Overcoming the Binary: A Case Study of Lollardy in the Diocese of Salisbury, 1485-1500

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Introduction

‘Wavering in my mynde and greatly doubting’

On 23rd March 1499, John Stanwey, a weaver from the parish of Saint Giles in Reading, stood before John Blyth, Bishop of Salisbury, at the Bishop’s Palace of Sonning Manor. With him was Thomas Scochyn, a tailor from the same parish, but a man who was probably John’s social superior, as a burgess of the guild merchant in Reading. Perhaps, therefore, when called upon to abjure, Thomas went first. He seems to be the more committed religious dissenter, confessing a full range of unorthodox beliefs; calling the Pope the antichrist, questioning the value of pilgrimages and criticizing offerings made to images instead of the poor. He also said he had believed that the sacrament of the altar was ‘veray bredd and nought ellys’. John’s abjuration reads differently. The formulaic structures and language of the abjurations recorded in the bishops’ registers prevents us from getting a precise understanding of John’s attitudes and feelings, but the tone of his confession seems very different from Thomas’s. Far from a clear statement of heterodox dissent, John says:

Also I the said John Stanwey have been wavering in my myde [mind] and greatly doubting upon the sacrament of the aultere whether it were the veray body of ou saviour Cryste or noo. Not having stedfast and herty byleve therin as a good crysten man shuld.

Ecclesiastical condemnations of heresy in the late medieval period were attempts to create an essential binary between the ‘good crysten man’ and the ‘heretike’. They sought to naturalise

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1 The Register of John Blyth, Bishop of Salisbury, ed. D.P. Wright (Chippenham, 2015), 61
3 Blyth, 59-60
4 Ibid., 61
5 Ibid.
this inquisitorial way of thinking amongst all Christians. The clear split in this register is, for a moment here, disrupted by John’s ‘wavering’. His doubts meant John was insufficiently orthodox, but he also does not resemble a stubborn heretic. Instead of a clear repudiation and abandonment of a heterodox belief, he abjured a vague lack of commitment to transubstantiation. He was being made to renounce his doubt.

The registers of Thomas Langton and John Blyth, successive Bishops of Salisbury, record the official business of the two men over the course of their episcopacies. When combined with a short entry included in John Morton, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s register covering the ‘The Vacancy of the See of Salisbury’ for the year following Blyth’s death, we have an unbroken record of the fifteen years leading up to 1500 in the Diocese of Salisbury. Within the ‘Miscellaneous Memoranda’ section of both registers are the heresy abjurations which will be the focus of my study. Most of the Lollards recorded lived within a small area between the towns of Newbury, Wantage and Reading in Berkshire. In an undated entry into Langton’s register, the order that appears to have initiated anti-heresy efforts under Langton has been preserved:

Monition to the curates of Newbury, Speen, Shaw and Thatcham, for the denunciation of known heretics and traitors in those parishes.

This began an increasingly concerted endeavour against Lollardy in the Diocese of Salisbury, which endured, discontinuously, well into the next century under Blyth’s successor Edmund Audley. Ever since J.A.F Thomson’s foundational work, The Later Lollards, both registers have been widely known to historians of Lollardy, but Blyth’s register was only edited and published by the Wiltshire Record Society in 2015. Compared to other ‘hotspots’ like

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6 John Arnold, Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe, (London, 2005), 206
8 The Register of Thomas Langton, Bishop of Langton, ed. D.P Wright (York, 1985), 69
Coventry, Norwich or the Chilterns, Salisbury has been analysed in less depth than might be expected for an area with such a rich Lollard heritage.

‘Lollardy’ is a term applied to a collection of beliefs originating from John Wyclif, an Oxford theologian whose reforming ideas, formed from his disapproval of the excesses of the post-schism church and his neo-Platonic philosophy, were declared heretical in 1382. The failed Oldcastle Rebellion of 1414, an uprising against Henry V which clearly followed a Wyclifite programme of reform, solidified public opposition to the ideas amongst the elite and Wyclif was formally declared a heretic at the Council of Constance the following year. Forced underground by the increased threat of persecution, our evidence for the ‘later Lollards’ – those heretics practising from 1414 up until the Reformation – is slight. There are barely any self-authored later Lollard sources, so we must rely upon the records of their persecution extant in ecclesiastical documents, like the two episcopal registers which will be the focus of my study.

Understanding later Lollardy is further complicated by its nominal ambiguities and diffuse ideological basis. ‘Lollardy’ was a label applied in the late medieval period, not only to those with Wyclifite associations, but to all nonconformists. Historians today must struggle, on a case by case basis, to classify the individuals they are studying. We cannot assume dissenters recorded in the registers had representative Lollard views, if there are such things, or were even Lollards at all. This is further complicated by the nature of episcopal registers as sources. Within the registers of Langton and Blyth we only have the final abjurations made by heretics. These statements are heavily influenced by inquisitorial pressure. Stanwey would have been interrogated, resulting in a confession which would in turn be organised by the inquisitional authorities into the list of heretical opinions and actions recorded under his name.

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9 Andrew Brown, *Church and Society in England 1000-1500*, (Basingstoke, 2003), 160-6
10 Ibid.
in the register. As John Arnold has noted, this process did not merely mediate the ‘true voices’ of the suspects, instead, inquisitors ‘prompted and shaped’ the speech.\textsuperscript{12} Abjurations are ‘multivocal’ documents and the biases of the ecclesiastical authorities dictated what was asked and what was omitted or ignored.\textsuperscript{13} It was a stressful and manipulative means of recording suspects’ views, which aimed to unequivocally classify them as orthodox or heterodox. This imposed binary means we must read against the text to get a sense of the nuances and everyday realities of Lollard life and belief.

The registers of Langton and Blyth are fascinating sources, but need to be approached cautiously, with an awareness of the context within which they were produced. These considerations have determined how I will use the registers in this study. Much scholarly effort has been expended trying to answer the simple question of ‘What was a later Lollard?’ Anne Hudson’s seminal work \textit{The Premature Reformation} popularised the intellectualist view that ‘all the essential theological and ecclesiastical teachings of early Lollardy remain intact.’\textsuperscript{14} More recently, some historians have claimed Hudson overstated the Wycliffite ideological coherence of the group, suggesting intention or even Wittgenstein’s model of ‘family resemblances’ as better options for identifying and understanding later Lollards.\textsuperscript{15} It is not in the remit of this case-study to map the ideological differences and similarities between different dissenters, especially because we cannot know how heavily inquisitional pressures warped the views recorded. Instead, I hope to shed some light upon Lollardy in Salisbury by interrogating the ‘blurred and permeable line that exists between orthodoxy and heterodoxy’, a line that cuts right through John Stanwey’s abjuration.\textsuperscript{16} In the first chapter I will emphasise the importance

\textsuperscript{12} John Arnold, ‘The Historian as Inquisitor: The ethics of interrogating subaltern voices’, \textit{Rethinking History}, 3 (1998), 381
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 383
\textsuperscript{14} Anne Hudson, \textit{The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History}, (Oxford, 1998), 469
\textsuperscript{15} For intention see Shannon Mcsheffrey, ‘Heresy, orthodoxy and English vernacular religion 1480-1525’, \textit{Past and Present}, 186 (2005) and for ‘family resemblances’ see Hornbeck, \textit{What is a lollard?}
\textsuperscript{16} Brown, \textit{Church and Society}, 163
of individual moments of doubt and spiritual agency as a component of dissent. Much has been made of the peer pressure and social links which brought individuals into the Lollard fold, but the Salisbury registers show that intellectual and emotional engagement was equally important for this process.¹⁷ I will then explore how these same individuals understood themselves in relation to a wider Lollard collective. Those abjuring defined their personal identities as Lollards partly through the collective identity of the group. Finally, I will show, by foregrounding these two aspects of individual Lollards’ identities – both their personal agency and their self-perception as Lollards – we can better understand their position in relation to the wider community in their corner of medieval Salisbury.

¹⁷ For study of social links see Shannon McSheffrey, Gender and Heresy: women and men in Lollard communities, 1420-1530, (Philadelphia, 1995)
Chapter One

‘I have had a great mynde to here sermons and prechynes of doctours and lerned men of the church.’\textsuperscript{18}

In this chapter I would like to restate the importance of recognising non-binary, highly individuated moments of belief (or unbelief), when trying to understand religious dissent at the end of the medieval period. On one level this is to push back against the traditional view of the later Lollards as ‘rustic simpletons’, who could only ‘simplify’ and ‘debase’ the words of their heresiarchs and teachers, before regurgitating them before the Bishop and his men.\textsuperscript{19} Despite their limitations as sources, the registers from Salisbury show many examples of engagement and considered thought on behalf of the dissenters, even if it could not be highly academic. More generally, this is a move against the traditional view that unbelief, in the sense of cynicism, atheism, irreligion and so forth, were impossible in the pre-modern, pre-enlightenment period.\textsuperscript{20} The idea that late medieval people could not, on an individual level, think outside the mainstream Catholic hegemony is faulty. Langton’s and Blythe’s registers are full of examples of the laity voicing doubt and engaging intellectually with issues of church and faith. Often, these moments are triggered by dissonances they have identified in their own lived experience. We must allow for this psychological investment on behalf of our medieval subjects, however lowly.

This also works to prevent us from viewing this history solely from the perspective of the Bishops and their inquisitors. As Susan Reynolds has pointed out, the clergy’s ‘professional

\textsuperscript{18} Blyth, 72
\textsuperscript{20} Arnold, Belief and Unbelief, 4
mentality made it much easier for them to attribute nonconformity to ignorant error than to thoughtful rejection’.\(^{21}\) It was not in their interests to even consider that the belief system which endowed them with such power, might be meaningfully questioned by a weaver from Reading. Langton and Blythe shared assumptions about the way in which a lay person came to doubt. They saw heresy as a poisonous infection which might be ‘spread’ through writing and preaching, rather than an innate doubt that could be arrived at from one’s own questions. These assumptions shape the surviving evidence.\(^{22}\) Because we only have the persecutor’s record of events, we must read against the text to find the flashes of individuality which can help us better understand religious non-conformity at the time. In this chapter I will show how these moments of engagement manifested themselves in the Salisbury episcopal registers at the end of the fifteenth century. These ‘moments’ may be instances of doubt, as in John Stanwey’s case in the introduction, or they may be more positive examples of rational thought being used to challenge orthodoxy. Less rational moments of feeling and emotion are also worth our attention. It is the role of the individual which unites these moments, showing the engagement of one person’s mind and the conclusions she or he draws regarding religion and the world around them.

The general move towards a more contemplative popular religion that the Catholic church made from the fourteenth century onwards created the environment for many of the unorthodox viewpoints recorded in the registers to form. With regards to the diocese of Salisbury in particular, Andrew Brown has shown that the apparent growth of private piety was compatible with, and did not generally subvert, the requirements of public orthodoxy.\(^{23}\) Despite this, it is undeniable that such a ‘psychological turn’ gave space to individuals to form and

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\(^{22}\) Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 24

\(^{23}\) Andrew Brown, *Popular Piety*, 208
adopt opinions which fell outside the mainstream. It is these individuals who leave their mark in the ecclesiastical records. Sometimes, the rigour with which these people take up their own personal, domestic faith is striking. Thomas Boughton was a shoemaker and woolwinder, brought before the Bishop along with other members of a group from North Berkshire in the summer of 1499. In his abjuration, Thomas describes the situation which led to his original conversion to Lollardy:

Also I confesse and knowledge that sith the tyme of my first acqueyntance with the said heretikes: I have had a great mynde to here sermouns and prechynes of doctours and lerned men of the church.

Boughton describes his actions after first being confronted with unorthodox thinking. What seems striking is the individual agency that he shows after first hearing these ideas. Since that day, he says, he has made a concerted effort to seek out the most learned viewpoints of the mainstream church, as a means of testing these ideas. Catholic hegemony still exerted influence, but Boughton detached himself from it, which allowed him the distance to weigh orthodoxy up against other forms of Christianity. Boughton resists, and in so doing takes control of his personal piety. In her studies of Lollard communities of East Anglia, Maureen Jurkowski has noted the religious ‘self-confidence’ of many dissenters in fourteen-twenties Earsham. The same could be said of Boughton. His abjuration is full of situations which show his willingness to take responsibility for his own intellectual and spiritual life.

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25 Blyth, 72
Boughton takes from the mainstream what he requires. He seems to ‘pick and choose’ in a way that exposes the superficiality of the inquisitor’s binary. It also exhibits his own willingness to claim spiritual agency. He describes listening to orthodox preachers:

And as long as they spack the veray woordys of the gospels and the epistles such as I had herd afore in our englissh bookys: I herkned wele unto them and had great delight to here them but assone as they began to declare scripture after their doctourys and brought in other maters and spack of tythes and offrynges I was sone wery to here them and had no savour in their wordys.  

Boughton takes ‘great delight’ from the preaching which falls into line with his version of strictly scriptural Christianity. He takes from the preacher what he wants, everything else he ignores. The same is true in other areas of his religious life. When taking communion in church, he describes how ‘I feyned with myn handys to honour it as christen men use to doo…’ Here the inquisitorial presence at the abjuration is evidenced by the inclusion of ‘as christen men use to doo’. But Boughton takes the initiative, continuing, ‘but my mynd and entent was nothing therto but to god almighty above in heven’. Wyclif rejected transubstantiation as philosophically untenable, but still believed Christ was present in the host at elevation. Boughton, like many later Lollards, instead regards the host as merely commemorative; he directs his mind to where he believes God to be, ‘above in heven’. He repurposes the ritual of the orthodox church for his own ends. In The Premature Reformation, Hudson makes the point that Christianity can provide a lexicon for social dissent, just as it can be used by princes and kings to justify their power. Boughton’s example shows that not only the words, but also

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27 Blyth, 72
28 Ibid., 71
29 Ibid.
30 Hornbeck, What is a lollard?, 15
31 Hudson, Premature Reformation, 210
the ritual of the orthodox church could be repurposed towards dissent if individuals were motivated to engage with the mainstream in an unusual manner.

Boughton, as others have noted, was clearly a very devout and comparatively well-read man. Yet even if Boughton was a particularly energetic and learned member of the community, other deponents that came before Langton and Blythe show similar, if less obvious, moments of intellectual engagement or agency. One important type of example comes when a person explains the motivating factors for their heretical views, and roots them in their own lived experience. In Blythe’s register, Roger Parker and Thomas Loryng both abjure their opposition to pilgrimages, saying that they see no use in worshipping relics or images. So far so formulaic, this being one of the most common complaints we hear from the Salisbury Lollards over these two decades and mentioned in twenty-nine out of thirty-seven individuals’ abjurations. Roger then goes on, however, shifting from the general to the more specific, suggesting ‘the money so spent should rather be departed mong the poore people.’ He then gets even more specific, shifting into anecdote and saying:

inso moch that upon xvi or xvii yeres past when I was dwelling in Bampton in Oxfordshir. Seynng men and women to goo barefote and offer images of wax or money to the reliques of Sainct Bernold ther: I scorned theym and called theym fools for doing.

Saint Bernold was a little known, local Anglo-Saxon saint whose relics were held at Saint Mary the Virgin Church in Bampton, where, sixteen or seventeen years beforehand, Roger Parker had lived. This flash of individuated detail gives us a glimpse of Roger’s world, but also his

33 My own figures, calculated from Langton and Blyth, equally 78% of individual abjurers.
34 Blythe, 69
35 Ibid.
36 John Blair, ‘Saint Beornwald of Bampton’ in Oxoniensia 49 (1984), 50
reaction to that world. He was not just against pilgrimages in a hypothetical way, or because he had been told by a heresiarch or teacher to think this way. He objected to pilgrimages because he had witnessed, on the one hand, the plight of the poor, and on the other, the amount of wealth and effort which were expended upon pilgrimages to his parish church. Arnold has written about medieval cases that show lay people had the capacity to internally reflect on the mysteries and practice of religion, and come to their own conclusion. These reflections could be prompted by the dogma of the church, but equally, they might be triggered by lived experience. Roger Parker appears to be evaluating the dissonances in his own environment, and from this making a judgement on mainstream religious practice that pushes him towards heterodoxy. As Mcsheffrey also found in her studies of the Lollards of Coventry, throughout the registers dissenting beliefs have been prompted by an intersection between an ‘individual proclivity to question orthodox doctrine and lived experience.’

This is not to say more mundane communal forms of teaching and learning were not also important within Lollard communities. Even when we try to read against the homogenising pressure of the register, many of the abjurations speak more to Lollard preferences for rote learning and memorization, than moments of personal inspiration and revelation. The reoccurrence of certain vocabulary is perhaps the most obvious evidence for this. The ubiquitous reference to ‘stokkys and stonys’ when making aniconic complaints reoccur eleven times across the two registers. This is a turn of phrase whose use in Lollard circles can be traced back to ‘The Twelve Conclusions’, posted to the door of Westminster Hall by a group of Lollards in 1395. The fact it was maintained in common Lollard usage one hundred years later evidences circulation and recycling of ideas amongst dissenters. This process can be seen

37 Arnold, Belief and Unbelief, 228
39 Mcsheffrey, ‘Venacular Religion’, 73
in more subtle ways as well. Anne Hudson has shown that in Lollard circles the term ‘prelate’ is used synonymously with ‘bishop’, but that the former carried with it a strongly derogatory force. Often in the Salisbury registers, ‘prelates’ is used when criticizing the ‘pardouns’, ‘curses’ and ‘indulgencys’ of the Pope and his bishops. The reoccurring connotative meaning of ‘prelates’ is evidence of the learning and memorization of ideas and vocabulary that took place. The views expressed in the abjurations are partly the result of these collaborations. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Lollardy was defined through interdependence between dissenters. But Margaret Aston’s view that this reliance on techniques like memorization by rote resulted in an ‘inward looking’ character to Lollardy as ‘enclaves in a hostile world’ is not supported by the picture suggested in the Salisbury registers. There is evidence of inculcation, but these run parallel with moments of individual inspiration and agency in relation to the wider world.

Belief and unbelief are socially conditioned. Other dissenters, their evangelising techniques and their ways of speaking, would have influenced the views of those recorded in the registers, just as mainstream religion and the wider world did. This does not, however, lessen the role of the individual in this process. Sometimes the views recorded exhibit external influences, while still containing an important flash of individual engagement. In Langton’s register, William Brigger of Thatcham, Berkshire, expressed his negative view of the clergy with an analogy:

    howe may it be that Blynde William Harper may lede Anodir blynd man to Newbery but both fall yn to the dyche so dothe all thes pristis to Bryng us alle to Dampnacion.

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41 See Blyth, 60, 72 and Langton, 75
43 Aston quoted in Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, 169
44 Reynolds, *Social Mentalities*, 35
45 Langton, 72
This metaphor reoccurs later in the same register, when Richard Hyllyng says of priests, ‘thei be blynde and lodismen [leaders] of blyndemen’.\(^46\) It also appears in other registers from different parts of the country applied to various different issues, for example when Richard Gryg of Wells states ‘When te peple go to churche at the sacrynge [consecration] tyme of masse, I haue saide that the blynde goth to the blynde.’\(^47\) It is a saying with biblical roots, which appears to have been in common parlance among Lollards at the end of the fifteenth century.\(^48\) But William Brigger’s use of the phrase is distinct because he seeks to make real the metaphor. Brigger understood and communicated the failings of the clergy by imagining the problems of William Harper, a local blind man he must have known, making the three-mile journey from his home in Thatcham across the river Kennet to Newbury, unaided. Even though Brigger probably heard this phrase in relation to anticlericalism from another Lollard, he then grounded it in his own experience, showing his understanding and investment in the issues at stake. Indeed, even if he was exposed to the idiom already altered in the localised way it is recorded in Langton’s register, the fact Brigger chose to explain his views in this way, when the generalised version would have sufficed, still shows us a moment in which he seeks to make his dissenting view his own. Confession is, to an extent, a moment of self-making.\(^49\) In presenting his views interlaced with elements of his own existence and identity, Brigger exhibits the personal relationship that he has to them.

This is not to say every case documented in the register should be analysed with the expectation it will shine a spotlight into the interior motivations and anxieties of the late fifteenth century abjurers. A certain amount of caution must remain, to make sure we do not, as Arnold puts it, ‘fill the blanks of the past with our own disguised and projected voices.’\(^50\)

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 75
\(^{47}\) Quoted in Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 150
\(^{49}\) Arnold, *Historian as Inquisitor*, 384
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 385
Arnold himself might sometimes fall into this very trap. Upon first reading Lollard abjurations from around 1500, the regularity of the common-sense objections to transubstantiation based on the host’s materiality is striking. These are often supported by hypotheticals drawn from nature, such as the one Henry Benet of Spene gives,

that if ther wer thre hostys in one pikkis one of theim consecrate and the odir not consecrate A mowse woll aswell ete that hoste consecrate as the odir tweyn unconsecrate the which he myght not if ther were the very body of Criste.\textsuperscript{51}

Arnold claims ‘This approaches the level of a scientific investigation – a thought experiment, if not a practical one.\textsuperscript{52} For Arnold, this is a perfect example of the free-thinking scepticism which is evidenced in inquisitorial records. This might be the case, but equally, the scenario involving the mouse and the host is a classic scholastic dilemma, which Anne Hudson has shown reoccurs across the course of fifteenth century records of heresy trials\textsuperscript{53}. Despite the wit these scenarios often bring to the registers, it is more difficult to know whether we can attribute them to moments of self-motivated scepticism, as Arnold does, or whether they are actually evidence of the teaching and memorization methods of Lollard communities. It is perhaps noteworthy that Arnold claims that these words had no Lollard context to them, apart from the fact they led to Benet falling under suspicion.\textsuperscript{54} In fact, the register shows that Benet also abjured heterodox views concerning pilgrimages. Also, he was from a village, Spene, with a long Lollard heritage.\textsuperscript{55} It is difficult to judge the balance between the individual and the collective in records of heresy, but it is important not to merely choose the option which suits our argument.

\textsuperscript{51} Langton, 486
\textsuperscript{52} Arnold, Belief and Unbelief, 224
\textsuperscript{53} Hornbeck, What is a lollard?, 77, Hudson, Premature Reformation, 468, 499
\textsuperscript{54} Arnold, Belief and Unbelief, 224
\textsuperscript{55} Spene was included Langton’s initial anti-heresy order, see above p5.
There is a need to tread carefully when attempting to draw out the thoughts and motivations of the individuals that form the subject of these episcopal registers. There is a risk that we will misrepresent the past and those within it. Yet to not look for these individuals is equally dangerous, as it risks obscuring the actual attractions of unorthodox practice and belief, and the motivations of those involved. This does not necessarily need to be limited to the realm of the rational. Rob Lutton has written convincingly on the appeal of dissent lying not only in its intellectual, ‘revelatory’ power to answer pre-existing questions and scepticism. It also has an ‘imagistic’ appeal, giving individuals affective or emotional experiences which motivate their practice. These individual, non-intellectual cognitive processes should be considered alongside the more rational examples that I have mentioned above. They add another dimension to the relationship that existed between the individual and dissent. When William Carpenter abjures in Bishop Blythe’s register, he rejects fasting saying, ‘that god maad both flesh and fisshye for the sustenaunce of mankynde’. As long as gluttony was avoided, he claimed, you should be free to eat whenever you wanted. He gives theological reasons to back up his objections to fasting, basing his arguments in the words of the bible. In Norwich in 1429, Margery Baxter presented more practical reasons to oppose fasting, saying it was better to use up leftover meat on a Friday, than to get into debt at the fish market. These are two very different reasons to object to fast days, but they are both, to some degree, grounded in ideology; whether that be religious scripturalism or a dislike for wastage or debt. The case of Alice Bishop in Blythe’s register seems subtly different, however. After giving the same theological reasons as Carpenter regarding the lack of scriptural precedence for fasting, she then says,

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56 Lutton, ‘Cognitive Psychology’, 110-17
57 Blythe, 81
58 The Holy Bible, Genesis 9:2, 15, ‘upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.’
59 Anne Hudson, Premature Reformation, 147
And hereupon I the said Alice confesse that upon thre yeres passed upon A sayntyse eve that was a fast commanded by the church; I eete bacon in myn owen hows having no regard unto the sayd fast.\textsuperscript{60}

Her inclusion and description of this single act of rebellion suggests that her objections to fasting were not merely an ideological, intellectual stance. The actual action of breaking the fast, alone, in the privacy of her own home, was important in itself. Alice decided to take the risk perhaps because the risk of this act of rebellion was part of the attraction. As Lutton points out, the thrill of being part of a secretive sect, debating and discussing prohibited books should not be underestimated when we are thinking about individuals and their relationship to dissent.\textsuperscript{61} Alice’s secretive meal in her house seems very different from Thomas Boughton’s efforts to seek out the ‘doctours and lerned men of the church’. But in a way they both are the results of an attitude or feeling an individual held or experienced and the actions which resulted from that. Whether either attitude or action was more motivated by the need for intellectual or spiritual satisfaction, or just the rush of thinking or acting in a dissenting way, they are both important to our understanding of dissenting individuals and their relation to heresy.

The Salisbury episcopal registers give us the voices of individuals, but they are individuals in an abnormal, highly stressful situation whose opinions are represented in abjurations heavily influenced by inquisitorial pressures. Despite this, as the only source that records the voices of the later Lollards, it is important that we do not ignore them. Understanding the Lollards as a collective is important, but the group can only be fully understood if we are alert to the individuals within it. Each dissenter’s relationship to heresy is, in the end, a personal one. I have attempted to analyse some of these personal moments here. They give us an impression of the intellectual efforts of some dissenters, and the theological

\textsuperscript{60} Blythe, 61

\textsuperscript{61} Lutton, ‘Cognitive Psychology’, 117
scepticism of others. Equally they can show us how personal identity could come into conversation with religious dissent. They can also show the more affective relationship a dissenter might have with religion and its practices. The abjurations leave us a record of these self-motivated moments of engagement but, as I will discuss later, such moments were not necessarily unique to dissenters. Members of the orthodoxy laity may have had equally rich intellectually or affective relationship to their personal faith although often this went unrecorded. The Salisbury Lollards clearly saw themselves as distinct from the mainstream, however, and this is what I will explore in my next chapter.
Chapter Two

‘but such as were of our sect and opinions’

There is a risk, in stressing such attention to the individual agency of the heretics of Salisbury around 1500, that they emerge as a random collection of freethinking, but largely unconnected, religious dissenters and doubters. Indeed, the last two decades have seen revisionist challenges being made about the nature of Lollardy in exactly this vein; that Lollardy was primarily the construction of Reformation propagandists or later historians, who labelled those who resisted the mainstream church in this way. The homogenising influence of the inquisitional sources, some have argued, means the Lollards have always been attributed a far more coherent identity than they deserve. The evidence from the Salisbury episcopal registers does not support this view. It is clear that many, although not all, of the ‘engaged’ individuals I drew attention to in my first chapter also saw themselves as belonging to a distinct group, separated from the mainstream church. Their dissenting identity was partly formed out of their understanding of themselves as part of a wider collective. The Lollards of Salisbury were, to use Anne Hudson’s term, a ‘self-conscious sect’. Their abjurations show that they had a sense of community with other Lollards in the area, understood the views they shared and even hint at their common history and hopes for the future.

It is worth restressing that this is not an argument grounded in shared ideology. In The Later Lollards, J.A.F Thomson wrote, ‘one cannot talk of a single Lollard creed but must always remember that beliefs varied, not only from group to group, but even from individual

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62 Blyth, 79  
63 Hornbeck, What was a lollard?, 2  
64 Hudson, Premature Reformation, 169-170
to individual. “It is better to try and understand the character of the sect by looking at the views the abjurers express about it, both directly and more indirectly, instead of trying to extrapolate out from any apparent shared formal doctrine. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the views held among the Berkshire Lollard communities Langton and Blyth were investigating fell upon a wide spectrum, across the parameters of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. This variety of opinion does not preclude a distinct sense of collective identity.

The manner in which the Salisbury dissenters described their views and activities in their abjurations often shows they perceived themselves in relation to a wider collective, distinct from the mainstream. In Blythe’s register John Godson of Buscot explains his views on orthodox churchmen, saying, ‘And more over I thought that non kept the veray feyth of cryst but such as were of our sect and opinions.’ Godson’s other statements are fairly typical for the Salisbury Lollards, including disbelief of transubstantiation and attacks on pilgrimage. They fail to capture anything of Godson’s personal relationship to dissent. But this comment shows us he felt his views clearly separated him from the teachings of the mainstream church. More than this, it shows Godson believed they associated him with a wider ‘sect’, a more authentically Christian alternative. These statements of relational identity are important, therefore, because they allow us insight into how the Lollards spoke about themselves as a collective and how they intended to be seen. Intention is certainly important in understanding what a Lollard ‘was’. For Shannon Mcsheffrey, ‘it involved a sense of being distinct from the blind and foolish followers of the orthodox Church.’ Consciously rejecting the total authority of the Catholic church to join an alternative sect played a big role in making you a Lollard in

65 Thomson, *Later Lollards*, 239. For a different opinion, see Anne Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 469
66 Blyth, 79
67 Mcsheffrey, *Venacular Religion*, 79
practical terms. It was also what attracted the attention of the Catholic authorities. William Carpenter stated:

I have holden and sayd afor dyvers persones that no person beyng of our sect and opinions shuld be confessed unto A preeest or to any other that were not of our byleve but oonly to oon of our sect.  

He seems primarily concerned with separation in practice as opposed to ideology. Unlike some Lollards, he does not reject confession outright, but instead aims to disassociate it from the orthodox church. Although his ideological stance is not conclusively Lollard in nature, Carpenter frames his personal views, couched in the terms of collective possession, as belonging to a wider heretical group, distinct from the Catholic mainstream.

The Salisbury Lollards’ propensity toward eschatological belief gives us further insight into how they viewed themselves as a group. Thomson noted that the Newbury Lollards, the community uncovered by Langton in the early fifteen-nineties, seemed particularly hopeful that the second coming would not be long delayed. Richard Hyllyng predicted in February of 1491,

within X yere space ther shal be one folde and one sheppard meanyng herby that all heretikis and Lollardis the which have receyved grace shall preche openly and no man shall dare say agayn theim.

Thomson attributes this tendency to chiliasm to the approach of the year 1500, hence Hyllyng’s reference to a ‘X yere space’. This may well be the case, but these statements also evidence Hyllyng’s self-conception as separate from the Catholic mainstream, a position he felt would

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68 Blythe, 80-1  
69 For Lollard views on confession see Hudson, Premature Reformation, 294-298  
70 Thomson, Later Lollards, 76-7  
71 Langton, 76  
72 Thomson, The Later Lollards, 77
be vindicated at the end of days. Such statements show a perception of a past, present and future as Lollards. As part of her work on the textual history of Lollardy, Anne Hudson claimed extant lectern-sized Lollard sermon collections and Wyclifite bibles might be used as evidence for the aims of the early Lollards. The size of these books indicates a hope that they would replace the Latin versions in parish churches in the future.\textsuperscript{73} The Salisbury Lollards’ eschatology is motivated by a similar hope for the future, in which Lollards might ‘preche openly’. William Carpenter told Langton,

\begin{quote}
I have taught and beleevyd that if the feith of Lollardis wer not, the world shuld be sone destroyed and in shortyme that Feith whos have it shuld be unto the uttermost makyng and advaunsemente so he kepe that feith in counseill privelly.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

This statement captures Carpenter’s opinions about the Lollards’ role in the present: preventing the destruction of the world. It also articulates his belief of the benefits, ‘makyng and advaunsemente’, that his dissenting faith will bring in the future. These are not the words of a casual dissenter, and show a conscious investment in dissent that was motivated by an end goal; whether that be the freedom to practice Lollardy in public or salvation itself.

Instances of mockery and blasphemy which are captured in the records can also give us clues as to a Lollard individual’s sense of exclusive identity. Expressions of disapproval for contemporary practice, such as pilgrimage or the honouring of images, are regularly in terms that imply a separation of the individual from the folly of the ordinary church.\textsuperscript{75} They are also often striking moments of wit which show how religious discord manifested itself in everyday discourse. Thomas Tailour’s first abjuration reads,

\textsuperscript{73} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 199\textsuperscript{74} Langton, 79\textsuperscript{75} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 169
I have seid and affirmed them fools [fools] which goith to Seynt Jamys in pilgremage or to eny odir places whereto pilgremys be wonte and usid to go and visitte.\textsuperscript{76}

Tailour vocalises his unorthodox opinions through his abuse towards pilgrims. In labelling his orthodox neighbours ‘folis’, he distances himself from them, making clear his own separate identity in a public way. Sometimes the mockery recorded has a complexity to it which implies more than just separation from the church and hints at more nuanced Lollard identities. Alice Hignell’s anti-image rhetoric is particularly violent. Like Tailour, she calls all those who make offerings to images fools, and then mocks various saints. Interestingly, her finally abjuration reads:

And for the mor despite of the seid Imagis have seid and been in full mynd willing and wysshing all I tho Imagys that stondith in void placis of the church wer in my yarde at home havyng an axe in my hand to hewe them to sethe my mete \textit{satisfy my nourishment} and to make my potte to Boyle.\textsuperscript{77}

There was an early Lollard case in 1392 in which Richard Waytestaythe, a chaplain, had scandalously seized an image of St Katherine and used it to cook his dinner, thanking God for his kindness in providing fuel.\textsuperscript{78} Could Hignell have been referencing this story? Mcsheffrey has claimed that the later Lollards do not appear to have seen themselves as part of dissenting tradition that stretched back to the previous century, and it may be that Alice Hignell had never heard of this case from a century before.\textsuperscript{79} It was an infamous story, however, which was recorded by the chronicler Henry Knighton, and the similarities certainly seem striking.\textsuperscript{80} If Hignell was consciously playing with precedent here, her abusive comment also becomes an

\textsuperscript{76} Langton, 70
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 78
\textsuperscript{78} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 76
\textsuperscript{79} Mcsheffrey, \textit{Vernacular Religion}, 73
\textsuperscript{80} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 76
affirmation of her Lollard identity, an identity partly defined by her engagement with Lollard history.

Abjurations can provide clear-cut evidence for distinct Lollard identity, but contradiction of the ideology or practices of the mainstream church is not, in itself, sufficient evidence for Lollardy. Not all those abjuring heresies in the Salisbury registers were Lollards. The study of Lollardy has often been impaired or complicated by the inclusion of an ‘eccentric or lunatic wing’, which makes Lollard communities appear far more radical and ideological or geographically expansive than they actually were.\textsuperscript{81} In Langton’s register Richard Lyllynston’s abjuration records a string of extreme views, including the wish that ‘all Cristendome’, both the clergy and the laity, ‘were in the myddys of helle.’ He then goes on to abjure his tendency to intimidate preachers in the alehouse.\textsuperscript{82} Lyllynston’s views and actions seem more in keeping with a ‘loose speaker and tavern unbeliever’ than anything else.\textsuperscript{83} This is backed up by the fact he was from Castle Coombe in Wiltshire, a village over forty miles west of the areas of Berkshire from which most of the Salisbury dissenters are derived. The way he was grouped with self-identifying Lollard dissenters in the registers speaks more to the inquisitors’ artificial binary than actual Lollard identity. Modern historians have a tendency to inherit this same binary. This means assumptions get passed on and inquisitorial mentalities are perpetuated.\textsuperscript{84}

The location of Lyllynston’s home town, combined with his extreme views, makes it unlikely that he was a Lollard. To understand Lollard identity through the registers then, we must look at the physical clues and social connections which are mentioned, as well as the doctrinal opinions they documented. Dissenters defined their Lollard identities partly through their interactions with their environment, so it is worth considering the geographical context.

\textsuperscript{81} Davies, \textit{Lollardy and Locality} 211
\textsuperscript{82} Langton, 80
\textsuperscript{83} Thomson, \textit{Later Lollards}, 241-2
\textsuperscript{84} Reynolds, \textit{Social Mentalities}, 27
out of which they emerged. These areas of Berkshire had a strong and persistent Lollard tradition.\textsuperscript{85} There was violence in the area during the last major Lollard uprisings in 1431 and, despite the general lull in the persecution of Lollardy in the middle of the century, there were still cases of heresy uncovered in 1440, 1445, 1475 and 1478\textsuperscript{86}. There is also evidence in the registers of the longstanding Lollard presence in the area. Thomas Boughton claimed in 1499 that he had held Lollard beliefs for twenty-five years.\textsuperscript{87} Philip Browne, a labourer from Hinton in Berkshire, told Langton in 1486 that he had held dissenting beliefs for ‘the space xl yere, [forty years]\textsuperscript{88}, suggesting a continuity of dissent in the area stretching back to at least the mid-fourteen-forties. The unorthodox ideas that are recorded in the registers were being formed by people who already lived in a society in which Lollardy was an established presence. Individuals with doubts would not have had to look far for more developed unorthodox opinions. The chain of perceptive steps taken between mere doubt, a conscious move outside the mainstream and explicit self-identification as a Lollard would have been easier to make in areas like the parts of Berkshire that Blythe and Langton’s registers focus upon.

The awareness that Lollards appear to have had of other heretical communities in their county or country would have strengthened their collective identity. Although notions of an ‘underground Lollard network’ have sometimes been overstated, Hudson has argued quite convincingly that Lollards held a general knowledge of areas which were friendly to their views.\textsuperscript{89} Lollards would construct their heretical identities in opposition to the catholic mainstream but also in communion with other Lollards. This is shown when Roger Parker admits:

\textsuperscript{85} Thomson, \textit{Later Lollards}, 53
\textsuperscript{86} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 447
\textsuperscript{87} Blythe, 71
\textsuperscript{88} Langton, 50
\textsuperscript{89} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 141
divers and many tymes have received them [other heretics] knowingly into myn owen hows [house] aswele at ledcombe regis aforsayd as in the forsaied chippyng Farringdon wher I sumtyme dwelled.\textsuperscript{90}

Blythe’s investigations uncovered two pockets of heresy, one on the northern border of Berkshire around the villages of Buscot, Farringdon and Hilton Waldrist. The other lay ten to fifteen miles south around Wantage and Letcombe. At some point in the sixteen or seventeen years Parker admits to holding dissenting views, he chose to relocate from one of these areas to the other. This may have just been coincidence, but it seems more likely that he self-identified as a Lollard, was aware of the group in Letcombe Regis, and chose that village so he could continue his involvement in a similar dissenting community to Farringdon’s. The move was an acknowledgement of shared identity. Lutton has argued that it was the opportunity to express oneself through collective exegesis and debate, and not an adherence to a stable and coherent body of doctrine, which rendered Lollardy an attractive proposition.\textsuperscript{91} Collectivity defined Lollardy as well as making it appealing.\textsuperscript{92}

Lollardy’s connection to vernacular book ownership and reading has been well documented by Anne Hudson and evidence of book ownership in the Salisbury registers can give us another window into how the dissenters viewed themselves.\textsuperscript{93} The common knowledge and opinions dissenters derived from these texts, but also the way they constructed the books as artefacts and symbols of their identity, plays into the collective character that emerges from the abjurations. Although Eamon Duffy has rightly questioned the simple link that was once drawn by historians between religion in the vernacular and Lollardy, it is clear that the ecclesiastical powers made associations between vernacular book ownership and heresy.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{90} Blythe, 68.
\textsuperscript{91} Lutton, ‘Cognitive Psychology’, 117
\textsuperscript{92} Davies, Lollardy and Locality, 208
\textsuperscript{93} Hudson, The Lollards and their Books
\textsuperscript{94} Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religions in England, 1480-1580 (London, 1992), 80-1
Bishop Blyth of Salisbury’s brother, Geoffrey Blythe, who was Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, sent a letter in 1511 to the Bishop of Lincoln. In this he stated, by imprisoning suspected Lollards, he had not only been able to get them to confess but also, ‘by meanes I have gete to my hands right many dampnable books, which shall noye no more [harm no more] by Goddes grace.’\textsuperscript{95} Importantly, most of the books which both the Coventry and Salisbury Lollards seem to have had access to were not overtly heretical; the ‘dampnable books’ were generally works of scripture. Thomas Boughton refers to ‘the gospels and the epistles such as I had herd afore in our englissh bookys’ and ‘an englissh booke that we calle the commaundment boke.’\textsuperscript{96} The Lollards themselves saw these vernacular books as constituting a challenge to the church, believing the content accorded with Lollard opinions and by extension was contrary to orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{97} In Thomas Tailour’s abjuration in front of Bishop Langton, he says:

\begin{quote}
I have kepte and holde by the space of ii yere one suspecte boke of commaundementis wreten in the same that no man shuld wurship eny thing graven or made with mannys (hand) wherby aftir that doctrine I have beleved that no man aught to wurship ymages or odir pilgremages.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

Interestingly, this ‘suspecte boke’, which is specifically glossed as a ‘Lollard book’ in the introduction to Tailour’s abjuration, appears to be a normal, vernacular decalogue. For both the ecclesiastical authorities and the Lollards, these vernacular texts were an external indicator of Lollardy even if their content wasn’t necessarily heretical.

Regardless of whether the books were heretical in content, used in a heretical way, or even just regarded as heretical, they were objects through which Lollards defined their

\textsuperscript{95} Quoted in Mcsheffrey ‘Vernacular Religion’, 61.
\textsuperscript{96} Blythe, 71-2
\textsuperscript{97} Mcsheffrey, Venacular Religion, 64-5
\textsuperscript{98} Langton, 70-71
Salisbury does not seem to have been a Lollard community dominated by a heresiarch who prescribed the views and identity of the group. What it did have was access to books and a propensity for book sharing. Richard Sawyer is named as William Brigger’s teacher in Langton’s register. Sawyer appeared in Bishop Courtenay of Winchester’s register, and he confessed to secretly reading books at night with William Carpenter (who also abjures in Langton’s register) and listening to him talk. Between these registers from different dioceses, a lateral pattern of discussion and mutual teaching emerges. In fact, this is a model which appears prevalent in later Lollard communities across the south of England. Hudson thinks this is evidence of the earlier success of grassroots Lollard education programs, but it might equally be attributed to how Lollards defined themselves. If owning books and discussing them took priority over adherence to a static ideology in what ‘made’ you a Lollard, it makes sense that Lollard practice reflected this. Arnold has discussed how medieval religious belief might be seen as ‘performative’. Belief lay in the activity of the believers. This is potentially a useful perspective for understanding the Salisbury Lollards and Lollards in general. The actions of dissenters, whether owning, reading and discussing books or choosing to live within a Lollard community, played an important role in how they defined themselves as Lollards.

A balanced reading of the Salisbury registers exhibits the collective character of those abjuring. In a sense this represents the next perceptive step on from those individual moments of engagement I discussed in the first chapter. Having been drawn away from the religious mainstream, many of the Salisbury dissenters made an intentional move into Lollardy. The statements in the Salisbury registers often make it clear that those abjuring viewed themselves
as part of a distinct ‘sect’, separate from the mainstream church, with a past heritage and hopes for the future. Whether they ever referred to themselves as ‘Lollards’ is more difficult to tell, due to the nature of the sources, but individuals often defined their dissenting identity partly through a sense of community. The actions recorded in the registers are also useful for understanding the dissenters’ sense of identity. The decisions they made to live in traditionally Lollard localities and the way devotional books were used, reflect how Lollards perceived themselves. In the end a ‘matrix of social, textual and theological interactions’, would have decided whether a late medieval dissenter was a Lollard.\textsuperscript{103} When trying to assess this at our historical remove, it might be just as beneficial to ask ‘how’ an individual believed, as it is to ask ‘what’ they believed.

\textsuperscript{103} Hornbeck, \textit{What is a lollard?}, 14
Chapter Three

*‘but that halfe yere paste I resorted & returnyd to myn olde errors and heresies ageyne’*¹⁰⁴

Until this point, I have focused on the individual dissenters recorded in Langton and Blyth’s registers and their relationship to Lollardy. On the one hand, the registers capture the moments of personal engagement which pushed them outside the mainstream. Simultaneously, these same individuals often exhibit, inadvertently or more self-consciously, self-identification as Lollards within their abjurations. But these dissenters cannot be properly understood in isolation; they must be seen within the context of the society in which they played an active role. Although there is plenty of evidence for societal oppression of dissenting ideas in late-medieval Salisbury, the registers also contain hints that Lollards in northern Berkshire benefitted from tolerance and even sympathy from orthodox elements of their communities. This suggests patterns of religious belief which contradict black and white polarities between the Lollard heretics and devout orthodoxy.¹⁰⁵ If, instead, we understand personal piety as sitting somewhere upon a spectrum of beliefs that exists between these two poles, we can better understand the Lollards in the Salisbury registers but also the great majority who leave no mark in the records. Our knowledge of the outliers can help us better comprehend those that remained within the parameters of orthodoxy.

The abjurations which I have based this case study upon are evidence in and of themselves of the persecution which Lollards and other dissenters suffered in the fifteenth century. The abjurations and accompanying penances, which were performed by the heretics in the corporate spaces of their community, were designed to bring disruptive members of the

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¹⁰⁴ Langton, 50-1
¹⁰⁵ Lutton, ‘Cognitive Psychology’, 108
laity back into the orthodox fold in a manner that implicated the whole of parish society. They even concluded with the requirement that ‘all crysten people here present to record and wytne ayenst us an every of us this our confession and abjuracion, if we or any of us hereafter doo or hold contrary to the same or any part of.’

The persecutory aims for the church’s vision of society must have affected the lived experiences of the Salisbury Lollards. The importance of the domestic realm for Lollard practice reflects these stresses. Many of the abjurees are recorded as ‘Recyvng them [other Lollards] wittingly in to myn howse.’ The domestic room stands as an unorthodox counterpoint to the parish church. Richard Sawyer’s confession about hearing William Carpenter read at night and Alice Bishop’s personal act of rebellion by eating ‘bacon in myn owen hows having no regard unto the sayd fast’, both reflect the necessity of private spaces for dissenting activity.

Equally, efforts towards outward conformity are included in the registers. The group from Reading which Alice Bishop was a member of admitted to Blyth in 1499:

that we have recyved the said holy sacrament not for any devocion or byleve that we had therin but oonly dreed of the people and to eschewe the Juberdye [Jeopardy] and daunger that we dredd to falle in if we had not doon as other crysten people dyd.

Whereas Thomas Boughton, in the case I discussed in Chapter One, presents his ‘feyning’ to take the Eucharist as an expression of personal spiritual agency, these Reading Lollards claim to have been only motivated by fear of their orthodox neighbours. Superficial conformity of this kind was used to avoid detection. Some of the dissenters certainly feared their neighbours’

\[\text{References}\]

106 Blyth, 62
107 Hudson, Premature Reformation, 451
108 E.g. Blythe, 323, 338
109 Thomson, Later Lollards, 78, Blyth, 61, for further discussion of these two cases see above p30 and p19
110 Blyth, 60
111 For Boughton see above p12
reaction to their views and most made some efforts to keep their activities secret from church authorities.

Despite these instances of anxiety and superficial conformity, what is more striking is the Lollard’s self-confident visibility in the wider community. The traditional interpretation of Lollards as a clandestine sect, with a membership recruited only from the anonymous lower levels of society does not fit with the evidence from Salisbury. The Lollards were socially and financially significant and held positions of responsibility within their communities. Several men were burgesses of their respective merchant guilds and Thomas Scochyn, who was a tailor, is noted in the Reading records as contributing a considerable amount to the renewal of letters in his guild’s chantry. It seems unlikely, in medieval towns in which reputation was prioritised and privacy was hard to come by, that the rest of the community were unaware of these prominent men’s subversive sympathies. In the register, Schochyn admits he ‘used to say that such offynges and giftes shuld rather be doon [given] unto the poore men that to such Images’ suggesting he didn’t keep his dissenting views to himself. The many examples of mockery in the register, discussed in the previous chapter, show how dissenting opinions were often directed towards orthodox members of the community, not hidden from them.

The Lollards were visible and integrated members of society, but the registers show they were also quite regularly vocal in their heterodoxy. Perhaps these incongruities suggest that local society was more tolerant of dissenting belief than we might expect. Ecclesiastical registers may not seem the best places to look for evidence of leniency, but in reading against the source, clues about general attitudes that lie at the records’ peripheries can be brought into

112 For traditional view see K.B. Macfarlane, *John Wycliff and the beginnings of English Non-conformity*, (London, 1952)
113 Brown, *Popular Piety*, 218
114 Blyth, 60
115 For mockery see pXX
focus. The case of Phillip Browne, the labourer who told Langton he had held heretical beliefs for forty years, is worth our attention here. His long heretical history could only have existed due to the toleration which his local society appears to have afforded him. He was an active evangelist of Lollard doctrine, stating,

And xii yere gone I was hirid to repe corre and there I seid afore diverse persone I cowed shew [could show] the way in hevyn & declarid the x commaundementys and aftir that seid thes wordis: what make thes false prestis that sey them to make the bodi of criste the which is nor in there power.\textsuperscript{116}

Browne admits to converting people while at work, reaping in the fields. He seems keen to use the social situations that his job afforded him to preach his Lollard creed, apparently unconcerned about declaring his heretical allegiances in a public setting. Of course, the fact he was now abjuring shows these actions eventually caught up with him, but the twelve-year gap between the preaching and the penance suggests someone only ‘named’ him when the Bishop’s agents came calling in the fourteen-eighties. Browne’s abjuration does make it clear that there was opposition to his beliefs. He faced the ‘exhortacion of diverse men’ to change his views, ‘most specially by the predicacion of the worshipfull fader John the Abbot of Abendon’ who, prevyng [proving] by diverse argumentys & resons myn oppynions to be false & contrary to faythe, I was for the tyme of half yere next folouyng that sermon made in good beleve of the sacrament of the Auter, but that halfe yere paste I resorted & returnyd to myn olde errors and heresies ageyne belevyng as I di did before.\textsuperscript{117}

Despite these earlier efforts to return him to the religious mainstream, he was not made to abjure. We can see this because he was not dealt with as a ‘relapse’, and burnt, by Langton in

\textsuperscript{116} Langton, 50
\textsuperscript{117} Langton, 50-1
1486. Rob Lutton has pointed to the long-term continuity of Lollard activity in the Kent Weald as evidence of widespread sympathy, or at least tolerance, in the area.\(^\text{118}\) Browne’s individual case might prove the same point for his part of Berkshire. The very fact orthodox Christians were attempting to change Browne’s opinions shows they were not so dogmatic as to be unwilling to engage with him, and not so fiercely oppressive as to instantly seek formal correction through the ecclesiastical courts. General society appears to have known about, and even abided, Browne’s dissenting views, suggesting a degree of toleration that belies the binaries inherent to the registers.

These surprising indications of tolerance that can be detected when we read against the Bishops’ registers should encourage a more nuanced understanding of the way that orthodox and heretical religious attitudes and practice coexisted and overlapped in parts of the diocese of Salisbury. Although I have generally avoided discussions of ideology within this case-study, the evidence for toleration reflects back upon an important feature of Lollard thought and its motivations that the registers attempt to obscure; the attraction of Wycliffite ideas ‘lay in their similarity to much wider patterns of piety.’\(^\text{119}\) Heterodox thinking, in its priorities, motivations and understanding of Christianity, often ran parallel with certain strands of orthodox thought. Lutton has noted how in the town of Tenterden, Kent, the popularity for giving towards Jesus Masses at the parish church increased when parochial giving more generally was decreasing. The orthodox religious motivations for this trend – greater focus on the figure of Jesus, to the detriment of the Virgin Mary and other saints – was in line with the views of the well-established Lollard community in the town.\(^\text{120}\) Those giving to the Jesus mass were probably not Lollards, although they might have been. What this shows, yet again, is the artifice of the


\(^{119}\) Andrew Brown, *Church and society*, 163

\(^{120}\) Lutton, ‘Geographies and Materialities’, 28
binary between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. In the diocese of Salisbury, Thomas Boughton’s ability to ‘pick and choose’ when he listens to Catholic preachers and Tailour’s ability to use a copy of the Ten Commandments as a ‘Lollard book’ shows the possible crossovers that often took place.\textsuperscript{121} Equally, Thomas Scochyn’s willingness to donate to his guild chapel shows that Lollards might still have been spiritually or emotionally invested in elements of the orthodox church.\textsuperscript{122} As Ian Forrest has recently put it, ‘The history of Lollardy could benefit from assuming greater commonality between Lollards and non-Lollards.’\textsuperscript{123} Lollards, and their orthodox neighbours, existed in a changing matrix of religious practice and attitudes in which the line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy often blurred. More practically, Lollards and their orthodox neighbours lived alongside one another, interacted and influenced each other. This is the context in which we need to understand the Lollard’s lived history.

In attempting to understand Lollardy’s place in local religious culture more holistically, we can better understand the spectrum of belief that existed amongst the dissenting, but also the orthodox. Turning first to the Lollards themselves, what MCSheffrey describes as the ‘vague bundle of beliefs’ that emerge from the registers as the later Lollard’s non-uniform ideological base shouldn’t surprise us.\textsuperscript{124} The nature of the inquisitorial process, which probed and recorded selectively, is partly to blame for this. But on top of this, the range of views belonging to abjuring individuals is a reflection on the varied influences and pressures exerted on each of them in the everyday world, where those views were formed. In the register of Bishop Langton, Augustine Stere and Henry Benet gave consecutive abjurations on the 28\textsuperscript{th} January 1491. They were both from the small village of Spene. Their shared locality, but also the heavily Lollard-influenced language they use (for example Benet’s reference to mice eating the host), means

\textsuperscript{121} Langton, 484 See discussion above p11 and p29
\textsuperscript{122} See above p34
\textsuperscript{123} Ian Forrest, ‘Lollardy and Late Medieval History’ in \textit{Wycliffite Controversies}, eds M. Bose and J.P Hornbeck, (Turnhout, 2001), 126
\textsuperscript{124} MCSheffrey, \textit{Vernacular Religion}, 49.
we can be reasonably sure they were both associated with the same group of Lollards, centred around Newbury. The range of views they express and the strength with which they express them, however, varies hugely between the two men. Stere dismisses the Church of Christ as ‘a Sinagoge and hous of marchaundise’ and priests as ‘enmyes of Criste’. He attacks the worship of images, inspired by reading his copy of the Ten Commandments and ‘attending to the wordis of the same litterally’. He also asserts the host is not the body of Christ as ‘pristis may bie XXXtie [buy thirty times] suche goddies for one penny And woll not selle one of theim but for two penys.’ Benet, on the other hand, simply says that money spent on pilgrimages would be better spent at home and admits ‘I have not belevyd stedfastly in the sacrament of thauter’, noting that a mouse would just as quickly eat a consecrated host as an unconsecrated one. Even when the homogenising influence of the register is accounted for, the differences in tone and content of the two abjurations, written side by side on the pages of the register, are clear to see.

The differences are striking, but should they surprise us? It makes sense that individual dissenters were invested in the sect to different levels. The dissenters recorded in the registers were having their views influenced and differentiated by the varied and contradictory experiences of daily life. The ‘strain of persecution’, as Mcsheffrey calls it when discussing the Coventry Lollards, would also have afflicted the Berkshire communities in the late fifteenth century. The attention of successive Bishops might have made some Lollards soften their views or pushed those on the fringes back towards orthodoxy. Even disregarding the threat of ecclesiastical discipline, orthodoxy still exerted an influence on the beliefs of even the most committed Lollards. Despite their efforts to separate themselves from the orthodox church,

125 Langton, 71
126 Ibid., 71
127 Ibid., 72
they were still immersed in the ‘thought-world’ of mainstream religion.\textsuperscript{128} Perhaps Henry Benet was still influenced by the reverence to the consecrated host propounded by his local parish church, reverence to which he was exposed throughout his life. Maybe therefore he was less able than Augustine Sterne to confidently reject transubstantiation. Dissenters, in short, were ‘human beings bound by the circumstances of time, place, and society’.\textsuperscript{129} It cannot be surprising, therefore, that they failed to reach consensus on every tenet of their faith.

This is a perspective upon Lollardy which might be usefully applied to the rest of society. The registers capture the mediated views of a selection of dissenters. It is likely there were Lollards in the area which never came before the Bishop. It is also likely that there were individuals who felt doubts or worse, as Murray puts it, ‘without getting to the point of stubborn challenge to orthodoxy.’\textsuperscript{130} Piety ‘ebbed and flowed’ and each individual’s relationship to their faith placed them somewhere on a fluid spectrum of belief.\textsuperscript{131} The church overlaid the binary of ‘heresy’ and ‘orthodoxy’ on this spectrum as an attempt to regulate belief, requiring individuals to practise their faith in a way which the church could control. We should not assume that those tried for heresy were any more interesting or complex than those for whom we have no record.\textsuperscript{132} Even members of the laity who held staunchly orthodox opinions throughout their lives might have had an equally intellectually and emotionally complex relationship to their religious belief as a radical heretic. Dissent, and the doubt which often accompanies it, can provide a rare window into late medieval people’s interiority, but orthodox belief does not necessarily signal blind compliance. Equally, those who leave no mark in the records may be impossible to access directly, but this does not mean they should be ignored or excluded from our understanding of the past. They would have fallen upon the same spectrum

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{128} Hornbeck, \textit{What is a lollard?}, 64
\item \textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 103
\item \textsuperscript{130} Jacqueline Murray quoted in Reynolds, \textit{Social Mentalities}, 36
\item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 38
\item \textsuperscript{132} Forrest, ‘Lollardy and Late Medieval History’, 124
\end{itemize}
of belief as the dissenters captured in the Salisbury Register and their presence is worth bearing in mind when considering the landscape of medieval piety.

Despite the best efforts of the Catholic authorities, hints of toleration intersperse Langton and Blyth’s registers. This is not to say Lollards in the area openly broadcast their unorthodox activity; there is certainly evidence of outward conformity and anxiety amongst the dissenting community. But these instances are matched by moments of surprising openness, for example when Lollards mock pilgrims or preach openly while at work in the fields. The Salisbury Lollards benefitted from a degree of leniency which enabled a long history of dissent in the area and allowed for Lollards to play an active role in their wider communities. The reason for this toleration is revealed when we reject the binary the register seeks to impose. Lollardy and orthodoxy, both in terms of ideology and participation, should not be seen as entirely distinct. Some of the trends which defined popular piety in the fifteenth century were common to orthodox devotion and Lollardy. Individuals might move between orthodoxy and heresy. Dissenters were variably committed to certain ideas. The range of belief and practices that made up late medieval religious life formed a spectrum which each individual dissenter and member of the orthodox laity feel somewhere upon. The religious environment of late medieval Salisbury was far more complex than the register might initially suggest.
Conclusion

The abjurations in Langton and Blyth’s registers, and the inquisitional efforts which underpinned them, were essentially a system of control. By singling out individuals as heretics, the church attempted to draw a boundary between acceptable belief and dissent. It was obedience, more than doctrinal variation, which motivated the binary the church enforced. The way these boundaries were increasingly hardened in the late medieval period, and the church’s willingness to ‘see heresy’, for example in apparently orthodox vernacular texts, shows insecurity on the part of the church and hints at a richness in religious culture that it was struggling to control.

The individuals recorded in the Salisbury registers offer us a tantalising glimpse into this culture. By focusing on the flashes of personal intellectual or emotional investment recorded in the abjurations, it is possible to read around the formulaic structure and biases of the registers. The dissenters show a commitment to a personal piety which they constructed for themselves, motivated by feelings of doubt or dissonances in their own experience. They were willing to reject mainstream practice or ideas, or ‘pick and chose’ from orthodoxy, to lead a religious life which they found satisfying. This flexibility should not be mistaken for a lack of collective identity; many of those abjuring had a sense of their membership of a wider Lollard group. They shared with other Lollards an understanding of their past and future, their separation from the ‘fools’ of the orthodox church and an identity defined through shared books and localities. Their piety was experimental and domestic, but could also be public facing and self-confident.

Although these dissenting individuals were labelled heretics by the Catholic church, their religious lives would not have been totally alien or distinct from the orthodox majority.

133 Arnold, Belief and Unbelief, 197
They lived alongside them and had similar experiences of the world and faith. The feelings and thought processes that emerge from the registers were not unique to the Lollards, and would have been extant in the orthodox mainstream. Evidence for tolerance in the registers shows the ‘porosity, plasticity and relativity’ of the line between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. This means understanding the outliers may help us better understand those that remained within the parameters of orthodoxy.

Despite the vivid evidence which can be drawn out of these registers, there are only thirty-seven individuals recorded. It would be useful to compare these cases with those within Bishop Audley’s register, which covers the years 1502 to 1521 in the diocese of Salisbury and contains another seventy-one heresy suspects, a source which has not yet been edited and published. It would be interesting to see if there was more evidence for Lollards’ perception of their collective past, future and the connections which existed between dissenting groups. A longer study could also investigate more thoroughly the overlap and crossover between orthodoxy and heresy in the area by looking at a wider range of sources.

The flaws of the episcopal registers will mean a degree of cautious imagination is always needed to avoid our understanding of the later Lollards, and wider popular religious culture, always being dictated by the aims and biases of the ecclesiastical sources. Historians must endeavour to be ‘imaginative yet accurate within the bounds of possibility.’ I have made some such imaginative leaps in this essay, in order to try and unlock the agency of these individual dissenters and place them in the context of their wider lived experience. In doing so we might hope to better understand Lollards like John Stanwey, ‘wavering’ in his belief on the fringes of orthodoxy, but also countless other individuals, whose names were never recorded,

134 Mcsheffrey, Vernacular Religion, 79
135 For an impressive example of this kind of study see Rob Lutton, Lollardy and orthodox religion in pre-Reformation England : reconstructing piety, (Woodbridge, 2006)
136 Paul Hyams quoted in Forrest, ‘Lollardy and Late Medieval History’, 124
but whose lives and piety contributed to the contradictions, complexity and variety of the religious environment of late medieval Salisbury.

Word Count : 12,000
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