

The Morning Star of Religious Reformation Long Before Luther

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History proceeds according to its own measure. After long gestation, when conditions are ripe, a new chapter begins. One person alone or an event does not change the course of history. Yet scholars often single out a representative figure or event to mark the beginning of an important historical change. 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, for on October 31, 1517, All Hallows' Eve, Augustinian Brother Martin Luther (1483-1546) posted the “Ninety-five Theses” on the main door of the church. He intended to criticise the sale of indulgences for the remission of sins, thus argued for limiting the secular power of the Pope and the Holy See. Martin Luther posted the “Ninety-five Theses” to stimulate theological discussion. Instead it led to a schism between local churches and the Holy See, and the power struggle between the Roman Curia and the German nation.

History pointed to Martin Luther and his “Ninety-five Theses” as the beginning of religious reformation. But more than 100 years before his birth, the call for church reforms had already been sounded in England.

Regarding the Reformation of the Church of England which lasted through four generations of the Tudor Dynasty, some people asked, “If Pope Leo X (1475-1521) had approved the annulment of the marriage between King Henry VIII and Queen Catherine, would England have undergone the Religious Reformation? Would the Church of England exist today? This incidental, personal matter, was it enough to bring about religious reforms throughout England? Indeed the Roman Church once considered England, under Henry VIII, the safest fortress of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1521 Henry VIII ordered his Prime Minister to burn all of Luther’s

writings that had made their way into England. In the same year he published “Defense of the Seven Sacraments,” in refutation of Luther’s “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (an attack against Roman Sacraments). The actions of Henry VIII even earned him the title of “Defender of the Faith” which the Pope granted in 1524.

The Church and the state have always had a delicate relationship of check and balance as well as cooperation. Legally speaking, the people of England observed two kinds of laws: the laws of the King and the laws of the Pope. Most times, the jurisdiction of the state worked well with the jurisdiction of the church. The king and the bishops governed England together.

But when the two sides disagreed or had conflicts of interests, who would be the ultimate master? This became the most severe test in church and state relations. When Henry VIII wished to extend the power of the monarch, the Church intervened in domestic affairs of England, including hindrance of the divorce of Henry VIII. In addition, the church not only owned many assets, taxes to the Roman Church also drained more than half of the wealth in England. All this challenged Henry VIII’s authority as the supreme ruler of the state. We can affirm that the divorce of Henry VIII was only a catalyst. Ideas of religious reforms and the political conditions in England were ripe for the Religious Reformation in England.

Long before the birth of Martin Luther, John Wycliffe (1324-1384) was praised as the “Morning Star of the Reformation.” Wycliffe, a Doctor of Theology at Oxford University, did not live in a vacuum. On the one hand, he represented the state in diplomatic activities; on the other hand he reflected on theological ramifications of the tensions between church and state. Like Luther, he was deeply dissatisfied with the church. He criticized the clergy for their lack of piety, and their relentless schemes for power and economic gains. Wycliffe believed that in order for the Church to reform, it must get rid of the excessive power of the Pope, and Church properties that stirred the greed among the clergy. Moreover, reclaiming the authority of the Bible, and the king’s responsibility towards the state would help the proper development of the church.

Wycliffe's criticism of the Pope may seem too harsh today. But it reflected the church-state tensions at that time. He was critical of the Church's over-solicitude over state policies. He attacked clerical interference in the secular administration where he believed the king's authority should override the Pope's. To him Christ is the head of the Church. Therefore no pope could lay claim to this title. The words and deeds of the pope should follow Jesus Christ and Peter. He further questioned papal elections, arguing that the choice of the cardinals was not necessarily the Lord's selection. Later Wycliffe even denounced the Pope as AntiChrist, not a member of the church. This caused a life-long conflict between him and the Roman Church. For Wycliffe, what would take the place of the supreme authority of the Pope? He wrote, "Even though there were a hundred popes and though every mendicant monk were a cardinal, they would be entitled to confidence only in so far as they agreed with the Bible."

Wycliffe objected to the supreme authority of the Pope and the church's interference in state affairs on grounds that there was no scriptural justification. His criticisms went further than Martin Luther in the "Ninety-five Theses." The Bible was the only core of Christian authority as well as the only arbiter of doctrine. He thought that the Bible contains the truth from God. Not only was it the sole authority, it should also be the common inheritance for the faithful, and not just a monopoly of some clergy. To reclaim that inheritance, he consulted the Latin Vulgate Bible and began to translate the Bible into English.

As early as the 7th century, the Church had translated a small portion of the Bible into English. But this time it was the whole Bible. Wycliffe translated the New Testament into clear, fluid English. His student, Nicholas of Hereford (d. 1420) helped to translate the Old Testament. The revised edition was published in 1388 after Wycliffe's death. Though the Catholic Church regarded his translation as heretical and ordered it to be destroyed, Wycliffe's first English Bible enjoyed the same importance as Luther's German translation. His clear, powerful and elegant translation deeply affected the development of the English language.

Regarding the responsibility of the king, Wycliffe thought that the king had the duty to oversee the secular conduct of church

ministers. If the clergy appropriated church property, the kings should confiscate it. Otherwise, it would be mismanagement by the king. God assigns kings as temporal rulers, so any hindrance to his administration should be punished. The church was no exception. Besides, he cited the actions of kings in the Old Testament, and pointed out that kings had the duty to protect theologians. What he meant by “theology” was knowledge of the Bible. As a Christian state, the laws of England should adhere to the principles of the Bible. Theological knowledge strengthens the state. Theologians therefore should advise kings to govern with truth.

Wycliffe ardently wished to return to the simplicity of the early church. The church should emulate the poverty of the Apostles, and not lose sight of its mission. He longed for a poor clergy that would replace those who jockey for power. Thus would they be able to proclaim faith instead of toiling for temporal wealth. In his time he also criticised the selling of indulgences, and equated it with simony. He was particularly scathing of such practices in monasteries. As monasteries did not exist in Jesus’ time, and began to appear only after the third century, he thought there was no biblical justification for the monastic system to exist. The state should confiscate monastic property which he felt was the root of clerical greed. Such radical ideas of Wycliffe not only stirred reformist currents in Europe and the Continent, Henry VIII later used this idea to justify the seizure of monastic properties in England.

Wycliffe tried hard to promote his ideas of religious reforms among his students at Oxford University. His followers were known as the Lollards, which means “those who mumble prayers.” They followed the example of Jesus who sent out disciples in pairs to preach. Dressed in red gown, in bare feet, they preached the theological ideas of Wycliffe. Their poverty and dedication touched a great number of people in England, especially those in the lower social strata. Some zealous ones among them even joined the Farmers’ Uprising led by Wat Tyler (d. 1381) to demand social and economic reforms. Besides the Oxford circle and the Lollards, Wycliffe also won the support of aristocrats and common people in London. These hated the greed of some clergy, and were attracted by Wycliffe’s sermons which were faithful to the Bible. Facing this unprecedented challenge, Pope Gregory XI (1370—1378) ordered

five times the arrest of Wycliffe, to be tried by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London. But like Martin Luther who was protected by German aristocrats, Wycliffe was protected by the state. He died on December 31, 1384.

Wycliffe's life-long passion in religious reforms was condemned as heresy. His body, for instance, was exhumed and burned. But even before Religious Reformation swept over Europe, the spark of reforms had already been lit in the Church of England. Some ask: Would Religious Reformation have occurred in England, had Pope Leo X granted divorce to Henry VIII? We can answer: The morning star of Religious Reformation was shining in England long before the birth of Martin Luther. When the waves of continental Reformation reached England, Wycliffe's thoughts had already prepared the soil. Quite a number of Lollards were also actively involved, and fanned Religious Reformation in England.

History did not stop at the time of Religious Reformation 500 years ago. The limbs in the body of Christ that have been separated for doctrinal, traditional and political reasons in the past is now once again walking on the road of unity; through mutual dialogue, they are moving toward communion. Still history is a good teacher for the Church today. Wycliffe in England and Luther in Germany saw the medieval church lose its way among the lures of wealth and power. They resolved in their own context to push the church to reform, to return to the original mission, and to embrace the truth of the Bible. They also reminded the clergy and the laity to learn together, serve together, and encouraged all the faithful to value their own identity and mission. Through self-improvement and respectful dialogue, not only can various members in the body of Christ give witness to Christian unity, but the Church's vitality can also shine forth as a bright morning star. Through the Church, the true light of Christ shines in the darkness, and history proceeds according to the motivating force toward a bright future.