

The Spirituality of *Piers Plowman*: A New Look

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In memory of Conrad Pepler OP (1908–1993)

Sixty years ago, Conrad Pepler wrote "The Spirituality of William Langland," a short study of the fourteenth-century poem, *Piers Plowman* (*Blackfriars* 20 (1939): 846-854). This book-length medieval religious poem, by a Londoner usually called William Langland, narrates the life story of a commoner, Will, in a series of ten dream-visions which give him insight into life, the community, evil and sin, and the search for God. In this poem, Father Pepler found "a truly English and liturgical type of spirituality that must have been characteristic of the devout members of the Church, both ecclesiastical and lay" ("Spirituality" 846). In his *Blackfriars* essay and in a chapter of his 1958 book, *The English Religious Heritage*, Father Pepler saw *Piers Plowman* as "delineating the beginning and growth of the spiritual life in the common man" (*ERH* 56). He defined the spirituality of *Piers Plowman* as "objective," reflecting "the restrained, austere and majestic treatment of the liturgy" in sharp contrast to the subjective, "realistic and emotional devotion to the humanity of Christ, so typical of fourteenth century piety" ("Spirituality" 853). He noted the centrality in the poem of the idea of relationship: "From the very fact of the Incarnation all mankind has become related to God in common brotherhood, even those outside the Church" (*ERH* 56; cf. "Spirituality" 850).

Father Pepler's article was written at a time of great scholarly interest in *Piers Plowman* as a religious work. It was preceded by the work of such giants as R. W. Chambers (1924, 1939) who compared *Piers* to the *Divine Comedy*; G. R. Owst (1925, 1926, 1933), who pointed out the influence of sermons on the poem; and C. S. Lewis (1936) who extolled its literary excellence.¹ Many scholars of the day were interested in sources and influences which had helped to form *Piers Plowman*: Mabel Day (1927) in Duns Scotus; T. P. Dunning (1937) in the Fathers and Aquinas; Greta Hort (1938) in the Breviary and Missal as well as theology; Sister Mary Aquinas Devlin OP (1939) in Bishop Brinton's sermons. Henry Wells (1929) explained the poem as an expression of the three lives of Christian

perfection, a view which influenced Father Pepler and many others. Another influence on his work was Christopher Dawson (1933), who called the poem "a voice from another world—the submerged world of the common Englishman...the authentic voice of the English people" (242).²

In the sixty years since Father Pepler's groundbreaking essay appeared, *Piers Plowman* studies have expanded dramatically. For example, bibliographies list 11 books and articles on *Piers Plowman* published in 1939 (DiMarco) and 75 in 1996 (*YLS*). An annual, the *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, began publication in 1987. A *Companion to Piers Plowman* appeared in 1988, and annotated bibliographies in 1978, 1982, and 1990 (in addition to an annual annotated bibliography in the *YLS*). Selections from the poem are now widely available for study in British secondary schools and American colleges and universities, and five paperback modernizations are currently in print.

The most significant work on the spirituality of the poem, the subject which Father Pepler opened, is probably Guy Bourquin's article, "*Piers Plowman* ou l'ascèse de la sincérité," (*La Vie Spirituelle* 131 (1977):686–714), followed by his two-volume study, *Piers Plowman* (Lille: U. de Lille, 1978). However, many other articles and books have illuminated aspects of the poem's spirituality. Morton Bloomfield, for example (*Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, [1961]), drew further attention to the immense influence of the Bible on the poem, and John Alford (*Piers Plowman: a Guide to the Quotations*. Binghampton: MRTS, 1992) traced and tabulated most of its Biblical (and other) quotations. Some studies have been done of the intertextuality of *Piers Plowman* and particular Biblical books: specifically, the Psalms, the Wisdom books and the Johannine books.³ A number of articles have pursued Father Pepler's insight about the liturgical character of the poem, perhaps most notably J. A. W. Bennett's study of poetry about the Passion of Christ and a series of articles by Raymond St. Jacques.⁴

In showing the "fundamentally liturgical" nature of *Piers Plowman*, Father Pepler noted that the protagonist's "prayer is communal; his approach to God is not isolated or solitary" (*ERH* 52, 53; "Spirituality" 850). This communal nature of the poem's thought was further emphasized by Bloomfield: "Piers is first of all socially oriented" (105) and by Ann Middleton in her study of the "public poetry" of the period.⁵ Unlike what Father Pepler called the "intense, personal, and chivalrous" devotion so popular at the time (*ERH* 33) which addressed God as spouse or lover in the style of the Song of Songs, the spirituality of *Piers Plowman* is "public" also in the names it uses for God. In *Piers Plowman*, God is never seen as spouse or lover; rather, in relationships which are public and open though deeply personal, God is named father, mother, brother, companion, judge,

lord, teacher, physician, creator, redeemer, comforter and champion.

In recent years, new attention has been paid to what Father Pepler called the "economic" (*ERH* 43) character of the poem's spirituality, namely its teaching about poverty and social justice. In this teaching, as in its "objective," "public" attitude toward God, the poem was evidently out of date, alien to the individualistic work ethic of the late fourteenth century which blamed the poor for their poverty, very much like the ethos of our times in developed capitalist countries. "The poem," Pepler wrote, "is a protest against the recent introduction of money power into the social scheme of his day" (*ERH* 42). A number of distinguished scholars have recently probed the attitude of the poem toward money and poverty, its use of a plowman as an ideal, its "point-by-point reversal of the almost universal contemporary criticism of laborers" (Kirk 7).⁶ The poem shows the poor as part of the community with a right to food and clothing, a right to be included, and a claim upon God and the wealthy members of the community.

Another aspect of the poem's spirituality which has been emphasized recently is its affirmation of material creation, the body, animals and plants, sexual love and marriage. M. T. Tavormina's book, *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995) is a recent explication of this attitude.

Most recently, new discoveries about the Lollards, followers of John Wyclif, are influencing studies of the spirituality of *Piers Plowman*, as scholars try to see what the poem has in common with the works of the "poor preachers." David Aers, for example, notes that *Piers Plowman* rejects or ignores "the conventionally dominant figurations of Christ's humanity" in favour of a Christ who preaches and acts in truth, emphasizing "a socially embodied and collective imitation of Christ, grounded in justice" with "a refusal to separate the spiritual from the social, the individual pursuit of the virtuous life, of salvation, from the pursuit of justice in communities" (68, 59, 67).⁷ He shows that this image of Christ is similar to that preached by the Lollards, but Dominicans will see a likeness between Langland's image and that preached by Dominicans, recalling Vicaire's emphasis on Dominic's love of the "apostolic life" and his imitation of "the divine Preacher."⁸ Efforts are ongoing to clarify relationships between the spirituality of *Piers Plowman* and the many other medieval spiritualities which historical research is uncovering.

Naturally, in addition to these developments, there have been changes in approach to *Piers Plowman* in the sixty years since Father Pepler's article was published. For one thing, attitudes toward authorship have changed. Pepler, like his contemporaries, assumed that the poem's statements about its narrator were biographical facts about the author (*ERH* 41-2). Today, any biographical statement about Langland, even his name, is considered

uncertain, although studies of dialect are making some probabilities weightier than others. Thus, today, probably no one would write of the spirituality of "William Langland," since so little is known of him. Even to write, as I have done here, of the spirituality of *Piers Plowman* may be questioned, since there is less uncertainty in drawing conclusions about the "B-version," or even about a particular manuscript of that version, than about the poem in general.

But in spite of these inevitable changes, in one way in particular Father Pepler was far ahead of his time as probably the first scholar to recommend the pastoral use of *Piers Plowman* as "a solid basis for a truly English type of spirituality" (*ERH* 40). Recommending the use of a then recent modernization of the text (by Henry Wells) as "easily readable without losing too much of the power of the original" (*ERH* 41), he obviously believed that the poem could be useful for those who were not scholars and those who did not read Middle English. The purpose of the poem, he believed, was "to assist...people in their journey to the Tower of Truth" (*ERH* 49) and he wrote to make that assistance accessible to contemporary Christians. Unfortunately, although the awareness of *Piers Plowman* has grown immensely in the last six decades, this awareness is still almost completely confined to academics. The poem is still not taught in courses in the history of spirituality, nor as an aid to preaching, nor are selections yet available for the general public as meditations or guides to prayer. The immense popularity of the work of Julian of Norwich (who seems to have been influenced by *Piers Plowman*) shows that people are hungry for solid, beautiful texts of spirituality, yet *Piers*, which J. A. W. Bennett called "the supreme English testament of Christian faith and practice" (85), remains the least known of English religious texts.

The poem's focus upon the lay life, its positive valuation of marriage, sexuality, and the body, its profoundly Biblical character, its strong teaching on social justice, are all aspects of spirituality particularly attractive and relevant to twenty-first-century needs. *Piers Plowman* draws the mind to contemplate the central mysteries of the faith: the Trinity, the incarnation, the indwelling, the church, and thus it is a help for those who wish to grow in faith and understanding. It is laced throughout with Biblical quotations, which some scholars see as the "spine" of the poem; its explanations of these verses qualify it as a Biblical commentary, an aid in preaching, teaching, and counselling. It dramatizes the liturgy and invites contemplation of its inner meaning. Its presentation of individual and social sin is realistic, sometimes comic and sometimes painful, touching the heart with compunction. And throughout the poem, the sense of God grows as transcendent and immanent, tender and majestic, infinitely merciful and faithful, mother and father of all humans, champion and saviour.

The language of the original and the complexity of the narrative have sometimes frightened away prospective students, but now excellent modernizations, editions with user-friendly notes, and articles and books written to introduce new readers to the poem make the study of the text easier.⁹ Medieval wills show that the poem was the possession of ordinary clergymen and laity; it seems to have been written for common people and loved by them for the first two centuries after it was written. Perhaps it is time now for this treasure of Christian faith to be opened again to the people.

- 1 Chambers, "Long Will, Dante, and the Righteous Heathen," *Essays and Studies* 9: 50–69; *Man's Unconquerable Mind*. London: Cape. Owst, "The 'Angel' and the 'Goliardeys' of Langland's Prologue," *MLR* 30 (1925): 270–79; *Preaching in Medieval England*. Cambridge: C. U. P., 1926; *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*. Cambridge: C. U. P., 1933. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*. London: Oxford U. P., 1936.
- 2 Day, "Duns Scotus and 'Piers Plowman'," *RES* 3 (1927): 333–4; Devlin, "Bishop Thomas Brunton [sic] and his Sermons," *Speculum* 14 (1939): 324–44; Dunning, *Piers Plowman*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937; Hort, *Piers Plowman and Contemporary Religious Thought*. London: S.P.C.K., 1938; Wells, "The Construction of *Piers Plowman*," *PMLA* 45 (1929): 123–40; Dawson, *The English Way*, ed. M. Ward. London: Sheed and Ward, 1933.
- 3 Michael P. Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song*. Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania, 1995; S. M. C. Davlin, "Piers Plowman and the Books of Wisdom," *YLS* 2 (1988): 23–33 and "Piers Plowman and the Gospel and First Epistle of John," *YLS* 10 (1996): 89–127.
- 4 J. A. W. Bennett, *Poetry of the Passion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; St. Jacques, "Langland's Bells of the Resurrection and the Easter Liturgy," *English Studies in Canada* 3 (1977): 129–135, and other studies.
- 5 "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94–114.
- 6 Elizabeth Kirk, "Langland's Plowman and the Recreation of Fourteenth-Century Religious Metaphor," *YLS* 2 (1988): 1–21; Gervase Mathew OP.wrote about "Justice and Charity in *The Vision of Piers Plowman*," *Dominican Studies* 1 (1948): 360–66.
- 7 "Christ's Humanity and *Piers Plowman*," *YLS* 8 (1994): 107–126.
- 8 M-H. Vicaire, *St. Dominic and his Times*, trans. K. Pond. London: McGraw Hill, 1964: passim, 161.
- 9 Two excellent editions in paperback, with helpful notes, are A. V. C. Schmidt, *Vision of Piers Plowman*, 2nd ed.
- 10 Everyman. London: Dent, and Boston: Tuttle, 1995, and Derek Pearsall, *Piers Plowman*. London: Arnold, 1978. The notes in W. W. Skeat's old edition, *Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, 2 vol. London: Oxford U. P., 1978, remain invaluable. The five modernizations currently in print are by Donaldson (Norton, 1990), Schmidt (Oxford U. P. 1992), Lovella (Pegasus, 1992), Goodridge (Penguin, 1959), and Economou (U. of Pennsylvania, 1996). See also James Simpson, *Piers Plowman, an Introduction to the B-Text*. London: Longman, 1990.