

The Twelve Delusions of the Lollards

by Lucy Swan

Beginning in about late fourteenth-century England, a movement of Christians known as the Lollards challenged many of the doctrines of the medieval Church. They raised questions about who possessed the legitimate authority to interpret Scripture, administer sacraments, compel oaths, and govern Christian life. They insisted on the primacy of Scripture over ecclesiastical hierarchy and disputed church dogma on transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, pilgrimages, and prayers for the dead. The movement unsettled the religious, legal, and political structures through which the ecclesiastical authorities exercised rule.

The poem below adopts the voice of an orthodox clerical opponent responding to such challenges. I have attempted to model, in verse, the kind of rhetoric you find in late medieval anti-heresy literature. The imaginary author's target is the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* (1395) and inhabits a worldview in which doctrine, law, and obedience are inseparable, and where dissent is

understood not as disagreement but as disorder. The poem explores how institutional authority defends its legitimacy through satire, moral certainty, and fear in a time when the boundaries of lawful rule were being openly contested.

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The Twelve Delusions of the Lollards
[The Twelf Dilusiouns of the Lollards]

The text that follows is translated literally from the Middle English at the cost of some archaisms, obscurities, and metri causa. While some of the original text has been slightly altered for effect, this translation is fully integrous to the meaning of the original poem.

*Writen by a humbl poet and servaunt of Crist
ayenes the yfel of that Lollardy. In nomine Patris,
et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*

I. The State of the Church

“Poor men, mere treasurers of Christ,”
Thy humility ye sacrifice
To start the great and holy pains
Of freeing the Church from Evil’s chains!
The Enemy surely will be frustrated—
By such saviors: mumbling and uneducated.

But does not Christ say in his gospel:
The Church was built on the saint apostle?
On Peter, and on that Rock alone,
Not on a river of swimming Bones.
Against the former, evil shall not prevail.
The latter, though, leads straight to hell.
But still, the Lollards have their qualms:
A lack of faith and hope and alms.
They say we “dote in temporality,”
and ought to treasure in our charity;
Poor peasants even live in sin,
Withholding indulgence from the tin.
“Just a penny!” calls the friar—
The Lollards cry, “A penny higher!” But
forgive us, Lollards! Show us mercy! To
untie thy sandals, we are not worthy! We
offer ourselves to thy guidance,
Lest the Church give to subsidence.

II. The Priesthood

First, the priesthood Christ ordained
Has power feigned and wrongly claimed.
These novel sacraments we practice
Oppose Holy Scriptures and distract us.
Lacking in virtue, compensating in vice,
The priests ought to deny the true rights
Of blessings to their congregation
God’s gifts are not meant for the nations.
No signs or rites or bishop’s blessings?
No white robes or other spiritual dressings?
Are we to just dismiss the command:

Hold fast tradition in thy hand?
And curse our priests, who in selfish gain,
Rise before dawn to serve in vain.
They feed the poor with idle hands,
Shepherding those little lambs.
With stomachs empty and coffers bare,
The Antichrist's servants trudge in prayer.
Toiling through the winter moans,
Their great sin is they live on bread alone!
In hunger and cold, they labor still,
Yet sloth is their most grievous ill.

III. Clerical Celibacy

The faithful clergy that denies the flesh
Induces greater sin than it tries to repress.
The Lollards sneer at this futility,
Accusing Christ's servants of sodomy
Yet, say, true Christians, with scoffing strife,
Did not Christ himself walk chaste in life?
No wife except the Church, His Bride,
Shall priests then take what the Lord denied?
Or is the better path the one
Christ's sweet and holy feet have gone?
"He lived in want!" the Lollards jeer,
"No wife or any comfort near!"
Such heresy of darkest thought
The Lollard way is full and fraught!
But priests who walk the narrow way
Serve Christ in deed, as well as say.
They even preserve the sanctity
Of sweet feminine virginity,

And render those unmarried women
Pure as Mary, fresh as linen.
The Lollards call these “hollow chores,”
And seek to make good Christians whores.

IV. Transubstantiation

The Lollards scorn the Eucharist,
With which our Lord and Savior purchased
Our salvation— sin’s solution.
They have no need for absolution.
They think they’ve reached perfection’s height,
So pure they need no sacred rite.
They look down on the rest of us
Who humbly accept the Lord’s forgiveness.
They mock this mystery divine—
How food from wheat and drink from vine
Could turn to flesh and blood and grace,
Surely no miracle takes place!
“Bread and wine are not changeable!”
Do yet think the Lord not capable?
Friar Thomas, faithful and bold,
Proclaimed what Holy Scripture told.
No hen’s egg, nor false pretense,
But the merits of grace in every sense.
With eyes ignoring the truth they see,
Poor Lollards reduce faith to logical decree.
“The Holy Sacrament,” they decide, “Is idolatry.”
O Foolish pride!
Not only this, they seek to prove it—
They take the body and put knives through it!
In league with throngs of wicked Jews,

Whom Corpus Christi they still abuse,
They steal the consecrated Host
And meet with secret hopes to boast
That blessed body will not bleed
Once they have done their evil deed.
Five violent acts of Caiaphas
The Devil's agents, proud of this—
But villainy has been exposed
By red miracles they fear to behold!
O Lord, forgive those wayward souls
Corrupted by hungry Lollard wolves
Who sheepishly disguise their works
As holy rather than perverse!

V. Exorcisms and Hallowings

And yet the miracles they witness
They quickly claim are spells of witches.
Misled accusations of necromantics
Are among those of the Lollard pedantics.
They scorn the signs Christ's servants perform
Calling oil and incense evil charm—
Tell me, Lollards, have ye forgotten
The works on earth of the Son Begotten?
Truly, demons fled from man to swine,
And led them running, squealing whines
Into a murky lake of death
Where each sow snorted a final breath.
Do ye fear the source of thy true creeds
Might perish now from Christian schemes?
For if no swine remain to bray,

What filth will guide the words ye say?
If such a thing were to come to pass,
Alas! ye could not look up a pig's...

[Translator's note: Here the document suffered significant damage and several lines were not recoverable. Scholars assume this lost section is further criticism of Lollard teaching and its suspected origins.]

...perhaps there is another reason
For their distaste of exorcism:
They cleave unto the demon's side
And with the Antichrist abide,
Condemning Light for purge of darkness.
They march in stride with foes to harm us,
Rejoicing not in truth, but lies,
Delighting in illness, our demise.
They bring about a foul sickness
With Lollard teachings they afflict us
Abomination devours like fire
Every peasant, merchant, squire—
Souls led astray by wicked heresy
Drop swollen and dead from conspiracy.
The True Church weeps into Her posies
Crying out this diagnosis:
"This Lollardy malevolence
Is even Greater Pestilence!"

VI. Clerics in Secular Offices

“Nemo potest duobus dominis servire,”
They preach, though it is clear that they
Fail to follow Scripture’s advice,
Claiming Christ, gripped by heresy and vice.
Yet of course, we shall submit to thy sage counsel,
We shall remove Christ from the council!
The King should not decide the Law—
Rather, let the ruling people, flawed,
Determine what justice ought to be,
What matter if the Pope disagrees?
He is merely Christ’s appointed
His authority need not be jointed.
Let earthly rulers have their say,
Let Christ’s lovely voice fade away
Who needs Christ when some headless crown
Can decide what is holy, true, profound.
Tell me Lollard, is it not right,
The Lord Christ Jesus,
Truth and Light,
Reigned as both High King and Priest?
What Scripture claims both capacities
Cannot be filled by God’s true servants,
Who pursue the blessed observance
Of walking in Christ’s holy wake
Guiding earthly realm for heaven’s sake?
Yet ye would strip His dual estate,
And leave the world to cruel fate.
Do ye fear the Shepherd’s guiding rod,
Or crave political chaos that mocks our God?

VII. Prayers for the Dead

The Holy Scripture teaches this:
 Before a soul may enter bliss
 He must be purged from worldly stain
 By suffering the cleansing flame.
 In purgatory, souls ache for heaven
 And through our prayers, we can lessen
 Time and agony and strife
 So each one sooner reaches eternal life.
 This charity is not transaction,
 But loving Christian interaction
 Lollards, do ye lodge complaints
 Against communion with the saints?
 If ye said, "Go in peace, be warm, well fed,"
 Yet offer not clothes, food, or bed,
 Tell me Lollards, what good is that?
 One's faith without this work is dead.
 Likewise, when souls grovel in need
 Ye ought to think of charity.
 Shall charity be deemed a vice,
 Or mercy's work as wicked price?
 We pray for souls in purging flame,
 Yet ye, too proud, dismiss their name.
 "No prayers for them!"—ye cruelly mutter,
 Ye value coin far more than brother.
 Instead of being cheerful givers,
 Ye cheerfully kiss thy thirty silvers
 And seek to withhold heaven's riches.
 I graciously will heed thy wishes:
 When I pray mercy for the damned,

I shall name ye no more, by thy demand.

VIII. Pilgrimages

These Lollards make a grave mistake
Roods are not idols, but aids to faith.
Not wood nor stone do we adore
But what they signify, and more—
The Lollards call detestable
That which makes faith accessible,
Wishing all the liaty ill
Who cannot read God's Word and will.
And of the saints, should we dismiss
Their holy works and blessed gifts?
We surely worship God alone
And place him rightly on the throne.
Veneration has clear difference
We acknowledge their magnificence
To hearten Christians in good deeds
By telling how the saints precede.
To honor them is not to place
Another god within our grace.
Rather, we affirm the paths they trod,
As faithful servants of our God.
Are saintly bones to be despised,
Their virtue lost, honor denied?
Would ye say this of that great prophet
Whose bones gave life unto a coffin?
Nay, instead the Lollards praise and favor
Lovely Christ's vicious traitor
They make a relic of his lips
And out of these their teaching drips.

They preach pilgrimage as vanity
And call ours a false Christianity
Enlighten me, would ye profess
That every pilgrim has transgressed?
Was Christ's journey not a pilgrimage too?
And would ye call the Magi fools?

IX. Confession

The Lollards scorn direct command
And hope to wrench the Keys from hands
That abjectly serve as consecrated authority
No prideful heart nor superiority.
Absolving sins is not self-serving
Nor does the Church delight in reserving
But in bestowing God's sweet mercies,
And vanquishing evil controversies.
Great evil, the Holy Scriptures smother:
"Confess thy sins unto one another!"
As conduits of God's great grace
The priesthood wipes each tear from face
And having thus the Holy Spirit,
Gives forgiveness— but Lollards fear it!
Confession shunning, the mumblers quiet
Keeping sin in darkness private.
What terrible evils they must commit
The Lollards shudder to admit!

X. War, Battle, Crusades

But we surely ought to obey the Lollards
Instead of Scripture, Pope, or scholar!
The Pope proclaims the will of God

And yet the Lollards are at odds.
 “We speak the truth of Christ, trust us,”
 They claim and yet they spurn God’s justice.
 Our holy wars, not born of hate,
 Are fought for love of Church and state.
 The sword, is wielded justly here,
 Defends the Lord and casts out fear
 Of pollution in the Church.
 Christ’s solution is to purge!
 Do ye Lollard, think ye possess
 A greater kind of righteousness
 Than Christ himself the reigning One
 By whom the battle has been won?
 Would ye have argued with the Lord
 When he urged his People’s sword
 Against enemy barbarian tribes
 That would have seen God’s People die?
 And now, ye Lollards hope the same:
 Ye support the Devil’s aims!
 Ye argue that the Church should cower
 To the Antichrist’s worldly power!
 Secretly thy plots ye mumble
 Conspiring Christendom to crumble.

XI. Female Vows of Continence and Abortion

Great wisdom must the Lollards know
 That they ponder and bestow
 On our lowly thankful ears
 This doctrine that they interfere!
 Do ye have not any shame
 That ye would conjure Christian blame

With words unholy, full of strife,
Ye twist the path to holy life.
With vicious thoughts, ye besmirch
The lawful teachings of the Church.
Ye seek to tempt and to entice
True Christian souls away from Christ.
Those who seek to imitate saints
Ought to practice self-restraint.
The Holy Scripture teaches thus:
The body does not belong to us.

XII. Arts and Crafts

Now, wise Lollards, pray, explain
Why glory shown to God is vain.
Goldsmith, cobbler, and craftsmen
Must repent of their vast sins!
Among those who must repent,
The Christ, of carpenter's descent.
The masons, workers of brick and stone
Built churches ye do not condone.
Weavers, shall their wheels not spin
Is clothing all the faithful sin?
The baker's hearth, shall that grow cold
Though bread sustains the young and old?
And what of tools when wars commence?
Best leave the faithful no defense!
I pray to thee, Almighty Lord,
My humble words, glory afford!
With eager hope, the truth to tell,
To serve Thee, Lord, and love Thee well,
I lift this offering of pen,

As worship to the Christ, Amen.

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