

MISHTOONI BOSE and J. PATRICK HORNBECK II (eds), *Wycliffite Controversies*, Brepols, Turnhout 2011, pp. XIV+359 p., 1 b/w ill., 2 b/w tables; VINCENT GILLESPIE and KANTIK GHOSH (eds), *After Arundel: Religious Writings in Fifteenth-Century England*, Brepols, Turnhout 2011, XIX+657 p., 3 b/w ill.

In the last twenty years or so there has been a revolution in the way theology, history and English literature have viewed the fifteenth century in England and continental Europe. Up to the 1990s the standard view was neatly expressed by David Knowles: "...the fifteenth century in England is peculiarly barren of great men and genial ideas." (1978) Others refer to this century as "the dark ages" or "dull and sterile". The main reason for this view is that the quality of religious and literary production in the fifteenth century was considered much inferior to that of the fourteenth century on the one hand and the sixteenth on the other. The imaginative and inspired vernacular spiritual writings of the fourteenth century, it is often claimed, had no equivalent in the fifteenth century because of the Church's repression of the Wycliffite and Lollard heresies, whose use of English had given a certain stimulus to spiritual writings. It was commonplace to assert that the dull orthodoxy of the fifteenth century and the declining state of the Church were ripe for reform in the sixteenth. In a sense, the fifteenth century got squeezed out as the inferior coda of the fourteenth century and the dull prologue to the sixteenth.

This view began to be challenged in the early 1990s by a number of scholars from various disciplines and perhaps the work that had most impact was that of Professor Eamon Duffy of the University of Cambridge. His *Stripping of the Altars*, whose first edition was published in 1992, painted the picture of a late medieval English church that was vibrant, vital and relevant to the people's need and concerns. Not all of Duffy's conclusions were accepted by his colleagues, but his work certainly opened a wide-ranging discussion about fifteenth century religious practices, theology, spirituality and literature. To be fair, there were also other scholars who had been re-evaluating the tenets of conventional wisdom about the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially with regard to the commonly held opinion that the works of John Wyclif and his followers were an anticipation of the sixteenth century protestant reformation. The standard view here is found in Workman's two volume study of Wyclif which shows how the fourteenth century theologian's writings are a foretaste of protestant authors. Wyclif was even known sometimes as the "morning star" of the reformation. This approach was strongly challenged by many scholars on all sides, as it were. Duffy, at one extreme, doubts whether

Wyclif or Lollardy were very significant at all in fifteenth century England. He claims that the mainstream of orthodoxy was relatively untouched by Wyclif or his followers. Others have examined the connection between Wyclif's teachings and those of his followers, the Lollards, questioning whether there is a linear relationship or not. Others again have looked at the social dimensions of Lollardy (some such as Kenneth McFarlane as early as 1972); analyses from feminist perspectives have not been lacking and there has been a veritable boom in textual criticism of Lollard and orthodox writings. The very definitions and concepts of "orthodoxy" and "heresy" have been called into question as some scholars found it harder and harder to draw a firm line between the two. It also became clear that heresy or dissent could not simply be equated with "reform" and orthodoxy with the preservation of the *status quo*. Indeed, the concept of "orthodox reform" became ever more important in explaining many features of the fifteenth century church in England and in continental Europe. Finally, in an age when the Carmelite Order was perhaps at its height in numbers and influence, specific studies of Lollardy from the Carmelite perspective of Thomas Netter of Walden have made a contribution to this re-appraisal of the fifteenth century.

Now this admittedly rather long introduction serves, it is hoped, to situate the two volumes which are the subject of this review. They are both the product of conferences held in Oxford in 2008 and 2009 respectively and represent the fruit of many scholars who have worked on the fifteenth century for many years. They are among the very best results of this intensive research at many levels and from many points of view. It is clearly impossible to do justice here to such a large number of contributions: 18 in the Bose/Hornbeck volume and 30 in the Gillespie/Ghosh volume. However, perhaps some of the conclusions and overall results can be summarised.

In *Wycliffite Controversies* there is clearly a specific focus on John Wyclif and his followers and one of the key debates here is precisely over the nomenclature used. Are Lollards necessarily in a direct relationship with the teachings of John Wyclif? Is there a difference between Wyclif and wycliffites, or even Lollards and lollards? What is the difference between a dissenter and a heretic? Is there a stable terminology that can be used unequivocally over a number of decades and in various places?

The specific questions about Wycliff, Lollards and lollardy in turn open up a more general debate about the nature of orthodoxy and dissent where it becomes clear that there is a shared ground of understanding as well as a set of differences. This view enables us to situate the opinions of dissenters in the broad sweep of fifteenth century intellectual history as similar in concerns to those of orthodoxy, yet also distinguished from them. Similarly, it seems harder and harder to depict orthodoxy and heresy in black and white: how much dichotomy exists? Is there not rather a *continuum* between heresy and orthodoxy? This is seen, for example, not so much in terms of content, but in the same rhetorical strategies used in sermons by both "sides" to advance their arguments.

Finally, these studies offer a wider lens through which to look at Wycliffites and Lollards where different disciplines can be used to unpack and explain both the support of and opposition to dissent. One application of this broader approach could be applied very fruitfully to Carmelite studies: an examination of the careers and views of those friars selected to take part in the various heresy trials in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Over a period of some forty years a considerable experience was built up by a number of men who had participated in the interrogation of men and women in several dioceses. It would be fascinating to consider how far they constituted a specific body of shared views and approaches, particularly in the context of the absence of a formal "inquisition" in the English church.

In *After Arundel* with almost twice as many topics as *Wycliffite Controversies*, there is naturally a wider range of material. The occasion for the conference in Oxford in 2009 was to mark the 600th anniversary of the promulgation of Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions* which placed severe limitations on the translation into the vernacular of the Bible. This event was seen as a watershed in English religious and literary production by, among others, Yale professor of literature, Nicholas Watson, who in a celebrated article in 1995, argues that Arundel's draconian provisions knocked the life out of vernacular production. This article acts, for some contributors, as a starting point for other, a foil for their own researches.

The thirty contributions are divided into various areas of interest: vernacular theology post-1409, spirituality, orthodox reform, conciliarism, humanism, literary self-consciousness, manuscript and translation studies, hagiography and printed works. What is perhaps significant here is that the abiding importance of Wyclif (*pace* Duffy) is maintained by these studies, along with the impossibility of categorising that significance in absolute terms. The whole thrust of the research evidenced in these thirty articles is to provide a new model of the fifteenth century: one which no longer sees it a merely a period of transition between two more interesting centuries. Some elements of this model would be the role of conciliarism, the sustained emphasis on orthodox reform, the continued lively and significant production of religious writings and the importance of continental European developments.

Both volumes are an important testimony to a highly significant historiographical movement which has recovered the depth and richness of the fifteenth century. Anyone working in fields of medieval literature, religious studies, theology, and spirituality needs to be aware of the contents of these two books, at least in as far as they pertain to their particular sphere of interest. Those teaching or working in Church history need to read all the articles to have a sense of this new approach to the fifteenth century.

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