

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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CHAPTER IX.

WICLIFFE'S VIEWS ON CHURCH PROPERTY AND CHURCH REFORM.

An Eternal Inheritance—Overgrown Eiches—Mortmain—Its Ruinous Effects—These Pictured and Denounced by Wicliffe—His Doctrine touching Ecclesiastical Property—Tithes—Novelty of his Views—His Plan of Reform—How he Proposed to Carry it out—Rome a Market—Wicliffe's Independence and Courage—His Plan substantially Proposed in Parliament after his Death—Advance of England—Her Exodus from the Prison-house—Sublimity of the Spectacle—Ode of Celebration.

THERE was another matter to which Wicliffe often returned, because he held it as second only in importance to “the power of the keys.” This was the property of the Church. The Church was already not only enormously rich, but she had even proclaimed a dogma which was an effectual preventive against that wealth ever being less by so much as a single penny ; nay, which secured that her accumulations should go on while the world stood. What is given to the Church, said the canon law, is given to God; it is a devoted thing, consecrated and set apart for ever to a holy use, and never can it be employed for any secular or worldly end whatever ; and he who shall withdraw any part thereof from the Church robs God, and commits the awful sin of sacrilege. Over the man, whoever he might be, whether temporal baron or spiritual dignitary, who should presume to subtract so much as a single acre from her domains or a single penny from her coffers, the canon law suspended a curse. This wealth could not even be recovered : it was the Church's sole, absolute, and eternal inheritance.

This grievance was aggravated by the circumstance that these large possessions were exempt from taxes and public burdens. The clergy kept no connection with the country farther than to prey on it. The third Council of the Lateran forbade all laics, under the usual penalties, to exact any taxes from the clergy, or lay any contributions upon them or upon their Churches.¹ If, however, the necessities of the State were great, and the lands of the laity insufficient, the priests might, of their own good pleasure, grant a voluntary subsidy. The fourth General Council of Lateran renewed this canon, hurling excommunication against all who should disregard it, but graciously permitting the clergy to aid in the exigencies of the State if they saw fit and the Pope were willing.² Here was “ a kingdom of priests,” the owners of half the soil, every inch of which was enclosed within a sacred rail, so that no one durst lay a finger upon it, unless indeed their foreign head, the Pontiff, should first give his consent.

In these overgrown riches Wicliffe discerned the source of innumerable

¹ Concil. Lateran. iii., cap. 19—Hard., tom. vi., part 2, col. 1681.

² Hard., tom. vii., col. 51. *Vide Decret. Gregory IX.*, lib. iii.

³ See “Opinions of Wicliffe” in Vaughan, *Life of Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 267.

evils. The nation was being beggared and the Government was being weakened. The lands of the Church were continually growing wider, and the area which supported the burdens of the State and furnished the revenues of the Crown was constantly growing narrower. Nor was the possession of this wealth less hurtful to the corporation that owned it, than its abstraction was to that from whom it had been torn. Whence flowed the many corruptions of the Church, the pride, the luxury, the indolence of Churchmen? Manifestly, from these enormous riches. Sacred uses ! So was it pleaded. The more that wealth increased, the less sacred the uses to which it was devoted, and the more flagrant the neglect of the duties which those who possessed it were appointed to discharge.

But Wicliffe's own words will best convey to us an idea of his feelings on this point, and the height to which the evil had grown.

"Prelates and priests," says he, "cry aloud and write that the king hath no jurisdiction or power over the persons and goods of Holy Church. And when the king and the secular Lords, perceiving that their ancestors' alms are wasted in pomp and pride, gluttony and other vanities, wish to take again the superfluity of temporal goods, and to help the land and themselves and their tenants, these worldly clerks bawl loudly that they ought to be cursed for intronning with the goods of Holy Church, as if secular Lords and Commons were no part of Holy Church."

And again he complains that property which was not too holy to be spent in "gluttony and other vanities," was yet accounted too holy to bear the burdens of the State, and contribute to the defence of the realm.

"By their new law of decretals," says he, "they have ordained that our clergy shall pay no subsidy nor tax for keeping of our king and realm, without leave and assent of the worldly priest of Rome. And yet many times this proud worldly priest is an enemy of our land, and secretly maintains our enemies in war against us with our own gold. And thus they make an alien priest, and he the proudest of all priests, to be the chief lord of the whole of the goods which clerks possess in the realm, and that is the greatest part thereof."³

Wicliffe was not a mere corrector of abuses; he was a reformer of institutions, and accordingly he laid down a principle which menaced the very foundations of this great evil.

Those acres, now covering half the face of England, those cathedral and conventual buildings, those tithes and revenues which constitute the "goods" of the Church are not, Wicliffe affirmed, in any legal or strict sense the Church's property. She neither bought it, nor did she win it by service in the field, nor did she receive it as a feudal, unconditional gift. It is the alms of the English nation. The Church is but the administrator of this property; the nation is the real proprietor, and the nation is bound through the king and Parliament, its representatives, to see that the Church devotes this wealth to the objects for

which if was given to her; and if it shall find that it is abused or diverted to other objects, it may recall it. The ecclesiastic who becomes immoral and fails to fulfil the duties of his office, forfeits that office with all its temporalities, and the same law which applies to the individual applies to the whole corporation or Church. Such, in brief, was the doctrine of Wicliffe.³

But further, the Reformer distinguished between the lands of the abbacy or the monastery, and the acres of the neighbouring baron. The first were national property, the second were private; the first were held for spiritual uses, the second for secular; and by how much the issues depending on the right use of the first, as regarded both the temporal and eternal interests of mankind, exceeded those depending upon the right use of the second, by so much was the nation bound closely to oversee, and jealously to guard against all perversion and abuse in the case of the former. The baron might feast, hunt, and ride out attended by ever so many men- at-arms; he might pass his days in labour or in idleness, just as suited him. But the bishop must eschew these delights and worldly vanities. He must give himself to reading, to prayer, to the ministry of the Word; he must instruct the ignorant, and visit the sick, and approve himself in all things as a faithful minister of Jesus Christ.⁴

But while Wicliffe made this most important distinction between ecclesiastical and lay property, he held that as regarded the imposts of the king, the estates of the bishop and the estates of the baron were on a level. The sovereign had as good a right to tax the one as the other, and both were equally bound to bear their fair share. of the expense of defending the country. Further, Wicliffe held the decision of the king, in all questions touching ecclesiastical property, to be final. And let no one, said the Reformer in effect, be afraid to embrace these opinions, or be deterred from acting on them, by terror of the Papal censures. The spiritual thunder hurts no one whose cause is good.

Even tithes could not now be claimed, Wicliffe held, on a Divine authority. The tenth of all that the soil yielded was, by God's command, set apart for the support of the Church under the economy of Moses. But that enactment, the Reformer taught, was no longer binding. The "ritual" and the "polity" of that dispensation had passed away, and only the "moral" remained. And that "moral" Wicliffe summed up in the words of the apostle, "Let him that is taught in the word minister to him that teacheth in all good things." And while

³ See 6th, 16th, and 17th articles of defence as given in Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, chap. 4, compared with the articles of impeachment in the Pope's bull. Sir James Macintosh, in his eloquent work *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, claims credit for the philosophic statesman Turgot as the first to deliver this theory of Church-lands in the article "Fondation" in the *Encyclopédie*. It was propounded by Wicliffe four centuries before Turgot flourished. (*See Vind. Gall.*, p. 85 ; Lond., 1791.)

⁴ Treatise on *Clerks and Possessioners*.

⁴ MS- *Sentence of the Curse Expounded*; apud Vaughan, vol. ii., p. 289.

strenuously insisting on the duty of the instructed to provide for their spiritual teachers, he did not hesitate to avow that where the priest notoriously failed in his office the people were under no obligation to support him; and if he should seek by the promise of Paradise, or the threat of anathema, to extort a livelihood, for work which he did not do and from men whom he never taught, they were to hold the promise and the threat as alike empty and futile. "True men say," wrote Wicliffe, "that prelates are more bound to preach truly the Gospel than their subjects are to pay them dymes [tithes] ; for God chargeth that more, and it is more profitable to both parties. Prelates, therefore, are more accursed who cease from their preaching than are their subjects who cease to pay tithes, even while their prelates do their office well."⁵

These were novel and startling opinions in the age of Wicliffe. It required no ordinary independence of mind to embrace such views. They were at war with the maxims of the age; they were opposed to the opinions on which Churches and States had acted for a thousand years ; and they went to the razing of the whole ecclesiastical settlement of Christendom. If they were to be applied, all existing religious institutions must be remodelled. But if true, why should they not be carried out? Wicliffe did not shrink from even this responsibility.

He proposed, and not only did he propose, he earnestly pleaded with the king and Parliament, that the whole ecclesiastical estate should be reformed in accordance with the principles he had enunciated. Let the Church surrender all her possessions—her broad acres, her palatial buildings, her tithes, her multi-form dues—and return to the simplicity of her early days, and depend only on the free-will offerings of the people, as did the apostles and first preachers of the Gospel. Such was the plan Wicliffe laid before the men of the fourteenth century.⁴ We may well imagine the amazement with which he was listened to.

Did Wicliffe really indulge the hope that his scheme would be carried into effect ? Did he really think that powerful abbots and wealthy prelates would sacrifice their principalities, their estates and honours, at the call of duty, and exchanging riches for dependence, and luxurious ease for labour, go forth to instruct the poor and ignorant as humble ministers of the Gospel ? There was not faith in the world for such an act of self-denial. Had it been realised, it would have been one of the most marvellous things in all history. Nor did Wicliffe himself expect it to happen. He knew too well the ecclesiastics of his time, and the avarice and pride that animated them, from their head at Avignon down to the bare-footed mendicant of England, to look for such a miracle. But his duty was not to be measured by his chance of success. Reform was needed; it must be attempted if Church and State were to be saved, and here was the reform which stood enjoined, as he believed, in the Scriptures, and

⁵ MS. of *Prelates*; *apud* Vaughan, vol. ii., p. 286.

which the example of Christ and His apostles confirmed and sanctioned; and though it was a sweeping and comprehensive one, reversing the practice of a thousand years, condemning the maxims of past ages, and necessarily provoking the hostility of the wealthiest and most powerful body in Christendom, yet he believed it to be practicable if men had only virtue and courage enough. Above all, he believed it to be sound, and the only reform that would meet the evil; *and* therefore, though princes were forsaking him, and Popes were fulminating against him, and bishops were summoning him to their bar, he fearlessly did his duty by displacing his plan of reform in all its breadth before the eyes of the nation, and laying it at the foot of the throne.

But Wicliffe, a man of action as well as of thought, did not aim at carrying this revolution by a stroke. All great changes, he knew, must proceed gradually. What he proposed was that as benefices fell vacant, the new appointments should convey no right to the temporalities, and thus in a short time, without injury or hardship to any one, the whole face of England would be changed. "It is well known," says he, "that the King of England, in virtue of his regalia, on the death of a bishop or abbot, or any one possessing large endowments, takes possession of these endowments as the sovereign, and that a new election is not entered upon without a new assent; nor will the temporalities in such a case pass from their last occupant to his successor without that assent. Let the king, therefore, refuse to continue what has been the great delinquency of his predecessors, and in a short time the whole kingdom will be freed from the mischiefs which have flowed from this source."

It may perhaps be objected that thus to deprive the Church of her property was to injure vitally the interests of religion and civilisation. With the abstract question we have here nothing to do; let us look at the matter practically, and as it must have presented itself to Wicliffe. The withdrawal of the Church's property from the service of religion was already all but complete. So far as concerned the religious instruction and the spiritual interests of the nation, this wealth profited about as little as if it did not exist at all. It served but to maintain the pomps of the higher clergy, and the excesses which reigned in the religious houses. The question then, practically, was not, Shall this property be withdrawn from religious uses ? but, Shall it be withdrawn from its actual uses, which certainly are not religious, and be devoted to other objects more profitable to the commonwealth ? On that point Wicliffe had a clear opinion; he saw a better way of supporting the clergy, and he could not, he thought, devise a worse than the existing one. "It is thus," he says, "that the wretched beings of this world are estranged from faith, and hope, and charity, and become corrupt in heresy and blasphemy, even worse than heathens. Thus it is that a clerk, a mere collector of pence, who can neither read nor understand a verse in his psalter, nor repeat the commandments of God, bringeth forth a bull of lead, testifying in opposition to the doom of God, and of manifest expe-

rience, that he is able to govern many souls. And to act upon this false bull he will incur costs and labour, and often fight, and get fees, and give much gold out of our land to aliens and enemies; and many are thereby slaughtered by the hand of our enemies, to their comfort and our confusion.”⁶

Elsewhere he describes Rome as a market, where the cure of souls was openly sold, and where the man who offered the highest price got the fattest, benefice. In that market, virtue, piety, learning were nought. The only coin current was gold. But the men who trafficked there, and came back invested with a spiritual office, he thus describes ; “As much, therefore, as God’s Word, and the bliss of heaven in the souls of men, are better than, earthly goods, so much are these worldly prelates, who withdraw the great debt of holy teaching,, worse than thieves; more accursedly sacrilegious than ordinary plunderers, who break into churches, and steal thence chalices, and vestments, and never so much gold.”⁷

Whatever may be the reader’s judgment of the sentiments of Wicliffe on this point, there can be but one opinion touching his independence of mind, and his fidelity to what he believed to be the truth. Looking back on history, and looking around in the world, he could see only a unanimous dissent from his doctrine. All the ages were against him; all the institutions of Christendom were against him. The Bible only, he believed,, was with him. Supported by it, he bravely held and avowed his opinion. His peril was great, for he had made the whole hierarchy of Christendom his enemy. He had specially provoked the wrath of that spiritual potentate whom few kings in that age could brave with impunity. But he saw by faith Him who is invisible, and therefore he feared not Gregory. The evil this wealth was doing, the disorders and weakness with which it was afflicting.- the State, the immorality and ignorance with which it was corrupting society, and the eternal ruin in which it was plunging the souls of men, deeply affected him; and though the riches which he so earnestly entreated men to surrender had been a million of times more than they were, they would have been in his account but as dust in the balance compared with the infinite damage which it cost to keep them, and the infinite good which would be reaped by parting with them.

Nor even to the men of his own time did the measure of the Reformer seem so very extravagant. Doubtless the mere mention of it took away the breath from those who had touched this gold; but the more sober and thoughtful in the nation began to see that it was not so impracticable as it looked, and that instead of involving the destruction it was more likely to be the saving of the institutions of learning and religion. About twenty-four years after the Reformer’s death, a great measure of Church reform, based on the views of

⁶ MS. *Sentence of the Curse Expounded* ; apud Vaughan, *Life of Wicliffe*, vol. ii., p. 306.

⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

Wicliffe, was proposed by the Commons. The plan took shape in a petition which Parliament presented to the king, and which was to the following effect:— That the crown should take possession of all the property of the Church; that it should appoint a body of clergy, fifteen thousand in number, for the religious service of the kingdom; that it should assign an annual stipend to each; and that the surplus of the ecclesiastical property should be devoted to a variety of State purposes, of which the building and support of almshouses was one.⁸

Those who had the power could not or would not see the wisdom of the Reformer. Those who did see it had not the power to act upon it, and so the wealth of the Church remained untouched; and, remaining untouched, it continued to grow, and along with it all the evils it engendered, till at last these were no longer bearable. Then even Popish governments recognised the wisdom of Wicliffe's words, and began to act upon his plan. In Germany, under the treaty of Westphalia, in Holland, in our own country, many of the richest benefices were secularised. When, at a later period, most of the Catholic monarchies suppressed the Jesuits, the wealth of that opulent body was seized by the sovereign. In these memorable examples we discover no trace of *property*, but simply the resumption by the State of the *salaries* of its public servants, when it deemed their services or the mode of them no longer useful.

These examples are the best testimony to the substantial, soundness of Wicliffe's views; and the more we contemplate the times in which he formed them, the more are we amazed at the sagacity, the comprehensiveness, the courage, and the faith of the Reformer.

In these events we contemplate the march of England out of the house of her bondage. Wicliffe is the one and only leader in this glorious exodus. Ho Aaron marches by the side of this Moses. Rut the nation follows its heroic guide, and steadfastly pursues the sublime path of its emancipation. Every year places a greater distance between it and the slavery it is leaving, and brings it nearer the liberty that lies before it. What a change since the days of King John! Then Innocent III. stood with his heel on the country. England was his humble vassal, fain to buy off his interdicts and curses with its gold, and to bow down even to the dust before his legates ; but now, thanks to John Wicliffe, England stands erect, and meets the haughty Pontiff on at least equal terms.

And what a fine logical sequence is seen running through the process of the emancipation of the country ! The first step was to cast off its political vassalage to the Papal chair; the second was to vindicate the independence of its Church against her who haughtily styles herself the “ Mother and Mistress of

⁸ Walsingham. Hume,, *Hist. of England*, chap. 18, pp. 366, 367. Cobbett, *Parliament. Hist. of England*, vol. i., pp. 295, 296.

all Churches;” the third was to make good the sole and unchallenged use of its own property, by forbidding the gold of the nation to be carried across the sea for the use of the country’s foes. And now another step forward is taken. A proposal is heard to abate the power of superstition within the realm, by curtailing its overgrown resources, heedless of the cry of sacrilege, the only weapon by which the Church attempted to protect the wealth that had been acquired by means not the most honourable, and which was now devoted to ends not the most useful.

England is the first of the European communities to flee from that prison-house in which the Crowned Priest of the Seven Hills had shut up the nations. That cruel taskmaster had decreed an utter and eternal extinction of all national independence and of all human rights. But He who “ openeth the eyes of the blind,” and “ raiseth them that are bowed down,” had pity on those whom their oppressor had destined to endless captivity, and opened their prison-doors. We celebrate in songs the Exodus of early times. We magnify the might of that Hand and the strength of that Arm which broke the power of Pharaoh; which “ opened the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder which divided the sea, and led the marshalled hosts of the Hebrews out of bondage. Here is the reality of which the other was but the figure. England comes forth, the first of the nations, led on by Wicliffe, and giving assurance to the world by her reappearance that all the captive nationalities which have shared her bondage shall, each in its appointed season, share her deliverance.

Rightly understood, is there in all history a grander spectacle, or a drama more sublime ? We forget the wonders of the first Exodus when we contemplate the mightier scale and the more enduring glories of the second. When we think of the bitterness and baseness of the slavery which England left behind her, and the glorious heritage of freedom and God-given religion to which she now began to point her steps, we can find no words in which to vent our gratitude and praise but those of the Divine Ode written long before, and meant at once to predict and to commemorate this glorious emancipation : “ He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder. Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the sons of men.”⁹

⁹ Psalm cvii. 14, 15.