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THE REAL JOHN WYCLIFFE

FEW men have been more variously interpreted—perhaps we should say, more misrepresented—than John Wycliffe. Reviled as a heresiarch, revered as a saint, alternately praised or blamed as a protestant, a patriot or a revolutionary politician, it is certain that no single epithet can do full justice to the many-sided figure which strides across the stage of fourteenth-century England.

Here is Professor Hearnshaw's estimate¹ :

“Wycliffe seems to have had no religious experience. He seems to have had no sense of sin; no heart of love; no evident communion with God. He was an academic theologian, a scholastic philosopher, a thinker whose interest in his theme was purely moral and intellectual. He made no emotional appeal; he roused no spiritual response in the souls of those to whom his dry syllogisms were addressed. He was, indeed, a rationalist, born before his due season. His affinities were with the eighteenth century and in the eighteenth century not with John Wesley but with David Hume. If he had lived in the nineteenth century he would have been the head, not of the Evangelical Alliance, but of the Rationalist Press. His definition of revelation would have satisfied the French *encyclopédistes*: revelation was to him merely a higher power of reason—*lumen supernaturale est forma perfectiva luminis naturalis*. The motive force behind the enormous activities of his closing decade was antagonism to Rome. He was anti-papal, anti-clerical, anti-monastic, anti-sacramental, all but anti-Christian. He was merely negative and destructive. His Bible was but a weapon of offence; his pamphlets were violent polemics; his Poor Priests were not evangelists but revolutionary agitators.”

Some of these statements are directly disproved by a study of Wycliffe's life and works. Knighton, a contemporary opponent, describes him as “the most eminent doctor of theology of his times, in philosophy second to none, in the training of the schools without a rival”.² “Wycliffe was famous as a philosopher before he became a theologian”, says Dr. Rashdall, “. . . he was the last great realist of the mediaeval schools”³. His theory of universals represents a moderate realism which had profited by the criticisms of Occam and the nominalists. In his view, universal ideas are only substances “in an equivocal sense”; they have merely an intelligible or possible *esse* which

¹ F. J. C. Hearnshaw, *Social and Political Ideas of the Middle Ages*, 222.

² Henry Knighton or Cnithon, *Chronicon Angliae*, ii. 151.

³ Hastings Rashdall, *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.n. Wycliffe.

is necessary and eternal. Their existence is only logically separable on the one hand from the particulars in which they are realised, or on the other hand from the mind of God, the *forma rerum* in which they eternally exist.

The chief interest of Wycliffe's philosophy lies in the part which it played in the development of his religious and political opinions. Writers who apply to him such epithets as "anti-papal", "anti-clerical", "anti-monastic" and "revolutionary" frequently cite in support his doctrine of "dominion founded in grace", set forth in the thesis *De Civili Dominio*. According to this bold speculation, perhaps the most characteristic of his hypotheses, lordship (*dominium*) belongs strictly to God alone: any dominion exercised by the creature is held of God (feudally) and forfeited by sin. "All lordship of man, natural or civil, is conferred upon him by God, as the prime author, in consideration of his returning continually to God the service due unto him, but by the fact that a man by omission or commission becomes guilty of mortal sin, he defrauds his lord-in-chief of the said service, and by consequence ensures forfeiture: wherefore . . . he is rightfully deprived of all lordship whatsoever".¹ Justice is the sole indefeasible title to dominion and property, and it is the right and duty of *politici*,² deputed by the civil power, to deprive unworthy ecclesiastics of their possessions.

For monks to hold property is unlawful and, indeed, "by God's law all things should be common". The communism expressed in this treatise, and more briefly in a tract entitled *De Servitute Civili*, written by Wycliffe in 1378, has been held largely responsible for the Peasants' Revolt which broke out three years later. It may be questioned whether John Ball was actually one of the Poor Priests but, according to Netter, he "publicly confessed that for two years he had been a disciple of Wycliffe and had learned from him the heresies which he had taught"³. Thorold Rogers speaks of the Poor Priests as "honeycombing the minds of the upland folk with what may be called religious socialism", as they preached to them of the "brave times when there was no king in Israel".⁴

¹ Quoted by R. Lane Poole, *Illustrations of the History of Mediaeval Thought* (1884), 294.

² Politicorum qui intendunt praxi et statui regnorum.—*De Civili Dominio*, i. 37.

³ Thomas Netter or Walden, *Doctrinale Antiquitatum Fidei Ecclesiae*.

⁴ Thorold Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, 254-5.

There can be no doubt that many of the Lollards, as Wycliffe's disciples came to be called, maintained and proclaimed views on private property that would be considered communistic today. Historians are agreed, however, that the times were ripe for the great blaze of 1381 and that it would have taken place had the reformer never lived.

Wycliffe has been widely regarded as the herald and har-binger of Protestantism,¹ "the morning star of the Reformation".² Professor Shirley styles him "the first of the Reformers".³ It would be an anachronism, of course, to claim him as a Protestant in the modern sense of the term. Even in his vigorously worded *Protestatio* against the abuses of the Roman see, he expressly disclaims any intention "to evade papal jurisdiction", declaring the pope to be "head of the Church militant" and "supreme vicar of Christ on earth" even as Caesar is the supreme vicar of God.⁴ He is emphatic, however, that popes and prelates must be obeyed only in so far as they teach the Word of God and exhibit the essential qualification of justice, as members of the elect. No pope is to be believed unless he is teaching by divine inspiration, or founding his utterances on Scripture.⁵ The schism consequent on the election of Clement VII in opposition to Urban VI accentuated Wycliffe's hostility to the papacy and, with the development of its scandals, he began to apply the title "antichrist" to the pope,⁶ or perhaps rather to the two rival popes.⁷ The sin of Silvester I in accepting the donation of Constantine was held responsible for the apostasy of his successors.⁸

Wycliffe's eucharistic teaching is decidedly ambiguous. Principal Workman writes: "Of the reality of transubstantiation—he uses the word, though protesting that it is an invention of the mediaeval Church—he has no doubt".⁹ Again, "Wyclif looked on the denial of the real presence as a renewal of the heresy of Berengarius".¹⁰ Rashdall agrees that "when he wrote the *De Civili Dominio*, Wycliffe still accepted the

¹ Vide e.g. John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*; Thomas Fuller, *History of the Worthies of England*; John Milton, *Areopagitica*; Dyson Hague, *Life and Work of John Wycliffe*.

² J. Bale (*Centuries*, iv. 154) was apparently the first to give him this title

³ T. Netter (?), *Fasciculi Lixaniorum Johannis Wyclif*, ed. W. W. Shirley, lxvi.

⁴ Cf. *De Potestate Papae*; *De Veritate Scripturae*, etc.

⁵ *De Apostasia*, lxx.

⁶ *Sermones*, ed. J. Loserth, ii. 1.

⁷ Cf. R. Buddensieg, *Polemical Tracts* (1883), introd. xxi.

⁸ *Sermones*, ii. 37.

⁹ H. B. Workman, *John Wyclif* (1926), ii. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 37n.

doctrine of transubstantiation", adding, however, that "to the last his views on the subject were tentative, shifting and barely consistent".¹ According to Professor Trevelyan, "he never went farther in his depreciation of the Sacrament than the position generally known as consubstantiation".² The authors of the article "Wycliffe" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* conclude: "His doctrine, which was by no means always consistent or clear, would thus seem to approximate closely to the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation".³ In F. D. Matthew's view, he held that though Christ's "presence is figurative, it is not simply a figure, but has a special efficacy and reality of its own".⁴ His difficulties in regard to the common teaching on the subject seem to have been largely philosophical and connected with an opposition to the nominalistic doctrine of the annihilation of substance, which is to be found even in his *De Logica*. Netter records: "Master John Wycliffe . . . repeated among other things three opinions concerning the multiplication of body, that is to say, dimensional, definite and virtual. The first two he declared were altogether false and impossible, but he acknowledged the third. Whence he declared that the body of Christ is not in the Sacrament of the Altar after the manner of multiplication, but that it is there virtually [*virtualiter*] to this extent as the king is in the whole kingdom".⁵ The view thus stated sounds like an anticipation of Calvin's doctrine,⁶ which became characteristic of "Reformed", as distinct from Lutheran, theology.

Wycliffe's Mariology reflects the extravagances which characterised the popular teaching of his times. In one sermon he even declares: "It seems to me impossible that we should obtain the reward of heaven without the help of Mary. There is no sex or age, no rank or position, of anyone in the whole human race, which has no need to call for the help of the holy Virgin".⁷ Elsewhere he maintains the Scotist theory of the immaculate conception⁸ and refers in glowing terms to Mary's

¹ Loc. cit.

² G. M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wyclif*, 175.

³ R. L. Poole and W. A. Phillips, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, art. "Wycliffe". The value of this verdict is somewhat discounted by the fact that the writers proceed to describe the doctrine of Article XXVIII as Zwinglian.

⁴ *English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted*, ed. F. D. Matthew, E. E. T. S. (1880), introd. xxxvi.

⁵ *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, 107.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, IV. xvii; *Tracts*, ii. 577-9.

⁷ Quoted by G. V. Lechler, *John Wycliffe and his English Precursors*, trs. P. Lorimer, 200.

⁸ *Sermones*, ii. 54.

assumption into heaven.¹ Towards the close of his life, he eulogised her in a tract entitled *Ave Maria*.²

While the monastic orders incurred his disapproval for their corporate wealth and worldliness,³ the mendicant rules were more agreeable to his idea both of preaching activity and evangelical poverty.⁴ When he appeared for the first time before the Archbishop at St. Paul's, the Duke of Lancaster provided four friars for his defence.⁵ In 1377 he greatly commends the religion of the Friars Minor, declaring that of all religious they are "dearest to God"⁶ and there can be no doubt that the example of Francis of Assisi was present to his mind when, about that time, he instituted his fraternity of Poor Priests (*sacerdotes pauperes*) who were to embrace the rule of evangelical poverty and thus "to follow a naked Christ".⁷ "To be poor without mendicancy, to combine the flexible unity, the swift obedience of an order, with free and constant mingling among the poor, such was the ideal of Wyclif's Simple Priests."⁸ "Christ our abbot", said he, "was poor and needy and lived with his disciples a life of poverty"; "St. Peter was so poor that he had neither silver nor gold", while St. Paul "travailed with his hands for his lifelode".⁹

The Poor Priests were to don a habit of coarse brown wool and to proclaim the Gospel in churches and churchyards, in highways and byways, and on village greens. Their preaching, like that of their master, was to be based in all things upon the Word of God. Like him they were to postillise or expound a chapter, rather than adopt the then new-fangled fashion of "taking a text".¹⁰ So far from being "a thinker whose interest in his theme was purely moral and intellectual," Wycliffe insists that the evangelist requires something more than a merely academic acquaintance with the Gospels. "O mar-

¹ *Sermones*, iv. 388-392.

² F. D. Matthew, op. cit., 203-208.

³ *Eulogium Historiarum*, London (1863), iii. 345.

⁴ *Chronicon Angliae auctore Monacho quodam Sancti Albani*, ed. Maunde Thompson, London (1874), 116.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶ *Chronicon Angliae*, 116: he changes his tone somewhat in the *Dialogus* or *Speculum Ecclesiae Militantis*, circa 1379.

⁷ His Poor Priests were seculars, however, some of them beneficed, and he maintained that the obligation of evangelical poverty rested upon the whole clergy.

⁸ W. W. Shirley in *Fasciculi Lixaniorum*, xl.

⁹ For Wycliffe's views on apostolic poverty, vide *De Civili Dominio* passim.

¹⁰ Dr. Thomas Gascoigne claimed Augustine's authority for the older method. "He preached 400 sermons without a text, et sic ego predicavi" (*Loci e libro veritatum*, ed. J. E. T. Rogers, 44).

vellous power of the divine seed ! ” he exclaims, “ which overpowers strong warriors, softens hearts hard as stone, and renews in the divine image men brutalised by sin and infinitely far from God. Plainly, so mighty a wonder could never be wrought by the word of a priest, if the heat of the Spirit of life and the Eternal Word did not above all things else work with it.”¹

At the time of instituting his fraternity, Wycliffe was probably Warden of Canterbury Hall, Oxford, and some of his Poor Priests were graduates of the university. They needed to be reminded, therefore, that the best method of sowing the seed is “ by a humble and homely proclamation of the Gospel ”. They must adapt their style to their hearers’ comprehension, remembering always that the end of every sermon should be the glory of God and the salvation of souls. In popular evangelism, abstruse questions, bypaths of exegesis and, above all, “ doubts of the schools ” are best avoided. Moreover, “ if the soul is not in tune with the words, how can the words have power? . . . In every proclamation of the Gospel, the priest must address himself to the heart ”.²

The following is an example of his own pulpit manner: “ Lift up, wretches, the eyes of your souls and behold him that no spot of sin was in, what pain he suffered for sin of man. He swat water and blood to wash thee of sin; he was bound and beaten with scourges, the blood rushing adown by his sides, that thou shouldest keep thy body clean in his service; he was crowned with sharp thorns that thou shouldest think on him and flee all cursed malice; he was nailed to the Cross with sharp nails through hands and feet and stung to the heart with a sharp spear that all thy five wits [senses] should be ruled after him, having mind on the five precious wounds that he suffered for man ”.³ Can it be believed that such a preacher “ made no emotional appeal . . . roused no spiritual response ” in the souls of his hearers ?

The tradition that Wycliffe translated the Vulgate into English rests on a statement made by Hus,⁴ and has been contested by modern historians like Dixon,⁵ Hook⁶ and

¹ *Sermones*, iv. 265.

² Loc. cit., 262-275 : it must be confessed, however, that Wycliffe does not always, or indeed often, live up to his exhortations on the subject of preaching.

³ *Select English Works*, ed. T. Arnold, iii. 107.

⁴ *Opera* (1558), I. cviii b: Hus states that the English commonly ascribed the translation of the entire Bible to him.

⁵ R. W. Dixon, *History of the Church of England*, i. 451.

⁶ W. F. Hook, *Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury*, iv. 83.

Gasquet.¹ Rashdall says: "His disciple, Nicolas Hereford (fl. 1390), began on the Old Testament, which he completed to Baruch iii. 20: the rest of the Apocrypha (except IV Esdras) was completed by another, possibly, as some have thought, by Wycliffe himself".² Whatever may be the final verdict of scholarship, it cannot be questioned that he constantly appealed to Holy Scripture as the primary and absolute authority in matters of faith and morals, and maintained the desirability of its being made generally accessible to Christians, in these respects at least, approximating closely to the standpoint of the Reformers.

"Apart from the technical Reformation doctrine of justification", says Rashdall, "there is little in the general principles of the sixteenth century Protestants which Wycliffe did not anticipate".³ The title, *Doctor evangelicus*, which he bears among the schoolmen, is fully justified by the general tone of his teaching. In devotion to the Sacred Humanity he resembles St. Bernard, his soteriology is St. Anselm's, his doctrine of grace mainly that of St. Augustine. Netter records that: "His disciples called him by the famous and distinguished name of John, son of Augustine".⁴ With the *Doctor gratiae*, he defines the true Church as "the whole number of the elect" (*universitas praedestinatorum*) embracing "only men that shall be saved", and with Calvin he adds that they cannot cease to be such, since theirs is the grace of final perseverance.⁵

The predestination taught by Wycliffe is absolute and unconditional⁶ and links him with the Reformation which, on its spiritual side, was strongly Augustinian. In one respect,

¹ F. A. Gasquet, *Old English Bible* (1897), whose argument is criticised by Miss M. Deansley in *The Lollard Bible* (1920). Whatever be the final verdict on the subject, Wycliffe's Biblical scholarship cannot be gainsaid.

² Loc. cit.

³ *Ibid.*, cf. F. Urquhart, *Catholic Encyclopedia*: "Wyclif resembled the Protestant Reformers in his insistence on the Bible as the rule of faith, in the importance attributed to preaching and in his sacramental doctrine. The doctrine of justification by faith does not, however, occur in his system." In view of what has been said above concerning his eucharistic opinions and his acceptance of seven sacraments, it is scarcely correct to say without qualification that he "resembled the Protestant Reformers . . . in his sacramental doctrine"; but "his insistence on the Bible as the rule of faith" is evident especially in the *Trialogus* and his last work, the *Opus evangelicum*.

⁴ Netter, *op. cit.* i. 34. The influence of Bradwardine's *De causa Dei contra Pelagium* (circa 1340) is apparent throughout the Latin works, but in the English works we come across statements like the following: "Each man that shall be damned is damned for his guilt and each man that shall be saved is saved by his own merit" (Sermon: *The Gospel on the Chairing of St. Petre* in Winn's *Selections*, 95).

⁵ *De Ecclesia*, ed. J. Loserth, 74, 111, 140; *Opera Minora*, ed. J. Loserth, 99, 114; *Trialogus*, ed. G. Lechler, 152; *Sermones*, iv. 148.

⁶ *De Ecclesia*, 3, 5, 29, 130, 464; *Opus Evangelicum*, ed. J. Loserth, i. 105; *Sermones*, iv. 45.

however, he differs sharply from the Reformers, as well as from Bernard, Mother Juliana and many others in the medieval Church. "Wyclif would never allow that the elect had assurance of their salvation".¹ The number of the saved was uncertain and no one could be sure whether or not he was included.² In accepting the ministrations of a priest, the laity cannot be sure if he is among the saved, nor can the priest himself.³

It is probable that Wycliffe's influence outside England has been greater and more abiding than in his own country. His manuscripts, chiefly the work of Czech scribes, are to be found for the most part in Prague and Vienna. A picture in a Bohemian Psalter of 1572, now in the University Library at Prague, presents Wycliffe as striking a spark and Hus as kindling the coals, while Luther brandishes a lighted torch. In 1529 Luther wrote: "I have hitherto taught and held all the opinions of Hus without knowing it. With a like unconsciousness has Staupitz taught them. We are all of us Husites without knowing it. I do not know what to think for amazement."⁴ A comparison of Wycliffe's *De Potestate Papae* with Hus's *De Ecclesia* suggests that the latter is largely a plagiarism of the former.⁵

On the evidence of John Horn, an eye-witness, Leland relates that: "On the day of the Holy Innocents, as Wycliffe was hearing mass in his church at Lutterworth, at the time of the elevation of the host, he fell down, smitten by a severe paralysis,"⁶ dying three days later on 31 December, 1384. The story may well be true and if so, it provides a striking setting for the last moments of one whose contribution to the theology of the eucharist was considerable, but who did not himself arrive at any very definite conclusions on the subject.

¹ B. L. Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, 171.

² "Nether we witen ne we trowe now to be sauyd" (*English Works*, ed. F. D. Matthew, xxvii. 420). "Men lakkys knowynge whether they ben partys of holy chirche", says the Lollardising version of the *Lay Folks Catechism* (ed. Simmons and Nolloth, E. E. T. S., 1901, line 313).

³ *English Works*, ed. F. D. Matthew, xxii. 298, 317; xxvii. 420.

⁴ *Letters*, ed. De Wette, i. 425.

⁵ On the relations of Hus to Wycliffe's doctrines vide Johann Loserth, *Wyclif and Hus*, Eng. trs. M. J. Evans, xv-xlvii and 280-291, e.g.: "Through many successive decades men were wont in Bohemia to designate John Wyclif the fifth evangelist" (xv., a reference being given to John Pribram, *Geschichtsschr. der hus Beweg.*, ii. 140). "During the last years of his life, Hus in reality appears as a genuine Wyclifite; with such verbal fidelity and not seldom with so much naïveté has he copied the writings of the Englishman" (xvi). For a contrary opinion vide Neander, *Allgemeine Geschichte der christlichen Religion und Kirche*, ed. Schneider, 317.

⁶ J. Leland, *Collectanea de rebus Brit.*, ii. 409.

At the Council of Constance in 1415 many of Wycliffe's propositions were condemned, together with those of his disciple, Hus. Some thirteen years after, according to a late tradition, Wycliffe's relics were reduced to ashes and cast into the river Swift. "Thus", in Fuller's well-known words, "this brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which is now dispersed all the world over!"

London.

S. LEIGH HUNT.