

**WYCLIF'S HERESY.**

The Precursor of Henry VIII.

Shockingly Blasphemous Character of Wyclif's Utterances.

Father Stevenson has added yet one more volume to the list of works, destined to explode long cherished historical illusions that have seen the light during the last quarter of a century. We do not mean to speak of purely Protestant prejudices as to the character of John Wyclif. But it has been a favourite idea even with Catholics, that Henry VIII. had to deal with a good, simple, believing people, whom he sundered by unparalleled violence from the unity of the Church. That belief as far as it concerns the religious character of Englishmen at the opening of the sixteenth century, must be largely modified. The majority, nay, a very large majority of Englishmen, were no doubt, Catholics and many of them good Catholics. But the spread of error, especially among the lower classes, for two hundred years before, despite of severely repressive measures, had been simply appalling. The peculiar form of these errors bear a very strong family resemblance to the system that triumphed in England under Edward VI. and Elizabeth, in a word, to Protestantism. The book we are reviewing leaves no room to doubt, from the ample evidence we possess, though but a fragment of what might have come down to us, that long before the name of Protestant had been invented, Protestants might have been counted perhaps by many thousands, on English soil. Had that soil not been well prepared for it, not even the strong Tudor will could have made the evil plant take root. Neither the evil lives of many Catholics, though this element weakened the power of resistance, nor the powerful influence of the Tudor sovereigns nor the abilities of men like Luther and Calvin, suffice to account for the success of the Protestant revolution in England. Protestantism has had a long pedigree. It had its rise in the Caesarian of the Conqueror and his descendants. Its principles were embodied in the teaching of John Wyclif.

Origin of this Anti-Papal Feeling

Probably there never was a time when it could be said that our country was absolutely free of error, either as regards its ecclesiastical politics or its religious belief. From the time of the early Normans there had always been in England a party which looked with undisguised suspicions on the dealings of the Papal Curia, as far as they were supposed to trench on the privileges and liberties of the sovereign. Many of the nobility and even some of the Bishops would gladly have made the King independent of the Pontiff in all matters save those which were of a purely dogmatic nature. Here it is enough to refer to the aggressions of William Rufus and the two Henrys, which were resisted by St. Anselm and St. Thomas of Canterbury. From the king this anti-Papal feeling descended to the nobility, and from the nobility to their tenants. This unfortunate irritation was kept alive by the system of Papal provisions, whereby patrons of benefices complained that they were deprived of their civil privileges, of which they loudly clamored for their restitution.

The mainspring of the Protestant system

Such were the predisposing causes, and when we find the yoke of authority irksome, we try at once to persuade ourselves that the said authority is an usurpation. To efface the distinction between the human and supernatural element in the Papal jurisdiction and set it all down as a mere earthly institution, was the next step, and along with the system of Church discipline, nay, the whole Christian priesthood and sacramental principles must needs be overturned. This is exactly what was done by the Wyclifites, and it forms the mainspring of the Protestant system, if system it can be called. Of course, accidental circumstances, as usual, set the machinery in motion. Disappointed ambition turned John Wyclif from an active churchman into a heretic, at it has done with many another since his day. The fact is at all events now as clear as daylight on the faith of records of unquestioned authenticity. Archbishop Islip, in founding Canterbury Hall at Oxford had imprudently attempted to unite Benedictine monks and secular priests in one and the same collegiate establishment. The undertaking did not work harmoniously, as might have been foreseen. The Archbishop removed the monks and made over the college to the secular priests, with Wyclif, then Master of Balliol, as Warden.

This was done without the authorization from the Crown needed for its legal

ity, and was subsequently held to be invalid. Besides, in making it over to the secular clergy he expressly reserved the right of altering the arrangement at any future period if he chose. Islip's register at Lambeth contains some quaint rules for the new college. No one shall be eligible as a Fellow who has any notable mark on his face. The cost of gowns, furs, etc., is minutely regulated. Latin is to be spoken in the house, but they are not at all to chatter together at the same time like geese or magpies. The Archbishop and his successors are to have the sole power of regulating the said Hall in its head members and property with full power to alter its statutes at will. Islip died in 1366, and was succeeded by Simon de Langham, Chancellor of England. His legal knowledge showed him that in the eye of the law the Hall had lapsed to the crown. Langham determined to turn Canterbury Hall into a College for the Benedictine Monks of his own Cathedral. He began by appointing Henry de Woodhull, a Monk of Canterbury, Warden, in place of Wyclif, who only held his office at the pleasure of the Archbishop. Thus was Wyclif, at an early period of his career, brought into a collision with the monastic Order, which he afterwards attacked with the bitterest hatred. He refused to submit; appealed to Rome, and the cause was heard at Viterbo, before Cardinal de Rocha, formerly Abbot of Cluny. Judgement was given in favor of the Archbishop, and the monks succeeded the secular clergy at Canterbury Hall.

This was a bitter disappointment to the ex-Warden, the more so as he had wished to pose as the champion of the seculars in the quarrel with regulars, and perhaps as a "Northern" against Kentishmen. Wyclif hoped to console himself by obtaining the vacant See of Worcester. At least so we are told by more than one English writer within a quarter of a century after Wyclif's death. If so, he met with a second disappointment. From this time he began the warfare against the teaching and authority of the Catholic Church which he continued unceasingly to carry on till his death. Were we wrong in surmising that his enmity to Rome had its first source in disappointed ambition?

We have thought it well by the above summary to call special attention to this first portion of Father Stevenson's work, because it relates to facts less universally known than the general character of Wyclif's heresies. As to these latter, they favor strongly of Calvinism, while on morals they have a great affinity with the doctrines of Socialists and the advocates of "Free Love." In a word, his blasphemous utterances would shock the great majority of Protestants. Strangely enough, he retained to the last a respect for the honor of the Blessed Virgin. After reading what Father Stevenson has given us from contemporary sources, we think it would not be easy to deny that the brutal excesses of the Kentish revolutionaries in 1382 were in great part traceable to Wyclif's influences. Here we are forcibly reminded of what we have read about Wesley's participation in the hideous scenes of the Gordon riots, though Wyclif, unlike his successor, thought it safest to remain tranquil in his Leicestershire Rectory while bolder men were engaged in the work of bloodshed and pillage.

But the most important part of Father Stevenson's researches is undoubtedly that which portrays the religious condition of England during the two centuries that preceded the Reformation. Wyclif's work did not expire with him. In Norfolk and Suffolk, in Essex, Kent and Lincolnshire, in London, Salisbury, Rochester, and many other places, episcopal visitations brought to light numbers of Wyclifites, secretly engaged in corrupting the faith and morals of their Catholic neighbors. Apostate Wyclifite priests have been known to give the consecrated host to be devoured by mice. Of all the perversities to this heresy, the most celebrated, by reason of his exalted position, was Reginald Peacock, Bishop of Chichester. In his earliest career he had been a vehement defender of Papal authority, but seems to have always succeeded by an imprudent and hotheaded style of disputing, in embittering every controversy in which he had the misfortune to engage. Nothing is more common than to find men of this caliber eventually in arms against the cause of which they had once been hot defenders. We could quote living instances by the score. So Peacock drifted into Wyclifism, and on the 28th of November, 1457, was condemned as a heretic by the Primate. He retracted at St. Paul's Cross, and for the rest of his days was committed to the charge of the Abbot of Tournay, in Cambridgeshire. He was but one of many condemned by the ecclesiastical courts for Lollardism, the result of whose history our author sums up as follows:

"We begin to understand at length the cause of that startling rapidity with which Henry VIII. was able to carry into execution his plans for the establishment of the Reformation. England was prepared for it, and had for long expected it. Cranmer offered scarcely any doctrine to his countrymen which was a novelty to them. They had long maligned the Holy See, they had long renounced the doctrine of the Sacrament; the supremacy of the throne had long been familiar to them and every other inno-

The truth about John Wyclif, his Life Writings, and Opinions, Chiefly from the Evidence of his Contemporaries." By Joseph Stevenson. S. J. London; Burns & Oates, 1885.

vation as it followed was welcomed as an old familiar friend. For long the eyes of the Crown and the greater lay lords had been fixed on the property of the religious houses. We wonder that the Reformation did not happen a century before the time when it really occurred. England seems to have been ripe for it, and if it may be permitted us to speculate we should probably have had it during the century previous to that in which it burst upon us, but for the turmoil connected with the wars of York and Lancaster. When Henry proclaimed war against the Head of the Church, he must have had the conviction strong upon his soul that in the struggle upon which he was about to enter he would be supported by a very large body of his subjects by whom the announcement had long been anticipated."

We recognize in Father Stevenson's conclusions a truth that, if not wholly unknown, has at least been imperfectly realized. When we realize it, we feel that we see more deeply into the history of mediæval England. She had done much to earn the awful punishment of a national apostasy.

Among minor points, the book we are reviewing brings out in an unexpected way the bad faith of Foxe in his 'Book of Martyrs.' He had access to the same sources of information on which the present volume has been compiled, and deliberately suppressed the portions which showed what abominable crimes his 'martyrs' were guilty of, and how richly they deserved their well-earned fate. The vigorous, if somewhat unparliamentary epithets, applied by Cobbett in his 'History of the Reformation' to the author of the 'Book of Martyrs,' are proved to be not a whit exaggerated. Another point incidentally dealt with is Wyclif's Bible. The claim cannot be admitted for a moment, and is disallowed even by his recent Protestant editors. It is possible, but not certain, that he translated the New Testament, as others had done long before him. And here we must conclude our notice of a truly valuable work, congratulating ourselves that the efforts of a Protestant society to glorify one of the most unattractive of Protestant heroes has been the occasion of such an important contribution towards the historical vindication of the Catholic Church and her work in England.—London Tablet.

A. M. D. G.

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