

Christian duty and religious doubt in the song of roland and the canterbury tales...



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The Middle Ages were marked by religious upheaval in Europe. Two new major world religions were coming to power: Islam and Christianity. The rapid success of Christianity led the Roman Catholic Church to become the dominant religious force in most of the western world, and as with any powerful institution, it became increasingly corrupt (Swanson 409). As Lillian Bisson writes in *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*, “[the] Medieval church . . . was a collection of competing factions with often contradictory agendas” (49). The church’s internal conflict led to public mistrust in religious authority (51-53). Expanding on Bisson’s observations, this paper will describe the development of religious doubt in Medieval Europe and note how it characterizes the literature of the period. Comparing two of the foremost texts of the Middle Ages – the anonymous epic *The Song of Roland* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* – I argue that the latter work registers a profound mistrust of religious authority that is not present in the former. The different images the two texts present of the church, I suggest, distinguishes *The Song of Roland* and the *Canterbury tales* as, respectively, early-Medieval and late-Medieval works. Three developments contributed to the rise of Christian doubt in the Middle Ages: the persecution of heretics, the Black Plague, and The Great Schism. As Bisson describes, the Catholic Church became increasingly powerful as it became inseparable from government. When the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, the church gained influence rapidly and a new doctrinal hierarchy began to develop in place of the former communal character of the church (52). Individuals who did not accept Catholic doctrine were either dismissed as subhuman, or – if they lived in what came to be called

Christendom – persecuted as heretics. Eventually, the laity and especially
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the middle and lower classes developed a sense of distrust for the church. Members of the clergy who became church leaders for money and status rather than religious conviction routinely abused their power. The general public noticed these abuses and so began the downfall of the previously ultimate trust in religious authority. The Black Plague, a tragedy that killed countless numbers of people in Christendom, also contributed to public mistrust in the church because the people realized their clergymen's prayers were useless against the illness. Faith in God's power and God's benevolence came to an all-time low as people helplessly watched their loved ones die. Many members of the clergy fled their positions in fear of the work required of them with the morbidly ill (50). A third major problem with the church resulted from what is known as the Great Schism. When two different men claimed the right to the papacy, immense scandal and internal conflict threatened the future of the church (56). During the same period, Oxford scholar John Wyclif began to criticize the church publicly. Not only did he challenge fundamental beliefs and practices by denying the possibility of transubstantiation, but he also attempted to diminish the priests' power. He translated the Bible to English for the first time in history, which made it much more available to the common person (58), and he claimed that any good Christian was a priest. This claim, along with the newly translated Bible and a growing lower class literacy rate, led to the decrease in a need for priests in order to worship. Suddenly, the common person could be religious without the intervention of the church. This shift in religious power is registered in the literature of the time: while early Medieval writings emphasize the higher ranking of monks and nuns, later works place more emphasis on the religious importance of poor preachers and even the laity. <https://assignbuster.com/christian-duty-and-religious-doubt-in-the-song-of-roland-and-the-canterbury-theses/>

With the church weakened by both internal conflict and diminishing credibility among the public, many Christians began to seriously reconsider church values and doctrine. Accordingly, the literature of the period reflects profound reservations about the church, reservations that are not present in earlier texts. The anonymous French national epic, *The Song of Roland*, written before Wyclif's criticisms and before the Black Death wreaked its havoc on Christendom, is unambiguously supportive of church authority. Written as a piece of propaganda for the necessity of Holy Wars, *The Song of Roland* demonstrates the intolerance of the church in the Middle Ages. Although *The Song of Roland* describes events that occurred in 778, it was composed in 1095: the year the first Crusade against the Muslims was launched. In reality, however, the battle the text deals with was not part of a holy war. In fact, it had nothing to do with Islam. The Basques, not the Muslims, had massacred the rear guard of the Frankish army. The writer of *The Song of Roland* uses extensive creative license to develop the story into a reductive allegory about the triumph of Christianity (good) over Islam (evil). The writer "gives religious significance to secular acts, appropriating the campaign of 778 not only as holy war but as war between God and Satan" (Dominik, 2). Within the allegorical framework of the text, Roland's tale is also the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Roland is a Christ figure who dies a martyr's death; the parallels between the two characters re-inforce the dogmatic nature of the text. Roland has Twelve Peers (Roland 1259), much like the Twelve Disciples of Christ. Ganelon, Roland's downfall, is figured as Judas. He betrays Roland by telling the Saracens (pagans and therefore enemies of Christianity) how they can ambush and kill the skilled warrior. Interestingly, Ganelon betrays Roland for reasons of pride rather

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than money. In his conversation with the pagans, Ganelon remarks: " If someone can bring about the death of Roland, / the Charles would lose the right arm of his body" (1266). The author draws a parallel between Roland and Jesus Christ, who in Christian mythology is often described as the " right hand" of God. Roland's death re-enforces the allegorical character of the epic. Attempting to alert his supporters that his army has been ambushed, Roland blows his horn so hard that he dies of sheer effort. Almost immediately, his soul is taken directly to Heaven by angels. Accordingly, the language used in the death scene recalls the Biblical episode of The Passion: " Roland the Count feels: his sight is gone; / gets on his feet, draws on his final strength, /the color on his face lost now for good" (1301). Christian allegory is used to justify not just the church, but the particular Crusade the church was promoting at the time of the epic's composition. Insofar as Roland's death is presented as noble, the scene reminds readers of the Christian value of sacrifice: holy war is justifiable because its warriors must suffer as Jesus Christ suffered for the common good of the people. The Song of Roland is used to promote the idea of Holy War as a necessary sacrifice that elevates the warrior to the status of Jesus Christ. Written somewhere between 1386 and 1400, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a late-medieval text, and as such, marked by the serious conflict surrounding the Catholic Church during this period. Lee Patterson, in his introduction to Chaucer in the *Norton Anthology of Western Literature*, underestimates the importance of religious doubt in Chaucer's writing. " Oddly enough", he writes, "[most] of these events [within and surrounding the church] find only the barest mention in Chaucer's poetry" (1697). As other critics have noted, however, Chaucer's texts often deal extensively with religion on a subtextual level. <https://assignbuster.com/christian-duty-and-religious-doubt-in-the-song-of-roland-and-the-canterbury-tales/>

Bisson notes that Chaucer had friends in common with John Wyclif and thus extensive connections to the critics of the church (58). Similarly, Helen Phillips argues that much of Chaucer's writing can be characterized as "anticlerical fabliaux", a common literary technique of the late Middle Ages that satirized, and thus undermined, church authority (104). Phillips also notes the subversive gesture of Chaucer's choice to write in vernacular English, as opposed to Latin, the official language of Roman Catholicism and, as such, a marker of the elitism that characterized the Medieval church. Well aware of the growing literacy among the people of the lower classes, Chaucer's use of vernacular English made his works - unlike the Bible - accessible to everyone across a wide class stata. His particular sympathy for people in the lower strata of the social hierarchy is registered throughout his writing. As Phillips argues, Chaucer's depiction of peasants "[...] is empathetic, unpatronising, and respectful". He contrasts "their sound moral judgement, sense of fair play and disgust with rogues [with] the arrogant clerical predators" (106). Aligning himself with the critics of the church, whose skepticism was frequently directed at its most powerful members, Chaucer presented the upper members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as hateful and corrupt, and his few examples of good religious figures are of the lowest status (107). Religious issues permeated many aspects of Chaucer's writings, even those texts dealing only indirectly with the church. In *The Canterbury Tales*, his most famous work, Chaucer uses characterization and imagery to subtly critique the corruption and tyranny of church authority. For example, the Miller, a character seemingly unassociated with the church, is among Chaucer's most potent vehicles for voicing religious doubt. As the Miller prepares to tell his tale, he says, "I'll tell a golden legend and a life," <https://assignbuster.com/christian-duty-and-religious-doubt-in-the-song-of-roland-and-the-canterbury-tales/>

which, as Nicholas Watson notes, is a common phrase used to describe the stories told of saints' lives in the time. Chaucer is "stripping [Christianity] of its pretensions," by describing the Miller's vile tale of adultery with language of a holy text (52). The Miller thus announces his tale as a satire of the seriousness with which people at the time approached religion, and the authority it had over them. The content of the Miller's tale also has a subtext of religious doubt. The Miller tells the story of Alison, a young woman who is married to a carpenter named John. Alison is having an affair with Nicholas, an Oxford student, and is also the object of the clerk Absolon's unrequited affections. The sexuality and crudeness of the tale establishes it as a profane story that is inherently at odds with Christian doctrine, which legislates against sins of the flesh. However, the Miller's tale has numerous religious references. Introducing Nicholas to the reader, the Miller sings "Angelus to the Virgin," an ancient prayer that, when used to describe adultery, becomes sacriligious(1720). Similarly, after Nicholas and Alison decide to trick John in order that they can become lovers, Chaucer writes: Now in her Christian duty, one saint's day, To the parish church this good wife made her way, And as she went her forehead cast a glowAs bright as noon, for she had washed it solt glistened when she finished with her work.(1722)Chaucer uses juxtaposition here to sacriligious effect. The images of cleanliness and purity ("bright", "glow", "glistened"), as well as the fact that Alison goes to church "in her Christian duty", establish the character as a hypocrite. Alison is incriminated by her zeal for the church, and vice versa. If this is a woman who upholds her "Christian duty", Chaucer suggests, then Christianity leaves a lot to be desired. The trickery that Alison and Nicholas create in order to prevent her husband from discovering their adultery also takes a

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blatant jab at Christianity. The lovers use the story of Noah and the Great Flood from the Bible to coerce John into believing another flood is coming. The exchange of Biblical scripture for sexual gain suggests that Chaucer felt the church was often used as a means to an end (usually sexual or monetary) rather than as a path to spiritual fulfillment. Similarly, in a later episode, Absolon tries to woo Alison from outside her bedroom window by using images and language from the Biblical "Song of Songs". What is interesting about the "Song of Songs" is that while it is a love song in the Bible, it is interpreted by clergy as a representation of the pure love between God and humans. Here, however, Absolon uses it to attempt to woo a married woman, an act that reverses the official purpose of the text. The many perversions of Biblical scripture work together in the Miller's Tale to form a sort of comedic interpretation of the hypocrisy of the authority and actions of the Medieval Christian church. While there are many religious figures portrayed in a negative light in *The Canterbury Tales*, the most deplorable is the Pardoner. A pardoner's job was to sell papal indulgences, pre-written slips of paper which gave forgiveness to a sinner in exchange for an act of retribution and a donation of money to the church. The pardoner became an important figure within the church in the 13th century, when the full doctrine of purgatory was established (Phillips 105). This doctrine defined purgatory as a place of short-term punishment for sinners who were not completely absolved at death, but who had not committed sins bad enough to be banished to hell for all eternity. Indulgences could be bought either for a living person or for a deceased loved one, to decrease the amount of time spent in purgatory. Naturally, these indulgences became a large source of corruption in the church. Some pardoners falsified the documents in order to

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earn extra money for themselves, and laity felt free to indulge in sin because they could simply purchase forgiveness. Even within this corrupt profession, Chaucer's Pardoner is particularly despicable. In the first paragraph of his Prologue, he announces that his sermon is always based on the phrase, "Radix malorum est cupiditas," or "Avarice is the root of all evil" (1757). He then immediately begins to describe how he uses religion for his own material gain by selling false relics and forged indulgences. Directly contradicting his own sermon, the Pardoner reinforces the subtext of religious doubt that runs throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. His hypocrisy is further compounded by the content of his tale, which is presented as a moral lesson and involves three men who die because of their own greed. In the General Prologue, the description of the Pardoner suggests what Phillips calls his "spiritual barrenness" (149). He is described as having long blonde hair, no facial hair, and a high-pitched voice, qualities that suggest he is effeminate. He is also described as being very fashionable, also a feminine trait. Accordingly, the narrator observes: "I think he was a gelding or a mare," (1715). The implication is that the Pardoner is either a eunuch or a homosexual, both figures who would have represented complete fruitlessness and barrenness during the Middle Ages. His own physical infertility suggests his even greater spiritual infertility (Phillips 149). In contrast to the Pardoner, the Parson in *The Canterbury Tales* is portrayed sympathetically. The Parson is of the lowest class of clergy, and his positive characterization suggests Chaucer's religious criticism was directed at the upper strata of the church. He is described in the General Prologue as "a good man of the priests' vocation, / A poor town Parson of true consecration, / But he was rich in holy thought and work" (1710). A man who

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truly cares for his congregation, the Parson hates to discipline someone who has not been able to pay tithes. Accordingly his tale is structured less as a story than as a sermon. The parson's tale suggests that his piety is sincere: indeed, a pious religious figure would not waste time telling light-hearted stories when he could instead be spreading the word of God. Unlike the Pardoner, the lower class Parson truly follows his own preaching. As a comparison of two Medieval works indicates, the intense conflict surrounding the Catholic church in the latter half of the period distinguishes early Medieval literature from later works. In the Song of Roland, which was composed before the major problems of dissent, disease, and corruption led to public doubt in religious authority, the church is depicted as the ultimate good triumphing over the ultimate evil, which is figured by Islam. The author does not appear to question whether Holy War was truly holy. In Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, however, the author voices serious skepticism about the church's influence and motives. Chaucer, himself a man of faith, does not attack Christianity as a belief system, but rather as an organized religion. He reserves his harshest criticism for the corruption and hypocrisy of the clergymen in the upper strata of the church hierarchy. As The Song of Roland reflects the success of Christianity's rise to power in the early Middle Ages, so The Canterbury tales registers the beginning of the church's internal fragmentation and diminishing credibility among the public. Works

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