

JOHN WYCLIFFE'S UNINTENDED AUDIENCES AND THE REVOLT OF 1381

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Abstract:

Decades ago, Wycliffe was thought to be the first mover of rebellion, but the idea that the great scholar was the ideologue of the revolt is now no longer defensible. The rising, as Anne Hudson¹ and many other medievalists have shown, was no concern of scholars; nor was it the outcome of Lollard sermons.

However, a clearer understanding of his doctrines, and his audiences, intended and unintended make it possible to assume the existence of a link between Wycliffe's doctrines, and the way his contemporary rebels had interpreted, and used them as motives for revolt.

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¹ Anne Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, Oxford, 1983

Introduction:

Indeed, the doctrine of Wycliffe with regard to secular property is among scholarly theories on religion, and on Church property that mostly concerns the story of the Peasants' Rising. Just as important are his translation of the Bible, and the introduction of the vernacular in explaining his views in religious matters. The coincidence of Wycliffe's anti-clerical actions with the few years preceding the revolt of 1381, might lead one to draw a link between the Oxford scholar, and the event that shook late medieval England.

Church Disendowment or Communism

Ten years before that event Wycliffe had expounded his famous theory of 'dominion.' All things, he said, belonged to God, and all men held of him directly. Only the good could hold property of him truly, and every good man possessed all things. The bad possessed nothing, although they seemed to possess. Hence he argued in favour of communism. All things must be held in common by the righteous, for all the righteous possess all. After this curious metaphysical juggle, he states that in practical life the good must leave the bad in possession; that a wicked master must be obeyed, and that resistance and revolution are justified by God only under certain strictly limited conditions.²

Though the practical application of his theory, as regards secular society, was quite conservative, the mere fact that such a great scholar had given his blessing to the theory of communism was welcome news to agitators throughout the country. Men of all sorts and all classes congregated to Oxford and spread over England, each with his own interpretation of intellectual innovations made there.

² George Macaulay Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, op. cit., p. 199

Meanwhile, Wycliffe himself became more and more interested in Church affairs, and lost all interest in his old theories about possession, and as he turned to be more revolutionary in religion; he became more conservative in social and political questions.

He praised the power of the King and the temporal lords, in order to forge a weapon with which he wanted to strike down the heads of the Church. His theory, both before and after the Rising, was that unlike temporal lords, Churchmen had no right to their property, because they ought to live in evangelical poverty on the alms of the faithful.³ The firm contrast between clerical and lay property is the most marked feature of his writings from 1377 onwards. The Poor Priests he sent before 1381 were meant to preach this doctrine, and not revolt of any sort against lay lordship. According to him, the Christ's poverty remains the touchstone of Wycliffe's thirty-three conclusions, which summarise his famous writing entitled '*De Dominio Civili*', which in fact measures the delinquency of the church, and its neglect of His commission to embody his life.

But popular missionaries, drawn from the people, speaking to the people and depending on the people for alms, seem to have been influenced by popular ideas. They could not make Wycliffe's distinction between secular and clerical property. He meant his missionaries to preach against the payment of tithes, and they condemned the performance of villeins' services as well; he meant them to denounce the riches of a corrupt Church, and they introduced into their abomination the riches of a corrupt aristocracy. A hostile satirist thus speaks of their double influence

All stipends they forbid to give

³ Ibid

*And tithes whereon poor curates live
From sinful lords their dues they take;
Bid serfs their services forsake.*⁴

Such men were agitators, and they apparently set light to one stack more than Wycliffe wished. But the Lollards, who were brought to trial by the Church for spreading his heretical doctrines, were in no single case accused of having participated in the Peasants' Rising. Similarly the indictments of the rebels contain no hint of heresy. The rebellion was not a Lollard movement, although some of the agitators were influenced by some of Wycliffe's ideas, and at Smithfield, Wat Tyler is said to have demanded disendowment of the Church. It is not unlikely that some of the Poor Priests entered into the movement in view of serfageabolition.⁵

Wycliffe clearly expressed his own view of the proper relations between master and servant. He continually emphasised the rights of property and the duty of performing services even to sinful lords. It was part of his regular moral teaching to exhort all Christians to render legal dues without question of their equity.⁶ His own theory of Dominion was too dangerous to the proprietary rights of the wicked, and therefore remained still-born in the 'De Dominio Civili'. Popular preachers were exhorting the villeins to withdraw their services from their masters because of the wickedness of the upper classes. This plea of moral indignation, which can be traced in the speeches and messages that provoked the Rising, was in accordance with the general tone of Wycliffe's old theory. But now that it had become a practical question, he obviously denounced it, together with any levelling inferences from the notion of Christian brotherhood.

⁴ Ibid, p. 200

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

*'The fiend,' he says, 'moveth some men to say that Christen men should not be servants or thralls to heathen lords, sith they ben false to God and less worthy than Christen men; neither to Christen lords, for they ben brethren in kind, and Jesus Christ bought Christen men on the Cross and made them free. But against this heresy Paul writeth in God's law.' 'But yet,' he goes on, 'some men that ben out of charity, slander Poor Priests with this error, that servants or tenants may lawfully withhold rents or services from their lords, when lords ben openly wicked in their living.'*⁷

Although Wycliffe made his position clear as to violent and illegal remedies, and did at least something to counteract any effect which his early academic speculations might have had on society, he acknowledged his sympathy with the serfs' demand for freedom, and his anger at their oppression by the upper class:

*'Strifes, contests and debates ben used in our land, for lords striven with their tenants to bring them in thralldom more than they shoulde by reason and charity. Also lords many times do wrongs to poor men by extortions and unreasonable ameracements and unreasonable taxes, and take poor men's goods and payen not therefore but with sticks (tallies), and defipisen them and menace and sometime beat them when they ask their pay. And thus lords devour poor men's goods in gluttony and waste and pride, and they perish for mischief and hunger and thirst and cold, and their children also. And if their rent be not readily paid their beasts ben distressed, and they pursued without mercy, though they ben never so poor and needy. And so in a manner they eat and drink poor men's flesh and blood, and ben man-quellers, as God complaineth by his prophets'*⁸

Wycliffe was one of the very few men who could see both the rights of the lords and the wrongs of the peasants. This large view of the social problems of the day enabled him, immediately after the rising was over, to speak of that astounding event with great moderation and breadth of view. At a time when all the upper classes thought of nothing but revenge, he had the courage to make the characteristic proposal that the Church property should be given to the secular

⁷ Ibid, p. 202

⁸ Ibid

lords, in order to enable them at once to relieve the poor of the burdens that had caused the outbreak.⁹

Christian democracy was the general tone of the Rising. The chief activist who had spread discontent and originated the theories of rebellion was a priest; John Ball. Friars and Lollards alike were accused, with more or less truth, of carrying on his work. In the Rising itself, several parsons of poor parishes put themselves at the head of their congregations and revenged on society the wrongs that they had endured.

But the vast majority of the actual leaders were not men of the Church. Those who called out their neighbours in the villages and towns of England were generally laymen. So were those who, during the early summer of 1381, went round from county to county preparing the rebellion.¹⁰

However, the battle against the Church had more than one front. During the late 1370's, Wycliffe's teachings constituted a prominent, even clamorous voice that linked the issues of not only wealth, law, and authority, but also vernacular literacy in a scheme of theological and political reform. Though not his person, Wycliffe's ideas gave impetus to the 1381 rising. Additionally, it is worth noting that all broadside publication of vernacular reformist theology, in the late fifteenth century, are traceable to Wycliffe and his followers.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ E. Powell, *Rising in East Anglia*, Cambridge, 1896, p. 189

The Vernacular as a Gateway for Laity into Religion and Politics

In 1377, Wycliffe produced a treatise addressed to the lay nobility “in the Latin language, as in the vernacular”, implying that laity should receive vernacular instruction in theology.¹¹

As an answer to raised questions about the teachings of the *De civilidominio*, he said, “I wanted this matter made clear to clergy and laity alike. So I gathered and published thirty-three conclusions about it in both languages [Latin and vernacular]. These conclusions appeared throughout a great part of England and Christendom, all the way to the Roman curia.”¹²

For Wycliffe, lay literacy did not mean that laypeople could imitate clerics, but that they would take a rightful and informed position in the discussion of churchly and national issues, precisely as lay people. Artisans and servants having learned to read would, therefore, gather local communities of theologically informed opposition.¹³

Disendowment proposals had been discussed before council and Parliament, but not publicly, as Wycliffe and his followers had done, as if on behalf England’s poor to their equals, with the young King’s regent John of Gaunt’s consent.¹⁴

The *De civilidominio*, and the thirty-three conclusions offered a theological rationale for disendowment, but his public preaching and other vernacular writing offered other reasons with wider public appeal for a public demand for the seizure of Church wealth. Thus, with other works like *De domini meridiano*,¹⁵ and the

¹¹ *Johannis Wyclif Opera minora*, ed. J. Loserth, London, 1913, p. 74.

¹² Margaret Aston, “Wycliffe and the Vernacular”, *Studies in Church History*, 1987, pp. 286-87

¹³ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, pp. 174-227

¹⁴ Joseph W. Dahmus, *The Prosecution of John Wyclif*, New Haven, 1952, pp. 10-17

¹⁵ Printed in *Polemical Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 417-25

Speculum seculariumdominorium,¹⁶it provided the structure for a powerful reformist imagination that could subsist on its own, apart from Wycliffe's specifications, and from the purposes of the English government and nobility.

To evade the reality that king and nobles are no worse than ecclesiastics, and are therefore unfit to claim the authority of destitution, Wycliffe appealed to a canon-law maxim: *Bona esslisasunt bona pauperum* (the goods of the church are the goods of the poor). To canonists, it meant that pastors and religious men were to give relief where it was needed. However, Wycliffe gave it literal inflection, giving the poor reasons to claim ecclesiastical *temporalia*.

The poor identified themselves with Wycliffe's aforementioned use of the Christ's authoritative poverty (using a vernacular they understood) to attack the Church.,¹⁷

Conclusion:

The coincidence of Wycliffe's attacks on a corrupt Church using Latin and the then flourishing vernacular, with the events that fuelled the rising of 1381 can only make reasonable minds draw a link between the two. However, John Wycliffe is historically known for having stood against the revolt, especially against the aristocracy of the time.

The most plausible explanation for such a controversy is that Wycliffe, when presenting his own views was addressing scholars like him, or Oxford students, who would constitute his missionaries to the different regions of the country to preach his anti-clerical doctrines.

¹⁶ Printed in *Opera minora*, pp. 74-97

¹⁷ Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion, England in 1381*, University of California Press, London, 1994, p. 86

Like today's sermons and speeches, however, Wycliffe's doctrines apparently reached audiences he had never expected them to reach. The lower clergy, especially parish preasts who were in permanent contact with ordinary people, transmitted the scholar's ideas to agitators who had neither the capacity, nor the desire to undrstand things the way their author had done. Instead, many of them gave these doctrines interpretations that fitted their own rebellious agendas.

