

John Wyclif (1328-1384)

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Scholar, Theologian, Reformer, Rebel.
Active 1360-1384 in England, Britain, Europe

One of the most significant thinkers and writers in late medieval England, John Wyclif continues to inspire vigorous debate. Probably the most infamous English heretic in history, Wyclif challenged some of the most deeply held doctrines of the medieval Christian church; yet he did so as a figure of the establishment, holding high office in Oxford University and occupying a significant role in high political circles. His posthumous reputation has been a battlefield between those, often representatives of Catholic orthodoxy, who imagine him as a dangerous rebel and opponent of tradition, and those, such as England's earliest Protestants, who construct him in diametrically opposed terms, as a courageous defender of truth against oppressive institutional structures. Although there is little doubt that Wyclif is an important figure in social and intellectual history, there is widespread disagreement as to the nature and scope of his output, the originality and significance of his philosophical and theological writings, the relationship between his writings and later cultural developments in England, and the extent to which he was involved in the major literary text to bear his name – the first complete translation of the Bible into English, still known as the 'Wycliffite Bible'.

Little is known about Wyclif's early life, although recent research has suggested that he may have been a member of the Richmondshire family from the North Riding village of Wycliffe; scholars surmise that he was born in the mid-1320s and went to Oxford University about 1350. At Oxford, his career seems to have progressed smoothly, advancing from fellowship of Merton College, to the position first of Master of Balliol College, and then to Warden of Canterbury Hall. His academic career was fairly conventional, although he does seem to have spent a number of years formulating and refining the beliefs which would later gain notoriety. Wyclif achieved a greater level of public visibility sometime in the 1370s, when he became a close political ally of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and fourth son of Edward III. It is this political role which seems, in part, to have aided Wyclif's notoriety, as his philosophical and theological ideas became more widely known.

In common with most late medieval theologians, Wyclif's work spans the divide between the disciplines now known as philosophy and theology, but which were not distinct entities in the medieval universities. Recent scholarship has suggested that as a 'philosopher', Wyclif has been unfairly overlooked in the history of that discipline, and some scholars go so far as to suggest that Wyclif should be reinstated as the last of the great medieval

scholastic philosophers. In the late 1360s and early 1370s, Wyclif collected his writings into a compendium known as *Summa de ente*, thirteen treatises grouped into two books. Broadly speaking, the first book is 'philosophical', the second 'theological'. Wyclif's philosophical enquiries are in three main areas: universals, lordship, and determinism. Wyclif's work on universals actually had a greater impact on theological discussion than on philosophical, and so will be examined alongside his theological writings below. His work on *dominium*, or lordship, also has theological overtones, but is equally significant as political philosophy. For Wyclif, rights to political power are valid only so long as the claimant is in a state of grace; a claimant in a state of sin invalidates all claims to power. The implication of this, of course, is that the office of the pope is potentially a powerless one, despite its ecclesiastical trappings; the 'true' pope is the most virtuous man on earth. Allied to this view is Wyclif's teaching on the 'true' church: the 'true' church is simply the body of the elect, both those in heaven with Christ and those on earth but predestined to salvation. The 'physical' church and the 'institutional' church are not the same thing as the 'true' church. The insights applied to religious power hold true for secular power as well: Wyclif emphasized the responsibility of kings towards their subjects, and was sympathetic towards the hardships experienced by those subjects. Wyclif's determinism has, to some extent, been overstated; although condemned after his death for the 'heresy' that everything happens by absolute necessity, Wyclif's attempts to reconcile human free will with divine omniscience are not substantially more radical than those of other theologians of the period.

It was, however, Wyclif's theological views which were the greatest source of controversy in the period and beyond. His philosophical beliefs contradicted the basis of the sacramental system of the late medieval church, in particular the sacraments of penance (confession) and the eucharist (communion). Wyclif's objections to the practice of confession are theological: contrition is necessary for sins to be forgiven, and since only God (hence not a priest) can know whether or not a sinner is truly contrite, it is illogical to ascribe the power of forgiveness to a priest, to be practiced at will. Equally significantly, confession, for Wyclif, has no scriptural foundation; compulsory annual confession is a mistaken imposition; and the economy of penances – including prayers, payments, and pilgrimages – is corrupt. Significant as these views are, it was Wyclif's interpretation of the eucharist which led directly to his infamy with the church authorities. One of the implications of Wyclif's view of 'universals' is that an 'accident' cannot exist without its 'substance' (the terms are all common currency in Aristotelian-influenced scholastic philosophy); this was in direct contradiction to the Church's doctrine of transubstantiation, which states that in the sacrament of the eucharist, the accidents of bread and wine remain, but the substances of bread and wine are annihilated, replaced with the substances of the body and blood of Christ. So Wyclif argued both that bread and wine remain after the consecration, and that Christ is not 'really' present in the sacrament in the precise way which the church had argued; his views were condemned by the Oxford authorities in 1381, and by the Blackfriars Council in 1382.

Wyclif, then, was a significant presence in late medieval philosophy and theology. But he has also traditionally been granted a place as one of the most influential figures in the development of English literature, an interpretation of his career which is by no means secure or settled. Academic writing in the late medieval period, of course, was conducted in Latin; all Wyclif's surviving texts are composed in this *lingua franca* of medieval Europe. But he also appears to have disseminated his views in the English vernacular, a radical move which has led both supporters and critics to align him with a particularly militant populism in late medieval England (exemplified most forcefully by the social uprising of 1381 known as the Peasants' Revolt). Scholars suggest that allusions within Wyclif's Latin works point to material composed in English, some of which could be oral, but some of which also appears to have been in written form. Although a number of late medieval vernacular 'Wycliffite' texts exist, and have been known about for a very considerable time, recent research suggests that none of these texts are by Wyclif himself; indeed, that nothing in English written by Wyclif has survived.

Yet Wyclif's name seems indelibly linked with what is undoubtedly one of the most important cultural artefacts produced in late medieval England: the complete translation of the Bible into English, undertaken in the final decades of the fourteenth century. An explicit challenge to the privileges of the priesthood, the English Bible was quickly condemned as heretical; it seems important, however, to place it into the wider cultural context of the emergence of English as a textual, 'literary' language. English poetry, of course, at this point witnesses the experiments of one its defining voices, Geoffrey Chaucer; but as Derek Pearsall and others have noted, English prose is also becoming a significant cultural medium at this point, with contemporary translations of *Mandeville's Travels*, Higden's *Polychronicon* and Bartholomaeus Anglicanus' *Of the Properties of Things* all emerging at the same time as the English Bible. Yet the designation of this Bible as 'Wycliffite' needs some qualification. Although the translation of the Bible was ascribed to Wyclif as early as the 1390s, recent work by Anne Hudson and others has demonstrated not just that the 'final' translation is a substantial revision of an earlier, 'literal' translation, but also that a large team of translators and assistants seems to have been responsible, rather than one guiding authorial presence. The term 'Wycliffite Bible' remains in common scholarly use, however, partly because bible translation was a characteristic feature of 'Wycliffism', even if not of Wyclif's own work.

Wyclif died on 31 December 1384, and was buried in the churchyard of Lutterworth church, where he had preached since being forced to leave Oxford because of his controversial views. His remains stayed there for less than half a century. In 1415 the Council of Constance pronounced an anathema on Wyclif; in 1427 Pope Martin V ordered the exhumation of his body; and in 1428 Richard Fleming, Bishop of Lincoln, acting on these instructions, oversaw the exhumation and burning of Wyclif's bones.

The fact that the authorities felt it necessary to take these steps some decades after Wyclif's death indicates the extent to which his views were still in

circulation; indeed, the movement which emerged around Wyclif's ideas, known as *Lollardy*, was by far the most significant and widespread 'heretical' movement in medieval England. There were cultural circumstances which may have led to individuals holding radical anti-establishment views; but it was the intellectual influence of Wyclif which tied these, sometimes disparate, concerns into a wider, broadly coherent, movement. Wyclif's views spread very quickly, in European academia (particularly in Bohemia, where Wyclif's influence on Jan Hus was profound), in Oxford itself, where defenders of Wyclif's views could be found some years after Wyclif's own death, and, significantly, in the wider 'popular' sphere of late medieval England. Lollardy developed a significant cultural presence in the last years of the fourteenth century, but the patience of the secular authorities seems to have been more or less extinguished by 1401, when the death penalty was introduced as a punishment for heresy; Archbishop Arundel's constitutions, issued in 1409, put a stop to academic involvement with Lollardy; and the movement appears to have lost all political respectability after the failed uprising of Sir John Oldcastle in 1414.

Yet the similarity between the Wyclif-inspired Lollards and the early English Protestants of over a century later is striking, and scholars are still searching for the most appropriate paradigm to configure the relationship between Lollardy and the English Reformation. Some scholars argue for a 'survival' of Lollardy, and indeed its central concerns do seem to reappear in English culture towards the end of the fifteenth century. But it is unclear as to whether the movement has 'survived', or been *revived* at this moment. Indeed, Lollardy itself seems to have become less 'Wycliffite' as the years wore on, with many 'Lollards' holding theological positions more radical than those of Wyclif himself. The precise nature of the relationship between Lollardy and Protestantism, then, remains a matter of considerable debate. Certainly the early English Protestants displayed an interest in Wyclif: both John Bale and John Foxe claim him as a precursor of Protestantism, but some doubt has been cast as to their familiarity with Wyclif's own writings. It seems clear that, despite his undoubted skills as a philosopher and theologian, Wyclif's greatest influence on English literary and religious culture has been through the unusually wide dissemination of his *ideas*, rather than of his *texts*.

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