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## **Religious Forms and Institutions in *Piers Plowman***

James Simpson

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### **ABSTRACT**

Which comes first: institutions or selves? Liberal democracies operate as if selves preceded institutions. By and large, pre-Reformation culture places the institution before the self. The self, and particularly the conscience as the source of deepest ethical and spiritual counsel, is intimately shaped, by the institution of the Church. This shaping is both ethical and spiritual; by no means least, it ensures the soul's salvation, though administering the sacraments especially of baptism, penance, and the Eucharist. The conscience is not a lonely entity in such an institutional culture. It is, rather, the portable voice of accumulated, communal history and wisdom: it is, as the word itself suggests, a '*con-scientia*', a 'knowing with'. These tensions generate the extraordinary and conflicted account of self and institution in Langland's *Piers Plowman*.

## Religious Forms and Institutions in *Piers Plowman*

Which comes first: institutions or selves? Liberal democracies operate as if selves preceded institutions, since electors choose their institutional representatives, who themselves vote to shape institutions. Liberal ideology, indeed, traces its genealogy back to heroic moments of the lonely, fully-formed conscience standing up against the might of institutions; those heroes (Luther is the most obvious example) are lionized precisely because they are said to have established the grounds of choice: every individual will be able to choose, in freedom, his or her institutional affiliation for him or herself. The act of choice is, in such a world-view, the initiating act from which institutions follow. Institutions are secondary to selves, and especially to the initiating act of conscience.

The more extreme, libertarian strand of that tradition regards all institutions with suspicion. Not only government, but schools and all government agencies, along with all churches not one's own, are not the solution, but the problem. This tradition champions what might be called a 'liberty to' model of liberty, as distinct from what might be called a 'liberty from' model. 'Liberty to' proclaims this definition of liberty for the individual: 'the condition of being able to act or function without hindrance or restraint; faculty or power to do as one likes' (OED, sense 2a). 'Liberty from', by contrast, recognizes the priority of institutions that grant liberties to individuals or

corporations.<sup>1</sup> In its extreme (though by no means uncommon) form, 'liberty to' arrogates for itself what had been the sole prerogative of God, to act in absolute freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Such an ideology, in both its less and more extreme forms (i.e. its liberal and libertarian forms), will produce its characteristic forms of history and literary criticism. Its historians will write institutional histories as histories of dissent from institutions. This tradition locates dissent because it admires dissent, persuaded as it is that the fully formed conscience is capable of producing persuasive, ethically impressive alternatives to oppressive institutions.

The literary critics who subscribe to such an ideology will treat the individual as a self-contained unit, independent of, and prior to, the institutions within which the individual is situated. The individual in this tradition is, as the word implies, indivisible; the individual is, in Lee Patterson's words, 'understood not as conditioned by social practices and institutions but as an autonomous being who creates the historical world through self-directed efforts'.<sup>3</sup> The function of literary criticism will be to delineate 'character', and to locate unmediated agency as a desired ideal, rather than to analyze the ways in which self and institutions are mutually dependent. For both historians and literary critics in the liberal tradition, the individual is separable from, and prior to, institutions.

The liberal tradition and its offshoot the libertarian tradition trace their genealogy principally to the Reformation of the sixteenth-century. What is the news on this question from the pre-Reformation Church? By and large, pre-Reformation culture

places the institution before the self. The self, and particularly the conscience as the source of deepest ethical and spiritual counsel, is intimately shaped, by the institution of the Church. This shaping is both ethical and spiritual; by no means least, it ensures the soul's salvation, though administering the sacraments especially of baptism, penance, and the Eucharist. The conscience is not a lonely entity in such an institutional culture. It is, rather, the portable voice of accumulated, communal history and wisdom: it is, as the word itself suggests, a '*con-scientia*', a 'knowing with'.<sup>4</sup> This tradition will admire and produce histories not of dissent but of institution-building and institutional commitment, such as Church history and hagiography. It will regard the institution as prior to the individual; it will also represent selves experiencing individuality as an intensely painful problem.

The late fourteenth-century English poem *Piers Plowman* admires dissent; it recognizes the need for new institutional forms, and it trusts, up to a point, the capacity of conscience to generate those new institutional forms. Does this mean that Langland regards the self as prior to institutions? Does this mean that Langland's protagonist Will is a self-contained, indivisible 'character', an abbreviation for 'William', as the great nineteenth-century editor W. W. Skeat refers to him?<sup>5</sup> Does this mean that for Langland institutions are secondary to the prior entity of the self?

In this essay I will argue that, for Langland, the self is fundamentally dependent on institutions, and in particular the institution of the Church. For Langland ecclesiology - or how the Church is shaped as an institution - is not at all separable from ideal forms of selfhood. For Langland, ecclesiastical satire is inseparable from imagining

the self's ideal form. For all that, Langland's is indeed a poem of dissent, in which the conscience does challenge the Church. One hundred and forty years before Luther's courageous act of conscience-driven dissent in 1517, Langland imagines that same dissent. He is also, however, deeply skeptical of that dissenting act, since Langland knows that a damaged Church produces a damaged conscience.

This is one of the many reasons why Langland's is a great poem: *Piers Plowman* inherits a model of the Church that has become untenable, and it knows it. The poem's extraordinary and disrupted range of formal choices is the form that knowledge takes.

### **Religious Institutions**

The pre-Reformation Western Church is a large and variegated entity. The purview of Langland's poem takes many of these institutions into account, but focuses with especial energy on one ecclesiastical institution, that of the friars. I begin by sketching the institutional shape of the Church.<sup>6</sup> In my penultimate section, I will show why Langland should focus so vigorously and so critically on the friars.

The principal division within the pre-Reformation Church was between the secular clergy and the religious orders. The secular clergy (from Christian Latin *saecularis*, 'of the world') was devoted to the care and instruction of the laity (from Greek *laïos*, 'people'), or people, especially though administering the sacraments. Secular clergy were located in parishes, and organized around a bishop, whose principal seat, or *cathedra* (meaning 'seat' in Greek), was located in a cathedral, itself located in a major urban centre. In Langland's England, the Archbishop of Canterbury

held primacy over that of York. And the archbishops were in turn ultimately subject to the jurisdiction of the pope in Rome.

The religious orders, by contrast, were those orders subject to a *regula*, or rule. For the most part, the religious lived in communities bound by their rule; in late medieval England there were upwards of 800 such communities, living under eight or so major types and sub-types of rule.<sup>7</sup> The main divisions among the religious orders was between monks (and nuns), canons and friars. Monasteries (so called from Greek *monos*, meaning 'single') were first founded in the West in the early sixth century by St Benedict, in the wake of the Fall of Rome (dateable for convenience from 410 CE): after the earthly city collapsed, monks retreated to places far removed from cities. Of course monastic foundations were, as engines of learning, prayer and social influence, necessarily tightly bound into larger systems of worldly power, but the monastery was in principle a self-enclosed heavenly city, imitating the heavenly Jerusalem wherein monks practised a life of contemplation. Each monastery or convent (for women religious) was subject to a rule, the first of which is the Benedictine rule, under the direction of an abbot or abbess.

Benedictine monks trace their founding to the early sixth century; monasteries were principal form of regular life in Western Europe until the rapid opening up of Europe from the late eleventh century, when new religious foundations sprang up in response to new social and spiritual needs. The most important and flourishing of these new foundations was that of the regular canons. Canons lived under a rule, the first of which was the Augustinian Rule. Like monks, Augustinian canons lived a

communitarian life without private property, though unlike monks they lived in urban centres, and their function was not primarily contemplative; it was instead to serve in public ministry, such as the provision of schools and hospitals.

New, reformist monastic orders emerged in the later Middle Ages (e.g. Cistercians, founded 1098, contemporary with the proliferation of Augustinian canons), but the hugely significant development in the religious orders came in the early thirteenth century, with the emergence of the fraternal orders (so-called from Latin *frater*, meaning 'brother'). Whereas monks had fled the fallen city, friars emerged in the newly resurgent urban culture first of Italy, and then, with remarkable rapidity, across all of Western Europe. As European trade and urban culture developed, so a corresponding spiritual culture developed, though in *opposition* to commercial culture. Thus St Francis, the son of a rich merchant of Assisi in central Italy, stripped himself of his secular garb in the main square of Assisi, to the acute embarrassment of his merchant father. The first orders of friars were those of Francis and Dominic; by Langland's time there were two further orders of friars, those of the Carmelites and the Augustinians. All were so-called *mendicant* orders, from the Latin word *mendicare*, meaning 'to beg'. Friars had no independent, stable source of income; wedded as they were to poverty, they were instead dependent on the charity of their surrounding communities. Friars not only introduced an extraordinarily vital spiritual and artistic culture into Europe; they also dominated university culture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries centres such as those of Paris and Oxford.

The pre-Reformation Church that Langland knew, then, was by no means a monolithic institution; it was instead highly variegated, and made up of many sub-institutions, themselves the product of different historical moments. The country-side and townscapes of England were, and remain, marked by these institutional developments: great cities had their cathedrals; significant cities and towns had their parish churches and houses of canons and friars;<sup>8</sup> villages had their parish churches; and the country-side was punctuated by abbeys.

How does Langland represent the Church? At the poem's beginning and end he represents it as a single, ideal entity: in Passus 1 the indisputably authoritative figure Holy Church instructs Will, and in Passus 19-20 we witness the construction of the Barn of Unity, a new, vernacular construction with, astonishingly, the ploughman Piers Plowman as Pope.<sup>9</sup> Leaving aside these ideal, single representations for the moment, let us turn instead to Langland's representation of particular, historically verifiable sub-institutions of the Church he knew. As we observe these particular representations, we shall also observe that Langland's Church is, in his account, a Church in serious disarray.

In the rapid snap-shot effect of the poem's Prologue, we already see glimpses of different institutional representatives. Take, for example, the following, in order of appearance. We start with figures on the very margins of the institutional Church, anchorites and hermits who do not move from their cells and who devote themselves to 'preieres and penaunce' in a life of abstinence (B Prologue, 25-28). These are clearly monastic figures, turned resolutely away from the world, though monastic figures on



the margins even of monastic society: these are truly solitary, virtuous figures living as if dead to the world.<sup>10</sup>

All the other ecclesiastical figures targeted in the Prologue are visibly failing. The first of these failures are the friars, whose spiritual functions have, by this account, been wholly subsumed by systems of material gain:

I fond there freres, alle the foure orders,  
Prechyng the peple for profit of the wombe  
Glosed the gospel as hem good liked;  
For coveitise of copes construwed it as thei wolde.

(B Prologue, 58-61)

The next ecclesiastical figure in the Prologue is a lowly member of the secular clergy empowered by a local bishop, a pardoner who preaches as if he were a priest, and absolves sinners for material profit that is then shared between pardoner and parish priest (B Prologue, 68-82). Parish priests themselves, along with their bishops, abandon their parishioners and run to London for more lucrative royal or baronial appointments, 'for silver is swete' (B Prologue, 83-99). Above all, we catch a glimpse of the papal court itself, and the cardinals (the 'courtiers', as it were, of the papal court, or *curia*) who have presumed to make their own pope (B Prologue, 100-11). This is almost certainly a reference to the schism within the Western Church that occurred from September 1378 (the probable date of the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*), when French cardinals elected their own pope, thus creating two popes, a situation that pertained until 1415. Langland's

Church, the Church across most of the period of writing and rewriting *Piers Plowman* (c. 1365-1388) can be described as a double-header.

To be sure, Langland is writing a specific genre in the Prologue, that of Estates Satire, which is predisposed to moral attack.<sup>11</sup> But hardly a single gesture in the rest of the poem gives any brighter image of a specific institution within the Church. Take for example the priests who welcome Mede, the personification of bribery, to Westminster in Passus 3: one of them takes her 'bi the myddel' (B.3.10) as she arrives. In her exceptionally adroit self-defence, Mede underlines the ways in which gift-giving is what makes the papal world go around: she declares that the Pope and his cardinals both receive and distribute 'presents' 'to mayntene hir lawes' (B. 3.215.16). Mede herself might call these gifts 'presents'; her opponent Conscience calls them bribery, or reward beyond dessert. Undeserved payment is not restricted to the highest levels of the Church: Mede declares that priests who preach also 'asken mede' among various forms of payment (B.3.223-34).

In Passus 5, in the confessions of the deadly sins, we hear that Wrath acts as a friar in convents so as deliberately to stir up enmity among the nuns (B.5.135-6). In Passus 7, a priest disagrees with the non-ecclesiastical figure Piers Plowman about the 'pardon' sent from St Truth, when Piers is clearly more perceptive about the nature of works and pardon (B.7.105-38). Langland is here registering profound dissatisfaction with the sale of indulgences, the issue that will be the flashpoint for the break-up of the Western Church in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In Passus 8 Will accosts two friars, 'maistres of the Menours' (i.e. Franciscans) who give him a self-serving

answer in response to his question as to where he might find 'Dowel', or right action in the world (B.8.6-19). Or in Passus 13 Will aggressively witnesses the greedy, self-satisfied academic Doctor of Divinity, 'godes gloton', guzzling and overeating on the dais at a feast (B.13.78-111).

All these vignettes underline the corruption of separate institutions of the Church, but none so damagingly as the friars. In Passus 20, after the agricultural laborer Piers has built the Church as the Barn of Unity, and has been appointed effectively as pope of this new, apostolic Church, the Church is attacked by Antichrist. The first in the train of the attackers behind Antichrist are the friars:

Freres folwede that fend, for he gave hem copes,  
And religiouse revered hym and rongen hir belles,  
And al the convent cam to welcome a tyraunt.

(B.20.58-60)

The Church that Langland knew was a Church whose broad history he knew. His sense of history, however, is consistently a sense of decline from pristine beginnings. In Passus 15, the figure Anima critiques the contemporary institution of the Church by broad comparisons with its historical beginnings. The ideal of charity is essentially located in the past, 'fern ago'. As examples of those who lived charitably in poverty, Anima cites the early hermits Antony, to whom the origins of monasticism are drawn, Egidius, and Paul (claimed as the founder of the Augustinian Friars) (B.15. 269-89), as well as some great figures of the primitive Church, Paul the Apostle, the disciples Peter

and Andrew, and Mary Magdalen (B.15. 290-306). He also says, in making the same point, that religious should not take alms from unjust rulers, but act

. . . as Antony dide, Dominyk and Fraunceys,  
Beneit and Bernard [bothe], whiche hem first taughte  
To lyve by litel and in lowe houses by lele mennes fyndyng.

(B.15.420-22)

Each of these figures is associated with the idealistic founding of an order (apart from Antony, who has already been mentioned, the orders are as follows, respectively: Dominican friars (1216); Franciscan friars (1223); Benedictine monasticism (c. 530); and Cistercian monasticism (1098)). Closer to home, but still in the historical frame of Christianity, Anima also refers admiringly to the conversion of England:

Al was hethynesse som tyme Engelond and Walis, [heatheness]  
Til Gregory garte clerkes to go here and preche. [made]  
Austyn [cristnede the kyng at Caunterbury],  
And thorough miracles, as men mow rede, al that marche he tornede  
[region][converted]  
To Crist and to Cristendom . . .

(B.15.442-46)

The past of all these institutional elements of the Church is inspired and glorious; the present is neither. Langland shares a sense of the Church's profound disarray with the vigorous movement coming into focus in the period of *Piers Plowman*, that of the Lollards.<sup>12</sup>

## Religious Institutions and the Ideal Self

We have so far seen snap-shots, as it were, of Langland's view of the Church's specific institutions; unless placed in a distant past, these snapshots are consistently, fiercely negative. How does this negative representation of ecclesiastical institutions work in the dynamic movement of *Piers Plowman*?

Langland's poem is divided into two principal sections: a *Visio*, or vision, of society as a whole (Passus B.1-7), and a *Vita*, or life (Passus B.8-20). The *Vita*, or life, is that of one person, Will, or, more properly, the ideal person to whom Will, as the human will, belongs. The second part of the poem is, then, a *Bildungsroman*, an education of the soul to its ideal form. The form of the poem matches the ideal form of the person: this part of the poem can, indeed, be called a 'person-shaped' poem.<sup>13</sup> The poem, that is, takes its own form as it fills out the ideal form of the soul. The *Vita* turns the questions of the *Visio* inward; the poem becomes literally psychoanalytical, as Will questions different and deeper faculties, or powers, of the soul of which he is himself a part.

What parts, or powers, of the soul does Will question? The psychological traditions that Christendom inherited from classical sources divided the soul, or psyche, into a primary division of a willing, desiring, loving part of the soul on the one hand, and a reasoning, analytical part of the soul on the other. Whereas Will is the will, or desiring part of the soul, the figures questioned by Will are the reasoning parts of the soul. The poem's actants (they cannot properly be called 'characters') are, then, powers

of the soul, with names such as Wit and Imaginatitif. Will also questions the educational and ecclesiastical institutions that ideally train the soul to its ideal form.

The *Vita* answers to the failings of the *Visio*. The *Visio* ends in crisis with the austere, apparently unattainable demands of Truth's pardon, to 'do well', absolutely. Doing well might sound simple enough, but if there is one certainty that emerges from the *Visio*, it's this: no-one does well, and certainly not absolutely. Will, the desiring part of the soul, longs, then, to know the answer to this fearsome question. And so as he turns inward, he poses the same question, with increasing intensity, to each of the rational and/or education figures who should know the truth: 'What is Dowell?', or what, Will asks, constitutes action in the world that will satisfy the austere, apparently unbending standards of God's justice, or what Langland calls 'Truth'?

As Will's soul moves through the crises of Passus 8-14, so too do the separate faculties of the soul coalesce. Whereas, that is, Passus 8-12 had been a psycho-analysis, the poem becomes, from Passus 15 forward, a psycho-synthesis, heralded by the appearance of Anima, the whole soul. And as the poem becomes a psycho-synthesis, reaching into deeper psychological resources of charity, so too does it turn inevitably to ecclesiological, or institutional, questions: how should the Church be grounded in order to produce the ideal, charitable form of the soul? The education of the soul, that is, necessarily entails the reformation of the Church. Institutions, in sum, play a major part in the construction of the ideal self.

Passus 15, in fact, mirrors the institutional pattern of Passus 1: whereas in Passus 1 the Church had berated the individual soul Will, in Passus 15 the situation is reversed:

having been educated through trial in a deep understanding of how humans might meet the standards of God's justice, Anima, the whole soul, can finally speak up. And when he does speak (Anima is, ungrammatically, male), he addresses two questions: charity on the one hand, and ecclesiology on the other.

Our training in the liberal tradition renders, perhaps, the connection of these two subjects surprising: for many modern readers, the question of the deepest sources of the self is entirely separate from any institutional question. These two subject matters might, that is, seem entirely disparate, the one (charity) being concerned with the most profound source of the self, while the other (the Church) addresses the problem of an external institution. If it is reasonably the business of Anima to treat charity (one of his names, after all, is *Amor*), we might want to ask why Anima should treat the Church. In the texture of Anima's speech as a whole, however, we can see that a treatment of charity is inseparable from a treatment of the Church. The two subjects are intimately related, because, for Langland, selves are grounded in institutions. Another sub-name of Anima is 'Conscience', 'Godde clerk and his notarie' (B.15.32). This involves the public functions of challenging or not challenging the world around him.

In Passus 15, then, the individual soul (in an ideal form) addresses the Church, as a reforming conscience. The Church as an institution is an inherent part of the story of the soul's education.

### **Can Langland's Conscience Reform the Church?**

The poem, then, enacts a psychosynthesis, at the end of which the individual soul is capable of understanding the deepest sources of charity on the one hand, and has the authority to reform the entire Church on the other. Langland, it would seem, does recognize that institutions nourish the soul, and does recognize that the soul's fullest expression is inseparable from the establishment of a capacious, sacrament-dispensing Church.

We began with a question: which comes first, Church or self? We seem to have arrived at a provisional answer, at least. Soul and Church, that is, exist for each other. Where precisely, however, does Langland locate the source of reform, in the Church, or in the soul? Which is more reliable? In this section I offer one example that suggests that Conscience, and only Conscience, is capable of a truly reforming impulse. My second, more powerful, example suggests the reverse: that a Conscience produced by a failing Church is incapable of reforming that Church. A failed Church produces a failed Conscience. In this second example, we shall also see why the institutional failing of the friars is lethal for the health of the individual soul.<sup>14</sup>

My first example is that of Conscience's academic feast in Passus B.13. I begin with a brief recapitulation of the narrative.<sup>15</sup> In this vision (the fourth), Conscience invites Will and Clergy to a feast. The other specified guests are an academic Doctor, and Patience, a mendicant pilgrim. Will sits at a side table with Patience, while Conscience, on high table, politely conducts a searching examination of his guests: what, he asks for the last time in the poem, is Dowel?



Much literary criticism of *Piers Plowman* across of the twentieth century devoted itself to scoring off Will as the problem: the *Vita* of the poem was about his moral progress; the institutions that trained Will were regarded as unproblematic; all Will had to do was follow their advice. In Conscience's feast of Passus 13 we can see how limited that view is; to be sure, Will is intemperate in his attack on the Doctor of Divinity, but so too are the clerical figures at Conscience's feast strictly limited. Their limitations propel Will, and Conscience, into reformist positions, beyond the Church.

At first Will himself asks the question about Dowel to the representative of the academic establishment in its complacent and well-heeled actuality, the academic Doctor introduced at the beginning of the passus. The academic friar is totally unaware of the pressure of Will's question;<sup>16</sup> he casually glances it aside:

'Dowel?' quod this doctour - and drank after -

'Do noon yvel to thyn evencristen - nought by thi power.'

(B.13.103-4)

This is the occasion for a satirical attack on the friar, and Will tries to capitalise on the moment as it is offered to him (B.13.105-10). Conscience, however, is the host, or overriding presence, at this meal, and Conscience does not attack the Doctor, but rather defers courteously, if shrewdly, to the Doctor's theological learning:

. . . Sire doctour, and it be youre wille, [if]

What is Dowel and Dobet? Ye dyvynours knoweth. [ theologians]

(B.13.114-15)

The Doctor's answer to this courteously posed question reveals the self-protecting, self-aggrandising mentality of the educational institution: 'dowel' is defined as doing as 'clerkes techeth'; 'dobet' as he who teaches; and 'dobest' as he who both teaches and acts according to his own teaching (B.13.115-17a). In these three steps the Doctor complacently assures himself of both his power and his honour: his power resides in the fact that he controls the unlearned in what they are to regard as 'doing well', while his honour is affirmed in the preservation of the higher stages of moral life to teachers themselves. The inadequacy of this declaration is evident most immediately by the fact that the Doctor does not himself do as he teaches, as Will points out.

Conscience does not take issue with this reply. Instead, he shrewdly allows its inadequacy to speak for itself beside the discreet answer of Clergy, to whom Conscience now poses the same question. Whereas the Doctor represents the academic institution in its literal actuality, Clergy here seems to me to represent the academic institution in its ideal potentiality. Conscience certainly feels more at ease with Clergy: he addresses him familiarly in the singular, unlike his plural, polite address to the Doctor: "Now thow, Clergy," quod Conscience, "carpest what is Dowel" (B.13. 118). Clergy's answer betrays none of the self-protecting assurance of the Doctor. He says that he is unwilling to answer the question, since Piers the Plowman, who appeals only to the 'science' of love, knows better (B.13.120-130).

Remarkably, then, Clergy acknowledges the hesitation of the entire academic establishment in the presence of a ploughman's knowledge. Piers, says Clergy, sets each 'science' at nothing, except the 'science' of love; to call love itself a 'science' in this

context is to insist that, paradoxically, the essential knowledge is not academic, but moral: we the poem's narrative is being propelled beyond academic learning precisely by an academic figure, who expresses the proper humility of the learned before the biggest questions.

It is clear by now that Conscience is quietly conducting a polite, but searching examination of his guests, which is what we would expect, after all, from the faculty of the conscience. The last figure to whom the question is put at the academic feast, and in the poem, is Patience. Patience is a totally non-academic, eremitic figure, who has been invited to this feast only as a mendicant pilgrim, and who sits at a side table with Will (B.13.29-36). Middle English 'pacience' bears much more of the semantic force of its Latin root, *patientia* (meaning 'suffering'), than the Modern English word 'patience' (see MED sense 1(a)). Conscience trusts Patience's long-suffering experience above academic learning:

Pacience hath be in many place, and paraunter knoweth [perhaps]

That no clerk ne kan, as Crist bereth witesse:

*Pacientes vincunt &c.*

[the suffering overcome]

(B.13.133-4a)

Patience's exposition of the dowel triad also points to the importance but limitations of academic learning. For in this academic milieu, his answer suggests a cognitive development that embraces, but transcends the academic culture represented in its potentiality by Clergy: to learn is to do well; to teach is to do better; and to love one's enemies is to do best. (B.13.136-9)

Here, too, then, is a figure who is taught, like Piers, by the 'science' of love; but his attitude to academic learning is not hostile: he includes learning and teaching as part of his triad. Unlike the complacent Doctor, though, he does not construct the triad for the self-aggrandisement of the academic institution, but instead opens the dobest element up to a radically Christian concept of love: *dilige inimicos* ['love (your) enemies'].

At this meal at the court of Conscience, the higher reaches of academic, theological learning are also seen to be impervious to the sense of Patience's paradox. The Doctor is quite untouched by the spiritual force Patience's riddling speech, dismisses the idea of the paradoxical might of suffering as nonsense. He declares that 'Al the wit of this world and wight [vigorous] mennes strengthe / Kan nocht [par]formen a pees bitwene the Pope and hise enemys' (B.13.172-4). This reveals the blinkered and uncomprehending view of the academic Doctor, since it is precisely what Patience has been saying, though with a different intent: it is not, indeed, 'wit' or 'strengthe' that *can* achieve the peace prophesied by Patience, but 'will' and suffering.

At this point we see the full force of Conscience, who acts in an astonishingly disruptive manner. He signals where his sympathies lie by overturning the etiquette of his role as host in his own academic feast. He abandons his position as host and master of the academic feast, and announces that he is leaving to be 'pilgrym with Patience til I have preved moore' (B.13.182). This is a radical choice from an educational point of view, since it involves abandoning educational and ecclesiastical institutions, and entrusting himself to the marginal figure Patience, on the road; Conscience wants to

'preve' in the experiential sense, rather than the academic, rational sense. Educational institutions, ecclesiastical teachers, and rational procedures can no longer contain the poem's spiritual energies and perceptions. And it is, revealingly, Conscience who drives the poem into deeper spiritual and more powerfully reformist territory.

My second example, which runs counter to the first, occurs in Passus 20. Will dreams that he sees the coming of Antichrist, who is followed by friars. Conscience counsels the 'fools' of Christ to retreat into the Barn of Unity. After two attacks on the Barn, Conscience calls on Clergy to save him, in response to which the friars offer their services; at first Conscience rejects their offer, but ultimately courteously allows them to enter, on condition that they have suitable physical provision, that they leave the study of logic, and that they do not multiply uncontrollably (B.20.212-72). The friars, under the instructions of Envy, do precisely what they have been forbidden to do by Conscience, while the attack on Holy Church continues.

This act of courtesy towards potential enemies is made out of mercy, but in making it, Conscience does, nevertheless, attempt to guard the Church against the threat to which the friars expose it. For one of the first points Conscience makes is that the friars will have 'breed and clothes/ And othere necessities ynowe' (B.13.248-49). So Conscience wishes to change the very foundation of the fraternal orders in respect of their mendicancy.

Conscience's act of mercy serves, however, to provoke, rather than stem, the threat to the newly constructed Church, the Barn of Unity. Whereas Conscience himself had gone on the road, in purifying poverty, with Patience in Passus 13, in Passus 20

Conscience recognizes that poverty can also corrupt, particularly if it is the basis of an institution. For the mendicant friars' material need prompts them to sell the sacrament of penance short. If, in Langland's view, the Church's principle reason for existence is to dispense the sacrament of penance, then the friars are destroying the Church by transforming the sacrament of penance into a business. This last point is dramatically enacted in the last movement of the poem, which focuses on the question of beggary in relation to the sacrament of penance.

Conscience's first act of courteous mercy in Passus 20 is to all of Christendom under the pestilential attack of Kynde; his second is to the mendicant orders in particular, and his third is to a single friar, 'Frere Flaterere' (B.20.356). The logic of these last two moments is to test the strength of the Church against the power of sin represented by Antichrist. The strength of the Church is tested by first defining the institutional danger of begging, and then by seeing how begging affects, and corrupts, the sacrament of penance. This sacrament is crucial, since it allows Christians to 'capitalise' on the Atonement, by 'paying back' their spiritual debts to Piers the Plowman. In this last moment, the entry of 'Frere Flatterere', not only is the Church effectively rendered useless, but Conscience himself is weakened.

Conscience now calls for a spiritual 'leche', or doctor, to heal those who are wounded by sin under the attack of Antichrist. The confessor appointed by Conscience is too demanding for the wounded, and Contrition asks Conscience to call instead 'Frere Flaterere', since, he says, many a man is wounded through hypocrisy (B.20.316). Contrition's suggestion is itself hypocritical, and Conscience at first resists it, saying that

the secular clergy, or Piers Plowman, are perfectly adequate to act as 'leche'. Suddenly, however, Conscience himself changes his mind, and agrees that the friar be fetched.

This is a second astonishing moment involving Conscience, since the source of greatest spiritual strength, the individual conscience, is itself weakened. The implication of this must be that for Langland the individual conscience is sustained by the institution of the Church, and that individuals are in a profound sense constituted by the Church; as the Church is threatened, so too is the individual conscience. Conscience accepts a hypocrite; the line between accepting a hypocrite and being a hypocrite is very thin.

These two examples, then, demonstrate Langland's divided position with regard to the force of Conscience: Passus 13 champions that force, whereas Passus 20 questions it. Whatever we make of that contradiction, we are in a position to answer two questions: (i) why should Langland attack the friars with such force; and (ii) where precisely, does Langland locate the source of reform, in the Church, or in the soul?

Langland attacks the friars with such force precisely because he is profoundly *drawn* to a mendicant culture (see Passus 13),<sup>17</sup> but also because he simultaneously recognizes that an institution without material grounding is going to become a corrupt institution (see Passus 20). The friars do not have a material grounding; as a result, they corrupt the sacrament of penance and they therefore destroy the Church.

Langland would seem to locate the source of reform in the individual conscience. That is certainly the conclusion to be drawn from Passus 13. If that is true, we might want to place Langland in the vanguard of the Reformation and its new, confident

account of the fully-formed individual conscience as prior to any institution. The very fact that we might want to make that case is itself suggestive. The fact that the case cannot be made convincingly is more suggestive, of Langland's transitional status. This status is underlined by the poem's ending, as Conscience leaves the Church, alone (B.20.381-87), crying after grace. However much this might seem at first blush triumphantly to herald the Reformation moment, the departure of Langland's Conscience is no triumph, but rather a tragedy. Like much great art, Langland's is indeed prophetic. Langland does foresee the Reformation, but he recoils from what he foresees.

### **The function of institutional satire**

From what has been argued so far, we can see that satire of institutions is by no means incidental to the fate of the soul for Langland. Institutional critique is every much as part of a program of spiritual reform as is personal inspiration by Piers Plowman. But what kind of satire will Langland practise? If Conscience is the unerring arbiter of the truth, then we would expect Langland's ecclesiastical satire to be delivered without qualification of any kind, except those imposed by due caution. We would expect his satire to have the confidence, that is, of divine judgement. Does it?

In this final section I argue that Langland resists the aspiration to deliver absolute judgements. Langland refuses the absolute authority of conscience as if it could survey human action as from a position outside history. Instead, Langland remains committed to the reformist energies of history, energies that can be activated



only from *within* the flow of history. He refuses to make absolute distinctions between the saved and the damned, and his satire refuses to make absolute judgements.

Revolutionary satire derives its legitimacy from eschatology: one can see confidently into the present, and isolate those who must be rejected, because one already knows the end of the story. Knowing the end legitimates confident understanding of the beginning, too: the revolutionary satirist moves confidently through history, discriminating the saved from the damned there also. A reformist satire, by contrast, is less ready to discriminate between saved and damned, because the reformist is located *within* history. The reformist defers eschatological judgment to God.

The frontispiece to Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* of 1563 exemplifies the polemical advantage of satire as eschatological judgment driven by a conscience in full possession of certainty.<sup>18</sup>

Its lower divisions represent a historical battle: on the middle left the persecuted evangelical saints burn, trumpets raised to hail the elect on Christ's right. On the bottom left the Word is preached, without a word added or subtracted to the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew letters, illuminating the sermon. To the bottom right, by contrast, a Corpus Christi procession leads towards the celebration of the Eucharist in the middle right panel, in which the Host is offered up, as if to the devils, on Christ's left.

The contrast between right and left is historically specific: it's satire of the present. The image as a whole, though, borrows iconography from another, ahistorical scheme. The image of Christ seated on the rainbow, drawn ultimately from Revelations 4:3, also derives from standard iconography of the Last Judgment. In this image, then,

Christ does not judge sinners and saved at the end of time. Instead, he already discriminates between the saved and the damned *in this life*. Eschatology, or the end of time, is thus transferred to the flow of time and historical conflict. Absolute judgment is made from within the flow of history. Because the True Church is truly known across time, indifferently to historical sequence, non-scriptural practice can be damned with the confidence of divine approval.

What bearing do these remarks have on the practice of satire in *Piers Plowman*? I'll answer this question with regard to Langland's treatment of the institutional Church's most prominent representatives, the clergy.

One of the most recurrent features of revolutionary moments is their targeting of intellectuals, or, to put it another way, targeting of those with specialized forms of knowledge. This is no less true of the cultural revolution of the sixteenth-century as it was of the cultural and political revolutions of China and, say, Cambodia in the 1970s. In *Piers Plowman*, too, clerics come under severe attack. As we shall see, however, Langland resolutely resists the temptation to invest that satirical attack on intellectuals with eschatological force. Instead, he locates his vision profoundly within this world, and so accepts, and even underlines, the limits of that vision and that 'sufferance'. As a result, he calls on the past of his own poem.

As we have seen, Antichrist attacks at the end of *Piers Plowman*, apparently capping the poem's own movement from Passus 16 forward through Biblical time – through the Old Testament to Christ's birth and ministry, to the crucifixion and resurrection, and from there to Acts and, finally, to Revelation. In keeping with a

powerful antifraternial tradition, the friars are intimately associated with Antichrist: “Friars followed that fend, for he gave hem copes” (B.20.58). Under the ferocious attack of Antichrist, Conscience twice calls for Clergy’s help. At the first call, it is the friars, representing Clergy, who fail Conscience. Precisely by way of bolstering their position, indeed, the friars go to university: ‘Envye...heet freres go to scole / And lerne logyk and lawe’ (B.20.273-4). This dark account of university learning, associated as it is with the onset of Antichrist at the end of time, would seem to align Langland with a well established eschatological tradition of anti-clerical satire.

Langland, however, refuses to draw on the maximal energies of that tradition to which he is clearly alluding. For Langland refuses to invest his satire with the eschatological force of absolute divine judgment. Langland certainly evokes the Last Judgment, in his account of Christ’s life. After his act of Dobest, of giving power to Piers to absolve humans of sin duly repaid, Christ ascends to heaven, where ‘at domesday’ (not now), he will judge ‘The goode to the Godhede and to greet joye / And wikkede to wonye in wo withouten ende’ (B.19.198-9). What replaces that future judgment in the here and now of worldly time is the Pentecostal descent of the Holy Spirit, who distributes weapons for the fight with Antichrist ahead. In the time of that struggle, Christ’s ‘sufferance’ allows space to all manner of men. That sufferance is grounded in Christ’s mercy, and disallows the finality or the anger of judgment in this world. In the time of this world, ‘Piers the Plowman peyneth hym to tilye / As wel for a wastour and wenches of the stewes / As for himself and his servants’ (B.219.438-40).

The fact that Conscience errs in allowing Friar Flatterer into the Church is equally an acceptance of the limited vision, and the consequent check on anger, that Christ's own sufferance entails. That limited vision is a refusal of eschatological certainty and eschatological anger. What we find instead is a reaching back into the poem's own energies and narrative. For Conscience's final, and repeated call for Clergy fulfills a prophecy from within the poem itself. Even after the friars have betrayed the Church, Conscience, at the poem's end, continues to call for Clergy: 'Conscience cryed eft and bad Clergie helpe hym' (B.20.374).

This repeated call fulfills the prophecy agreed on by both Clergy and Conscience much earlier, in Passus 13, in what at face value looks like a permanent separation. Conscience, to Clergy's initial disgust, leaves the academic feast to convert the world with Patience. He would, he says, 'have pacience parfitliche than half thi pak of bokes' (B.13.202). Clergy, however, accurately prophesies the time when Conscience will need Clergy: Conscience will see the time 'Whan thou art wery forwalked, wilne me to counseille'. Using a revealing pun, Conscience agrees: "'If," he says, "Pacience be oure partyng felawe and pryvé with us bothe, / Ther nys wo in this world that we ne sholde amende"' (B.13.207-8).

The pun embedded in the phrase 'partyng felawe' expresses my point about Langland's recuperative satire: the phrase can mean both 'fellow with whom we take our leave' (a sense surely activated at this moment of leave taking), *and* 'our partner'. The narrative history of Langland's poem accentuates the provisional partings of satire, before registering the recuperative restorations. It's true, of course, that we do not see

this recuperation of Clergy by Conscience in action; we only hear patient Conscience passionately wish for it. The individual conscience needs the Church as much as the Church needs the individual conscience; the individual conscience's attacks on the failings of the institution are essential though in no way absolute.

### **Further Reading**

C. David Benson, *Public Piers Plowman* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003)

David A. Lawton, 'The Subject of *PP*', *YLS* 1 (1987), 1-30

Wendy Scase, '*Piers Plowman*' and the New Anticlericalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

James Simpson, 'The Power of Impropriety: Authorial Naming in *Piers Plowman*', in *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays*, edited by Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 145-165

---- *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text*, second, revised edition (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007)

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<sup>1</sup> OED, sense 2c: 'Each of those social and political freedoms which are considered to be the entitlement of all members of a community; a civil liberty.'

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118-72 (at p. 138). The essay was first published in 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Patterson, 'Historical Criticism and the Development of Chaucer Studies', in his *Negotiating the Past, The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3-39 (at p. 19).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Strohm, 'Conscience', in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, edited by Brian Cummings and James Simpson, *Twenty-First Century Approaches*, 2 (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 206-223.

<sup>5</sup> W. W. Skeat, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman...by William Langland*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886), 2:xxvii-xxxii.

<sup>6</sup> For a rich account, see R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, pp. 214-5.

<sup>8</sup> [I could supply a map of Medieval Cambridge to exemplify this point of the editors would like me to do that]

<sup>9</sup> All passus references are to the B-Text.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Hanna, 'Will's Work', in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), pp. 23-66.

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<sup>11</sup> Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the 'General Prologue' to the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> James Simpson, 'From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*,' *Medium Aevum*, 55 (1986), 1-23.

<sup>14</sup> Discussion of these two examples is drawn and abridged from James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text*, second, revised edition (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007), pp. 126-34, and 206-14 respectively.

<sup>16</sup> The doctor is cautiously though definitely specified as a friar by Will at B.13.70-77.

<sup>17</sup> For the initially surprising but, a deeper level, entirely plausible account that Langland admires the friars, see Lawrence M. Clopper, *Songes of Recelesnesse: Langland and the Franciscans* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Title page. John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, first edition (London, 1563) (reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics, University Library, University of Cambridge)