

The Lollards and social and religious reform

by Doris Haddock

Lollardy, the indigenous Proto-Protestant movement that evolved in the late fourteenth century from the teachings of John Wycliffe, was the first widespread heretical sect in England. It was of great concern to both Church and State authorities for over forty years until the suppressive and repressive actions that they instigated forced it underground. Lollardy was essentially a religious reform movement but one whose tenets held ramifications for the entire structure of English society. Although throughout Europe previous individuals and groups who were desirous of religious reform had indicated discrepancies between Biblical teachings and Church practice, their challenges had been “not to the church as a body but to abuses within it: the call was not to another church but to the revivification of the existing one, which remained the only one”.¹ In comparison, although Lollardy also criticised clerical abuse of power and position, it denied Church authority in a range of areas, particularly with regard to its authority as the sole determiner of salvation and its right to hold temporal power and possessions. The movement’s adherents engaged in a range of activities that challenged the authority and structure of the Church, and because the Church was such an integral part of society, these activities were also a challenge to society’s structure. This aspect was strenuously and effectively promoted by the Church as a means of encouraging secular authorities to act against the Lollards and dissuading potential followers from joining the sect.² In this paper, the process of the merger will be examined through: an analysis of Lollard doctrine and the resultant activities that held inherent social implications; the allegations made by the movement’s enemies that created fear in the secular community that Lollardy was a threat to social regulation and harmony; and the resultant legislative changes which finally categorised Lollardy as subversion.

Lollard rejection of the Church’s self-proclaimed position as sole authority in all religious matters was based on their belief that the Bible was the foundation of faith and the source of all truth.³ They denied the necessity for the clergy to act as the intermediary between God and the laity, and therefore they devalued the sacraments, decreased the significance of ecclesiastical ceremonies and prayers, and asserted that oral confession was unnecessary.⁴ As a result, both the central position of the Mass and the monopoly of priests were gone.⁵ Instead, the Lollards emphasised that individuals should take responsibility for their own relationship with God by searching out for themselves the truth in the Scriptures. As a consequence, “the church in its traditional form...lost its *raison d’être*”, with the real church being composed of true members bound together by grace.⁶ The Lollards also criticised the Caesarian clergy, (those in civil government) and claimed the Church had no

¹ G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, II, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), p. 519.

² M. Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition" in *Past and Present*, No. 17, April, 1960, p. 7.

³ Leff, *Heresy*, p. 497.

⁴ G.M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, (London: Longmans, 1909), pp. 175 - 6.

⁵ A.K. McHardy, "Bishop Buckingham and the Lollards of the Lincoln Diocese" in D. Baker, (Ed.), *Studies in Church History*, Vol. 9: Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest, (London: Cambridge, 1972), p. 142.

⁶ Leff., *Heresy*, pp. 517-519.

entitlement to its possessions or its temporal power and position.⁷ They believed that disendowment would restore the Church's "spiritual inheritance by relieving it of its undue load of temporal acquisitions",⁸ an argument which gained popularity among the nobility as over one third of England was in the hands of the Church.⁹ Lollardy also maintained that the Church should be subservient to secular power and liable to secular correction.¹⁰

As such teachings played a major role in Lollard doctrine, the sect presented a major threat to the power of the Church, particularly when Lollardy was no longer confined to Oxford but became a popular heretical movement, "an expression of hostility towards the clerical church".¹¹ In attempting to combat Lollardy, the Church in England did not have the secular legislative support that existed elsewhere in Europe to counteract heresy. Lambert argues in fact that "the absence of a fully coordinated machinery of repression was decisive for the continued existence of Lollardy".¹² The Church's power was limited to excommunication which, while a forceful deterrent in many situations, was ineffectual against a sect that did not believe in the Church's right to excommunicate and whose wandering priests were difficult to apprehend.¹³ Therefore, the Church needed to enlist the co-operation of the secular government which was able to strengthen its legal authority in parliament if necessary. It was thought that this goal could best be achieved by demonstrating that the Lollards were a threat to the country's social order. Such an allegation would find a ready reception among the higher classes as England had in recent years experienced turmoil and social unrest from such events as the Black Death and its social aftermath,¹⁴ defeats in the Hundred Years War, minor civil war involving the Lords Appellant, and the 'Good Parliament' of 1376 which impeached several royal officials for corruption.¹⁵

The necessity for linking the Lollards with social agitation was realised in the initial stages of the sect's growth by Pope Gregory XI who, in 1377, sent letters to King Richard II, the University of Oxford, and Archbishops Sudbury and Courtenay in reply to his receipt of a copy of Wycliffe's Propositions. The archbishops were ordered to "use their best endeavours to convince the king, the princes of the blood, the nobility and council that the condemned teaching was not merely erroneous, but

⁷ E.C. Tatnall, "John Wyclif and Ecclesia Anglicana" in The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1969, p. 41; McF, p. 70.

⁸ Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition", p. 8.

⁹ Tatnall, "Ecclesia Anglicana", p. 24.

¹⁰ Leff, Heresy, pp. 581-2.

¹¹ M. Aston, Faith & Fire, (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), p. 23.

¹² M.D. Lambert, Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 260.

¹³ H.G. Richardson, "Heresy and the Lay Power under Richard II" in The English Historical Review, No. 21, January, 1936, p. 7.

¹⁴ The population of England had declined from approximately 4 million to 2.5 million, thus forcing up the value of labour. Free labourers demanded higher wages, and villeins called for freedom from feudal dues and to be able to choose their place of work. G.M. Trevelyan, A Shortened History of England, (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 192.

¹⁵ G. Clark, The Illustrated History of Britain, (London: Treasure Press, 1982), p. 81.

subversive of all government".¹⁶ He urged Oxford to seize Wycliffe and his followers, and send them to the archbishops for correction because Wycliffe:

*hath gone to such a pitch of detestable folly, that he feareth not to teach, and publicly preach, or rather to vomit out of the filthy dungeon of his breast, certain erroneous and false propositions and conclusions, savouring even of heretical pravity, tending to weaken and overthrow the status of the whole church, and even secular government.*¹⁷

That his instructions were followed is evident from the writings of Wodeford and Dymocke who both vigorously attacked the concept of temporalities. The former threatened that disendowment would result in "the people...lawfully remov(ing) the possessions of kings, dukes, and their lay superiors, whenever they habitually offended"¹⁸ while the latter referred to its creating conflict between Church and State lords. He claimed that the commoners "would...usurp for themselves the lordships of others" resulting in civil war, and that "no one thenceforward in this kingdom would possess his lordships in safety, since anybody would be able to rise against another when he wished".¹⁹

The Peasants' Revolt of June 1381, was most fortuitous for the Church in its effort to discredit Wycliffite teachings. Although the uprising was not linked to Wycliffe and his followers,²⁰ both the Church and many contemporary writers realised that it was an opportunity to discredit the Lollards by alleging that their involvement was of major importance. The link was further strengthened because chroniclers were convinced of the significance of its occurrence at Corpus Christi as this feast honoured the Eucharist which was often celebrated with pageants and Miracle Plays.²¹ It was well known that Lollards condemned the doctrine of transubstantiation and believed that Miracle Plays were sinful:

*sythen an erthely seruaunt dar not takun in pley and in bourde that that his erthely lord takith in ernest, myche more we shulden not maken oure pleye and bourde of tho myraclis and werkis that God so earnestfully wrougt to vs. For sothely, whan we so down, drede to synne is takun away.*²²

The strong similarity between the demands of Wycliffe and those attributed to John Ball, one of the uprising's leaders, was also noted. These points included "the abolition of the ecclesiastical hierarchy ... (and) all monks, (and) the distribution of

¹⁶ K.B. McFarlane, John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity, (London: English Universities Press, 1952), p. 80.

¹⁷ J. Foxe, The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe, Vol. 3, New York: AMS Press, 1965, p. 5. Foxe refers to this letter as 'this wild bull'.

¹⁸ O. Gratus (Ed.), revised E. Brown, Fasciculus Rerum Expetendarum & Fugiendarum, (London: 1690, I), p. 231 in Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition", p. 9.

¹⁹ H.S. Cronin (Ed.), Rogeri Dymmok Liber Contra XII Errores et Hereses Lollardorum, Wyclif Society, 1922, pp 13, 27- 8, 177 in *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ M. Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasants' Revolt" in Past and Present, No. 143, May, 1994, p. 46 and G.M. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, (London: Longmans, 1909), p. 200.

²¹ Aston, "Corpus Christi", p. 4.

²² A. Hudson, Selections from English Wycliffite Writings, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 97.

clerical property among the laity”.²³ Even more damning however was their direct linkage in Ball’s alleged ‘confession’ where:

*he confessed publicly to them that for two years he had been a disciple of Wycliffe and learned from the latter the heresies which he had been taught; from Wycliffe had arisen the heresy concerning the sacrament of the altar and Balle had openly preached this and other matters taught by him.*²⁴

When this statement is viewed in the light of Wycliffe having written in early 1381 that there would be “a rising of the people under prophetic leadership”²⁵ and the allegation that Nicholas of Hereford preached that Sudbury’s murder during the revolt was justified,²⁶ it is not surprising that there was an increasing belief that ‘misbelief and mayhem’ were inextricably linked. Some attributed the revolt to a divine signal that heresy had not been corrected,²⁷ but the over-whelming concept that was developing was that “unchecked religious dissent led to the collapse of social order”.²⁸

Lollard belief in the importance of the Bible and the necessity that all people should have access to its teaching was reflected in their conviction that the most important duty for priests was to understand the Bible and expound it.²⁹ Therefore, in an effort to spread Biblical teaching and their own anti-clerical doctrine, the sect’s clerical and lay preachers became commonplace in many areas of England. The Lollard sermon became their ‘special weapon’.³⁰ As “most lay people’s knowledge of the Bible was what came to them from preachers”,³¹ the potential danger posed by unlicensed and uncontrolled evangelisers whose teachings would reveal to all the disparity between Biblical teaching and orthodox Church practice, was quickly realised by the Church. Therefore, allegations were made that the preachers were “stirring up trouble”,³² while Ball’s confession in 1381 claimed that:

*there was a certain company of the sect and doctrines of Wycliffe which conspired like a secret fraternity and arranged to travel around the whole of England preaching the beliefs taught by Wycliffe ... If they had not encountered resistance to their plans, they would have destroyed the entire kingdom within two years.*³³

²³ R. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 227.

²⁴ Fasciculi Zizaniorum, Rolls Series, 1858, pp. 272 - 4 in R.B. Dobson, (Ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 378.

²⁵ J. Wycliffe, *De simonia*, 7, p. 93; 8, p. 101-3, in M. Wilks, "Reformatio Regni: Wyclif and Hus as Leaders of Religious Protest Movements", p. 125, in Baker, *Studies in Church History*, Vol 9.

²⁶ Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, p. 245.

²⁷ Aston, "Corpus Christi", p. 46.

²⁸ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, p. 354.

²⁹ Wycliffe, *De veritate II*, p. 137, in *Ibid.*, p. 524.

³⁰ Trevelyan, *Age of Wycliffe*, p. 177.

³¹ M. Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*, (London: Hambledon, 1984), p. 109.

³² FZ, pp. 292, in Leff, *Heresy*, pp. 564.

³³ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, p. 378.

In 1382, the conspiracy theory had gained such credence amongst the clerical hierarchy that they proposed a Private Statute to the parliament, without the knowledge of the Commons, in which they stated that unlicensed preachers:

*engender discord and dissension betwixt divers estates of the said realm, as well spiritual as temporal, in exciting of the people, to the great peril of the realm.*³⁴

Preaching also brought the Lollards into direct conflict with the mendicant friars whom they referred to derogatively as CAIM³⁵ and criticised for spreading superstition.³⁶ In reply, a Carmelite wrote that Lollards were:

*always spreading dissension and inciting the people to insurrection, so that it was hardly possible for any one of them to preach without their hearers being provoked to blows, and discord would arise in towns.*³⁷

Lollard preaching was conducted in English as their belief was that “trouthe schould be openly knowen to alle manere of folke, trowthe moueth mony men to speke sentencis in Yngelysche that thai han gedirid in Latyne”.³⁸ They also produced the first English translation of the Bible and many religious tracts. The official Church view was that the Bible needed interpreting and was open to heresy and error if this did not occur.³⁹ In comparison, the Lollards believed all people, both men and women, were entitled to hear and read the self-evident truths of the Bible for themselves. They asserted that Latin Masses were irrelevant to the commoner and described them as being similar to “an adder which is affected by a charm said over it, even though it cannot understand the words”.⁴⁰ The Lollards claimed that Latin was used because “the clergy wanted to make the laity as ignorant as themselves”.⁴¹ Lollard vernacular works increased the vulnerability of the Church as more people recognised for themselves the divergence between Biblical teaching and Church practice. It also enabled the laity to participate in theological discussions in a manner that had not previously been possible. Hoccleve complained:

*Our fadres olde and modres lyued wel,
And taghte hir children as hem self taght were
Of holy chirche and axid nat a del
“Why stant this word heere?” and “why this word there?”*

³⁴ Foxe, *Acts*, p. 37.

³⁵ CAIM = C (Carmelites), A (Austins), I (Jacobites), M (Minorities). Caim was the common usage for Cain and Lollards frequently referred to Caim's Castle in their rejection of the material church. Aston, *Faith and Fire*, pp. 95, 99, 102.

³⁶ Trevelyan, *Age of Wycliffe*, p. 179.

³⁷ FZ, p. 272, in Aston, “Lollardy and Sedition”, p. 15.

³⁸ Hudson, *Writings*, p. 127.

³⁹ McFarlane, *English Nonconformity*, p. 91.

⁴⁰ B.L. Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, (Cambridge, 1919), pp. 7-9, in Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, p. 256.

⁴¹ Hudson, “English Heresy?”, p. 277.

“Why spake god thus and seith thus elles where?”
“Why dide he this wyse and mighte han do thus?”⁴²

The Church recognised that preaching and unrestricted access to the Bible were the main challenge to its authority but was slow to acknowledge that the use of the vernacular was the basis of Lollard popularity.⁴³ It was not until 1407 when Arundel's Constitutions were drafted, that 'translation was compounded with subversion'.⁴⁴

Legislative changes generally occurred when the laity was concerned about social unrest and rebellion. The first, *De excommunicatio capiendo*, followed the Peasants' Revolt and provided for the arrest of unauthorised preachers.⁴⁵ The second was an act of the 'Merciless Parliament' of 1388 that came after the upheaval caused by the Lords Appellant. It appointed commissioners to confiscate Lollard writings. Lambert claims that the Appellants who controlled the parliament, wanted to "maintain order in the secular as much as in the ecclesiastical sphere".⁴⁶ Both of these laws marked the first stage in the legal recognition that Lollardy was more than a religious reform movement.

The most important legislation was finally enacted in 1401 after much delay caused by the political turbulence that accompanied the usurping of the crown by Henry IV in 1399. *De heretico comburendo* decreed that all heretics or possessors of heretical writings who refused to abjure or relapsed after doing so, were to be burnt by the lay authorities.⁴⁷ Its measures may also have been considered a way of deterring political conspiracies against the new king.⁴⁸ This law marked the commitment, not just co-operation, of the secular power to eliminating heresy. "To the sin of heresy was now added the crime of subversion,"⁴⁹ and this was tightened by further acts in 1406 and 1414.

In 1413, the Oldcastle Rebellion confirmed the Church's allegations that heresy was a threat to public order.⁵⁰ The four years of social unrest and open insurrection that it generated, discredited Lollardy and lost it any of its remaining upper class support.⁵¹ The reality of the uprising's aims cannot be specified as primary sources reflect considerable prejudice, but it was claimed that the royal family, nobility and ecclesiastical hierarchy were to be killed and the Church dispossessed.⁵² Consequently, Lollardy was seen as a challenge to royal authority and

⁴² "To Sir John Oldcastle", in F. Furnivall, (Ed.), *Hoccleve's Works: Minor Poems*, (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber, 1892), p. 13, in R.D. Kendall, *The Drama of Dissent*, (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 18.

⁴³ Hudson, "English Heresy?", pp. 265, 267.

⁴⁴ Leff, *Heresy*, p. 592.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

⁴⁶ Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, p. 261.

⁴⁷ Leff, *Heresy*, p. 595.

⁴⁸ Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, p. 262.

⁴⁹ Leff, *Heresy*, p. 596.

⁵⁰ J. Catto, "Dissidents in an Age of Faith? Wyclif and the Lollards" in *History Today*, 37, Nov. 1987, p. 52.

⁵¹ E.G. Rupp, *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 2.

⁵² Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, p. 263.

equated with sedition. The 1414 statute which ensued, made it obligatory that all “royal officers were responsible for suppressing heresy as part of their duties.”⁵³

The Oldcastle Rebellion led to a widespread fear of heresy and the conviction that Lollardy was part of a conspiracy.⁵⁴ Previous incidents such as the Pattishall riot in 1387, the South Yorkshire disturbances in 1392, and the 1400-1405 Welsh uprising of Owen Glyn Dwr were now linked to the Lollards.⁵⁵ They were later accused of involvement in the Southampton plot of 1415, the attacks by Scottish forces on Berwick and Roxborough in 1417, and with spreading rumours that Richard II was still alive.⁵⁶ Throughout the next decade, any disturbance of the peace was attributed to the Lollards, a perspective that was supported by the 1431 insurrection in Salisbury which had extremely tenuous links to Lollardy.⁵⁷ There was also the fear that the Hussite heresy in Bohemia would influence this English heretical movement and a subsidy was paid for the crusade against the Hussites.⁵⁸

Lollardy was only one of the many channels of lay revolt in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries but it provided a religious base for all revolt.⁵⁹ It began as a religious reform movement, however the character of its doctrine was such that it presented a challenge to not just the Church, but the structure of English society and government. The Church recognised its own vulnerability and the ramifications for its future which were inherent in Lollard teaching, so that it made concerted allegations that attempted to link Lollardy to social disturbance. Suppression was considered to be more effective than argument.⁶⁰ The success of the Church’s campaign was such that Lollardy became the label for any non-conformity and resulted in spiritual and temporal authority establishing a criterion of acceptable public religion with religious conformity becoming a function of secular power.⁶¹ Lollardy was forced underground but remained of significance in preserving an anti-authoritarian, anti-sacerdotal and anti-sacramental spirit which assisted in preparing popular beliefs for the English Reformation.⁶²

⁵³ Leff, Heresy, p. 597.

⁵⁴ J. Catto, "Religious Change under Henry V" in G.L. Harriss, (Ed.), Henry V: the Practice of Kingship, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 113.

⁵⁵ McFarlane, English Nonconformity, pp. 138-9, E. Powell & G.M. Trevelyan (Eds.), The Peasants' Rising and the Lollards - a Collection of Unpublished Documents, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899, p. ix, J. Thomson, The Later Lollards, 1414 - 1520, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 10.

⁵⁶ Aston, "Lollardy & Sedition, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-29.

⁵⁸ Aston, Lollards and Reformers, pp. 76-77.

⁵⁹ Trevelyan, Age of Wycliffe, p. 352.

⁶⁰ Mcfarlane, English Nonconformity, p. 147.

⁶¹ Catto, "Dissidents", p. 46.

⁶² A.G. Dickens, "Heresy and the Origins of English Protestantism" in J.S. Bromley & E.H. Kossmann, (Eds.), Britain and the Netherlands II, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 65.

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