

THE HISTORY
OF
PROTESTANTISM

BY THE
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WITH FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY ILLUSTRATIONS
BY THE BEST ARTISTS

“PROTESTANTISM, THE SACRED CAUSE OF GOD’S LIGHT AND TRUTH AGAINST THE
DEVIL’S FALSITY AND DARKNESS.”—*Carlyle*

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Book Second.

WICLIFFE AND HIS TIMES, OR ADVENT OF PROTESTANTISM.

CHAPTER I.

WICLIFFE: HIS BIRTH AND EDUCATION.

The Principle and the Rite—Rapid Growth of the One—Slow Progress and ultimate Triumph of the Other—England—Wicliffe—His Birthplace—His Education—Goes to Oxford—Enters Merton College—Its Fame—The Evangelical Bradwardine—His Renown—Pioneers the Way for Wicliffe—The Philosophy of those Days—Wicliffe's Eminence as a Scholastic—Studies also the Canon and Civil Laws—His Conversion—Theological Studies—The Black Death—Ravages Greece, Italy, &c.—Enters England—Its awful Desolations—Its Impression on Wicliffe—Stands Face to Face with Eternal Death—Taught not to Fear the Death of the Body.

WITH the revolving centuries we behold the world slowly emerging into the light. The fifth century brought with it a signal blessing to Christianity in the guise of a disaster. Like a tree that was growing too rapidly, it was cut down to its roots that it might escape a luxuriance which would have been its ruin. From a Principle that has its seat in the heart, and the fruit of which is an enlightened understanding and a holy life, Religion, under the corrupting influences of power and riches, was being transformed into a Rite, which, having its sphere solely in the senses, leaves the soul in darkness and the life in bondage.

These two, the Principle¹ and the Rite, began so early as the fourth and fifth centuries to draw apart, and to develop each after its own kind. The rite rapidly progressed, and seemed far to outstrip its rival. It built for itself gorgeous temples, it enlisted in its service a powerful hierarchy, it added year by year to the number and magnificence of its ceremonies, it expressed itself in canons and constitutions; and, seduced by this imposing show, nations bowed down before it, and puissant kings lent their swords for its defence and propagation.

Far otherwise was it with its rival. Withdrawing into the spiritual sphere, it appeared to have abandoned the field to its antagonist. Not so, however. If it had hidden itself from the eyes of men, it was that it might build up from the

¹ Lord Macaulay, in his essay on the Church of Rome, has characterised the Waldensian and Albigensian movements as the revolt of the human intellect against Catholicism. We would apply that epithet rather to the great scholastic and pantheistic movement which Abelard inaugurated; that was the revolt of the *intellect* strictly viewed. The other was the revolt of the *conscience* quickened by the Spirit of God. It was the revival of the Divine principle.

very foundation, piling truth upon truth, and prepare in silence those mighty spiritual forces by which it was in due time to emancipate the world. Its progress was consequently less marked, but was far more real than that of its antagonist. Every error which the one pressed into its service was a cause of weakness; every truth which the other added to its creed was a source of strength. The uninstructed and superstitious hordes which the one received into its communion were dangerous allies. They might follow it in the day of its prosperity, but they would desert it and become its foes whenever the tide of popular favour turned against it. Not so the adherents of the other. With purified hearts and enlightened understandings, they were prepared to follow it at all hazards. The number of its disciples, small at first, continually multiplied. The purity of their lives, the meekness with which they bore the injuries inflicted on them, and the heroism with which their death was endured, augmented from age to age the moral power and the spiritual glory of their cause. And thus, while the one reached its fall through its very success, the other marched on through oppression and proscription to triumph.

We have arrived at the beginning of the fourteenth century. We have had no occasion hitherto to speak of the British Isles, but now our attention must be turned to them. Here a greater light is about to appear than any that had illumined the darkness of the ages that had gone before.

In the North Riding of Yorkshire, watered by the Tees, lies the parish of Wicliffe. In the manor-house of this parish, in the year 1324,² was born a child, who was named John. Here his ancestors had lived since the time of the Conquest, and, according to the manner of the times, they took their surname from the place of their residence, and the son now born to them was known as John de Wicliffe. Of his boyhood nothing is recorded. He was destined from an early age for the Church, which gives us ground to conclude that even then he discovered that penetrating intelligence which marked his maturer years, and that loving sympathy which drew him so often in after life to the homesteads and the sick-beds of his parish of Lutterworth. Schools for rudimental instruction were even then pretty thickly planted over England, in connection with the cathedral towns and the religious houses; and it is probable that the young Wycliffe received his first training at one of these seminaries in his own neighbourhood.³

At the age of sixteen or thereabouts, Wicliffe was sent to Oxford. Here he became first a scholar, and next a fellow of Merton College, the oldest foundation save one in Oxford.⁴ The youth of England, athirst for knowledge, the

² Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 1; Oxford ed., 1820.

³ Lechler thinks that "probably it was the pastor of the same-named village who was his first teacher." (*Johann von Wiclif, und die Vorgeschichte der Reformation*, vol. i., p. 271; Leipzig, 1873.)

⁴ Of the twenty and more colleges that now constitute Oxford University, only five then ex-

fountains of which had long been sealed up, were then crowding to the universities, and when Wickliffe entered Merton there were not fewer than 30,000 students at Oxford. These numbers awaken surprise, but it is to be taken into account that many of the halls were no better than upper schools. The college which Wickliffe joined was the most distinguished at that seat of learning. The fame, unrivalled in their own day, which two of its scholars, William Occam and Duns Scotus, had attained, shed a lustre upon it. One of its chairs had been filled by the celebrated Bradwardine,⁵ who was closing his career at Merton about the time that the young Wickliffe was opening his in Oxford. Bradwardine was one of the first mathematicians and astronomers of his day; but having been drawn to the study of the Word of God, he embraced the doctrines of free grace, and his chair became a fountain of higher knowledge than that of natural science. While most of his contemporaries, by the aid of a subtle scholasticism, were endeavouring to penetrate into the essence of things, and to explain all mysteries, Bradwardine was content to accept what God had revealed in His Word, and this humility was rewarded by his finding the path which others missed. Lifting the veil, he unfolded to his students, who crowded round him with eager attention and admiring reverence, the way of life, warning them especially against that Pelagianism which was rapidly substituting a worship of externals for a religion of the heart, and teaching men to trust in their power of will for a salvation which can come only from the sovereign grace of God. Bradwardine was greater as a theologian than he had been as a philosopher. The fame of his lectures filled Europe, and his evangelical views, diffused by his scholars, helped to prepare the way for Wickliffe and others who were to come after him. It was around his chair that the new day was seen first to break.

A quick apprehension, a penetrating intellect, and a retentive memory, enabled the young scholar of Merton to make rapid progress in the learning of those days. Philosophy then lay in guesses rather than in facts. Whatever could be known from having been put before man in the facts of Nature or the doctrines of Revelation, was deemed not worth further investigation. It was too humble an occupation to observe and to deduce. In the pride of his genius, man turned away from a field lying at his feet, and plunged boldly into a region where, having no data to guide him and no ground for solid footing, he could learn really nothing. From this region of vague speculation the explorer brought back only the images of his own creating, and, dressing up these fancies as facts, he passed them off as knowledge.

isted, viz.—Merton (1274), Balliol (1260–82), Exeter (1314), Oriel (1324), and University College (1332). These foundations were originally intended for the support of poor scholars, who were under the rule of a superior, and received both board and instruction.

⁵ Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 2.

Such was the philosophy that invited the study of Wicliffe.⁶ There was scarce enough in it to reward his labour, but he thirsted for knowledge, and giving himself to it “with his might,” he soon became a master in the scholastic philosophy, and did not fear to encounter the subtlest of all the subtle disputants in the schools of Oxford. He was “famously reputed,” says Fox, “for a great clerk, a deep schoolman, and no less expert in all kinds of philosophy.” Walden, his bitter enemy, writing to Pope Martin V. respecting him, says that he was “wonderfully astonished” at the “vehemency and force of his reasonings,” and the “places of authority” with which they were fortified.⁷ To his knowledge of scholastics he added great proficiency in both the canon and civil laws. This was a branch of knowledge which stood him in more stead in after years than the other and more fashionable science. By these studies he became versed in the constitution and laws of his native country, and was fitted for taking an intelligent part in the battle which soon thereafter arose between the usurpations of the Pontiff and the rights of the crown of England. “He had an eye for the most different things,” says Lechler, speaking of Wicliffe, “and took a lively interest in the most multifarious questions.”⁸

But the foundation of Wicliffe’s greatness was laid in a higher teaching than any that man can give. It was the illumination of his mind and the renewal of his heart by the instrumentality of the Bible that made him the Reformer—certainly, the greatest of all the Reformers who appeared before the era of Luther. Without this, he might have been remembered as an eminent scholastic of the fourteenth century, whose fame has been luminous enough to transmit a few feeble rays to our own age; but he never would have been known as the first to bear the axe into the wilderness of Papal abuses, and to strike at the roots of that great tree of which others had been content to lop off a few of the branches. The honour would not have been his to be the first to raise that Great Protest, which nations will bear onwards till it shall have made the circuit of the earth, proclaiming, “Fallen is every idol, razed is every stronghold of darkness and tyranny, and now is come salvation, and the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever.”

How Wicliffe came to a knowledge of the truth it is not difficult to guess. He was, D’Aubigne informs us, one of the scholars of the evangelical Brad-

⁶ The study of the *artes liberales*, from which the Faculty of Arts takes its name were, first, *Trivium*, comprehending grammar, dialectics, and rhetoric; then *Quadrivium*, comprehending arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. It was not uncommon to study ten years at the university—four in the Faculty of Arts, and seven, or at least five, in theology. If Wicliffe entered the university in 1335, he probably ended his studies in 1345. He became successively Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and, after an interval of several years, Bachelor of Theology, or as they then expressed it, *Sacra Pagina*.

⁷ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 554; Lond., 1641.

⁸ Lechler, *Johann von Wiclif*, vol. i., p. 726.

wardine.⁹ As he heard the great master discourse day by day on the sovereignty of grace and the freeness of salvation, a new light would begin to break upon the mind of the young scholastic. He would turn to a diviner page than that of Plato. But for this Wicliffe might have entered the priesthood without ever having studied a single chapter of the Bible, for instruction in theology formed no part of preparation for the sacred office in those days.

No doubt theology, after a fashion, was studied, yet not a theology whose substance was drawn from the Bible, but a man-invented system. The Bachelors of Theology of the lowest grade held readings in the Bible. Not so, however, the Bachelors of the middle and highest grades: these founded their prelections upon the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Puffed up with the conceit of their mystical lore, they regarded it beneath their dignity to expound so elementary a book as the Holy Scriptures. The former were named contemptuously *Biblicists*; the latter were honourably designated *Sententiarii*, or Men of the *Sentences*.¹⁰

“There was no mention,” says Fox, describing the early days of Wicliffe, “nor almost any word spoken of Scripture. Instead of Peter and Paul, men occupied their time in studying Aquinas and Scotus, and the Master of Sentences.” “Scarcely any other thing was seen in the temples or churches, or taught or spoken of in sermons, or finally intended or gone about in their whole life, but only heaping up of certain shadowed ceremonies upon ceremonies; neither was there any end of their heaping. The people were taught to worship no other thing but that which they did see, and they did see almost nothing which they did not worship.”¹¹

In the midst of these grovelling superstitions, men were startled by the approach of a terrible visitant. The year 1348 was fatally signalised by the outbreak of a fearful pestilence, one of the most destructive in history. Appearing first in Asia, it took a westerly course, traversing the globe like the pale horse and his rider in the Apocalypse, terror marching before it, and death following in its rear. It ravaged the shores of the Levant, it desolated Greece, and going on still toward the west, it struck Italy with terrible severity. Florence, the lovely capital of Etruria, it turned into a charnel-house. The genius of Boccaccio painted its horrors, and the muse of Petrarch bewailed its desolations. The latter had cause, for Laura was among its victims. Passing the Alps it entered Northern Europe, leaving, say some contemporary historians, only a tenth of the human race alive. This we know is an exaggeration; but it expresses the

⁹ D'Aubigne, *Hist. of Reform.*, vol. v., p. 110.

¹⁰ Lechler, *Johann von Wiclif, und die Vorgeschichte der Reformation*, vol. i., p. 284; Leipzig, 1873.

¹¹ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 555. After the *Sentences of Peter Lombard*, in the study of theology, came the patristic and scholastic divines, and especially the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas.

popular impression, and sufficiently indicates the awful character of those ravages, in which all men heard, as it were, the footsteps of coming death. The sea as well as the land was marked with its devastating prints. Ships voyaging afar on the ocean were overtaken by it, and when the winds piloted them to land, they were found to be freighted with none but the dead.

On the 1st of August the plague touched the shores of England. "Beginning at Dorchester," says Fox, "every day twenty, some days forty, some fifty, and more, dead corpses, were brought and laid together in one deep pit." On the 1st day of November it reached London, "where," says the same chronicler, "the vehement rage thereof was so hot, and did increase so much, that from the 1st day of February till about the beginning of May, in a church-yard then newly made by Smithfield [Charterhouse], about two hundred dead corpses every day were buried, besides those which in other church-yards of the city were laid also."¹²

"In those days," says another old chronicler, Caxton, "was death without sorrow, weddings without friendship, flying without succour; scarcely were there left living folk for to bury honestly them that were dead." Of the citizens of London not fewer than 100,000 perished. The ravages of the plague were spread over all England, and a full half of the nation was struck down. From men the pestilence passed to the lower animals. Putrid carcasses covered the fields; the labours of the husbandman were suspended; the soil ceased to be ploughed, and the harvest to be reaped; the courts of law were closed, and Parliament did not meet; everywhere reigned terror, mourning, and death.

This dispensation was the harbinger of a very different one. The tempest that scathed the earth, opened the way for the shower which was to fertilise it. The plague was not without its influence on that great movement which, beginning with Wicliffe, was continued in a line of confessors and martyrs, till it issued in the Reformation of Luther and Calvin. Wicliffe had been a witness of the passage of the destroyer; he had seen the human race fading from off the earth as if the ages had completed their cycle, and the end of the world was at hand. He was then in his twenty-fifth year, and could not but be deeply impressed by the awful events passing around him. "This visitation of the Almighty," says D'Aubigne, "sounded like the trumpet of the judgment-day in the heart of Wicliffe."¹³ Bradwardine had already brought him to the Bible, the plague brought him to it a second time; and now, doubtless, he searched its page more earnestly than ever. He came to it, not as the theologian, seeking in it a deeper wisdom than any mystery which the scholastic philosophy could open to him; nor as the scholar, to refine his taste by its pure models, and enrich his understanding by the sublimity of its doctrines; nor even as the polem-

¹² Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 507.

¹³ D'Aubigne, *Hist. of Reform.*, vol. v., p. 110.

ic, in search of weapons wherewith to assail the dominant superstitions; he now came to the Bible as a lost sinner, seeking how he might be saved. Nearer every day came the messenger of the Almighty. The shadow that messenger cast before him was hourly deepening; and we can hear the young student, who doubtless in that hour felt the barrenness and insufficiency of the philosophy of the schools, lifting up with increasing vehemency the cry, "Who shall deliver me from the wrath to come?"

It would seem to be a law that all who are to be reformers of their age shall first undergo a conflict of soul. They must feel in their own case the strength of error, the bitterness of the bondage in which it holds men, and stand face to face with the Omnipotent Judge, before they can become the deliverers of others. This only can inspire them with pity for the wretched captives whose fetters they seek to break, and give them courage to brave the oppressors from whose cruelty they labour to rescue them. This agony of soul did Luther and Calvin undergo; and a distress and torment similar in character, though perhaps not so great in degree, did Wicliffe endure before beginning his work. His sins, doubtless, were made a heavy burden to him—so heavy that he could not lift up his head. Standing on the brink of the pit, he says, he felt how awful it was to go down into the eternal night, "and inhabit everlasting burnings." The joy of escape from a doom so terrible made him feel how small a matter is the life of the body, and how little to be regarded are the torments which the tyrants of earth have it in their power to inflict, compared with the wrath of the Ever-living God. It is in these fires that the reformers have been hardened. It is in this school that they have learned to defy death and to sing at the stake. In this armour was Wicliffe clad before he was sent forth into the battle.