

## Introduction

The popular view of John Wyclif is that he was the first to translate the Bible into English; William Cameron Townsend founded a Society named for him with a mission of translating Scripture into every human tongue. A more developed understanding recognizes him as having written numerous works of scholastic theology, philosophy, and ecclesiastical polemics in Latin, and having supervised the fourteenth-century Bible translation associated with his name. For some time, scholars assumed that sermons and treatises in Middle English ascribed to him were written by him, but it has become clear that we cannot accurately identify any English works of Wyclif.<sup>1</sup> His writing and preaching catalyzed a movement among clergy and laity that began in part as a preaching mission, and in part as an academic reaction against a perceived wandering from orthodoxy, which gradually came to be known as Lollardy. This heresy was associated by contemporary chroniclers with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 (probably incorrectly), caused the introduction of burning at the stake to England in 1401, and came to be identified with high treason with the abortive coup against Henry V associated with Sir John Oldcastle in 1415.<sup>2</sup> Wyclif's thought also played an important part in the formulation of Hussite theology in Bohemia in the early fifteenth century, and it was association with Wyclif's thought that brought Hus to the stake at Constance, also in 1415.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, repr. Toronto University Press, 1997, p. 10. Hence, published collections like F.D. Matthew's *The English Works of Wyclif hitherto Unprinted*, Early English Text Society O.S. 74, London 1880, most recently reprinted in 1990, must be understood as containing useful Wycliffite documents not ascribable to Wyclif.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Hudson's *The Premature Reformation*, Clarendon Press, 1988, should serve as the benchmark history of Lollardy. More recently, Richard Rex's *The Lollards*, Palgrave, 2002, provides a briefer but unfavorable view of the phenomenon. Patrick Hornbeck's *What is a Lollard?*, Oxford University Press, 2010, gives a better picture, particularly of the relation between Wyclif and Lollard writings.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Kaminsky's *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, University of California Press, 1967, remains the best English-language survey. More recent work in English has been dominated by Thomas Fudge; see his *The Magnificent Ride: The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia*, St. Andrews

The literature associated with Wycliffism has generally fallen into two groups: in one, the writing is in Latin, the language of the cultural elite, and in the other, the writing is in the vernacular, the language of the common people. The Latin works, especially those of John Wyclif himself, are either scholastic theology, filled with ideas and terms requiring advanced education, or they are theological polemics directed against ecclesiastic issues.<sup>4</sup> The English works are sermons, tracts, and pamphlets that teach the ideas Wyclif addresses in his Latin works, preach the gospel as seen through a Wycliffite lens, and exhort the reader/audience to become involved in their expressed version of the Christian life.

*Triologus* is an exception among Wycliffite texts, and certainly in Wyclif's own body of writings, fitting neatly into neither group. Like the first group, it is in Latin, and contains the stuff of academic theology. The structure of the work is purely scholastic: it is laid out roughly according to the pattern of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, upon which every candidate for a doctorate in Theology was required to write a sustained commentary. *Triologus* is made up of four books, as are the *Sentences*. The first concerns God and divine power and knowledge, while the second covers creation, from the basics of substance, through human being, to the angels. The third book explicates the virtues and vices, and explores the Incarnation and redemption Christ offers. The fourth book explains the sacraments, most notably the Eucharist. Wyclif was the first to deny the philosophical tenability of transubstantiation within an Aristotelian metaphysics, and was roundly condemned for this during his own lifetime, and for centuries to come. The final book also indicts the church for having allowed the friars to create private religions, as well as a host of other problems. Traditionally included as a supplement to the *Triologus* is Wyclif's brief treatise *De Dotatione Ecclesie* (On the endowment of the church), which continues his critique of the late fourteenth-century church. It is different from *Triologus* in being a scholastic tract rather than a dialogue, and Wyclif himself may not have intended it to be appended to the already lengthy work. It is included here primarily to show the antipapal and antifraternel tone of many of Wyclif's works dating from his final years in Lutterworth.

Studies in Reformation History, Ashgate, 1998, and *Jan Hus: Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia*, I.B. Tauris, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> For a complete catalog, see Williell R. Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclif*, Toronto University Press, 1983. The genre of Wycliffite Latin works is dominated by Bohemian commentators on Wyclif's philosophy; for Lollard use of Latin, see Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, Cambridge University Press, 2002; Fiona Somers, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

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Unlike Wyclif's other Latin works, though, *Trialogus* is meant for readers unlikely to pursue academic or high-level ecclesiastical careers. While the structure echoes Lombard, the prose certainly does not. It consists of a three-way conversation between *Alithia*, a "solid philosopher" [in Greek, Verity or Truth] and a woman (which would have been unimaginable in Oxford at the time), *Pseustis*, [Greek: Liar] the sceptical doubter (in fact representative of the kind of scholar Wyclif most often attacks, a "doctor of signs"), and *Phronesis*, [Greek: Wisdom] the mature theologian, or Wyclif himself. As the conversation progresses, Phronesis gets the most space, but his voice is much less formal and much less pedantic than is Wyclif's voice in other works.

Wyclif borrows these characters from one of the best-known school texts of the period, the *Eclogues* of Theodolus. Virgil had composed the definitive piece for pastoral literature, a genre that would captivate medieval readers, but his Latin was a challenge for beginners. Schoolboys were exposed to Theodolus at a young age, both to help with learning Latin, and to teach classical mythology. Theodolus's *Eclogues* appear to have been the product of the Carolingian schools, and was a widely known and generally respectable model by the late fourteenth century. In Theodolus's version, the maiden Pseustis represents the pagan mythos, while the virginal Alithia, a descendant of David, responds with tales from the Bible. Phronesis serves as referee and judge, a model of restraint for the verbal duel that rages between the two young maidens. The work appears designed for young readers, the perfect introduction to Latin literature for restless children.<sup>5</sup> That Wyclif would use these characters suggests that he intended the work for readers with considerably less education than the readers of his other works. His use of the characters is inventive, particularly as regards Pseustis. In Theodolus's version, Pseustis is an Athenian girl telling stories of her classical culture, culled from Ovid and other such works. In Wyclif's, Pseustis is a friar. The connection is natural only to those familiar with Wyclif's fierce animosity for the preaching methods of the friars; many of them embraced a "Classifying" movement, in which they wove images from Ovid, Livy, and Virgil into their sermons.<sup>6</sup> One of the foremost of these was the Dominican Robert Holkot, who had also been an important philosopher at Oxford in the decades before the Black Death. His thought typified some of the most daring of those who followed Ockham's approach, and Wyclif's own

<sup>5</sup> See Patrick Cook, *Ecloga Theoduli* in Daniel T. Kline, ed., *Medieval Literature for Children*, Routledge, 2003, pp. 188–203.

<sup>6</sup> See Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century*, Blackwell, 1960.

philosophical position seems in some places to be formulated directly in opposition to Holkot. Holkot had also written a homiletic manual that quickly became influential, the *Super Libros Sapientie*, virtually the antithesis of Wyclif's own approach to preaching.<sup>7</sup> The character of Pseustis hardly shows the wit and humour of Holkot, one of the most human of the theologians active in the fourteenth century, but it does suggest that Wyclif intended the reader of *Trialogus* to be on the alert for opponents likely to trot out pagan myths if given half the chance. We will return to this when considering the audience of *Trialogus*.

#### JOHN WYCLIF: LIFE AND WORKS

Wyclif was born in Yorkshire in the village of Wycliffe, likely in 1328, into a family of lesser nobility.<sup>8</sup> He was ordained in 1351, and began studies at Oxford a year or so earlier. He may have begun studies before the Black Death, during the last years of Oxford's "Golden Age" of theology, when figures like Thomas Bradwardine, Adam Wodeham, William Heytesbury, and Robert Holkot were, or had recently been, active. Oxford was alive with controversy, with advances in logic and philosophy of language impacting metaphysics, natural philosophy, and theology. The intellectual atmosphere had been determined in large part by William Ockham's conceptualist logic and ontology, formulated in an attempt to rid Aristotelian reasoning of extra-philosophical influences. Ockham's thought had a significant bearing on philosophy and theology both in England and on the Continent, encouraging thinkers to consider the distinction between pure philosophical reasoning as stipulated by Aristotle and the type of theologically directed synthesis championed by Aquinas, Scotus, and other thirteenth-century luminaries.

The camps were not evenly divided between Ockham's followers and his detractors, though; many of those who opposed his metaphysics, like Walter Burley, certainly made use of his logically based methodology, while others who favored his metaphysics, like Holkot, were more willing to engage in expressly theological issues than Ockham had been. At the same time, an important movement at Merton College combined logically and mathematically oriented reasoning with the physical sciences,

<sup>7</sup> The only available edition of this remains a reprint of the incunabula edition of Hagenau, 1494. That it saw print at such an early date evinces its popularity, which remained high into the sixteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> See Ian Levy, ed., *A Companion to John Wyclif, Late Medieval Theologian*, Brill, 2006.

making important advances in mechanics, optics, and theoretical physics. Included among the Mertonian “Calculators” were William Heytesbury, who favored an Ockhamist ontology, and Thomas Bradwardine, who was determinedly opposed to Ockhamism. In fact, Bradwardine turned his attention from the science of mechanics to refuting the Pelagianism that many had accused Ockham and his followers of having endorsed. To complicate things even more, tensions between friars, that is students and teachers associated with Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, or Augustinians, and “seculars,” whether ordained or lay, were high. In 1356, Archbishop Richard Fitzralph of Armagh had published *De Pauperie Salvatoris*, his biting critique of mendicancy, forcing friars with distinctly divergent philosophical positions, like Adam Wodeham and Walter Chatton, into common cause against those who might otherwise have been allies.

On top of all this, the entire civilized world seemed to be in its death throes. The Black Death had begun on the Continent in 1347, and had become widespread in England by 1349. Plague’s immediate impact on social and economic conditions was tremendous, but the stark terror that it brought into peoples’ lives seems to have been felt in many of the theological writings of the period, both within and outside the universities. Notable mystics like Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggest a keen interest in experiencing the divine among non-academic, literate laity. Arguments regarding the power of human will in one’s eternal fate, which had been measured and painstaking in Oxford during the 1320s, became susceptible to exaggeration and hyperbole, as suggested in Bradwardine’s *De Causa Dei* and the debates it inspired after 1349. In short, Wyclif entered into an intellectual atmosphere charged with philosophical and theological tension.<sup>9</sup>

He began his years at Oxford at Merton College, but seems to have moved quickly to Balliol, where he was elected its master in 1360. Five years later he was appointed master of Canterbury College, which had been founded for both monks and secular scholars, but his appointment was revoked when the college was reorganized in 1367 to be solely for monks. At the same time he was supported by “livings,” or appointments to rectorships at parishes located elsewhere, that paid for his continued

<sup>9</sup> See my *John Wyclif*, Oxford University Press, 2009, for an overview of the intellectual atmosphere of Oxford in the fourteenth century. For a more developed overview, see William Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England*, Princeton University Press, 1987.

schooling while another, usually less educated, priest served the parish in his stead. This was a common practice, and would elicit no comment for anyone other than Wyclif, who would later criticize the very same arrangement. Of the several livings he relied upon, he actually served the longest at his last, in Lutterworth, Leicestershire; he received it in 1374, and when he left Oxford in summer, 1381, it was to this parish that he retired, there to serve until his death in December, 1384.<sup>10</sup>

During his early years at Oxford, Wyclif may have studied law, then philosophy, advancing to theology by 1363. During the years spent pursuing the prestigious Doctorate in Theology, he would have been required to engage in intensive study of Scripture hermeneutics, philosophical theology, and the works of the great theologians of the Christian tradition, from the Fathers through to the present, with special emphasis on the writings of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus. The customary requirement, analogous to today's doctoral dissertation, was a formal Commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. The *Sentences* is a compendium of issues and problems associated with Christian doctrine that Lombard, Bishop of Paris, had written over the course of a decade teaching theology in the 1150s.<sup>11</sup> In its four books, Lombard addresses the many questions that had arisen over each aspect of the faith's teaching, giving a list of differing approaches, including those that led to heresies. Within a generation, the masterwork was recognized as the ideal structure for the systematization of theology, and became the standard by which every theologian was to be measured, well into the early Modern period.<sup>12</sup> As mentioned above, Wyclif seems to have envisioned *Trialogus* as an introduction for the laity patterned on Lombard's *Sentences*, which makes *Trialogus* a rarity in medieval theology. As a guide to the inner workings of scholastic thought written for non-theologians, it is comparable to Thomas Aquinas's *Compendium Theologiae* (begun in 1272 and left uncompleted).<sup>13</sup>

During these years before the beginning of Wyclif's more public career, he wrote extensively in logic, philosophy, and formal theology. His first

<sup>10</sup> The most recent biographical studies are that of Anne Hudson in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, and G.R. Evans, *John Wyclif: Myth and Reality*, Lion Hudson, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to the *Sentences*, see Philipp W. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> In her definitive study of the *Sentences*, Marcia Colish notes that a study of the history of the *Sentence Commentaries* would be the ideal guide through later medieval and early modern theology. More recently, see *Mediaeval Commentaries on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard*, vol. 1, ed. G.R. Evans, Brill, 2002; vol. 11, ed. Philipp W. Rosemann, Brill, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Aquinas's Shorter Summa*, tr. Cyril Vollert, Sophia Institute Press, 2002.

works, entitled *De Logica*, show a wide-ranging and insightful philosophical mind already interested in the application that formal logic and philosophy of language have to an understanding of the written word of Scripture. In the collection of treatises later named *Summa de Ente*, written between 1365 and 1372, Wyclif makes his case for an ontological understanding of the divine nature in direct opposition to the conceptualist model of Ockham. Earlier scholars have called his position “ultra-realist” in its advocacy of the existence of universals *ex parte rei*, and his ontology is certainly a ringing endorsement of the idea that created particulars have their definition through already extant universals, which exist primarily as Ideas in the divine mind. It is important to understand, though, that Wyclif’s position is not Platonism; he does not suggest that these universals exist in a realm between God and creation. His realism has been misinterpreted by later medieval critics, especially following his condemnation at Constance in 1415, and the publication of his philosophical works a century ago has only slowly begun to resolve this inaccurate picture of Wyclif’s thought.<sup>14</sup> This is in part because the treatises of highest value in understanding Wyclif’s philosophy, *De Universalibus* and *De Ydeis* remained unavailable until very recently. *De Universalibus*, explaining how universals are instantiated in particulars while remaining singular things, as well as addressing familiar Aristotelian criticism of universals as philosophical “monsters” and showing how the existence of universals affects human understanding of created phenomena, was unedited until 1984. *De Ydeis*, which contains analysis of how things as understood by God are related to created beings, and how God’s powers relate to His knowledge, has recently been edited, and will soon appear with a translation.<sup>15</sup>

Wyclif’s career outside of Oxford may have begun quite early. Archbishop Thoresby of York wrote a catechism for the laity in 1357 in Latin, which he had translated into English by a Benedictine, John Gaytrick, who was associated with the church with which Wyclif was associated at the time. In 1361, Archbishop Islip of Canterbury published a similar catechism. Islip was Wyclif’s supporter for wardenship of Canterbury College in 1365; Wyclif could have been involved in either, if not both, of the two projects, even if there is no hard evidence for it. Of course, if he had been, it is hard to imagine his supporters’ not having taken great advantage of this fact during

<sup>14</sup> See Paul V. Spade, “The Problem of Universals and Wyclif’s Alleged ‘Ultrarealism,’” *Vivarium* 43.1 (2005), pp. 111–123.

<sup>15</sup> See *De Universalibus*, ed. Ivan Mueller, tr. A. Kenny, Oxford University Press, 1986; *De Ideis*, ed. Vilem Herold and Ivan Mueller, tr. S. Lahey and P. Streveler, Brill, forthcoming.



the years in which Wycliffism was the bane of Archbishops Courtenay and Arundel. The first documented activity beyond Oxford and his livings is his appointment to be a member of the team conducting John of Gaunt's negotiations with the pope at Bruges in 1374. His effectiveness here is doubtful, because he did not remain in Belgium beyond the council's first stage, but it is clear that the Duke of Lancaster retained Wyclif's services.

This was the period of Edward III's dementia, after the death of Edward the Black Prince, during the minority of Richard II. John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and Edward's youngest son, was effectively England's ruler, and his antipathy for the church hierarchy was legendary. Wyclif had begun to include some very harsh criticism of the church, particularly of its ownership of property and of papal power wielded for the sake of the papacy alone, in treatises he wrote on lordship and authority between 1373 and 1376. These include *De Dominio Divino* (1373) and the first treatises of the *Summa Theologie*, including the massive *De Civili Dominio*. The Duke appeared with Wyclif at an inquiry into Wyclif's preaching at St. Paul's before Archbishop Sudbury in February 1377, and his scorn for Sudbury caused the proceedings to end in a riot, with the Londoners supporting Sudbury against Gaunt. Gregory XI issued papal bulls condemning Wyclif's arguments later that year, and Wyclif was imprisoned briefly at Oxford. He appeared again before the Archbishop, this time at Lambeth palace, for a formal inquiry, but Joan of Kent, the Black Prince's widow and mother of the young Richard, interceded on Wyclif's behalf. The final public act occurred after some of the Duke's men violated sanctuary at Westminster Abbey in pursuit of two escapees from the Duke's prison in August 1378. The two men were seized, and one was murdered at the altar; Archbishop Sudbury and William Courtenay, Bishop of London, were enraged. Wyclif's arguments on the Duke's behalf, contained in the middle of *De Ecclesia*, vigorously condemn the church's presumption that it can stand above civil justice.<sup>16</sup>

During this period, Wyclif wrote *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, his remarkable study of the theology of Scripture hermeneutics. He had already composed a postilla on the entire Bible, a monumental accomplishment designed to show the breadth and depth of Scripture as the perfect vehicle for divine wisdom. Earlier theologians like the Victorines, Bernard of Clairvaux, and the Franciscans Bonaventure and Nicholas of

<sup>16</sup> For Wyclif's political fortunes, see Joseph Dahmus, *The Prosecution of John Wyclif*, Yale University Press, 1952.



Lyra had contributed significantly to the tradition of Scripture interpretation, and Wyclif's *Postilla super totam Bibliam* guarantees him a place among the great medieval commentators; his philosophical and theological study of the principles of Scripture hermeneutics only reinforces this. While *De Veritate* has been edited, and recently translated, the *Postilla* has only been edited in small sections.<sup>17</sup>

In June, 1381, Wat Tyler and a renegade priest, John Ball, led peasants in armed rebellion against the government, specifically against John of Gaunt and the standing ecclesiastical hierarchy. A poll tax levied to pay for war with France had infuriated laborers, particularly in Kent and Essex, and an armed mob entered London and sacked the Duke's palace, looting and burning as they went. On June 14, they captured and murdered Archbishop Sudbury at the Tower of London. That day and the next, the young Richard II personally implored the mob to disperse. Apparently impressed by his courage, they did. John Ball had preached a sermon that smacked of Wycliffite sentiment, condemning church ownership and unjust civil rule, and although it is unlikely that Ball had been one of his disciples, there was enough to associate Wyclif with the rebellion as far as many in the church were concerned. The murdered Sudbury was succeeded by William Courtenay, a longtime foe of Wyclif, who called a special council at Blackfriars to examine Wyclif's thought for heresy. Courtenay's council met on May 17, 1382, a day on which London experienced a mild earthquake. This was interpreted as an omen by both Wyclif and his opponents; twenty-four separate conclusions associated with Wyclif's writings and preaching were condemned, ten as heresy and fourteen as erroneous. After this, and a second council a month later, Wyclif lost any hope of being a force on the nation's political stage. While he was not formally condemned, enough of his teachings were condemned to lead to him and his followers being forbidden to preach or teach at Oxford. He had left Oxford for Lutterworth during the tumultuous summer of the year before, and he would remain there, in rural Leicestershire, until he died on December 31, 1384.

In the last five years of his life, amidst the confusion of rebellion and repeated attacks by the rapidly growing number of his opponents, he wrote voluminously. He composed extended treatises on the papacy and the pestiferous illnesses the church appeared to be suffering, a blizzard of smaller tracts aimed at the "private religions" of the friars,

<sup>17</sup> See Gustav Benrath, *Wyclif's Bibelkommentar*, De Gruyter, 1966; also John Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, tr. Ian C. Levy, Medieval Institute Publications, 2000.

and in all likelihood, revisions of many of his earlier works. Despite being forbidden from saying more about it, his attention could not be kept from what he perceived as the mistaken doctrine of transubstantiation. The church had held that the elements of the Eucharist, the bread and wine consecrated at the altar, became at base Christ's body and blood while retaining the properties of bread and wine. This had been the position of Radbertus in his arguments with Ratramnus in the ninth century, and of Lanfranc against Berengar in the eleventh. The doctrine took the name "transubstantiation" in the late twelfth century, and differing complex eucharistic theologies developed out of the thought of Aquinas and Scotus. At the root of the complexity was the Aristotelian ontology of substance and accidents; accidents, or properties like shape, color, weight, size, and so forth, need a substantial being in which to exist, and the doctrine seemed to demand that the substantial being change identity without the accidents being changed. Theologians before Wyclif had admitted the metaphysical implausibility of this, but Wyclif was the first to argue openly that an understanding of the sacrament did not entail transubstantiation.<sup>18</sup>

Wyclif did not use his pen only to attack the status quo; these years also saw him engage in moral theology in the form of an extended commentary on Matthew 5–7 (The Sermon on the Mount) called *Opus Evangelicum*. The second half of this work is commentary on Matthew 23–25 (which includes the "little apocalypse") and John 13–17, entitled *Of Antichrist*. This is Scripture commentary combined with anti-papal and anti-mendicant polemic, varying significantly in tone from the first half's exploration of Christ's law. He was at work on this when he died. In its last pages, he writes

Certain theologians [i.e. Wyclif himself] say that it is necessary that a theologian be instructed in right logic, philosophy and metaphysics, and that he have these five pieces of armor at hand: first that he know universals apart from things . . . Second he should know the teachings of Christ according to right metaphysics of the nature of time and other accidents, how they do not exist unless as formal and accidentally inherent dispositions of their subject. And through this he can understand . . . it is not possible for an accident to be without a subject. And this confounds the heresy that consecrated host could be accident without underlying subject, or a nothing. Third that he knows that with God and the creating spirit everything that was or will be are in present to Him in the

<sup>18</sup> See Ian Levy, *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy*, Marquette University Press, 2003.