

heretic lives

Medieval Heresy from Bogomil and the
Cathars to Wyclif and Hus

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PROFILE BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

HERIBERT'S WARNING

'**a** new heresy is born in this world and in our days.'

So declared the Monk Heribert at the turn of the first millennium. Addressing himself to 'all Christians in the Orient and in the Occident, North and South, who believe in Christ', he warned that a new heresy was being spread throughout Périgord by 'men of iniquity' who claimed the authority of the Apostles.¹ Displaying a horror soon to be characteristic of the 'orthodox' Christians throughout Europe, Heribert sought to secure their well-being from the perilous doctrines advanced by these new preachers of iniquity.

The heretics Heribert had discovered were, as he saw them, pseudo-apostles bent on undermining the integrity of the faith and on converting people to their error. Though false apostles, they seemed to live chaste and pious lives, which was all the better for undermining the Church. Pretending to follow the apostolic life, they did not eat meat, did not drink wine except on the third day, and refused to accept money. They were often found in prayer, genuflecting a hundred times a day, and were active and successful missionaries and preachers. Heribert alleged that they had 'corrupted and brought to them numerous people, not only laypeople, who have given up their belongings, but also clerics, monks, and nuns'.² In their simple life of preaching and poverty, the heretics might seem to be following the core teachings of the Church, in a resumption

of the apostolic life, but, he contended, the appearances were deceiving. The heretics might have adopted the apostolic life, but they followed it imperfectly because they had rejected the core teachings of the Church itself. They were ‘perverse’ and ‘hidden and deceptive’, and entered churches only to corrupt others. They denied alms had any value and, rejecting all property, held all wealth in common. The heretics also rejected the mass, maintaining that the Eucharist was nothing more than a piece of blessed bread. They might attend mass, but only as a pretence and so that they might corrupt others and lead them to turn their backs on the altar. They took communion but threw the host behind the altar or placed it in the missal instead of eating it, like good Christians. They rejected the cross and accused those who honoured it of being idol-worshippers, and they refused to pray like the ‘orthodox’ and proclaim: ‘For yours is the Kingdom, and you rule all creatures for ever and ever, Amen.’³

Beyond their rejection of Catholic doctrine and adoption of unorthodox teachings, the heretics were able to ‘perform many wondrous feats’.⁴ Not only could they convert members of the laity and priests, monks, and nuns to their ways; once converted, the new heretics could not be turned back to the true faith. ‘No one,’ Heribert asserted, ‘no matter how rustic, adheres to their sect who does not become, within eight days, wise in letters, writing and action, [so wise] that no one can overcome him in any way.’⁵ Heribert then goes on to describe a spectacular miracle, which he claims to have witnessed himself. A group of heretics were bound in chains and placed in a wine barrel which was open at the bottom and shut at the top. The barrel was then turned over and guards were set over it. On the following morning, the heretics were gone, and, inside the barrel, a vase which had had but a little wine in it was found to be full.⁶ The letter concludes with references to numerous other marvellous deeds and a final warning that the heretics were invading Périgeux and other areas.

Heribert does not identify the leader of the group of heretics in the region of Périgord. In this respect his account differs from the reports of many later writers on heresy, but it features numerous of the central themes in the development of heresy in the Middle Ages, as well as some of the challenges facing those who attempt to find out about the lives of medieval heretics.

Some of the most serious challenges concern the documents themselves: Heribert’s letter demonstrates, better than almost any other one from the Middle Ages, the difficulties of using these documents. On one level, like most of the

available sources, the letter was clearly written by a good Catholic, a monk who clearly sought to warn his fellow Christians against 'heretics'. The letter was written by one of the victors in the great struggle between heresy and orthodoxy in the Middle Ages and bears the mark of the biases held by members of the orthodox clergy. It was the clergy who possessed the truth; the doctrines and dogmas sanctioned by the Church were the only true teachings, and those perceived as offering something different, even if that was based on the Gospels, were deemed to be in error. Moreover, the heretics are not allowed to speak for themselves; their teachings, and the motivations they had for accepting and spreading those teachings, are based on the interpretations of Heribert, and these were in all likelihood based on a stock collection of beliefs drawn from St Augustine of Hippo and other earlier writers, who had outlined what the heretics were supposed to believe. Although Heribert did not ask the leading questions that the Inquisitors would raise in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, he was influenced in his account by literary traditions which described the beliefs of the heretics from the earlier history of the Church.

Even though the sources themselves are often problematic, they can nevertheless offer important information about the emergence and nature of heresy, as does the letter of Heribert. The letter, known for some time from a twelfth-century copy but recently found in a manuscript of the eleventh century, provides evidence concerning the origins of medieval heresy. It has traditionally been taken to demonstrate the influence of Bogomil missionaries on the emergence of heresy in western Europe, and it has been suggested that the arguments which apply to the twelfth-century document hold just as well for the eleventh century. Arguments in favour of reading the letter as an authentic eleventh-century document remain controversial, but, if the letter of Heribert is accepted as a reliable account, it would provide evidence for the early arrival of the Bogomils and would reinforce the opinion of those who accept Bogomil's influence on the heresy of Stephen and Lisois. Even if the leaders of the heresy at Orléans were not influenced by the Bogomils, it is generally held that missionaries from Bulgaria, preaching a message first taught in the tenth century by the simple village priest Bogomil, helped to shape the teachings of the Cathars, whose popularity in southern France had a dramatic impact on the career of Count Raymond VI of Toulouse.

Heribert's letter is also suggestive about the nature of the heretics' beliefs

in his day and throughout the later Middle Ages, and it indicates the possibly dualist nature of medieval heresy. Bogomil and generations of his followers taught a Christian dualism that emphasised the transcendent nature of God and the authority of the devil over the world. The rejection of meat and wine by Heribert's heretics may well reveal a Christian dualism which identified the material world as inherently evil. Their prayer recalls that of dualists of the eastern Mediterranean, and their rejection of images of Christ on the cross and of the Eucharist is also indicative of a rejection of the material world. These teachings gained increasing prominence among heretics in southern France, Italy and other parts of Europe in the mid-twelfth century and were among the core beliefs of the Cathars, whose movement was perceived as the greatest threat to the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. The Cathars' challenge was deemed to be so serious that it inspired the Church to launch a crusade and the Inquisition to destroy their movement. These efforts ultimately proved successful, even though it is sometimes said that the crusade did more to damage southern French culture and independence than it did to destroy heresy. The Cathar heresy, however, proved to be attractive to many Christians throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries despite the extent of the persecutions it provoked, and one final flourishing of the heresy took place under the direction of Pierre Autier and his followers in the early fourteenth century.

Even if the heretics in Heribert's letter were not Christian dualists, they did seek to live the apostolic life and did base their teachings on the Gospels. Devotion to the scriptures and the life of Christ and the Apostles was promoted by all the leading heretics, whether dualist or not. The evangelical life was the most important model of Christian piety throughout the Middle Ages, and the heretics of Périgord adopted this model in their ascetic lifestyle, refusal to accept money, attention to prayer and active missionary work. Indeed, the life of active preaching and poverty emerged as a core value for heretics from Bogomil to Pierre Autier. The great leaders of heresy of the twelfth century, most notably Henry the Monk, took up the life of missionary preaching, condemning the failures of the Church and seeking to promote a more pure and pristine version of the faith. Attracting a large, although short-lived, following, Henry sought to restore the Church to its original, apostolic purity, and the power of his preaching encouraged many to give away their worldly possessions. More successful and long-lasting was the movement initiated by Valdes

of Lyons, whose heresy was firmly based on the Gospels and the apostolic life. The very essence of his heresy involved the life of preaching and poverty, and his and his followers' unwillingness to give up the practice of preaching led to their denunciation by the Church and ultimate condemnation as schismatics and heretics. The group at Périgord may be said to have also anticipated the radical and violent apostolic movement of Fra Dolcino, whose extreme devotion to the apostolic life led to the outbreak of attacks on the Church and its representatives. Despite their strict adherence to the apostolic life, Valdes, Henry, and the sectaries of Périgord were deemed heretics because of their rejection of Church authority and criticism of ecclesiastical materialism – being too good a Christian was at times as big a problem as not being Christian enough.

Heribert's letter, in reviewing the nature of the heresy at Périgord, thus traces the basic outlines of heresy, especially popular heresy, in the Middle Ages. It reveals the essential problems the documents pose, and it illustrates the basic character of heresy from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. It also hints at the emergence of a different kind of heresy in its report on the miracles and prodigies associated with the heretic movement of Périgord, which had an apocalyptic flavour.⁷ Apocalyptic and prophetic sentiments were very important in the development of medieval religious beliefs, both orthodox and heterodox. Apocalypticism fuelled the violent movement of Fra Dolcino and the Apostolici or Apostolic Brethren. Their eschatological expectations drove them to renounce both material possessions and the authority of the Church and to open warfare between members of the movement and the Church itself. A rough contemporary of Dolcino, Marguerite Porete also cultivated a prophetic and mystical belief that undermined the traditional role of the Church in society and in the plan of salvation. Marguerite Porete was a member of the Beguine Movement, which adopted an apostolic lifestyle, and her *Mirror of Simple Souls* was a handbook of the spiritual life and mystical path to God that offered a means to salvation independent of the Church. Her execution was a reminder of how sternly the Church was prepared to deal with those who questioned or undermined its authority.

The dedication to the apostolic life and the desire to return to the true Christian path revealed by the heretics at Périgord also found expression in learned circles. Indeed, leading heretics in the Middle Ages were found not only among the 'rustics' mentioned in Heribert's letter but also among the most educated

members of society. Two of the greatest and most influential of the medieval heretics were the trained and learned theologians John Wyclif and Jan Hus. Their teachings examined some of the central doctrines of the Christian faith and came to conclusions that anticipated the teachings of Martin Luther. Motivated by many of the same concerns that inspired earlier heretical leaders, Wyclif and Hus applied their vast learning to questions of religious belief and practice and to the proper ordering of the Church in society. Their conclusions, like those of their many predecessors, rejected the teachings of the 'orthodox' Church and led to their eventual break with it or even, in Hus's case, to a fiery end.

The outlines of the history of heresy in the Middle Ages can be seen in the letter of Heribert. Driven by concerns of proper belief and practice, many Christians in the Middle Ages were condemned as heretics by an increasingly hierarchical and powerful Church. Responding to the call of the true faith, heretics sought to create a more pure Church and a religious experience that followed the teachings of Christ more faithfully. From Bogomil in the tenth century to Jan Hus in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth, religious leaders outside the boundaries of the Church provided an alternative to the normative Church and its teachings. They offered a challenge to its authority and, at times, faced the full fury of the religious and political leaders of their day. The heretics also contributed to the growth of the medieval Church and influenced the development of orthodox belief and practice. Although many of the heretics faded from the pages of history or suffered a dramatic end, they were a pivotal part of the history of the Church in the Middle Ages and important agents in the evolution of medieval religious belief and practice.

CHAPTER NINE

JOHN WYCLIF: ENGLAND AND THE LOLLARDS

According to an English chronicler writing about the year 1382, ‘In those days flourished master John Wyclif, rector of the church of Lutterworth, in the county of Leicester, the most eminent doctor of theology of those times. In philosophy he was reckoned second to none, and in scholastic learning without rival. This man strove to surpass the skill of other men by subtlety of knowledge to traverse their opinions.’¹ Indeed, it was as a teacher of philosophy and theology at Oxford that Wyclif made his name and developed a loyal following among other university masters and students. He also attracted support, as a result of his teaching and theological work, from the nobility, peasantry and parish clergy. He was a profoundly influential scholar, whose teachings had an impact on religious life and thought in England and on the continent, most notably in Bohemia and on the work of Jan Hus. A daring thinker, Wyclif came to challenge much of the traditional theology and ecclesiology of the Church, undermining Catholic doctrine on the sacraments, on the institutional Church and on priesthood. Although he remained in communion with the Church and died hearing the mass, Wyclif faced increasing animosity from those around him even before his death; nothing reflects the changing attitudes toward Wyclif better than the case of a contemporary who changed his description of the Oxford theologian from ‘venerable doctor’ to ‘detestable seducer’.² Wyclif emerged not only as England’s most important heretic but

also as one of its first, since the kingdom had registered very few examples of heresy before the fourteenth century. A man of deep learning, unlike any previous medieval heretical leader in this respect, Wyclif none the less contributed to the emergence of a popular movement in England: the Lollards. This movement lasted into the sixteenth century, when it merged with the Protestant movement. Indeed, in his biblical fundamentalism, in his attitudes toward the priesthood and in related matters Wyclif has sometimes been described as a forerunner of Martin Luther and the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century; this holds especially of his doctrine of the Eucharist, which emphasised the spiritual over the physical.³ Although this topic remains a matter for some debate, Wyclif surely offered a dramatic alternative to the teachings of the Catholic Church and a radical reworking of Christian teaching, which inspired a large national and even international following.

The exact date of Wyclif's birth remains uncertain, but his later scholarly career offers some suggestions for a possible date.⁴ The future Oxford don was probably born at some point in the 1330s, possibly as early as 1330 and most likely not later than 1335/38. Little is known of his early years and of his family, and there is little agreement over the exact place of his birth. It is likely that he came from Yorkshire, but attempts to identify him with a Wycliffe family from a village of that name near Richmond have proved inconclusive. But, even though the exact date and place of his birth remain elusive, it is certain that the intellectual, religious and political developments in England in the mid-fourteenth century shaped Wyclif's mature outlook and influenced the personal development of his later years, which are much better known.

The record of Wyclif's life becomes much better documented after he entered the schools of Oxford, where he was to spend nearly the whole of his adult life and which shaped many of his ideas. His entry to university indicates that he had already received the basic grammar school education. He was most likely ordained a priest in 1351, then joined the Augustinian Order. From here on the events of his life come into clearer focus. He was first noted at Merton College in 1356, where he was a Fellow. He appeared later at Balliol College, where, in 1360, he assumed the position of Master of Arts. His stay at Balliol, however, was relatively short; he seems to have abandoned his post after only a year or so, to take up a curateship in Lincolnshire in 1361. This was the first in a series of ecclesiastical benefices Wyclif held, and, although he most likely took

up residence in Lincolnshire after his appointment, he seems not to have lived there very much. Indeed, as with most of his pastoral appointments, he exercised the office *in absentia*, leaving his routine ministerial duties with another cleric.

Throughout the 1360s Wyclif continued his academic career while acquiring canonries and other Church offices. In 1361 he received the licence to study theology at Oxford for two years, an honour he renewed for another two years in 1368, and in 1372 he became a Doctor of Theology. For part of that period he had lived in rented rooms at Queen's College. In late 1365 he was appointed Warden at Canterbury College by Simon Islip, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had reformed the College to accept secular clergy and not just regular clergy (that is, monks). Wyclif held this position until 1367, when Islip's successor, Simon Langham, ordered him to leave. The new Archbishop decided that membership of the College should be limited to Benedictine monks, as it once had been, and so Wyclif and other secular clergy were no longer welcome. His efforts to fight the ouster, which reached Rome in 1370, proved unsuccessful, and he was ultimately forced to leave the College. This development might explain the vehemence of Wyclif's later criticisms of the monks, since it caused him both personal frustration and financial loss.⁵ Indeed, he would thenceforth be identified as the advocate of those in secular orders and the first university opponent of those in monastic orders.⁶ Despite this setback, Wyclif had already begun to acquire a number of ecclesiastical benefices that would provide him with the resources necessary to survive and continue his studies. In 1362, the university, as it was wont to do for its more promising students, sent a petition for a canonry and prebend in York for the young Wyclif. The request was granted only partially, and Wyclif was given a prebendary at Aust in Gloucestershire, and a canonry in the church of Westbury-on-Trym near Bristol, which he seems to have held until the end of his life, even if he was not there to fulfil his pastoral duties.⁷ In 1368 he was granted a rectory in Buckinghamshire and in 1371 was promised a canonry in Lincolnshire; he held the post in Buckinghamshire until his death but seems never to have actually received the other position. In 1374 Wyclif was granted the rectory of Lutterworth in Leicestershire by the King, in recognition of his services to the crown. Wyclif retired there in 1381 but turned over the parish duties to a curate named John Horn.⁸ And, even though he had accumulated

a number of ecclesiastical benefices, Wyclif seems to have spent most of his time at Oxford, from 1356 to his retirement in 1381.

It was during those years that Wyclif established his reputation as the leading scholar at Oxford, and even in all of England. At Oxford he came into contact for the first time with the nominalism of William of Ockham, which he adopted in his early years, before joining in the general reaction against it. Because philosophy at Oxford was in decline and there were no real philosophers of note either at the university or in the colleges, Wyclif was particularly influenced by scholars of an earlier generation, including Richard Fitzralph and Thomas Bradwardine and the even earlier eminence, Robert Grosseteste. Along with his introduction to higher studies and to the writings of earlier scholars, Wyclif himself began to teach. He gained prominence as a philosophy teacher in the 1360s, identifying himself as a 'real philosopher' rather than a 'doctor of signs'.⁹ As he came to abandon nominalism and establish himself as a philosopher, Wyclif attracted a growing following at the university, in part because his philosophy came to offer certainty. His supporters were also attracted by the depth of his learning; one of Wyclif's rivals, Thomas Netter, admitted that he was 'astounded by his [Wyclif's] sweeping assertions, by the authorities cited, and by the vehemence of his reasoning'.¹⁰ Not content with philosophy, Wyclif began teaching theology in 1371, one year before becoming a doctor in that subject. His philosophical positions, of course, influenced the direction of his theology, and he came to examine a broad range of matters, including the institutions of the Church, the clergy and the Eucharist.

As a scholar of growing renown, Wyclif also wrote some 132 treatises on philosophical, theological and even legal matters, less than half of which survive in English manuscripts; only sixteen of them survive in more than one English copy. His output was significant in all areas. A sufficient number of copies of treatises apparently survived in the generation after his death, before his official condemnation, and his writings also survived outside of England. His works on theological and ecclesiastical matters are perhaps the most numerous; most of his treatises on philosophy were written before 1371, when he turned to theology. Among his works of philosophy are *De actibus animae* ('On the Actions of the Soul'), 1368/69; *De ente praedicamentali* ('On Categorical Being'), 1368–9; *Tractatus de logica* ('Treatise on Logic'), 1371–73; *De ente* ('On Being'), 1371–74; *Summa de ente libri primi tractatus primus et secundus* ('Summa on Being, Book

One, Tracts One and Two'), 1372/73; *Tractatus de universalibus* ('Treatise on Universals'), 1374. In these and other works Wyclif set out his essential philosophical positions, which influenced both his own theology and the work of contemporaries at Oxford and beyond. In terms of metaphysics, Wyclif maintained two basic principles. He believed that 'Nothing is and is not at the same time', a position holding pure negation, and that being exists and was the first unquestionable truth.¹¹ For Wyclif, being is transcendent and all things participate in it, and from this he reasoned that there was a chain of being that led from God to the individual. In this way Wyclif believed that God was irrevocably connected to the world he had created and to all the creatures in it. He also maintained that all being is eternal and that all beings, at all times, are apparent to God. Along with his teachings on being, of importance to Wyclif's later thought was his understanding of universals, which were discussed in his works on being and universals. He derived his ideas on universals from Augustine and believed that all universal concepts have their own subsistence. For Wyclif, universals were a means to understand the world; for all things participate in the universal concept and share a common nature although they are distinct from the universal, and they are made intelligible through that participation.

Perhaps of greater importance than his philosophical writings were Wyclif's many theological and ecclesiastical works, which were shaped by his philosophical assumptions as well as by his own moral values and perception of the institutional Church. These works began to appear in the 1370s, and he continued to produce theological and doctrinal treatises until his death, a number of them during the last few years of his life. But one of his earliest works was a commentary on the entire Bible. At some point between 1370/1 and 1375/6, Wyclif compiled his *Postilla super totam bibliam* ('Afterthought on the Whole Bible'), the only commentary on the whole Bible from the second half of the fourteenth century.¹² The *Postilla* not only considered every book of the Bible; it also emphasised the poverty and humility of the early Church, by way of criticising the Church of the fourteenth century.¹³ The *Postilla* also illustrated Wyclif's growing focus on the Bible and his recognition of the importance of putting the Holy Scriptures at the centre of Christian life. His concerns with the Bible were expressed again in 1378, in his *De veritate sacre scripture* ('On the Truth of Sacred Scripture'). In that same year he wrote *De ecclesia* ('On the Church'), which outlined Wyclif's ideas on the visible and invisible Church

and criticised Pope Gregory XI (1370–78). He continued and sharpened his critique of the Pope and of the institution of papacy in 1379, in *De potestate pape* ('On the Power of the Pope'). These were among several treatises he wrote in the 1370s, in which he considered civil society, the Church, and the relationship between the two. He first explored these matters in *De dominio divino* ('On Divine Dominion') and *De statu innocencie* ('On the State of Innocence') in 1373/74, then more fully in *De civili dominio* ('On Civil Dominion') in 1375–77, and then again in *De officio regis* ('On the Office of the King') in 1379. In the last work, Wyclif stressed the authority of the King over the clergy, recognised his duty to reform the Church – one of Wyclif's greatest concerns – and repudiated some of the opinions voiced in the work on civil dominion.¹⁴ Along with his ecclesiological works of 1379, Wyclif wrote one of his most important and controversial theological works, *De eucharistia* ('On the Eucharist'), which offered his explanation of the nature of the change taking place in the substance of the host – an explanation that was ultimately condemned as heretical. Thus these works defined his position on a wide range of topics and revealed a daring thinker, who offered sometimes radical propositions about the nature of the Church, civil society, priesthood and the sacraments.

Along with his numerous academic treatises, Wyclif composed many sermons, but only a small number of those he delivered survive. These sermons have been collected in the *Sermones Quadraginta* ('Forty Sermons') and used to disseminate his ideas to an audience beyond that of his scholarly works, one which included simple priests. He also produced numerous sermons he did not deliver, written on behalf of other preachers. This body of sermons was designed for use throughout the Church calendar year and pointed out the scriptural readings to be used on various Sundays. Others of his literary sermons were written for various saints' days throughout the calendar and contained comments on the scriptural passages to be used for those services.

Wyclif's activities, however, were not limited to the intellectual field but extended to the political arena, a preoccupation he would also explore in several of his treatises. As early as 1370 or 1371, in his university lectures, Wyclif may have formulated for the first time an opinion on matters of lordship and dominion.¹⁵ In 1371, when he probably first made acquaintance with John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (1340–99), uncle to the future King Richard II, Wyclif was ready to involve himself in England's political life. His political activities may

well have been determined by his growing reputation as a philosopher and theologian; political powers may have seen in him an effective force against the more traditional university scholars of the day.¹⁶ Whatever the reason for his involvement in political matters, Wyclif seems to have taken his first steps in that direction when he participated in the parliament of 1371. At issue was the wealth of the clergy and the rights of the secular authority over ecclesiastical wealth. At the parliament, two Augustinian Friars argued that, in times of emergency, the secular power has the right to seize ecclesiastical property and to impose taxes on the clergy. Wyclif, possibly at the suggestion of John of Gaunt, took up the controversy, arguing on the side of the Augustinian Friars and against the claims of Rome to be exempt from royal taxation at all times.

His position on clerical wealth earned Wyclif the growing hostility of Church leaders but greater support from lay powers, and he would be further involved in political affairs in the coming years. In July 1374 Wyclif was sent to Bruges on a diplomatic mission, as a representative of the King, to join in negotiations with papal legates over the matter of financial payments from the English clergy to the Pope. The discussions were a dismal failure for the crown and an almost complete triumph for the papacy. Wyclif was paid the handsome sum of £60 for his services but was no longer present when the negotiations were completed, and his exact role in them remains uncertain.¹⁷ It is certain, however, that he continued to develop his ideas about the relationship of Church and state, which subordinated the clergy to the King and further enhanced his reputation with the secular leaders of England.

He took part in political affairs on several other occasions in the 1370s, each time advancing the interests of the English government. In 1376, Wyclif promoted the interests of his protector, John of Gaunt, and the claims of the English monarchy against the Good Parliament and William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, who had emerged as an important leader during the meeting and had taken the lead in criticising the King's advisers for corruption and incompetence. Wyclif preached against William, whom he denounced for his worldliness, wealth, excessive devotion to politics and neglect of spiritual duties; he also spoke out against clerical abuses and the wealth of the Church and its ministers. His preaching helped to undo the efforts of the Good Parliament and of William of Wykeham, much to the pleasure of Wyclif's patron, and inspired a move toward reforming the Church and the faith. But his outspoken opposi-

tion to the Church's claims to secular power and wealth brought Wyclif his first taste of trouble. This was from William Courtenay, the Bishop of London, who had spoken in defence of Wykeham. Courtenay summoned the theologian to the episcopal court at St Paul's. John of Gaunt's power and influence served to undermine Bishop William's efforts against Wyclif. The Duke of Lancaster's appearance at the proceedings with his ally, Lord Percy, Marshal of England, led them to break up in disorder; the people of London rioted in support of their Bishop following a bitter exchange between Gaunt and him.¹⁸

Wyclif's political activities took place while he was developing his ideas on civil dominion and reflected the positions he took on behalf of the royal government and his patron. As he had done in earlier years, Wyclif spoke on behalf of the secular authority in 1377 and again in 1378. In 1377 he defended the interests of the government in a dispute over the delivery of gold bullion to the papal court at Avignon, partly as taxes and tithes owed to the papal administration and partly as revenues from benefices which a number of cardinals held in England. As all medieval rulers believed, control over gold was necessary for the strength of the government and of the economy, and so Wyclif was asked whether England

might lawfully for its own defense in case of need, detain the wealth of the kingdom, so that it be not carried away in foreign parts, even though the pope himself demands it under pain of censure and by virtue of the obedience owing to him.¹⁹

As expected, Wyclif's response was fully in the government's favour, and as he had only previously expressed in a short pamphlet. He argued that the papal tax collector, who traditionally took an oath to do nothing to harm the kingdom, had in fact violated his oath. Exporting large quantities of gold, Wyclif reasoned, was so detrimental to the health of the kingdom that the tax collector was guilty of perjury. Citing natural law, the Gospels and individual conscience, Wyclif explained that the government's position was the correct one.²⁰

In October 1378, Wyclif provided support for the state in a highly controversial matter concerning the rights of the Church. He was again called upon by his patron, John of Gaunt. The Duke had ordered his soldiers to enter Westminster Abbey to apprehend two prisoners who had escaped from the Tower of London

and sought sanctuary at the Abbey. The soldiers, violating the Church's ancient right of sanctuary, caught one of the squires and killed the other one, who was allegedly guilty of treason; they also murdered one of the Abbey's servants, who attempted to prevent the arrest. The Bishop excommunicated all those involved in the violation of the sanctuary, and the matter was then brought before the parliament. Wyclif defended the actions of the soldiers, asserting that the prisoner who was killed died while resisting a legal arrest. Wyclif further set out the rights of the civil authority in pursuing a suspect and entering the sanctuary, and also limited the rights of those who claimed asylum in churches. His defence of the Duke and of his men before parliament also formed the basis of his treatise *De ecclesia*. Wyclif's political activities served two important ends: they allowed him to develop his own ideas on secular and religious authority and they secured for him powerful lay patrons, who were to protect him when he faced the threat of excommunication and other ecclesiastical penalties.

Lay protection would be especially important and necessary for Wyclif by the late 1370s, when his teachings had become increasingly radical and critical of the Church. Not only had Wyclif's arguments on civil dominion over the Church and clergy earned him the enmity of the Church hierarchy, but his denunciations of Church power and wealth also raised the ire of the bishops. The first attempts to censure Wyclif came in 1377, a momentous year for the Oxford theologian. His ever more strident criticisms of the papacy did fall on deaf ears, and Gregory XI, perhaps as the result of the complaints of English Benedictines or of some other enemy who sent passages from *De civili dominio*, sent a letter, denouncing Wyclif, which arrived only late in the year 1377, to the Masters and Chancellor of Oxford, the bishops of England and the King, Edward III. The letter included a list of some eighteen of Wyclif's teachings which were deemed offensive. According to the Pope, Wyclif 'has fallen into such a detestable madness that he does not hesitate to dogmatize and publicly preach, or rather vomit forth from the recesses of his breast certain propositions and conclusions which are erroneous and false'.²¹ Gregory also accused Wyclif of 'preaching heretical dogmas which strive to subvert and weaken the state of the whole Church and even secular polity'.²² Wyclif, according to the Pope, was guilty of holding opinions similar to those of such condemned thinkers as Marsilius of Padua and John of Jandun and asserted that only a righteous man may hold authority. The Pope alleged further that Wyclif had led the faithful away

from the true path of righteousness with his false doctrines, including the belief that only God could absolve a penitent sinner, the belief that the Church was made up of those predestined to salvation or foreknown to be damned, and his teaching that the Church, with its claims to power and wealth, had become corrupted. Therefore, reasoned the Pope, Wyclif should be punished. He ordered that the university should no longer allow such opinions as those of Wyclif to be taught at Oxford, under penalty of loss of the privileges received from the Holy See. The Chancellor and Masters were further commanded to arrest Wyclif or have him arrested in the Pope's name and delivered to the Archbishop of Canterbury or to the Bishop of London, where a confession could be extracted from the theologian.

Wyclif himself sent a spirited reply to this letter of condemnation to Gregory's successor, Pope Urban IV (1378–89), asserting his devotion to the faith and especially to the Gospels. He also apologised to the Pope, whom he greeted as a welcome successor to Gregory, for not being able to appear in person in Rome to defend himself, and it seems most likely that Wyclif intended to remain on good terms with the new Pope. An important declaration – but Wyclif was saved not so much by his personal statement to the Pope as by several external developments. The force of the papal declaration was weakened significantly by the death of Gregory and, even more so, by the beginning of the Great Schism, which lasted from 1378 until 1417. Following Gregory's death, two claimants to the papal throne – one in Rome, the other in Avignon – asserted their legitimacy at each other's expense. The Schism divided Europe and caused great difficulty for the established Church, not the least of which was the failure of the papal denunciation of John Wyclif: the attention of the popes was drawn now to matters of state and away from the teachings of an Oxford theologian. Beyond that, however, it is likely that the papal condemnation of Wyclif in 1377 would have failed even without the advent of the Schism. The authorities at Oxford, notably the Master and future Chancellor, Robert Rigg, a great admirer of Wyclif who would remain one of his most ardent supporters, seemed little interested in punishing their most shining star. It may be argued that, even if Wyclif had not been the leading English scholar of his day, the Chancellor and Masters at Oxford would have been reluctant to punish him because they resented papal interference in their affairs. Ultimately, Wyclif and the authorities at Oxford agreed that the don would be held at Black Hall until his teachings

were reviewed; he was subsequently absolved by the university and his teachings were deemed to be true.

But the most important reason why Wyclif was not censured may well have been the support he received from the leading secular authorities in England. Support from figures in high places helped him to avoid an appearance at the episcopal court. When he finally did appear at the Archbishop of Canterbury's chapel at Lambeth Palace to defend himself, he suffered no punishment other than a warning not to spread false doctrines. Not only had the bishops seemed reluctant to pursue the Pope's case, but Wyclif's safety was guaranteed by the Queen Mother, Joan, widow of Edward (the Black Prince) and mother of King Richard II, who had sent one of her knights with the express order that no judgement should be pronounced in the case.²³ His service to the crown and its allies, as a theorist and propagandist, was, and continued to be, of vital importance; hence the members of the royal family supported him against ecclesiastical authorities. Indeed, rather than punish him, the crown sought his advice on the matter of the export of gold. Moreover, the temporal authority surely welcomed Wyclif's increasingly vehement critiques of the Church and of its representatives; the vigorous reforms he promoted would limit the wealth and power of the Church, to the benefit of the crown. Wyclif maintained that it was the crown that was best situated to implement the reformation of the Church, an argument that enhanced his value to his royal and aristocratic patrons. As a result of protection from the Queen Mother, as well as strong support from his university colleagues and the Chancellor, the efforts to condemn Wyclif and his teachings failed in England in 1378, and he continued to teach and participate in the political affairs of the country.

Wyclif's troubles, however, were not at an end. Although the efforts in 1377/8 to condemn him or limit his influence failed, a new process in 1380 was more successful, in part because his own, ever more radical, views increased opposition to him and provided his enemies with more ammunition. Disappointed over the failings of Pope Urban and over the Schism, Wyclif took a harder line on the papacy in his writings of the late 1370s, repudiating the Church hierarchy in its entirety, and laid the foundation for even more extreme statements in his writings of the 1380s. He also produced his massive work on the Bible, which asserted the fundamental truth of the text and maintained that it should be available to all Christians, lay and religious.²⁴ His work on the

Eucharist, however, in which he rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, proved to be most problematic and marked the beginning of Wyclif's transformation, from radical critic and reformer into a heretic, or, as noted by a contemporary scholar, from 'venerable doctor' into 'detestable seducer'.

In 1380, William Barton, Chancellor of Oxford and Fellow at Merton College, established a commission to examine Wyclif's eucharistic teachings. Barton, a doctor of divinity, had long opposed Wyclif's teachings in his own lectures and writings. Now he felt the time was right to take steps against his rival, who had begun to lose support among one of his most important constituencies: the scholars at Oxford in the mendicant orders. Barton appointed twelve doctors to the commission: six mendicant friars, four members of the secular orders and two monks, and it appears from the composition of the commission that Barton, despite his personal opposition to Wyclif's teachings, intended to give Wyclif a fair hearing. One member of the commission was Robert Rigg, who would succeed Barton as Chancellor in 1382; he was a staunch supporter of Wyclif and would suffer for it in the mid-1380s.²⁵ The commission ultimately condemned two of Wyclif's propositions on the Eucharist, but only by the slight majority of seven to five, which reinforces the view that Barton intended a fair hearing. Wyclif's teachings that the substance of the bread and wine of the eucharistic offerings remains after consecration and that the body of Christ is figuratively and not physically present in the bread and wine were condemned as erroneous and a danger to the Church.²⁶ Responding to the commission's report, Barton declared that anyone holding, teaching or defending these views would be imprisoned, stripped of any university function and excommunicated.

Wyclif, however, remained undaunted by the report, asserting 'that neither the chancellor nor any of his accomplices could weaken his opinion'.²⁷ Surprised and disappointed by the decision, he made up his mind to appeal against it rather than accept it. But he would not pursue his appeal in any ecclesiastical court, as both the law of England and the Church required. Instead, Wyclif turned once again to the King, seeking from the crown protection from his ecclesiastical rivals. The King seems to have ignored Wyclif's petition, but John of Gaunt may have become involved. The Duke reportedly travelled to Oxford to discuss the matter with his former client and to convince him to obey the Chancellor's instructions. The Duke's wishes, and the King's unwillingness to entertain the

petition, reveal the growing disquiet among Wyclif's former patrons about the increasingly unorthodox tenor of his teachings. It was one thing to advocate the supremacy of the temporal power over the spiritual in political matters and to condemn the corruption and abuse of the clergy, but quite another to advocate doctrines condemned by the Church as erroneous. As Wyclif's own teachings became ever more extreme, support from his allies in the government and Church began to wane.

Wyclif, despite John of Gaunt's wishes to the contrary, undertook his own defence, publishing his *Confessions* on 10 May 1381. In this tract he defended and reasserted the positions repudiated by the commission, attempting to restore his good name after the condemnation. He railed against the opinions of the commission members and fully stated his positions on the Eucharist against what he considered to be errors of the established Church. He asserted the need for doctrinal change in order to correct the flawed teachings of the Church on the sacrament. But his vehement defence of his own ideas on the Eucharist and demand for their institution alienated the aristocratic and royal patrons who had been essential to his success and whose support would be necessary to implement any of the reforms, doctrinal and institutional, that he advocated.

Wyclif suffered even further erosion of support from his former patrons and other sympathisers as a result of the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt in June 1381. Although it is unlikely that he supported the revolt or that his teachings were directly responsible for it, his enemies surely blamed him and his ideas for it. They were aided by the confession of the one of the revolt's leaders, the priest John Ball, who reportedly declared, just before his execution after the brutal suppression of the revolt, that 'for two years he had been a disciple of Wyclif, and had learned from him the heresies he had taught'.²⁸ Wyclif's reaction to the revolt also undermined any support he may still have expected from society's leaders and added more fuel to the fire for his enemies. He condemned the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury by the rebels while admitting that the Archbishop had been guilty of excessive worldliness; and he denounced the revolt in general, but he argued that the rebels' biggest error was their failure to get support from parliament. He also expressed some sympathy for the rebels, even arguing that they had a legitimate complaint about excessive taxation, for which Wyclif blamed the clergy.²⁹

Following the condemnation of his teachings and the Peasants' Revolt,

Wyclif left Oxford, retiring to his rectory at Lutterworth. There he continued to write at a feverish pace, completing treatises he had begun at Oxford and preparing numerous pamphlets and sermons in attack of the friars, whom he blamed for his exile from Oxford. In his last years, Wyclif completed three volumes on different kinds of heresy: *De simonia* ('On Simony'), *De apostasia* ('On Apostasy') and *De blasphemia* ('On Blasphemy'). In these works, composed in 1381 and 1382, Wyclif offered some words of moderation, in a half-hearted attempt to regain support from his former allies, but mainly criticised the clergy forcefully and endorsed his position on the Eucharist. In his work on simony, which was the sin of the buying and selling of Church offices, Wyclif denounced as simony any form of clerical worldliness and corruption. For him, apostasy included the failure of members of the clergy to live up to the demands of their vocation and the support of the Church's teaching on the Eucharist. In *De apostasia*, Wyclif offered an impassioned defence of his own teachings on the Eucharist as well as denouncing the errors of others. *De blasphemia* is a long and somewhat disorganised catalogue of the sins and abuses of the clergy at all levels, with particular bile reserved for the cardinals and the friars. These works were followed by the *Triologus* ('Dialogue') in 1382 – a discussion between Truth, Falsehood and Wisdom, which offers a summation and restatement of many positions Wyclif took in earlier works, including a commentary on the Eucharist and further attacks on the friars. Of all his works, this was one of the most popular; it was printed at Basle in 1525, offering a possible link with the Reformers of the sixteenth century.³⁰ At the time of his death, Wyclif was working on the *Opus evangelicum* ('Opus on the Gospel'), which revealed its author's respect for the Bible and for Augustine. In the first volume of the *Opus*, Wyclif provided a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, and in the second volume, subtitled *De antichristi* ('On Antichrist'), he discussed the Gospel of Matthew.

Although free to write during his last years, Wyclif was troubled by two major events in his life: further persecution from his enemies and ill health. The hand of his critics was strengthened by the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury because the new Archbishop, William Courtenay, had long led the opposition to Wyclif. As the leading primate in England, he took the initiative to stamp out heresies taking root in the kingdom. He was motivated not only by Wyclif himself but also by Wyclif's supporters at Oxford. Ironically,

the atmosphere at Oxford had improved following Wyclif's departure. A new Chancellor, Robert Rigg, was appointed, who had supported Wyclif at the commission that condemned the theologian and would support Wyclifite scholars after his appointment. In particular, Rigg was an advocate of Nicholas of Hereford and Philip Repton when both took clear Wyclifite positions. When Hereford preached a sermon arguing that clergy in orders, meaning monks and friars, should not be allowed to take a degree at Oxford, Rigg invited him to deliver the second sermon on Ascension Day, at which point Hereford defended Wyclif's teachings.³¹ Similarly, Repton received the enthusiastic approbation of the Chancellor when he defended Wyclif's teachings on the Eucharist and the clergy in a sermon he delivered.

Courtenay, shortly after assuming the see at Canterbury, called a council to condemn the teachings of Wyclif and his followers on 17 May 1382. Known as the Earthquake Council because an earthquake shook London during the meeting – an event seen as an omen both by Wyclif and by his opponents – the meeting was held at the house of the Black Friars in London and would formally condemn a number of Wyclif's teachings. The new Archbishop called together nine bishops, thirty-six theologians and canon lawyers, and a number of lesser clergy to debate twenty-four propositions from Wyclif's writings. After four days of discussion and debate, the members of the council declared ten of Wyclif's teachings heretical; the other fourteen were deemed erroneous. Wyclif's views on the Eucharist, the sacramental powers of the clergy, clerical wealth and papal power were among those declared heretical. Although Wyclif was not excommunicated, his followers were to be punished, and the Archbishop submitted a petition to the government, subsequently approved, which called for the arrest and imprisonment of unlicensed preachers. Courtenay also sent a friar to Oxford, to implement the decrees and enforce the will of the council and of the Archbishop at the university. Despite their efforts on Wyclif's behalf and vocal support of his ideas, the Chancellor and Wyclif's allies buckled under the pressure from the Archbishop. Rigg accepted the condemnation of Wyclif's teachings and published it at Oxford, thus forbidding the dissemination of Wyclifite doctrines there. He also forbade Wyclif and his supporters to teach at Oxford, and both Hereford and Repton were excommunicated for their views, even though Wyclif himself was not placed under the ban.

Along with the condemnation of the Earthquake Council, Wyclif was plagued by strokes, which makes his substantial literary production all the more remarkable. In November 1382 Wyclif suffered his first stroke, a debilitating attack that left him partially paralysed. Despite continued poor health, Wyclif did not stop writing his sermons and treatises. His pastoral duties, however, were undertaken by his curate John Horn, as they had been since his return to Lutterworth. And it is Horn who offers moving testimony on Wyclif's last days and death following a massive stroke on 28 December 1384:

On Holy Innocents' Day, as Wyclif was hearing mass in his church at Lutterworth, just as the Host was elevated, he fell smitten by an acute paralysis, especially in the tongue so that neither then nor afterwards could he speak.³²

He lingered for three days after that and then died on 31 December 1384. Despite the condemnation of several of his propositions, Wyclif remained in communion with the Church and was therefore buried in consecrated ground, in the graveyard at the church of Lutterworth.

Wyclif's story, however, does not end on the last day of 1384, but continues into the fifteenth century, in England and on the continent. The Lollards and various continental theologians and churchmen were influenced by Wyclif's teachings on different matters, and these opinions form Wyclif's greatest legacy. Disseminated by his direct and indirect followers, Wyclif's views on civil dominion, the Bible, the Church and its priesthood, and the Eucharist constitute a powerful body of ideas which in some ways foreshadowed the doctrines of Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers. The Reformation did not arrive in Wyclif's day, of course, but his ideas must be considered in order to understand his importance in the history of the late medieval church.

Among Wyclif's important teachings – although it is not given now the weight it was once believed to have in his thought, and it should not be considered to be part of his broader theological programme – was his opinion on civil dominion.³³ His theoretical preoccupation with matters concerning the state may have attracted his attention to contemporary politics and drawn to him figures such as John of Gaunt. After his publication of the work on civil dominion, Gaunt called Wyclif to London to preach against the bishops, who

came to a very critical opinion of the work, different from the line taken by the Duke of Lancaster.³⁴ Whatever the immediate impact, Wyclif himself would ultimately leave this work behind as he developed his ideas about the Church, but it remains of note none the less, and it helped in bringing him to the attention of the great powers of his day.

Underlying his conception of civil dominion was the belief that all earthly power derives from God's grace. His understanding of dominion drew from such earlier thinkers as Richard Fitzralph, Giles of Rome (through Fitzralph) and Marsilius of Padua.³⁵ He argued that the secular power represented by kings and lords was empowered by God himself and that, as proved by scripture, they had the authority to rule over the Church. Kings and lords must, however, follow the dictates of the Pope so long as they adhere to the teachings of the Gospels, which are the central source of authority for Wyclif in both spiritual and secular matters. On the other hand, Wyclif rejects the authority of the Pope to excommunicate anyone, claiming that only the individual can excommunicate himself through sin. Driving Wyclif's thought on dominion was not only his recognition that the power exercised by kings was scripturally sanctioned, but also his thought that true lordship was characterised by justice, so that, without it, there was no lordship. He did accept that tyrants could rule and were sent to punish sin and establish civil dominion, but a tyrant would not exercise true dominion. Civil law, Wyclif held, was established for the benefit of the community and in order to ensure the safety and necessities of life, but true dominion was exercised only by the righteous; the true lord followed the teachings of the Gospel and had received God's grace.

More important and developed than his expressed views on civil dominion was his understanding of the Church, which had a more lasting and profound impact on his thought than his understanding of grace and dominion had. Worked out in several treatises, including those on the Church, on the King's office, and on the powers of the Pope, his conception of the Church drew from Augustine's *De civitate Dei* ('On the City of God'), but pushed to the extreme Augustine's identification of two cities – the earthly one and the heavenly one.³⁶ Although Wyclif recognised three distinct meanings of the term 'church', he stressed that the true meaning, or the true Church, was that which is made up of the elect. Only those who were predestined to salvation are part of it, and the Church itself is comprised of three parts: 'one triumphing in heaven,

one sleeping in purgatory, and one battling on earth'.³⁷ The saved are bound together by God's grace and constitute the true Church under Christ, just as those not among the elect are bound together for all eternity under the authority of Antichrist.³⁸ The two groups are strictly divided and no one, in Wyclif's view, knows to which group he or she belongs, nor can anyone claim to know or assert that they belong to the true Church, or claim to be its head.³⁹

Wyclif's understanding of the 'true Church' had clear implications for his attitude toward the Church militant and its representatives, the Pope and the clergy. As he declared in *De potestate papae*:

The Catholic truth which I have often repeated consists of this: that no pope, bishop, abbot, or any spiritual prelate is to be believed or obeyed except in so far as he says or commands the law of Christ.⁴⁰

For Wyclif, it was not necessary to follow the dictates of the Pope or other cleric unless that dictate itself followed the law of the Gospel. Many of the institutions and sacraments of the Church were called into question by Wyclif's view on the visible Church; the intercessory role of the clergy was also denied, even though he never explicitly said so. Because it is uncertain whether any member of the clergy, including the Pope himself, can be identified as belonging to the true Church, then, reasoned Wyclif, it was not necessary for the hierarchy to exist – which he often denounced for its avarice, worldliness and corruption. The Pope and other members of the hierarchy, because of their failure to live according to the Gospels, had demonstrated their very uselessness and, even worse, their identification with Antichrist. The Church and its leaders had become more concerned with worldly power and possessions than with the care of souls, and, like many of his contemporaries, Wyclif identified the moment of fall of the visible Church with the endowment of this institution by the Roman Emperor Constantine, in the fourth century. Wyclif believed that it was better to return to a time before the establishment of the imperial Church by Constantine and to disendow the Church, so as to make it possible for it to return to its apostolic purity.

Wyclif's repudiation of the visible Church on account of its failure to live according to the teachings of the Gospels demonstrates the fundamental importance of the Bible to him. Known as *Doctor Evangelicus* ('the Evangelical Doctor'), Wyclif placed an emphasis on the scriptures which links him not

only to earlier medieval heretics like Valdes but also to the Protestants of the sixteenth century like Martin Luther. Yet Wyclif did not adopt the notion of *sola Scriptura*, as did Luther and the Protestant Reformers, but he recognised the value of the writings of Augustine and other exegetes and theologians on the Bible. Moreover, his emphasis on the scripture itself was nothing new, but part of a long tradition going back for centuries; his own commentary on the Bible borrowed from Nicholas of Lyra, among others. But in spite of his debt to other exegetes and acceptance of the work of earlier theologians, Wyclif asserted the absolute truth of the scripture and the absolute centrality of the Bible to Christian life. So important was the Bible to Wyclif that he declared that ‘all Christians, and lay lords in particular, ought to know holy writ and defend it’, and, again, ‘no man is so rude a scholar but that he may learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity’.⁴¹ Indeed, his rejection of the visible Church was the result of his belief that the Church and its ministers were not necessary intermediaries for understanding the Holy Writ. Although it is perhaps anachronistic to speak of the ‘priesthood of all believers’, it is certain that Wyclif hoped that all could read the Bible, and his sentiments concerning its importance inspired the first English translation of the text. Wyclif himself was most probably not involved in any such enterprise, even though an attribution to him was made as early as 1390; but he can certainly be seen as the guiding light behind the translation.⁴²

Wyclif’s stress on the importance of the Bible for all Christians stems from his understanding of it as the absolute and unchanging word of God. For him, those who raised questions about the scriptures or pointed out inconsistencies in the text were the real heretics, because the Bible was the truth – it was God’s word. As he declared in his work on the sacred scripture:

For since the whole of sacred scripture is the word of God, there could not be a superior, safer, or more effective testimony than this: if God who cannot lie says this in his scripture, which is the mirror of his will, then it is true.⁴³

As the word of God, then, the Bible is the absolute and ultimate authority in all matters. But it must be noted that Wyclif was not a biblical literalist; rather, it was the underlying sense of the words of the Bible that was true. As he argued

in *De veritate sacrae scripturae*, the Bible is the combination of the written word in the book and the meaning derived from the symbol in the text. Moreover, Wyclif asserted that there were five levels of truth in the Bible: the truth of life, the truths of life in their ideal being, the truths in their existence, the truths written on man's soul, and the truth of sounds or books. The Bible was, therefore, the source of all truth for Wyclif. It was the mirror of God's will and the mirror of right conduct for all Christians. It was also the voice of the Son of God and, as such, it was the law of the Church and the source of all true doctrines.⁴⁴ The Bible was, therefore, the final authority and the absolute truth, and the failure of the visible Church to adhere fully to its teachings rendered it unworthy of any authority it might claim.

Although Wyclif's political philosophy, which rejected the established Church and asserted temporal authority over it as well as biblical extremism, brought him to the limits of orthodoxy, it was his position on the Eucharist that was clearly heterodox and caused the greatest difficulties both during his lifetime and after. Wyclif did not come easily or early to his controversial understanding of the nature of the Eucharist; as late as 1378 he still accepted the Church's teaching on transubstantiation, before his own study and application of philosophical realism to the question led him to reject Catholic doctrine as in error.⁴⁵ And even then, he did not reject the sacrament as instituted by Jesus, but only denied a teaching of the Church which, as he explained, had been formalised during the reign of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) and no earlier. It should be noted that Wyclif's concern was also motivated by his understanding of the Church and its clergy; eucharistic doctrine as taught in his day maintained the sacerdotal authority of these institutions, about which Wyclif had serious doubts.

But Wyclif came to reject the Catholic teaching on the sacrament for philosophical and theological reasons. He could not accept the standard explanations for the transformation of the Eucharist into the body and blood of Christ that were given in his day. These held that the bread and wine were completely replaced by the body and blood of Christ after consecration; only the appearance of bread and wine remained, while the substance was that of the flesh and blood of Christ. For Wyclif, this could not stand from a philosophical perspective because the bread and wine had to preserve their substance even if they were – in philosophical terms – only accidents. Moreover, Wyclif could find

no scriptural justification for the doctrine of transubstantiation, a potentially more troubling problem than the philosophical difficulties of accepting Church teaching. He was, however, convinced that the rite was a sacrament instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper, when he said to the Apostles: 'This is my body' (Matthew 26: 26). This passage led Wyclif to the belief that, at the moment of that declaration, the body and bread existed together, and thus when the bread and wine are consecrated on the altar they exist with the body and blood of Christ, although not the literal body born of the Virgin Mary. Wyclif's teachings on the Eucharist, therefore, approached the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiality. For him, the so-called miracle of the mass was not that the bread and wine were transformed into the body and blood of Christ, but that the two substances coexisted. The eucharistic offerings underwent a spiritual transformation whereby they were 'naturally bread and wine and sacramentally Christ's body.'⁴⁶

These teachings laid the foundation for the continued growth and development of movements in England and on the continent into the fifteenth century, despite the condemnations faced by Wyclif before his death. As is evident from the activities of Robert Rigg, Nicholas of Hereford and Philip Repton, Wyclif found support at Oxford even after he had been condemned by Church authorities in 1380, and even, for a brief moment, after the Earthquake Council. It was among Wyclif's Oxford supporters that the movement which came to be known as Lollardy first emerged. These university Lollards – a term of derision meaning 'mumblers', first applied to one of Wyclif's followers in 1382 – adopted the Oxford don's teaching on the Eucharist, his ardent anti-sacerdotalism and criticism of ecclesiastical corruption, his views on the subordination of spiritual to temporal authority, as well as his belief in the necessity of moral reform.⁴⁷ They had supported him throughout the 1370s, attracted by his daring and radical solutions to various philosophical and theological questions, and preached on his behalf after the condemnations of 1380 and 1382. They were unable, however, to withstand Archbishop Courtenay's onslaught and were excommunicated and suspended from teaching. Some of them recanted their support for Wyclif and were brought back into the Church and university, but in 1382 a major step was taken in the suppression of Lollardy.

Wyclif's supporters were not completely eradicated by Courtenay, and over

the next few decades they provided leadership and composed key works for the Lollard movement. During the late fourteenth century a Wyclifite English Bible was produced, numerous sermons were written, a gloss of the Gospels and a separate commentary on the Book of the Apocalypse were composed, and a theological dictionary of some 509 entries drawing, in part, from Wyclif's pastoral work was compiled at Oxford between 1384 and 1396, for the use of preachers without access to a good library.⁴⁸ Among those who continued to preach Wyclifite doctrines was Richard Wyche, a priest of Hereford who was active from the late fourteenth century until his burning in 1440. Another figure was William James, an Oxford scholar who was finally captured near Oxford in 1395. Along with those associated with Oxford, there was a number of lesser clergy and parish priests who promoted Wyclif's teachings. That group included, among others, William, a priest in Thaxted, John Brettenham of Colchester, William Sawtry, a chaplain of Norfolk who was the first Lollard to be burned (23 February 1401 or shortly thereafter), and William Ramsbury of the diocese of Salisbury.⁴⁹ Perhaps the most important of the lesser clergy was William Swinderby, an orthodox preacher before his conversion to Lollardy and a speaker of great skill who attracted a significant number of followers to the movement, including John Oldcastle, a Lollard leader of the early fifteenth century. Swinderby naturally attracted the attention of the authorities, who pursued and condemned him, but he disappeared into Wales in 1391 before he could be captured and most likely continued to preach for some time to come.⁵⁰

Wyclif's impact was felt well beyond his original Oxford circle and the lesser clergy that taught variations of his propositions and reached all levels of the laity. His strident denunciations of the clergy and of their worldliness and wealth certainly resonated with the laity responsible for paying tithes and taxes to support the Church. The Lollards included artisans and skilled craftsmen, townfolk in Leicester, London, Northampton and elsewhere, and even some gentry. Those attracted to the group included the poor, but also the more prosperous; some may have come from the highest levels of society. Perhaps the most important sub-group was that of the so-called Lollard knights, ten of whom were identified by name in the pages of contemporary chronicles. The knights – and it seems that there were well more than ten – played a key role in the growth and development of the movement, and their status and sympathetic

attitude offered to the Lollard preachers and scholars a degree of protection which allowed them to continue their work of developing and disseminating Wyclifite ideas. The most prominent of the Lollard knights was Sir John Oldcastle, a secular leader of the movement who raised rebellion in 1414 after his conviction for heresy. Intended to prevent his own punishment and institute a Lollard reform of the Church, Oldcastle's revolt failed and demonstrated the dangers of Wyclifite teachings. In consequence, the King ordered the suppression of Lollardy, and many of the leaders were hunted down and massacred. Lollardy, however, somehow survived and remained a viable, albeit underground, movement throughout the fifteenth century.

The final chapter of Wyclif's story involves his official denunciation and completes his change, from theologian and radical critic of the Church, into a heretic. This chapter opens just prior to Oldcastle's defeat and the persecution of the Lollards, and it reveals the hardening of attitudes toward heresy and heretics in England. In 1407, William Courtenay's successor as Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, ordered the heads of the Oxford colleges to hold regular examinations of the college members, to ensure that Wyclif's teachings were not being taught and that all members were strictly orthodox. The Archbishop also established yet another commission to examine the works of Wyclif. Four years later, the commission condemned some 267 propositions of Wyclif as heretical or unsound, and then sent the list to Rome for further consideration and condemnation by the Pope. At the Lateran Council of 1413, a number of Wyclif's works, but not all of them, were burned. A moment of perhaps even greater consequence for Wyclif's teachings occurred at the Council of Constance in 1415, which also condemned Wyclif's Bohemian disciple, Jan Hus, and resolved the Great Schism. At this meeting, one of the most important in Church history, forty-five of Wyclif's doctrines, which had previously been condemned at Prague in 1403, were condemned again, including his teachings on the Eucharist, the clergy, the papacy, the tithes and others.⁵¹ This condemnation by one of the highest authorities of the Church confirmed that Wyclif had been a heretic unworthy to remain buried in consecrated ground. The order was given that his body was to be exhumed; but the local Bishop at that time was the old Wyclifite sympathiser, Philip Repton, who did nothing. Wyclif's body was, however, exhumed by Repton's successor, Richard Fleming.⁵² In the spring of 1428, the body was dug up and burned, and the ashes were thrown into a stream

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running through Lutterworth. Despite this ignominious end, Wyclif's legacy had a marked impact on further developments – in England and especially in Bohemia.