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PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE CONCEPT OF POVERTY

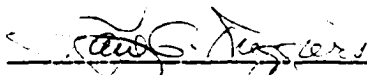



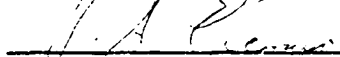
A DISSERTATION  
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PIERS LOWMAN AND THE CONCEPT OF POVERTY

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DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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## PREFACE

For the modern reader of The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman several items, not counting the language itself, demand thoughtful attention. Langland's ambivalent attitude toward progress and the status quo is one of these. As some have pointed out, he was not a revolutionary; he deplored most change and thought the old ways were best. Yet, he envisioned a better life attainable through an individual inner reform, which would inevitably produce societal change. He believed in a God-ordained order which had fallen from pristine perfection but which men could ultimately enjoy once again through the grace of the incarnation. The changes of which he dreamed were spiritual ones, and yet they would bring about other more tangible reforms as well.

A second and closely related theme in Langland is his attitude toward the poor: he was vastly sympathetic toward them, so much so that many have conjectured upon his own poverty and have called him the poet of the poor.<sup>1</sup> Yet he

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Christopher Dawson, Mediaeval Religion and Other Essays (London: Shed and Ward, 1934), p. 170.

nowhere advocated any uprising of the poor to better themselves materially, for this would have violated his belief in a God-created class structure.

These two large concerns which reflect an ambivalence in Langland, a searching for his true beliefs, play a large part in creating that ambivalence the modern reader feels toward the poem: it is finished yet undone; Langland sees but "through a glass darkly." He is affected both by a religious tradition and by a harsh economic reality. The poem reveals his unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the two.

In the creation of any work of art two forces merge--the artist's own creative genius and the masses of external materials upon which his genius works. Those externals are comprised of the literary traditions in which the artist chooses to work or in which he finds himself working and the milieu--social, political, religious, economic, whatever--in which the artist actually lives.

Applying these to William Langland, one has Langland the artist about whom very little is known outside the creative work itself.<sup>2</sup> As for his literary traditions, Morton Bloomfield has rather systematically discussed the broad

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<sup>2</sup>See any of the following for discussion of the person William Langland:

R. W. Chambers, Man's Unconquerable Mind (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), pp. 97-109.

E. Talbot Donaldson, The C-Text and Its Poet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), pp. 199-226.

George Kane, Piers Plowman: The Evidence for Authorship (London: Athlone Press, 1965), pp. 52-70.



classifications into which Piers fits.<sup>3</sup> There remain and probably always will remain the the smaller traditional themes and forms and genres to examine with regard to this multifaceted work. The author's milieu was, of course, that of the fourteenth century, so fully and admirably set out by May McKisack.<sup>4</sup>

The work that follows will trace in detail the extensive religious tradition dealing with the concepts of poverty and wealth and will show in what ways Piers fits into that tradition. It will also highlight the realities of life in the fourteenth century which could not have escaped Langland's notice, and which in fact did not, as the poem reveals.

The tradition and the reality were Langland's two sources; he could not free himself entirely from the former, nor could he allow himself to deal fully with the latter. He was caught, and the tension within him that he could not unravel is communicated in the poem.

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<sup>3</sup>Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, ca. 1962).

<sup>4</sup>The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399. Volume V of the Oxford History of England (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

## PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE CONCEPT OF POVERTY

### CHAPTER I

#### THE RELIGIOUS TRADITION CONCERNING POVERTY

Poverty for most people living in the twentieth century United States is a social evil to be eradicated as quickly, completely, and efficiently as possible. This country has from time to time declared war on poverty (albeit in some opinions half-heartedly); statemen have campaigned, been elected or defeated on the strength of their poverty programs; the poor have organized and marched on Washington to demand governmental aid in remedying their condition. None of this is regarded as strange, for these are the recognized means of rectifying a social wrong, as poverty is widely acknowledged to be.

The response to poverty has not been in the realm of action alone. Much has been written to inform others of the plight of the poor. These debates on and discussions of poverty involve understanding how widespread poverty is, setting the standards below which it exists, contemplating the best means of eliminating it for the most people. Almost no one argues that poverty should be continued, supported, or

encouraged by or in any group or area of the country. Poverty is regarded as no good for anyone anywhere.

In this modern republican state poverty is a negative condition: not having enough money to feed, clothe, and house one's self and one's family, not being above a certain standard of decency. (Just what that standard is may differ from time to time or among groups, but it is always well above the mere necessities of life.) And, it is a relative condition. By the poor, the contemporary American analyst means those who are poor in regard to living standards in the nineteen seventies in this country.<sup>1</sup>

In The Other America,<sup>2</sup> one of the most influential surveys of poverty in America today, Michael Harrington summarizes poverty this way:

Poverty should be defined in terms of those who are denied the minimal levels of health, housing, food, and education that our present stage of scientific knowledge specifies as necessary for life as it is now lived in the United States.

Poverty should be defined psychologically in terms of those whose place in the society is such that they are internal exiles who, almost inevitably, develop attitudes of defeat and pessimism and who are therefore excluded from taking advantage of new opportunities.

Poverty should be defined absolutely, in terms of what man and society could be. As long as America is less than its potential, the nation as a whole is impoverished by that fact. As long as there is the other America, we are, all of us, poorer because of it.

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<sup>1</sup>See New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1967), 11.642b-c for a detailed discussion of these ideas.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Harrington, The Other America (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1962), p. 175.

In short, for a contemporary social observer, such as Harrington, poverty is an unquestioned evil, a crippling disease of the individual, a blight upon the nation.

For people living in medieval England this was not the case, partly because of differing definitions of poverty, partly because of the different outlook of that age. Poverty was not then defined so concisely, and because the standard of living did not vary so drastically among the Christian nations, poverty was not a term which depended on a particular national setting for its definition. The poor in Rome were poor in the same ways as the poor in London.

Poverty had another dimension as well in the feudal or manorial middle ages. A villein was not poor only in respect to the non-possession of goods, but in terms of the non-possession of his own time. He was poor if his overlord did not allow him adequate time from his manorial services to cultivate the plot of land allotted to him for his own sustenance or if he could not cultivate enough land to enable him to pay his master dues in kind and feed himself as well.

In addition, poverty was not merely a negative term. With the holy examples of St. Augustine, St. Benedict, and St. Francis before them, the people of the middle ages had to regard some kinds of poverty as essentially good, as means to heaven, as ideals attainable on earth by those destined for salvation. The basis for the medieval understanding of poverty was, naturally, neither political action nor

sociological and psychological treatises, but the Holy Word of God.

### The Bible<sup>3</sup>

Of the multitude of references to the poor and to poverty in the Bible, several stand out as those with which the medieval man was most familiar, those which recurred repeatedly in the Biblical commentaries and sermons by the Church Fathers and which were therefore the staple for the preachers of all later times. These were a common reference ground for even the semi-learned. They were the means by which poverty was explained, justified, excused, commended, continued, endured.

The simplest of these references came from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, one of the beloved Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5.3). Even more to the point was the passage as it was found in Luke 6.20: "And he, lifting up his eyes on his disciples, said: Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

A lengthier but equally important passage came from the Gospel of Luke 16.19-25. This was the familiar Dives and Lazarus parable in which Abraham, in whose bosom poor Lazarus had his heavenly abode, told Dives: "Son, remember

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<sup>3</sup>The Biblical passages quoted are taken from the Douai version of the Bible and are given by book, chapter, and verse in the text.

that thou didst receive good things in thy lifetime, and likewise Lazarus evil things, but now he is comforted and thou tormented."

The first part of the long parable of the rich young man was another basis upon which the Christian's attitude toward riches was fixed (Matt. 19.16-24). In this passage the young man asked Jesus what he must do to be saved. "Jesus saith to him if thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me." Jesus also told his disciples that "It is easier for a man to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven."

The latter part of this same parable gave a foundation for those blessings that were believed to be in store for the poor (Matt. 19.25-30). Everyone who had left kinfolk and possessions for Jesus' sake was promised life everlasting. "And many that are first, shall be last: and the last shall be first." (Cf. Ps. 33.7).

From the literally hundreds of other scriptural references to the poor, the rich, and poverty, a few general ideas might be drawn. The first of these was that those who had abundance had to give of it to those who had less (see Eccclus. 29.12). This behavior was in direct imitation of Christ: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that being rich he became poor, for your sakes; that through

his poverty you might be rich" (II Cor. 8.9). Not only was giving alms Christlike but it was also giving unto Christ himself who would repay with eternal life. "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25.40 and cf. Prov. 19.17 and 28.27). In addition almsgiving was good for the soul: "For alms deliver from all sin, and from death" (Tobias 4.11. Cf. Tobias 12.8-9 and Ps. 40.2).

If those who had much gave to those less fortunate, then the kingdom of God would be at hand. "In this present time let your abundance supply their want, that their abundance also may supply your want, that there may be an equality" (II Cor. 8.14). This equality if achieved in the present time would create a community such as existed among the Apostles after Jesus' death. "And all they that believed, were together, and had all things common. Their possessions and goods they sold, and divided them to all, according as every one had need" (Acts 2.44-45. Cf. Acts 4.32-35).

#### The Fathers of the Church

The early Church Fathers in commenting on these and other such passages did much to create a coherent religious literary tradition concerning the treatment of the poor and the activities of the wealthy for those who followed them. The theories and examples for behavior were clear and were the same from age to age.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>For proof that this tradition still exists and is

The earliest builders of the tradition, more than twelve hundred years before William Langland came along to give his contribution, were the Apostolic Fathers such as Clement of Rome (fl. 95). In his Epistle to the Corinthians Clement maintained that rich and poor alike were part of Christ's visible body, the Church, and each should aid the other, a theme that continued unbroken to Langland's time.

The visions and parables of the Shepherd of Hermas (ca. 96) treated the rich and poor allegorically, an early Christian use of one of the forms that Langland was to expand so fully, while propounding the Biblical ideas of mutual aid and interdependence. It embellished such bald ideas as those in Prov. 22.2: "The rich and poor have met one another: the Lord is the maker of them both:" and Ps. 33.7: "This poor man cried and the Lord heard him. . ."

Cyprian (ca. 200-258), an ardent verbal advocate of the proper use of wealth, did not confine himself to mere words but gave his entire fortune to the poor. In a treatise "On Works and Alms" he explained that giving alms could save man's soul by freeing him from sin. This idea recurred in the larger work The Lapsed. Of the brothers Basil (ca. 330-379) and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-395), Basil in particular

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being followed see Jacques Leclercq, Christianity and Money, trans., Eric E. Smith (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959.) And for a modern discussion of the tradition see Pie-Raymond Regamey, Poverty: An Essential Element in the Christian Life, trans., Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950).



was harsh on the vices of the wealthy and full of sympathy and advice for the poor. Both believed that giving to the poor was giving to Christ who would repay the gift. Ambrose (340-397) spoke out in favor of the commonalty of goods in Jacob and the Happy Life. Jerome (340-420) modified this idea into the more practical theory of stewardship of goods which Basil also advocated.

St. John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) spoke out on almost every aspect of riches and poverty--from what constituted true riches to how material wealth should be used, from advice to the poor on bearing their condition properly to how the right spirit within could save a rich man. His works alone are ample to provide the framework for the tradition of handling poverty to which Langland belonged.

Paulinus of Nola (353-431), who with his wife lived a celibate life and cared for the poor around him, wrote a long letter "On the Alms Table" in which he explained that by giving alms man brought God into his debt and God would repay with eternal life. This was a fuller discussion of ideas that appeared in Jerome's and Basil's works. Paulinus also treated the ideas of stewardship and of commonalty of goods.

Scattered throughout the works of St. Augustine (354-430) the Church Father best known in the middle ages, were references to the poor. In "Of the Work of Monks" and "On Patience," in "On the Sermon on the Mount" and "Sermons

on the Liturgical Seasons," as well as in The City of God, he told what poverty of spirit was and what it brought, gave advice to the poor on patience and endurance, and praised the commonalty of goods which had once existed but had passed away.

Boethius (ca. 480-524) who was so influential in fourteenth century thought had very little to say of a practical nature on the subject of poverty. He did, however, in his Consolation of Philosophy explain that riches alone could not make men happy, that riches were of one substance with power, glory, respect, and pleasure, and that therefore, these must all be sought together. If one sought all of these, one would be seeking true happiness, which was true goodness, which was God. Thus Boethius believed that the world's riches were of no value in themselves because they could not render man happy.

Many others dealt with wealth and poverty both separately and together, in detail and briefly, but the ones mentioned above were the major contributors to the tradition. This tradition was a vast and fluid subject consisting of many closely related topics, including poverty of goods and poverty of spirit, the nature of true riches and what makes one really poor, advice to the poor on endurance and to the rich on almsgiving. The constructors of the tradition could not, like Farrington, simply label the subject "poverty" as evil and then go about calling for its eradication. For them

it was a part of the post-Edenic world, a consequence of man's fall. Only through a regeneration of God's spirit within man could such a given be changed.

A thoroughgoing and detailed study of each of the interrelated topics is helpful in understanding the many references to poverty in Piers Plowman. The weight of this tradition fell heavily on Langland and influenced him at every turn. In spite of conflicts which he clearly saw between the literary tradition and the actual conditions of life, he could not escape engulfment by the Church.

### Poverty as a Good

For the modern researcher probably the most striking attitude the Church Fathers held concerning poverty was their conviction that it was a good in itself. These early Christian authors praised it amply and in terms foreign to the twentieth century. St. John Chrysostom declared, "Poverty, to those who bear it wisely, [patient poverty] is a great possession, a treasure that cannot be taken away. . .". Elsewhere he described poverty as a gentle, beautiful maiden of goodly proportions, with a mild, clear eye and a kind mouth.<sup>5</sup> In Cum Saturninus et Aurelianus he said, "poverty

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<sup>5</sup>Homiliae de Statuis, II.24, PG 49.45; trans. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st series, ed., Philip Schaff (New York: Scribners, 1889), IX, 353 and Homilia XC.4 In Matthaeum, PG 58.791; trans., Nicene-1, X(1888), 533. This particular set of volumes edited by Schaff will be hereafter abbreviated as Nicene-1 and the volume, date, and page number given following the abbreviation. Notice that the

is a sure refuge, a peaceful port, an abiding security, a joy free from dangers, a pure happiness, an untroubled life . . . an abundance which nothing can assail.<sup>6</sup>

Basil called poverty "my dear friend and nurse of philosophy. . ."<sup>7</sup> For Ephraim Syrus (ca. 301-ca. 373) poverty was a pitying mother "who nourishes her children with choice things. . ."<sup>8</sup> These descriptions were supported by the belief that poverty engendered virtue and thereby benefited man's soul and fitted him for heaven.

### Poverty Associated with Virtues

Chrysostom maintained that poverty could not be an evil, since it taught prudence, endurance, and wisdom and since the poor were praised by God. He cited the parable comparing the rich man to a camel (Matt. 19.21-23) to show that poverty drew men toward heaven and therefore toward

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quotations gathered under each division of the topic, poverty, are rather arbitrarily arranged; many of the quotes given under one topic readily fit into another. The original authors, of course, did not subdivide in these same divisions. They moved from one idea to another as sermon writers are wont to do--as the spirit moved them.

<sup>6</sup>Cum Saturninus et Aurelianus, 3, PG 52.416, trans., Leclercq, Christianity and Money, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup>Epistola IV ad Olympium, PG 32.235, trans., Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd series, ed., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), VIII, 113. This set of volumes edited by Schaff and Wace will be hereafter abbreviated as Nicene-2 and the volume, page, and date given following the abbreviation.

<sup>8</sup>Homily on Admonition and Repentance, 21, trans., Nicene-2, XIII (1956), 336. Ephraim Syrus was unavailable in Migne.

God. In the Hebrews homily he explained that since a poor man was not fearful of loss, he would more readily speak out on the side of virtue; he could not be threatened into silence as easily as could a rich man. And since the poor were more easily able to part with their few possessions than rich men from their many, the poor were less prone to greed and avarice.<sup>9</sup>

In answer to those who argued that poverty encouraged the sin of stealing, he replied that poverty compelled one to work; theft was the result of idleness. But if thieves would only consider, he continued, they would realize that it was easier to work than to steal and live in fear, and that therefore work, the virtuous path, was actually closer to man's nature. Since, then, poverty could not hinder virtue, it could not injure the soul of a good Christian.<sup>10</sup>

Lactantius (260-340) believed as did Chrysostom: he illustrated in The Divine Institutes that wealth prevented man, by its weight, from looking toward heaven. The wealthy man's mind was fixed on earthly things. He said, ". . . the poor and humble, who are unencumbered, more readily believe

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<sup>9</sup> Homilia LXXVII.3 in Joannem, PG 59.414, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 281; Homilia XVIII in Epistolam ad Hebraeos, PG 63.137, trans. Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 453; Homilia X in Epistolam ad Philippenses, PG 62.261, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 233 and Homilia II in Epistolam ad Hebraeos, PG 63.28, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889) 375.

<sup>10</sup> Homilia II in Epistolam ad Ephesios, PG 62.20-21, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 58 and Catecheses II ad Illuminandos.3, PG 49.235, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 167.

God than the rich, who are entangled with many hindrances;  
 . . . No one favors virtue but he who is able to follow it;  
 but it is not easy for all to follow it: they can do so  
 whom poverty and want have exercised, and made capable of  
 virtue."<sup>11</sup>

Poverty Is Pleasurable, not Fearful

In comparing the rich man and his life with the poor man and his, Chrysostom clearly favored the poor. He explained that poverty provided more resources for pleasure since that state was freed from cares, hatred, fighting, contention, strife. The pleasure the poor experienced was also pleasure of a greater degree because they had not been sated and so could still desire. This made food taste better to them. And they were satisfied with less rich sorts of food, so their health remained better.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>De Vita Beata, VII.1, PL 6.737-738, trans., Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev., A. Cleveland Coxe (1885; rev. New York, Scribners, 1926), VII, 195. This set of volumes will be hereafter abbreviated as ANF followed by the appropriate volume and page numbers. Clement of Alexandria, Stromatum, II.5, PG 8.954 supported a similar position by quoting Plato's Athenian Stranger conversing with Socrates in The Laws: "For the very rich to be also good is impossible--those I mean whom the multitude count rich. Those they call rich who . . . are owners of the possessions worth most money which any bad man may possess." trans., Ante-Nicene Christian Library, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1869), XII, 13. This set of volumes will be hereafter abbreviated ANCL followed by the appropriate volume, date, and page number.

<sup>12</sup>Homilia II in Epistolam ad Hebraeos, PG 63.26-27, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 374; Homilia XXII in Joannem, PG 59.137-138, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 79; Homiliae de

The desires of the poor in other things than food were also more moderate. Chrysostom believed that the poor did not desire their necessities as much as the rich did their excesses and that they would part with their few possessions more readily than the rich from their many.<sup>13</sup>

Julianus Pomerius (fl. ca. 497) further explained that the good poor man if he had a bodily good would regard it as a temporary consolation, so that if he lost it, he would regard the loss as a trial not as a punishment. In fact, he would not really feel whether he possessed or lost.<sup>14</sup> Boethius' Philosophy said, "And it is true that they which have much, need much; and contrariwise, that they need little which measure not their wealth by the superfluity of ambition but by the necessity of nature."<sup>15</sup>

Poverty was not a condition to be feared. Chrysostom stated that the necessities of life were enough for a man and

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Statuis, II.22, PG 49.44, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 352, and Homilia XII in Epistolam II.6 ad Corinthios, PG 61.490, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 341.

<sup>13</sup>Homilia XIII.4 in Epistolam II ad Corinthios, PG 61.496, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 346.

<sup>14</sup>De Vita Contemplativa (hereafter Vita), II.13.3, PL 59.457, trans., Ancient Christian Writers, ed. Johannes Quasten et al. (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press and Bookshop, 1947), IV, 79. This set of volumes will hereafter be abbreviated as Quasten followed by the appropriate volume, date, and page number.

<sup>15</sup>"The Consolation of Philosophy" (hereafter CP) in The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy, trans., H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand (London: William Heinemann, 1918), p. 201.

that men did not die from hunger and cold. He obviously was not speaking of abject, starvation poverty; few of the commentators did, a clear indication that they were dealing with theory, with tradition, and not at all with reality. The other things men feared from poverty--ill treatment and contempt--rich men suffered as well because of others' envy.<sup>16</sup>

A rich man also suffered greater anxieties. Sometime during his life he would probably suffer reverses and would then come unprepared to poverty. The poor man lived more securely, experiencing fewer changes in fortune, and was able to enjoy those gifts from God common to all men--sunshine, fresh air. The rich man at times would fear for his very life since he was a target for robbers wherever he might be. The poor man, caring only about his necessities, had greater safety, quietness, and security.<sup>17</sup> As a result he slept more easily. Since he was tired from his honest labor, his rest came more quickly and sweetly as well. Chrysostom

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<sup>16</sup> Homilia II in Epistolam ad Philippenses, PG 61.197, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 193.

<sup>17</sup> Homiliae de Statuis, II.19, PG 49.43, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 351 and Homilia II in Acta Apostolorum, PG 60.357, trans., Nicene-1, XI(1889; rev. 1912), 307. Compare the quote from Boethius: "Wherefore thou, who with much perturbation fearest now to be assailed and slain, if thou hadst entered the path of this life like a poor passenger, needest not be afraid, but mightest rejoice and sing even in the sight of most ravenous thieves," (CP, pp. 203-205).



quoted Ecclesiasticus 31.1: "The anxieties of wealth drive away sleep" to show how uneasy the rich man was in this life then used the parable of Dives and Lazarus to show that even after death a rich man might not rest.<sup>18</sup>

To those who feared poverty saying it forced them to stand in need of others, Chrysostom argued that every man was in need of others continually and that in fact the rich stood in more need than did the poor. So one should be glad to escape the greater humiliation of being rich and should accept men's mutual need as a sign of God's wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

Boethius believed the same thing: ". . . riches, which are thought to suffice of themselves, rather make men stand in need of other helps."<sup>20</sup>

Cyprian and Augustine both supported Chrysostom's declaration. In The City of God Augustine said that the wealthy man was "haunted by fear, heavy with cares, feverish with greed, never secure, breathless from endless quarrels with his enemies."<sup>21</sup> And Cyprian explained that the rich

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<sup>18</sup> Homiliae de Statuis, II.23, PG 49.44, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 352 and Homilia II in Epistolam ad Philippenses, PG 61.195, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 191.

<sup>19</sup> Homilia XVII.3 in Epistolam II ad Corinthios, PG 61. 520-521, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 361-362 and Homilia XVIII in Epistolam ad Hebraeos, PG 63.136, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 453.

<sup>20</sup> CP, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> De Civitate Dei, IV.3, PL 41.114, trans., The Fathers of the Church, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari et al. (1950 rev. Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1962), VIII, 193. This set of volumes will hereafter be

man was in bondage to his possessions and therefore had no mental rest.<sup>22</sup> Boethius put the same sentiment into a poem:

Although the rich man from his mines of gold  
Dig treasure which his mind can never fill  
And lofty neck with previous pearls enfold,  
And his fat fields with many oxen till,  
Yet biting cares will never leave his head,  
Nor will his wealth attend him being dead.<sup>23</sup>

### Christ's Poverty

One of the strongest supports for maintaining that poverty was a good in itself was the fact of Christ's poverty. He was understood literally to have been a poor man who practiced His own admonition to "be not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat, nor for your body what you shall put on" (Matt. 6.25 ff.). But more important Jesus became poor in a deeper sense when He renounced His divine powers to become man: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that being rich he became poor, for your sakes; that through his poverty you might be rich" (II Cor. 8-9). Here was the example to follow--be poor in this life and rich in the next. Christ had promised riches untold if one would just follow Him. "And everyone that hath left house, or

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abbreviated Deferrari followed by the appropriate volume, date, and page number.

<sup>22</sup> Epistola I ad Donatum, PL 4, 222-223, trans., ANF, V, 279.

<sup>23</sup> CP, p. 239.

brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting. And many that are first, shall be last; and the last shall be first" (Matt. 19.29-30).

Augustine, Chrysostom, and Ambrose all commented on the passage in II Corinthians. Chrysostom used Christ's poverty as another proof of the virtues that would arise from poverty: "godliness, sinlessness, sanctification."<sup>24</sup> Augustine stated that Christ "became poor, to whom all things belong . . . lest anyone believing in Him should dare to be unduly exalted because of earthly riches." In a Christmas sermon he expounded upon the glorious treasures which would come to man because of Christ's having been made poor. Man would eventually have divine riches which would satisfy his longings. As for earthly riches, Augustine scoffed at them in another sermon: "Consider riches; what is richer than He by whom all things were made? Yet although He was rich, He took mortal flesh in a virgin's womb . . . Such riches and such poverty! Riches, that you might be created; poverty, that you might be redeemed."<sup>25</sup> Ambrose used the fact of Christ's poverty to illustrate to the Christians in the

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<sup>24</sup>Homilia XVII.1 in Epistolam II ad Corinthios, PG 61.518, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 360.

<sup>25</sup>De Catechizandis Rudibus, I.22.40, PL 40-41.339, trans., Quasten, II(1946), 72 and Sermo CXCIV.3.3, PL 38-39.1016, trans., Deferrari, XXXVIII(1959), 39.

church at Vercellae that they should neither exclude the poor from their fellowship nor exalt in their own riches.<sup>26</sup>

### Material Poverty as a Christian Ideal

Since Christ was actually poor, even absolute poverty was praised as a Christian ideal.<sup>27</sup> Both St. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580-662) and St. Antony (ca. 251-356) took complete poverty as their goal. "He is poor who has renounced all his goods and possesses nothing at all save his body; and who, in severing his attachment to it, has confided himself to the care of God and pious men."<sup>28</sup> Antony justified this state to his monks by asking them what it would avail them to possess what they could not take with them: "For we brought nothing into this world, and certainly we can carry nothing out" (I Tim. 6.7).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Epistola LXIII.87 ad Vercellensem Ecclesiam, PL 17.1265, trans., Nicene-2, X(1955), 469.

<sup>27</sup>Not all the Fathers advised such a complete sort of poverty. As was mentioned above, Chrysostom counseled a moderate sort, consisting in having only the necessities of life. St. Gregory of Nyssa, Oratio I de Beatitudinibus, PG 44.1207, said that men should be poor in the heavy material things such as gold that weighted down the soul, trans., Quasten, XVIII(1954), 95.

<sup>28</sup>St. Maximus the Confessor, Capitulum de Charitate Centuria, II.88, PG 90.1014, trans., Quasten, XXI(1955), 171.

<sup>29</sup>St. Athanasius, Vita S. Antonii, 17, PG 26.867 and 870, trans., Quasten, X(1950), 35. St. Augustine, Enarratio in Psalmum, XXXVIII.17, PL 36-37.424, provided an answer to Antony's question about the value of goods that could not follow a man after death. He explained that the way to get earthly riches to heaven was to send them ahead in the hands of the poor, trans., Quasten, X(1950), 112, fn. 67. This

Jerome claimed, "Such is the climax of apostolic virtue--to sell all that one has and to distribute to the poor (Luke 18.22), and thus freed from all earthly encumbrances to fly up to the heavenly realms with Christ."<sup>30</sup>

Basil told Amphilochius that the bishop of Caesarea recommended having one garment as the sum of one's possessions. All else should be put into the hands of those whose duty it was to care for the poor.<sup>31</sup>

When one looks at some of the foregoing statements of the Fathers concerning the value and desirability of poverty, one might expect the Fathers to draw the logical conclusions from such statements and to point out that since it is good to be poor and since everyone wants good for himself, everyone should be poor. From that it follows that the rich should give up their goods, and the poor should remain in their blessed state, thus making every one equal and bringing back the state of apostolic virtue enjoyed by the first Christians. This is not a position that they held, however, except as a theoretical possibility. The first Christians failed to maintain such a state, and the later Fathers seemed to realize that such sacrifices and endurance were beyond the capabilities of the common man. The Fathers

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idea will be dealt with more extensively under the topic of advice to the rich (see p. 57 and fn. 131).

<sup>30</sup> Epistola CXXX.14 ad Demetriadem, PL 22.1118, trans., Nicene-2, VI(1954), 268.

<sup>31</sup> Epistola CL.3 ad Amphilochium, PG 32.603-606, trans., Nicene-2, VIII(1955), 208.

were not practicing communists; they accepted the reality of the class-structured society and wanted to live within it. They were not radicals and rather than draw the communistic, utopian conclusions that do follow some of their presumptions about poverty, they shifted ground and interpreted poverty as poverty of spirit when such a definition might save them from extremes.

### Poverty of Spirit

The words of Christ in the Beatitudes were, of course, a fine source for considering the state of poverty whether of goods (Luke 6.20) or of spirit (Matt. 5.3). Gregory of Nyssa reconciled the difference between the gospels by saying that material poverty was included in poverty of spirit. Those who were poor "for the sake of the spirit" were given riches of the soul in exchange for material goods.<sup>32</sup> Augustine in his "On the Sermon on the Mount" said that "the poor in spirit are rightly understood as the humble and the God fearing." These needed not be poor in worldly possessions so long as they were moderate in desires. It was possible, he maintained, to find a man with worldly wealth who was not puffed up with pride and a poverty stricken man with no humility. The former was poor in spirit, and the latter was poor indeed. In his "On the

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<sup>32</sup>Oratio I de Beatitudinibus, PG 44.1207, trans., Quasten, XVIII(1954), 95.

Psalms" Augustine pointed out that the poverty pleasing to God "in animo est, non in sacculo."<sup>33</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa in his "Sermon on the Beatitudes" agreed with the essential importance of humility in understanding who the blessed poor were. He said, "by poverty of spirit the Word understands voluntary humility."<sup>34</sup> Humility, i.e., poverty of spirit, led to virtue just as did poverty of goods, for the riches that made the humble man blessed were riches of holy virtues: "modesty, justice, piety, humility, gentleness, innocence, purity, prudence, temperance, love."<sup>35</sup> The humble were blessed and would be rewarded in the hereafter, once they had fought the good fight, armed with these virtues. The vice of covetousness was what prevented such poverty of spirit while it also despised poverty of goods. The poor in spirit were rich in God's spirit while poor in their own, which was the praise Paulinus of Nola gave to Pammachius.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> De Sermone Domini in Monte, I.1.3, PL 34.1232, trans., Deferrari, XI(1951, rpt. 1963), 21; Sermon II: On the Beatitudes, 2, trans., Deferrari, XI(1951, rpt. 1963), 358 (this sermon is not in Migne), and Enarratio in Psalmum, CXXXI.26, PL 36-37.1727, trans., Nicene-1, I(1886), 123, fn. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Oratio I de Beatitudinibus, PG 44.1199, trans., Quasten, XVIII(1954), 90.

<sup>35</sup> Julianus Pomerius, Vita, II.13.2, PL 59.457, trans., Quasten, IV(1947), 78.

<sup>36</sup> Epistola XIII.18 ad Pammachium, PL 61.217, trans., Quasten, XXV(1966), 134.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) in a treatise called "Quis Dives Salvetur?" ("Who Is the Rich Man that Shall Be Saved") explained that poverty of goods was not positively required, for even the rich could be poor in spirit. He expounded on the Matt. 19.16.ff. parable of the rich young man. What was necessary for salvation, Clement maintained, was the having of one's soul in the right attitude, humility or poverty of spirit. He said that destitution without a special object was not really desirable, but it was better to have enough for oneself and to spare for others. Clement believed that Jesus counselled the young man to sell the passions of the soul that prevented his giving to the poor of his material possessions. Since one could sell possessions and still have evil passions, be poor in purse and rich in evil, Jesus could not have advised this, so He must have meant the man to sell his passions.<sup>37</sup>

The rich man who was compared to a camel was a man rich in evil things, externals. Salvation depended not on externals but on the state of the soul. The humble soul, poor in spirit, was rightly rich in virtue and would be saved.<sup>38</sup> Ambrose admonished the Vercellians, "But if you will be rich, you must be poor. Then shall you in all things be rich if you are poor in spirit. It is not property which

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<sup>37</sup>Quis Dives Salvetur? XI-XV (hereafter QDS), PG 9.615-619, trans., ANF, II, 594-595.

<sup>38</sup>QDS., XVIII-XIX, PG 9.623, trans., ANF, II, 596.



makes rich, but the spirit. . . . Poverty then is not in nature but in our feelings."<sup>39</sup>

There was, of course, another sort of spiritual poverty which made one poor in the very virtues which true poverty of spirit encouraged. To avoid this wicked spiritual poverty one must give.<sup>40</sup> When one gave to others, one became spiritually wealthy; thus once again being rich in virtue implied being poor in goods. One avoided the evil spiritual poverty by true poverty of spirit (humility) which allowed one to give and thereby attain the other poverty, that of goods. This in itself was a reconciliation of the two gospel versions of the Beatitudes.

#### The Rich Are Poor and the Poor Are Rich

In addition to justifying poverty by using Christ's example and words, the Church Fathers attempted to prove that the rich were poor and the poor rich; they defined and re-defined their terms. Ambrose stated to Constantius that "Poverty and riches are names which imply want and satiety. He is not rich who wants anything, nor poor who does not want." He added that the just poor man would not despise

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<sup>39</sup>Epistola LXIII.89-90 ad Vercellensem Ecclesiam, PL. 17.1265, trans., Nicene-2, X(1955), 470.

<sup>40</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, Oratio I de Beatitudinibus, PG 44.1199, trans., Quasten, XVIII(1954), 89 and Chrysostom, Homilia XL.5 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios, PG 61.352, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 247.

his poverty because he had a whole world of riches.<sup>41</sup>

Clement in The Miscellanies quoted Plato (as having said in The Laws), "It is not the diminishing of one's resources, but the augmenting of insatiableness, that is to be considered poverty; for it is not slender means that ever constitutes poverty, but insatiableness, from which the good man being free, will also be rich."<sup>42</sup>

Chrysostom explained that one sure proof of being rich was the despising of wealth and wanting nothing. Those in poverty despised wealth more, he said, and thus were really rich. Those with much wealth always wanted more; therefore, they were truly poor. He advocated despising the world's wealth and believing it to be nothing so that one would want nothing and would, therefore, be rich. He said, "He is poor who desires much and is rich who stands in need of nought;" and "He is rich who does not desire to become rich and is poor who cannot bear poverty but even amidst wealth thinks himself poorer than the poor." In order to be truly rich one must despise riches: "To be rich indeed is to need little, not to possess much." Angels, Chrysostom said, differed from men in that angels did not want so many

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<sup>41</sup>Epistola II.11 ad Constantium, PL 16.919, trans., Deferrari, XXVI(1954, rpt. 1967), 80 and De Jacob et Vita Beata, I.8.37, PL 14.643, trans., Deferrari, LXV(1972), 143.

<sup>42</sup>II.5, PG 8.954, trans., ANCL, XII(1869), 14. Compare the following from Boethius: "What bridle can contain in bounds this their contentless will,/ When filled with riches they retain the thirst of having more?/ He is not rich that fears and grieves, and counts himself but poor" (CP, p. 183).

things as men did. So, the less men needed things, the more they on earth resembled angels.<sup>43</sup> In heaven there was no want so there was no poverty but only true riches.<sup>44</sup> There was no material substance in heaven, therefore, true riches must be immaterial. On earth, then, we ought to be rich in spiritual things, not in earthly treasures.

In a chapter entitled "The Christian Alone Is Rich" Clement of Alexandria explained in detail that he was truly rich whose treasure was in heaven, who possessed good things of the soul. The Christian alone possessed righteousness in his soul; this was true riches. Earth's wealth caused only misery.<sup>45</sup> Augustine told of the vanity and fears of those who laid up earthly treasures. They did not even know for whom they hoarded: not for themselves for they would die; not for their children, since they would die as well.

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<sup>43</sup> Homilia LXXX.4 in Matthaeum, PG 58.729-730, trans., Nicene-1, X(1888), 484; Homilia II ad Philippenses, PG 62.197, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 192-193; Homilia XI in Epistolam I ad Timotheum, PG 62.555-556, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 443, and Homilia LXXX.3 in Joannem, PG 59.436, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 298.

<sup>44</sup> St. Augustine, Sermo LXXVII. 9.13, PL 38-39.488, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 346.

<sup>45</sup> Paedagogus, III.6, PG 8.603-607, trans., ANF, II, 280. Boethius had a very philosophical discussion of what constitutes that state of happiness toward which all aspire and which cannot come from earthly treasures: "If blessedness be the chiefest good of nature endued with reason, and that is not the chiefest good which may by any means be taken away, because that which cannot be taken away is better, it is manifest that the instability of fortune cannot aspire to the obtaining of blessedness" (CP, p. 195).

Riches, it seemed, were gathered merely to be stolen or lost.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, spiritual treasures could not be stolen. And the Lord gave rich compensation to those who scorned this world's vain treasures. Cyprian quoted Mark 10.29 to show that he who left this world would "receive seven times more in the present time, and in the world to come life everlasting."<sup>47</sup>

### Nature of True Riches

True riches were defined positively as virtue, wisdom, and faith--spiritual values. In "Quis Dives Salvetur?" Clement explained that "he is truly and rightly rich who is rich in virtue" for he would make a holy and faithful use of any material wealth he might have.<sup>48</sup> Julianus Pomerius defined wealth as modesty, justice, piety, humility, gentleness, innocence, purity, prudence, temperance, and love.<sup>49</sup> Those who possessed this wealth of virtue would not necessarily escape suffering, Chrysostom explained, because as thieves would break in where there was gold so the devil

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<sup>46</sup>Sermo LX.2-4, PL 38-39.403-404, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 290-291.

<sup>47</sup>Liber de Lapsis, 12, PL 4.489, trans., Quasten, XXV(1957), 22.

<sup>48</sup>QDS.XIX, PG 9.623, trans., ANF, II, 596.

<sup>49</sup>Vita, II.13.2, PL 59.456-457, trans., Quasten, IV(1947), 78.

would besiege those who were virtuous. This was a trial by God to be endured.<sup>50</sup>

The wise man was rich, said Ambrose to Simplicianus, referring to I Peter 3.4: "but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in the incorruptible apparel of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." The wise man was rich in a quiet and simple spirit. Since such a person appeared rich to God, he must be rich indeed. Such a one had peace and longed for nothing. Ambrose further expanded this idea: "She [Prudence] fears not want, for she knows that nothing is wanting to the wise man, since the whole world of riches is his."<sup>51</sup> Chrysostom added his voice to these: "Poverty is a festival, if thou be wise. . . . It is not possible for him to be rich, who is not wealthy in his soul; like as it is not possible for him to be poor, who hath not the poverty in his mind."<sup>52</sup>

To the Church at Vercellae Ambrose said that a man in the Church was rich if he was rich in faith, for faith alone could accompany man after death when worldly wealth had to be left behind. "He then is rich who is an heir of

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<sup>50</sup> Homiliae de Statuis, I.29, PG 49.31, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 342.

<sup>51</sup> Epistola XXXVIII ad Simplicianum, PL 16.1142, trans., Deferrari, XXVI(1954, rpt. 1967), 304 and De Officiis Ministrorum, II.14.66, PL 16.127 trans., Nicene-2, X(1955), 53.

<sup>52</sup> Homilia LXXX.4 in Matthaeum, PG 58.729, trans., Nicene-1, X(1888), 484.

of God, a joint heir with Christ."<sup>53</sup> St. Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315-386) put it all succinctly: "A great thing is a faithful man, being richest of all rich men. For to the faithful man belongs the whole world of wealth, in that he disdains and tramples on it. For they who in appearance are rich, and have many possessions, are poor in soul: since the more they gather, the more they pine with longing for what is still lacking. But the faithful man, most strange paradox, in poverty is rich: for knowing that we need only to have food and raiment and being therewith content (I Tim. 6.8) he has trodden riches under foot."<sup>54</sup>

#### Advice to the Poor

Although the greatest proportion of the writings of the Church Father dealing with the subject was concerned with the proper use and value of riches and with advice to the rich on aiding the poor, some of them did spend time in advising the poor on how to cope with their condition. Chrysostom advised the poor to remember that "Apostles, patriarchs, prophets, and just men" were among the poor.

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<sup>53</sup> Epistola LXIII.86-87 ad Vercellensem Ecclesiam, PL 17.1265, trans., Nicene-2, X(1955), 469.

<sup>54</sup> Catechesis V De Fide et Symbolo.2, PG 33.507, trans., Nicene-2, VII(1955), 29. In a Homily on Admonition and Repentance, 21, Ephraim Syrus said, "No one in creation is rich but he that fears God; no one poor but he that lacks truth," trans., Nicene-2, XIII(1956), 336. If one puts with this statement the Proverb concerning fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9.10), then Ephraim agreed with those Fathers who felt the rich man was the wise man.

Poverty was a sign that God loved you and numbered you among His followers who could overcome the temptation to blaspheme their condition.<sup>55</sup>

The poor, Chrysostom said, were sent into the world as teachers. They praised and thanked God while having less than other men and so could instruct others in humility, pity, and mercy. He also likened the poor to physicians who cut out the corruption in the wounds of others. These statements, even if not spoken directly to the poor, would serve to make the poor who heard them more content with their lot, as it was shown to be God-given and purposeful.<sup>56</sup>

More directly to the poor, Chrysostom said that they were not to grieve over their conditions but should thank God for He had enabled them to receive with little labor the same and even greater rewards than the rich. The poor were not to take the property of others. Chrysostom did realize that this was a grave temptation to be overcome by those who had little.<sup>57</sup> Origen as well saw this trap for the poor and advised them to pray sincerely "lead us not into temptation"

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<sup>55</sup> Homiliae de Statuis, I.28-29, PG 49.31, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 342.

<sup>56</sup> Homilia XI in Epistolam I ad Thessalonicenses, PG 62.466, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 373-374 and Homilia XXX.7 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios, PG 61.255, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 179.

<sup>57</sup> Homilia II in Epistolam ad Hebraeos, PG 63.27, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 374 and Homilia X in Epistolam I ad Thessalonicenses, PG 62.461, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 370.

and to understand that the devil tried "to cast down the poor and needy."<sup>58</sup> Basil added the admonition "Be satisfied with your own possessions. Poverty with an honest sufficiency is preferred by the wise to all pleasure." He further stated that the poor should not borrow lest they lose their freedom from care, that thing in which they were more abundant than the rich.<sup>59</sup>

In fact, not only should the poor not take from others, but they should give to those who have even less. In the "Twelfth Baptismal Instruction" Chrysostom reminded the poor of the widow and her mite (Mark 12.41-44 and Luke 21.1-4). No matter how little one had, one was to give of his goods to the less fortunate. Poverty, then, Chrysostom told the poor, was no hindrance to virtue so long as one wished to be virtuous. Nor did poverty keep one from the life of philosophy (by which Chrysostom's editors say he meant Christian moral training, religious contemplation, and the monastic life).<sup>60</sup>

The poor should realize that they were chosen by God and were useful, should not complain, should not steal, should give alms, and should not seek wealth. Ephraim Syrus

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<sup>58</sup>Libellus de Oratione, II.29.6, PG 11.534, trans., Quasten, XIX(1954), 116.

<sup>59</sup>Homilia VII.3 in Hexaemeron, PG 29.154, trans., Deferrari, XLVI(1963), 110 and Homilia II.3 in Psalmum XIV, PG 29.274, trans., Deferrari, XLVI(1963), 186.

<sup>60</sup>Catechesis II ad Illuminandos, 26-28 and 38-39, PG 49.235-237, trans., Quasten, XXXI(1963), 181-185.



said, "Be thou a lover of poverty, and be desirous of neediness. If thou hast them both for thy portion, thou art an inheritor on high."<sup>61</sup> Augustine warned the poor to seek only for a sufficiency, only for what was enough; the rest was a burden. He quoted I. Tim. 6.6: "Godliness with sufficiency is a great getting" to help sustain them in their purpose. He used this same Biblical passage in another sermon showing how "those who seek to become rich fall into temptation and a snare." This was also a theme in The City of God.<sup>62</sup>

The poor also were to work if they could. Julianus Pomerius declared that the poor who could work to help themselves, if they did not but took from the church, had hindered those who were more needy than they.<sup>63</sup> Basil added to this the idea that the poor should not cast away hope and be idle. They should look to the swallow who was so inventive in her poverty. She would wet her wings to make mud for her nest by rolling in the dust. The poor like the swallow should do what they could with what they had.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Homily on Admonition and Repentance, 16, trans., Nicene-2, XIII(1956), 334.

<sup>62</sup>Sermo LXXXV.5.6, PL 38-39.522-523, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 368; Sermon 11 (Morin, 1922) on the Beatitudes, trans., Deferrari, XI(1951, rpt. 1963), 359 (this sermon is not in Migne), and De Civitate Dei, I.10, PL 41.23-24, trans., Deferrari, VIII(1950, rev. 1962), 34.

<sup>63</sup>Vita, II.10.1, PL 59.454, trans., Quasten, IV(1947), 74.

<sup>64</sup>Homilia VIII.5 in Hexaemeron, PG 29.175-178, trans., Deferrari, XLVI(1963), 126.

The poor were not, however, to glory in their poverty, for there were humble rich who were better than the proud poor. Rich and poor alike were to be humble and pious.<sup>65</sup> If one was poor in resources yet grasping in intention then poverty did not save one. He who was poor was not necessarily blessed, unless he bore his poverty well.<sup>66</sup> In Gregory's Pastoral Care (ca. 540-604) the poor were to be admonished to avoid pride and to realize that they possessed unseen riches and were to be comforted and encouraged.<sup>67</sup>

Bearing one's poverty well meant bearing it patiently. Chrysostom in a memorable simile compared poverty to a fiery furnace and those poor who bore it patiently even thankfully to the three children who were not burned in the flames (Daniel 3.39).<sup>68</sup> The patience of the poor, said Augustine, was a God-given gift which would never perish. He interpreted the reference of Ps. 9.18 to non-perishable patience to mean that such patience should not have been in vain but should have as its reward bliss eternal.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> St. Augustine, Sermo LXXXV.2.2, PL 38-39.521, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 367.

<sup>66</sup> Homilia in Psalmum XXXIII.5, PG 29.362, trans., Deferrari, XLVI(1963), 256.

<sup>67</sup> Regulae Pastoralis, III.2.3, PL 77.52-53, trans., Quasten, XI(1953), 92-93.

<sup>68</sup> Homilia IV.12 in Matthaeum, PG 57.53, trans., Nicene-1, X(1888), 30.

<sup>69</sup> De Patientia, 15.12 and 29.26, PL 40-41.617 and 625-626, trans., Nicene-1, III(1887), rev. 1917), 531 and 536.

### Voluntary Poverty

These directions were to the poor in general but more particularly they applied to those who were poor by chance or circumstances. The Fathers also spoke in approval to those who were poor by choice. Again Christ was the example for all those who gave up their riches to become poor (see pp. 17-18). He gave away all He possessed for others. He was sufficient unto Himself and could provide for others. Yet He, as a preacher, by right could have received from others.<sup>70</sup> Basil used Christ's voluntary poverty as the example to follow, adding that the Beatitude was to be understood as referring to those who from the soul chose poverty, for "to be blessed a thing must be deliberate." For him the praiseworthy poverty, that to which God listened (Ps. 33.7) was practiced intentionally.<sup>71</sup>

Augustine cited voluntary poverty as the "quickest way to the home where God Himself is our true riches."<sup>72</sup> Chrysostom said of the one who was voluntarily poor that his soul was "resplendent as gold, shines like a pearl and blooms like a rose." Such a one stood near God and had heaven as

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<sup>70</sup> Chrysostom, Homilia XLV in Acta Apostolorum, PG 60.316, trans., Nicene-1, XI(1889, rev. 1912), 274 and The Didache 13.1-2 which commands the people to give to the preachers, trans., Quasten, VI(1948), 23.

<sup>71</sup> Homilia in Psalmum XXXIII.5, PG 29.362, trans., Deferrari, XLVI(1963), 256.

<sup>72</sup> De Civitate Dei, V.18, PL 41.162, trans., Deferrari, VIII(1950, rev. 1962), 284.

his pavement. And yet such a one would not be proud, for poverty led to virtue and made one humble. Chrysostom continued that no one was richer than "he who chooses poverty of his own accord and with a ready mind, for he has enough of everything. . ." <sup>73</sup> In his "Lecture XVI on the Holy Ghost" St. Cyril explained that voluntary poverty was a gift from the Holy Spirit. <sup>74</sup>

The Fathers made several statements about those who practiced voluntary poverty: priests, contemplatives, monks, prophets. Abbot Moses (ca. 330-ca. 405) said, "Separation from material things, that is, voluntary poverty, and endurance with patience, and understanding are the possessions of a monk." These three things would save a man if he possessed them. <sup>75</sup> The Shepherd of Hermas told how one could tell a true from a false prophet. A true prophet did not prophesy for money but made himself more needy than any one else. <sup>76</sup>

A priest, said Julianus Pomerius, should be one "who has either left that which was his own to his kinfolk or

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<sup>73</sup> Homilia XLVII.5 in Matthaeum, PG 58.486, trans., Nicene-1, X(1888), 295 and Homilia XVIII in Epistolam ad Hebraeos, PG 63.136, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 452-453.

<sup>74</sup> Catechesis XVI: De Spiritu Sancto, 22, PG 33.950, trans., Nicene-2, VII(1955), 121.

<sup>75</sup> Martin of Braga, Sayings of the Egyptian Fathers, trans., Deferrari, LXII(1969), 18-19.

<sup>76</sup> Mandatum XI, 1.8, PG 1.943-944, trans., The Apostolic Fathers: An American Translation, ed. Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 139. This edition will hereafter be called Goodspeed.

distributed to the poor or added it to the property of the Church, and placed himself for the love of poverty in the number of the poor, so that he himself lives as one voluntarily poor on what he administers to the poor." A brother in a community (member of a religious order) was one who had given up all worldly things and so was afraid to lose nothing. He retained so firmly his spiritual treasures, those things for which he had abandoned earthly things, that for them he would give up his life willingly. Julianus also spoke of the contemplative. He was one who "casts the things of the world on the world, and delivers himself up with a devoted mind to Christ. . ." And he, "having given his possessions for the use of the poor, in one act divests himself of the world and raises himself to heaven with all his strength."<sup>77</sup>

#### Patient Poverty

Whether poor by chance or by choice, there was but one way to bear that poverty, and that was patiently, willingly. Chrysostom spoke to the poor telling them not to weep if they were poor unless they were despondent over their poverty; then they should weep for their weakmindedness or rather they should reform themselves that they might rejoice in their poverty since it allowed them greater enjoyment of

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<sup>77</sup>Vita, II.11, PL 59.455 and II.16, PL 59.460 and I.12, PL 59.428, trans., Quasten, IV(1947), 76, 83, and 32.

God's natural world.<sup>78</sup> Ephraim Syrus addressed himself to the poor man who wished for wealth: "Who has granted to thee, thing of dust, to be rich amidst poverty? Be not thou through desires needy and looking to others. Sufficient for thee is thy daily bread, that comes of the sweat of thy face."<sup>79</sup> He went on to say, "The sick in conscience alone abhors the draught of poverty; the fainthearted dreads the yoke of indigence that is honorable." In a Clementine Homily Peter was quoted as having said, "one is not unquestionably righteous because he happens to be poor . . . That poverty is not acceptable which longs for what it ought not."<sup>80</sup>

Chrysostom supported this view of what poverty was good: "Good is wealth, yet not absolutely, but to him only to whom it is not sin; and again poverty is wicked, but not absolutely, but only in the mouth of the impious, because he is discontented, because he blasphemes, because he is

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<sup>78</sup>Homilia XII.5 in Epistolam II ad Corinthios, PG 61.488, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 340.

<sup>79</sup>Homily on Admonition and Repentance, 21, trans., Nicene-2, XIII(1956), 336. This quote brings to attention a periferal concern of the praisers of poverty. Because of his disobedience, Adam was told by God he would have to live by the sweat of his brow. For some this divine decree precluded any but the most meager existence since living from accumulated wealth could hardly be construed as earning one's daily bread with one's own sweat. Because man had sinned, he was forced to work and to live from hand to mouth. Thus he ought not be wealthy, for this was not the lot prescribed for sinful man.

<sup>80</sup>Homilia XV, 10, PG 2.363, trans., ANF, VIII, 311.

indignant, because he accuses Him who has made him."<sup>81</sup>

Regarding those to whom poverty was wicked, Origin (185-254) proclaimed their status: those who had endured their poverty ignobly and had not conducted themselves "as becometh saints" (Eph. 5.3) had forfeited hope of heaven.<sup>82</sup>

The above quote by Chrysostom to the effect that wealth was good for those who did not make of it sin contained the over-riding import of the Saints' and Fathers' advice to the rich. If one had wealth, one might seek perfection by giving one's goods away or one might keep them yet avoid sin by using the wealth properly.

#### Commonalty of Goods

Yet there was another solution to the problem of riches and poverty which must be dealt with prior to turning to the Church Fathers' direct advice to the rich: this solution was the commonalty of goods as it was practiced by the Apostles in the first years following Christ's death. The Scriptural references to this practice were Acts 2.44 and Acts 4.32. Paulinus used these passages to praise this ideal of Christian behavior which Pammachius had been practicing.<sup>83</sup> St. Augustine argued that since the early church,

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<sup>81</sup>Homilia de non Evulgandis Fratrum Peccatis, 2, PG 51.356, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 236.

<sup>82</sup>Libellus de Oratione, II.29.6, PG 11.534, trans., Quasten, XIX(1954), 116.

<sup>83</sup>Epistola XIII.20 ad Pammachium, PL 61.219, trans., Quasten, XXXV(1966), 136. Chrysostom, Homilia XI in Acta

which the monks were supposed to be emulating, held all things in common, the monks ought to do likewise. They should work for their bread since everything belonged equally to everyone. In another place Augustine used these passages describing the early church to show the motive Christians had for holding wealth in common. This, he said, was a better motive than had the Romans who used the term "commonwealth" to mean the people's common wealth and who did not allow even the consuls to have private wealth. Augustine implied here that Christians should do better than the pagan Romans because they had the better motive but that they were not living up to their ideal.<sup>84</sup> Chrysostom also lamented the decline of the good old custom which was "excellent, being a comfort to poverty and a corrective of riches."<sup>85</sup>

The later Fathers did not have only the passages from Acts to use as a foundation for their beliefs and writings, but they had the very early writings of the Apostolic Fathers as well. The Didache and The Doctrine (ca. 150-ca. 100), early manuals of moral instruction and church

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Apostolorum and Homilia VII in Acta Apostolorum, PG 60.96 and 64, praised this early church custom, trans., Nicene-1, XI(1889, rev. 1912), 73.

<sup>84</sup> De Opere Monachorum, 25.32, PL 40-41.572, trans., Nicene-1, III(1887, rev. 1917), 519 and De Civitate Dei, V.18, PL 41.164, trans., Deferrari, VIII(1950, rev. 1962), 285.

<sup>85</sup> Homilia XXVII.2 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios, PG 61.227, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 157.



discipline, both listed as part of the way of life (as opposed to the way of sin and death) the rule that "You shall not turn away from the needy, but shall share everything with your brethren, and you shall not say it is your own."<sup>86</sup>

Ambrose added his praise to the idea of commonalty of wealth, saying that the just man would reckon his wealth as wealth held in common and would share it with the needy. Paulinus in a letter recommended that the rich should give to the poor to effect an equality, thereby using 2 Cor. 8.14 to support his position and to supplement the Acts' passages.<sup>87</sup>

Chrysostom put a slightly different twist to the idea of all things being the common property of all when he said that the gifts of God in baptism were given to all in common so that the rich could not look down on the poor and the poor could not feel lesser than the rich.<sup>88</sup> The effect of this shift in emphasis was not different: all men were equal in God's sight. Or as Augustine put it, quoting

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<sup>86</sup>The Doctrina 4.8 and The Didache 4.8, trans., Goodspeed, p. 6 and p. 13.

<sup>87</sup>Ambrose, De Jacob et Vita Beata, I.8.37, PL 14.643, trans., Deferrari, LXV(1972), 143 and Paulinus, Epistola XII ad Amandum, PL 61.200, trans., Quasten, XXXV(1966), 105.

<sup>88</sup>The Eleventh Baptismal Instruction (Papadopoulos-Kerameus 3), 21, trans., Quasten, XXXI(1963), 167. This particular work is not found in Migne.

Proverbs 22.2: "The rich and the poor meet together, the Lord is the maker of them both."<sup>89</sup>

Although the Church Fathers in the early days did talk about a commonalty of goods and an equality of all before God, they realized that this was the ideal, not the real state of things. No doubt they hoped that as the kingdom of God on earth approached, the real would begin to approach the ideal.<sup>90</sup> But as the time of that kingdom was in the uncertain future and not so imminent as was once thought, the Fathers turned to dealing with the real. Riches existed and the duty of the Fathers lay in telling the wealthy how they might be saved in spite of or even because of their wealth.

### Stewardship

As a sort of midway between true equality or commonalty of goods among all men and the amassing of large private fortunes, the Fathers tried to place the idea of stewardship. This, as Rev. Vernon Bartlet pointed out in "The Biblical and Early Christian Idea of Property," was a

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<sup>89</sup> Sermo LXXXV, 6.7, PL 38-39.523, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 368.

<sup>90</sup> Bede Jarrett in Social Theories of the Middle Ages (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1926) says, "Communism was a lost ideal left behind in the Garden. . . . 'As for riches,' says Tolomeo de Lucca, 'all things were in common which can only happen among the perfect' (De Regimine Principum, IV.4)," p. 122.

common Biblical theme in both Old and New Testaments.<sup>91</sup> All men were merely stewards of what rightfully belonged to God; some were stewards over larger amounts than others but no matter; each must do his duty and render an account to God of how he has watched over and used the portion under his care. This is, of course, highly reminiscent of the parable of the talents and the faithful steward (Matt. 25.14-30). Each steward's duty was to care for those less fortunate and to share his portion with those who had none or little but to whom as sons of God like himself were due portions like his own.

St. Jerome in a letter to Paulinus asks of this steward: "What use are walls blazing with jewels when Christ in His poor (Matt. 25.40) is in danger of perishing from hunger? Your possessions are no longer your own but a stewardship is entrusted to you."<sup>92</sup> St. Basil described the good man or, as we might call him, the proper steward: "The good man, however, neither turns his heart to wealth when he has it, nor seeks after it if he has it not. He treats what is given him as given not for his selfish enjoyment, but for wise administration."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Property, Its Duties and Rights (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1913), pp. 83-116.

<sup>92</sup>Epistola LVIII.7 ad Paulinum, PL 22.584, trans., Nicene-2, VI(1954), 122.

<sup>93</sup>Epistola CCXXXVI.7 ad Amphiloichium, PG 32.886, trans., Nicene-2, VIII(1955), 279.

Julianus Pomerius in discussing the larger body of stewards, the Church, said that the wealth of the Church was not its own but instead it possessed "in common with all those who have nothing" and the priests were its stewards.<sup>94</sup> This then was a microcosm of the larger situation on earth. St. Gregory concurred in this assessment of the function of the wealthy. "God has entrusted, not given, wealth to certain people, that they be wise custodians and dispensers of it to the actual owners, the poor and needy."<sup>95</sup>

In several places Chrysostom added his support to these ideas. If God had given one wealth, he had done so that one might use the wealth to help the needy and thereby might free oneself from sins. Earthly goods were really just a loan to be used for good. The things a man truly owned were those things he could take with him at death or could send on before him--charitable acts.<sup>96</sup>

Paulinus of Nola in his letters created a fairly complete theory of the divine economy of riches in this world: the rich were stewards of their wealth and were lent wealth by Christ. They were to lend support to the poor to create

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<sup>94</sup>Vita, II.9.2, PL 59.453-454, trans., Quasten, IV(1947), 72-73.

<sup>95</sup>Regulae Pastoralis, III.20.21, PL 77.86, trans., Quasten, XI(1950), 258, fn. 166.

<sup>96</sup>Homiliae de Statuis, II.20, PG 49.44, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 351 and Homilia XI in Epistolam I ad Timotheum, PG 62.556, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 443.

the ideal equality of goods talked of in II Cor. 8.14. By donating their possessions to the poor, they repaid Christ's loan to them with and of His own gifts.<sup>97</sup>

Jerome in his dialogue "Against the Pelagians," had Atticus the Catholic argue that the rich young man in the parable could not go to heaven: one could not be rich and perfect. However, when reminded of those men such as Abraham who were rich and yet were in heaven, Atticus explained that ones such as Abraham gave up their riches by proper use of them. They were rich for others, not for themselves, and were true stewards of God's wealth.<sup>98</sup>

#### Wealth Potentially Harmful

Wealth was then to be used, not amassed. If this were not done, wealth could be harmful because it engendered pride. Gregory quoted Proverbs 28.20: "He that maketh haste to be rich, shall not be innocent," in support of this idea.<sup>99</sup> In The Didache and The Doctrina part of the way of death is the way of "men that have no heart for the poor, are not concerned about the oppressed."<sup>100</sup> The Shepherd of

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<sup>97</sup> Epistola XXXIX.4, Epistola XII.1, Epistola XXXII.21, and Epistola XXXIV, PL 61.365, 200, 340-341, 344-350, trans., Quasten, XXXV(1966), 24-25 which provide a detailed discussion of this point.

<sup>98</sup> Dialogus Adversus Pelagianos, 11-12, PL 23.525-526, trans., Nicene-2, VI(1954), 453.

<sup>99</sup> Regulae Pastoralis, III.20.21. PL 77.86, trans., Quasten, XI(1950), 157.

<sup>100</sup> The Didache, 5.2, trans., Quasten VI(1948), 18 and The Doctrina, 5.2, trans., Goodspeed, p. 7.

Hermas explained how failure to share might harm the rich: the groans of the poor would reach God's ears and He would shut the doors of His tower to the rich who had refused to stop those groans by sharing.<sup>101</sup>

Augustine warned those who put their trust in riches that they would be deceived for they would be rendered proud, not free from care. He believed that riches more than anything else engendered pride. Those who wanted to be rich should be rich in good works.<sup>102</sup> Cyprian commented that if the rich would give to the poor, then riches would not be their ruin, for not only would they not have enemies and fear thieves but also they would have heavenly treasure.<sup>103</sup>

If a rich man did not give to the poor, he could harm himself spiritually by becoming gluttonous and avaricious. And if a rich man took from a poor one, not only did he hurt himself three ways (by giving himself a bad conscience, by endangering his goal of heaven, and by drawing condemnation of others on himself), he actually had helped the poor man since to suffer ill nobly was a gain in disciplining of virtue.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Visio III, 9.5-6, PG 1.907, trans., Goodspeed, p. 116.

<sup>102</sup>De Catechizandis Rudibus, I.16.24, PL 40-41.329, trans., Quasten, II(1946), 53 and Sermon 11 (Morin, 1922) on the Beatitudes, 4-5, trans., Deferrari, XI(1951, rpt. 1963), 360-361.

<sup>103</sup>Liber de Lapsis, 11, PL 4.488, trans., Quasten, XXV(1957), 21-22.

<sup>104</sup>Chrysostom, Homilia Quod Nemo Laedatur Nisi a

The rich in the Bible were charged not to be high-minded or proud (I Tim. 6.17): this emphasized that pride was their besetting sin and the one they must especially avoid. Augustine and Chrysostom both commented on this passage to the effect that it was not riches that were the problem but the pride that they might create. The rich did not need to give all their wealth away so long as they were not proud.<sup>105</sup> Wealth, said Chrysostom, was to be used for the necessities of life. He did not equate the rich man and the covetous one: a covetous man was not master of his wealth and always wanted more; a rich man need not be like that.<sup>106</sup>

#### Rich and Poor Are Complements

Another reason the rich should not be proud--besides the fact that they were really not owners but merely stewards of wealth--was the fact that God had created rich and poor to complement each other. They were both equally part of God's benevolent system. The Shepherd of Hermas explained this relationship in his parable of the elm and the vine.<sup>107</sup> The

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Seipso Liber, PG 52.465-466, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 274 and Homilia LI in Acta Apostolorum, PG 60.357, trans., Nicene-1, XI(1889, rev. 1912), 306.

<sup>105</sup> St. Augustine, Epistola CLVII ad Hilarium, 4.26, PL 33.687, trans., Deferrari, XX(1953, rev. 1965), 343.

<sup>106</sup> Homiliae de Statuis, II.13-14, PG 49.40, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 348.

<sup>107</sup> Similitudo II, 1.5-10, PG 1.954-955. The earlier parable is Similitudo I, 1.11, PG 1.953, trans., Goodspeed, pp. 146-148.

rich man was poor in his relations with the Lord; the poor man was rich in prayers and confession. The rich man supplied the poor man's needs and the poor man prayed for the rich. Thus each fulfilled the command of an earlier parable: "Do your own work and you will be saved."

The poor man worked with his prayers which he had received from God and which he gave back to God (he is a steward). The rich man worked with his goods which he had received from God and which he gave in turn to the poor (he too is a steward). The Shepherd did not put forth the idea that in giving goods to the poor one was really giving to Christ or to God what was His own nor the idea that such giving put Christ in one's debt. These ideas were a later enlargement of the theme. The poor man who was aided by the rich one would give thanks for the rich man who believed that God would reward his giving because God listened to the prayers of the poor. The rich and the poor were partners like the elm and the vine.

In the "First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians" there was a more succinct statement of the theme underlying the Shepherd's parable: "Let the strong care for the weak, and the weak respect the strong; let the rich support the poor, and the poor render thanks to God for giving them the means of supplying their needs."<sup>108</sup> God's earthly kingdom could be built from such interwoven parts.

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<sup>108</sup> Epistola I ad Corinthios, PG 1.283, trans., Quasten, I (1949), 32.



St. Paulinus of Nola explained that humanity was governed by a sort of alternation of riches and poverty. God created the rich for the poor and the poor for the rich so that he who had plenty might provide for the needy and the poor might be the means for just action on the part of the wealthy.<sup>109</sup> Or as Chrysostom had it: if there were no poor, the greater part of man's salvation would be overthrown for there would be nowhere to bestow one's wealth. The rich needed the poor more than the poor needed the rich. This he explained using the example of two cities--one all wealth, the other all poor. Which would last longer? The poor one because it had the laborers the other city lacked and without which it could not endure.<sup>110</sup>

Augustine gave advice to both rich and poor. Those who received food from those who worked with their hands should not despise their benefactors, nor should the workers despise those whom they fed. They were both part of God's world. To support this he quoted I Cor. 1.11: "If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great matter if we reap your carnal things?" He advised: "Ye rich, lay out your money; ye poor, refrain from plundering. Ye rich, distribute your means; ye poor, bridle your desires." If

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<sup>109</sup> Epistola XXXII.21 ad Severum, PL 61.340-341, trans., Quasten, XXXVI(1967), 154.

<sup>110</sup> Homilia XVII.3 in Epistolam II ad Corinthios, PG 61.520 and Homilia XXXIV.8 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios, PG 61.292, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 361 and 205-206.

they followed this advice, they would be like the elm and the vine.<sup>111</sup>

### Wealth Is to Be Used

Obviously, the key to having wealth and yet remaining unharmed by it was to use the wealth and use it wisely. Chrysostom explained that from one of the names of wealth, one could derive its function. "Riches are called 'usables' [χρημάτα] that we may 'use' them rightly, and not keep and bury them; for this is not to possess them, but to be possessed by them." In another homily he concluded that God was not the author of all wealth and poverty. Instead he was the maker of the useful rich like Abraham. Their wealth was truly of God.<sup>112</sup>

St. Cyril of Jerusalem believed that riches were not the devil's. He quoted the Septaugint version of Proverbs 17.6: "the whole world of riches is for the faithful man." And to explain why this was so he found that there was no fault in wealth well used. One could be justified by money if one gave it as alms to the poor. And one could give all one's wealth away thus finding the door to the kingdom of heaven by following Christ's advice to the rich young

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<sup>111</sup>Epistola LXVII ad Hilarium, 4.38, PL 33.692, trans., Deferrari, XX(1953, rev. 1965), 351 and Sermo LXXXV, 5.6, PL 38-39.522, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 368.

<sup>112</sup>Homilia LXXX in Joannem, PG 59.438, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 299 and Homilia XXXIV. 9-10 in Epistolam ad Corinthios, PG 61.294, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 207.

man.<sup>113</sup> Chrysostom agreed with this position. For him it was lawful to be rich but "without rapine, violence, and ill-report." He said, "neither poverty nor wealth is good in itself, but our own disposition" and "Neither is wealth an evil, but the having make a bad use of wealth; nor is poverty a virtue, but the having made a virtuous use of poverty."<sup>114</sup>

The Shepherd of Hermas compared rich men to round stones. They must become square to be useful; something must be cut away. A wealthy man's riches when they were cut away made him useful to God. The Shepherd explained that the master had made some of his servants rich that they might perform deeds for him such as giving to the poor.<sup>115</sup> Gregory the Great in his Pastoral Care told how one might escape the judgment in Eccles. 5.9: ". . . he that loveth riches shall reap no fruit from them." One must distribute them for good, must not love them or give them away merely to gain praise or dominion over others.<sup>116</sup>

The commentators gave a number of reasons why wealth must be used, varying from direct obedience to God's word in

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<sup>113</sup>Catechesis VIII de Providentia Dei, PG 33.631, trans., Nicene-2, VII(1955), 49.

<sup>114</sup>Homilia XI.10 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios, PG 61.94, trans., Nicene-1, XII(1889), 62 and Homilia de non Evulgandis Fratrum Peccatis, PG 51.355, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 236.

<sup>115</sup>Visio III, 6.5-7 and Similitudo I, 1.8-11, PG 1.903-904 and 953, trans., Goodspeed, p. 113 and p. 146.

<sup>116</sup>Regulae Pastoralis, III.20.21, PL 77.86, trans., Quasten, XI(1950), 157.

the Bible or to orders from church superiors, to elaborate reasoning on how giving might save the giver's soul and might place Christ in his debt. Several sections of the "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles" (3rd Century) gave orders about how the poor were to be treated. They were to be found a place in the church and their miseries were to be alleviated. Bishops and priests in particular were responsible for their welfare.<sup>117</sup> The Shepherd listed some things that were right to do and that one should not be restrained from doing. These included looking after orphans and needy, relieving God's servants from distress, and "being more needy than all men."<sup>118</sup>

In the "Letter of Polycarp to Philippians," (d. ca. 155) the elders were directed to neglect "neither widow nor orphan nor poor man," and were themselves to keep "far from all love of money."<sup>119</sup> Cyprian, in making these same demands on the clergy to whom he wrote, added that they might pay for expenses of indigent strangers from his own portion, thus providing precept and example for others to follow.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Constitutiones Apostolicae, II.58 and IV.1, PG 1.742 and 807, trans., ANCL, XVII(1870), 87 and 107.

<sup>118</sup> Mandatum VIII, 1.9-11, PG 1.934, trans., Goodspeed, p. 134.

<sup>119</sup> Epistola ad Philippenses, PG 5.1010, trans., Goodspeed, p. 241.

<sup>120</sup> Epistola XXXVI, PL 4.335, trans., ANF, V, 314. Palladius in Historia Lausiaca, PG 34.995-1262, has a number of stories of people who, to enrich their souls, had given up riches to help the poor, trans., Quasten, XXXIV(1965), 26,

Cyprian devoted an entire treatise ("On Works and Alms") to the discussion of almsgiving.<sup>121</sup> First almsgiving was a way for man to wash from him whatever foulness of sin he had contracted since Christ's atonement for man's original sin (P.1. p.2). Cyprian quoted many scriptures to support his position. "By almsgiving and faith sins are purged" (Prov. 16.6). "As water extinguisheth fire, so almsgiving quencheth sin" (Ecclus. 3.30). "But give alms and behold all things are clean unto you" (Luke 11.41). Alms could appease God's anger when even prayer and fasting could not avail. "Break thy bread to the hungry, and bring the poor that are without a home into thy house. . . And God shall hear thee" (Isaiah 58.1-9). (P. 2, p. 2 and P. 4, pp. 3-4).

Alms could reach God's heart. "Shut up alms in the heart of the poor and these shall intercede for thee from all evil" (Ecclus. 29.12). "Prayer is good, with fasting and alms; because alms doth deliver death, and it purgeth away our sins" (Tob. 12.8-9). (P. 5, p. 5). Cyprian also laid to rest the fears of those who hesitated to give alms lest they be poverty stricken. "He that giveth unto the poor shall never lack, but he that turneth away his eye shall be in great poverty" (Prov. 28.27). (P. 9, p. 7).

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37-38, 50, 55, 105-106, 117-118, 129, 132, 134-135, 138, 143-144, 148, 153-155, 174.

<sup>121</sup>Liber de Opere et Eleemosynis, PL 4.625-631 and 641, trans., ANCL, XIII(1869); paragraph and page numbers will be given in the text.

In Cyprian's own words, "that cannot be exhausted whence the service of Christ is supplied, whence the heavenly work is celebrated." (P. 9, p. 7). He used Tob. 4.7-11 to summarize his treatise: "Give alms of thy substance, and turn not away thy face from any poor man. So shall it be, that neither shall the face of God be turned away from thee. . . . And fear not when thou doest alms; for thou layest up a good reward for thyself against the day of necessity, because that alms do deliver from death and suffereth not to come to Gehenna. Alms is a good gift to all that give it, in the sight of the most high God." (P. 8, p. 16).

St. Paulinus of Nola devoted all of "Letter 34: On the Alms Table" to the same subject.<sup>122</sup> He strengthened his position with slightly fewer and slightly different, though just as convincing, scriptural quotations. "He that despiseth the poor provoketh his Maker" (Prov. 17.5). "For we brought nothing into this world: and certainly we can carry nothing out" (I Tim. 6.7). "Or what hast thou that thou hast not received?" (I Cor. 4.7). "He that hath mercy on thee poor lendeth to the Lord" (Prov. 19.7). (34.2, p. 163).

Paulinus elaborated on this last quote and put together a theory that others besides himself had expounded. God in a sense came in man's debt when man gave to God through alms to the poor. God would repay His debt with the

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<sup>122</sup>Epistola XXXIV: Sermo de Gazophylacio, PL 61. 344-350, trans., Quasten, XXXVI(1967); paragraph and page numbers will be given in the text.

gift of eternal life. There was a circular distribution of gifts. God gave material gifts to man that he might out of love share these with his less fortunate brothers, thereby giving to Christ their brother. God then, who was needful of nothing, would repay the givers with eternal heavenly treasures. "It is through the poor that Christ receives from you on earth, and on their behalf that He shall repay you in the next world" (34.6, p. 167).

Paulinus indicated that God had made some "poor for your profit," that is, some He made poor that others might aid them and reap eternal rewards (34.6, p. 167). The poor were a trial for the wealthy to see if they did have understanding "concerning the needy and poor" (Ps. 40.2 and 41.1 in 34.8, p. 169). The poor who had been helped would then pray for their benefactors and would keep their names in God's ear (34.10, p. 171). All of Paragraph 10 was devoted to telling how the poor who had been relieved would delight in the health and well being of the benefactor, how they would thank God for him, would pray for him and would have him in their minds all the time (pp. 170-171).

### Christ in Man's Debt

The idea of Christ or God being put into man's debt was a recurring one and was supported by the idea that feeding the poor was the same as feeding Christ: ". . . as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25.40). Cyprian in The Lapsed said

that wealth was to be used to heal the wounds of sin and to make the Lord beholden to you.<sup>123</sup> Leo the Great (?-d. 461) gave magnificent expression to this idea: "And that His presence might never seem to be wanting to us, He so effected the mystic union of His humility and His glory that while we adore Him as King and Lord in the Majesty of the Father, we might also feed Him in His poor, for which we shall be set free in an evil day from perpetual damnation, and for our considerate care of the poor shall be joined with the whole company of heaven."<sup>124</sup> Gregory of Nyssa declared that one who gave to the poor would share in Him who became poor and would reign with Him who though He became poor now reigns over all.<sup>125</sup>

Augustine in his "Sermon on the Beatitudes" repeated these same ideas: give earthly riches to Christ by giving to His poor and you would be rewarded. The Lord had made both rich and poor (Prov. 22.2). Augustine went on to explain that the Lord had made one rich that he might aid the poor and He had left one poor to test the rich.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Liber de Lapsis, 35, PL 4.507-508, trans., Quasten, XXV(1957), 41.

<sup>124</sup>Sermo IX.3, PL 54.163, trans., Nicene-2, XII(1956), 119.

<sup>125</sup>Oratio I de Beatitudinibus, PG 44.1207, trans., Quasten, XVII(1954), 96.

<sup>126</sup>Sermon 11 (Morin, 1922) on the Beatitudes, 6, trans., Deferrari, XI(1951, rpt. 1963), 363-364.



Basil explained alms as both a gift requiring no repayment from the poor and a loan that Christ would repay.<sup>127</sup>

Chrysostom also subscribed to this view. He said that if a man called the poor and maimed to his table then God would be his debtor and would never forget but would repay.<sup>128</sup>

In several places St. Augustine further expounded these ideas. He believed that we were all Gods' beggars and since we were, we had to acknowledge our own mendicants so God would acknowledge His, that is, us. Christ would repay that which was given to His poor, His beggars; He would willingly come into debt to do this; He wished to repay earthly with heavenly goods. He would even repay with interest what had been given Him through alms gifts. In giving alms one gave to Him who gave one the wherewithal to give in the first place, and He received it who in the end would give Himself to one.<sup>129</sup>

Augustine's "Lenten Sermon 210" explained that during Lent one should be particularly mindful of the poor "so that what you take from yourself by living sparingly you may lay away in heavenly treasure." During this season especially, one should "let the voluntary neediness of the one possessing

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<sup>127</sup> Homilia II.5 in Psalmum XIV, PG 29.278, trans., Defarrari, LXVI(1963), 190.

<sup>128</sup> Homilia I in Epistolam ad Colossenses, PG 62.304, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 260.

<sup>129</sup> Sermo LXI, 7.8, PL 38-39.411; Sermo CXXIII, 5.5, PL 38-39.686; Sermo LXXXVI, 3.3, PL 38-39.524-525, and Sermo LX, 8.8, PL 38-39.406, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 296, 474, 369, 293.

an abundance become the necessary abundance of the one in need." Thus the giving of alms might cancel out the debt one owed to God, the giver of all things.<sup>130</sup>

Augustine quoted the Vulgate version of Ecclus. 29.12: "Shut up alms in the heart of a poor man and it shall make supplication for thee before the Lord" then said that the poor were "our carriers, by whom we convey our goods from earth to heaven." This was the only way one could use earthly treasure and be sure it would not be lost, stolen, consumed by rust.<sup>131</sup>

St. Paulinus of Nola supported this way of making earthly treasure real. He said that the eternal wealth which was to compensate in the next life those who were poor here might flow back over those who in this life had given of their transient wealth to aid those poor.<sup>132</sup> In Chrysostom's "Twelfth Baptismal Instruction," he explained that if one wanted true and enduring wealth then one should give all adornments into Christ's hands by giving them to the poor.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>Sermo CCX, 10.12, PL 38-39.1053, trans., Deferrari, XXXVIII(1959), 107.

<sup>131</sup>Sermo LX, 8.8 and 10.10, PL 38-39.406-407, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 293. Note that here is the answer to St. Antony who wonders what it avails men to amass wealth that they cannot take with them after death (see above, p. 19).

<sup>132</sup>Epistola XXXII.21 ad Severum, PL 61.340-341, trans., Quasten, XXXVI(1967), 154.

<sup>133</sup>Catechesis II ad Illuminandos, 46, PG 49.238, trans., Quasten, XXXI(1963), 187.

Ambrose said that the wealthy must seek Christ's interests, for the beauty of riches was "not in the purses of the rich but in their support of the poor."<sup>134</sup>

Riches were to be used toward salvation, for good purposes such as God had commanded, and to redeem transgressions, not to increase them. "Let the poor feel that you are wealthy; let the needy feel that you are rich. Lend your estate to God; give food to Christ:" this was Cyprian's advice.<sup>135</sup> Chrysostom maintained that "None can rescue you from hell, if you obtain not the help of the poor."<sup>136</sup>

#### The Rich Can Be Saved

The rich then could be saved; they were part of God's plan; they could be useful. Or as Paulinus put it: "God loves to have the good and holy rich among his poor."<sup>137</sup> Ambrose declared that riches themselves were not to be censured for in them was scope for virtue. He quoted Prov. 13.8: "The ransom of a man's life are his riches," and explained

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<sup>134</sup>Epistola II ad Constantium, 26, PL 16.924, trans., Deferrari, XXVI(1954, rpt. 1967), 88.

<sup>135</sup>Liber de Habitu Virginum, I.11, PL 4.461-462, trans., ANCL, VIII(1868), 341-342.

<sup>136</sup>Homilia XXVII.3 in Joannem, PG 59.162, trans., Nicene-1, XIX(1889), 96.

<sup>137</sup>Epistola XIII.18 ad Pammachium. PL 61.218, trans., Quasten, XXXV(1966), 134.

that one who used his riches to help the poor ransomed his soul.<sup>138</sup>

Augustine, in expounding the parable of the rich young man, explained that what was impossible for man on earth was possible for God. God could save a rich man even though a camel might never go through the eye of a needle. God could by His grace help the rich to give up all and be saved or to keep the riches yet do it humbly and still be saved. "If a man is able, if perfection require this of him, let him not possess. If hindered by any necessity he is not able, let him possess, not be possessed; let him hold, not be held." Man was to possess innocently if he must possess at all.<sup>139</sup>

The rich who possessed riches but were not possessed by them and who had renounced all they possessed--either actually by giving possessions away or spiritually by not loving them--had renounced the world and could be saved.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>Epistola LXIII ad Vercellensem Ecclesiam, PL 17. 1265, trans., Deferrari, XXVI(1954, rpt. 1967), 355.

<sup>139</sup>Epistola CLVII ad Hilarium, 4.27-29, PL 33.688, trans., Deferrari, XX(1953, rev. 1965), 343 and Sermo CXXV, 7-8, PL 38-39.694, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 479.

<sup>140</sup>Epistola CLVII ad Hilarium, 4.25 and 35, PL 33.687 and 690, trans., Deferrari, XX(1953, rev. 1965), 342 and 348-349. In De Gestis Pelagii, I.11.23, PL 44-45.334, Augustine mentioned that he regarded this epistle as a refutation of the Pelagian error concerning the salvation of the rich. He summed up the error thusly: "Rich men even if they are baptised, unless they renounce all, have, whatever good they may seem to have done, nothing of it reckoned to them; neither can they possess the kingdom of God,"

For Augustine total giving of all one's goods was not necessary for salvation. The rich must be rich in good works (I Tim. 6.18), but this did not entail the complete abdication of all one's goods. "Sermon XI on Matt. 7.7," Augustine said, was being given on behalf of the poor who had asked him to speak for them. The rich, he said, were to give of their substance to the poor; they need not give up all their costly and choice foods but they must give something to the poor. They should let their superfluities be the poor man's necessities.<sup>141</sup> Chrysostom agreed with this moderate approach. He held that one could and should cast away material goods but that he would compel none to do so who felt he could not. Each must, however, spend part of his goods on the poor and must not get for himself more than is necessary.<sup>142</sup>

Chrysostom's view was slightly more strict when he said that it was not enough to feed a poor man if one then proceeded to live voluptuously. Those who did not feed the poor would perish but those who did give must not give too

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trans., Nicene-1, V(1887), 193. Augustine manifestly did not believe that.

<sup>141</sup> Sermo LXXXV, 3.4, PL 38-39.522 and Sermo LXI, 11.12 and 12.13, PL 38-39.413-414, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 297-298 and 367.

<sup>142</sup> Homilia CX.4 in Matthaeum, PG 58.793. trans., Nicene-1, X(1888), 534.

little or give lightheartedly.<sup>143</sup> And Augustine also said that even giving all to the poor was not really enough. One must then follow Christ, have love in one's heart.<sup>144</sup>

### Right Spirit Necessary

So behind the action must lie the spirit. Aid must be given to the poor but this must be done with a loving, willing heart. Just as the spirit in which the poor bore their poverty could make of it a virtue or an evil so the spirit with which the rich gave could influence the effects of their gifts upon them.

St. Augustine made this point clear when he explained in a sermon that being rich in itself did not cause problems: it was the desire to be rich that brought temptation. The spirit in which one acquired, possessed, and used wealth was what God saw in man.<sup>145</sup> Jerome in commenting on the parables of the widow's mite and of Dives and Lazarus used them to show that wealth given to the poor was valued in accord with the spirit in which it was given.<sup>146</sup>

Augustine used the Dives and Lazarus parable in the same way. He commented that we know both that Abraham was

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<sup>143</sup>Homilia VIII in Epistolam ad Colossenses, PG 62.351, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 294.

<sup>144</sup>Sermo CXLII, 8.9, PL 38-39.783, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 535.

<sup>145</sup>Sermo LXI, 9.10, PL 38-39.412, trans., Nicene-1, VI(1888), 297.

<sup>146</sup>Epistola CXVIII ad Julianum, PL 22. 964-965, trans., Nicene-2, VI(1954), 223.

rich and that Lazarus was in heaven in Abraham's bosom. Thus Abraham was a saved rich man just as surely as Dives was a lost one. Their salvations then could not have been dependent upon their riches but must have been determined by the godliness of the one man and the pitilessness of the other. He went on to show what little value Abraham placed on his riches since he was willing to sacrifice his son, the one for whom he presumably would have amassed his fortune.<sup>147</sup>

Chrysostom stated rather baldly the idea behind the statements of these others: it was possible to be rich and also to show pity, to have a right spirit within one.<sup>148</sup> Augustine concluded likewise in "To Consentius: Against Lying." There he explained that giving to the poor could be a good or an evil, depending upon the motive. If one gave out of pity then that was a good work; if one gave in order to boast about the deed, that was a sin.<sup>149</sup> In the Lausiaca History one of the things for which Palladius (ca. 363-ca. 431) praised Lausus was that he had voluntarily diminished

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<sup>147</sup> Epistola CLVII ad Hilarium, 4.23, PL 33.686, trans., Deferrari, XX(1953, rev. 1965), 340-341. Chrysostom in Homilia de non Evulgandis Fratrum Peccatis, PG 51.355, explained that Dives was punished not for having been rich but for having been cruel. Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom not because he had been poor but because he had borne that poverty thankfully, trans., Nicene-1, IX(1889), 236.

<sup>148</sup> Homilia II in Epistolam ad Philippenses, PG 62.196, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1889), 192.

<sup>149</sup> Contra Mendacium ad Consentium, I.7.18, PL 40-41. 528-529, trans., Nicene-1, III(1887, rev. 1917), 487-488.

his wealth by giving to the needy and had done this not at all for praise.<sup>150</sup>

Julianus Pomerius also maintained that alms must not be given to obtain praise in this life; one should give to relieve the needy and to purchase an inheritance in heaven but the giving must be done without ostentation or desire for esteem. Pomerius severely limited the motives that were acceptable: one must not give from desire for reputation, from carnal pity, or from hope of reward.<sup>151</sup> Thus one should give from one's spiritual feelings of the kinship of all men through Christ.

The Shepherd of Hermas warned that the giver should not try to decide who was really needy and deserving of alms. The giver's duty to God was to give to all who asked. Those who received wrongly, who were not truly in need, would have to account to God.<sup>152</sup> Thus one must give freely to all. Chrysostom said that the giver must also not force beggars to perform for their alms. They should not be forced to get attention by becoming jugglers, buffoons, or flatterers. Merely asking for alms for Christ's sake should be enough. He warned that those who did not hear beggars asking would

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<sup>150</sup>Historia Lausiaca, PG 34.995-1262, trans., Quasten, XXXIV(1965), 26.

<sup>151</sup>Vita, III.24.1-2, PL 59.507, trans., Quasten, IV(1947), 151.

<sup>152</sup>Mandatum II, 1.407, PG 1.915-916, trans., Goodspeed, p. 124.



not be heard asking of God.<sup>153</sup> Thus one must give freely to all, without coercion or expectation of repayment, reward, or entertainment.<sup>154</sup>

### Summary

One might summarize the Church Fathers' sayings on poverty as follows. They believed that in the ideal society, God's kingdom on earth, toward which every Christian yearned, all men would partake equally of the material goods; each would share with others "to effect an equality;" each would be mindful that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and would not pretend to own but would use what he needed and help others to the rest. Since such a state did not exist, the Fathers tried to deal with the fallen world to make it approach the ideal as nearly as possible. They stressed the idea of stewardship, of using God's goods for the benefit of self and others. And they attempted to get each section of society, regardless of wealth, to conduct itself in a Christlike way.

Since Christ was poor and humble, the poor were to be patient and humble. The rich were to become poor, if not in goods at least in spirit. Since Christ helped others by

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<sup>153</sup> Homilia XI in Epistola I ad Thessalonicenses, PG 62.465, trans., Nicene-1, XIII(1989), 373.

<sup>154</sup> That this belief continued into and through the fourteenth century is evident in a quote from St. Antonino's Summa Moralis II.ii.24.iv: "It is not sufficient that a man give alms; he must also take trouble to give them in the right way" (Bede Jarrett, p. 180).

using the riches of His Godhead for men's salvation, the rich were to aid by their wealth those less fortunate. The poor were to intercede, as did Christ, for the rich. The rich were to succour the poor and thereby tender aid to Christ Himself, the poor man's brother. No matter what a man's station in life, he might look to Christ<sup>155</sup> to see how he should conduct himself.

From these particular statements concerning poverty and riches, some larger generalizations about the Church Fathers' beliefs may be drawn. They looked back to a past ideal of Christian communal life and forward to the millenium.<sup>155</sup> But in between they supported the status quo to a great extent. They were social conservatives. They wanted reform, but individual spiritual reform or regeneration, not social revolt. Man, because of Adam's fall, had to expect a hard life on this earth; God's justice required it. They believed man had to be content with his God-given lot and work within it to be as Christlike as possible. The world for them was a theocracy, hierarchically ordered, stable, understandable. Each man in it knew his place, and if he looked to God, he could know how to use his place in the best possible way.

The Fathers were ultimately optimists, for despite this world's shortcomings and disappointments, they knew that

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<sup>155</sup>Max Beer, The General History of Socialism and Social Struggles (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1957), I, 199.

the millenium would eventually come and that every good Christian could hope for life eternal and the riches of heaven. Rich and poor alike, if they were patient, kept the faith, and were good stewards could have wondrous rewards in heaven. This world was not really so important except as a means to the next: much could be and had to be endured here but the rewards were worth the pain.

Since God was present everywhere, nothing was without purpose to the Fathers. Even the condition of poverty itself was God-ordained and purposeful. Poverty was a high calling in direct imitation of Christ, and the poor man had to be faithful to his calling.<sup>156</sup> He was to be cherished by others and to be worthy himself. The rich man as well had to strive to fulfill God's purpose for him. Rich and poor alike had failed in the past and in the present to do God's will and both needed Christ's intervention and helpful presence and example for future success.

For the Fathers economics was not a science but a part of moral philosophy. Not for them was the concept of unregulated free enterprise. Bede Jarrett set out three principles of mediaeval economics saying that these were derived ultimately from the Fathers and that they were the background into which the mediaeval moralists tried to fit

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<sup>156</sup>Helen C. White, Social Criticism in Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944), p. 7.

trade and the wealth it engendered.<sup>157</sup> The first principle was that money making had and should have a limit. That which was limitless was unlawful; therefore, when money making became an end in itself, it was not a lawful pursuit.<sup>158</sup> It must be the means to an end which was to be sufficiency for one's self or the aid of those less fortunate.<sup>159</sup>

The second principle was that trade and commerce must be carried on honestly and well--no deceptions, no tricks of the trade, no stretching the truth. Lastly, in mediaeval and earlier economics there was a just price for every item; that price could and should be determined by law with regard to existing circumstances, and everyone was bound to observe and abide by the just price. These principles implied that each man was his "brother's keeper," directly involved in helping others, especially those less fortunate.

For the Fathers private property was essentially a "talent" to be used and not hidden away; men would be called

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<sup>157</sup>Bede Jarrett, pp. 157-160.

<sup>158</sup>Compare the remark by St. Thomas in *Lectio v*, p. 348: "The art of acquiring money is subordinate to the art of using money" (Jarrett, p. 154).

<sup>159</sup>Compare the remark by St. Antonino in *Summa Moralis* I.i.3.iii: "The object of gain is that by its means man may provide for himself and others according to their state. The object of providing for himself and others is that they may be able to live virtuously. The object of a virtuous life is the attainment of everlasting glory" (Jarrett, p. 156).

to account in heaven for the use of their goods on earth. St. Thomas declared that men might lawfully possess private property but insofar as the use of property went "no man ought to have anything proper to himself but all in common, so that thus each may communicate easily to another in his necessities. Hence says the Apostle: 'Charge the rich of this world not to be highminded . . . but to communicate to others.'" Bede Jarrett asserted that this statement from a later saint of the Church was in direct agreement with the earlier patriarchs, in particular, with St. Augustine in his Commentary on St. John.<sup>160</sup> Private ownership then was acceptable only when joined with public use of one's personal wealth, for after all, everything, including man himself, belonged to God.

The key words for the Fathers were patience in all one's individual circumstances, charity in all one's dealings with others, and faith at all times in God and His goodness. With these virtues in his heart, no man could wrong another, hate his own existence, or defy God's orders.

### Mendicant Contributions

While for the most part mediaeval attention to poverty fell into the same categories as those of the earlier Church Fathers (in fact, much of it was quoting, summarizing,

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<sup>160</sup> The St. Thomas quote is in Jarrett, p. 127 and the Biblical reference is to I Tim. 6.17-18. The reference to St. Augustine is found in Jarrett, p. 122.

and interpreting the pertinent passages from the Fathers), there was a unique mediaeval contribution: the position of the mendicant orders, in particular the Franciscans toward apostolic poverty. The controversy within and without the Order of the Friars Minor provided further literature on the topic.<sup>161</sup>

When St. Francis gathered his brotherhood (ca. 1210), he enjoined upon them complete poverty in imitation of Christ and His apostles. When this was included as part of the written Regula Prima, 1221, opposition arose among the brothers to the strictness of such a vow, resulting in a revised, less strict rule, Bullata, 1223. St. Francis, however, before his death (1226) reiterated in his Testament his adherence to the absolute and apostolic poverty, including a prohibition against even touching money (p. 339).

Into this internal division of opinion and policy entered the various popes. In 1230 Gregory IX in the bull Quo elongati declared the Testament not binding and allowed the friars to use an intermediary to handle alms money for them and friends to keep money in reserve for them (p. 346). In 1245 Innocent IV declared that all property of The Friars

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<sup>161</sup>The information concerning the mendicant controversy may be found in David Knowles and Dimitri Obolensky, The Middle Ages, Vol. II of The Christian Centuries (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), and in New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 6.38d and following and 11.651d to 652a. The appropriate page numbers from Knowles and section numbers from NCE will be given in the text.

Minor actually belonged to the Holy See, thereby preserving the letter of the Rule forbidding ownership of property (Ordinem vestrum). This papal order was resisted by the friars themselves and a stronger faction arose within the brotherhood--the zelanti, who felt themselves the heirs of St. Francis's original brotherhood. Into this potential schism stepped St. Bonaventure, who "by his commentary on the Rule, his anodyne Life of St. Francis, and the constitutions passed at the chapter of Narbonne (1260), standardized a via media between laxity and rigour and established the ideal of the 'sparing use' (usus pauper) of all things" (p. 347). As is often the case this via media was not the road others chose, for "by preaching the 'sparing use' in practice and the spiritual and relative rather than the material and absolute observance of poverty, he sowed the seeds of the controversy that was to agitate the order after his death and the whole western church fifty years later" (p. 347).

Rather than attempt a via media, the members of the order broke into factions with first one group then another in control. The popes too fluctuated in their support of the factions. In 1279 Nicholas III approved the renouncing of all possessions as a Christlike action and forbade further discussion on the subject (Exiit qui seminat). His successor Martin IV commended and reverted to the earlier practice of the order's utilization of intermediaries to

handle its goods but allowed these to be controlled by the friars thus reducing yet further the spirit of St. Francis' Rule (Exultantes in Domino, 1283). Within the order the Spirituals arose, heirs of the zelanti, accepting absolute poverty (the use only of food and clothing allowed), abstaining from the study of philosophy (Aristotle), following the Rule and the Testament completely, ignoring papal dispensations on their vows.

Because of their rigid stance, the Spirituals were persecuted. Celestine V separated them from the Franciscans entirely (1294). Others reinstated or ousted them by turns. In 1312 Clement VI accomplished a compromise of short duration (Exivi de paradiso). The Spirituals themselves were not fond of compromise. Their intransigence finally exasperated John XXII who had formerly been favorable to them. He demanded that they submit to their superiors in the order on all things (Quorundam exigit, 1317). Those who refused were condemned, and four were burned as heretics (651d). Some left the order; others became schismatics, later to be called Fratricelli, existing in fragmentary groups scattered mainly in Italy (p. 348 and 651d).

This was not the end of the problem. Despite differences within the order as to how great a degree of poverty to practice, the Franciscans all, in theory at least, agreed that their practice was taken from Christ's own life. They believed that they were unique in following His example.



This was the root of the extra-order difficulties. John XXII took decisive action on this point in Quia nonnumquam (March 1322) "in which he declared that Christ and his apostles as head and rulers of the Church owned property, though as individuals they had the right of renouncement" (p. 350). Since this struck at the very foundation of Franciscan beliefs, the order naturally resisted and reasserted the doctrine of Christ's absolute poverty. Later in 1322 John XXII revoked papal ownership of Franciscan possessions (Ad conditorem) thus placing the order in the awkward position of owning property while claiming it followed Christ's absolute poverty. John relented somewhat and resumed "ownership of real property as opposed to perishable goods" (p. 351). But in 1323 he again condemned the belief that Christ owned no goods (Cum inter nonnullos).

At approximately this same time (ca. 1324) William of Ockham became involved in the controversy, supporting the Franciscans against the Pope.<sup>162</sup> His first work Opus nonaginta dierum had been an attack on the Pope's position concerning Christ's poverty, and when Michael of Cesena fled to Avignon, Ockham went with him, an "embittered man pledged to the cause of the schismatic Franciscans."<sup>163</sup>

Clearly the problem was not solved, and it was further complicated by the emperor's seeming encouragement

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<sup>162</sup> Frederick C. Copleston, Medieval Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 123.

<sup>163</sup> Knowles and Obolensky, pp. 410-411 and 446.

of the Franciscans. In 1328 Michael of Cesena, the minister-general of the order, rather than obey a summons to Avignon for papal questioning, fled to the emperor and accused the Pope of heresy. John XXII was undaunted; in 1329 he reaffirmed Christ's right of ownership (Quia vir reprobus). Throughout his pontificate, to 1334, groups of Friars Minor remained in schism especially in Germany, and William of Ockham ceaselessly wrote against the papal position (p. 351 and pp. 410-411).

In England the controversy took much the same turn as it did in the larger realm of papal affairs, although the protagonists tended to be monks (possessioners) and friars (non-possessioners), with the latter group divided as to how much non-possession was essential, and the English Franciscans tended to be rather more conservative in their theories on poverty.<sup>164</sup> In 1329, however, four Franciscans in Cambridge were arrested for defying the Pope and taking a strong stand on the question.<sup>165</sup> Friar William Jordan and the monk Uthred of Boldon were two of the better known persons involved in the English controversy along with Richard Fitzralph, Archbishop of Armaugh, neither monk nor friar but clearly anti-mendicant, and Bishop Brunton, a monk decidedly in favor of and in sympathy with poverty.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup>Morton Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1961).

<sup>165</sup>Bloomfield, p. 95.

<sup>166</sup>For further information about these men and about

To these individuals must be joined the vast body of medieval preachers investigated by Owst and often anonymous, who spoke their opinions on the various aspects of poverty.<sup>167</sup> Very often these preachers simply reworked the old themes gleaned from the Fathers.<sup>168</sup> Odo of Cheriton in the early thirteenth century quoted from St. Ambrose: "The poor man

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other Englishmen involved in discussions about poverty, see: Sister Mary Devlin, "Bishop Brinton and His Sermons," Speculum, XIV(1939), 324-344.

Sister Mary Devlin, ed. The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, 2 vols., Camden Third Series, Vols. LXXXV-LXXXVI (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1954).

Francis Aidan Gasquet, "A Forgotten English Preacher," The Old English Bible and Other Essays, 2nd ed. (1897; reissue Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1969), pp. 63-101.

Aubrey Gwynn, a series of articles about Richard FitzRalph in Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review, XXII(1933), pp. 389-405 and 591-607; XXIII(1934), pp. 395-411; XXIV(1935), pp. 25-42 and 558-572; XXV(1936), pp. 81-96; XXVI(1937), pp. 50-67.

Dom David Knowles, "The Censured Opinions of Uthred of Boldon," Proceedings of the British Academy, XXXVII(1951), pp. 305-342.

Mildred E. Marcett, Uthred de Boldon, Friar William Jordan, and 'Piers Plowman' (New York: the author, 1938).

William A. Pantin, "Two Treatises of Uthred of Boldon on the Monastic Life" in Studies in Medieval History Presented to F. M. Powicke, ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin, and R. W. Southern (Oxford: Univ. Press, 1948), pp. 363-385.

<sup>167</sup>G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961). Page numbers in the following paragraphs refer to this work. See also his book Preaching in Medieval England (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1926).

<sup>168</sup>Bromyard, a contemporary of Langland, quotes from Eusebius of Caesarea, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory, and others. The ideas of the Fathers were in the air for those who listened to sermons. Langland could have known them, if not from their own works then from the sermons of others.

in his hut, wealthy in conscience, sleeps safer upon earth than the rich man in his gold and purple," then added his own example of the benefits of poverty by noting that a saintly hermit, when asked why he lived in a tiny hovel, replied, "One can leap to heaven more quickly from a little hut than from the lofty palace of kings" (MS Arund. 231, ii, fol.476, p. 571). The security of the poor was further dwelt upon by Bromyard in Summa Predicantium. He counseled the honest peasant to say when seeing another man's wealth, "I prefer my rustic poverty, with security and happiness, to those splendid banquets and robes with remorse of conscience, so many snares of men and demons and the fear of punishments in hell" (p. 296).

The enviable condition of the poor on the day of judgment was pointed out by many--the Austin Friar John Walde, the Franciscan Nicholas Bozon, and an anonymous preacher who said, "Sir, tho<sub>3</sub> god sende the litill, thou art never the lesse beholden unto hym for too skilles. On ys, thou haste the lesse to <sub>3</sub>eve hym acountes of at the daye of dome; and anothur, the lesse ioye that thou haste in this worlde, the more thou shalte have in heven" (MS Roy. 18. B. xxiii, fol. 61, p. 297).

Another anonymous sermon writer explained once again the lesson to be learned from Christ's humble birth: "Heere men may see, who-so biholdeth wel, gret povertie in the aray at this lordes birthe. And bothe pore and riche moun lerne

heere a lessoun, the pore to be glad in her poverté and bere mekely hire a-staat, seyngé hire lord and hir maker wyfully to 3eve hem suche ensauple; the riche also to be a-drad of misusynge of her richesse in lustis and lykyngis out of mesure, and lyttil or no<sub>3</sub>t to depart of hem to Cristis pore bretheren" (MS Add. 41321, fols. 45b-46, p. 501).

The necessity for poverty of spirit was reiterated in Jacob's Well: "For sum beggere desyreth in wyl to have more rychesse, 3if he my<sub>3</sub>te have it, and wolde have more worshypp, and makyth more of hymself, and heyere in herte beryth him than sum ryche man. This man, be he nevere so poure in catel and in nede, he is no<sub>3</sub>t poure in spiryte" (p. 367). An anonymous writer sounded a similer theme: "pryde is also ofte tymes in pore men yvel yclothed, as well as in ryche men. Ffor ofte tymes pore men gruccheth a<sub>3</sub>enst god and holdeth hemself more worthy, and to haue more mede byfore god than thylke that be at more ese. And some beth so deceyved" (MS Harl. 2398, fol. 9b, p. 367).<sup>169</sup>

Both rich and poor were told about their respective places in God's benevolent order. Bromyard explained that the rich had been deputed by God to be caretakers of the poor and that their wealth was their payment from God. Master Ralph of Acton revealed why some were strong and rich and others weak and poor: God willed the former to be so in

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<sup>169</sup> These passages indicate that the preachers chastized both rich and poor; in this regard all men were equals (see pp. 361 and 366-367).

order that they might save their souls by their helping others; He willed the latter that they might save themselves by their enduring hardships in patience (MS Jo. Rylands Lib. Manch. Lat. 367, fol. 4, p. 561).

Yet within this same group existed a strong sympathy for the poor whose hardships they saw and probably shared. Bromyard saw "The poor man is imprisoned and spoiled for the benefit of his master's table, and while the religious eats of the poor man's substance, and flatters the master, the rich man is lying in wait to plunder the poor again" (Owst, Preaching, p. 91). Both Bromyard and Master Wimbledon complained about the bad treatment the poor received from the rich who fed and clothed their animals while the poor starved and froze (pp. 305 and 327-328). Or as yet another unnamed writer said of the poor he is "helpeliss in this cause. For, and he compleyn to anny othur gret man, there is no rekener; for he is of the same condicions hymselfe, and commonly the gret holdeth togethur. . . . And <sub>3</sub>iff he goth to the lawe, there is non helpe; for trewly lawe goys as lordshipp biddeth hym" (MS Roy, 18. B. xxiii, fol. 134, p. 329).

Within this group then we find the seeds for revolt against the traditional, religious view of poverty. Their literature was full of "persistent ventilation of the sufferings and wrongs of the poor--not exceeded, probably, by the most outspoken champions of social revolution in any age . . ." (p. 236). And yet they themselves did not preach

open revolt or social change.<sup>170</sup> They tried to explain what caused the disharmony in their social order, but they were unable to realize that the very roots of that order were at fault. They believed in the class system as a God-ordained order: "no other was conceivable to them" (p. 564). Nonetheless their literature, at base and however unintentionally, was a literature of secular revolt (p. 236). To this group Langland belonged.

Like the Fathers, Langland voiced the traditional view that poverty was a blessing on the road to eternal life; on the other hand, like the preachers, he saw and recorded the sufferings of the poor for whom poverty was not a blessing but a curse. So when Langland wrote Piers Plowman, he had a long rich tradition from which to draw. But he was not content to ignore the unsettling, tradition-disturbing problems of his own time.

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<sup>170</sup>For example, Bromyard compares the social order to a well strung harp: in order to have melody, each must keep its own place (p. 558). Owst declares that the clergy believed men to be equal in origin, in being subject to mortality and to judgment after death, but concerning man in this life, they believed that God had placed each man in the class in which he must abide. For, when each estate did not fulfill its sacred obligations to the others, then confusion and the "devil's state" arose (p. 567 and p. 563).

## CHAPTER II

### THE REALITIES OF FOURTEENTH CENTURY LIFE

The Christians' belief about poverty were, then, rather carefully and completely detailed by the Church Fathers and their commentators. The theories were set and not really challenged. The learned men, content with what the Fathers had said, studied and taught those beliefs. The non-learned had little chance to read and study for themselves. Life was too precarious to allow much discussion of theories or possibilities among any but the rich and learned. Besides, very few men of any station in life questioned the Church and her teachings. So these traditional beliefs about riches and poverty became part of what everyone believed even without having learned; they were part of the mental environment of men and were accepted willingly, totally, unthinkingly.

The poor themselves must at times have wondered how their lives could be considered blessed, but they were inarticulate masses. If they were not content with their lot, they, at least, were so rooted in it, as had been their parents and grandparents, that they did not know how to question it. They were poor; everyone they knew was poor;



everyone's ancestors had been poor: poverty was a given condition, inescapable.

The rich, on the other hand, were inescapably rich; their ancestors had been rich and their children would be rich. They justified their riches in the same way the poor explained their poverty: it had always been that way. Ideas of change were not easily entertained by either side, for both sides believed that change could only bring disaster. The rich could get richer without social change and might get poorer with it. The poor might get poorer with or without change so they did not want to risk their precarious existence. They did not envision ideas of social progress whereby things could get better for everyone.

But the fourteenth century saw some drastic shifts in this outlook, particularly on the side of the poorer, lower classes. These changes did not appear out of nowhere in 1300, but in that century they became so apparent to all that they could not be ignored. They became a part of the beliefs of the people just as were those ideas about poverty.

These two sets of beliefs were, however, not compatible. If poverty were blessed, then why were not the rich giving away riches in hoards? Since they were not, why should the poor merely wait patiently for heavenly rewards? Why should not they take some of the riches, thereby giving the rich a more blessed life and easing their own burdens as well? Perhaps this life was not merely a vale of tears to

be endured, but rather a place to be enjoyed, a place where some material goods could be had by many without the coming of the millenium. Perhaps society could change without the spiritual reformation the Churchmen always talked about, and perhaps in the new society things would be more equal, materially, not spiritually.

These and other questions more and more troubled the minds of fourteenth century thinkers. They tried to reconcile all the differences, to understand all the things they had believed and were coming to believe. Some succeeded; others did not. Langland was among those who tried and failed, yet his failure resulted in a remarkable work of art in which both groups of ideas were present and working. Art is not vanquished by tension, but often comes from it. The first chapter set forth the traditional ideas on poverty; this one will consider the social situation in the fourteenth century, so that we may finally evaluate the artwork resulting from Langland's dealing with these two sets of ideas.

### The Political Situation

Walter Ullmann in his History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages provided an extremely useful method for comprehending the varying theories of government in the middle ages. He saw "two main theses of government and law in the medieval period" (p. 12).<sup>1</sup> The earlier of these he termed

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Ullmann, A History of Political Thought: The

the ascending theory in which all power potentially resided in the people who might elect others to handle the power for them but who at base retained it within themselves. They had inherently the right to resist any ruler whom they had elected but who had ceased to represent them. In the familiar pyramid metaphor, power ascended from the base, the people, to the apex, the king. Ullmann called this a populist form of government.<sup>2</sup> Under this system a king held the land as the representative of the people and others held from him upon rendering suit and service. This represented common ownership by the nation in the person of its king and private use of land in the form of conditional ownership.<sup>3</sup>

The opposing form of government used the same metaphoric pyramid but had original power focused in the apex, the ruler. All other power descended to the various officials below the king; he conceded part of his power to them. This descending theory was highly adaptive to

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Middle Ages (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970). Specific references to this book will be given by page number in the text, unless further explanation is needed.

<sup>2</sup>p. 13. I shall use this term as Ullmann did, without the modern, socialist connotations. It is worth noticing, however, that Bede Jarrett in Social Theories of the Middle Ages says, "The feudal System was perhaps the nearest approach to a consistent system of communism that has ever been practiced on a large scale" (p. 132).

<sup>3</sup>Jarrett, p. 144.

Christian ideas and in practice became a theocentric theory wherein all potential power resided in God, who delegated actual power to the king, His vicegerent, who in turn bestowed it upon those whom he chose. This latter theory was most closely associated with the ideas of divine right kingship, of the Christian kingdom or empire, and with the highly ecclesiastical nature of medieval life. The former, however, existed and remained operative to a greater or lesser degree throughout the period.

In England the fourteenth century was a time of peculiar political tensions: ". . . it was the period in which the idea of the State emerged and with it also political thought proper" (p. 158).<sup>4</sup> This newly emerging idea of the state arose out of the struggle between the two latent forms of government described by Ullmann. On the one hand was feudalism which although not so rigid in England as on the Continent yet was a firmly entrenched customary force. Feudalism was, in practice at least, and this was where its power lay, a contractual form of government. The English king held "Engla-land" in virtue of a contractual agreement between himself and the people. He held the land conditionally, was the steward, and could be discharged.<sup>5</sup> On both sides of the feudal bond existed rights, duties, obligations, privileges.

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<sup>4</sup>See Christopher Dawson, Mediaeval Religion and Other Essays (London: Shed and Ward, 1934), pp. 188-189.

<sup>5</sup>Jarrett, p. 133.

There was always an agreement, albeit between inferior and superior, and the source of power came, not down from above, but from that contract and oath between the parties.<sup>6</sup> In this sense feudalism allowed for the growth of an ascending, populist form of government. If the feudal oath was not kept by either side, the other party had the right to cancel the agreement. "The release of the people from their allegiance followed automatically on the non-fulfillment of his promise by the king; when he ceased to rule according to law, his violation of a mutually binding agreement itself invalidated any claim on his part to the obedience of the people on theirs."<sup>7</sup> From this custom, which in theory the superior party would deny, came a sense and a tradition of popular power. Thus feudalism was an evolving and flexible form of government, able in the course of time to become constitutional. "The debt which the English constitution owed to feudal principles of government is very great indeed" (p. 154).

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<sup>6</sup>As an example of this in practice, I offer: In the thirteenth century the whole commonality of the manor of Brightwaltham came to manorial court, and of its own will gave up its rights of common in the lord's wood, and in return the lord allowed them another common not to be used by his own beasts. "The villeins are here represented in the light of a communitas or organized community which, while nominally unfree, was able to hold property and enter into a contract with the lord on equal footing." E. Lipson, The Economic History of England, Vol. I, "The Middle Ages," 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1929), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup>Jarrett, p. 133. A footnote to this passage relates that Aquinas also held this position in De Regimine Principum, i. 6.

On the other side of the struggle loomed the theocratic, descending form of government. This was, of course, the side of the kings themselves, who, arguing that they were divinely appointed by God, also contended that all power resided in them for distribution to whomsoever they chose. In this situation no single person had a right to any political action; all was conferred from above. Theocracy, Ullmann maintained, could never evolve: it was as it was.

Whenever theocracy was uppermost in the struggle, any populist attempts to bring change were necessarily revolutionary in nature because of the rigidity of the descending theory. Violent outbursts occurred occasionally in England in the Middle Ages, but because of the strength of entrenched, flexible, feudalistic customs, there was no severe revolution; the theocratic form was never absolute enough to require it (pp. 145-155). There was merely a struggle of varying intensity, with sometimes the ascending and sometimes the descending ideas of king and state in the fore. This tension between opposing forces elucidates a number of the occurrences of particular interest in the fourteenth century and could not have escaped the notice of a social observer of Langland's perspicacity.

Under the first of the fourteenth century kings, Edward II (1307-1327) the struggle between these views of government was very clear. In the long run, the monarchy

received such crippling blows and the lords acquired such unprecedented powers that absolute monarchy was never able to root itself in English soil and the beginnings of constitutional monarchy took hold. Edward I had tried to assert his theocratic position fully; Edward II wanted to do likewise but lacked his father's ability and power.<sup>8</sup> The barons, who had resented the first Edward's treatment of them and exaltation of himself, avenged themselves on the son. In 1310 they forced Edward to surrender his councilor and favorite Piers Gaveston and to accept a committee to draw up ordinances for governing the realm. This, of course, manifested an obvious belief that just law originated within the people acting through the barons, not from the king. The king was placed under the law.

Naturally Edward resisted, but he was not strong enough to control his opponents, nor could they crush him. They did, however, have the upper hand. Because of English defeats at the hands of the Scots (Battle of Bannockburn,

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<sup>8</sup>The facts presented here can be corroborated in any good English history book; the application is my own aided by Ullmann's thoughts and those of A. R. Myers, England in the Late Middle Ages 1307-1536, (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1961). The Myers book is the fourth volume in the Pelican History of England, and I refer to it by page number in the text. Other sources are:

May McKisack, The Fourteenth Century (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959).

John D. Davies and F. R. Worts, England in the Middle Ages (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928).

Mary Bateson, Mediaeval England 1066-1350 (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1903).

1314), Edward lost further prestige--one of the great weapons of the theocracy was its prestige, the aura of power and divinity that surrounded it. As this aura was eroded, Edward had to accept further Ordinances, limitations on his expenditures, and his hated first cousin Thomas of Lancaster as his councilor-in-chief (1315-1316).

In order to strengthen his position Edward tried to build up a royalist party, the chief members of which were the Despensers. When the lords, in particular, the Marcher lords, succeeded in banishing the Despensers, Edward was thoroughly roused. He recalled the Despensers, marched on his lords, and defeated them at Boroughbridge in 1322. That year all the Ordinances were annulled, and Edward tried to rule as an absolute monarch. He did not see how weakened the idea of theocracy had become during the years of civil strife nor realize how firm the actual power of the lords had become.

In fact, one lord, Roger Mortimer, exiled after Boroughbridge was so strong that, in league with the Queen, he succeeded in forcing Edward II to abdicate in favor of his son Edward III. When Roger, Isabella the Queen, and young Edward landed, the chief lords of the land all supported them. It should be noted that the lords did not want a republic; they accepted the rightful heir, though a bit prematurely from Edward II's point of view. They wanted a



monarchy, but one controlled by the peers of the land. In fact, Roger and Isabella reigned for three years.

In 1330 an alliance arose between the young king who wished to assume his kingly role and those lords who were disgusted by Mortimer's greed and ruthless power. An ideal balance was achieved. The young king was exactly to the barons' liking--manly, princely, chivalrous, generous; he seemed the perfect prince. This, of course, could not last. Edward's one early attempt to act without the consent of and in fact contrary to the barons of the realm ended in failure for Edward.

In 1340 he had dismissed the treasurer and chancellor who, he believed, had hindered his war efforts in France. The lords supported the chancellor and demanded that no lord be tried except in Parliament by his peers and that Parliament control the appointing of ministers. Edward yielded to these demands because of his pressing need for money for the wars, and though he later revoked his statutes on these points, he was careful to work with the lords and to choose ministers they approved. "From 1341 to 1369 there was almost complete harmony between the king and his magnates; for not only was Edward careful not to act counter to their prejudices and interests, but he won their cooperation by conducting a successful war in a wealthy foreign land" (p. 22).

After 1369 and the resumption of the Hundred Years' War this harmony was destroyed. The war went very badly

for the English; Edward III was becoming increasingly senile, and the Black Prince, the heir and everyone's hero, was stricken with dropsy, growing worse almost daily, unable to help the realm. Whereas Edward's power and influence waned with his increasing senility and subjection to his mistress Alice Perrers and with the French victories, the baronial powers did not. Edward had conceded much to Parliament and the barons in order to have money for his wars. Once they had these powers, the magnates did not easily relinquish them. They had been given that for which they had previously fought unsuccessfully. The monarchy received a severe blow through its own hand.<sup>9</sup>

The extent of this blow was evidenced in the Good Parliament of 1376. Aided, strangely enough, by the dying heir to the throne, the Black Prince, the Commons in Parliament and some of the lords--once again a delicate balance of forces operative for a short time--demanded and received certain concessions from the monarchical forces headed by

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<sup>9</sup> Note the parallel situation between the aristocracy and the lower free classes. After the Black Death the lords--to further their own interests--freed some serfs, paid higher wages to laborers, encouraged the abandonment of old customs such as returning runaway serfs. The expectations of both serfs and laborers were thus raised. They too were given what they had not been able to take; they wanted not only to keep their new found freedoms and prosperity but to have more. "Constrained by circumstances, the aristocracy thus helped to develop the class of free tenants, farmers, and well-paid labourers who, after repeatedly raising their demands at the expense of the higher orders, turned against them in 1381," [Ch. Petit-Dutaillis and Georges Lefebvre, Studies and Notes Supplementary to Stubbs' Constitutional History (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1968). p. 261].

Lancaster, brother to the Black Prince. Certain lords, including the chamberlain, accused of corruption were condemned to imprisonment and forfeiture. The royal mistress was banished, and the royal council had forced upon it nine lords and prelates of Parliament's choosing.

This new balance, favoring Parliament, did not long survive. The Black Prince died most inopportunately while Parliament was in session and gradually all the good was undone. Lancaster was in power again. The next year (1377) Edward III died, and Richard II, a boy of ten, came to the throne. Naturally Richard had to rule through various councils, regents, and ministries, none of which was very successful. The French ravaged England's coastal areas, and the wars both in France and in Scotland went disastrously on. Taxes were levied again and again until they touched off one of the most interesting events of the fourteenth century, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

The Revolt resembled the Good Parliament in several ways: in both blows were struck for the ascending form of government; both were doomed to failure. The promises given under duress by the young king and his councillors at Mile End and elsewhere were broken almost immediately upon the king's realization that he and his group were safe and protected once more.

The 1381 struggles revealed another facet of the political situation: the lowest members were not allowed to

assert themselves at all in governmental strife. The fight for supremacy between the forms of government was carried on within the upper classes. The ascending form was not populist in the modern sense of the word but populist in theory, holding that the people (nobles) had rights and that the king was under the law made by the people, that is, by the higher classes. When the lower classes wished to extend this theory into real practice in 1381, the aristocracy sided with the king against them.

The opposing forces came to grips once again in a Parliament, the Merciless Parliament of 1388. The previous year an army under the king's uncle Thomas of Gloucester and the Earls of Arundel and Warwick had defeated the king's forces. The Parliament summoned by the victors exiled, executed, or otherwise removed the king's chief supporters and rewarded themselves with lucrative appointments.

Once again the monarchy, though beaten, reasserted its power; once again it was enabled to do so partly because of the irresponsible behavior of those in the opposition, partly because tradition was strong on the monarch's side. Once again a period of comparative harmony resulted--1389 to 1397. The king did not overtly attempt to rid himself of his barons or to seize power. He quietly set about reinforcing his position with friends and allies.

In 1397 Richard made his attempt to assert his absolute kingly powers: he arrested Gloucester, Arundel,

and Warwick and had the acts of the Merciless Parliament repealed. But Richard went too far. He also exiled Lancaster's son, although Lancaster was one of his allies, thereby alienating one who had supported him and giving his opponents a leader. Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard II was accurate in its rendering the king's inability to see the limitations of his power and his blind belief in the sanctity of the office despite the incompetence of the man.

The fourteenth century ended with a victory of sorts for the forces of ascending government. The lords came to the aid of Henry of Lancaster when he landed in England; they made little or no protest to his assumption of the throne. And when in 1400 some did rise up in Richard's favour, their revolt was easily crushed, and Richard was no longer allowed to live to be a rallying point for subsequent uprisings.

The new king Henry IV was a king, in theory, of a different sort. He was a magnate of the realm who took the throne by force, not the heir of an hereditary monarch. The very arguments he used to justify himself--Richard's "default of governance and undoyng of the gode lawes" (Myers, p. 35)--were such as could be used against any king, including himself and were the arguments of one who believed in the ascending form of government, a king under the law. This is, of course, a difficult position for any king, and

Henry had his troubles, but they took place in the fifteenth century, outside the scope of this discussion.

These political power plays, though important, were not necessarily the events most remarkable to those living in the fourteenth century. Several dramatic and significant events occurred during these years. The first of these, the Black Death, while not the starting point of overwhelming social and economic changes, did increase the speed of such changes. The second, the Peasants' or Great Revolt, which greatly startled all its contemporaries, had very little concrete effect, except in the immeasurable realm of the human spirit. The changes it wrought were in hopes, fears, beliefs.

### The Black Death

Sometime between June and August of 1348 that most catastrophic of fourteenth century events, the Black Death, reached England.<sup>10</sup> Although no one can be sure of the actual figures, experts estimate that between one third and one half of the entire English population was exterminated.<sup>11</sup> The figure might be as low as 23 percent or as high as 45 percent, but the probable total of Englishmen dead was 1.4 million.<sup>12</sup> In reality the figure, whatever it was, was staggering. Some

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<sup>10</sup>Philip Ziegler, The Black Death (New York: John Day Co., 1969), p. 121.

<sup>11</sup>Ziegler, p. 128 and McKisack, p. 332.

<sup>12</sup>Ziegler, p. 230.

villages were badly decimated; some barely touched, but generally speaking no family was unharmed, for if the plague did not attack a particular family, it most certainly attacked someone they knew. Those who were not ill lived in mortal terror of becoming ill. The atmosphere of those months from August 1348 to the end of 1349 was one of sickness, death, and fear.

Nor when those months were passed was England done with the plague, for it recurred in 1361, 1368-69, 1371, 1375, 1390, effectively forbidding that it be forgotten.<sup>13</sup> No one was secure; no one understood the horrible thing that was ravaging the country. The plague was believed by nearly everyone to be a punishment from God upon a wicked land. It was thought to travel in a dark, foggy cloud from place to place. The superstitions concerning its genesis, means of communication and prevention are amazing to a modern man knowing as he does about variant forms of the plague, fleas on rats, and bacilli spread in saliva and through the air.<sup>14</sup>

The Black Death affected every possible aspect of English life; there was nothing it did not touch, directly or otherwise. In most instances it acted as a catalyst intensifying and speeding by double and triple changes already at

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<sup>13</sup>Ziegler, p. 234.

<sup>14</sup>Ziegler, pp. 13-29.

work. With half the population dead, the other half realized some advantages: more money, more land, and more food per capita. Of course, these were mixed blessings. Although there was more food, there were fewer people to harvest and process it. During normal times each villein household had several men upon whom the manorial obligations fell; the work could be divided, thus lightening the burden of doing the lord's work. After the plague the manorial obligations seemed doubly severe because there were fewer people to fulfill them.<sup>15</sup> Evidence indicates that in the early months of the plague, fields were left full of grain rotting where it stood. Hands were too few to gather, thresh, and grind it. And those who should have done so were fearful of being smitten by the disease if they met with others to work and were often so despairing of life that they could not work at their ordinary daily tasks. They sat and waited to be seized by death.<sup>16</sup>

Because fewer people existed who were able to work, the wages paid to those people went up dramatically. Wages had been rising for a generation before the plague; now they skyrocketed.<sup>17</sup> Wages from 1340-48 increased 33 percent; in the next ten years, they rose 60 percent. Rural wages--the

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<sup>15</sup>Lipson, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup>Ziegler, pp. 175-176 quotes Knighton, a contemporary, concerning these plague conditions (R.S. 92. II. 61-62).

<sup>17</sup>Lipson, p. 96.



majority of all wages paid--went up 48 percent.<sup>18</sup> When wages go up, naturally prices go up as well; although prices fell sharply after the plague, they rose thereafter immediately.<sup>19</sup> The price hike was a benefit for the villeins in particular since they, unlike paid laborers, had produce to sell. Thus the money in hand for both villein and laborer increased. England was on its way toward a moneyed economy, and the Black Death speeded this process immediately.

The dramatic shift in wages and prices caused other changes in relationships between employer and employed, between lord and tenant, between consumer and seller.<sup>20</sup> High wages both resulted from and caused demands on the part of laborers. They realized their numbers were smaller than what was needed so they could demand higher wages. An increase in one's laborer's wages caused others to demand as much or more. Thus among employers a struggle ensued over who was to hire the available labor, and one employer would try to entice another's laborers away with promises of more money and benefits. This attitude on the part of the employers kept the Ordinance of Labourers (1349) from being effective. Each was so anxious to have his work done--primarily this was farm labor which needed doing at specific and limited

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<sup>18</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 259.

<sup>19</sup>Ziegler, p. 244.

<sup>20</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 256.

times--that he could not keep from breaking the Ordinances by hiring at higher wages.<sup>21</sup>

The economic results of the Black Death also affected the manorial relationship between lord and villein. As wages went up the lord could less and less afford to hire help and had to depend upon his villeins and their week work. The villeins who up to this time had been substantially better off than the laborers, now saw the workers getting relatively great sums of money for work the villeins did for nothing. Consequently more and more villeins wished to become free men, to put themselves on the labor market.<sup>22</sup> Many deserted their manors and went out for hire to other lords who, wishing to get their crops tended, did not return the offending serfs to their original owners. A villein's expectations were raised; thus he became less satisfied with his lot. The onus of being a serf was much greater than when everyone was a serf. As more escaped and as those who escaped made more money, the ones left behind regarded their status as less and less acceptable. "The Black Death constituted a landmark in the historical evolution of the English peasantry from servitude to freedom: It gave a violent shock to the ancient manorial arrangements and

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<sup>21</sup>Lipson, p. 92.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

weakened irreparably the stability of the rural framework of mediaeval society."<sup>23</sup>

The lord of a manor had great problems after the plague. His villeins left him; laborers were expensive and hard to find; his crops were essential and had to be tended. The lord did what he could in no consistent way. He tried to keep his villeins doing their customary services, even at times succeeding in reinstating services which had previously been commuted.<sup>24</sup> When he could not do this, to prevent his villeins' running away, he might commute their services to money payments, thereby getting money to pay for hired labor. He might make them free renters, even leasing the demesne itself to them if necessary. By this process some lords gradually became landlords and eventually in the course of years English country squires.<sup>25</sup>

Many, perhaps even most, of the manorial lords resisted any sort of change in the state of the manor.<sup>26</sup> Whenever leasing the land was necessary, they would if they could, procure short term or limited leases and when those ran out, they would revert to the older, more customary land tenures. When all else failed, when his tenants were gone and he could not hire laborers, the lord might shift from

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<sup>23</sup>Lipson, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>26</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 262

agriculture to sheep farming. This process, associated with enclosure and later centuries, began after the Black Death, but was strongly resisted, for it was indeed a radical departure from the old ways.

In towns the effects of the plague were much the same. ". . . in the towns also the high price of labour gave to the survivors an unprecedented prosperity."<sup>27</sup> Those who had more wanted more and became increasingly bitter and divided among themselves. Masters and journeymen who had previously been on opposing sides as journeymen combined against those employers who did not wish them to become masters, united to get more money from the customers.<sup>28</sup> Merchants whose trade was interrupted by the plague and some of whom went bankrupt had to struggle vigorously to maintain themselves.<sup>29</sup> They were a rising and insecure class even in the good times; during plague years they were yet more aggressive.

The plague also had astounding effects on consumers and sellers of goods of all kinds. Wages and prices both went up sharply. Consumers, of course, resisted the price hike but had more money in hand to buy if they wished.

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<sup>27</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 268 and 270.

<sup>28</sup>E. Lipson, The Growth of English Society, "Part I: The Middle Ages," 4th ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1959), p. 46 (hereafter, Lipson, Growth) and Petit-Dutaillis, p. 269.

<sup>29</sup>McKisack, p. 224

There was a substantial increase in the amount of money circulating; an exchange of money rather than of goods in kind began to be the basis of the economy for all classes. Sellers of goods, whether producers or not, enjoyed the rise in prices and as one might expect tried to take advantage of an already improved market. Evidence from contemporary accounts and from the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers reveals that adulteration of food, misweighing of goods, watering of beer, and other fraudulent practices were quite prevalent at this time.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the fullest statement of such practices is to be found in Modus Tenendi Curiam Baronis, a treatise on court keeping printed by Wynkyn de Worde ca. 1510 but belonging to an earlier date.

Also of all comyn bakerys amonge you that make unholysom brede for mannes body and kepe not the assyse ye shall do us to wete.

Also of all bruers and tapsters that brue and kepe not the assys and sell by cuppes dysshes and bolles and by mesures unsealed do us to wete.

Also yf there be ony amonge you that useth double mesures, that is to saye a grete mesure to bye with and a smaller to sell with or useth fals ballaunce or weyghtes yerdes or in dysceyte of ye kynges people shewe us.

Also of all bochers fysshers or ony other vytelers [that] sell vytayles corrupte and not holsom for mannes body or sell to excessyvely ye shall doo us to wete of theym.

Also yf there be ony regratoures or forstallers amonge you that bye in the waye to bye corne or ony other vytayle at ye townes ende or in ony other place to make the chepe thereof derer do us to wete of them.

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<sup>30</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 270.

Also yf there be ony myllers among you that use to take excessive toll otherwyse than they ought to do by ryght ye shall do to wete.

Also yf ther be ony vagabondes or hasarders or robbers amonge you that wake on ye nyght and slepe on the day and haunte customable ale houses and tavernes and routes aboute, and no man wote for whens they come ne whether they shall [go] ye shall do us to wete of them and of thyr recettoures.<sup>31</sup>

In other ways than these the moral tenor of this period appears to have lowered. The proximity and all pervasiveness of death--never far from the medieval man's mind at any time--was now insupportable. Despair paralyzed the people or chivied them into frenzied reckless behavior. Cattle were left untended and crops rotted in the fields. Singing, dancing, reveling in riotous drunkenness abounded. Marriages were strange alliances of young and old since there were fewer people from whom to choose, and contemporary accounts hold that marriage was more mercenary than before. Crime was on the increase; criminals were said to be flocking into London.<sup>32</sup>

Religion which could perhaps have prevented some of the moral collapse, itself underwent a decline. The number of parish priests declined sharply; England lost perhaps

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<sup>31</sup>Jarrett, pp. 158-159.

<sup>32</sup>McKisack, p. 205. See also Ziegler, pp. 160 and 272, who reports William of Dene, a monk of Rochester as saying, "The entire population, or the greater part of it, has become even more depraved, more prone to every kind of vice, more ready to indulge in evil and sinfulness, without a thought of death, or of the plague which is just over, or even of their own salvation . . ." (p. 164).

half of her clergy.<sup>33</sup> Obviously they were exposed to the plague in pursuing their ordinary duties which they did most admirably during the worst months. But as they died off, they were of necessity replaced with hastily and ill-trained men lowering the already dubious standard of the parish clergy.

As a body the higher clergy did not over-exert themselves in caring for the sick and destitute. They bent their energies more toward preventing the lesser ranks from receiving the higher wages necessary for existence in the post-plague years. Archbishop Islip said,

The unbridled covetousness of men would grow to such a height as to banish charity out of the world, if it were not repressed by justice. The priests that now are, not considering that they have escaped the danger of the pestilence by divine providence, not for their own merits, but that they might exercise the ministry committed to them for the sake of God's people and the public good, nor ashamed that layworkmen make their covetousness an example to themselves, have no regard to the cure of souls though fitting salaries are offered to them, and leaving that betake themselves to the celebration of annals for the quick and dead, and so parish churches and chapels remain destitute of parochial chaplains, and the said priests, pampered with excessive salaries, discharge their intemperance in vomit and lust, grow wild and drown themselves in the abyss of vice, to the great scandal of ecclesiastics and the evil example of laymen.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps in the case of Archbishop Islip the intentions behind such actions were good: to keep the priests from

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<sup>33</sup>McKisack, p. 332. See also Bertha Haven Putnam, "Maximum Wage-Laws for Priests after the Black Death, 1348-1381," American Historical Review, XXI(1915-1916), pp. 12-32.

<sup>34</sup>W. W. Capes, The English Church in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (London: Macmillan and Co., 1900), p. 78.

being lured from their parishes by offers of higher wages.<sup>35</sup> But the effects were often bad, for the priests in the parishes really were not receiving adequate payment. And those among the lower clergy who were not men of character, when denied the necessary wages, often became increasingly greedy and willing to wander about fomenting anger against the wealthy ecclesiasts.<sup>36</sup>

The government naturally felt it had to do something during such severe social unrest, and naturally its actions were reactions. It wished to revert to the old status quo ante plague, not knowing how to proceed to a new status and fearing changes of all sorts. In June of 1349 the first measure to avert an approaching catastrophe was taken: the Ordinance of Labourers.

Among other things the Ordinance decreed that those men and women under sixty who had no means of support had to work when and where they were needed; they could not wander about seeking higher wages. Nor could alms be given to any able-bodied person capable of working or the giver was subject to imprisonment. Contracts once made between employer and worker could not be broken. Employers were to pay wages at the 1346 rate and were to be fined if they

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<sup>35</sup> McKisack, p. 297.

<sup>36</sup> Petit-Dutaillis, p. 271. See also Ziegler, pp. 172 and 261-263 and Putnam, p. 15 who points out that the relations between higher and lower clergy resembled those between employer and laborer--the former attempting to keep down the wages of the latter.



offered higher wages. Food sellers and innkeepers were to charge reasonable prices.<sup>37</sup> In February, 1351, the Ordinance became the Statute of Labourers and was made more specific. Many wages were fixed by amount. The Statute was reissued and made more severe, though no more effective, as the years passed.

The government did not succeed in re-establishing the status quo although it did retard the rise of rural wages and the breakup of the manorial system.<sup>38</sup> The process of change that had begun before the Black Death and that was accelerated by it went on slowly. Cracks and rifts were filled and repaired, but they did not hold; the movement was too strong.

### The Peasants' Revolt

The series of shifts in the social order that the Black Death occasioned and increased was one of the activating forces underlying the second electrifying event of the fourteenth century--the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. "In town and country alike the workers were now [post-plague] conscious of their strength, jealous in defense of their comfort and their pleasures, and ready to attack the lords,

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<sup>37</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 264; Lipson, pp. 96-97; and Philip Lindsay and Reg. Groves, The Peasants' Revolt: 1381 (London: Hutchinson and Co., n.d.), p. 113. The idea of the existence of a reasonable and just price is here much the same as it was with the Church Fathers, see above, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 267.

the rich, and the king's officers, who were endeavoring to deprive them of their new prosperity."<sup>39</sup>

The causes of the Revolt of 1381 were complex and varied, but can be reduced to two: the economic and social crises surrounding the Black Death and the political and economic crises of the French wars. The previous pages have explained the first of these causes in some detail: the manorial system was changing; wages and prices were high; peasants had greater expectations than ever before, and some saw them fulfilled; the government was trying to control the crises by conservative rather than progressive means.

This general contributing factor had as its specific activating agent the commissions of laborers instituted by the government to enforce the Statute of Labourers. These commissions were very active and very tyrannical, and the statutes became increasingly severe.<sup>40</sup> For example, in 1361 a statute decreed that laborers who went about seeking higher wages were to be branded on the forehead. Large groups of people of varying positions--priest and layman, bondman and free, town artisan and rural worker--found themselves joined in opposition to the statutes and the commissions that tried to limit or remove their new found prosperity and pride.

The wars with France, as well as with Scotland, had long occasioned heavy taxes on the people. While England

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<sup>39</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 270.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., pp. 264 and 266.

was winning battles and her prestige was unhurt, the people paid the tax with only minor grumbling. But when England began losing badly and could neither gain French lands nor protect her own, the people began to complain more seriously about wasted tax money and to blame the king's advisors for mismanaging his affairs. Security declined and the people were unhappy.<sup>41</sup>

The wars also increased the number of men who were used to the ways of war. These men were then loosed upon English soil during the lulls in the fighting. In France the fighters were accustomed and even encouraged to live by pillaging the surrounding countryside; in England they continued their bad habits. In France they became used to bloodshed and cruelties of war; in England they remained brutalized. In the French wars disorderly conduct was a way of life; in the English countryside it became more and more so. A not negligible percentage of the male populace had borne arms and knew how to do so, could assume leadership of small bands of men, and could organize attacks. These men were ripe for a chance at action.<sup>42</sup>

The culmination of the effect of the French wars on the Peasants' Revolt was the Poll Tax of 1381 which in fact triggered the beginning of the Revolt proper. This tax was

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<sup>41</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 272.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

most heavy and unfair. It required of every lay person over fifteen and not a beggar one shilling, that is, three groats, or the equivalent of one week's wages. Previous taxes had exacted no more than one groat or four pence per head.<sup>43</sup>

The wealthier were to assist the poorer but no one was to pay less than one groat or more than twenty shillings. Since not all poor people had wealthy friends to aid them, the tax fell unequally on all. And in fact, the tax was an attempt to conciliate the rich and to make the poor pay more than they had previously.<sup>44</sup>

The people's reaction to the tax was to provide the collectors with fraudulent lists of inhabitants thus lessening the amount owed by a village. The government saw through the fraud; it would not believe the population had diminished as radically as the lists indicated. If one were to believe the poll tax records, one would have to believe that the population in England declined by one third from 1377 to 1381. "In Essex and in Kent, the counties where the revolt first broke out, the figures fell from 47,962 (1377) to 30,748 (1381), and from 56,557 to 43,838."<sup>45</sup> Commissions were set up to correct the tax lists and to extort the money being withheld.

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<sup>43</sup>Lipson, p. 104.

<sup>44</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 279.

<sup>45</sup>McKisack, p. 407 and Petit-Dutaillis, p. 280.

The people rebelled. On May 30, 1381, the men of Fobbing, Essex, assembled to hear the royal commissioner Thomas Bampton demand further tax money. They outright refused to pay a penny more, and when Bampton ordered their spokesman arrested, "the peasants, about one hundred strong, fell upon the party from London, beat them, and stoned them out of the town."<sup>46</sup> This was the start of the violence which spread to cover almost the whole of the realm, which paralyzed the government for days, which invaded London and imprisoned the king and his councillors, which destroyed with little thought of rebuilding.<sup>47</sup> ". . . the revolt of 1381 was, so to speak, a settlement of old scores of every kind. It was above all an eruption of long-cherished envy, hatred, and malice--feelings which had every excuse--towards the selfishness of the rich."<sup>48</sup>

The rebellion was a strange almost indefinable event. In a sense, it was a political occurrence; the rebels demanded a change of governmental officials, the "traitors" whom they blamed for all the governmental difficulties. But they believed that this alone would cure insoluble problems. They remained faithful to the king's person and blamed him for nothing but gave him no solution for England's immense

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Oman, The Great Revolt of 1381 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 32.

<sup>47</sup> Petit-Dutaillis, p. 293.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

financial difficulties and no alternative for the hated yet necessary taxation. They had no real idea of the reforms needed to help the realm and offered no political program at all.<sup>49</sup>

There were strong religious aspects to the rebellion; a wandering preacher John Ball was one of the leaders and some of his sermons became peasant demands. He and others had strong ideas about Christian democracy and about the distribution of church property among the people. One of the rebels' demands was for the division of ecclesiastical property among the people reserving enough to support the clerks and one bishop.<sup>50</sup> And yet the movement was not a Lollard phenomenon; it was not heretical.<sup>51</sup> Archbishop Sudbury was hated and destroyed not so much because he was Archbishop as because he was rich and one of the king's so-called traitorous advisors.

The Peasants' Revolt is perhaps best described as a social uprising of a non-unified sort. The peasants' demands were predominately of a social nature; the abolition of serfdom and the repeal of the Statute of Labourers. Their actions were acts of social warfare; terrorizing and humiliating nobles, destroying the property of the rich, denouncing manorial customs, destroying records of servile status

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<sup>49</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, pp. 275-276.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 276.

and duties, demanding charters of freedom and privilege.<sup>52</sup>

"The rebels thus demanded the abandonment of every measure taken since 1285 for the maintenance of public order and the regulation of labour."<sup>53</sup>

Opinions of the results of the Great Revolt have changed since J. E. Thorold Rogers and others maintained that the uprising virtually ended villeinage. Recent scholars believe that the revolt had little effect on the conditions of peasant life.<sup>54</sup> King Richard's remark "serf ye are and serfs ye shall remain" held true for the next decades.

The charters of freedom and privileges granted under duress to the rebels were quickly revoked once the king and nobles had regained their composure and power. The rebels and their leaders were, of course, punished, though not so severely as one might expect; there was no widespread slaughter of the masses. There were executions, but most of them followed legal trials and some were stayed by the king's request. Thus a few leaders who one expected would be killed actually were pardoned. In comparison with the French reaction to the Jaquerie, the English government was indeed mild mannered.

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<sup>52</sup>Petit-Dutaillis, p. 277.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 303 and Lipson, p. 109.

The results then of the strange revolt were evident not in status or condition but in the minds of the people. Their failure to secure changes for themselves made the peasants even more bitter over their lot; in the years that followed, local insurrections became more common.<sup>55</sup> The peasants continued to fight for what they now conceived as their rights. They had held the upper hand, though only for a passing moment; they had felt a sense of power, of the ability to control the government and their own destiny. The fact of the extreme transience of this moment only made it more desirable.

The peasants saw that the social structure in which they were trapped could be changed; another world was possible. Just as the taste of new prosperity after the Black Death whetted the appetites of the lower classes for more wealth, so the hint of power experienced in the Peasants' Revolt excited their passions for more. "It was long before the privileged classes forgot the fear which they had felt, long before the people forgot their lost opportunity of winning a little more prosperity."<sup>56</sup> Society was becoming more unsettled, less predictable.

The upper classes were not unaffected, although they would have liked to have been so. They were frightened and shocked. They had seen an uprising among a group that they

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<sup>55</sup> Petit-Dutaillis, p. 303.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 304.



did not consider capable of anything but bestial toil and obedience. Their sacred way of life had been threatened, and their initial reaction to the scare had been paralysis. They had sensed themselves powerless, a state of being totally foreign to them.

Naturally their reaction, once they were able to react, was strong. They wished to prevent any such occurrence in the future, and the only way they knew to effect this was by a vigorous upholding of the status quo. They did not consider changing those things to which the peasants objected because that would mean a drastic change in what they considered the divine order of things. The status quo served them very well; they believed any change would be for the worse. So just as after the Black Death the government and nobles tried to reinforce the old order so did they after the Peasants' Revolt.

But the economic changes resulting from the Black Death, causing in part the Great Revolt, and going in fact beyond both, were merely retarded and not stopped by the repressive measures of the upper classes. Serfdom did eventually end; the Statutes of Labourers were eliminated, not because of the Peasants' Revolt but because such measures no longer served. England was changing, becoming a nation with diverse interests, agricultural, mercantile, industrial. The old ways were no longer the good ways and they gradually died.

### Summary

In short, England in the fourteenth century was a society in change. This is not unusual in any society, but at this time the changes were extremely widespread and affected all aspects of life. "The Mediaeval Age [was] an age of groups and guilds, of communes; the ending of it passed into a period of intense personal self-development. Men no longer held, they owned".<sup>57</sup> "The pattern of several centuries was breaking up; not only the pattern of society but the set of men's minds as well."<sup>58</sup>

The pattern which was in the process of change was the old, familiar, rural, manorial one which perhaps should be briefly set out. About ninety percent of England's population lived in villages; under twelve percent were in the towns or cities.<sup>59</sup> Thus Ashley can say with confidence "To understand the rural life of England during this period is to understand nine-tenths of its economic activity."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Jarrett, p. 149. Compare the following from Dawson, p. 159: "It [14th C.] saw the breakdown of the universal theocratic order of medieval Christendom and the rise of political nationalism and religious division, and at the same time it witnessed the passing of the old agrarian feudal society and the rise of capitalism and urban industrialism."

<sup>58</sup> Ziegler, p. 239 and also p. 279: "Assumptions which had been taken for granted for centuries were now in question, the very framework of men's reasoning seemed to be breaking up."

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> Petit-Dutaillis, p. 256.

On the manor lived the lord and his family who depended on the products of the manor for their sustenance; the few free tenants, if there were any, who paid rent for the use of their land; the villeins who "with his virgate of arable land and appurtenant rights to meadow and waste, presented all the appearance of a substantial farmer by the side of the poor and struggling cottager,"<sup>61</sup> and the cottagers, perhaps the villeins' younger sons who could not inherit the fathers' positions and who sold their labor when and where they could. Their lot was a most precarious one; they were guaranteed no work and no succor. Manorial social life in general was stable, interdependent, and functional during the early Middle Ages.

No one, however, escaped the urgent sense of living on the edge of disaster. If the crops failed, and famine and pestilence struck, lord, villein, cottar--all suffered. "The Middle Ages were niggard in their material fruits to men; often life was a perilous adventure between the horrors of semi-starvation and bad health. The sense of need was born in all, and in all it was stimulated as the responsibilities of life increased with age. Thus, the terrible and continuous series of financial and economic demands of this period from all classes to all classes--a startling feature of the times--can be better understood." "Generally there

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<sup>61</sup>Lipson, p. 43.

was enough to eat and enough to clothe the shame of nakedness: but there was never enough of good food and good raiment except, perhaps, for the highest in the land. The dread of pestilence and famine, caused either by the devastations and losses of war or by epidemics, was never far distant. Life was insecure in its basic need--physical sustenance."<sup>62</sup> But changes were at work.

The social structure was shifting: towns were growing up with a rising middle class of merchants and artisans, and the manors were breaking up. As the cloth industry grew and exports of both cloth and wool increased, the merchants became more numerous and more wealthy. But their social position was insecure: they had no fixed and defined place in the old order, and therefore no loyalty to it. They were a new class with no traditions, no roots, no past, so they felt threatened and were defensive about their position and purpose in society.

The manorial system was crumbling under economic forces outside its control. "The medieval organization of rural labour broke down completely when the villeins suddenly found at hand alternative and more profitable sources of livelihood, whether in trade and industry, or as free labourers."<sup>63</sup> Both the gradual commutation of villein services and the eventual alienation of the demesne itself

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<sup>62</sup>Davies and Worts, pp. 91-92.

<sup>63</sup>Lipson, p. 92.

changed the character of rural life.<sup>64</sup> The latter tended to make the lord into a sheep farmer or a land lord living off the money rents of his tenants. The former created a new rural class--the English yeoman, a tenant farmer or small proprietor who became increasingly more prosperous.<sup>65</sup>

Another group also came into its own especially after the wage hikes following the Black Death--the cottagers. These hired laborers, once wages became high and labor scarce, were no longer barely able to stay alive; they were in demand and became better off than the formerly envied virgaters. Thus, social equality, once typical of each group within the manorial system, was superseded by an ever widening gap in economic and social status.<sup>66</sup> When nearly everyone was a serf and the serfs were more prosperous than the poor freemen, serfdom was not regarded as such an onerous position. As freemen grew in numbers and in wealth, serfdom grew more shameful, less bearable.<sup>67</sup> So the rural people, like the townsmen, were socially insecure and threatened by the changes that struck at the old ways.

Even the idea of land itself was changing. Land was no longer that upon which a family lived for untold

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<sup>64</sup>Lipson, p. 78.

<sup>65</sup>G. G. Coulton, The Medieval Village (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1931), p. 385 and Lipson, p. 103.

<sup>66</sup>Lipson, p. 117.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89.

generations, using it to produce food for life, never owning it outright but always holding it in tenure from someone, ultimately from the king who represented the people.<sup>68</sup> Land became an object to own, exploit, buy and sell for capital, for profit, for money. The lord, rather than feeling himself morally responsible for those tenants who worked his land, more and more felt economically obliged to sell tenants' land from under them, to consolidate parcels of land into grazing fields, to exploit his land to his own best advantage.<sup>69</sup>

"The economic theory of the [early] Middle Ages had subordinated the interest of the individual to the welfare of the community, and medieval morality was no less binding on the lord than on his tenants. But the older conceptions of right and wrong were breaking down, and in their stead grew up the conviction that a man might do with his own as he would. . . . More stress began to be laid upon the rights of ownership than upon its duties. Land came to be regarded purely as a source of wealth, and its real relation to the community was utterly obscured. Common law placed no legal obstacle in the way of the lords, but the legality of their action was not called into question, its morality was unsparingly denounced."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Jarrett, p. 144.

<sup>69</sup>Lipson, p. 117.

<sup>70</sup>Lipson, p. 131.

"Money was beginning to take the place of land as the symbol of power, and with money came, curiously, the sense of absolute ownership." As serfs became free and thereby landless, conditional ownership ceased because it was the conditions of suit and service that were sold. At first money was equivalent not to the value of the land, but to the suit and service the land entailed. Gradually this idea grew fainter and land itself became the item bought and sold. "It was money, then, that altered the attitude of the mediæval mind toward property, though the mere substitution of money for land did not at first destroy the older theory of conditional ownership."<sup>71</sup>

Land became concentrated in the hands of fewer people, and those few felt much less their moral obligations to the many who had been dependent on the land for their livelihoods. "All the ranks of society had once owned some land but none without doing service for it; now the majority lost their land in exchange for money, and those few into whose hands it came did less service for it, or less obvious service."<sup>72</sup>

Tentative capitalism arose in place of the manorial system as the landowners tried to work the land for money profits from sheep or produce rather than to use it to sustain the families who lived on the land. As a result many

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<sup>71</sup>Jarrett, pp. 143 and 141.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

rural tenants were forced to become wandering laborers or to go to the towns and many rural villages were depopulated entirely.<sup>73</sup> The old customs were gone; the interdependence ruined.

A moneyed economy was emerging. The manorial system, functional in an age of natural husbandry and not in an age of money transactions, gradually became less and less economically sound.<sup>74</sup> After the plague the amount of money per person was larger; wages and prices rose, so more money changed hands. More people were monetarily prosperous. At the same time land was being viewed as money. And the plunder from the French wars increased the volume of money available. The woolen industry was growing as was trade, and therefore, merchants were increasing in numbers. Hence "trade was one of the strongest of the new forces in favour of absolute ownership, since the more thoroughly you own, the more motive have you for endeavoring to add to your possessions."<sup>75</sup> The movement was toward a money economy, and industrial and mercantile society.

Trade was placing a greater amount of money in the hands of a larger number of people than was ever thought

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<sup>73</sup>Lipson, pp. 116 and 130. See also Jarrett, p. 142: "The English peasant . . . in gaining his liberty lost his land."

<sup>74</sup>Lipson, p. 83.

<sup>75</sup>Jarrett, p. 147. See also Lipson, pp. 83 and 88.



possible before, and medieval men were hard put to accommodate this wealth into their old mental scheme.<sup>76</sup> They believed that greed occasioned trade, and greed of course was a sin. But they also saw that trade and the money it produced brought about many desirable changes. So they modified their absolute position on trade by saying that the sinfulness of greed could be counteracted by using the profit from trade in some worthy cause, to help the poor, or in the common good.<sup>77</sup> The evils of trade, and men did see that not only its motivation but also its perpetration (actuation) could be evil, were assumed to come "from a wrong principle or motive on his part who entered upon it, that it was precisely the intention of the trader which had to be put right, and that therefore economics became a moral question to be solved only by a moral answer."<sup>78</sup>

This solution to the problem of gaining wealth was much the same as the Fathers' solution to the problem of having wealth. They believed it was best not to be wealthy, but if a man were wealthy, right spirit and almsgiving could

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<sup>76</sup>Jarrett, p. 171.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., pp. 162-164. Note Aquinas' position on this subject: "Nevertheless, gain, which is the end of trading, though not implying by its nature anything virtuous or necessary, does not in itself connote anything sinful or contrary to virtue, wherefore nothing prevents gain from being directed to some necessary or even virtuous end, and thus trade becomes lawful" (S.T. II. ii. 77. 4).

save him. The medieval moralist felt that trade was not good but if one were a trader, his good intentions and almsgiving might save him as well. The moralist was not, however comfortable with trade and at times denounced it as had the Fathers. "Yet somehow the facts were too much for the theories, and gradually the merchants came to be recognized as men who need not necessarily be judged to be in sin."<sup>79</sup> By the end of the fifteenth century owning private property and indulging in trade to amass wealth were regarded as ordinary acceptable ways of life, and the wealthy one need not even feel obliged to give alms to atone for the sin of being wealthy.<sup>80</sup>

While these social and economic changes were taking place, England was also changing politically. She was becoming aware of herself as a nation against other nations and wanted to protect her people, her borders, her trade, her goods. The idea of a medieval unified Christendom was decreasingly applicable. The emergent nation was also struggling within herself to find what sort of nation she would be--theocratic or populist. Who would rule--the people or the king? Thus all aspects of life in fourteenth century England were in flux, all were threatened from within and without. Change was omnipresent and ominous. Excitement and panic fought for sway.

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<sup>79</sup>Jarrett, p. 177.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

Forces such as these had considerable effect upon Langland's mind and subsequently upon his art. Piers Plowman is full of allusions to contemporary events, references to the poor, the rich, the wicked--the real fabric of the age, thus supplying the second large stream of influence upon the creative endeavor of the artist. The following chapter will present detailed evidence of the existence of this influence but will begin with a presentation of the similarities between Langland and his religious predecessors.

### CHAPTER III

#### TRADITION, REALITY, AND PIERS PLOWMAN

Upon returning to Piers Plowman after perusing the Church Fathers for statements concerning wealth and poverty, one must be struck by how many times Langland sounds like a fourteenth century Father. The patriarchs, if they had been reaching out to Langland's audience, might have used his words; or conversely, Langland, in attempting to instruct his readers, used thoughts and words whose origins lay with the Fathers themselves.

Nearly every ramification of the subject was touched upon by Langland, sometimes in brief remarks, sometimes in long passages. An examination of these portions of the text proves how very thoroughly Langland belonged to the religious tradition. One quote in particular exemplifies how Langland moved easily from one branch of the topic to another, creating a coherent theme:

And alle þe wise þat euere were, by au<sub>3</sub>t I kan aspye,  
Preisen pouerte for best lif if Pacience it folwe,  
And boþe bettre and blesseder by many fold þan Richesse.  
Alþou<sub>3</sub> it be sour to suffre, þer comeþ swete after.  
As on a walnote wipoute is a bitter barke,  
And after þat bitter bark, be þe shelle aweye,  
Is a kernel of confort kynde to restore.  
So after pouerte or penaunce paciently ytake:

Makeþ a man to haue mynde in god and a gret wille  
 To wepe and to wel bidde, wherof wexep Mercy  
 Of which crist is a kernell to conforte þe soule.  
 And wel sikerer he slepeþ, þe segge þat is pouere,  
 And lasse he dredeþ deep and in derke to ben yrobbed  
 Than he þat is ri<sup>3</sup>t riche; Reson bereþ witnesse:  
Pauper ego ludo dum tu diues meditaris.  
 Alþou<sup>3</sup>, Salomon seide, as folk seep in þe bible.  
Diuicias nec paupertates &c,  
 Wiser þan Salomon was bereþ witnesse and tau<sup>3</sup>te  
 That parfit pouerte was no possession to hauē,  
 And lif moost likynge to god as luc bereþ witnesse:  
Si vis perfectus esse vade & vende &c.  
 And is to mene to men þat on þis moolde lyuen,  
 Whoso wole be pure parfit moot possession forsake  
 Or selle it, as seip þe book, and þe siluer dele  
 To beggeris þat begge and bidden for goddes loue.  
 (B.XI.257 ff.; K.452)<sup>1</sup>

#### Poverty as a Good (cf. I.10-I.11)

Obviously Langland believed as did the Fathers that poverty was a good in itself. The long section wherein Pacience explained poverty to Haukyn was highly reminiscent of the way in which the Fathers explained poverty in positive descriptive terms (B. XIV. 275-321). Paraphrasing Vincent of Beauvais, Langland described poverty in the following

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<sup>1</sup>George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, Piers Plowman: The B Version (London: Athlone Press, 1975). I used this edition for all references to the B text unless otherwise noted. When referring to the A text, I used George Kane, Piers Plowman: The A Version (London: Athlone Press, 1960). For the C text references I used Walter W. Skeat, The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts, Vol. I (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1886). Individual references will be given in the body of the paper with all information self explanatory except the abbreviations K, K.A. and S, which indicate Kane's B, Kane's A, and Skeat's edition and which precede the page numbers for easier reading. Any square brackets used in the quotations indicate readings I have preferred over those given by Kane in his texts; I have therefore eliminated the brackets Kane used himself.

ways. Poverty was:<sup>2</sup>

odibile bonum, a hateful good, because it was hateful to pride and although at times hateful to bear, like the bitter walnut, was sweet for the soul inside.

remocio curarum, a remover of cares, since poor men did not sit in judgment over others or punish others.

possessio sine calumpnia, possession without trickery, since the poor man obtained his winnings rightfully and without deceit or borrowing.

donum dei, a gift of God, since it caused the soul to flourish and kept the body from foolishness.

sanitatis mater, the mother of health, since poverty was a friend in all temptations, the doctor of the country, and the lover of innocence.

absque sollicitudine semita, a narrow path without anxiety, since the poor man could walk anywhere without fear of robbery. This was the path of peace.

sapiencie temperatrix, the nurse of wisdom, since the poor man used few words and those were true ones, not spoken for reward.

negocium sine dampno, business without damage, since the poor man took only his rightful payment for his labor and cared not if he lost a little in trade so long as he grew in charity.

absque sollicitudine felicitas, happiness without worry, a sweetness or sustenance for the soul, the soul's healer when poverty was borne with patience.

#### Poverty Associated with Virtue (cf. I.11-I.13)

The sort of poverty thus described led naturally to the virtues and away from the seven deadly sins:

Ac in pouerte þer pacience is pride haþ no my<sup>3</sup>te,  
Ne none of þe seuene synnes sitten ne mowe þer longe,  
Ne haue power in pouerte, if pacience it folwe.  
(B.XIV.218-220; K.526)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>K.529-532. The definition of poverty as incerta fortuna is omitted from both B and C texts. In Vol. II of the above mentioned Skeat edition, Skeat refers to one of Chrysostom's descriptions of poverty (in "Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews," cap.x.homil.18.sec.3) which I failed to discover on my own (p. 213, fn. 136).

<sup>3</sup>According to Morton Bloomfield in The Seven Deadly

The poor man was not proud because he had daily to practice humbleness before those who were richer in order to eat. Nor were the poor wrathful, for those who beg must speak mildly. The poor could not buy rich foods or good linen thus gluttony had no hold on them. Covetise was long and poverty short, and therefore, covetousness could not get a good hold on the poor man. Lechery was not for the poor because they had no money to woo the wenches or buy luxurious foods. Sloth could overtake the poor, but when he did, adversity caused the poor man to turn back to God, his greatest help.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps one reason Langland felt that poverty encouraged virtue was that he believed that grace, which enabled man to live a virtuous life was rooted in poverty:

Ac grace ne growep no<sub>3</sub>t [but amonges lowel];  
 Pacience and pouerte þe place is þer it growep,  
 And in lele lyuyng men and in lif holy,  
 And þoru<sub>3</sub> þe gifte of þe holy goost as þe gospel telleþ:  
Spiritus vbi vult spirat.

(B.XII.60-63; K.469)<sup>5</sup>

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Sins (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952), this Passus is the only place in literature wherein the Seven Deadlies are used to deprecate the rich and elevate the poor; more typically they are used to castigate all classes (p. 200). Compare also C.XIII.171ff.; S.349 in which Langland lists the names of other poets who have "preouen pacient pouerte pryns of all vertues."

<sup>4</sup>The sin of envy is not included here; one cannot help but wonder whether Langland omitted it because it is surely the sin most likely to beset the poor man and hardest for him to escape.

<sup>5</sup>The alternate reading in brackets is from those MSS listed by Kane as WHmCrGYCBLMRF. Compare also B.XIX.

These "lele lyuyngre" and "lifholy" men in whose poor lives grace functioned and flourished were "sonner saued" than were "kete clerkes þat konne manye bokes" (B.X.464-465; K.435) because:

Clerkes and kete men carpen of god faste  
And haue hym muche in hire mouþ, ac meene men in herte.  
(B.X.70-71; K.410)

Poverty Is Pleasurable (cf. I.13-I.17)

Poverty for Langland was pleasurable in the same way as it was for the Fathers. The poor had fewer anxieties than did the rich. "Ac wel worth Pouerte! for he may walke vnrobbed/Among pilours in pees yf pacience hym folwe" (C.XIV.1-2; S.352).<sup>6</sup> In fact Langland referred to Augustine as having taught "That pure pouerte and pacience was a louh lyuyngre in erthe,/A blessid lyf with-oute busynesse bote oneliche for the soule" (C.XVII.154-155; S.435).. Of course, one sort of pleasure that the poor were to experience was not of this world. From Christ's life and death they were instructed:

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248-249; K.645 wherein Grace, the gift of the Holy Ghost, teaches as one of its gifts, the ability to live in poverty and in "longyngre to ben hennes." As is often the case active grace comes after the workings of the Holy Ghost but also activates those workings. See also Donaldson, Piers Plowman: The C-Text, who says "Poverty--patient poverty--is the chief means to grace . . ." (p. 173).

<sup>6</sup>Refer back to III.122, in particular to ll.267-269 quoted there and also to the odibile bonum section discussed on III.124.



And se bi his sorwe þat whoso loueþ ioye  
 To penaunce and to pouerte he moste puten hymselfen,  
 And muche wo in þis world willen and suffren.  
 (B.XIX.66-68;K.635)

The poor were to remember concerning Christ:

And wheiþer he be or be no<sub>3</sub>t, he bereþ þe signe of pouerte  
 And in þat secte oure saueour saued al mankynde.  
 Forþi al poore þat pacient is of pure ri<sub>3</sub>t may clamen,  
 After hir endynge here, heueneriche blisse.  
 (B.XIV.258-261;K.528)

### Christ's Poverty (cf. I.17-I.19)

Christ's poverty was as important for Langland as for the Fathers and brought forth from him a splendid passage:

[Wyse men] forsoke wele for þei wolde be nedy  
 And woneden wel elengely and wolde no<sub>3</sub>t be riche.  
 And god al his grete Ioye goostliche he left  
 And cam and took mankynde and bicam nedy.  
 So [nedy he was], as seiþ þe book in manye sondry places,  
 That he seiðe in his sorwe on þe selue rode:  
 "Boþe fox and fowel may fle to hole and crepe  
 And þe fische hap fyn to flete wiþ to reste:  
 Ther nede hap ynome me þat I moot nede abyde  
 And suffre sorwes ful soure, þat shal to Ioye torne."  
 Forþi be no<sub>3</sub>t abasshed to bide and to be nedy  
 Siþ he þat wro<sub>3</sub>te al þe world was wilfullliche nedy,  
 Ne neuere noon<sub>3</sub> so nedy ne pouerer deiðe.  
 (B.XX.38-50;K.662)<sup>7</sup>

As with the Fathers this poverty was understood materially as well as spiritually: "Oure prynce Iesu pouerte chees and hus aposteles all,/ And ay the lenger thei lyueden the lasse good thei hadde" (C.XIV.3-4;S.352).

Langland was quite explicit about what lessons were to be drawn from Christ's example of poverty:

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<sup>7</sup>The alternate readings in brackets are from MSS listed by Kane as WHmCrGYOC<sup>2</sup> CBLM.

For oure Ioye and oure Iuel, Iesu crist of heuene,  
 In a pouere mannes apparaille pursueþ vs euere,  
 And lokeþ on vs in hir liknesse and þat wiþ louely chere  
 To knowen vs by oure kynde herte and castynge of oure ei<sup>3</sup>en,  
 Wheiþer we loue þe lordes here bifore þe lord of blisse;  
 And exciteþ vs by þe Euaungelie þat, whan we maken festes,  
 We sholde no<sup>3</sup>t clepe oure kyn þerto ne none kynnes riche;  
Cum facitis conuiuia nolite inuitare amicos.  
 'Ac calleþ þe carefulle þerto, þe croked and þe pouere;  
 For youre frendes wol feden yow, and fonde yow to quyte  
 Your festynge and youre faire <sup>3</sup>ifte; ech frend quyteþ so  
 ooper.  
 Ac for þe pouere I shal paie, and pure wel quyte hir  
 trauaille  
 That <sup>3</sup>yueþ hem mete or moneie and loueþ hem for my sake.'  
 . . . . .  
 And al was ensample, soopliche, to vs synfulle here  
 That we sholde be lowe and loueliche, and lele ech man  
 to oper,  
 And pacient as pilgrymes for pilgrymes are we alle.  
 And in þe apparaille of a pouere man and pilgrymes liknesse  
 Many tyme god hap ben met among nedy peple,  
 Ther neuere segge hym sei<sup>3</sup> in secte of þe riche.<sup>8</sup>  
 (B.XI.185-196 & 240-245;K.448-452)

### Material Poverty (cf. I.19-I.21)

Langland praised both absolute poverty and poverty  
 with minimal possession, again following the pattern set forth  
 by his forefathers. In an above-quoted passage he used the  
 parable of the rich young man to show:

That parfit pouerte was no possession to haue,  
 . . . . .  
 Whoso wole be pure parfit moot possession forsake  
 Or selle it, as seiþ þe book, and the siluer dele  
 To beggeris þat begge and bidden for goddes loue.  
 (B.XI.272 & 276-278;K.454)

However, in the odibile bonum passage (B.XIV.294-296;K.531)  
 poverty was described as possession without calumpnia,

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<sup>8</sup>Another specific example of the lesson to be learned  
 from Christ occurs in B.I.172-176;K.251.

indicating that the poor could and did possess things righteously.<sup>9</sup>

Poverty of Spirit (cf. I.21-I.24)

Many of the quotations already given reveal how thoroughly Langland equated poverty with humility.<sup>10</sup> In the C text (X.175-188) Langland gave a long list (more complete than in B) of those who were truly poor and needy. Of these, those:

That taken these meschiefs meekliche and myldliche at  
herte;  
For loue of here lowe hertes owre lord hath hem graunted  
Here penaunce and here purgatorie vp-on thys pure erthe,  
And pardon with Peers Plouhman a pena et a culpa.  
(C.X.183-186;S.239)

In fact the reprieve from sin that Christ provided for mankind "of pouerte be moste,/And of pure pacience and parfit bileue" and it was applicable to no one "but þei be poore of herte" (B.XIV.192-195;K.524).

Edward Vasta in The Spiritual Basis of Piers Plowman discussed in several places the relationship of the first beatitude to Piers. He believed that the general message of the pardon in all texts was that beatitude for it "concerns withdrawal from the affluence of external goods, both riches and honors, by learning to use them with moderation and, more

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<sup>9</sup>Bloomfield, Apocalypse, pp. 135-136 and 148 gives similar and further discussion of Langland's position on mendicant possessions. See below, III.146-III.148.

<sup>10</sup>B.XIV.280;K.530. B.XIV.219;K.526, and B.XII.60 (alternate reading);K.469, for example.

excellently, by despising them altogether. The work of the Visio and Dowel corresponds to this beatitude, ending with complete withdrawal from external goods."<sup>11</sup>

Patient Poverty (cf. I.36-I.38)

If Langland related poverty to humility often, he related it to patience almost absolutely. The one who was voluntarily poor and patient in his poverty was "sib to god hymself, so nei<sub>3</sub> is pouerte" (B.XIV.273;K.529). For Langland, at least as much as for the Fathers, patient poverty was the only sort acceptable. "And alle þe wise . . ./ Preisen pouerte for best lif if Pacience it folwe" (B.XI.256-257;K.452).

The character Pacience in B.XIV was the one who most thoroughly dealt with the subject of poverty in all its aspects. Patient poverty was the sort over which the seven deadly sins had no hold (B.XIV.218-220;K.526). The patient poor were those who might "cleyment,/ After hir endynge here, heueneriche blisse" (B.XIV.260-261;K.528). Concerning those patient poor at the judgment day, Pacience explained to Haukyn:

Ther þe poore dar plede and preue by pure reson  
To haue allowaunce of his lord; by þe lawe he it cleymentþ.  
Ioye þat neuere ioye hadde of ri<sup>3</sup>htful Iugge he askep,  
And seiþ, "lo! briddes and beestés þat no blisse ne knowep  
And wilde wormes in wodes, þoru<sub>3</sub> wyntres þow hem greuest  
And makest hem wel nei<sub>3</sub> meke and mylde for defaute,

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<sup>11</sup>Vasta (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1965), p. 111.

And after þow sendest hem somer þat is hir souereyne ioye  
 And blisse to alle þat ben, boþe wilde and tame."  
 Thanne may beggeris, as beestes, after boote waiten  
 That al hir lif han lyued in langour and defaute.  
 But god sente hem some tyme som manere Ioye  
 Oþer here or elliswhere, kynde wolde it neuere;  
 For to wroþerhele was he wro<sup>3</sup>t þat neuere was Ioye shapen.  
 (B.XIV.108-120;K.519-520)<sup>12</sup>

Advice to the Poor (cf. I.29-I.34)

As with the Fathers, a great portion of Langland's advice was directed to the rich on proper use of wealth, but he did offer counsel to the poor as well. He believed that everyone who could work should work rather than beg, for those who begged without need were not included in Piers' pardon (B.VII.85ff.;K.375 and C.X.61ff.;S.233). Those who were able to work and did so were to be content with their hire, not always wanting more:

But he be heiȝliche hyred ellis wole he chide;  
 That he was werkman wro<sup>3</sup>t warie þe tyme.  
 Ayeins Catons counseil comseþ he to langle:  
Paupertatis onus pacienter ferre memento;  
 He greueþ hym ageyn god and gruccheþ ageyn Reson,  
 And þanne corseþ þe kyng and al þe counseil after  
 Swiche lawes to loke laborers to chaste.  
 Ac whiles hunger was hir maister þer wolde noon chide  
 Ne stryuen ayeins þe statut, so sterneliche he loked.  
 (B.VI.312-320;K.367-368)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Regarding the reward to come for the patient poor, see also C.XIII.176-210;S.349-350 and B.XIV.212-215;K.526. Both Bloomfield and Donaldson equated Dowel with patient poverty, "the best way to lead the Christian life in the world, the lowest but by no means unworthy way of Christian perfection" (Bl., p. 5) and "the first stage in the soul's journey to perfection" (D., p. 171).

<sup>13</sup>See the earlier passage B.VI.194ff.;K.360 for Hunger's affect on the workers. The passage quoted indicates Langland's strong desire for each class to remain in the station in which it found itself, not striving for betterment or change.

For Langland a sufficiency in the necessities was enough: any extra was sinful. He believed "For ho so loueth, leyue hit wel god wol nat lete hym sterue/ In myschef for lacke of mete ne for myssynge of clothes." (C.XI.200-201; S.273). He implied that even though a poor man might physically die from hunger, he, like Lazarus, would live on in Abraham's bosom (C.IX.279-283; S.219).

The poor should realize that poverty was one way God chastized his "deere children" (B.XII.12; K.465) and understand that he had provided for their spiritual, if not physical, comfort here and hereafter:

Cordis contricio, oris confessio, operis satisfactio;  
 These thre with-uten doute tholen all pouerte,  
 (C.XVII.32-33; S.425)<sup>14</sup>

#### Voluntary Poverty (cf. I.34-I.36)

Langland praised voluntary poverty by likening it to the maiden who leaves her family by choice to marry one she loves. Such a maiden was more loved by her mate than one who came to him through a marriage broker and a financial arrangement. Christ was comparable to the husband who preferred his maiden to come voluntarily (B.XIV.265-273; K.529). This poverty was, of course, to be borne patiently (l.272. See above pp. 130-131). Langland condemned those who dissimulated:

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<sup>14</sup>"Langland, though he realizes the sins and shortcomings of the poor provides them with all the consolation in his power, the conclusions of his philosophy of life," Edwin M. Hopkins, "The Character and Opinions of William Langland," Kansas University Quarterly, II, No. 4 (April 1894), p. 259.

For þer are beggeris and bidderis, bedemen as it were,  
 Loken as lambren and semen lif holy,  
 Ac it is moore to haue hir mete on swich an esy manere  
 Than for penaunce and parfitnesse, þe pouerte þat  
 swiche takeþ.  
 (B.XV.205-208;K.546-547)

Rich Are Poor and the Poor Rich  
 (cf. I.24-I.27)

The idea the Church Fathers expressed that the rich were really poor and the poor rich was also one of Langland's (C.XIV.5-25;S.352). Abraham and Job were both rich men but "Abraam for al hus god hadde much teene,/In gret pouerte he was yput" (11.7-8). "And also Iob the gentel what Ioye hadde he on erthe,/How bittere he hit bouhte" (11.15-16). While saved both these men was the blessing God gave to all the poor: the ability to endure all poverty patiently through the gift of grace.

Commonalty of Goods (cf. I.38-I.41)

That God had given men certain things to hold in common Langland was quite as sure as were the Fathers. Clothes, food, and drink belonged to all men to be used in moderation to preserve life for the good of all (B.I.20-26; K.242). Other things as well were common property of all and not to be bartered:

Ac to bugge water ne wynd ne wit ne fir þe ferþe,  
 Thisse foure þe fader of heuene made to þis foold in  
 commune;  
 Thisse ben trupes tresores trewe folk to helpe,  
 That neuere shul wexe ne wayne wipouten god hymselfe.  
 (B.VII.53-56;K.372)

From this passage Langland's readers were to understand that man's intelligence (in this case among lawyers) was to be used to help his fellow men preserve life.

Knowledge that God had given the necessities of life to all in common, especially when combined with the idea that all men were brothers in Christ, ought to keep Christians from coveteousness: "Forþi cristene sholde be in commune riche, noon coueitous for hymselfe" (B.XIV.201;K.525).

Instead, envy had taken this teaching and turned it to his own purposes, causing the friars to preach subtly "That alle þynges vnder heuene ou<sub>3</sub>te to ben in comune" (B.XX.276;K.675; emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup> God gave not all but three or four particulars to all men; the majority of what he gave to all was a spiritual gift--brotherhood in Christ and the promise of salvation through grace. Langland believed "not in actual community of ownership, but rather in reasonable equality; those who have more, caring from their abundance for those who have less."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Both J. J. Jusserand in English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages (Chatham, Gr. Britain: Mackay & Co., 1950), p. 164 and Helen C. White in Social Criticism in Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century (New York: Macmillan Co., 1944), p. 12 make this same point though neither with the same emphasis as I. Not only did Truth not give all things to all men to be held in common but he also commanded men not to covet what others had. Thus it is that the friars' teaching of communism to the "lewed" (l.277) is blameworthy, for how could they later resist envy when even the friars failed to do so. The theory of communal ownership is not wicked in itself, but it is not properly nor easily understood; it is not for everyone to ponder.

<sup>16</sup>Hopkins, p. 248.



Rich and Poor Are Complements  
(cf. I.46-I.49)

Several passages show that Langland did believe that the rich and poor were created as brothers under God to complement each other:

And we hise breþeren þoru<sub>3</sub> hym ybou<sub>3</sub>t, boþe riche and  
pouere  
Forþi loue we as leue children shal, and ech man laughe  
of ooper,  
And of þat ech man may forbere amende þere it nedep  
And euery man helpe ooper for hennes shul we alle:  
Alter alterius onera portate.  
And be we no<sub>3</sub>t vynkynde of oure catel, ne of oure  
konnyng neþer,  
For woot no man how nei<sub>3</sub> it is to ben ynome fro boþe.  
(B.XI.208-213; K.449-450)<sup>17</sup>

Wealth Potentially Harmful  
(cf. I.44-I.46)

If the wealthy refused to acknowledge their poor brethren and to give of their substance, then their wealth was of great harm to them:

For, how hit euere be ywonne bote hit be wel dispended,  
Worldiche wele is wicked thyng to hym that hit kepeth.  
For yf he be fer ther-fro ful ofte hath he drede  
That fals folke fecche away felonliche hus godes;  
And <sub>3</sub>ut more hit maketh men meny tyme and ofte  
To synegen, and to souchen soteltees of gyle,  
For couetyze of that catel to culle hem that hit kepeth;  
And so is meny man ymorthred for hus money and goodes,  
And tho that duden the dede ydampned ther-fore after,  
And he for hus harde holdynge in helle, par aunter.  
So couetise of catel was combraunce to hem alle;  
Lo, how pans purchasede faire places and drede,

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<sup>17</sup> Both the B and C texts indicate that God made both rich and poor purposefully since he could easily have done otherwise. B.XIV.166-167; K.528 states that it was God's will to have men differ; C.XVII.19-21; S.425 states that such differences are for the best (he hopes).

That rote is of robbers the riches with-ynne!  
 For he that gadereth so his good god no-thing preiseth.  
 (C.XIII.235-248;S.351)<sup>18</sup>

The seven deadly sins were directly involved with the wealthy just as they were apart from the poor. In particular wealth led to pride as poverty led to humility:

For seuene synnes þer ben assaillen vs euere;  
 The fend folweþ hem alle and fondeþ hem to helpe,  
 Ac wiþ richesse þo Ribaudes rapeþ men bigileþ.  
 For þer þat richesse regneþ reuerences folweþ,  
 And þat is plesaunt to pride . . .  
 The hei<sub>3</sub>e wey to heueneward ofte Richesse letteþ:  
 Ac pride in richesse regneþ rapeþ þan in pouerte;  
 [Arst] in þe maister þan in þe man som mansion he haueþ.  
 Ac in pouerte þer pacience is pride hap no myȝte,  
 (B.XIV.202-218;K.525-526)<sup>19</sup>

Another sin besetting the wealthy, more serious than that of pride was "vnkyndenesse." "Vnkynde richesse" dried up Dowel and destroyed Dobest, thus wiping out the very goals of the poem (C.XV.19;S.369). It damned the soul: "Diues deyed, dampned for his vnkyndenesse/Of his mete and his moneie to men þat it neede" (B.XVII.268-269;K.601). Such behavior was the worst sin against the holy ghost, and therefore, unpardonable (B.XVII.254-260;K.601):

Be vnkynde to þyn euenecristene . . .  
 . . . . .

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<sup>18</sup>See also B.XII.51ff.;K.568 and C.XIII.210ff.;S.350 for further indications of the harm done by wealth.

<sup>19</sup>The alternate readings in brackets are from MSS listed by Kane as WHmCrGYOC<sup>2</sup>CLBM and WHmGYOC<sup>2</sup>CBLM respectively. Compare the passage in C.XIII.218ff.;S.350-351 wherein the rich are likened to weeds growing in dung as they grow in pride.

The holy goost hereþ þee no<sub>3</sub>t ne helpe may þee by reson.  
 For vnkyndenesse quencheþ hym þat he kan no<sub>3</sub>t shyne  
 Ne brenne ne blase clere, for blowynge of vnkyndenesse.

To wealthy such as these "the hei<sub>3</sub>e weye to  
 heueneward" was of course denied:

Allas þat richeshe shal reue and robbe mannes soule  
 Fram þe loue of oure lord at his laste ende!

So I seye by yow riche, it semeþ no<sub>3</sub>t þat ye shulle  
 Haue heuene in youre herberwyng and<sup>3</sup> heuene þerafter  
 (B.XIV.132-133 & 140-141;K.520-521)<sup>20</sup>

Wealth Is to Be Used (cf. I.49-I.54)

The key to avoiding these sins of the wealthy was to  
 be sure the wealth "be wel dispended."<sup>21</sup> The giving of alms  
 was the standard, acceptable means for distributing wealth,  
 the end of which was both the keeping of the rich from sin  
 and the bringing about of a "reasonable equality" (see above,  
 III.134). Almsgiving, derived from the text Date et dabitur  
vobis (Luke 6.38), was said to be the "lok of loue" that  
 would let out the grace of God to comfort all sinful men  
 (B.I.202-203;K.253).<sup>22</sup>

"The nedy and þe naked nymeþ hede how þei liggeþ/  
 Castep hem cloþes for cold for so wol truþe" who was Christ

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<sup>20</sup>B.XIV.126ff.;K.520 and C.XVI.303ff.;S.423 both  
 reaffirm the idea that the rich cannot have heaven on this  
 earth and hereafter as well.

<sup>21</sup>C.XIII.235-236;S.351. Compare B.XII.56;K.468  
 and the preceding sections of this paper.

<sup>22</sup>The failure to do almsdeeds is one of the things  
 that brings a man to sloth (B.XIII.409-412;K.509).

(B.VI.15-16;K.348-349).<sup>23</sup> He who had pity on the poor and needy followed His blessed example (B.I.172ff;K.251). Such giving was Do-bet (A.XI.188-192;K.A.415).

The rich had a tendency to give to those who did not need or did not deserve it rather than to the poor: this was "no ryght ne reson for rather men sholde/Help hem that hath nouht than tho that han no neede" (C.XII.28-30;S.287).<sup>24</sup> However, if one did not know whether a beggar was truly needy or not, one ought to give to him if he asked in God's name: "For wite ye neuere who is worpi, ac god woot who hap nede./In hym þat takeþ is þe trecherie if any treson walke," (B.VII.78-79;K.374).<sup>25</sup>

The rich ought also to be careful about receiving gifts from the poor:

And þou<sub>3</sub> pouere men profre þee presentes and <sub>3</sub>iftes  
 Nyme it no<sub>3</sub>t an auenture þow mowe it no<sub>3</sub>t deserue.  
 For þow shalt yelde it ayein at one yer<sub>es</sub> ende  
 In a wel perilous place þat Purgatorie hatte.  
 (B.VI.41-44;K.350)

Thus, in all his dealings with the poor the rich man was risking his eternal life.

A portion from the memorable parable of the merchant and the messenger summed up the duties of the rich man who

<sup>23</sup>Almsdeeds are the hooks holding the gates on the mansion of Truth which is in the heart of man (B.V.594;K.344).

<sup>24</sup>B.IX.92-93;K.397 and B.XI.183-184;K.448 express this same sentiment. See also the long quote regarding who should be called to a feast (III.127).

<sup>25</sup>Perfection requires the giving up of one's goods as Christ instructed the rich young man (B.XI.271-274;K.453).

wanted to be saved:

<sup>3</sup>e wyten wel, <sup>3</sup>e wyse men what this is to mene,  
 The marchaunt is no more to mene bote men that ben ryche  
 Aren a-countable to Crist and to the kyng of heuene,  
 That holden mote the heye weye euene the ten hestes,  
 Bothe louye and lene the leele and the vnyeelle,  
 And haue reuthe, and releue with hus grete richesse,  
 By hus power, alle manere men in meschief yfalle;  
 Fynde beggars bred backes for the colde,  
 Tythen here goodes treweliche a tol, as hit semeth,  
 That oure lord loketh after of eche a lyf that wynneth  
 And <sup>3</sup>ut more, to make pees and quyte menne dettes,  
 Bothe spele and spare to spene vpon the needful,  
 As Crist himself comaundeth to alle Cristene people,  
 (C.XIV.65-78;S.354)

The Rich Can Be Saved (cf. I.58-I.61)

For, although it was not easy, it was possible for  
 a rich man to be saved--a thoroughly patriarchal stance:

Ac leueth nouht, <sup>3</sup>e lewede men that ich lacke richesse,  
 Thauh ich preise pouerte thus and preoue hit by ensamples  
 Worthiour, as by holy writ and wise philosopheres.  
 Bothe two beth goode be <sup>3</sup>e ful certayn,  
 And lyees that our lorde <sup>3</sup>loueth and large weyes to heuene.  
 Ac the poure pacient purgatorye passeth  
 Rathere than the ryche thauh thei renne at ones.  
 (C.XIV.26-32;S.352-353)

The long dispute (B.X.337ff.;K.427ff) concerning  
 whether or not the rich could be saved and the further rami-  
 fications of precisely who it was that would be saved and  
 whether faith or works was necessary was a discussion abso-  
 lutely within the Fathers' tradition. And Langland seemed  
 to decide that God to whom all things were possible would  
 save the rich if they had used their wealth properly:

Ac if ye riche haue rupe and rewarde wel be poore,  
 And lyuen as lawe techeth doon leaute to hem alle,

Crist of his curteisie shal conforte yow at þe laste,  
And rewarden alle double ric<sub>3</sub>hesse þat rewful hertes  
habbeþ.

(B.XIV.145-148;K.521-522)<sup>26</sup>

Right Spirit Necessary  
(cf. I.61-I.64)

To use wealth properly meant distributing it with the right spirit and motivation. One ought not ask for praise when giving alms or expect to have one's name engraved on a church window in honor of one's gift (B.III.69-75; K.274-275). Langland agreed with the scriptural exhortation not to let the left hand know what the right hand did in giving alms (Matt. 6.2-3). To do otherwise was sinful and characteristic of Pride who told all his good deeds so as to be well thought of by others (C.VII.47-48;S.133).

Nature of True Riches  
(cf. I.27-I.29)

If the rich could properly share their wealth in the generous spirit of Christ, then they would not be relying upon that wealth to save them through purchased prayers and pardons (B.VII.185ff.;K.381). Their own good deeds and the prayers of those whom they had aided would speed them toward heaven. They would have learned what the real treasures of the world were. Very early in the poem the dreamer saw the difference between earthly and spiritual treasures and chose

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<sup>26</sup>B.VII.23ff.;K.370ff. reveals that even merchants and perhaps lawyers will be saved if they will use their wealth well and for the good of those less fortunate.

the latter:

"Teche me to no tresor, but tel me þis ilke,  
How I may saue my soule þat Seint art yholden."  
"Whan alle tresors arn tried treuþe is þe best;  
(B.I.83-85;K.246)<sup>27</sup>

Throughout this passage the phrase "truth is the treasure" recurred (ll.131,135,137,207,208), and Holy Church made it clear that Truth was Love and Love was Christ and Christ dwelt, through grace and the Holy Ghost, within man's heart where man could find him by the grace of the Holy Ghost. This was the ideal the search for which motivated and informed the poem.

Christ in Man's Debt  
(cf. I.54-I.58)

One of the effects of proper sharing of one's wealth was that of bringing Christ Himself into one's debt, of obliging Him to repay with eternal life the gift He received as a poor man whenever any other poor man was helped. Langland had Christ say, "Ac for þe pouere I shal paie, and pure wel quyte hir trauaille/That ȝyueþ hem mete or moneie and loueþ hem for my sake" (B.XI.195-196;K.448-449).

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<sup>27</sup> Earlier in this passage (l.46ff.) Holy Church has told the dreamer how to use earthly treasures properly:

For riȝtfully reson sholde rule yow alle,  
And kynde wit be wardeyn youre welþe to kepe  
And tutour of youre tresor, and take it yow at nede;  
(ll.54-56)

This passage has a vague intimation of the stewardship idea found in the Church Fathers as does the idea that the rich should care for the poor. Langland, however, does not deal with this subject directly.

In a vein reminiscent of Augustine's comment on men as God's beggars Langland described worthy beggars as "goddes minstrales" whom the rich ought to feed rather than those lewd minstrels usually found at the rich men's tables. The rich should do this for love of the lord of these minstrels, that is, for God's love, in the same way they honor the king's minstrels for love of the king (B.XIII.439ff.;K.511).<sup>28</sup>

Summary (cf. I.64-I.68)

Many of the generalizations one drew from a reading of the Church Fathers could be drawn as well by studying Piers Plowman. Langland believed that the present society was not so good as the past and that a glorious future could be attained; nostalgia for the good old days and hope for the golden millenium sustained him while he saw around him the degeneracy of his present age. Hospitality had declined (B.X.93-103;K.412).<sup>29</sup> Those things such as the weather, the pole star, the sky, by which men had predicted events, were no longer reliable because "þer is a defaute in þe folk" (B.XV.347ff.;K.555). The age of the holy saints was gone, and men no longer shared their goods as they had before but

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<sup>28</sup> St. Augustine, "Sermo LXI," 7.8, PL. 38-39.411, trans. Nicene-1, VI (1888), 296. Compare also C.X.126-127 and 134-137; S.235.

<sup>29</sup> George Kane, Middle English Literature (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1951), pp. 213-214 discusses some things that Langland shares with satirists: nostalgia for better days gone by, a conviction of the degeneracy of his own time, and a notion of a better time to come.



groveled after more and ever more (B.XV.269ff. and 533ff.; K.550-553 and 565). The peace and plenty of past days were gone though they would come again.<sup>30</sup>

Langland's concern for the present age was to some extent similar to that of the Fathers. He did not advocate social revolution to bring about the millenium; he feared change because it had moved man away from the glorious past but not toward the golden future. His solution was to keep the status quo outwardly while working upon the inner heart of man to effect a spiritual revolution. This was, of course, the area wherein he departed most from tradition, wherein he was caught up in the social and cultural stirrings of his age. His words said one thing; his spirit another. He practices what he preached: outward conformity and inward revolution.<sup>31</sup>

One of the best passages in Piers in which Langland advocated social stasis was A.X.99-117 wherein Wyt said:

But suffre & sit stille & sek þou no ferpere,  
 And be glad of þe grace þat god haþ Isent þe.  
 For <sub>3</sub>if þou comsist to clymbe, & coueitest herre,  
 þou mi<sub>3</sub>test lese þi lou<sub>3</sub>nesse for a litel pride.  
 . . . . .  
 And ri<sub>3</sub>t so be romberis þat rennen aboute  
 Fro religioun to religioun, reccheles ben þei euere;  
 Ne men þat conne manye craftis, clergie it telliþ,  
 Thrift oþer þeodem with þo is selde ysei<sub>3</sub>e:

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<sup>30</sup> See also B.III.299-324; K.288-290 and B.IV.114-133; K.300-301 and C.XVIII.85 ff.; S.459 and C.VI.70-80; S.120 for other comments upon these ideas.

<sup>31</sup> White, p. 11 notes that the ideal society revealed in Piers is not drastically opposed to the real fourteenth century one but is that society perfected.

. . . . .  
 if þou be man married, monk, oper chanoun,  
 Hold þe stable & stedefast & strengþe þiseluen  
 To be blissid for þi beryng, <sub>3</sub>e, beggere þei<sub>3</sub> þou were.  
 Loke þou grucche nou<sub>3</sub>t on god þei<sub>3</sub> gyue þe litel;  
 Be paied wiþ þe porcioun, pore oper riche.  
 (K.A.;384-386)

This passage appeared only in the A text, and while there were B and C passages that pointed to the same sentiments, the early A text version was the strongest and most straight forward statement (See B.X.132-133;K.414, B.XI.394-398; K.461, and C.XVIII.289-293;S.477).<sup>32</sup>

Concerning economics and morality Langland was, as he was regarding the status quo, caught between traditional belief and popular practice. It is obvious from the many references to merchants that they were an intrinsic part of fourteenth century life and that they were often not honest. The dangers of trade were quite as clear to Langland as to the Church Fathers.<sup>33</sup> He, like them, believed that money making should be limited, for that which was unlimited was unlawful: "He hap ynou<sub>3</sub> þat hap breed ynou<sub>3</sub>, þou<sub>3</sub> he haue no<sub>3</sub>t ellis" (B.VII.86;K.375).<sup>34</sup> Langland believed that

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<sup>32</sup> T. P. Dunning in Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the A-Text (1937; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 191 regrets the omission of this passage from the later texts as destructive of unity. I reason that the author no longer accepted this traditional way of looking at his world; he was beginning to doubt whether men should stay in their allotted niches, so he omitted this very straightforward statement of that belief.

<sup>33</sup> B.II.215-217;K.268 and B.VII.18-38;K.371.

<sup>34</sup> Remember that one of the complaints lodged against

there was a difference between meed and "mesurable hire," one was a sin and the other not; this difference he felt was being obscured in practice, and he went to great lengths to clarify the matter (B.III.231ff.;K.284ff.).<sup>35</sup> This surely implied a change in fourteenth century attitudes toward gain from that which Langland believed existed in the past.

Langland did not advocate the abandonment of trade, merely the redirection of its goals. Truth would grant merchants his pardon if they would use their wealth properly:

And make Mesondieux þerwip myseise to helpe,  
Wikkede weyes wightly amende  
And bynde brugges aboute þat tobroke were,  
Marien maydenes or maken hem Nonnes,  
Pouere peple bedredene and prisons in stokkes  
Fynden swiche hir foode for oure lordes loue of heuene,  
Sette Scolers to scole or to som kynnes craftes,  
Releue Religion and renten hem bettre.

(B.VII.26-33;K.370-371)

Aid to others not self aggrandisement was to be the aim of the merchant.

Patience, charity, and faith were key words for Langland as they were for the Church Fathers. Pacientes vincunt, "loue is triacle of heuene . . . plante of pees . . . ledere of þe lordes folk of heuene . . . leche of lif"

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the friars was that they did not limit their numbers, which is contrary to God's ways. One should note:

That in mesure god made alle manere þynges,  
And sette it at a certain and at a siker nombre.  
And nempnede hem names, and noumbrede þe sterres:

(B.XX.254-256;K.673)

<sup>35</sup>Dunning, pp. 70-71 and 96 discusses the various sorts of meed.

(B.I.148-205;K.250-253, and fiat-voluntas tua move like leit motifs throughout the poem.<sup>36</sup>

Mendicant Controversy  
(cf. I.68-I.74)

Langland also made a contribution to the literature concerning the position of the friars and the possessioners of the church. Although he did not discuss monks to any great extent, when he did mention them Langland seemed to prefer their way of life;

For if heuene be on þis erþe, and ese to any soule,  
It is in cloistre or in scole, by manye skiles I fynde.  
For in cloistre comp no man to carpe ne to fiȝte  
But al is boxomnesse þere and bokes, to rede and to  
lerne.  
(B.X.305-308;K.425)<sup>37</sup>

At least this was the ideal, and many if not all monks still held to the ideal. The contemplative monks in particular were favored, for Grace had taught them "to lyue in longynge to ben hennes,/In pouerte and in pacience to preie for alle cristene" (B.XIX.248-249;K.645). In this way they fought Antichrist.<sup>38</sup> One definition of Dobet

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<sup>36</sup>See for examples B.XV.149ff.;K.543-546, B.XVI.4ff.; K.570 and 176ff.;K.581, B.XIV.33;K.514, B.XIII.135;K.492, and B.XIIII.171;K.494.

<sup>37</sup>Monks were limited in numbers in precisely the way friars were not; see fn. 31 above. Note that Wrath did not like to abide with the monks for they were stern with him (B.V.169-176;K.316).

<sup>38</sup>Contemplation, a monkish propensity, is determined to follow Piers to Truth even when others are turning back because of difficulties (C.VIII.305-306;S.193). White, p. 11 believes that this character represents all monks.

seemed to apply well to monks and other possessioner clergy:

Dobet dop ful wel, & dewid he is also,  
 And hap possessions & pluralites for pore menis sake;  
 For mendynaunt, at meschief po men were dewid,  
 And þat is riȝtful religioun, none renneris aboute,  
 Ne no leperis ouer long ladies to shryue.  
 (A.XI.199-203;K.A.416)

While this passage seemed clearly to indicate that Langland did not hold with the absolute apostolic poverty the friars advocated, yet he did believe in Christ's poverty:

Oure prynce Iesu Pouerte chees and hus aposteles alle,  
 And ay the lenger thei lyueden the lasse good thei hadde;  
Tanquam nichil habentes, & omnia possidentes.  
 (C.XIV.3-4;S.352)

He held that this was the ideal not the actual, since men had not been able to conduct themselves as true apostles should. Once a few men held to the ideal, St. Francis and his followers, but since that time mendicants had not pursued the true apostolic poverty, bound up as it must be with charity (B.XV.230-233;K.548 and 269-289;K.550-551). Instead the friars pursued the wrong sort of poverty--wearing the frock of poverty while refusing to aid their poor brethren and serving instead only the rich (B.XI.63ff.;K.440 and B.XIII.7ff.;K.484). Some, perhaps minor clergy and not particularly friars:

Loken as lambren and semen lif holy,  
 Ac it is moore to haue hir mete on swich an esy manere  
 Than for penaunce and parfitness, þe pouerte þat swiche  
 takeþ.  
 (B.XV.206-208;K.547)

But, friars too were guilty of seeming "lif holy" and of amassing wealth and living well while professing to follow Christ's example.<sup>39</sup>

The cure for this behavior Langland intimated was to be found in accepting moderated poverty. The hardships of absolute poverty seemed, except in the lives of saints, rather to fix the mind on the cares of this world than on the joys of the next. A poverty in which the necessities of life were provided, usually through manual labor though ideally from the gracious generosity of others--unasked for--allowed the poor religious to devote himself to "penaunce and parfitnesse" and charity toward others.<sup>40</sup>

Langland admitted that there were even in the imperfect scheme of things some who fulfilled these goals, who "parfourneb þis prophecie . . . Dispersit, dedit pauperibus" (B.XV.327ff.;K.553). These took of that which they had begged to provide for their own food and shelter, to pay their workmen, and to "ȝyueþ hem þat ne habbeþ" (l.331). If there were more such then the kingdom of God would be at hand. Langland had his own ideas about how to bring about more such men as these from the realities of their fourteenth century lives.

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<sup>39</sup> Compare the long passage C.X.200ff.;S.240.

<sup>40</sup> See above III.128-129 and the corresponding fn. 9. Bloomfield discusses Langland's qualifications upon absolute poverty and the ways in which these views correspond to those of Fitzralph and the monk of Bury St. Edmunds (Apocalypse, pp. 135-136 and 148).

With regard to Piers Plowman W. W. Capes has said, "With nothing revolutionary in its tones, with no word of dissent from the Church's ancient creed and practice, its author, William Langland, had expressed in homely language much of the strong feeling that was burning in the hearts of thousands, the passionate impatience and the evils that were widespread in the social life around them."<sup>41</sup> Having seen how Langland agreed with the church, let us now see what he said about the various aspects of fourteenth century life.

Political Situation  
(cf. II.81-II.93)

Langland very obviously believed in a society with a rigid class structure; he believed in, depended on, and praised kings, knights, clergy, and commoners who knew their assigned duties and did them (e.g., B.I.94ff.;K.246).<sup>42</sup> In examining his attitude toward these various segments of society, one might ascertain what sort of political system Langland advocated. He was thoroughly monarchical; those passages wherein he set up ideal states all included a proper king. His refrain was, "Ac þer shal come a kyng. . ."

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<sup>41</sup>The English Church in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, p. 139.

<sup>42</sup>Francis A. R. Carnegy, The Relations between the Social and Divine Order in William Langland's "Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman" (Breslau, 1934), pp. 10-11 discusses the various stations and duties of people with regard to remaining in one's allotted place.

(B.X.322ff.;K.426. Compare B.Pro.112;K.233 and B.III.284ff.; K.288-290).

Langland was not, however, a thorough-going theocrat. In Ullman's terms Langland was a proponent of the ascending or populist form of government:

Thanne kam þer a kyng; kyn<sub>3</sub>thod hym ladde;  
 Might of þe communes made hym to regne.  
 And þanne cam kynde wit not with and clerkes he made  
 For to counseillen þe kyng and þe commune saue.  
 The kyng and kyn<sub>3</sub>thod and clergie boþe  
 Casten þat þe commune sholde hire communes fynde.  
 The commune contreued of kynde wit not with crafts  
 And for profit of al þe peple Plowman ordeyned  
 To tilie and to traueille as trewe lif askep.  
 The kyng and þe commune and kynde wit þe þridde  
 Shopen lawe and leaute, ech lif to knowe his owene. 43  
 (B.Pro.112-122;K.233-234)

This passage indicates that the commons--whatever that term did or did not mean--were the basis of the king's power and that they had specific and important duties to fulfill for the good of the state.

The king had duties as well and was to fulfill them properly. He was to rule under the auspices of divine justice, or he would be corrected by justice (B.XIX.302-303; K.648-649).<sup>44</sup> A king might take whatever he needed from his

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<sup>43</sup>Hopkins, pp. 243-244 discusses the class structure of society in Piers and those passages indicating that the kind was a king under the law. He also offers his interpretation of the change in emphasis from B to C regarding whether it is the might of the commons or much might of men (indicating the knighthood) who cause the king to rule (B.Pro.112-113;K.233 and C.I.139-140;S.13).

<sup>44</sup>William Birnes, "Christ as Advocate: The Legal Metaphor of Piers Plowman," Annuaire Mediaevale, XVI(1975), p. 91 discusses the monarch's position under the law as



people in order to live and rule, but his taking was to be done under the aegis of moderation and reason (B.XIX.466; K.658-659). He was not to overburden his commons (B.III.315-316;K.289). The king had to realize that he could not rule alone but needed the help and assent of the commons (B.IV.182-183;K.304), for they were his "tresor" and "tryacle at [his] nede" (B.V.49;K.308).<sup>45</sup>

While providing limits upon kingship and a popular power base for it, Langland did not provide for methods of correcting a king who exceeded his power, other than the warnings that he would be corrected by spiritus iusticie if he were guilty (B.XIX.302-303;K.648-649) and that until he improved, his kingdom would be in ever worsening confusion (B.III.325;K.290).<sup>46</sup>

Langland did not press this theory to the logical conclusion that an unjust king could and should be deposed. The well known fable of the belling of the cat proves this adequately, exemplifying that each estate or class was to fulfill its proper function in its own place no matter what

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revealed in the Christ-Lucifer debate. The law is supreme even over Christ who fulfills the law in harrowing hell.

<sup>45</sup> Donaldson had a more detailed and critical discussion of the meanings of the word "comune" than had Hopkins, referring to the above mentioned B and C texts and to other instances of the term (pp. 88-108). Donaldson points out that the idea of a contract between the king and his people is a very old principle in England (p. 101).

<sup>46</sup> See Donaldson, pp. 90-91 for further comments.

confusion might be reigning in the other estates.<sup>47</sup> Nothing could be gained from jumping out of one's station and something could be lost--one's own sense of having fulfilled God's plan for one. By implication then Langland would not have favored the Peasants' Revolt.<sup>48</sup>

Economic Situation  
(cf. II.97-II.99 and II.116-II.120)

Langland's position on the economics of his day has been touched upon earlier (see above III.144). He was caught between his desire for the ideal and his realization of the actual. He wanted the same limits on trade as did the Fathers. Similarly he wanted merchants, like kings and commons, to fulfill their duties properly. He realized that they were a new and substantial class to be added to the social structure and that they needed, as did everyone,

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<sup>47</sup> Again both Hopkins (pp. 244-246) and Donaldson (p. 100) discuss this point at length.

<sup>48</sup> Two passages make this sufficiently clear, both of them from the C text, which is doubly clear on this point: C.IX.84ff.;S.201 which includes the line, "Consaile nat the comune the kyng to displease," and C.IX.377ff.;S.91 which reads in part:

Ac relacion rect is a ryhtful custome,

As, a kyng to cleyme the comune at his wille

To folwe hym, to fynde hym and fecche at hem hus consail,

That here loue thus to him thorw al the londe a-corde.

Donaldson regards the former of these passages as the fullest statement in Piers of Langland's political views (pp. 102-103). Consider also Christopher Dawson, Medieval Religion, who states, "Langland is in fact thoroughly English in the way in which he combines an intense class-consciousness and a hatred of social injustice with a strong conservatism and a respect for the established order" (p. 182).

rules to follow so that their existence might be for the benefit of all.

The lengthy episode of Mede the Maiden (B.II to B.IV;K.255-304) revealed that Langland was very aware of the increasing and relatively recent power of money over all segments of fourteenth century life: no one escaped the taint of cupidity (see esp. B.III.122ff.;K.278).<sup>49</sup> But Langland also realized that a labourer is worthy of his hire (Luke 10.7); people did need and want and deserve payment for jobs well done (B.III.231ff.;K.284ff.)<sup>50</sup> And Langland accepted the fact that even in trade--wherein greed might most easily grow--there might be no sin:

In marchaundise is no Mede, I may it wel auowe;  
It is a permutacion apertly, a penyworþ for anoper.  
(B.III.257-258;K.286)

This statement implied that so long as trade was kept on a semibarter basis, even though money rather than goods might be exchanged, then meed of the wrong sort was not involved.<sup>51</sup>

Langland's great fear was that this delicate balance could not be maintained--that Pride and with it Avarice

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<sup>49</sup>Dawson, p. 172.

<sup>50</sup>Carnegy (p. 8) discusses Piers' relationship with his master Truth as symbolic of the relationship that should exist between any labourer and his employer (B.V.550-551; K.341). Truth pays promptly and properly and Piers accepts.

<sup>51</sup>Concerning economics, Hopkins says that this quote is one of the few that has any direct economic bearing. There are few economic theories in Piers but many economic facts (p. 247).

would conquer Conscience and its cohorts, Humility and Patient Poverty. Langland feared that "the power of the purse [was] destroying the old values, the old world of feudal loyalties and obligation, till a Christian's duty [was] no longer clear."<sup>52</sup>

That Conscience shal no<sub>3</sub>t knowe who is cristene or hepen,  
 Ne no manere marchaunt pat wip moneye deleþ  
 Wheiþer he wynne wyþ right, wip wrong or wip vsure.  
 (B.XIX.358-350;K.651)

Social Situation  
 (cf. II.112-II.115)

Langland set out in clear, ringing terms the problems he saw in his social environment. He deplored many of the practices and morals of his time--including his own. In justifying to Reason his own life, Long Will explained that things were not as they ought to be, thus preventing "Lyf-holynesse and loue" from permeating society:

Hit by-cometh for clerkus Crist for to seruen  
 And knaues vncrowned to cart and to worche.  
 . . . . .  
 Bondmen and bastardes and beggers children,  
 Thuse by-longeth to labour . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Ac sith bondemenne barnes han be mad bisshopes  
 And barnes bastardes han ben archidekenes,  
 And sopers and here sones for seluer han be knyghtes,  
 . . . . .  
 Lyf-holynesse and loue han ben longe hennes.  
 (C.VI.61-81;S.120)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>R. W. Chambers, Man's Unconquerable Mind, p. 160.

<sup>53</sup>The C Version of this passage is longer and more detailed, including more examples of how the poor suffer.

The sins spoiling Haukyn's coat revealed some of the unsavoury practices of the day by merchants, usurers, and plowmen (B.XIII.356ff.;K.506). Some of the worst of the lot were the:

Brewers and Bakers, Bochiers and Cokes;  
 For þise are men of þis molde þat moost harm wercheþ  
 To þe pouere peple þat parcelmele buggen.  
 For þei poisons þe peple pryueliche wel ofte  
 Thei richen þoru<sup>3</sup> regratrie and rentes hem biggen  
 Of þat þe pouere peple sholde putte in hire wombe.  
 (B.III.79-84;K.275)

Even at the end of the poem this group remained unredeemed: a brewer refused to enter Unity "while I kan selle/Bop dregges and draf and drawe at oon hole/Thikke ale and þynne ale; þat is my kynde" (B.XIX.398-400;K.654).

Merchants in general were prone to sinful deeds. The character Avarice was a merchant whose first lesson was "Wikkedly to weye" (B.V.202ff.;K.318). The merchants also grabbed Falsehood for their apprentice in the Mede episode (B.II.215-217;K.268). In Piers' pardon the merchants were not covered so fully as were other classes ("noon A pena & a culpa" l.19), but Truth did tell them that if they practiced their trade honestly and openly then used their earnings properly, then he would "sende yowre sowles in saufte to my Seintes in Ioye" (B.VII.18-37;K.370).<sup>54</sup>

Lawyers were not so lucky regarding the pardon:  
 "Men of lawe hadde lest for [þey bep lob/ To mote for mene

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<sup>54</sup>Notice the ambiguity here in Langland's feelings toward the merchants.

men but <sub>3</sub>if þei hadde money]" (A.VIII.45-46;K.A.351).<sup>55</sup>  
 Yet here too Langland left some hope: it was possible, though not likely, that a lawyer might practice law "for oure lordes loue" (l.50) then he too might be saved (B.VII.40-52;K.371-372). In the Prologue lawyers appeared as pleaders for money and not for God's love: "Thow my<sub>3</sub>test bettre meete myst on Maluerne hilles/Than get a mom of hir mouþ til moneie be shewed" (B.Pro.211-216;K.240).<sup>56</sup>

Both the city and the country were troublous places:

Meny sondry sorwes in cytees fallen ofte.  
 Bothe thorw fuyr and flod and al for false puple,  
 That by-gylen good men and greueth hem wrongliche,  
 The whiche cryen on hure knees that Crist hem auenge,  
 (C.IV.90-93;S.69)

The mayors who should have been supervising what sort of person was desiring the freedom of the city had succumbed to the wiles of Mede thus undermining the moral fabric of the city (C.IV.108-120;S.71). In the country the workers were no longer content with their proper wages but wanted more and ever more food and wages (B.VI.307-318;K.367-368). Nor were they satisfied to remain on the land to which they belonged but "renne in arerage and rome fro home,/ As a reneyed caytif recchelesly rennen aboute" (B.XI.129-130; K.444-445). All this is against reason.

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<sup>55</sup>The alternate reading in brackets is from MS listed by Kane as H.

<sup>56</sup>Charity is rarely found among the lawyers (B.XV.239;K.548).

Viewing the fourteenth century as he did, Langland must have felt what Yeats much later voiced:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.

("The Second Coming," 11.3-8)<sup>57</sup>

Yet Langland retained hope for his times: merchants might use their wealth well to "Marien maydenes . . ." and lawyers might "spendeþ his speche and spekeþ for þe pouere" (B.VII. 29-31 and 47; K.370-372). These classes might find niches for themselves in the social structure and all might be well when each should know and do his part.

While Langland saw the problems of his age, hoped for improvement within the old class structure, and longed for a time when a king would come to set things right, he also clearly saw who were suffering the most: the people, the poor masses whom the knights did not defend, from whom the king as well as the merchants and lawyers plundered, and whom the tradesmen duped, cheated, and poisoned. Two long and justly well known passages illustrate Langland's deep sympathy for the poor:

The most needy aren oure neighebores and we nyme good  
 hede,  
 As prisones in puttes and poure folke in cotes,  
 Charged with children and chef lordes rente,

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<sup>57</sup>The Norton Anthology of English Literature (New York: Norton & Co., 1962), Vol. II, p. 1355.

That thei with spynnynges may spare spenen hit in  
 hous-hyre,  
 Bothe in mylk and in mele to make with papelotes,  
 To a-glotype with here gurlles that greden after fode.  
 Al-so hem-selue suffren muche hunger,  
 And wo in winter-tyme with wakynges a nyghtes  
 To ryse to the ruel to rocke the cradel,  
 Bothe to karde and to kembe to clouten and to wasche,  
 To rubbe and to rely russches to pilie,  
 That reuthe is to rede othere in ryme shewe  
 The wo of these women that wonyeth in cotes;  
 And of meny other men that muche wo suffren,  
 Bothe a-fyngrede and a-furst to turne the fayre outwarde,  
 And beth abasshed for to begge and wolles nat be aknowe  
 What hem needeth at here neihebores at non and at euen.  
 (C.X.70-87;S.234)

These were the people whom the rich should have been aiding  
 while instead they had windows glazed and engraved with  
 their names (viz. B.III.48-50 and 61ff.;K.273-274).

Not only did the poor suffer from men's carelessness  
 but from nature's blows as well, as Pacience explained to  
 Haukyn:

Ac beggeris aboute Midsomer bredlees þei soupe,  
 And yet is wynter for hem worse, for weetschoed  
 þei gange,  
 Afurst soore and afyngred, and foule yrebuked  
 And arated or riche men þat ruþe is to here.  
 Now, lord, sende hem somer, and som maner ioye,  
 Heuene after hir hennys goyng þat here han swich defaute.  
 For alle sy<sub>3</sub>testow haue maad noon mener þan ooper  
 And yliche witty and wise, if þee wel hadde liked.  
 And haue ruþe on þise riche men þat rewarde no<sub>3</sub>t  
 þi prisoners;  
 Of þe good þat þow hem gyuest ingrati ben manye;  
 Ac god, of þi goodnesse gyue hem grace to amende.  
 For may no derpe hem deere, droghte ne weet,  
 Ne neiþer hete ne Hayll, haue þei hir heele;  
 Of þat þei wilne and wolde wanteþ hem no<sub>3</sub>t here.  
 Ac poore peple, þi prisoners, lord, in þe put of meschief,  
 Conforte þo creatures þat muche care suffren  
 Thoru<sub>3</sub> derpe, þoru<sub>3</sub> droghte, alle hir dayes here.  
 Wo in wynter tymes for wantynges of cloþes,  
 And in somer tyme selde soupes to þe fulle.



Conforte þi carefulle, crist, in þi riche,  
 For how þow confortest alle creatures clerkes bereþ  
 witnesse:

Conuertimini ad me & salui eritis.

(B.XIV.160-180;K.522)

And again it was the rich who could have helped but did not,  
 though Christ had commanded them.<sup>58</sup>

Langland saw the problems, the perpetrators, the victims, and the solutions: all lay within his vision of the fourteenth century. His solution was moral and therefore religious; so, what had he to say of the religious men of his time? Since in their power lay part of the cure of the ills and since those ills were not being cured, one might expect Langland to be unstinting in his criticism of them. He was.<sup>59</sup>

All levels of the clergy were condemned by Langland. The higher clergy, including the pope, were not working for peace but were inciting wars among Christian men and were setting bad examples (C.XVIII.233-251;S.473). Avarice dwelt among them presently although Charity formerly was found

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<sup>58</sup> D. Chadwick, Social Life in the Days of Piers Plowman (1922; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), pp. 81-82 gives other references to the hardships of the poor: B.XIV.233 and 246;K.527, B.XVII.221-222;K.599, and C.X.254;S.241.

<sup>59</sup> Of Langland, White says, "He finds in the corruption and weakness of the clergy at large one of the great sources of social ill, just as he sees in devotion to the ideals which they preach the great hope of the restoration of the peoples of christendom and the hope of the conversion of the heathen" (pp. 9-10). See C.XVIII.233ff.;S.473 and C.X.203-258;S.240-241.

"Amonges erchebisshopes and bisshopes" (B.XV.244;  
K.549).<sup>60</sup>

Langland did provide a picture of proper behavior  
for the prelate:

Euery bisshop þat bereþ cros, by þat he is holden  
Thoruȝ his prouince to passe and to his peple shewe hym,  
Tellen hem and techen hem on þe Trinite to bileu,  
And feden hem wiþ goostly foode and nedy folk to fynden.  
Ac ysaie of yow spekep and oȝias boþe,  
That no man sholde be bisshop but if he hadde boþe  
Bodily foode and goostly foode to gyue þere it nedep:  
(B.XV.570-576;K.567-568)

The lower clergy, parish priests and parsons, were  
likewise bad examples to their flocks: "Right so out of holi  
chirche alle yueles spredep/There inparfit preesthode is,  
prechours and techeris" (B.XV.94-95;K.539, see also 96-135).  
Such men neglected all their proper duties, as did Sloth who  
had been a parson for thirty years (B.V.415-421;K.332-333).  
And they quarrelled--stirred up by Wrath--shamefully with  
the friars about tithes and influence over parrishioners  
(B.V.144-151;K.314). They complained that they were too  
poorly paid and desired to move to London "To syngen for  
symonie for siluer in swete" (B.Pro.83-86;K.232).

Nor did the friars escape Langland's accusations.  
In fact because of their loftiness of purpose and the poten-  
tial for good that their ideals held and because of their  
behavior that spoiled those ideals and wrecked that lofti-  
ness, Langland was especially harsh toward the friars:<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See also B.XV.557ff.;K.567.

<sup>61</sup> See above, III.146-III.149.

I fond þere Freres, all þe foure ordres,  
 Prechyng þe peple for profit of þe wombe;  
 Glosed þe gospel as hem good liked;  
 For coueitise of copes construed it as þei wolde.  
 Manye of þise maistres mowe clopen hem at likyng  
 For hire moneie and hire marchaundiȝe marchen togideres.  
 Siþ charitie hap ben chapman and chief to shryue lordes  
 Manye ferlies han fallen in a fewe yeres.  
 But holy chirche and hij holde bettre togidres  
 The mooste meschief on Molde is mountynge vp faste.  
 (B.Pro.58-67;K.230-231)<sup>62</sup>

This picture Langland amplified and reinforced many times over. Friars were not charitable though their founder had been (B.XV.232;K.548). They were greedy and while professing poverty heard confessions and preached to the people for love of money (B.III.35ff.;K.272 and B.XI.55ff.;K.440). They also preached "for pure enuye of clerkes" and to please proud men (B.X.70-78;K.410-411), thus they failed to give support and aid to man's soul.

The most important fact revealing Langland's opinion of the friars was their position at the end of the poem. Unity was assailed by many foes including Sloth with "passynge an hundred" priests with knives and other unclerical gear (B.XX.218-220;K.671).

Conscience cryede, "help, Clergie or I Falle  
 Thoru, inparfite preestes and prelates of holy chirche."  
 Freres herden hym crye and comen hym to helpe,  
 Ac for þei kouþe noȝt wel hir craft Conscience forsook  
 hem.  
 (B.XX.228-231;K.672)

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<sup>62</sup>There is a significant change from the B to the C versions of line 66 in B. C's version reads, "Bote holy church and Charite choppe a-down swich shryuers," which indicates that Langland had even less confidence in the ability of the friars to live up to their ideals as the years passed.

The power to aid men in the world did lie with the religious groups, but they failed to respond. Only the friars tried to help and were unable because they did not know and follow their rule.

Conscience tried to instruct them to "Holdeþ yow in vnitee, and haueþ noon enuye/To lered ne to lewed, but lyueþ after youre reule" (B.XX.245-246;K.673). Many good things would thence follow. However, Envy intervened and took the friars off with him to become learned. Thus, they forsook the people's needs or taught them envy in turn and a malicious desire for communal life (273-278;K.675).<sup>63</sup> At the last a friar did come ostensibly as a physician for the people's wounds; he proved to be "frere Flaterere" who hurt more than he helped with his soft and easy treatments.

This final treachery stung Conscience into his departure:

To seken Piers þe Plowman, þat pryde myȝte destruye,  
And þat freres hadde a fyndyng þat for nede flateren  
(B.X.382-383;K.680-681)

Thus the friars were the breaking point in the ills of mankind just as they were to be one of the first cures. Once Pride was gone, they might know their rule rightly and have a maintenance sum to fulfill their needs so that they would not use flattery. This was, obviously, a modification of the traditional mendicant position on possessions. And as

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<sup>63</sup>Refer to fn. 12 for discussion upon the inadvisability of teaching communal doctrines to the unlearned.

illustrated earlier (III.148) Langland believed such modification to be essential.

The fact that Langland thought absolute poverty more often a harbinger of sin than of virtue did not imply that he advocated that amassing of wealth so often associated with monasteries and churches. At one point, in a vein more radical than usual for Langland, he has Anima advocate the confiscation of church property by the secular power as a means of purging religion of the poison of its wealth (B.XV.553-567;K.566-567). More typically, however, moderation was his (and Anima's) advice:

For hadde ye potage and payn ynogh and penyale to drynke,  
And a mess permyd of o maner kynde,  
Ye hadde riȝt ynoȝ, ye Religiose, and so youre rule  
me tolde.

(B.XV.315-317;K.553)<sup>64</sup>

This much was necessary to prevent envy, flattery, and unwholesome beggary. But an excess of possessions prevented the religious from fulfilling their duties to God and to men (B.XV.557-567;K.567 and C.VI.164-167;S.127). The religious should in fact perform their wonted tasks with no regard to how much they were paid, and in addition they should care for those poorer than they from whatever goods they did have (B.XV.342ff.;K.554).

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<sup>64</sup> Compare a passage in C:  
Every man that hath Ynwitt and hus hele bothe,  
Hath tresour ynow in treuthe to fynde with hym-selue.  
(C.XI.180-181;K.269)

From whence were to come those necessities, the acceptable possessions of the religious? Ideally these would come from the freely given alms, tithes, and superfluities of the laymen who were following God's plans for them (B.XI.283-289;K.454-455).<sup>65</sup> God would provide for them. In practice, of course, many clergymen, especially priests, were paid a salary as well. Both the wages and the alms had to be properly given and received. The alms received were to come from honestly earned "wynnynges" (C.XVIII.35-36;S.455 and B.XV.305-312;K.552). The bishop who ordained the priests was to provide wages for them so "Thanne nedep yow noȝt to nyne siluer for masses þat ye syngen" (B.XI.291-295;K.455). The bishop who failed to do so "shal be blamed bifore god" (B.XI.312;K.456). That many bishops were in fact blameworthy for this failure and for others Langland illustrated again and again as he did the failures in all stations of life. Nowhere were his ideals reached or put into practice.

Plague and Revolution  
(cf. II.93-II.104)

Concerning those two phenomenal events of fourteenth century existence, the plague and the Peasants' Revolt, Langland spoke relatively little. The revolt he did not

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<sup>65</sup>Note that these plans include proper care of family and heirs before giving money to religious groups (B.X.317-325;K.425-426 and B.XV.313ff.;K.553).

mention directly at all. Certainly he did not approve: as he said in the belling of the cat episode: "For hadde ye rattes youre raik ye koupe no<sub>3</sub>t rule yowselue" (B.Pro.201; K.239). He had no faith in the ability of the rabble to govern itself; government was the special province of the king. He believed in a properly constituted kingship (see III.149-152) and in class structures within which each group functioned for the good of all.

As did many men of his time, Langland accepted the plagues as a punishment from God upon His sinful people. And he could not understand why this curse failed to draw men to better lives. He saw instead that the people grew worse "syn þe pestilence tyme" (B.X.73-87; K.410-411 and also B.V.13; K.305 and B.XX.110ff.; K.666 and 143ff.; K.667). He particularly mentioned the unhappy marriages, the tendency toward spoiling children, and the discontent of the labourers in post-plague days (B.IX.170-172; K.402-403, B.V.34-36; K.307, and B.VI.316-321; K.368).<sup>66</sup>

It is in these statements that we so clearly see Langland as part of that group of medieval preachers mentioned earlier (I.74-I.78) who spoke out upon every troublesome aspect of fourteenth century life, who themselves were part of a past religious tradition but who were on the verge

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<sup>66</sup>It is possible that the wedding vows of Mede and Fals (B.II.74ff.; K.259) which parody the ordinary service are meant as a commentary upon the improper and irregular marriages that occurred after the plague when many priests were not all they should be.

of breaking drastically with it to initiate a new tradition. Langland's "championship of justice for the oppressed, his sane admixture of respect for institutions with his rebuke for those who defile them, his gospel of mutual sympathy and work as contrasted with revolution, his stress upon good deeds and moral reform without theological subtlety, all these and more were being proclaimed unceasingly from the pulpits of the land."<sup>67</sup>

Langland, then, had two strong and conflicting influences with which to deal as he wrote Piers--the religious tradition which with the existence of the preachers was itself not free from internal tensions and the realities of fourteenth century life which were by nature tension ridden. To create poetic order from these chaotic elements was his task, and given the enormity of the task, his success in Piers was considerable.

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<sup>67</sup> Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 575.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Not only does one find, as Owst so thoroughly did, that Langland was part of a vociferous group of medieval preachers and, as I have shown, that he was part of a long religious tradition, but one finds that Langland partook of a great many traditions, mainstreams, and bodies of ideas.<sup>1</sup> Yet he belonged totally to none of them. His adjective is not evangelical, not traditional, not revolutionary, but eclectic. And his eclecticism was pragmatic. Whatever helped him to unfold his thought upon the state of man and man's eventual perfection and salvation, Langland took and used. What did not help was rejected as was any approach or technique that worked for a time then became inadequate. Langland's beliefs, for example, were to a great extent similar to Wyclif's concerning the reforms needed in the church and the plight of the poor; yet, Langland did not pursue them to the ends that Wyclif did nor to the extremes of the Lollards.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Owst, Preaching in Medieval England, p. 295. See also Hopkins, p. 269 for further comment on Piers as a preaching work.

<sup>2</sup>Dawson, pp. 187-189 gives examples of the

Morton Bloomfield has rather carefully examined the various genres into which Piers falls: it partakes of one form and of another, and indeed this confusion and intermingling of genres is one result of the thematic determination of the form.<sup>3</sup> Bloomfield's conclusion is that Piers is an apocalyptic book, concerned with Christian perfection. While this is true and a most helpful guide in reading Piers, it is not the whole truth. Perhaps regarding Piers there is no whole truth. Concomitant with apocalyptic and expanding its application is the adjective eclectic. Piers is apocalyptic but not only so, concerned with perfection but with salvation too, otherworldly yet fully grounded in this world. Piers is not one but many. That is its delight and its downfall.

Piers embodies, for example, all three of the solutions available, according to Huizinga, to the medieval mind wishing to escape the all pervasive pessimism of the age--religious, social, and poetical.<sup>4</sup> The religious solution, the forsaking of this world and the escape into the next, of course, underlies all of Piers. Those who do well here will have their rewards in heaven; those who are poor

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similarities between Landland and Wyclif. Page 193 notes some pertinent differences.

<sup>3</sup>Bloomfield, Apocalypse, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1956), pp. 37-41.

here will be rich in heavenly rewards.<sup>5</sup> The poetical approach is in fact the poem, wherein the hardships of medieval life appear in dream form and the poor common plowman becomes through the agency of the dream a type of Christ.

The social solution, which Huizinga says is not the one usually taken in the middle ages, is also present, though in embryo, in Piers. This path involves the amelioration of this world. As this paper has shown and as Huizinga predicted, Piers does not advocate the abolition of existing institutions or any sort of social revolution. What it does imply is the improvement of society through moral reformation of the individuals within that society.

This spiritual reformation is essential to Piers and is intricately bound up in the questions of poverty and wealth. Here in the very foundations of his poem Langland found himself caught between the two realities I have so far described--the vast religious tradition in which he believed and within which he wrote and the realities of life engulfing him. This tension led him to approach individualism, social reform, protestantism and also pulled him back into collective stasis, hope in the other world, and moral reformation.

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<sup>5</sup>Dunning points out how the particular artistry of the A Visio combines this other worldliness with realistic details, pp. 199-200.

What Langland wanted was a society in which each person knew and did his duty no matter what it was. In that ideal state no one would be fatally poor materially or fatally rich spiritually; each man would help his brother, and the entire world would thereby be converted. What he wanted was God's kingdom come on earth. Men would be personally perfected and morally regenerated thus effecting a social amelioration without social revolution. When every individual is reformed, society itself undergoes a change; the reverse is not always the case. Society can undergo revolution while leaving many individuals untouched. Langland feared the latter and devoutly desired the former.<sup>6</sup>

Poverty in its broadest sense is for Langland the instrument by which this individual reformation can come about. Poverty of spirit eliminates pride--the sin which beset early medieval thought just as patient poverty of goods kills avarice the sin most prevalent in the speculation of the later middle ages.<sup>7</sup> Poverty is instrumental in instilling the virtues in men which lead them to godlike behavior. Thus it is that poverty leads to individual incarnation, the birth of God's spirit in each man, without which His kingdom cannot come.

"The central issue for Langland is the problem of poverty. On the negative side, that involves a failure of

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<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Kirk, The Dream Thought of "Piers Plowman" (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 41, 46, and 63.

<sup>7</sup>Owst, Literature and Pulpit, pp. 307-308.

two of the basic requirements of the Christian life, justice and charity. On the positive, it involves an appreciation of the meaning of poverty for the social aspects of the Christian life. Poverty is the touchstone of the existing order in church and society; it is both the explanation of the problem of the world's wrong and the solution to it."<sup>8</sup>

If poverty is properly accepted and understood and if wealth is reasonably readjusted, then both justice and charity will reign upon earth. Mankind will be perfected. This never occurs in Piers, however; the kingdom never comes, for what is necessary is not the perfection and therefore salvation of one man Piers, but of all men, Conscience and Will. Furthermore, Christ's incarnation while adequate to allow for the possibility of perfection and salvation and while serving as an example of both makes neither probable nor certain. Man's perfection and subsequent salvation are left ultimately in his own hands. He is "Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall."<sup>9</sup>

What then can aid man in his quest since the mere facts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection are not enough? Christ's spirit of love, charity, and the grace of the Holy Spirit are man's hope. The means for abolishing Mede is Charity; the method for relieving the poor is alms.

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<sup>8</sup>White, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>John Milton, Paradise Lost, III.99, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1962), p. 63.

The curse of pride is poverty of spirit.<sup>10</sup> The agent which will allow such humble charity, such charitable poverty, to be active is the grace of God through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

H. W. Wells and more particularly Morton W. Bloomfield have commented upon Langland's Joachist tendencies.<sup>11</sup> Here again Langland takes from a tradition what he finds useful and adds to it what he finds needful. "While Langland seems never to have been in the least heretical, the originality of his poem lies in the rearrangement of the old ideas and images."<sup>12</sup>

The best known and most widespread of the ideas of Joachim of Flora is his developmental theology of history in which all time is divided into three ages each of which foreshadows the next and is governed by a person of the trinity.<sup>13</sup> The first age, the age of the Law and of the Father, is associated with the Old Testament and characterized by fear, servile obedience, work, married men, laymen, and knowledge. The second age revealed in the Grace of

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<sup>10</sup>See Dawson, pp. 175 and 185 and Dunning, pp. 101-108 for discussions of the spiritual remedies for social ills.

<sup>11</sup>H. W. Wells, "The Philosophy of Piers Plowman," *PMLA*, LIII (1938), 339-349 and Morton Bloomfield, "Joachim of Flora," *Traditio*, XIII (1957), 249-311. See also Bloomfield, *Apocalypse* for other references to Joachim and Langland.

<sup>12</sup>Wells, p. 341.

<sup>13</sup>In addition to the Bloomfield article see the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 for Joachim and his beliefs.

Christ the Son the New Testament is characterized by faith, filial obedience, blood and suffering, clergy, children and youths, and wisdom. The third age is the age of the Love of the Holy Spirit which necessitates an Eternal Gospel transcending the New Testament as the New transcended the Old.

This third age, which was sometimes conceived of as yet to come but which Joachim felt had begun, was characterized by love, liberty, contemplation, monks and a spiritualized clergy, infants, and perfect intelligence. This age would be preceded by the coming of Antichrist and inaugurated by a barefoot order of contemplatives. Thus this concept of progressive history is both ultimately optimistic and specifically depressing. The good would triumph eventually, fighting its way through present evils and chaos.

Unquestionably these Joachite ideas influenced Langland. Wells, Bloomfield, and R. W. Frank have stressed the triune structure of the Vita revealing how Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest relate to the persons of the trinity.<sup>14</sup> Ruth Ames has examined how the Visio relates to the Old Testament and the Vita to the New.<sup>15</sup> My conception of Piers Plowman utilizes these ideas, depends upon Bloomfield's apocalyptic

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<sup>14</sup>Wells, pp. 348-349; Bloomfield, Apocalypse, p. 132; and R. W. Frank, Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>The Fulfillment of the Scriptures: Abraham, Moses, and Piers (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), p. 50.

explanation, and goes beyond them all. Piers Plowman is a utopia manque; it is spiral in form, triune in structure, and unfinished overall.

"The poem opened with a picture of the earthly commonwealth portrayed as it is and as it should be; it ends with an allegory of the spiritual commonwealth as it should be and as it is. The poem finishes where it started, for it begins and ends in actuality."<sup>16</sup> This is not, however, entirely accurate, as the poem does not end precisely where it began; it has spiralled to a higher level of consciousness for the dreamer and the reader. They have progressed from knowledge, obtained in the Visio, through to the wisdom of the Vita. They are ready to find perfect intelligence as they "gradde after grace." The quest has not ended but begun again with a better understanding of what is being sought.

The poem starts with the picture of the earthly and ends with the allegory of the spiritual; what is missing is the utopia in which the earthly and the spiritual are united and everything is as it should be--a Renovatio, which would grow from and fulfill the Vita as it grew from and fulfilled the Visio.<sup>17</sup> And the informing spirit of the whole poem written and unwritten is poverty.

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<sup>16</sup>Kane, Middle English Literature, p. 246.

<sup>17</sup>Bloomfield, Apocalypse, p. 98 gave me the term which I have taken for my own purposes here.



The Visio represents the first age, the age of the Father in which is found the germ of all that which is to come. "What this montaigne bymeneth and the merke dale,/ And the felde ful of folke I shal 3ow faire schewe" (B.I. 1-2;S.20). This encompasses all of life; humankind and its final destination, here and hereafter. Holy Church provides at the beginning the basis of what man needs to know to be saved. He should love and follow truth, be moderate and humble, desire heavenly not earthly treasures, and share his goods. The key to all is date et dabitur vobis: "And that is the lok of loue that vnloseth grace" (C.II. 198;S.37).

The virtues that Holy Church recommends are humility and active charity--the very virtues that Piers embodies when he appears later in the Visio. These virtues correspond to the two great laws Jesus laid down: Love the Lord your God more than yourself and love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>18</sup> These virtues are the essence of poverty--of spirit and of goods. If a man knows and practices perfect poverty, he will be saved, he will unleash the grace of God upon himself. This is the good life.

In her book The Fulfillment of the Scriptures: Abraham, Moses, and Piers Ruth M. Ames touches upon the fact that the Visio relates most directly to the Old Testament. "But it is rather as though Christ is present in the first

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<sup>18</sup>Vasta, p. 95.

part of the poem in the hidden way in which he is present in the Old Testament, and the pilgrim is not ready to perceive him. Actually, Christ does not appear until late in the poem, and when Holy Church describes the Creation, she only hints at the Incarnation."<sup>19</sup> The dreamer and the reader are passive recipients of necessary knowledge throughout the Visio and are set upon the way to life.

The Visio deals with this world and particularly with the ways in which Mede has corrupted it. The real treasures, those of the spirit, are lost in the search for this world's gold. There is one, however, who is not tainted by the world, the humble plowman Piers. He epitomizes the spirit of the first age. He is a married servant of Truth, here God the Father though by implication including the Son. He believes in and follows the dictum: he who works not neither shall he eat (II. Thess. 3.10) yet he practices the rule of feed my sheep (John 21.15-17). He has the knowledge of the way to Truth and that knowledge is the Law--the ten commandments plus the two that Jesus said encompass all the law and the prophets: love the Lord more than yourself and your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22.36-40).<sup>20</sup> Piers is himself a prophet.

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<sup>19</sup>Ames, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup>Donaldson, pp. 160-161 discusses the relationship of Piers to the parable of the rich young man. For him the Visio corresponds to keeping the commandments, which is not enough for perfection. Piers wants to go beyond the place of the rich young man.

But Piers is bound up in this world; he cannot lead the throngs to Truth until his half acre is plowed, for he realizes that until the bodily necessities of man's life are provided, man cannot--unless he be a saint--live the higher life of the active search for God's plan for him.<sup>21</sup> Those who toil to exist, who do well minimally, who plow their half acre may be saved through God's mercy as were Abraham and Moses and even the faithful heathen (B.XII.283-292;K.482-483). Piers and those like him work to effect an equality of goods, to assure that each man has enough but not too much, to institute a proper poverty of goods among all men in this life.

Truth sends his pardon to such as these who live in and of this world as best they can. Their tasks, however, are not so easy as at first they seem and propel the workers along the road toward a better life. As each man does his own work, he finds out his interdependence upon others. Individual cares for daily bread when satisfied lead to active charity toward others less fortunate. A man cannot do well and do for himself alone; in doing well he of necessity involves another.

This is but the lowest form of Dowel and Piers is not satisfied with it. He is ready to pass from knowledge to wisdom, from servile to filial obedience, from married worker to Good Samaritan, from the good man to the better

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<sup>21</sup>Dunning, p. 127.

man, from prophet to saint. This he does when he tears the pardon and resolves on a different sort of life:

I shal cessen of my sowyng," quod Pieres "& swynke  
 no<sub>3</sub>t so harde,  
 Ne aboute my [bely-ioye] so bisy be na moore;  
 Of preieres and of penaunce my plou<sub>3</sub> shal ben hereafter,  
 And wepen whan I sholde werche þou<sub>3</sub> whete breed me  
 faille.  
 (B.VII.117-120;K.244)<sup>22</sup>

The Visio then contains the germ of Dowel which along with Dobet and Dobest makes up the Vita; thus the Vita fulfills and explains the Visio. The Vita reflects the age of Christ the Son as revealed in the New Testament. One of the most vivid scenes in the Vita is that of Christ's passion and his harrowing of hell. He as the Son of God in His humility and His active charity is the example for all men of the better life that can be lived. His faith, suffering, and filial obedience are the standards to which all others should aspire.

Once again there is one who lives up to the example--Piers, no longer a rude plowman concerned with externals and mere doing well but more and more a type of Christ, like the Good Samaritan, whom he resembles. The incarnation is skillfully represented by Christ's jousting in and shedding his blood over Piers' armor so that the dreamer can scarcely

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<sup>22</sup>Donaldson, p. 161 indicates that the tearing of the pardon signifies Piers' rejection of the way of the rich young man, that is, the mere following of the commandments. Piers desires a more perfect life than that. He will follow the second half of Christ's teaching and will go, sell what he has, and give to the poor. The alternate reading in brackets is from MSS listed by Kane as WHmCrGYOC<sup>2</sup>CBLMRF.

tell who is Christ and who Piers (B.XVIII.10 and 22-26; K.608 and B.XIX.5-14;K.632). Piers is Christ in His human nature, and he epitomizes the virtues leading to the perfect love of God--humility and active charity.<sup>23</sup>

This second age in the Vita is the age of patient poverty and of charity as they are within men, in the individual spirit.<sup>24</sup> Thus the dreamer and the reader actively seek wisdom, something more than just a knowledge of what is necessary for salvation. They wish to understand how to use that knowledge to perfect themselves.<sup>25</sup> The spirit of the law not the law itself is what they seek, and they find it in Christ's suffering upon the cross. They realize that one must not just accept God's mercy, but must seek it out and act upon it. And just as the knowledge in the Visio that the providing of one's own material essentials cannot be accomplished without the aid of and provision for others so does the wisdom come in the Vita that the spiritual health and well being of the individual can be maintained

<sup>23</sup>Donaldson, pp. 182ff. and Vasta, p. 136.

<sup>24</sup>In the articles about Joachim's three ages, his second is the age of grace and his third that of love and the Holy Spirit. Here is an example of the way in which Langland took the structure provided and used it as he saw best. For him, in his poem, Christ is most closely united with love and the Holy Spirit with grace, so for Langland the second age is that of the love of the Son and the third is of the grace of the Holy Ghost.

<sup>25</sup>Refer to Donaldson, p. 161 mentioned above. See also Kane, MEL, p. 244 regarding the higher sort of life.

only within the larger body of Christ, the church (B.XX. 204-213; K.671).

Because of the importance of the active, visible church and its clergy in the second age, their faults are most severely censured in the Vita. Theirs is the problem; theirs is its cure (see III.159-162). The second age is one which is characterized by the interference of secular with spiritual power and which culminates in the coming of Antichrist.<sup>26</sup> The final Passus of Piers reveal this coming in specific details and prepare for the age to come. Just as the Visio ends abruptly with a crisis which catapults the reader from the highest level of the first age into the lowest of the second, Dowel, so does the Vita end cataclysmically thrusting the reader into yet a higher plane.<sup>27</sup> The highest level of Dobest is the basis of the third age, that which is to come.

The age of the Holy Spirit is the age of grace wherein the mercy of God the Father through the love and humility of the Son meet in mankind as the grace of the Holy Spirit. Once this meeting takes place man is perfected and saved. He is truly free and makes his choices right, guided by grace.<sup>28</sup> His intelligence comprehends both knowledge

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<sup>26</sup>Bloomfield, Traditio, p. 282.

<sup>27</sup>"In short, it is part of Langland's general manner to close off one section climactically and begin another abruptly," Vasta, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup>Donaldson, p. 190 and Frank, p. 96 discuss various aspects of grace that coincide with my argument.

wisdom. Things are as they should be. The symbol of this age is once again Piers, aided by Christ's example and commandments:<sup>29</sup>

And whan þis dede was doon do best he [tau<sub>3</sub>te],  
 And yaf Piers pardon, and power he grauntedē hym,  
 Myght men to assoille of alle manere synnes,  
 To alle maner men mercy and for<sub>3</sub>ifnesse  
 . . . . .  
Spiritus paraclitus ouerspradde hem alle.  
 Quod Conscience and knelede, 'þis is cristes messenger  
 and comēþ fro þe grete god; grace is his name.  
 . . . . .  
 Thanne bigan grace to go wip Piers Plowman  
 (B.XIX.182-213;K.642-643)

At the conclusion of the poem the object of the quest is not Truth by name as it was in the Visio but Piers himself. Conscience sets out "To seke Piers the Plowman" thus he "gradde after grace" (B.XX.382 and 386;K.680-681). Langland earlier has Piers and Christ sharing natures: Piers becomes Christlike as Christ becomes man. Here the identification sharpens. The quest is the same; Piers is Truth once the seeker himself has grace. All men then become Christ; this is the ultimate divinization of man and concomitant humanization of God as promised through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>30</sup> The reaching out of

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<sup>29</sup> "Let Piers Plowman denote man endowed with the spirit of Christ, or human nature in its highest form (Skeat, Notes, p. 250), until the end of the poem is reached, and Conscience sets out in search of him. Then and there he may be assumed to take the character of Christ, but in this place it may be regarded as a natural climax, and a fitting conclusion to the whole," Hopkins, p. 254. The alternate reading in brackets is from MSS listed by Kane as WHmCrGYOC<sup>2</sup>CBLM.

<sup>30</sup> Bloomfield, Traditio, p. 281.

man to God as first revealed in the Old Testament merges at last with the down reaching of God through his Son in the New. The blend is perfect; the union complete.<sup>31</sup> Ames believes that Piers is not everyman but is human nature idealized. "As the poem follows the course of history, the man partaking of the goodness of God [Piers] is united with the goodness of God become man [Christ]."<sup>32</sup> In the third age which Langland envisions, Piers would be everyman, or rather every man would be Piers.

In this world the nearest man can come to such blessedness before the third age is in the cloister.<sup>33</sup> The reformed mendicancy and special monasticism Langland advocates are precursors of the age to come when a purified, spiritual clergy led by contemplatives will embrace all men. There will be no wars, the Jews will be converted, all men will be reconciled, and the theology of the beatitudes will endure to the end of the world.<sup>34</sup>

Langland and Joachim are one in yearning for this era: Joachim believed it had begun; Langland was not so

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<sup>31</sup>This is the final goal of all history; Bloomfield, Traditio, p. 265.

<sup>32</sup>Ames, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup>Bloomfield, Traditio, p. 281. Compare Piers B.X.305-308;K.425.

<sup>34</sup>NCE.VII. pp. 990b-991a. See the following passages in Piers for corresponding ideas: C.XVIII.243-257; S.473, B.III.290-324;K.288-290, B.IV.113-133;K.300-301, and B.X.322-332;K.426.



sure it ever would. For him it was a dream beyond even the dreams he was able to incorporate into his poem. He did not write a Renovatio but the indications of what it would have been like are present in the Vita.

The Renovatio would have described a kingdom in which Mede had no power, wherein each segment of society knew and performed its proper functions, and over which love ruled supreme (B.III.290-324;K.288-290 and B.IV.113-133; K.300-301 and B.X.322-332;K.426). The rich would care for the poor; the poor would have enough and not want more. Charity, patience, humility would blossom in everyone whatsoever his station in life. All this would happen here on earth: not a Paradiso but a Renovatio is what Langland foreshadowed in his poem.

Why did he not bring this foreshadowing out into the light of his own work: why is there no third section to complete the triune structure Langland leads us to expect? Perhaps Langland died before he could write such a section; perhaps he would never have felt himself able to write it no matter how long his life. For such an undertaking, given the dual strands of Langland's mind, would have been exceedingly difficult.

For an author writing solely within the religious tradition of the Church Fathers the creating of a paradiso is very probable and of a renovatio certainly possible. And for one writing completely within the realm of this

world a utopia is not unthinkable. But for an author who partakes of both worlds the task is doubly hard. He cannot let his fancy go to mere speculation and wishful thinking about what might be or will be; he needs must take this world's realities into account. Nor can he let this world with its faults and flaws shape his writing into a satiric picture of the future or let it provoke some secularized utopia, a world disguised as another place and reformed by radical new institutions; the religious tradition loaded him with too much spiritual hope and too much social conservatism.

Langland saw Joachim's scheme of theological history as a way out, as a means of uniting this world and the next. Thus he writes realistically about man's spiritual condition (Confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins B.V.62ff.; K.309ff.) and with spiritual insight into man's realistic situation (Descriptions of the poor people's plight, C.X. 70-87; S.234 and B.XIV.160-180; K.522-523). For him, as for Joachim, "history is more than a collection of exempla; in fact, it is the progressive assimilation of society to the mystical body of Christ."<sup>35</sup>

This assimilation is figured in the building and fortifying of Unity by Grace and Piers (B.XIX.215ff.; K.644ff.).<sup>36</sup> The attack on Unity by Antichrist and his

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<sup>35</sup>Bloomfield, Traditio, p. 265.

<sup>36</sup>Bloomfield, Apocalypse, p. 133.

forces is part of the Joachite plan--a necessary evil preceding the age of the Holy Ghost. But Langland foundered in the attack; the evils were so real, so much a part of fourteenth century life that it pushed aside the theological possibilities inherent in that life, rendering them unreachable to Langland. George Kane implies this very thing: "as the author came steadily nearer to the unhappy conviction which ends his poem, so his emotion fixed itself the more firmly upon this symbol [Piers] and his moralism became increasingly overwhelmed by the sense of contrast between actuality as he saw it and the ideal state that in his fantasy he associated with Piers."<sup>37</sup>

Why could Langland not reconcile these two? Why could he not rise above the real to realize his fantasies in the creative process of the poem. No one has the answers to such speculations, and of and in themselves they are worthless, unless they direct the reader's attention back to the actual written poem. This they do. They reveal a spiralling, triune structure patterned after Joachim's triune theological history and underscore the theme of perfect poverty as the means for attaining the Renovatio leading to the final judgment. The pattern is there for the reader and for Long

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<sup>37</sup>Kane, MEL, pp. 242-243. See also Chambers, Mind, p. 165 and Donaldson who said of the poet that he was one "who remained ever discontent with what he had accomplished and, to the end of his life, kept striving to write in the way God wished--eo ordine quo Deus voluit," p. 198.

Will to follow; the directions are clear--but left for another to read.

Perhaps as R. W. Chambers suggests regarding the lapse of time between the A and B texts, during which Langland explored some of the questions from A, which he had not answered, then wrote about them in B, perhaps after a sufficient length of time the resolutions of these difficulties would have appeared, and Langland would have written again.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps, however, that very, growing inability of the age itself to resolve its own inconsistencies would have kept Langland from any such resolution.

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<sup>38</sup>Man's Unconquerable Mind, pp. 132-142.

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