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John Wyclif's Reformation Reputation

By John Davis

IN recent history writing, the concept of 'forerunners' of the reformers of the sixteenth century is regaining some lost ground. In particular, it is being shown that the reformers often stand in direct line of descent from certain heterodox traditions of the later middle ages with regard to such themes as scriptural authority, the nature of the church, grace, and sin. For example, both John Hus and John Wyclif believed in the sufficiency of scriptural authority rather than in the dual authority of scripture and tradition, and both believed in a church of the elect, essentially hidden within society. At the same time, they believed that society and secular occupations formed a kind of quasi-church in which the sovereignty of God was the source of all authority. Martin Luther stands in direct line of descent from this tradition, and the English reformation had behind it one of the strongest 'heretical' traditions in Europe, that of Wyclif and the Lollards. The problem of influence and origin in the sixteenth century is complex, but it cannot be denied that heterodox traditions form the context of much that followed after.

These problems concern the long witness of the remnant that remained faithful to the religion of the Word, however inadequately, throughout the accretions of medieval christendom which threatened to wipe out the scriptural and historical basis of Christianity itself. Two articles by Margaret Aston have appeared in recent years in prominent historical journals dealing with the problem of Wycliffite influence upon the English reformation.[1] Although these articles are the product of a consummate knowledge of the literary sources, they are little related to much recent work in local diocesan archives. Thus, their claim decisively to cloud the concept of 'the morning star' of the English reformation, that Wyclif had any appreciable effect upon the thought of the English reformers and their followers in the parishes, was both premature and misleading. In the first of the two articles, Mrs. Aston dismisses the 'great valhalla of the English Reformation', consisting of Wyclif and the major figures of Lollardy, as the literary polemics of the early Protestant reformers like John Bale and John Foxe whose concern was not historical veracity but the defence of their faith against the charge that it was a 'secte newe fangled': 'protestantism, in its origins, is less like a hydra than a cyclops'. Thus we have this unnatural monster staring out at history with its baleful eye upon any straw that will help make the bricks of its new edifice.

Mrs. Aston does make some telling points: there is no sign of a Lollard press turning out Lollard literature before the reformers printed the old Lollard manuscripts as propaganda reprints. However, here Mrs. Aston concedes that the association of merchants and publishers who were mainly responsible for the growth of reforming opinion in England in the years 1525 to 1547, were themselves in close contact with Lollard

circles. A close inspection of the records suggests that colporteurs and merchants engaged in these activities were Lollards, or neo-Lollards themselves, as were many of their reading public. The areas of Protestant affiliation grow up over, or in close proximity to, the old Lollard sects within the city of London, and in the south-eastern counties. It appears that much of the time Mrs. Aston is arguing in a vacuum, she is not considering the actual structure and spread of reforming opinion itself, on the ground. She does admit that many themes were held in common by both Lollards and reformers, principally the attack upon pilgrimages, veneration of images, and invocation of the saints. She does not point out that these themes were the most prominent part of the Cambridge reformers' programme until 1531, and that these reformers moved in Lollard circles. Similarly, she does not point out that the publishers of heretical books, 'the Christian Brethren', were publishing works attacking the mass as early as 1531, at a date when no academic reformer apart from Frith had begun to contemplate such a theological debate. The most likely explanation is that Tudor Lollardy played more than a passive role in the production of heretical literature, since Lollards had been attacking the mass for over a century.

In her onslaught upon Wyclif's personal standing as father of English reform, one feels that Mrs. Aston is more at home, and has greater validity than in her remarks about Lollardy as a movement. After all, Wyclif was only founder of one wing of Lollardy, the biblical or evangelical Lollards, as opposed to the more rationalistic and eccentric kind. Mrs. Aston points out that there is no evidence of Wyclif as founder of an apostolate of poor priests, or that one is justified in claiming him as father of the English bible. He was a clerical pluralist, immersed in politics and realist metaphysics, and the English reformers owed as much to the thought of Luther and Erasmus as they did to Wyclif, probably more. But, this does not alter that fact that the thought of the English reformers tended to be cast in an indigenous mould; they were concerned in the first place with the themes and topics raised by Wyclif and his immediate academic followers: clerical simony, idolatrous worship of images and saints, and the spurning of Christ as man's sole mediator in salvation and intercession:

> Christ is our heed that sitteth on hy,
> Heddes ne ought we have no mo.

Thus ran a sixteenth century adaptation of Lollard verse. Antipapalism and iconoclasm continued to be strong traits in the English reforming spirit, heir to Lollardy and Wyclif himself. There can be no doubt that Mrs. Aston overtaxes her argument by suggesting that Wyclif was no reformer, and that he made no direct attack upon traditional theology; if he made no explicit attack on the real presence, he effectively attacked transubstantiation, the keystone of medieval sacramental grace. To suggest that Wyclif cannot be claimed the author of anything in English is doubtful purism. In fact, Mrs. Aston is not content to recognise Wyclif as a conscious reformer, a founder of a movement, because he was content to think thoughts and write, and was fortunate enough to die in bed. If such rigorous

demands were made upon all influential historical figures, then history would cease to make sense.

In exorcising the ghost of the Protestant legend, Mrs. Aston has made a reassessment of Wyclif's place in the sixteenth century that much easier.[2] By critical examination of Protestant historiography false assumptions as to Wyclif's authorship of Biblical translations and a vernacular corpus of heretical literature, his conscious sponsoring of a reforming movement, and his direction of the Lollards, have been exposed. On the other hand, it is not denied that significant remnants of the legend may yet be established, and that Wyclif can be regarded as the founder of the Lollards and of reforming impulses by default. Inevitably, as Mrs. Aston points out, such a judgment is important for the problem of the Lollard contribution to the English Reformation, and in another article, Mrs. Aston has concluded that 'in so far as the work of sixteenth-century reformers touched upon the textual bases of the Lollard movement, it was a work of recovery and revival.'[3] Further, the Lollards found much to applaud in the doctrine of the reformers particularly with regard to image worship, pilgrimage and clerical endowments. Returning to Wyclif himself, while he cannot be regarded as the definite source of the vernacular scriptures, he elevated the authority of scripture: while his eucharistic thought failed to reach a definitive stage, he did deny transubstantiation and thus set a precedent for reformulation. However, the main point that Mrs. Aston is making in these articles seems to be that Lollardy was essentially a false start: that Wyclif was far from being the morning star of the Protestant legend: 'And perhaps we shall find it easier to understand the limitations of England's major heretical movement, if we understand the limitations of its founder'.[4] The survival of a devotional insular heresy which can be called Lollard in the widest sense of a loosely held bundle of heretical tenets, some Wycliffite in complexion, others eccentric and individualistic, is presumably accepted. Indeed, the survival of Lollardy on the ground well into the sixteenth century has never been seriously disputed by any historian of the movement, and recent regional studies by Dr. J. A. F. Thompson have demonstrated the continuity of Lollard traditions until 1520.[5] The problem of definition, of how far Lollardy is a consistently held body of beliefs throughout the fifteenth century, is becoming increasingly clear. The consensus of opinion in recent years seems to be that Lollardy is a heretical hash rather than a doctrinal programme. The residual problem of Lollardy then concerns its influence upon the English Reformation: it is essentially a sixteenth-century affair. Seen in the light of Mrs. Aston's articles Lollard influence upon the sixteenth-century is clearly weak; where Wyclif's name is revered by the reformers it is the result of polemical hindsight. Unlike many medievalists, Mrs. Aston tends to discount continuity when viewing the developments of reformation and renaissance.

While showing a consummate grasp of Protestant historiography on the subject of Wyclif and Lollardy, Mrs. Aston does not go on to delineate other schools of thought. In some ways this is a pity since Mrs. Aston herself seems to be following in a tradition of Lollard studies every bit as well defined as that of the Protestant polemicists,

namely the Gairdner tradition. For Gairdner, Wyclif was a typical schoolman who should never be regarded as a heresiarch; in the words of Mrs. Aston: 'For all his originality and importance, Wycliffe began and ended his career essentially a schoolman . . . he never admitted to the denial of the real presence, and he died in full communion with the church.'[6] Moreover, Gairdner minimised the importance of Lollard survival in the sixteenth-century and suggested that it was as inimical to the new reforming order as it had been to the old: 'And the fact that the reformers of the sixteenth-century had to start again on a new footing was due at least in part to the academic limitations of their fourteenth-century predecessor.'[7] On the other hand, like Mrs. Aston, Gairdner did not altogether deny some importance to Wyclif and the Lollards in the sixteenth-century; 'The ground, however, was prepared for a good deal of theological change if heresy instead of being suppressed, were once encouraged by authority.'[8] While reading both Gairdner and Mrs. Aston, certain statements seem to cancel each other out in the final analysis: Wyclif and Lollardy were a false start, indeed, Wyclif was not really a heretic and the Lollards were inimical to reform. On the other hand, Wyclif founded a heretical movement by default and his followers 'had some success—a success which produced offspring its parent would hardly have recognised'.[9] The result was that Wyclif and the Lollards ended up in the Protestant pantheon by mistake and were presumably persecuted for fundamentally different heresies from those of the reformers of the sixteenth-century. The anomaly is clearly apparent in Gairdner's statement that Lollard ideas 'mingled with, and domineered over the Reformation, though they did not bring it on'.[10]

The linking of Lollardy and Reformation, or of Wyclif and the Reformation, implies a consideration of the antecedents and genesis of reforming ideas. The criticisms levelled by W. H. Frere at Gairdner's work in 1910 can, in some measure, be applied to Mrs. Aston's assessment of Wyclif's reformation reputation. Frere found Gairdner's handling of the causes of the English Reformation disappointing. He also found Gairdner's conception of reformation too narrow, and therefore, considered that Gairdner has missed the true significance of Lollard survival. Professor Trevor-Roper has recently reminded us that the reformation of the church also entails the reformation of society.[11] Frere's definition of Lollardy took in its social as well as its religious characteristics; 'a term which loosely comprises a vast number of tenets or tendencies scattered over every field of human thought and activity.'[12] Wyclif is seen as the stone that caused innumerable ripples in the pool; 'If his followers pushed his tenets to conclusions that he would not have sanctioned, they nevertheless took their premisses from him: and though it is not fair to charge him personally with all the outcome, yet it is necessary to take all the developments, even the most extravagant, into account if the movement that came from Wyclif's impulse is to be adequately studied.'[13] The process of reformation cannot be confined to the Protestant reformers of the magisterial reformation, but must be seen to include the religious ferment of the Puritans and Anabaptists. In this broader sense, Lollardy is clearly an important antecedent of the

religious ferment of the sixteenth-century: 'Thus Lollardy, in the narrow and exclusively theological sense, is too slender a stream to trace as being the source of the Reformation; but in its wider and truer sense it is a watershed that profoundly affects the upper reaches of every stream which emerged into the field to swell the Reformation current in the sixteenth-century.'[14] Mrs. Aston is primarily concerned with the place of Wyclif himself in the sixteenth-century rather than with Lollardy, but by examining Wyclif's reputation in the Protestant legend, it must be emphasised that she is by-passing the wider implications and results of Wycliffite thought. In this wider sense, it may be that the skeleton that arises from the record offices, from the local history of Tudor Lollardy, popular mixed heresy, scepticism, Anabaptism and early Puritanism, may not be so very different from the Protestant ghost.

For example, the trials of the early Protestant reformers like Bilney, Arthur, and Latimer, have left articles and abjurations that contain essentially similar heresies relating to the veneration of images, prayers to the saints, and the practise of pilgrimage, as those contained in the trials of Lollards in the fifteenth-century and in the opening decades of the sixteenth-century. Thomas Batman, prior of the Hospital of of St. Bartholomew, Rochester, was called before Bishop Fisher in 1528 for evincing Lutheranism in his preaching. Batman's Lutheranism turns out to be superficial commendations of practices beyond the sea, and the articles of the abjuration are predominantly Lollard in character; 'that no man should offer to sayntes nor worship them but only god. Also I have said that no man should offer to the Rood of Grace nor to our Lady off Walsyngham or other ymages for they be but stokes and postis.'[15] The impression is that far from proving a conscious theological source, Lollardy was a broad conditioning factor in the opening stages of the English Reformation. It was a spring board for early reforming ideas, providing the academic preachers with an audience and the Biblical translators with readers. The local traditions of Lollardy, such as that existing in S.W. Kent, become successively, centres of sacramentarianism, Protestantism and Puritanism. The most drastic revision of the Gairdner school has come from Professor A. G. Dickens who recently concluded, 'That Lollardy thus survived and contributed in some significant degree toward the Protestant Reformation is a fact based upon massive and incontrovertible evidence.'[16] Professor Dickens goes on to show how the most informed of the conservative minds opposing the reformers viewed the reception of Lutheranism as a recrudescence of heresy within the context of Lollardy. The connection between Lollardy and Wyclif is not a narrow theological stream but rather an expanding tradition of dissent, closely allied to anticlericalism. On the other hand, some main features of this dissent, the attack on the cult of the saints and the doctrine of transubstantiation, found their genesis in the Wycliffite debates of the late fourteenth-century. These tenets cannot be directly fathered upon Wyclif in every detail, and owe as much to William Taylor and the Wycliffites of the early fifteenth-century. However, it is doubtful whether such debates would have gathered momentum without the initial revolt of the evangelical doctor. For

these reasons, Wyclif may still be viewed as a morning star, albeit on a broader horizon.

NOTES

[1] Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and the Reformation,' *History*, June, 1964: 'John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation', *Past and Present*, April, 1965.
[2] Margaret Aston, 'John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation', in *Past and Present*, 30, p. 23.
[3] Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and the Reformation: Survival or Revival?' in *History*, vol XLIX, no. 166, p. 169.
[4] Margaret Aston, 'John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation', p. 49.
[5] J. A. F. Thompson, 'The Later Lollards 1414-1520' 1965.
[6] Margaret Aston, loc. cit. pp. 42 and 49.
[7] ibid., p. 51.
[8] James Gairdner, 'Lollardy and the Reformation', 1908, pp. 287-289.
[9] Margaret Aston, loc. cit. p. 51.
[10] James Gairdner, op. cit., p. 100.
[11] H. Trevor-Roper, 'Religion, the Reformation and Social Change', Historical Studies, iv (1963).
[12] W. H. Frere, 'Lollardy and the Reformation', in Alcuin Club Colls. 35, p. 43.
[13] W. H. Frere, loc. cit. p. 43.
[14] ibid., p. 43.
[15] Rochester Episcopal Registers, vol IV, fol. 127r.
[16] A. G. Dickens, 'The English Reformation' p. 37. See Professor Dickens, earlier treatment of this subject, 'Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York 1509-1558' (1959).