THE epitaph of a certain thirteenth-century theologian sums up a dominant intellectual attitude of the age. It said of him simply that “he knew all that there is to be known.” The men of the thirteenth century felt so sure of themselves and their capacity to understand and make general statements about the nature of the world around them that there was no danger of this being taken as a jest. Such magnificent self-confidence, moreover, seemed to be fully justified by imposing achievement. Gothic cathedrals soared to the skies and dominated horizons in sharp contrast to earlier, earthbound structures. The sculpture and the glass of these awe-inspiring buildings told the whole story of men from the Creation to the Last Judgment and provided, as has often been said, an encyclopedia in pictures for those who could not read. For those who could read, encyclopedias in words were both plentiful and imposing, encompassing such subjects as history, natural history, law, and morals. Perhaps most impressive of all was the *Summa theologica* of
St. Thomas Aquinas, a great summary of theology which endeavored to ask and answer, by the exercise of human reason, a huge number of bewildering metaphysical questions.

But in cultural matters, just as in economic and political life, the thirteenth century may have pushed too far too fast. While settlers, hungry for profits, tried to cultivate marginal lands, and kings, thirsting for power, demanded increasing obedience from their subjects, cathedrals toward the end of the century were built so high that they were either left unfinished or, as at Beauvais, actually collapsed. St. Thomas died at the height of his powers, and one account reports that shortly before his death he abandoned work on the *Summa*, saying "I cannot do it." The harmonious and majestic reconciliation that had given meaning and form to mediaeval civilization began to crumble just as men found themselves struggling for survival in the physical disarray of their society brought on by famine, plague, and war. Disillusioned by the moral and spiritual disintegration of the age, they sought security and salvation with desperate energy and ingenuity.

Modern readers tend to view the self-confidence of the thirteenth century with admiration and nostalgia, even to the extent, on the part of a few, of deeming the thirteenth the greatest of centuries in our entire
own intellectual powers or pretensions. In this attitude of mind we resemble the fourteenth century. During that period of economic and political instability, men seldom found the traditional answers adequate to meet the crushing new problems that seemed to arise on all sides. The change in mental attitude is graphically illustrated by the fact that the *summa* or summary, which had been a favorite compositional form of the thirteenth century, was replaced in the fourteenth century by the tract. This characteristic form of writing was addressed to particular, often practical, questions and written from all conceivable points of view, conservative and progressive. In certain respects the age indeed gives the impression of being intensely conservative and progressive at the same time. Yet even reactionary approaches frequently arrived at conclusions that were new, and with hindsight the fourteenth century can be seen as a period of gestation for some distinctly modern ideas. Such a view will be taken in this final chapter, but with a warning to the reader to bear constantly in mind that most "modern" movements were still minority movements and that the diversity of the age defies most attempts at formulation.

Having said this, one must reiterate that the men of the fourteenth century remained wholly mediaeval—which is to say profoundly religious. This does not mean that they were moral or pious, but that good or bad, weak or strong, they accepted unquestioningly
the ultimate superiority of spiritual values in life. For this reason the humiliation of the papacy and the abuses of the clergy were traumatic. Their need for faith in God was if anything increased, with the result that the fourteenth century was a period of religious innovation in which many sought solace and salvation outside the established church. Those who did had the effective choice of attempting either to substitute intuitive religious experience (mysticism) for organized religious service or to develop their own personal formulation of necessary belief (heresy) in place of established dogma.

Mysticism

Mysticism had a long history within the development of Christianity. St. Augustine’s Confessions, for example, radiate a mystical outlook, and the twelfth century produced one of the greatest mystics of all time in the person of St. Bernard. In the thirteenth century, however, mysticism was less prevalent because the mystic’s search for God is intuitive and the age was fundamentally rational, preferring reason to intuition. The opposite was true of the fourteenth century, when rationalism was often questioned and mysticism became a dominant strain of European religiosity.

The first and greatest of the fourteenth-century mystics was the German Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1327), who, like St. Thomas Aquinas, was a member
of the Dominican order. Eckhart was trained in the scholasticism of St. Thomas but went beyond scholasticism to the study of Neoplatonism. As another writer in this series has explained, “the Neoplatonists sought to be in touch with the absolute, with the eternal, which they conceived as lying behind all phenomena.”

1 This striving for the union of the individual soul with the absolute became the major preoccupation of Meister Eckhart. Eckhart taught that by Divine Grace the essence of the soul, or “spark” as he called it, could be unified with God so long as the individual was prepared to dedicate himself entirely to this goal. Such an emphasis on the possibility of union between God and his creatures, however, verged dangerously near to pantheism and as a result Eckhart was condemned for heresy by the papal court at Avignon. This judgment has become the source of some controversy. Few scholars would deny that Eckhart’s language was so paradoxical and ambiguous that it might have disquieted orthodox theologians. Yet it also seems clear that despite his startling language Eckhart had no heretical intentions.

Eckhart’s German disciples, Johann Tauler (ca. 1300–1361) and Heinrich Suso (ca. 1295–1366), were more cautious. Suso, speaking constantly about the sorrows of Christ, placed himself in the center of the orthodox tradition. Both Suso and Tauler avoided

Eckhart’s ambiguous references to the Trinity; they also divorced themselves from suspicions of pantheism by attacking pantheist heretics with great vigor, if not vituperation. A similar course was taken by mystics in other parts of Europe. In Flanders the great mystic Jan Ruysbroeck (1293–1381) followed the general pattern of Eckhart’s thought but made a sharp and open break with pantheism, while in the South, mystics like the famous St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), acting without any direct relationship to the mysticism of the North, also pursued a more strictly orthodox and militant course.

The influence of this mystical current was manifold. Unlike earlier mystics, those of the fourteenth century were not content with pursuing their vision in seclusion and isolation. Eckhart and his followers had a message that they burned to share, and their most constant activity was the preaching of this message to as many people as would listen to it. Thus the most characteristic expressions of the movement were sermons composed and delivered in the German vernacular. These sermons take a pre-eminent place in the history of German culture because the constant use of German to express a complicated and ecstatic vision enriched the vernacular and helped to shape the course of German prose.

The spread of mysticism also resulted in an important movement for moral reform. Because the mystics insisted that union with God could be
Triumph

achieved only by the pure in heart, people became concerned with problems of morals and ethics. In Germany this concern helped to give purpose to life during a period of social incoherence. In addition, the practical aspect of the movement affected the course of education. Through the influence of Ruysbroeck, a community was established in Holland which educated the young in the so-called *Devotion moderna*, or new devotion. This Dutch community was to train some of the leading thinkers of future generations including the great Christian Humanist Erasmus. Mysticism also had an indisputable link with the Protestant Reformation. While men like Suso and Tauler were careful to insist upon their orthodoxy, their message stressed an inner response which by implication could easily be extended to a contempt for outward forms such as the sacraments. Tauler himself referred to the “inward-looking man” and declared that “churches make no man holy, but men make churches holy.” The perpetuation of such sentiments helped to foster a gradual alienation from the Church and cultivated the harvest that was later to be reaped by Martin Luther.

Heresy

Most of the fourteenth-century mystics remained in the orthodox camp and were generally careful to avoid conflict with Church dogma. But criticism, of course, went further and frequently resulted in her-
esy. Indeed, throughout the century heresy posed a great problem and challenge for Church discipline and Christian life.

The most radical challenge was offered by the heresy of the Free Spirit. This movement had existed in the thirteenth century, but became truly dangerous only after the papacy had moved to Avignon. There is not much accurate information regarding the beliefs of the devotees of the Free Spirit because most of their writings were efficiently consigned to the flames. Yet the major outlines of the heretical program are clear. The fundamental tenet was that man could achieve deification by his own decision and without the aid of Divine Grace. Free Spirit heretics claimed godlike powers and declared that they had reached a state of sinlessness which rendered traditional morality irrelevant. This doctrine was probably the most radical attack on tradition that the Middle Ages had ever known. Standard moral precepts were turned upside down as Free Spirit heretics proclaimed unrestrained sexual license and tried to justify idleness and theft. Whether the Free Spirit heretics actually practiced what they preached is a question that is nearly impossible to answer, but merely preaching such a doctrine was a sufficient threat to orthodoxy. Furthermore, its followers were surprisingly well organized and were able to spread their ideas from France to Austria and from Holland to Italy. Naturally the Church did its best to uproot this growth
and by the fifteenth century had largely succeeded. But the initial success of the movement was a significant symptom of the times and an important harbinger of the future.

Entirely different from the heresy of the Free Spirit was the English heresy of John Wyclif (ca. 1330–1384). In his early career as a professor at the University of Oxford, Wyclif was known only as a scholar who enjoyed complicated theological arguments. If he had lived in another, happier age he might have spent his life in dry, scholarly disputes. But in the late fourteenth century England was becoming a hotbed of anticlericalism. For one thing, the client popes of the French monarchy were making constant and exigent demands for money. By no means eager to meet these papal exactions, the English aristocracy challenged the authority of the Avignonese papacy and sought support in latent anticlericalism and such a potent spokesman as Wyclif.

Wyclif based his attacks on the clergy on a position diametrically opposed to that of the Free Spirit heresy. While the latter argued that man could become divine by his own decision and without intervention of Grace, Wyclif stressed the saving power of Grace and the fundamental sinfulness of man. According to Wyclif, no man could claim absolute power or dominion without the gift of Grace. This limitation he extended even to the priestly office and priests, including popes; those who were not in a state
of Grace were according to Wyclif no priests at all. With the popes in Avignon and the clergy becoming more and more embroiled in secular affairs, this doctrine attracted much favorable attention and support. But as Wyclif grew older he became more radical. In his later writings he attacked the very existence of Church government, not just its unworthy servants, and argued that true Christian life depended on a return to the literal rather than the customary allegorical interpretation of the Bible, which meant, in this context, the elimination of the clerical hierarchy. Finally, just before he died, he attacked the doctrine of the Eucharist, which conferred on priests, worthy or not, the exclusive right to administer this central sacrament of the Church, a monopoly for which he found no authority in the records of the apostolic tradition. From a plea for radical reform Wyclif had moved to a direct challenge of the most fundamental dogma of the church. His influential supporters, hardly prepared for open heresy, began to be disaffected. If he had lived longer he might have faced severe penalties, but he died unharmed before the tide had fully turned against him.

The heresy of Wyclif was notable for a number of reasons. Before the late fourteenth century, England had been a stronghold of orthodoxy and was remarkably immune from heretical infection. Thus Wyclif's successful career in the most orthodox of countries was an impressive testimony to the weakening of
Church discipline and the burgeoning criticism of traditional standards and dogmas. More specifically Wyclif's insistence on a literal interpretation of the Bible led to a translation of the Bible into English. The vernacular Wyclifite Bible was copied frequently and had an important influence on the development of the English language as well as on the development of English piety.

If Wyclif's growing intransigence toward the end of his life cost him his aristocratic support, it earned him a sizable following among the lower classes. After his death, these followers, known as "Lollards," were persecuted and went underground until they were able to take up their criticism openly once more during the time of the Protestant Reformation. Wyclif's views were also carried by Czech scholars to Bohemia, where they had more obvious success. Transplanted in Bohemia, Wyclif's example stimulated and encouraged John Hus (1370–1415) in developing the heresy which exerted a great influence on central Europe throughout the fifteenth century and which was another important forerunner of the Protestant Reformation.

Nominalism and Political Thought

Beside the introspective reformism of the mystics, the radical reformism of the Free Spirit heretics, and the near Protestant reformism of the Wyclifites, the remarkable diversity of fourteenth-century thought
and criticism was rounded out by the logical reformism of the nominalist movement. The major tenets of nominalism were no more new to the fourteenth century than were the other previously mentioned movements. What was new was the rigor with which they were driven to their ultimate conclusions and the train of highly significant consequences which this procedure produced.

The great fourteenth-century exponent of nominalism was an English Franciscan by the name of William of Ockham (ca. 1295–1349). In the later Middle Ages, the Franciscans competed openly and often passionately with their rival order, the Dominicans. In the realm of philosophy, this meant that Franciscan scholars tended to exploit the inherent contradictions in the magnificent theoretical edifice of the Dominican school. Brought to its greatest perfection by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae*, it was organized on the principle that human reason is generally compatible with faith. For example, St. Thomas tried to demonstrate that such a basic proposition of Christian faith as the existence of God could be proved by human reason. Ockham, on the other hand, contended that a sharp division had to be made between reason and faith. According to him, human beings could only be certain about knowledge obtained by direct experience received through intuition or the senses and that such experience could only perceive particulars and not general
categories. For Ockham, therefore, the great scholastic categories were mere names (in Latin, *nomina*, whence the term nominalism) and could not—as his opponents maintained—be made the subject of human science. The most important of these general categories was, of course, the idea of God; and Ockham, following his argument to its logical conclusion, insisted that knowledge of God could properly be sought not through human science but only in revealed theology. Human science, that is, should no more concern itself with theology or metaphysics than theology should interfere with such human sciences as grammar, logic, or physics. By this simple but devastating formula, the elaborate synthesis constructed by St. Thomas was torn down and reduced to fragments.

Self-evident as Ockham’s view will seem to us—since it is axiomatic to modern science—nominalism never became more than a minority movement in the fourteenth century. Its ramifications, however, were frequently far more widespread and important than the number of its followers would suggest, and its implications often seemed to be reflected in some of the characteristic tendencies of the age. Nominalism, for example, with its stress on earthly knowledge susceptible of dispassionate proof, might seem to provide little place for mysticism; but its very insistence that knowledge of God was irrational and could not be approached by human science left this ultimate
problem to the subjective methods cultivated by the mystics. In this context it is interesting to point out that Martin Luther, who—though no mystic—was to affirm the subjectivity of religion and to denounce the teachings of St. Thomas, was to be educated in the nominalist University of Erfurt and to refer to William of Ockham as his “dear master.”

Nominalism also had a great influence on the development of political theory. Ockham himself was not content to pass his life within the confines of a university. He became actively engaged in politics and took the side of the Franciscans in their attacks on papal worldliness. As a result he was condemned and forced to flee to the court of the Pope’s leading enemy, Emperor Louis of Bavaria, where he joined other refugees from papal wrath who served as propagandists for the imperial cause. One of the most original and effective of these was Marsiglio of Padua (ca. 1275–1343), whose ideas were similar to Ockham’s but whose writing was less obscured by difficult language and whose conclusions were far more revolutionary.

Marsiglio of Padua’s major work was the *Defensor pacis* (*Defender of the Peace*), written in collaboration with the Parisian scholar John of Jandun in 1324. Probably the most significant contribution to political theory written in the later Middle Ages, it attacked the theory of a united Christian community ruled over by the pope. As Ockham had argued for a sep-
aration between the spheres of faith and human science, so Marsiglio argued for a separation between spiritual and secular authority. Marsiglio, however, did not rest with the theory of two coordinate powers, but went on to insist that the Church should be subordinated to the state. The clergy, according to Marsiglio, were simply members of the state whose special function was to teach and interpret scripture. In all other matters he considered them to be no different from other classes in society and claimed that they should therefore be subject to secular authority.

In addition to defending the superiority of the secular to the spiritual, Marsiglio also developed some striking constitutional ideas about the nature of the state itself. The ultimate source of authority, he declared, rested among the better citizens of the state, who should shape the laws. It was the function of the monarch merely to enforce them; and if he failed in this responsibility or exceeded his authority, he was simply to be replaced. In modern terms this meant that Marsiglio wanted the executive to be placed in a position subordinate to the legislature.

This formulation, a moderate constitutional theory, with its explicit statement of separation of powers, sounds very modern; and indeed it was too advanced for the fourteenth century. That it earned its authors excommunication was hardly surprising, considering its implications for the papacy, but it is perhaps strange that it did not attract more secular attention
—it was not widely read—since much of it only described existing conditions. Rulers like Edward I and Philip the Fair had already succeeded in subordinating the Church to the state on occasion, and bodies of prominent citizens had begun to exercise constitutional checks on the monarch in England and many other parts of Europe. But theory in the Middle Ages often lagged behind practice; and a candid statement of a new position, such as the *Defensor pacis*, was frequently taken to be more shocking than was its practical implementation. In retrospect, it is clear that the *Defensor* was truly epoch-making. Not only were all opponents of papal supremacy from Wyclif to the reformers of the sixteenth century to turn to it for theoretical ammunition, but it announced an emphasis on secular politics that was to become a characteristic trait of the modern world.

*Nominalism and Natural Science*

One of the most remarkable achievements of the fourteenth century was the development of new scientific theories by groups of scholars at the universities of Oxford and Paris. Gradually they began to question the assumptions of the Aristotelian and mediaeval world view and to formulate theories, which if not fully modern, constituted important departures from existing traditions. Before we examine the details of this achievement, and the possible influence it may have had on scientists of the sixteenth and seven-
teenth centuries, it will be worthwhile to note that it, too, was related to a nominalistic attitude. Not all the fourteenth-century scientists were Ockhamists, but unquestionably the nominalist view of knowledge created a more favorable atmosphere for scientific thought.

Throughout the Middle Ages most men regarded the natural world as a mirror of Divine Truths. They believed that the universe could be read as a book revealing Divine purpose; and they studied natural objects, not for their unique qualities, but as symbols of something greater. Men thought, for example, that lion cubs were born dead and came to life on the third day as symbols of Christ’s Resurrection. Such an approach may have served poetry, but it hampered scientific speculation because it supplied theological generalization in place of critical observation. Nominalism, on the other hand, dissolved such symbolic “truths” into tangible particulars. The nominalists were determined to find a limited body of knowledge that could be regarded as certain; and they rejected all abstractions which did not conform with direct intuition. This approach led them to open up entirely new scientific vistas.

Important contributions to science, however, were made long before Ockham. In the thirteenth century, the great age of Dominican theology at Paris, a group of scholars associated with the Franciscan order at Oxford turned their attention to mathematics and
science. The first, Robert Grosseteste, did impressive work in geometry and optics, and inspired many students. The foremost of these was Roger Bacon—an erratic genius whose work sometimes foreshadowed experimental method but who was largely misunderstood in his own day. This tradition of scientific study at Oxford was carried on in the fourteenth century by a group of scholars at Merton College, notably Thomas Bradwardine. These men not only made important contributions to the study of mathematics but developed an interest in problems of motion that was soon picked up by others at Paris.

It can be seen, then, that scientific interest was by no means exclusively dependent on the philosophy of Ockham, but it was at Paris, in a distinctively Ockhamist atmosphere, that the most impressive fourteenth-century work was done. The Parisian theorists started with the physics of Aristotle and regarded themselves as Aristotelians, but in commenting on the master they made important modifications which proved to be the first step in the break-away from classical views which culminated in the work of Galileo and Newton. Most important was their new work on motion. All previous theorizing about this subject had derived from the physics of Aristotle, which began with a fundamental distinction between vertical, or "natural," and horizontal, or "forced," motion. This latter was explained as the result of constant pushing. A projectile, that is, was believed to be pro-