Historical Papers
Communications historiques

The Social Doctrine of John Wyclif [1]

John Gilchrist

Volume 4, Number 1, 1969

Toronto 1969

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030715ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/030715ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (print)
1712-9109 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Gilchrist, J. (1969). The Social Doctrine of John Wyclif [1]. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, *4*(1), 157–165. https://doi.org/10.7202/030715ar

THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF JOHN WYCLIF [1]

JOHN GILCHRIST
Trent University

By way of introduction to this paper I should like to call attention to two aspects of recent research in medieval canon law and theology. Firstly, the work of scholars such as Baldwin, Tierney, de Couvreur and Noonan, has done a great deal to unearth the doctrines of the canonists and theologians on questions of poverty, just price and usury. From their research we are today much more aware of the part played by the canonists and theologians in formulating and developing social concepts that had a profound effect well beyond the confines of the law courts and universities. Secondly, in late medieval theology, that is, the post-Ockham period, Oberman and others are giving us a much better picture of the sort of theological tradition that the early reformers such as Wyclif, Huss, Luther and Calvin were heir to. [2]

These two bodies of research can, I think, be synthesized, and the present paper is a contribution towards a much larger design that aims at re-examining the socio-economic doctrines of the early reformers in the light of the new insights given us by recent research in the two areas I have mentioned. My general thesis is that the early reformers were so moulded by their theological tradition that they became ultra conservative in their social doctrines. And this was no accident. Their theology was a product of metaphysical realism and scriptural fundamentalism, which taken together may well have produced a revolutionary ecclesiology and sacramentology, but inhibited all innovation in social doctrine. Whenever the reformers had to deal with social or economic problems, their solutions tended to be some version of fairly standard medieval doctrines. Any departure from the norm can be explained in terms of the brand of metaphysics and theology propounded by the individual reformer.

A study of John Wyclif is part of this larger design for two reasons. The first is that the importance of his career as a priest, philosopher, theologian, politician, heretic and heresiarch, has been very much neglected by historians until quite recently. He deserves to be studied more widely and more systematically. The second reason for looking at him is that both the University of Oxford and

[1] For bibliography see J. A. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), 253-262, and G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Manchester University Press, 1967), II, 752-777.

[2] J. Gilchrist, *The Church and Economic Activity in the Middle Ages* (Macmillan, 1969), *passim*.

England at large were experiencing critical times in his day. Wyclif's life spans the period of the Black Death, the opening of the Hundred Years War, the conflicts over matters of papal provisions and taxation. It was also a period of increasing demands by the secular power for more money to pay for the wars and for the ever growing complexity of the governmental machinery. In philosophy and theology it was a century of change, the breakdown of the traditional links between faith and reason, and the emergence of a new brand of scepticism. Wyclif was involved in many of these happenings, and to observe the reaction of a professional academic to the events of his time helps us to understand the depth of the changes that were pressing upon him.

Wyclif has not had a good press. The traditional view was that propounded in the nineteenth century, by historians such as Froude, who found in Wyclif "the great forerunner of the Reformation... [whose disciples] under his captaincy... spread out over the country as an army of missionaries, to preach the faith which they found in the Bible... [men who] carried with them copies of the Bible which Wycliffe had translated." [3] Present day historians are not so complimentary. Wyclif has been described as an academic of highly conservative and traditional philosophical views, an extreme realist, who fought at Oxford a last ditch stand against the Ockhamite philosophy. Some of the modern assessments are indeed harsh. Such is the conclusion of Robson, "Vanished is the picture of the Great Reformer; in his place stands an obstinate and rancorous pedagogue." [4] For Leff, Wyclif is an extremist, influenced by worldly ambition, unsubtle and repetitive, whose system turns out to be "little more than a few guiding threads in endless words." [5]

It may well be that Leff and the others are right, but they leave untouched the area of Wyclif's social thought, and this as well as other aspects of his ideology such as his canonistics, need to be examined before we can accept that Leff is in fact correct.

It must of course be admitted that the grounds for summarily dismissing Wyclif's social ideas seem obvious enough. A brief glance at his career, which was mainly that of an academic philosopher and theologian, spent largely at Oxford (c. 1350-1381) and then for the last few years in the parish of Lutterworth, gives little reason to assume that Wyclif was concerned with or even aware of the social and economic forces rapidly changing the society in which he lived.

[3] J. A. Froude, *History of England,* II (New York, 1875), 25, 27.

[4] Robson, *op. cit.*, 4.

[5] G. Leff, "John Wyclif: the Path to Dissent," *Proceedings of the British Academy,* 52 (1966), 143-180, here 147-148.

As an absentee priest, he was typical of his day. Money was possibly always short – his brief incursions into politics in 1374, 1376-1377, and 1378 did not help him financially – and McFarlane suggests it was a very disappointed Wyclif who learnt sometime in 1375 that the prebend of Caistor in Lincoln had gone to someone else. From that time, says McFarlane, Wyclif began to harbour a sense of persecution. [6]

The point I want to establish here is that Wyclif's experience of the non-academic world was not an overtly pleasant one. His political experience was to do with papal taxation and clerical wealth, and if we turn to the schedule of nineteen propositions, attributed to Wyclif and condemned by the pope on May 22nd, 1377, we find that eight of the nineteen had socio-political undertones, e.g. No. 2, God cannot give civil dominion to a man in perpetuity, either for himself or his heirs; 13, Christ's disciples have no power to exact temporalities by means of censures; and 17, Kings may deprive those ecclesiastics of their temporalities who habitually misuse them. [7]

The nineteen propositions do not indicate the nature of Wyclif's later heresy, which largely concerned scripture, papal authority and the sacraments, but they are important in showing that socio-political concepts had a definite place in the development of his thought.

In examining the social doctrine, one thing must be made clear. Nowhere does Wyclif discuss at length or in our terms his social ideas. These we have to piece together from the 40 or so Latin works attributed to him. Obviously this method has weaknesses. In justification, however, I think it can be argued that most of Wyclif's later writings are polemical and occasional works, containing a few basic notions which persist throughout their great bulk. Within these limitations an orderly treatment of his doctrine can be pursued.

The first thing to notice about Wyclif's doctrine is that he rarely particularizes. The reason for this may have been sheer neglect or indifference, but I think it is neither. It is a consequence of his philosophical realism. Wyclif was indeed a realist, an extreme one; at the basis of his thought lay the concepts of Necessity, Eternity, and Indestructibility. Through these concepts Wyclif conceived all existence. He was not therefore concerned with the world of the senses, nor with particular objects. He was concerned with the ultimate reality, with the hierarchy of ideas flowing, as it were in a stream, from the supreme Being to the singular object. He was a determinist,

[6] K. B. McFarlane, *John Wyclif and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (EUP, 1952), 29.

[7] Text in translation in J. Dahmus, *William Courtenay Archbishop of Canterbury, 1381-1396* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 47-49.

and his theology and view of society were formed in that framework. His determinism meant that he rarely questioned or departed from social realities. [8]

Thus Wyclif treated society as static and unchanging. Society consisted of the three orders of priest, soldier, and worker. In harmony the three orders constituted an organic whole *(unam personam unicordem),* in which the priests pray, the secular lords defend, and the people produce. [9] As for the third order, which includes all producers and distributors of goods, its role is to serve the needs of the other two :

> and the third part of the church, that is, the labourers and others dealing in temporal goods ought to minister in temporal things to the two former classes within reasonable limits. [10]

The cooperation of all three estates must lead to the destruction of the party of the devil. [11]

Wyclif, like most medieval thinkers, concentrated on the first two estates, that is, the clergy and rulers. What he had to say about them is atypical and most of us will be familiar with the line of approach that we find in such predecessors as Dante, Marsiglio of Padua, and William of Ockham. Wyclif's most interesting comments concern the third estate; unfortunately, as we shall see, these comments were all too few.

The question that we must now try to answer is to what extent was Wyclif aware of the complex nature of the system he described ? First, concerning the clergy, we should notice that Wyclif emphasized their spiritual functions to the exclusion – in theory, at least – of all temporal pursuits. The canonists had been more generous and had allowed clerics in certain circumstances, e.g. when their living was too poor, to have secular employment or occupation, as teaching or farming. [12] By contrast, Wyclif's program for the clerical life was wholly idealistic because it turns out to be little more than the advocacy of a return to evangelical poverty with a reliance upon pure alms and tithes as a source of income.

Wyclif derived this doctrine from two sources. First, there was the example of Christ himself who was "in secular matters the poorest of men". [13] Second, Wyclif appealed to the theological distinction that

[8] Robson, *op. cit.,* 145-146, 148-150.
[9] All references to Wyclif's works are to the Wyclif Society editions (London, 1883 foll. – Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966). Here *De officio regis,* 58-59.
[10] *Speculum ecclesie militantis,* 80-81.
[11] *Ibid.,* 81.
[12] Gilchrist, *op. cit.,* 54-55.
[13] *Opus evangelicum,* III, 133.

before the Fall from Innocence men had the use of goods but not ownership. The syllogistic reasoning is simple enough. Before the Fall, man had perfection, ownership is a limitation, therefore in the state of innocence "all things were to be held in common." [14] After the Fall, private ownership became necessary as a curb upon man's greedy nature. Property owning is then a concession to man's fallen state. The distinction is well expressed in Wyclif's own phrase, "Every proprietor sins venially." [15] Wyclif then does not deny the necessity of temporal things, but as a realist he regards them as objects that tend to divert men from their true purpose. All men should turn away from the things of the world, but especially the clergy for they have positively renounced the goods of the world.

In this doctrine of the community of goods, Wyclif was heir to a long tradition. The idea itself had emerged clearly in the early twelfth century. The canonist, Ivo of Chartres, had expressed it thus : *Iure divino omnia sunt communia, iure vero constitutionis hoc meum, illud vero alterius est.* [16] The idea became part of the general canonical and theological tradition. Petrus Cantor (c. 1197) states it clearly and simply : *Omnia enim de iure nature communia sunt. Postea ex iniquitate Hoc meum, illud tuum.* [17]

Wyclif extended his consideration of clerical possession to outlining the practical consequences of their betrayal of their obligations. He blamed clerical greed as the cause of plague, famine and war. He argued that if the clergy could be persuaded to renounce possession, all sorts of economic and spiritual good would follow. Indeed, he produced an ingenious plan by which, in England, clerical surrender of ecclesiastical property would lead to better husbandry, the land would carry more cattle, population would rise, and this would produce more taxes to pay for the defence of the realm.

Against this background Wyclif produced his theory of *Dominium* and Grace, a theory that brought his first condemnation in 1377 and on subsequent occasions, until the final one at Constance in 1415.

In his theory of *Dominium* Wyclif emphasizes the concept of man's lordship over the world before the Fall, a lordship that was subsequently lost, and only restored by virtue of Christ's passion and death on the cross. But to whom was lordship restored ? To those who shared in the fruits of that passion. Those who share thus, are in

[14] *De civili dominio*, III, 204.
[15] *Ibid.*, 168.
[16] P.L. 161, 1095.
[17] *Summa de sacramentis et animæ consiliis*, ed. J. A. Dugauquier (Analecta Mediævalia Namurcensia 7; Louvain-Lille, 1957), §208, p. 162.

a state of grace. Lordship therefore depended on being in a state of grace.

The basic theory was not new, but Wyclif adopted it to strengthen his case against clerical lordship of any kind. To do this he not only asserted that temporal rulers could dispossess any ecclesiastic abusing his wealth, but he identified clerical dominion itself as *ipso facto* proof of moral laxity and therefore confiscation of clerical goods could follow.

At the same time he removed from the lay power the possible charge that it, too, could be dispossessed, that is, if it were lacking in grace, by asserting that it is in the nature of the civil power to possess civil dominion; also, in practice, he came to grant clerical civil dominion of possession, if not of ownership. Was then his theory wholly impractical? Wilks thinks not. The latter, following Knowles, I suspect, has brilliantly developed the theme that Wyclif directed his theory not against actual possession of temporalities by clerics, which he was prepared to accept, but against the papal theory of universal *Dominium.* Wyclif's theory was, in fact, no more than a re-statement of "the old lay ideal of a theocratic monarchy and a proprietary church." Later, even this was abandoned for the organic theory of the state, as expressed in the *De Officio Regis.* [18]

In turning from the clergy to the laity, one is struck by the possible contradiction in Wyclif's thought. If property owning is sinful, why impose it upon the laity? Wyclif did not ask that question, and, in fact, whenever he considered the laity as laity, his ideas tend to derive from a fairly uncritical acceptance of the doctrines of the early fathers of the Church, notably from Augustine and Chrysostom. I say "uncritical" because he gives little sign of being aware of the extent to which the patristic doctrines had been modified by the canonists during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Wyclif's concept of wealth was thoroughly rooted in the Fathers. Wealth was sin. The wealthy man "sins at least venially by living in such a fashion." [19] Wyclif's views on such matters as profit, trade, usury and price are conservative and dated, and out of touch with the economic realities of his own time. He lands himself in syllogistic and theological impasses by such arguments as the following. In commenting upon Matthew 6: 24: No man can serve two masters, Wyclif points out that God will provide for the birds of the air and how much more so for man himself, if only man will trust Him.

[18] M. Wilks, "Predestination, Property and Power: Wyclif's theory of Dominion and Grace," *Studies in Church History,* 2 (1965), 220-236, here 235-236.

[19] *Sermones,* I, 46-47.

Therefore if man is poor, it is not because of some fault on the part of God, but of some lack of trust by man in His providence. Trust and you shall not want. [20]

Although Wyclif admits the practical necessity of the trades and crafts, even of commerce, he follows Chrysostom in believing that the latter cannot be pursued without some sinfulness. Buying and selling is incompatible with the state of innocence and holiness. As for those who seek profit as such, they commit mortal sin.

As a consequence of his fundamentalist views of scripture and his extreme realism, Wyclif regards all commercial instruments as of the party of the devil. Contracts, wills and even civil actions for recovery of debts he finds sinful and expressed *"inter partes peccabiles."* [21] As for obvious admitted abuses such as fraud and usury, he makes a few references to them; what he has to say is traditional, and often more rigorist than the canonical doctrines of the time. On slavery he is undecided. As for masters and their servants he is fairly simple. Masters often defraud their servants, but so do workers defraud their masters. He exhorts both groups to act in a christian fashion. [22] All in all, Wyclif maintains the threefold division already mentioned.

In other respects, Wyclif's doctrine militated against the accumulation of capital, which was common enough in such commercial centres as London. He considered too active a pursuit of profit excluded charity; if trade had to be indulged in, let the superfluous profits be distributed to the poor.

This raises the question then whether Wyclif had anything new to say about the treatment of poverty. Did he, for example, recognize that poverty of the able-bodied poor was perhaps more serious than that of the "blind, the lame and the deaf" to whom he often referred? [23] The answer is no. Wyclif was no social reformer. In fact, I find two quite dissimilar and contradictory notions present in his occasional writings on the problem of poverty. The first is the notion that "the state of poverty is closer to the state of innocence and consequently a more perfect state for the christian," a notion which was traditional in the middle ages. In other words, blessed are the poor. [24]

This first notion is acceptable enough because it does not exclude the action of charity. But Wyclif's second notion is, I think, part of a

[20] *Ibid.*, 312-313.
[21] *De civili dominio*, I, 265.
[22] *Sermones*, II, 232-234.
[23] *Ibid.*, 339-342.
[24] *De civili dominio*, III, 89.

newly emerging doctrine that reaches maturity in the Tudor period, namely, that poverty is a crime and a punishment for man's sin : –

> On this matter it should be noted that temporal necessities are never lacking unless the sin of the christians, who have use of temporal things, is to blame; for either God would fail in providing or man in sinning, to whom God would provide; but the faithful cannot blame God for this failure, since He is all powerful, all-knowing and all-willing; it follows then that man has no one to blame but himself. [25]

On the alleviation of poverty, Wyclif is again traditional in his teaching. He distinguished the poor into the two classes of the able-bodied and the needy, and he had a discriminatory approach that was somewhat more strict than that expounded by the canonists since the twelfth century. [26] The class Wyclif most despised were the sturdy beggars, who included friars, pilgrims, ex-soldiers, sham cripples, and a host of strolling actors, prostitutes and various fools. He seemed neither aware of nor concerned about the conditions that produced these groups.

In teaching that the Church's wealth was held in trust for the good of the poor, Wyclif again was thoroughly orthodox. In urging men to consume only what they need and give the rest to the poor, he was saying nothing new. Even the doctrine that in time of necessity the poor can take sufficient for their needs had a respectable ancestry. What was new in Wyclif's doctrine was his claim that the responsibility for distributing the surplus goods belonged to the secular power and not to the clergy. "Distribution of corporal alms belongs to the lay ministry, while the clergy should be concerned with distributing the more powerful spiritual alms." [27]

All this produces for the historian of socio-economic ideas a negative conclusion, namely, that Wyclif had nothing new to say. [28] This conclusion serves to confirm what others, working from the point of view of Wyclif's metaphysics or theology, have already told us. In the last years of his life, his main passion was to define the new ecclesiology, in which the visible Church was not the real Church. The real Church was the *congregatio predestinatorum.* [29] Thus, although he might look at society, it was only to see beyond the life of men on earth into the constitution of the church of the saved. By comparison with the eternal salvation of man, life on earth was transitory and of little concern. When he did produce social ideas

[25] *Opus evangelicum,* II, 341.
[26] Gilchrist, *op. cit.,* 119.
[27] *De potestate pape,* 90.
[28] A number of themes have yet to be explored, notably Wyclif's attitudes towards women, marriage, government, war and slavery. His doctrine of clerical dispossession was potentially revolutionary, although again it was not new.
[29] Leff, *Proceedings, British Academy,* 52, 158.

they were either traditional or introduced as a means of chastising the clergy. Some of the moderate points in his teaching, which would have been beneficial to society, e.g. a better tax system, had no chance of success because he alienated the lay powers, without whose support he could not have implemented his ideas. By this alienation it might be argued that Wyclif destroyed any hope of reform after his day, and instead of bringing the Church that he so despised to a more realistic appraisal of its position in society, and so to play a larger role during the coming century, he merely accelerated the processes under way since the beginning of his own century, that is, the divorce between Church and Society.