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Chaucer's religion.

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THESIS

CHAUCER'S RELIGION

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout this thesis I shall attempt to determine Chaucer's religious attitudes and beliefs as shown in his writings and as interpreted by various critics.

In the study of the religion of Chaucer it is necessary to take full account of the unusual period in which he lived. The Church of Rome had fallen into such a state of decay that only the external forms remained. The monasteries were places of worldliness and luxury and the clergymen had become greedy pleasure seekers with no concern for the welfare of the people. Blackmail and the unlicensed sale of indulgences were two of the means used by the clergy to secure money.

Into this picture stepped Wycliffe, the zealous reformer, who vigorously attacked the abuses of the church, gathered to himself a band of loyal followers called Lollards, and finally was excommunicated by the angered Church.

In the midst of this struggle between Church and State Chaucer lived and wrote. He portrays the life of the time realistically, and without partisanship. On one page you find a rascally Friar, on the next a pious Parson. Chaucer "was not a poet of the church, caring only to teach; not a poet of the chivalry that had already passed its prime; not merely a reformer, to make his verse a political weapon; but he was a broad-minded, unprejudiced gentleman of England with sympathy
for all the men and women who in their various ways found their lives worth living."*
II. RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE TIME

The religion of England in the fourteenth century was that of the Roman Catholic faith. The church held two cardinal dogmas, transubstantiation and the celibacy of the clergy: one substituted mystery and implicit faith for human sense and reason; and the other created an immense number of resolute adherents to the pope scattered through all Christendom without any ties of country, domestic affection, and nature.*

The power of the Church of Rome was in a considerable degree founded upon miracles, and its policy was to gain a hold upon the minds of men by appealing to the senses. The authors of the Romish religion were aware of the influence that the senses possess over the heart and the character. They constructed magnificent edifices with stained glass windows all calculated to inspire religious solemnity. Music and decorations were in the church to fill the heart with devotion, and the splendor of the altar and the sacrifice were powerful aids to piety.

Besides every other circumstance belonging to the religion of this period were two distinguishing articles of the Roman Catholic system: prayer for the dead, and the confession of sins. Although prayer for the dead was liable to abuse, it had a powerful appeal to the genuine sentiments of human nature.

The practice of auricular confession had the same objections and advantages.

Several other circumstances in the Roman Catholic religion as practiced in the fourteenth century cooperated to give it a powerful ascendancy over the mind. One of these circumstances was found in the fasts and abstinences of the church, and another in the sacrament of extreme unction. The first confession and the first communion were also times that were of great significance to the minds and emotions of the people.

The power of the church had been too mighty and all-powerful and by the time of Chaucer already had fallen. The captivity of the Pope at Avignon followed by the Great Schism in which two rival popes tried to rule was significant of the weakening of the church. Its hold was weakened on the minds of men, but its external structure remained undefaced. The church was the breeding ground for the things that were causing the social decay and disorganization of feudal society.

During the Dark Ages the clergy were the only ones engrossed in learning. The monasteries were the chief places in which the study and writing of books was continued. Consequently the clergy were the only ones qualified to fill even civil offices of state. They were our historians, our fine writers,

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** A Chaucer Handbook - Robert D. French - p. 37
our poets, and they alone possessed the degree of general knowledge and of practice in business, which was necessary in public affairs. In the fourteenth century other candidates were eligible, but habit prevailed and churchmen continued in public office. It became a part of the religion of our ancestors to see high office combined with clerical character, and they thought it was a sacrilege for anyone else to hold office. The clergy encouraged these prejudices and declared that otherwise they would be deprived of their rights.*

Another of the privileges of the clergy was in the courts of law. They claimed exemption from judgment under the secular courts proclaiming that their only authority was the church. This divided authority between Church and State gave rise to ecclesiastical courts in which all cases dealing with clergy were tried. Aside from judging cases of morality such as marriage, divorce, and probation of wills they decided suits for church dues and prosecution of sins punishable by the church. In these cases the church courts became very corrupt. The clergy was given unlimited privilege and in many cases churchmen who had committed grave civil offenses such as murder were saved from imprisonment by the corruption of these courts.**

Ecclesiastical sanctuary was one of the inviolable privileges claimed by the church at this period. The monasteries, nunneries, and churches were respected as places outside

* In the Days of Chaucer - Tudor Jenks - p. 103-120
** In the Days of Chaucer - Tudor Jenks - p. 103-104
the jurisdiction of civil law, and to them people in distress fled. Once inside the monastery or convent, the person was comparatively secure from the law. This protection, as with other ecclesiastical privileges, was abused. Soon monasteries became the shelter for lawbreakers and criminals who wished to escape prosecution. The secular courts objected strenuously to this practice and on many cases violated the right of sanctuary. The natural result was the calling of many suits which widened the breach between the civil and ecclesiastical courts and sharpened the struggle between Church and State.*

The greatest concern of the English government was relative to the usurpations and encroachments of the court of Rome upon the royal sovereignty and internal polity of England. In the eleventh century Gregory the Great won a dispute with the emperors of the house of Franconia about investitures and from that time the sovereign pontiff frequently nominated whomever he pleased to the vacant bishoprics and benefices in every country of Europe. The ascendancy of the church, however, was never so complete as to stop interference from the secular sovereigns.

The venerable bishop Grossteste, friend of Roger Bacon, distinguished himself by his opposition to the sinister policy of Rome. The pope sent him a mandate requiring him to bestow upon one of his holiness's nephews, then a child, a

* In the Days of Chaucer - Tudor Jenks - p. 103-104
vacant canonry in his see of Lincoln. Grossteste refused and rebuked the pope saying that nothing was more contrary to the doctrine of the gospel, or more odious in the sight of Jesus Christ.

Edward I also had disputes with the pontiff concerning the obligation of the clergy to contribute to the expenses of state. The clergy claimed exemption from all state taxes. In 1297 Edward put the clergy who refused to contribute to the support of the civil government outside the protection of the law. He also gave directions to the officers in his different courts, to hear only those cases respecting the clergy in which they were defendants; to do every man justice against them and to do them justice against nobody. The result of this order was that the clergy could not appear abroad without being attacked by ruffians. The archbishop of Canterbury himself, leader of the opposition, was forced to fly from his palace and hide. Edward I thus enforced his own cause, that of weakening the empire of the hierarchy, in the most effectual manner, by employing the people to insult the order they had regarded as sacred, or accustoming them to see it insulted. One of the last measures of the reign of Edward I was the statute of provisors in 1307. This statute prohibited the bringing into the kingdom any of the pope's writs of provisions or reservations for the disposal of benefices, and the exportation of money under the denomination of first-fruits.

It was in this state that the question of civil and
ecclesiastical authorities was handed down to Edward III. Edward II was an imbecile and during his reign no measures were taken against the usurpations of the church. Thus that which the hierarchy had lost under a vigorous secular administration they recovered under the feeble one which followed.

It was not until 1343 under the reign of Edward III that any parliamentary measures were taken against the encroachments of the court of Rome. Stratford, archbishop of Canterbury, is supposed to be instigator of these proceedings and endeavored to shut out the enormous influx of foreigners into the benefices of the English church and maintain the purity of its ancient constitution as to the election or nomination of its ministers. He also sought to prevent the church revenues from being conveyed into foreign countries. As a consequence the act of the last year of Edward I was reenacted with an amendment subjecting those who transgressed it to the pains of outlawry.

In 1365 the pope again became oppressive and demanded of Edward III tribute that King John had not paid. The pope also summoned the king to court to answer for the default in case he refused to comply to the demand. Edward decided to end the vassalage and took the matter to parliament. Parliament decided the tribute was not to be paid and that the king should oppose any effort to collect it by force. At this time Edward III stopped Peter's Pence, which was the payment of the annual
tax of one penny upon each house for the support of an English college at Rome.

The collection of funds that Edward III tried to stop was perhaps the most flagrant abuse of the clergy. For many years the pope had imposed taxes that took the form of extortion. He used many contrivances to drain the treasuries of Christendom and fill the Roman coffers. He introduced a tax called first-fruits, alleging that he had a right to one year's income upon all vacant bishoprics and ecclesiastical preferments. The sale of indulgences, pardons, and dispensations also brought a boundless revenue to Rome and the people objected to money leaving the country.

In 1376 the Commons presented a long bill to Edward III asking a change in the taxes demanded by the pope. They claimed that the taxes were the cause of all the famine and poverty in the land. They added that the tax paid to the pope for ecclesiastical dignities amounted to five times as much as the tax appertaining to the king for the whole realm. Also brokers of Rome, for money, promoted many ignorant and unworthy men to livings of one thousand marks yearly, while the learned and worthy hardly obtained twenty marks. Aliens, enemies to the land, who never saw the parishioners, enjoyed these livings. Edward III replied that he had already provided by statute a remedy and the abuses continued although parliament proceeded to prosecute individuals in public affairs hoping to stir up hatred against the administration.*

In Chaucer's day the two curses of the English Church were the pluralist and the absentee. The absentee secured an income from a parish which he rented to another clergyman. Some parishes rarely saw a resident rector in spite of threats of excommunication against those who let their churches to farm. The degree of absenteeism varied with the zeal of the bishops. In Gloucestershire in 1300 there were practically none, but unfortunately most bishops granted exemptions on easy terms to oblige a wealthy lord.*

Absenteeism was caused largely by Pluralism. Some instances of plurality were outstanding. In 1344 at the request of Queen Philippa, Philip Beauchamp, nearly six, had a dispensation from Clement VI for a canonry at Southwell, and by the time he was fourteen Philippa had procured for him fourteen preferments. So serious was the offense in England that in 1364 Urban V wrote to the archbishops of Canterbury and York ordering a census of all benefices in order to stop pluralities and other scandals. Nothing decisive was done in spite of a similar order from the pope in 1366 and the abuses continued to oppress the country.

The wealth and luxury of the monasteries was another source of irritation. The orders of regular priests in the Roman Catholic Church were divided into monks and friars who took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The distinction

between the orders was that monks were forbidden to possess private property, but had all things in common. Friars abjured possession of all property, whether private or in common. The friars were universally mendicant while the monks soon came to possess (from donations and bequests) immense revenues. As the monasteries grew rich, they became luxurious.* Even to ignorant people the contrast between their solemn professions of poverty and humility on the one hand, and the splendor of their living on the other, scarcely could fail to be strikingly apparent. Monasteries soon became objects of popular aversion.**

As the monasteries declined the orders of mendicant friars sprang up. For a time they were held in the esteem that the monks formerly had been. The friars lived on the alms of their countrymen, resolved to be in all respects the reverse of the monks and to toil disinterestedly for the salvation of fellow creatures. Nevertheless, the friars became as corrupt as the monks and obtained wealth through the abuse of confession. By confession, one of the principle doctrines of the Church, a person secured forgiveness of sin. These friars, who desired money, gave easy absolution of sins and did not insist on penances providing the person could pay well.***

The ecclesiastical courts which gave unlimited privileges to the clergy caused much suffering for the common people.

* Life of Geoffrey Chaucer - William Godwin - Vol. 1, p. 188-190
** In the Days of Chaucer - Tudor Jenks - 111 - 120
*** Life of Geoffrey Chaucer - William Godwin-Vol. 1, p. 190-196
They were liable to seizure at any time for failure to pay tithes or dues. The summoners who served the writs were very dishonest and mercenary, often extracting money from the poor by blackmail or threat of excommunication. Persons who neglected to go to confession were taken to court and punished for the omission. Although the practice was against the Councils of the Church, bribes were taken in place of penance. In fact, some persons paid annual fines to prevent having their lives investigated.

Pardoners made a very luxurious living through the sale of indulgences. The pardoners were authorized by the pope and were entrusted with the care of remitting, for money, not the sins themselves, but part or the whole of the penance imposed for sins. The man must be repentant, and have duly confessed his faults; the money he paid to the pardoner was only a kind of commutation of his penance. The money was to be sent to the papal or episcopal treasury and applied to worthy causes. Authorized pardoners were provided with patents on which the visa of the bishop of the place was to be added. Such was the rule, but exceptions became frequent and the rule forgotten. These pardoners belonged to the regular clergy and were always men of excessive impudence. They dispensed with the ecclesiastical license and wandered like peddlers trafficking in pardons. There was much competition and the success of the authorized pardoners attracted a crowd of others who were really vagabonds. The self-appointed pardoners had few scruples and profited by
those of others. They released clients from all sorts of vows so that their affairs prospered in proportion to the number of interdicts, prohibitions, and penances which were imposed. They passed the time in undoing what had been done by the clergy.*

Pope Boniface IX tells all these things and more. He ordered all the bishops to institute an inquiry into all that concerned these pardoners and empowered the bishops to imprison them without any form of trial.

Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1378, ordered the patents of the pardoners to be searched and only bearers of regular licenses to be allowed to go on with their business. It was in this corrupt condition that Wycliffe found the church and immediately set out to reform the institution.

Wycliffe came into prominence by writing a treatise against the tribute demanded by Urban V for the support of an English college at Rome. He was a man of humble birth but possessed of unusual abilities, and his mind was scarcely less original than that of Bacon or Shakespeare. He was without a peer in philosophy and his reasoning led him to new and original opinions. Wycliffe started to rise early. When he was thirty-seven years old in 1361 he was elected master of Balliol College. Four years later he was invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Islip, to accept the function of warden of a new college, Canterbury Hall.

The rule of general proscription against the clergy

* Chaucer's Pardoner and the Pope's Pardoners-J.A. Jusserand, p.423
passed by parliament in 1371 is one of the evidences of the pro-
gress of the opinions of Wycliffe. When he began his preaching, 
the spread of his tenets was astonishing; and it is before 1382 
that that Knighton, the monkish historian, writes that every 
second man throughout England was a Lollard.

The question of papal provisions and reservations was 
not settled in 1373. The clergy of different states of 
Christendom acknowledges two independent heads on earth. On 
occasions they declared it a necessity to obey the pope, and to 
disregard the injunctions of the king and legislature of their 
country. Some negotiation or compromise was clearly necessary 
and the English government sent an embassy to the pope at 
Avignon to adjust the affairs. The result was the Congress at 
Bruges, to which Wycliffe was one of the commissioners. At this 
time the zeal of his public efforts to point out the abuses of 
the friars was unrestrained. Probably one reason was that 
Langham, a member of the regular clergy, had deprived Wycliffe 
of the wardenship of Canterbury Hall and expelled the regulars 
from it. However, Wycliffe was still well thought of at Oxford 
where he was elected professor of divinity.**

As one of the commissioners at Bruges, Wycliffe 
learned much of the policy and dogmas of the Church of Rome from 
his intercourse with the envoys of Gregory XI. The result of 
the Congress of Bruges was six bulls of Gregory XI which were

supposed to adjust the questions of church and clergy in England. The conclusion was a compromise in which the pope agreed to employ no more reservations, and the king to forbear an appointment to benefices indiscriminately of his own mere authority.*

At this time Wycliffe's attacks on the church were becoming prominent. Wycliffe's system was to teach in a bold, vigorous, yet simple way. He opposed first the supremacy of the pope as he said that he saw no authority or reason in the Scriptures to give him sovereign power over the whole church. Wycliffe exposed a multitude of usurpations growing out of this principle. In penances, pardon, indulgences, and masses for the dead, he saw a traffic making the court of Rome the most venal and unprincipled then existing on the face of the earth. It was a means of slavery which reduced the minds of its proponents to a state most pitiable and abject. Wycliffe called this fabric of superstition the Antichrist and declared that the object of his desires was to give Christians liberty by inquiry and instruction. He claimed the right of every man to examine the authority of the Bible for himself.**

Wycliffe next attacked the pride and luxury of the hierarchy. The bishops had risen into a condition of temporal princes. They took up arms and formed themselves into a compacted incorporation to resist the authority of the state and

** Don Chaucer - Henry Dwight Sedgwick - pp. 150-156
defy the kings. They placed the spiritual power superior to the resentment and control of the civil. At the same time they were indifferent to the decorum of their station. Wycliffe was the unrelenting enemy to the ostentation of the prelates of the church. It was his object to establish a preaching clergy, not subservient to a foreign power and not debauched by opulence. This clergy was to instruct and inform those they led.

Wycliffe also attacked the ecclesiastical courts and preached that the priesthood should not be exempt from secular jurisdiction. He urged the necessity of putting the clergy on a footing with the rest of the community.

Another dogma that Wycliffe opposed was the celibacy of the clergy. He felt that it was a doctrine founded on erroneous views of human nature, and tended to draw them together into a party having no feelings in common with their fellow citizens.

Wycliffe was an advocate of the doctrines of predestination and grace. His creed presented the creator of the world as an arbitrary being who capriciously decided the fates of mankind. Wycliffe was a reformer but not a philosopher. His remarkable zeal and fervor coupled with the grandeur of his views attracted many people. He aimed at producing a revolution in the morals of his country and Europe. For this purpose he invited men to shake off superstition and judge for

themselves. He told them that they would be condemned not by excommunication and absolutions, but by their own character and actions. He succeeded in breaking the chains of superstition which had so long bound Europe.

Wycliffe was too nearly a Puritan. He did not take sufficient consideration of some of the fundamental properties of the human mind. He did not enough regard man as the creature of his own senses. He was too severely inclined to strip religion of its ornaments.

Wycliffe's plan of attack upon the established church was, however, that which was probably best calculated for effect in the times in which he lived. The ideas of men at this time were gross, and nothing but the severe simplicity which he used would have produced the shock necessary to a revolution. The awful and apostolic plainness which he exhibited was indispensable to his success.*

Through the efforts of Wycliffe and other religious writers, the men and women of the period were taught to think for themselves. The satirical spirit was not limited to the poets but entered the minds of the common people. An indication of the change was that old truths were questioned and authority of every sort lost its grip upon the English people. The Age of Faith passed into the age of skepticism.**

* Life of Chaucer - William Godwin - Vol. II p. 214
** A Chaucer Handbook - Robert K. French - p. 3
III. CHAUCER VERSUS WYCLIFFE

Chaucer's relation to religious beliefs and tendencies of the time is difficult to ascertain. He had to be obscure, as at that time there was danger in expressing sentiments that were looked on with disfavor by the established church.

Some scholars consider Chaucer a Wycliffite and cite the Parson of the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales as evidence. The parish priest is the only member of the clergy who is depicted in a highly favorable light. As Chaucer's representatives of Rome are treated in a satirical manner, these scholars say that the Parson represents Wycliffe, who stood in like contrast to the clergy of the day. Such a biographer was Professor Brewer, who says, "Chaucer was a Wycliffite and therefore not favorable to the Friars." Simon in his essay gives four reasons for considering the Parson a portrait of Wycliffe.* First, the Parson took his doctrine from the gospel and Wycliffe did likewise. Second, the Parson was a holy man and Wycliffe was distinguished also by an irreproachable life. Third, the Parson was a learned man and Wycliffe loved and cherished learning. Fourth, the outward description coincided. The Parson walked barefoot, with a staff in hand, a custom which Wycliffe and the Lollards followed.

Ward, however, refutes this belief. He feels that

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* Chaucer a Wycliffite - Simon - pp. 229-292

** Chaucer - Adolphus William Ward - p. 134-142
Chaucer's clearness of vision enabled him to appreciate the life of purity, self-sacrifice, and devotion in others, although he might not have had the inclination to follow it himself. It is this that led him to draw the portrait of the Parson which is not the picture of Wycliffe. Men of holy life were not so rare that the picture of a typical representative of the class must be assumed to be that of one particular man. The evidence is against this belief. At the time of the Prologue Wycliffe had been dead for several years and the details are not in harmony. The Parson belonged to the lowliest station in life with a brother who was a Plowman. He was poor by birth and remained poor by choice. He walked from one end of his parish to the other in all sorts of weather.* Wycliffe could have done so but there is no evidence that he did. The tone also is different from what it would have been with Wycliffe. Chaucer exhibits a consciousness of intellectual superiority that he would have not felt toward Wycliffe. The man that Chaucer had in mind doubtless was a member of the class of humbler curates who were content to live in obscurity and find their chief happiness in doing good. This picture hardly coincides with Wycliffe's struggle for recognition.

Another weighty reason for believing that Chaucer was not a Wycliffite in any sectarian sense, was that he made no reference to Wycliffe and but one to Wycliffe's partisans, the

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* Don Chaucer - Henry D. Sedgwick - p. 151
Lollards.* In the Canterbury Tales, Harry Bailly, the host and master of ceremonies on the pilgrimage, when he asks the Parson for a tale, begins:

"Sir Parisshe Prest," quode he, "for Goddes bones, Telle us a tale,"

the Parson, displeased by this profanity, cries out,

"Benedicite! What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?"

The Host, who was not a man to be readily snubbed, exclaims,

"O Jankin, be ye there? I smelle a loller in the wynd."

And he shouts a warning to the company, "Now! goode man, herkeneth me:

"We schal han a predicacioun; This Lollere heer wil prechen us somwhat."

The Shipman who was a "good felowe" and liked a "draught of wyn", takes alarm, and bursts out with

"Nay, by my fader soule; that schol be not! heer schal he not preche; He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche."

The fact that the Shipman expresses pious horror of heresy does not prove a thing as it is probably a chance reference in keeping with the time. However, that the Shipman feels impelled to break into a threatened sermon with the story of the

*Chaucer - Adolphus W. Ward - p. 130
merchant's wife and the monk is a subtle piece of satire, whether intentional or not.*

The notion that Chaucer was a Wycliffite took its rise with the Reformers in the sixteenth century. They used everything that might be helpful in their contest with the Church of Rome. To them Wycliffe as their forerunner was an object of ardent affection. It was a natural desire to join with him that Chaucer to gain the prestige of having the greatest English writer of the period enlisted on their side. The Plowman's Tale supported this theory in that it contained bitter denunciations of the practices prevalent in the Church of Rome. The result was that Chaucer was classed as a reformer and enrolled among the ecclesiastical writers primarily because of the spurious Plowman's Tale. Henry Wharton, who wrote a sketch of Chaucer, said that he was scarcely excelled by any theologian of his time in his zeal for a purer religion. No one now is inclined to class Chaucer among the saints and the Plowman's Tale is no longer included in the editions.

The belief tried to survive in other ways and the sponsors took passages from his undisputed works. Many of these passages if taken alone would give the impression that their author was contemptuous of the men who ruled the church. The difficulty is that these attacks made upon all those engaged in the enforcement of ecclesiastical authority were not of the individual but of the time. They were part of the regular stock.

* Chaucer and His Times - Grace Harford - p. 196-210
in trade of all writers.

Chaucer agreed with the Shipman who explained, "We all believe in God", but feared the loller would make trouble. Harry Bailly and the Shipman in the several ways are typical Englishmen of the period before Puritanism. They respected religion, but wished it to keep its place in the pulpit and the confessional and not come out to spoil the gaieties of life. Chaucer also, being a typical Englishman, had some similar attitude toward religious matters. If he came into relations with the Wycliffites at all, it was through his patron, the Duke of Lancaster. John of Gaunt had Wycliffe also under his protection and used him as a weapon against the bishops who aspired to political predominance.* John of Gaunt never at any time had the least sympathy with the doctrinal reform of Wycliffe. However, this protection might have been the reason Chaucer's satire was directed chiefly against the clergy; thus he endorsed certain of the accusations of the Lollards, without however going over to their doctrine.**

There is nothing in Chaucer's genuine writings to furnish any ground for considering him a follower of Wycliffe. The belief was born of the wish and kept alive by it. No two men were more unlike in mental characteristics or in ways of looking at life. Chaucer was above all a writer and accordingly he looked on all social and political phenomena with the passion-

* Don Chaucer - Henry D. Sedgwick - p. 152
** Don Chaucer - Henry Dwight Sedgwick - pp. 150-156
less point of view of a man of letters. Nothing escaped his view but likewise nothing excited him and the satirical element in his writings was kept under control. His objections to the clergy were only the most common ones held by all thinking men of his age. The laziness and luxury of the monks, the greed and licentiousness of the friars, the frauds of the pardoners, and the scoundrelism of the summoners were too common topics to accuse the person indulging in them of being a reformer. There is nothing of intolerance in Chaucer. He pictures but does not denounce the iniquity of his villains. For his religious rascals he seems in fact to have had a sort of liking. At any rate he invariably has something to say in their favor. His monk, although a pleasure loving sinner devoted to hunting, is a "manly man" and a "fair prelate." His friar, a fawner upon the rich and a despiser of the poor, is a merry and delightful companion.* His summoner, a drunken scoundrel, is a "gentle harlot and a kind." This is not the attitude exhibited by men who wish to reform the universe or even feel a passionate dislike for the way its affairs are carried on. Chaucer was a man of letters and as such his business was to portray men as they were and not as they ought to be. His aim was to be a mirror, not to reform. He speaks of all questions of the time with good humored contempt. Ward says, "He didn't try to be a leader of forlorn hopes or a champion of doubtful causes."**

These characteristics at once throw Chaucer out of alliance with the men who aimed at reforming the world. Although doubtless he as well as others saw the evils he was not the man to set about correcting them or to denounce bitterly those who had brought the world into that condition. It is good that Chaucer was not fiery and severely satirical as literature founded on indignation is often repellent in its bitterness. It is probably that Chaucer's lack of opposition made him more effective in bringing about the results the Reformers wanted than any of their own impassioned invectives. His writings free from bitterness gave a clear picture of the worldliness of the churchmen and this exposure of the corruption reached large numbers. His weapons were formidable because the people who should have felt resentment were amused. In fact The Canterbury Tales were often cherished by the men they destroyed.*

IV CHAUCER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CHURCHMEN

The contest of this period between the Church and State was essentially a contest between the spiritual and military order. As Chaucer was a soldier and protected by John of Gaunt, his sympathies were naturally with the military order. Many of the tenets of Wycliffe found favor with the class with which he had become affiliated. It is only in this way that he can be characterized as a follower of Wycliffe. Actuated by this view Chaucer would naturally present the most unfavorable side of the clerical body and a correspondingly favorable one of the military.* However, good or bad, his clerics are people whom he has seen with his own eyes. The picture is not a flattering one, but we know on reliable authority that it is a true one.**

In the divisions prevailing in the church, Chaucer sympathized with the secular clergy as opposed to the regular. In the case of the two principal bodies constituting the latter, his hostility was greater toward the friars than toward the monks.*

The monastic orders had forgotten their primitive rule of poverty and labor. Chaucer's Benedictine Monk is a fat, highly-fed cleric, whose sole idea is hunting. He

* Studies in Chaucer - Thomas Lounsbury - Vol I, p. 477-484
** Chaucer - Adolphus W. Ward - p. 134-135
looked after the estates of the monastery but did not burden himself with much study. He was in sympathy neither with old things nor with work. The monk is a true representative of the monasteries after they were corrupted by lax discipline and luxury. He is stout, energetic, and quite fit to be an Abbott. He is a mighty hunter - in spite of his obligations to his order - and will have bells to his horse. He likes the new order better than the old, which was "somdel streit." He was not interested in the rule of St. Augustine but preferred hunting the hare to discipline. His sleeves were purfiled (a mark of luxury) with gray fur, and his hood was fastened with a golden pin, in the larger end of which was a "love-knotte." He was fat and even greasy; he liked a good swan to eat; and rode a brown horse in fine condition.

This monk treats with contempt the dictum that a monk out of his cloister is a fish out of water:

"The reule of seint Maure or of seint Beneit
By cause that it was old and somdel streit
This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace,
And heeld after the newe world the space.
He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
That seith that hunters ben not hooly men,
Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
Is likned til a fissh that is waterless,"
This is to seyn, a monk out of his chapitre."

Prologue, Lines 173-181

A more luxurious fellow could scarcely have been drawn, or a figure more strictly representative of the popular idea of a monk. Chaucer treated him with amusement and even liking. The esteem in which the Monk was held by his fellow pilgrims revealed itself at the time he undertook to relate his long list of tragedies. "The Monk belonged to the 'gentles', and the Host was not so ready to interrupt him as in the case of Chaucer, who was a somewhat ambiguous personality, even to the omniscient Bailly."

It became necessary for the knight, the natural leader of the group, to assert himself and interrupt the tale.

Another Monk, daun John, was pictured in The Shipman's Tale. He was a shrewd rascal who deprived the merchant not only of money but borrowed his wife and completely fooled the merchant. The Merchant's wife had borrowed a hundred francs to pay some debts of which her husband knew nothing, and John secured the money from the merchant and made the wife earn it by spending a night with him. Daun John was, in rank and station, just such a man as the Monk of the pilgrimage. Both were persons of position in their order, often entrusted with important business by their abbott. The host receives this tale with

* Chaucer - G. L. Kittredge - p. 164
acclaim and excites a laugh at the Monk's expense by telling the company to be on their guard and not invite any monks to visit their houses.*

For the friars Chaucer seems to have less sympathy. Thomas Speght furnishes us a tradition that, "manye yeres since, master Buckley did see a recorde in the same howse, where Geffrye Chaucer was fined two shillinges for beatinge a Franciscane Fryer in fletestreate."** Although this assertion has been discredited by many on the ground that it rested on the sole testimony of an unknown person, investigation has shown that this Master Buckley was undoubtedly the keeper of the records of the Inner Temple in Speght's time, consequently Speght was the one person likely to have seen such a record if it existed. Thus the tradition is entirely plausible and has been used as a reason why the poet's "hands ever after itched to be revenged, and have his pennyworth's out of the friars."***

The Franciscan Friar of the Prologue is but a clever and prosperous beggar, who uses his gift of fine language to insure himself a merry life. Huberd was a member of the traveling clergy and had a license to beg within limits. He was a festive, good natured fellow, so fond of women that he lisped to make his voice sound sweeter.

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* Chaucer - G. L. Kittredge - p. 23
** Chaucer's Canterbury Tales - John M. Manly - p. 12
*** The Chaucer Tradition - Aage Brusendorff - p. 27
Chaucer amusedly gives us to understand that although Huberd's fondness for young women had led him to break his vows, he was still one of the pillars of his order.

"He hadde maad ful many a mariage
Of yonge woomen at his owene cost.
Unto his ordre he was a noble post."

Prologue, Lines 212-214

The Friar was so fond of money that he cared little how it was obtained. People liked to confess to him because he was easy in his absolution if it were well paid for. He believed that if a person gave money to the "povre freres" he was truly repentant. Huberd could sing, and tell love stories to amuse the women and girls. He was as strong as a wrestler, and yet his neck was as white as a lady's. He was at home with tavern-keepers and tavern-frequenters; but he kept away from beggars and vagrants.

"For unto swich a worthy man as he
Accorded not, as by his facultee,
To have with sike lazarsaqueeuntaunce."

Prologue, Lines 243-245

To the rich and respectable people he was, however, accommodating and polite, and not above begging of a poor widow. Huberd was well dressed in a "double worstede semy cape." Here Chaucer satirizes all friars as Huberd
was an honor to his order and the "best begger in al his hous." Whenever there was a chance of any profit arising, no man was more courteous, serviceable, or virtuous:

"And over al, ther any profyt schulde arise, Curteys he was, and lowe of servyse."

Prologue, Lines 249-250

With the pilgrims the Friar held a position of much less prominence than that of the monk. He had a natural understanding with the Wife of Bath. "It was with women like her, wealthy and respectable citizenessos, that the Friar, as the Prologue tells us, liked to cultivate an acquaintance. He much prefers their society to that of lazars and poor wretches in the suburbs. Their interchange of courtesies, then, is amicable enough, and the intrusion of the Sumner, in apparent defence of the Wife, is quite uncalled-for. His object, of course, is to snub the Friar, between whom and himself there is intense professional jealousy. The Wife, for her part, has no liking for sumners, who were quite as pervasive and unpopular in the middle ages as catchpolls were in the eighteenth century, and she ignores his unwelcome advocacy."*

Chaucer painted another picture of the begging friars in the Summoner's Tale which gave a description of their methods of obtaining money. The tale is a very

* Chaucer - G. L. Kittredge - pp. 190-191
satirical one as the friar is a vile wretch interested only in becoming wealthy.

The Summoner was a repulsive fellow, who sold the powers conferred on him by the ecclesiastical courts, sacrificing poor wretches and unwary lovers. He was not even so agreeable a person as the Friar. The children ran away when his red, pimpled face came into view. He thought morality was for other people; and made the worst possible use of his power over the young people in his diocese. The Summoner loved wine and when drunk spoke nothing but Latin of which he knew a few terms:

"Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood.
And whan that he wel dronken hadde the wyn,
Thanne wolde he speke no work but Latyn.
A fewe termes hadde he, two or thre,
That he had lerned out of som decree - "

Prologue, Lines 636-640

He thought a man's soul was in his purse, and was always ready to commute the sentence of an archdeacon for a fine, which he put into his pocket. Because he was the ugliest man in the company he wore a garland of flowers and was very playful. Even for the Summoner Chaucer felt a sarcastic amusement:

"He was a gentil harlot and a kynde;
A bettre felowe sholde men noght fynde."

Prologue, Lines 647-648
He was a thorough wretch but withal a "good felowe."

The Summoner and the Friar wasted little affection on each other and we are regaled by two holy men telling tales on each other. The Friar told the story of a Summoner who was a very filthy rascal, living by blackmail. One day the Summoner rode forth to get money out of a widow and as he went met a gay forester who was a fiend from hell. They visited the widow together and the Summoner tried to collect money on threat of excommunication and when she refused he accused her of unfaithfulness. The impudent malignity of this accusation stirred the wrath of the old woman who immediately assigned him to a place in hell. The forester became aroused and the Summoner relates:

"'Now, brother,' quod the devil, 'be not wrooth; Thy body and this paune been myne by right. Thou shalt with me to helle yet to-nyght, Where thou shalt knowen of oure privete Moore than a maister of dyvynyte.' And with that word this foule fiend hym hente; Body and soule he with the devil wente Where as that somonours han hir heritage. And God, that maked after his ymage Mankynde, save and gyde us, all and some, And leve thise somonours goode men bicometh!"

The Friar's Tale, Lines 1634-1644
The charitable wish with which the Friar concluded after announcing that these Summoners have their heritage in hell is an exquisite touch and typical of Chaucer.

The Pardoner, a friend of the Summoner, and "the one lost soul among the Canterbury pilgrims"*, represented that cynical class of exploiters who speculated and lived richly on popular superstition. He sold papal indulgences and carried relics in his packet also for sale. He was musical, wore no hood, and had wax-yellow hair that hung down his back. He had prominent eyes like a hare, a "small" voice, and no beard. In his bag were pardons from Rome and curious relics - a pillow case which he said was a piece of the Virgin's veil, and a piece of the sail of the boat Peter was in when the Lord saved him. By selling pardons he made more in a day than a poor parson earned in two months. In fact,

"He made the person and the peple his apes."

Prologue, Line 706

Yet the Pardoner had his good points. In church he was a "noble ecclesiaste." He read well and sang the offertory well in order to get money from the people. This Pardoner was an intellectual scoundrel. He was the most abandoned character among the Canterbury Pilgrims, and the cynicism

* Chaucer - G. L. Kittredge - p. 180
with which he boasted of his infamy has often been cited as an example of Chaucer's heedless or defiant violation of dramatic propriety. "Some have tried to justify the poet on the plea of 'in vino veritas.' But the Pardoner was quite sober. No draught of 'moist and corny ale' will account for his self-revelation." The Pardoner in revealing the horrid hypocrisy of his professional life is trying to please the host and pilgrims. The host wanted a ribald story but the gentlefolk objected and the Pardoner changed to a sermon. The sudden change from the proposed ribald story to one of high morality was, then, the dramatic occasion of the Pardoner's long preamble, which contained so much cynicism. The Pardoner was a famous pulpit orator, and was about to repeat one of his best sermons. "He knows that he shall preach with fervor, because he has the histrionic temperament, and also because the tale is so moving that no one could tell it flippantly. Besides, he is proud of his eloquence, and has no mind to spoil his discourse by slipshod delivery. Under these circumstances, the cynical frankness of the Pardoner is dramatically inevitable."* He knew that the pilgrims would realize he was a hypocrite and was simply telling them beforehand that he also knew it. He was willing to pass for a knave but not for a fool. He told

* Chaucer - G. L. Kittredge - pp. 211-218
them that when he preached in church he did so in a loud, commanding voice for he learned by rote that which he had to say. He had papal permission to beg but was in argument with the secular clergy over money. As the Pardoner was afraid of trouble with the secular clergy he prepared part of his speech in Latin to make the people think him learned. His theme was always the same, namely, the "love of money is the root of all evil." First, he said he told them where he came from, exhibited his bulls, and warned the folk against being so bold as to disturb him in his holy work. Then he spoke a few words of Latin to stir men to devotion. Next he produced his relics that were unauthentic, but guaranteed to effect marvelous cures. One of them was to kill jealousy - a sly dig at the rivalry between the regular and secular clergy. The Pardoner then proclaimed that he was not going to follow the example of the Apostles and labor with his hands when he could go on begging for a living. The Pardoner was a good psychologist and successful in his work.

Chaucer used not the slightest exaggeration concerning the Pardoner. He knew well the Pardoners of his time and described them with minute accuracy. Chaucer's Pardoner earned a hundred marks a year, had no license and no account to render, consequently kept all gains for himself.*

* Chaucer's Pardoner and the Pope's Pardoners - J. A. Jusserand - pp. 423-436
The Prioress Chaucer treats with sympathy mingled with a touch of sly humor. She was well brought up and tried to be exactly right in every way. "She was a gentlewoman of the upper bourgeoisie, who was a little conscious of that deficiency usually expressed by the words 'not quite.'" She seemed more interested in manners and education than in religion. Her chief characteristic was sensitiveness which amounted to sentimentality. Eglantyne loved animals and had dogs even though it was against the instructions of ANCREN RIWLE. Her tenderness was unusual:

"She was so charitable and so pitous
She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde."

Prologue, Lines 143-145

The Prioress was attractive with a well-formed nose, blue eyes, a very broad forehead, and a small red mouth. Around her neck she had a pair of beads on which hung a brooch of gold inscribed Amor vincit omnia. This inscription may mean love of God or man - probably a little of both as Chaucer enjoyed gentle satire.

The impression that the Prioress made upon the company is suggested by the courtesy with which the Host invites her to tell a story after the Shipman has finished.

* Dan Chaucer - Henry D. Sedgwick - p. 242
The softness of his speech and manner contrasts strongly with the robust banter that immediately precedes.

It is no accident that Chaucer makes the Prioress tell the pathetic legend of the pious little boy who was murdered for his childlike devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Her tender heart could not fail to be wrung with compassion for the unfortunate lad. The Prioress revealed a poignant trait of thwarted motherhood which is very affecting.

Eglantyne was one of the gentlefold and did not appreciate the rough humor of some of the other pilgrims. In her tale the Prioress answered the Shipman's story of the bad monk by mentioning an abbot who was true to his office and to God.

"This abbot, which that was a holy man,
As monkes been - or elles oughten be."

This was not satire but showed that the Prioress was not disposed to lend an ear to current slander.

In strong contrast to these lax churchmen stood the figure of a true priest, who won both respect and love. He showed the attainable beauty of true religion in such a way that even the Lollards could have found no fault in him. The good village Parson was with his brother the Plowman, the only Christ-like person in the whole company. He was the

Chaucer - G. L. Kittredge - 174-178
perfect priest never farming out his parish in order to go to London, nor excommunicating his parishioners for failure to pay tithes. Rather he would pay them himself. His parish was wide but he visited in all kinds of weather even the farthest ones:

"Wyd was his parisshe, and houses fer asonder,
But he ne lefte not, for reyn ne thonder,
In sicknesse nor in meschief to visite
The ferreste in his parisshe, much and lite,
Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf."

Prologue, Lines 491-495

The Parson was a noble example unto his sheep as he practiced before he preached. His idea was that a priest should keep clean for the sake of the parishioners and he took such good care of his fold that no wolf got in. He was discreet and benignant in his teaching and his whole business was to draw fold to heaven "by fairnesse and good ensample." However, if any person, rich or poor, was obstinate the Parson would correct him sharply. The Parson was not impressed by pomp or pride but preached Christ's gospel and his apostles twelve. Chaucer sums up the essential difference between the Parson and other clergymen in one line,

* Chaucer a Wicliftite - H. Simon - p. 229-231
** Chaucer - Emile Legouis - p. 150-154
"He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie."

Prologue, Line 514

The Parson lived up to his description in the Prologue wherein he was accustomed to snub sinners sharply whenever the occasion seemed to demand it. The Host in calling upon the Parson for a tale swears like a pirate.

"The Persone him answerde: 'Benedictee!

What eylth the man so sinfully to swere?"

The Parson and the Clerk are scandalized by the language of the Wife of Bath. The Clerk has the greater cause for resentment, for the Wife has aimed her shafts at him directly, not in malice, but in mischievous defiance. She went out of her way to attack his order, railing at them especially for their satire on women. And, worse than all, she has told how she had married a clerk of Oxford, an alumnus of our scholar's own university, and had reduced him to shameful subjection. For this tale the Wife deserved a rebuke which no one could give so fittingly as the Clerk. However, the Clerk was not one to thrust himself forward and he rode quietly along until his turn came and he courteously began the tale of the patient Griselda. Here the Clerk reveals his learning in the consummate art with which he answers the Wife without appearing to notice her arguments. She has said that clerks could not possibly speak well of wives yet he is telling a story the theme of which is wifely
fidelity under affliction. He is refuting the heresies of the Wife and vindicating his own order in a skillful and deliberate manner. His ending in which he announces that his lesson is not for wives, but for Christians in general, is especially clever. The Clerk, however, does not abandon the subject here but without warning turns to the Wife of Bath and offers to recite a song that he has just composed in her honor. The song which is a masterstroke of sustained irony extols the practices and precepts of the Wife. Only the Clerk, a trained rhetorician, could have composed it and turned upon an opponent so adroitly. The Clerk is a moral philosopher, and he has proved both his earnestness and his competence.*

The Clerk was the immortal student of all time.

He was studying for the clergy and so interested in his books that he spent all the gold he could grasp from his friends for them. He was thin and threadbare but had a library of twenty books. The Clerk was a man of few words:

"Noght o word spak he moore than was neede,
And that was seyd in forme and reverence,
And short and quyk and ful of hy sentence;"

Prologue, Lines 304-306

He was a philosopher and therefore had little money, but borrowed all he could and then prayed for the souls of the

* Chaucer - G. L. Kittredge - pp. 154-200
people who lent it. The Clerk had the attitude of a true scholar and teacher:

"Sowynyge in moral vertu was his speche,
And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche."

Prologue, Lines 307-308

The Plowman, brother of the Parson, was the ideal layman. He loved God best at all times and then his neighbor as himself. He would thresh and dike and delve without pay for every poor person and always paid tithes both of his own labor and property.

The Plowman's goodness was in great contrast to most of the clergy. Where they sought money without labor he worked diligently without pay.

"A trewe swynkere and good was he,
Lyvynge in pees and parfit charitee."

Prologue, Lines 531-532
Chaucer's attitude toward the church was the same as toward the churchmen. He saw the corruption of their institutions and practices and painted a realistic picture of them. However as with the churchmen his satire was mixed with amusement. Chaucer pointed out the evils but did not set himself up to judge them. In the description of the Monk, we get a little of Chaucer's attitude toward the monasteries. No longer were they places of spirituality and self-sacrifice. The discipline had become lax and even the love of books and learning had departed. The Monk furnished a good example of the luxury and laxness of discipline that characterized the monasteries. He dressed in the finest clothes and spent all his time amusing himself with horses and hunting. The monasteries no longer insisted that the monks live lives of seclusion and righteousness.* This Monk traveled far afield and had no use for work. As he thought:

"What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!"

Prologue Lines 134-138

Evidently this Monk belonged to one of the wealthy monasteries.

* Geoffrey Chaucer - Emile Legouis - p. 149
in which the monks lived lives of ease without fulfilling any of the duties or obligations of their posts.

The Prioress also gave a picture of life in a convent. Worldliness seemed to creep in there also as her chief interest was in fine manners. The discipline here had also become rather lax as she cared for several dogs, a practice against the rules set down for nuns in Ancren Riwle.

Our knowledge of Chaucer's attitude toward the ecclesiastical courts comes primarily through the Summoner. He points out very plainly the abuses that were prevalent at the time, but keeps an attitude of cynical amusement. According to Chaucer's picture the ecclesiastical courts had become so corrupt that the agents were merely blackmailers, threatening the reputations of innocent people who did not pay as they desired. The summoners had such absolute contempt for authority that they served false writs and accepted bribes.

Toward the doctrines of the church Chaucer held much the same attitude. He did not state baldly his own views but revealed them through his treatment of the beliefs of others. Celibacy was a doctrine that he satirized very subtilly and effectively. He accomplished this end in his portrayals of the churchmen who, though sworn to celibacy, took their pleasure of the young women in the neighborhood. The Friar in the Prologue arranged marriages for young women that he had got into trouble. The Summoner was a fine fellow because

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Chaucer's Prioress - F. J. Furnivall - pp. 133-196
"He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn
A good felawe to have his concubyn
A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle;"

Prologue Lines 649-651

Also Chaucer added,

"In daunger hadde he at his owene gise
The yonge girls of the diocese."

Lines 663-664

The monk in The Shipman's Tale cared nothing for his vow of celibacy at the time he purchased the wife of the merchant for a night.

Confession was a doctrine that Chaucer frequently treated. It is uncertain whether Chaucer believed in the doctrine itself although he satirized its abuse. Some critics maintain that Chaucer was an extremely orthodox churchman and revealed his true beliefs in The Parson's Tale which contained a sermon on Penitence emphasizing the need of auricular confession. Simon however questions that Chaucer even wrote the sermon but Hadow taking the opposite point of view says that Catholicism appealed to Chaucer on the emotional side. It is certain that the Parson was a devout Catholic although Chaucer's faith cannot be stated so definitely. Because Chaucer idealized the Parson we cannot say that he accepted all his doctrines. However, in the Prologue he plainly showed his attitude toward the abuse of confession. He ridiculed the clergy for accepting
money in place of repentance:

"For unto a povre ordre for to yive
Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;
For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
He wiste that a man was repentaunt;
For many a man so hard is of his herte,
He may nat wepe, althogh hym sore smerte."

Prologue Lines 225-230
VI RELIGIOUS VIEWS OF CHAUCER

"Chaucer must have ranked high as a religious writer. Not to speak of his legends, he put forth his ABC, an elaborate prayer to the Virgin, advancing through all the letters of the alphabet. He translated a famous work of mortification, Innocent on the Wretched Condition of Mankind, and a famous homily upon the Magdalen, ascribed to Origen."* These poems do not give us any real knowledge of Chaucer's religious opinions although they prove his ability to enter into the feelings of other men. The authorship of the prayer to the Virgin, beginning "Mother of God and Virgin Undefiled," is disputed between Chaucer and Occeleve, but anyway furnishes no specific evidence as to belief. The same is true of the prayer ABC.

In his great work there are three stories of a distinctly religious character in that they deal with the lives of saints and martyrs. These are the tale of St. Cecilia, told by the Second Nun; the tales of Constance, told by the Man of Law; and the tale of the Prioress. None of the three are of much value for the insight they give into Chaucer's religious opinions.**

The tale of St. Cecilia was written in Chaucer's youth and is the feeblest in execution. It is one of the popular legendary stories of a miracle in the life of a saint.

* Chaucer and His Poetry - G. L. Kittredge - p. 10
Cecilia is doomed to die but the first attempt to kill her was a miserable failure as the fire that was kept up around her day and night did not even warm her body. However her persecutor is obliged to do his duty and this time she falls under the axe. Evidently Heaven was sufficiently contented with the single exhibition of energy it had put forth as after three days of living and preaching with a cut throat, Cecilia died.

The *Man of Law's Tale* is a decided improvement on this in the matter of conception and execution. The main interest is no longer concentrated upon the purely miraculous, but upon the human element in the story.

The *Tale of the Prioress* is the best of the narratives that deal with matters of religion. The theme is the murder of an innocent Christian child by Jews. After death little St. Hugh had a pearl placed on his tongue by the Virgin which caused him to sing until it was removed. Although the story is told with tenderness we have no reason to believe that Chaucer believed this absurd tale. If we consider these poems evidence of that kind we would have to consider Chaucer an orthodox Catholic and a believer in miracles. That view is emphatically contradicted by revelations in his other poems. Even in the *Man of Law's Tale* Chaucer leaves the impression that he has no faith in miracles. When Constance is strangely preserved for years on the sea the poet says,

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Studies in Chaucer - Thomas Lounsbury - Vol. II, pp. 484-490
"Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
Eek at the feeste? who myghte hir body save?
And I answere to that demande agayn,
Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,
Was with the leon frete or he asterte?
No wight but God, that he bar in his herte."

The Man of Law's Tale, 470-476

After each miraculous rescue Chaucer asks the same question and gives the same answer. Is he reiterating his belief in miracles? No one who understands Chaucer believes so. Rather he was unleashing some of his amused skepticism.

The fourteenth century was a period in which men were breaking from traditional beliefs and there was audacity even about sacred subjects. Chaucer was a man of modern times rather than the Middle Ages and accepted no views upon mere authority. He was skeptical about many things including religion. Toward morality Legouis felt that Chaucer was rather indifferent. He said, "Chaucer readily praised love that was virtuous or love that was not; we find him one day writing a prayer to the Virgin, at the request of the good Duchess Blanche of Lancaster, and the next praising some princely sinner, whose infringement of the marriage law had caused a scandal. He was quick to sin and quick to repent. His aim was to please and not to edify."*

* Geoffrey Chaucer - Emile Legouis, p. 20
Chaucer made no pretense to virtue and yet many of his poems reflect a warm and apparently sincere piety. Again Legouis explained, "This incongruity is to be met with often enough, and we need not wonder at it. Indeed he need be a clever analyst who would exactly gauge Chaucer's religious feelings, for they probably kept changing from year to year and almost from hour to hour. There were varying moments in the day when he made fun of the Mendicant Friars, when he prayed with fervor, by preference to the Virgin Mary, when his sly humor did not spare even the gospels, or when he felt sick of the world and looked heavenward. It is probable that he was about as much of a free-thinker as was possible in his day, living without restraint, but not without remorse, lingering for many years on the primrose path, and after a contrite old age reaching the pious end to which his disciples have testified."

Some of the contradictions are due to the fact that Chaucer was presented at different periods in his life. However, there is no moral purpose in Chaucer and he accepts with a smile the imperfections of humanity.

If you want to find Chaucer teaching a lesson do not go to his humorous pictures but watch when he is idealizing. The virtues of his Knight, Clerk, and Parson are hidden sermons. The Knight with his purity, piety, and modesty, was a pattern of chivalry and could have served well as a model to the degenerate

* Geoffrey Chaucer - Emile Legouis - p. 20
clergy. The Clerk, so wrapped up in his books that he neglected to earn a living, must have been a rarity. Above all the village Parson "whose noble personality is made up of negations or abstentions; he did not excommunicate those who refused to pay him their tithe; nothing could prevent him from visiting his poorest parishioners; he did not do himself what he forbade others to do; he did not forsake his flock in order to go to London, and so forth. In these praises given to one man are contained reproaches for hundreds of others."*

These touches show us the moralist in Chaucer. Chaucer found virtue worthy of his praise, but he could not prevent a human sympathy for the sinner. He exposed fraud and trickery, but it was with a smile rather than with bitter upbraiding."**

Chaucer at times is irreverent even in reference to God. He uses a familiarity of tone that verges on blasphemy. To Chaucer the Creator sometimes seems no more than an earthy lord by whom he can paint a comparison. In The Parliament of Fowls he writes,

"Of instruments of strenges in acord
Herde I so pleye a ravyshyng swetnesse,
That God, that makere is of al and lord,
Ne herde nevere beter, as I gesse."

Lines 197-200

* Geoffrey Chaucer - Emile Legouis - p. 146
** In the Days of Chaucer - Tudor Jenks, p. 152
This seeming irreverence is not convincing evidence of disbelief although it does not indicate a spiritual frame of mind. However, he has a critical spirit which he applies even to the Bible as coolly as a coolly as a cold-blooded rationalist. In The Merchant's Tale, Pluto and Proserpine had a discussion in which Proserpine speaks in contemptuous terms of the infidelity of the monarch of Israel, Solomon.

"Pardée, as faire as ye his name emplastre,

He was a lecchour and an ydolastre."

Lines 2297-2298

Surely no spiritually minded man would have spoken the truth so bluntly.

There is a difference in attitude in the earlier and later work of Chaucer although the same spirit of denial is in both. In the latter it has not the same prominence nor suggestiveness. Troilus and Cressida was written before The Legend of Good Women or The Canterbury Tales and has more direct skepticism. Cressida, anxious to relieve the mind of her lover about the warnings of the divine oracle, declares that

" - goddes spoken in amphibologies,

And, for a sooth, they tellen twenty lyes."

Book IV, lines 1406-1407
The question of predestination or freedom of the will is also pondered by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The poem contains a long disquisition on this subject which, however, proves nothing but Chaucer's interest. He has heard arguments for both sides and knows not which to believe.

"Syn God seeth every thyng, out of doute and, And hem dispoynteth, thorugh his ordinaunce, In hire merites sothly for to be, As they shul come by predestynne.

"But natheles, allas! whom shal I leve? For ther ben grete clerkes many oon, That destyne thorugh argumentes preve; And som men sayn that, nodely, ther is noon, But that fre chois is yeven us everychon. O, welaway! so sleighe arn clerkes olde, That I not whos opynyon I may holde."

_Troilus and Criseyde_, Book IV, lines 962-973

* Chaucer and His Times - Grace Hadow - pp. 221-223
In the later works of Chaucer the skepticism is not an expression of excitement rather than conviction, nor is it put in the mouths of the characters. Chaucer himself suggests the doubt. He is skeptical of the orthodox belief concerning future life. One passage from the introduction to *The Legend of Good Women* opens:

"A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,
And I acorde wel that it ys so;
But, natheles, yet wot I wel also
That there his noon dwellyng in this contree,
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
Ne may of bit noon other wayes witen,
But as he hath herd seyd, or founde it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it prevo."

Lines 1-9

In these lines Chaucer indicates his opinion of future life. He neither denies nor affirms his belief in it since he thinks that it is something with which no living man has had acquaintance.

*The Knight's Tale* carries a more significant passage because the sentiments were added by Chaucer himself, and were not in the source:

"His spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,
As I cam novere, I kan nat tellen wher."
There is not the slightest indication that the poet had any faith in the orthodox belief about future life.

The Retraction of Chaucer at the end of *The Parson's Tale* is a strange section. It makes the customary apology for the tales and closes with the wishes for the salvation of the author's soul. But in between lies a remarkable bit of prose in which he asks forgiveness for the translation of worldly vanities. This passage is authentic and included in all complete manuscripts of the Tales. It is the real conclusion to the work as is proved by the heading. It was however added by Chaucer at the end of his life in a state of contrition and repentance and is an eleventh hour repentance not to be taken too seriously.

Brusendorff says that it is "not to be regarded as a formal negation of the very spirit of his art. If this had been Chaucer's intention he might simply have burned his draft of the Tales, which was certainly not published till after his death; however, he merely wanted to revoke any spiritual heresies possibly implied by certain of his editynges of worldly vanities, and this he did in the present passage, his Retraccions."

* The Chaucer Tradition - Aage Brusendorff, p.131
During Chaucer's life the Church of England was corrupt and weak, despite the efforts of such men as Wycliffe to reform its abuses. There was a great cleavage made by the Church and all was either clerical or secular. A barrier existed between the Church and State, marking off churchmen from laymen. The churchmen were everywhere and had their own cathedrals, abbeys, monasteries, and courts. They had a separate government with their own laws, customs, privileges, and rights, and too often held their allegiance to the church to be of first importance. The wealth of England was largely controlled by religious corporations which meant that the people were held in oppression by the clergy under pretense of gaining money for sacred purposes. The Church meanwhile supported an enormous number of non-producers - pluralists and absentees - on the rents, tithes, and charges collected from workers and tradesmen. Churchmen, friars, monks, and pardoners were very worldly and dishonest in their methods of making money.

Wycliffe rose to prominence and vigorously attacked the corruption of the church. He denounced the supremacy of the pope for its attending evils - illicit sale of indulgences and pardons. He attacked the luxurious life of the clergymen and also their worldly pleasure seeking and lack of concern for the parishioners. Celibacy also aroused his anger. Wycliffe was a Puritanical man, who believed in predestination and was fiery
in his denunciations of the church abuses.

Wycliffe had the same patron as Chaucer, John of Gaunt, and it is probable that their friendship with John was the only connection between them. Wycliffe was a violent and zealous reformer of the church, but Chaucer merely painted the abuses in an accurate but amused fashion. Chaucer satirized the church rascals - the monks, friars, summoners, and pardoners - and idealized the worthy men - the parsons, plowmen, and clerks. It is a striking manner in which Chaucer combines caustic observation of the weaknesses and hypocrisies of men, with innate reverence for all that is good and noble.

Chaucer held neither the orthodox beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church nor the heresies of Wycliffe. Although he satirized the abuses of the church he was not a Lollard but a keen-minded Englishman who appreciated virtue. Chaucer, however, did not set himself up as a judge of human nature but merely wrote in a realistic fashion that which he actually observed. He was a sympathetic and entertained portrayer of persons of all classes.

Chaucer was a typical Englishman of the day in that he was skeptical of all traditions, customs, and doctrines. He accepted nothing without examination because it was sanctioned by the past.* Upon subjects he found himself in the position of some others - he was uncertain. Chaucer had much reverence for

* Chaucer - Adolphus W. Ward - p. 150
God in his religious tales and prayers, yet was undecided about future life as it was a subject about which he could secure no direct information.
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