"**Towards a History of Tolerance:**
Christian Attitudes to Jews and Muslims in the Middle Ages"
By Nicholas Watson, Harvard University

Introduction

First, I want to thank all of you for coming, and to thank my hosts in Calgary this week, Dr. Douglas Shantz and Dr. Jacqueline Jenkins. It's an honour to be asked to speak in this distinguished series, the Bentall Lectures in Christian Theology. For me the lecture offers an unusual opportunity to speak of things I care about to an audience that doesn't consist solely of academics—whose relationship to the material tends to be more scholarly and historical than ethical and personal. I should say at the outset, while there is still time for you to leave if you wish, that I am not going to be talking so much about the wide range of social attitudes medieval Christians across Europe had to Jews and Muslims as about the theological problems and opportunities Jews and Muslims represented for a small group of late-medieval Christian thinkers. And even here, my main interest is in the branch of theology in which these problems are relevant—the branch known as "soteriology," or salvation theology—and what discussion of these problems can tell us about "tolerance" itself. Although I am a historian, not a theologian, my topic tonight is the history of ethics, not actions, ideal rather than real behavior, explored within the theological framework of Christian doctrine. As we shall see, the relation of "tolerance" to Christian thought is actually a vexed question.

The sometimes benign, often neutral or mildly hostile, occasionally horrifically violent history of inter-faith relations from the time of the First Crusade in the mid-twelfth century through to the end of the fifteenth century forms the backdrop to much of what I have to say. But in the late Middle Ages, in the country from which the texts I'll be discussing originated, England, there had never been any Muslims. And England's Jews had been forcibly expelled in an early example of ethnic cleansing that was fully endorsed by the English Church. This all happened at the end of the thirteenth century, a hundred years before these texts were written. These events would have left behind street names and other ghosts of memories; no doubt some scattered families who converted to Christianity more or less thoroughly; and a fiercely divided set of attitudes about Jewish religion and ethics on the part of English Christians.[1] I will be discussing these attitudes

---

[1] Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, puts a horrifically anti-Jewish story into the mouth of a Prioress in his *Canterbury Tales*, making supposed Jewish malevolence into a garish backdrop against which the power and beauty of the Virgin Mary shines yet more bright. But at the same time, he insists that the Prioress speaks only for herself, twice adding a "quod she" to her words (*Canterbury Tales* 7.454, 581) to distance himself quietly from taking responsibility for them – this at a time and place in which there were rather few obvious pressures to show cultural sensitivity towards Jews or other marginalized figures. For an similar story in circulation in late-medieval Bristol, see Harvey Hames, "The Limits of Conversion: Ritual Murder and the Virgin Mary in the Account of Adam of Bristol," *Journal of Medieval History* 33, (2007) pp. 43-59

as I go, but necessarily only in the context of what late-medieval English Christian writers thought about Jews and Muslims *in their absence*, and with what some may find an overly optimistic emphasis on the scattered attempts some of these writers made to include them within the scheme of Christian salvation. In this they went against the grain of late-medieval formal theology, despite the weight of the history of persecution of which these writers were aware.[2]

The two most interesting examples of the late-medieval tendency to stress the power of the divine mercy are those of William Langland in *Piers Plowman*—a late fourteenth-century poetic meditation on the bold idea of a Christian society—and his contemporary Julian of Norwich in *A Revelation of Love*—a work Rowan Williams has hailed as "the most significant contribution to Christian theology written in the English language."[3] *While I am not sure that either of these works provides us with a detailed blueprint for a modern theology of tolerance, I do propose that they lay the foundations for an account of civic society whose basis is distinctively Christian, not secular, and which thus also helps me make the larger point I am trying to make here, about the essential usefulness of history, understood critically, to contemporary Christian ethical theory and practice.*

My aim then is twofold. *First*, I hope to show that we can learn something from these late-medieval attempts at the attitude we now call "tolerance" (the proper medieval English term would be "suffrance"), not only about the *history* of tolerance (as my title has it) but also about what tolerance actually is, how it functions as a complex ethical category in today's world, and in today's churches, and perhaps how it might be made to function better. It's a history, and these are writings, in other words, that shouldn't be read only by scholars. *Second*, and I'll return to this near the end of my lecture, I want to use this study of the history of tolerance to imply an argument about the theological and ethical potential of history itself – to argue that Christians of all denominations and varieties of belief need to be aware of and lay claim to the whole of their history, not only those parts that specific Christian traditions consider most important to themselves. Indeed, I hope at least to gesture towards showing how a particular idea much emphasized in the late medieval period – the idea that associates the Christian community, in its participation in the eucharist, with the incarnate body of Christ – can be used to derive a theory or theology of history that still commands respect and merits serious study. This is especially the case with regard to the two main writers I am concerned with this evening, the poet William Langland and the visionary Julian of Norwich. They saw the incarnate body of Christ as a promise and symbol that extends beyond the Christian Church as such, to all who share in Christ's humanity – that is, to all human beings across space, culture, belief, and time. [4]

---

[2] For an accessible account of medieval European persecution of Jews and others, see R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, Second Edition (Oxford/Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007).
[3] See Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, back cover.
[4] William Langland is quoted from the edition by A. V. C. Schmidt, William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, Everyman Books (London: Dent, 1978). Julian of Norwich is quoted from *Writings of Julian of Norwich: "A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman" and "A Revelation of Love,"* ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). Both these editions aim to be reasonably accessible to readers unfamiliar with Middle English.

The Notion of Tolerance

First, however, what of tolerance itself? What is this term, what does it describe, and how does it function in contemporary ethical discourse? In some respects the title to which I am speaking should really be "Before Tolerance," since both the term *tolerance* and the concept as we now have it post-date the medieval period, deriving as they do from the final few decades of the seventeenth century (as the careful entry in the Oxford English Dictionary makes clear).[5] During these decades, the exhaustion that followed the violent religious wars that had consumed much of Europe during the middle half of the century – the Thirty Years War in Germany, the Civil War in Britain, and others – generated a widespread repudiation of the narrowly defined doctrinal antagonisms that were understood to have caused these wars, and a renewed emphasis on the need for an idea of community that might transcend, or at least find ways to ignore, specifically doctrinal difference. The word group "tolerate, tolerance, toleration," ultimately derived from different forms of the Latin verb *tolerare* (to allow, endure, suffer, or agree to something) but in occasional use in English since the fifteenth century in the sense "to license or approve of something," emerged in these decades as a term of legal ethics, a virtue tied to a new jurisprudence or concept of government.

The fundamental early statement of the principal of tolerance comes from the English philosopher John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* of 1685/89.[6] Locke describes toleration as "the chief characteristic mark of the true Church," more important than any religious denomination's "antiquity," "pomp of outward worship," "discipline," or even "orthodoxy of ... faith," adding with characteristic sharpness "for everyone is orthodox to himself," and claiming in his somewhat vague prefatory remarks that the roots of tolerance as an ethical practice are in the Christian virtue of charity. Locke's letter coincided with the promulgation by the British Parliament of an Act of Toleration (1689), which allowed limited freedoms to Nonconformist religious denominations, while keeping the Anglican Church at the centre of national life and worship and firmly excluding Roman Catholics, Quakers, and others, whose time would come only much later. Avidly studied as it was by the drafters of the American Constitution in the early nineteenth century, and an influence in other crucial articulations of the ideal of social pluralism, Locke's *Letter* has been seen as one of the basic documents that underwrote the European Enlightenment's development, through the eighteenth century, of the idea of civic, or secular, society: a society governed to promote the "commonwealth"; that is, according to Locke, "a society... constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests," namely "life, liberty, health [...] indolency of body, and the possession of... things." As this definition of "civil interests" around health and wealth suggests, the Enlightenment also recognized tolerance as an important category in

---

[5] This is a point not made often enough in studies of the history of tolerance. Indeed, some historical scholars knowingly use the word "tolerance" anachronistically in order to defend pre-Enlightenment Christian society from the common, stereotypical charge of repression and benightedness. See, e.g., the introduction to *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), a book which contains an excellent overview of some of the issues raised here.

[6] For a convenient, online edition of this letter, see http://www.constitution.org/jl/tolerati.htm.

the functioning of mercantile or capitalist society, an approach to ideological or religious difference that made it less likely that such difference would interfere with trade.

Tolerance Today

What does this sketch of the recent, though still relatively early, history of "tolerance" tell us about how the term functions today? I would suggest that tolerance is now an attitude most sectors of society, religious and secular, would regard as a virtue, in principle a good thing, part of modern life that in most circumstances goes without saying; but also that our collective approval of tolerance as an ideal is, in many quarters, more qualified and limited than we think it is. Secular thinkers of liberal persuasion feel committed to tolerance, not least because the religious and secular right is the only sector of contemporary western society that explicitly attacks it.[7] But secular liberals nowadays often find the term itself condescending or overly limited, still smacking of the careful limits put in place by those who designed the frankly intolerant Act of Toleration three hundred years past. Secular liberals tend to organize their ethical thinking around the utopian ideal of a pluralism that combines the maximum of cultural multiplicity with the minimum of cultural friction. In this setting, a term that admits that there's an element of putting up with something, even of suffering, in the practice of tolerance – that by definition we tolerate things we don't want to tolerate – is liable to be seen as cutting too close to the bone; and it's common now to find the word under fire from those who feel it doesn't express an unqualified enough enthusiasm for the principle of cultural variety that has undergirt, for example, Canadian political ideology over the last forty or so years. Secular liberals, in other words, hold that we won't have attained a tolerant society until tolerance is so natural to us it is no longer a virtue, and would thus have us move beyond the word into a glorious, and category-free, future.[8]

Christians have, I think, a more tortured relation to the term for they sense somewhere that the roots of the virtue of tolerance as it's been historically constructed are only shallowly Christian at all. Although Locke may have been partly right to identify tolerance with the Christian virtue of charity, the fact remains that tolerance came to the fore in his thought as a means of ameliorating specifically religious conflict: that is, of keeping opposing Christian belief systems from tearing at one another's throats. (Those who see Locke's invocation of Christianity in the letter as largely strategic, even ornamental, have a point.) Not only does this mean that tolerance is most readily defined in negative terms, as a mental or cultural state in which judgments are *not* made, differences *not* emphasized, in the interests of *avoiding* dispute or violence, and at the cost of *suspending*, or perhaps even *negating*, what might otherwise be considered essential principles – a definition that renders Locke's association of tolerance with the fundamentally activist virtue of charity suddenly problematic (even the more obviously proximate Christian virtue, patience, in its specific form of forbearance, only broadly fits

---

[7] For a recent attack from an evangelical perspective, see Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti, *The Truth About Tolerance: Pluralism, Diversity And The Culture Wars* (Madison, WI: Intervarsity Press, 2007).

[8] See, e.g., several of the essays collected in *Liberalism for a New Century*, ed. Neil Jumonville and Kevin Mattson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Secular liberal suspicion of the word often derives directly or indirectly from the influential book by Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

this negative description). It also means that the emergence of tolerance in western ethical discourse partly needs to be understood as the revolt of an emerging civil or secular society against the dominance, precisely, of religion; and as the harbinger of a modern cultural order in which religion has ceased to be the sole, or even the most important, arbiter of many kinds of ethical question. Tolerance is one of a number of ideals that seem to upstage Christian ethics by offering something broader and more inclusive – thus threatening one of Christian ethic's fundamental claims, to universality. Don't forget that in many secular circles "religion" itself, not merely "fundamentalism" or "conservative Christianity," might well be offered as an *antonym* to "tolerance," denoting a mode of thought so clearly intolerant that it's very good of secular liberals to tolerate it at all.[9]

I suspect that it is this sensation of being sidelined by civic society that causes some contemporary Christians to set what they think of as proper limits to the reign of toleration. The arguments within many Christian denominations around contraception, abortion rights, gay marriage, and the ordination of gays and women – all fought with a virulence reminiscent of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, and all depending equally defiantly on claims that particular ethical positions have universal claims – are also arguments about what some feel to be the humiliating dominance of secular ethics, its permissive corruption (as the conservative party in these arguments insists) of *revealed* ethics. According to this party, "liberal" Christians, who affirm the religious validity of contraception, gay marriage, and so on, are by definition allowing their membership in civic society an improper dominance over their religious obligations. Civic society itself, within which Christians usually live relatively comfortably, suddenly reemerges as that hostile Pauline entity, "the world," to which it is crucial "not to be conformed" (Romans 12:2).

My point is that any answer that merely turns on the principle of tolerance as it is presently defined is weak, because for historical reasons tolerance really is partly an anti-theological and anti-doctrinal category, very much more closely integrated into post-Enlightenment thought than into any distinctively Christian discourse. Since contemporary secular society requires those of many faiths and none to get along, this is on one level a thoroughly good thing. Modern ethical systems need to have their own kind of potential for universalization or generality, and also need not to operate as covert agents for the dominance of one group's ethics over another's. In saying this I perhaps lay bare my own liberal political preconceptions, but they are widely shared and fundamental to many of the public institutions such as the United Nations that have emerged from the twentieth century's reprise of the wars of religion—the wars of ideology fought among communism, fascism and democracy.

---

[9] For different recent perspectives on these issues, see *Toleration and Its Limits*, ed. Melissa S. Williams and Jeremy Waldron (New York : New York University Press, 2008), a collection of papers from the American Philosophical Society's 2004 annual conference; and Marie A. Eisenstein, *Religion and the Politics of Tolerance : How Christianity Builds Democracy* (Waco, Tex. : Baylor University Press, 2008), a book which specifically sets out to counteract the secular view that Christianity is by definition intolerant.

Notions of Tolerance in the late Middle Ages

It is now time to consider the rich tradition of Christian ethics. We need to go deeper, further back into a past before the term had emerged; before the specific structures of intra-Christian religious antagonism that made the word necessary had settled into the conflicted shape in which Locke found them; and before the split between religious and secular conceptions of society that Locke and his Enlightenment successors engineered had become conceivable. We need to look at how the attitudes that became the secular virtue of tolerance were imagined and practiced before the sixteenth-century Reformation. It was the Reformation that generated a religious climate in which antagonism to the doctrinal positions of rival Christian denominations became a basic part of the theological thought of all the mainstream churches. It took the Enlightenment, with its advocacy of tolerance, to rescue western society from these antagonisms.[10]

I want to suggest in the rest of this lecture that contemporary Christians could do worse than to think of modern civic society as, in an extended sense, the Body of Christ, and that if they do so it might become possible to rethink the secular ideal of tolerance in more sophisticatedly theological terms. Late-medieval social thought was dominated by an inclusive, but also pluralistic, image of Christian society as the Body of Christ, whose various members performed various social and ethical roles: roles equally necessary though not necessarily equal, since the head is worthier than the limbs, the limbs than what Paul in I Corinthians 12 calls our "unpresentable" or "shameful parts," the organs of reproduction and excretion. This image of society, which was particularly suitable as a way of expressing the Church's increasing emphasis on the laity – on those of its members who lived "in the world" rather than tucked away in monasteries and hermitages – indeed gave birth in the late thirteenth century to an important festivity, the Feast of Corpus Christi, which for the next three hundred years rivaled some of the major feasts of the Church in the intensity it brought to bear on the idea around which it was formed, the sacramental idea of society as Christ's body. It was on the feast of Corpus Christi (still celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, i.e. 60 days after Easter, often in early June) that members of many late-medieval English towns celebrated their civic participation in this religious metaphor by staging the so-called Corpus Christi plays, also called the Miracle or Mystery Plays, their subject the entirety of Christian history.[11] This idea of the whole of society as the Body of Christ would be shattered by the Reformation with its creation of rival claimants to represent Christ's body on earth.[12]

---

[10] To some extent my thinking about the relation between Christianity and the notion of tolerance in these pages has been anticipated by Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), who provides the most searching recent analysis of the term "tolerance" from a pluralist perspective. For a probing recent attack on a standard Protestant account of Reformation theology as fundamentally liberative (and thus on the standard Protestant stereotype of medieval Christianity as fundamentally repressive), see James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[11] See V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London: Arnold, 1966); Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relations and Symbolic Acts in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[12] For a study of the feast, somewhat less optimistic than my presentation here, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Of course mainstream late-medieval Christian uses of the Body of Christ metaphor were far from tolerant, except in the limited sense that they gave legitimacy to different Christian avocations and allowed for a certain inclusivity of theological thought. (Although this is not its reputation, late-medieval theology was far more pluralistic, far less concerned about small differences of doctrine, than in the centuries that followed.) On the contrary, the ecclesiological thought that gave birth to the Body of Christ metaphor had as one of its first formal principles the doctrine that, as the constitutions of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 had it, *extra ecclesiam nulla salvatio*, there is no salvation outside the Church.[13] Opinions might differ as to how to define the Church, but the general run of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theology was clear that no amount of special pleading could extend the definition of the Church to encompass the unbaptized, or Jews and Muslims in particular. Many late-medieval theologians, drawing on the twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard as well as on Augustine's *City of God*, expressed implicit sympathy for Jews and Muslims in their accounts of the Last Judgment, at least to the extent of insisting that bad Christians, Christians whose lives failed to measure up to their faith, would be punished far more severely than those who did not have the advantages of faith. But despite a measure of speculation about the notion of "implicit belief," the view that both faith as such and participation in the Church's sacraments were necessary to salvation made it difficult for scholastic theologians to think of even Jews and Muslims of exceptional virtue as capable of salvation.[14]

Worse, there are many signs that the spread of the metaphor of the Body of Christ to describe late-medieval society was linked to an increasing social intolerance for Jews and Muslims as well as other marginal groups whom the Church defined as heretical. The latter would include twelfth-century Cathars the Waldensians, Lollards, Hussites, and others of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. England's expulsion of its Jews, one of a series of expulsions that took place across western Europe during the late thirteenth century, occurred at much the same time as its introduction of the feast of Corpus Christi, and under the auspices of the same brilliantly gifted archbishop of Canterbury: the Franciscan John Pecham, in some other respects one of the current archbishop, Dr. Rowan Williams's worthier successors. The horrifying theological conspiracy theory known as the "Jewish blood libel," which derived its potency from the Gospel of Matthew's account of the trial of Christ and the chilling words Matthew makes the Jews say to Pilate – "his blood be upon us and upon our children" (27:25) – took flight in the

---

[13] What the council actually says, in Norman Tanner's English translation is: "There is indeed one universal church of the faithful, outside of which nobody at all is saved [*extra quam nullus omnino salvatur*], in which Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice" (*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Guiseppe Alberigo, Norman P. Tanner, etc. [Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990], I.230).

[14] Peter Lombard, drawing on *The City of God* and other works, held that there would be four groups at the Last Judgment, the Perfect, Good Christians, Bad Christians, and the Heathen. Bad Christians would suffer the worst punishment, since they knew the truth but rejected it. For a careful account of the medieval and post-medieval Catholic church's thinking about "implicit belief," see the online essay "The Salvation of Non-Christians, Specifically Muslims (http://www.diafrica.org/kenny/SalvationOfMuslims.htm). "Implicit Belief" theory argues that certain people of religions other than Christianity, perhaps even people of no religion, may be helped by God to find ways of thinking and feeling that somehow correspond to Christian belief and can thus become recipients of divine grace.

thirteenth century partly because of the increasing attention being paid in Christian devotional and social thought to the image of Christ's incarnate, suffering, bleeding body. Brilliant and depressing work has been done by scholars from R. I. Moore (in a book entitled *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, see note 1) to Steven Kruger, formerly of the University of Alberta (in a book called *The Spectral Jew*),[15] to tease out the links between the hardening attitudes towards Jews in much of late-medieval Europe, the emergence of fantastic anti-Semitic narratives about Jewish ritual desecration of the Eucharist and murder of Christian children, the pogroms to which such narratives indirectly or directly led, and the emergence of the new, "incarnational" theology, with its strong emphasis on the humanity of Christ, that was arguably late-medieval Christianity's most important positive legacy to the post-Reformation churches.[16] At its worst, the Body of Christ as an image for Christian society – an image derived precisely from this intense new interest in the details and meaning of Christ's human life – enabled late-medieval Christians to play out one of the most abhorrent behaviours available within the structure of Christian thought, by posing, with Christ, as the vulnerable victims of a group in reality far less powerful than themselves, the Jews, and thus justifying acts of savagery that still scar our collective cultural memory, and whose influence is still sometimes felt even in tolerant, pluralistic Canada.[17]

Muslims provided less of a threat to the integrity of the Body of Christ than did Jews, at least once the Christian reconquest of Spain was well under way in the thirteenth century (although the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 aroused serious and well-justified political fears of incursions into Western Europe). While Islam was formally considered one of the most pestilent Christian heresies – a heresy grounded not only in the denial of both of Christianity's signature doctrines, the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, but also in the supplementation of the Bible by a Third Testament, the Qu'uran – Islam consistently did better in late-medieval Christian thought and narrative than did Judaism. In the *Inferno*, when Dante imagined a Limbo in which virtuous pagans could shelter in comfort from the torments of hell without breaking theological principle and entering heaven, he found space amongst his Greek and Roman poets and philosophers for three Muslims, the philosophers Averroes and Avicenna, and the monarch and warrior Saladin. Although Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist and others used to dwell there before Christ harrowed hell, there are no Jews in Limbo when Dante and Virgil pass through.[18]

---

[15] *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[16] See also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

[17] Because of its early history, the fate of its founder, and its appropriation of the Jewish narrative pattern of persecution and redemption, Christian thought has a considerable investment in the image of the persecuted righteous person, and has proved all to willing to deploy this image to justify acts of violence, even in situations in which Christians in practice had almost absolute political hegemony over their "persecutors." For reflections on Canadian Anti-Semitism, see Manuel Prutschi, "Anti-Semitism in Canada," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 16 (2004), online at: http://www.jcpa.org/phas/phas-prutschi-f04.htm.

[18] See *Inferno*, Canto IV, for example in the superb new edition and translation by Robin Kirkpatrick for Penguin Classics (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 2006). Medieval scholastic thought was arguable indebted to Arab intellectuals such as Averroes and Avicenna in even more profound ways than it was to Jewish ones

The need to combat Muslim armies in the futile attempt to retake the Holy Land was theologically influential in one way; it led to the emergence, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the idea of holy war or crusade, an idea that replaced the earlier Christian emphasis on pacifism. By the Reformation, crusading was already possible to imagine as an intra-Christian practice, and most of the wars of religion that spanned the century and a half between Luther and Locke owe their ideology of warfare indirectly to the crusading ideal.[19] But while medieval works that recount the crusades or incite Christian Soldiers to march off to fight in crusades employ the usual a rich mix of racial and religious slurs to spur on the troops (pagans, heathen hounds, heretics, and so on), medieval Christians – especially in the north of Europe, far away from the battlefields of the Mediterranean lands – found it much easier to sympathize with Muslims than with Jews. Indeed it's partly in connection with Muslims that the discourses of tolerance I'll turn to now first grow up.

For outside the careful theological formulations of scholastic thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, and outside the structures of ecclesiology proposed by the Fourth Lateran Council which claimed that salvation could only take place within the church, late medieval theology was full of speculation about the extent of the divine mercy. It is often thought that medieval soteriology was harsh, that medieval thinkers assumed that the numbers of the saved at the Last Judgement would be few compared with the vast legions of the damned. Indeed sometimes this view is expressed by the great early twelfth-century theological logician Anselm, the man who first developed the doctrines of "imputed sin" that lie behind many modern doctrines of atonement. This is one of the historical mistakes made in Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's rich and important new study of the history of the idea of the secular, *A Secular Age*, a book on which this lecture draws more than once. Taylor's mistake was to follow a gloomy ex-Jesuit French intellectual historian, Jean Delumeau, in his study of the historical uses of hellfire, the lugubrious and wonderful *Sin and Fear*, a must-read for those who like this sort of thing.[20]

In fact, late-medieval religious thought had moved as far in the direction of inclusion in its thinking about divine judgment as in any period before the twentieth century. Moreover, it had done so for good, practical, pastoral reasons, in an attempt to convince as many laypeople as possible that they might have a place in the scheme of salvation and should improve their lives – or, at least, repent of their sins on their deathbeds – to take advantage of this fact. For, as the psalmist says, "his mercy is above all his works" (Psalm 145:9, translating the Latin Vulgate version). It was this inclusiveness, this idea that God would get at least all Christians into heaven somehow (if necessary after many

---

such as Maimonides, and Dante's suspension of these figures, with Saladin, in a place without suffering, albeit a place still far away from heaven, is a measure of the respect in which they were held.

[19] A rich and accessible resource on this topic is *The Crusades: A Reader*, ed. S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures VIII (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2003).

[20] Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, Thirteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also Frank Burch Brown, "The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God's Eternal Design," *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993), 329-56.

eons in purgatory), that Luther and especially Calvin came to regard with such disdain. This way of conceptualizing soteriology seemed to them to detract from the majesty, purity, and unpredictable graciousness of God. In *The City of God*, Augustine writes against a group of early fifth-century Christians he calls the *misericordists*, who argue that all baptized Christians must necessarily attain salvation, and links their views with those followers of the Greek theologian Origen, who believed in *apocastasis*, the final salvation of all humankind.[21] For all that formal theology again tended to frown on both beliefs, they were well alive in the fourteenth century. For if Christ could save even the feeblest and least committed lay Christian – say a man of violence, a mercenary, or a man whose life had been dedicated to the sin of usury, a merchant – how could he not look favorably on those who, after their own lights, tried to follow God's law as best they understood it? Indeed, a version of such a view was a scholastic commonplace, one against which Luther's doctrine of justification by faith was arguably constructed: writes the fourteenth-century Oxford Franciscan theologian, Robert Holkot, that "God will not deny his grace to those who do what is in themselves to do."[22] (A classic statement of what Luther would castigate as "salvation by works," although you'll notice that Holkot does write of grace; it's only that his version of grace is predictable and posited on behaviour, whereas Luther's is radically unknowable, beginning and ending in the predestining justice of God.)

There are a number of different manifestations of this emphasis on the saveability of humankind. Some texts, especially texts written to be used around the dying, focus on the ease with which God forgives sins, how a single drop of his blood suffices to purify as many sins as there are grains of sand in the sea. Others focus, not on the generic nature of the divine mercy but on the possibility of God's exercising a particular forgiveness towards especially virtuous non-Christians, often including Muslims because of their reputation for scrupulously following their own law.[23] Still others combine these approaches by arguing directly that God gives all a serious chance of salvation. For example, an interesting theologian called Uthred of Bohdon or Bolton, a Benedictine monk from the Durham region who taught at Oxford in the 1360s, was criticized for the view that everyone, at death, was given a momentary vision of God, which determined her or his final salvation, since some embraced it with love and hope while to others it was a cause only of shame and despair. Muslims, Jews, and Christians all had the same chance of opening their dying hearts to God.[24]

The armchair traveler Sir John Mandeville produced a book of presumably fictitious *Travels* written in Anglo-Norman French during the 1350s, a bestseller which has never

---

[21] Augustine's arguments about eternal salvation and damnation take up Book 21 of *The City of God*. They can be tracked and understood most conveniently and in most detail via the online *St. Augustine's City of God* Commentary Project: http://www.augustinecityofgod.net/.

[22] This tag is best known from Holkot's Commentary on *Wisdom*, but formulaic in the fourteenth century as a way of describing the relationship between grace and works. For Holkot, see the article in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/holkot/.

[23] For a study, see Cindy L. Vitto, *The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 79.5 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989).

[24] See David Knowles, "The Censured Opinions of Uthred of Boldon," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 37 (1951), 305-42.

gone out of fashion, but has continued to be copied, translated, and adapted throughout the nearly seven centuries of its lifespan. He opined that the faithful of many religions and nations followed their own law better than Christians did theirs. In a pivotal scene in this book, Sir John is overwhelmed by his conversation with the Sultan of Egypt, who points out the deficiencies of Christian practice (about which he knows a sinister amount), and, while admitting the superiority of Christian doctrine in theory over his own Islamic beliefs, announces that he can hardly be expected to become a faithful Christian when he has never been able to discover anyone else who corresponds to that description. (It seems to be a basic problem with Christian law for Sir John that it is almost impossible to put into practice, that its standards make hypocrites of all who aspire to it.) The Sultan's considered view informs the whole of the rest of Sir John's travels, which take him east through the Holy Land, through Persia, India, and China, all the way to the gates of the Earthly Paradise, and back again. He reports on the laws and rituals of different faith systems as he goes, and makes comments such as the following extraordinary plea for a pluralistic understanding of the divine law:

"And even if these people [in this case, the Brahmins] do not have the articles of our faith nevertheless I believe that because of their good faith that they have by nature, and their good intent, God loves them well and is well pleased by their manner of life, as he was with Job, who was a pagan, yet nevertheless his deeds were as acceptable to God as those of his loyal servants. And even if there are many different religions and different beliefs in the world, still I believe God will always love those who love him in truth and serve him meekly and truly, setting no store by the vainglory of the world, just like these folk, and Job.... Also in the Gospel he says... 'I have other sheep which are not of this fold' (John 10.16), as if he said, 'Other servants I have besides those not under the Christian law.' And with this agrees the vision which was shown to Saint Peter in the city of Jaffa... [this is the vision in Acts 11 in which Peter learns that God does not distinguish between 'clean' and 'unclean,' gentile and Jew.] For we know not whom God loves, nor whom he hates."[25]

It spoils the irenic nature of this wonderful passage when Sir John speaks in favour of practices such as religious self-slaughter – the *suttee* of Indian widows, the supposed practice of throwing oneself under the wheels of the Juggernaut in order to attain salvation by martyrdom – and that he has a particular animus against Jews, and Jews alone. I think this is because his vision of the world as a whole is governed by an idea of *natural law*, that is, that like St. Paul in the first chapter of Romans, and also like a great deal of Enlightenment and modern ethical theory, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau on, he understands ethics as innate in all human communities because of their common origin as God's creatures and as descendants of the chosen few who journeyed, with Noah, in the ark. Apart from Christians, in their failure to live up to their ideals, the Jews seem to be the sole exception to the rule of natural law, and Sir John appears to be offloading (in a

---

[25] See *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, ed. C. W. R. D. Mosley, Penguin Classics (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1983), 180.

wearily familiar way) moral guilt he also attributes to Christians on their Jewish contemporaries.[26]

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville offers a medieval foretaste of the way in which travel would broaden the European Christian mind. I think it could be studied as an early attempt to lay the grounds for what would become civic secular society. While this book certainly captures something important about the late-medieval religious longing for a post-doctrinal and essentially functionalist ethics, John Mandeville's musings about law may not be that much more deeply grounded in Christian theology than John Locke's later musings about tolerance. They fail to register the tension which other thinkers felt, sensitive to the need to do justice to Muslims, Jews, and others, when confronted with the gap between that need and the fierce exigencies of Christian dogma.

In an important scene in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the autobiography of a devout woman from East Anglia written about eighty years after Sir John Mandeville in the 1430s, the protagonist is punished in a unique manner by God for insisting on a similar belief, the belief God loves everyone far too much to damn anyone. In a foreshadowing of modern religious conflicts between tolerance and sexual sin, Margery Kempe is punished for her sin of too much mercy by being subjected to visions of demons disguised as naked men, some priests, others "hethyn" [heathens], each more priapically endowed than the last, who offer her sexual favours in a noisy and aggressive fashion she finds unendurable, because distractingly tempting, until she accepts the brute fact of eternal damnation. An inveterate pilgrim by land and sea, Margery Kempe has been the beneficiary of the kindness of many strangers, including men like the Saracen who carries her on his back up the hill of Golgatha where Christ was crucified; and her intense appreciation of the overwhelming nature of divine mercy, its infinite compassion for what, at worst, could only ever be finite sin, makes the severity of formal theological teaching on damnation unbearable to her. Margery Kempe knew her Walter Hilton, who in his *Scale of Perfection* from around 1390 follows the orthodox line that:

"Two maner of men are not reformed by vertu of [Christ's] passioun. One is of them that beleveth it not; anothir is of them that loven it not. Jewes and Paynims [*pagans*] han not the benefits of this passioun... Thanne thinketh me [*it seems to me*] that thise men gretly... err that seyn that Jewis and Sarcenys and paynemes... may be maad saaf [*can be saved*].... False Cristen men, the whiche are out of charite [*who do not possess charity*] and live and dien in deedly sinne... goon to peines of helle endlesly, as Jewes and Sarcenes do."

---

[26] *Mandeville's Travels* also propounds an early form of an anti-Jewish version of the Last Times, in which the Day of Judgment is anticipated by the release of the Lost Tribes from the mysterious kingdoms of Gog and Magog, from which they will be unleashed into the world. According to repugnant passages in some *Mandeville* versions, contemporary European Jews are in a political conspiracy with their "Lost" brethren. There are clear connections here with the much later anti-Jewish conspiracy theory that led to the forging of the so-called Protocols of the Elders of Zion in early twentieth-century Russia (for a careful account and commentary, see http://ddickerson.igc.org/protocols.html); for a study of the sinister portability of this kind of material, see Robert E. Lerner's *The Powers of Prophecy: The Cedar of Lebanon Vision from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of Californian Press, 1983).

Despite this discouragingly categorical statement, Margery Kempe continues to pray for the salvation of all even as she concedes that the demands of eternal justice may point in another direction, asking for what she can never know if she will receive.[27]

William Langland's *Piers Plowman*

The two most interesting responses to the dynamic tension between formal theology and the late-medieval tendency to stress the power of the divine mercy are those of William Langland in his great and endlessly complex late fourteenth-century poetic meditation on the bold idea and the sad reality of a Christian society, *Piers Plowman*, and his contemporary Julian of Norwich in her speculative visionary rumination on sin and love, *A Revelation of Love*. The latter work Rowan Williams has hailed as perhaps "the most significant contribution to Christian theology written in the English language."[28] It is with these two works that I want to spend the last few minutes I have here, because they contain the essential theological response to medieval institutional and social anti-Semitism is made, in two rather different forms. *While I am not sure that either of these works provides us with a detailed blueprint for a modern theology of tolerance, I do propose that they lay the foundations for an account of civic society whose basis is distinctively Christian, not secular, and which thus also helps me make the larger point I am trying to make here, about the essential usefulness of history, understood critically, to contemporary Christian ethical theory and practice.*

Both of these works rely on and contribute to their age's particular interest in Christ's human nature, involving the metaphor of the Body of Christ at every level of their thought. Langland's strange peasant saint, Piers Plowman, is a kind of image of the innate goodness in humankind that allows the incarnation (despite all that Augustine said about original sin) to take place; while Julian's ruminations on why sin was allowed to enter a world created by love begin as she stares at a crucifix which miraculously bleeds before her eyes as she lies in bed, apparently dying, and continue for several decades until she understands that Christ did not die and was not raised merely in the past, but that his suffering and triumph takes place at every moment of human history and indeed provides that history with its fundamental pattern. But whereas, as we've seen, the figure of the Body of Christ could and did serve violent and persecutory agendas even during Langland and Julian's lifetimes – one thinks, for example, of that exceptionally dark and nasty anti-Semitic play, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, composed not forty miles from Julian's Norwich within a decade or two of her death – both these thinkers understand that figure holistically or universally. Both, that is, notice that Christ was not incarnated merely in the Church, but that Paul's very metaphor of the Church as Christ's body ties his enfleshed human nature in kinship to the whole of sinning, suffering, and redeemable humanity.

---

[27] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), Chapter 59; Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Thomas Bestul, TEAMS Middle English Series (Kalamazoo, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 2.3. For a more detailed analysis of these passages and those that follow from William Langland and Julian of Norwich, see Nicholas Watson, "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997), 146-87

[28] See Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, back cover.

Piers Plowman approaches this theme in a culminating scene set as a visionary reenactment of the Harrowing of Hell, the moment when Christ, immediately after his death, "descended into hell" as the Apostle's Creed has it and, according to traditional theology, seized from the devil the souls of all those who had patiently waited for him: Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, the prophets, John the Baptist, and all those other, mostly Jewish figures noticeable by their absence from Dante's Limbo. Standing athwart the shattered gates of hell, Christ takes the opportunity to announce that one day, at the Last Judgment, he will be back to decide, not merely the blessed fate of this privileged few, but that of all humanity, Christian and non-Christian: "And thanne shal I come as a kyng, crouned, with aungeles,/ And have out of helle alle mennes soules." What will then happen? Christ, in his unresurrected incarnate human nature – still a *soul* as well as *God* – does not exactly know, perhaps even has yet to decide. But he does know that his emphasis will be on mercy: "Ac to be merciable to man thanne, my kynde [*my nature, either human or divine*] it asketh." Why? Because Christ is related to all humankind: to Christians by baptism and blood (i.e. the shared fact of humanity), to others by blood alone: "For we beth bretheren of blood, but noght in baptisme alle." Langland's Christ is frankly a misericordist when it comes to Christians, declaring that: "alle that beth myne hole bretheren, in blood and in baptisme,/ Shul noght be dampned to the deeth that is withouten ende..." As to those he calls his "halfe-bretheren," Jews, Saracens, and pagans, things are not so sure, although Christ insists that "it lith in my grace/ Wheither thei deye or deye noght for that thei diden ille," arguing that, despite the fearsome resistance provided by formal theology, with its doctrines of eternal damnation, "I may do mercy thorugh rightwisnesse, and alle my wordes trewe...." Formal theology does not tie Christ's hands. Finally, Christ grounds his thinking in the exact place in late-medieval incarnational theology from which that monstrous Christian creation, anti-Semitism, took its growth: the fact of his own blood – also the fact that his bleeding makes it impossible to ignore the bleeding of others: "And my mercy shal be shewed to manye of my halve-bretheren;/ For blood may suffre blood bothe hungry and acale [*that is, blood relations may be able to tolerate seeing each other hungry and in need*],/ But blood may noght se blood blede, but hym rewe" [*that is, blood relations will always finally come to one another's help in danger*] (see *Piers Plowman* B 18.366-400; reference in note 2).

For Langland's Christ, in other words, his own blood is neither a legitimate source of racial or religious hatred, a sinister token of the Jewish blood debt, nor indeed merely the privileged resort of those baptized Christians who partake of that blood once or twice each year at the Mass, affirming their identity with his body as they do so – and affirming it, it's clear, in a manner Langland considers essential to his model of Christian society.[29] Instead, Christ's blood offers something more: a renewal of the ties that bind all human beings through their common descent from Adam; and a guarantee that these ties will ultimately demand he intervene in the destiny of his suffering half-brothers, as they face

---

[29] In Langland and Julian's time, lay Christians still generally made only annual communion, at Easter. The climax of their attendance at mass on other days was not the communion itself (nor, as in many modern churches, the Peace), but the Elevation of the Host. For a justly celebrated account of the extraordinary veneration paid the elevated host, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

the eternal darkness prescribed for them by the fact of Adam's sin. It's not surprising that Langland's figure of earthly ethical behaviour, Piers, the character who shows how the heroic actions and words of Christ can be played out, imitated by the engaged Christian, also regards his own duty to extend to all. "*Audivi archana verba que non licet homini loqui*...," "I heard secret words that are not given to humans to speak," writes Langland at the end of this scene, alluding to Paul's account of his journey to the third heaven in II Corinthians 12 to suggest (in a manner reminiscent of *Mandeville's Travels*) that Christian revelation as we have it is not all there is. Clearly, the map of salvation laid out here, and the map of civic society in its inclusion of Christ's "full" and his "half" brethren, is one that takes seriously not just the strictures of formal theology but also the reality of what, many centuries later, certain Christian missionaries, appalled by the salvation theology that consigned the hundreds of millions of souls they could never reach to eternal fire, would hopefully call "God's uncovenanted mercies."[30]

Julian of Norwich and *A Revelation of Love*

As to Julian, much of her thinking revolves around her simultaneous awareness of the existence of sin and of the force of the promise Christ makes to her in the course of her revelation, that "sin is behovely [necessary or fitting or proper] but alle shalle be welle and alle shalle be welle and alle maner of thing shalle be welle." She understood this promise as offering a resolution not only to the problem of human sin but also to that of eternal judgment, the damnation of those who do not believe, or do not live up to their beliefs (Chapter 27, for full reference see note 2). As she correctly notes, "one point of oure faith is that many creatures shall be dampned: as angelis that felle ought of heven for pride, which be now fendes, and man in erth that dyeth out of the faith of holy church—that is to sey, tho that be hethen—and also man that hath received cristondom and liveth uncristen life, and so dyeth oughte of cherite. All theyse shalle be dampned to helle without ende, as holy church techeth me to beleve. And stonding alle this, methought it was unpossible that alle maner of thing shuld be wele, as oure lorde shewde in this time" (Chapter 32). For a formal resolution of this "unpossible" conundrum (the word "unpossible" here references the scholastic logical category of the *impossibilium*, the alogical or absurd proposition), Julian, like Langland, understands she must wait until the end of time. "There is a deed the which the blisseful trinite shalle do in the last day, as to my sight. And what the deed shall be and how it shall be done, it is unknowen of alle creatures which are beneth Crist, and shall be tille whan it shalle be done… This is the gret deed ordained of oure lorde God fro without beginning, tresured and hid in his blessed brest, only knowen to himselfe, by which deed he shalle make all thing wele. For right as the blessed trinite made alle thing of nought, right so the same blessed trinite shalle make wele alle that is not welle" (Chapter 32).

---

[30] Interestingly, "uncovenanted" is first used in English in the 1680s, at about the same time as Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. The phrase, "God's uncovenanted mercies" was in use by 1871, in Richard Ingham's *Handbook on Christian Baptism* (London: Stock, 1871), 2.240, and subsequently became sufficiently formulaic that Thomas Hardy could use the phrase in a scene in *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

How can Julian's views be squared with medieval Christian orthodoxy? In the same way as Langland's Christ promises to have "mercy thorugh righteousness and alle my words true," by invoking the idea that Christ is not bound by the limits of his own covenants with humanity, nor even bound by human understandings of what constitutes consistency of doctrine: "That that is unpossible to the is not unpossible to me," says Christ to her: "I shalle save my worde in alle thing, and I shalle make althing wele" (Chapter 32). Mercy and truth, in the words of the psalmist, shall meet together; justice and peace, shall kiss (Psalm 85:10). The hope of universal salvation that Julian holds out here is an exciting one for those of us who work on the history of Christian doctrine. Of special interest is Julian's view that many theological issues, indeed many ethical issues, cannot be decided under the conditions in which humans live their lives, despite the fact of divine revelation. In the religious economy of the *Revelation of Love*, Christ's suffering makes possible the redemption of all humanity, in part because all humans suffer, and in suffering participate in his redemptive work, "travailing and groaning" along with the entirety of creation (Romans 8:22). Not least among the sufferings to which human life subjects us is the suffering of ignorance, the tension that is the *unpossibil* fact that God is at once just and merciful, able to "save his word" that condemns many while also making "alle thinge welle." Julian's *Revelation* at its center is about both the participation of all humankind in the body of Christ and in the humility, the necessary acceptance of the limits of our ethical and theological knowledge, to which this participation subjects us.

Conclusion

I hope, in this lecture, to have aroused sufficient curiosity in some to impel them to go and read these writers for themselves. Now to conclude. All this material about medieval speculations on the fate of Jews and Saracens and the mercifulness of God may be very well, may even be intriguing and moving, but how can I suggest that it has any purchase on the present? It is not easy to see why a fourteenth-century English male poet and a fourteenth-century English female visionary should be able to put much pressure on modern discussions of the topic. Langland and Julian are surely too local, too informal as religious thinkers, and too distant from us in time, to be more than curiosities when it comes to the urgent work of continuing to reflect on the meaning of Christian thought as it intersects with current issues facing the Christian churches, not to mention secular society itself.

But perhaps these works are not too distant to matter. What Langland and Julian and several other writers I have mentioned have in common seems to me to be something of real value to modern Christian thought and, I would want to add, to modern secular thought. For Locke, tolerance has something to do with Christian charity but everything to do with good government and economics, with making social and commercial sense of an increasingly pluralist (and, we would now add, "globalized") world. For many of Locke's secular liberal descendants, Locke did not go far enough, for charity and tolerance are tarnished words—words which do not take us where we need to go in embracing cultural plurality. For many conservative Christians tolerance is a marker, not at all of Christian charity, but rather of modern permissiveness, a sign of the worldliness of secular society in its embrace of the plural. These are hard-edged differences to

negotiate, especially for liberal Christians who are pulled both ways and not always sure how far their tolerant attitudes are "merely" secular, and how far they represent a legitimate tradition of interpretation of the Christian "deposit of faith."

For Langland and Julian the possibility of divine tolerance towards those their religion considered outsiders is fundamentally grounded in their understanding of the Christian faith, an understanding based on premises modern theological systems may seldom emphasize but that are nonetheless fully current and comprehensible. Both work with radical, or we might say "opened" or universalized versions of the crucial metaphor of the Body of Christ to argue that, one way or another, this Body must extend across all space, time, and religious systems, since all (as Langland puts it) are Christ's "bretheren of bloode." This is so for both writers because God created all people, not only Christians, and because his incarnation fused him with his whole creation, not only Christians (indeed, not only people). For Julian and Langland God is seen as creating humankind *in order* to become incarnate. The incarnation was not only God's response to human sin; it was the purpose and end point of the creation. In a strange and beautiful meditation on these themes, Langland claims that God needed the incarnation in order to experience the one thing his omnipotence could not understand: the experience of lack.[31] More formally correct in her theology, Julian confines her account of lack to humankind and the creation as a whole, but insists on the central point that lack is what *constitutes* the experience of being a creature, that to be created by God is to experience the joy of being, but also to long to be united with the source, the creator: with a fullness beyond the creaturely. For all that Langland and Julian, like all Christians, hold the Christian revelation to be a privileged source of knowledge about God and the creation, the common experience of being a creature – Christ's bloody brother, one of those joined in yearning for the creator – is far more significant, for both writers, than anything that divides Christian, Jew, and Muslim.

Langland and Julian both show us something important about the figure of the Body of Christ as an image for thinking theologically about society as a whole and also about the radically inclusive potential of that image, and thus perhaps its adaptability to the model of civic society we inherit from Locke. Indeed, I would go further and say that Langland and Julian represent for us an understanding of "tolerance" that can deepen or reclaim what I have called its "shallow" link with Christian discourse by insisting on its implied connection with patience or (in Middle English) "sufferance": that is, with the suffering tolerance Christianity ascribes to God. "Who suffreth more than God," says another of Langland's characters, Reason (*Piers Plowman* B 11.379), reproving the impatient attacks on contemporary religious and moral abuses launched, over and over again, by the poem's narrator, Will. How do Langland and Julian "reclaim" the idea of tolerance? By bringing us back to a moment in the history of Western European Christianity before the denominational divides of the Reformation had effectively devastated the metaphor of church and society as Christ's Body by breaking the formal unity on which the metaphor

---

[31] "So God that bigan al of his goode wille/ Bicam man of a mayde mankynde to save,/ And suffrede to be sold, to se the sorwe of deying, /The which unknytteth alle care, and comsynge [*is the source*] is of reste" (*Piers Plowman* B 18.211-14). Only by experiencing it could God understand death and the peace that follows it (the speaker of the passage, appropriately enough, is the allegorical figure Peace).

depended: a moment in which tolerance was not yet a civic virtue designed to keep warring religious denominations separate but, in principle, an essential function of all ethical behaviour, because it corresponded to what was perceived as an essential part of the character of God himself.

In order to understand themselves in relation even to the present, Christians need all of their history, including the medieval parts of its history against which the Protestant denominations revolted; and secular western post- and non-Christians need all of that history too. It is not that the Middle Ages either can or should be reclaimed as an era of lost unity, as used to be the fashion amongst European artists and intellectuals, or that we can make direct use even of the most profound and provocative of the religious thinkers that era produced: times really have changed. But the aspirations to the unity-in-plurality we have learned to identify with modern western secular society are actually built upon something older whose intellectual and metaphorical coherence is not secular but theological. We do well to remember that "civic society" as it is now conceived is, in part, a secular resurrection of an older and differently oriented theological image: the image of the Body of Christ.