

THE HISTORY
OF
PROTESTANTISM

BY THE
REV. J. A. WYLIE, LL.D.

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*

VOL. 1.

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LIMITED
LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK & MELBOURNE

1899

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

CHAPTER III.

WICLIFFE'S BATTLE WITH ROME FOR ENGLAND'S INDEPENDENCE.

Impatience of the King and the Nation—Assembling of Lords and Commons—Shall England Bow to Rome?—The Debate—The Pope's Claim Unanimously Repudiated—England on the Road to Protestantism—Wicliffe's Influence—Wicliffe Attacked by an Anonymous Monk—His Reply—Vindicates the Nation's Independence—A Momentous Issue—A Greater Victory than Crecy—His Appeal to Rome Lost—Begins to be regarded as the Centre of a New Age.

WHEN England began to resist the Papacy it began to grow in power and wealth. Loosening its neck from the yoke of Rome, it lifted up its head proudly among the nations. Innocent III., crowning a series of usurpations by the submission of King John—an act of baseness that stands alone in the annals of England—had sustained himself master of the kingdom. But the great Pontiff was bidden, somewhat gruffly, stand off. The Northern nobles, who knew little about theology, but cared a great deal for independence, would be masters in their own isle, and they let the haughty wearer of the tiara know this when they framed Magna Charta. Turning to King John they told him, in effect, that if he was to be the slave of an Italian priest, he could not be the master of Norman barons. The tide once turned continued to flow; the two famous statutes of Provisors and Praemunire were enacted. These were a sort of double breast-work: the first was meant to keep out the flood of usurpations that was setting in from Rome upon England; and the second was intended to close the door against the tithes, revenues, appeals, and obedience, which were flowing in an ever-augmenting stream from England to the Vatican. Great Britain never performed an act of resistance to the Papacy but there came along with it a quickening of her own energies and a strengthening of her liberty. So was it now; her soul began to bound upwards.

This was the moment chosen by Urban V. to advance his insolent demand. How often have Popes failed to read the signs of the times! Urban had signally failed to do so. The nation, though still submitting to the spiritual burdens of Rome, was becoming restive under her supremacy and pecuniary exactions. The Parliament had entered on a course of legislation to set bounds to these avaricious encroachments. The king too was getting sore at this "defacing of the ancient laws, and spoiling of his crown," and with the laurels of Crecy fresh on his brow, he was in no mood for repairing to Rome as Urban commanded, and paying down a thousand marks for permission to wear the crown which he was so well able to defend with his sword. Edward assembled his Parliament in 1366, and, laying the Pope's letter before it, bade it take counsel and say what answer should be returned.

“Give us,” said the estates of the realm, “a day to think over the matter.”¹ The king willingly granted them that space of time. They assembled again on the morrow—prelates, lords, and commons. Shall England, now becoming mistress of the seas, bow at the feet of the Pope? It is a great crisis! We eagerly scan the faces of the council, for the future of England hangs on its resolve. Shall the nation retrograde to the days of John, or shall it go forward to even higher glory than it has achieved under Edward? Wicliffe was present on that occasion, and has preserved a summary of the speeches. The record is interesting, as perhaps the earliest reported debate in Parliament, and still more interesting from the gravity of the issues depending thereon.²

A military baron is the first to rise. “The Kingdom of England,” said he, opening the debate, “was won by the sword, and by that sword has been defended. Let the Pope then gird on his sword, and come and try to exact this tribute by force, and I for one am ready to resist him.” This is not spoken like an obedient son of the Church, but all the more a leal [loyal] subject of England. Scarcely more encouraging to the supporters of the Papal claim was the speech of the second baron. “He only,” said he, “is entitled to secular tribute who legitimately exercises secular rule, and is able to give secular protection. The Pope cannot legitimately do either; he is a minister of the Gospel, not a temporal ruler. His duty is to give ghostly counsel, not corporal protection. Let us see that he abides within the limits of his spiritual office, where we shall obey him; but if he shall choose to transgress these limits, he must take the consequences.” “The Pope,” said a third, following in the line of the second speaker, “calls himself the servant of the servants of God. Very well: he can claim recompense only for service done. But where are the services which he renders to this land? Does he minister to us in spirituals? Does he help us in temporals? Does he not rather greedily drain our treasures, and often for the benefit of our enemies? I give my voice against this tribute.”

“On what grounds was this tribute originally demanded?” asked another. “Was it not for absolving King John, and relieving the kingdom from interdict? But to bestow spiritual benefits for money is sheer simony; it is a piece of ecclesiastical swindling. Let the lords spiritual and temporal wash their hands of a transaction so disgraceful. But if it is as feudal superior of the kingdom that the Pope demands this tribute, why ask a thousand marks? why not ask the throne, the soil, the people of England? If his title be good for these thousand marks, it is good for a great deal more. The Pope, on the same prin-

¹ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 552.

² Lechler makes the bold supposition that Wicliffe was a member of this Parliament. He finds it upon a passage in Wicliffe’s treatise, *The Church*, to the effect that the Bishop of Rochester told him (Wicliffe) in public Parliament, with great vehemence, that conclusions were condemned by the Roman Curia. He thinks it probable from this that the Reformer had at one time been in Parliament. (Lechler, *Johann von Wiclif*, vol. i., p. 332.)

ciple, may declare the throne vacant, and fill it with whomsoever he pleases.” “Pope Urban tells us”— so spoke another—“that all kingdoms are Christ’s, and that he as His vicar holds England for Christ; but as the Pope is peccable, and may abuse his trust, it appears to me that it were better that we should hold our land directly and alone of Christ.” “Let us,” said the last speaker, “go at once to the root of this matter. King John had no right to gift away the Kingdom of England without the consent of the nation. That consent was never given. The golden seal of the king, and the seals of the few nobles whom John persuaded or coerced to join him in this transaction, do not constitute the national consent. If John gifted his subjects to Innocent like so many chattels, Innocent may come and take his property if he can. We the people of England had no voice in the matter; we hold the bargain null and void from the beginning.”³

So spake the Parliament of Edward III. Not a voice was raised in support of the arrogant demand of Urban. Prelate, baron, and commoner united in repudiating it as insulting to England; and these men expressed themselves in that plain, brief, and pithy language which betokens deep conviction as well as determined resolution. If need were, these bold words would be followed by deeds equally bold. The hands of the barons were on the hilts of their swords as they uttered them. They were, in the first place, subjects of England; and, in the second place, members of the Church of Rome. The Pope accounts no one a good Catholic who does not reverse this order and put his spiritual above his temporal allegiance—his Church before his country. This firm attitude of the Parliament put an end to the matter. The question which Urban had really raised was this, and nothing less than this: Shall the Pope or the king be sovereign of England? The answer of the Parliament was, Not the Pope, but the king; and from that hour the claim of the former was not again advanced, at least in explicit terms.

The decision at which the Parliament arrived was unanimous. It reproduced in brief compass both the argument and spirit of the speeches. Few such replies were in those days carried to the foot of the Papal throne. “Forasmuch”—so ran the decision of the three estates of the realm—“as neither King John, nor any other king, could bring his realm and kingdom into such thralldom and subjection but by common assent of Parliament, the which was not given, therefore that which he did was against his oath at his coronation, besides many other causes. If, therefore, the Pope should attempt anything against the king by process, or other matters in deed, the king, with all his subjects, should, with all their force and power, resist the same.”⁴

³ These speeches are reported by Wicliffe in a treatise preserved in the Selden MSS., and printed by the Rev. John Lewis in his *Life of Wiclif*, App. No. 30, p. 349; Oxford, 1820.

⁴ Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 552. Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 19. Vaughan, *Life of John de Wicliffe*, vol. i., p. 266; Lond., 1828.

Thus far had England, in the middle of the fourteenth century, advanced on the road to the Reformation. The estates of the realm had unanimously repudiated one of the two great branches of the Papacy. The dogma of the vicarship binds up the spiritual and the temporal in one anomalous jurisdiction. England had denied the latter; and this was a step towards questioning, and finally repudiating, the former. It was quite natural that the nation should first discover the falsity of the temporal supremacy, before seeing the equal falsity of the spiritual. Urban had put the matter in a light in which no one could possibly mistake it. In demanding payment of a thousand marks annually he translated, as we say, the theory of the temporal supremacy into a palpable fact. The theory might have passed a little longer without question, had it not been put into this ungracious form. The halo which encompassed the Papal fabric during the Middle Ages began to wane, and men took courage to criticise a system whose immense prestige had blinded them hitherto. Such was the state of mind in which we now find the English nation. It betokened a reformation at no very great distance.

But largely, indeed mainly, had Wicliffe contributed to bring about this state of feeling in England. He had been the teacher of the barons and commons. He had propounded these doctrines from his chair in Oxford before they were proclaimed by the assembled estates of the realm. But for the spirit and views with which he had been quietly leavening the nation, the demand of Urban might have met a different reception. It would not, we believe, have been complied with; the position England had now attained in Europe, and the deference paid her by foreign nations, would have made submission impossible; but without Wicliffe the resistance would not have been placed on so intelligible a ground, nor would it have been urged with so resolute a patriotism. The firm attitude assumed effectually extinguished the hopes of the Vatican, and rid England ever after of all such irritating and insolent demands.

That Wicliffe's position in this controversy was already a prominent one, and that the sentiments expressed in Parliament were but the echo of his teachings in Oxford, is attested by an event which now fell out. The Pope found a supporter in England, though not in Parliament. A monk, whose name has not come down to us, stood forward to demonstrate the righteousness of the claim of Urban V. This controversialist laid down the fundamental proposition that, as vicar of Christ, the Pope is the feudal superior of monarchs, and the lord paramount of their kingdoms. Thence he deduced the following conclusions:—that all sovereigns owe him obedience and tribute; that vassalage was specially due from the English monarch in consequence of the surrender of the kingdom to the Pope by John; that Edward had clearly forfeited his throne by the non-payment of the annual tribute; and, in fine, that all ecclesiastics, regulars and seculars, were exempt from the civil jurisdiction, and under no obligation to obey the citation or answer before the tribunal of the magistrate. Sin-

gling out Wicliffe by name, the monk challenged him to disprove the propositions he had advanced.

Wicliffe took up the challenge which had been thrown down to him. The task was one which involved tremendous hazard; not because Wicliffe's logic was weak, or his opponent's unanswerable; but because the power which he attacked could ill brook to have its foundations searched out, and its hollowness exposed, and because the more completely Wicliffe should triumph, the more probable was it that he would feel the heavy displeasure of the enemy against whom he did battle. He had a cause pending in the Vatican at that very moment, and if he vanquished the Pope in England, how easy would it be for the Pope to vanquish him at Rome! Wicliffe did not conceal from himself this and other greater perils; nevertheless, he stepped down into the arena. In opening the debate, he styles himself "the king's peculiar clerk,"⁵ from which we infer that the royal eye had already lighted upon him, attracted by his erudition and talents, and that one of the royal chaplaincies had been conferred upon him.

The controversy was conducted on Wicliffe's side with great moderation. He contents himself with stating the grounds of objection to the temporal power, rather than working out the argument and pressing it home. These are—the natural rights of men, the laws of the realm of England, and the precepts of Holy Writ. "Already," he says, "a third and more of England is in the hands of the Pope. There cannot," he argues, "be two temporal sovereigns in one country; either Edward is king or Urban is king. We make our choice. We accept Edward of England and refuse Urban of Rome." Then he falls back on the debate in Parliament, and presents a summary of the speeches of the spiritual and temporal lords.⁶ Thus far Wicliffe puts the estates of the realm in the front, and covers himself with the shield of their authority: but doubtless the sentiments are his; the stamp of his individuality and genius is plainly to be seen upon them. From his bow was the arrow shot by which the temporal power of the Papacy in England was wounded. If his courage was shown in not declining the battle, his prudence and wisdom were equally conspicuous in the manner in which he conducted it. It was the affair of the king and of the nation, and not his merely; and it was masterly tactics to put it so as that it might be seen to be no contemptible quarrel between an unknown monk and an Oxford doctor, but a controversy between the King of England and the Pontiff of Rome.⁷

⁵ "But inasmuch as I am the king's peculiar clerk [*peculiaris regis clericus*], I the more willingly undertake the office of defending and counselling that the king exercises his just rule in the realm of England when he refuses tribute to the Roman Pontiff." (Codd. MSS. Joh. Seldeni; Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, Appendix, No. 30.)

⁶ The same from which we have already quoted.

⁷ See Wicliffe's Tractate, which Lewis gives in his Appendix, *Life of Wiclif*, p. 349.

And the service now rendered by Wicliffe was great. The eyes of all the European nations were at that moment on England, watching with no little anxiety the issue of the conflict which she was then waging with a power that sought to reduce the whole earth to vassalage. If England should bow herself before the Papal chair, and the victor of Crecy do homage to Urban for his crown, what monarch could hope to stand erect, and what nation could expect to rescue its independence from the grasp of the tiara? The submission of England would bring such an accession of prestige and strength to the Papacy, that the days of Innocent III. would return, and a tempest of excommunications and interdicts would again lower over every throne, and darken the sky of every kingdom, as during the reign of the mightiest of the Papal chiefs. The crisis was truly a great one. It was now to be seen whether the tide was to advance or to go back. The decision of England determined that the waters of Papal tyranny should henceforth recede, and every nation hailed the result with joy as a victory won for itself. To England the benefits which accrued from this conflict were lasting as well as great. The fruits reaped from the great battles of Crecy and Poitiers have long since disappeared; but as regards this victory won over Urban V., England is enjoying at this very hour the benefits which resulted from it. But it must not be forgotten that, though Edward III. and his Parliament occupied the foreground, the real champion in this battle was Wicliffe.⁸

It is hardly necessary to say that Wicliffe was nonsuited at Rome. His wardenship of Canterbury Hall, to which he was appointed by the founder, and from which he had been extruded by Archbishop Langham, was finally lost. His appeal to the Pope was made in 1367; but a long delay took place, and it was not till 1370 that the judgment of the court of Rome was pronounced, ratifying his extrusion, and putting Langham's monks in sole possession of Canterbury College. Wicliffe had lost his wardenship, but he had largely contributed to save the independence of his country. In winning this fight he had done more for it than if he had conquered on many battle-fields. He had yet greater services to render to England, and yet greater penalties to pay for his patriotism. Soon after this he took his degree of Doctor in Divinity—a distinction more rare in those days than in ours; and the chair of theology, to which he was now raised, extended the circle of his influence, and paved the way for the fulfilment of his great mission. From this time. Wicliffe began to be re-

⁸ Wicliffe had pioneers who contested the temporal power of the Pope. One of these, we have already seen, was Arnold of Brescia. Nearer home he had two notable precursors: the first, Marsilius Patavinus, who in his work, *Defensor Pacis*, written in defence of the Emperor Lewis, excommunicated by Clement VI., maintains that "the Pope hath no superiority above other bishops, much less above the king" (Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 509); and the second, William Occam, in England, also a strenuous opponent of the temporal power. See his eight propositions on the temporal power of the Papacy, in Fox.

garded as the centre of a new age.