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CHAUCER'S RELATION TO THE RELIGIOUS
MOVEMENTS OF HIS DAY.

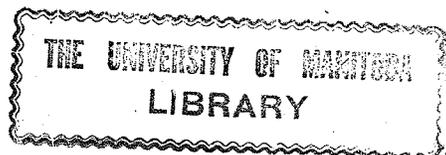
by

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Outline.

Introduction.

Religious position of poets not usually canvassed

unless

- a) scanty material -p.1
- b) subsequent religious controversies -p.1

I. Antecedently likely that Chaucer was a Catholic

- a) personal characteristics -p.2
- b) uniformity of religious adherence -p.2

II. The two chief religious movements in England

- a) reform within and without -English Catholics -5
- b) Chaucer representative of English Catholics -6

III. Relations of Church and State

- a) spirit of national independence asserting itself -8
- b) attitude of England to papacy -10
- c) Chaucer representative of this attitude -11

IV. Clergy in England

- a) seculars - archbishops, bishop, archdeacon, summoner, priest, clerk -14
- b) regulars - monks and abbots, prioress, friars, pardoners -17

V. Chaucer's attitude towards the different orders

- Regulars
- a) monk- 21
 - b) friar - 23
 - c) pardoner -27
 - d) summary of (a) (b) (c) -31

- Secular
- e) Archdeacons -31
 - f) summoner -34
 - g) priest, clerk, plowman
(ideal characters) -34

VI. Wycliffe as the poor parson

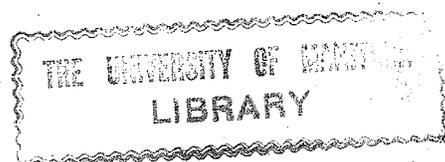
- a) Chaucer's picture -38
- b) relations between poet, John of Gaunt
and Wycliffe

VII. Divisions between lay and cleric -42

VIII Chaucer restrained in freedom of utterance by
fear of consequence -46

IX. The alleged skepticism of Chaucer

- a) transition -47
- b) skeptical nature of his mind and the
tendencies of belief to which he was exposed
-p.50
- c) legends -53
- d) alchemy, etc. -54
- e) irreverence -58
- f) the deity -59
- g) immortality -60
- h) summary -62



X. Philosophy of Life.

XI. Conclusion.

Chaucer's Relation to the Religious Movements of His Day.

Introduction.

The difficulty of determining **precisely** the religious views of a poet, who is not specifically a sacred poet, but who devotes himself simply to a portrayal of the ordinary life of his time in all its aspects, is a very common one.

a) The question of his faith is not usually debated unless there are some special reasons calling for it. One of these reasons is where there is a scarcity of information regarding the prevailing religion and incidental information may be gleaned from the writing of the poet. Another is when he happens to have flourished in a crisis, out of which subsequent religious controversies took their rise, and rival partizans are each anxious to claim for their side the support of a man of letters. Usually the question, if raised, is regarded merely as a by-question, or as a matter of mere intellectual curiosity.

b) In the case of Chaucer his religion often has assumed an importance more than ordinary through the anxiety of Protestant Catholic

controversialists to claim him for their respective sides. Had it not been for this fact, it may be doubted whether the subject of this essay would ever have been brought into serious discussion.

I. Likely a Catholic.

a) personal characteristics.

On the contrary, the personal characteristics and disposition of the poet, his social position and relations, and ~~all~~ his intellectual and moral tendencies, as well as the almost complete uniformity of the religious adherence of his day, would all point to his accepting, with the devotion, or lack of devotion, of an ordinary man of the world, the prevailing religion.

b) uniformity of religious adherence.

He lived almost in the heart of the middle ages. His lot was cast in an era far removed from the heresies that disturbed the early days of christianity and nearly two hundred years before the religious upheaval in the sixteenth century. In Chaucer's time there was but one religion in the western world. To ask a European of the day what ~~the~~ religion was, would be almost an insult. Sir Walter Scott

has caught and graphically described the spirit of the times in the interview between Quentin Durward and Hayraddin Maugrabin. "Are you a Christian?" asked the Scotchman. The Bohemian shook his head. "Dog!" said Quentin (for there was little toleration in the spirit of Catholicism in those days) "dost thou worship Mahoun?" "No," was the indifferent and concise answer of the guide who neither seemed offended or surprised at the young man's violence of manner. "Are you a Pagan then, or what are you?" "I have no religion" answered the Bohemian. Durward started back" (1) Christian, Mahomedan, Pagan, those were the alternatives. They exhausted the possibilities of religious adherence. Such a thing as utter scepticism could find no place in Durward's mind. To be a Christian was to be a Catholic, to be a Mahomedan was to be a dog; to be a Pagan or a skeptic was to put oneself outside the pale. There were representatives in Europe

(1) Quentin Durward. Chap. xvi

of these three, but for any other kind of religion good or bad, the majority of Europeans could find no more place than Quentin Durward.

If we consider his times then, there is a strong presumption that Chaucer was a loyal Catholic. And it is necessary to put this clearly forward in the beginning. It is true that there were Catholics and Catholics. There were Anglo-Catholics and French Catholics, Italian Catholics and others who differed keenly, but mainly from political causes. Yet, while this is true, and while the decision we shall reach, turns largely on the differences between the English and other Catholics, yet to read into the fourteenth century the divergencies of modern Protestantism and Catholicism, would lead to grave misinterpretations of such a mind as Chaucer.

It is easy for us to understand how a man may be a Methodist, an Anglican, a Baptist, a Presbyterian or a Romanist and still be a Christian. To Chaucer or even to Wycliffe it would have seemed incredible that a man could be a Christian and be anything else than a Catholic.

II. The Two Chief Religious Movements in England.

(a) Reform within - English Catholics.

It was to a great extent because Chaucer lived at the same time as Wycliffe and was brought into relations with him, that the poet's religious views have become a matter of debate. Wycliffe lived and died a Catholic. At the time of his death he was priest of a Catholic parish. (1) On many points where Wycliffe diverged from the church, he was but the mouthpiece of the English Catholics of the time. (2) If we find that Chaucer diverges on these matters also it will not prove that he sympathized with Wycliffe in those divergencies from Catholicism for which the latter was disciplined. It will only establish the fact that Chaucer was an Englishman as well as a Catholic. In the heated debates following the Reformation under Henry VIII Protestant writers claimed that Chaucer was a pupil of Wycliffe's and was one of those who prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation

(1) Perry, "Students' English Church History" p.444

(2) Dean Hook, "Lives of Archbishops of Canterbury

as distinct from the Reformation within the Catholic Church. (1) The solution of the subject of this essay lies, it would seem, in that distinction. There was a Protestant Reformation and there was a Catholic Reformation.

The former affected the church in its ministry, in its practice, in its ritual and in its doctrine. It not only swept away what men of Chaucer's day recognized as abuses, it penetrated to the vital questions of faith. The latter dealt only with what the Catholics considered abuses. On which side the tendencies of Wycliffe's teaching lay is unquestioned. He was the precursor of the Protestant Reformation. On which side was Chaucer? The position taken in this essay is that Chaucer attacked only what the English Catholics considered abuses.

b) Chaucer representative of English Catholics

To establish what position it will be necessary to review a few selected passages from his writings, which present Chaucer's characteristic attitude to the clergy or the beliefs of the church. Failing contemporary evidence, this is the only way open. The reliability of this method has

Studies in Chaucer.

(1) Lounsbury III p. 461

been questioned, it is true, on the ground that these expressions of opinions are not personal but are put in the mouth of his characters. (1) When it is noted, however, that there is a certain uniformity in what he makes his characters say, and when it is noted further, that their utterances are consistent with the incidental revelations of his personal opinions, we may accept them as giving the truest idea of the poet's position that it is possible for us to secure. Chaucer has said more concerning the ~~man~~ ministry of the church than he has said concerning the doctrines. Thus it is not so difficult to determine his attitude toward the clergy. But to lay too great stress on this aspect of the subject would be largely labour spent in vain. Nearly all the modern critics are agreed with Professor Lounsbury when he says - "Chaucer, in describing his clerical characters used only the commonest of commonplaces about them" (2) The bitterest denunciations of abuses in the Church can, moreover, be found in the writings of men most devoted to its interests. (3) Langland and Gower are quoted as examples.

(1) Lounsbury. II p.484 - 485 (cf p.491)

(2) Ibid p.467

(3) Ibid p. 468

A much greater perplexity arises from the deeply rooted conception that the ante-Reformation clergy and laity must have acted as the Roman Catholic clergy and laity would be expected to act at the present time. (1) If we approach the references in Chaucer in that frame of mind, the conduct of all classes, clerical and lay, will be most puzzling. A brief historical survey of the relation of Church and State in England, is therefore a necessary preliminary to a proper appreciation of Chaucer's attitude.

III. Relations of Church and State.

a) Spirit of national independence

Before the Norman conquest, the union of Church and State has been compared to the union of soul and body in one man. "If the flesh sometimes lusted against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, they were always one in action" (2) To establish his own power the Conqueror brought the principles of feudalism to bear on the Church. He separated the spiritual from the civil jurisdiction, by the

(1) Hook. "Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury
III p.17

(2) Ibid. III. p.7

establishment of spiritual courts. "The union of Church and State thenceforth may be compared to the union of man and wife in one household. Although the general interest was one and the same, there was room for misunderstandings, disputes and even divorce." (1) There arose almost immediately a struggle for the mastery, between the two powers, the civil and the ecclesiastical. The clergy were the popular leaders, they were of the people. The barons, who at first supported the Crown, became, in time, converts to the popular side. When the tyranny of Richard and John became intolerable and it was clear that the contest was no longer for the superiority of Primate at Canterbury but for that of the Pope, and that his design was to make England a fief of Rome, the whole people united in the one object of asserting the national independence. "The first Englishman," says Dean Hook, "stood before the world on the 15th of June, 1215" (2)

(1) Hook, "Lives of Archbishops of Canterbury, III, p.7

(2) Ibid. III, p.8, 9, 10.

It is in that sense that Chaucer is spoken of as an "Englishman" here.

b) Attitude of England to the Papacy.

He represents fairly the attitude of England to the papacy. From the reign of Henry III, when the national character began to be formed, all parties in England were resolute in resisting the unlawful requirements of the pope. What were lawful requirements and what were not, was the subject of debate; but, in maintaining a due independence, all were united; all regarded the papal power from a feudal point of view. (1) The pope was the spiritual feudal lord of western Christendom, there was no question of that but just as the feudal rights of a sovereign would be resisted when they were abused, so with the rights of the pope. An illustration may be taken again from "Quentin Durward". The quarrel between Louis and Charles, Duke of Burgundy, turned, as the Envoy words assert, upon the fact that Louis was both exceeding and abusing his feudal right as king.

(1) Hook, "Lives of Archbishops," III pp. 18.19

No one in England really denied the sovereignty of the pope until the reign of Henry VIII when feudalism had almost expired. Wycliffe, toward the end of his life, owing to his peculiar theory of "dominion" virtually denied the necessity of the papacy under certain conditions; but it would be absurd to look for any sympathy with that extreme position, in the utterances of Chaucer. All we find are genial satires of the abuses of papal power.

c) Chaucer representative of this attitude.

For example, in the Clerks Tale there is an imaginary ~~ka~~ scene descriptive of the evils and intrigue of the Papal Court. Griselda's husband is represented as going to Rome to get a dispensation annulling his marriage. Chaucer reveals in every line his disapproval, if the word is not too strong for one of his disposition, his detestation of such abuse of power.

"Whan that his doghter twelf yeer was of age,
He to the court of Rome in subtil wyse
Enformed of his wil, sent his message,

"Comaunding him swiche bulles to devyse
As to his cruel purpos may suffyse,
How that the pope, as f^or his peoples reste,
Bad him to wedde another, if him leste.
I saye, he bad they sholde countrefete
The popes bulles, making mencion
That he hath leve his first wyf to lete,
As by the popes dispensacioun,
To stin^ke rancour and dissencioun
Bitwixe his peple and him; thus seyde the bulle,
The which they han publiced atte fulle"

Cant. Tales E.736-749

The court of Rome had been secretly informed beforehand.
The motive for counterfeiting the bull is hypercritical.
It was to "stinte rancour"; but the real motive
is to "answerhis cruel purpos". It is needless
to say that these are satirical criticisms of abuses,
there is no denial of real authority.

Again in the Parson's tale, there is a fairly

full discussion of the rights of sovereignty and its abuses. It would be tedious to analyse this long passage. Suffice it to say that the key to it is the familiar quotation - "The pope calleth himself servant of the servants of God" So long as he exercises his power in that spirit, then it was a duty to submit to him, for "God ordeyned that som folk sholde be more high in estaat and in degree and that som folk more lowe, and that everich sholde be served in his estaat and in his degree." (1)

These quotations, which are representative of his whole attitude exactly express the spirit of contemporary England. The pope was at this time at Avignon and was regarded by Englishman as a "French" pope, and the words just quoted cannot be interpreted as indicating disloyalty/to the just rights of the pope. We may conclude this statement by quoting the words of a French Abbott, one of the preachers at the Council of Trent:

(1) Parson's Tale, C. 772.

"At the pope's court there is no sanctity, lawsuits and quarrels being the happiness of that court, and imposture its delight. Tryanny, rapaciousness and simony are practised in every part of it. It is a diabolical court" (1) Enough has been said on this point to justify the position that is to be established in this essay, namely, that Chaucer's opposition to the Catholic Church, was the opposition of those aiming at reforming it from within. This has been dealt with rather freely because it is regarded as determinative.

IV. Clergy in England.

a) seculars.

The clergy of Chaucer's day are broadly distinguished as Regular and Secular. "The regular clergy were those living under a rule, as canons regular monks and friars. The secular clergy consisted, not only of the higher and lower grades of priests, but of a vast army of clerks.The secular clergy were under the jurisdiction of the Bishops; while many of the Regulars were not" (2)

(1) Hook. ~~Ibid~~ III p.62

(2) Trevelyan. "England in the age of Wycliffe.

Before passing to Chaucer's attitude towards the different orders of the clergy, it would be perhaps be as well to make more particular distinctions. As it has been stated, there were, in the mediaeval Church two main divisions, - the secular and the regular. The Pope with his college of Cardinals was supreme over both. The seculars, in England were divided into two archbishoprics, the one of Canterbury and the other of York. These were again subdivided into bishoprics, which, if very large were divided into smaller districts under the supervision of archdeacons, who were generally selected from the clergy. The bishop made the archdeacon his deputy and the archdeacon in turn made use of the summoner, or server of summonses, who interpreted the laws of the church as best suited the purse of the archdeacon. The parishes were in charge of priests. In many cases, the poor parsons were unable to exist on the small income from the tythes and so let their benefices

and sought chantries in London or elsewhere. "The most usual way of endowing a church at this period was to establish a chantry or a chapel, with priests specially attached to it to sing masses and say private ~~parry~~ prayers for the souls of deceased persons named in the bequest..... Besides the regular chantry priests, great numbers of needy clerics lived by obtaining occasional employment to pray for souls" (1)

In addition to the beneficed clergy were the clerks. "Clerk" was a loose term which applied to anyone studying for the ministry. There were large numbers of them and they formed a very important class. "Part of them were engaged as teachers in the numerous grammar schools of the country.The clerical influence was still so great among those who made their living by the pen, that the clerks employed by the landowners and merchants were mostly "clerks" in the

(1) Prevelyan, England in Age of Wycliffe, p.132

original sense of the word; they were generally in holy orders." (1) These six, then, the archbishop, the bishop, the archdeacon with his assistant, the parish priest and the clerk, constitute the second division.

b) Regulars.

To pass on to the other group - the regulars.

"The term regular clergy is calculated to produce an illusory effect; it gives one the idea that the monks have always been ecclesiastics - have always essentially formed a part of the clergy - and this is, in point of fact, the general notion which has been applied to them indiscriminately, without regard to time or place, or to the successive modifications of the institution. And not only are monks regarded as ecclesiastics, but they are by many people considered as, so to speak, the most ecclesiastical of all ecclesiastics, It is an impression full of error. At their origin and for at least two centuries afterwards, the monks were not ecclesiastics at all; they were laymen

(1) Trevelyan, p.153

united together by a common religious creed, in a common religious sentiment, and with a common religious object, but altogether apart from the ecclesistastical society, from the clergy, especially so called." (1) In many cases however the monks took holy orders.

In the case of a larger monastery there was usually a convent dependent upon it, the Lady Superior of which was a Prioress; frequently the prioress had the rank of an abbess and in consequence was served by a "chapeleyne", and one or more priests.

The other orders in this group were the Pardoners and Friars, and these, too, recognized no authority save the pape's. The neglect of religious duties by the clergy and the degenerancy of the monks gave rise to

606

(1) Hook. III p. 74

mendicant orders, or the Preaching Friars. The two most important orders were the Franciscans and the Dominicans. The latter first appeared in England in 1221, the former in 1224.

"The primary principle of the older monks had been to fly from the world, the profession of the mendicants was the reverse of this. To go into the world; to have no houses or possessions of their own; to live a life of poverty in the narrowest cell and on the hardest fare; to carry thence the church to the poor." (1)

The character of the Pardoner, with his "indulgences" is perhaps better known than that of the friar. "Indulgence" was at first simply a commutation for penance. The punishments inflicted for sins committed were long; fasting and mortification had to be carried on for months and years. The faithful were permitted to transform these interminable chastisements into shorter expiation. Thus a clerk might exchange a year of penance against

(1) Hore, A.H. "History of Church of England.
p.155

(2) Jusserand, p. 309

three thousand lashes, reciting a psalm at each hundred" (1) Gradually the idea of a commutation disappeared, a theory of the "Treasury" took its place. This theory, though acted upon long before, was not clearly put forth until the fourteenth century. "In a bull of the year 1350 Pope Clement explains that the merits of Christ are infinite, and the merits of the Virgin and the saints are superabounding. This excess of unemployed merit has been constituted into a 'treasury'" (2) Having thus so much wealth at her disposal, the church sent certain people, authorized by letters, to offer to good Christian people some part of the heavenly wealth. These people "expected in return some part of the much more worldly riches their hearers might be possessed of and which could be applied to more tangible uses than the "treasury". The men entrusted with this mission were called sometimes

(1) Jusserand. p. 309

(2) Jusserand. p.511

"Quaestors" on account of what they asked, and sometimes "pardoners" on account of what they gave." (1)

V. Chaucer's attitude towards the different Orders. Regulars.

a) Monks.

Having thus briefly outlined the divisions of the clergy, we pass to a consideration of Chaucer's attitude towards the different orders. We find scattered throughout his ~~worke~~ works, attacks upon them. These attacks take the form of subtle insinuations, of open satire, or even more commonly of the statement of discreditable facts. In the description of the pilgrims, in the Prologue, Chaucer laughs at the inconsistent display of the monk:

"A monk ther was, a fair for the maistrye,
An outrydere, that loved venerye;
A manly man to be an abbot able.
Ful many a deynke hors had he in stable;
And, when he rood, men myghte his brydel here
Ginglen in a whistlyng wind as clere,
And eek as laude as dooth the chapel-belle
Ther, as this lord was keper of the celle.

.....
Of pricking and of hunting for the hare
Was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare.
I seigh his sleeves purfiled at the hond
With grys, and that the fyneste of a londs;
And for to festne his hood under his chin
He hadde of gold y-wroght a curious pin."

Cant. Tales pp. 165-172 & 190-196

In the Shipman's Tale, we have the story of the deceitfulness of a monk. Brother John, on finding the merchant's wife perplexed about some secret trouble asks her to tell him all her grief and promises not to betray her confidence. When he learns of her financial embarrassment, the kindly monk promises to assist her. On a pretext of borrowing for himself, he secured the hundred francs from the unsuspecting merchant, and gives it to the "faire wyff". Thus the wilful deceiver wins undeserved credit for benevolence.

The larger monasteries must have been for political reasons, especially obnoxious to the spirit of independence in England. They denied the right of the state to control them, and by spending their money freely at Rome, obtained exemption from the jurisdiction of the local bishops. (1)

(1) Hook. III p. 43 (based on Chron. of Abignon)

Englishmen came to regard them as foreign institutions. "The monks no longer played a patriotic and formidable part in the politics of the country. The life of the monastery was cut off from the life of the nation" (1)

b) friar.

While the monks were living useless lives with the extravagance of country gentlemen, the friars went forth without scrip or purse, as missionaries to the neglected poor. The rapidity of the rise, the early success and ~~perplexity~~ prosperity, then the corruption and the disgrace of these mendicants is a startling fact of mediaeval history. At first they lived among the poor, poor as they, and being besides experienced, devout and compassionate, they kept up the traditions of their order. (2) By the sick-bed, in the poor house, in the abode of death, whence others were flying, the fearless friar was to be found. At every corner they stood preaching the gospel, and they preached not dry doctrines, but living experiences. Gradually they won the respect of the middle and upper classes. (3)

(1) Trevelyan. England in Age of Wycliffe p.157

(2) Jusserand. "English Wayfaring Life" p.289

(3) Hook. "Lives of Archbishops of Canterbury"

"Even after their order fell into disrepute, the friar was popular with the mercantile classes on account of his varied attainments and experiences." (1) Their vast store of varied and interesting knowledge of the world gave them entrance to the homes of the nobility. They began to despise the other orders of clergy and began to evade their vows of poverty by placing their property in the hands of trustees. (2) In defiance of their rules they became students and soon were the leading scholars of the Universities. (3) "Leaning directly upon Rome, and always sure of support there, they feared not to enter the lists against bishops, priests and even monks, with which latter, they were generally on very bad terms." (3)

They were supposed to live by labour and begging: the latter soon became the regular means of living, and begging became a science. The country was divided into limits, from which we get "limitours." According to some critics, they even exacted an agreed rent from the limitours. No doubt Chaucer makes reference to this when he says of his friar, "His purchase was wel bettre than his rente" (4)

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- (1) Skeat. Y Notes on Canterbury Tales. p.208 A 208
 - (2) Hook. "Lives of Archbishops of Canterbury III p.51
 - (3) Perry. Students' English Church History. p.317
 - (4) Canterbury Tales A.256

These mendicants were bitter rivals of the parish clergy. Among the many causes perhaps the bitterest centred about the confessional. These itinerant priests had the power to grant absolution, and, as they were strangers to those to whom they ministered, they soon fell into grave abuses of their powers. They were sought by those who wished easy absolution, ~~and~~ They were popular with many but respected by none. All classes united to make their confessions a by-word. This outstanding vice of the friars is the one to which, in current literature, most frequent references are made; and it is the one on which Chaucer dwells in the genial satire, characteristic of his work. Here as elsewhere he makes "no attempt to show sin in other than its true light. Right as are his moral judgments, quick as he is to perceive evil, Chaucer is never touched by the spirit of the reformer" (1) He seems almost to have had a liking for his religious rascals. The friar reveals his own iniquity, but with all his faults he is regarded as a jovial companion:

(1) Root. "Poetry of Chaucer" pp. 28-29

"A Frere there was a wantoun and a merye

.....

Ful wel biloved and familier was he
With frankelneys over-al in his countree,
And eek with worthy wommen of the town"

Cant. Tales. A.208 & 215-7

As was said above, the chief cause for hatred of the friars, was their abuse of the power of granting absolution. This has not escaped Chaucer's view.

"Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
And plesaunt was his absolucioun

He was an easy man to give penaunce

Ther as he wisht to han a good petaunce"

Cant. Tales. A. 221-224

In the Sumoner's Tale we see a rascal of friar play on the folly and weakness of human nature. He visited the district "To preche, and eek to begge, it is no doubte"

Cant. Tales. D. 1712

"Trentals" seyde he "deliveren fro penaunce
Hir freendes soules, as wel olde as yonge,
Ye, whan that they hun been hastily y-songe;
Nat for to hold a preest joly and gay,
He singeth not but o masse in a day;
Delivereth out quod he anon the soules;
.....
Now spede yow hastily, for Cristes sake."

Cant. Tales. 1724 - 1732

Virtuously he wrote on "tables al of yvory" the names of "alle folk that yaf him any good, Assaunces that he wolde for him preye."

Cant. Tales 1744 -5

but as soon as he was out of sight

"He planed away the names everichon That he bifdun had writen in his tables;"

Cant. Tales D. 1758-9

To prove that Chaucer was only giving ~~mind to the~~ expression to the common mind of England, the words of Matthew Paris will suffice; he records that the people used to say; "Let us do what we please; some or other of the preaching brothers will pass this way one whom we never saw before and shall never see again. To him when we have done what we will, we can confess without trouble and annoyance" (1)

b) Pardoner.

Of all those who helped to bring disgrace upon the Church, the Pardoner was the most detested. His wallet was "bretful of pardon come from Rom all hoot" (2) By selling these to the credulous peasantry and dealing in spurious relics - a pillow-case

(1) Hook, III p.56

(2) Canterbury Tales A.686

which he called our Lady's veil, and pig-bones in a glass as the relics of a saint & he made more in one day than the honest parson earned in two months (1) There is abundant testimony in contemporary literature that the villany of the Pardoners had provoked antipathy not only in England, but throughout ~~England~~ Europe. A bull of Pope Urban V in 1369, shows that the Pope himself was aware of their evil practices. "Very often also" the letter says "when they mean to hurt a rector or his curate, they go to his church on some ~~feats~~ feast day especially as such time as the people are accustomed to come and make their offering. They begin then to make their collections or to read the name of their brotherhood or fraternity and continue until such an hour as it is not possible to celebrate mass conveniently that day. Thus they manage previously to deprive these rectors and vicars of the offerings which accrue to them at such masses." (2) Again, Pope Boniface IX, speaking at the very time Chaucer wrote his tales, says "Certain religious, who even belong to different mendicant orders,

(1) Cant. Tales A. 694

(2) Jussurand. "English Wayfaring Life" p.325

and some secular clerks, occasionally advanced in the eccleastical hierachy, affirm that they are sent by us and that they have received the mission to treat of certain affairs,to receive money for us and the Roman Church, and they go about the country under these pretexts" (1) Langland in his prologue makes statements directly against the pardoner -

"There preached a pardoner, as he a priest were
And brought up a bull, with bishop's seals
And said he himself would absolve them all,
From breach of fasting and broken vows."

Piers Plowman Prol. 66-69

Here again, we may say that Chaucer was only giving expression to the common mind of England.

"But of his craft, fro Berwik unto Ware
Ne was ther swich another pardoner
For in his male he hadde pilewe-beer,
Which that, he seyde, was our lady veyl.

.....

But ^{with} these relikes, whan ^{that} he fond
A povre person dwelling upon land
Upon a day he gat him more moneye

(1) Jusserand. p. 314

"Than that the person gat in monthes tweye.

And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,

He made the person and the people his apes"

Cant. Tales A.692-706

In his tale of the three revellers Chaucer's pardoner interrupts the narrative occasionally in order to discourse upon such sins as gluttony or swearing;

"~~Get~~ swering is a thing abominable

And false swering is yet more reprevable."

Cant. Tales C. 631-2

and again

"For drunkenesse is verray sepulture

Of mannes wit and his discrecioun.

In whom that drink hath dominacioun,

He can no conseil kepe, it is no dread."

Cant. Tales C. 558-561

He concludes his take by reminding the people that though they sin, pardon may be obtained for money:

"Myn holy pardoun may youalle waryce,

So that ye offre nobles or sterlinges,

Or elles silver broches, spones, ringes

.....

Your name I entre heer in my rolle anon

"In-to the bliss of hevene shul ye gon;
I yow assaile, by myn heigh power,
Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer
As ye were born: and, lo sirs, thus I preche.

Cant. Tales[©] 906 - 915

d) summary

It has been previously pointed out that the regulars were not always a part of the clergy especially so called. When they did attain holy orders, they were rivals everywhere of the parish priests. They were answerable to the pope rather than to the local bishops and from the privileges they enjoyed they amassed such wealth as made them objects of envy. If we add to this that they were the agents of Rome, it is easy to understand how the spirit of independence in England resented their presence. This helps to explain why Chaucer sympathized with the seculars rather than the regulars. The latter did not take part in the essential work in the parishes. In many parts of the Catholic world today, as in all ages, there are no regulars, but only parish clergy. Thus when Chaucer attacks the regulars he is not attacking the central ministry of the Church.

Seculars e) Archdeacon

In turning to a consideration of his attitude to the secular clergy, a few quotations may be selected as examples of the many indirect allusions in his works. It is a noticeable fact that the poet says nothing about the abuses among the bishops, but the picture of the archdeacon in the Friar's ^{Tale} ~~Tale~~, shows that he was not blind to what was going on amongst the higher clergy.

"Whilom ther was dwellinge in my countree
An erchedeken, a man of high degree,
That boldȝy dide execucioun,
Of wicchcraft and eek of banderye,
Of diffimacioun, and avoutrage,
Of church-reves, and of testaments,
And eek of many another maner cryme
Which nedeth nat rehercen at this tyme;
Of usure and of simonye also."

Cant. Tales^D, 1299-1309.

That this is put in the mouth of a friar, the open enemy of all the secular clergy, may, in view of the poet's many indirect allusions, be interpreted as something more than the sentiments of a friar. It must surely represent Chaucer's own view, at least in part. If the poet had held views quite different

from the friar's description of the archdeacon, he would never have made him speak as he does. All that can be said is, that in making this charge, the charge of a recognized enemy, Chaucer leaves room for the sympathy he shows elsewhere with the better classes of the secular clergy.

The archdeacons are the Oculi Episopi. "When the bishop's eye was evil we do not marvel that evil predicated the whole body. Through the policy or negligence of the diocesans the archdeacons obtained large powers." (1) Too often these used these powers as a means of enriching themselves. The connection between the bishops and the archdeacons is clearly brought out in the lines;

"For er the bisshop caught hem in his hook

They weren in the archdeakens book".

Cant. Tales D 1317 - 1318.

The passage shows the unpopularity into which the secular clergy had fallen. There were many good clergy in the parishes, but as a class they were involved in the disgrace brought upon them by those who were prominent in public life.

(1) Hook. III p.39

f) summoner.

Attached to the archdeacon was an official whose conduct goes far to explain how far an Englishman's instinctive sense of justice was outraged. The archdeacon had

"A Somnour redy to his hond,
A slyer boy was noon in Englend;
For subtilly he hadde his espialle,
That taught him, when that him might availle
He coude spare of lechours oon or two,
To techen him to foure and twenty mo.
For though this Somnour wood were as an hare,
To telle his harlotyre I wal nat spare"

Cant.Tales D.1321 - 28

g) ideal characters.

As an indication of the attitude that Chaucer adopted in the internal conflicts between lay and clergy, it is significant that in the Canterbury Tales where his position is most clearly brought out, the broad contrast of character suggests the preference of the poet. This is a clearer proof than incidental

allusions. The characters in the Canterbury Tales are intended to be representatives of the various types of English life. In his delineation of them, we may infer that the predilections of the poet would reveal themselves. It is full of significance that in the portrayal of characters it is only in the case of two or three that the poet succeeds in suppressing his irony and presenting to us an ideal. One of these ideal characters is the knight. It is conceded that this character is a favourite. (1) He is represented as brave, chivalrous, honourable, well-travelled, intelligent, in fact, he possesses all the qualities that go to make a genial companion, a good citizen and a worthy Christian.

"He never yet no villeinye ne seyde

In al his lyf unto no maner wight

He was a verray parfit gentil knight."

Cant.Tales A 70-72

The other ideal characters, the Poor Parson, the Plowman and the Clerk, introduce us to a fresh aspect of the subject. The most important of these is the poor parish priest. An important matter comes up for consideration with this character, the bearing of it upon

(1) Lounsbury, II 479-480.

Chaucer's attitude to the clergy and upon his relations to the clergy and upon his relations to Wycliffe and the ultra-reformer.

When Chaucer chose for his parish priest, what has proved to be a most popular and beloved character, he betrays most clearly that he was not antagonistic to the Church's ideal of the ministry. Nowhere in his description does he seem conscious of drawing on his imagination for what a priest should be. The picture is one which he had always had in his mind, not one which his mind created. He bitterly attacks the priest who "let his benefice for hire and left his sheep encumbered in the mire, ran off to London to seek a chantry," this, in his mind, does not destroy the ministry for it is an abuse of the sacred office and not the sacred office itself. The picture of the poor priest is best given in the poet's own words:

"A good man ther was of religioun,
And was a povre persoun of a town,
But riche he was af holy thoght and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk
That Cristes Gospel trewely wolde preche;
His parishhens devoutly wolde he teche.

"Benigne was he, and wonder diligent,
And in adversitee ful pacient;
And swiche he was y-preved ofte sythes.
Ful looth were him to cursen for his tythes,
But rather wolde he yeven, out of doubte,
Unto his po~~vre~~ parishhens ab~~oute~~
Of his offring, and eek of his substaunce.

;;.....

A bettre preest I trouve that nowhere noon is
He wayted, after no pompe and reverence,
Ne marked him a spyced conscience,
But Cristes lore and His apostles twelve,
He taughte, and first he fol~~owed~~ed it himselve"

Cant. Tales A479-491, 525-29

Had Chaucer held the theory of "Dominion", which in the end rejected the Catholic Ministry, he could never have used the words, "For if, a pr~~est~~est be foul on wh~~m~~m we trust", (1) Chaucer's selection of the poor parish priest as an ideal (2) shows that he had an ideal and was loyal to it. Had he been no more than

(1) Cant. Tales. A501

(2) Root - Poetry of Chaucer p.26

a literary purveyor of entertainment, as some critics would seem to suggest, he would have omitted this ideal character, and chosen as a victim of his satire, one of the many unworthy parish priests of his day.

Before considering the other matter in connection with the poor parson, it seems fitting to call attention here to two other characters who, amongst the pilgrims were closely connected with the parson,-- the plowman his brother, and the clerk of Oxford. The consideration of the former throws more light on the poet's estimate of the parson.

"A trewe swinker and a good was he
Living in pees and parfit charitee.
God loved he best with all his hole herte.
At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,
And then his neighbour right as himselve."

Cant. Tales. - A531-535

The "clerk of Oxford" clearly has the poet's sympathy perhaps one reason for this is "Chaucer's own love for books and scholarship." (1) He had not yet got a benefice and he was not worldly enough to have office,

(1) Greenlaw. Chaucer Selections Note 1.301 ff.

"For him was lever have at his beddes heed
Twenty bokes, clad in black or reed,
Of Aristotle and his philosophye,
Than robes riche, or fithel~~t~~, or gay sautrye.

Cant. Tales A.293

He had "but litel gold in cofre" but lived as was the
custom of clerks, on the bounty of friends.

VI. Wycliffe as the Poor Parson.

a) Chaucer's picture.

Another point to be considered in connection with
the poor priest, arises out of the use made of the
character in later controversies. It has been assumed
that the ideal is none other than Wycliffe. This theory
apparently had its birth in prejudices which conceived
that Wycliffe was the only true parish priest left in
the fourteenth century; while, in fact, there were
many parish priests who had not abused their office.
Such characters would inevitably be forgotten, but
there do, survive many great names to certify ~~these~~
the existence of real religion. Among these may be
named Oream and Bradwardine. (1) Then too, we must
remember that one of the most popular books of devotion

(1) Hook. III, p.64

in western Christendom, "The Imitation of Christ" was written by a man of that age.(1) And many of the sacred edifices which we attempt to imitate today were designed and built in that age. (2) In thinking of the worship in those buildings we cannot confine ourselves to the laity entirely, we are forced to picture many a faithful parish priest.

"Who Christes lore and His apostles twelve"
Did teach "and first he followed it himselfe,"

It is not likely that Wycliffe, whose teaching led directly to Communism, and whose teaching might be quoted as justifying the extravagances of John Ball, could be regarded as an ideal, by one as clearly related to the royal party as Chaucer was.

Moreover the picture contains several features that Chaucer would have omitted had he been painting the Reformer. (3) An Oxford professor would not in the ordinary course of events, be made to sit

(1) Hook, "Lives of Archbishops of Canterbury, III p.64
(note)

(2) Lounsbury, "Studies in Chaucer" II p.483

(3) Hook, Vol.III p.65

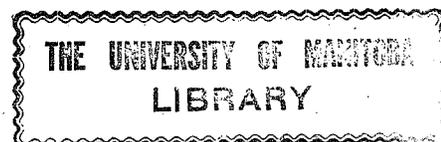
for the picture of a poor country parson.

The parson is "lernered", but the context implies that his learning was relative to his position. Wycliffe's learning had made him famous. The poor parson's "stay-at-home" qualities, if they are to be applied to the Oxford Professor, must be taken rather as marked sarcasm than as praise. "What evidence upon the subject exists, and it is certainly of the scantiest, would point, if in any way, to an opposite conclusion. At the time the Prologue was presumably written, Wycliffe had been dead for several years. Nor are several of the details in the lives and characters of the poetical and historical figures in very exact harmony. The parson of the sketch belongs to the lowliest station in life. He is the brother of the Plowman. He is poor by birth and remains poor by choice. He walks from one end of his parish to the other in all sorts of weather. Wycliffe, doubtless could have done all this had there been need." (1)

b) relations between the poet, John ^{of Gaunt, and} Wycliffe.

No further comment on this would be needed if it were not that both the poet and the reformer are known

(1) Lounsbury. *Studies in Chaucer* II p.483.



to have had relations with John of Gaunt. We know that John of Gaunt was Wycliffe's patron. Chaucer was married to a sister of the wife of the Duke. From this it has been argued that Wycliffe and Chaucer were friends and fellow reformers. In history we can find but little evidence. (1) Lancaster did stand by Wycliffe for political reasons, and used him as a weapon against bishops who aspired to political predominance. (2) Later it is known that Lancaster refused to support the reformer when he was implicated in doctrinal charges. (3)

With regard to Wycliffe and Chaucer, there seems to be no record of their having met at any time. Even if they did meet, it is hardly likely that the gay poet would have grown intimate with so fervent a spirit as that of Wycliffe. Until some historical evidence is forthcoming we are left to ~~probability~~ probability, and the probability of their having been intimate is very slight, while the probability that he was a "follower" or a "Pupil" as has been suggested (4) is even less.

(1) Hook. "Lives of Archbishops of Canterbury. p.69 (note)

(2) Emile Legois. "Chaucer," p. 36

(3) Trevelyan. "England in Age of Wycliffe," P.174

(4) Lounsbury. II p.46B

This latter extravagance is taken seriously by Foxe the authority of the Book of Martyrs. (1) It was based, not only on the slight evidence already referred to, but on works which at that time passed as Chaucer's, but are now proven to be spurious, chiefly upon "The Tale of the Plowman." Foxe scores the simplicity of the bishops in allowing the circulation of Chaucer's works inasmuch as they had been instrumental in leading many to the true faith. (2) The best comment on it all ~~the~~ is the remark of Professor Lounsbury; "No one is now inclined to reckon Chaucer among the saints. No one is now engaged in circulating his works with the object of converting men to the true faith." (3)

VII. Divisions between lay and cleric.

In summing up the discussion of the attitude taken toward the secular clergy, in which the poet's relation to Wycliffe is an incident, we are confronted with the question of internal politics. And here is a complication. There was a division between layman and cleric.

(1) Lounsbury. II pp -463-464

(2) Ibid. II p. 466

The division arose out of various circumstances peculiar to England. The key to the situation is that all the high offices of the state were filled by the more dignified clergy. They were the Chancellors, the judges, the statesmen, the diplomats, the ambassadors. (1) Dean Hook, in his "Lives of the Archbishops of Caunterbury", says, "My business has been, in this book, to write the lives, with few exceptions, not of divines, but of statesmen and lawyers." He quotes from "Baker's Chronicle" a long list of public functionaries, which consists for the most part, of names of bishops, archdeacons and parsons. The reason for this was that they alone possessed the necessary learning. In the House of Lords for a long period, the majority lay on the side of the lords spiritual. While the Commons had the power to grant or withhold subsidies, to defend the liberty of the subject and to resist any abuse of royal power, all initiative in legislation lay with the House of Lords. As the higher clergy controlled that body, the clergy possessed undue influence.

(1) Hook. III p.16

When a time came that there were sufficient educated laymen to fill these positions the clergy were loath to give them up. (1)

In Chaucer's time the antagonism between lay and cleric took the specific form of an antagonism between the military and ecclesiastical parties in England. This was originally due to the fact that Edward I had introduced a paid army, and in so doing, had changed the alignment of parties. It would be out of place to trace this in detail, it is enough to say that Chaucer was a civil servant attached to the court, and that his affiliation with the army led him to the side of the military party. (2)

The situation was a very complicated one. As a rule, the higher clergy were anti-papal. (3) But when it seemed likely that they would be beaten at home, they often appealed to Rome. It is well known that the prerogative of the chapter, of the King and of the pope, in the appointments of the higher clergy, caused many quarrels. England resented the filling of her benefices with foreigners

(1) Hook. *Lives of the Archbishops*, pp. 21-22

(2) Lounsbury. *Ibid* II

(3) Hook. *Ibid* III pp.19-20

and partizans of the pope. (1) The payments of monies to the papal court was also a standing grievance. (1)

Nor, in this statement of the grievances of Englishmen against secular clergy, must we omit notice of the non-residence of bishops and others; of the animosities aroused by the conduct of church courts; of the scandals resulting from the breaches of the rule of celibacy, and generally of the spirit of worldliness shown by the secular clergy as a body.

These facts are well known and are noted here only to show that Chaucer's cynical references to the secular clergy of England, are not to be interpreted as revolt against the church. What was urged earlier with regard to the poet's attitude toward the authority of the pope, finds a parallel in his attitude to the authority of the clergy.

VIII. Chaucer restrained in freedom of utterance.

In the attempt to show that Chaucer was an ordinary English Catholic of his day, we have been concerned with the positive evidence from his writings and from personal and contemporary history. An assertion has been made, which if proven, would render all that could be advanced from these sources of little

(1) Perry. Students' English Church History. p.321.322

consequence. It has been said that Chaucer might have gone farther in revolutionary statements had it not been that he was restrained by fear of consequence. (1) This is almost entirely conjectural and must be dealt with as such. Were the consequences of free speech such that they exercised an unhealthy restraint? The speculations of Wycliffe, the spirit of contemporary Oxford, do not point that way. (2) The difficulties of bringing the reformer to task do not point that way. And Wycliffe was a priest, far more open to prosecution for unorthodox views than a layman. Lists of names of laymen who did speak out on the ultra-reforming side are given in the chronicles; (3) Chaucer is not among them. That may be because he was neither prominent nor influential enough. The fact at least shows that when a layman had deep convictions he did speak out, and the consequences were not sufficient to prevent him. "The practical immunity enjoyed by the disciples of Wycliffe during the first year of their existence was not due to any disinclination on the part of Archbishop Courtney

(1) Lounsbury. II. 521

(2) Vickers. "England in Later Middle Ages" pp 242, 283

(3) Perry. "Students' Church History" pp.447-448

to use severity, but it is rather to be accounted for by the fact that there did not exist in England at any time any machinery for bringing severity to bear upon heretics. Up to this period persecution had been almost unknown in England, and it is doubtful whether anyone had ever been capitally punished for heresy. There was no statutory power to arrest, try far less to punish with death." (1) The efforts of Archbishop Courtney, from 1382 on, to secure the passing of laws such as would enable him to proceed against the Lollards and others are a proof that Chaucer had not much to fear from existing laws. If he were prevented from uttering his deepest convictions, it was not through fear of legal consequences. A much more likely conclusion would be that he was restrained only by his loyalty to the essential beliefs of the Church.

IX. The alleged Skepticism of Chaucer.

a) Transition.

A study of the poet's religious views as reflected in his writings, shows him to be a fair representative of contemporary England. His relations with John of Gaunt and Wycliffe, as far as they are

(1) Perry, *Students' Church History*, pp.446-7

known, exhibit nothing to the contrary. So far, Chaucer's attitude towards the religious movements of his day, has been discussed as if he had no choice beyond being a forerunner of the reformation within the Catholic Church or of the reformation without the Catholic Church.

B) Skeptical nature of his mind.

There is however, another attitude possible. He may have been a skeptic. His satires may have been directed not only against the abuses in the government and abuses of the faith of the Church, but against the faith itself. If this were his true attitude neither Romanist nor ultra-reformer could claim his allegiance. This is the account of the poet to which Professor Lounsbury would seem to incline. " In his way of looking at things he is a man of modern times rather than of the middle ages" (1) Again, he says of him, "Here, then is a critical turn of mind manifested in regard to many beliefs which were then widely held by the learned as well as the unlearned." (2)

(1) Lounsbury. Studies in Chaucer. II p.496

(2) Ibid. II p.503

Further he says this critical spirit is "Applied by him to the facts of the Bible as coolly as by the most cold-blooded of rationalists or the most scoffing of infidels." (1) Professor Lounsbury observes that there is a gradual change noted in Chaucer's views about religion; he sees a marked difference between the attitude shown in the poet's later works and that shown in his earlier works, the "critical mood", the "tendency to denial" is in both, but "in the latter" he says, "it has neither the prominence, the directness, nor the suggestiveness which it displays in the former." (1)

All this is perfectly clear and consistent. Chaucer began with skeptical tendencies. In his early life these tendencies were not pronounced; he hinted at them by putting doubts in the mouths of his characters, rather than by stating them himself. But gradually his faith faded and towards the end of his life, doubt and denial became the leading characteristics of his mind. (2) The main point on which Professor Lounsbury insists, is not so

(1) Lounsbury. II. p. 509-510

(2) Ibid. II. p.504

much the doubt, though he does insist on that, as the progressive development of the doubt.

It would be audacious to venture criticism of such an authority, except with the countenance of some Chaucerian student of repute. Emile Legois gives a very different picture. That he has seriously considered the problem is shown by this statement. "It is probable that he was almost as much of a free-thinker as was possible in his day." (1) That is saying much less than Lounsbury says. The one identifies his "critical turn" with the extremest forms of the present day. The other can go no farther than to state the probability of his being as skeptical as he could be in the fourteenth century -- a vastly different thing. With regard to the aspect of his doubt on which Lounsbury lays particular stress, namely, its progressive development, these two scholars are directly opposed. The one makes Chaucer grow in doubt from more to more, the other makes him, after a contrite old age "reach the pious end to which his disciples have testified". (2)

(1) Emile Legois. Chaucer, p.35

(2) Emile Legois. Chaucer, p.35

While Lounsbury would seem to attribute the doubt of the poet to intellectual difficulties, the French critic would regard his flippancy in religious matters as the product of easy or even as of fast living.

The latter would seem to be the more tenable. It seems to harmonize better with what is known of the character and disposition of the poet and particularly with the statements made in his Retraction. "Wherefore I biseke you mekely for the mercy of god, that ye preye for me, that Christ have mercy on me and foryeve mi giltes; and namely, of my translaciouns and endytinges of worldly vanities, the which I revoke in my retracciouns; as is the book of Troilus; The book also of Fame; The book of seint Valentynes day and of the Parlement of Briddes; The tales of Canterbury, thilke that sounen in-to sinne; The book of Lecun; and many another book if they were in my remembrance." Cant. Tales. E.1083.

Professor Lounsbury's argument is based on the premise that "an interval of doubt is always apt to prevail bewtween the death of Pan and the reign of Christ." (2) In such an interval Chaucer lived, hence his doubt. Is there any evidence of such doubts, reagrding the essentials of Christianity in that period as would justify the application of the phrase "an interval between the death of Pan and the reign

(1) Lounsbury. II p.493

of Christ."? If not Professor Lounsbury's argument rests on a false presumption. It was a time of keen debate on philosophical questions intended to defend or to elucidate Christian doctrine. "The conflict of thought was like a meeting of the waters." "From one direction flowed the stream of Arabian commentators on Aristotle and their Franciscan supporters; from another the broad river of the great Dominicans, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, who attempted to reconcile Christian and Aristotelian philosophy; from another the torrent of Roger Bacon, who attacked the comparative futility of all studies except languages and mathematics, and asserted that logic was not a science but an art, and the instrument and hand-maiden of the sciences; and finally the impetuous rush of Duns Scotus, reinforced by the Byzantine thinkers, who re-established in more than her former pride of place the supremacy of Logic as the "ars artium" and the "scientia scientiarum". Out of this shock of waters arose the realism of Duns Scotus and the ultra-nominalism of Ockham." (1) Arising out of this "philosophical ferment", as well as out of the wide-spread abuses in the church, there were keen discussions on various

(1) Church Quarterly Review. -(article on John Wycliffe.)
Oct. 1891.
Wycliffe) p.119

aspects of religion. In the case of Wycliffe and his followers, opposition to abuses finally developed into doctrinal divergences. But Chaucer is not believed to have shared the views of this party.

Though it was a time of grave social unrest, there is no evidence to show that the vital doctrines of Christianity were matters of doubt or even of speculation.

c) legends

The arguments which have been advanced to support the theory of Chaucer's skepticism, do not seem to be convincing. Except in the case of his alleged immortality, they prove that Chaucer was a skeptic in matters about which men of his calibre, have at all periods of history revealed their incredulity. He is stated to have rejected the legends of King Arthur, (2) and the following quotation is given to substantiate the statement: *the legend of the cock and the fox, the priest says,*

"is also trewe I undertake,

As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,

That wommen holde in ful gret reverence"

Canterbury Tales - B.4401

But there is nothing more surprising in this than in the attitude taken by the Greek writers of the fourth

(1) Hook. III p.66

(2) Lounsbury. II p.496.

century B.C. to the legends of Homer. It proves him to be skeptical about certain beliefs which many of his day held firmly, but these beliefs in legends had little if anything to do with the essential faith of the Catholic Church.

d) Alchemy.

He is also said to have entertained doubts about alchemy, astrology and kindred occult arts of his day. In speaking of the poet's disbelief in alchemy, Professor Lounsbury says "No reader of the Canon's Yeoman's tale needs to be told of the light in which he (Chaucer) looked upon alchemy. Never has there been a completer exposure than his of its fraudulent practices, never a more scornful portrayal of the so-called science, as being itself nothing but a fraud." (1) Surely the same argument applies here as applied to his belief in legends.- Chaucer's skepticism in regard to these matters did not necessarily affect his belief in the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Chaucer's opposition to alchemy, unlike the opposition of his contemporaries, was an intellectual one. But even this need not astonish

(1) Lounsbury. II p.501

us -- Horace's attitude was much the same -

"Tu ne quaesieris (scire nefas quem mihi, quum tibi)

Finem dederint, Leucone nec

Babylonios

Temptares numeros"

Horace Odes I xi.

To assume that Chaucer's insight into these frauds has any connection with his religious views, is to assume that religion itself is necessarily fraudulent and not as we believe supremely true.

Amongst the Latin poets read by Chaucer, Skeat does not include Horace (1) but doubtless he was familiar with others who were as sceptical of these so-called sciences.

The argument used by Lounsbury based on Chaucer's skepticism with regard to miraculous legends and beliefs depends largely on whether the following assertion is consistent with historical facts; "Here then, is a critical turn of mind manifested in regard to many beliefs which were then widely held by the learned as well as by the unlearned. We find ourselves in contact with a man who, living within a credulous and

(1) Skeat- Works of Chaucer-iv.(Introduction) p.c ci

superstitious age, is neither credulous nor superstitious"
(1)

Evidence can be brought forth that Chaucer did not stand alone, and that such incredulity was by no means confined to the learned of the day. A very illuminating extract regarding the attitude of the masses in this matter is quoted by Jusserand from the Chronicles of the Monastery of Melse. Abbot Hugh, of Leven, had in the first half of the fourteenth century, order@d a new crucifix for the choir of the chapel- "And the artist never worked at any fine important part of his work except on Fridays, fasting on bread and water. And he had all the time a naked man under his eyes, and he laboured to give to his crucifix the beauty of the model. By means of this crucifix the Almighty worked open miracles continuously. It was then thought that if access to this crucifix were allowed to women, the common devotion would be increased, and great advantages would result from it for our manastery. Upon which the Abbot of Citeaux, by our request, granted us leave, to let honest men and women approach the crucifix But profiting from this license, to our misfortune, women began to come in numbers to the crucifix, although in them devotion was cool, and presented themselves only

(1) Lounsbury. "Studies in Chaucer." II p.503

to look at the church." (1) "This naive complaint " Jusserand adds, "is interesting from many points of view, it shows without concealment what was done to bring such or such a sanctuary into favour with the pilgrims; in the present case the effort made did not succeed, the prodigies do not seem to have responded to the expectation and people came only from curiosity to visit the church and the fine crucifix of the monastery." (2)

e) **Irréverence.**

It is alleged, further that Chaucer deals with the facts of the Bible as would "the most scoffing of infidels." (3) The one reference given from the Merchant's Tale (4) to substantiate this, is by no means clear;

"Pardee, as faire as ye his name emplastre,

He was a lechour and an ydolastre"

Cant.Tales E.2297

and it is admitted that this is no worse than a blunt statement such as would surprise one from a "spiritually minded man;" and "no one is now inclined to reckon Chaucer among the saints." (3) In his incidental allusions to the Bible he speaks of it with reverence and as the basis of belief - for example he says :

(1) Jusserand, "English Wayfaring Life." p.344-5
Chronicles of Melsa

(2) Jusserand, p.345

(3) Lounsbury. II p.509

(4) Ibid. II p.466

"Criste spake himself ful brode in holy writ
And wel wot no villeinye is it"

Cant. Tales A. 739

f) the Deity.

His reckless manner of speech in addressing the Deity or in speaking of Him, established by quotations from "The Parliament of Fowles" and "The Book of the Duchesse", is no more than common for men like Chaucer in any age;

"Of instruments of strenges in acord
Herde I so pleye a ravissing sweetnesse,
That god, that maker is of al and lord
Ne herde never better, as I gesse."

Parlement of Fowles. 197-200

In the other quotation we have the words of the despondent husband who, on reflection admits that he cannot blame fortune for her conduct;

"And eek she is the las to blame,
Myself I wolde have do the same,
Before god, hadde I been as she;
She oghte the more excused be.
For this I say yet more thereto,
Hadde I be god and mighte have do
My wille, whan my fers she caughte
I wolde have drawe the same draughte"

Book of the Duchesse. 675-682

Such words may prove irreverence but not necessarily skepticism.

g) immortality

Not only must passages which seem to imply a doubt or denial of human immortality, be isolated from the rest of his works, but the poet must also be denied such freedom of thought as we find in Scripture itself, before they can be made to bear the burden put upon them by Lounsbury. The first extract given to illustrate is taken from the "Legend of Good Women"

"A Thousand tymes have I herd men telle,
That ther is joye in heven, and peyne in helle;
And I acorde wel that it is so;
But nathelless, yit wot I wel also
That ther nis noon dwelling in this countree,
That either in heven or helle y-be
Ne may of hit non other weyes witen,
But as he hath herd seyde or found it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it prewe."

Legend of Good Women, Pro.1-9

In commenting upon these lines Lounsbury says "Chaucer in them indicated clearly that none have any real acquaintance with the nature of the future life..... He does not presume to deny what is said of it He does not affirm his belief in it " (1)

(1) Lounsbury. *Ibid* II 513.

The quotation given is almost a variation of the same sentiment Shakespeare expresses when he speaks of "the undiscovered country, the bourne from which no traveller returns" (1) and as St. John expresses when he says "And it doth not yet appear what we shall be" (2)

It is however ~~from~~^{on} the following extract from the Knight's Tale that Lounsbury rests most confidently -

"His spirit chaunged hous, and wente ther,
As I cam never, I can not tellen wher.
Therfor I stinte, I nam no divinistre;
Of soules finde I net in this registre,
Ne me ne list thilke opinouns to telle
Of him, though that they wryten, wher they dwelle."

Cant. Tales A-1851

Indirect expressions often reveal faith better than direct statements, and Chaucer's indirect allusions to heaven and the future life are not infrequent and are strictly orthodox. The Poor Parson shows the way to heaven and leads the way thither. In the Retraction the Virgin and all the saints are invoked evidently

(1) Hamlet. III 1.79

(2) I John. 3, 2.

with faith in their continued existence. He himself hopes to be one of them "at the day of dome that shulle be saved." (1)

A refusal to make positive assertions regarding the future life is not at all, the same thing as a denial of continued existence. Chaucer is agnostic in refusing to describe the life beyond the grave, even as St. John was, but there is surely no denial of it in the passage "His spilit changed hors and wente" somewhere else. If the spirit changed its abode and migrated, it certainly survived. Inasmuch as Chaucer was never in the new abode he declines to describe it.

h) summary.

The great difficulty in establishing a view that Chaucer was neither Ultra-Reformer nor Catholic, but a skeptic lies in the claim that his skepticism was progressive and only reached its climax near the end of his life. If that were true it would be very difficult to attach a satisfactory meaning to his Retraction. The Retraction was written when the Canterbury Tales

(1) Cant. Tales I. 1017.

were completed, for Chaucer there apologizes for whatever in them tends to sin. The tone throughout is earnest. He asks forgiveness for what he knows to be harmful in his works. His conscience was evidently moved. If Chaucer had been conscious of doubts regarding the essential faith, he would surely have confessed it here; but there is no mention of it. He laments only the levity of his earlier days. It is the "editynges" of worldly vanities, "lecherous lays" and such like things for which he feels remorse. These faults had their source in his worldly vanity or in his "unconninge". His "unconninge" may mean as Skeat suggests (1) his imperfect knowledge of theology. The poet's own account of himself must be taken in preference to anybody else's. He makes himself in the end, not a conscious skeptic, conscious of swerving farther and farther from the faith, but a man who has often failed in virtue.

(1) Skeat. Vol III p.503

While he was sceptical about superstitions and legends and such things, the Retraction must always be an almost insuperable difficulty in the way of theories that would make Chaucer a skeptic of the vital truth and especially one who ended his life in complete skepticism.

X. His Philosophy of Life.

This view seems to be in keeping with his character and view of life; according to Kittridge, he was "neither an ascetic nor a devotee"⁽¹⁾, which tallies with his own description of himself that he was a man of "life abstinence". (2) The same writer remarks also that "he took his religion seriously and that there is no hint of unsteadiness in his theological views" (1) Everywhere his spirit is that of a genial and kindly man of the world. His satire is always good-natured, the victims of it might almost smile at themselves. "If he loved God he did not make the feeling offensive to his neighbours." (3)

(1) Kittridge. "Chaucer & His Poetry." p. 33.

(2) Houses of Fame, II 660

(3) Lounsbury. "Studies in Chaucer," II p. 473

Perhaps his character can best be illustrated by considering this peculiar quality of his satire. "He speaks with contempt of the gentility based on position and descent not upon character. But this contempt is invariably good-humoured and little calculated to provoke resentment." (1)

"His monk, given up to the pleasures of life, is a manly man, a fair prelate. His friar, a fawner on the rich, a despiser of the poor, is a merry and delightful companion. His summoner, a drunken scoundrel, a gentle harlot and a kind." (2) Yet it would be a mistake to think he liked his rascals better his respectable pious people. There is a greater intensity, a better purpose in his description of the Poor Parson than in any of the rascals.

His view of life is in exact correspondence with his character. "He was the apostle of the gladness of the joy of living for the mere delight of living." (3)

(1) Lounsbury p. 473

(2) Ibid p.471

(3) Ibid p.535

He had no sympathy with the choice of a career of aimless self-sacrifice. Yet he was not without interest in the deep problems of life. The problem of freewill and foreknowledge had a deep fascination for him. (1) He wrestles at times with the problem of evil in a world created by a good God. (2) These are the very questions clergymen say men of the world love to dally with. And Chaucer dallies with them so. The world for him, notwithstanding its sorrows, of which he was not oblivious, was on the whole a very good world.

XI. Conclusion.

To conclude, Chaucer was an Englishman of his day. Neither aristocrat nor plebeian, he comes from the heart of the English people and exhibits the well known traits of his countrymen. He shows the independence of all alien influence which marked the age.

He was an Englishman of his day, and he was an English Catholic of his day.

(1) Lounsbury, II p.533

(2) Root. Poetry of Chaucer. p.28

He recognizes the suzerainty of the pope, while resenting the abuses of his power. As an English courtier and soldier would do, he sides with the military against the ecclesiastical party. As an Englishman, he stands up for the poor parish priest and has scant respect for those who interfere in his parish. As an English^{man} he joins with all Catholics in bewailing the corruptions in the Church. So far his cause is common with those who eventually broke with Catholicism and no doubt his mockery would help to encourage the spirit which later took the shape of the Protestant Reformation. But it is usually admitted that Chaucer never thought of this result. He was loyal to the Catholic faith.

In the two chief ways in which divergence found expression he clung to the old paths. In all his works there is no hint that he shared Wycliffe's opposition to Transubstantiation. (1) The pope for him is still pope, even though according to Wycliffe's theory of Dominion, he has forfeited all authority.

(1) Root. "Poetry of Chaucer." p.28

The quotations given from the sermon at the Council of Trent furnish a parallel to Chaucer's attitude to justify one in asserting that his criticisms are directed against the abuses of the Church and not against its essential faith.

The poet's "restless intellectual curiosity led him to question many things in heaven and in earth and under the influence of the new spirit of the Renaissance, he began no doubt to exercise the right of private judgment. But he was and remained in his beliefs and hopes, in all essentials a Christian and a loyal Catholic, there is no reason to deny and no adequate reason to doubt." (1)

Chaucer was certainly skeptical, but, his skepticism was confined to a disbelief in superstitions and legends of his day. No wonder he made fun of the superstitions about relics, for example, when we read "if the monks in different localities were to be believed, there were of John the Baptist four shoulders, eight arms, eleven fingers, in addition to twelve whole hands, thirteen heads and seven bodies" (2)

(1) Root. "Poetry of Chaucer." p.23

(2) Hook. III 46.

He jeered at ~~many~~ many things believed in his day but there were many who jeered with him and in the end jeering was not in vain.

Later history shows that in that turmoil of the fourteenth century two main tendencies had their birth- the one to reform within the Catholic Church, the other to reform without. This essay is limited to an attempt to decide with which of these movements Chaucer was in sympathy.

The conclusion is that Chaucer was on the side of the reform within the Catholic Church.

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