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### The Influence of the Black Death Upon the Life and Works of John Wycliffe

William Henline

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir\_henlinew@csl.edu

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE BLACK DEATH  
UPON THE LIFE AND WORKS OF JOHN WYCLIFFE

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A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary  
Department of Historical Theology

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the degree  
Bachelor of Divinity

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by  
William P. Henline  
December 1944

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_

*Thos. Stoyer.*

*W. M. Reinhardt*



## INTRODUCTION

The fourteenth century scratched its mark deeply into the pages of English History. Its events have produced far-reaching effects, not only upon England, but upon the history of the whole world. Two such events which convulsed all England were the Black Death and the works of John Wycliffe. They are of opposite nature - one wrought horrible destruction upon the world, while the other attempted to bring about a better Church than was known in medieval times. For this reason most historians treat them separately as mere chronological events. However, the Black Death and John Wycliffe are not entirely unrelated. The Black Death produced certain conditions and results which aided and influenced the works of the English pre-Reformer.

The purpose of this paper then is to ascertain to what extent John Wycliffe was influenced by one of the greatest calamities which has ever come upon the world.

To the average person the Black Death recalls vaguely a horrible phase in medieval Europe which merely came, but also merely went. This great blight was not a passing thing. It left lasting, livid scars on succeeding generations. It was a type of revolution from which no class escaped; no institution remained unaffected. In fact, many of the medieval institutions were all but destroyed by the Black Death. It also accentuated many of the evils in the world and in the Church. It is, therefore, only natural that it would effect the work



of the reformer who lived during this epidemic and whose work followed only a few years later.

Thus in order to fully understand the connection between the Black Death and the works of Wycliffe, it is necessary to consider what the coming of the Plague did to England, the conditions it produced, and how such conditions would affect a man of the character and training of John Wycliffe. Only when we understand these things, can we understand the aid which Wycliffe received from the curse which God placed upon all the people of Europe.

The village was a 'manor' held by one lord - resident or non-resident, lay or spiritual. All society was built on two pillars - lord and his serfs. The serfs, who composed the great majority of the village, worked the domains by compulsory labor under the supervision of his bailiff.

The manorial system had led England out of the Dark Ages and had led men to conquer the forest, subdue the wild, and cultivate the land. It had protected the weak behind the shield of custom, even while making them half slaves. But although it gave peace and stability, it checked progress and denied freedom. It had played a great part in the English history, but it was fast becoming an antiquated and useless institution.



# I

## ENGLAND BEFORE THE PLAGUE

The medieval English village at the turn of the fourteenth century was self-sufficing in its labors and its poverty. It often suffered from famine, but never from unemployment. The people were little connected or concerned with the world beyond their own forest bounds, except through the personal activities and requirements of the lord. Each village supplied its own needs, for it contained its own miller and craftsmen. It fed itself by tilling the soil in the old traditional methods - the villein worked the open strips of field and shared the common rights over the meadows and waste.

The village was a 'manor' held by one lord - resident or non-resident, lay or spiritual. All society was built on two pillars - lord and his serf. The serfs, who composed the great majority of the village, worked the domain by compulsory labor under the supervision of his bailiff.

The manorial system had led England out of the Dark Ages and had led man to conquer the forest, subdue the soil, and colonize the land. It had protected the weak behind the shield of custom, even while making them half slaves. But although it gave peace and stability, it checked progress and denied freedom. It had played a great part in the English history, but it was fast becoming an exhausted and useless institution. <sup>1</sup>

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1. Trevelyan, G.M. History of England, p. 236.



Already before the opening of the fourteenth century the beginning of change became perceptible. The lords in isolated incidents found it more convenient to take rent of a penny or half penny rather than the day's work due on the lord's domain. But the commuted villein did not necessarily become a free man in the eyes of the law. In fact, the commutation was often made revocable by the whim of the lord. This change from serfdom to hired labor went forward quietly and gradually on some estates.

This was the life in England in the beginning of the fourteenth century. In time the change would have become complete. However, it was the Black Death which suddenly struck England that greatly accelerated the heretofore normal pace of changes, outmoding many institutions and changing the purpose of others.



## II

### THE COMING OF THE BLACK DEATH

"O happy posterity, who will not experience such abysmal woe and will look upon our testimony as a fable." <sup>2</sup> With these words Petrarch concludes his well known letter in which he describes to a friend the devastation of the town of Florence by the Black Death. It is hard for us even to imagine the horror which came upon the world because of this terrible epidemic. This was not the first time the bubonic plague struck the world, for history describes such an epidemic as far back as time of the Trajan. <sup>3</sup> But the plague at this time was unique among the pestilences which have visited Europe because of its ubiquitous nature. <sup>4</sup> Perhaps never since the time of the Deluge has the world been visited by such a calamity as the epidemic which laid seige to the Eastern Hemisphere about the middle of the fourteenth century. For during that period, and on several occasions after, Europe was visited by a variety of the bubonic plague. It derived its modern name, the Black Death, from the fact that the disease caused black spots and inflammatory boils and tumors to form on the skin of the victim. <sup>5</sup>

Affairs had been going well in England. True, their king, Edward III, had been at war with France; but in spite of the war England was prospering. Edward's armies had been victorious at Crecy in France. The treaty of Bretigny with France marked the height of Edward's reign.

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2. Nohl, The Black Death, p. 17.

3. The Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. XVII, p. 991.

4. Colby, Selections From Sources of English History, p. 101.

5. The Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. IV, p. 33.



"A new sun," says Walsingham, "seemed to have arisen on the people in plenty of all things, and the glory of such victories." <sup>6</sup> Here, truly, was a "merry" England, a nation which thought it had reached the zenith of its medieval glory. Tournaments and public spectacles of all kinds were held; extravagance in dress, not confined to one sex or even to the laity, was the order of the day.

However, the feeling of triumph was short lived. The scenes of festivities were soon changed to scenes of general mourning. Suddenly from out of the East the Black Death descended upon England, bringing death and misery to the large cities and the secluded hamlets alike. It would seem that the epidemic had its origin in the center of China in or about the year 1333. <sup>7</sup> It traveled slowly to India and Persia and from these regions to Europe by means of the three main arteries of commerce then existing. <sup>8</sup> It appears, too, that the disease exhausted itself in the place of its origin at about the same time it reached Europe. It is believed that ships from the Crimea carried the Black Death to England, <sup>9</sup> and that it first appeared at Melcombe Regis in Dorsetshire in 1348. In August of that year Bishop Ralph of Shrewsburg issued letters recommending through his diocese of Bath and Wells processions and stations in the churches to avert "the pestilence which had come into a neighbouring kingdom from the East." <sup>10</sup>

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6. Capes, A History of the English Church, Vol. III, p. 72.
  7. Larned, The New Larned History, Vol. II, p. 1034.
  8. Nohl, op. cit., p. 17.
  9. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 442.
  10. Capes, op. cit., p. 72



Historians describe almost inconceivable scenes caused by the epidemic. The misery caused was beyond description. The most familiar sign of the disease was the appearance of hard, dry, swellings which developed in different parts of the body. These swellings appeared especially under the arms, in the groin, or on the neck. They were accompanied by violent, shivering fits and fever which rendered the victim terribly weak. Often the boils grew to almost the size of hens' eggs and were exceedingly painful, irritating the whole body. In the most deadly forms of the disease, livid patches marked the back and chest, accompanied by the vomiting of blood.<sup>11</sup>

Modern medical authorities have suggested that the epidemic included both the bubonic and pneumonic plagues.<sup>12</sup> This would account for the varient reports of contemporaries as to how the disease affected its victims. Usually the victim suffered excruciating pain for three days before death mercifully relieved him. Death came on the fourth day at the latest. However, death did not wait three days to take all its victims. It is reported that many fell down and died in the streets without having felt the least bit ill before.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 443.

12. Encyclopedia of Social Science, Vol. II, p. 575.

13. Nohl, The Black Death, page 32, records different ways in which the Black Death affected the victims: "Reports from different countries and times concerning the suffering caused by the disease vary to an extraordinary extent. Boccaccio makes no reference to pain. Others of the fourteenth century report that the sick died within three days gently, as if asleep. Of children in Germany it is said that they passed away laughing and singing. In the town of Thornberg the pestilence tormented the people to such a degree that they rent their hands and arms and tore out their hair. In many places in Transylvania they assailed one another in the alleys and streets, and in their frenzy tore and bit each other like dogs. Defoe relates that the boils, when they became hard and would not burst, caused such terrible pain that they resembled the most exquisite tortures. Many to escape their torments threw themselves out of windows, shot themselves, or took their lives in other ways."



Being extremely contagious the plague spread very rapidly. It was communicated from the sick to the healthy by contact of the clothes and the breath of the infected. When the plague came to the community and the people began to die like flies, the rest in the village became panicky. Those who could, tried to escape by fleeing to uninfected regions; but in reality they only carried the invisible, microscopic germ with them - thus spreading the disease to a new region. The Black Death advanced quickly from the southwestern coast, where it first appeared to the counties of Devon and Somerset, and then on to Bristol, Gloucester, and Oxford.<sup>14</sup> It reached London in the late autumn of 1348. In the course of 1349 the Black Death covered all the counties of central England and Wales. The pestilence raged with unabated force until May 1349, then lingering on for some months more. By 1350 it had traveled up as far north as to invade Scotland.<sup>15</sup> Probably few places escaped, perhaps none, for the annals of contemporaries indicate that the plague spread "throughout the land."<sup>16</sup>

Nearly all reports agree in stating that the Black Death claimed most of its victims from among the poor and badly nourished.<sup>17</sup> The only immunity from infection was isolation. Thus, it was that the Black Death centered its fiercest attacks on the towns and cities, for here the people were crowded together as in our modern tenement sections.

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14. Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. IV, p. 33.

15. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 442.

16. Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. IV, p. 33

17. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 443: "The first visitation of the Black Death carried off especially the young and those in middle life." Note: the reason for the predominance of deaths among these two classes was not given, nor was I able to find any other who ventured such a statement.



The dark, undrained, filthy streets, which sunlight never touched, afforded a constant haunt to germs. The unsanitary conditions of the Medieval Age was a real friend to the Black Death. But even though the poorer classes were not unaffected — no age, rank, or class was spared. J.E.T. Rogers in his History of Agriculture and Prices in England reports: "It is stated that in England the weight of the calamity fell on the poor and that the higher classes were less severely affected. But Edward's (King Edward III) daughter, Joan, fell as victim to it (the Black Death) and three archbishops of Canterbury perished in the same year." 18

Vastly contrasted were the scenes of "merry" England before the plague to the scenes of mourning a year later. Panic and misery were written over the faces of young and old alike. Their eyes betrayed the deep sorrow which they had experienced. Upon meeting a friend the conversation consisted of asking if this or that loved one still remained among the living. No one knew whether he would live to see the next day -- death might take him at any moment.

Universal gloom settled on all society, which had either one of two effects. We see the outbursts of callous selfishness and luxurious self-indulgence on the part of many who tried to live wholly in the pleasures of the present, shutting their eyes to the uncertainties of the future and the miseries of social life about them; while to others that mysterious scourge was but the instrument of God's displeasure at the sins of a guilty people. 19 Then as the plague wore on,

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18. Larned, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 2711.

19. Capes, op. cit., p.76.



famine also set in. Now all the extravagances were gone. People were scurrying through the streets like shadows, in search of food they were unable to find. Gold and silver no longer possessed the power to purchase bread. <sup>20</sup>

Soon the lack of hands to bury the dead became very perceptible. In addition to the enormous increase in corpses, those to whom the job of burying the dead had previously fallen were also killed by the Black Death. Corpses decaying in the streets created an awful stench. Boccaccio reported in his description of the plague in Italy: "Some carried sweet smelling flowers in their hands; others oderiferous herbs, and still others divers kinds of spiceries, holding them up to their noses thinking them most comfortable for the brain because the air seemed so infected by noisome smell of dead carcasses." <sup>21</sup>

People were dying so fast that common graves were used for large numbers. "As many as twenty, forty, or sixty corpses were delivered to the church burial in the same pit at the same time": Robert of Anesbury (fl. 1350).<sup>22</sup> Even at first very few would accompany the body. Then as the plague continued, even if it were an "honorable" person, none of the neighbors joined in the procession to the church, but only the meanest kind of persons -- the grave makers and coffin bearers, and then only for money. A few poor priests followed the body with lights or no light; perhaps the body was not even taken to the appointed church, but to the one nearest at hand. The burial service consisted in a short service and "the body being unreverently

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20. Nohl, op. cit., p. 41.

21. Ibid p. 24.

22. Colby, op. cit., p. 102.



thrown into the first open grave." <sup>23</sup> Often when one or two priests were to bury one body, as many as six or eight biers followed behind to take advantage of the Christian burial of the priests; and these bodies were dumped into the open grave of the first corpse. <sup>24</sup>

One of the most terrible consequences of becoming infected with the disease was that the patient was given up for lost and then was forsaken by everyone, even by the nearest relative. "There was no love, no faithfulness, no trust." A neighbor would not lend a helping hand to another. One brother forsook the other; husbands, their wives; parents, their children. People died not only of the plague but also of want and privation. <sup>25</sup> Often when the Black Death invaded a home the rest of the family fled, leaving the sick and all the valuables in the wide open house.

Much uncertainty is attached to the statistics based on medieval sources. The conflicting reports make it extremely difficult to set the exact mortality of Europe or even of England. There can be no doubt that estimates made by contemporary writers were grossly exaggerated. Estimates of the mortality have ranged from one-fifth to nine-tenths of the population. Pope Clement VI, from an investigation which he had made, reported that the total mortality of the world from the Black Death of 1348 - 1349 was 42,836,486. <sup>26</sup>

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23. Nohl, op. cit., p.26.

24. Ibid., p. 27.

25. Ibid., p. 30.

26. Ibid., p. 17.



Hecker calculates that one-fourth of the population of Europe or about "25 millions of persons died in the whole of the epidemics." <sup>27</sup> The following mortality rates of selected groups on the percentage bases has been worked out: Clergy, 40% (Note: they were particularly exposed to infection); adult lay tenants as high as 75% and as low as 4%; in monasteries, from below 10% to 50%. <sup>28</sup>

England seems to have been more severely affected in the first pestilence than most countries of Europe. <sup>29</sup> Many records exist of deaths in particular places, or among special classes, such as the parochial clergy; and these statements appear to be well founded. An interesting account is given by Henry Knighton, a clergyman connected with the church at Leicester. Although he was a boy at the time of the Black Death, an "abundance of direct information" concerning the plague was at his disposal. "Then the grievous plague penetrated the seacoasts from Southampton, and came to Bristol, and

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27. The Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. XVII, p. 991; The Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. IV, p. 33; et al quote Hecker as giving the mortality of Europe at 25 million. Nohl, The Black Death, p. 3, says of this report of Hecker: "The number of victims of the plague in the fourteenth century in Europe is estimated by some to be too low if placed at 25% of the population .... Germany whose losses for 1348 are estimated at 1,244,434. Statistics of a number of towns add up to 90,000. Hecker is mistaken when he reduces this number to 9,000."
28. The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, Vol. III, p. 575.
29. Colby, Selections from Sources of English History, p. 101, "If the mortality of England were placed at one half of the population, the statement would be hard to disprove." Cheyney, A Short History of England, p. 243, "It has been carefully estimated that instead of about one person dying out of twenty, as would be the rate in an ordinary year, one of every two died during this epidemic." Trevelyan, History of England, p. 237, "The reduction of the English subjects of Edward III in sixteen months, from perhaps four million to perhaps two and a half million souls ...."



there almost the whole strength of the town died, struck, as it were, by sudden death; for there were few who kept their beds more than three days, or two days, or half a day; and after this the fell death broke forth on every side with the course of the sun. There died at Leicester in the small parish of St. Leonard more than 300; in the parish of Holy Cross, more than 400; in the parish of St. Margaret of Leicester more than 700; and so in each parish a great number." 30  
Fifty thousand bodies were buried in the churchyard which Sir Walter Manny had purchased for the use of the poor. 31

While we cannot easily conceive what must have been the full effect of such wholesale destruction, we know, at least, that not only were whole families wiped out, but whole parishes and towns were exterminated. 32 Nowhere were the churchyards large enough. While exaggeration in figures is simple enough, a mental overestimation of the horror and the pathos caused by the Black Death is impossible.

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30. Cheyney, Reading In English History, p. 255 quotes Henry Knighton's account of the Black Death in full.  
31. Hume, History of England, Vol. II, p. 107.  
32. Nohl, The Black Death, p. 17; "Two hundred thousand market towns and villages in Europe were completely depopulated."



## "THE MORNING STAR OF THE REFORMATION"

The Black Death had caused a period of gloom. All institutions were in a process of decay; all the evil social, religious and economic effects which the Black Death had caused in one generation continued on into the next. On the surface everything looked black. Undoubtedly many of the people of that day could see no hope for their world. Nor did the disturbance caused by the "reactioneries" of the day help to bring their world back to the "golden days", as they knew them before the plague. "Only in the light of later history do we perceive in full light that the age of Wycliffe holds a great place in the progress in our country (England), that its efforts were not futile and that its great men did not live in vain." <sup>33</sup> An Oxford professor describes Wycliffe as "not only the greatest figure in Oxford history, but along with Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, as one of the four men who have produced the greatest effect on the English language and literature, and still further as wholly unapproached in the entire history of England for his effect on our English theology and religious life." <sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately the details of the early life and works of John Wycliffe are obscure and scanty. Unlike the works of Luther, whose personality radiates from his writings, the works of Wycliffe contain

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33. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 2.

34. Beckett, The English Reformation of the Sixteenth Century p. 62, quoted from Montagu Burrows; "Wiclif's Place in History," p. 4.



little self-revelation.<sup>35</sup> He was born near the end of the first quarter of the fourteenth century. The year of his birth is usually given as 1324, on the assumption that he was sixty at the time of his death in 1384. Even the place of his birth is debated, but it is generally accepted that he was born in Yorkshire.<sup>36</sup> Upon his father's death in 1353 the Reformer undoubtedly succeeded him as the proprietor of the family manor whose overlord was John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, since 1342. This is a significant fact in view of the later relation between the Duke and the Reformer.<sup>37</sup>

Confusion with another John Wycliffe, as it would seem, a namesake of the Reformer, has made it difficult to trace with precision the latter's career at Oxford. Three of the then existing colleges and a hall have claimed him as an inmate.<sup>38</sup> But historians are in disagreement as to who the Reformer was and who the namesake.

Although the public work of Wycliffe did not extend over twenty years, his training was long and thorough. Years of quiet, persistent

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35. Mackinnon, Origin of the Reformation, p. 124.

36. Cambridge Medieval History, p. 486: "Leland in his Collectanea mentions Wiclif, a north - Yorkshire village, as the place 'unde Wigclif haereticus originem duxit'. In his Itinerary he says, 'Wyclif was born at Hipswell, some miles to the south - east.' The contradiction is apparent only. One note mentions the seat of the family, the other records the birth of an individual. For a half century before his birth his family had some local importance, holding the advowson and the manor. Wiclif was part of the honour of Richmond granted to John of Gaunt in 1342, and if (as is possible) Wiclif himself became Lord of the manor, Gaunt was his overlord for some thirty years."

37. Mackinnon, Origin of the Reformation, p.80.

38. Capes, A History of the English Church, Vol. III, p. 109.



work spent in study, lecturing, and preaching prepared him for his later labors. <sup>39</sup> All evidence points to the fact that Wycliffe began his university career at Baliol College where he first became a fellow and then was elected Master of Baliol in 1360. In the following year he resigned at Baliol and took up his duties at the rectory of Fillingham in the Lincoln diocese. <sup>40</sup> After another year the university petitioned Pope Urban V to "provide" him another living. This was granted in a prebend in the collegiate church of Westbury, near Bristol. <sup>41</sup> During this period of his life, besides being a pluralist, he was a non-resident priest. For in 1363 he obtained a five year dispensation from residence at Fillingham, which was then renewed for two years that he "might continue his studies at Oxford". He appears to have neglected even getting a dispensation for his absence from his prebend at Westbury. It is interesting that during this period of his life he had no scruples about these abuses which he later condemned so vehemently. <sup>42</sup> In 1368, in order that he might better attend to his duties at the University, he exchanged his living at Fillingham for that of Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire, about fifteen miles from Oxford. <sup>43</sup> Two years later, in 1370, he received his Doctor of Divinity. When Edward III presented him with the rectory of Lutterworth in Leicestershire in the year 1374, he again changed his living. This parish remained his until his death in 1384.

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39. Beckett, op. cit., p. 65.

40. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 80.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Hore, History of the English Church, p. 188.



During the various stages of his career as student and lecturer in the fields of arts and divinity, Wycliffe acquired a great reputation. His later works proved him to be a master of scholastic philosophy and theology. Even an enemy like Knighton had to admit that Wycliffe was the "most eminent doctor of theology of those days. In philosophy he was second to none, in scholastic learning incomparable." <sup>44</sup> According to one of his followers, W. Thrope, Wycliffe was "in body spare, frail, and emaciated, in conversation most innocent," that he was loved by most men in the kingdom. <sup>45</sup> Others say of him: "He was a man of most simple appearance with bare feet and russet mantle. As a soldier of Christ, he saw in his Great Master and his apostles the pattern he was bound to imitate." <sup>46</sup> It is evident that he tried to follow this pattern in his reformation. He based his teachings on Scripture, which to him was so important that he took up the work of its translation for the benefit of the laity. <sup>47</sup> His eager hatred of what was wicked compelled him to denounce vehemently whatever he regarded as such. <sup>48</sup> However, he was a lover of humanity, and his sympathy laid with the common man.

Wycliffe's writings are often redundant and tedious to read, yet they show an alert, subtle, and fertile mind; and that they come from a man who was an independent thinker and an earnest reformer

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44. Cheyney, Readings in English History, p. 267, Knighton was a monk of Leicester.
45. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 124.
46. Froude, History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth, Vol. II, p. 27.
47. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 124.
48. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 105.



These characteristics were important, for only a sturdy individualist, who had courage and force of character, could break through the traditions in which the age was so steeped to assert himself against the dominant religious orders and beliefs to bring forth reform. Mackinnon says of the writings of Wycliffe: "In spite of his defects as a writer (though the works written in Middle English are linguistically important), we do not read far in most of his numerous writings without realising that he is a man with a message for his age, a man with a very high ideal of the practical religious life, and a just sense of its scandalous decadence. With the abstraction and erudition of the scholar he combines the striving of the active reformer." 49

This is the man, whom God endowed with the strength of character and able mind to denounce the wickedness in the Church which was aggravated, not entirely, but to a large extent, by the Black Death. He had seen such evils in the Church before 1348, but he had also experienced how the plague produced such conditions as to breed even greater evils and intensify those already existing.

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49. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 125.



#### IV

##### A DIVIDED ENGLAND - A THINKING PEOPLE

A few years after the Black Death the affairs in the English government were just the opposite of what they had been. Their strong king, Edward III, had become a mere figure-head. The war with France had also been suffering reverses. England found that she was pouring money into armies which were only losing ground. The country was ruined by taxation due to the war and her credit was destroyed by repudiated loans. <sup>50</sup>

Besides the war with France England had an internal war between the higher nobility and the parliament. In 1376 the Privy Council finally summoned the "Good Parliament". It is a significant fact that this Parliament went on record as "first desiring that the Government should cease to be corrupt, and that the money wrung from the public at a time of general distress should be honestly spent for public purposes and not appropriated by small cliques." <sup>51</sup>

On the surface it may seem that the war with France was the disturbing element which caused these reverses in the government. However, it was much more deep seated than just the war. An even greater factor was the effect of the Black Death. As has already been shown England lost almost one half of her population in less

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50. Smith, Pre-Reformation England, p. 267.

51. Trevelyan, England In The Age of Wycliffe, p. 16.



than two years. Even though it had struck its hardest blow against the poor, the upper classes had not remained unaffected.<sup>52</sup> Many government officials, who had died as a result of the plague, had to be replaced. But who was left to replace them? The plague had not only caused a great loss of life, but it had seriously lowered the standard of education of the people. A layman who could read or write was hard to find. The higher, educated clergy were the natural ones to fill the gaps left by the lay officials, but the infiltration of the clergy into the secular offices also caused much grief. As early as 1371 parliament had petitioned the king to exclude all ecclesiastical officials from the great offices of the state, which they held almost exclusively "as the most able and learned people of the realm." It was felt, and rightly so, that temporal and state matters ought not be placed on men who should be absorbed with spiritual duties.<sup>53</sup> "The bishops were serving two masters - God and the world," says Trevelyan.<sup>54</sup> Many of them played so great a role in politics and so little in ecclesiastical affairs that their dioceses are forgotten - only the secular offices which they held are recorded in history.<sup>55</sup>

It might not have been so bad had the chapters of the cathedrals been allowed to appoint their own bishops. They would have appointed men whose interest was with the Church instead of men who mixed into the affairs of the government, but the pope had his hand in

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52. Larned, The New Larned History, Vol. IV, p. 2711.  
53. Lord, Beacon Lights of History, Vol. III, p. 405.  
54. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 110.  
55. Ibid. p. 106.



all appointments.<sup>56</sup> As it was, contrary to all justification of law or reason, the pope claimed England as his property.<sup>57</sup> Nor was England strong enough to stand alone in complete repudiation of the most fundamental idea of medieval thought - the supremacy of the pope.<sup>58</sup> England itself was not ready for a reformation like that of Henry VIII.

The whole situation with the Church and the government went around in a vicious circle. The laity was dissatisfied with the Church mixing into the affairs of the state, and yet when the corrupt element in the form of the Duke of Lancaster and his followers entered politics, parliament had to support the ecclesiastical officials to fight off his corruption.

Even the laity of England was not united. There was a feeling of enmity between the higher and lower classes. Many writers believe that one cause for the gap between the two classes of society was the fact that many of the wealthy people had fled from the cities when the Black Death came; while the poor had to remain and suffer its fiercest attacks. The bitterness against the wealthy because of their flight from the pestilence was so great that in some towns of Europe it was rumored that the plague was artificially caused by the rich.<sup>59</sup>

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56. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 108.

57. Lord, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 396.

58. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 78.

59. Nohl, The Black Death, p. 138.



However, disregarding this unfair prejudice against the rich, there was even a greater reason for the ill feeling - that of economic conditions. The Black Death had diminished the population to such an extent that whole districts were thrown out of cultivation.<sup>60</sup> Although the scourge of the Black Death at first fell heaviest on the laboring people, later it produced marked improvements in their social and economic status. Since so many peasants had been swept away by the plague, labor - whether villein or free - suddenly became more valuable. The peasants could and did force the landlords to pay almost twice as much for the same work they had done before the plague.<sup>61</sup> While the prices of agricultural produce in its raw form were not materially increased, the cost of rural labor in its simplest form increased by at least 50 per cent, and the wages of artisans still more. The spending power of the peasants became larger with no great increase in their living expenses.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, hard times set in for all employers of labor and all who lived on fixed incomes. Landowners and employers looked upon the sudden rise of prices almost as a violation of the laws of nature.<sup>63</sup>

Since the government sympathized with the distress of the landlords, an almost immediate result was the attempt to regulate prices of food and labor. This was the origin of the Labour Statutes, which on February 9, 1351 fixed a definite tariff of wages for different occupations.<sup>64</sup>

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60. Larned, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 2710.

61. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 463.

62. Capes, A History of the English Church, Vol. III, p. 79.

63. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 463.

64. Ibid., p. 464.



However, not all the laboring people were willing to abide by the Labour Statues. Every succeeding parliament passed acts and more acts, endeavoring to enforce these labor laws. But no act of parliament could repeal the Black Death or abolish the spirit of the age. <sup>65</sup> Even though the Labour Statutes did control the rising prices to some extent, their end result was only to add to the widespread grievance which finally provoked the Peasants Revolt. <sup>66</sup>

Nothing is more remarkable than the change in the temper and mental activity of the lower orders during the fourteenth century. The saying of the day was: <sup>67</sup>

"When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?"

The peasants and laboring classes had tasted of something good. The landlords and employers had needed them. Many of the poor had become wealthy. Exalted by this new order, they were not willing to go back to their old manner of living, but carried on struggles for freedom. <sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the Black Death had taught them that all men were equal in the face of death. During the pestilence the rich, the nobles, the clergy, the employers died - not as many - but just the same as the poor. According to Nohl this experience was no small thing, for "not only did it shake the foundations of the rigid

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65. Trevelyan, History of England, p. 239.

66. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 464.

67. Cheyney, A Short History of England, p. 236.

68. Trevelyan, History of England, p. 239.



system of mediaeval castes, but produced the consciousness of the equality of all men before the face of God - that consciousness which led up to the Reformation."

Medieval society, stereotyped as it was, had been capable of readjustments. Capital found openings in a new direction, so that the medieval society would have been transformed gradually, had there not been a sudden rupture with the past. But circumstances had combined to make this impossible. Society and its institutions suffered an especially hard blow from the terrible pestilence. Since the shock of the Black Death was so great that England recovered only gradually. When it did recover, the old institutions were no longer suitable to the changed requirements of the time.<sup>70</sup> For one thing the old manorial system of tilling the soil was fast disappearing. More and more the peasants were becoming free men who worked as hired laborers. These free laborers attempted to ignore the laws fixing their wages, and conducted strikes that were frequent, but not always successful. Those who had no land of their own often emigrated to towns or manors where their illegal demands were accepted.<sup>71</sup>

The idea of personal freedom was brought to the peasant by commutation for economic reasons. But once this idea was awakened, it was immediately discovered to be in accord with the teachings of Christianity. Complete slavery had long been opposed by the Church,

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70. Cambridge Modern History, Vol. I, p. 500.

71. Trevelyan, History of England, p. 239.



but the abbots and bishops who held manors all over the country had not yet seen any incompatibility between Christianity and the status of the villein.<sup>72</sup> The bishops and abbots were in too many cases devoid of Christian brotherhood and Christian justice where their own property was concerned.<sup>73</sup> The peasants also began to see that the common origin of man from Adam and Eve was a very real and valid argument against the hereditary serfdom. Without the possibility of proof, it seems that this inconsistency on the part of the Church made the people a little more skeptical of accepting the old traditions and institutions so blindly.

Formerly the monasteries were schools of learning. Here manuscripts were copied, and beautiful illustrations were done. The monks and monasteries had been useful to society. However, in the latter part of the fourteenth century the monasteries deteriorated and were no longer useful, but were a nuisance to society.<sup>74</sup>

All these things had an important effect on the people. It gave them a broader and more critical attitude toward the existing social and religious institutions.<sup>75</sup> Thus, when Wycliffe began his reform, he found two things. On the one hand,

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72. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 196.

73. Mackinnon, Origin of the Reformation, p. 113 quotes Coulton, "The Mediaeval Villiage" p. 42 (1925) "I judge the monk to have been, on the whole, a slightly better landlord than the layman."

74. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 158.

75. Encyclopedia of Social Science, Vol. III, 576.



the nation was divided; so that, like Luther a century and a half later, he did not have to stand alone against one, united, solid nation, but his adversaries were busy fighting each other. In the second place, he found supporters among a people who had begun to question the old institutions and look for new and better things in "this new era."

...wonder, who had no more economic security than a beggar of that time. Individually this is not the whole truth. While he did not have a home which he could call his own, he possessed a certain amount of the economic comforts of life. But this mode is false; he was not wealthy; he did not live in the luxury of the high priests and Roman officials. There was not the great economic gulf between the poor which was later filled into the people's treasury and himself. However, this was what could be said of his Church in the medieval age. It was not a great contrast to the dirty, ragged, undernourished masses of the poor, splendor, and overuse for glittering gold and wealth in land. 75

75. Medieval Age, by John G. Gillingham, p. 121: "The contrast which history presents between the primitive and medieval Christianity goes far to justify Shiller's criticism that, owing to the decadence of the spirit of the world in the Church, the latter is in many respects a travesty of the former. His fundamental position is that true Christianity is the Christianity of Christ and the apostles, and that the later medieval development was a travesty of the first, and that, when so tried, it falls away from the first and appears as a corrupt, hybrid thing. This medieval development could be and must be purified if the new religion is to be true to itself and realize the will of its founder."



## THE ATTACK ON THE CHURCH

Scripture refers to Jesus and His followers as poor men. Often this point is over emphasized, and Jesus is pictured as a destitute, poverty stricken wanderer, who had no more economic security than a beggar of that time. Undoubtedly this is not the whole truth. While He did not have a home which He could call his own, He possessed a certain amount of the economic comforts of life. But this much is true; He was not wealthy; He did not live in the luxury of the high priests and Roman officials. There was not the great economic gulf between the poor widow who threw her last mites into the Temple treasury and Himself. However, this same thing cannot be said of His Church in the medieval age. It did show a great contrast to the dirty, ragged, under nourished masses by its pomp, splendor, and avarice for glittering gold and wealth in land. 76

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76. Mackinnon, The Origin of the Reformation, p. 121: "The contrast which history presents between the primitive and medieval Christianity goes far to justify Wiclif's criticism that, owing to the domination of the spirit of the world in the Church, the latter is in many respects a travesty of the former. His fundamental position is that true Christianity is the Christianity of Christ and the apostles, and that its later mediaeval development must be tried by the test, and that, when so tried, it fails to pass the test and appears as a corrupt, hybrid thing. This degenerate development ought to and must be purified if the Christian religion is to be true to itself and realise the will of its founder."



The masses of England were definitely burdened by taxes. With the country at war and the government corrupt, more and more money had to be taken from the taxpayers who were already over taxed. Yet the Church paid very little to the support of the government in the way of taxes.

This problem of taxation was so great a sore spot in national politics that in 1376 the "Good Parliament", though opposed to John of Gaunt, concurred with him in his policy to reform and tax the Church. Even the Commons, after having worked with the bishops against the Duke for two months, turned to sympathize with the Duke in his policy against the Church. In 1380 when the government needed 160,000 pounds to carry on the war, it was decided that if the clergy would raise a third of that amount; the remaining 100,000 pounds would be raised by a poll tax on the laity.<sup>77</sup> It must be remembered, however, that this was an extra tax; it was not for the general support of the government.

A greater burden of taxation fell to the laity, because the amount of taxable land had been diminished by the Church. The property in possession of the Church is reported to have been one-third of all the land in the realm. Much of this land the Church received during the time of the Black Death. The medieval period was a superstitious age. Even in modern times, though superstitious acts are frowned upon by society as silly and out of tune with the

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77. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 102.



scientific age; yet when trouble comes many people revert to just such superstitious acts. They run to fortune tellers, have their tea leaves read, rely on horoscopes. If this happens even in this enlightened age, how much more would it not happen during the age when superstition was condoned by society. Medical science was practically unknown during the fourteenth century. People knew nothing of microscopic germs. So when that invisible enemy struck out of nowhere, the people reverted to all manner of superstitions. The nervous strain upset the minds of the people to such an extent that they were extremely gullible. Rumors were circulated that the Black Death came riding on a black horse, or else a giant striding along, his head reaching above the roofs of houses. <sup>78</sup>

Innumerable examples might be quoted to show how deeply the Church was involved in these superstitions of the medieval age. <sup>79</sup> Prayers and vows were the two main spiritual means by which the Church endeavored to combat the plague. With the world quickened to a sense of sin, people rushed to sacrifice their means to the Church. They did anything and everything to escape from the uncanny disease. The Church had gained enormous wealth by bequests of land and gold for masses. <sup>80</sup> At this time so much was given to the Church for the building of altars, bells, and masses that measures had to be taken "to secure some pittance for the rightful heirs." People brought money to the monks and when they would no longer take it,

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78. Nohl, The Black Death, p. 17.

79. Capes, A History of the English Church, p. 76.

80. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 39.



the money was thrown over the walls of the monasteries.<sup>81</sup>

The Church was not satisfied with the wealth it had gained at the time of the Black Death. Now since it had gained a sizable foothold on the national wealth, it craved still more. A complaint was made in Parliament that the impositions of Rome were intolerable. By death or transference of bishops the pope sometimes extracted five times the yearly revenue from one See. The cardinals and other foreigners residing in Avignon enjoyed several of the best Church preferments.<sup>82</sup>

Even though the people were overburdened with secular taxes, the Church carried on its rival system of taxation; thus rendering the poor still poorer.<sup>83</sup> The pope made the country pay dearly for all his bulls, many of his nominees, who bought benefices in "the sinful city of Avignon" never saw the shores of England.<sup>84</sup> The cardinals robbed the Church and state of 20,000 marks annually and did nothing but sit in Avignon. The papal collectors, living like princes and dukes in London, sent vast sums of money to the papal city.<sup>85</sup> In 1366 Archbishop Langham of Canterbury made an investigation and found "that a considerable number of clergy of his province were in possession of as many as twenty benefices, and in some cases even more."<sup>86</sup> The Church treated sin as a means of filling her coffers instead of regarding it as a great enemy with

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81. Nohl, *op. cit.*, p. 134f.

82. More, History of the English Church, p. 186.

83. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 40.

84. Mackinnon, The Origin of the Reformation, p. 75.

85. Ibid., p. 76.

86. Ibid., p. 74.



which it had to contend. It was said that the shepherds of the Church fed themselves and "sheared, or rather, fleeced the sheep." <sup>87</sup>

Finally the greed and avarice of the Church led to serious trouble. The whole nation was aroused by a demand from Pope Urban V for the payment of Peter's Pence, which was promised as an annual tribute by John Lackland at the time of his reconciliation with the pope. England was arrears thirty-three years in payment. <sup>88</sup> The English people had forgotten about Peter's Pence in that time, and now when they were hard pressed this demand for extra taxation came to them. When the whole nation united in refusing to comply to the bull of the pope, a second demand for payment came. It was in regard to this matter that John Wycliffe was drawn into political affairs and thus began his work as an active reformer. The year in which he first made his public appearance is uncertain. It is not known definitely whether he was drawn in the discussion before the conference in Bruges or not. <sup>89</sup> In either event, on July 26, 1374

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87. Nohl, op. cit., p. 161.

88. Beckett, The English Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, p. 65.

89. Mackinnon, The Origin of the Reformation, p. 82 f.: "One of his earliest productions is a short thesis in reference to the question of the annual tribute payable by the English king to the pope, in which he professes to give a report of speeches of a number of lords against the papal demand in parliament. Lechler is of the opinion that this report refers to the proceedings of the parliament of 1366 which dealt with the claim of Urban V to the arrears of the annual tribute payable by the English king to the pope. Loserth, on the other hand, argues forcibly that the tract refers to the council of lords temporal and spiritual, which discussed this subject in 1374, and places its composition subsequent to it." Lord, Beacon Lights of History, p. 404."... the parliament was the mere mouthpiece of Wyclif who was now actively engaged in political life and probably as Dr. Lechler thinks had a seat in Parliament."



Wycliffe and a group of other men were appointed as a commission to discuss with the papal representatives at Bruges the tribute question which was made more vital by the second refusal to pay on May 21. Wycliffe was the only distinguished theologian on the commission and ranked second.<sup>90</sup>

We do not know exactly what transpired at this meeting. No real reforms of ecclesiastical abuses were effected, it ended merely as a deal between the king and the pope for their respective benefit. But as a result of this meeting, Wycliffe decided to devote his life as an advocate of practical reform in the Church.<sup>91</sup> He returned to Oxford and began to work on his theories which developed in his De Dominio Divino and De Civili Dominio.

Wycliffe was evidently influenced, directly or indirectly, by Marsilius of Padua.<sup>92</sup> He maintained that God is the real possessor of all things. From God, the righteous, but only the righteous (those who were not in mortal sin), received the right to possess property. Carried out to its practical application, this theory taught communism. Wycliffe, however, did not apply it in the concrete way to temporal affairs. In later years most of those who preached against lay property were not real followers of Wycliffe.<sup>93</sup> He turned this theory into another direction -- aimed it at the ecclesiastical endowments. According to him the Church had the right to possess

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90. Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII, p. 489.

91. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 83. Preface of "De Dominio Divino".

92. Mackinnon, op. cit., Workman does not agree with this, but that Wycliffe was not influenced by Marsilius.

93. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 200.



their property only as long as it was used according to the purpose of the endowment. If, on the other hand, the Church misused the ecclesiastical endowments, the state possessed the right to deprive her of it and use it to maintain the poor or for other good. Furthermore, the state had the right to decide when the ecclesiastical property was being misused. In his opinion it was misused now, since the wealth of the Church had impoverished the people and had demoralized and secularized the Church. The threat of excommunication could not debar the state from undertaking this, for excommunication did not apply to temporal affairs. Moreover, the king who refused to secularize misused ecclesiastical property was a traitor to God and an enemy to his country.<sup>94</sup>

This teaching immediately aroused bitter opposition on the part of the clergy. Wycliffe was cited by Archbishop Sudbury to appear before Convocation in St. Paul's on February 19, 1377. Nothing came of this trial but that John of Gaunt, who was Wycliffe's protector, had an unseemly wrangle with Archbishop Courtney and then dragged Wycliffe away from the Convocation a few minutes later.

It can easily be seen why the Duke would be such a staunch supporter of Wycliffe, when we realize the weakness of Wycliffe's theory. If the king and "the witty lords" were to distribute the ecclesiastical property among the lay proprietors, the "witty lords" such as John of Gaunt and his followers would have been far more likely to keep the

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94. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 84 f. cf. for complete discussion of De Dominio Divino.



property than to give it to the "poor gentlemen." 95

Nevertheless Wycliffe gained many followers as a result of his theory. Later he wrote several more tracts in a similar vein. In his De Ecclesia and De Protestate Papae he taught Augustine's doctrine of predestination and used that doctrine as a basis for the theory that not all popes were the head of the Church, but only those who acted and lived as Christ did while He was on earth. Wycliffe would have the church poor and unadorned, but the popes sat in luxurious palaces and maintained a swarm of arrogant officials and did not preach the Gospel. Wycliffe held that the influence of the pope and prelates was so bad on England that he would sweep away the papacy and the whole hierarchy and leave the parish priest unfettered by clerical superiors.<sup>96</sup>

There is no proof that the Black Death directly caused Wycliffe to bring forth his attack on the Church. Nevertheless, the Black Death intensified the wealth and secularization of the Church -- and at this Wycliffe aimed his attack. Hore says to this:  
"Wycliffe's great grievances were with the wealth of the Church, the worldly-mindedness of the Friars, and spiritual persons mixing themselves up in secular business. ... It was against the Pope as

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95. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 40. "If there had been any security that the class of "poor gentlemen" would have been strengthened, nothing could have been better for English society, as it was then."

96. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 95 - 102 for full discussion of these two theories.



a secular ruler that he revolted, against his greed of money, his oppression of National Churches and his abuse of patronage."<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, the Black Death intensified these abuses to such an extent that the people could bear them no longer and were ready to reform the Church. Thus Wycliffe found many of his supporters.

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97. Hore, op. cit., p. 194f.



## CONDITIONS AMONG THE LOWER CLERGY

The Black Death struck a terrible blow against the clergy of England. On a whole this class of society was the hardest hit. As has already been mentioned the mortality among the clergy as a class has been estimated at 40 per cent. Rather precise data can be found on the death of this class. Diocesan registers show in what great numbers the beneficed clergy died at their posts during this time. This fact - that the mortality among the parish priests was higher than any other class - is a great credit to the priest of that day. It shows that even in the face of death many stayed with their people to do their duty manfully. Many of the priests caught the plague themselves in their death-bed ministrations or from the pestilential air of the graveyards where they dwelt, for it has been held that infection was largely due to cadaveric poison.<sup>98</sup> Yet week after week others were always ready to step into the places of their deceased brethern. They came for institution to the bishops who were living for the most part unscathed among the people.<sup>99</sup> In East Anglia in a single year upward of 800 parishes lost their priest, 83 of them twice and 10 of them three times in a few months. This does not include the chaplains and stipendiary priest of whom no account is given.<sup>100</sup>

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98. Capes, A History of the English Church, p. 75.

99. Ibid., p. 74.

100. Ibid.



Again among many of the religious houses there are precise details given as to the loss of life. The heads of these houses came to the bishops for institutions and the vacancy lists were made out. The monastic chronicles throw light on the losses of the rank and file. Archbishop Parker said spitefully: "the pestilence raged among the impure crowds of monks."<sup>101</sup> Capes gives the following statistics: "In the house of Augustinian Canons at Heveringland, prior and canons died to a man. At Hickling only one survived. At Meaux only ten were left out of fifty monks and lay brothers. At St. Alban's forty-seven of the inmates, besides many scattered in the cells, sickened and died, together with the abbot."<sup>102</sup> A great number of the houses were wiped out completely. In general the houses suffered a severe shock; many of them to such an extent that they never did recover, others again were absorbed into other houses. It is interesting to note that one house, Christ Church of Canterbury, suffered very little. It is believed that the reason for this was due to the plentiful water supply and the better drainage system.<sup>103</sup>

People died so fast that the priests could not minister to all of them. Something had to be done. Therefore, the Church relaxed her rules. Knighton, a clergyman at the time of Wycliffe tells that general power was given "to all and every priest, both regular and

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101. Capes, A History of the English Church, p. 74.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.



secular, to hear confessions, absolve with full and entire episcopal authority except in matters of debt, in which case the dying man, if he could should pay the debt while he lived, or others should certainly fulfill that duty from his property after his death. Likewise, the pope granted full remission of all sins to whoever was absolved in peril of death and granted that the power should last till next Easter, and every one could choose a confess at his will." <sup>104</sup> In the hour of peril the "Faithful" were encouraged to confess their sins to one another with the full assurance of the validity of the confession. The Eucharist might be given by a deacon if no priest could be found, and people were assured that faith would supply the place of extreme unction, when time and means were lacking. <sup>105</sup> This is an interesting fact, for it shows that the Church must have been in dire straits. To relax the principles which are basic to the Roman hierarchy and priesthood proved to be a dangerous thing for the Roman Church, for it carried over into the time of Wycliffe. If the priests were not absolutely essential to perform the sacraments during the emergency, were they absolutely necessary in normal times? At least, the people had become callous to the lack of priests during that extended time.

The emergency called for another extraordinary measure to fill the gaps left by the deceased priests. The qualifications of acceptability had to be lowered. Men below the age fixed by the canons

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104. Cheyney, Readings in English History, p. 255.

105. Capes, op. cit., p. 75.



were taken into the ranks of the priesthood. The Bishop of Norwick is recorded to have ordained with papal sanction sixty young men below the fixed canon age.<sup>106</sup> This is only one bishop. If this were done all over the country, the number must have been extremely great. On the other hand, in order to obtain enough priests the mental and character requirements had to be lowered. These men were passed rapidly through the lower stages to the priesthood. The result was an ignorant, careless, and not too moral a clergy. Men were brought into England from the continent. These foreigners were ignorant of the English language. Even if they were natives of England, the masses were said in Latin, which the people did not understand at all and the priest but very little. Preaching fell into disuse, for few had the ability and still fewer had the inclination to preach. Many of the priests could just read their missals, and no more. They were hardly able to say by heart the Pater Noster, the Creed or the Ten Commandments.<sup>107</sup>

Immediately after the Black Death the parish priests and vicars were not becoming wealthy. When the cost of living began to rise as a result of the scarcity of laborer, the priests who never received more than a pittance, suffered hard times - many could no longer live on the old stipends. Often they sympathized with the laboring class in their demands for higher wages, even sometimes

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106. Capes, op. cit., p. 75

107. Hore, History of the Church of England, p. 185.



following their example to strike for higher wages.<sup>108</sup> Rewards were larger in other professions, so many left the ranks of priests. Others again, left the parishes to become private chaplains where they could get higher wages.

On the other hand, the higher clergy, while living off of the fat of the land, did not see eye to eye with the lower clergy in the matter of wages. The wealthy prelates showered their poorer brethren with indignation. Nor was this division of opinion between the higher and lower clergy a small thing, only to have its effect on the immediate years, but from this time on we note a growing sense of jarring interests and divided sympathies between these two classes of clergy.<sup>109</sup>

However, when we look at the friars and the regular clergy, we see an altogether different picture. During the thirteenth century the Mendicant friars had increased enormously in England. At one time they had been the ablest and perhaps the best soldiers of the pope. They had gained the hearts of the people and had stimulated religious life, but after the Black Death they had become a nuisance to society.<sup>110</sup> Besides the Mendicants England

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108. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 124. "The Black Death had made parish priests scarce and like the labourers they took advantage of the scarcity to try to improve their social position. How low that position was is illustrated the chronicler's remark that these limitations of their stipends 'forced many to steal'." Taken from Gibson's Codex ii 755 ed. 1713.

109. Capes, op. cit., p. 80.

110. Lord, Beacon Lights of History, p. 397.



had become dotted with convents and religious houses of other orders. There was a constant battle between the friars, the regular and the secular clergy. It was not until Wycliffe began his attack on them that the quarrel was healed; then they joined hands to fight against a common enemy. As Wycliffe put it: "... but now Herod and Pilate, who before were enemies, have now become friends." <sup>111</sup>

In original works the monks had become sterile. There are some great names in their age of English History, but none of them were monks. Chaucer and Langland were laymen, Wycliffe was an Oxford graduate. The cloister no longer rivalled the university. The monk had become narrow in his sympathy. He had little interest in what went on outside his immediate abbey. He had nothing to care for or work for but the maintenance of the wealth and position of his house. <sup>112</sup> One gets the truest picture of the popular estimation of these monks and friars from the sarcasm of Chaucer. <sup>113</sup>

Pier's the Plowman was also written against the wealthy, pomp, and corrupt clergy. <sup>114</sup>

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111. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 153.

112. Ibid., p. 157.

113. Beckett, The English Reformation in the Sixteenth Century, p. 57. "Few are the monastic abuses which called forth the censure of the Reformers that are not made the subject of the poet's (Chaucer) humorous satire."

114. Hore, History of the Church of England, p. 187 f. "The Satirist, supposed to have been William Langland who wrote, about 1370, "Piers Ploughman's Vision," exposed in severe terms the immoral conditions of society, the corruptness of the church and the divisions amongst the friars. He complains of men having taken away the honor of God, of worldly-mindedness of the priests, and asserts that the Pope is the anti-christ. He represents himself as one in search of a creed, but the sectarianism of the clergy baffled him; he could learn nothing from them except that the Dominicans advised him not to be a Franciscan and the Franciscans advised him not to be a Dominican."



The friars had the pope's sanction to hear confessions. They made use of this privilege.<sup>115</sup> It is evident that after the Black Death the practice of farming out "termini" or "limits" to individual friars was adopted. The friar paid a fixed rent to his convent for the exclusive rights to preach and hear confessions. The emoluments were his to keep for his own needs.<sup>116</sup> It was to no purpose that a faithful parish priest refused absolution to a black sheep of his flock. A friar could give it and be gone. He did not have to deal with the man later. Chaucer says that when money was involved the friar was an easy confessor.<sup>117</sup>

"Full sweetly heard he confession  
And pleasant was his absolution."

If the friars were refused a church, they erected their pulpits under a cross, from which they railed against the sloth and ignorance of the parish priest. In the parsonage they had a terrible name. "They were exhibited in pothouses as foxes preaching with a sheep muffled under their cloaks; as apes sitting by a sick man's bed with a Crucifix in one hand and with the other in the sufferer's fob."<sup>118</sup> The custom of the begging friars was to go from door to door in pairs, followed by a third man with a sack. They received gifts of corn, bacon, logs for their fires. Their promises to speak

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115. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, p. 139. "The friar had many advantages over the parish priest, sometimes he had greater learning, usually had brighter wit, always later news and more general knowledge of the world outside the parish."  
116. *Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. VI, p. 741.  
117. Beckett, *The English Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 28.  
118. Hore, *op. cit.*, p. 186f. from Professor Blunt's *Reform* p. 44.



prayers in return for the gifts were speedily forgotten. They went about as hucksters, selling pins and knives.<sup>119</sup> There were only 4,000 friars in England and yet they cost the country 40,000 pounds annually.<sup>120</sup> These friars set the welfare of the order above that of the country.

Many of the secular clergy were no better than the monks.<sup>121</sup> Historians accuse them of disoluteness and ignorance. They are described as having a total disregard for duty and the welfare of their flock. Many of them were given over to carelessness and worldliness. They spent their time in public houses, gambling, revelling and were given over to swearing.<sup>122</sup> The cure of souls was regarded only as a source of income. Many parsons without leaving even a vicar in charge deserted their dull rounds of duty and ran to the city. Here they obtained other jobs and still eked out the pittance from the people whom they were neglecting.<sup>123</sup>

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119. Beckett, op. cit., p. 29

120. Mackinnon, The Origin of the Reformation, p. 123, quotes from "De Triplici Vinculo Amoris". p. 9.

121. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 127, "In this age it was the friar, not the parish priest who was singled out as having a lower standard than even laymen." Trevelyan seems to be a friend of the priest. He disagrees with the authors who maintain that as a whole the parish priest degenerated. In his History of England Trevelyan makes this statement (p. 243), "It may be questioned how far the loss of moral and intellectual leadership by the Church was due to greater corruption or inefficiency than of old. It was not so much that the clergy had sunk, as that the laity had risen." Of course, all will have to admit that there were faithful priests, and that they did not as a group sink to the depths of the friars and monks.

122. Hore, op. cit., p. 185.

123. Trevelyan, England in the Age of the Wycliffe, p. 123.



In these ways even the lower clergy bled the poor people. The bishops were content to overlook these things, but not so Wycliffe. He had really begun as an academic reformer by his theories of Dominion. However, in later years he turned to be a practical reformer. He now aimed his attack at the lower clergy, claiming that the monks were a burden to the state because they deprived it of large sums which might be used for the poor. They used their vow of poverty as a means to rob the poor.<sup>124</sup> Wycliffe held strongly that the life of the cloister was at variance with the freedom and active spirit of the Gospel. He attacked the friars on economic, religious, and national bases. Moreover, Scripture did not warrant their existence, but they only did irreparable damage to the morals and religious life of the people.<sup>125</sup> They nurtured a false notion of piety, and put the tradition of the pope in place of the knowledge of Christ. The lower clergy was a bad example to the laity by their immoral lives. By their insatiable greed they encouraged the people to cling to relics and idols for help. As in Luther's time the friars gave the people a false conception of Indulgences.

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124. Cheyney, Readings in English History, p. 267 f. quotes a portion of one of Wycliffe's sermons in his own language and spelling against the possession of property by clergymen.
125. Mackinnon, op. cit. p. 123.



## VII

### TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

When Wycliffe saw the need in the Church, he was not satisfied to merely criticize, but he set out on a constructive reform. There is evidence that the Black Death had contributed essentially to the general deterioration of morals among the laity.<sup>126</sup> The clergy by their lives and abuses had encouraged the people to continue in this moral degeneracy. Wycliffe saw that something had to be done. He felt that only by making the will of God better known to these illiterate people could the desired change be brought about.<sup>127</sup> Thus it was that he began a twofold program to teach the laity the Word of God.

For a man in that age Wycliffe held the Scriptures on an unusually high plane. He had maintained that they were the supreme authority - all church traditions must agree with Scripture or else be of no value. In his tract "De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae" his thesis was "Holy Scripture is the highest authority for every Christian, and the standard of faith and all human perfection."<sup>128</sup> In this tract he pointed out that Scripture is inerrant and that it is divinely inspired. He felt that every Christian should read it, but in order to do that the layman must have it in his own language. This high sense of the importance of Scripture impelled Wycliffe to set forth his translation.

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126. Nohl, The Black Death, p. 163 f.

127. Smith, Pre-Reformation England, p. 270.

128. Mackinnon, The Origin of the Reformation, p. 90.



Wycliffe's was not the first translation of Scripture. It had been translated into Norman French, but only the upper classes could read Norman French, and even those were fast dying out. Also portions of the Bible, especially the Psalms, had been translated into English at an early time. But the whole Bible had never been translated into the English language. At Wycliffe's instigation, then, Nicolos de Hereford with a few other scholars translated the Old and New Testament into English. Hereford was doctor of divinity at Oxford and a follower of Wycliffe. It is uncertain whether Wycliffe contributed anything to the actual work of the translation or not, even though he had translated large portions of the Gospels in his homilies. Be that as it may, it was at his instigation that the Bible was translated.<sup>129</sup> Since Greek and Hebrew were not taught at the university and were little known, this version was not taken from the original, but from the Latin Vulgate. John Purvey, an ardent follower of Wycliffe and later his secretary, revised Hereford's version. This work was finished about 1395.

Even though the translation contained no doctrinal bias,<sup>130</sup> it immediately brought forth bitter opposition against Wycliffe.<sup>131</sup>

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129. Mackinnon, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

130. Capes, *A History of the English Church*, p. 128.

131. More, *History of the Church of England*, p. 196, says of the Church's attack on Wycliffe's translation: "Wyclif's translation of the Bible might have no doubt been better, but why did not the Pope, who so interested himself in the Church of England, and why did not the English Prelates, who complained of Wycliffe's translation, help him to make it better, or bring out a better translation of their own?"



Henry Knighton, contemporary clergyman of that time condemned Wycliffe's translation and its purpose in the following account:

"This Master John Wycliffe translated from the Latin into the tongue of the Angles (though not of angels) the gospel which Christ intrusted to the clergy and learned men of the church in order that they might gently minister it to the laity and to the weak according to the exigency of the times and the need and mental hunger of each one. Thus to the laity and even to such women as can read this was made more open than formerly it had been even to such of the clergy as were well educated and of great understanding. Thus the evangelical pearls have been scattered abroad and trampled by the swine, and that which used to be dear to the clergy and laity is now a common jest in the mouth of both. The gem of the clergy had become the toy of the laity." 132

The English Bible accomplished the purpose for which Wycliffe had intended it. By means of his translation the laity did get the Word of God, even if they didn't get it from the friars and priests. In the early years of the fifteenth century before the art of printing was invented, the cost of the Bible was an extreme handicap to its circulation. However, it was sold in portions according to the purchaser's means. The laity held the Bible in highest esteem. Even though it was dangerous to possess and heresy - which soon

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132. Cheyney, Readings in English History, p. 267.



was but one step from the stake - to read, the Bible had a wide circulation among all classes of society. <sup>133</sup>

"Wycliffe's chief glory was undoubtedly his translation of the Bible, enabling people to read their Bibles in their own language." <sup>134</sup>

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133. Beckett, The English Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, p. 73.

134. Hore, History of the Church of England, p. 195.



## VIII

### POOR PRIESTS

It was not enough to have the Bible in the people's language, were there no agency to publish it abroad and apply its teachings to everyday life. As has been mentioned before; Wycliffe, convinced that the error and corruption of the Church had left the people altogether ignorant of Scriptural truths, was determined to right this duty in which the church had failed.

The Mendicant friars had been instituted as preaching orders. The sermon was not new. But the friars had permitted it to fall into disuse and to degenerate. Wycliffe, himself a great preacher, had condemned the trival sermons of the time, saying that they were to amuse men and to win their money. The people learned little or nothing from the preaching of that day. Wycliffe wanted a different kind of preaching - preaching which would call men to repentance and be an instrument of reformation in life and manner.<sup>135</sup>

It was, then, to supply this need that he gathered about himself from his students at Oxford, men who thought as he did. He trained these men of culture and learning to be itinerant preachers. They were not to preach of relics and of indulgences, but of the faith they found in the Bible - of repentance and the grace of God.<sup>136</sup> Wycliffe laid much less stress on scholarship than on the knowledge of Scripture as a qualification of his work. Their mission was

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135. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 177

136. Froude, History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to Death of Elizabeth, p. 27.



to the poor and simple, proclaiming the Word of God to them in language they could understand.

Clad in their russet, with a staff in hand, they moved from place to place - preaching sometimes in churches and sometimes in the open air. They lived from free will offerings of the people, but refrained from begging. Because they had taken the vow of poverty and could hold no benefices they were called "Poor Priests". This term was applied to them in counter-distinction to the preaching friars, called "Penny Preachers", who were more interested in extorting money from the people than to save souls.<sup>137</sup> A tract, "Why Poor Priests Have No Benefice", was written, supposedly by Wycliffe in defense of the Poor Priests. In that tract it was stated that it was against their conscience to hold a living, or at least to seek one. For one reason, the patron usually expected something in return. Another reason which prevailed on the itinerants to decline was the restraint it would place upon their ministrations, for without this limitation they had to "surely help themselves and serve their brethren."<sup>138</sup> One reason which was not stated in the tract, but undoubtedly was a major factor why they had no benefices was the greed of the friars and the Church. This avarice and greed had led to their corruption. Wycliffe and the Poor Priests had denounced all wealth and maintained that "all the evil in the Church

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137. Mackinnon, The Origin of the Reformation, p. 105.

138. Beckett, The English Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, p. 88.



could be traced back to the Donation of Constantine." 139

We know very little of the Poor Priests before 1382, the year in which their persecution began.<sup>140</sup> We are told that "wandering preachers had begun to appear in the villages with versions of Wycliffe's doctrine and to compete with the local influence of their enemies."<sup>141</sup> We know, too, that these Poor Priests carried with them copies of the English Bible, and that they left them here and there as they traveled.<sup>142</sup> Remember that these were costly treasures. How different that was from the friars who robbed the people rather than leaving treasures.

After Wycliffe's death his followers were called Lollards. The increased rapidly, gaining adherents, not only among the poor and simple, but also among the higher classes. The "good Queen Anne" and the Earl of Lancaster were favorable to their cause. Many merchants assisted the Poor Priests in their travels.<sup>143</sup> The Lollards became so numerous that in London by the year 1382 the bishop of Lincoln was reluctant to start proceedings against a certain Swynderby for fear of exciting a popular disturbance.<sup>144</sup>

The activity of the Poor Priests against the friars was so successful that one chronicler notes that in the year 1382 the people

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139. Smith, Pre-Reformation England, p. 57.

140. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 291.

141. Ibid., p. 152.

142. Froude, op. cit., p. 27.

143. Beckett, op. cit., p. 78.

144. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 106.



refused to give alms to the friars or even to listen to their sermons, but told them to work instead of beg for a living.

Wycliffe's reform had started out as a religious reform, but like most reforms it became linked with the politics of the time. The reason that it failed to produce a lasting reformation was that the "fulness of time" had not yet come. 145

Mackinnon says of Wycliffe's success or failure: "Success is not necessarily the test of a movement or a man. A greater test is to fail in order to succeed, and Wiclif may, in the person of those who took up and carried on his work under more favorable conditions, fairly claim to have achieved this kind of success." 146

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145. Mackinnon, op. cit., p. 127.

146. Ibid.



## CONCLUSION

Thus it was that the Black Death influenced the work of the English Reformer. As has been shown there are no direct influences, but the indirect influences are great. The seeds of evil in the Church which Wycliffe attacked had already been in existence before the Black Death. It was only when the Black Death nurtured these evils that they grew to large proportions. The Black Death caused the Church to accrue great wealth and to become more secularized. Wycliffe maintained that these two facts were the root of all evil in the Church. The Black Death had taken away so many of the priests, that the requirements for the clergy had to be lowered. The result was a careless and ignorant clergy, and thus an ill instructed laity.

Perhaps, the reader says, "The evils were growing and even without the Black Death would have developed to their large proportions." That may be true, but it is also true that the Black Death hastened their development so that the breaking point came when it did.



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