

John Wycliffe

Biography / Overview

John Wycliffe (c. 1328–1384 CE) was an English theologian, scholar, and early reformer whose bold critiques of the medieval Church earned him the title “Morning Star of the Reformation.” Educated at Oxford—where he would also later teach—Wycliffe emerged as a leading voice against ecclesiastical corruption, challenging the Church’s immense wealth, political entanglements, and theological practices.

One of his most groundbreaking efforts was advocating for Scripture to be made available in the common language of the people. At a time when the Latin Bible was guarded closely by Church authorities, Wycliffe and his followers translated it into Middle English, opening access to ordinary believers and undermining clerical control over religious knowledge.

Wycliffe’s dissent didn’t stop there. He openly rejected key doctrines such as papal supremacy, the idea of transubstantiation, and the Church’s claim to mediate salvation. His radical views sparked outrage among Church leaders, and although he died before he could be formally condemned, his legacy lived on.

His writings significantly influenced later reformers like Jan Hus and Martin Luther. In a dramatic postscript to his story, Church authorities exhumed and burned his remains in 1428—decades after his death—as a symbol of their enduring condemnation of his teachings.

Sources:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wyclif/>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Wycliffe>

<https://iep.utm.edu/wyclif/>

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Notable Works:

Triologus – A philosophical dialogue addressing metaphysical and Eucharistic debates through an allegorical conversation.

De Ecclesia – Argues that the true Church is not an institution but the community of the elect.

De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae – Asserts Scripture’s ultimate authority, surpassing Church tradition and papal decrees.

The Wycliffe Bible – The first full English translation of the Bible, attributed to Wycliffe and his circle (c. 1382).

Manuscript Legacy:

Wycliffe’s ideas spread underground through the Lollards, lay preachers who circulated his writings despite repression. Over 250 manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bible survive, attesting to its broad, clandestine readership during a time of intense censorship.

Birth Date / Death Date

Born: Around 1328 CE, likely in Hipswell or Wycliffe-on-Tees, Yorkshire, England

Died: December 31, 1384 CE, in Lutterworth, Leicestershire, England

Sources:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Wycliffe>

<https://iep.utm.edu/wyclif/>

Notable / Best-Known For

Producing the first complete English Bible translation from the Latin Vulgate

Publicly challenging papal authority and clerical elitism

Proclaiming Scripture as the sole, infallible source of Christian truth

Anticipating Reformation doctrines like justification by faith and predestination

Inspiring the Lollard movement, a populist and proto-Protestant call for reform

Famous Quotes

“Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on his sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by his righteousness.” — Sermons

“The Bible is for the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” — Attributed

“It is not necessary to go either to Rome or to Avignon in order to understand the faith of the Gospel.” — De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae

Major Works / Textual Contents

De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae

Upholds the Bible’s supremacy over Church tradition, councils, and papal declarations

Advocates for universal access to Scripture, arguing for its clarity and sufficiency

Triialogus

A fictional discourse between Truth (Alithia), Falsehood (Pseudos), and Prudence (Phronesis)

Delves into scholastic themes: logic, universals, and the Eucharist

Wycliffe Bible

A collaborative translation of the Latin Bible into Middle English

Exists in two main versions: an earlier, literal rendering and a later, smoother revision

Played a vital role in promoting biblical literacy among English speakers

Influences / Intellectual Context

Educated within the Scholastic tradition, Wycliffe was deeply influenced by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and William of Ockham. However, he broke from their orthodoxy by applying rigorous logic to critique Church dogma and institutional excess.

His reformist ideas emerged during the Avignon Papacy, the Western Schism, and growing

English resentment toward Church taxation and foreign influence. Wycliffe's theology resonated with both academic and political circles seeking ecclesiastical reform.

Legacy and Modern Significance

Wycliffe laid essential groundwork for later reformers like William Tyndale, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. His principle of sola scriptura (Scripture alone) and calls for moral reform foreshadowed the Protestant Reformation by more than a century.

Despite being labeled a heretic, his vision endured through the Lollards—a movement that kept reformist teachings alive in pre-Reformation England. Wycliffe is now honored within Anglican, Reformed, and Evangelical traditions as a foundational figure in the movement toward religious freedom and biblical accessibility.

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

Global Bible Translation: Wycliffe Bible Translators, a leading organization named in his honor, continues his mission to bring Scripture to every language community on Earth.

Symbol of Reform: Wycliffe remains a powerful symbol of resistance to ecclesiastical corruption and centralized religious control.

Digital Access: His writings and Bible translations are now widely digitized, studied in medieval literature, theology, and church history programs.

Public Memory: Memorials to Wycliffe stand in Oxford and the Reformers' Memorial in Geneva, celebrating his role in religious and intellectual liberation.

Suggested Reading and Resources

A. Key Scholarly Texts

Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

Workman, Herbert B. *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Reformer*. Clarendon Press, 1926.

Levy, Ian C. *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy*. Marquette University Press, 2003.

Kenny, Anthony. *Wyclif*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

B. Digital Archives and Organizations

Wycliffe Bible Translators: <https://www.wycliffe.org>

Lollard Society Archive: <http://www.lollardsociety.org>

British Library – Wycliffe Bible Manuscripts: <https://www.bl.uk>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wyclif/>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://iep.utm.edu/wyclif/>