
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Wyclif on Ecclesiology: issues of perspective

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The ecumenical ecclesiology of our own day places an emphasis on a number of themes which the developments of the twentieth century have made important. The concept of 'communion' or *koinonia* is now a focus of the work of the World Council of Churches. All churches involved in ecumenical discussions confront the question of the place diversity ought to have in a united Church. The problem of ministry continues to present a major difficulty in all schemes for unity, as it has done throughout the century, and on this front progress is slow because there can be no mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries until a shared ecclesiology can be arrived at. Today's ecclesiology is also much concerned with the relationship between the Church and the world, especially in terms of issues of peace and justice and of ecology.

These great themes looked different to Wyclif, writing when the driving preoccupations were those of the end of the fourteenth century. It is instructive to see how Wyclif explained the crises of his own day, because it helps to give a perspective for our own time. Perspective is important in ecumenical ecclesiology. It is ecumenically essential to cultivate the habit of trying to see the Church from the point of view of other members of it as readily as from our own, and that includes, as far as is now possible for us, endeavouring to see from the vantage-point of other ages. Indeed, it is in itself an important aspect of respect for diversity as well as of faithfulness to the apostolic tradition that we should do so.

The principle can readily be illustrated. Something of the difference perspective can make is apparent in comments on Wyclif made in later ages. In the sixteenth century, when many spoke with alarm of the results of disturbing the proper order of things, we find a commentator saying that Wyclif has not only broken the rules of right order, by refusing to accept its hierarchical character, but has gone further, and reversed natural order altogether. 'There is no aspect of the condition of the Church not stung by Wyclif, none of its powers undisparaged. He is not himself content to deny obedience and submission to his own superiors, even persuading his subordinates to do the same. And not thinking this to be enough, he must make the subordinate superior to those set over him and vassals superior to their lords... for then would all things be truly confounded.... The people would be like a wild and ferocious beast, and more wild and savage than any other.'[1] By the seventeenth century, when it had become 'politically correct'

1 Castro Zamorensis, *Adversus omnes haereses libri quattuordecim*, Paris 1571, col. 964, and see V. Murdoch, *The Wyclif Tradition*, Ohio 1978, p 13.

in some circles to try to overturn hierarchy in favour of equality, Milton saw Wyclif as a 'healing messenger'...'warring against humane Principles, and carnall sense, the pride of flesh that still cry'd up Antiquity, Custome, Canons, Councels and Lawes, and cry'd down the truth for noveltie, schisme, profanenesse and sacriledge'.[2] If the same teaching can be read with such conflicting assumptions about priorities, we are inescapably presented at the outset with a problem about this 'diversity over time' and its relationship to continuity in the maintenance of faith and order.

Most important here is the need to be sensitive to the differences of priority and assumption which examples such as these illustrate. For example, Wyclif would not hold with Luther that the Church stands or falls on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. For Wyclif celestial heritage is according to merit[3] and works count with faith.[4] Justification by faith alone is not only not part of the agenda of revised priorities he is anxious to establish in the Church; it does not present itself to him as an issue. At every point he proves both to be and not to be a forerunner of the Reformation and the internal economy of his ecclesiology is his own. That has to be respected not only for reasons of historical accuracy, but because it is itself an element in the very diversity over time which has to be weighed equally with acceptance of our contemporary diversity.

Diversity

On the whole Wyclif himself sees diversity as a good. Wyclif readily accepted the Scriptural argument that it is God's intention that there shall be diversity in the gifts he gives to the Church. But he and his contemporaries tended to see the issues that raised in terms of differences of ranking. It is, for example, possible to speak of three 'degrees' of gifts in the parable of the talents.[5] This was a significant point for Wyclif, and not one he was prepared to let pass unchallenged. One of his most consistent bugbears was the claim made by members of the religious orders, especially the friars, that they were somehow more Christian or better Christians, than the ordinary faithful.[6] There is no superior form of religion as practised by those in orders or those in the religious life who are monks or nuns or friars, Wyclif argues.[7] But he himself would accept that there is differentiation of office or task. He says so in discussing the *status* or disposition of the constitutive elements of the Church.[8] He describes it as divided into three, *naturalis*, *ministerialis* and *moralis*. It seems to him uncontroversial that God put (*instituit*) the section of

2 John Milton, *Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence, Against Smectynuus*, London 1641, p 36.

3 Wyclif, *Sermones*, ed. J. Loserth, London, 1886-9, *Pars* III, *Sermo* 42, p 355.

4 *Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 35, p 293 ; *Sermones*, pars III, *Sermo* 42, p 359, et al.

5 *Sermones, Pars* II, *Sermo* 6, p 36.

6 *Unde habebitur differencia quod illi ordines differuntur specifice a religione apostolica vel communi simplici christiana? Sermones, Pars* II, *Sermo* 32, p 261. There are good friars; Wyclif is not blindly condemnatory: he gives an example of a good Carmelite, *Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 28, p 223.

7 *Sic enim blasphemant fratres quod religio sua sit prestancior quam communis religio christiana. Sermones, Pars* II, *Sermo* 3, p 21.

8 *Disposicio in qua verbum Dei ordinavit creaturam rationalem stare, ut debite serviat Deo suo. Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 35, p 312.

the Church (*pars ecclesiae*) which has responsibility for ministry into the *status ministerialis*, and that, as Scripture says, he called some to be prophets, some apostles, some teachers.[9] But he would place the emphasis on the shared hope of heaven, and argue that if it were not possible for all conditions of men and women in the Church to be saved, that would mean that God had deserted his Church.[10] Wyclif also had a strong sense of the Eucharist as people coming together. He draws on Augustine's idea thatjust as bread is made from grains drawn from many places, so the Eucharist is made by a contrite people collected in unity.[11] He insists, too, that all members of the Church are bound to mutual help.[12] This rests on a doctrine of the Church as corporate person[13] which is of course much more complex than we can deal with here, but which itself implies a solidarity of the people of God incompatible with the superiority of some to others as Christians.[14]

But when we come to the dimension of time Wyclif perceives another aspect of the problem of diversity. William of Ockham (c.1280/5—1323) had seen a Church divided, with a papacy in exile at Avignon. Like Wyclif, he was forced to take stock of what had seemed immovables and discover in them a certain relativity. The principle that the sacraments are ' divinely empowered with an inviolable inner efficacy of grace' was securely established by Ockham's day. It was accepted that papal power was given by Christ to Peter and was thus also divinely entrusted. In this way, the Church could be seen as both a 'sacrament-bearer' and bearer of authority of jurisdiction.[15] Ockham suggested that this set of assumptions might be modified by stressing that Christ imposed limits on Peter's power.[16] Here he was in tune with the conciliarists who appealed to the practice of the apostles and the primitive Church, as Wyclif and the Hussites were also to do. Peter and his successors can thus be shown to be no more than first among equals, *primus inter pares*, and it can be argued that doctrinal disputes ought to be settled by councils, that popes have erred, that the Church ought to be governed by brotherly consultation. Conciliarists added to this a 'relativity theory' which says that there can be development in Church practice and some aspects of Church's constitution can be changed to suit the time or as a result of 'experience'.[17]

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9 *Et quosdam dicit prophetas, quosdam apostolos et quosdam doctores. Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 35, p 313.

10 *Remanet autem in nobis via possibilis dona spiritus experiendi et beatitudinem attingendi. Aliter autem Deus defective deseret suam ecclesiam et non foret nisi desperacio in viante post apostolos succedente. Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 35, p 293.

11 *Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 25, p 191.

12 *Omnes christiani sunt unum corpus in Domino. Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 49, p 423.

13 *Sancti doctores dicunt concorditer quod omnes electi a principio mundi usque ad diem iudicii sunt una persona que est mater ecclesia. De Ecclesia*, ed. J. Loserth, London 1886, p 20.

14 For a recent important study on this theme, see P. McPartlan, *The Eucharist makes the Church*, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh 1993.

15 J.J. Ryan, *Structure and Function of the Church in William of Ockham*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 1979, p 7.

16 *Potestati suae certos fines, quos non deberet transgredi, assignavit...Christus constituens beatum Petrum super omnes fideles, certos fines posuit, quos ei transgredi non licebat.* Ryan, p 9.

17 Cf. Henry of Langenstein, *Consilium Pacis*, ed. H. Hardt, 1697; *Magnum Oecumenicum Constantiense Consilium*, Frankfurt, Leipzig, vol. II p 47 ; translated J. K. Cameron, 1952, part 2, pp 1-92, Harvard thesis. John of Ragusa, *De auctoritate conciliorum*, Basel Universitätsbibliothek, MS A.1.17, fols. 134-297, fols. 187-97, 212-20.

It was asked by some of Wyclif's contemporaries whether the laws of the Church indeed could or should change over time. Sourly, he comments that to judge from the behaviour of prelates it would seem so.[18] Similarly one might enquire whether the Church was holier and more perfect in an earlier age, and answer in a similar way that it might seem so, but that cannot be the case.[19] So just as Wyclif would limit approval of diversity of gifts and functions if that seems to set one group of Christians above another as Christians, so he would limit endorsement of the view that there ought to be diversity over time in the Church if that would imply inferiority in the Church itself at some time or times.

A third aspect of the issue of diversity which interests Wyclif is of pressing importance today — the place of 'local' variation, with different Churches preserving different 'identities'. Because of his anxieties about contemporary abuses of the exercise of power in the Church, he was eager to show that the Pope was not head of the universal Church, but only of what could be described as a 'local' part, that is, the 'part' which is militant here on earth.[20] Here he certainly accepts the principle that 'local' may be taken metaphorically.[21] (Modern equivalents are 'ethnic' or 'national' or 'denominational' Churches.) Wyclif, like Marsilius before him and Hus after him,[22] preaches a local national ecclesial autonomy, with national churches[23] constituting stores of theological and spiritual wisdom in which in part their ecclesial identity can be deemed to consist.[24]

Local churches and secular authority

In arguing this, Wyclif was trying to devolve authority to local churches, for

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18 *Utrum regulas prelacie et militantis ecclesie oportet secundum variationem temporis variari, et videtur quod sic ex praxi prelatorum ecclesie. Sermones,* Pars III, *Sermo* 52, p 451.

19 *Dubitatur utrum ecclesia ut antiquior sit sanccior atque perfeccior, et videtur quod sic.... Sermones,* Pars III, *Sermo* 51, p 434.

20 *Dicunt doctores periciores quod dominus papa non est caput universalis sed particularis ecclesie dum tamen perseveranter vixerit tamquam papa.* Wyclif, *De Ecclesia,* ed. J. Loserth, Wyclif Society, London 1886, p 31.

21 *Notando tamen quod vocando ecclesiam quamcunque nomine loci hoc potest intelligi dupliciter, vel appropriate quoad habitacionem illius loci vel secundum partem, et in hoc sunt quotlibet gradus secundum amplitudinem parcium ecclesie.* Wyclif, *De Ecclesia,* p 16. For Wyclif all this was inseparable from the mediaeval discussuion of parts and wholes. *Immo oportet...negare omnem particularem ecclesiam, cum particulare non dicitur nisi in comparacione ad totale et universale. Ideo negata universali et totali ecclesia neganda foret quelibet particularis ecclesia, vel aliter dicentum foret quod Deus cognoscit mille universales ecclesias...quod est summe hereticum. De Ecclesia,* p 20.

22 The conciliar movement as a whole must be seen as a response to growing centralisation of Church administration and jurisdiction. Marsilius, Wyclif, Hus, want national or state churches and link that with seeing whole aspects of Church's tradition, esp. papal authority, as fundamentally opposed to Scripture and reason. The alternative to papal centralism which emerges is a devolution of power to nation-states and secular rulers. During the schisms of 1378-1417 and 1437-49, princes tended to determine the allegiance of clergy and peoples and ecclesiastical policy. For a convenient summary of the issues, see *The Cambridge History of Mediaeval Political Thought,* ed. J. H. Burns, Cambridge 1988, p 573.

23 And their local universities.

24 Jean Dunbabin, 'Government', *The Cambridge History of Mediaeval Political Thought,* ed. J. H. Burns, Cambridge 1988, pp 504f.

reasons which have a great deal to do with his mistrust of over-centralisation. Here he foreshadows a movement which was to gather force in the sixteenth century, but with an emphasis much stronger than Wyclif's on the role of the secular government in the government of the Church. The sixteenth-century thrust was to find substitutes for a centralized papal power in 'princes' and 'magistrates'. This was to encourage a stress on the duty to submit to civil authority, and an elevation of the case to be made that there is divine sanction for that authority.[25] In pressing this case, Wyclif expressed views on the duty of obedience to secular authority which are somewhat at variance with his thinking about the duty of obedience to authority in the Church. The patristic line had been, in general, that resistance to secular government was justified only if the government required the subject to break God's law. In his *De officio regis* Wyclif took that to be right. Wyclif thought that liegemen might have the right to overthrow a tyrant but on the whole he argues that the subject should be submissive.[26] He could not so wholeheartedly endorse obedience for its own sake to the exercise of authority by those with responsibility for ministry in the Church.

All this has to do not only with the call for local ecclesial identity, with the concomitant possibility of diversity of ecclesial pattern between one such Church and another, but also with the issues of the Church's relation to the world. Wyclif holds that lay rulers have a responsibility to correct abuses in the Church. It is one of 'Antichrist's excuses' (an *excusatio Antichristi)* to say that lay rulers are not allowed to lead Christ's people back in the right direction when they have been led astray.[27] The distinction Wyclif wishes to make in this kind of discussion is of the first importance as a statement of his position on the Church's relation to the world. He says that 'power' properly belongs in the secular sphere. In the Church those who hold positions of authority ought to be simply the instruments of God's power, and they should not seek power for themselves.[28] But in his experience the secular arm (*seculare bracchium*) seduces priests so that they do not wish to make the Church conform to the law of Christ, and they struggle for wealth and power.[29] Again and again Wyclif criticises those Christian ministers who do nothing to build up the Church but on the contrary work against what is to its good in their striving for wealth.[30]

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25 But the sixteenth century prince is not seen as usurping Christ's headship in the state when he requires obedience, as, in the eyes of late-mediaeval dissidents, the prelate is in the Church.

26 *Tractatus de officio regis*, ed. A. W. Pollard and C. Sayle, Wyclif Society, London 1887, p 201. See, too, *Tractatus de Civili Dominio*, ed. R. Lane Poole, Wyclif Society, London 1885; *De Dominio Divino*, ed. R. Lane Poole, Wyclif Society, London 1890.

27 *Quod non licet dominis temporalibus ordinacionem Christi huic contrariam exercitum suum reducere. Sermones*, Pars II, *Sermo* 3, p 21.

28 *Ad dei honorem et ecclesie obedienciam plus ministrantes, secluso ab eis seculari dominio ut veneno, sed seculare dominium debet seculi potentatibus concomitante virtute et gracia reservari. Sermones*, Pars III, *Sermo* 28, p 217.

29 *Numquid credimus estimandum est officium sacerdoti Christi sic pugnare pro stercore temporalium et sic intendere loricatum. Sermones*, Pars III, *Sermo* 3, p 16.

30 *Ad edificacionem ecclesie, sed bona naturalia usque ad sudorem excitant pro temporalibus contra utilitatem ecclesie acquirendis. Sermones*, Pars II, *Sermo* 3, p 31.

The Church and the world

In Wyclif's day, the boundary between secular and spiritual power was easily blurred among the higher clergy themselves, because feudal society had long imposed secular responsibilities upon them. It seemed to Wyclif (in keeping with these priorities), appropriate to challenge the Church's high-handed behaviour in property-matters and call for disendowment and the confiscation of ecclesiastical property. This preoccupation was partly prompted by events. In 1371 Wyclif was present at a debate in Parliament in which two Augustinian friars argued that it was justifiable to seize ecclesiastical property for the common good. What pious laymen had given to the Church they could take back if the secular community had greater need of it. It appears that Wyclif was asked by John of Gaunt and the Black Prince's widow to explain to the Papacy that the English clergy could not afford to pay papal taxes in wartime. Wyclif's response was to develop a challenge to the view that the spiritual and therefore higher authority of the Church made it immune from secular taxation. He went so far as to argue for the right of the secular government to despoil the richer clergy.[31]

Chapter 7 of the *De Ecclesia* begins what is really a separate treatise within the work, *De captivo Hispanensi*. This is a judgement laid before Parliament by Wyclif at the King's wish. The recent case[32] on whether it is allowable for the King's government to drag from the shelter of sanctuary escaped prisoners who have taken refuge in Westminster Abbey prompted Wyclif to elaborate his theory of the relation of Church and state. Westminster Abbey had appealed to its privileges. Wyclif says there are no true privileges except those founded in Scripture. These are spiritual blessings.[33] Other privileges, immunities, prerogatives, honours, property, worldly dominion, are snares of Satan and ruin the Church. People who seek them do not, by definition, belong to the Church. Privileges are valid only if they tend to the good of the Church.[34] The highest privileges of the Church derive from poverty. It is a sin in laymen to endow and in clergy to accept endowments. That is not how things were in the early Church. Privileges are valid only if they tend to the good of the Church, and the disturbance of England or her inhabitants can be of no advantage to the Church; so no privilege can hold good if it tends to injure the realm or any part of it.

Authority and power

It is clear in this dispute as elsewhere that Wyclif was concerned above all about the abuse of power. He had grown up with a conception of authority in the Church which was strictly hierarchical. So it was natural to speak in terms of power as something exercised 'over', subordinates, that is, of dominion and lordship. If that sort of power went wrong, the alternatives it became necessary to look for seemed to him to be three. It could be argued that true authority lay not with the hierarchy of the Church but with

31 It fitted his case about grace that reprobates should be recognised by their greed for money and their corruption.

32 11 August, 1378.

33 *De Ecclesia*, Chapters 8 and 9.

34 *De Ecclesia*, Chapter 10.

Scripture. It could be argued that authority in the Church ought to be not hierarchical but shared among equals, horizontal rather than vertical. It could be argued that even if authority properly lay with those at the head of a hierarchy, they lost it if they lacked grace. These three ideas are developed in Wyclif's ecclesiological writings, especially the *De Ecclesia* and the *De Dominio Divino* and in the *De Civili Dominio.*

Wyclif's *De Dominio Divino* was intended to be an introduction to his *Summa in Theologia.*[35] Wyclif begins it with a prologue in which he says he intends to approach the study of theology by expounding the doctrine of dominion or lordship which is to be found in Scripture. He defines it as a 'habit' (in the Aristotelian sense of a characteristic) unique to rational natures, by virtue of which such natures are set over that which serves them. Lordship and service are thus a paired and inseparable relationship, and in themselves a good and proper one.

Lordship is not eternal, because there have to be objects for it to act upon. So lordship originated with creation. Genesis implies that God became Lord only when there were creatures over whom he had dominion. We are, then, discussing something which operates only within the created order, and, in the case of human society, within the damaged order of a fallen creation. Lordship is not the same thing as right, says Wyclif, because someone can have a right to a thing without obtaining lordship of it. But lordship includes right, which is the basis on which the relationship of lordship and service ought to operate. If there is no right, the lordship becomes violence or exploitation of power.

Lordship is not identical with power. Wyclif gives the example of the rule that a priest has the 'power of the keys' even if he has no-one subject to his power. That is to say, he retains the authority to declare absolution even when he has no penitent before him. Nor is lordship the same thing as having the use of that over which dominion is claimed.[36]

The fact that the arena of lordship for mankind is an arena in which all is muddied by sin is central for Wyclif. In *De Dominio Divino* and *De Civili Dominio* Wyclif argues that lordship depends on grace. In the present sinful state of the Church true lordship can not exist without it. If, as Wyclif holds, the converse is true, and everyone who is in a state of grace has lordship, we have a substantive challenge to the hierarchical picture of proper order in the Church.

Our twentieth-century vantage-point has its own priorities. Yves Congar, for example, writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, in a study in which Wyclif has a place, argues a position on hierarchy and obedience from the comparison which now has to be made between secular and spiritual societies. He suggests that jurisdiction in any society is the power of saying what is just (*dicere jus*), what must be done, in practice as well as in theory, and that that power is essential to all societies. That means that it is necessary to the Church, too, he says. Here he sees the Church above all as a society of

35 Ed. R. L. Poole, Wyclif Society, London 1890. It may be an unfinished work. Lane Poole, pp xxi ff.

36 Here Wyclif was taking a position on the fourteenth century controversy about ecclesiastical property and the place of poverty in general in the Church. Wyclif agrees with the Spiritual Franciscans and Marsilius of Padua against John XXII.

mutual responsibility, because God wills that we should be saved in the Church, that is, socially, and by mutual help. All this is very much of the twentieth century in its emphasis, and Wyclif would need a gloss before he could see the force of our current foundation assumptions. But the Church, Congar goes on, is not only a divine society. It is also a human society; and a human authority, even though received from God, must regulate human wills so as to make them agree, and so as to lead them to a unity in cooperation. Here Congar is arguing for an obedience which is directed towards the common task and is using hierarchy only to the purpose of mutual help. Yet he knows that many Orthodox thinkers reproach Roman Catholics for having naturalised, secularised, made worldly and pagan the idea of the Church, so that the Church seems a body in which some command and some obey, and whose unity is hardly more than a unity of obedience.[37] So Congar is of the late twentieth century both in his assumptions about the analogy with society and in his ecumenical awareness of the criticisms others may make of his own Church's record.

The domain of grace

Wyclif's leading idea is of a Church which is a domain of grace. Here he was taking a position on an issue which was also to engage the Bohemian Hus and to call down on him the opposition of John of Ragusa in the early fourteenth century.[38] He claimed that it was not the visible fact of baptism which made men and women Christians, but God's secret election. It is of the first importance to the doctrine of predestination before Calvin that it is not known who the predestinate are. Once that is accepted it is possible to say that there is only one (invisible) universal Church, and that there is no salvation outside it, and at the same time to challenge the authority of the (visible) Church's existing hierarchy. Thus Wyclif can argue that the Pope cannot call himself head of Church because he cannot know whether he is predestinate; and that it cannot be true that obedience to the Pope is required in order to be saved.[39] Indeed when the Church falls from grace it becomes the Devil's nest, the *nidus diaboli.* [40]

The motivation for Wyclif's case is the desire to challenge abuses in existing structures at least as much as it is the wish to put forward this positive account of things in which, ecclesiologically speaking, grace is all.[41]

37 Y. Congar, *Sainte Église*, Paris 1963, pp 204-7.

38 P. de Vooght, '"Universitas praedestinatorum" et "corpus fidelium" dans l'ecclésiologie de Jean Hus', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 32 (1956), 487-534. G. Thils, 'Le "Tractatus de Ecclesia" de Jean de Ragusa', *Angelicum*, 17 (1940), 219-44.

39 *De Ecclesia*, p 16. A similar purpose of dethroning excessive claims to powers not shared by all Christians is served by Wylif's contention that Christ must be the Church's only Head, for otherwise the Church will be a two-headed monster.

40 *Sermones, Pars* I, *Sermo* 20, p 138.

41 We can see that illustrated in a contrast pointed out by J. E. Rea of the lead-bearing ideas in theories of common priesthood through the ages. The Waldensians of the twelfth century spoke of the priesthood of the saints; Wyclif of the priesthood of the predestinate; Luther of the priesthood of true believers. Each was a way of expressing disquiet at the real or imagined exploitation or abuse of authority by a clerical class, by relocating 'priesthood' in the whole body of Christ's people collectively. J. E. Rea, *The Common Priesthood of the Members of the Mystical Body. An Historical Survey*, Westminster, USA 1947.

Wyclif cannot paint his good minister without concomitant darkening of the present ones, especially the papacy.[42]

He saw various ways of checking and balancing clerical and papal claims to absolute power to save. There were holy men before there was a papacy, and sometimes the papal chair is unoccupied, so it must be true that Christians can be saved independently of the papacy. For example, in the *De potestate papae* (c.1370?) he says that the Pope's claims to plenitude of power are ill-founded in Scripture and that his salvation is not more certain than that of any man. Every command of the Pope ought to be examined to see if it is in conformity with the Scriptures. (This is a key reason why every Christian ought to know the Scriptures, Wyclif argues.) The Pope is just like all other Christians in that he is only truly and effectively holder of his office if he lives in accordance with Christ's commands. These are all primarily, for Wyclif, reasons to see the papacy as not essential to salvation, and only secondarily reasons to place reliance on Scripture and on grace.

Wyclif's theology of ministry

The last of these reasons has important implications for Wyclif's theology of ministry. He says that the Christian should take Christ to be his priest, vicar, bishop and pope, and regard as Christ's representatives in the ministerial office only those prelates whose good works he sees. Such good works are to be taken as an indication that the clergy in question may be predestinate, and that is essential if as Wyclif insists, no-one who is not predestinate can rightly fulfill the office of priest. This is an important departure from the principle generally held in the Church until then and since[43] that the unworthiness of an ordained minister does not invalidate his ministry or make it sacramentally ineffective. It creates a situation where there can be no security in the Church's rulings, for we cannot know whether they are approved and sanctioned by God. Some saints canonised here on earth may be rejected by God and vice versa. Even apparent miracles, Wyclif points out, may have diabolical delusions in them.

Wyclif says that priests entrammelled in worldly greed are unworthy to preach, even if they know the gospel, which they often do not. He argues that it is more important to preach than to minister the sacraments.[44] Preaching by means of stories and examples will not do. There must be explanation of Scripture. Anything else is to serve a meal without bread.[45] Preaching of the gospel should be thorough not piecemeal.[46] His main point is that the first task of the minister is the preaching of the gospel.[47]

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42 *Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 28, p 217. But he understands that quarrelling is not God's will: *bellantes, excommunicantes et militibus altercantes sunt contrarii legi Deo. Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 29, p 230.

43 See Thirty-Nine Articles, Article 26.

44 E.g., *De quatuor sectis novellis*, in Wyclif, *Political Works*, p 261, and *Opus Evangelicum*, II.35.

45 *Sermones*, ed. J. Loserth (London, 1888), II, p 159, *Sermo* 22.

46 *De Officio Petro*, p 35.

47 *Primum atque precipuum opus pastoris est veritatis fidei evangelizacio, secundum est in sanctitate vite et sequele Christi exemplacio et tercium est usque ad mortem in fide et thesauro Christi que sunt virtutes defensio. Sermones, Pars* II, *Sermo* 16, p 115.

Worldly priests are unfit to pray for the people, that is to act as mediators. They are also unfit to minister sacraments.[48] They are unfaithful stewards who will be punished.[49] Wicked priests are infidels.[50] Wyclif can argue that such prelates actually hate Christ.[51] Those who ought to be Christ's ministers (that is, his instruments) are actually persecuting him.[52]

That brings us to a notion we have already touched on in Wyclif, that of the minister as instrument to do God's will, rather than as possessing a power which Wyclif thinks appropriate only to the secular arm.[53] When priests fail to be ministerial instruments, Wyclif would say that they cease to be efficacious in their ministry. Wyclif was to develop this claim in various directions. The abuses he thought he saw could all be addressed in this way by denying that the perpetrators had grace and thus showing them to be usurpers of the authority they were exercising.

The indicators we can trust, the test of conformity with Scripture and the signs of grace in righteous living, are no more than pointers. Ultimately, God alone knows the truth. This is an ecclesiology of profound uncertainty, if one of trust in God, and Wyclif saw the difficulties. But it seemed to him so important to challenge what he believed to be abuse that it was worth setting the trust of the faithful in the security of the sacraments at risk. Grace was the only security they needed, and indeed the only security the Church ought to look to. That is an important point, because ecclesiology must always be concerned with questions of the security of the life and work of the Church, with whether a given community is truly the Church and thus truly the community of salvation.

Wyclif's crisis and ours

Wyclif wrote at a time of ecclesiological crisis. The problem he identified was the obverse of the post-Reformation multiplication of division in the Church. It seemed to him that the Church in the West had become an institutional monolith. These two extremes, of fragmented unity and a unity which is preserved at the cost of denying diversity its proper place, are equally inimical to the ecumenical goal and for some of the same reasons. Wyclif saw things as a man of his age. How could he not? He saw issues concerning the

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48 *Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 3, p 17. *Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 3, p 20.

49 *Sermones, Pars* III, *Sermo* 3, p 18.

50 *Dubitatur...si religiosi nostri privati ut sic a religione degenerent et sint ut sic per consequens infideles. Sermones, Pars* II, *Sermo* 32, p 261.

51 *Prelato superiores ecclesie qui debent esse cives apostolorum et magis domestici Dei odiunt multipliciter dominum Jesum Christum, saying in effect, nolumus hunc regnare super nos. Sermones, Pars* II, *Sermo* 5, p 30.

52 *The persecucio Antichristi* today *...excedit tam diurnitate quam ypocritica callidate persecucionem qua Christus fuit in persona propria per sacerdotes legis veteris persecutus. Notemus (rogo) legatos cum bullis missos a latere antichristi et videamus quid sonat ad edificacionem ecclesie secundum legem evangelii, quin pocius dicunt impicite quot nolunt legi Christ regnanti super eos subici. Sermones,* Pars II, *Sermo* 5, p 30.

53 *Debemus imaginari atque supponere quod Deus influit virtutem ministrandi toti ecclesie militanti et quilibet minister illius ecclesie habet ex dono Dei partem talis virtutis. Et ipse tamquam sarra vel ministerium per illam virtutem agitur, ut perficiat domini voluntatem Sermones,* pars III, *Sermo* 32, p 251.

Church's relation to the world in feudal terms, terms of power and dominion, of proper spheres of Church and state and the dangerous seductiveness of wealth. Ministers he saw as instruments under grace of the purposes of God; and as properly keeping themselves unspotted by the seductions of such power, dominion or wealth. What are the lessons for us now ? Above all, perhaps, that theological expression always has an intellectual context which reflects the preoccupations of contemporary secular thought. If it is taken out of that context and used as authority for conclusions drawn in later ages in different circumstances, as Wyclif's has frequently been, there is a danger of misunderstanding its import. That is dangerous if the result is to elevate such 'principles for their time' to a theological status which really belongs only to what the Church has found in Scripture in every age. Confessional documents framed in circumstances of polemic, such as the Lutheran Augsburg Confession and the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles, are particularly susceptible to the danger of being made foundations of 'confessional identity', over against other Christian communions. We have to look critically at diversity over time as well as diversity now to get it right ecumenically.

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