

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

Ginel MOCANU*

Abstract:

During the second half of the 14th century, the opposition to the Roman Church took an organized, fundamental form in England. Its most important advocates were John Wycliffe and his disciples, the "Lollards." As early as 1350, Wycliffe supported the emancipation of the Church of England from under papal authority, an idea promoted by the English monarchy. John Wycliffe advances two fundamental theses: a theory of secular power that resembles that of Marsiglio de Padova, and one that refers to the reformation of the Church. Wycliffe's ideas foreshadow Martin Luther's doctrine that came to light in 1517, and that is the reason why he is considered a precursor of the Protestant Reform. Lollards - Wycliffe's disciples - disseminated a simplified version of their mentor's theological doctrine. Lollardy is comprised of three trends of opposition: a university trend, animated by Wycliffe's disciples in Oxford; a political trend, rallying the noblemen supporting the Crown's independence from the Church; and thirdly, there is secular Lollardy, associating a ruthless criticism of the visible Church to the teachings of the Gospel.

Keywords:

John Wycliffe, the Lollards, the Protestant Reform, England, the Church of Rome, papacy

During the 14th century, the conflict between the Church and the English Kingdom deepened as an anti-clerical trend started taking shape, including

* Ginel Mocanu, PhD student at the *Andrei Șaguna* Orthodox Faculty of Theology, *Lucian Blaga* University of Sibiu, Romania. E-mail: ginel_mocanu@yahoo.com.

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

all social categories - and especially the emerging bourgeoisie, comprised of chapmen and tradesmen in towns, the gentility in the country side and the dependent peasantry. The estates and privileges of the English Church as well as its subordination to the Roman Curia triggered, in England, a general hostility regarding the Church of Rome. This hostility gave birth to a two-fold opposition movement, directed against the English Church and clergy on one hand, and against papacy on the other¹. The economic transformations taking place in England starting with the middle of the 14th century generated important social and political shifts, having profound implications on church life. The opposition to nobility and the Roman church - the largest owner of real estate and, therefore, justifier of feudal institutions - took an organized, fundamental shape. Its most important advocates were John Wycliffe and the Lollards. Our study aims to present the main reforming theses advanced by John Wycliffe and his Lollard disciples, their reception by English society and the political, social and religious impact thereof.

Born around 1328 in Wycliffe, Yorkshire county, John Wycliff came from a family that was part of the gentry. Although he kept tight connections with his place of birth, his life and activity were tied to the town of Oxford and its famous university; it was here that Wycliffe completed his studies and unfolded his career. He studied theology, philosophy and law at the famous Balliol College of Oxford University. In 1361, he was named provost in Fillingham (in the western part of the current Lincolnshire) and the following year, 1362, he was granted a prebendary at Aust, close to Bristol². John Wycliffe's career pinnacled in 1372, when he became a Doctor of Divinity and was appointed Professor at the University of Oxford, which fully contributed to the accomplishment of this theological formation³.

In parallel to his church duties and intellectual pursuits, John Wycliffe got involved in politics. As early as 1350, he supported the emancipation of the Church of England from under papal authority, an idea promoted by the English monarchy. At around 1360, with the escalation of the disputes between the Oxford University and the Franciscan and Dominican orders, Wycliffe protested against the tendency of the members of these monastic orders to seize almost all management positions in universities. In 1365, Wycliffe approved the decision of the English parliament absolving King Edward III from the payment of a 1000-mark tribute claimed by Pope Urban V. In the ensuing trial, he was a

¹ Andrei Oțetea, *Renașterea și Reforma*, Ed. Științifică, Bucharest, 1968, p. 261.

² Michel Arnaud, s.v. "Wycliff John", in *Dictionnaire de l'Histoire du Christianisme*, préface de Jean Delumeau, Encyclopædia Universalis & Albin Michel, Paris, 2000, p. 1071 (hereinafter abbreviated to *DHC*).

³ *Ibidem*.

Ginel Mocanu

prosecutor, supporting the case of the English Crown and accusing the corruption and greed of the Catholic clergy⁴.

In 1370, John Wycliffe was employed by the English Monarchy. The Duke of Lancaster, John de Gaunt (1340-1399) sent Wycliffe to Bruges, as an ambassador of the English Kingdom attached to Pope Gregory XI. In fact, the influential Duke of Lancaster and John Wycliffe became good friends; the latter would benefit from John de Gaunt's protection and support until the end of his life. In Bruges, John Wycliffe unsuccessfully advocated the exemption of England from the payment of the fees to the Curia. After his return from the mission in Bruges, John Wycliffe went on to ruthlessly attack the Roman Church and the Papacy, uncovering the abuses carried out by them. He militated for the Church of England to leave the tutelage of the Papal Curia and to be subordinated instead to state authorities. Starting with 1370 and until the end of his life (1384), John Wycliffe openly took on the role of exponent of the political trend that was hostile to France, to Papacy and to members of the high clergy⁵.

1. The theological doctrine of John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe's doctrine comes through his theological writings that he started working on in 1374; the most important ones are: "De Dominio divino" (1375), "De civili dominio" (1376), "De officio regis" (1378), and "De potestate papae" (1379). John Wycliffe advances two fundamental theses: a theory of secular power that resembles that of Marsiglio de Padova, and one that refers to the reformation of the Church.

In his work "De dominio divino" (On divine dominion), Wycliffe states that only God has full sovereignty. The entire authority to lead or own dominions belongs to God. He exercises directly, without the Pope's agency, his exceptional right over earthly goods; therefore, kings are liable not before the Pope, but before God. When sovereigns and popes err, man can talk directly to God - the absolute sovereign - without mediators, because it is by Him that human beings are allowed to take possession of a small part of this *dominium*⁶.

⁴ Pr. Nicolae Chifăr, *Istoria creștinismului*, vol. IV, Ed. Trinitas, Iași, 2005, p. 9; Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Šesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *Istoria Bisericească Universală*, vol. II (1054-1982), Ed. IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1993, p. 107.

⁵ Michel Arnaud, s.v. "Wycliff John", in *DHC*, p. 1071.

⁶ *Ibidem*. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Istoria Creștinismului. Primii 3000 de ani*, translated by Cornelia Dumitru and Mihai-Silviu Chirilă, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2011, p. 515; Pr. Nicolae Chifăr, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 9; Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Šesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 107-108.

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

In “De civili dominio” (On civil dominion), Wycliff elaborated on ideas related to God’s ownership (*dominium*) of worldly goods. He claims that God entrusted Church leaders with assets to use, but not to own; those assets were in the custody of the Church and their purpose was to be used to praise Him. Clergy’s failure to meet their true mission was reason enough for the civil authority to confiscate their estates and assign them to others, who served God properly. This belief was shared by nobles, who could not wait to lay hands on the estates of the Roman Church⁷.

As disputes between the English Kingdom and the Church of Rome deepened, the idea of placing the Church of England under state authority gained a following; this cause was embraced in 1370 by John Wycliffe; it was also shared by John de Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, leader of the anti-clerical group at Court and Wycliffe’s protector. The latter passionately claimed that, according to Holy Scripture, clergy had the right to donations and tithes from believers at most, while their other possessions (castles, domains, slaves) must be given to the people to use⁸.

On February 19, 1377, John Wycliffe was summoned before the ecclesiastic court, from the order of Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury. He attended the call accompanied by the Duke of Lancaster, marshal Percy and a strong escort. The Archbishop did not dare to attack Wycliffe, instead warning him to be more restrained in his accusations against the Roman Church. Wycliffe’s adversaries extracted 18 fragments of his writings and sermons that they consider heretic and sent them to Rome. Also, William of Courtenay, Bishop of London, who had spoken of Wycliffe’s first attacks against Papacy in his work “Treaty on the Crusade,” succeeded in obtaining two papal convictions against Wycliffe in 1377 and 1378. Pope Gregory XI criticised the English Archbishop’s lack of vigilance and action, asking for a minute analysis of Wycliffe’s writings. If he had been declared a heretic, he would have been arrested and, within a three-month span, he would have been given over to Rome in order to stand trial⁹.

After the death of King Edward III (1377), John de Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, took over regency during the minority of Richard II (1377-1399). The Archbishop of Canterbury could not arrest Wycliffe as long as the Duke of Lancaster, his protector and supporter, held regency of the English Crown. Yet the hierarchy requested some of the most valuable professors from English universities to com-

⁷ Earle E. Cairns, *Creștinismul de-a lungul secolelor. O istorie a Bisericii creștine*, revised edition, Ed. Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 2007, p. 246; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 515.

⁸ Pr. Nicolae Chifăr, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 10; Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Șesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 108.

⁹ Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Șesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 108; Michel Arnaud, s.v. “Wycliff John”, in *DHC*, p. 1072.

ment on Wycliffe's teachings. At the beginning of 1378, at Lambeth Palace in London, there commenced the debates regarding John Wycliffe's teachings. By intervention of the Queen Mother and Wycliffe's supporters, the only repercussion was Wycliffe being suggested to withhold from preaching for a while¹⁰.

The death of Pope Gregory XI in 1378 and the beginning of the Great Papal Schism (1378-1417) delayed the repression of Wycliffe's teachings. This was a favourable moment for Wycliffe, who took this opportunity in order to resume his papal denigration campaign. If, before the advent of the Great Papal Schism (1378), Wycliffe acted as a moderate reformer who militated for the elimination of immoral clerics from church and the sequester of church estates, after this event, which gave a strong blow to the authority of the papal see, the illustrious pre-reformer triggered a violent attack against the Roman Pontiff and against the Roman Curia. After a short period in which he manifested his admiration for Urban VI, Wycliffe started denigrating the Pope, calling him an "Antichrist," which is what he also called Clement VII, his adversary in Avignon. According to Wycliffe, both of them were "dogs fighting for the same bone." In his opinion, "hierarchical church became the synagogue of Satan; the choice of pope is a demonic forgery; the excommunications passed by a pope and by bishops are nothing else but the threats of Antichrist."¹¹

Between 1378 and 1382, John Wycliffe developed his theories on church reform. Although his theological reflection is innovative, his teachings sometimes lack clarity. Yet there are a few basic principles that operate as common denominators of his work. In "De veritate Scripturae" (On the Truthfulness of Holy Scripture), a work he developed in 1378, Wycliffe proclaimed the exclusive authority of the Holy Scripture over faith. In his opinion, Holy Scripture is the only source of the divine truth. He claims that the authority of the Holy Scripture is independent from the authority of the Church, as an institution. Although for centuries the hierarchy had been God, Church, and Scripture, Wycliffe proposes a change in this order and have God, Scripture and then Church. Wycliffe believes that the Holy Scripture is clear enough and does not need comments; he relates it to the authority of the Apostolic Fathers, claiming that, in their comments, they do not facilitate the understanding of the Scripture, but on the contrary, the Scripture "judges the Fathers." Also, he claims that it was not the Church that, by means of its decrees, gave meaning to the Scripture, but that the Scripture have authority to the Church. Between man and the Holy Scripture there is no need for Church¹².

¹⁰ Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Şesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 108.

¹¹ Jean Delumeau, *Frica în Occident (secolele XIV-XVIII). O cetate asediată*, vol. II, translation, epilogue and notes by Modest Morariu, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1986, p. 33.

¹² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 515.

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

Starting with 1378 - the year in which Wycliffe published his treaty “De ecclesia”, he justified his criticism of the Roman Church by elaborating a definition of the Church that he opposed to the official one, supported by the clerics and theologians of his time. For him, a true Church is a poor, spiritual one, comprised of those predestined to take part in it. In order for the Church to regain its virtues, it needs to be stripped down of its possessions and taken back to its primitive poverty. At the same time, the Church is the predestined body of the chosen ones. It is “the true Wife of Christ and our Mother.”¹³ According to Wycliffe, the universal church was not the gathering of believers spread out in the entire world, as Conciliarists claimed, but rather the gathering of the chosen ones throughout the ages. The worldly church - the visible church - could not be identified with the true church, since there were sinners in its ranks, which Wycliffe called “praesciti,” (the afore known), as well as the redeemed¹⁴.

More specifically, John Wycliffe divided the church in three: The Triumphant Church in heavens, which included the angels, the Militant Church on earth, and the Latent Church in purgatory: “Sic non dicimus ecclesiam catholicam nisi que in se continet ista tria: partem in cello triumphantem, partem in purgatorio dormientem et partem in terris militantem”¹⁵. And since a believer’s predestination or lack thereof was only known by God, nobody could certainly know during their lifetime whether they truly are part of Church. Not even appurtenance to the institutional Church (the visible one) or the occupation of a clerical position is a warranty of being part of the invisible Church („Ecclesia triumphans”) whose head is Christ and whose true nature would unravel at the end of time. Therefore, for Wycliffe, it is possible to be “in” the Church without being “of” the Church. Believers can still discern on what pleases the “true Wife” of Christ by following evangelic criteria.¹⁶

Starting from the premise that the true Church is only that of the predestined, of Christians in a state of grace, while the visible Church comprises both the righteous and the sinners, Wycliffe claims that even popes can be sinners, and that is why we should not obey them¹⁷. Thus, Wycliff challenges the place and

¹³ Henri Bourgeois, Bernard Sesboüé et Paul Tihon, *Histoire des dogmes*, vol. III: *Les signes du salut*, Éd. Desclée, Paris, 1995, p. 455.

¹⁴ Timothy George, *Teologia Reformatiorilor*, translated by Corneliu Simuț, Ed. Institutului Biblic “Emanuel” of Oradea, Oradea, 1998, pp. 44-45.

¹⁵ John Wyclif, *Tractatus de Ecclesia*, ed. Johann Loserth, Trübner & Co., London, 1886, I, 1-5, p. 8.

¹⁶ Henri Bourgeois, Bernard Sesboüé et Paul Tihon, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 455; Timothy George, *op. cit.*, pp. 45.

¹⁷ John Wyclif, *Tractatus de Ecclesia*, II, 1-3, p. 32: Item, iuxta sepe dicta non sic assereret quod sit predestinatus, eo quod non est de substantia fidei catholice quod iste sit predestinatus [...] sed si non sit predestinatus, non est capitaneus in ecclesia sancta Dei.”

authority of hierarchy in the Church. To him, papacy is a human invention created in the times of Constantine the Great, and it should be abolished. It is not a divine institution, because it has no biblical grounds. This suspicion of church hierarchy prompts Wycliffe to envision the casting of the papal title. Also, he claims that the Church is useless for the redemption of believers. One of Wycliffe's leading ideas is his will of establishing a direct connection to God: the predestined man does not need a hierarchical church in order to be redeemed.¹⁸ Wycliffe was a supporter of predestination, taking Saint Augustine's theses on the determination of grace to the extreme.

John Wycliffe's criticism expands unto the sacraments of the Church. He debates against the sacred nature of the holy mysteries. Wycliffe attacks common teachings on transubstantiation. While the Roman Church teaches that the elements of the Eucharist (bread and wine) turn into their essence or substance (the body and blood of Christ) without changing their exterior form, Wycliffe believed that the essence or substance of the elements is indestructible and that Christ is present during the Holy Eucharist only in spirit, and can be perceived by faith or *consubstantially*, in the meaning of a simultaneous presence of the bread and the body of Christ¹⁹. Regarding the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, he recommends public confession and denies priests who have committed mortal sins the right to forgive the sins of believers²⁰.

Wycliffe rejected the adoration of icons, saints and relics, which he considered useless. He believed that people are not redeemed by ceremonies, acts of repentance or indulgences, but by good deeds. Regarding worship, Wycliffe insisted on the sermon being delivered in English, because he knew that the people could not understand Latin. Starting with 1380, John Wycliffe worked on the translation of the Holy Scripture into English. In 1382, he had already completed the first full handwritten translation of the New Testament into English; in 1384, his colleague, Nicholas de Hereford, concluded the translation of the Old Testament into English. Thus, for the first time, the English could understand the Holy Scripture in their own language²¹. In short, John Wycliffe's theses foreshadowed the major themes of the 16th century Reform.

¹⁸ Henri Bourgeois, Bernard Sesboüé et Paul Tihon, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 455; Timothy George, *op. cit.*, pp. 45; see also J. R. Evans, *John Wyclif*, Lion Hudson, Oxford, 2005, p. 215 and fol..

¹⁹ Earle E. Cairns, *op. cit.*, p. 246; Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Şesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 108-109.

²⁰ Michel Arnaud, s.v. "Wycliff John", in *DHC*, pp. 1071-1072.

²¹ Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Şesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 108; Earle E. Cairns, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

2. The social impact of John Wycliffe's ideas

Wycliffe's ideas spread out across the academia, as well as among humble social categories. He recruited numerous followers among his colleagues - Oxford professors, among students of theology, young priests as well as among cultured laymen. After 1382, Wycliffe's partisans were disrespectfully called "Lollards," meaning "nonsense spreading mumbler." The name, "Lollard," derives from the verb *lollaert*, belonging to a group of dialects spoken in central Germany and whose correspondent in literary German is the verb *lullen*, which means to mumble, to mutter, to hum²².

The first Lollard group was formed in Oxford, around a few of Wycliffe's colleagues, led by Nicholas de Hereford. In the academia, Wycliffe's movement stood for freedom of thought and attitude. In addition to his heretical conceptions, Wycliffe declares people's right to have initiative, to act and think freely, against clergy's attempts of leading them in all matters. He is an advocate of free agency and of equality of men before God. Due to his position regarding the Eucharist, John Wycliffe alienated all the mendicant monastic orders of the era (Franciscans and Dominicans), losing their support

Wycliffe's disciples - organised by him in a community of poor priests - disseminated the ideas of their mentor in a simplified form among the lay community by means of their sermons²³. The opposition to nobility and the Roman Church grew progressively, often shrouded in the religious cloth of egalitarian ideas spread by Lollard preachers. Thus, during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Lollard preacher John Ball launched the dictum: When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?²⁴; it would prove immensely successful and used on a wide scale to attack the riches of the Church.

In 1381, a great peasant uproar started in Essex and Kent counties, in South-Eastern England. The main objectives of the rioters were to abolish serfdom and suppress lay and ecclesiastic overlords²⁵. They wanted the seizure of church estates and the simplification of ecclesiastic organisation. In exchange, they showed loyalty to royalty which, in their opinion, was the source and symbol of justice; they believed that the King is the only one who could bring justice. On June 13, 1381, the rebels entered London under the leadership of Wat Tyler and Lollard preacher John Ball. King Richard II was forced to negotiate with the rebels, who requested

²² E. U., s.v. "Lollard", in *DHC*, p. 609.

²³ Jean Delumeau, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²⁴ Richard Barrie Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, MacMillan St Martin's Press, London, 1970, p. 374.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 131-132.

Ginel Mocanu

a radical reform of legislation and judicial organisation, including the repeal of The Statute of Labourers and the impropriation of the Church real estate, leaving it enough to support the clergy and whatever exceeded that, “to be divided amongst the population in the parish.” Apparently, under the influence of Lollard Oxonians led by Nicholas de Hereford, the Peasants’ Revolt of June 1381 became strongly anti-clergy in nature²⁶. In the name of freedom and equality, the rebels massacred noblemen and clerics. The Queen Mother herself was abused, while Lord Chancellor Simon Sudbury was killed. These episodes of violence discredited Wycliffe, whose political support was withdrawn by the Court. After Wat Tyler’s killing, the revolt was mercilessly repressed. King Richard II and William Courtenay, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, strove hard against the Lollards. The so-called Earthquake Synod reunited in London in 1382, incriminated 24 theses from Wycliffe’s writings and banished him from his teaching position. He withdrew to the parish in Lutterworth where he wrote, as a dialogue between truth, lie and wisdom, his last work, entitled “Trialogus.” John Wycliffe died on December 31, 1384²⁷. His death found him in isolation, in a feud against mendicant monastic orders, against princes and even his former colleagues at Oxford. Wycliffe failed in his reforming ambitions, ending up as head of a minute sect; yet, as he had never been excommunicated, he could be buried in Christian ground²⁸.

In 1415, at the Council of Constance, 45 theses extracted from Wycliffe’s writings were incriminated, and it was ruled that his writings would be burnt. In 1427, Pope Martin V renewed the incrimination of Wycliffe’s work. Out of a desperate gesture aiming to suppress Lollardy - which had spread into England - it was decided to unearth and burn Wycliffe’s human remains. This posthumous punishment is explained by the success and profound influence of Wycliffe’s ideas outside England.

3. The reforming movement of the Lollards

In England, Lollardy survived the death of its founder, John Wycliffe, in 1384. Lollardy continued to propagate among city dwellers, tradesmen, noblemen; Wycliffe’s ideas were even embraced by the lower clergy. Numerous characters in Court and a few members of the House of Commons supported Lollardy.

Henry IV of Lancaster’s accession to the throne of England (1399-1413) was marked by a wave of repression against Lollard heretics. In 1401, the first Eng-

²⁶ E. U., s. v. “Lollards”, in *DHC*, p. 609.

²⁷ *Ibidem*; Michel Arnaud, s.v. Wycliff John, in *DHC*, p. 1072; Prof. Ioan Rămureanu, Pr. Prof. Milan Šesan, Pr. Prof. Teodor Bodogae, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 109.

²⁸ Michel Arnaud, s.v. “Wycliff John”, in *DHC*, p. 1072.

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

lish decree, condemning heretics to death by burning, was passed (*De haeretico comburendo*). According to the provisions of the decree, any peasant, tanner or tailor who contested the holiness of the Eucharist or attended at night a brotherly gathering preaching the word of the Bible was condemned to death and executed by pyre burning. In fact, the first Lollard martyr, William Sawtre, was burnt a few days before the passing of the decree²⁹. In 1407, the Church of England took another measure against Lollardy, whose repression gained a unique characteristic in England; the English clerical hierarchy officially prohibited all the existing versions of the Bible translated into English. This prohibition remained in effect until 1530, during the reign of Henry VIII³⁰.

In 1414, a Lollard Rebellion set off, led by Sir John Oldcastle, quickly jugulated by the new King Henry V (1413-1422). This rebellion had a strong political hue, when the barons and the knights, on the side of the Lollards, led by Sir John Oldcastle, mutinied against the king. This rebellion triggered a series of harsh repercussions and marked the end of an open political influence of the Lollards. John Wycliffe's teachings were afterwards solemnly condemned by the Council of Constance (1414-1418). In spite of a new failed attempt at a plot in 1431, Lollardy entered a long period of illegality³¹. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, Lollards were oppressed by state authorities. But their oppression varied from one diocese to the other, while certain laymen were protecting the heresy; by the end of the 14th century, England had not been acquainted to Lollardy yet.

The procedure used for questioning Lollards was changed in 1416, two years after the failure of John Oldcastle's revolt and one year after Wycliffe's conviction by the Council of Constance; all suffragan bishops and archbishops were to investigate heretics in their rural deaneries and gather the confessions of at least three persons in relation to their cause. The accusation was notified by a Notary Public, the suspect was arrested and their house was searched. The accused was cited before the court, their refusal leading to excommunication by contempt of court and which, at the end of one year, made them guilty of heresy³². Torture was never introduced in England for these trials. Few death convictions were passed in comparison to the number of arrests. For instance, in 1521, out of three or four hundred heresy suspects, John Longland, Bishop of Lincoln, only condemned four to death

²⁹ E. U., s. v. "Lollards", in *DHC*, p. 609.

³⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 516.

³¹ Jack Robert Lander, *Government and Community; England, 1450-1509*, London, 1980, pp. 146-147.

³² J. A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards, 1414-1520*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965, pp. 222-223 și 227.

Ginel Mocanu

by burning³³. Apparently most Lollards discarded their heretical beliefs easily and were only condemned to public penitence³⁴.

J. A. F. Thomson drew up a table of all oppression campaigns against Lollards that took place between 1414 and 1522; they were rather infrequent; until the middle of the 15th century, there are very few cases of heretics discarding the heresy or being burnt on a pyre³⁵. Starting with 1486, with the Tudor dynasty's accession to the English Throne, oppressions against Lollards grew considerably, and the number of those suspected of heresy rose³⁶.

3.1. The territorial expansion of the Lollard movement

The essential feature of Lollardy in the 15th century was its regional character. It disappeared in some areas and survived in others, sometimes very close together. Between 1414 and 1520, the list of cases of heresy includes few locations in the South of England and close to London; most parishes suspected at the beginning of the 16th century had already included Lollards one hundred years prior, and there are numerous examples that prove this continuity³⁷. Yet, these heretical communities were in contact, proven by the books that passed from one to another, especially after the proliferation of the press. Yet Lollards' main activity consisted in secret meetings, in a local, family environment, in which women played a very important role³⁸. These connections between Lollard communities were limited to areas in the proximity of London, and employed the help of tradesmen.

The most interesting Lollard community was located in Chiltern district, Buckinghamshire, south of Lincoln diocese. The heresy returned to Amersham town towards 1495; in 1506 and 1507, bishop Smythe tried over 60 Lollards here, and over 20 in Buckingham. The oppression of heretics resumed in 1511, when several women were arrested in Amersham. In 1521, 350 heretics from the area came before bishop Longland³⁹. The Lollards of Chiltern district communicated

³³ Christopher Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England, 1400-1530*, Longman, London, 1989, p. 82.

³⁴ J. A. F. Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 237-238.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1988, pp. 456-457; Christopher Harper-Bill, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 482-483.

³⁹ Claire Cross, *Church and People, 1450-1660: the Triumph of the Laity in the English Church*, Fontana / Collins, London, 1976, p. 32; see also A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, London, 1964, pp. 47-48.

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

easily with those in Reading, Berkshire, where several heretics were discovered in 1480 and 1490. Their influence stretches south, all the way to Hampshire⁴⁰.

In Kent County, in south-eastern England, Lollards were numerous in Canterbury, Tenterden, Benenden and Cranbrook, but they seem to have few connections with the communities of Chiltern or Essex⁴¹. In Eastern England there had been groups of Lollards from the beginning of the 15th century, but they seem to have disappeared from Norfolk and concentrated in Essex and Suffolk⁴².

Also, a group of Lollards is attested in Coventry, central England. The Lollards of Coventry had regular connections with the Lollard communities in London, Chiltern, Bristol and Leicestershire⁴³.

In Western England, especially around Bristol, there were numerous Lollard communities, attested starting with 1460 and until the beginning of the 15th century⁴⁴. Yet in the south-west of England (Exeter diocese), no Lollard community is attested.

In the north of the English Kingdom, the Lollard movement made its presence felt only at the beginning of the 16th century; during 1528 and the end of Henry VIII's reign (1547), the registers of the York Archbishopric mention thirty cases of heresy, of which only three are certainly influenced by Luther or Zwingli⁴⁵.

Lollardy was very active in London. The London-based Lollard community had numerous connections with those of Chiltern district⁴⁶; all its meetings were clandestine. There are detailed records on a heretic group that established its residence in the centre of London (Bird's Alley, close to St. Stephen Coleman Street), in a house belonging to tailor William Russell. The Lollards of London were considered the organisers of the sect in the south of England; their efforts were encouraged by John Colet, the Dean of Saint Paul Cathedral in London, who, around 1510, was criticising the worship of icons and the lack of dignity of some priests⁴⁷.

3.2. The social and economic status of Lollards

The social and economic status of the Lollards was the object of numerous talks. One might believe that after the repression of the revolts in 1414 and 1431,

⁴⁰ J. A. F. Thompson, *The Later Lollards, 1414-1520*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965, p. 53; Claire Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 32 și 34.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 191; Claire Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

⁴² Claire Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38; Anne Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 451; J. A. F. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁴³ Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. 141.

⁴⁴ J. A. F. Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34; 38-39, 51.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 192; 200-201.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

⁴⁷ Claire Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40; see also Jonathan Arnold, *Dean John Colet of St. Paul's. Humanism and Reform in Early Tudor England*, I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd., London New York, 2007.

Lollard beliefs had become a trait of people of humble origins. But this standpoint was reviewed in light of modern research. In the rural environment there are Lollards at all levels of the society; from castellans to seamen⁴⁸. In the urban environment and especially in London, Lollards include both rich merchants and tradesmen. The trading and legal environment were known for their anti-clergy stance; their influence promoted the cause of this heresy.

According to the opinion of A. G. Dickens, the “proletarian” nature of Lollardy developed in parallel to the loss of its political and secular backing at the beginning of the 15th century⁴⁹. One of the specific characteristics of Lollardy is the important role played by women, and their involvement in the actions carried out within the sect, in contrast to the Catholic Church, in which they occupied an inferior position. In general, it was the daughters and not the sons of itinerant preachers who would continue their fathers’ work⁵⁰.

Lollard groups were spread especially in the communities of drapers, as drape-making facilitated the dissemination of new ideas: wool purchasing and drape selling, population shifts due to apprenticeship and trade stimulated travel and allowed contact with townspeople and the world of books, ergo the world of heresies. These situations are typical in the East of England, in Kent, Chiltern and later in Yorkshire⁵¹.

In the North of England, Lollards are not just drapers, but also cobblers, blacksmiths, tailors, carpenters, tradesmen whose trade includes an element of mobility; traders are more numerous than farmers. The heretics also include a few priests, a few mendicant brothers and sometimes professors⁵². The relationship between heterodoxy and professional mobility is also confirmed in the case of Lollards in South-Eastern England; it is the case of Kent County, where suspected parishes are those in which Lollards fled to Norfolk as early as 1428⁵³. In Essex County, the Lollard heresy spread in the region so-called Broadcloth; according to the investigation carried out by Archbishop Warham in 1511, Lollards are attested in East Bergholt, Dedham, Saffron Walden and especially Colchester. Looking at a

⁴⁸ D. Plumb, “The Social and Economic Spread of Rural Lollardy: a Reappraisal”, in W. J. Sheils and D. Wood, (ed.), *Voluntary Religion. Studies in Church History*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 128-129.

⁴⁹ A. G. Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Claire Cross, “Great Reasoners in Scripture: The Activities of Women Lollards 1380-1530” in D. Baker (ed.) *Medieval Women. Studies in Church History*, subsidia 1, Blackwell, Oxford, 1978, pp. 360-361; 378.

⁵¹ A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York, 1509-1558*, Hambledon Press, London, 1959, p. 14.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 51-52.

⁵³ J. F. Davis, *Lollard Survival and the Textile Industry in the South-East of England*, in G. J. Cuming (ed.), “Studies in Church History”, vol. III, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1966, pp. 192-193.

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

list of all Lollards attested in the above-mentioned region between 1414 and 1534, we can see that half of them were tradesmen, of which 41% - weavers, and the rest tanners, milliners, skinnners, cobblers, parchment makers. At the beginning of the 16th century, many sellers of heretic books were arrested in ports and towns - Norwich, King's Lynn, Colchester, Rye, Exeter and London, where most of the wook and cloth trading took place⁵⁴.

Lollardy spread fast not only among the poor in London, but also among the rich. In 1523, a Catholic priest was complaining of "all these weavers and millers, mostly heretics"⁵⁵. Yet the Lollards of Chiltern and on the Thames Valley did not conform, at the beginning of the 16th century, to the current stereotype; although it is difficult to outline them, they certainly were not all poor, semi-rural weavers⁵⁶.

The social and economic status of various Lollard families in Buckinghamshire was analysed and it was found that between 1524 and 1525, three hundred persons from four parishes had to pay taxes to the treasury; a quarter of them were Lollard supporters, which proves that the Lollard sect had members among all the strata of the society, and not only the poorest, although these were small towns such as Hughenden, Great Marlow, Denham or Amersham. Moreover, these heretic families were united by matrimonial alliances; some of them left their inheritances to the poor, but never to churches or monasteries⁵⁷.

It is then possible that Lollards indeed were people of modest means at the beginning of the 15th century, but starting with 1450 and especially towards the advent of the Reform, documentary sources show them as integrated in the middle class, especially in towns, ports and cloth trading areas, meaning in the areas that were most open to trade.

3.3. The faith-related teachings of Lollardy

Sometimes it is very difficult to know the theological opinions of the Lollards in the 15th century, since, starting with 1450, the term "Lollard" was applied to all heretics, without differentiation. After the repression of the Lollard revolts of 1414 and 1431, Lollard books and ideas continued circulating illicitly, but no new texts appeared until the first years of the 15th century. The main points of opposition of the Lollards regarding the church are known to us by means of the counts or the discard of heresy, drawn up during Lollard trials. But the movement's loss of their entire secular and especially academic support left them, between 1450

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp.193-196.

⁵⁵ Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, pp. 96-97.

⁵⁶ Claire Cross, *op. cit.*, (*Church and People...*), p. 35.

⁵⁷ D. Plumb, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-121.

and 1520, unable to rely on anything but Wycliffe's old theological treatises or on the works that vulgarized his theology; thus, they simplified or generalized Wycliffe's thinking, which originally was quite complex⁵⁸.

Two important features define Lollard theology: biblical fundamentalism and radical rationalism. The most complete presentation of the first Lollard teachings is found in *The Twelve Conclusions*, submitted to the Parliament in 1395. According to this document, the Church of England was vassal to "its step mother, the great Church of Rome." The sacerdotium, as understood and applied at that time, was not in agreement with what Jesus Christ had established. Priests' celibacy favoured sins against nature. The "alleged miracle" of transubstantiation made people idolatrous. Clerics had to be prohibited from acting as judges or provisional rulers. The *Conclusions* condemned prayers for the dead, pilgrimages, icon worshiping, teachings on the purgatory, papal indulgencies, the cult of saints. They declared that one does not need to confess to a priest in order to be redeemed and that war was contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. Lollardy is characterized by the practice of a simple, "evangelical" faith and by its opposition to the Roman Church. According to Lollardy, the first task that priests had to accomplish was to preach and reclaim for all men and women free access to the Holy Scripture in their national language⁵⁹.

Lollards condemned icon worshiping. The reference to "dead pictures" is a constant motif during the 15th century. No testaments of the Lollard knights of the 15th century include provisions - so frequent elsewhere - regarding the care of statues of saints in churches. Yet John Wycliffe did not condemn icons systematically. He protested against the representations of the Holy Trinity and of Jesus Christ, especially on crosses. Wycliffe mostly reprehends three-dimensional images, i.e. wood or stone sculptures, and not so much bass-relief or stained glass windows. According to Wycliffe, icons were legitimate if they allowed the believer to think of God; these "accidents" or external representations of spiritual objects then had to be forgotten as fast as possible. Even before Wycliffe's death, his disciples started reprehending icons. We have here a typical example of deviation of Wycliffe's ideas towards an extremist path⁶⁰. The most important scripture-related objection that Lollards bring against icon worshiping is idolatry. Also, they believe that the money spent in order to adorn churches could be used to help the poor⁶¹.

Lollards also prohibited pilgrimages, whose purpose, according to them was the adoration of pieces of wood and rock, and whose cost could be spared and in-

⁵⁸ Jean-Marie Mayeur, Luce, Pietri, Marc Venard, André Vauchez (coord.), *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 444.

⁵⁹ E. U., s. v. *Lollards*, in *DHC*, p. 610.

⁶⁰ Margaret Aston, *op. cit.*, p. 100, 102, 104-105, 107, 109-110, 155.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 126-127.

John Wycliffe and the Lollards: Precursors of the Protestant Reform

stead be spent on benefactions for the poor⁶². In 1521, Lollard Thomas Geffrey of London stated that a true pilgrimage would be “to go barefoot and visit the poor, the weak and the ill, the true icons of God.”⁶³

Lollards did not believe in the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. John Wycliffe stated that Christ was only present in the wafer in a spiritual sense, and not in flesh; Catholics’ piety for the wafer was only a superstition, since it remained bread after the consecration. The refusal to accept transubstantiation was what brought Lollards the harshest convictions. Some of the most extreme Lollards believed that the “missa” was only a “commemoration” of Jesus’ sacrifice⁶⁴.

Wycliffe believed that the Holy Scripture was the only source of divine truth. According to his vision, the Scripture was the centre of spiritual life for believers. That is why, in order to track down the adepts of the heresy, authorities would search for books in English. Most Lollard meetings consisted in reunions - not for prayer, but for reading the Scripture out loud, in English⁶⁵. Some Lollards read contemporary theology treaties. They contained Wycliffe’s ideas, that had been vulgarized in English. The most well-known treaty is called “Wycliffe’s Wicket” or “The Wicket,” wrongly attributed to Wycliffe himself. This title is often found in the investigations of the Bishop of Lincoln in 1521⁶⁶.

The lives of the saints, very common in Catholic environments, are completely cast off by Lollards. The adoration of saints as well as prayers that ask for their intervention for the redemption of sinners are the quintessence of everything that the Lollards fight against: icon worshiping, purgatory, Catholic indulgences and papacy⁶⁷.

Lollard rationalism refuses to grant priests special powers of baptising children, of consecrating the bread, of blessing the water or of forgiving sinners in the name of Christ. Some Lollards go as far as to say that any good Christian could become a priest, which implies a stark criticism of all unworthy clerics, including the pope, often referred to as “the Antichrist.”⁶⁸

We can therefore sense a pattern of loathing for the clergy among Lollards. At the same time, they have a tendency to act in illegality, to hide, to avoid exposure rather than promoting a reform actively. Also, most of those suspected of the

⁶² S. Bridgen, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95; M. Aston, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

⁶⁴ J. A. F. Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-247.

⁶⁵ S. Bridgen, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

⁶⁶ Anne Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

⁶⁷ Jean-Marie Mayeur, Luce, Pietri, Marc Venard, André Vauchez (coord.), *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, vol. VII: *De la réforme à la Réformation*, (1450-1530), Éd. Desclée, Paris, 1994, p. 448.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

Ginel Mocanu

heresy prefer to discard their heretical belief rather than suffer martyrdom. The reformation of the church, as envisaged by the Lollards, did not succeed. Their faith could not become a national religion, as opposed to the Hussite heresy in Bohemia, undoubtedly because of the lack of political support, but also because it did not present an attractive alternative: many Catholics who could join the Lollards against the Church did not agree with their ideas on transubstantiation, or with Wycliffe's theories on predetermination; Lollardy lacked something that Luther was going to thrive on: the transition from desperation in front of sin to the discovery of redemption by faith.

Conclusions

In the Church of England, the reforming inspiration was given by John Wycliffe as early as the 14th century. He foreshadows Lutheran and Calvin theses that would emerge a century and a half later. In the first stages, Wycliffe's ideas spread across the academia, but especially among humble social categories, where he gathered his disciples. Lollardy survived the death of its founder; starting with 1450 and especially during the advent of the Reform, Lollardy was adopted by tradesmen, merchants and traders; in fact, these were the professional categories that supported the reforming movement on the continent, also. The Lollard theology is founded on the doctrine developed by John Wycliffe, which they simplified and took to the extremes, in some cases. Regarding the teachings of faith, Lollardy is characterized by the practice of a simple, "evangelical" faith and by its opposition to the Roman Church. Lollards gave great importance to the sermon; at the same time, they claimed free access to the Holy Scripture for all people, in their national languages. Wycliffe's ideas, taken over and processed by his Lollard disciples, are rightly considered by numerous historians the English origins of the Protestant reform.