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John Wycliffe's Religious Doctrines

GORDON LEFF

John Wycliffe was the major English Reformer of the Middle Ages. But he was not the 'Morning Star' of the Reformation if by that is meant its direct forerunner. Wycliffe's voice, for all its distinctiveness, was not a lone voice; and its advocacy was less of new doctrines or institutional forms than of spiritual renewal by a return to first apostolic principles exemplified in Christ's life and teachings. Moreover, Wycliffe's main influence was felt not among his Lollard followers in England, even if they did continue into the sixteenth century, but upon John Hus and his followers in Bohemia, where the demand for religious reform fused with the demand for political independence into a wider movement.

Wycliffe's outlook is best understood as a highly individual, often idiosyncratic, development of what may be called an apostolic view of Christian truth, going back, in the form in which he received it, to the apostolic groups of the early twelfth century.¹ It took its inspiration from the image of Christ, derived from the Bible, of a possessionless, homeless wanderer, renouncing all dominion over men and things, and devoting himself to preaching salvation and spiritual ministration. His life, and that of his disciples, were the norm for all Christians, above all those in priestly orders, from the pope downwards. True Christian discipleship therefore meant a church without temporalities or jurisdiction, and a priesthood distinguished solely by its spiritual qualities of life in emulating Christ's life of temporal renunciation and preaching the gospel. Hence their only identity was a spiritual one as members of Christ's sacramental life. In the circumstances of the time, it contrasted increasingly with the contemporary church's growing visible identity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through the continuing acquisition of temporalities and jurisdictions renounced by Christ. By Wycliffe's time it had become the contrast between an apostolic and a non-, or at least post-apostolic church.²

The distinction represented a new critical attitude to the contemporary church which, in its visible corporate form as a privileged hierarchy, was no longer to be equated with the Augustinian conception of the militant church as God's saving will on earth. Instead, its failings and abuses were to be interpreted as a falling away from Christ, which could only be overcome by restoring the visible church to the apostolic pattern of his earthly life. Christ,

therefore, rather than any human representative, was not only the true head of the church in his divinity, but the judge of the visible church in his humanity. This was a measure of the distance which it had travelled from the traditional conception, and a supreme irony that it came from the appeal to the figure of Christ as a man. That appeal, being founded on the Bible, also gave the Bible a further role as the institutional arbiter of the canonical forms of Christian life as well as the doctrinal arbiter of Christian belief. In combination with a diversity of outlooks—the apocalyptic expectations of the Franciscan Spirituals and other Joachimists, and later the Hussite Brotherhoods, the historical interpretations of the Waldensians and Marsilius of Padua, the denunciations of Dante, among others—the Bible provided the prescriptions for the church's reform to the exclusion of all non-scriptural, purely human ordinances contained in canon law. That was at no time in the Middle Ages a doctrine of *scriptura sola*; the appeal to Christ's example was also an appeal to apostolic tradition. The first was in defence of the second, and for its restoration, not for some new departure in either doctrines or institutions. Rather, it had as its accompaniment what was perhaps the most universal of the new attitudes to religion in the fourteenth century: the displacement of a purely institutional view of the church, conceived in terms of the juridical and canonical authority of its hierarchy, by faith in Christ through participation in his word in the Bible. The distinction between those in orders and laymen was secondary and—for the Waldensians, Hussites, Wycliffe and, in a different way, Ockham—irrelevant. Far from spiritual office sanctifying its holder, it gave no guarantee of spiritual fittedness. The only test of that was conformity to Christ's law contained in the Bible. Far, then, from authority in the church residing exclusively in its hierarchy, failure to live according to Christ could entail the deposition of any or all of its members, and at the hands of laymen: expedients given expression in conciliar theory in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the need to resolve the Great Schism (1378–1417), and a further sign of a wider and less exclusive definition of the church, even if from a different inspiration.

Wycliffe's religious outlook evolved from the apostolic inspiration.³ To it, he brought a metaphysics of extreme realism which invested all essence or natures with an independent and indestructible existence as eternal archetypes in God. From that he was able to conclude that the church, God's word in Scripture, and the bread and wine in the eucharist, all existed, and continued to exist truly in their archetypal reality, outside their visible transient existence in this world with, as we shall see, far-reaching consequences. In giving his religious conceptions a metaphysical foundation—and an extreme one which went further than any one else in the same direction—Wycliffe arrived at new interpretations of

the church, its relation to Scripture, and the eucharist, which reinforced the more extreme conclusions drawn from the apostolic ideal—above all by Marsilius of Padua, two generations before him, in his *Defensor Pacis* published in 1324.

In common with Marsilius and most of the upholders of an ideal apostolic church, the centre of Wycliffe's religious doctrines was the relation of the Bible to the church. That was not, as used to be believed, from upholding a doctrine of *scriptura sola*, any more than it was among his contemporaries and predecessors. Wycliffe certainly revered the Bible as the repository of all truth eternally given. But of itself that would hardly have undermined the church if he had not—again like his predecessors and contemporaries—at the same time denied the church's authority. He did so from an application of his metaphysical principle to apostolic principles. On the one hand, the Bible as God's word was true in itself for all time. On the other hand, the church in its unchanging archetypal being was to be sought not in its temporal form in the world, but in the essence in which God had eternally conceived it—out of the world. The true nature of the Bible and the church were not therefore contradictory; but since only in the Bible was God's eternal word revealed in this world, it must be taken to point to the true nature of the church, which is not to be found in this world. The truth of the Bible was ever-present in its every word, although Wycliffe was compelled, by the arguments of opponents at Oxford, to modify his earlier strictly literal interpretation. Every part of it nevertheless had to be accepted absolutely without qualification; it contained all that was to be known, and it could not be modified.⁴ Its truths, though, were not all equally accessible, and it needed the help of reason, as it conformed to Wycliffe's own brand of metaphysical truths, and the testimony of the saints and canonical authorities, among whom Augustine was pre-eminent, to elicit its implicit meanings. Together they constituted the *sensus catholicus*, a further indication that Wycliffe did not take the Bible alone in isolation from authentic catholic tradition.⁵ It was the purely human laws of the recent church which he opposed. In order to combat them, as well as any wrong interpretations—even among the Fathers—every believer had an obligation to know Scripture and defend it. That was where biblical fundamentalism bit: it meant the exclusion of the visible church in its existing post-apostolic form from the dialogue between the believer and tradition. In its place was God's Word fittingly interpreted; it became the mediator between God and man, and even when it could not be comprehended, its words must nevertheless be adhered to.

It was there, in appealing to Scripture over the heads of the hierarchy and at the same time disavowing the hierarchy in the name of Scripture, that the force of Wycliffe's doctrine of the Bible lay. If the reason was historical, in the post-apostolic church's betrayal of

Christ's teachings, the grounds were metaphysical. They provided him with the means for rejecting the present visible church in the name of its true archetypal reality, which existed independently and eternally. He thereby translated Augustine's eschatological division of the faithful into the two cities, into an eternal metaphysical division between the damned and the saved. Where St Augustine, in his *City of God*, had treated them all as members of the church in this world, Wycliffe foreshortened the process by making them from the outset what they were for all eternity. Only the elect, therefore, were ever part of the church, even in this world; and the damned were forever excluded from it. Each represented a separate reality which could not even merge temporally.⁶

The effect was to transform the traditional meaning of the church from the communion of all believers into the body of the elect—Wycliffe's definition. Those who were truly of it were bound together eternally by the grace of predestination, enabling them to remain in a state of election until the end, immune from the consequences of mortal sin. And the church was in being wherever the elect were. Like everything else it had always existed archetypally, and so before the incarnation. So correspondingly had the damned; they were equally of one congregation—composed of the three classes of infidels, heretics, and those not chosen—with Antichrist at their head. In lacking the grace of election, their grace in this world, however great, did not suffice for salvation; they therefore remained in mortal sin, even when temporally in grace.⁷ Each body was accordingly eternal and its membership irrevocable.

The overriding consequence of their division was the denial of any visible identity to the church. In contrast to his insistence upon the sovereignty of every word in Scripture, reiterated in work after work, Wycliffe equally never ceased to stress that, in this world, neither the saved nor the damned could be known, save by a special revelation.⁸ In the context of Wycliffe's conception, such ignorance was disruptive of any ecclesiastical authority. If only the chosen were of the church, and they could not be known, there was no reason for accepting any visible priestly authority, or indeed for such authority at all, since in keeping with Wycliffe's metaphysics, the saved and the damned remained what they were, regardless of what happened in this world.

Wycliffe fully accepted those implications. On his definition, the church needed neither priests nor sacraments, merely conformity to God's Word and catholic tradition in the sense defined earlier. Yet Wycliffe could not entirely abandon himself to the full rigour of his own doctrine. He neither went the whole way in rejecting the sacraments or the hierarchy, nor was he prepared to leave those who violated God's law to their future judgement by God. Like so many later medievals, he was obsessed by the presence of Antichrist in the

church, which the outbreak of the Great Schism in 1378 appeared to confirm; and Wycliffe, in the growing stress of his hostility towards all forms of religious authority in his last years, came to identify the whole endowed church with Antichrist as the church of the damned.

There was therefore an ambivalence in Wycliffe's attitude to the church, between his metaphysics and his moral and religious attitudes, which finally became irreconcilable. On the one hand, since the church was constituted of elect, who were unknown, there could be no warrant for the authority of any pope, prelate or priest; they might all be of the damned, and if they were (itself beyond visible proof) they should not be obeyed. At the same time, equally destructive of the notion of a hierarchy, every member of the elect, as alone of the true church, could be ordained of God, and so any layman could receive orders from him. As Wycliffe expressed it, there was no need to be a cleric in order to be a priest,⁹ a view echoed over the preceding three centuries by every heretical group and to be re-echoed by the Lollards and the Hussites, taking it to the threshold of the Reformation. That gave a licence for making God's word in the Bible the sole criterion of truth and authority in conformity with the *sensus catholicus*. On the other hand, Wycliffe, for all his willingness to discount the hierarchy as metaphysically unverifiable, could not resist applying the same catholic sense to judge it, according to whether a priest or pope conformed to Christ's teaching known in God's Word. Fundamentalism was made to serve pragmatism as well as metaphysics. Logically it flawed his system; psychologically it gave him the best of two worlds, which he exploited to the full. He at once denied that any pope or priest could claim to exercise authority without a special revelation¹⁰ (itself beyond visible proof) and he used the Bible as authority for denying most of the attributes of the existing church—its wealth, hierarchy, coercive power, independent jurisdiction, the very existence of offices such as those of the pope and cardinals for being unscriptural—and to condemn those involved in them as betrayers of Christ. Here Wycliffe drew upon the apostolic ideal as enunciated above all by Marsilius of Padua, although without mentioning his name.

With Marsilius he saw the cause of the church's loss of its original apostolic purity in the so-called Donation of Constantine, an eighth-century forgery but taken as authentic until exposed by Laurenzo Valla in 1440, purporting to be the first Christian emperor's legacy to the church, in the person of the pope, of his western possessions. For Wycliffe, with characteristic lack of constraint, Pope Sylvester I, in accepting them, committed the crime of secularization, leading to the growth of a 'Caesarian' hierarchy, civil involvement and priestly avarice, the worst of all heresies. The only path of return to Christ was for the church to renounce that property and jurisdiction for ever.¹¹ In Wycliffe's culminating theological phase, in

the last eight years of his life, beginning with *De Civilis Dominio*, that demand became a call to disendowment as the accompaniment of his offensive against the contemporary church. In his *De Potestate Pape*, written in 1379, it led to a rejection of the church hierarchy altogether: both on theological grounds, that spiritual power was of its nature entirely independent of human agency; and on the scriptural grounds, already developed by Marsilius of Padua, to deny the Petrine basis of papal primacy or indeed, as already mentioned, the scriptural basis for the existence of popes and cardinals at all. Both grounds confirmed his metaphysical grounds, formulated just previously in his *De Ecclesia*, for refusing an inherent claim to office to any pope or priest as lacking an inherent title to membership of the church. Metaphysically, theologically, and scripturally, the path to religious authority was barred; morally it led undeviatingly to Antichrist and eternal damnation. As with Marsilius, only the layman could win. But where for Marsilius it was as a citizen of a republic, for Wycliffe it was as an individual member of the true church—the saved layman—or as king, who was also the ruler of the church as well as of his temporal subjects, a difference which at once expressed a different ecclesiology and a different political tradition. What was common to both was the same appeal to an apostolic view of the church to deny it, in the name of Christ, any independent temporal dominion or judicial standing, thereby striking at the very institutional existence of the contemporary church as it had developed since the so-called Gregorian reform in the eleventh century. For both Marsilius and Wycliffe reform of the church consisted in its dissolution and disendowment by the lay power.

In Wycliffe's case it received a theological justification in the superior authority which the king had received from God. There, too, he went further than anyone else. In his *De Officio Regis*, written also in 1379, he compared the difference between the king's power and the church's power to the difference between Christ's divinity and Christ's humanity.¹² The king, as God's vicar, stood apart from the rest of mankind; to resist him was to sin. Even tyrants were divinely ordained and had to be suffered, provided the evil was not to God,¹³ a familiar Augustinian argument, which was again reinforced by Christ's—rather than Paul's—injunction to obey the king. Unlike Augustine, though, Wycliffe shared the view of Aquinas that kingship or lordship was inherent in all human association and had existed before the Fall. Since the church's secularization, that lordship extended to the church's temporalities, over which the king could exercise the same coercive power as he had received from God over all his subjects. It included the power to correct and banish evil priests, sequestrate church property, even demolish churches in an emergency and convert them into towers for defence. The entire church must be obedient to the king—including

the pope over matters of patronage—as the saints were during their time in the world. Whereas a pope could be deposed, disobeyed, corrected and denied, to lay rulers there must be universal submission.

Once again the demands of practical morality overrode metaphysics and ecclesiology; metaphysically there was no more means of knowing whether a king was damned or saved than a priest. Wycliffe's doctrine of royal power, in his *De Officio Regis*, thereby effectively superseded his earlier doctrine of dominion, in *De Civilis Dominio*, dating from 1376, that only grace could confer temporal lordship.¹⁵ On the one hand, the church was excluded from civil and spiritual jurisdiction on metaphysical and biblical grounds. On the other, kings and secular lords, to whom the doctrine of dominion and grace could have applied with most force, were expressly endowed by Wycliffe with divinely ordained authority, the sanction for which he found, not surprisingly, in Scripture, with everything else. Even without it, his notion of dominion and grace, which he had adapted from Richard FitzRalph, was singularly devoid of immediacy for exactly the same reason as was his notion of the saved or damned pope or layman. Like the rest of Wycliffe's treatment of the church hierarchy, more tangible means were needed to give effect to his beliefs than a general embargo on illegitimate lordship.

For that reason it is misleading to associate Wycliffe's developed outlook with the doctrine of dominion and grace. The reason for its persistence was that extracts from his *De Civilis Dominio*, containing it, were sent by William Courtenay, then Bishop of London, to Pope Gregory XI in 1377, following Wycliffe's summons by Courtenay for preaching against William of Wykeham, probably at John of Gaunt's behest. Their censure by Gregory, in 1378, stuck. But the real significance of the event was that it marked a turning-point in Wycliffe's thinking into the full-fledged anti-sacerdotalism, just stopping short of anti-sacramentalism, which characterized the last six years of his life. It had its final outcome in his doctrine of the eucharist.

Unlike the doctrine of dominion and grace, his view of the eucharist grew directly out of his metaphysics. Its formulation in *De apostasia* and *De eucharistia*, both written in 1379, led at once to the end of his career at Oxford for the censure—again not of heresy—that it incurred, and set the seal on his opposition to the contemporary church. After his withdrawal from Oxford to Lutterworth in 1381, he spent the remaining three years until his death indicting the entire ecclesiastical and religious hierarchy—the Caesarian clergy—including his erstwhile allies, the Friars, as Antichrist. Foremost among Antichrist's badges was their support for the doctrine of transubstantiation. Paradoxically, its denial by Wycliffe also became the badge of heresy among Wycliffe's Lollard followers, and the Hussites, but without making a Wycliffe a heretic.

The question of transubstantiation largely dominated the thinking of his last five years.¹⁶ For the previous fifteen years he had tried various ways of reconciling it with his own doctrine of the indestructibility of being. His own attempts, singular though they were, were, like his other doctrines, part of a long succession going back to the eleventh century. Nor did he ever deny the universally accepted theological truth that the bread and wine of the host became converted into Christ's body and blood. What he rejected was the accompanying belief that, after their conversion, all that remained of the bread and wine were their appearances, together with the accepted explanation, deriving from Aquinas, that the appearances were maintained by the 'quantity' belonging to the real bread and wine before their transubstantiation. Ockham had also challenged that explanation—not the occurrence—on opposite grounds to Wycliffe, namely, that all being was individual substance which was inseparable from 'quantity'.

For Wycliffe the inseparability of quantity, or any other accident, from substance was ontologically impossible from the nature of being. To begin with, an accident, whether a quantity or a quality, could not exist without a substance, because it was defined in relation to a substance. To make one separate from the other would also undermine all knowledge, since it would destroy all certainty and make everything illusory by not being able to pass from appearances to their underlying reality. It would also lead to idolatry in worshipping accidents, as that which was inessential and the lowest form of existence, instead of Christ's body. Conversely, to identify the real substantial bread and wine with Christ's body and blood would lead to the opposite blasphemy of associating him with what was material and corruptible. His blood would then putrify, or become sour with the degeneration of the bread and wine, be broken and eaten by priests or animals, and his blood spilt if the wine was upset. It also led to the supreme sacrilege that the priest, through speaking the words of consecration, could make Christ's body, whereas in fact the words were merely an instrument through which God worked the transformation—a further instance of Wycliffe's rejection of human powers in effecting the sacraments. Finally, the disappearance or annihilation of the bread and wine would mean the destruction of all matter—whose archetype they shared—and so the destruction of the universe, implicating God in the annihilation of his own creation.

To this characteristic combination of the tangible and impalpable, Wycliffe brought his own solution, which was that transubstantiation consisted not in the physical transformation of the bread and wine into something else—Christ's body and blood—but the coming of something new in Christ's advent to the bread and wine. That advent transubstantiated the bread and wine, not physically, but figuratively

or sacramentally, as now containing, or coexisting with, Christ's presence. It was a real presence, but spiritual, although Wycliffe never specified what that meant. Hence the transformation of the bread and wine was both natural and supernatural; they remained bread and wine but they also became sacramentally Christ's body and blood—in Wycliffe's words, 'The body of Christ in the form of bread and wine'. Like Christ, it had a dual nature: in its earthly aspect as bread and wine, in its divine aspect as Christ's body. It thereby came close to the later doctrine of consubstantiation.

Independently of the tenability of Wycliffe's explanation, he at least thought that he had not denied the truth of the doctrine; and as with all his positions, he invoked the *sensus catholicus* in his support, arraigning the modern church for being in error. Nevertheless, his doctrine of the eucharist became one of the hallmarks of subsequent Lollard heresy, known as 'remanence' for affirming the continuance of the substance of the bread and wine. As such it was perhaps a measure of how far Wycliffe had departed from orthodoxy. While each of his positions was founded in contemporary attitudes or traditional doctrine, their ultimate effect was the rejection of traditional doctrine over the central questions of the nature of the church, the role of the Bible, the authority of temporal rulers, and the eucharist. In every case the appeal was to the one palpable criterion of God's word in the Bible to supplant the authority of the church by individual judgement, and it was founded upon a set of metaphysical beliefs which effectively freed individual believers, kings, the sacraments and the eucharist, and finally belief itself, from the mediation of the church. That Wycliffe never went to the point of complete emancipation from its authority, but sought spiritual reform within its institutional renewal, kept him within the Middle Ages while pointing in the direction of the Reformation.

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NOTES

- 1 For the background, see G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester 1967), vol. I, Prologue; R. I. Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy* (London 1976); M. D. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy* (London 1977).
- 2 See G. Leff, *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook* (New York 1976), ch. 4.
- 3 For a fuller account of what follows see G. Leff, 'John Wyclif, the Path to Dissent', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LII, 1966, pp. 143–80 and Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, II, ch. 7.
- 4 *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, 3 vols (Wycliffe Society [WS], London 1905–7), I, pp. 1–2 and *passim*.
- 5 *Trialogus* (Oxford 1869), bk III, ch. 31.
- 6 *De Ecclesia* (WS 1886), pp. 2, 7.

- 7 *ibid.*, pp.8, 63, 99, 102–3, 106, 139.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.251; also *De Civili Dominio*, 3 vols (WS 1885, 1900, 1903–4), I, p.25.
- 9 *De Officio Regis* (WS 1887), pp.134, 149; also *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, II, p.248; *De Ecclesia*, p.577; *De Eucharistia* (WS 1892), pp.98–9.
- 10 *De Potestate Pape* (WS 1907), p.179; *De Ecclesia*, p.31; *De Civili Dominio*, I, p.387.
- 11 *Opera Minora* (WS 1913), pp.204, 206; *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, I, p.70; *De Civili Dominio*, III, pp.59, 217; *De Blasphemia* (WS 1893), p.61.
- 12 *De Officio Regis*, pp.13, 16, 137, 143.
- 13 *ibid.*, pp.4–6, 346.
- 14 *ibid.*, pp.61, 64, 71, 84, 97, 188, 207.
- 15 Vol. I, *passim*.
- 16 For what follows, see Leff, 'John Wyclif, the Path to Dissent', pp.177–9; Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, II, pp.549–57; and G. Leff, 'Ockham and Wyclif on the Eucharist', *Reading in Medieval Studies*, II, 1966, pp.1–13 and references.