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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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Aspects of the Black Death

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(The corruptions in the Church of the fifteenth century have been excused on the grounds of the great mortality among the Clergy, caused by the Black Death. Mr. Cope gives a convincing answer to this over-simple explanation of scandals covering centuries.)

THERE are periods in history when the current of events seems to flow like a placid stream apparently unchanging in its course. Then an event occurs which converts the placid stream into a furious torrent tearing down all the familiar landmarks of life in its headlong course. But, in reality, the change is not so sudden as it appears. Forces have been gathering momentum, perhaps for centuries previously, to move towards a given end, and the event which is regarded as their cause is in reality their culmination. Such was the Great War of 1914-18 and so is the war in which we are now engaged. A similar cataclysm occurred in the later Middle Ages when there swept across Europe a plague as devastating as any which has occurred in the history of Western civilization. When in 1348 it reached our shores, it disorganized the entire community and threw the whole machinery of mediæval life out of gear.

The Black Death, to adopt the name given to it by later historians, did not itself initiate changes, but accelerated those already in being. During the period from 1066 to the end of the thirteenth century, society had been more or less static in its condition. The gradual fusion of the Norman and Saxon elements in the community was completed and for the first time an English nation was in existence. But during the long reign of Edward III many changes were

apparent. Feudalism and its economic counterpart, the Manorial System, were dying. In place of custom and a definite grading of individuals, there appeared the modern idea of wage labour and the cash nexus. The rise of the towns, the triumph of the craft-gilds over their older rivals, the phenomenal growth of the woollens industry, and, above all, the growth of a national spirit which found its expression in the literature of Chaucer and Gower.

Chaucer in the Canterbury Pilgrimage has left us a brightly coloured picture of fourteenth century life. Every aspect is represented in that wonderful narrative. The various grades of clerics, the knight, the miller, the prioress, with her love motto, "*Amor vincit omnia*," engraved on her brooch; these are but a few of the many characters which flit through Chaucer's immortal pages.

Life moved then with a placidity which might well be the envy of the present generation. Of that age scarcely any traces remain unless it be the church bells which, as Froude reminds us, "fall upon the ear like the echo of a vanished world."

But there is a darker and more sinister side to the glittering pageantry of life depicted in the Canterbury Tales. The pilgrims represented, for the most part, men and women of leisure, sauntering by easy stages on a pilgrimage which, as the years passed, became more a fashionable pastime than a religious duty. The lives of the bulk of the population were perpetually menaced by poverty, disease and cruelty. Starvation must have been no uncommon fate when the local harvest failed. The towns were squalid and their condition insanitary. Diseases of all kinds were rampant and the winter diet of salted and dried meat and fish must have provided a fruitful breeding ground for the many epidemics which scourged the Middle Ages, and of which the Black Death was merely the worst. Already there were patent signs of the disintegration of feudal society.

It was in the rural districts where the effects of the plague were most obvious. The mortality may have been greater in the towns, but it does not appear to have disorganized urban life as was the case in the country districts. Rural society at this time was made up of three chief classes. The villeins, who were serfs in all but name (though a villein could hold property and employ free labourers):

the labourers, who were freemen and who could sell their labour to whom they chose: the leaseholders or free tenants, who were a much smaller class.

In the fourteenth century the lord usually let out his land to a bailiff who was responsible for its management.

In two years the Plague reduced the population of England (estimated at three millions), by over one-third. This reduction had many important social results. Owing to the scarcity of labour, its price rose. Natural economic laws came into play. Labourers demanded and obtained higher wages, double and in some cases treble what they were before the plague. Thus for a time the standard of life rose and there was for the English agricultural labourer a short-lived golden age.

In modern times a rise in real wages and the standard of life means prosperity. But in the mediæval world such changes had the effect of disorganizing a social system built mainly on custom. Economic laws were but little understood. Men could not disabuse their minds of the idea that Society was composed of rigid strata in one or other of which each member of the community had his or her appointed place. Even as late as the sixteenth century, Edward VI maintained that, "Men . . . had been placed by God in ranks or orders, each with his own work to do and each with its own appropriate mode of life."

After due consideration of the matter, Edward III and his Council, a year after the outbreak of the plague, issued the Proclamation of 1349. This was confirmed by the Statute of Labourers two years later.

The preamble of this recited that :

"Because a great part of the people, and especially of workmen and servants, lately died of the pestilence, many seeing the necessity of masters and great scarcity of servants will not serve unless they may receive excessive wages and some rather willing to beg in idleness than by labour to get their living."¹

This Statute aimed at keeping wages at the level maintained two years before the plague, despite the increase in the price of food, but it did not achieve its purpose. It was not only broken by the labourers, but also by many lords and their bailiffs, who naturally preferred their harvest

¹ *The Economic History of England*. E. Lipson. Vol. I. p. 44.

to be gathered in at higher wages than to pay no wages at all while it rotted in the fields.

In many ways the Black Death struck a fatal blow at the older system of agriculture. Dr. Eileen Power, who has devoted much time to the study of the subject writes :

“ The Black Death came upon a rural world which was already changing. Almost from its inception the manorial system had contained within itself the seeds of decay. . . . The agrarian world, then, was changing all through the century before the Black Death, and the increased use of and demand for money during that century promoted the change. . . . Into this changing world there crashed the Black Death. In many parts its immediate effects were cataclysmic ; there was complete temporary disorganization and a rise of prices which brought with it a rise of wages and a serious labour problem.¹

The smouldering discontent occasioned by economic and social stress, coupled with the imposition of a Poll tax, burst into flame twenty years later in the Peasants' Revolt, an extremely well-organized movement which nearly succeeded in achieving its purpose. But the Peasants' Revolt was more than a fight for better economic conditions, important though these were. The question of personal and political liberty was also involved. It was, moreover, essentially a religious movement. In the Middle Ages there was not that divorce of the religious from the secular which exists at the present day. Religion permeated almost every action of the lives of the individual and the community. The Peasants' Revolt represented a movement towards a better conception of Christianity than the Church of the Middle Ages could provide, as Professor Trevelyan writes :

“ The general tone of the rising was that of Christian democracy.”²

When we turn from the economic to other aspects of the national life we see that in these, too, the fourteenth century was a period of change. The Church especially was in an appalling state. In theory the mediæval Church had been helped by the State to free itself from some of the worst features of Papal domination. The Statute of Provisors, for example, had struck a blow at the interference of the Pope

¹ *History*. July, 1916.

² *England in the Age of Wycliffe*. Chapter VI. p. 202.

in the election of English bishops, but it was often evaded and for many years to come the bishops were bound to the Papacy.

The bishops occupied nearly all the great offices of State. The famous William of Wykeham, for example, was Lord Chancellor of England for four years. This was not a fault in itself, but it tended to weaken the influence of the Church, as the bishops were officers of State first and servants of the Church afterwards. The various grades of clerics represented a State within a State, for, through the ecclesiastical courts, they administered justice among their own members as well as in certain cases among the laity also.

“ In a population of three millions the ecclesiastics numbered between 20,000 and 30,000. Their ‘ spiritualities ’ in dues and offerings amounted to twice the King’s revenue.”¹

The scandal of “ benefit of clergy ” was a crying one in the fourteenth century, but we can trace the growth of the King’s justice in a diminution of the number of offences which came under the jurisdiction of the spiritual courts. Serious offences like high treason, murder and rape were now tried in the secular courts even if committed by clerics.

The lot of the parish priest in the fourteenth century must have been hard. The majority of the parish churches had insufficient incomes owing, in many cases, to the fact that the local monasteries took a large part of the endowments. The monasteries also disorganized diocesan affairs as they were largely independent of the bishops. Livings were farmed out in the same manner as land and the parish priest was miserably paid in comparison with the more highly placed officers of the Church. This was the reason why so many of the priests sided with the rebels in the Peasants’ Revolt. Everywhere in this period we can observe a tendency for the material progress of the Church greatly to outstrip its spiritual influence. Commutation of penance, for example, was a regular practice and as common as the commutation of the feudal dues. The Summoner spied on individuals and reported their delinquences to the spiritual courts.

The friars, a picturesque feature of fourteenth century life, were disliked on account of their habit of prying into private houses and also because of the fact that they were

¹ *A Short History of the English People.* J. R. Green. Chapter V. p. 234.

under the jurisdiction of the Papacy, thus being largely independent of the English Church. They were specially disliked by the parish priests, for they trespassed on their domain. The theory that the corruption which had crept into the Church and Christendom in general was the result of the Black Death is discounted by the fact that these abuses were of long standing, and could not have been caused by any single catastrophe, however great.

Cardinal Gasquet states that :

“ In dealing with this subject it is difficult to bring home to the mind the vast range of the great calamity, and to duly appreciate how deep was the break with their existing institutions. The plague of 1349 simply shattered them. . . .”¹

This gives the impression that all the evils which existed in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were due to the effects of this pestilence. But these evils were of earlier and slower growth. All over Christendom the same thing was taking place. Corruption was rife. In Italy, the Church reached a depth of infamy which we can be thankful had no parallel in our own country. Browning's poem in which the dying Bishop plans a tombstone on which shall be engraven figures of “ Pans and Nymphs,” is a typical example of the degeneracy of the times in Italy.

Movements for the reform of the English Church were, however, not lacking. Chief among these was that initiated by John Wycliffe, though for at least a century before his time there had been stirrings in that direction. Wycliffe's attacks were at first concentrated against the most obvious abuses of the Papacy. In the early days he had the support of John of Gaunt and the barons, who coveted the enormous wealth of the mediæval Church.

“ The problem of Church and State in John of Gaunt's mind assumed the simple form, how best to plunder the rich ecclesiastics for his own ends : Wycliffe's position in the matter was that endowments were an innovation, and a hindrance to the proper spiritual purpose of the Church. The ideas of the two converged only in their common dislike of the endowed classes whether of priest or monks.”²

Later, however, when Wycliffe proceeded to attack Transubstantiation, he lost the support of his distinguished ally.

¹ *The Great Pestilence* (A.D. 1348-9). Chapter X. p. 217.

² *Wycliffe and Movements for Reform*. By R. Lane Poole. pp. 76-77.

The day for a complete break with the Papacy on questions of doctrine had not arrived. Wycliffe's courage and endurance, however, never failed him. In 1377, he was arraigned before Convocation in London on a charge of erroneous teaching. The trial ended in a riot, and no satisfactory conclusion as to the heresy or otherwise involved in his teachings was reached. In the next year occurred the Great Schism. This made Wycliffe more strongly opposed to the Papacy and at this time he formed bands of preachers who, travelling from village to village, promoted his teaching among the inhabitants, thus forming the background of a Protestant tradition which had great influence in the sixteenth century.

It was in 1381 that Wycliffe attacked Transubstantiation, the mainspring of the Papacy and the Mediæval Church. Oxford University supported him, but the forces against him proved too strong. His supporters at Oxford were forced to recant their heresy, or else abandon their offices. The decline of Oxford as a centre of learning and culture dates from this time (1382). Thus, during his lifetime, the public influence of Wycliffe declined. He retired to his parish of Lutterworth, where he died in 1384, just after he had been summoned by Pope Urban to proceed to Rome to answer a charge of heresy.

After his death his enemies were more active and in 1398 his remains were removed from their grave, burned and the ashes thrown into a nearby river. It is perhaps a symbol of the influence which Wycliffe's teachings were to have on the world, that from this river his ashes were to flow into the boundless ocean. Thus if, in his own country, the ideals and teachings of Wycliffe were to receive a setback, their dissemination abroad was destined to achieve great results.

Jerome of Prague, who had studied at Oxford, introduced Wycliffe's writings into Bohemia where they exercised a great influence on the Czech nation. Thus the nation which in modern times has produced such men as President Masaryk and Dr. Benes, was among the first European countries to profit by the teachings of a characteristically English reformer.

A study of the history of the fourteenth century gives one a sense of frustration. Great schemes of reform in Church and State seem to be on the verge of fruition, only to come to nothing. We see Peter de la Mare leading the

Commons against the tyranny of John of Gaunt ; Wycliffe protesting against the increasing errors and materialism of the Church ; Langland against the social injustices which characterized the times ; and the Peasants' Revolt, so full of promise of economic and political freedom, only to be broken by a reactionary king and barons.

As it was, our country had to wait until the sixteenth century for religious freedom : until the seventeenth for the triumph of parliamentary institutions ; whilst even in our own age, the social problem is still only approaching solution. In the fourteenth century the forces of reaction were too strong for the reformer. Lack of the printed Word and the absence of reliable information and statistics made nation-wide reform impossible. But the seed of progress was already sown and the succeeding centuries were to see it come to fruit. The degeneracy of the Papacy had rendered the idea of the *Republica Christiana* impracticable and the rise of the national State was assured.

Professor H. J. Laski writes :

" For the existence of separate and right-claiming nationalities had become (or was becoming) an inescapable fact. Præmunire and Provisors in England, the Pragmatic Sanction in France, were the index to a modernity which had escaped the swaddling clothes of mediæval thought. . . . Once there had been the captivity of Avignon, the Great Schism, and the Councils, pluralism in government was only a matter of time. The Reformation only set the seal upon ideas that an earlier generation had made inevitable."¹

On the Black Death has been laid the blame for many of the evils with which fourteenth century England was assailed ; among them the break-up of the manorial system and the corruption of the mediæval Church. It is a convenient though somewhat faulty method of reasoning, to ascribe to a single event the blame due to slow changes, imperceptible perhaps to the generation in which they occur, but patent to a later age. As it is, the Black Death has cast a glamour upon the minds of some historians under which its effects are unduly exaggerated. Others, after a closer study of the available evidence have assigned that calamity to its rightful place and viewing it in due perspective, decline to make it responsible for evils which originated elsewhere.

¹ *Political Theory in the Later Middle Ages. Cambridge Mediæval History.* Vol. VIII. Chapter XX. p. 620.