

1958

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "6. John Wyclif's Divine Dominion and the End of the Middle Ages. Pt. IV: The Medieval Ferment." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 36-43.

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6. John Wyclif's Divine Dominion and the End of the Middle Ages

Abstract

John Wyclif (c. 1320-1384) has been called both the last of the schoolmen and the morning star of the Reformation. A native Englishman and a Franciscan, he spent most of his life at the University of Oxford, first as scholar, later as teacher of theology, and, from 1356 to 1382, as master of Balliol College. He witnessed the opening battles of the Hundred Years' War between England and France (1337-1453) with its heavy toll of life, the beginning of the Great Schism (1378-1417) during which there was one pope at and another at Avignon, and finally the spectacle of peasant revolts in France and England. The situation in England during Wyclif's lifetime was complicated by the reluctance of Englishmen to support the policies and especially the heavy financial demands of a papacy which was operating from the French-dominated seat at Avignon.
[excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Middle Ages, Medieval Era, John Wyclif, Reformation

Disciplines

European History | European Languages and Societies | History

Comments

This is a part of [Section IV: The Medieval Ferment](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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John Wyclif (c. 1320-1384) has been called both the last of the schoolmen and the morning star of the Reformation. A native Englishman and a Franciscan, he spent most of his life at the University of Oxford, first as scholar, later as teacher of theology, and, from 1356 to 1382, as master of Balliol

* Marsilius of Padua, The Defender of Peace, trans. Alan Gewirth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), II, 425-432. Used with permission.

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Wyclif began his career as an ordinary medieval university teacher. He was both a popular lecturer and an outstanding disputant. Soon he was the leading scholar at Oxford, and students came from afar to sit under him. [He joined the current criticism of the papacy and the Church in England, hitting hard at papal demands for money to finance clerics to English benefices, the practice of holding several appointments at the same time (pluralism), and the custom of priests' drawing income from posts they seldom visited (absenteeism). The fact that Wyclif himself was guilty of the last of these practices did not prevent his criticising it. Much of his lecture material later found its way into voluminous writings, as often happened before the appearance of the printing press. This makes it difficult to determine just when he arrived at some of his ideas.]

[Wyclif's criticisms of the Church, which were in accord with the views of the Spiritual Franciscans, gained him a large following. This following included noblemen, who were anxious for some excuse to take over Church property; the monarch, who was anxious to control so large a national institution as the Church; friars, who were critical of the Church's wealth; merchants, who were envious of the preferred positions of papal appointees; and also peasants, who were hoping for anything which would better their lot. As a result of such a wide base of potential support and particularly because of the preferred position which he enjoyed at the royal court, Wyclif soon found himself called upon to take an active part in politics, something which other idealistic critics have also welcomed. This involvement in practical affairs seems to have turned his thought from typical medieval criticisms to the whole question of the relationship of church and state, as well as to the more inclusive question of power itself.]

[There were five main sources upon which Wyclif's thinking drew. In opposition to a rising nominalism he strongly defended a philosophical realism like that of Plato's, which emphasized the reality of the universals, rather than that of the individuals. Nominalism could be used to destroy much of the Church's teaching about such things as the sacraments, and make room for an all-inclusive faith which would take the place of reason. As we shall see, this possibility was to be realized in the thought of William of Occam. Wyclif drew, secondly, upon the Bible and in later years was instrumental in translating it into English.

*Wyclif's protest began from inside the church.
Papacy was at a low point Babylonian Captivity.*

A third source of his thought was the church of apostolic times, which he took as the standard for what the Church should be. He also made heavy drafts on the thought of Augustine, especially on that part which stressed the idea of predestination. Finally, his political thinking was influenced by the ideas of Marsiglio. While there was little unmedieval or startlingly new about most of these strands of thought, it was the emphasis and direction which Wyclif gave them that was sufficient to make him one of the key figures in breaking up the thought of the Middle Ages.]

Sometime prior to 1377 Wyclif wrote several Latin tracts, including De civili dominio (Civil Dominion) and De dominio divino (Divine Dominion) which laid the foundation for a sustained denial of the right of papal taxation and intervention. In these tracts he argued that all power and authority -- all dominion -- both in church and state, belongs to God. The legitimacy of the power delegated to these two institutions depends on the righteous use of it. Civil Dominion opens with the assertions that no one in mortal sin can hold a position of leadership and that everyone who is in a state of grace has real lordship over the whole universe. If anyone, or any institution, should fall into sin or misuse its power, it becomes the duty of another person or institution to correct that misuse. There was no question in his mind but that the Church was in dire need of correction, and that the task of reform was the responsibility of the state. Among other things, this meant that the state could take over the property of the Church in England.]

The pope, according to Wyclif, receives his power from Christ, while the king receives his directly from God. Since Christ was both human and divine, this meant that the king represented the divinity of Christ while the pope represented His humanity. This reversal of interpretation was validated, for Wyclif, by the fact that Christ and the apostles had freely accepted the dominion of the state, and made no claims to temporal dominion. The Church, on such a basis, became the universitas predestinatorum (the body of the predestinate) instead of the universitas fidelium and was to live in apostolic poverty. By thus setting state above church and God above both of them by virtue of His dominion, Wyclif evolved a new first principle, capable of standing alone without depending on anything else. Dominion was a first principle such as Aristotle's reason or Augustine's sovereignty, and a principle which in many ways was to be close to Protestant faith. With the help of the translated Scriptures, it was an authority which was available to an even larger community than the ideas of Marsiglio.]

Wyclif's ideas brought down upon him the wrath of the papacy. In no fewer than five bulls, issued in 1377 and addressed to the English hierarchy, the king, and the University of Oxford, the pope called for action against this heretical professor. In the bull addressed to the university, Gregory XI (1370-1378) drew upon De civili dominio in specifying Wyclif's errors:

*Every Christian should stamp out misused power.
Dominion - state over church.*

Gregory, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to his beloved sons the chancellor and University of Oxford, in the diocese of Lincoln, grace and apostolic benediction.

We are compelled to wonder and grieve that you, who, in consideration of the favours and privileges conceded to your University of Oxford by the apostolic see, and on account of your familiarity with the Scriptures, in whose sea you navigate by the gift of God, with auspicious oar, you, who ought to be, as it were, warriors and champions of the orthodox faith, without which there is no salvation of souls, -- that you through a certain sloth and neglect allow tares to spring up amidst the pure wheat in the fields of your glorious university aforesaid; and what is still more pernicious, even continue to grow to maturity. And you are quite careless, as has been lately reported to us, as to the extirpation of these tares; with no little clouding of a bright name, danger to your souls, contempt of the Roman church, and injury to the faith above mentioned. And what pains us the more is that this increase of the tares aforesaid is known in Rome before the remedy of extirpation has been applied in England where they sprang up. By the insinuation of many, if they are indeed worthy of belief, deploring it deeply, it has come to our ears that John de Wycliffe, rector of the church of Lutterworth, in the diocese of Lincoln, Professor of the Sacred Scriptures, (would that he were not also Master of Errors,) has fallen into such a detestable madness that he does not hesitate to dogmatize and publicly preach, or rather vomit forth from the recesses of his breast certain propositions and conclusions which are erroneous and false. He has cast himself also into the depravity of preaching heretical dogmas which strive to subvert and weaken the state of the whole church and even secular polity, some of which doctrines, in changed terms, it is true, seem to express the perverse opinions and unlearned learning of Marsilio of Padua of cursed memory, and of John of Jandun, whose book is extant, rejected and cursed by our predecessor, Pope John XXII, of happy memory. This he has done in the kingdom of England, lately glorious in its power and in the abundance of its resources, but more glorious still in the glistening piety of its faith, and in the distinction of its sacred learning; producing also many men illustrious for their exact knowledge of the holy Scriptures, mature in the gravity of their character, conspicuous in devotion, defenders of the catholic church. He has polluted certain of the faithful of Christ by besprinkling them with these doctrines, and led them away from the right paths of the aforesaid faith to the brink of perdition.

Wherefore, since we are not willing, nay, indeed, ought not to be willing, that so deadly a pestilence should continue to exist with our connivance, a pestilence which, if it is not opposed in its beginnings, and torn out by the roots in its entirety, will be reached too late by medicines when it has infected very many with its contagion;

we command your university with strict admonition, by the apostolic authority, in virtue of your sacred obedience, and under penalty of the deprivation of all the favours, indulgences, and privileges granted to you and your university by the said see, for the future not to permit to be asserted or proposed to any extent whatever, the opinions, conclusions, and propositions which are in variance with good morals and faith, even when those proposing strive to defend them under a certain fanciful wresting of words or of terms. Moreover, you are on our authority to arrest the said John, or cause him to be arrested and to send him under a trustworthy guard to our venerable brother, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bishop of London, or to one of them.

Besides, if there should be, which God forbid, in your university, subject to your jurisdiction opponents stained with these errors, and if they should obstinately persist in them, proceed vigorously and earnestly to a similar arrest and removal of them, and otherwise as shall seem good to you. Be vigilant to repair your negligence which you have hitherto shown in the premises, and so obtain our gratitude and favour, and that of the said see, besides the honour and reward of the divine recompense.

Given at Rome, at Santa Maria Maggiore, on the 31st of May, the sixth year of our pontificate. *

[This papal interference, which bordered on the inquisitorial in a country which had not yet known the Inquisition, was not welcomed by all parties in England. The strong stands taken by Wyclif's friends at Oxford and at the royal court, aided by rioting on the part of the populace, broke up the two hearings in which he was called to face the charges of heresy (1377, 1378). The fact that, beginning in 1378, there were two popes helped to insure his continued safety. [The Great Schism seems to have had another effect: it increased Wyclif's opposition to the papacy. He now turned his hostility against the theory as well as the practice of the Church.]

[Until this time Wyclif had gone out of his way to accept, in opposition to the nominalists, the Church's teaching regarding transubstantiation, but without paying much attention to the reasons for his stand. Now he pressed his philosophical realism into the area of the sacraments, the very heart of the Church. If Christ were the substance of the sacraments, he argued, then as a real universal this substance could not be changed by any means at all. Further, he pointed out, transubstantiation had not been a dogma of the Church until the time of Innocent III (1198-1216).] Wyclif had no desire to eliminate the Eucharist. He only wished to eliminate what he thought could not be explained in terms of the New Testament and his

* Guy Carleton Lee, ed., Source Book of English History, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1905), pp. 211-212. Used with permission.

*Denied that there was no such things as transubstantiation
only three important sacraments.*

own philosophical realism. He held on to the Eucharist, baptism, and marriage as sacraments, while denying such status to the others. His own interpretation of the sacraments was far from clear, and we will have to wait for the Reformation for any thoroughgoing reconstruction in this area.

Wyclif's radicalism on the subject of the sacraments lost him the support of many of his powerful patrons. It also alienated the friars, who up to now had stood behind him, and many of his friends at Oxford. In the spring of 1382 the archbishop of Canterbury again tried to get Wyclif branded a heretic. This time, in a council at which he was not present, ten of his views were declared heretical and fourteen were declared erroneous:

I. -- That the material substance of bread and of wine remains, after the consecration, in the sacrament of the altar.

II. -- That the accidents do not remain without the subject, after the consecration, in the same sacrament.

III. -- That Christ is not in the sacrament of the altar identically, truly and really in his proper corporal presence.

IV. -- That if a bishop or priest lives in mortal sin he does not ordain, or consecrate, or baptize.

V. -- That if a man has been truly repentant, all external confession is superfluous to him, or useless.

VI. -- Continually to assert that it is not founded in the gospel that Christ instituted the mass.

VII. -- That God ought to be obedient to the devil.

VIII. -- That if the pope is foreordained to destruction and a wicked man, and therefore a member of the devil, no power has been given to him over the faithful of Christ by any one, unless perhaps by the Emperor.

IX. -- That since Urban the Sixth, no one is to be acknowledged as pope; but all are to live, in the way of the Greeks, under their own laws.

X. -- To assert that it is against sacred scripture that men of the church should have temporal possessions.

XI. -- That no prelate ought to excommunicate any one unless he first knows that the man is excommunicated by God.

XII. -- That a person thus excommunicating is thereby a heretic or excommunicate.

XIII. -- That a prelate excommunicating a clerk who has appealed to the king, or to a council of the kingdom, on that very account is a traitor to God, the king and the kingdom.

XIV. -- That those who neglect to preach, or to hear the word of God, or a gospel that is preached, because of the excommunication of men, are excommunicate, and in the day of judgment will be considered as traitors to God.

XV. -- To assert that it is allowed to any one, whether a deacon or a priest, to preach the word of God, without the authority of the apostolic see, or of a

Emphasis on scripture (Go back to the Bible) began to translate the Bible. Had many followers. Was given a country parish.

catholic bishop, or some other which is sufficiently acknowledged.

XVI. -- To assert that no one is a civil lord, no one is a bishop, no one is a prelate, so long as he is in mortal sin.

XVII. -- That temporal lords may, at their own judgment, take away temporal goods from churchmen who are habitually delinquent; or that the people may, at their own judgment, correct delinquent lords.

XVIII. -- That tithes are purely charity, and that parishioners may, on account of the sins of their curates, detain these and confer them on others at their will.

XIX. -- That special prayers applied to one person by prelates or religious persons, are of no more value to the same person than general prayers for others in a like position are to him. *Praying for someone (useless)*

XX. -- That the very fact that any one enters upon any private religion whatever, renders him more unfitted and more incapable of observing the commandments of God.

XXI. -- That saints who have instituted any private religions whatever, as well of those having possessions as of mendicants, have sinned in thus instituting them.

XXII. -- That religious persons living in private religions are not of the Christian religion.

XXIII. -- That friars should be required to gain their living by the labour of their hands and not by mendicancy.

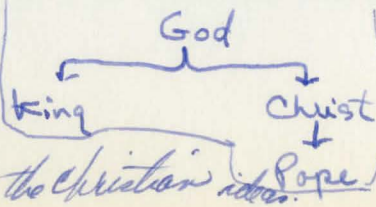
XXIV. -- That a person giving alms to friars, or to a preaching friar, is excommunicate; also the one receiving. *

In the same year he was demoted from his position at Oxford and permitted to retire to his small parish of Lutterworth, where he lived out the last two years of his life. That this was the extent of his punishment was probably due to the strength of his remaining patrons. In 1415 he was condemned by a Church council and some years later his body was exhumed, burned, and the remains were thrown into the river Swift.

From his reduced position at Lutterworth Wyclif, together with his followers, had developed three new methods for reforming the Church in England. These followers were called Lollards, a derogatory term which originally may have meant "singer" or "bab-bler" and which was applied to almost any dissident group at the time. They were drawn from the few Oxford scholars who remained loyal to his teachings concerning dominion and who were willing to follow him into his heretical teaching about the Eucharist; from pious and often self-taught laymen; and from the lowest grades of the regular clergy. Like the Franciscans and Waldensians, the Lollards went out in pairs, barefoot, and in apostolic poverty to preach directly to the people. Denied the use of the churches, they spoke wherever the people would gather to hear them. In this way they bridged the gap which had long existed

* Ibid., pp. 209-210.

*Looked to the state to help him
Christ being human gave rule
to the pope. (Indirectly from God)
King has a special duty to God to foster the Christian idea.*



in medieval society between the clergy and laity. So great was the impression they made that one writer has said in parts of England every other person was a Lollard. They were suppressed in the fifteenth century, but not before they had laid the ground for the evangelical approach of the Reformation. The second method of continuing reform which Wyclif's followers developed was the polemical political writing, often on single sheets of paper, which appealed directly to the lower classes. In this way the Lollards forged a weapon which was to become one of the hallmarks of English political life down to our own time.

These popular methods of preaching and propaganda were strengthened by a third approach which was of even greater significance. Like Roger Bacon before him at Oxford, Wyclif had seen the importance of the study of languages. Under his impetus, his followers took up the translation of the Bible into English. Exactly how much of the actual translating Wyclif himself did we do not know. The result was the first complete translation of the Bible into English and it was finished before 1400. This marks the beginning of an interest in the English Bible which finally produced the King James Version in 1611. In this way there was opened up not only a direct appeal to literate people to concern themselves with religion and politics, but they were also offered at the same time a public standard for their thought and action. Furthermore, Wyclif's ideas now could be carried forward by a group of people thus educated. Only the centuries which followed could adequately explain the importance of what Wyclif and the Lollards had begun.

This and the preceding chapter have been concerned primarily with the medieval Church and the ways in which it tried to build a universal Christian society -- Christendom -- in Western Europe. Claiming to have truth and the means of salvation exclusively in its possession, the Church demanded that every aspect of Western culture be made to conform to its teachings. For a time at the beginning of the High Middle Ages this lofty goal may well have been within its reach. But the Church was unable permanently to contain the ferment of medieval society -- precisely why this was true men still continue to debate -- and whatever harmony or balance it had achieved was soon lost. Thus ended the first attempt by Western man to build and maintain the type of highly complex culture that we call a civilization. The conclusion of this attempt was not accompanied by catastrophic events similar to those that had marked the collapse of the Roman world, nor was it followed by a long and crucial "dark age." Instead, the Middle Ages merged, in many ways almost imperceptibly, into what we call the modern era, carrying with it many of its achievements (such as Gothic cathedrals and universities) and some of its problems (such as the relationship between faith and reason and that between church and state.) In the chapter which follows, we shall examine the economic and political events of the High and Late Middle Ages, which effected the downfall of manorialism and feudalism and which help to explain even further the ferment of medieval society.

*Lollards were not stamped out.
Became more heretical as time went on.*