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From Sacred Mystery to Divine Deception: Robert Holkot, John Wyclif and the Transformation of Fourteenth-Century Eucharistic Discourse

In his extremely popular preaching handbook the *Summa praedicatorum*, in a chapter devoted to the Eucharist, the fourteenth-century Dominican John Bromyard relates an exemplum about a certain holy man. This man's "faith towards the sacrament was so great," Bromyard writes, that it was often said that were Christ himself to enter "the church during the elevation of the host, the man would not go to look at him, and in so doing lose sight of the host."¹ While it lacks the spectacular firepower that characterizes so many Eucharistic miracle stories, that characterize so many of Bromyard's own stories — like the one about the bees who construct a honeycomb tabernacle and buzz chants to honour a hive-hidden host — in many ways it does more than most to move us to the very centre of the medieval Eucharistic experience.² It is, when all is said and done, a story about belief and about the miracle of the Eucharist. This unnamed holy man does not need to get up, does not need to hurry over to greet Christ at the door. He does not need to do any of these things because he already sees Christ right there in the upraised hands of the priest, in the consecrated host.

The Sacramental Miracle and the Miracle of Belief

While recent historians have been keen to focus on the Eucharist and its worship as a social object capable of generating the miracle of social cohesion,³ of delineating and reinscribing power relations within the medieval

1. John Bromyard, *Summa praedicatorum* (Venice, 1586) Prima Pars, "Eucharistia," cap. vi, a. 8, 244a: "Exemplo cuiusdam sancti, de quo scribitur, quod tantae fidei erat erga istud sacramentum, quod dicere solebat, quod si sciret, quod Christus in forma humana in hora elevationis corporis Christi transiret ante ostium ecclesiae, quod non-iret ad ostium, ut illum videret, et ostiae visionem dimitteret."

2. The story about the bees was understandably popular. Bromyard relates it at *Summa Praedicatorum*, cap. vi, a. 4, p. 240b, and notes that he takes it from Thomas of Cantimpré's *Liber de apibus*. Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1929), Vol. 2, bk. ix, c. viii, 114–15, had already popularized the story.

3. Mervyn James, "Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town," *Past and Present* 98, (1983): 3–29; and John Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 64–72.

community,⁴ and even as a symbol capable of multiple reinterpretations, appropriations and uses,⁵ Bromyard's anecdote returns us to the church, to the mass and to something incomparably more fundamental. The consecration of the host was a miraculous event. When John Pecham, the Franciscan theologian and soon to be Archbishop of Canterbury looked into the matter in the late 1270s, he counted fifty separate miracles that must regularly occur every time any priest, anywhere in the world, says a mass and in so doing transforms the host, which never ceases to look like anything but a piece of bread, into the very body of Christ.⁶ While this can be a surprisingly easy fact for the modern historian to lose sight of, it was never far from the mind of the medieval theologian, the common priest, the layperson. "Take away this sacrament from the Church," explains Bonaventure in *On Preparing for the Mass*, a training manual he wrote in the 1250s, "and only error and faithlessness would remain in this world. The Christian people, like a herd of swine, would be dispersed, consigned to idolatry like all those other infidels. But through this sacrament the Church stands firm, faith is strengthened, the Christian religion and divine worship thrive. It is for all these reasons that Christ said, 'Behold, I am with you always to the end of time.'"⁷ For Bonaventure, for his fellow theologians, for most all of Christian Europe, the Eucharist was not a symbol of Christian truth. It was Christian truth made real, not as a sign, but in the reality of Christ's bodily presence within the consecrated host. Medieval Christians may well have deployed the Eucharist as a social object, as a cultural object, but these deployments necessarily presupposed and were warranted by a belief in the miraculous transformation of bread into body. Without that belief, the Eucharist could never have become such a potent, even multivalent, social and cultural object.

Precisely because the truth of the entire religion rested in this sacramental miracle, most every theological treatise, pastoral manual and popular devotional work would at some point assert that there could be no room for deception, no falsity in it. As William of Auxerre would put it in the 1240s, "deception [*simulatio*] has no place where the truth of the body of Christ is

4. Sarah Beckwith, "Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body," in *Culture and History: 1350–1600*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 67, analyses the Eucharist as the site of "an intense debate about the very nature of sacramentality and social power."

5. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and "The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities," in *Culture and History: 1350–1600*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 43–63. Heather Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People," in *A Distinct Voice: Medieval Studies in Honor of Leonard E. Boyle, O.P.* ed. Jacqueline Brown and William P. Stoneman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 562–3, outlines the limits employing "linguistic paradigms" to study medieval religious culture and, more specifically, the medieval experience of the Eucharist.

6. Pecham, *Quodlibet* IV, q. 41 in *Quodlibeta quatuor*, ed. F. Delorme and G. J. Eitzkorn (Grottaferrata: Quaracchi, 1989), 263.

7. Bonaventure, *Tractatus de praeparatione ad missam*, in *Opera omnia* (Rome: Quarrachi, 1882–1902), VIII, cap. I: 1:3, p. 100: "Tolle hoc Sacramentum de Ecclesia, et quid erit in mundo nisi error et infidelitas, et populus christianus quasi grex porcorum dispersus et idolatriae deditus, sicut expresse patet in ceteris infidelibus. Sed per hoc stat Ecclesia, roboratur fides, viget christiana religio et divinus cultus; unde inquit Christus: *Ecce, ego vobiscum sum usque ad consummationem saeculi.*"

concerned.”⁸ The practical challenge to this theological tenet was all too obvious. In the early 1320s, the English Franciscan William Ockham (in a thoroughly orthodox treatise) raised the problem this way, “[I]t is clear that the body of Christ is not seen in the sacrament of the altar, it is only understood, only the appearance of the bread is really seen.” Ockham then adds for good measure, “no one would hold that the body of Christ really is contained under the appearance of the bread were it not for the authority of the Savior and of the Church.”⁹ Ockham’s observation was neither original, nor controversial, but it is an important marker.

In the generations after Ockham, over the course of the fourteenth century, the perceptual challenges posed by the Eucharist would come to be framed in ever starker terms becoming a touchstone for debates about the natural order, the nature of truth, the truth of faith. These debates were always more than mere intellectual games because the Eucharistic event organized an entire religion, organized its beliefs and its practices. Indeed, it organized the very self-understanding of the Christian believer who gazed at it in the upraised hands of the priest, a believer whose connection to and experience of the world, of the divine and of himself, was entirely bound up with what he saw in those upraised hands. If Bromyard’s unnamed holy man could look at the consecrated host and see and experience Christ as present, it could no longer be taken for granted that everyone shared that same vision, that same experience, that same faith and confidence. Bromyard himself was aware of this and it is this awareness, more likely than not, that explains why he chose to include his decidedly unspectacular tale in the *Summa praedicatorum*. After all, the story, as Bromyard tells it, has less to do with the miracle of the Eucharist than it does with this one man’s belief in it, with the miracle of his belief in the forever unseen.

Sacred Mysteries, Curiosity, and the Eucharist

“There are many statements,” writes John Wyclif, the Oxford trained theologian, in his *On the Eucharist* of 1379, “from both the saints and the church, that explain that these sensible sacraments are not the body and blood of Christ, but only their sign and yet in this matter, there are many Christians in

8. William of Auxerre, *Summa aurea* IV, ed. J. Ribailier (Rome: Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1980) d. VII, cap. vii, q. 4, p. 173: “. . . simulatio nullum habet locum, ubi veritas corporis Christi est.” William invokes this idea while arguing that priests should never deceive their parishioners about whether or not the host is consecrated. More typical is Bonaventure, *Sententiarum* IV, in *Opera omnia* IV, d. X, p. II, a. II, q. II, ad. iii, p. 137, who considers the problem entirely within the context of sensory discrepancy: “Ad illud obicitur de deceptione, dicendum, quod in hoc Sacramento nullus sensus decipitur nec aliquid, quia est Sacramentum veritatis.”

9. William Ockham, *De corpore Christi in eucharistia*, in *Opera theologica* X, ed. Carolus A. Grassi (St Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1986), cap. 8, p. 107 [ln. 23–30]: “Ex istis aliisque pluribus auctoritatibus patet quod corpus Christi in sacramento Altaris non videtur, sed intelligitur solum, quamvis species panis realiter videatur. Ad hoc etiam non desunt rationes, nam illud quod in aliquo loco percipitur oculo corporali sine omni auctoritate potest evidenter cognosci ibidem existere, sed nullus sine auctoritate Salvatoris et Ecclesiae teneret corpus Christi sub specie panis realiter contineri, non ergo ibi videtur oculo corporali.” For a defence of the sincerity of Ockham’s Eucharistic orthodoxy, see Gabriel N. Buescher, *The Eucharistic Teaching of William Ockham* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1950), 1–14.

name who are worse than pagans in faith. For it would be much less evil for that man who first saw the sun rise to worship it as god for all the rest of the day than repeatedly to worship as his true God those accidents that he sees during mass, in the hands of the priest, in the consecrated host."¹⁰ Wyclif's reasons for rejecting contemporary doctrines of the Eucharist, for rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation and the belief in Christ's bodily presence beneath the appearance of bread, are both complex and manifold. No doubt the particularities and peculiarities of his own metaphysics had conspired to make him think that the whole idea was nonsensical.¹¹ His reading of scripture and the church fathers had convinced him that the notion of bodily presence was a new and misguided idea developed in 1059, in the aftermath of an earlier round of Eucharistic controversy.¹² Even the nature of Eucharistic adoration throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the growing desire to see the host during mass and the popularity of Corpus Christi festivals and processions may have played a part in convincing him that the religious beliefs and practices of his fellow Christians had gone seriously off-track.¹³

Implicated in all of these reasons, both reflecting and fueling them, is the very notion of the consecration as a miraculous event. In a tradition that had interpreted the sensory paradoxes posed by the miracle of the Eucharist as mysteries, as figures whose truth needed to be uncovered, Wyclif was unwilling to follow suit. To put it bluntly, either priests are liars or God is a liar, and for Wyclif the possibility of divine deception was simply too harsh to imagine, would be too much to endure. "Since God chose to give us so great a gift," Wyclif writes, "it hardly seems fitting with the splendor of his truth, that

10. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: The Wyclif Society, 1892), cap. I, pp. 26–27 [In. 20–1]: "Quotlibet sunt dicta sanctorum atque ecclesie que docent quod illa sacramenta sensibilia-non-sunt corpus Christi et sanguis sed eorum figura; et forte in isto multi sunt christiani nomine in fidelitate paganis peiores. Nam minus malum foret quod homo illud quod primo videt mane per totum residuum diei honoret ut Deum quam quod regulariter illud accidens quod videt in missa inter manus sacerdotis in hostia consecrate sit realiter Deus suus." Wyclif's commentary here brings to mind Marco Polo's description of the inhabitants of the mountains of Ferlec, a kingdom on the island of Lesser Java (Sumatra), *The Travels* (London: Penguin Books, 1958), trans. R. Latham, 253, "The people of the mountains live like beasts. For I assure you that they eat human flesh and every other sort of flesh, clean or unclean. They worship many different things; for whatever they see first when they wake in the morning, they worship."

11. Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent: 1250–1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 499 and 550.

12. Maurice Keen, "Wyclif, the Bible and Transubstantiation," in *Wyclif in His Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 11–3; and Ian Christopher Levy, "Christus qui mentiri-non-potest: John Wyclif's Rejection of Transubstantiation", *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie* 66, (1999): 316–34. On the significance of this date for Wyclif's conception of ecclesiastic decline, see P. J. J. M. Bakker, *La Raison et le Miracle: Les Doctrines Eucharistiques (c.1250–c.1400)* (Diss., Nijmegen, 1999), 274–76.

13. On medieval Eucharistic practices and devotion, see E. Dumoutet, *Le désir de voir l'hostie et les origines de la dévotion au saint-sacrament* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1926). On Wyclif's possible reactions to these practices, see J. I. Catto, "John Wyclif and the Cult of the Eucharist," in *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, ed. Katherine Walsh and Diana Wood (Oxford: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by Blackwell, 1985), 279–82, who contrasts Wyclif's emphasis on the Eucharist as a tool for increasing interior devotion with his contemporaries' tendency to worship it as a relic. H. Philips, "John Wyclif," 572–75, examines the reasons behind Wyclif's belief that lay Eucharistic adoration inevitably devolved to mere idolatry.

he would deliver himself to us to honor in a veil." He concludes, "Every such deception is evil for man naturally seeks to know the truth" and since our senses "judge that the very substance of bread and wine remain after consecration, and not just their appearance, it does not seem fitting for the lord of truth to introduce such an illusion when graciously communicating so worthy a gift."¹⁴ Such a miracle would undermine every system of knowledge, would render every certitude about the world worthless. Appearances would have no necessary connection to reality. Nothing could be inferred from the evidence of the senses.¹⁵ We would find ourselves like the ancient sceptics, affirming that nothing can be known, asserting nothing but affirmations of our own ignorance. We would be unable to know the truth of our vows, of our faith, of our sanctity, of scripture itself.¹⁶

If God cannot deceive, then blame must rest squarely on the shoulders of the clergy. Throughout the lengthy nine chapters that make up *On the Eucharist*, Wyclif includes only one Eucharistic miracle tale and, in Wyclif's hands, it is less a miracle tale than a story about the telling of such tales, about a priest who fuels his audience's devotion with a fraudulent wonder story. It seems that one day, according to Wyclif, a preacher told his congregation about a sick man who entered a church and, with great devotion and much show, made this public profession, "Oh God, reverently I consume you so that you will cure this illness that hinders me, not a spiritual illness, but a bodily one." Suddenly, a consecrated host descended from the altar and entered the man's heart through an opening in his chest (no doubt the source of his otherwise unexplained infirmity). The man was immediately and completely healed. So ends the unnamed priest's tale, but not Wyclif's. Later that day, Wyclif concludes, when a friend commended the priest on his fine performance, the priest confessed, "My mouth made up that pretty little lie."¹⁷ Not all miracle stories are such blatant fabrications and Wyclif acknowledges that many highly esteemed and revered saints have reported experiencing such miracles. None of this does much to change Wyclif's opinion of things. "It

14. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. III, p. 57 [ln. 7–25]: "Cum ergo Deus decrevit nobis dare donum tam magnum, videtur convenire sue veritati magnifice quod dedit nobis ipsum in velamento honorifico illusionem hominis excludente. Omnis enim talis deceptio est mala, cum homo naturaliter innititur cognoscere veritatem . . . Cum ergo sensus hominis tam exteriores quam interiores iudicant illud remanens esse panem et vinum rei-non-consecrate simillimum, videtur quod-non-convenit domino veritatis tantam illusionem inducere in gracieose communicando donum tam dignum."

15. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. III, p. 73 [ln. 7–14]: "Nec valet glosare dicta sancti quod intelligit sic esse nisi fiat miraculum, tum quia nullo existente miraculo-non-foret aliqua creatura, tum etiam quia nemo potest mereri vel beatificari sine miraculo, ymmo maneret ubique incertitudo, quando et ubi foret miraculum, et per consequens periret certitudo de quacunque materiali substantia et sic naturalis philosophia."

16. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. III, pp. 78–9 [ln. 27–9]: "Sed contra istam perfidiam arguitur quod nedum tollit omnem naturalem scienciam sed etiam omnem fidem; nam sic devians nedum tenetur sentire cum antiquis errantibus quod nullam affirmationem cognoscunt sed negaciones ut quod nichil sciunt et eis similia sed tenentur habere conscienciam de asserendo vel iurando aliquid contingens praxim hominum, et periret quelibet policia vel religio christiana; nam nemo debet mentiri pro toto mundo, sed generaliter pars securior est tenenda; cum ergo nulla noticia quam habemus de materiali substantia fundatur infallibiliter in principio infallibili congoscendo, videtur quod irregulariter debemus nullam talem asserere."

17. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. 1, pp. 19–20 [ln. 19–5].

would be exceedingly far-fetched," he notes, "to conclude from such stories that the body of Christ is really present in the host."¹⁸

Wyclif's is a demand that the miracle of the Eucharist conform to the demands of the senses and reason. If the consecrated host looks like bread, it really must be bread. A long tradition had worked in quite the opposite way, arguing that it was the very definition of a miracle that it exceed human reason. Writing in the 1270s, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas suggested that the term "miracle" derived from another word, "admiration," an experience "which arises when an effect is manifest, while its cause is hidden; as when a man sees an eclipse without knowing its cause." Admiration gives rise to wonder, but wonder is a relative experience. "A thing can be wonderful to one man," Thomas explains, "and not at all to others: as an eclipse is to a rustic, but not to an astronomer." Miracles, however, are not relative, but absolutely wondrous because their cause is "absolutely hidden from all: and this cause is God. And so, those things that God does outside the causes that we know, are called miracles."¹⁹ Bonaventure, who was Thomas's contemporary at the University of Paris, suggests something similar when, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, he notes that a miracle arises "not from natural powers, but from supernatural powers." Inquiry into miracles, accordingly, requires a degree of humility. We ought to be like the childless Abraham, Bonaventure counsels, not like the childless Zechariah. When God told the aged Abraham that soon he would have a male heir and in time his descendants would be "as numberless as the stars," Abraham believed because "he considered the divine power." By contrast, when the angel Gabriel promised Zechariah that he and Elizabeth, old and barren though they seemed to be, would soon have a son, Zechariah "hesitated to believe, because he considered human impotence. From this contrast," Bonaventure concludes, "we are taught that miracles ought to be considered in terms of higher causes."²⁰

Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century pastoralia are full of cautionary tales about friars and seculars, quite often scholars, who fail to consider the miracle of the Eucharist in terms of higher causes. The Franciscan author of the

18. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. I, p. 20 [ln. 5–9]: "Sed esto quod fiant miracula c. hostiam consecratam (ut narrat beatus Gregorius), adhuc foret nimis extraneum noscenti consequencias ex istis inferre quod corpus Domini sit illa hostia consecrata." Wyclif was not exactly alone in doubting whether people saw the real body of Christ when they experienced such miracles. In an analysis that would become something of a *locus classicus*, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1952), III, q. 76, a. 8, argued that whenever people see a little child or a bit of flesh in the priest's upraised hands, they do not see Christ's real body. In such cases, God effectively intervenes in the perceptual process and causes people to see these miraculous apparitions, either through acting directly on the viewer's eyes or by altering the surface characteristics of the host so that it appears to be a small child or a bit of flesh. In any event, Thomas is careful to add that these sorts of divine interventions are in no way deceptive or false. They have nothing in common with the illusions of magicians, for example, because they are created "for the sake of representing a certain truth, that the body of Christ truly exists underneath this sacrament."

19. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-I, q. 105, a. 7, pp. 500–01. On medieval notions of wonder and the preternatural, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 120–26; and Caroline Bynum Walker, "Wonder," *The American Historical Review* 102, (1997): 1–26.

20. Bonaventure, *Comment. in evangelium lucae*, in *Opera omnia* VII, C. 1, vs. 18, p. 18.

late thirteenth-century *Book of Exempla For Use in Preaching* tells a “most horrible” tale, a tale of a Parisian arts scholar of English origin, a mirror of good religion and morals who, on his deathbed, his head turned in shame from a ministering priest, announced he could never believe this article of faith.²¹ Late in the fourteenth century, Bromyard warns of those “who wish to know and inquire into the reasons behind their every doubt.” This, he informs us, is the worst form of curiosity and to prove his point he includes the story of a man, recently dead, who appears to his confessor and announces that he is among the damned because “he did not believe, nor could he ever believe . . . that the true Christ was contained in this sacrament.”²² In the pseudo-Vincent of Beauvais’s *Moral Mirror* — a popularizing medieval encyclopedia from the early fourteenth century — the author offers something of a well-trod definition of curiosity, “Curiosity is the vehement application of the mind to any vain and useless inquiry.”²³ He connects curiosity (again following well-established tradition) to the senses and to Eve, who was all too curious about what the serpent had to say. Significantly, he immediately updates the story, suggesting that Eve is little different than “those who act against God’s precepts and irreverently approach the altar, especially while the divine mass is celebrated, curiously wishing to see what the priest does.” These people are like Herod, who wanted to witness Jesus’ miracles but saw nothing because he was motivated not by piety, but merely by curiosity.²⁴ Curiosity becomes a form of blindness, resulting in the literal inability to see and to experience what is there for any and all to see.

The host itself was there for all to see, transformed by the priest’s words, elevated at the moment of consecration, accompanied by wafts of incense and the ringing of bells, all working together to proclaim the truth of faith and of a divinely instituted order.²⁵ Indeed, the host had to be seen. “Although the origin of [original] sin was principally the consent of reason,” Bonaventure writes in the *Breviloquium*, “its occasion was brought forth by the bodily senses.” As a result, the senses, and vision in particular, cannot simply be abandoned. Rather, they must be cleansed and purified. The sacramental medicine must

21. *Liber exemplorum ad usum praedicatorum*, ed. A. G. Little (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1908), 7–8, (12).

22. Bromyard, *Summa praedicatorum*, 244a: “Quanti autem periculi sit talis curiositas, patet per illum, de quo fertur quod confessori suo post mortem apprensus, dixit, se esse damnatum, quia-non-credit, nec credere potuit, licet de hoc pluries confessus fuisset, verum Christum in hoc contineri sacramento.” Gavin I. Langmuir, *History, Religion and Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 259–63, discusses the psychological effect that such doubts could have on medieval Christians.

23. ps.-Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum morale* (Bellerie, 1624; rpt. Graz: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1965), III, p. iii, d. ii, col. 997: “Primus itaque gradus superbiae est curiositas. Est autem curiositas vehemens applicatio mentis ad aliquid vanum et inutiliter inquirendum.”

24. ps.-Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum morale*, III, p. iii, d. ii, col. 1001: “Contra preceptum Domini faciunt, qui irreverenter accedunt prope altare, maxime dum celebrantur divina, curiosa videre volentes que fiunt a sacerdote, quod est eis illicitum. Herodes viso Iesu gavisus valde, sperans se signum aliquod videre ab eo fieri. Sed quia curiositate, non-pietate vel devotio movebatur, nullam videre meruit, et sic illa visio-non-profuit ei, sed obfuit.” The ps.-Vincent discusses Eve and the serpent in the preceding column.

25. V. I. Kennedy, “The Moment of Consecration and the Elevation of the Host,” *Mediaeval Studies* 6, (1944): 122–50.

include both a spiritual remedy and “something of the nature of sensible signs, so that, as sensible objects had been the occasion of the soul’s slide into sin, so too they would become the occasion of its ascent.”²⁶ The epistemological deficit between what was seen in the consecrated host and what was asserted to be present was made good by recourse to what, in a manual written to train young Franciscan novices, Bonaventure, and any number of other theologians, would call our “mental eyes.” The Eucharist needed to be seen and consumed spiritually, but these spiritual senses did not so much bypass the corporeal senses as work with them, complete them. Bonaventure advised fasting, regimes of penance and a continual reflection on, even identification with, Christ’s humiliation, suffering and pain.²⁷ Preachers, Bromyard advised, must urge their congregations towards right belief, confession, penance and a vigilant custody of the house of conscience.²⁸ Worthy reception of the Eucharist depended upon this physical and spiritual preparation and the results of such preparation could be overwhelming, an almost palpable sense of spiritual consolation.²⁹

Robert Holkot on Deceiving Gods and Invincible Ignorance

No good any of this for Wyclif, who again and again returns to the sheer immensity of the divine deception that seems implicit in the doctrine of the real bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. If the appearance of bread could regularly exist in the total absence of its proper substance, then why not every appearance? From our perspective, the world would become nothing but a “ball of accidents,” all surface and no depth, forever misleading, deceiving, damning. In many respects, and despite the controversy that surrounded him, Wyclif’s fears and arguments were neither original nor unique. Scholastic theologians in both England and France had already developed any number of scenarios involving (for lack of a better expression) a deceiving God. These scenarios or thought experiments were especially tied to debates about the nature of vision and cognition, to something known as intuitive cognition, the immediate intellectual or sensory grasp of an object’s presence and existence. William Ockham, as is so often the case, is the most famous player in these debates. Imagine you are looking at a star. Now imagine that God, who can do anything, destroys the star while conserving your vision of it. What you

26. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, in *Opera omnia* V, P. VI, c. I, p. 265: “Ad hoc ergo, quod medicina correspondens esset omnibus supradictis, oportuit, quod non-tantum esset spiritualis, verum etiam aliquid haberet de sensibilibus signis, ut, sicut haec sensibilia fuerunt animae occasio labendi, ita essent ei occasio resurgendi.”

27. Bonaventure, *Regulam ad novitiorum*, in *Opera omnia* VIII, c. iv, p. 317: “Quod si in die dominico propones communicare, studeas te ante per triduum as fervorem spiritus ordinare, ut sis in sexta feria praecedenti ab omni cogitatione immunda abstractus. Semper autem habeas mentales oculos ad Jesum crucifixum, spinis coronatum, aceto et felle potatum, sputis et contumelias saturatum, a peccatoribus blasphematum, acerbissima morte consumptum, lancea perforatum, a mortalibus jam sepultum.”

28. Bromyard, *Summa praedicatorum*, “Eucharistia,” cap. VI, pp. 246b–247a.

29. Bonaventure, *Tractatus de praeparatione ad missam*, in *Opera omnia* VIII, cap. II:5. It is worth noting here that in this entire treatise, Bonaventure never once discusses looking at the Eucharist.

now see is a nonexistent star. There is no necessary connection between what you see and what exists.³⁰

In the generation after Ockham, in the 1330s, another Englishman, the Dominican Robert Holkot would, for the first time so far as I can make out, almost entirely frame the analysis of the Eucharist within the problematic of divine deception. God can do more than the intellect can understand, Holkot asserts, and if he wished, he could hide the entire *machina mundi* under the appearance of a mouse, the substance of an ass under the appearance of a man.³¹ When all is said and done, Holkot accepts what would form the core of Wyclif's arguments against the bodily presence of Christ in the host. For Holkot, the possibility of this sort of divine deception reveals the limits of human knowledge, and he readily admits that there can be no absolute certitude when it comes to knowledge about singular things, about flies and stars and men.³² For all that, when we see something, we do not normally feel compelled to doubt its existence. Holkot believes this response is reasonable. "I am sufficiently persuaded," he concludes, "that God would not work such transmutations because he has not revealed such things to anyone, nor does it appear that he would do such things unless great utility would result."³³ In other words, experience *seems* to teach us that God would only deceive people in this way if he had some very good reason.

Holkot's seemingly casual, even comfortable, acceptance of these consequences at this point in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* cannot fully conceal the hidden tensions and strains within the argument. In order to explain away any possible deception and falsity in the very sacrament of

30. William Ockham, *Quodlibeta VI*, q. 6, in eds. Gedeon Gál et al., *Opera philosophica et theologica*, vol. IX (St Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1980), 605. For brevity, I have greatly simplified Ockham's analysis. Philotheus Boehner, "The Notitia Intuitiva of Non-Existents According to William Ockham," in ed. Eligius Buytaert, *Collected Articles on Ockham* (St Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1958), 274–87, offers the clearest account of how Ockham situates this scenario within his broader epistemological and cognitive theories. Compare with Katherine Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 115–29, for a somewhat different interpretation. For a profound interpretation of the relevance of these debates for understanding the shape of the scientific revolution and the secularization of Western society, see Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 117–202.

31. Robert Holkot presents these objections to the doctrine of bodily presence at *Super sententias* (Lugduni, 1518, rpr. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1967), IV, q. III, primi principi, secundo: "Praetera, si talis conversio unius rei in aliam foret possibilis: et tamen res in quam fit conversio-non-augeretur: sequeretur quod deus posset convertere totam machinam mundi in substantiam musce: vel etiam quod posset ponere quamlibet substantiam sub specie alterius. et sic posset ponere asinus sub specie hominis: immo pari ratione mille asinus in specie unius hominis vel econtrario: et sic periret omnino certitudo experientie." He responds with his own opinions at *Super sententias*, IV, q. III, Responsio, ad secundum.

32. Holkot, *Super sententias*, IV, q. III, Responsio, ad experientiam: "Quantum ad certitudinem experientie: credo quod nulla est certitudo creata ita certa de aliqua re praesenti: quin posset esse falsa per mutationem: tamen, hec lateat me an sit vera an falsa." At *Super sententias* IV, q. III, ad secundum, he adds, "Dicendum est quod deus potest plus facere quam intellectus intelligere, et ideo-non-est inconveniens concedere quod deus posset totam machinam mundi convertere et facere existere sub speciebus unius musce." Gary Macy, *The Banquet's Wisdom: A Short History of the Lord's Supper* (Mahway: Paulist Press, 1992), 120, also points out these similarities between Holkot and Wyclif.

33. Holkot, *Super sententias*, IV, q. III, Responsio, ad secundo: ". . . et sic de aliis, quo sufficienter est mihi persuasum quod deus talia-non-transmutavit: quod hoc-non-revelavit alicui: nec apparet quare hoc faceret: quia talia-non-facit sine magna utilitate sequenti."

truth, earlier theologians had made recourse to the language of figures and mysteries, to the fittingness of what appears in relation to the sacrament's deeper and ultimate truth. In the early fourteenth-century preaching manual, the *Fasciculus morum*, the anonymous author argues that the Eucharist's perceptual discrepancies, far from being mere deceptions or illusions, are actually paradoxes whose meaning, if properly understood, can deepen the believer's faith. The whiteness of the consecrated host, for example, indicates that we ought "to be pure and white in the chastity and purity of our life."³⁴ Holkot, by contrast, leaves the entire discussion at the level of sensory awareness. He never redefines the Eucharist's perceptual challenges as figurative paradoxes and this means that he never shifts the analysis from the level of empirical to spiritual experience. Rather, Holkot opts to define the believer's position with respect to the Eucharist entirely in terms of the fundamental breakdown that it reveals in the natural order. The Eucharist moves from being a unique (if uniquely repeatable) miraculous event, to being the very standard around which all sensory experience and natural knowledge is organized.

Holkot's steadfast refusal to leave the level of empirical analysis opens the door to what would, several decades later, become Wyclif's greatest fear. Holkot's emphasis on sensory discrepancy introduces the real and unacceptable possibility that God did, in fact, erect the very sacrament of truth on a scaffold of falsity, that God, in short, is a liar. Holkot was far from the only fourteenth-century theologian to confront this problem. It had become something of a hot topic and point of controversy for Holkot's own Dominican community in England.³⁵ The (somewhat) deeper roots for the specifically fourteenth-century shape of this discussion can be traced to debates about God's creative capacities and omnipotence. Could God have created another world, a better world than the one (that is, *this* one) that he actually did create? To resolve questions like these, theologians tended to distinguish between God's absolute power (*potentia dei absoluta*), that is, his power considered in terms of anything he could possibly do, and his ordained power (*potentia dei ordinata*), that is, the way he freely chose to express his power in the particular creative act that is this world. Questions like these compelled many fourteenth-century theologians, beginning with John Duns Scotus and William Ockham, to recognize the utter contingency of creation. God was in no way bound to create this world, nor any other world for that matter. He could have created a different world with different sorts of laws.³⁶

34. *Fasciculus morum*, Vii, ed. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 409.

35. On these debates see Hester Goodenough Gelber, *It Could Have Been Otherwise* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 191–222.

36. For an overview of these debates, see William Courtenay, "The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages," in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. T. Rudavsky (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), 243–69; and *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo: P. Lubrina, 1990). Also, Edward Grant, "The Condemnation of 1277, God's Power, and Physical Thought in the Late Middle Ages," *Viator* 10 (1979): 211–44.

Reflections on God's omnipotence and the contingency of creation, not only forced medieval theologians to rethink the nature of nature and the status of natural laws, but also the nature of grace and the economy of salvation. For Holkot, as for any number of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, it gave rise to what became known as covenantal theology.³⁷ Just as the world is utterly contingent, so are the various roads to salvation, the sacraments. God could have chosen different sacraments, different rules for human accession to grace. There is nothing intrinsic to the sacraments that requires them to be efficacious. There is no human action whatsoever that, considered on its own, merits God's forgiveness or guarantees us our salvation. Rather, there exists something like a covenant, a pact, an agreement, between God and man. God has freely established an order and road to salvation. If human beings do their best to follow that road, to participate in those sacraments, then God will freely (and not out of any compulsion) recognize those efforts as worthy.³⁸ None of this, however, was without its complications and problems. Covenantal theologies sought to maximize God's freedom while simultaneously seeking to find some source of order and regularity in the world. But it was a solution that was itself prone to the very sorts of problems it sought to resolve. After all, if God truly is free, couldn't he revoke or alter his covenant with men? Couldn't he promise things and then fail to keep his promise?³⁹

For Holkot, questions about the truth of the Eucharistic event are fundamentally connected to debates about the trustworthiness of both the natural and sacramental order. His almost casual acceptance of real perceptual error in "the very sacrament of truth" depends upon a more far-reaching understanding of the sort of commitments that bind God and man in a covenantal universe. In an earlier section of his *Sentence* commentary, in a series of questions concerning the nature of God's knowledge, Holkot asks whether God could reveal a false future to someone. In other words, could God promise or reveal something to someone, to some creature, knowing all the while that he has no intention of keeping that promise? Citing Augustine's *On Lying*, a text that set the stage for all medieval and Reformation thinking about deception, Holkot notes, "A lie is to say something false with the intention of deceiving." Now Augustine had in fact written this, but Holkot goes on to provide an illuminating gloss. He writes, Augustine's "opinion ought to be explained like this: A lie is to say something false with an inordinate intention to deceive." Since God, by definition, cannot act inordinately, he cannot lie. This accomplishes little for us, however, because there is no reason why God cannot ordinally, yet "knowingly assert something false and with the

37. Heiko Oberman, "*Facientibus quod in se est deus non denegat gratiam*: Robert Holcot, O.P. and the Beginnings of Luther's Theology," in *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Ltd, 1986), 84–93, discusses Holcot's commitment to covenantal theology.

38. For a brief summary of covenantal theology and its connections to debates about God's omnipotence see, Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant and Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 41–65, esp. 62–64.

39. For the link between covenantal theology and fourteenth-century Dominican debates about divine deception, see Gelber, *It Could Have Been Otherwise*, ch. V, "The Limits of Lying."

intention of deceiving a creature.” And so it is, Holkot explains, that God rightfully deceived the Egyptians, and continues to deceive demons, not to mention various and sundry sinners.⁴⁰ As Holkot understands both scripture, as well as God’s freewill and omnipotence, divine deception is not merely an ever-present possibility, it is part and parcel of God’s continuing involvement in the world. In such a world, against such deceptions, our ignorance is complete. For Holkot, the possibility of such invincible ignorance shifts the emphasis from the truth or falsity of our beliefs, to the quality with which we believe, to the sheer act of believing in and doing what God commands. God can deceive us. God could order us to worship a creature as God, to believe something false. God may well be inscrutable, but we must have faith that he is not malicious and that he will keep his promises. So long as we do what he says, believe in good faith, our faith, however, false, will still have merit.⁴¹

Theologians, however, were far from the only medieval Europeans concerned about God’s trustworthiness and the truth of their beliefs. And here we can move from the seemingly abstract debates of the schoolmen, from Holkot’s easy willingness to accept the epistemological perils implicit in covenantal theology, to the broader world of popular religious practice and belief. The practice of personal confession, which the church had instituted as an annual requirement for all Christians beginning in 1215, incorporated exactly

40. Robert Holkot, III *Sententiarum*, q. 2, Lib. II, in *Seeing the Future Clearly: Questions on Future Contingents*, ed. Paul A. Streveler and Katherine H. Tachau (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1995), 156 [ln. 948–66]: “. . . quia secundum Augustinum, libro *De mendacio*, capitulo iii, ‘Mendacium est falsa vocis significatio cum intentione fallendi.’ Et hoc debet sic exponi: cum intentione deordinata fallendi. Sed Deus-non-potest habere intentionem deordinatam in aliquo facto suo, et ideo Deus-non-potest mentiri nec peierare, tamen Deus potest asserere falsum scienter et cum intentione fallendi creaturam, quia-non-includit contradictionem in Deo; immo Deus imperfectus esset si-non-possset hoc intendere, nam aliqua creatura potest mereri ut decipiatur a Deo. Et credo quod daemones meruerunt decipi a Deo in multis, et quod Deus multa facit cum intentione fallendi eos, et fecit.” Here I follow the lead of both K. Tachau, in two separate articles, “Robert Holcot on Contingency and Divine Deception,” in *Filosofia E Teologia New Trecento: Studi in ricordo di Eugenio Randi*, ed. L. Bianchi (Louvain-la Neuve: Fédération internationale des instituts d’études médiévales, 1994), 178–88; and “Logic’s God and the Natural Order in Late Medieval Oxford,” *Annals of Science* 53 (1996): 250–55; and especially H. Gelber, *It Could Have Been Otherwise*, pp. 191–222. Neither of them address these problems in relation to Eucharistic theory. I should add that here again Holkot seems to leave his analysis at something like the literal and empirical level. When confronted by apparent cases of deceit in the Bible, Augustine, *Lying*, in *Treatises on Various Subjects*, ed. Ray Deferrari, trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), c. 5 (7), p. 62, argues that they are always: (1) condemned; (2) presented as acceptable only in relation to and relative to something much worse (and this means that the lie, in itself, is still absolutely unacceptable); or that (3) they must be interpreted figuratively, that is, “they are not lies at all because they bear some metaphorical significance.” This latter approach is the one taken by most theologians when considering the Eucharist. Holkot rejects these sorts of subtle distinctions and asserts that all apparent cases of biblical deception are just that, cases of deception, pure and simple.

41. Holkot, *Quodlibet III*, in *Seeing the Future Clearly*, q. 8, a. 3, ad secundum, p. 100 [ln. 458–63]: “Et ad Anselmum, quando dicit, ‘si falsa fuit, nihil prodesset potuit,’ debet suppleri antecedens sic: si falsa fuit stante ordinatione divina, quia sola vera fides est mundativa a peccato originali in adultis, nihil prodesset potuit ad illum effectum. De facto tamen multi merentur in fide falsa et excusantur per ignorantiam invincibilem concomitantem bonam voluntatem bene credendi.” See Gelber, *It Could Have Been Otherwise*, pp. 267–307, for a more detailed analysis of this problem as it appeared to fourteenth-century English Dominican theologians.

these same sorts of dilemmas, between the ideal of a complete and accurate examination of conscience and a recognition of the uncertainties that plagued all such investigation. Even the earliest manuals of personal confession from the late eleventh century recognize the importance of the penitent's intentions and beliefs. Beginning in the thirteenth century, however, confessional treatises place an ever greater emphasis on the role and complexity of intention. In his *Little Handbook of Cures*, the fourteenth-century Spanish curate Guido of Monte Rocherii noted that "human intentions are nearly infinite."⁴² As a result, the sinner can rarely be sure that when she examines her conscience she sees everything or that she sees things correctly. Every appearance of sanctity or sin, every intention, holds out the potential for deception, like so many veils, so many false appearances. Holkot, when faced with similar conundrums of invincible ignorance, invoked the idea of our faith in God's goodness and God's reliability. Confessors did something similar. They urged penitents to trust God's mercy, to have faith in the practice of confession itself. Since "no man knows whether he has ever made a perfect confession," Petrus Palude, the early fourteenth-century Dominican theologian, recommended that every confession end with a general statement such as, "concerning every other venial and mortal sin, confessed and not, I acknowledge my guilt."⁴³ There was little choice. To refuse to recognize these limits was to lose one's way in an endless examination of conscience. Theologians referred to this as scrupulosity. The scrupulous penitent saw sin everywhere, forever undisclosed and doubted the efficacy of any confessional interrogation that failed to guarantee complete and total knowledge of conscience's contents. "At long last," Antoninus of Florence would write in the fifteenth century, "the scrupulous conscience brings forward the tempest of desperation."⁴⁴

Wyclif and the Rejection of the Miraculous

All of which finally returns us to Wyclif because a kind of scrupulous anxiety fundamentally shapes Wyclif's conception of the world, a world in which the threat of deception is everywhere and the fear of epistemological failure reigns supreme. "I am horrified," writes Wyclif, suddenly and without warning, in the middle of a sermon on the importance of charity, "at the very idea that a quality or any sort of accident could be the kind of thing that could exist

42. Guido of Monte Rocherii, *Manipulus curatorum* (Strassburg, 1490), II:II, ch. 9, p. lxxix: "Et quia intentiones humane sunt quasi infinite ideo de his que sunt peccata ex intentione non-potest certa regula dari loquimur ergo hic de his que sunt peccata mortalia ex natura sua." Bartholomew of Chaimis, *Confessionale* (Augsburg, 1491), III:III, makes a similar point and brings out the epistemological implications: "Primo enim omnes peccatorum circumstantias confiteri est impossibile cuius ratio est: quia cum singulares circumstantie peccatorum sint quasi infinite sed nullus obligatur ad confitendum ea que in infinitum possent procedere quia de talibus non-est ars neque scientia ergo nullus tenetur omnes confiteri."

43. The quotation comes from Antoninus of Florence, *Summa theologica*, Vol. 3, pt. 3, cap. XXI (Verona, 1740), 797: "De modo absovendi nota quod dicit Petrus Palude, quia homo nescit, utrum umquam fecerit unam perfectam confessionem, expedit, quod in omni confessione sacramentali post quaedam specialiter enumerata sequatur generalis clausula, scilicet *de omnibus venialibus et mortalibus, confessis, et-non-confessis dico meam culpam.*"

44. Antoninus, *Summa theologica*, cap. X, pt. 9, p. 194.

through itself and not inhere in a substance."⁴⁵ Wyclif's horror at this moment certainly has something to do with the nightmare of a world made unknowable, but its emotional register derives from the related and much more ominous possibility that we could become unknowable to ourselves. If self-subsistent appearances can exist in the world, then why can't they also exist within our own souls? What if we could perceive the presence of charity within ourselves and yet still be damned? For Wyclif this is the sort of world that must be rejected, a world whose very conditions of possibility must be denied. Shortly after this unexpected outburst, Wyclif admits that we can never be sure whether we possess charity and grace. But there are signs and from these signs we can, perhaps, attain some sort of probable knowledge that we are among the predestined.⁴⁶ Wyclif warrants his confidence in these probable signs because he has, in effect, shifted the battle against scrupulosity and doubt, against a world in which a deceptive God could randomly sever the link between appearance and reality, from within the house of conscience back out into the world, to the Eucharist.

And how does Wyclif resolve this apparent case of divine deception? "Here we respond by asserting that there are two forms of vision, two forms of eating, two forms of consumption, namely corporeal and spiritual. We grant that in the sacrament the body of Christ is seen only with the mental eye, not with the corporeal eye, namely by faith through a darkened mirror."⁴⁷ At first this reads no differently than what Bonaventure had written, than what Bromyard had preached; yet everything is different. The words of consecration, Wyclif contends, transform the host into a "most efficacious sign"⁴⁸ that has the power, the virtue, "to move the faithful soul devoutly to the memory of Christ."⁴⁹ At one moment he will suggest that Christ is present to the Eucharist like an image in a mirror,⁵⁰ at another he will invoke the relation between words and what they signify.⁵¹ Christ is present, really present (Wyclif never denies the doctrine of real presence), but it is a spiritual presence.⁵² However it is

45. Wyclif, *Sermones*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: The Wyclif Society, 1889), vol. III, XVIII, p. 139 [ln. 19–23]: "Horreo quidem quod qualitas vel accidens quodcumque sit res que posit per se existere et-non-substantie inherere, quia sic sine fundacione possent fingere gratiam ut fundamentum caritatis datam a Deo singulariter et prius gratificantem hominem Deo."

46. Wyclif, *Sermones* III, XVIII, p. 140 [ln. 11–17]: "Supposita ergo distincione noticie patet quod nullus nostrum hic cognoscit intuitive, demonstrative vel infallibiliter quod gracia vel caritas sibi inest, sed noticie probabili possunt ex actu dileccionis cognoscere et ex infirmitate intencionis preservandi conformi probabilitate convincere quod sit predestinatus et sperare quod erit beatificatus."

47. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. I, p. 13 [ln. 1–6]: "Sec hic respondemus per distincionem quod est dare duplicem visionem, duplicem esum et duplicem sumpcionem, scilicet corporalem et spiritualem; et sic concedimus quod-non-videmus in sacramento illo corpus Christi oculo corporali sed oculo mentali, scilicet fide per speculum in enigmate."

48. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. III, p. 63.

49. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. VII, p. 219.

50. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. I, p. 13 [ln. 6–11]: "Et sicut ymago est integra ad omnem punctum speculi, sic quod videri potest vel secundum partem vel totum ab aliquo oculo corporali alicubi posito; sic intelligendum est in parte de corpore Christi in hostia consecrata ut speculo." On Wyclif's interest in and use of medieval optical theory, that is, the science of perspective, see H. Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Optics of the Eucharist," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 245–58.

51. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. V, p. 144.

52. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. VII, p. 216 [ln. 5–7]: "sed corpus Christi licet sit ibi vere et realiter, tamen est ibi-non-verius quam sacramentaliter ut in signo."

conceived, this change does nothing to transform the very being of the bread, does nothing to transform the natural order.

Idolatry, according to Wyclif, arises when proper distinctions are not respected, when the natural and the spiritual are confused, when the sign is mistaken for the signified, when the host is worshipped as if it really contained Christ's body. Wyclif's response to the threat of idolatry inherent within the sacramental event is to radically separate the spiritual order from the natural order. He renders the event almost irrelevant to the natural order. At one level, this is the assertion of human reason, of our ability to know and understand the world in which we live. When Wyclif argues that it makes no sense to worry about everything that God could do, that we must limit ourselves to "the order actually imposed," he is, for all intents and purposes, stabilizing the natural order by exiling the possibility of miracles, of divine intervention.⁵³ To imagine anything else, to imagine a world in which accidents could exist without substances, appearances without reality, is to imagine a world of absurdities in which human reason could no longer function with any degree of confidence. In these restrictions on God's involvement in the world, there are, perhaps, the first tentative steps towards a secularized conception of nature.

But these steps, however, tentative, must be understood within their own contexts, within the play of forces and tensions that set them in motion. There are moments when Wyclif, as he runs through the litany of epistemic disasters that must necessarily follow if orthodox Eucharistic theory is true, sounds oddly reminiscent of Rene Descartes, alone in his stove-heated room, pondering a world and a life in the grip of a capricious and thoroughly evil god. As some commentators have suggested, there is a sense in which Wyclif invents or imagines "Cartesian man."⁵⁴ But this resonance between Wyclif and Descartes conceals fundamental differences in their responses to the threat of scepticism and in the motives that underlie their responses. When Wyclif attacks the Eucharistic devotions of his time as idolatrous, he is, in effect, asserting that, in the natural order there cannot be anything beyond the competence of human sense and reason. But unlike Descartes, the desire for absolute certitude does not motivate him. When Descartes, in the third of his *Meditations*, sets out to prove God's existence, he does so for the express purpose of guaranteeing the rationality and certitude of his nascent methodology.⁵⁵ Wyclif moves in precisely the opposite direction. He asserts the adequacy of reason and sense in their proper sphere of operation in order to establish and guarantee God's veracity and goodness. If God cannot be trusted in his dealings with the natural world where human reason ought to

53. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. IV, p. 109 [ln. 1–6]: "Sed hic dicitur . . . de duplici potencia; non est enim nostrum querere usque ad quos limites homo potest agere de Dei potencia absoluta; sed quid liceat homini et quid debeat facere de lege iam posita, sic quod expedit primo saltem confuse cognoscere quid homo potest facere in hoc ministerio."

54. Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 85–6.

55. Rene Descartes, *Meditations*, ed. G. Herrernan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 118–23.

operate more or less successfully, then there is all the more reason to worry when we move to those areas where reason is more prone to failure, when we consider the quality and truth of our faith, when we look within the inscrutable and potentially infinite and self-deceptive depths of conscience. Wyclif's concerns have little to do with certainty. They have everything to do with security.

The radical separation of the spiritual from the natural, however, comes at the price of placing an even greater emphasis upon the believer's conscience, on the quality and the truth of his intentions. If the sacrament is truly a sign, then how well it functions depends entirely upon the one who reads, interprets, and follows it. When Wyclif writes "the truth itself hates the duplicity of falsity," the falsity he has in mind is the falsity of belief, those corruptions of intent, known and unknown, that can render the sacrament less efficacious.⁵⁶ Having relieved God of the ability to deceive, the source of deception becomes the believer himself, those probable signs, those half-known, half-understood intentions. Against this sort of self-deception and this sort of fear there is neither recourse nor defence. This is the source of the anguished and vitriolic rhetoric that spills across the pages of Wyclif's *On the Eucharist*. It is also, I think, the source of his barely contained horror.

56. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, cap. VI, p. 159 [ln. 1–6]: "Quoad virtutes theologicas oportet omnino habere fidem sanctam de humanitate et deitate Christi et de concernentibus hoc sacramentum, quia impossibile est infidelem in istis placere Deo manducando vel bibendo hoc sacramentum in memoriam Christi, cum ipse sit veritas odiens duplicitatem falsitatis."