Rosenthal on Tanner and Norman and trans, 'Lollards of Coventry, 1486-1522'  

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There's Always Time for a Little Persecution

In this volume of material relating to the prosecution of the Lollards of Coventry and its environs between 1486 and 1512, the editors give us a valuable introduction to and a fairly comprehensive view of the nature of later Lollardy in the provinces, and then a rich collection of materials--in the Latin of the Episcopal registers and assorted other records and then in English translations--that reveals as much about the inquisitors and their world as it does about those being investigated. The translation (including the occasional passages in contemporary English that were entered into the record) is unprecedented, I believe, for volumes in the Royal History Society's Camden Series, and it increases the classroom utility of the volume manyfold. The labor of the edition was divided: Norman Tanner did the bulk of the work of transcription and translation, and Shannon McSheffrey wrote the introduction and did the extensive digging reflected in the valuable notes and appendices (covering the suspects named in the prosecutions, the books mentioned or referred to in those proceedings, and a cast list of clerics and others who were present). These two experienced scholars--both with well-regarded work on Lollards and provincial Lollardy to their credit--have meshed in this enterprise, and it is hard to think of another single volume of primary materials that brings home, quite this clearly and concisely, the nature of the prosecution, the parochial nature of Lollardy as a deviant form of lay thought and behavior, and the way these eccentric or heretical convictions were woven into the social, vocational, and family fabric of the late medieval world.

The materials presented here are taken from a variety of records. The proceedings of 1486-1503 are as reported in the Episcopal registers of John Hales, bishop of Coventry and Lichfield (1459-90), while those of 1511 are taken from the Episcopal registers of Geoffrey Blyth (1503-31) and from Blyth's Lichfield Court Books that cover 1511-12 (and which record the abjurations that resulted from much harsher proceedings). Some gaps are filled in by additional material taken from John Foxe's Acts and Monuments (with excerpts from Foxe's 1563 edition compared with their restatement in the edition of 1570). A few bits from Blyth's Visitation Book complete the assemblage of these records of the separate proceedings that took place over the course of a generation. The editors tell us that some of the records have only been preserved in a badly damaged condition and that some of the hands are almost impossible to decipher; no reason to doubt them on either count.

What went on when the inquisitorial apparatus was set into place, presided over by men who were ready, willing, and usually eager to proceed against those who stood, in their eyes, in need of correction and abjuration (or punishment)? When one was suspected of Lollard convictions and/or
activities and/or connections, and so called forth to account—whether for the first time or as a recidivist—what was it all about? What we have as a guide, of course, is the establishment's records, which means that it is all depicted in terms of confession or denial, in fairly standardized tales of indoctrination or of steadfast tales of resistance to indoctrination, or a look at a fairly limited list of unacceptable beliefs and practices, and at a lot of naming of names. We note that a large number of women were summoned, while many others were named in the testimony about networks and cells. Their role—like that of the men—ran from the naive auditor who just stumbled into an evening of subversive talk to the active propagandist of her or his version of the hot gospel. We also note the frequent reference to the crafts practiced by those within the movement, a list that certainly supports the view that later Lollardy was most attractive to artisans and to free but lower level workmen and to those of their social and familial circles. Those summoned identify themselves or their companions and acquaintances as spurriers, tailors, cutlers, servants, painters, shoemakers, smiths, cappers, fullers, glovers, and others at this level. Then we note the numerous attestations concerning residential patterns: stability over the years, in many cases, but some telling of peripatetic lives as lived before our unfortunate witnesses had the ill luck to settle within the purview of our zealous bishops. While John Atkynson had lived with his uncle for three years, and then three elsewhere as an apprentice, and then back with uncle for half a year, and then for one and one-half years at Warwick, until now "continuously" at Coventry for two years (p. 129), John Spon "has lived all his life" (of 40 years) in Coventry and nearby Allesley (p. 133).

Beyond their social and economic backgrounds—presumably issues of limited interest to Hales and Blyth and their fellows—what was at the heart of these matters? The main forms of heretical belief that were uncovered fit into a few basic and familiar categories: rejection of the role and efficacy of the saints, doubts about the real presence in the eucharist, general skepticism regarding pilgrimages, aspersions about the pope and his role, some grumbling about charity rather than tithes, and the like. A few of those being grilled expressed rather vivid anti-clerical opinions, and it seems safe to assume that they could have been speaking for most of their fellows. The occasional bit of color in a statement shows through the general gloom. If none of our defendants is quite as good as the Norwich woman who argued that the ingested host was subject to the regular processes of digestion and defecation, there are some bold passages of skepticism (and of danger): John Falkys had little regard for the image of the Virgin and he said that would it speak to him he "would give it a halfpennyworth of ale" (p. 71), while Margery Goyle supposedly said that Christ was conceived of Joseph's seed in the same way that her own son had been of her husband's (p. 91). And one sure sign of Lollardy or dangerously pro-Lollard inclinations—at least among those already in these ranks—was the knowledge of, let alone the possession of, (English) books of a forbidden nature. The inquisitors struck a rich vein when the testimony of Robert Silkby (p. 148) led them to an English volume of the Commandments, "a small quire" of the Gospel of John, the gospels and epistles in English, a volume of the Gospel of Matthew, one of the Apocalypse, and "the book that he had from Gest" for 10 shillings. While men and women who stood well above our subjects on the social pyramid might have gloried in and elaborated on fair sized libraries in their will, it was dangerous ground for those already under suspicion and typecast as being relegated to the outer circles of respectability. Nor was it likely to be of much help to Agnes Yong's daughter that she "can read well" (p. 149).

One aspect of innumerable inquisitorial proceedings—and one that links these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century investigations with those of more recent years—is the focus in the questioning on unraveling the networks of heretics. "With whom did you heretic," we might say; when and where did
it begin, how long did it go on, who else was present, who took the initiative, who else knew of it, how often, and more of this sort, over and over and over. Nor were all of those under severe pressure necessarily reluctant to name names, and with a capital sentence hanging over the relapsed we can understand that self-preservation might begin very close to home. The oft-used formula or routine of public abjuration carried an obligation to denounce any who made further heretical overtures to our penitent; to squeal on one's fellows was as much a part of the healing process as was walking to church in one's underwear with the bundle of faggots that would be held aloft during a sermon that was apt to focus on the transgressor's transgressions.

Plea bargaining and mitigating circumstances and turning state's evidence probably go back to the earliest shards of the Mesopotamian legal records, and these 15th and 16th century records are rich in instances of men and women who were eager to clear themselves by telling how they had been led astray: "He never trusted the teachings of Hacher and Bown, or of anyone else, etc." (p. 144). Nor was chivalry dead: "at the promptings of his wife Joan, he fell into heresy--namely against the sacrament of the altar, pilgrimages, and the veneration of images" (p. 154), though he now knows much better. The closing jaws of the vice were very frightening; brave were those, like one Christopher, a shoemaker, who went to his death unwavering in his view that priests lived incontinently and that they preached falsely.

It really does seem as though these dedicated if wayward men and women who are telling their tales (albeit known to us by way of a hostile recorder's text) did frighten most of their contemporaries--far beyond any threat they could have hoped to mount. If the establishment wanted and needed Lollards, we should note that Lollards seemed willing to oblige. Nor is it so clear that the danger they posed was just a creature born of the self-serving rhetoric of clerics and mendicants, already under the fire of public scrutiny, or that it was merely a fiction implanted in the consciousness of folk who were conditioned to believe much of what they were told. Society was a complex fabric, and it was held together in good part by a shared world view that bound church and privilege and secular power and the morality of the market place into a whole--somewhat tattered though it might be. Many people of limited skepticism but of reasonable common sense and some independence of judgment did believe there was a communist threat in the 1930s and 1950s, whatever proof could be offered, whatever refutations could be adduced. Heretics, however sincere and attractive, preach heresy at some risk. Most of our late medieval Lollards knew they were playing with fire, whatever motives drove them to such a brave if bleak and self-appointed social role.

The work of Tanner and McSheffrey should not be tainted by my political reflections about ideology and conformity. They have given us, in a short volume, a rich collection of material about heresy and a delightful grab bag of details about and insights into late medieval society. Our tribute to their labor will surely be measured by the frequency with which this volume is consulted, cited, and quoted. "Model edition" is a stock phrase of complimentary reviews. Nevertheless, it is fully merited for this volume.

