
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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

THE LITTLE REFORMATION.

WYCLIFFE AND THE LOLLARDS.

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IT is a matter for some surprise that the reforming spirit which was so active in England during the fourteenth century did not effect a Reformation in the Church of that age, as did the revived activity of the same spirit in the sixteenth century. One can only conclude that "the fulness of time" had not come. But, as inquiry is made into that remarkable movement begun by Wycliffe and continued by his followers, one realises that the ground was prepared by these people, the seed was scattered, and at last their labours were rewarded at harvest time.

In order to understand this movement, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the historical background of the fourteenth century. Above all, we must know something of Wycliffe's work and teaching, for the Lollards were his professed followers.

The thirteenth century had been an age of great activity. The Friars had set out on their task inspired by noble ideals. Their efforts had been crowned with a measure of success. Society as a whole had been uplifted by their labours. Further, it was an age of glorious Church architecture. The Papacy was at the height of its power. Learning had been graced by such men as Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon. However, this state of things did not endure. A period of decline set in with the early years of the fourteenth century. By this time the Friars had lost their first fervour and forgotten their foundation vows. The Papacy was discredited in the eyes of Europe because of the Babylonish Captivity which began in 1305. As Professor Von Schubert says, "while France was deriving political advantages simply from a Pope who was French in sentiment but put forward absolute claims, as he had done before from Rome, the morally fettered representative of God was completely forfeiting the sympathies of the other princes. A national pope was obviously no pope at all." [1] Besides this fact, the temporal and financial aims of the Papacy presented a shameful scene of abuse.

English ecclesiastical and political life was bound up with that of the Continent. Our land had her part to play in the drama of those days, for she had possessions in France, and the Hundred Years' War had begun. The internal policy of the first three Edwards produced legislation which showed that England repudiated the idea of a papal supremacy in Church and State alike. That this tendency gained momentum is not surprising, for the end of the Babylonish Captivity saw the commencement of the Great Schism. A lamentable spectacle indeed!

[1] *Outlines of Church History*, p. 233.

Into such a world came John Wycliffe (1324–84). Of his early years little is known beyond the fact of his Yorkshire origin. In the University of Oxford, even as a young man he "stood without a rival."[1] He became Fellow and afterwards Master of Balliol. Occupying several livings in turn, he died as incumbent of Lutterworth in Leicestershire. These livings were held in succession, not together, as was the custom in those days, but he obtained permission to spend a number of years in study at Oxford, having first made provision for the spiritual needs of his benefice. His activities were varied. For his learning, he was far famed, even on the Continent. But he was eventually swept into the stream of public life. Papal abuses had become a vital topic in the country. Although repressive legislation had been introduced, the old abuses lasted on. The Commons, however, were determined to investigate the whole matter, and in 1374 envoys were sent to Bruges, amongst them Wycliffe, to deal with the questions in dispute. Unfortunately, the conference produced no satisfactory results. Another event in 1366 had brought Wycliffe into prominence. It was when the Pope demanded the arrears of tribute, payment of which had been suspended for over thirty years. This was the occasion of another outburst of anti-papal feeling. Wycliffe's part was prominent, for he penned a pamphlet on the topic. The whole country was united in declaring that any attempt to enforce payment should be resisted by the King. Wycliffe's activity on this matter brought his other work into prominence, and the Pope issued five Bulls demanding proceedings against his teaching. These were addressed to the King, the Archbishop, the Bishop of London and Oxford University. At the Bishop of London's instigation (Courtenay) the seemingly reluctant Primate assembled with his bishops in 1377 to inquire into Wycliffe's public utterances. The trial ended in great commotion, for the Reformer was supported by John of Gaunt, Earl Marshal Lord Percy and four learned friars. But not only so, the Londoners broke into the already confused assembly in support of Wycliffe. Though they hated the Duke of Lancaster, Gaunt, they loved Wycliffe. A second trial was held in the following year. This seems to have been in answer to the Pope's Bulls. It was no more successful than its predecessor. Once again, the crowds stopped the proceedings. Wycliffe's influence at the Court, in the University and in London was indeed potent. Another council was held in 1382. By now, the Reformer had attacked the Papacy, denouncing it as Anti-Christ. He had also condemned the doctrine of Transubstantiation. This seemed too much for many people. In addition, some wrongly attributed the cause of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 to his writings. It was at this point that certain of his friends deserted him, in particular, John of Gaunt. Twenty-four "articles" were examined by the Council. Of these, ten were condemned as heretical. Fourteen were censured. The chancellor and proctors of Oxford were compelled to join in the condemnation, and it was ordered that no one

[1] Green, *A Short History of the English People*, p. 229.

should teach or lecture on them. The Wycliffite party, however, was so strong in the University, that until the King brought pressure to bear, no follower of the Reformer was suspended. In spite of this condemnation, Wycliffe was allowed to end his days in peace at Lutterworth. Not until 1428 was his body disturbed. When no further harm could be done to him, his remains were disinterred, burnt heretic-wise, and his ashes cast into the river. A futile deed of fierce fanaticism!

What of his teaching? Viewing the state of Christendom shown in the corrupt state of the Papacy, the worldliness of the higher clergy, the degeneracy of the friars and the decayed and lax condition of monasticism, he called for a return to Apostolic poverty. With his piercing perception he perceived that the mercenary spirit within was the cause of decay; so he called for a thorough policy of Church disendowment. It was in this that John of Gaunt was interested. He and his followers coveted the riches of the Church, wanting a share of ecclesiastical plunder. Wycliffe was too high souled to see the self-seeking of these unnatural allies. Shocked by the spectacle of a disgraced Papacy he attacked the basic claim of the primacy of St. Peter, maintaining that the Papal power was not wielded as St. Peter's successor, nor yet as Christ's Vicar on earth, but that it was obtained from the Cæsars. In all these, he appealed to Scripture for authority.

In his work, *De dominio*, he maintained that all "dominion" which was God's prerogative, was founded upon grace. Developing the idea in feudal terms, he maintained that the possession of "dominion" was always subject to the rendering of due service to God. Mortal sin was a breach of tenure and so incurred forfeiture. This was evidently conceived of as in an ideal state, so Wycliffe made certain reservations. Whilst "dominion" belonged to the righteous man alone, "lordship" might be held by the wicked, but only by God's permission. This doctrine contained high explosive. It would seem to have been ignited in the Peasants' Revolt. But it must be remembered that these unlettered men had not the fine distinctions of the philosopher in their minds. Whilst Wycliffe had no part in the revolt, his enemies laid the blame at his door. An examination of the circumstances will show that the results of the Black Death and the Statutes of Labourers were largely responsible for the upheaval. As Workman says, it was but "the rude translation into the world of practice of a theory of 'dominion' that destroyed the 'lordship' of the wicked."[1] Wycliffe had a deep sympathy with the unfortunate victims of the revolt. This sympathy is like the leit-motiv of a piece of music that runs all through his work and "redeems his fiercest denunciations and his most impossible dreams." Wycliffe showed how he had been influenced by Archbishop Fitzralph and William of Ockham as he elaborated his theories on "dominion."

In the treatise, *De officio Regis*, he maintained that the kingly office was derived immediately from God; from this he concluded

[1] *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. XII, p. 819.

that the King was over the clergy. By His obedience to Pilate, he said that Christ had shown that even tyrants should be obeyed. If Henry VIII had been aware of this work, he could not have followed its outline more thoroughly. The Stuarts could not have sought a more clear statement of "The Divine Right of Kings."

The Babylonish Captivity and the Great Schism led him to attack the papacy as Anti-Christ. Afterwards he declared the doctrine of transubstantiation to be absurd. Most of this work was destructive, but on the constructive side we find his insistence on the authority of Holy Scripture. This found expression in two ways. First, in his organisation of the Poor Preachers. These men, armed with translations of short portions of scripture, carried his teaching into the West Country, the Midlands, East Anglia and a great portion of the South. Secondly, and perhaps his greatest work was his translation of the Bible into English. This was a great achievement, for he had no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek, and translated from the often faulty Vulgate. In this work he was ably assisted by several of the more learned of his followers. His plan was opposed by the hierarchy, and licences are still extant which prove their opposition. However, his method of spreading the truth is well vindicated by to-day's circulation of the Scriptures in hundreds of tongues, and by their presence in castle and cottage alike. Such was the work of John Wycliffe who has been styled "The Evangelical Doctor," "The Morning Star of the Reformation," "The first English Reformer and Father of English prose," and "The last of the Great Schoolmen." It is astonishing that he effected so much in those darkened days. Green's words seem to be apt. "The spare emaciated frame of Wycliffe, weakened by study and asceticism, hardly promised a Reformer who would carry on the stormy work of Ockham; but within this frail form lay a temper quick and restless, an immense energy, an immovable conviction, an unconquerable pride. The personal charm which ever accompanies real greatness also deepened the influence he derived from the spotless purity of his life."[1]

Although Wycliffe's followers were called Lollards, the name is not peculiar to them. There was an almost contemporary movement in Brabant, though a little prior to that in England, whose supporters were nicknamed Lollards. The name is Dutch in origin and means "to sing softly," "to lull," "to drone." These, like the Waldenses and the "Spiritual Friars" before them, were inspired by the example of apostolic poverty. They devoted themselves to deeds of Christian kindness, and were conspicuous for their self-denial and devotion to others during the Plague of Antwerp in 1350. Although we must not confuse the continental movement with that within our coasts, it goes to prove that the stirrings of the Spirit were being felt in Europe as a whole.

Lollardry in England began when Wycliffe sent out his poor preachers, clad in their russet robes, bearing their Evangelical message. It soon became a power in the land, for these preachers

[1] Green, *ut supra*, p. 229.

of the Gospel found a public eager to hear. Oxford became the centre of the movement. London heard the news gladly. Other centres of activity sprung up as already mentioned. There can be no doubt that Wycliffe was the most effective preacher of his day, and the Lollards spread his teaching. The spreading of his attacks on the Political Prelates aroused the anger of the bishops. He and his followers were marked men. The bishops were further alarmed at the Lollard preaching of a system of Church Order that was largely framed on Presbyterian lines.

With Courtenay's appointment to Canterbury we can well imagine that severe action would be taken against the Lollards. There was much that was commendable in the new Archbishop's character, but it must be remembered that he had a long score to settle with Wycliffe. Doubtless he was embittered by the recollection of his previous failure to silence the Reformer. Opposition had stiffened, and what had once been mere ecclesiastical scorn, now was changed into vigorous action. The " Earthquake Council " of 1382 secured the condemnation of certain tenets of Wycliffite teaching as heretical. Being successful in this attack, an onslaught was made on Oxford as the seat of Wycliffism. At first it seemed as though this attempt to purge the University would fail. Although the Commons refused to follow the lead of the Lords who had allowed repressive measures against the Lollards, the King had given powers to the prelates to proceed against them. At first the Archbishop's mandate to suppress the new teaching was treated with contempt. Yet, such pressure was later exerted that Dr. Rugge, the Chancellor, was subdued, Philip Repyngdon and John Aston recanted, and Nicholas of Hereford fled. The astonishing thing is, that Wycliffe was allowed to remain at Lutterworth in peace. Successful as this attempt to suppress the new movement might seem, it did not effect its purpose. Several factors contributed to its failure. Political circumstances fanned discontent. Then there was the failure of the " crusade " headed by the militant Bishop of Norwich in 1383. This " crusade " was in favour of Pope Urban against the followers of the anti-pope. There was an anti-papal and anti-clerical feeling abroad throughout the land. It showed itself in anti-papal measures and in opposition to the " Cæsarian Prelates." Another factor in favour of the movement was the interest of Richard's Consort, Anne of Bohemia, who appreciated the evangelical elements in Wycliffe's creed. Later, papal demands were so exacting that the anti-papal legislation of the Edwards was renewed. Supported by these circumstances the Lollards increased, and in 1395, in an emboldened moment presented a memorial to Parliament asking help in reform. For the first time, the House was asked to pronounce upon doctrinal issues. The tenets of Lollardry were set forth in the Memorial. These largely followed Wycliffe's teaching, but on certain doctrinal points they showed a marked advance on their leader's position. The subjects touched upon in its twelve " conclusions " included the position of the Papacy in Christendom, the ministry, clerical celibacy, transubstantiation, vows, warfare and the blessing of

material things. The old issues were raised again, and in particular the cry against statesmen-bishops. The appeal did not move Parliament, so the document was posted on the doors of St. Paul's and the Abbey. The King was in Ireland at the time. On his return he subdued the knights who had presented the petition. Pressing the matter still further, Oxford was subjected to another attack on Lollardry.

The movement now began to decline. No leader of worth was at hand to follow Wycliffe. Courtenay's persecution robbed it of the support of Oxford. Thus, its intellectual spring was severed at its source. As Green says: "From that moment Lollardism ceased to be in any sense an organised movement, and crumbled into a general spirit of revolt. All the religious and social discontents of the time floated instinctively to the new centre." [1] Yet it seems that this very lack of organisation allowed the movement to penetrate far and wide.

More strenuous times were ahead. Arundel was now on the throne of Augustine. He was chancellor as well. Henry IV had been assisted to the throne by the bishops, who demanded his support in purging the country of the religious discontents and in defending the rights of the clergy. The result was the statute of 1401, "De Haeretico Comburendo," which armed the bishops with terrible powers. Even before the statute came into operation, William Sawtre, chaplain of St. Osyth, Walbrook, suffered at the stake. Wycliffe's Oxford friends were tried. Some wavered, some recanted. John Badby, a tailor of Evesham, was made of sterner stuff and suffered for his faith. William Thorpe, another layman, died in prison. Events showed that Oxford was not yet purged of the new religion, for despite the statute and its terrors, the University still bore traces of Lollardry. Yet Arundel was more thorough in his attack on Oxford than was Courtenay. In 1411 the University was purged, freedom of thought suppressed, and a bonfire made of the works condemned as heretical. In the following reign persecution continued. Sir John Oldcastle bore the brunt of the offensive. After examination by Arundel he was handed over to the secular power as a heretic. The Lollards rose in revolt to assist him. Their effort was quelled by force, but Oldcastle escaped and lived in hiding for three years. At last he was caught and put to death. Of his helpers, some were hanged and afterwards burnt as heretics. Lollardry was now driven underground. Yet the movement survived in hiding. Right on into the sixteenth century we find a succession of Lollard martyrs. Although the movement had been cut off at its intellectual source and subdued by persecution, it had centres of influence. This is shown by the activities of the Bishop of Norwich in his prosecutions for heresy. Some recanted. Others suffered. In 1455 Bishop Pecock paid attention to the movement in his *Repressor of overmuch blaming of the Clergy*. In spite of all this, the Lollards were active right on to the Reformation and gained a new vitality with the spread of Luther's teaching.

[1] Green, *ut supra*, pp. 251–2.

The chain of reformation was thus completed. It began with Wycliffe, then passed on to Huss, afterward to Luther, thence to our own Reformers. If evidence is needed, it is provided by one of Bishop Tunstall's letters to Erasmus, written in 1534. The Bishop wrote: "It is no question of pernicious novelty, it is only that new arms are being added to the great band of Wycliffite heretics."

It remains to inquire as to what contribution this "little reformation" made to the later movement which effected so much, and, why it seemingly failed where the other succeeded.

Wycliffe certainly foreshadowed the later successful policy. King and Parliament effected the Reformation. Papal authority was repudiated. The King was acknowledged as head of the Church. Ecclesiastical possessions were confiscated in certain quarters, though a thorough policy of disendowment was not pursued. The Bible became the authoritative court of appeal, and was available to all. Trevelyan is clear on this point. "Every important aspect of the English Reformation was of Native origin. All can be traced back as far as Wycliffe, and some farther." [1]

The apparent failure of the movement would seem to be due to several causes. Wycliffe died at a time when what had been largely work of destruction might have been turned to constructive effort. Further, there was no able successor to carry on his work. Added to this, the first generation of Lollards were not, as a whole, of the stuff that martyrs are made of. It must also be remembered that the suppression of thought in Oxford was like a blight which lasted for a century. Above all, whilst the Church was in a position of some measure of subjection to the Papacy with all its evils, corruption, and internal disorders, the Church of England was "in no position to reform herself had she wished, because she had no independence, and indeed no corporate existence." In that period the political struggles were of such a nature that the throne was by no means safe, and the Lollards were often misrepresented by their enemies as politically dangerous. The movement, however, made a definite contribution to the work of reform. As has been well said, the Lollards "were sentinels against an army of enemies till God sent Luther to relieve them." [2]

[1] *History of England*, p. 250. [2] Fuller.