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## From the Medieval Church to the English Reformation: John Wycliffe and King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, 1536–1539

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## **From the Medieval Church to the English Reformation: John Wycliffe and King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, 1536–1539**

While the main purpose of the Reformation in Germany and Switzerland was to condemn and annihilate the immoral practices of the Roman Catholic Church and to spiritually strengthen both the clergy and the laity, the Reformation in England did not strictly follow the doctrines of Martin Luther and John Calvin, retaining much of the Catholic tradition of the Middle Ages. However, as early as in the Medieval times, religious life in England was “tainted” by steadily growing anticlericalism, whose principal reason was the wealth of the Church. Monasteries owned approximately one-third of all the cultivated land in the country. Such vast land holdings of the religious houses clearly meant that they controlled about one-half of the Church's annual income.

The most serious challenge to the unity of the Church in England came in the fourteenth century with John Wycliffe<sup>1</sup> (c.1320–1384), an English scholastic philosopher, theologian, lay preacher, translator, a lecturer at Oxford University in the years 1361–1382, and a prolific writer, who strongly criticized the excessive wealth and power of the clergy. It is noteworthy, however, that although Wycliffe with his fierce criticism of the monastic life did indeed herald the English Reformation in terms of the purity and material simplicity of the clergy, he was not the first churchman to propagate a stricter and more evangelical approach in Christian teaching to the outwardly pleasures of the Church, specifically denouncing the accumulation of wealth.

In the Middle Ages, new ideas concerning work began to spread under the influence of the great monastic brotherhoods, which started to view even hard labor as service to God and the direct way to salvation. Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 547), a monk and a Christian saint, who, remarkably, was honored by the Roman Catholic Church as the patron-saint of Europe, became widely known as the founder, in c. 530, of an order of monks. Benedict's main achievement was his *Rule*, containing precepts for his brethren, written in the form of seventy-three short chapters which regulated the spiritual life of the monks, and their everyday duties. As the *Rule* of St. Benedict offered a unique combination of balance, moderation, and reasonableness, it was, henceforth, adopted by most

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1 Also spelled Wyclif, Wycliff, Wicliffe, or Wicliffe.

religious communities founded in the Middle Ages, making the *Rule* one of the most influential religious precepts in western Christendom monasticism. The rules of behavior for the members of the Benedictine Order declared that both manual and intellectual labor was a religious duty. More than half of the chapters described how to be obedient and humble to God and to other brethren of the Order. Chapter XXXIII of the *Rule*, entitled “Whether the Monks Should Have Anything of Their Own,” advised:

The vice of personal ownership must by all means be out in the monastery by the very root, so that no one may presume to give or receive anything without the command of the Abbot; nor to have anything whatever as his own, neither a book, nor a writing tablet, nor a pen, nor anything else whatsoever, since monks are allowed to have neither their books nor their wills in their own power. Everything that is necessary, however, they must look for from the father of the monastery; and let it not be allowed for anyone to have anything which the Abbot did not give or permit him to have. Let all things be common to all, as it is written. And let no one call or take to himself anything as his own [...]. But if anyone should be found to indulge this most baneful vice, and, having been admonished once and again, doth not amend, let him be subjected to punishment. (*The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*)

Chapter XLVIII of St. Benedict’s precepts, under the title “Of the Daily Work,” condemned idle life and leisure: “Idleness is the enemy of the soul; and therefore the brethren ought to be employed in manual labor at certain times, at others, in devout reading [...]. If, however, the needs of the place, or poverty should require that they do the work of gathering the harvest themselves, let them not be downcast, for then are they monks in truth, if they live by the works of hands, as did also our forefathers and the Apostles” (*The Holy Rule*). Accordingly, while the primary duties of the monks were directly religious, in the monastic orders work was perceived as a direct way of serving God, whereas idleness was condemned as leading to licentiousness. Significantly, for Benedictine monks the function of labor was not to secure material wealth but to discipline the soul.

It may also be appropriate to refer here to St. Francis of Assisi (1181 or 1182–1226), a friar and preacher, one of the most venerated religious figures in history, who abandoned a life of luxury and gave away all his temporal goods to the poor. He founded the Franciscan Orders, whose *Rule* was based on the three vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity, with an emphasis on absolute poverty. Chapter II of the *Rule of St. Francis of Assisi* of 1223 “Concerning Those Who Wish to Adopt this Life” required that they “go, sell all they have, and attempt to give it to the poor.” Chapter IV under the title “That the Brothers Should not Accept Money” strictly forbade the monks “to receive money in any form either directly or through an intermediary.” Chapter VI commanded “That the Brothers should appropriate neither house, nor place, nor anything for themselves; and they should go confidently after alms, serving God in poverty and humility, as pilgrims and strangers in this world” as

“[t]his is that peak of the highest poverty which has made you my dearest brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven, poor in things but rich in virtues” (*Rule of St. Francis*).

John Wycliffe’s call for dispossessing monasteries and distributing their property to the needy gained him a large audience of sympathizers, for whom he was a person standing for the national cause. He traced the source of the vices of the clergy to their wealth, obtained through the Church’s monopolistic control of the means of salvation. In his numerous treatises, he did not hesitate to openly condemn the involvement of the churchmen in the earthly matters at the expense of praying, preaching, and serving God. Wycliffe claimed that the evils coming from the blind accumulation of the riches and from the Church endowments were enormous; the state had been drained of its treasury and, consequently, secular lords had become impoverished, which caused unrest in the country. His criticism of the wealth of the Church revealed the wickedness of the clergy. Accordingly, argued Wycliffe, the confiscation of the ecclesiastical property would prove beneficial not only for the religious life but also for the political and economic stability of England. In his undated treatise *How the Office of Curate is Ordained of God*, Wycliffe listed the principal vices of the churchmen: simony and usury as well as the financial abuses of the poor, the most explicit evidence of which was the forceful and unscrupulous execution of the tithe. Such practices were both unbiblical and inhumane, not befitting a Christian, and a clergyman in particular. In the treatise, the clergy’s pursuit of personal glory and promotion at the expense of their spiritual duties is explicitly condemned:

[T]hey make themselves busy, night and day, to get worldly advancement, and their own worship and dignity in this world, by pleading and striving therefore, considering it great righteousness to hold forth and maintain points of worldly privilege, and dignity; but about spiritual dignity, and high degree of heavenly bliss, they will not strive against spiritual enemies; for they strive not who shall be most meek and willingly poor, and most busy in open preaching and private counseling how men shall obtain heaven, as Christ and his apostles did. But they, like moles, remain rooting after worldly worship, and earthly goods, as though there were no life but only in the wretched world. (Wycliffe, *How the Office* 15)

In his another undated treatise, *Tractatus De Pseudo-Freres*, John Wycliffe openly condemns monks who, instead of serving as the models of piety, holiness, meekness, and humility, embodied sloth, gluttony, pride, and envy; they hindered true preaching, exposed impurity, immorality, fornication; they encouraged vengeance, lawsuits, and warfare. Wycliffe also accuses the friars of avarice, worldliness, and hypocrisy. Although they preached poverty, they themselves accumulated wealth and lived in comfort. They wore wide habits in order to hide their large bellies, and harmed the poor by excessive begging. Their monasteries, built by robbery and injury of the parish churches, became the houses of debauchery (*Tractatus* 322). It may be worth quoting here the Basel letter of John Calvin who, on 23 August, 1535, wrote “To the Most Mighty and Most Illustrious Monarch, Francis, Most Christian King

of the French,” accusing “the priesthood” of ignorance and neglect “because their belly is their God, and their kitchen their religion”<sup>2</sup> (xx).

Wycliffe was particularly severe on the mendicant orders, claiming that the accumulation of temporal goods clashed with the biblical idea of absolute poverty and asceticism to which monks and friars should have been devoted. Significantly, in 1384, a few months before his death on 31<sup>st</sup> of December, because of his deteriorating health, he declined to respond to the summons by Pope Urban VI to come to Rome. In his explanatory letter to the Pope, Wycliffe strongly argued:

[...] I submit that the Roman pontiff, inasmuch as he is Christ’s highest vicar on earth, is among pilgrims most bound to this law of the gospel. For the majority of Christ’s disciples are not judged according to worldly greatness, but according to the imitation of Christ in their moral life. Again, from out this heart of the Lord’s law I plainly conclude that Christ was the poorest of men during the time of his pilgrimage and that he eschewed all worldly dominion. This is clear from the faith of the gospel. [...] From this I infer, as a counsel, that the pope should leave temporal dominion to the secular arm, and to this he should effectually exhort his clergy. For in such wise did Christ have signified through his apostles. (“In the Year of Death”)

Surprisingly, despite his radical and unwelcome criticism of the ecclesiastical vices, Wycliffe remained undisturbed during his lifetime. However, long after his death, at the Council of Constance in 1414–1418, he was condemned as a heretic, particularly for his demand that Church property be confiscated. His books were destroyed, and his body was exhumed and burned for heresy. Admittedly, his theories heralded the Reformation. Unexpectedly, the greatest appreciation of John Wycliffe’s claim came in 1644 from John Milton in his famous speech to the English Parliament, which has become one of the best known expositions of individual freedom rights. The following excerpt directly refers to Wycliffe:

Lords and Commons of England! consider what nation it is whereof ye are, and whereof ye are the governors: a nation not slow and dull, but of a quick, ingenious, and piercing spirit; acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point the highest that human capacity can soar to [...]. Why else was this nation chosen before any other, that out of her, as out of Sion, should be proclaimed and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all Europe? And had it not been the obstinate perverseness of our prelates against the divine and admirable spirit of Wickliff, to suppress him as a schismatic and innovator, perhaps neither the Bohemian Husse and Jerome, no, nor the name of Luther or of Calvin, had been ever known: the glory of reforming all our neighbours had been completely ours. But now as our obdurate clergy have with violence demeaned the matter, we are become hitherto the latest and the backwardest scholars, of whom God offered to have made us the teachers. (90)

2 The letter was attached to the initial, incomplete version of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1535.

Wycliffe's greatest contribution to English Reformed theology was the first translation of the whole Bible into the vernacular language, which he instituted, himself translating at least the Gospels. Consequently, a tradition of reading the Scriptures gradually developed into an important component of English national culture. The task was completed by the followers of his teachings, hence named the Wycliffites, also known as the Lollards. Lollardy was a political and religious movement which existed from the mid-fourteenth century until the English Reformation; initially led by Wycliffe himself, it was from the start denounced as heresy. In the early years of the reign of Henry VIII, Sir Thomas More, the chief investigator of heresy, was granted by Bishop Cuthbert of London a license which enabled the grantee to possess 'heretical' books needed as evidence in his investigation. The undated license "to the very reverend and distinguished Sir Thomas More" declared:

Since of late, after the Church of God throughout Germany has been infested with heretics, there have been some sons of iniquity who are trying to introduce into this country of ours the old and accursed Wycliffite heresy and its foster-child the Lutheran heresy, by translating into our mother tongue some of the most subversive of their pamphlets, and printing them in great quantity. They are, indeed, striving with all their might to defile and infect this country with these pestilential doctrines, which are most repugnant to the truth of the catholic faith. (Bishop Cuthbert)

It is noteworthy that Wycliffe and the Lollards were sheltered by English anticlerical nobility and royalty, among the latter, curiously enough, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, Earl of Richmond, one of the younger sons of King Edward III. The reason for such an alliance could have been the desire of the nobles to use the Lollard church reformers to acquire new sources of revenue from the English monasteries. The Lollards faced serious persecutions after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and although neither Wycliffe himself nor most of his followers supported the revolt, one of its prominent leaders, John Ball (hanged during the rebellion as a traitor), who gained considerable fame as a preacher by expanding Wycliffe's doctrines, exposed the whole movement to the anger of the King. Among the primary ideas of Lollardy was the rejection of the acquisition by church leaders of temporal wealth as excessive riches drew them away from religious concerns and led them to greed. For over a hundred years, Lollardy was strongly opposed and, as quoted earlier, openly associated by leaders of the English Reformation with Protestantism which was not fully adopted by Anglicanism. Indeed, the similarity between the Lollards and the Protestant reform groups, among them the Puritans, clearly reveals apparent continuation of the Lollard ideas through the Reformation in England although the very extent and scope of their influence at the time may be a point of debate.

Wycliffe's call for apostolic simplicity and purity as well as for the Church reform and the revival of the Bible was subsequently taken over by Christian Humanism, a Renaissance movement which reached England in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Among its most articulate proponents were the prominent

scholars and theologians, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas More, and John Colet. Those three famous men of letters of the time, called the "Oxford Reformers," urged the revival of art and learning, which developed under the name of the Renaissance. Unquestionably, the rediscovery of ancient classics, but also of the Church Fathers and the Bible, paved the way for the religious revolution. Both Erasmus and More were tirelessly exposing the monks' corruptive and sinful nature: hypocrisy, immodesty, worldliness, prejudice, inclination to discord, vanity, and snobbery. The connection between the Renaissance and the Reformation, although complex and problematic, is undeniable.

Although the need for reform in Europe could not be questioned, the scope and methods were difficult to universally be determined. Significantly, while the main objective of the German and Swiss Reformation was to denounce and condemn the immoral practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation in England, as already noted, did not closely obey the Lutheran or Calvinist doctrines, retaining much of the medieval Catholic tradition. As was remarked earlier, Lollardy had been active from the fourteenth century until the Reformation, zealously depicting the English clergy as vain, corruptive, and degenerated, and strongly criticizing Catholic theology, even illegally, during the times of Henry VIII. As claimed before, the Lollards, effectively absorbed into Protestantism and always considered dangerous, had never been powerful enough to achieve significant aims. However, although their activity did not immediately cause a religious revolution, the English Reformation may indeed have been rooted in the Lollards movement.

It is commonly thought that the major cause of the English Reformation was the desire of Henry VIII, who reigned from 1509 to 1547, to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of the powerful Spanish Catholic monarchs, Isabelle of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, in order to marry Anne Boleyn. However, it would be erroneous to think that the King of England could have broken the ties with the Apostolic See merely for the wish of annulling his marriage. The English Reformation was a *political*, and to a much lesser degree liturgical, revolution. The Church in medieval England possessed a vast amount of land, and the clergy enjoyed broad, undeserved privileges in tax paying as well as in trying some cases at courts. Thus the effective ruling of the country must have been much disturbed. Money for the costly wars King Henry extensively waged, as well as for his luxurious lifestyle, could have been a prerequisite for *his own* religious revolution. Accordingly, seizing the power over the Church in England seems to have been a reasonable and feasible means of gaining the wealth owned by the clergy and, most of all, by the monasteries. Not arguable, Henry's actions were decidedly supported by a growing popular discontent with the privileges of the Church and of the papacy.

England was unique in the manner in which the Reformation was conducted. Although it was not the first country where the main impetus for reform was political, its national, though semi-reinforced, Church was the first such an institution in Europe. Another unique aspect of the English Reformation was the extent to which

Henry VIII minimized the possible religious consequences which accompanied the Reformation in other countries. Indeed, the King's character and ambitions were formative for the religious upheavals in England, at least in their early stages. Not well acquainted with the Scriptures, and having only a superfluous knowledge of the Canon Law, Henry perceived himself as a theologian and a zealous Catholic. In 1520, he launched a fierce attack on Luther's writings, especially on his polemical treatise *The Babylonish Captivity of the Church*, which expressed the German Reformer's strong disapproval of the system of seven sacraments. For condemning Luther's heresy, which was clearly revealed in 1521 in the King's pamphlet *The Defense of the Seven Sacraments*, dedicated to Pope Leo X and vigorously defending papal authority, Henry VIII was, in return, granted by the Pope the highly respected title of the *Defensor Fidei*.

The most fundamental and inevitable political consequence of the Henrician Reformation was the repudiation of the papal authority. The break with Rome was legalized through a number of Parliamentary acts. Similarly, anticlerical bills were released to weaken the Catholic Church. The reason for King Henry's attempt to radically limit the power of the Church was at least twofold: the Church increasingly acted against the state authority of the King and, more importantly, it had become an international institution of great influence and wealth. In 1531, Henry, for the first time, turned to Parliament for support. The so-called "Long Parliament of Reformation" or the "Henrician Parliament," which sat from 1529 until 1536, passed numerous acts abolishing the jurisdiction of the pope and, by forth of the 1534 Act of Supremacy, recognizing the monarch "our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm" as "the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England" ("The Act of Supremacy" 443). The passing of the Act against the Pope's Authority in 1536, being practically an extension of the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals and of the subsequent Act of Supremacy, removed the last traces of papal power in England, including the Pope's right to decide disputed points of Scripture.

The Act of Supremacy was preceded by the 1532 Act in Conditional Restraint of Annates, which forbade the English clergy the payment of substantial annates to Rome, which were required for each appointment of the archbishop or bishop. The act contained a threat that if the Pope refused to relinquish his right to the annates and, consequently, withheld consecration, the newly appointed archbishops and bishops would be consecrated without papal sanction. A subsequent supplication made by the House of Commons against the church government and ecclesiastical courts in England was presented to the bishops for their reply. After a considerable resistance, the bishops conceded that no new ecclesiastical ordinances would be enacted without the King's permission. Shortly, the marriage of the King with Catherine of Aragon was declared invalid, and Henry's secret wedlock with Anne Boleyn was legally sanctioned and further confirmed by the Act of Succession of 1533, which granted the right to the throne to the heirs of Henry and Anne.

However, there were no significant changes in doctrine or worship, in religious fundamentals or practice. Yet although religious doctrine and worship changed very

little under Henry VIII, the dissolution of the monasteries was, by far, the most important social upheaval in the English Reformation. Anticlerical atmosphere in England, radicalized by the Humanistic movement, which by then had reached the country, helped King Henry to dissolve the lesser monasteries in 1536, and the remaining greater monasteries as well as other religious houses in 1539, and to take over their lands and revenues. Monastic land and buildings were confiscated by the Crown. By 1540, monasteries were being dismantled at a rate of fifty a month. Some of the lands, obtained as a result of the dissolution, were subject to leases granted to “the servants of the Crown,” who supported, or at least sympathized with Henry’s break with Rome, whereas the remaining portion of the Church lands was sold off to the gentry and the nobility, which considerably inclined them toward the King. To provide the proper justification of the planned dissolution of the monasteries, the Lord Chancellor to the King, Thomas Cromwell, appointed by Henry to conduct a general visitation of the monasteries, sent his special agents to inspect the hundreds of monastic houses, and to report to him on the state of the clergy, commonly accused, as already noted, of ignorance, lack of proper education, excessive wealth and promiscuity. The reports, in the form of the letters to Cromwell, could not have been better proving the necessity of religious reform and radical action. The letters vividly described the usual routine of the monastic life:

Please it your [Cromwell’s] good lordship to be advertised that the Abbot of Langdon passeth all other that ever I knew in profound bawdry; the drunkennest knave living. The Abbot caused his chaplain to take an whore, and instigate him to it, brought her up into his own chapter and there caused him to go to bed with his whore that the Abbot provided for him. The house is in utter decay and will shortly fall down. You must needs depose him and suddenly sequestrate the fruits, and take an inventory of the goods. You can do no less of justice. (“The Dissolution of the Monasteries” 116–117)

In another letter to Cromwell, one of his agents, John Bartelot, reported that he and five other persons had found the London Crutched Friars’ prior in bed with a prostitute:

Pleas it your honourable mastership to be advertised, that in the tyme of Lent last past Your contynuell oratour John Bartelot, with other to the number of v. persones of good Conversacion, ffound the prior of the Crossid Fryers in London at that tyme being in bedde with his hoore, both nakyd, abought xi. of the klok in the for none, upon Fryday, at which tyme the said priour, to thentent his mysde-meaner and shamefull facte shuld not be known wherby he shuld susteyn opyn shame, knelid upon his kneez, and only desyrid your said oratour and his company to kepe secret his said acte and not to disclose in any wise the same. (“John Bartelot to Cromwell” 59)

As a result of the reports which listed a considerable number of religious offences and moral misconduct prevalent in the monasteries, the 1536 Parliament issued the first of the two so-called “Acts of Suppression” by which the lands of the monasteries, as well as their goods, were confiscated “for the Crown”:

Forasmuch as manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys, priories, and other religious houses of monks, canons, and nuns whereby the governors of such religious houses, and their convent, spoil, destroy, consume, and utterly waste, as well as their churches, monasteries, priories, principal houses, farms, granages, lands, tenements, and hereditaments, as the ornaments of their churches, and to the great infamy of the king's highness and the realm, if redress should not be had thereof. ("The Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries" 770)

By the Second Suppression Act, the Act for the Dissolution of the Greater Monasteries of 1539, the abbots and abbesses were required to relinquish their monastic houses "voluntarily." However, there were rare yet drastic instances of disobedience, promptly severely punished. The execution of Abbot Richard Whiting of Glastonbury was described in a letter dated 15 November, 1539, by one of the Cromwellian visiting agents, Richard Pollard, written to his Superior:

Pleasyth it youre lordship to be advertysed, that the late abbot of Glastonberye went frome Wellys to Glastonberye, and there was drawn thorowe the towne upon a hurdyll to the hyll callyd the Torre, wher he was put to execucion; att wyche tyme he askyd God mercye and the kyng for hys great offensys towards hys hyghenes. ("Richard Pollard to Thomas Cromwell" 261-262)

Unquestionably, the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s was the major outcome of the Henrician Reformation and one of the most revolutionary developments in English history. According to popular estimates, in April 1536, there were over 800 monasteries, abbeys, nunneries, and friaries in England, which housed over 10,000 monks, nuns, friars, and canon. By April 1540, there had been none left. George W. Bernard, professor of early modern history at the University of Southampton, in his 2011 article claims that before the destruction of the monasteries there had been nearly 900 religious houses in England, approximately 260 for monks, 300 for regular canons, 142 nunneries, and 183 friaries. There had been about 12,000 people in religious orders: 4,000 monks, 3,000 canons, 3,000 friars, and 2,000 nuns. This clearly reveals that by the total population of 2.75 million, estimated at the time, one adult man in fifty lived behind the monastic bars (Bernard, "The Dissolution" 390). With no doubt, the confiscation policy of Henry VIII provided the Tudor monarchs with immense wealth. The immediate effect of the Dissolution was the transfer of vast tracts of land to the Crown. The worth of the monastic land was at least three times higher compared to the value of the existing royal landholdings.

As already noted, although the Act of Supremacy officially ended Catholicism in England, in no sense could the "new" religion be called "reformed." Though not a Catholic zealot any longer, Henry, excommunicated in December 1535 from the Roman Catholic Church, remained loyal to the Catholic teaching. His "Six Articles of Religion" of 1539 further hindered the reforms, reaffirming the Catholic doctrines on the main issues. Under Henry VIII, the Bible was translated into English and

placed in the churches. More radical reforms could only be resumed after Henry's death in 1547.

It is generally claimed that the dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell stemmed from financial reasons. However, Prof. Bernard, in his already quoted article, argues that, much more significantly, Henry was determined, first, to assert his royal authority and, second, to demonstrate, under the influence of Erasmus, his religious skepticism about the value of the institutions which supported superstition, corruption, and decadence, thus ignoring the development of modern European thought. Significantly, the first visible outcome of the Henrician Reformation was the dissolution of the smaller monasteries, which allowed monks and nuns to move to larger religious houses. However, the Pilgrimage of Grace of October 1536, led by Robert Aske, virtually a rebellion aimed most of all against the King's dissolution, directed Henry's anger against all the monasteries, making monks and friars surrender their houses to the Monarch and denounce their past way of life. This is reminiscent of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 which, admittedly, contributed to the serious persecutions of the Lollards because rebellion had always been perceived as a threat to the state and sanctioned any repressive action which might have followed.

George Bernard's 2012 study *The Late Medieval Church: Vitality and Vulnerability before the Break with Rome* questions, or rather verifies, a popular claim that the Henrician Reformation was the inevitable result of the corruption, promiscuity, excessive wealth, and superstition of the late medieval Church. Following Eamon Duffy's reassessment of pre-Reformation religious life in England in his well-acclaimed work published two decades earlier and entitled *The Stripping of the Altars*, Bernard demonstrates the vibrancy and great vitality of the Church, and he reveals the confidence as well as responsiveness of the clergy to the Catholic teaching of the time; he reconsiders the depth of the religious knowledge of the English laity, provocatively arguing that in this respect the Henrician Reformation was not inevitable. However, he also draws attention to vulnerabilities that made both the break with Rome and the dissolution of the monasteries possible. Yet Bernard concludes that the removal of those vulnerabilities would not have necessarily prevented the King's Reformation, though it might have been much more difficult for Henry to have successfully accomplished the total dissolution of the monasteries, strikingly, with the relative lack of their resistance to the dismantling and transformation of parish religious life that followed (*The Late Medieval Church* 236).

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### Streszczenie

#### **Od średniowiecznej krytyki kościoła do angielskiej reformacji. John Wycliffe a likwidacja klasztorów przez Henryka VIII w latach 1536–1539**

Reformacja angielska poszła własną drogą; nie stosując się ściśle do zasad luteranizmu czy kalwinizmu zachowała wiele cech średniowiecznej tradycji katolickiej. Jednak jeszcze w średniowieczu pojawił się w Anglii charyzmatyczny kaznodzieja i uczonec, John Wycliffe, stanowiąc poważne zagrożenie dla jedności kościoła. Można przyjąć, że jego ostra krytyka wad duchowieństwa, zwłaszcza upodobania do bogactwa, zradyzalizowała na następne wieki angielski antyklerykalizm, co musiało wpłynąć na reformację Henryka VIII, która była jego osobistą, bardziej polityczną niż liturgiczną, rewolucją. W ten sposób, choć doktryna oraz wiara w Kościele w Anglii uległy jedynie niewielkim transformacjom, likwidacja klasztorów w latach 1536–1539, która przyniosła monarchii Tudorów ogromny majątek, stała się najbardziej rewolucyjną przemianą angielskiej reformacji.

### Abstract

The English Reformation did not closely follow the Lutheran or Calvinist doctrines, retaining much of the medieval Catholic tradition. However, still in the Middle Ages, a scholastic, charismatic preacher, John Wycliffe, posed a serious challenge to the unity of the Church in England. It can be claimed that his fierce criticism of the ecclesiastical vices, particularly the clergy's excessive wealth, strongly radicalized anti-clericalism in England in the coming ages. Therefore, inevitably, Wycliffe's preaching must have influenced King Henry VIII's own Reformation which was essentially a political, and to a much lesser degree liturgical, revolution. Accordingly, although the religious doctrine and worship changed very little in England, the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536–1539, which brought the Tudor dynasty enormous wealth, became the most important upheaval of the English Reformation.