

Article

# What Is Charity? William Langland's Answers with Some Diachronic Questions

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**Abstract:** Charity turns out to be the virtue which is both the root and the fruit of salvation in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, a late fourteenth-century poem, the greatest theological poem in English. It takes time, suffering and error upon error for Wille, the central protagonist in *Piers Plowman*, to grasp Charity. Wille is both a figure of the poet and a power of the soul, *voluntas*, the subject of charity. Langland's poem offers a profound and beautiful exploration of Charity and the impediments to Charity, one in which individual and collective life is inextricably bound together. This exploration is characteristic of late medieval Christianity. As such it is also an illuminating work in helping one identify and understand what happened to this virtue in the Reformation. Only through diachronic studies which engage seriously with medieval writing and culture can we hope to develop an adequate grasp of the outcomes of the Reformation in theology, ethics and politics, and, I should add, the remakings of what we understand by "person" in these outcomes. Although this essay concentrates on one long and extremely complex medieval work, it actually belongs to a diachronic inquiry. This will only be explicit in some observations on Calvin when I consider Langland's treatment of Christ's crucifixion and in some concluding suggestions about the history of this virtue.

**Keywords:** literature; theology; Langland; *Piers Plowman*

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"What is charite? Quod I"

(*Piers Plowman*, BXV.148)

"Charissimi, diligamus nos invicem: quia charitas ex Deo est. Et omnis qui diligit, ex Deo natus est, et cognoscit Deum. Qui non diligit, non novit Deum: quoniam Deus charitas est [Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for charity is of God. And every one that loveth, is born of God, and knoweth God. He loveth not, knoweth not God: for God is charity.]"

(1 John 4:7–8)<sup>1</sup>

Charity turns out to be the virtue which is both the root and the fruit of salvation in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, a late fourteenth-century poem, the greatest theological poem in English. It takes time, suffering and error upon error for Wille, the central protagonist in *Piers Plowman*, to grasp Charity. Wille is both a figure of the poet and a power of the soul, *voluntas*, the subject of charity.<sup>2</sup> Langland's

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<sup>1</sup> *Piers Plowman* survives in three versions. In the epigraph, I quote from the B version: (Langland 1995); but throughout the essay, I study the final or C version (Langland 2008), occasionally with modern English translation by George Economou (Langland 1996). References to *Piers Plowman* in my text are to Passus and line. Quotations from the Latin Bible are to the Vulgate Colunga and Turrado (1965) with English translations from the Douay Rheims version revised by Richard Challoner: Challoner (1989).

<sup>2</sup> On will as the subject of charity, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.24.1. References to Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* are given in my text to Part, Question, Article and part of article: I use the parallel text edition, (Aquinas 2012). On will, *voluntas*: *Summa Theologiae* I.82 with 83 on *liberum arbitrium*, so important in the final version of *Piers Plowman*.

poem offers a profound and beautiful exploration of Charity and the impediments to Charity, one in which individual and collective life are inextricably bound together. This exploration is characteristic of late medieval Christianity. As such it is also an illuminating work in helping one identify and understand what happened to this virtue in the Reformation. Only through diachronic studies which engage seriously with medieval writing and culture can we hope to develop an adequate grasp of the outcomes of the Reformation in theology, ethics and politics, and, I should add, the remakings of what we understand by “person” in these outcomes. Although this essay concentrates on one long and extremely complex medieval work, it actually belongs to a diachronic inquiry. This will only be explicit in some observations on Calvin when I consider Langland’s treatment of Christ’s crucifixion and in some concluding suggestions about the history of this virtue.<sup>3</sup>

In the Prologue of *Piers Plowman*, Langland’s alliteration links what will become a major topic of exploration: the relations between Charity and Holy Church (Langland 2008, Prologue lines 62–65, 85–89, 152–169). In the Prologue, these relations become strikingly secularized.<sup>4</sup> The language of Charity now seems a vestigial one, a memory, so much so that its articulation in contemporary England depends on the sudden, mysterious appearance of a visionary figure who has descended from heaven to educate the person she addresses as “Wille” (I.3–12). She begins by asking him if he has actually seen the polity he has just depicted in the Prologue. She laments its secularism. The people, she observes, seek their final fulfilment, their *telos*, in this world alone. They have no will for a supernatural end nor do they even tell stories about this: “Of othere hevене then here thei halde no tale.” Their manic energies, with the Hobbesian polity displayed in the fable of the mice, rat and cat, are now judged as a rejection of Truth, the creator of all (I.7–16). But it is these energies, de-Christianization and a world dominated by universal commodification, which will pervade the ensuing Passus (II–VIII) and the poem’s final Passus (XXII). Langland returns again and again to the assimilation of the Church to this world once Holy Church herself has disappeared near the beginning of Passus II, never to reappear. Nowhere does Langland make explicit how he understands the relationship between the visionary Church descending from heaven to teach him and the historical Church which fills the poem. But before she disappears (II.55), she offers Wille a dense lesson on Charity. Before she does this, she shows how Wille has become part of the world he depicted and satirized in the Prologue. For he, like his fellow-Christians, has become an amnesiac. He cannot recognize Holy Church as the agent of his baptism and the one to whom he had promised obedience (I.69–75). She elicits in Wille a longing for amendment, for faith in Christ and for instruction on the way to salvation (I.76–80).

Once such longings have been revived in Wille, Holy Church responds with a discourse of Truth and Charity. She invokes 1 John 4 with the quotation “*Deus caritas* [God is love]”: “let us love one another, for charity is of God. And every one that loveth, is born of God, and knoweth Christ. He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for *God is charity*” (1 John 4:7–8, my italics). Holy Church affirms that those who love in truth and charity participate in the divine life becoming a heavenly gift to others (I.84–87). This is congruent with St. Thomas’s teaching that charity is a certain friendship (“*caritas est amicitia quaedam*”) with God which draws humans to share in eternal happiness. In such a view, the love of our neighbors becomes a participation in divine life (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.24.2, *resp* with II-II.23.2, *ad* 1).<sup>5</sup>

She follows her invocation of John’s Epistle with an exquisite allegorical lyric on the incarnation. In the passage immediately after “*Deus caritas*”, John wrote: “By this hath the charity of God appeared towards us, because God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live by him” (1 John 4:9). He emphasizes that “God first loved us, and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins”.

<sup>3</sup> For two fine examples of the kind of diachronic work to which I gesture, see Pfau (2013) and Simpson (2018).

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of this surprising aspect of a fourteenth-century work, see Aers (2015).

<sup>5</sup> For a recent work that tries to assimilate *Piers Plowman* to the incorrigible neoplatonism of John Milbank and so-called “Radical Orthodoxy,” see Gruenler (2017).

In this divine act, we discover what constitutes charity: “In hoc est charitas” (1 John 4:10: see with John 15:15). Similarly, Langland’s Holy Church discloses the meaning of Charity through God’s healing acts:

For Treuthe telleth that love ys triacle to abate synne  
 And most soverayne salve for soule and for body.  
 Love is the plonte of pees, most precious of vertues,  
 For hevene holde hit ne myghte, so hevy hit semede,  
 Til hit hadde of erthe ygoten hitsilve.  
 Was never lef uppon lynde lyhtere ther-aftur,  
 As when hit hadde of the folde flesch and blode taken.  
 Tho was hit portatif and persaunt as is the point of a nelde;  
 May non armure hit lette ne none heye walles.

(I.146–154)

[For Truth counts love sins’s best antivenin  
 And the sovereign of salves for the body and soul.  
 Love is the plant of peace, most precious its powers,  
 Heaven could not hold it, so heavy it first seemed,  
 Till it begat itself on earth.  
 Never was leaf upon linden lighter thereafter,  
 As when it had taken flesh and blood form.  
 Then it was light and piercing as the point of a needle;  
 There’s no armor or high wall can block it.]

The complex allegorical imagery in this passage has been analysed by Ben Smith, and there is no need to rehearse his fine account.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to note that Langland composes an extraordinary vision of the ineffable energy and healing power of divine love. The apparent weight of this charity is, paradoxically, made light by taking on the earthly flesh of human nature. Divine charity made flesh becomes as piercing as the point of a needle. Commentators have observed the link between Langland’s image here and Paul’s figuration of the word of God as “more piercing [*penetrabilior*] than any two-edged sword; and reaching unto the division of the spirit, of the joints and also the marrow, and is a discerner of thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Holy Church then associates the Father and the Son in the crucifixion. The Father, she says, “lokede [looked] on us with love, let his sone deye/Mekeliche for oure mysdedes to amende us alle” (I.162–164).

Thinking of the diachronic inquiry to which this essay belongs, I will offer one comment on this medieval representation. We should note the emphasis both on the Father’s love for fallen humanity, even in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and on his tender love for his Son. This characteristically medieval vision takes with total seriousness Paul’s statement that the incarnation was to reconcile sinful humans with God, *not* to reconcile a wrathful God with fallen humanity by inflicting torture and pain on a sinless substitute. “God indeed was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing to them their sins” (2 Corinthians 5:19). By God in Christ, fallen humanity is reconciled to God and called to practice “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18–20). Holy Church then adds that just as the Father looked on us with love even in the crucifixion of his Son, so the Son meekly prays

<sup>6</sup> Smith (1966, pp. 21–34).

with mercy to the Father to forgive those who tortured him, hung him on the cross and pierced him to the heart (I.163–170). Nothing in Langland's later treatments of the crucifixion, descent into hell, and resurrection contradict or even qualify this vision.

In contrast, let us recall the strange transformation of God's love in the Reformation's standard theory of the atonement: penal substitution. Calvin's *Institutes* illustrates and celebrates this dogmatic innovation in Book Two, chapter 16.<sup>7</sup> Here Calvin allegorizes the traditional teaching and narratives around Christ's descent into hell, so central in *Piers Plowman* (Apostles' Creed; *Summa Theologiae* III.52; *Piers Plowman* XX). He turns the descent into hell *after* the crucifixion and death of Christ, into a representation of Christ's crucifixion and despair under the hammer of his Father's wrath, torture, and abandonment of his Son. Typical of Calvin's teaching is the following:

It was expedient at the same time [the crucifixion] for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgement. For this reason, he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death.

(*Institutes* II.16.10)

Indeed, Calvin is certain that Christ was a substitute for fallen humanity bearing the Father's wrath, punishment, and his infliction of torture, certain that he experienced the despair of the damned. In the same chapter, he writes: "Christ was put in the place of evildoers as surety and pledge—submitting himself even as the accused—to bear and suffer all the punishment that they ought to have sustained" (II.16.10). So the creedal descent into hell is actually Christ suffering "the death that God in his wrath inflicted upon the wicked." Paying his Father "the price" he demanded for our redemption entailed not only the agony of the crucifixion ("only a bodily death" to Calvin) but "the greater and more excellent price of suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man" (II.16.10). He "bore the weight of divine severity" inflicted by his Father "and experienced all the signs of a wrathful and avenging God" (II.16.11). Calvin then vehemently defends his ascription to Christ of "despair" (traditionally seen as a mortal sin alienating one from God), "despair" caused by his Father's tortures (II.16.12). He reaffirms that the tortures, abandonment and death due to us was simply "transferred to the head of the Son of God." He tells his readers that they must remember that "this substitution" in which the Son embraces the Father's "cruel torments," the "righteous vengeance" of the "Father's will," is to transfer our eternal punishment onto the Son's head (II.16.5). In my view, which I shall not develop here, this model of relations between the Father and the Son became a source for increasingly widespread rejection of Nicene Trinitarianism in the seventeenth-century Reformation.

Be that as it may, Calvin's account of relations between the Father and the Son in the crucifixion, one at the heart of the Reformation, displays a very different form of Christianity to any we encounter among medieval theologians, poets and contemplatives. The Reformers invention of penal substitution dogmatics is a revolutionary break with the traditional theology and devotion in an area of decisive importance for understanding changes in ideas about charity. Any remotely adequate account of such changes has to be built on identification of medieval versions of charity. The present essay seeks to contribute to this inquiry by focusing on a powerful medieval work to which the exploration of charity is central.

Returning to *Piers Plowman*, Holy Church follows her account of charity with a forceful insistence that Christians must try to imitate Christ. They must do so not by self-inflicted bodily suffering but by the practice of generous love in the community, especially love manifested in material support of "the pore" (I.171–204). Even virtues such as chastity will be chained in hell if they lack charity, while faith without charity is dead (I.175–184: James 2:26).

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin (1965). Reference in my text to Book, Chapter, Section in his *Institutes*. I have found the following especially helpful in thinking about the diachronic issues here: (Van Nieuwenhove 2003; White 2013; 2017, chp. 7–9; Shuger 1994, chp. 3).

After Holy Church disappears from the poem, Langland initiates a constant elaboration of the representation of the Church in the Prologue (see II–VIII; XVI–XX). I discussed this elaboration at length in *Beyond Reformation*.<sup>8</sup> There I followed the way Langland envisages the emergence of forms of secularization which make traditional virtues and their language unintelligible. He offers rich exemplification of this process. Sin is profoundly social, destroying the bonds of community, naturalizing vices which destroy charity and giving such vices the traditional names of virtues. Langland tends to locate the most decisive causes of such processes in the Church itself. How could this possibly happen? Through the Church having become a powerful material institution fully immersed in contingent social relations where, as Chaucer's Wife of Bath observes, "al is for to selle."<sup>9</sup> Even the sacrament of penance and the interpretation of Scripture are represented as commodities in the Church's accumulation of power and wealth (for example: Prologue 56–59; III.38–67; XXII.324–379). Charity, too, has been turned into merchandise by contemporary friars (Prologue 62–63), a classic example of the paradiastolic speech which will dominate the collapse of the Pentecostal polity in Passus XXI.<sup>10</sup> Langland has a sharply realistic understanding of the way his Church had indeed become a polity enmeshed in a polity: it raised taxes; it was a massive landowner immersed in contemporary modes of production, exchange, and control over working people which were the same as those of lay lords; it made and enforced laws; it had its own courts; and it could order the lay power to execute those it judged to be heretics.<sup>11</sup> As we will see, he calls this *Constantinian* ecclesiology.

Perhaps it is not surprising that in this situation the figures in whom he places hope for the reformation of the church are a layman (Piers the Plowman) and the gifts of the soul known as Conscience, Reason and Liberum Arbitrium (Free Decision).<sup>12</sup> It is to Liberum Arbitrium I now turn.

He is "Cristes creature" well known "in Cristes court," one who knows both Conscience and Clergie (learning; the Church's clergy). He is "a will with a resoun" guiding the human person in the choices which gradually lead her or him to the supernatural goal of the will: participation in the goodness of God (XVI.158–201). As such, he addresses Wille's question: *Where is Charity found?* (XVI.287). Wille recalls that for many years he has lived in London but never found Charity although he has heard many mendicant sermons on it. He then invokes Paul's great oration on this theological virtue (1 Corinthians 13), lamenting that he has only met people who are led by covetousness (XVI.288–297). He has found that Charity can only be glimpsed figuratively, in an enigma (XVI.296–296<sup>a</sup>). Yet he now knows that only through the practice of Charity can the will be fulfilled and find happiness.

Responding to Wille, Liberum Arbitrium corrects aspects of the lengthy Franciscan teaching recently given by Patient Poverty. He insists that Charity can be discerned in the practices of people in all callings (XVI.299–329).<sup>13</sup> Wille reacts to this moving account of human benevolence with a sharpened longing for Charity (XVI.336–338). He asks another question: *Do the Church's clergy know Charity?* The first answer he receives is as elusive as it is subtle. Liberum Arbitrium does not mention clergy but says that the most perfect knowledge of Charity is found in the holy layman we met earlier in the poem, one who combined the public teaching role of the clergy with agrarian labor (XVI.340–340<sup>a</sup>; VII–VIII). Later in the poem this layman becomes a figure of the human nature assumed by God in the incarnation. Later still he becomes a figure of the apostle Peter in the Pentecostal Church (XX.16–25; XXI.83–335). Liberum Arbitrium then acknowledges the grace of charity among laity and clerics, although he claims it has very seldom been found among friars since the time of St. Francis: nor is it among mendicants (XVI.345–374). But Wille's question has reopened one of the poem's central preoccupations: the contemporary condition of the ecclesiastical polity.

<sup>8</sup> Aers (2015) and Simpson (2007, pp. 154–59, 211–15).

<sup>9</sup> *Canterbury Tales* III.414 in Chaucer (2005).

<sup>10</sup> On paradiastolic speech, see Aers (2015, pp. 85–87) with Zeeman (2020, chp. 1–2).

<sup>11</sup> For the late medieval English Church and the beginnings of its killing of Lollards, see McNiven (1987).

<sup>12</sup> On Conscience, see Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* I.19.12–13 with I-II.19.5–6; on Liberum Arbitrium I.83. For a recent attempt to describe Conscience in the different versions of *Piers Plowman*, see Wood (2012).

<sup>13</sup> On Patient Poverty, Franciscanism and Langland's Theology, see Aers (2004, chp. 5).

Liberum Arbitrium has already maintained a forceful, conventional attack on modern ecclesiastics. There he claimed that a corrupt priesthood corrupts the whole society: “oute of holy churche al evel spredeth/There inparfit presthoed is, prechares and techares” (XVI.246–247, with 242–285). He now returns to the relations between Charity and Holy Church with a rather less conventional outcome.

Driven by the remorseless criticism of the contemporary Church in the poem he inhabits, Wille asks another searching question: *What is holy churche?* (XVI.125). The answer is encapsulated in one word: “Charite” (XVII.125). This virtue entails life in a community formed by love and fidelity (XVII.126–128). This reply is close to one Wille receives later from Christ in the figure of the Good Samaritan: “charite, that holy churche is” (XIX.276–278). Yet once more Langland is emphasizing that Charity is a set of practices which constitute collective and individual forms of life shaped by God’s revealed law. In this vision, law and gospel are indissolubly joined. Twice it is asked whether non-Christians live lives of charity. Certainly, Liberum Arbitrium replies, “Iewes and gentel Sarresines” consider that they follow God faithfully and love him (XVII.132–135). Certainly they have “a lyppe of oure beleve” (XVII.252–53). But they reject the divine mediator, Jesus Christ, and so they reject the law of love revealed in the new covenant. Charity, Liberum Arbitrium argues, is bound up with this law (XVII.136–143, 150–193<sup>a</sup>, 239–261, 295–320<sup>a</sup>). Perhaps, he reflects, through attending to natural law (“lawe of kynde”) non-Christians may find their way to “a maner charite [a kind of charity]” (XVII.151–155). This may be a version of what Aquinas calls an “imperfect virtue,” and it clearly has a natural end, not the supernatural one of Charity, the supernatural virtue drawing its subjects to participation of the divine life.<sup>14</sup> Liberum Arbitrium affirms that God “aloueth [approves, allows] no love but law be the cause.” His example to illustrate the point here is that lecherous people and thieves have love without law: they love, but they simultaneously hate “leute [fidelity, truth, justice].” They are thus hanged for their lawless loves (XVII.136–138). Analogously, he maintains, “Sarresynes and Iewes” who reject Christ and his gospel law to love according to natural law and mistaken religious traditions will not finally participate in divine life (XVII.156–164, 181–187). For that, *conversion* is necessary (XVII.185–193<sup>a</sup>, 295–320<sup>a</sup>).<sup>15</sup>

But conversion into what actually existing historical community? Conversion into what form of life? What is the historical form of Holy Church? How is it related to the vision of Holy Church who descended from Heaven to teach Wille and then disappeared from his sight and the poem? At just this point Liberum Arbitrium locates the agency of Charity in a way that offers a fascinating challenge to contemporary orthodoxy. He declares that it would be an act of *charity* for the lay elites to use carnal *force* to *disendow* the Constantinian medieval church:

Hit were charite to deschargen hem for holy churche sake  
And purge hem of the olde poysen ar more perel falle.

(XVII.231–232)

[It would be charity to relieve them for Holy Church’s sake  
And purge them of the old poison before the peril grows.]

If Holy Church is Charity, its enmeshment in the pursuit of dominion and wealth leads Liberum Arbitrium to a striking proposal. Only through coercion exercised by the laity can the Church become the community it was called to be by Christ. As scholars have observed, this is a distinctly Wycliffite proposal. It was enacted by Henry VIII in the first stage of the English Reformation, but it is far from Langland’s last word on reformation of the Church. That last word rejects the very grounds of

<sup>14</sup> For an exemplary display of why and how to read St Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* with Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, see Overmyer (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Liberum Arbitrium is correcting claims by Trajan earlier in the poem (XII.75–85). On “The Salvation of the Righteous Heathen,” see Pearsall’s introduction in Langland (2008, pp. 37–39).

Wycliffite commitment to the Crown and armed lay elites as agents both of reformation and charity, but that is not a story that I will pursue here.<sup>16</sup>

Instead I will follow Langland's poem as it draws Wille into the heart of Charity (XVIII–XX). The modes now shift to allegorical visions brilliantly integrating the liturgy of Lent and Easter together with scriptural narratives.<sup>17</sup> What begins as the contemplation of an icon (the tree of Charity propped up by the three planks of the Trinity) becomes a dynamic process of narratives and imagery exploring Charity and the ways of salvation. In this sequence Charity is Jesus Christ figured in the Good Samaritan (XIX) and in the acts of Holy Week, the Harrowing of Hell, resurrection and ascension (XX–XXI). As James Simpson observed, in this process Charity is both "found in the inner recesses of the self" and "is simultaneously a *historical* idea."<sup>18</sup>

Wille's longing for Charity now experiences joy (XVIII.2). He sees the source of Charity as a mysterious garden, the human heart. Here the Trinity has planted a tree called *Ymago-Dei*. Its flourishing depends on "Trewelove," the presence of the Trinity and the activity of *Liberum Arbitrium*. This is a characteristic example of Langland's model of the doubled agency that is human and divine, so subtly displayed in Augustine's *Confessions*.<sup>19</sup> As Wille lovingly contemplates the tree, its Trinitarian creator and its adversaries, it transforms into a tree with a beautiful fruit: the fruit of charity. It represents each degree of Christian life (marriage, widowhood, virginity) and is again transformed as the fruit becomes human lives threatened by mortality and the consequences of original sin before the incarnation. Only through the incarnation of Christ can the fruit of charity be saved from the prison house of limbo where Satan gathers all the saints up to and including John the Baptist (XVIII.1–180).

In poetry continuing to display a dazzling range of allegorical modes, dialogue as liturgical drama, Langland shows how Charity finally becomes intelligible in Wille's engagement with sacred history and a journey through Faith (met as Abraham) and Hope (met as Moses) to Charity (Christ in the figure of the Good Samaritan; Christ as the parodic knight going to joust on the cross in Jerusalem; Christ as *Christus Victor* liberating humans from Hell: XVIII–XX). It is on an aspect of Christ's appearance as the Good Samaritan that I shall now attend.

Wille has been contesting the doctrine of Trinity which Faith (Abraham) tried to disclose. After some thoroughly unpersuasive similitudes, ones more congruent with tritheism and subordinationism than with Nicene dogma, Wille simply rejects such teaching: "'Y leve [believe] hit nat,' Y sayde" (XVIII.196–97). Faith's response to this apparently heretical rejection is a model of patient charity:

"Muse nat to moche theron," quod Faith, "til thow more knowe"

Ac leve hit lelly al thy lyf-tyme,

That thre bilongeth to a lord that leiaunce claymeth."

(XVIII.198–200)

["Don't muse too much on it," said Faith, "until you know more,

But believe it loyally all of your lifetime.

Three belongs to a Lord who claims allegiance."]

This has not always been the response of Christian authorities (whether Catholic or Reformed) to those rejecting orthodox doctrine. But Faith is in the process of teaching Wille that through the incarnation the Son of God produces children of Charity with Holy Church as the mother (XVIII.203–208). He is shown to be faith informed by charity (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.4.3 and 4) as we see Lazarus lovingly held in his lap, awaiting the liberating presence of Christ (XVIII.269–289: see Luke 16:19–31). Liturgically,

<sup>16</sup> See Simpson (2007, p. 159); Gradon (1980, pp. 187–88); Scase (1989, p. 85).

<sup>17</sup> Simpson (2007, chp. 7); Aers (1975, pp. 79–108).

<sup>18</sup> Simpson (2007, pp. 165–66); Gruenler (2017, pp. 292–93).

<sup>19</sup> Aers (2009, chp. 1 and 4).

time past, time present and time future (including the eschatological return of Christ) coexist. Salvation history is being performed, and the late fourteenth-century figure of Wille has become a participant:

“Allas!” Y saide, “that synne so longe shal lette  
The myhte of goddes mercy that myhte us alle amende!”  
And wepte for his wordes . . . ”

(XVIII.286–88)

[“Alas! I said, “that sin shall hinder so long  
The might of God’s mercy that might amend us all!”  
And wept for his words . . . ]

These tears flow into Wille’s encounter with Hope (Moses) in the next Passus where he is to hear about the love of God and love of neighbor (XIX.1–26: Matthew 22:37–39). But, just as the baptized Christian Wille had opposed the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. So he opposes Christ’s teaching on love of neighbor uttered by Moses (XIX.27–47). It seems, to him, far too indiscriminate: not all one’s neighbours seem loveable. Still arguing, still searching in the company of Faith and Hope, Wille suddenly encounters the third theological virtue: Charity. This is now figured forth as the Good Samaritan riding on a mule to joust in Jerusalem armed only in vulnerable human flesh (XIX.28–52). Langland’s brilliant dramatization of Jesus’s parable fuses the narrative of Luke 10:25–37 with a well-known exegetical tradition of allegorical interpretation.<sup>20</sup> The Good Samaritan in the parable is the Christ; the utterly helpless, assaulted and half-dead man (“semyvief” in *Piers Plowman*) is fallen humanity whose recovery depends entirely on the divine charity of the incarnation together with the sacramental gifts the Samaritan leaves in the inn/Church for the wounded man and his gradual healing (XIX.48–95).

With Faith and Hope, Wille follows the Samaritan Christ (XIX.78–82). He complains about the abject failure of Faith and Hope to help *semyvief* as he lay wounded in the wilderness. He also shares with Christ his objections to their teaching on the Trinity and on the love of “al mankynde” (XIX.96–107). In response the Samaritan displays an aspect of Charity which had been most profoundly articulated by St. Thomas. Namely, that *Charity is friendship*. In an article explaining why Charity cannot exist without Faith and Hope, he observes that it signifies not only the love of God but also a certain “friendship [amicitiam]” with God. This implies, Aquinas maintains, “a certain mutual return of love, together with mutual communion, as stated in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (VIII.2).” He brings together Aristotle’s understanding of friendship in mutuality with St. John on Charity: “God is charity: and he that abideth in charity, abideth in God and God in him” (1 John 4:16). Recollecting, too, Paul’s teaching that God has called us to “the fellowship of his Son [in societatem filii eius]” (1 Corinthians 1:9), he argues that such fellowship “consists in a certain familiar colloquy with him [quaedam familiaris conversatio cum ipso].” This begins now and is perfected in the future life by grace (*Summa Theologiae* I-II.65.5, *resp*). Later in the *Summa Theologiae*, in his treatise on Charity, Aquinas elaborates how Charity is friendship, devoting an article to this topic (II-II.23.1). He quotes Christ’s statement to his disciples: “I will not now call you servants . . . but my friends [amicos meos]” (John 15:15: II-II.23.1, *sed c*). And he concludes: “Therefore charity is friendship [Ergo caritas est amicitia].” Jesus utters the words Aquinas quotes during the long discourse after he has washed his disciples’ feet (John 13–15). Through the incarnation, humans are called to a certain kind of friendship drawing them into communication with God best figured in the language of friendship to emphasize the mutuality of this love, a friendship which *is* charity (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.23.1, *resp*). And this takes us quite beyond anything intelligible to Aristotle: love of one’s enemies. Still, even this precept of Christ can be

<sup>20</sup> On this figure and the exegetical tradition, see Smith (1966, chp. 4); Aers (2009, pp. 88–92, 97–101).

grasped as the way the friendship of charity extends to our enemies because of our friendship with God and the fact that our enemies belong to God to whom “the friendship of charity [amicitia caritatis] is chiefly directed” (II-II.23.1, *ad 2*).

This describes the place to which Wille has gradually been drawn. He is now given the kind of intimate, patient conversation with the Samaritan Christ which shows us what divine friendship might look like. Without anxiety, let alone terror, Wille confesses his resistance to some core Christian teachings on the nature of God and on Christian ethics. The Samaritan Christ responds without any lordly distance, without any disdain for the constantly erring Wille, not long ago lost in the land of longing and abandoning moral questions in hedonistic despair (Passus XI). This response is a model of the way mercy and compassion are inextricably joined in God as a form of justice (beautifully explicated by Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.30.1, *ad 1* and 30.2, *ad 3*).

The Samaritan generates a cornucopia of images evoking divine love and its source within the relations of the Trinity, showing Wille how traditional Trinitarian theology always acknowledged the need for a plurality of always inadequate models (XIX.111–334). In the context of the present essay, I wish only to draw attention to the explicit teaching about Charity as Wille is introduced to the sin against the Holy Spirit. In a fascinating move that seems to me unprecedented in medieval theology, the Samaritan Christ teaches us that unkindness is the mysterious sin against the Holy Spirit, the only sin that is unforgivable in the gospels (Luke 12:10; Matthew 12:32; Mark 3:28–29). In Langland’s language, *unkindness* encompasses the modern meaning of the word. But because he uses the word “kynde” to mean both Nature and God, the creator of Nature, “unkynde” means acts against Nature and God (XIX.172–277).<sup>21</sup> We are told that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit foster “fyn love” and faith that cleanses us from sin. But, contrary to Calvinist dogmatics affirmed at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), divine grace is resistible. If we are “unkynde” and fail to be “merciable” to our fellow creatures, then the Holy Ghost becomes “god and grace withouten mercy” (XIX.178–213). Having stated this twice (XIX.184–189, 218–219<sup>a</sup>), the Samaritan goes on to explain that “unkyndnesse quencheth” the grace of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, “unkyndnesse” blocks the loving fire and light of the Spirit (XIX.225–226). This view is glossed by Paul’s warning that lack of Charity nullifies all the other virtues someone may have (1 Corinthians 13).

So the sin against the Holy Spirit is unkindness, the denial of charity which is the friendship (“amicitia”) between God and humankind so vividly unfolded by Aquinas. The Samaritan stresses that in the parable of Dives and Lazarus the rich man’s wealth was legitimately accumulated: he was damned not for his wealth but for his *unkindness* to the beggar at his gate. He lacked charity (XIX.233–250). This alienated him from divine friendship and mercy. Once again Christ the Samaritan emphasizes that it is “unkyndenesse” which “quencheth, as hit were/The grace of the holy goest, godes owene kynde” (XIX.253–256). Unkindness, lack of charity, undoes God’s good creation and culminates in murder (XIX.257–271). In the face of such cruelty, the Samaritan discerns the demand of charity in a terrifying text from the Apocalypse: “How long, O Lord (holy and true) dost thou not judge and revenge our blood on them that dwell on earth?” (Apocalypse 6:10). The Samaritan returns to *Liberum Arbitrium*’s identification of Charity and Holy Church insisting that in the Last Judgement divine love will be withheld from whoever “love and charite destroyeth” (XIX.274–278).

Unterrified by the Samaritan’s account of the consequences of unkindness, Wille trusts in the friendship offered him by the Samaritan to put a question to him. Supposing I have rejected the virtue of charity and sinned in merciless unkindness but repent as I am about to die and beg for grace from the Holy Spirit against whom I have sinned (XIX.279–282). Can I have forgiveness? The Samaritan’s merciful reply is carefully marked with warnings about the dangers of such delayed repentance despite his affirmation that God’s mercy is above all his works (XIX.283–334: Psalm 144:9). With this embodiment of *amicitia* and Charity, the Samaritan concludes his teaching on Charity, the Holy

<sup>21</sup> See Pearsall’s note on XIX.185 in [Langland \(2008\)](#).

Spirit and the Trinity. He gallops off towards Jerusalem (XIX.335–336: see with XIX.49–51). Passus XIX has displayed Charity both in the Samaritan's redemption of *semyvief*, half-dead humanity, in his friendship with Wille and in his teaching on the Trinitarian relations of Charity. Now the poem turns to the liturgy of Holy Week, to the sublime acts of Charity, the victory on the Cross, the Harrowing of Hell and the Resurrection (Passus XX–XXI) followed by the Pentecost (Passus XXI).

These Passus include some of the finest theological poetry in English as Langland composes representations of the crucifixion that often go sharply against the grain of late medieval devotional norms. Furthermore, his models of the redemption are distinctively eclectic. Partly they are Anselmian (*Cur Deus Homo?*), but they retain strands of patristic models (though not the theories that ascribed rights to the devil).<sup>22</sup> It is not appropriate to attempt another reading of these Passus here. All I now intend to do is discuss some aspects of Jesus's great oration in the Harrowing of Hell. I merely wish to recollect Christ's representation of his charity and friendship elaborating the language in which he had taught Wille about charity, kindness and unkindness in the form of the Samaritan.

As the "lord of lyf," he declares "lyf is my drynke" (XX.403). He now thirsts for the salvation of souls (XX.407–408<sup>a</sup>: John 19:28). He considers the end of history and the Last Judgement on humans. How will we, none without sin, fare in the face of divine love and judgement? Christ affirms that his "kynde" demands that he be "merciablen" to mankind. As the second person of the Trinity, he assumed human nature (XX.20–25) so he and humans have become "brethere of o bloed [one blood," whether or not people are baptized. Christ seems to affirm both a fraternity, an *amicitia* of blood and also one of blood and baptism (XX.415–420). He asserts the freedom and power of his grace to save his brethren however badly they have done (XX.428–429). He acknowledges that "holy writ" calls for punishment of sinners. But he reasserts that Charity is rooted in his "kynde" as God-man: this shapes his exercise of judgement (XX.432–436<sup>a</sup>). His commitment to be merciful to many of those who are not baptized ("my halve-brethere") shows that justice is now mercy (XX.434–438<sup>a</sup>). He affirms that his very justice ("rihtwysnesse and rihte") will "mercy al mankynde bifore me in hevene" (XX.439–40). He glosses this promise with the observation that he would be "an unkynde kyng" were he not to help his "kyne" in need (XX.441–442<sup>a</sup>).

Aquinas's treatise on Charity in the *Summa Theologiae* includes a fascinating Question on Mercy (II-II.30). He shows how charity is inseparable from mercy and kindness. He argues that true justice ("vera iustitia") does not have disdain ("dedignationem") to sinners but rather compassion ("sed compassionem"). He quotes from Matthew's gospel: "Jesus seeing the multitudes had compassion on them [misertus eis] because they were distressed and lying down like sheep that have no shepherd" (Matthew 9:36: *Summa Theologiae* II-II.30.1, *ad* 1). Later he concludes that the "sum total [summa] of the Christian religion consists in mercy, as regards external works: but the inward love of charity, whereby we are united to God, outweighs both love [dilectioni] and mercy for our neighbors" (II-II.30.4, *ad* 2). He concludes this Question on Mercy by reiterating that Charity makes us like God by uniting us to him in the bond of affection ("per affectum uniti"). In this way, it surpasses Mercy by which we are made like God "as regards similarity of works" (II-II.30.4, *ad* 3). He recalls Jesus's command: "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6.36; II-II.30.4, *obj* 3 and *ad* 3). As Aquinas had argued in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*:

God acts mercifully, not indeed by going against his justice, but by doing something more than justice; thus a man who pays another two hundred pieces of money, though owing him only one hundred, does nothing against justice, but acts liberally or mercifully [misericorditer]. The case is the same with one who pardons an offense committed against him, for in remitting it he may be said to bestow a gift. Hence the Apostle calls remission a forgiving: *forgiving one another, as Christ has forgiven you* (Ephesians 4:32). Hence it is clear that mercy does not

<sup>22</sup> See Marx (1995); Gruenler (2017, pp. 350–60).

destroy justice, but in a sense is the fullness thereof. And this it is said: *Mercy exalteth itself above judgement* (James 2:13).

(I.21.3, *ad 2*)

These reflections on mercy and justice have profound implications for models of redemption and Christian ideas about the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to him. They belong to paradigms quite incompatible with Calvin's version of God the Father and his role as torturer-in-chief in the crucifixion. As Aquinas says in the next article:

The work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy; and is founded thereupon [Opus autem divinae iustitiae semper praesupponit opus misericordiae, et in eo fundatur].

(I.24.4, *resp*)

Aquinas's teaching seems to me congruent with Langland's unfolding of Charity, Mercy and Justice disclosed in Christ's assumption of humankind and his just kindness, mercy, to his kin. This exemplifies the *kindness* to which he calls humans in a life of charity.

This is a vision of God, a doctrine of God and ensuing ethics which would become impossible, perhaps even unintelligible in the Magisterial Reformation. Why? As with all complex historical processes, the answer will be multicausal and hermeneutic. One strand, as I have indicated in my discussion of Calvin's version of Father and Son in the crucifixion, is the distinctively unmedieval invention of the theory of penal substitution as the new orthodoxy of the atonement. This itself may have sources in specific forms of patriarchy emerging in the Reformation, as Debora Shuger argued in her chapter on Calvinist passion preaching in *The Renaissance Bible* (chapter 3). It also seems to have sources in the collapse of Charity into predominately charity as almsgiving and into Reformation versions of a new and unprecedentedly punitive poor law. Finally, the causes include changes in social relations we try to describe and understand as the processes on which the development of eighteenth-century capitalism depended.<sup>23</sup>

In a concluding word, I should draw attention to my designation of the Reformation in the previous passage as the "Magisterial Reformation." I do so because my own reading currently suggests to me some fascinating, if obscure, continuities between versions of charity in Langland and some versions found in Protestant groups held in contempt by the Magisterial Reformation. If this turns out to be the case, it will be very congruent with radical change and surprising continuities I found in my recent study of versions of predestination and reprobation from Aquinas to Milton.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See especially (McIntosh 1998, 2012, 2013). All are superbly informative studies for anyone trying to conduct diachronic inquiries in these areas. Also relevant in such an inquiry is Walsham (2006) and Gurney (2018).

<sup>24</sup> As I write this, the work is under review at University of Notre Dame Press.

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