

"FOUNDATIONS" SERIES*

A STUDY OF ENGLISH REFORMERS

(2)

— *The Philosophy of Wyclif* —

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Introduction

An old proverb goes something like this: "As a man *thinketh* in his heart, so is he."¹ Man's whole life and existence is intricately and inextricably wrapped up in his thought processes. Thought determines attitude. Attitude determines deed. Deed determines character. Character determines life. And the decisions of life determine destiny. Thought processes, attitudes, deeds, the character of individuals and their lives also influence and determine the course of history. The purpose of this paper is to show that Wyclif's basic philosophy and thought undergirded his later attitude, works, and influence for good upon the course of human history.

The common denominator for Reformation thought and action was love of Sacred Scripture. The Reformers reckoned it eternal and precious, surpassing man's most exalted masterpieces, and from whose Guidebook pages of light, the keeping of men in ignorance and darkness was criminal — both against God and against humanity. It was to them a Book by which to live, and for those who trust its promises — a Book by which to die. Although they had been brought up and nourished in Roman Catholic dogma and tradition, they came to a parting of the ways over this one main issue: Was *it* the God-breathed Book infallible or wasn't it? Did it take precedence over the pronouncements of popes or didn't it?

Albert Einstein was once asked about his belief in God and in the veracity of the Scripture record. The learned physicist replied, "Of course I believe, for without the record of God as a basis for rational thought, the whole order and majesty of the universe would be called in question, and nothing would make sense." Would that our modern-day educationist and scientific leaders could produce more men of mind and thought like that of the renowned Jewish doctor!

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Character Formation

“Wyclif...a man of sterling character,” writes Fountain, “...of clear understanding, vast knowledge, and strong convictions...His intellectual brilliance, integrity, and fearlessness made him a formidable foe.”² Sergeant says that he was “irreproachable in his moral character, whose every act reveals a roused and wakeful conscience.”³ Furthermore, he was considered by many of his contemporaries to be “the most holy of all the men in his age...absolutely blameless in his conduct.”⁴

Wherefore very many of the chief men of this kingdom, who frequently held counsel with him, were devotedly attached to him, kept a record of what he said, and guided themselves after his manner of life.⁵

Perhaps the greatest tribute ever paid Wyclif arrived posthumously in the form of an official document bearing the Oxford University seal and dated October 1, 1405. It lends credence to the manner in which his reputation was held in highest esteem by the closest of personal acquaintances:

His conversation from his youth to his death was so praiseworthy and honest in the University that he never gave any offence, nor was he aspersed with any mark of infamy or sinister suspicion; but in answering, reading, preaching, and determining, he behaved himself laudably, as a valiant champion of the truth, and vanquished by sentences of Holy Scripture all such as by their wilful beggary blasphemed and slandered the truth of Christ. This doctor was not convicted of heretical pravity, or by our prelates delivered to be burned after his burial. God forbid that our prelates should have condemned a man of so great probity for a heretic, who had not his equal in all the University, in his writings on logic, philosophy, divinity, morality, and the speculative sciences.⁶

The moral lineaments of this courageous man and the effective force of his stainless life were forged under the tutelage of men such as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Among the Oxford lecturers, Robert Grosseteste, the 13th Century Bishop of Lincoln who gained international fame by his sharp rebuke of Innocent IV in 1253, gave to Wyclif his great erudition and absolute reliance upon Biblical authority.⁷

Wyclif considered Thomas Bradwardine to be his chief mentor, however, and referred to him as "Doctor Profundus." Bradwardine, noted for his brilliance in mathematics and astronomy, was also versed in the truths of Scripture — and in this field became "more renowned than he had been as a philosopher and scientist."⁸

A direct forerunner of the later Reformers, Bradwardine lectured at Merton on the doctrines of grace, and seems to have made a profound impact on the mind of young Wyclif. His views on God's Sovereignty and the absolute necessity for grace contrasted sharply with views of the Pelagians and Manichaeans, and seem to have had great formative influence on Wyclif's later predestinarian outlook. Certainly he frowned on the ideas of free-will, merit through good works, the winning of grace by congruity, etc. "In the schools of the philosophers," he writes, "we rarely heard a word said concerning grace, but we were continually told that we were the masters of our own free actions, and that it was in our power to do well or ill."⁹ He also taught that human nature is "impotent for good, the best deeds of men are unmeritorious, everything worthy comes of the free grace and with the absolute foreknowledge of God."¹⁰ This teaching commended itself to his contemporaries, among whom was Chaucer who cites Bradwardine not obliquely when he made the Nun's priest confess the following:

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I ne cannot boult it to the bran,
As can the holy doctor, saint Austyn.
Or Boëce, or the bishop Bradwardyn.¹¹

It has been suggested that Milton also alludes to Bradwardine's influence upon Wyclif and to men whose lines of mental concourse tend toward complex metaphysical concepts:

In discourse more sweet...
Others apart sat on a hill retired,
In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high
Of Providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate,
Fixed fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute,
And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.¹²

Hume admired learning and skepticism as the two greatest qualities in Wyclif, considering also his remarkable austerity of life and manners.¹³

Gilpin credits Wyclif with noble attributes, likening him to Bacon:

His amazing penetration; his rational manner of thinking; and the noble freedom of his spirit, are equally the objects of our admiration. Wicliff was in religion, what Bacon was afterwards in science; the great detector of those arts and glosses, which the barbarism of ages had drawn together to obscure the mind of man.¹⁴

Of his dauntless character, Sergeant gives to Wyclif the most revealing accolade of all. Comparing him with John Knox, he says: "And the same epitaph might be written over the grave of each — 'Here lies one who never feared the face of man.'" ¹⁵

Biographers and historians have mistakenly judged Wyclif from preconceptions of their own theology and times. How very human, but *not* Divine!¹⁶ Stacey labels this a mistake that in all fairness we must *not* make:

“To judge Wyclif as if Luther and Calvin had already lived...to look at [him] through post-Reformation eyes is the one temptation that must be resisted.”¹⁷ Continuing, he says that

His sincerity and singlemindedness, his fearless defiance of established authority and his readiness to stand Wyclif *contra mundum* were admirable qualities in a man who set himself up against the greatest organization on earth when he believed that organization to be wrong.¹⁸

State of the World

Historian John Foxe describes the status quo of Wyclif’s day:

All the world was in a most desperate and vile estate, and the lamentable ignorance and darkness of God’s truth overshadowed the whole earth... The whole state of religion was depraved and corrupted...The world, forsaking the lovely power of God’s spiritual Word, was altogether led and blinded with outward ceremonies and human traditions; in these was all the hope of obtaining salvation fully fixed; insomuch that scarcely any other thing was seen in the temples or churches, taught or spoken of in sermons, or finally intended or gone about in their whole life, but only heaping up of certain shadowy ceremonies upon ceremonies; neither was there any end of this their heaping.¹⁹

Into this situation came Wyclif. Hailed variously as “a palm tree in the desert, a cedar of Lebanon among brushwood, a freeman amid a race of slaves,” his name has stood out like a patch of warm color from the drab and dismal pages of the Dark Ages. Foxe cites God’s providence in ushering Wyclif onto the stage of world history at this moment in time:

Through God’s providence stepped forth into the arena that valiant champion of the truth, John Wickliff, our countryman, whom the Lord raised up here in England, to detect more fully and amply the poison of the Pope’s doctrine and false religion.²⁰

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If there is one thing stronger than the strongest authority ever set up, it is the spirit of revolt against wrong based upon an overwhelming conviction of truth. Wyclif and his friends were first Reformers, however, not simply because they revolted against authority, but because they went back to the first and strictest authority of all, and rejected all its merely human accretions.

Men of thought, of accurate logic, and of an awakened conscience all over the land stood with Wyclif in his insistence that Christian practice should conform to the root-principles of Christianity, and refused to accept the papal superstructure as of equal authority with the foundation which it hid from sight.²¹

Wyclif maintained that "the simple and plain truth doth appear in the Scriptures, whereunto all human traditions, whatsoever they be, must be referred."²² For him the Word of God had to be not only proclaimed and believed, but also applied. Once he *saw* a truth (belief), it had to be declared (proclamation) and acted upon (obedience).

Edward III, the father of Wyclif's friend and benefactor John of Gaunt, became an admirer of Wyclif, but not so the clergy and mendicant monks, who hated him bitterly and tried to bring about his downfall. His bold declaration of the truth had gotten him great displeasure and hatred at the hands of many men, especially the monks and richest of the priests.

He sharply criticized them for their indolence, for their habit of begging, and for their perversion of religion. The worship of images and relics he called foolishness, and in no uncertain terms he denounced the sale of indulgences, masses for the dead, and processions and pilgrimages. The Pope he denounced as Anti-Christ, the proud, worldly priest of Rome, the most accursed of clippers and purse-curvers.²³

Ritual and Ostentation

The Puritanical fibre in Wyclif emerges when we see his dislike for anything which, by its complications, takes the mind and heart away from the central underlying truth. Too much decoration and magnificence of architecture, for example, detracted the worshiper.

In the popular preaching of his day, priests would resort to any unbiblical means in order to secure the interest of their hearers, but these methods and men to Wyclif were disgusting. They seemed to him "lying and ludicrous," a farce and a detraction from the dignity and effectiveness of God's Message. The Word itself had to be central, and he strongly censured those who neglected it.

On singing, "It seems that we seek our own liking and pride in this song more than the devotion and understanding of that which we sing, and this is great sin," he said.²⁴ Especially in church music he laid bare the danger of all ritual, with a passionate plea for simplicity and sincerity in worship. Disapproving of the then current "loud singing and intoning" which he called "grete crynge and blowynge of mannus vois,"²⁵ he appealed to Augustine:

As oft as the song delighteth me more than that which is sung, so oft do I confess that I sin grievously.²⁶

God's Word has a peculiar and incomparable eloquence of its own, in its very simplicity and modesty of form. A flowery, captivating style of address is of little value compared to right substance. Christ did not teach His disciples to sing, but to preach the Gospel.²⁷

Religious entertainment not only diverted the attention of men from true devotion, but had to be maintained at enormous cost. He strictly held that all such performances were frivolous, and stirred the baser passions of

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vain men to dancing rather than to mourning — warning ‘fools’ who find pleasure in them that they should dread the sharp words of Augustine quoted above. The most novel thing about Wyclif was that he sincerely believed that the preacher should dispense with *everything* but the Scripture. A century and a half later, another would follow in his train with the same battle-cry: “*Sola Scriptura!*”

Authority of Scripture

In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (1378), Wyclif affirms the unconditional, binding authority of Holy Scripture, and asserts that “the Bible is the Word of God or Will and Testament of the Father; God and His Word are one.”²⁸ The Holy Scripture was to him an external, infallible Authority. “It is impossible for any part of the Holy Scripture to be wrong. In Holy Scripture is all the truth.”²⁹ Throughout his life he faithfully maintained that Scripture is the highest expression of the Divine Law (“Goddis Law” — as Wyclif referred to the Bible), as opposed to the manmade statutes of the Church. It was this despised position that brought down upon his head the wrath of papal authority, and repeated attacks by his opponents.

A revolutionary stand, it meant that “Goddis Law” must take precedence over the decrees and pronouncements of “Mother Church.” Scripture to Wyclif was the *magistrum optimum*, “higher than reason or church tradition, and doctrines were to be upheld *only* if they agreed with Holy Scripture.”³⁰ Fathers and Doctors in the history of the Church be there many, but Wyclif put the Bible on a higher pedestal than them all. “All law, all philosophy, all logic, and all ethics are in Holy Scripture...the Bible is indeed one perfect Word, proceeding from the mouth of God...Christ as the foundation of all salvation and sole Redeemer of man is the subject of the Bible in all its parts.”³¹

To those who argued that the Bible could not be easily understood, Wyclif pointed out that the foremost requirements to understanding the Book were spiritual. “We must be *given* eyes and ears to register the truth of the Bible if we are really to recognize and grasp it,” he emphasized.

Only by and through the Holy Spirit can anyone understand the Word. No one can understand who is not first enlightened by Christ. A devout, virtuous, and humble spirit is necessary. Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture...first its primary and literal sense must be taken, then its secondary and figurative meanings...One part of Scripture explains another, and every text must be understood in the light of Biblical truth as a whole.³²

Humility, then, is the first prerequisite to understanding. It does *not* proceed from man’s intellect, ability, religious organization, or self. “So the student of Scripture does not acquire the wealth of wisdom unless with contrition he becomes humble.”³³ After that, a good life is the best guide to Biblical knowledge. Finally, the most powerful ally to an understanding of the Word is hearing it preached,³⁴ to which Wyclif and his “Bible Men” gave considerable importance. “The preaching of the Word of God is an act more solemn than the making of the Sacrament,” he said. “The most high service that men have on earth is to preach God’s Message.”³⁵

Dominion Theory Spurs Translation

That which so inflamed the Roman Church against Wyclif was that he insisted on the right of every individual to form his opinion independently of the hierarchy — on the basis of reason and Scripture alone. Habitually he appealed to the Word of God, as did Hus, Luther, and Calvin after him, as “the highest expression of the Divine Law.” Hence, the crying need

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for making the Bible readily available in the language of the people.

Broadbent observes that Wyclif's translation of the Bible into English for the first time "shed great light upon England, and wrought a revolution in English thought. The English Bible has proved to be one of the most effectual powers for righteousness that the world has ever known,"³⁶ and its effect on the consciences of men "the most potent influence in bringing about English liberty."³⁷

The doctrine he called 'Dominion' established the fact of personal relationship and direct responsibility of each man to God. 'All authority...is from God, and all who exercise authority are responsible to God for the use of what He has committed to them.'³⁸

The theory of Dominion...taught that every man was the tenant-in-chief of God and no intermediary came between them. This led to the necessity of a personal relationship between God and man, and an individual responsibility on the part of the tenant-in-chief to know the law of God and to keep it. It was the Bible which made this possible and Wyclif drew his own conclusion: 'And so it is a help here to all men to study the Gospel in that tongue which they know best...'³⁹

No serious attempt had ever been made to turn the whole of Scripture into an accurate English equivalent. Ecclesiastical edicts and prejudice against such an undertaking had so brainwashed the populace that Wyclif deliberated for considerable time before he was willing to face the task, but face it he must — and accomplish it despite the prohibition. Men must be able to read for themselves God's Message in their own language. "He believed that he was handling the very oracles of God, and that every part must be accepted without reserve."⁴⁰

Wyclif happened to be on the side of history. The lawfulness of an English Bible became a subject for serious debate everywhere. Under the preaching of his Lollard helpers, men came to realize that the Bible was

theirs to have and to read.

Wyclif Contra Romanism

Wyclif's position against the teaching of the canons was absolutely uncompromising. Sergeant records something of the trend of the times:

From the eleventh century, the dogma of the Church has been perverted. The popes have been wrong, the councils have been wrong, the decretals are full of heresy. If Rome will not unsay her false doctrine, the national Churches must repudiate her claim to lead them. She has built up a crazy superstructure on the true foundation; we must sweep it away, and get back to the life and words of Christ.⁴¹

He fought the shameful tyranny of the pope and his clergy because they had assumed divine authority and held God and His Law for nothing...Had the opportunity presented itself, he would have delighted in stripping the corrupted Church of her meretricious robes and jewels with the supreme confidence of an honest man that only in this way could that Church once again deserve the majestic title as 'Bride of Christ'.⁴²

Differences of opinion and points of contradiction and grievance abounded. Time and tradition had heaped upon the backs of the faithful "heavy burdens and grievous to be borne."⁴³ The primary points of contention to be considered here, however, are these: the Bible, the Church, the priests and popes, and the Sovereignty of God versus the will of man. His position on the first establishes those on the other three and greatly strengthens them. Thus interwoven and linked, it may be difficult to separate them for the purpose of analysis.

His greatest discord with the ruling hierarchy, as cited above, was that of the Bible versus tradition and the word of man. *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, published in 1378 just as the Papal Schism began, was the Magna

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Carta of Wyclif's life for reform. It stated the authority of the Bible as supreme; not simply one authority among many, it stood supreme above all the rest.

Neither the testimony of Augustine nor Jerome, nor any other saint, should be accepted except in so far as it is based upon Scripture. Christ's law is best and enough, and other laws men should not take but as branches of God's law.⁴⁴

Toward the end of 1378, Wyclif completed *De Ecclesia* in which he made a clear distinction between the Roman Catholic "Church" and the true Church. The *visible* Church is the institutional church containing both saints and sinners, both saved and reprobate. The *invisible* Church on the other hand, known only to God, is composed of those predestined to be saved before the foundation of the universe was laid — outside which there is no salvation. From Augustine he taught that this invisible, universal Church consists of three parts:

1. The Church Triumphant, consisting of the saved dead — the saints in Heaven.
2. The Church Militant, consisting of the predestinate who are still alive.
3. The Sleeping Church, consisting of the dead in purgatory, suffering the flames of purging.⁴⁵

Although Wyclif's third point is not in congruity with the *Sola Scriptura* position held subsequently by Luther and the later Reformers, we must remember that centuries of *Catholic dogma contra Scriptura* had taken their toll upon even the best of hearts and minds. He *was* the Morning Star, after all, whose initial beams (imperfect though they may have been) portended more light to come.

Wyclif's realist philosophy compelled him to believe that the Church has existed from before the Incarnation because it has always existed in the mind of God. The question then arises, "How can one distinguish between

the predestinate and the reprobate?" His answer is interesting:

The predestinate will invariably demonstrate their standing in grace before God by the life they lead...characterized by piety and obedience to the Word of God.⁴⁶

By finding the test of the predestinate in their living in conformity with the teaching of God, Wyclif sweeps away much of the Catholic system as then practised. Absolution must depend wholly upon worthiness in God's sight...Apart from this even the pope has no right to grant absolution...The whole system of indulgences therefore rests upon the false basis of an inexhaustible store of supererogatory merit at the disposal of the pope. Even God himself, Who alone can grant indulgences, cannot remit sin without satisfaction. Moreover if the pope possessed such power he should use it freely and so restore the golden age, or he would be guilty of the death of those whom he might have saved.⁴⁷

Both Calvin and Wyclif made the same distinction regarding *the Church*, whose membership is known to God alone. The Church concept embraces both *visible* and *invisible*, but not all whom we now see as "members of the Church" belong to it in reality. Much chaff is still mixed with the wheat. Peter and Judas, for example, both belonged to the visible Church, *but only one* belongs to the elect of God.

Of Priests and Popes

Wyclif was convinced that the love of money was at the root of the Roman Church's deplorable moral weakness. If a priest neglects his duties to God and to the sheep of God, or if he fails to live an exemplary life before them, no member is justified in continuing to support him. Taxation cannot be enforced by threats of excommunication, and all gifts to the clergy must be strictly voluntary. The Papal Schism (1378) thoroughly disillusioned him, and in 1379 he renewed his attack upon the papacy with

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the publication of *De Poteste Pape*. In it he denied that the office has any divine foundation. It is only of human origin, rather, and might even become demonic, since it is comprised of mere men. He declared that the pope who failed to follow Christ in simplicity according to the Word is Anti-Christ, and before the end of his literary career he advocated dispensing with the papal office entirely.⁴⁸

Clear logic is expressed by Wyclif on the matter of "Peter and the Keys":

But what of Christ's promise to Peter and to his successors, 'Whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'? This text, Wyclif says, misunderstood, puts fear into many simple Christians. It was a contract which God made with Peter, the captain of the apostles, whereby he promised to him and the priests his successors that he would give them the keys of the kingdom of heaven. If they used their powers unerringly, he would graciously be present to effectuate their sentence. This is one of the greatest privileges ever conferred on a mortal.

But to avoid heresy it must be noted that it is not possible that if the Pope or anyone else by some symbol or other claims to bind or loose, the binding and loosing automatically takes place. If you grant this you have to grant that the Pope cannot sin, and therefore that he is God; otherwise he could go wrong and act out of conformity with the key of Christ...It is impossible for any vicar or prelate of Christ to open or close, unless he acts in conformity with the key of Christ which has already opened or closed; otherwise he would be another God in opposition to our God.⁴⁹

All authority, both ecclesiastical and secular, is conferred directly by the grace of God, he asserted, and is consequently forfeited when the wielder of that authority is guilty mortal sin.

Of Sovereignty and Free Will

Wyclif's theology of salvation was predestinarian in that nobody knows whether a given pope or anybody else belongs to the true Church, and it does not differ appreciably from that of the other Reformers. It was a sovereign work of God, but the Continental Anabaptists did not believe this. They gave much place to human co-operation and effort in salvation. In this they differ fundamentally from the Reformers.

The individual human being has an independence of other human beings which no creature has of the Creator. Sin and disobedience toward God diminish individual liberty, of course,* but do not take it away altogether. Kenny states:

It is possible for a child to walk freely, though necessitated to walk as he does by his tutor leading him by the hand; similarly it is possible for the created will to be led by the Spirit of God. But man has the freedom to walk away from God's saving guidance on the disobedient feet of pride.⁵⁰ It is necessary that particular events come about by absolute necessity, for God necessarily and independently fore-ordains, foresees, and wills, by the will of His own good pleasure, every particular creature. Nothing can resist His Will, and so nothing can prevent any effect. Just as no one can prevent the world's having been, no one can prevent any effect coming to be at the appropriate time. The antecedent is outside any created power and is accordingly altogether unpreventable. Similarly, therefore, is everything which formally follows from it.⁵¹

*This is a spiritual law established by the Creator for order and protection in human society, the abrogation of which carries with it scientific, penal consequences equally as binding as any physical or material law.

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Wyclif contends that the only truth about the future that can be known is the divine plan for the future. So too with the past. That which we know of the past is simply the plan of God that has already been perfected in history past. (There is history past as well as history present and history future.) "The truth lying behind negations and possibilities is simply the power of God to do otherwise than in fact He does."⁵²

The Chaucer Connection

Moral corruption and spiritual confusion had inundated the whole of contemporary society. In *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer lays bare the rottenness of the Roman agents, and Fountain explains the famous 'Vision of Piers Ploughman' as "forcefully unmasking the sins of the clergy..."⁵³

In his commentary on the 'Poor Parson,' Fountain concludes that Chaucer's poetic character is but the personification of Wyclif's "Bible Men" who were all, in fact, "Poor Parsons."

We do not know at what point Wycliffe and Chaucer made contact, or precisely what relationship they had, but we can be confident that Chaucer held him in high esteem and that, when describing his 'Poor Parson' in his Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, he had Wycliffe in mind. There are clear indications that there was a connection but the description speaks for itself:

A good man was ther of religioun
And was a poure *persoun* of a toun
But riche he was of holy thoght and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk
That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche:
His parissheis devoutly wolde he teche.

Benygne he was and wonder diligent
And in adversitee ful pacient...
Wynd was his parisshe and houses fer asonder,
But he ne left nat for reyn ne thonder,
In siknesse nor in meschief to visite
The ferreste [furthest] in his parisshe,
 muche and lite [rich and poor],
Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf.
This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf [gave]
That first he wroghte and afterward he taughte;
Out of the gospel he those wordes caughte [took],
And this figure he added eek [also] therto
That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?
For if a preest be foul on whom we truste,
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste...
But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve
He taughte but first he folwed it hym selve.

Fountain continues reporting on the state of medieval society: "The most disturbing feature about the life of the peasant...was that he was in bondage to the Church and its sacraments (corporal penance, pilgrimage, and the payment for special Masses for the dead). 'Penance' was at this time being replaced by 'payment'...In the hawking of pardons the Church reached its lowest depth, and it was not only Wycliffe who attacked such corruption, but others before him and after. The best known was Chaucer... [In] *Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims included a number of disreputable clerics...Chaucer's description of the friar is of particular interest."⁵⁵

Ful swetely herde he confessioun
And pleasant was his absolucioun

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He was an esy man to yeve penaunce
Then as he wiste to have a good pitaunce
For unto a poure order for to yive
Is signe that a man is wel y-shrive (absolved)
For if he yat, he dost make avaunt (boast)
He wiste that a man was repentaunt
For many a man so hard is of his herte
He may not wepe although hym sore smarte
Therefore in stede of wepyng and preyers
Men moote yive silver to poure freres...
He knew the Taverners wel in every toun
And every hostiler and tappestere (barmaid)
Bet than a lazar (leper) or beggester (beggarwoman).

Milton and Wyclif

Moral judgments are the backbone of history. Mudroch says that "John Milton was opposed to hierarchy, to the dazzling heights of the episcopal see, and he had the courage to say it... [He] shared with Wyclif the horror of seeing the Church defiled, God adjured, and worship debased by human inventions and human minds assuming the position of God himself. [He] identified the Church of Rome as the Corrupt Church, convinced that it was only redeemed with the arrival of the Reformation... [He] also believed that England (the "Lost Darling" of the papists) was God's land..."⁵⁶ Quoting him in connection with these thoughts:

...let us recount even here without delay the patience and long suffering that God hath us'd towards our blindnesse and hardness time after time. For He being equally neere to his whole Creation of Mankind, and of free power to turne his benefick and fatherly regard to what Region or Kingdome He pleases, hath yet ever had this lland under the speciall indulgent eye of his providence; and pittying us the first of all other

Nations, after He had decreed to purifie and renew his Church that lay wallowing in Idolatrous pollutions, sent first to us a healing messenger to touch softly our sores, and carry a gentle hand over our wounds; He knockt once and twice and came againe, opening our drousie eye-lids leasurely by that glimmering light which Wicklef, and his followers dispers't, and still taking off by degrees the inveterat scales from our nigh perisht sight, purg'd also our deaf eares, and prepar'd them to attend his second warning trumpet in our Grandsires dayes. How else could they have beene able to have receiv'd the sudden assault of his reforming Spirit warring against humane Principles, and carnall sense, the pride of flesh that still cry'd up Antiquity, Custome, Canons, Councels and Lawes, and cry'd down the truth for noveltie, schisme, profanenesse and sacriledge; when as we that have liv'd so long in abundant light, besides the sunny reflection of all the neighbouring Churches, have yet our hearts rivetted with those old opinions, and so obstructed and benumm'd with the same fleshly reasonings, which in our forefathers soone melted and gave way, against the morning beam of *Reformation*.⁵⁷

A Case of Barbaric Inhumanity

The crowning episode illustrating the Roman Church's hatred for Wyclif took place some forty years after his death. Is it just possible that William Shakespeare's famous lines two centuries later were penned in retrospect of the spiteful spleen poured out upon his predecessor?

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed heare;
Bleste be the man that spares thes stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.⁵⁸

By order of the Council of Constance (1415), the Reformer's bones were to be disinterred and refused reburial. The decree stated:

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This holy synod declareth, determineth, and giveth sentence, that John Wickliff was a notorious heretic, and that he died obstinate in his heresy; cursing alike him and condemning his memory. This synod also decreeth and ordaineth that his body and bones, if they might be discerned from the bodies of other faithful people, should be taken out of the ground, and thrown away far from the burial of any church, according as the canons and laws enjoin.⁵⁹

The edict was executed in 1428 when the Bishop of Lincoln burned the remains and scattered the ashes upon the waters of the River Swift running through Lutterworth. A sad commentary on the depraved nature of the "sons of Adam"* again illustrated, as so often has been displayed in the history of mankind. Spiritual or temporal authority, when pushed to its logical extreme, pronounces its final verdict: "I kill you because I do not like you."

Foxe concludes his remarks on Wyclif by stating that the great Reformer had "some cause to give thanks, that they would at least spare him till he was dead, and also give him so long respite after his death, forty-one years to rest in his sepulchre before they ungraved him, and turned him from earth to ashes; which ashes they also took and threw into the river ... thinking thereby to utterly extinguish and abolish both the name and doctrine of Wickliff for ever ... But these and all others must know that, as there is no keeping down of verity, but it will spring up and come out of dust and ashes, as appeared right well in this man; for though they digged up his body, burnt his bones, and drowned his ashes, yet the Word of God and the truth ... with the fruit and success thereof, they could not burn."⁶⁰

*Human nature, totally depraved and beyond redemption — but for the grace of God!

As the ashes were carried by the Swift to the Avon, by the Avon to the Severn, by the Severn to the 'narrow seas', and by the 'narrow seas' to the ocean, so the Reformer's teachings and message reached out into all England, and from England into far distant lands.⁶¹

And though his bones from the grave were torn
Long after his life was ended,
The sound of his words, to times unborn,
Like a trumpet-call descended.

The Scriptures Proscribed

Even as late as the death of Sir John Oldcastle (Lord Cobham), leader of the Lollards following the death of Wyclif and martyred at the stake in 1471, a law was passed stating that

... he who should be so bold as to read the Scriptures in English should forfeit land, chattels, goods and life, and be condemned as a heretic to God, an enemy to the crown, and a traitor to the kingdom; that he should not have any benefit of sanctuary; and that, if he continued obstinate, or relapsed after being pardoned, he should first be hanged for treason against the king, and then burned for heresy against God.⁶²

And all this in the name of God! We shudder today to think of such despotism and tyranny, and say "the world and its institutions have changed." And so would we all hope. As of this date, however, Salman Rushdie, British author of *The Satanic Verses* (a critique of Islam) has a price-tag on his head and is still in hiding because of death-threats upon his life issued by the Imam "in the name of Allah" to every Mohammedan worldwide. Times have changed?

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The same destruction of men's souls as formerly is oft carried out, *but even more subtly and expeditiously now*, by the enemy who mesmerizes them with the spirit of deception and sleep — or of indifference and unconcern.

But if our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost; in whom the god of this world hath *blinded* the minds of them which believe not, lest the *light* of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them ... [and they should be *saved* — from sin and death and the Judgment to follow]⁶³

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF JOHN WICLIF
THE EARLIEST CHAMPION OF ECCLESIASTICAL REFORMATION IN ENGLAND,
HE WAS BORN IN YORKSHIRE IN THE YEAR 1324,
IN THE YEAR 1375 HE WAS PRESENTED TO THE RECTORY OF LUTTERWORTH:
WHERE HE DIED ON THE 31st DECEMBER 1384,
AT OXFORD HE ACQUIRED NOT ONLY THE RENOWN OF A CONSUMMATE SCHOOLMAN,
BUT THE FAR MORE GLORIOUS TITLE OF THE EVANGELIC DOCTOR
HIS WHOLE LIFE WAS ONE IMPETUOUS STRUGGLE AGAINST THE CORRUPTIONS
AND ENCROACHMENTS OF THE PAPAL COURT,
AND THE IMPOSTURES OF ITS DEVOTED AUXILIARIES, THE MENDICANT FRATERNITIES,
HIS LABOURS IN THE CAUSE OF SCRIPTURAL TRUTH
WERE CROWNED BY ONE IMMORTAL ACHIEVEMENT,
HIS TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO THE ENGLISH TONGUE.
THIS MIGHTY WORK DREW ON HIM, INDEED, THE BITTER HATRED
OF ALL WHO WERE MAKING MERCHANDIZE OF THE POPULAR CREDULITY AND IGNORANCE:
BUT HE FOUND AN ABUNDANT REWARD IN THE BLESSING OF HIS COUNTRYMEN,
OF EVERY RANK AND AGE, TO WHOM HE UNFOLDED THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE.
HIS MORTAL REMAINS WERE INTERRED NEAR THIS SPOT:
BUT THEY WERE NOT ALLOWED TO REST IN PEACE:
AFTER THE LAPSE OF MANY YEARS,
HIS BONES WERE DRAGGED FROM THE GRAVE, AND CONSIGNED TO THE FLAMES:
AND HIS ASHES WERE CAST INTO THE WATERS OF THE ADJOINING STREAM.

Inscription Found in the Lutterworth Parish Church (Dated 1837)

To the memory of one of the greatest of Englishmen,
His country has been singularly and painfully ungrateful...
He is the first of the Reformers.⁶⁴

Notes

1. "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he..." (Proverbs 23. 7)
"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." (Matthew 12. 34)
"Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in Heaven. Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name have cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works?' And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." (Matthew 7. 20-23)
2. Fountain, 31.
3. Sergeant, 139.
4. Sergeant, 9.
5. Ibid. (Tribute paid Wyclif in the course of his examination for heresy before Archbishop Arundel)
6. Sergeant, 349.
7. Estep, 61.
8. Woychuk, 20. (See also *Culture & Language*, March, 1990, p. 44)
9. Sergeant, 68.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. II, lines 555-561. *Note*: Not all philosophy is godly or sane. Scott Elledge in the Norton edition (p. 42) explains:
As God in the Old Testament holds His enemies in derision [Psalm 2. 1-5 q. v.], so the poet's irony mocks the philosophers of hell — making their discussion sound like a parody of high talk by ignorant men on popular theological and philosophical topics.
13. Mudroch, 68.
14. Gilpin, 49.

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15. Stacey, 14.
16. "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment."
(John 7. 24)
17. Stacey, 162.
18. Stacey, 164.
19. Foxe, 50.
20. Foxe, 49.
21. Sergeant, 59.
22. Foxe, 53.
23. Houghton, 66.
24. Stacey, 24.
25. Stacey, 49.
26. Ibid.
27. Fountain, 66.
28. Broadbent, 119.
29. Stacey, 83.
30. Stacey, 81.
31. Stacey, 80.
32. Broadbent, 120.
33. Stacey, 82.
34. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."
(Romans 10. 17)
35. Stacey, 82.
36. Broadbent, 118.
37. Ibid.
38. Broadbent, 121.
39. Stacey, 79.
40. Fountain, 47.

41. Paraphrase of Wyclif by Sergeant, p. 14.
42. Sergeant, 261.
43. "But do ye not after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men..." (Matthew 23. 3-5)
44. Workman, 2: 150.
45. There is *never* escape from the flames of hell, according to Luke 16. 26: "And beside all this, between us and you there is a *great gulf fixed*: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; *neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence*."
No further purging is necessary, according to such as the following:
"The blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanseth us from *all* sin." (1 John 1. 7)
"By the which we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, *which can never take away sins*: but this man (Christ), after He had offered *one sacrifice for sins for ever*, sat down on the right hand of God." (Hebrews 10. 10-12)
"And Jesus said unto him, 'Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23. 43)
46. Estep, 66.
47. Workman, 2: 15.
48. Estep, 67.
49. Kenny, 50.
50. Kenny, 35.
51. Kenny, 36.
52. Kenny, 27.
53. Fountain, 15.
54. Fountain, 67.

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55. Fountain, 4.
56. Mudroch, 49.
57. Ibid.
58. Epitaph appearing on his gravestone.
59. Sergeant, 356.
60. Foxe, 69.
61. Houghton, 68.
62. Broadbent, 122.
63. 2 Corinthians 4. 3-4.
64. Mudroch, 76. (As quoted from W. W. Shirley, ed., *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif cum Tritico*. London: 1858, xlvi)

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