

## From Minority to Maturity: The Evolution of Later Lollardy

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*Abstract: Though English supporters of the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe (d.1384)—known as “Lollards”—had been drawn from academic and noble/gentry circles during the later-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries, persecution, equation of heresy with sedition, and the failure of Sir John Oldcastle’s Rebellion (1414) ensured overt abandonment of Lollard ideas. Consequently, post-1414 (“later”) Lollardy in England has been characterized as an amorphous, introverted network—appealing to those of lesser socio-economic status—being unworthy of description as a sect because of its deficiency of organization. However, the movement’s consistency and infrastructure are reappraised by considering its heterogeneity in terms of society (demography, literacy, and socio-economic status), interactions (modes of dissemination), and motivation, participation, and organization (appreciating the dynamics of religious movements). From a comparative perspective, Lollardy’s acephalous, reticulate infrastructure—similarly to that of Waldensianism and other movements—may have proved beneficial by facilitating adaptability during persecution thereby ensuring Lollardy’s survival until the Reformation.*

Keywords: Lollardy, Waldensianism, Pentecostalism, John Wycliffe, Lollards, England

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Whereas the ideas of the English theologian John Wycliffe (d.1384) had wider European resonances—proving a significant influence on the Czech reformer Jan Hus (d.1415) and the later Reformation in Bohemia—in England, his teachings (emphasizing *sola scriptura*) led his followers (known for reading aloud) to be described, derogatively, as “Lollards” (mumblers) from at least 1382.<sup>1</sup> Wycliffe’s views gradually gained support beyond his Oxford pupils and he briefly enjoyed the patronage of Richard II’s uncle, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, but identification of Lollard views with those espoused during the Peasants’ Revolt (1381) led to broader persecution of his adherents. Although some gentry figures (such as Sir Thomas

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<sup>1</sup> Hudson and Kenny, *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*). “Wycliffe, John (d. 1384)”; Hudson, “Lollardy: The English Heresy?,” 261.

Latimer and Sir John Cheyne continued to patronize Lollardy, the enactment—by the English Parliament—of *De heretico comburendo* (1401) equating heresy with sedition (and punishing heretics with burning at the stake) ensured Lollard activities thereafter became largely clandestine; with the failure of the Rebellion (1414) of the condemned Lollard (and friend of Henry V) Sir John Oldcastle (d.1417) further securing overt abandonment of Lollard ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Perspectives of the Reformation as uninfluenced by a medieval inheritance of reforming ideas have tended, therefore, to assume that Lollardy decayed into insignificance after Oldcastle's Rebellion and that later investigations were merely localized episodes.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, post-Oldcastle Lollardy has been portrayed as “fragmented,” “dispersed,” as an “ill defined...body of sentiment,” as comprising only “a few ignorant groups,” as “a small, scattered minority of dissidents united by their sense of being the few true Christians on earth,” and as an inchoate assembly of eccentrics of little education, expressing views which had economic (rather than academic) origins and reflected an instinctive skepticism and materialism.<sup>4</sup> It has been recognized that:

Lollards demonstrably enjoyed social connections with each other, and took part in shared devotional experiences, themselves perhaps too informal and inchoate to be termed ritual or liturgy, yet still testifying to a social spirit which can properly be described as community or tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Yet “later” (post-1414) Lollardy is widely believed to have suffered from the double deficiency of possessing neither a common organization nor—after Oldcastle's death—any leader capable of commanding the loyalty of the movement as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Except during its early years, “Lollardy seems to have remained barely if at all organized (*sic*)” and was “not sufficiently clearly

<sup>2</sup> Kightly, *ODNB*, “Lollard Knights (act. c.1380–c.1414);” M. Jurkowski, *ODNB*, “Latimer, Sir Thomas (1341–1401);” Saul, *ODNB*, “Cheyne, Sir John (d.1414);” Thomson, *ODNB*, “Oldcastle, John, Baron Cobham (d.1417).”

<sup>3</sup> For example, Tuck, *Crown and Nobility, 1272–1461: Political Conflict in Late Medieval England*, 205–6; Thomson, *The Later Lollards, 1414–1520*.

<sup>4</sup> Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England*, 342; McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, 100, 183–85; Knowles and Obolensky, *The Middle Ages*, 451; Chadwick, *The Reformation*, 14–15; Rex, *The Lollards*, 149; Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools: The Relation of the “Summa de Ente” to Scholastic Debates*, 243; Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 213, 227–28.

<sup>5</sup> Rex, *Lollards*, 108–9.

<sup>6</sup> Thomson, *Later Lollards*, 2.

may no longer choose to portray Lollardy as John Foxe's emotive "secret multitude of true believers" or as a figurative "springboard of critical dissent from which the Protestant Reformation could overleap the walls of orthodoxy," it might be possible to concede that Lollard communities (in ideas and infrastructure) may have played at least a minor role in making some minds receptive to later Reforming (and Nonconformist) ideas.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Stokes, *The Lollards*; Dickens, *English Reformation*, 59; Aston, "Lollardy and the Reformation," 219–42; Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 473–507.

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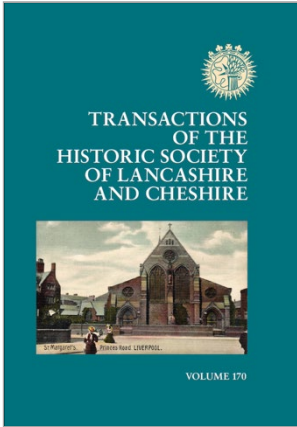
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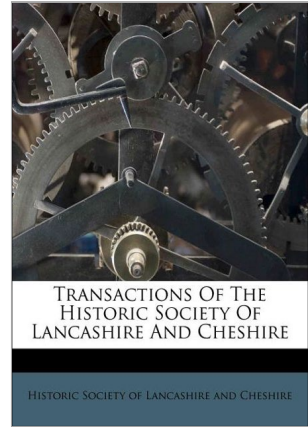
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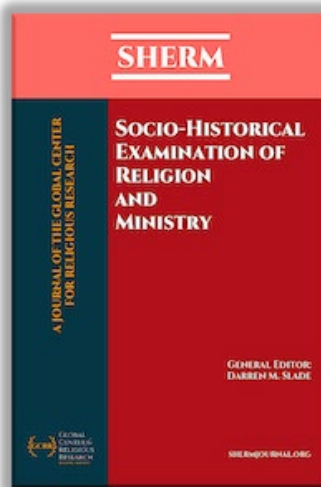
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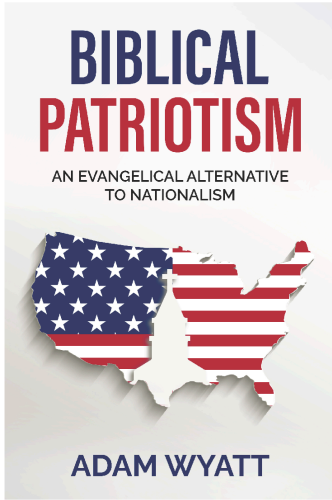


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