

JOHN WYCLIFFE—King's Chaplain

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We are told that Richard III owned a copy of the Wycliffe Bible, and this makes us wonder what the King admired in the Oxford scholar's life and opinions. As a royal chaplain, Wycliffe was employed to support the Government's policy against the few who protested on behalf of the papacy. He published certain polemics against parish priests—(polemics which led to his taking a leading part in the hierarchy of the Church)—“ (the parish priests) enjoyed the exemptions and privileges of the clergy, escape hard work, and . . . to partake of the loaves and fishes of clerical life ” . . .

William Courtenay, Bishop of London, attacked Wycliffe, as the Duke of Lancaster had sought Wycliffe's advice. There was great political and religious argument between the Bishop of London's party, in 1371, and the sympathisers of Wycliffe and the Duke.

On the question of “ sanctuary in Parliament ” raised by the Archbishop, Wycliffe was introduced to give evidence for the “ anti-clericals ”; on this occasion the discussion fizzled out, and next year, the Government issued a weak statute considered totally harmless by the clerical party.

The Bishop of Norwich, Despenser, obeying a Papal Bull of Urban VI, led a crusade into France, to attack the supporters of the rival Pope, Clement VII. They trampled over Flemish territory, and ghastly cruelties and excesses were perpetrated, especially at Ypres, where the “ Conqueror of West Flanders ” had to withdraw from the army of Charles VI. By the end of September, 1383, the crusade was over. When Parliament met, Despenser was “ on trial ”; Wycliffe had never been in favour of the bloody crusade. The Bishop lost his temporal duties for incapacity, and many others were heavily fined.

On January 26th, 1384, a nine months' truce with France was entered upon, while danger came to the English Border country in the shape of the Scots who crossed over into England as soon as the English/Scots treaty expired, and the English/French treaty was signed. The Army moved northwards under the leadership of the Duke of Lancaster and his brother Thomas of Woodstock. The Duke went no further than Edinburgh, allowed people with their property to escape, and did not permit the burning of the city. Many criticized his leniency, although later Richard II took an army to Edinburgh, was less lenient, but even less successful.

In order to purchase bishoprics or other desirable habitations, friars used to sell absolutions or indulgences for even terrible crimes, and thereby gain a large income. Those who followed Wycliffe were sworn enemies of the Mendicants (who had been called “ most dear to God ”). Also, monks employed often, vicars who did all the hard work, on a miserable stipend, while the monks drew a salary from any rectorial tithes.

In 1371, a strong party grew up under John Wycliffe, which advised the disendowment of the clergy and their removal from offices of state. “ In the interests of the Church ” Wycliffe was horrified with the secularisation of ecclesiastics.

The Treasurer and Chancellor resigned; it was suggested that only laymen would hold office under the Crown. There was a Parliamentary grant of £50,000 assessed at 22s. 3d. on each parish (it was thought there were 45,000 parishes, but in fact there were only 9,000!).

The friars became Wycliffe's most bitter enemies, but that did not happen until he denied the doctrine of Transubstantiation. He represented the anti-Papal attitudes of many Englishmen of that day; there was a quarrel concerning the extent and nature of Papal power. In a petition of the first Parliament of Richard II's reign it had already been put forward that they withdraw the exportation of treasure to the Pope.

There was considerable support in the nation for Dr. Wycliffe, which was illustrated when some English prelates received certain Papal Bulls sent to the University of Oxford and the Archbishop of Canterbury ordering the arrest and examination of Dr. Wycliffe; he had a letter sent to him, anonymously, of encouragement. In 1378, Sir Lewis Clifford (of the household of the loyal Wycliffite, the Princess of Wales) refused to allow the condemnation of the accused, as also did the Londoners, and Wycliffe was released with a caution.

In his "*De Civili Dominio*," Wycliffe seems to be extremely communist, and with his denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation, he is in reality forming a new order; he is rebellious but is not really connected with the rebels of Kent, or John Ball, "the mad priest of Kent."

In 1382, Wycliffe put seven propositions before Parliament; the Commons required the Archbishop of Canterbury, Wycliffe's old foe, to summon a Council to settle the question of heresy. Dr. Wycliffe was found guilty of ten heresies and fourteen errors; however, the Duke of Lancaster befriended Wycliffe and other Lollards, and the old man ended his days in peace. "The Lollards indeed were a power that repaid consideration—in Leicester, Bristol and London."

On the suppression of Lollardy, there were two political parties, differing as to methods of procedure. The Earl of Arundel wished to work through the ecclesiastical courts, and early in 1407, he took advantage of a synod, at St. Paul's, for the election of the representatives for the forthcoming Council of Pisa, to republish certain constitutions originally promulgated at Oxford in 1407—against Lollards and vicious friars, providing that:

- a) none should preach without licence.
- b) schoolmasters should be careful in the expounding of Scripture to their pupils.
- c) that the works of Wycliffe should not be used in the Oxford school till they had been authoritatively sanctioned.
- d) translations of Scripture were not to be made or read without the permission of the Ordinary.

Wycliffe himself may not have written the entire vernacular Bible which Richard III owned, but although the Medieval Church did not ban necessarily every Scripture in English, they had to be authorised.

The work of Wycliffe had to contend with the orthodox, Thomas of Gloucester, persecutor of Lollards, Humphry Duke of Gloucester, the patron of monks and scholars, and less exalted, there was the man from Bristol, John Bount, benefactor of friars.