Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England

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This is a book about the parish—not one particular parish, but the parish as an idea. In medieval parlance, “parish” was an umbrella term that encompassed not only the physical space of the parish church and its churchyard but also the congregation and even the district in which its members lived. But the parish was also a model of the ideal spiritual community and the eternal community of heaven. It offered a framework for negotiating the relationship between individual, community, and God, and it also shaped the way medieval people thought about time and about the relationship between the living and the dead.

1. Although Chaucer makes a clear distinction between parish and parishioner—“parisshe” and “parishen”—in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, the two words are used interchangeably by most authors. According to the Middle English Dictionary, the words parish and parishen can be used to refer to both parishes and parishioners, and distinguishing between the two can be extremely difficult (see the entries for “parish,” n.; and “parishen,” n.1 and n.2). Both “parish” and “parishen” are in wide use in the fourteenth century, but the term “parishioner” does not appear until the fifteenth century (MED, “parishioner,” n.). Parishioners were also frequently described as “even-Cristen” (MED, “even,” adj., 16c). Kümin discusses the problem of terminology in Shaping of a Community, 2.
Collective worship and the life of the parish mattered deeply to laypeople, and both loom large in late medieval visual and vernacular culture.

It may seem obvious, given the ubiquity of parish churches across medieval England (upwards of 9,000 by about 1200),\(^2\) that the parish would be a central site and subject of Middle English literature. But far more historians than literary scholars have given their attention to these sites of social organization. For many generations, the parish was viewed solely as an index of post-Lateran and pre-Reformational compliance and change; studies were generally angled toward the sixteenth century, the growth of lay organization, and the rise of Protestantism.\(^3\) More recently, however, a number of scholars have focused on the parish in its own right. Eamon Duffy championed the parish in *Stripping the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580*, a sweeping account of lay devotion that, in turn, paved the way for several important regional studies of the parish.\(^4\) Both Peter Brown and Katherine French have made meticulous use of a large body of documentary evidence—churchwardens’ accounts, episcopal registers, guild records, wills—in order to examine many aspects of late medieval piety, religious practice, and lay organization.\(^5\) French, in particular, has given us a much better sense of the import of the parish in the lives of laypeople, especially women, and their involvement in its upkeep and maintenance.\(^6\) Middle English literature often factors into historical studies of the parish, but too often it is used principally to illustrate and affirm the data gleaned from other kinds of documents.

In drawing attention to the parish imaginary, I assemble a somewhat heterogeneous collection of Middle English texts, including sermons, handbooks, and liturgical texts as well as narrative poetry, exempla, and drama. I also explore a range of visual sources, including manuscript illuminations, parish wall paintings, and stained glass. What motivates this diverse array of texts and images is the conviction that they operate at parish level, whether they were produced expressly for lay readers, listeners, or viewers, or for parish priests looking to better educate the laypeople in their care. They all grapple in different ways with questions related to parochial identity and the importance of collective worship. They are intensely concerned, moreover, with the extent to which salvation might be a collective enterprise.

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2. Swanson, *Church and Society*, 4.
3. French provides an overview of early approaches to the parish in the introduction to *People of the Parish*, 15–17.
4. In recent decades, a number of important monographs and essay collections have appeared: French, Gibbs, and Kümin, eds., *Parish in English Life*; Burgess and Duffy, eds., *Parish in Late Medieval England*; Kümin, *Shaping of a Community*.
Their parish-orientation also means they are fundamentally concerned with the negotiation of public life—the parishioner both in the nave and out in the world—and they ask their readers, listeners, and viewers to imagine and understand themselves not just as individuals seeking reconciliation with God but as members of a much broader community. We should not assume, of course, that the parish was a place in which sermons and pastoral handbooks were delivered verbatim or followed to a tee. Parishioners were not, as Emma Mason observed decades ago, “dutifully programmed automatons.” Indeed, the texts and images that I consider offer much more than a reflection of what the parish looked like or what took place in it. As Paul Strohm reminds us, “only rarely can we expect [texts] to tell us ‘what happened,’ or to contribute materially to our factual base. They offer crucial testimony on other, though no less historical, matters: on contemporary perception, ideology, belief and—above all—on the imaginative structures within which fourteenth century participants acted and assumed that their actions would be understood.”

As actors in and products of a dense network of perceptions, discourses, experiences, and practices, the texts, images, and objects that I consider in this book are “vehicles of conception” that order and construct the parish.

It is surprising that the parish has not been more central to the study of late medieval lay devotion and vernacular theology. In a seminal essay that appeared in *Speculum* in 1995, Nicholas Watson drew special attention to the study of late medieval English religious culture and, more particularly, to the aftermath of the imposition of Archbishop Thomas Arundel’s repressive Constitutions in 1409, an event that, to Watson’s mind, imposed a deadlock on the production of vernacular theological writing. Defining “vernacular theology” as “any kind of writing [. . .] that communicates theological information to an audience,” he focused almost exclusively on works written between 1350 and 1450 and deliberately excluded drama, saints’ lives, and most sermons in order to limit his focus to “more intellectually challenging texts.” In more
recent years, however, scholars have expanded the disciplinary and literary parameters of vernacular theology to include a wider variety of texts—drama, liturgical texts, sermons—and a broader range of questions about their performative, poetic, and imaginative potential.¹²

Texts falling under the broad rubric of vernacular theology are often associated with self-examination and self-correction, and a number of recent studies draw special attention to literature derived from the cloister. For Nicole Rice, late medieval prose spiritual guides enable ambitious readers to take up the self-discipline of the professional religious rule.¹³ Jennifer Bryan argues that Middle English devotional literature is more fundamentally concerned with selfhood and interiority, prompting its readers to turn inward in order to see and behold themselves.¹⁴ This book aims instead to show how Middle English devotional literature engages with questions of collective worship and community. Like other studies, my book positions late medieval devotional literature in relation to the pastoral reforms that followed the promulgation of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Council’s call for reform was met with an outpouring of catechetical treatises and penitential handbooks, all aimed in different ways at improving the spiritual health of the laity.¹⁵ Late medieval Christians wanted to know how to go about ensuring their salvation at the end of time. Indeed, this is one of the driving questions of *Piers Plowman*: “How do I save my soul?”¹⁶ I argue that, in seeking to answer the question that was on every Christian’s mind, vernacular theology emphasizes not only the importance of collective devotion but the idea that salvation is best achieved through the ritual life of the parish, alongside one’s even-Cristen. Kneeling in the nave during the Mass, many English laypeople would have been able to see a Last Judgment painting looming above them on the chancel arch. With the damned on the left and the saved on the right, such an image—what Pantin called “a sermon in itself”—reminded viewers of the two outcomes that awaited them.¹⁷ Even more importantly, however, it articulated the relationship between parochial

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¹². See especially the cluster of essays on the topic of vernacular theology and medieval studies in Holsinger, ed., “Literary History and the Religious Turn,” a special issue of *English Language Notes*.


practice and future salvation, between the ritual life of the parish and the eternal life of the saved.

In turning my attention to collective parochial worship, I focus on a number of texts that, despite their popularity among medieval readers, continue to be sidelined in modern scholarship, even by scholars working in the field of vernacular theology. The *Prick of Conscience*, by all accounts a medieval bestseller, has been described but rarely interpreted or analyzed. This is also largely true for John Mirk’s *Festial* and the anonymous *Northern Homily Cycle*. Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne*, a veritable reservoir of stories, has garnered more attention than most, particularly in recent decades, and yet its emphasis on the parish has been largely overlooked. And the *Lay Folks Mass Book* has received almost no interest from literary scholars, despite the fact that it is filled with vernacular prayers and the rich descriptions of parochial practice that historians often cite. I bring peripheral texts to the fore but I also put them in conversation with the visual and material culture of the parish, from the baptismal font and the churchyard grave to wall paintings and stained glass. I also set these texts and images in conversation with more canonical works such as *Piers Plowman*, a poem that is itself deeply committed to thinking about spiritual community and religious practice. Middle English literature raises important questions about the nature and function of parochial worship and about what it meant to be a parishioner. In considering such a wide-ranging combination of texts and images, I bring peripheral texts to the foreground and set them in conversation with more canonical works such as *Piers Plowman*, a poem that is itself deeply committed to thinking about spiritual community and religious practice.

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20. As Ford puts it in a recent book-length study of the *Festial*, Mirk’s sermon collection “offers an unrivaled opportunity to study late fourteenth-century Christianity as it was expounded to the ordinary, rural men and women who comprised the majority of the English population.” *John Mirk’s Festival*, 13.

21. Apart from Morey, who has explored the *Northern Homily Cycle* in its legal and literary contexts, studies of the collection have focused almost exclusively on its textual sources and affiliations: see Morey, “Legal and Spiritual Sanctuary,” 326–25.


23. Parish art has been the subject of much recent work. Kamerick discusses the visual culture of the parish and the important role that images played in lay devotion. *Popular Piety and Art*, 69–105. See also Stanbury’s wide-ranging exploration of late medieval visual culture in *Visual Object of Desire*.

24. Benson suggests that Langland may have drawn on the “common artistic grammar” and “familiar” iconography of parish wall paintings in *Public “Piers Plowman, “* 164.
images, this book aims to enrich our understanding of why the parish and the ideal of collective worship mattered to late medieval laypeople. I seek to understand, moreover, the role that vernacular literature plays in articulating and shaping this ideal, and the extent to which it invites readers themselves to enter into the process of imagining and constructing the parish.

I begin where all parishioners began their lives in the church: at the font. I begin, too, in the churchyard, where earthly life ended but where deceased parishioners entered the extended community of the living and the dead. Chapter 1 argues that late medieval sermonists (the anonymous author of the *Northern Homily Cycle*, for example, or John Mirk in his *Festial*) sought to shape lay expectations about religious identity and experience by turning to two tropes, font and churchyard grave, that offered a means of exploring how the parish articulated itself. Both are closely associated with the capacious concept of *kynde*, especially in *Handlyng Synne* and *Piers Plowman*, where they provide a staging ground for the performance and renewal of parochial identity. Continuing with the sacramental life of the parish, chapter 2 explores penitential practice and argues that, after 1215, confession became a fundamentally parochial and, more particularly, collective enterprise. Later medieval liturgical prayers such as the *Confiteor*—widely available in vernacular translation—emphasize the distinctly parochial contexts of penance while also framing the Mass in collective penitential terms. Literature certainly draws on liturgy and doctrine, but it is also keenly attentive to the symbolic role that parochial space plays in the life of the penitent. Looking at sermon exempla from *Handlyng Synne*, I argue that, in order to illustrate the efficacy of parochial penance, Mannyng concentrates on its physical setting, paying particular attention to the role that parochial thresholds—the churchyard gate, the church door—play in repelling the devil and compelling the layperson from sin to salvation. I then explore the more beleaguered parish of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, a parish whose walls are vulnerable to outside attack and the infiltration of profit-seeking friars. Throughout the poem, Langland uses the metaphor of horticultural grafting to emphasize the friars’ physical violation of the parish and its practices.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine two powerful metaphors for lay devotion and the work of getting saved: walking and labor. In the context of the parish, the layperson’s spiritual progress is often figured as a kind of pedestrian journey, however halting or slow. I begin by demonstrating that walking was itself a medium of religious experience in the parish: parochial processions brought a congregation to its feet, all walking together toward salvation. I also explore the long tradition—going back to Augustine’s description of love as the foot of the soul—of associating charity and the avoidance of sin with pedestrian
movement in sermons, handbooks, and visual art. In chapter 4, I explore the motif of agricultural labor, which offered a lexicon for exploring the collective and cooperative nature of medieval devotion. Manual labor is used in such texts as the *Northern Homily Cycle* to describe not only penance and charity but also pastoral care. Priests are cast as farmers who till the word of God, and laypeople the day laborers who do God’s work. In the well-known agricultural sequence in the Luttrell Psalter, images of manual labor are paired with images of singing clerics in order to draw an analogy between working the land and working the spirit, and in order to shape the extended members of the Luttrell household into a spiritual enterprise. Langland takes up many of these concerns in *Piers Plowman*, and I argue that he invokes the language of agricultural bylaws in order to explore spiritual community on the half-acre.

Although this is a book about how vernacular literature explores the idea of the parish, the fifth and final chapter considers how one particular parish—All Saints, North Street in York—used vernacular literature to imagine itself. The so-called *Prick of Conscience* Window is best known for its Middle English quotations from the *Prick of Conscience*, but I argue that, beyond merely citing and illustrating the poem, the window adapts it for a parochial audience. By interpolating the poem directly into the ritual life of the parish, the window makes vernacular reading a tool of parochial worship and, ultimately, a means to salvation.