

Wiclif's *Place in History*

Three Lectures
Delivered Before the University of Oxford
in 1881



Montagu Burrows, M.A.
Professor of Modern History

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This volume is republished for the benefit of those interested in the history of the Bible and Christian church. John de Wiclif (many different spellings of his name) was the first translator of the Bible into English and the first reformer, who was called the Morning Star of the Reformation. He was so despised by the Catholic church that his bones were dug up, burned, and the ashes thrown into the River Swift in Lutterworth, England. Great numbers of Wicliff's writings were destroyed by those in power during and after his life, so this information is valuable!

In this volume you will find treasures such as: "There was not a single work of his committed to print till 1525, *i.e.* till after an interval of one hundred and forty-one years since his death, and eighty years after printing had been invented; and yet multitudes of books had already issued from the press. Nor was this first book, the "*Dialogus*," printed in England, but in Germany." p. 13

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PREFACE

THESE Lectures owe their origin to the visit of the late Dr. Cather to Oxford in 1879. He had for years devoted himself to the task of stirring up the public mind to some enthusiasm on the subject of Wiclif's memory; and it was mainly to his exertions that Quincentenary commemorations were held in the above and preceding years at London, Dublin, and elsewhere. He hoped, with the "assistance of members of the University, to hold some such Wiclif commemoration at Oxford, but it was put off to another year. Meanwhile this excellent man died of a bronchial attack, brought on by his exertions in the cause.

It must be confessed that there did not seem to be much heart at Oxford for the proposed celebration; but it is possible that this lukewarmness might have been more the result of a want of accurate knowledge than anything else. That defect was certainly shared by the present Lecturer, who soon discovered how unsatisfactory were all the usual sources of information on the subject. He can only claim for these Lectures that they are the fruit of an honest attempt to understand the many problems which gather round the career of Wiclif. It will be observed that no one of the authors cited is implicitly followed; for no one of them can be exempted from independent criticism.

Perhaps Dr. Cather aimed at too much when he pleaded for commemorations of particular events in different years of the life of the great Reformer. Is it not possible that the country might yet, in the course, of the next two or three years, become sufficiently interested in this extraordinary man to encourage some more general demonstration of respect and admiration than has yet taken place, a demonstration which would appropriately connect itself with the year of his death, 1384?

Oxford, Christmas, 1881.

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LECTURE I

THE HISTORY AND PRESENT STATE OF THE WICLIF LITERATURE

In this University it would be unnatural to begin a review of the history of the Wiclif Literature without referring to one familiar name. Twenty-three years ago the only Oxford man who had in modern times made, as far as we know, a real study of Wiclif, Dr. Shirley, Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History, died early in life, and just when he seemed to be about to do great things. His present reputation rests, and deserves to rest, on the advance he made beyond his predecessors in the classification of Wiclif's works, and on the Preface which he prefixed to the "Fasciculi Zizaniorum," the collection of documents which he edited in 1858 for the Master of the Rolls. That Preface was but a fragment, but it attracted an attention far beyond what might have been expected from its bulk. It was to have been followed by a complete edition of Wiclif's English works, and by a digest of his life and opinions, which would no doubt have been extremely valuable.

Some of these works have, since Dr. Shirley's death, been printed, in accordance with his wish, by the University Press, and edited by Mr. Thomas Arnold; some others have seen the light within the last few months under the auspices of Mr. Matthew and the Early English Text Society. All this is valuable work; and Mr. Matthew's Preface is a distinct gain. But the full estimate of Wiclif's historical position has been made by no English hand. Like many other things which we should have done ourselves, it has been left to the Germans, among whom Professor Lechler, of Leipsic, must be especially mentioned. Utilising with great skill the labours of Dr. Vaughan, Dr. Shirley, and others, he has given us a most

laborious and scientific treatment of the subject in all its various bearings, and he has fortunately found an excellent editor and translator into English in Dr. Peter Lorimer. He also writes from the elevated stand-point of one who has studied Wyclif's great series of Latin manuscripts, still lying unprinted in the Imperial Library at Vienna. It is, indeed, perfectly certain that a final estimate of the opinions and position of the man can never be attained until we have the whole of his writings before us, until the difficult process of sifting out the spurious works attributed to him has been completed, and until their chronological sequence has been determined by the critical examination of several competent scholars. But enough has been already done to demand a notice in this University, and to afford a fair assurance that we shall not have to retrace our steps in any such way as to make our present work a waste of time.

ERRORS OF MODERN WRITERS.

And the circumstances of the case admit of no delay. Let any one who has surveyed the field of knowledge even now available for students of the Wyclif Literature look round him at the numerous English books which, in some form or other, undertake to deal with the subject. He cannot but observe that both the admirers of the Reformer, even the most industrious, and those who detest his memory, even the least unfair, have been the victims of the obscurity which has hitherto enshrouded the mighty dead. They have groped about in a most dim and confused light. They have had at their service only portions of the Reformer's works, and they have based their estimate on writings which are not his own. They have too often grounded opinions on isolated passages, and even these in the distorted form of "Articles" unfairly extracted from his

writings by some Synod or Council bent on procuring a condemnation. These deficiencies are most conspicuous in the sketches which appear in our modern summary histories, but they may be more or less generally traced everywhere. Too often, indeed, the public has been at the mercy of those who have used the opportunity to convey their own opinions in the account they have given us of one whose distant orbit places him beyond the range of ordinary observation, though that difficulty has been far from restraining observers within the modest limits of assertion which befit the circumstances.

Nor has this absence of materials been the only difficulty. We are only of late beginning to understand that the contempt and ridicule which has been so much the fashion to visit upon the Scholastic Philosophy of the Middle Ages, should at least be silent in reference to those statements of Wiclif's which are conveyed in language familiar enough in his day, and only obscure to our ignorance. Men forget that they are dealing with the foremost man of his University at one of its loftiest periods, the acknowledged representative of the greatness of Grosseteste and Ockham, the man of whom his bitter contemporary opponent, Knighton, a most competent witness, confessed that he "came to be reckoned inferior to none of his time in philosophy, and incomparable in the performance of school exercises, a man of profound wit, and very strong and powerful in disputations, and who was by the common sort of divines esteemed little less than a god."

OBSCURITY OF MEDIEVAL TIMES.

And if it is high time that some effort should be made to restore this extraordinary man to his true position with regard to the events of his age, no apology is necessary for

making that effort at Oxford. Here, in this very place, under the shadow of buildings not even yet swept away, was, from five hundred to five hundred and fifty years ago, the home and centre of his wonderful career. Is it not from hence that one-sided and partial views of it should be corrected, undue depreciation exposed, the various phases of the storm which has for nearly all this time raged around his memory reduced, if the metaphor be allowed, to some atmospheric law ought it not to be from hence that a fresh start should be made towards rehabilitating the character and position of one respecting whom some, at any rate, hold the deliberate opinion that he stands at the very summit of the eminence which has been climbed throughout the ages by Oxford men ?

At this place it ought not to be necessary, but perhaps even here it may be the best plan, to devote a few minutes to the history of the processes by which the world has come to such knowledge concerning Wiclif as it possesses. We shall then, at any rate, be in a better position to comprehend how it is that such partial and contradictory views on the subject have found favour at various times, and how natural it is that the confusion should have lasted down to our own day.

The study of the Middle Ages has made some progress of late years at Oxford. It will therefore require no elaborate argument to prove that we know exceedingly little about it. With the exception of Chaucer, no English writer of Wiclif's time is read by any but antiquarians. The difficulty of realising the world of the fourteenth century is still enormous. The whole fabric of the Medieval Church, in the midst of which Wiclif's career is enshrined, has undergone such vast changes that people are too apt to forget that there is any continuity between it and the present Church of England. The social and political life of our times

stands as far removed from that obscure age as the literary and ecclesiastical life. No art of printing had as yet transmitted the form and pressure of the times.

But still we have to account for something more than this difficulty of realising the distant and the dissimilar. We do not, for instance, experience it in forming our estimate of Alfred the Great, though double the number of centuries roll between us. Or if we require a better illustration, take the case of Wiclif's own contemporary, the great William of Wykeham; how familiar do we at this place feel with him in comparison! We seem to think with his thoughts, to live in his life; but then he provided a continuous memorial in his magnificent colleges, and in the statutes which have protected and made them famous. His Quincentenary, celebrated of late with all pomp at New College, commanded eloquent eulogy, which passed with the whole country as perfectly appropriate; yet who can doubt for a moment whether he or Wiclif deserves most the respect and admiration of the world?

Wykeham would certainly be unremembered as a divine or as a statesman, though he played his part on the political stage better than most of his contemporaries. His modern fame is due to the wisdom and munificence with which he used the wealth derived from his numerous ecclesiastical preferments in the foundation of the line of our great Public Schools, and in the improvement and completion of the University College system, which had been originated by Walter de Merton. To Wiclif we owe, more than to any one person who can be mentioned, our English language, our English Bible, and our reformed religion. How easily the words slip from the tongue. But is not this almost the very atmosphere we breathe? Expand that three-fold claim a little further. It means nothing less than this:—that in Wiclif we have the acknowledged father of English prose,

the first translator of the whole Bible into the language of the English people, the first disseminator of that Bible amongst all classes, the foremost intellect of his time, brought to bear upon the religious questions of the day, the patient and courageous writer of innumerable tracts and books, not for one, but for all the different classes of society, the sagacious originator of that whole system of ecclesiastical reformation, which in its separate parts had been faintly shadowed forth by a genius here and there, but which acquired consistency in the hands of the master. By him and by those he had trained that Reformation was so firmly planted that it took deep root in the land, and after giving the impulse to similar and later movements on the continent, issued at last in the great system under which we live, one almost identical with that of the Rector of Lutterworth, who died a century and a half before his work had fulfilled its appointed results.

Wiclif founded no colleges, for he had no means; no human fabric enshrines his ideas; no great institution bears his name. The country for which he lived and died is only beginning to wake up to a sense of the debt it owes his memory. And yet so vast is that debt, so overpowering the claim, even when thus briefly summarised, that it might be thought no very extravagant recognition if every town in England had a monument to his memory, and every university and college named in his honour. It is something to be thankful for that a private Theological Hall, bearing that illustrious name, has been recently built in our suburbs.

It will then be at once admitted that Wiclif's reputation has in England by no means kept pace with the modern revival of historical activity. How has his name so strangely dropped out of the place which it should have occupied? How is it that it has taken five centuries to advance so far as even to make the modest claim for his

commemoration which a few persons have ventured of late to press upon the public? This may well precede all other questions.

The primary cause must be looked for in the resolute, persistent, and successful efforts of the ecclesiastics of the unreformed Church to brand the memory of the Reformer with the fatal stigma of "heresy," and, acting under the orders of Synods and Councils, to destroy every vestige of his writings on which they could lay hands. And here let us avoid a too common error.

We are not at this distance of time to imitate the spirit shown by the ecclesiastics of Wiclif's age by speaking of their conduct as if we should have acted differently. That way of speaking has of itself obstructed progress by the unfavourable impression it has produced on fair-minded men. Consider what a portent this Oxford Doctor (or Professor, as he virtually was) must have appeared in the fourteenth century, attacking from his chair, close to this very spot, every portion of the existing Church system, from the Pope at the head to the friar at the foot, not with the vulgar weapons of reckless fanaticism sharpened upon popular prejudice, still less with the weapons of professed unorthodox sentiment, but with the well-tempered steel of philosophical reasoning, based on an appeal to the Scriptures and the Primitive Church, and invested with the defensive panoply of a strictly moral, industrious, self-sacrificing, courageous life. It was no mere University student, no mere learned writer, no fanatic summoning men to come out from an accursed Church and become schismatics. It was the one wise and prudent man on whom kings, princes, and Parliaments relied in their struggles for national liberty, calling upon Churchmen to reform their abuses from within. It was the independent inquirer beseeching men to consider what the Fathers of the First

Ages had taught, and resolutely insisting on that incorporate union between religion and morality, which the corrupt customs and institutions of medievalism had so grievously obscured. Was it wonderful that these customs and institutions, hallowed by the support of good men, each portion of the system having been commenced with applause by the generation which seemed to witness for its necessity, should appeal for protection against the ruthless destroyer? Even minds candid enough to receive some ray & of light might well have failed to perceive in what quarter a substitute for the denounced system was to be found. It is easy enough to forget how plain the road has been made for us by the rude but effective processes of a later generation than that of Wiclif.

Thus to the Church, impelled by wrath and terror, it became a necessity that the writings, and even the translated Bible, of the Reformer, should, if possible, be utterly suppressed. One or other must succumb. Either the Church must be reformed root and branch under this man's teaching, or there must be an entire obliteration of it. There was no middle course. They were successful just so far as this. The name of Wiclif was lost in the subsequent century, or only remembered in connection with what was thought disgraceful.

That Wiclif's teaching was not wholly suppressed and overwhelmed, nay, that his work for the Church made progress underground, in spite of the hand of power, was due to the circumstance that he adopted the Divine model—to the poor the Gospel was preached. His "Poor Priests" (of whom more here-after) reached classes which were freer to receive impressions than the great and literary. His writings, laboriously copied, and all the more precious for the labour which no art of printing had yet facilitated, were treasured up in many a yeoman's farm, in

many a labourer's cottage, and also in the halls of not a few sturdy knights and country gentlemen, who from their place in Parliament exercised some slight influence in mitigation of the wrath with which the new doctrines were assailed. The circulation was secret, a fruit the sweeter because forbidden by those against whose dictation men's consciences revolted; it was influential on the middle class of the nation, not on its prominent men. The very name of the benefactor was, as perhaps he would himself have wished, forgotten in the doctrines which he had been the means of making known; for the dangerous name was naturally omitted. Nor did the Renaissance, which shed such light on everything else, bring Wiclif's name before the world. There was not a single work of his committed to print till 1525, *i.e.* till after an interval of one hundred and forty-one years since his death, and eighty years after printing had been invented; and yet multitudes of books had already issued from the press. Nor was this first book, the "*Triologus*," printed in England, but in Germany. Add to this the effect of the wars and revolutions which convulsed England for the greater part of the fifteenth century. How many a name which would have come down to us with all clearness in other centuries, has emerged from the fifteenth little better than a myth!

But a still more direct cause of the oblivion which befell the name of Wiclif in the times preceding the Reformation was the discredit which attached to it through the fanaticism of so many *of* the "Lollards." The cunning skill which fastened upon the Reformer the responsibility for the levelling and socialistic doctrines of a large section of these men was only too successful; and its influence was so powerful that it has remained to our own day with but little abatement. It may be traced not only in the pages of Lingard, which excites no surprise, but in such a book as

Dean Hook's "Lives of the .Archbishops of Canterbury," where we should hardly have expected to find the venerable author referring to Wiclif's "republicanism" or to the extreme revolutionary principles which he had maintained and propagated." So fatal has been this stigma to the Reformer's fame that it may be well to deal with it before we proceed further with the history of the Wiclif literature.

Proceeding at first from the very natural hostility of his contemporaries, the survival of these charges—so far as it is not the result of mere thoughtless repetition—may be accounted for on two grounds:—(1) the supposed connection of Wiclif with the Insurrection of the Boors in 1381, along with the assertion that John Ball, its moving spirit and the true progenitor of the revolutionary Lollards, professed to have imbibed his views from Wiclif; and (2) the mistakes which have been made in interpreting a scholastic thesis of the Reformer's—that "Dominion is founded in Grace."

The first of these causes of the discredit attached to Wiclif's reputation has been treated by many writers. It has been shown that Ball's so-called confession was not drawn up till forty years after his execution, and even from that questionable document it cannot be gathered that Wiclif ever held any correspondence with the rebels; while the silence or the contemporary Froissart, who treats the insurrection at length, as well as of the later Walsingham, ever ready to fasten upon a supposed flaw in Wiclif's character, outweighs any such vague assertions. The latter writer does, indeed, virtually confute the scandal by connecting the movements with the friars, who had recently become Wiclif's deadly enemies. Wiclif himself notices it as *lamentabilis conflictus* and strenuously defends his followers from the charge of disseminating a spirit or

anarchy and disobedience. But the absence of this accusation from any of the articles officially charged against Wyclif, when it is certain that the most alight and feeble would have been welcome, is of itself enough to settle the question. Dr. Vaughan has well said that "the Reformer always felt his dependence on the civil power, as his only means of protection against the displeasure of the ruling clergy, much too sensibly to allow of his becoming the patron of revolt against the authority of the magistrate." [monograph, p. 263]

As we shall not recur to this subject it may be well to caution the unwary against being deceived by the favorite device of the period following on Wiclif's lifetime, when the Lollards of all sections—and there were many varieties [Under the common name of Lollards was gathered every species of religious malcontent." [Faec. Zizan., p. lxxvii]—were commonly included under the convenient name of Wycliffite's; a practice which has been repeated in later times. This is most unjust. It was to be expected that these poor, persecuted men should degenerate when their leaders were removed by death or silenced by the band of power, that their ignorance and fanaticism should increase as the movement was driven into more and more secret channels, and that rank socialistic extravagances should grow up amongst them. It was the offensive and fanatical conduct of these men which excited attention and provoked repression; but it would be an equally great mistake to suppose that there were not Lollards of a superior type to this. At any rate the Reformer and his "Poor Priests" may be as easily distinguished from the revolutionary men who disgraced the Pre-reformation as Luther and Melancthon from the Anabaptists of Munster. [Mr. Churchill Babington, in his Introduction to Pecock's *Repressor* (Master of the Rolls'

ries), makes the following remark, but it conveys only a part or the truth. There were Puritan, and Puritans: — "The discontented party of the Church of the Fifteenth Century may fairly be considered as precursors of the Reformed Church of the Elizabethan age, while the more extreme portion (to whom the name of Lollards is perhaps now more usually limited) were developed into the Puritanical party of the same period."]

As to the quaint expression, "Dominion is founded in Grace," Dr. Shirley has shown that the second equally quaint, and to us profane, thesis charged against Wiclif, "God must obey the Devil," was used by him as a correlative, by which he sought to repel the extreme inferences apparently capable of being drawn from the first. They were both, in fact, the paradoxical forms in which the schoolmen of the day were accustomed to present their conclusions. It may be worth while to attempt to make them intelligible.

Wiclif found himself confronted with a vast, long-descended system of ecclesiastical domination, which required, if its abuses were to be removed, to be attacked not only by exposure, but by logical proof, suited to the feudal frame-work of existing society. The ecclesiastical system had been studiously built into that frame-work. The mark of a fee-simple, "for ever" had been most carefully stamped on every portion of it, irrespective of all reference to moral fitness or corresponding duty. At least it had come to this. His object was to show that the system was under no such inherent condition of "for ever," and that its being established was nothing unless it was doing the duty for which it was intended. As "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," so the clergy were established and endowed for the sake of the whole body of the Church; the whole body of the Church did not exist for the benefit of the clergy. The spiritual office was not a