

Wycliffe and Heresy

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On December 31st, 1384, a priest died. No loud fanfare sounded, no one paraded through the streets; a stranger in town might not even realize that this man died holding heretical beliefs. Over forty years later his bones would be removed from the church graveyard, burned, and cast into the River Swift. However on that New Year's Eve, John Wycliffe, called by some the "Morning Star of the Reformation," quietly passed away as a baptized church member and Catholic in good standing.¹

Wycliffe's career as a scholar, priest, and political player constitutes the narrative for this article. A narrative that shows how a medieval man could hold deviant opinions - and hold them quite strongly - yet be considered for most of his life as a fairly normal professor. Before beginning this discussion, it will be useful to define the term heresy. Heresy, according to the American College Dictionary, is an "opinion or doctrine at variance with the orthodox or accepted doctrine, esp. of a church or religious system."² In other words, a heretic is an individual whose beliefs lie contrary to what an established religious organization accepts as orthodox. So then, it becomes necessary to define orthodoxy. The American College Dictionary defines it as, "sound or correct in opinion or doctrine, esp. theological or religious doctrine."³ Simply put, then, heresy is deviation from orthodoxy. By definition, all one must do to be accused of heresy is to hold an opinion apart from the orthodox.

In practice, it did not work quite that clearly in fourteenth-century England. Heresy, at least in England, was not only religious but also political. The scholar R. I. Moore believes that heretics

¹ K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London: The English Universities Press, 1952) 106.

² C.L. Barnhart, ed. *The American College Dictionary* (Random House: New York, 1964.)

³ *Ibid.*

suffered and sometimes died for their beliefs, but their persecutors did not punish and kill because of them.⁴ In fourteenth century England only those heretics who constituted a threat to the religious, social, or political order were likely to have action taken against them for their heresy. Even then, provided one had powerful protectors, heretics were not likely to be burned at the stake or anything so extreme.

In John Wycliffe one finds an excellent example of how heretical thought could turn to something punishable. Wycliffe moved through stages in his life, gaining education and popularity, employment by people in high places who provided protection, and eventually losing that protection and popular support. Along the way he met resistance from Church authority, mainly because he spoke too loudly and appeared threatening. As he progressed through life, Wycliffe's ideas on religion, politics, and life in general changed, but through those changes he retained enough of a following to be viewed by the established order as a potential danger. Earlier on, that support came largely from the nobility, and secondarily from other liberal churchmen. As his ideas evolved, he lost most of that support, but gained some from men at Oxford, and more among the common people. The combination of friends, supporters, and the political climate of the time ensured that while heresy hurt his political and social standing, he was not treated nearly as harshly as some later proponents of similar ideas.⁵

A plethora of secondary material is available on John Wycliffe. A few of the prominent twentieth century works include two authoritative biographies: Herbert Workman's exhaustive two volumes, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, and K.

⁴ R. I. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, (Belknap Press: Cambridge, 2012) 6-7.

⁵ The most detailed discussion of Wycliffe's life is found in Herbert Workman's *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church* (Archon Books: Hamden, 1966 [1926].) The most accessible for this study's look at Wycliffe's heresy is Joseph H. Dahmus, *The Prosecution of John Wyclif* (Archon Books: Hamden, 1970.)

B. McFarlane's more succinct but also more objective, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*. Later authors of note include Anne Hudson, whose many articles on Wycliffe caused late medieval scholars to look at him in a new light, and Anthony Kenny, who focused more on the development of Wycliffe's earlier heresies and how Wycliffe's philosophy influenced his writings. This paper will focus on Wycliffe and heresy in late medieval England, when and why his beliefs first became noteworthy, and the consequences.⁶

As English heresy in the time of Wycliffe was almost inevitably tied up with politics, a bit of space is necessary to divulge the basics of the political situation in fourteenth century England. The English king needed funds for the continuing war with France, while Pope Gregory XI required financing for his military actions in Italy. The pope believed he should be allowed to receive this funding from the Church in England, while the king wanted to tax the English church for his own needs. These discussions rose and fell over the years, but came again to the forefront during the 1370s, when both sides simultaneously felt the need for cash.⁷

Another disagreement came in the form of religious appointments. Theoretically, many Church leadership positions were filled by the agreement of those clergy affected. For instance, when an abbot died, it fell to the members of the abbey to elect the next abbot. In essence, it was a republican - almost democratic - form of governance. In practice, however, many offices were filled bureaucratically, by appointment. Neither the king nor the pope wished to end the appointment system; both enjoyed the benefits of having these positions available as political and financial favors that could be issued to useful servants/subjects. The quarrel came over who should make the appointments. The pope wished to fill several

⁶ A note here is in order on the spelling of John Wycliffe's name. Many variations appear both in primary and secondary sources. This author has chosen to use the spelling Wycliffe, however in quotations from other authors the spelling of their choice remains.

⁷ McFarlane, *Beginnings*, 31, 34.

English offices with clergy who supported his political positions but were also at odds with the English king's politics. The king understandably desired men who agreed with his policies and could be useful to him. In both the matters of taxation and office holders, Wycliffe's religious position on Church and the State appeared beneficial to English noblemen's politics.⁸

At the time he becomes of import to us in the early 1370s, Wycliffe was most likely a sententiary at Oxford. As a sententiary, one of his primary tasks involved devising statements for debate. These statements would be defended and refuted at Oxford while students and others in the university listened. Such debates were a recognized part of the collegiate learning process. Controversial statements induced intellectual discussion, and many sententiaries crafted ones that boarded on the heretical. Wycliffe was no exception. A few of his early assertions serve to show Wycliffe's thought process at this stage of his career; "Temporal lords have the power to take away temporalities from ecclesiastics." "No one prejudged is a part of the church." "No one is bound to give tithes or offerings to bad-tempered priests."⁹ As an Oxford scholar, Wycliffe was doing nothing new, but taking some of these thoughts outside the halls of academia and into the political world could prove hazardous.¹⁰

In spite of this, he chose to publicize his views. Wycliffe, like many others of his social standing, desired a position that could provide a reasonable amount of power and financial support. In the fourteenth century a foray into politics could provide exactly that. While the nobility did not care so much about his philosophical or purely religious statements, many of his opinions on Church and State worked in favor of the current king's predicament with Rome. The following statement is a direct quote, not a modern translation. This author has only made some spelling updates. "Nay grudge not

⁸ Ibid., 37-39.

⁹ All three quotations taken from Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19-21.

herefore that God is chief lord, for it falleth to his Godhead to be lord of each king and more courteous lord may no man have, no more profitable laws to lead a man by reason. For his lord suffereth he not to less good but by reason may he asks no rent but for thine own profit.”¹¹ This statement not only provides a glimpse into Wycliffe’s thought process, it also insinuates the Church has no right to land taxes.

John of Ghent, an English duke in the service of the king, agreed with many of the economic and political undertones embedded in Wycliffe’s ideas. Not only should the Church not receive English property taxes, he and Wycliffe also believed the State should be able to confiscate money and property from unrighteous clergy, and that the Church should not interfere in matters of state. In John of Ghent, Wycliffe found not only an employer, but also a true friend. While Wycliffe’s motives were religious and John of Ghent’s political, their end goals for Catholicism were largely the same: a contrite and devout Church, reduced in wealth, and without direct secular power.¹²

John of Ghent and Wycliffe were not alone in their distaste for the current religious situation. Many people in the fourteenth century, clergy and laymen alike, disapproved of unethical practices within the church. In the early to mid 1370s, Wycliffe did not veer too far away from many of his fellow ecclesiastics, especially friars, who applauded the idea of poor and devout clergy serving the people. The relevant difference of note here is that Wycliffe propagated these opinions in the public, political sphere. Not every church official desired to hear such talk, especially from a government employed scholar championing the cause of the English. A Franciscan friar quietly walking about in poor, humble service, and an Oxford scholar

¹¹ Wyclif, John, *Select English Writings*, ed. by Herbert E. Winn, (London: Oxford University Press, 1929) 62. Spelling updated by Lynsay Flory.

¹² Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 8.

paid to discover and discuss methods for the state to acquire church property, necessitated different responses.¹³

Those who disapproved almost always included high ranking church officials. The pope, a few English bishops, and many others in Rome felt that such beliefs were far too drastic, even deviant. According to Joseph Dahmus, "Had Wyclif restricted his activities to oral controversy at Oxford, the hierarchy would probably not have molested him."¹⁴ But he had not remained in Oxford, rather, he had chosen to enter politics on the side of the nobility. Largely because of that publicity, in February of 1377 Wycliffe was arraigned at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The specific charges are lost, but in substance they covered the authority of church and state, and added charges about the power of the papacy to excommunicate. Nobility, clergy, and commoners were all present at this meeting, including John of Gaunt. It is likely that Wycliffe would not have been in this situation at all had he not been making these statements in Gaunt's service. Gaunt knew this, and was present to ensure the safety of his employee and friend. Other supporters included a number of commoners and a few friars. It is unlikely the convention intended to excommunicate Wycliffe. They simply wished to intimidate him into refraining from propagating his opinions outside of Oxford. The London prelates wished to humble him, to send him scurrying back to the relatively safe confines of university halls. His accusers, however, were unable to execute the plan. Again, the exact details have become muddled, but scholars understand that a commotion of some sort, involving the commoners, erupted within the Cathedral. It caused the meeting to end before anyone could pronounce anything definitive against Wycliffe or his teachings.¹⁵

¹³ Gordon Leff, "Wyclif and Hus: A Doctrinal Comparison." In *Wyclif in His Times*, by Anthony Kenny (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1986) 105.

¹⁴ Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 25-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22. For a fuller account of the arraignment at St. Paul's see *Ibid.*, 21-33.

While that fortuitous event ended one arraignment, it did not stop Wycliffe's opponents. His accusers wrote to Rome, and by May of that same year Pope Gregory XI issued five papal bulls against him. Included with the bulls was a list of nineteen separate heresies. When one remembers that Wycliffe studied and taught at Oxford, most of these heresies do not appear beyond the accepted margin of scholarly disagreement. In fact, many held the potential for a good fourteenth century debate. However, due to the political climate of the time, especially with tensions between England and the Vatican, one can see how the pope considered them a threat. These were heresies worth fighting against due to potential political and economic implications. For example, number six states, "If God be, temporal lords may lawfully and with merit take from a delinquent church the blessings of fortune."¹⁶ Keeping in mind the disagreement over paying taxes/tithes, and one can see how this could pose a problem for Roman authority. Especially since the Church rather openly harbored a number of corrupt clergy. Number eight provides another instance of religious doctrinal differences with socio-political implications, "We know that it is not possible for the vicar of Christ [the pope] simply by means of his bulls, or by means of them and his own will and consent and that of his college, to declare anyone fit or unfit."¹⁷ If this assertion grew to be widely accepted, it would mean that high ranking clergy, even the pope himself, would lose the political ability to declare leaders fit or unfit. As this ability often acted as a tool to achieve temporal goals, both secular and religious leaders would have been acutely aware of the political problems and possibilities with such a statement. As if these were not enough, the final statement alone would have been sufficient cause for Church authority to act: "An ecclesiastic, indeed even the Roman pontiff, may lawfully be rebuked by those subject to him and by laymen, and even

¹⁶ Ibid., 49. For a detailed analysis of the purported heresies and some interesting suggestions on how they reached Pope Gregory's attention, see Margaret Harvey, "Adam Easton and the Condemnation of John Wyclif, 1377:" *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 113, No. 451 (April, 1998).

¹⁷ Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 49-50.

arraigned.”¹⁸ Wycliffe asserted that even the pope himself could lawfully be removed from power.

The quote below contains a portion of the first bull, written to Archbishop Sudbury in London. This section holds the gist of the threatened pope’s instructions:

[W]e charge and direct...you, secretly investigate the preaching of said propositions and conclusions, a copy of which we are sending you included under our seal, and if you find [them heretical] have said John seized and incarcerated on our authority and seek to extort a confession from him concerning the same propositions or conclusions, and this confession together with whatever said John may have asserted or written by way of induction or proof of said propositions and conclusions, as well as what you may have done concerning the above, you will transmit to us by trusty messenger under your seals, quietly and unknown to anyone; and you will keep the same John under careful guard in chains until you will receive further instructions from us concerning him.¹⁹

Secret examination, incarceration, interrogation, for the first time in this case it appears the church is giving orders for the traditional medieval prosecution of a heretic. But Rome was a long way from London, and although these directions were written in May, there is no indication they were at all acted upon until December. It may well be that the royalty, Oxford, and many English prelates did not see a need to act any sooner. There is some indication the establishment at Oxford was offended that the matter came up at all. The counts against Wycliffe, while undoubtedly controversial in the

¹⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹⁹ Ibid., 40.

mainstream medieval world, appeared only slightly atypical in the halls of a university. They were provocative, but not exterminable.²⁰

The English authorities never arrested Wycliffe or interrogated him as the pope commanded. Instead, in March 1378 Wycliffe received orders to go to Lamberth and defend his statements. This event was attended by mainstream English clergy, men from Oxford, some nobility, and the general public. John of Gaunt made his customary appearance, as well as Joan, widow of the Black Prince; they both worked towards Wycliffe's liberty. Although not an attendant, the queen mother also made known her desire to see Wycliffe cleared of all charges. Wycliffe the scholar might claim a solid academic defense saved him, but it is not true. In actuality his beliefs were judged to be within orthodoxy not because he gave a brilliant defense but because he had the support of nobility, royalty, commoners, and many men at Oxford. These folk did not see his views as pure heresy, but within the realm of scholarly religious and political debate. This does not mean he got off scot-free. The council instructed Wycliffe not to speak of these things among laymen, because laymen might misinterpret and misapply his position in a heretical way. His theories could not be discussed in the streets, but he could still write and debate among the scholars at Oxford.²¹

Although he emerged physically unscathed, the trial at Lamberth had an emotional effect on Wycliffe. Wycliffe never thought of himself as a heretic. The very fact that Pope Gregory accused him of such a thing disturbed him deeply. If anything, Wycliffe considered himself a better Christian than the pope. He even sent a letter to Pope Gregory in defense of his opinions.²² A short excerpt taken directly

²⁰ McFarlane, *Beginnings*, 73, 77–80.

²¹ Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Trial Procedures Against Wyclif and Wycliffites in England and at the Council of Constance." (*Huntington Library Quarterly* Vol. 61, No. 1 1998): 8.

²² A translation of this letter can be found in John Wickliff, *Writings of the Reverend and Learned John Wickliff, D.D.* ed. by William M. Engles, (Presbyterian Board of Publication, Philadelphia, 1840.) 48.

from the original (with only updated spelling) shares the letter's flavor.

John and James erred when they conveyed worldly highness; and Peter and Paul sinned also when they denied and blasphemed in Christ; but men should not sue him in this for then they went from Jesus Christ. And this I take as wholesome council that the pope leave his worldly lordship to worldly lords as Christ gave him, –and move speedily all his servants to do so. For thus did Christ, and taught thus his disciples, till the fiend had blinded this world. And it seems to some men, that servants that dwell lastingly in this error against God's law, and flees to sue Christ in this... [are] open heretics.²³

Wycliffe did not mince words. He disapproved of many Church policies, such as heavy, mandatory taxation, the pope's luxurious lifestyle, executing religious war, and the general intermixing of the political and religious. Thankfully for him, Wycliffe did not reside in Rome, where his outspoken views could have put him in an extremely uncomfortable position. He lived in England, where many educated and ignorant people felt similarly, although sometimes for more secular reasons.²⁴

Also fortunate for Wycliffe, a larger event drew attention away from himself and towards Rome. A conflict arose over whom should receive the position of pope. The details of the argument are not important to this paper; it is enough to say that at one point there were three different men claiming the title, a situation which left little to no time for prosecuting men like Wycliffe. The Great Western Schism, as it came to be known, forced the Roman Church's attention inward; it had to resolve the problem at hand. So while Rome

²³ Wyclif, *Select English Writings*, 76. Spelling updated by Lynsay Flory.

²⁴ Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 73.

attempted to determine who should be pope, Wycliffe studied in relative peace in Oxford. The Great Western Schism may have also led Wycliffe to consider further heresies; should the office of pope even exist?²⁵

A combination of his own inquisitive mind, his treatment at the trial, and current events, likely led Wycliffe to probe deeper into well-accepted church teachings. He now began questioning some of the fundamental tenants of Catholicism, especially the legitimacy of immoral clergy, the very position of pope, and the doctrine of transubstantiation. This last denied the “miracle” of the mass, where in essence a priest’s blessing over bread and wine used in the sacrament of communion turned it into the blood and body of Christ. Also, while for years Wycliffe (and many others) publicly claimed the ultimate authority of biblical text, he relied more and more on the authority of *sola scriptoria*, scripture alone. Interpreting biblical texts without consulting over approximately 1,000 years of written analysis, and claiming that any Christian could do so, appeared if not heretical, at the very least dangerous.²⁶

By 1380 his views on these fundamental issues were becoming increasingly deviant, furthering the already present divisions of ecclesiastical and monkish scholars. Wycliffe ran far afoul of even the friars, with whom he had up until this point in time remained amicable. Polarizing as he could be, his teachings also drew a following of their own. Several Oxford men toyed with his new heresies. Some dispersed versions of them among the more ignorant common folk. Generally speaking, peasants were much less interested in his radical beliefs about communion, and more interested in his

²⁵ Workman, John *Wyclif*, Vol.II, 46-7, 52-4.

²⁶ Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 93-95.

ideals of an incorrupt Church and a State where only righteous leaders ruled.²⁷

Various historians maintain markedly different opinions about the role current and personal life events played in Wycliffe's later heresies. It is this author's opinion that major events can and often do influence academic scholars. They can lead to thought processes that might not otherwise enter one's mind; they can make an individual think in ways he or she might never have considered, or at least, not considered at the same level or in that exact same way. In Wycliffe's case, the combination of Pope Gregory's accusation and the Great Western Schism likely did encourage Wycliffe to rethink his ideas on the papacy. However, even before all this, his thoughts were already traveling down a dangerous road, one which could - and did - lead to the rejection of what he perceived as unrighteous church leadership, very serious questions on the doctrine of transubstantiation, and a belief that alms should be voluntary and given only to those who deserve them. He also encouraged those who received alms to take just enough to sustain themselves, not enough to store up revenue for additional expenses.²⁸

One might note that up until 1381, Wycliffe himself did not follow this last ideal. While he had left the political sphere by the end of 1378, in his time there he had hoped to receive a bishopric from the king. That never occurred. By the end of 1378, the political scene no longer needed him, and he no longer desired it. He had been passed over for promotion and the only political patronage he had gained was a living as the rector of Lutterworth. There is no evidence that during the first several years he held this position, he resided at Lutterworth or provided any ministerial services for it; he simply

²⁷ McFarlane, *Beginnings*, 83-6, 88. A more detailed list of Wycliffe's later heresies, in his own words, can be found in John Wyclif, *The English Works of Wyclif, Hitherto Unprinted*. Ed. by F. D. Matthew. (Boydell & Brewer, London, 1998 [1902]) 458-482.

²⁸For a more detailed analysis on Wycliffe's more theological deviance, see Ian Christopher Levy, "Grace and Freedom in the Soteriology of John Wyclif." *Traditio*, Vol. 60, (2005): 279-337.

retained the income. It is difficult not to note the disparity between Wycliffe's beliefs on the separation of church and state and the need for modest, hardworking clergy, and his own position as a scholar accumulating income from an under-cared-for parish.²⁹

Withdrawing to Oxford gave this dissatisfied religious scholar time to study and evaluate his ideas. But his continually radicalizing views escalated a growing tension within the Oxford colleges. During the winter of 1380–81 the situation came to the attention of the university. A committee of twelve was given the task to evaluate many of the teachings Wycliffe (and a growing number of other individuals) were propagating. The verdict was a divided one: seven against and five for their inclusion. It was the minimum necessary to pass judgment. Ten of Wycliffe's teachings –including those on the doctrine of transubstantiation– were condemned, and twenty four additional assertions pronounced erroneous. A few of the ten deemed heretical are listed below, examples of Wycliffe's progressive heresies.³⁰

2. That Christ is not in the sacrament of the altar identically, truly, and really, in his proper corporal presence.

5. That if a man be truly contrite, all exterior confession is superfluous and unprofitable to him.

9. That after Urban VI, no one is to be received as pope, but every man should live after the manner of the Greeks, under his own laws.³¹

²⁹ Anne Hudson, "Wycliffism in Oxford, 1381–1411" In *Wyclif in His Times*, by Anthony Kenny (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1986) 67.

³⁰McFarlane, *Beginnings*, 84, 93.

³¹ Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 94. The full translated lists of heretical and erroneous articles can be found on pp. 93–95.

From even this partial list one can see Wycliffe's movement away from acceptable Oxford debate and into more radical heresy. For instance, in the early 1370s, he simply suggested that there be a mechanism to remove unrighteous church leaders from office. In 1377, he believed the papacy should confine itself to religion and the biblical authority given to bishops. By 1381, he rejected the very office of pope.

Wycliffe did not receive an invitation to the Oxford hearing. He himself was not on trial, only his controversial opinions, which by this time were being taught, discussed, and expounded on both within and without university walls. The pronouncement against these assertions meant that all professors and lecturers were banned from teaching or debating such views. Wycliffe, although not personally attacked, would be prohibited from teaching those things upon which he based his career, arguably his life. He knew full well that this pronouncement was because of his ideas and the following they created. Although not mentioned by name, the university knew who had invented, honed, and popularized these views. Wycliffe had become an officially unspoken but nonetheless recognized heretic. The matter was so serious that John of Gaunt, acting solely as a friend rather than as a political voice, came to Oxford and privately helped convince Wycliffe that it was in his own best interest to step down from his position at the university. In May, 1381, Wycliffe relinquished his professional ties and retreated to Lutterworth where, with the help of Nicholas Hereford, a follower from Oxford, he quietly continued to write and oversee the translation of Latin Scripture into the vernacular.³²

His decision to leave Oxford has made some wonder if Wycliffe publically recanted. Although one cannot be absolutely certain, it is unlikely. At this time the authorities thought it enough to quiet him; they did not require full repentance, something men like Nicholas Hereford would face in the near future. Soon after his departure in

³² Dahmus, *Prosecution*, 90-3. See also McFarlane, *Beginnings*, 84-5.

1382, Wycliffe suffered a stroke which left him partially paralyzed. Less than two years later, near Christmas of 1384, he suffered a second stroke while attending mass in Lutterworth. He fell from his seat onto the stone floor, and the vicar paused the service while others took him home. Three days later, on December 31st, 1384, Wycliffe died.³³

During his lifetime, Wycliffe the man never constituted a threat to the established Church or University. He was only a discontented Oxford scholar and low ranking clergyman. His teachings, rather than his person, were what appeared alarming. Some bishops and parliamentary members had found them so in 1377, and brought the arraignment at St. Paul's. Pope Gregory certainly thought them threatening when he sent the bulls to England that same year. And finally, during the winter of 1380-1 Oxford did not condemn the scholar, but the beliefs.

These ideas on church and state authority, the supremacy of the literal Bible, and the substance and purpose of communion, combined with their appeal to others both within and without the University system, are what made Wycliffe appear on the fourteenth century heretical radar screen. As long as he remained in the good graces of the nobility, or when the Church had to confront the much bigger issue of who is truly pope, Wycliffe remained fairly safe. However, as the combination of a stubborn scholar and devout Christian, "he was prepared without flinching to believe authority wrong."³⁴ This eventually made him unpopular in politics, and as he progressed, even doubted and rejected by most colleagues. Unlike some later heretics who continued to speak boldly at this stage, when people and politics both stacked against him, Wycliffe decided to quietly leave.

³³ Workman, *John Wyclif*, 316.

³⁴ McFarlane, *Beginnings*, 71.

But after his departure and eventual death the heresies he wrote and taught remained. Gordon Leff rightly states “Wyclif himself was never the leader of a sect, nor was he condemned as a heretic during his lifetime. To the end he remained convinced of his own orthodoxy”³⁵ and yet, “Wyclif was the greatest heresiarch of the later Middle Ages.”³⁶ Over the next few decades, Wycliffe’s teachings would continue in various forms as academic and popular Lollardy. The ripple effect forced several men in Oxford to either recant or suffer harsher consequences than the politically connected Wycliffe ever did. Across the English Channel, John Hus would cling to a less extreme version of Lollardy, but his insistence on practical application, the ability of the Church to focus now that the Great Western Schism had been resolved, and a lack of high ranking friends, all combined against Hus and many other dissidents who took inspiration from Wycliffe. But whereas the instigator, Wycliffe, simply resigned, the follower burned at the stake.³⁷

In the end, pure heresy – deviation from orthodox belief – did not kill in fourteenth century England. Only when these views appeared threatening did anyone of influence take note. Even then, a combination of patronage and larger political events could keep one relatively safe from incoming attack. But when radical changes were proposed, propagated, and threatened to perform, traditional authority did what needed to be done to retain the status quo. In the fourteenth century this could mean silencing a professor, or publicly burning a poorer man who read the scholar’s works and practiced a version of them. While Wycliffe could be silenced, his writings endured. Many of his concepts revived in the hearts and minds of future deviants. According to Gosh, “The combination of an academic

³⁵ Leff, “Wyclif and Hus,” 106.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Trial Procedures against Wyclif and Wycliffites in England and at the Council of Constance:” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (1998): 10–28. Pages 10–20 go into much more detail on the treatment and trials of Wycliffe’s Oxford compatriots, while 21–28 explain those of John Hus and the Bohemians.

study of the Bible and an inspirational access to the divine mind was a remarkably potent one[.]”³⁸

³⁸ Kantik Gosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002) 66.