

# John Wycliffe's Work and Worth

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**R. M. Wilson**

*Secretary, Religious Tract Society*

Our subject brings us back to the fourteenth century. Europe in the fourteenth century presents a picture which has more of sadness than of gladness in it. Edward III is on the throne of England; his glorious victories leave a train of misery behind them, but the war with France leads to good results in so far as it promotes the growth of national feeling and the beginnings of vernacular literature. John XXII occupies the see of Rome, but Rome is at Avignon, so to speak, for the Babylonish Captivity has already begun. The Papal claims had come to their zenith in Boniface VIII, who opened the fourteenth century with a magnificent and financially profitable Jubilee, and declared with superior audacity in his Bull "Unam Sanctam" "that it was altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff." "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. xvi. 18). From that time a decline may be traced in the fortunes of the Papacy. It is seen first of all in the tacit submission of Boniface VIII and his successors to the Kings of France. The Papacy becomes the creature of a civil power, and that civil power is not even an Italian government. Hence the magnificence of Avignon, while Rome, deserted by the Popes, falls into a state of anarchy, and is in danger of losing all her ancient prestige.

## **Two POPES: Two EMPERORS.**

Louis of Bavaria is the Emperor, but there is a doubt about him just as there is a doubt about the Pope. When the Emperor Henry VII died there was a double election in Germany; some of the electors chose Louis of Bavaria, others chose Frederick of Austria. It was in some respects an age of dualism; after all, if there could be two Popes, why not two Emperors? If, in the one case, the resources and refinements of ecclesiastical Latin were severely taxed by the exchange of those salutations which were known as anathemas, in the other case, the war of words gave way to the war of deeds; yet it would be unfair to say that the ecclesiastics objected to bloodshed. Long before the fourteenth century one hundred and thirty-seven corpses were counted in the basilica of Liberius after the faction-fight between Pope Damasus and his rival Ursicinus, and long after the fourteenth century Lord Acton wrote of the Inquisition that "a man's opinion of the Papacy is determined by his opinion about religious assassination." Louis of Bavaria defeated Frederick of Austria and established his own claim, even though he lacked the goodwill and support of the Bishop of Rome. There was no love lost between Pope John XXII and the Emperor Louis. The Pope excommunicated the Emperor, and the Emperor returned the compliment by declaring the Pope to be deposed for heresy, and by appointing Nicholas V as anti-pope.

## **Forerunners of Wycliffe**

The mention of heresy shows that the Emperor is not alone in his opposition to John XXII. We see the Franciscans involved in the fray. In the previous century the return to simplicity had been advocated by Francis of Assisi with a zeal which was as admirable as it was undeniable. In the words of Professor Coulton, "the story of the first Franciscans and

Dominicans is one of the imperishable idylls of the world.” But even before Francis was cold in his grave the glory of the revival had given place to the gloom of widespread declension. Francis’s attack upon capitalism failed, and his followers often became capitalists under the disguise of destitution. The ideals of Francis were soon forgotten, and it was a very different picture that the world saw then when it beheld idleness and poverty masquerading as religious self-denial. As we read this pitiful tale in Matthew Paris, the great historian, in our own Roger Bacon, in the Italian Bonaventura, in the Spaniard Alvarez Pelayo, in the Fleming John Brugman, we can see that the few who tried to hold on to the original Franciscan ideal were indeed in a marked minority. Just as the Waldenses and the Humiliati were the precursors of Francis and Dominic, so these better spirits among the Franciscans were the forerunners of Wycliffe and Luther, and received somewhat similar treatment. The Spirituals, or “Little Brethren “ (Fratricelli) as they were called, maintained that Christ and His apostles possessed nothing and that their Founder was right when he said that “naked he would follow the naked Christ.” Nicholas III, in 1279 in his Bull “Exiit qui seminat,” made a solemn pronouncement in their favour, which was incorporated in canon law; but John XXII, who was a financier, contradicted the solemn pronouncement of Nicholas III, and ruled in favour of the majority, declaring that to say that Christ and His apostles were devoid of possessions was to be guilty of heresy. Some of the Fraticelli were burnt at the stake for their heresy, showing that the reformation of the Church from within was a dangerous business.

### **The Miniature Reformation**

It is not strange, therefore, to find some of the Franciscans taking sides with Louis of Bavaria in his quarrel with John XXII, and urging an appeal from the Pope to a General Council. William of Ockham, the English Franciscan, writes in defence of Louis, and we see his Protestantism in his declaration that Christ, and not the Pope, is the Head of the Church, and that Scripture alone is infallible. This time also witnesses the publication of the celebrated *Defensor Pacis* of Marsiglio of Padua, perhaps the most original political treatise of the Middle Ages. In this work, which is dedicated to Louis, King of the Romans, Marsiglio questions, among other things the temporal authority of the Pope, the right of the priests to punish heresy, whether St. Peter was ever Bishop of Rome at all; and affirms that secular jurisdiction and temporal property belong to the Emperor. This movement, because of its anticipations of the sixteenth century, has been called “The Miniature Reformation.”

### **Wycliffe’s Early Days**

Such were some of the happenings in Europe when John de Wycliffe was a baby in the nursery; and his mother, Catherine, the lady of the manor of Wycliffe; wondered, as all fond mothers do, what mark her son would make in the world. We know extremely little about his early life. He was a Yorkshireman of the North Riding, and he had all the sturdiness and independence of outlook of the Yorkshireman, as well as other characteristics, which life at Oxford did not succeed in impairing. The small manor of Wycliffe was close to Richmond, and as a boy John must have observed that the archdeaconry of Richmond was always held by an absentee, either a foreign Cardinal or Bishop or a favoured servant of the King. This evil was so general that it was before his eyes wherever he went, and we can understand the protests in his sermons against the profits of a cure being sent out of the country to an absentee cardinal.

In 1342 the fief of Richmond passed from the hands of its former lords of John of Gaunt, and Richmond became one of the titles of the house that was afterwards known by the name of Lancaster. This meant that John of Gaunt became John Wycliffe's overlord—a fact which is not without its bearing on several events in the career of the future Reformer.

### **Wycliffe at Oxford**

Meanwhile, the scene changes from Richmond, Yorkshire, to Oxford, where Wycliffe enrolled himself at Balliol, probably in 1345. Oxford was then little more than a huddled mass of mean houses. The streets were dark and filthy tunnels, with an open kennel or sewer in the middle. Balliol was then outside the city walls, near the Bocardo gate, and owed its origin to a penance imposed on John de Balliol, lord of Barnard Castle, for vexing the Church and the Bishop while he was hopelessly intoxicated. Part of the penance was “a sum of fixed maintenance to be continued for ever to scholars studying at Oxford.” This was the beginning of Balliol Hall for sixteen poor students in 1266; it was John de Balliol's widow, Dervorgilla, who really carried out the work; the scholars were governed by rules framed by themselves, subject to her intentions, and they were presided over by themselves. University democracy was much in evidence at Balliol.

### **Master of Balliol**

If 1345 be approximately correct for Wycliffe's entrance to Oxford, he must have been there when the Black Death raged through the noisome alleys in 1349.

“The school doors were shut, colleges and halls relinquished, and none scarce left to keep possession or to make up a competent number to bury the dead. ‘Tis reported that no less than sixteen bodies in one day were carried to one Church and yard to be buried.”<sup>1</sup>

The wonder is that pestilences did not break out more frequently. The filth in the streets, the broken condition of the sewer and pavements, the foul and begrimed waters which were used by the brewers and bakers for making ale and bread, the butchers' bones and other vile refuse which blocked the stream, the corpses of dead animals which filled the gravel pits where New College afterwards arose—these things were enough to cause a plague to wipe out both “town” and “gown” if the medieval nose had been at all susceptible. Life at the University did not become anything like normal again for three or four years, and this rude interruption may explain the late date at which Wycliffe took his master's degree. Elected Master of Balliol in 1358 or 1359, he became Master of Arts in 1361, and was instituted as Rector of Fillingham in the same year. After spending a little while there he decided that he should secure a dispensation of absence in order to study for a degree in theology. He obtained a licence for non-residence from his bishop, and it is one of the minor ironies of his life that Urban V, at the petition of the University of Oxford, grants the student, absentee-rector the medieval equivalent of a fellowship by making him a prebend of Aust in the collegiate church of Westbury-on-Trym, near Bristol. There was nothing unusual in this. Students in theology were generally beneficed seculars with a dispensation for absence. Their senior standing might be considered a guarantee for good behaviour; but the statutes, which took nothing for granted, laid it down that during lectures they should sit as “quiet as girls”<sup>2</sup>; as a matter of fact, they were often the most difficult and disorderly element in university life. Whether the future Reformer was mixed up in any College excitements, we do not know. He

had his own troubles as Warden of Canterbury Hall, but we must pass over much that is of interest and greet him as Doctor of Divinity in 1372.

### **Grosseteste's Example**

Needless to say, he did not gain the D.D. of Oxford without becoming involved in the scholastic controversies which engaged the thinkers of his time. The University was then in a ceaseless intellectual ferment, and questions were keenly debated between the Franciscans and Dominicans. The strife between the rival philosophical creeds of "realism" and "nominalism" was unremitting; and in becoming an influential voice at Oxford, Wycliffe was indebted to those who went before him. One of his early Oxford sermons names some philosophers and theologians who had brought renown to England. This list includes the names of the venerable Bede, St. John of Beverley, and Robert Grosseteste. Grosseteste, commonly known as "Lincolniensis," the leading bishop of the previous century, was *the* power at Oxford as lecturer, chancellor, and friend of the Franciscans, and every good influence that made for liberty in the national life had his support. The independence and courage of his "sharp epistle" to "Master Innocent" gained him a European reputation. And in nothing did Wycliffe follow him more faithfully than in his constant appeal to the authority of Scripture.

### **The Authority of the Bible**

Even in his scholastic days he had arrived at the position that the Scriptures are supreme in all human thought. He is familiar with Jerome, Gregory the Great, John of Damascus, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventura and Duns Scotus; Bradwardine and Fitzralph have their influence on him as men of his own century; among the ancients he salutes Augustine as his master, so much so that "his disciples called him by the famous name of John, son of Augustine";<sup>3</sup> but when all these sources are acknowledged it remains true that the chief of his authorities is the Bible, and the Bible with a preference for literal interpretation. His Biblical lectures as a "cursor," in preparation for his doctorate in theology, had been no empty form; and they are probably the basis of his earliest *theological* work, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, which is an uncompromising defence of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and brings him very close to the standpoint of the reformers of a hundred and fifty years later. From the third part of this work, although it belongs to later years, we can see that Wycliffe must have encountered opposition at Oxford; he asserts the right of the State over the property of the Church, he declares that only by disendowment can the Church be purified, that tithes should be withholden from bad priests; and he complains that "the man who defends the truth of Scripture suffers contumelies and persecutions."<sup>4</sup>

### **Wycliffe as a Commissioner**

Religious and political interests were closely interwoven in those days, more so than they are today. It was regarded by many as unsatisfactory that a French Pope should be at the head of the Church, and that so much money should go out of England for the benefit of this foreigner and his company of cardinals. The relations between England and the Papacy had been strained. In 1373 Gregory XI demanded 100,000 florins from the clergy of England for his campaign against Visconti, Duke of Milan; but Edward III already required a tenth for his

French war, and the King's taxes must come first. The clergy could hardly be expected to pay both sets of taxes. It was not the first, nor the last time, that the clergy had to choose between the Pope and their own country. It was decided that a commission should be appointed to explore avenues towards a settlement in conference with three nuncios appointed by Gregory. Bruges was fixed as the place of meeting. This mission to Bruges shows John Wycliffe as a politician in the service of the King. The other commissioners included John Gilbert, Bishop of Bangor, who afterwards became Chancellor of Ireland and sat in condemnation of Wycliffe at the Blackfriars Synod in 1382, Sir William Burton, a layman with strong religious feelings, Juan Gutierrez, Dean of Segovia, a trusted agent of John of Gaunt, Simon de Multon, D.C.L., and Robert Bealnap, a civil servant who was afterwards made chief justice of the Court of Common Pleas and received a knighthood. They met the papal nuncios, the Bishops of Pampeluna and Sinigaglia, and the provost of St. Minion's, Valence, Giles Sancho, D.C.L. The conference did not last long. The elements of which it was composed were too irreconcilable. Wycliffe was the only theologian on his side of the commission, and there is no doubt as to his views on the subsidy to the Pope. We learn them from his *Determinatio*:

“Christ Himself is the Lord-Paramount, and the pope is a fallible man, who, in the opinion of theologians, must lose his lordship should he fall into mortal sin, and therefore cannot make good any claim to the possession of England. It is enough, therefore, that we hold our kingdom as of old, immediately from Christ in fief, because He is the Lord-Paramount, who, alone and by Himself, authorizes every right of dominion allowed to created beings.”

Here is the principle that *dominion is founded on grace*, which Wycliffe emphasises over and over again. He would be no party to compromise in letting down his own country. When he found that the Crown was not in earnest, he left Bruges rather than be a party to any prearranged deal between Edward and Gregory. The negotiations were continued with some slight changes in the personnel, and the upshot of the matter was that certain verbal promises were made by the Pope, in return for which concessions he was to receive not the full subsidy for which he had asked, but a very substantial portion of it, viz. 60,000 florins. It is entirely to Wycliffe's credit that he was no party to such a disgraceful surrender to the papal claim, and quite appropriately he received no reward for his services at this time, in contradistinction from the other members of the commission.

### **Revolutionary Principles**

So much for Wycliffe's first excursion into politics. Before the commission had resumed its sittings he was back in Oxford, preaching before the University and engaged on the publication of some of his writings. He had the pleasure of crossing swords with William Woodford (“pleasure,” be it said, for the Irishman's partiality for argument was strong in Wycliffe); they interchanged arguments on the limit of civil dominion and the right of the clergy to possess property. He was busy with his vast treatises on “Civil and Divine Dominion.” We may read these pages as we read Plato's *Republic*, or More's *Utopia*; but, if we apply them to the immediate situation in England, we can easily see how charged with dynamite they were.

If all real dominion is founded on grace, and if mortal sin is a breach of tenure that involves forfeiture, then the arrangements of society are very far from being right, and are contrary to the law of nature, not to speak of the Church's insecurity through the widespread evils of

nepotism, pluralism, absenteeism and other irregularities. No wonder there was opposition at Oxford, no wonder the outspoken Yorkshireman was accused by some of blasphemy and heresy. Coming events were beginning to cast their shadows before them.

### **A Disturbance at St. Paul's**

After the death of the Black Prince and the end of the Good Parliament, we find John Wycliffe in alliance with John of Gaunt, proving the truth of the saying that politics makes strange bedfellows. We can understand why Lancaster should seek the services of an outstanding philosopher and theologian like Wycliffe, but it is not so easy to understand why the Reformer should become the tool of a man with whom he had little in common beyond his hostility to the power and wealth of the hierarchy. Probably the political opportunist saw how useful the idealist would be with his pen and his voice and his University influence, whereas Wycliffe did not realise that he was but a cat's-paw in the Duke of Lancaster's game. At any rate, we find Wycliffe preaching all over London that the Church should be restored to its original poverty and that neither prelates nor priests should hold secular offices—sermons which fitted in admirably with the Duke's determination to oust the bishops from the chief offices of the Crown and get their places filled by his own satellites. Wycliffe was probably blissfully unaware that Lancaster was packing Parliament for his own ends, but others saw what was going on, and their anger had to find some expression. When Convocation met, Archbishop Courtenay singled out Wycliffe as the Duke's ally, and he was cited to appear before the bishops on February 19, 1377, in the Lady Chapel of St. Paul's. The Duke himself, with Henry Percy, the King's marshal, and four Oxford friars, accompanied Wycliffe to the Cathedral. There were unfriendly exchanges between the Duke and the Archbishop; political rumours increased the confusion with which the assembly broke up, and Wycliffe was carried off by his supporters. The comment of the chronicler is that the devil knew how to take care of his own.

### **Wycliffe's Personality**

Whether the pictures of Wycliffe in use today bear any close resemblance to the man as he really was we cannot be certain, they are probably of too recent a date to be considered authentic in the full sense of the word. From verbal description we know that he was thin and worn; he must have been endowed with some real charm of manner, otherwise men of the highest rank would hardly have found pleasure in his society. But it is not easy to detect the qualities which constituted this charm. In his writings there is sound learning, intellectual fire, and a moral earnestness that is very downright; but there is not much evidence of a sense of humour or of those deep, personal emotions which make rough Martin Luther so human and lovable. We are conscious of an element of hardness as we read his tracts and treatises; as far as we know, none of his family circle followed him in the path he trod, and this may help to account for it. But here and there he does paint a picture which raises a smile, as when he speaks in his *Leaven of the Pharisees* of the friars who became pedlars of knives, purses, pins, girdles, spices and silk for women, and present ladies with lapdogs, to get many great gifts in return; or, as in his *Comment on the Testament of St. Francis*, where he describes the friar accompanied on his rounds by a scarioth or Iscariot or treasurer, into whose bag the spoils were poured, and the friar's nice scrupulosity is seen in his counting the coins with gloves on, lest he be guilty of touching filthy lucre; or, as in his *Ave Maria*, where he upbraids the ladies for being so busy with gay and costly clothing and kerchiefs and pearls

and ribbons, dancing and leaping by night and sleeping it off the next day, forgetting God and the devotion of prayers. The preponderance, however, of the intellectual and moral sides of his nature over the emotional element is noticeable throughout. Undoubtedly the blamelessness and simplicity of his private life must have given him a considerable influence in a gross and greedy generation; when we add to this his reputation as the first scholar at his University, his zeal as a patriot, and his devotion as a Churchman, we can understand why he was an adviser of the King, a companion of nobles, the head of a party at Oxford, and the leader of a band of keen disciples at Oxford and at Lutterworth.

### **The Pope *versus* the Reformer**

The Oxford Reformer is now within eight years of his death and fateful events take place in quick succession. The trial at St. Paul's having failed, Gregory XI issues a series of Bulls, and cites Wycliffe to appear before him in person. This was not only an attack on the Reformer, it was an attempt to override the ecclesiastical courts and the statute law of the realm, and to establish the papal inquisition in England. Gregory's schedule of Wycliffe's errors shows that the ground of the papal indictment was based on Wycliffe's *De Civilo Dominio*. Court circles should see the dangerous and revolutionary nature of the tenet that dominion is founded on grace. But theological counts are not wanting, the denial of excommunication, the attack upon the Pope's power of the keys, and, last but not least, the claim that every ecclesiastic (even the Roman pontiff) may be lawfully set right, and even impleaded by subjects and laymen. Evidently Wycliffe, if he lived in our day, would not agree with Bishop Frere of Truro as to the impropriety of ecclesiastical decisions by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. But he would be in favour of disendowment, and the voluntary system in vogue in the Church in Ireland, Canada and Australia.

### **Wycliffe at Lambeth**

A month after the issue of Gregory's Bulls, Edward III died, and Richard II's first Parliament was in no hurry to humour the Pope's arrogance. Although Gregory's bulls were in the Archbishop's hands, the Council asked Wycliffe whether the nation was not justified in keeping back for its own defence the large amount of gold which was going out to foreigners at the demand of the Pope. £10,000 a year went to French clergy alone from English livings. Wycliffe replied that the treasure of the kingdom should not be sent away, and he based his judgment on the law of Nature, the law of the Gospel, and the law of Conscience. Nor could much satisfaction be got out of any proceedings against Wycliffe at Oxford by the Pope. The masters regent through the chancellor declared publicly "that Wycliffe's theses were true, though they sounded badly to the ear." Early in 1378 Wycliffe appeared at Lambeth, where the bishops were within their rights in trying him; but the influence and the sympathy of the government deterred the bishops from pronouncing any final judgment upon the accused. Wycliffe put in a written "Protestatio" in defence of his conclusions, but the trial was interrupted by citizens of London, who broke into the Archbishop's chapel and made noisy demonstrations in favour of the Reformer.

**"L'Homme Propose Mais Dieu Dispose"**

A few days after this third failure to silence the fighting Yorkshireman, Gregory himself departed this life, and was succeeded by Urban VI, or rather—by the Great Schism—Urban VI, with Clement VII as Anti-Pope, ranged in full bellicosity against each other, and dividing Europe into two hostile camps. This situation deepened Wycliffe's dislike of the papacy and strengthened his conviction that an unworthy pope was an Anti-Christ rather than the Vicar of Christ. In his *De Potestate Papae* (148, 186, 212) he argues that both should hold their peace till the Church should decide—which anticipates the policy of Gerson at the Council of Constance; and adds that meanwhile “we English cannot accept either,” for their rivalry shows them both to be anti-Christ. Hus of Bohemia borrowed largely and freely from this work, without mentioning the source of his indebtedness, and it was thanks to the Great Schism that the influence of our Reformer penetrated Bohemia. France and Scotland espoused the cause of Robert of Geneva, the “butcher” who took the title of Clement VII. Italy and England were in favour of Urban VI; so were Wenzel and Sigismund, and they carried their Czech subjects with them. Thus England and Bohemia were on the same side in this international quarrel, an alliance which was greatly strengthened when in 1382 at St. Stephen's, Westminster, Richard II married Anne, the sister of Wenzel, Bohemia's King. Urban VI favoured this match because he thought it would prevent Bohemia from recognising his rival at Avignon; and he succeeded far beyond his hopes or desires. Queen Anne's retainers carried back to Bohemia the works of Wycliffe, with the result that our Reformer lived again in the land of John Hus and Jerome of Prague.

### **Wycliffe to Hus, Hus to Luther**

The greater number of Wycliffe's manuscripts are found at Prague and Vienna, usually the work of Czech scribes. Hence the picture in a Bohemian Psalter of 1572, which represents Wycliffe as striking a spark, Hus as kindling the coals and Luther as brandishing the lighted torch. In 1529 Luther wrote to Spalatin:

“I have hitherto taught and held all the opinions of Hus without knowing it. With a like unconsciousness has Staupitz taught them. We are all of us Hussites without knowing it. I do not know what to think for amazement.”<sup>5</sup>

We might change the word “Hussites” into “Wycliffites,” for the doctrines for which Hus was condemned and burnt at Constance in 1415 were taken almost verbatim from the works of Wycliffe. This may be seen at once when we compare Wycliffe's *De Potestate Papae* with Hus's *De Ecclesia* in parallel columns. Sentences, and even whole paragraphs, are practically word for word the same! The picture in the Bohemian Psalter is not, therefore, an exaggeration. The influence of our Reformer outside England has been perhaps greater and more abiding than in his own country.

### **The “Poor Preachers”**

But this is to anticipate. No mention has been made of the crowning activities of his life, his sending forth of his “poor preachers” and his English Bible. Following the method of Francis of Assisi, he began to send out his “poor priests” or “itinerant preachers” before he left Oxford and retired to Lutterworth for good. To call them “poor preachers” does not mean that they were without pulpit ability, but that they exemplified in their own persons the poverty and simplicity of ministers of the Gospel. They were to go from place to place, trusting to the



goodwill of their neighbours for board and lodging, armed with some of their master's tracts and sermons. Some of them were men of university standing, some were unlettered and unbeneficed clerics, for Wycliffe averred that "an unlettered man with God's grace can do more for building up the Church than many graduates."<sup>6</sup>

### **Sacramental Doctrine**

Wycliffe was not only a patriot who objected to the Pope's interference with the internal affairs of his country, nor simply a politician who desired that through Parliament the nation should reform the Church that seemed unwilling and unable to reform herself; he was above all a theologian who referred matters of Church and State alike to the Word of God as the supreme authority and the final touchstone. In teaching the people the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, the Lollard preachers were to denounce the many the grievous abuses in the Church and proclaim the true doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Various estimates have been made of Wycliffe's idea of the true doctrine of the Eucharist. In philosophy he was a "Realist" like Aquinas, yet he attacked the main position of Aquinas with unmistakable vigour. According to Professor Trevelyan, in his *England in the Age of Wyclif* (p. 175) "he never went farther in his depreciation of the Sacrament than the position generally known as Consubstantiation"; according to Principal Workman, he retained Transubstantiation, though not without many questionings and modifications. But Wycliffe took his stand much more openly beside the condemned Berengar. In the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum* ("Bundles of Tares") we get opinions which were attributed to our Reformer by his opponents. When these coincide with statements in his own *De Blasphemia*, and *De Eucharistia*, we may be fairly certain that these impressions of contemporary adversaries are correct. The whole theory of the division of "substance" and "accidents" fell to pieces under Wycliffe's criticism. "The consecrated host which we see on the altar is neither Christ nor any part of Him, but an effectual sign."<sup>7</sup>

According to Wycliffe, a body cannot be present unless it is present in the fullness of its attributes, having dimension, colour, smell, taste, etc., appropriate to the substance of which it is formed.

"Master John Wycliffe argued concerning the conclusions he set forth, and was impeached by various religious doctors of sacred theology. Then the same Master repeated amongst other things three opinion's concerning the multiplication of body, that is to say, dimensional, definite, and virtual. The first two he declared were altogether false and impossible, but he acknowledged the third. Whence he declared that the body of Christ is not in the sacrament of the altar after the manner of multiplication, but that it is there virtually to this extent as the king is in the whole kingdom."<sup>8</sup>

"Virtualiter," not "virtually" in the sense of "almost" or "as if," but *in working power, in real efficacy, in actual operation, by the power of the Divine Spirit.*

### **Berengar, Wycliffe and Cranmer**

This is an anticipation of the sixteenth-century position both in Calvinism and Anglicanism. Jeremy Taylor developed the position that the inherent power of the body of Christ is in the Sacrament, and Calvin, in his *Institutes*,<sup>9</sup> emphasises the same precious thought:

“Though it seems an incredible thing that the flesh of Christ, while at such a distance from us in respect of place, should be food to us, let us remember how far the secret virtue of the Holy Spirit surpasses all our conceptions, and how foolish it is to wish to measure its immensity by our feeble capacity. Therefore, what our mind does not comprehend let faith conceive, viz. that the Spirit truly unites things separated by space.”

Of course, there are many passages in Wycliffe which are not at all as clear as the foregoing; his writings exhibit that healthy inconsistency which is a sign of growth; he was in many respects the son of his times, and did not get quite free from the thought-moulds of his own age; but these flashes of light are an anticipation of Cranmer and Calvin and Hooker.

### **The Peasants' Revolt**

The institution of the Poor Preachers, who proclaimed the Gospel without desire of gain, was meant to give the people instruction in which they were sadly lacking, but it met with opposition from the friars, who preached little but legends and insipid stories, and from the bishops, who were more concerned with other things than evangelical preaching. Wycliffe's aim was to send forth men who not only knew something of the Bible, but who knew something of the quickening power of the Word in their own lives. He shows his discernment when he says:<sup>10</sup>

“O marvellous power of the Divine Seed! which overpowers strong warriors, softens hearts hard as stone, and renews in the divine image men brutalised by sin. Plainly so mighty a wonder could never be wrought by the word of a priest, if the heat of the Spirit of Life did not above all things else work with it.”

The Poor Preachers had a real though limited measure of success for the flame of Lollardy burnt in several English counties and in parts of Scotland for the next one hundred and fifty years, in spite of all the official efforts to quench it, and in spite of the early discredit which they suffered through the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.

This outburst, as Principal Workman points out, was due to economic and political causes, and would have happened if Wycliffe had never lived. But it was most unfortunate for our Reformer, for it looked like a rude endeavour to put into practice his ideal theory that dominion is founded on grace, which destroys the lordship of the wicked and relieves the poor man from the necessity of paying taxes to bad rulers whether in Church or State. Whatever his share in fanning the discontent among the peasants, it is to his credit that he did not turn his back upon them after the Rising. He continued to espouse their cause, and to protest against the perpetual serfdom of the serf. In this his attitude shines out in contrast with Luther's denunciations against the peasants in Germany. The English squire's son champions the cause of the oppressed, in spite of his growing unpopularity with those in power; the German miner's son hounds on the princes in their retaliation against the ignorant and oppressed peasants, who had been guilty of revolt.

“Against the murdering thieving hordes of Peasants [says Luther] whoever can should knock down, strangle and stab such publicly or privately, and think nothing so venomous, pernicious and devilish as an insurgent: . . . Such wonderful times are these, that a prince can merit heaven better with bloodshed than another with prayer.”

From such a blot the escutcheon of our Reformer is happily free. It remains true to say that when we look for a medieval theologian who raises his voice in serious protest against the wrongs of serfdom, we do not find one until we come to the heretic Wycliffe.

### **Did Wycliffe Translate the Bible?**

Wycliffe's reference to the power of the divine seed of the Word brings us to the subject of the English Bible. His theory of dominion founded on grace really involved, and was bound to lead to, the democratisation of God's law, i.e. the making of a vernacular version of the Scriptures. The translation of the Bible was conceived and partly carried out between 1380 and 1384. *Wycliffe was the instigator of the plan rather than the executor of the work.* His special disciple and secretary was Dr. John Purvey. When Wycliffe was condemned and left Oxford, Purvey went with him as his secretary to Lutterworth, and there the work was continued. Walden, a Carmelite friar who was "elected inquisitor-general of the faith to punish the Wycliffites," describes Purvey as "the glossator and translator of Wycliffe, for he was the continual Achates of Wycliffe right down till his death, and drank in his most secret teaching."<sup>11</sup>

At this point we touch ground which is perhaps more controverted nowadays than any other part of Wycliffe's life. It is not a subject for surprise that medieval apologists such as Cardinal Gasquet, Mr. G. K. Chesterton and Mr. Hilaire Belloc should attempt to show that the Church did not keep the Bible from the people, and that, therefore, Wycliffe's English Bible was a work of superfluity, if it ever had any real existence. But a recent article in the *Living Church* indicates that there are Anglican clergy who take the same view. The writer, a Rector in the Protestant Episcopal Church, U.S.A., asks whether there is any reference earlier than the nineteenth century to Wycliffe's translation of the Bible, because he can find none. In his article he quotes the *Constitutions* of Archbishop Arundel, passed at Oxford in 1408. The year 1408 belongs to the fifteenth century, and is only twenty-four years later than our Reformer's death.

### **Contemporary Evidence**

After speaking of the danger of mistakes being made in the work of translating the Scriptures, the Council declares:

"We therefore order and ordain that henceforth no one translate any text of Holy Scripture into English or other language into a book, booklet or tract, and that no one read any book, booklet or tract lately made in the time of the said John Wyclif or since . . . until such translation shall have been approved and permitted by the diocesan. . . ."

To any unprejudiced reader these words show a definite connection between John Wycliffe and the work of translating the Bible, or parts of it, into English; and such was the judgment of Archbishop Arundel and the Council of Oxford. The writer in the *Living Church* gives Wilkins' *Concilia*, III, 157, as the reference for this quotation. If he had gone on another two hundred pages in this same volume he could hardly have persisted in his denial of plain contemporary evidence. For on page 350 we read a letter from the same Archbishop Arundel to Pope John XXIII, which makes the reference as clear as daylight. Oxford had been in a ferment for some time after Wycliffe's condemnation by the Synod of Blackfriars in 1382.

There had been academic discussion at Oxford between 1400 and 1407 as to the lawfulness of vernacular Bibles. It was not by accident that Archbishop Arundel chose Oxford for the scene of the prohibition of English Bibles. In his letter to John XXIII in 1412 he describes our Reformer as “that wretched and pestilent fellow, of damnable memory, that son of the old serpent, the very herald and child of Antichrist,” who “to fill up the measure of his malice, *devised the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures* into the mother tongue.” That was the head and front of his offending; it also describes his share in the enterprise. Wycliffe “devised the expedient”; others carried out the work under his supervision and encouragement; his secretary Purvey did a considerable portion of it.

In line with this evidence of Archbishop Arundel is Henry Knighton’s continuator. He was a canon of St. Mary of the Meadows at the same time as Hereford and Reppingdon.

“In those days [1382] the most eminent doctor of theology . . . Master John Wycliffe translated into English (not, alas, into the tongue of the angels), the Gospel which Christ gave to clerks and doctors of the Church . . . through him it is become more common and open to laymen, and women who are able to read, than it is wont to be even to lettered clerks of good intelligence.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Who are “The Dogs”?**

From the Pope downwards a favourite argument of those who opposed vernacular versions of Scripture for the laity was “Nolite sanctum dare canibus.” This was Innocent III’s plea against the Waldensians at Metz. Wycliffe counters it by pointing out that the “dogs” are not the illiterate faithful at all, but those who disfigure Christ’s teaching and are sensualists. For example, in one of his Polemical Works, *De Nova Praevaricatione Mandatorum*, he speaks of opposition against vernacular Gospels by those in authority because of the contrast afforded between the life lived by Jesus Christ and the lives lived by the priests:

‘When Christ’s manner of life should be disclosed, it would be clearer than daylight that they (our Pharisees and Satraps) are opposed to Him in their lives, and not Christians deserving commendation. . . . And therefore they oppose the turning of the Gospels into the vulgar tongue, so as to hide their baseness.’

Buddensieg dates this tract as 1381.<sup>13</sup>

Further contemporary evidence might be quoted, but it may be summed up in the careful conclusion of Miss Deanesly on this point:

“There is more contemporary evidence as to authorship than any could be found, for instance, to prove that Chaucer wrote the ‘Canterbury Tales.’”<sup>14</sup>

### **“Trevisa” should be “Wycliffe” in Preface to A.V.**

The mistake made by Sir Thomas More, Councillor and Chancellor of Henry VIII, when he wrote his *Dialogue* in 1528, is largely responsible for misleading many who have questioned and minimised the work of Wycliffe. Sir Thomas More took for granted that the Wycliffite Bible must have been heretical, since the ecclesiastical authorities disapproved of it; he tells us quite definitely that the heresy in the only Wycliffite Bible he had himself examined (Richard Hun’s) was *in the prologue*; yet it never occurred to him that there might have been

nothing to quarrel with in the Wydiffite translation of the text itself. The Constitutions of Oxford did not condemn Bibles made *before* the days of Wycliffe, and More jumped to the conclusion that the English Bibles which he had seen in some houses must have been copies of these, and could not have been Wycliffe's translation. Caxton made the mistake of attributing the so-called pre-Wycliffite medieval Bible to Trevisa. Trevisa was a "turner" or professional translator of classical works; he translated the *Polichronicon* into English, but there are no manuscript grounds for attributing to him any translation of the Scriptures. Later writers follow Caxton in this mistake, and the preface to the Authorized Version followed them all. Cranmer, in quoting precedents for vernacular versions, says:

"In our King Richard II's days, John Trevisa translated them into English, and many English Bibles in written hand are yet to be seen with divers translated, as it is very probable, in that age."

In fairness to our Reformer, the name of John Trevisa should be struck out from this preface and the name of Wycliffe inserted in its place. It was the Wycliffite version which was seen and known and used by the orthodox in some places in England, just as in Italy and in Germany orthodox nobles and convents of sisters in some cases possessed vernacular Bibles derived from Waldensian sources without any suspicion of their heretical origin.

### **Wycliffe's Abiding Work.**

Wycliffe's followers were hunted and persecuted by the Church authorities with unrelenting zeal, but their leader held his living of Lutterworth to the hour of his decease on the last day of 1384. Because he held this living and because he was not strangled or thrown into a dungeon or burnt alive, it has been seriously argued by some that he was neither a persecuted man nor the "morning-star of the Reformation" which many have claimed him to be. One might equally well argue that since the late Lord Acton and the late Baron von Hügel died in peace within the Roman Communion, therefore they were in all things dutiful and submissive sons of Mother Church; yet it remains true that if any priest or layman in the ordinary rank and file of membership had said or written what they said and wrote in the way of criticism and in the way of protest, he would have shared the fate which overtook Father Tyrrell and other modernists. Wycliffe was the strongest intellectual and spiritual force in Oxford in his day; he was held in the highest esteem both amongst the learned and amongst the masses of the people; as one who was known to enjoy the protection of the Duke of Lancaster, he could go a long way in defiance of ecclesiastical authority with comparative impunity. To him, in spite of all that Cardinal Gasquet and other detractors have tried to say, belongs the honour and glory of the first translation of the Scriptures into Middle, as distinct from Early English. His inconsistencies are real and undeniable: He denounced absenteeism, yet he himself was an absentee Rector for some years; he deprecated the clergy holding any secular office, yet he was himself for a while a politician in the service of the Crown. But we can understand these weaknesses. His other inconsistencies are partly accounted for by the fact that he belonged to the end of the medieval period, and the beginning of the Reformation period. None the less, he strikes notes which are by no means out of date and leaves us an example for which we can unfeignedly thank God. In use of sanctified reason, in appeal to the Word of God as the supreme and final authority, in stern simplicity of private life, in emphasis on the Christian citizen's trusteeship of his powers and possessions, in disapproval of war as an unholy and wasteful curse, in protest against power ill-gotten and ill-used, the echoes of his voice may still be heard. There is much truth in the judgment of Professor A. F. Pollard<sup>15</sup>:

“Wycliffe indeed is more representative of English theology than any foreign divine; he anticipated practically all the Protestantism that the English Church adopted in the sixteenth century. Possibly he anticipated more; he was not a bishop, and he did not breathe a spirit of compromise. He was perhaps more of a Puritan than an Anglican; and he pointed to heights or depths to which the Established Church never rose or fell. But the path which he illumined was the path which England took, however much she may have stumbled on the way, and however far she may have stopped short of his ideal; and the Morning Star of the Reformation in England was also its guiding light.”

### **Broadcasting the Ashes**

Wycliffe died in peace in Lutterworth, but the Church authorities whose evils he had so glaringly exposed could not suffer his bones to rest in peace. In 1415 a committee appointed by the Council of Constance to examine the heresies of Wycliffe and Hus brought in a strongly adverse report. Wycliffe’s writings, which comprise ninety-six Latin works, not counting English tracts and papers, were ordered to be burnt, and his bones to be dug up and cast out of consecrated ground. Some years later, in obedience to peremptory orders from Pope Martin V, Wycliffe’s bones were disinterred, burnt to ashes, and then cast into the little River Swift, which flows under the bridge not far from Lutterworth Church. From the Swift his ashes were borne into the Avon, from the Avon into the Severn, from the Severn into the narrow seas, and from the narrow seas into the broad ocean. “Thus,” says Fuller, “the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over.”

### **R. M. WILSON**

Endnotes:

- 1) Wood, *University of Oxford*, I. 449.
- 2) Rashdall, *Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, II. 605.
- 3) Netter, *Doctrinale Antiquitatum Fidei Eccles. Cath.*, I. c. 34, p. 186.
- 4) *Ibid.*, III. 99, 172.
- 5) *Letters*, ed. De Wette, I. 425.
- 6) Dial. 54.
- 7) Conclusions, *F. Z.*, p. 105.
- 8) *F. Z.*, p. 107.
- 9) Bk. IV., chap. 17.
- 10) Serm. IV. 265.
- 11) Thomae Waldensis, *Doctrinale Antiquitatum Fidei Catholicae Ecclesiae*, Venice, ed. Blanciotti, F. B., 1757.

- 12) Knighton, *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, II, 151-2. Lumby, J. R. Rolls, Series 9, 1889.
- 13) *Polemical Works*, I, 126, Wycliffe Society, Buddensieg, R. 1883.
- 14) *The Lollard Bible*, p. 250.
- 15) *Factors in Modern History*, p. 103.