

BRITISH HISTORY II

Week IV: The Lollards (Michaelmas 1998)

Have the Lollards been over-rated as a threat to Church and State?

John Wycliff's ideas originated from a single position: that to exercise ecclesiastical authority one must be in a state of grace. The implication of Wycliff's doctrine was not only far ranging, but also in its wider context could not be confined to matters of ecclesiastical interest. State of grace could be interpreted as embracing the authority of government; as such, Lollardy could be a potential threat for both ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical institutions. However, it is difficult to assess the dangers the Lollards posed during this period, as the movement was not a coherent or uniform body; but rather composed of individuals with diverse beliefs and religious or political aspirations. Moreover, because the Lollard movement was identified as subversive, its adherents were often forced to conceal their beliefs; thus providing the historian with additional difficulties when it comes to evaluating their impact. As heresy was something of an unknown phenomena in England, it is also necessary to note that neither Church nor state had in place the mechanisms - such as the continental Inquisition - to deal with this threat. Therefore, awareness of their own inadequacy may have served to perpetuate fears disproportional to the actual threat caused by the Lollards. Nevertheless, to dismiss the Lollard threat as over-rated by emphasizing the geographical disbursement of Lollard communities, or their small size, would be deceptive and somewhat misleading. After all, Christianity itself certifies that a powerful movement can start out in small numbers, endure state persecution, and succeed. In addition, the statistical data for the period is circumstantial at best, while the historian must also take into account prevalent Medieval attitudes: for contemporaries the Lollard movement was a source of considerable panic and alarm by its very conceptual existence. Lastly, the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381, the Oldcastle Revolt of 1413, and the Lollard uprising of 1431 are indications that the Lollard threat was real, even though over-exaggerated by authorities.

Tracing back the Lollard movement to its founder, John Wycliff, it is possible to discern that from its roots Lollardy had both a religious as well as a political dimension. In the 1370s Wycliff had become the favorite anti-clerical spokesman on behalf of the government; and in 1374 he had even participated as a member of the diplomatic mission to Bruges. He was therefore known to the knightly members of the court circle, many of whom found in his pronouncements echoes of and justification for their own anti-clerical and anti-papal sentiments. Foremost among these was John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, whose anti-clerical attitudes dovetailed with Wycliff's conviction that the civil governor may deprive a cleric whom he considers profane from his office and property. In the following decades Wycliff's attack on the Roman Catholic hierarchy deepened into an assertion that the Papacy was an instrument of the anti-Christ, and widened into an attack on the power and wealth of the priestly class in general. Patriotic feelings in England against a French pope from Avignon calling for Wycliff's arrest, as well as Lancaster's timely interventions, combined with the schism in the Papacy to save Wycliff from persecution. And yet, although many friars were initially happy to spread Wycliff's ideas as messengers against the materialistic preoccupation of ecclesiastical authorities, Wycliff's progressive radicalism, and his flat denial of transubstantiation served to alienate many of his supporters. His doctrine on the Eucharist in particular turned many of the friars, monks and orthodox theologians against him. Wycliff continued his campaign by appealing strongly to the religious conscience of the individual - enlightened by the scriptures - and launched an attack against the Catholic mass and other ritualistic aspects of the Church. However, the 1381 Peasants' Revolt lost Wycliff the support of Lancaster and many hitherto sympathetic landowners, who perceived the Lollards as leaders of the recent unrest. However, while Wycliff himself was prepared to condemn the insurgency, the revolt was the logical outcome of his thinking; one that Wycliff never repudiated in his lifetime.

Wycliff died peacefully in bed in 1384. But his ideas endured and were preached by his students and their followers, who soon received the derisive nickname of Lollards.¹ The definition of what and who were the Lollards is problematic. Three groups may be distinguished in its initial formation: the academic followers of Wycliff at Oxford, some members of the court of Richard II, and the humble disciples of heresy in the towns and in the countryside. But not all Lollards embraced Eucharistic heresy, and many more were indifferent to Wycliff's views on the Papacy, or his assaults on the purpose of pilgrimage, cult of saints and images. According to Heath, it was the peculiar characteristic of the Lollards that they espoused causes and ideas in tortuous and highly selective ways. In other words, although the basic doctrines of the so-called Lollard movement were derived from the ideas of Wycliff, as messengers, they were susceptible to misinterpretation of Wycliff's thinking, and often confused or misused his pronouncements. Among those who involved themselves with dissenting opinions there was a considerable range of attitudes and personal creeds: those who had previously tended towards anti-clericalism; those who had been drawn towards mystical and personal religious observances; those who wished to practice Puritanism and asceticism; and a smaller number who were attracted by the idea of independence from established authority, whether ecclesiastical, non-ecclesiastical or both.

The Lollard threat to the Church was probably more serious than the political threat of the Lollards to the state. The former was more wide-ranging, as it constituted an ideological heresy as well as assault on the institutional and hierarchical foundations of the Church from both within and without. The combination of Wycliff's doctrine of the true Church and his predestinarianism implied a comprehensive rejection of the entire ecclesiastical establishment: there was no reason according to the Lollards why the believer should recognize the spiritual authority of another individual or of an earthly organization. It was thus characteristic of Lollardy to attack those elements of the Church which most emphasized its institutional aspects: the payment of tithes; excommunication; the forms of penance prescribed in the confessional; prayer to and adoration of the saints along with the cult of their relics; and above all, the reverence paid to a spiritual authority based on laws other than what the Lollards regarded as the law of God. Ideologically, hostility to the veneration of images and denial of the transubstantiation in the Eucharist, as well as opposition to pilgrimage were the highest forms of heresy; questioning the most revered principles of the orthodox Catholic creed. On a more temporal level the Lollards denounced luxury and the slothfulness of the higher clergy and preached a simple earnest Christianity based on equality, personal sincerity or zeal, and the teachings of Christ in the New Testament. In this way the Lollards were not only undermining the authority of the senior clergy, but were attacking the employment of clerics in civil administration and the possession of temporalities by the Church. The Medieval Church was in fact the biggest landowner in England, and so the Lollards drew up detailed suggestions for the redistribution of Church property, and recommended that clerical temporalities could be used to finance universities, almshouses and could be employed as additional revenue for the king. These attacks were very real: the Lollards found much support on a popular level from members of the lower clergy, and to a lesser extent from sympathetic laymen. In effect, the Lollards contributed to the amplification of State attack on the Church - until at least 1410 the idea was afloat in England of confiscating the property of the Church - at a time when divisions within the Papacy had made the Church vulnerable to outside pressure, and their doctrine and denunciations of Church worldliness provoked a movement within the Church to reform corruption and reduce terrestrial proclivities. But perhaps the most serious source of alarm for the Church authorities was the attempt by the Lollards to persuade the public to study the scriptures in translation, and to reach their own conclusions. The Church was sufficiently alarmed in the later years of Richard II's reign to seek the death penalty for heresy; and in 1401, two years after the accession of Henry IV, the *Statute of De Heretico Comburendo* was introduced in Parliament to reinforce and augment the earlier motion.

¹ From the Dutch word *Lollen* or *Lullen*, meaning chanter of prayers

The alliance of Church and State against Lollardy in the Lancastrian period offers a fascinating view of the political implications of the Lollard movement. McFarlane's study shows that there were prominent Lollards in the court of Richard II, as well as in the minority Council, possibly connected with the royal family and each other through marriage ties. At least seven knights² have been positively identified as Lollards, while three other Ricardian courtiers have been tentatively recognized as such. Evidence suggests that the Lollards may have been active servants of the Black Prince, and indeed, the involvement of some of them in diplomacy may well have helped to forge the links between the heretical movements in England and Bohemia at the time of Richard's first marriage. Under these circumstances, those barons who sought to curb the influence of Richard's entourage would have favored more vigorous action against an illicit religious movement which claimed members of the king's chamber and household among its adherents. Likewise, magnates who had been jealous of Lancaster's predominant role in politics during the early years of the reign, welcomed the opportunity to challenge and reverse his policies in his absence, and were not likely to be sympathetic towards the followers of the heretical academic whose career and opinion had been promoted by Lancaster to serve his own ends. Thus, the Lollards provided useful ammunition for the critics of Richard II's government; and since the Lord Appellants who seized power at the end of 1387 were in particular concerned with the problem of public order, the Lollards were targeted for persecution. Heath points out that there were other reasons why the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the baronial opponents of Richard II were willing to act in each other's interests: the Appellants and their supporters favored a more aggressive policy of war in France, in open conflict with the king's preference for a peaceful end to the tussle. So those members of the episcopate who considered it their duty to uphold the cause of Urban VI on the battlefield as well as within a divided Christendom welcomed the possibility of a more vigorous policy against France and Clement VII. For their part, the Lords Appellants were more than willing to accommodate the Church by seeking to put an end to an heresy that was so closely identified with the court circle.

It is thus understandable why under the first two Lancastrian kings Lollardy became more actively persecuted, and attempts were made to eradicate the movement altogether. After all, not only the Lollards were loosely identified with Richard II's court, but they were also a source of substantial civil unrest. It was easy to read into Wycliff's philosophy a program of social revolution: his theories on dominion, on the grace of the righteous as the basis of authority, the exaltation of the power of the state over the church, and the right of temporal rulers to correct ecclesiastics, were far reaching and especially pertinent to Henry IV, who was seen by many contemporaries as an usurper. Furthermore, the Lollard appeal lay to no small extent in the expression which it gave to the frustrations of the underprivileged, who were increasingly aware of their deteriorating social, political and economic conditions. Of course, Lollardy rarely developed revolutionary tendencies in the late fourteenth century, but the rejection of all things subversive after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 meant that the nobility, who up to this point had protected the Lollards and had even participated in their doctrinal creed, became alarmed and fearful and distanced themselves from the movement by withdrawing their patronage. There is no evidence to associate John Ball and the other leaders of the 1381 uprising to Wycliff. Nevertheless, the most significant aspect of the rebellion was its widespread assault on monastic houses and church property, and the revolt served to convince the upper-classes that the insurgency against established authority was part of an organized movement for agitation. It was therefore possible after 1381 to regard Wycliff's followers as potential rebels and instigators of sedition; so that by the first quarter of the 15th century the common repute of a Lollard was even less enviable than it had been a generation earlier.³ There was alarm over the manner as well as the matter of Lollardy, and it was under these circumstances that Archbishop Courtenay pressed home the first successful campaign against the movement in 1381.

Although the turbulence of Henry IV's reign allowed the Lollards a brief respite - only two alleged Lollard heretics were burned in accordance with *De Heretico Comburendo* - the state was now

² The most important of these were Sir Richard Sturry and Richard Lewis Clifford

³ There can be little doubt that the Lollard movement would have been far more successful, and extremely dangerous to the authority of both Church and State, had the printing press been available in the fourteenth century

even more conscious that Wycliff's teachings on the nature of 'true lordship found in grace' could be turned against the secular prince and the establishment as swiftly as against endowed religion. At the same time, Archbishop Arundel's defeat of University Lollardy in Oxford within these years must have given him the necessary confidence to move against its lay sympathizers elsewhere. The archbishop's undertaking is also a reflection of Henry V's strongly orthodox sentiments, without which Arundel would not have dared to openly attack Oldcastle, an intimate of the king and a member of the aristocracy. Certainly the Oldcastle uprising of 1414 is a good example of the fact that the Lollard threat was over-exaggerated. The rebellion demonstrated that the movement had no conclusive social aims, nor a defined program beyond a vague idea of seizing the present king and overthrowing his government. Judging by the number of chaplains who participated in the rebellion, the main leadership came from the lesser clergy and artisans; but the numbers were very small - a few hundred at most - and the revolt clearly created more panic than was justified. More significantly, the ease with which the rebellion was suppressed, as was another uprising in 1431, verifies that both insurgencies were far too fragmented, their membership too dispersed, and communication links too poor within their rank-and-file to be of any threat to the established order.

Lollardy was a variable creed which stressed individuality and a return to a more simple and basic form of Christianity. During the political disturbances of Richard II's reign, and the early Lancastrian period, the movement became a convenient scapegoat for civil and ecclesiastical authorities to target and persecute, as Lollards were increasingly denounced for stirring up the pervading socio-political-economic ills. Though over-rated, nonetheless the Lollard threat was not fictitious. What needs to be distinguished is that the movement was a far more serious threat to the institutional authority of the Church than it ever was to the State, whether politically or socially. Despite deviations from Wycliff's line, most Lollards agreed with his thinking that the individual must remain subservient to the authority of the state. On the other hand, Wycliff's questioning of the Church and the papal influence found the largest number of supporters within the movement. The fact that Lollardy endured under persecution, that it spread to the continent - Jan Huss in Bohemia - and that many of its tenants were incorporated by the Protestant Reformation, testifies that Lollardy was never fully extinguished, and the movement remained resilient and vibrant well into the 16th century.

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