



## THE RECANTATIONS OF THE EARLY LOLLARDS

It is a curious fact in the history of national thought that the first considerable group of men who were persecuted in England for matters of religion submitted themselves almost without resistance to ecclesiastical authority. A group of bold, earnest, enthusiastic men in the first flush of an assertion of independent judgment and of the world's need of moral reform nevertheless abjured their beliefs, acknowledged the authority of the Church, and conformed themselves to its behests almost as soon as they were bidden to do so by its accredited officials. After the beginning of the series of prosecutions of this group of heretics in 1377, almost twenty-five years elapsed before the first man was found who carried his resistance to the bitter end. In a word, the whole of the first generation of the Lollards recanted.

Heresy was a new phenomenon in England. The medieval ideal of religious uniformity, of complete homogeneity of faith among all the individuals of the nation, over all the countries of Christendom, and through all the centuries of Christian time, had been existent in England to a remarkable degree. But in the later decades of the fourteenth century it became evident that this long career of unbroken orthodoxy was drawing to a close. Ecclesiastical revolt, radical religious ideas, and even actual heresy were showing themselves in several parts of the country and in various classes of society. The most conspicuous centre of this disaffection was undoubtedly the University of Oxford. Here the influence of Wycliffe became supreme, remained so till his retirement in 1381, and revived soon after that time to remain dominant for many years. In his personal teachings, in his disputations, and in his various literary productions, Wycliffe was taking a position antagonistic not only to many of the practices of the Church, but to much of its philosophy and theology; and he was moreover largely carrying the University with him.<sup>1</sup> Robert Rigge, the chancellor for the year 1382, favored his influence in every way. He appointed Dr. Nicholas Hereford, a prominent adherent of Wycliffe's views, to deliver the chief sermon of the year in the English language, that given on Ascension Day,

<sup>1</sup> Bull of Pope Gregory XI., of May 22, 1377; Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, Rolls Series, I. 346.

May 15. This was preached in the cemetery of St. Frideswide's, where Christ Church College now stands. It was distinctly directed to the populace, and expressed religious views that received more approval from the citizens of Oxford than from the conservative clergy.<sup>1</sup>

A month later the chancellor appointed, as the preacher of the Latin sermon on Corpus Christi Day, Philip Reppington, who had lately taken his doctor's degree, and in his first lecture had declared that in moral matters he intended to defend the doctrines of Wycliffe, and that in regard to the sacrament of the altar he would place a finger before his lips till God should further enlighten the hearts of the clergy. On this very day, which had been specially appointed to honor the doctrine of transubstantiation, Reppington declared Wycliffe's opinion of the sacrament to be true, the chancellor afterwards congratulating him upon what he had said.<sup>2</sup> At another time a student named William James, in the presence of all the masters of arts, declared that the Eucharist was mere idolatry; and the chancellor made no comment except to interpose the mild restriction, "if you speak as a philosopher."<sup>3</sup> Of course there were others who took a more conservative stand, but on the whole Oxford seems to have been dominated by the "Lollards," as this English party came to be called from their heretical predecessors on the Continent.

Partly an offshoot of this Oxford agitation was the propaganda of the so-called "poor priests." From as early a date probably as 1377, many preachers unauthorized by the proper church officials, under the constant direction and advice of Wycliffe and other Oxford men, were travelling through the country, "on foot, clothed in long garments of russet, all of one cut, sowing their errors among the people, and preaching them publicly in their sermons."<sup>4</sup> We know, unfortunately, but little about these "poor priests," but occasionally some of the more conspicuous of them leave a fuller record of their sayings and doings. John Aston, a master of arts of Oxford, travelled on foot through the country, refusing to use a horse lest his care and feeding might delay him, thus, as a contemporary opponent amiably describes him, "leaping up from his bed like a dog, ready to bark at the slightest sound."<sup>5</sup> On Palm Sunday he preached at Leicester, denying the power of prelates to excommunicate for other than spiritual offences, declaring that the

<sup>1</sup> *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, Rolls Series, pp. 304-308.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> *Chronicon Angliae*, Rolls Series, p. 395.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Knighton, *Chronicon*, Rolls Series, II. 176.

rules of the monastic orders were attempts to make a more perfect religion than that of Christ and the apostles, and giving what was certainly an unorthodox definition to the doctrine of transubstantiation. But his strongest denunciations were reserved for the wealth, the luxury, the idleness of many of the clergy. He declared that there would never be a good and permanent peace in the realm until all temporal possessions were taken from the clergy, and he called upon his hearers to raise their hands in a vow that each would help as far as he was able in this object. On St. Matthew's day he preached at Gloucester in much the same strain, through here the special burden of his sermon was opposition to the crusade against France which was then being organized by the Bishop of Norwich.<sup>1</sup> This is of course the description of an antagonist, and we may safely credit the unauthorized preachers with more exhortation to devotion and teaching in the humble duties of life, and with somewhat less of polemic and destructive doctrine than appears here. But even so, disseminating, as they did, translations of parts of the Bible into English; preaching in the church-yards, the market-places, and the open roads; developing a more emotional and more popular religious life, they must have formed a distinctly new and disturbing influence, quite apart from the heretical views which they probably held and expressed.

Among the nobility and gentry there was much criticism of the existing organization and administration of the Church, and considerable irregularity of belief. John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the highest noble of the realm, supported Wycliffe and other Lollards on more than one occasion, and consistently antagonized the clergy. Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland and Lord Marshal of England, was also declared to be a "fautor" of the Lollards. Sir John Montague, who subsequently became Earl of Salisbury, when he came into possession of the manor of Shevley removed all the wooden images of the saints which had been gathered in the chapel there by his predecessors and had them laid away in obscurity, excepting a certain figure of St. Catherine, which was such an especial favorite with the servants that he allowed it to be placed in the kitchen. Long afterward, when he met an inglorious and unshriven end at the hands of a mob at Cirencester, in the abortive rising of 1400, the chronicler points out that having been through all his life a derider of the sacraments and a scoffer at images, he himself closed his life without the comfort of the sacrament of confession.<sup>2</sup> At least three influential members of the King's

<sup>1</sup>Knighton, Rolls Series, II. 176.

<sup>2</sup>Walsingham, Rolls Series, II. 244.

council, Sir Lewis Clifford, who fought with John of Gaunt in Spain, in France and in Africa; Sir Richard Stury, an old servant of Edward III., and fellow-ambassador with Chaucer in Italy, and Sir John Clanvowe were known as Lollards. Later, Sir John Cheyne, Speaker of the House of Commons, and Sir Thomas Erpingham, Lord Chancellor, and, later still, Sir John Oldcastle, were adherents of the "new sect." Certain knights had received the soubriquet of *milites capuciati* because they refused to take off their caps or hoods when the host was carried past in the street.<sup>1</sup> Complaint was made by the more conservative that many of the gentry gave protection and support to the wandering preachers, forcing the villagers to attend their sermons, and preventing any action being taken against them.<sup>2</sup>

Not only at the university, among the lay nobles and gentry, and in the rural villages, but among the townsmen there was equal or greater religious unrest. In London a certain Peter Pateshulle, who had made use of a papal appointment to leave the Augustinian order, of which he had been a member, "escaping from the nest of the devil," as he expressed it, began making statements which purported to be disclosures of the enormities committed in the house of that order. He was induced to go to the church of St. Christopher to repeat these in more detailed form. Word was taken to the house of the Augustinians of what Pateshulle was saying, and some twelve of their number proceeded to the church to listen. Finally, one of them was unable to contain himself and rose to deny the charges. Immediately a scuffle ensued, the friars were ejected, the disturbance spread to the street and was only prevented from becoming a serious riot by the efforts of various men of influence in the city.<sup>3</sup> When John Aston, one of the Oxford men, was being tried for heresy at Lambeth, the sympathizing mob actually broke in the doors of the archbishop's room and put a stop to the trial.<sup>4</sup> At another time Lollard placards were fastened on the doors of St. Paul's and handed through the streets. The mayor and aldermen of London, carried along by the puritanic wave, declared that the bishop was neglecting his duty of punishing vice, and that immorality was thriving so that they feared that some judgment would fall upon them and that the city would be swallowed up by an earthquake. They proceeded, therefore, to take the matter into their own hands, arrested all prostitutes, shaved their heads, and had them drawn through the streets on open wagons, preceded by men playing pipes

<sup>1</sup> *Chronicon Angliae*, Rolls Series, p. 377.

<sup>2</sup> Knighton, II. 181.

<sup>3</sup> Walsingham, II. 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 65.

and horns, to attract the more attention to their shame.<sup>1</sup> At Leicester, just outside the city gates and near the old lepers' hospital, was a chapel which served the Lollards regularly as a place for religious gatherings. Here a certain priest named William Swyn-derby preached to great crowds which gathered from the town and from the surrounding country. When he had been forbidden by the Bishop of Lincoln to preach any more in this or in any other chapel, church, or churchyard in the diocese, he chose a pile of millstones set out for sale by the highway as his pulpit, and defied the bishop to interfere with his preaching, "so long as he possessed the good-will of the people."<sup>2</sup> At Oxford on the occasion of Repingdon's Corpus Christi Day sermon already mentioned the mayor was present at the invitation of the Chancellor, and had with him a hundred armed men, twenty of whom accompanied the radical party subsequently to the meeting inside the church and thus helped to overawe the orthodox element. It is quite evident that the populace of the town of Oxford was in sympathy with the Lollards in the University. In Reading also and in Northampton tracts were being distributed by the religious agitators.

Among the lower clergy there was evidently much sympathy with one or another aspect of the prevalent revival. Chaucer's parish priest, one of the few men whose pictures he draws with a loving touch, was called a Lollard because he objected to profanity.

" 'Sir parish prest,' quod he, 'for goddes bones,  
Tel us a tale,'  
The persone him answerde, '*benedicite*,  
What eyleth the man, so sinfully to swere?'  
Our hoste answerde, 'O Jankin be ye there?  
I smelle a loller in the wind.'"<sup>3</sup>

Thus during the last two decades of the fourteenth century and the first three or four of the fifteenth we hear of Lollards in all directions. The statement of a contemporary chronicler that "scarcely would you see two men on the road but one of them was a disciple of Wycliffe,"<sup>4</sup> is certainly a great exaggeration, or true of only very limited localities. Moreover, by no means all of the agitation on religious questions was heresy. Nevertheless there is quite enough evidence to show that as great a wave of religious as of social and political unrest was passing over England; and that in many cases this religious dissent extended to actual heresy.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Knighton, II. 191, 192.

<sup>3</sup> The Shipman's Prologue, ll. 4-15, Skeat's ed. B. 1170-1176.

<sup>4</sup> Knighton, II. 197.

At first there was evidently some reluctance to take strong action to meet the rising tide of rebellion against ecclesiastical authority. Perhaps the bishops themselves were favorable to some of its objects. It was the age of the Statutes of Provisors and Praemunire, of the Spiritual Franciscans and of the Great Schism. Archbishop Simon of Sudbury was a moderate man, and the church authorities generally were bitterly reproached by the more strict of the next generation for their laxity. Perhaps the favor given to the movement by persons closely connected with the King may have combined with this moderation to bring about that neglect by which "they sent their sheep out exposed to the jaws of wolves, and no one of them lifted his staff to drive these away."<sup>1</sup>

Half-hearted suits were brought against Wycliffe himself in 1377, 1378 and 1381; but in the spring of 1382, under the influence of the new archbishop, Courtenay, a much more strenuous series of prosecutions was begun. On May 17th of that year a council of church officials and theologians met at the call of the archbishop in the hall of the Dominican friars in London. This body held seven sessions at intervals during May and June, and did much to bring the prevailing discussions and agitations to a culmination. In the first place, a number of statements of doctrine which were said to be habitually made by the Wycliffites in their sermons and disputations were formulated and condemned. The archbishop then proceeded to issue a general mandate reciting these condemned errors and heresies and prohibiting anyone from holding them, teaching them, or having any intercourse with any person who should hold or teach them.<sup>2</sup>

At the second session of the council appeared the chancellor of Oxford, Robert Rigge, and a doctor of theology, Thomas Brightwell. They were examined as to their recent actions in relation to the heretical party at Oxford, and also concerning their own beliefs. As to the latter they professed entire orthodoxy and agreed immediately to the statement of condemnation of the Lollard teachings. Then in penitence for the favor which the chancellor had recently shown to Wycliffe and his friends, Rigge went on his knees before the archbishop and humbly asked pardon. This was granted him through the mediation of the Bishop of Winchester. The chancellor was then ordered to seek out, to suspend, and force to recantation all persons at Oxford still clinging to the views officially condemned. As a result of this action Philip Reppington, Nicholas Hereford, John Aston and Lawrence Bedeman were brought before

<sup>1</sup> Walsingham, II. 188.

<sup>2</sup> *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, pp. 272-282.

the archbishop and the council. After a certain amount of discussion and postponement Bedeman and Reppington made their peace with the archbishop and were restored to their positions at Oxford, the former on the 18th of October, the latter on the 23d. Aston was more recalcitrant, at least for a while, and he was handed over to the secular power for imprisonment. But his resistance only endured for a few weeks, when on the 24th of November he made the following recantation :

“In the name of God Amen. Y John Aston priest unworthy, required of my Lord the erchbyschop of Canturbery the nynetene day of June in the yer of grace a thousand thre hundred fourscore and two, in the hous of the Freres Prechoures at London whan y was required to say what y felyde in the matyr of the sacrament of the autere, y have knowlechyde, and yit I do, that the selfe bred that the priste holdes in his hondes is made, throu the vertue of the sacramental wordus, verely the self Christus body that was borne of the mayden Marye and taken and suffrede deth on the crosse, and thre days lay in the sepulchre, and the thridde day ros from deth to lyve, and steyede up into heven and syttes on the ryght honde of God, and in the day of dome schal come to deme the quikke and the ded ; and over this I beleve generally alle that holy writ determynet in worde and in understandyng, or what ever holy kyrke of God determynes of alle this.

“Whan J was requirede specyaly to say what I felde of this proposition : Materiale brede leves in the Sacrament after the consecration ; J make this protestation that I never thought ne taugt ne prechide that proposition. For I wote wele that the mater and the speculation thereof passes in heyghte myn understandyng, and therefore als mykele tellys openly for to leve in this mater I beleve, and of this mater or of any other touchyng the ryght beleve of holy kyrke, that is nought expresside in holy writte, I beleve, as oure modur holy kirke belevs, and in this belyve I will dye, and of this thing I beseke alle men and alle wymmen to whom this confession come to bere me witnesse before the hygest juge at the day of dome.”<sup>1</sup>

Nicholas Hereford, the remaining Oxford teacher who was under prosecution, fled from England, journeyed to Rome and appealed to the Pope. After a hearing before a convocation of the clergy there, however, he was condemned and committed to prison. Freed from the papal prison by the Roman mob in one of the frequent risings of this period, Hereford returned to England and eluded arrest for a time ; but in 1391 he gave up his resistance, obtained royal protection, and was reconciled to the Church.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the whole group of Oxford contemporaries of Wycliffe, so far as they had become prominent enough to attract attention, recanted. Wycliffe's own retirement to the obscurity of Lutterworth seems, notwithstanding his continued literary activity, to have placated sufficiently the conservative forces of his own time.

<sup>1</sup> Knighton, II. 171-172.

<sup>2</sup> Forshall and Madden, Introduction to the *Wycliffite Versions of the Bible*, Vol. I., p. xvii.



In the various other places where heresy was growing up we find the same readiness to recant when pressure was brought to bear. William Swynderby, who had gathered the crowds of Leicester and its vicinity to listen to his preaching from the millstones in the King's highway, was summoned by John Buckingham, Bishop of Lincoln, to appear before him on a certain day in the cathedral at Lincoln. Here he was convicted of teaching various errors and heresies and remanded to the bishop's prison. The Duke of Lancaster happened to be there at the time, and the friends of Swynderby appealed to him to use his influence with the bishop to obtain for the heretical preacher an easy form of retraction or a mild punishment. His recantation was, however, humiliating enough. He seems to have made no resistance to the bishop's requirement, which was that he should declare on oath that all those things which he had taught and which were now objected to had been false, that he should swear never to preach such things again, and that he should promise not to speak publicly again under any conditions within the diocese of Lincoln, without the special permission of the bishop. Moreover, he was required to take the same oath openly and audibly after service on each of the succeeding Sundays, in three parish churches in Leicester, and in the churches of Melton Mowbray, Halyton, Hareborough and Lowtborough; so that all the people who had before listened to his bold preaching should now hear his recantation.<sup>1</sup>

William Smith, a friend and fellow-worker with Swynderby, was forced by the Archbishop of Canterbury to recant at Leicester, in 1392, and by way of penance was required to walk around the market-place, clothed only in his shirt, carrying a crucifix in his right hand and an image of St. Catherine in his left. The archbishop also compelled him to surrender his translation of the Bible into English, and other works which he had been engaged in writing for the previous eight years. Roger Dexter and his wife were at the same time required to walk around the public square in shirts and carrying crosses.<sup>2</sup>

In the same year, 1392, when the King was holding a great council at Stamford, the ecclesiastical members and a number of other churchmen were gathered into a convocation in the church of the Carmelites of that city to examine a certain Henry Crumpe. He was an Irishman, a doctor of theology, a member of the Cistercian order. He had ranked as a conservative in the times of Wycliffe at Oxford, but had subsequently preached heresy in Ire-

<sup>1</sup> Knighton, II. 189-198.

<sup>2</sup> Knighton, II. 312.

land and was now teaching questionable opinions at Oxford. He made some defense of his views, but finally, on the 30th of May, in the presence of the archbishop and a large number of ecclesiastics and laymen, at the church of St. Mary, abjured all irregular teachings. He was forbidden to teach or to preach further without the special license of the archbishop.<sup>1</sup>

John Purvey, an intimate personal friend of Wycliffe and joint translator with him of the Bible, after almost twenty years of preaching and writing was imprisoned in the archbishop's prison at Saltwood, and then brought before a council of the province of Canterbury at St. Paul's in London, on the 29th of February, 1400. Here he made, in Latin, a most abject recantation, which he was compelled to repeat in English at St. Paul's Cross, Sunday March 6. A part of his abjuration before Convocation is in the following terms :

"In which matters I have humbly submitted myself and do at present submit myself to the correction, judgment, and instruction of the reverend father and lord Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury, with his council, acknowledging the truth of the Catholic faith and my former errors and heresies ; and standing here in person, not induced by violence or fear, but purely, spontaneously and freely, I curse and abjure forever all my heresy, and especially that with which I have been recently charged."<sup>2</sup> At the same time John Becket of London and John Seynon of Darton, both laymen, made public recantation of their Lollard opinions.

It is impracticable to follow out every instance of persecution for heresy during these last two decades of the fourteenth century, but in all cases we find the same result : whenever any considerable degree of pressure on the part of the authorities is brought to bear, recantation follows. It was not until 1401 that a poor chaplain of Leicester, William Sawtre, after one recantation refused again to belie his opinions, withstood a long and harassing trial, and was finally burned at Smithfield. It was nine years more before the first instance was found of a man who never recanted, but clung to his beliefs faithfully all the way to the stake.

This brings us again to our first question. Why did the early Lollards all recant? The general giving up of religious beliefs under persecution has not been a familiar historical occurrence. Readiness to desert personal religious convictions has not been generally characteristic of human nature. On the contrary it has been a very common phenomenon for men to exhibit a devotion to

<sup>1</sup> *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, pp. 343-359.

<sup>2</sup> *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, p. 400.

their peculiarities of religious belief quite sufficient to withstand the bitterest persecution and the most repulsive forms of death. The very successors of these same heretics, the Lollards of the next generation, from about 1415 to 1450, showed themselves a peculiarly stiff-necked people and furnished a roll of martyrs quite worthy to compare with those of the next century. Under Henry VIII., under Mary and under Elizabeth, there was but little shrinking from the consequences of faithfulness to religious beliefs whether Catholic or Protestant. Hundreds of men and women then, as thousands before and since, went to the stake readily enough, when a simple recantation would have saved them. Men have been on the whole much more ready to die for their religious principles than to desert them. It therefore remains all the more a curious question why all the early Lollards who were persecuted recanted.

Some elements of the solution of the problem lie ready to hand. An appreciable number of those subjected to prosecution probably looked upon the whole discussion as a matter of academic interest only. They considered the dispute as to the nature of the Eucharist as a question of dialectics. This was especially true of the Oxford men. Much of the intellectual life of the universities of the time consisted in the drawing of fine distinctions, in making ingenious interpretations of the words of the church fathers and the philosophers, in the infinitely continued formulation and recapitulation of definitions and arguments and inferences. Wycliffe himself was first of all a schoolman, a disputant. For instance, in defending his thesis that the bread after the ceremony of consecration was not transformed in its substance, but only in its significance, he declared that it was similar to the case where Gregory or Innocent is converted into a pope, but remains the same man as before, or where a sinner is transformed into a good man, or where wood is converted into an image, or water into ice, but all remain essentially the same as before. Or again, combatting the doctrine that the bread ceases to be bread in substance, though it retains evidently its accidents of whiteness, roundness, taste, solidity and such qualities, he said that in that case the consecrated bread was infinitely lower in its nature than horse-bread, or rat's bread, or even than a rat's dung, for all of these at least have substance, while the sacramental bread is said no longer to have its substance; but as all substance is infinitely more perfect than any mere attribute, the syllogism is complete and the sacramental bread is the inferior.<sup>1</sup>

Wycliffe, it is true, in addition to the disputant, was a great reformer, an earnest, intensely religious man. Many other men ap-

<sup>1</sup> *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, pp. 108-109.

preciated and participated in the former part of his interest, but did not share in the latter. For them it was one thing to hold and defend these radical opinions for dialectical uses, for the excitement of academic debate; it was quite another to stand by the same beliefs when ordered to abjure them by the constituted authorities. Probably several of the most prominent of the early Lollards recanted because their views were only academic, not really serious or earnest, or in any proper sense religious.

A second class of those whose heretical beliefs did not lie very deep might be described as those who were led into them largely by their political interests. In the scheming and intrigue for political influence which in the latter years of Edward III. and during the reign of Richard II. took the place of the more worthy party divisions of other and better periods, one of the most constant threads of policy was a certain antagonism to the clergy. Many men of ambition and activity in political life found it to their interest to oppose the prelates who were at that time doing so large a part of the work of government. Opposition to the clergy ran easily into opposition to the organized church. Participation with the more earnest Lollards in their criticism of the existing church system could hardly be distinguished from sharing with them their divergencies of doctrine. It is probable that many of those who earned the condemnation of the orthodox element really shared but slightly in the most earnest parts of the religious excitement in the country. And it is only natural that such men should readily desert their party when suspicion of holding heretical views became a serious detriment to their political success. John of Gaunt gave no support to the Lollards after the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381. In 1395, when King Richard was carrying on a campaign in Ireland, two of the bishops came over to him to complain of the activity of the Lollards and to charge their boldness to the support they received from some of the members of the King's council. Richard, stricken with one of his sudden fits of anger, hastened to London. The scene with the accused councillors is better told in the words of a chronicler who was living at the time than it can be in any more modern English.

“The kyng whan he had conceyved the malice of these men, he cleped hem to his presens, and snybbed hem; forbad hem eke thei schuld no more meynnten no swech maters. Of Richard Story he took a hooth, for he swore on a book that he schuld nevyr meynnten no swech opinionones. And after this hooth the king saide—‘And I swere here onto the, if evyr thou breke thin ooth, thou shal deye a foul deth.’ They that were gilty in this mater withdrow gretly her oterauns of malys.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Capgrave's *Chronicle of England*, Rolls Series, p. 260.

Sir Lewis Clifford, another old-time supporter of the Lollards, signalized his desertion of them in 1402 by communicating to the Archbishop of Canterbury a series of statements of doctrines which they had put forth and the names of those who were responsible for these doctrines.<sup>1</sup>

Still a third class might be distinguished as men of extreme, unbalanced, or visionary temperament, who might fairly be expected to adopt readily any unusual opinions, but who would be likely to give them up with equal readiness, or from equally insufficient motives. For instance, a certain knight in Wiltshire, named Lawrence de St. Martin, asked for the communion on Easter even; but when the priest handed him the consecrated wafer, instead of putting it into his mouth he took it in his hands, rose from his knees, and carried it home, fastening the door, dividing the bread into three pieces and eating one with oysters, one with onions and one with wine. He then announced that it seemed very much like any other bread, such as he had in his house already. Meanwhile the priest had followed, imploring him not to commit so great sacrilege, and the servants of his house drew back in astonishment and terror. One can hardly conceive of a piece of more ill-placed levity and of more reckless impiety, according to all medieval standards, and one is therefore hardly surprised to find St. Martin succumbing immediately when, a few days afterward, he was summoned before the Bishop of Salisbury and ordered to submit himself to the advice of a number of clergymen who were sent to visit him. Very soon he announced his conversion to orthodox views, asked the bishop's pardon, and declared himself willing to undergo any penance that should be imposed upon him. The bishop ordered him to erect a stone cross at Salisbury on which should be carved the whole story of his enormity, and required him to appear there repeatedly on holidays, with uncovered head, barefoot, and clad only in his undergarments, to make a public statement of his penitence and disavowal of his previous impious views.<sup>2</sup>

Again, there was a certain old gentleman (*venerabilis miles*, the chronicler calls him), of London, named Sir Cornelius Clowne. He had been a believer in Lollard doctrines, but was much impressed by the solemnities of a certain religious procession which passed through the streets of London in recognition of the decision of the council of 1382. The day after the procession he attended the celebration of the mass by a young priest in the chapel of the Dominicans. As the celebrant broke the bread the knight saw with wonder that,

<sup>1</sup> Walsingham, II. 253.

<sup>2</sup> Walsingham, I. 450-451.

instead of its previous aspect, it had all the appearance of veritable flesh, raw and dripping with blood. Moreover, as the third particle of the bread, as is usual, was about to be dropped into the cup of wine, Clowne saw plainly the letters of the word "Jesus," bloody and flesh-like in the whiteness of the piece of bread. He was immediately convinced of the truth of transubstantiation, and himself the next day, after the sermon, narrated his vision publicly and announced himself as intending to live and die in the belief that in the sacrament of the altar there is the true body of Christ, and not merely material bread.<sup>1</sup>

The fourteenth century seems to have been especially marked by a certain lack of mental balance and calmness. The constructive work of the great medieval, philosophical, theological and legal writers had been completed in the thirteenth century; the fifteenth century was to be provided with new intellectual material and interests through the Renaissance; but lying between these two was a period of intellectual restlessness, criticism, aimlessness that lent itself especially easily to all sorts of aberration. The "Vision" of William of Hampole, as that of another William, "concerning Piers the Plowman," alike give evidence that England was not without a tendency corresponding to that mysticism which was so prevalent on the Continent.

But after all the problem of the recantations is not yet solved. If those men are eliminated whose ready abjuration is explained by their merely disputatious interest, or their political schemes, or their unbalanced minds, there still remain others who are not to be so accounted for. There were men who were earnest, sincere, moderate; and yet these also recanted when put under pressure. Men who had given years of devotion to the cause deserted the cause when they were placed in a critical position. Men recanted who had given every evidence of capacity for self-sacrifice and every indication of moral courage. A reason must be found which will include such men as well as those classes previously described.

The explanation will probably be found not in characteristics of human nature, but in characteristics of the time to which the phenomena belong. In fact this is the solution suggested, the irresistible pressure of the age to bring about uniformity, the incapacity of the single individual to place himself permanently in opposition to the mass of the community.

It is true that the fact of these men submitting only when authority was asserted shows that the immediate cause for their abjuration lay within the realm of fear; but it was not so much the

<sup>1</sup> Knighton, II. 163-164.

fear of material punishment, nor of ecclesiastical condemnation, nor even of spiritual danger, as it was the fear of isolation, the dread of separation from their kind. They lost their courage, but it was under the stress of an overwhelming recognition that by their divergent beliefs they were separating themselves from the vast mass of Christian mankind. Each felt himself to be one man against all the authority, all the learning, all the organized order and agreement of Christendom past and present. Above all, each man must have endured an internal conflict, his reason warring against his own gregarious instinct, against that corporate spirit of the time in which he himself so completely shared.

It is somewhat difficult for us in our own individualistic modern times to realize the strength of such a feeling to a man in the fourteenth century. The whole character of the Middle Ages tended to subordinate a man to the organization of which he was a member. If a man earned his living by the cultivation of the soil, as did probably four-fifths of the population, he was a member of a village community whose farming and other industrial operations were interwoven and combined almost inseparably. Intermingled holdings, common pastures, co-operative performance of service, made a man almost as dependent on his neighbors as on himself. The political life of the group of villagers was a congeries of mutual dependencies and common responsibilities. Their religious life gathered them all in the same parish church. Bound together into a single body by economic, legal and social ties, the unit of rural society was not so much the individual man as it was the village or manorial group. A townsman was primarily a constituent part of some merchant or craft guild within the bounds of which were included his whole life and career, its material necessities, its possibilities of ambition, its social and intellectual enjoyments. It was his guild that obtained for him his opportunities and privileges in trade, that kept up the shrine about which his religious life centered, that organized the mystery plays in which he participated, that administered the charitable funds that might give succor to him in his misfortune or relief to his widow and orphans. It was his guild that would unite priest and brethren in masses for his soul after his death. Such a man was not so much an isolated individual as a part of a certain organized body, that is to say his craft, trade, or at the broadest his civic fraternity.

Similarly, if medieval society is looked upon in its feudal aspect it consists, at least in its upper strata, of a group of persons all closely bound together by reciprocal services and duties. The "religious" man or woman was a unit in some monastic order, from

whose property he drew his sustenance, to whose rules he conformed his life, whose constituted authorities he obeyed. Thus through all society in the Middle Ages ran this corporate feeling, this instinct of union and close combination with other men. The man who was not united with other men in a somewhat similar position would have felt himself, as in most cases he would really have been, miserable indeed. Moreover the medieval type of mind was thoroughly satisfied with such a subordination and inclusion of the individual in the larger body. The individualism in which the modern man rejoices, or perhaps until recently has rejoiced, his willingness to be the free lance in industry, in travel, in enjoyment, in thought, in religion, was a characteristic or a product of the period of the Renaissance and of the Reformation. The Middle Ages knew little or nothing of it. The recognition that he is one against the world is an exhilarating thought to a modern man; to the medieval man it would have meant utter misery.

Thus when a man realized that he was, in the most omnipresent of all medieval relations, that of religion, actually alone, separated from his fellow-men, excluded from the society to which he naturally belonged, under all but universal condemnation as a traitor to Christendom, one cannot wonder that a sudden fear, a loss of all courage and strength of resistance might have seized upon him, and an entire resignation to the authority of the universal church have followed. An almost pathetic instance of this occurred in 1387. A certain priest, of Lollard views, serving in the household of Sir John Montague, having become ill and feeling that he was upon his death-bed, asked that a priest should be summoned to whom he could confess and from whom he should receive extreme unction. Some servants of the family reminded him that he had often taught them that all confession to another is unnecessary; that if a man confessed to God it was quite enough. He only answered to say that he had sinned, but now wanted a priest. Then Dr. Nicholas Hereford, the great Oxford Lollard, who happened to be present in the house at the time, was summoned to his bedside and urged him to cling to his old beliefs. But the dying man only reiterated his request, declaring in his agony that he only wished to die as a Catholic, and that the sin of his departure unshriven would rest with those who were now denying him the opportunity of confession. And the poor wretch finally died in the midst of his longing for the customary last rites of his Church. It is not hard, probably, even for us, to feel how in the gathering mists of death all disputes, novelties and intricacies of doctrine lost their clearness and force, and only a great longing remained to die as his fore-



fathers had died, as other Christians were dying, to die, as he said, *catholice*.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of a trial before the church authorities and a great gathering of the orthodox clergy and laity was measurably the same. When an Aston, a Purvey, a Swynderby had to face the archbishop and a whole group of bishops and other churchmen ; when it was so evident that these prelates represented the Church as a whole ; when it was felt that the Church was synonymous with the whole community of Christian believers dead and living ; not only all these outward powers but his own instincts pleaded with him for concession, for retractation of all that separated him from the Church ; in a word for recantation.

The great force therefore which broke down the religious independence of the early Lollards, which induced them to desert the heretical beliefs which they had adopted, was the collective spirit of the age, a spirit which they themselves fully shared. It was an instinctive tendency to allow the individual to be dominated by society as a whole. Not until the thought of resistance to the Church had become much more familiar, till there were many more sympathizers with such resistance, and above all until a fundamental change in the whole structure of society had encouraged the development of more individualism, were many men found who would or could withstand to the end the pressure of organized ecclesiastical authority.

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<sup>1</sup>Walsingham, II. 159-160.