

Theology and practice in *Piers Plowman*¹

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Abstract

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The fourteenth-century English poem Piers Plowman, by William Langland, tells of a quest for and pilgrimage to Truth, or God. The poem is lengthy and diffuse, and evidences Langland's keen interest in philosophy, theology, politics, social conditions and apocalyptic literature, to mention only some areas. Underlying all, however, is a concern with the practical living-out of abstruse doctrinal concepts in everyday life. This essay explores certain characters and concepts which embody the doctrine and practice of charity, in order to demonstrate the interweaving of theory and practice which characterizes Langland at his best.

1. Introduction: some previous studies

Some recent readings of *Piers Plowman* have tended to approach it from political, social, or deconstructive viewpoints. Such stances have sometimes departed from, but more often elaborated on, the earlier critical interest in the poem's interpretation of history, its application of rhetoric or of methods of biblical exegesis, its satirical import, its unity and form (Middleton, 1988:1-25). These are most valuable, but neglect the pragmatic, workaday import of much of Langland's theology. The text em-

¹ The germ of this essay is to be found in Chapter 2 of *Personification and Characterization in Piers Plowman* (Levey, 1976). Since more recent studies have not, in my opinion, sufficiently developed the subject any further I have embarked on this considerably revised and updated paper.

ployed in this essay is thus the B text of the poem, in which, more than in the other three versions (the A and C texts, and the recently discovered Z version), Langland particularly attempted "to relate the reality of redemption to the actuality of the contemporary world" (Godden, 1990:205). *Piers Plowman* insists on absolute states from its first images of the high tower of Truth and the abysmal dungeon. And the characters who embody those poles are amongst Langland's most potent. Truth and Kind (a concept encompassing but surpassing our modern notion of Nature) and Charity, three concepts the personification of which already endows them with a kind of vitality, find their richest vitality and expression in Christ, to whom the poet carefully relates them, and take on additional vigour in their interactions with other, associated, characters.

Studies which have attended, more traditionally, to the theological and intellectual background include the following: Raabe (1990) shows the centrality in the poem of a faithful imitation of God, who is Truth. The present essay suggests that it is the practical application of another theological virtue, charity, which most clearly undergirds this faithful imitation. Goldsmith (1981) rightly explores the significance of *Piers Plowman* as the image of God, but interprets the image in too static a sense. Studies such as that of Baldwin (1981) concentrate on the intellectual-political emphases of the poem, neglecting certain theological aspects, such as the concept of charity, entirely. Conversely, while critics such as Scase (1989) extensively explore theological issues such as charity in relation to contemporary anticlericalism and even describe "the work of the poem" as "the work of charity" (119) they tend to adduce extratextual, rather than textual, material in support of their views. Such is also the case with Kerby-Fulton (1990), who traces the contemporary theological and mystical roots of "Langland's sense of urgency and indignation" (202), but fails to explore his practical suggestions in this regard. Even Griffiths's otherwise excellent study (1985), which views charity as first exemplified (i.e. practically) and then revealed "in stories which move it from tropological [moral] to a historical or spiritual context" (91), perceives the poem as essentially irresolute (107), not as determinedly focused on the real implications of a practical charity.

Simpson (1990), while according due respect to the theological and intellectual background, employs a deconstructive methodology, demon-

strating how at times Langland “adopts the genres of authoritative institutions and reveals their limitations” (128). Nevertheless, he firmly holds the view that “the relations of justice and love” are the basic problematic of the poem (246, 247). This is true up to a point, but as a result Simpson tends to see charity in terms of justice, and thus insufficiently examines the wide scope of the term in Langland.

Recently Harwood (1992) and Burrow (1993) have also published important studies of *Piers Plowman* which adopt a methodology different from the hitherto usual. Harwood’s (1992:31) formalist-historical reading assumes “that the dynamic of the poem arises with a problem of belief [experienced by Langland himself] and that the perspective and material shift as the poem turns from one mode of knowledge to another”. Thus centring on differing conditions for belief, Harwood speaks often, but vaguely, of the divine love (e.g. Harwood, 1992:138) and seldom addresses the issue of human works of charity which is dear to Langland’s heart. Burrow, as a self-confessed unbeliever, prefers to treat “the imaginary and the fictional” in the poem, and argues that Langland is creating a “fiction of self” (Burrow, 1993:4, 5), stressing the fictive power of the poet’s imagination as a result. Burrow’s approach is refreshing and vigorous yet, understandably, has nothing to say about the great theological commonplaces such as the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and their expression in the world, which are Langland’s most pressing consideration.

2. Truth

Truth², as one of the goals of the quest in *Piers*, is also one of the poem’s governing characters (Raabe, 1990:28-32). As such, he is much more than a structural or rhetorical device unifying the poem (Mills, 1969:188, 189). Not only is he an attribute of God, but in the poem he also becomes identified with God, which identification is consistent with Aquinas’s view

² In this essay the *name of the character*, Truth, will be spelt with a capital T, and the *concept* with the lower-case letter.

that “He [God] is truth itself” (I. q.16 a.5; 1920:232)³. Hence unpersonified truth is the highest concept of the poem.

The character Truth may be found embodied in Piers Plowman, Christ and others such as the Good Samaritan, yet in the last resort must still be sought – on earth – by a despondent Conscience. The entire poem explores the search for truth which ought to be that of every soul, and this quest employs large portions of the intellect, for, according to Aquinas (I. q.16 a.1; 1920:225), “the true denotes that towards which the intellect tends”. No wonder that Will, the narrator-dreamer, is often urged to use his brains in his search for Truth.

Some characters, such as Piers, succeed in finding Truth; some, such as Will, seek but do not quite reach him, emphasising the recurrent cycle of the Christian life; still others, such as Lady Meed, never even try. But the concern of this essay is with some of those for whom truth is the *leitmotiv* of their existence. For instance, Truth and Love are closely associated: precisely because Love is the gate leading directly into Heaven, Holy Church can point out, “For-thi ... /Whan alle tresors ben tried, Treuthe is the beste” (B.I.206-7; Schmidt, 1978:16).

Piers Plowman’s first speech (B.V.537ff; Schmidt, 1978:61) soon establishes him as a reliable guide to Truth. As he progressively comes to take on the identity of Christ, so he comes to embody Truth. Truth points through his representatives to the climactic invasion of Hell and beyond, to the seemingly anticlimactic end when Conscience seeks Piers on earth.

When Truth is first described by Piers he is as vigorous as Piers himself, and closely related to him. His lamblike humility recalls that of Christ as the Lamb of God (Jn. 1.29). Truth dwells in the heart of the Christian (B.V.606-7; Schmidt, 1978:64), even as the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of *truth* – resides in the human heart (Jn. 14.17). Above all it is as the conquering Redeemer that Truth is seen: “truthe that so brak helle yates” (B.XI.163) is also “he that Soothnesse is” (B.XVIII.282; Schmidt,

³ In this essay the Harvard Reference System is employed, but modified where medieval texts and translations available in several editions are quoted, so that the citation refers first to the generally used notation indicating the position of the quotation in the text, and second to the details of the actual edition used.

1978:228). It is made clear that Truth possesses deep affinities with the persons of the Trinity, especially with Christ, but also with those akin to Christ yet earthly, such as Piers. Indeed Piers's last task, as with his first, is to "tilie trithe" (B.XIX.263; Schmidt, 1978:243): throughout the poem a practical Piers is the correlative of a theoretical Truth.

3. Characterization of Truth

Although Truth is an abstraction, and fittingly neither engages in any dialogue nor performs any actions, he is, in Piers's words at least, strongly individualized, explicit and concrete. Langland employed the dramatically effective method of creating Truth and Piers almost in tandem, and allowing Truth to take his life from that of Piers. When Truth is seen later in varied contexts, the earlier scenes govern the later, so that all are controlled by the early identification with the Creator.

Truth is a very medieval and un-pagan deity, for his whole concern is that people should worship him in obedience and in temperance (B.1.13-26, 34ff; Schmidt, 1978:10). Even so, the confusion of most of the characters in Passus V indicates that no-one can find the road to truth of himself or herself, and emphasizes that a tangible earthly guide is needed. The false pilgrim with his ostentatious insignia and wide travels (B.V.516ff) has not even heard of Truth, a clear and tangible indication of where Truth is not; but Piers knows Truth well, and proclaims his character in simple, pragmatic terms.

Piers's graphic image of the just employer, who is worthy of such devoted service as Piers has rendered during his whole working life, refers to Christ's parable of the labourers, who each received a penny from the scrupulously fair master of the house (Mt. 20.1-16). Truth in *Piers Plowman* is thus no academic concept, for it is related to the daily quest for salvation: in his bounty Truth is "the presteste paiere that povere men knoweth", who pays promptly and justly in currency of eternal life. At the same time he is meek as a lamb (B.V.551-3; Schmidt, 1978:62), pointing his identity with Christ.

While the prosaic directions to Truth's court, with their exact rules based on the Decalogue, are eminently practical, the vigorous description of the actual castle in terms reminiscent more of the New Law (B.V.560ff, 585ff;

Schmidt, 1978:63) is a subtle blend of the practical and the theological, as one might expect of Langland: the moat is of Mercy, the pillars of penance, and the gateguard is called Grace.

Though unchanging, as befits his absolute nature, Truth is not a sterile personification, because he is seen in many different contexts and guises. For instance, Truth, the Daughter of God, embodies Langland's occasional, universalizing technique of creating his characters in both genders, and also reminds us of his sophisticated handling of time. She encompasses the *Old Testament* experience of truth as law, while the Truth of the early part of the poem embraces the truth of all time.

Other, minor developments of the concept of truth mostly relate their practice to pragmatic, necessary results, such as the idyllic prophecy of Conscience, that Meed's mastery will be superseded by those who have the interests of truth at heart (B.III.290-304; Schmidt, 1978:33). Here truth is simply an ideal; but an element of personification creeps in with the prophetic keynote of Conscience's speech, where truth acts as a judge (B.III.318-319; Schmidt, 1978:34). However, as the strange signs of "sixe sonnes" (B.III.326; Schmidt, 1978:34) imply, the perfect reign of truth on earth when Christ will be that judge is yet to come. Be this eschatological fact as it may, Truth must be striven for in this generation: Reason's immediate demand to his earthly audience is "Seketh Seynt Truthe, for he may save yow alle".

The search for truth is not easy: the way is hard, and Piers has followed it for many years. It requires single-mindedness; only Piers's evocative description of the goal will bring order to the milling crowds, and even Piers only received the pardon of truth when he has obeyed exactly, after he has tilled the ground in sweat (B.VIIff; Schmidt, 1978:77).

In the end, of all the characters in the poem, only Piers is entrusted with the task of maintaining Unity, that house of Truth on earth (B.XIX.319ff): the implications are that only a person with a practical bent can perform this function. In fact such service of truth is by no means passive; it requires an eternal vigilance against Antichrist, who cuts away the crop of truth (B.XX.53ff). This last vivid image is a reminder once again of the biblical sower, Christ himself, and marries the practical and the theological.

4. Charity

Robertson (Robertson & Huppe, 1951:24, 32) has argued strongly that the two poles of charity and cupidity permeated medieval thought, so that for instance even in the sphere of knowledge *scientia* or worldly wisdom fostered cupidity, and *sapientia* promoted charity. His contention is a moot point (e.g., Howard, 1966:21), but the poem is explicit about both the theory and the practice of charity, viewing it very much as Aquinas does: "The Divine Essence Itself is charity, ... formally charity is the life of the soul" (II. q.23. a.2; 1916:267). Langland's near-contemporary and fellow English writer, Julian of Norwich, like Aquinas and Langland an author with both a practical and a mystical bent, takes the same view: "our light is God, the everlasting Day ... This light is charity" (83, 84; 1966/1973:209). Charity theologically embraces union of the mind with God as well as love of humanity (I Cor. 13), and Langland's views likewise have both intellectual and practical ramifications. The two aspects of charity mean that love when not directed to God *as well as* to other people is not necessarily charity (Aquinas, II.1. q.62 a.2; 927:150).

A host of minor references to Christian love prepares the way for the actual introduction of Charity as a character. For instance, the reader learns that Dowel is "charite the champion" a pilot who steers the human soul (B.VIII.46-7; Schmidt, 1978:87): an intimation that love is a soldierly, sailorly, active virtue. Langland almost never presents a character in isolation, and this is especially true of Charity, who is continuously linked with other people. In particular, the final explicit embodiment of charity in this poem is in the figure of the Good Samaritan. This is not accidental: the Samaritan is an excellent example of love in action.

The eight Visions of the poem develop an increasingly broad concept of Charity. It is important, therefore, to see that the idea is present throughout the poem, not only in the eponymous figure. Still, the theory of charity takes on vitality as the character grows into full existence, and this is especially true in Passus XV, where Will has learnt to set Charity and Christ side by side (153,162; Schmidt, 1978:181-182). Charity here cares nothing for "rentes ne of richesse" (177; Schmidt, 1978:182) and is enviably devout. But he also goes on pilgrimages in order to help others and his honest work, charitable in the best sense, brings comfort to many

(182-92): the laundry image concisely combines the theological notion of cleansing with an immediate, practical application.

In similar vein, the allusions to *Piers Plowman* (196, 199, 212; Schmidt, 1978:183) bind Piers to Charity in an intimate relation: the one – a symbol of honest toil – will reveal the other. Changing the metaphor, the poem observes that the might of Charity, the champion of God and humanity, issues in the courtesy and championship of the true Knight (220-222; Schmidt, 1978:183): a practical outworking of love at all levels of society.

In three evocative lines the clothing image recurs:

For I have seyen hym in silk and som tyme in russet,
Both in grey, and in grys, and in gilt harnes –
And as gladliche he it gaf to gomes that it neded
(220-222; Schmidt, 1978:183).

In contradistinction to Will's earlier view that "I have lyved in londe ... /And fond I nevere ful charite" (152-153; Schmidt, 1978:181), Charity is shown to be a ubiquitous and compassionate person, given to practical help of those truly in need. At the same time, though, he would soonest walk in rich robes, and wear the tonsure (228-229; Schmidt, 1978:184). While this image represents one of many places in this poem where the ideal priest becomes a point of reference for Langland's view of charity, Charity's high standards embody a profound concern for integrity which leads him to avoid even the Franciscans of the present day (230-232). On the other hand, he is content to be a king's counsellor provided that truth holds sway at the court (235-236) and approves of rich men who lead honourable lives (233-234). Langland has occasionally been portrayed as mystically-inclined, e.g. by Robertson and Huppe (1951), but far closer to the truth is his down-to-earth and flexible attitude to such theological virtues as charity. Thus he shows Charity not only as singing and reading (during the liturgy), but also as riding and running; as an active figure who refuses to beg, for that is too passive and selfish an activity; a figure whose preferred mode of locomotion is walking (225-228, 256; Schmidt, 1978:184-185). The verbs well convey the sense of practical energy in the service of divine purpose which is a hallmark of Langland's thought.

In the following *Passus* (XVI) charity is described under the metaphor of the tree and its fruit. Though Charity is not in this section a character as

such, the metaphor effectively suggests the outworking of charity in practical attitudes of patience and compassion, which are firmly rooted “in a gardyn ... that God made hymselfe” (13; Schmidt, 1978:198). And in Passus XVII we come across the figure of the Good Samaritan, who is himself a figure of Christ and yet is inextricably linked with a down-to-earth charity.

The various practices of charity in this poem are well summed up by the mysterious figures of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest: doing well, better and best. Critical debates on these concepts (the most recent substantive account is that of Harwood, 1992:16-17, 30-31) have equally emphasized their centrality to the poem and neglected the obvious fact that, whatever else is involved, they refer *primarily* to the various ways in which charity may be expressed, both on earth and in heaven. I should like to demonstrate this point by examining some textual references to Dowel. (Dobet and Dobest often represent an intensification or logical development of the charitable impulse.)

Thus, in the controversial ‘pardon’ scene (Passus VII) it is made clear that this absolute pardon which Piers obtains is contingent on obedient work (2-3; Schmidt, 1978:77). The indignant priest who rejects the pardon because Piers has not gone through the right ecclesiastical channels nevertheless unwittingly summarizes its whole thrust when he construes it as “Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule” (112; Schmidt, 1978:82).

Dowel becomes an early object of Will’s pilgrimage (VIII.2; Schmidt, 1978:86), but not as an ideal. Rather, the basic polarities are practical: “Dowel and Do-yvele mowe nocht dwelle togideres” (24). Dowel is, in fact, “charite the champion” (46), an image which blends the notions of the ideal and the practical. A few lines later Thought shows that Dowel is true speech and – significantly – honest labour (81-84); Dobet is meek and gentle, helping all people according to their needs (86-87); and Dobest lives the life of a bishop (96). But each is an attainable and far from idealistic state, “nocht fer to fynde” (80).

Later appearances of the triad elaborate in various ways on this initial vision of a charity which is authentic and sensible. There can be little doubt that the start of doing well, and thus the foundation of all other

Christian endeavour, whether down-to-earth or mystical and theological in nature, is the exercise of charity. In particular Piers's life, and Christ's, which are profoundly practical in essence, are emblematic of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest successively (Coghill, 1933:108). The figure of Thought shows Will how the triad is to be described in tangible actions (Frank, 1957:50).

Christ is presented very decisively in terms of the triad, lives Dowel and becomes Dowel. The triad is an application of Christ's teaching in particular concrete cases, as we may observe from Wit's description of the ideal case where Dowel lives in the body's castle along with the soul and looks after the surrounding defences, while his daughter Dobet attends continually to the domestic service of Anima (IX.1-13; Schmidt, 1978:91). Their close kinship is cemented by the fatherly care of Dobest, "a bisshopes peere" (14). In terms of the doctrine of the Incarnation it is no less a person than Christ who indwells the body as Dowel, and Skeat expresses the identity of Dowel and Christ: "'Sir Dowel' is the type of perfect humanity, afterwards exemplified in the person of Christ" (Skeat, 1886 (II):137). The same point is made at the end of Passus VII – also the end of the A version of *Piers Plowman*, and thus the poet's final word on Dowel at that point – where the narrator advised all Christians to seek God's grace in order to carry out such works, "That after oure deth day, Dowel reherce/At the day of dome, we dide as he highte" (196-201; Schmidt, 1978:85). In Langland's mind here, Dowel is the figure of an eschatological judge, who is certainly none other than Christ.

Succeeding Passus continue to explore these concepts; important for our purposes is an incident such as Dame Study's impatience with Wit's lengthy discourse on Dowel to Will. She exclaims tartly that Dowel is not attained unless one is willing to "lyve in the lif that longeth to Dowel", no matter how much may desire intellectual knowledge (X.133-4; Schmidt, 1978:104). Doing, not wishing, is the keynote. Will's failing to see the practical point is reflected in his confident remark that "To se muche and suffre moore, certes, ... is Dowel" (XI.410; Schmidt, 1978:133). Ymaginatif, himself a person who is "ydel nevere", almost immediately condemns this passive stance of the Dreamer, accusing him of "meddling" with "makynges", fiddling with poems (XII.1, 16; Schmidt, 1978:134, 135). Will obtusely resists the challenge to activity, observing piously that

if anyone could tell him the whereabouts of Dowel and company, he would never labour, but would “wende to holi chirche” (28). Ymaginatyf’s Pauline observation that Dowel is faith, hope and charity, but that the soonest to save is charity (XII.30, 31), sets Will straight and affirms the poem’s emphasis upon charity.

5. *Via et Veritas*

Langland has been assembling a strong case for seeing Dowel as charitable, in both the doctrinal and the practical senses. As the last part of this essay hopes to demonstrate, the poem more and more closely identifies Christ with Charity as it moves towards its end: a Christ and a Charity who are not only sublimely transcendent, but also firmly immanent.

Langland’s vision of a charity which spans heaven and earth reaches its climax in his presentation of Christ. Using the raw material of the Gospels, Langland shows how the Incarnation above all else implies that “Jesu Crist of hevene,/In a povere mannes apparaille pursueth us evere” (XI.184,5; Schmidt, 1978:124). The allusion is clearly to the first introduction of Piers in the poem as a poor man with a practical bent; Trajan’s remark a few lines later that “... in the apparaille of a povere man and pilgrymes liknesse Many tyme God hath ben met among nedy peple” (XI.241,2; Schmidt, 1978:126) likewise relates Christian doctrine about Jesus to the reality of earthly poverty.

Passus XVIII, which represents the highest point of Langland’s thought on Christ, portrays him as a Knight, a metaphor shared with such characters as Charity and Piers. But already the compact life of Christ in the tree of Charity episode (Passus XVI) is a context significant of a close relationship between Christ and Charity. This passage lays emphasis upon such practical deeds of charity as Christ’s “lechecraft”, his acts of healing (104; Schmidt, 1978:201) and his feeding of the multitude, but also on his vigorous cleansing of the temple (XVI.125-129; Schmidt, 1978:202).

Throughout the poem Langland’s characterization of Christ demonstrates his interest in exploring the paradoxes surrounding a man who is also God; a God who is a person also sensitive to human need and willing to meet it in human deeds. The very realization of Christ as a literary character is a

paradox: he is both literally 'the historical Christ' and a typological figure within a poem (Vasta, 1965:27). He rules in heaven, but also in the receptive human heart (cf. Ps. 14:2). The death of Christ itself, the demise of one who is life, is incongruous: "The lord of life and of light tho leide his eighen togideres" (XVIII.59; Schmidt, 1978:221). The length of this line, both in syllable count and in the long vowels, alerts one to the portentousness of the moment.

As with Dame Julian of Norwich, the poet views Christ very much in terms of attributes of life, love and light (1966/73:208). Such attributes are divine and transcendent, but also, and especially in the case of love or charity, earthly. Other metaphors include those of the prophet (e.g., XVIII.370; Schmidt, 1978:232), healer (see above) and – by implication – farmer (XX.53-57; Schmidt, 1978:252). But it is the images of Passus XVIII, so dramatically presenting Christ as conqueror and champion, which also most successfully show his mercy, justice and charity – and indeed identify him with charity.

The excitement of the galloping figure "Barefoot on an asse bak" (XVIII.11; Schmidt, 1978:220) is sustained by the apparent enigma of Faith's remark that "In Piers paltok the Plowman this prikiere shal ryde" (25). A ploughman: humanity in general: God – the syllogism is complete.

The images which follow the powerful depiction of Christ's death and resurrection boldly unite his "Harrowing of Hell", or divine conquering of evil, with the jousting of a doughty yet earthly knight: "The lord of myght and of mayn and alle manere vertues" (XVIII.319; Schmidt, 1978:230). The gradually increasing tension is reinforced by the dialectic of Christ's lengthy and vigorous speech, between such poles as "Thow, Lucifer, in liknesse of a luther addere ... And I, in liknesse of a leode" (XVIII.355, 357).

Not incidentally, his words declare him to be a skilled and energetic debater as well as a person versed in the arts of war. The most significant antithesis, though, is surely that between the "doctour of deeth" and the "lord of life" whose "drynke" is love (365, 366). Love, as in St. Paul, is not merely an abstract notion, but is essentially practical in its out-workings. As Langland has Christ observe, "And for that drynke today, I

deide upon erthe. I faught so, me thursteth yet, for mannes soule sake” (367, 368).

One might feel that after the climax of Christ’s death, resurrection and victory, viewed in such vividly earthly terms, Langland’s ability to demonstrate the meaning of the doctrine of Christ on the terrestrial plane would be exhausted. Far from it. He has still has Conscience discourse at length on the connotations of the name *Christ*. Firmly maintaining an earthly dimension, Conscience declares that *Christ* means ‘King’ and ‘conqueror’ (XIX.26-107; Schmidt, 1978:235-238) – and also ‘prophet’ (48). Still another summary of Christ’s life deals with its relation to Dowel, Dobet and Dobest and modulates into a narrative of the establishment of Piers’s work (178-199; Schmidt, 1978:240-241): an easy step since Piers, like Christ, has acted so well and with such charitable import in the best – most practical – sense. While Charity and Christ are being developed as characters in the poem, they are literally fleshed out; and a consistent concept of love seems to underlie all the people in the poem who are the agents of Truth.

6. Conclusion

Huppe (1950:180-185) rightly discusses such themes as truth, love and charity as being governing ideas of the poem. In common with many commentators, though, he rather tends to disregard the closing scene of the poem, and this essay therefore ends with a brief discussion of Langland’s own conclusion. After the heights of the declaration of Christ as champion and victor, the ending of the poem seems almost disappointing; but in fact it reiterates the importance of an active seeking of charity in this world.

It is Conscience who has the last word, as one who has, throughout the work, been of a practical turn of mind. He is at the gate of Unity Holychurch, and is threatened by Sloth and Pride (themselves, of course, antithetical to the charity which Langland has been advocating). Conscience’s possible allies, such as Contrition, have been beguiled by a false friar. When Conscience realizes this he cries out that he will become a pilgrim and seek Piers the Ploughman. Will the Dreamer awakes for the last time from his dream (XX.330-385; Schmidt, 1978:262-263). Many, though fortunately not all, critics of *Piers Plowman* have seen this reaction as world-denying and ascetic in intent, especially because Conscience

“gradde after Grace” (387). They miss the point that each time Will awakes, he sees truth more deeply; Conscience is not, in fact, escaping the world and seeking an atemporal grace. Rather, he is begging for grace to continue seeking Piers – and therefore the active, compassionate and practical living-out of charity – in the world itself. Will’s insight at this point, after he has experienced so much, is that the search continues even more urgently, not that the struggle to live out Christian doctrines ceases.

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