Europe After Wyclif

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In the early to mid-1430s, a young boy named Egbert walked through a public square in the market town of Deventer bearing a plate of food, eyes down, clothing and hair cut distinctively. Son of a nearby gentry family, he had been sent to the local Latin school, widely regarded as the best in the region (where Erasmus would go fifty years later), in hopes of securing him an advantageous clerical career. Once in Deventer he encountered a newish group of “Brothers” living a “Common Life.” They drew him toward another option, to choose spiritual rigor rather than careerist ambition. On this day he chanced to encounter a female relative in the square. When he did not lift his eyes to greet her, she knocked the plate out of his hand and exclaimed, “What for a lollard is this who goes walking about like that?” Here was a teenage relative of good family and fine education walking through town in a hyperreligious manner, as she saw it, lacking the courtesy even to greet kin, possibly harboring suspect views. The slur this woman reached for was “lollard.” It came from a Dutch word meaning “to mumble” and had originated as a dismissive gesture toward extraordinarily religious persons who spent their time, as it appeared, mumbling prayers, much as the word *beguine* sprang from a French word of more or less the same meaning. She might instead have used *beghaert*, a word suggesting someone “puffed up,” especially about religion. These words would accumulate multiple meanings over time: a slur directed at anyone accounted hyperreligious, the accepted slang for groups living specially religious lives outside formal religious orders, a tag for individuals with dubious spiritual views or practices, sometimes all three working at once—which would then, confusingly, also become true in historians’ subsequent use of these terms. The word *lollard* seemingly migrated across the Channel, doubtless from seaport to seaport, from the Low Countries to England (though some have also suggested a native English origin).
What should we make of calling someone a lollard in the mid-1430s at Deventer? Had the term moved back to continental Europe freighted with new meaning in the wake of Master John Wyclif? Had lollards become the talk of seaport towns? It’s hard to say. This slur might echo Wyclif’s condemnation at the Council of Constance, lollard thus taking on tones not only of the hyperreligious and suspicious but of the seriously heretical. No allusions to Wyclif or lollards as such appeared however in the flurry around the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, though they were themselves pursued early by an inquisitor and then a decade or so later by a hostile Dominican. On the continent Hussites loomed larger in popular rumor and worry. These were people sustaining open rebellion against church and emperor and threatening Prague, the capital of the empire and the home to central Europe’s earliest university, and sometimes outside Bohemia they were labeled Wycliffites. Hussite also occasionally appears as a general slur in early fifteenth-century Europe, though likewise nearly never applied to the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life.

Traditional accounts of medieval heresy have framed lollards and Hussites as national heresies. This label mirrored the nineteenth century’s preoccupation with the nation-state as well as romantic notions of national character, even as it echoed and perpetuated inherited protestant genealogies for the Reformation. What we make of this story of young Egbert—or, on a grander scale how we position lollards and Hussites in late medieval society and culture—hinges upon how we frame religious stirring broadly in fifteenth-century European society. One temptation is to make religion and especially religious upheaval nearly the whole story, another to treat such dissenting groups largely apart from European society and religion more generally. Since the 1980s John Wyclif, together with those writings and teachings in English and Latin deemed “lollard,” have awakened intense scholarly inquiry on the part of intellectual historians and theologians but especially among scholars of Middle English literature. Indeed, lollard writing for a time nearly came to dominate a literary canon or anticanon otherwise given over to Chaucer and Langland or Julian and Margery. To a historian, lollards can appear to have become a wholly owned subsidiary of English departments, the libeled or apotheosized lollards assuming center stage—an ironic inversion which other scholars have in turn disputed, denied, or ignored. Recently we seem to have entered a season of reflection and indeed of moving on, an after phase, evident in a widely noted con-
Many scholarly questions, old and new, persist: the exact connections between Master Wyclif and lollards, the degree to which Hussite positions and debates bore the mark of Wyclif’s writings, the possible relation of lollard writing to something called vernacular theology, the extent to which Arundel’s intervention remolded religious culture or language, any ripple effects of lollards on devotion and devotional writing more broadly, the character of the “lollard” Bible, what writings should be called lollard, and so on.

I readily acknowledge the continuing importance of these questions and the learning that has gone into them this last while. I come to this from another angle, however, as a historian of religious movements in the high and later Middle Ages, mostly on the continent, especially the Low Countries and German lands. I seek richer accounts of the culture and religion of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, more variegated storylines and cultural paradigms not stuck inside rigid and antiquated notions of humanists versus scholastics, Latin versus vernacular, churchmen versus people, inquisitors versus mystics, priests versus women, orthodox versus heretical, and so on. Tensions there were in late medieval religious culture, sometimes awful ones, at times murderous ones. Still, lines were not always so simple, clear, or clean. Tensions proved creative as well as destructive, and crossovers and intersections often surprise.

To overstate the point, and perhaps unfairly, if we insist on seeing this world entirely through a narrow version of Eamon Duffy’s thriving “traditional religion,” or just as entirely through the tight focus of heroic “dissenting lollards,” we effectively create the obverse and reverse of one and the same false coin. Moreover, the notion of “Europe after Wyclif” is itself ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so, implying both a question and an assumption, about ripples of change across Europe. The focus here will not be upon ripples of influence as such, real, imagined, or feared. Such work rests on detailed reception studies which claim considerable scholarly attention in Bohemia just now, careful and technical manuscript work that is both admirable and important. Here my question is about historical positioning, how we imagine a Europe in which lollards and Hussites in some sense fit in, not just as the paradigm for subversion or as a rebellious anomaly, but as players in a late medieval Europe all astir.

Ever since the sixteenth century, humanist and reformist punditry, sometimes allied now with reductionist approaches to social or cultural
power, have conspired to turn our storylines into binaries, even among scholars who piously foreswear all binaries. We must be careful. Jean Gerson could shake his head at the visionary claims of Birgitta of Sweden but defend those of Joan of Arc, write in French or Latin as it suited, as did too Hus (Czech) and Grote (Dutch) and countless other contemporary figures. Master Gerson could act to condemn masters Wyclif and Hus, while defending the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life against a Dominican inquisitor whom he condemned. He could expound on ecclesiastical power at length, and also lead the Council of Constance into declaring conciliar authority ancient, authentic, and binding under the Holy Spirit. He could attack simony as eating away at the integrity of the church, and yet defend the ranked enjoyment of the accoutrements of office and its privileges as essential to the dignity of those estates. Gerson was undoubtedly an exceptional personality, but his paradoxes were not so exceptional. Religious rhetoric and spiritual claims could be shrill, even unrelenting, and the more so as they moved past the complexities of all social or religious reality. In a world of amazing contrarieties, late medieval religious practice steadily complicated, layered, and nuanced the meaning and working out of these pronouncements. We must imagine people finding ways to live with such contrariety, as too those who insisted on very particular visions of what religion was or should be.

For people in the fifteenth century too, this could all prove quite bewildering. In 1383, five years into the papal schism, Master Geert Grote, founder of the Devotio Moderna, wrote a long canonistic exposition for a close friend, also a Parisian-trained cleric, answering an agonized call for advice on the rival popes. In the end Master Geert characterized his words as disordered outpourings of mind and heart which came to no clean legal resolution favoring either pope. He talked instead of overcoming his own “interior schism,” and moving in love to “gather” (congregare) a few around him into a sheepfold of Christ. A shorter letter to this same friend at that same time noted the “fall” and “ruin” of the church as marks of the end time, and recommended that they no longer pursue the inherited ways of worldly and worldly-wise clergymen but rather the books and truth of clergy—moving themselves to act as preachers and teachers of that bookish truth (both were deacons, not priests). In this same atmosphere of uncertainty Cardinal Pierre d’Ailly, along with not a few others among the learned, turned for help to prophetic revelation, even as they pored over...
law and scripture and wrote learned tractates and entered into tough negotiations, all to bring some order and understanding to a European church they found, even beyond the trying matter of papal schism, in disarray. Catherine of Siena with her followers in Tuscany and beyond vigorously backed the Roman pope, while Friar Vincent Ferrer, a preacher active in Iberia and France, firmly backed the Avignon pope, both reformers renowned for the power of their rhetoric in their native tongues.

**CANON LAWYERS ON THE SHAPE OF RELIGION**

If we stand back a little from literal readings of the angry or the pious pronouncements of single-minded reformers and prophets, we may seek a more panoramic view of the late medieval church, and for that we turn to lawyers. By the late fourteenth century law and lawyers, not theologians, had dominated the church and its business for over two centuries. This is precisely why they were so fiercely (and ineffectively) impugned by theologians, who always remained distinctly in the minority and rarely gained powerful posts (thus Wyclif and Luther, and many already before them). To grasp what these church lawyers took for granted and tried to account for, we must begin with what they presumed. Remember that in medieval society nearly all persons (small communities of Jews or Muslims excepted) were christened as babies, and by virtue of the invisible and ineradicable mark of the Lord Christ imprinted on their forehead were joined at birth to Christendom, and hereby also obligated from childhood to religious duties at once cultic, moral, and faithful. This meant church jurisdiction over dimensions of their lives we might account social—thus marriage, wills, tithes, land-bearing church claims, and more. This took in over 90 percent of Europeans (indeed down to the Reformation or the Revolution). Beyond them a smallish minority, highly privileged in religion and often in social status as well, bound themselves to a more particular rule of life by vow, and these people professed to religion had long since co-opted the word (religio) for their status and life, indeed were commonly referred to as “the religious.”

Accordingly, the term apostate referred most commonly in this era to renegade monks or nuns or friars and only occasionally to those relative few in the later Middle Ages who repudiated their baptism to join a community of Jews or Muslims. The jurisdictional claim that came with baptism
could in principle still order apostates of either sort back to their previous estates, though actual practice on this account was more nuanced and varied.

Those deemed heretics too continued to fall under the church’s jurisdiction by virtue of their christening. Here coercive power was intended in principle not to torture or kill but to turn errant souls back to keeping the church’s law. Condemnation followed properly only on the persistent refusal of such persons to acknowledge the authority implicit in that baptismal mark and obediently to recant errant views or practices pointed out to them by churchmen. In Latin and all later medieval languages this “law” enfolded layers of meaning stretching from Scripture itself to items of belief and practice as well as its broader inherent sense of obligation—a point that masters Wyclif and Hus fully shared with the larger community, even if the term was employed by them more specifically to drive their conception of that community. Ecclesiology, how one understood the make-up of the church (though, remarkably, not yet an explicit part of Peter Lombard’s Sentences in the 1150s and hence of the required formal teaching of theologians) underlay any coherent articulation of how medieval European society and religion conjoined and indeed how the community itself was constituted. This too was a point that both Wyclif and Hus intuitively grasped (whence the importance of works on this subject in their oeuvre), as had theologians and canonists more explicitly since the battles between mendicants and seculars and then the showdown between Pope Boniface VIII (a smart canon lawyer) and King Louis the Fair (counseled by his lawyers). Still, in some sense it all rested on baptism, indeed the baptism of infants. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries several dissident groups had explicitly challenged this foundation, calling for a conscious or chosen adult baptism or blessing. Notably, too, the consecrated vows of those called religious had long since accounted in monastic spirituality as a second baptism. All this, interestingly and intriguingly, the fundamentals of christening and community, Wyclif, Hus, and other reformers and dissidents from around the year 1400 left untouched as such.

Given these presumptions, then, canonists offered a scheme that parsed the social and religious state of a Europe-wide church in a layered definition of religion. The scheme summarized here comes from Johannes Andreae (ca. 1270–1348), a Bolognese professor of law, by way of Archbishop Antoninus of Florence (1446–1459). Master Johannes, notably, had been
married and spawned children inside and outside of marriage, including a
daughter (“Novella”) said to help him in copying his lectures, while Friar
Antoninus, an Observant Dominican in the middle of Medici Florence, au-
thored a summa of law and theology subsequently dubbed moralis since he
focused more on matters of practice than doctrine, more on jurisdiction in
the internal court (confession and the like) than the external (ecclesiastical
property and personnel). According to this scheme, widely echoed, reli-
gion referred, first and most broadly, to all who offered up that cult or wor-
ship owed the true God, thus all the christened (totam christianitatem), also
called simply the religio christiana. This is a term that both Gerson and
Wyclif also invoked for their own distinct purposes: Gerson especially
to establish the religion of the parish (not the cloister) as basic, Wyclif
(and Hus) to highlight his vision of a “true” parish or “congregation” as
foundational.

Second, religio referred more specially, these lawyers say, to those who
acted upon their christening in virtue, thus all good Christians (universi-
tatem bonorum christianorum). These, we might say, are the people Duffy
lifted out for us, their presence real enough, those laity zealous in deed and
devotion, while his account in effect silently passed over the spectrum of
less zealous folk in the lawyers’ first inclusive typology. “Good Christians”
are the people Wyclif and Hus have in mind too, their “goodness” somewhat
differently framed (as other reformers did each in their own way); these
ture, zealous, or devout whom they aimed to define, foster, or set apart
from that larger more amorphous body embracing all the christened. That
broader group of all the christened often appear as the apt targets of
reproachful preachers and confessors (and, of course, of the “good” who
needed reminding). These were people who appeared, or perhaps were, rela-
tively indifferent to church attendance, from time to time unscrupulous
in work, unfaithful in marriage, miserly in prayer or alms-giving, foggy
about the creed, and easily resentful of clergy. They were not heretics—
those judged to have taken an alternative way in belief or practice—and
certainly not infidels (meaning, unbaptized). Nor indeed did they see
themselves as anything like those smaller groups of the true, illumined, or
zealous, while the latter in turn regularly distinguished themselves from
this reputedly negligent horde of the christened, as lollards or Hussites did
as well. We might say that this broad category was intended to embrace
people christened at birth who as adults drifted into, or quietly sorted out
for themselves, a level of practice that might suit, just which duties and devotions to fulfill and how intently and reverently to take guidance and instruction from clergymen. Our expositions often overlook these more “ordinary” cases, though they were held so firmly in the eye of preachers—drawn as our interests often are to the special or more “interesting” cases of the religiously animated. Importantly, we have no real way to construe in what percentages these two typologies coexisted among the later medieval laity. As for those rightly or wrongly called lollards, beyond their possibly taking a striking stance toward one or another common practice or belief, it was doubtless their earnestness that stood out, their determined zeal which verged toward religion in the stricter set-apart sense of the religious.

Third, and more specially still, religio referred, these lawyers suggested, to the clerical estate, those persons dedicated to the maintenance and carrying out of religious cult and practice, the tonsured in effect, all those in the “secular” clergy from minor orders to the vicar of St. Peter. In some later medieval ecclesiologies those positioned theologically or politically at the opposite end of conciliarists defined church more exclusively or emblematically as the clergy or the bishops or simply the cardinals and pope, for they bore and sustained the whole cult of religion.

Lastly, and most strictly (strictissimo), these lawyers say, the term religio referred to those who had submitted by vow to a superior and dedicated their entire lives wholly to God alone, coming thereby personally to inhabit the estate of religion (status religionis). Master John Wyclif was well aware of all these distinctions, or ones like them. He would himself in time repudiate altogether any exclusive claim to religion by those whom he called, by a key and deliberate inversion, the “private religious,” meaning especially friars but also propertied monks. He echoed a virulent antifraternal mood growing since the thirteenth century, especially among secular masters and priests (he was both, as were Hus and Gerson). Friars and their churches operated at the center of every town of any size, rivaling local parish pastors, such that resentment of these “privileged religious” became widespread in late medieval Europe, this often mirrored to comic effect in vernacular satire—along with, one must also add, equal admiration for and attraction to the friars as learnedly and actively working among the people. In terms of our typologies we might also say that masters Wyclif and Hus, and in a more restrained way Gerson, each of them a secular
priest and thus of the third category, were upending the more exclusive claims to religious status of the fourth, though their critique in its particulars could also reach well beyond that.

These lawyerly typologies corresponded to intelligible socio-cultural perceptions of Europe’s religion of the christened in the high and later Middle Ages, and as such would be commonly and broadly understood even by many in the “out” groups. Religion referred collectively to all the baptized, whatever their degree of practice and however minimal their knowledge or devotion, then more particularly to those laity accounted zealous and virtuous in actual deed; more narrowly still it referred to the secular clergy, the bearers of cultic religion and moral authority among the people, and then most particularly to the consecrated professed, religion’s embodiment and exemplars. The first two groups, lay, were subject to local civil law in all matters except those touching the oversight of the church and churchmen; the last two, the clerical and the professed, were subject in principle exclusively to ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the oft-resented benefit of clergy, that sacral and juridical autonomy for which Thomas Becket had given his life a good two centuries earlier, founding thereby the best-known and most widely visited pilgrimage site in England and one of the best-known in Europe.

Not everyone, reserving heretics and apostates for now, fit neatly into these categories, and those who did not have also tended to capture more scholarly interest, as they did to some degree in their own time. For such extraordinary types, however, precedents and even quasi-legal forms of recognition also emerged. Already in the thirteenth century the distinguished canonist Cardinal Hostiensis recognized that some laypeople lived more religiously (arctiorem et sanctiorem) than others, meaning not just more virtuously but in forms of life identified as more religion-like, for instance, as hospitalers, recluses, hermits, or pious widows, types all visible in thirteenth-century Italian towns. These too, he opined, might be called religious in an extended sense (largo modo dicitur religiousus). While this position never gained full traction—it does not appear, unless I am mistaken, in Friar Archbishop Antontinus’s exposition, for instance—it regularly was invoked in legal rulings as well as practical settlements worked out with local communities over the next two centuries—until this was all shut down by the Council of Trent. In the fifteenth century Friar Johannes Nider (ca. 1380–1438), likewise a key figure among Observant
Dominicans, himself in attendance at both major councils and a player in interactions with Hussites, wrote two still-unedited works on “laity living as religious,” as he called them. The works remain unedited in part because they are so densely packed with canon law, hence not easily recognized by scholars of religious life for what they are: his attempt to sort out the status of some nine socioreligious groups, overwhelmingly but not exclusively women (beguines, secular canonesses, recluses, and so on) who had all assumed a large presence in his world, especially the Rhineland and South German cities, and who also fell disproportionately to the care of friars. These were zealously religious people who looked and acted in ways or forms neither clearly lay nor clearly clerical or religious, who also in part did not know how to position their own form of life within the church. Nider, though tough-minded about church matters, aimed mostly to defend these groups as legitimately or plausibly religious and to interpret their way of life as protected— presuming they did not overstep certain trip wires that might suggest disobedience or heresy.¹⁵

Dissent Groups, Their Self-Regard, and Their Labels

Friar Johannes Nider hardly approved of Wyclif—he aimed to refute Hussites, though also to converse and negotiate with them. Yet Master John Wyclif held to some views little different on this point from Friar Nider: namely, that a Christian keeping to the perfection of the gospel outside the cloister was not to be called worldly or lay (observans perfeccionem evangelii extra claustrum corporale non dicitur secularis), for Christ and the apostles had lived that way too, and for that matter the “imperfect” might live as well inside as outside a cloister.¹⁶ Wyclif’s voice here may be indignant, defensive, or even prospective. But the Oxford master and parish rector could imagine, indeed more and more, Christian or religious people who observed Gospel perfection outside a cloister, and hence were not to be dismissed merely as “in the world.” Obviously some of these would come to be called lollards. Because the lay among them were often married—the poor preachers looked more like austere friars outside formal orders—they did not resemble so obviously those varied groups of celibate quasi-religious (beguines, recluses, and so on). Were they then a novel and improved form of the zealous laity? Or, under their “Abbot Christ,” with their poor priests
and preachers, were they in fact a good deal like Nider’s “laity practicing
religion,” in this case “true religion”? To certain authorities they manifestly
looked quite otherwise: people who had broken in belief or practice with
their compact at christening (one way of articulating heresy) and hence in
dire need of being brought back round by teaching, inquisition, or coercion
before their spiritual disease be allowed to infect the larger body.

But what of their own self-regard?27 Lollards and Hussites certainly did
not see themselves as breaking with their christening, rather as fulfilling
it, and they never challenged infant baptism. They saw themselves more as
a faithful remnant, the true and zealous, first of all over against all the in-
different and errant but equally over against errant clergy. They called on
people to make a turn back to the true ways of the Law of Christ. In a
sermon preached in 1406 at St. Paul’s Cross, William Taylor urged people
to recognize, first, that the whole church, priests and people, had fallen
away from the love and especially the “law” of God, that nearly all the bap-
tized were hypocrites, which he found evidenced for instance in their sham
fasting.18 The need was for the “true people” to “gather,” and for these true to
separate out as a group of law-keepers.19 Still others among these “true”
would accuse the majority of late medieval churchgoers of rampant idolatry
for their reliance on images in worship or their turning bread (the reserved
host) into an object of worship. Still, we must be careful not to isolate cer-
tain charges out of context, as earlier protestant pundits did. We must sit-
uate these charges and countercharges in a larger world of religion astir.

One recurrent difficulty in approaching this religious stirring with a less
over-determined narrative language springs from the labels they then and
we still wield. Terms like lollard, Beguine, or Beghard suffer now, and suf-
ffered then, from acquired interpretive associations, also true for Cathars
and Waldensians as well as Free Spirits. In a pioneering dissertation forty
years ago, Robert Lerner concluded that there were in fact no Free Spirits;
the sect, at least in the sense of identifiable people adhering to an intentional
sect of religious libertines, was a concoction rather of the papal ruling Ad
nostrum. More recently Mark Pegg, now followed by R. I. Moore, has argued
that there were no Cathars, at least in the sense of a distinct religious com-
unity with a self-conscious dualist cosmology or theology; there were
rather boni homines zealously pursuing religion in varied ways, only some
of which may have moved into a fully dualist cosmology, such a theology
constructed as much, or possibly more, by adversaries and inquisitors.20
Modern Devout, English lollards, and Czech Hussites there certainly were, Waldensians too, and people whom others pointed to as Cathars or Free Spirits. At the same time, not every rumor of unusual religious practice or belief yields evidence of heroic religious dissenters. A good deal of what we can detect on the ground falls somewhere in between, the lives of individuals or groups that often played out very locally. Hence we have problems, as scholars increasingly see, deciding what should count as, say, lollard or Free Spirit in teachings or writings. Too often scholars fail to perceive or determine how freely or suspiciously or even ordinarily such works or people circulated among other parishioners or alongside those more extraordinarily religious, with works of all sorts also often found in the same codex.

I am not wholly persuaded myself by those who see charges of heresy as mainly manufactured in order to bolster an ecclesiastical establishment on the march; among other possible objections this vision tends to rob the religious aspirants themselves of their humanity and singular spiritual energies. At the same time, I readily concede that the pursuit and categorization of persons as heterodox could generate its own realities and drive people moreover toward adopting new positions in society and religion. And in a society where religion and social power came so thoroughly intertwined, acts in one sphere nearly always had consequences for the other. Rumors spun about the oddly or extraordinarily religious could acquire a proverbial life outrunning the more mundane or complex realities, while measures taken against such groups or individuals could well drive them to the fringe or into resistance and new forms of coalescence. But what they actually were, what they were rumored to be, and the ways that rumors and charges in turn created their own realities—these still confront historians with puzzles not easy to untangle. Ian Forrest, if I read him correctly, laid out more by way of methods for finding heresy or warning of it, as well as for dealing with rumors and reports of it, than instances of heresy as such. While a narrative of people making their own communities and finding their own religious way, only to be confronted by an arrogant new university-trained intellectual elite, has generated wide resonance, it masks more conflicted complexities on the ground, including instances and attitudes of practical tolerance. It also confers on these clerical inquisitors a degree of power, as well as a stickman quality, that also does not necessarily bear out in realities on the ground.
Master John Wyclif, a priest with a living, died quietly in bed in 1384, reportedly after hearing mass, exiled from Oxford with certain teachings under censure to be sure, but writing furiously nearly to the end. That same year Master Geert Grote died of the plague in Deventer while appealing to Rome against the bishop of Utrecht’s withdrawal of his license to preach, a right he had secured as a deacon and exercised vigorously for three or four years around the diocese. In fall 1383, as an honor, he was invited to preach to the annual diocesan synod, and took this occasion to lambast its assembled clergy for their female companions, hearth-mates or hearth-girls as slang had it (focarista)—and he loudly called upon laypeople to shun their masses.\(^25\) Still, most secular clergy, most parishioners too, were easy with an ancient custom whereby 25 to 65 percent of local parish priests may have had companions.\(^26\) We must not draw our lines too simply. So too for the first decade and more, Master Jan Hus’s local battle in Prague was grounded not only in his preaching and in strife within the theological faculty at Prague, but concretely in local legal actions disputing his leading a highly successful preaching church independent of a parish; in this matter, reigning law, though fungible, was mostly not on Hus’s side—an act that could look too much like what friars had done.\(^27\)

As with Master Geert each side immediately tried to wield canon law to their advantage, all the way up to Rome in appeals. This had long since become standard operating procedure in the late medieval church for those who had the learning and access as well as time and money. Between late 1414 and early 1418 these actions shifted to Constance and were now dealt with in council. At Constance, Birgitta would be critiqued and approved and later critiqued again, with Gerson’s intervention on the matter circulating in over one hundred extant manuscripts. If we focus only on Wyclif or Arundel, with little sense of the push and shove that could be church business as usual in this period and with a storyline already implicitly in hand, we overlook striking anomalies. This Oxford master was not personally condemned (as distinct from a selection of his teachings in 1382) until thirty years after his death and burial in a country churchyard fifty miles north of Oxford in 1384. His bones were dug up and burned only in 1428, thirteen years after the condemnation in May 1415 at Constance. Consider too that after more than a generation of bloody warfare between splintered Hussites and imperial and ecclesiastical forces, both sides additionally riven by social partisanship, a face-saving solution was proffered in offering
communion in both kinds, an issue not part of Master Hus’s original reform agenda.

Locality and Centrality in Later Medieval Religious History, a Reversed Dynamic

Europe around the year 1400 had emerged as an increasingly networked whole while still built essentially upon deeply local societies. From the mid-twelfth to the mid-fourteenth centuries the driving forces in culture and religion had tended toward invading those customary worlds, even to pulling people out of them. I speak here not so much of Bartlett’s conquest moving outward from a northwest heartland to far-flung peripheries, a conquest driven by military force as well as expanding ecclesiastical power—this vision in part an inflection of the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in the 1170s. I have in mind varied distinct impulses that reached into local societies multiply: a common law for the christened (canon law) working its way out from a monarchical papacy and from masters of law in Bologna and elsewhere into every diocese and potentially every parish; an ever more philosophically inflected understanding of the arts and of the Christian faith as “theology” radiating out from masters in Paris, Oxford, and mendicant studia; ever more common literary motifs traveling from court to court and town to town across every vernacular literature; ever more centrally institutionalized religious orders with friars commanding a strong presence in nearly every town; ever more common patterns of devotion planted by those friars in sermons, confessional guides, and meditational practices; ever more common expectations for pastoral care after Lateran Council IV spread by way of episcopal synods and pastoral manuals. All this tended slowly but surely to undo an older cultural and religious order. It also generated local resentments, famously toward friars, but also inquisitors and canon lawyers. Yet the momentum never halted, even during the papacy’s residence in Avignon. Figures like Wyclif and Hus and Grote and Gerson and D’Ailly might critique various aspects of all this themselves, even vigorously; still, paradoxically, their own careers and work and writing wholly presumed and shared in this larger networked world.

From about the 1370s, however—whether owing to papal schism, or the deepening devastation of plague, or the disruptions of economic boom and
bust, or the planting of universities now across Europe, or the appointing of more permanent regional inquisitors, or the energies of newly emerging religious groups, or indeed the deepening of Christian religious culture at lower social levels—this centralizing momentum was confronted with equally strong forces originating locally and regionally. I lift out only a few aspects relevant here. Consider the character of a newer leadership, in three broad types. We have Master John Wyclif alongside Master Geert Grote, Master Jan Hus and Master John Gerson, also Sister Birgitta and Sister Catherina of Siena, and further Friar Vincent Ferrer, Friar Johannes Nider, Friar Bernardino—with many more like them. After three generations of dominance by friar-theologians, secular masters of theology assumed real leadership again, all of them masters who also had an eye now on the state of parishes. Women visionaries and prophets in turn were gathering communities around them to a degree not seen since Hildegard of Bingen, however expansive the role of quasi-religious women’s communities had been in the intervening years. Friars and monks hardly disappeared. Crucial, however, was the emergence among them of Observants, ardent reformist minorities within virtually all orders from the 1370s or so, often quite embattled internally, mostly in the end splitting off to form their own houses and networks, as with the Colettines among the Clares. These Observants easily paired in purpose and worldview with the new urbanized Carthusians, and the one or two new orders that emerged in this era such as the Brigittines or the Windesheim canons and canonesses (the professed branch of the Devotio Moderna).

They all saw themselves as a faithful core in a church or within orders overrun with corruption, privilege, and indifference. Failing to bring the larger whole with them, they focused upon gathering the likeminded around themselves, normally without wholly repudiating the church as such, however fiercely and relentlessly they critiqued it. Indeed, they soon came to count on its privileges and support for their own favor, as they did on wealthy lay patrons. These reformers, especially its leaders, but often adherents too, worked across Latin and the vernacular, back and forth, according to need and purpose. Ambidextrous writers and preachers, they actively promoted a new spiritual intensity and in effect a new spiritual order, in both languages—preaching with the pen, as the Carthusians said— their views often articulated with a rigorous if not extremist edge. These groups too proved mostly relaxed about mixing status or rank differences,
be it clerical with lay or elite with common, associating in ways that ventured beyond reigning custom in either secular or ecclesiastical society, often incurring critique here too from those accustomed to more status-conscious inherited patterns of religious life. They also presumed liturgical worship and resolved to practice it, be it that of an order or in private exercise such as the Little Hours of the Virgin; but they focused most intently on meditational regimes, more and more of them self-designed. Those regimens commonly presumed both reading and writing as well as the use of song, ballad, hymn, or verse.

Allow me to illustrate briefly with a little-known figure on whom I am currently at work. Alijt Bake of Utrecht and Ghent (1413–1455) would eventually become a canoness and then prioress for ten years, at Galilee, a new Windesheim house founded in Ghent, the largest city in the Low Countries. Already as a laywoman in Utrecht she had tried out various religious options including that of urban recluse, and would weigh joining the Franciscan Colettines. She suffered in despair through an extended vocational crisis without losing her questing spirit, determined that she must become a nun inwardly, as she put it, before becoming one outwardly—all this later written up in a searing account she entitled *My Beginnings and Progress*. Among other exercises she undertook, self-imposed while still a lay postulant, she worked daily through her own form of passion exercises. Here I offer a small recollection, penned in her own tongue, of what she did: “time in, time out, I stayed with it, not only the talking but also the meditating and learning inwardly what I should be doing to that end. What I learned in this way, I wrote all out so I would not forget it. Thus I spent my whole time: ever talking and pondering and learning and writing and scratching out and writing yet again, such that I forgot about all my other scattered thoughts.” That is to say, amidst these meditational exercises she took as well to talking aloud and writing down what she intended and experienced and learned as ways of honing her mental focus, making her a nun “inwardly” while still a layperson. Reading and writing and exercising and self-reflection were all of a piece. Forms of this may be found scattered across nearly the whole spectrum of adherents to these new religious circles, whether in the vernacular (as here in Middle Dutch) or in Latin. At the heart of it lay the working assumption that these texts or regimens could be adjusted or fine-tuned or even individually invented, written down, or compiled as needed. University and devout circles are not exactly
the same, but we find interestingly in both similar patterns of textual transmission and of community or group formation around those transmitted texts. These texts, and acts of reading and writing, were very much at the center of this era, and their proliferation was famously fostered by the crisscrossing of texts at the councils, then further facilitated locally by regional networks which might form in turn their own focal point as local communities.\footnote{31}

Consider for a moment the story of the fifteenth century’s most successful text, Thomas of Kempen’s *Imitation of Christ*, penned in the early 1420s, and surviving still in nearly nine hundred manuscripts.\footnote{32} This too is a story both of locality and multiple networks, one which scholars have yet fully to work out. What came to be accounted as one book titled *De imitatio Christi* began as four distinct pamphlets circulating as singles and clusters, eventually more often three together. In Thomas’s own autograph copy of 1441 they appear in fact (in slightly different order) as the first four of thirteen such pamphlets—but we have notably more than a dozen manuscripts containing one or another of the four books dating prior to 1441. The inciting moment for penning the first two pamphlets, we think, was Thomas’s term as novice master in a new house of Windesheim canons regular outside Zwolle in the early 1420s, hence his call to pursue an inner life (the kingdom of God within you) and ultimately to dedicate oneself to religious life as such (overt at the end of the present Book I). The teachings come to us, however, in part from remembered collations which Thomas had heard delivered by Brothers of the Common Life in Deventer when he was a teenage schoolboy there, destined like Egbert for a clerical job. These “talks” were delivered to any and all comers. Their “points” or “sayings” (*dicta*) were remembered, or eventually written down, as aphorisms or spiritual proverbs, sentence by sentence, memorable lines conceived in part as antidotes to the earthy proverbs that governed lay life. Like Egbert in our opening scene, Thomas had come to live for a time in the Brothers’ house. Later as a canon regular, from notes or memory, in his thirties and in a cloister, he turned these sayings, some no doubt also of his own making now as novice master, into assonant Latin, gathered in themed units as chapters and little books—without wholly losing their contact with the street and young clerics and lay life.

Such were the origins as best we can surmise. But its transmission was broad and almost instant through multiple networks still to be sorted out,
a kind of map to fifteenth-century religious life. Already by mid-century and in Thomas’s own lifetime three of its books went into English, probably at Sheen, even earlier into Dutch for a house of Sisters, likewise very early into Low German, also quite soon in Latin reaching all the way to reformist Benedictines in Italy, and so on. It traveled both anonymously and under several different names, most prominently, strikingly, that of Jean Gerson. For the next three generations the “book” (in one form or another) circulated widely in Observant circles across many orders, especially the more monastic, as well as among the Carthusians, but no less among women Franciscan tertiaries. Then in the sixteenth century it became required reading for Jesuits, though Reformation protestants also avidly appropriated it after making some necessary modifications—an “interior life” for them, yes, but no “monastic life.” All the same, we must not be misled by those nine hundred manuscripts. The great majority of people in Deventer—people like the aunt who had dismissed her schoolboy nephew as a “lollard”—did not attend these Sunday afternoon conferences. Transmission, as it now reaches us, inevitably favors religious or semireligious and obscure lay ownership except in high court circles; so we do not know how many of these sayings traveled in little individual quires. At the same time many lay people remained chary of these solemn calls to a special interior life or a separatist religious circle, just as parish priests and a Dominican inquisitor worried that these Brothers were in effect setting up their own parish by taking preaching and spiritual guidance into their own hands—as in many ways they were, along with the lollards and Hus.

The De imitatio Christi was not alone in its rooted locality and simultaneous spread across intersecting regional or transregional networks. This is what we find for many religious texts in the fifteenth century, quite especially—at least with surviving books—among Observant houses, some of the most spectacular producers and gatherers of books. Observant movements in the fifteenth century could never take over whole orders, or even come close, in good part owing to the self-interest of those already comfortably inhabiting convents and monasteries, abetted by the strength of the social and political connections they could call upon. Further, the majority of contemporary religious saw themselves as exercising good sensible customs for upholding religious life developed over time, not entering into the rabid new schemes of extremists. In a long plaintive treatise, Johannes Nider laid out all the objections that established houses threw up to being
reformed. So too most parishioners were wary of reformist groups, including the lollards—not necessarily keen to suppress them, unless they threatened social unrest, but dubious about this loud call for a “true” religion that moved in ways so contrary to embedded custom, so seemingly extreme, even if it echoed common concerns and touched on widespread resentments or doubts. Historiography has commonly grouped Observants and Carthusians in one category as reformist, and Wyclif and Hus in another as dissenters or heretics—and of course there were real differences of approach and principle. At the same time, we risk thereby creating historical blinders of our own making and in effect telling our own form of a partisan story. We fail to see the range and the paradoxes: how a Master Geert could be shut out of preaching for his attack on priests keeping companions, only to be revered subsequently as the spark igniting that diocese’s largest religious movement; how Friar Bernardino of Siena could become the leading popular preacher in Italy and stage a large revival of Franciscan piety in and outside orders, while also being charged with heresy for promoting the cult of the Name of Jesus by way of his imageless image (bearing symbols of the Name) held up as a key prop in his preaching.

**COMMON “NODAL POINTS” AND MULTIPLE RESPONSES IN A DIVERSE RELIGIOUS CULTURE**

Such binary narratives obscure concerns that cut across nearly all groups. They also fail to acknowledge the presence now of modalities in communication and text production that enabled the formation of such groups and of greater networking within and beyond them. So to round out this essay I highlight ways in which these groups, if distinct, also lived in the same world, the degree to which they presumed widely recognized simmering hot points, or nodal points as I call them, in the culture, even when the varied groups also took quite diverse paths in pursuing their religious ends.

This was the great age of medieval parishes. They remained for most people, and arguably more than ever, the fundamental matrix. Among nearly all those “stirred-up” about religion in this era we find the formation of separate circles, sometimes adjunct to a parish, sometimes in effect alternate or even antiparishes, in still other cases convent-like gatherings apart from vows or an order, a more exclusive or even anticloister, or a
distinct community within and yet outside an order as in the case of Observants. Such initiatives appear everywhere: the group that formed around Catherine of Siena and the groups sustained by her letters (often taking the formal shape of “tertians”); the communes formed by the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life as well as the broader gatherings for collationes (talks, bible studies) held in their houses Sunday or feast day afternoons; the multiple Hussite parties forming up around particular leaders or agenda points with their own chants or broadsides; not to speak of those gentry or burger laypersons with money, leisure, and zeal enough to acquire books or a spiritual guide and form their own private devotional circle. Despite all the recent research we are less clear perhaps about what lollards were (or if they were even one thing), in or out of the local parish, their own alternative or paraparochial community, or an adversarial gathering—and these realities, as with Waldensians over the generations, would have varied deeply in localities and over time.

The forming of distinct and independent religious communities was everywhere being tested and often at issue, thus prominently the case of Hus’s Bethlehem. It nearly always came with charges that preaching or teaching or confessing or spiritual guidance went on inside these groups apart from parish jurisdiction or mendicant oversight. While there was a long tradition of paraparochial confraternities and tertaries, along with guilds and side altars, this looked like a different sort of threat, to the wholeness of the parish itself, the base community of the christened, even a way of appropriating to themselves or setting up something like their own religious order. Dominican inquisitors—one in the 1390s, another at the Council of Constance—tried to charge the Brothers and Sisters with mortal sin for forming communes outside a recognized religious order, something they had undertaken in order to imitate the first community at Jerusalem, that model long since reserved for recognized religious orders. The Modern Devout had managed to bring it off by way of an ingenious use of civil law, ceding to one another mutual ownership and inheritance of all their formerly private goods. But for a lay person to undertake this constituted mortal sin, even a form of murder, Friar Grabow charged, for it cut that person off from carrying out those tasks essential to their estate, namely, bearing children and caring for material needs. It made a “lay” person (secularis) like a “religious” (i.e., without property), an inherent contradiction. Ultimately this generated a protracted legal process, carried all
the way from the local world of Utrecht to the church’s center at Constance. There Masters Gerson and D’Ailly argued in a determinative *consilium* that the only religion properly speaking was the one Christ had observed, the *religio christiana*. This Christian religion (in contrast to Benedictine or Franciscan or Dominican religion) did not require the counsels of perfection as such, and could be observed perfectly apart from vows, as the apostles and disciples had done in the early church, many of whom were married or had property. It required no “added-on” or “made-up” religion (*religiones facticias*). Popes, cardinals, and prelates, they observed pointedly, could also “perfectly” observe this “Christian religion” apart from vows and while possessing property.38

Another Dominican inquisitor earlier had charged a group of Devout Sisters with confessing to their Martha before going off to their local priest. This Martha held that she (or people she could provide) offered deeper and better guidance than he. In many or nearly all these instances the parish of christening, of cultic and fiscal duty, and of burial would get at least partly if not wholly repudiated by a select circle claiming to speak more acutely to godly life—thus those choosing to attend sermons at Bethlehem in Prague or to gather around “poor preachers,” or still others orienting their spiritual lives around the ministrations of an Observant friar or a trusted recluse. Many of the religiously animated in this period—Wyclif perhaps, Hus fairly early on, Gerson, Catherine, and countless others—sought to reconstitute a more godly community at the local level, which was in principle the parish itself, but often in effect projected new communities that partly mirrored the parish, partly supplanted it. To varying degrees, they yearned at the same time (as in some sense both Langland and Chaucer did) to project or foster or favor more godly forms of the parish priest, a figure that was commonly maligned as ignorant, bossy, immoral, and so on through a long list of charges. In the schemes of Gerson and others, the parish priest, not the bishop or pope or friar, was now for the first time accounted ideally the foundational figure in sacral office; this move came to ecclesiastical or political expression at the Council of Basel with the inclusion of parish priests, at least in theory, as possible constituent members.

So in this religious culture one nodal point is the forming of distinct godly communities, imagined increasingly as taking shape beyond the parish or the cloister and yet still very much in the image of a parish or a cloister. In all this, we are dealing, we must always remember, with the
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religiously zealous, whether lay or clerical, who in most instances were a tiny minority. In a town like Deventer, the Sisters might have represented 4 percent of the town’s population, arguably more in some large beguine towns. Moreover, in the making and especially the expansion of some of these communities, social considerations (need, shelter, broken families) moved people to join as much as religious ones.39

A second nodal point has already been touched on: reading and writing, thus the producing, consuming, and distributing of books, especially in the vernacular, but also in Latin as now becoming fundamental to the promotion of religious life (which also presumed the new availability of paper). The fifteenth century generated a veritable explosion of religious prose in the vernacular and Latin alike, leaving us with more manuscripts still than from any other century. Print emerged midway through this century in part simply as a new and more efficient way to keep up with demand. In German and Dutch about three-fourths of the manuscript material is religious in nature, far outdistancing, say, romances. On the continent especially scholars have turned their focus to tracing book production within these newly emerging religious networks, thus the Modern Devout, Carthusians, or Observants.40 Care is needed with both our tallies and our rubrics. It is too tempting to reduce these masses of spiritual prose to block categories, thus ascribing them wholesale to the Modern-Day Devout in the Low Countries, or configuring them in England as lollard, nonlollard, or antilollard. So too the label pre-Hussite has sadly predetermined interpretations of a whole body of textual material.41 Copies of Richard Rolle on the Psalms, a text lollards appropriated along with many others, equal or outnumber those manuscripts distinctly lollard in character, leaving to one side the now much-studied matter of “lollard” Bibles and the degree to which they were or should be accounted as distinctively lollard. Some fifteenth-century religious writings plainly reflect distinct partisan agendas, and can be traced back in theme or emphasis to a particular religious circle. But one miscellany—and we have hundreds or thousands of them—or indeed one library list from the late Middle Ages ought to keep us from forming quick and easy conclusions. Crossover, merging, and amalgamation appear everywhere. So what in actuality do we have then? Evidence of people or communities with shared belief or simply layered intertextualities? A codex harboring some leaves with writings deemed lollard or Wycliffite and kept in a convent library proves what? Marguerite Porete’s
work famously, and despite the burning of both her person and her book, was read in orthodox circles, the book circulating whole or in fragments and in translations.42 We are just at the beginning of understanding a world with distinct communities and yet also with broad interwoven interests, concerns, and contacts, as manifested for instance so strikingly in these miscellanies and in book collections.

Furthermore, while there could be trouble on occasion about reading religious books in the vernacular, the English attempt to suppress some vernacular books (which in any case appears to have been singularly ineffective) must be treated as the exception rather than the rule. Prayers and parts of the Bible and meditations had been emerging in the vernacular in many languages since the thirteenth century, and that pace accelerated dramatically after the 1370s. Likewise, while well into the thirteenth century the language of legal documentation across Europe was Latin (one of the markers of Bartlett’s “colonization”), more and more property agreements or fee arrangements, varying in time and by region, began to get recorded in local languages. The reasons have only partly been explored as yet, one likely driver being enhanced roles for local magistrates and burghers in the making of these documents (and in England of course “Law French” remained its own “sacred” language for legal and administrative affairs). The very real parallel with shifts into the vernacular for religious texts as well has hardly been explored as yet. In any case, the basis of primary education remained mostly Latin for a long time, and the gold standard for stately documents remained Latin, as it did for most things ecclesiastical. Still, a shift toward the vernacular in everyday legal matters—whatever the sequence and connections, again varying by region and language—must have made the shift toward more and more religious books written and reproduced in the vernacular seem natural as well, partly to meet the needs of lay social elites (noble or burgher), partly to meet the needs of dedicated religious groups such as beguines; perhaps even disproportionately so—but not exclusively, as Grundmann first argued,43 to meet the needs of women, who read romances or eventually kept household books in the vernacular.

The Modern Devout in Dutch towns, in the face of some hostility and of an inquisitor, vigorously and successfully defended their use of books in the vernacular in the 1390s, a defense probably intended for the Sisters and their books first of all. This apologia was written in Latin with a heavy inflection of law and authorities in order to address an inquisitor
and ultimately the bishop, then made available in somewhat simpler form in Middle Dutch. The Devout strategically conceded that critiqued authors like Eckhart should be avoided. In reality they and others went on reading Eckhart widely in the fifteenth century (most extant manuscripts date from then), as well as Jan Ruusbroec, whom Gerson had attacked, and of course Marguerite Porete, if not under her name. One of the striking traits of these miscellanies—lost in editions and in the singling out of a particular author, orthodox or suspect—is their range of materials, some of it common, some of it quite distinct.

Of late the term *vernacular theology* has sometimes been invoked for those aspects of this phenomenon that involve the writing and circulation of religious texts in the vernacular. The term was launched by Bernard McGinn with a different intent, then expanded by Nicholas Watson explicitly for the world of English religious prose (especially Julian of Norwich), and is now increasingly invoked as well on the continent. It has sparked considerable discussion, from a historian’s viewpoint carried on too exclusively inside English or literary departments. Just as interpretive approaches to lollards and Hussites remain tainted still at times by their earlier confessional and nationalist framing, so this term—echoing its origins as a riff on monastic theology—comes loaded with freight. Jean Leclercq proved ingenious and also astonishingly successful in 1956 when—faced with the dominance of scholastic theology both inside the Catholic Church and in perceptions of medieval thought—he perceived and himself helped make accessible to others an explosion of innovative and refined religious writing in Latin in the eleventh and twelfth centuries led by Cistercians, Carthusians, and Premonstratensians. So he countered with his innovative notion of a distinct monastic theology, which he set against the themes, genres and purposes of scholastic theology. This term is now a commonplace in textbooks and general narratives, and one that mostly dismays scholars. It carries no precise meaning, intellectual or social, and eludes nearly every attempt at a more nuanced definition, while silently living off its originating binary tension and occluding more complex understandings of twelfth-century culture and quite especially its crossovers (Peter Abelard was a monk, and from the beginning Leclercq said that Anselm of Bec/Canterbury did not fit). To speak of a vernacular theology may, like the term *monastic theology*, represent one way to give this religious prose space and standing in our conceptions of later medieval culture. But
its binary energies only blur and confuse our grasp of contemporary linguistic, cultural, and religious realities.

Another matter is whether one language or another may somehow more authentically express the intent of a person or a heart. This is an especially intriguing one for the fifteenth century, when many could to varying degrees move back and forth passively and actively between more than one language, also between, say, Latin liturgy and prayers or sermons in the vernacular. But neither Latin nor a vernacular is necessarily in itself a decisive determiner or inflector of content as such; routine or radical religious thought could appear in either language (and in the case of Meister Eckhart both). So too insistence upon *reformatio*, whether of the self or of a community or the church at large, may be found everywhere, and in all languages, as could nearly every other “hot” religious theme in this era. The determining consideration was more likely one of presumed audience. Further, all of this likewise has a distinct rhetorical dimension, going both ways. As with twelfth-century monastic authors assailing schoolmen or rival forms of monasticism, attacks on Latin learning or philosophical sophistry, or alternatively of lay unreliability in religious expression, were recognizable rhetorical tropes and carriers of group prejudice or resentment as much as substantive critiques. Sermons, arguably the dominant medium of this era, were usually vernacular outside cloister, university, or chapter settings, but sometimes nonetheless Latin in their recording, copying, or reading. Other genres, meditations for instance, similarly crossed languages easily and regularly.

If religious community is one nodal point, and the reading and writing and group-forming potential of texts another, a third was property. The medieval church was big business, very big business, collectively and locally. A parish always meant, beyond pastoral care, fiscal obligations, a parish priest’s ritual services rarely being rendered apart from stole fees, a monastery never entered apart from expected gifts, and so on. This applied a fortiori at the papal court, which had grown even more dependent since Avignon on monies it harvested from appointments, judicial decisions, and curial business of every sort. For Observant reformers the enemy were the *proprietarii*, propertied monks and friars, as they labeled the vast majority of their co-religious, all those fitted out with personal funds or goods or rooms. For the Modern Devout the answer was to form a strict commune in a community of mixed laity, clerics, and priests, with only a small number
ordained and chosen by internal election. Calls for disendowment among still other groups aimed to sever all links between property and religion, even if the effect of the lollard initiative would mainly have been to enrich the crown and lay lords, though the Lollard Disendowment Bill also foresaw these reclaimed monies directed to educational institutions (as Luther would later argue for). On the other hand, it was often the crown and great lay lords who with their resources significantly patronized the newly reformed or Observant or Carthusian houses, also coincidentally beguines. At the Council of Constance the clamor about property, broadly called simony, was constant, and all the solutions proposed or legislated proved makeshift and partial. God’s work in parish and cathedral remained at the heart of things, and God was highly honored, most agreed, in buildings, endowments, vestments, images, and prayers—indeed, more than honored, also accessed. At Constance, churchmen railed against the ways of the papal curia, but they met first of all in order to restore the curia; one person’s excessive fee was another’s income. Anyone approaching the grand Carthusian houses at Pavia or Mount Grace, communities embodying the epitome of the age’s spiritual ideals, would be gazing up at stone walls, a splendid gate, guesthouses, and servants. Had these visitors been allowed inside, they would have seen single luxury condos, so to speak, inhabited by learned reading and writing monk-hermits.

Beyond this unavoidable and even indivisible intersection of the spiritual and the material, to which scholars are now giving thoughtful attention, some fifteenth-century writers within the more zealous of these religious circles worried equally or even more about another kind of property, a personal self-possession, a propertied interior (eighenheid in Dutch)—a notion first influentially articulated by Dominicans like Eckhart and Tauler in German but central already to Marguerite Porete in French and later to Jan Ruusbroec in Dutch. Many related texts came to be accounted Free Spirit in some interpretations. For the spiritually intent the issue at stake here was all too real, a preoccupation of Aljit Bake, for instance. The more zealously religious a person became, the harder one worked at it inwardly—whether as a professed or a lay person, or as an in-between—the more such persons might also come to take ever fuller inner ownership of their religiosity, be it of their virtue or asceticism or constancy in prayer or tasting of God’s sweetness. They became thus inwardly propertied with luxuriant and privileged spiritual goods. Hence their intent and language
of returning to the “ground”; of the need to have this interior stripped down to nothing, willingly or unwillingly, however harsh that way in experiential practice, however long a person might find herself indeed abandoned in spiritual poverty and emptiness. These preoccupations dotted the spiritual landscape, whence a continuing readership for Eckhart and Marguerite among others (whether or not the source was known). This also opened up writers and practitioners to charges of Free Spirit heresy, even when their own speculations were mostly headed in quite different directions, and not toward any libertine freedom from religious or moral expectations.

Parish and community, reading and writing, property and spirit are only three key nodal points deeply embedded in this religious culture and so evidently at work across many or in some instances all these groups. One could mention others, for instance, a turn to the “law” or rules as the answer, whether that law be Scripture or strict adherence to a rule or a self-imposed spiritual regimen. Equally or even more central, as already noted, is the role of the material in the spiritual, an attack on images amidst a world filled with ever more and ever more lifelike painted and sculpted presences of the divine, of bleeding hosts from a risen Lord, and much more we could go on naming. It is not at all my intent here, it should be said, to deny the particularity, authenticity, and creativity of distinct fifteenth-century groups such as lollards, nor indeed their locality in the first instance. Nor do I fail to recognize that some proved far more radical in word and more rejectionist in practice than others. It is to point first of all toward a common landscape alive with identifiably particular but also widespread nodal issues. These underlay distinct initiatives pursued both broadly and locally amidst a culture generating widespread stirring, and especially in matters of religion—these religious stirrings, however, always and inevitably touching on matters that were equally social and the material.

It is appropriate then to ask why some groups or movements or teachings in this era gained acceptance, while some slipped by, some found workable compromises, and some met with rejection and even bloody exclusion. There is no simple answer. This reverts to questions of locality, first of all, to the particular circumstances, personalities, and issues. Still, some religious matters were patently more dangerous to raise than others, especially as one moved out of the understood *sic et non* of university debate to
take them up in such ways as to inspire distinct local communities. Yet it was hardly predictable that the bloody host at Wilsnack could eventually gain acceptance despite episcopal and theological objections, as well as the Hussites’ communion in both kinds, even as Wycliffites would be singled out for their repudiating the eucharistic transformation. In principle theologians, especially those in leadership at the Council of Constance, claimed to welcome open debate. Pierre D’Ailly, in the case involving the Modern Devout, held that the subcommittee taking up this matter of *fides* should convoke all masters of theology present at the council to hold a free and open discussion, learn from one another and determine what conformed to Scripture, the matter thus to be settled not in the dark and by individuals but in the light and by all. That was how he handled “matters of faith” assigned to him at council, he claims. It had hardly gone so in the condemnation of Wyclif and especially Hus, possibly something he was now rueing two years later, that also manifestly a matter of *fides*.

Again circumstances count, and not only the much studied ones surrounding Hus and the emperor and the fate of the council in its opening days. Initially, and then for two more years, the matters of *unio* and *reformatio* looked frustratingly, even dangerously, intractable. But Master John Wyclif, several of his teachings already condemned at the Blackfriars council in 1382 and long dead, seemed in a sense easy picking, thus their confirming an earlier papal denunciation and pleasing the English prelates, their denunciation of articles already deemed heretical, if now reinforced with a fuller theological apparatus. Furthermore, they appeared to be dealing with a matter of *fides* that seemingly threatened the whole community of the christened, and the capital of the empire in particular—even if their catastrophic railroading of Hus the next month only made the matter far worse in the end.

Nearly a century ago Johan Huizinga published a visionary portrait of the late medieval Low Countries imagined as in a late autumn harvest glow. He aimed, he said, to recapture the world he saw in Flemish painting. His portrait in fact derived mostly from texts, a deep and rich reading of late medieval chronicles, poetry, and court epics mostly written in French. His vision of religion in all this was by contrast strikingly spare and dour, his vision of all these late medieval religious enthusiasts and ascetics, the Modern Devout in particular, overshadowed perhaps by the stern Dutch
Calvinists among whom he lived in Groningen. Now, after generations, even centuries, of a declining late Middle Ages, scholars are looking again with fresh eyes. Imagine a portrait of later medieval religious life that captured in full measure and in all its radiant variety this explosion of religious writing in all languages including Latin. It would not be like one of those slightly staid set-pieces featuring a person or group. It would capture the spirit and texture of one of those extravagant late medieval altarpieces which presented far more three-dimensional carved or painted figures and stories than any single viewer could possibly take in at once, even if most of the individual saints or story lines were relatively common and recognizable. Such altarpieces, I suggest, come closer to the religious world I am trying to describe than do those more famous and elegant Flemish primitives. This was a world of religion all alive and astir and bursting out of its frame. Such large multidimensional altarpieces, we should also remember, stood at nearly every pillar or side chapel in some late medieval churches. That said, one must also, and paradoxically, include in our mind’s eye too those ardent and influential minorities whose religious lives turned entirely away and inward and upward, some discounting altogether such altarpieces and devotion, while a few others would have simply destroyed such pieces as idolatrous.

The vision I am suggesting here has some difficulty with Berndt Hamm’s influential Frömmigkeitstheologie, with its notion of a Zentrierung of religious culture during this period. Mine suggests rather a vision of landscapes alive with multiple distinct and even adversarial communities, each embedded in quite particular local cultures, and yet also paradoxically linked increasingly in a broader world of shared networks and common cultural nodal points, laden with religious, cultural, and social potency: issues of religious community and property, of reading and writing in Latin and the vernaculars alike, of the divine presence in the eucharist or relics or images, of spiritual modes radically this-worldly and fleshly or alternatively radically otherworldly, not only disembodied but in a sense dispirited. This is the exuberant European religious world bursting out of its frame in multiple forms during the two or three generations following the deaths of Masters John Wyclif and Geert Grote in 1384. Yet, we must remember too, the majority of people still went on working out their religious duties and aspirations mostly within the framework of their local parish and whatever additional options (shrines, quasi-religious groups,
recluses, friars) might be available to them, whether they did so routinely or indifferently or zealously. When we attempt to understand lollards or Hussites or Modern-Day Devout or Carthusians or Free Spirits or whatever else in the fifteenth century, we must try to keep all of this somehow in the frame, something contemporaries too could hardly manage.

NOTES

This essay remains close to the paper I delivered at the “Europe After Wyclif” conference. My thanks to Michael Van Dussen and Patrick Hornbeck for their invitation, and also for their patience.


3. To be clear, this is when the incident would have occurred; our written account of it by disciples of Egbert, doubtless a story he told of himself, comes from ca. 1483.


7. "maxime ad hoc, ut non sequerur antiquitatem mundane conversacionis in clero, sed veram predicacionem et doctrinan eius non ex operibus cleri sed ex libris et ex veritate." Gerardus, Epistola 20, ed. Mulder, 77.


14. There is a fairly large literature on this topic; the subject is also central to my Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). In addition to Elizabeth Makowski, “A Pernicious Sort of Woman”: Quasi Religious Women and Canon Lawyers in the Later Middle Ages (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), see the work of Kasper Elm, who regarded this position as a major modification of his teacher Herbert Grundmann’s claim that all religious enthusiasts ended up either in cloisters or in heresy; amidst his large bibliography a basic work: “Vita regularis sine regula: Bedeutung, Rechtsstellung und Selbstverständnis des mittelalterlichen und
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17. This is what Fiona Somerset has tried to get at most recently, Feeling like Saints: Lollard Writings after Wyclif (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).


19. Somerset, Feeling like Saints, 72. In fact, while the particularities of the Lollard emphasis upon law may distinguish them, an emphasis upon keeping to or restoring the law is common to many groups in this period, including many of the most rigorous and “orthodox.” Compare my work in n. 13 supra.


22. Somerset, Feeling like Saints, acknowledges this issue at the outset and settles it by aligning “lollard” with those who echoed teachings of Wyclif. But of course only certain teachings of Master Wyclif were condemned, and in fact much that she recounts is quite similar to broad stretches of late medieval religiosity more generally. In so far her findings often confirm the broader argument of this essay rather than setting out a distinctive Lollard ethos.

already raised some of these issues, as have her many studies and editions over the past forty years.


25. The works generated by this controversy, and the controversy itself, are now wonderfully edited and laid out by Rijcklof Hofman, ed. *Gerardi Magni Sermo ad clerum traiectensem de focaristas*, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 235 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011).


27. Fudge in *The Trial of Jan Hus*, 116–117, building on Kejř, presents some of this material, but too much in the shadow of what will come, as if the whole were of a single piece. This was, however, just how such conflicts were originated and initially worked out, in court and with law, always of course with matters of power and rank and religion hovering over them. And their outcome could go either way, in the case of the Modern Devout ultimately in their favor, as in my *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 84–118, and then again at the Council of Constance, ”Illicit Religion,” 103–116.


30. Ibid. I am nearing completion of a full reconstruction and translation of all her work.


33. See, for instance, Maximillian von Habsburg, *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi: from Late Medieval Classic to Early Modern Bestseller* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011)

34. See, for instance, James Mixson, *Poverty’s Proprietors: Ownership and


37. One central theme in my Sisters and Brothers; see especially chap. 5.

38. See my “Illicit Religion” for more details.

39. See my Sisters and Brothers, 128–135.

40. Work in this area has multiplied in recent years, especially in German and Dutch, also Latin and English, somewhat less so in French and Italian. A recent fine example among a host of such new studies: Anna Dlabacova, Literatuur en observantie: De Spieghel der volcomenheit van Hendrik Herp en de dynamiek van laatmiddeleeuwse tekstverspreiding (Hilversum, Netherlands: Verloren, 2014). Beyond the recent volume edited by Van Dussen and Soukup, see, mostly for English literature and with a more inward gaze, Devotional Culture in Late Medieval England and Europe: Diverse Imaginations of Christ’s Life, ed. Stephen Kelly and Ryan Perry (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014).

41. Another category is sometimes a “new devotion” spreading across late medieval Europe. See the Europe-wide body of essays in Die ’neue Frömmigkeit’ in Europa im Spätmittelalter, ed. Marek Derwich and Martial Staub (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoek and Ruprecht, 2004).

42. See now the splendid essays in Marguerite Porete et le “Miroir des simples âmes”: Perspectives historiques, philosophiques et littéraire, ed. Sean Field, Robert Lerner, Sylvain Piron (Paris: Vrin, 2013). I attempted to locate her contextually with "Marguerite of Hainaut and the Medieval Low Countries” (25–68).


45. Bernard McGinn raised questions about the language in which writers thought and articulated their experience of God, obviously women writing in the vernacular but no less trained scholastics. See especially his work on
Eckhart: *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), where the issue is, for instance, whether Friar Eckhart could think and express certain notions by way of the German word *Grund* for which he could produce no real equivalent in Latin.

46. In what has now become a larger bibliography, see representatively, for the range of opinions, the essays in *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), especially Vincent Gillespie’s attempt (3–42) to nuance the state of religious conflict and reform in the earlier fifteenth century, Ian Johnson’s hard-hitting critique (73–88) of a notion of “vernacular theology,” and Nicholas Watson’s effort (563–589) to save aspects of it as at work positively in fifteenth-century religious writing. Jeremy Catto, a historian, implicitly echoing some of the broader dynamics invoked above, suggests (43–54) that the period after Arundel was more open than ever in England to international influences of all kinds.


49. English-speaking readers now have a way into this learned and important body of work, in *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety: Essays by Berndt Hamm* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004).