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James Gairdner

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BOOK I
THE LOLLARDS

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CHAPTER I

THE EARLY LOLLARDS

It is rightly felt that a great movement in history which has left permanent, widespread, and far-reaching consequences could not have been entirely due to the persons or the circumstances of the particular age which produced it. Predisposing causes there must have been, even far back in the past; and there certainly were such in the English Reformation. Yet that movement itself unquestionably originated only in the sixteenth century. Not till then was there a positive separation from Rome and a revision of Church doctrine by an isolated national Church. Look at them with what eyes we may, such things undoubtedly mark a new era in Christianity; and with whatever condemnation we may think fit to censure particular agents, the religious revolution itself, it cannot be contested, was a historical fact of the very highest magnitude. As to the predisposing causes, they afford matter for discussion and verification.

What led
to the
English
Reforma-
tion?

One whom we might well take as a guide considers the Reformation as "a great national revolution which found expression in the resolute assertion on the part of England of its national independence." These are the words of the late Bishop Creighton, who further tells us in the same page¹ that "there never was a time in England when the papal

¹ *Historical Lectures and Addresses*, p. 150.

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Was it a national revolution?

authority was not resented, and really the final act of the repudiation of that authority followed quite naturally as the result of a long series of similar acts which had taken place from the earliest times." I am sorry to differ from so able, conscientious, and learned an historian, and my difficulty in contradicting him is increased by the consciousness that in these passages he expresses, not his own opinion merely, but one to which Protestant writers have been generally predisposed. But can such statements be justified? Was there anything like a general dislike of the Roman jurisdiction in Church matters before Roman jurisdiction was abolished by Parliament to please Henry VIII.? Or did the nation before that day believe that it would be more independent if the Pope's jurisdiction were replaced by that of the king? I fail, I must say, to see any evidence of such a feeling in the copious correspondence of the twenty years preceding. I fail to find it even in the prosecutions of heretics and the articles charged against them—from which, though a certain number may contain denunciations of the Pope as Antichrist, it would be difficult to infer anything like a general desire for the abolition of his authority in England. Moreover, if any such general sentiment existed I cannot, for my part, understand why there never was an attempt to throw off papal jurisdiction before the days of Henry VIII. A nation may, no doubt, find it hard to release itself from the grip of a domestic tyrant or of a foreign conqueror. But a spiritual power, as such, can only rule by the willing obedience of its subjects—unless, indeed, the temporal ruler find it his policy to strengthen spiritual jurisdiction by coercive laws. But in that case, if his policy do not prove altogether mistaken, the temporal ruler must for his part rely for support on a spiritual authority generally recognised and acquiesced in by his subjects.

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That Rome exercised her spiritual power by the willing obedience of Englishmen in general, and that they regarded it as a really wholesome power, even for the control it exercised over secular tyranny, is a fact which it requires no very intimate knowledge of early English literature to bring home to us. Who was "the holy blissful martyr" whom Chaucer's pilgrims went to seek at Canterbury? One who had resisted his sovereign in the attempt to interfere with the claims of the papal Church. For that cause, and for no other, he had died; and for that cause, and no other, pilgrims who went to visit his tomb regarded him as a saint. It was only after an able and despotic king had proved himself stronger than the spiritual power of Rome that the people of England were divorced from their Roman allegiance; and there is abundant evidence that they were divorced from it at first against their will.

What, then, was the true nature of that struggle between papal and secular authority which Bishop Creighton would have us regard as a struggle for national independence? We shall see some other instances of it as we go on. But we may say simply, in a general way, that it was essentially the same as it was in the days of Becket. It was a contest, not of the English people, but of the King and his Government, with Rome. And it was not confined to England; for the very same conflict appears in the history of other nations. The only difference is that while the Pope exercised a spiritual supremacy in all kingdoms, his claims have not been admitted in England now for nearly four centuries. In her own spiritual sphere men acknowledged the authority of the Church at large. She had her own system of law, which all were bound to respect; and her clergy, as spiritual persons, claimed exemption from secular jurisdiction. They could not even be punished for crime against the laws of the land until

State of
the Pre-
Reforma-
tion
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they had first been degraded and put in the position of mere laymen. In short, there were two systems of law within the kingdom, canon and civil law. But canon law declared only what was supposed to be right in the abstract. It had in itself no coercive power, except the powers of appointing penance, excommunicating offenders, and depriving men of certain offices. The King's courts alone could deal with landed property, arrest and imprison for civil crimes, or pass sentence of death. But a certain power of arrest came to be allowed to bishops for the prevention of heretical disturbance, as we shall see by and by. The two systems, indeed, could only work together on some general understanding, and there was friction between them at times; but the limits of each could generally be decided by the King's courts, or, in the last resort, by the King himself, though he, for his part, always professed to be, like any other layman, an obedient son of Holy Church. If, on the contrary, he was very perverse, it was in the power of the Pope to excommunicate him, and even to assign his kingdom to another, as in the case of King John; for the spiritual power was theoretically above all. Few kings, however, cared to push matters to an extreme, and, as regards national feeling, the people evidently regarded the cause of the Church as the cause of liberty. That their freedom suffered grievously by the abolition of papal jurisdiction under Henry VIII. there can be no manner of doubt.

Not that the jurisdiction of the Church was popular among all classes of the community; for no jurisdiction ever is so. Laws of all kinds press more or less heavily on particular interests, and, quite apart from offenders against morals or Church doctrine, there were naturally some who disliked being called on even to pay tithes. There were also various kinds of Church dues, recoverable in the spiritual courts, which were unpopular among

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the mercantile communities in the large towns. The Church, moreover, offered in various places the privilege of sanctuary to debtors, and even to criminals; and the immunity from civil jurisdiction, called "benefit of clergy," was not only extended to all the minor orders and officers of the Church, but ultimately to all who were able to read. Exemptions of persons and places from the ordinary law of the land, however careful may have been the discipline of bishops and abbots, could hardly have been productive of good results, and the termination of all possibility of conflict between two different systems of law was, no doubt, a desirable thing in itself. But the means by which this was brought about were beyond measure tyrannical; and the nation at large assuredly did not estimate independence of Rome as a very precious boon.

It may, however, be said that the political aspect of the Reformation as a revolt against Roman jurisdiction, whether on the part of the King or of the people, is not its only or its most essential aspect; and there is some truth in the objection. For the Reformation, of course, carried with it a considerable amount of doctrinal change, and it may fairly be asked if doctrinal change was not a cause rather than a consequence of the movement. If it was a cause, then the Reformation must be regarded mainly as a theological revolution, the sources of which are to be traced in earlier times, and our first study should be to explore those earlier influences which first created dissatisfaction with the authoritative teaching of the Church. Whence did those influences come?

The popular theory is that they may be traced back a full century or more to the teaching of Wycliffe and that of the Lollards who followed him. This theory is certainly plausible. But though it is undoubtedly true that modern Protestants find much in Wycliffe's teaching with which they can very well

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sympathise, they might certainly find much else with which they could not. And, apart from the value of his theological views, however we may regard them, a more vital question comes up for consideration, On what authority did he rest them? This brings us once more to the question of jurisdiction; for, of course, any resolute attempt to change the fixed theology of a Church entrenched in such a strong position as we have just described could only hope for success by appealing to an authority presumably stronger than that which it sought to set aside. It may be doubted, however, whether Wycliffe aimed thus to alter the very basis of things. He sought rather to obtain recognition within the Church for principles which he considered not only consistent with her teaching, but really involved in it; and if he was not quite submissive to certain papal bulls and denunciations, we may presume that he regarded the end of the controversy as still far off, and conceived that after a full hearing he should be able to justify himself. Nor have we a right to suppose that, if he had failed to do this, he would not ultimately have submitted.

Weakness
of papal
author-
ity in
Wycliffe's
day.

That he paid less respect to papal authority than the many before his time and after is undoubtedly true. But papal authority in his time was exceptionally weak, and the way had been paved for his philosophy, not only by the course of events, but by thinkers of an earlier period. At the beginning of the century the poet Dante in Italy (no less a scholastic philosopher than a poet) had expressed a theory which doubtless was in the minds of many. There were two supreme authorities in Christendom to whom all Christians were alike subject—the Emperor in temporal things, and the Pope in spiritual. Their rule was co-extensive, but differed in character. In matters of faith the Emperor was the Pope's subject; in secular matters the Pope

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was the Emperor's. This was opposed to the older teaching of the schools, according to which the Emperor himself derived his authority from the Pope by virtue of his consecration. And such teaching had been acknowledged by emperors themselves, as when the fiery Frederic Barbarossa held the stirrup of Pope Alexander III. For the old theory was that spiritual power was to temporal as sunlight to moonlight. Even ordinary priesthood had in it something more exalted than kingly authority itself, and demanded special respect from the secular power. This view had really something to say for itself, namely, that it was not only received, but to a large extent acted upon. Dante's view, on the contrary, was merely a philosophic or poetic dream. The Holy Roman Empire, in the first place—fancifully regarded as a continuation of that of Augustus—was a perfect unreality, and only had a semblance of reality in Dante's day, when the victorious Henry VII. made his way into Italy and was crowned at Rome. The Papacy, on the other hand, seemed half to have forfeited its claims on Christendom by retreating to Avignon under the wing of France. Pope Boniface VIII. had overdone the papal pretensions in his struggle with Philip the Fair, and this was the result. Seven popes, all of them French by birth, followed each other at Avignon for a space of about seventy years, and the feeling for papal authority suffered considerably. John XXII. may have meant well; but in his struggle with Lewis of Bavaria, Henry VII.'s successor in the Empire, the latter had the sympathy of the great philosopher Marsiglio of Padua, and of "the Invincible Doctor," William of Ockham, not less famous in the schools of Paris than in those of his own country at Oxford. In 1338 the princes of Germany declared the Empire independent of the Pope, and a German Empire it virtually remained from that time till its extinction,

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with the most shadowy claims on Christendom at large. It was for the Papacy now to recover itself.

In 1377 Pope Gregory XI. brought the papal See back from Avignon to Rome, and there was hope for one brief moment of better guidance for the Christian world. But when he died next year and was succeeded by Urban VI., the French party among the cardinals set up an anti-pope, and began the Great Schism which was scarcely extinguished even forty years later.

Wycliffe's activity began during the Avignon period, some years before the schism, and he died six years after it broke out. The social, the political, and the spiritual condition of the world were all alike bad. The powers of heaven were shaken and those of earth as well. The shameful trafficking in benefices at "the sinful city of Avignon" had aroused the indignation of "the Good Parliament" at the end of Edward III.'s reign; and when, some years earlier, Urban V. had demanded of the King of England arrears of the tribute conceded to the Papacy by King John, Wycliffe had taken a leading part in the schools, if not in the council chamber, in repudiating the unwarrantable claim. But while the things of the Church were thus mixed with degrading things of earth, the social life of nations had been upset by other causes. The world had not yet recovered from the fearful depopulation caused by the Great Pestilence and the social results which followed it. The servile classes, whose labour had become more valuable from the thinning out of the population, were becoming dangerous to their superiors, who, blind to the necessities of the time, strove to bind them to old conditions. Wat Tyler's rebellion—the natural consequence of this—filled the upper classes with dismay, and John Ball (Wycliffe's forerunner, as some called him, though eighteen of Wycliffe's principles had been denounced by papal bull four years before),

Exceptional times.

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alike by his preaching and by his messages, was stirring up all over the country an agitation against serfdom. That was the climax in which civil government was paralysed and lost its footing, rocking to and fro in cabals and parties for a whole generation after. There was no security anywhere for peace and order, either in Church or State.

Nor did scholars and philosophers help much. Wycliffe had been looking long before for firm ground in his celebrated doctrine that dominion is founded in grace, a truth that, imperfectly apprehended, probably added to the general confusion. This doctrine, as set forth by him, implied that there was no real dominion, no real authority, and no real ownership of property without the grace of God. A man in mortal sin had no right to anything at all, but a man in a state of grace really possessed all things. Nay more, among Christians there ought to be a community of goods. As to the clergy having property of their own, it was a gross abuse. They ought to live on alms freely given. Tithes were really of such a nature, and they ought to be withheld from a clergyman who did not do his duty. The withdrawal of tithes, he said, would be a far better punishment for a sinful priest than getting him fined by his archdeacon or his bishop. And he warned the laity that they neither atoned for nor extenuated their own sins by endowing churches, but made themselves partakers of the sins of the clergy as well. The laity had serious responsibilities no less than the clergy, and the laity should be instructed in religion out of the Bible itself translated into their own English speech. The Bible was the source of all law, divine and human, and kings ought to study it in order to govern rightly. The great duty of the priesthood was preaching and expounding the Word, a really more important duty, in his eyes, than even administering the sacraments. But the clergy were

Wycliffe's
philosophy.