Treasures New and Old: Oxford, John Wyclif, and the Reformation

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In an 1832 letter to his nephew, a new student at Oxford, retired Oxford professor Edward Berens reminded him of all the advantages of attending university, including the presence of other scholars to guide him, the abundance of public lectures, and the many books available to him. Oxford, Berens noted, was an opportunity not to be wasted.\(^1\) This was just as true in the 1300s as it was in the 1800s. The University of Oxford was not just a school, but an academic community, and a generator of new ideas. If Oxford was a garden, scholars and scholarship were its fruit. Oxford played a key role in medieval scholarship and the dawn of the Renaissance. In particular, Oxford was the academic home of John Wyclif, the so-called “Morning Star of the Reformation.”\(^2\) Much like Martin Luther needed the printing press, Wyclif needed Oxford, and he could not have contributed his scholarship and ideas about reform to academia without the academic resources and community of Oxford.

Oxford existed in some form or another for a long time before definitive records can reveal. In 1490, John Rous ascribed its founding to Alfred the Great, “at his own expense,” and several other scholars agree. Another, citing Juvenal, credited an ancient British monarch, Arviragus, with its founding, around 70 A.D. Another history dated it even further back, reporting that when the legendary Brutus of Troy invaded the island of Great Britain, “certain Philosophers…chose a suitable place of habitation,” namely Oxford.\(^3\) However it began, the town of Oxford was home to an important and respected set of academics by the 1100s. In 1190, one source reported that Oxford was “abounding in men skilled in mystic eloquence…bringing forth from their treasures things new and old.”\(^4\) In 1214, Pope Innocent III

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\(^2\) Like many medieval figures, John Wyclif’s name has multiple variations. This paper will use “Wyclif,” the spelling used in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. In direct quotes, the spelling used in individual sources has been preserved.


issued a charter of liberties to the university to resolve a conflict between the local community and the scholars, and in 1227 Henry III formally granted Oxford privileges as a university.\(^5\) By the time of Innocent’s charter, however, Oxford must have already functioning as a thriving academic center, since there existed a scholarly community to be in conflict with the local town. Henry did not grant Oxford privileges so much as he legitimized the ones it was already exercising. When Oxford began is less important, however, than what Oxford became, and what it allowed scholars such as Wyclif and others to do.

Like Oxford’s, Wyclif’s origin and early life are murky and only vaguely known. There are few sources before his importance was already established. There was a family belonging to the minor gentry of the name Wyclif, but there was no definitive link with John Wyclif himself except the surname and the logic that since John Wyclif attended a university and lived the life of a scholar, he likely came from a family with a comfortable amount of money. Similarly, there was a William de Wycklyffe, another fellow at Balliol, one of the colleges of Oxford, but still no indication of whether John Wyclif was related to William de Wycklyffe beyond the similar surnames.\(^6\) The first certain record of Wyclif’s career is his position as a fellow at Merton, another college of Oxford, between 1355 and 1357.\(^7\) Sadly, before that time biographical details or details of his career are educated guesses at best and tentative speculation at worst. From the known requirements to hold a fellowship at the time, he had studied at Oxford between four and six years prior to that, so it is safe to assume that Wyclif came to Oxford between 1349 and 1351.\(^8\) He must have completed a means test to demonstrate his mastery of his education, which was a requirement to hold a fellowship.\(^9\) All of these, however, are educated guesses based on other records and not from specific sources on Wyclif himself.


\(^{6}\) John Adam Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools: The Relation of the “Summa de ente” to Scholastic Debates at Oxford in the Later Fourteenth Century* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 10; 14. Since Wyclif’s own name has a multitude of spelling variations, the difference in spelling is not necessarily significant.

\(^{7}\) Robson, 10.

\(^{8}\) Robson, 14.

Even after that first relatively definitive record of Wyclif’s life, details are sparse. He was a Master of Balliol in 1360, lived in the town of Fillingham for about two years, returned to Oxford in 1363, and received the Wardenship of Canterbury College. The college was restructured shortly afterwards, and in 1368 Wyclif took a position in the rectory of Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire. He remained there until April 1374, when he received the rectory of Lutterworth, Leicestershire, which was his final home. He held that position through the peak of his career, after his dismissal from Oxford, up until his death in 1384. Throughout his life and no matter where he lived, he continued to be a prolific, opinionated, and widely-read scholar.

There are more certain sources on Wyclif’s later career. In 1372, John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, took him into service. Lancaster was the son of Edward III, and younger brother of the Black Prince. When Edward suffered a stroke in 1376, Lancaster unofficially assumed the regency for his young nephew, heir to the throne. Wyclif wrote arguments supporting the Duke of Lancaster’s policies, which began to limit Church power within England. Although his role in the political power struggle between the English government and the Catholic Church was minor at best, it was an important step in his career and his fame. Additionally, Wyclif’s service to Lancaster meant the Duke kept him relatively protected from potential blowback from those within England. Those outside of England, meanwhile, were too preoccupied with the Great Schism, which lasted from 1378 to 1417, to be concerned about an English scholar with relatively little political power.

Many have rightly celebrated the printing press for how it revolutionized the spread of information and allowed Martin Luther to spark the Protestant Reformation. Wyclif did not have the printing press. Wyclif had Oxford, and the scholarly resources there allowed for the germination and spread of his ideas in much the same way that the printing press had spread Luther’s. Wyclif’s Oxford was an excellent place for new ideas and discussion, and it was growing. There were six colleges of Oxford University

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11 DNB, s. v. “Wyclif, John.”
13 Green, 59.
in the 1370s, including Balliol, Merton, and others. This number grew in 1379, closer to the end of Wyclif’s career, with the establishment of the seventh college, St. Mary’s.\textsuperscript{15} Wyclif’s Oxford was academically wealthy, and that was increasing with every year.

Although pre-Reformation Oxford was a Catholic university in the same way that every pre-Reformation institution was Catholic, the university governed itself more or less autonomously. In a perhaps unconscious echo of papal election, the masters of the university chose their chancellor from among themselves.\textsuperscript{16} When the university clashed with the town, not infrequently, appeals went to the king of England and not the pope. To the frustration of the townspeople, the king usually decided in favor of the university.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, the whole of the fourteenth century saw successive expansions in the rights of the university and the “almost…irresistible” authority of the chancellor.\textsuperscript{18} The chancellor eventually had authority over any trial involving a clerk, student, or master of the university, which was even more authority than ecclesiastical courts at the time.\textsuperscript{19} Oxford’s authority and independence were crucial to its prestige and power as a center of learning. Thanks to English orneriness and mistrust of the papacy, scholars at Oxford did not have to concern themselves very much with whether or not they lined up with Catholic orthodoxy. In contrast, the University of Paris, closer to Rome both geographically and politically, was more regulated by the papacy.\textsuperscript{20}

Medieval universities began to move away from the \textit{trivium}—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—and \textit{quadrivium}—geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music—in favor of philosophy and the dialectic. Theology retained its preeminence in value, though not in numbers, as one had to have special papal dispensation to teach it, theoretically ensuring uniform, quality theology.\textsuperscript{21} Convinced that the secret wisdom of the past had been lost, scholars began a renewed, enthusiastic study of classical texts in Greek and

\textsuperscript{15} Green, 54.
\textsuperscript{16} Leff, 81-82.
\textsuperscript{17} Leff, 85.
\textsuperscript{19} Leff, 83-93.
\textsuperscript{20} Leff, 119.
\textsuperscript{21} Leff, 118-120. In practice, of course, it obviously did not achieve this.
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Latin, even as they began to use the vernacular for their own scholarship instead of Latin.  

Oxford had a host of great scholars in succession, and a close relationship with the University of Paris meant scholars could transmit ideas to and from the Continent, resulting in academic flourishing and diversity even before Wyclif. None of the other scholars had the printing press either. Prior to the printing press, scholarship had to be done by independently wealthy nobles, or an individual with their patronage, at a monastery, or, as in the case of Wyclif and countless others, at a university, since a sizeable library was often prohibitively expensive. Scholarship at a university provided for more academic diversity than an individual scholar or single patron. Moreover, Oxford was the second location in England to establish a printing press, in 1478. Before the printing press, universities like Oxford were crucial to creating meaningful scholarship, and they quickly adopted the innovation once it became available.

Wyclif was not the only scholar at Oxford to disagree with certain teachings of the Church, especially what later scholars called Nominalism. William of Ockham, himself a previous professor of Oxford, wrote that God was the only necessary entity, while everything else, from the physical world to human minds to souls, was “contingent and unnecessary;” that is, nothing existed in itself apart from God. Wyclif subscribed to Aristotelian logic, was strongly realist in his ideology, and believed the existence of all things to be eternal. Thomas Bradwardine expressed a sentiment similar to John Calvin’s teaching of total depravity, which leaned toward predestination, but Richard FitzRalph and Walter Burley supported Augustinian notions of free will. Thomas Buckingham tested several positions before likewise defending Augustinianism. Wyclif was not an isolated case of scholarly reform at Oxford, but was part of an academic community which fostered new ideas.
and the questioning of old ideas. Universities “made learning professional.”

The academic community and resources of Oxford was essential both to the genesis and dissemination of Wyclif’s ideas.

Other scholars at Oxford included Robert Grosseteste, the university’s first chancellor. He translated and wrote commentaries on several of Aristotle’s works, such as *Nicomachean Ethics* in the mid-thirteenth century. In addition to logic, he wrote on natural science, mathematics, and physics. Roger Bacon was also associated with Oxford around that time, although he never achieved a doctorate or master’s there. Still, he wrote extensively on varied subjects, viewing all human academic pursuits as a way to pursue knowledge of God. His scientific bent was not shared by all his colleagues, but his academic contributions were important nonetheless. Another famous Oxford scholar was Duns Scotus, who lived and wrote a little later than Grosseteste and Bacon. Like Ockham, Duns Scotus was a founding influence in the later philosophical school of Nominalism. All of these scholars, famous in their own day and in the modern age, were part of the academically fertile ground of Oxford, without which Wyclif could not have been the reformer he was.

Because teaching at Oxford strongly emphasized exercises in formal logic, starting with a premise and creating syllogisms, the learning environment allowed for ample debate and free flow of ideas. Far from being a restricted, dogmatic environment, university life allowed scholars the resources and the academic community necessary to generate and develop original ideas. This did not guarantee safety or quality, of course. Not every scholar at Oxford was a Wyclif, not every treatise was a *Summa de Ente*. Sometimes ideas which were too new or too original attracted institutional ire, exemplified in Wyclif’s eventual dismissal from Oxford and the Catholic Church’s posthumous declaration Wyclif was a heretic. Institutional learning was a two-edged sword; just as an institution could create a garden for the cultivation of learning, it could weed out the ideas that threatened its orthodoxy. Yet an institution which could rule learning could also create an academic community that a lone scholar could not match. The Catholic

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28 Leff, 117.
30 Green, 31-34.
31 Green, 38-39; *DNB*, s. v. “Ockham, William.”
32 Green, 56.
33 Green, 65.
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Church produced scholars, and many reformers, including Wyclif and other lay reformers, came from within the Church.

Religion in the British Isles prior to the Reformation and the establishment of the Anglican Church unsurprisingly shared many characteristics with religion on the Continent. There were accusations of corrupt and uneducated priests, and a population which only dimly understood their religious rituals; however, the population was generally consistent in their attendance, and believed in the rituals even if they did not understand them. England and the Continent were also similar in that reform usually began with individuals who had some sort of education, whether primarily theological or secular. Objection to a doctrine or ritual requires an understanding of that doctrine or ritual, meaning that the average person was unlikely to oppose church teaching. The majority of the population was “unreflective” about their faith. This was not due to any inherent lack of curiosity or skepticism, but because the average person did not have access to an education which inclined them to question and philosophize about reality and doctrine.

Wyclif, on the other hand, had the advantage of an unmatched education. With a doctorate in theology, the resources of a university at his disposal, and the patronage of a prince, he was in prime position to start questioning and arguing against official Catholic doctrine, and question he did. He harshly criticized the many monastic orders on their theology and their very existence, condemned the doctrine of transubstantiation, viciously disparaged the practice of indulgences, and objected to papal authority. He argued all of this primarily from Scripture, with only the occasional appeal to practicality.

Wyclif did not just criticize the Church for its wealth and corruption. He also wrote extensively on what he considered to be theological traps and vices of the Church. He criticized friars and orders of clergy for trying to establish religions more perfect than the one established by Christ himself. It was apostasy, he maintained. Friars attempted to establish a new, more

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36 Vaughan, vii.
perfect order of religion, but Wyclif rejected the notion that this was at all possible. The establishment of new orders was based on an underlying assumption that men could create a new, more perfect and more holy doctrine than the one that was already being taught. Since the existing Church had been established by Christ himself, for men to create a more holy order necessarily implied that they could create something more holy than God had created. To do so was to place man above God, which was plainly heretical.

Beyond Wyclif’s objection to the mere establishment of holy orders, he objected to their practices and theologies. He called begging a “foul error,” arguing that God had ordained work first as man’s holy office, then as penance for the first sin. Irrevocable oaths, like those taken by priests and friars, also placed man’s authority above God’s, which was blasphemy. If a person had converted to a false religion, no human authority could or should prevent him from leaving. To stay in such a religion was to accept damnation, which was yet another wrongdoing on the part of an already corrupt organization. The permanently binding oaths trapping an individual in a false religion were another sin on top of the lies of the order.

Wyclif’s teaching met with enthusiastic acceptance among many of the people of England, especially among the poorer, less educated Englishmen. Opponents disparagingly called Wyclif’s followers “Lollards,” possibly corrupted from Dutch for “mutterer.” Insulting though it was, they embraced the name without any apparent resistance. His followers grew abundant at Oxford and elsewhere. One historian irritably wrote that at Oxford, one could not “meet five people talking together but three of them [were] Lollards.”

In the late 1370s, Pope Gregory XI finally composed a bull against Wyclif, “Professor of the Sacred Scriptures (would that he were not also Master of Errors),” declaring that he was preaching errors and lies, and leading persons astray. Wyclif was “vomiting up” heretical ideas in a “detestable madness,” and Gregory ordered the University of Oxford to arrest

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38 Wyclif, “Against the Orders of Friars,” 224.
39 Wycliffe, “Against the Orders of Friars,” 222.
40 Robson, 138.
41 Jenkins, 96.
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Wyclif and send him to the Archbishop of Canterbury or London. Attached was a list of Wyclif’s offending teachings, with instructions that they be “bundled and burned.” Wyclif was still under the not-insignificant protection of the Duke of Lancaster, who was disinclined to listen to the papacy even when it was holding its own, and Gregory’s death in 1378 precipitated the Great Schism, as well as preventing Gregory from taking further action against Wyclif. Wyclif remained in England, unarrested, though the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381 followed shortly thereafter, and Wyclif retired from Oxford.

Wyclif’s response did not call Gregory detestable in so many words or accuse him of vomiting madness, but he was no less sharp. He defended his writing, responding that Christ and the apostles on earth had refused worldly honor, and the men of the cloth ought to leave worldly honor to worldly princes. He claimed he would “with good will go to the pope,” but said that he had already been called by God where he was and could not refuse, echoing Acts 4:19.

The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 was the final controversy in Wyclif’s living career. It used Wyclif’s work as one of the keystones of their rebellion. Although it was sometimes called Wat Tyler’s Rebellion the first instigator was not Tyler, but the equally radical former priest John Ball, who believed that the rights of poor English serfs had to be taken by force because their lords and the clergy would never willingly give them. “When Adam delved and Eve span,” Ball’s pithy and pious slogan went, “Who then was the gentleman?” Ball’s inflammatory rhetoric and the rebels’ ideologies coincided somewhat with Wyclif’s writing, Ball being a “scholar of Wickliff.” Wyclif’s writing did not endorse the use of force and was not the cause of the rebellion, however, since Ball had been a radical “long before”

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44 Robson, 219.
45 Green, 61; Zophy, 35.
48 John Adam Robertson, John Wycliffe: Morning Star of the Reformation (Basingstok: Marshall, 1984), 40; Jenkins, 100.
49 Lister M. Matheson, “The Peasants’ Revolt through Five Centuries of Rumor and Reporting: Richard Fox, John Stow, and Their Successors,” Studies in Philology 95 no. 2 (Spring 1998), 137.
Wyclif had the fame to have had any influence on him.\textsuperscript{50} Although many contemporaries blamed Wyclif, he was a reformer, not a revolutionary; he was sympathetic, but not a supporter.\textsuperscript{51} He “deplored” violence, and believed that one’s Christian duty to society persisted regardless of social injustice.\textsuperscript{52} Additionally, Wyclif had been in service to John of Gaunt for nearly ten years by 1381, and did not seem to have any reason to oppose or threaten Lancaster’s regency or the reign of Lancaster’s nephew, Richard II. Lancaster was Wyclif’s faithful protector, and Wyclif did not turn on him at any time.\textsuperscript{53}

The Peasants’ Revolt peaked in June of 1381, when the rebels managed to effectively take over the city of London for two days. They sacked the Duke of Lancaster’s residence, the Savoy Palace. Worse, the rebels murdered Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, among others. Though still young, Richard II reacted with poise and confidence, meeting the rebels and granting their demands, although the concessions were soon retracted and the leaders, such as John Ball, executed (Wat Tyler had died over the course of the rebellion in London).\textsuperscript{54} Despite Wyclif’s lack of personal involvement, his ideological association and sympathy with the rebels was enough for many to regard him with suspicion, and he lost the protection he had enjoyed from the Duke of Lancaster. The new Archbishop of Canterbury, William Courtenay, convened a synod to determine Wyclif’s culpability. An earthquake hit when the synod convened, which Courtenay and others at the synod took as confirmation of their suspicions of Wyclif. Disgraced and dismissed from the university, Wyclif left Oxford to live out the remainder of his life in Lutterworth.\textsuperscript{55}

The title “Morning Star of the Reformation,” though perhaps overly florid, gives an indication of the importance of Wyclif. Despite Gregory’s reprimand, the papacy was unable to address Wyclif’s writings as a threat to itself until after Wyclif had died, and left it to Richard II and John of Gaunt to deal with the turmoil following Wyclif’s writings. The inability of the papacy to calm the waters stirred by reformers was a key element of the Protestant

\textsuperscript{50} Robertson, 41.
\textsuperscript{52} Robertson, 41, 45.
\textsuperscript{53} Stubbs, 137.
\textsuperscript{54} Jenkins, 101-102; Matheson, 128.
\textsuperscript{55} Robertson, 54.
Reformation, and it began with Wyclif, who in turn began with Oxford. If Wyclif was the morning star, then Oxford was the sky in which he rose.