

23. Did Lollardy pose a serious challenge to the late medieval church?

In February 1395 a group of Lollards nailed their 'Twelve Conclusions' to the doors of Westminster Hall. On the 31st of October 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenburg. Both documents contained radical ideas regarding prayers for the dead, purgatory and the position of the papacy. Both the sects the documents represented shared similar concerns about transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, pilgrimages, confession and the priesthood that were deeply challenging to the established church. Why is it then that 50 years after Luther's Theses were nailed to a church door his actions had sparked a European-wide Reformation whereas the group of Lollards had ceased to be an identifiable presence in England? Lollardy was originated by John Wyclif, an Oxford don, philosopher and theologian, who was profoundly concerned with what he saw as the failings of the medieval church and felt compelled to create a system of beliefs that corrected these failings, which was later disparagingly labelled 'Lollardy'. Wyclif and the group of followers he drew believed in predestination, rejected the sacraments and wished to minimise the priest's role in religious practice by translating the Bible into the vernacular, facilitating a personal relationship with God for all. In assessing whether Lollardy posed a serious challenge to the medieval church we can separate Lollardy's potential threat as a belief system from the practical threat the Lollards as a body posed in the late medieval period. Ideologically, it is easy to see how Lollardy could be considered a serious challenge to the church in that it undermined centuries of Catholic tradition and sought to limit the power and wealth the church had been able to accrue. However, in practice, Lollardy suffered from lack of popular and political support. The groups of Lollards that persisted in their belief despite persecution from the state were small in number and too self contained to convert followers away from traditional belief and constitute a serious challenge to the late medieval church. Contrary to reformist propaganda that has pervaded the study of this period for centuries the church was strongly supported by an active laity and were unlikely to lose a large number of followers to Lollardy. Whilst it is clear that the church did not risk being reformed by a movement that had limited support, the church itself persecuted Lollards in earnest demonstrating that Lollardy was a doctrinal challenge. Lollardy was ultimately more damaging to the church in the period following the Henrician Reformation in creating an early English tradition of Protestant type beliefs and martyrs than it was damaging to the late medieval church as a self-contained ideology.

Ideologically, Lollardy was a serious challenge to the church. Its key beliefs undermined centuries of established church practice and the mere fact that a portion of the lay had adopted these beliefs was inherently threatening to church control. Their key belief was that of predestination; each individual was predestined for either heaven or hell and worldly actions could not change this. This belief led to a rejection of the sacraments, most notably the mass. In devaluing the mass Lollardy challenged the church in many ways. Lollard doctrine not only stripped the mass of value as a method of increasing one's chance of going to heaven it also denied the miracle of transubstantiation. This was both a doctrinal challenge and a challenge to the church's key elements of support. Much of our evidence for the strength of the medieval church lies in the lay's enthusiasm for the mass. The Jesus Mass, championed by Lady Margaret Beaufort, found an audience in the upper stratas of society and became hugely popular in the Middle Ages whilst in the lower orders mass was demanded at a higher frequency than the church had previously offered. If Lollardy became more popular and it was believed more widely that the mass was ineffective in attaining salvation past centuries of the church's teaching would be revealed as completely invalid and the church would risk losing lay support. In devaluing the mass and other sacraments Lollardy challenged the power of the priest in medieval society. If a priest was unable to administer sacraments he no longer had primacy in medieval society by determining the spiritual future of his parish. In addition to challenging priests in this way Lollardy also implied that members of the clergy could be predestined for hell and therefore trusting them to administer religious services was a grievous mistake. One of the religious services Lollardy was especially reluctant for priests to administer was confession, suggesting a practice that amounted to universal priesthood. In reducing the role of the

priest in these ways Lollardy posed a serious challenge to the church since reducing the priest's presence in most of the population's lives would seriously impact church control over society. The rejection of the mass also had financial implications. Much of the late medieval church was financed on the premise that one could pay for a spiritual service that would increase the likelihood of an individual going to heaven. The existence of chantries, prayers and benefactions after death and many monastic houses would be compromised if wealthy individuals believed that their actions had no relevance for their spiritual destiny. Lollardy's emphasis on predestination also led them to reject pilgrimages, images and relics as examples of useless worldly efforts to change one's preordained spiritual future. In the Twelve Conclusions, the theological writings of the Lollards, the reverence that was given to relics was disparagingly referenced 'for if the Rood tree, nails, and the spear, and the crown of God should be so holy worshipped, then were Judas' lips, whoso might them get, a wonder great relic.'¹ This posed a challenge to the church's monopoly on doctrine and there were financial implications of losing the money spent by pilgrims travelling to visit important relics. Rejecting spiritual guidance from the clergy, Wycliff and subsequent Lollards relied on scripture for their religious practice and several examples of Wycliffe's translation of the Bible used by Lollards survive. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular was a serious challenge to the church's hold over their flock as it encouraged the lay to make their own judgements on the Bible without the church's influence, though the lack of organisation in the distribution of these books limited the practical threat Lollardy was able to pose to the late medieval church. As with many other Lollard principles, while the ideas were subversive they did not have significant effects due to the practical realities of the Lollard movement. In many ways, Lollardy was ideologically challenging to the late medieval church in the same way Protestantism was challenging to the early modern church. However, unlike Protestantism Lollardy was not supported by a popular movement generated by printed books reaching a more highly educated and engaged population nor did it have political support. Lollardy did pose a serious ideological challenge in that it contradicted church doctrine with reference to the Bible but was hampered by the religious, social and political environment which was not conducive to a Lollard rise.

We can see that the Lollards did pose a serious ideological challenge to the church in the church's response to their presence in England. Despite the church being in a strong position and the Lollards being in a comparatively weaker force the church felt challenged by Lollardy. Indeed, the perceived threat was so strong that English clerics felt compelled to inform the Pope Gregory XI of the Lollard presence in England. The fact that the Pope was informed of this insurgence shows that the church perceived Lollardy to be a very serious challenge as they informed the highest ecclesiastical authority. The damning language used in the response of the Pope shows the papacy felt the threat keenly. In May 1377 Pope Gregory XI sent a papal bull condemning those who sheltered Lollardy in the strongest language 'through negligence and sloth on your part allow cockle to spring among the pure wheat in the field of your glorious university aforesaid, and (what is worse) to grow up; and take no means (as we were lately informed) for rooting out of the same; to the great blemishing of your fair name, the peril of your souls, the contempt of the Roman church, and the decay of the orthodox faith'². The Pope demanded the Lollards' swift removal and the English clergy concurred. To prevent the Lollards from slowly gaining momentum the church tried to stamp them out before, to the eyes of an outsider, they constituted a serious threat. In most areas with a Lollard presence the primary period for Lollard persecution was the early 15th century following the condemnation of Lollardy as heretical in 1415. Over sixty Lollards were tried for heresy between 1428-31 in Norwich and there were several notable burnings including that of Sir John Oldcastle, boyhood companion of Henry V, which drove Lollardy underground for the latter part of the 15th century. After the persecution of those the church labelled as 'Lollards' in the 15th century there was a resurgence of persecution in the early sixteenth century. The latter persecu-

¹ <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/varia/lollards/lollconc.htm>

² <http://www.thereformation.info/Papal%20Bull.htm>

tion is especially interesting as by this time Lollardy had become so fragmented that the Lollards' beliefs were probably vastly different from each other and the numbers of those in whom Lollard belief had survived were very small. However, the church believed itself to be overrun with heresies; the Bishop of London in 1523 referred to 'the great band of Wycliffie heresies'³ and the suppression of heresy was deemed to be an appropriate chief task of a Convocation in 1511. This resurgence in persecution has been interpreted as showing both Lollard survival into the sixteenth century and even an increase in the challenge they posed to the church. Hudson in 'The Premature Reformation' states that in the sixteenth century 'there was a substantial number of Lollards, or at least of men and women who at some stage had shown sympathy with Lollard causes and teachings.'⁴ Bernard however in 'The Late Medieval English Church' considers the numbers of arrests and concludes 'The numbers involved are tiny... These are rare and isolated cases not a surge.'⁵ It is more probable that rather than showing an increase in the numbers of Lollards the increase in persecution indicates that the church was becoming increasingly sensitive and paranoid about the risk of heresy and wished to punish any dissidents to discourage heterodoxy. Lollardy was clearly a challenge to the late medieval church's monopoly on doctrine as the church recognised a threat to its superiority and persecuted the Lollards to an extent which would have been illogical if Lollardy was not a serious challenge to the church. Lollardy's doctrine proved to be its most threatening attribute; some beliefs were absorbed into the Reformation where they were ultimately successful and adopted throughout the country. However, though Lollard doctrine was a challenge to the church it was unable to pose a serious challenge to its stability due to lack of support from an institution or popular movement that would enable the reform of the medieval church.

Although church authorities were obsessed by the fear of Lollard doctrine the practical challenge it posed was very limited. The Lollards never had a leader who was charismatic, wholly committed to their idea of salvation, an effective communicator or a good organiser. Leadership was crucial in producing a heresy that was a significant challenge to the church as demonstrated by the Waldensians who operated in the 13th century. This heresy proliferated under the leadership of Peter Valdes but collapsed without a centralising figure after his death. The Lollards did not have a similar figure in Wyclif who was an intellectual reformer rather than a street preacher. He was able to gather a small band of fellow intellectuals at Oxford but was either unwilling or unable to communicate his beliefs effectively to a wider social group. When challenged Wyclif lacked commitment to his convictions and preferred to retire from Oxford rather than defend his beliefs as Valdes did. Wyclif did not have an intellectual successor and thus the only centralising force was lost from the group. As a result the heresy fragmented and was left to evolve within smaller sects leading to disparate beliefs in a community the church labelled universally as 'Lollards'. These differing beliefs within a community made them considerably less able to challenge the authority of the church as they lacked cohesion and the absence of effective leadership from Wyclif made them an attenuated force even during their prime. Lollardy was a religion of the word and one of the most significant limiting factors to its popularity was the intellectual atmosphere of the 15th century. Lollardy placed emphasis on the translation of the Bible into the vernacular and the exploration of God through scripture yet the vast majority of the laity were uneducated and unable to read the Bible in Latin or English. Those who were somewhat educated would have lacked the intellectual self confidence to defend their beliefs and this could explain the Lollards' willingness to recant their beliefs when confronted by ecclesiastical authority. The most significant limiting factor was the lack of

³ Bernard. George W. 2012 *The late medieval English church: vitality and vulnerability before the break with Rome* Yale University Press, p.221

⁴ Hudson, Anne. 1988. *The Premature Reformation*. Clarendon Press. Found in Bernard. George W. 2012 *The late medieval English church: vitality and vulnerability before the break with Rome* Yale University Press, p.210

⁵ Bernard. George W. 2012 *The late medieval English church: vitality and vulnerability before the break with Rome* Yale University Press, p.210

printing in England in the early 15th century. Initially text production was one of Lollardy's major strengths. In the late 14th and early 15th centuries there was an surge in the production of Lollard texts with 294 anonymous sermons published. 'The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards' is an important piece of theological writing, systematically critiquing the weaknesses of the late medieval church with consistent references to scripture that contradicted church teaching. For example, the Lollards criticise 'War, Battle and Crusades' as contrary to the New Testament 'the which is a law of grace and full of mercy'⁶. Clearly, the Lollards' ability to rebuke church teaching with the use of the Bible challenges the church's monopoly on belief. However, once Lollardy had been declared heretical in 1415 publication slowed and no new ideas were published after as early as 1440. With limited manuscript copying and without the printing press the Lollards were unable to spread their ideas and engage a wider portion of the population.

Certain aspects of Lollard doctrine were unpopular within medieval society, limiting their potential to be a serious practical challenge to the church. The keystone of Lollardy, predestination, while ideologically threatening was unappealing to a lay population whose main goal was to achieve heaven and whose certainties Lollardy ripped away. If they believed Lollardy was the true faith they had to reject the Mass, pilgrimages and other mechanisms that they were hitherto confident would mean they could enter heaven. The Lollards' belief in predestination meant that they could not offer alternatives to the Mass that would ensure you reached heaven and they did not establish a rival church organisation. Without an alternative to the structured Catholic church they were unlikely to gain followers and neither could they offer members of the clergy alternative positions within their organisation. Additionally most churchmen found Lollardy to be deeply distasteful as it rejected many of the basic tenants upon which the church was founded. The late medieval church was often critiqued but no churchman ever suggested that an institution as important as the Mass should suddenly be refuted as the Lollards did.

The political atmosphere of the late 14th early 15th century was not conducive to a Lollard rise. Both Richard II and Henry V were deeply set against the Lollards. Richard II was deeply committed to the traditional faith as most clearly evidenced by the Wilton Diptych where he appears, a vision of divine kingship, being blessed by the Virgin Mary, her angels and a number of saints. As a result Richard took pride in destroying the Lollards with the inscription on his gravestone reading; he 'suppress(ed) the heretics and scatter(ed) their friends.'⁷ For Henry V Lollardy took on an artificial political dimension during the rise of Sir John Oldcastle and as a result persecuting the Lollards was politically expedient. The Lollards suffered from lack of political protection. Heresy profited during times when monarchs were intellectually engaged rather than taking a devotional approach to religion. One of the reasons that Protestantism was adopted in the 16th century by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, other than it being politically expedient, was that early modern monarchs were intellectually engaged with doctrine and the intellectual climate supported questioning of doctrine. The Lollards suffered from the devotional religious climate of the time. High status Lollards in the reign of Richard II such as Thomas Latimer, John Trussell and Lewis Clifford were only labeled 'The Lollard Knights' after their deaths as discretion was vital to their avoidance of various cycles of persecution during their lives. Only in their wills could the influence of Lollardy in their lives be expressed but this was valueless to the growth of Lollardy. Political protection would have enabled heresy to pose a more serious challenge to the church as demonstrable by Martin Luther's relationship with Prince Frederick III who shielded Luther from persecution and enabled him to produce more writing and challenge the church over a period.

In assessing whether Lollardy was a threat to the medieval church we must consider to what extent was the church vulnerable to Lollardy. After the Reformation it was beneficial for religious reformers to promulgate ideas of a corrupt medieval church which was benefitted by changes latterly made and it was argued that the

⁶ <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/varia/lollards/lollconc.htm>

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-II-king-of-England>

medieval church was ripe for reform. More recently revisionist historians such as Duffy in his book 'Stripping of the Altars' have discovered through intricate examination of case studies that the church was considerably healthier than previously believed. If we take the view that the church itself was stable, Lollardy, in its fragmented state, cannot be seen as a serious challenge to an entrenched institution. The lay population's interest in the church is easily demonstrable. In most wills generous benefactions to the church can be seen in

donations to chantries and generosity can also be seen over people's lifetimes in their donations to church buildings. The period before 1530 saw no stop in the building of churches and money was given by different stratas of society. A new steeple in Louth was erected whilst a new church tower was built in Eye all from parishioners' pockets. In the period between 1370 and 1532 95% of the population made bequests to their parish church, which shows that the general population were sufficiently satisfied with their parish church to be willing to spend their money in maintaining it. If the population were satisfied with their religious instruction it is unlikely that they would stray to any heresy however tempting. Whilst the vast majority of the population were satisfied with the church there were several instances of complaints regarding the clergy which have been used to demonstrate widespread dissatisfaction. However, these complaints are easily explained. In some cases complaints were caused by administrative errors; the tithe system was undergoing teething problems in larger cities like London and some people complained that the tithes that they were paying were supporting a church they did not attend. Rather than showing dissatisfaction with the late medieval church this shows engagement. People actively wanted to fund the churches that they attended rather than rejecting the tithe system as a whole. Some complaints centred around individuals such as a priest of Norfolk who collected his tithes accompanied by his mistress. Complaints of this kind cannot be seen as representative of dissatisfaction on a wider scale. Other notable complaints against the clergy such as John Colet's convocation sermon in 1512 and William Melton's *Sermo Exhortatorius* in 1510 can be seen as part of a tradition in the Catholic church of self criticism and reformation. Both Colet and Melton were members of the clergy who wished to see their church flourish and better itself rather than exchanging it for heretical beliefs such as Lollardy. MacCulloch explains it best, in 'Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700' when discussing John Colet and his preaching on the faults of the clergy he says; '[Colet]'s anti-clerical outpourings are in fact the highest form of clericalism.'⁸ It is important to remember that complaints against the church are consistent across the 12th to the 16th century and complaints of uneducated clergy, simony and particularism are not indicative of a unique crisis point. Whilst theologians debated the smaller weaknesses of the church, the larger part of society were engaging in the aspects of Christian belief that Lollardy challenged more than they had previously. All classes displayed religious enthusiasm in the commission of more masses. The Jesus Mass served the middle and upper classes and while this can be seen as the mass morphing from a religious to a social occasion it is nonetheless testament to the fact that the mass was of cultural importance. Lay people insisted on multiple masses and the production of religious literature for the lay population increased showing a commitment to the church. It could be argued that increased lay interest in Christianity beyond the parameters of the church shows that they were dissatisfied with the services the church itself was providing and were forced to look elsewhere. However, it is important to remember that the lay population was also heavily involved in their parish church as evidenced by the care invested in parish church altars at the time. The engagement shown by all levels of society shows that the medieval church was strong and whilst it was criticised this criticism mainly arose from members of the clergy who wished to purify the church through reform. This engagement also shows that people were invested in the medieval church and were not interested in heresies like Lollardy. The strength of the church's position meant that

⁸ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. 2003 *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*. Penguin. p.34

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though Lollardy was a doctrinal challenge it was impossible for the Lollards, a small force, to pose a serious challenge to the church's stability in this period.

To conclude, while Lollardy as an ideology did pose a serious spiritual challenge to orthodoxy through its independence of thinking, the Lollards as a practical force did not pose a serious challenge to the medieval church as evidenced by the weak and fragmented nature of the Lollards in comparison to the strong edifice of the medieval church. However, the strength of Lollard doctrine was not insignificant as shown by the resurgence of popular belief in their ideas by the Lutherans in the latter stages of the 16th century. Had circumstances been favourable to the Lollards it is possible that Lollardy may have been able to proliferate and been seen as a more significant challenge to the medieval church. Indeed, it is almost irrelevant to speculate whether Lollardy directly informed the course of English Protestantism or was simply adopted by those who wished for Protestantism to have a longer history in England as it was clearly thought to be significant enough to be remembered by early Protestants and immortalised in John Foxe's Book of Martyrs. The true challenge the Lollards posed the church was in later Protestant use of them as propaganda. Protestants used the Lollards presence in England to create an artificial Protestant heritage in England and their role as propaganda was more significant in challenging the early modern church than any threat Lollards may have posed as a self contained ideology at the time of their origin.

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