The Call to Read

Reginald Pecock’s Books and Textual Communities

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Fifteenth-century England was a time of intense debate and speculation about the nature of the religious life, the role of the church in Christian society, and the faith of the ordinary Christian. Questions once voiced and discussed by churchmen in places beyond the reach of ordinary lay folk were asked in vernacular writings that circulated among men and women of all walks of life. Controversy about the authority of the Bible, for example, as a supreme source of Christian knowledge raged in both the secular and sacred realms. Questions about the proper way to interpret the Bible, the best way to educate the Christian laity in matters of faith, and proper modes of interaction between the pious laity and God’s ministers were on the minds of many, as we can observe from the contents and concerns of sermons, tracts, treatises, and manuals. Thinking about these kinds of issues was stimulated in large part by the Lollard heresy, which flourished openly in the fourteenth century and underground in the fifteenth and threatened to change the very structure of the Christian community and the practice of Christian religion. Churchmen like John Mirk, John Capgrave, John Audelay, Reginald Pecock, the anonymous author of *Dives and Pauper* and the Longleat sermons, and other anonymous writers were all invested, in various ways, in finding an appropriate response to the Lollard heresy and in revitalizing orthodoxy through vernacular writings aimed at lay readers. The kinds of
questions that the Lollards brought forth, about sacred doctrine, the role of the Bible, and the authority of the church, stimulated orthodox churchmen to seek answers, accommodations, and solutions that would acknowledge and engage with Lollard concerns without tearing the Christian community apart. The range of responses offered by people like Audelay, Capgrave, and Pecock helps us to see the fifteenth century as a dynamic rather than a dull time, in which writers, poets, and preachers were stimulated to come up with new ideas about the best way to structure Christian behavior and belief.

Until recently, we have been so fixated on the repressive, restrictive official responses to the Lollard heresy that we have not been able to open our eyes to the way that the threat of heterodoxy drove people like Reginald Pecock and John Capgrave to find alternative means of unifying the Christian community and engaging the laity in the practice and learning of their faith. In their critique of contemporary literary history, Stephen Kelly and Ryan Perry write that scholarly attention to Lollardy has limited our understanding of the religious works written in the aftermath of the English heresy: “The scholarly attention paid to the circulation of Wycliffite ideas and of the Wycliffite Bible itself distorts, we contend, the scene of fourteenth and fifteenth century theological speculation in England. Scholarship has presented us with a camera obscura, in which either the influence on religious writing of Wycliffite thought is pictured as all-pervasive or Wyclifitism is perceived as an ideological fiction propagated by the authorities in order to legitimize a tightening of secular and/or ecclesiastical control.”

Certainly in Pecock’s case, the influence of Wycliffite ideas was not all-pervasive, even though he spent time and effort countering Wycliffite claims; rather, Wycliffite culture galvanized his thinking and made him reach for new ideas about lay religion, ideas from sources as diverse as Aquinas, Aristotle, and Wyclif himself. Scholars such as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton are beginning to paint a new picture of the religious and literary scene of late medieval England, which can be better understood as a dynamic intellectual culture where diversity of thought was possible and customary, as people of all kinds pressed in different ways against and beyond traditional orthodoxies.
The changing picture of late medieval religious culture in England is witnessed by the words used to categorize its literature. The term *vernacular theology* itself has experienced a shift: first coined by A. I. Doyle in 1953 in his famous but unfortunately unpublished “Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in English in the 14th, 15th, and Early 16th Centuries,” the term was used provocatively by Nicholas Watson in his seminal 1995 article “Censorship and Cultural Change” to differentiate a body of challenging and intellectually explorative fourteenth-century religious writing from a very different kind of writing produced in a climate of censorship in the fifteenth century. More recently, the term has been used by a wide range of scholars working to “draw our attention to the richness and variety of vernacular literary production under the umbrella of religion.” In the 2006 journal *English Language Notes* a cluster of articles by Elizabeth Robertson, Daniel Donoghue, Linda Georgianna, Kate Crassons, C. David Benson, Katherine Little, Lynn Staley, James Simpson, and Nicholas Watson suggest diverse new ways of understanding the religious writing of late medieval England and demonstrate “the insights to be gained” from viewing vernacular theology as a “capacious category,” even suggesting that “the plural, vernacular theologies, is surely more apt.” In writing this book, it is my aim to present the corpus of Reginald Pecock as one of the most fascinating and important bodies of work for our understanding of his cultural moment and of just how “capacious” vernacular theology could be.

Indeed, viewing Pecock’s corpus as one of many vernacular theologies of late medieval England helps us to avoid the pitfall Linda Georgianna warns against, of reducing the category “to a coded term for various binaries—English versus Latin, or theology versus moral instruction, or the like.” Understanding Pecock’s accomplishment requires that we recognize his vernacular theology as an innovative body of work written in English in which moral instruction, philosophical truth, devotional exercises, and theological doctrine mingle together, stimulated by the teachings of thinkers ranging from Aristotle to Aquinas to Wyclif, in order to assist all Christians in their efforts to follow the “Reule of Crysten Religioun” while living in this world. Written in the vernacular, the surviving books facilitate access to
theological and philosophical training, not for “suche lay men whiche schulden mowe leerne and vndirstonde tho writingis if they weren maad in Latin” (Folewer, 7), but for those who cannot read Latin. By noting that some laymen can read Latin while others “kouthe not studie and undirstonde hem if they were maad in Latin,” Pecock suggests that within his London milieu we cannot be certain of a clear division between Latinate clerics and laymen literate only in English. While it certainly is true that Pecock is introducing new material and doing new things in the vernacular, we must be careful, as Ian Johnson warns, to avoid using words like *appropriation* to describe work like that of Pecock, given that such vocabulary, based on “seeing medieval vernacular textuality in terms of its competition against colonial, clerical Latin culture and its sources,” can obscure the “common ground between Latin and English texts/culture, let alone their rich intertextual relations.” Pecock’s decision to use the vernacular as a vehicle for transmitting the learning of moral philosophy from the university environment to a wider audience does not necessarily mean that he was educating and empowering lay readers alone. While Pecock generally speaks of his readers as members of the laity, he also notes, as I point out in chapter 1, that his books are useful for young scholars and university clerics in disciplines outside theology. As increasing numbers of scholars help us to better understand the different dimensions of vernacular theology during this once-neglected period of literary history, I offer this study of Pecock’s books to give us a better idea of the plurality and sense of possibility that characterized fifteenth-century culture. The term *vernacular theology* provides what Linda Georgianna calls “a tool of critical analysis” that can be particularly useful in understanding Pecock’s accomplishment. His vernacular theology is one that draws on approaches to teaching from the university setting, that has its source in Aquinas’s great synthesis of reason and faith, that extends and innovates traditions of teaching pastoral theology in English going back to Lateran IV, that shares some of Lollardy’s “intellectual terrain,” that fosters cohesion among clergy and laity instead of promoting “the acquisition of religious knowledge as a zero-sum game wherein every gain by the laity is registered as a loss for clerical authority,” that provides for the whole Christian soul not only food for thought but fruits for meditation and devotion, and that of-
fers new ways of understanding doctrine as meaningful Christian practice for those living in the here and now.9

The contents of Pecock’s writings are the subject of this book. An extensive study of Pecock’s works and thought has not emerged since the 1980s, when Charles Brockwell published a monograph on Pecock.10 The most significant work on Pecock to emerge since then is Wendy Scase’s immensely important biography, a work that fills in many gaps in our knowledge about Pecock’s life and career but offers less in the way of detailed analysis of Pecock’s writings.11 In her biography, Scase tells us that Pecock was born in Wales, probably around 1390, and educated at Oxford. After his BA and MA, he studied theology at Oriel College, probably from 1416 to 1424. His first position was the rectory of St Michael’s, Gloucester, which he resigned when he was appointed master of Whittington College, a position he held from 1431 to 1444, as I discuss in detail in chapter 1. He was made bishop of St. Asaph in 1444 and then of Chichester in 1450. In 1447 Pecock preached a sermon in London that offended many important secular and spiritual authorities; his books and his views became controversial from then on. During the 1450s his position became tenuous as he was examined and forced to revoke his heresies, positions on doctrine that could “uncharitably be rendered” as heretical views, such as his notion that it was not necessary to believe in Christ’s descent into hell, the Holy Ghost, the Catholic Church, and the communion of saints.12 He made a public recantation and died several years later, having been deprived of his bishopric as well as his books and his writing materials.

In addition to this valuable biography by Scase, a few articles have been published over recent years that examine Pecock’s writings in relation to questions about translation, authorship, heresy, and biblical hermeneutics. This work has highlighted the significance of Pecock’s writings in our understanding of late medieval debates about these subjects.13 In doing so, they have demonstrated the need for a book-length study that assesses Pecock’s place in fifteenth-century intellectual, religious, and literary culture.

The first two functions of this book, then, are to fill the gap in our knowledge about Pecock’s writings and to better clarify where he stands within his fifteenth-century context, in terms of the contribution he
offers to debates about lay religion and to the tradition of teaching religion to the laity. Throughout this book I draw comparisons between Pecock's teachings and a range of material written in the vernacular and read by the pious laity in fifteenth-century England. This material includes translations, didactic treatises, guides to contemplation, devotional tracts, pastoral compilations, and polemical writings: reference will be made to works such as The Abbey of the Holy Ghost, Hilton's On the Mixed Life, Saint Edmund of Abingdon's Mirror, Jacob's Well, Book to a Mother, The Testimony of William Thorpe, A Ladder of Foure Ronges, Contemplations on the Dread and Love of God, and The Book of Margery Kempe. This field of comparison will help to illuminate the ways that Pecock's writings adapt, extend, and even innovate contemporary approaches to the teaching of doctrine, prayer, contemplation, and the moral life.

The contribution that Pecock makes to late medieval thought helps us to see that the institutional response to the Lollard heresy, which has dominated scholarly inquiry until recently, is simply one on a spectrum of possible responses. The sweeping legislation of Archbishop Arundel, with the Constitutions of 1409, reacted to the problem of heresy among both laity and clergy in the Christian community by forbidding people to read, think, and discuss certain things. I will discuss the relationship between the Constitutions and Pecock's corpus in more detail in chapter 2, but for now I would like to highlight the fact that Arundel thinks big: rather than seeking answers to the questions raised by the Wycliffite heresy, he attempts to shut down thinking on these matters entirely. As Nicholas Watson points out, the Constitutions were a set of laws put in place in 1409 that were designed to put an end to Lollardy. The Constitutions were meant to reinforce orthodox doctrine and thinking by censoring academic discussions of theological matters, by forbidding the writing and reading of English translations of scripture without episcopal approval, and by strictly regulating the activities of preaching and teaching. Some preachers were denied the right to share with the laity religious knowledge that extended beyond the material outlined in Pecham's 1281 Constitutions, legislation that had constituted an innovative and exciting attempt at reforming religious instruction after the council of Lateran IV by ensuring that all Christians should receive vital spiri-
tual instruction through “sermons covering the fourteen Articles of Faith, the Decalogue, the two Evangelical Commandments, the Seven Works of Mercy, Deadly Sins, Principle Virtues, and Sacraments.”

Much religious instruction in the vernacular that circulated in late medieval England can be seen as a development of the “elaborate and unusually sophisticated” program of instruction laid out by Archbishop Pecham and his council; it appears, however, that one of Arundel’s answers to heresy was to limit circulation and production of works that took their stimulus from this syllabus of instruction but offered education beyond the subjects approved in 1281.

Restricting the practice of religion and the learning of the faith in these ways was certainly a powerful response to the problem of crisis in the Christian community; how effective this legislation was is another matter. A number of critics, including Fiona Somerset, Shannon McSheffrey, and Vincent Gillespie, have rejected the notion that Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409 had any real impact on the production and reception of stimulating and exciting religious writings. McSheffrey points out, for example, that upper-class lay readers were allowed to hold on to their Bibles despite the new legislation. The survival of just under 250 copies of the Wycliffite Bible from this period also tells us that the decree against owning the Bible may not have been observed. Vincent Gillespie’s recent work on the “post-Arundel” period argues that the career of Archbishop Chichele may be a more important consideration than Arundel’s legislation for examining the production of literature in the fifteenth century that was dedicated to the renewal and reform of orthodoxy. For Kate Crassons, “the vibrant life of medieval dramatic performance” provides an example of a “distinctive mode of vernacular theology” in which questions and issues thought to be polemical and dangerous were talked out in innovative ways, undisturbed by Arundel’s decrees. These scholars share the view that Arundel’s legislation may not have had such a drastic effect on the vernacular theologies that were produced and read in the fifteenth century. What I would suggest is that Arundel’s legislation can be seen as one response among many to the problem of heresy and crisis in Christian society. If people like Pecock were still looking for effective methods of combating heresy and fortifying orthodoxy in the mid-fifteenth century, we
can be sure that Arundel’s Constitutions were not entirely successful in wiping out the independent thought of the laity, that the crisis of heresy in the Christian community was not over, and, more importantly, that there was room for alternative thinking on ways of re-instating orthodoxy.

I would even suggest that there are certain resemblances between the sweeping changes that Arundel proposes and the sweeping changes that Pecock proposes. Pecock also thinks big. He is concerned not only with the spread of heresy but with laxity of devotion, basic misunderstanding of the faith among the majority of the laity, rampant superstition, singular practices that have no rational basis, and overwhelming disrespect for the learned clergy. He, too, looks for a solution to these threats to the health and vitality of the Christian community that will be just as powerful as Arundel’s legislation in reinforcing the authority of the clergy and in wiping out error. His solution, however, comes in the form of a mass educational program, or what I will describe as the construction of a textual community centered on his books. Rather than placing certain topics out of bounds, Pecock invites all to contemplate them in a carefully structured and directed process of schooling in his corpus of instructional materials. In his system, members of the laity are challenged to think in new ways about religious faith and to apply their intellects in new and active ways to their belief system—a system that they have customarily absorbed passively. They are taught new means of expressing and engendering devotion for God. In short, the way that they think about and practice religion will be changed. Pecock’s changes are in the form of education: a systematic, uniform, and universal program of education that will control problems like heresy and superstition without resort to censorship or repression.

Pecock thinks big when he mandates the reform of teaching and preaching in Christian society. He stridently calls for reform throughout his corpus, announcing that the time has come to usher in more productive methods of teaching, to change the way doctrine is presented to the laity, and to strengthen the rational foundations of belief among both clergy and laity. This renewal demands the participation of fellow clerics within the community, and Pecock is not particularly meek in asking for it. Indeed, he is intensely critical of the practices of
other teachers and preachers. He says, for example, that it is “ful un-
seemly” in preachers to present themselves as “reulers and reformers
and enformers” of the lay people only to neglect their flock (Folewer,
10). This neglect stems from their abandon of “argumentis of resoun” 
(Folewer, 10). Those who neglect the teaching of moral philosophy
abuse their “greet autorite and overtte over the heerers” (Folewer, 10).
This criticism of fellow divines echoes throughout Pecock’s corpus.
He does not mince words in criticizing the practices and learning of
fellow clergy. For example, Pecock warns lay readers that they should
not blindly rely on their teachers for their understanding of the nature
of faith and law but should instead learn how to examine “pure certain
groundis wherby it schal be certain that it is so feith or lawe” (Folewer,
34). The best way to avoid being “bigilid” is to demand more sophisti-
cated teaching, “though men crie upon thee ful lowed, seying ‘this is
feith’ and ‘that is feith’, and ‘this is lawe’ and ‘that is lawe’” (Folewer,
34). It seems to me that in his eagerness to spread his forms of teach-
ing, Pecock steps on the toes of other clerics like him in the London
community. His frequent comments about his detractors, and his criti-
cisms of their lack of learning, all reinforce the observation of Wendy
Scase that Pecock’s “enmities were to prove costly.”21 Scase argues
that a “major motive behind Pecock’s downfall was political,” that the
decision to try him for heresy was part of a larger effort to demon-
strate the power of temporal princes over the church by exerting
“royal authority over the archbishop and prelates in the cause of cor-
recting a cleric.”22 Though the impetus for Pecock’s downfall may
have been the decision of the temporal authority to make an example
of him in order to exalt the authority of the Lancastrian monarchy, it
also seems clear that Pecock himself had created a strong opposition
among clerics who were happy to support his prosecution.21 Perhaps
he would have had more support among his fellow clerics if he had
tempered his criticism in his earnest zeal for reform. In his devotion
to his project of revolutionizing Christian pedagogy, Pecock may have
underestimated his opposition, or the power of his “inpugners whiche
laboren by gile and wile to make her inpugnacioun seme good before
the multitude of lay men, and at temporal lordis eers, and at multi-
tude of clerkis not scolid in divinite, or not profundely endewid in di-
vinite” (Donet, 8). Having more support among the multitude of
laymen, clerks, and temporal lords might have ensured a more secure future for Pecock's pedagogical initiatives.

Pecock makes it clear that we should take seriously this project of Christian pedagogy when he tells readers that it is divinely inspired. In his prologue to *The Reule of Crysten Religioun*, Reginald Pecock describes the dream vision that made him decide to write the book. He claims that he was visited by a multitude of beautiful ladies, who arranged themselves in seven companies and identified themselves as the daughters of God. These "ful comely and faire" women addressed Pecock in this way: “Man, we ben treuthis of universal philosophie comprehending lawe of kinde and lawe of feith. We ben out of the lond of resonable soulis longe time exilid. We ben thilke whiche schulen schewe to thee in desirose longing, and teche how thou schalt boothe knowe, serve and have thy final eende, perpetual joie and al thyn hertis feeding” (*Reule*, 32). Having told Pecock that their seven companies comprised all the learning and knowledge that he would need to live a proper spiritual life, as well as to “teche and counseile al othere to live cristenly,” the lovely ladies told him that they wanted to win some lovers for God with the power of Pecock’s pen (*Reule*, 34). They asked him to write a work that would give them textual form and so offer to vernacular readers a source of religious truth that would be so “ful and sufficient to almankinde” that no other study of “goostly philosophie and cristen divinite” would be necessary (*Reule*, 35). The resulting product was, of course, *The Reule of Crysten Religioun*, a book that educates Christian readers of late medieval England in the nature, benefits, punishments, and moral law of God, the wretchedness and wickedness of humanity, and remedies for mankind’s sins and failings.

The contents of Pecock's surviving corpus of six vernacular religious books can be described in the same way, as a written record of these truths of universal philosophy “comprehending lawe of kinde and lawe of feith” (*Reule*, 32). Though other books in his oeuvre are written for more specific purposes, like correcting particular errors of belief, his works all share the goal of presenting to readers those truths that are necessary for our salvation, which we know by reason and by faith. Pecock tells us in the introduction to *The Reule of Crysten Religioun* that many of his books are written with the same purpose:
the Reule and “the othere bookis to this present book perteiningly
knitte to and annexid,” which include the Bifore Crier, The Donet, The
Filling of the Foure Tablis, The Book of Divine Office, and The En-
chiridion, as well as “othere mo bookis” that he lists elsewhere, offer
an abundance of knowledge and instruction “which can not so esily be
leerned in other bokes, neither in sermouns or prechingis, neither by
mennis spekingis” (Reule, 9). To achieve this goal, of providing each
individual reader with all the “kunning” he will need “forto be a good
cristen man,” and thus offering to lay readers a religious education
that is unprecedented in its scope, Pecock spends a good part of his
career, from the early 1430s to the late 1450s, producing vernacular
writings on subjects such as the sacraments, the priesthood, the Bible,
the writings of the church fathers, and God’s moral law (Reule, 35). In
addition to providing an immense resource of religious information,
Pecock’s writings train readers in rational modes of thought and argu-
ment. As he presents readers with knowledge about the soul, about
sin, and about God’s moral law, he educates readers in principles of
logic and argumentation so that they can process and understand this
knowledge rationally.

In their content, Pecock’s books of religious instruction are simi-
lar in many ways to Thomas Aquinas’s Summa theologiae, a vast ency-
clopedic work treating subjects such as the existence of God, the
nature of the created world, the ultimate goal of human life, the na-
ture of virtue and sin, free will, the nature of human emotion, and the
sacraments. Pecock’s works range over the same topics as Aquinas’s
Summa, under the seven main topics of the nature of God, God’s bene-
fits, God’s punishments, God’s moral law, man’s wretchedness, man’s
wickedness, and remedies for man’s wickedness. In the same way that
Aquinas merges the philosophical teachings of Aristotle with the doc-
trine of the medieval church, Pecock brings cogent analysis of the
moral life together with instruction on the sacraments and the articles
of faith. Pecock’s books admittedly are less complex than Aquinas’s
Summa: his section in the Reule on God’s nature and essence focuses on
God’s qualities of goodness, infinity, and mercy, for example, without
examining the finer points of God’s existence, essence, and operations
covered in the first book of the Summa. It is noteworthy, however,
that both Pecock and Aquinas base their account of the moral life, not
on the seven virtues, the seven vices, or other popular groupings, but on the order of being. Mark Johnson says that the moral section of Aquinas’s *Summa*, the *Secunda pars*, was intended to answer questions of the “how” and the “why” of the moral life”: “The goal of the *Secunda pars* was to answer those questions, by discovering some unifying notion that would encompass the moral life based rather upon the nature of the reality under consideration—the human person—than upon some preexistent order, traditionally handed on because of its link to, say, confession.”

Pecock’s moral teaching is similarly based on questions about how we know what we know about God, how God has blessed us with gifts and benefits, what makes us sin and indulge in vice, and what we can do to merit heaven.

Important differences between Pecock’s approach to moral instruction and that of the *Secunda pars* of the *Summa* tell us that Pecock’s project is not to simplify and translate the teachings of Aquinas. For example, Pecock’s teaching is arranged differently from that of Aquinas: Pecock blends teaching on the sacraments with teaching of moral philosophy in his treatment of subjects like God’s law, God’s benefits, and God’s nature, instead of treating the sacraments in a separate and final book. Despite these differences, however, there are extraordinary points of resemblance between Pecock’s systematic approach to lay religious education and Aquinas’s *Summa*. For example, as I suggest in chapter 5, both Aquinas and Pecock treat the moral life by establishing first principles and then abstracting from these principles more specific rules of conduct. Though Pecock’s teaching on God’s moral law is not organized into categories corresponding to the virtues of faith, hope, charity, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, he covers the same particular subjects, like usury, worship, and friendship, within his own system. The scholastic method of dialectical inquiry in Aquinas’s *Summa*, described as “the basic analytical method applied to all areas of study and used to elucidate the meaning of textual points, to harmonize seeming contradictions and to adjudicate logically between differing interpretations of matters arising from a text,” is also featured in Pecock’s program for lay education. As readers pass from the *Donet* to the *Reule* and finally to the *Folewer*, as the moral instruction becomes more detailed and sophisticated, alternative approaches to particular issues and alterna-
tive interpretations of matters arising from scripture are considered and brought to bear on Pecock's own teaching. Jeremy Catto argues that “most of what Pecock taught is the standard orthodox teaching of the schools, given a Thomist direction by his insistence on the primacy of the intellect.” The similarities between the Summa and the interlocking system formed by the Reule, the Donet, and the Folewer make Pecock look like a fifteenth-century scholastic thinker, drawing on authoritative traditions of teaching from the academic world to provide the laity with a new way of thinking about Christian belief and conduct.

Regrettably, there is not enough space in this study to do justice to the complicated question of the influence of Aquinas and other scholastic thinkers on Pecock's corpus of vernacular writings. I limit myself in this book to a brief comparison in chapter 5 of the approach to moral instruction in Pecock's pedagogical system and in Aquinas's Summa; a fuller examination of the sources of Pecock's moral instruction will be part of a book-length study I have begun on moral philosophy in the literature and the schools of late medieval England.

Though a careful examination of the relationship between moral philosophy in the Summa and in Pecock's corpus cannot be carried out here, it is useful to keep in mind the similarities in scale between Pecock's resources for vernacular instruction and Aquinas's Summa. Both offer comprehensive, wide-ranging instruction on everything a Christian needs to know about doctrine and devotion; what makes Pecock so innovative is that he makes this knowledge accessible to lay readers who lacked the kind of training in the arts that university students would have had before they learned moral philosophy and theology through works like Aristotle's Ethics, Aquinas's commentary on the Ethics, and the Sentences of Peter Lombard. Indeed, I would suggest that Pecock's educational corpus constitutes an attempt to transfer the rudiments of a university education in the arts to the vernacular, through his instruction on terminology, on rules of logic, and on the syllogism, and through his attempt to condense the most important teaching on Christian morality and doctrine in his books. Such a project would have uses beyond the streets of London: Pecock reminds us in several places that his books are intended not just for the laity but also for university students. His books, as they travel back
and forth, will help to blur the boundary between the lay world and the academy, providing knowledge for both intellectually minded laymen and “clerkis being yonge biginners in scole of divinite” or “clerkis not leernid moche in comoun philosophie, in metephisik and in the highest party of divinite” (Reule, 86). For Oxford scholars engaged in the study of civil law or medicine, for example, or for undergraduates in the faculty of arts who would not complete an MA or go on to further studies in the faculty of theology, Pecock’s books would act as useful primers on philosophy and theology. They would also provide accessible introductions for those just starting out in the study of theology. They would help to round out the studies of “othere clerkis of othere facultees not having time and leisour to studie in highest metaphisik and divinite” (Reule, 86), or, in other words, of other students who would not have time to pursue the same course of studies that Pecock pursued at Oxford, first in natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and metaphysics, and then in the Bible, Lombard’s Sentences, and commentaries on the Sentences by theologians such as Aquinas, to earn his MA probably in 1416 and his Bachelor of Theology from Oriel College by 1424. The information provided in the Reule on God and “persoonis in godhede” constitutes “scole ynone for ever” and is perfect training for those who seek doctrine in order to “be stirid to love god and to have fervent wil forto serve god” (Reule, 86).

It can be argued that Pecock capitalizes on current trends in Oxford’s faculty of theology in his efforts to transfer an entire discipline of thought into the vernacular for diverse readers interested in learning doctrine that would increase their love for God. In his work on the theological curriculum at Oxford University, Catto notes that practical moral theology was the going concern in the fifteenth century. He says that this period was not one of great innovation at Oxford: “There is little evidence of the engagement of minds in theological controversy which had been obvious when Scotus, Bradwardine or Wyclif had lectured in the schools.”28 Pecock’s own corpus of practical moral theology was likely influenced by these currents at Oxford: rather than engaging in theological speculation, he too focuses on practical questions about the moral life that were relevant to lay readers. These practical questions were the focus of study among
monks, friars, and parish clergy, many of whom would pass on this learning to the lay population in the form of sermons. Catto remarks that the “moral and topical questions” that interested theologians at Oxford in the fifteenth century would have given “their academic work, especially if it were diffused in sermons, a broad social relevance.” Pecock took this initiative one step further by providing books of instruction that enabled the laity to study for themselves “the accumulated pastoral theology of the schools,” including knowledge of the sacraments, faith, prayer, contemplation, virtue, and vice.

The books that Pecock offers to lay readers, constituting a comprehensive guide to the Christian faith, are like nothing else available in the vernacular in fifteenth-century England. The third purpose of this book is to assess the position that Pecock’s vernacular writings occupy in the context of late medieval reading culture. I am interested primarily in what Pecock has to say about the role that reading plays in the spiritual and intellectual lives of the laity and in religious reform in late medieval England. I am fascinated, in particular, by the fact that Pecock’s corpus of religious books offers something new to late medieval reading culture, something that partly grows out of inherited ideas from the scholastic period and from fourteenth-century writers like Walter Hilton but partly emerges as an entirely new solution to problems of heresy and laxity of devotion among the laity. In this book, I examine what Pecock tells us about the role his books will—and should—play in the lives of his intended audience of lay readers, and I argue that this should open our eyes to the diversity of opinion in this period about the shape religious reform could take, about what was possible for, and appropriate for, lay readers, and about how the reading of books could revitalize and stabilize religious devotion in a culture that was heading toward Reformation.

One of Pecock’s particularly interesting contributions to late medieval reading culture, for example, is his notion that the private, silent reading of the individual layman and laywoman fosters an engagement with “communal structures” rather than disengagement. As I argue in chapters 2 and 3, Pecock’s project of invigorating Christian society as a whole starts with the training of each individual in theology, moral philosophy, and rational modes of thought. While he advises “alle thy cristen peple” to take his Reule of Crysten Religioun
“with hisse purtenauncis,” or companion books, “into use of ful bisy, ech day studying, leerning and comuning and afterward thereupon remembiring, and if not in ech day, yitt in holy daies, and that as bisili as peple ben in werk daies y-occupied aboute worldis winning” (Reule, 13), he does not mean for readers to neglect the “leeful occupaciouns aftir that men ben therto by goddis grace able, callid and assigned,” such as “marchaundising for the comoun profite” (Donet, 214). As Cynthia Baule points out, scholarly debate over the growth of private, as opposed to public, reading in late medieval England tends to emphasize that private reading is “abstract, silent, and disengaged with personal interaction.”32 Private reading fosters the growth of interiority and self-reflection, while public reading brings members of a community together through the warmth of “human contact seen in the relationship between speaker and hearer.”33 Just as Baule suggests that Capgrave’s Life of Saint Katharine “complicates the distinction between public and private reading,” making it clear that the “relationship between the oral and written can only be understood through the investigation of specific texts and contexts,” I suggest in chapter 3 that Pecock’s advocacy of very bookish spiritual and pedagogical practices among the laity does not necessarily result in their withdrawal from the outside world or the separation of the individual from the community.34 Rather, private study in Pecock’s corpus stimulates the growth of self-reflection and self-examination among lay readers at the same time as it ties individuals to the community, fostering communication and human contact.

For example, though his readers can meditate on his teaching in the “solitude of private chambers,” their engagement with the self is followed by and fulfilled in dialogue, discussion, and “felawlik comunicacioun” among members of the community, which fosters “group identity.”35 This communal engagement, which I discuss in chapter 7, is possible because Pecock’s books are designed to train readers in rational modes of thought and argument, creating a level playing field for a sort of academic discussion between clerical and lay members of the community. It is significant that the role models that Pecock provides for his lay readers are learned clerics who devote serious labor to study for the purpose of spreading God’s truths in service to the Christian community, rather than contemplative monks whose read-
ing is a form of withdrawal from the world. For Pecock’s readers, solitary reading is not a “prelude to an immediate encounter with the Divine” but a prelude to dynamic human interaction and vital discussion within the community of the faithful.36

Furthermore, Pecock’s readers are not isolated or distanced from Pecock himself in the experience of solitary study. Because Pecock’s personality and presence inform the text to such an extent through his interjections, directions to readers, references to his own experiences, and bold assertions about the difference between the texts that he has authored and other inferior books, I would argue that his writing does not foster a major separation between author and audience. The voice of the teacher is constantly heard, guiding the lay reader through the reading experience; as I suggest in the conclusion to this book, this may be a conscious effort to prevent the lay reader from confronting the text in an undirected way and an effort to control the reading process. Pecock’s constant presence in the text encourages a connection between author and reader, preventing the reader from feeling a sense of disengagement and distance in the solitary reading experience. Pecock’s emphasis on the value of solitary, bookish spiritual practices among the laity is particularly interesting, considering that he is writing at a time when lay studiousness and lay reading of vernacular religious texts created “anxieties” among Pecock’s contemporaries.37 Directing the lay folk to study and learning could open the door to uncontrolled lay speculation on religious doctrine: Karen Winstead observes the appearance of “anti-intellectual currents” in late medieval England, noting that some churchmen “worried that modeling intellectual piety to a laity not equipped to pursue it might lead to heretical speculation.”38 She adds, “Amateur lay ‘theologians,’ however orthodox, might undermine ecclesiastical authority through their pesky questions.”39 Pecock does not share the anxiety of some of his contemporaries that private reading among the laity leads to the loss of clerical control over the formation of Christian belief. Indeed, he suggests that solitary study of the right kinds of texts can bring individual members of the laity back under the supervision, authority, and control of the learned clergy, allowing the clergy to shape the development of faith and understanding in subtle yet powerful ways. Learning may provoke lay questioning, but the provision of a uniform
corpus of teaching materials on the matters most important to know also means an opportunity to direct lay speculation and lay thought in productive ways, and thereby to provide stronger roots for orthodox belief.

It is my view that Pecock’s books are designed to help construct a community of articulate and intellectual lay readers who will develop certain habits of thought and behavior such as an aptitude for learning, respect for learned clergymen, and the development of dialogue and amicable relations within the community. I believe that when Pecock looks around him, at members of his London community, at the reading material that is currently circulating, and at the state of lay devotion, he sees an opportunity to change the way things are done and thought in terms of sharing God’s word, structuring piety, and understanding religious truth. He sees a moment that is ripe with possibility and ready for change. He sees the chance to woo individuals to God in new ways and to create different norms of behavior and belief through the production of a vast corpus of materials that will form the basis for a new kind of religious community. These kinds of ambitions are rampant in the century after Pecock’s death as Catholic and Protestant reformers alike envision new ways of structuring patterns of belief and forms of conduct. Pecock’s own ambitions show that this kind of dynamism of reformist thought was not lacking in the fifteenth century.

Since the concept of textual community informs my reading of Pecock’s works, I should clarify what I mean by it before proceeding further. This term, coined by Brian Stock, has been variously applied by medievalists to the literature of medieval England. While Stock invented the term to “interpret the beliefs and activities of small, isolated, heretical and reformist groups in medieval Europe,” it has since been used to describe the communal gestation of a work as well as a kind of subculture of people who are brought together by virtue of owning or having access to a certain book. For Felicity Riddy, for example, “A textual community may be a social community, but it is also the community of those who do not know one another but who read the same book; a community of the living and the dead.” For Stock, textual communities are actual groups of people who recognize themselves as such, “microsocieties organized around the common under-
standing of a script,” who normally see themselves “as small units within the whole: they are the dissenters and reformers, whose social dramas are played out against the backdrop of a larger world.”

According to my reading of Stock’s work, a textual community is a group of people brought together by their common interpretation or reading of a particular text; this interpretation may be suggested to them by a charismatic leader, an interpres figure, whose literacy enables him to understand the text and then “pass his message on verbally to others.” The interpretation becomes the common possession of the group itself, however, through the discourse of the group. Stock writes that textual communities take their authority from this common understanding rather than from the inherited traditions of the past. Members of the group understand their chosen text—the Gospels, perhaps—in a way that differs sharply from how it has been read before. For Stock, it is this break with traditional norms that distinguishes a textual community from a reading community: the differing interpretations of a textual community “issue in rule-bound patterns of behaviour that break with what has come before.” As Stock writes, “By a process of absorption and reflection the behavioural norms of the group’s other members were eventually altered.”

The members are self-consciously part of a group, and they feel themselves to be different from others who understand texts like the Bible according to traditionally and perhaps institutionally established meanings; their own interpretations of the text justify and authenticate different types of group experience. The connection of one member to another, through a common understanding of a text, transcends “backgrounds, professional allegiances, and antecedent beliefs.” Paul Strohm suggests that the Lollards like those who gathered with John Claydon to read and hear the tract Lanterne of Light are a “splendid example” of Stock’s textual community.

There are some fundamental differences between Stock’s definition of textual community and my use of his concept to better understand Pecock’s project. While Stock is interested in real textual communities, men and women brought together by contact with particular texts, I am interested here in an imagined, ideal textual community—that conceived by Pecock as the intended audience for his corpus. In chapter 1, in my investigation of what we know about
Pecock’s audience, I distinguish between this imagined community and the actual readers of his historical audience, using the concepts of the intended reader, the historical reader, and the implied reader. This investigation is speculative, in large part, because we know so little about the reception of Pecock’s works. Unfortunately, I can offer no historical accounts of members of Pecock’s textual community who were interrogated by authorities and found to be influenced in important ways by common interpretations of his texts. I can, however, present both internal and historical evidence that helps us to understand some of the factors that may have influenced the reception of Pecock’s books, and some of the possible responses that his works may have elicited. As I will note in chapter 1, Pecock’s envisioned textual community is much broader than the particular community of London merchants that we can definitely connect with him. When Pecock declares that his works must be read by all Christian people, it is clear that he does not see his readers as a small “unit” within the whole of Christian society. His intention is to reform Christian society as a whole, starting at the level of the individual. My use of the concept of textual community also differs from Stock’s to take account of the fact that Pecock’s textual community is more textual. In Stock’s definition of textual community, only one literate is necessary—the interpres who understands the text and passes on his understanding of it to the other members of the community. Pecock’s envisioned textual community is far more text based: his readers are the members of the group, and though Pecock envisions that his books will have a life beyond the private study, in the form of oral readings and dialogue within the community, he is ultimately determined that even poor members of society should have access to copies (at least in the form of extracts) of his books. Oral transmission alone is not what Pecock intends.

As I demonstrate, however, Pecock’s envisioned textual community has much in common with Stock’s definition, and this is why I find his concept so useful. First, Pecock’s readers are to be brought together by their reading of his books. These books offer an alternative source of religious knowledge that is partly a reading or interpretation of two other texts: the Bible and the book of reason. These two source-
books provide the *materia* for the creation of Pecock’s *Reule of Crysten Religioun*: Pecock tells his readers that the writing of this book was inspired by the daughters of God, truths of universal philosophy “comprehending lawe of kinde and lawe of faith” (*Reule*, 32). Throughout his instruction in this book, on the seven essential matters of religious truth, Pecock is careful to specify which truths are rooted in the book of reason and which are rooted in the Bible. The law of kind, or book of reason, offers truths relating to God’s moral law that we can discover solely through the use of our rational faculties: these include our knowledge of man’s moral nature, the nature of the intellect and the soul, the kind of behavior that God expects from mankind, and our natural inclination to search for God—all truths that were discovered by the ancients like Aristotle. The Bible offers truths “into whos knowing men mowe not come by laboure of natural resoning, whiche trouthis and articles ben therefore knowun of us by feith oonly” (*Reule*, 10): these include knowledge about the nature of heaven, about Christ’s life on earth, and about the sacraments, which God shares with us through the Bible. The doctrine of the Trinity is an example of a truth regarding God’s nature that we cannot discover on our own: to teach the matter of “the thre persoonis and the propirtees of tho thre personnis in godhede,” Pecock must “bringe forth auctorite of feith writun in holi scripture” because this is a matter in which “re-soun may make no proof of certeinte or of sufficient likelihood if al feith be deducid and leid aside” (*Reule*, 23). Pecock interweaves truths from both sources in his treatment of subjects like God’s benefits, God’s punishments, and God’s moral law. For example, in his discussion of God’s benefits, he directs readers first to the knowledge about benefits that can be gleaned from the book of reason and second to the knowledge that can be derived only from the Bible. By transmitting to readers the most essential truths that God has transmitted to us through the book of reason and the Bible, Pecock provides a comprehensive resource of knowledge for a full Christian education. In terms of their content, then, it can be said that Pecock’s books do not contain radically new interpretations of Christian belief or moral philosophy; instead, they condense the most important truths for Christians to know from the two most authoritative books available.
What makes Pecock’s works innovative, instead, is his organization of this knowledge. As I noted above, for example, Aquinas, in his *Summa theologiae*, saves the sacraments for the last book, while Pecock treats them variously under the topics of God’s moral law, which we know by faith, and God’s benefits, which we know by faith. Pecock organizes moral teaching into a new system of four tables, replacing the Decalogue, which presents doctrine in an insufficient manner. The articles of faith are also presented differently in Pecock’s system: while the institutional church delivers articles of faith to the laity in a “nakid forme,” Pecock provides rational evidences that help readers to “conceive, perceive, and trowe the same thing” (*Reule*, 91). By condensing the most important matters for all to know in a kind of *summa theologiae*, which asks lay readers to learn and understand religion differently, Pecock proposes a break with traditional teaching of Christian doctrine: the four tables, the seven matters, and the teaching of articles of faith completely reform the way that moral precepts and Christian faith are learned by the laity. For example, Pecock’s readers learn the twelve articles of the Creed from Pecock’s teaching on matters such as God’s nature and benefits. The articles of belief in the Creed “touching the godhede and touching his benefete in mak- ing creatures” are taught in various different places in Pecock’s books, according to his own system of seven matters of Christian knowledge (*Donet*, 103). Pecock takes a completely new approach to the organization of doctrine and the articles of belief, offering readers sources for learning Christian behavior and belief that are different from the “comoun rekening of the vii deedly sinnis” (*Donet*, 105), the teaching on the “vii giftis of the holy goost,” the teaching of “sacraments of cristis ordinaunce in the newe lawe” (*Donet*, 117), and the “comoun foorme of the x comaundementis” (*Donet*, 145), all of which must be replaced by Pecock’s forms, despite the fact that these “doctrines, scolis and prechingis ben so famose, and so moche apprised and sett by of clerkis and of the lay partie” (*Donet*, 102).

Passing on a message, in textual form, from his own understanding of the Bible and the book of reason, Pecock can be seen as a kind of charismatic *interpres* figure who presents to other members of the textual community the truths that they need to know in new forms.
When the universal truths of philosophy and faith visit Pecock in a dream vision described above, they enable him to hear a message, as “so many reformers, heretics, and mystics” did. What he hears is not exactly new doctrine, or truths that diverge in a major way from orthodox belief. What Pecock does differently is to present these truths to lay readers, whose reading material does not customarily contain extensive teachings on moral philosophy, such as teachings on the passions, on moral vices, on the various powers of the soul, on involuntary and voluntary deeds, on “meenal” virtues, on the distinction between “kunningal” virtue and moral virtue, and on the difference between “sciencial” faith and “opinional” faith. He also provides detailed teaching on the Christian faith, on theological questions including the difference between “grace moving or stiring” and “grace allowing or accepting” (Reule, 1), the importance of Christ’s sacrifice for securing man’s salvation, the relations between the persons of the Godhead, and the difference between making amends for sin and moving God, in his infinite mercy, to pardon sin. Pecock’s task is to inscribe truths of philosophy and faith in vernacular books, offering readers a new way of understanding the Christian codes of conduct that they have been taught through systems like the seven deadly sins and the Ten Commandments. When the universal truths tell Pecock to approach the teaching of religion in this new way, they assure him that it will help him to win more lovers for God. Pecock’s divinely approved rational treatment of doctrine must help to create a common understanding of doctrine and faith among the laity that breaks with the inherited traditions of the past.

Pecock also breaks new ground in the emphasis he puts on his readers’ intellectual development. Rather than relying passively on the opinions of the auctores and the teachings of the church, readers must learn to work through processes of argumentation themselves in order to distinguish between heterodox and orthodox belief: we can see Pecock insisting on this approach to religious instruction in his lack of citations of authoritative texts and his extended arguments from reason. The authority of the community comes from training in the book of reason rather than from inherited interpretations of religious truths. Though the beliefs of members may not be different
from orthodox doctrine, the way of arriving at these beliefs, through logical analysis rather than passive acceptance and memorization of doctrine provided by the clergy, is different.

Pecock’s readers will feel themselves to be part of a group by learning his seven matters and four tables alongside one another, in schools, in public congregations, in small councils, and even in the home. As I suggest in chapter 2, Pecock’s plans for formal lay education in his corpus create the setting in which the textual community will come together as a group. His readers are invited to be self-conscious of their participation within the group: Pecock often makes clear the distinction between the kind of person who is a “scoler” in his corpus (Donet, 126)—someone who is considered part of a group of “greet wittid and leerned lay men” (Donet, 161) or of “wise and discreet cristien peple” (Reule, 365)—and the kind of person who is mired in error, caught up in superstition, or idling in the infantile stages of intellectual development (Folewer, 13). Scholarly readers are literate, capable, and accustomed to thinking through difficult matters, and Pecock never ceases to insist upon this readerly identity throughout his introductions to his books. His readers’ backgrounds, antecedent beliefs, and professional allegiances are transcended in their textually organized education: Pecock’s scheme for education embraces poor men who can afford only extracts of his books (Donet, 177) and rich men of the clergy and laity who can get involved in both the learning process and the production of copies of Pecock’s books, “yvel and weel disposid men of the lay partie” (Reule, 19), men and women, boys and girls.

It is important to note, however, that these people may not share the sense of group identity to the same degree as Lollard communities that Shannon McSheffrey has studied. McSheffrey notes that individuals in these groups were “connected to one another by their common participation in clandestine gatherings, who willfully and collectively differentiated themselves from the majority (and, in their eyes, godless) Church.”53 She warns, though, that “the cohesiveness of these groups of heretics should not be exaggerated” and that many “drifted in and out.”54 Members of Pecock’s textual community are invited to willfully differentiate themselves from a number of godless others—those who have been misled by Wyclif and his followers, those
who say their prayers like inarticulate babies and old men, those who spew passages of the Bible without proper understanding, and those who do not even understand the meanings of the words they throw around in debate with clerics. Pecock encourages readers to see distinctions between the well-trained, rational reader and the foolish, dull-witted, even godless other.

Finally, Pecock proposes spiritual and intellectual practices that constitute changes and refinements to everyday ways of doing things, from prayer to public worship to communal interactions. As I suggest in chapter 5, the processes of learning in Pecock’s books are a kind of “ritual of self-definition,” especially in terms of the way that readers are expected to learn scholastic modes of thought and rational argumentation. Stock writes that these rituals of self-definition are “processes of conversion, initiation, and confirmation” that help to form the ideas “that make a group cohere.”55 In the case of Pecock’s textual community, systematic training in his corpus, through various levels of study, is a kind of process of conversion that turns the lay reader into a “scoler” in divinity. Pecock’s texts also propose new forms of communication and cooperation between lay and clerical members of the community. Pecock attempts to foster the “horizontal energies of group consciousness” by bringing laity and clergy together in the activity of learning—energies that are “essential” to Stock’s definition of textual community.56

By understanding how Pecock’s envisioned textual community works, we can better understand how lay reading practices can revitalize and stabilize orthodox religion by affecting modes of thought, patterns of behavior, forms of communal engagement, the development of interiority and self-reflection, the formation of individual identity, and the development of group identity. Lay reading practices, rooted in Pecock’s corpus of vernacular materials, can change the structure of Christian belief and practice. The intention of this book is to draw together these insights, offered both directly and indirectly throughout Pecock’s writings, about the power of books and learning to change the very fabric of the Christian community.

The seven chapters that form the body of this book focus on the following subjects: Pecock’s historical and implied textual communities, the structure and foundations of the textual community, the nature of
reading practices within the textual community, the books at the cen-
ter of the textual community, and the relations among members of the
textual community. The first chapter offers observations on the nature
of Pecock's audience and the possible responses that his books may
have elicited. The second chapter is on the educational system and
processes on which the textual community depends: I examine the
significance of Pecock's plan for systematic, uniform, and formal reli-
gious education. The third chapter looks at the place that this theo-
logical training occupies in the lives of lay readers by analyzing
Pecock's treatment of the mixed life. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chap-
ters focus on the uses of books. Chapter 4 is about the role of Pecock's
books in the devotional life, particularly in practices of ritual reading
and meditative reading. The fifth and sixth chapters consider the
structure, nature, and aims of two very different reading experiences
by examining, respectively, the role of the book of reason and of the
Bible in Pecock's textual community. Chapter 5, on the book of rea-
son, considers the role that Pecock's books play in training readers to
learn God's moral law. Chapter 6 describes the much more limited
role and use of the Bible in the textual community. In the seventh
chapter, I focus more broadly on Pecock's understanding of the rela-
tionship between the clergy and the laity within his idealized textual
community. The book concludes by considering the significance of
Pecock's oeuvre within his cultural moment.

Perhaps what interests me most, in this study of Pecock's vernacu-
lar theology, is Pecock's sense of the power of books like his to influ-
ence relations in society, to change belief systems, to shape behavioral
patterns, and to alter modes of cognition; what interests me is the way
that his books are set up to achieve all of this. I argue that Pecock's
attempt to educate lay readers is more than an effort to supply reli-
gious instruction: it is an attempt to establish and unite a community
of readers around his books, to influence the way that these readers
behave and relate to one another, and to change the way that they
understand the world and their place in it. Indeed, Pecock is con-
vinced that conformity to orthodoxy and religious renewal depend on
this very textual, bookish project: it is his aim to harness the power of
texts to change the way that the laity conceives of religion.