

whether a white man is even capable of grasping the words, let alone believing them. For the rest, you have Moses and the Prophets: Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and the others. Read them, and see for yourself what they are saying.

Piers Plowman at Vatican II

ANSELM ATKINS

The front cover of the Penguin paperback *Piers the Ploughman* shows a woodcut of Langland lying beside a Malvern stream watching his vision of Piers. Piers is plowing the field of the world—there are the jackdaws flapping up out of the furrows and the sun shining hotly. Piers is giving Will a straight look, and Will is looking back: respectful, but a little dull and sheepish. They are both, naturally, barefoot. Then this other book, in covers exceedingly hard, and with no woodcut, opens to page thirty-five and, after a pointed quotation from St Augustine, commences a summary: ‘The Church needs, not only one to form her in the first place, but always, because she is deformed, a *reformer*. And this is Christ himself. This is why, throughout everything that we must not shirk saying, and in painful compassion and sorrowfully recognizing our co-responsibility, about the shadow-side of the Church, yet we can always firmly believe, in glad and unshakable faith, not in a sinful Church but in the holy Church.’ And further down the page (of *The Council, Reform and Reunion*) Hans Küng goes on: ‘. . . insofar as God’s holy Church is a Church of men and sinful men, she, with everything that she is and has, is subject to that word of the Lord which reads “Do penance and be converted.” Insofar as the Church is deformed, she has to be reformed: *ecclesia reformanda*.’

The churchman who says the Church *may* be reformed, or *must* do penance, has a healthy secure faith. He knows the Church is going to come out alright; thick or thin, it makes no difference. He can allow reform; even help it along; even let it touch himself. It is not (he believes) the word of man but the word of the Lord that calls him and the Church to penance. It is not transalpine busybodies who administer pur-

gatives and prescribe poultices; it is Christ himself. And who would not want to be touched by Christ's hand, smooth or rough? Somewhere in the theology of the Church there needs to be a paragraph like Küng's which says, Reformers are not doing it, Christ is. If reform in the Church is contact with Christ, then reform is sacramental. And so it must be continuous, normal, inherent in the Church, part of the Church's law of growth towards omega. The sharpest formulation of the law is *ecclesia semper reformanda*. What a fine Catholic thing! Happily, reformability is a fact, and we ourselves—and especially we—actually do have the privilege of sharing in the Church's catharsis. The only thing needful is to admit it and begin. One who very long ago did was William Langland. His poem *Piers the Ploughman* is, from one legitimate point of view, a song of Church reform—a song about Langland's good friend, about a near kinsman of his and the vineyard he had. The word of a man, but in a way, the word of the Lord too, because how else could the Lord speak? For Langland, as for Küng, the Church is 'Holy Church'—and he means the one sitting at Avignon with pope, pardoners, and all; and Piers, rather like Dante's Beatrice, becomes, by stages, the reforming Christ.

William Langland lived between councils: Vienne (1311), Langland (b. 1332), Pisa-Constance (1409, 1414). It was the age of the decline of scholasticism and the currency of Occam, the slack period in Church history when nothing was doing: the mudflats of ebbtide, the years of the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, the Western Schism, and the Wife of Bath. The only thing left to try, it looked like, was an abandon-ship; which was tried. But even before Luther came, heart-breaking attempts were being made to reform the Church in 'head and members', as the cry went; so much so that it is really this, rather than mudflats, which characterizes the period, Churchwise. Here was holy Church become, to all appearances, and if you'd have it in black and white, a great white maggot or a sleek black leech (etc.; let Lord Macaulay or Virginia Woolf describe it), and the best hearts (St Catherine) and minds (Nicholas of Cusa) of Christendom in anguish and ghostly torment over it, but all to no purpose, for the reforms were stillborn. The striking thing is that this earnest sustained reform effort, unlike the Tertullianist abortion in Africa, or the Albigensian in France, or Wyclif's, was at work within the limits of visible Church unity. Let's see a roster of orthodox reformers and then go on to the one we are interested in, Langland. There was Pierre d'Ailly, who wrote, among many other things, *Warning: Church Needs Reforming in Head and Mem-*

bers; Nicholas of Clemanges (*The Ruin and Rebuilding of the Church*); Humbert of Romans (*What to Take Up at the Council of Lyons*); Durandus of Mende (*How to Hold a General Council*); Gerson, at Constance, slightly Gallican, but always for peace, union, and moderation; and so on, many more, all dustily forgotten since the mid-sixteenth century.

Not one list of pre-Reformation Catholic reformers I can find names Langland. He doesn't even have an entry—at least not under L—in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, which is ordinarily adequate in historical matters. Yet Langland was more thoughtful, more earnest, more balanced, more Catholic, than most of the reformers of the time—and he was England's own. Why didn't he make a mark? For one thing, he was a layman who quit theological training after minor orders and so had no place in the ecclesiastical machinery; and next, he had no council to go to. He had only his naked voice—'laymen are permitted to speak the truth if they choose,' he said—no more listened to than mould in a leafless wood, until the Protestant Reformers, to the Church's confusion, sponsored him on their bill. Now it is time to retrieve him and take him, disguised as a *peritus*, to Vatican II, and hear him out. The French have Congar, the Germans Küng, the Americans (excusably) Rynne. The English have had Langland six-and-a-half centuries.

Whatever we say about Piers, reform, and the Council, we ought to bear in mind J. F. Goodridge's remark in the Introduction to his Penguin translation (page ten): 'Langland was not, primarily, either a satirist, a social commentator, or a preacher. He was a poet . . .' Langland's object was not to draw up a schema on ecclesiology or address a forty-point programme to the bishops assembled. He wrote a poem—about men and women—about sin and Christ—about poverty, charity, fraud and injustice—about masters of theology, hot-pie sellers, papal wars, and Holy Scripture. When we view Langland solely as a reformer we are not seeing him as he saw himself, or as literary criticism sees him. We aren't taking him at the highest level his genius reached—the level of the total poem, the earthy spiritual vision. We are accommodating Langland to a merely topical subject. And why? surely it's not that we like reformers better than poets? Well, we are looking, like Will, for Truth. I don't suppose it's wrong to ask poets questions. Langland *does* have something to say that applies to the Council and to reform, and it deserves our attention.

John XXIII said the Council's first business is the rejuvenation of Christian life. The issue is, How are Christians to act now at this point in history so as to co-operate most fully with God's advancing plans?

Fr Küng maintains (page fifty-two) that although rejuvenation includes personal individual reform, it must not content itself with the 'purely interior' but must go as far as the 'outward conditions, means, forms and structures of the Church' which have it in their power to help or hinder the Church's interior life. Langland covers both domains. The shortcoming of the elaborate official reform programs of the day was that housecleaning was always scheduled to begin next door. In one's own house there might be a great shaking of mops, but little show of dust. Langland gets the pig by the ears when he asks Lady Church, *How may I save my soul?* and sets out after Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. The development of the theme of quest for the 'real right thing' makes *Piers* the equal of any spiritual classic. His matter, which is just the slightest bit complicated, eventually centres on Truth, Patience, and Charity, without omitting the Adamite enormities along the way. As for the *outer* shape of the Church, as opposed to this private inner pilgrimage, his observations are clear as ice: the entire edifice needs scouring top to bottom—as does society, government, and every man. The temperate working premise underlying his criticisms is surely this: 'Holy Church is the source of all holiness and truth, which spring from her through honest men who teach God's Law' (Bk 15). Furthermore, he is not just a finger-pointer: 'I blame no one, but pray God to reform us all, and give us grace to follow Charity. For if anyone met him, they would find he shrank from condemning others.' That doesn't mean he didn't see what he saw. Here is a select syllabus of abuses: 'There is much more I could say about the Papal Court, but it is not for me to say it' (Prologue); '(Lucre) makes bishops of men who can scarcely read' (Bk 3); 'If any (priests) hunt with hawks and hounds, they shall lose their boasted livings' (Bk 3); 'If the prelates did their duty, no christian man would . . . be without bread and soup . . . Why cannot we Christians be as charitable with Christ's gifts as the Jews, who are truly our teachers, are with theirs?' (Bk 9); 'What need have they to take money for saying Masses? If they are worthy of any wages, he who gave them their title should pay them' (Bk 10); 'The Doctors of Canon Law make and unmake marriages' (Bk 15); 'If property is a deadly poison that corrupts them, it would be good for Holy Church's sake to relieve them of it' (Bk 15).

The more Will comes to himself and recognizes Patience and Charity for prime clues in his search, the less fangy his critique of the Church Contemporary becomes. He is able to accept the human frame of the Church once he learns what his own nature is. The satire of the last

book is mellow. Friar Creep-Into-Houses, who comes soliciting private subscriptions, is not a character born of Swiftian *saeva indignatio*—he's a Guinness-like creation. Contrast 'The Coming of Antichrist' with Tertullian's last bitter Montanist work, *On Purity*, and you see very graphically the difference between a reformer who has followed Congar's Four Rules (priority of charity and the pastoral; remaining within the community; patience; return to sources), and one who hasn't.

Langland favors what the Council Fathers call the pastoral approach. 'Every Bishop who carries a crozier is thereby bound to travel through his diocese and show himself to his people' (Bk 15). The following passage needs one alteration ('Law of Christ' for 'Ten Commandments'), but the gist of it has already been expressed in the First Session: 'So, all you friars and theologians who preach to the layfolk, talking abstrusely about the Trinity and stirring up questions beyond the reach of Reason, little wonder that the ignorant people are led to doubt their Faith! Most of you had far better give up teaching such stuff, and preach instead about the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins' (Bk 15). The object of Will's search is *Do-Well*, put into practice. Theorists who ignore the crises across the alley-way get none of Langland's sympathy. Some learned men, he says, 'drive at the high table as if they understood the Deity, and when their guts are full munch on God with their mouths. Meanwhile some poor wretch may cry at their gate, tormented by hunger and thirst and shivering with cold; yet no one asks him in . . .' (Bk 10). It wouldn't be correct to conclude, however, that Langland underestimates the role of theology in the Church's life. *Piers* is rich in good theology. Apparently Langland escaped the shallowness of the schools by staying home with his wife and studying privately. And this is the place to indicate, without going into it, how he has confirmed Congar's fourth Rule (about sources) and Karl Rahner's warning that it's no use being pastoral if dogma is unprepared for the move. The three sources Langland uses are Scripture, liturgy, and the Western Fathers. He has read, marked, learned and inwardly digested Scripture; his handling of it is personal, appropriate and frequent; nor has modern scholarship given a completely satisfactory account of his work in this area. Then the liturgy: whole sections of *Piers* have to be interpreted with reference to the Easter cycle, as Goodridge has pointed out. And so, armed with living doctrine, Langland, a true lay prophet in the Church, relentlessly pounds out his vision of what religion has come to, and what it ought to be: 'Then I heard parish priests complaining to the Bishop that since the Plague their parishes

were too poor to live in; so they asked permission to live in London, where they could traffic in Masses, and chime their voices to the sweet jingling of silver. Bishops and novices, Doctors of Divinity and other great divines—to whom Christ has given the charge of men's souls, and whose heads are tonsured to show that they must absolve, teach and pray for their parishioners, and feed the poor—I saw them all living in London, even in Lent' (Prologue).

Were Langland alive today he would rattle with excitement to see the Council and its interpreters singling out as the cardinal issue the problem of Truth. Conservatives and progressives alike insist on 'Truth first and always'. But what a difference. Truth for the latter is not a hoard to 'preserve and protect.' It is a talent, allergic to napkins, that loves trading. Not a meal of roast lamb warm in the belly—a wild boar rather, and all we the beaters. Von Hugel's description of the two attitudes toward truth (from a 1921 letter quoted in de la Bedoyere's *Life*, p. 330) is still pertinent: 'Such minds see truth, reality of all kinds—or what they take to be such—as so many geometrical figures; within these luminous lines, all is true, 'safe,' 'correct'; outside them at once begins error, 'danger' incorrectness . . . Then there are other minds which see truths, realities, as *intensely luminous centers*, with a semi-illuminated outer margin, and then another and another, till all shades off into utter darkness. Such minds are not in the least perturbed by even having to stammer and to stumble.'

But regardless of what our own side may be in the controversy, it is encouraging to see Truth given its rightful place once more. There is a gap between the Catholic doctors of *veritas*—Augustine, Aquinas, and Newman—and us. So often Catholics justify Kingsley's impression. We either forget that truth is a virtue, or else raise it to such an unapproachable height that it no longer holds our interest or arouses our practical concern. Against this, it just happens 'truth' is the most prominent word in *Piers*. I noted thirty-eight references to it, and there are more. Oddly, and in spite of his acquaintance with Augustine, Langland seldom if ever thinks of truth as a body of doctrine or an object of intellectual assent. By that much he lets himself out of Vatican II dialogue. But luckily for us and him there is a good deal more to truth than the abstract treatises have prepared us for.

First of all, truth is something to be *sought for*. 'When all treasures are tested,' Lady Church insists, 'Truth is the best.' *Piers*, in Book Five, is the servant of Truth and claims to know the way to him. All Christians must take up the search. 'Covet truth—seek after Truth' are the ex-

pressions. (Relevant to the present, the subject *whether* and *how far* and *by what call* a Catholic need enter upon such a thing as a search for what he already supposedly possesses in copious supply is little treated today, so far are we from Langland's and Von Hugel's mentality.) So a thousand Christians throng over the countryside till they meet a pilgrim 'sewn all over with devices' who has been to all the 'shrines of the saints' for the good of his soul. 'Do you know anything about a saint called Truth?' the Christians ask him. 'Good heavens, no!'—he never heard of him!

Then secondly, truth is something you *are* and *do*: as in St Paul's phrase 'doing the truth.' It is Gandhi's or Martin Luther King's *satyagraha*, 'truth-force.' Under this usage come honesty or personal integrity and everything from the laborer's pride in being as good as his word, and the fidelity of the man moving through the fancier Existentialist categories, to the Old Testament idea of God's own righteousness and truth—Yahweh the fair and unfailing bargainer. This meaning of truth shades off into truth as 'goodness-in-the-concrete' as opposed to evil and corruption. It is also the truth which is stifled behind the solemn flaccid countenances of hypocrisy. It is, then, plain truth without wrappers that Langland means when he says, wryly, 'the man who tells the truth to those in power is condemned first' and 'Lucre has choked up the truth and trampled on your justice' (Bk 3). Again (with an eye to a pastoral council), 'Truth commands us to take care of the needy and clothe the naked,' 'Truth once taught me to love all men alike' (Bk 6), and 'Wherever there is perfect truth and patient speech and poverty of spirit, there you will find Charity' (Bk 14).

Finally, truth in Langland's third general sense is a *numen*, a *theophany*. When the dream begins, Will is in a flat plain, a wilderness. Set over toward the East is a high castle which, Lady Church afterwards informs him, is the home of Truth—that is, God. When we recall the use made of the castle-image by St Theresa and Kafka, we can't help being strongly affected by Langland's putting Truth in a castle and keeping him there for the whole poem as a presence in the background. Truth appears in different guises, too. He sends Piers a 'pardon' by a messenger . . . but, like the line to Kafka's castle, the pardon confusedly fades out and turns into an uncompromising warning from the Athanasian creed. Various, Truth is the Trinity, the Holy Ghost, Christ, and one of the Four Daughters of God. Truth reigns in the Last Age. Truth is what antichrist attacks; Truth breaks open the gates of hell. Truth is what Piers worships and serves; it is the 'field of Truth' he plows.

And so we are back at the woodcut, Piers plowing. There'd as well have been another reproduction on the rear cover, since the poem ends with a beginning: a fresh search for Piers. It is not too much to hope that Vatican II will end with *its* doors open and a new search begun.

A Consultation and a Congress

I. RELIGION AND TELEVISION, AT CAMBRIDGE

Last September a Consultation on *Religion in Television* was held at Cambridge under the auspices of the Independent Television Authority. It was the second such consultation, the first having been held in Oxford in the summer of 1961. There were this year at Cambridge over a hundred delegates; they were mostly producers of ITV religious programmes and the numerous ministers of every denomination who act as religious advisers either to the Authority itself or to the various programme companies. The very holding of such a Consultation gives the lie to those who imagine that no serious thought is given to this aspect of television, and who think that somehow religious programmes just happen in a kind of muddled parsonic way. It was more convincing still to have been present and to have seen the energetic desire of all those engaged in the job to do something worth while, and the exacting self-criticism to which they subjected themselves. Why then do the religious programmes leave so much to be desired?

The answer is surely that the problem of communicating religious truth by means of a mass medium to a multi-denominational, and largely pagan, country is a great deal more difficult than the arm-chair critic allows. The Bishop of Woolwich, who read a paper during the proceedings, spoke of the difference between what he called (using Tillich's language) the 'manifest' church and the 'latent' church, by which he meant the 80 per cent of the population who, even when Christian in name, have little or no sympathy with the churches, whose mind is cast in a secularist and humanistic mould, hostile to 'religion', to the metaphysical, the supernatural, the mythological. He suggested that the purpose of religious programmes should be not so much to convert the members of the latent church to the manifest church, which must always be a minority group acting as leaven in the mass, but to speak to the latent church in its own language, and to be content to bring it closer, without conscious commitment to Christ, to the kingdom of God. The formula seems to me to be as full of ambiguities and consequent confusions of thought as *Honest to God*, but it has the merit of