

NICOLE R. RICE

Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature



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LAY PIETY AND RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

In late fourteenth-century England, the persistent question of how to live the best life preoccupied many pious Christians. One answer was provided by a new genre of prose guides that adapted professional religious rules and routines for lay audiences. These texts engaged with many of the same cultural questions as poets like Langland and Chaucer; however, they have not received the critical attention they deserve until now. Nicole Rice analyses how the idea of religious discipline was translated into varied literary forms in an atmosphere of religious change and controversy. By considering the themes of spiritual discipline, religious identity, and orthodoxy in Langland and Chaucer, the study also brings fresh perspectives to bear on *Piers Plowman* and *The Canterbury Tales*. This new juxtaposition of spiritual guidance and poetry will form an important contribution to our understanding of both authors and of late medieval religious practice and thought.

NICOLE R. RICE is Associate Professor of English at St. John's University.

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For my parents, for Howard, and for Lana ל"ו

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Preface

In later fourteenth-century England, the persistent question of how to live the “best life” preoccupied many pious Christians, and new answers proliferated for enterprising laypeople. The literate might read the catechism or monastic meditations translated from Latin into English; the prosperous could participate in administering religious guilds and chantries or perhaps retire to monasteries. During this period, religious reformer John Wyclif argued controversially that perfection was to be found in the life of biblical reading, preaching, and teaching, a priestly discipline that should be accessible in some measure to every Christian. Meanwhile the instabilities and contingencies of religious identity offered ready material for poetic satire. *Piers Plowman*, Langland’s great, inconclusive meditation on the complexity of Christian life, begins as narrator Will dons a shepherd’s clothes, “in habite as an heremite, vnholý of werkes,” assuming a new religious role even as he acknowledges its falseness. In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, monks persistently flout the Benedictine vow of stability, appearing in taverns, manors, and ladies’ beds: everywhere but in their cloisters.

During a period when many forms of professional religious life were subject to lay interest and emulation, as well as doubt and critique, vernacular authors responded in varied ways to the question of how lay Christians should seek spiritual fulfillment. This book analyzes some of these textual formations of lay piety in an age of social change and religious upheaval, drawing upon a largely neglected body of religious guidance together with reformist discourses and contemporary poetry.¹ At the heart of my study lie five late Middle English prose spiritual guides – the anonymous *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, *Fervor Amoris*, *Book to a Mother*, *The Life of Soul*, and Walter Hilton’s *Mixed Life* – that propose to define and routinize religious life for lay readers wishing to move beyond catechism to explore the ordered practices and contemplative experience traditionally associated with life in religious orders.² I argue that these guides, written between the beginning of Wyclif’s career and the flowering of “vernacular Wycliffism” in the

fifteenth century,³ must be newly understood as culturally central texts whose new literary popularizations of the religious life mediate between the requirements of orthodoxy and the impulses of reform. Prose spiritual guidance, which has recently begun to receive critical notice commensurate with its importance in the late medieval period, proves a flexible and innovative literary mode that can be most profitably studied in conversation with poetic and polemical visions of the religious life. This study also brings fresh perspectives to bear on selected works of Langland and Chaucer, poets alternately skeptical and hopeful about the future of religious discipline.

I have selected these particular guides based on their claims to offer plans for devout living to spiritually aspirant lay readers.⁴ The five works considered here are united by similar constructions of their audiences: they posit readers, whether known or imagined, ambitious to move beyond basic religious competence toward fuller dedication to religious life, perhaps even contemplative experience.⁵ Walter Hilton ascribes to his addressee a wish “to serue our lord bi goostli occupacioun al holli, wiþoute lettynge or trobolyng of wordeli bisynesse.”⁶ The author of *Fervor Amoris* solicits a wider group of lay readers who “al day askin how þei schul loue God, and in what maner þei schul liue to his plesaunce for his endles goodnes.”⁷ In response to this perceived demand, each of the guides proposes techniques for transforming lay existence into a form of “goostli occupacioun,” a dedicated religious life in which the reading subject might “serve” and “love” God without undermining priestly intellectual, pastoral, and penitential power.

The key to this balancing act is the careful transformation of religious discipline into textual form. These guides translate contested religious roles into new written models of self-regulation and self-assertion for lay readers, exploiting the overlapping senses of discipline (a system of correction or mortification; a process of education; a branch of learning) to encourage readerly self-regulation and expand possibilities for lay identification with the disciplines of monastic, anchoritic, fraternal, and secular clerical life. These are guides written for readers in the world, and this fact is critical. Their authors endeavor to draw readers *back* to the world on newly rigorous terms, constructing new modes of lay religious conduct to be explored under the careful supervision of clerical authority.⁸

In addition to being linked by their shared concept of audience, these five guides deserve particular attention because they illuminate some of the most significant uses of literary form to shape lay religious knowledge and practice at the end of the fourteenth century and into the early fifteenth.⁹ In the first part of the study, I treat guides that reimagine cloistered modes

of religious discipline as textual frameworks for lay self-regulation in the world. The monuments of professed religious life – cloister and rule – become literary forms for redefining lay religious practice within the social structures of penance and lay community. In the second part of the book, I explore spiritual guides that present priestly life and the Bible as model and rule for lay Christian conduct, encouraging their lay readers to imitate clerical modes of biblical study, preaching, and pastoral care without encroaching on priestly prerogatives. While the first group of texts is cautious in its textual and ideological strategies, drawing upon cloistered forms of religious life to mediate between powerful lay desires and the actual requirements of penitential discipline, the second group proves reformist,¹⁰ mediating between Wycliffism and orthodoxy to accommodate new forms of lay spiritual authority within the boundaries of ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹¹ In my concluding chapter, I show that circulation of these works in the fifteenth century both complicates their messages and suggests important continuities between fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literary practices, with implications for our larger narrative of Middle English literary history.

The claustral and clerical categories that I am positing describe ways of transforming religious disciplines into didactic literary forms.¹² To create this distinction for texts is not to imply that these categories were distinct in the realm of professional religious practice (for example, monastic and priestly status nearly always overlapped for monks in later medieval England). Nor do the clericalizing texts I consider necessarily disparage the monastic life or contemplative life more broadly. For both groups of guides, the multiple meanings of religious discipline suggest strategies for the formation of lay religious identity on numerous fronts. In the *Abbey* and *Fervor Amoris*, monastic enclosure and contemplation reinscribe pastoral penitential discipline and collective social regulation. In *The Life of Soul*, *Book to a Mother*, and Hilton's *Mixed Life*, reading, preaching, and pastoral care become literary realms in which apostolic life is posited as a site of lay-clerical cooperation rather than a threat to ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Placing spiritual guidance in conversation with reformist discourses and contemporary poetry reveals with new clarity a set of common concerns about lay piety's challenges to contemporary religious roles. As David Aers and Lynn Staley observe in *The Powers of the Holy* – one of few full-length studies to consider canonical poetry together with religious prose – Chaucer, Langland, and Julian of Norwich are all engaged in a “submerged conversation regarding the boundaries between lay and clerical activities” in the period.¹³ By constructing this “conversation” in a new way, in terms of relations among lay piety, religious discipline, and literary form, I show how

these texts work to investigate, cross, and even redefine lay–clerical boundaries during a particularly fraught period for these categories. Chaucer and Langland share a preoccupation with the status of religious figures as models for laity, and both explore extreme scenarios that the spiritual guides wish to avoid, the crossing of social and disciplinary boundaries that didactic texts strive to reconfigure.¹⁴ Rather than arguing for poetry as “simply another form of vernacular theology,”¹⁵ I suggest that poetry and devotional prose may illuminate each other, for Chaucer and Langland often ask the very questions that didactic authors seek to answer. Chaucer’s response to monastic imitation and clerical impersonation exposes the dangers that exist at both ends of the disciplinary spectrum, while Langland’s work functions both as analogue and counterpoint to the reformist works of spiritual guidance. Where *Piers Plowman* remains theoretical in its approach to diffusing “clergie” among laity and pessimistic about the state of pastoral care, the guides in question attempt to carve out a textual middle ground, reimagining certain intellectual and pastoral aspects of clerical discipline as tools for practical lay use.

The book unfolds as follows. The Introduction establishes a cultural matrix for the readings to come. In the post-plague period, amid institutional readjustments and the expansion of lay religious education, privileged elements of professional religious reading and practice became increasingly available to pious laity. In this section I consider the extension of different forms of religious discipline into the lay world, examining laypeople’s efforts to accrue spiritual capital through affiliation with contemplative religious orders, investment in corporate organizations such as religious guilds and chantries, and use of texts including monastic rules, liturgical books, and books of hours. During the same period, John Wyclif’s polemical writings interrogated the relation between religious discipline and perfection. Asserting that perfection lay in adherence to the dictates of scripture, Wyclif challenged the validity of the religious orders and advocated a radical form of identity between lay and priestly practice. In orthodox lay efforts to participate in and cooperate with clerical practices, I suggest we see an attraction to priestly culture that the authors of spiritual guidance exploit in their efforts to shape acceptable forms of religious practice.

Chapter 1, “Translations of the cloister: regulating spiritual aspiration,” argues that *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* and *Fervor Amoris* imagine lay pious aspiration as a potentially disruptive social force, a means of evading clerical authority or seeking spiritual transformation that might threaten existing categories of religious status. These works reimagine cloistered

modes of discipline as ways to inculcate independent lay modes of self-control, returning readers to the supervision of confessors and the social structures of the larger lay community. By analyzing these texts as newly disciplinary translations of older works (for the *Abbey*, a French precursor, and for *Fervor Amoris*, Richard Rolle's anchoritic *Form of Living*), the chapter illuminates the literary workings of their cautious clerical ideologies. When considered alongside these two spiritual guides, Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* is freshly seen as a knowing response to intersections of lay spiritual desire and monastic discipline, as it registers the confusions of material and spiritual capital that result from bourgeois lay identification with flawed rather than idealized claustral discipline.

While the guides considered in [Chapter 1](#) look to the cloister and rule to construct new modes of lay spiritual discipline, the texts considered in the book's second part simultaneously imagine the pious lay public and confront the Wycliffite challenge as they fashion new orthodox modes of lay apostolic life. [Chapter 2](#), "Dialogic form and clerical understanding," argues that *The Life of Soul*, *Book to a Mother*, and Hilton's *Mixed Life* adopt dialogic forms to posit the sharing of "clerical understanding" between priestly authors and lay readers.¹⁶ This chapter charts the construction of the inscribed lay reader as a textual interpreter who moves toward an individual understanding of the Bible, in conversation rather than competition with the priestly advisor. Techniques of reading, writing, and emendation become implicated in lay addressees' reform in the image of Christ, and the Bible is treated as a source to be consumed in the movement toward a simultaneous *imitatio clerici* and *imitatio Christi*. The emphasis these guides place on Christ as identical with scripture, and on unmediated contact with "holy writ," align them with Wyclif and the later Lollard Bible translators. But in highlighting the materiality and permeability of the Bible, they work – as does *Piers Plowman* – to resist insistence upon the Bible as a transcendent textual entity, refusing to privilege the text at the expense of the reader.

In [Chapter 3](#), "Lordship, pastoral care, and the order of charity," I show that Hilton's *Mixed Life*, written for a wealthy lay lord, engages with contemporary controversy over the meanings of pastoral care and the clerical life in an effort to reform rather than reject the link between temporal and spiritual authority. The chapter explores Hilton's vision of a lay pastoral *imitatio clerici* that assimilates the lives of lay lord, prelate, and Christ, in juxtaposition with moments from Wyclif's writings and *Piers Plowman* that expose the costs to charity of clerical greed and lay spiritual pretension. By examining Hilton's advice on ordering charity in

tandem with some of Langland's meditations on the elusiveness of this virtue, I show that Hilton's advice to a particular addressee also represents an important response to the broader contemporary crisis over clerical discipline and authority.

Chapter 4, "Clerical widows and the reform of preaching," focuses on the transmission of preaching power, a contested aspect of clerical identity during a period when lay aspiration and heterodox pressure forced the serious evaluation of lay rights to public spiritual authority. The chapter examines selected Wycliffite arguments on lay and female preaching alongside *Book to a Mother's* widowed addressee, who is constructed as a Christ-like teacher, and Chaucer's resistant female preacher, Alison of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Placed in conversation, these texts render the clerical preaching widow possible and problematic, exemplary and satirical at this fraught moment in religious history. *Book to a Mother* offers a polemically orthodox vision of lay *imitatio clerici* as *imitatio Christi*, proposing to empower the reader and condemn mendicant corruption much as some Wycliffites did, but without abandoning sacramental authority or priestly voice to lay readers.

The Conclusion, "Spiritual guides in fifteenth-century books: cultural change and continuity," considers the circulation of some of these guides in the fifteenth century, in the years after Arundel's Constitutions, written in 1407 and published in 1409, designed to restrict the circulation of biblical translations made since Wyclif's time. The decades following the Constitutions have been characterized as an anxious time for the composition of new religious works, but a period when fourteenth-century works continued to move freely among elite readers.¹⁷ Indeed, I argue, we find affinities between the guides of Chapter 1 and Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, which, in explicit response to Lollardy, looks to the cloister to propose a limited view of the lay reader's capacity for understanding and fitness for public spiritual authority. By considering the circulation of some of the guides in fifteenth-century books, I show that numerous and often surprising varieties of orthodox practice persisted into the fifteenth century.

By considering religious prose together with poetry, as works produced in a shared context of religious ferment, this study will enrich our understanding of how devotional prose mattered to later medieval readers and how it might figure in our own narratives of Middle English literary history. Two abiding questions – what is the best life for the layperson in the world? How might that life take textual shape? – powerfully link didactic prose with canonical poetry.¹⁸ These questions connect to a broad textual

system of lay religious discipline and self-transformation, in which literary compromise and hybridization become key to shaping new forms of lay spiritual life. By pursuing the complex affiliations of these works as they traveled to fifteenth-century readers of diverse religious statuses, I also hope to expand our understanding of how texts shaped the many varieties of orthodoxy that circulated in late medieval England.

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Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Abbreviations

EETS	Early English Text Society (OS, Original Series, ES, Extra Series)
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
<i>MLQ</i>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>

Introduction

SPIRITUAL CAPITAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE IN THEORY

Material success and the search for spiritual certainty often went hand in hand for the lay faithful in later medieval England.¹ Acts of endowment such as chantry foundation and donation to monasteries, where masses were said periodically for the benefit of individual souls, enabled the laity to benefit from the activities of religious professionals, tapping into the network of services dedicated to amassing and distributing the treasury of spiritual merit.² For some fortunate laity, earthly life may have presented greater time and opportunity not only to cultivate the active penitential life, but also to pursue the “spiritual life”: what P. S. Jolliffe calls “the whole of a Christian’s life insofar as it is directed towards that perfection which God demands from him, in which prayer is central and in the course of which sins are purged and virtues implanted.”³ But as numerous scholars of the period have observed, living a life of perfection was easier said than done, and “the desire to meld an authentic spiritual life and a prosperous worldly existence constituted a site of genuine cultural struggle in late-medieval society.”⁴ Texts written to transform this struggle into productive modes of practice are the subject of this study.

In a late medieval English culture characterized by the frequent “intersection of piety and prosperity,” some prosperous laity looked to religious professionals for models of the religious discipline that might eventually lead to perfection. In this introduction, I look first at the venerable monastic idea of *disciplina* as a fundamental plan for perfect living and then at its radical late fourteenth-century rejection by Wyclif, who argued for secular clerical life (i.e., non-vowed clerical life in the world) as the most perfect form of apostolic religious practice.⁵ Although Wyclif viewed the religious orders as lacking scriptural justification and argued for the superiority of secular clerical models, I contend that contemporary practical and textual evidence suggests lay interest in multiple and overlapping various

forms of religious discipline, an interest upon which the authors of spiritual guidance would capitalize.

Scholars who approach medieval courtesy literature with the aid of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice have noted that conduct guides aided their readers in the attainment of "symbolic capital," defined as "the prestige or renown attached to a family and a name" in return for material and symbolic investments such as protection and economic aid.⁶ Bourdieu argues further, "symbolic capital is always *credit*, in the widest sense of the word, i.e., a sort of advance which the group alone can grant those who give the best material and symbolic *guarantees*."⁷ We might begin to conceptualize the lay search for spiritual self-improvement as in part defined by a search for spiritual capital: a fund of credit for salvation and a repertoire of techniques leading to personal perfection, available in return for financial investment.⁸ For some laypeople in late fourteenth-century England, success in the mercantile economy may have facilitated pursuit of "the disciplined development of the self," freeing up the time and material resources necessary to seek the spiritual "guarantees" available to those in professional religious life.⁹

The required practice of penance linked all Christians, regardless of status, as a minimal religious discipline. From the fourth to the twelfth century, penance had gradually been transformed from a public, one-time act to a private and repeatable practice of confession, contrition, and satisfaction. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 obligated all to engage annually in confession, mandating a form of self-discipline, in cooperation with clerical authority, that would become fundamental to late medieval religious mentalities.¹⁰ The penitent, having expressed contrition for sin, was required to accuse herself and then, separately from the priest's absolution (increasingly given before any satisfaction was performed), to reform her own internal dispositions in order to produce a reformed self.¹¹ Thus, as Asad observes, "[t]he outstanding feature of penance is not merely its corrective function but its techniques of *self-correction*."¹² In a culture where penitential practice was the entry point to religious expression, those individuals who devoted themselves professionally to "self-correction" may have offered the most visible examples of how religious life could lead to personal perfection. On practical and textual levels, the disciplines of regular and priestly life were privileged sites for laity to begin accumulating spiritual capital.

The chance to live according to professional "ritual discipline" was a privileged option available only to a few, and the late fourteenth century witnessed animated conversation over the best version of religious *disciplina*.

Latin patristic writers had first adopted *disciplina* to represent the Greek term *paideia*, meaning education in its fullest sense, “not only the intellectual element of education, but also its moral aspect . . . the method, its precepts, the *rule* that the master imposes upon the student.”¹³ Synonymous with a “rule of faith,” discipline thus referred both to the act of teaching and to the subject matter taught: “under Saint Augustine’s pen, *disciplina christiana* is the *rule of Christian life*, the law that dictates in every case how to conduct oneself according to the faith.”¹⁴ Another key sense of *disciplina*, arising from this nexus of teaching and learning, denotes its corrective function: “a penalty inflicted to warn and amend the guilty person.”¹⁵

During the early medieval period, the monastery was the site where these meanings of discipline – as educational process, body of knowledge, and technique of correction – had coalesced most clearly into a specific Christian way of life, organized by the *Rule of Benedict* (*Sancti Benedicti Regula Monachorum*, c. 593–94), which quickly became the most widely used monastic rule in the West. The *Rule* defines religious discipline as an exercise in submission to and praise of God, admonishing the reader,

[l]isten carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions . . . This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true king, Christ the Lord.¹⁶

The *Rule*, largely devoted to explaining the performance of the *Opus Dei* (the monastic liturgy),¹⁷ uses the term *disciplina* to refer to many aspects of monastic life: to the “good order” the *Rule* establishes in the monastery, to the *Rule* itself, to the proper ways of chanting the psalms or receiving new brothers, and to the “penalties and corrections” imposed for infractions of the monastic discipline.¹⁸ According to the *Rule*, collective prayer, ordered practice, private reading, and meditation should combine to promote each monk’s spiritual return to “him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience.” This complex of meanings became common to medieval monastic authors who treated discipline as a system of practices both mandated by authority and self-imposed, always undertaken in a spirit of radical humility.¹⁹

The monastery remained throughout the Middle Ages the most privileged site for the strictly supervised “disciplined development of the self,” even as monks began to share the laity’s esteem with the new regular orders of friars. The friars became more visible in England after the plague of

1348–49 and its consequent clerical mortality, for they were permitted to supplement the confessional and preaching duties of secular priests.²⁰ For many late medieval laity, the cloister still represented the most “powerful *symbol* of the mental aspiration toward heaven that defined the ideal spiritual life.”²¹ But in later medieval England, the arguments of theologian John Wyclif on the superiority of priestly discipline in the world offered a radical alternative to the vowed religious life of monks or friars as the ideal site for lay religious identification. Although Wyclif’s positions may not have been shared by most pious laity, his views on priestly discipline have important implications for vernacular texts written to guide lay readers and negotiate boundaries between lay and clerical authority. I consider Wyclif’s arguments here in order to set the scene for the interventions of Middle English spiritual guidance.

Wyclif’s arguments for the superiority of secular clerical life, and against the regular religious orders, built upon his vision of Christianity as a communal practice with the unadorned biblical text as its only legitimate source. The idea of priestly discipline as the ideal form of religious life was hardly novel: as the contemporary priest’s guide *Speculum Christiani* proclaims, “as gold es more preciose than al other metal, so es prestehode more excellent than al other diuine officeȝ and dignites.”²² But rather than emphasizing that priestly worth derived from “office,” Wyclif argued that the priest’s dignity lay in his literal imitation of Christ’s preaching and adherence to his words as recorded in the Bible. Although the monastic order had traditionally viewed its own discipline as the ideal imitation of the apostolic life, as did the friars after them, Wyclif’s vision left no room for the religious orders.²³ As Wyclif argues in *De Civili Dominio* (c. 1375–76), a treatise concerned preeminently with the *lex Christi*, the only source for all human law, true religious life must be based only on Christ’s example, for no rule should be added to the precepts that Christ taught and embodied. Turning the vocabulary of the religious orders against them, he writes, “the rule of religion that Christ instituted is the most perfect possible, therefore if an extraneous thing were added, it would be impious.”²⁴

The mandate to adhere to biblical precedents made any additional rules suspect, particularly those involving “private” observances not dedicated to “edifying” the Church. In developing the contrast between novel, “superadded” private forms of religion and the evangelical model that demands only the performance of virtue, Wyclif casts the cloister as a dangerous place where material goods are mistaken for spiritual, as opposed to the “pure” clerical life in the world, where goods are communal and evangelical movement unfettered. This contrast is expressed in the

difference between the providential movement of preachers, identified as the “militia Christi,” and the pointless self-restraint of those in the cloister. In Wyclif’s idealizing view, true secular clerics are those who “profess poverty, chastity, and obedience to our mother the church and not to the convent”:²⁵ they actively battle the world, the flesh, and the devil, working to edify the church, while those who “retreat foolishly into the cloister” are tempted by the physical ease of the cloistered life.²⁶ In contrast to those who “bind” themselves to such self-serving observances, St. Paul, next to Christ in exemplarity, steadfastly resisted the torpor of the cloister. Wyclif approves the Apostle’s avoidance of degenerate fellowship, “lest in being bound to any private profession he should be delayed from the work of the gospel, for as Gregory says, the strong athlete of Christ refused to be enclosed in the cloister, in order that he might earn more for his God.”²⁷ Here a very different notion of spiritual capital appears: in Wyclif’s view, merit is amassed to be given back to God in evangelical practice rather than hoarded in the cloister for the sake of individual or communal “spiritual security.”

With his conviction in preaching as the most fundamental aspect of priestly discipline, and his concern about the degeneracy of the contemporary priesthood, Wyclif manages to be pro-clerical in theory but anti-clerical with regard to contemporary practice. In extending his evangelical vision to lay practice, he begins to imply a breakdown between the categories of clerical and lay status, a dissolution that would become more extreme in the theories of his followers and in vernacular Lollardy.²⁸ While forms of religious life lacking scriptural bases are unacceptable accretions to Christ’s “rule,” Wyclif argues that the “religious life” may be lived most genuinely by simply avoiding sin and behaving virtuously.²⁹ Indeed, all Christians should be engaged in some measure in spreading the gospel: “spreading God’s word toward the edification of the church” is for Wyclif the very definition of religious discipline.³⁰ Wyclif’s philosophy, with its emphasis on simplifying the life of pastoral service and evangelism, had much in common with that of the friars, although he came later in life to condemn the mendicants for their entanglement in church property and politics.³¹ In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, his treatise on the literal interpretation of the Bible, Wyclif goes further to blur the line between priestly and lay responsibilities. His radical interpretation of Christ’s command to Peter to “feed my sheep” requires both priests *and* laity to teach the gospel, for in his view all fathers are priests: “if the fleshly father and elders are required by both testaments to teach God’s law to their sons, how much more must spiritual fathers, in such a way that they should all be priests! Every faithful

person has the power spiritually to generate children for the church out of the seeds of the strength of faith.”³²

Wyclif’s view of the Bible as the only true “rule” for Christian practice³³ and his arguments for the possibility of shared lay–clerical intellectual, evangelical, and pastoral practice implied a challenge to the entire late medieval system of religious discipline, which depended for its coherence upon the maintenance of distinctions between clerical and lay “office³ and dignites.” For Wyclif, these distinctions became unimportant, as in the case of penance, which was a departure from the gospels and therefore unnecessary. In any case, his belief that God alone could evaluate contrition rendered priestly absolution irrelevant.³⁴ If priest and layperson ultimately possessed the same biblical mandate and the same “power spiritually to generate children for the church,” then the only form of “self-correction” necessary for clergy and laity was absolute conformity to “God’s law.”

SPIRITUAL CAPITAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE IN PRACTICE

In later medieval England, laypeople’s practical engagements with religious professionals – monks, friars, secular clergy, and others – suggest sustained lay interest in the disciplines of religious life in many quarters. Practices including confraternity and corrody at religious houses may have offered personal ways for prosperous, pious laity to engage with the religious orders. Others in search of the spiritual capital to be gained through charity and intercessory prayer sought out contact with the practical liturgical aspects of secular clerical discipline, while still apparently respecting the priestly “office³ and dignites” that Wyclif wished to sweep away.

The varieties of semi-religious life remain more elusive for late medieval England than for the Continent where, since the twelfth century, many types of lay practice had appealed to laypeople who, in André Vauchez’s terms, “aspired to perfection while not desiring or being able to enter monastic life.”³⁵ Such options included membership in third orders associated with the friars³⁶ and the custom of abiding by a strict devotional program within the lay household. The lay third orders associated with the Franciscans and Dominicans left few traces in England, although a few scattered references to *sorores minores* may allude to Franciscan tertiaries rather than Franciscan nuns.³⁷ Moreover, almost no mention exists from England of beguinages, the female lay religious communities that flourished in northern Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, although there is evidence of two “communities resembling beguinages” in early fifteenth-century Norwich.³⁸

Given what may have been the relative dearth of such forms of lay religious organization, lay confraternity with religious houses, as well as the practice of corrody (retirement at a religious house), were two practices whose popularity in later medieval England implies lay interest in regular religious discipline and its attendant spiritual benefits.³⁹ In the case of the letter of confraternity, the lay benefactor donated money or land to a religious house, in return for which the house agreed to distribute alms and perform liturgical commemorations on the donor's behalf. By this means the donor fulfilled the active duty of charity, which was expected as an act of justice and stewardship to the poor and also functioned as a means of penance, to alleviate purgatorial suffering.⁴⁰ Not only did entry into confraternity with a religious house, a ritual that originally involved the ceremonial acceptance of the order's rule, entitle the *confrater* or *consoror* to individualized spiritual capital, but the status of *confrater* or *consoror* might also have given donors an increased sense of participation in the life of a religious house.⁴¹

Letters of confraternity speak a language of spiritual entitlement, explaining that the donor's material gifts will be transmuted directly into spiritual capital, promising, in one typical formulation, "full participation in all the good things, by the tenor of these presents, that the mercy of our savior may grant to be performed by our brothers."⁴² Those in receipt of letters of confraternity could be buried in the habit of the order: this ceremonial garbing ushered deceased members into the "guarantees" afforded to full members.⁴³ In June 1377, John de Meaux, a knight of York diocese, asked to be buried in the church of Saint Bartholomew in Aldeburgh, in the Franciscan habit. His will reads, "I wish my body to be buried in the habit of the Friars Minor, for I am a member of that same order, and I wish my body to be covered by a black rag on the day of my burial."⁴⁴ The combination of habit and black rag seems paradoxically to signify his financial investment in the spiritual rewards of asceticism and humility.

Like lay confraternity with religious houses, with which it may often have overlapped, the practice of corrody offered the promise of spiritual capital in return for material outlay. A corrody, essentially a pension given for cash or a grant of land, comprised a "bundle of privileges" granted to a lodger or non-resident of a religious house.⁴⁵ Corrodies often generated considerable income for late medieval religious houses,⁴⁶ yet in official documents, the practice was sometimes described in spiritual terms suggesting it served as a way for well-off, pious laity to participate in the *habitus* of a chosen religious house, accruing spiritual capital while organizing their religious lives in terms of ritual regulation and ordered contemplation.⁴⁷

Those who retired to a religious house were entitled to share in all of its material and spiritual benefits, “participating in its religious life, sharing its merit and enjoying the provision of all their physical needs.”⁴⁸ The 1378 *Corrodium Paynot* grants corrody to Thomas and Johanna Paynot, a burgess and his wife, at the house of the Carmelite Friars of Lynn. After describing the details of their food and lodging, the document grants the couple free access to the spiritual spaces and practices of the friary, permitting them to enter “into their [the friars’] church through the cloister at all hours of the divine office.”⁴⁹ Without obligating them to follow the rule of the order, this agreement suggests that Thomas and Johanna will agree to submit to the friary’s particular “logic of practice.” To borrow from Bourdieu’s formulation, in the system that this document lays out, “the whole social order imposes itself at the deepest level of the bodily dispositions through a particular way of regulating the use of time, the temporal distribution of collective and individual activities and the appropriate rhythm with which to perform them.”⁵⁰ This clause suggests that the couple may be engaged, potentially for much of their day, in observation of the *Opus Dei* with the friars, not just as onlookers but as participants. Along with the right to this flexible engagement in the order’s *habitus*, the corrody also grants Thomas and Johanna the same right to “participation” in spiritual benefit, from the friars’ prayer and other activities, that the above letter of confraternity granted to its *confratri* and *consorores*.⁵¹ This brief look at the evidence of wills, letters of confraternity, and corrodies suggests that a sense of possibility existed at the end of the fourteenth century for privileged laity to enter in practical ways into regulated and introspective religious lives.

While the cloister attracted some who sought daily access to the rhythms of its “spiritual life,” the parish was the most immediate and primary site for the expression of devotion by most laity. Lay investments and limited participation in clerical discipline, understood both as a “body of knowledge” and as “physical and spiritual practice,” were basic features of late fourteenth-century parish life. Even had they been able to navigate Wyclif’s academic Latin, it is uncertain whether many devout laypeople of the late fourteenth century would have been receptive to his conviction that lay fathers should be considered “presbyteri” or that all Christians could eschew the requirements of the confessional. The ecclesiastical condemnations of some of Wyclif’s views on preaching, the eucharist, and auricular confession in 1382, however much they distorted his actual positions, further removed him from the mainstream of piety.⁵²

However, in parallel with lay participation with religious institutions through practices of confraternity and corrody, collective modes of lay