

John Wycliffe

(also known as John Wiclif)

1328-1384

by Williston Walker

✘ The fourteenth century was an epoch of great changes. Mediaeval feudalism, with its strongly divisive spirit, was giving way to a new national feeling. A real sense of common unity of interest was beginning to be felt by the peoples of France, of England, and in a less degree of Germany. A new power was therefore rising, that of national life. It speedily entered into conflict with the papacy, and with momentous results. Though Boniface VIII asserted the extremest papal claims, and even declared in essential agreement with the teachings of Aquinas, in a bull of 1302, not only that the papacy ruled all secular princes, but that obedience to the pope is needful for salvation, he encountered the most determined opposition of the French king, Philip IV, and of the French people. So strong did the newly awakened French monarchy show itself, that from 1305 to 1377 the papacy itself left its ancient seat at Rome, and the popes lived for the most part in Avignon. All were Frenchmen, and were largely subservient to French political interests. One or two were men of low moral standards and almost purely secular ambitions. This transfer of residence and submission to French influence lost the papacy much of its prestige in the rest of Europe, while the popes of this period carried their system of taxation to a height heretofore unexampled. The papacy never was more burdensome, but it had lost the leadership and high spiritual purpose which alone could make its burdens endurable. Men were beginning to criticize it from many points of view.

The Franciscans and Dominicans had lost much of the zeal which had made them so useful in the years following their foundation, while the popes were supporting the looser element in them in laxer interpretation of the "rules." The character of the clergy was too often unworthy. Theology, which in the teachings of Aquinas had seemed a science solidly buttressed by philosophy, was now largely held to be philosophically improbable, to be accepted only because taught by the church. Religion was not declining; but the mediaeval institutions of religion were more and more showing themselves inadequate. Earnest men, like Dante and William of Occam, were opposing the claims of the papacy to control the state; and one bold voice, that of Marsilius of Padua, in 1324, questioned the whole papal system; but they were yet relatively few, and the mediaeval scheme of doctrine, with its great hierarchical structure, though inwardly weakened, stood apparently as strongly as ever.

Yet in one region of Europe, before the fourteenth century came to a close, the most effective, if not the most logical, critic of the papacy that had yet appeared was to arise and to lead in a movement for reform of no little importance. This reformer was John Wiclif. England, thanks to its insular position and the direct relations of its kings since the time of William the Conqueror to the great land-holders, had possessed an unusual sense of solidarity of interest. The national feeling had there developed to a degree

only comparable to that of France. Under Edward III, in 1339, England began the long war with France, incidents of which were to be the English victories of Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356). It was at the time that the papacy had its seat at Avignon, and was largely under French influences. Naturally the payment of taxes to such popes, and the appointment by them of their French protégés to English ecclesiastical posts, were looked upon by a large party in England as aids to England's enemies. Statutes known as those of "Provisors" and "Praemunire" were passed by Parliament, in 1351 and 1353, intended to limit papal appointments and appeals to the papal courts; and, in 1366, Parliament refused to pay to the pope the taxes granted by King John in 1213. It was this feeling of resistance to what seemed foreign aggression that Wiclif was to share, and it was to be the beginning from which he was to advance to far more radical criticisms of the papacy.

John Wiclif was born probably in the village of Hipswell in the county of northern England known as Yorkshire, at some unknown date which has been conjectured to have been about 1324. Of his early life almost nothing is known, save that he went as a young student to Oxford, and gained great distinction there as a scholar and a teacher. When he emerges into the light of history it is as a man of high philosophical attainments, who departed from current theological conceptions in the direction of a renewed Augustinianism, such as Thomas of Bradwardine (1290-1349) had made influential at Oxford. We shall see this in his emphasis on predestination, and his strong sense that religion is a relation of God to the individual human soul.

It was not merely in Oxford that Wiclif had won distinction. In 1366 or 1367, as one of the chaplains of Edward III, he put forth a vigorous defense of the action of Parliament, already mentioned, in refusing further payment of taxes to the pope. From this publication Wiclif's open opposition to papal encroachments may be dated. He soon followed it with others. By 1374 he had become a doctor of divinity. In April of that year he was nominated by the king to the pastorate of Lutterworth, and, in July, he was sent as a royal commissioner to treat with the representatives of Pope Gregory XI, regarding the vexed question of ecclesiastical appointments in England. He was evidently in high favor at court.

Thus far Wiclif had gone but little, if at all, farther in his criticisms than many of the Franciscans had done. His motives were opposition to the wealth and corruption of the church, and patriotic resistance to papal encroachments. His argument was curiously mediaeval. All authority is a "lordship," a fief, held by its possessor from God, who is overlord of all. As a temporal fief, if misused, is forfeited, so spiritual lordships are vacated if not rightly employed, or if the holder is unfit. If an ecclesiastic is of bad character, in "mortal sin," or if he uses his office to accumulate riches or gain temporal power, things inconsistent with the purpose for which the ministry was established by Christ, his "lordship" is forfeited, and may be taken from him by the civil authorities. The enforcement of ecclesiastical claims by spiritual penalties, which in mediaeval practice would have followed such attempts to seize the possessions of the clergy, is not to be feared, since even the pope's

excommunication is ineffective unless he against whom it is directed is really deserving of condemnation in the sight of God. Only the "law of Christ" as laid down in the New Testament is of final authority as a criterion of rightful action. In its last analysis the church consists only of the "predestinate;" but as they are not easily distinguished, the practical test is apparent conformity to the "law of Christ."

These views commended Wiclif to the favor of the most powerful, but one of the least popular, of the English nobles, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, fourth son of Edward III. John was without a spark of religious sympathy with Wiclif, but he headed a hungry party who thought to profit by despoiling the English church, and believed that in Wiclif he had one whom he could use as a tool for that purpose. John's support was to be a safeguard to Wiclif, but the latter was too profoundly religious to enter into real sympathy with that greedy noble's hopes, and probably too guileless wholly to fathom his plans. Thanks to this support, an attempt to bring Wiclif to trial before the Convocation of the Province of Canterbury, gathered in St. Paul's in London in February, 1377, utterly failed, the proceedings being frustrated by an angry personal encounter in the church between John of Gaunt and the Bishop of London. Gregory XI now issued five bulls condemning Wiclif's opinions in the matters of the withdrawal of property from its unworthy possessors and excommunication, and comparing him with Marsilius of Padua. But court favor still served the reformer. Though Edward III died in June, 1377, and John of Gaunt went into temporary political eclipse, the mother of the young king, Richard II, proved Wiclif's friend, and through her aid an attempt of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London to discipline him was frustrated in 1378. For the next three years Wiclif was not molested.

It was during these three years of comparative peace, apparently, that he achieved two of his greatest services. Convinced of the need of popular preaching, as Valdez and Francis had been before, and as John Wesley was to be in a later age, he now began sending out "poor priests," that is, unendowed preachers, not necessarily clergymen, who should proclaim the gospel in churches, in marketplaces, in the fields, wherever they could gather an audience. The condition of the lower classes of England was such as to secure them a ready hearing. That frightful pestilence known as the "black death", had ravaged England in 1348-49, 1361, and 1369, and, especially in the first attack, had been terribly destructive. Probably half the population, possibly more, had perished. The whole labor situation was unsettled for years by the consequent scarcity of workmen, and the attempts of Parliament to regulate work and wages by legislation. The lower classes of the population were in a state of profound discontent; and they listened eagerly to Wiclif's "poor priests," whose denunciation of the wealth and arrogance of the high clergy, and assertion that the "law of Christ" demanded "humility, love, and poverty"—to quote Wiclif's own phrase—found ready response.

To aid these preachers, and to give to the people generally the Word of God which Wiclif was convinced was the only final authority for the Christian, he now undertook with his friends the translation of the Scriptures from the

Latin Vulgate into English. It was a time of much interest in the developing language. Sermons were being widely preached in it. Its use had recently been established in law-court practice. Wiclif was therefore following the spirit of the age in putting the Bible into the English tongue. Of the greatness of his service there can be no question. The gospels and Psalms had been translated or paraphrased repeatedly from early Anglo-Saxon times; but these versions had at best a very limited circulation. The new work, especially the New Testament which was from Wiclif's own pen, was idiomatic, forceful, readable. He gave the whole Bible to his nation; and, in so doing, not merely contributed to its religious development, but exercised a formative influence upon all subsequent English versions of the Scriptures, and upon the general growth of the English language.

While engaged in this work during his three years of comparative peace, events were occurring which caused Wiclif to advance to far more radical criticisms of the papacy than he had hitherto uttered. The death of Gregory XI in 1378 found the cardinals, a majority of whom were Frenchmen, at Rome. The pressure of the Roman populace and other influences compelled the choice of an Italian pope, Urban VI; but that election the same cardinals repudiated a few months later and selected another head for the church in the person of Clement VII, who returned to Avignon. All Europe was distressed at the spectacle of two rivals in office, each with about an equal following. The French pope ultimately had the allegiance of France, Spain, Naples, and Scotland; the Roman, of England, Germany, and most of Italy. The scandalous schism thus begun was to last till healed, after infinite labor, by the Council of Constance in 1417. The sight of two popes mutually anathematizing each other, and proclaiming crusades, the one against the other, turned Wiclif now fully against the papacy. Could men so un-Christlike in action be living rightly according to "the law of Christ;" and if not so living, had they not forfeited their "lordship"? He could but answer that such popes were "vicars of Anti-christ." But he now went farther. He criticized not the papacy only, but the whole priestly order which drew its income from revenues and endowments, the monks with their landed possessions, and even the mendicant friars, whom he had formerly favored, whose vow of poverty was so often really ignored. Applying the test of conformity to Scripture, Wiclif now rejected indulgences, a treasury of good works, private confession, the worship of saints, pilgrimages, and purgatory, and asserted the spiritual equality of all priests.

Wiclif's greatest breach with popular religious conceptions was occasioned by his denial, in the spring of 1381, of the doctrine of transubstantiation. It aroused antagonism as almost nothing else could have done. No belief was more widespread at the period, and none seemed more sacred to multitudes than the faith that when the priest pronounces the words of consecration the elements are transformed in their substance into the very body and blood of Christ. Roman Catholic devotion still clings with peculiar affection to this doctrine which seems to bring Christ into vital contact with present life. To Wiclif, however, it appeared unscriptural and irrational. His own view was essentially that of a spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament which

Augustine had taught. But something more than its supposed unscripturalness or irrationality may have led Wiclif to the dangerous task of attacking transubstantiation. He was at war with what he deemed an un-Christlike body of clergy who were unjustly lording over God's heritage. Their highest power, the power no layman was believed to possess, was that on their consecrating act, the miracle of transubstantiation is wrought. Deny that miracle, and the chief distinction between clergy and laity, the main spiritual buttress of clerical claims, is swept away.

This attack by Wiclif cost him many friends. The University of Oxford condemned his opinions, though, such was the esteem in which he was there held, without mentioning his name. Even untheological John of Gaunt urged him to silence. Within a few weeks, however, a great disaster overtook the Wiclifian cause—a disaster for which Wiclif was only in remote degree responsible. The years-long discontent of the lower classes has already been mentioned. In June, 1381, it flared up in a terrible insurrection directed against what the peasants deemed the forces of oppression. Deeds and mortgages were burned, lawyers killed, the inns of court at the Temple in London and John of Gaunt's palace were destroyed, the Archbishop of Canterbury and some of the king's leading agents in the collection of taxes were murdered. King Richard II, himself, was in great peril. Fierce as it was, the storm soon passed; but the nobles were ruthless in their acts of repression and the feeling was widespread that Wiclif's attacks on the clergy, and especially the preaching of his "poor priests," were responsible for the disorder. Some influence may have come from Wiclif's preachers, though he himself had no direct share in the revolt; but the movement as a whole was due to the working of long-standing economic grievances.

The discredit into which the peasant revolt brought Wiclif's cause for the time being emboldened his enemies, and in May, 1382, his doctrines were condemned by a synod held in London. His popularity remained too great, however, for successful personal attack. He wrote much in vigorous English tracts and in Latin. He pushed forward the cause he had at heart to his utmost. It was while in his own church at Lutterworth on December 28, 1384, that he suffered the paralytic stroke from which he died three days later.

Wiclif's chief characteristic was moral earnestness. He was a patriot anxious to save England from foreign tyranny; but even more he was a Christian intent on advancing the Kingdom of God. He broke with the current religious system on many points. He rejected the papacy, at least of such popes as were then in power, denounced the wealth of the clergy, criticized the monks, rejected transubstantiation, urged preaching, proclaimed the unique authority of the Scriptures, gave England the Bible in its own tongue. He evidently regarded vital religion as an inward and personal experience. His view of it was far deeper than that of most men of his age. These are great services; but they hardly entitle him to be called, as he has often been styled, "the morning-star of the Reformation." His conceptions of religion, however profound, were the familiar mediaeval Roman Catholic thoughts of ascetic "apostolic poverty," and of the gospel as a "new law." He had no new theory of the way of

salvation, or of Christ's relations to men, to offer. Hence he was no Luther. Rather he was one of the most radical and deserving of the mediaeval reformers—a man who belonged to the Middle Ages, not to the new day.

This failure to give to his age that which was vitally new probably accounts for the surprising fruitlessness of his movement in England. At his death he had a large following, and on the whole royal tolerance made easy the path of his party till the downfall of Richard II in 1399. No church was founded, however. On the accession of John of Gaunt's son, Henry IV, first of the House of Lancaster, the royal policy was changed to one of persecution. The political significance of the "Lollards," as Wiclif's followers were called, ended with the execution of their leader, Sir John Oldcastle, in 1417, and their religious importance did not long survive. The one lasting influence of the movement in England was the impulse which it undoubtedly gave to the reading of the Bible; and the number of manuscripts of Wiclif's translation which have survived, in spite of attempts to destroy them, is remarkable.

In one remote region of Europe, however, Wiclif's work was to have a powerful influence. The Bohemian reformer, John Huss, did little more doctrinally than reproduce Wiclif's opinions, often in Wiclif's very words. More conservative intellectually, Huss did not share Wiclif's rejection of transubstantiation. Unlike Wiclif, he urged the right of the laity to partake of the wine as well as of the bread in communion. In conduct Huss was much more a man of action than Wiclif. A teacher in the University of Prague from 1398 onward, he became, in 1402, the preacher of the Bethlehem church in that city. During the reign of Richard II of England, whose queen was a Bohemian princess, many Bohemian students had been attracted to Oxford and had returned with Wiclif's writings. Of these Huss made a thorough study. They appealed to his Bohemian patriotism by reason of their rejection of foreign authority, and soon to his religious spirit by their bold criticism of the evils of the age. To him, as to Wiclif, Christ is the sole head of the church, only the "predestinate" are its members, and all ministers are essentially equal in spiritual powers. In sermons of great popular influence Huss denounced the corruption of the Bohemian clergy, and advocated Wiclifian positions. The Bohemian element in the University and city of Prague largely sympathized with him, and through his influence a decree was obtained from King Wenzel, by which the Bohemians, though a decided minority, were given a controlling influence in the University. The result was that Huss became the chief power in that seat of learning, while the disgruntled Germans and other foreigners regarded it as unorthodox and established, in 1409, the University of Leipzig.

These events led to a breach between Huss and his archbishop, and in 1410 he was excommunicated for Wiclifianism. The contest was now fully on, and Huss enjoyed large popular support as well as the somewhat fickle favor of King Wenzel. The situation attracted European attention, and the emperor Sigismund now summoned Huss to appear before the great general Council of Constance, which had been called, primarily, through the work of the leading theologians of the University of Paris, to heal the schism and effect reforms in the church. Thither he went, protected, as he certainly supposed, by a safe

conduct from the emperor. He was, however, promptly imprisoned, and a pitiful contest ensued. On May 4, 1415, the council condemned Wiclif's views, and ordered his body cast out of consecrated ground. It urged Huss to yield his opinions to its authority. The leaders of the church sincerely felt not only that a council was wiser than any individual in the church, but that only by the recognition of the duty of all Christians to submit their private convictions to its authority could they rid the church of its rival popes and end the scandal of the schism. To allow Huss to assert his judgment against that of the council would be to lose all that the council had won for church unity. They were perfectly honest in this position. But Huss was equally sincere. He would play no tricks with his conscience. He would not deny what he believed to be the truth even when the council declared him in error. It was a contest of opposing principles, and the future was with Huss, for the principle for which he stood was essentially the right of private judgment which Protestantism was to assert. Firm in his opinions, he was condemned by the council as a heretic, and on July 6, 1415, was burned at Constance, meeting his death with heroic firmness and Christian courage.

In Bohemia Huss was regarded as a national hero. A large part of its population openly supported his cause, and, in 1419, the terrible civil wars began. The Hussites gradually divided into conservative and radical parties, and the latter was nearly extinguished in battle in 1434; but its remnants survived. Out of some of them, and of others influenced by Waldensian views, which had long found a following in Bohemia, the *Unitas Fratrum* came into being soon after the middle of the fifteenth century. This communion was much modified by the influence of the Lutheran reformation; but it is the spiritual ancestor of the modern Moravians. Thus Wiclif's influence long survived, in modified form, in a land which he never saw and which was far from that in which he did his work.

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