Wycliffe and the Lollards

In this image, depicting a painting by W.F. Yeames entitled “The Dawn of the Reformation,” we see John Wycliffe giving copies of his newly translated-into-English Bibles to 14th-century preachers known as “ Lollards.”

What is the origination of the term “Lollards?” Based on the Dutch word *lollaert*, which effectively means “mumbler,” the word was used pejoratively to describe Wycliffe’s followers.

A professor of philosophy and theology at Oxford, Wycliffe was dismissed from his position over his disagreements with the Catholic Church. Among other things, he did not believe in “transubstantiation” (a Roman-Catholic doctrine which holds that bread and wine, taken during communion, become the body and blood of Jesus).

Wycliffe also disputed the office of the papacy, asserting that Popes were not Biblically based. When the church developed a schism in the 14th century, Wycliffe saw that as a good thing (since he hoped it would end in the destruction of the papacy).

Dr Mike Ibeji, an associate producer for Simon Schama's “A History of Britain,” has written an article, for the BBC, about Wycliffe and the Lollards. He tells us how important they were during the late-medieval period:

> *John Wyclif and his Lollard followers were the first recognised critics of the established church since the fifth century.*

People throughout England took notice of the Lollards and their belief system. The movement attracted many people - from the country, from the city and even from the House of Commons. Two of their most-important beliefs were: All men should have access to a Bible printed in their own language and the main job of a priest was to preach.

Driven underground by the policies of King Henry IV (in 1399) and a new heresy law (passed in 1401), the Lollards did not totally leave the scene (even when they became targets for burning at the stake). Their members were mostly artisans and tradesmen until a Lollard revival began (around 1500).

When Henry VIII decided to abolish the Roman Catholic Church, in favor of his version of Protestantism (which became known as the Anglican Church), the Lollards had paved the way. Their *Twelve Conclusions*, which were written around 1395, stated (among other things) that the Church in England had become subservient to its “stepmother the great church of Rome.”

Credits:

The painting, described above, is maintained at the Suter Gallery in Nelson, New Zealand.

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