PIERS PLOWMAN, POVERTY, AND THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

HENRY H. DOSS. *Piers plowman*, poverty, and the medieval church. (Under the direction of DR. PETER LARKIN)

This thesis examines the claim that the 14th century experienced a dramatic change in how poverty is understood and addressed in society. This shift can be understood as a long-term social dialectic – one that arcs toward synthesis, but tends toward conflict -- where two contrary points of view are competing for dominance and are always in a state of tension. The two competing points of view are: (1) poverty as primarily a spiritual and church-mediated challenge and (2) poverty as a social, state-mediated challenge. In the 14th century, several significant demographic changes acted on this conflict: the great plague of 1348; an emerging, soon-to-be-dominant culture of commerce and exchange; the migration of wage earners from rural areas to urban centers; and the tension between early medieval Church-mediated approaches to poverty with an increasingly concentrated population of the poor in cities. Although there are many areas of conflict, the primary opposing points of view can be defined as religious value systems on the one hand and emerging opportunities in the world of finance and capitalism on the other. Both the religious and the secular-economic seek to control the social conversation regarding poverty, and each must change and evolve to accommodate the complex intersection of a constantly changing experience of material conditions on the one hand, and shifting social and religious views on the other. This thesis uses the 14th-century allegorical dream narrative *Piers Plowman* as the focus for an inquiry into then-current views of poverty, how those views had been shaped through history, and how they were changing during the latter half of the century.

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Chapter I: Poverty in Context

> *Because a great part of the people and especially of the workmen and servants has now died in that pestilence, some, seeing the straights of the masters and the scarcity of servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages, and others, rather than through labour to gain their living, prefer to beg in idleness.*
>
> Ordinance of Labourers, 1349[1]

"The poor are always with us," is more than just a quotation from Matthew; it captures rather nicely the profoundly intractable, ever-present nature of poverty.[2] Viewed as a social or economic problem, poverty is a decidedly different challenge than when it is viewed as a spiritual or moral problem. This difference in point of view will have a profound influence on how poverty is understood to happen, what should be done about it, and who should be responsible for it.

This paper hypothesizes that prior to the 14th century, the leaders of society in England – the church, the state, landowners – considered poverty to be more a religious, or spiritual issue than a social or economic issue; consequently, practical or structural approaches to dealing with poverty were framed primarily by Scripture and the Church. Because of this religious-influenced paradigm, the poor were defined in terms of their place and role in a spiritually defined cosmos, and the treatment of the poor was

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[1] Library, *The Statute of Laborers, 1351*.

[2] Matt 26:11. All quotations are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version*. Oxford University Press, 1977.

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understood and proscribed in terms of how a Christian should understand and treat poverty. The change from a religious-centered view of poverty toward a more secular-defined view of poverty accelerated dramatically in the latter half of the 14th century. The Great Plague of 1348, and the ensuing wage inflation, worker/wage-earner empowerment, and various economic stresses placing the wealthy in direct conflict with a suddenly valuable work force, provided the necessary conditions to usher in a new era. These new economic and social stresses combined with the simultaneous collapse of feudalism and the growth of the state as a power and influence in what had previously been areas of authority for the Church led to a perfect storm of community conflict, economic competition, demographic turmoil, and social unrest[3]. This large-scale disruption in turn accelerated the transformation of poverty from a primarily spiritual issue with Church-mediated solutions to an increasingly economic/social issue with State/Capitalist-mediated solutions.[4]

In the latter decades of the 14th century William Langland composed *Piers Plowman*, a remarkable dream narrative which functions as a detailed explication of the then-current views of many of the critical social, religious or economic problems. If this text is interrogated with an eye to both understanding how Langland views poverty and how those views might represent or anticipate significant changes from previous concepts

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[3] Although the collapse of the Feudal system was a complex series of events, it, too, can be linked in many ways – as both cause and effect -- to the rise of capitalism, trade expansion, and the need for economic efficiency.

[4] J. L. Bolton, in *The Medieval English Economy: 1150 – 1500*, argues that the 14th century was a period of economic transition, moving from a "concept of society with considerable economic implications . . . to an economic idea with economic consequences" (320). Specifically, Chapter 10 "Economic Ideas" presents what I believe to be a persuasive argument that the 14th-century member of society, while not a fully formed capitalist, could "formulate (broad) economic concepts and implement them." David Aers in "*Piers Plowman* and Problems in The Perception of Poverty: A Culture in Transition" argues for the transition from "orthodox Christian ideology" to an ethos that would "embrace changing attitudes to wealth" (7). Although outside the scope of this thesis, I would assert that the emergence of a new social system based on capitalism was one of the key drivers of the dramatic change in how poverty is treated.

of poverty, we can create a significant historical marking post – a point in time captured in text where poverty is on the cusp of changing from a spiritual to an economic issue.

In Langland's poem, we see both the state of the poverty problem in the late 14th century and some of the many and sundry ways in which the problem is being addressed in society, because the poem is both an assessment of various solutions (or approaches) to poverty as well as a detailed description of the material facts of late-14th-century poverty. The poem is dynamic and constantly in dialogue and debate, presenting conflicting points of view, arguing various philosophies and theologies and oftentimes contradicting itself. The intrinsic contradictions of the poem are "difficult to follow . . . and once a thread emerges, it then leads nowhere in particular or digresses into new sets of ideas and narratives."[5] For this reason – precisely because its inner contradictions and conflicts mirror the same contradictions and conflicts then present in medieval society -- *Piers Plowman* captures the late 14th century transitional status of poverty perfectly and serves as the focal point for examining the core hypothesis of this paper.

Framing this inquiry requires some distinctions about what specific aspect of poverty is being addressed. The primary interest of this thesis is approaching the question of where and how poverty intersects with economics, and how that intersection influences and changes religious perspectives of poverty. The purpose is two-fold: (1) To establish a primary linkage between a powerful Church structure that mediated virtually all aspects of poverty from the 11th or 12th centuries up to the latter half of the 14th ; (2) To examine how changing demographics, economics and social structures led to an accommodation of wealth by the Church, which in turn led to a significant set of

[5] Shephard, xi.

modifications in how poverty was addressed in the 14th and following centuries. There are three conceptual components of poverty that this thesis investigates: (1) The role of the Church in establishing and administering poor relief and in adjudicating issues of how poverty is understood; (2) The ways in which poverty is addressed in *Piers Plowman*, and how the poem acts as a negotiation; (3) The demographic and social changes that occurred in the period which accelerated the dialogue between religion and wealth, and which led to significant changes in views of poverty.

Although there are multiple sources used in this paper, several merit particular notice and recognition at the outset. With respect to how the Church framed and shaped views of poverty, Brian Tierney has been the primary source. Tierney's fundamental interest is how Church and State compete over time, and how the Church and canonical thinkers work in society to shape laws, customs and practices. Tierney would view the history of poverty as one of negotiation between Church canonists and an increasingly cosmopolitan and often prosperous world. This negotiation occurred in the domains of legal structures, the nature of who was entitled to relief, and the various means and institutions by which poor relief was administered.[6]

With respect to an inquiry into the issue of how poverty is treated in *Piers Plowman*, Anne Scott's text *Piers Plowman and the Poor* has guided much of the claims about the poem in this thesis. Her central perspective is that *Piers Plowman* specifically, and Medieval literature in general, are texts that are actively engaged with the world, responding to changing circumstances, changing needs and changing social conditions. Her assertion that the poem is in an active state of negotiation as it is being written, and that it is resolving (not has resolved) pressing issues of faith and salvation in the real

[6] Tierney, 1.

world informs much of this paper's assertions about how *Piers Plowman* functions as an inquiry into poverty. Additionally, Scott's taxonomy of five distinctive meanings of poverty provides a conceptual framework for understanding Langland's world view, and how it reflects core Medieval values concerning wealth, and the intractable conflict in that era between "the spiritual value of poverty and the material scandal of the poor."[7]

Derek Pearsall's short essay "Poverty and Poor People in *Piers Plowman*" provides an essential overview of several key issues. Pearsall interrogates the important differences between rural and urban poverty, both as experienced by the poor and as witnessed by the non-poor; he emphasizes that the concentration of indigent populations into urban centers led to a society markedly more focused on the negative aspects of poverty in society, and an increasingly urgent need to demarcate between deserving and undeserving poor. Pearsall also provides a clear perspective on the ongoing social dialogue (in the world and in *Piers Plowman*) addressing the problem of how to reconcile the notion of poverty as a Christian virtue, against the desire to legitimize wealth and the growing merchant and middle class population. This observation correlates closely to his comments on the very important, ongoing, and unresolved conflict between the advocacy of a voluntary, Christian poverty as one of the highest spiritual ideals, and the reprehensible nature of poverty as it manifests itself in an increasingly urban world. Finally, Pearsall provides the important perspective of *Piers Plowman* as a poem that is in active dialogue about issues of poverty, rather than a consistent proclamation of pre-determined points of view, observing that Langland appears to be "working at the

[7] Scott, 25 – 67.

problem . . . rather than presenting in a rhetorically persuasive manner a conclusion he has already arrived at."[8]

With respect to demographics and specific changes in society such as the rural to urban migration phenomenon, and considering only the data and analytical side of demographics, John Hatcher has provided the demographic perspective. The other side of data – the interpretation of what might or might not have happened because of more-or-less empirical events – is as interesting as the "factual" history of the period. Lester Little is the primary source for developing an understanding the implications of the collision between poverty and the emerging profit economy. J. L. Bolton provides a perspective on how the real economic activity of the medieval era worked in tandem with the growing influence of the state over time to create (or begin to create) an actual economic system, and on how the Church could influence not only actions, but the very structure of economic systems. One need only think of the economic policies regarding usury to see this.

These texts, along with the others cited, provide the historical background and context for the views expressed here in general: That the church was the primary driver of poor relief and social views of poverty up until the late 14th century, and that the state began to assume primary accountability after that period; that powerful demographic and economic forces were at play in the 14th century, leading to a clash between the Church and commerce and an accommodation of emerging Capitalism by the Church; and that *Piers Plowman* acts as a mirror of the uncertain and active negotiations occurring between wealth and poverty in the latter half of the 14th century.

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[8] Pearsall, 179.

Chapter II: Poverty in Transition

The many formal and informal medieval approaches to charity and the multitude of social points of view about the poor are obviously complex. English society during the 14th century was adjudicating, pivoting, adjusting, and adapting to a host of economic, political, religious issues that were themselves constantly changing. A partial list of the most pressing questions in this period will illustrate this: Is profit a good thing? If so, how? Are merchants a necessary evil or virtuous contributors to society?[9] And does being a successful merchant impose an obligation to help the poor? How does one distinguish necessary poverty from unnecessary poverty? Does the church infrastructure help ameliorate or perpetuate states of poverty? How can profit, interest, wealth and excess be understood in relationship to the poor? Perhaps most important: Who is ultimately accountable for the poor – church or state -- and how is this accountability negotiated?

The social challenge of poverty is constantly in flux, and while it is a ubiquitous part of all societies in all times, the various social conditions that are at play vary wildly. In the latter half of the 14th century, the combination of low population and rising wages

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[9] This is an issue that merits more discussion. As an example of how conflicted and uncertain Langland was about the legitimacy of merchants and commerce, consider Robertson and Stephens' following statement: "There was much debate about whether merchants exercised a legitimate function in society, since they did not create anything, but made money from redistributing the work of others. In the following lines (VII, 40 p. 115 n.) Langland takes the position that their trade has intrinsic moral hazards, but defends the function itself." This rather nicely illustrates the necessary negotiation of wealth and faith then current in medieval society: Merchants (and profit) are necessary parts of a growing economy; but money threatens their salvation. But, since money and exchange are necessary, mercantilism is accepted, conditionally. See Passus III, 175 – 227, where the character of Meed is making the case for a meaningful role for wealth and prosperity – as a necessary precondition of philanthropy. Still, Langland is uncomfortable. In other words, Langland cannot make up his mind, and this is an example of the profound social equivocation of the period.

led to relatively few problems with poverty; that is not to say, however, that poverty diminished in 14th century society, but that the nature of poverty changed rather significantly, and began a transformation from a primarily religious problem to a socio-economic, secular problem.

We can look at the years from 1348 to 1381 as being transformative in very critical ways with respect to changing views about poverty, driven by wage conflict, growing needs for capital, the rise of the merchant class and social mobility – to name just a few of the social forces at work. The *Piers Plowman* of the turbulent, post-plague, wage-conflicted, increasingly transaction-oriented period of the late 14th century provides us an example of social, ethical, religious and economic principles in flux, the traditional, legacy Catholic view of the world in collision with emerging economic realities. Perhaps none of those economic realities was more important than those caused by the plague.

The great pandemic of 1348 – 1350 wiped out a significant portion of the population of England – depending on the sources one might choose, somewhere between one third and one half of the total.[10] The total population dropped from just below five million to quite possibly as little as two million in just a few years. Prior to the plague, England's population had been on a path of steady growth. Given rising levels of available wage labor, and an entrenched stratum of landlords, wealth was concentrated

[10] What percentage of the population died in the Great Plague, and what might be the absolute number of deaths? This question has many answers, and there are sources available to back just about any claim one chooses. For this paper, my choice of source is John Hatcher, Chapter 2, "Direct Evidence of Population Change." Hatcher's analysis accounts for a broad range of possibilities and variables, and provides an appropriate range of mortality rates, from the low side of approximately 35% to the high side of approximately 70%. The implication is that the population of England in the 1300s and the first half of the 1400s declined from approximately 5,000,000 to as low as 2,000,000. It is misleading to make too empirical of a claim here, but it is very safe to claim that it was a period of remarkable death – and of remarkable wage inflation.

and controlled in a small segment of the population.[11] This abundance of population led directly to difficult economic times for the vast majority, the result of which was immense downward pressure on compensation structures for the peasant class, difficult living circumstances for all but a very slim minority of wealthy, and extraordinary social pressures driven by widespread sustenance-level work. Feudal society was under enormous pressure as the haves and the have-nots grew more and more distant.

Regardless of the specific number or percentage of deaths, the impact of the plague was to reverse the capital-labor table, suddenly rendering labor scarce. This was not a short-lived phenomenon. The imbalances between labor and demand continued for decades beyond the 1348 plague and created an economic dynamic that pitted the emerging wage laborer class against the hiring agent. Wages began a climb and "reached a peak somewhere between 1430 and 1460."[12] It is no small matter to note that wages continued climbing for nearly one hundred years. This upheaval generated a number of complex and volatile demographic changes: an increase in wages, accompanied by a resentful and conflicted social view of wage earners; increased mobility from rural to urban settings as newly empowered wage earners migrated in search of higher incomes; an increase in the type and net number of poor, driven by prices that exceeded wage inflation and the more isolated, mobile poor of the urban areas; and a deep sense of conflict and tension between the haves and the have-nots.

In this milieu of change and upheaval, the social structures created to deal with poverty begin a long-term cycle of relative improvement, moving from a multitude of

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[11] Bolton, 180 ff. The "expansion without growth" economic phenomenon is not uncommon, but was particularly severe in the half century prior to the great plague of 1348. In this period, the privileged were more likely to experience better living standards. But "the poor had to pay" (184).
[12] Hatcher, 48.

assistance methodologies, primarily organized around the church infrastructure, toward a more coherent, state-sponsored system of poor relief.[13] At its simplest, the change can be seen as poverty moving from a primarily church-based system to a more secular system, driven by three primary factors: demographics, changing ideologies of poverty and charity, and dramatically altering patterns of government.[14] This transition in point of view and approach occurs across an array of social, theological and intellectual domains, but the central conflict and change in social constructs of poverty resides in the tension between the secular and religious worlds driven by and accelerated by a dramatically changing economic landscape.[15]

If we look back from William Langland's late 14th century perspective to the world of the 12th century, we find a powerful Church structure riding a centuries-long buildup of Papal power and claiming the role of primacy regarding governance of both Christian and secular realms. If we then look past Langland's era and on into the 15th and 16th centuries, we find secular government gradually assuming a co-equal, if not superior, role in relation to the Church. This shift in power had a particularly profound influence on perceptions, strategies and attitudes toward the poor,[16] and occurs in the dynamic of a complex array of social, demographic, economic and religious changes.

"The poor are a difficult group to identify and discuss as whole" because the conditions under which poverty occurs, and the state of administrative and social support

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[13] McIntosh, 1 – 25.
[14] McIntosh, 2.
[15] This claim is based primarily on the "Epilogue" found in *The Mind of the Middle Ages*, by Frederick B. Artz. This chapter is a century-by-century narrative summary of 200 – 1500, and traces the meta-level issues across the period. In addition to the rising tensions between wealth and a growing middle/wage-earning class, there is the constant presence of the conflict between religious institutions as the primary source of social stability and the rising influence and power of secular government. The gradual shift from religious-based to civil/social-based perspectives regarding poverty leads to a concomitant shift in how poverty is understood and managed.
[16] McIntosh, 15.

systems, are in a constant state of flux from time to time and place to place.[17] This state of flux was particularly dramatic during the time William Langland was writing *Piers Plowman*. Langland is living and writing at the historical epicenter of plague-driven population decline, and *Piers Plowman* reflects the social and religious turmoil which followed. Although many of the substantial changes that are accelerating in the time of Langland would play out over the decades and centuries following Langland, the seeds of change are there and can be seen clearly in the text of his poem: the beginning of the decline of power of the Catholic church; a relatively rapid change in economic circumstances leading to a new class of wealthy individuals; an increase in the number and type of impoverished individuals, primarily seen in the shift from urban to rural populations; a newly empowered wage-earning class; and the gradual but steady increase in the power of the secular state relative to the power of the church-state. It is a combination of social changes that is broad, deep and powerful.[18]

[17] Rubin, 169.

[18] This broad set of claims is intended to establish the rather straightforward point that the 350-year period from roughly the 12th through the 15th centuries was turbulent in some very specific ways: social norms and organizational structures were being challenged; population swings were as dramatic as any in human history (a long steady increase, accompanied by all the economic consequences of increasing populations; followed by a sudden, dramatic decrease and the attendant economic consequences of that); the foundations of religious conflicts that ultimately led to the Reformation were evolving; and many, many others. The primary sources for these claims are: Artz, Epilogue, 1, The Middle Ages, Century by Century" and Hatcher.

Chapter III: The Social-Religious Background of Poverty

To better understand the transitional nature of poverty as an issue in the 14th century, it is helpful to take a broad look at how the Church and the secular state interacted and operated prior to and during this period. This Section examines the social and religious domains of poverty leading up to the 14th century. The specific concern here is to understand how poverty was understood, as that understanding was mediated by the then-dominant authority – the church.

Langland and his contemporaries inherited an established system of values and strategies for the poor, and it is this inherited system that is being negotiated and changed. During the transitional centuries from approximately the second feudal age (950 – 1350) into the late Medieval period, issues of policy and law were adjudicated simultaneously in two court systems and two forms of government: The Church and the secular state. In *Medieval Poor Law: A Sketch of Canonical Theory and Its Application in England,* Brian Tierney examines the respective roles of canon law and the church in vetting the critical issue of property ownership and communal property. Tierney is concerned with how canon law established the legal status of the poor (including a working definition of deserving poor vs undeserving poor), how the poor might establish claims on other individuals and society, and how institutions could be established and administered to serve the poor.

As Tierney shows, in the emergent thinking of the medieval era the task of managing the poor was complicated by the fact of the two-state state: the emerging and evolving secular state itself (along with the ever-changing roles and functions of governments, the monarchy and legal system), and the Church, which operated in every way as a fully vested, fully functional and co-equal branch of government.[19] The medieval actor had no problem accepting a dualistic legal and court system, one empowered by society and one empowered by religious principles. The medieval individual believed that Man has a "two-fold destiny, a life of the body and a life of the spirit, a life to live here on earth and an eternal life in the hereafter."[20] Logically medieval society accepted and took for granted that there would be two players establishing policy relating to the poor, two distinct public authorities, each of which would be accountable for their respective domains, and which would share the task of understanding, defining and managing poverty.

The great challenge to canon law in the Medieval era was to first establish a legal and definitional status for the poor, one that could both comport with textual histories (primarily Scripture, but also the Scholastics) and with evolving economic prosperity and rapidly changing demographics and social structures. Jurisprudence, beginning in the eleventh century, began to adopt the rediscovered Roman/Justinian principles of law, and adapt those to the strong desire in the medieval intellect to create a framework of order consistent with a Catholic cosmology. Secular law was influenced by these adaptations to Roman/Justinian principles; but canon law began to develop a deeply ordered and

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[19] Tierney argues that the Church's co-equal status was validated in many domains, including property laws, the structural institutions (such as the parish) which were designated as deliverers of poor relief, and practice and theory. As noted elsewhere, Tierney quotes the legal historian F. W. Maitland: "The medieval church was a state": hence the claim of "co-equal status."

[20] Tierney, 3.

detailed structure relating to issues of ownership, poverty, charity and institutionalized approaches to the poor, aimed at codifying centuries of legacy decrees, opinions, rulings and writings relating to the church.

Beginning with Gratian's *Decretum* in 1140, writers, thinkers and religious leaders began the long process of defining and re-defining law and policy relating to poverty, and rationalizing these points of view with religious authority, and, over time, with economic realities and opportunities for wealth creation. This rationalization process was complicated in the medieval era by the historical notion of "holy poverty." Voluntary poverty, or asceticism, was a state that was recognized as a form of worship, and something that was wholly and totally pleasing to God and good for the individual soul. In the case of voluntary poverty, the church did not need to establish a legal status: the state is voluntary. Whether one was born poor and made a conscious decision to continue in a state of poverty to demonstrate a love of God, or at some point voluntarily gave up possessions to enter into a state of poverty, the result, according to canon law, was voluntary poverty, a "positive action (of) divesting oneself of property."[21] The concept is embedded in canon law, in the lives of Saints, and in Scripture, and is foundational to the conflict between secular materialism and the desire for wealth and the core teachings of Scripture.[22]

The other state of poverty, the state requiring definition and the establishment of legal status, was involuntary –or "necessary" – poverty. Those who fit into this category

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[21] Scott, 53.

[22] Tierney addresses a broad array of canon law, church doctrine and the philosophical antecedents of the Scholastics as their work relates to poverty in Chapter I, "Poverty." This chapter is particularly important because it clearly outlines the inherent difficulty of distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary poverty, as well as the extraordinary depth and breadth of law, philosophy, theology and real-world institutions and practices aimed at poverty. Even given the complexity of the issue, Tierney asserts that medieval "men were quite capable of distinguishing between holy poverty and idle parasitism" (11).

– widows, the infirm, the elderly and so on – were considered as a special group, one that required careful elucidation of rights, privileges and protection.

This argument that the medieval Church exercised co-equal power with then-existing state political structures, and that in fact the Church operated as a *de facto* state, is an important perspective to bear in mind when thinking about poverty and its amelioration. The power of the church cannot be underestimated. It functioned as an "international society with an international government. The medieval Papacy was the only international government that has ever really worked in Europe since the days of the Roman Empire."[23] The church exercised its power to appropriate legal authority over the poor, conferring both legal/representational rights for the poor, and decreeing that the poor, when faced with legal issues that were complicated by poverty, would be tried in ecclesiastical courts, rather than secular courts.[24] This allowed the Church to assume accountability for defining what poverty was (and was not), to appropriate institutional accountability for supporting the poor, and – more important – to supersede secular law when secular courts were adjudicating the poor.[25]

The legal/definitional challenges faced by the Church regarding the poor were made urgent by increasing economic momentum and growth of commerce, which became a significant force by the 13th century. Although society would still be largely rural, subsistence-level, and at best only marginally literate, the level of commercial

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[23] Tierney, 3.
[24] Tierney's Chapter I, "Poverty" offers broad support for these claims. Tierney argues that the Church established that poverty claims would be adjudicated "before a church court rather than before a secular one," that the poor would be provided "free counsel," and that the poor were ensured of a wide variety of "technical privileges" (11 -17).
[25] In fact, Tierney notes that as a matter of course, all legal issues relating to poverty would fall under the jurisdiction of church courts. See 18.

activity rose consistently from the second feudal age on (normal economic cycles and variances assumed).[26]

As the canonists and others worked in this period to define what it means to be poor, they had to address the issue of affluence and ownership in relation to poverty, in a manner that was consistent with Scripture and circumstances.[27] They encountered a centuries-old and persistent notion that private property was itself a contradiction of Scripture and "contrary to the divine will."[28] This conundrum forced the canonists into a long process of ecclesiastical glossing, fudging and writing, to arrive at a reconciliation. The answer was inherent in the process of inquiry. As Tierney puts it:

> The importance in the present context of their complex and rather rarefied arguments on the problem of the rights and obligations inherent in property ownership is that it was precisely in discussing abstract theories of property that the canonists developed the conceptions that were to shape their practical doctrine of charity. (28).

The collision of private property ownership and Scriptural principles necessitated some clever arguments. One of the primary authorities throughout this period, Gratian, argued in his *Decretum* that there are two laws: natural law and custom. The former is determined by law and Scripture (the Gospels, specifically) and natural law includes the

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[26] The economic conditions and changes of the medieval period are difficult. Bolton argues that economic and demographic trends prior to about 1300 were clear: "expansion in most sectors of the economy" (180). This expansion was driven primarily by population growth (CF. Hatcher, 21 – 30.) The combination of increasing population, improvements in agriculture, and a growing international trade system led to a long period of relative prosperity, at least for the already prosperous. Ironically, all the conditions of relative prosperity functioned as the flip side of economic disaster, waiting for a precipitating event. Bolton outlines this process in his Chapter 6: Towards a Crisis," 180 – 206.

[27] Again, Tierney's "Theory and Practice" documents the hard work of aligning theory and practice in the real medieval world. See 89 – 109.

[28] Tierney addresses the issue of the conflict between ownership of property and salvation at great length in "Property," 22 – 43. The central conflict is between the explicit communality of property in Scripture and the evolving need to account for property ownership in Christian thought. The issue is brought into relief when considering the needs of the impoverished in the presence of plenty, or excess.

"common possession of all things."[29] This seems obviously contrary to the individual accumulation and ownership of property; Gratian resolves this apparent conflict by simply assigning the rules and laws of property to the realm of custom and legal enactment. Although this switch seems a neat trick, it required further work to establish a basis for actual law-making. The matter of the obligations of property ownership (and the attendant accountability toward the poor by those who owned property) was best resolved, and created the emergent and evolving ecclesiastical view of charity, by the decretists Huguccio and Teutonicus. Their argument, as outlined by Tierney, is rather convoluted and relies as much on glossing historical texts as on reason. It went something like this:[30]

1: Natural law asserts that all things are common.

2: There are two critical terms in this assertion:

One is "natural" as it modifies law.

A second is "common."

3: Natural law does decree that all things are common, but only in a "special sense" of the term common.

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[29] Tierney's discussion of ownership and property focuses largely on Gratian's distinction between "natural law" and "customs." Gratian summarily assigns the issue of property to "laws of custom," thereby rather handily eliminating the need to deal with natural law (The Gospels, especially) as they relate to the ownership of property. Gratian's primary source for this argument is Aquinas, whose basic argument is that since laws relating to the ownership of property are distributed by "emperors and kings of the world," those laws are the laws of human. Therefore, laws relating to property are assigned to "customs" rather than natural law (28).

[30] Gratian did not provide final resolution to issues of poverty; in fact, he "left quite a tangle for the decretists to unravel" (Tierney, 30). Paramount among the many tangles was the need to define the term "common." The path to finding a definition of common that links it to property in a manner that will accommodate wealth accumulation, and account for sensitivity toward the poor, is a bit tortured. But it served its purpose. As Tierney notes: "It is a very legalistic and artificial way of arguing, but that is the way lawyer's minds sometimes work" (33).

> 4: The term "common" as it relates to "natural" proceeds "from reason," and in this sense common can be interpreted to mean that "all things are called common, *that is they are to be shared in time of necessity."*

This argument "clearly established a connection between the natural law theory and the obligations of charity."[31] Johannes, following his need to be grounded in textual authority, cites Roman lay precedent, especially Justinian, even if his reference was bogus. (Tierney judges his Justinian citation(s) as being a "piece of pure legal fiction."[32]) In any event, by glossing Gratian, re-positioning the analysis from "natural" to "common," and citing Justinian, Johannes succeeded in establishing a legal basis for charitable obligations associated with property rights, and rationalized wealth with Scripture (or custom and natural law). As Tierney notes, "however clumsy the argument, it does lead to the very important conclusion that the community of property prescribed in natural law consists in an obligation on property holders to share their wealth with those in need."[33]

This centuries-long process of negotiation, debate, dialogue and glossing led by the 14th century to a reasonably established set of paradigms which informed society's perspectives about poverty.

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[31] Tierney, 17.
[32] Tierney, 28.
[33] Tierney, 33.

Chapter IV: Four Experiences of Poverty in Medieval England

The issue of poverty in late medieval England is negotiated in two domains: the actual, specific material conditions of the poor and the competing religious and economic views of how and why some individuals live in a state of material want, while others do not.[34] The issue is complex enough in and of itself, encompassing a dizzying array of conditions and circumstances over time. In medieval studies, it is complicated by the difficult state of material records. But even more complexity is introduced by the simple recognition that the record of how poverty is understood in this period– that is, the way the poor are viewed, and the way society should address the issue of poverty – is almost exclusively the view of poverty expressed by the voice of privilege, the literate and leisured classes who have access to both the time and education necessary to create written ideas about poverty. Consequently, poverty is "constructed at the intersection of two processes: the process of economic, demographic and social change which refashions areas and forms of need on the one hand, and the cultural perceptions of needs as they are translated into idioms of charity and evaluations held by diverse social groups on the other."[35] This process occurs in multiple domains, but over the time period under consideration Tierney posits four core areas of negotiation and change that are especially critical to issues of poverty:

1: Voluntary and Involuntary Poverty

2: Deserving and Undeserving Poor

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[34] Tierney, 11.
[35] Rubin, 172.

3: Church- and State-Administered Systems of Poor Relief

4: Poverty as Influenced by Migration from Rural to Urban

Voluntary and Involuntary Poverty

The question of how and why one might be born into or voluntarily choose a state of poverty – and the corollary issue of how society responds to the poor – is addressed in a wide variety of ways in the medieval period. At its simplest, poverty might be the result of circumstances beyond an individual's control and so involuntary. Or, poverty might be a state into which one enters voluntarily, for a specific spiritual reason. From the earliest beginnings of Christianity, the state of intentional poverty – the state of being voluntarily without means and without possessions -- is closely associated with Christ and a state of being Christ-like. The question of the relationship between a state of poverty and salvation is considered endlessly from early Christianity up to the time of Gratian (and, of course, afterwards); countless disputations regarding the virtue of poverty and the danger of wealth are written over the centuries – oftentimes contradictory, oftentimes unclear, and frequently resolving very little.[36]

As Gratian is composing his *Decretum* in the 12th century, poverty still resides at the very center of Christian thought, a "central Christian ideal."[37] The issue of how to treat the poor would seem to be simple and clearly explicated in the Gospels: those who

[36] Langland, for example, is consistently concerned with the material plight of the genuinely poor, and argues for an obligation to ameliorate suffering; he consistently asserts that the genuinely poor are experiencing a specific grace of God, and that poverty is intrinsically a blessing; and he consistently asserts that poverty is a virtue, while carefully articulating all the ways it could be relieved. All these points of view, as contradictory as they seem, are argued forcefully. And the contradictions are not resolved. Langland, of course, is not alone. Consider: Augustine, Aquinas, Gratian (and the many decretists following him), the Gospels, the Schoolmen, as examples.

[37] Michael Bailey. *Religious Poverty, Mendicancy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages,* 457.

avoid worldly possessions and look to the after-life will more likely achieve salvation; those who cling to materiality and the physical world of wealth and possession will be less likely to achieve salvation. Scripture tends to be somewhat clear on this issue, in both Testaments, with any number of passages clearly devoted to providing guidance regarding the issue of poverty and salvation. Proverbs 19:17 for example notes that charity for the poor is directly related to salvation: "He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed." And the consequences of not being charitable toward the poor are equally clear, as in Luke 6:24: "But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full."

Where theology provides the dominant thinking to inform social perspective, poverty tends to be a virtue, because it brings the impoverished closer to God. From this perspective, either voluntary or involuntary poverty is an advantaged state and more likely to support a path to salvation. Those who choose a life of poverty in religious orders are admired and held up as examples of Christian virtue;[38] those who are seen as suffering the involuntary misfortunes of deprivation are likewise seen as favored by God.

For the most part the medieval actor would not be concerned with pragmatic approaches to ending poverty, simply because the dominant theology had firmly established that (1) poverty was a path to salvation and (2) poverty was a part of the divine social order. This accepted cosmology of poverty would be challenged as plagues, wage inflation, social migration and a disrupted social order all combine to cause poverty

[38] Of course, even in the case of intentional religious poverty there is conflict. The anti-mendicant movement prompts Langland's dismissive, negative view of false or hypocritical mendicants. "Clerks and clever men converse glibly of God | And have him much in their mouths – but lowly men in heart" (X, 70 – 71).

to take on a new and much more urgent concern with a new distinction: the deserving and the undeserving poor.

Deserving and Undeserving Poor

One of many doctrinal tasks for the medieval theologian was finding a Scriptural-based approach to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor, and "then what to do with the latter."[39] This definitional challenge preoccupied canonists, decretists, church leaders and philosophers throughout the medieval period. The merger of the interpretation of Scripture with the rigor of jurisprudence provided a particularly powerful tool – order – with which to undertake the process of rationalizing views of poverty to theological positions. A "revived study of the Roman Corpus, in which the whole field of jurisprudence was systematically organized according to rational principles, came with the force of a revelation. There was no passion among medieval intellectuals stronger than the passion for order."[40]

The deserving/undeserving distinction was troublesome to the theological mind and serves as a kind of "canary in the coal mine" indicator for movements away from a purely Scriptural view of what poverty means toward a point of view addressing how a clearly formed social point of view might best deal with poverty. That is, the more the conversation about the poor focuses on who merits charity, versus what charity itself serves (or, how it might be possible to avoid providing poor relief to certain classes of poverty, instead of how an individual of faith might benefit from a more indiscriminate

[39] Pearsall, 175.
[40] Tierney, 7.

practice of charity) the more likely the conversation is shifting from the sacred to the secular. Generally, the issue is disputed from both points of view, sometimes simultaneously, so the definition of deserving is never fully resolved. Gratian himself never resolved the issue but "left a difficult task of interpretation to his successors, for he himself hesitated between two contrary opinions, at one point urging openhanded generosity to all, and at another point insisting on the need for cautious discrimination in the bestowal of alms."[41]

The idea of charity only serves to complicate the issue of deserving/underserving poor. In the Christian tradition, charity was a means to salvation, and focused less on the act of relieving poverty and more on the inherent virtue of poverty (and the likely by-product of poverty – salvation). In the case of Christian charity, then, deserving/undeserving distinctions matter less than the advantage gained by the donor, because of the "element of self-interest in the Christian doctrine of charity."[42] But when the act of contributing is aimed more at the target – at the actual alleviation of suffering and want -- then the contributor is apt to practice a little more careful targeting of charity. This intersection of charity and poverty is the ground on which exchange and capitalism most interestingly begin to interact with religion.

During the medieval period, at least until the 14th century, there was little "evidence of real concern for the poor at all, only an elaborate explanation of the circumstances in which a donor could expect to get full value in spiritual coin for alms given, and when not."[43] The game being played was salvation for the donor, not help for the poor. This focus on the act of charity as an action aimed at achieving personal

[41] Tierney, 54.
[42] Tierney, 47.
[43] Tierney, 51.

salvation, as opposed to an organized, societal approach to alleviating poverty, places poverty squarely in the domain of the theological rather than the secular, and it can be closely correlated to the choice of structure through which aid to the poor was administered. That is, if the act of contributing to the poor is intrinsically a religious act, and not a social act, then it is most likely that it will be mediated through a religious structure. And for most of the medieval period, and substantially on into the early modern era, the Church was the primary organizational mechanism for poor relief.[44]

Poor Relief: Church- or State-Administered?

As previously discussed, throughout the medieval era, there was a dual source of authority over a range of social, political and legal issues, with the church clearly establishing equal (if not sometimes superior) standing with secular domains. And since the existence of mankind was dualistic, "two public authorities were needed to promote the welfare of human society."[45] Canon laws and the church hierarchy established a clear authority – both spiritual and legal – across a broad array of domains and concerns. It is important to realize that canon law and the church in the medieval era were the dominant

[44] Tierney provides a broad overview of the many primarily Christian institutions providing poor relief in his Chapter IV, "Institutions." Marjorie McIntosh provides a more detailed overview of those structures in *Poor Relief in England.* The ever evolving structural approaches to poverty included some formal charitable giving laws (trusts, etc), hospitals and almshouses, and the parish network. Most of these institutions and processes were grounded in religious thought and practices. "Most hospitals – not only those linked to a monastic organization – had a religious component" (63). Her chapter titled "The drastic impact of religious policies on hospitals and almshouses" speaks clearly to the inextricable link between medieval poverty and the medieval church.

[45] Tierney, 3.

"law of a universally acknowledged public authority, just as much true law as the law of the state; and law relating to the relief of poverty was one branch of canon law."[46]

The existing church infrastructure of the period – the parish system, the church courts and even (until the Reformation) the papacy – all participated in both creating the laws and regulations that defined and governed the distribution of charitable relief, and in the actual administration and delivery of relief. Since the church for all practical intents and purposes defined who should receive poor relief and under what circumstances and in what measure, it fell to the existing church organization to deliver relief. In this delivery system "the parish was to assume a position of central importance."[47] The *Decretum* and a long line of follow-on decretists made it clear that the Church – the Bishops in their Diocese on down through the local parish priest – had responsibility for "feeding and protecting the poor."[48] Gratian noted that "it behooves a bishop to be solicitous and vigilant concerning the defense of the poor and the relief of the oppressed."[49] As with the difficulty of distinguishing the deserving and undeserving poor, the issue of which organization – secular or religious – has standing to create and enforce poor relief is directly related to whether or not poverty is seen as an issue of religion or as an issue of socio-economic consequence. Lester Little captures this dynamic as he discusses the medieval profit economy: "Adaptation to the profit economy was therefore fraught with difficulties. It created tensions between morality and behavior, between theology and society, and between religion and life itself."[50] The

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[46] Tierney, 5.
[47] Tierney, 67.
[48] Tierney, 68.
[49] From the *Decretum Gratiani*, qtd. by Tierney, 68.
[50] Lester Little, 9 – 29.

critical distinction, again, is that poverty can be understood through the lens of religion or through the lens of economics.

This transformation – the steady secularization of the issue of poverty and the rise of class privilege associated with virtuous wealth – can be seen in action in the 14th century post-plague migration from rural to urban settings.

d: Rural to Urban Migration and New Forms of Poverty

The post-1348 plague workforce, empowered by a dramatically reduced labor pool and the resultant upward pressure on wages, sought to leverage this sudden increase in their ability to sell labor in the growing markets with higher-priced wages found in the urban centers. The need to concentrate the various components of active trade – transportation, finance and communications – meant that urban areas were increasingly important as areas of opportunity for wage earners, leading to a population inclined toward geographic mobility, and increasingly inclined to migrate into urban areas. In the course of attracting bigger populations, the urban environment produced its own, unique and different form of poverty – the able-bodied, mobile poor -- and accelerated the shift from a culture dominated by religious/church views of what poverty is and how it should be addressed, to a new, administrative, secular-oriented view of poverty that allowed for social judgments to distinguish who would receive poor relief, rather than religious-informed views about charity as a means to salvation.[51]

[51] Little addresses the complex changes in the new ways poverty manifested itself as a result of the rural urban shift of the 14th century, and how social systems evolved to address these new manifestations of poverty. See especially "Scholastic social thought," 173 – 183 and "Urban Life," 19 – 29.

This new, concentrated population of chronically poor people was increasingly seen as a "threat to the social order (and) a source of disquiet and irritation."[52] Inevitably, in the presence of an ever-concentrated population of non-local poor, the pressure increased for theologians to find a theological solution or answer to poverty that would allow for the more prosperous urban class to deal with the poor as "a scourge and a menace," rather than as a target for Christian charity. The practical result of this intersection of in-your-face poverty and an established Church structure was a process of 'justifying the financial activities of the urban rich . . . on the grounds that profit was the necessary prerequisite of philanthropy."[53] Although quite the tautology, this core argument would come to hold much power.

Another change precipitated by the population growth of towns and urban centers and a concentrated population of the poor, is a decided shift in theological focus, which is in turn correlated to the concentration of scholarship and education in urban settings.[54] This change can be understood by contrasting the rural, reflective and passive monastic setting with that of the more active, urban theological education system. The rural, monastic structure fostered a contemplative mind set, aimed at a specifically religious vocation. Alternatively, urban theological study, combined as it generally was with existing secular studies, tended to focus on disputation and a more active engagement with this world, rather than a more reflective engagement with other-world. A practical outcome of this change is also a shift from a passive acceptance of poverty as an inherent part of the religious cosmology toward a new, interventionist activism where studies are

[52] Pearsall, 172.
[53] Pearsall, 173.
[54] Little, 26.

"geared toward active ministry."[55] Essentially, this change is grounded in a notion of progress, where theological scholars maintained "their respect for the received tradition and (drew) strength from it" while at the same time "sought to expose its weaknesses and contradictions in order to build upon it, in order to reach higher and see further." [56] And it is this new activism, this new notion of progress in the world that collides in the second half of the fourteenth century with an increasingly mobile experience of poverty and a need to deal with the poor, outside of the context of family, traditions and community.[57]

It is in this milieu of change in the last half of the 14th century – growing urban populations, a new class of mobile poor, rising wages and a decreasing labor pool, a widespread social anxiety driven by the mass mortality of the 1348 plague, and the rise of a new commercial elite class, to mention a few – that William Langland writes his dream vision poem.

[55] Little, 184.
[56] Little,174.
[57] Lester Little provides a nice summary of this demographic change in "Christian Morality," 35 – 41.

Chapter V: *Piers Plowman*: Poverty and Religious Thought at a Tipping Point

Piers Plowman provides an extraordinarily robust text for a consideration of poverty, sitting at it does at the very fulcrum point of extreme social, demographic, religious and economic changes, all occurring in a relatively compressed timeframe of a few decades – 1348 to the 1380s. The three versions of the text that exist today can be dated between 1362 and the decade of the 1380s. This obviously means that Langland was engaged in writing the text from around fourteen years after the 1348 - 1349 plague, until likely after the first Great Peasant's revolt of 1381.[58] Although any attempt to pinpoint when a specific, significant social change occurs is likely to miss the mark, it is nevertheless interesting to consider *Piers Plowman* as a literary text that sits at the very fulcrum point of definitive changes in how poverty is understood and addressed.

The poem is a representative medieval allegorical narrative in the form of a dream vision, where the writer presents the narrative as an actual, experienced dream. The dream vision suits Langland's purpose well, because truths revealed in dreams are disguised, unrealistic and fanciful. But what is most notable about Langland's vision is the degree to which the characters, the action and statements are unclear. The poem is less an allegorical declaration of fixed values and points of view and more an exploration of the unknown. His topic is Christianity in general and how faith manifests itself in the minds and actions of mankind particularly.

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[58] Shepherd, 591 – 596.

The poem can be a difficult read, with a difficult plot (perhaps a non-existent plot), and little real narrative structure. It resists being summarized, but the basic story is the telling of a dream by the character Will. At the beginning of the poem (in the tenth line), Will falls asleep and subsequently has eight consecutive dreams or visions (and two dreams within dreams). In each of the dream visions, Will encounters an allegorical figure or figures representing some part of medieval culture, and each of the characters engages in some activity or debate relating to some kind of social and/or spiritual issue. The narration is intended to have opposing characters articulate some point of view, to debate that point of view with an oppositional character or characters, and to arrive at some sort of resolution to the problem. But it is rarely definitive in any way, on any issues. Or, said differently, it is frequently definitive in multiple and contradictory ways. Derek Pearsall describes the poem this way: "the structure of the poem is associative and idiosyncratic, the very sequence of materials often difficult to understand, its handling of dream and allegory shifting, inconsistent, opportunistic; what appears to be its main ordering structure – Will's search for Dowel, Dobet and Dobest -- turns out to be a façade, and the central theophanic character, Piers Plowman, a mystery; characters emerge, disappear, re-emerge, problems are taken up and dropped unsolved. But any standards but its own it is near to artistic breakdown."[59]

The complexity, idiosyncrasy and unpredictability of the poem make it a difficult text with which to engage; but in a very meaningful way, these chaotic features of the poem reflect the specific conditions of the late 14th century. *Piers Plowman* serves as a compendium of thinking regarding, poverty, a mixture of both rigorously argued religious points of view about poverty and a rather unique – albeit convoluted – view of

[59] Derek Pearsall qtd. In Shepherd*, xi.*

the actual, material conditions of society. A careful look at the poem can provide a window into the past, through which one can view the secular and social experience of 14th century, and a rich, compelling explication of contemporary religious thought regarding poverty. Even more, the poem anticipates the future, carrying within it hints of what's to come, especially to the ways in which the increasingly conflicted views of poverty from religious and economic perspectives will be managed. In many ways, the poem sets the table for all the critical elements of the Reformation: capitalism, salvific anxiety and an intrinsic anti-Catholic sentiment (or, anti-mendicant).

In the medieval religious mind in general, and in the world of *Piers Plowman*, poverty is not an aberration, nor is it even a condition that should be changed; it is in the world, and the poor are in the world for a specific, spiritual reason. Given the foundational reality of this divinely ordained cosmology, the reason for the presence of the poor is made clear, acceptable, and appropriate, inhabiting a pre-ordained place in the world. Consequently, the poor are seen as a means to an end for salvation, and as a necessary, vital piece of the human condition. As Scripture says to Will in Passus X: "God orders both high and low (X, 370)," and later adding for good measure that "God might have made all men rich if he'd wished, | But it's for the best that some be rich and some beggars and poor" (XI, 198 – 199).

But what is most critical to bear in mind with respect to poverty is the degree to which the poem serves as an active inquiry, rather than a clear declaration of a particular orthodoxy.[60] It is a passionate, emotional and powerful narrative, but it is also one that is

[60] Although multiple sources are used in this paper relative to the issue of poverty in the medieval era in general, and *Piers Plowman* more specifically, the primary source for much of the point of view argued here derives from Anne Scott, *Piers Plowman and the Poor*.

situated in uncertainty and reflects the social, demographic and theological/economic uncertainty of the late 14th century itself.[61]

Piers Plowman: A Transitional Narrative

Langland is an astute observer of the real world, a deeply committed person of faith and clearly a learned person. And while Langland's voice is clearly a privileged, upper-class voice, (what Derek Pearsall refers to as a voice of "not the feelings of the poor but the views and opinions of their various spokesmen"[62]) his representations of the poor – the multiple inventories of types and classes of people, the physical descriptions of poverty and the actual poor, his repeated references to the poor and their special place in the process of salvation – provides a window through which to see social transformation – a large-scale social transition -- in process.

In *Piers Plowman*, Langland is not so much *proclaiming* a point of view about the poor as he is working to *develop* a point of view about them. He is, in fact, throughout the text of the poem, negotiating, attempting, debating and trying out points of view. His established perspective – a religious one – is contested by a legion of stresses and challenges. We can see this active negotiation or dialogue in the many debates about the relative character traits of Meed, particularly throughout much of Passus III. Meed is being offered in marriage to Conscience, who resists on both social and theological grounds. Conscience delivers a detailed summary of the deep character flaws Meed possesses: She corrupts the church, pursues wealth and pleasure, engages in bribery,

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[61] Abrams, 273 – 275.
[62] Pearsall, 168.

flaunts the courts and laws, and in general succumbs to worldly temptations associated with wealth, prosperity and sensual indulgence.[63] Meed, in turn, provides to the King her arguments on her behalf: She grants reward for great achievements, relief to the needy, succor to the apprentice class, and in general provides some measure of worldly happiness to a host of various and sundry occupations. Most important, perhaps, she argues that Meed is vital to commerce, that "meed and merchandise must go together" (III, 226). The argument, encompassing multiple points of view and multiple value systems (law, scripture, social conventions, commerce) engages multiple characters representing widely varied social roles and functions and is ultimately unresolved. The King finally proclaims that the ultimate liability for wrong in the world falls not to Meed, but to Wrong. He makes a pact with Reason and Conscience and . . . Will wakes up. This leaves the core issue nicely unresolved and still open to debate and negotiation, rather than establishing a clear point of view.

This distinction – that *Piers Plowman* is a poem of negotiation as much as declaration, that it is a poem of inquiry in real-time, and that it is a work where the author participates in the discovery of points of view through the actions of the allegorical players, rather than passively declaiming an accepted theological or social doctrine – is critical to an understanding of how poverty is understood in the late 14th century. The poem is not really a poem *about* poverty or the poor. It works as both a record of thinking and perceptions of thinking in late 14th century, and, at the same time, as Langland's attempt at reconciliation – the reconciliation of his own spiritual mind set with the existing, material world, to bring Christian ideals into the domain of the physical world.[64]

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[63] Conscience goes to great lengths to prove Meed unworthy as a bride. See especially III, 120 – 169.
[64] Scott, 13 – 19.

That he does this in a dream vision poem, which incorporates dreams within dreams, and that it is near impossible to separate the real from the imagined, means that the reader has much work to do. In fact, the dream vision structure of the poem works as a device to accommodate equivocation, and leave the burden of understanding on the reader: As the poet says: "What this dream may mean, you men that are merry, | You divine, for I don't dare, by dear God in Heaven*"* (Prologue, 209 – 210). Further, as in the example of Meed cited above, Will conveniently simply wakes up from his dreams at moments of tension, leaving arguments unresolved. At the end of Passus VII, as a pardon granted to Piers on behalf of some penitents is being disputed by a priest, the sound of the argument awakens Will and the reader is left hanging. An even more complex example of a convoluted and equivocal part of the narrative is found in Passus XI, where Will is arguing with Scripture about self-knowledge (specifically, Will's lack of same). As the argument escalates, Will (already in a dream state) goes to sleep and dreams within the current dream, allowing him to investigate multiple other points of view, only tangentially related to self-knowledge, until – again with arguments rather inconclusive but thorough – he awakes from the dream-within-a-dream, and returns to the primary dream state.

Frequently, and consistently, allegorical characters present lengthy, detailed arguments in support of some perspective or value; then, virtually without exception, an opposing point of view or perspective is presented: Meed's dialogue back and forth with Conscience as they debate their proposed marriage is a perfect example. Rarely is anything or any idea or any belief proclaimed or declared as definitive, without a voice speaking a contrary point of view. In this constant give and take, the dream narrative

form allows Langland a great deal of latitude to start, stop, suspend and in multiple ways to switch abruptly from one topic to another, and to leave arguments in suspense and unresolved. This may be seen as reflecting the multiple conflicting social currents and social contradictions of Langland's time.

Piers Plowman: A Christian Poverty Cosmology

Langland's basic premise is a simple one, and it is representative of the reigning cosmological view of his time: God has created everything, ordained its order, and all exists for a reason. Early in the poem, Holy Church arrives to begin Will's journey.[65] She tells Will in detail that God (referred to in this passage as Truth) has ordered the world to accommodate and nurture mankind: "For he is the father of faith, formed you all |Both with skin and with skull, and assigned you five senses | To worship him with while you are here*"* (I, 14 – 16). Truth continues throughout this passage to demonstrate to Will that all things in the world proceed from, and are subject to Truth and Faith, that all things are ordered according to God in a specific cosmology -- God *"*created ten orders*"* (I, 105) -- and that man has been provided with senses and reason to arrive at salvation or "a natural knowledge that's nurtured in your heart*"*(I, 142).

Clothing, food and drink and all of the necessities of physical existence are provided by virtue of God's grace, as part of this specific order of things, but there is still a great mystery to be resolved: Why in the presence of all needs being provided to

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[65] Here the character of Holy Church seems to be representative of the institution of the (Catholic) Church and the administrative structures it operates. However, allegorical characters in Piers Plowman can be tricky, sometimes rather obvious (Usury represents Usury, for the most part) and often complex (as in Haukyn).

mankind are there still those who suffer from want? It is this basic question – examined in the worlds of reason, theology, economics, sociology, academics, and scholarship – that is a preoccupation of Langland throughout the poem. Even the issue of salvation is mediated by and through examinations of how those who are beneficiaries of God's grace react to and deal with those who are not.

There is no question that poverty is real but equally no question that poverty has a purpose, a divinely ordered purpose. What is not clear is why or how things go so awry so often. Holy Church makes it clear that the poor are under special protection, meriting special treatment. "Therefore, I implore rich persons to have pity on the poor" (I, 175). Holy Church reminds Will that the sacrifice of crucifixion was necessary to "save" the poor. This notion of the linkage between sacrifice (the Crucifixion of Christ) and charity was part of the cosmology from the earliest days of formal Christianity, but Passus 1 introduces a new set of questions and a new player in the cosmology – profit. In the space of five lines, Holy Church captures both the Christian requirement for charity, and the troubling issue of wealth and profit:

> For though you are true of your tongue and truly earn your profits
> And are as chaste as a child crying at a church service,
> Unless you really love and relieve the poor
> And share in a goodly way such goods as God sends you,
> You have no more merit in Mass nor in Hours.
>
> (I, 179 – 173)

These lines frame up the social tension between wealth and poverty that plays throughout the text and is one of the primary preoccupations of the period: How can wealth and

profit be understood in a Scriptural context, and how does the possession of wealth relate to the quest for salvation? Profit can, it seems, be honestly earned, but only provided those profits are shared. In fact, it is the sharing of wealth that allows an individual to create profit. Truth makes this abundantly clear in these lines, as the issue of how merchants (who are all presumably dedicated to buying, selling and profiting) can achieve salvation:

> And sell it again and save such profit as they are made,
> And have hospitals built with it to help the unfortunate,
> Or apply it to repairing roads that are in poor condition,
> Or to build bridges that have broken down,
> Or marry off maidens or make them nuns.
>
> (VII, 25 – 30)

While profit as an end in and of itself is more than a little suspect, a merchant or other profit-oriented individual may still achieve salvation by devoting profit to various charitable enterprises. This issue was a growing concern in the latter 14th century, as social and hierarchical structures began to transition into new systems, and social mobility both created new financial opportunity and created a new class of urban poor.[66] This new class of poverty in turn created new problems with respect to classification, raising questions about how charity should best be distributed by the wealthy. The rich live in risk of sacrificing their salvation in exchange for wealth -- "Paul proves it impossible, rich men in Heaven*"* (X, 341) -- and in fact, being poor is directly equated to

[66] The social and geographic mobility generated in some measure by labor shortage-driven wage increases also contributed to migration into urban centers, as newly empowered wage-earners sought out higher wages. Derek Pearsall notes that in the post-plague 14th century, "more and more people are chronically poor and concentrated in urban centers, where they constitute an anonymous and rootless class, more and more perceived as a threat to the social order" (172).

being Christ-like. Scripture tells Will in no uncertain terms: "Why I'm making much of this matter is mostly for the poor; | For in their likeness our Lord has often let himself be seen*"* (XI, 233 – 234).[67]

It is not coincidental that Passus I begins with Holy Church, because most of the issues that Will faces will be considered through the lens of Scripture. Lines 179 – 209 of Passus 1 in fact set the stage for a confrontation between the unalterable truths of Scripture and the complex, real-world experiences of post-1348 life in England. This is the great cosmological battle between this world and the other world. Will begins his dream in the Prologue in a "wilderness (that is) nowhere that I knew" (Prologue, 12), an unreal place. It is a world nearly devoid of objects and landscapes, and the text will continue throughout in this ill-defined, vague spatial setting. In the midst of this unreality, Will carefully categorizes and inventories all the many occupations and preoccupations of humans in the world, and sets up a contrast between two states: those who fritter away their lives in false, sinful fashion -- "Sleep and sloth pursue them always" (Prologue, 45) -- and those who practice the most critical of all virtues: charity. The Prologue and the declarations of Holy Church in Passus I, establish the framework for conflict and tension between the view of Christ and Christianity as exemplary of charity and concern for the poor, and the emerging proto-Capitalist emphasis on exchange, commerce, and profit.[68] It is the need to accommodate the latter view inside of the former view that provides much of the conceptual tension throughout the poem. This essential conflict can be clearly and explicitly read in these lines:

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[67] Scripture here represents both the biblical text and the many active interpretations of Scripture, especially as seen in the evolution of canonical law. Scripture intends to establish the primacy of the Bible in deciding all social issues.

[68] "Charity" and "love" operate in a complex inter-relationship. Love is expressed in charity and charity is expressed in selfless love. The words can be interchangeable.

> Man of these Masters may clothe themselves richly,
> For their money and their merchandise march hand in hand
> Since Charity has proved a peddler and principally shrives lords,
> Many marvels have been manifest within a few years.
> Unless Holy Church and friars' orders hold together better
> The worst misfortune in the world will be welling up soon.
>
> (Prologue, 62 – 66)

What Langland wants the reader to understand here, in a not-surprisingly, near-apocalyptic sense, is that the world of the mid 14th century has come to an impasse, between Holy Church (charity/love) and money. The pressing need for access to capital and transactions, and the increasing opportunity for more individuals to acquire wealth,[69] both operate in direct conflict with core spiritual values. Even shrift, which is profoundly spiritual, has become an object of exchange, and the most fundamental expression of spirituality made manifest in the Crucifixion – charity – has become a commodity. What Langland represents via Holy Church is nothing less than truth: "Truth is the best. | Now that I've told you what Truth is – there's no treasure better – I may delay no longer now: our Lord look after you" (I, 206 – 209). Here, too, Langland emphasizes the central conflict, by comparing "truth" – that is the essential truth expressed by Holy Church – with "treasure." The lengthy description of those busy in the world pursuing earthly treasure is juxtaposed against real treasure, the spiritual treasure of Holy Church.

[69] "Wealth" here can mean simply some kind of financial circumstance significantly over that of the average serf prior to 1348.

Piers Plowman, Commerce and Capitalism

At the same time, as charity and patience and other Christian values that inform how society must respond to poverty are being validated in the poem, commerce, exchange, profit and the total ecosystem of an emerging capitalism are encroaching on the spiritual realm and showing signs of appropriating the theological in service to capitalism – a transformation that will reach its apex in the Reformation.[70] The rhetoric of exchange and commerce is not new in *Piers Plowman*, but derives from a long tradition of rendering theological arguments in commercial terms, and of exploring the tensions between wealth, commerce and prosperity on the one hand, and the rather clear declarations of Christian faith regarding poverty and wealth on the other. The language of salvation from the beginnings of Christianity is a language of exchanges and transactions, especially in soteriological discourses. However, there is a significant addition to the economically tilted language in the late medieval period, and that is that economic thinking and a focus on materiality begins to penetrate beyond issues of salvation and to reside in the entirety of the "spiritual project."[71]

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[70] The conflict between and ultimate collaborative partnership of capitalism and religion (dominated in the earliest stages by Protestantism) is addressed rather definitively in Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit Of Capitalism*. R. H. Tawney provides an overview of the "triumph" of economics over the church in *Religion and The Rise of Capitalism*. Tawney describes the transition from Medieval, church-dominated society to a capitalist-oriented society as a "triumph of massed capital," which led to the "triumph of the State and its conquest, in great parts, of Europe and of the Church" (70).

[71] In "ertas Est Donum Dei: Hagiography, Lay Religion, and the Economics of Salvation in The Digby Mary Magdalene," Teresa Coletti explores at length the homilectic and hagiographical intersection of saints and the secular, and the evolution of hagiographical texts from a pure form of saint's lives to texts that begin to rationalize and validate economic concessions in secular society. Coletti maintains that economics was always present in these texts: "The intersection of religious and economic themes and tropes, to be sure, was a recognized commonplace in medieval discourses of redemption, which from the earliest Christian centuries had rendered the theology of salvation in economic terms" (341). Coletti's observations about the Digby Magdalen have much relevance to *Piers Plowman*, and both can be understood as a forum

Piers Plowman is replete with references to merchants, exchange, possessions and money, and they generally occur in the context of a strongly soteriological text. That is, salvation in *Piers Plowman* is both a spiritual event and a transaction, an exchange in the sense that salvation can be *bought* by the currency of deeds, repentance and devotion.

The tension is always between piety and commerce, between a world view focused on salvation and the hereafter and a world view that is focused on wealth creation, possessions and materiality. This tension is seen in an active state of negotiation in the character of Meed beginning in Passus II. Meed arrives on the scene as the second major character to speak after Holy Church, and introduces many of the central conflicts associated with charity and commerce, wealth and poverty and the basic conversation about profit conflicting with salvation. That Meed is represented as a means of exchange is not accidental and says much about how Langland will address the issue of commerce, profit, wealth and exchange. Meed as representative of profit or wealth is contradictory, confused and chaotic, both attractive and repellent, desired and dangerous; she is defined not by any intrinsic worth, but by her exchange value. The character of Meed, like profit itself, presents as nothing more than a superficial feature, an aggregation of appearances.

Lines 8 – 18 of Passus II provide an introduction to Meed. They are a description not of who she is, but exclusively about what she is wearing, and how she is adorned. She is "wonderfully dressed" and "her robe was most rich," but she is also a "bastard" and "her father was false." When Will first sees Meed, he knows that he is in the

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for exploring issues of wealth and proto-capitalism: "Although the play shares with a wide range of late Middle English homiletic texts the tradition that modeled Mary Magdalene as the ideal penitent, the text makes that famous penitential life part of a more ambitious and nuanced tale about the value, circulation, and use of wealth and material goods" (340).

presence of something exciting, but also something which threatens his and other's personal salvation. This presentation of Meed introduces the central issue of wealth and prosperity (as an alluring and very dangerous thing) and her character initiates the interrogation which looks at the role of wealth or profit in the presence of poverty.[72]

In Langland's medieval cosmology, poverty – both virtuous, voluntary poverty and necessary or involuntary poverty – is a profoundly important part of the Christian worldview. Material possessions of any sort beyond what are absolutely necessary are dangerous; the closer one is to come to Christ, the less one must possess of the world. It is important to note that it is Truth that introduces Meed, Truth that tells Will in no uncertain terms that he should be wary of Meed, and Truth that cautions him to not "let your conscience be overcome by coveting Meed" (II, 51).

What unfolds in Passus II is the interaction of a catalog of characters who are influenced by Meed, who are corrupted by Meed, who desire Meed, and who, in various and sundry ways, demonstrate all the many ways profit/wealth as represented by Meed might lead one astray. Clerks, sheriffs and all manner of civil actors wander into and out of the scene, as do allegorical figures representing usury, simony, avarice and various and sundry other social ills and vices; and each one's appearance provides Langland an opportunity to observe and opine about how profit has corrupted this or that particular character. What is clear from all the action is that Meed has little to recommend her in the way of virtue. As Liar proclaims, in a preamble to Meed's proposed marriage:

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[72] Meed is one of the more complex allegorical figures in the poem. She is an aristocratic and wealthy figure, much desired. She is the antithesis of Holy Church and the fact that a wedding between her and Conscience is being negotiated implies that she lacks the same. In the wedding negotiations Meed represents selling and profit, and is antithetical to spiritual values. Clare Lees addresses the issues of capitalism and exchange, in the context of gender issues, in: Lees. "Gender and Exchange in *Piers Plowman*."

> Let all who are on earth hear and bear witness
> That Mede is married more for her property
> Than for goodness or grace or any goodly parentage.
> Falseness fancies her for he knows she's rich,
> And Favel with his fickle speech enfeoffs them by this charter
> That they may be princes in pride and despise Poverty.
>
> (II, 75 – 81)

This passage sums up a number of key challenges Langland is negotiating: Profit is a suspect motive for leading a spiritually good life. Profit in and of itself has no redeeming qualities. And profit will turn attention away from Christian charity, and toward a self-referential love of possessions. These factors will in turn cause the wealthy individual to be less charitable, leaving them vulnerable to damnation. Whoever marries Meed will be liege to the material, "enfoeffed" and in service to wealth, rather than grace. The conflict between following the right path to salvation and the allure of profit is made very clear; but Langland, as I will demonstrate, is just beginning to face the social challenge of (1) understanding that wealth and acquisitiveness are permanent features of human nature, and (2) that there must be an alignment between or rationalization of wealth and poverty. Can one possess wealth and still live a life that is true to Christian principles of salvation? This question is overtly addressed by Meed herself, later in Passus III. It is an important argument for it addresses both the possibility of virtuous wealth and the relationship between wealth and poverty.

In Passus III, Meed and Conscience are engaged in a debate, and Conscience has delivered a lengthy diatribe cataloging all the many social ills caused by Meed.[73] In response, Meed declares that "where misery prevails most, Meed may help" (III, 177). This statement is followed by a lengthy disputation in which Meed outlines the many instances where need – real, serious human needs such as food, shelter, merriment, and shelter – is met with a distribution or sharing of excess profits. Meed deftly turns the notion of profit back on itself and profit is transformed into gift. Her description of profit is of a thing that can be given, not hoarded; it is a thing to be used for good, not evil. In fact, profit/wealth is foundational to life itself: Meed declares: "No life, as I believe, can last without Meed" (III, 227). It is an argument that is simultaneously true and misleading; at the very least, it is incomplete. On the one hand, it makes clear that without commerce, exchange, profit and wealth, there is no possibility of providing gifts, charity or support for other human beings. There would in fact be no such thing as voluntary poverty, because all would be in a condition of necessary poverty. In an interesting way, the point of view Meed expresses captures one of the central challenges of the period: who is accountable for delivering relief to the poor? To state this in 21st century terms, Meed believes that poor relief is a private sector accountability, and without a strong private sector generating wealth and profit, meaningful treatment of poverty is unlikely.

But Conscience is not convinced of this and reminds Meed that there are two kinds of wealth: one is wealth "That first God of his grace grants in his bliss | To those who work well while they are here" (III, 232 -3), and the other, more likely and much

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[73] Conscience here represents human-centered conscience. But like all of Langland's allegorical figures, there is quite a bit of flexibility in the interpretation. In this specific argument, Conscience is the voice of accountability for right action, speaking against the ills of avarice, greed and money.

more common, is wealth that "men in power desire" (III, 246). The distinction between these two kinds of profit/wealth delineates both the difference between a virtuous wealth (which is granted by God) and a drive or hunger for wealth that is driven by money lust. The distinction also introduces a component of the deserving/undeserving poor distinction as well by describing "deserved" wealth as that accruing to those who are willing and able to work. This observation regarding work will play a strong role in how Langland ultimately equates virtue with toil or labor. Theology has earlier remarked in Passus II: "Truth knows what's true, | For *digmus est operarius"* (II, 123).[74] The Latin is from Luke 10: 7: "Worthy is the laborer." When Langland approaches the issue of whether the poor deserve aid, their willingness to labor and earn (or not) will be the critical deciding point. This is also a crucial point for Conscience to employ in distinguishing virtuous wealth from corrupting wealth, but the primary tool for arguing the danger of wealth is an appeal to multiple Scriptural references, across multiple verses. Langland is, after all, ultimately basing the bulk of his arguments on the authority of Scripture, so in this particular case of arguing for and against the nature of wealth, the final authority is Scripture. The net of the argument, after several pages of detailed Scriptural references is a simple one, also from Scripture: "For better is a good name than great riches. *"*[75]

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[74] Theology represents the interpretation of Scripture and the application of that interpretation in the world. In this instance, Theology is making the argument for a rather conservative view of poverty. Theology is speaking to an interpretation of Scripture.

[75] Proverbs 22:1.

Class, The Preservation of Wealth and "Deserving" Poor

One of the most vexing issues of the time was the mobile wage earner, migrating especially into urban areas in search of higher wages. This migration of population created a new class of opportunistic but often disadvantaged individuals, who were increasingly viewed not as poor, but as lazy.[76] For Langland, and for most others of his period, the newly mobile, often newly poor presented both an ideological challenge and a practical challenge: Is charity directed toward the poor something to be granted based on a distinction between those who deserve it, and those who don't; or is it something that the true Christian does without regard to merit? Chrysostom – the Fourth Century Archbishop of Constantinople, ascetic and Saint – wrote eloquently that charity toward the poor should be indiscriminate: "Let us put a stop to this ridiculous, diabolical, peremptory prying . . .. If someone genuinely asks for food, do not put him to any examination."[77] That is to say, do not bother to make discriminations between deserving and underserving poor; simply practice charity to all in service to your personal salvation and leave judgment to a higher power. Langland, too, understands the power of indiscriminate charity, but he is troubled, conflicted and indecisive – at times for and at times against.

Frequently, we encounter the use of the term "wastour" in *Piers Plowman*. It serves as a kind of encoded protest against common ownership, and the absence of work ethic and virtuous earning. Langland favors helping the poor but he is strongly conservative in wanting to be sure that charity is deserved, in the specific ways he is

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[76] Rubin addresses this issue of how understandings are derived in the intersection of two processes: economic, demographic and social change and cultural perception.
[77] Chrysostom as quoted by Anne Scott, 41.

defining the term. His disinclination to endorse a wholly indiscriminate charity is seen in how he portrays those who would pressure employers for higher wages. This wage earner/capital conflict occurs in the historical context of the Peasants Revolt of 1381, and it may be understood as a direct reaction against the Christian communism that was being preached. John Ball, just before the revolt, said this in a sermon:

> Good people, things cannot go right in England and never will, until goods are held in common and there are no more villeins and gentlefolk, but we are all one and the same. In what way are those whom we call lords greater than ourselves. If we all spring from a single father and mother, Adam and Eve, how can they claim or prove that they are lords more than us?[78]

Ball's advocacy of a commonality amongst all people, and the notion that this implies that all material possessions should be held in common and shared, illustrates the tension intrinsic to the desire to define the class of undeserving poor – the "wastours." The challenge becomes one of definition: are the poor living in poverty because the world is not ordered properly, according to a Christian-communist world view of shared, common property, or are the poor living in poverty because they are willfully choosing to be poor? This definitional conflict creates profound social anxiety in *Piers Plowman*, as the secular views of the poor begin to supersede the more Christian/Scripture-defined views of the poor. Langland shares this secular anxiety, even as his anxiety resides inside of a profoundly Christian/Charity worldview.[79] He sides with the employers, and uses the

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[78] Ken Pennington, *John Ball's sermon*. n.d (http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/churchhistory220/LectureTen/JohnBall.html).

[79] Langland explores the intersection of the sacred and secular throughout *Piers Plowman*. The central claim can be thought of as one that equates truth with faith. "Truth is within it, | and would have you

word "wastours" as "an ideological and partisan class term in order to describe a negative version of the mobile, able-bodied workers who, according to fourteenth-century labor law, posed a great threat to the interests of the employing class."[80] It is a difficult juxtaposition of values – the claim for Christian charity and classifying the poor as "wastours" -- and Langland never actually resolves this in any decisive manner.

Truth tells Will in Passus VII that it is sometimes very appropriate to withhold support for the poor: "For whoever asks for alms, unless he has need, | Is as false as the Fiend and defrauds the needy, | And also beguiles the giver against his will" (VII, 67 - 69). But then in virtually the same breath, Truth cites St. Jerome: "Do not choose whom you pity lest by chance you pass over him who / deserves to receive, since it is uncertain for whose sake you will please God more" (VII, 78). Deserving/undeserving? Piers, after working through the conundrum created by this conflict between strict Scriptural standards and the pragmatic issues of his time, makes some attempt to define precisely the deserving poor:

> But men old and hoary that are helpless of strength,
> And women with child for whom work is impossible,
> Blind and bedridden and broken-limbed people
> Who take their misery meekly, leper-men and others,
> Have as plenary pardon as the plowman himself;

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behave as his words teach. | For he is the father of faith" (I, 12 – 13). A footnote accompanying this passage in the Norton text notes that "Langland plays on three meanings of the term "Truth": (1) fidelity, integrity – as in modern "troth"; (2) reality, actuality, conformity with what is; (3) God, the ultimate truth" (15). But the touchstone, the place that Langland and his many allegorical characters return to consistently is the question of how issues of the secular world conform with and align to matters of faith.

[80] Crassons, 34.

> For love of their low hearts our Lord has granted them
> Their penance and their purgatory in full plenty on earth.
>
> (VII, 100 – 06)

This description of the deserving, suffering poor gives us a clear working definition of who merits help in need, and at the same time acknowledges the virtue of poverty – in this case necessary or involuntary poverty. Poverty in Truth's terms is clearly a product of difficult circumstances beyond the control of the individual. But, at the same time, this state of poverty is a blessing granted by their Lord; by virtue of their suffering poverty on earth, they have a straight path to salvation. Their poverty essentially prepays for their salvation.

This deserved and salvific poverty is in direct contrast to the undeserved and socially threatening poverty described in the Statute of Labourers, a failed attempt by Edward III to control wages. A good twenty or more years prior to Truth speaking to Will about deserving poor, this legislation went so far as to describe the undeserving poor (undeserving at least in the minds of those who wrote the legislation) as criminals:

> And because many sound beggars do refuse to labour so long as they can live from begging alms, giving themselves up to idleness and sins, and, at times, to robbery and other crimes-let no one, under the aforesaid pain of imprisonment presume, under colour of piety or alms to give anything to

> such as can very well labour, or to cherish them in their sloth, so that thus they may be compelled to labour for the necessaries of life.[81]

This passage anticipates much that Langland will have to say about "wastours" in *Piers Plowman*. Passus VI provides Langland an opportunity to hypothesize about the implications of withholding support for the poor. Along with a group of penitents, Will commences to plow a designated half-acre, in an effort that initially occurs as communitarian.[82] However, as work commences, many of the penitents begin to feign various complaints, or simply refuse to work. This causes Will to confront another issue of poverty: If support is withheld from the poor, even when their poverty is the result of laziness or dissembling, what is one to do about the consequences, such as starvation? The answer is a decidedly conservative one, siding with the interests of the employer. Will simply allows Hunger to present itself and in the presence of real deprivation – and without any help from Will, society or the church – the penitents return to work and produce necessities.[83] The lesson is clear: those who are "wastours" need only be left to their own devices, introduced to need, and they will see the error or their ways and become productive. Later, of course, once their immediate needs are satisfied, the penitents once again forego productive work.

The depths of the conflict that Langland is negotiating can best be seen in this line: "Therefore, poverty is a hateful good" *(*XIV, 287). At this point in the poem, Passus

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[81] Library, 1351.
[82] This may remind the modern reader of the 17th century Christian Diggers and Levellers movements, and illustrates the power, attractiveness and endurance of communitarian principles
[83] Hunger here is a representation of physical need, but can also be seen as a counter to sloth.

XIV, Will is asleep and the protagonist is Haukyn,[84] the active man. He wears a coat of Christian faith, soiled with the seven deadly sins. Much of his sin is related to his activity in the world and its focus on acquisition and profit and gathering. Conscience and Patience teach Haukyn about penance and – importantly – about the virtues of poverty. Patience provides Haukyn with a powerful, compelling and deeply spiritual definition of poverty, carefully delineated as either voluntary, necessary or deserved. Poverty, says Patience, is:

> a hateful good, a removal from cares,
> a possession without impropriety, a gift of God, mother of
> health, a narrow path without anxiety, nurse of wisdom, a
> business without loss, an uncertain fortune, felicity without care.
>
> (XIV, 276)

Perhaps better than any other passage, this captures the idealized Christian view of poverty. It is a state of being that is actually divine, and is the one certain way to bring a human being directly into the presence of God. To the modern mind, perhaps, the notion that physical want and deprivation could be a "gift of God" may seem remote, but the passage captures the essence of what Langland wanted to feel about poverty: That at its most pure it was a state of direct contact with divinity and a direct path to salvation.

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[84] Haukyn is one of the more complex characters in the poem. The character (*activa vita*) represents the active man in the real world. "Literally, Haukyn is a minstrel, a wafer-seller, a hard-working, industrious, cheerful soul, whose only fault is that his coat is untidy: . .. Allegorically, Haukyn stands for the whole body of sinning, penitent laity" (Maguire, 98).

Chapter VI: Conclusion: Langland's Unfinished Project

The project which William Langland takes on in *Piers Plowman* – to negotiate a rational relationship between society and the church, and in so doing to better understand poverty, charity, wealth and profit as they intersect with faith -- is doomed to failure. The forces of economic change, the rise of the modern, administrative secular government system, an emerging capitalism, and the emergence of individualism are in historical terms just around the corner. The poor will in fact become a social/economic issue. Voluntary poverty as a path to salvation, although it will linger into the modern world, will increasingly fall out of favor. Urban, active, interventionist thinking will come to dominate. The delivery of charity and poor relief will become a system, a set of laws and conventions and processes, rather than an individual act of will.[85]

This separation of poverty from a spiritually mediated foundation, to a social-legislative foundation tears at the very foundation of the salvific view of poverty. Throughout *Piers Plowman*, Langland repeatedly equates poverty, misery, and suffering with a direct path to salvation. These lines in Passus XIV, clearly and definitively make the case for the direct correlation between poverty and salvation:

Misery is always an intermediary and makes him think

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[85] McIntosh provides a useful and succinct overview addressing changes in poverty and poor relief from 1350 – 1600 in her "Introduction." "Part 1: Chapter 2 'Seeking Alms'" provides a more detailed survey of how systematic, government-supervised programs began to replace church-administered programs in the same period. Lester Little addresses the issues of poverty as they relate to Christian morality paradigms in the Medieval era in "Part 1: The Spiritual Crisis of Medieval Urban Culture." This chapter also provides a solid working framework for the urban to rural migration shift, which itself contributed to the re-shaping of poverty as an economic, rather than a spiritual, issue.

That God is his greatest help, and after God no one,
And he is his servant, as he says, and of the same household.
And whether he serves him or serves him not, he bears the sign of poverty.
And in that livery our Lord delivered all mankind
Therefore, any poor man who is patient may claim by pure right,
After his ending here, Heaven-kindgom's bliss.

(XIV, 255 – 261)

The last two lines of this passage summarize the core message of *Piers Plowman* with respect to poverty: Poverty (and misery and suffering) provide an intrinsic right to salvation, while material possessions, wealth, and prosperity are dangerous to the human soul. The latter point – wealth as an impediment to salvation – is almost always provided as a counterpoint to poverty seen as a salvific path. In fact, we are told frequently that the rich can be saved only through grace, because their wealth compromises their faith. Will hears in Passus X about the difficulty inherent in the rich achieving salvation: "Paul proves it impossible, rich men in Heaven; | Solomon also says that silver is the worst thing to love" (X, 341 – 342). And just to make the point as clear and definitive as possible, these lines come up in Passus XIV: "patriarchs and prophets and poets too | Wrote works to warn us not to wish for riches | And praised poverty with patience; the Apostle bears witness | That the poor have heritage in Heaven, and by true right, | While rich men may not claim right, but only mercy and grace." (X, 344 – 348) The foundational point – that poverty is a direct path to salvation, and that wealth is a dangerous and difficult impediment – is clear. And it is made repeatedly.

Still, the equating of poverty with salvation and the linking of material wealth to vice (or, at the very least, the distinct danger of vice) is a world view that is already in the process of losing favor in Langland's time, as the growth of commercial power and trade structures and the rise of secular government collectively appropriate the issue of poverty into their purview. Given how often the poem is modified, expanded and updated, and how often various characters contradict one another on issues of society and the world, and how frequently various points of view are debated, it is difficult not to wonder if Langland knew that the tides of social change were overpowering his world view. The poem's ending is ambiguous, hardly a declaration of victory or certainty. Peace is replying to Conscience's cry for help from Clergy and Contrition while engaged in a battle-debate with, amongst many other threats, a hypocritical Friar. Contrition, replies Peace, "lies drowned in dream . . . and so do many others. | The Friar with his physic has enchanted the folk here, | and given them a drugged drink: they dread no sin" (XX, 377 – 379). In other words, the values of the Church have been compromised by a corrupt clergy and the forces of evil in the world. And with this rather grim conclusion established, Conscience abruptly declares an intention to go on a pilgrimage to find Piers the Plowman. And, just as abruptly, Will awakes.

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