

**The Perception of Holiness: Spiritual Idealism in Late Medieval & Reformation England,  
1350-1539**

By

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The Perception of Holiness: Spiritual Idealism in Late Medieval & Reformation England, 1350-1539

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the formation of spiritual idealism in England during the late medieval era and into the early Reformation period. It highlights how English observers and writers discerned holiness among monastics. Tracing four archetypes of spiritual idealism, personal piety, idyllic poverty, austerity, and eschewing religious corporatism from 1350-1539, it shows these categories defined the essence of Christian holiness. Moreover, monastic adherence to these archetypes earned certain orders praise and garnered reverence from the laity. While a long historiography of monastic decline in England has dominated scholarly work, this dissertation suggests that certain, ascetic orders, such as the Carthusians did not fall into disrepute, but remained at the apogee of spiritual idealism and personified holiness in the perceptions of many observers. Nevertheless, Reformation ideology employed these categories, though shifting their interpretation, which coupled with the divorce crisis of Henry VIII encouraged the acceptance of the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536-1539. Widespread popular rebellions against the dissolution nor the unyielding orthodoxy exemplified by the English Carthusians failed to halt the suppression of the religious houses. Yet this dissertation demonstrates that the employment and manipulation of spiritual idealism played an integral role in shaping the events of the English Reformation and ultimately the Henrician religious settlement.

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## **Introduction: The Perception and Culture of Spirituality in Late Medieval England**

This dissertation project examines perceptions of holiness and spiritual idealism among the monastic orders in England through the works of late medieval and early modern lay and clerical writers, satirists, poets, and acute observers of religion, focusing upon the century leading up to the suppression of the religious houses in 1536-1539. It further demonstrates how widespread perceptions of spiritual idealism contributed to the process of dissolution during the 1520s and 1530s. Highlighting the excellent reputations of specific monastic orders such as the Carthusians, among others, the work shows that chroniclers regularly judged the spiritual merit of monastic orders on an individual basis, valuing groups who maintained a lifestyle of spiritual integrity.

The dissertation addresses four interlocking questions. First, are most historians of English monasticism correct in their interpretation that it had become a corrupt institution, desperately in need of reform or total abolition in the century before 1536? Second, does this interpretation conform to the contemporary understandings of ideal monastic spirituality and its place within English society? Third, how did diverse forms of monastic lifestyles along with each order's corresponding reputation for spiritual idealism or the lack of exceptionalism, influence the views of contemporary critics of monasticism and their audiences? Finally, to what degree did understandings of monastic holiness or sacredness contribute to the imagery of exceptionalism within the surviving documentation during the years preceding the Reformation?

This dissertation will discern what late medieval contemporaries regarded as "exceptional" and "ideal" forms of monastic lifestyle, as they characterized monastic practitioners in their writings. Spiritual exceptionalism and idealism are defined in four archetypal categories: questing for personal piety, living in idyllic poverty, adhering to austerity,

and eschewing religious corporatism.<sup>1</sup> Spiritual idealism and holiness among the monastic orders stemmed from a disciplined lifestyle as well as individual piety. While traditional coenobitic monasticism as well as the mendicant orders bore the brunt of reforming ire, hermits, anchorites, and frequently the contemplative orders, especially the Carthusians, maintained an immunity from reformist ire. Therefore, the holy individual, whom transcended earthly existence and avoided relations within the human community, ascending to constant communion with the divine, proved an enormously powerful image in late medieval society. Much research on mystics, contemplatives, and eremitical monasticism suggests that certain groups stood outside the widely perceived spiritual failings of the late medieval monasticism.<sup>2</sup> Favorable descriptions in many texts centered on the belief that these individuals or groups lived a pure and holy lifestyle. Through this sacred status the monk or nun became a powerful intercessor who acted as a medium between the divine and the laity. This task proved a valuable and potent spiritual service. “It has always been felt that a life so independent of the common intercourse of human relationships must possess a secret known only to a few, and asceticism has there been venerated” by late medieval culture, noted historian R.M. Clay.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Giles Constable, *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Constable suggests many of these characteristics formed the basis for modern historical evaluation of the “state of monasticism” during the middle ages. C.H. Lawrence, *Friars: The Impact of the Mendicant Orders on Medieval Society*, New York, NY: (I.B. Taurus, 2013), pp. 65-89; C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, New York, NY: (Routledge, 2015). Lawrence also suggests historians have employed a similar set of criteria to judge the meritocracy of the monastics during the medieval period. For a detailed analysis and description of these categories see chapter two of this thesis or Ludo Millis, *Angelic Monks and Worldly Men*, Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 1992), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> R.M. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, London, UK: (London, 1914). Ann K. Warren *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, Oakland, CA: (University of California Press, 1985). *Anchoritism in the Middle Ages Texts and Traditions*, Catherine Innes-Parker and Naoe Kukita Yoshikawa eds., Cardiff, UK: (University of Wales Press, 2013). Wolfgang Riehle, *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England*, Cornell, NY: (Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> R.M. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, p. xv.

Hence some monastic orders, such as the Carthusians, found themselves in a unique position as many benefactors and critics greatly esteemed their semi-eremitical, rigorously pious, and non-worldly lifestyle. The contemplative orders formed a niche in the world of mystics and holy persons that at once proved more prominent than the single recluse yet retained the essence of holiness by renouncing the world and living as a hermit, which earned them reverence in the perceptions of many medieval and early modern authors. Thus, this study argues that many texts communicated a specific form of spiritual idealism to their audiences, emphasizing individual piety, personal holiness, and distance from worldly affairs, and subsequently observers employed this definition to judge the spiritual merit of monastic orders.

Much of this work elucidates perceptions, attitudes, and memories as they related to holiness and sacredness, which are sometimes amorphous categories to measure. Yet phenomenological methodology, which studies concepts of religious faith and spiritual experience, aids historians by providing a window into the views and ethos of late medieval thinkers. When qualifying concepts such as the sacred or holiness, scholars often rely upon phenomenology to help inform their historical understanding. As a major claim of this dissertation rests upon certain monastic groups being singled out as uniquely holy or sacred among a much larger segment of profane monks by medieval and early modern observers, it employs some phenomenological methodology. Defining what constituted sacredness or holiness in late medieval and early modern thought, this study relies upon the seminal work of Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.<sup>4</sup> Widely considered the founding text of phenomenology, it suggests numinous experience or communing with divine was a central and essential practice of western religion. Otto provides an alternative framework for studying religion and attitudes

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<sup>4</sup> Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of Holiness: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, reprint of the 1923 English edition, New York, NY: (Martino Fine Books, 2010).



concerning religion beyond reductionist theories of psychology, sociology, or Marxism. Leon Schlamm a scholar of religious studies, notes Otto's pioneering methodology helps the modern researcher, "to assist in the recovery of memories of numinous experience . . . and thereby to convince his [or her] readers of the reality, vitality, value and authority of religious experience."<sup>5</sup> The validity of the numinous experience itself does not concern the present work, but only the opinions and beliefs concerning those that observed monastic numinous experience and its broader effects on the perception of monastic sacredness. Phenomenological theory helps this study explore the opaque, metaphysical aspects of spirituality surrounding the monastic orders.

"Holiness, then, contains within itself a *sui generis* category, that is peculiar to religion and defines the essence of religion: the *Sensus Numinis*- the feeling of the divine," posits Melissa Raphael.<sup>6</sup> This definition of course includes the experience of the divine within religious evocation, but more importantly for this study, the reaction to sacred communal objects or individuals, such monks, abbeys, or monastic orders. In the most basic sense, as Paul Tillich points out, holiness originates from "a sacred realm" where "the divine is manifest. Whatever is brought into the divine sphere is consecrated. The divine is the holy."<sup>7</sup> Then holiness and sacredness, in a phenomenological sense, describe a transcendental state between the sacred and profane. These states are nevertheless experienced or observed phenomena within reality. Tillich further advocates that the perception and public recognition of holiness provides a "cognitive doorway" for understanding religion.<sup>8</sup> From this point of view a community

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Schlamm, "Numinous Experience and Religious Language", *Religious Studies*, 28, (1992), p. 551.

<sup>6</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness*, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, Chicago, IL: (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 215.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 215.

essentially mediates concepts of holiness, as it collectively determines what objects or individuals become holy. When the community recognizes a person or group as holy, great reverence, influence, and even power come from this unique status. This provides these individuals with a degree of spiritual superiority and allows them to take on symbolic power within the community. “The ontological status of holy persons,” Raphael affirms, “is no different from that of any natural object of the same class,” but when communal members imbue these individuals with sacred recognition they are transformed from the profane into a holy symbol representing the spiritual apogee within a culture.<sup>9</sup> The Christian saint, for example, gains reverence from participating within cultural and religious value systems, rising above expected norms, then receiving communal recognition for these actions, and hence a transmuted status from a profane to a holy individual. With this status of holiness the saint brings benefits to the community, not from his or her natural state, but rather through a process of mediation with the divine, which members of the community value, support, and channel for their own particular purposes.

It is this power of the sacred person, through his or her unique state of holiness, to offer influence with the divine within a particular cosmological framework. The relics of Saint Thomas Becket, for example, might generate extreme reverence, psychological abatement of fears, even supernatural protection from natural phenomena to medieval Catholics, but to Hindus of the same age, the saint’s bones prove nothing more than skeletal remains with no special ability to influence their reality. The same logic holds true among the monastic orders, with some groups maintaining an exceptional reputation for holiness, while others became profane in the perceptions of many English thinkers. Specifically, the laity valued the contemplative orders,

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<sup>9</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness*, pp. 34-39.

such as the Carthusians, whose mediation with God proved more efficacious than other monks because of their exceptionally pious lifestyles. As potent holy men the monks then acted on behalf of their patrons specifically and even the Christian community at large, appealing to the divine for special favors in both worldly affairs and the afterlife. This dissertation argues that holiness among the monastic orders in late medieval England was based upon the combined articulation of spiritual idealism within texts and teachings of the time, which when accepted by the larger Christian community created a religious cultural ethos that determined the spiritual merit of particular individuals or groups.

It remains clear that late medieval thinkers considered certain monastics holy and not others. Their writings suggest that these monks earned such judgments.<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade asserted that communal sanctification of certain holy persons took place when a bifurcation of the sacred and the profane occurred within the thought of the communal majority. “Man,” he argued, “becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane.” This manifestation proves to be “something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects [or individuals] that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”<sup>11</sup> Such differentiation, attained through specific, even formulaic cultural actions that differ radically from the normal, catapults the individual into another state of being. The person then takes on a different and superior status among other normal, profane people within reality. So it is through “venerating the object [or person] as holy,” Raphael also confirms, “men and women participate in the history of mediation between

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<sup>10</sup> Eamon Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, New Haven, CT: (Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 54-61. Duffy suggests the particular reputation of certain holy people in late medieval English religion centered upon their genuineness and dedication to other worldly pursuits.

<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane The Nature of Religion*, New York, NY: (New York, 1959), p. 11.

God and themselves” based upon certain religious and cultural standards of the age.<sup>12</sup> This participatory aspect of religion proves essential for this study’s definition of holiness in late medieval thought.<sup>13</sup> Thus, using Otto and Eliade’s theories on holiness as well as the sacred and profane, this dissertation illuminates the views of late medieval observers on spiritual exceptionalism and its relationship with monasticism.

These intellectual frameworks that outline concepts of the sacred and profane prove invaluable in case studies of medieval monasticism and determining what traits caused observers to perceive a particular order or individual as embodying spiritual idealism. This work focuses upon the Carthusians as exemplars of spiritual idealism, but also makes comparisons with other contemplatives such as the Bridgettines, Observants, and hermits, who within contemporary descriptions were often described in radically different terms than other profane ecclesiastics. Coupled with literature and copious historical evidence, this work provides a window into late medieval understandings of spiritual idealism, which stressed the vital nature personal holiness and non-worldliness among monastic orders.

This dissertation, then, illuminates complex religious thought in the writings of many observers, suggesting why these thinkers considered only certain religious orders spiritually exceptional and not others. Along with the popularity of well-respected orders of the late middle ages, such as the Carthusians, the praise and material support of hermits as well as anchorites further demonstrated the increasing importance of the contemplative lifestyle and its connection to personal holiness in the century preceding the Reformation.<sup>14</sup> The historian Ann Warren has

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<sup>12</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness*, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Historian Ann Warren’s exhaustive research on the number of anchorites during the late middle ages shows in the thirteenth century 198 individuals practicing, the fourteenth 214, the fifteenth 204, and the sixteenth (until 1539) 68. Her statistics also show steady and continuous patronage of solitaries before the Reformation period. Judging

shown, “identification with the anchorite was immediate and constant. The anchorite was part of the routine life of the community . . . both commonplace and awe-inspiring . . . identification with the anchorite provided the villager with a private conduit to heaven and salvation . . . a close and visible symbol of holiness.”<sup>15</sup> The Carthusian order shared many characteristics with hermits or recluses, such as mandated silence, self-imposed seclusion, the pursuit of intense contemplation, and hence society increasingly placed monetary and spiritual value upon these introspective pursuits for the divine. The solitary, whether dwelling in a lonesome cave far away from civilization, walled into a cell adjoining a parish church in busy London, or situated within the cells of Carthusian monasteries, laid upon him or herself the hardship of isolation. In this state of voluntary exile, the desert of the mind, he or she engaged in spiritual battles with the forces of evil, sought the divine in mystical transcendence, searched for the deepest meanings of the Christian life through intense introspection, and prayed for the souls of his or her supporting community.<sup>16</sup> Many religious critics of the time saw this lifestyle as the epitome of spiritual idealism and praised those groups that truly sought personal holiness, which in turn benefited the entire Christian community.<sup>17</sup>

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from the continually increasing amount of revenue this institution received from royal, aristocratic, gentry, mercantile, artisan, and the yeomanry classes over the course of four centuries in England, we may safely surmise that hermits and anchorites garnered respect, if not immense respect, from their benefactors, performing a valuable social and spiritual service for their communities. Warren does note that socio-economic giving took on different forms. Royal, aristocratic, and gentry benefactions usually was generic, providing for the endowed space, not a particular individual. Whereas merchants, artisans, and yeomen typically listed the recluse they left funds for by name. This suggests that they had close and personal relationships with these individuals and placed great value upon their prayers and communal position. Ann K. Warren *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, pp. 262-263.

<sup>15</sup> Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, p. 282.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon Mursell, *The Theology of the Carthusian Life in the Writings of St. Bruno and Guigo I*, Salzburg, AS, (University of Salzburg Press, 1988), pp. 9-19.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Thompson, “Introduction: *Monasteries and Medieval Society*” in *Monasteries and Society in Medieval Britain, Proceedings of the 1994 Harlaxton Symposium*, Benjamin Thompson, ed., Stamford, UK: (Paul Watkins Press, 1999), pp. 3-5.

Much historical research has also found the Carthusians, uniquely among the monastic orders, did not suffer from the same worldliness, moral degeneration, and lacking the spiritual fervor as most other forms of monastic living in the fifteenth century. This suggests that many English observers perceived certain monastic lifestyles as more spiritually exemplary or efficacious, and through their writings strengthened the reputations of these religious orders that rigorously pursued personal holiness. The Tudor cleric Nicholas Harpsfield, for instance, testified to these claims of Carthusian exceptionalism when chronicling the last days of monasticism in the kingdom. He stated, “the Carthusians, I say, men of so singular integrity and virtue, men of so hard and so penitential and of so spiritual and so contemplative life, that they might seem rather angels appearing in men's bodies than men.”<sup>18</sup> Along with contemporaries, historians also have suggested the unique Carthusian lifestyle contributed to its reverence among late medieval writers. C.H. Lawrence, the highly respected scholar of monasticism, suggested the Carthusians were “unique in having successfully domesticated the ideal of the desert in the form of a permanent institution, which never relaxed or compromised its distinctive pattern of life, so that to the end of the middle ages it never required the attention of reformers. The regime differed from other experiments of this kind by creating a group hermitage in which the individual pursued the solitary life within the context of a supporting community.”<sup>19</sup> Giving further credence to the Carthusian lifestyle as holy and exceptional, historian David Knowles asserted that most monastic orders in the years leading up to the Reformation had become

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<sup>18</sup> William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, (London, 1575), p. 210.

<sup>19</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 146.

lukewarm in observing their discipline and devotion to austerity with, “the Carthusians alone excepted.”<sup>20</sup>

These expressions of spiritual idealism among monastics found prominence in the wake of the pietistic movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Bursts of renewed religiosity consumed the minds of men and women throughout England and beyond, which originated from a desire for personal spirituality. Above all they wanted to emulate their image of the primitive church. The *vita apostolica*, as contemporaries called it, was an attempt to replicate a lifestyle that mirrored that of the first age of Christians.<sup>21</sup> Religious orders and numerous wandering individuals renewed a struggle for voluntary poverty and contemplation in the desert, which was vital to their image of Christian perfection. This proved something of a knee-jerk reaction against the state of coenobitic monasticism of the age that stressed continuous cycles of chanting and liturgical performances, while surrounded by grandeur, instead of an intensely personal spirituality. Time for contemplation and austerity differentiated the new Cistercian and Carthusian orders from the old orders such as the Cluniacs or Benedictines. The monks of Citeaux, however, within two generations of their founding in 1098 in most cases became victims of their own success, exchanging lavish wealth for their original ideals, unlike the Carthusians.<sup>22</sup> During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the friars were also born out the *vita apostolica* fervor, seeking to reclaim the lifestyle of the primitive church, rebuff avarice, and engage in widespread evangelism. These efforts increased the Christian zeal of late medieval

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<sup>20</sup> David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. III, Cambridge, UK: (University of Cambridge Press, 1959), p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Giles Constable, *Reformation of the twelfth Century*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 146-171.

Europe and by the fifteenth century the laity were enthusiastically participating in spiritual movements that demanded dedication to personal piety such as the *devotio moderna* phenomenon. These forces had the cumulative effect of transforming the ideals of monasticism.<sup>23</sup> Mysticism, contemplation, and personal devotion, championed by eremitical luminaries such as Richard Rolle, Adam the Carthusian, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich, encouraged a new, highly personal form of spirituality during the two centuries preceding the Reformation.<sup>24</sup> Such movements demonstrated that spiritual idealism was formed via a deeply individual religious devotion as well as by practicing personal piety.<sup>25</sup>

Carthusians and other contemplative orders especially flourished during this age of religious movements. Kings and nobles slowly but steadily increased the number of large Carthusian endowments during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, attesting to the social relevance and popularity of the contemplative lifestyle.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in England no other monastic houses were founded during the fifteenth century except one Bridgettine abbey and three Carthusian monasteries. This support provided a visible sign linking the ethos of spiritual idealism with the laity. The construction and maintenance of expensive anchorholds and charterhouses, such as in London, York, and Kingston, testify that English communities placed increasing value upon introspection and personal holiness during the later middle ages.<sup>27</sup> Hermits

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<sup>23</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, pp. 265-269.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Riehle, *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England*.

<sup>25</sup> Mary C. Erler, *Reading and Writing during the Dissolution: Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530-1558*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1-4.

<sup>26</sup> Glyn Coppack “‘Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for our God’: Carthusians and the Community in Late Medieval England”, in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, Janet Burton and Karen Stober, eds., London, UK: (Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 168-182.

<sup>27</sup> Even a town as small as Faversham in the midlands went to great expense to maintain their anchorite, which took



and contemplative orders were able to harness these attitudes of the age and participated within the spiritual life of the community as powerful spiritual intercessors. They transformed themselves into sacred vessels, enjoying a unique and potent relationship with the divine that most ecclesiastics never attained. Such ascetics spiritually enriched their communities through their prayers and presence. The anchorhold and Carthusian cell proved, “the arena of spiritual warfare, a place for contemplation, a representation of the prison of the early martyrs, a penitential prison . . . condensed into a single vision, that portrayed the inheritance of the past transmuted into the mythology of the present,” Warren confirms.<sup>28</sup> In other words, much research has confirmed that many late medieval observers revered monastics that embodied the spiritual idealism of the age and cherished their spiritual services.

Surviving documentation also indicates kings, gentry, and yeomanry alike supported many monastic institutions nominally, yet in the last years of late middle ages they more frequently, when it came to the care of their soul, relied specifically upon Carthusians, Bridgettines, and recluses throughout England. As Warren confirms, “Carthusians and Bridgettines, sharing with the anchorite motif of withdrawal, asceticism and contemplation . . . their ties to the fifteenth and sixteenth century anchorites were many . . . in each period [the lifestyle] represented an accommodation between the old and the new, the conservative and the avant-garde.”<sup>29</sup> The commonality of these groups rested upon their pious and austere lifestyle, which in the eyes of the laity was indicative of personal holiness. In turn many critics and benefactors increasingly supported these forms of monastic living in the years preceding the

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up a sizeable portion of the parish budget. The community valued the intercessor, who continuously worked on their behalf, seeking divine favor for the community and praying for their souls in death. As cited in Ann Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons*, p. 257-263.

<sup>28</sup> Ann Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ann Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons*, p. 288.

Reformation because they amalgamated with their own religious ethos and sense of spiritual idealism.

This dissertation moves sequentially through five thematic chapters. Each section outlines a particular aspect of spiritual idealism in the thought of poets, humanist scholars, royal ministers, churchmen, and social critics, further highlighting its development in late medieval and early modern England.

Chapter one, “The Long Decline: Old Wisdom & New Perspectives on English Monasticism,” works through the long and turbulent historiography of English monasticism. It traces the historical analysis and understanding of the state of monasticism from the decades following the dissolution in the 1530s until the present. The chapter questions the long-held belief of churchmen and intellectuals that monasticism was at a low ebb at the dawn of the Reformation, ripe for total abolition, which the majority of the populace from peasant to king welcomed. It further probes the memory of medieval monasticism among later intellectual luminaries, such as the philosopher David Hume, Victorian historian James Anthony Froude, and Cardinal Francis Aidan Gasquet. The focus of the section, however, rests upon the monumental work of the historian-monk David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, published during the mid-twentieth century, which revolutionized English monastic studies. His revisionist work more than any other historical study challenged the nearly universal acceptance of the late medieval decline and spiritual failure of monasticism, and instead asserted its continued importance, even vitality, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. After Knowles, modern historical research has continued debating the decline narrative and assessing the state of English monasticism on the eve of the dissolution, which the dissertation examines and remains a part of this post-revisionist scholarship.

Chapter two, “The Perception of Spiritual Idealism in Late Medieval English Literature,” assesses the contributions of a large body of both lay and clerical attitudes concerning English spiritual idealism during the late middle ages. It largely draws upon popular literary evidence and polemical accounts from the late fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, providing an evolutionary track of the perception of spiritual ideals within vernacular literature leading up to the Reformation period. Famous poets and writers, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, John Lydgate, and John Skelton, in many ways represented the spirit of their age. The entertaining and often sensational nature of their work appealed to a numerically significant audience, shaping a wide array of attitudes regarding holiness during the late middle ages. Such authors communicated religious values of the time, allowing historians to discern the archetypal category of spiritual idealism, and subsequently determine the perceived exceptionalism or failure of certain monastic groups based upon these standards. Monastic critics largely described spiritual idealism in four amorphous categories: the quest for personal piety, maintenance of idyllic poverty, austere living, and the denial of religious corporatism. Hence this chapter elucidates how these four categories formed the basis of spiritual exceptionalism in late medieval literature, which then translated to contemporary perceptions of holiness.

Chapter three, “Spiritual Idealism & the Rhetoric of Reform: Humanists, Polemicists, & Protestants,” moves beyond fictional literary images and draws attention to the similar characterizations of spiritual idealism that were also found in humanist criticism and reform treatises on monasticism. Many famous intellectuals and pamphleteers, such as Simon Fish, Erasmus, Thomas More, John Colet, and William Tyndale, maintained a highly nuanced image of spiritual idealism in the early reformation period. These late medieval rhetoricians whether staunch traditionalists or reformers, contributed greatly to the furtherment of religious thought through devotional treatises, sermons, and popular pamphlets. Their work shows that new attitudes were

heavily influenced by traditional archetypes of spiritual idealism, which stressed the continued importance of individual holiness and the disassociation from worldliness. While all these thinkers believed monasticism needed reform, few called for the outright abolition, even praising particular religious orders that remained virtuous, such as the Carthusians. These reformers continually stressed the key tenets of spiritual idealism as founded upon personal piety and eschewing religious corporatism.

Chapter four, “Spiritual Idealism Personified: The English Carthusian Order 1400-1540,” tests the overarching claims of this dissertation regarding spiritual idealism in a case study of the Carthusians and also highlights some examples of other contemplatives such as the Bridgettines, Franciscan Observants, and other sacred recluses for comparative purposes during the early Reformation period. It argues that many observers and critics found spiritual virtue within certain religious orders that exhibited exceptional devotion and personal holiness. The section further explores how concepts of spiritual idealism allowed certain monastics to enjoy high reputations in the perceptions of Tudor observers, while other orders received only condemnation from the same writers. The chapter concludes with the great martyrdom of the Carthusians during the king’s divorce crisis, suggesting that the martyrdoms at once demonstrated the fullness of traditional spiritual idealism at a time of shifting conceptions of spirituality during the English Reformation, and galvanized subsequent perceptions of monastic spiritual exceptionalism concerning the Carthusian order.

Chapter five, “The Dissolution of the Monasteries & Spiritual Idealism,” surveys the voluminous evidentiary base that the English crown employed in its condemnation of monasticism and further used as justification for the dissolution of the monasteries. It shows the anticlerical legislation that came out of the Reformation Parliament beginning in 1529 became the basis for challenging the monastic institution. The crown then used traditional

understandings of spiritual idealism to justify the closure of the small monasteries in 1536 because of purported moral failings and rampant worldliness. Moreover, the shock generated from kingdom wide surveys in *Valor Ecclesiasticus* and the *Compendium Compertorum* gave the final justification for lay intervention into monastic affairs, which ultimately culminated with the suppression of the religious houses by parliamentary statute. Popular uprisings and immediate reactions to the closure of the monasteries demonstrate that much of the laity nevertheless valued the monastic presence in their communities, often seeing the houses as repositories of spiritual merit that might be channeled for their spiritual benefit. Throughout this long process, Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII stressed their desire to reform these ancient institutions on the basis of traditional spiritual idealism, and ultimately shifted public sentiment enough to accomplish the entire suppression over several years.

In sum, this dissertation project examines the contemporary perception and development of English spiritual idealism during the Late Middle ages and the early Reformation periods between 1350-1540. The central focus of the work explores how various contemporary thinkers and their audiences understood and also transformed archetypes of spiritual idealism. Many writers singled out particular religious orders, such as the Carthusians as spiritual exemplars of holiness among many other profane monastics. This suggests such monastics, uniquely, did not suffer from the same worldliness, moral degeneration, and lacking the spiritual fervor as other monastic orders in the perceptions of many observers during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Hence this work explores these concepts of spiritual exceptionalism, determining why within English thought certain individuals or groups were revered for personal holiness and others were perceived as profane. Thus, the dissertation shows the importance of spiritual idealism in shaping the events leading into the Reformation, decisively influencing the dissolution of the monasteries, and galvanizing the legacy of holiness within particular religious groups in English memory.

## Chapter I

### The Long Decline: Old Wisdom & New Perspectives on English Monasticism

Something of a renaissance of monastic scholarship has occurred over the last few decades, elucidating the culture and perception of spirituality in the middle ages. An intensified scrutiny of late medieval thought regarding the religious orders during the pre-Reformation period in England has generated a multitude of scholarly publications that goes beyond the traditional good or bad debate and the decline and fall narratives that so often dominate dissolution histories. Twenty-first century scholarship on religion has witnessed both extensive growth and a systemic change in focus, moving away from more orthodox debates on confessional ideology, and instead highlighting local variation and regional manifestations of spirituality. Perhaps, as Catherine Innes-Parker suggests, this increasing interest in pre-modern spirituality and religious culture has arisen in “reaction to increasing secularization in many developed countries and societies.” She further asserts that “medieval spirituality is no exception, as indicated by the rising number of conferences dedicated specifically to the devotional world of the Middle Ages, and the number of books and articles published over the past thirty years.”<sup>30</sup> In spite of this increasing interest there remains a dearth of research concerning the spirituality of the English contemplative orders and their perception among late medieval observers.

Concerning these nuances in research, this literature review delineates the historiography of English monasticism since the mid-sixteenth century, founding this dissertation on the latest intellectual framework. Tracing the influence of traditional accounts of monasticism as well as

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<sup>30</sup> *Anchoritism in the Middle Ages Texts and Traditions*, Catherine Innes-Parker and Naoe Kukita Yoshikawa, eds., p. 1.

the latest historical works, this chapter emphasizes the shifting scope of monastic studies in late medieval England.

For nearly five centuries historians of the English Reformation have at least tacitly accepted the decline narrative of late medieval religion, which presupposes Western Catholicism entered into a terminal decline of virtue and spirituality during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with monasticism especially exemplifying the failings of the medieval Church.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The literature on this subject is voluminous. What follows are the most influential general accounts of English Reformation history that have shaped modern scholarship since the mid-twentieth century. For the classical interpretation of the English Reformation see: A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, New York, NY: (Schocken Books, 1964) and G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England 1509-1558*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 38-50. For a regional study, see: A.G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York 1509-1558*, London, UK: (The Hambledon Press, 1982), pp. 168-214. Also for the traditional interpretation of the English Monastic failures see: A.G. Dickens, *Late Monasticism and the Reformation*, London, UK: (The Hambledon Press, 1982), pp. 101-104. For a more recent approach to the Reformation that retains some of the traditional theories see: Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, New York, NY: (Penguin Books, 2003). MacCulloch concluded that the resentment of the priesthood and Church itself by the English people failed to adequately explain the triumph of Protestantism in the kingdom, but nevertheless, traditional religion could not provide parishioners with spiritual satisfaction. In short, MacCulloch felt that the Reformation in England remained inevitable largely because medieval Catholicism simply never had the theological weaponry to retain its adherents against highly persuasive Protestant ideology. Nevertheless, a school of revisionism began with J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, Oxford, UK: (Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1984). He questioned the acceptance of Protestant ideology within the English populace, and through the evaluation of thousands of wills, postulated that the populace retained its Catholic identity and much of its traditional confessional makeup long into the sixteenth century. This wave of revisionism was increased and carried forward into the intellectual mainstream largely through the scholarship of Christopher Haigh, Robert Whiting, and Eamon Duffy, *The English Reformation Revised*, Christopher Haigh ed., Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Christopher Haigh, *The English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors*, Oxford, UK: (Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 56-72. Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1991). Robert Whiting, *Local Responses to the English Reformation*, New York, NY: (Palgrave, 1998). Eamon Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, New Haven, CT: (Yale University Press, 1992, second ed. 2005). Duffy remains the leading historian on traditional religion and has done more than any other historian in reframing perceptions of the Church in the late medieval period. His claims go much farther than Scarisbrick, suggesting that traditional religion did more than simply suit the people; rather it proved highly popular. For regional studies see: Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath Reformation & Rebellion in and English Village*, New Haven, CT: (Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 65-84; Margaret Bowker, *The Henrician Reformation The diocese of Lincoln under John Longland 1521-1547*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1981). Christopher Haigh, *Reformation & Resistance in Tudor Lancashire*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 159-195. In the twenty-first century Ethan Shagan took this revisionist model and demonstrated that local populaces accepted certain aspects of Reformation ideology and adapted it for their own particular communal use in acquiring political advantage differently everywhere. Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Alexandra Walsham further suggested that localities retained certain understandings of the traditional sacred landscape of pre-Reformation England, while accepting piecemeal aspects of religious reform, which differed at the local level: Alexandra Walsham, "The Reformation and 'The Disenchantment of the World' Reassessed," *The Historical Journal*, Vol.51, Issue 2 (June

Beginning in the early sixteenth century monks became objects of visceral attacks in popular literature.<sup>32</sup> Simon Fish's famous treatise, *A Supplicacyon for the Beggars* (1529), for example, portrayed monks and friars as lazy lecherous parasites. He further described their houses as dens of ponderous wealth, immorality, and sexual deviance, draining England of its resources.<sup>33</sup> Much polemic of this sort circulated throughout the period.<sup>34</sup>

During the mid-sixteenth century, the highly influential Protestant martyrologist John Foxe, helped perpetuate the image of the regular clergy as popish charlatans, masquerading under the guise of pious ascetics.<sup>35</sup> Following Foxe, many historians took up his mantle. They trumpeted the dissolution of the monasteries as the crowning Protestant achievement of the Reformation, which set the Church free from the grasp of Roman superstition and ignorance.

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2008), p. 506; Alexandra Walsham, "Sacred Topography and Social Memory: Religious Change and the Landscape in Early Modern Britain and Ireland", *The Historical Journal*, Vol.55, Issue 4, (Dec., 2012). Alexandra Walsham, *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain, Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700*, New York, NY: (Routledge, 2014). Another useful article for understanding the reassessment of the Reformation and modern scholarship is Peter Marshall, "(Re)defining the English Reformation", *Journal of British Studies*, 48, (July 2009). Most recently Marshall argues that scholars have only recently begun assessing the culture of the Reformation in England and that competing ideas generated many cultures of reform that had varied degrees of success among English localities: Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation*, New Haven, CT: (Yale University Press, 2017). The evaluation of monastic culture within the broader Reformation remains paramount in characterizing the effects of this religious transformation among local and competing cultures. Also see Eamon Duffy, *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants, and the Conversion of England*, (Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Before 1520 there had been much criticism of monasticism, but this decade saw popular writers pour scorn upon the institution at higher rates and in unprecedented ways.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon For the Beggars*, (1529), reprinted in *Four Supplications 1529-1553 A.D.*, J. Meadows Cowper, ed., London, UK: (N. Trubner & Co., 1871), pp. 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Helen L. Parish, *Monks, Miracles, and Magic Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church*, New York, NY: (Routledge, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 4 editions (1563, 1570, 1576, 1583). Online critical editions available at: <https://hridigital.shef.ac.uk/john-foxe-project/>



Gilbert Burnet,<sup>36</sup> John Strype,<sup>37</sup> and David Hume,<sup>38</sup> among others, authored massive historical works on the Reformation that dominated intellectual circles during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These men furthered the grand narrative of declining, rotten monasticism. Hume concluded the ancient institutions epitomized corrupt medieval religion and proved little more than “receptacles of sloth and ignorance.”<sup>39</sup>

The Victorians largely maintained this inglorious understanding of late English monasticism as licentious, worldly, and completely out of touch with the early modern, Protestant spiritual ethos. Most notably, James Anthony Froude offered a fiercely polemical account of the suppression of the monasteries based on a critical reading of primary evidence.<sup>40</sup> He found the burden of proof overwhelming that monasticism, including the belated efforts of the friars, became overwhelmed with worldly desires, failing to maintain their devotional ideals. Summing up his convictions, Froude called the dissolution, “England’s salvation.” In like manner, the dawn of twentieth century saw one of its most renowned historians George Coulton, describe monasticism as, “a wearisome story of embezzlement and robbery.”<sup>41</sup> Hence Victorian

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<sup>36</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 7 vols., (London, 1679-1715).

<sup>37</sup> Strype, John, *Ecclesiastical Memorials relating chiefly to religion and the reformation of it, and the emergences of the church of England under King Henry VIII, King Edward VI and Queen Mary I*, (London 1721-1733).

<sup>38</sup> David Hume, *The History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James II, 1688*, 6 vols., (1754-1761). For a detailed analysis of the historiography see: Rosemary O’Day, *Debate on the English Reformation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Manchester, UK: (Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> David Hume, *The History of England*, vol. 3, p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Death of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth*, 12 vols., (London, 1856-1870).

<sup>41</sup> George .G. Coulton, *Ten Medieval Studies*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 89.

and Edwardian interpretations of cloistered life differed little in substance than their predecessors.

Nevertheless, the twentieth century witnessed a culture of increasing religious toleration, which brought changes to intellectual understandings of monasticism and the origins of the dissolution. Cardinal Francis Aidan Gasquet authored several studies illuminating the work of previously unknown Catholic writers. He portrayed the monks as a class set apart and the victims of a brutish Henry VIII. The collapse in monasticism, which so many Protestant historians saw as inevitable, lacked credibility and much of their evidence remained spurious, he argued.<sup>42</sup> Coulton vociferously attacked Gasquet, damning him as a modern “Romanist,” jaded by his own religious convictions. While the cardinal did not pioneer a positive interpretation of English monasticism before the dissolution, he brought the notion into the historical mainstream.<sup>43</sup> His research questioned the long-held Protestant-centric interpretation of the Reformation. Yet it nonetheless failed in systemically transforming late medieval monastic studies. In the wake of Gasquet’s confessional work, historian Geoffrey Baskerville tried rewriting the tale of the dissolution in an even-handed way, which dealt fairly with both Protestant and Catholic alike. In his introduction, however, he quickly pointed out any person who consulted monastic sources would, “see how sadly in the course of centuries the religious fell short of their ideals.”<sup>44</sup> His study, while more objective than Gasquet’s eulogy of fallen

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<sup>42</sup> Francis Aidan Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries: An Attempt to Illustrate the History of Their Suppression*, 3 vols., (London, 1887-1888).

<sup>43</sup> John Vidmar, *English Catholic Historians and the English Reformation, 1585-1954*, Sussex, UK: (University of Sussex Press, 2005), pp. 88-111, (especially subsection on Gasquet).

<sup>44</sup> Geoffrey Baskerville, *English Monks And the Suppression of the Monasteries*, (London, 1937), p. 14.

Catholicism or Froude's whiggish description of Protestant triumph, never became a foundational work in monastic studies because of its complete reliance upon printed sources.<sup>45</sup>

What generations of historians were unable or unwilling to produce the great scholar-monk David Knowles, in his magnificent three volume survey of monasticism, *The Religious Orders in England*, revolutionized the historical understanding of monasticism in general, while also shifting consensus on the subject away from the decline narrative.<sup>46</sup> Knowles offered for the first time a balanced account based on manuscript sources, which reevaluated copious amounts of evidence and transformed the historiography of English religion. He declared that the state of monasticism in 1520 had, "no serious scandals apparent . . ." and further suggested the sources described, "a contented group of men or women living a regular and devout, if neither zealous nor austere life."<sup>47</sup> Knowles, like many Catholic historians before him, asserted that Henry VIII and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell, treated unfairly both monks and nuns alike, who though not at the height of their discipline, still found a populace that respected the cloistered life. "It would seem clear," he remarked, "that there was no animus against the religious on the part either of the local gentry or of the monks' neighbors."<sup>48</sup>

Such claims proved less than novel, as Gasquet had made similar remarks fifty years before this. Instead of marginalizing the collective evidence of monastic failure contained within the great surveys of the religious houses between 1534-1535 *Compendium Competorum* and

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<sup>45</sup> Numerous historians pointed out that Baskerville only used printed sources and never consulted archival material, which tremendously weakened the value of his work.

<sup>46</sup> David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, 3 vols., vol. 3, (Cambridge, 1959), p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, p. 75. From this point all citations come from the final volume of Knowles' study.

<sup>48</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, p. 302.

*Valor Ecclesiasticus* as the cardinal had, Knowles launched a full frontal assault.<sup>49</sup> Largely judging the sources as unreliable, he noted they were riddled with confused terms (such as sodomy) and the product of a biased team of royal yes-men, little concerned with the truth and more interested in advancing their own interests.<sup>50</sup> The interrogation techniques of Richard Layton, Thomas Legh, John Price, John Tregonwell, John Vaughan, Ellis Price, and Thomas Bedyll, among other royal commissioners in 1535, were “harsh, bullying treatment,” which proved “only part of the visitors’ policy of intimidation.”<sup>51</sup> In sum, Knowles wrote, “whatever may be the precise degree of truth in the statistics of the *Compendium Competorum*, they cannot be accepted as reliable evidence of what at first they seem to assert, viz. the universal depravity of more than half the religious houses.”<sup>52</sup>

Apart from explaining away the harsh findings from the kingdom-wide commissions in 1535, Knowles stressed the positive evidence of numerous regular visitations preceding these surveys as well as those visitations performed after the completion of the *Compendium Competorum*. Such records, ecclesial and royal, he considered objective unlike the *Compendium*, and these sources simply did not confirm the descriptions of monastic houses as dens of vice, immorality, and sexual deviance that royal observers asserted. On the contrary, Knowles argued the visitors of 1536 often went “out of their way to praise certain communities,” and “without exception,” they gave “a far more pleasing impression of the life of these monasteries than do the visitors of the previous autumn and winter.”<sup>53</sup> His work emphasized that

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<sup>49</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, pp. 294-303.

<sup>50</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, pp. 268-291.

<sup>51</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, p. 289.

<sup>52</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, pp. 302-303.

monastic communities largely provided valuable social services, remained acceptably devout, and stood as cultural landmarks within English society until their very end.<sup>54</sup> Stressing these important socio-religious aspects of the monastic houses in a seemingly fair manner, Knowles reframed the debate on late medieval monasticism and began transforming the institutional reputation in late medieval scholarship.

Since the 1950s Knowles' work has dominated the historiography of monasticism. Few have dared to question, let alone challenge his claims until quite recently. Even after nearly 60 years his study remains a standard point of origin for any investigation of English monastic history. Most research on late medieval English religion has embraced his conclusions, filled the holes in his arguments, and answered challenges from mainstream historians of the Reformation such as A.G. Dickens.<sup>55</sup> An important aspect of monastic historiography certainly comes in the form of general Reformation accounts. These studies have likely influenced historical understandings of monastic life and the dissolution far more than specialized literature on the religious orders. Offering a succinct and highly readable account of the Reformation, Dickens argued in his landmark study of 1964, "no major section of the early Tudor Church stood more grievously in need of reform and fresh inspiration than did the regular clergy."<sup>56</sup> His perception of Catholicism in terminal decline influenced a generation of historians and also marginalized some of the impact Knowles had upon Reformation studies. Only in the 1980s did historians seriously and collectively question the grand narrative of decline, disassociating themselves from at least a tacit Protestant antagonism.

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<sup>53</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, pp. 306-307.

<sup>54</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, pp. 325-334.

<sup>55</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>56</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, pp. 53-54.

J.J. Scarisbrick first challenged the notion of ubiquitous discontent with traditional religion with his analysis of some 2,500 wills. Regarding the monasteries and friaries he suggested, “through the 1530s and 1540s the overwhelming majority of people were still pouring bequests into the old religion.”<sup>57</sup> His work began a historiographical shift often called revisionism, which questioned the veracity of the traditional decline narrative, and in its place offered an image of medieval religion as steadily serving the needs of its practitioners.<sup>58</sup> Scarisbrick, Christopher Haigh, Eamon Duffy, and Robert Whiting became leading lights of this movement.<sup>59</sup> While these historians dramatically altered popular understandings of the English Reformation in general, they offered little reassessment of monasticism specifically, and frequently invoked Knowles’ vision. Their students and disciples have largely followed in suit. It seems that the words of Dickens on English monasticism half a century ago still hold true: “the enterprise itself has been too well described by Professor Knowles to demand further detailed narratives.”<sup>60</sup>

Specialist historians have produced excellent research on late medieval monasticism and the dissolution, but it often remains confined within a sub-field and is only sometimes incorporated into more general Reformation studies. Nonetheless, modern historians usually situate their work as either supporting or challenging Knowles’ assessment. For example, Joyce

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<sup>57</sup> J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation of the English People*, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> Rosemary O’Day, *Debate on the English Reformation*. O’Day in great detail sets out the main arguments of the debates on the English Reformation in this work.

<sup>59</sup> J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation of the English People; The English Reformation Revised*, ed. Christopher Haigh; Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations*; Eamon Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*; Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation*.

<sup>60</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, p. 140.

Youings questioned Knowles' characterization of the royal visitors, especially Richard Layton, as bloodthirsty bureaucrats. She writes that the actions of royal agents "do not" display a trail of "unrelieved villainy" perpetrated upon the monks.<sup>61</sup> Youings alone challenged this hostile image of the source material in the twentieth century. Subsequent historians in the twenty-first century have also questioned Knowles on this point, debating his disqualification of so many primary observers.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, in line with more mainstream Reformation accounts, R.W. Hoyle advanced Knowles' presentation of the *Compendium Competorum* and *Valor Ecclesiasticus* in an influential article on the dissolution. He argued that Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII sought a limited settlement more like continental arrangements, which Thomas Wolsey even attempted some fifteen years before the first Suppression Act in 1536. The financial situation in 1534, however, became increasingly desperate, demanding drastic action. Hence Cromwell ensured his commissioners discovered copious amounts of damnable conduct among the religious houses. Though the evidence itself remained highly questionable in Hoyle's judgment, it proved shockingly real enough for many members of the Reformation Parliament, who shifted their opinions in large numbers in support of a large-scale monastic reform. Cromwell then engineered a wholesale destruction, not systemic reform, with his new statutory authority.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Joyce Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*, London, UK: (Allen and Unwin, 1971).

<sup>62</sup> Anthony N. Shaw, "The Compendium Competorum and the Making of the Suppression Act of 1536", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, (University of Warwick, 2003). Christian Knudson, "Naughty Nuns and Promiscuous Monks: Monastic Sexual Misconduct in Late Medieval England", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Toronto, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> R.W. Hoyle, "The Origins of the Dissolution of the Monasteries", *The Historical Journal*, 38, no. 2, (1995) pp. 275-305.

This disparity between Youings and Hoyle illustrates the larger historiographical issue of characterizing source material within the debate on late monasticism.

The twenty-first century has witnessed Knowles take some criticism. A new generation of scholars is currently reconsidering the decline narrative. Joan Greatrex has provided a useful historiographical essay on this subject, where she encourages the evaluation of the primary sources covering the dissolution on their own terms and through new methods, calling for less reliance upon previous assumptions.<sup>64</sup> Benjamin Thompson suggests monks themselves proved discontented with the aspirations of traditional monasticism and instead favored a more comfortable and married lifestyle, which explains their frequent embrace of the dissolution settlement.<sup>65</sup> G.W. Bernard asserts that Knowles' account suffered from bias against a Protestant leaning royal government. He claims Henry VIII remained legitimately concerned with reforming religion in England, arguing historians should not accept the immediate financial gains of the dissolution as the predominant motive.<sup>66</sup> Thus, modern historical research has questioned aspects of Knowles' *magnus opus* and reinvigorated a limited version of the decline narrative.

The most recent manifestation of the Knowles divide appeared between two excellent Ph.D. theses. Anthony Shaw<sup>67</sup> and Christian Knudson<sup>68</sup> both situated their studies upon Knowles' characterization of the source material. Shaw saw him as overly critical of the 1535

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<sup>64</sup> Joan Greatrex, "Recent Perspectives in Monastic History", in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, James G. Clark, ed., Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 46-47.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin Thompson, "Monasteries, Society, and Reform in Late Medieval England", in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, James G. Clark, ed., Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2002), p.188.

<sup>66</sup> G.W. Bernard, "The Dissolution of the monasteries", (2011), *Historical Association Journal*, pp. 390-409.

<sup>67</sup> Anthony N. Shaw, "The Compendium Compertorum and the Making of the Suppression Act of 1536", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Warwick, 2003).

<sup>68</sup> Christian Knudson, "Naughty Nuns and Promiscuous Monks: Monastic Sexual Misconduct in Late Medieval England", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Toronto, 2012).



visitors, citing many examples of genuine praise for religious houses, which demonstrated the visitors' fair treatment of the monks. Knudson found precisely the opposite, suggesting the royal visitors wildly exaggerated their descriptions of monastic failure and sexual deviance.

Therefore, concerning the state of monasticism before the dissolution, modern historians have struggled in reaching a consensus on the nature of the main evidentiary sources, and in the words of Nicholas Orme, "no absolute judgment can be made on either side."<sup>69</sup>

Moving away from this strictly good or bad type of monastic characterizations, this dissertation probes deeper into late medieval thought, examining concepts of spiritual idealism and how these perceptions informed popular opinions of the religious orders as well as influenced the events leading up to the suppression of the religious houses. This methodology will increase historical understanding of the dissolution by scrutinizing varied perceptions of the monastic institution and its spirituality, determining what this meant for English society at the twilight of the Middle Ages. The dissertation intends to expand the scope as well as challenge aspects of current debate of the decline narrative and dissolution.

One of the key insights of this dissertation relates to differing perceptions of the English populace regarding holiness among monastic orders. It argues that observers believed contemplative orders, such as Bridgettines and Carthusians, exemplified contemporary understandings of spiritual idealism and other, traditional orders did not. Thus, it remains crucial to also outline the historiography relating to contemplative orders in England. Specifically the historiography of the Carthusians takes center stage, who were the most numerous and frequently cited of these orders.

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<sup>69</sup> Nicholas Orme, "Monasteries in Medieval Cornwall: Mediocrity or Merit?" in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2008), p. 227.

E. Margaret Thompson undertook the first comprehensive study of the Carthusians in England in 1930, where she expanded upon her regional examination of the two earliest Carthusian foundations in Somerset published in 1896.<sup>70</sup> Her keen attention to detail and exhaustive documentary thoroughness attest to the quality of the work. Written at the height of positivist methodology, its forced-march chronological style of fact finding takes away from any specific thematic focus. Thompson, like most historians that preceded and followed her, highlights the exceptional nature of the Carthusians within a vast monastic pantheon of monks with less spiritual rigor. Her account crescendos with the great London martyrdom, which in the minds of most historians confirms both the religious zeal and spiritual superiority of the order. This incident and its memory remain a dominant theme in Carthusian historiography.

Another influential work, also relating to the martyrdom, is the work of the Catholic monk-historian Lawrence Hendricks, who in *the London Charterhouse* reprinted many of the trial transcripts dealing with the London martyrdom.<sup>71</sup> His detailed study made available numerous letters from foreign ambassadors as well as English officials referencing the martyrdom and treatment of the Carthusians during that time of tumult. As the events themselves are not the focus of the present study, but rather the perceptions and feelings they inspired concerning the order, this source remains of great interest and its critical analysis of each source proves useful. Providing an essay on the Carthusian ideology during the Reformation and how it shaped the order's conflict with Henry VIII, David and Gervase

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<sup>70</sup> E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England*, London, UK: (The Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930). E. Margaret Thompson, *A History of the Somerset Carthusians*, second edition, London, UK: (John Hodges, 1896).

<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Hendricks, *The London Charterhouse, Its Monks and Its Martyrs, with a Short Account of the English Carthusians After the Dissolution*, (London, 1889). Full text available online at: [https://archive.org/stream/cu31924029404310/cu31924029404310\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/cu31924029404310/cu31924029404310_djvu.txt)

Matthew brought Carthusian thought and theology into the forefront of their scholarship. Nevertheless, the lack of footnotes and wandering nature of the book causes doubts concerning the historicity of their statements.<sup>72</sup> Sir William St. John-Hope's, *The History of the London Charterhouse* also provides a useful analysis of the Carthusians, especially the martyrs during the dissolution.<sup>73</sup> St. John-Hope describes the familiar story of the Godly Carthusians facing down the tyranny of Henry VIII. He was an archaeologist and undertook basic excavations of the London priory site. While one must applaud his efforts in elucidating the architecture of the London Carthusians, the findings remain fairly limited, as the work only concerned a single charterhouse and the most renown of the institutions.

David Knowles great work discussed the Carthusians in detail, though within a broader monastic context. He provided a scholarly, yet passionate account of the martyrdom, but even he assumes the exceptionalism among the Carthusians and trumpets their martyrdom as evidence of his suppositions. "The London Charterhouse was to give to English monastic history one of its brightest pages, and it is possible for us to see that the heroism of so many of its sons in the hour of flood and whirlwind was no sudden impulse or unpredictable accident, but the native resistance of a fabric not built upon the sand," he wrote.<sup>74</sup> This tacit, even unquestioning acceptance of Carthusian exceptionalism precludes all examinations of the religious order in England to date. Such assumptions must be tempered and rolled back in order for modern

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<sup>72</sup> David and Gervase Matthew, *The Reformation and the Contemplative Life: A Study of the Conflict between the Carthusians the State*, London, UK: (Sheed & Ward, 1934).

<sup>73</sup> Sir William St. John-Hope, *The History of the London Charterhouse from its Foundation until the Suppression of the Monastery*, (London, 1925). Full text available online: [https://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_London\\_Charterhouse\\_f.html?id=7YcxAQAAIAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/The_history_of_the_London_Charterhouse_f.html?id=7YcxAQAAIAAJ)

<sup>74</sup> David Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, p. 222.

thinkers to accurately reconstruct early modern perspectives of the Carthusians and their spiritual contributions to the religious culture of the age.

Historians have probably covered no other aspect of Carthusian history in more detail than the London charterhouse and its famous martyrdoms for logical reasons. It remains the best documented charterhouse and stood at the heart of the kingdom, where many keen observers provided commentaries. Even the testimony of some of the monks themselves survives from the period of martyrdom, preserved in the work of Tudor Carthusian monk, Maurice Chauncy.<sup>75</sup> An important historiographical question lies with the traditional emphasis upon London: How much exactly did the famous martyrdoms strengthen, develop, or even create the Carthusian reputation as a spiritually exceptional order? Rather than assuming monastic exceptionalism emanated from the House of Salutation beginning with its founding, this dissertation moves beyond the well-trod ground of London and its monks, widening the scope of the examination to include the other regions where the Carthusians impacted society. By placing scrutiny upon other priories, such as the Mount Grace charterhouse in Yorkshire and Sheen at Richmond,<sup>76</sup> a clearer and more comprehensive image of the contemplative orders and especially the Carthusians becomes apparent. This image depicts these supposed recluses participating in the spheres of humanistic learning, extensive book making, and the vibrant spectrum of lay spirituality. This does not

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<sup>75</sup> Maurice Chauncy penned his original manuscript *Historia Aliquot Martyrum* in 1546, which he published in Mainz in 1550. He sent the work to La Grande Chartreuse in order the prior might admit himself and many of the English Carthusians as exiles to the chapterhouse at Bruges. Two Carthusian monks, Vitus Dulkem and V.M. Doreau, reprinted this Latin version of the events in 1888: Maurice Chauncy, *Passio xviii Carthusianorum*, (London, 1888). Chauncy later in 1570 composed another version, which added more references and details than the original chronicle. H.G. Richardson transcribed and translated this final edition, which the Church Historical Society published in 1935: *The Passion and Martyrdom of the Holy English Carthusian Fathers*, which will be used throughout the rest of this thesis. For further details see Thompson, *English Carthusians*, pp. 343-352 or Knowles, *Religious Orders*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>76</sup> John Cloake, *Richmond's Great Monastery The Charterhouse of Jesus of Bethlehem of Sheen*, (Richmond Local History Society, paper no. 6, 1990).

necessarily mean the order lacked austere living, personal holiness, or spiritual exceptionalism, but it does suggest at least some Carthusians, like their monastic brethren, participated in the affairs of late renaissance culture to some degree.

Nevertheless, some modern works have scrutinized the order and looked beyond London, such as C.B. Rowntree's unpublished doctoral thesis, which have contributed to our understanding of Carthusian finances and daily operations of many of the charterhouses.<sup>77</sup> Rowntree's lengthy and well researched essay does have very short chapters on attitudes toward the Carthusians as well as Carthusian spirituality itself. Yet the bulk of her project centers upon finance and patronage, not the popular perception or exceptional nature of Carthusian monks. This study provides a useful starting point for reconsidering the basic assumptions about English Carthusians. Rowntree showed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Carthusians were taking enormous sums for mortuary masses and special spiritual services from all social classes throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, in proportionally greater amounts than other orders during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; this was also at a time when donations to other orders remained stagnant or waned. Specifically, the House of Salutation in London maintained an extensive treasury, filled with bequests purchasing Carthusian prayers. All of this stood flagrantly against the founding rule and questions the integrity of the order in maintaining its distance from worldly affairs. Additionally, it confirms the popularity of the order among the laity. Nonetheless, such findings call into question at least some of the assumed truisms concerning Carthusian exceptionalism in English history and may reflect uninformed attitudes of the populace toward the Carthusians that were founded more upon legend and reputation than the

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<sup>77</sup> Carol B. Rowntree, "Studies in Carthusian History in Later Medieval England", unpublished D.Phil thesis, (University of York, 1981).

historical reality of the order. Yet Rowntree never published her work, so it remains known only to a select group of specialist historians and hence faces great limitations in shaping future scholarship on English monasticism.

Historian Dennis Martin, however, found much to praise in the Carthusian conduct during the Reformation in his survey of sixteenth century Europe, arguing that Carthusians earned their reputation as the most exceptional of monks. “The ‘numquam deformata’ label was well deserved. Carthusians bowed to external political pressure in regions that became Protestant, but with few exceptions they submitted only under duress. In many instances their loyalty to the ‘old faith’ was heroic,” he wrote.<sup>78</sup>

The twenty-first century has seen some, but little production. No historian has undertaken a detailed and comprehensive study of the Carthusian order in England since the 1930s. Outside of the odd article and doctoral thesis there have been small advancements in our understanding of the English Carthusians and their contributions to Reformation spirituality in nearly a century. Only recently have Glyn Coopack & Mick Aston undertaken fresh archaeological examinations of certain Carthusian monasteries.<sup>79</sup> They focus upon Mount Grace priory in Yorkshire as well as earlier excavations of the House of Salutation in London by St. John Hope. Their research suggests that previous literary studies may have overestimated the sequestered nature of the Carthusians, as they discovered extensive evidence of the monks spending an enormous amount of time and resources on worldly activities, such as mass book

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<sup>78</sup> Dennis R. Martin, “Carthusians during the Reformation Era: ‘Cartusia nunquam deformata, reformari resistens’”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 41-42.

<sup>79</sup> Glyn Coppack and Mick Aston, *Christ’s Poor Men The Carthusians in England*, London, UK: (Tempus, 2002). Glyn Coppack; “Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for our God’: Carthusians and the Community in Late Medieval England”, in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, Janet Burton and Karen Stober, eds., Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 168-182.

manufacturing. Similar investigations have also found the same among the Bridgettine abbey at Syon.<sup>80</sup> This, coupled with Rowtree's fiduciary study, suggests that the order, in practice, differed little from other religious orders at the dawn of the Reformation period. Nevertheless, many contemporary sources asserted the Carthusians and other contemplatives were set apart from other monastics in spiritual exceptionalism. Late medieval chroniclers often saw these groups as vastly superior to other orders of the age in both austere living and personal holiness. This suggests that the Carthusian and contemplative reputations themselves remained more powerful in shaping the order's public perception than the actual daily activities within the monasteries. Thus, in an attempt to clarify this paradox, this dissertation looks beyond the assumptions of traditional secondary literature on English contemplatives, employing the latest scholarship to illuminate perceptions of late medieval spirituality.

Historian and literary scholar Julian M. Luxford, has done much in advancing the understanding of medieval contemplative orders in England. His essays on the subject clarify the need for more research on spirituality and its contributions to the Reformation settlement. He argues that this contemplative "culture is virtually ignored in British universities, and the situation is little better in North America." Speaking specifically on the Carthusians, "little has been published on the order's interaction with lay society in general except where the dissemination and influence of devotional texts is concerned . . . studies of Carthusians in England and Scotland . . . thus present substantial opportunities. As noted, the field as a whole is not virgin, but it is certainly open. For the benefit of the soil, what is sown there should be fresh and even experimental in its frame of reference, as well as augmentative of previous returns."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham, *Syon Abbey and Its Books: Reading, Writing, and Religion, c. 1400-1700*, Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2010).

In sum, a long and rich historiography of monasticism provides an excellent terminus for this present study, which moves away from long-held positions and more traditional debates on the institution. Instead it questions the nature of thought and perception surrounding monastic practitioners and how late medieval understandings of holiness shaped the events leading to the dissolution of the monasteries. Thus, answering Luxford's challenge, this dissertation attempts to elucidate the culture of spiritual idealism before and during the English Reformation. It focuses on the widespread belief of contemporaries in the exceptionalism among contemplative monastics, exploring attitudes toward these groups and focusing on subtly shifting perceptions of spirituality within English religious culture.

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<sup>81</sup> Julian M. Luxford, "Introduction" in *Studies in Carthusian Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages*, Julian M. Luxford, ed., Turnhout, Belgium, (Brepolis Publishers, 2008), pp. 8-9.



## Chapter II

### The Perception of Spiritual Idealism in Late Medieval English Literature

#### Introduction

This chapter creates a comprehensive sketch of both lay and clerical attitudes concerning English spiritual idealism in the late Middle Ages. It largely draws upon popular literary evidence and polemical accounts from the late fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, tracing the evolutionary perception of spiritual ideals within the vernacular literature of late medieval England leading up to the Reformation period. The rationale for the selected texts stemmed from their popularity and influence with a broad readership that extended beyond their immediate temporal context.<sup>82</sup> Famous poets and writers, in many ways, represented the spirit of their age. The entertaining and often sensational nature of their work appealed to a numerically significant audience, and as much research has demonstrated, shaped a wide array of attitudes regarding holiness during the late medieval period.<sup>83</sup> Such authors communicated religious values of the time, allowing historians to assess the archetypal categories of spiritual idealism, and subsequently determine the perceived exceptionalism or failure of certain ecclesial groups.

Three basic questions outline the scope of the chapter: what did society at large believe was the place and role of the late medieval spiritual elite as conveyed through literature? How did poetic representations contribute to and inform lay perceptions of the ecclesiastical estate, specifically the religious orders? Finally, why did certain groups, such as the Carthusians, even in popular depictions, often receive more reverential treatment than other groups?

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<sup>82</sup> *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*, Sarah Rees Jones, ed., Turnhout, Belgium, (Brepolis Publishers, 2003); *Reading and Literacy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Ian Frederick Moulton, ed., Turnhout, Belgium, (Brepolis Publishers, 2004); "Introduction", William Kuskin, in *Caxton's Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing*, Notre Dame, IN: (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 2-5.

<sup>83</sup> Katherine Zieman, *Singing the new Song Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England*, Philadelphia, PA: (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

The basic outline of the chapter will move chronologically forward from the late fourteenth century to the 1530s, examining the images of monks and to a lesser degree others within the ecclesiastical hierarchy as depicted in famous works of poetry, polemics, anticlerical treatises, and satire, creating a portrait of the spiritual ideal and anti-ideal and their subtle evolution during the late middle ages. Ludo Millis, a historian of monasticism crucially points out that when attempting to create a phenomenological or metaphysical category, such as a “monastic or spiritual ideal,” the scholar must grapple primarily with ideas and perceptions, not records of material culture. Any keen observer of monastic histories must note the cycles of vitality and decay associated with the founding and reform of religious orders. These interpretations typically focus upon the expansion, numbers, and patronage of the orders, rather than their spiritual significance within society. Such categories, “are not adequate in a comprehensive study of the impact of monasticism as a religious ideal, because vitality is mostly interpreted as gathering of material wealth and secular power, whereas, religiously speaking, true vitality all but inevitably leads to precisely the opposite, namely to more seclusion, and thus to retreat from worldly matters,” states Milis.<sup>84</sup> Hence spiritual idealism proves difficult to understand or grasp for modern scholars, let alone measure in traditional historical documents. Nevertheless, through literature spiritual idealism becomes clearer and fictional representations as well as images provide a means of discerning why many lay and ecclesiastical observers favored a specific kind of spiritual elite, dedicated to supplicating the divine on behalf of society. The works of Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, John Langland, John Lydgate, John Audelay, John Skelton, to some degree John Wycliffe and latter Lollard polemic, as well as other less well-known authors who gave voice to the thinking of their age, provide the primary evidence examined in this chapter. Literature offers an optimal source base for examining religious virtue and spirituality as historical phenomena within a culture. It demonstrates with remarkable clarity the

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<sup>84</sup> Ludo Millis, *Angelic Monks and Worldly Men*, Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 1992), p. ix.

anxieties and opinions of a society that might not otherwise find expression out of fear, shame, or public pressure. The influential literary scholar Greg Walker suggests, “to read literature historically allows us to see how contemporary men and women deployed the ideas, concepts, and symbols that mattered to them and how they represented their own relationships to such ideas and symbols. It allows us to hear them discussing questions of morality, identity, belief, private and public probity and responsibility openly . . .”<sup>85</sup>

Building upon Walker’s theory, this chapter argues that literary texts frequently provided images of generational conflict, which probed the perceptions and feelings of the age, even though they provide a fictional and not necessarily historical analysis themselves. Such texts create images that contain truth insofar as they convey feelings or beliefs of real people based upon their own analysis of reality. As the literary scholar Jill Mann points out, popular imagery and satire “depends on and exploits the frameworks known as ‘social stereotypes’ – the traditional images that . . . reflect, but also can create, or contribute to, stereotypes; the way in which an individual author writes about monks . . . can well influence the way in which his audience henceforth perceives monks . . . in real life.”<sup>86</sup> Such social stereotypes colored the perception of the religious orders among lay audiences. Popular images and polemical works contributed enormously to shaping lay attitudes regarding the religious orders as well as determining each group’s particular status within the spectrum of spiritual idealism. In other words, as Mann puts it, “literature and popular prejudice supported each other.”<sup>87</sup> Among the literate in late medieval society, and those who chose to listen at public readings, popular texts, such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, were widely circulated and re-issued in multiple editions,

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<sup>85</sup> Greg Walker, *Reading Literature Historically Drama and Poetry from Chaucer to the Reformation*, Edinburgh, UK: (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: Literature of the Social Classes and General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>87</sup> Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, p. 9.

especially after the adoption of print.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, during the late middle ages many of England's poets came from monastic orders. The most influential of these writers was John Lydgate, who penned and translated many treatises on spiritual virtues during his career. "Lydgate's work," according to his most recent modern biographer Derek Pearsall, marked "changing fashions and attitudes" of the day, and this offers the scholar "an explanation of literature in the light of history."<sup>89</sup> A broad readership consumed his verses and these tales surely informed as well as reinforced the perceptions of the clergy and laity alike, regarding the state of the religious orders.<sup>90</sup> The early modern period also remained pregnant with these spiritual values. Tudor poet laureate John Skelton, for example, did much to frame and influence the category of spiritual idealism for his audiences. His work, in the words of literary scholar Greg Walker, lends itself "to the historian, he speaks for the common-sense values of the traditionalist courtiers, the nobility and the populace at large."<sup>91</sup>

Therefore the prevalence of such literature and polemics during the late middle ages and early modern periods that emphasized spiritual idealism suggests that many writers and their audiences saw specific religious orders, such as the Carthusians, as embodying a spiritual exceptionalism of the age, largely because these groups maintained four distinct religious ideals: the quest for personal piety, maintaining idyllic poverty, austere living, and the denial of religious corporatism. Teasing out these spiritual ideals coupled with their corresponding anti-ideals in medieval literature, this chapter elucidates the foundations of spiritual idealism among late medieval

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<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols., Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 25-29. Also see: "Introduction," William Kuskin, in *Caxton's Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing*, pp. 2-5.

<sup>89</sup> Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, London, UK: (Routledge Press, 1970), pp. 4-5.

<sup>90</sup> Mary C. Flannery, *John Lydgate and the Poetics of Fame*, Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell & Brewer Press, 2012), pp. 1-5.

<sup>91</sup> Greg Walker, *John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 2-3.

writers and their audiences based upon these four categories that remained largely fixed until the advent of Reformation ideology.

The quest for personal piety proved simply the zealous devotion of an individual, or particular group of monastics, who pursued a lifestyle in imitation of the *vita apostolica*. They sought the perfect Christian lifestyle based upon the scriptures, as well as through divine contemplation and prayer. Part of this quest for a pure and holy lifestyle related to the image of idyllic poverty, which meant different things to different groups. The key feature, however, remained living in humility and avoiding worldliness, and most of all not seeking a life of comfort or luxury. Wealth and avarice had no place within the spiritual ideal. Closely relating to idyllic poverty, austere living denoted accepting the physical burdens of the monastic rule and doctrinal mandates: fasting, physical mortification, making do with simple garments in the midst of a world that valued finery, maintaining a sparse diet, and remaining humble in spite of elevated social station. The denial of religious corporatism involved avoiding the vast array of worldly entanglements that took attention away from serving the divine in law or commerce, and dispensing holy merit or prayer specifically for monetary reward, especially when such activities became exploitive.<sup>92</sup> Thus, this chapter contends that these spiritual themes were prevalent in many popular writings, confirming the claims of this dissertation regarding spiritual idealism among popular, lay attitudes during the late middle ages. Subsequently this four-fold understanding of spiritual idealism informed varying English responses to a disparate monastic culture during the pre-Reformation period. The remainder of the chapter outlines these categories as depicted in many forms of popular literature.

Certainly much ecclesiastical satire and historiographical analysis confirms that many, if not most, learned individuals during the middle ages considered the clerical estate and especially the

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<sup>92</sup> A detailed analysis of each concept follows in each subsection of this chapter; for further explanation of the terms look ahead to the introductory paragraphs of each categorical subsection.

religious orders a lazy and lecherous group that spent more time hunting and feasting than following a strict spiritual discipline.<sup>93</sup> “Anticlericalism . . . at the end of the fourteenth century,” observes historian David Loades, “was not directed against priests as such, but against the Church as an institution, which had neglected its missionary function and bred a swarm of greedy parasites to take advantage of its unassailable position.”<sup>94</sup> The detailed analysis of spiritual idealism that follows proves Loades’ characterization of anticlericalism inaccurate. Instead individual virtue remained paramount, and writers regularly singled out specific groups or even individuals who rebuffed their notions of spiritual idealism. The modern genre of anticlericalism proves a massive umbrella for criticism against all things religious, coming from both intrinsic ecclesiastical sources as well as lay commentators.<sup>95</sup> Anticlericalism, while a somewhat anachronistic category, nevertheless highlights the underlying commonalities of complaints against this estate, forming anti-ideals. Spiritual anti-ideals consisted of eschewing personal piety, seeking worldly wealth, enjoying the pleasures of secular society, and seeking monetary or social advancement through ecclesial corporatism.<sup>96</sup> Hence negative stereotypes provide a window into the antithesis, that is, optimal religious behavior. The anti-ideal, turned on its head, becomes a narrative of spiritual idealism.

Many typical anti-type religious characters were primarily interested in the material advancement that their ecclesial station could provide, devising clever ways of exploiting lay people around them and neglecting their professed function within the church hierarchy. For example, in his

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<sup>93</sup> Mishtooni Bose, “Writing, Heresy, and the Anticlerical Muse”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, Elaine Treharne, Greg Walker, and William Green, eds., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 279-282. Also see: Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, pp. 6-11.

<sup>94</sup> David Loades, “Anticlericalism in the Church of England”, p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> Mishtooni Bose, “Writing, Heresy, and the Anticlerical Muse,” pp. 279-282.

<sup>96</sup> Robert C. Palmer, *Selling the Church: The English Parish in Law, Commerce, and Religion, 1350-1550*, Chapel Hill, NC: (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 1-9. Palmer outlines many of the aspects of what this study terms religious corporatism in late medieval England.

famous poem of the fifteenth century, *The Dance of Death*, John Lydgate, himself a Benedictine of Bury St. Edmund's monastery, had the figure Death condemn a worldly abbot, who too frequently indulged in the bounty of his table: "Sir Abbot and priour, with your broad hatt / Gret is your hed, your bely rounde & fatt / Ye must come daunce, thouth ye be nat liht."<sup>97</sup> Moreover, both Chaucer's Monk and Friar in *The Canterbury Tales*, also depicted as portly figures, largely disinterested with fulfilling any ideals of meager diets, fasting, or maintaining strict observance of their disciplines. The poet described the monk as, "a lord ful fat and in good point" and "an outrydere that lovede venerye." The friar was described as "rounded as a belle," and one that "knew the taverns wel in every toun / and everich hostiler and tappestere."<sup>98</sup> These figures hardly conjured the image of a devoted group of religious, subscribing to personal piety, idyllic poverty, austere living, or rigorous spiritual discipline. Rather Chaucer emphasized the worldliness and corruption of the characters. The monk enjoyed high appointment, rode beyond the cloister, and relished hunting as well as possibly sexual promiscuity. He was clearly not portrayed as a spiritual exemplar. Nor did the friar have an idyllic aura about him, as he frequented taverns and cavorted with barmaids instead of ministering to the townspeople. Thus, such literary models conveyed to an increasingly broad audience certain anticlerical perceptions throughout the late middle ages, and did much to color popular stereotypes of monks, friars, and the clergy in general.

Shunning these anti-ideals intertwined with religious corporatism became a key feature of the *vita apostolica* movement among the religious orders and friars. This reform effort dominated the spiritual idealism of the high and late middle ages. It championed the notion of living precisely as the first age of Christians had in accordance with the scriptures and also pursuing personal holiness

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<sup>97</sup> John Lydgate, *The Dance of Death, Edited from MSS. Ellesmere 26/A13 and B.M. Lansdowne 699, Collated with the Other Extant MSS*, Beatrice White ed., London, UK: (Early English Text Society, 1931), p. 31.

<sup>98</sup> *The General Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales, The Selected Canterbury Tales, A New Verse Translation*, Sheila Fisher ed., London, UK: (W.W. Norton, 2011), pp. 12, 16, 19, 20.

through devotion to God. Almost universally contemporary observers considered imitation of the *vita apostolica* the purest form of Christian living.<sup>99</sup> Part of this ideology related to the image of voluntary poverty, which meant modest living and the abandonment of worldly concerns as well as declining temporal advancement.<sup>100</sup> Chaucer's dutiful parson in *The Canterbury Tales* personified many of the ideals of the movement, as he remained the only figure who remained above criticism, serving his parish humbly and refusing to participate within the cycle of religious corporatism. Together anticlericalism and religious exceptionalism, expressed through the *vita apostolica* movement, amalgamated from the pages of medieval literature, illuminating the spiritual idealism of the age.

The clergy themselves developed much of the rhetoric of anticlericalism and anti-ideals of the later middle ages, chiding differing forms of monastic lifestyles, as each group claimed to possess the most authentic Christian existence imitating the apostolic age. Most conspicuously, literary scholar Wendy Scase observes, "there was thus an underlying incompatibility between the friars and the secular clergy, and between the friars and the monks."<sup>101</sup> Ecclesiastics, such as the father of English anticlericalism Archbishop of Armagh, Richard FitzRalph, often attacked each other more viciously than when the laity criticized the clergy.<sup>102</sup> The friars claimed to be the truest imitators the

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<sup>99</sup> Ernest W. McDonnell, "The Vita Apostolica: Diversity or Dissent", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 24, Issue 1, pp. 15-31.

<sup>100</sup> David Loades, "Anticlericalism in the Church of England Before 1558: An 'Eating Canker'", in *Anticlericalism in Britain 1500-1914*, Nigel Aston and Matthew Cragoe, eds., London, UK: (Sutton Publishers, 2001), pp. 3-8.

<sup>101</sup> Wendy Scase, *'Piers Plowman' and the New Anti-clericalism*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>102</sup> The friars, generally, found themselves the object of opprobrium. Their interference with regular parish life as well as the important issue of diverting funds away from the secular clergy by hearing confessions, preaching, performing baptisms, and burying the dead, found them regularly at odds with the traditional, secular clergy. A vehement critic of the fraternal orders was Archbishop of Armagh, Richard FitzRalph, who historians consider the father of English anticlericalism during the mid fourteenth century. He questioned even the scriptural right for friars to exist: "Friars were not called by the church to have [pastoral] power, since the Church rather would have called, secular teachers, curates, and propertied religious, who were instituted by the church and incorporated into the ecclesiastical hierarchy before the advent of the friars by 1,200 years or thereabouts, than it would call



primitive church, traveling in a state of absolute poverty, begging for food, and providing pastoral care as well as evangelism.<sup>103</sup> Monks cited the New Testament scriptures and long tradition as confirming their apostolic lifestyle.<sup>104</sup> Justification for the traditional monastic institution centered upon living together and holding all material goods in common as did the apostles. The brothers remained personally bereft of goods, but allowed the order or house to possess worldly objects and wealth for the use of the monks, who had dedicated their lives to corporate prayer as well as personal spiritual edification.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, religious and fraternal orders frequently failed in attaining or maintaining humble living standards and representing the epitome of Christian virtue, which subsequently found them the creatures of much anti-clerical ire and literary satire.

Vibrant religious movements during the late fourteenth century, such as Lollardy and Wycliffism, suggested that many observers found the state of religious life, to some degree, lacking in its original goals and requiring reform or complete abolition.<sup>106</sup> Anne Hudson, the great literary historian of Lollardy, points out that the typical complaints of Lollards regarding monks stemmed

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adventitious friars, whose order it did not institute,” Richard FitzRalph, *Unusquisque*, as cited in Penn R. Szittya, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*, Princeton, N.J., (Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 137.

FitzRalph was heavily influenced by the writings of William of St. Amour. His most consequential works were: *De Periculis novissimorum temporum*, *De Pharisaeo*, and *De valido mendicante*. Each questioned the validity of fraternal monasticism based upon scripture and the traditions of the church. He argued that friars simply did not belong within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, had no evidence in scripture, and only hampered the ability of the regular clergy and monks to perform their pastoral functions. This of course included the friars receiving the revenues derived from performing these pastoral functions.

<sup>103</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society*, New York, NY, (Longman Publishers, 1994).

<sup>104</sup> The key scriptural passage came from the Acts of the Apostles 2: 41-45: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need.”

<sup>105</sup> The quest for personal piety always loomed large among reformers and the saints. “What mattered was interior conversion, the renunciation of personal wealth and ambition, and a humble perseverance in everyday tasks. The main road to perfection lay in voluntary poverty, both material and spiritual,” confirms historian C.H. Lawrence. C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 266.

<sup>106</sup> J.A.F. Thompson, *The Later Lollards 1414-1520*, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 245-247.

from “endowment in general, [which] harms those who genuinely cannot earn their own living by diverting alms to the able-bodied idle.”<sup>107</sup> John Wycliffe, the inspiration for the movement, himself condemned monks as “pests of society, enemies of religion, and patrons and promoters of every crime.”<sup>108</sup> The Oxford theologian considered monasticism a blight upon society because it did not spiritually benefit society. Monks took coin or landed gifts to fund an extravagant lifestyle, ignoring their *regula* and hence neglecting prayerful duties that the laity contracted with them to provide. The religious orders further played no part in preaching the Gospel to the ill served laity, as they remained isolated within the monastery, living a life of sloth. “Christ ordained all his apostles and disciples, to live an open good life,” proclaims Wycliffe, “in meekness and willful poverty, and discreet penance, to teach busily his Gospel to the people, and not to be closed in great cloisters . . .”<sup>109</sup> Contemplation itself was not the enemy. For, he also suggests, Christ and John the Baptist went into the wilderness to discern the will of God, but only for a brief while. Then they returned into the world teaching the true religion to the masses with no monetary reward. “It is exemplified and commanded of Christ,” Wycliffe writes, “not to be closed in a cloister . . . so [they] should be needed to leave this living of cloister and feigned obedience by singular profession, and to dwell among the people . . .”<sup>110</sup> Too frequently the monks used their life of perpetual contemplation as a means of avoiding preaching and doing good works. Thus, in order to avoid laborious priestly responsibility and live in luxury, these “blind hypocrites, feigned contemplative life and say that it is best and they

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<sup>107</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation, Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 351.

<sup>108</sup> John Wycliffe, *Of Feigned Contemplative Life*, in *The English Works of John Wycliffe Hiterto Unprinted*, F.D. Matthew, ed., London, UK: (Early English Text Society, 1880), p. 178.

<sup>109</sup> John Wycliffe, *Against the Orders of Friars*, in *The English Works of John Wycliffe Hiterto Unprinted*, F.D. Matthew, ed., London, UK: (Early English Text Society, 1880), p. 221.

<sup>110</sup> John Wycliffe, *Against the Orders of Friars*, p. 221.

may be not needed for the charity of god, to leave preaching of the gospel and live in contemplation. See now the hypocrisy of false singing; Christ preached the gospel and charged all his apostles and disciples to go and preach the gospel to all men,” trumpets Wycliffe.<sup>111</sup>

The theologian relentlessly spilt copious amounts of ink condemning easy monastic living.<sup>112</sup> He states plainly that the “religious orders,” if they maintain their existence, should reform and attain their obligation, which regarded “as the substance of their religion, the obedience paid to Christ, [and] the poverty and chastity which they maintain for the cause of him.”<sup>113</sup> Greed and concerns with temporal gain had long manifest themselves among the monastic “sects,” as he called them, and only by avoiding material “entanglement . . . in things temporal” would they end this most “scandalous ignorance and the sloth and heresy which now disgrace the heritage of Christ.”<sup>114</sup> As the passage suggests, the lack of personal piety and the failure in their spiritual duties to the laity were his chief complaints against the religious orders.

Beyond Wycliffe, later Lollards, likely inspired by his anticlerical rhetoric, maintained a similar position on the religious orders. This treatment of monks and other overly endowed ecclesiastics in general was displayed in a famous Lollard sermon, entitled *Omnis Plantacio*. It reflected the perception of the religious orders as lazy beggars that profited from feigned piety, enjoying a life of comfort and luxury for providing no spiritual services to the community.<sup>115</sup> The

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<sup>111</sup> John Wycliffe, *Of Feigned Contemplative Life*, p. 188.

<sup>112</sup> Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*, (London Press, 1984), pp. 313-316.

<sup>113</sup> John Wycliffe, *Triologus*, in *Tracts and Treaties of John de Wycliffe, D.D. with Selections and Translations from his Manuscripts, and Latin Works*, Robert Vaughan, ed., London, UK: (Blackburn and Pardon, 1865), p. 168.

<sup>114</sup> John Wycliffe, *Triologus*, in *Tracts and Treaties of John de Wycliffe*, p. 175.

<sup>115</sup> *The Works of A Lollard Preacher, The Semon Omis Plantacio, the Tract Fundamentum aliud nemo potest pnere and the Tract De oblacione iugis sacrificii*, Anne Hudson, ed., Oxford, UK, (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. lxiii. The entire sermon was reprinted during 1529 and again in 1530 amid enhanced reformist discourse: “*A Proper dyalogue between a Gentillman and an Husbandman.*” See D.H. Parker, “*A Proper dyalogue between a Gentillman and an Husbandman:*’ the Question of Authorship,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, (1996), pp.

influence of such tracts, likely penned circa 1420, went well beyond the upheavals of early Lollardy and carried weight into the Reformation period, as the sermon was reprinted several times and widely circulated among reformist camps. Claiming that the religious orders had pilfered the treasury of the church to enrich themselves, the Lollard preacher argued these monks had bankrupted the institution, which then proved unable to provide charity to the needy, declaring “endowed clerkis, monkis and chanouns and freris” had “robbid Cristis Chirche of goodis of fortune, and maad it worldly pore.”<sup>116</sup> The writer did note that these holy orders had, however, honorably served the Christian community in the past.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, the greed and accumulation of property created a culture of entitlement among the religious orders, who then expected the comforts of a wealthy lord instead of the harsh and ideal lifestyle as proscribed in the monastic discipline. Religious orders proved worthy of their benefices in times past because, in short, they lived virtuously. Though the author felt “the sects” were beyond hope, if they could return to a state like that of the primitive church, forsaking their worldly wealth and living in accordance with the scriptures, they might regain their spiritual value to society. This sermon suggested that even among monastic critics as vehement as the Lollards that a gradation existed in their perception of spiritual value among the clergy and the religious orders based upon individual merit, not institutional failure.

Highlighting this individuality of spiritual virtue, a Lollard contingent presented parliament in 1407 or 1410 with a bill that suggested the confiscation of the monastic landed revenue, which the crown would appropriate and in turn create many new secular landowners. In a curious statement, however, the signatories noted that they would not touch the property of certain religious orders or

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63-75. Literary scholar Anne Hudson has identified the anonymous author of the sermon as a “peripatetic preacher”, who traveled broadly avoiding the authorities, while espousing Lollard-like criticism of the benefited clergy and sacraments. Four manuscripts of the sermon survive from the fifteenth century and reformers of the sixteenth century incorporated much of the tract into their own rhetoric.

<sup>116</sup> *Omis Plantacio*, (1420), in *The Works of A Lollard Preacher*, Anne Hudson, ed., pp. 108, 139-140.

<sup>117</sup> *Omis Plantacio*, (1420), in *The Works of A Lollard Preacher*, Anne Hudson, ed., p. 108.

intuitions. Chief among these groups were “the monks of the charterhouse,” which was common nomenclature for the Carthusian order.<sup>118</sup> Whether the Carthusians garnered an especial reverence within the monastic pantheon from the Lollard revolutionaries remains unclear, but of the few orders shown clemency each proved among the most well respected in the medieval world, such as the Cluniacs, Hospitallars, hermits, Crutched friars, and Carthusians.<sup>119</sup> It seems likely that this bill differentiated certain religious orders based upon their perceived spiritual value to society. Religious houses that remained on good terms with the communities they lived in and provided effective spiritual services were not touched. Wendy Scase echoes this criticism in her study on the “new anticlericalism,” noting that the animosity toward some religious orders and not others, “may be reflected in the preferences of the laity of this period for the less institutional orders, such as . . . the Carthusians.”<sup>120</sup> This evidence suggests that contemporary understandings of spiritual idealism played a significant role in shaping lay perceptions of merit among religious groups of the time.

Throughout these anticlerical texts several features of the critiques stand out. Wycliffe’s writing denounced monks who misappropriated endowed wealth, lived in luxury, and avoided their pastoral duties. He had no qualm with contemplation itself, but when it became perpetual and monks failed to serve their spiritual community actively, they had no place in his vision of late fourteenth century society. Echoing these assertions, the anonymous Lollard preacher in his sermon *Omnis*

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<sup>118</sup> *The Lollard Disendowment Bill*, in *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, Anne Hudson, ed., Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 137. In her extensive discussion of Carthusians, Margaret Thompson showed that the Carthusian order in England or individual communities of these monks were commonly referred to as monks of the charterhouse. This proved common nomenclature when describing the order in England throughout the late middle ages and early modern period. Furthermore, the royal visitors during the Tudor period in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* regularly referred to the Carthusians as monks of the charterhouse. E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England*, (London, 1930).

<sup>119</sup> Anne Hudson suggests that the Lollards had simply not yet added the monetary value of these houses into the calculation for disendowment, while at the same time claiming the thoroughness of the document made over many months. Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, pp. 338-341.

<sup>120</sup> Wendy Scase, *The New Anti-Clericalism*, p. 122.

*Plantacio* also attacked monks for enjoying worldly pleasures and not performing spiritual services to the laity. These works suggest critics of English monasticism and their audiences during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries found the institution as a whole lacking in spiritual idealism. Yet a clear gradation existed among religious orders in the minds of these observers. Specific monastic groups who maintained a zealous dedication to personal piety, lived in austerity, and avoided worldly pleasure, such as the Carthusians or revered hermits, through their aura of holiness still provided valuable spiritual services to lay communities, and frequently did not receive condemnation in traditional works of anticlericalism.

### **Quest for Personal Piety**

The quest for personal piety was a key aspect in forming spiritual idealism within late medieval Christianity. St. Catherine of Siena, certainly one of the most influential saints of the late middle ages, wrote, “my cell will not be one of stone or wood, but that of self-knowledge.” The quest for individual illumination through contemplation and prayer remained a hallmark of spiritual idealism before the Reformation. The historian C.H. Lawrence, further confirms, “the monastic bodies that continued to flourish” after the black death, “were those that succeeded in accommodating this quest for personal identity . . . the wider dissemination of literacy among the laity, produced a new kind of religious sentiment, which expressed the ascetical vocation as primarily a search for individual fulfillment.”<sup>121</sup> Certainly religious developments throughout the fifteenth century, such as the movement began by Gerard Groote in Holland, who founded a group of pious individuals dedicated to personal edification and zealous prayer called the Brethren of the Common Life. This group of both laymen and clerics lived a strict religious life, based upon a renunciation of personal wealth and worldly aggrandizement, and instead replaced such pursuits with an intense

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<sup>121</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 269.

reading of the scriptures and a lifestyle dedicated to the imitation of *vita apostolica*. Groote himself viciously denounced clerical vice, especially the lack of personal piety.<sup>122</sup> This movement, often called the *Devotio Moderna*, swept across Western Europe. Its most popular expression came from the work of Thomas a Kempis, *De Imitatione Christi*. He wrote, “by two wings is man lifted above earthly things, by simplicity and purity. Simplicity ought to be the intention, purity the affection.”<sup>123</sup> As this reference suggests, the movement encouraged individuals to seek for personal piety by practicing introspection and avoiding worldly entanglement, imitating Christ. For it was only through contemplation, individual reformation, and prayer that the Christian could attain the most holy life, ensuring unification with God and his saints in heaven. *Devotio Moderna* coupled with the *vita apostolica* deeply influenced the English mystical tradition. Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, for example, embodied this ethos in their works that above all stressed an inner struggle to align the personal will with the divine and abandon temporal concerns. Such expressions of the movements and the widespread popularity of ascetics testified that much of the laity perceived the traits and goals of this lifestyle, chiefly the pursuit of personal holiness, as the highest spiritual ideal.<sup>124</sup> The practitioners hence proved valuable members of the community for their potent spiritual services, which significant benefactions confirmed.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> T.P. Van Zijl, *Gerard Groote, Ascetic and Reformer*, New York: NY: (Catholic University of America, Studies in Medieval History, n.s. 18, 1963).

<sup>123</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *De Imitatione Christi*, vol. i, p. 20, my translation.

<sup>124</sup> David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, London, UK: (Burns & Oates Publishers, 1961), p. 43. *Mysticism and Reform 1400-1750*, Sara S. Poor and Nigel Smith, eds., South Bend, IN: (University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), p. 6

<sup>125</sup> Michael Hicks, “The Rising Price of Piety in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, Janet Burton and Karen Stober, eds., Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 95-112. Hicks suggests that the dramatically increasing cost of monastic endowment in the late middle ages caused the laity to seek out individual clerics to say masses for their souls, paying them on an annual rather than perpetual basis. This shift shows that the laity favored clerics who enjoyed high spiritual reputations, many of whom came from the contemplative orders, such as the Carthusians.

England witnessed a powerful mystical movement during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that took inspiration from the *Devotio Moderna*, stressing the quest for personal spirituality and a continued struggle toward Christian perfection through both contemplation and prayer. Several of the more well-known mystical works written by Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, helped generate reverence for individual piety among their large audiences. Furthermore, only the contemplative religious orders that enjoyed high reputations for intense asceticism and personal holiness, such as the Carthusians and Bridgettines, saw renewed enthusiasm in endowments and benefactions during the fifteenth century, unlike most other religious orders. This further testified to strong lay support for this specific form of spirituality that stressed the pursuit of individual holiness.<sup>126</sup>

At the heart of the mystical experience remained the quest for personal spirituality, accomplished through communion with the divine. “Prayer is the deliberate and preserving action of the soul,” wrote Julian of Norwich. “It is true and enduring and full of grace. Prayer fastens the soul to God and makes it one with God’s will.”<sup>127</sup> Julian’s contemporary, Margery Kempe described her spiritual journey as a lifelong pursuit for reunion with the divine. She practiced intense introspection and prayer, which were frequently accompanied by powerful fits of emotion.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* summarized the value of contemplation and gave reason for the enthusiastic social support of such mystical literature in one statement: “One loving, blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead than anything

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<sup>126</sup> Michael Hicks, “The Rising Price of Piety in the Later Middle Ages,” pp. 95-112.

<sup>127</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, (1395), in *Julian of Norwich Revelations of Divine Love*, Clifton Wolters, ed., Baltimore, MD: (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 55.

<sup>128</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, (1438), Anthony Bale, ed., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 19-21.



else you could do.”<sup>129</sup> The excerpts from these mystical works shows the importance of the individual connection with the divine and the purity such an encounter imbued upon the contemplative, which proved a popular and potent form of personal piety in the late middle ages. In this way, the mystic brought benefits to lay members of society as well as souls of the dead, dispensing his or her spiritual merit for the benefit of the community. While these works of spirituality carried great weight in their own time, their value was further demonstrated when both William Caxton and Wyken de Worde published Julian’s and *The Cloud* author’s works in the early sixteenth century. They disseminated these writings to a broader audience that eagerly purchased these and other works that stressed the quest for personal piety as the highest form of spirituality.<sup>130</sup> Thus, mystical literature shows the high value late medieval and early modern society placed upon personal piety, treasuring the works of spiritual exemplars who taught a path to individual spiritual perfection.

More widespread than devotional tracts or mystical writings, the works of England’s most eminent poets further elucidate popular perceptions of spiritual idealism among the ecclesiastical estate in late medieval society. Geoffrey Chaucer’s pardoner figure demonstrated an antithesis to personal holiness, which, when turned on its head, offers a window into the perception of personal piety. This creature of religious corporatism was an arch anti-type of personal holiness. His testimony without question proved the most blatantly reprehensible to the ideal of medieval spirituality of all of the religious figures in *The Canterbury Tales*. In the opening statements of his tale, the pardoner declared that he cared nothing for the duty of his office and eagerly deceived poor parishioners only for his own gain. He further announces in a sermon, “radix malorum est cupiditas”

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<sup>129</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, (ca.1390), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Evelyn Underhill, ed., second edition, London, UK: (1922), p. 47.

<sup>130</sup> *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England*, William F. Pollard and Robert Boenig, eds., Bury St. Edmunds, UK: (St. Edmundsbury Press, 1997), pp. ix-xi.

taken from the scripture, 1 Timothy 6:10, (“greed is the root of all evil,”) yet he himself paid no heed to the warning in scripture, as in the next lines he states, “thus can I preche agayn that same vyce / which that I use and that is avarice. / But though myself be gilty in that sinne.” Chaucer also highlights the pardoner’s lacking personal, spiritual virtue: “it is joye to see my bisnesse. / Of avarice and of swich cursednesse / is al my preching for to make hem free / to yeven hier pens and namely unto me. / For myn entente is nat but for winne, / and nothing for correccioun of sinne.”<sup>131</sup> The character further boasts that his oratory proved so great that that he, “wol non of the Apostles counterfete,” and not through his pious lifestyle, but skilled speech he would get the most destitute person’s last pence, even “the porvereste widwe in a village, / al shold hir children sterve for famyne.”<sup>132</sup> Such bragging about swindling the poor and bombastic avaricious hypocrisy provides an image of the spiritual anti-type, as the pardoner stood proxy for everything that the laity loathed among the ecclesial estate, which therefore illuminates what they valued, and that was personal piety. Speaking to this reduction of the ecclesial office to a profane state, the host of the pilgrims became so incensed with the nefarious actions of the pardoner that he wished to castrate him and cast his severed genitalia into hog manure.<sup>133</sup> The reaction of the host communicated the especially vile nature of the pardoner’s apostasy. The pardoner did not pursue personal piety. Instead he forsook the sacred duties of his office, cheating those he purported to serve, and lacking entirely the ethos of medieval spirituality. He wronged the weakest members of society, all while making a mockery of the salvation process of the church, only to enrich himself. Such a powerful example of the spiritual anti-type demonstrated the importance individual piety among the perception of the medieval laity.

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<sup>131</sup> *The Pardoner’s Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., pp. 598, 600.

<sup>132</sup> *The Pardoner’s Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., pp. 602.

<sup>133</sup> *The Pardoner’s Tale*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., p. 635.

On the other hand, the famous poet John Gower, a friend of Chaucer, definitively outlined his perception of late medieval spiritual idealism as it related to the pursuit of personal piety in one of his three major works, *Mirour de l'homme*, stating a monk “should nurture his religion in discretion, humility, and simplicity.” Furthermore, the religious took “vows against the pleasures of the flesh,” agreeing to endure “the pain of a harsh life.”<sup>134</sup> Spiritual idealism, in much of Gower’s work, centered upon personal asceticism and imitating the *vita apostolica*. He stressed the importance of the pure monk who fulfilled his religious duty to the divine as well as lay society. Emphasizing the image of the primitive church and early monasticism, he also highlighted a need for the personal reformation of pious practices among the religious. “The filthiness of the habit a monk wears,” writes Gower, “is an outward sign that he is without pride and haughtiness, that his inner spirit is of pure white spotlessness.” These words suggest that Gower considered the individual outward expression as indicative of the sacred quality of the monk. Monastic vows did not themselves make the monk sacred. Rather personal discipline and a dedication to the simple, yet pious Christian life created an aura of holiness around the spiritually virtuous monk. Once these monks had attained a state of sacredness through their pursuit of personal piety, many of the laity then placed great value on the spiritual services that these particular monks provided. He confirmed this stating that pure monks must pray earnestly for the betterment of secular society, “that is the function of their order.”<sup>135</sup> Gower’s work sheds light onto the ideal of personal piety under the larger umbrella of spiritual idealism and how it created an aura of holiness around the certain religious orders or specific holy persons.

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<sup>134</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l'homme*, in *The Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay, ed., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1902), pp. 235-237.

<sup>135</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l'homme*, pp. 235-237.

Conversely, William Langland, a contemporary of Gower and Chaucer, in his poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, outlined the failings or anti-ideals of the religious orders within the social conditions of the 1370s and 1380s, stressing the duty of the clergy toward the poor in the wake of the Peasants Revolt as well as the Lollard movement. This illuminated the poet's understanding of spiritual idealism, and specifically the role of personal piety in forming it: "Here messe and here matynes and many of here Oures / arn don undevoutlych: drede is at the laste / lest Crist in constorie acorse ful manye." Here Langland outlined the lacking personal conviction and impious nature of the masses and prayers that the ecclesiastics performed. The poet emphasized that these monks performed their religious function without devotion, neither glorifying God nor attaining individual spiritual merit. Such absence of personal conviction placed the monk's soul in jeopardy, as in the last judgment Christ in his heavenly consistory court would condemn him. Instead of pursuing a pious lifestyle, the religious "syngen there for symonye, for silver is swete," the poet observes. Hence the monk or friar that did not fulfill his monastic duty to himself or those he served became a profane object, singing masses, hours, and praying for monetary reward, not spiritual merit.

Late medieval poetry held up such imagery as depicted in *Piers Plowman* as the antithesis of spiritual idealism, pursuing worldly gain, not personal piety for the benefit of all Christendom. In a similar fashion to many of Chaucer's religious caricatures, Langland's anti-type characters lacked individual virtue and remained creatures of the world, focused upon temporal gain or advancement, not spiritual exceptionalism. This demonstrates that in Langland's perception, monks and all the clergy, had a duty to the spiritual communities they served, which they were largely not performing; they should "prechen and prey for them, and provide for the poor," he declares.<sup>136</sup> He also chastises false hermits who professed a life of introspection to avoid work, condemns friars and monks for

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<sup>136</sup> William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, (ca. 1390), in *The Donaldson Translation Middle English Text Sources and Backgrounds Criticism*, Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd, eds., New York, NY: (W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 7.

“prechyng[e] [to] the peple for profit...,” and found fault with pardoners who cared nothing for true contrition, offering absolution to “lewde men” for a handsome price.<sup>137</sup> When the clergy, especially monks, forsook religious virtue and instead took on worldly pursuits under the guise of religion, they became unworthy of their unique spiritual status and the monetary support from the laity.

As with Gower and Chaucer, personal piety unequivocally remained key in Langland’s understanding of spiritual idealism. In the opening scene of *Piers Plowman*, a figure descended from the “tower of truth” to illuminate the simple plowman. The character noted that nearly everyone that was in a state of well-being or luxury sought no heaven other than in their present existence. This proved folly. For God “yaf yow five wittis, forto worschep hym therewith the while that ye ben here.” The figure further informed the plowman, “Lef naught thi likame for a lyer him techeth: that is the wrecched world wolde the bitraye. For the fende and thi flesch folweth togidere, / and that shendeth thi soule: sette it in thin herte.”<sup>138</sup> In other words, the dispenser of truth informed Piers that God gave man five senses to honor and worship the divine, which entailed not indulging the desires of the body and avoiding association with worldly pleasures. Therefore, if individuals gave into the cares of the world, they lacked holiness and were associated with the fiend, the Devil. As many of the clergy described in prologue proved deficient in this sacred quality, they dishonored God, risked their own soul, and failed to serve the spiritual needs of the laity.

Coupled with this negative example of worldliness, the figure of Holy Church illuminated ideal spiritual practices. Upon her revelation as Holy Church to Piers, he immediately fell upon his knees and “preyed hir piteously prey for my synnes / and also kenne me kyndeli on Criste to bileve.” The wisdom figure summed up that the ideal devotion of all Christians was the pursuit of personal piety: “It is a kynde knowing that kenneth in thine herte / for to ovy[e] thi Lorde lever than thiselve /

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<sup>137</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, pp. 3-8.

<sup>138</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, p. 15.

no dedly synne to do dey though thou sholdest. / This I trowe be treuthe.”<sup>139</sup> In this example, Langland emphasized an innate or natural knowledge of the divine, known only in the heart. This form of ontological truth guided the religious practitioner that pursued union with the divine. Furthermore, by grasping and channeling this inner spiritual language of the heart the individual demonstrated a love for God, while at the same time avoiding worldly attachment and sin, which led to eternal damnation of the soul. This language asserts that the pursuit of personal piety, which meant understanding a divine language carried in the heart, led to spiritual enlightenment and subsequently an outward disassociation with sin or worldliness for the ultimate purpose of unification with the divine.

Numerous references from the most renowned English poets of the late middle ages confirm that many of the laity revered ecclesiastics who sought personal piety. Once in a state of spiritual idealism, these religious practitioners were eagerly employed by the laity to supplicate the divine on their behalf. In this way, the texts suggest that pursuing individual piety created a spiritual ideal in the minds of late medieval poets, which subsequently influenced their audience’s perception of spiritual idealism based upon the sacred or profane quality of the religious agents.

Less well-known literature also contributed to this perception of the religious orders alongside the more famous works. For example, an anonymous poem of the mid fifteenth century entitled *Why I Can’t Be a Nun* provided a mild and nuanced critique of monasticism in its account of an allegorical religious house, which stood proxy for the institution as a whole. Full of zeal the narrator sought holy orders as a nun, traveling “Thorowgh Ynglond long and brode,” seeking an abbey renown for piety. Quickly the narrator, called Kateryne, fell into a dream vision where an angelic being provided a tour of a nunnery, which likely represented the authorial perception of monasticism. The religious house first appeared beautiful and in good order from the outside, “but

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<sup>139</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, pp. 16, 20.

syn had made hyt fulle unclene within.” She found many characters, whose names and actions represented the generally accepted failings of fifteenth century monasticism: Dame Sclowthe, Dame Veyne Glory, Dame Lust, Dame Wantowne.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, in the illusory convent, chastity “was so lytelle beloved there.” Yet, Kateryne notes, regarding the personified lady chastity, “sum her loved in hert fulle dere.”<sup>141</sup> Though some of the nuns maintained their vows, as the passage confirms, many also failed, living lives that honored the pleasures of the world, such as lust, avarice, and sloth, while neglecting their duties of prayer and charity. Ultimately the narrator left the convent due to, “the wanting of obedience, for hyt schulde be chese in consciens, alle relygius rule wytneseth the same, and when I saw her in no reverence, I might no lenger abyge for schame.”<sup>142</sup> She, in consultation with her heavenly guide, felt that a life dedicated to personal piety outside of the nunnery proved superior to the religious life mired in world pursuits. Nevertheless, the poem ends with hope for a reformed monastic life: “For nun wold I nevere be none, for suche defawtes that I have see, but yyf they might amendyd be, and forsake her syn both day and nyght, God yyf me grace that day to see.”<sup>143</sup> This poem cleverly pointed out that the personal failings of the nuns brought disrepute upon the institution. The quest for personal piety shines through the work, as the author abhorred the state of the abbey within the writer’s vision because of the conduct of the nuns, who failed to practice personal piety and lived a worldly existence. Kateryne then vowed to live a pious and ascetic life outside of the abbey, where she could more earnestly dedicate herself to contemplation and prayer, the highest ideals of a Christian as contained in the poem. This tale, though centering upon an anonymous order of nuns, illuminates the general perception of the religious life. The imagery

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<sup>140</sup> *Why I Cant Be a Nun*, in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, James Dean ed., Kalamazoo, MI: (Western Michigan University Press, 1991), pp. 231-238.

<sup>141</sup> *Why I Cant Be a Nun*, p. 238.

<sup>142</sup> *Why I Cant Be a Nun*, p. 239.

<sup>143</sup> *Why I Cant Be a Nun*, p. 240.

translates well the views of many observers toward universal monasticism in both male and female orders. Its rhetoric suggests that a particularly devout group, such as the Carthusians, would have found respect, even reverence, in the eyes of this anonymous author for their strict lifestyle and zealous pursuit of personal piety, which the writer saw as the highest monastic ideals.

As much evidence has suggested, the pursuance of personal piety remained a hallmark of late medieval spiritual idealism in England. The Carthusian order, for example, largely embodied this individual piety.<sup>144</sup> Their unique, quasi-hermetic lifestyle encouraged introspection, focusing upon the divine and channeling the inner language of the heart, as Langland mentioned. On account of this pious living, they appeared to disassociate themselves from a temporal focus, which many observers considered crucial within the construct of spiritual idealism, as shown through many of the religious characters in the *Canterbury Tales*. Finally, as Gower insisted, it was the essential duty of the religious to remain in the cloister, abandon the material world, and pray for lay society. The Carthusian lifestyle proved extremely well suited to meet the demands of medieval society, as voiced through Gower. The focus on zealous individual spirituality proved a hallmark of the Carthusian order, which many commentators perceived as sacred among the profane world.<sup>145</sup> The Carthusians, argues historian C.H. Lawrence, proved unique among the religious orders as they “successfully domesticated the ideal of the desert in the form of a permanent institution, which never relaxed or compromised its distinctive pattern, so that to the end of the middle ages it never required the attention of reformers.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Glyn Coppack, “Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for Our God”, pp. 166-168.

<sup>145</sup> Dennis R. Martin, “Carthusians during the Reformation Era: ‘Cartusia nunquam deformata, reformari resistens’”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 41-66.

<sup>146</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 147.



Speaking explicitly to this perception, the French text *Miroir du Monde* juxtaposed a passage concerning heretics against the orthodox spiritual ideal of the day, which in the original language proved the Cistercians. Nevertheless, in the English translation of the treatise, entitled *Mirrore of the Worlde*, undertaken on behalf of the Scrope family of East Anglia during the mid-fifteenth century, the translator switched the reference of the Cistercians with the Carthusians. This indicates that at least the translator certainly found the Carthusians more praiseworthy than the Cistercians. His choice of this monastic group, when he could have selected any order, suggests it maintained the highest spiritual idealism of the day and the writer as well as his audience saw the monks at the apogee of spiritual idealism.<sup>147</sup> Demonstrating that lay patrons valued Carthusian spirituality more than less ascetic orders, the fifteenth century saw the foundation of three Carthusian charterhouses and one Bridgettine abbey, while no other new religious houses were founded. The founders of these institutions showed by the selection of these orders what values the laity held in the highest esteem, most notably the zealous pursuit of personal piety by the solitary contemplative.<sup>148</sup> It was precisely because these monks diligently worked toward personal piety through contemplation that English communities placed large numbers of resources into these monastic communities when other orders continually witnessed decreasing revenues and affiliation.<sup>149</sup> Late medieval attitudes, then, likely associated this sacred quality of personal piety with specific religious orders, explaining why Carthusians, Bridgettines, or Observants proved exceptional among the religious orders in the eyes of

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<sup>147</sup> *Mirrore of the Worlde: A Middle English Translation of Le Miroir du Monde*, Robert R. Raymond, Elaine E. Whitaker, & Ruth E. Sternglantz, eds., Toronto, CA: (Toronto University Press, 2003), pp. 24, 94.

<sup>148</sup> David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, London, UK: (Burns & Oates Publishers, 1961), p. 43.

<sup>149</sup> Glyn Coppack, "Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for Our God: The Carthusian and Community in Late Medieval England", in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, Janet Burton and Karen Stober, eds., London, UK: (Boydell press, 2008), p. 168. Coppack shows that increasing numbers of the laity sought obituary memorials and/or burials in or near the charterhouses from 1450-1534. So great were the numbers that the monks found it burdensome. He also argues that this proved unique to the Carthusians, who only grew more popular because of their perceived personal holiness; whereas the laity did not seek out other monastic orders that comparatively lacked the zealous personal spirituality embodied by the Carthusians.

many observers. In sum, much literary evidence confirms that the quest for personal piety remained a cornerstone of late medieval spiritual idealism corresponding to the *devotio moderna* and *vita apostolica* movements, founded upon contemplation of the divine, individual virtue, and subsequently the critical religious services an ecclesiastic provided his/her community.

### **Idyllic Poverty**

Along with individuals or groups attaining personal piety, another key tenet of medieval spiritual idealism was founded upon the notion of idyllic poverty. The ideal of poverty is an ideal for those who were not impoverished. The bulk of the lower orders regularly lived in a state of poverty.<sup>150</sup> Hence idyllic poverty primarily remained the preserve of the higher social orders, who voluntarily denied themselves worldly wealth and the material possessions it provided. Nonetheless, this voluntary denial of material goods and luxury also earned holy persons merit in the eyes of most observers because of their sacrifice of privilege. The religious orders, universally, professed poverty as one of the three seminal oaths of their institutional and individual devotion to God, followed closely by chastity and obedience. Such a profession of poverty meant giving up all worldly goods, personally. Vociferous debate ensued between the fraternal and monastic orders over the question of individual versus absolute poverty; the friars arguing for the later, and monks the former, both claiming that they followed the apostolic model of poverty.<sup>151</sup> Monastic orders professed complete personal poverty, giving their worldly possessions to the institution, where the abbot appropriated the goods for the betterment of the monastery and the religious community it served. Thus, with no material interest in the world monastics could devote their focus completely to the divine. For the monk this meant contemplation, prayer, singing the hours in praise of God, and, at least theoretically,

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<sup>150</sup> Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, Ithaca, N.Y., (Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 66-67.

<sup>151</sup> Wendy Scase, *The New Anti-Clericalism*, pp. 47-52.

physical labor for his sustenance.<sup>152</sup> As religious orders developed excellent reputations for their devout lifestyle, the laity sought out their spiritual services, providing endowments or alms for the monks' perceived efficacious prayers. Throughout the middle ages monetary success generated expansion and also caused laxity as time went on, often. This in turn generated the need for renewal and reform, spurring the creation of new religious orders that returned to strictness and poverty. Then the cycle began all over again.<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless, what remained paramount to lay observers was the image of poverty and humility.<sup>154</sup>

Avoiding worldliness, historian Benjamin Thompson notes, remained synonymous with a state of idyllic poverty. For “monks were generally supposed to put off their worldly selves inside the monastery to exchange their secular identity for a spiritual persona.” When the monk failed to maintain individual poverty, he also tainted the institution, and this “form of worldliness,” Thompson continues, “threatened to deprive the religious of their sense of living a distinct life and following a separate calling.” By the sixteenth century, he asserts, “perhaps only the Carthusians, on a small scale, were successful in maintaining a tangible isolation from society over centuries,” which helps explain why they enjoyed such a high reputation for non-worldliness and holiness among late medieval English observers. “Monasteries could not be created and sustained without the support of society,” argues Thompson. And few orders successfully maintained a state of idyllic poverty in the perception of many English writers, hence why groups, such as the Carthusians, received more monetary support and reverence than other competing monastic institutions.<sup>155</sup> A humble existence

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<sup>152</sup> *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Justin McCann, ed., London, UK: (Burns & Oates Publishing, 1952).

<sup>153</sup> Ludo Millis, *Angelic Monks and Worldly Men*, p. ix.

<sup>154</sup> Robert Whiting, *Local Responses to the English Reformation*, London, UK: (Macmillan Press, 1998), pp. 16-22.

<sup>155</sup> Benjamin Thompson, “Introduction: *Monasteries and Medieval Society*” in *Monasteries and Society in Medieval Britain, Proceedings of the 1994 Harlaxton Symposium*, Benjamin Thompson, ed., Stamford, UK: (Paul Watkins Press, 1999), pp. 4-5, 8, 12. See also Carol B. Rowntree, “Studies in Carthusian History in Later Medieval England”, unpublished D.Phil thesis, (University of York, 1981), pp. 265-366. Rowntree shows that Carthusians

and denial of worldliness demonstrated the commitment of the monastics to a life devoted solely to the divine. This sacred quality generated favor with God, and thus other members of society might channel this preferment for their own spiritual benefit.

Many polemical accounts and literature of the late middle ages cast idyllic poverty as an essential element of spiritual idealism. Nevertheless, many critics of monasticism also cited the worldliness of the religious as cause for immediate reform or total abolition. “Reason and the law of God require,” wrote John Wycliffe, “that one who is a chief servant of God should be duly ministered unto in things temporal; but both reason and the real good of God’s servant, require that he be not too much laden with these temporalities, since they serve their possessor only in so far as they facilitate his duty towards God.”<sup>156</sup> Wycliffe’s statement highlighted his own and the later Lollard view that all clerics must live modestly, in the image of the primitive church, having only enough material possessions to serve the lay community. Anything beyond this proved avaricious and took away from the sacred quality of the religious. Lollards throughout the fifteenth century regularly denounced the monastic failure to maintain the vow of poverty. “For thus Lucifer robbide Adam of goodis of fortune, of kynde and of grace, as the clergie robbith now the chirche of these manere of goodis” and these “religious folk” were then guilty of “apostasie,” wrote an anonymous Lollard preacher.<sup>157</sup> The preacher castigated monastics who took endowments or benefice income away from the true servants of parish communities. He compared them to the devil, who pillaged the goods of the biblical figure of Adam, resulting in his expulsion from paradise. The statement reflected how deeply the preacher loathed the hoarding of wealth among the religious orders, which

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enjoyed increasing revenues during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries when other monastic orders saw declining monetary support from lay society.

<sup>156</sup> John Wycliffe, *Triologus*, Book 4, in *Tracts and Treatises of John de Wycliffe, D.D. with Selections and Translations from his Manuscripts, and Latin Works*, Robert Vaughan, ed., London, UK: (Blackburn and Pardon, 1865), p. 170.

<sup>157</sup> *Omis Plantacio*, (1420), in *The Works of A Lollard Preacher*, Anne Hudson, ed., pp. 118, 122.

contributed only to luxurious monastic living, not charity. Hence, Lollards and their sympathizers enunciated the widespread sense that the religious needed to maintain personal modesty in lifestyle and found monastic communities upon the notion of idyllic poverty.

Frequently in late medieval literature the religious orders that remained devoted to the ideal of poverty received high praise from poets and social critics alike. For example, the Benedictine monk John Lydgate, in his famous rendering of the poem, *The Dance of Death*, described a scene where the character Death came upon many figures whom represented social archetypes, some Death received well and others whom he condemned for their failings in life. Notably Lydgate chose a Carthusian monk to model ideal spiritual behavior. Certainly the monk-poet had extensive contact with monastics of all orders, especially his own Benedictines. Hence when Death approached a monk of the charterhouse, Lydgate describes the monk as “loathsome” in appearance, wearing rags and emaciated from fervent fasting, “with chekis ded & pale, causid of wache, & long abstynence.” The austerity of the Carthusian stood in stark contrast with most of the other well clothed and fed religious figures within the tale.<sup>158</sup> For instance, Death comments upon the fine dress of a pompous cardinal: “Ye be abaisht, it seemeth and in drede Sir Cardynall . . . Your gret array al shal levyn heer / your hatt of red, your vesture of gret cost / al these thynges, rekenyd well I feer / in gret worship, good ays is lost.” Responding to Death, the cardinal laments “that I shal nevir here aftir clothid be in grise nor Ermyn lik to my degree . . . by which I have lernyd weel and see how that al joie eendith in hoynesse.”<sup>159</sup> Where the Carthusian remained in lowly poverty and clothed modestly, the cardinal wore splendid attire and allowed worldly desire to swoon his mind. As the cardinal declares, he should have focused on humility and spiritual pursuits during his life instead of temporal aggrandizement, which took away his aura of holiness. Echoing these closing remarks of the

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<sup>158</sup> John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, p. 47.

<sup>159</sup> John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, pp. 11-14.

Cardinal, an ascetic, whose order Lydgate does not tell, points out that along with a fear and love of God, humble virtue proved “a sur acquytaile” against Death’s sting.<sup>160</sup> Such dialogue highlighted the categorical importance of idyllic poverty among the religious. Lydgate provided incisive commentary on monasticism as he himself was a Benedictine monk, and he also made clear in his poem that a key aspect of medieval spiritual idealism lay with maintaining a state of apostolic poverty.

Further hinting at the relevance of idyllic poverty as a key pillar of English spiritual idealism, John Audely, a priest and poet at the court Henry V during the early fifteenth century, describes the virtue of forsaking worldliness among the religious orders in his great work, *Council of Conscience*: “in poverty and in prayerys , in preve penawns / and to abeyde abstinens, and forsaken abundans,” proved essential for a quality monastic practitioner.<sup>161</sup> Throughout *Council of Conscience* the poet continually stressed the importance of idyllic poverty. If a monk failed to maintain this critical aspect of his discipline, he could never hope to attain personal holiness, bring renown to his order, nor properly serve the lay community through his prayers. Worldliness was the bane of the religious orders according to Audely, who argued that monastic duty required the individual to forsake wealth and temporal influence. On the “mater of monkys in a meke maner and to al relegyous the beth iblest by Goddis ordynans . . . ye schuld have no propurte; / on the pore hit schuld be spend!” Audely exclaims. As the text asserts, a monk found fulfillment through modesty and poverty. By successfully maintaining these conditions, the monk could then dedicate himself to a life of supplicating the divine for his own soul as well as the laity. In Audely’s words, the monastic “that

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<sup>160</sup> John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>161</sup> The Blind John Audely, *Counsel of Conscience, XI Marcolf and Solomon*, (1426), in *John the Blind Audely, Poems and Carols* (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302), Susanna Fein, ed., Kalamazoo, MI: (Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), p. 37.

prayn . . . besyly, both nyght and day” performed the obligation of his order.<sup>162</sup> When the monk remained dedicated to prayer, he had no time for worldliness, evidenced through his lack of material goods and temporal power. Therefore, always the acute observer, Audely stressed that a state of idyllic poverty and humility among a religious order was confirmed through the holiness of its monks. The poet ended his stanza on monasticism by quoting scripture: “*Humilitas est radix omnium virtutum,*” (humility is the root of all virtue). This key verse cautioned readers to remain humble and live modestly, maintaining idyllic poverty.

This notion of spiritual idealism also becomes apparent in more widely circulated literature such as *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer hinted at the concept of idyllic poverty through the character of his parson, who was the religious exemplar of the *Canterbury Tales*. The great poet describes the parson as, “povre,” stating, “he coulde in litel thing han suffisance,” and “ful looth were him to cursen for his tithes.”<sup>163</sup> The parson was portrayed as modest and refusing to pursue excommunication of his parishioners for his due payments. In this text and others, the author framed, for his audience, the idea that respectable ecclesiastics were those who lived in poverty and who eschewed worldly advancement in favor of forbearance and humility. This spiritual ideal of poverty, then, informed and influenced general perceptions of all the clergy.<sup>164</sup> For medieval poetry largely founded its rhetoric upon the assumption that God favored those who voluntarily forsook the world and its material wealth. *The Summoner’s Tale* echoed such claims when Chaucer describes spiritual idealism through the mouth of a friar, whom the character defines as those “who folweth Cristes gospel and his fore, but we that humble been and chast and pore, werkers of goddess

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<sup>162</sup> John Audely, *Counsel of Conscience*, p. 39.

<sup>163</sup> *The General Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., p. 34.

<sup>164</sup> Lester Little, *Religious Poverty*, pp. 66-67.

word, not auditours.”<sup>165</sup> The speech highlighted the importance of humility and poverty in creating the spiritual ideal of the clergy. Therefore, this imagery as shown in *The Summoner’s Tale* of the modest ecclesiastic, devoted to his pursuit of the divine, living in idyllic poverty, flowed through the ages, forming a key aspect of late medieval spiritual idealism.

The ideal of poverty among ecclesiastics also remained influential during the early modern period. John Skelton, Tudor poet laureate, certainly a voice of the age, more than a century after the medieval writers in 1517 further advanced the general perception of spiritual idealism as it related to poverty throughout his famous poem, *Colin Clout*. In the verses, Colin, the protagonist and narrator, depicts the state and failings of the Tudor church with excellent anticlerical wit. Speaking for many among the laity, the poem begins: “Thus I, Colin Clout, as I go about, and wandering as I walk / I hear the people talk. / Men say, for silver and gold / mitres are bought and sold; / there shall no clergy appose a mitre nor a crose.”<sup>166</sup> Such commentary suggested an avaricious clergy, who did not fit into the category of idyllic poverty, and instead purchased their offices and used them for material gain, not spiritual edification of the laity. Furthermore, Skelton portrays monastics as living “*in deliciis, in Gloria et divitiis, in admirabili honore, in Gloria et splendore fulgurantis hastae, viventes parum caste,*” (in splendid luxury, in glory and richness, in amazing state, in pomp and magnificence, with splendid possessions, and living unchaste).<sup>167</sup> In this way Skelton pointed out the failings of monks to maintain a state of personal poverty. Instead they lived in magnificent luxury. These actions made the religious orders into an anti-spiritual ideal.

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<sup>165</sup> *The Summoner’s Tale*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Peter Tuttle, ed., p. 661.

<sup>166</sup> John Skelton, *Colin Clout*, (1517), in *The Complete Poems of John Skelton, Laureate*, Philip Henderson, ed., London, UK: (J.M. Dent and Sons, 1931), p. 291.

<sup>167</sup> John Skelton, *Colin Clout*, p. 296.



Naming specifically the Benedictines, regular canons, Cistercians, all orders of friars, even the Observant Franciscans, Skelton found their lacking personal piety and grand lifestyle repugnant to his notion of spiritual idealism on account of their profession to live in poverty. Rather, these orders, “set in majestie and spiritual dignitie,” became the antithesis of spiritual idealism in the poet’s prose.<sup>168</sup> He lampoons the state of the religious orders as dens of decadence and worldliness, but also stresses the importance of modesty and charity in creating a concept of idyllic poverty within his negative remarks on the religious orders: “farewell benignitie, farewell simplicitie, farewell humilitie, farewell good charitie!”<sup>169</sup> Apart from this criticism of the religious orders, Skelton provides one positive verse regarding an anchorite: “the Pope may an holy anchor call / out of the stony wall / and him a bishop make / if he on him dare take to keep so hard a rule / to ride upon a mule / with gold all betrayed / in purple and pall belapped.”<sup>170</sup> While he directed this statement at condemning the luxurious lifestyle of a prelate, the image of an anchorite who lived humbly, according to his or her profession and in idyllic poverty, shows the poet’s perception of spiritual idealism; it was precisely these qualities made the hermit holy. Thus, the work of Skelton confirms that Tudor society still revered religious practitioners that maintained idyllic poverty and humility as late as the 1520s.

Living in idyllic poverty remained an important aspect of late medieval spiritual idealism. Through many works of literature and polemic the model ecclesiastic avoided worldliness while maintaining a humble lifestyle. In this way the monk, through his devotion to personal poverty, aggrandized his order, which then gained it reverence from many observers. Conversely, the monk that did not live into the archetype of idyllic poverty and strived for worldly gain, failed in his

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<sup>168</sup> John Skelton, *Colin Clout*, p. 294, 305.

<sup>169</sup> John Skelton, *Colin Clout*, p. 300.

<sup>170</sup> John Skelton, *Colin Clout*, p. 291.

fundamental spiritual duty. For in the words of John Gower, the religious that “lives in the world, then alters the nature of the order that was first established, and consequently respect for the order is lost.”<sup>171</sup> Depicting this imagery, the noble parson in Chaucer, the austere Carthusian in Lydgate, Audely’s more gentle advice, or the harsh anticlericalism of Skelton, these poets provided a social critique that represented and influenced late medieval attitudes regarding spiritual idealism.

### **Austerity**

Closely intertwined with the notion of idyllic poverty was a lifestyle dedicated to austerity. Austere living demanded that the religious orders maintained the physical burdens of the rule and scripture, specifically modeled on the example of Christ and his apostles as outlined within the Christian New Testament: fasting, remaining unostentatious, eating a Spartan diet, and striving for modest manners in all aspects of life. Such austerity outwardly demonstrated an inner truth concerning the monks, that they had not idly professed their oaths and indeed underwent a transforming experience, in which they shifted their entire focus and devotion from the temporal world to the spiritual realm. Monastics always claimed that they lived in poverty, personally. Yet, as regularly proved the case, when monks were surrounded by luxurious trappings and maintained enormous endowed wealth, observers rarely perceived such an “impoverished” state as the spiritual ideal. Speaking to this perception, many critics of the religious orders during the late middle ages came under the conviction that many among the monastic orders had become corrupt and focused upon building institutional wealth. As surviving visitation records from many bishops and archdeacons also confirm, these writers argued that the traditional rigors of monastic discipline had declined in most monasteries in the century preceding the Reformation.<sup>172</sup> Nevertheless, a heightened

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<sup>171</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l’homme*, in *The Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay, ed., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1902), p. 235.

interest from the laity regarding austere lifestyles, especially in a culture of waning standards, remained a key feature of spiritual idealism, which proved readily observable to outsiders. The religious orders, such as the Carthusians, who did not surround themselves with material adornment and maintained a humble existence, dedicated to fasting, labor, and prayer, proved exceptional among other orders, and subsequently received much reverence from lay patrons and writers.<sup>173</sup>

This concept of austerity became abundantly clear within the literature of the late medieval England.<sup>174</sup> William Langland, for example, delineates the ideal of the austere lifestyle of the religious orders in *Piers Plowman*: “In pryacers and in penance putten hem manye, al for love of owre Lorde lyveden ful streyte, in hope for to have Heveneriche blisse – As ances and heremites that holden hem in here selles, and coveiten nought n contre to kairen aboute for no likerous liflode her lykam to plese.”<sup>175</sup> The poet here clarified two aspects of the spiritual ideal as it related to an austere lifestyle: First, the key to attaining heavenly bliss came from a true devotion to prayer and penance. Secondly, monks could only accomplish these devotions when they remained in their cloisters, strictly performing the proper rituals required of them and communing with the divine. Such activities remained essential for a holy lifestyle. Monks who lacked an austere existence cavorted around the countryside seeking worldly pleasures and did not remain devoutly within the cell. Only a few lines later in the prologue describing a field full of folk, who represented social stereotypes of Langland’s day, the author juxtaposes this previous image of good ascetics against the worldly pursuits of many other ecclesiastical groups, especially the monks and friars: “bidders and beggeres

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<sup>172</sup> James G. Clark, “The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England”, in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, James G. Clark, ed., Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 3, 17.

<sup>173</sup> David Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, vol. 3, pp. 158-160.

<sup>174</sup> Jill Mann, *Medieval Estates Satire*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>175</sup> William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, (ca. 1370-1390), in *William Langland, Piers Plowman, The Donaldson Translation Middle English Text Sources and Backgrounds Criticism*, Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd, eds., New York, NY: (Norton Publishers, 2006), p. 2.

fast aboute yede, [til] her bely and her bagge [were bretful] y-crammed; [flite thanne] for here fode, foughnten ate ale. In glotonye, God it wote, gone jij to bedde . . . slepe and sleuth seweth hem evre.”<sup>176</sup> The poet drew attention to the worldliness of the monks and friars, who instead of devoting themselves to divine contemplation and following strictly their *regula*, enjoyed the pleasures of the world like any common layman.

Chaucer also remarked on the failings of the religious orders through his monastic caricature. The monk had many fine horses adorned with silver bridles and numerous hounds for his hunting pleasures. This depiction hardly indicated an austere lifestyle. Chaucer’s monk proved far more interested in carnal pursuits and worldly dealings than performing his role as a spiritual intermediary between humankind and God, as the description of him confirms: “[for] the reule of seint maure or of seint Beneit, by cause that it was old and somdel streit,” the poet writes, “but thilke text held he nat worth an oistre,” for the monk “of priking and of hungting for the hare was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare.”<sup>177</sup> Thus the writer portrays monks and many other members of the ecclesial hierarchy as people of the world, not of an austere, holy life.

Much like his contemporaries, John Gower offered a harsh commentary on the lifestyles of religious orders in his time. He found that monastic standards had declined to a pathetic state, and many of the religious orders lived more in the fashion of glamorous laity than a select group of ascetics devoted to a simple and penitential lifestyle. “Monks,” he writes, originally “took vows against the pleasures of the flesh and endured the pain of a harsh life. But now those observations have been completely abandoned.”<sup>178</sup> Echoing the criticism of Gower, the anonymous medieval poem, *The Simonie*, shared many of the complaints of the more famous late medieval poets,

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<sup>176</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, p. 4.

<sup>177</sup> *The General Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., p. 14.

<sup>178</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l’homme*, in *The Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay, ed., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1902), p. 235.

chastising the monastic orders for easy living and not taking their spiritual professions seriously. Following Gower, the anonymous author states: “Religioun . . . nu is the most del i-went to eise and glotonie. Where shal men nu finde fattere or raddere of lere? Or betre farende folke than monekes, chanons, and frères?” The text emphasized the proliferation of gluttony among ecclesiastics, which could be readily observed through their obese figures. This description illustrated an anti-ideal of monastic living, for all the religious orders mandated fasting and simple diets. The excessive consumption of fine foods caused the individual monk to lose the reverence of fellow ecclesiastics as well as the laity because he did not maintain his austere existence. This stripped him of his aura of sacredness. In this way, the monk became profane, not fitting the definition of late medieval spiritual idealism.

John Lydgate also idealized austerity in the life of monks. The poet provided the image of an anti-type within *The Dance of Death*, where he described an abbot, whose “beli [was] large and fatte,” and having an heir, well and able, the abbot should not fear to dance, jeers Death. The prelate responds, pleading for mercy, lamenting “my liberties, nor my gret aboundaunce, what may thei availe, Yit aske I mercy, with devoute repentaunce.” Lydgate, in a rather foreboding statement, advised worldly monks to maintain their vows, as Death declares, “who so is fattest, in his grave soonest shal putrefie.”<sup>179</sup> As the speech shows, overeating and relishing in the delights of the temporal realm proved folly for ecclesiastics. Instead they must maintain austerity in all aspects of their life to receive divine blessing and reward. Conversely, he also offered a glimpse of spiritual idealism contained in the dialogue between Death and a hermit. As Death came upon the recluse, he states: “Ye that have lived long in wildirnesse and continued long in abstinence, tyem is come . . . of my daunce to have the experience.” After remarking upon his harsh life in the desert, dedicated to prayer, strict living, and, contemplation, the hermit declares: “And for my part welcom be goddis

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<sup>179</sup> John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, pp. 30-31.

grace, thankyng my lord with humble cheer and face.” Death replies, “that is welle seyde and thus shulde every wight thank his god and al his wittes dresse to love and drede hym with al his herte and might . . . a better lessoun ther can no Clerke expresse.”<sup>180</sup> In a similar fashion with Gower and the anonymous writer of *The Simonie*, this interlocution stressed the importance of the austere monastic life. While the worldly abbot upon seeing death reacted in terror, due to his temporal pursuits, the hermit, living in the desert in a state of austerity had no fear of Death. For the hermit lived modestly, according to his vows, and spent his days in pursuit of the divine, and did not pursue material aggrandizement. Such imagery throughout literature continually stressed the importance of the concept of austerity in formulating the larger category of spiritual idealism among late medieval thinkers.

### **Denial of Religious corporatism**

The fourth archetype forming traditional spiritual idealism was the denial of religious corporatism. Throughout monastic history a long-standing friction existed between worldly, economic rewards from the laity in return for dispensations of holy merit by the monks. As the majority of Christian society in the Middle Ages valued the prayers of holy figures and religious orders renowned for their outstanding zeal, individuals regularly offered monetary contributions for their spiritual services.<sup>181</sup> This in turn put the monastic institutions into a position of worldly obligation, which occupied much of their attention. While such services made the institution materially wealthy, it paradoxically made the order or house less spiritually attractive.<sup>182</sup> This wealth and worldliness created a religious institution that became more devoted to its economic success and

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<sup>180</sup> John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, pp. 72-74.

<sup>181</sup> Michael Hicks, “The Rising Price of Piety in the Later Middle Ages,” pp. 95-112.

<sup>182</sup> Ludo Millis, *Angelic Monks and Worldly Men*, p. ix.

worldly obligations than pursuing personal piety, living in idyllic poverty, and maintaining austerity. When a monastery fell into this quagmire of religious corporatism, many commentators then poured scorn upon its declining standards. Building upon this chapter's representation of religious corporatism, it further demonstrates that medieval authors regularly criticized ecclesiastics who employed the sacred function of the church, such as administering the sacraments, solely for personal material gain. These actions defined religious corporatism, and participation within it continually proved a chief complaint of many observers of the late medieval church. Monastic participation in such worldliness probably did more harm to their image than any other factor. This temporal focus of many religious orders caused social critics to outline the ideals of holy religious practitioners, whose spiritual virtue they might hold up as a guiding light of spiritual idealism. The denial of religious corporatism, in short, involved avoiding the vast array of worldly entanglements that drew the attention of the religious orders away from a pure service to the divine on behalf of themselves as well as lay communities.<sup>183</sup>

Avoiding participation in religious corporatism meant the complete devotion to an authentic Christian lifestyle, as envisioned in the *vita apostolica* and *imitatione Christi* reform movements, where adherents strove to imitate the primitive church. The importance of shunning religious corporatism as a category within the archetype of spiritual idealism becomes abundantly clear through late medieval literature. John Gower, for instance, in many of his works criticized the overwhelming religious corporatism that existed during his time, and offered a salient description of the purpose of the religious orders in *Mirour de l'homme*: "They should be attentive in praying to the glorious God, within their cloisters and monasteries, for us secular people. That is the function of their order, for which they are abundantly endowed with a full measure of goods so that they do not desire to seek elsewhere for money."<sup>184</sup> This statement succinctly defined the ideal role of the

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<sup>183</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, pp. 135-156.

religious in Gower's perception. Furthermore, continues the poet, "St. Augustine says in his teaching that just as a fish lives only in water, so Religious must lead its life according to the rule of the convent, fully obedient and cloistered."<sup>185</sup> This dichotomy between the sacred and profane remained essential to Gower's understanding of spiritual idealism. For the monk could not participate within the rampant religious corporatism of the late middle ages and also fulfill the true role of his estate. Hence the poet likened an outrider to a fish out of water.

Chaucer also used the image of the fish out of water to describe the anti-type monk, who wandered outside his cell, participating in religious corporatism of the temporal sphere. In the *General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales*, he describes the monk on pilgrimage as an outrider that roamed beyond the cloister, who cared nothing for his founding rule or the duties it proscribed. Rather, the caricature chose to let those "olde thinges pace, and held after the new world the pace." Moreover, Chaucer further scolds the failings of monastic lifestyles in the character, who was not vigilant in his spiritual practices: "What should he studie, and make himselven wood, upon a book in cloister alwey to pure, or swinken with his hands and laboure as Austin bit? How shal the world be served? Lat Austin have his swink to him reserved." Such language created a stereotype of the monk who could not be troubled to live devoutly, following the rule, contemplating upon ecclesiastical texts, or engaged in spiritual struggle through prayer. The monk bluntly declares if the order's founder wanted such pious duties performed, let him do it himself because the monk had no intention of living in this manner, nor according to a strict rule. Rather he preferred easy and luxurious living in the manner of secular lords, enjoying the benefits of religious corporatism. Such descriptions sought to influence a broad audience regarding the worldliness of many of the religious orders. This showed that monks largely embraced temporal advancement through the acquisition of treasure or

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<sup>184</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l'homme*, in *The Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay, ed., p. 235.

<sup>185</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l'homme*, in *The Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay, ed., p. 235.



material comfort, and in this fashion became part of religious corporatism, serving the world, not the divine. The poet ultimately concludes that a monk who did not follow the discipline and distance himself from temporal pursuits, essentially proved no monk at all, but a creature completely outside its habitat: “Ne that monk, whan he is reccheless, is likened til a fish that is waterlees, this is to seyn, a monk out of his cloister.”<sup>186</sup> Such language testifies that medieval thinkers believed the religious orders should avoid participation in activities that brought worldly advancement. Hence a monk who engaged in worldly affairs of religious corporatism transformed his very essence from sacred to profane in the perception of these critics, becoming exactly like a fish out of water. Thus, the place of monastic was in the cloister, devoted to a life of prayer and contemplation, not pursuing temporal aggrandizement in the world.

Contemporary audiences likely saw *The Canterbury Tales* as an outright assault upon ecclesiastical participation in religious corporatism, and the stories did much to inform observers regarding the tenets of spiritual idealism. Speaking to the participation of the clergy in the world of religious corporatism, Chaucer described the vast majority of his ecclesial characters as entangled in worldly affairs and misusing their sacred clerical status or office. For instance, describing the friar, Chaucer lambasted the mendicant’s willingness to use his position to enrich himself at great cost to the spiritual well-being of the individuals he swindled: “ful wel beloved and famulier was he / with frankeleyns over al in his contree, / and eek with worth women of the toun; / for he hadde power of confessioun, / as seyde himself, more than a curat, / for his ordere he was licentiate. / Ful sweetly here he confessioun, / and plsaunt was his absolucioun; / he was an esy man to yeve penaunce / there as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.”<sup>187</sup> Here the poet highlights the misuse of the religious office and the sacrament of confession, which the friar used to gain temporal wealth. A few lines into the

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<sup>186</sup> *The General Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., p. 14.

<sup>187</sup> *The General Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., p. 17.

prologue it became clear that the friar's heavy involvement with religious corporatism stripped the character of his sacred quality: "Therefore, in stede of wepinge and preyeres, / men moot yeve silver to the povre frères . . . there nas no man nowher so virtuous. / He was the beste beggere in his hous, / and yaf a certey ferme for the graunt: / noon of his bretheren cam ther in his haunt. / For though a widwe hadde nought a sho, / so pleasant was his *in principio*, / yet wolde he have a farthing, er he wente. / His purchase was wel better than his rente."<sup>188</sup> Throughout the prologue Chaucer stressed the worldliness and corporate nature of the friar's religion. The character proved a master of sermonizing, which he exploited for gaining money, not the spiritual edification of the laity. Moreover, having a purchase well better than his rent indicated that through his skilled speech he was able to acquire more money than it cost him to live, amassing wealth through his exploitation of the ecclesial corporate system. As friars, by their vows, were to remain in a state of absolute poverty, such worldly attachment, accumulating treasure from the dispensation of absolution or prayers proved entirely unacceptable to contemporary critics, rebuffing any notion of spiritual idealism.

In a similar manner, Chaucer described the misuse of an ecclesial office by a summoner in *The Canterbury Tales*, who also exploited his position within the religious corporate system to pilfer the purse of the unknowing laity. The character defrauded many innocent people with the threat of excommunication: "he took him-self a freet profit therby; / his maister knew nat alwey what he wan. / With-outen mandement, a lewd man / he coude somne, on peyne of Cristes curs, / and they were gladdre for to fille his purs, / and make him grete festes ate nale. / And right as Judas adde purses smale, / And was a theef, right swich a theef was he; / his maister hadde but half his duetee."<sup>189</sup> The poet points out the problematic issues with the late medieval ecclesiastical corporate system, which largely stemmed from less virtuous members of the bureaucracy. The description of the summoner

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<sup>188</sup> *The General Prologue*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Sheila Fisher, ed., pp. 18-19.

<sup>189</sup> *The Friars Tale*, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Peter Tuttle, ed., p. 628.

proved a perfect example of exploitation of religious corporatism, as he used his office to cheat unknowing innocents out of their money for his personal gain and also defraud the church itself by keeping many of the fees that were intended for the archdeaconry. These examples demonstrated the worst of late medieval spiritual anti-types, who enthusiastically participated in the religious corporatism of the time, and these negative images played no small part in shaping late medieval spiritual idealism

Conversely, the priest and poet John Audley provided advice to members of the religious orders so they might avoid the world of ecclesial corporatism, as Chaucer described, and instead achieve spiritual exceptionalism in his work, *Counsel of Conscience*. Describing the idyllic monastic life, he writes: “Redele these releygous men schul hav high reward, yif thai kepyn her cloyster and here comawndment. For one fondyng of the Fynd, fulfyl your forward, and casis awai covetyse, that is cause of cumberment, and kepe youe clene in chastyte. To charete ale asent.”<sup>190</sup> As these lines suggest, Audley, like Chaucer, considered the focus of the monk upon the divine fundamental to his socio-religious duty, and intimately related to this proved the avoidance of worldly pursuits, such as the acquisition of wealth. The desire for worldly things encumbered the sacred quality of the religious devotee. As the monk sought worldly gains or recognition through the mechanism of religious corporatism he became a profane agent, losing his aura of sacredness.

John Lydgate also saw the active participation of the religious orders in religious corporatism as polluting their claims of embodying spiritual idealism. In his poem, *Dance of Death*, the figure of Death explains to an Augustinian canon how his involvement in worldly affairs had impeded his journey toward God: “And ye sire Chanoun, / with many grete prebende, / ye mai no lenger, have distribucioun. / Of gold & siluver, largely to dispende. / For ther is now, no consolacioun.” The cannon responded: “mi benefices, with many a personage . . . Al my richesse, mai me not disporte . .

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<sup>190</sup> The Blind John Audely, *Counsel of Conscience*, p. 40.

. unto the worlde, surplus & prebende, / al is veyneglorie, treuli to reporte. / To dei welle, eche man shulde entende.”<sup>191</sup> The canon laments the loss of his temporal offices and the wealth and power they had brought him throughout his life. This speech cut to heart of the religious vocation, which many thinkers saw as the highest spiritual ideal, where the practitioner approached the divine pure of heart, with motives for spiritual fulfillment, not temporal advancement. For, as the poet reminded his readers, all the worldly pomp and titles proved irrelevant when one faced death.

Lydgate specifically emphasized the virtue of avoiding the worldly affairs of religious corporatism through the mouth of a Carthusian in *Dance of Death*, having the monk declare to Death: “unto the world I was dead long ago by my order and my profession, though every man be he not so strong dread to die after his fleshly inclination, but it pleases God to borrow my soul and fend off my damnation; some good today shall be but not be tomorrow.”<sup>192</sup> By not associating with the system of religious corporatism and temporal aggrandizement the figure emphasized the importance of avoiding participation in earthly affairs. Therefore, having a specific order, widely perceived as championing ascetic virtues, such as the Carthusians, Lydgate emphasized that certain monastic orders remained more aligned to the spiritual idealism as advocated by many critics of the religious orders.<sup>193</sup>

John Gower further highlighted how participation in the world of ecclesial corporatism extinguished the flames of spiritual idealism among the religious orders. A monk who “seeks out property sins greatly against his rule,” he exclaimed. Additionally, if the monk exploited the laity around him, using the ruse of institutional poverty for his own gain, notes Gower, “there is nothing in

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<sup>191</sup> John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, pp. 40-42.

<sup>192</sup> John Lydgate, *Dance of Death*, p. 49. This is my transliteration.

<sup>193</sup> E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England*, pp. 354-367.

the world so villainous.”<sup>194</sup> These statements show that late medieval writers had within their social consciousness a concept of religious idealism that was built upon a disassociation from religious corporatism. When the monk remained in his cloister, contemplating on the divine, developing an intimate relationship with God, he fulfilled the role of his estate. Even the critical Gower seemingly placed great value upon this spiritual ideal of the late middle ages, stating: “A monk should nurture his religion through discretion, humility, and simplicity.”<sup>195</sup> In other words, the monk, to attain sacredness in the eyes of the community, must be seen as representing spiritual idealism, which meant avoiding worldly entanglement as well as fulfilling their role as an intermediary between the laity and the divine through prayer, pious living, idyllic poverty, and austerity. Much of Gower’s criticism focused upon the religious corporatism of his day. He did not, however, see the failings of the religious orders as institutional.<sup>196</sup> Monasticism, in his work, remained a venerable and praiseworthy part of society when its adherents remained disciplined, lived in modesty, communed with the divine, and most importantly prayed for the lay community that supported it. When the monk fell into exploitive religious corporatism, he could not maintain his essential role within medieval society nor justify his existence, at least in a spiritual sense, according to Gower.

The work of the medieval poets did much to formulate a concept of late medieval spiritual idealism and disseminate their critiques among English audiences. This imagery was largely carried forward into the early modern era, until Reformation ideology began reshaping some aspects of spiritual idealism.<sup>197</sup> For example, the anticlerical treatise *The Plowman’s Tale*, published in 1532

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<sup>194</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l’homme*, in *The Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay, ed., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1902), pp. 235-236.

<sup>195</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l’homme*, in *The Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay, ed., pp. 235-236.

<sup>196</sup> Dieter Mehl, *English Literature in the Age of Chaucer*, London, UK: (Longman, 2001), pp. 64-67.

<sup>197</sup> Helen L. Parish, *Monks, Miracles, and Magic Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church*, New York, NY: (Routledge, 2005).

pseudonymously under Chaucer's name, describes many of the grumblings of medieval authors concerning the religious orders.<sup>198</sup> Disassociation from religious corporatism remained closely linked to notions of spiritual idealism in early modern England. Buttressing this analysis, the author of *The Plowman's Tale* castigated ecclesiastics that "wearyn myter and rynge, with double worsted well ydight, / with royall mete and riche drinke, / and rideth on a courser as a knight." The text highlights the material finery churchmen of the day enjoyed. Embracing such things as lavish clothes, imbibing in exquisite gastronomy, and parading around as temporal lords demonstrated the enthusiasm that early modern ecclesiastics had embraced, pursuing worldly fulfillment in the place of earnest penitential practices. The author further asserts that specifically among the religious orders charity, righteousness, and spiritual duty had entirely gave way to temporal desires: "And all this the monkes han forsake, / for Christes love and saynt Benette. / To pride and ease have them take; / This religion is yvell be-sette." Hence, as the text suggests, pride, worldly dealings, and the exploitation of their unique spiritual position stained the image of the religious orders. "Some on her church dwell / appayrelled poorely, proude of porte. The seven sacraments they done sell / in cattell catching is her comforte. Of eche matter they wollen mell / and done hem wronge is her disporte. To affray the pple they ben fel / and holde hem lower than doth the lorde"<sup>199</sup> As the text shows, clerics that used their office solely for monetary gain became spiritual anti-types in the perception of early modern writers. In this way these ecclesiastics transformed their sacred essence, in minds of these observers, into the realm of the profane.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition*, Princeton, NJ: (Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 51.

<sup>199</sup> As reprinted in Andrew N. Wawn, 'The Plowman's Tale' and Reformation Propaganda", in *Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 2, London, UK: (McMillan, 1972), pp. 126-137. Greg Walker, *Reading Literature Historically*, p. 141. Literary scholar Greg Walker, confirms that Tudor critics especially lamented the "finery [of the religious orders] and their adoption of secular and manners."

<sup>200</sup> Greg Walker, *Reading Literature Historically*, pp. -140-141.

The anonymous work *Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester*, written in 1529, also shows the importance of monastic communities avoiding religious corporatism. The tale begins in the world of the Old Testament Book of Esther, where many characters and social groups represented contemporary factions in Tudor society. Specifically, the Jews stood proxy for the religious orders.<sup>201</sup> Speaking to this allegory, the villain character Aman, in a speech against the Jews, declares: “A greate number of Jewes with in this realm do dwell, / A people not goode, nor for youre common weale . . . For theyre possessions be of subsaunce, so greate and so large that I feare at the length, / they wyll attempte to subdewe you by strengthe.”<sup>202</sup> This allusion to the extreme wealth and power of the religious orders highlighted the disdain of worldly involvement of the ecclesial caste. The critique singled out the wealth and temporal aspirations of monasticism, as it lapsed into temporal concerns instead of spiritual. Such claims and idyllic perception of the religious orders becomes even clearer when the character of Hester defends monasticism, arguing: “the Jewes be the people of god elected, / and weare his badge of cyrumsicion, /the dyly prayer of that hole secte, as the psalms of David by gostly inspiracion, / Eke holy ceremonies of gods provision to god is vaileable, / that nothing greater, and al the whole realme for the fares y better.”<sup>203</sup> What proved apparent in *Hester* was the value of the monastic order that did not participate in the world of religious corporatism.

Echoing these sentiments, William Caxton, England’s first printer, published a popular version of famous spiritual advice book from high middle ages, *Somme Le Roi*. The text was better known by its English title, *The Book of Vices and Virtues* or *The Royal Book*, which Caxton

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<sup>201</sup> Greg Walker, *Reading Literature Historically*, pp. 36-37, 48.

<sup>202</sup> *The Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester*, (1529), in *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester, Edited from the Quarto of 1561*, W.W. Greg, ed., Leipzig, GR: (O. Harrossowitz, 1904), p. 30.

<sup>203</sup> *The Enterlude of Godly Queen Hester*, (1529), W.W. Greg, ed., p. 43.

translated and brought into the mainstream of literature at the turn of the sixteenth century. Throughout the work its author described the proper conduct of laity as well as clergy, noting how each social estate might properly observe and maintain Christian virtue, while also avoiding worldly vices. In a discussion of the first of the Ten Commandments, the author noted that a monk could not properly follow the dictates of God if he sought temporal wealth: “Against this commandment he that too much loveth here treasure, gold or silver or other worldly things.”<sup>204</sup> Moreover, the text continues, “Religious . . . that withhold by covetous or avarice good, from doles, meat and drink, or other profits, that they should give to poor folk,” have lapsed into worldliness and failed in upholding their vows and duty to God.<sup>205</sup> As the text confirms, many early modern writers, much like their medieval predecessors, found value in monks that avoided religious corporatism and instead remained dutiful to their founding discipline. Throughout the late Middle Ages and in Henrician England, when monks avoided the allure of religious corporatism they became holy objects that ensured the physical and spiritual vitality of the realm through their perceived efficacious relationship with the divine. Thus, the denial of religious corporatism, as evidenced through many works of literature, proved a key concept within the formation of spiritual idealism.

## Conclusion

In sum, this chapter has examined the imagery of ecclesiastical vice and virtue as portrayed through the pens of many renowned poets and anticlerical writers, suggesting that these works, because of their wide circulation and popularity, informed as well as influenced late medieval and

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<sup>204</sup> *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth Century Translation of the Somme Le Roi of Lorens D'Orleans*, W. Nelson Francis, ed., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 1. My translation and modern transcription.

<sup>205</sup> *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, W. Nelson Francis, ed., p. 37.



early modern audience's perception of spiritual idealism. This literary evidence makes clear a conceptual archetype of spiritual idealism existed in late medieval English thought, founded upon four categories: the quest for personal piety, a life spent in idyllic poverty, the maintenance of austere living, and the denial of religious corporatism. Together these categories defined the ideal form of monasticism. When the monk achieved these standards, he became sacred, and authors saw such an individual as essential to the spiritual welfare of Christian society. The holy monk in these texts, who attained such spiritual exceptionalism, became an object of reverence, praised for his piety, sought out for his dispensation of holy merit, and was worthy of his endowed position. Conversely, these observers also depicted profane, anti-type ecclesiastics as overindulgent, impious, ostentatious, and eager for worldly aggrandizement. Thus, the works of Chaucer, Gower, Langland, Lydgate, Audelay, and Skelton, among others, offer a window into the social consciousness of these thinkers and to some degree their audiences, elucidating pre-Reformation spiritual idealism through fictional representations.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Greg Walker, *Reading Literature Historically*, p. 1.

## Chapter III

### **Spiritual Idealism & the Rhetoric of Reform: Humanists, Polemicists, & Protestants**

The archetypes of spiritual idealism as highlighted in chapter two among the many poets and writers of the later Middle Ages also remained prevalent within the polemical literature produced during the early Reformation period in England (1517-1540). Humanist criticism, reform literature, and popular pamphlets suggest that intellectuals, similar to authors of fiction, often shared an understanding of spiritual idealism that stressed the importance of personal piety, idyllic poverty, austerity, and the avoidance of religious corporatism among clergy and monastics. Some of these thinkers, however, did not see monastic devotion as the most sacred and exceptional form of Christian life. They attempted to alter slightly traditional notions of holiness during the Reformation. Yet these new ideas essentially maintained the ethos of medieval spiritual idealism. Hence, a highly nuanced image of holiness surrounding the religious orders appeared throughout numerous works in the years preceding the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536. The writers examined in this chapter produced a broad spectrum of literature from Catholic or Protestant devotional works to polemic from a variety of confessional and intellectual perspectives, which influenced a pan-European audience along with many English readers. Therefore, the categorization of Protestant, humanist, Catholic, and polemicist remain fluid, applying to each author in the context of each particular work as it shaped the English religious reform. Thus, this chapter argues that within the writings of Desiderius Erasmus, Thomas More, John Colet, Martin Luther, William Tyndale, and other polemicists that the perception of spiritual exceptionalism among certain strict monastic orders, such as the Carthusians, and its absence among others, shaped debates on holiness and encouraged the

religious settlement of Henry VIII that eventually culminated with the suppression of the religious houses from 1536-1539.

Humanism had a profound impact upon English thinkers, stressing the goodness of humankind, charitable works, personal moral virtue, and seeking truth from ancient authorities. Christian humanists urged a return to the primitive simplicity of the early church, often given expression in the *vita apostolica* and *devotio moderna* movements. Devotees encouraged systemic ecclesiastical reforms beginning in the early sixteenth century, which took root and grew slowly. By 1529 a leading humanist, Sir Thomas More served as the king's chief councilor and lord chancellor. Moreover, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge became cradles of the humanist philosophy, drawing many of the leading minds from Europe, such as Desiderius Erasmus who visited three times in 1499, 1505, and 1508. During his residency he befriended More and also another influential scholar, the scholar-priest John Colet. The combined teachings, impact, and publications of these luminaries cultivated the intellectual climate for monastic reforms, and perhaps unknowingly the eventual acceptance of its wholesale destruction. While a concerted royal campaign and profound shock generated from the surveys of the monasteries in 1535 proved the primary drivers of the dissolution effort, the opinions among social elites regarding the need for monastic reforms played a significant role in the toleration or even encouragement of the suppression of the religious houses. Nevertheless, most humanists and even Protestant critics frequently distinguished between monastics who maintained the tenets of traditional spiritual idealism and those who had become corrupted through their affiliation with the world. These reformers largely demanded these venal monks should imitate the stricter orders or pursue another form of life entirely.

Erasmus throughout his long literary career maintained a remarkable consistency of thought, emphasizing the formulation of the ideal Christian life carefully enhanced through an intensive study of scripture and the practice of personal holiness. Remaining dubious on the discovery of divine truth within strict ascetic practices or dogma, he never saw the monastic life as the apogee of spiritual idealism and remained highly critical of lax religious orders. His prominence as an international humanist reformer ensured that his work remained influential in many English circles and beyond.<sup>207</sup> Skeptical of the monastic enterprise generally, the prince of the humanists did note that in the perception of many observers, certain orders within the monastic pantheon were more strict, austere, and revered than others. Speaking to this notion, in a letter to his friend the Augustinian prior Servatius Rogerius he declares, “what can be more loathsome or more impious than these religious orders when they become relaxed.”<sup>208</sup> Having firsthand experience in the monastic life as a former Augustinian canon, Erasmus also considered some orders more virtuous than others. Crucially he saw monasticism as one form of spiritual idealism that could lead to personal holiness, but was not necessarily the most sacred lifestyle. In his great work the *Enchiridion* he writes, “do we not see members of the most austere monastic orders maintaining that the essence of perfection lies in ceremonies or in a fixed quantity of psalmody or in manual labor . . . the monastic life should not be equated with the virtuous life: it proves one kind of life that could be advantageous or not based on the individual’s disposition of mind . . .”<sup>209</sup> The underlying essence of Christian virtue within these

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<sup>207</sup> John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition*, Princeton, N.J., (Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 44. King confirms, “Erasmian writings had immense impact on English authors and readers, an effect that was deeply penetrating and long lasting.”

<sup>208</sup> (Erasmus to Prior Servatius Rogerius, July 1514), in *Opus Epistolarum D. Erasmi Roterodamensis*, P.S. Allen & H.M. Allen, eds., 12 vols., vol. I, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1906-1958), no. 567.

<sup>209</sup> Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, (1504), as cited in Knowles, p. 149.

remarks acknowledged the vestiges of traditional spiritual idealism. Certain orders had higher reputations than others and these strict orders maintained such reputations because of their austerity and removal from worldly affairs. Erasmus plainly states that strict devotion *could be* advantageous when such ritualism proceeded from a state of personal piety, which emphasizes the continued importance of individual spiritual connection with the divine that proved so important within humanist thought. These subtleties regarding spiritual idealism that undergirded his work demonstrate that medieval concepts of spirituality remained interwoven within humanist spiritual idealism.

In *The Colloquies* Erasmus probes the virtues of monasticism in one conversation between a mercenary soldier and a Carthusian. Throughout the dialogue the soldier questions the monastic vocation and the holiness garnered from strict observance of ritual. The Carthusian carefully outlined that the outward expressions of his order, such as vows, habits, and psalters did not purify the soul, but these things symbolized and confirmed an inner faith. Erasmus questioned how external practices could lead to interior Christian perfection among the religious orders. Ultimately, his two interlocutors concluded that spiritual exceptionalism originated from personal piety and rejecting worldliness. Testifying to this, the soldier asserts, “you put too much confidence in habits, diet, forms of prayer, and outward ceremonies, and neglect the study of the Gospel Religion.” To which the Carthusian replies, “it is none of my business to judge what others do; as to myself, I place no confidence in these things, I attribute nothing to them; but I put my confidence in purity of mind and in Christ himself.” The soldier asks, “why do you observe these things then?” The monk responds, “that I may be at peace with my brethren and give none offense. I would give no offence to anyone for the sake of these trivial things, which it is but a very little trouble to observe. As we are men, let us wear what clothes we will . . . the

shaving of the head or color of the habit does not indeed, of themselves, recommend me to God.”<sup>210</sup>

Being satisfied with this explanation of monastic spirituality, the soldier complained bitterly of his impoverished state and asked for monetary assistance from the monk, but he found little recompense: “I have nothing to give you,” declares the Carthusian, “but I will go and ask what the prior will do.” Scoffing at the monk’s state of voluntary poverty, the soldier quips, “if anything was to be given, your hands would be ready to receive it.” Insulted, the monk interjects, “as to what others do, let them look to that, I have no hands either to give or take money.”<sup>211</sup> Exhausted from their lively discussion, the two decide to continue their arguments following lunch, which concluded the colloquy. The debate highlighted that an exterior expression of piety demonstrated an interior holiness of the individual. Thus, according to Erasmus personal piety was validated through an austere, zealous lifestyle, and which differentiated the pure, holy monk from the worldly, profane monk. The selection of a Carthusian instead of another monastic affiliation to stand proxy for the entirety of the religious orders in the conversation suggests that the author considered these monks to most accurately represent his spiritual ideals as well as being highly revered for holiness among European audiences.

Another humanist that found much rigor lacking among the monastic institution generally, but still regarded the strictest orders, such as the Carthusians, as spiritual exemplars was the friend and colleague of Erasmus, John Colet. He proved an earnest reformer and advocate of the Erasmian vision of Christianity while a distinguished professor at All Souls’ College in Oxford. In his many commentaries on scripture Colet made frequent digressions into

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<sup>210</sup> *The Colloquies of Desiderius Erasmus Concerning Men, Manners, and Things*, N. Bailey, trans., E. Johnson, ed., London, UK: (Gibbings & Co, 1900), P. 281.

<sup>211</sup> *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, E. Johnson ed., p. 285.

abuses of the church. Longing for the simplicity and holiness of the primitive church, he deplored the religious corporatism of his day, and denounced the creatures that administered the church court system as the most, “atrocious race of men! Deadliest plague to the Church of Christ! Very devils transformed into angels of light . . . more hurtful to Christian people, seeing that, on account of the position they falsely hold in the Church, none can openly despise them with safety, but everyone must put his neck beneath their sword – the sword of bad example, the sword of pecuniary fines and extortion.”<sup>212</sup> Colet saw the misuse of ecclesiastical office as a failure of personal integrity among the church officials, who should have taught the divine law to the laity, instead of arbitrarily punishing them for hapless disobedience against rules they did not understand. This coupled with the personal enrichment of clerics from dishonest practices, he considered the whole system unacceptable and in desperate need of reform. For in his mind the only reason the ecclesial legal hierarchy existed was, “to render men bloodless and penniless by never ending pecuniary fines; themselves the meanwhile all swollen with thefts and robberies.”<sup>213</sup> Here Colet’s remarks demonstrated some key pillars supporting his understanding of spiritual idealism, which rested upon simplicity, personal integrity, and eschewing religious corporatism.

This reformist spirit continued throughout his long ecclesiastical career, where he served as dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral chapter in London from 1504 until his retirement to the Carthusian monastery at Sheen in 1519. Colet’s reputation as a humanist reformer certainly preceded him and when the archbishop of Canterbury gave him the opportunity to address the

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<sup>212</sup> John Colet, *Exposition of Romans*, (1497), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet, D.D. Dean of St. Paul’s, and Founder of St. Paul’s School With an Appendix of Some of his English Writings*, London, UK: (George Bell and Sons, 1909), pp. 69-70.

<sup>213</sup> John Colet, *Exposition of Romans*, (1497), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, p. 69.

entire body of the clergy at convocation in 1512, he used this chance to declare unequivocally his dissatisfaction with the state of the church and reforms he considered necessary. He argued that, “nothyng hath so disfigured the face of the churche as hath the facion of seculer and worldly lyuyng . . . whiche chiefly doth reste in foure euilles of this worlde: . . . in diuillisshe pride, in carnall consupiscence, in worldly covetousness, in secular business.”<sup>214</sup> Colet’s list of clerical failures echoed criticisms from the medieval past, focusing upon the lack of personal piety, luxurious living, and clerical worldliness. “The beautiful ordre and holy dignite in the churche is confused,” he asserts, “whan the hightest in the churche do meelee with vile and erthly thynges . . .”<sup>215</sup> Offering remedy for the abject state of the religious orders and secular clergy, Colet suggests a “medicine of purgation of maners, and then after offer vs the same to taste.”<sup>216</sup> In other words, the church universal might be reformed through the observance of personal piety among its members, and then their virtuous examples would inspire others to imitate this morality. Moreover, only principled individuals, he argued, should receive higher positions within the hierarchy. Hence, “benefices of the churche be gyuen to those that are worthy . . . by the ryghte balance of virtue . . . against the spotte of symonie,” Colet exclaims.<sup>217</sup> Speaking specifically to the reform of the religious orders he suggests, “monkes ought only to gyue them selfe to prayer and fastyng, and to the chastyng of their flees, and obseruyng of theyr rules.”<sup>218</sup> Colet certainly believed the church needed reformation and monasticism as well. Seeing the

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<sup>214</sup> John Colet, *Convocation Sermon*, (1512), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, pp. 294-295.

<sup>215</sup> John Colet, *Convocation Sermon*, (1512), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, pp. 297.

<sup>216</sup> John Colet, *Convocation Sermon*, (1512), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, p. 299.

<sup>217</sup> John Colet, *Convocation Sermon*, (1512), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, pp. 300.

<sup>218</sup> John Colet, *Convocation Sermon*, (1512), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, p. 301.



worldliness and immorality among many clerics and monks, in typical humanist fashion he called for a return a purer form of spiritual idealism within the past, founded upon individual virtue, simplicity, and the avoidance of worldliness.

Colet rarely praised monasticism as the most virtuous Christian life because of his high standards of spiritual exceptionalism, which most monastic orders failed to attain. Erasmus suggests, “though no one approved of Christian devotion more than he, yet he had but very little liking for monasteries . . . the reason was not that he disliked religious orders, but that those who took them did not come up to their profession. It was, in fact, his own wish to disconnect himself entirely from the world, if he could only have found a fraternity anywhere really bound together for a gospel life.”<sup>219</sup> It seems that Colet finally found his idyllic life, modeled upon the primitiveness of the early church, among the Carthusians. At the end of his priestly career he decided to take up residence with the monks at Sheen, where they allowed him to construct a small domicile and live among the brethren. He wrote to Erasmus in 1514 longing for his withdrawal from busy London eager to take up his abode among the monks of Sheen, where he might spend the rest of his days in contemplation and prayer. “I am daily thinking of my retirement, and of my retreat with the Carthusians. My nest there is almost finished. So far as I can conjecture, you will find me there, on your return, dead to the world,” declares Colet.<sup>220</sup> Speaking to his years spent at Sheen, George Cavendish an attendant of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey recorded in his *Life of Wolsey*, while they stayed in the charterhouse for a short period after his master’s fall from power, Wolsey and Colet attended mass together every day at the

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<sup>219</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *The Lives of Jean Vitrier Warden of the Franciscan Convent at St. Omer and John Colet Dean of St. Paul’s, London Written in Latin by Erasmus of Rotterdam, in a Letter of Justus Jonas*, J.H. Lupton, trans. & ed., London, UK: (George Bell & Sons, 1883), p. 34.

<sup>220</sup> John Colet, *Letter to Erasmus*, (1514), reprinted in J.H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, p. 215.

Carthusian chapel and in the afternoons they, “would sit in contemplation with one or other of the most ancient fathers of that house . . .”<sup>221</sup> The former dean of St. Paul’s had seemingly discovered a place where he might mimic his perception of spiritual idealism exhibited by the early Christians in strict devotion and meditation upon the divine, striving toward personal holiness.

Colet’s affinity with the Carthusian order stemmed from his shared vision of Christian perfection with these monks, where individual virtue remained necessary for the divine blessing of the entire group. As historian Jonathan Arnold points out regarding Colet’s theological vision, he “elevates the role of human will above intellect because it is this will that conforms to God’s loving will and thereby enters into the process of ascent, and return, to God,” and “the maintenance of the hierarchical order is essential for the attainment of perfection; therefore, priests must be as virtuous as angels in order to save the Body of Christ.”<sup>222</sup> Thus, Colet saw the Carthusians as Christian exemplars, who embodied his notions of spiritual idealism, emphasizing the importance of personal piety, distancing themselves from worldliness, and maintaining a life of devout strictness in imitation of the primitive church.

Martin Luther, also a former Augustinian canon, questioned the spiritual idealism exhibited by the religious orders and like Erasmus and Colet before him, he denied monasticism represented the sole, holiest form of Christian life. His impact in England did not reach the same magnitude as it did in the Holy Roman Empire or Switzerland, yet the systemic effects from his challenge to ecclesiastical authority remained critical for encouraging religious reform.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> George Cavendish, *Life of Cardinal Wolsey by his Gentleman Usher George Cavendish*, (1558), London, UK: (Thomas Davison, 1828), p. 237. Also see: Lupton, *Life of John Colet*, p. 312.

<sup>222</sup> Jonathan Arnold, *Dean John Colet of St. Paul’s Humanism and Reform in Early Tudor England*, London, UK: (I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 30.

Initially, Henry himself published a diatribe against Lutheran theology in 1521 entitled *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, which confirmed Roman orthodoxy and secured him the title *Fidei Defensor* from the papacy. As the Reformation movement gained momentum, the king declared Lutheran tracts a menace among his subjects, writing to the Cambridge vice-chancellor in 1529 he states such, “erroneous and pestiferous words . . . and conclusions which might pervert their judgment and occasion division and contention in the chief parts and articles of our faith and religion, wherein is like to ensue, unless it be repressed, the dissolution of our commonwealth.”<sup>224</sup> Lutheran works took root in England during this early period, but never bore fruit until after the death of Henry, fulfilling the underground evangelical vision. Echoing his master’s remarks, Cardinal Compeggio while papal legate lamented in correspondence to his secretary at Rome in the same year that Lutheran pamphlets flooded London, which must have included the tract *De Votis Monasticis* and led many into heterodox opinions.<sup>225</sup>

In this work completed during 1521, Luther communicated his views on monasticism in his typical acerbic prose, denying the monastic vocation proved any more virtuous than dutiful lay devotion. He writes in *Votis Monasticis* that the religious orders, “divide the Christian life into a state of perfection and a state of imperfection. To the common people, they ascribe a life of imperfection; to themselves, a life of perfection,” and “they measure it by the show and appearance of outward works and by their vows . . .”<sup>226</sup> In a similar train of thought as Erasmus,

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<sup>223</sup> David Birch, *Early Reformation English Polemics*, Salzburg, AS: (Universitat Salzburg Press, 1983), pp. 22-23.

<sup>224</sup> (Henry VIII to Cambridge Vice Chancellor Buckmaster, March 1529 ) *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. iv, (ii), no. 6367.

<sup>225</sup> (Cardinal Compeggio to Papal Secretary at Rome, April 1529,) *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. IV, (iii), no. 5416.

<sup>226</sup> Martin Luther, *De Votis Monasticis*, (1521) in *Luther’s Works*, James Atkinson, ed., vol. 44, Philadelphia, PA: (Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 262-263.

Luther saw a bifurcation of clerical superiority and lay inferiority regarding spirituality as fundamentally flawed. Moreover, strict ritualism and continuous rounds of prayers in themselves proved worthless when seeking Christian perfection without an accompanying inner faith that amalgamated the individual with the divine. Luther plainly states, “monastic vows made and kept apart from inner faith are sins . . .”<sup>227</sup> He further saw a state of idyllic poverty as another outward work that did not replace personal faith, writing, “the same can be said of the vow of poverty . . . under this holy vow of poverty they [the religious orders] have become the most greedy of men and are rolling in wealth . . . They do not work. They are supported by the rest of the world, devouring everyone else substance although they are perfectly able and hearty.”<sup>228</sup> Here Luther attacks not the institution of monasticism, but the failure of monks to maintain traditional standards of spiritual idealism. Even the rhetoric of such a fierce critic as Luther saw these essential monastic practices of personal piety, austerity, and the separation from worldliness differentiating the virtuous from the profane monk. “To sum the whole matter up,” he declares, “works and vows can be taught and recommended only if you can say they are wholesome and useful to salvation and justification.”<sup>229</sup> Thus, like many Christian humanists, Luther saw monasticism as one lifestyle that could prove virtuous, depending upon the personal piety and faith of the individual practitioner.

Confirming Luther’s view that the monastic vocation did not prove inherently spiritually superior to other forms of devotion, he gave clear expression to such sentiments in a sermon given in 1534:

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<sup>227</sup> Martin Luther, *De Votis Monasticis*, (1521), p. 276.

<sup>228</sup> Martin Luther, *De Votis Monasticis*, (1521), p. 267, 334.

<sup>229</sup> Martin Luther, *De Votis Monasticis*, (1521), p. 292.

God is not concerned about the rules of the Franciscans, Dominicans, or other monks, but wants us to serve him obediently and love thy neighbor. They may consider their monastic rules to be something wonderful and special, but before God they are nothing. The very highest, best, and holiest work is when one loves God and the neighbor, whether a person is a monk or nun, priest or layperson, great or small . . . Therefore, what will happen on judgement day is that many a maidservant who did not know whether she had done anything good all her life will be preferred before a Carthusian monk who has the appearance of great holiness and yet has loved neither God nor his neighbor.<sup>230</sup>

Luther emphasized the importance of individual holiness, where the lowliest maid servant might stand on par with the most revered of the monastic orders. As Erasmus selected a Carthusian to represent all monks in his colloquy, Luther also chose to use this particular order to highlight his own understanding of holiness. By juxtaposing a lowly servant against the most austere monk and showing through the proper application of inner faith the former could surpass the later, he sought to inculcate the importance of individual spiritual perfection among all members of society. Critically, an underlying assumption within the perceptions of spiritual idealism among these two reforming theologians and their readership was that the Carthusian order proved the most revered for its strict adherence to the medieval tenets of spiritual idealism, which was likely why they played upon its reputation for rhetorical purposes.

Even within the most earnest reform pamphlets appeals to these late medieval archetypes of spiritual idealism loomed large. Nevertheless, encouraging popular sentiment against monasticism proved a chief goal of the widely circulated pamphlet entitled *A Supplication Against the Beggars* published in 1529. While it was anonymously written, most contemporaries attributed it to the friend of William Tyndale, Simon Fish, whom government agents arrested on charges of heresy in 1530. He died shortly after from plague before he could stand trial, but his

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<sup>230</sup> Sermon of Martin Luther, "A Maid is More Godly than A Monk," 1534, in *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 7 vols., John Nicholas Lenker, ed., vol. 7, Grand Rapids, MI, (Baker Books, 2000), pp. 75-77.

inflammatory 16-page pamphlet left an indelible mark upon the English Reformation. Though the crown placed it upon the list of banned books, it continued to circulate widely and went through several subsequent reprintings that encouraged the king to intervene against the rapacious clergy and religious orders oppressing the poor through economic and theological tyranny. John Foxe considered the work so influential that he included it in each of his four editions of *Actes and Monuments*, preserving Fish's arguments for subsequent generations of Protestant sympathizers. Thomas More penned two book length responses to the pamphlet in *A Supplication for Souls*, which in More's cool academic style challenged and disproved many of Fish's economic assertions as well as defending the orthodox position on the doctrine of purgatory.<sup>231</sup>

Fish's work itself, vehemently anticlerical, described the religious orders as little more than abusive landlords, participating in exploitive religious corporatism. Appealing directly to the king to intervene against the religious orders, Fish notes that along with the prelates, "Monkes, Chanons, Freres, Pardoners and Somners . . . who is abill to nombre this idell, rauinous sort, which haue begged so importunately that they haue gotten yuto there hondes more than the therd part of all youre Realme. The goodliest lordshippes, maners, londes, and territories, are theirs." He further pointed out that these same clerics also possessed more than 10% of crops and livestock throughout England, which devastated lay revenues and ultimately endangered the solvency of the kingdom.<sup>232</sup> Furthermore, the fraternal orders alone extorted £43,333 annually that might otherwise be given in alms to the poor or the king according to Fish's calculations, and he continues, "this wil they haue, or els they wil procure him that will no

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<sup>231</sup> David Birch, *Early Reformation English Polemics*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>232</sup> Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon For the Beggars*, (1529), reprinted in *Four Supplications 1529-1553 A.D.*, J. Meadows Cowper, ed., London, UK: (N. Trubner & Co., 1871), pp. 1-2.

gue it them to be taken as an heretike.”<sup>233</sup> What did this wealth procure among “these greedy sort of strudy, idell, holy theues, with these yerely exactions that they take of the people? . . . truly nothing . . .” he reports. Coupled with this accumulation of worldly goods, the monks also lacked personal spiritual integrity in acquiring such wealth, as they “will not pray for no man but for them that gyue them money.”<sup>234</sup> Then according to the pamphlet these, “superfluous rychesse illected them to ynclene lust and ydelnesse.”<sup>235</sup> Enthusiastic participation in religious corporatism, therefore, led to a lifestyle of luxury, sloth, and vice among the religious orders. Fish earnestly argued that the practices and lifestyle of the religious orders indicated they lacked even a semblance of spiritual idealism.

His remedy for this moral failure among monastics was lay intervention. In a similar fashion as other Protestant reformers, he called upon the king to intervene on behalf of his subjects and strip these “Godly beggers” of their privileged status, forcing them to live virtuously and maintain contemporary notions of spiritual idealism. “Tye these holy idell theues to the cartes, to be whipped naked about euery market towne til they will fall to laboure,” he exclaims, “then shall the idell people be set to worke,” and, “the gospel be preached.”<sup>236</sup> Fish’s remarks do not call for the abolition of monasticism. Rather he demands that secular authorities force monastics to strive for a more virtuous and holy lifestyle, maintaining personal piety and

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<sup>233</sup> Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon For the Beggars*, (1529), reprinted in *Four Supplications*, J. Meadows Cowper, ed., p. 3.

<sup>234</sup> Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon For the Beggars*, (1529), reprinted in *Four Supplications*, J. Meadows Cowper, ed., p. 11.

<sup>235</sup> Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon For the Beggars*, (1529), reprinted in *Four Supplications*, J. Meadows Cowper, ed., p. 6.

<sup>236</sup> Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon For the Beggars*, (1529), reprinted in *Four Supplications*, J. Meadows Cowper, ed., p. 14.

disassociating themselves from worldly corruption. Through lay compulsion, the religious orders might perform their true function of caring for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the laity. Thus, even within the most vehement anticlerical diatribes, an understanding of late medieval holiness remains, highlighting the continued importance of traditional notions of spiritual idealism.

Lacking the shock impact of Fish's short attack, William Tyndale had the greatest cumulative impact upon English perceptions of holiness and did more than any other to spread Lutheran ideas throughout England. His core theology expressed in numerous pamphlets during the 1520s rested upon one crucial foundation, the vernacular Bible must be available for every believer to read or hear. He had completed a translation of the New Testament while in exile from Greek manuscripts by 1526, and it began circulating throughout evangelical circles immediately upon leaving the press. Miles Coverdale, the former Austin friar, completed Tyndale's work of translating the entire biblical text into the vernacular and published it as the popularly known *Tyndale Bible* in 1535. Their efforts flooded English markets with affordable copies of scripture.<sup>237</sup> This access to the Bible, Tyndale believed, created an environment similar to the first age of Christians, where individual faith developed organically, which he like many humanists, considered essential for true faith and achieving otherworldly salvation. Personal introspection caused a transformative interior journey through faith, and this proved the only means of finding spiritual salvation.<sup>238</sup> Tyndale displayed these pillars of Lutheranism in all his works, but this theology was exhibited most clearly in his tract *The Parable of the Wicked*

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<sup>237</sup> David Daniel, *William Tyndale: A Biography*, New Haven, CT: (Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 316-321.

<sup>238</sup> David Daniel, *William Tyndale: A Biography*, pp. 247-249. Such opinions may offer some insight into why the Carthusians were seemingly more highly respected, as they proved particularly austere as well as contemplative.



*Mammon* published in 1528. “The just or righteous must live by faith. For in the faith we have in Christ, and in God’s promises find we mercy, life, favor, and peace,” he declares<sup>239</sup>

Formulating these Lutheran notions were his observations of the contemporary church and its inability to maintain the traditional tenets of spiritual idealism. Tyndale believed that during the Middle Ages worldly prelates and priest-craft had corrupted true religion of the primitive church through superstition, idolatry, and avarice.<sup>240</sup> “For how many centuries have they [the clergy] not batted on the poor layman,” he writes, “especially, of course, the religious orders and, most of all, the friars . . .” Taking aim at monasticism, he argued monotonous rituals and communal prayer did nothing for collective humanity. “Though thou hast a thousand holy candles about thee, a hundred ton of holy water, a ship full of pardons, a cloth sack full of friars coats, and all the ceremonies in the world and all the good works,” these things should never be considered “holy.”<sup>241</sup> Tyndale’s rhetoric proved scathing as he sought to expose the religious orders as pious frauds, who pretended holiness and exploited the laity through deception.

Such as Luther and Erasmus before him, Tyndale certainly proved no admirer of monasticism, yet within his thought traditional archetypes of spiritual idealism remained prevalent. For he saw the failure of the religious orders as originating from their lacking personal holiness, which stemmed from their entanglement with worldly affairs. Speaking to this in his *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue* in 1530 he writes, “monks, friars, black, white, pied, grey, and so forth, by a thousand names of blasphemy an of hypocrisies . . . ye must

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<sup>239</sup> William Tyndale, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, (1528), in *The Works of the English Reformers, William Tyndale and John Firth*, 3 vols., Thomas Russell, ed., vol. I, London, UK: (Ebenezer Palmer Printing, 1831), p. 85.

<sup>240</sup> Helen L. Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic: Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church*, London, UK: (Routledge, 2005), pp. 40-41.

<sup>241</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, (1528), Russell, ed., p. 86

believe in holy church and do as they teach you . . . and with their false and subtle wiles had beguiled and mock the ignorance of the world.”<sup>242</sup> Describing this “ignorance,” he urged individuals not to entrust their salvation to the prayers of a monk, stating the laity should not, “trust in his holiness. Our trust is in God, in Christ, and in the truth of God’s promises.”<sup>243</sup> Here Tyndale stressed the essential quality of personal piety among every believer, not just a select religious caste.

It also proved especially sacrilegious to the reformer for monastics or anyone to accept money for prayers affirming, “all good works must be done free . . . and that no profit be sought thereby.”<sup>244</sup> This monastic participation in religious corporatism, gaining immense wealth for spiritual services, especially drew Tyndale’s ire. He denounced the religious orders as being filled with the spirit of mammon, which he defined: “mammon is an Hebrew word, and signifies riches or temporal goods, and namely, all superfluity, and all that is above necessity . . . unrighteous mammon.”<sup>245</sup> Here he shows the monks failed to maintain the idyllic poverty they professed, highlighting their charlatanry and luxurious living, “spending the money that was gotten with alms and blood of martyrs upon goodly plate, and great vessels of gold, and silver, without care of things to come, despising God, whom they worshiped for their belly’s sake only.”<sup>246</sup> He concludes that “here on earth [monks] receive their rewards, as with the pharisees

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<sup>242</sup> William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, (1531), in *The Works of the Fathers and Writers of the Reformed English Church*, Henry Walter, ed., vol. II, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1850), p. 13.

<sup>243</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, (1528), Russell, ed., p. 136.

<sup>244</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, Russell, ed., p. 100.

<sup>245</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, Russell, ed., p. 102.

<sup>246</sup> William Tyndale, *The Practice of the Prelates*, (1530), in *The Works of the Fathers and Writers of the Reformed English Church*, Henry Walter, ed., vol. I, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1849), p. 245.

with their prayers and fasting.”<sup>247</sup> Thus, the religious orders in Tyndale’s perception did not maintain any of the core aspects of spiritual idealism, failing to imitate the Christians of the primitive church.

Tyndale certainly condemned the systemic failure of monasticism, he nevertheless stressed the importance of personal holiness within his perception of spiritual idealism, expressed through outward signs or works. Such exterior manifestations, crucially, must be inspired from individual faith and devotion that he described as the “inward righteousness of the heart,” and subsequently then, “outward righteousness confirms inward righteousness.”<sup>248</sup> Hence, any lifestyle, lay, clerical, or monastic became endowed with holiness when internal faith inspired external actions. As the righteous individual in Tyndale’s argument, “without action or compulsion of the law, bringeth forth good works,” and “knoweth and is sure through outward work that he is a true believer, and in favor of God.”<sup>249</sup> This statement suggests then that the most strict contemplative orders, such as the Carthusians, who maintained this key tenet of personal piety along with avoiding association with worldliness, found favor in the perceptions of many observers.<sup>250</sup>

Tyndale’s attack on institutional monasticism ironically showed that even the most ardent of Protestant reformers valued many aspects of traditional spiritual idealism that the most exceptional religious orders embodied. While he encouraged popular attitudes of resentment against monasticism, his polemic itself failed to bring reforms of the religious houses or the

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<sup>247</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, Russell, ed., p. 102.

<sup>248</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, Russell, ed., p. 99.

<sup>249</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, Russell, ed., p. 93.

<sup>250</sup> See Chapter 2 of this dissertation for a full explanation of medieval spiritual idealism that the Carthusians strictly maintained.

abolition of the monastic orders, but it played a role in shifting the public perception of monks, and along with humanist criticism, prepared the ground for the later royal campaign that ushered in the dissolution of the monasteries from 1535-1539.<sup>251</sup> The reformer also forced responses from royal polemicists, encouraging public debate over the social utility of the religious orders and shaping perceptions of spiritual idealism during the early Reformation.<sup>252</sup>

Sir Thomas More remained the king's most talented polemicist and the leading intellectual supporter until Henry's divorce forced his resignation as Lord Chancellor in 1533. Though never publicly admonishing crown policies, he never accepted the theological ramifications of the divorce, nor agreed to the royal supremacy over the church. More's refusal to sign the oath of supremacy ultimately led to his trial for high treason, which returned a guilty verdict and then his execution shortly followed on Tower Hill in 1535. With this, Henry lost his most able councilor, servant, and publicist, who might have steered England on a more moderate course of reform than the hot tempered and earnestly Protestant Thomas Cromwell, who had replaced More in 1532 as chief minister. More valued tradition and order far more than most reformers as well as his humanist colleagues. These sentiments remained apparent within his religious writings and confirm his acceptance of traditional spiritual idealism.<sup>253</sup>

He largely maintained the most favorable opinion of monasticism among the humanist reformers. Never seeing monasticism as inherently flawed or the liturgical ritual virtually

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<sup>251</sup> Stanford E. Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament 1529-1536*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 117-118. For a full account of these events during the dissolution of the monasteries, see chapter 5 of this dissertation.

<sup>252</sup> William Tyndale: *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, (1526), *The Obedience of a Christian Man and how Christian Rulers ought to Govern*, (1528), *The Practice of Prelates*, (1530), *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, (1531). All available full text with historical analysis at: <http://www.tyndale.org/works.htm>

<sup>253</sup> James Monti, *The King's Good Servant, But God's First: The Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More*, New York, NY: (Ignatius Press, 1997), pp. 15-23.

worthless as Erasmus, More considered aspects of monasticism, certain religious houses, and even entire orders deficient in holiness, but the institution itself remained a vital part of Christian society within his perception of spiritual idealism. In his perception, the contemplative orders proved the closest imitation of the primitive church, and because of earnest devotion and strictness these specific orders had not fallen into moral disrepute. Chief among these pure monastics were the Carthusians, among whom More lived for more than four years while a law student at Lincoln Inn; for a time he even considered joining the order. His son-in-law William Roper reported in his biography of More that he spent many hours in deep introspection with the brethren, but decided he could not maintain the austere standards of the Carthusians nor abide by the vow of chastity. Hence, More felt it a wiser course of action to be a good layman than a lax monk.<sup>254</sup> Nevertheless, he confirmed his feelings toward the order in a public response to Tyndale in 1532 when he described, “the monks of the charter house . . . of very vertuose devcyon, among whom God be thanked we se many lyve to very greate age . . .”<sup>255</sup> Furthermore, while imprisoned in the tower and witnessing the martyrdom of three Carthusians from his window, More illuminated the spiritual factors that differentiated these monks from other religious orders in a conversation with his daughter proclaiming, “what a greate difference there is between such as have in effecte spent all their days in a straight, hard, penitential and paynefull life religiously, and such as have in the world . . . consumed all their tyme in pleasure and ease licentiously.”<sup>256</sup> Such references suggest More admired the spirituality and devotional practices of the Carthusians, who earnestly maintained personal piety,

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<sup>254</sup> William Roper, *Lyfe of Sir Thomas More, Knight*, (ca. 1578), C.V. Hitchcock, ed., London, UK: (Early English Text Society, 1935), p. 6.

<sup>255</sup> Thomas More, *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, L.A. Schuster, ed., vol. I, (London, 1973), p. 126.

<sup>256</sup> William Roper, *Lyfe of Sir Thomas More, Knight*, (ca. 1578), C.V. Hitchcock, ed., pp. 80-81.

austerity, and avoided worldliness. When practiced with exceptional spiritual rigor monasticism had great religious value to the monk as well as members of the Christian community, who benefited from the dispensation of spiritual merit from these virtuous ascetics.

Apart from his admiration of the Carthusians, More certainly believed that monasticism as a whole needed reform, which he communicated within his many writings even before the outset of the Reformation movement. For example, in his most famous work *Utopia* originally published in Latin during 1516, he stressed the importance of individual holiness among the monastic vocation, which the monk attained through the avoidance of worldliness and religious corporatism. Utopia was fictional island in the new world that stood proxy for England, and through this medium More critiqued the many failings of his own society, specifically the political and religious systems. For instance, he described the great landowners including the religious orders as so, “covetous and insatiable . . .” for material wealth gained through exploitive farming techniques that they allowed their sheep to “consume, destroy, and devour whole fields, houses, and cities . . . they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves.”<sup>257</sup> A central complaint within the work probed the social problems stemming from the enclosure movement, which fenced off formerly communal lands for the sole benefit of landowners. Often this practice proved devastating to local communities that depended upon the use of common fields to graze their flocks.<sup>258</sup> More saw the great monasteries as a primary offender, “yea, and certain abbots, holy men no doubt, not contenting themselves with the yearly revenues and profits that were wont to grow to their forefathers and predecessors of their lands, . . . they

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<sup>257</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, (1516) Wayne A. Rebhorn, ed., New York, NY: (Barnes & Noble, 2005), p. 29. *Utopia* was first published in English in 1551 by Sir Thomas More’s son-in-law, William Roper.

<sup>258</sup> Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 147-167.

enclose all into pastures; they throw down houses; they pluck down towns, and leave nothing standing but only the church to be made a sheep house,” writes More. This involvement in worldly affairs and the eager participation in religious corporatism clearly removed the aura of holiness from the monastic institutions that destroyed traditional ways of life within their communities for the sake of temporal enrichment. Moreover, the wealth generated from these ventures further perverted the idyllic austere monastic lifestyle, as such riches lead to luxury and sloth.<sup>259</sup> This participation in religious corporatism and the subsequent traits stemming from worldly entanglement proved the antithesis of spiritual idealism in More’s critique.

Beyond *Utopia*, his later writings primarily offered orthodox responses to the works of Fish, Luther, and Tyndale throughout the 1520s where he, along with the bishop of Rochester John Fisher and the bishop of London Cuthbert Tunstall, led the royalist charge against Protestant heresy. His skills as one of England’s preeminent humanist rhetoricians were initially displayed in Latin treatises against Luther between 1518 and 1528.<sup>260</sup> At the end of this rhetorical campaign he decided that circumstances dictated a change in tactics. The deluge of heretical pamphlets circulating in London necessitated vernacular responses, so the laity could easily read or hear a persuasive defense of Catholicism. The first salvo came in *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, which More published in 1529. He argues against Lutheran positions in an imaginary dialogue between two interlocutors labeled as *the author* and *the messenger*. Early on the messenger took a position that the avaricious clergy and religious orders deliberately deceived the laity through superstitious practices such pilgrimage and the veneration of relics,

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<sup>259</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, (1516), Wayne A. Rebhorn, ed., pp. 31-32.

<sup>260</sup> *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523); for a detailed analysis of the English responses to Luther see David Birch, *Early Reformation English Polemics*, pp. 23-27.

which filled ecclesial coffers and promoted a luxurious lifestyle of ease. To which the author responds, “folk figure that the clergy are glad to favor these ways and to feed this superstition under the name and guise of devotion . . . for the lucre and worldly advantage that they themselves receive from the offerings.” Yet More points out that integrity among the caretakers of shrines and sacred relics did not regularly exploit believers. Rather, the “vast majority of these . . . [remain] in the hands of such religious . . . who receive no profit from it. If they believed it to be what you call it, superstitious and wicked, they would never let it continue . . . and neither in body nor in goods take any profit.”<sup>261</sup> Here he illuminated the continued importance of individual holiness and the plain, unmaterialistic lifestyle that evidenced such an ethereal state. This concept of personal piety remained essential in More’s edification of traditional spiritual idealism.

More drew attention to these ideals also in *A Supplication for Souls* published in 1529, which confuted Fish’s anticlerical pamphlet. He elucidated the spiritual value and social utility of the devout cleric and pure monastic. Not pretending that abuses of ecclesiastical system never occurred, he nevertheless encouraged careful scrutiny of the whole institution, showing that most of the clergy remained dutiful and pious. He specifically took aim at Fish’s description of monastics as beggars, declaring they “beg in our name and in our name receive your money, whereof we receive both your devotion and their prayers.” Worthy monks deserved alms and the laity should provide generous donations to ensure the furtherment of devout services that ultimately benefited the givers, More argues.<sup>262</sup> The chancellor also pointed out that Fish’s

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<sup>261</sup> Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, (1528), Mary Gottschalk, ed., New York, NY: (Scepter Publishers, 2006), pp. 75-77.

<sup>262</sup> Thomas More, *A Supplication for Souls*, (1529), Mary Thecla, ed., Westminster, MD: (Newman Press, 1950), p. 14.



universal treatment of the clergy and religious orders proved unfair as well as offering an inaccurate assessment of their quality. “All the faults that any lewd priest or friar doth, all that layeth he to the whole clergy,” More states, “laying to their charge the breach of chastity and abuse in fleshly living . . .” and furthermore, “all virtuous good priests and religious folk he calleth idle holy thieves, because they spend their time in preaching and prayer.”<sup>263</sup> More subtly hints at his vision of spiritual idealism within these remarks, highlighting the importance of personal piety, simplicity, and distance from worldly concern. These practices created a state of holiness in More’s perception, and many, though not all, of the clergy embodied these archetypes. He concludes, “these heinous crimes laid unto the whole clergy – and as every wise man seeth, some very falsely and some very foolishly.”<sup>264</sup> Thus, More saw the need for reforms among the clergy and church, but his experiences and beliefs had demonstrated that many worthy individuals continued to maintain the traditional tenets of spiritual idealism, suggesting that ecclesiastical institutions still played a vital role in Christianity as well as maintaining its relevance to lay society.

In sum, this chapter explored the concept of spiritual idealism within many significant polemical works during the early Reformation period. Such writings have provided a window into the nuanced realm of religious thought among key late medieval thinkers. Their tracts suggest that popular and learned opinions on monasticism remained varied and complex regarding its individual and social utility. Some authors found desirable attributes within particular religious orders such as the Carthusians, while others wanted the institution removed entirely from England. Generally, these works demonstrated that gradation of spiritual

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<sup>263</sup> Thomas More, *A Supplication for Souls*, (1529), Mary Thecla, ed., pp. 26-27.

<sup>264</sup> Thomas More, *A Supplication for Souls*, (1529), Mary Thecla, ed., p. 27.

exceptionalism existed in the perceptions of many observers regarding monasticism, and most orthodox thinkers linked the maintenance spiritual idealism with monastic virtue. Conversely, Protestants condemned the institution, yet still highlighted the importance of the traditional core tenets forming spiritual idealism within their new ideology. The combined treatises show that individual devotion and the pursuit of holiness remained a key feature of Christian exceptionalism, encouraging debate and shaping popular perceptions, which ultimately led to the Henrician religious settlement and the dissolution of the monasteries by 1536. Nevertheless, Erasmus, Colet, and More considered monasticism one kind of Christian lifestyle that might prove holy depending upon the personal piety of the practitioner, but they also suggested it was not inherently superior to other forms of Christianity. Even Luther and Tyndale largely admitted that the monastic vocation could be beneficial if the individual believer knew such ritualism remained meaningless as it related to the process of otherworldly salvation and the monk only performed spiritual exercises voluntarily. This all suggests that the archetypal notions of traditional spiritual idealism were maintained by leading orthodox thinkers as well as among the most vehement reformers, who stressed the continued importance of personal piety and simplicity, along with the avoidance of luxury and worldliness.

## Chapter IV

### Spiritual Idealism Personified: The English Carthusian Order 1400-1540

Most historians claim that Carthusians stood above other monastics in their spiritual exceptionalism before and during the tumultuous events of the English Reformation. Traditional accounts of the Carthusians have focused upon the dynamic episodes of the London charterhouse, the unyielding resolve of its members, and the eighteen martyrdoms of those monks that refused to accept the Royal Supremacy, which defied Catholic orthodoxy and made King Henry VIII head of the Church of England. These events profoundly shaped contemporary perceptions along with the later historiography of the order.<sup>265</sup> Yet recent studies have questioned these assertions, emphasizing the devotion and fortitude of other orders throughout the late middle ages in the face of extreme persecutions from the Tudor crown.<sup>266</sup> Scholars have highlighted the zeal of Bridgettines, Cistercians, and Franciscan Observants, challenging the Carthusian status as the only order to merit the classification as exceptional in the final century of English monasticism.<sup>267</sup> This chapter examines contemporary visions of monastic exceptionalism, emphasizing the reactions of observers regarding the conduct of the religious orders before and during the sweeping religious reforms of Henry VIII. Drawing upon a wide variety of sources from monastic chronicles to the books of Protestant martyrologist John Foxe,

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<sup>265</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, pp. 222-241; also see chapter one of this dissertation.

<sup>266</sup> David H. Williams, *The Tudor Cistercians*, Leominster, UK: (Gracewing Publishing, 2014); Nicholas Orme, "Monasteries in Medieval Cornwall: Mediocrity or Merit?" in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, Janet Burton & Karen Stober, eds., Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2008).

<sup>267</sup> E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham, *Syon Abbey and its Books, Reading, Writing, and Religion 1400-1700*, London, UK: (Boydell Press, 2010); R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe 1215-1515*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Hilary M. Carey, "Devout Literate Lay People and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Later Medieval England," *Journal of Religious Studies*, xiv, (1986-1987).

and the writings of exiled Carthusian chronicler Maurice Chauncey, this chapter shows that the famous and dramatic events of the Reformation that encompassed the most resolute members of the religious orders played a significant role in both shaping contemporary perceptions of these orders and also influencing post-dissolution understandings of spiritual idealism.

On the whole, contemporary writers throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries highly regarded the Carthusian order for its austerity and personal piety.<sup>268</sup> Later historians have also observed a strictness and unique zeal among the English Carthusians. Even the fastidious David Knowles readily accepted the traditional wisdom that these monks were an exceptional order among the monastic pantheon at the time of the Reformation. He stated that monasticism from the “judgment of modern critics” was not at the apogee of its discipline at the time of the dissolution, “the Carthusians alone excepted.”<sup>269</sup> Most modern historians have also accepted this Carthusian anomaly as accurate, as these monks were “particularly renown for their austerity and sincere devotion to their religious life,” declares Francis Gasquet more than a century ago.<sup>270</sup> Dennis Martin echoed these remarks nearer the present: “Carthusians bowed to external political pressure in some regions that became Protestant, but with few exceptions they submitted only under duress. In many instances their loyalty to the ‘old faith’ was heroic.”<sup>271</sup> Probing the

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<sup>268</sup> Glyn Coppack, “Make Straight in the desert a highway for our God:” Carthusians and Community in Late Medieval England, in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, Janet Burton and Karen Stober, eds., Woodbridge, UK: (Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 168-183.

<sup>269</sup> Knowles, *Religious Orders*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>270</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Routledge, 2015); Dennis R. Martin, “Carthusians during the Reformation Era: ‘Cartusia nunquam deformata, reformari resistens’”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 41-66<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>, pp. 41-42; Carol B. Rowntree, “Studies in Carthusian History in Later Medieval England”, unpublished D.Phil thesis, (University of York, 1981).

<sup>271</sup> Dennis R. Martin, “Carthusians during the Reformation Era: ‘Cartusia nunquam deformata, reformari resistens’”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 41-66<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>, pp. 41-42.

veracity of modern historiography, the writings of contemporary observers indeed confirm many of these modern attestations regarding the Carthusian order in England.

By 1500 only nine Carthusian houses had been established in England: Witham (1178), Hinton (1227), Beauvale (1343), London (1371), Coventry (1381), Kingston-Upon-Hull (1377), Axholme (1397), Mount Grace (1398), and Sheen (1414). The first three were ruggedly rural establishments in the true nature of Carthusian seclusion. The next five foundations came out of the urbanization movement in the late Middle Ages and were placed on the edge of busy commercial centers. Axholme and Mount Grace retained a rural character, but stood on the main regional highways in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. Finally, Sheen had the enviable position adjacent to the royal palace at Richmond. Many of the records for these houses did not survive the ravages of time, therefore this chapter will concentrate upon the main record sources available, but room for expansion into the local dynamics of the smaller, less visible houses remains worthwhile for future research.<sup>272</sup>

The London charterhouse enjoyed much of its success from its proximity in the capital and the high traffic volume that moved through it.<sup>273</sup> Sheen, being constructed near the Tudor family seat kept the monks in close contact with king and court. It especially became the object of continual royal patronage right up until its dissolution. It also was the first house Queen Mary

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<sup>272</sup> Many of the records for these houses did not survive the ravages of time, therefore this chapter will concentrate upon the main record sources available, but room for expansion into the local dynamics of the smaller, less visible houses remains worthwhile for future research. For information regarding the two most rural houses in Somerset see: E. Margaret Thompson, *A History of the Somerset Carthusians*.

<sup>273</sup> Lawrence Hendricks, *The London Charterhouse, Its Monks and Its Martyrs, with a Short Account of the English Carthusians After the Dissolution*, (London, 1889). Full text available online at: [https://archive.org/stream/cu31924029404310/cu31924029404310\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/cu31924029404310/cu31924029404310_djvu.txt); Sir William St. John-Hope, *The History of the London Charterhouse from its Foundation until the Suppression of the Monastery*, (London, 1925); Andrew Wines, "The London Charterhouse in the Later Middle Ages: An Institutional History," unpublished D. Phil thesis, (Cambridge University, 1998).

re-founded when she came to the throne in 1554.<sup>274</sup> Much scholarly work and archaeological studies have shown a spiritually robust and monetarily profitable relationship between the Carthusian houses and their surrounding communities from the early fifteenth century until the final dissolution in 1539.<sup>275</sup> The laity provided these houses with large land endowments, bequests, and regularly desired burial within these chapterhouses.<sup>276</sup> Regarding the popularity of these houses, enthusiastic lay patronage of these institutions shows a strong belief in the potency of Carthusian prayers. This may also indicate a preference for these monks instead of other orders, who the laity perceived as having a stronger intercessory role with the divine. Little more than a century of existence saw both Sheen and London become two of the ten richest religious houses in all of England and Wales, enjoying enthusiastic support from the monarchy, landed class, and county gentry via monetary donations and lavish endowments.<sup>277</sup> For an order that had only nine established houses by 1530, the Carthusian ascent from founding to becoming one of the richest orders per capita testifies to the popularity and importance of these monks in the perceptions of the laity, as rarely do individuals give significant portions of their wealth to causes or groups that do not garner their strong confidence. Nevertheless, other monastic houses also continued receiving contributions, but the Carthusians and other contemplatives usually saw

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<sup>274</sup> Neil Beckett, "Sheen Charterhouse: From its Foundation to its Dissolution," unpublished D.Phil. thesis, (Oxford University, 1992); John Cloake, "Richmond's Great Monastery The Charterhouse of Jesus of Bethlehem of Shene," *Richmond Local History Society* paper no. 6, (1990).

<sup>275</sup> Glyn Coppack and Mick Aston, *Christ's Poor Men The Carthusians in England*; Savine, "English Monasteries", pp. 100-103.

<sup>276</sup> Carol B. Rowntree, "Studies in Carthusian History in Later Medieval England", unpublished D.Phil thesis, (University of York, 1981). Rowntree usefully put all the surviving figures of endowments in Carthusian houses in the appendix of her thesis, which shows a significant engagement of lay communities with most houses, but especially at Mt. Grace, Hull, London, and Sheen.

<sup>277</sup> Rowntree, "Studies in Carthusian History in Later Medieval England," pp. 338-340; Glyn Coppack and Mick Aston, *Christ's Poor Men The Carthusians in England*.

increasing revenues at a time when other orders witnessed stagnation or decline in monetary support.<sup>278</sup> Therefore, the exceptional nature of the order and its alignment with the general perception of holiness among the laity may explain this disparity between contemplatives and other orders at the twilight of the middle ages.

King Henry VII, among others, patronized the Carthusian houses at Beauvale, Coventry, Sheen, and London during the 1490s, as he appreciated the order's uniquely spartan lifestyle and spiritual zeal. When one of the monks at Sheen asked to return to the Cistercian order from where he had transferred, the king became involved, denying the request, citing he could not allow monks to "return from fish to flesh, from haircloth to broadcloth, from solitude to society."<sup>279</sup> The implication, at least in Henry's mind, was that the Cistercian life proved far less rigorous than the Carthusian, and this strict lifestyle conveyed spiritual exceptionalism.<sup>280</sup>

Beyond the highest strata of late medieval and Tudor society, many others also saw spiritual exceptionalism conveyed through the Carthusians. J.A.F. Thompson in his study of some 700 London wills, found after 1490: "the increasing favor shown to the Carthusians among the monks and the Observants among the friars suggests that the Londoners were not uncritical in their bestowal of favors and had a preference for the most austere orders." He also noted the

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<sup>278</sup> Rowntree, "Studies in Carthusian History", p. 190-346. Rowntree's analysis shows that from the initial founding period from 1370-1414 the Carthusians received much support from wealthy individuals, mostly from the county gentry and clergy: "The Carthusians received rather more support from the clergy in general and the episcopacy in particular, than most monastic orders could expect. But the social grouping from which they derived perhaps their most significant patronage was the county gentry." She also noted that this was a disproportionately large amounts in comparison with other orders. p. 317.

<sup>279</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Venice*, vol. i, p. 183.

<sup>280</sup> C.B. Rowntree has pointed out in her study of bequests, Henry VII great support and generosity to the Carthusians earned him the highest honor the order could bestow in 1496, when the prior of La Grande Chartuse granted him an anniversary obituary. This entailed that every Carthusian house sang 30 successive masses for his soul annually. Rowntree, "Studies in Carthusian History", pp. 290-292.

popularity of Observants remained, “less striking than that of the Carthusians.”<sup>281</sup> In confirmation of this claim, William Lawrence a middling-sort Londoner when asking for prayers after his death, states in his will shortly before the dissolution of the religious houses: “I have great confidens in their [Carthusian] devoutens for the wele and comfort of my soule.”<sup>282</sup> In a similar fashion, the duchess of Buckingham in 1480 also left in her will 20d to every monk and priest of the Carthusian order in London and Sheen as well as the Bridgettine house of Syon for these holy men to sing five masses each for the care of her soul. She also left an endowment to an anchorite at All Hallows in the London wall for this individual to pray for her soul.<sup>283</sup> Such testimony demonstrates the preference of the English laity for contemplatives over other orders when it came to the solicitation of prayers for their well-being in the afterlife because of their close association with the spiritual idealism of the age.<sup>284</sup>

Historians have long highlighted this popularity of the Carthusians and other contemplatives on the eve of the Reformation. In the late sixteenth century, a Lincolnshire gentleman Sir Thomas Cumberworth, distributed large amounts of funds to numerous religious orders, but emphasized the contemplatives named in the will. Specifically, he named two nearby anchorites and the Carthusians of Mt. Grace in Yorkshire, who he left more than twice the combined amount he gave to the rest of the monasteries.<sup>285</sup> Even the Protestant apologist A.G.

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<sup>281</sup> J.A.F. Thompson, “Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xvi, (1965), pp. 189-190.

<sup>282</sup> As cited in J.A.F. Thompson, “Piety and Charity”, p. 189.

<sup>283</sup> British Library, *Additional MS 34213*.

<sup>284</sup> David A. Harrap, “The Phenomena of Prayer: The Reception of the *Imitatio Christi* in England (1438-c.1600),” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, (University of London, 2016), pp. 48-60.

<sup>285</sup> *Lincolnshire Documents 1440-1544*, vol. 149, Andrew Clark, ed., London, UK: (Early English Text Society, 1914), pp. 44-57.



Little admitted the extensive popularity of Carthusians and other contemplatives during the early sixteenth century, but argued while their austere reputation impressed some, its appeal remained limited because of their hermetic nature.<sup>286</sup> Recent research has convincingly shown exactly the opposite. The quasi-hermetic Carthusian lifestyle devoted to an intense struggle for individual piety was exactly what appealed to lay observers.<sup>287</sup> Carthusian popularity, wrote historian C.H. Lawrence, lay in its austere and clandestine lifestyle that “successfully domesticated the ideal of the desert in the form of a permanent institution, which never relaxed or compromised its distinctive pattern of life.”<sup>288</sup> Such reputations were born in the high Middle Ages and only grew with time as the laity came to place increasing value upon personal piety and introspection, which formed the basis of spiritual idealism during the late medieval period.

A group of Lollard knights further attested to the spiritual value of certain groups among the religious orders. These men informed King Henry V in 1410 that the Crown should absorb virtually all religious institutions on account of their lechery upon society without contribution. They did, however, specify he should spare certain groups from this condemnation because of their spiritual and tangible benefactions to the laity, specifically they named the “collegiis, cantoribus, canonicis ecclesiarum . . . de monachis Cartusie . . . de heremitoriis, de fratribus cruce signatis.”<sup>289</sup> These knights singled out the Carthusians, hermits, and the military order of St. John. This gradation of religious orders in the perception of Lollard rebels suggests that even

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<sup>286</sup> A.G. Little, “Introduction of the Observant Friars into England”, *Proceedings of the British Accademy*, x, (1923), p. 460-464.

<sup>287</sup> Dennis R. Martin, “Carthusians during the Reformation Era: ‘Cartusia nunquam deformata, reformari resistens’”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 41-66; R.M. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, (London, 1914), p. 77.

<sup>288</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, (London, 2015), p. 146.

<sup>289</sup> *St. Albans Chronicle 1406-1420*, V.H. Galbraith ed., Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 55.

enemies of traditional religion differentiated these groups based upon their apparent spiritual value to the laity, as they possessed a sacred quality that other groups lacked. This petition also demonstrated only a small number of monastic groups held the respect of popular religious reformers at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and contemplatives proved a sizeable portion of them.

An anonymous writing at the end of the fifteenth century also suggests the opinions regarding contemplatives proved much higher than many of the other religious orders. The author juxtaposed the image of contemplatives against other orders. It showed contemplatives exemplifying most closely the standards of spiritual idealism in the late Middle Ages. The work delineates many of the religious orders and the stereotypes associated with each group. Within these descriptions, the writer identified many of the things he or she saw as the antithesis of spiritual idealism. For instance, the author names the Cistercians, who lived in luxurious accommodations and extravagant wealth; the Benedictines, who fraternized with nuns; secular and regular canons, who kept nuns in their cells and reviled with them in drunkenness; the Hospitallars, who wore lavish clothing and ate meat three times daily; and finally, the Dominican, Franciscan, and Austin friars, who sought only material advancement and avoided austere living conditions. The writer suggests if a new religious order were created that had all the vices of these listed orders, it would become an order of Satan, suggesting few could live as a Carthusian.<sup>290</sup> This highlights the acute perception of contemporary observers regarding spiritual ideals of their time, showing how specific religious orders reflected or rebuffed their notions of spiritual idealism.

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<sup>290</sup> British Library, *Harley MS 2253*.

Another example of this clear differentiation among the religious orders came from the testimony of a prelate of Benedictine monks in the early sixteenth century, who complained against the reforms of monasticism instituted by Cardinal Wolsey when legate *Latere* to live stricter lifestyles in imitation of the most austere orders. The prior argued few individuals were capable of imitating the Observants, Bridgettines, or Carthusians. He makes clear many observers considered these three groups at the apex of austerity and spirituality among the English religious orders.<sup>291</sup> Furthermore, during the phase of episcopal visitations in Henry VIII's reign, the commissioner Thomas Legh reported that all of the canons at Fordham Priory near Ely implored him to libertate them from their religious lives, as they could not fulfill their obligations to live in such strict conditions, preferring the life of the secular clergy.<sup>292</sup> Moreover, later when royal agents disbanded the four orders of friars in Lincoln the townspeople seemingly cared little, as the Bishop of Dover recounted that "in the Grey Freyrs ys a godely condyte, for the which the meyar and the aldermen was with me to make sute to have the condythe into the cete." The leading members of the city made no mention of the spiritual loss of the friars, whose absence was hardly noticed. Rather, the acquisition of the convent and physical property proved their main concern.<sup>293</sup> These writings taken as a whole attested to the general reverence for the

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<sup>291</sup> *Documents Illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks 1215-1540*, W.A. Pantin, ed., vol. 3, Camden Society Third Series, vol. liv, (London, 1933-1937), no. 283, p. 124.

<sup>292</sup> "Thomas Legh to Thomas Cromwell, (November 1, 1535,)" in *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries Edited from the Originals in the British Museum*, Thomas Wright, ed., London, UK: (Camden Society, 1843), pp. 82-83.

<sup>293</sup> "Richard Bishop of Dover to Thomas Cromwell, (May 23, 1538,)" in *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries Edited from the Originals in the British Museum*, Thomas Wright, ed., London, UK: (Camden Society, 1843), p. 192. Ethan Shagan has also pointed out this apathy toward the spiritual loss of Halies Abbey in his study of the Reformation.

strict devotional practices of the contemplative orders as well as a profound disrespect for those who were not seen as spiritual exemplars.

Notions of spiritual idealism could also profoundly influence the lower social orders. Initially Carthusians built their houses deep in the wilderness, but during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the order began constructing charterhouses closer to the growing number of towns throughout Europe in order to provide spiritual edification to the burgeoning populace. Describing this shift of the Carthusian order from far off deserts to urban centers, the Bishop of London, Michael Northburgh writes: “holy and wise men, being inspired by the Holy Spirit, knowing in these places the ancient solitude of the order had little to offer in example for others, constructed, in many kingdoms, many houses near towns and people.”<sup>294</sup> As the testimony of many wills and donations confirms, a broad spectrum of English society monetarily supported the prayers of these monks.<sup>295</sup> They seemingly valued the prayers of these Carthusians more other orders of the time. For example, during an uprising in 1371 a large group of London citizens broke windows at St. Paul’s Cathedral and destroyed an extensive amount of property within the nearby Clerkenwell Abby. The mob then moved into the Smithfield vicinity and began threatening to burn the Carthusian house to the ground. Then a disagreement arose between the leaders of the riot, and after some discussion among the group they dispersed without compulsion from the authorities or monks.<sup>296</sup> While only this passing reference exists

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<sup>294</sup> The National Archives UK, LR2/61 f., 13: “Sapientes et sancti viri instictu sancti spiritu edocti. Considerantes antiquam vestry ordinis solitudinem modicum proficere. Ad exemplum aliorum. In aliis regnis fecerunt fieri plures domos iuxta magas ciuitates et villas. Prout vidimus proper . . . sanctum audomarum ac infra civitatem . . .”

<sup>295</sup> For the inventory of patrons, endowments and goods see: Public Record Office, L/R 2/61 – London Charterhouse Register and British Library, MS Cotton, Otho BXIV – Sheen Charterhouse Register. Sir William St. John-Hope, *The History of the London Charterhouse from its Foundation until the Suppression of the Monastery*, (London, 1925), pp. 94-102.

<sup>296</sup> Public Record Office, L/R 2/61 – London Charterhouse Register, f. 12.

regarding the event, it suggests that at least some individuals among the rioters did not want to disturb or feared attacking the Carthusians. Yet they seemed perfectly content to attack other religious establishments with impunity. What their motivations for ceasing their attack stemmed from remains unknown, but it seems plausible that the mob differentiated between the Carthusians and other religious institutions. Perhaps these Londoners saw these monks as spiritual exemplars, and hence refrained from destroying their property.

Monastic exceptionalism of course meant maintaining the four tenets of spiritual idealism as identified within the second chapter of this study during the fifteenth century, but it also extended to worldly, political stances that defined the order in its last years of existence during the English Reformation, such as remaining unyielding to traditional religion in the divorce crisis between Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon as well as the ensuing struggle over religious authority during the 1530s. Throughout these events the king and his council bore witness to the devotional tenacity that had long earned the Carthusians their reputation. When seeking widespread approval for the *Act of Supremacy* in 1534, which replaced the pope with the king as head of the English Church, the crown earnestly sought the approval of the London Carthusians, whose acquiescence on these matters, the king's council felt, could turn the tide of public opinion in their favor. Councilors and high level clerics made repeated visits to the London charterhouse to solicit the approval of the monks, which they never received.<sup>297</sup> The London Carthusians, nearly to the last monk, refused to abandon their traditional religion, directly leading to their eventual martyrdom, and this only increased their already excellent reputation.

Along with the Carthusians, the Bridgettines were among the strictest contemplative orders, but maintained only a single house in England, which enjoyed the high opinions of many

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<sup>297</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, 1534*, vol. vii, nos. 614, 702.

contemporary observers and subsequent historians alike.<sup>298</sup> It perhaps owed its prominent reputation to its position and close relationship with Carthusian house of Sheen across the river at Richmond. One member of the community the monk and humanist scholar Richard Reynolds, who enjoyed friendship with Sir Thomas More and John Colet, became a vehement critic of the Royal Supremacy over the church. He found himself a prisoner in the Tower in April 1535 along with three Carthusian priors, and during his examination denied the crown's authority to put him on trial regarding religious matters, stating he preferred martyrdom over sin. The king lamentably ordered his and the three recalcitrant Carthusians execution in May of 1535. Reynolds died stalwart to his ideals of religion, encouraging his Carthusian companions on the scaffold to the end. His words during the execution purportedly convinced many of his convictions as well as the exceptionalism of his order.<sup>299</sup> The remaining Bridgettines, however, surrendered shortly after his death and recognized the legitimacy of the Supremacy. Therefore, the actions of one zealot likely earned the Bridgettine order some fame for exceptionalism and shaped the perceptions of many observers of the time, but the number of Bridgettine references in the surviving records remain much fewer than those directed toward the Carthusians. One solitary house with a single exemplar within it hardly confirms a widespread belief in the exceptionalism of the Bridgettine order in England. Yet, the association with the Carthusians at Sheen, the seclusion and contemplative lifestyle of the Bridgettine order, and the devotion of a charismatic martyr interwoven, formed the core of late medieval spiritual idealism, and this may suggest why contemporary observers gave high praise to the smallest order in England.

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<sup>298</sup> E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham, *Syon Abbey and its Books, Reading, Writing, and Religion 1400-1700*, London, UK: (Boydell Press, 2010)

<sup>299</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, 66.

These observers and their surviving writings continually highlight the importance of reputation coterminous with conceptions of holiness regarding the religious orders. Smaller contemplative orders received a more distinguished position than larger and more well-known orders in the perceptions of many thinkers of the late Middle Ages and early modern periods. It seems that these contemplatives *did* live stricter lifestyles than other monks, but did not necessarily obey the dictates of their *regula* as strictly as their reputations might suggest. The minutia of monastic rules remained so far off the radar of contemporary observers they rarely mention it. Nevertheless, many writers did point out the groups they believed embodied their notions of spiritual idealism. Much documentation from the royal visitations shortly before the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 shows that the Carthusians, for example, failed to observe their founding discipline absolutely, yet they lived a stricter, more secluded, and deeply contemplative lifestyle than other orders, which was more in line with the ideals of spiritual exceptionalism in that age. This feature of the order earned them respect from the laity, and sometimes praise from royal visitors.

Testifying to this assertion, Nicholas Bedyll, a royal investigator, during the long process of his interrogation of the London Carthusians informed Chancellor Thomas Cromwell they could dispense with the monks and their strong opposition to the Supremacy Oath more easily, “if it were not for the opinion which men had [of Carthusians] and some yet have, in their apparent holinesse.”<sup>300</sup> Similarly, the commissioners reported of the Carthusian house of St. Anne at Coventry: “all priests in virtue and devout seclusion and religion excellent . . . the house

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<sup>300</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, no. 1090.

well maintained.” They also indicated the monks had a thriving school and were over-burdened with numerous intercessory masses for the dead.<sup>301</sup>

In London, the commission recorded the Carthusian monastery had many gilded sacramental items of gold and silver, such as censors, pyxis, chalices, crosses, and plate, along with a luxurious oriental carpet.<sup>302</sup> The monks were earnestly constructing new chapel space to accommodate the amount of mortuary masses they agreed to sing for the surrounding laity. They also enjoyed large incomes from rents.<sup>303</sup> Regarding this lifestyle, when the prior of the London house died in 1531, John Batemason, one of the brothers had a vision of the deceased in spirit form chastising the monks for eating from pewter dishes and using fine cloth in their habits.<sup>304</sup> This hardly suggests the brethren maintained the spartan conditions of reputation. Along with this, further evidence gathered in later historical studies has shown the Carthusians unquestionably failed to observe many of the dictates of the original rule. Every English Carthusian house granted lay individuals burial within the charterhouse, gave rich patrons letters of fraternity, and allowed select individuals to live among them, such as Thomas More and John Colet. They sometimes allowed visitors into their chapels for services and on occasion were consulted for spiritual advice. The founding rule prohibited all such actions.<sup>305</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>301</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., 6 vols., London, UK: (Royal Publication, 1810-1834), vol. iii, p. 53.

<sup>302</sup> Public Record Office, E117/12/22 – Inventory of Contents for the London Charterhouse.

<sup>303</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol. i, p. 431. For a description of the archaeology and building projects see: St. John-Hope, *London Charterhouse*, pp. 107-143.

<sup>304</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, no. 1047.

<sup>305</sup> Rowntree, “Studies in Carthusian History in Later Medieval England;” Glyn Coppack and Mick Aston, *Christ’s Poor Men The Carthusians in England*. For original statutes see: *Consuetudine of Guigo I, 5<sup>th</sup> Prior of the Carthusian Order*, Canterbury, UK: (St. Mary’s Mary’s Press, 2018). Available online: [https://www.academia.edu/38249602/The\\_Consuetudine\\_of\\_Guigo\\_I\\_5th\\_Prior\\_of\\_the\\_Carthusian\\_Order](https://www.academia.edu/38249602/The_Consuetudine_of_Guigo_I_5th_Prior_of_the_Carthusian_Order)



many observers readily testified to the harsh lifestyle that earned the order such a strong reputation for holiness. The monks Andrew Boorde, George Norton, Nicholas Rawlings, and Thomas Slater, formerly of the charterhouse and seeking a transfer to another order, referenced the strictness of the Carthusians informing Cromwell such living standards as isolation, extreme fasting, and manual labor, which they had been subjected to were so rigorous it seemed “un-Christian.”<sup>306</sup> While the Carthusians failed in observing their founding discipline perfectly, they largely maintained the integrity of their reputations of intense devotional practices, austerity, seclusion, and personal piety in the perception of the laity as well as in the experiences of former practitioners.

This then suggests the monk’s rigorous lifestyle caused adherence to the original rule to prove of little consequence in the perceptions of outsiders because of their unawareness regarding such minutia. Rather, it was the more readily observable traits of the Carthusians that carried forward its excellent reputation of holiness throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>307</sup> For many records from the general chapters criticized how the monks lived and the need for reform within the English province. One visitor from the general chapter in 1417 even suggested that “a reformation of the order might seem desirable.”<sup>308</sup> The priors of the order seem

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Carthusians were supposed to construct their houses in the desert, far from urban centers. The number of monks at a priory should never exceed twelve. The rule prohibited them from accepting gifts, possessing gilded sacramental items, the chalice alone excepted, allowing lay residence within their houses, and allowing lay burial within the monastery. The monks were not supposed to accept endowments or donations from the laity to sing mortuary masses. The Carthusians of England were in violation of all of these provisions, among others.

<sup>306</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, 1047, vol. IX, 12; also printed in Margaret Thompson, *English Carthusians*, pp. 390-392.

<sup>307</sup> Rowntree, “Studies in Carthusian History”, p. 372. Dennis R. Martin, “Carthusians during the Reformation Era: ‘Cartusia nunquam deformata, reformari resistens’”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 41-66<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>. R.M. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, p. 77.

<sup>308</sup> British Library, *Rawlinson MS*, D. 318, ff. 104-127, 128-129, 150. Visitors noted that the monks went outside the cloister too frequently, they seemed to maintain personal possessions. The visitors regularly ordered the priors to follow the rule more strictly.

to have fastidiously policed the conduct of the monks, as subsequent records make little mention of the faults previously described.<sup>309</sup> Hence, minor internal issues had little impact upon the general perception of the order. At the Hull charterhouse in 1535, for example, the surrounding community confirmed the excellent reputations of the monks in the perception of the laity, as the royal visitors reported that the brothers remained: “well-favored and commended by the honest men of Hull and others for their good living and hospitality.”<sup>310</sup> Upon reading this comment, Cromwell accused the monks of bribing the visitors for their good opinion.<sup>311</sup> The royal agents usually negative remarks surrounding the religious houses were contrasted by their untypically favorable report on the Carthusian house. This likely attests to the especial devotion and strict living of the Carthusian order, as readily observed by outsiders. “No question of it,” wrote commissioner Whalley, the Carthusians “be exceedingly superstitious, ceremonious and pharisaical, and wondrously addicted to their old mumpsimus.”<sup>312</sup> Whalley’s dissatisfaction highlights the dedication of Carthusians to maintaining their discipline throughout the tumultuous suppression period, which certainly increased their reputation for spiritual exceptionalism among contemporary observers.

Speaking to this resolve, the letters of the royal visitor Jaspar Fylolle, writing to Cromwell on the state of the London charterhouse in 1535 hints at the general reputation of the Carthusians, as he remarked “these Charterhowse monkes will be called solytary,” but he felt this

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<sup>309</sup> Public Record Office, L/R 2/61 – London Charterhouse Register, ff. 23-38.

<sup>310</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, 980.

<sup>311</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, 1166. Knowles comments on this situation, finding the claims of bribery groundless in *Religious Orders*, p. 308.

<sup>312</sup> Whalley to Cromwell, printed in Thompson, *English Carthusians*, pp. 415-416.

general perception was inaccurate, as every monk had a key to the cloister door and kept his cell full of documents and letters from the outside world. Yet his statement that the general impression surrounding the order was one of solitaries, intimately focused upon the interior, devotional life remains key in understanding the strong reverence that came from many social strata for these particular monks and value individuals placed upon their communal presence as well as prayers.<sup>313</sup> The perception of the Carthusians as austere hermits, focused upon the divine, did much to confound the Tudor investigators.

Likewise, in the previous year Thomas Bedyll outlined the stalwart religious character of the Carthusians that earned them such a strong reputation for holiness. Throughout his conversations with these monks on the subject of the Royal Supremacy, Prior John Houghton, among others under his leadership, refused to swear the supremacy oath. Bedyll reported, “they be obstinately determined to suffer all extremities rather than to alter their opinion” and all the monks were “al of one mynd.” He added that “they pretend holines on this behalf, surely the ground of their said opinion is hypocrisy, vayne glory, confederacy, obstinacy, to the end they may be seen to the worle, or specially to suche as have confidence in thaim, more feythful and more constant than any other.”<sup>314</sup> Echoing this remark, a disgruntled monk of the London charterhouse Thomas Salter, wrote in 1535 that the Carthusians, and to a lesser degree the Bridgettines, held “considerable influence upon the people, notwithstanding the strict enclosure; for many persons used to resort to the Carthusians for spiritual advice.”<sup>315</sup> These statements

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<sup>313</sup> “Jaspar Fylolle to Cromwell, September 5, 1535,” in *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries Edited from the Originals in the British Museum*, Thomas Wright, ed., London, UK: (Camden Society, 1843), p. 67.

<sup>314</sup> “Nicholas Bedyll to Cromwell, Ascension Day, 1534,” in *Three Chapters of Letters on the Suppression of the Monasteries*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>315</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. vii, no. 1046.

confirm that many among the laity found the Carthusians bastions of holiness, and the monks refusal to compromise their spiritual integrity during the Reformation only added to this widespread belief in Carthusian exceptionalism.

In the months after the Henry VIII secured his divorce from Katherine of Aragon in May of 1533, the Tudor government worked tenaciously to secure the oaths of the leading churchmen and most respected members of the religious orders throughout England regarding the validity of the settlement as well as the acceptance of later Royal Supremacy, which made the king head of the church within his realm in November 1534.<sup>316</sup> After the resignation of Sir Thomas More as chief minister and his subsequent arrest, Thomas Cromwell became chancellor and immediately set out to gain the approval of the Observants, Bridgettines, and Carthusians. The acceptance of the religious settlement by the most respected orders would ease the cooperation of the remaining orders.<sup>317</sup> Cromwell and his commissioners struggled mightily to persuade the leaders of these groups to accept the king's new position, and during this time the resolve and devotion of the religious orders was put on public display. Ultimately, some chose martyrdom over compliance with the crown.

The first targets of the Tudor government in seeking approval of the new religious settlement were the Observant friars. At the outset of the Reformation the Observants had seven houses with nearly 200 friars divided among them. The two most prominent convents were near London at Greenwich and also at Richmond, where the friars enjoyed a close relationship with

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<sup>316</sup> For an excellent and detailed narrative of these events see: G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England 1509-1558*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 38-50.

<sup>317</sup> Knowles, *Religious Orders of England*, pp. 329-333.

the Carthusians at Sheen and Bridgettines at Syon.<sup>318</sup> In March 1532 the provincial leader of the brethren, William Peto, refused, on behalf of the entire order, to swear the oath of Supremacy and disavowed the king's councilors in a public sermon at Greenwich.<sup>319</sup> After this, Cromwell's agents arrested the leading Observants and placed the rest of the friars under confinement in their convents. The commissioner Richard Layton failed in securing the order's compliance with the Supremacy oath during the course of his visitations<sup>320</sup> and Cromwell wasted little time in exiling the two leaders, Peto and Elstow, along with jailing several more of the friars in the Tower during June of 1534. Royal officials repeatedly tried persuading them to accept the Supremacy with little success.<sup>321</sup> Eventually two of the most ardent brothers named Rich and Risby were executed. Historians know little of the fate of those who remained. Knowles noted that fragmentary sources suggest out of 140, 40 remained in confinement at monasteries, 30 fled abroad, 36 accepted pensions, and 31 died in a manner unknown.<sup>322</sup> For uncertain reasons following the suppression of the Observants, contemporary observers did not lament the loss of the group as loudly or publicly as the later Carthusians. "Within a few weeks," Knowles writes, "the English province of the four orders of friars had ceased to exist. Thus, without noise or outcry, almost without a whimper, a familiar class of men disappeared from English life."<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> The Observants maintained close relations with the royal house. Queen Katherine always had an Observant as her confessor and the provincial William Peto, served as confessor to princess Mary before the divorce proceedings.

<sup>319</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. V, 941.

<sup>320</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, 841.

<sup>321</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, 856.

<sup>322</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, 1607, as cited in Knowles, *Religious Orders*, p. 210.

<sup>323</sup> Knowles, *Religious Orders of England*, p. 365.

While in their own time the Observants enjoyed an excellent reputation for strictness and devotion, later writers and historians alike have judged the order as less committed to its principles because most of its adherents chose exile or compromise instead of martyrdom, unlike the Carthusians. Neither did they enjoy a prolific chronicler of their struggle as did the Carthusians in Maurice Chauncy. Nevertheless, Cromwell certainly considered the Observant acceptance of the Supremacy as essential in his strategy for garnering widespread support. He also felt they threatened his designs enough that without their approval he needed to imprison them, preventing these well-respected traveling preachers from spreading dissent across the kingdom. Only after Cromwell had these friars safely within the Tower did he approach the likewise revered orders of the Bridgettines and Carthusians. It seems likely that the friars proved a more potent threat than these contemplatives, who for the most part remained secluded within their monasteries with less opportunity to stir up trouble among the populace. Nonetheless, Cromwell and the king saw the Carthusians, Observants, and Bridgettines as paramount conquests, which would ensure an easier way forward in their transformative vision of the English church and later the monastic dissolution.<sup>324</sup>

The Carthusian reputation for spiritual exceptionalism originated from many centuries of austerity and personal piety, but the series of eighteen martyrdoms between June 1535 and May 1537 at the hands of royal agents confirmed this perception, emblazoning it into memories of contemporary observers as well as subsequent historians. These dramatic events gave immortality to the perception of the Carthusians as the embodiment of late medieval spiritual idealism. The many and public martyrdoms of the Carthusians definitively showed that these

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<sup>324</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. V, 941, (1532); Stow, *Annals*, p. 559, (London, 1615).

monks, more than any other order, were unwilling to compromise devotional integrity, even to the point of death, which testified to their intense spirituality and resolve. They displayed these virtues to the English populace in the widely publicized deaths of the three priors, seven monks, and eight *conversi*, who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy or compromise in matters of religion.

The martyrdoms also illustrate how significant the crown considered the Carthusian acceptance of its religious settlement. Being able to use this respected order, a long-held exemplar of spiritual idealism, as a model of cooperation with the Supremacy would make the conquest of the remaining religious orders, friars, and secular clergy easier. Nevertheless, the road to Carthusian compliance proved long and difficult. A brother of the Whitham charterhouse informed the king's chief minister that many of the Carthusians, "judged it extreme heresy to swear to maintain the king's acts against the Pope's power; so much so that some of them said they would rather be exiled or suffer death as martyrs in the Pope's just cause."<sup>325</sup> Attitudes of defiance among the spiritual elite could inspire not only their own monks, but also those of their surrounding communities. As the case of the Cistercian monk George Lazenby of Jervaulx Monastery in Yorkshire shows, the Carthusians of Mt. Grace caused him to rethink his position on the Supremacy even though his order and house had already accepted it.<sup>326</sup> The commissioners reported of the Cistercians at Jervaulx that they "made answer like true subjects," outside of Lazenby.<sup>327</sup> Largely on account of the Carthusian hold-out on the issue as well as their spiritual council, Lazenby refused to acknowledge the king as head of the church. Even more

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<sup>325</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, no. 510.

<sup>326</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, no. 1025. For a full discussion of Lazenby and the Cistercian communities see: David H. Williams, *The Tudor Cistercians*.

<sup>327</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VIII, no. 1069.

boldly, he demanded an audience with Henry. He remained convinced that he could persuade the crown of the Supremacy's heterodoxy and illegality.<sup>328</sup> For his efforts, Lazenby was martyred on 6 August 1535. The government feared such situations would become more frequent if they failed in gaining Carthusian endorsement of the Supremacy.

Maurice Chauncy, a monk of the London charterhouse, who after a prolonged struggle accepted exile over martyrdom during the Reformation years, chronicled the last generation of Carthusians in England in several works. He carefully described the events from the late 1520s and 1530s: the martyrdoms, his leadership of the remaining English monks in the Low Countries, the Marian restoration of the charterhouse at Sheen, and the Carthusians final banishment under Queen Elizabeth. Within his dossier, Chauncy preserved many of the letters, trial transcripts, and intimate conversations among the monks.<sup>329</sup> Regarding Prior John Houghton, Chauncy recalled that his guidance of the London Carthusians garnered strong devotion among the monks as well as the surrounding community. In Chauncy's version of events Houghton embodied the spiritual idealism of his age and encouraged those in and near his monastery to do the same. "For he led there for twenty years a very remarkable life, in much austerity, in humility, in patience,

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<sup>328</sup> "Sir Francis Bigod to Cromwell, (1534)" *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VIII, (i), 1025, 1031, 1069.

<sup>329</sup> Maurice Chauncy penned his original manuscript *Historia Aliquot Martyrum* in 1546, which he published in Mainz in 1550. He sent the work to La Grande Chartreuse in order the prior might admit them as exiles to the charterhouse at Bruges. This version two Carthusian monks, Vitus a Dulkem and V.M. Doreau, reprinted in 1888: Maurice Chauncy, *Passio xviii Carthusianorum*, (London, 1888), p. 82. Moreover, Chauncy later in 1570 composed another version, which added more references and details than the original chronicle. H.G. Richardson transcribed and translated this final edition, which the Church Historical Society published in 1935: *The Passion and Martyrdom of the Holy English Carthusian Fathers*. For further details see Thompson, *English Carthusians*, pp. 343-352 or Knowles, *Religious Orders*, pp. 222-223. Houghton's fragmentary journal entries also remain in *Letters and Papers*, vol. VIII, 661; reference from Knowles, *Religious Orders*, p. 231. Chauncy also wrote another short account of the martyrdoms in 1539 before his exile, *The History of the Sufferings of Eighteen Carthusians in England, Who Refusing to Take Part in Schism, and to Separate Themselves from the Unity of the Catholic Church, were Cruelly Martyred*, published later under the same name, London, UK: (Burns and Oates Publishers, 1890). This study uses primarily the 1539 edition, as it was not written with the analysis of hindsight and provides the most authentic narrative of events surrounding the English Carthusians during the Reformation.



and perfect self-mortification, a diligent keeper of his cell and silence, always concealing and repressing the grace given him, lest it should be noticed, desiring always to be unknown and deemed worthy of no estimation.”<sup>330</sup> Tudor agents labored intensely to acquire Carthusian support for its religious settlement with little success. Cromwell and the king’s council made several diligent attempts in the early 1530s to get the Carthusians to “preach the word of God” in the charterhouses as well as in large public venues, such as St. Paul’s Cross in London, on the acceptability and forthrightness of the royal supremacy. All these efforts failed to secure a single Carthusian preacher.<sup>331</sup> Additionally, after much effort spent in convincing Prior Houghton along with Priors Robert Lawrence of Beauvale and Augustine Webster of Axholme charterhouses to accept the king’s position as head of the church, the crown turned to alternative means of persuasion, favoring force over coercion. A letter from John Husse to Lord Lisle suggests that Cromwell became so desperate when dealing with the jurors involved with the Carthusians trial he resorted to browbeating and threatening the men into offering a guilty verdict.<sup>332</sup> Chauncy records that Cromwell, “came to them quickly , and by his cruel threats compelled them to deliver their verdict, or rather their false finding in condemnation of our holy Fathers, and to find them guilty of high treason . . .”<sup>333</sup> When the treason verdict was rendered, Henry ordered the execution of these three leaders at Tyburn in London on 4 May 1535, complete with a public spectacle of hanging, disemboweling, and quartering.

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<sup>330</sup> Maurice Chauncy, *The History of the Sufferings of Eighteen Carthusians in England, Who Refusing to Take Part in Schism, and to Separate Themselves from the Unity of the Catholic Church, were Cruelly Martyred*, (1539), reprinted, London, UK: (Burns and Oates Publishers, 1890), p. 2.

<sup>331</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VII, no. 1047, and vol. xi., no. 244.

<sup>332</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VIII, 606; also printed in Thompson, *English Carthusians*, p. 397.

<sup>333</sup> Maurice Chancy, *The History of the Sufferings of the Eighteen Carthusians*, p. 56.

Following these gruesome executions, Cromwell wrote to the king, recommending they not make another highly public scene of the remaining defiant Carthusians, as he feared further public executions might cause unrest in London because of the high esteem the community held for the Carthusians.<sup>334</sup> The Spanish ambassador also wrote in response to this gruesome event with the three priors that a general uproar came over London. “The enormity of the case,” he declared, “compelled me to inform your Majesty [the emperor Charles V] that yesterday three Carthusians, and one monk of the Order of St. Brigit, all men of good and sound doctrine, as well as exemplary life and reputation, were dragged through the streets of this capital to the place of execution, and there put to death for no other cause than their having said and maintained that the Pope was the true chief and sovereign of the universal Christian Church.”<sup>335</sup> The Wriothesley Chronicle describes in detail the violent execution of these four monks and one secular priest, who died because of their defiance of the religious settlement. Yet it also juxtaposes these martyrdoms, conspicuously, against the actions of another priest, John Ferne, who recanted his denial of the Supremacy and “had his pardon delyvered him on the Tower Hill, and so was quitt.”<sup>336</sup> These references suggest that the public trials and executions may have had exactly the opposite effect the government intended. Rather than cowing the remaining monks and displaying royal power to the populace, it only encouraged the resolve of the remaining Carthusians and strengthened their reputation for spiritual excellence among many contemporary observers. As Chauncy records: “it was notorious that they [the three priors] underwent this kind

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<sup>334</sup> Cromwell to Henry, (27 September 1536), *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. XII, 501.

<sup>335</sup> “Eustace Chapuys to the Emperor Charles V, 6 May 1535,” *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish*, vol. v., (I), no. 156.

<sup>336</sup> *A Chronicle of England during the Reigns of the Tudors from A.D. 1485 to 1559*, C. Wriothesley, ed., Camden Society, New Series xi, (London, 1875), pp. 27-28.

of death and punishment, and that this was the cause and occasion, and no other . . . we desired death, but it fled from us, for they sought to overcome us by tiring us out.”<sup>337</sup> A week after these events, the Bishop of Faenza declared that rumors circulated of many “men displeased” throughout the kingdom because of “the cruelty of the King of England to certain religious, as they were of exemplary and holy life”<sup>338</sup> Sir Thomas More echoed his comments in a statement made to his daughter as he witnessed the Carthusians and Reynolds going to their death, proclaiming: “Thes blessed fathers be nowe as cheerfully going to their deathes as bridegrooms to their marriage, wherefore thereby maiste thow see . . . what a greate difference there is between such as have in effecte spent all their days in a straight, hard, penitential and paynefull life religiously, and such as have in the world . . . consumed all theyr tyme in pleasure and ease licentiousslye.”<sup>339</sup>

After all this, still considering the Carthusian conquest of the highest importance, shortly following the execution of the three priors, King Henry himself met with the leading monks of the London charterhouse, hoping his presence might dissuade them from also becoming martyrs. One of them, Sebastian Newgate was a personal friend and spiritual advisor of the king. Not even the intervention of Henry himself affected the zeal of these Carthusians, much to his chagrin.<sup>340</sup> In the face of such stubbornness, a second group of the leading monks Humphrey Middlemore, William Exmew, and Sebastian Newdigate received the same fate as their priors on

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<sup>337</sup> Maurice Chancy, *The History of the Sufferings of the Eighteen Carthusians*, P. 59, 62.

<sup>338</sup> “Bishop of Faenza to M. Ambrogio, 17 May 1535, ”in *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. viii, no. 726.

<sup>339</sup> William Roper, *Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, Knight*, pp. 80-81. Roper was the son-in-law of Sir Thomas Moore and he wrote the biography of Moore after his martyrdom and within living memory of the Reformation events.

<sup>340</sup> Speeches printed in Clifford, *Lady Jane Domer*, pp. 27-32.

19 June 1535, after a last ditch attempt by royal agents and privy councilors failed in securing their acceptance of the Supremacy. Such efforts and high-level involvement confirm that the crown considered the Carthusian support for the Supremacy of great importance. Nevertheless, Cromwell handled the second set of martyrs much differently than the priors, as they did not receive a public trial and their executions took place in secrecy. On the scaffold Houghton garnered much sympathy for his stance and later received a sainthood for his zeal. The crown stifled the later martyrs, not allowing them to make public speeches such as Houghton had, where he stated: “I publicly declare that not through any pertinacity, malice, or rebellious spirit, do I commit this disobedience and denial of the will of our lord the King, but solely through fear of God, lest I should offend His Supreme Majesty; because our holy mother the Church has decreed and determined otherwise than your King and with his Parliament have ordained; wherefore I am bound in conscience and am prepared, and am not confounded, to endure these and all other torments that can be inflicted, rather than go against the doctrine of the Church.”<sup>341</sup> Houghton and Reynolds made speeches professing their loyalty to the king and at the same time demonstrating exceptional personal piety, which both made them spiritual exemplars and garnered communal reverence. The violent spectacle of the priors aroused indignation from the London populace, and many throughout Christendom viewed it as a scandal of the highest magnitude.<sup>342</sup>

Remaining stalwart in their convictions, four more Carthusians of the London house followed in the example of the martyrs on 11 May 1537. Probably owing to the circumstances surrounding the Northern Rising and Pilgrimage of Grace, together the largest revolt in English

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<sup>341</sup> Maurice Chancy, *The History of the Sufferings of the Eighteen Carthusians*, p p. 57-58

<sup>342</sup> Maurice Chancy, *The History of the Sufferings of the Eighteen Carthusians*, pp. 59-60.

history with religion as the chief cause, the Crown charged these four monks with treason and then hanged them, two near the Hull charterhouse in Yorkshire and the other two near Beauvale charterhouse in Nottinghamshire. The pieces of their bodies were displayed upon the walls at York and Nottingham as an example of those who encouraged defiance against the king's supremacy over the church.

During the preliminary phase of suppressing the monasteries in 1535, largely in reaction to rumors of forcible seizure of the institutions and the expulsion of the monks, many commoners took up arms in the massive uprising called the Pilgrimage of Grace.<sup>343</sup> This army of 40,000 came together in 1536 under the leadership of the middling lawyer, Robert Aske. Much of the north of England arose in rebellion, unified in their desire to abolish the changes in traditional religion and halt the suppression of the monasteries.<sup>344</sup> While the rebels did finally get a promise of rectifying the situation from the crown, Henry reneged on his vow and continued the suppression after the rebel army had disbanded. Aske and the principal leaders were rounded up and put on trial for treason.<sup>345</sup> The records of his leadership leave no doubt regarding the sacredness of the religious orders to many of the commoners throughout the north of England.<sup>346</sup> Aske notes, “the abbeys in the north partes gaf great almons to pour men and laudable servyd

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<sup>343</sup> The first Act of Suppression of the lesser monasteries passed through parliament in 1535, mandated that all religious houses with less than twelve practicing monks or nuns must be closed and the property of these institutions would revert to the crown. The second act of suppression in 1539 extended the first act to all the religious houses in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Geoffrey Baskerville, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries*, London, UK: (Phoenix Press, 2002).

<sup>344</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. III, pp. 320-321. See chapter 5 of this dissertation for a full description of the Pilgrimage and other northern rebellions.

<sup>345</sup> Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The Pilgrimage of Grace: The Rebellion that Shook Henry VIII's Throne*, London, UK: (Weidenfeld & Nicholson Publishers, 2002).

<sup>346</sup> Michael L. Bush, *The Pilgrims Complaint: A Study of Popular Thought in the Early Tudor North*, St. Andrews, UK: (Ashgate Publishing, 2009).

God . . . And by occasion of the said suppression the Devyn service of almightie God is much minished, greate nombre of messes unsaid, and the blisshed concecration of the sacrament now not used and showed in thos places, to the distreas of the faith, and sperituall comfort to man soul . . .”<sup>347</sup> Furthermore, the western uprising in 1549, nearly ten years after the final suppression, were more discriminatory regarding what abbeys should be restored, as they wanted only abbeys with spiritual exceptionalism revived: “we wyll that the halfe parte of the Abbey lands and Chauntrye lands . . . be geven again to two places . . . and there to be established a place for devout persons, which shall pray for the king and the common weath . . .”<sup>348</sup> The Pilgrimage of Grace rebels, in this same vein, while generally desiring the seized abbeys restored, specifically asked “to have the Freres Observauntes restored uton ther houses agayn.”<sup>349</sup> They named no other order. This suggests that many members of the late medieval social strata perceived certain religious orders as more distinguished than others, as they singled out especially holy groups whose presence they were willing to fight for and clearly valued among their communities.<sup>350</sup>

Following the conclusion of the northern risings and considering his position secure, Cromwell moved against the remaining Carthusians in the London Charterhouse on 29 May 1537. And of these twenty monks and eighteen *conversi*, eight still refused the Oath of

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<sup>347</sup> “The Examination of Robert Aske,” (April 1537), in *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xii, no. 900.

<sup>348</sup> “The Demands of the Western Rebels,” (1549), as printed in *Tudor Rebellions*, Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch, eds., 5<sup>th</sup> edition, London, UK: (Pearson-Longman, 2008), p. 152.

<sup>349</sup> “Copie of the articles to the Lordes of the King’s Cownsell at our coming to Pontefract,” 4 December 1536, in *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. XI, no. 1246.

<sup>350</sup> It remains paradoxical that large swathes of the northern populace were willing to fight to keep their monasteries, yet the monks themselves remained apathetic at best toward the rebellion. Often they seemed downright hostile toward it. Historians have suggested that the monks had little to gain from joining the rebellion and everything to lose at a time already pregnant with royal hostility toward the religious orders. Knowles, *Religious Orders*, pp. 326-327.

Supremacy. These last of the Carthusian recalcitrant Cromwell sent to Newgate Prison where they died of starvation. What became of the remaining *conversi* little is known other than many also went with the monks into prison.<sup>351</sup> This series of martyrdoms has inspired impassioned narratives as well as much scrutiny. Perhaps the greatest impact of these martyrdoms proved their legacy, which showed the strict Carthusian lifestyle prepared these monks, more than any other order, to face death rather than compromise their spiritual integrity. Such events confirmed, but also enhanced the reputation of the Carthusians as contemporary sources and the subsequent historiography testify.

Beyond London, the public outcry and controversy of the first Carthusian martyrs caused the authorities to shift their approach toward the few remaining monks that would not accept the supremacy. The government moved to stifle these obstinate brothers in seclusion instead of executing them publicly, as proved the case with the last Carthusians who were starved to death in Newgate Prison. An anonymous Augustine monk at Canterbury noted in his chronicle of the Reformation, “The same yeres also many Cartulienses suffered deth for disobedience towards the Kinges majesty.”<sup>352</sup> This observation suggests that the Carthusian reputation for unyielding devotion to their ideals had taken root in the minds of observers beyond London. At Sheen, for example, where very little evidence remains of the last years of the charterhouse, historian Neil Beckett has undertaken an exhaustive study of the charterhouse, and argues strongly that contrary to previous assessments that confined the Carthusian resolve largely to the London

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<sup>351</sup> For a fuller description of the events see: E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England*, pp. 379-410 or Knowles, *Religious Orders*, pp. 222-240.

<sup>352</sup> “Chronicle of the Years 1532-1537, Written by a Monk of St. Augustine’s, Canterbury,” in *Narratives of the Days of Reformation*, J.G. Nichols, ed., lxxvii, (Camden Society, 1859), p. 282. *Chronicle of the Grey friars of London*, J.G. Nichols, ed., lxxiii, London, UK: (Camden Society, 1852), p. xxvi. Also available online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/camden-record-soc/vol53/pp29-53>. The Grey Friars Chronicle also notes many Carthusian deaths.

house, the “Sheen monks were ready to suffer as the London monks did, but discovered that there was not the need – even that there was not the opportunity – to do so.”<sup>353</sup> For the crown and its ministers had no desire to create further martyrs. Similarly, the commissioner Richard London, stated that the acting leader of Beauvale Chapterhouse, after witnessing the death of its prior and enduring extreme pressures from the highest levels, notified the authorities that his monks would “surendre straightaway.”<sup>354</sup> While this example does not maintain the stalwart image of the London martyrs, it does not necessarily degrade the reputation of the order on the whole. As this monastery’s prior had already become a martyr in the first executions, and the house held out for over two years, enduring strong pressure and severe treatment from royal agents during this time. Only under great duress and in hopelessness did the monks surrender their house and then went into exile.<sup>355</sup>

Following the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536-1539 the memory of the Carthusians martyrs only increased the reputation of the order during its last years. It was John Foxe, the famous Protestant martyrologist, whom mentioned several times, almost grudgingly, in his great work *Acts and Monuments* the remembrance surrounding the Carthusian executions: “they held to their popish idolatry to the last,” and by doing so, “stirred up dissention.”<sup>356</sup> Furthermore, “of these worthies,” he noted, “many doth commend them so highly, especially the

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<sup>353</sup> Neil Beckett, “Sheen Charterhouse: From its Foundation to its Dissolution,” unpublished D.Phil. thesis, (Oxford University, 1992), p. 175.

<sup>354</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. XIV, 1321. For many other examples of Carthusian compliance with royal demands see: Thompson, *English Carthusians*, pp. 436-474.

<sup>355</sup> *Chronicle of the Grey friars of London*, J.G. Nichols, ed., lxiii, (Camden Society, 1852). Also available online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/camden-record-soc/vol53/pp29-53>. Also see: *A Chronicle of England during the Reigns of the Tudors from A.D. 1485 to 1559*, C. Wriothesley, ed., Camden Society, New Series xi, (London, 1875).

<sup>356</sup> John Foxe, *Acts & Monuments*, vol. v., pp. 439.



three priors . . . so dignified with the pretended title of martyrs.”<sup>357</sup> Such testimony from the hand of a hostile critic offers much insight into the general perception and memory of the Carthusians several decades after these events transpired. Foxe clearly focused upon the effects of the martyrdoms, especially the priors, but he further noted that these executions generated a backlash from the populace. He implied that a significant number of individuals raised an outcry over the executions of the Carthusians because of their “popish idolatry,” which a more objective writer might have called deep and sincere devotion to traditional religion. Writing contemporaneously with Foxe, the Elizabethan cleric Nicholas Harpsfield perhaps described the perception of the Carthusians most accurately when he wrote: “The Carthusians, I say, men of so singular integrity and virtue, men of so hard and so penitential and of so spiritual and so contemplative life, that they might seem rather angels appearing in men's bodies than men.”<sup>358</sup>

In sum, this suggests for the most part Carthusians since the great expansion of their order in the British Isles from 1370-1414, became and remained one of the most revered of the monastic orders. These monks, while failing in absolute observance to its founding principles, such as allowing non-Carthusians burial within their houses, granting residence to certain individuals, and performing liturgical services for particular patrons, nonetheless did maintain a hermetic existence, austere living conditions, and impeccable internal discipline. To this exceedingly strict and rugged lifestyle many other orders failed to imitate; and former Carthusians later also testified to this strictness. Last, the famous martyrdoms occurring mostly from the London charterhouse, but supported by the brethren from the other houses as well as some other monks of differing orders, cemented this long-held reputation of the Carthusians in

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<sup>357</sup> John Foxe, *Acts & Monuments*, vol. v., pp. 101.

<sup>358</sup> William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, (London, 1575), p. 210.

the memories of contemporary observers and later historians. For when the king made these quasi-hermits choose between their spiritual integrity or torture and death, in large numbers they chose the latter. Regarding such deaths even John Foxe admitted the order maintained its stalwart reputation and many of the populace found these men praiseworthy. Thus, the events of the Reformation and suppression of the monasteries both enhanced and confirmed the Carthusian reputation for devotional excellence and maintaining the standards of late medieval spiritual idealism.

## Chapter V

### Spiritual Idealism During the Dissolution of the Monasteries

Beginning in 1529 King Henry VIII called upon Parliament to assist him in rejecting the powers of the papacy within his realm, which crucially allowed him to complete his divorce proceedings with Katherine of Aragon. The legislature ultimately nullified the pope's authority, addressed grievances against the clergy, and granted the king unprecedented powers over the church. Using this new ecclesiastical authority contained within the *Act of Supremacy*, Henry and his ministers saw an opportunity to simultaneously achieve monastic reforms and abate the crown's burgeoning debts. Late in 1534 royal commissioners began comprehensive visitations of church properties throughout England and Wales. They compiled this financial assessment into the six-volume collection known as *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, completed by the summer of 1535. In addition to this valuation report, royal agents in the fall of the same year also investigated monastic behavior and recorded their discoveries into a dossier called the *Compendium Compertorum*. It vividly illustrated the lacking moral conduct of many monks, nuns, and entire religious communities. This chapter examines the impact of the anti-clerical statutes in conjunction with the impressions of these royal agents, highlighting the overt as well as the underlying concepts of spiritual idealism portrayed in these documents. It further investigates how outrage generated from these findings regarding the immorality and lack of holiness among monastics and clergy heavily influenced the Henrician religious settlement and encouraged the dissolution of the religious houses between 1536-1539.

Early in 1529 King Henry sent out writs summoning 310 men of varying religious ideologies to assemble in Parliament at London for the purposes of addressing longstanding

ecclesiastical abuses against royal authority. Two hundred and thirty-six burgesses and 74 knights of the shire represented the commons of England and Wales in the commons of parliament. Together with the House of Lords, they expressed the will of the lay populace regarding the need for reforms within the church.<sup>359</sup> While Tudor parliaments hardly proved egalitarian or democratic bodies, within the context of the late Middle Ages they do provide an excellent sampling of opinions concerning the church and monasticism at the dawn of the Reformation. The commons and king committed to a program of systemic reform for the church. Hostility toward the clergy and the perception of their lapsed spiritual ideals drove the Reformation movement. J.J. Scarisbrick, the eminent Tudor historian, saw an anticlerical mood behind many of the statutes between 1529-1536, which he described as “a many-headed hydra . . . which could range from hostility to the local parson and resentment of tithes, of the workings of the ecclesiastical courts and of frivolous excommunications, etc., to a program of wholesale dispossession of the ‘abbey-lubbers’ and lordly bishops – a policy often innocent of much philosophical or theological implication.” Some members of the Reformation Parliament, he points out, “argued that the Church needed radical purging, that society could no longer carry this uneconomic burden, this vast institution which absorbed so much manpower, sterilized so much wealth, took so much and gave back so little.”<sup>360</sup> In the wake of Martin Luther,

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<sup>359</sup> Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Reformation Parliament 1529-1536*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1970); J. Patrick Coby, *Henry VIII and the Reformation Parliament*, New York, NY: (W.W. Norton, 2005).

<sup>360</sup> J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, Berkeley, CA: (University of California Press, 1968), pp. 6-8. Anticlericalism remains a complex historical phenomenon that historians have probed, but rarely achieved consensus upon. Christopher Haigh, “Anticlericalism and the English Reformation”, in *The English Reformation Revised*, ed. Christopher Haigh, pp. 56-75; David Loades, “Anticlericalism in the Church of England Before 1558: An ‘Eating Canker’?”, in *Anticlericalism in Britain 1500-1914*, eds. Nigel Aston & Matthew Cragor, (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishers, 2001), pp. 1-18; Christopher Haigh, “Anticlericalism and Clericalism, 1580-1640”, in *Anticlericalism in Britain 1500-1914*, eds. Nigel Aston & Matthew Cragor, (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishers, 2001), pp. 18-42; Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*.

Reformation machinations abounded throughout England from the piecemeal programs of Erasmus, John Colet, and Thomas More to the sweeping new visions of Thomas Cromwell and William Tyndale. It was within this atmosphere that the Reformation Parliament began its work.<sup>361</sup>

#### The Anticlerical Statutes & The Reformation Parliament, 1529-1535

Amid the swelling tides of religious change, Parliament received formal grievances from the laity against clergymen who neglected their parochial duties through absenteeism (non-presence within a parish or diocese), pluralism (holding multiple parish beneficed livings), and engagement in religious corporatism (exploitation or misuse of the clerical office for personal monetary gain). These complaints had at their core an anger directed at clerical neglect of spiritual and administrative duties along with egregious sums charged for death duties and probate. For instance, several knights and London merchants introduced six specific grievances to the House of Commons in 1529 concerning clerical abuses of the benefice system.<sup>362</sup> Citing habitual priestly absenteeism from parishes, hence spiritual neglect, these reformers proposed using secular legal channels to address clerical abuses directly and avoid altogether the traditional network of convocation or diocesan synods. Henry put his full support behind the effort, which quickly became law.<sup>363</sup> The statute forced rectors to become spiritual pastors, not absentee commercial landlords, at least in theory. Royal meddling in ecclesiastical affairs was

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<sup>361</sup> Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation*.

<sup>362</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (21 Henry VIII, c. 13), vol. 3, pp. 294-295; also see: Haigh, "Anticlericalism and the English Reformation", in *The English Reformation Revised*, ed. Christopher Haigh, p. 60.

<sup>363</sup> S.E. Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament, 1529-1536*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 81-89, 118-126, 130.

not new in English history. What differed significantly from the past proved the magnitude of secular intrusions into ancient ecclesiastical rights, authority, and powers beginning in 1529.

Some historians have questioned the motivations behind the actions of the crown and Reformation Parliament, as many exceptions and loopholes remained concerning pluralism and absenteeism of the beneficed clergy.<sup>364</sup> Rather than providing largescale reform to purported systemic problems, the legislation did little more than funnel the fees for absenteeism into royal instead of ecclesiastical coffers. The new law still let laymen lease the tithe and advowson (appointment of the curate) rights of benefices from rectors, who in return received fixed annual payments, allowing them to live elsewhere and enjoy their pensions for no spiritual care. These were not insignificant sums, as rectories controlled an immense amount of wealth in 1529 with parish glebe lands producing nearly one third of the agricultural produce in England. Rectors then received a 10% tithe-tax from all crops and livestock in parish.<sup>365</sup> The legislation required rectors to reside within their parish as well as perform pastoral duties, and it further strictly forbade them from leasing their parish to other clergy, unless they held a special license.<sup>366</sup> Enforcement, however, came through local parishioners supervising their priests. From the years

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<sup>364</sup> Royalty could hold an unspecified number of parishes under lease: archbishops could have eight; dukes six, with each ducal chaplain controlling two parishes himself, which effectively allowed aristocrats to control twelve parish rectories; each bishop could hold six benefices; any university degree holder could hold two parishes; relatives of titled peers could hold multiple benefices; the archbishops and king could issue licenses for multiple benefice holders under any circumstance, providing the applicant paid an annual fee. Thus, many ways existed for clerics to control more than a single parish. The statute completely failed to curtail pluralism's greatest offenders, and merely made it a profitable venture for the Crown. Palmer, *Selling the Church*, pp. 162-164.

<sup>365</sup> In most instances, rectors had responsibly appointed bailiffs to manage their estates, who also served the rural parishioners spiritual needs. When compared with continental clerical abuses, English parishioners enjoyed excellent spiritual care. Italian and French royalty commonly held several archbishoprics, bishoprics, and abbeys simultaneously. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey became the first English bishop to ever hold multiple sees in unison. Furthermore, the Marquis of Dorset, an egregious landlord, held numerous benefices throughout the North of the kingdom. Abuses clearly existed in the realm, but remained far less serious than across the channel. Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, pp. 48-49, 58-59.

<sup>366</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (21 Henry VIII, c. 13, article 9), vol. 3, p. 293. Clerics could lease out their benefice to pursue a degree at the university or if their health necessitated it.

1531-1536, the London Court of the Exchequer issued 222 citations against priests that violated the 1529 statute. Only 51 of these cases went to trial, and thirteen received convictions.<sup>367</sup> One case in the diocese of Winchester shows locals employing the legislation to ameliorate a conflict with their priest. William Lusher a parishioner at Puttenham, Surrey, found himself before the consistory court for attacking his vicar, George Maychell. Lusher issued the threat that if “he did not say and minister divine service in his cure there, that they would by the order of the law move him out . . .” While Lusher or the parishioners had no legal right to deprive Maychell of his office or living, they proved keenly aware of the legal developments in London and used the circumstances to encourage “good relygon and proper dyvine services.”<sup>368</sup>

Moreover, in the huge diocese of Lincoln, approximately 23 percent of the parishes reported their rector as an absentee from the years 1517-1531.<sup>369</sup> Nevertheless, many provided a suitable replacement curate or bailiff to discharge their duties during absences, which was legal until 1530 without royal or archiepiscopal permission.<sup>370</sup> Most Lincoln parishioners seemed content with their situation as the churchwardens, popularly elected officials, made few formal complaints when they had ample opportunity during annual visitations of the diocese during the

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<sup>367</sup> Public Record Office: E13. Plea rolls of the exchequer of pleas, EI159/310, ms. 9 (Hilary); EI159/313, ms. 10 (Trinity); EI159/313, ms. 8 (Trinity); EI159/310, ms. 9 (Hilary); EI159/314, ms. 12d (Easter); EI159/314, ms. 19 (Trinity); EI159/314, ms. 21, (Trinity); EI159/314, ms. 26 (Michaelmas); EI159/314, ms. 27 (Michaelmas); EI159/314, ms. 20, (Michaelmas); EI159/314, ms. 16d, (Michaelmas); See also Robert C. Palmer, *Selling the Church, the English Parish in Law, Commerce, and Religion, 1350-1550*, Chapel Hill, NC: (Chapel Hill University Press, 2002), pp. 170-181.

<sup>368</sup> Public Record Office, STAC 2/17/86, as quoted in Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*.

<sup>369</sup> *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln 1517-1531*, vol. 1, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson, (Lincoln, UK: Lincoln Record Society, 1930), pp. 82, 126; The number of priests present in the archdeaconries of Bedford during a visitation were recorded at 14.8% nonresident, Buckingham, 25%, Lincoln 19.6%, Huntingdon, 22%, Stowe, 35%, and Oxford, 35%.

<sup>370</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (21 Henry VIII, c. 13, article 9), vol. 3, pp. 293-294.

decade preceding the Reformation Parliament.<sup>371</sup> Relatively few denunciations of clerical abuses actually came to fruition in a legal sense within the surviving documentation. Thirteen convictions of absenteeism and commercialism from London parishes and sparse complaints in the massive diocese of Lincoln, hardly suggests widespread clerical abuse or discontentment of parishioners against churchmen. These figures could also indicate, however, that the many loopholes in the law prevented successful prosecution and promoted indifference to litigation. The use of temporal legal channels and local awareness of larger political developments shows many late medieval observers remained perceptive of the Reformation mood and its developments. Along with the social impact, these prohibitions against absenteeism, pluralism, and economic exploitation successfully began a secular assault upon traditional ecclesiastical authority.

The king wasted little time in pressing his advantage with strong support within parliament for transforming the hierarchy and administrative structure of the English church. Work began with reissuing the ancient statute of *premunire*, which a previous legislative session had originated in the mid-fourteenth century during Edward III's reign. This act confirmed the supremacy of the royal courts and the king's prerogative powers over the pope regarding the nomination of bishops, and also forbade legal appeals to any authority outside of the kingdom.<sup>372</sup> The Henrician statute of *premunire* added and explicitly outlined that any person who attempted to undermine royal law through appeals to papal or ecclesiastical courts was guilty of treason.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Margaret Bowker, "Henrician Reformation and the Parish Clergy", in *The English Reformation Revised*, ed. Christopher Haigh, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 89-91.

<sup>372</sup> *Statutes of the Realm of England*, (27 Edward III, c. 2-3), vol. 1, eds. T.E. Tomlins and W.E. Taunton, (Burlington, CA: Tanner Richie Publishers, 2007), pp. 334-339.

<sup>373</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (21 Henry VIII, c. 25), vol. 3, p. 316.



Charging the entire clerical estate with *premunire* shortly after the passage of the act, the crown agreed to grant a pardon for a massive payment of £100,000 from the archiepiscopal province of Canterbury and £18,840 from York.<sup>374</sup> Such restraint of traditional Roman authority proved useful when the king pressed his divorce claims, and subsequently dismantled the medieval church structure and hierarchy.

During March 1532, the commons issued the *Supplication Against the Ordinaries* provision, granting the king sole authority to summon the convocation of the clergy, name the president of each session, approve the agenda, and all recommendations of the assembly required the royal assent before becoming canons of the church.<sup>375</sup> Convocation stubbornly attempted to maintain its independence from royal suzerainty, but after serious intimidation from Henry and in no doubt of the common's resolve, the body surrendered its governance to the king on 15 May 1532, which was known as the *Submission of the Clergy* proclamation.<sup>376</sup> Perhaps ironically, the crown took such action at a time when the convocation had already undertaken aggressive internal reforms, insisting upon priestly residence within parishes, increasing educational requirements, strengthening penalties against immorality, and mandating scriptural study, which attempted to put the clergy more in line with the spiritual idealism of the age.<sup>377</sup> Such swift and successful actions of the crown confirm the general perception of the clerical estate as failing to

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<sup>374</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (22 Henry VIII, c. 15, 1530-1531), vol. 3, pp. 334-338. The reason for the disparity in sums stemmed from vastly larger concentration of wealth in the southern archdiocese than the north.

<sup>375</sup> "Commons Supplication against the Ordinaries, May 1532," *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. 1, no. 22.

<sup>376</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (25 Henry VIII, c. 19, 1533-1534), vol. 3, pp. 460-462.

<sup>377</sup> "Proceedings of Convocation, November 1529," *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. 4, no. 6047

conform to the traditional image of late medieval spiritual idealism, even if hard evidence at the local level did not bear this out.

Additionally, in the spring of 1533, Parliament passed the *Act in Restraint of Appeals*, forbidding any appeal from an episcopal court to authorities outside of England. While this act seemingly did little more than the statute of *premunire*, it famously declared, “this realm of England is an empire . . . governed by one Supreme Head and King . . . unto whom a body politic, compact of all sorts and degrees of people, divided in terms, and by names of spirituality and temporality, be bounden and owe to bear, next to God, a natural and humble obedience.”<sup>378</sup> This declaration went beyond the anticlerical statutes of *Provisors* and *Premunire*, as these ancient laws made no mention of causes of matrimony, divorce, and rights of tithe or testamentary, which remained essential in blocking any appeal of Queen Katherine to Rome following the annulment pronouncement of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer on 23 May 1533.<sup>379</sup> It further paved the way for the royal seizure of ecclesiastical revenue sources and tighter control of the English church.

While parliament debated the *Supplication Against the Ordinaries* in 1532, it also proceeded against papal monetary interests, passing the *Conditional Restraint of Annates*. It declared that the customary one-third of the diocesan income in the first year that was sent to Rome upon the consecration of a new bishop should instead total only 5% of the income.<sup>380</sup> This proved little more royal brinkmanship against Rome to secure the Henry’s candidate, Thomas

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<sup>378</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (24 Henry VIII, c. 12), vol. 3, pp. 427-429.

<sup>379</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (25 Henry VIII, c. 22, 1533-1534), vol. 3, pp. 471-474. While Archbishop Cranmer pronounced the marriage with Catherine annulled and Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn legal before the birth of Elizabeth, such actions did not receive full statutory validation until nearly a year later with the *Act for the Establishing of the King’s Succession*.

<sup>380</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (23 Henry VIII, 5, 1530-1531), vol. 20, pp. 385-388.

Cranmer as archbishop of Canterbury, who shortly after the passage of act received his office with papal blessing. Henry directed his agents at the Vatican to inform the pope of his constant “efforts to resist the importunity of our people from passing the statute.”<sup>381</sup> In a diplomatic dance Henry placed himself in the position of being the only check on parliament dissolving significant papal revenues, amounting to economic blackmail. The act itself proved highly unpopular even with the bishops and abbots, who had personally suffered from paying annates, and likely the commons feared economic and spiritual reprisals from the pope as well as Catholic trading partners. Upon getting his candidate confirmed as archbishop, the king quickly backed down and annulled the act.

Nonetheless, after securing his divorce with Katherine, Henry and Cromwell urged parliament in 1534 to move against the last vestiges of papal authority and revenue in England and Wales. The legislature, sensing the king had taken the Reformation movement past the point of no return, issued the *Act in Absolute Restraint of Annates* as well as the *Act Forbidding Papal Dispensations and Payment of Peter’s Pence*. Between these acts, parliament deprived Rome of all payments, declared future canons of the church must be issued by the convocation under the direction of the archbishop of Canterbury, forbade English monks or clerics to accept any papal bulls or licenses, and again confirmed the already customary practice of the king alone nominating candidates for bishop within cathedral chapter elections.<sup>382</sup> Finally, in 1534 parliament granted Henry absolute authority over the church with the *Act of Supremacy*. It allowed the king to govern the church in a similar fashion as parliament, and required all clerics

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<sup>381</sup> As cited in J. Patrick Coby, *Henry VIII and the Reformation Parliament*, p. 153.

<sup>382</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (25 Henry VIII, c. 20 & 21), vol. 3, pp. 462-471.

and gentlemen to swear an oath stating they accepted the king as supreme head of the church in England.<sup>383</sup>

Historians have largely understood the actions of the Reformation Parliament as initially part of the larger movement of religious change throughout Europe. Yet after the passage of the anticlerical statutes in 1529, some in parliament, and certainly the crown, saw an opportunity to expand secular power over the ecclesiastical estate amid Reformation euphoria, which the chronicler Edward Hall noted was “to the great rejoicing of the lay people and to the great displeasure of the spiritual persones.”<sup>384</sup> They seized the moment, usurping the church of many of its traditional customs and powers.<sup>385</sup> While this interpretation proves accurate, the crown could never have accomplished such a sweeping power grab without the support of the commons, along with a pervasive general perception of the church and clergy as abusive, impious, and in great need of compulsory reform from an external force.

A strictly political interpretation of events also deemphasizes the important element of spiritual idealism at the core of these legislative acts. Within the numerous Reformation statutes, the commons continually sought to limit the ability of the clergy, especially the ordinaries, from participating in religious corporatism, and hence neglecting the spiritual ideals of personal piety, austerity, and idyllic poverty for temporal gains. As Hall opined, “these things before this time might in nowise be touched nor talked of by no man except he would be made an heritike, or lese

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<sup>383</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (26 Henry VIII, c. 1), vol. 3, p. 492.

<sup>384</sup> Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle: Containing the History of England During the Reign of Henry the Fourth and the Succeeding Monarchs, to the End of Henry the Eighth, in which are Particularly Described the Manners and Customs of those Periods, 1548*, London, UK: (J. Johnson Printing, 1809), pp. 765-766.

<sup>385</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, pp. 113-122; Elton, *Policy and Police*, pp. 217-235; David Loades, *Henry VIII Court, Church, and Conflict*, Richmond, UK: (National Archives, 2007), pp. 88-100, 112-116; J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, p. 299; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 381.

al that he had, for the bishops were chauncelors, and had all the rule about the king, so that no man durst once presume to attempt any thing contrary to their profit or commoditie. But now when God had illumined the eies of the kyng, and that ther subtell doings was once espied: then men began charitably to desire a reformation.”<sup>386</sup> Testifying to this feeling, the law prohibiting clerical probate fees states: “the ordinaries did then promise to reform and amend their oppressions and extortions . . . these unlawful exactions were not reformed nor amended but greatly augmented and increased, against right and justice, and to the great impoverishment of the King’s subjects.”<sup>387</sup> Furthermore, it highlighted general displeasure of the populace regarding the religious corporatism involved with mortuary fees. Thus parliament prohibited the clergy from taking mortuary payments from the poor, children, widows, or those that had the misfortune to die outside of their home parish: “there has been much . . . complaining that the greatness and value of the [mortuaries] has been excessive to the poor people and other persons of this realm.”<sup>388</sup> Additionally, in the act against pluralism and absenteeism the legislature put intense pressure upon the clergy to avoid enriching themselves at the expense of pastoral care: “if any person having one benefice with cure of souls, . . . accept and take any other benefice with cure of souls . . . after such possession had thereof, the first benefice shall be adjudged in the law to be void.” Furthermore, “And that if any person . . . obtain at the Court of Rome or elsewhere any license to receive and take any more benefices with cure than is above limited, such person shall incur the danger, pain, and penalty of £20 and also lose the whole profit of every such benefice he receives.”<sup>389</sup> Throughout the sessions of the Reformation Parliament,

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<sup>386</sup> Edward Hall, *Hall’s Chronicle*, pp. 765-766.

<sup>387</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (21 Henry VIII, 5, 1529), vol. 3, pp. 285-288.

<sup>388</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (21 Henry VIII, 6, 1529), vol. 3, pp. 288-289.

reformers and traditionalists alike stressed the need of the clergy to refocus their energy on spiritual duties. Through secular channels they sought to reform the institutional church that had largely failed to align with contemporary understandings of holiness and spiritual idealism.<sup>390</sup> This prevailing perception allowed the crown to acquire many of the powers and authority of the medieval church.

Though these busy legislative sessions brazenly confirmed the supremacy of royal authority over ecclesiastical affairs at the height of the Henrician Reformation struggle, they largely dealt with clerical and administrative reforms, not the appropriation of ecclesiastical revenues to the crown.<sup>391</sup> Modern research has questioned the motivations and personalities behind the shift from a reform agenda into the crown's crusade for the acquisition of vast portions of church wealth after 1534. The current historical consensus cites the clever plans of Thomas Cromwell to bolster treasury revenues and also enhance royal power as the primary causes of the strategic revision.<sup>392</sup> For the theological adjustments of the church proved far less radical than the administrative and hierarchal transformations. Henry seemed very content with Catholic theology as his doctrinal manifesto the *Act of Six Articles* confirms, so long as he was pope in all but name and likewise benefited from the formerly papal revenues.<sup>393</sup> Cromwell

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<sup>389</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (21 Henry VIII, 13, 1529), vol. 3, pp. 292-296.

<sup>390</sup> Claire Cross, *Church and People England 1450-1660*, second edition, Oxford, UK: (Blackwell Publishers, 1999), pp. 49-53.

<sup>391</sup> Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Reformation Parliament 1529-1536*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1970); J. Patrick Coby, *Henry VIII and the Reformation Parliament*, New York, NY: (W.W. Norton, 2005).

<sup>392</sup> G.R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1967). Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation*, pp. 215-219. While some have questioned Elton's analysis of Cromwell's systemic administrative reforms, attempts to discredit his work have remained largely unsuccessful. For a full account of this debate and its historiographical importance see: Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation*, pp. 131-139.

being more Protestant and Machiavellian than his master, had long seen an opportunity to secure royal finances through the exploitation of clerical wealth. Due to massive expenditures upon Henry's French wars, the chief minister invoked the *Annexing First Fruits and Tenths to the Crown* clause within the *Suspension of Annates Act*. This severed the remaining fiduciary responsibilities of the English church from Rome and appropriated the payments to the crown.<sup>394</sup> Only a few years prior in 1532 parliament had suspended these payments to Rome, and described the sums as "so intolerable a burden. . . unreasonable and uncharitable," causing "universal damage, prejudice, and impoverishment of this realm."<sup>395</sup> Whereas when the fees were instead given to the king, reformers made no such cries of egregiousness. It simply became an administrative matter for all newly installed clergy, monastic or ordinary, to purchase a royal license. They then, instead of paying annates once per episcopate to Rome, paid 10% of their income on all benefices to Henry, annually.<sup>396</sup> Thus, not only the grandest prelate but also then the country parson came to shoulder a much heavier financial burden under the king than the pope, which totaled nearly £40,000 per year added to the royal accounts.<sup>397</sup>

Once the crown had appropriated all papal revenues from the secular clergy, it quickly looked upon the monasteries as another vast and yet untapped source of wealth. On the recommendation Cromwell, who had long denounced monasticism as "a pious fraud, founded

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<sup>393</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (31 Henry VIII, c.13), vol. 3, pp. 733-739. The act, which was vigorously debated in parliament and convocation, confirmed traditional interpretations of church doctrines. It affirmed transubstantiation, mandated clerical celibacy, required the laity only take communion in one kind (the wafer only), validated masses for the dead (doctrine of purgatory), and argued that auricular confession to a priest remained necessary for individual salvation. These positions proved a crushing defeat to the evangelical Protestant faction of Henry's court. Nevertheless, the theological implications of removing papal authority from the church were not insignificant.

<sup>394</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (25 Henry VIII, c. 20 & 21), vol. 3, pp. 462-471.

<sup>395</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (23 Henry VIII, 5, 1530-1531), vol. 20, pp. 385-388.

<sup>396</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (23 Henry VIII, 5, 1530-1531), vol. 20, pp. 462.

<sup>397</sup> J. Patrick Coby, *Henry VIII and the Reformation Parliament*, London, UK: (W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 156.

upon the false doctrine of purgatory,” the king encouraged parliament to dissolve many of the lesser monastic houses throughout England and Wales.<sup>398</sup> He did this under the auspices of a reform effort designed for the betterment of religion, which also had the secondary effect of greatly enhancing his personal fiscal position. When the first *Act of Suppression* became statute in March of 1536, nearly 620 monasteries dotted the English and Welsh landscapes, filled with approximately 9,000 monks and nuns. This legislation mandated the closure of any religious house with a yearly income below £200 or fewer than 12 professed monks in residence.<sup>399</sup> Yet it protected the larger monasteries from closure, citing their ability to maintain standards of spiritual idealism. Almost half of these smaller, but ancient institutions did not have a sufficient endowment to generate this figure. The government encouraged beliefs in the lechery and depravity of unsupervised monastic houses, and quickly the perception of ubiquitous failure among the English religious orders became accepted wisdom in London, as the preamble of the statute confirms: “Forasmuch as manifest sin, vicious, carnal, and abominable living, is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys, priories, and other religious houses of monks, chanons, and nuns,” who “spoil destroy, consume, and utterly waste as well their churches [and] monasteries . . . to the high displeasure of Almighty God, slander of good religion, and to the great infamy of the King’s Highness and the realm.”<sup>400</sup> Upon the closure of the lesser religious houses the physical property and lands reverted to the crown once royal agents determined the valuation. The crown gave the monks the option of transferring to larger

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<sup>398</sup> Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 103.

<sup>399</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (27 Henry VIII, c. 57, 1535-1536) vol. III, pp. 575-578.

<sup>400</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (27 Henry VIII, c. 57, 1535-1536) vol. III, pp. 575-578.



houses of their order or joining the ranks of the secular clergy.<sup>401</sup> To appropriate such large swathes of territory spread across the kingdom, parliament created the court of augmentations, existing from 1536-1547.<sup>402</sup> While the king did allow some of the confiscated lands to take on renewed ecclesiastical functions, such as parish churches, the court sold the bulk to wealthy, secular landowners.<sup>403</sup>

The process of dissolution proved largely the creation of Thomas Cromwell, with some adjustments in tactics made by the king himself, but it was not without precedent.<sup>404</sup> Attempts to reform the smaller monasteries had been on Henry's mind since much earlier, however, when Wolsey directed his government. The cardinal-archbishop became papal *legatus-a-latere* in 1518, and endeavored to reform all the religious houses in England. Ordering visitations and issuing a compendium of statutes on proper monastic behavior and observance he vowed to enforce, Wolsey determined that in 29 smaller monasteries, "neither God was served, nor religion kept." He then closed these houses and amalgamated the monks into larger houses of their particular orders from 1524 until his dismissal in 1529.<sup>405</sup> Even as late as 1529 the king still sought papal bulls to amend the monastic situation: "Let the cause be the conservation of

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<sup>401</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, pp. 309-312.

<sup>402</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (27 Henry VIII, c. 25, 1535-1536) vol. III, pp. 569-574.

<sup>403</sup> Geoffrey Baskerville, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries*, pp. 144-146.

<sup>404</sup> The Spanish ambassador, Chapuys, noted some disagreement between the king and Cromwell regarding the pace of the dissolution. Cromwell preferred a more gradual effort, counseling a slow and methodological effort. Whereas Henry, perfectly in character, wanted immediate gratification of his desires for quick bullion. The London gentleman George Wyatt also recounted the differing policies of minister and king. Certainly, David Knowles considered Cromwell to be entirely to blame for the dissolution, but further research and new sources have suggested that Cromwell preferred a course of reform, not total dissolution. *Calendar of Letters and Papers, Spanish*, vol. 5, parts 1 & 2, pp. 83-84; *The Papers of George Wyatt, Esquire*, David M. Loades, ed., Camden Society, vol. 5, London, UK: (Royal Historical Society, 1968), p. 159; David Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, pp. 269-370, 303.

<sup>405</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. III, pp. 158-163.

religion, which cannot be observed except in communities of a sufficient number, individuals scattered in small monasteries bringing nothing but discredit upon religion. Let the Cardinals have a commission to unite, at their discretion, those monasteries which cannot support twelve religious out of their fruits, and make one perfect out of several imperfect.”<sup>406</sup> Yet with the fall of Wolsey and Thomas More and worsening relations with Rome, Cromwell, now chief minister, formulated a propaganda campaign and shrewd strategy that convinced many to stand aside while the crown seized the entire landed wealth of English and Welsh monasticism in just a few short years.<sup>407</sup>

Since the eleventh century certain strict monastic orders received exempt status from regular diocesan oversight from the bishops, and the papacy granted these orders, such as the Cistercians, Carthusians, and Premonstratensians, the right of self-visitation through general and provincial chapters. Hence from an early time, some orders enjoyed a privileged status on account of their spiritual exceptionalism. Nonetheless, virtually all abbeys and Benedictine monasteries, among others, did not enjoy this exempt status at the time of the Reformation. Protocol for the visitation of these houses allowed the bishop or his designee to investigate and then correct individual monasteries. Visitation originated with a set of questions derived from regional ecclesiastical customs and canon law. Following the visitation, the prelate could then issue injunctions designed for the administrative reform or moral rectitude of monks and nuns, or whole religious houses. During the laborious legislative months of 1534, the crown employed its new authority, urging Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer to conduct visitations of some

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<sup>406</sup> “Peter Vannes to Wolsey, 29 May 1529,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. 4, no. 5605

<sup>407</sup> Geoffrey Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government*. Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, pp., 269-270, 291.

non-exempt religious houses along with the secular clergy, which he did promptly. Following the passage of the *Act in Restraint of Appeals* through Parliament in the spring of 1533, the king's lawyers proclaimed no monastic order could remain under the control of a foreign jurisdiction, meaning Rome.<sup>408</sup> This legal interpretation coupled with the *Act of Supremacy* allowed the crown to undertake a general visitation of all monasteries. Henry wasted little time in appointing Cromwell as vicar general in January 1535, granting him authority to exercise the king's expanded ecclesial powers.

#### *Valor Ecclesiasticus* – The Financial Survey of 1535

Cromwell with his new authority immediately named royal commissioners tasked with appraising the value of all church property.<sup>409</sup> The sum of this comprehensive financial survey became the massive dossier *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, which along with the *Compendium Competorum* formed the evidentiary basis for the two pronged assault upon monasticism, culminating with the first *Suppression Act* in 1536.<sup>410</sup> More than a century ago historian Alexander Savine produced an economic and statistical analysis of the *Valor*, which remains the only detailed study at present of the rich source apart from one unpublished dissertation.<sup>411</sup> He concluded that most of the monasteries held decent, even strong fiscal positions, and on the

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<sup>408</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (24 Henry VIII, c. 12), vol. 3, pp. 427-429.

<sup>409</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., 6 vols., London, UK: (Royal Publication, 1810-1834). The origins of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* were to generate a new valuation of all church property, monastic and secular, so that the king might get current market value on his newly acquired revenues of first fruits and tenths in 1533. These figures had previously been based upon an assessment from 1292.

<sup>411</sup> Alexander Savine, "The English Monasteries on the Eve of Dissolution", in *Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History*, Peter Vinogradoff, vol. I. Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1909); Anthony N. Shaw, "The Compendium Competorum and the Making of the Suppression Act of 1536", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Warwick, 2003). Shaw primarily focuses upon the *Compendium*, but also deals with much of the evidence with the *Valor*.

whole were not in massive debt as contemporary critics and previous generations of scholars had assumed. Yet, less than one quarter of their total income came from spiritual sources, such as bequests, donations, tithes, ecclesial court fees, and pilgrimage. This meant more than three quarters of the monastic revenue derived from agricultural and commercial sources, and large portions from rents alone.<sup>412</sup> In 1535 the monasteries collectively possessed nearly one third of all lands in England and Wales, generating significant sums from endowed wealth. This fortune for the most part benefited only a small and select group of clerics, which in some cases bred resentment, but often indifference in the perception of the laity.

The English Carthusians houses seem from the records of the *Valor* to have maintained similar levels of commercial interests as other monastic orders and did not garner the animus of contemporary observers. The two charterhouses in Somerset of Whitham and Hinton, especially the later, had close ties with the trading fairs at Norton, significant interests in the wool industry, and even some mining occurred on the priory lands. Commissioners valued Whitham at £215 and Hinton at £248, each having a decent income from temporal sources with relatively small amounts of debt.<sup>413</sup> In Nottinghamshire, the priory of Beauvale had an annual income of £227, with nearly one third coming from mining leases on its land.<sup>414</sup> At the house at Axholme in Lincolnshire, the report showed the monks received most of their income from rents, with a total revenue of £237.<sup>415</sup> At Coventry, the house enjoyed an income of £251, most coming from spiritual sources. The commissioners recorded that “all priests in virtue and religion excellent . .

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<sup>412</sup> Savine, “English Monasteries”, pp. 100-103, 216-217. Also see Knowles, *Religious Orders*, pp. 246-253, for a very succinct explanation of Savine’s findings.

<sup>413</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., vol. I, pp. 156-157.

<sup>414</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., vol. V, p. 156.

<sup>415</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., vol. IV, p. 135.

. the house well maintained.” Running a school, the monks cultivated good relationships with the surrounding community. With an annual revenue of £174 from rents and spiritual sources, the smaller of the two Carthusian priories in Yorkshire at Kingston-Upon-Hull had the smallest income in the entire order.<sup>416</sup> Mt. Grace charterhouse held an income of £382, nearly double its nearby sister house in Yorkshire. It also generated a large amount of its profits from rents, but further had a book making industry and spiritual sources of wealth.<sup>417</sup> Sheen Carthusians had the largest income of the order at £777, which came from its location adjacent the royal palace at Richmond and the patronage that came from this fortunate position.<sup>418</sup> The London house was the second richest, generating an income of £643. Its largest sources of revenue came from rents and spiritual sources. Commissioners further noted the valuable gilded liturgical equipment, such as plate, pyx, chalices, crucifixes, and one lavish oriental carpet, which in comparison to other large monastic houses was not extensive.<sup>419</sup> Thus, evidence take from the *Valor* suggests that the Carthusians were neither heavily in debt and held similar fiscal positions as other monasteries, generating much of their income from rents, maintaining some commercial interests, and providing spiritual services to their local communities, and at least in their business dealings did not seem austere or spiritually exceptional.

A dominant thread of dissolution historiography has concentrated on lackluster monastic hospitality and philanthropy toward the poor. Savine found that the monks appropriated 3-4% of their incomes for direct aid or charity to the poor within their communities.<sup>420</sup> This neglect had

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<sup>416</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., vol. V, p. 126.

<sup>417</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., vol. V, p. 84.

<sup>418</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., vol. II, pp. 51-54.

<sup>419</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., vol. I, p. 431.

the effect of causing resentment of the monks among the laity, who saw monastic indifference toward less fortunate as a chief cause for suppression, many have argued. W.K. Jordan, for example, in his foundational studies of early modern charity asserts that Reformation ideology brought to light in the minds of the county gentry and London merchants “the condition of poverty” among large portions of the English populace. This recognition ushered in “an age when men [and women] came to possess a vision of their society as they wished it to be, when with a swift and disciplined outpouring of charitable funds they undertook to create and order the institutions of a new society with their own substance,” Jordan notes.<sup>421</sup> These new practices of lay philanthropy and later governmental policies, championed by the laity, replaced an increasingly arcane religious institutional charity, which failed to abate varying conditions of poverty. Charitable trusts, instead of the religious houses, came to dominate the care of the poor during the early Tudor period, claims Jordan, as “the monasteries had outlived their social usefulness.”<sup>422</sup> Overtly neglecting the needs of the poor was never the aim of the church and monasteries, but these institutions had simply never developed systematic programs to ameliorate poverty or distribute aid. David Knowles, however, suggests that even small amounts of relief from the monasteries would have made a significant impact upon the lives of those that had fallen upon hard times as well as the destitute.<sup>423</sup>

It remains likely, however, that the volume of direct relief or philanthropy provided for the denizens surrounding monastic centers were tertiary in the general perceptions of most observers. Modern historians have proven far more concerned with the lacking charitable

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<sup>420</sup> Alexander Savine, “English Monasteries”, pp. 216-217.

<sup>421</sup> W.K. Jordan, *The Charities of Rural England 1480-1660*, London, UK: (Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 9.

<sup>422</sup> W.K. Jordan, *The Charities of Rural England 1480-1660*, p. 180.

<sup>423</sup> Knowles, *Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, pp. 264-265.

endeavors among late medieval monasteries than contemporary observers. As the parliamentary statute against begging from 1529 clearly illustrates, disdain, not mercy toward the poor proved far more evident among the laity: “Beggars without letters shall be stripped naked from the middle upwards and whipped within the towns where they be taken, or set in the stocks, at the discretion of the justice.” The act continues, “if any person or persons, being whole and mighty in body and capable of labor, who be taken in begging, or be vagrant and able to give no reckoning of how he does lawfully get his living, shall be tied to the end of a cart naked and be beaten with whips throughout the town until his body be bloody.”<sup>424</sup> The ethos of Protestant Europe came to be one of distinguishing the authentic and deserving poor from the undeserving. The undeserving included not only able-bodied men, but also disorderly women, and outsiders.<sup>425</sup>

Philanthropy simply was not the primary purpose of monastics, nor the chief concern of the Reformation Parliament. Instead the pursuit of spiritual idealism, channeled for the otherworldly benefit of the laity, proved the especial province of the religious orders. While the laity donated to monasteries for the provision of the poor, most considered this to be the monastic poor, as these individuals had taken vows of poverty and completely dedicated their lives pursuing divine communion. When the giver supported monks and nuns, it was commonly thought, they incurred divine favor because the monks maintained an intimate connection with the divine, and in a sense the donation could be seen as a gift directly to God. Such actions also helped earn the giver divine favor, which remained beneficial in securing a pleasant outcome in

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<sup>424</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (22 Henry VIII, 19, 1530-1531), vol. 3, pp. 328-332.

<sup>425</sup> *Health Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe, 1500-1700*, Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham, eds., London, UK: (Routledge, 1977).

the afterlife. The spiritual welfare of the community and the individuals within it had always been the most important function of the monasteries. They were repositories of spiritual merit that the laity could draw upon for their benefit.<sup>426</sup> Prayers of the monks assuaged trepidations of death and the journey into the afterlife. Sacred apotropaic devices maintained within the religious houses ameliorated fears in a pre-scientific society, such as blessed girdles that brought divine protection during childbirth. Material provision of the community, while not insignificant, had never been the aim or service of the religious orders.

Hence, the argument that the much of the English populace supported the suppression of the monasteries because they failed to provide enough charity simply misrepresents the primary social utility of the institutions for the late medieval laity. In the words of Thomas Gybson, who in a speech in the House of Commons urged the king to proceed against the monasteries with great caution, as “it was thought . . . the said [Suppression] act . . . advanced the revenues of your noble Crown without prejudice or hurt of any of your poor subjects or of the commonwealth of this your realm, yet nevertheless the experience which we have had by those houses that already be suppressed showeth plainly unto us that a great hurt and decay is thereby become and hererafter shall come to this your realm and great impoverishing for many your poor obedient subjects . . .”<sup>427</sup> Throughout his speech Gybson differentiates between religious and material consequences. His most pressing concerns described as causing “great hurt” and “decay” seem most well situated within a spiritual context. Whereas he later notes large

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<sup>426</sup> Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*, Harvard, MA: (Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 83-87.

<sup>427</sup> British Library, Cotton MS, Cleo. E, IV, f. 214.



numbers of laborers and husbandmen would also suffer from the closure of these institutions, Gybson's first worry focused on the loss of spiritual services to the laity.

Historian Claire Cross confirms the continuing importance of the religious orders in her examination of more than 5,000 wills throughout the northern counties from the years 1520-1540. She found that approximately 40%-50% of testators left bequests for friars or monks to sing masses for the benefit of their souls.<sup>428</sup> J.J. Scarisbrick has additionally discovered similar percentages within his study of nearly 2,500 wills throughout England.<sup>429</sup> J.A.F. Thompson found even higher numbers of bequests for prayers in 700 London testaments, with preference for the orders most renowned for spiritual exceptionalism, such as the Carthusians.<sup>430</sup> Recent research has also shown that the austere, contemplative orders enjoyed a larger share of these endowments than other monastic groups.<sup>431</sup> Even in light of this evidence, some scholars have still questioned the commitment of the Christian populace to the medieval practice of endowing masses in the Reformation era and to the religious orders themselves, because of the disparity among wills.<sup>432</sup> Irrelevant of the amount of monetary contributions or specified number of post-mortem masses, many individuals continued making provisions for the prayers of monks, nuns, and friars, suggesting they must have considered such intercession with the divine as integral

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<sup>428</sup> Claire Cross, "Monasticism and Society in the Diocese of York, 1520-1540," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5<sup>th</sup>, XXXVIII, (1988), pp. 144-145

<sup>429</sup> J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 6-8.

<sup>430</sup> J.A.F. Thompson, "Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xvi, (1965), pp. 189-190.

<sup>431</sup> David A. Harrap, "The Phenomena of Prayer: The Reception of the Imitatio Christi in England (1438-c.1600)," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, (University of London, 2016), pp. 48-60.

<sup>432</sup> R.W. Hoyle, "The Origins of the Dissolution of the Monasteries," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 38, No. 2, (June, 1995), pp. 278-279.

within their personal salvation journey.<sup>433</sup> In Cross's words, the monasteries brought "spiritual comfort to man's soul" and "played a positive part in northern life."<sup>434</sup>

### *Compendium Compertorum* – Monastic Immorality on Display, 1535-1536

The *Compendium Compertorum* spectacularly presented a portrait of lecherous and licentious monks and nuns, who engaged in bacchanalia and flouted contemporary notions of spiritual idealism. Generations of historians have remained divided in their analysis regarding the motivations of the commissioners in compiling the dossier, largely based upon confessional ideology.<sup>435</sup> Protestants such as James Fronde and George Coulton saw these royal agents as highly motivated, but not the heinous villains described by Catholics, such as Francis Gasquet.<sup>436</sup> Knowles in his great work on English monasticism objectively cast a revision upon the *Compendium* in a fashion that separated his work from that of previous scholars. He became the

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<sup>433</sup> Testators obviously had reasons beyond spiritual intercession leaving monetary contributions to monasteries. Often, they sought to secure their family's connection with the monastery for future generations, not only for future intercessory prayers but also for practical, worldly assistance. Another related to public affiliation with the monastery as a demonstration of religious loyalty or allegiance with other powerful families that also supported a particular monastery or religious order. Self-aggrandizement cannot be overlooked, as many late medieval people wanted to display themselves as a pious, gaining the social advantages that accrued from this perception. Frequently the elderly gave large bequests to fund the donor's residence in monastery in old age, widowhood, or retirement, where they lived in as corrodians, who the monastery provided with ample food, drink, comfort, and spiritual council until death. Finally, some gave land or property to avoid confiscated by state authorities or local rivals. R.H. Snape, *English Monastic Finances in the Later Middle Ages*, New York, NY: (Barnes and Noble Publishers, 1968).

<sup>434</sup> Claire Cross, "Monasticism and Society in the Diocese of York, 1520-1540," pp. 144-145.

<sup>435</sup> From the Elizabethan age the divide over the state of Christian morality and virtue among English monastics largely depended upon the observer's religious affiliation. Catholics saw the monks and nuns as victims, who generally lived ethically and obeyed the monastic rule. Whereas Protestants considered the religious orders the epitome of scandal and debauchery, outliving their spiritual utility.

<sup>436</sup> G.G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion*, 4 vols., Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1923); James Fronde, *Reign of Henry VIII*, vol. II, London, UK: (Strand Publishing, 1908); Francis Aidan Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries: An Attempt to Illustrate the History of Their Suppression*, 3 vols., (London, 1887-1888).

impartial, steady academic, who presented his assessment of the evidence without strong factional bias. He highlighted that the royal agents never qualified their terms, which made it difficult for modern historians to interpret clear meanings from the text. The many alleged sexual crimes of the monastics, chiefly sodomy, he argued, remained unsubstantiated through other sources before and after the dissolution period. The episcopal visitations of monasteries immediately following the royal visitation of 1535, Knowles notes, “without exception . . . give a far more pleasing impression of the life of these monasteries than do the visitors of the previous autumn.”<sup>437</sup> He then suggested the royal commissioners likely exaggerated most of what they recorded in the *Compendium* and he through careful erudition blunted many of the most spectacular findings.<sup>438</sup> The impact of Knowles’s work on the scholarly thought surrounding this major source in the English Reformation cannot be overstated. Before his reassessment, historians needed only give a cursory glance upon the *Valor* and *Compendium* together along with their subsequent historiography to observe the nearly complete moral and spiritual failure of the religious houses in England and Wales.

Historians have for the most part accepted Knowles’s reframing of the evidence with some exceptions.<sup>439</sup> Anthony Shaw recently invigorated debate surrounding the state of monasticism in late medieval England.<sup>440</sup> He argues most critics of the *Compendium* have narrowly focused upon the lists of sexual sins against monks and typecast the visitors as

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<sup>437</sup> Knowles, *Religious Orders*, p. 307.

<sup>438</sup> Knowles, *Religious Orders*, p. 294-301.

<sup>439</sup> Joan Greatrex, “After Knowles: Recent Perspectives in Monastic History”, in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, (Boydell, 2002), pp. 35-50.

<sup>440</sup> Anthony N. Shaw, “The *Compendium Compertorum* and the Making of the Suppression Act of 1536”, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Warwick, 2003).

uncritical brutes. This perception subsequently shaped the historical characterization of the documents as well as the motives of the visitors. Through careful examination of the visitations and dialogue between Cromwell and his agents, Shaw demonstrated the royal visitations became a dynamic effort aimed at reforming, not necessarily dissolving, the monasteries. Moving beyond traditional assumptions, he noted the visitors did not possess rigid, pro-Protestant instructions from Cromwell at the outset of their examination. Nor did they proceed with a preconceived agenda given by the king that was later used to suppress the religious houses. For example, in February of 1536, the crown demanded Cromwell restrain the visitation and realign the overall objectives on monastic reform, putting it more in unison with Henry's moderate feelings. Here Shaw showed that the massive visitation proved above all a royal reform effort, a fact-finding mission which might support any changes the crown considered necessary as they sought affirmation of the Royal Supremacy among the religious.

Christian Knudson on the other hand suggests that "the *Compendium* was designed to showcase sexual crimes."<sup>441</sup> He challenged directly Shaw's description of the sources and posturing of the visitors. Knudson shows that the visitors had an agenda coming from the crown or at least certain ministers, such as Cromwell. For the half century before the dissolution was not a period of particular debauchery within the cloister. Rather the amount of sexual deviance in the late medieval times in all likelihood remained at a similar rate with earlier periods, he argues. The larger source base of the *Compendium*, however, skewed the historical perception of late monasticism as failing, whereas it actually remained at a normal level within the context of the middle ages, Knudson shows. He further demonstrated these claims through a rigorous

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<sup>441</sup> Christian Knudson, "Naughty Nuns and Promiscuous Monks: Monastic Sexual Misconduct in Late Medieval England", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Toronto, 2012), p. 219.

examination of episcopal visitations in Norwich and Lincoln following Knowles, but in a more comprehensive manner. Thus, scholarly opinion remains divided over the qualification and analysis of these primary bodies of evidence surrounding the dissolution. Debating the benevolent or sinister nature of the royal visitors does not concern this present work. Instead the broader impact of the *Compendium* upon perceptions of monasticism convinced many contemporary observers that many monks and nuns had deviated from pre-Reformation notions of spiritual idealism, which invalidated their social utility and demanded compulsory systemic change.

When taken as a whole, the litany of monastic transgressions against traditional norms of spiritual idealism remains overwhelming. Entry after entry within the *Compendium* illustrates numerous monks, priests, and nuns who engaged in matters of worldly advancement, broken vows of chastity, and in many cases incestuous as well as homosexual relations. Even as the old monastic institutions remained an important part in the religious and cultural ethos of many, the perception of immorality, exacerbated by a royal anticlerical propaganda showing a massive deviation from concepts of traditional spiritual idealism, encouraged the acceptance of Cromwell's dissolution plan. Using Wolsey's template from ten years earlier, Cromwell prepared the way for monastic suppression by challenging the moral integrity of the smaller monasteries.<sup>442</sup> After discerning the worth of these institutions and their property, he ordered a universal visitation of the monasteries throughout England and Wales in July of 1535, intent upon investigating rumors of waste and immorality. Unlike previous provincial or diocesan visitations, however, many of the inquisitors were laymen. They received a standard list of questions to begin their inquiry of the monastics, along with *compertes*, denunciations against

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<sup>442</sup> Stanford Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament*, pp. 223-225. Lehmborg states: "For several years the idea of confiscating monastic endowments to meet the king's financial needs had been taking shape in Cromwell's mind." Cromwell had drafted legislation to move against the monasteries as early as 1529, which was more mild treatment than his final plan in 1536. *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 246.

individual monks or nuns. The summation of these complaints, when collected, formed the infamous *Compendium Compertorum*. Most of the allegations dealt with ethical failures of the religious, especially sexual vices, which surprised and shocked contemporary observers.

For example, as the commissioners circulated throughout the north of England, they recorded at the monastery of Repon, “Thomas Rede, sub-prior, and three others, named as sodomites *per voluntarias pollutiones*.”<sup>443</sup> At Garadon they reported, “5 names noted as sodomites, one with 10 boys. 3 of the monks seek release from religion.” Across Yorkshire the house of Dale contained, “incontinence, John Staunton, abbot, with one single and one married woman; Wm. Bramston, with 5 married women.” Within Shelford the royal agents discovered, “3 sodomites, 3 guilty of incontinence, 3 desire release from religion.” Likewise at Thurgarton, “10 sodomites, some with boys. Incontinence, Thos. Dethyk, prior, with several women, and 6 others with married and single women; 8 seek to be released from religion.” The commissioners found at the Benedictine house of Arden Monialium, “incest, Margery Lepton, ‘peperit ex canonico regulari.’”<sup>444</sup> Finally, at the Carthusian house of Mount Grace, the lesser charge of only “2 seek release,” was leveled against the order.<sup>445</sup> Such findings among numerous religious houses of Yorkshire, Litchfield, and Coventry flouted the critical virtue of personal piety, which remained essential in the late medieval perception of spiritual idealism.

Similar results from East Anglia only strengthened the case for sweeping reforms or outright suppression. In the diocese of Norwich, at the monastery of Spein, the investigation

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<sup>443</sup> “*per voluntarias pollutiones*” means in this and every following instance, masturbation. It seems the bashful commissioners chose to use Latin when articulating sins of a particularly grievous, sexual nature.

<sup>444</sup> “peperit ex canonico regulari,” means Margery had a child with one of the canons present at the institution.

<sup>445</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 364, “*Compendium Compertorum*, February 1536.”

revealed, “incontinence, Ric. Cobbes with various women, and 8 others ‘fatentur voluntar polluc.’” Furthermore, within the nearby house of Westacre there existed, “incontinece, Wm. Wyngfelde, the prior, confesses ‘voluntar. polluc.,’ another ‘cum conjugata,’ another ‘per voluntar. polluc.,’ and another ‘cum duabus feminis et fatetur se passum esse sodomiticum.’”<sup>446</sup> Even at the massive monastery of Bury St. Edmund's, commissioner Thomas Leigh expressed that “John Melford, the abbot, delights in the company of women and in sumptuous banquets; he delights in cards and dice, lives much in his granges, and does not preach. Thomas Ringstede, the prior, and 8 others, are defamed for incontinence with women; 1 confesses adultery, and 2 ‘voluntar. polluc.’”<sup>447</sup> Moreover, the situation at the smaller house of Castellacre remained similar, “incontinence, 2 with single women, and 6 ‘per voluntar. polluc.,’ one of them also with a married woman; sod., 1 ‘cum puero et per vol. polluc.’”<sup>448</sup> The commissioners further divulged at Westedereham, “the two monks who have the cure of souls of the country say the crime of sodomy is prevalent among the priests, as well secular as regular, and the youths who are not yet married; they seek that the remedy of marriage may be granted to such.”<sup>449</sup> These examples remain but a few of the copious similar accusations leveled against monks, nuns, and friars throughout England and Wales.

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<sup>446</sup> A monk “engaged in sodomy with a woman and a brother,” which certainly must mean another monk within the house.

<sup>447</sup> “*Compendium Competorum*, February 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 366.

<sup>448</sup> “*Compendium Competorum*, February 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 365. “One committed sodomy with a boy and masturbated.”

<sup>449</sup> “*Compendium Competorum*, February 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 366.

Such findings of rampant masturbation, fornication, and homosexual relations among the monastics astonished contemporary observers, negatively influencing public perception of the religious orders. While historians have worked tirelessly to elucidate the preconceived agenda of the visitors, noted inconsistencies, and demonstrated the lack of clear definitions for the many carnal vices among the sources, late medieval thinkers simply did not have luxury of time or intellectual freedom to consider these denunciations fully.<sup>450</sup> The effect of this work sent shockwaves through English society, especially in London. For, as an anonymous witness reported after the visitations of the religious houses had concluded:

whereupon was returned the booke called the Blacke Booke, expressing of everie such house the vile lives and abhominable factes, in murders of their bretherene, in sodomyes, in wordomes, in destroying of children, in forging of deedes, and other infinite horrors of life, in so much as deviding of all the religious person in England into two of these partes two of these partes at the least were sodomites: and this appeared in writing, with the names of the parties and their factes. This was shewed in parliament, and the villanies made knowen and abhorred.<sup>451</sup>

Parliament mediated, even tempered the statutory royal takeover of the religious houses, but ultimately the startling descriptions of monastic vices Cromwell presented to the commons in conjunction with royal influence won a legislative victory for the king in the *Suppression Act*.<sup>452</sup> The Protestant divine Hugh Latimer, recalled that “when their enormities were first read in the parliament house, they were so great and abominable that there was nothing but ‘down with them.’”<sup>453</sup> As historian R.W. Hoyle confirms, in a moment of emotional frenzy, “parliament was

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<sup>450</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. III, pp. 294-303. Knowles points out that often terms such as sodomy cannot have its literally meaning. For in the 181 accusations of sodomy, only eight times can the word be clearly discerned to mean explicitly homosexual relations or pedophilia.

<sup>451</sup> *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries*, T. Wright, ed., p. 114.

<sup>452</sup> For a full account of the parliamentary maneuvering see: Stanford Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament*, pp. 223-228.



presented with an expose of the immorality discovered by the visitation and was persuaded of the need to institute a reform.”<sup>454</sup> This suggests that the monastic deviation from accepted notions of spiritual idealism proved the primary motivator for the acceptance of governmental reforms in the *Suppression Act*, as initially the smaller houses filled with purported sloth and villainy were the only targets, not the larger institutions that in the perception of the laity still maintained high religious ideals, although the evidence does not bear this disparity out.

The *Suppression Act* asserted that the smaller houses had not fulfilled their sacred duties or live piously, and conversely the greater monasteries maintained spiritual exceptionalism. As the act confirms, “a great multitude of the religious persons in such small houses do rather choose to rove abroad in apostasy than to conform themselves to the observation of good religion . . . unless such small houses be utterly suppressed and the religious persons therein committed to great and honorable monasteries of religion in this realm where they may be compelled to live religiously . . . wherein, thanks be to God, religion is right well kept and observed.”<sup>455</sup> Evidence within the *Compendium*, however, clearly shows that the larger houses readily deviated as frequently from traditional norms of spiritual idealism as had the smaller institutions. This certainly casts doubt upon accuracy of the *Compendium* and the genuineness of the dissolution as a monastic reform effort. As the government’s own visitation records showed the monks of the greater and lesser houses equally debauched and breaking with notions of spiritual idealism. Speaking to this, the commissioner Richard Layton practically admitted the whole visitation was little more than elaborate framing operation against the monks. Before setting out against them,

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<sup>453</sup> “A chronicle and Defense of the English Reformation,” in David Loades, ed., *The Papers of George Wyatt Esq.*, London, UK: (Camden Society, 1968), pp. 159-160.

<sup>454</sup> R.W. Hoyle, “The Origins of the Dissolution of the Monasteries,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 2, (June, 1995), p. 296.

<sup>455</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (27 Henry VIII, c. 57, 1535-1536) vol. III, pp. 575-578.

he wrote to the chief minister declaring, “there can be no better way to beat the King's authority into the heads of the rude people in the North than to show them that the King intends reformation and correction of religion. They are more superstitious than virtuous, long accustomed to frantic fantasies and ceremonies . . . you will never know what I can do until you try me.”<sup>456</sup> Hence, it seems evident that Cromwell employed the scandalous reports within the *Compendium* to achieve immediate political victories, illuminating what he chose and ignoring the rest.

The preamble of his dissolution bill cited the failure of the monastics to maintain the tenets of late medieval spiritual idealism as the primary drive for reform via suppression: “among the little and small abbeys, priories, and other religious houses of monks, chanons, and nuns, where the congregation is under 12 persons . . . to the slander of good religion . . . vicious living shamelessly increases and augments.”<sup>457</sup> The act itself, while mandating the closure of any institution generating less than £200 per annum and/or having less than twelve monks present, it importantly granted the caveat that the king could extend clemency to any house he desired through letters of patent.<sup>458</sup> This critically enabled the government to argue that nearly the whole of the lesser monastic houses were in a state of moral decay, but at the same time permitted those serving in parliament to take comfort that in the event of objections concerning particular houses, exceptions could occur. Henry pardoned nearly one quarter of the smaller houses that should

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<sup>456</sup> “Richard Layton to Cromwell, July 1535,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. VIII, no. 955.

<sup>457</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (27 Henry VIII, c. 57, 1535-1536) vol. III, pp. 575-578.

<sup>458</sup> “The kings highness, at any time after the making of this act, may at his pleasure ordain and declare by his letters of patent under his great seal that such of the said religious houses which his highness shall not be disposed to have suppressed nor dissolved by authority of this act, shall still continue, remain, and be in the same body corporate and in the said essential estate, quality, and condition as well in possessions as otherwise they were afore the making of this act.” *Statutes of the Realm*, (27 Henry VIII, c. 57, 1535-1536) vol. III, pp. 575-578.

have been dissolved, approximately 80 institutions on the basis of ability to pay the crown its fee or negotiated bribes. The three Carthusian monasteries liable for suppression at Hull, Beauvale, and Coventry were able to obtain a pardon, irrelevant of their spiritual exceptionalism, because they had funds available to secure their houses.<sup>459</sup> Additionally, in the west country the monasteries of Bindon (Cistercian), Lacock (Augustinian), and Cleeve (Cistercian), which regarding the later the commissioners specifically reported was “a head house of monks of the order of Citeaux, by report to all the country . . . of honest conversation, all desiring continuance in religion,” received exceptions to continue for the price of £300 each.<sup>460</sup> Several cases of extensions through bribery and political cronyism occurred as well. Most conspicuously, nearly the entirety of the Gilbertine houses, a tiny, regional English order relegated to the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire areas, maintained its existence.<sup>461</sup> Therefore, it seems clear the motivations of the crown were not genuine reform, but the acquisition of monastic wealth.

While this cleverly orchestrated propaganda campaign allowed Cromwell and the king to successfully move against the monasteries swiftly under the rallying cry of much needed reform, evidence at the local level, even the correspondence of the commissioners themselves at times contradicts the imagery presented within the *Compendium*. Many religious houses both great

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<sup>459</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. III, pp. 315-317. At least the houses at Coventry and Hull maintained extremely favorable relations with their neighboring community and were well respected for their spiritual exceptionalism, but these factors remained irrelevant when they sought to avoid dissolution. *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. x, nos., 858, 916, 917, 980.

<sup>460</sup> Public Record Office, *SC12/33/37*, as cited in J.H. Bettey, *The Suppression of the Monasteries in the West Country*, Gloucester, UK: (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1989), pp.61-62. Generally Cromwell offered a pardon within his private negotiations if a particular house could pay the crown nearly the full value of the house and its properties.

<sup>461</sup> G.W.O. Woodward, “The Exemption from Suppression of Certain Yorkshire Priors,” *English Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 300, (July, 1961), p. 386; Rose Graham, *St. Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines: A History of the Only English Monastic Order*, London, UK: (1901), p. 174. The Gilbertines had the good fortune that their primate Robert Holgate, was president of the Council of the North and soon to be bishop of Landaff and had enough influence with Cromwell to obtain a pardon for the entire order, 18 houses.

and small maintained an aura of spiritual idealism in the perceptions of numerous contemporary observers. The visitors hinted at and sometimes outright declared monastic houses that maintained the tenets of spiritual idealism garnered respect among locals, who saw them as vital parts of their communities. For instance, referencing the Carthusian monks of Hull the visitor Sir Ralph Ellerker informed Cromwell, “they are well-favored and commended by the honest men of Hull and others for their good living and great hospitality, and they also desire that you would be good master to the prior and his brethren, and that their house may be continued.”<sup>462</sup> Moreover, the commissioner Thomas Bedyll concerning the Benedictine abbey at Ramsey wrote it consisted of “the best sort,” and “I pray God I may find other houses in no worse condition.”<sup>463</sup> Layton as well privately informed Cromwell that after his visitation of the Benedictines at Durham he found the monks “blameless.”<sup>464</sup>

Shortly after the investigation of the Benedictines at Bokenham monastery, its prior pleaded with Cromwell to “obtain [his] favorable license for the keeping of one cure and one chapel with four masses in the week day, with two honest religious priests for maintaining their poor house.” He also notes that the monks wished for some laymen in the community to become trustees of the chapel, as they were “afraid great men who could not be resisted will require them to do as they like.”<sup>465</sup> Additionally, the great monastery of Bury St. Edmund’s, which had

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<sup>462</sup> “Sir Ralph Ellerker to Cromwell, 28 May 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 980.

<sup>463</sup> “Thomas Bedyll to Cromwell, 15 January 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 103.

<sup>464</sup> “Richard Layton to Cromwell, 26 January 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. X, no. 183.

<sup>465</sup> “Prior of Bokenham to Cromwell, 10 November 1535,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*.

received such a damning report within the *Compendium* was apparently well respected in the perception of its lay neighbors and regional pilgrims, as the commissioners lamented the popularity of its vast reliquary.<sup>466</sup> These examples suggest that the same monasteries that regularly got such unfavorable treatment from the royal visitors sometimes received laudatory opinions from their neighbors regarding their maintenance of spiritual idealism.

Even with significant popular support at the regional level, the weight of the *Compendium*, along with the pamphlets of the reformers, successfully brought down much of English monasticism. Cromwell had accomplished the first part his plan to acquire the wealth of the smaller religious houses largely by using his expansive survey for manipulation and deception. An anonymous chronicler described the effects of the *Compendium* upon popular sentiments: “the parliament being made acquainted with their vile lives, were redely contented both to confirme the surrender, and geive their consyntes to the giving of all the reaste to the kinge.”<sup>467</sup>

Portraying the monasteries as vile hives full of sexual deviance, the *Compendium* ruptured contemporary perceptions of many religious houses as bastions of holiness. For the publicized image of flagrant debauchery and worldliness, irrelevant of its truth, denied any pretense of personal piety, austerity, and the avoidance of religious corporatism among these monks. Even if members of the Reformation Parliament personally knew of monasteries that did not align with the findings of the *Compendium*, the enormity and comprehensiveness of the accusations jaded their larger perception of the monasticism. Together with intense royal

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<sup>466</sup> “John Ap Rice to Cromwell, 5 November 1535.” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. IX, no. 772.

<sup>467</sup> *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries*, T. Wright, ed., p. 115.

pressure, these sentiments directly led to the passage of the suppression statute dissolving the smaller religious houses, even though the material it was largely based upon was hastily cobbled together, unsubstantiated, and wildly divergent from previous visitation records. The first *Act of Suppression*, Knowles declares, “could have succeeded only if the whole system had in fact been proved to be rotten; otherwise, it is said, public opinion, and the protests of the religious and their friends, would have been too much for the government,” and subsequently, “the evidence of the visitors was the principal instrument that secured the passing.”<sup>468</sup>

### Popular Reaction to the Dissolution & the Final Suppression of the Monasteries

Largescale northern uprisings immediately followed the *Suppression Act* in 1536 as royal agents began confiscations and closures in the north, midlands, and west country. Restoration of the religious houses and defense of traditional religious customs were the rebel’s primary objectives. The Pilgrimage of Grace, as the largest revolt came to be known, saw a combined 40,000 commoners, gentry, and clergy arise against the new Protestant religious policies of the crown and the destruction of the many small monasteries throughout the north.<sup>469</sup> As the words of their leader Robert Aske testify, “the abbeys in the north parts . . . laudably served God,” and their destruction proved greatly “to the distress of the faith and spiritual comfort to man’s soul.” The Duke of Norfolk echoed these remarks when he wrote to the king about the fate of the monasteries declaring, “the howses [are] greatlie beloued with the people.”<sup>470</sup> Popular rebellions

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<sup>468</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. III, p. 294.

<sup>469</sup> Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The Pilgrimage of Grace: The Rebellion that Shook Henry VIII’s Throne*, London, UK: (Weidenfeld & Nicholson Publishers, 2002).

<sup>470</sup> “Aske’s Examination, 11 April 1537,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xii, no. 901.

delayed but did not stop the closure of the monasteries. Yet crucially, these strong reactions among the populace altered the trajectory of the English Reformation and demonstrated the continued importance of monastic institutions, as often monks and nuns continued to represent spiritual idealism in the perceptions of many observers.

The pronouncement of the dissolution of the lesser monasteries from parliament in 1536 generated intense feelings of fear, anger, and injustice in the midlands and the north especially. Royal commissioners seized vestments, plate, jewels adorning icons, and anything else of value within churches and monasteries. Rumors even circulated, “there shall be no church within five miles, and that all the rest shall be put down.”<sup>471</sup> By autumn of 1536 the commons of Louth in Lincolnshire, infuriated over reports concerning the treatment of their neighboring religious communities and tremendously proud of their newly constructed church steeple, formed an armed guard at the parish church to defend it against the king’s agents. The townsfolk seized the royal officials upon their arrival, forcing them to swear an oath to the “true religion of God,” and imprisoned the royal commissioners they labeled “Cromwell’s men” in the church. These actions effectively began the Lincolnshire Uprising, 1536-1538.

The rebels of Louth, led by the shoemaker Nicholas Melton, dubbed “Captain Cobbler,” immediately marched to the nearby Legbourne Nunnery, arrested the royal collectors, and forced the return of the treasures to the house and restored the nuns to their positions. News of these efforts spread across Lincolnshire and fostered support for the rebels among all three estates. By October of 1536, an army of 10,000 assembled under the command of northern peers, who marched on Lincoln. Parish clergy had played a prominent role in galvanizing support for the

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<sup>471</sup> As cited in M.E. James, “Obedience and Dissent in Henrician England: the Lincolnshire Rebellion 1536”, *Past and Present*, 48, (1970), p. 48.

rebellion, spreading news of the heroic exploits of “Captain Cobbler” and God’s bold warriors of Louth.<sup>472</sup> When the bishop of Lincoln’s chancellor Thomas Raynes mustered the Lincolnshire militia against the rebels, a ferocious contingent among the troops attacked and killed Raynes with their staves and pitchforks. Joining up with the Lincoln militia in the city, the rebels drew up a list of demands and sent them to London, calling for the Henry to restore the monasteries and traditional religious services.<sup>473</sup>

In response, the king sent the duke of Suffolk and an army of 3,000 to parlay with the rebels. The duke, however, refused to negotiate while the rebels remained assembled under arms. The yeoman captains agreed to disperse and return to their homes, so long as the gentry leaders swore to muster them again if the king would not restore the monasteries and the Mass. Returning to their farms, the army marched home carrying the banner of the five wounds of Christ, signifying their role as Christian warriors. The standard designed by the rebels also displayed the symbols of the chalice, the plough, and the hunting horn. Historian Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested that these images represented the three social orders that supported the rising: the clergy (the chalice), the peasants (the plow), and the nobility (the hunting horn).<sup>474</sup> With the troops dispersed, the duke delayed negotiations and persuaded the gentry who supported the rebellion to give up their ideals for monetary gain. He subsequently rounded up the demagogues of the commons and executed them. Nicholas Melton “Captain Cobbler,” while

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<sup>472</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch & Anthony Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, (New York, NY: Pearson Longman Publishers, 2008), p. 29.

<sup>473</sup> “Demands of the Lincolnshire Rebels, October 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. IX, no. 705.

<sup>474</sup> MacCulloch & Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions*, p. 30.



awaiting his execution remarked, “what whorsones were we that we had not killed the gentlemen, for I thought allwayes that they would be traytors.”<sup>475</sup>

Simultaneous with the Lincolnshire Rising, the largest popular revolt in English history known as the Pilgrimage of Grace 1536-1538 began. Historian Penry Williams has suggested, “fundamentally the Pilgrims were protesting against an unprecedented intrusion by the crown into their local communities and traditional ways.”<sup>476</sup> The actions and frequently the surviving documentation of the rebels shows they believed that the monasteries enshrined essential apotropaic devices, the manifestation of saints, and were also the means to enter into the presence of God, and any assault on such sacred places demanded an overwhelming response from Christian devotees.<sup>477</sup> Originating in the same fashion as the Lincolnshire Rising, the Pilgrimage of Grace proved a massive lay spiritual protest on behalf of monastics and traditional religion against the *Act of Suppression*.<sup>478</sup> A single organized rebellion, however, did not occur. Rather the revolt consisted of numerous small, popular uprisings, spanning across the north and midlands, which eventually amalgamated into one vast army that demanded cessation to the monastic dissolution.

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<sup>475</sup> “The Commons of Westmorland to Lord Darcy, 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xi, no. 1080; MacCulloch & Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions*, pp. 145, 147-149; R.W. Hoyle, “Thomas Master’s Narrative of the Pilgrimage of Grace”, *Northern History*, 21, (1985): p. 72. The Lincolnshire Rising strictly remained a separate affair from simultaneous the Pilgrimage of Grace rebellion. The failure and bad treatment of the leaders of the Lincoln Rising stoked popular discontent, and played a significant role in motivating participation in the much larger Pilgrimage of Grace.

<sup>476</sup> Penry Williams, *The Tudor Regime*, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 321.

<sup>477</sup> Michael L. Bush, *The Pilgrims Complaint: A Study of Popular Thought in the Early Tudor North*, St. Andrews, UK: (Ashgate Publishing, 2009).

<sup>478</sup> J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, pp. 339-346; C.S.L. Davies, “The Pilgrimage of Grace Reconsidered,” *Past and Present*, 41, (1968), pp. 56-60. Scarisbrick, even goes so far as to call it a religious movement.

The leadership consisted of more than a dozen gentlemen and peers.<sup>479</sup> At its pinnacle, the Pilgrims had an army of more than 40,000.<sup>480</sup> After gaining control of the northern portion of the kingdom, Robert Aske a lawyer and chief captain, issued a proclamation stating, “for thys pylgrymage, we have taken, hyt is for the preservacyon of Crystes Church, of thys realme of England . . . and to the entent to macke petycion to the Kynges Highnes for the reformacyon of that whyche is amysse within thys hys realme.”<sup>481</sup> The monasteries remained essential for local and regional spirituality as well as cultural exchange in the rural north. These religious houses provided rudimentary education, a trusted vault to store important deeds or other legal contracts, tenancies for farmers, a place of relative independence for unmarried women, and vital spiritual services to the laity.<sup>482</sup> The rebel leaders maintained that if the *Act of Suppression* continued unopposed, all these valuable services would be lost forever.<sup>483</sup>

The Pilgrims carried the banner of the five wounds of Christ and the relics of St Cuthbert from Durham monastery as their battle standards. Durham remained a central pilgrimage site throughout the Middle Ages and key center of northern spirituality. St Cuthbert’s relics demonstrated the centrality of the monasticism and importance of traditional spiritual idealism within the motivations and ideals of the rebellion. Aske moved his forces into the city of York

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<sup>479</sup> The rebel leaders were Thomas Lord Darcy, Lord Latimer, Sir Christopher Danby, Robert Bowes, and Robert Aske, among others; Aske was the principal captain in the Pilgrimage.

<sup>480</sup> Michael L. Bush, *The Pilgrimage of Grace: A Study of the Rebel Armies of October 1536*, Manchester, UK: (Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 136-137, 146, 427-428;

<sup>481</sup> “Second Proclamation of Robert Aske Captain of the Pilgrimage of Grace, October 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. ix, no. 705.

<sup>482</sup> Similar complaints were raised throughout England. For examples of the west country see: J.H. Bettey, *The Suppression of the Monasteries in the West Country*, pp. 57-70; for the southern counties see: Roger Manning, *Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex: A study of the Enforcement of the Religious Settlement, 1558-1603*, Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>483</sup> “The Pontefract Articles, 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Vol. 11, no. 1246.

and nailed his plans to the door of the minster, the seat of Edward Lee the archbishop. He declared his peaceful intentions toward the king, and further resolved to restore all the suppressed religious houses, including the Benedictine houses of Holy Trinity and the nunnery of St Clements, along with the Augustinian house of Healaugh in York. Later in October another contingent of Pilgrims gathered at Jervaulx Abbey, which became a regional headquarters of rebel commanders. Their first act restored the nearby Coverham Abbey.<sup>484</sup>

One of the Pilgrim captains Sir Thomas Percy sent a lieutenant around to many of the monasteries to have contingents of their monks bolster their ranks in their march into Yorkshire. In some cases the monks did join, such as those from the suppressed houses of Whitby, Newburgh, and Bridlington. The Cistercian abbot of the large monastery at Rievaulx even offered to come in person. On the whole, however, perhaps ironically, the monks did not participate enthusiastically within the rebellion. Especially the larger houses that had little to gain and much to lose did not support the rebels openly. The smaller, suppressed houses did participate in larger numbers, but their embrace proved lukewarm at best.<sup>485</sup> Nevertheless, many of the great families of the north, such as the Percys that held the earldom of Northumberland joined in the rebellion. Yet even with such broad social support the Pilgrimage of Grace and the northern risings did little for monasticism besides slow the suppression of the religious houses. When the duke of Norfolk engaged in negotiations with the Pilgrims at York, he gave assurances that the king would address the grievances of his subjects regarding religion and restore many of the worthy monasteries, which Henry largely ignored once the rebel army disbanded and its leaders imprisoned.

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<sup>484</sup> “The Pontefract Articles, 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Vol. 11, no. 1246.

<sup>485</sup> Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, pp. 325-327.

The monarch extended a pardon to all the rebels outside of the middling captains, such as Robert Aske, who revealed many of his inner thoughts during his interrogations in the Tower. Knowing his execution to be certain, he had little reason to veil his true beliefs. Regarding the monasteries of the north, he stated they brought many “spiritual comfort” and “when the said abbeys stood, the said people had not only refreshing in their bodies but also spiritual refuge both by ghostly living of them and also by spiritual information and preaching . . . so that the people were greatly refreshed by the said abbeys.”<sup>486</sup> This revolt compelled Henry to issue the *Act of Six Articles*, which restored many of the functions of traditional religion and reversed most of the Protestant doctrines adopted from 1532 to 1534.<sup>487</sup> Thus, the Pilgrimage of Grace did not ultimately fail, nor did it succeed completely either. For a short while the authorities allowed to stand the restoration of sixteen of the fifty-five dissolved religious houses in the episcopal province of York. Nonetheless, starved for funds the government ignored popular sentiment regarding the monasteries and moved forward its program of suppression in order to acquire the valuable lands and property, which it promptly sold to fund its wars abroad.<sup>488</sup>

There still remained the problem of justifying the suppression of the larger monastic houses when the crown began to move against them shortly after the first *Suppression Act*. In 1534 Cromwell had placed a bill before parliament, which was rejected, to seize all monastic and episcopal land for the purpose of augmenting royal income to defend the realm against potential

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<sup>486</sup> “The Examination of Robert Aske, April 1537,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xii, no. 900.

<sup>487</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (31 Henry VIII, c.13), vol. 3, pp. 733-739. The act, which was vigorously debated in parliament and convocation, confirmed traditional interpretations of church doctrines. It affirmed transubstantiation, mandated clerical celibacy, required the laity only take communion in one kind (the wafer only), validated masses for the dead (doctrine of purgatory), and argued that auricular confession to a priest remained necessary for individual salvation. These positions proved a crushing defeat to the evangelical Protestant faction of Henry’s court. Nevertheless, the theological implications of removing papal authority from the church were not insignificant.

<sup>488</sup> C.S.L. Davies, “The Pilgrimage of Grace Reconsidered”, *Past and Present*, 41, (1968), pp. 56-60.

Catholic enemies arising from the divorce crisis.<sup>489</sup> Consequently, the government adopted a piecemeal strategy to take over the remaining ecclesiastical properties. It justified confiscations by arguing that monasteries were wracked by internal vice. The first *Act of Suppression*, as discussed earlier in this chapter, targeted only the smaller monasteries, although the complaints that justified this action concerned the larger monasteries equally. Allowing the greater houses to remain unmolested lessened resistance in the House of Lords from the great abbots, who sat in the chamber. Cromwell's tactics for maneuvering the 1536 legislation through parliament meant he lacked strong grounds to suppress the larger monasteries on the basis of reform. Moreover, the combined fallout from the Lincolnshire Rising and the Pilgrimage of Grace along with managing the dissolution of the smaller monasteries, occupied much of the chief minister's attention between 1536 and 1539 when the second and final *Act of Suppression* passed through parliament.<sup>490</sup>

During the aftermath of the rebellions, within the debates of the Reformation Parliament, chronicler Edward Hall recorded the words of Protestant leaning Bishop John Stokesly, "these lesser houses were as thorns, soon plucked up, but the great abbots were like putrefied old oaks; yet they must needs follow, and so would others do in Christendom before many years were passed."<sup>491</sup> This statement demonstrated the fervor among some in parliament and at court to dissolve monasticism entirely during the Reformation period. It remained clear from as early as 1534 that the ambitions of Cromwell, and perhaps the king, were to acquire as much property and revenue from the ecclesiastical estate as possible, transferring this wealth to the crown. By

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<sup>489</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (31 Henry VIII, c. 9), vol. 3, pp. 728-729.

<sup>490</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (31 Henry VIII, c. 8, no. 13, 1539) vol. III, pp. 569-574.

<sup>491</sup> Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*: p. 820.

1538 correspondence between Cromwell and the lord treasurer Sir Brian Tuke showed that the crown had exhausted its financial resources, and the government became increasingly desperate for new, large sources of revenue. The northern uprisings demonstrated that support for the monasteries could galvanize the populace against the government with strength enough to challenge Cromwell's vision. Such defiance necessitated the use of the powers within the *Supremacy Act* equating support for traditional religion with treason, which both removed potential enemies and acquired monastic lands for the crown.

The first *Act of Suppression* effectively created a legal situation where abbey lands were treated as part of the ruling abbot or prior's personal patrimony. Hence, if an abbot was found guilty of treason, under *Act of Attainder* the monastery lands reverted to the crown, precisely as with lay property. As many individuals discovered, Henrician courts often defined treason and heresy to be whatever the king felt at that moment. Such proved the case with five influential abbots between 1536 and 1539. Government officials arrested Hugh Cooke the abbot of the large Benedictine house at Reading for harboring a cell of Roman devotees as well as singing a weekly mass for the pope. Shortly after his execution, commissioners from the court of augmentations seized the property of his former monastery, placing it into the king's care. The abbots of the houses at Glastonbury, Woburn, Lenton, and Colchester also found themselves at odds with royal religious policies. This led directly to their trials, executions, and seizure of their monasteries.<sup>492</sup> Writing to a friend during his imprisonment, the abbot of Colchester remarked of Henry and Cromwell, "if all the water in the Thames were flowing gold and silver, it were not able to slake their covetousness."<sup>493</sup> His words expressed the popular sentiment that the

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<sup>492</sup> Geoffrey Baskerville, *The Suppression of the Monasteries*, pp. 176-180.

<sup>493</sup> "Abbot of Colchester to Lord Lisle, November 1537," *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xiv, no. 458.

government sought to fill the treasury through the acquisition of ecclesiastical property, regardless of former promises to the monks or their spiritual exceptionalism.<sup>494</sup>

Frequently when monastics were faced with the choice of living much more ascetically and under stricter discipline, large numbers of most orders chose release from their vows instead. (This was more true of monks than of nuns, who had fewer opportunities in secular life than they did as nuns, and a more difficult reentry.) But Carthusians, who certainly would not have any fewer opportunities in the secular world than other monks, still did not want to abandon monasticism. This suggests that they did not fear stricter standards for monastic conduct, and they rebuffed secular opportunities.<sup>495</sup>

Winds of religious change blew across the English landscape from 1536-1539 and many monastics took advantage of highly lucrative terms offered by the fourth round of royal visitors that were hurriedly taking inventories of the greater monasteries and investigating new *compertes* that Cromwell issued as early as January of 1537. Most saw the writing on the wall

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<sup>494</sup> “Cromwell to the various great abbots, January 1538,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xiii, no. 573. Cromwell continued to give false assurances of the safety of the great monasteries, as many of the abbots had clearly written to him in the previous months fearing the suppression of their houses. Rumors circulated that the crown intended to dissolve the remaining religious houses within the year, which indeed proved true.

<sup>495</sup> David Knowles has carefully analyzed the fate of the monks and nuns who were affected by the closure of the smaller monasteries within the surviving documentation. He shows that in Yorkshire out of a total of 289 monks and 265 nuns, 117 monks and 28 nuns desired release from monasticism altogether. The men usually desired secular orders. These figures amounted to 40.5% of the monks and 10.5% of nuns in the north elected to leave a monastic lifestyle when given the option. In the midlands 21% of monks took “capacities,” which meant they became seculars; in Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Gloucestershire, 32.6% took capacities; Norfolk saw 72% and Sussex saw 93% take capacities. On the whole, approximately 10% of nuns desired release from the monastic lifestyle, which proved much lower than the percentage of monks. Specific religious orders were often concentrated in a particular region and gross disparities existed between the number of monks desiring release within the differing orders. Norfolk and Sussex, for instance, were dominated by small houses of Austin canons, which saw 48.5% attrition rates. The independent Benedictine houses maintained similar numbers. The Cistercians saw only 8.6% attrition to secular orders. It was only the Carthusians in these regions that could claim not a single monk sought release. This commitment of the Carthusians suggests that their devotion to the monastic lifestyle remained stronger than other orders, and this testifies to why many observers considered the order spiritually exceptional. Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, pp. 309-312.

and chose not to follow in the example of the five abbots or the 18 Carthusians and die as martyrs. Rather most monks took pensions and further accepted beneficed livings as secular priests. For example, the Benedictine abbot of the house at Pershore declared his willingness to accept the situation when he wrote to Cromwell in 1537: "I am willing to resign and leave the monastery in good care in return for a pension for myself and my monks." He received the sizeable annual sum of £160 along with a luxurious country house and estate with manicured gardens.<sup>496</sup> Abbot Segar of Hailes monastery also voluntarily handed over the famous and vast Cistercian house for a lucrative yearly pension of £100, a country mansion, and small estate along with smaller pensions for the brothers.<sup>497</sup> A significant number of 3,000 remaining monks gained government pensions, got beneficed livings, and also absentee licenses so they might pursue scholarly endeavors at Oxford and Cambridge. For as Knowles observed, "rumors were abroad everywhere that all monasteries would be suppressed, and in consequence the communities were preparing to lease or sell whatever they could."<sup>498</sup> Royal agents proceeded against the institutions without any statutory authority and this required them to negotiate, persuade, and cajole the surrender of each monastery individually. Surrenders were usually mutually agreeable and the commissioners did not face strong protests, as in some cases with the great monasteries the king transformed them into cathedral chapters where the abbot became a dean and the monks secular canons. It seems that most monks recognized the changing times and lacking the spiritual exceptionalism and unyielding zeal exhibited within the Carthusian order a few years earlier, accepted new roles with good monetary compensation.

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<sup>496</sup> As cited in Geoffrey Baskerville, *The Suppression of the Monasteries*, p. 186.

<sup>497</sup> "Memoranda Relating to Abbot Segar of Hailes, 1538," *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xxi, no. 775.

<sup>498</sup> Knowles, *Religious Orders of England*, vol. III, p. 352.



Nevertheless, two of the 18 Carthusian martyrs John Rochester and James Walworth, formerly of the London house, then in residence at Hull, decided to maintain their Roman loyalty to the last. For this defiance the duke of Norfolk ordered them hung up with chains “until their bones fell to the ground,” noted the chronicler Maurice Chauncy.<sup>499</sup> Seeing further defiance as futile, even the Carthusians gave no more resistance, as the commissioner Richard London reported at the charterhouse at Beauvale where the prior and his monks were “redy befor our commyng” and said they would “surendre straightaway.”<sup>500</sup> The remaining brethren of the order accepted no pensions or dispensations from the king, making their way to charterhouses in the Low Countries under the leadership of Maurice Chauncy. He writes, “this was done on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, 1538, a day very bitter, on which our inheritance was given over to others, our house to strangers, and converted to the vilest uses.”<sup>501</sup> This suggests that the Carthusians, more than any other order, maintained the tenets of late medieval spiritual idealism throughout the English Reformation.

The second *Act of Suppression* of 1539 passed in May 1539, originally titled the *New Bishoprics Act*, confirmed the king’s authority to appropriate and manipulate ecclesiastical lands for the creation of new dioceses throughout England and Wales. In autumn of this same year, the crown transformed six of the great monasteries into new cathedral chapters at Bristol, Gloucester, Chester, Oxford, Peterborough, and Westminster. When Cromwell brought the bill to the Commons there remained little need for apologetics or justification, as most of the great monasteries had already surrendered before the creation of the statute. He, however, during the

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<sup>499</sup> Maurice Chauncy, *Suffering of the Eighteen Carthusians*, p. 70.

<sup>500</sup> “Dr. London to Cromwell, December 1538,” *Calendar of State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. xiii, no. 1239.

<sup>501</sup> Maurice Chauncy, *Suffering of the Eighteen Carthusians*, p. 71.

last day of its debate, made a few amendments and added a preamble purportedly written by Henry himself. Here the king denounced monasticism as, “the slothful and ungodly life which hath been used among all those sort which have borne the name of religious.”<sup>502</sup> Beyond these vituperations, the act itself proved little more than parliament accepting the surrender of the remaining English and Welsh religious houses. It further confirmed all lands and property of dissolved religious houses since the 1536 act as well as any future surrenders went into the monarch’s possession and canceled most leases within one year. In the House of Lords, the bishops and abbots never raised a single word of public protest. It remains likely that the destruction of the most zealous individuals, an intensive suppression campaign, and the sizable pensions offered to the monks encouraged many to remain silent as the crown dissolved the greater monasteries.<sup>503</sup>

The numerous reform acts from 1529-1534 certainly affected the innerworkings of the church, adjusted hierarchy, and altered theology, but these remained insignificant in comparison to the plain and visible effects the suppression of the religious houses had upon English and Welsh communities. Many of these institutions had stood for nearly 1,000 years as repositories of holiness and remained cultural landmarks. Monks, nuns, and friars prayed for, preached to, and employed many laborers and professionals throughout the realm. The loss of these familiar and essential elements of medieval, Christian society in such a brief time transformed the English church in a more tangible way, observable at every social strata, than any of the previous anticlerical acts.<sup>504</sup> For the religious houses, often, were a hallowed spaces to many local

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<sup>502</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, (31 Henry VIII, c. 8, no. 13, 1539) vol. III, pp. 569-574.

<sup>503</sup> R.W. Hoyle, “The Origins of the Dissolution of the Monasteries,” pp. 299-300; Knowles, *The Religious Orders of England*, pp. XXXX

<sup>504</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, & Memory in Early Modern Britain & Ireland*, Oxford, UK: (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 2-5.

communities, retaining this sacred quality even long after the monks had gone. Richard de Methley, the former priest and Tudor mystic, for example, argued that the abandoned religious houses retained a spiritual potency and devotees should hold vigils at the sites to better commune with the divine.<sup>505</sup> Such proved the case in Yorkshire at the Carthusian house of Mount Grace as late as 1614, when royal agents apprehended more than 30 individuals for holding an illegal religious service within the former monastery.<sup>506</sup> Historian Ethan Shagan has further shown devotion to these sacred spaces during and after the dissolution varied widely from the total spoliation of some abbeys such as Hailes at the hands of locals to unyielding defense of the structures such as in Pipewell, Northamptonshire, where the community lynched, then hanged a thief caught pillaging the monastery.<sup>507</sup> This suggests that at least some of the ruined spaces still retained an aura of sacredness in the perceptions of many late medieval and early modern Christians during and long after the dissolution.

In sum, the dissolution of the religious houses that took nearly a decade occurred because of a concerted effort from the government, a clever propaganda campaign built upon long standing anticlerical complaints, and the devastating blow to monastic reputations among public opinion through the *Compendium*. Throughout the 1520s a Protestant wind stirred the embers of religious reform throughout England. This attitude, while still the minority, coupled with the Henry's desire for a divorce and need of revenues, drove the realm headlong into the

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<sup>505</sup> Richard de Methley, "An Epistle of Solitary Life," in *The Thought and Culture of the English Renaissance: An Anthology of Tudor Prose 1481-1555*, Elizabeth M. Nugent, ed., Cambridge, UK: (Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 391-392.

<sup>506</sup> Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, High Commission Act Book 16, (1612-25/26), ff. 31, 38. As cited in Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape*, p. 167.

<sup>507</sup> Public Record Office, E 315/109, f. 23r. As cited in Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and The English Reformation*, p. 178. See his chapter on the Abbey of Hailes for a detailed analysis of abbey destruction during the dissolution, pp. 162-197.

Reformation. The anticlerical statutes of 1529 and those that later followed attacked the church and brought significant transformations to the hierarchy, administrative structure, and Christian theology. Most notably, the king replaced the pope as supreme head of the church and ecclesiastical fees were diverted from papal into royal coffers. During this time, Cromwell initiated his great plan for royal solvency, beginning the massive financial survey of church assets *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, which prepared the way for the forcible acquisition of monastic property. He then ordered a universal visitation of monastic houses searching for moral failures compiled into the *Compendium Competorum*. It portrayed monastics as vial, worldly, sexual deviants, who had fallen far outside traditional notions of spiritual idealism, losing their sacred status and social utility in the perceptions of the laity. This shocking evidence destroyed the reputation of English monks and nuns, especially at court and in parliament, driving the legislature to suppress the smaller religious houses through statutory authority in 1536.

Widespread popular rebellions arose through the kingdom in support of monasticism and traditional religion, but these uprisings did little more than delay the crown's destruction of these ancient institutions. While the first *Suppression Act* claimed that the larger monasteries were beacons of religious idealism, royal agents almost immediately began pressuring these houses to surrender voluntarily through bribery and fear. So successful were these efforts that virtually all monks accepted pensions and new roles as secular clergy, except the Carthusians. Ultimately, notions of monastic holiness and spiritual idealism among significant portions of the laity were not enough to rescue the monastic way of life from royal hostility and greed.

## Conclusion

In Conclusion, this dissertation has demonstrated the power of ideas in late medieval society relating to Christian spirituality. It shows that perceptions of holiness shaped religious debates and drove politics. Archetypes of spiritual idealism remained steady throughout the late Middle Ages and into the early Reformation period, as orthodox and reforming thinkers employed similar concepts of ideal holiness within their descriptions of an optimal professional class of religious mediums that bridged the cosmic divide between corporal existence and spiritual transcendence. Holiness denoted favor with the divine, and this required exceptional personal piety and avoidance of worldliness among the practitioners. Such characteristics were most often found in the contemplative religious orders, who stressed the repetitious cycle of asceticism, strictness, and individual spiritual perfection. When these monastics embodied notions of traditional spiritual idealism, the laity then channeled this holiness for their own particular needs. Thus, when keen observers began questioning the lacking aura of sacredness among many monastics during the sixteenth century, it began the long road to the suppression of the English religious orders, transferring traditional notions of spiritual idealism into different vessels.

Chapter one, “The Long Decline: Old Wisdom & New Perspectives on English Monasticism,” traced the historiography of monasticism from the Reformation period to the present. It shows that historians have for many centuries maintained that English monasticism had fallen into disrepute because of lax moral standards and worldly association shortly before the Reformation. Only with the work of David Knowles did scholarship move passed confessional bias and find a new objective analysis that shapes all modern work on monasticism. The dissertation moves beyond the current historiographical debate of goodness or badness of

the monastic vocation and into post-revisionism, examining monastic development within popular perceptions of spiritual idealism.

Chapter two, “The Perception of Spiritual Idealism in Late Medieval English Literature,” sets the foundation of archetypal spiritual idealism upon late medieval literature. From the works of luminaries such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate, who represented the spirit of their age, audiences bore witness to the development of a fourfold category of spiritual idealism derived from fictional descriptions of Christian holy figures and antitypes. These archetypes were the quest for personal piety, maintenance of idyllic poverty, austere living, and the denial of religious corporatism. The chapter elucidates how these four categories formed the basis of contemporary understandings of spiritual exceptionalism and holiness.

Chapter three, “Spiritual Idealism & the Rhetoric of Reform: Humanists, Polemicists, & Protestants,” further demonstrates how the archetypes of spiritual idealism as developed within late medieval literature informed intellectual writings during the early sixteenth century and influenced many great thinkers of humanism and Protestantism. These intellectuals largely maintained the tenets of traditional spiritual idealism, but began questioning whether monastics alone possessed these virtues and still remained at the apex of spirituality. They rarely called for the complete abolition of monasticism, but certainly felt it needed reform, as the institution had fallen away from traditional notions of holiness built upon personal piety and eschewing worldliness, they argued.

Chapter four, “Spiritual Idealism Personified: The English Carthusian Order 1400-1540,” highlights how contemplative orders such as the Bridgettines, Franciscan Observants, hermits, and especially the Carthusians became the favored spiritual mediums between the laity and the divine during the late Middle Ages because they most closely maintained spiritual idealism in the perceptions of many observers. It further argues that the events leading to the famous martyrdoms

of the 18 Carthusians during the king's divorce crisis confirmed the importance of traditional holiness and also shaped the legacy of the Carthusians in the collective English memory.

Chapter five, "The Dissolution of the Monasteries & Spiritual Idealism," argues that the work of the Reformation Parliament beginning in 1529 put into place statutory measures allowing the crown to discipline and control the ecclesiastical estate of England. The crown steadily moved against the monastic institution in order to acquire its extensive landed wealth. Additionally, Thomas Cromwell and the king justified the suppression of the religious houses because the monks failed to observe the tenets of traditional spiritual idealism. Monastics had become immoral and worldly. This spiritual laxity was evidenced through the two great surveys *Valor Ecclesiasticus* and the *Compendium Compertorum*, which shocked parliament and many others into supporting anti-monastic legislation. This moment of reform euphoria allowed the king to move against the religious houses, eventually suppressing all monasteries between 1536-1539 on the basis of reform in line with notions of traditional spiritual idealism.

Answering the four research questions posed at the beginning of this dissertation, historians have perhaps spent too much effort determining whether English monasticism was in various states of goodness or badness in the decades preceding the Reformation.<sup>508</sup> Viewing the institution through the lens of popular spiritual idealism, the dissertation has shifted the focus from debates on charity, immorality, or disciplinary failure, and instead shown how many observers understood varying groups within monasticism in relation to their own understanding

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<sup>508</sup> The four questions were: First, are most historians of English monasticism correct in their interpretation that it had become a corrupt institution, desperately in need of reform or total abolition in the century before 1536? Second, does this interpretation conform to the contemporary understandings of ideal monastic spirituality and its place within English society? Third, how did diverse forms of monastic lifestyles along with each order's corresponding reputation for spiritual idealism or the lack of exceptionalism, influence the views of contemporary critics of monasticism and their audiences? Finally, to what degree did understandings of monastic holiness or sacredness contribute to the imagery of exceptionalism within the surviving documentation during the years preceding the Reformation?

of holiness. Certainly particular religious orders garnered more reverence and disproportionate amounts of monetary contributions from the laity because of their perceived holiness. Chief among these groups was the Carthusians, who more than any other monastic order embodied the four archetypes of spiritual idealism in the perception of many lay observers. The maintenance of this reputation in poetry, literature, and scholarly treatises only enhanced the order's prestige as these works enjoyed large audiences. Nevertheless, the Carthusians participated in many of the same worldly activities that other orders were chastised for, but their hermetic nature, austere repute, and small overall numbers likely enhanced their public image as holy and pious solitaries, who exemplified lay perceptions of spiritual idealism. The martyrdom of the 18 Carthusians during the Reformation struggle both confirmed the devoutness of the order and enlarged their fame within English history. Throughout the late Middle Ages the perception of spiritual idealism among individuals and groups determined their social utility and legacy.

In sum, this dissertation has probed concepts and perceptions of spiritual idealism among many influential thinkers and writers during the late Middle Ages, who continually shaped the tenets of English spirituality between the years 1350-1539. Focusing specifically on what defined holiness, it argued that four central archetypes formed that basis of Christian spiritual idealism, which were the quest for personal piety, maintenance of idyllic poverty, austere living, and the denial of religious corporatism. Monastics had long represented the apex of spirituality within English religion, but as individuals and entire orders fell away from these key archetypes of spiritual exceptionalism, they lost their aura of holiness. This metamorphosis transformed these individuals from sacred vessels of the divine into worldly creatures, who then differed little from the laity. As this change occurred throughout the late Middle Ages, poets, polemicists, and acute observers distinguished the exceptional from the mundane religious orders. They argued that



pure monastics remained an essential part of late medieval society, as the laity saw them as potent spiritual intercessors, whose prayers could be channeled for their spiritual benefit. Writers highlighted the social utility of monks and nuns that embodied their notions of spiritual idealism, as these extrinsic behaviors demonstrated intrinsic holiness. The contemplative orders and solitaries, especially the Carthusians, distinguished themselves as spiritual exemplars in the perception of lay observers from other religious orders, but only remained a small fraction of monasticism. As humanist criticism and Protestant ideology spread during the early sixteenth century these reformers questioned the utility of corrupt monasticism, yet they still advocated for a return to traditional notions of spiritual idealism, though altered slightly within these new ideologies. Ultimately, dynamic colloquies, works of literature, and religious polemic encouraged secular authorities to implement monastic reform to preserve traditional spiritual idealism. This work in conjunction with the pressing financial needs of Henry VIII stemming from his divorce crisis, led to a concerted royal effort to dissolve the English monasteries. Throughout this struggle from 1529-1539 many monastics, especially those spiritual exemplars among the Carthusians, demonstrated their unyielding resolve and exceptionalism among the religious orders through largescale martyrdoms. This dissertation has shown, perhaps ironically, that in claiming to preserve the same spiritual idealism monasticism had originated among the English populace, the crown slowly suppressed the totality of the religious houses. Thus, the archetype of spiritual idealism proved the key ideological force that inspired impassioned debate and continually generated socio-religious change throughout the late medieval period and English Reformation.

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