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Ideologists, Instigators or ‘Stage Props’? Priests and Popular Protest in the English Rising of 1381

Abstract: Uprisings and revolts were a frequent phenomenon in the 14th and 15th century. The role priests played in these events has lately been reassessed by some scholars. It has become increasingly clear that popular movements were much less dependent on clerical leadership than previously thought. Using the example of the so-called English ‘Peasants’ Revolt’ of 1381, where priests undeniably played a considerable role, I argue that there are three distinct ways of thinking about priestly involvement in protest movements, where it did in fact occur: As ideologists, as instigators and as mere props for political theater. These perspectives should be distinguished, yet they should also be integrated into a model that leaves room for the agency of priests and popular movements alike.

Keywords: Kent, Essex, John Ball, Richard II, Thomas Walsingham, Jean Froissart, Thomas Brinton

In the summer of 1381, a popular uprising of unprecedented scale erupted in the English counties of Kent and Essex, not far from London. From there it spread all the way north to Yorkshire.¹ Although it lasted for only a little more than a month it became famous under the label ‘Peasants’ Revolt’, an invention of the 19th century today considered a misnomer by most historians.² They point out that although the participants of the rising often came from rural areas and were, at least in their majority, agricultural producers, being a part of a ‘peasant movement’ was certainly not the way in which they conceived of their actions. But what it was they thought they were doing instead remains a hotly debated issue.³ In what follows, I shall make the case that the line of questioning pursued in this volume, i.e. exploring the political uses of the power of the priests, can shed some new light on the question of the ‘ideology’ informing the English rising of 1381. After giving an overview of the events of the summer of 1381, I shall examine the role attributed to priests in the rising in three steps, going backwards, so to speak, from modern interpretations to medieval reports and finally to some of the actions of the rebels. The point I will be arguing is that all three

¹ A highly readable account has recently been published by Barker 2014. Eiden 1995 offers by far the most thorough one, but unfortunately no English translation is available.

² Strohm 2008.

³ The latest summary has recently been provided by Prescott 2016.

perspectives are somewhat defective on their own and should therefore be integrated into a more comprehensive model that centers the dialogical relationship between protest movements and their interlocutors from the clergy.

The events of the Rising of 1381 are – as late medieval revolts go – very well documented, so in order to keep the cast of characters down to a manageable number, each chapter will be built around one historical figure, each of whom played a distinct part in the events. The first chapter will examine how modern scholars viewed the role of John Ball, often seen as the main ‘ideologist’ of the movement, while the second will use the historical writing of Jean Froissart to make a point about the way in which the ruling elite made sense of the role of priests in popular protest. The final chapter will look at a brief encounter between the rebels and the Bishop of Rochester, Thomas Brinton.

The movement of 1381

Before zooming in on these three characters, I shall use a brief overview of the events of the uprising to get one common misconception about the “power of the priests” in late medieval revolts out of the way: There is little reason to believe that preaching – or any other kind of priestly activity – triggered the rising of 1381 in the sense of constituting its root cause. Samuel Cohn has recently shown that medieval popular movements in general did not require the leadership of priests – although on occasion they may have used it.⁴ Instead of following the highly partial medieval sources in belittling lay commoners’ capacity for self-organization, the rising can be much more readily explained as a collective reaction to a case of government overreach.

The background of the unrest of 1381 is England’s “Hundred Years’ War” with France, which from an English perspective had been going terribly for almost a decade. After the widely revered king Edward III had died in 1377, the power of the monarch rested in the hands of a council, since his successor, his grandson Richard II, was a boy of only ten on the day of his coronation.⁵ The disastrous military situation on the continent strained the royal finances. Although regular, almost annual taxation had been normalized over the course of the 14th century, taxes were still one-off and had to be agreed to individually by a parliament. In fact, parliaments were primarily held to secure the finances of the crown by passing taxes and subsidies and the monarch was under no obligation to convene a parliament unless he needed money. In the 1370s, in these semi-regular get-togethers of England’s ‘political community’, the rich townspeople, rural gentry and great lords repeatedly butted heads over who had to foot the bill for the war.

⁴ Cohn 2006 and Cohn 2012.

⁵ On the council see Saul 1997, 24–55.

One way to avert this conflict, for a while anyway, was to shift the pressure of taxation downward to the commoners who were not represented in the parliaments. An obvious way of doing this was to experiment with new modes of taxation. And so, in 1377, parliament agreed to a poll tax, which was calculated by the number of household members instead of by movable goods, thereby letting wealthier people off comparatively easily. Perhaps not surprisingly, this exercise was repeated in 1378.

Although this second poll tax was fraught with staggering levels of tax evasion, which probably already signaled popular resentment, a parliament at Northampton, hastily convened in November 1380 and responding to a dramatic shortfall in royal finances, agreed to a third one, thus almost certainly creating the impression that poll taxes were on their way to becoming an annual burden. To make matters worse, this time parliament failed to make any meaningful provisions as to how the resulting inequities were to be ameliorated: A toothless provision that "those of adequate means shall help those of lesser means as far as they are able"⁶ was counteracted by another, stating that nobody was to pay more than twenty shillings.⁷ In any event, the rate of one shilling per person was "exceptionally high".⁸

Even this manifestly unfair act of parliament, however, did not cause a revolt right away. The reaction of the English population at first was tax evasion on such a massive scale that we should think of it in terms of an organized boycott. The organizational origins of the movement of 1381, although it becomes visible only later that year, probably lie in this collective effort to subvert the collection of the tax. It was very successful: If the rolls that documented the collection had been correct – which everybody realized they were not – England would have lost a third of its population within a matter of only three years.⁹ Not surprisingly, the amount of money collected was nowhere near the sum the Crown required. Therefore, after it had become apparent that the realm was rife with tax evasion, commissions were sent into the counties in order to investigate the matter and find people who still had to pay up. It was this ill-advised decision which triggered the uprising.

The first instance of militant resistance occurred in Brentwood (Essex) on May 30, 1381 and was directed against a commission headed by Justice of the Peace John of Bampton.¹⁰ He had summoned local villagers to discuss the matter of taxation but was violently assaulted and forced to flee. Contrary to the impression the sources try

6 RP VI (1377–1384), 191 : "les suffisantz selonc lour afferant eident les meindres".

7 Gillespie 1998.

8 Dobson 1983, 112.

9 For a brief overview of the three consecutive poll taxes see Fryde 1996, 44 and Kaeuper 1988, 354. An edition has been provided by Fenwick 1998, 2001 and 2005, who, however, calls the amount of evasion into question and assumes a larger number of exempt people.

10 This is based on the account of the Anonimale Chronicle (AC 1927, 134), according to Eiden the documentary evidence by and large corroborates this version of the events, see Eiden 1995, 190–196.

to create, this was most likely no spontaneous eruption, but a calculated escalation.¹¹ By the early summer of 1381, unseen by the authorities and therefore hidden from our sources, a movement had formed, led by the more well-to-do local elites of the villages in Kent and Essex.¹² Its participants certainly knew that commissions were coming and it seems as if they had been preparing for a signal to strike.¹³

Within a matter of days huge bands of people came together in Essex and Kent and local acts of disobedience can be traced in the sources all over the region. The insurgents demonstratively burned written documents in public places, freed prisoners and vandalized the manor houses of unpopular nobles – not nobles in general, they selected their targets with great care.¹⁴ While the revolt continued in the southwestern counties and simultaneously spread to the west and to the north, large bands marched from Essex and Kent towards London, where they handed over petitions to the royal government, calling, among other things, for the heads of royal officials, the Duke of Lancaster and for an end to the institution of servitude. On June 12 they gained access to the city, where they laid waste to the houses of their political opponents, sacking, for instance, the Duke of Lancaster's famous Savoy Palace. Nowhere does their desire to be seen not as lawless rioters but as coherent movement become as obvious as in this episode, when they demonstratively refrained from plundering the goods of the richest man of England, destroying them instead. One of the chroniclers, who grudgingly reports on the evident restraint the rebels showed, claims – probably in order to portray them as brutal savages in spite of reporting evidence to the contrary – that they threw one of their own into the flames of the burning palace as a punishment for looting, “crying that they were zealots of truth and justice, not robbers or thieves”.¹⁵

Events quickly came to a head in London and the government succeeded in dispersing the crowds in a confusing turn on June 15 when after several days of looting, negotiations, and extra-legal executions, the boy-king Richard seized upon the claim the rebels had been repeating constantly, namely that they were the king's most loyal fol-

11 Brooks 1985 and also Ronan 1989 were the first attempt to systematically reconstruct evidence from the sources that the rebels were by no means as disorganized and chaotic as the chroniclers make them out to be.

12 Dyer 1984.

13 Brooks 1985. The temporal proximity to the view of frankpledge, which allowed them to gather bearing arms, is likely no coincidence, see Dyer 1984, 14. For the Frankpledge see White 1998 and Schofield 1996.

14 Fryde 1996, 46 highlights a very important fact, when he writes: “Nobles were given a bad fright, though the risings were threatening their properties and especially their estate records more than their persons. Any killing [. . .] that took place occurred in London and a few other towns. One outstanding feature of events in the countryside was the rarity of murders and the absence of lethal class animosities”.

15 Knighton 1995, 214–215: “Vnus autem illorum nephandorum sumpsit unam pulcrum peciam argenteam, in gremioque abscondit, quod videns alius et sociis referens, ipsum cum pecia in ignem proiecerunt, dicentes se zelatores veritatis et iusticie, non fures aut latrones”.

lowers. Richard II, after negotiations in London's tournament-venue of Smithfield had gone sideways and seen the rebels' negotiator struck down and killed (the famous Wat Tyler, whose name is sometimes eponymous with the revolt as a whole), declared himself their 'captain' and succeeded in leading them away from the city long enough for the urban militia to be mobilized.¹⁶ This led to the collapse of the movement around London.¹⁷ The revolt raged on in the counties, but the authorities had regained the initiative and a successful campaign of repression was launched immediately.

Measured against the radical program that was formulated in the petitions, the uprising was a failure – the petitions had called for the end of villeinage, abolition of the labor legislation designed to keep wages down in spite of the labor shortage caused by the Black Death,¹⁸ and basically an end of all noble and church privileges "except for the king's own lordship".¹⁹ It is worth remembering, however, that it is probably no coincidence that the third poll tax was also the last. On the minds of England's ruling elite, the rebellion remained a lasting shock, an unexpected natural catastrophe that begged an explanation. This feeling is captured in the verses of an anonymous poet who, writing in 1382, connected it with an outbreak of plague and an earthquake that had occurred that year.

The Rysing of the comuynes in londe (The rising of the commons in the land),
 The Pestilens, and the eorthe-quake (The pestilence and the earthquake),
 Theose threo thinges, I vnderstonde, (These three things, I understand),
 Beo-tokenes the grete vengauunce & wrake (Betoken the great vengeance and ruin)
 That schulde falle for synnes sake (That shall come to pass because of sin)²⁰

The poets' interpretation of the rising brings us right back to the question of the power of the priest: The three events, in his view, are divine warnings to refrain from sin, directed, presumably, at everyone. But in the following lines he makes it clear that clerics are needed in order to interpret these signs correctly:²¹

¹⁶ One chronicler imagines Richard's words as follows: "Non causemini, nec sitis tristes de morte proditoris et ribaldi. Ego enim ero rex uester, ego capitaneus et ductor uester". Walsingham 2003, 438.

¹⁷ The details are hard to reconstruct, but Eiden 1995, 257–262 succeeds in building a convincing approximation. A theory why this cunning move worked will be presented in my dissertation.

¹⁸ For labor legislation and the cultural phenomena attached to it, see Knight 2000.

¹⁹ Dobson 1983, 164. For the original see AC 1927, 147: "et qe nulle seignur ne aueroit seignurie fors swelment estre proporcione entre toutz gentz, fors tansoulement la seignurie la roy".

²⁰ Robbins 1959, 59. My translation.

²¹ See Pugh 2000, 99: "The poet argues that falsehood is a sin subject to God's punishment, a punishment meted out by both the rebellion itself and the earthquake. The answer to this problematic falsehood, however, is the knowledge of the clerks: [. . .] the author locates temporal authority in the clerks; their knowledge is privileged as the locus of proper judgment against the rebellious classes".

As this Clerkes conne de-clare (As the clerics can explain)
 Now may we chese to leue or take (Now we may choose to take it or leave it),
 Ffor warnyng haue we to ben ware (For we have a warning to be careful),²²

The implied assertion about priestly power in this poem is that it should have a monopoly on interpreting social reality and on determining what belonged to the natural order of the world and was thus outside of the realm of politics.²³ The rising the poet responds to, however, was in itself proof that this logic was in fact a double-edged sword. Priests did figure prominently in it in various roles, because in 14th century England their power and authority was a powerful instrument.

Ideologists: John Ball's role in modern interpretations

When considering the role 'the power of the priest' played in the rising of 1381, one clarification seems necessary from the outset. In the sources that report the events priests, in the sense of 'ordained men of the church', are ubiquitous. Their roles, however, differ widely and do not necessarily have much to do with their social function of belonging to a group of people "authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God".²⁴ The most prominent victim of the rebels, Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was probably beheaded for his role as the king's chancellor. The campaign of repression was led by the bishop of Norwich, but he acted mostly as a royal agent and it is hard to see how his church background would have informed his war-like actions.²⁵ Men of the church also often appear as the butt of protest, we have a detailed account of the fierce conflict between the rebellious townsfolk and the powerful abbot of St. Albans, for instance, but this may have more to do with their role as particularly unpopular landlords. Moreover, it almost goes without saying that our sources were authored by men of the church, from the chroniclers who unanimously denounced the revolt to the humble scribes who documented the rebels' criminal persecution in the courts.

²² Robbins 1959, 59. My translation.

²³ Crane 1992, 201–210. Paul Strohm carefully dissects the strategies employed by the chroniclers to delegitimize the rebels, Strohm, 1992, 36–42. Justice highlights that the chroniclers contrast their own literacy with the supposed "mute idiocy of the peasant", Justice 1994, 18. Especially when they were angry, the "peasants'" incompatibility with the political sphere became evident, because to the minds of the chroniclers "peasant anger was opposed to thought", Freedman 1998, 179.

²⁴ The definition given by Merriam-Webster's dictionary for the word "priest".

²⁵ Although with Bishop Despenser things might be more complicated – he is, after all, famous especially for personally leading a crusade against the followers of the Avignonese pope shortly after the revolt, see Miller 2002.

Many of these men were ordained, to be sure, and by this definition 'priests'. So clearly, asking what the role of 'priests' was in 1381 allows for a whole array of answers, as is to be expected in a society in which institutions affiliated with the church were important political entities and, in spite of growing rates of lay-literacy, also dominated most intellectual activities.

There is, however, something that, if not entirely unique, sets the Rising of 1381 apart from other medieval revolts, and that is much more directly linked to the political use of religious knowledge in popular politics.²⁶ There is a noticeable participation of clerics in the ranks of the insurgents. Herbert Eiden has documented at least 35 members of the clergy who participated in the revolt on the side of the rebels.²⁷ This suggests that in 1381 the power of the priest was more important than can be said for many other cases of popular unrest in the later Middle Ages. This requires an explanation, but has often been ignored, because the large and famous uprisings, like the one of 1381, have been considered the prototypes of later medieval protest movements, not the exceptions they actually were.²⁸

By far the most famous priest to participate in the English rising of 1381 was John Ball. Considering his lowly status, we know quite a few things about his life, even before the revolt. He was a member of the lower clergy, probably a chantry priest, men who read mass for the souls of the deceased for pay.²⁹ He may have hailed from York originally, but one source has him preaching in Essex as early as 1364.³⁰ He seems to have stayed there, because he got into conflict with the church authorities in Essex only two years later, when he was banned from preaching, something that would happen to him again and again from this time on. Archbishop Sudbury personally ordered him to be arrested in December 1376 and excommunicated him.³¹ He must have been released after a while but was detained again only a month before the revolt erupted in late April, 1381.³² From this incarceration in Maidstone he was freed by the insurgents,³³ probably

²⁶ In the last decade or so, the term 'popular politics' has increasingly been employed by researchers to capture the political behavior and actions of those sections of society that lacked a legitimate voice in political discourse. Hinck 2019, 16.

²⁷ Eiden 1995, 442–447.

²⁸ The „peculiar” and by no means representative nature of the movement of 1381 was highlighted by Cohn 2010.

²⁹ Kowaleski 2006, 255.

³⁰ Eiden 1995, 443–444 and Logan 1968, 63–64. There is some room for speculation that he originated from Essex, this seems conceivable, if farfetched. See Bird/Stephenson 1976.

³¹ CPR XVI, 415. This may be related to the so called 'Good Parliament', a connection on which I shall elaborate below and in greater detail in my forthcoming dissertation.

³² Eiden 1995, 443 and Logan, 1968, 63–65.

³³ Or, possibly, Bishop's Stortford, see Barker 2014, 212. This has wide-ranging implications, as Eiden 1995, 219 fn. 16 notes, because if Ball was not broken out of Maidstone prison, it is virtually impossible for him to have even been present at Blackheath.

on June 11, well into the second week of the revolt.³⁴ The chronicles tell us that he delivered a sermon just before the rebels entered London, on June 12 – Corpus Christi – that was attended by many thousand people.³⁵ Interestingly, it is unclear what he was doing in the crucial days thereafter, when the movement controlled London and negotiated with the government. The chronicles rarely mention him and if they do, they simply assume that he was a leader in a general sense.³⁶ What is more, documentary evidence mentioning him is lacking altogether for this crucial time. After the collapse of the revolt on June 15 he apparently fled, but he was arrested, put on trial and executed on July 15 in St. Albans, with one of the chroniclers, Thomas Walsingham, as an eye-witness.

The fact that Ball had been a preacher for well over a decade makes it likely that he was well-known by “the common people, whom he always strove to entice to his sermons by pleasing words, and slander of the prelates”,³⁷ (as Walsingham informs us) and that he was freed for this reason. Modern scholars have often made him out to be the movement’s ‘ideologist’.³⁸ If this is to imply that John Ball’s preaching shaped the ideology of the 1381 rebels, this is a problematic proposition, but surely any treatment of the power of the priest in the movement still has to start with him.

There can be little doubt that John Ball was a prominent figure among the rebels and the date his arrest was ordered, April 26, 1381,³⁹ makes one suspect that in times of mounting popular disaffection Archbishop Simon Sudbury wanted to take a notorious troublemaker off the board. Ball had perhaps been preaching against the poll tax or against the commissions enforcing its collection.⁴⁰ This would have certainly fit his profile, but the order for his arrest – in as much as it makes reference to the content of his preaching – does not mention this. This, however, should come as no surprise, because it was his invective against the pope in Rome,⁴¹ which provided the grounds for excommunication. Sudbury denies him the power of the priest, stating that he demands the arrest of John Ball, “who we do not consider a priest, but rather a schismatic and an apostate”.⁴² Another hint that Ball may have been directly involved in

³⁴ Eiden 1995, 204.

³⁵ For the importance of Corpus Christi see Aston 1994, but also Justice 1994, 157 and *passim*. See also Cohn/Aiton 2013, 295.

³⁶ Prescott 2004, 561.

³⁷ Dobson 1983, 374. For the Latin original see Walsingham 2003, 544: “Nec defuerunt ei de communibus auditores, quos semper studuit per detracciones prelatorum, et placencia verba, allicere ad sermonem”.

³⁸ A term employed, albeit in passing, by Eiden 1995, 204: “beherrschende[r] ‘Ideologe’”.

³⁹ Logan 1968, 64. For the full document see Conc. Brit. III, 152–153.

⁴⁰ The commission for Essex was established on March 16, the one for Kent on May 3, so only the former can have been active prior to his arrest. See Dobson 1983, 122.

⁴¹ As opposed to the one in Avignon, presumably.

⁴² Conc. Brit. III, 152 “Johannem Balle, quem non presbyterum, sed potius schismaticum et apostaticum reputamus.”

the organization of the resistance in Essex is Walsingham's claim that Ball had predicted that he would be freed.⁴³

In light of this evidence, it is entirely possible, even likely, that John Ball was informed about, or even part of, early organizational efforts against the poll tax. His role, however, must have been relatively minor, because otherwise it is hard to imagine that the sources, whose narrative this would fit perfectly, would not tell us so.⁴⁴ After all, they left out no chance to emphasize the rebels' incapability of organizing the movement without help. Moreover, in May, when the movement in Essex was preparing to face the commissions, Ball was almost certainly in prison. Perhaps even more tellingly, freeing him does not seem to have been a top priority for the rebels. If we accept that the revolt broke out in the last days of May, surely efforts to free the 'leading ideologist' of the movement would have taken place before June 11, when he was finally broken out of jail – along with all other prisoners.⁴⁵ The concrete evidence for Ball being something like the movements' ideologist amounts to very little, and is mostly conjecture. It seems just as likely that the rebels got Ball out of prison because he was a famous preacher whose theology fit into their worldview. Ball, sitting in jail, waiting to be released, appears more like an object of the movement's actions, than as its guiding light.

But what if John Ball had a significant effect on the rebels' ideology after his escape? This, too, does not seem likely, judged by the only two actions that we know he carried out on the rebels behalf in the four days that separate him regaining his freedom and him fleeing London after the movement's collapse. For one thing, we know that he preached a well-attended sermon at Blackheath just outside of London on the day after his release.⁴⁶ In it, he almost certainly developed a theological reasoning for the rebels' actions. The chroniclers' renditions of Ball's sermon are extremely powerful, albeit to modern ears in quite the opposite way than their authors intended.⁴⁷ When Walsingham reports that Ball opened with the vernacular proverb: "When Adam delved, and Eve span/ Who was then a gentleman?" he is sure to command our sympathies, but such sentiments, to the chronicler, were a "self-evident absurdity".⁴⁸

⁴³ Walsingham 2003, 544–546.

⁴⁴ Tellingly Walsingham (= Dobson 1983, 374) says that Ball "instructed the people that tithes ought not to be paid and that tithes and offering ought to be withheld", but mentions nothing of taxes.

⁴⁵ In a similar vein Prescott 2004, 560. Barker 2014, 212–213 does not buy into this hypothesis and maintains that Ball was not freed in Maidstone. The jailbreak there, she argues, was unrelated. She does not, however, contest, the extremely late date of June 11, if anything her account demotes Ball's role even further.

⁴⁶ Barker 2014, 213–216 even maintains that the whole sermon is an invention of Thomas Walsingham and never actually took place, at least not at Blackheath.

⁴⁷ Cf. Dobson 1983, 369: "Above all, the famous sermon which Froissart put into the mouth of John Ball has had an effect on his modern readers quite the opposite of what the author can have intended. As translated by Berners, Ball's sermon becomes the most moving plea for social equality in the history of the English language."

⁴⁸ Strohm 1992, 40.

It is debatable if they are more or less faithful to Balls' social and religious thought or a mere representation of the chroniclers' own fears about the subversive potential of Christian religion.⁴⁹ I tend towards the former,⁵⁰ but however that may be, it bears remembering that the people John Ball preached for had already gone through the considerable trouble of being on the road for several days to march to London and mobilize for the movement at an enormous personal risk. It is implausible to assume that only now, after the fact, they received a structured reasoning for this behavior.⁵¹ Unless we assume some kind of mass hypnosis, the people who listened to Ball's sermon had already made up their minds without one. For them, at least at this point in time, Ball did not *create* an ideology, but *confirm* beliefs they already held.

The other thing we can be fairly certain John Ball did, was writing messages for the movement, poems, to be precise. They have become well known under the name 'John Ball's letters'.⁵² One of them was used as evidence in his trial, "found in the sleeve of a man who was to be hanged for taking part in the rebellion"⁵³ and was copied by Thomas Walsingham, who then continues:

John Ball confessed that he had written this letter, that he had sent it to the commons, and admitted many other things.⁵⁴

We know that sending this kind of letters must have been a common practice among the rebels, because another chronicler, Henry Knighton, writing shortly after the events, copied five different but stylistically very similar ones, apparently without quite knowing what to make of them.⁵⁵ Two of these also explicitly purport to be written by John Ball, one representative example reads as follows:

John Ball greets you all well and would have you know that he has rung your bell
Now for right and might, and will and skill, and God speed all.
Now is the time: Lady help Jesus, thy Son, and thy Son his Father,

⁴⁹ Arnold 2009, 152–153 provides a list of examples that can probably be added to.

⁵⁰ A point made by Freedman 1999, 267: "Of course the chroniclers were aghast at the danger to order and hierarchy, but they did not live in a world completely deaf to the plaintive voice of those under them. Their reports depict this voice in stylized terms, yet authentic details are revealed through chinks in what might otherwise seem an effective hegemonic discourse".

⁵¹ In a similar vein John Arnold writes about the young shepherd Hans Behem who preached unlicensed radical sermons about equality to thousands of German pilgrims in the little village of Niklas-hausen, near Würzburg a century later: "Behem was always, to some large degree, the creation of his audience: those who flocked from southern Germany came to the Tauber valley principally because of their own projected expectations and hopes." Arnold 2009, 155.

⁵² Although it is possible, that he may not have actually authored all of them, see Prescott 2004.

⁵³ Walsingham 2003, 549.

⁵⁴ Walsingham 2003, 549.

⁵⁵ For an introduction see Justice 1994, 13–66.

to make a good end, in the name of the Trinity, to that which is begun.
Amen, amen, for love, amen.⁵⁶

These letters puzzled not only the chroniclers – Walsingham observed that they were “full of riddles”⁵⁷ – but scholars debated them for a long time, too.⁵⁸ Steven Justice probably solved the mystery when he argued that these letters were intended to be used as broadsides and that they were meant to be read out loud in public, for instance in front of the parish church.⁵⁹ It is uncertain, whether John Ball wrote the letters that are given in a different name.⁶⁰ But even if he did, the rebels then copied and circulated them among themselves and what is immediately obvious – and more important to the point under consideration here –, is that they cannot have been intended to convey any kind of ideology to people who were not already informed. Their content and language evoke popular vernacular sermons, and according to Justice we should think of them as “shorthand” for texts that were common knowledge among literate and illiterate people alike.⁶¹ To give just one example, the rhyme of “will” and “skill”, used in the poem above, appears in the very beginning of the “most popular English poem of the Middle ages”,⁶² the *Prick of Conscience*, a didactic poem that had tremendous influence on 14th century vernacular sermons.⁶³ Rosell Hope Robbins was therefore right when he observed that John Ball, in his letters, turned omnipresent literary clichés about the sad state of affairs in the realm of England and about the reign of sin into a call to action by adding lines like “God do bote for nowe is time” (“God make the reckoning, for now is the time”).⁶⁴ But this did not make him a “priestly theoretician” of the movement.⁶⁵ If the power of the priest was first and foremost preaching the word of God, it is almost as if by writing the letters the rebels were trying to put this power into a portable device, thus actually separating it from

56 For the Middle English original see Knighton 1995, 222:

Ion Balle gretyþ 3ow wele alle and doþ 3ow to understande, he haþ rungen oure belle.
Nowe ryzt and myzt, wylle and skylle. God spede every y dele.
Noew is tyme lady helpe to Iesu þi sone, and þi sone to his fadur,
to make a gode ende, in þe name of þe Trinite, of þat is begunne.
Amen, Amen, pur charite, Amen.

57 Walsingham 2003, 548: “Aingmatibus plenam”.

58 Maddicott 1986, 138 links them to a tradition of “poems of social protest in Early Fourteenth-Century England”.

59 Justice 1994, 28–30.

60 Prescott 2004.

61 Justice 1994, 13–66.

62 Lewis 1998.

63 “All thing he ordaynd aftir is wille/ in sere kyndes, for certayn skylle”, Morris 2013, 4.

64 Knighton 1995, 222–223.

65 Robbins 1979, 37.

the priestly person. These activities by Ball and the other rebels show how important the priestly power of preaching was for the rising, but apparently not so much as a means to develop an ideology, but rather as a tool for mobilization.⁶⁶

Although the chroniclers call him a leader, we never actually see John Ball in any clear position of 'leadership'.⁶⁷ After his sermon at Blackheath for the rest of the revolt we hear very little of him until his capture. The negotiations in 1381 with the royal government and the young king were carried out by laymen – perhaps not all by the famous Wat Tyler, as is often assumed, but definitely not by any member of the clergy. This is also borne out quite clearly in what we can reconstruct of their content. The concerns that were voiced seem to be political, economic, and legal, and – more importantly – so is the language. An anonymous Anglo-French prose chronicle preserves what is probably a copy of a list of the rebels' demands that circulated in the royal administration⁶⁸ – and it makes no mention of any religious rationale, even when proposing reforms to the religious institutions of England:

He also asked that the goods of Holy Church should not remain in the hands of the religious, nor of parsons and vicars, and other churchmen; but that clergy already in possession should have a sufficient sustenance and the rest of their goods should be divided among the people of the parish. And he demanded that there should be only one bishop in England and only one prelate and all the lands and tenements of the possessioners should be taken from them and divided among the commons, only reserving for them a reasonable sustenance. And he demanded that there should be no more villeins in England and no serfdom nor villeinage but that all men should be free and of one condition.⁶⁹

This is the language of petitions, not of theology. The program of the rebels was framed in religious language and imbued with priestly authority in John Ball's ser-

⁶⁶ Green 1992, 191 highlighted a tradition of complaint literature and popular preaching that "at the very least [. . .] may be said to have helped inflame deeply banked resentments in 1381". I would agree as long as the word "help" is understood in terms of mobilization, and not in terms of instigation.

⁶⁷ Prescott 2004. Knighton even reports that after they broke him out of prison the rebels "carried him off with them (abire eum secum fecerunt), for they intended to make him their archbishop", a curious choice of words. See Knighton 1995, 210–211. Similarly, Thomas Walsingham writes that after the rebels freed him John Ball "followed them (eos secutus est)". Walsingham 2003, 546.

⁶⁸ This is a speculation on my part, but the form and style resemble very much a list turned into prose text. For an overview of the Chronicle see Gransden 1983, 110–113, 164–168 and V.H. Galbraith's introduction in AC 1927, xiii–xlvi.

⁶⁹ Dobson 164–165. For the Anglo-Norman original see AC 1927, 147: "et qe les biens de seint esglise ne deveroient estre en mayns des gentz de religionne, ne des parsones et vikeers, ne autres de seint esglise, mes les avances averont lour sustenance esement et le remanent de les biens deveroient estre divides entre les parrochiens; et nulle evesqe serroit en Engleterre for une, ne nulle prelate for une, et toutz les terres et tenementes des possessioners serroient pris de eux et partiez entre les comunes, salvant a eux lour resonable sustenance; et qe nulle nayf serroit en Engleterre, ne nulle servage ne nayfte, mes toutz estre free et de une condicione".

mons and letters, but this was a 'tactical' addition,⁷⁰ which was dropped in circumstances in which it would have been inappropriate. In late medieval England there was certainly no clear opposition between religion and politics, but this notwithstanding, suspecting a 'Christian egalitarianism' as laying at the core of the movement is only correct in the general sense that late medieval people considered all things only to be legitimate if they were in accordance with the law of God. But opinions like Owst's statement that "the preaching not merely of friars but of other orthodox churchmen of the day was ultimately responsible for the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt"⁷¹ probably stretch the meaning of the word 'responsible' too far. The rebels' demands and actions were not developed out of a theological construct that percolated downward from a radical faction of priests – there was no need for that. This, however, was the opinion of many contemporary observers.

Instigators: Jean Froissart's portrayal of John Ball

Jean Froissart was certainly the stylistically most colorful chronicler of his time, and his report of the events is as vivid as one of the many war-stories he relates from the Hundred Years' War. In 1381, however, he was not actually in England and he only returned there after he had finished his account of the revolt. He did have some well-informed sources who probably witnessed some of the events, but his report is still a better source for how the revolt was perceived by his aristocratic readership than for the actual events,⁷² even though he corroborates much of what we are told by other sources. His report of the inception of the revolt attributes great importance to the power of the priest.

[the villeins in southern England] said that they were too severely exploited and that at the beginning of the world there were no serfs, and none could be such, unless he committed treason against his lord, just as Lucifer did against God;⁷³ but such was not their rank, for they were neither angels nor spirits, but men formed in the same image as their lords – who kept them as beasts. This they could no longer endure and wanted to be treated equally, and if they were to plough or do any form of labour for their lords, they wanted payment for it. On previous occasions they had been persuaded to such thoughts by a mad priest from the county of Kent called John Ball, and for his mad words he had been thrown into the Archbishop of Canterbury's prison a good many times;

⁷⁰ Arnold 2009, 153.

⁷¹ Owst 1961, 304. For a recent affirmation of this statement, originally made in 1933, see Cohn/Aiton 2013, 296.

⁷² Ainsworth 1999, 56 makes the case that occasionally he also subverts the social "order he purports to uphold".

⁷³ Note that Froissart, in having the rebels compare themselves to Lucifer, is ridiculing them subtly, because to his mind they were guilty of the same sin as the fallen angel, namely rebelling against their master. This allusion was likely not lost on his readers.

for on Sundays after mass, when the people were leaving the church, this John Ball had been in the habit of going to the lectern and preaching there, causing the people to gather around him.⁷⁴

To Froissart's mind, John Ball was the man who gave the ideas to the people. He clearly would have found the label 'ideologist' quite fitting for the rebellious priest. The ideology on offer is, however, fairly secular – the speech Froissart puts into Ball's mouth contains few references to scripture except for the line "Why do they keep us in servitude? Do we not all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve?",⁷⁵ which is likely a reference to the sermon of Blackheath. While other sources maintain that this sermon took place right before the rebels entered London,⁷⁶ and therefore long after the beginning of the rising, for Froissart Ball's preaching is what actually starts the entire movement. Froissart makes Ball's role as an instigator especially clear by also portraying him as the one who comes up with the plan for action:

They have their ease in fine manor houses, while we have toil and labour, and the rain and wind in the fields, and from our exertions comes the means for them to maintain their estates. [. . .] Let us petition the king for he is young, and we will make him aware of our servitude and tell him that we would wish things to be otherwise or else we will find our own remedy. If we go to him directly and as a group, all manner of people who are called serfs and are kept in bondage will follow us in order to be liberated. When the king sees or hears us, he will provide a solution, peaceful or otherwise.⁷⁷

Against the backdrop of the timeline we can construct with reasonable certainty from the other sources, Froissart's account here is obviously made out of whole cloth. John Ball did certainly not organize an uprising in the spring of 1381, as mentioned above, he was incarcerated during the time in question! But to Froissart, who was just as much a writer as he was a historian, and presumably to his mostly aristocratic readership, there was something intuitively and satisfyingly true about portraying a priest as the instigator and prime mover of a revolt. This reveals the ideological assumptions the chronicler and his audience shared, the exact assumptions that were threatened by the rising: That commoners were base peasants and thus rightly excluded from the political sphere.⁷⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, Ball's radical sermon, as imagined by Froissart, is still a powerful piece of literature: A series of rhetorical questions aims at the very heart of the theory of the three estates that the elites tended to adhere to, a society neatly made up of those who worked, those who prayed and those who fought.⁷⁹ Even though the notion of equality advocated in the sermon must have been absurd to aris-

⁷⁴ The Online Froissart 2019, fol. 70 r.

⁷⁵ The Online Froissart 2019, fol. 70 r.

⁷⁶ Eiden 1995, 219.

⁷⁷ The Online Froissart 2019, fol. 70 v.

⁷⁸ Freedman 1999, 133–135 and *passim*.

⁷⁹ For medieval criticisms of the society of orders, emerging in the thirteenth century and thereafter, see Töpfer 1994.

ocratic audiences, Ball's attack remains so literarily powerful that the literary effect Froissart achieves is to create the impression that this might make sense to many people.⁸⁰ What he wanted to impress upon his readers was that sermons, even absurd ones, could be dangerous and that the effects of this illicit preaching might only show once it was too late. After all, the organization of a revolt could be done in secret:

Thus spoke John Ball, and other such words, as he was accustomed to doing in the villages every Sunday after mass, which meant that many common people heard him. Some of them who had nothing but evil intentions said, "He speaks the truth!" and, **murmuring and conferring** among themselves (*murmuroyent et recordoyent l'un a l'autre*) as they walked **in the fields or on the roads** together from one village to another, or in their homes, they said, "John Ball speaks of such things and what he says is true."⁸¹

The language here strongly evokes images of conspiracies, plotted "in the fields" where the peasants were among themselves. Froissart elegantly captures the sense of paranoia that must have pervaded the landholding elite after a rising that must have come unexpected to many. The solution to this problem, however, was obvious to the chronicler:

The archbishop of Canterbury, who was informed of this, had John Ball arrested and put in prison for two or three months as punishment. It would have been better if he had been sentenced to life imprisonment or put to death the first time, rather than what he did with him, for it was his wish to release him, as he could not find it in his conscience to have him executed. When John was out of the archbishop's prison he continued in his folly just as before.⁸²

To Jean Froissart the power of the priest needed to be controlled, because if those who wielded it questioned the existing social hierarchy it could cause revolts and lead to anarchy. The Archbishop, by not controlling the actions of John Ball, had neglected his duties and thus allowed a catastrophe to happen.

The function of the priest as instigator in Froissart's account is twofold: It serves as a powerful warning to his elite audience but it also re-affirms the very answer that the ruling elites would have given to Ball's provocative questions about the justification of their dominance: Namely that commoners were naturally incapable of rational thought and needed leadership from others. Froissart sneeringly comments about those who marched to London:

⁸⁰ Perhaps a good comparison to the effect intended by Froissart is Leo Löwenthal's iconic warning of the allure of fascism, condensed into a fictitious speech called "what the agitator says" ("Was der Agitator meint"). Its shocking effect is achieved because Löwenthal's invented speech masterfully conveys under which material circumstances fascist rhetoric might actually make psychological sense to somebody. I would suggest that Froissart is doing something very similar here. Löwenthal 1990, 183–184.

⁸¹ The Online Froissart 2019, fol. 70 v.

⁸² The Online Froissart 2019, fol. 70 v.

Yet the truth is that at least three quarters of these people did not know what they wanted or who they were looking for, but were simply following each other like brute beasts.⁸³

The overblown role of John Ball is not unique to Froissart's chronicle. As R.B. Dobson has observed:

Few features of the early stream of commentary on the great revolt of 1381 are more impressive than the unanimity with which the chroniclers stress the importance of the role played by the foolish priest of Kent. Froissart, Walsingham and Knighton, writers of very different temperaments and interests, all agreed in seeing John Ball as the eminence grise of the Peasants' Revolt.⁸⁴

All the chronicles downplay the amount of planning and organization that must have been a prerequisite for the movement's enormously successful mobilization – sometimes illogically while simultaneously stoking fears of conspiracies. In the *Anonimale Chronicle* the rebels flee into the woods after attacking the commission in Brentwood and only come out when they are half-starved. Organizing the revolt is not their choice, but their last resort. And again, it is John Ball who 'counsels' them.⁸⁵

The importance attributed to John Ball in the chronicles, I would argue, is primarily a result of the ideological bias that seeks to present the peasants as antithetical to the sphere of politics and thereby implicitly refutes the entire basis on which the movement rested, namely their capability of self-organization.⁸⁶

This distortion was exacerbated by fears of heresy that gripped many who were writing from positions within the church. Walsingham claims that John Ball was a follower of John Wyclif, the famous theologian from Oxford, who at the time questioned central tenets of the catholic church – ironically Wyclif was under the protection of the rebels' mortal enemy, the Duke of Lancaster. Henry Knighton says that Wyclif at least paved the way for John Ball.⁸⁷ Wyclif was forced to denounce the uprising later and a forged confession of John Ball was designed to portray him as an ardent student of Wyclif's teachings.⁸⁸ The belief in the 'power of the priest' who preaches falseness evidently was not only a rhetorical strategy to the elites: To them the link between heresy and popular insurrection was strong post-1381.⁸⁹

The idea that the power of the priest could sow discord in a society that depended on the harmony of the three orders was common at the time. But this betrays more of the ideological assumptions of the chroniclers than constituting a faithful documenta-

⁸³ The Online Froissart 2019, fol. 71r.

⁸⁴ Dobson 1983, 372.

⁸⁵ Namely to get rid of most of the clergy: "En quell temps les communes avoient a lour conseil une chaplain de male part, sire Johan Balle par noune, le quel sire Johan les conseulla de defair toutz les seignurs et lercevesques et evesques, abbes et priours [. . .]." AC 1927, 137.

⁸⁶ Something the movement advocated quite forcefully, see below.

⁸⁷ Knighton 1995, 242.

⁸⁸ The *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, see Dobson 1983, 376–378.

⁸⁹ Cohn/Aiton 2013, 296–297.

tion of the organizational efforts of priests that started the rising. Thomas Brinton, himself the most famous preacher in England at the time, formulated the fear of the susceptibility of commoners to the influence of the power of the priests in one of his sermons:

the lower classes rather listen to the shouts of those who teach errors than to true preachers.⁹⁰

This threatened the divinely ordained order, which he elsewhere describes as follows:

Four estates were created by God, along with their tasks: First the prelates and ecclesiasts to praise God and for the guidance of the souls. Secondly, the kings and princes and other temporal lords to defend the land and for the guidance of the bodies. Thirdly, the honest merchants to govern for the common good. Fourthly, the faithful workers and artisans, who diligently undertake what they are born to, because man is born to labor.⁹¹

Here Brinton expands the traditional model of the three estates in order to be able adapt it to the political realities of his time, in which some non-noble members of the laity were represented in the parliaments, namely the rich urban oligarchs, while others remained unrepresented and forced to toil for their betters. Men like Thomas Brinton believed that 'patient poverty' was a great virtue and they abhorred unrest like the one started by the movement of 1381.⁹² This makes the role he played – or rather: the one he was assigned – in the rising all the more interesting.

Stage-props: Thomas Brinton's encounter with the rebels

Herbert Eiden has found an indictment brought forward before the commission that was tasked with the legal repression of the revolt in Kent after the rising had collapsed. It states that

⁹⁰ Devlin 1954, 362 (= Sermon 80): "Immo mediocres et populares cicius audiunt clamores doencium errores quam veros predicatoros". See also Wenzel 2005, 49.

⁹¹ Devlin 1954, 259–260 (= Sermon 56): „Quattuor genera hominum a Deo ordinantur et eorum labores. Primo prelati et ecclesiastici ad laudandum Deum et ad regimen animarum. Secundo reges et principes et alii domini temporales ad defendendum terram et ad regimen corporum. Tercio fideles mercatores pro utilitate rei publice gubernanda. Quarto fideles operarii et laboratores, qui illud impent diligenter ad quod nati sunt, quia homo nascitur ad laborem." My translation. Brinton makes this point rather in passing, what he is actually getting at in this sermon is that there is a fifth estate created by the devil, the usurers (Devlin 1954, 260).

⁹² Rigby 2007, 28. This was common: On *Piers Plowman*, an enormously influential work of contemporary literature, see Knight 2000, 120.

Richard Bocher from Rochester on the Wednesday before the feast of Corpus Christi [= June 12], between the village Deptford and the city of London harassed the Bishop of Rochester and, against the peace, restrained his horse.⁹³

Nobody was hurt and Brinton got away unharmed. This minor incident corroborates a seemingly equally minor passage that appears in only one of the chronicle reports, written by a Franciscan in Canterbury around the year 1400.

Jack Straw and Thomas Melro, returning to the field called Blackheath, and called on the bishop of Rochester to meet them. And when the bishop asked them, who was the leader who would speak to him, a tiler from Essex [almost certainly a reference to Wat Tyler_VG], a man of great eloquence, came forward and recounted to the bishop the many grievances of the ordinary people on account of the taxes and oppressions of the great, asking him to explain this to the king; their intention, so he said, was to return to their homes once a suitable remedy was provided.⁹⁴

The chronicle continues with a curious jump to a later negotiation with the king, which Brinton – or any of the other persons involved here, for that matter – had nothing to do with. This is, however, in keeping with its clumsy overall writing style. In the paragraph quoted above we can almost see the chronicler, writing two decades after the events, desperately trying to string disparate bits of information into a coherent narrative. He fails to make sense of it, but what emerges quite clearly is that the rebels wanted Brinton to speak for them and that this has something to do with Blackheath – the place where John Ball was said to have delivered his sermon based on Adam and Eve the next day, June 12, the feast of Corpus Christi. Why? Possibly because Brinton was famous for sermons like the following, which he had preached to a large crowd at a procession in honor of the coronation of Richard II in 1377:

For God from the beginning did not create one man of gold from whom sprang the rich and also the noble, and another of clay from whom are descended the poor and ragged because with a certain spade Adam dug the earth.⁹⁵

This sermon became popular – Thomas Walsingham reports it in general terms in his narrative of the coronation.⁹⁶ The notion that Adam and Eve signified that there should be no other distinction between people than the one between man and woman was a

⁹³ “Ricardus Bocher de Rouchestre die Mercurii proxima ante festum Corporis Christi inter villam de Depeford et civitatem Londini insultum fecit Episcopo Roffensi et refrenavit equum suum contra pacem.” (my translation). The Latin original cited here is printed in Eiden 1995, 220.

⁹⁴ Continuatio Eulogii 2019, 39, for the Latin original see Continuatio Eulogii 2019, 38.

⁹⁵ Devlin 1954, xxvii. The sermon was obviously delivered in English, otherwise it would have had very little effect. What survives, however, are Brinton’s notes in Latin. We do not know what exactly he said (and even less, what people heard). Cf. Rigby 1995, 311.

⁹⁶ Walsingham 2003, 154: Brinton exhorted the people and the lords to be peaceful because discord in society displeased God. The lords should not agree to taxation without a reason: “In progressu autem processionis concionatus est ad populum Episcopus Roffensis, hortans ut dissensiones set discordae, ortae et diu continuatae, inter plebem et Dominos, sopirentur, probans per multa argumenta huiusmodi dissensiones Deo plurimum displicere. Hortatus est insuper Dominos, ne tantis de cetero sine causa taxationibus populum appropiarent.” Brinton, according to Walsingham, went on to say that

commonplace at the time, albeit one that sat uncomfortably with the established order.⁹⁷ Therefore John Ball's sermon on the same theme was not necessarily inspired by Brinton,⁹⁸ even if we do not assume that Walsingham made up the entire thing.⁹⁹ It is worth noting, however, that John Ball and Thomas Brinton were two preachers who lived in close proximity to each other for many years.¹⁰⁰ What is more, if we believe the indictment, we have to assume that Richard Bocher, hailing from Rochester, knew what the bishop of his hometown was preaching on a regular basis. When he grabbed the reins of his horse, we may suspect that he did not want him to speak with the king on the rebels behalf – nothing in their later behavior suggests that they were about letting only priests do this – but rather to deliver the sermon for Corpus Christi at Blackheath the next day.

Who was Thomas Brinton? What made him so attractive to the rebels? Brinton was a Benedictine monk of humble origins,¹⁰¹ who had worked his way up in the church hierarchy to become the Bishop of Rochester – his diocese would have been one of the centers of the revolt. In his sermons he habitually lamented the vices of the people but especially of the rich. At the procession for Richard's coronation he also criticized the way in which taxes were levied:

I preach against the injustice of certain rich men who show less compassion towards the poor than do the Jews or Saracens. The leaders of the Jews collect from the rich that the poor may be fed. The princes of the Christians indeed collect from the poor that the rich may be supported in their pride. [. . .] Even the Saracens are scandalized because we treat so unmercifully the poor whom we call the servants of Christ.¹⁰²

It is not hard to see what must have motivated Richard Bocher to approach Brinton: Clerics of the time never tired of denouncing the abuses of the rich and the powerful, so much so, that these laments had become sufficiently well-known clichés for the broadsides (i.e. 'John Ball's letters'). These slips of parchment or paper worked as shorthand for a predominantly illiterate audience, whose oral culture is mostly lost to us, but who were apparently familiar with these tropes and ideas. Mostly through listening to sermons, we may suspect. This goes to illustrate John Arnold's point that orthodox Christianity offered a lot of material that could be used to question the

if there was a rational reason for taxation, everyone should do what needed to be done, "patiently, without complaint or hint of discord." Walsingham 2003, 155.

⁹⁷ But see Devlin 1954, 195. The proverb „when adam delfe and eve span, whare was than the pride of man" dates back to c. 1340. Contrary to Töpfer's speculation (see Töpfer 1994, 350–351) that Ball's turning the rhyme into a call for revolution depended on the context, it was also not in itself new in 1381, cf. Friedman 1974 and Arnold 2009, 152.

⁹⁸ Although Devlin 1954, 196 suspected as much and I concur.

⁹⁹ Unlikely: see Justice 1994, 101–103.

¹⁰⁰ Owst 1933, 291.

¹⁰¹ Devlin 1954, xvii remarks that it is noteworthy that Brinton seems to have taken the ideal of poverty seriously: We can tell from his will that he died fairly poor in comparison to other church prelates.

¹⁰² Devlin 1954, xxvii for the Latin version see Devlin 1954, 196.

existing social order without crossing the line into heresy.¹⁰³ In the 1370s and 1380s Thomas Brinton was certainly the most famous of the many priests criticizing the ruling elite's sins, particularly in and around his diocese.

It is worth noting that while the rebels tried to win Brinton over, they never even mention once his theological adversary, the – arguably – much more radical John Wyclif, whose teachings were later blamed for the revolt. While the relationship between the movement of 1381 and Wyclif is debatable, but tenuous at best,¹⁰⁴ the rebels' attempt at recruiting Brinton, a highly regarded prelate, suggests autonomy on behalf of the insurgents and demonstrates their capability of making rational, tactical decisions – they were not merely being preached at, they were consciously selecting the preachers whose sermons they wanted to hear and who they believed would be helpful to their mobilizing efforts.

Brinton's critique was, however, essentially moralistic and therefore conservative in its outlook.¹⁰⁵ His moral criticism was inoculated against its broader social implications by the belief that all hierarchies were divinely ordained and therefore any rebellion against them meant to commit the deadly sin of pride for questioning God's will.¹⁰⁶ The poor, though closer to Christ, were supposed to endure their poverty and subjugation with patience.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, Brinton did not only *not* take the rebels' side, but even took part in one of the commissions that persecuted them legally in the uprising's aftermath. Months and years later he still preached against the insurgents, scolding them for murdering an archbishop and proclaiming them to be beyond savior.¹⁰⁸ So why should the rebels have tried to convince Brinton? Was it merely naivety on the part of Richard Bocher or the rebels more generally, a terrible miscalculation? This would certainly fit with the chroniclers' views of their strategic capabilities.

There is, however, an argument to be made that the rebels had a very rational reason to try to get Brinton to preach at Blackheath on the feast of Corpus Christi, even if they did not harbor any illusions about his likely stance on their movement and it tells us much about how we should interpret the role the power of the priest played from their perspective and with regard to their strategy of mobilization. On the one hand it is worth pointing out that the documentary evidence reports some kind of altercation, albeit a minor one. At least the indictment suggests some kind of

¹⁰³ Arnold 2009, 152.

¹⁰⁴ Justice 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Eiden 1995, 220. But see Rigby 1995, 313 who argues that this label makes little sense for medieval preachers, because they were sincere in condemning the status quo, not defending it, as the term 'conservative' might be taken to mean.

¹⁰⁶ Rigby 2007, 28.

¹⁰⁷ See Rigby 1995, 313–314 and Rigby 2007, 28.

¹⁰⁸ Devlin 1954, 454–458 (= Sermon 99).

attempt to coerce the bishop.¹⁰⁹ More importantly, however, what Thomas Brinton was arguably most famous for had a direct connection to the political logic that undergirded their mobilization, a connection that has mostly been underestimated or overlooked: A main reason for Brinton's fame was not the sermon at Richard's coronation, but his role in parliament, especially during a long stand-off in 1376 that became famous under the name 'Good Parliament'.

It took place at the very end of the reign of Edward III, when the revered war-hero had become senile and the government was under the influence of his brother, the Duke of Lancaster and – many critics thought – his mistress, Alice Perrers.¹¹⁰ The confrontation was sparked by the government's demand for a subsidy and constitutes a well-known milestone in the development of the English parliament. It saw the first time the Commons – i.e. the rich burghers and those members of the gentry who did not receive an individual summon, as did the 'Peers', the great magnates of the realm – acted as an independent body. It was also the first time they elected a 'speaker', Sir Peter de la Mare.

The many parallels between the movement of 1381 and this organized rebellion of the rural gentry and urban oligarchies only a few years earlier are quite striking, but have so far only been commented on briefly.¹¹¹ Both started out by refusing taxation and quickly morphed into movements that attacked royal advisers in a crusade against a perceived reign of corruption surrounding the king – all while constantly proclaiming their loyalty to his person. If the Good Parliament and the movement of 1381 are connected by scholars at all, it is usually by noting in passing the similarities in the rhetoric that was employed, which centered on concepts of virtue and corruption.¹¹² The mainstream interpretation is that both movements are manifestations of a pervasive sense of demise and frustration with the status quo in two different strata of English society. This is correct, of course, but there is more to it: It is possible to interpret the relationship between the two events in a more causal manner. I would contend that the move-

109 Froissart also reports that the rebels recruited – by force – Sir John Newton (of Rochester!) to "come with [them] and be [their] commander-in-chief, and do [their] bidding" and that this was done in other counties as well. This may be interpreted as an attempt at recruiting knights of the shire as MPs although this may be too far-fetched. The Online Froissart 2019, fol. 71v.

110 The standard monograph is Holmes 1975.

111 Dodd 2006, 41 "Although the rebels' solutions to their grievances were often extreme and unconstitutional (as one would expect in a rebellion), a remarkable number of their complaints paralleled precisely the themes which had been raised in parliament over the previous decade, and especially in the Good Parliament of 1376 the extent of concurrence is truly remarkable, and is a point that has been surprisingly overlooked in modern scholarship".

112 Fletcher 2010.

ment of 1381 drew quite consciously on the ‘script’¹¹³ that was provided by the aristocratic-bourgeois alliance of 1376.¹¹⁴

The well-informed French *Anonimale Chronicle* famously reports the movement’s ‘watchword’:

And the said commons had a watchword in English among themselves, ‘With whom haldes yow?’, to which the reply was, ‘Wyth kynge Richarde and with the trew communes’; and those who did not know how to reply or would not do so were beheaded and put to death.¹¹⁵

This should perhaps be taken more literally than previously thought, namely as a reference to the body of the Commons in Parliament. Perhaps Gwilym Dodd has it backwards when he writes: “There were, of course, some serious and irreconcilable divergences between the rebels and Commons – not least their respective views on the issue of labour and taxation”.¹¹⁶ After all, at a closer look, they are rather the reverse side of the same coin: While the Commons in Parliament demanded a strict enforcement of the wage caps that had been introduced as a response to the labor shortage wrought by the Black Death of 1349, the rebels in 1381 demanded freedom of contracts and a cap on rents.

Of course, Dodd is right to point out that the rebels cannot possibly have thought that their behavior was legal,¹¹⁷ but this is somewhat beside the point, which is rather that the ‘Good Parliament’ provided them with a sense of what the political project they were participating in actually was, enabling collective action. Quite similar to the letters attributed to John Ball, it was a shorthand for the discursive logic they wanted their political project to be located in. That the chroniclers deliberately misunderstand their actions and refuse to entertain the possibility of something like a broader logic behind the rising has been shown by Paul Strohm and Steven Justice.¹¹⁸ This explains quite satisfactorily the absence of any direct mention of this political argument on the part of the rebels by the chroniclers.¹¹⁹

If I am right about the core movement of Kent and Essex being mobilized within a framework that essentially consisted of hijacking the political logic that had informed the ‘Good Parliament’ a few years earlier, the little episode with Brinton falls into place. Brinton had become famous with a sermon he delivered probably on May 18, 1376

¹¹³ A term borrowed from Charles Tilly 2008, xi.

¹¹⁴ I will develop this argument in more detail in my dissertation on the strategies of mobilization of large-scale popular movements in late medieval Germany and England.

¹¹⁵ Dobson 1983, 130. For the Anglo-Norman original see AC, 1927, 139: “Et les ditz communes avoient entre eux une wache worde en Engleis, ‘With whom haldes yow?’ et le respouns fust, ‘Wyth kynge Richarde and wyth the trew communes’: et ceux qe ne savoient ne vodroient respondre, furent decolles et mys a la mort”.

¹¹⁶ Dodd 2006, 43.

¹¹⁷ Dodd 2006, 44.

¹¹⁸ Strohm 1992, 36–42 and Justice 1994 passim.

¹¹⁹ Bush 1999 and Watts 2015.

while the 'Good Parliament' was in session. He took as his theme James 1:25, "the doer of the work shall be blessed" and the sermon can indeed only be described as a call to action.

Now, among the institutions that were established in England in the past, one practice of great renown and excellence is still in use: the Lords and Commons are called together to Parliament to discuss and legislate for the good state of the country. But of what use is it to discuss affairs in Parliament and publicly denounce transgressors of the law, if such denunciation is not followed by due correction? Laws are worthless unless they are correctly enforced. But is it not known, and almost everywhere publicly acknowledged, that it is not people who incline to virtue but those who lead vicious and scandalous lives who have long had the chief share in the government of this kingdom? We universally grumble and protest against the rule of such men, yet we do not have the courage to speak the truth as to the proper remedy.¹²⁰

The ideological proximity to the rebels is self-evident, but what was even more desirable from their perspective was the public demonstration of having Thomas Brinton preach in a similar fashion on Corpus Christi, before they confronted the king and the government. It would have been a symbol hard to misinterpret for anyone: The political program of cleansing the royal court had been taken up by the '*true Commons*' ("*trew communnes*") – a name that implied that they replaced the false ones. After all, "falsness reigns in every flock"¹²¹ as they proclaimed in one of their surviving letters.¹²² The power of the priest, in this instance, was a means to play political theater, and it is quite possible that the Kentish rebels saw in the famous bishop of Rochester not so much an actor, but a mere stage-prop. In any event, it was not at all naive of them to try to cast him for the part.

In one notorious episode of the rising, a little further north in Bury St. Edmunds (Suffolk),¹²³ the rebels took this approach of using a priest as a stage-prop quite literally: The chief Justice of the king's bench, John Cavendish, after he had been hounded for days, was decapitated and his head propped up on a spike.¹²⁴ After the prior of the local abbey, John de Cambridge, had also been beheaded, a grotesque play unfolded at the town's pillory:

¹²⁰ Wenzel 2008, 244.

¹²¹ Knighton 1995, 222–223.

¹²² Bishop Brinton, just a year before the revolt, was also part of a commission with the following appointment: "March 2 Archbishop of York, Bishops of Winchester, Hereford, **Rochester**, Earl of Arundel, and others appointed to a commission upon complaint of the kings subject in the present parliament that the commons of the realm have fallen into utter destitution by reason of the multiplied payments of tenths fifteenths and other subsidies and from other causes. They are to enquire into the condition of the realm, the conduct of the king's officers and ministers, the state of his revenues, the fees paid to the king's officers at the beginning of the late reign, the annuities granted, the expenses of the household etc. and report to the king and council thereon." Cal.Pat. Rolls, 3 R II, 459. My emphasis. See also Cohn/Aiton 2013, 171.

¹²³ The leader of the rebels there, John Wrawe, was also a priest from Essex.

¹²⁴ Eiden 2001, 216. Steven Justice has speculated that the rebels' script for their actions was derived from vernacular passion plays. See Justice 2007.

They turned the prior's head towards the head of the judge, than to his ear, as if asking for advice, than to his mouth, as if demonstrating friendship, wanting to mock the friendship and advice which the two had had between themselves all their lives.¹²⁵

This ghastly show makes use of a priest as stage-prop, but he needed to be killed first.¹²⁶ This goes to show that the idea of using the power of the priest for political theater meant that the rebels often had to deprive the priests of their agency to use their power. Perhaps the rebels' attitude towards priests is condensed in the indictment of a John Shirle of Nottinghamshire, who, sitting in a tavern after the rising had been crushed, lamented the death of John Ball, who he said:

had been condemned to death falsely, unjustly and for envy [. . .] because he was a true and worthy man, prophesying things **useful** to the commons of the kingdom.¹²⁷

Maybe the fact that he was talking about John Ball in terms of usefulness is telling us something. But so should the fact that on July 16 Shirle was hanged for this very statement.

Conclusion

In late 14th century England, the power of the priest could be the voice of virtue and legitimacy in political interactions.¹²⁸ This authority could be harnessed by popular movements to make a political point and establish themselves in the discourse of the politics of virtue. This is certainly the reason for John Ball's prominent role. But as Thomas Brinton shows us, these political resources had a will of their own and were usually tied to an institution that was primarily concerned with upholding authority – the church.

Bishop Brinton preached extensively against the rebels after the revolt had concluded, taking them to task for attacking the natural order of authority in general, but more specifically for killing England's highest ranking priest, Archbishop Simon Sudbury. Brinton likened the rebels to the Jews, who he says had no sense of guilt when they witnessed the crucifixion of Christ.¹²⁹ The power of the priest, which the rebels

125 Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey 1896, 127. "Capitibus igitur illudentes, caput prioris applicuerunt ad caput iusticiarii [i.e. Cavendish's], nunc at auriculam, quasi consilium postulando, nunc ad os ejus, quasi amicitias ostendendo, volentes pro hoc eis impropere de amicitiiis et consiliis quae inter se invicem vita comite habuerunt." For Walsingham's version see Walsingham 2003, 482. Cf. Justice 2007, 213–215.

126 For background concerning the episode see Rigby 1995, 166–169 and Eiden 2001.

127 Dobson 1982, xxviii.

128 Which is not to say that there was no permanent strand of anti-clericalism.

129 Devlin 1954, 457 (= Sermon 99): Disobedience required open confession: "Quantum ad secundum. Si anima peccatrix recesserit a gremio ecclesie per inobedienciam, oportet quod erumpat et clamet

had planned to use for their mobilization, was now turned against them in Brinton's famously powerful sermons: Rebellion was always wrong for two reasons, Brinton said: For one thing, did the Bible not say

Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh?¹³⁰

Nevertheless, the second reason Brinton gave suggests clearly that he had understood the parliamentary script of the rebels quite well and aimed to undermine it, now that the elites were back in control: "Secondly, servants made lords do not know how to govern".¹³¹

The power of the priest, as far as it played a role in the rising of 1381, cannot be reduced to one of the three concepts of priests as ideologists, instigators or stage-props. All these approaches suffer from denying agency, either to the rebels or to the priests. The rebels of 1381 were not the recipients of a radical ideology invented by clerics like John Wyclif or John Ball, let alone did the latter's personal theology become their world-view. Nor did the priests assume leadership of simple-minded peasants, instructing them with respect to sensible strategies, as Froissart would have us believe. This does not mean that by using the capabilities of priests in their ranks, or listening to the many sermons lamenting the state of the realm, the people who rose up in 1381 did not gain access to thoughts and ideas they otherwise would not have had and that the religious discourses were merely ornaments on what was a fundamentally secular ideology, quite the contrary: It is very likely that their interaction with ideas from outside their social world influenced them considerably, but the notion that it was priests who developed the ideas and the rebels just carried them out clearly needs to be rejected in favor of a more interactional model. Popular movements and priests were independent interlocutors vying for control over what the power of the priest would be used for.

per humilem confessionem. Que quidem confessio debet esse voluntaria sine coactione, nuda et aperta sine celacione, integra sine divisione, gestina sine dilacione. Non quod peccator occultet peccatum ut Caym. Non quod excuset ut Adam, sed pocius se accuset clamans cum David, Ego sum qui peccavi". We can see Brinton working in an implicit refutation of one of the rebels' arguments in mentioning the biblical Adam in this context. Afterwards he cuts to the chase: "Et hoc est contra eos, qui licet ecclesie et proximo manifestas iniurias intulerunt sine causa, ecclesias encendendo, personas ecclesiasticas et precipue patrem suum archiepiscopum crudeliter occidendo, proximas forte innocentes decapitando, eorum bona depredando, et domos subuertende, et tamen dicunt se non habere conscientiam super isto. Et es ratio eorundem. Quia cum quilibet iudicabitur secundum suam conscientiam, et sua conscientia eos non arguit in presenti, igitur nec infideles iudicarentur de infidelitate, nec Iudei de Christi crucifixione, quia non habuerunt conscientiam."

130 1 Peter 2:18. For Brinton's quotation see Devlin 1954, 458 (= Sermon 99).

131 Devlin 1954, 458 (= Sermon 99): "Secundo servi facti domini nescierunt gubernare ut patuit per eorum facta".

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