

John Wyclif's Concepts of Church, Clergy and Laity

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*Dedicated to Professor Dr Hans Schneider
on occasion of his 80th birthday*

1. John Wyclif – forerunner of the Reformation?

In the Middle Ages the generally accepted pattern of Christian religion was centered on the church as a hierarchically organized agency of salvation. The church passed on God's grace to the faithful through the sacraments, which were administered by priests exclusively enabled to do so by a special sacramental power conferred by their ordination. The priests and the clergy as a whole thus acted as mediators between God and man. The possibility of experiencing direct encounters with God in mystical piety and the scholarly debates on the exact nature and scope of priestly authority, for example in the sacrament of penance, did not affect this pattern. The prominent religious function of the ministers had made the clergy a special class in the church, superior to the so-called laity.¹ The origins of this development lay in antiquity, with the concept of the ecclesiastical office as priestly ministry and the Eucharist as a sacrifice of atonement, as well as the legal privileging of the clergy by Emperor Constantine. It was reinforced by the clericalization of the church in the so-called Gregorian Reform of the eleventh century. The dogmatization of the doctrine of transubstantiation and the introduction of obligatory confession at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 further enhanced the reputation of the priesthood. The idea that clergy and laity formed two different "genera christianorum" was firmly established in canon law.²

The Reformation of the sixteenth century replaced the previous pattern of Christian religion with a new one. The reformers placed man directly before God, eliminating any mediation by church and clergy. It was no longer the rites administered by the clergy that brought salvation to men, but the Word of God, which directly granted the individual the forgiveness of sins and called to faith.

¹ BRADSHAW, PAUL FREDERICK, art. Priester / Priestertum III.1. Christliches Priestertum. Geschichtlich, TRE 27 (1997), 414–421.

² Decretum Gratiani, C. 12 q. 1 c. 7 (ed. Friedberg I, 678).

Luther developed the doctrine of the universal priesthood of the baptized believers, and in the wake of Calvin's Reformation presbyterial and congregational forms of church leadership emerged. In Protestantism, too, the ministers soon formed an elite again, but this was now distinguished by education and way of life and no longer by any particular religious quality. In this respect, the Reformation view of Christianity represented a fundamental innovation compared with the medieval pattern.

As such, however, it was not allowed to appear. For pre-modern historical thought only the old and original was true and every innovation illegitimate. The reformers therefore took great pains to prove that they were in perfect agreement with the Bible and the earliest Christianity, and they also tried to prove that in the course of time there had always been witnesses of the Protestant truth who, as "reformers before the reformation", had represented the old-new Protestant teachings.³

Among the persons claimed by the reformers as such alleged witnesses of truth was the fourteenth-century Oxford don John Wyclif (c. 1330–1384).⁴ Publicists of the English Reformation such as John Bale and John Foxe praised him as the "morning star of the Reformation". In addition to his esteem for Holy Scripture, his criticism of the papacy and his rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation, it was above all his ecclesiology that made Wyclif attractive to Protestants. In fact, it showed some affinity with the later reformation doctrine, but in reality, it was based on very specific premises. It would therefore be mistaken to view Wyclif solely in terms of the Reformation of the sixteenth century.⁵

³ SCHÄUFELE, WOLF-FRIEDRICH, "Vorreformation" und "erste Reformation" als historiographische Konzepte. Bestandsaufnahme und Problemanzeige, in: Andrea Strübind / Tobias Weger (ed.), *Jan Hus – 600 Jahre Erste Reformation*, München 2015 (Schriften des Bundesinstituts für Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa 60), 209–231; id., *Die Selbsthistorisierung der Reformation mittels der Konzeption evangelischer Wahrheitszeugen*, in: ZKG 128 (2017), 156–170.

⁴ On Wyclif's life and work see WORKMAN, HERBERT B., *John Wyclif. A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 2 vols., Oxford 1926; MCFARLANE, KENNETH B., *John Wycliffe and English Non-Conformity*, Harmondsworth 1972; LAHEY, STEPHEN E., *John Wyclif*, Oxford 2009 (Great Medieval Thinkers); LEFF, GORDON, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages. The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent c. 1250–c. 1450*, Manchester / New York 1967, II 494–558; LEVY, IAN CHRISTOPHER (ed.), *A Companion to John Wyclif. Late Medieval Theologian*, Leiden / Boston 2006 (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 4).

⁵ "At every point he proves to be and not to be a forerunner of the Reformation and the internal economy of his ecclesiology is his own" (EVANS, GILLIAN R., *Wyclif on Ecclesiology. Issues of Perspective*, in: *Anvil. An Anglican Evangelical Journal for Theology and Mission* 11 (1994), 45–55, at 46). Cf. Stephen Lahey, *Wyclif, 1380–1384*: "The storm that was to envelop Western Christianity in the sixteenth century continues to make medieval reformative ideals difficult to envision, and this is certainly true with Wyclif's idea of the church and its ministers. His writings are filled with sentiments that bespeak Lutheran, Calvinist, or

Wyclif's view of the relationship between clergy and laity in particular has attracted the interest of scholars. In earlier studies, Wyclif was taken as a representative or at least a precursor of the teaching of the universal priesthood of all Christians.⁶ Gordon Leff argued that Wyclif had practically denied the priesthood as a particular order within the church, and in this he saw "the single most destructive and heretical feature of Wyclif's teaching".⁷ Recently this view has been contested with good reason. As we shall see, Wyclif did not want to abolish the clergy and the priestly order, but to reform them. The universal priesthood, as Wyclif understood it, was a spiritual priesthood and in this respect was close to Luther's later conception, although it was based on different theological premises. Hereinafter we shall examine Wyclif's soteriological and ecclesiological tenets and their consequences for the determination of the relationship between clergy and laity, appreciate them in the context of their time and finally look at their influence on the Lollards.

2. Predestination and the church

Wyclif's reformulation of the relationship between clergy and laity is based on three preliminary theological assumptions: his conception of the church as a community of the predestined, his peculiar understanding of the sacraments in general and of the Eucharist and penance in particular, and his esteem for the Bible as the "law of Christ".

An intensified dogmatic debate on the nature of the church did not emerge until the fifteenth century. At the time of Wyclif, the church was primarily seen as the "(mystical) body of Christ" concerning the biblical metaphor, and also as the Bride of Christ or Mother of the Faithful.⁸ Wyclif shared all these notions. But he went even further by presenting his own sharply profiled definition. According to him, the church was the "congregacio omnium predestinatorum".⁹

Anabaptist ideas: a universal spiritual priesthood of Christians, an emphasis in scripture preaching over sacramental offices, a rejection of ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the absolute revocation of secular political authority for the church – all suggest Protestantism. Yet Wyclif's intent was far from that of the later Reformers, not least because he never seemed to imagine the doctrine of justification by faith."

⁶ E.g. REA, JAMES EDWARD, *The Common Priesthood of the Members of the Mystical Body. An Historical Survey of the Heretical Concepts of the Doctrine as Compared with the True Catholic Concept*, Washington, D.C. 1947 (Studies in Sacred Theology 101), 39–83.

⁷ LEFF, Heresy (as note 4), II 520.

⁸ FINKENZELLER, JOSEF, art. Kirche IV. Katholische Kirche, in: TRE 18 (1989), 227–252, esp. 229f.

⁹ WYCLIF, JOHN, *De ecclesia*, ed. by Johann Loserth, London 1885, 2.27–28. For the following, see SCHMIDT, MARTIN, *John Wyclifs Kirchenbegriff. Der Christus humilis*

With this definition Wyclif referred to Augustine's doctrine of predestination.¹⁰ Sharpening his doctrine of grace, Augustine had finally developed the idea that God had decided the eternal fate of human beings by gracefully predestining some to beatitude through his free election, while the majority of the others would fall to damnation as punishment for their sins. Following Augustine, Wyclif identified the church in its proper sense with the totality of all human beings predestined for salvation – deceased, living and unborn alike –, whether they were at present in the state of grace or not.¹¹ Those who were not predestined and were heading towards eternal damnation did not belong to the church. Wyclif called them, as Thomas Bradwardine (c. 1290–1349) before him, the “foreknown” (*praesciti*), to suggest that God had not actively rejected them, but knew from eternity that they would be damned.

Wyclif's new concept of church, inspired by Augustine, had subversive potential. The true church of Christ and the empirical ecclesiastical institution – Wyclif spoke of the “*ecclesia nuncupativa*”¹² – were now no longer congruent. For in the empirical, institutional church, the predestined and foreknown were mixed together, it included members of the devil as well as members of Christ. Wyclif translated this difference between the church believed and the institutional church into the distinction between “*esse de ecclesia*” and “*esse in ecclesia*”: “*notandum quod aliud est esse in ecclesia, et aliud esse de ecclesia, cum in ecclesia sint tam membra Christi quam membra dyaboli, sed de ecclesia sunt solum predestinati qui post iudicium sunt realiter membra Christi*”.¹³

Augustins bei Wyclif. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage: Wyclif und Luther, in: Friedrich Hübner / Wilhelm Maurer / Ernst Kinder (ed.), *Gedenkschrift für D. Werner Elert. Beiträge zur historischen und systematischen Theologie*, Berlin 1955, 72–108; SHOGIMEN, TAKASHI, Wyclif's Ecclesiology and Political Thought, in: LEVY, A Companion to John Wyclif (as note 4), 199–240, esp. 215–225; SCHÄUFELE, WOLF-FRIEDRICH, Die Kontinuität der Kirche. Oppositionelle Konzeptionen im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter, in: Andreas Speer / David Wirmer (ed.), *Das Sein der Dauer*, Berlin / New York 2008 (MM 34), 398–413, besonders 409–412.

¹⁰ OTTO, SEAN A., Predestination and the Two Cities. The Authority of Augustine and the Nature of the Church in Giles of Rome and John Wyclif, in: Sini Kangas / Mia Korpiola / Tuija Ainonen (ed.), *Authorities in the Middle Ages. Influence, Legitimacy, and Power in Medieval Society*, Berlin 2013, 145–157, esp. 153–156.

¹¹ “*ecclesia catholica sive apostolica sit universitas predestinatorum, quorum aliqui sunt mortui, aliqui vivi, et aliqui generandi*” (WYCLIF, JOHN, *De civili dominio*, ed. by Reginald Lane Poole / Johann Loserth, 4 vols., London 1885–1904, I 358.29–31). “*sumitur ecclesia pro convocacione predestinatorum, sive sint in gracia secundum presentem iusticiam sive non. Et isto modo ecclesia est articulus fidei, de quo loquitur Apostolus Ephes. VI°. Et sic nullus prescitus est de sancta ecclesia, licet sit in illa*” (WYCLIF, *De ecclesia*, as note 9, 409.15–19).

¹² WYCLIF, *De ecclesia* (as note 9), 408.29–30.

¹³ WYCLIF, JOHN, *Sermones*, ed. Johann Loserth, 4 vols., London 1886–1889, II 399.8–12. Cf. WYCLIF, *De ecclesia* (as note 9), 89.16.

Wyclif repeatedly stressed that no one could know whether he belonged to the predestined and thus to the true church. One could only be sure of this because of a special divine revelation, which, however, only some saints had received.¹⁴ Nor can one know about any other person whether he is predestined and a member of the church. There can be only indications of this. A virtuous behaviour in following the poor and humble life of Christ might be an evidence that a person is presently in God's grace.¹⁵ However, the present state of grace does not yet say anything about a person's eternal destiny – It is possible that a person who is in grace now will fall away in the future, and an evil person may repent in future. The impossibility of knowing who belonged to the true church made Wyclif's conception "an ecclesiology of profound uncertainty"¹⁶.

Wyclif's predestinarian ecclesiology had far-reaching consequences. The uncertainty about divine predestination undermined the authority of the prelates and the clergy in a highly effective way and thus became the most important instrument of Wyclif's criticism of the church – even more so than his theory of the correlation between dominion and grace¹⁷, from which he derived the demand for the expropriation of the church by secular lords, that led to the condemnation of his theses by Pope Gregory XI in 1377. "In many respects the uncertainty was more damaging to the institutional church than the condemnations of certain offices, practices, or individuals".¹⁸

If no one, not even clerics and prelates, could know who belonged to the true church of the predestined and who did not, then they could neither hereticate nor excommunicate anyone. Conversely, they could not canonise anyone either.¹⁹ In effect, church discipline and the veneration of saints (apart from

¹⁴ "Sicut igitur homo sine speciali revelacione non assereret sine formidine se esse predestinatum, sic nec assereret se esse membrum, et per consequens, non caput illius ecclesie" (WYCLIF, *De ecclesia*, as note 9, 5.24–27). Cf. *ibid.*, 18.4–6; WYCLIF, *De civili dominio* (as note 11), I 381.8f.; WYCLIF, JOHN, *Opus Evangelicum*, ed. by Johann Loserth, 2 vols., London 1895–1896, II 216.5–15.

¹⁵ "Unde quamvis nesciamus nostram predestinationem ex fide, demonstracione vel intuicione, habere tamen possumus probabilem coniecturam ex nostra conversacione et virtutibus graciose a Domino nobis datis, et specialiter si sumus humiles de Dei ordinancia congaudentes" (WYCLIF, *Opus Evangelicum*, as note 14, II 197.23–27). Cf. WYCLIF, JOHN, *Triologus, cum Supplemento Trialogi*, ed. by Gotthard Victor Lechler, Oxford 1869, 325.

¹⁶ EVANS, *Wyclif on Ecclesiology* (as note 5), 54.

¹⁷ KENNY, ANTHONY, *Wyclif*, Oxford / New York 1985 (*Past Masters*), 42–55; HOFFARTH, CHRISTIAN, *Urkirche als Utopie. Die Idee der Gütergemeinschaft im späteren Mittelalter von Olivi bis Wyclif*, Stuttgart 2016 (*Hamburger Studien zu Gesellschaften und Kulturen der Vormoderne* 1), 203–260.

¹⁸ HUDSON, ANNE, *The Premature Reformation. Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Oxford 1988, repr. 2002, 316.

¹⁹ "Sicut ergo nemo nostrum scit modo, utrum alius sit modo predestinatus filius ecclesiae vel praescitus, sic non debet iudicare aliquem esse membrum ecclesiae, vel ipsum

Mary and other biblical figures), which was so important for popular piety, were made impossible.

But not only did the clergy not know whether other people were predestined and members of the church – it was also impossible to tell whether the clerics themselves belonged to the church. It was quite possible that a person was a bishop or a priest and presently in the state of grace, but in reality a *praescitus* and therefore not a member of the church.²⁰ Yes, even of the Pope, neither he himself nor anyone else could know whether he was a predestined member of the church. The canonical election by the cardinals and the solemn enthronement as bishop of Rome gave no evidence about this. As a consequence, Wycliffe spiritualized the concept of the papacy and decoupled it from the Roman bishopric.²¹ God alone decided who was pope and the vicar of Christ, not an earthly institution. Peter had been pope and had held a prominent position among the apostles – but solely because of his outstanding holiness and the greater similarity of his life to the life of Christ.²² In the same way, later on, and also today, the pope and vicar of Christ was and always is the one from the number of the predestined who follows Christ most closely and is most similar to him. This does not necessarily have to be a cleric; it is also conceivable that a layman might be pope (but not a woman, since the weakness of her sex makes her incapable of preaching the gospel in public).²³

The uncertainty about whether the pope or another prelate belonged to the true church of the predestined had serious consequences for the question of ecclesiastical authority. Gordon Leff emphatically pointed this out:

“Now it was his insistence upon men’s ignorance which perhaps more than anything else made Wyclif’s doctrine so disruptive; for it undermined the whole of the existing order. If only those who were chosen by God belonged to the church, and they could not be known, there was no reason for accepting any visible authority or for recognizing the claims of those who exercised it. Even more, there was no reason for such authority at all: if all who were predestined to glory remained of the elect, regardless of temporal vicissitudes, nothing could

damnare, excommunicare canonisare vel aliter declamare, nisi forte hoc fuerit sibi revelatum” (WYCLIF, *Triologus*, as note 15, 325).

²⁰ “Et patet quod homo potest esse episcopus, dominus et minister ecclesie, eciam prescitus, existens in gracia secundum presentem iusticiam, sed homo non est cum hoc membrum sancte matris ecclesie” (WYCLIF, *De ecclesia*, as note 9, 140.26–30.)

²¹ On Wyclif’s conception of the papacy see LEFF, *Heresy* (as note 4), II 531–541.

²² WYCLIF, JOHN, *Polemical Works in Latein*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 2 vols., London 1883, II 668.19–23. Cf. SHOGIMEN, *Wyclif’s Ecclesiology* (as note 9), 218.

²³ “papa est quicumque viator, qui sequitur Christum similius, ubi femella excluditur, quia quantumcumque sit sancta femina, propter infirmitatem sexus non permittitur evangelizare publice in ecclesia nec orare detecto capite” (WYCLIF, JOHN, *De potestate pape*, ed. by Johann Loserth, London 1907, 271.28–33).

further or detract from their final destiny. And likewise for the damned. The church in its traditional form therefore lost its *raison d'être*.”²⁴

As we will see, this judgment is overdone and based on a false understanding of Wyclif's doctrine of predestination. In truth, Wyclif by no means considered the institutional church to be superfluous. But it is true that his ecclesiology shook the authority of the church hierarchy. If it was uncertain whether a prelate belonged to the church of Christ, then he could not be given the authority to issue compulsory ordinances. All laws and directives issued by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, all canon law (which Wyclif knew well and, as far as it was based on the Bible and the church fathers, appreciated), and all ecclesiastical traditions had thus become uncertain. In particular, if a prelate showed by his moral misconduct that he was currently not in a state of grace, he was not to be obeyed. In the end, Wyclif considered the Bible, the “law of Christ”, to be the only source of authority. Orders of the pope or bishops could only be obeyed if and insofar as they were in accordance with it. Whether such accordance existed, however, was ultimately a matter for each individual believer to judge for himself.²⁵

3. The sacrament of orders and the clerical estate

With his predestinarian ecclesiology, Wyclif had massively shaken the authority of the prelates. But it also had an impact on the position and perception of the lower clergy. For of course only a *praedestinatus* could be a priest in the true sense of the word. In this respect, too, Wyclif decoupled the priestly office directly conferred by God from the formal episcopal ordination.

It is God himself who gives men spiritual authority and thus calls them to ministry.²⁶ External rites in the sense of a “sacramentum sensibile” are not of absolute necessity.²⁷ The scholarly question when the apostles would have received the ordination as priests or bishops is therefore mistaken.²⁸ If there was a special ordination of the apostles by Christ at all, then time and place were intentionally left unknown to us so that we would not devote too much attention

²⁴ LEFF, Heresy (as note 4), II 519.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II 522.

²⁶ For the following see LEFF, Heresy (as note 4), II 525f.; PENN, STEPHEN, Wyclif and the Sacraments, in: LEVY, A Companion to John Wyclif (as note 4), 241–291, here: 276–279.

²⁷ WYCLIF, De potestate pape (as note 23), 32.13–19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.17–34.6.

to the external ceremony.²⁹ In the primitive church (*ecclesia primitiva*) there was no need for such externals – that the clerics were gifted with the Holy Spirit was immediately recognizable to the faithful by the miracles they worked.³⁰ Similarly, today it is the exemplary way of life following Christ and the faithful exercise of his ministry that make up the priest, not the rite of ordination.³¹

Despite all his reservations about external acts of consecration, Wyclif did not go so far as to demand the abolition of the sacrament of ordination.³² Ordination by the bishop was and remained the rule for him. The conviction that it was not the outward ceremony but the authorization by God himself that established the priestly character ultimately did not lead Wyclif to the dismissal of priestly ordination, but on the contrary to its preservation. For even if the ordaining bishop was a *praescitus* and lived in sin, God could compensate for the fault of such a prelate.³³ Nevertheless, Wyclif's conception had a subversive potential. For if God's action alone constituted ordination, then ordination did not have to be reserved to the bishop, but could also be administered by a simple priest.³⁴ Moreover, it was also conceivable that God called a person to the priesthood without any external rite and without any involvement of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

While Wyclif generally adhered to the sacrament of ordination, he criticized the plurality of holy orders. At the time of the apostles there were only the orders of presbyters (priests) and deacons. Wyclif rejected all other orders as unscriptural: the so-called minor orders of porter, lector, exorcist and acolyte as well as the order of subdeacon. On the other hand, he stressed that there was no difference in dignity and authority between priest and bishop.³⁵ In fact, according to Wyclif, a simple priest could administer all the sacraments. But he considered it a reasonable decision that as the number of priests increased, certain tasks would be reserved for the more able among them, without negating the power of the lower clergy to step in in an emergency.³⁶

²⁹ WYCLIF, JOHN, *De simonia*, ed. by Sigismund Herzberg-Fränkel / Michael Henry Dziewicki, London 1898, 112.27–33; WYCLIF, *Opus Evangelicum* (as note 14), II 260.40–261.4.

³⁰ WYCLIF, *De simonia* (as note 29), 8.12–17.

³¹ WYCLIF, *Polemical Works* (as note 22), I 258.21–24.

³² YARNELL, MALCOLM B., *Royal Priesthood in the English Reformation*, Oxford 2013, 37f.

³³ “sive papa sive episcopus alius in vita iusta defuerit, Dei est non exigente peccato ecclesie errore alis prelati supplere. Deus enim potest sine tali ministro digno vel indigno personam in tali statu constituere” (WYCLIF, *Opus Evangelicum*, as note 14, II 260.26–30).

³⁴ WYCLIF, *De potestate pape* (as note 23), 314.14–20.

³⁵ HORNBECK, J. PATRICK, *What Is a Lollard? Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England*, Oxford 2010 (Oxford Theological Monographs), 147.

³⁶ WYCLIF, *De potestate pape* (as note 23), 275.3–27.

The point of Wyclif's theology of orders was the direct divine commissioning of the ministers of the church and the levelling of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – but not the abolition of the clergy as a particular estate within church and society. Wyclif supposed that the church could in theory consist only of lay people, because apart from Christ no other person is required with absolute necessity to constitute the church.³⁷ But for Wyclif, this was a purely hypothetical option, not a practical one. In fact, in the course of salvation history there had always been a particular priesthood: in the original *sacerdotium secundum legem naturae*, all male first-borns were priests. The declination of this priesthood from its original holiness to the worship of the Golden Calf (Ex 32:1–4) made the establishment of a new priesthood necessary. The *sacerdotium secundum legem mosaycam* was reserved for the sons of Levi. However, this priesthood also deteriorated over time and ended even in the murder of Christ. Thus the third and best priesthood took its place, the *sacerdotium secundum legem gratiae*, in which Christ, his apostles, and their successors served as priests; here, too, however, in the course of time a deplorable decline occurred.³⁸

With regard to his own time, Wyclif adopted the common notion of the three estates of clergy, nobility and commoners,³⁹ and in keeping with the definition of the two *genera christianorum* in canon law, he spoke of two “parts” of the church: “ecclesia habet duas partes, scilicet clericos et laicos tamquam corpus et animam”.⁴⁰ Wyclif conceived the distinction between the estates of the realm as well as between the *partes ecclesiae* in hierarchical terms. The estate of the common people is good, the secular lords are better, but the clerics form the “pars ecclesie optima”.⁴¹ However, the distinguished position of the clergy entailed a special responsibility. Again and again Wyclif emphasized the special obligation of the clergy to follow Christ, which confronted them with higher charges than the laity.⁴² Due to this higher obligation, misconduct by clerics is more reprehensible than that of lay people. The higher the position in the church hierarchy, the greater the guilt. If the clergy does not faithfully fulfill

³⁷ “absolute necessarium est quod ecclesia Christi non desinat nec ex peccato dyaboli destruat; sed nulla persona citra Christum absolute necessaria requiritur ad componendum dictam ecclesiam. Persone autem quas Deus elegit, quod est nobis incognitum et contingens, sunt necessarie ex suppositione” (WYCLIF, *De civili dominio*, as note 11, I 381.2–7). Cf. *ibid.*, 392.10–16; 420.10–13.

³⁸ WYCLIF, JOHN, *De veritate sacrae scripturae*, ed. by Rudolf Buddensieg, 3 vols., London 1905, III 233.3–25; WYCLIF, *Opus Evangelicum* (as note 14), II 5.2–6.30.

³⁹ WYCLIF, *Sermones* (as note 13), I 252.32–253.18.

⁴⁰ WYCLIF, *De civili dominio* (as note 11), II 72.22f.

⁴¹ See above note 39.

⁴² “oportet enim nos sacerdotes, qui vicem apostolorum debemus gerere, propinquius sequi Christum quam laicos” (WYCLIF, *De veritate s. s.*, as note 38, III 165.11–13). Cf. LEVY, IAN CHRISTOPHER, *Wyclif and the Christian Life*, in: LEVY, *A companion to John Wyclif* (as note 4), 293–363, here: 319.

the task entrusted to it by Christ, then this *optima pars ecclesiae* becomes the worst and most abominable Antichrist.⁴³ In the end it was a logical consequence that Wyclif recognized the Antichrist in both rival popes of the Great Schism and eventually even in the papacy as such.⁴⁴

4. Wyclif and the sacraments

Wyclif's predestinarian ecclesiology not only did not exclude the existence of a particular clerical estate, it also did not contradict the paradigm of the transmission of grace through the sacraments.⁴⁵ Earlier studies had assumed that Wyclif's emphasis on the divine election of the predestined would have invalidated the imparting of grace through the church and its ministers.⁴⁶ If eternal beatitude was based solely and directly on the unchangeable and inalienable divine predestination, then an additional conveyance of grace by the institutional church was apparently superfluous, and there was no longer any need for priestly action. In this case, it would be a peculiar inconsistency that Wyclif seemed to attribute a certain value to the sacraments after all. Herbert B. Workman concluded: "When faced with the difficulty of the place and the value of the sacraments in his system Wyclif goes off at a tangent and never comes to grips with the problem."⁴⁷

The assumption that predestinarian ecclesiology would make the sacraments superfluous seems conclusive, but it is based on false premises. For Wyclif's idea of predestination did not at all amount to a determinism. Anthony Kenny and Ian Christopher Levy have shown that Wyclif's doctrine of predestination, unlike, for example, Calvin's, in no way excluded human freedom.⁴⁸ For according to Wyclif, divine election is not with absolute necessity but with hypothetical or conditional necessity. Ultimately, it is identical with the foreknowledge of God. God, who stands beyond time and for whom all things are simultaneous, knows from eternity of every single person whether he will open himself to divine grace or refuse it. Thus man's action is the cause of divine election. Wyclif goes so far as to attribute to human will and action an influence

⁴³ WYCLIF, *Sermones* (as note 13), I 253.14–16.

⁴⁴ SCHÄUFELE, WOLF-FRIEDRICH, *Der Antichrist bei Wyclif und Hus*, in: Mariano Delgado / Volker Leppin (ed.), *Der Antichrist. Historische und systematische Zugänge*, Freiburg / Stuttgart 2010 (Studien zur christlichen Religions- und Kulturgeschichte 14), 173–207, here: 166–176.

⁴⁵ On Wyclif's theology of the sacraments see PENN, *Wyclif and the Sacraments* (as note 26).

⁴⁶ See above note 24.

⁴⁷ WORKMAN, *John Wyclif* (as note 4), II 13.

⁴⁸ KENNY, *Wyclif* (as note 17), 31–41; LEVY, IAN CHRISTOPHER, *Grace and Freedom in the Soteriology of John Wyclif*, in: *Traditio* 60 (2005), 279–337.

on the will and choice of God. But if predestination is only a foreknowledge of the human response to divine grace, it does not per se make obsolete the sacramental transmission of grace. Wyclif's doctrine of predestination is not first and foremost a theory of human salvation, but serves primarily as an instrument for deconstructing the authority and claims to power of the church hierarchy.

Wyclif does not simply reject the notion that God's grace is imparted to believers through the sacraments. However, here again we find his characteristic emphasis on the sole activity of God and the corresponding tendency to decouple the direct inner action of God from the external ceremonies and practices. Following Augustine, Wyclif differentiates between the external sign (*signum*) and the invisible reality (*res signata*) of the sacrament.⁴⁹ What really matters is the *res signata*, the transmission of divine grace, which God grants to the predestined. The external rites and elements of the sacrament are but signs of this grace. Wyclif warns against attaching too much importance to them and he sharply criticizes the "cultores" or "doctores signorum". For God can give his grace to the predestined quite independently of the sacrament. That is why Wyclif considers the sacraments to be not absolutely necessary for salvation.

Even with these basic features of Wyclif's theology of the sacraments, the role of the priest, who is responsible for their external administration, is put into perspective. To make things more difficult, a priest who is not one of the predestined is from the outset incapable of passing on God's grace and the Holy Spirit. And since we cannot know who is predestined, this is a possibility that is inherent in every sacramental ministry. An obvious consequence of this consideration would be Donatism. Wyclif has tried to avoid this conclusion.⁵⁰ Repeatedly he speaks out against the Donatist view. Similarly to the ordination to the priesthood, he considers it possible that God bestows his grace on the believer with every other sacrament even when administered by a *praescitus* or a public sinner, because God himself compensates for the donor's defect.⁵¹ Even if the priest belongs to the foreknown and should live in a state of mortal sin, he harms only himself, not his congregation; pious believers can benefit from receiving the sacraments from his hand.⁵² Again, the decoupling of internal reality from external performance does not serve to destroy the latter, but to save it. In fact, for Wyclif, more important than the worthiness of the donor

⁴⁹ PENN, Wyclif and the Sacraments (as note 26), 245–249.

⁵⁰ WILKS, MICHAEL, Predestination, Property, and Power. Wyclif's Theory of Dominion and Grace, in: Geoffrey John Cuming (ed.), *Studies in Church History*, London 1965, 220–236, at 226; HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18), 316.

⁵¹ SCHÄUFELE, *Die Kontinuität der Kirche* (as note 9), 410.

⁵² "Videtur autem mihi quod praescitus eciam in mortali peccato actuali ministrat fidelibus, licet sibi dampnabiliter, tamen subiectis utiliter sacramenta" (WYCLIF, *De ecclesia*, as note 9, 448.14–16). Cf. *ibid.*, 448.30–32).

was that of the recipient of the sacraments. For only the predestined really received God's grace, those foreknown had no benefit from the sacraments.

Nevertheless, Wyclif does not always seem to have kept himself clear of Donatist tendencies.⁵³ He can state that God suspends a minister who falls into mortal sin from his office and ministry.⁵⁴ Several times he quotes the canonical prohibition to hear the masses of unchaste priests.⁵⁵ Prelates who wage war for worldly possessions cannot administer the sacraments to the faithful either.⁵⁶ In the *Confessio* with which Wyclif defended his view of the Eucharist in 1381, he categorically declared it impossible for a *praescitus* to celebrate this sacrament.⁵⁷ Accordingly, the Blackfriars Council of 1382 listed among Wyclif's erroneous teachings, "quod si episcopus vel sacerdos existat in peccato mortali: non ordinat, conficit, nec baptizat".⁵⁸ In Wyclif himself, anti-Donatist and Donatist sentiments were still unbalanced.⁵⁹ The Donatist tendencies became fully manifest only with the Lollards.

Even though Wyclif basically adhered to the sacramental transmission of salvation, with his conception of the sacraments he put into perspective the distinguished position of the clergy. This applies especially to his understanding of the Eucharist.⁶⁰ Because of his realistic ontology, Wyclif was forced to reject the doctrine of transubstantiation dogmatized in 1215. The idea that the substances of bread and wine could be annihilated and replaced by the substances of the body and blood of Christ seemed absurd to him. Instead, he assumed the remanence of bread and wine. Together with them, the body and blood of Christ were also present in the Eucharist, but this was not a real, substantial presence, but a spiritual, sacramental one. In terms of a difference of aspects, bread and wine were present in the sacrament of the altar for the physical eye, and the body and blood of Christ for the spiritual eye. Although Wyclif did not deny the salvific efficacy of the Eucharist, his rejection of transubstantiation meant a diminution of the reputation of the celebrating priest, to whom popular belief attributed the power of "making God" through the execution of the miracle of the transmutation of substances.

⁵³ LEFF, *Heresy* (as note 4), II 526; PENN, *Wyclif and the Sacraments* (as note 26), 244.

⁵⁴ "Deus quemcunque prelatum vel viatorem suspendit a suo officio vel ministerio quando incidit in mortale" (WYCLIF, *Sermones*, as note 13, III 45.34–36).

⁵⁵ E.g. WYCLIF, JOHN, *De officio pastorali*, ed. by Gotthard Victor Lechler, Leipzig 1863, 15. Wyclif refers to the *Decretum Gratiani*, D. 32 C. 5 (ed. Friedberg, I 117).

⁵⁶ WYCLIF, *Sermones* (as note 13), III 17.31–34.

⁵⁷ "impossibile est praescitum carentem fide secundum iustitiam praesentem conficere" (*Fasciculi Zizaniorum magistri Johannis Wyclif cum Tritico*, ascribed to Thomas Netter of Walden, ed. by Walter Waddington Shirley, London 1858, Rolls Series 5, 116).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁵⁹ "Wyclif never resolved these antinomies" (LEFF, *Heresy*, as note 4, II 526).

⁶⁰ KENNY, *Wyclif* (as note 17), 80–90; PENN, *Wyclif and the Sacraments* (as note 26), 249–272.

A further reduction of priestly authority in the domain of the sacraments resulted from Wyclif's view of penance.⁶¹ He considered the auricular confession to the priest, which was considered a prerequisite for the forgiveness of sins and had been made obligatory for all believers at least once a year in 1215, to be unnecessary. According to him, the only crucial factor was repentance, and it was sufficient for the believer to confess his sins directly to God. Forgiveness, too, was granted by God alone and did not rest in the authority of the priest. The authority of binding and loosing according to Mt 16:19 (and 18:18) does not denote a sovereign power of the confessor to absolve. Rather, he could only confirm declaratively the forgiveness already granted by God; if God did not forgive the impenitent sinner, priestly absolution was ineffective.

5. The bible as "lex Christi"

A further qualification of the sacramental imparting of salvation and thus of priestly authority resulted from Wyclif's appreciation of the Bible.⁶² For him, the Bible was the law of Christ (*lex Christi*), the authoritative document of God's will towards mankind. It contains all truth and is without error. Knowledge of the Bible is therefore indispensable for clerics and lay people, men and women alike.⁶³ Accordingly, Wyclif saw the preaching of the gospel as the first and foremost duty of priests.⁶⁴ He expressly declared it to be even more important than the administration of the sacraments.⁶⁵ By virtue of his ordination, every priest is entitled and obliged to preach. Wyclif rejects the then widespread custom of making preaching dependent on a special episcopal permission. The sermon should not, as often was the case with the friars, be limited to anecdotes and examples. Its goal is to communicate the biblical stories, especially the Gospels, to the people.

⁶¹ PENN, Wyclif and the Sacraments (as note 26), 283–289.

⁶² LEFF, Heresy (as note 4), II 511–516; KENNY, Wyclif (as note 17), 56–67.

⁶³ "fideles autem, quos vocat ut mites et humiles corde, cuiuscunque generis fuerint clerici vel laici, viri vel femine submittentis colla interioris hominis logice et eloquencie scripture, inveniunt in ea virtutem operandi [...] et sapienciam inflatis absconditam" (WYCLIF, De veritate s. s., as note 38, I 117.2–8).

⁶⁴ "sic igitur ex lege caritatis et principiis fidei demonstratur, quod sacerdotes precipue debent arti operis predicandi attendere, cum ex isto habent officii dignitatem" (WYCLIF, De veritate s. s., as note 38, II 150.15–17). On Wyclif's views on preaching in general see Levy, Wyclif and the Christian Life, 312–315.

⁶⁵ "patet secundo, quod predicacio verbi dei est actus solempnior quam confectio sacramenti, cum tantum sit unum recipere verbum dei sicut corpus Cristi. igitur multo plus est, populum recipere verbum dei, quam unicum personam recipere corpus Cristi" (WYCLIF, De veritate s. s., as note 38, II 156.3–7).

Because the Bible is the only infallible authority for Wyclif, the lay people must also be familiar with it. A *fides implicita* that submits to the authority of the church is not sufficient. On the contrary, all precepts of ecclesiastical authorities must be judged by whether they are in accordance with Scripture, and only if this is the case may they be obeyed.⁶⁶ This assessment is the responsibility of each individual believer.⁶⁷ Wyclif grants every lay person the right and duty to judge the actions and teachings of the church and its ministers according to the Bible. Apparently, he did not doubt that this was actually possible. In any case, the Bible in its literary sense was comprehensible to the laity. For a more profound understanding of the Scriptures, however, knowledge of philosophy (especially metaphysics and logic) and theology would be required. As a result, this meant that lay people had to become theologians as well: “oportet, omnem hominem esse theologum”.⁶⁸

Consequently, Wyclif called for the Bible and its truths to be made accessible to the faithful in the vernacular:

“Christ and his apostles converted a great multitude by unveiling sacred scripture to them, and that in the language which was most familiar to the people. That was why the Holy Spirit gave them the knowledge of all tongues Why then should not modern disciples of Christ [do likewise]? [...] The faith of Christ must be unlocked to the people in each of the languages of which the Holy Spirit has given us knowledge”.⁶⁹

In fact, the first translation of the complete Bible into English was produced in the circle around Wyclif. The genesis of this so-called Lollard Bible is extremely complex. Wyclif himself was not directly involved, but he can be considered the inspirer for this enterprise. However, he himself does not seem to have thought that the laity should acquire their knowledge of the Bible through their own reading. Rather, they were to be instructed in faith through the preaching of the ministers.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See above note 24.

⁶⁷ LEFF, Heresy (as note 4), II 522; MCNIVEN, PETER, Heresy and Politics in the Reign of Henry IV. The Burning of John Badby, Woodbridge 1987, 14.

⁶⁸ WYCLIF, De veritate s. s. (as note 38), I 378.5f. Cf. LEFF, Heresy (as note 4), II 522–524; SHOGIMEN, Wyclif’s Ecclesiology (as note 9), 236.

⁶⁹ WYCLIF, JOHN, Opera minora, ed. by Johann Loserth, London 1913, 75. English translation by KENNY, Wyclif (as note 17), 64f.

⁷⁰ WILKS, MICHAEL, Misleading Manuscripts. Wyclif and the Non-Wycliffite Bible, in: Derek Baker (ed.), The Materials, Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History, Oxford 1975 (SCH 11), 147–161, at 158f. with note 47.

6. Universal priesthood in Wyclif?

Wyclif, as we have seen, qualified the traditional prerogatives and authority of the clergy in various ways. On the other hand, he maintained the existence of a particular clerical estate and assigned to it a specific function in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. How does this fit in with those statements in which he speaks of a universal priesthood? In the following, we will consider the most important passages from Wyclif's Latin writings; the English writings used by earlier scholars in this context cannot necessarily be considered authentic.

First of all, it is important to note that Wyclif's reflections on this topic are in the context of his ongoing criticism of the clergy. He states that many people think that "nowadays" children of God (*fili Dei*) could hold the priesthood even without having been ordained by a well-benefited bishop (*episcopus cesareus*).⁷¹ Indeed, if the worldliness of the clergy progresses, it could even come to the point that clergy and laity change places – while the clergy devote themselves to worldly business, it would then be up to the laity, men and also women, to interpret the Scriptures.⁷²

On several occasions, Wyclif expressly claims every predestined layman to be priest. In *De eucharistia* he refers to the testimony of the church fathers: "videtur iuxta testimonium Augustini, Crisostomi et aliorum sanctorum quod omnis predestinatus laycus est sacerdos, et multo magis devotus laycus conficiens."⁷³ In *De potestate papae* he extends this idea to all clerical orders: "Sicut enim omnis christianus et specialiter bonus presbiter est sacerdos, sic est spiritualiter hostiarius, ceroferarius, lector, exorcista, subdiaconus, diaconus et sacerdos."⁷⁴

Nevertheless, lay people taking over priestly duties was not part of Wyclif's program of church reform. Malcolm B. Yarnell has critically re-read the relevant passages.⁷⁵ According to him, they are not to be understood as practical options or demands, but rather as hypothetical considerations in the service of

⁷¹ "Et multis videtur quod dimissa presumpcione temeraria filii Dei possent inpresenciarum uti officio sacerdotis, licet a episcopo cesareo non fuerint consecrati" (WYCLIF, *Opera minora*, as note 69, 178).

⁷² "et divertente clero ad seculum plus quam laici everti possit clerus in laicos et e contra, ita quod laici tam viri quam femine intendant postillationi scripture, clerici autem traditionibus humanis, bellis, contencionibus et aliis negociis secularibus, contempta fide scripture, quo foret nimis propinqua dispositio anticristo" (WYCLIF, *De veritate s. s.*, as note 38, I 154.9–15).

⁷³ WYCLIF, JOHN, *De eucharistia tractatus maior. Accedit Tractatus de eucharistia et poenitentia sive De confessione*, ed. by Johann Loserth, London 1892, 98.30–32.

⁷⁴ WYCLIF, *De potestate pape* (as note 23), 315.10–14.

⁷⁵ YARNELL, *Royal Priesthood* (as note 32), 32–38; cf. HORNBECK, *What Is a Lollard?* (as note 35), 150–156.

Wyclif's argumentation against the misconduct of the clergy. Wyclif did not desire the priestly service of the laity, but the proper, godly service of priests. In *De eucharistia*, therefore, only a few lines after the quoted sentence, Wyclif affirms the legitimacy and rationality of the church's directive that only ordained priests should celebrate the Eucharist:

“Verumptamen sicut ecclesia racionabiliter variavit in verbis confectionis ad omnibus hiis quatuor evangelistis servando sententiam [...], sic racionabiliter ordinavit quod soli sacerdotes propter religiositatem et dignitatem in moribus hoc sacramentum conficerent.”⁷⁶

Admittedly, it might be necessary for the laity to perform priestly duties if the bishops ordain unworthy persons. But no one should do this rashly and pretentiously, and better than such a priestly ministry of lay people would always be if the bishops ordained worthy priests.⁷⁷ For Wyclif, the universal priesthood of the laity is thus a theological reflection and an option for exceptional situations, but his real concern is the reform of the clergy. Hornbeck concludes that “Wyclif and the majority of English dissenting writers were hyperclericalists who envisioned the retention and purification, rather than the outright abolition, of the clerical estate.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Wyclif was moving on a critical boundary: “it was precisely in the relationship of priest to layman that Wyclif came closest to the abyss without ever quite falling over it among the Waldensians.”⁷⁹ Peter McNiven sees here a conflict between two different personal traits of Wyclif:

“Within Wyclif's personality there co-existed, at times uneasily, the strict logical philosopher who denied the need for a visible church, and the more pragmatic puritan who believed that whatever its ultimate limitations, an institution purged of abuses and otherwise reformed could still have a rôle in upholding and propagating Christianity.”⁸⁰

So, in reality, did Wyclif not whole-heartedly support the idea of a universal priesthood? This conclusion would only be valid if the doctrine of the universal priesthood were to be equated with the rejection of a particular clerical order and the call for a regular priestly ministry of lay people. In fact, Wyclif's statements aim at something quite different from the outset, that is, at the spiritual character of the predestined. In this sense the adverb “spiritualiter” in the quotation from *De potestate papae* is to be understood: the predestined one is “in a spiritual sense” porter, lector, deacon and priest. Elsewhere, Wyclif uses the phrase “sacerdos in patria” – but it does not follow from this spiritual priesthood that a predestined person should exercise priestly functions without episcopal ordination:

⁷⁶ WYCLIF, *De eucharistia* (as note 73), 99.2–7.

⁷⁷ WYCLIF, *Opera minora* (as note 69), 174–176.

⁷⁸ HORNBECK, *What Is a Lollard?* (as note 35), 146.

⁷⁹ LEFF, *Heresy* (as note 4), II 525.

⁸⁰ MCNIVEN, *Heresy and Politics* (as note 67), 13.

“Hic dicitur, quod quilibet predestinatus est sacerdos in patria nec debet propterea omnes ritus et opera sacerdotibus limitata exercere, nec debet fidelis sine revelacione consecrationem episcopi sui contempnere.”⁸¹

With this notion, Wyclif comes surprisingly close to Luther's later conception of the universal priesthood of all believers put down in his *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*: “For whatever has crawled out from baptism may boast that it has already been ordained priest, bishop, and pope, although it is not befitting for everyone to exercise such an office.”⁸² The only difference is that Wyclif makes predestination the prerequisite of the spiritual priesthood, while Luther bases it on baptism (and faith).

7. The bible, Donatism and universal priesthood with the Lollards

Whether Wyclif himself sent out so-called Poor Priests, dispossessed preachers of the Gospel, is disputed today. But since the early 1380s, his students carried the teachings of their master from Oxford into the country and to the laity. The Wycliffite or Lollard movement⁸³ was much more diverse than was previously thought, and it sometimes took positions that differed from those of Wyclif.⁸⁴

An essential feature was the central role of Holy Scripture and biblical preaching. The Wycliffite translations of the Bible into English promoted the knowledge of the Scriptures among the laity, which had already been called for by Wyclif, and enabled them to criticize the corrupt church on a biblical basis.⁸⁵ In line with Wyclif's claim that every lay person should become a theologian, there were ambitious ideas to expand the educational system⁸⁶, but overall the movement was rather hostile to education.⁸⁷

⁸¹ WYCLIF, *Polemical Works* (as note 22), I 259.9–12

⁸² LUTHER, Martin, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520 (trans. mine); WA 6, 408.11–13: “Dan was ausz der tauff krochen ist, das mag sich rumen, das es schon priester, Bischoff und Bapst geweyhet sey, ob wol nit einem yglichen zympt, solch ampt zu uben“. Cf. Harald GOERTZ, *Allgemeines Priestertum und ordiniertes Amt bei Luther*, Marburg 1997 (MThSt 46).

⁸³ Sometimes a distinction is made between academic Wycliffism and popular Lollardism. Following Anne Hudson, I use both terms synonymously (HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation*, as note 18, 2).

⁸⁴ On the Lollards see HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18); REX, RICHARD, *The Lollards*, London 2002; HORNBECK, *What Is a Lollard?* (as note 35); LEFF, *Heresy* (as note 4), II 559–605.

⁸⁵ HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18), 238–247.

⁸⁶ For example, Lollards demanded that fifteen new universities be founded from confiscated church revenues (*ibid.*, 174).

⁸⁷ There was “a persistent strain of anti-intellectualism” (*ibid.*, 225).

As far as the relationship between clergy and laity is concerned, the Lollards went beyond Wyclif's ambiguous positions in two respects: as a rule, they espoused a decidedly Donatist attitude, and they were more open to the possibility of lay people performing priestly duties. Occasionally, Wyclif's view of the validity of the sacraments of wicked priests is found in English Wycliffite texts.⁸⁸ In general, however, these tracts, like the Lollards interrogated by episcopal commissions, deny the authority of wicked priests to administer the Eucharist or other sacraments. An early example is the Lollard priest William Swinderby questioned in Leicester in 1382: "Credit firmiter, ut asserit, quod quilibet sacerdos existens in mortali peccato, si ponat [se] ad conficiendum corpus Christi, potius committit idolatriam quam conficit."⁸⁹ From later times, numerous other evidences of this kind can be cited.⁹⁰

With regard to the universal priesthood, it should be remembered that the Lollard movement was not centrally organized. It should not be imagined as a kind of regular church with formally appointed ministers. Rather, there were loose networks and family associations, and Lollard preachers owed their influence to their personal charisma, not to an institutional commission.⁹¹ Many of these preachers were priests who had received the regular episcopal ordination, but also lay people served as evangelists. It was therefore natural that the Lollard movement should take up the attempts at the conception of a universal priesthood found in Wyclif and go beyond them in their practical implementation. However, this does not apply to the written tracts of the Lollards and other dissenters. In them we find no pleas for the assumption of priestly duties by lay people. Instead, a spiritual priesthood in the sense of Wyclif is advocated here: "And þouȝ lewde men ben good lyueris and wise men, zit ben þei not prestes of office, ne þei be not bounden to preche of office, al be it þat þei be prestes spirituali."⁹²

The situation is different with the statements of Lollards recorded in interrogation protocols.⁹³ As early as 1388, an interrogated group of Lollards in Leicester believed that every good Christian was a priest and entitled to

⁸⁸ "Þes Anticristis sophistris schulden knowe wel þat a cursed man doþ fully þe sacramentis, þouȝ it be to his dampnyng, for þei ben not autouris of þes sacramentis, but God kepith þat dygnyte to himself" (WYCLIF, JOHN, *Select English Works*, ed. by Thomas Arnold, 3 vols., Oxford 1868–1871, III 227f.).

⁸⁹ Quoted from HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18), 283. Cf. MCNIVEN, *Heresy and Politics* (as note 67), 44f.

⁹⁰ See HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18), 317.

⁹¹ REX, *The Lollards* (as note 84), 81f.

⁹² Sixteen Points on which the Bishops Accuse Lollards, quoted from HORNBECK, *What Is a Lollard?* (as note 35), 158.

⁹³ HORNBECK, *What Is a Lollard?* (as note 35), 166–171.

preach.⁹⁴ In 1401, Wyclif's disciple John Purvey claimed that all predestined people were made priests by God, and lay people could administer all the sacraments.⁹⁵ The opinion that lay people, not only men but also women, could celebrate the Eucharist is also found in other sources as, for instance, in the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* of 1395: "we suppose [consider] þat on þis wise may euery trewe man and womman in Godis lawe make þe sacrament of þe bred withoutin oni sich miracle".⁹⁶

A number of references suggest that some Lollards accepted the priesthood of women.⁹⁷ For example, in 1391 the educated layman Walter Brut argued that "women have the power and authority to preach and make the body of Christ, and they have the power of the keys of the church, of binding and loosing".⁹⁸ There were rumors about women presiding over Eucharistic celebrations, but it is unclear how often such a practice occurred and whether it was possibly only an isolated case. A regular women's priesthood in the proper sense of the word did not exist even among the Lollards.

8. Conclusions

Wyclif maintained the existence of a particular priesthood, the necessity of priestly ordination and the usefulness of the sacraments. But by his predestinarian ecclesiology with its principle of the unrecognizability of the members of the church he undermined the authority of the church hierarchy and its ministers. In the end, he accepted only the authority of the Holy Scriptures. In various ways Wyclif reduced the pre-eminence of the clergy over the laity, without intending to abolish the separation between them. First of all, he decoupled the ministers' spiritual authority conferred directly by God from the external assignment to ecclesiastical offices and dignities while generally maintaining

⁹⁴ "quilibet bonus homo, licet literaturam nesciat, est sacerdos" (quoted from HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation*, as note 18, 325); "quilibet laicus potest sancta evangelia ubicumque predicare et docere" (ibid., 354).

⁹⁵ "Quod omnes boni christiani sunt praedestinati, veri sacerdotes ordinati, seu facti a Deo ad offerendum Christum in seipsis, et ad docendum evangelium proximis, verbo et exemplo" (*Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, as note 57, 387). "Item quod laici possunt legitime ministrare omnia sacramenta necessaria ad salutem" (ibid., 390). Cf. ibid., 402.

⁹⁶ *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, quoted from HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18), 326.

⁹⁷ Cf. CROSS, CLAIRE, *Great reasoners in scripture. The activities of women Lollards, 1380–1530*, in: Derek Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women*, Oxford 1978, 359–380; ASTON, MARGARET, *Lollard women priests?* in: id., *Lollards and Reformers*, London 1984, 49–70; HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18), 137, 151; REX, *The Lollards* (as note 84), 104–108.

⁹⁸ Quoted from HUDSON, *The Premature Reformation* (as note 18), 326.

episcopal ordination to the priesthood. Secondly, he decoupled the divine communication of grace to the faithful from the external administration of the sacraments and denied their necessity for salvation while in principle maintaining their usefulness for the faithful. Finally, he placed the preaching of the gospel above the celebration of the sacraments. Preaching was the supreme duty of priests, but the laity should also know and propagate the Scriptures.

As for himself, Wyclif avoided drawing the most radical conclusions from his theological views. With regard to Donatism and the universal priesthood, his theology had subversive potential, but he himself did not fully exploit it. Despite occasional wavering, he maintained the validity of the sacraments administered by wicked priests, and the delegation of priestly tasks to lay people was only a hypothetical possibility for him. In both respects, the Lollards went beyond Wyclif. In their majority they adhered to Donatism and probably also approved and practiced a priestly ministry of lay persons and perhaps also of women.

Wyclif's conception of the universal priesthood of the predestined was not intended to be a contribution to the practical reorganization of the church, but was conceived primarily theologically and spiritually. In this respect it is close to Luther's conception of the universal priesthood of the baptized.