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The non-Christians of
Piers Plowman

Three kinds of non-Christians appear in *Piers Plowman*: Jews, Muslims (or “Saracens”), and what we might call generic non-Christians – that is, those who have not become Christians simply because they had no opportunity to hear the word of Christ, having been born too early or too far away to have been exposed to Christian doctrine. The representation of Muslim non-Christians in medieval western texts has been addressed recently by several historians and literary scholars, including in John Tolan’s *Saracens* (2002) and in my own *Idols in the East* (2009), as well as in the older but still useful studies of Norman Daniel, Dorothee Metlitzki, and Richard Southern. These studies have shown that the representation of non-Christians has a complex but intertwined genealogy, with the portrayal of one subset of non-Christians often involving conventions used to depict another. For example, the term that most commonly denotes “idol” in medieval vernacular texts is “mahom” or “mahon” (French; English “mahoun” or “mahound”), drawn from the name of the prophet of Islam.

Conventions drawn from anti-Judaic discourse, as we will see below, were applied to Islam, as well as to other forms of pre-Christian idolatry. Accusations of heresy, too, were intertwined with anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish invective. This tradition of depicting non-Christians, moreover, was complicated by the actual historical circumstances of medieval Muslims, Christians, and Jews, who at different times and in different places lived in close proximity. Their cohabitation was often marked by violent conflict and discord, but on occasion by mutual understanding and exchange.

The depiction of non-Christians in medieval literature must therefore be understood not only in terms of the actual history of relations between different faith communities (which were also separated, in most cases, by ethnic affiliation), but also in terms of the ideologies that underlay the construction of religious identity. Yet approaching this topic in *Piers Plowman* presents a special challenge: while medieval literary works such as the *Song*

of *Roland*, Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, or Dante’s *Inferno* each present a relatively self-contained, internally consistent view of the non-Christian “other,” Langland offers no such certainty to his reader. Instead, his poem presents a range of possible perspectives, leaving the reader to sift through the various theological positions on non-Christians that might be adopted by a believer. This chapter therefore begins with a short account of how the text of *Piers Plowman* obliges the reader to weigh certain specifically defined alternative positions against one another. It then turns to the depictions of non-Christians at some key moments in the poem. The ambiguities of these depictions of non-Christians vary, moreover, between the B and C versions of the text, though this is further complicated by the variations to be found within the poem’s manuscript tradition.

This chapter addresses all three kinds of non-Christians found in *Piers Plowman* – Jews, Muslims, and generic non-Christians – beginning with an examination of the ways in which the poem constructs Christian identity based on the imagined identity of the pre-Incarnational Jew, going on to explore how the ambiguity in Jewish identity (as seen from the Christian point of view) inflects the Christian view of non-Christian others, especially Muslims. These latter were seen as both participating in a retrogressive return to the so-called “Old Law” of Moses and embarking upon a novel Christian heresy. The chapter will then consider what I have called the generic non-Christian, especially the figure of the so-called “virtuous pagan” that is the focus of Langland’s exploration of whether God could choose to grant salvation outside of the sacrificial covenant of Christ. This part of the chapter places the poem’s presentation of non-Christians in the context of Langland’s vision of salvation history, in which the temporal succession of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – as well as the typological prefiguration of Christ’s rule provided by the imperial rulers of ancient Rome – provides the framework for Langland’s apocalyptic expectations. The discussion of Langland’s account of the “virtuous pagan” is briefly compared to similar explorations of the theology of salvation found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1308–21) and the Middle English alliterative poem *Saint Erkenwald* (c. 1390), and is placed in the context of Walter Hilton’s more dogmatic view of the possibilities of salvation for non-Christians as presented in his *Scale of Perfection* (also c. 1390).

The time of salvation

In *Piers Plowman*, the poet offers a wide range of perspectives, leaving it to the reader to come to a conclusion that approximates – that is, comes as close

as it is possible to come, in a post-lapsarian world, to – truth. To some extent, the placement of such an interpretive obligation on the reader is a typical feature of allegory in general.¹ Yet this impulse is at its most acute in *Piers Plowman*, as a brief comparison with another fourteenth-century devotional allegory, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, makes clear. In the earlier poem, Dante continually corrects his reader both through direct address (e.g., *Inferno*, 9.62–3; *Purgatorio*, 8.19–21) and through the narrator's painstaking process of seeking to know and repeatedly undergoing reproof when he errs, whether by Virgil in Hell or Beatrice in Paradise. In *Piers Plowman*, by contrast, the reader is instead offered a series of possible alternatives. Beyond the interpretive obligation placed on the reader by the genre of allegory, and beyond the heightened expectations that Langland places on his own reader, the effort to interpret the poem's theological positions is further heightened by the often substantial differences that separate the poem's various redactions, especially the B and C texts; finally, the complicated textual tradition of the fifty-odd surviving manuscripts, none of which seems to descend directly from any of the others, adds a further level of hermeneutic uncertainty.

The reader is placed in a difficult position, not only as a result of the generic expectations characteristic of allegory, heightened in Langland's treatment of the genre, but also by the existence of multiple redactions of the poem. Some critics deal with this latter complication by simply assuming that the revisions of the C version supersede the text of the B version. With regard to the question of salvation, for example, David Aers asserts that the more narrow, Augustinian theological position expressed in the C version is unequivocally to be taken as Langland's final (and orthodox) word on the subject.² This view of the final authority of the C text makes sense only if we read the work first of all as theology and only secondly as poetry, and moreover if we assume that Langland made the alterations that appear in C out of theological conviction, not out of circumspection in response to increased policing of orthodoxy. We cannot know with certainty what factors motivated the revisions that generated the C text, with its greater dogmatism and theological precision. We can, however, as Elizabeth Kirk suggests, choose "to face the fact that these poems are poems and not treatises, without ceasing to learn from medieval theology, philosophy, and pulpit oratory."³ That is, we must recognize the extent to which, as visionary poetry, *Piers Plowman* requires a certain degree of ambiguity in order to ensure that the poem dynamically produces a spiritually reformed reader, through a rigorous process of education, rather than simply producing a directly and simply informed reader in the way that a non-poetic, theological treatise might do.

It is crucial to have some sense of Langland's method of spiritual formation of his reader in order to take stock of the depiction of non-Christians found in *Piers Plowman*. Especially in the B text, the poem does not offer a single clear statement of orthodox theological positions on Jews, Muslims, or other non-Christians. (It does not even offer clearly defined positions that are less than orthodox, as we find in Dante.) Instead, Langland offers what David Benson calls a "dialectic," requiring the reader to sift through the multiple theological options as part of the quest for truth and personal reform of the spirit.⁴ Like Prudentius' *Psychomachia* and the anonymous medieval play *Everyman*, *Piers Plowman* stages a range of voices, some of which are clearly to be dismissed, but many of which are to be taken very seriously. Yet while in the *Psychomachia* and *Everyman* the vices and virtues are personified with highly essentialized qualities and in conceptually pure terms, something very different happens in *Piers Plowman*. The personifications, especially the newly coined personifications, represent different possible subject positions, some of which espouse points of view that the reader is apparently supposed to support (or, better, learn to support), while others espouse points of view that the reader is supposed to find lacking. As Nicholas Watson puts it, Langland "maintain[s] an extraordinarily flexible relationship between poet, poem, and world in which the intellectual quest of the poet, the spiritual journey of the narrator, and the historical development and decline of Christian society are presented in ever-changing balance."⁵ Now, it does not follow that the reader who, at least temporarily, comes to hold a position that the poem later disavows or shows to be lacking is to be seen as a defective, "fallen" reader; on the contrary, it may be that such failures are simply part of the process that the reader (or the soul) must endure in order to move forward on the road of faith. It is clear, however, that the reader is meant at least to try to judge these different subject positions and to test them out against what he or she knows of religious doctrine and rightly guided belief.

This dynamic, so central to the aims of *Piers Plowman*, casts the poem's depiction of non-Christians in a peculiar light. While other kinds of medieval literature present Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians in terms of larger discourses of religious alterity and bodily diversity, they do so in a consistent way; in other words, we can arrive at a coherent assessment of how we are to understand "pagans" in the *Song of Roland*, or Jews in the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*.⁶ In *Piers Plowman*, however, the dynamism of the reader's engagement with the various subject positions creates a more complex web of interpretation. The depiction of non-Christians in the poem is not internally consistent precisely because the reader is expected actively to engage in interpretation, producing a reader who is not simply informed of

how she should understand the place of the non-Christian in salvation history, but who instead gradually comes to a fuller understanding of salvation concurrently with her own spiritual reformation.

In considering the ways in which the three kinds of non-Christians described above are presented in *Piers Plowman*, it is helpful to keep in mind the temporal schema of salvation history, and the place of each of these non-Christian identities within that time frame. The role of the Jewish people in Christian salvation history is twofold: on the one hand, Jewish history before the Incarnation of Christ was understood to be a prefiguration of Christian history, and within this schema important figures in Jewish history were interpreted as types or foreshadowings of Christ or other sacred figures. Moses's delivery of the enslaved children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, for example, was understood as a foreshadowing of Christ's spiritual delivery of Christian souls from the bondage of sin, and therefore Moses was a type or prefiguration of Christ. In contrast to this fundamentally positive view of Jewish history, centered on Jews who lived prior to the temporal hinge of the Incarnation, we also find a much more explicitly negative view of Jewish history applied to the period after the birth of Christ. In this view, any Jew who was virtuous would recognize the divinity of Christ and become a Christian. There could, therefore, be no such thing as a "good" Jew after the time of the advent of Christ. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was understood as a dramatic confirmation of the displacement not only of the physical site of the Temple, but of the religious community it had represented.

Yet the simple binarism of this view – good Jews before the Incarnation, bad Jews after the Incarnation – was, at a deeper level, more complex. While the view that Jewish history before the Incarnation prefigured events in Christian history necessarily presented prominent figures in that history (such as Moses, Abraham, or David) in a positive light, Jewish identity was seen as positive only in the sense that it was replaced or superseded by its fulfillment within Christian salvation history. To put it another way, even pre-Incarnation Jews were valued not as Jews, but only as foreshadowings or prefigurations of Christians, or even of Christ himself. The "real" children of Israel, from the point of view of medieval Christians, were constituted in the body of Christ (that is, the Church). Moreover, the simple view that post-Incarnation Jews were simply bad was complicated by the theological position, influentially argued by Augustine, that the continued presence of Jews in Christendom was not only to be tolerated, but was theologically necessary. Jews would be a witness to the inexorable unfolding of salvation history, and their conversion, in the fullness of time, would be a sure sign of the approach of the Apocalypse.⁷

The place of Muslims within this vision of salvation history was similarly complex. On the one hand, Muslims (or "Saracens") were simply yet another manifestation of paganism, characterized by their devotion to idolatry as well as a tendency toward violent and lascivious behavior. This view of Islam as pagan idolatry is ubiquitous in the medieval literary tradition, in *chansons de geste*, romances, and mystery plays, and therefore texts that depart from this grotesque caricature – such as Langland's *Piers Plowman* or *The Book of John Mandeville* (with which Langland's work was repeatedly copied) – stand out for how they actually engage with Islam as a theology. In these texts, Saracens are seen not merely in terms of a specific religious orientation (rather than generic pagan idol-worship) but also in relationship to both Christianity and Judaism. For the Mandeville author, Muslims can be compared to Jews in their common failure to accept Christ; yet he differentiates sharply between their respective possibilities for salvation. "Because they come so near to our faith," he writes, "they can easily be converted to the Christian law" ["Et pur ceo q'ils vont si près de nostre foy sont ils de legier converty a christienne loy"].⁸ Jews, by contrast, are presented in *The Book of John Mandeville* as an almost demonic threat to Christian unity: they continue to speak Hebrew, the Mandeville author asserts, simply in order to maintain the ability to communicate with and assist the enclosed tribes of Gog and Magog (conflated with the lost tribes of Israel) when they burst forth and attempt to massacre Christians during the End Times. While Langland does not demonize Jews in the way the Mandeville author does, he also indicates an openness to religious conversion on the part of Muslims: "For Sargens han somewhat semyng to oure bileue, / For þei loue and bileue in o Lede almygty, / And we lered and lewed, bileueþ in oon God" (B.15.392–4).⁹

By identifying the prophet Muhammad as a "Cristene man" (B.15.398) who deceived his followers with a mockery of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove (B.15.400–8), Langland highlights the resemblance of Islam to Christianity, with a defective human figure inhabiting the place that can rightfully only be inhabited by Christ. In temporal terms, Islam comes after Christianity in the historical sequence of religions; paradoxically, however, in its inability to recognize (Christian) spiritual truths, Islam is a retrogressive return to the limitations of the so-called "Old Law" of the Jews. To put it another way, medieval Christian views of the temporal sequence of religions could be seen in two ways: in terms of the historical sequence Judaism – Christianity – Islam, or in terms of the ontological sequence Old Law – New Law – Old Law, in the sense that Muhammad's false "law" was simply a return to the Old Law of Moses rather than an innovation built atop the New Law offered by Christ.¹⁰ While it might occur at a later point in historical

time, Islam was not seen as an innovation or a reformation within Christianity, but rather as a leap backwards into a period of spiritual blindness. In view of this complex time schema with regard to spiritual salvation, it is unsurprising that the temporal position of the so-called "virtuous pagan" was similarly complex. Born before the Incarnation, or otherwise unable to have access to the redemption offered by Christian doctrine, the virtuous pagan was able to reach salvation only through an evasion of the normal laws of time.

Like medieval polemical biographies of Muhammad, such as the eleventh-century *Vita Mahumeti* or the thirteenth-century *Roman de Mahomet*,¹¹ the description of the prophet in *Piers Plowman* emphasizes the linkage of religious deviance and excessive materialism, whether expressed in the form of greed or lasciviousness. Langland associates Muhammad with the accumulation of material wealth, blaming the spiritual degeneration that precedes the apocalypse on the twin evils of "Makometh and Mede" (B.3.329). Like the author of the *Roman de Mahomet*, Langland attributes false miracles to Muhammad, describing how through fakery he deceived his gullible people, and stresses Muhammad's claim to be the messiah (C.17.159). Yet Langland differs from the earlier polemical accounts in his strong emphasis on the role of Islam as a Christian heresy, grouping "Sargens and scismatikes" (B.11.120) and stressing the similarity of Christianity and Islam (B.15.392–5, 606–12; cf. C.17.132–5). In this he resembles another medieval poet who sought to bring about reform of the church, Dante, who places Muhammad (along with Ali, founder of Shi'a Islam) in the circle of Christian schismatics in hell.

By comparing Christianity and Islam, Langland invites the reader to compare Christ and Muhammad. The comparison is particularly evident in an episode that Langland adapted from the *Golden Legend* of James of Voragine (or perhaps from James's own likely source, the *Speculum historiale*, or *Historical Mirror*, of Vincent of Beauvais).¹² Langland reports that Muhammad trained a white dove to come peck grains of corn that he had concealed in his ear; when his people saw the dove on the prophet's shoulder, he told them that the bird had come from heaven as a messenger from God (B.15.406–7). This kind of false miracle also appears in the *Roman de Mahomet*, where Muhammad is said to have hidden pots of milk and honey to make them seem to appear miraculously; like the author of the *Roman de Mahomet*, Langland presents the false miracle as evidence of Muhammad's subtlety ("hise sotile wittes," B.15.399). In addition, however, this episode serves to underline Muhammad's imitation of Christ. The dove, a "messenger to Makometh," is clearly a parody of the Holy Spirit, characteristically represented as a white dove both in scenes of the Annunciation and

in scenes depicting Christ's baptism. The dove is a false "messenger," not a true mediator of divine power as the Holy Spirit is. Correspondingly then, Muhammad is also a false messenger, not a true intermediary like Christ. This is why Langland states of the Muslims, "in a feiþ lyueþ þat folk, and in a fals mene" (B.15.506).

Because Langland draws this comparison between Muhammad and Christ, and because he characterizes Muhammad using conventions found in polemics like the *Vita Mahumeti* and the *Roman de Mahomet* which explicitly identify Muhammad as a manifestation of Antichrist, we might expect Langland to return to the figure of Muhammad in his own account of the last days and the coming of Antichrist, found in the final passus of *Piers Plowman*. Instead, Langland distinguishes clearly between Muhammad and Antichrist: while he repeatedly calls Muhammad a "man" (B.15.396, 398), he implies that Antichrist is to be identified with Satan himself, "a fals fende" (B.20.64) that appears "in mannes forme" (B.20.52). Langland's association of Muhammad and Antichrist is much more limited than that found in other texts on the prophet. This is because Langland uses Muhammad not as a type of Antichrist, but as an example to establish the central role of the "mene" or intermediary. For Langland, Muhammad differs fundamentally from Christ in being a "fals mene"; only Christ, as both God and man, is a perfect mediator between heaven and earth. As a "fals mene," Muhammad serves as an example of those who should be imitators of Christ, intermediaries between the faithful and God: Langland concludes his account of Muhammad by stating that "Englisshe clerkes a coluere fede þat Coueitise higte, / And ben mannered after Makometh, þat no man vseþ trouþe" (B.15.414–15). It can be dangerous and difficult to call for reform of one's own community; doing so through a comparison to some group or person wholly alien to the community makes it easier. Moreover, by avoiding the simple demonization of the prophet through a comparison to Antichrist, as was conventional in the polemical tradition, Langland instead requires his readers to consider the similarities between Muhammad and "Englisshe clerkes" of their own day, evaluating their level of faithfulness to "treuth." Muhammad serves not so much as a representative of a rival religious law as a measure against which to evaluate the faithfulness of Christian clerics to their own law, especially priests who are themselves a "mene" as they participate in the sacrifice of the Mass. This use of Islam as a spiritual foil – a spur to internal reform – is also found in *The Book of John Mandeville*, where the narrator has a private audience with the Sultan of Babylon. The Sultan tells his visitor that he and all Saracens know that a Christian victory in the Holy Land is sure to take place just as soon as "they serve their God more devoutly" ["ils serviront lour Dieu plus devotement"].¹³

Supersession and retrogression

The presentation of Saracens in general and the figure of Muhammad in particular is slightly altered in the C version of *Piers Plowman*, both in terms of content and in terms of context, since the descriptions of Muhammad discussed above are spoken by Anima in the B text, but by Liberum Arbitrium (Free Will) in the C text. Before turning to these passages, it is helpful to examine, if only briefly, the broader context for the comparison of the two versions, particularly the shifting depiction of Jews and Judaism which has been so well analyzed by Elisa Narin van Court.¹⁴ Judaism functions in *Piers Plowman* as a template for Christianity, within the logic of supersessionism described earlier, in which significant figures and events in Jewish history before the Incarnation serve as prefigurations or foreshadowings of figures and events in Christian history. As Narin van Court has shown, Langland's depiction of Jews and Judaism differs significantly between the B and C versions of *Piers Plowman*. She suggests that this shift can be described in terms of a move from one conception of supersession to another: that is, from a focus on fulfillment to a focus on replacement, where Jewish identity is effaced as it is superseded by Christianity. Narin van Court's analysis of the representation of the Jews in the B and C texts is useful not only in itself but also because the representation of Jews serves as the foundation of the depiction of non-Christians more generally, in two ways. First, "Saracens" are often depicted in medieval texts as being akin to Jews, with the so-called "law of Muhammad" being understood as a retrogressive return to the "law of Moses" (as we saw in the *Roman de Mahomet*, discussed above). Second, within the logic of supersession, Jews and Judaism serve as a prefiguration of Christians and Christianity, and therefore normative religious identity (and, by extension, heretical departures from it) is based upon or derives from Judaism. In other words, the depiction of Jews in *Piers Plowman* sheds light on the depiction of Muslims both directly, through the association of Islam with the retrogressive "Old Law," and indirectly, through the template that Judaism was thought to provide for the conceptualization of Christian identity, as well as for heterodox departures from it.

In her account of the revisions found in the C text, Narin van Court emphasizes "the extent to which the dialectical tension that is so marked in the B text collapses in the C revision."¹⁵ She argues that although many critics find Langland to be magnanimous in his account of non-Christian religions, much of that quality has been revised out of the C text: "the generosity that Langland demonstrates toward the Jews in B is radically transformed in C," with revisions that include "an increased divisiveness with regard to living (or idealized) Jewish communities, and a figure of the converted Jew to

fulfill the poem's prophetic anticipations of Jewish conversion."¹⁶ We might expect to find a comparable distinction in the treatment of Muslims in the C version, with a heightened emphasis on orthodox positions regarding the availability of salvation to non-Christians, and a more stringent articulation of the separation between Christianity and non-Christian religions. As we noted above, Langland resembles the author of *The Book of John Mandeville* in the way he refers explicitly to the possibility of religious conversion on the part of Muslims: "For Sargens han somewhat semyng to oure bileue, / For þei loue and bileue in o Lede almyȝty, / And we lered and lewed bileueþ in oon God" (B.15.392-4). The lines in the C text that most closely correspond to this passage in the B text seem at first glance to be similarly generous, in theological terms: "For Sarrasynes may be sauēd so yf they so bileueð - / In þe letynge of here lyf to leue on Holy Churche" (C.17.123-4). The repetition of this sentiment a few lines later seems, if anything, more inclusive, so that "Iewes and gentel Sarresines" are said to "lelyche . . . byleue . . . / And o God þat al bygan with gode herte they honoureth / And ayther loueth and byleueth in o Lord almyhty" (C.17.132-5). Both Jews and Muslims are included here among those who worship the "one God who created all," "one God almighty," and still later in the same passus this apparently inclusive vision is enlarged to include also "scribes" (perhaps Pharisees): "For sethe þat this Sarrasines, scribz and this Iewes / Haen a lype of oure bileue, the lihtlokour, me thynketh, / They sholde turne" (C.17.252-4).

Yet such a reading overlooks the careful restrictions that are placed on the possibilities of salvation within the theological framework of the C version. The acknowledgment of the correspondence of Muslim and Christian belief found in B, where "þei" (that is, Saracens) "loue and bileue in o Lede almyȝty, / And we lered and lewed bileueþ in oon God" (B.15.392-4), is transformed in the C text, becoming at once more expansive (including Jews and "scribes") and more restrictive: "Sarrasynes may be sauēd so yf they so bileueð - / In þe letynge of here lyf to leue on Holy Churche" (C.17.123-4; emphasis mine). In other words, Saracens might be saved "if" they were to become Christians, entering into the sacramental order of the church. Similarly, the assertion found in C that Muslims, Jews, and "scribes" all share "a lype of oure bileue" (C.17.253) does not imply that such folk are saved. Rather, it suggests that they might more readily be converted (literally, "turned") to Christianity: "the lihtlokour me thynketh / They sholde turne, hoso trauayle wolde and of þe Trinite teche hem" (C.17.253-4). Here, the burden of responsibility for the salvation of these excluded non-Christians lies upon those lazy Christians who have yet to take up the task of converting these ripe fruits ready for harvest by Christ. This narrower view of what

might be required for salvation can best be understood in the context of the Trajan episode that appears earlier in the text (B.11.141ff.; C.12.73ff.), and which seems to suggest that there exist possibilities for salvation outside of the sacraments of the Church. (The Trajan episode is considered in more detail below.) The crucial feature to note in this context is the limitation placed on the inclusive vision of non-Christian salvation: it is open to them only "if" they believe in "Holy Church," and the significance of their shared "belief" in a single God is simply that they may be more readily converted to Christianity.

One further aspect of the C-text revisions regarding non-Christians deserves mention: that is, the short biography of Muhammad. While this account appears in both the B and C texts, the latter version goes beyond the former in its identification of Muhammad as a would-be "Messie" or Messiah (C.17.159), a deceptive counterpart to the true "Messie" (C.17.298, 303), Jesus. While the Jews fail to recognize Christ as Messiah, instead labeling him a "*pseudo-propheta*" (C.17.309), the Muslims wrongly identify Muhammad as Messiah. In other words, the Jews fail to recognize the Messiah when they see him, while the Muslims do recognize a Messiah – but the wrong one, Muhammad instead of Christ. In both cases, however, the error is one of partial or limited knowledge: as Langland puts it, both "Sarresynes and also þe Jewes / Conne þe furste clause of oure bileue, *Credo in deum patrem*" (C.17.315–16). They know in part, and are simply waiting to be taught the rest.

Such deficient, partial knowledge on the part of "Sarresynes" is also evident in a passage which is sometimes put forward as evidence of an inclusive attitude toward Muslims to be found in the C text,¹⁷ in which the account of how Muhammad deceived his followers into believing that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit by training a tame dove or "coluer" to sit on his shoulder is immediately followed by a comparison with contemporary Christian clergy:

In such manere [i.e., just as Muhammad called the dove],
me thynketh, moste the Pope,
Prelates and prestis preye and biseche
Deuouteliche day and nyhte and withdrawe hem fro synne
And crie to Crist a wolde his coluer sende,
The whiche is þe hy Holy Gost þat out of heuene descendet . . .
(C.17.243–6)

Such a view is put forward, for example, by Dorothee Metlitzki, who argues that in these lines "the Muslim Prophet in *Piers Plowman* is held up as an example to the Christian Pope," so that "Muhammad the evil enchanter has

become Muhammad the political sage and has been accepted on an equal footing."¹⁸ In other words, in this reading of the passage, the Christian clerics are urged to imitate Muhammad, calling upon the dove of the Holy Spirit just as Muhammad called upon the literal dove that perched upon his shoulder. Such a reading, however, completely inverts the temporal relationship of Christianity and Islam as understood in medieval texts, in which Muhammad's training of the dove is posterior to – a crafty imitation of – the true dove of the Holy Spirit, familiar in Christian iconography of the baptism of Jesus, as well as in depictions of Pentecost and the Annunciation. Christian clerics could never imitate Muhammad's calling upon his dove because his act was itself already secondary, a parodic imitation of the originary dove of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the C version, we find a heightened focus on the need for internal reform on the part of the Christian community, beginning with the reform of the individual Christian soul. The account of non-Christians, whether Jews or Muslims, is geared toward that aim, with both of these religious laws serving each in their own way as a foil or defective counterpart to Christian orthodoxy. Yet the careful treatment of the possibility of salvation available to non-Christians found in the C text, where Muslims and Jews can be saved only if they "turn" or convert to Christianity and formally embrace the sacraments of the Church, is complicated by the account of Trajan found earlier in the text. On the one hand, we might read the restrictive account of salvation found in passus 17 of the C text, discussed above, as a corrective against the potentially destabilizing story of the salvation of Trajan. On the other hand, we might see the Trajan episode as a challenge to the orthodox position put forth in passus 17, inviting the reader to weigh in the balance the Augustinian view that salvation is possible only within the sacraments of the Church against the view that God's omnipotence is not circumscribed by any bounds, and that He can save whomever He will.

Opening the door to salvation: the case of Trajan

The Trajan episode in *Piers Plowman* has been thoroughly studied, most recently by Frank Grady in his account of the so-called "virtuous pagan" in Middle English literature, as well as within the larger context of medieval retellings of the story of Trajan's salvation, which appeared in a wide range of texts, including saints' lives and universal histories as well as literary works including Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Middle English *Saint Erkenwald*.¹⁹ The most widely diffused version of the story, and Langland's likely source, appears in the *Golden Legend* of James of Voragine, within his

life of Pope Gregory the Great. Among the saint's miraculous accomplishments is the astonishing salvation of the Roman emperor Trajan, who lived before the time of Christ and should, therefore, have been excluded from spiritual redemption. Moved by the memory of the emperor's compassion, Gregory prays for Trajan's soul, and is answered: James of Voragine writes, "The voice of God responded from above, 'I have granted your petition and spared Trajan eternal punishment.'" ²⁰ Already within the *Golden Legend* account, there is immense uncertainty regarding the status of Trajan's redeemed soul, and the means of its salvation: James declares that "some have said that Trajan was restored to life, and in this life obtained grace and merited pardon," but that "others have said that Trajan's soul was not simply freed from being sentenced to eternal punishment, but that his sentence was suspended for a time," while still others offer different explanations. ²¹ This range of possible causes of salvation lies behind the multiple versions of the Trajan legend to be found in the later Middle Ages, where the narrative provided a kind of test case or experimental model for thinking through such questions as: What was required from the individual soul for salvation? Are the sacraments of the Church necessary to salvation? Is God's omnipotence sufficient to transgress the limitations He voluntarily set for himself in ordinarily requiring the sacraments of the Church for salvation to take place?

Piers Plowman offers no such explicit philosophical or theological conclusion as to what might be the correct answer to these questions, nor does it even suggest that such a conclusion might be possible. Instead, the story of Trajan serves as a kind of eruption of grace into the poem, marked by the voice of the redeemed emperor who cries out, "Ye, baw for bokes!" (B.11.140; C.12.73). The urgency and sense of rupture provided by these first words is emphasized in the opening lines of the passage, where the speaker is first identified not by name but as "oon was broken oute of helle" (B.11.140). The speaker goes on to name himself as "Troianus" (Trajan), "a trewe knyght" who, although "ded and dampned to dwellen in pyne / For an uncristene creature" (B.11.141-3), was subsequently saved. The question is: How? Trajan himself refers to a number of possible factors, stating that

Gregorie . . . wilned to my soule
 Sauacion for þe soopnesse þat he seizin my weerkes.
 And after þat he wepte and wilned me were graunted grace,
 Wiþouten any bede biddynge his boone was vnderfongen,
 And I saued, as ye may see, wiþouten syngynge of masses,
 By loue and by lernynge of my lyuynge in truþe,
 Brougte me fro bitter peyne þer no biddynge mygte.
 (B.11.146-52)

On one level, Trajan's salvation appears to be caused by Gregory's own exercise of will (he "wilned to my soule / Savacioun"); on another level, Trajan's salvation appears to be achieved through Gregory's compassion, expressed not only in prayer but also in his own tears ("he wepte"), which in turn incite divine compassion; on a third level, Trajan's salvation appears to be due to his own merit, a result of his having lived his life "in treuthe." ²² The multiple explanations of the nature of Trajan's salvation as given in the *Golden Legend* are here refracted, in Langland's provocative account, through Trajan's own explanations of how his salvation was effected.

Much scholarly debate has centered on the validity of Trajan's argument, the implications of his claims, and the philosophical and theological contexts within which these must be interpreted. ²³ For our purposes here, considering the case of Trajan within the larger framework of Langland's presentation of non-Christians in general, it is most pertinent to note the ways in which Langland invites us to juxtapose the case of Trajan with the presentation of non-Christians elsewhere in the poem. This juxtaposition includes his reference to Trajan not only as a "paynym" (B.11.162) but as a "Sarsyn" (B.11.164), even though this term is normally used to refer to Arab Muslims, designating both religious and ethnic difference. ²⁴ Some exceptions to this practice appear in Middle English romance, such as (for example), the pagan Danes who are identified as "Saracens" in *King Horn*. ²⁵ Langland's reference to Trajan as a "Sarasene," however, may be more than an accident arising from a vague use of the term: we might instead see this as a deliberate invitation to the reader to juxtapose the Trajan story with the discussion of Saracen religious difference elsewhere in the poem. Moreover, the reader is also invited to compare the Trajan episode more specifically with the short biography of Muhammad that appears in the poem: the emblematic figure of the dove, trained by the deceitful prophet to trick his followers into believing that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit, appears widely in the iconography of Gregory the Great. The saint is depicted writing his great work, the *Moralia in Job*, under the influence of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove whispering in his ear, ²⁶ and the several versions of the saint's *vita* allude to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove inspiring Gregory as he wrote.

This implicit comparison of Muhammad and Gregory, both associated with the iconic figure of the Holy Spirit as a dove, reinforces the ways in which the poem addresses the clergy, reminding them of their responsibility to mount renewed efforts to convert Saracens and Jews, and underlines the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit – whether represented parodically, as in the biography of Muhammad, or directly, in the "coluer . . . whiche is þe hy Holy Gost" (C.17.246-7). Langland's account of Muhammad, like the

story of Trajan, serves as a kind of challenge to the reader, requiring an interpretive effort that does not merely consist of determining what might be an orthodox theological position on the matter (whether the salvation of Saracens or of pre-Incarnational pagans) but rather requires that the reader engage dynamically with the arguments as they are offered. In the case of Trajan, taking that redeemed soul at his word means embracing a radical position that the sacraments of the Church are not necessary to salvation; at the same time, however, it is impossible to deny the fact of Trajan's salvation, in all its awe-inspiring paradox. The solution may lie, as David Aers suggests, in simultaneously acknowledging the fact of Trajan's salvation while also recognizing the very limited nature of Trajan's own understanding of how his salvation was achieved. As Aers puts it, "Trajan may be freed from hell, but he has certainly not yet begun to reflect on the Christian gospel."²⁷ While Trajan's own "jaunty confidence in the needlessness of the revealed word of God in scripture"²⁸ is not to be imitated by the reader, the fact of Trajan's salvation is nonetheless a visible sign of the working of God's grace in the world.

Seen in this light, the temporal dimension of the Trajan episode becomes intelligible: living and dying before the Incarnation, Trajan lives in the wrong time to enjoy the salvation offered by the redemption of the Crucifixion. But God plucks him out of time, through the mediation of Gregory and his compassionate tears, and saves him – because he can. Trajan is identified first of all not as an emperor of Rome but as "oon was broken out of helle" (B.II.140), the rupture of hell's grasp mirrored in the abrupt emergence of the speaking voice. The same language of rupture reappears later in the passage, when love and truth are said to have broken the "gates of hell":

Ac þus leel loue and lyuyng in truþe
 Pulte out of peyne a paynym of Rome.
 Yblissed be truþe þat so brak helle yates
 And saued þe Sarsyn from Sathanas and his power.
 (B.II.162–5)

Whose "love" and "truth" have the power to "pull" out the soul, to "break" these bonds? Surely not the individual soul, except insofar as that soul is moved by grace. This eruption of grace is a manifestation of divine power, and its acknowledgment of the unconstrained nature of that power – or, better, the limitations of any human intellect that attempts to comprehend that power – is what separates the poetry of Langland from the sober dogmatism of a theological treatise, such as the roughly contemporary *Scale of Perfection* by Walter Hilton (1380–96).

In Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, the situation is unequivocal: "Jewes and paynemes" (that is, Saracens or Muslims) are both excluded from salvation, Jews because they believe the Incarnation to be nothing but "sclaundre and blasfemye," Muslims because they believe it to be "fantom and folie." Hilton notes that some people say that

Jewis and Sarcenys and paynemes, bi kepyng of hire owen lawe, mown be maad saaf, though thei trowen not in Jhesu Crist as Holi Chirche troweth and as Cristen men doon, in as mykil as thei wene that her owen trouthe is good and siker and sufficient to here savacion, and in that trouthe thei doon, as hit semeth, many good deedes of rightwisenesse.

But, Hilton states flatly, that "trouthe" is not enough: "Nai, it is not ynowgh so." The "trouthe" of the Jews and the Saracens is only "un unschapli trouthe," not to be confused with the perfectly formed truth of the Christian believer, and therefore they are "not reformed to the liknes of God, but goon to peynes of helle eendelesli."²⁹ Hilton's emphasis on the need for spiritual "reform," a term he uses repeatedly throughout this chapter, is in many ways very similar to the urgent call to reform found in Langland's *Piers Plowman*. The two works are diametrically opposed, however, in how they call for this reform: Hilton dogmatically instructs his reader what to believe, imposing reform from without, while Langland engages his reader in a dialectical process that produces reform from within. The non-Christians of *Piers Plowman* are not so much Jews, Muslims, and pre-Incarnational pagans as they are tools that the poet offers to his reader, inviting her to use them to shape her soul into a more perfect form of Christ.

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- 24 R. Adams, "Piers's Pardon and Langland's Semi-Pelagianism," *Traditio*, 39 (1983), 367-418; R. Frank, *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1957; *Aers, *Sanctifying Signs*.
- 25 M. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press [1962].
- 26 See A. Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, chs. 2 and 3.
- 27 M. Adams, "Universals in the Early Fourteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, 411-39 (438).
- 28 *Avicenna Latinus: Liber de anima seu sextus De naturalibus*, ed. S. van Riet, vol. 1, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1972, 1, 1; 36-7.
- 29 See I. M. Resnick, "Peter Damian and the Restoration of Virginity: A Problem for Medieval Theology," *Journal of Religious History*, 39 (1988), 125-34.
- 30 John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, Liber secundus, Distinctiones 1-3, ed. C. Balic, Vatican, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1973, 296 (d.2, q.5).
- 31 D. Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1975; A. Cole, "Trifunctionality and the Tree of Charity: Literary and Social Practice in *Piers Plowman*," *ELH*, 62 (1995), 1-27.
- 32 *Somme le Roi*, ch. 50, 30, 203; *Book of Vices and Virtues*, 94. See R. Hanna, "Speculum Vitae and the Form of *Piers Plowman*," in *Answerable Style: The Idea of the Literary in Medieval England*, ed. F. Grady and A. Galloway, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2013, 121-40 (esp. 122-5).
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- 34 U. Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, 68.
- 35 N. Kretzmann, trans., *William of Sherwood's Introduction to Logic*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1966, 54n13; Ramon Llull, *Arbor scientiae: Romae in festo sancti Michaelis archangeli anno MCCXCV incepta, in ipsa urbe Kalendis Aprilibus anno MCCXCVI ad finem perducta*, 3 vols., ed. P. Varneda, Turnhout, Brepols, 2000.
- 36 On these figures, see *Atomism in Late Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, ed. C. Grellard and A. Robert, Leiden, Brill, 2009.
- 37 See, respectively, *Smith, *Book of the Incipit*; G. Rudd, *Managing Language in Piers Plowman*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1994; S. Tolmie, "Langland, Wittgenstein and the Language Game," *YLS*, 22 (2008), 103-29; N. Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire*, Cambridge University Press, 2006; *Harwood, *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief*.
- 38 Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. L. Sherley-Price; rev. R. E. Latham, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, 252. See J. Mann, "Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman*," *Essays and Studies*, 32 (1979), 26-43.
- 39 *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. M. G. Sargent, Exeter University Press, 2005, 11.
- 40 B. Harwood, "Imaginative in *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Aevum*, 44 (1975), 249-63; A. J. Minnis, "Langland's Ymaginatif and Late-Medieval Theories of

- Imagination*," *Comparative Criticism: A Year Book*, 3 (1981), 71-103; *Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Studies on Conscience range from Thomas Patrick Dunning, *Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the A-text*, London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1937, to Wood, *Conscience and the Composition of Piers Plowman* (who is the more flexible considering the diverse and shifting registers focused in this figure).
- 41 R. Hanna sees Imaginative as distinct from that version in the scholastic traditions; "Langland's Ymaginatif: Images and the Limits of Poetry," in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. J. Dimmick, J. Simpson, and N. Zeeman, Oxford University Press, 2002, 81-94.
- 42 See Owens, "Faith, Ideas, Illumination, and Experience," 444.
- 43 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 60 vols., trans. T. Gilby et al., London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964-73, 1.6 and 7.
- 44 See Minnis, "Langland's Ymaginatif."
- 45 See Galloway, *Penn Commentary*, 332-60.
- 46 Smith, *Book of the Incipit*, 157-70, 257-8n87.
- 47 See J. Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory*, 1280-1520, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, 70-1, 328-9.
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- 49 K. M. Fredborg, L. Nielsen, and J. Pinborg, "An Unedited Part of Roger Bacon's 'Opus Maius': 'De Signis,'" *Traditio*, 34 (1978), 75-136.
- 50 E. Sylla, "The Oxford Calculators," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, 540-64.
- 51 On medieval ideas of "the event," and radical contingency as a theme in other late fourteenth-century Middle English literature, see J. Mitchell, *Ethics and Eventfulness in Middle English Literature*, New York, Palgrave, 2009.
- 52 On this audience see A. Middleton, "The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*," in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background: Seven Essays*, ed. D. Lawton, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1982, 101-23.

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- 1 *Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*, 11-17; R. Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 63-5, 81. See Chapter 4 above.
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- 3 E. D. Kirk, *The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1972, 13.
- 4 C. D. Benson, "What Then Does Langland Mean? Authorial and Textual Voices in *Piers Plowman*," *YLS*, 15 (2001), 3-13.
- 5 N. Watson, "Langland and Chaucer," in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, ed. E. Jay, D. Jasper, and A. Hass, Oxford University Press, 2009, 367.

- 6 On the *Song of Roland*, see *Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries*, 15-45; on the *Croxtan Play of the Sacrament*, see L. Lampert-Weissig, "The Once and Future Jew: The Croxtan Play of the Sacrament, Little Robert of Bury and Historical Memory," *Jewish History*, 15 (2001), 235-55.
- 7 On the Augustinian view, see J. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.
- 8 *Jean de Mandeville: Le Livre des merveilles du monde*, ed. Christiane Deluz, Sources d'histoire médiévale 31, Paris, CNRS, 2000, 277 (ch. 15).
- 9 Citations are from Schmidt. For further discussion of this passage see below.
- 10 *Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 223-8, 257-62.
- 11 On polemical biographies of the prophet, see *Tolan, *Saracens*, 135-69 (ch. 6, "Muhammad, Heresiarch"); on the *Roman de Mahomet*, see R. Hyatte, *The Prophet of Islam in Old French: The Romance of Muhammad (1258) and the Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)*, Leiden, Brill, 1997, 1-18.
- 12 On the sources and circulation of the account of Muhammad found in the chapter on Pelagius in the *Golden Legend*, see S. Mula, "Muhammad and the Saints: The History of the Prophet in the *Golden Legend*," *Modern Philology*, 101 (2003), 175-88.
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- 14 E. Narin van Court, "Hermeneutics of Supersession: The Revision of the Jews from the B to the C text of *Piers Plowman*," *YLS*, 10 (1996), 43-87.
- 15 Narin van Court, "Hermeneutics of Supersession," 47.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 47, 50.
- 17 On the concept of "universal salvation" in the B text versus the C text, see D. Pearsall, "The Idea of Universal Salvation in *Piers Plowman* B and C," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 39 (2009), 257-81.
- 18 *Merlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England*, 202.
- 19 See *Grady, *Representing Righteous Heathens*, 1-44; on the Trajan narrative, see G. Whatley, "The Uses of Hagiography: The Legend of Pope Gregory and the Emperor Trajan in the Middle Ages," *Viator*, 15 (1984), 25-63; *Vitto, *Virtuous Pagan*.
- 20 Jacobus de Voragine [James of Voragine], *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols., Princeton University Press, 1995, 1.178-9; Latin text in Theodor Graesse, ed., *Legenda aurea vulgo historia lombardica dicta*, Leipzig, Librariae Arnoldianae, 1850, 196-7.
- 21 *Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 1.179.
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- 23 For a survey of these, see *Grady, *Representing Righteous Heathens*, 20-2; for overview of the terms of the debate, see *Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 84-8.

- 24 See *Tolan, *Saracens* 10-12 (on early etymologies of the term), 126-8 (on the use of the term to refer to non-Muslim "pagans"); *Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 113-15.
 - 25 See D. Speed, "The Saracens of *King Horn*," *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 564-95.
 - 26 See, for example, the author portrait in an eleventh-century manuscript of the *Moralia in Job*, Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, MS Msc. Bibl. 84 (fol. 1r, author portrait); also the twelfth-century author portrait in Cleveland Museum of Art, J. H. Wade Fund ms 1955.74 (Engelberg, 1143-78), fol. 1.
 - 27 *Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 124.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, 125.
 - 29 Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, book 2, ch. 3 (ed. Bestul, TEAMS), lines 96-150.
- 10 MANUSCRIPTS AND READERS OF *PIERS PLOWMAN*
- 1 J. A. Burrow, "The Audience of *Piers Plowman*," *Anglia*, 75 (1957), 373-84, reprinted with a postscript in his *Essays on Medieval Literature*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, 102-16.
 - 2 *Middleton, "The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*."
 - 3 K. Kerby-Fulton and S. Justice, "Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin," *New Medieval Literatures*, 1 (1998), 59-83.
 - 4 Washington, DC, Folger Library, MS v.b.236; Princeton University Library, Taylor MS 10.
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 - 9 S. Horobin, "Harley 3954 and the Audience of *Piers Plowman*," in *Medieval Texts in Context*, ed. G. D. Caie and D. Renevey, London, Routledge, 2008, 68-84.
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