

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

## Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

---

Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

---

5-15-2005

### English Reformation Apocalypticism Foreshadowed in Lollard Sermons

Douglas Reinders

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, [pastordoug@zionfremont.com](mailto:pastordoug@zionfremont.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/stmsp>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Reinders, Douglas, "English Reformation Apocalypticism Foreshadowed in Lollard Sermons" (2005).  
*Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers*. 42.  
<https://scholar.csl.edu/stmsp/42>

This Seminar Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

English Reformation Apocalypticism Foreshadowed  
in Lollard Sermons

---

A Seminar Paper presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Historical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

---

By

Douglas Reinders

Advisor

Paul W. Robinson 1-6-05  
Paul Robinson Date

Reader

Robert Rosin 1/6/05  
Robert Rosin Date

English Reformation apocalypticism<sup>1</sup> in the sixteenth century is said to have been influenced primarily by Protestant sources from continental Europe, as well as by the Joachite tradition which was the main force behind the apocalyptic mood that had settled over the Continent. Since strains of these influences are thought to be evident in sixteenth century English Protestantism, it has been concluded by some scholars that continental apocalypticism migrated across the channel into England where it came to dominate the development of English Protestant thought on the end times.<sup>2</sup> This conclusion, however, overlooks apocalyptic themes in the writings of John Wycliffe and his Lollard followers. Little consideration has been given to the idea that these themes in the writings of Wycliffe and the Lollards could also have possibly contributed to the development of apocalyptic thought among sixteenth century English Protestants.

In order to support the suggestion that Lollardy also contributed to the development of English Reformation apocalypticism of the sixteenth century, it is helpful to examine Lollard literature containing apocalyptic ideas. Lollard tracts and treatises provide some information of Lollard views on the end times. One notable source is the Lollard Latin commentary on Revelation, *Opus Arduum*,<sup>3</sup> which gives a detailed account of the Antichrist and events preceding Christ's second coming. However, a study of Lollardy's apocalyptic influence would

---

<sup>1</sup> Apocalypticism does not necessarily mean an expectation of the imminent end of the world. It can be understood as the anticipation of an approaching crisis or event that will end the present evil age and usher in a new one. See Curtis V. Bostick, *The Antichrist and the Lollards: Apocalypticism in Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 6-9. Lollard apocalyptic seems to encompass both the imminent end of the world and the imminent end of the present age through some crisis. Lollard apocalyptic is not confined strictly to one or another understanding of apocalypticism.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism and the English Reformation from John Bale to John Foxe and Thomas Brighton* (Appleford, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978), 11, 233-4. See also Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530-1645* (Oxford: The University Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 265. Hudson says that it was written in the early part of 1390 and that even though it is of English origin, the thirteen copies which exist today were written on the continent, most which were produced by the Hussites. This would explain Luther's believing that the commentary originated on the Continent. His connection with the commentary is that he wrote a preface to it.



be incomplete without any reference to Lollard sermons.<sup>4</sup> Sermons can provide information about the movement's apocalyptic teachings and how important apocalyptic ideas were in the minds of its reform-minded sympathizers—at least in the minds of its writers and preachers, readers and hearers.

Our study primarily focuses on available Lollard sermon literature in an effort to buttress the argument that Lollard sermons and preaching cannot be ignored in a discussion about what influenced English Protestant apocalyptic thought of the sixteenth century. An examination of sermon literature, however, would not be complete without considering the questions of diffusion and to what extent Lollard teachings and sermons were diffused in England. This is done in a section devoted to the methods of dissemination. In a final section, the similarities between Lollard and English Protestant apocalypticism are examined.

But before we begin our treatment of Lollard sermons, it is helpful to take a look at the situation in England which gave rise to Lollardy and its apocalyptic teachings. Why was apocalypticism on the minds of the Lollards in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? What events or circumstances precipitated the appearance of Lollardy and Lollard apocalypticism? Who were the Lollards?

### **The Need for Reform**

Before the latter part of the fourteenth century, heretical movements had been largely unheard of in England. In spite of the close contact England maintained with Europe in terms of trade, culture, and the church, England remained immune from the diseases of dissidence found

---

<sup>4</sup> Roy M. Haines, "'Wilde Wittes and Wilfulnes': John Swetstock's Attack on Those 'Poyswunmongeres,' the Lollards" in *Studies in Church History*, ed. by G. J. Cuming and Derek Baker (Cambridge: The University Press, 1972), 143-4. Haines mentions Owst's criticism of James Gairdner's failure to examine Lollard sermon literature in his four-volume work on Lollardy. A study of Lollardy is not complete without looking at the sermon literature.



in pockets on the continent. Heresy from Europe made few inroads in England. Moreover, there were no indigenous heresies to speak of previous to Wycliffe's stand against the abuses of the church in England.<sup>5</sup>

One reason for this could have been the control the ruler of the state exercised over the church. On the Continent, the church fought more aggressively to hold its own in matters where it perceived its authority was threatened by secular rulers. Problems often arose in connection with appointments which led to abuse and the call for reform. However, in England for example, the controversy over investiture ended in victory for the king, who retained the power to make appointments to high ecclesiastical office. Without violence or scandal, the church gave in to the king who usually adhered to a fair standard when making appointments, thus avoiding the outcry often heard in continental Europe.<sup>6</sup>

The king could not ignore the massive property holdings of the church—roughly a third of the land by the close of the Middle Ages. Since the government needed money to carry out the administration of the kingdom, the Church could not be exempt from contributing to the state's coffers. Therefore the king had to ensure that trustworthy and loyal persons were appointed to high ecclesiastical positions. It was not until the ascendancy of more powerful English kings in the fourteenth century that the church agreed to such terms. Moreover, the papal schism further eroded the pope's power and influence in England.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason for the absence of heresy in England prior to Wycliffe was that the government was on guard against any heresy that might come from the Continent. The Cathars were arrested and sentenced under Henry II, and the Franciscan missionaries who arrived in the 1220s were required to demonstrate their commitment to orthodoxy. Even merchants from

---

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1977 and 1992), 225.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 3. .



France failed to escape the scrutinizing eye of the government since they might be purveyors of heretical beliefs.<sup>8</sup> The government took these necessary precautions to preserve within its realm peace and order, two essential components in maintaining its hegemony over the state and the church.

However, in spite of these measures taken by the government, the situation in the church became progressively worse due to several factors. With the decline of the influence of the friars, there was no religious movement to move in and pick up where the friars had left off. Formal worship simply did not meet the religious demands of the people who found the popular style of the friars much easier to swallow.<sup>9</sup> Monks and clergy exacerbated problems by resenting the friars for collecting money which they thought rightfully belonged to them. This gave the impression to many people that tithes were the most important commodity in the church, and that that was the only thing which concerned priests and monks.

The strain of war created tension within society. An undue portion of the taxes fell on the people to support the war against the French, while the church continued to receive large endowments. The people waged protests against the wealth and pride of the clergy, sometimes in the form of rebellion and uprisings such as the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Inept government failed in its policies, thus clearing the way for extremism.

The rise in literacy and the appearance of literature in the vernacular contributed to the growing mood of dissent within the church.<sup>10</sup> Religious treatises and pamphlets were in greater circulation, reaching a larger segment of the population than in previous centuries. Perhaps this was due to an increase of interest on part of the laity in ecclesiastical affairs. Spiritual and

---

<sup>8</sup> Lambert, 226.

<sup>9</sup> Rex, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984), 193.



devotional literature encouraged piety and heart-felt devotion to Christ. As people began to take a more personal interest in their spiritual lives, they began to see that the practices of the clergy were inconsistent with biblical practices extolled in devotional literature.<sup>11</sup>

The clergy derived its power from the authority of being able to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. It could also perform masses on behalf of both the living and the dead for the forgiveness of sins. This eventually led the clergy to abuse the masses by exploiting them as a means of fundraising for the church. Moreover, a magical power was ascribed to the sacrament and the masses which led to idolatry. With the help of men such as Wycliffe, the people began to see through the erroneous practices of the clergy.

It was these reasons that caused the skepticism and growing dissatisfaction with the church, paving the way for the Lollards. The very name "Lollard" comes from *lollium*, a tare, which contemporaries applied to the sect. However, it was used in Flanders early in the fourteenth century to mean "hypocrite." Some say the word is a derivation from *lollen*, "to sing softly," or from Walter Lollardus, who spread Wycliffite teachings on the Continent.<sup>12</sup> Others think it is associated with "lolling" the tongue and its connection with "stupidity."<sup>13</sup> It was first used to refer to the Wycliffites in 1382 when the Cistercian Henry Crumpe applied the name to them at Oxford. The name was found in episcopal documents in 1387 and 1389 and soon thereafter came to be used quite regularly in a pejorative sense.<sup>14</sup> The Lollards' harsh criticism of the church and the call to reform earned them the scorn of the religious establishment which reflected this sentiment in the name it gave to them.

---

<sup>11</sup> Rex, 12.

<sup>12</sup> J. C. Carrick, *Wycliffe and the Lollards* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 199.

<sup>13</sup> Rex, xii in the introduction.

<sup>14</sup> Aston, 1. See the footnote on that page.



## Lollard Treatises

The Lollards were outspoken critics of the church and the clergy, aiming their attacks against the abuses of the priesthood in treatises and sermons.<sup>15</sup> A prime example of this can be seen in a writing entitled *Duty of the Priesthood*, in which the Lollard author says that priests ought to emulate the poverty of the Apostles and forsake the pecuniary benefits their office brings them. The main task of priests should be to preach the gospel, as did the seventy-two who were commissioned by Christ in the Gospel of Luke. The author cites the example of Peter's humble lifestyle and quotes the story of Cornelius<sup>16</sup> as an example for the priests to follow. He condemns the practice of simony, claiming that Christ taught openly against this practice.

The friars also do not escape the author's judgment. They preach out of greed and avarice, deceiving the people with their heresies and fables, only to collect money afterward for their sermons. The people should not tolerate such falsehood from the Antichrist, and prelates should stand against them in order to prevent the falsehoods of the friars from growing. The friars ought to emulate the example of the Apostle Paul who taught that a preacher ought to preach without asking for money.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Power of the Pope* addressed to "Christian men," the author challenges the primacy of the pope. Other bishops have more power granted them from God just as Paul had more power than Peter concerning the edification of the church. The appointed pope could be the Antichrist,

---

<sup>15</sup> Michael Wilks, "Royal Priesthood: the Origins of Lollardy," in *The Church in a Changing Society* (CIHEC Conference in Uppsala, 1977), 63-70. Wilks claims that the Lollard movement was a court-centered movement beginning with Wycliffe, the organizer of the movement. The movement at first was officially sanctioned. Anne Hudson maintains that the Lollard movement was of university provenance and not founded by uneducated fanatics. Some of the Lollards were men of letters, which helps to explain the spread of literacy through the publishing of their own books and other literary forms. "*Laicus Litteratus: The Paradox of Lollardy*," in *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*, ed. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 222-236.

<sup>16</sup> *The Duty of the Priesthood in Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 121. "We schulden thenke hou Petir lyuede whanne Cornelius sente afir him, how symple he was fed and herborid, and hou he answerde. But now freris reuersen Petir and multiplen newe lawis and persoonen of their ordris, hauynge more than Petir hadde."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-21.



Satan transfigured into an angel of light. Since the pope is a heretic because of his open support for simony, and because of the general dissension against him in the church, he could be the very Antichrist spoken of in Revelation. There are others more worthy, more virtuous in word and deed than the bishop of Rome. The author cites the example of the bishop of Lincoln, Robert Grosthead, who is worthy of the honor of his office. But the pope is an unbeliever who will not be saved from eternal damnation. Therefore, men are warned to beware of the pope who stands outside the church, unworthy to be a part of her.<sup>18</sup>

From this passage it is evident that the author is linking the church of his day with the time of the Antichrist portrayed in Revelation. He even says that the time set in John's Revelation has come to pass, for the pope is acting contrary to Christ. According to the author, Rome has turned away from the Scriptures and instead relies on its own pride. Rome's faith is dead because it fails to bear the fruits of good works. Moreover, the pope disseminates error which accompanies the last times. The pope's actions are a fulfillment of II Thessalonians 2:11-12 and Revelation 20:7. Satan is unbound, permitted to deceive many people. The church is experiencing this now.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, in this treatise the author is not pleading for a violent expulsion of the pope.<sup>20</sup> The evil in the Church in the person of the pope has reached apocalyptic proportions, fulfilling the prophecies of Paul and John. Yet the author leaves out any mention of reform or a plan of action to be taken by Christians in order to rid the church of an evil pope. Instead, the author warns that the pope is the Antichrist, a companion of Satan of whom men should beware. Even the pope's seemingly legitimate election deserves investigation, for he could have procured

---

<sup>18</sup> *Power of the Pope*, Ibid., 125-26.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Dean Smeeton, *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale* (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1986), 29-30. The Lollards attempted to restore the church to its original purity in the first three centuries of its existence without overthrowing the church or setting up their own.



his office through simony or may have been elected by false cardinals. Therefore men ought to put their faith in God's Word and not in the pope who does not belong to the church. Only the Bible is a trustworthy guide in spiritual matters.

It is noteworthy that the author encourages his readers to rely on Scripture alone, to turn away from the tradition and authority of the visible church. He seems to suggest that the papacy is beyond salvaging. It is too corrupt. Only those who believe and demonstrate their faith in word and deed comprise the real membership of the church. The temporal church is so ridden with heresy that it is best to trust in the uncontaminated Word of God. The reform that the author alludes to is personal in nature, for the institutional church is beyond repair. He concentrates on transforming the minds of his readers.

This is not to say that the author opposes reform in the leadership of the church or wishes to let the present state of the church run its course. Had he been apathetic about the abuses in the church, he would not have taken the effort to address them in his writings. However, his main emphasis is on the reforming power of the Scriptures. The only way a transformation of character and enlightenment of mind can come about is if the people return to the Scriptures for a perfect example of how the church and its members reflect their faith in Christ. The author simply reflects the Lollard emphasis on the Bible.

The Lollards expressed their discontent with the church in treatises as we have just seen. But how much did John Wycliffe influence their attitude and aid in the spread of Lollardy? The extent to which John Wycliffe directly aided the proliferation of Lollardy among the English is uncertain.<sup>21</sup> It is true, however, that he influenced several academicians at Oxford and wrote treatises and sermons in Latin which the Lollards embraced and diffused through their preaching.

---

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, vol. 2 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 559. Wycliffe did not found Lollardy as a movement. Of course, his teachings made an impact on the Lollards.



Wycliffe himself did not send out preachers even though he mentions the “poor men” who preached his doctrines. Some, like Lambert, argue that, had Wycliffe himself encouraged these men to preach, his parish in Lutterworth would have been a center of Lollardy, but this is not borne out by any evidence.<sup>22</sup> These men propagated his teaching among the country folk and in the provincial towns.

At first, several academically trained men at Oxford--Nicholas Hereford, John Repton and John Aston--gravitated toward the teachings of Wycliffe who was influential at Oxford. Priests as well were attracted to the movement and most likely preached his teachings. In the *Duty of the Priesthood*, Wycliffe states that one of the foremost functions of a priest is to preach, a command which the Lord Himself gave. As the movement grew, lay evangelists joined its ranks, further spreading its teachings among the laity.

The church and the state began to act against the movement in 1382. In that year a council took place in London where Archbishop Courtenay condemned some of Wycliffe's teachings contained in the *Thirty-Seven Conclusions*.<sup>23</sup> Although hardly anything was done against Wycliffe himself, steps were taken to purge the university of Wycliffite teaching. The leading Wycliffites--Nicholas Hereford, Philip Repton, John Aston, and John Purvey--had to appear before the archbishop. Repton and Aston repudiated the teachings of Wycliffe. Repton went on eventually to become Abbot of Leicester, Bishop of Lincoln, and a cardinal, while Aston returned to the preaching of Lollardy. Nicholas Hereford, who had been more of an extremist than Wycliffe, preached Lollardy in the West, but later renounced the movement and died a Carthusian. Purvey recanted but later took up the cause of Lollardy again until his death. However, in spite of the punitive measures taken by the church and the state at Oxford, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Lambert, 241.

<sup>23</sup> In *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson.

movement continued to grow as a result of the zeal of the Lollard preachers, the profuse literary activity of Wycliffe himself, and the troubled conditions of the time. In the fifteenth century, the church and state took additional measures to suppress Lollardy, one such measure being execution. But this too had little effect on preventing the spread of the movement.<sup>24</sup>

The Lollards expressed concerns over the abuses and false teachings of the church.<sup>25</sup> This led them to paint a picture of the church in apocalyptic imagery in an attempt to incite reform.<sup>26</sup> This is best illustrated in some of their sermons, of which about three hundred have survived. In them the reader comes across apocalyptic and eschatological phrases and words such as “day of doom,” “heaven,” “hell,” “tribulations,” “persecution,” “antichrist,” “devil,” and others, all of which are meant to cause the reader to think about how he is conducting his life and to move him to amend his ways.

The reform encouraged through apocalyptic preaching was not aimed only at the church or at the pope, the Antichrist.<sup>27</sup> Lollard sermons addressed the individual as well. The individual had to reform his life through repentance and vigilance, spurred on by the imminent end. This is especially seen in Lollard sermons.

### **A Collection of Lollard Sermons**

The group of Lollard sermons to be examined for their apocalyptic and eschatological content belongs to a sermon cycle comprised of 294 sermons broken down into five sets or divisions. These sermons were first printed in 1869-71 by Thomas Arnold. Anne Hudson

---

<sup>24</sup> Lambert, 243-246.

<sup>25</sup> For a complete listing of the abuses see Anne Hudson, *Twelve Conclusions* in *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*.

<sup>26</sup> Leff, 602. He maintains that apocalypticism made its way into Lollardy.

<sup>27</sup> Bostick, 143. Bostock says, “Lollard sermons attest to the intent to communicate to audiences a shrewd view of the Antichrist, complete with documentation how it has corrupted church and society.” Bostock, however, fails to explain why this is important and what the Lollards intended to accomplish by making the claim that the pope was the Antichrist.



collated all of the known manuscripts containing these sermons and published her own edition.<sup>28</sup> Eleven of the manuscripts contain all 294 sermons; other manuscripts are missing some of the sermons of the cycle.<sup>29</sup> This suggests that the plan of the sermon cycle was thought out as a whole, but this does not mean that one person necessarily authored all of the sermons. The sermons were simply tailored to fit the cycle.

To date, thirty-one manuscripts which contain sermons belonging to the cycle have been discovered. Unfortunately, their history and ownership are obscure.<sup>30</sup> It should be mentioned that there are derivative manuscripts in which some of the sermons of the cycle are present. When Lollard sermon manuscripts fell into the hands of the authorities, they were most likely destroyed. However, in less extreme cases, the authorities may have demanded that all heretical content simply be expurgated from the sermons. Manuscripts (derivative manuscripts) exist in which both these altered sermons and sermons from the cycle are found together.<sup>31</sup>

Scholars disagree over the date of composition. In all likelihood, the sermons were written sometime during the end of the fourteenth century. They bear a resemblance to the thought contained in the Latin works of Wycliffe and make reference to historical events which can be dated. Of course, an exact dating of all the sermons is impossible since many of Wycliffe's works cannot be dated with pinpoint accuracy. It has been suggested that these sermons are simply English translations of Wycliffe's Latin sermons, yet the English sermons do not harmonize with the Latin texts from which they were apparently translated. The sermons, however, do resemble the content of the commentary, *Opus arduum*, on the Apocalypse. This

---

<sup>28</sup> Arnold's work is *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1869-71).

<sup>29</sup> Anne Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 44. Also, for a complete textual explanation on the organization of the sermons, see pp. 8-50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

commentary has been dated 1389-90. Therefore some scholars date the composition of the sermons around that date also.<sup>32</sup>

Scholars from the fifteenth century on have suggested a few names of possible authors, John Wycliffe and John Purvey, Wycliffe's secretary, being the two most favored. Some manuscripts have Wycliffe's name attached, probably inserted by a scribe. John Purvey's *Confescio* of 1401 was found among short extracts from the sermons, which led some scholars to draw the conclusion that Purvey must have authored them. However, the extracts themselves omit any direct indication of the author. The hypothesis that Purvey wrote the sermons remains unproven.

During the Reformation, Wycliffe was held to be the author. Wycliffe himself had stated that he had written certain works in English, especially sermons. Moreover, his call for a translation of the Bible into English tended to support such a view. But again, it is impossible to prove the origin of the sermons at the hand of Wycliffe. Current scholarship maintains that the authorship of the sermons should remain anonymous since there simply is not enough evidence to warrant the assertion that either Wycliffe or Purvey composed the sermons.<sup>33</sup>

Were the sermons composed by a single author or were others involved as well? This is the next question which arises pertaining to the composition of the sermons. Evidence seems to suggest several authors. Discrepancies between repeated translations of texts from the Vulgate offer the best evidence in favor of multiple authors. But it is possible that one author wrote the sermons over a significant period of time. Many of the sermons in Set 4 are extremely short. It could be that the author started them, adding things as he went along, with the ultimate intention

---

<sup>32</sup> Hudson and Gradon, vol. 4: 10-11, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., vol. 4: 20-31.



of finishing them at a later time.<sup>34</sup> However, no matter who the author or authors were, it is evident that they were educated and familiar with theological resources such as commentaries.

The next consideration is audience. The brevity of the sermons leads one to think that they served as a guide for the preacher. This is one possible suggestion. Since some of them resemble short devotions which the preacher could have expanded for preaching purposes, they were probably meant more for private reading than for preaching before an audience. It has also been suggested that the sermons were to be read sequentially on an ongoing basis. Hudson claims that the phrase “as the nexste byfore” in the sermons is an allusion to such a practice.<sup>35</sup>

The main audience, however, for which these sermons were intended was the laity. The sermons lack longwinded, convoluted elaborations on Christian doctrine, and the structure of the sermons is simple. The author is more concerned about explicating the biblical text than presenting a systematic theology. Since the Lollards regarded the Bible as the most trustworthy guide in life, they devoted much literature to its explication. One could classify the sermons as homilies, expositions of scriptural texts on practical daily living and piety.

### **Apocalyptic Themes**

We come now to the actual sermons themselves. The first sermon which we wish to examine is Advent Sermon 27 from Set 1 (consisting of 54 sermons in all) in the sermon cycle. In Advent Sermon 27, which is based on the passage of Luke 21:25-33, the author underscores the second coming of Christ.<sup>36</sup> He opens with, “This gospel telluth derkly a prophesie of Crist,

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 33-4.

<sup>36</sup> The Lollards noted three advents of Christ: Christ’s coming into this world through the virgin birth, His entry into Jerusalem in order to be crucified, and His coming at the end of time. My usage of the term “second coming” above refers to Christ’s coming at the end of time.

how hit schal be in this chirche byfore the day of doom.”<sup>37</sup> There will be signs in the sky which point to Christ’s return. In the day of His coming from heaven with His holy angels, Christ will take the faithful with him to heaven. Therefore the faithful should not fear that day but should rejoice that they will be freed from the pain of this earthly prison to experience the promised bliss of heaven. The enemies of Christ will be free for a time to commit sin, but then they will be cast away from His presence forever: “And membris of the feend ben drye fro grace, and ben adredde for Crist and sentence of his chirche.”<sup>38</sup>

The advent of Christ is sure to come. This promise rests on the word of the Scriptures. But this does not mitigate the preacher’s concern for the chosen during the terrible events which will precede Christ’s coming. He expresses his care for those chosen by God by wishing that none should perish but “floter in the see.”<sup>39</sup> He exhorts his listeners to be ready for the coming of the Lord because it often happens that men give up their belief in God for the things of this world. But Christ is sure to come to judge the world, and that is why He sent prophets to warn mankind about the “Day of Doom.” Since the day of Christ’s coming remains a mystery, people then ought to ready themselves for that great and terrible day by doing works of charity.

The sermon makes no mention of the pope as Antichrist or of clerics and priests propagating false teachings. Instead, the sermon is directed at the individual rather than at the institutional church. The preacher calls for reform in the life of the individual. One ought to observe the figurative signs of the sun, moon and stars: the sun represents Christ, the moon is the holy church and the stars are the saints in the world. These signs are significant in changing the will of men and in indicating the coming of doom. Those who fail to prepare themselves will be cut off from God. What Christ has ordained will surely come to pass.

---

<sup>37</sup>*Sermon 27*, ed. Anne Hudson, vol. 1: 330-331.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>39</sup> Most likely an allusion to Noah’s salvation.



The themes of repentance and the call to a sanctified life comprise the central message in this sermon. The author intends to evoke contrition in his listeners by stressing the period of the end times. The listeners are warned of the consequences of their actions should they fail to produce the fruits of a godly life by not heeding the words of Christ. The preacher omits any reference to the evil conditions in the church.

The second coming of Christ figures prominently in Sermon 28 based on Matthew 11:2-10: "This gospel telluth a story of Iohn Baptist, that touchith alle thre aduentis of Crist but specially the thridde, to whom seruen two byfore."<sup>40</sup> It was John who prepared the way for Christ's coming by preaching a message of repentance. He confessed that he himself was not the Christ, but instead "meuede men to trowen in Crist manye gaatis."<sup>41</sup>

The preacher speaks about how the clerics of John's day did not live after the manner of John. Instead, they lusted after food and costly attire. They accused John of having a demon and Christ of being a friend of sinners. The preacher then compares the clerics of his day to the clerical Jews who refused to live according to the manner of John and Jesus. Clerics follow the devil and lack virtue in their lives. They forsake Christ, adhering to the teachings of the Antichrist as he is taught by the devil. "For these ypocrihtes leuen Crist and Iohn Baptist his prophete, and chesun hem a new weye that mut ofte tymes be clowtid, and be dispensed with by antecrist, as the feend techuth hem."<sup>42</sup> (From the context it is apparent that the preacher is equating the Antichrist with the pope.) The preacher accuses the clerics of being hypocrites who live on alms and dwell among kings and lords in order to receive benefices. They are blind guides who lead the blind, causing both to fall into the lake of fire. They follow Peter (the pope) in his errors. The preacher accuses them of being "satan" (sathanus), for they pervert the truth of

---

<sup>40</sup> *Sermon 28*, vol. 1: 335.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

Christ by adding to His law superfluous man made rules which men must bear. They conveniently subtract from Christ's law that which they find too onerous to keep.

The preacher points out the abuses of the clerics of his time, calling them "satan." "Antichrist" is a reference to the pope. Through the use of these terms the preacher alerts his listeners to the wiles of the blind guides of the church who are destined to "the deppuste lake of alle." If they follow these blind guides, they too will end up in hell. The idea of reform is implicit in that one should cease following the clerics and the pope in order to avoid eternal punishment, and instead, lead a life of piety grounded in the teachings of Christ and John the Baptist.

Sermon 17 based on Matthew 24:3-13 under the "Communion of Saints" section (set 2, comprised of 31 sermons in all) elaborates on the persecution that Christians will endure in the latter days for being faithful to Christ and His law. The prelates, however, have become too preoccupied with civil and canon law. They covet this knowledge more than they do the love of Christ and neglect His law. What Christ foretold in Matthew 24 has truly come to pass in the church. The prelates and the monks have twisted the knowledge of God to their own destruction.

The preacher accuses the pope of being a hypocrite because he declares himself the Holy Father and a friend of Christ even though he does not love Christ. But his hypocrisies will cease upon his death. The pope has caused much dissension in the church, never before witnessed in the church since the birth of Christ. Wars and fighting are a result of his wickedness. Each land takes sides and fights for its pope.<sup>43</sup> And who is it that causes such strife but the pope who is the Antichrist? If it were not for his meddling in secular affairs, God would grant peace in Christendom.

The preacher also blames the priests for the trouble witnessed in the church. They should stick to the business of preaching as God has commanded them and withdraw from taking part in

---

<sup>43</sup> A reference to the papal schism.



secular affairs. Both the pope and the priests are acting contrary to God's law by intervening in matters that concern kings and lords who have been appointed by God to rule.

The schism is one of the manifestations of trouble during the tribulation. "And heere it semeth to monye men that Crist spac of this tyme in which these two popis fihton thus togydere; for sith Crist is alwyttý, and loueth wel his chirche, and telluth in Apocalipse of monye lasse perelus, why schulde he not tellon of this, that is so perelows?"<sup>44</sup> In Matthew 24 Christ says that there will be great tribulation on the earth like never before. The preacher adds that the bodily torment experienced during the tribulation is evident now, manifest in the acts of the popes who "sendith byschopus and monye men to sle monye men, wymmen, and children."<sup>45</sup> Both popes deserve to be thrown into hell. They ignore the reproof of Christ who told Peter to put away his sword. Christ was the good shepherd who gave up His life for His many sheep, but the popes do just the opposite, giving up many others to death for the sake of their pitiful cause. They are the Antichrist: "And so of byleue he is antichrist that putteth mony thowsynde lyues for his owne fowl lihþ; and howeuere anticrist speke here, it is opon by Cristus lawe that men schulde not fihte thus, ne for such a cause."<sup>46</sup> If the popes, the sons of perdition, are damned, then the men who fight for them are fighting for the cause of the devil. The popes act as if they have more power than Christ. They fail to emulate the life of Christ and persecute those who adhere to the "old byleue." This too is a sign of the great tribulation.

The preacher says that in spite of the persecution that is happening in the church, God will save His chosen ones. The days of tribulation have been shortened on account of the elect. But in the meantime, before Christ's coming and the end of suffering, there is the opportunity to preach the Gospel in the world, the one thing the world needs most: "For men that ben chosone

---

<sup>44</sup> *Sermon 17*, ed. by Pamela Gradon, vol. 2: 91.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

vnto blisse of heuene other men that han tyme to expoune this capitle and ben tawte of God and meuyde for to tellon it, and specially hif thei seen the dede acorde with the speche, may telle more of Cristus wordis heere.”<sup>47</sup>

The tribulation is a stimulus, stirring the individual to reform his life. In the sermon, the focus is not on changing the pope or the church over which he presides. Rather, one is exhorted to trust in the old faith as revealed in Christ’s Word. Reform then connotes a life of trust in Christ toward which every person should strive.

Sermon 19 from the same set of sermons also expounds on the first thirteen verses of chapter 24 in the Gospel of Matthew. The disciples inquired of Jesus the time when the day of tribulation would come. But Christ revealed to them neither the day nor the hour lest they sleep in sin. It was from this that Christ wished to rescue them: “For men schuld on euermore wake, and kepe hem from perele of synne, sith thei wyte neuere whanne God schal come, so that whanne he come, he fynde hem redye to take iugement of God.”<sup>48</sup> God will come when it pleases Him. The concern of men, then, should be not the time of Christ’s return but reforming their lives in order to be ready for the Day of Judgment. But men transgress the first commandment by not forsaking their sin and running after the things of this world, believing that there is yet enough time to repent. This is a dangerous way to live, for only God knows the exact time of judgment. However, even though God has hidden this from men, He has revealed His law so that they might know how to live.

Prelates sin in that they think they are all-knowing. God has blessed them with knowledge, yet they misuse this wonderful treasure for their own self-interests. If they would read the Scripture, they would realize how wrong they are in acting as they do. At this point in

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>48</sup> *Sermon 19*, Ibid., 101.



the sermon, the preacher calls on prelates to examine themselves daily and to reform their lives if they are not in accordance with God's law: "And thus schuldon alle men, but algatis prelatis, ouerse ther state and ther lihf, wher it be acordyng to Godis lawe, or aftur costumys of the feend, and continue thing wel doon, and mende that is amys."<sup>49</sup>

The "high priests" should especially fear the judgment of God, for God will punish them if they neglect their duties. God will bring them into judgment for causing many to go astray. They should seriously consider their actions, for they cannot avoid the reckoning of God. This should lead them to tend God's sheep and forsake themselves, for this is most beneficial to the church. God's judgment is coming; therefore both the church and her members must be prepared.

Sermon 21 based on Mark 13:1-13 speaks to the unchristian conduct of the two popes, the perpetrators of the schism. The popes must conduct themselves according to the life of the Apostles in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Priests and bishops should extricate themselves from the fighting and not take sides since such conduct is inappropriate for their office. The preacher says the popes ought to submit humbly to the emperor and abjure any claim to secular power. They should emulate the humble lives of Peter and Paul.

The days which precede the Day of Doom will be filled with wars. Nations will rise up against other nations. According to the preacher, this is already happening in Cristendom: "*Folc schal ryse agenys folc*, as Sarazenus agenys Latynus, *and rewme agenys rewme*, as Englonde agenys Fraunce."<sup>50</sup> Amidst this tribulation the church should be reformed. Laity and clerics alike should collaborate in helping the church during these difficult times. Reform should begin with the church at Rome, since it is the pope who has caused all the troubles in Cristendom:

But here men seyn, sith this wrong is brode spred in Cristendam, and Goddus hoost schulde be myhty to do this dede agenys the feend, in monye placis schuldon men

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>50</sup> Sermon 21, Ibid., 112.

worche on this weyge to helpe ther modyr. But sith the nest and heed herof ys at Rome, where it bygan, it semeth to monye men that at Rome schulde this rygtyng bygynne; and so schulde this hed be stoppud to feyne censurus agenys God.”<sup>51</sup>

The Antichrist (pope) would become impotent if riches and worldly lordship were taken away from him, and God’s Word would not be despised as it is now.

Clerics are commanded to help in God’s cause and so enter into heaven. By doing so, they might draw many with them. But as it stands now, clerics are headed for hell, and by their actions cause others to head that way as well. The preacher turns his attention to the friars who should also help in God’s cause instead of lusting with their whole hearts after temporal goods. They should teach faith in Christ as they have been commissioned to do.

The pope is compared with the devil. Paradoxically, the preacher says that if it were possible, men should obey the pope as people obeyed Peter. But that is impossible now because rendering any obedience to the pope is tantamount to obeying the devil. Thus men should be aware of the false teachings of the pope and his minions, the friars.<sup>52</sup>

The sermon addresses the need for reform in the church, especially among the leaders who mislead the people. The pope and priests are most responsible for this and consequently are bound for hell. But perhaps the fear of hell and God’s judgment will cause them to turn from their wicked ways.

The Parable of the Five Talents (Matthew 25:14-23) in Sermon 23 is dedicated to the “Day of Reckoning.” From the beginning of the world God has desired that His servants should strive for heaven. This they do in their pilgrimage here on earth, using what God has given them for His glory. They know that they will have to give an account of their lives on the Day of Judgment.

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 116.



The first two servants in the parable are faithful with what God has given them, but the third one is not. He neglects to do good works, putting his mind to the ways of the world instead. He fails to understand that this does not profit his salvation, the church, or even himself. Even though God has given him one talent, this unfaithful servant has everything he needs to sustain himself in this life, all to the glory of God. But he sits on the treasure he has received.

This is similar to what the prelates do. "And by this [they] cause men supposon that monye prelates of the chyrche huydon Godus tresour in the erthe, to ther owne dampnacion."<sup>53</sup> On the last day Christ will say to His faithful servants, "Well done," but to the unfaithful servant he will say, "Of thi mowth I iuge the, for thow schuldist haue this konnyng, and loue theraftur by thi staat."<sup>54</sup> The preacher calls the prelates the servants of the devil. They will be punished forever in hell.

Men are encouraged to be awake at Christ's coming. Even now they should be awake in doing works of charity. In Sermon 25, on the pericope of Mark 13:33-37, the preacher opens with the sentence that all men, especially bishops, should remain alert while they are still alive and Christ has not yet returned. Since Christ loves His church, He has placed priests and bishops in her to govern her and instruct the souls under her care. "For this cause he chargeth most, sith he loueth more his chirche than ony o persone therof, and bad alle to worschipe this modur, bothe in the oolde lawe and in the newe."<sup>55</sup> In these duties the priests and bishops ought to serve faithfully, for there is no greater honor than being bound to the church in such service. They must be vigilant in carrying out the work which the Lord has entrusted to them: "And so alle the goodis of this world hath he put in mennys hondus, but specially in prelatus hondus, whom he

---

<sup>53</sup> *Sermon 23, Ibid., 128.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Sermon 25, Ibid., 140.*

bydduth kepe his chyrche and specially sowlus, that thei schulden kepe and teche hem by Godus lawe.”<sup>56</sup>

No man knows when he will die or when Christ will return; therefore Christ bids everyone to be awake. If one hopes to be saved, he must awake from sinning so as not to be found asleep. Reform consists of living by God’s word and rising from the sleep of sin, for a terrible judgment awaits those whom the Lord finds sleeping: “For the trompe schal waken vs, othur to blisse or to peyne. And this Lord schal dampne alle tho that he schal thanne fynde slepynge; for eche man that schal be sauwd schal be clene at the day of dom.”<sup>57</sup>

Sermon 31, entitled *Common of a Virgin not a Martyr*, was composed in honor of two feasts: The Virgin not a Martyr and the Feast of Many Virgins (a reference to the parable of the Ten Virgins). The preacher says that “it telluth the state of the chyrche bothe now and at the day of doom; and specially by this part that schulde qwykene the tothur half.”<sup>58</sup> The church and the individual should concentrate on reforming their spirits, for the church is comprised of both the visible and invisible just as a person is composed of both a body and a soul. The spiritual or the invisible is more worthy than the visible; therefore more attention ought to be devoted to its nurture.

In Matthew 25:1-13, the ten virgins are those that are spiritual, just as the priests and others in the church are considered to be. The virgins are divided into two groups of five: the foolish and the wise. The five foolish ones will be damned to hell forever, whereas the five wise ones will be in heaven without end, no longer among the company of hypocrites. The oil of the virgins symbolizes right devotion to God which prepares them for heavenly bliss. The vessels of the virgins are their souls which contain the oil, and the lamps are the good works of the virgins.

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>58</sup> *Sermon 31*, Ibid., 173.



Those on earth who have this same oil perform works of charity and center their thoughts on God. Even tribulation seems light to them. They endure the sufferings of this world as Christ did for the sake of mankind. All good works and sufferings should help one reach one goal: to be prepared for the coming of Christ. "For al oure traueyle here in erthe schulde be don for this ende; to mete with Crist and his chyrche rihtly at the day of doom."<sup>59</sup>

However, the popes, as well as the cardinals and bishops, seek their own glory, desiring to have much worldly power and to be worshipped in this world. Curates take benefices for these very reasons. Priests serve only to receive money. Monks think of their bellies while friars lust after women. On the outside it appears as if the friars are holy and righteous, but instead they are "foule putis," void of the oil of good works. The preacher warns men to be aware of this hypocrisy. Strive to have the oil of good works at Judgment Day: "So it is to dreede to monye that ben pore and lyuon chaste, that thei schal at the day of doom wanton oyle in ther laumpus."<sup>60</sup>

In the middle of the night the "laste dom" will come, unbeknown to men. God has also hidden from their knowledge their eternal destiny, whether it be in heaven or in hell. The angels will give the cry of warning; the trumpet will sound. "This cry is warnyng of aungelus, that schal be to this day that Poule clepuh the laste trompe, and somme Gabriellus horn."<sup>61</sup> This will precede Christ's triumphant appearance with His bride, the church. At that time both the saved and the damned will rise from the dead to answer for the deeds they have done on earth. Christ will take the righteous unto Himself and will damn the fools--the hypocrites--who failed to honor Him during their life.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 176.

On the Day of Judgment it will be too late for fools to change their ways. They should have lived rightly while they had the opportunity to do so on earth. As they see the saints in heavenly bliss, they will plead with Christ to take them to heaven. But Christ will not give heed to them. They will experience the pain of their weeping and the torment of hell forever.

In the closing sentence of the sermon, the preacher encourages personal reform to avoid punishment. And since no one knows when the day of the Lord will come, he should be awake now in this life. "And thus, as Crist concludeth ofte, alle maner of men schuldon wake, sith thei knowe not the day of doom, ne hour in whiche thei schal be deede."<sup>62</sup>

Sermon 6, one of the ferial sermons, or sermons preached on non-feast days, from Set 4 in the sermon collection, briefly speaks about the ministry of John the Baptist who prepared the way for Christ through his preaching and godly life. He took on his office for the sake of the people, unlike the two popes who think only of themselves. John came and "mouyde men to mekenesse and to thenke on the day of dom."<sup>63</sup> John prophesied that the valleys will be filled and the mountains brought low. This is how it will come to pass on the Day of Judgment.

The proud will be damned; the meek will be filled with eternal bliss. During the time of tribulation, some men will turn to righteousness because of the word which must be preached. The preacher seems to think that he himself is in the end times, for he says, "And this word shulde moue men to mekenesse and to leue pride; and so it is ful nedeful to preche nou as it was thanne."<sup>64</sup> Finally, on the last day all men will see Christ: "For at the laste day of dom shal Crist be thus seyn of al men."<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>63</sup> *Sermon 6*, ed. Anne Hudson, vol. 3:16.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



The preacher concludes with the remark that sermons such as this one are necessary to reform the hearts of men. Such sermons teach people the virtues by which to live while exhorting them to flee from sin. Apocalyptic language is meant to spur people on to good works in preparation for the "day of doom."

### **A Second Collection of Lollard Sermons**

Apocalyptic and eschatological themes are also found in a collection of Lollard sermons (sixteen sermons and the *Sermon of Dead Men*) edited by Gloria Cigman.<sup>66</sup> No one manuscript contains all sixteen sermons. The entire set of sermons, including the *Sermon of Dead Men*, is written in three different manuscripts.

It cannot be determined with any certainty who actually authored the sermons. The first manuscript, which contains the first twelve sermons, was probably written by two scribes sometime in the first half of the fifteenth century. A fifteenth century reader later made some corrections and inserted Latin headings, although the sermons are in the English vernacular.

Sometime in the fifteenth century the manuscript fell into the hands of the Mainwaring family in Ightfield, a village near the Shropshire/Cheshire border. Names of several members of the family appear in the manuscript. By the middle of the sixteenth century the manuscript was in the possession of John Mainwaring. Since he was rector of the church at Ightfield, it is conjectured that he had an interest in collecting the material. He also might have been the recipient of a letter from John Tenche, the curate of Wrenbury. This letter as well as others was

---

<sup>66</sup> *Lollard Sermons*, ed. Gloria Cigman, with a description of the manuscripts by Jeremy Griffiths and an analysis of the language by Jeremy Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

found in the binding of the manuscript. At any rate, the manuscript remained in the Mainwaring family until 1926.<sup>67</sup>

The second manuscript contains only the *Sermon of Dead Men*. It was most likely copied in the first half of the fifteenth century by one scribe. Additions in the form of annotations were inserted later by several people, possibly by a bishop and by one of the owners of the manuscript.<sup>68</sup>

The third manuscript contains sermons 8-16, 11a, and the *Sermon of Dead Men*. The authorship of the manuscript cannot be determined, but it is thought that only one scribe wrote the manuscript using an English script in the beginning of the fifteenth century. Corrections were added later by several unknown persons. The author made use of quotations in Latin to support his references in the sermons.<sup>69</sup>

All the sermons are based on texts from the Gospels and were written for days in the liturgical year. It is uncertain, however, as to whether they were composed as a whole for a cycle in the church year or were compiled into a collection. Based on internal evidence, it seems the latter was intended.<sup>70</sup> It is possible that there may have been more sermons in this particular cycle of sermons. For example, each Sunday in Advent and Lent has a sermon, whereas only one sermon was written for Epiphany. The lack of sermons for some parts of the church year suggests that there could have been more sermons.

Certain components within some of the sermons give an indication that these sermons were meant to be preached. At the end of eleven of the sermons the preacher concludes with a prayer, the culmination of his presentation. His use of the pronouns "I" and "you" suggests the

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Jeremy Griffiths, xi-xii, xv, xviii.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., xx-xxi.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., xxv.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., xliii.



presence of an audience. However, there is also evidence which indicates that parts of the sermons were not intended for a formal audience. Some of the material apparently served for personal edification or to guide the preacher in his preaching. Such sermons would have been particularly useful for itinerant preachers who had little education, yet desired to warn and save souls. In other words, these sermons could have been composed with the itinerant preacher in mind.<sup>71</sup>

The composer of the sermons must have been a learned person with theological resources at his disposal. He makes apt use of commentaries and ancient authorities, and demonstrates skill in selecting his material for the sermons. Some of the sermons exhibit a complex structure. The author makes extensive use of *exempla* which he takes from everyday life.<sup>72</sup> These tend to give a “lively” dimension to the sermons.

One sermon of particular interest for our discussion is an Advent sermon on Luke 21:25-33. The gospel lesson refers to the second coming of Christ in all His majesty. No one knows when that day will come except the Father Himself, who has kept this from the knowledge of men. Therefore the listener must not be negligent in living a holy life, asleep in sin, but rather be awake in virtue which will make him ready for that day which is sure to come. God wishes that no man should perish and for that very reason came to save mankind.

As the sun is above all of the planets, so is Christ Lord of all. That means any one who wishes to be saved must obey His law because it is above all other laws. Christ’s commandments are the light of heaven. Some people are misled, however, thinking that fasting or saying prayers or paying for many masses or building monasteries suffices to allow them entry into heaven. But

---

<sup>71</sup> See page xlv for the evidence.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., xlvii-xlviii.

this is not true. On the “last Dai of Dom,” the light will shine on their works and reveal them for what they really were, nothing.

The spiritual sick man in mortal sin who desires to reform his soul seeks the preaching of God’s Word: “So a gostli sike man in dedli synne that desireth gretli helthe of his soule, desireth gretli after crowyng of the cok (that is, after true prechyng of the word of God).”<sup>73</sup> And once he comes in contact with the Word, he rejoices, hoping in the grace that is offered.

The duty of the priesthood is to proclaim the coming of the Judge. Christ always sends messengers in advance to the place where He comes. But they are not always faithful. The preacher accuses the prelates, priests, and curates of being thieves, of trying to enter the door into Christ’s kingdom by another way. Instead of being faithful messengers, they engage in the practice of simony, which is darkness. They are hypocrites and invent worthless laws. Many of them are negligent in their duty to preach, being more concerned with their attire and their position before men. They are like clouds without water and an eclipse which blocks the light of Christ. As a result of the priests failing to preach the word, a spiritual pestilence comes upon the souls of men. But “the vnprofitable seruant [He] throweth into the vttermore derknessis, there schal be wepyng and gnaastyng of teeth.”<sup>74</sup>

By comparing the priests to the moon which will turn into blood--one of the signs spoken of in the Book of Revelation--the preacher is implying that such a sign has already drawn near. The moon turned into blood is the sinful life of the priests. On the last day Christ will command them to depart from Him because their hands are full of blood. They will be accused of the sins of pride, covetousness, and simony. It is the sin of simony that the priests commit the most often, and God loathes this sin most of all.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 16 in the regular text.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 20.



The preacher describes the conditions in the world which are occurring in his time and will happen shortly before the coming of the Lord. Kings flaunt their pride and oppress the people, depriving them of their bread. The great amount of land they own they use for themselves. They contrive false charges against their subjects in order to distort money from them, but a dreadful doom which is ordained by God will overtake them. This brings the preacher to the conclusion of his sermon, which is rich in apocalyptic imagery taken directly from Scripture:

As he [Christ] wente vp in a cloude, so schal he come agen to the dredful Doom, as the aungelis tolden the apostlis at his assencion . . . And 'in maieste': that is, in gret bryghtnesse, ful comfortable to his frendes and his derlingis . . . . That dai schal be a dai of wraththe, the dai of tribulacion and of anguische, the dai of chalenge and of wrecchidenesse, the dai of derknesse and of myiste, the dai of hye cloude and of whirlewynd, the dai of trumpe and of noise, vpon wardid citees and hie corneris.<sup>75</sup>

We come to the question: What do all of these Lollard sermons suggest? They indicate that apocalyptic and eschatological themes were common among Lollard preachers. The Lollards used such themes to instill reform in the lives of their followers and to encourage renewal in the Church. The sermons also show that apocalyptic and eschatological themes were present in England before any influence from the Continent in the sixteenth century. The consciousness of the people was filled with an apocalyptic understanding of the times in which they lived.

### **Diffusion of Lollardy**

Apocalyptic and eschatological themes are undeniably present in Lollard sermons, as demonstrated above. But the question which now must be answered is to what extent Lollard sermons were distributed throughout England. The mere existence of sermons should not lead

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 28.

one to the premature conclusion that they enjoyed a wide readership. Other factors must be considered as well.

In the fifteenth century, the Lollards became a smaller body with a clear sense of their mission. Ecclesiastical authorities had at times vehemently persecuted them, which further strengthened their resolve to propagate their beliefs and remain steadfast in them. With the break from the official church complete, the second generation of Lollards relied on their own reading and interpretation of the Scriptures for spiritual nourishment and support.

Wycliffe had preceded the Lollards in leaning only on the Scriptures for spiritual support. He more or less advocated the principle of Scripture alone, ascribing to the Scriptures the highest authority.<sup>76</sup> This explains why he avidly supported a translation into the vernacular and encouraged all people to read the Scriptures. Of course, he could have also encouraged the people to read the Scriptures to further his cause against the ruling ecclesiastical establishment of the church. If the people had a translation of the Bible which they could read and understand, he could easily muster their support. Moreover, the people then would be able to see for themselves how the pope was the Antichrist in a corrupt church and that the end of the world was just on the horizon.

In order to spread their beliefs, the Lollards carried out preaching campaigns. Preaching and not the repetition of the liturgy in a formal worship setting allowed them to vary their message which was a more effective means of diffusing their teachings.<sup>77</sup> Through preaching, spiritual knowledge was imparted to others. In a few of the sermons presented here, the preacher passed judgment on Catholic priests for failing to carry out their God-given obligation to preach the Word. The salvation of souls was at stake because of their negligence. If the priests did not

---

<sup>76</sup> Matthew Spinka, "John Wyclif, Advocate of Radical Reform" in *Advocates of Reform: From Wyclif to Erasmus*, ed. Matthew Spinka (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 26-7.

<sup>77</sup> Smeeton, 162-164.



preach, many people could be lost to hell. The Lollards took this seriously and so emphasized preaching.

The Lollards believed in the priesthood of all believers and therefore encouraged lay preaching, even the preaching of women. They looked down on the ordination of priests by bishops since every believer had the right from God to serve in a priestly capacity without the approval of men.<sup>78</sup> Lollard beliefs were disseminated through preaching and teaching by lay people, and the best way to accomplish this was through the medium of sermons.

During the first half of the fifteenth century the activity of the Lollards moved into sections of England that had at first been untouched by their teachings. The eastern part of the country became an important center for Lollardy in spite of some persecution by the ecclesiastical authorities. This measure caused many clergy to abjure their affection for Lollardy, turning Lollardy more into a lay movement.<sup>79</sup> This perhaps is another explanation for the emphasis on lay preaching, since clergy sympathetic to the movement gradually left its ranks.

There is one instance of a preacher leaving behind a copy of his sermon for his listeners to study afterward. This most likely was not the norm,<sup>80</sup> but it does provide an example of how Lollard teachings were diffused. Itinerant preachers making their circuit did not have a large amount of time to spend at one particular conventicle. When the time expired at a gathering, he simply left behind a sermon.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 50, 52. See also G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), 134. Owst maintains that this idea of lay preachers began with Wycliffe and not his Lollard followers.

<sup>79</sup> Leff, 598. Lollardy was also considered a political movement by its detractors. Yet Lollardy remained true to its theological teachings.

<sup>80</sup> There simply is not enough evidence to make the claim that leaving behind sermons was a common practice among the Lollards.

<sup>81</sup> Spencer, 43-4.

In addition to preaching, the Lollards realized the need for education. Their opponents accused them of spreading heretical views through small organized schools. Small groups of followers or sympathizers were gathered at a predetermined time and location for this very purpose.<sup>82</sup> At a convocation held in 1429, clerics voiced concern about the proliferation of Lollardy in southern areas of the country. Even though Lollardy had begun to decline somewhat in the 1430s, the records of the bishops' courts show that small communities of them survived in areas such as London, Coventry, Leicester, and the eastern counties.<sup>83</sup> If it were not for the small schools that provided for the instruction of adults, Lollard beliefs might have disappeared altogether.

Based on the evidence of increased citations of heresy during his reign, Henry VII seems to have revived the persecution of Lollardy. This continued under Henry VIII in 1510 and 1518, when about 50 Lollards were prosecuted. Prosecutions and some executions were carried out in the two decades that followed. But in spite of the claim that Lollardy may have lost some of its influence during that time, it did remain alive.<sup>84</sup> For the most part, families and small communities perpetuated Lollard beliefs. Some of these communities even maintained contact with other Lollards in spite of the fact that there was no one leader who oversaw the direction of the movement.

Unfortunately, not much is known about how the Lollards conducted their gatherings in the sixteenth century. J. W. Martin suggests that Lollard gatherings might have provided an atmosphere for impromptu discussion on various religious topics. Perhaps at the beginning of the meeting a circulated sermon was read to serve as the basis for discussion. Such a practice could

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>83</sup> John A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards 1414-1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 2.

<sup>84</sup> A.G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York 1509-1558* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 8.



have been helpful to those present who might have been illiterate. It is most likely that Lollard gatherings took place in individual homes under the leadership of a local person.<sup>85</sup>

### **Conclusion: Similarities Between Lollard and English Reformation Apocalypticism**

Up to this point in our discussion of the influence of Lollard apocalypticism on English Reformation apocalypticism, we have shown that conditions in the church paved the way for the appearance of Lollardy and the movement's call for reform in apocalyptic terms. This is borne out in several treatises and especially in the sermons we have examined. We have demonstrated that Lollard apocalyptic ideas were diffused throughout England, particularly through the medium of preaching at small gatherings. This now brings us to the similarities between Lollard and English Reformation apocalypticism.

Lollardy remained alive well into the sixteenth century when Protestantism appeared. It has already been stated that some scholars maintain that Lollardy exercised little, if any, influence on the English Reformation apocalypticism. Instead, ideas of reform from the Continent surged into England, completely obliterating Lollard beliefs. However, this view ignores the evidence of Lollard treatises and sermons which pre-date the arrival of continental apocalypticism and actually contain apocalyptic beliefs resembling those coming from the Continent.

From the evidence it cannot be denied that apocalyptic and eschatological themes were frequent in Lollardy. It is quite possible that English reformers drew their ideas of the apocalyptic from the Lollards and not strictly from the Continent.<sup>86</sup> It cannot be denied that

---

<sup>85</sup> J. W. Martin, *Religious Radicals in Tudor England* with a preface by A. G. Dickens (London: The Hambledon Press, 1989), 14-18.

<sup>86</sup> Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 264. "In common with most persecuted sects, the Lollards evinced great interest in the last book of the Bible. From the trial of Walter Brut in 1393 to the investigation of Hacker of London

Luther called the pope the Antichrist; however, he was not original in doing so. Wycliffe and the Lollards had asserted this 150 years before. Luther wrote a preface for the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* in which he admits that he is not the first to equate the pope with the Antichrist. The commentary for which he wrote the preface was a copy of the Lollard *Opus Arduum*. Luther was not the founder of English Protestant apocalypticism.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, for Luther apocalyptic preaching did not play as big a role in the reform of the individual as it did for the Lollards. The Lollards preparedness for Christ's return was based on holy and pious living. They tended to stir up fear in their listeners and intensify that fear with statements like, "No one knows whether he will be saved or not." However, Luther's focus was on justification through faith and the comfort that that teaching brought to one's conscience. He underscored repentance through the preaching of the Gospel instead of instilling belief through apocalyptic preaching, even though he did denounce the pope as the Antichrist who will receive his just punishment.

William Tyndale, for example, espoused the Lollard belief that the pope was the Antichrist. It is true that he was influenced by Martin Luther, having read some of his writings; however, the preponderance of Tyndale's beliefs regarding apocalypticism resembled those of the Lollards, especially his understanding of the pope as the Antichrist. He too believed that the pope was unworthy to be called pope because of his immoral conduct. The pope failed to be the good shepherd by neglecting to feed the sheep given to him by God. Instead, the pope fed them with the poison of his man-made traditions. The papacy failed to exhibit moral virtue, a

---

in 1520, individual Wycliffites used the obscurities of the Apocalypse both to castigate their orthodox fellows and to justify their own hopes for a better world to come. Critics of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century interest in apocalyptic literature have sometimes written as if this were a new phenomenon, but in fact the reformers and puritans could draw upon a tradition of vernacular exegesis that deserves much fuller treatment than can be given here. This tradition, at least as it is manifested in Wycliffite texts, seems to be largely innocent of the influence of Joachim of Flore, at least in its detailed exegesis."

<sup>87</sup> Bostick, 54-55. Also see A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 33-37. Dickens mentions some connections between Lollardy and Lutheranism.



prerequisite for God-given spiritual authority. The pope elevated himself to the level of God. His bishops were partially to blame in this, since in their preaching they extolled him as practically possessing divine qualities.<sup>88</sup> Was this not a sign of the Antichrist?

John Bale, who believed that the Reformation was an eschatological event, often turned to Wycliffe and his followers for apocalyptic ideas. He as well as other Reformers used Lollard literature in apocalyptic interpretation, especially regarding the pope as the Antichrist.<sup>89</sup> The Lollards generally believed that Satan had been loosed around 1000 AD in the papacy. Bale also favored this view. Since the Reformation was an eschatological event, Bale claimed that history and biblical prophecy had to be understood in a new context in order to take into account the significance of the Reformation and what it meant for mankind.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Lollard apocalyptic was instrumental in Bale's interpretation of the pope as the Antichrist.

Dickens claims that English Protestantism in the form of Lutheranism and Calvinism barely had a foothold in England during the reign of Henry VIII: "Again, the ingredients of early Protestantism proved already numerous in the reign of Henry VIII, yet among them Lutheranism may scarcely be regarded as predominant and Calvinism as yet remained almost negligible."<sup>91</sup> Protestant apocalypticism from the Continent certainly contributed to the development of English Protestant apocalypticism; however, it is not as if continental apocalyptic ideas reached

---

<sup>88</sup> Smeeton, 178-181. Smeeton says that "Tyndale was in keeping with the Lollard tradition which stressed moral virtue as a prerequisite for spiritual authority." Since the pope lacked moral virtue, he was not a true servant of Christ but rather the Antichrist. This position differs from Luther's understanding of the pope as the Antichrist in that, instead of telling people to trust in Christ's work on the cross for salvation, the pope tells them to trust in papal decrees and laws. The Lollards reasoned that the pope was the Antichrist because he did not live a righteous life while Luther said he turned people away from the Gospel. Tyndale espoused the former position.

<sup>89</sup> Bale most likely consulted Lollard tracts and the *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. It is quite possible he drew his apocalyptic ideas from Lollard sermons as well.

<sup>90</sup> Bauckham, 26-29.

<sup>91</sup> Dickens, 7-8. See also Ian Stackhouse, "The Native Roots of Early English Reformation Theology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 66 (1994): 22-23, 26. "It does appear, in many instances, that at this popular level it was native Lollardy rather than any continental theology, German or Swiss, that was making the greatest contribution to early Tudor heresy. . . . In the aftermath of events at Wittenberg it was scarcely possible to be a mere Lollard any more, although the appearance of Luther's name in the trial of heretics at this time should not be misconstrued as a sign of the influence of his theology."

an unsown field. The seeds of Lollard apocalypticism had already been sown in England by the time of the English Reformation. English Protestantism also drew from this indigenous apocalyptic tradition.

Dickens also asserts that Lollardy and English Protestantism underwent a merging process in the 1530s. The Lollards made use of Tyndale's New Testament while some Protestants are said to have reissued Lollard tracts. Tyndale's New Testament allowed the Lollards to read the Scriptures in the vernacular, a practice valued by English Protestants as well. Lollardy had some teachings in common with Lutheranism but for the most part was little influenced by its sacramentarian teachings and emphasis on justification based solely on faith.<sup>92</sup>

The merging of English Protestantism and Lollardy most likely resulted from the efforts of the lower and middle classes. As the more mobile persons from these classes moved about, they no doubt shared their ideas with others in various regions: "A cloth-worker goes to ply his craft in East Anglia and returns to spread heresy; two York tailors working in London join a Protestant circle and flee back to York after the execution of their leader."<sup>93</sup> Moreover, these more mobile persons were able to traverse the country less impeded by tortuous terrain and poor roads. This allowed the exchange of Protestant and Lollard ideas.

Persecution also seems to have forged together the two movements. Both Lollards and Protestants were deemed enemies of the established order and consequently faced execution. The two groups realized their commonality in being punished for their beliefs. During the reign of Queen Mary, Protestants were forced to gather in a fashion similar to that of the Lollards. The choice before the Protestants was either to rejoin the Catholic church or meet surreptitiously.

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 246.



One theme that predominated among English Protestants was the imminent end of the world. They truly believed that they were living in the last times, waging a war with the Antichrist who ruled over the false church. They sought solace in preaching the Word of God, knowing that they became victorious in exposing the Antichrist for what he was. Even though he had not been completely destroyed, his power had begun to wane. Christ would ultimately destroy him at His imminent second coming to judge the world. They believed that victory over the Antichrist came through persecution, not with the aid of the physical weapons used in warfare. With this idea was connected the preaching of the Gospel. The more the Gospel was preached, the greater the opposition to it. The devil and his minions realized that their time was getting short and unleashed their fury on the chosen.<sup>94</sup>

The belief in the imminent end of the world flowed and ebbed in the consciousness of Protestants, depending on historical events and circumstances. For example, some Protestants felt that the preaching of the Gospel had been sufficient enough to destroy the Antichrist, as in the case of the defeat of the Spanish Armada.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, there would be little left of the Antichrist for Christ Himself to destroy when He came again. However, in more ominous times, the Protestants centered their hope on Christ's second coming.

The Reformation was seen by Protestants as a conflict with an eschatological significance. The faithful were to preach the Word and endure tribulations and persecutions until the coming of Christ. They looked forward to Christ's triumph over the Antichrist. Apocalyptic preaching during the Reformation served as a means to encourage individual and ecclesiastical reform in order to be ready for Christ:

The medieval Judgment Day sermon was a time-honoured and effective means of conveying the urgency of spiritual and eternal issues, and in the same vein many an

---

<sup>94</sup> Bauckham, 145-6.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 147.

Elizabethan preacher took the signs of the nearness of the End as his cue for denouncing the sins of society, exhorting sinners to repentance, encouraging the faithful to holy living and preparedness.<sup>96</sup>

Such language filled English Protestant sermons.

This understanding of the imminent end is seen in Lollard apocalyptic sermons as well. The Lollards thought that they too were living in the end times. Sermons on the second coming of Christ were intended to change the individual, to help him prepare for Christ's return. The themes of repentance and pious living are clearly seen in the Lollard sermons above.

English Protestantism exhibited the Lollard urgency to preach the Gospel which for the Lollards was absolutely necessary. In the Lollard sermons, priests and bishops are criticized for failing to preach the Word. Moreover, the Lollards believed that they were warring with the Antichrist, the pope, just as did English Protestants. Lollard sermons prophesied of Christ's victory over him in the end, a prophecy which the English reformers believed and preached as well.

Even though the relation between Lollardy and English Protestantism is still obscure, it seems that Lollardy, to some degree, did bequeath apocalyptic ideas to English reformers, especially the idea of the pope as the Antichrist. It is difficult to ignore the apocalyptic ideas in Lollard treatises and sermons. Moreover, English Reformation apocalypticism resembles Lollard apocalypticism more than it reflects the influences of Luther and Calvin, though it would be misleading to say that Lutheran and Calvinistic ideas exercised no influence whatsoever on the development of English Reformation apocalypticism. Since Lollardy and English Protestantism were brought closer together as a result of various circumstances, each influenced the other to an extent, though to what exact extent cannot be said. It is fair to say that Lollard apocalyptic ideas

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 150.



made their way into English Protestantism and that these ideas to promote reform had long been in England before their arrival from the Continent.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

*English Wycliffite Sermons*. Volumes I and III edited by Anne Hudson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, 1990. Volume II edited by Pamela Gradon. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. Volumes IV and V edited by Pamela Gradon and Anne Hudson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

*Lollard Sermons*. Edited by Gloria Cigman. Description of the manuscripts by Jeremy Griffiths and analysis of the language by Jeremy Smith. The Early English Text Society, Oxford: University Press, 1989.

*Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*. Edited and with an Introduction, Notes and Glossary by Anne Hudson. Cambridge: University Press, 1978.

### Secondary Sources

Aston, Margaret. *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval England*. London: The Hambledon Press, 1984.

Bauckham, Richard. *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism and the English Reformation from John Bale to John Foxe and Thomas Brightman*. Appleford, England: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978.

Bostick, Curtis V. *The Antichrist and the Lollards*. Leiden: Brill, 1998.

Carrick, J. C. *Wycliffe and the Lollards*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.

Dickens, A. G. *The English Reformation*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York 1509-1558*. Oxford: University Press, 1959.

Firth, Katharine R. *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530-1645*. Oxford: University Press, 1978.

Gairdner, James. *Lollardy and the Reformation in England*. 4 vols. London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1908.

Haines, Roy M. "'Wilde wittes and wilfulnes': John Swetstock's Attack on those 'poyswunmongeres,' the Lollards." In *Popular Belief and Practice*, 143-153. Edited by G. J. Cuming and Derek Baker. Cambridge: University Press, 1972.



Hudson, Anne. "Laicus Litteratus: The Paradox of Lollardy." In *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*, 222-236. Edited by Peter Biller and Anne Hudson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffe Texts and Lollard History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Lambert, Malcolm. *Medieval Heresy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992.

Leff, Gordon. *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*. 2 vols. New York: Manchester University Press, 1967.

Martin, J. W. *Religious Radicals in Tudor England*. London: The Hambledon Press, 1989.

Owst, G. R. *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450*. Cambridge: University Press, 1926.

Rex, Richard. *The Lollards*. Palgrave, 2002.

Smeeton, Donald Dean. *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale*. Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1986.

Spencer, H. Leith. *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Spinka, Matthew. "John Wyclif, Advocate of Radical Reform." In *Advocates of Reform: From Wyclif to Erasmus*, 21-31. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953.

Stackhouse, Ian. "The Native Roots of Early English Reformation Theology." *Evangelical Quarterly* 66 (1994): 19-35.

Thomson, John A. F. *The Later Lollards 1414 – 1520*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

Wilks, Michael. "Royal Priesthood: the Origins of Lollardy." In *The Church in a Changing Society*, 63-70. CIHEC Conference in Uppsala, 1977.