

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## Donald Dean Smeeton

# Holy Living and the Holy Ghost: A Study of Wycliffite Pneumatology

*Dr Smeeton is Dean of the International Correspondence School in Brussels, where he is closely associated with the work of the European Pentecostal Theological Association. His research interest is in the Lollards, and he is the author of Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale.*

To attempt the task suggested by the title of this essay appears to be an act of futility which, in the end, can satisfy no one. It will not please those who have, in the evangelical tradition of John Foxe, recreated the Lollards after their own image. This narrow and partisan historiography reforms these English dissenters of the fifteenth century into a charismatic band of poor preachers representing the 'true' church suffering through the dark ages while affirming a fully realized Protestant theology. The Wycliffites are assumed to be the diminutive but uneducated descendants of the Oxford don who is remembered for his arduous Latin, his scholastic mentality, and his connections at court.<sup>1</sup> The specialist in the field, on the other hand, will be skeptical that any serious pneumatology can be posited for the Lollards. The movement was, after all, non-philosophical, non-speculative, and even non-theological, at least in the meanings of that day. The Wycliffites were pragmatic and skeptical of anything that suggested magic or gullibility and thus were constant critics of miracles that were beyond substantiation. It was, of course, their orthodox persecutors who were perceived as manipulating magic and necromancy to validate their claim to supernatural endorsement. According to this view, the Wycliffites were simplistic, yet rationalistic, naysayers of status quo.

Neither position now appears to be a justifiable understanding of Wycliffism. The publication by Anne Hudson of *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (1978) provided an anthology of Lollard tracts complete with critical apparatus and interpretive

<sup>1</sup> The classic essay that traces this position during the earliest part of the Reformation is 'John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation', which has been reprinted most recently as a chapter in Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy In Late Medieval Religion* (London: The Hambleton Press, 1984), 243-272.

notes.<sup>2</sup> Although many of these materials appeared in print here for the first time, Hudson's early work proved to be a precursor preparing the way for a complete sermon cycle which for some unexplicable reason has never been thoroughly studied.<sup>3</sup> Although only one volume has thus far been released, *English Wycliffite Sermons* is proving to be a landmark in Lollard studies. A landmark can, of course, not only indicate distance but it can also indicate a point of change. The latter appears to be the case in Lollard studies. A brief survey of Wycliffite pneumatology, especially as it is expressed in these recent publications, is suggestive of the new directions for such explorations.<sup>4</sup>

Wycliffism was not a heresy created by an allegiance to a new revelation or a new doctrine. On the contrary, it conceived of itself as a prophetic voice crying in the wilderness of modernity. According to Lollard judgment, the friars were a new sect, transubstantiation a new theory, and the pope a new claimant to authority. As a guardian of orthodoxy, Wycliffism could appeal to the historic, or ecumenical, creeds.<sup>5</sup> Such creeds, not the opinions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, were to be the test of right belief. 'And if thou wole examyne feith, wher it be truthe of Cristis chirche, loke where that it is groundid in ony article of the crede: if it be not groundid there, take it not as beleue' (SEWW 82/276-278).

Lollard pneumatology, like much of the rest of its theology, was largely traditional. Pneumatology was not in itself a point of controversy but is indicative of other issues. Even as the traditional creeds defined the trinity, Wycliffite pneumatology affirmed the established tripersonistic monotheism. The doctrine of the trinity is frequently affirmed in the Lollard texts. The words of Christ to Nicodemus, for example, were understood to be an explanation of the trinity. 'Baptyne and watur and the Hooly Gost tellen Nichodeme the Trinnyte' (EWS 470/32-33). Although the total number of paragraphs that explicitly mention the Holy Spirit are less than three dozen spread throughout the 109 sermons published thus far, the third member of the trinity is implicitly suggested in the references to the Father and the Son. God's unity, not his diversity, was the Lollard emphasis, so the western understanding of the double progression of the Spirit was a logical extension of this unity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Published in London by Cambridge University Press. Herein cited as SEWW. One should also note Ms. Hudson's important essays recently collected and published under the title *Lollards and Their Books* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> *English Wycliffite Sermons*, edited by Anne Hudson, Vol. I (Oxford University Press, 1983). Herein cited as EWS.

<sup>4</sup> Thomson warns against attempting to formulate a Lollard theology, but he

Christ techeth how he with his Fadur is the same God in kynde, and brynguth forth the Hooly Goost. For ellys the Faadur hadde this Goost, and Crist hadde not this same Goost, and so not al that the Fadur hath hadde Crist as verrey God. But sith this word of Crist is soth, hit scheweth oponly that Crist is God; and of hym with hise Fadur cometh forth the Hooly Goost. This Hooly Goost may not be maad but euere cometh forth of these two, as if the schynyng of the sonne come forth euere of ligt and rigtnesse. (EWS 450/68–451/76).<sup>6</sup>

Even the redemptive work of Christ was not so much the unique activity of the Son as the concerted action of the trinity. 'The joye of the fadir is remyssion of oure synnes, and not oonli of the Fadir but also of the Sone and of the Holi Goost. For as oo [one] wille and worchyng is in the godhed, so o [one] loue is of the holi and vnseperable Trinite' (SEWW 50/37–40). One can only confess Jesus Christ as Lord by the instruction of the Holy Spirit (EWS 644/34–40). Even prayer is trinitarian (EWS 493/60–64). There is, then, an assumed pneumatology in the work of the Father and the Son, but the direct references to the Holy Spirit are uniquely instructive.

Like others of their age, the Lollards saw eternal values looming largely over temporal affairs; this life was a preparation for the next. One must pass from mere existence to eternal life by spiritual birth; that is, one must be birthed by the Spirit. This 'ys muche more wondyrful than mannys kyndly burthe' (EWS 242/64–65). This change was described as 'by Goost maad childron of hooly chyrche, and so in spiryt maad Godus children' (EWS 470/38–39). The great divide among the sons of Adam is marked not by religious affiliation but by obedience to the Holy Spirit. One pathway for the earthly pilgrim was spiritual, the other fleshly. One sermon observed that some walk in the Spirit and are led by the Spirit, but others are controlled by the flesh and are headed for hell (EWS 660/4–6). All mankind could thus be divided into two groups or 'sects': 'The firste sectt hath the Holi Goost, that techith it and makith it lyue. The secounde sectt is goostly deed, for it wantith qwekenyng of this Spirit. The tothir dyuersite is this:

---

was working primarily from surviving court records that are by their very nature negative, partial, and defensive. John A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards 1414–1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 250.

<sup>5</sup> The defence of Lord Cobham, for example, begins with an affirmation of the Apostle's Creed. 'The Examination of the Honourable Knight, Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham', *An English Garner: Fifteenth Century Prose and Verse*, ed. by Edward Arber (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1903), 175f. For a Wycliffite exposition of the creed see, Thomas Arnold, ed. *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, 3 Vols. (Oxford: University Press, 1869–71), II, 114–116. Herein cited as Arnold.

<sup>6</sup> See also EWS 460/20–461/51.

that men of the firste sectt kepen hem in charite—the tothir sectt hatith [hates] this' (EWS 615/23–27). Another Lollard source describes charity as the 'cloth' that separates the one true church from the other.<sup>7</sup>

The association of love and the Holy Spirit should be noted, for although the whole trinity loves man and acts for his salvation, the Spirit is particularly associated with the divine motivation for man's redemption. For example, 'This charite is the Hooli Goost' (EWS 474/119) and 'this Goost is loue of God' (EWS 484/100 also 464/16). Likewise, the first pentecost was understood to be a declaration that men should have charity (EWS 471/47). One passage teaches that as power pertains to the Father and wisdom to the Son, so love is the special attribute of the Spirit. 'Therefore seyth Seynt Jon. God is charite, and he that dwelleth in charity dwelleth in God, and God in him.'<sup>8</sup> The Holy Spirit, in turn, teaches Christians how they should love God and others. The Spirit brings love to perfection in all the saints.<sup>9</sup>

Although the individual is dependent on the work of the Spirit, he is not to wait passively for the work of divine intervention. Just as the disciples prepared for the day of pentecost, the believer must 'dispose hem to receyue the Hooly Goost by the gracious gifte of God' (The Wycliffites were not the first, not the last, to hold the contradiction that man should prepare for God's unmerited gift.) Specifically man should fast, be devout, and be moved to spiritual works. On the contrary, the coming of the Spirit can be hindered by materialism, envy, falsehood, and worldly living. Nevertheless, if the Holy Spirit does not come and remain, the 'defaute is in man and not in God' (EWS 600/66–601/80).

Even as Christ's obedience to the Father was the natural expression of that filial relationship, so the Christian renders obedience to God. The Old Testament law, important though it was, was a mystery until one was quickened by the Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Thus the life led by the Spirit is essentially the life of loving obedience to the Father. The Holy Spirit and holy living are linked and remain so throughout one's life. Whatever else the Comforter announced by Christ was to be for the disciples, he was certainly a moral guide. 'Crist telluth hise disciplus of comyng of the Cownfortour whiche is the Hooly Goost, and what lif thei schal aftur lede' (EWS 459/1–2). The Comforter made one perfect in virtuous

<sup>7</sup> Arnold, III, 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 99. See also F. D. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted*, EETS, O.S. No. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truebner, 1902), 363. Herein cited as Matthew.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold, III, 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

works.<sup>11</sup> The converse, however, is also true so that men whose lives are marked by strife and warfare 'lyuen not bi the Hooli Goost' (EWS 665/11). The unpardonable sin was understood to be remaining in such rebellion against God to the end of one's life.<sup>12</sup>

This position underlies the Wycliffite criticism of the priestly prelates whose lives were judged to be out of keeping with the Holy Spirit. They quenched the gifts of the Holy Spirit<sup>13</sup> and blasphemed the Spirit by forbidding men to preach.<sup>14</sup> The Holy Spirit clearly could not be in such men.<sup>15</sup> The anticlericalism, which was sometimes so strident, was an expression of the Lollard's assumption that the absence of God's Spirit produced sinful living. The second of the famous 'Twelve Conclusions' stated:

Oure usuel presthod, the qwich began in Rome, feynid of a power heyere than aungelis, is nout the presthod the qwich Cryst ordeynede to his apostlis. This conclusion is proud for the presthod of Rome is mad with signis, rytis and bisschopis blissingis, and that is of litil uertu, nowhere ensample(d) in holi scripture, for the bisschopis ordinalis in the newe testament ben litil of record. And we can nout se that the Holi Gost for oni sich signis geuith oni giftis, for he and his noble giftis may not stonde with dedly synne in no manere persone. The corrolary of this conclusion is that it is ful uncouth to manye that ben wise to se bisschopis pleye with the Holi Gost in makyng of here ordris, for thei geuen crownis in caracteris in stede of whyte hartys, and that is the leueree [uniform] of antecryst brout into holy chirche to colour ydilnesse (SEWW 25/13-24).

(As Hudson observes, the pun 'crownis' can refer either to the tonsure or to money. The 'whyte hartys' suggest moral purity.) The discerning of spirits was a useful gift from God because good spirits moved men to virtuous deeds and evil spirits moved men to sin (EWS 646/91-96).

The Lollard accusations against the spirituality were not, in reality, simply anticlericalism. Clerics who should be spiritual pastors were judged to be only pharisaical prelates more concerned about earthly pleasures than eternal purposes. Lollards agreed with the patristic judgment that the greatest danger to the church was not heresy of thought but heresy of life. Simony was a cursed heresy because it presumed that the gifts of the Holy Spirit could be purchased with money instead of freely given to all men

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 109 and 120. See also, Matthew, p. 351.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

as Christ had said (SEWW 61/68–71).<sup>16</sup> Morally and spiritually disqualified churchmen should be not only ignored but also condemned. The Wycliffite concluded that righteous is as righteous does and this logic led some to conclude that the most holy man is the true pope. It can easily be understood why the accusations of personal failure (i.e., sexual sins) and social insensitivity (i.e., disregard for the poor) were fundamental to the Wycliffite understanding of Christianity. Such conclusions could not have engendered popularity, so that the Lollard as 'the louer of God and of his word' would be, in turn, slandered by the 'open enemies to trouthe and figteris agens the Holy Gost' (SEWW 109/98–99).

By holding that behaviour betrays character, the Lollards were radically committed to faith shown by works even as the book of James, a Lollard favourite, observed: 'Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom' (James 3:13). Thus even while the authorities were grilling the heretic's theology, the Lollard was examining the persecutor's life. The very violence used against the Lollards was evidence that the hierarchy was in error because it violated Christian charity. One passage said that though man may be christened and know the points of faith, he would not be saved without keeping God's law. Such a man would 'be ful hard and depe dampnyd in helle, more than hethene men'.<sup>17</sup>

The Lollards' antisacramentalism was also undergirded by their understanding of historic orthodoxy, especially as it related to the trinity and the work of the Spirit. Even as the two natures of Christ were defined and defended in the creeds, they were often affirmed in the Wycliffite sermons. Although not frequently discussed directly, the eucharistic controversy is often close to the surface of this topic. For example, there is a strong stress on the two natures of Christ with the often stated affirmation that his physical body was in heaven and, therefore, should not be mistaken for the bread and the wine. Christ as God was everywhere present, but his body could not be in the bread for his body was in heaven. The bread itself was not changed. Transubstantiation was understood to be a recent perversion and a denial of the orthodoxy insisted on in the creeds. Moreover, the opponents of Wycliffism could, and should, be challenged because their interpretation of the eucharist resulted not only in doctrinal error but also immoral practice. The coming Reforma-

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 68 and Arnold, III, 280.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold, III, 196.

tion debate over the meaning of 'this is' cast its shadow in these sermons. The bread could honestly be called the body of Christ, just as the dove was the Holy Spirit. 'We mai graunte that this dowue was the Hooli Goost, as we graunten that this persoone was comynge down in this dowue. And thus, as God seith in his lawe that seuen oxen ben seuen yeer, that the sacrid breed is verili Goddis bodi, so it seemeth that he seith that this dowue is the Hooli Goost' (SEWW 114/41-45, see also EWS 346/37-50 and 576/84).

Confirmation was also challenged for the Wycliffites held that the ultimate confirmation was the work of the Holy Ghost, not the wagging of the bishop's finger.<sup>18</sup> 'When a child hath discrecion, and can and wile vnderstande the word of God, it is sufficiently confermed be the Holy Gost and nedeth noon other confirmacion' (SEWW 34/23-25).

In order to obey God one must first know God's commandments or, in more common Wycliffite terms, God's law (EWS 468/109-112). If one hopes to live rightly, one must know what to do and thus logically must have access, physically and linguistically, to the Scriptures. Lollard soteriology and sacramentology rested on the assumption that the Bible was God's word for man and 'the Hooly Goost spekuth eche word of hooly writ' (EWS 475/4). The spiritual person sought out and studied God's law. Even as the absence of physical appetite was an indication of illness, the lack of a desire for God's word was evidence of spiritual disease. This desire, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit who 'sette syche wordis in his lawe' (EWS 422/111). The passage says, 'The Hooly Goost meueth euere somme men to studye Godis lawe and haue mynde of this wyt. And so loue of Godis lawe and sad sauour therin is a tokne to men that thei ben Godus children' (EWS 463/110-113). The Scripture was not so arcane or esoteric that only the trained could understand it. The gift of interpretation of tongues was taught be 'witt of wordis, as this Goost geueth many men witt to knowe what holi writ meneth' (EWS 646/99-100). By the Holy Spirit, Christian men can know God's word even if they understand it only in general terms because 'oure bodily witt and naked reson may not comprehende hit' (SEWW 112/74-75). If men should claim that the Scripture was too difficult to be understood, they were in effect claiming to be wiser than the Holy Spirit (EWS 422/111-112). Although the Christian must have a

---

<sup>18</sup> This premise is stated by the defendants at some of the Lollard trials. For example, Norman P. Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich 1428-31*, Camden Fourth Series, XX (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), 140, 146 and 179.



'clene lyf' to rightly understand the Scriptures, the Scriptures help 'makith sad mannis soule in the Holy Gost, andd stong to worche therafter' (SEWW 71/185 and 108/53-54). Morality was tied to hermeneutics, but the word was sufficient for man's salvation without the need of confirming miracles. William Thorpe, for example, complained that 'men and women delight now, more for to hear and know miracles, than they do to know God's Word or to heart it effectuously.'<sup>19</sup>

Although the jury of history has not yet rendered its final verdict, the recently published sermons show that Wycliffism must now be considered more than a critique of traditional orthodoxy. It claimed a moral earnestness and internal motivation for dynamic Christian living in an age that stressed the externals of religion and intellectual assent to the faith. For the Lollard, the trinity was not the intellectual abstraction of the schoolman or the ineffable experience of the mystic. His was the moral road that ran between Scylla and Charybdis. The Scripture translated into English was his source, and pneumatology translated into morality was his dynamism.

---

<sup>19</sup> 'Examination of Oldcastle', 137. For an example of a Lollard warning about magic, see SEWW 24/195-201.