Chaucer and Christian Tradition

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1. INTRODUCTION

The medieval use of Scripture and scriptural tradition generally—that is, of the Bible and its accessory literature and commentary—can only be understood adequately when the textual materials are contextualized within the relevant social history of medieval Christian tradition. This becomes particularly apparent when we consider the case of Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer was eminently a 'textual' man, but he was preeminently a moral, social, and political man, a statesman committed to the ethical well-being of his community, and it was these concerns which directed—even dictated—his attention to scriptural tradition.

Medieval European Christianity was not primarily a metaphysical system, a superstitious regard for the supernatural, a chimerical escape from the burdens of existence, nor an authoritarian and oppressive set of shackles imposed on the 'innocent' and 'natural' freedoms of humanity. It is true that during the thirteenth century a metaphysical system, based on Aristotle and largely, though not entirely, academic, did develop; that a hope for a better life hereafter was often inculcated, although medieval people devoted far more attention to ways of facing the problems of this life than they did to dreams about the next; and it is also true that Christian thought, although humane, was not characterized by the kind of sentimental humanitarianism that grew up during the later eighteenth century and has since come to dominate modern thought. "Man," wrote St. Augustine, "is a great thing, made in the image and likeness of God, not in that he is encased in a mortal body, but in that he excels the beasts in the dignity of a rational soul." But he went on to quote with approval the warning of Jeremiah, "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man." Man's great gift, and the "image of God" within him, was reason, and when he abandoned it for the sake of passion, he lost his "likeness," becoming something other than a man. Our fellow men are to be loved, he thought, not for themselves, but for the virtues reflected in them, or for the source of those virtues, God.

Christians inherited from Antiquity a mode of thought, not so much a "system" as a fundamental attitude, that envisioned the existence of "intelligible" (intangible) realities, whose existence was available to the reason but not immediately to the senses, calling them for their own purposes after St. Paul "the invisible things of God." Although these are to be understood, as St. Paul said (Romans 1:20), "through the things that are made," they are not "abstractions" derived from observing the qualities of concrete particulars, or from "experiment upon things seen": they are rather external realities, "natural" in their own right. Among them were the virtues, which were the gift of God's grace, available to those who loved them and Him. And God was Himself the apex of a hierarchy of such realities. The efficacy of the virtues, when they were reflected in men, was thought to be a matter of common experience, for they protected men from the ill consequences of their "natural" inclinations. Thus St. Augustine was able to say, quite reasonably under the circumstances, that every Christian has an obligation in his "pilgrimage" through the created world "to comprehend the eternal and spiritual" by his observation of "corporal and temporal things." Such things, as Hugh of St. Victor was to put it later, are "the voice of God speaking to man." The Trinity was a mystery, difficult to comprehend, but faith did not involve a mystical leap into the realm of the "supernatural." Most educated Christians regarded "magic" as an illusion. The miracles of Christ and his Saints were not magical, but were manifestations of God's grace. The idea of the "supernatural" was introduced into Europe by the scholastic philosophers in the mid-thirteenth century. To confuse a sense of the reality of the "intelligible" with ordinary superstition, as Cain does in the Wakefield Mancuto Abel, is to demonstrate both irrationality and what St. Augustine calls "the crime of malevolence." However, we, with an entirely different universe of discourse, may wish to wrest something of the message of the Old Testament, observed that "Some, as it were, are noisome, who were neither in the deep sleep of folly nor able to awaken in the light of wisdom, misled by the variety of innumerable customs, thought that there was no such thing as absolute justice but that every people regarded its own way of life as just. For if justice, which ought to remain immutable, varies so much among different peoples, it is evident that justice does not exist." There is nothing new, we notice, about the lure of "situation ethics," and the fact of cultural diversity has long been recognized. But St. Augustine continues, "They have not understood, to cite only one instance, that 'what you do not wish to have done to yourself, do not do to another' (cf. Matt. 7:12, Luke 6:31) cannot be varied on account of any diversity of peoples." and he goes on to call attention to "charity (or the love of God and of one's neighbor for the sake of God) and its most just laws." The catechism of Queen Elizabeth I, composed many years later in a different world, contains the statement: "My duty towards my neighbor is to love him as myself, and to do to all men as I

5. That is, such inclinations were "natural" after the Fall, although not "natural" to man as he was created. The words "natural" and "natural" as applied to man are thus ambiguous.
10. "Sinnbildlich" is a term used in the Middle Ages to describe something that is "natural" in the sense of being a reflection of the natural order. It is similar to the modern concept of "ecological" or "environmental" practices.
11. I refer to human ecology, although the general attitude that the world was to be "used" for the sake of God probably contributed to reasonably sound "ecological" practices.
would they should do unto me." And Alexander Pope, still later, could write in his Essay on Man that "all Mankind's concern is Charity," adding that "where Faith, Law, Morals all began, / All end, in Love of God and Love of Man." St. Augustine is in fact typical of the whole "Christian era" in regarding charity, or love, as the basic message of the Scriptures. Its implications vary from place to place and from time to time, so that each generation requires new verbal elaborations to make it vivid and understandable.

The general outlook we have briefly sketched, except for the Christian addition of the "laws of charity," is an adaptation of classical attitudes in Pythagorean and Platonic traditions, and it continued to influence European thought, with some exceptions especially toward the end of the period, down through the early eighteenth century, providing a certain cultural continuity. Before considering the variety of ways in which it was applied, it may be useful to inquire into the literary assumptions that accompanied it. St. Augustine had found Licentius to keep his poem on Pyramus and Thisbe, but to arrange it in such a way that it would praise divine love, and he defined a fable as a lie composed for utility and delight. He thought that figurative language made truth hidden beneath its surface more pleasant and memorable when they were discovered with some effort, and that such discovery aided in the comprehension of the intelligible. These views are reflected in numerous statements about the usefulness of fabulous narratives from the early Middle Ages to the defenses of poetry written by Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Salutati. In general, therefore, although there are in the Middle Ages many explicitly doctrinal poems and narratives, there are many others whose doctrine is concealed beneath a pleasing surface. This tendency to the support for "enlightened modern attitudes" in medieval literature, to read such works literally has led to some curious interpretations. Some figurative language, like "the sleep of folly," or the "light of wisdom" in the passage from Saint Augustine quoted above, is more or less inherited from the general intellectual posture, and some of it, more obscurely derived from the "things that are made" or from classical sources often requires research to discover. The following very brief survey should help to explain why students of Chaucer should be interested in scriptural and pastoral materials, and at the same time introduce some of the more important general sources for such study.

II. MILITIA EST VITA HOMINIS SUPER TERRAM

Turning now to the general changes in medieval culture that led to varying emphases on the "laws of charity"—and here we shall content ourselves with a very brief account, ignoring many variations and emphasizing the close of the period—we find that Christianity in the earlier Middle Ages stressed the abandonment of superstitious worship (of various kinds from locality to locality) and pagan ritual, and the importance of controlling violence. Thus St. Caesarius of Arles, whose eloquent and effective sermons enjoyed wide circulation, especially since they were sometimes confused with the sermons of St. Augustine, pointed to the evils of sacrilege, homicide, adultery, false testimony, theft, rapine, pride, envy, avarice, wrath, drunkenness, and detraction. Similar transgressions likely either to disturb the peace or to lead to disturbances of the peace were emphasized in the Old German Beichten, which were probably influenced by the sermons. Peace could not be maintained without the support of the soul, so that an effort was made to see it as that everyone knew the Paternoster and the Creed, and the abovementioned at Baptism often included specific recitation of pagan beliefs. As St. Gregory's famous letter to Mellitus indicates, Augustine of Canterbury was urged not to destroy pagan temples but to transform them into churches. In much the same way the songs of the pagans were transformed. Alfeld is said to have composed verses in English in order to lead his listeners "to health by interweaving among the foolish things, the words of Scripture," and our first English poet of record, Caedmon, sang songs of great skill and subtlety to his vernacular audience. The vanity of worldly ease and glory and the necessity for the wise man to maintain his militia are celebrated in short poems like "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," and longer poems, in military "epic" terms, from Beowulf and the "Christian Epics" to The Song of Roland, portray the struggle to maintain wisdom and to combat vice, stressing the dangers of fraternal discord. The Psychomachia of Prudentius, which affected iconography in the arts for centuries, and the Beatus page of the St. Albans Psalter reflect a common concern. This general idea persisted throughout the Middle Ages, and is well illustrated, for example, in a letter by Elizabeth's faithful and longsuffering counsellor William Cecil to Nicholas White in 1570. Cecil, we should notice, loved the virtues "settled in" his friend, and he himself was armed against the "darts and pellets" of the world by faith. His words paraphrase St. Paul:

10. On Order, 1, 8, 24.
9. Solologues, 2, 10, 18 and 19.
11. On Christian Doctrine, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13 to 15. A more eloquent and striking statement of this principle, since it involves sayint imagery, may be found in St. Gregory's Preface to his commentary on the Cautionary of Canticles.
12. Sermo 169 in Opera, ed. D. G. Morin (Mareottii, 1937), 1, 684. There are similar lists in other sermons. It is not difficult to find a similar emphasis in St. Gregory's account of the armies of the Vikings in Moralis, 31, 85-87, 88, 76, cols. 620-21.
I do connyse and will not desist to love heartily the honest virtues which I am persuaded are settled and rooted in you, and so will, except you make the change. I am as well known to me if I were not more tormentied with the blights of the world, willing to live in calm places, but it pleaseth God otherwise to exercise me, in sort as I cannot shun the rages thereof, though his goodness preserves me as it were with the target of his providence, from the dangers that are gaping upon me. Viva homini est militia super terram. I use no armour of pride against the darts or pellets, but confidence in God by a clear conscience.

During the later Middle Ages it was thought that one achieved strength for this battle through the sacrament of confirmation.

III. DEUS CARITAS EST

Local strife by no means disappeared during the early twelfth century, as the successful preaching of St. Norbert, who sought to calm it, well illustrates. But a new militia Christi arose with the establishment of the crusading orders, directed against paganism in the Holy Places across the sea, first with the transformation of the Order of the Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem into a military order (1113) and then with the establishment of the Knights of the Temple of Solomon (1118), whose aims and ideals were set forth in a rule under the aegis of St. Bernard, providing the foundation for the European cult of chivalry. The ascetic ideals of these orders and the demand for self-sacrifice in chivalric doctrine illustrate once more the fact that the two kinds of militia could be combined. One was an inspiration to the other, and both were inspired by love. More settled conditions generally, especially within the confines of monastic and cathedral schools, permitted extension of the central doctrine of Christian belief, love. The Canticle of Canticles, upon which the most influential and distinguished commentary had long been that of St. Gregory the Great, received new attention. Five commentaries on this book were produced in the ninth century, one in the tenth century, six in the eleventh, and thirty-three by writers who died between 1115 and 1215. Of the last, six treated the Bride as the Blessed Virgin, whose cult developed steadily during the century, so that in 1198 Odon de Soleae, Bishop of Paris, added the Ave to the Paternoster and the Creed as formulas to be recited daily by Christians. Among the authors of the commentaries were such distinguished figures as St. Bernard, Alanus de Insulis, Honorius of Autun, William of St. Thierry, Hugh of St. Victor, Richard of St. Victor, and Albrecht of Rievaulx, whose commentary, unfortunately, has been lost. Meanwhile, treatises on love, both human and divine, proliferated, and included the extremely influential transformation of Secceo's De amicitia into a work On Spiritual Friendship by Albrecht of Rievaulx, and the same author's Mirror of Charity. Abaelard had written a love story, The History of My Calamities, to illustrate the vulnerability of sexual love to the whims of Fortune (Providential justice misunderstood), a theme still flourishing in Chaucer's Troilus and in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, and he explores the possibility of its transformation into divine love. This last possibility, elaborated by Albreid,21 was to have far-reaching consequences in the works of Dante and Petrach, in Castiglione's Courtier, where it received a "Platonic" decor, and even in Elizabethan sonnet sequences.22

Tags from the Canticle had long been used to illuminate Latin poems, like the famous "Levis exsurgit Zephyrus" from The Cambridge Songs, which concludes with an echo of Cant. 3:1. Spring in the Canticle is the tempus quotidiam, or time of penance during Lent, and the contrast between the burgeoning of the earth, the mating of the birds and animals, with the penitential duties of the Christian or the scholarly duties of the schoolboy moved by another love became a popular subject for song, and there is indeed a reflection of this theme at the opening of The Canterbury Tales, whose pilgrims are, presumably, setting out on a penitential journey. In the schools of the twelfth century new poetic material was provided by a renewed interest in the Classics, especially in the poems of Ovid. Although both St. Caesarius and Rabanus had warned against hearing "wicked" or "lecherous" songs, 23 a warning that continued to echo in later confessional manuals, masters in the schools, like Hildebert du Lavardin, and their students who learned Latin and plainsong simultaneously,24 became especially interested in Ovid, not because he was regarded as a "lecherous poet," but because he was read as a "mockery of light loves," offering vivid and telling illustrations of their consequences. Mythographers like "the Third Vatican Mythographer," and commentators like Arnulf of Orleans both summarized traditional teachings and offered aid to new students seeking moral instruction in the Classics. If a verse from Ovid could serve Alanus de Insulis as a "theme" for a sermon,25 and if Ovid could offer useful quotations for a commentary on the Canticle,26 there was no reason why he could not serve as a model for schoolboys, most of whom were in any event thoroughly familiar with sexual activity, partly because of a lack of privacy and squemishness in medieval homes, and partly because they came from a prevailingly agricultural environment. A kind of Ovidian wit, reinforced by scriptural allusions, flashes through some poems in the Canticle.

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17. Thomas Wright, Queen Elizabeth and her Times (London, 1838), II, 364-65.
22. See the forthcoming study of sonnet sequences now in preparation by Thomas P. Roche, Jr.
23. Caesarius,Opera, I, Sermon I, pp. 10-12; Rabanus, Homelae (First Series), PL, 110, col. 34. The homilies of Rabanus often reflect the sermons of Caesarius.
26. See the commentary by Thomas the Cistercian, PL, 206, cols. 22-862.
increasing frequency with imagery from the Canticle, was especially venerated by St. Bernard. 27 She was celebrated in some of the most beautiful Latin sequences ever written, and she became increasingly an inspiration to chivalry and courtly love as well as an object of popular devotion. 28 Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Arthur, the model for English chivalric pietas, carried her image on his shield and called to her as he rode into battle, foreshadowing that later model of chivalric reform in a decadent "Arthurian" court, Sir Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Towards the close of the thirteenth century the last of the great troubadours, Giraut Ràquier, addressed her in moving terms, and in his final song, "Be'm degra de l'amor tenter," he realized that through their pride and malice, "far from the commandments and love of our Lord," Christians had been cast out of God's Holy Place across the sea. The holy militia had failed because of "disordered will," so that Christians, raging at one another, should be driven into the earth. The song concludes with a prayer to Mary:

Dona, Maires de carítat, 
accepta nos per pietae 
de nos fib, nostra receptar, 
gracia, perdón, et amor.

Notable men, still moved by what were then regarded as Christian ideals of military valor, turned to her in fourteenth-century England. Sir John Chandos, famous for valor and wisdom, wore a surcoat embroidered with her image; that image often adorned English swords and bracteates, and Garter Knights bore it on their right shoulders during Divine Service. 29 Visual testimony of the devotion of Richard II survives in the Wilton Diptych. The beauty and grace of the Virgin were widely heralded, and it was natural that Chaucer should surround another inspiration to chivalric conduct, Blanche of Lancaster, with her imagery, 30 having written, presumably, one of his earliest surviving poems, the "ABC," for her devotion to Mary. Later on, he would close his great poem shadowing the failure of English chivalric ideals with a prayer to the Trinity for defense against both visible and invisible foes and to Jesus for mercy.

For love of mayde and moder thyne benigne!

This is no mere rhetorical flourish, no empty convention, but in the context of its time a powerful appeal for a redirected love that might free Chaucer’s contemporaries from the attacks of “invisible enemies” of the kind that produced the “disordered will” of Giraut’s Christian crusaders, and that brought Trolus (and Troy) to destruction. The success of enemies within invited attacks by visible enemies without.

27. See the attractive and useful volume, Saint Bernard et Notre Dame, edited by P. Bernard (Abbaye de Sept-Fons, 1953).
28. See the reference in note 19 above.
29. Edmund Waleston, Pictor Marinos Briosonius (London, 1879), pp. 41-46. I wish to thank my colleague Gail M. Gibson for calling my attention to this volume.
As European governments grew more complex and written documents multiplied in their administrations, there were new demands for "practical" literacy among lay officials. In England, the rise in the number of such documents was especially impressive during the reign of Henry II, who was himself notable for his love of learning. M.T. Clanchy writes that "an educated layman in 1300...like Henry de Bray was probably familiar with some writing in three literary languages (Latin, French, and English). John of Salisbury, following but modifying the Institutio Tributaria attributed to Plutarch, held that there are four things that should be inculcated in rulers of commonwealths: a reverence for God, self-discipline, the learning of officials and those in power, the affection of officials, and this subject, and their protection. The learning of officials, and these subjects, is the work of the master of all services, was an important matter for John, who thought that all learning had as its end the promotion of charity. Among officials, he thought avarice, an aspect of the love of the tangible, to be the worst of vices, and this idea was to become more important with the passage of time and the increasing complexity of both secular and ecclesiastical administration. The 'political' theory of the day (actually the part of moral theory, as it had been in Aristotle's Politics) was based on the assumption that the commonwealth was an integrated whole whose health depended on the virtue of all of its members, including the prince. "If, then, everyone were to labor in self-cultivation," John said, "and were to regard external things as alien to him, the result would be that the whole would gradually become the best, virtue would flourish and reason would rule, with mutual charity everywhere prevailing, so that the flesh would be subjected to the spirit and the spirit would, in complete devotion, be joined together."

How were the literate able to learn "the laws of charity? As Clanchy notes, "The sacred Scriptures, which had dominated literature since before 1066, still stood in pride of place, of course, but they were surrounded and overlaid from the twelfth century onwards by the gospels and summaries of the schoolmen. Among the summaries of the schoolmen the most important was the Four Books of Sentences of Peter the

41. See the stimulating and useful book by M.T. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).
42. W.L. Warren, Henry II (London, 1973), p. 208. On documents, see Clanchy's table, op. cit., p. 44. Feeling that he lacked time to read all of St. Gregory's Moralia, Henry had Peter of Blois compile a compendium on Job known as the Glossa ordinaria (PL, 207, cols. 775-92), so that he could master it quickly.
44. Politeia, 5. 3.
45. Ibid., 7. 11.
46. Ibid., 8. 5.
47. Ibid., 6. 29. Cf. Aegidius Romulanus, De regimine principum, 1. 2. 10 (Rome, 1607), p. 72. This work was extremely popular in fourteenth-century England.
grow, and a very influential commentary on it was provided by William of Conches, who had assisted in the education of King Henry II of England.54

Were laymen interested in works of this kind? Henry II was an avid reader, and other noblemen shared his enthusiasm for books. The Beau-

mont twins, Robert and Waleran (b. 1104), are said to have astonished Pope Calixtus and the Cardinals with their learning at the age of 15 during a conference at Gisors. In Britain, Abelard, whose father, he says, had some knowledge of letters, encouraged his educator; and he abandoned

his inheritance for learning. Many younger sons of noblemen went to

schools like Robert of Arbrissel. St. Norbert, and St. Bernard were astonishingly popular. Not all noblemen could read and write Latin as Henry de Bray could, but even those who did not often had access to this kind of learning. Thus Baudoin of Guines, who was knighted by Thomas of Canterbury, was not a "mute auditor" of
theological writings, but listened eagerly to readings in the Scriptures, de-
manding not only the literal but the spiritual sense. He enjoyed disputa-
tion with his clerks and had translations made, including one of the Canticle of

Canticles, along with a gloss on the text. His library contained a variety of

books, including the Life of St. Anthony, a work on physics, a work on the

nature of things, books of noble deeds, songs, and fabliaux.55 It is true, however, that his son preferred stories about Roland, Oliver, and King

Arthur, and romances.56 Generally, the literary abilities and tastes of

noblemen in the twelfth century are difficult to assess, but modern his-
torians may have been over-critical about this matter. Clanchy, referring to the

next century, observes somewhat acerbically that "by and large the

knights of thirteenth-century England, and their families too, probably had a

wider and deeper knowledge of language than those historians who have

adopted a patronizing tone towards them because they were not highly

literate."57 Among vernacular writers in England we should include Marie

de France, who probably belonged to a noble family and who indicates in

the Prologue to her Laís that she could translate Latin. Her Laís were said,

by a somewhat prejudiced contemporary observer, to have been especially

popular among the ladies. They were undoubtedly designed to produce

lively discussion and varied interpretation among the members of their au-
ned circule, and they are, as might be expected, largely concerned with var-

ties of love.

54. PL., 198, cols. 1053-1722. All Chaucerians should, of course, have a firsthand

familiarity with standard texts used in the schools during Chaucer's time if only to acquire an

understanding of prevailing attitudes.

55. Lambert d'Andres, Chronique (Paris, 1855), pp. 173, 75. Baudoin was a vigorous

man. After the death of his wife, Chelétienne, in 1177, he developed a taste for virgins, and there were said to have been 33 children at his funeral. Lambert, who was a priest, taints

his lechery by saying he "does not call him either a "pagan" or a "courty lover," either of which would

not have to be spectacularly lecherous to produce some twenty-odd children in twenty-odd years. Nor were lecherous inclinations confined to men. See the account of the Countess Yde

de Bouteuf, ibid., 205, 207.


57. Enchiridion, 65.

59. For accounts of these works, see John T. McNeill and Helen M. Gaster, Medieval

Handbooks of Penance (New York, 1938), pp. 25-50, and Adrian Moray, Burhcholme of


60. This work is described at length in P. Fourrier and G. Le Bras, Histoire des

61. For the importance of this work see Don D.A. Wilmart, "Une opuscule sur la

confession composée par Guy de Southwicke versus la fin du XIIe siècle," Recherches de

cerning the sacraments and penance especially was provided by the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, as the reactions of local bishops clearly indicate. The Profession of Faith at the opening of the Council endorsed, for the first time officially, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the decree on penance demanded that everyone participate in Communion at least once a year.

The decree itself is worth quoting:

"Every one of the faithful of either sex (mâles et femmes), after he arrives at the age of discretion (i.e., seven years), should confess all of his sins faithfully and diligently, and seek to fulfill all the penance enjoined by the Church. For the private, to his own priest, at least once in the year, and should seek to fulfill all the penance enjoined by the Church. For the public, to his own priest, at least once in the year. This penance is to be performed at Easter. The priest shall not absolve a man from his sins, if he has not performed his penance.

The sacrament of the Eucharist, unless, indeed, on the advice of his own priest. If the priest is in severe, he should be denied entrance in the church (i.e., suffer minor excommunication); and if he is dead, he should be denied a Christian burial."

Here the requirements for an annual participation in the Sacrament of the Altar and annual confession are combined, for it was thought participation in the former might be ineffectual, or even noxious, if the individual were in a state of sin. However, it was recognized that the proper administration of penance would require considerable skill on the part of priests, and the decree went on to urge that the priest be discreet and cautious "so that in the manner of a skilled consecrated physician, he may administer wine and oil to the wounds, diligently inquiring of the circumstances, both of the sinner and of the sin, by means of which inquiry he may prudently judge how he should counsel the sinner and what kind of remedy he should apply, using varied evidence in curing the sick."

If the decree were to be properly implemented, an enormous program of education would be necessary. With reference to the latter the Council had already recognized the need for more efficacious preaching, observing that "the preaching of the word of God is known to be most necessary" for the Christian soul. "For even as the body is nourished by material food, so is the spirit of life."

Thus, that the proponents of transubstantiation and the Church at large should approach this matter in the same way as they did the Eucharist, with care and respect, and that bishops should provide instruction in the doctrine of transubstantiation to their clergy and people.

Moreover, the Council repeated a decree of the Third Lateran Council, which now acquired a new significance, that there should be a master in every Cathedral Church to teach grammar and other subjects to the local clergy and to "other poor scholars" free of charge, and that there should be a master of theology in every metropolitan church. Insofar as the Eucharist is concerned, enthusiasm for its efficacy became widespread, leading eventually to the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi with its attendant processions, sometimes under guild auspices.

Generally the response to the Council was astonishing. Bishops both in England and on the Continent echoed it in their Constitutions, sometimes supplying manuals of instruction for their priests to enable them to become skilled physicians. Meanwhile, the Council repeated a decree of the Third Lateran Council, which now acquired a new significance, that there should be a master in every Cathedral Church to teach grammar and other subjects to the local clergy and to "other poor scholars" free of charge, and that there should be a master of theology in every metropolitan church. Insofar as the Eucharist is concerned, enthusiasm for its efficacy became widespread, leading eventually to the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi with its attendant processions, sometimes under guild auspices, and to the cycles of mystery plays. In addition, the necessity for confession to be complete and circumstantial stimulated the production of confessional manuals both in Latin and in the vernaculars. Such manuals were written by the Lincolnshire scholar William de Montibus, a man before the Council but resembling a miniature "Parson's Tale," became a standard school text in the fourteenth century.

It had been customary to compose sermons for special social groups known as sermones ad status. Society was, John de Salisbury insisted, an interrelated whole, somewhat like the human body, and its health depended on the proper functioning of all of its parts, or on the virtues of all of its members, and since society was hierarchical, on the fidelity of each member to his superiors and the charitable treatment of inferiors. Purity of life was ideally insured by love, for, as St. Augustine had said, Christ binds His Church (Christian society), which is His body, "which has many members performing diverse offices, in a bond of unity and charity." To endanger this bond was to offend against "the laws of charity." The "diverse offices" exposed men to various temptations, some peculiar to each


63. For the Profession of Faith, see Hefele and Leclercq, op. cit., V, 1325. The decree of the Fourth Lateran Council on the Eucharist was echoed in episcopal statutes throughout the thirteenth century. One of these is the decree of the Bishop of Exeter, who urged his priests to explain the doctrine of transubstantiation to laymen with examples, reasoning, and miracles. See Wilkins, op. cit., II, 133.

64. Hefele and Leclercq, V, 1350.


67. Wilkins, II, 54.


69. Hefele and Leclercq, V, 1341.

70. See most recently V. A. Kolbe, The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford, 1966), esp. pp. 44-49.

71. See Orme, English Schools, pp. 103-34. The text is by the Lincolnshire scholar William de Montibus (d. 1213), Pt. II, 207-213. The text is by the Lincolnshire scholar William de Montibus (d. 1213), Pt. II, 207-213. 207, cols. 1153-56.

office. The great Cardinal Jacques de Vitry preached special sermons to prelates, to priests in synods, to regulars, to scholars, to pilgrims and crusaders, to merchants, to farmers and craftsmen, to servants, to virgins, and to widows. They similarly, in his manual for Dominican preachers, Humbert de Romans, master of the Order, presented his followers with materials for one hundred such sermons, ranging from "ad omnes homines" to "ad mulieres meretrices." Manalls of confession were sometimes organized in the same way, suggesting that priests inquir of their penitents specifically concerning the obligations of each group. For example, of monks, whether they have observed the rules; of priests concerning simony, the proper expenditure of church funds, and the observance of the offices; of clerics concerning unjust tithes; of burgesses concerning lying, guile, usury, pledges, baratry, and unjust weights and measures; of agricultural laborers concerning theft, lies, the eradicating of boundaries, encroachments on the lands of others, and of faithfully maintaining their works and services. It is not often recognized by historians that oppressive lords, greedy merchants, and slothful peasants were alike violators of fidelity, and they confessed questions them about the matters and required penances for them. However, surveys of the social order like that near the beginning of Piers Plowman or that in the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales probably owed a great deal to the habit of thought engendered both by preachers and by confessors in their attention to specific social groups.

Humbert de Romans was, as indicated above, a Master of the Dominicans, and Archbishop Peckham was a Franciscan. The Friars, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans, helped enormously, both in their theoretical studies and in their pastoral work, to implement the decree of the Lateran Council of 1214, which was included in English first in 1221, establishing a convent at Oxford. Their numbers increased rapidly, and by the end of the century Black Friars in London, with its great church two hundred and twenty feet long, was well established and had close connections with the royal court, which it retained throughout the next century. The Franciscans' great London church Greyfriars, even larger than Blackfriars, adorned with marble columns and a marble floor not entirely consistent with Franciscan ideals of poverty, did not arise until the next century, but while the order had established itself in towns throughout England, it was impressed by their zeal, and they won the hearts of townsmen with their evangelical fervor and popular preaching, which often included the employment of songs. They became active in such civic matters as the construction of waterworks for towns, and the wealthy who wished to reward

75. E.g., see Mansi, 24, coll. 528; cf. cols. 987-88.
76. See David L. Jeffrey's study, The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spiritualities (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1973), On Franciscan literature generally, see John V. Fleming, An Introduction to Franciscan Literature of the Middle Ages (Chicago, 1977).
work was the Lamere as lails based on the Elucidarium of Honorius of Autun and the Sentences of Peter Lombard, indicating once more an interest on the part of laymen in problems of doctrine. Grosseteste's Chasteau d'Amour, probably directed to a noble audience, is an indication of this kind of interest. For other works in the same tradition, which extends into the next century, Legge's chapter "The Interdict and the Fourth Lateran Council" forms a useful guide. 85 The "earl" she mentions was Henry of Lancaster, father of Chaucer's Blanche, whose Synec Medicines describes his own penitential experience, and offers, at the same time, a remarkable illustration of the effects of the new penitential doctrines on a distinguished layman. There is, in fact, a close relationship between literature describing the need for penance and devotional literature, as W. A. Pantin has observed. 86 True penance was inspired by love, not by fear. Love for Christ and the Virgin and sympathy for their sufferings at the Crucifixion, portrayed in many English lyrics, was thus a very proper inspiration to contrition, the basis for true penance. Among thirteenth-century English works the Ancrene Wisse, which contained sections on Confession, Penance, and Love, including an account of the seven sins, became, as Geoffrey Shepherd said, a "manual of counsel" cherished by "many gifted Englishwomen and Englishmen of the last medieval centuries." 87 The spirituality of the twelfth century, as the Merse of St. Edmund clearly demonstrates, blended well with the new doctrines following the Lateran decree, and the latter undoubtedly contributed to the renewed interest in the former, which grew as the Middle Ages progressed toward the Renaissance. 88 The "medicine" of the new pastoral theology was thus in part a logical development of the doctrines of love that flourished in the twelfth century, and it helped to reinforce and preserve them.

V. NON VENI PACEM MITTERE, SED GLADIUS

During the thirteenth century the population of England, as of Europe generally, experienced rapid growth, possibly as a result of the increasing consumption of meat. 89 The villages of England and the manorial organizations associated with them (for vill and manor did not always coincide) became integrated into tightly knit communities whose social interests were supported by centers of two kinds, the local courts and the parish churches. Speaking generally, the courts were of three kinds: manorial courts representing the community of the manor; honor courts to which freemen had access in some areas; and the county court with its sub-

82. Cressy, op. cit., p. 71.
85. See Forster's interest in penitential material and a general discussion of the sources of his statutes and their influence, see Cheney, English Synodalia, Chapter III.
The nature of the site generally, see Helen M. Cam, "Liberties and Communities in Medieval England," (New York, 1963), pp. 345-47; and on county courts in the fourteenth century, see J. R. Maddicott, "The County Court in England: The Making of a Public Office," (1984, pp. 27-34). The term "serfdom" is used here to refer to the legal status of those who were bound to the land by feudal obligations.


95. The situation has been studied by Ian Kershaw, "The Agrarian Crisis in England in the Fourteenth Century," in R. H. Hinton, Peasants, Knights, and Heretics (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 85-132. The term "serfdom" is used here to refer to the legal status of those who were bound to the land by feudal obligations.


Another, however, has pointed out that although taxation was sometimes disastrous locally, the economy as a whole, as wool exports indicate, remained vigorous, and that the nation as a whole did not share the economic difficulties experienced in the government. However, we may conclude about this period, it seems that the Exchequer "seal of the green wax" became an object with which to terrorize people, and a sensitivity to taxation developed which in turn was to hamper foreign policy and lead to "tyrannical" measures in the next reign, a disaster of devasting proportions struck the land in 1348-49, the Black Death, which, according to some estimates, wiped out between a third and a half of the population, although its effects were not uniform throughout the country.

Chaucer was only a small boy in London when this happened, but he must have witnessed some of the devastation and panic and heard harrowing tales about it during his early youth, especially since plagues were recurrent, in 1354, 1361, 1369, and in the seventies. In the countryside the "wrath of God" was felt keenly, inspiring new interest in themes from The Consolation of Philosophy which began to appear, with increasing frequency in wall paintings in parish churches, along with representations of St. Christopher, whose influence was thought to be helpful in protecting St. Christopher, whose influence was thought to be helpful in protecting the sick, thereby increasing its popularity in the Midlands, whereas "there is no corresponding decline in wages, a fact that stimulated parliamentary agitation. A more determined effort to control wages may have been partly responsible for the Revolt of 1381.

The royal courts generally had been suffering from a failure to observe the ordinances of 1346 that stipulated that the royal justices execute the laws for rich and poor alike, that they should take no bribes and fees from anyone except the King, and no gifts beyond food and drink of small value. In spite of it magnates frequently retained justices and sergeants on regular basis, a fact that led to widespread discontent. The judicial process was being corrupted on a large scale, affecting not only justices of

100. The green seal of the Exchequer was still a frightening object many years later, since its reappearance on a document could be used to extort money from illiterate persons who recognized it but could not read. See the Waterford play of the Last Judgment, ed. David Bevington, Medieval Drama (Boston, 1972), p. 647, lines 283-84, although the editor's note misinterprets the word green.
106. Cf. I. A. Raff, "An English Village After the Black Death," Med. Stud., 29 (1967), 163-64. Cf. the same author's Warboys (Toronto, 1974), p. 200. The conditions described here were widespread. John Bellamy, Crime and Public Order in the Later Middle Ages (London and Toronto, 1973), p. 6, reports that "in 1302 there was a great clamour against the committing of felonies and trespasses and the excesses of officials." There were said to be constant complaints of violence and vagabondage in Staffordshire and many other places in Devon. The Chronicle of Kinghtson reported a wave of theft in 1364.
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assize and jail delivery, but also justices of the peace and local sheriffs, not
to mention the central courts themselves. Chaucer's Sergeant of the Law
was to the central courts what his lord was to the baronial courts. His
holding, which was a hereditary one, increased with the rise in his
position. He was a man of influence and power, and he used his
position to further his own interests. His extensive holdings in land
were a source of wealth and power for him and his family. He was a
man of great influence and power in his community.

return for a man to the manors of England, which functioned
as the basis for the national economy, the disruption in local communities
we have discussed was further aggravated by the development of industries
that offered wages on a piecework basis. This led to an increase in the
number of menial laborers. The Black Death caused a major disruption in the
agricultural economy of England, which in turn led to a decrease in the
value of agricultural produce. This, in turn, led to a decrease in the
value of agricultural labor.

the ecclesiastical hierarchy was not immune to the temptations
that beset other members of society. As we have seen, the Friars were
becoming wealthy, and in many instances greedy and unscrupulous, and
their actions and their officials, never popular, were becoming more and
more burdensome to their communities. The Black Death impoverished
the parishes and monastic communities and left many small chapels in the
parish without support. In her study of the church in Lincolnshire
Dorothy Owens writes that "the rolls of the justices of the peace for 1360
and 1373 are full of accusations of theft and violence committed by chap-

tains." But such accusations were confined neither to Lincolnshire
nor to those years.116 Moreover, similar offenses were committed by other mem-
ers of the hierarchy. Parsons were not all like Chaucer's Parson. Thus
in 1372 the Parson of Rothwell with others stole crops of 5 acres valued at
5s. an acre at Cuxwold. Shortly thereafter Walter the Parson of Scoter har-
nessed a horse and fellon and rapped her, extorted 4d. 6d. From a man, stole 20
pigs belonging to the Abbot of Peterborough, and 19 other pigs, and
assaulted a man. In 1375 another Parson is said to have stolen a black bull
belonging to the Master of the Temple.117 In the same year the Parson of
Wotton in Norfolk is said to have raped a man's wife and stolen goods

115. This situation is discussed at length in an article on the Wife of Bath by the
present author soon to appear.

116. To cite an illustrative example, one Henry Souther of a town in Lincolnshire is
said to have bought all the shoes made by William Bird and his men for 52d. a pair on 11 Oc-
1372 and then, on 28 March and later during the year sold them for 8d a pair "to the
serious oppression of the people." See Rosemund Silleen, Records of Some Sessions of the

117. R. M. Kibworth, Sessions of the Peace for Bedfordshire, Bedfordshire His-
torical Record Society, 48 (1969), pp. 52, 55, 57, 57-8, 63; and the same author's Rolls of
the Gloucestershire Sessions of the Peace, Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire
123, 124-5, 130-131. In which instance the chaplain broke into a man's house, raped his wife, and stole
goods valued at 1½s., but the Dean of Hawkswood, having discovered this misdemeanor, exiled
him from his charity, for which he in turn was indicted, as he was in a later case of ex-
communication. Chantry chaplains seem to have especially enjoyed raping wives and stealing
the husband's goods, sometimes, indeed, taking the wives with them also.

118. Rosemund Silleen, op. cit., pp. 55, 205, 209.
worth 20s. 119 These are merely illustrative cases, and it would be possible to compile substantial lists of vicars and clerks accused of similar offenses, to name but a few of the many that were levied from church and monastery officials. The extortionate practices of archdeacons and other church officials were notorious, 120 but such practices took a variety of forms. To judge from the accounts of church officials and monastic officials, the acts of extortion were frequently accompanied by threats of violence, including murder. 121 The accounts of church officials, monastic officials, and other church officials are often devoid of any explanation for the acts of extortion, and these accounts are sometimes accompanied by threats of violence, including murder. 122 The accounts of church officials, monastic officials, and other church officials are often devoid of any explanation for the acts of extortion, and these accounts are sometimes accompanied by threats of violence, including murder. 123

119. Bertha Haven Putnam, Proceedings before the Justices of the Peace in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (Cambridge, 1930), p. 120.

120. E.g. see Margaret Aston, Thomas Arundel (Oxford, 1967), pp. 90-94.


122. G. G. Sayles, Select Cases before the Court of the King's Bench, VII (Oxford, 1921), p. 63.


The continuing influence of the Lateran decree was probably stimulated by the general decline in mores that accompanied social change in the...
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130. Op. cit. Chanters IX, X, XI. It is not difficult to detect the influence of the decrees in works of a more literary character. Chaucer's Tales is a case in point. In the early part of the poem (c. 1375), the author follows a description of the bylaws and by-laws, as we call them to-day, in the town of Canterbury. These by-laws are intended to provide a set of rules for the conduct of the citizens. In the later part of the poem (c. 1380), the author follows a description of the by-laws and by-laws, as we call them to-day, in the town of Canterbury. These by-laws are intended to provide a set of rules for the conduct of the citizens.


132. Sentences, 2. 21. 3.


134. It has been alleged that the King is suspect because he fought under one of the King's wages in the war. This allegation has found its way into a popular school text. However, it is clear that the King did not fight under one of the King's wages in the war.


136. See Ronell, op. cit., p. 362; Renault parlamentum, III, 456a. Under "sense" and "humanity" the Speaker referred to the competence of Henry's ecclesiastical and lay associates.
maintain the coherence of English society. New lessons in love, like those afforded by The Consolation of Philosophy, seemed desirable to shift men's affections away from "sensible" goods toward those goods that are "eternal and spiritual." Boethius was a potent supporter of Augustinian ideals of responsibility and of freedom from that slavery of the spirit that subjects men to the whims of Fortune. Finally, if the wrath of God were to be appeased, the clear remedy was penance, and through it a new dedication to "the common profit." Chaucer had translated Boethius for his friends and patrons, and had written Troilus, further enforcing the contemporary relevance of Boethian ideas. In The Canterbury Tales he offered trenchant and amusing criticisms of the weaknesses of social groups, along with vivid reminders of the ideals that were being disregarded. He begins with the Knight's jocular portrayal of the evil effects of the conceivably and inscrutable passions and the desirability of harmony with "the fair chain of love"; and he closes with a very satirical sermon on the practical means of achieving that harmony on the "way" to what Christians regarded as their "home," from which, as Boethius had reminded them, they can be exiled forever only by themselves. It is not the purpose of this essay to examine patristic and scriptural materials in the Tales specifically, but simply to suggest that Chaucer's narratives would have been impossible without the traditions of patristic and scriptural teachings as they were adapted and elaborated to meet the needs of medieval life. To understand Chaucer it is, I believe, important to discover as much as we can about those traditions, so that we can recognize them when Chaucer employs them; and, at the same time, to discover as much as we can about the actual lives of people living in his time, so that we can understand the relevant application of those traditions. Otherwise, we shall be in no position to account for his success nor to appreciate the craftsmanship he employed in saying what he wished to say vividly and effectively to his own audience.

II

The Bible and Chaucer's Text