

Heresy, Orthodoxy, and English Vernacular Religion, 1480-1525*

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Robert Grosseteste famously defined heresy as ‘an opinion chosen by human perception contrary to holy scripture, publicly avowed and obstinately defended’.¹ While much of modern scholarship on medieval heresy has assumed precisely what Grosseteste asserts — that opinions differing from mainstream orthodoxy were conscious intellectual choices — recently a number of historians have challenged Grosseteste’s emphasis on intentionality in the makeup of the medieval heretic. Mark Pegg, the historian of thirteenth-century Catharism, argues, for instance, that those identified by inquisitors as Cathars were often not public avowers and obstinate defenders but rather unwitting by-products of ecclesiastical authorities’ need to define and establish right and wrong doctrine, to pigeonhole the beliefs and practices of people to whom the categories of Cathar and Catholic had not hitherto existed. Heresy resided, in this view, in the minds of its prosecutors rather than in the intentions of the accused.² A few scholars of late medieval England have echoed this approach

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¹ Quoted in Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, ed. H. Luard, 5 vols. (Rolls Series, London, 1880), v, 400; cf. Gratian, *Decretum*, C. 24, q. 3, cc. 27–31, *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. Aemilius Friedberg, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1879–81), i, cols 997–998.

² Mark Gregory Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245–1246* (Princeton, 2001), esp. 15-19, 141-51. This approach to heresy draws from the influential work of scholars like Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1972), Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (London, 1983; orig. 1966), and R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford, 1987), and challenges

in their view of late medieval English Lollards, suggesting that their heresy may have been no more than a clerical construct, their ideas best regarded as a series of attitudes related to ethics rather than a conscious choice to differ from the established church.³ This has not been the mainstream recent interpretation of the Lollard movement, however: the most influential scholar writing on the Lollards, Anne Hudson, has argued forcefully for what might be called an intellectualist approach to Lollardy, wherein the early Wycliffites' theology was central to the formation of a coherent heretical sect and that conscious adherence to this creed, as a fully-articulated theology, remained the central characteristic of the Lollards up to the Reformation.⁴

In this article I wish to re-examine the boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy in England in the late Lollard period, from about 1480 to 1525.⁵ I will argue that the border between a heretic and an orthodox believer was permeable and situational rather than strictly theological, shifting according to the social position of the person making the judgement. But I will also contend that the existence of heretics — those who consciously differed from the established church in late medieval England — was not invented by prosecuting authorities. To my mind the definitive issue is intention: to be a heretic in England in the decades around 1500 involved more than a concern for the poor or an interest in vernacular bibles (impulses found among both the 'orthodox' and the 'heretical'), it involved a choice to reject the authority of the Catholic church. The surviving evidence of later fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century

the 'intellectualist' (the word is Pegg's) approach of historians like Arno Borst (Les Cathares, trans. Charles Roy [Paris, 1978]) or Bernard Hamilton (e.g. his 'Wisdom from the East: The reception by the Cathars of Eastern Dualist Texts', in Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (eds.), Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530 [Cambridge, 1994], 38-60), who focus on the transmission of ideas.

³ As argued recently, for instance, by P. J. P. Goldberg, 'Coventry's "Lollard" Programme and the Making of Utopia', in Rosemary Horrox and Sarah Rees Jones (eds.), Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities, 1200-1630 (Cambridge, 2001), 103; also earlier by J. J. Scarisbrick, The Reformation and the English People (Oxford, 1984), 6; R. N. Swanson, Church and Society in Late Medieval England (Oxford, 1989), 335.

⁴ See Anne Hudson, The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History (Oxford, 1988), 5, 17-18, 278-81; Curtis Bostick, The Antichrist and the Lollards: Apocalypticism in Late Medieval and Reformation England (Leiden, 1998), esp. 176, 194. Hudson's Premature Reformation and Richard Rex's new short survey The Lollards (London, 2002) are the standard works on Lollardy; for a thorough and up-to-date bibliography, see Derek G. Pitard, 'Bibliographies for Lollard Studies', <<http://home.att.net/~lollard/bibhome.html>> (2003).

⁵ These dates respectively denote the revival of prosecution (and thus evidence) for Lollardy after a half-century hiatus and the approximate beginning of the Reformation in England.

prosecution of heresy delineates individuals, connected to one another by their common participation in clandestine gatherings, who wilfully and collectively differentiated themselves from the majority (and, in their eyes, godless) church. At the same time, however, the cohesiveness of these groups of heretics should not be exaggerated: while a few remained devout adherents of their dissenting version of Christianity, many others drifted in and out, experimenting with the new ideas but ultimately abandoning them, especially in the wake of prosecutions. Late Lollard ideology itself was also less cohesive than Hudson has argued: it was tied not so much to a strict theological tradition going back to Wyclif and his disciples, but rather to a self-conscious separation from orthodoxy based only loosely on Wycliffite doctrine and most importantly on direct access to the word of God, often although not always through the reading of scripture. Thus if early sixteenth-century Lollardy was more than a vague bundle of attitudes, it was also less than a coherently organized sect with a fully-articulated creed.

I will develop this argument by considering vernacular devotional practices — English prayer and the reading of English books — among the heterodox and the orthodox in the years before the Reformation. A number of historians, drawing from evidence that even knowledge of the Lord's Prayer could be prosecuted as heresy in the decades around 1500, have assumed that the use of the vernacular in religion was an unequivocal marker of heresy in pre-Reformation England. While it is undeniable that both Lollards and their opponents made strong associations between heresy and the use of the English language in religion, we must also consider the flood of vernacular books coming from the early English presses, published by printers with apparently fully orthodox intentions, yet which included, among other things, versions of supposedly forbidden prayers. These books, Catholic in authorship and intention, were nonetheless popular among Lollards, who found the texts' content compatible with their own desire for religious matter in English. A discussion of late Lollard reading not only illuminates the plasticity of the categories of orthodoxy and heresy, but also challenges Hudson's argument about the continuity of the Lollard creed from the late fourteenth century to the Reformation. There is very little evidence that late Lollards ever saw, possessed, or read anything in the corpus of Wycliffite writings, excepting the scriptural translations. Instead, the Lollards read and profited from English devotional treatises originally aimed at an orthodox audience. The nature of vernacular religion in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries does not allow for simple and easily defined categories of orthodox and heterodox based solely on whether the books or prayers were in English or Latin; the language

and even the contents of the devotional material were less important than the ways in which they were read, spoken, and understood.

Religion in the Vernacular around 1500

In 1603, Robert Parsons, the English Catholic polemicist, attacked his deceased but still influential counterpart on the Protestant side, John Foxe, for Foxe's characterization of the burning of seven heretics in Coventry in 1520. As Foxe had described in his *Acts and Monuments*, 'the only cause' of the arrest and execution of four shoemakers, a glover, a hosier, and a widow, was that they had taught their children the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the 10 commandments in English.⁶ Parsons hoped his reader would find this as incredible as he did:

⁶ Robert Parsons, *A Treatise of Three Conversions of England from Paganisme to Christian Religion*, 3 vols ([St-Omer], 1603), ii, 408–9; A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640* (hereafter *STC*) (2nd ed.; London, 1976), no. 19416. Parsons was commenting on Foxe's story of the 'seven godly martyrs' of Coventry, the outlines of which story Foxe first told in his Latin martyrology in 1559 (John Foxe, *Rerum in ecclesia gestarum* [Basel, 1559], 116–17; reprinted in Shannon McSheffrey and Norman Tanner (eds.), *Lollards of Coventry 1486–1522* (Camden Society, 5th ser., xxiii, Cambridge, 2003) [hereafter *Lollards of Coventry*], 295–6); in its vernacular version first in 1563 (John Foxe, *Actes & monuments of these latter & perillous dayes, touching matters of the church* [London, 1563; *STC* 11222] [hereafter *A&M* (1563)], 420–21; *Lollards of Coventry*, 296–308); then in 1570 in its final revised form (read by Parsons) (John Foxe, *The first [second] volume of the ecclesiasticall history contaynyng the Actes and Monumentes, newly recognised and enlarged*, 2 vols continuously paginated [London, 1570; *STC* 11223] [hereafter *A&M* (1570)], 1107; *Lollards of Coventry*, 308–14). Subsequent editions of the *Acts and Monuments* repeated the same text without alteration. A 19th-century edition of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, (ed. George Townsend, 8 vols (London, 1843), hereafter *A&M* [1843]), frequently cited by modern scholars, is largely a reprint of the 1570 and 1583 editions of *Acts and Monuments*, but it is not always strictly accurate in its transcription. It is, however, much more widely available than the 16th-century editions. Here I will cite both the earliest 16th-century edition in which particular material appears and, for ease of reference, the 19th-century Townsend edition. On John Foxe and his martyrologies, see Thomas S. Freeman, 'Fate, Faction, and Fiction in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*', *The Historical Journal*, xliii (2000), 601–23; and David Loades (ed.), *John Foxe and the English Reformation* (Aldershot, 1997), esp. Loades, 'Introduction: John Foxe and the Editors', 1–11, John King, 'Fiction and Fact in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*', 12–35, and David Newcombe, 'Appendix: A Finding List of Extant Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Editions of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*', 306–30. On Parsons and the *Three Conversions*, see Thomas H. Clancy, *Papist Pamphleteers: The Allen-Persons Party and the Political Thought of the Counter-Reformation in England, 1572–1615* (Chicago, 1964), esp. 108, 133–4. The debate regarding vernacular scriptures in the post-Reformation period is illuminated by Alexandra Walsham, "'Domme Preachers'?" Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print', *Past and Present*, clxviii (2000), 72–123, esp. 75, 97.

what discreet man liuinge will beleuee him in this behalfe, that so many poore and ignorant people should be condemned, and put to the fire aliue, for only teachinge their children, the Lords prayer, the Creed, and ten commandements in English? ... Who (I say) will beleuee this monstrous tale, which Foxe affirmeth ... [this] fiction, that we [Catholics] hold readinge of scriptures in English, as also the vsinge of these parts of Christian Doctrine in our mother tongue, to be heresie.⁷

The points of view held by polemicists Foxe and Parsons epitomize the apparently irreconcilable evidence about religion in the vernacular in early sixteenth-century England. On the one hand, we know that on a number of occasions late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century bishops or their deputies charged Lollard suspects, as an aspect of their heresy, with reciting and teaching the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Creed in English. As some prominent scholars of the Lollard movement have interpreted it, often drawing on Foxe, such evidence indicates that association of Lollardy with the English language was so strong that from about 1410 until the Reformation all religion expressed in vernacular terms was automatically considered suspect. The early decades of the sixteenth century have in particular been depicted as a period in which even advocacy of the Our Father in English was a dangerous act.⁸ On the other hand, however, as Parsons suggested and Eamon Duffy has more recently outlined,⁹ we have considerable evidence that knowledge of basic elements of religion in the vernacular language was being encouraged as an element of orthodox religion in the years around 1500. This is most strikingly exemplified in the outpouring of English-language devotional literature from the early English presses, which frequently included English versions of the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Creed. In a sense, both Foxe and Parsons were right: people were prosecuted for knowing and teaching prayers in English, and yet in other circumstances Catholic authorities regarded such knowledge as laudable and orthodox. The polemicists' antithetical arguments can be reconciled by acknowledging that the issue was not so much the content or the

⁷ Parsons, A Treatise of Three Conuersions, ii, 410–1. The italics in this quotation are original, indicating paraphrase from Foxe's work.

⁸ Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and Literacy', in Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion (London, 1984; reprinted from History, lxii [1977], 347–71), 212–4, 216–7; Anne Hudson, 'Lollardy: The English Heresy?' in Lollards and their Books (London, 1985), 162; Hudson, Premature Reformation, 31, 166, 472.

⁹ Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580 (New Haven, 1992), esp. 53–87.

language of the prayers — or of the English books that were also a hot issue in Lollard prosecutions in this period — as the intentions of the person praying or reading. Heresy was at least as much — or more — about authority as it was about doctrine.

Although less prominent than Lollard objections to the eucharist and practices associated with the cult of saints, the issue of vernacular prayer arose in a number of different heresy prosecutions between 1480 and 1525. Some of our evidence for concern about English prayer comes from original sources. In 1486, for example, Bishop John Hales of the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield forced two men, each accused of a number of heretical opinions and practices, to abjure their advocacy of vernacular prayer. John Smyth of Coventry forswore his opinion that each person should know the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Creed in English, while Richard Gylmyn of the same city was accused of having the same three prayers in the vernacular, presumably in a book or tract.¹⁰ Most of the remaining evidence for Catholic prosecutions of vernacular prayer as a heresy to be abjured comes to us mediated through the martyrologies of John Foxe. Although Foxe's work, often preserving material from ecclesiastical records that have since been lost, is both invaluable and inescapable for the study of later Lollardy, it is imperative to keep in mind his polemical purposes when evaluating the evidence he presents.¹¹ It is undeniable that vernacular prayer was sometimes associated with heresy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, but it is also possible to make too much of evidence derived from Foxe.

Foxe's account of Bishop John Longland's prosecutions of the Lollards of Buckinghamshire and surrounding counties in the 1520s, the original records of which are no longer extant, contains a number of references to the learning of the Pater noster, the Ave, the Creed, and other prayers in English. William

¹⁰ Lollards of Coventry, 72–3. For similar concerns in the early fifteenth century, see Norman P. Tanner (ed.), Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428–31, (Camden Society, 4th ser., xx, London, 1977), 73. Another man accused of heretical beliefs who abjured before Hales in 1490, Robert Clerke alias Teylour, confessed to having believed that it was damnable to say the Our Father or Hail Mary (Lollards of Coventry, 95–96); there is no evidence, however, of his connection with the Lollards of Coventry and I would argue that he was a religious eccentric rather than a member of the Lollard community. John A. F. Thomson, The Later Lollards, 1414–1520 (London, 1965), 107, concurs, but cf. Hudson, Premature Reformation, 311.

¹¹ On the overall question of Foxe's accuracy, see Freeman, 'Fate, Faction'; and Loades (ed.), John Foxe and the English Reformation, esp. Loades, 'Introduction', 9–10; King, 'Fiction and Fact', 12–35. On Foxe as a source for Lollardy, see John A. F. Thomson, 'John Foxe and Some Sources for Lollard History: Notes for a Critical Appraisal', Studies in Church History, ii (1965), 251–7.

Littlepage, for instance, said that Thurstan Littlepage ‘had taught him ... the Pater noster, & Aue in English. His Crede in Englishe he learned of his grandmother’.¹² James Morden similarly testified against Alyce Atkyns, who learned from him ‘the Pater noster, Aue Maria and Creede in Englishe’.¹³ By Foxe’s account, the learning of English prayer was seen both by the Lollards of the Chiltern Hills and their prosecuting bishop as a component of Lollard practice; alongside these charges were the usual accusations of Lollard objections to the real presence in the eucharist, to pilgrimage, and to other Catholic practices and beliefs. It was not Foxe’s practice to invent material, so it is likely that the association of English prayer and heresy did indeed occur in Longland’s prosecutions; but it must be recalled that even as Foxe presents it the advocacy of English prayer was prosecuted in the context of other accusations of heresy.

In the case of the Coventry Lollards burned in 1520, however, Foxe was less circumspect, perhaps because in this case he worked from oral rather than documentary sources. As we have seen from Robert Parsons’s account, Foxe reported that six men and one woman of Coventry were burned in 1520 ‘only’¹⁴ because they passionately desired to say English prayers. Foxe’s story of the ‘7 Godly martyrs’, as he called them, underwent a number of revisions through the editions of the martyrology published in his lifetime, and it is worth a closer look to examine how Foxe used narratives like this to highlight themes he wished to emphasize.

Foxe did not apparently have access to the original ecclesiastical records of the 1520 burnings, relying instead upon oral histories and popular memory for the stories he fashioned.¹⁵ The first version, which appeared in the 1559

¹² A&M (1570), 952; A&M (1843), iv, 228.

¹³ A&M (1570), 949; A&M (1843), iv, 225. See also A&M (1563), 621; A&M (1570), 951, 952, 957, 1117–8, 1119; A&M (1843), iv, 227, 228, 235, 580–1, 582, 584.

¹⁴ A&M (1563), 420; Lollards of Coventry, 297. Foxe rewrote this somewhat in subsequent editions to say that English prayer was the ‘principall cause’. A&M (1570), 1107; Lollards of Coventry, 309.

¹⁵ Foxe tended to distinguish between his paraphrases from ecclesiastical records and his own commentaries or narratives by typeface, italics most often indicating a translation or paraphrase from original records; the Coventry material is not italicized nor in any other way does it indicate that Foxe used ecclesiastical records. Foxe’s source for the story may well have been his wife, Agnes Randall, or another member of her family; Agnes’s father was a citizen of Coventry and Foxe himself stayed briefly in the city in the 1540s (J. F. Mozley, John Foxe and his Book [London, 1940], 27). The subsequent revisions of Foxe’s account of the Coventry martyrs indicate that he made further enquiries in order to flesh out the original story, probably on his return to England with the accession of Elizabeth. His naming of the mayor and sheriffs at the beginning of his 1563 account (A&M [1563], 420; Lollards of Coventry, 297) suggests

Latin publication Rerum in ecclesia gestarum written while Foxe was in exile during the reign of Mary I, is somewhat vague, recounting the story of the wife of a prominent man named Smyth who was burned along with six men outside the town walls of Coventry. The woman, as Foxe related it, was nearly spared the execution intended for the others, but as she was being escorted home, the summoner who led her by the arm discovered a paper hidden in her sleeve on which was written the Lord's Prayer. Because of this, she was led back and consigned to the fire along with her companions. The episode is loosely dated as occurring around 1490 (about thirty years out of date).¹⁶

After gathering better information upon his return to England, Foxe was able to develop the story: in the first English-language edition of his martyrology, published by John Daye in 1563, Foxe told both an expanded version of the story of Mistress Smyth and the tale of another leading Coventry Lollard, Robert Hachet, bravely standing up to the bishop, castigating him for denying access to vernacular prayer:

Why my Lorde (saieth he [Hachet]) we desyre no more but the Lordes praier, the articles of the christian faythe, & the commaundements in Englishe, which I thynke suerly euery christian man ought to haue, and wyll you punyshe vs for that? Unto this one doctour aunswered and sayd. Lo my Lorde you may see, what fellowes would these be if they might raigne? At the which woordes, the byshop cried away with them, & so gaue iudgement on them all to be burned.¹⁷

This story was excised from subsequent editions of Foxe's martyrology, perhaps because of its implausibility, although Foxe retained the tale of

that he used a mayoral list or civic annal for some of his information, but the story as a whole is far more extensive than anything found in such a source for this period. Foxe, or his agents, almost certainly gathered other parts of the story from local informants, one of whom was quite possibly the 'mother Halle' named in the 1570 and later versions (A&M [1570], 1107; Lollards of Coventry, 311; A&M [1843], iv, 558). As Tom Freeman has pointed out to me in private communication, after Catholic attacks on the accuracy of the 1563 edition of Acts and Monuments Foxe was particularly concerned in 1570 to name his sources. He was especially sensitive about the issue of execution for the reading of vernacular bibles: Nicholas Harpsfield, in Dialogi sex contrasummi pontificatus, monasticae vitae, sanctorum Sacrarum imaginum oppugnatores et pseudomartyres (Antwerp, 1566), 827–8 and 833, had called him a liar for making this charge.

¹⁶ John Foxe, Rerum in ecclesia gestarum (Basel, 1559), 116–7; Lollards of Coventry, 295–6. For the story of Joan Smyth of Coventry, see Shannon McSheffrey, Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities (Philadelphia, 1995), 34–7.

¹⁷ A&M (1563), 420–1; Lollards of Coventry, 297–9.

Mistress Smyth's scroll and continued to suggest that the 'principall cause' of the Coventry Lollards' apprehension was their instruction of their children in the Lord's Prayer and the ten commandments in English.¹⁸ Given the substantial evidence elsewhere that the seven Coventry heretics in question held a full spectrum of Lollard belief,¹⁹ we must regard Foxe's characterization of the reasons for their arrest as either misinformed or disingenuous. Nonetheless, although Foxe slanted his coverage and sometimes misrepresented, wittingly or unwittingly, the context in which English prayer was prosecuted, other sources, especially Hales's register, show that he was not inventing (as Parsons alleged) the concern of late medieval church authorities over praying in English.

The question of vernacular religious knowledge in late medieval England was not straightforward, as Anne Hudson and Margaret Aston have pointed out. It seems likely that the association of heresy with the use of English made the issue problematic through much of the fifteenth century. Of particular importance were a number of ecclesiastical ordinances promulgated in the early decades of the fifteenth century, including Archbishop Arundel's Constitutions of 1409, which placed tight restrictions on the use of the vernacular both in religious books and in sermons (and by extension, perhaps in scripturally-derived prayers like the Our Father or the Hail Mary).²⁰ These ordinances had a chilling effect on religious writings in the English vernacular; even the great opponent of Lollardy, the priest Reginald Pecock, who tried to combat the Lollards on their own turf by writing extensively in the vernacular,

¹⁸ A&M (1570), 1107; Lollards of Coventry, 309–10; A&M (1843), iv, 557–8.

¹⁹ The main manuscript sources for the Coventry Lollards, all held in the Lichfield Record Office, are MS. B/A/1/12, Register of Bishop John Hales of Coventry and Lichfield (1459–90), fos. 166r–169v; MS. B/A/1/14i, Register of Bishop Geoffrey Blyth of Coventry and Lichfield (1503–31), fos. 72r, 98r–100r; MS. B/C/13, Court Book of Bishop Geoffrey Blyth of Coventry and Lichfield (the 'Lichfield Court Book'), 1511–12; and MS. B/V/1/1, Bishop Geoffrey Blyth's Visitation Book, 1515–25, p. 99. These records have been edited and translated in Lollards of Coventry. Original records of the 1520 and 1522 prosecution and execution of Coventry Lollards do not survive (with the exception of an insert into the Lichfield Court Book, now fo. 9r [Lollards of Coventry, 283–4], regarding the 1522 episode); our fullest accounts come from the various editions of Foxe's martyrologies.

²⁰ David Wilkins, Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae (4 vols; London, 1737; rept. Brussels, 1964), iii, 314–9, esp. 317; Nicholas Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', Speculum lxx (1995), 822–64; Hudson, Premature Reformation, 431–6; Aston, 'Lollardy and Literacy', 212–6; H. Leith Spencer, English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages (Oxford, 1993), 134–95; Steven Justice, 'Lollardy', in David Wallace (ed.), The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature (Cambridge, 1999), 676–8; Henry Ansgar Kelly, 'Lollard Inquisitions: Due and Undue Process', in Alberto Ferreiro (ed.), The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages (Leiden, 1998), 288, 296.

was convicted of heresy in his own right in 1457 at least partly for writing his refutations in English.²¹ But the chill was not total. As Fiona Somerset has recently argued, orthodox academic discourses on the issue of the English bible were not as univocal as we have sometimes thought; even in the years just preceding the Constitutions, usually characterized as a period of increasing identification of advocacy of vernacular scriptures with heresy, it was possible for an Oxford scholar to promote an English bible without censure or other repercussion.²² Nor was Arundel's attitude regarding lay religious education shared by all his successors in the archiepiscopal seat: towards the middle of the fifteenth century Bishop John Stafford of the diocese of Bath and Wells (later to become Archbishop of Canterbury) ordered a translation of various elements of the Christian faith, including the Creed and the ten commandments, and a copy to be placed in each church of his diocese.²³ A similar didactic purpose underlay much of late medieval religious drama, including the Pater Noster and Creed plays of the city of York, which presented the Our Father and the Creed to the inhabitants of northern England's major city in their own language, elucidated by scenes illustrating each article of the prayers.²⁴

Stafford's advocacy of vernacular religious learning may have been a minority position in the middle years of the fifteenth century, but the situation was soon to change. The advent of the English vernacular printed book in the last decades of the fifteenth century transformed the nature of English religious culture, with the early printing presses producing a deluge of editions of vernacular religious treatises. The dominant printers of the early period — William Caxton, Wynkyn de Worde, and Richard Pynson — were by no means Lollard sympathizers, but nonetheless printed most of their religious literature in English.²⁵ The transition from manuscript to print of the Festial, a late

²¹ Hudson, Premature Reformation, 55–8.

²² Fiona Somerset, 'Professionalizing Translation at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century: Ullerston's Determinacio, Arundel's Constitutiones', in Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson (eds.), The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity (College Park, Penn., 2003), 145–57.

²³ The Register of John Stafford, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1425–1443, 2 vols., ed. Thomas S. Holmes (Somerset Record Society, xxxi–xxxii, London, 1915–16), ii, 173–80.

²⁴ The earliest reference to the Creed play is about 1446, while the Pater Noster play is first evinced about 1378 in John Wyclif's writing; both continued to be performed into the Reformation period. Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York: The Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play', Speculum, 1 (1975), 55–90, especially 57–9, 71.

²⁵ H. S. Bennett, English Books and Readers 1475 to 1557 (Cambridge, 1952), 57–8, 65–76; N. F. Blake, 'William Caxton', in M. C. Seymour (ed.), English Writers of the Late Middle Ages, 3 vols. (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), iii, 1–68; Seth Lerer, 'William Caxton', in David Wallace (ed.), The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature (Cambridge,

fourteenth-century English sermon cycle written by John Mirk, makes an interesting case.²⁶ Mirk, a Lollard-fighting parish priest, argued that greater lay knowledge of the basic prayers in English could be a powerful weapon against heresy.²⁷ Despite Mirk's anti-Lollard intentions, the Festial was little copied in the decades following Arundel's Constitutions, perhaps because its advocacy of the vernacular was deemed too sensitive; the few copies of the cycle made in the post-1409 period tended to omit the sermon which most strongly encouraged lay vernacular knowledge of the Pater noster.²⁸ Tastes had changed by the end of the century, however: as Susan Powell has pointed out in her study of the text's printing history, Mirk's cycle underwent a remarkable revival of popularity. Printed first by Caxton in 1483 and in twenty-one further editions by a number of different printers before 1519, it was possibly the most popular English work of the early printing period.²⁹ Powell has hypothesized that Caxton's intended audience for the book was both clerics and pious laypeople and that the number of subsequent editions suggests that his sense of the market was astute.³⁰ Caxton's inclusion of material encouraging lay knowledge of vernacular prayer is instructive. Although Caxton's exemplar for his 1483 printing came from the manuscript tradition without the Pater noster sermon, he decided, probably completely coincidentally, to supplement the Festial with another shorter collection of sermons, the Quattuor Sermones. The purpose of the Quattuor Sermones was specifically to teach the basic tenets of the faith in English, starting with the Our Father and moving on to the Hail Mary, the Creed, the ten commandments and other elements of the Catholic faith.³¹ Although Mirk's sermon cycle had thus likely been censored earlier in the fifteenth century, by the 1480s Caxton saw no reason to exclude vernacular

1999), 720–38; Barbara Belyea, 'Caxton's Reading Public', English Language Notes, xix (1981), 14–19; A. S. G. Edwards and Carol M. Meale, 'The Marketing of Printed Books in Late Medieval England', The Library, xv (1993), 95–124; George R. Keiser, 'The Mystics and the Early English Printers: The Economics of Devotionalism', in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1987 (Cambridge, 1987), 9–26, esp. 10–12.

²⁶ Susan Powell, 'What Caxton Did to the Festial: The Festial from Manuscript to Printed Edition', Journal of the Early Book Society, i (1997), 48–77; Spencer, English Preaching, 182–3; STC 17957–17973.5.

²⁷ See, in its modern edition, John Mirk, Mirk's Festial, ed. Theodore Erbe, Early English Text Society, Extra Series, xcvi (1906), vol. 1, pp. 282, 299.

²⁸ Powell, 'What Caxton Did', 49.

²⁹ Ibid., 48.

³⁰ Ibid., esp. 48–9.

³¹ John Mirk, Festial and Quattuor Sermones (Westminster, 1483; STC 17957) and subsequent editions (STC 17958–17973.5); Powell, 'What Caxton Did', 49–53.

prayers in a book aimed at laypeople and so inserted another set of sermons with an even more extensive vernacular catechetical program than found in Mirk's original.

The Festial is only one of a number of books printed in this period with English versions of the Our Father and other basic Christian prayers. Especially after 1500, a significant number of editions of religious works featured versions of these prayers in English, including The Arte or Crafte to Lyue Well (Wynkyn de Worde, 1505) and the Kalender of Shepherdes (printed by Pynson in 1506 and by Wynkyn de Worde in 1508 and many times thereafter).³² In Pynson's foreword to his translation of the Kalender, he says that he wants to present this work in English so that all people can come to know the elements of their faith, such as the ten commandments, as well as they already know their Pater noster.³³ The Art or Crafte to Lyue Well and the Kalender not only provided translation of and commentary on the Our Father, Hail Mary, Creed, and ten commandments, but also illustrated them graphically with woodcuts containing the words of the prayers incorporated into the image, in speech balloons.³⁴

Books published in England in the decades around 1500 make it clear that knowledge of the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Creed, and the ten commandments in English was not associated exclusively with Lollardy by the early years of the sixteenth century. Although some scholars have characterized religious knowledge in the vernacular as prima facie evidence for Lollardy in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries,³⁵ this overstates the case. I have

³² The Art or Crafte to Lyue Well (Westminster, 1505 [STC 792]); Kalender of Shepherdes (London, 1506 [STC 22408; see also 22409–22411]). On orthodox advocacy of vernacular prayer in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, see Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 53–87 (see 81–3 for discussion of the books cited here). Although, as David Loades notes, the printing of this style of religious literature abruptly ceased in the early 1530s ('Books and the English Reformation prior to 1558', in Jean-François Gilmont (ed.), The Reformation and the Book [Aldershot, 1998], 285), Protestant catechisms contained many of the same basic elements (instruction in the Creed, the ten commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacraments), if arranged in a different form. On the latter, see Ian Green, The Christian's ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England c. 1530–1740 (Oxford, 1996), 300–556.

³³ Kalender of Shepherdes, sig. A2r.

³⁴ Art or Crafte to Lyue Well, fo. 15r; Kalender, sig. G3v–G5v. Pynson's woodcuts are virtually identical to Wynkyn de Worde's. Reproductions of the woodcuts of the Our Father (from the Art or Crafte) and the Hail Mary (from a later edition of the Kalender) can be seen in Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, plates 37 and 39 (between 116–117).

³⁵ Aston, 'Lollardy and Literacy', 213–14, 216–17. Hudson says several times that the possession of vernacular scriptures was 'primary' or 'sufficient' evidence of heresy (Premature Reformation, 211–12, 231, 383), although in other sections of her book she notes that English prayer or possession of English books was corroborative rather than primary evidence (166,

uncovered no plausible evidence from this period where the sole accusation in a charge of heresy was the knowledge of English prayers — or, as will be discussed below, the holding of English books. Advocacy of vernacular prayer and possession of English books were prosecuted when they were part of a complex of beliefs that challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and indeed only became heretical in the eyes of ecclesiastical officials when associated with other challenges to orthodoxy.

The root problem perceived by bishops and their deputies in their citation of vernacular prayer as a heretical practice was the use of such prayers to undermine the Church's authority. For instance, in 1514 a number of suspects were brought before Bishop Richard Fox of Winchester and accused, as was Thomas Wattys of Dogmersfield (Hants.), of using the articles of the Creed to promote their objections to the doctrine of the real presence in the eucharist:

I confesse my self to haue erred in making false declaration vpon this clause of the crede: 'God ascended in to hevyn and from thens he is to come to deme both quycke and dede'. Whervpon I erroneously declared and bileved thus: 'Where thou good lord art in hevyn and art to come thens to deme both quicke and deed, then thou art not here in erth in flesh and blode in thaltar in fourme of brede, for thou wolt not be at noe chawing of tethe but thou wolt be etyn with heryng of erys [hearing of ears]'.³⁶

These accusations suggest that it was not the vernacularity of Lollard prayer but the accompanying exegesis that was at issue.

Apart from using clauses of the Creed as a basis for denying the real presence, another possible difference between Lollard and orthodox attitudes towards English prayer is bilingualism. Although printed devotional treatises aimed at the orthodox by no means avoided English, the assumption underlying these treatises was that the truly devout and knowledgeable layperson understood a healthy smattering of Latin as well. English versions of the Pater and the Ave were encouraged because they helped layfolk understand the Latin words they already knew well and probably used on a regular basis.³⁷ But while

234).

³⁶ Winchester, Hampshire Record Office, MSS A1/18–A1/20, Register of Bishop Richard Fox, 4 vols (hereafter Reg. Fox), iii, fo. 73v; see also iii, fos. 74v, 74v–75r, 76r.

³⁷ The importance of knowing the Latin words to the Our Father is emphasized, for instance, in A Lytell Geste How the Plowman Lerned His Pater Noster (Westminster, 1510

it cannot safely be claimed that orthodox doctrine forbade English prayer, Lollards on the other hand may have denigrated the usefulness or efficacy of Latin versions. Thus when James Morden ‘vused hys Pater noster and Creede so much in Englishe, that he had forgotte many wordes therof in Latyne, and therefore was inioyned by bishop Smyth to say it no more in Englishe, but onely in Latyne’, or when Thomas Coupland accused Thomas Couper and Roger Hardyng ‘because these ii. could not saye their Crede in Latine’, it may have been their rejection of Latin words that was at issue rather than advocacy of English.³⁸ Lollard rejection of Latin was part of an overall rejection of Catholic authority and, from the point of view of the ecclesiastical prosecutors, it was the rejection of authority that was the real crux of the matter.

* * *

If language was an issue for prayers, in the eyes of those concerned about heresy in the decades around 1500 it was even more a matter of controversy for books. In turn, Lollards themselves highly prized access to vernacular religious writings, particularly but not exclusively the scriptures. Direct access to religious knowledge, and in particular to the word of God as contained in the Christian bible, was the central core of Lollard practice. Gatherings of Lollards consisted mostly of listening to a man or woman read aloud, and members of Lollard communities expended a good deal of energy acquiring and trading English books. Bishop Geoffrey Blyth of Coventry and Lichfield, who regarded such books as agents of the spread of heresy, saw this as especially dangerous. In a letter he wrote to the bishop of Lincoln, William Smith, Blyth remarks that by imprisoning the Coventry suspects he has not only been able to get them to confess, but also ‘by such meanes I have gete to my hands right many dampnable books, which shall noye no more by Goddes grace’.³⁹

Reference to books is made throughout the records of prosecution of Lollards in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries: receiving, possessing, or listening to ‘books of heresy’ were in themselves considered heretical acts. But while the records often refer generically to the volumes in Lollard possession as ‘books containing heresy’, ‘books of heretical depravity’, or ‘very bad books’, those specifically identified in the record are in fact mostly books of scripture. The Lollards of Coventry, a heretical community for which we have a substantial amount of evidence regarding reading material, traded

[STC 20034]).

³⁸ A&M (1570), 949, 951; A&M (1843), iv, 225, 227. Cf. Hudson, Premature Reformation, 31.

³⁹ Lollards of Coventry, 140.

around and read to one another from all books of the Bible — copies of the Old and New Testaments are mentioned, along with separate volumes of the Psalter, the book of Tobit, the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles of Paul and James, and the Revelation.⁴⁰ Lollard witnesses in Coventry and elsewhere also made frequent mention of books ‘de mandatis’ (‘on the commandments’), which were possibly commentaries on the decalogue rather than a simple translation,⁴¹ and there are two references to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, printed in 1507 by Julian Notary.⁴²

Bible translations were, of course, hardly uncontroversial in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England.⁴³ From the time of Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409, laypeople were to hold scriptural translations only after

⁴⁰ Old Testament: Lollards of Coventry, 116, 118, 125, 132; New Testament: *ibid.*, 117–18, 157; Psalter: *ibid.*, 155 (cf. 145); Tobit: *ibid.*, 106, 116, 233, 241; Gospels: *ibid.*, 103, 106, 152, 156, 157, 173; Matthew: *ibid.*, 117, 146; John: *ibid.*, 118, 146; Gospels and Epistles: *ibid.*, 72, 146, 182; Acts: *ibid.*, 117; Epistles of Paul: *ibid.*, 116, 117, 130, 133, 147, 173; James: *ibid.*, 155; Revelation: *ibid.*, 146. Roger Landesdale mentioned a book ‘of heretical depravity’ that began, ‘At the begynnyngh whan God man’ (*ibid.*, 118); this may well have been Genesis (in the Wycliffite version, Gen. 1:1 is rendered ‘In the bigynnyngh God made of nou3t heuene and erthe’), but equally it may have been a Lollard text or orthodox devotional work. The Lollards of the Chiltern Hills and London had similar reading habits: see A&M (1570), 940–1, 944, 947–62, 1117–9; A&M (1843), iv, 207–8, 215–16, 222–40, 580–4; Dublin, Trinity College, MS. 775, Archbishop Ussher’s Notebook [a 17th-century transcript of parts of the courtbook of Bishop Fitzjames of London from c. 1511; hereafter Ussher’s Notebook], fos. 122v–124r.

⁴¹ Lollards of Coventry, 106, 117, 128, 146, 155, 158, 179, 194, 207, 217, 241; Ussher’s Notebook, fos. 122v–125r; Trowbridge, Wiltshire Record Office (hereafter WRO), Register of Bishop Thomas Langton, 2 vols (hereafter Reg. Langton), ii, fos. 4v, 35r, 36r; WRO, Register of Bishop John Blythe (hereafter Reg. J. Blythe), 74v; WRO, Register of Bishop Edmund Audley (hereafter Reg. Audley), fo. 144rv; Reg. Fox, iii, fos. 73v, 74v; A&M (1570), 940–1; 949, 952, 956–61; A&M (1843), iv, 207–8; 225, 228, 234–9. On the commentaries, see below, n.70.

⁴² Ussher’s Notebook, fo. 124r; A&M (1570), 959; A&M (1843), iv, 237; The Treatys of Nycodemus Gospell (London, 1507 [STC 18565]).

⁴³ On Lollards and the bible, see Margaret Deanesly, The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions (Cambridge, 1920; reprint 1966); Hudson, Premature Reformation, 228–77; David Lawton, ‘Englishing the Bible, 1066–1549’, in David Wallace (ed.), The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature (Cambridge, 1999), 454–82. Debates about the appropriateness of scriptural translations were neither confined to England nor unknown among Protestants. On vernacular bibles in pre-Reformation Germany (where scriptures in the vernacular were printed frequently before 1522), see Bob Scribner, ‘Heresy, Literacy and Print in the Early German Reformation’, in Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (eds), Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530 (Cambridge, 1994), 271–3. For continued controversies about religious materials and print that straddled both sides of the confessional divide after the Reformation, see Walsham, ‘Domme Preachers’, 74–77; and Jean-François Gilmont, ‘Introduction’, in The Reformation and the Book, ed. Jean-François Gilmont, trans. K. Maag (Aldershot, 1998), 2–4.

they had been licensed to do so by their ordinaries. The evidence regarding the effect of Arundel's Constitutions is, however, equivocal. On the one hand, the Constitutions were likely responsible for a freeze on English translations of scripture; England was virtually alone in Europe in its lack of printed vernacular Bibles in the incunable period, and H. Leith Spencer has noted a distinct decline in the use of English translations of scriptural passages in the course of preaching.⁴⁴ At the same time, some aspects of the Constitutions may have been a dead letter: there is only one surviving license for an English bible, and yet the Wycliffite English scriptures were among the most widely circulated of vernacular manuscripts in the fifteenth century, held by many people whose orthodoxy was without doubt.⁴⁵ As with English prayers, the simple possession of the scripture in English was never the sole basis for an accusation of heresy in the later fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries.

In any case, ecclesiastical prosecutors' descriptions of biblical works as books filled with 'heretical depravity' seems inappropriate, to say the least, as John Foxe gleefully pointed out on a number of occasions.⁴⁶ The Wycliffite Bible was an fairly literal translation from the Vulgate; unless it was accompanied by the General Prologue or other preface containing material challenging Catholic doctrine, it was not technically objectionable to Catholic theology. It is unlikely that many copies Lollards held included these contentious prefatory texts, as the vast majority of surviving copies do not.⁴⁷ The absence of the General Prologue is made even more likely by the fact that most of the late Lollard scriptural books attested in the evidence were copies of parts of the Bible rather than the whole: sometimes the Old Testament or New Testament, but most frequently smaller units such as the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles, or individual books.

But it was not the technical heresy of the books' content that was the primary issue, either in the eyes of the prosecutors or the prosecuted: the goal for the Lollards was to achieve direct knowledge of the scriptures without clerical mediation, and ecclesiastical officials saw this, with justification, as showing intention to disobey the authority of the Church. Some Lollard defendants explicitly believed that their direct knowledge of English prayers and books would more easily allow them to achieve salvation than would the

⁴⁴ Spencer, *English Preaching*, 134–95, esp. 175–83.

⁴⁵ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 23–4, 205, 231–4; Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*, 1–17; Richard Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (London, 1993), 107–8.

⁴⁶ See e.g. *A&M* (1570), 960; *A&M* (1843), iv, 239.

⁴⁷ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 237–8. Note, however, that the book of Wycliffite Scriptures held by Richard Hunne did include the Prologue. *A&M* (1570), 932–3; *A&M* (1843), iv, 184–6; Ussher's Notebook, fo. 124r.

ministrations of the Catholic clergy. Richard Gylmyn of Coventry, for instance, had various books of English scripture and was accused of saying that he wanted to live according to their precepts and through this he believed he would be saved. No priest in the pulpit, he said, speaks as well as his book speaks.⁴⁸ Although on the one hand Bishop Hales's apparent characterization of the knowledge of the basic Christian prayers and scriptures in English as heretical seems out of place, on the other hand he was undoubtedly correct in thinking that Lollards believed that such knowledge allowed them to bypass the mediations of the Church.

Perhaps because the intention in reading them was to challenge the Church's authority, the content of English books came to seem oppositional to Catholic doctrine, too: not only to ecclesiastical prosecutors but perhaps even more to the Lollards themselves. When Thomas Bown of Coventry was heard to describe the books owned by the local men of power, William Pysford and William Wigston, as 'very beautiful books of heresy',⁴⁹ I would argue that Bown regarded the books as heretical because they were religious works in English, perhaps the scriptures, not because their content was heterodox. Pysford and Wigston themselves would likely have disagreed with Bown's characterization, a point to which I will return. Here the Lollards' own attitudes bear emphasizing. The Lollards made a link between religious books in English and their own proclivity to dispute the Church's place in religious life: they assumed that any layperson's reading of books in English constituted the same sort of challenge. When deposing about his fellow heretics, for instance, Balthasar Shugborow thought it important to mention that Alice Rowley possessed a primer or book of hours in English, 'with a red cover'.⁵⁰ Yet Alice Rowley, a widow of a former Coventry mayor and of substantial status,⁵¹ was exactly the kind of woman who might have been expected to own such a book had she been orthodox — primers were among the most commonly printed books of the era, and women of the *haute bourgeoisie* were central to their intended market.⁵² But Shugborow was likely right that Alice Rowley, a fervent Lollard, saw her use of the book as a challenge to the Church, even if the book is very unlikely to have included anything technically heterodox. In other

⁴⁸ *Lollards of Coventry*, 72.

⁴⁹ 'Pulcherrimos libros de heresi'. *Lollards of Coventry*, 185. It is, of course, possible that it was the scribe recording the deposition, not Bown, who designated the books as heretical.

⁵⁰ 'Alicia Rowley habuit librum ad quinque vel sex annos preteritos de primario in Anglic', rubro velamine coopertum'. *Lollards of Coventry*, 145. This is likely the same book as the English psalter Rowley had (*ibid.*, 155).

⁵¹ See McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*, 29–30, 123–4.

⁵² Edwards and Meale, 'The Marketing of Printed Books', 117.

testimony, witnesses were recorded as describing scriptural books as containing heretical matter. For instance, John Jonson deposed about a book belonging to Richard Gest that contained ‘the sort of perverse opinions that Richard and John Gest preached and favoured’⁵³; Richard Gest himself confirmed that the book contained ‘heretical depravity’, as he had been informed by his son, Thomas, a priest (Gest perhaps could not read it himself).⁵⁴ Yet it seems almost certain that the book to which Jonson and Gest referred was the same one Robert Silkby acquired from Richard Gest, which Silkby told the bishop was a book of the Gospels and Epistles in English.⁵⁵ The Lollards would presumably not have called the content ‘perverse’ or ‘depraved’ among themselves, of course — this was probably either a scribal interpretation or an example of the witnesses adopting language they thought would appease the ecclesiastical authorities. Altogether, though, the evidence indicates that they thought the content accorded with Lollard opinions and by extension that it was contrary to opinions espoused by the Catholic church.

Similarly, Lollards apparently found congenial — and in some cases explicitly read as heretical — the orthodox devotional treatises that were coming off the English presses in considerable numbers in the years around 1500. Coventry Lollards possessed a book of saints’ lives, a book ‘of the passion of Christ and Adam’, Alice Rowley’s primer in English, and a little book ‘on the dead or sick man’⁵⁶ (possibly Here begynneth a lytell treatyse of the dyenge creature enfected with sykenes, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1507⁵⁷). Suspects in the diocese of Lincoln were reported to own a number of books that were almost certainly originally aimed at an orthodox audience: James Morden said that he taught Alice Atkyns a ‘peece of an English booke beginning: here sueth 4. thinges by which a man may knowe whether he shall be saued &c’.⁵⁸ Others had books of the service of the Virgin Mary in English,

⁵³ ‘Interrogatus an novit effectum huiusmodi libri, dicit quod erat de huiusmodi perversis opinionibus quas Ricardus Gest et Johannes predicant et favent’. Lollards of Coventry, 111.

⁵⁴ ‘Fatetur quod novit librum fuisse de et super heretica pravitate confectum’. Lollards of Coventry, 143.

⁵⁵ Lollards of Coventry, 146. Roger Landesdale identified what was apparently the same book as a New Testament. Lollards of Coventry, 117–8.

⁵⁶ Lollards of Coventry, 133, 142, 145, 147, 179, 202. Primers and other books on the lives of saints, Christ’s passion, and the art of dying were common in the late middle ages and were among the more popular early printed books. On these works, see Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 79, 209–86, 313–27; Aston, ‘Devotional Literacy’, 122–5.

⁵⁷ Westminster: Wynkyn de Worde, 1507 (STC 6034).

⁵⁸ A&M (1570), 949; A&M (1843), iv, 225. I have not identified this text.

The Prick of Conscience, a dialogue between a Jew and a Christian, a treatise on the Pater noster, and a treatise on the seven sacraments.⁵⁹

Unexceptionably orthodox as these books might appear to us, it seems likely that Lollards read and interpreted them as congruent with their own views. A Lollard in Oxfordshire who appeared before authorities in the diocese of Lincoln in 1521, Alice Cottismore, understood her copy of the Legenda aurea (one of the most popular books of saints' lives, printed ten times in England by 1521) to be hostile to images and pilgrimages. As her servant testified, Alice Cottismore

caused Syr John Boothe, person of Britwell, to read vpon a booke which she called Legenda Aurea; and one Saintes lyfe he read, which did speake agaynst pilgrimages, and after that was read, her mastres said vnto her: loe daughter, now ye may heare as I tolde you, that this book speaketh agaynst pilgremages.⁶⁰

As Foxe reports, another Lollard in Lincoln diocese, John Edmundes alias Ogins of Burford, similarly said of the popular Kalendar of Shepherds 'that hee was persuaded by this booke, readyng these woordes: that the Sacrament was made in the remembraunce of Christ'.⁶¹ In this light we cannot be sure that the various 'forbidden books', books of 'heretical depravity' — or even the various books said to be 'against the sacrament of the altar' or 'against the sacrament of baptism' that Lollards were cited as possessing⁶² — were indeed any different from the vernacular religious books that the unexceptionably orthodox gentry and urban elites bought and read in the decades on either side of 1500.

The same issues presumably arose in Lollard witnesses' citation of other religious activities that appear on the face to be entirely congruent with orthodox practices. A cursory perusal of orthodox devotional treatises of the decades around 1500 reveals a strong emphasis on numerically-organized lists of religious knowledge important for the good Christian to possess and understand.⁶³ Nonetheless a Lollard — and his or her prosecutor — might well

⁵⁹ A&M (1570), 954, 955, 957, 958; A&M (1843), iv, 230, 232, 235, 236.

⁶⁰ Foxe, A&M (1570), 1118; A&M (1843), iv, 582; STC 24873–24880.5.

⁶¹ Foxe, A&M (1570), 960; A&M (1843), iv, 238. These words do not appear in the Kalender; on sig. G3r, the author states 'we receyue the sacrament of the auter in mynde of his passyon'.

⁶² E.g. Lollards of Coventry, 115; A&M (1570), 956, 957; A&M (1843), iv, 233, 235; Ussher's Notebook, fo. 124r; Reg. Langton, ii, fo. 38v; Reg. Audley, fos. 107v–108r.

⁶³ See, e.g., the works cited above, n.32, or Richard Pynson's treatise of about 1509, the frontispiece of which reads: 'In this boke is conteyned the Articles of oure fayth. The .x. commaundementis. The .vii. works of mercy. The .vii. dedely synnes. The .vii. pryncypall

have seen the possession of such religious knowledge in the vernacular as an act of heresy. Sometimes such lists were derived from scripture: Lollards of Lincoln diocese, for instance, showed considerable interest in memorizing the eight Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12).⁶⁴ But the religious matter need not have been scriptural for Lollards to find the matter useful or healthful for the soul, or for their prosecutors to find it worth recording. John Edmunds accused Joanne Colins, young daughter of noted heretics Richard and Alice Colins of Ginge, for having learned ‘the tenne Commaundementes, the vii. deadly sinnes, the vii. workes of mercy, the v. wittes bodely and ghostlye, and viii. blessings, and v. chapters of S. James Epistle’.⁶⁵ Edmunds sent his own daughter Agnes into service in the Colins household expressly so that she, too, could be instructed in these things.⁶⁶

As David Lawton has remarked regarding debates over scriptural translations in the period between the Wycliffite and Tyndale translations, the contest was about ‘authority and who has access to it’, about ‘how liturgy and private devotions articulate the relation of lay and cleric’.⁶⁷ Lollard insistence on their access to the scriptures, prayers, and religious knowledge more generally was a self-conscious challenge to the monopoly claimed by the orthodox clergy. The content of the scriptures and prayers was thus in some ways less important than the interpretations drawn, than the talk that the books or prayers inspired. A key was how the books and prayers were actually used in Lollard gatherings: readings were commonly followed by discussion in which scriptural passages especially were used as jumping-off points for conversations that questioned doctrines or practices favoured by the Church. A favourite among the Lollards of Coventry, for instance, was the gospel, ‘Noli timere pusillus grex’ (‘Fear not, little flock’, Luke 12:32-33),⁶⁸ which advocated giving alms to the poor; it could easily have served as a text on which to ground discussion about the making of offerings to the poor rather than to shrines.⁶⁹ Books of the ten commandments, containing prohibition of worshipping graven images, provided another obvious opportunity to consider images and pilgrimages. Anne Hudson notes that both Lollard and orthodox commentaries on the decalogue survive; although the Coventry Lollards may have been reading the Lollard versions, it is equally or perhaps even more likely that they

virtues. And the .vii. Sacramentis of holy Chirche’ (London, [1509?] [STC 3359]).

⁶⁴ *A&M* (1570), 949, 953, 956, 958, 960; *A&M* (1843), iv, 224, 229, 234, 236, 238.

⁶⁵ *A&M* (1570), 960; *A&M* (1843), iv, 238.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Lawton, ‘Englishing the Bible’, 457, 460.

⁶⁸ *Lollards of Coventry*, 205–6, 227, 235.

⁶⁹ E.g. *Lollards of Coventry*, 65–6, 103, 150, 235.

were reading orthodox versions (many of which were printed in the years before 1511).⁷⁰ In a sense, it does not matter: whether the commentaries were Lollard or not, the conversations that arose from their readings in Lollard circles were almost certainly contrary to Catholic views.

Social status also conditioned how the act of reading in English was interpreted by the authorities who prosecuted Lollards and by the Lollards themselves.⁷¹ We have plenty of evidence, for instance, that ecclesiastical authorities viewed reading vernacular scriptures as a pious and laudable practice when the reader was a person of high station whose religious leanings were otherwise unexceptionable. As Thomas More put it in the 1520s, many ‘good and catholyke folke’ read their English bibles ‘with deuocyon and sobernesse’.⁷² Yet accused Lollards who appeared before the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield and their deputies in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries — almost all of artisanal status — clearly identified holding, reading, and trading of vernacular religious books as an act contrary to orthodoxy. The Lollards who deposed before the bishop also apparently believed — although their information was a bit vague — that a number of the most important men of their city, the civic leaders, were also adherents of their movement, because they, too, owned vernacular religious books, including copies of the English scripture.⁷³ The Coventry Lollards were, I would argue, wrong about the religious inclinations of their civic leaders⁷⁴: mayors and

⁷⁰ Premature Reformation, 4–5, 21 n.75, 167. Wynkyn de Worde published treatises on the ten commandments in 1505 and 1510 (STC 23875.1 and 23876), but most frequently such commentaries on the decalogue were included in omnibus treatises on the Christian faith, such as Mirk’s Festial (see above n. 31), The Art or Crafte to Liue Well, The Kalender of Shepherdes (see above n. 32) or the treatise by Pynson referred to in n. 63.

⁷¹ Lawton, ‘Englishing the Bible’, 459, has made a similar point for the period before Arundel’s Constitutions.

⁷² Thomas More, A Dialogue Concerning Heresies, 2 parts, ed. Thomas M. C. Lawler et al., vol. 6 of The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, 15 vols., ed. L. L. Martz, et al. (New Haven, 1963–97), pt. 1, 316–17, 331, 337–41 (quotations at 317).

⁷³ Lollards of Coventry, 117, 148, 156, 157, 158, 180, 185, 187–8; cf. 237, 251.

⁷⁴ I make this argument at length in Gender and Heresy, 41–5. I disagree on the issue with a number of historians, who have hypothesized that a number of pivotal figures in the Coventry civic elite were Lollards. Alongside the artisan Lollards’ suspicions, these scholars cite other evidence about those same men’s interest in vernacular scripture and devotional works, and their involvement in moral reform and poverty relief movements in Coventry in the 1490s and 1500s (deemed by Jeremy Goldberg to be a ‘Lollard programme’ of reform). I would argue that these men’s religious practices were congruent with mainstream orthodox piety of civic elites in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century and that the elaborate bequests in these men’s wills for obits and chantries make it unlikely they were much interested in Lollardy. The case for heresy in the Coventry civic elite is most strongly made in Imogen

aldermen, and prosecuting bishops like Geoffrey Blyth, probably would have concurred with More's opinion that it was possible for a layperson to read the bible in English and still consider oneself 'good and catholyke'. But it depended on the social station of the particular layperson: many church authorities were clearly less sanguine about those of lower orders gaining direct access to scriptures. Although frankly we have little evidence in this period about their reactions to lower-status readers who were not otherwise leaning to Lollardy, later evidence such as Bishop Gardiner's 1543 Act for thadvancement of true Religion makes clear that some ecclesiastical officials did not consider bible-reading an appropriate activity for craftsmen, husbandmen, and non-aristocratic women.⁷⁵ Unmediated access to the scripture in the hands of those types of people was inherently dangerous; even the ability to read, very unusual among the social groups from which Lollardy drew most of its adherents, could be evidence of heterodox intentions.⁷⁶

But if clerical and secular authorities were inclined to judge the propriety of reading vernacular scriptures or indeed of any book according to position on the social scale, the factor of social status affected the Coventry Lollards' interpretation of vernacular reading differently. They did not make the same assumption that their social betters could be trusted with religious knowledge while they could not; they associated any desire to read devotional or scriptural material in the vernacular with their own desire to achieve the unmediated word of God. In their eyes, then, any religious material written in the vernacular was, by the fact of its Englishness, a challenge to the hegemony of the Church, and anyone favouring its reading was, *ipso facto*, one of them. But we make a mistake if we take the Lollards' view to be fully representative of the religious world of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England. There were, in early sixteenth-century England, multiple understandings — and sometimes what we might consider misunderstandings — of what it meant to be a heretic.⁷⁷

Luxton, 'The Lichfield Court Book: A Postscript', Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research, xlv (1971), 120–5; and Goldberg, 'Coventry's "Lollard" Programme', 97–116. See also John Fines, 'Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, 1511–1512', Journal of Ecclesiastical History, xlv (1963), 160–74 at 166; and Charles Phythian-Adams, Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1979), 278n.

⁷⁵ 'An Acte for thadvancement of true Religion', 34 and 35 Henry VIII, ch. 1, Statutes of the Realm, 11 vols (London, 1817; rpt. 1963), iii, 896.

⁷⁶ Shannon McSheffrey, 'Literacy and the Gender Gap in the Late Middle Ages: Women and Reading in Lollard Communities', in Jane H. M. Taylor and Lesley Smith (eds), Women, the Book and the Godly (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1995), 157–70.

⁷⁷ See John H. Arnold, 'Margery's Trials: Heresy, Lollardy and Dissent', in John H.

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As we have seen, our evidence indicates that most Lollard books in the early sixteenth century were scriptural, and that by the early sixteenth century most of the non-scriptural books held by Lollards appear to have been printed books aimed at the orthodox market. Despite their origin in the orthodox print shops of late fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century England, Lollards found these books — or interpreted them to be — compatible with their interests. The sheer volume of printed books in the book culture of England by the first and second decades of the sixteenth century made them much more easily available to Lollards than the manuscripts of their own tradition. Indeed, excepting the scriptural translations, there is remarkably little sign that later Lollards read anything in the Wycliffite corpus of writings. This presents a serious challenge to the view of late Lollardy presented by Anne Hudson, who sees the Lollard creed as cohesive from the late fourteenth through to the early sixteenth centuries. Lollardy, she argues, was a creed of the book, founded on the continuing influence of the writings of Wyclif and his followers, and once the academic foundation of the movement was sundered by Archbishop Arundel's purge of Oxford about 1410, it was the writings that carried Wyclif's influence through to the sixteenth century.⁷⁸ While the theological subtlety of Wycliffite writings and the importance of Wyclif to the Lollard movement have been clearly shown for the early years of the movement, the argument that non-scriptural Wycliffite writings continued to have direct influence into the early sixteenth century does not stand when considered in the light of late Lollard reading material.⁷⁹

Between the 1480s and the early 1520s, among all known sources related to Lollards and their books, only two Wycliffite texts can be specifically identified. The 'booke named William Thorpe' that John Edmunds of Burford was accused of possessing⁸⁰ was presumably the Examination of William

Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (eds.), Companion to Margery Kempe (Woodbridge, forthcoming 2004), for an exploration of this issue in relation to the accusations of Lollardy made against Margery Kempe; see also Arnold's Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc (Philadelphia, 2001), 12–13, 157–63.

⁷⁸ This argument is developed throughout Hudson's work; see especially Premature Reformation, 5, 17–18, 278–81. Curtis Bostick makes the argument for theological coherence (specifically apocalypticism) through texts even more strongly in The Antichrist and the Lollards, esp. 176, 194.

⁷⁹ Rex has also challenged Hudson's view on the continuing theological influence of Wyclif (The Lollards, 59–61, 74–8), briefly considering the issue of late Lollard reading of the Wycliffite corpus (76–7).

⁸⁰ A&M (1570), 957, 960; A&M (1843), iv, 235, 238.

Thorpe, an autobiographical account of proceedings against an early fifteenth-century Lollard.⁸¹ Although there is only one reference to Thorpe's book, six Lollards in London and Lincoln diocese were reported to have had another text, Wylyffes Wicket.⁸² There are in addition several vague references to Wyclif's works: Richard Hunne was said to possess 'Wylyffes dampnable workys';⁸³ in 1496 Thomas Maryet of Southwark confessed to having 'secretly kept and hold and prively redd withyn myn house bookis, libellis, volumes, tretes, and other werkis wretyn in englissh compiled by John Wykcliff, a dampned heretik';⁸⁴ and a number of men in the diocese of Winchester were accused in 1513 of possessing 'diuerse bokis of heresie and specially a boke of heresy called Wiclif'⁸⁵ (the latter may, of course, have been Wylyffes Wicket).

It is probably not coincidental that the only Wycliffite text that can be said to have had a significant circulation among Lollards in the early sixteenth century, the Wicket, is also the only Wycliffite text thought to have been written after the middle of the fifteenth century.⁸⁶ Modern scholars, led especially by Anne Hudson, have uncovered a significant corpus of Wycliffite writings composed in the period before Arundel's Constitutions in 1409. But with two exceptions, manuscripts of Lollard texts are written in hands dating from before 1450 (with the vast majority dating from before 1409),⁸⁷ and the whereabouts of manuscripts of these texts in the period between the first decade of the fifteenth century and the Reformation or later is almost entirely unknown.⁸⁸ In short, the evidence of late Lollard reading material and of the

⁸¹ Edited by Anne Hudson in Two Wycliffite Texts, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 301 (Oxford, 1993).

⁸² E.g. John Stilman of London, who confessed in 1518 'quod Johannes Wylyff erat sanctus in coelo. Et quod liber editus per ipsum Johannem vocatus The Wykett erat bonus et sanctus liber'. Ussher's Notebook, fo. 125r; for Stilman, see also A&M (1570), 940–41; A&M (1843), iv, 207–8. Other references to Wylyffes Wicket are Ussher's Notebook, fos. 123r, 124v, 125r; A&M (1570), 940, 950, 957–8; A&M (1843), iv, 207, 226, 234, 235. On the Wicket (which was printed in 1546 [STC 25590]), see Hudson, Premature Reformation, 451–2.

⁸³ Ussher's Notebook, fo. 124r.

⁸⁴ Reg. Langton, fo. 66r.

⁸⁵ Reg. Fox, iii, fos. 69v, 70v–71v. William Mason of London denied that he had a book called 'Wyclif'; Ussher's Notebook, fo. 124r.

⁸⁶ Hudson, Premature Reformation, 18, 451–2.

⁸⁷ See Hudson, Premature Reformation, 17–18; Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon (eds.), English Wycliffite Sermons 5 vols (Oxford, 1983–1996), i, 53–97; iv, 19. The two exceptions are early sixteenth-century copies of the Thirty-Seven Conclusions and the Latin sermon Omnis plantacio (Hudson, Premature Reformation, 17–18), neither of which are attested in records of prosecution from the late period.

⁸⁸ See, for instance, Hudson's discussion of medieval ownership of the Wycliffite sermon cycles: English Wycliffite Sermons, i, 53–97 passim. In the one case where there is an

production and location of manuscripts suggests that Lollards of the period between 1480 and 1525 had little direct access to most of the vast corpus of Wycliffite writings we now know existed.

The absence of Wycliffite writings from the evidence of late Lollard reading is paralleled by a lack of evidence for the cohesive and continuous influence of Wyclif and his early disciples in specifics of arguments, as opposed to general ideas that could have been handed down through oral transmission. There is little sign that the Lollards uncovered in the decades around 1500 themselves focused on the origins of their creed or saw themselves as the representatives of a long tradition of true Christians in the way that John Foxe and other later Protestants would view them; Wyclif's name, for instance, is mentioned rarely in testimony.⁸⁹ There are, of course, common threads between fourteenth- and sixteenth-century Lollards: sayings about images being but 'sticks and stones', for example, are seen in the 12 Conclusions of 1395 and in testimony from the early 1520s and frequently in between.⁹⁰ But these are catchy phrases, not elaborated theological doctrines. One single example suggests exposure to Wycliffite writings: John Harris of Upton, prosecuted in the early 1520s, glossed a passage of Genesis in a way that strikingly recalls one of the Lollard sermons composed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.⁹¹ But this one case is too thin a foundation for an over-arching argument about the continuing influence of Lollard writings.

This is not to deny that later Lollards derived their basic doctrines from their earlier brethren, or even that a few later Lollards may have had access to Wycliffite writings. In general, though, the evidence of later Lollard thought shows that it owed more to working out from first principles — in particular the principle of unmediated access to and derivation of all ideas from the scriptures — than to following a specific doctrinal line that comes through non-scriptural Lollard texts. We are, admittedly, at the mercy of incomplete evidence when

identifiable medieval owner of a manuscript, it was in the hands of a Dominican preacher, who had been given license to own it by the prior of his convent (i, 60–1).

⁸⁹ In the records of prosecution of the Coventry Lollards between 1486 and 1522, Wyclif's name appears only once (Lollards of Coventry, 183), and in the records of Warham's prosecutions in Kent in 1511–12, it is never mentioned at all (Norman Tanner [ed.], Kent Heresy Proceedings, Kent Records xxvi [Maidstone, 1997], xv). Euan Cameron comments that the later Waldenses, from what we can tell, also had little sense of the origin or putative founder of their dissent. Cameron, Waldenses: Rejections of Holy Church in Medieval Europe (Oxford, 2000), 168–9, 298.

⁹⁰ Anne Hudson (ed.), Selections from English Wycliffite Writings (Cambridge, 1978), 27 (1395); Reg. Hales, 166rv (1486); Reg. J. Blythe, fos. 70r–78r passim (1499); Reg. Audley, fo. 148v (1508); A&M (1570), 947, 956; A&M (1843), iv, 221, 233 (1518–21).

⁹¹ Hudson, Premature Reformation, 5.

considering the ideas and concerns of Lollards in the decades around 1500; we have only the records of prosecution. As far as we can tell, the basic emphases of late Lollard thought reflect themes also stressed by their predecessors, especially in objections to the cult of the saints and to the sacraments. Yet there is virtually no evidence that the subtle theological reasoning of the earlier Wycliffites were known to their later brethren and sistren. This is hardly surprising — even assuming the texts had been available — given the marginal role played in the late Lollard communities by clerics or anyone else likely to have a formal theological education.⁹² Late Lollards instead give a layperson's view of the religious issues of the day. Above all what marks the later Lollards is a self-conscious sense that they, as true Christians, must directly acquire and interpret the word of God. Objections to Catholic practices, especially anything that related to the claims of the Catholic clergy to act as mediators between God and his people, follow from this. The importance of directly reading, hearing, and understanding religious knowledge, without the corrupting intervention of the Catholic clergy, underlies the relatively indiscriminate Lollard desire for any vernacular devotional writing. Although it is more than plausible that the foundational belief that all should flow from scriptures did owe its origin to Wyclif's thought, this is not the same thing as arguing that the Lollard creed in a more specific sense — the reasoning behind objections to Catholic doctrine — continued in substantial coherence, through the medium of writings, into the sixteenth century.⁹³

Lollards and Religious Dissent in the Early Sixteenth Century

When thinking about early sixteenth-century Lollards, we have to consider involvement in heretical activities in terms broader than strict intellectual or ideological commitment to theological ideas. At the same time as we acknowledge that being a member of a religious group entails matters of belief and conscience, we must also allow that people come to partake in particular religious activities because of broader social and cultural factors as well as theological convictions.⁹⁴ Lines of recruitment in late Lollard groups, for instance, went firmly along already existing lines of social interaction:

⁹² Hudson, Premature Reformation, 449–50, 467; McSheffrey, Gender and Heresy, 77–79.

⁹³ Much of my argument here accords with Thomson, Later Lollards, 239–50, although I disagree that Lollardy 'was essentially a negative movement' (ibid., 253), and I would emphasize more than Thomson does the late Lollards' scriptural fundamentalism.

⁹⁴ Richard G. Davies, 'Lollardy and Locality', Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th series, 1 (1991), 191–212.

primary was familial relationship, closely followed by economic associations, especially through a common trade or workplace, and neighbourly ties.⁹⁵ This is perfectly normal when considered alongside sociological studies of recruitment to modern minority religious movements.⁹⁶ We must also note that while modern scholars sometimes envisage involvement in Lollardy as a life-long commitment born of pure theological fervour, it seems much more likely — both by analogy with studies of modern religious sects and by evidence of Lollard involvement in the sixteenth century — that Lollards differed in their level of dedication to their ideas. Some flirted with involvement in heretical groups; some were easily scared off when prosecutions loomed; some were far more committed, indeed willing to persist in their beliefs — some would say heroically, some would say foolishly — to the death.

The precise nature of ties among later Lollards — and how we might describe them — remains unclear. Some of the lack of clarity derives from the ambiguities of modern vocabulary. In asking whether late Lollards constituted a ‘movement’,⁹⁷ scholars differ in their evaluations of how much organization this rather vague word implies. Similarly, we may debate whether late Lollards constituted a ‘sect’.⁹⁸ Wyclif considered himself and his followers to be a ‘true sect’ in opposition to the false sects of monks, canons and friars.⁹⁹ Catholic authorities also used the word to label those they prosecuted, although in their case ‘sect’ was synonymous with ‘group of heretics’.¹⁰⁰ As John Thomson has remarked, we cannot ‘deny that the Lollards are entitled to be considered as a sect’, if what we mean by that is a group of people tied to one another by more or less similar religious views.¹⁰¹ Yet Patrick Collinson and Richard Rex prefer to use the term in its post-Reformation, Troeltschian sense — by which definition Lollards cannot be considered a sect, being insufficiently

⁹⁵ McSheffrey, Gender and Heresy, 72–9, 87–107.

⁹⁶ See Bryan Wilson, Religion in Sociological Perspective (Oxford, 1982), 118; Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, ‘Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects’, American Journal of Sociology, lxxxv (1980), 1376–95; William Sims Bainbridge, The Sociology of Religious Movements (New York and London, 1997), 149–74; Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion (Berkeley, 2000), 114–38.

⁹⁷ Swanson, Church and Society, 335; Rex, The Lollards, 81–2.

⁹⁸ See Margaret Aston’s illuminating discussion in ‘Were the Lollards a Sect?’, in Peter Biller and Barrie Dobson (eds.), The Medieval Church: Universities, Heresy, and the Religious Life (Studies in Church History, Subsidia xi, Woodbridge, 1999), 163–91.

⁹⁹ Aston, ‘Were the Lollards a Sect?’, 177–80.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. Lollards of Coventry, 102, 108, 111, 115; Aston, ‘Were the Lollards a Sect?’, 168–75.

¹⁰¹ Thomson, Later Lollards, 239–40.

separatist.¹⁰² As they point out, almost all Lollards (from what we can tell) continued to participate in orthodox services and for the most part were externally distinguishable from their more conventional neighbours only by their devoutness. As Mother Halle, one of John Foxe's informants in Coventry in the 1560s, looked back on it, the Lollards of that city differed from their fellows mainly 'in godlynes of life', even showing, or pretending, 'worship and deuotion, at the holdyng vp of the Sacrament', conspicuous only in their keen objection to oaths.¹⁰³ We must recognize that 'sect', like many other such terms, is an 'eel of a word, which slips in our hands even as we think we have hold of it'; but, as Margaret Aston asks, what other word could we use?¹⁰⁴

We may also question whether Lollards can be said to have made up 'communities', a word which may overemphasize the cohesiveness of their groupings.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, inter-city networks of a kind apparently existed: Lollards fleeing from one jurisdiction could be taken in by their fellows in another city.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, the Coventry evidence also suggests that, apart from three central figures who knew most of those who were involved in heretical activities,¹⁰⁷ the web that connected Lollards was loosely spun. Gatherings in Coventry were small, usually only three or four people, no more than ten. Even those who were heavily involved in Lollard activities were sometimes only vaguely aware of others in the city interested in the same ideas. Robert Hachet, for instance, was a frequent host of Lollard gatherings and closely tied to Roger Landesdale, Robert Silkby, and other important Coventry Lollards, yet he apparently only vaguely knew Joan Smyth, another active

¹⁰² Patrick Collinson, 'Night Schools, Conventicles and Churches: Continuities and Discontinuities in Early Protestant Ecclesiology', in Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (eds.), The Beginnings of English Protestantism (Cambridge, 2002), 209–35, esp. 215–25; Rex, Lollards, 108, 131–2.

¹⁰³ A&M (1570), 1107; Lollards of Coventry, 311.

¹⁰⁴ Aston, 'Were the Lollards a Sect?', 191.

¹⁰⁵ This represents a rethinking of my position from the publication of my Gender and Heresy in 1995.

¹⁰⁶ One fascinating example of this is Joan Warde alias Wasshingburn, who in the 1490s fled from Coventry to Northampton, and thence travelled on to London. Through Lollard connections in the metropolis she married another heretic, and together they moved to Maidstone, Kent, where they were both prosecuted by the archbishop of Canterbury. Alone, perhaps widowed, Warde made her way back to Coventry some time in the first decade of the sixteenth century, where she picked up once again with the heretics she had known there in the 1490s. Lollards of Coventry, 238.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Silkby, Roger Landesdale, and Alice Rowley. See Lollards of Coventry passim.

proselytizer central to another sector of the city's dissenting population.¹⁰⁸ Even the testimony of the well-connected central figures among Coventry Lollards consisted, in about equal parts, of reports of actual conversations or readings of suspect books, and reports of rumours and imputations of guilt by association: 'She [Alice Rowley] says that Spenser and Bradley are very familiar. ... She heard that Northopp belongs to the sect. ... The wife of William Revis, skinner, who is a piemaker, as she heard from Hawkyns, belongs to the same sect. ... Hawkyns is intimate with Bown'.¹⁰⁹

No doubt the need for secrecy and the dangers attendant on open heresy were largely responsible for the attenuated nature of ties among Lollards in the early sixteenth century. Even in a modern pluralistic society, where adherence to minority religions normally does not bring threats to life or livelihood, it is characteristic of religious sects that some members remain adamant and lifelong adherents, while a good many others drift in and out, attracted at one point in their lives but later losing their dedication. In the case of sects in which membership is dangerous or illegal, the transience is even more marked.¹¹⁰ It should thus not be surprising that some who experimented with Lollard ideas decided subsequently to revert to orthodoxy: a number of Coventry defendants deposed that they had once held the beliefs of which they were accused, but that they had abandoned them when they felt that they were too risky. Thomas Warde, for instance, admitted that he had in the past listened to the reading of heretical books and favoured Lollard ideas, but that twelve years before, he had renounced these beliefs and done penance for them. Matthew Markelond said that he had held heretical beliefs in the 1480s, but that in 1486 when Bishop Hales prosecuted eight men for Lollardy, he renounced these beliefs and burned a book of the gospels in English that he had possessed.¹¹¹ While obviously such statements may have been made by defendants as a way to deflect more serious charges (both Warde and Markelond abjured, but neither was given particularly difficult penance¹¹²), it is also perfectly credible that men and women would repudiate heresy when the risks became manifest. In the case of the Coventry Lollards, for instance, it seems plausible that after Blyth's prosecution in 1511-12, which culminated in the burning of Joan Warde in April 1512, only a small circle of the most dedicated adherents — the core of whom went on to become

¹⁰⁸ *Lollards of Coventry*, 124.

¹⁰⁹ *Lollards of Coventry*, 157, 160.

¹¹⁰ Frederick Bird and Bill Reimer, 'Participation Rates in New Religious and Para-Religious Movements', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, xxi (1982), 1-14.

¹¹¹ *Lollards of Coventry*, 203, 152-53.

¹¹² *Lollards of Coventry*, 169, 190.

Foxe's '7 Godly Martyrs' in 1519 — continued to take part in heretical activities.

Thus sixteenth-century Lollards were not the direct inheritors of the sophisticated theological writings their forebears produced at Oxford in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries; nor can they be said to have constituted a counter-church; and arguably even the words 'sect', 'movement', and 'community' overplay the cohesiveness of their connections to one another. Nonetheless the beliefs to which these people adhered cannot helpfully be characterized as the degraded understandings of 'rustic simpletons',¹¹³ or as pagan survivals among isolated hill-folk¹¹⁴; nor was Lollardy an amorphous 'set of values' that includes everything from sympathy for the poor and objections against sexual immorality to interest in English books.¹¹⁵ Being a heretic in early sixteenth-century England meant more than being charitable, sexually continent, and interested in the vernacular: it involved a sense of being distinct from the blind and foolish followers of the orthodox church, and it involved the core belief that the scriptures, rather than the Catholic clergy, were the authority upon which Christian faith and practice should rest. Even if I argue that late Lollards did not possess a fully-articulated theology, and that their connections to one another were often limited to a remarkably small number of fellow heretics, this is not the same as contending that Lollardy itself is merely a construct of the fevered imaginations either of medieval clerics or of modern historians.¹¹⁶

Lollards were marked — to borrow from Euan Cameron's characterization of the Waldenses — by a 'style of religious dissent',¹¹⁷ by a conscious distancing from Catholicism. Participation in Lollard readings and discussions — at least after the point at which it became clear to the individual that the matters being discussed went beyond conventional piety — involved a deliberate choice to challenge the authority of Catholic church. At the same time, in early sixteenth-century England the concepts of 'heresy' and

¹¹³ K. B. McFarlane, John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity (London, 1952), 168, 180, 184.

¹¹⁴ Scarisbrick, Reformation and the English People, 6.

¹¹⁵ As recently argued by Goldberg, 'Coventry's "Lollard" Programme', esp. 103.

¹¹⁶ Swanson, Church and Society, 335; retracted (acknowledging that Hudson's work had caused him to rethink) in Catholic England: Faith, Religion and Observance before the Reformation (Manchester, 1993), 35 n.102.

¹¹⁷ Cameron, Waldenses, 176; see also 96, 168. It is interesting to note the ways in which the Lollard 'style of dissent' differed from that of the Waldenses; as Cameron puts it, the Waldenses 'lived in the same world as the Catholics, characterized by ritual penance and mediated holiness' (p. 144), while Lollards rejected the penitential emphasis of Catholicism.

‘orthodoxy’ must not be defined too rigidly, and especially not with reference to detailed theological doctrines; instead it is useful to consider the relationship between heterodoxy and orthodoxy as characterized by porosity, plasticity, and relativity. The ascribed meaning of practices and beliefs was shaped by the intentions of the practitioner and by the social place occupied both by the practitioner and by the person making the judgment, whether a church authority or a heretic trying to identify a fellow. Similarly, the heresy of the vernacular books and prayers the Lollards prized often did not reside in their substance but in the way that they were spoken, read, and understood. The technical content was largely beside the point — the goal for the Lollards in reading and praying in the vernacular was to achieve direct knowledge of the scriptures and other religious material without clerical mediation, and ecclesiastical officials saw this, with justification, as showing a choice to disobey the authority of the Church. In late medieval England, heresy resided more in intention than in doctrine, more in contests about authority than in the minutiae of belief.

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