.

31 Ibid., p. 92.

was expected to recite these three fundamentals to himself throughout the saying of the mass.[32]

The Ten Commandments figured prominently in sermons, religious treatises, and during confession. Each commandment could be expounded upon at length, with the whole culminating in a universe of sins for the Christian to beware. For example, the priest could employ the fourth commandment, "Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath Day," in his exhortations against "shooting, wrestling, singing, and rioting on Sunday, especially at time of mass."[33]

The religious writers of the fourteenth century were especially fond of allegorizing the seven deadly sins. According to the thirteenth-century Dominican scholar, St. Thomas Aquinas, these are pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, lechery, and gluttony. The parson's sermon from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and the "Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins" from Langland's Piers Plowman are probably the best-known treatments of the seven sins, and represent what Ackerman called "completely traditional reflections of one of the most intense preoccupations of popular Christianity."[34]

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[32] Bennett, p. 323.

[33] Ackerman, p. 93.

[34] Ibid.

Langland's personifications of these sins provide some of the most scathing criticism, the most biting humor, and the most unforgettable pictures of fourteenth-century England presented in his poem. Chaucer's parson, on the other hand, presents a counterpoint to his other, ribald characters and their stories, with his sincere discussion of the sins, their ramifications, and their remedies. It is interesting that the Parson's Tale is the only one of the pilgrims' tales written in prose rather than rhymed verse. The Parson's Tale, in Nevill Coghill's translation, presents a discussion of the seven sins which, while it can be interpreted allegorically, is concise, clear, and much more to the point, for modern readers at any rate, than the lavish versions favored by most medieval writers.[35] The Azenbyte of Inwit ("Remorse of Conscience") contains perhaps a more typically medieval, very elaborate allegory of the sins, in the form of a seven-headed ocean beast. Each head represents a sin, and bears many horns which are the manifestations of the sin depicted.

In any case, all of these depictions of the seven sins:

> aim at teaching the classical Christian theory of sin - namely, that sinful conduct of all kinds is

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[35] Chaucer, Geoffrey, The Canterbury Tales, tr. Nevill Coghill (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1951, reprint 1986), pp. 505-506.

at last the result of the individual's pride or self-love, of his placing his own physical ease and self-esteem above love of God and neighbor.[36]

The remedy for pride was humility, from which all virtues grew. The seven virtues consisted of four cardinal virtues, which came from classical writers, and three theological virtues. The cardinal virtues were temperance, fortitude, prudence, and justice. The theological virtues were faith, hope, and charity. The tree was the image most often used by medieval writers and artists, and the tree of virtues pictured the pot of humility holding the tree, with branches of the virtues, and leaves representing subspecies of the virtues.[37]

The seven sacraments were handled in every religious instruction manual and treatise. By far the most important for the laity was that of penance; it certainly was given the most attention by the writers, as well as by the Fourth Lateran Council. The other sacraments were baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, matrimony, orders, and unction. In general, the writings and sermons dealing with the

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[36] Ackerman, p. 96.

[37] Ibid., pp. 95-97.

sacraments concentrated on "externals," on proper behavior and reverent thoughts, rather than on theory.[38]

Notably missing from this discussion of religious instruction for the medieval laity is the Bible itself. Although Beryl Smalley pointed out that the Bible was "the most studied book of the Middle Ages,"[39] the teaching of Scripture to the laity, as Protestants later understood it, was not practiced. In the age before printing, Bibles were of course extremely rare and expensive; at any rate, rarer still was the layman who could read it. They had to rely on other media for their Bible stories. Religious writers quoted or paraphrased much Biblical material; this practice is especially noticeable in Piers Plowman. One work outstanding for its attempt to relate Biblical history is Cursor Mundi ("Overrunner of the World").[40]

The church employed visual means of relating Biblical stories to the people, appearing in the church building itself. The Christian layman could not understand the Latin mass, he could often barely recite, much less could he theorize upon the meaning of, the Pater Noster, the Hail Mary, or the Apostle's Creed. Unless he lived in

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[38] Ibid., p. 97.

[39] Smalley, Beryl, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952), p. xi.

[40] Ackerman, p. 101.

or frequently visited a town, he rarely had an opportunity to hear a sermon or a reading of Piers Plowman. What did confront him every Sunday, however, were the paintings on the church walls, with their vivid, if not necessarily accurate, depictions of Biblical stories, and with their extremently graphic images of the Last Judgment and of the horrors of Hell that awaited the sinner. The paintings also portrayed the seven sacraments and the vices and virtues, often employing the tree symbol.[41]

Finally, the fourteenth century was the age of the miracle play, which Pantin described as representing:

> a turning point in the development of religious drama, for it was then apparently that the strictly liturgical drama of the early Middle Ages, performed in churches in Latin, gave place to more elaborate vernacular plays, performed outside the churches, in churchyards, in market-places or in the streets.[42]

The miracle plays presented scenes from the Bible, and particularly dwelt on the Nativity and the Passion of Christ. The miracle plays, which paralleled the church wall paintings in their depictions of such Biblical events,

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41 Pantin, p. 240.

42 Ibid., p. 242.

were generally produced in the towns, and probably found a larger audience than did even the sermons.[43]

For all that the sermons, miracle plays, and religious poems and other tracts reached almost exclusively the town folk, they embodied the same themes which were expounded upon by every parish priest and which had been legislated by the Fourth Lateran Council. What Pantin said of fourteenth-century religious art can apply to all types of religious instruction of that age: its aim was "a fairly simple and direct moral and emotional appeal."[44] The seven-headed monster of vices and the seven-branched tree of virtues, the church wall painting of the Last Judgment with its vivid scenes of the glories of Heaven for the saved and the horrors of Hell for the damned, the sermons and homiletic literature, the treatises which dwelled on the same subjects again and again, the poems which entertained while they warned of the consequences of pride, of gluttony, and of the other deadly sins: all of these carried the themes of sin, confession, and penance. Along with the miracle plays, they also stressed Christ's humanity, His Nativity, His Passion, and above all His sacrifice on the cross, which would save mankind. The medieval layman might not be able to hold forth on theory or complicated points

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[43] Ibid., p. 243.

[44] Ibid., p. 241.

of doctrine, but these central themes he must have at least understood, for they bombarded his senses and his life relentlessly. And those who have left us any written record of their spiritual imaginations have shown that these are the themes which determined their Christian spirituality.

CHAPTER 4

THE DISCOVERY OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

The preceding chapters have dealt with the various socio-economic, political, and religious aspects of fourteenth-century England which influenced lay spirituality. All of these can be seen in the light of a broader and more profound phenomenon of that age, one which directly affected, and indeed helped to determine, lay spirituality. This phenomenon was a crucial factor in the emergence of the great English mystics, who so deeply influenced the religious experience of their lay contemporaries. What Colin Morris termed *The Discovery of the Individual* took place in the twelfth century; the promise of that discovery was realized in the fourteenth. Morris saw individualism in the great humanists of the twelfth century, in Peter Abelard, Heloise, and Ailred of Rievaulx. Here indeed lay great promise, which was fulfilled in the fourteenth-century mystics who expressed religious individualism as few had done before. At the same time, the widespread use of the English language along with certain developments in the church enabled believers other than the learned to experience a sense of self.

Morris was concerned not with political but with personal individualism, which manifested itself in the study of personal character and in the pursuit of self-knowledge.[1] He perceived western individualism as almost an eccentricity among world cultures, characterized by acute self-awareness, and he traced its origins to western Christianity and to classical antiquity. Morris maintained that although the early church emphasized community over individuality, Christianity's:

> central belief, that God became man for man's salvation, is itself an affirmation of human dignity which could hardly be surpassed, and its principal ethical precept is that a man must love others as he loves himself.[2]

He stressed the link between humanism and individualism, with the reminder that "it is difficult to have a high regard for humanity if one does not value individual men."[3]

The recovery of classical learning and of Latin, the particular individualism of Christianity, and their blending in twelfth-century humanism were crucial to the discovery

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1 Morris, Colin, The Discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200 (New York, 1973), pp. 3-4.

2 Ibid., p. 11.

3 Ibid., p. 10.

of the individual. Similarly, currents running from 1200 to 1400 were crucial to the further development of the individual, one who need not be scholar or monk. Ironically, the catalyst which made the new vein of individualism possible was a move away from Latin and toward the use of the vernacular language. In England, it further involved a move away from French.

Since the Norman Conquest, French had been the language of the rulers, of noble society, and of politics. By the end of the fourteenth century, this had changed: In a version of his Confessio Amantis written in 1390, the poet John Gower, who hitherto had employed Latin or French in his works, explained that King Richard II personally had requested that Gower write in English. Gower graciously acquiesced.[4] Politics played a part in this lingual transformation, of course. While twelfth-century rulers of England still considered England a part of France, their fourteenth-century descendants claimed parts of France as belonging to England. The Hundred Years War came out of this change in perspective, and fostered English nationalism and Francophobia. These political developments were reflected in the transition from French to English as the proper language of courts of law and of Parliament.

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4 McKisack, May, The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399 (Oxford, 1959), pp. 528-9.

A statute of 1362 mandated the use of English in courts of law; in 1363, the chancellor first opened Parliament in English.[5] Although French remained the language of Richard II's court, Shakespeare made excellent use of Henry V's inability to speak French, and Henry's touching conversation with his beloved Kate took place less than twenty years after Richard's reign had ended! These developments had been anticipated in the grammar schools; in the 1340s schoolmasters at Oxford first required their students to construe Latin into English rather than into French, and by the 1380s this had become the general practice.[6]

It was in the realm of literature that the English language truly blossomed in the fourteenth century. The tradition of magnificent English poets is firmly rooted in the age of Chaucer, Langland, and the Pearl author. They were joined by the creators, generally anonymous, of the miracle plays, and the writers of didactic religious literature. May McKisack noted that by the time John Gower wrote his last notable work, in English, c.1390:

> English had invaded the realms of lyric and romance, of comedy and tragedy, of allegory and drama, of religion

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[5] Ibid., p. 524.

[6] Ibid.

and education. It had become the language, not of a conquered, but of a conquering people.[7]

The area in which this English invasion boded most ominously and most tellingly was in the translation of the Bible. Calls for vernacular renditions of the Holy Word had been sounded at least since the efforts of Peter Waldo in the twelfth century, and since then had been linked with unorthodoxy. The church had discouraged Bible-reading in the twelfth century, and continued to do so in the fourteenth. And it was indeed an unorthodox, if not dangerously heretical, group which published the first English translation of the Bible in its entirety. The original Lollard Bible appeared in the 1370s; the second, much more readable edition was completed in 1396, and enjoyed wide popularity, as evidenced by the existence of over one hundred fifty manuscript copies.[8] McKisack summed up the significance of the Lollard Bible this way:

> If the association of the vernacular Bible with unorthodoxy was in some ways unfortunate, it is none the less evident that the lollards had met a demand which extended far beyond the circle of their adherents.

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7 Ibid., p. 525.

8 Ibid., pp. 523-4.

> The decline of French as the language of educated society and the great resurgence of English as a literary language in the second half of the fourteenth century, meant that, despite persistent discouragement of Bible-reading by authority, an English Bible had become a necessity, long before the Reformation.[9]

Exactly why the church so greatly feared vernacular translations of the Bible has much to do with the rise of individualism, and with the connection between vernacular Bibles and unorthodoxy. The church's position was that Holy Scripture in the wrong hands too easily could be misinterpreted. The church opposed lay preaching on the same grounds. The official position held that only an ordained priest could interpret Scripture, and only such a one could preach the Word to the people. Church doctrine was built upon centuries of tradition and scholarly authority; it was no simple thing to be read directly in the Bible and understood by all Christians. These concerns of the church are plausible, yet there was much more at stake than correct understanding of doctrine. If any Christian were free to read the Word of God for himself, what need had he of a priest to relate the Word to him? And if he could read and interpret Scripture for himself, could he

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9 Ibid., p. 524.

not start to question other fundamentals of catholic faith, as did the very Lollards who published that first translation? And perhaps those who feared vernacular Bibles and who burned Lollards were justified in their fears; the basic tenets of Protestantism, including salvation through faith rather than through works, rest upon the absolute authority of Scripture and the priesthood of the believer. If the Christian no longer needed the organized catholic church, what would become of that church? These questions would not help bring about the end of that universal church for more than one hundred fifty years, but they certainly were lurking in the shadows of fourteenth-century England. And they were made possible when men and women began to release themselves from the absolute authority of the church hierarchy, and to rely upon what they could read and think about and discover for themselves. This required what Morris had called acute self-awareness and introspection.

There were, nevertheless, changes within the orthodox church which stressed the role of the individual, as well as his worth. Morris pointed to Christianity's promise of salvation for all men, and the value which that promise places on the individual. Morris also held that the discovery of the individual was closely tied to twelfth-century humanism. The effects of that humanism upon Christian belief are particularly evident in the fourteenth century.

The theology of Peter Abelard illustrates this humanistic influence. Abelard's hymns on the Passion of Christ reflect a change in perception. The traditional interpretation of the Passion had depicted it as a victory; crucifixes had portrayed a living, glorious Christ. Abelard's hymns called for compassion for the suffering Christ. Christians were beginning to identify with Christ's humanity, to see Him as a man, not only as a divine judge. Identification with the Passion of Christ reached its greatest and most eloquent heights in the writings of the fourteenth-century mystic, Julian of Norwich. Abelard's attitude towards sin heralds a move in the direction of Christian introspection. His interpretation of sin as lying "solely in the intention" represented to Morris a "striking instance of the contemporary movement away from external regulations towards an insight into individual character...."[10] The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 further reflect concern with introspection and with individual character. The requirement of annual confession put into effect by the Council placed great emphasis on a very personal and individual aspect of religious practice.

It was not humanistic but mystic theology which found such moving expression in fourteenth-century England. In fact, the most celebrated and individualistic

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[10] Morris, p. 75.

twelfth-century mystic was Abelard's arch-rival, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Ever fearful of applying human reason to church doctrine, and therefore ever fearful of Abelard, St. Bernard did display "a mysticism which gave an outstanding place to the individual."[11] He believed that the ultimate Christian experience, the union with God, fulfilled rather than absorbed the self, which maintained its separate identity after the union.[12] The mystical theology of St. Bernard blended with the humanism of Peter Abelard to create a mysticism centered on the Passion of Christ. This evolving mysticism found fullest expression in fourteenth-century England in the resurging language of the English people.

Another trend in western Christianity encouraged individual spiritual development. In the twelfth century, monasticism was revered as the surest way to Christian perfection. All over western Europe new monastic orders sprang up, and the numbers of religious grew enormously. This was the century which witnessed the tremendous growth of the Cistercian order, the founding of the first Premonstratensian, Carthusian, and Gilbertine houses, the establishment of the order of Austin canons, and the formation of the military orders of the Knights Templar, the Knights Hospitallers, and the Teutonic Knights. By the end of

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[11] Ibid., p. 157.

[12] Ibid.

the fourteenth century, the old monastic zeal had given way to concentration on individual piety and on introspection. The number of hermits and anchorites in England reached its zenith in the fourteenth century. The monastic communities which did grow were eremitical. David Knowles observed that from 1340 to 1400 six new Charterhouses - belonging to the severely ascetic and eremitic Carthusians - were founded; this number made up two-thirds of the houses of that order established in England.[13] Concerning these developments, Knowles observed:

> Neither Charterhouses nor movements of ideas can of themselves produce mystics, but it can at least be said that the religious climate of the age was sympathetic to a personal and 'mystical' approach to the way of perfection; the older conception of the monastic life as the only secure way of salvation...had lost its wide appeal and its place had been taken...by the way of personal, if not solitary, endeavor.[14]

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13 Knowles, David, The English Mystical Tradition (New York, 1961), p. 43.

14 Ibid.

Study of the mystics requires a definition of "mysticism" as it is understood in the Christian church. There is no better instructor than David Knowles, who wrote in _The English Mystical Tradition_ that of the three kinds of knowledge of God, or theology, there is one:

> by which God and the truths of Christianity can not only be believed and acted upon, but can in varying degrees be directly known and experienced...This knowledge, this experience, which is never entirely separable from an equally immediate and experimental union with God by love, has three main characteristics. It is recognized by the person concerned as something utterly different from and more real and adequate than all his previous knowledge and love of God...It is felt as taking place at a deeper level of the personality and soul than that on which the normal processes of thought and will take place, and the mystic is aware...of the soul, its qualities and of the divine presence and action within it, as something wholly distinct from the reasoning mind with its powers. Finally, this experience is wholly incommunicable, save as a bare statement, and in this respect all the utterances of the mystics are entirely inadequate as representations of the mystical experience, but it brings absolute certainty to the mind of the

recipient. This is the traditional mystical theology, the mystical knowledge of God, in its purest form.[15]

The great question which the mystics themselves pondered, and which continues to confront all who study mystical theology, is this: Is the mystical experience possible for all Christians, or is it open only to a chosen few? The great mystic teachers all agree that the mystical knowledge of God is a free gift from Him, and cannot be earned. On the other hand, there are those who have come to the mystical life not suddenly or easily, but through years of prayer and striving, of total dedication of themselves to Christ.[16] It is a question which probably cannot ever be answered in this world. The fact remains that in fourteenth-century England, as in other parts of western Europe, a number of mystics emerged who were revered for their holiness, whose writings were often books of instruction for those who would pursue the mystical life. Their works still stand among the greatest testaments ever given of the mystical experience.

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15 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

16 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

CHAPTER 5

THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE MYSTICS

The four great English mystics of the fourteenth century were Richard Rolle, the unknown author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich. Although very little is known of their lives, certain facts can be ascertained, and certain conclusions drawn about them. Richard Rolle was for much of his life a hermit, and is known as the Hermit of Hampole. He was apparently the best-known of the mystics, and his works remained popular until the Reformation. Large numbers of manuscript copies of his works exist. Julian of Norwich, like Rolle, lived the life of a solitary, as an anchoress. Of course even the name of the author of The Cloud remains a mystery, although he was probably a solitary, and perhaps a Dominican.[1] Walter Hilton is thought to have lived for a while as a hermit; he eventually became a canon in an Augustinian priory. All four of the mystics followed the solitary life. All wrote from personal experience of the mystical knowledge of God, and for the instruction of others who aspired to the solitary or mystical life. All exhibited

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[1] Knowles, David, The English Mystical Tradition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 71.

a mastery of expression in the English language. For all their similarities, they did display great differences in their approach to, as well as in the depth of, their spiritual experiences.

Richard Rolle's most famous work, The Fire of Love (Incendium Amoris), written in the first person and containing autobiographical information, is a testimony to what Rolle believed to be an ultimate contemplative experience. The author of The Cloud and Hilton, on the other hand, make little mention of themselves in their writings. Their spirituality is much more advanced and complex than Rolle's. The author of The Cloud even warned against taking too seriously such signs as Rolle's "heat" and "sweetness," which he believed were superficial and misguiding.[2] At the same time, the Cloud author and Hilton lack Rolle's warmth and joy. Julian of Norwich, the last of the great mystics of her age, regained the personal aspect of the mystical life in her Showings. At age thirty, she was given her showings, sixteen revelations of the Passion of Christ, which guided the rest of her religious life. Julian recaptures the personal emotion of Rolle, while developing even farther than the Cloud author and Hilton an insight into the mystical knowledge of God.

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2 Ibid., p. 96.

Richard Rolle was born about the year 1300, in Thornton-le-dale, Yorkshire, and is believed to have died in September 1349, of the plague. Thanks to the information he supplies in his writings, and that provided in the *Legenda* written by the nuns of Hampole in anticipation of his canonization (which never occurred), more is known of his life than of the other English mystics. Rolle studied at Oxford, but left at age nineteen, before taking a degree. He returned to Yorkshire, only to run away from home, according to the *Legenda*, to become a hermit. Although he spent much of his life as a hermit, Rolle was never officially licensed by the bishop, as the church generally required. His tendency to avoid the ordinary routes of religion emerges in his writing; he makes frequent allusion to his belief that the way to holiness is not through ecclesiastical office or recognition. For Rolle, the only way is through abiding love of God, a love stemming from humility.

The experience which moved Rolle to write *The Fire of Love* he describes in the opening sentence of his Prologue:

> I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth, too, not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire. I was astonished at the way the heat surged up, and how this new sensation brought great and unexpected comfort. I had to keep feeling my breast

> to make sure there was no physical reason for it!
> But once I realized that it came entirely from within,
> that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful,
> but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted,
> and wanted my love to be even greater.[3]

Rolle ends his prologue in his typically artless manner:

> I offer...this book for the attention, not of the
> philosophers and sages of this world, not of great
> theologians...but of the simple and unlearned, who
> are seeking rather to love God than to amass knowledge.
> For he is not known by argument, but by what we do
> and how we love...And so, because I would stir up
> by these means every man to love God, and because
> I am trying to make plain the ardent nature of love
> and how it is supernatural, the title selected for
> this book will be The Fire of Love.[4]

The whole of the book continues in this simple, straight-forward style. Rolle's appeal lies in the energy of his conviction, in the beauty of his language, and in the

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3 Rolle, Richard, The Fire of Love, translated into modern English with an introduction by Clifton Wolters (London, 1972, reprinted 1988), p. 45.

4 Ibid., pp. 46-47.

practical advice he offers. Rolle's goal is the love of God, his means of achieving it is through forsaking love of worldly things and earthly honors, his ultimate mystical experience lies in the fire of love. Rolle writes again and again of the three manifestations of this union with God:

> Therefore all those who are filled with love and joy, the seekers after inextinguishable heat, unite to sing in one glorious choir of rich melody...The very fervour of their sweet love ravishes them with the sight of their Beloved. Flowering through this loving flame into all virtue they rejoice in their Maker. Their mind is changed and passes into lasting melody. From now on their meditations become song....When the time comes for them to leave this irksome, sick world, without a shadow of a doubt they are borne up to God...And it is all because they were completely absorbed in supreme love, an indescribable love that blazed in their souls, and made them love God with such sweetness and devotion. Fundamentally they knew nothing within themselves but spiritual heat, heavenly song, divine sweetness.[5]

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[5] Ibid., pp. 59-60.

Rolle later relates the significance of the fire, the song, and the sweetness: "In these three things (which are the sign of love in its most perfect form) the utmost perfection of the Christian religion is undoubtedly found."[6]

It is not difficult to discern Rolle's appeal to the common man and woman. His three manifestations of mystical love, expressed in sensory terms, were easily accessible; Margery Kempe spoke of the fire she felt, the sweet melodies she heard. Here is where Rolle has earned criticism, not only from his contemporaries, but from modern historians, especially David Knowles, who felt that Rolle's experiences were those of a "beginner," and that he never showed signs of considering "the higher degrees of the mystical life,"[7] as did the author of The Cloud, Hilton, and Julian. There are those who disagree with Knowles on Rolle's mysticism, notably Rolle's modern translators and editors. Other scholars also contest Knowles' view. In The Spirituality of the Middle Ages, François Vandenbroucke sympathized with Rolle's experiences as being truly spiritual and not merely sensory, since Rolle:

> distinguishes two kinds of 'ravishing' or rapture, one with loss of the bodily senses and the other without

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[6] Ibid., p. 89.

[7] Knowles, pp. 53-54.

it. The second is more perfect than the first, because it is more meritorious; it consists in 'the elevation of the spirit into God by contemplation.'[8]

Other aspects of Rolle's writing and his mysticism held allure for lay spirituality. His style was unadorned, his experience easily understood, his message straightforward. He had little use for the wealthy, the titled, for those in ecclesiastical office. He rallied for the poor and suffering, whose tribulations, if borne gladly in Christian love and humility, would earn them the joys of Heaven.[9] He further felt love to be far superior to knowledge, echoing the anti-intellectual climate of the spirituality of his age.

Finally, Rolle's writings have a personal, cozy feel. He is not afraid to reveal his own weaknesses and temptations, and to use them to good effect. His trials resemble those of Margery Kempe, who was forever undergoing some humiliation for the sake of her religion, and who generally came out on top in the struggle! One memorable scene in The Fire of Love describes four women who criticized Rolle:

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8 LeClercq, Jean, et al., A History of Christian Spirituality, vol. II, The Spirituality of the Middle Ages, tr. The Benedictines of Home Eden Abbey, Carlisle (Burns & Oates, London, 1968), p. 419.

9 Rolle, The Fire of Love, pp. 65-66.

> One rebuked me because in my eagerness to restrain the feminine craze for dressy and suggestive clothes I inspected too closely their extravagant ornamentation ...Another rebuked me because I spoke of her great bosom as if it pleased me...The third jokingly took me up when I appeared to be going to touch her somewhat rudely, and perhaps had already done so, by saying, 'Calm down, brother!'...When I came to myself I thanked God for teaching me what was right through their words...A fourth woman with whom I was in some way familiar did not so much rebuke me as despise me when she said 'You are no more than a beautiful face and a lovely voice: you have done nothing.' I think it better therefore to dispense with whatever their particular contribution to life is, rather than to fall into their hands, hands which know no moderation whether loving or despising! Yet these things happened because I was seeking their salvation, and not because I was after anything improper.[10]

This startling passage reveals Rolle's characteristic method of dealing with sexual temptation. He repeatedly and harshly attacked women for leading men to sin, and thereby exposed his own weaknesses where women were concerned.

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[10] Ibid., pp. 81-82.

Rolle's bouts with forbidden desire call to mind the twelfth-century recluse, Christina of Markyate, whose Life includes a description of a vision of Christ entering her womb in the form of a baby. This scene has led to speculation that Christina actually gave birth to a baby.

For all its homespun appeal, The Fire of Love was not written in the vernacular, but in Latin. Rolle's greatest English work is The Form of Living, whose title means Model or Pattern of Living. The Form was a guide to the contemplative life written for an anchoress named Margaret Kirkby. Margaret, formerly a nun of Hampole, was enclosed at East Layton in December 1348; Rolle must have written The Form at that time or soon afterward, as he died the following September.[11] The Form's popularity is evidenced by the existence of thirty-eight manuscript copies in English, plus several Latin renditions and fragments, and an edition of the first six chapters in verse.[12]

Although The Form is more methodical than The Fire of Love, with less anecdotal information, its themes are the same, and they are expressed with Rolle's typical candor and warmth. He describes the three kinds of weakness which lead sinful people to Hell: "lack of spiritual vigor,"

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11 Rolle, Richard, The English Writings, tr., ed., and introduced by Rosamund Allen (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 152.

12 Ibid., p. 153.

or giving in to temptation; "putting bodily desires into practice;" and exchanging "a permanent good for a transitory pleasure; in other words, they exchange unending happiness for a little fun in this life."[13] Rolle includes in this discourse on weakness a comment which rings with beauty, and then ends on a typically picturesque note:

> ...a man who does not possess Jesus Christ loses everything he owns, and everything he is, and everything he might acquire; he does not deserve to live, not even to be fed with the food pigs eat.[14]

While counselling humility and the forsaking of the love for this world, Rolle at the same time cautions against excessive abstinence or asceticism. Such practices deprive the believer of the strength he needs to serve God; furthermore, they are only external signs which can be employed by hypocrites who are seeking glory and honor for their holy ways. On excessive abstinence, Rolle says:

> ...I know very well, it is not God's wish that we should do this, because the prophet says, 'Lord, I shall reserve my strength for you'(Psalm 59:9), so

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13 Ibid., pp. 153-154.

14 Ibid., p. 154.

> that he would be able to sustain his service of God to his dying day, and not fritter it away in a short little space of time, and then languish wasting away and groaning beside the wall.[15]

Rolle felt it unnecessary to wear a hair shirt or practice other forms of extreme asceticism:

> For I don't want you to think that all those who bear the outward appearance of holiness are holy and not preoccupied by the world; nor that all who concern themselves with worldly affairs are sinful.[16]

In his guide for Margaret's enclosure, Rolle wrote of the four things she must understand to "be properly prepared" for her enclosed life of contemplation: "what things corrupt an individual...what purifies one...what preserves one in purity...what things induce one to subordinate the entire will to God's will..."[17] In this section, he includes lengthy lists of the three kinds of sin, those of inner feelings, of speech, and of actions,

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15 Rolle, The English Writings, p. 155.

16 Ibid., p. 161.

17 Ibid., p. 164.

as well as numerous miscellaneous sins.[18] The three things that purify, for example, are "heartfelt contrition," "oral confession," and "satisfaction" which comes through "fasting, prayer, and acts of charity."[19]

Rolle then discusses love at some length. He describes the three degrees of love: insuperable, inseparable, and singular. Insuperable love exists "when nothing which is contrary to love of God can overcome it...." The next degree of love, inseparable, is attained:

> when all your heart and your thought and your strength are so wholly, so entirely and so perfectly fastened, fixed and confirmed in Jesus Christ that your thought never slips away from him, never being parted from him except when sleeping...When you are not able to forget him at any time, whatever you do or say, then your love is inseparable.[20]

Only a very few souls reach the highest degree of love:

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[18] Ibid., pp. 164-166.

[19] Ibid., p. 166.

[20] Ibid., pp. 170-171.

> where all comfort and consolation are excluded from your heart except those of Jesus Christ alone...Then your soul is loving Jesus, thinking Jesus, desiring Jesus, breathing only in its desire for him, singing to him, catching fire from him, resting from him. Then the song of praising and of love has arrived...the soul which is in the third degree is like burning fire and like the nightingale which loves song and harmony and exhausts itself in its great love; in this way the soul is (only) comforted by its praising and loving of God, and until death comes is singing spiritually to Jesus and in Jesus.[21]

Rolle generally is not given to pondering great questions of contemplation, but he does ask, as well as attempt to answer, several concerning love: "What is love?" It is a burning desire for God. "Where is love?" It is in the soul, in the heart.[22]

Finally, Rolle speaks of the two Christian lifestyles, the active and the contemplative. Those who follow the active life should perform, among their other works of faith, the seven corporal acts of mercy:

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21 Ibid., pp. 171-172.

22 Ibid., pp. 174-177.

> to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty drink, to clothe the naked, to give shelter to those who have no housing, to visit the sick, to give assistance to those who are in prison, and to bury the dead.[23]

He ends The Form by describing the state of the contemplative, encapsulating his perception of the mystical experience:

> A man or woman who has the vocation to the contemplative life is first inspired by God to abandon this world and all the frivolities and materialism and the debased physical urges of it...then (after they have tasted the sweetness of the love of God) he motivates them to devote themselves to holy prayer, meditations, and tears. Later, when they have experienced many temptations, and when the impure assault of thoughts which are trivial, and of frivolous matters, which will overwhelm those who are not able to destroy them, are retreating, then he does cause them to assemble their heart within themselves and fix (it) solely on him, and he opens the gates of heaven to the eye of their souls, so that the eye itself (may look) into heaven. And then the fire of love is really ablaze in their heart, burning there, making it cleansed

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[23] Ibid., pp. 181-182.

> of all earthly contamination; and from that time onward they are contemplatives, enraptured in love, because contemplation is a vision, and they gaze inside heaven, with their spiritual eye.[24]

While Richard Rolle is content simply to describe such manifestations of the mystical life, the author of The Cloud of Unknowing probes much deeper into the theology involved. In many ways he seems to pick up where Rolle left off, giving credence to Knowles' observation that Rolle was only a beginner. Knowles felt that the author of The Cloud "has some claims to be considered the most subtle and incisive, as well as the most original, spiritual writer in the English language."[25] Although the manuscript tradition of The Cloud indicates its long popularity, it gives little or no hint of the identity of its author, or of the dates or location of his work. Scholars have been able to determine from the manuscripts his probable origin in the East Midlands. His familiarity with Rolle, and Hilton's with him, lead to the conclusion that he wrote between 1345 and 1386; Knowles places the date closer to the latter end of that period.[26] While there is some support

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24 Ibid., pp. 182-183.

25 Knowles, The English Mystical Tradition, p. 67.

26 Ibid., p. 70.

for Carthusian connections in The Cloud, Knowles finally concludes that the author was more likely a Dominican. He rejects totally the idea once held that the author could have been Walter Hilton. It would appear that this great mystic wanted to remain anonymous, and he has succeeded for more than six hundred years.

The Cloud of Unknowing is intended as a guide for a young man who has just taken up the solitary life. There is little or none of the anecdote, the homey illustration, the moralizing tone of Rolle here. The author does not expect to be understood by every reader or listener, nor does he desire it. He writes only for the person who is "deeply committed to follow Christ perfectly...who...has resolved to follow Christ (as far as is humanly possible with God's grace) into the inmost depths of contemplation."[27] Yet his message, like Rolle's, is love. Love of God surpasses knowledge, love for God must leave behind love of any earthly thing, love is the only way to reach God. This love for God can be found only through the cloud of unknowing.

The author of The Cloud describes the four phases of growth in the Christian life: the Common, the Special, the Singular, and the Perfect. His student has passed through the Common phase where most Christians stay, through

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27 The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling, ed. with introduction by William Johnston (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1973), p. 43.

the Special, and now is embarking upon the Singular, living "at the deep solitary core of your being, learning to direct your loving desire toward the highest and final manner of living which I have called Perfect."[28] The pursuit of this perfection is the subject of the Cloud. At the start of his spiritual journey, which is a gift of God and cannot be merited, the young student will likely at first:

> feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. Try as you might, this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God...But learn to be at home in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud. But if you strive to fix your love on him forgetting all else, which is the work of contemplation I have urged you to begin, I am confident

28 Ibid., pp. 45-56.

> that God in his goodness will bring you to a deep experience of himself.[29]

The key to reaching the Perfect phase of the Christian life is this:

> He whom neither men nor angels can grasp by knowledge can be embraced by love. For the intellect of both men and angels is too small to comprehend God as he is in himself.
>
> Try to understand this point. Rational creatures such as men and angels possess two principal faculties, a knowing power and a loving power. No one can fully comprehend the uncreated God with knowledge; but each one, in a different way, can grasp him fully through love.[30]

It is important that the student understand that he cannot simply imagine a dark cloud above him and thereby enter the cloud of unknowing, for:

> When I speak of darkness I mean the absence of knowledge. If you are unable to understand something or if you

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29 Ibid., pp. 48-49.

30 Ibid., p. 50.

> have forgotten it, are you not in the dark as regards this thing? You cannot see it with your mind's eye. Well, in the same way, I have not said 'cloud,' but cloud of unknowing. For it is a darkness of unknowing that lies between you and your God.[31]

To enter this cloud, the student must create a cloud of forgetting between himself and every created thing and activity:

> I make no exception. You are to concern yourself with no creature whether material or spiritual nor with their situation and doings whether good or ill. To put it briefly, during this work you must abandon them all beneath the cloud of forgetting.[32]

When the young contemplative asks, "How shall I proceed to think of God as he is in himself?" his teacher can only answer "I do not know." He has discovered that:

> Thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I can know, choosing rather to love him

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[31] Ibid., p. 53.

[32] Ibid.

> whom I cannot know. Though we cannot know him we can love him.[33]

He has reached the cloud of unknowing, and within it, he can love God without thought or reason.

This is the essence of the spirituality of the author or The Cloud. In subsequent chapters he deals with many aspects of the contemplative life - why it is the higher of the two forms of Christian living, what pitfalls await the one who has chosen the contemplative life, what signs show that a person has been chosen by God for contemplation. Throughout, the author deals with each step, each obstacle along the way with a quiet authority which is reassuring, and which must come from one who personally has dwelt in the cloud of unknowing for a long time.

He deals with the same subjects which Richard Rolle discusses, but in a less sermonizing manner, and with a grasp of their deeper meanings. When Rolle counsels Margaret on the folly of excessive abstinence and asceticism, he warns against weakening the body and falling prey to the sin of pride. The author of The Cloud relates abstinence and asceticism to the sins they are intended to drive out:

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[33] Ibid., p. 54.

> Fast as much as you like, watch far into the night, rise long before dawn, discipline your body, and if it were permitted - which it is not - put out your eyes, tear out your tongue, plug up your ears and nose, and cut off your limbs; yes, chastise your body with every discipline and you would still gain nothing. The desire and tendency toward sin would remain in your heart.[34]

The only way to rid the heart of the root of sin is through contemplative love.

The author of The Cloud tells his student of what awaits him if he perseveres in the work of contemplation, for difficult work it is:

> Then perhaps he may touch you with a ray of his divine light which will pierce the cloud of unknowing between you and him. He will let you glimpse something of the ineffable secrets of his divine wisdom and your affection will seem on fire with his love. I am at a loss to say more, for the experience is beyond words. Even if I were able to say more I would not now.

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[34] Ibid., p. 64.

For I dare not try to describe God's grace with my crude and awkward tongue.[35]

The unknown teacher mentions several times the fire of love, as well as "other consolations, sounds, joys, or delights," in passages that seem to point to Rolle's writings. He differentiates between that delight which "does not originate outside the person, entering through the windows of his faculties, but wells up from an excess of spiritual joy and true devotion of spirit," and that which does come from outside, and which may be good or evil.[36] Whereas Rolle treats the fire, song, and sweetness as ultimate manifestations of contemplative love, and places almost his entire emphasis upon them, the author of _The Cloud_ treats them as only a part, and possibly a dangerous part at that, of the mystical experience. Herein lies the great difference between these two writers: Rolle's mysticism can be much more easily grasped and displayed; the mysticism of the _Cloud_ author requires much deeper contemplation. When the two authors are compared, Rolle's mysticism comes out as the more superficial. The author of _The Cloud_ has experienced the fire of love, but he has passed beyond it and has explored the cloud of unknowing.

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35 Ibid., p. 84.

36 Ibid., pp. 109-110.

Much closer in spirit to the Cloud author than to Rolle is Walter Hilton. Although he is almost as enigmatic as his predecessor, it is agreed that he must have attended Cambridge, then spent time as a hermit, and finally became an Augustinian canon. He died March 24, 1396. Hilton's most famous work is The Ladder of Perfection. As did both his forerunners, in his great work he is counselling someone who has embarked upon the contemplative life. Hilton's student is an anchoress. In describing Hilton's style, David Knowles remarked, "When reading The Cloud...we feel the impact of a strong, original, masterful and independent personality; Hilton is gentler and less aloof." Knowles further points out that The Ladder is much more methodical and well-planned than either The Cloud or Rolle's works.[37]

Rolle's theme of contemplation revolves around the fire of love, that of the author of The Cloud centers upon the cloud of unknowing. To understand Hilton's approach to contemplation, it is helpful to keep in mind what Clifton Wolters said of him in his introduction to The Ladder of Perfection: "While many writers on spirituality tend to stress the mystery and remoteness of the Godhead, Hilton is emphatic that he has fully revealed himself in Jesus

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[37] Knowles, pp. 100-101.

Christ...."[38] Here we may add to David Knowles' definition of mysticism that of Evelyn Underhill:

> Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or lesser degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.[39]

Wolters expands this by saying that "the union can only be achieved by man's responding in love to God's love, and...this has been made possible by the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ."[40] While, as Wolters points out, all four of the great English mystics would agree with this expanded definition, it is Hilton whose work emphasizes the central role of Jesus Christ.

The Ladder of Perfection begins by admonishing Christians against hypocrisy. The second chapter discusses the two ways of Christian life, the active and the contemplative. To Rolle's requirement that actives perform the seven corporal works of mercy, Hilton adds the seven spiritual works of

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38 Hilton, Walter, The Ladder of Perfection, tr. Leo Sherley-Price, introduction by Clifton Wolters (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1957; reprint 1988), p. xxii.

39 Ibid., p. xx. Wolters is quoting from Evelyn Underhill's Practical Mysticism.

40 Ibid.

mercy: to correct the sinner, to teach the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, and to pray for the living and the departed.[41] He further directs the active Christian to do penance:

> For the body must be chastised with discretion to atone for our past misdoings, to restrain its desires and inclinations to sin, and to render it obedient and ready to obey the spirit."[42]

These practices are also useful to the contemplative at the beginning of his calling.

Hilton devotes the remainder of The Ladder to the stages of the contemplative life, to the progression toward perfection. He writes that there are three degrees of the contemplative life:

> The first degree consists in knowledge of God and of spiritual matters. It is reached through the use of reason, through the teachings of others, and by the study of the Holy Scriptures; it is not accompanied

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41 Ibid., p. 255.

42 Ibid., p. 2.

> by feelings of devotion infused by a special gift of the Holy Spirit.[43]

This degree is good for the knowledge it brings, but it is not true contemplation, "since it can be acquired without love." Without love, this knowledge can lead to the sin of pride. The second degree of contemplation "consists principally in loving God, and does not depend upon intellectual light in spiritual matters." In this degree, the Holy Spirit brings such "joy, delight, and comfort" to the person meditating that "he desires nothing more than to pray and feel as he is doing."[44]

The third degree of contemplation:

> consists of both knowledge and love; that is, in knowing God and loving Him perfectly. This is achieved when the soul is restored to the likeness of Jesus and filled with all virtues. It is then endowed with grace, detached from all earthly and carnal affections, and from all unprofitable thoughts and considerations of created things, and is caught up out of its bodily senses. The grace of God then illumines the mind to see all truth - that is, God - and spiritual things

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43 Ibid., p. 3.

44 Ibid., p. 5.

> in Him with a soft, sweet, burning love. So perfectly is this effected that for a while the soul becomes united to God in an ecstasy of love, and is conformed to the likeness of the Trinity...Whenever a soul is united to God in this ecstasy of love, then God and the soul are no longer two, but one: not, indeed, in nature, but in spirit. In this union a true marriage is made between God and the soul which shall never be broken.[45]

God may grant the gift of this degree to any Christian, but only the contemplative can fully experience it.

Here Hilton warns the aspiring mystic about visions and other

> sensible experiences of seemingly spiritual origin, whether of sound, taste, smell, or of warmth felt like a glowing fire in the breast or in other parts of the body; anything, indeed, that can be experienced by the physical senses.[46]

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45 Ibid., pp. 7-8.

46 Ibid., p. 10.

These sensations do not signify true contemplation. Hilton points a finger even more specifically at Rolle and his followers when he says:

> And should you hear any sweet melody or suddenly taste a sweet but unaccountable savour in your mouth, or a fiery heat in your breast, or any other kind of pleasurable sensation elsewhere in your body, be on your guard.[47]

These sensory experiences come from angels, good or evil, not from union with God. True contemplation should not be pursued for the pleasure that these sensations bring, but "that your soul may come to a real perception of God."

> Be rooted and grounded in love...that with all the saints you may know and experience something of the greatness of His wonderful love and goodness, the height of His almighty majesty, and the boundless depth of His wisdom.[48]

After dispensing with the faint-hearted in this manner, Hilton launches the student on a soul-searching quest for

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[47] Ibid., p. 11.

[48] Ibid., pp. 13-14.

true contemplation. He discusses the three means which mystics utilize in this work: reading of Scripture and other spiritual books, meditation, and prayer. Since Hilton's anchoress cannot read (a curious statement which he makes in Chapter 15 of The Ladder, leading to speculation that his anchoress is a literary device), he directs her to concentrate on the other practices. Through meditation she will realize her sins and will recognize the virtues she lacks; through prayer she will be cleansed of her sins and will acquire the virtues she needs. Hilton discusses prayer at some length, and in these passages the simple beauty and strength of his counsel shines through:

> The purpose of prayer is not to inform our Lord what you desire, for He knows all your needs. It is to render you able and ready to receive the grace which our Lord will freely give you...Although prayer is not the cause for which our Lord gives grace, it is nevertheless the means by which grace, freely given, comes to the soul.[49]

In common with the other religious teachers of his day, Hilton advises his student to recite the Pater Noster and the Hail Mary. Hilton in fact includes all of the

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49 Ibid., p. 28.

basic spiritual instruction of his time in The Ladder. He explains that the contemplative must acquire humility:

> for it is the first and last of all virtues; as Saint Augustine says, if you plan to build a high house of virtues, first lay deep foundations of humility. It is also the last because it preserves and guards all other virtues: as Saint Gregory says: Whoever acquires any virtues without humility is like a man who carries powdered spices in the wind.[50]

When the student has obtained humility, she must hold firmly to the articles of faith and to the sacraments. Hilton admonishes her, and all Christians as well, to follow all rules and regulations made by those who govern the church, without question or criticism.[51] Here, as elsewhere in The Ladder, Hilton aims his pen at those he calls heretics, who stir up the simple to unnecessary fear and despondency. It is also noteworthy that Hilton spends over one-fourth of the first book of The Ladder on the seven sins. All sins stem from pride, the "misguided love of self."[52]

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[50] Ibid., p. 20.

[51] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

[52] Ibid., p. 66.

Although his discourse on sin is a lengthy one, Hilton's message does ring more with hope for eternal salvation than with despair in the human condition. This hope lies in Jesus Christ, who has saved us by His Passion. In Hilton's theology, the soul of man originally was created in the image of the Trinity:

> ...the mind was created strong and steadfast by the virtue of the Father, so that it might hold fast to Him, neither forgetting Him nor being distracted and hindered by created things; and so it has the likeness of the Father. The understanding was made clear and bright, without error...and so it has the likeness of the Son, Who is eternal Wisdom. The will...was made pure, rising like a flame towards God without love of the flesh or of any creatures, by the sovereign goodness of God the Holy Spirit, Who is holy Love.[53]

Original sin drove man's soul from this blessed Trinity into "forgetfulness and ignorance of God, and into a debasing and deliberate love of himself."[54] This is not cause for despair; it is cause for joy in "the endless mercy of our Lord," who extends His mercy to all who ask for it. "Let

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[53] Ibid., p. 50.

[54] Ibid.

everyone, whoever he may be, call on the Name of God - that is, ask salvation through Jesus and His Passion - and he shall be saved."[55]

Hilton maintains that the soul may be re-formed by grace to the state it held before original sin, and that this is "the true life of contemplation...."[56] All that the soul has lost, and all that it must seek and desire in order to regain what it has lost, lies in the word JESUS.[57] The contemplative must forsake everything else in her search for Jesus. This search will take many years, and will involve much toil:

> But if you do not give up, but search diligently, sorrow deeply, grieve silently, and humble yourself until tears of pain and anguish flow because you have lost Jesus your treasure: then at length and when He wills it you shall find Him.[58]

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55 Ibid., p. 52.

56 Ibid., p. 55. Translator's use of hyphen in "re-formed" is intentional.

57 Ibid., p. 54.

58 Ibid., p. 60.

Within the heart of The Ladder, Hilton reveals where Jesus is to be found: "Jesus is the treasure hidden in your soul."[59]

Walter Hilton discusses more emphatically and at greater length the Passion of Christ and its significance to all Christians than did his predecessors; even he does not come close to the personal devotion to that Passion which Julian of Norwich expresses in her Showings.

Julian herself tells in her book what little is known of her life. She received her revelations, or showings, starting on May 3, 1373, when she was thirty and a half years old; she wrote the conclusion to her longer book in 1393. The shorter text's introductory paragraph, probably not written by Julian, states that in 1413 she was still alive, an anchoress at Norwich. Although Julian's Showings are extremely personal, she gives no other autobiographical information except to say that when the showings took place she was suffering from an illness which everyone around her, including her mother at her bedside, took to be terminal. Julian's given name and surname, her place of birth, her religious and literary education are not mentioned. Four bequests in wills evidently were made to her; the date of the last bequest reveals that she was alive as late as 1416, still in her cell next to the parish Church of

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[59] Ibid., p. 61.

St. Julian in Conisford, Norwich.[60] One other record of Julian appears in The Book of Margery Kempe, in which Margery talks of visiting Julian at her cell.

Julian's Showings differs from the writings of her mystical predecessors in several ways. She does not write as if to instruct a specific student entering the contemplative life; she does not set out to give a pattern of living for the contemplative, to tell him why he must seek the cloud of unknowing, or how to climb the ladder of perfection. Julian, in her artless manner, attempts to describe sixteen revelations she has received from God, and to explain what twenty years of meditation upon these showings have revealed to her about unity with Him. She is at once simpler and much more profound than her predecessors. The difficulty in reading her Showings may help explain their relative obscurity until the mid-seventeenth century. Although Margery Kempe spoke of Julian as a well-known spiritual counsellor, she made no mention of Julian's revelations or of the books she wrote of them.[61] For Julian wrote two versions of her Showings, known as the short and long texts. The short text is the earlier effort. Julian spent many years further

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60 Julian of Norwich, Showings, tr. with introduction by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 18-19.

61 Ibid., p. 18.

pondering her showings, and wrote a much revised and much lengthier version.[62]

Julian does seem to write for an audience of some kind, as indicated in Chapter vi of the short text. Although she protests that the reader should not consider her a teacher, and that she is not good just because the revelations have been made to her, she does want it known that her showings were given to her for the benefit and comfort of all Christians, a sentiment echoed by Margery Kempe.[63]

In the first chapter of the short text, Julian recounts what she asked of God:

> I desired three graces by the gift of God. The first was to have recollection of Christ's Passion. The second was a bodily sickness, and the third was to have, of God's gift, three wounds."[64]

She later names the wounds: "the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of longing with my will for God."[65] Just as she had wished, illness befell her when she was thirty and a half years old, and during

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62 Ibid., p. 23.

63 Ibid., pp. 133-135.

64 Ibid., p. 125.

65 Ibid., p. 127.

this illness she received the showings. The revelations themselves she describes as coming to her in three ways: "by bodily vision and by words formed in my understanding and by spiritual vision."[66] She repeats this toward the end of her book, adding that:

> About the bodily vision I have said as I saw, as truly as I am able. And about the words, I have repeated them just as our Lord revealed them to me. And about the spiritual vision, I have told a part, but can never tell it in full....[67]

Although Julian scrupulously strives to recall and explain all that she has received in her revelations, she realizes that she can never adequately describe what is beyond the power of human language.

She vividly and graphically relates the first showing, which comes when she appears to be at the point of death. She is staring at a crucifix brought by her priest, when the pain which has racked her body leaves her all at once:

> And suddenly it came into my mind that I ought to wish for the second wound, that our Lord, of his gift

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[66] Ibid., p. 135.

[67] Ibid., p. 322.

> and of his grace, would fill my body full with recollection and feeling of his blessed Passion...And at this, suddenly I saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown, all hot, flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as it seemed to me that it was at the time when the crown of thorns was thrust down upon his blessed head. Just so did he, both God and man, suffer for me. I perceived, truly and powerfully, that it was himself who showed this to me, without any intermediary, and then I said: Blessed be the Lord![68]

At the same time that Julian saw this bodily vision, she saw a spiritual vision of God's love. From this first revelation, Julian explains that she "saw in my understanding six things," among them the Passion and the divinity of Christ. This revelation has also shown her that God has made every thing, and He has done so for love. Finally, the revelation has shown Julian "that God is everything which is good, and the goodness which everything has is God."[69]

In this manner Julian recounts each of her sixteen showings, and then explains what the Lord reveals through

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68 Ibid., p. 129.

69 Ibid., pp. 132-133.

each one. Her theology agrees with that of her mystic predecessors, as does her fundamental understanding of - if not her approach to - contemplation. She explains that the Christian must empty himself of all love of the world so that he may reach God:

> Every man and woman who wishes to live contemplatively needs to know of this, so that it may be pleasing to them to despise as nothing everything created, so as to have the love of uncreated God. For this is the reason why those who deliberately occupy themselves with earthly business, constantly seeking worldly well-being, have not God's rest in their hearts and souls; for they love and seek their rest in this thing which is so little and in which there is no rest, and do not know God who is almighty, all wise and all good, for he is true rest...When the soul has become nothing for love, so as to have him who is all that is good, then is it able to receive spiritual rest.[70]

Julian agrees with the other English mystics on other points, as well. She speaks of the eternal joy promised to all who are saved:

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[70] Ibid., pp. 131-132.

> And he who...generally loves all his fellow Christians loves all, and he who loves thus is safe. And thus will I love, and thus do I love, and thus am I safe - I write as the representative of my fellow Christians - and the more that I love in this way whilst I am here, the more I am like the joy that I shall have in heaven without end....[71]

She stands with Hilton on the subject of salvation. Hilton states that everyone who asks for salvation through Jesus shall find it. Julian declares: "any man or woman who voluntarily chooses God in his lifetime may be sure that he too is chosen."[72] And as Hilton reveals that Jesus is in our soul, so is it shown to Julian:

> ...I lay still awake, and then our Lord opened my spiritual eyes, and showed me my soul in the midst of my heart. I saw my soul as wide as if it were a kingdom, and from the state which I saw in it, it seemed to me as if it were a fine city. In the midst of this city sits our Lord Jesus....
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> The place which Jesus takes in our soul he will nevermore vacate, for in us is his home of homes...And

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71 Ibid., p. 134.

72 Ibid., p. 161.

> it was a singular joy and bliss to me that I saw him sit, for the contemplation of this sitting revealed to me the certainty that he will dwell in us forever....[73]

Julian discusses the place of penance:

> ...he accepts the penance for every sin imposed by his confessor, for this is established in Holy Church by the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Every sinful soul must be healed by this medicine, especially of the sins which are mortal to him.[74]

Her approach to prayer agrees with that of her predecessors, that it is a means to unity with God. Julian places two conditions on those who pray:

> One is that they will not pray for anything at all but for the thing which is God's will and to his glory; another is that they might apply themselves always and with all their might to entreat the thing which is his will and to his glory...For this we say the

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73 Ibid., pp. 163-164.

74 Ibid., p. 155.

> Our Father, Hail Mary, I Believe, with such devotion as God will give us.[75]

Another statement resembles that of Hilton's trinity of the soul and what original sin has done to it: "Prayer unites the soul to God, for although the soul may always be like God in nature and substance, it is often unlike him in condition, through human sin."[76] Finally:

> And so prayer makes harmony between God and man's soul, because when man is at ease with God he does not need to pray, but to contemplate reverently what God says...But when we do not see God, then we need to pray, because we are failing, and for the strengthening of ourselves, to Jesus....And so with prayers, as I have said, and with other good works that Holy Church teaches us to practise, the soul is united to God.[77]

Julian devotes a great deal of her contemplation to the subject of sin. Hilton explains that sin is cause for joy in the endless mercy of Jesus, Who forgives sinners

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[75] Ibid., p. 157.

[76] Ibid., p. 158.

[77] Ibid., pp. 158-159.

and Who suffered the Passion for them. He then gives a lengthy discourse on sin, generally devoted to enumerating the many kinds of sin and how to deal with them. Julian agrees with Hilton that human sin is not cause for despair. In a particularly complex argument, she explains that:

> God also showed me that sin is no shame, but honour to man...Sin is the sharpest scourge with which any chosen soul can be beaten, and this scourge belabours and breaks men and women, and they become so despicable in their own sight that it seems to them that they are fit for nothing but as it were to sink into hell; but when by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit contrition seizes them, then the Spirit turns bitterness into hope of God's mercy. And then the wounds begin to heal and the soul to revive, restored to the life of Holy Church...And as sin is punished here with sorrow and penance, in contrary fashion it will be rewarded in heaven by the courteous love of our Lord God almighty...And so all shame will be turned into honour and into greater joy.[78]

Julian's contemplation of sin reveals her profound and singular theology. She wonders why sin could not have

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78 Ibid., pp. 154-155.

been prevented, since it has brought so much harm to God's creatures, and since it is sin which stands between herself and the Lord. He answers that "Sin is necessary." It is necessary in that the pain which sin causes:

> purges us and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy; for the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this, and that is his blessed will for all who will be saved. He comforts readily and sweetly with his words, and says: 'But all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.'[79]

Even these words from God do not satisfy Julian, who still does not understand how all things could be well, when sin has caused so much harm. The Lord shows her that Adam's sin was the greatest harm ever done, and that the atonement:

> is more pleasing to the blessed divinity and more honourable for man's salvation, without comparison, than ever Adam's sin was harmful. So then it is our blessed Lord's intention in this teaching that we should pay heed to this: For since I have set right the greatest of harms, it is my will that you should

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[79] Ibid., pp. 147-149.

> know through this that I shall set right everything which is less.[80]

Finally Julian comes to see that there are certain things which God wishes us to know, that we shall be saved and that He is our Savior. There are other things, however, that He does not want us to comprehend, matters which are his "privy counsel." It is not our place to understand or even to desire understanding of them.

As she often does, Julian eventually arrives at a conclusion which can be found in The Cloud or in The Ladder. The difference between her and the other writers is that while they simply declare as fact what they have learned through long years of contemplation, Julian takes the reader through every step of her meditation, explaining how she has come to her understanding. In fact, the other authors and Julian, so profound in different ways, illuminate each other's work by the light of their different approaches to the great questions of Christian theology.

There is one central point on which all of the mystics agree emphatically. As Julian ends her book, she summarizes this crucial point magnificently:

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80 Ibid., p. 150.

And from the time that it was revealed, I desired many times to know in what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love....

So I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw very certainly in this and in everything that before God made us he loved us, which love was never abated and never will be. And in this love he has done all his works, and in this love he has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our creation we had beginning, but the love in which he created us was in him from without beginning. In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end.[81]

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81 Ibid., pp. 342-343.

CHAPTER 6

MARGERY KEMPE: LAY SPIRITUALITY IN ACTION

The sole surviving firsthand account of English lay spirituality of the late fourteenth (early fifteenth) century is remarkable in numerous respects. _The Book of Margery Kempe_ has the distinction of being the first autobiography written in English; Margery and her book hold several more dubious honors as well. Since the discovery of the unique complete manuscript of _The Book of Margery Kempe_ in 1934, her readers have promoted her as a mystic, diagnosed her as hysteric, passed her off as naive and unbalanced, and consistently included her in treatises on medieval English spirituality. In the twentieth century, as in her own, Margery Kempe has remained irritating, perplexing, but above all, fascinating. No one whose path she has crossed has been able to ignore her. Although she must have been atypical (if not abnormal), she nevertheless sums up in many ways the evolution of spirituality in late medieval England. Her peculiar spirituality is the culmination of the effects of socio-economic-political influences upon the church and upon the religion of her age.

Margery Kempe was born in Lynn, Norfolk, around the year 1373, to John Brunham, prominent citizen and five

times Mayor of Lynn. About 1393, Margery married John Kempe, another citizen of some standing in Lynn. When in her early twenties, following the birth of her first child, Margery temporarily lost her mind. It was her firm conviction that she was restored to sanity by a vision of Christ. Although she believed that this visitation of God's grace upon her saved her, she continued her prideful, lustful ways, ignoring His calling. In the first twenty years of their marriage she bore her husband fourteen children. During this period, Margery and John attempted and failed at several business ventures, including a mill and a brewery. Margery notes that she loved fine clothes, and was proud of her family's status in Lynn. At one point she scornfully reminded her husband that she had married beneath her station. Although Margery had experienced God's grace at a young age, she continued for a long time to remain a woman of the world.

At about the age of forty, Margery decided to forsake the earthly pleasures she had so enjoyed, to pursue a spiritual life. She convinced her husband to take a vow of chastity, and spent much of her life thereafter on a series of religious pilgrimages, which began with trips to shrines in England. In 1413, she embarked upon the first of her foreign pilgrimages, to the Holy Land, where she arrived in the spring or summer of 1414. On her return trip she traveled to Rome and to Assisi, and made her way

home to England in the spring of 1415. In the summer of 1417, Margery visited Santiago de Compostela. She did not resume her foreign travels until 1433, when she escorted her German daughter-in-law home to Danzig. She returned to Lynn in 1434.[1]

Margery was the recipient of many visions and visitations from Christ, and spent a great amount of time in involuntary weeping and wailing, much to the chagrin of her fellow travelers and church-goers. Ridiculed for her behavior, on several occasions tried for Lollardy, Margery nevertheless evidently was admired for the sincerity of her religious beliefs. Some twenty years after her spiritual journey had begun in earnest, Margery was directed by the Lord to record her experiences in a book. Margery could not read or write, so was forced to find a scribe to record her memoir for her. The first attempt proved to be virtually unreadable, as the scribe had written in garbled English and German, and had formed irregularly shaped letters. In 1436, Margery finally was able to enlist the help of a priest, who revised the earlier scribe's Book and added a much shorter second Book. Although the priest must have

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[1] See Kempe, Margery, The Book of Margery Kempe, tr. B.A. Windeatt (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1985, 1989), pp. 29-30, and Atkinson, Clarissa, Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 54-56.

done some editing and polishing, the force of Margery's personality and spiritual convictions shines through.

The Book of Margery Kempe may be considered by some as valuable solely as a piece of social history; her spiritual experiences are hardly comparable with those of her contemporary, Julian of Norwich. Margery, however, reveals as no one else of her age has done, the way in which a lay person internalized and expressed her personal, very individualized, Christianity. Furthermore, for all her eccentricities, Margery's life is a reflection of her times, and it is important to consider just how Margery fits into the currents of change in fourteenth-century England.

Margery Kempe was a member of that increasingly influential class in society, the free, urban, relatively prosperous burgess. Her hometown of Lynn was a trading center, ruled by the leading merchants of the town. As Clarissa Atkinson noted in Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe, the burgesses of Lynn:

> were...permitted to form a self-governing merchant guild...the Guild of the Holy Trinity played a major part in the affairs of Lynn. Women were admitted to membership, and the last public record of Margery Kempe is the note of her admission in 1438.[2]

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[2] Atkinson, Mystic and Pilgrim, p. 76.

Why the disreputable Margery was allowed into the Guild at this late date, and not while she was a young business woman, is a mystery. Perhaps the privilege to which she was after all entitled was granted in deference to her age, for she must have been sixty-five at the time of her admission.

The town of Lynn held two particular opportunities for Margery's spiritual development. She was not far from the cell of Julian of Norwich, whom she visited several times. Furthermore, Lynn had trading connections with Germany. In the only specific mention of any of her fourteen children, Margery related that her son moved to Prussia, where he married. The son and his wife traveled to England and lived with Margery until the son's death a month after their arrival. This German connection makes possible Margery's knowledge of pious German women. Finally, as a town dweller, Margery probably would have had the opportunity to hear of current works of religious instruction. Although she evidently never enjoyed the advantages of formal education, she was well acquainted with numerous such treatises, including "St. Bride's book," as she called the _Revelations_ of St. Bridget of Sweden, as well as "the Bible with doctors' commentaries on it,...Hilton's book, Bonaventura's _Stimulus Amoris_, _Incendium Amoris_, and others

similar."[3] Margery explained that a priest read these works to her.

Focused as she was upon spiritual matters, Margery did not make even passing comment on much of the great social and political upheavals of her age, but one such development touched her in an alarming way. She was accused of Lollardy, and tried on several occasions. In an age of heresy and persecution, in a country which did not accept the vocation of a pious woman who remained outside the convent or anchoress' cell, Margery was particularly vulnerable to such charges. She loudly pronounced God's wishes and His will to all and sundry, and she quoted Scripture, practices which enabled her critics to brand her a Lollard. Although her orthodoxy is evident throughout her Book, Margery's eccentricities set her apart. She was perceived as an agitator. An outspoken woman, claiming special grace from God, who continued to live in the world while supposedly leading a religious life, was an easy target.[4] Although acquitted each time she was charged with Lollardy, Margery had to deal with the taint which such accusations left upon her reputation. The punishment for confirmed and unrepented heresy was burning, and Lollards were burned. The threat of such was very real in Lynn;

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3 The Book of Margery Kempe, p. 182.

4 See Atkinson, Mystic and Pilgrim, pp. 103-112.

the first Lollard martyr, burned in 1401, was William Sawtre, the priest of St. Margaret's Church in Lynn, where Margery worshipped.[5] While her ability to prove her orthodoxy during trial saved Margery from the stake, her singular methods of expressing her faith kept her at odds with church authorities throughout her life.

This trouble haunted Margery in her dealings with a friar who came to Lynn to preach. Windeatt notes that the preaching friar might have been the Franciscan William Melton; at any rate, his treatment of Margery occupies several chapters of her Book. Margery was excited about the friar's coming to Lynn, as he was a famous preacher, and she looked forward to hearing his sermons. He, on the other hand, was forewarned about Margery by the parish priest, who told him:

> 'Sir, I pray you be not displeased. A woman will come here to your sermon who often, when she hears of the Passion of our Lord, or of any high devotion, weeps, sobs and cries, but it does not last long. And therefore, good sir, if she should make any noise

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[5] Collis, Louise, Memoirs of a Medieval Woman: The Life and Times of Margery Kempe (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1964), pp. 18-19.

at your sermon, bear with it patiently and do not be dismayed by it.'[6]

As predicted, Margery burst into one of her cries during his first sermon, but the friar did not mention it. Soon after, Margery attended another of his sermons, and lapsed into another of her weeping spells. This time his patience wore out, and the friar banished her from his sermons. Some defended her tears as a gift from God and a sign of His grace, but public opinion turned against her, and the friar himself refused to believe that Margery's tears were a divine gift, preferring to think that they were evidence of some sickness. The friar agreed to allow Margery to attend his sermons if she would acknowledge that her weeping was caused by illness, but Margery "well knew by revelation and by experience that it was no sickness, and therefore she would not for all this world say otherwise than as she felt."[7] Margery's confessor finally forbade her attendance at the friar's sermons.

This episode illustrates the fundamental differences between Margery's own perception of her spirituality and that of many of her contemporaries, who variously construed her behavior as that of a self-righteous windbag, a hypocrite,

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6 The Book of Margery Kempe, pp. 187-188.

7 Ibid., pp. 188-190.

or an outright heretic. Margery believed that the grace of God was at work within her, manifested in her visions of Christ's Passion, her conversations with Jesus and with His Mother, her cries and weeping, and her gift of prophecy. She felt that she was an instrument through whom God saved many souls. Her spirituality - influenced by current trends in piety, by the mystical writings which were read to her, and by her own interpretations of her life experiences - is that of a woman who strives mightily for the heights of spiritual union with God, but who can only express herself in the most earthbound terms.

Margery's first visionary experience was less disturbing in this way than her later spiritual marriage to the Godhead, her homey talks with Jesus and Mary, and her graphic descriptions of the Passion. In the opening chapter of her Book, she describes her first visitation from Christ during her madness following childbirth:

> ...this creature went out of her mind and was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days...And when she had long been troubled by these and many other temptations, so that people thought she should never have escaped from them alive, then one time as she lay by herself and her keepers were not with her, our merciful Lord Christ Jesus - ever to be trusted, worshipped be his name,

> never forsaking his servant in time of need - appeared to his creature who had forsaken him, in the likeness of a man, the most seemly, most beauteous, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits, and he said to her these words: 'Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you?'
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> And as soon as he had said these words, she saw truly how the air opened as bright as any lightning, and he ascended up into the air, not hastily and quickly, but beautifully and gradually, so that she could clearly behold him in the air until it closed up again.[8]

This is not exactly the kind of vision which the English mystics experienced; however, just as they did, Margery emphasized that when Jesus talked to her it was a visitation of His grace upon her, through no merit of her own. She, in keeping with her more respected predecessors, was careful to maintain that she recorded her experiences not for personal glory, but for the glory of God. Just as they had, so Margery repeated that she welcomed all the shame, humiliation, and slander which came her way, because she knew it only

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8 Ibid., p. 42.

increased her joy in eternity to come. Like Rolle, Margery felt the fire of love and heard the sweet melodies of Heaven; like Julian, she received showings of Christ's Passion. Unlike Julian, Margery pitched in with domestic chores at the Nativity:

> And then the creature went forth with our Lady to Bethlehem and procured lodgings for her every night with great reverence, and our Lady was received with good cheer. She also begged for our Lady pieces of fair white cloth and kerchiefs to swaddle her son in when he was born; and when Jesus was born she arranged bedding for our Lady to lie on with her blessed son. And later she begged food for our Lady and her blessed child. Afterwards she swaddled him, weeping bitter tears of compassion, mindful of the painful death that he would suffer for the love of sinful men, saying to him, 'Lord, I shall treat you gently; I will not bind you tightly. I pray you not to be displeased with me.'[9]

Julian sought to explain points of theology through her showings of the Passion; Margery was swept up entirely in her earthbound descriptions of events as she perceived

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9 Ibid., pp. 53-54.

them. Perhaps most disturbing, from the point of view of spiritual theology, is Margery's marriage to the Godhead while she was on pilgrimage at Rome:

> ...the Father of Heaven said to her, 'Daughter, I am well pleased with you, inasmuch as you believe in all the sacraments of Holy Church and in all faith involved in that, and especially because you believe in the manhood of my son, and because of the great compassion that you have for his bitter Passion.'
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> 'Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, because I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall live with me without end.'[10]

Margery said nothing, as she feared the Godhead; but Jesus spoke up and asked the Father to forgive her for she was young. The Father then went on to perform the marriage:

> And then the Father took her by the hand (spiritually) in her soul, before the Son and the Holy Ghost, and the Mother of Jesus, and all the twelve apostles, and St. Katherine and St. Margaret and many other saints and holy virgins, with a great multitude of angels, saying to her soul, 'I take you, Margery,

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10 Ibid., p. 122.

for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, provided that you are humble and meek in doing what I command you to do.'[11]

In the next chapter, the Father is even more explicit:

'Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want.'[12]

While these visions of Margery's might appear to the modern reader as more appropriate material for the analyst's couch than for the mystic's cell, they illustrate vividly the manner in which a lay person might attempt to internalize and then express spirituality. Margery could not separate the concept of earthly marriage from that of her marriage

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11 Ibid., p. 123.

12 Ibid., pp. 126-127.

to God, or at least she could not describe it in any terms other than those of her own earthly experience. Yet in these chapters, as throughout her Book, Margery strives to incorporate what she has learned of spirituality into her own practice of it.

The manifestations of Margery's spirituality which most often led her into trouble were her uncontrollable weeping and her "cries," her term for what must have been piercing screams. Margery's cries and tears reveal the influence of continental mystics and pious women; they also indicate why her English contemporaries found her so irritating. Her form of religious expression, her "manner of living" as she continually called it, was just not acceptable in fourteenth-century England. The continent held a tradition of pious women which England did not have. These women, greatly revered in Europe in Margery's day, had several characteristics in common with her. They were married women who strove to live chastely, who followed the spiritual path while living in the world rather than retiring from it, who received gifts of visitations, prophecy, and tears. Margery often implies familiarity with these women, as she does with the works of the English mystics. She seems to have modelled herself after St. Bridget of Sweden, who also joined God in a spiritual marriage, and whose book Margery mentions several times as "Bride's book," which the priest read to her. Margery's run-in with the

preaching friar provides an instance in which she appeals specifically to the example of another continental woman famous for her piety, and for her tears.

When the friar dismissed Margery's cries and tears as sickness rather than accepting them as the holy gifts Margery knew them to be, the priest who would later serve as Margery's second scribe began to doubt her as well. His faith in her was restored, Margery says, when he read the *Vita* of:

> Mary of Oignies, and of her manner of life, of the wonderful sweetness that she had in hearing the word of God, of the wonderful compassion that she had in thinking of his Passion, of the abundant tears that she wept, which made her so weak and feeble that she could not endure to look upon the cross, nor hear our Lord's Passion repeated, without dissolving into tears of pity and compassion.'[13]

To drive her point home, Margery gave the chapter number (with opening line!) in which Mary's grace of tears is particularly discussed.

The experiences of Mary of Oignies (d. 1213) bear strong resemblance to those of Margery. She persuaded

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[13] Ibid., pp. 191-192.

her husband to lead a chaste life, wept uncontrollably whenever she thought of the Passion, and heard sweet music from spirits. Margery sought permission to wear white, and to receive weekly communion; she did not eat meat; she was told by God that she would not spend time in purgatory but would ascend straight to Heaven. All of these can be found in Mary's Vita.[14]

Another pious woman who must have been known to Margery was Blessed Dorothea of Montau (1347-94). Dorothea lived in Danzig after she married at sixteen. Like Margery, Dorothea struggled to live a religious life while remaining a married woman. After her husband died in 1390, she was enclosed at Marienwerder Cathedral. Accounts were written of her life and visions. Margery visited Danzig when Dorothea's popularity would have been at a high point. Margery's life paralleled hers in much the same way as it did Mary's: uncontrollable tears, pilgrimages, weekly communion, a vow of chastity with her husband.[15]

Margery appealed to an even higher authority (in English eyes) to give credibility to the spirituality of her tears. She visited Julian of Norwich, even then renowned for her holiness and wisdom, and asked Julian how she could be sure that the "tokens" she received - the tears, talks

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14 Ibid., pp. 18-19.

15 Ibid., p. 21.

with the Lord, revelations, and all the rest - were indeed from God, and not from evil spirits. Julian answered:

> 'Any creature that has these tokens may steadfastly believe that the Holy Ghost dwells in his soul. And much more, when God visits a creature with tears of contrition, devotion or compassion, he may and ought to believe that the Holy Ghost is in his soul...No evil spirit may give these tokens, for St. Jerome says that tears torment the devil more than do the pains of hell....'[16]

During the same visit, Julian reaffirms Margery's belief in the value of shame and humiliation. She advises:

> 'Set all your trust in God and do not fear the talk of the world, for the more contempt, shame and reproof that you have in this world, the more is your merit in the sight of God.'[17]

Aside from spiritual considerations, Margery's trials and tribulations, caused by the reactions of others to her unusual behavior, served time and again to allow her

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16 Ibid., p. 78.

17 Ibid.

to vindicate herself. English spirituality in the fourteenth century was expressed in the solitary life of the religious, the hermit or anchorite. There was no tradition of a married religious woman, loudly proclaiming her spiritual worth wherever she went and to whomever had the misfortune to meet her. Margery was not seen merely as obnoxious and overbearing; she was believed by some to be downright dangerous. Margery was able to prove her orthodoxy each time she was charged with Lollardy; she was even able to convince some people of her gift of grace from God. Still, in ways hardly imagined at the time, yet already foreshadowed in the Lollards, Margery's "manner of living" was indeed a sign of change. It would never, and could never, have occurred to Margery Kempe that in its way her book was as significant and as ominous as the Lollard Bible. They both herald an evolution which would lead to an ultimate Reformation of a peculiarly English character.

As orthodox as her beliefs were, Margery Kempe represented a departure from traditional English Christian society. She was urban, free, and prosperous (at least for much of her life). Although illiterate, she had access to books, and was familiar with the spiritual literature popular in her day. She wanted more from her religion than traditional dictates allowed. She was an individualist.

The forces which brought about such individualism had been at work for centuries, as had the forces behind

several basic tenets of Protestantism. The Reformation did not spring suddenly from the mind and pen of Martin Luther; John Wyclif anticipated him by almost one hundred fifty years. Peter Waldo preceded Wycliff in his call for vernacular Bibles by two centuries. The church itself promoted emphasis upon the individual with its program of required confession. The church further created its own trouble with the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism, damaging its claim of universality. Social, political, and economic forces - plague, extended wars, taxes, and labor shortages - contributed to the unrest already felt in the religious sphere. Finally, by the end of the fourteenth century, the English kings had established their supremacy over the pope in several crucial areas of church-state relations.

Most fourteenth-century English men and women still held to the traditional doctrines of Mother Church, and Margery Kempe and the mystics were no exception. What they did hold in common with the Lollards was their belief in the use of vernacular language, and above all their individualism. The great mystics, Margery, and the Lollards were all in search of a personal experience of God. It was only a matter of time before the universal church, which reacted to such individualistic ideas as the reading of Scripture in the vernacular and the priesthood of the believer with burnings at the stake, came toppling down.

In a curious way, Margery foreshadows the struggle to come in the sixteenth century when she speaks with Henry Bowet, Archbishop of York. She has been called a Lollard and a heretic by many of his retinue, and Margery has to defend herself to him. Although Margery never would have intended it to be, her record of the ensuing discussion can almost be allegorized as a dialogue between the established church and the upstart individualist. It is only fitting, then, that Margery has the last word:

> ...the Archbishop took his seat, and his clerics too...And during the time that people were gathering together and the Archbishop was taking his seat, the said creature stood at the back, saying her prayers for help and succour against her enemies with high devotion, and for so long that she melted into tears. And at last she cried out loudly, so that the Archbishop, and his clerics, and many people, were all astonished at her, for they had not heard such crying before.
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> When her crying was passed, she came before the Archbishop and fell down on her knees, the Archbishop saying very roughly to her, 'Why do you weep so, woman?'
>
> She answering said, 'Sir, you shall wish some day that you had wept as sorely as I.'
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> And then, after the Archbishop had put to her the Articles of our Faith - to which God gave her

grace to answer well, truly and readily, without much having to stop and think, so that he could not criticize her - he said to the clerics, 'She knows her faith well enough. What shall I do with her?'

The clerics said, 'We know very well that she knows the Articles of the Faith, but we will not allow her to dwell among us, because the people have great faith in her talk, and perhaps she might lead some of them astray.' Then the Archbishop said to her: 'I am told very bad things about you. I hear it said that you are a very wicked woman.'

And she replied, 'Sir, I also hear it said that you are a wicked man. And if you are as wicked as people say, you will never get to heaven, unless you amend while you are here.'

Then he said very roughly, 'Why you!...What do people say about me?'

She answered, 'Other people, sir, can tell you well enough.'[18]

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[18] Ibid., p. 163.

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