Europe After Wyclif

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Chapter Eleven

“If yt be a nacion”: Vernacular Scripture and English Nationhood in Columbia University Library, Plimpton MS 259

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In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, Robert Gottes, a yeoman farmer from rural Norfolk, arranged for two tracts advocating open dissemination of English scripture to be copied into his small, parchment-bound notebook, now Columbia University Library, Plimpton MS 259. The first of these tracts, “What Charyte Ys,” is familiar to scholars from Mary Dove’s edition of Cambridge University Library, MS Il.6.26, and from two lollard-interpolated versions of the Pore Caitif. The second tract, entitled “Crysts Wordys,” appears for the first time in this essay. Its author argues that English scripture must be made widely available because England cannot be a nation unless its lay inhabitants have access to scripture in their mother tongue. This tract, together with other texts that emerged out of the contentious late fourteenth-century debates over vernacular Bible translation, reveals that these disputes sparked intense interest in the parameters of English nationhood among both lollard and orthodox believers. Could a nation be a nation without a vernacular Bible? The author of “Crysts Wordys” implicitly argues that because a nation is by definition a reading community founded on scripture, England “ys none nacion” without widespread access to an English Bible.

The relationship between heresy and “nationalism” is contested. Since the nineteenth century, John Wyclif and Jan Hus have played starring roles in English and Czech nationalist narratives, now the subject of much critique. But there is ample evidence that fifteenth-century Hussite authors were themselves interested in the meaning of nationhood and saw their reform work as bettering the Czech natio, meaning not only the Bohemian group at the university in Prague but also the greater Czech-speaking public. Hus and later reformers used the vernacular to unite and mobilize this diverse audience; thus for these reformers, preserving the Czech vernacular
became a key part of preserving the Czech nation. Likewise, “Crystys Wordys” suggests that English reformers, both lollard and orthodox, found in the Bible debates a venue for exploring what it meant to be a nation.

This essay encounters “Crystys Wordys” at two moments in time: first, at the end of the fourteenth century, when debates about English nationhood and biblical translation gained new urgency in the face of Wyclif’s challenges to the English church; and second, at the end of the fifteenth century, when Robert Gottes selected it for inclusion in his miscellany. The appearance of “Crystys Wordys” at this late date and in this lay context indicates that the relationship between English scripture and English nationhood was still of interest to some readers, though these later readers were very different from the original participants in the translation debates. At the end of the fourteenth century, academics and prelates argued openly at Oxford about the legitimacy of the English Bible. By the end of the fifteenth century, after Archbishop Thomas Arundel’s 1409 Constitutions had banned unauthorized Bible translations produced after the time of Wyclif, these discussions had retreated from the universities into the countryside where they passed informally among neighbors, as illustrated by the appearance of “What Charyte Ys” and “Crystys Wordys” in Gottes’s notebook. As in fourteenth-century Oxford, support for the English Bible in the fifteenth century was not a uniquely lollard position, but the contents of Plimpton MS 259 suggest that Robert Gottes may indeed have been sympathetic to lollard’s spiritual teachings, particularly the importance of direct engagement with scripture. His notebook is an invaluable witness, then, both to a previously unattested text and to the development of lay interest in accessing the English Bible in late medieval England.

THE NATION AND THE BIBLE

The only known copy of “Crystys Wordys” appears in Robert Gottes’s late fifteenth-century miscellany, but the tract had likely been circulating for nearly a century before it reached him. The debates at Oxford over Bible translation to which the tract responds were most fervent from circa 1390, when Henry Knighton noted with disdain the popularity of the Wycliffite Bible, through 1414, when heresy prosecutions and support for Archbishop Arundel’s 1409 prohibitions increased following Oldcastle’s Revolt. Three formal determinations on the subject survive, all from circa 1401: two
against Bible translation written by the friars Thomas Palmer and William Butler, and one in favor by the secular cleric Richard Ullerston. In addition to these three texts, an anonymous compiler working sometime between 1410 and 1425 collected twelve tracts advocating English scripture in CUL MS Ii. 6. 26. “What Charyte Ys,” the first of the two tracts in Plimpton MS 259 that advocate for English scripture, appears in the Cambridge compilation and in two early fifteenth-century lollard manuscripts of the Pore Caitif.

Internal evidence suggests that “Crystys Wordys” most likely emerged from the same context as “What Charyte Ys,” and indeed the two tracts were likely travelling together by the end of the fifteenth century, perhaps in booklet form. The text of “Crystys Wordys” indicates that the debates over English scripture were already underway when the tract was written, and that positions for and against—“lay peyyll” versus “menn of holy chyrch”—had been established. Nevertheless, when the tract was written “dyuers opynyons” on the subject could still be voiced openly: the question had not yet been resolved. Thus “Crystys Wordys” was most likely written after circa 1390, when debates over translation began in earnest, and before circa 1414, when Arundel’s “opynyon” found broader support. In the interim, participants in the debate found themselves grappling not only with the threat of heresy, but with larger issues about the status of the English language and the English nation.

The author of “Crystys Wordys” begins by expressing his or her wonderment at clerical opposition to vernacular scripture: “Whereas dyuers opynyons be hold that lay peyyll schold knowe nodyr vnderstond holy scripture, I merveyle gretly þerof that the menn of holy chyrch schold sey soo, or els perauenture they reputyth Englysch peyyll for none nacion.” For this medieval author, English nationhood is assumed, though his or her conception of nationhood is contingent on the dissemination of vernacular scripture. How much more would he or she “merveyle,” then, that medieval English nationhood is indeed contested among modern scholars of nationalism? The debate hinges on the wide varieties of meanings attached to “nation,” both medieval and modern. According to Benedict Anderson, one of the most influential scholars of the origins of national identity, nationalism first developed in the eighteenth century, with the rise of print media and the concurrent decline of dynastic reigns and the universal Catholic church. Without the guiding influence of the church, the
general public sought another community to which they could belong: the
national community, imagined on a monumental scale through the lan-
guage of popular publications.\textsuperscript{17}

Anderson’s periodization of national development precludes the possi-
bility of medieval nationhood, but his definition of “nation” as “an imagined
political community” usefully highlights the constructed, rhetorical nature
of national identity.\textsuperscript{18} Anderson’s emphasis, moreover, on the importance
of the vernacular resonates with late medieval developments, particularly
Bible translation, as “Crystys Wordys” suggests and as Adrian Hastings
argues in his controversial book, \textit{The Construction of Nationhood}. Hast-
ings asserts that medieval England fulfills Anderson’s definition of “na-
tion,” and that stirrings of English national identity are visible from the
eighth century onward, starting with Bede.\textsuperscript{19} Although Hastings’s work
has not passed without critique, it has stimulated interest in medieval con-
ceptions of “Englishness.” Recent studies highlight the variety in expres-
sions of medieval English identity and the importance of vernacular
language for medieval conceptions of the nation.\textsuperscript{20}

Whether or not medieval England fulfills modern requirements for na-
tionhood, texts like “Crystys Wordys” make it clear that medieval English
people were themselves interested in what it meant to be a nation. But the
definition of “nation” was as indeterminate in the Middle Ages as it is
among modern scholars.\textsuperscript{21} In ancient Rome, the personified \textit{Natio} was the
goddess of childbirth, and in classical contexts the word is best translated as
“race” or “people.”\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Natio} retained this sense in the Vulgate, though it ap-
pears only infrequently in comparison to its synonyms \textit{gens} and \textit{populus}.\textsuperscript{23}
Most medieval commentators drew on Isidore of Seville’s \textit{Etymologies}, in
which the seventh-century archbishop identifies \textit{natio} as a synonym of \textit{gens},
that is, “a number of people sharing a common origin,” and portrays lan-
guage as the origin of nations at the Tower of Babel: “nations [\textit{gentes}] arose
from languages, and not languages from nations.”\textsuperscript{24}

Over the course of the Middle Ages, the term acquired a broader range
of meanings, not only “ethno-cultural” but also “geopolitical.”\textsuperscript{25} In 1140
Bernard, the Bishop of St. David’s, referred to the Welsh \textit{natio} as distin-
guished by “language, laws, habits, modes of judgment and customs.”\textsuperscript{26} At
the Council of Constance in 1415, England’s representative Thomas Polton
expanded upon the definitions offered by Bernard and Isidore when he out-
lined the range of meanings associated with \textit{natio}:
Whether a nation be understood as a race, relationship, and habit of unity, separate from others, or as a difference of language, which by divine and human law is the greatest and most authentic mark of a nation and the essence of it... or whether it be understood... as an equality of territory... in all these respects the renowned nation of England or Britain is one of the four or five nations that compose the papal obedience.27

Polton’s argument illuminates the different parameters of English nationhood, especially as imagined vis-à-vis other nations: geographic boundaries, ethnic descent, but especially linguistic difference.28

Language, “the greatest and most authentic mark of a nation,” was thus a privileged element of the medieval sense of natio.29 This direct link between a nation’s identity and its unique vernacular language forms the basis for the argument in “Crystys Wordys” that nationhood depends on the availability of vernacular scripture. But the tract was also informed by a contemporary sense that national stability was in jeopardy, a fear exploited by advocates for the English Bible as they prepared to defend their position at the end of the fourteenth century.30 This was indeed a period of substantial unrest. Abroad, England was only just emerging from wars in Scotland and France.31 At home, the social order was in flux after successive waves of plague, political authorities were reeling after the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, and the church was struggling to respond to increasingly bold demands from the supporters of John Wyclif for social and ecclesiastical reform. These supporters, with Wyclif’s approval and perhaps even his assistance, completed a full Bible translation in the 1380s.32 It was immediately popular with both lollard and orthodox readers and remained so through the fifteenth century, even after the text was banned by Arundel’s 1409 Constitutions. The many surviving fifteenth-century copies, and indeed the continued circulation of tracts like “What Charyte Ys” and “Crystys Wordys,” demonstrate the continued demand for the English Bible and the selective application of Arundel’s legislation.33

Vernacular preaching came under scrutiny at the Blackfriars Council in 1382; the English Bible was next.34 But although opponents of scriptural translation were motivated by antilollard sentiment, not all of its supporters were influenced by lollard teachings. Some were undeniably followers of Wyclif, but others were entirely orthodox and saw vernacular scripture
as a tool to combat heresy. Thus it is crucial to attend closely to nuances of belief when approaching texts advocating English scripture: support for the English Bible is not a sufficient criterion to diagnose lollard sympathies. Such caution is equally necessary when approaching fifteenth-century sources, as will be evident in this essay’s subsequent analysis of the spirituality of the Gottes family.

In its language and themes “Crystys Wordys” closely resembles the larger body of texts advocating English scripture. The argument its author advances—that English scripture is a necessary component of English nationhood—does not appear elsewhere, but assertions in favor of scriptural translation predicated on English national identity do exist, as explored by Jill C. Havens in her article on lollard “nationalism.” Moreover, the sense of the “nation” as a textual community that the author develops in “Crystys Wordys” underlies other contemporary discussions of English nationhood, though it only fully emerges in this tract. As the following analysis will reveal, the “nation” in “Crystys Wordys” is both a linguistically distinct people—a gens in the biblical sense advanced by Isidore—and an abstract entity unto itself, as in Polton’s fifteenth-century description. According to the author of “Crystys Words,” each nation is distinct from but comparable to other nations, and every nation must have appeared at Pentecost, as in Acts 2:5: “and there were dwelling at Jerusalem, Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.” Finally, every nation must have a Bible in its own vernacular because the “nation” is imagined as an inclusive reading community of laymen and clerics seeking to know and understand holy writ.

The entire tract reads:

Whereas dyuers opynyons be hold that lay pepyll schold knowe nodyr vnderstonde holy scripture, I merveyle gretly þerof that the menn of holy chyrch schold sey soo, or els perauenture they repyuth Englysch pepyll for none nacion. & If yt be a nacion me thynkyth they do wrong for this cause: for Cryst Rebukyd the Saduces & seyd they erryd by cause they knew no scripture, neythyr the virtu of godd, the wich is in the gospell [Mark 12:24; Matthew 22:29]. Seynte Paule seyth: Non erubesco euangeliu quia virtus dei est [Romans 1:16]. All ye may rede on wytsonday yn the dedys of the postelys, þe ii chapter, how ther come to Ierusalem of all maner nacions of the world to hyre Cryst prech his word [Acts 2:1–13]. And he takyht yt to euerly nacion seuerally in ther moder tonge. Wher-
fore, me thynketh he gaue yt to Englysch men as well as to oder na-
cions, or els yt must be seyd ther ys none such nacion. Allso yt ys wrytyn
ad hebreos tercio Cap° iii yt is seyd by the holy gost: Today yf ye haue
herd his voyse ye wyll not hard your hertes yn bytternys lyke the day of
temptacion [Hebrews 3:8].38

The first three lines introduce the author’s thesis. By preventing the la-
ity from learning scripture, clerics are denying English people a key fea-
ture of nationhood, the nation as a Christian reading community. Here,
then, a “nacion” is both an entity unto itself—“If yt be a nacion”—and a
group of people: “perauenture they reputyth Englysch pepyll for none na-
cion.” As we have seen, medieval definitions of natio exhibit this same flu-
idity of meaning. The term can refer to a gens of common descent and
language, as in Isidore’s Etymologiae; to a community bound together by
laws and customs, as in Bernard’s 1140 definition; or to a socially, politi-
cally, and culturally distinct collective that encompasses all these senses,
as in Polton’s 1415 defense at Constance.

The text continues: “& If yt be a nacion me thynkyth they do wrong for
this cause: for Cryst Rebukyd the Saduces & seyd they erryd by cause they
knew no scripture, neythyr the virtu of godd, the wich is in the gospell
[Mark 12:24; Matthew 22:29].” This reference to the Sadducees is unusual:
when the Sadducees or Pharisees enter into lollard discussions of Bible
translation, the invocation is generally used to accuse clerics of ignorance,
corruption, and hypocrisy.39 In the Holi Prophete David, for example, the
author writes of churchmen who neglect their duties: “Sich proude clerkis
and blyndid in peyne of here synnes shulden taken hede what Crist seïp, in
Mt. xxiii° ch., to pe blynde saduceis, where Matheu writi þus: ‘Ye erren, ye
cunne not þe scripturis neiþir þe vertu of God.’” These clerks are “grete
foolis” and “prisoneris to þe deuyl.”40 But in the passage from “Crystys
Wordys,” it is not entirely clear who is following the Sadducees’ bad ex-
ample: is it the “menn of holy chyrch” who limit vernacular scripture? Or
is it the “Englysch pepyll” who, deprived of holy writ, remain ignorant of
“the virtu of godd”? The equation of holy writ with God’s power is partic-
ularly characteristic of lollard texts, as is the anticlerical bent of “Crystys
Wordys.”41 But the polemic in this tract is comparatively tame. Though
invoking the Sadducees certainly had negative connotations, the author’s
subsequent argument builds on holy writ’s power and not on clerical error.
"Crystys Wordys" is thus less an excoriation of clerical misdeeds than a corrective based on scripture.

The author turns next from the Sadducees to Pentecost and the main substance of his or her argument: "All ye may rede on wytsonday yn the dedys of the postelys, þe ii chapter, how ther come to Ierusalem of all maner nacions of the world to hyre Cryst prech his word [Acts 2:1–13]. And he takyht yt to every nacion seuerally in ther moder tonge. Wherfore, me thynketh he gau ye to Englysch men as well as to oder nacions, or els yt must be seyd ther ys none such nacion." Whitsunday appears in two other tracts advocating for English scripture, *First Seith Bois*, a vernacular translation and adaptation of Ullerston’s determination on the English Bible, and the first tract in CUL, MS Ii.6.26. In both these texts, the appearance of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost demonstrates that it is licit for the gospel to appear in the vernacular, in the present as in Jerusalem. In *First Seith Bois*, the Spirit “ȝaf to many diuerse nacions knowing of his lawe be on tunge, in tokene þat he wolde alle men knewe his lawe.” In Cambridge Tract I, the Spirit’s intentions are likewise pragmatic: because “þe most parte of þe world know[eb] neyþer Ebrew, Grew ne Latyn . . . on Witsonday, wanne þe Holy Gost liȝtited on Cristi[s] disciplis, he . . . tauȝte hem . . . alle maner langages.”

In the passage from “Crystys Wordys,” the author also establishes nationhood by comparison with “oder nacions.” In contrast to Adrian Hastings’ argument that England’s national identity was “precocious” and that it established a prototype for other nations to follow, “Crystys Wordys” asserts that England is a nation only if it is equivalent to “oder nacions.” The author of “Crystys Wordys” does not name the nations he or she has in mind, but lists of nations where vernacular Bibles already existed or languages into which the Bible had been translated appear in four other texts advocating vernacular scripture. Every one of these lists includes France, while the Low Countries, Germany, Spain, and Italy appear twice. Armenians, Britons, Bohemians, and Wendels (Slavic peoples) are each listed once. These catalogues of comparable nations and peoples suggest that the contemporary sense of nation relied in part on a process of comparison. Here, nations are distinguished by their respective vernaculars, and all are distinguished from England by their unchallenged possession of vernacular Bibles.
In the reference to Whitsunday in “Crystys Wordys,” there is a still larger—and more conceptually complex—claim about the origins of nationhood. In this author’s literal reading of Acts 2:5, nations only exist if they appeared at Pentecost.49 This biblical precedent both validates a nation’s vernacular as a suitable medium for scripture and establishes its very nationhood. If England is to be one of the nations of the world, the English people must understand scripture in English, as other nations do in their respective languages. If it does not, then “yt must be seyd ther ys none such nacion.” There is no clear parallel to this argument in other tracts advocating the translation of scripture. These texts sometimes deploy threats of instability due to a lack of scriptural and moral education, as in Cambridge Tract I, which warns that England “schal be moued and chaungid from oure nacion to anoþer nacion, but we amende us.”50 But threats of rebellion or conquest do not invalidate English nationhood: they simply reveal the precariousness of a nation founded and maintained in the absence of widespread knowledge of God’s law.

In playfully casting doubt on England’s qualifications for nationhood, the author takes the vocabulary of Acts 2:1–13 to its logical extreme. If all the nations of the world were at Pentecost and could understand the Holy Spirit in their own language, and if the English vernacular is an unsuitable vehicle for Biblical translation, then it follows that it was excluded from this communal experience and cannot be numbered among the true nations. It is a nation without a mother tongue, without direct validation of its nationhood by the Holy Spirit. It is, then, by biblical precedent, no nation at all. But concluding his or her argument at this point shows that the author of “Crystys Wordys” is confident about English national identity as he or she understands it: even “the menn of holy chyrch” would not argue that English is “none nacion.” And yet England’s lack of nationhood is a logical but unintended consequence of their prohibitions. These prohibitions cannot stand when faced with such dire implications for the English nation. Vernacular scripture must be widely disseminated and efforts must be made to educate all “English peyll” so that they may understand it.

This, then, is the last and most important qualification for nationhood in “Crystys Wordys”: a nation is—or should be—a scripturally engaged textual community. The author construes national identity as necessarily grounded in vernacular engagement with scripture, and depicts England
as a textual community based on direct engagement with the Gospels.\textsuperscript{51} This reading community should be inclusive rather than exclusive, extending to both clerics and laymen, and indeed encompassing all “Englysch pepyll.” This inclusivity is broadly characteristic of lollard formulations of the Christian community, but here there is none of the language of sectarian exclusion—the true church of the saved, as separate from the false church on earth—often found in lollard texts.\textsuperscript{52} Instead, the reading community of the “nacion” is limited only by a desire and ability to “knowe [and] vnderstond holy scripture.”

In most respects, the sense of English nationhood advanced in “Crystys Wordys” is entirely consistent with contemporary depictions. Here, as in other medieval definitions, England is both a genus and an abstract collective. In tracts that list nations where translated Bibles were already in circulation, England likewise appears as a distinct nation comparable to other nations. Pentecost is invoked elsewhere in texts advocating for the English Bible as a precedent for vernacular scripture. Finally, the driving goal of all the advocates for the English Bible was ultimately the cultivation of a national reading community, insofar as they all argue in favor of widespread and unimpeded study of scripture. What is distinct in “Crystys Wordys” is that England cannot be a nation unless it satisfies these requirements, “or els yt must be seyd ther ys none such nacion.” English nationhood is, in fact, not assumed at all—it depends on scriptural engagement. “Crystys Wordys,” then, encourages us to revisit the question of medieval English nationhood and its development. Isidore, Bernard, and Polton do not define natio as a reading community, but Benedict Anderson does. It may be that the development of a national reading community, as imagined both in modern scholarship on nationalism and in “Crystys Wordys,” did not have to wait for the advent of print. Certainly, revisiting the texts of the Bible debates has the potential to expand our understanding of the term as it appears in late medieval sources.

This essay has thus far focused on the English nation as it appears in the fourteenth-century Bible debates, through the lens of “Crystys Wordys.” But the manuscript containing the only known copy of this tract is a fifteenth-century miscellany. The next step, then, is to explore the tract’s later manuscript context. Interest in “Englishness” had not decreased over the course of the fifteenth century; indeed, it intensified as a result of England’s military campaigns, the ongoing centralization of government
administration, and the overall rise of the English vernacular. This trend was likely most pronounced among yeomen and husbandmen, who were starting to participate as never before in local administration and in foreign and domestic wars. Plimpton MS 259 at once sheds new light on the theme of nationhood in the Oxford Bible debates and provides an example of the spread of interest in the English Bible within these newly prominent social groups.

ROBERT GOTTES AND HIS BOOK

Plimpton MS 259 is a small softbound book of sixty-one folios. It is an untidy manuscript, with excised and blank pages, and as many as twenty different fifteenth- and sixteenth-century scribal hands. In it, the Gottes family recorded or had recorded a variety of short texts in Latin and Middle English, including two florilegia of Latin moral adages, quotations from scripture, a variety of religious tracts, and records of land and livestock transactions. The identification of the compilers comes from these accounts, which pertain to members of successive generations of the Gottes family: Robert, Richard, and Nicholas, all of Little Ryburgh, Norfolk. Robert Gottes was earliest of these compilers.

Manorial records and the Gotteses’ accounts show that Robert’s social and economic activities were typical of contemporary yeomen. But the survival of Plimpton MS 259 makes the Gottes family unusual: until the end of the sixteenth century, few manuscripts associated with yeomen survive. The Gotteses were likely more literate than most of their neighbors, but this does not mean that the texts in the manuscript were for the Gotteses’ sole use. They may well have read aloud to friends or taught them to read using the collections of adages, which were a feature of basic Latin instruction in grammar schools. Certainly, the number of hands in the miscellany means that many different people were involved in its production from the late fifteenth century until it fell out of use in the sixteenth century.

Given the many different actors involved in the manuscript’s compilation, it is not surprising that the spirituality evinced by its religious texts can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Both “What Charyte Ys” and “Crystys Wordys” include concepts and language that suggest that their authors may have been influenced by lollard spiritual ideals, but
neither is overtly heretical and both could equally appeal to devoutly orthodox readers. The same holds true of the other religious texts in Plimpton MS 259. In the analysis of the manuscript that follows, themes that resonate with lollard ideas are noted as such, but none of these resonances are sufficient to demonstrate the existence of self-conscious lollardy in Little Ryburgh in the late fifteenth century. These ideas may instead bear witness to the wide-ranging influence of lollard beliefs and practices on orthodox religion.

Plimpton MS 259 contains six religious texts in hands dating from the late fifteenth century, when the first Robert Gottes owned the book and likely began its compilation: a series of scriptural quotations in Latin from the readings for Lent (fols. 23v–25v); another list of Latin quotations, some scriptural, entitled “Textus of Autorite” (fol. 27v); a short treatise on right living entitled “Thes be the ix things þat pleasith god most spechially” (fol. 29v); “What Charyte Ys” (fol. 30v); “Crystys Wordys” (fol. 31r); and a final excerpt from the Latin Vulgate, Matthew 22:34–40, where the evangelist describes Christ’s confrontation with the Pharisees (fol. 31v).60

The first set of scriptural quotations focuses on themes central to lollard spirituality, as recently characterized by Fiona Somerset. On fol. 23v, Matthew 18:15–22 provides justification for correcting one’s brother when he or she errs, as in the emphasis on neighborly correction within lollard communities identified by Somerset and Edwin Craun.61 A list of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20:12–19—a key passage for both lollard and orthodox moral instruction—appears on fol. 24r; and the shorter extracts on 24v–25v all condemn judging men unjustly.62 In light of the lollard commitment to pacifism—a belief grounded in charity as God’s law—the selection of Daniel 13:52–53 may have been particularly pointed: “the innocent and the just thou shalt not kill.”63 The extracts included under the heading “Textus of Autorite” on fol. 27v are less thematically cohesive, but the final scriptural quotation on fol. 32v, Matthew 22:34–40, focuses on a favorite lollard theme in its injunction to love: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God. . . . This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets.”64

“Thes be the ix things þat pleasith god most spechially” is a numbered list of pious acts, each contrasted with another religious deed less pleasing to God (fol. 29v).65 The acts that God prefers are based on affective devo-
tion: “wepe I tere for þi synnys while þu lyuyst or for crystys love; þat pleast more cryst þan a C tymys so mich after þi deth.” The lesser acts are performed postmortem, require monetary expenditure, or involve physical suffering: “sey no words of babbytyng ne of salanndyre for godds loue; for þat pleast more Jhesus þan þu wentist barefeitid bledyng.” This prohibition on gossip accords with Somerset’s observation that well-regulated speech was particularly important in lollard spirituality. She found that the preservation of peace within the community was paramount in the active form of love featured in lollard texts, and this same understanding of charity appears here: beside the seventh injunction, “excuse þi neyghbor & torne all thing in to þe best,” the scribe has written “Charite.”

The version of “What Charyte Ys” in Plimpton MS 259 is almost identical to Mary Dove’s edition of the Cambridge text. The author begins by asserting that charity, God, and holy writ are one and the same and that if we may not speak openly about any one of them, then we may not discuss the others either. He or she extends this argument to the point of absurdity: because “holy wrytt spekeþ of all the werkes þat euer god made”, if we cannot speak of holy writ then we cannot speak of anything at all, not “of hevyn, neþer of erth, ne of hell, ne of no creature þat euer god made.” Indeed, Christ “tawght yt hym selfe to all menne gode & yuell,” because knowledge of scripture and Christ’s law is crucial for salvation: “For we know nat gode frome Ivell but by wisdom of holy wrytt [Romans 7:7]. And þerfore Cryst cursith in his lawe all pepyll þat bow awey herre erys fro yt & blessith all pepill þat hyre yt & kepe yt justly.” The author concludes that those who hearken to scripture are good executors of Christ’s will, in both the sense of desire and the sense of testament, while those who ignore it are cursed.

According to Mary Dove, “there is nothing specifically Wycliffi te” in “What Charyte Ys.” But in her analysis of the tract as it appears in the Pore Caitif, Nicole Rice notes that the author uses sect vocabulary to develop a sense of an “in-group”: the “heuynly pepill” who keep Christ’s law are contrasted with “pepyll þat bow awey herre erys.” This sense of a privileged community is emphasized by the use of plural pronouns: the we both includes and excludes. Moreover, as Somerset notes, lollard authors often equate Christ’s law with holy writ and interpret charity or love as “þe principall parte of holy wrytt.” As in “The ix things þat pleasith god,” lollard understanding of “charyte” includes a focus on activity, on using
scripture to relate to other members of the Christian community. “Charyte” is active, it is based in holy writ, and it is found within a limited community of believers.73 In “What Charyte Ys,” it is also linked with a speech act, with the capacity to proclaim scripture. Here, all speech refers back to God’s creation, holy writ, and charity.74 Speaking and hearing holy writ fulfills the testament of Christ and the requirements of love: to limit preaching on scripture, then, is to break the commandments. Given that this tract contains no overtly heterodox material, it is entirely possible that its arguments could have appealed to and circulated among devoutly orthodox believers, but its author may have been familiar with lollard spiritual teachings.

Finally, while the opinions in favor of Bible translation expressed in “What Charyte Ys” and “Crystys Wordys” were part of an ongoing debate at the end of the fourteenth century, arguing for English scripture was a subversive act after Arundel’s Constitutions passed into legislation in 1409. According to Margaret Aston, vernacular literature, whatever its content, acquired an edge of danger in this period.75 Nicholas Watson famously attributed the derivative and hyperpious nature of fifteenth-century vernacular theology to the self-censorship occasioned by Arundel’s laws.76 Nevertheless, lollard spirituality became a part of the fabric of fifteenth-century piety. The generation of Oxford-trained ecclesiastics who led the English church in the decades after Arundel’s prohibitions were heavily influenced by Wyclif’s arguments for reform and attempted to respond constructively.77 Some even supported producing an approved translation of the English Bible—Mary Dove suggests that Arundel himself may have intended to produce one.78 But by the end of the fifteenth century, advocates for the English Bible had to tread a fine line or risk Reginald Pecock’s fate.79

The question of lollardy’s urban or rural afterlife is open for debate, but the material in Plimpton MS 259 suggests that some lollard ideas may have been circulating in rural Norfolk in the late fifteenth century.80 It may be significant that while most of the heresy trials in East Anglia centered on towns grouped around the Suffolk border, two men from South Creake, a town only eight miles to the north where Robert Gottes later rented land, were prosecuted for heresy in 1429.81 The Gottses do fit the demographic profile of heresy suspects in fifteenth-century East Anglia developed by Maureen Jurkowski. These suspects tended to be locally prominent farmers in rural areas who worked to expand their landholdings and were ac-
tive in local administration. Also like the Gottesses, they were often literate and displayed a marked reverence for scripture. Indeed, Gail McMurray Gibson has suggested that Norfolk was a county particularly amenable to religious dissenters, and that East Anglian religious culture was heavily influenced by lollard spiritual ideals.

The 1537 will written by Robert Gottes’s son Richard, however, offers a different picture of the family’s piety. Here, Richard exhibits a strong devotion to Mary and his local parish. He leaves money for building a new steeple in the parish church, and makes two additional bequests to supply lights before the Host and an image of Mary. Richard also leaves money to guilds, friaries, and the Cathedral in Norwich. The last of his religious bequests is the most extravagant: a yearly stipend for a priest “to sing for my soule and for my frendes sowles withyn the church of Ribrugh forsaid by the space of foure holl yeres.” Venerating images, supporting friars, endowing chantries—these are practices that are neither consistent with current assessments of lollard spirituality, nor with the texts in Plimpton MS 259.

Richard’s bequests are all the more remarkable given the religious climate of the late 1530s, when Henry VIII began to implement protestant legislation at the parish level. Wills respond only slowly to changes in church administration and practice, but it is striking that Richard chose to make these bequests even given the mounting pressure against images and religious institutions.

There are a few possibilities for reconciling the inconsistencies within the spirituality exhibited by members of the Gottes family. First, it may be that Richard and his father subscribed to different systems of belief and practice. The affective religious texts in Plimpton MS 259 from the mid-sixteenth century suggest, however, some continuity of belief within the family. Second, it is conceivable that neither Plimpton MS 259 nor Richard’s will accurately represent the Gotteses’ religious affiliations. Wills are formulaic, and using them to interpret piety is controversial. Likewise, miscellanies sometimes appear to be random collections of texts that the compilers happened upon. It is possible that Plimpton MS 259 was assembled in this haphazard way, given the diversity of the manuscript’s contents, but the loose grouping of thematically coherent religious texts implies that they were selected more carefully.

The most likely scenario is that the Gottes family participated in the wide range of practices and beliefs available in the fifteenth century, without
clearly differentiating between lollard and orthodox spirituality. As has been so often observed in recent scholarship, these two traditions were highly permeable and exhibit strong mutual influence. Both may have appealed to unusually pious believers for their stringency, their emphasis on community, and their promise of salvation. “Crystys Wordys” and Richard Gottes’s will, then, lie at different points within a spectrum of contemporary beliefs and practices, but they were not incompatible. It may even be that vernacular scripture was a point of particular concord between them: as Ian Johnson notes, one mid-fifteenth-century scribe included a copy of Ullerston’s defense of the English Bible immediately after Nicholas Love’s anti-lollard *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Christ* in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.648. Even as he or she endorsed antiheresy legislation with a marginal “Amen” written after Arundel’s memorandum authorizing the *Mirror*, this scribe patently supported dissemination of English scripture. Like the Morgan manuscript, then, the inclusion of “What Charyte Ys” and “Crystys Wordys” in Plimpton MS 259 encourages us to explore the fluidity and inclusivity of English religious cultures after Wyclif. They suggest that both lollard and devoutly orthodox readers were interested in accessing English scripture directly, and that fourteenth-century arguments in favor of the English Bible were in circulation even as late as the end of the fifteenth century. Certainly, Plimpton MS 259 and its local context are ripe for further study.

NOTES

1. Hereafter Plimpton MS 259. My thanks to the editors of this volume and to the attendees of the Europe After Wyclif conference for their thoughtful comments. In particular, I would like to thank Maryanne Kowaleski, J. Patrick Hornbeck II, Richard Gyug, Susanne Hafner, and Salvatore Cipriano for their guidance and encouragement at different stages in this project. My thanks also to Maureen Jurkowski for her comments on this essay, to Anne Hudson for her insights on these tracts, and to Consuelo Dutschke at Columbia University Library for her archival assistance. Finally, my thanks to Ian Gottes for his generosity with his time and resources.

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10. Dove, Bible, 6–8; Watson, “Censorship,” 830.

13. Ibid., 117; Rice, “Reading,” 185.
14. In Plimpton MS 259, the two thematically linked tracts appear on facing folios in the same hand and with the same mise-en-page.
15. Plimpton MS 259, fol. 31r.
17. Nationalism is a modern concept and the term is generally avoided in studies of historical nationhood. Nation, however, is not a modern concept; see Ruddick, English, 3. See also Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983; repr., London: Verso, 2006), 9–26, 37–46. For critiques, see Özkırımlı, Theories, 152–156.
24. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, ed. and trans., The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 192; see also Ruddick, English, 120.
25. Ruddick, English, 120.


28. These are the same criteria used in fourteenth-century depictions of England; see Turville-Petre, *Language*, 14.


31. For an introduction to the role of the Hundred Years War in stimulating national sentiment, see Green, “National Identities,” 115–129.


36. Havens casts the Oxford debates, which included both orthodox and lollard participants, as “the Lollard translation debate,” and interprets “nationalism” in the debates as lollard. Havens, “Enlishe,” 97.


38. Plimpton MS 259, fol. 31r. Louisa Foroughi, “‘This was found in an olde written booke:’ An Edition of Fols. 1–32 of Columbia University Library Plimpton MS 259, A Late Medieval Miscellany” (MA thesis, Medieval Studies, Fordham University, 2013), 67. My thanks to Anne Hudson for noting the rough
similarity between the biblical quotations here and corresponding passages in the Wycliffite Bible.


43. Ibid., 144.

44. Ibid., 92.


56. For a contents list, see Foroughi, “Booke,” 3–6 and 19–20.

57. The transaction records include Roberts from multiple generations. The first known reference to a Robert Gottes appears in a 1475 charter from Great Ryburgh: British Library, Wodehouse Papers, Additional MS 39221, fol. 10r; Acker, “The Crafte,” 78n7. This Robert died in 1494: British Library, Additional MS 39228, fol. 17r.

58. British Library, Additional MS 39221, fol. 96r: on a 1572 valuation of corn, two witnesses sign their own names—including Nicholas Gottes—while six use symbols.

60. These tracts are part of a loose grouping of religious material in hands dating from the late fifteenth and the mid-sixteenth century.


65. I have not found this text attested elsewhere.


67. Dove, ed., *Advocates*, 117; Foroughi, “Booke,” 66–67. The version of “What Charyte Ys” in the Cambridge compilation is slightly longer than the version in Plimpton MS 259: it includes a list of the gospels and a curse upon those who fail to honor holy writ. These last few lines are also omitted in one of the *Pore Caitif* versions, British Library MS Harley 2336. Rice, “Reading,” 185–186. A Latin testament of Christ appears in a mid-sixteenth century hand immediately before “What Charyte Ys” on Plimpton 259, fol. 30r, probably as a compliment to this passage; for Charters of Christ and lollardy, see Emily Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 193–228.

68. The focus on speech suggests this tract is responding to limitations on preaching promulgated by the 1382 Blackfriars Council or the preaching licenses mandated by Arundel. Rice, “Reading,” 185n41.

69. I take *Wycliffite* here as synonymous with *lollard*, as Dove uses “Wycliffite” and “Lollard” interchangeably.

70. Rice, “Reading,” 186. In her manuscript, the phrase is “heuenly men,” closer to lollards’ self-identification as “trewe men.”


73. Ibid., 65–66. For a similar passage see the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible in Dove, *Advocates*, 65.

74. My thanks to J. Patrick Hornbeck II for noting the resemblance here to Wyclif’s theology of “universals by community,” according to which all individual created things derive from and refer back to universal ideas in God’s mind. See Stephen E. Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).


86. For chantry endowment during this period, see Lutton, *Lollardy*, 55–60.


88. Official positions toward images and monastic houses were inconsistent but increasingly hostile, especially from 1536 to 1538; Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 132–133.

89. Robert Lutton’s study of Tenterden, Kent, also found that spiritual beliefs attested in wills tend to remain the same within family groups. Lutton, *Lollardy*, 20.

90. Ibid., 19–26, 39–40.

91. Ibid., 11–19.