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Among the many unsettled questions relating to Chaucerian studies that of the possibility of Chaucer's dependence on Wycliffe occupies a primary position. This study deals with this problem in one specific area: Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideals of the parish clergy.

In regard to Chaucer, the study concerns itself primarily with the Canterbury Tales. The relevant works of Wycliffe consist of a number of his English and Latin religious books and treatises. The study also considers background information on the historical situation of the two men, as well as a representative selection of the writings of their predecessors and contemporaries on the ideal of the parish clergy.

In considering Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideals of the parish clergy this study fully acknowledges that these men demonstrate a remarkable amount of agreement in their presentations of this ideal. After a thorough consideration of these points of agreement, however, this study cannot conclude that Chaucer was directly indebted to Wycliffe for his position. To affirm such a conclusion would be to attempt to make the available evidence prove much more than it in fact does. Rather, the evidence suggests that both men were in a very loose tradition of reform which manifested itself in widely different forms in the Mediaeval world. Wycliffe and Chaucer assuredly held many of the same ideas and concerns in their respective ideals of the parish clergy. This is especially true of their insistence on the priests' dedication to a simple life of service and pious example to their people. Yet, Wycliffe took a far

more radical stance than Chaucer in his proposed means for the realization of this ideal. Moreover, there existed many other sources from which Chaucer could have drawn the basis for his ideal of the parish clergy. In view of the many other writers who had expressed similar views, and considering that Chaucer differed with Wycliffe on many essential points, this study concludes that the evidence is insufficient to indicate that Chaucer depended on Wycliffe for his ideal of the parish clergy.

# A CONSIDERATION OF CHAUCER'S AND WYCLIFFE'S IDEALS OF THE PARISH CLERGY

by

C. Daniel Crews

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Charles P.R. Tisdale
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser Charles P. R. Tisdale

Oral Examination Committee Members John Barber.

Robert L. Kelly

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# A CONSIDERATION OF CHAUCER'S AND WYCLIFFE'S IDEALS OF THE PARISH CLERGY

## INTRODUCTION

Through the centuries scholarly investigations into the life and works of Geoffrey Chaucer have filled many volumes, answered many questions, and raised many more. The modern age knows far more about this likable poet than it does about most of its other literary giants of former ages. Yet, for all the energies expended on Chaucer studies many mysteries remain to challenge new researchers and to tickle the curiosities of readers generally.

One of the most intriguing of these unanswered questions is that of Chaucer's relation to Wycliffe. To what extent does the work of England's greatest poet of the fourteenth century resemble that of the radical Oxford reformer? What opportunities might Chaucer have had to become familiar with Wycliffe's ideas? How strong is the possibility that Chaucer drew some of his materials directly from Wycliffe? Was Chaucer a Wycliffite after all? This thesis hopes to help answer some of these queries.

A paper of this length obviously cannot hope to cover adequately every aspect of the Chaucer-Wycliffe problem. For this reason it will confine its investigations to a particular area: Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideals of the parish clergy. This topic has the advantage of being rather specific while occupying a very important position in the

writings of both men bearing on the problem as a whole. Since the topic is so specifically religious it would also appear to be a most likely source for detecting direct Wycliffite influence on Chaucer.

Chaucer and Wycliffe demonstrate a remarkable amount of agreement in their presentations of their ideals of the parish clergy. After a thorough consideration of these points of agreement, however, this study cannot conclude that Chaucer was directly indebted to Wycliffe for his own position. Rather, the evidence suggests that both men were in a very loose tradition of reform which manifested itself in widely different forms in the Mediaeval world. Wycliffe and Chaucer assuredly held many of the same ideas and concerns in their respective ideals of the parish clergy, yet Wycliffe was far more radical than Chaucer in his application of these ideas. Moreover, there existed many other sources from which Chaucer could have drawn the basis of his ideal of the parish clergy. Wycliffe and Chaucer were thus "cousins" in the reform tradition rather than "father and son."

In trying to ascertain the literary dependence of one man upon another one logically begins with the works themselves. With Chaucer the Canterbury Tales offer the most fruitful ground to explore since they contain his latest productions and treat of the religious subject matter most likely to have been influenced by Wycliffe. The relevant works of Wycliffe consist of a number of religious books and treatises, part of them in English and part in Latin. Some knowledge of the men's lives is also essential, as is an acquaintance with their times and the similar writings of their predecessors and contemporaries. The utilization of

all these sources of information results in a paper organized into five main chapters. Chapter I interjects background information into the problem of Chaucer-Wycliffe relations and devotes some attention to the importance of the clerical ideal in the thought of each. Chapter II deals with Chaucer's ideal of the parish clergy. This treatment centers primarily around Chaucer's presentation of his ideal Parson in both the "General Prologue" and in the body of the Canterbury Tales. The other clerics in the tales are seen as foils to the ideal Parson, their imperfections making his success all the more apparent. Chaucer uses many avenues of approach in setting forth his ideal of the parish clergy, revealing portions of the complete picture by his treatment of several members of the clergy, all of which must be considered. The paper will focus particularly upon those clerics with whom Wycliffe also deals. Thus, in a general treatment of Chaucer's clerics the Pardoner might receive more attention than the Friar. In this case, however, the Friar demands special attention because of Wycliffe's prominence in the fraternal controversies. Wycliffite influence on Chaucer, if any, is more likely to be evident in the Friar than in the Pardoner. It will also be noted that the content of the "Parson's Tale" itself receives little attention. This is because, as will be demonstrated, the content of the tale has remarkably little to do with the question at hand. As will also be seen, this does not make the "Parson's Tale" inconsequential, however. Chapter III presents Wycliffe's ideal of the parish clergy. Chapter IV synthesizes the two men's views but goes on to point out differences as well. In addition, Chapter V considers the views of Chaucer

and Wycliffe on the ideal of the parish clergy in relation to statements made by other authors on the same subject. It is in this that the real difficulty in trying to assess the possibility of Wycliffe's influence on Chaucer arises. That is, the points of comparison between the two men are thoroughly orthodox. Thus, it is nearly impossible to build a firm case for Wycliffe's having influenced Chaucer's view of the parish clergy since there were numerous other well-known authors from whom the ideas might have been drawn. Chaucer's "Parson's Tale" is "orthodox," as is his ideal Parson, as is his particular sort of anti-fraternalism. The more extreme, specifically Wycliffite proposals for the parish clergy, find no voice and little sympathy in Chaucer. As these investigations reveal that Chaucer could have drawn his thoughts on the parish clergy from many other sources besides Wycliffe, and considering that he differs with Wycliffe on many essential points, this study concludes that the evidence is insufficient to indicate that Chaucer depended on Wycliffe for his ideal of the parish clergy.

# CHAPTER I

## THE PROBLEM STATED

No issue figured more prominently in the thought of John Wycliffe than that of man's proper conduct upon this earth. Heaven was the ultimate goal, but the present life was the only road to that hoped for paradise. Wycliffe composed numerous treatises dealing with this subject, among them a work entitled "A Schort Reule of Lif." In this work Wycliffe asserted what he considered to be the proper duty of the various stations of life, and within it there stands the following passage:

> If thou be a prest, and nameli a curate, lyve thou holili, passyng other in holy preyere and holy deseir and thenkyng, in holy spekyng counselyng and trewe techyng, and ever that Goodis hestis and his gospel be in thi mouth, and ever dispice synne, to drawe men therfro. And that thi dedis ben so rigtful, that no man schal blame hem with reson, but thin opyn dedis be a trewe book to alle sogettis and lewid men, to serve God and do his hestis therbi. Ffer ensample of good, and opyn and lastyng, sterrith rude men more than trewe prechyng by nakid word. And waste not this goodis in grete festis of reche men, but live a mene lif of pore mennys almes and godis, bothe in mete and drynk and clothes; and the remenand give treuli to pore men that have nought of ther owne, and may not labore for febulnesse or seknesse and than thou shalt be a trewe prest bothe to God and man.[1]

These words cannot help but call to mind Chaucer's description of his Parson in the "General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales:"

[1] Select English Works of John Wyclif, ed. Thomas Arnold (Oxford, 1871), III, 205-206.

A good man was ther of religioun
And was a povre Persoun of a toun,
But riche he was of hooly thoght and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk,
That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;
His parisshens devoutly wolde he teche.
Benygne he was, and wonder diligent,
and in adversitee ful pacient. . . .
(I, A, 478-481)[2]

The same qualities find emphasis in each description. The priest is a faithful teacher of his people. Chaucer's and Wycliffe's priests both seek to draw their parishioners up to goodness rather than to confirm them in their wrong-doing. Both recognize that deeds preach far better than mere words no matter how holy those words may be, and both therefore live blameless lives before God and Man. As Chaucer phrases it:

This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,
That first he wroghte, and afterward taughte. . . .
He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselve.
(I, A, 496-497, 528)

To support this principle of setting a good example for their people, a principle which constitutes the major point of both Chaucer and Wycliffe in these passages, both their priests are poor men free from greed and covetousness for worldly possessions. Each lives on little himself and gives to the poor the surplus

Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce.
(I, A, 489)

In short, these two passages of Wycliffe and Chaucer agree in so many respects in their presentation of the ideal of the parish clergy that

[2]Citations from Chaucer in the text are to The Complete Works of Chaucer, ed. Frederick N. Robinson, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, 1957). References are to fragment groups and lines.

they might very well be talking about one and the same man.

These similarities in Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideal parish priests give rise to some rather interesting speculations. Since the portraits are so similar, is it possible that these lines indicate that they may have shared still other conceptions in common? Was Chaucer a Wycliffite after all? This latter question has plagued Chaucerians for centuries. Many scholars, feeling that the issue is settled in the negative, would prefer not to consider the matter further, yet such comparisons as the one above keep opening the issue afresh.

As Thomas Lounsbury reports, it was the sixteenth century reformers of the Cranmer group who first drew the names Chaucer and Wycliffe together.[3] These men, engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the might of the Roman Papacy, sought support for their cause wherever they could find or manufacture it. It is therefore not surprising that the reformers sought to link the greatest English poet they knew to the views and sympathies of John Wycliffe, the man hailed by the reformers as the forerunner of the English Reformation.

The extreme means by which the early reformers tried to make Chaucer a good Wycliffite are open to question in the present age. Still, as Lounsbury admits, the evidence of their time gave more support to their efforts than would be true today. That is, numerous pieces of literature spuriously attributed to Chaucer circulated in that day. Literary criticism of the sixteenth century regarded most

[3]Thomas R. Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer (New York, 1892), II, 461.

of these works as genuine, including some which most decidedly opposed anything smacking of Papal authority. Among these the so-called "Plowman's Tale" is foremost, both as regards popularity and the zeal of its anti-Catholic feeling.[4] Wycliffe himself could not have opposed Rome more effectively.

Thus, it is not surprising to find the noted chronicler of Protestant martyrs, George Fox, claiming Chaucer for the "right" side:

> I marvel to consider this, how that the bishops, condemning and abolishing all manner of English books and treatises which might bring the people to any light of knowledge, did yet authorize the works of Chaucer to remain still and to be occupied, who, no doubt, saw in religion as much almost as we do now, and uttereth in his works no less, and seemeth to be a right Wicklevian, or else there was never any, and that all his books almost, if they be thoroughly advised, will testify (albeit it be done in mirth and covertly) . . . wherein, except a man be altogether blind, he may see him at the full.[5]

The assumption that Chaucer was a Wycliffite was not, however, held by the sixteenth century reformers alone. John Tatlock in the first quarter of our century came to essentially the same conclusion.[6] In 1940 Roger Loomis' verdict was not far different.[7] For all this, it is perhaps a certain H. Simon, about whom the author could discover no further information, who has pushed this conclusion to its farthest limit. Eleanor Prescott Hammond in her summary of his "Chaucer a Wycliffite," published in Chaucer Society Essays, Part III (1876),

[4]Lounsbury, p. 462.

[5]Cited in Lounsbury, pp. 463-464.

[6]"Chaucer and Wyclif," MP, XIV (1916-17), pp. 257-268.

[7]"Was Chaucer a Laodicean," in Essays and Studies in Honor of Carlton Brown (New York, 1940), pp. 129-148.

states that Mr. Simon believes so strongly in the Wycliffism of Chaucer that he insists that any orthodox Catholic positions or statements found in Chaucer's works could not possibly come from Chaucer himself. Any such positions that Simon found in the Canterbury Tales he attributed to an unknown interpolator (or interpolators) who altered the manuscript at Westminster sometime before 1430.[8]

As might be expected, other scholars quite firmly deny such extreme views of Chaucer's dependence on Wycliffe. As Lounsbury dryly remarks: "No one is now inclined to reckon Chaucer among the saints."[9] Lounsbury himself will serve as spokesman for those who take the other extreme position on Chaucer's Wycliffism: "He [Chaucer] may have seen, and doubtless did see, its [the age's] evils as clearly as any other; but he was not the one to set about the task of its regeneration, or to denounce with bitterness those who had brought it into the condition in which it was."[10] Lounsbury is not content, however, with this statement of the case, for he continues:

> Accordingly, he looks upon all the social and political phenomena of his time from the comparatively passionless position of a man of letters who happened also to be a man of genius. . . .
>
> He has reached that degree of tolerance of other men's opinions that he has ceased to feel that there is any essential difference between right and wrong. To such a person the tragedy of life is little more than a stage tragedy. . . . So far as Chaucer had any conscious aim at all it was to mirror the life of his day, not reform its morals.[11]

[8] Chaucer, a Bibliographical Manual (New York, 1938), p. 319.

[9] Lounsbury, p. 466.

[10] Ibid., p. 319.

[11] Lounsbury, p. 472.

Most modern Chaucerians would agree in some respects with Lounsbury, especially as opposed to the views of such a man as Fox. Still, many of his statements, particularly the assertion that Chaucer had "ceased to feel that there is any essential difference between right and wrong," strike the ear as sounding too extreme in their own direction. Chaucer may not have been an overt preacher of moral reform, but to make an amoral being out of him is unthinkable. Another approach is called for.

None of the above positions has quite succeeded in building an absolute case for its own point of view. Fox and his companions admittedly overlooked many factors in their assigning of Chaucer to the simple category of "Wycliffite." On the other hand, Lounsbury and his associates seem to forget that Chaucer and Wycliffe were contemporaries and that the possibilities for their having known of one another's works are very great indeed. Wycliffe was at least ten, and some scholars would say close to twenty, years Chaucer's senior. Yet, partly as a result of the many years of study, two decades in some cases, required to become a Mediaeval theologian, Wycliffe reached his period of greatest influence at just about the same time as Chaucer was performing his greatest services for the British crown. While Chaucer was growing up, becoming a page in the household of Lionel, and getting himself captured in France (1359), Wycliffe was quietly and slowly progressing from degree to degree in peaceful Oxford. Both entered public life at about the same time. Wycliffe received the wardenship of Canterbury Hall, a college for the education of clerics, in 1365. In 1367, as a result of the monastic

communities' political machinations, he lost this position, a fact which clearly would not have increased his love for the clergy regular or for the patronage system of the day. While all this was going on, Chaucer married and began the transition from carefree young courtier to responsible civil servant. The year 1372 marked what may be called the mature debut of both men. Wycliffe received the degree of Doctor of Divinity (after twenty and more years of study), and Chaucer was sent on official business to Italy, a mission of some importance and one which resulted in his private renaissance.

A personal meeting of Chaucer and Wycliffe in these years is nowhere alluded to, but is possible nonetheless. This possibility is an intriguing one, especially since both men were simultaneously under the patronage of John of Gaunt, younger son of Edward III and the power behind the throne of Richard II (1377-99). The two men had numerous opportunities for chance encounters during the 1370's, but the year 1374 offers a particularly tempting occasion. History records that Chaucer leased a dwelling at Aldgate on May 10th, 1374, a fact which implied a coming change in his court position. On June 8th he received the appointment of Comptroller of Customs for the Port of London. In making arrangements for his departure from court and in the various matters needing settlement upon his assuming of his new position, Chaucer must have been in fairly constant attendance at the royal palace throughout May and June of that year. It also happens that in May of 1374 the King appointed a commission to go to Bruges to negotiate with Papal ambassadors concerning appointments to English benefices. This commission did not actually depart for Bruges until

July and was, presumably, at court for most of the intervening time receiving instructions, credentials, and the like. In the list of these commissioners the name "John Wycliffe" stands second! Chaucer and Wycliffe were thus in the same relatively confined space at roughly (perhaps exactly) the same time. What the results of such a meeting might have been we can never know for sure. The possibility that Chaucer met Wycliffe and was influenced by him, however, is a most intriguing one.

Those who deny the importance of historical factors in forming literature may wonder about the ultimate significance of any Wycliff-ite influence discovered in Chaucer. Others may wonder at the choice of their ideals of the parish clergy as an area in which to consider what the extent of this influence, if any, may have been. The author, however, feels that no literary work can be fully understood without considering the cultural forces which influenced its author's thinking. In Mediaeval studies this demands a consideration of the Church.

The Mediaeval Church was an all-embracing mother, enfolding all of society within its outstretched arms. All were theoretically within the fold, even if some might have actually preferred the dangerous wilds to the "Sheepfold of Christ." One could be an outlaw from the church as well as from the state.[12] At the head of this society stood the Pope, and England's King was (in name at least) his vassal. Much of the regal energy was devoted to walking the delicate balance between independence and heresy. Nothing, in fact, could be attempted without

[12]George M. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe (London, 1912), p. 104.

taking the church into account. It is therefore with good reason that Trevelyan says in his book on the age of Wycliffe: "It is indispensable to know the state of the church in the fourteenth century and the character of the religious instruction which she at that time gave to the nation in order to understand Wycliffe and his doctrines."[13]

All this being true, it would be a wonder beyond relating if Chaucer, who is often characterized as the very embodiment of fourteenth century England, should prove totally unaffected by the religious influences of his age. D. W. Robertson, Jr., in his Preface to Chaucer has provided invaluable insight into the effect of the age in which Chaucer lived upon his works. Robertson agrees essentially with the statement of Wölfflin that "even the most original talent cannot proceed beyond certain limits which are fixed for it by the date of its birth."[14] Gone are the days when readers applauded Chaucer for creating his own style and forms ex nihilo. The author of the Canterbury Tales, as Robertson emphasizes, was very much a product of the artistic conventions of his age.[15] Mediaeval art, as is well known, was religious art. Thus Chaucer the man and Chaucer the artist related very intimately to religion and religious issues. The question of his possible associations with such a prominent religious figure as Wycliffe becomes an important one indeed, especially if it can be shown that Wycliffe was one of the major religious influences on

[13]Trevelyan, p. 105.

[14]D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton, 1962), p. vii.

[15]Ibid., p. 241 et passim.

the poet.

The question still remains: "Why choose the ideal of the parish clergy as a basis for discovering possible influence of Wycliffe on Chaucer?" In answer to this, the ideal of the parish clergy is particularly suited for this purpose because of three factors: the importance of the parish priesthood in the Mediaeval ecclesiastical system, the prominence of the clerical ideal in Wycliffe's thought, and the significance of this ideal in the Canterbury Tales.

When one thinks of the Mediaeval Church, the usual picture is that of the pomp of the Papal court, that of a bishop officiating with full pontifical ritual in his cathedral, or that of long lines of monks and friars, heads all shaven and tongues bringing forth delicious strains of Gregorian chant. History likes to remember these colorful aspects of Mediaeval life, and such pictures are far from being totally inaccurate. The importance of the bishop especially can hardly be overestimated, for he it was who wielded nearly absolute authority over each person in his diocese. In an age when tithing was required by law, his financial dominance was also considerable.[16]

Still, for all his importance, the bishop was only one man, and a diocese had many many parishes: six hundred or so.[17] The real voice of the church for most of the people thus had to be the bishop's representative, the parish priest. He it was who baptized them at birth,

[16]Margaret Deanesly, A History of the Mediaeval Church, (London, 1959), pp. 197-198.

[17]A. Hamilton Thompson, The English Clergy and their Organization in the Later Middle Ages (London, 1959), pp. 197-198.

prepared them for confirmation, presented them to the bishop when their preparation was done, and gave them the Lord's body and blood. He granted them absolution for their sins, joined them in marriage, and finally at death gave them the last rites and burial. To treat of the parish priest is to treat of religion as it most closely approached the people, and this is to get at the heart of religion itself.

Wycliffe clearly saw the importance of the ideal of the parish priesthood in relation to his schemes for reform as a whole. Scarcely a one of his works does not deal with this ideal or its abuse in some detail, and in many of them few pages indeed leave the subject unmentioned. The image of the true parochial priest, because of his intimate contact with all aspects of the people's religious life, figured in every area of Wycliffe's ideas. None of his conceptions had more far-reaching significance.

The importance of the ideal of the parish clergy is noteworthy in Chaucer's poetry as well. Recent interpretations of the Canterbury Tales have emphasized this fact as never before. The first of these is that of James Baldwin. Baldwin views the Canterbury pilgrimage as something far larger than a simple journey to the shrine of Thomas à Becket. For Baldwin "the life of the Medieval Christian was framed by Creation and Doomsday."[18] Chaucer, moving within this frame, is said to have made the Canterbury pilgrimage symbolic or representative of the pilgrimage of man on this earth. Thus ". . . the destination of the pilgrimage becomes . . . not so much the Canterbury shrine as

[18]Robert M. Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 112, summarizing the views of Baldwin.

'The Parson's Tale,' because it unfolds the wey to Him who is the way, the truth, and the light."[19] Robert M. Jordan supports this basic view of Baldwin's and adduces to its support not only the general tenor of the times, but also several specific details from the Canterbury Tales itself. It will be noted that the piece begins in the early morning with the design of Taurus, the sign of early spring, in the sky. When the Parson begins his tale, however, dusk is fast approaching, and Libra, the sign of fall and year's twilight glows in the heavens. Were the times of morning and evening chance occurrences, and did Chaucer simply make a mistake in substituting the fall sign at the end of his work for that of spring? Or, in view of the trouble he went to to make his confusion obvious (X, I, 10-11), and considering the thoroughness of Chaucer's astrological knowledge apparent in his other works, did he do these things intentionally, and do they suggest one possible interpretation of the Canterbury Tales as a whole? Jordan firmly believes that Chaucer meant to produce far more than a roadside drama, and emphasizes quite strongly the universality of the tales. In this scheme the Parson takes on special importance as the one who presides over the end of life's journey, thereby being at the crux of the entire poem.

William W. Lawrence adds his support to these conclusions. He stresses the fact that, even though the scheme proposed in the "General Prologue" for each pilgrim to tell four tales was not completed,

[19]James Baldwin, "The Unity of the Canterbury Tales," Anglistica (Copenhagen, 1955), p. 926.

"the tales are, however, definitely finished."[20] Lawrence sees the "Parson's Prologue," the "Parson's Tale," and "Chaucer's Retraction" as bound together and constituting a definite and intentional pious concluding statement to the Canterbury Tales. According to Lawrence this group sheds quite a different light on the reading of the rest of the tales than might otherwise be supposed. Kittredge too is careful to emphasize the Christian sincerity of Chaucer in the writing of the Canterbury Tales.[21] Chaucer's Parson does indeed, then, proceed

To knytte up all this feste, and make an ende (X,I, 47),

an ende which allows the Canterbury Tales as a unit

To enden in som vertuous sentence (X,I, 63).

Thus Chaucer's parish priest, as the primary bearer of this universal message of life, death, and preparatory pilgrimage, takes on great importance indeed. The evidence shows that the humble parish priest is transformed into a star of the first magnitude. The whole question of Chaucer's conception of the parish priesthood becomes one of great importance.

In close conjunction with the above it must be stated that the Baldwin-Johnson interpretation of the Canterbury Tales is not presented here as the only, the "correct," interpretation. Yet, as is well known to students of the Mediaeval period, the literature of the Middle Ages can present itself on several levels at once: the literal,

[20] Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1950), p. 145.

[21] George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and his Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), pp. 32-33.

the allegorical, the tropological or moral, and the anagogical, which treated of the church and the last things.[22] Chaucer himself, as a learned man of his age, was well aware that even the most entertaining story might have a symbolic or mystical interpretation in addition to the strictly literal or narrative one.

Thus, even though the rather involved Baldwin-Jordan interpretation of the Canterbury Tales is not the only possible one, an appeal for it can be made on the basis of the most reputable Mediaeval practice of multiple interpretation. The theory is coherent within itself, and is thus a valid one according to the literary principles of even Chaucer's own age. Multiple interpretation gives Mediaeval literature much of its depth, brilliance, and resilience. It is therefore a most appropriate approach to use in looking at Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, whose possession of these qualities is unexcelled. This is rendered the more secure by the fact that Chaucer himself gives some rather clear indications in the work that he had something very like the Baldwin-Jordan approach in mind in addition to the literal level. His placement of the "Parson's Tale," and the confusion of "Libra" may be cited in this regard. For all these reasons Chaucer's Parson deserves a careful scrutiny, and any Wycliffism he does or does not possess affects one's interpretation of and response to the Canterbury Tales as a whole. That is, if Chaucer is using the Parson as a vehicle of expressing strongly Wycliffite opinions, then the Canterbury Tales takes on a decidedly radical tone. Even the statements on

[22]For a discussion of multiple interpretation see John Ciardi, "How to read Dante," Varieties of Literary Experience, ed. Stanley Bradshaw (New York, 1962), pp. 171-182, esp. p. 177.

penance given in the "Parson's Tale" would have to be explained in a new and cynical light. The use made by both Chaucer and Wycliffe of the ideal of the parish clergy offers another argument for comparing this aspect of their thought. In considering the place of the Parson in the "General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" the following chapter will show that Chaucer uses this ideal character as a foil for exposing the imperfections of the other clerics. The chapter on Wycliffe's ideal will demonstrate that he used his conception of the ideal parish priest in much the same way. That is, Chaucer's use of the Parson as a foil is the approximate literary equivalent of Wycliffe's use of the parish priests to condemn the other clergy. Thus the parish priest not only occupies a central place in the writings of both Chaucer and Wycliffe, but also occupies this position in roughly the same way.[23] Taking all of the above into account, the relation of the two men's clerical ideals thus becomes a question of major critical importance.

[23]Credit for suggesting this comparison must be given to Prof. Robert Kelly in a note to the author, Dec. 1, 1969.

## CHAPTER II

## CHAUCER'S IDEAL OF THE PARISH CLERGY

What now does Chaucer present as his ideal of the parish clergy? Granted that his picture of the "povre parson" bears a marked resemblance to a description given by Wycliffe of his "poor prieste," do the Canterbury Tales provide additional information on Chaucer's ideal which may help in clarifying its relation to that of Wycliffe? To answer this query it is necessary to take a closer look at Chaucer's Parson and his relation to the other pilgrims in the "Prologue" and in the body of the tales themselves.

The first chapter has touched on the main details of Chaucer's portrait of the Parish Priest in the "General Prologue." Still, as the above references are by no means exhaustive, a few more words are in order at this point. Harold F. Brooks in his book Chaucer's Pilgrims observes that the Parson is characterized by habitual actions. That is, Chaucer paints his Parson not so much by physical description, e.g., as in the case of the Miller and his red beard, or by dress, as in the case of the Merchants. Rather, the Parson equals what he does.[1] Thus, Chaucer's portrayal of the ideal parish priest is from the very outset an active one, and, since the emphasis is on action, a vigorous one. Chaucer's ideal cleric does not belong to that order of clerics who speak of lofty and abstract principles but cannot

[1](London, 1962), p. 9.

relate them to everyday life. As Brooks notes, the Parson has attained the Christian ideal of holiness and simplicity, and yet has succeeded in coupling this to an intensely active, vital, and meaningful life.[2]

Some, however, have criticized Chaucer's poor Parson as being good but simple-minded. This criticism cannot stand, for as Chaucer says in the "General Prologue":

> He was also a lerned man, a clerk.
> (I,A, 480)

Chaucer thus does not agree with the opinion that "the best priest is a dumb priest." The full extent of the training Chaucer implies for his Parson is not clear. In Mediaeval England candidates for the priesthood received their first instruction from their local priests or from small schools in the nearby religious houses.[3] After this elementary education the lads went on to the university at Oxford or Cambridge. Most were around fourteen years old at this point, and after studying Latin, literature, rhetoric, and logic for four years received the degree of Bachelor of Arts. Seven more years of theological training led to the degree of Bachelor of Divinity at the age of twenty-five, and three more years of study might lead to the degree of Doctor of Theology.[4]

[2]Brooks, p. 34.

[3]Cardinal Gasquet, Parish Life in Mediaeval England (London, 1909), p. 72.

[4]Cardinal Gasquet, pp. 73-79.

Most candidates for the priesthood did not complete the full course. Chaucer gives no indication that his Parish Priest was to be a Doctor of Theology, but the fact that he calls him "clerk" (I, A, 480) implies that the Parson had at least some university training. His simplicity is a learned simplicity, a simplicity which could call on the head as well as the heart.

After stressing this ideal priest's diligence in caring for his flock, Chaucer turns to the question of tithes. Tithing was a legal obligation upon the Mediaeval man, and for non-payment of tithes a person was subject to excommunication. The formula used by priests to excommunicate recalcitrant parishioners has been preserved, and reads in part:

> Acorsen hem fader son and holy gost: accursen hem patriarkes, prophetes and apostles and all godes disapules and all holy Innocentes, martieres, confessoures and virgines, monkes, canons, heremytes, prestes and clerkes that they have no part of messe ne matenes ne of none other gode praire, but that peynes of hell be her mede with Judas that betrayed oure lorde Ihesu Crist.[5]

It was with these words ringing in his ears that Chaucer set forth his "benygne" ideal parish priest.

Yet one must not think that Chaucer presented his ideal of the parish clergy as a milksop. After emphasizing the good example the Parson set for his people in his personal life, and relating that he was a faithful shepherd who did not desert his flock for the greater delights of London or the securer life of a brotherhood (abuses which

[5]Muriel Bowden, A Commentary to the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1945), p. 233.

were common in the Mediaeval world), Chaucer adds:

> But it were any person obstinat,
> What so he were, of heigh or lough estat,
> Hym wolde he snybben for the nonys.
> (I, A, 521-523)

Chaucer's ideal parish priest has no fear of opposing the establishment when circumstances demand. This introduces a radical note to the Parson's description, a note which passes overlooked in the common conception that he is a kindly and loving parish priest. Chaucer admittedly does not go into great detail on this point, and is careful above all not to specify any particular persons "of heigh degree" who are worthy of such rebuke. Still, the simple Parson, who "waited after no pompe and reverence" (I, A, 525) would stand for the right no matter what the odds. This may have been dangerous in Mediaeval thinking, and carried to extremes would have frightened Chaucer himself. Still, Chaucer's Parson definitely possessed such a quality, and as Chaucer says:

> A bettre preest I trowe that nowher none ys.
> (I, A, 524)

What, now, is the relation of Chaucer's Parson to the other religious as they are presented in the "General Prologue," and what part do these clerics play in the statement of Chaucer's ideal of the parish priest? For the most part the other clerics in the "General Prologue" serve as foils to Chaucer's ideal Parson. That is, they, in their varying degrees of non-fulfillment of the clerical ideal point up in even sharper degree the Parson's fulfillment of that ideal.

In regard to this, the fact that Chaucer's ideal parish priest was a "parson" figures importantly. In the Mediaeval English church this term "parson" had a very specific denotation which sets Chaucer's

Parson quite apart from the other clerics in the "Prologue." The "parson," or persona, of a Mediaeval parish was the priest directly and officially entrusted with the care of souls in a given parish. His were the obligations to watch after the spiritual well-being of his flock, and to him belonged by law all the parish revenues. Ideally this arrangement resulted in an intimate and binding relationship between the parson and his people, but too often this was not the case. A parson who wished to be absent from his flock for any length of time could hire a "vicar" to take his place. In such a case the actual spiritual care of the parish's people fell on the vicar, though the parish revenues still remained the property of the parson. From these he might make such allowance as he chose for the vicar's support.[6] In case of illness or other pressing necessity the hiring of a vicar by a parson could prove very helpful but, as is well known, the practice often resulted in the people's suffering the abuse of neglect. The parson meanwhile accepted more lucrative employment or recreation elsewhere. All too often he cared nothing for his charges' welfare while enjoying the benefit of parish revenues all the same.

Chaucer says of his Parson:

> He sette nat his benefice to hyre
> And leet his sheep encumbred in the myre. . . .
> (I, A, 507-508)

thereby affirming the Parson's loyalty to his charges and emphasizing the closeness between priest and people.

[6] A. Hamilton Thompson, The English Clergy and their Organization in the Later Middle Ages (New York, 1947), p. 117.

The other clerics in the "Prologue," such as the Monk and the Friar by the very nature of their callings do not share in the life of the people so intimately as can the Parson. In addition to this, the lives of all the other clerics fall far short of their clerical ideals, the Parson alone being all that he should be. This might imply that Chaucer thought of the pastoral office as the proper office for a priest. If this were so, Chaucer's ideal parish priest would also be his representative of the ideal cleric in general. The evidence of the "General Prologue" is not conclusive enough to prove that Chaucer had no use for any but the parish functions of the clergy (cf. the clerk), and this was probably not his intention. Still, Chaucer's choice of a parish priest as his ideal cleric rather than a monk or friar, as well as his great emphasis on the Parson's closeness to his people, indicates his sympathies in this direction. Other information to be considered later in this paper will perhaps shed more light on this possibility.

Within the "General Prologue" itself, however, numerous factors demand prior consideration. This segment of the Canterbury Tales contains several specific instances of other clerics with their imperfections serving as foils for Chaucer's ideal parish priest. Harold F. Brooks in his Chaucer's Pilgrims sees the little group of the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar as depicting progressively worse cases of failure in the clerical ideal.[7] Following his lead, this paper will consider each of these three characters in their capacity as foils to the Parson. The

[7]Brooks, p. 16.

Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar may be taken as representatives of the clerics as a whole.

> Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioresse. . .
> That of hir smyling was ful symple and coy
> Hire greatest oath was by Seinte Loy. . .
> (I, A, 118-120)

Thus Chaucer introduces Madame Eglentyne, that gentle and proper lady whose true self must remain somewhat of a mystery. As one reads Chaucer's description of his Prioress, one finds little in her make-up which is deserving of strict criticism. At the same time there remains the feeling that something essential is lacking in Madame Eglentyne. Chaucer himself makes few remarks directly to her detriment. Such of these remarks as occur are couched in language as gentle as the lady herself. Her French, which she speaks so "fetisly," has more of the rhythms and accents of England than it does of those of France.

> For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.
> (I, A, 126)

Her table manners betray an excessive amount of training and concern with neatness, and her sentiments towards animals are perhaps a trifle too effusive. The mention of her broad forehead in I, A, 154-155 may be intended to imply that she was somewhat slow of wit, but, as Professor F. N. Robinson states in his note on these lines, the additional revelation that the Prioress was a woman of large frame renders it more probable that Chaucer merely drew this feature in relation to the rest of her body.[8] In short, Chaucer presents his lady Prioress as a rather unfortunate woman whose faults are small ones, but who is nonetheless

[8] The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 655.

not quite suited for her station in life. Of what sort is the love proclaimed by her rosary brooch as the conqueror of all? As Chaucer notes (I, A, 139-141), she endeavored to deport herself as a lady of the court and was very conscious of the dignity of her position as prioress. Through this Chaucer points up Madame Eglentyne's striving after the non-essentials and externals of the religious life. Perhaps she does this because she lacks sufficient depth of personality to enter into the deeper places of the spirit. At any rate, the Prioress contrasts in this with the Parson, who through his spiritual grounding transformed even the simplest works into actions of true significance. The Parson found therein the true meaning of his life, a meaning which Madame Eglentyne seems to desire but not to be able to discover.

The Monk presents quite a different picture. He has found meaning a-plenty in his life. The only difficulty is that the meaning he has found is hardly that for which a monk is supposed to strive. As Madame Eglentyne really should have been a lady-in-waiting at court, so the Monk would have been far better off as a country baron. As Chaucer says:

> Of prikyng and of huntyng for the hare
> Was al his lust; for no cost wolde he spare.
> (I, A, 191-192)

The Monk's failure to realize his true calling in life, unlike Madame Eglentyne's, is quite open and apparent. He makes no pretense of holiness and devotion to his monastic rule, but, as Chaucer reports of him, "leet olde thynges pass" (I, A, 175). He is an "outrider" indeed, departing from his rule both in spirit and in occupation. If the Prioress' spirituality proved somewhat shallow, the Monk's was non-existent.

Little does the Monk care for work with his hands or for other simple acts of service. How different this is from the devoted Parson.

Though Chaucer quotes the saying "How shall the world be served?" (I, A, 187) in support of the Monk, the question rebounds upon the jolly outrider. Chaucer's seeming support hardly bolsters the Monk's case at all, for the reader is forced to ask: "How shall the world be served indeed by such clerics as this?"

The Friar carries matters a step farther. The Monk presents himself as no true cleric, but about him there hangs no hint of real corruption. The Friar's record cannot boast the same. The marriages made at his own cost (I, A, 212) as Professor Robinson states,[9] were certainly those of young ladies he himself had seduced. The pins carried in his tippet as presents for the wives (I, A, 233-234) also indicate that his intentions were far from honorable or pious. The Friar thus uses the sacrament of marriage for his own convenience. This corruption of even the rites of the church continues into the sacrament of penance as well:

> Ful swetely herde he confessiouns
> And pleasaunt was his absolutioun:
> He was an easy man to yeve penaunce,
> Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
> For unto a povre ordre for to yive
> Is segne that a man is wel yshryve.
> (I, A, 221-226)

These lines cannot but bring to mind those referred to in the first chapter concerning the good Parson.

> To drawen folk to hevene by fairnesse
> By good ensample, this was his bisynesse.
> But it were any persone obstinat,
> What so he were, of heigh or lough estat,
> Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys.
> (I, A, 519-523)

The contrast speaks for itself, as does the sincerity of the men in

[9]Robinson, p. 656.

question.

Thus the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar present themselves in ever greater contrast to the humble Parson. Like comparisons might be made between the Parson and the Summoner. It will suffice to say, however, that he is all that these other clerics are not. The Parson's entire being finds fulfillment in his work, and this he performs well and faithfully. The other religious may fail only in little things and almost pitifully like Madame Eglentyne, or they may be the very antithesis of the ideal they profess like the Friar. None can match the humble Parson.

The Pardoner in particular is the very antithesis of the true Parson, and of all the avenues of attack used by Chaucer to chastize the unworthy clergy, that of the Pardoner is the most severe. Chaucer labels him as a "geldyng" (I, A, 691). This relates not only to his physical state, but to his spiritual sterility as well.[10] He is thus a complete contrast to the Parson, "fertile" in the works of God. The body of the Canterbury Tales will make this contrast all the more obvious. There the Pardoner's hypocritical treatment of the sacrament of penance clashes sharply with the example of the Parson, for it is by the way of true penance that the Parson, the true cleric, points Men to God. The Pardoner's penance is but a hollow parody of the spiritual gifts offered by the Parson.

The Clerk of Oxenford, however, offers a partial exception to Chaucer's line of clerical failures. In fact, the Clerk may be con-

[10]This imagery is developed by Robert P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner: The Scriptural Eunuch and the Pardoner's Tale," Speculum, XXX (1955), 180-199.

sidered a fair academic equivalent of Chaucer's ideal parish priest. He certainly lacks the moral blemishes of the more venial clerics of the Canterbury pilgrimage. The good Clerk remembers his benefactors in his prayers, and as Chaucer carefully notes:

> Sowynge in moral vertu was his speche,
> And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.
> (I, A, 307-308)

The Clerk contrasts with the Parson primarily in the sphere of practicality. The Parson is actively involved in life and with the down-to-earth problems of his people. The Clerk moves in another world, an abstract world, and spends his little money on books rather than on feeding the poor or even on himself. Thus the Parson in his day-to-day simple vitality outshines the scholarly Clerk. One must take care, however, in building up too strong a case for Chaucer against the Clerk. Such satire on him as is given is on the order of that used in the case of Madame Eglentyne. The Clerk is assuredly an attractive character, but would hardly succeed among the flesh and blood problems confronting the Parish Priest.

The main body of the Canterbury Tales also sheds some light on Chaucer's ideal of the parish clergy. How does the Parson behave? How do the other clerics behave, and what sort of clergymen appear in the stories themselves? As was true in the case of the "General Prologue" this study is largely one of contrasts.

The first glimpses of those connected with religion in the body of the Canterbury Tales do not redound to the clergy's favor. Nicholas, the crafty clerk in the "Miller's Tale," cares not at all for his theological studies, but concerns himself solely with seducing carpenter John's pert young wife. Nicholas, however, is only a student, not a

full parish priest, and thus his amorous exploits perhaps lie beyond this paper's proper sphere. The same is largely true as well of Nicholas' rival, the dandy Absolon, though the fact that he is a parish clerk entitles him to some consideration. This young man, with his curled golden hair and fine red garments hardly presents an image of the pious cleric. His attempted seduction of John's wife bears ample witness to the fact that his religious state cannot subdue his lustful nature any more than his white surplice can cover his reveler's garb. Thus far Chaucer's clerks have been far short of ideal. In the tale immediately following the Miller's moreover, there is another mention of a most appropriate unsavory character to figure importantly in Chaucer's presentation of his ideal of the parish clergy.

In the "General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" Chaucer introduced a considerable number of non-parish clergy who contrasted very markedly with his ideal Parson. As noted above, this fact taken alone might give the impression that Chaucer completely idealized the parish clergy at the expense of all other types. The "Reeve's Tale" disposes of this notion. Chaucer in speaking of Symkin's wife says of her:

> The person of the toun her fader was. . . .
> (I, A, 3980)

Here then is a parish clergyman who, insofar as regards celibacy at least, has strayed far from the ideal. The tale also relates that this parson intended to make Symkin's daughter his heir

> Bothe of his catel and his mesuage.
> (I, A, 3980)

This inheritance comprised enough worth to be greatly desired by the Symkin family, who themselves were far from poor. This particular parish priest, then, has apparently not heard of the virtue of poverty.

Yet some may object that Chaucer does not necessarily condemn this parson for his conduct. The following lines speak against such a conclusion:

> For hooly Churches good moot been despended
> On hooly Churches blood that is descended.
> Therfore he wolde his hooly blood honoure
> Though that he hooly Churche sholde devoure.
> (I, A, 3983-86)

These stinging words of satire, words which approach outright cynicism, bear such condemnation as falls otherwise only on the Pardoner. They fit the testy Reeve quite well, yet in view of the other clerical portraits one can also hear in them the voice of Chaucer. He has depicted his ideal parish priest and is not afraid to condemn a bad one. The parish clergy has its fallen members as well as does the clergy regular.

The Canterbury Tales abound with other examples of what a priest is not to be. The Friar's archdeacon and summoner rigorously punish sin, but care more for the penance money than for the spiritual aid involved. The Summoner's friar gives the unsuspecting people easy penance in order to take over the parish priest's business, thinks more of buildings than he does of souls, and rather than preaching clearly from Scripture twists the texts to encourage monetary gifts to himself (III, D, 7790ff.). His actions make a mockery of his pretensions that his only intention is to preach and spread God's word (III, D, 1821), and that fasting and simple dress are all he desires (III, D, 1881-82). The Pardoner and his false relics, the Shipman's lecherous monk, and the double-dealing Canon of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" add to the distressing picture.

The upshot of all these clerics of dubious character is to make one say with Thomas in the "Summoner's Tale" that for all their false piety

> Yet fare I never the bet.
> (III, D, 1951)

As Thomas was driven by the friar's duplicity to turn once more to his parish priest (III, D, 2095), so too do the reader's thoughts return to the simple yet honest Parson.

How does the Parson present himself in the body of the Canterbury Tales? He first appears in the "Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale" (II, B, 1163-1190). There he is called on by the host to tell a tale, and, as might be expected of one described as totally dedicated to the work of his clerical calling, replies instead with a reproof to Harry Bailly for swearing. His zeal, in this case, proves unwise, for he only succeeds in bringing abuse upon himself, including the charge of Lollardy. Some may capitalize upon the fact that the Parson does not deny the charge to support his (and thus Chaucer's) Wycliffite persuasions. The text itself gives no real support to this interpretation. Indeed, the chief aspect of the Parson's character revealed by this episode is his ability to bear attack without sinking to recrimination or out and out name calling himself.

The truth of this trait is sealed when the Parson finally does tell his tale. For him there is none of the immediate revenge enjoyed by the Reeve or the Summoner. Neither is there any of the cooly calculated and patiently awaited striking back employed by the Clerk. When his time comes, the Parson simply proceeds to preach on a worthy matter,

> To knytte up all this feste, and make an ende.
> (X, I, 47)

The contents of the "Parson's Tale" need not be examined in great detail here. Suffice it to say that its theology is perfectly orthodox in Catholic eyes, and that its main thrust, for all its dogmatic intri-

cacy, is the living of a truly practical Christian life. The specific content of the tale is drawn primarily from two sources: a treatise of Pennaforte and one of Peraldus.[11] It provides a very scholastic presentation of the sacrament of Penance, but contains nothing that could be called characteristically Wycliffite. To the modern reader this moral sermon is hopelessly obscure and dull. It must be remembered, however, that the Parson was a Mediaeval cleric addressing a Mediaeval audience. The modern reader might gain little but confusion from "The Parson's Tale," but the people of the times would have had trouble in understanding a priest who presented his topic in any other way. For this reason the intent of the tale of far more significant for the purposes of this study than its content per se. The tale's greater significance in relation to the Canterbury Tales as a whole has already been dealt with in a previous chapter.

To close, then, Chaucer presents the Parson in the "General Prologue" as the ideal parish priest who practices every word of what he preaches. The other clerics, both in the "Prologue" and in the body of the tales themselves, serve to emphasize in sharp detail the Parson's accomplishments in realizing his clerical ideal through the agency of their own failures in this respect. Since most of them are not of the parish clergy it would not be expected that the ideal of their respective callings would correspond in every respect to that of the Parson's. Still, he alone it is who succeeds in fulfilling his obligations to any real extent, and he alone it is who clearly shows forth the image of

[11]Eleanor P. Hammond, Chaucer a Bibliographical Manual (New York, 1938), p. 320.

Christ in his dealings with the common people who are the church. His sincerity, industry, and genuine devotion are without question or equal. In the body of the tales his actions live up to the achievements Chaucer has reported of him in the "Prologue." The Parson, then, while he may not be perfect, fully deserves the epithet "ideal." That is, he approaches the "ideal" about as closely as the imperfections of human-kind will allow.

# CHAPTER III

## WYCLIFFE'S IDEAL OF THE PARISH CLERGY

By the middle of the fourteenth century the English Church from top to bottom was in need of reform. Abuses such as those depicted by Chaucer were not universal, but were widespread. On the parish level they were fast becoming unbearable. The times were right for religious reform. All that was lacking was a spokesman--and that spokesman stepped forward in the person of John Wycliffe.

Wycliffe clearly saw the need for church reform in fourteenth century England and devoted the last part of his life to that end. Among all of Wycliffe's many concerns for reform, the ideal of the parish clergy figured prominently. As noted in the preceding chapters (cf. pp. 10-11), these parish priests, by their closeness to the people exercised tremendous influence on the church as a whole and thus occupied a crucial position in Mediaeval society. It was therefore with good reason that Wycliffe devoted so much attention to these men. His presentation of the ideal of the parish clergy was carefully thought out and comprehensive. As was the case with Chaucer, the presentation of Wycliffe's clerical ideal on the parish level led of necessity to his dealing with the other clergy in relation to the parish priests.

One concerned with the ideal of the parish clergy must consider first the sort of men who will comprise that clergy. The realization

of an ideal necessitates the procuring of men agreeable to that ideal. It is therefore in deadly earnest that Wycliffe asks the question: "Who ought to be appointed curate over the people according to God's law and reason?"[1] This question he immediately answers by saying that the clergyman must be "intellectually and emotionally instructed for the exercise of the curate's office."[2] Yet, education does not form the only criterion, for in the same treatise Wycliffe says that the clergy must "follow the highest Pastor in morals."[3] Wycliffe makes these two requirements for the priesthood equally essential, saying that no bishop should ordain a man without first ascertaining his fitness in both education and morals.[4]

Once a man was ordained a priest, Wycliffe says his first responsibility must be "to recognize Christ and to act according to His will."[5] He echoes this injunction for worthy conduct in a more earthy manner when he states that the first job of a pastor is to "cleanse his own spring" before turning to the wells of others.[6] For Wycliffe the priestly ideal was one of service. He roundly condemns those who enter the priesthood seeking only after worldly security, and those who consider their parishioners' confessions only as an easy source of steady

[1]"On the Pastoral Office," trans. Matthew Spinka, in Advocates of Reform (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 55.

[2]Loc. cit.

[3]Ibid., p. 44.

[4]De Blasphemia, ed. Michael Dziewicki (London, 1893), p. 177.

[5]Ibid., pp. 98-99.

[6]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 48.

income.[7]

Among all the parish functions of the parish clergy Wycliffe granted the first place to preaching. His regard for it cannot be minimized, as illustrated by the following passage taken from one of his sermons written to be preached on Sexagesima Sunday:

> O marvelous power of the Divine seed! which overpowers strong men in arms, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into divine men, men who had been brutalized by sins, and departed infinitely far from God. Obviously such a high morality could never be worked by the word of a priest if the Spirit of the eternal Word did not, above all things else, work with it.[8]

All the different parts of Scripture, says Wycliffe, must be illumined with the flaming Word of God and then explained to the people.[9] This interpretation of all the parts of Scripture is a most important point. Wycliffe himself was thoroughly trained in the involved scholastic methods of Mediaeval discourse. Many of his own works are couched in this difficult style, and his supreme mastery of it is attested to by the fact that modern scholars find his writings to be some of the most intricate, minutely precise, and difficult to translate of all the Mediaeval writings which exist. Concerning preaching to the people, however, Wycliffe belonged to quite a different school. He rages long and loud at those who, in order to show off their own abilities, involve

[7] De Blasphemia, pp. 117-118, 182.

[8] "Sermon for Sexagesima," quoted in Gotthard Lechler, John Wiclif and his English Precursors, trans. Peter Lorimer (London, 1878), I, 285.

[9] De Blasphemia, p. 51.

the people in needless subtleties. Too often, he observes, such men attempt to twist the Gospel by crafty word machinations to serve their own ends.[10]

Wycliffe's insistence on the necessity and worth of preaching must not be understood as concerning words alone. He says: "If the soul is not with words, how can the words have power?"[11] A priest must exemplify his teaching with his life, or all his preaching is worthless. This he supports with an appeal to Psalm XLIX: 16-17: "But to the sinner God has said: 'Why do you declare my justices and take my covenant in your mouth? You have hated discipline and have cast my words behind you.'"[12] The clergy are bound to teach the world to put aside the things of the world "by work as much as by word."[13] In view of these statements on action and clerical conduct, one can see that when Wycliffe says "Nothing is more perfect for a man to do than the worthy sowing of the word of God,"[14] he includes "active demonstration" as well as "verbal explanation."

In living out their priestly ideal the parish clergy were to be true shepherds of their flock. In speaking of shepherds Christ distinguished between the "true" shepherd and the "mercenary" shepherd who deserts his flock at the first sign of danger.[15] This distinction was taken in the Middle Ages as an expression of Christ's own clerical ideal.

[10]"On the Pastoral Office," pp. 51-53.

[11]"Sermon XL," quoted in Lechler, I, 285.

[12]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 48.

[13]Dialogus, ed. A. W. Pollard (London, 1896), p. 3.

[14]"Sermon XVI," Sermones, ed. Johann Loserth (London, 1887-90), I, 110.

[15]John X: 11-12.

Surely Wycliffe bore it in mind as he wrote the following passage concerning the office of a pastor, whose responsibilities he deduces as:

> To feed his sheep spiritually on the word of God, that through pastures ever greener they may be initiated to the blessedness of heaven; to purge the sheep of disease, that they may not infect themselves and others as well; to defend his sheep from ravening wolves, both sensible and insensible.[16]

Wycliffe realizes, however, that many priests fall far short of this ideal. In fact, he is careful to list three kinds of shepherds among the parish clergy. First are the true shepherds. These fulfill their calling in both word and deed. Then come those shepherds who speak the right words and perform the right actions, but who do so only to insure their own praise and security. Lastly come those who bear the name of shepherd, but do not make even a pretense of performing a shepherd's duties.[17] These latter are the "mercenary" shepherds condemned by Christ. They think only of themselves and not of their sheep.

Yet, says Wycliffe, the true shepherd will remain faithful to his sheep and will defend them against any foe whatsoever. This they will do even if the defense must be made against their own ecclesiastical superiors.[18] In one place Wycliffe uses the figure of the vinedresser for the parish priest. He is "to purge the church militant of false shoots not bedded in the highest Pastor . . . and to dispose its branches that they may better bear fruit for the blessing of the

[16]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 48.

[17]De Civili Dominio, ed. Johann Loserth (London, 1876), pp. 127-128.

[18]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 37.

church."[19] The respective rank of these "false shoots" is to make no difference to the ideal priest. He must perform his duty in this respect no matter what the cost to himself, no matter how extreme such actions might seem to those around him.

Yet, in Wycliffe's time one did not have to be in danger or under pressure to desert his flock. Many pastors were only too glad to leave their parishes to seek greener pastures in the cities or at court. For these too Wycliffe had a word, saying that they "sin gravely"[20] who desert their charges for more lucrative positions.[21] The true shepherd, the true pastor, is the very opposite of such men.

For the better realization of their ideal obligations Wycliffe said that the priests are to be poor men who do not seek after more and more earthly wealth. Unlike temporal officers, to whom the goods of the world are not forbidden, the priests are to possess no more of the world's commodities than are necessary to clothe and feed them.[22] Such tithes or other monetary contributions as they receive beyond these basic needs are to be given to the poor. In all these matters the clerics are simply to follow the example of the apostles. These men were not concerned with riches or with getting their full share of the tithes; they were too busy caring for the sheep. According to Wycliffe, the modern shepherds would do well to heed this manner of faithful service.[23]

[19]"On the Pastoral Office" p. 32.

[20]_De Blasphemia_, p. 106.

[21]_Ibid._, p. 177.

[22]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 33.

[23]_Ibid._, p. 43.

Only thus, said Wycliffe, could they truly fulfill their vows to dedicate themselves wholly to the service of God.

Some clerics, however, were gravely concerned about their right to a "decent and living wage comparable to those of the other professions." Wycliffe answered these men with a quotation of the Lord from Ezechial XLIV: 7: "There will be an inheritence for the priests; I am their inheritence."[24] Yet he sadly notes that in his day the priests are ready to excommunicate the faithful for even the slightest offense--including the non-payment of tithes.[25] This practice Wycliffe roundly condemns in numerous passages of "On the Pastoral Office" and De Blasphemia. In the latter work Wycliffe quotes Gratian, the twelfth century monk who edited the famous Decretals, as saying: "It is repugnant to the reason for giving alms to drag them out [of the people] by crafty pleading or excommunication."[26] Again in De Ecclesia Wycliffe says that the priests of Christ must be more merciful than were the priests of the Old Testament.[27] He urges that only open and manifest sins be reproved publicly in the church, and states as well that the only form of excommunication a Christian knows is to refuse to have dealings with an ungodly person.[28] If these ideals were put into practice, thought Wycliffe, the priest could indeed be a simple shepherd of Christ, and his staff would not be a gold-plated cudgel.

[24]Dialogus, p. 9.

[25]Select English Works of John Wyclif (Oxford, 1881), III, 217.

[26]De Blasphemia, p. 180.

[27]Johann Loserth, ed. (London, 1896), p. 214.

[28]Sermones, IV, 454; De Blasphemia, p. 100.

For Wycliffe, the monks, the friars, and even the hierarchy of his day had strayed far from their clerical ideals. Indeed, so widely had they missed their mark that their activities, rather than aiding the labors of the parish priests, actually hindered them. So corrupt did Wycliffe consider the friars that he found it necessary to write an entire treatise against them. In this work he castigated the friars especially for their interference into the proper sphere of activity of the parish clergy.[29] He felt too that the monks should likewise be released from their vows so that all clerics might "return to the sect [party or order] of Christ."[30] Even the hierarchy, according to Wycliffe, should return to the simple life of service of the earlier church and give up its richness of living, prideful behavior, and retinues of servants.[31] No longer must there exist such clerics as those about whom Wycliffe quipped that they boast of the fatness of their benefices "which nevertheless they are able to spend every year."[32] In short, all priests should be poor parsons at heart.

For Wycliffe this clerical ideal, this pastoral ideal, of the simple priest's ministering the "true and lively word" to his faithful people had been realized in the early church. There were true priests then and there were many true priests in his own day. Yet Wycliffe insisted that all priests return to this earlier ideal of simplicity and loving care for souls. Once the priests accomplished this, thought

[29]"De Quatuor Sectis Novelis," in Polemical Works, ed. John Buddensieg (London, 1893), passim.

[30]De Blasphemia, p. 14.

[31]Ibid., p. 3.

[32]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 44.

Wycliffe, then all the world's distractions would be swept away so that their hearts and souls would not be diverted from their true purpose in this life. With all the non-essential complications thus removed, Wycliffe truly believed that the parish priests would then be able to:

> minister faithfully to their flocks in things spiritual, and to support the faithful by their office, and the wandering poor by their hospitality. . . .[33]

As will be seen in a later chapter, Wycliffe was not totally alone in his views of the ideal of the parish clergy. His views, in many respects, were certainly extreme. Yet, in his call for total dedication to the service of his Lord he echoed the aspirations of faithful Christians throughout the ages.

[33]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 35.

## CHAPTER IV

## COMPARISON OF WYCLIFFE'S AND CHAUCER'S IDEALS

The foregoing considerations of Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideal of the parish clergy reveal a surprising amount of agreement between them in the essentials of their ideals. It has been seen that both men showed great concern for the type of men who were to compose the parish clergy. As Wycliffe said: "There is no doubt but that a curate intellectually and emotionally instructed for the exercising of the curate's office ought to be set over a given flock."[1] Chaucer too considered educational preparation a prerequisite for the parish ministry, for he characterized his ideal parson as "a lerned man, a clerk" (I, A, 480). Furthermore, Chaucer's use of the Prioress, Monk, and Friar as foils to the Parson emphasizes his concern that he be emotionally and temperamentally suited for the religious state. The Prioress and the Monk, especially, are not so much evil as simply unsuited for the job.

In his own clerical ideal Wycliffe laid great stress on preaching as the principal duty of the priest. As noted in Chapter III, however, he meant far more by "preaching" than the simple public verbalization of sermons. As he says in one of his own sermons: "...simple preaching is not enough unless it is accompanied by other good works. . . ."[2]

[1]John Wycliffe, "On the Pastoral Office," in Advocates of Reform, ed. and trans. Matthew Spinka (Philadelphia, 1953), pp. 55-56.

[2]John Wycliffe, Sermones, ed. Johann Loserth (London, 1887), II, 280.

Wycliffe goes on to say that it was this "active preaching" which attracted so many people to Jesus. The Pharisees were not lacking in verbal preaching. Yet, says Wycliffe, it was Jesus alone who preached the love and mercy of God by deed as well as by word. The priest of Christ must do likewise.[3]

This, of course, agrees completely with Chaucer's emphasis on the active nature of his Parson's ministry. At the very beginning of his portrait of the ideal priest Chaucer asserts that the Parson was a priest

> That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche.
> (I, A, 481)

He takes care, however, to affirm that

> He taughte, but first folwed it hymselve.
> (I, A, 528)

Thus, in the thought of both Chaucer and Wycliffe every aspect of the parson's life was to point toward and exemplify the worth of his teaching. It was through these actions of love and understanding that the priests were to carry out Christ's commands to be true shepherds of the sheep.

Still, for both Chaucer and Wycliffe good actions alone were not sufficient to make an ideal priest. The ideal parish priest was not to allow, even by silent toleration, the abuses and wrongdoings of others. It will be remembered that in the "General Prologue" Chaucer was quick to assert that the good Parson, for all his gentleness, would "snybben sharply for the nonys" (I, A, 523) <u>any</u> obstinate sinner no matter what his rank. This is quite in agreement with Wycliffe's words:

[3]<u>Sermones</u>, II, 280-281.

> Prelates say in effect today, 'Despoil your poor sheep and simple ones of so much money, else I will thoroughly excommunicate you and I will suspend them from entering the church and from divine service.' Would such great blasphemy and infidelity prevent any really faithful priest from observing justice?

Chaucer's words were directed against powerful secular pressures on the priests, and Wycliffe's against ecclesiastical threats. The substance of both men's thoughts is the same: The priest must stand for the right against any offender whatever, even if this offender is one's own superior.

At the same time as the priests were to wax strong in defense of the truth they were not to become prideful or to live luxuriously. Wycliffe said that the priests were to possess no more of the world's commodities than was necessary to clothe and feed them. Any overabundance was to be returned to the poor: "But in case part of these [tithes and offerings] remain to be distributed, they ought to distribute them to the poor of Christ and use it prudently for other purposes in accordance with the will of the Lord."[5] Above all, said Wycliffe, the priest is not to attempt to force revenues out of his people, and most especially was excommunication not to be used as a threat in this respect.[6] This injunction can but call to mind the lines of Chaucer:

> Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithe,
> But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,
> Unto his povre parisshen aboute
> Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce.
> (I, A, 486-489)

[4]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 37.

[5]Ibid., p. 43.

[6]John Wycliffe, Select English Works, (London, 1881), III, 217.

The first part of this parallel between Chaucer and Wycliffe, that concerning cursing for tithes, speaks for itself. Both men clearly detested the all too current practice of extracting revenues from reluctant parishioners by threatening them with excommunication, and thus with eternal damnation, if payment was not forthcoming. The likeness extends farther than this, however, for it will be noted that in sharp contrast to the practice of those covetous clerics who forcibly extracted money from the people, Chaucer has his Parson return to his people a part

> Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce.
> (I, A, 489)

This is precisely what Wycliffe had urged the parsons to do. In Mediaeval England the parish tithes were apportioned by law for various purposes: church upkeep, bishop's portion, hospitality for travelers, etc. One fourth of the tithe, though, belonged to the parish priest for his own maintenance and pleasure. Many priests actually took more than their share from the parish revenues, but Wycliffe said that even the quarter granted the priests by law was excessive if it provided for more than basic food and clothing. This "overabundance," together with additional gifts for weddings, funerals, etc., Wycliffe said should be returned to the poor of the parish.[7] The priest's quarter of the tithe was his "sustaunce," and the additional gifts were his "offrynges," to use Chaucer's terminology. Chaucer and Wycliffe thus saw eye to eye and detail to detail in regard to this matter of the tithe.

To sum up then, Chaucer and Wycliffe both pictured their ideal

[7]"On the Pastoral Office," pp. 33, 43.

priests as men called and committed to the ministry of service. They were to gain no rewards for themselves, but were to devote all their energy and resources to the care, both physical and spiritual, of their people. Once these things were done, the church would be able to return to the simple and loving service of Christ. Until that day the priest was to point out the true path, to turn men's thoughts to heaven, and to make certain that the end of each man's earthly life might be a good and profitable one.

These close affinities between the essential principles of the clerical ideals of Chaucer and Wycliffe can but raise once more the question of the first chapter: Was Chaucer a Wycliffite after all? Thus far the evidence seems to point in that direction. Yet, this paper has so far considered only what Chaucer and Wycliffe have in common in their ideals of the parish clergy. However, if one is to prove dependence of Chaucer upon Wycliffe (as considerations of such parallels generally attempt to do) attention must be given to dissimilarities in their ideals as well. It is here that Chaucer's non-Wycliffism evidences itself most clearly.

Unlike Chaucer, Wycliffe carried the basic themes of his ideal of the parish clergy to their extreme conclusions. Some historians have considered Wycliffe a starry-eyed dreamer. Perhaps in the final analysis he was, yet it must be emphasized that as he dreamed his dreams he was not content to leave them as vague, fragile, and unattainable abstractions. As he dreamed his ideals, he also visualized the means for their realization. Wycliffe interwove his schemes for realizing his ideals so closely with the ideals themselves that they too became part of the ideal, and the ideal became a part of the tangible. That is,

if one were to define the "ideal of the parish clergy" in a narrow sense, the description of the character and work of such an ideal parish priest would constitute the presentation of that ideal. For Wycliffe, however, much more than this was involved. As conceived by Wycliffe, the ideal of the parish priest came to include not only the ideal priest himself, but also the means for purifying the corrupt clergy so that they too might approach this true clerical life. This is more especially true since for Wycliffe the ideal priest was one who as part of his ministry would work for the perfection of his fellow clerics and fellow men. As applied to Wycliffe, then, the "ideal of the parish clergy" is a rather broad term denoting not only the desired end, but also the means to that end. Wycliffe's ideal was thus a "practical" corrective as well as a theoretical program. In his works Wycliffe does indeed speak at times of "the ideal priest" and at others of "the purifying of the clergy." One cannot read far in his works, however, without finding that he has so closely intertwined the two ideas that to separate them is undesirable if not impossible. In the more abstract areas of Wycliffe's theological premises, those on the Eucharist for example, one may find cases where this principle of intertwining means and ends is not fully realized. In the case of the ideal of the parish clergy it is realized to the full.

On the question of means and realization the clerical ideals of Chaucer and Wycliffe diverge. This does not mean that all the foregoing likenesses were not valid, but that, after all these elements of the "ideal proper" had been formulated, Wycliffe projected means to attain them which were significantly different from Chaucer's. At the same time that Wycliffe was noting what the ideal priest ought to be,

he could not help but see that there were many priests who came far short of this ideal. This fact led him to wonder why this should be so. Why were so many of the clergy failing in their ideal? The major cause of this, Wycliffe decided, was the enormous weight of temporal goods which bore upon the priests. Administering temporal affairs took up so much time that they had little time left for tending to their pastoral obligations.[8] Wycliffe also lamented that this earthly wealth led the priests to become prideful, and that, having tasted of the fruits of pride, they became greedy for more and more of it. He said that while men used to preach only for God, the priests now preach only to increase their own reputation and glory.[9]

The cause of all this, as Wycliffe decided in his Trialogus, was the so-called "Donation of Constantine," whereby the Roman Emperor had bestowed lands and goods on the church. Wycliffe believed that in presenting the church with temporal riches the Emperor had only started a string of ecclesiastical abuses. In creating the necessity of administering these goods in the church, he had also occasioned the setting up of distinctions of rank (hierarchy) in the church which had not been there before. With these positions came corrupting pride.[10] Wycliffe observed that those clerics who had no large temporal possessions were largely the better for it: "The evil-doing of such simple clerics, however, seems less although their status and responsibility for directing

[8]"On the Pastoral Office," p. 69.

[9]Sermones, IV, 265.

[10]Trialogus, ed. Gotthard Lechler (Oxford, 1869), (IV, 15), p. 296.

the church may be called 'inferior.'"[11] This observation led Wycliffe directly to a radical solution of the problem.

If poor priests are the best priests, then all priests ought to be poor. This was the logical deduction Wycliffe made from the facts before him, and for him this conclusion conformed strictly to the word of Christ. Wycliffe, in expanding on this, said that all priests should voluntarily divest themselves of all worldly riches and honors:[12] Either let them remain truly clergy in the image of Christ, or purely secular lords; for Christ hates such duplicity in possessions on account of the falsity which it implies."[13] This, ideally, would mean that henceforth all clergy would refuse to accept the monies coming to them, or would use these funds solely for the benefit of the poor and other needy. The monasteries would give up their lands, the bishops would dismiss their retinues, and the parish priests would return to the simple life, the life known to the apostles and other ministers of the early church.

Such indeed was the ideal. Yet Wycliffe was wise enough to know that such a selfless surrendering of wealth on the part of the church was about as likely to take place as a glutton was likely to trade a steak for a crust of bread. Wycliffe had seen enough of the church and had known enough of its leaders to realize that voluntary ecclesiastical disendowment was a nearly impossible thing to hope for. Force would be necessary to gain the desired ends of simplicity and service. Not only must possessions be wrested from the church, but also those

[11] De Blasphemia, ed. Michael Dzwicki (London, 1893), p. 187.

[12] "On the Pastoral Office," p. 56.

[13] Ibid., p. 60.

offices which sprang from or had been corrupted by temporal ecclesiastical wealth. There must be a total reform, and every opposing force must be swept away. This included the bishops and even the Pope himself. These officials had been so corrupted by riches, and had given such bad examples in their high offices to the true priests, the parish priests, that the offices themselves must perish.[14] Then Christ's simple clergy could truly fulfill their function once more. This, for Wycliffe, was simply the practical solution.

In Wycliffe's thinking, the state, as the only institution strong enough to force the church to give up its wealth, naturally inherited the task of reforming the church.[15] For Wycliffe to make such a suggestion he first had to develop a considerable amount of theory to support it. This resulted in his concept of "dominion." In the briefest possible terms, this theory held that final sovereignty in all things resided with God. All authority or "lordship" held by humans was simply in trust. No human ever has an absolute right to any authority, and all such authority as may be given him remains his only as long as he fulfills its functions as God wills. Once a person misuses authority, he in fact loses all authority. The church and state are related since the authority of both comes directly from God, and each, as a representative of God's ultimate authority, is to exercise a correcting influence on the other.[16] Thus Wycliffe could say: "Wherefore. . . . the lords tem-

[14]Wycliffe's views, summarized by Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe (London, 1912), p. 121.

[15]John Stacey, John Wyclif and Reform (London, 1964), passim.

[16]De Civili Dominio, ed. Johann Loserth (London, 1885), p. 70.

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[16]De Civili Dominio, ed. Johann Loserth (London, 1885), p. 70.

poral are able legitimately and meritoriously to take away the wealth of an offending church."[17]

What all this rather involved and sometimes tedious practical theology boils down to is a plea for forcible revolution against the mainstay of Mediaeval society. The state would be the principal agent in this armageddon, but it would be aided and abetted by the "true" parish priests, who would rejoice that right should at long last prevail. "Right thinking" Wycliffite laymen too would lend their support to the venture. Wycliffe was concerned primarily with England, but such cataclisms as the abolition of the Papacy would of necessity shake all of European society to its foundations. The final result, then, of carrying out Wycliffe's ideal of the parish clergy would be a Christendom in which dedicated secular lords worked together with simple priests, supported by the free-will offerings of the laity, to build a living Christian society on earth totally different from what the Middle Ages had known before. The precise nature of this society would be revealed in due time by the Holy Spirit, but its major outlines were to conform to the pattern of the Apostolic church.

What now is Chaucer's position on this exceedingly important part of Wycliffe's clerical ideal in the wider sense? If he were as thoroughgoing a Wycliffite as earlier evidence has seemed to suggest, then these last ideas of Wycliffe should be his logical conclusion too. In truth, however, Chaucer gives not the slightest indication of any such ideas. He may indeed have expressed a preference for the humble parish priest over the more worldly clerics, but it going a long way to argue from

[17] De Civili Dominio, p. 267.

this simple fact that Chaucer was advocating a forcible overthrow of the Mediaeval institutional church. Here he and Wycliffe decidedly part company.

It must not be concluded, however, that Chaucer was simply an institutionalist. No one can read the Canterbury Tales and assert that Chaucer was not poignantly aware of the institutional church's shortcomings. On the other hand, revolt for Chaucer was not the answer. Perhaps he saw that the state, as well as the church, was too selfish to be the agent of reform, and that to bring down both institutions would create such havoc as few men could bear. Perhaps he preferred to reform people rather than institutions. In any case, although many of Chaucer's ideas may be called "Wycliffite" in some sense, it soon becomes apparent that he was not about to lend his support to the revolutionary cause.

An earlier portion of this paper has emphasized the fact that Chaucer and Wycliffe were contemporaries, were rising to prominence at the same time, that they might very well have met and known one another, and that Chaucer had ample opportunity to be influenced by Wycliffite ideas. Still, the great differences in the courses pursued by the two men after the events of 1374 indicate that the influence of Wycliffe on Chaucer was not overwhelming. After 1374, having been disillusioned by his first venture into Papal politics, Wycliffe turned from philosophical to polemical writing and thus began to stir up whirlwinds of controversy around himself. Chaucer's endeavors involved him in quite different activities. Thus, while Wycliffe was turning out anti-establishment tracts and defending himself before various commissions, Chaucer wasdrinking in the nectar of Italy while performing the King's business, inspecting shipments in the port of London by day, and reading and

writing most of the night.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 provides an intriguing example of the different courses pursued by Chaucer and Wycliffe. This revolt grew out of long-standing grievances on the part of the English peasants and poor freemen against their lords. It was the establishment of a new and very harsh poll tax in 1380 which fanned the sparks of resentment into revolution. The unpopular tax was collected rigorously, so rigorously in fact that by May of 1381 the country was on the verge of violent civil strife. Rebellion broke out first in Essex and by June had spread into Kent. Angry crowds began to converge on London. The young Kind Richard was not able to meet the people on his first attempt,and, to use McKisack's phrase, "with [John] Ball as their prophet and [Wat] Tyler as their captain"[18] the angry countrymen began to burn and destroy. This was more than a revolt of the outlying districts, for the citizens of London joined them in burning the Savoy Palace, the residence of John of Gaunt. Order was restored only when the young King finally rode to meet the insurgents and assured them that their demands for fairer treatment would be met. Satisfied, they dispersed, even though the Mayor of London had slain Wat Tyler, the rebel leader, in a fit of anger. There was some trouble to come in other areas, but once the situation was calmed in London the rest of the rebellion had no chance. As events turned out the peasants lost as much as they gained, for as Trevelyan says in his History of England:

[18]May McKisack, The Fourteenth Century 1307-1399 (Oxford, 1959), p. 408. Description of the revolt drawn from this source, pp. 406-413.

> The immediate result was a strong and cruel reaction, when every promise made to the peasants in the hour of need was broken, and a bloody assize made mock of the pardon granted by the King.[19]

In the aftermath of the revolt Wycliffe received a good deal of condemnation which labeled him as a major cause of the disturbances. Wycliffe himself almost certainly had no direct part in summoning the people to this form of open revolt against all authority. Nevertheless there is some truth in attributing part of the blame for the rising of 1381 to Wycliffe. Wishing to hasten the day of ecclesiastical reform, Wycliffe established, some time around 1379, groups of poor itinerant preachers to carry his message throughout England. These were the Lollards, and such men as Chaucer undoubtedly sympathized with many of their ideals. The Lollard movement soon got out of hand, however, and many of the listeners to Wycliffe's ideas began to apply his demands for poverty to the lords secular as well as ecclesiastical. Wycliffe had indeed planted a seed which threatened to take over the whole garden.

Chaucer's own opinion of these affairs seems to have roughly paraleled that of his patron, John of Gaunt. This lord had at first been a firm supporter of Wycliffe and had even become his champion in the many intrigues of the day. Yet, when Wycliffe's ideal of the parish clergy began to threaten his own as well as the church's security, he became noticeably cooler toward the reformer. When the new and very heavy poll tax, levied in part to pay for Gaunt's expensive wars, finally forced open rebellion of the peasants, John of Gaunt quickly lost all avowed Wycliffite tendencies.

Chaucer's own life records show no tendency on his part to put

[19](New York, 1937), p. 241.

aside his comfortable government positions in order to take up the banner of Wycliffism.[20] It is thus no surprise to find him taking no part in the aftermath of the Peasant's Revolt and Wycliffe's ensuing difficulties. His few literary references to either affair are veiled or non-belabored. In the "Knyghtes Tale" (I, A. 2459) he mentions the "cherles rebellyng," but these words of Saturn in no way refer explicitly to the events of 1381. The passage, however, continues: "The gronynge and the pryvee empoysoning. . . ." (I, A, 2460). "The "gronynge" may indeed relate back to the revolt, for Hollinshed (16th century) reports that the tax which caused the actual outbreak of violence was paid "with great grudging and many a bitter curse."[21] Chaucer, however, does not dwell on the subject, and hurries on to "empoysoning," which has nothing to do with the disturbances of John Ball and Jack Straw. Since the "Knyghtes Tale" is dated around 1382, it seems apparent that Chaucer considered the dire events too fresh in everyone's mind to bear much mention. Chaucer does perhaps allude to Jack Straw in Troilus and Criseyde (IV, 183-184). This work is dated (by Robinson) c. 1386, so perhaps Chaucer felt that by this time the siutation had cooled off enough to be referred to more openly. Here again, however, the reference is brief and certainly not sympathetic. Some, however, may argue that Chaucer's very silence on the subject of revolt proves his real support of Wycliffe's ideas of compulsory reform. The tone of such oblique references to the idea, e. g. those cited above,

[20] F. N. Robinson, "Introduction," The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boston, 1957), xxii-xxiii.

[21] Lewis Sergeant, John Wyclif (New York, 1892), p. 283.

give no hint of sympathy for forced or violent ecclesiastical reform.

The status quo had been kind to Chaucer, and it is not surprising to find him less rash in wishing to see it destroyed than Wycliffe may have been. More than this, however, Chaucer was wise enough to see the irreparable damage which would be done if society were toppled by such violent means as Wycliffe's proposals had a tendency to encourage. His work shows every sympathy for thorough-going clerical reform. Still, his open yet careful ecclesiastical criticism reveals that aiding and abetting violent revolt was the farthest thing from Chaucer's mind.

# CHAPTER V

## CHAUCER AND WYCLIFFE IN RELATION TO OTHER WRITERS

The preceding chapter has provided clear indications that Chaucer was not a follower of Wycliffe in all matters concerning the ideal of the parish clergy. Such considerations, however, do not necessarily exhaust or deny the possibilities for Chaucer's dependence upon Wycliffe for this ideal. Granting that Chaucer did not accept Wycliffe's positions in their entirety, and that he certainly disavowed those which were overly radical, could not the essentials of Chaucer's ideal, together with numerous specific details, have been derived from statements made by Wycliffe?

Chaucer's "Summoner's Tale" might be used to support an affirmative answer to the above question, for the criticism of the friars expressed in it corresponds in remarkable degree to that of Wycliffe. These similarities warrant close examination, since both Chaucer and Wycliffe see the friars as a threat to the parish clergy, and both make use of the friars' wickedness to point up in sharper detail the ideal of the true parish clergy. Chaucer's use of the Friar in the "Prologue" to act as a foil to the ideal Parson has been discussed in Chapter II. This usage is continued with equal intensity in the "Summoner's Tale."

No sooner has Friar John gained entrance to Thomas' house than he begins to boast of preaching:

> . . . a sermon after my symple wit,
> Not all after the text of hooly writ;
> For it is hard to you, as I suppose.
> And therefore will I teach you al the glose.
> (III, D, 1789-92)

Again, to support his assertion that Christ referred to the friars when he said "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3).. Friar John says:

> I ne have no text of it, as I suppose,
> But I shal fynde it in a maner glose. . .
> (III, D, 1919-20)

This is the very sort of thing that Wycliffe had castigated the friars for doing. He was greatly disturbed that the friars took only certain texts from the Bible which supported their positions and totally ignored others. When texts were not available for their support they would interpret (gloss) and twist passages to dupe the people into thinking their assertions were Scriptural. Wycliffe demanded that the whole Gospel be preached to the people, free of human machination. He continues:

> But the friars corrupt and hate this way of evangelizing, because they are afraid that they cannot base in the whole gospel the amassing of temporal goods through preaching the gospel. . . . It is certain that such preaching of the friars in hope of temporal gain is in the sight of God notorious simony.[1]

A concrete example of these assertions of Wycliffe is sorrowfully given by Chaucer's Summoner's friar. The reader soon learns that the "gloss" as interpreted by him urges the people to give generously to the friars' building program, an interpretation decidedly hard to draw from the words of Scripture itself. The friar has said "For lettre sleeth" (III, D, 1794), meaning "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

[1]"On the Pastoral Office," trans. Matthew Spinka, in Advocates of Reform (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 52.

He himself, however, sticks to the letter of Thomas' demands for the partition of the "gift." Chaucer leaves no doubt that the spirit of such twistings of Scripture as the friar perpetrates are the very spirit of death itself. When Chaucer at the end of the tale gives Friar John his just reward, his condemnation of such blatant sophistry and hypocrisy speaks for itself. Thus the friar's false assertions that:

> We han this worldes lust al in despit. . .
> We fare as seith th' apostle; clooth and foode
> Suffisen us, though they be not ful goode. . . .
> (III, D, 1876; 1881-82)

turn upon him. Chaucer in this agrees with the words of Wycliffe, who lamented that the friars "preche fablis and heresies and afterward to spoile the peple, and selle hem her false sermouns."[2] He agrees too that clerics should adhere to the words of the Apostle: "Having food and wherewith we are clothed let us be content" (I Timothy 6:8).[3] Chaucer, by placing these sentiments in the mouth of such an obvious scalawag as the Summoner's friar, only confirms his culpability.

It was such men as this who, for Chaucer and Wycliffe, were usurping the rightful office of the parish clergy. Wycliffe wished the priests to "purge wisely the sheep of disease. . . ."[4] Their advice and admonitions given through the sacrament of penance would naturally be a primary means of accomplishing this end. He was quick to note, however, that all too often the parish priest was being hampered in this endeavor by the ubiquitous friars. Wycliffe complained that the friars

[2] Select English Works (London, 1881), I 176.

[3] "On the Pastoral Office," p. 33.

[4] Ibid., p. 48.

urged the people to make their confessions to them rather than to their parish priests, and that their efforts very often met with success. This Wycliffe opposed, primarily because it severed the proper relation between parson and people, but also because the friars used their powers of absolution to obtain financial gain for themselves.[5] These charges can but bring to mind certain lines spoken by Friar John in the "Summoner's Tale:"

> I wole with Thomas speke a litel throwe,
> Thise curatz been ful necligent and slowe
> To grope tendrely a conscience
> In shrift. . . .
>
> (III, D, 1815-18)

Here Chaucer presents a friar blatantly trying to steal "business" away from the local priest. Chaucer's portrait reveals this friar's purely selfish intentions in doing this, and his treatment of Friar John leaves no doubt as to his opinion of him.

This usurpation of the pastoral office by the friars would have been of particular concern to Chaucer in view of the role he assigns to the Parson in the scheme of the Canterbury Tales. The Canterbury pilgrimage had begun early in the morning with Harry Baillie as shepherd of the little flock and the Miller's bagpipe striking up the marching song at the fore. The tales are begun in a happy if not jovial manner and the springtime world is full of hope and expectation. By the time the Parson comes to tell his tale, however, evening is drawing nigh, the autumn sign is in the sky, the pilgrims have experienced the trials of life, and thoughts turn to more serious matters of death and judgment.

[5]"De Quattuour Sectis Novelis," in Polemical Works, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg (London, 1883), I, 252-256, et passim.

It is at this point that the Parson assumes before all the true leadership of the pilgrimage. Now he will sow the pure wheat (X, I, 36) of honest piety and speak of:

> Moralitee and vertuous mateere.
> (X, I, 38)

He prays:

> And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende
> To shewe yow the way, in this viage,
> Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage
> That highte Jerusalem celestial.
> (X, I, 42-45)

Thus it is that the parish priest, the simple Parson, leads the merry pilgrims to their destination. This is his proper function, and all follow him alike, Knight, Wife, Friar, and Cook. Harry speaks for all when he says:

> Beth fructuous, and that in litel space,
> And to do well God sende yow his grace!
> Sey what yow list, and we wol gladly heere.
> (X, I, 71-73)

Thus, in a sense, the Parson becomes the key to the entire Canterbury Tales. This may well symbolize the fact that Chaucer saw the parish clergy as the true shepherds of man's pilgrimage of life, for as he says in the opening of the "Parson's Tale" (X, I, 75-80) penance is the best way to make the pilgrimage to heaven. It is thus quite understandable that Chaucer should tolerate no interference with the priests from any source, particularly from so serious a threat as the friars.

It must be noted that the characterization of the friar Huberd in the "Prologue" agrees in its criticism with that of the "Summoner's Tale." Huberd

> . . . was an easy man to yeve penaunce,
> Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
> (I, A, 223-224)

He too had an appreciation for the finer things of life, including a richly woven semicope (I, A, 262), and, if one reads interpretively, of young maids for whom he occasionally had to make marriages at his own cost. Huberd too had no use for the simple parish clergy (I, A, 219), and thus shared Chaucer's condemnation with his fellow, Friar John. Wycliffe would have delivered a similar judgment.

Care must be taken, however, not to assume too much from these correspondences between Chaucer's and Wycliffe's condemnations of the friars. If Wycliffe had been the first one to speak out against the friars in defense of the parish clergy, then a good case might be made for Chaucer's having derived these ideas from him. In truth, however, the controversy between the friars and the parish (secular) clergy had been raging off and on for more than a hundred and fifty years before the time of Chaucer and Wycliffe. Arnold Williams in his article "Chaucer and the Friars" traces the progress of this controversy in careful detail.[6] Scarcely three decades after the foundation of the first group of friars by SS. Francis and Dominic (c.1215), quarrels had arisen between the secular clerics and the friars over the latter's absolute poverty, interference in parish affairs (particularly with confession), and growing domination of the universities. One of the first writers to oppose the friars was William of St. Amour with his De Periculis Novissimorum Temporum (1256). William, besides attacking the extreme eschatological speculations of some of the friars, fixed on three charges which were to become the basis for nearly all attacks to come. These were that the friars (1)

[6] Speculum, XXVIII, 1953, 499-513. Unless otherwise noted the details of the secular-friar controversy are drawn from this source.

preached without a calling solely for their own gain, (2) cultivated friends among the rich and powerful of the world while ignoring the poor and lowly, and (3) captivated weak women all too ready to be led astray by a dashing friar. William's charges were made within the inner circles of the church and stirred little popular furor. William himself was silenced by Pope Alexander VI, and it was not long before the friars had rewon all or nearly all of their former prestige.[7]

Others were to carry on the struggle, however, both in ecclesiastical and in lay circles. The most notable clerical successor to William of St. Armour was Richard Fitzralph, Archbishop of Armagh (c. 1350). This cleric wrote two treatises dealing in part with the problem of the friars, De Pauperie Salvatoris and Defensio Curatorum. Besides repeating the general charges of William, he says in the latter work:

> In may diocesy Armacan [Armagh] y trowe y have two thousand sugettes, mansleers, comyn theeves, incendiaries that settith houses afyre, & other euel doeres, that beth acursed by sentence euereche yere, of the whiche unnethe cometh to me & to my penitaunsers, fourty a yere; and siche fongeth the sacramentis as other men doth, & me trowith, that thei beth assoyled, & by noon other than by freres with-oute drede, for noon other men assoileth hem.[8]

Fitzralph would have been an older contemporary of Chaucer. The fact that he had been Chancellor of Oxford and an extremely popular preacher makes it very likely that his works were known to Chaucer. Several specific passages in the two men's work sound very similar, though absolute proof of Chaucer's use of Fitzralph is lacking. At any rate, the quotation from Defensio Curatorum accords well with Huberd and his "easy

[7]Richard Trench, Medieval Church History (New York, 1878), p. 238.

[8]Williams, p. 503.

penance." In addition, it will be recalled that in the "Summoner's Tale" a "sturdy harlot" accompanied Friar John carrying a bag to receive the monies the friar's begging brought. This fellow was known as a bursarius and his existence was necessitated by the fact that the friars themselves, being under a rigid vow of poverty, were not supposed to handle money. It was this very thing that Fitzralph had castigated in rebuking the supposedly unmercenary friars for always having about them "a fellow who collects pennies."[9] Fitzralph also protested against the costly apparel worn by some of the friars,[10] a fact which brings to mind Chaucer's lines about Friar Huberd:

> Of double worsted was his semycope
> That rounded as a belle out of the presse.
> (I, A, 262-263)

A final parallel may be drawn between the end of the "Summoner's Tale" and Fitzralph's asssertionthat sooner or later the laymen are going to begin to wonder why the friars are so anxious to hear their confessions and realize that the friars do so only for their own gain. Chaucer presents Thomas as doing this very thing and taking appropriate action to remedy the situation. This still does not prove that Chaucer knew of these passages of Fitzralph, but the possibility is there.

Whatever Chaucer's relation to Fitzralph may have been, he was certainly acquainted with the thought of William of St. Amour. This does not necessarily say that he had read William's writings themselves. He did know the Romance de la Rose, however, and had even made a translation

[9] Williams, p. 506.

[10] Ibid., p. 508.

of it.[11] Scholars have established that Jean de Meun, second author of the Roman, adopted many of William's ideas and incorporated them into his poem.[12] Many of these passages borrowed by Jean de Meun from William's are echoed in Chaucer's presentations of Huberd and Friar John. Thus Chaucer says of Huberd:

> For he hadde power of confessioun,
> As seyde hymself, moore than a curat. . . .
> (I, A, 218-219)

Friar John's actions and words reflect the same sentiments. These lines suggest those of False-Semblant in the Roman:[13]

> I may assoil, and I may shryve,
> That no prelat may lette me,
> All folk, where evere thei founde be.
> I not no prelat may don so,
> But it the Pope be, and no mo.
> (6364-68)

The friars were supposed to minister to the poor, but both Huberd and Friar John preferred rich and powerful acquaintances. Once again False-Semblant says:

> I love bettir th'acqueyntaunce
> Ten tymes, of the kyng of Fraunce
> Than of a poore man of mylde mod,
> Though that his soul be also god.
> (6491-94)

The Roman also rebukes the friars who "loven setes at the table," and who love to be reverenced by the world (6913-19). Chaucer's friars fall guilty to this failing as well (I, A, 240-245; 261. III, D, 1839-44).

[11] F. N. Robinson, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boston, 1957), p. 564. References to the Roman are from the supposed Chaucerian version given by Robinson, pp. 565-637.

[12] Williams, p. 505.

[13] Credit for pointing out this and the two following parallels should be given to Williams, 505, 507, 508.

These parallels are the more meaningful since False-Semblant had identified himself as at times taking on the identity of a friar (6338), and William of St. Amour was mentioned quite specifically (6763, 6778).

The significance of the above facts is very great indeed. The major concern of this thesis is the relation of Chaucer's ideal of the parish clergy to that of Wycliffe. The reaction to existing conditions of both Chaucer and Wycliffe must be seen in relation to the importance each assigned to the parish clergy, and that, as has been shown, was considerable. Numerous parallels have been noted between Chaucer's and Wycliffe's condemnations of the friars' wickedness and usurpation of the proper duties of the parish clergy. Judging from Chaucer's and Wycliffe's writings alone, one might find strong support for the assertion that Chaucer drew heavily upon Wycliffe in this respect. Further research, however, has revealed many other possible sources for Chaucer's views. In the case of Fitzralph the possibility of literary dependence must remain a conjecture. There is no doubt, however, that Chaucer knew quite well the views of William of St. Amour, at least as presented by Jean de Meun. The upshot of all this is not so much to prove that Chaucer drew upon Jean de Meun rather than Wycliffe, but to illustrate that there was a long tradition or anti-fraternal, pro-parish clergy literature in which Chaucer and Wycliffe both stood. The parallels between Chaucer and Wycliffe are no more exact or striking than those between Chaucer and St. Amour or Fitzralph.[14] Chaucer may indeed have drawn from Wycliffe, but the evidence is far from enough to make this an inevitable conclusion.

[14]This conclusion is supported by Williams, p. 504, 513, who finds no verbatim or specifically Wycliffite passages in Chaucer's words against the friars.

The above conclusions in regard to Chaucer's and Wycliffe's anti-fraternal writings can but lead one to ask similar questions concerning correspondences in the other parts of their ideals of the parish clergy. That is, many points of Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideals have paralleled one another so closely that some relation between the two seems to be implied, the most tempting conclusion being that Chaucer borrowed from Wycliffe. In the case of their opposition to the friars, however, it has been seen that, for all the similarities between Chaucer's and Wycliffe's views, there were many common sources in a long tradition from which both might have drawn. Were there not still other sources from which Chaucer may have received ideas for his ideal of the parish clergy which had no Wycliffite connections? Did Chaucer not know, or could he very well have known, other sources for his ideal?

In answer to the above, let it be said that many others before Chaucer and Wycliffe had concerned themselves with the ideal of the parish clergy. Indeed, there is no part of either Chaucer's or Wycliffe's ideals that was not presaged in the works of others. This may be proven by a point by point consideration of Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideals in relation to the works of their predecessors.

Chaucer and Wycliffe both asserted that the priests were to be men of worth and morality. These exact sentiments may be found in the Decretals of Gratian, an enormous eollection of the edicts of various Popes up to the early twelfth century. Wycliffe certainly knew the work, for in one of his statements on the type of men who should compose the clergy he quoted directly from Gratian.[13] Chaucer too was familiar with this

[13] De Blasphemia, ed. Michael Dziewicki (London, 1893), p. 177.

work, which by his time was a standard of church law, and quoted from it in describing the vagaries of his Monk in the "General Prologue."[14] The Gemma Ecclesiastica of Gerald of Wales also blamed many of the evils of the day on the ignorance and lewdness of the clergy.[15] It is probable that Chaucer himself had seen a copy of this work, for being an all-purpose collection of quotable "gems," it had become one of the most popular treatises of the time and circulated widely.

While Chaucer may or may not have had personal knowledge of the Gemma Ecclesiastica, both he and Wycliffe were most certainly familiar with the life and works of Robert Grosseteste, the Bishop of Lincoln (1168-1253). Grosseteste was almost a folk hero by the fourteenth century and was regarded as a saint by popular acclamation. His Dicta, a collection of excerpts from his sermons and other writings, was tremendously popular in the time of Chaucer and Wycliffe. As regards the parish clergy, Grosseteste had involved himself with difficulties with the monastic establishment for refusing to ordain one of their proteges for a parish in the Lincoln diocese. Grosseteste remarked that the man was clad in scarlet, had numerous rings upon his fingers, and, in short, made quite a dashing appearance. Unfortunately, as the bishop found upon questioning the gentleman, he was "almost totally without knowledge," and was thus firmly rejected as a candidate for ordination.[16]

Both Wycliffe and Chaucer time and time again emphasize that the parish priest must exemplify in his own life the truth he teaches. In

[15]Maurice Powicke, The Christian Life in the Middle Ages, Oxford, 1966.

[16]Gotthard Lechler, John Wyclif and His English Precursors (London, 1878), I, 80.

this they both reflect the sentiments of Augustine: "If, in truth, you go about in an immoderate way of living and plunge yourself into violent actions, then however much your tongue may sing the praises of God, your life blasphemes him."[17] This active conception of the priestly role also echoes that of Francis of Assisi, the father of the Franciscans. It is recorded that the Dominicans were concerned mainly with verbal preaching while the Franciscans "without disdaining the merits of a persuasive utterance, paid more attention to the practical works of charity."[18] The friars of these orders would themselves have emphasized these distinctions in their ubiquitous preaching. Chaucer, as a faithful churchman, may have taken note of this; the wily friar of the "Summoner's Tale," though his reference to Elijah (III, D, 2116) identifies him as a Carmelite, is, nonetheless, the archetype of a corrupted Dominican; while his ideal priest shares the ideals of the early dedicated Franciscans.

Chaucer and Wycliffe find another prior ally for their ideal of the clerical life of service in Grosseteste. This bishop was well known for the pastoral bent of his preaching and was a firm ally of the earlier and still dedicated Franciscans.[19] Grosseteste also emphasized in his sermons to his diocesan clergy the practical nature of the clerical life and insisted that his priests realize through righteous conduct the ideals taught by the faith.[20]

Still others treated this question. Bishop Grandisson of Exeter

[17] Quoted in De Blasphemia, p. 2.

[18] Francis Stevenson, Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (London, 1899), p. 60.

[19] Ibid., p. 37.

[20] Lechler, I, 38.

gave his clergy guidelines for their dress and actions, while Gerald of Wales devoted half of his aforementioned Gemma Ecclesiastica to the subject of clerical morality, employing quotations "from many sources."[21] It is interesting to note that in dealing with the same theme in De Ecclesia Wycliffe supports his contentions by a quotation from Pope Gregory I, another clergyman concerned that the clergy be "in the world but not of the world."[22] Chaucer too was familiar with at least some of Gregory's thought, for this Pope was a favorite authority in Mediaeval pastoral theology. Chaucer quotes him nine times in the "Parson's Tale" and once in "Melibee."

Another important point in the clerical ideals of both Chaucer and Wycliffe was the requirement that the parsons be faithful shepherds of their people, guiding and correcting all members of the flock no matter what might be the rank of the person involved or the consequences to oneself. Hand in hand with this went their admonitions that priests were not to desert their charges for more attractive positions elsewhere, to run "to Londoun unto Seinte Poules" as Chaucer put it. (I, A, 509). This last statement finds support even in the warnings of Archbishop Sudbury of Canterbury, a contemporary and opponent of Wycliffe (d. 1381). He said: "It has come to our attention that rectors of our diocese scorn to keep residence in their churches and go to dwell in distant and unhonest places. . . ."[23] These the archbishop roundly condemns. Akin to this are the various admonitions of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury,

[21] Powicke, P. 124.

[22] De Ecclesia, ed. Johann Loserth, London, 1886, p. 450.

[23] George M. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe (London, 1912), p. 123.

the predecessor and sponsor of St. Thomas à Becket himself. In Theobald's writings, carefully preserved for posterity by his secretary, John of Salisbury, he warns that a shepherd is accountable for his sheep:

> He who shuts his eyes to the errors of those over whom he rules and emboldens them to sin, opens the way to multitudinous excesses. For we shall not be able to pass over such excesses and leave them unpunished, lest we should be even more grievously rebuked for neglect of our duty by Him who is no acceptor of gifts or exceptor of persons.[24]

Robert Grosseteste is again a forerunner of these positions of Chaucer and Wycliffe. His personal life illustrated their ideal of the true shepherd, and in his administration he was known for his "godly solicitude and care for souls."[25] He told his pastors that "he would rather be himself a pastor and feed the sheep of Christ in his own parish than to read letters to the other pastors from the chair."[26] Grosseteste's resistance to the powerful monks has already been noted. In addition, he resisted a Papal legate and then the Pope himself on the question of appointing unworthy men to parishes simply because they happened to be relatives of high ecclesiastical personages.[27] This he did believing that a bishop is bound by his vows to Christ not to allow any abuses in the church whatever their source.[28]

[24]The Letters of John of Salisbury, ed. W. J. Miller and H. E. Butler, London, 1958, I, 160.

[25]Lechler, I, 29.

[26]Ibid., pp. 34-35.

[27]Loc. cit.

[28]Lechler, I, 41.

Progressing logically from the above ideals, Chaucer and Wycliffe both asserted that the priests should be poor in worldly goods, giving to the needy rather than hoarding for themselves. Above all they were not to "curse for their tithes." The ideal of clerical poverty was, of course, a cornerstone of the ideals of the monks and friars. By the fourteenth century these men may have been recalcitrant in practicing this ideal themselves, but what they lacked in actual practice they made up for by greater voicing of the theory. One does not have to look far to discover a possible source for both Chaucer's and Wycliffe's ideals on the subject for any wandering friar would have said the same. In addition, Saints Bernard and Anselm of Beck had both held that all the clergy, not just the monks (or friars), should not possess earthly goods.[29] Augustine in his Quicunque had even gone so far as to enumerate methods for returning riches given to the church.[30] Wycliffe, of course, was familiar with these men, and it is interesting to note that Chaucer quotes both of them in the "Parson's Tale" (Augustine twenty-four times).

Chaucer and Wycliffe also agreed that riches and pride were major reasons for the fact that so many parish priests failed in their ideal. In this they again follow the lead of Grosseteste, who himself had sent a memorial to the Pope denouncing pride as a major cause of clerical abuse. He blamed the curia and the Pope himself for encouraging such abuse, pride, and covetousness by allowing priests to hold several bene-

[29]Cited in De Blasphemia, p. 15.

[30]Ibid., pp. 234-236.

fices at one time for financial profit.[31]

Thus Chaucer and Wycliffe not only agreed between themselves on the essentials of the ideal of the parish clergy, but were in basic agreement with many other churchmen as well.[32] Chaucer truly parallels Wycliffe in his ideal, but at the same time parallels the thoughts of numerous other writers. A realization of this point is absolutely essential if one hopes to approach the question of Chaucer's relation to Wycliffe.

[31]Lechler, I, 43.

[32]In the case of Wycliffe, precedents might also be cited even for his radical schemes for the realization of his "ideal." This, however, lies beyond the scope of the present study.

# CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSIONS

The question of Chaucer's possible dependence on Wycliffe in his ideal of the parish clergy may now be dealt with from a wider perspective than was possible when the matter was first proposed in Chapter I. The opinions of those who would assert Chaucer's dependence upon Wycliffe, such as George Fox and John Tatlock, have been considered. So too have the thoughts of those, such as Lounsbury, who deny this dependence. Most importantly, the works of Chaucer and Wycliffe themselves have been explored as thoroughly as possible. These works have, hopefully, been allowed to speak for themselves, but they have been approached not simply as isolated phenomena but as writings having a definite context and relation to writers and events that have gone before them. The facts having been considered, it remains to draw final conclusions from them. Once again, the conclusions which constitute this thesis can make no claim to have settled the issue for all time. They do not claim to be more than they are: a studied interpretation of the facts presently available.

Many similarities have been discovered in Chaucer's and Wycliffe's presentations of their ideals of the parish clergy. At the same time, it has been shown that many other churchmen had devoted their attention to this ideal of the parish clergy, many of them arriving at similar

conclusions to those drawn by Chaucer and Wycliffe. The works of these men circulated widely in fourteenth century England, and Chaucer would have been familiar with many of them either through their own works or through references made to them by others. His acquaintance with not a few of them has been demonstrated through his citations of them in his own works. Chaucer's studies likely did not give him as close or minute knowledge of these men as Wycliffe enjoyed, but his own reading of theological works is fully attested to by both the "Endlink to the Man of Law's Tale" and the complex "Parson's Tale." In addition, Chaucer himself translated Pope Innocent's De Contemptu Mundi and the De Consolatione Philosophiae of Boethius. It is common knowledge that Chaucer possessed as well what was for his time a very large private library of sixty volumes or so. It is difficult to imagine sixty Mediaeval books brought together at one time, none of which contained any theology. All this, together with Chaucer's inquisitive nature, leads one to the inevitable conclusion that Chaucer was fairly well versed in the finer details of theological opinions and disputes, the status of the parish clergy standing high on the list.

This is not to deny that Chaucer was familiar with the positions of Wycliffe (or Wycliffe himself for that matter). Considering Wycliffe's closeness to John of Gaunt and the court, and remembering the furor he caused, it would be nearly miraculous if Chaucer were totally oblivious to Wycliffe's influence. At the same time, unless we have many more direct and concrete parallels between the specific statements of Chaucer and Wycliffe, it is stretching the evidence totally out of proportion to say that Chaucer depended heavily and mainly on Wycliffe for his ideal of the parish clergy. The opinions of Tatlock and Loomis as discussed

in Chapter I, while there may be a certain amount of truth in them, do not find firm support in the evidence which exists.

The parallels between Chaucer and Wycliffe are actually little, if any, closer than are the parallels between Chaucer and many other theologians. Indeed, as good a case might be made for Grosseteste as Chaucer's inspiration as for Wycliffe if one were intent on discovering Chaucer's "one and only" mentor.

It is the view of this thesis, however, that to draw any such narrow conclusion would be a mistake. Rather, a view which takes more fully into account all the evidence at hand must be very wary of trying to pinpoint specific sources for Chaucer's ideal of the parish clergy. At the same time, the very real sympathies which exist between the clerical ideals of Chaucer and Wycliffe cannot be ignored.

The more comprehensive view sees both Chaucer and Wycliffe as members of a very loose reform tradition in the church, stretching from Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory, through such men as Theobald and Grosseteste to their own time. The use of the word "tradition" here does not mean to signify a definite body of truth carefully preserved and carefully handed on from generation to generation. What it does mean is the sharing of these men of an essential sympathy with each other regarding, at the very least, their ideals of the parish clergy. At times the men in this tradition were very conscious of their relation to other writers. At others its members may scarcely have been aware of their fellows. In all cases, though, this tradition favored the simple over the intricate, the humble over the proud, the giving over the taking, the careful over the careless. It was above all a tradition which sought to realize the will of Jesus Christ for the clergy as best as it could understand that will.

Wycliffe most certainly belongs to this tradition. Chaucer too finds a place within it, though his own part must not be confused with that of Wycliffe. The confines of this tradition were broad indeed and included saints, bishops, Popes, mendicants, and not a few laymen such as the so-called Wycliffite nobles of King Richard's court. Each had their varying roles. Wycliffe's goals were to stir the souls of his hearers to zealous reforming action. Chaucer's was to touch his hearers' inmost hearts and at the same time to involve them in a work of artistic excellence.

The longer part of this thesis has sought to emphasize the tremendous extent to which the two men's intentions went hand in hand. Chaucer was in this respect a poet of supreme high seriousness. This thesis thus holds that a reading of Chaucer in conjunction with portions of Wycliffe has resulted in a better understanding of Chaucer's work as a whole. Its conclusion, however, is that in the genealogy of the clerical reform tradition Wycliffe and Chaucer are related more as cousins than as father and son.

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