

John Wycliffe

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John Wycliffe (pronounced /ˈwɪklɪf/; also spelled **Wyclif**, **Wycliff**, **Wiclef**, **Wicliffe**, or **Wickliffe**) (c. 1328 – 31 December 1384) was an English theologian, lay preacher,^[1] translator, reformist and university teacher who was known as an early dissident in the Roman Catholic Church during the 14th century. His followers are known as Lollards, a somewhat rebellious movement, which preached anticlerical and biblically-centered reforms. He is considered the founder of the Lollard movement,^[1] a precursor to the Protestant Reformation (for this reason, he is sometimes called "The Morning Star of the Reformation"). He was one of the earliest opponents of papal authority influencing secular power.^[2]

Wycliffe was also an early advocate for translation of the Bible into the common tongue. He completed his translation directly from the Vulgate into vernacular English in the year 1382, now known as Wycliffe's Bible.^[3] It is probable that he personally translated the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and it is possible he translated the entire New Testament, while his associates translated the Old Testament.^[4]

Wycliffe's Bible appears to have been completed by 1384,^[4] with additional updated versions being done by Wycliffe's assistant John Purvey and others in 1388 and 1395.^[5]

John Wycliffe



Full name	John Wycliffe
Born	c. 1328 Ipreswell, England
Died	31 December 1384 (aged about 60) Lutterworth, England
Era	Medieval philosophy
Region	Western philosophy
Notable ideas	Wycliffe's Bible
Influenced by	Roger Bacon • William of Okham
Influenced	Jan Huss • Martin Luther • Robert Grosseteste • Thomas Bradwardine • Richard Fitzralph

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Early life



John Wycliffe

Wycliffe was born in the factory village of modern-day Hipswell in the North Riding of Yorkshire, England in the mid-1320s.^[6] His family was long settled in Yorkshire. The family was quite large, covering considerable territory, principally centered around Wycliffe-on-Tees, about ten miles to the north of Hipswell.

Wycliffe received his early education close to his home.^[7] It is not known when he first came to Oxford, with which he was so closely connected until the end of his life, but he is

known to have been at Oxford around 1345. He was influenced by Roger Bacon, Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Bradwardine, William of Occam, and Richard Fitzralph.

^[*citation needed*]

Wycliffe owed much to William of Occam's work and thought. He showed interest in natural science and mathematics, but applied himself to studying theology, ecclesiastical law, and philosophy. His opponents acknowledged the keenness of his dialectic, and his writings prove he was well grounded in Roman and English law, as well as in native history.^[*citation needed*]

During this time there was conflict between the northern (*Boreales*) and southern (*Australes*) "nations" at Oxford. Wycliffe belonged to Boreales, in which the prevailing tendency was anticurial, while the other was curial. Not less sharp was the separation over Nominalism and Realism. He mastered most of the techniques.

Wycliffe became deeply disillusioned both with Scholastic theology of his day and also with the state of the church, at least as represented by the clergy. In the final phase of his life in the years before his death in 1384 he increasingly argued for Scriptures as the authoritative centre of Christianity, that the claims of the papacy were unhistorical, that monasticism was irredeemably corrupt, and like the Donatists that the moral unworthiness of priests invalidated their office and sacraments.^[8]

Early career

At Oxford

Wycliffe was Master of Balliol College, Oxford in 1360, and 1361.^[9] In 1361, he was presented by the college with the parish of Fylingham in Lincolnshire. For this he had to give up the leadership of Balliol College, though he could continue to live at Oxford. He is said to have had rooms in the buildings of The Queen's College, Oxford. As baccalaureate at the university, he busied himself with natural science and mathematics, and as master he had the right to read in philosophy. Obtaining a bachelor's degree in theology, Wycliffe pursued an avid interest in Biblical studies. His performance led Simon Islip, Archbishop of Canterbury, to place him at the head of Canterbury Hall in 1365, where twelve young men were preparing for the priesthood. Islip had designed the foundation for secular clergy; but when he died in 1366, Islip's successor, Simon Langham, a man of monastic training, turned the leadership of the college over to a monk. Though Wycliffe appealed to Rome, the outcome was unfavourable to him. This case would hardly have been thought of again had not contemporaries of Wycliffe, such as William Woodford and Rev. John Woodbridge I, seen in it the beginnings of Wycliffe's assaults upon Rome and monasticism.^[*citation needed*]

Between 1372 and 1384, he became a Doctor of Divinity, making use of his right to lecture upon systematic divinity, but these lectures were not the origin of his *Summa*. In 1368, he gave up his living at Fylingham and took over the rectory of Ludgershall, Buckinghamshire, not far from Oxford, which enabled him to retain his connection with the university. Six years later, in 1374, he received the crown living of Lutterworth in Leicestershire, which he retained until his death. He had already resigned as prebendary of Aust in Westbury-on-Trym.

Political career

Wycliffe's entrance upon the stage of ecclesiastical politics is usually related to the question of feudal tribute to which England had been rendered liable by King John, which was not paid for thirty-three years until Pope Urban V in 1365 demanded it. Parliament declared that neither King John nor any other had the right to subject England to any foreign power. Should the pope attempt to enforce his claim by arms, he would be met with national resistance.

Pope Urban apparently recognized his mistake and dropped his claim. The tone of the pope was, in fact, not threatening, and he did not wish to draw England into the maelstrom of politics of Europe. Harsh words were bound to be heard in England, because of the close relations of the papacy with France. It is said that on this occasion Wycliffe served as theological counsel to the government, composed a polemical tract dealing with the tribute, and defended an unnamed monk over against the conduct of the

government and parliament. This would place the entrance of Wycliffe into politics about 1365–66.

Wycliffe's more important participation began with the peace congress at Bruges. There in 1374 negotiations were carried on between France and England, while at the same time commissioners from England dealt with papal delegates respecting the removal of ecclesiastical annoyances. Wycliffe was among these, under a decree dated July 26, 1374. The choice of a harsh opponent of the Avignon system would have broken up rather than furthered the peace negotiations. It seems he was designated purely as a theologian, and so considered himself, since a noted scriptural scholar was required alongside of those learned in civil and canon law. There was no need for a man of renown, or a pure advocate of state interests. His predecessor in a like case was John Owtred, a monk who formulated the statement that Saint Peter had united in his hands spiritual and temporal power – the opposite of what Wycliffe taught. In the days of the mission to Bruges Owtred still belonged to Wycliffe's circle of friends.

Wycliffe was still regarded by papal partisans as trustworthy; his opposition to the ruling conduct of the Church may have escaped notice. It was difficult to recognise him as a heretic. The controversies in which men engaged at Oxford were philosophical rather than purely theological or ecclesiastical-political, and the method of discussion was academic and scholastic. The kind of men with whom Wycliffe dealt included the Carmelite monk John Kynningham^[10] over theological^[11] or ecclesiastical-political^[12] questions. Wycliffe's contest with Owtred and William Wynham (or Wyrinham or Binham) of Wallingford Priory and St Albans, the Benedictine professor of theology at Oxford, were formerly unknown, as were the earlier ones with William Wadeford. When it is recalled that it was once the task of Owtred to defend the political interests of England against the demands of Avignon, one would more likely see him in agreement with Wycliffe than in opposition. But Owtred believed it sinful to say that temporal power might deprive a priest, even an unrighteous one, of his temporalities; Wycliffe regarded it as a sin to incite the pope to excommunicate laymen who had deprived clergy of their temporalities, his dictum being that a man in a state of sin had no claim upon government.

Wycliffe blamed Wynham for making public controversies previously confined to the academic arena. But the controversies were fundamentally related to the opposition, which found expression in Parliament against the Curia. Wycliffe himself tells^[13] how he concluded that there was a great contrast between what the Church was and what it ought to be, and saw the necessity for reform. His ideas stress the perniciousness of the temporal rule of the clergy and its incompatibility with the teaching of Christ and the apostles, and make note of the tendencies evident in the measures of the "Good Parliament" of 1376-77. A long bill was introduced, with 150 headings, in which were

stated the grievances caused by the aggressions of the Curia; all reservations and commissions were to be done away, the exportation of money was forbidden, and the foreign collectors were to be removed.

Public declaration



Wycliffe speaking to Lollard preachers.

It was in this period that Wycliffe came significantly to the fore. He was among those to whom the thought of the secularization of ecclesiastical properties in England was welcome. His protector was John of Gaunt, who was acting as ruler at this time. He was no longer satisfied with his chair as the means of propagating his ideas, and soon after his return from Bruges he began to express them in tracts and longer works – his great work, the *Summa theologiae*, was written in support of them. In the first book,

concerned with the government of God and the Ten Commandments, he attacked the temporal rule of the clergy – in temporal things the king is above the pope, and the collection of annates and indulgences is simony. But he entered the politics of the day with his great work *De civili dominio*. Here he introduced those ideas by which the good parliament was governed – which involved the renunciation by the Church of temporal dominion. The items of the "long bill" appear to have been derived from his work. In this book are the strongest outcries against the Avignon system with its commissions, exactions, squandering of charities by unfit priests, and the like. To change this is the business of the State. If the clergy misuses ecclesiastical property, it must be taken away; if the king does not do this, he is remiss. The work contains 18 strongly stated theses, opposing the governing methods of the rule of the Church and the straightening out of its temporal possessions.^[14] Wycliffe had set these ideas before his students at Oxford in 1376, after becoming involved in controversy with William Wadford and others. Rather than restricting these matters to the classroom, he wanted them proclaimed more widely and wanted temporal and spiritual lords to take note. While the latter attacked him and sought ecclesiastical censure, he recommended himself to the former by his criticism of the worldly possessions of the clergy.

Conflict with the Church

Theologically, his preaching was strong belief in predestination that enabled him to believe in the “invisible” church of the elect, made up of those predestined to be saved, rather than in the “visible” church of Rome.^[15]

Wycliffe wanted to see his ideas actualized – his fundamental belief was that the Church should be poor, as in the days of the apostles. He had not yet broken with the mendicant friars, and from these John of Gaunt chose Wycliffe's defenders. While the Reformer later claimed that it was not his purpose to incite temporal lords to confiscation of the property of the Church, the real tendencies of the propositions remained unconcealed. The result of the same doctrines in Bohemia – that land but which was richest in ecclesiastical foundations – was that in a short time the entire church estate was taken over and a revolution brought about in the relations of temporal holdings. It was in keeping with the plans of Gaunt to have a personality like Wycliffe on his side. Especially in London the Reformer's views won support; partisans of the nobility attached themselves to him, and the lower orders gladly heard his sermons. He preached in city churches, and London rang with his praises.^[citation needed]

The first to oppose his theses were monks of those orders that held possessions, to whom his theories were dangerous. Oxford and the episcopate were later blamed by the Curia, which charged them with so neglecting their duty that the breaking of the evil fiend into the English sheepfold could be noticed in Rome before it was in England. Wycliffe was summoned before William Courtenay, Bishop of London, on 19 February 1377, "to explain the wonderful things which had streamed forth from his mouth". The exact charges are not known, as the matter did not get as far as a definite examination. Gaunt, the Earl Marshal Henry Percy, and a number of other friends accompanied Wycliffe, and four begging friars were his advocates. A crowd gathered at the church, and at the entrance of the party animosities began to show, especially in an angry exchange between the bishop and the Reformer's protectors. Gaunt declared that he would humble the pride of the English clergy and their partisans, hinting at the intent to secularise the possessions of the Church. The assembly broke up and the lords departed with their protege.^[16]

Most of the English clergy were irritated by this encounter, and attacks upon Wycliffe began, finding their response in the second and third books of his work dealing with civil government. These books carry a sharp polemic, hardly surprising when it is recalled that his opponents charged Wycliffe with blasphemy and scandal, pride and heresy. He appeared to have openly advised the secularization of English church property, and the dominant parties shared his conviction that the monks could better be controlled if they

were relieved from the care of secular affairs.

The bitterness occasioned by this advice will be better understood when it is remembered that at that time the papacy was at war with the Florentines and was in dire straits. The demand of the Minorites that the Church should live in poverty as it did in the days of the apostles was not pleasing in such a crisis. It was under these conditions that Pope Gregory XI, who in January, 1377, had gone from Avignon to Rome, sent on 22 May five copies of his bull against Wycliffe, dispatching one to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the others to the Bishop of London, King Edward III, the Chancellor, and the university; among the enclosures were 18 theses of his, which were denounced as erroneous and dangerous to Church and State.

The reformatory activities of Wycliffe effectively began here: all the great works, especially his *Summa theologiae*, are closely connected with the condemnation of his 18 theses, while the entire literary energies of his later years rest upon this foundation.

[*citation needed*] The next aim of his opponents – to make him out a revolutionary in politics – failed. The situation in England resulted in damage to them; on 21 June 1377, Edward III died. His successor was Richard II, a boy, who was under the influence of John of Gaunt, his uncle. So it resulted that the bull against Wycliffe did not become public till 18 December. Parliament, which met in October, came into sharp conflict with the Curia. Among the propositions Wycliffe, at the direction of the government, worked out for parliament was one that speaks out distinctly against the exhaustion of England by the Curia.

Wycliffe tried to gain public favour by laying his theses before Parliament, and then made them public in a tract, accompanied by explanations, limitations, and interpretations. After the session of Parliament was over he was called upon to answer, and in March, 1378, he appeared at the episcopal palace at Lambeth to defend himself. The preliminaries were not yet finished when a noisy mob gathered with the purpose of saving him; the king's mother, Joan of Kent, also took up his cause. The bishops, who were divided, satisfied themselves with forbidding him to speak further on the controversy. At Oxford the vice-chancellor, following papal directions, confined the Reformer for some time in Black Hall, from which Wycliffe was released on threats from his friends; the vice-chancellor was himself confined in the same place because of his treatment of Wycliffe. The latter then took up the usage according to which one who remained for 44 days under excommunication came under the penalties executed by the State, and wrote his *De incarcerandis fedelibus*, in which he demanded that it should be legal for the excommunicated to appeal to the king and his council against the excommunication; in this writing he laid open the entire case and in such a way that it was understood by the laity. He wrote his 33 conclusions, in Latin and English. The masses, some of the nobility,

and his former protector, John of Gaunt, rallied to him. Before any further steps could be taken at Rome, Gregory XI died (1378). But Wycliffe was already engaged in one of his most important works, that dealing with what he perceived as the truth of Holy Scripture.

The sharper the strife became, the more Wycliffe had recourse to his translation of Scripture as the basis of all Christian doctrinal opinion, and expressly tried to prove this to be the only norm for Christian faith. To refute his opponents, he wrote the book in which he endeavored to show that Holy Scripture contains all truth and, being from God, is the only authority. He referred to the conditions under which the condemnation of his 18 theses was brought about; and the same may be said of his books dealing with the Church, the office of king, and the power of the pope – all completed within the space of two years (1378–79). To Wycliffe, the Church is the totality of those who are predestined to blessedness. It includes the Church triumphant in heaven, those in purgatory, and the Church militant or men on earth. No one who is eternally lost has part in it. There is one universal Church, and outside of it there is no salvation. Its head is Christ. No pope may say that he is the head, for he cannot say that he is elect or even a member of the Church.

Statement regarding royal power

It would be a mistake to assume that Wycliffe's doctrine of the Church – which made so great an impression upon famous priest Jan Hus - was occasioned by the western schism (1378–1429). The principles of the doctrine were already embodied in his *De civili dominio*. The contents of the book dealing with the Church are closely connected with the decision respecting the 18 theses. The attacks on Pope Gregory XI grow ever more extreme. Wycliffe's stand with respect to the ideal of poverty became continually firmer, as well as his position with regard to the temporal rule of the clergy. Closely related to this attitude was his book *De officio regis*, the content of which was foreshadowed in his 33 conclusions: One should be instructed with reference to the obligations in regard to the kingdom—to see how the two powers, royal and ecclesiastical, may support each other in harmony in the body corporate of the Church. The royal power, Wycliffe taught, is consecrated through the testimony of Holy Scripture and the Fathers. Christ and the apostles rendered tribute to the emperor. It is a sin to oppose the power of the king, which is derived immediately from God. Subjects, above all the clergy, should pay him dutiful tribute. The honors which attach to temporal power hark back to the king; those which belong to precedence in the priestly office, to the priest. The king must apply his power with wisdom, his laws are to be in unison with those of God. From God laws derive their authority, including those which royalty has over the clergy. If one of the clergy neglects his office, he is a traitor to the king who calls him to answer for it. It follows from this that the king has an "evangelical" control. Those in the service of the Church must have

regard for the laws of the State. In confirmation of this fundamental principle the archbishops in England make sworn submission to the king and receive their temporalities. The king is to protect his vassals against damage to their possessions; in case the clergy through their misuse of the temporalities cause injury, the king must offer protection. When the king turns over temporalities to the clergy, he places them under his jurisdiction, from which later pronouncements of the popes cannot release them. If the clergy relies on papal pronouncements, it must be subjected to obedience to the king.

This book, like those that preceded and followed, was concerned with the reform of the Church, in which the temporal arm was to have an influential part. Especially interesting is the teaching which Wycliffe addressed to the king on the protection of his theologians. This did not mean theology in its modern sense, but knowledge of the Bible. Since the law must be in agreement with Scripture, knowledge of theology is necessary to the strengthening of the kingdom; therefore the king has theologians in his entourage to stand at his side as he exercises power. It is their duty to explain Scripture according to the rule of reason and in conformity with the witness of the saints; also to proclaim the law of the king and to protect his welfare and that of his kingdom.

Views on the papacy

The books and tracts of Wycliffe's last six years include continual attacks upon the papacy and the entire hierarchy of his times. Each year they focus more and more, and at the last, the pope and the Antichrist seem to him practically equivalent concepts. (A similar conclusion would be reached by Protestants more than a century later.)

Yet there are passages which are moderate in tone; G. V. Lechler identifies three stages in Wycliffe's relations with the papacy. The first step, which carried him to the outbreak of the schism, involves moderate recognition of the papal primacy; the second, which carried him to 1381, is marked by an estrangement from the papacy; and the third shows him in sharp contest. However, Wycliffe reached no valuation of the papacy before the outbreak of the schism different from his later appraisal. If in his last years he identified the papacy with antichristianity, the dispensability of this papacy was strong in his mind before the schism. It was this very man who laboured to bring about the recognition of Urban VI (1378–1389), which appears to contradict his former attitude and to demand an explanation.

Wycliffe's influence was never greater than at the moment when pope and antipope sent their ambassadors to England to gain recognition for themselves. In the ambassadors' presence, he delivered an opinion before Parliament that showed, in an important

ecclesiastical political question (the matter of the right of asylum in Westminster Abbey), a position that was to the liking of the State. How Wycliffe came to be active in the interest of Urban is seen in passages in his latest writings, in which he expressed himself in regard to the papacy in a favorable sense. On the other hand he states that it is not necessary to go either to Rome or to Avignon in order to seek a decision from the pope, since the triune God is everywhere. Our pope is Christ. It seems clear that Wycliffe was an opponent of that papacy which had developed since Constantine. He taught that the Church can continue to exist even though it have no visible leader; but there can be no damage when the Church possesses a leader of the right kind. To distinguish between what the pope should be, if one is necessary, and the pope as he appeared in Wycliffe's day was the purpose of his book on the power of the pope. The Church militant, Wycliffe taught, needs a head – but one whom God gives the Church. The elector [cardinal] can only make someone a pope if the choice relates to one who is elect [of God]. But that is not always the case. It may be that the elector is himself not predestined and chooses one who is in the same case – a veritable Antichrist. One must regard as a true pope one who in teaching and life most nearly follows Jesus and Saint Peter.

Attack on monasticism

His teachings concerning the danger attaching to the secularizing of the Church put Wycliffe into line with the mendicant orders, since in 1377 Minorites were his defenders. In the last chapters of his *De civili dominio*, there are traces of a rift. When he stated that "the case of the orders which hold property is that of them all," the mendicant orders turned against him; and from that time Wycliffe began a struggle which continued till his death.

This battle against what he saw as an imperialised papacy and its supporters, the "sects," as he called the monastic orders, takes up a large space not only in his later works as the *Trialogus*, *Dialogus*, *Opus evangelicum*, and in his sermons, but also in a series of sharp tracts and polemical productions in Latin and English (of which those issued in his later years have been collected as "Polemical Writings"). In these he teaches that the Church needs no new sects; sufficient for it now is the religion of Christ which sufficed in the first three centuries of its existence. The monastic orders are bodies which are not supported by the Bible, and must be abolished together with their possessions. Such teaching, particularly in sermons, had one immediate effect – a serious rising of the people. The monks were deprived of alms and were bidden to apply themselves to manual labor. These teachings had more important results upon the orders and their possessions in Bohemia, where the instructions of the "Evangelical master" were followed to the letter in such a way that the noble foundations and practically the whole of the property of the

Church were sacrificed. But the result was not as Wycliffe wanted it in England – the property fell not to the State but to the barons of the land. The scope of the conflict in England widened; it no longer involved the mendicant monks alone, but took in the entire hierarchy. An element of the contest appears in Wycliffe's doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

Relation to the English Bible

National honor seemed to require an English translation, since members of the nobility possessed the Bible in French. Portions of the Bible had been translated into English as early as the seventh century under the auspices of the Catholic Church. While Wycliffe is credited, it is not possible exactly to define his part in the translation, which was based on the Vulgate.^[17] There is no doubt that it was his initiative, and that the success of the project was due to his leadership. From him comes the translation of the New Testament, which was smoother, clearer, and more readable than the rendering of the Old Testament by his friend Nicholas of Hereford. The whole was revised by Wycliffe's younger contemporary John Purvey in 1388. Thus the cry of his opponents may be heard: "The jewel of the clergy has become the toy of the laity."



John Wycliffe portrayed in Bale's *Scriptor Majoris Britanniae* 1548.

In spite of the zeal with which the hierarchy sought to destroy it due to what they saw as mistranslations and erroneous commentary, there still exist about 150 manuscripts, complete or partial, containing the translation in its revised form. From this, one may easily infer how widely diffused it was in the fifteenth century. For this reason the Wycliffites in England were often designated by their opponents as "Bible men." Just as Luther's version had great influence upon the German language, so Wycliffe's, by reason of its clarity, beauty, and strength, influenced the English language as the King James Version was later to do.

Activity as a preacher

Wycliffe aimed to do away with the existing hierarchy and replace it with the "poor

priests" who lived in poverty, were bound by no vows, had received no formal consecration, and preached the Gospel to the people. These itinerant preachers spread the teachings of Wycliffe. Two by two they went, barefoot, wearing long dark-red robes and carrying a staff in the hand, the latter having symbolic reference to their pastoral calling, and passed from place to place preaching the sovereignty of God. The bull of Gregory XI impressed upon them the name of Lollards, intended as an opprobrious epithet, but it became, to them, a name of honour. Even in Wycliffe's time the "Lollards" had reached wide circles in England and preached "God's law, without which no one could be justified."

Anti-Wycliffe synod

In the summer of 1381 Wycliffe formulated his doctrine of the Lord's Supper in twelve short sentences, and made it a duty to advocate it everywhere. Then the English hierarchy proceeded against him. The chancellor of the University of Oxford had some of the declarations pronounced heretical. When this fact was announced to Wycliffe, he declared that no one could change his convictions. He then appealed – not to the pope nor to the ecclesiastical authorities of the land, but to the king. He published his great confession upon the subject and also a second writing in English intended for the common people. His pronouncements were no longer limited to the classroom, they spread to the masses. "Every second man that you meet," writes a contemporary, "is a Lollard."

In the midst of this commotion came the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Although Wycliffe disapproved of the revolt, he was blamed. Yet his friend and protector John of Gaunt was the most hated by the rebels, and where Wycliffe's influence was greatest the uprising found the least support. While in general the aim of the revolt was against the spiritual nobility, this came about because they were nobles, not because they were churchmen. Wycliffe's old enemy William Courtenay, now Archbishop of Canterbury, called in 1382 an ecclesiastical assembly of notables at London. During the consultations on 21 May an earthquake occurred; the participants were terrified and wished to break up the assembly, but Courtenay declared the earthquake a favorable sign which meant the purification of the earth from erroneous doctrine, and the result of the "Earthquake Synod" was assured.

Of the 24 propositions attributed to Wycliffe without mentioning his name, ten were declared heretical and fourteen erroneous. The former had reference to the transformation in the sacrament, the latter to matters of church order and institutions. It was forbidden from that time to hold these opinions or to advance them in sermons or in academic discussions. All persons disregarding this order were to be subject to prosecution. To accomplish this the help of the State was necessary; but the Commons

rejected the bill. The king, however, had a decree issued which permitted the arrest of those in error. The citadel of the reformatory movement was Oxford, where Wycliffe's most active helpers were; these were laid under the ban and summoned to recant, and Nicholas of Hereford went to Rome to appeal. In similar fashion the poor priests were hindered in their work.

On 18 November 1382, Wycliffe was summoned before a synod at Oxford; he appeared, though apparently broken in body in consequence of a stroke, but nevertheless determined. He still commanded the favour of the court and of Parliament, to which he addressed a memorial. He was neither excommunicated then, nor deprived of his living.

Last days

He returned to Lutterworth, and sent out tracts against the monks and Urban VI, since the latter, contrary to the hopes of Wycliffe, had not turned out to be a reforming or "true" pope, but had been involved in mischievous conflicts. The crusade in Flanders aroused the Reformer's biting scorn, while his sermons became fuller-voiced and dealt with what he saw as the imperfections of the Church. The literary achievements of Wycliffe's last days, such as the *Trialogus*, stand at the peak of the knowledge of his day. His last work, the *Opus evangelicum*, the last part of which he named in characteristic fashion "Of Antichrist", remained uncompleted. While he was hearing Mass in the parish church on Holy Innocents' Day, 28 December 1384, he was again stricken with apoplexy and died on the last day of the year. Shortly after his death, the great Hussite movement arose and spread through Middle Europe.

The Council of Constance declared Wycliffe (on 4 May 1415) a stiff-necked heretic and under the ban of the Church. It was decreed that his books be burned and his remains be exhumed. The exhumation was carried out in 1428 when, at the command of Pope Martin V, his remains were dug up, burned, and the ashes cast into the River Swift, which flows through Lutterworth. This is the most final of all posthumous attacks on John Wycliffe, but previous attempts had been made before the



Burning Wycliffe's bones, from John Foxe's Book of Martyrs (1563)

Council of Constance. The Anti-Wycliffite Statute of 1401 extended persecution to Wycliffe's remaining followers. The "Constitutions of Oxford" of 1408 aimed to reclaim authority in all ecclesiastical matters, specifically naming John Wycliffe in a ban on certain writings, and noting that translation of Scripture into English is a crime punishable by charges of heresy.

None of Wycliffe's contemporaries left a complete picture of his person, his life, and his activities. The pictures representing him are from a later period. One must be content with certain scattered expressions found in the history of the trial by William Thorpe (1407). It appears that Wycliffe was lacking of body, indeed of wasted appearance, and physically weak. He was of unblemished walk in life, says Thorpe, and was regarded affectionately by people of rank, who often consorted with him, took down his sayings, and clung to him. "I indeed clove to none closer than to him, the wisest and most blessed of all men whom I have ever found. From him one could learn in truth what the Church of Christ is and how it should be ruled and led." Hus wished that his soul might be wherever that of Wycliffe was found.

Thomas Netter highly esteemed John Kynyngham in that he "so bravely offered himself to the biting speech of the heretic and to words that stung as being without the religion of Christ". But this example of Netter is not well chosen, since the tone of Wycliffe toward Kynyngham is that of a junior toward an elder whom one respects, and he handled other opponents in similar fashion. But when he turned his roughest side upon his opponents, as for example in his sermons, polemical writings and tracts, he met the attacks with an unfriendly tone.

Doctrines



John Wycliffe at work in his study

Wycliffe's first encounter with the official Church of his time was prompted by his zeal in the interests of the State. His first tracts and greater works of ecclesiastical-political content defended the privileges of the State, and from these sources developed a strife out of which the next phases could hardly be determined. One who studies these books in the order of their production with reference to their inner content finds a direct development with a strong reformatory tendency. This was not originally doctrinal; when it later took up matters of dogma, as in the teaching concerning transubstantiation, the purpose was the return to original simplicity in the government of the Church. But it would have been against the diplomatic practice of the time to have sent to the peace congress at Bruges, in which the Curia had an essential part, a participant who had become known at home by his allegedly heretical teaching.

Since it was from dealing with ecclesiastical-political questions that Wycliffe turned to reformatory activities, the former have a large part in his reformatory writings. While he took his start in affairs of church policy from the English legislation which was passed in the times of Edward I, he declined the connection into which his contemporaries brought it under the lead of Occam. Indeed, he distinctly disavows taking his conclusions from Occam, and avers that he draws them from Scripture, and that they were supported by the Doctors of the Church. So that dependence upon earlier schismatic parties in the Church, which he never mentions in his writings (as though he had never derived anything from them), is counterindicated, and attention is directed to the true sources in Scripture, to which he added the collections of canons of the Church. Wycliffe would have had nothing to gain by professing indebtedness to "heretical" parties or to opponents of the papacy. His reference to Scripture and orthodox Fathers as authorities is what might have been expected. So far as his polemics accord with those of earlier antagonists of the papacy, it is fair to assume that he was not ignorant of them and was influenced by them. The Bible alone was authoritative and, according to his own conviction and that of his disciples, was fully sufficient for the government of this world (*De sufficientia legis Christi*). Out of it he drew his comprehensive statements in support of his reformatory views – after intense study and many spiritual conflicts. He tells that as a beginner he was desperate to comprehend the passages dealing with the activities of the divine Word, until by the grace of God he was able to gather the right sense of Scripture, which he then

understood. But that was not a light task. Without knowledge of the Bible there can be no peace in the life of the Church or of society, and outside of it there is no real and abiding good; it is the one authority for the faith.

These teachings Wycliffe promulgated in his great work on the truth of Scripture, and in other greater and lesser writings. For him the Bible was the fundamental source of Christianity which is binding on all men. Wycliffe was called "Doctor evangelicus" by his English and Bohemian followers. Of all the reformers who preceded Martin Luther, Wycliffe put most emphasis on Scripture: "Even though there were a hundred popes and though every mendicant monk were a cardinal, they would be entitled to confidence only insofar as they accorded with the Bible." Therefore in this early period it was Wycliffe who recognized and formulated one of the two great formal principles of the Reformation—the unique authority of the Bible for the belief and life of the Christian.

It is not enough realized that, well before Luther, Wycliffe also recognized the other great Reformation doctrine, that of justification by faith, though not in fully worked out form as Luther achieved. In *Christ stilling the Storm* he wrote: "If a man believe in Christ, and make a point of his belief, then the promise that God hath made to come into the land of light shall be given by virtue of Christ, to all men that make this the chief matter."

Basal positions in philosophy

Wycliffe earned his great repute as a philosopher at an early date. Henry Knighton says that in philosophy he was second to none, and in scholastic discipline incomparable. If this pronouncement seems hardly justified, now that Wycliffe's writings are in print, it must be borne in mind that not all his philosophical works are extant. If Wycliffe was in philosophy the superior of his contemporaries and had no equal in scholastic discipline, he belongs with the series of great scholastic philosophers and theologians in which England in the Middle Ages was so rich – with Alexander of Hales, Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham (Occam), and Bradwardine. There was a period in his life when he devoted himself exclusively to scholastic philosophy: "when I was still a logician," he used later to say. The first "heresy" which "he cast forth into the world" rests as much upon philosophical as upon theological grounds.

In Plato, knowledge of whom came to Wycliffe through Saint Augustine, he saw traces of a knowledge of the Trinity, and he championed the doctrine of ideas as against Aristotle. He said that Democritus, Plato, Augustine, and Grosseteste far outranked Aristotle. In Aristotle he missed the provision for the immortality of the soul, and in his ethics the tendency toward the eternal. He was a close follower of Augustine, so much so that he

was called "John of Augustine" by his pupils. In some of his teachings, as in *De annihilatione*, the influence of Thomas Aquinas can be detected. So far as his relations to the philosophers of the Middle Ages are concerned, he held to realism as opposed to the nominalism advanced by Occam, although in questions that had to do with ecclesiastical politics he was related to Occam and indeed went beyond him. His views are based upon the conviction of the reality of the universal, and he employed realism to avoid dogmatic difficulties.

The uni-divine existence in the Trinity is the real universal of the three Persons, and in the Eucharist the ever-real presence of Christ justifies the deliverance that complete reality is compatible with the spatial division of the existence. The center of Wycliffe's philosophical system is formed by the doctrine of the prior existence in the thought of God of all things and events. This involves the definiteness of things and especially their number, so that neither their infinity, infinite extension, nor infinite divisibility can be assumed. Space consists of a number of points of space determined from eternity, and time of exactly such a number of moments, and the number of these is known only to the divine spirit. Geometrical figures consist of arranged series of points, and enlargement or diminution of these figures rests upon the addition or subtraction of points. Because the existence of these points of space as such, that is, as truly indivisible unities, has its basis in the fact that the points are one with the bodies that fill them; because, therefore, all possible space is coincident with the physical world (as in Wycliffe's system, in general, reality and possibility correspond), there can as little be a vacuum as bounding surfaces that are common to different bodies. The assumption of such surfaces impinges, according to Wycliffe, upon the contradictory principle as does the conception of a truly continuous transition of one condition into another.

Wycliffe's doctrine of atoms connects itself, therefore, with the doctrine of the composition of time from real moments, but is distinguished by the denial of interspaces as assumed in other systems. From the identity of space and the physical world, and the circular motion of the heavens, Wycliffe deduces the spherical form of the universe.

Attitude toward speculation

Wycliffe's fundamental principle of the preexistence in thought of all reality involves the most serious obstacle to freedom of the will; the philosopher could assist himself only by the formula that the free will of man was something predetermined of God. He demanded strict dialectical training as the means of distinguishing the true from the false, and asserted that logic (or the syllogism) furthered the knowledge of catholic verities; ignorance of logic was the reason why men misunderstood Scripture, since men

overlooked the connection – the distinction between idea and appearance. Wycliffe was not merely conscious of the distinction between theology and philosophy, but his sense of reality led him to pass by scholastic questions. He left aside philosophical discussions which seemed to have no significance for the religious consciousness and those which pertained purely to scholasticism: "we concern ourselves with the verities that are, and leave aside the errors which arise from speculation on matters which are not."

Veneration

Wycliffe is honored in the Church of England on December 31 and in the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) on October 30.

See also

- Wycliffe's Bible
- Wycliffe Bible Translators, one of the worlds largest international organisations dedicated to translating the Bible into every living language in the World; named in honour of John Wycliffe.
- Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, one of the Church of England's designated Evangelical theological colleges, is also named in his honour.
- Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto
- Wycliffe College (Gloucestershire)
- Movie: John Wycliffe: The Morning Star (<http://www.amazon.com/John-Wycliffe-Morning-Keith-Buckley/dp/B00066TBDU>)
- Middle English Bible translations
- William Tyndale
- Jan Hus

The Bible in English
Old English (pre-1066)
Middle English (1066-1500)
Early Modern English (1500-1800)
Modern Christian (1800-)
Modern Jewish (1853-)
Miscellaneous

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 12. ^ (*De dominatione civili; De dotatione ecclesiae*)
 13. ^ *Sermones*, iii. 199
 14. ^ *DNB*, lxiii. 208-209.
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 16. ^ An excellent account of this dispute between the bishop and the protectors of Wycliffe is given in the *Chronicon Angliae*, the gist of which is quoted in *DNB*, lxiii. 206-207.
 17. ^ Walker, Williston. *A History of the Christian Church (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1958) 269*

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- John Wyclif (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15722a.htm>) Catholic Encyclopedia
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