

The Authority of the Preacher in a Sermon of John Wyclif

Sean Otto

Introduction

It has long been realized that preaching was of the utmost importance to the late medieval reformer John Wyclif. And yet, few have taken the time to read his extensive preaching corpus, which reflects his theology and philosophy, and which allows us a glimpse of what he thought that the laity ought to be taught. While his formal theology has been studied often, especially his views on the Eucharist and scripture,¹ little has as yet been written about his pastoral theology and his preaching itself. In much the same way, issues of authority, especially concerning the authority of scripture and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, have received attention,² but the relationship between clerical authority, preaching, and the laity has received less attention than it deserves, as these issues were clearly important to Wyclif.³

In his sermons, Wyclif takes the time to discuss the *pastoralia*, by which I mean those topics, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and so

¹ See Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy*, Marquette University Press: Milwaukee, WI 2003 and the extensive bibliography there.

² See, for example, David Luscombe, 'Wyclif and Hierarchy,' in Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks (eds), *From Ockham to Wyclif* (Studies in Church History, Subsidia 5), Basil Blackwell: Oxford 1987, 233–244.

³ Of the handful of studies on Wyclif's preaching, two by Edith Wilks Dolnikowski, 'The Encouragement of Lay Preaching as an Ecclesiastical Critique in Wyclif's Latin Sermons,' in Beverly Mayne Kienzle et al. (eds), *Models of Holiness in Medieval Sermons: Proceedings of the International Symposium (Kalamazoo, 4–7 May 1995)*, Fédération internationale des instituts d'études médiévales: Louvain-la-Neuve 1996, 193–209 and 'Preaching at Oxford: Academic and Pastoral Themes in Wyclif's Latin Sermon Cycle,' in J. Hamesse et al. (eds), *Medieval Sermons and Society: Cloister, City, University*, Fédération internationale des instituts d'études médiévales: Louvain-la-Neuve 1998, 371–386, most closely reflect my purpose here. In the first of these, Dolnikowski argues that Wyclif encouraged lay preaching in order to stimulate better preaching amongst the clergy, and in the second, she argues (372) that the purpose behind the Latin sermon cycle is "to show by example how to preach the word of God in particular liturgical settings and to underscore the supreme importance of preaching in the life of a priest and scholar" and that the Latin sermons thus form a model collection for the use of other preachers. My purpose here, of course, is to demonstrate how Wyclif constructs his authority as preacher, rather than to demonstrate the purpose or importance of preaching *per se* in his overall program.

on, that the medieval church thought it needful for all Christians to know.⁴ These topics were by their nature uncontroversial. In fact, the English church legislated more than once as to what these topics were, and required by law that they be taught the laity.⁵ However, before Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel's Constitutions of 1407–1409,⁶ which restricted the preaching rights of unbeneficed clergy, there was considerable ambiguity about the rights and duties of those in holy orders to preach, and it was in this ambiguous situation that Wyclif composed his sermons.⁷

My particular focus here will be on a sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Octave of the Epiphany, where Wyclif uses the opportunity of preaching to convey his views on idolatry and images, as well as his rejection of transubstantiation. In doing so, Wyclif was defying the authority of the church hierarchy and exerting his own authority as preacher and *magister sacrae paginae*, master of the sacred page, in order to correct what he thought of as an abuse of teaching authority, by the mendicant orders among others, who were perpetuating a dangerous fiction about the Church's central sacrament. There are two authorities at work here in Wyclif's preaching; the authority of those in holy orders, and the authority of scripture. As we shall see, Wyclif consistently chooses the latter over the former.

To begin, I will briefly set out Wyclif's understanding of the office of preacher in order to provide some context for the sermon content that will form

⁴ See Ian Christopher Levy, 'John Wyclif and the Christian Life,' in Ian Christopher Levy ed., *A Companion to John Wyclif, Late Medieval Theologian* (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 4), Brill: Leiden 2006, 293–363, at 308–311; Siegfried Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England: Orthodox Preaching in the Age of Wyclif*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2005, 229–252. For medieval legislation on teaching the laity see, for example, the decrees *Inter Caetera*, *Quia nonnullis*, and *Cum sit ars artium* of the Fourth Lateran Council, found in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Norman P. Tanner ed., 2 vols, Sheed & Ward: London 1990, 1.239–240, at 248. See also Leonard Boyle, 'Aspects of Clerical Education in Fourteenth-Century England,' in *The Fourteenth Century, Acta IV*, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies: Binghamton, NY 1977, 19–32, reprinted in Leonard E. Boyle, *Pastoral Care, Clerical Education and Canon Law, 1200–1400*, Variorum: London 1981.

⁵ See for example the Constitutions of Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln (1235–1253), as well as the Lambeth Constitutions of Archbishop Pecham of Canterbury (1281), article 9 "De informatione simplicium sacerdotum," which both contain essentially the same list of topics. The text of these decrees is found in F.M. Powicke and C.R. Cheney, eds., *Councils and Synods, with Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, 2 vols, Clarendon: Oxford 1964, 1.265–278 (Grosseteste) and 2.900–905 (Pecham). See also Wenzel 2005, 346–53.

⁶ Found in David Wilkins ed., *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, 4 vols, London 1737, 3.314–319.

⁷ H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1993, 171–174, G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An introduction to sermon manuscripts of the period c.1350–1450* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1926, 1–4; Levy 2006, 303.

the basis of this study. Then I will provide a close reading of the content in Wyclif's *Sermo* I.13 on the First Commandment of the decalogue, paying particular attention to how Wyclif's teachings here relate to questions of authority and preaching. Finally I will offer my conclusions drawn from this reading.

The Office of Preaching

Wyclif clearly viewed preaching as a duty and responsibility for those in holy orders, something which he is very clear about in his sermons and elsewhere.⁸ "Before everything else Wycliffe lays stress upon the truth that the preaching of the Word of God is that function which serves, in a degree peculiar to itself, to the edification of the Church; and this is so, because the Word of God is a seed."⁹ Wyclif is quick to point out, however, that it is God's grace that allows the preacher to edify, God's grace which opens the Scriptures to the congregation, quoting Matthew 10:20, he writes: "For the Saviour relates how the same head of household, who went forth to hire labourers, went forth to sow his own seed, for as it is written in Matthew 10:20: 'For it is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you.'"¹⁰ In another sermon, Wyclif praises the power of this seed that is the Word of God, quoting once more Matthew 10:20:

O marvellous power of the divine seed which overthrows strong soldiers, softens hearts made hard as stones, and recalls men, turned into beasts by sin and thus removed infinitely distant from God, and

⁸ See J. Wyclif, *Sermones*, 4 vols, J. Loserth ed., Wyclif Society: London 1887–1890 [volume number.sermon number, page:line(s); these conventions will be followed throughout], 2.16, 4.30 and 4.31. See also J. Wyclif, *De officio pastoralis*, G. Lechler ed., A. Edulmannum: Lipsiae 1863, 31–37; idem, *Opus Evangelium*, 4 vols, J. Loserth ed., Wyclif Society: London 1895–1896 (reprinted Johnson Reprint: New York 1966), 1.2:27–4:10, 31, 2.32. See also Johann Loserth, 'Introduction,' in Wyclif, *Sermones*, 1.iii–xxii; Gotthard Lechler, *John Wycliffe and his English Precursors*, P. Lorimer and S. G. Green trans., Religious Tract Society: London 1904, 193–208; G. R. Evans, *John Wyclif: Myth and Reality*, IVP Academic: Downer's Grove, IL 2005, 122–128; Levy 2006, 293–364.

⁹ Lechler 1904, 195. See Wyclif, *Sermones* 4.30, 256/5–8: "Iam in evangelio hodierno [Luke 8.11] descendit paterfamilias specialius quomodo ecclesia debet utriusque se habere ad spiritualissimum actum edificandi ecclesiam qui est predicatio verbi Dei."

¹⁰ *Sermones* 4.30, 256:8–12: "Narrat enim Salvator quomodo idem paterfamilias qui exiit conducere operarios exiit seminare semen suum, quia Matthei X^o, 20 scribitur: *Non enim vos estis qui loquimini sed spiritus patris vestri qui loquitur in vobis.*"

transforms them into men made godly. [There is] no doubt that the word of the priest is not able to accomplish such great wonders, unless in the first place, the spirit of life and the eternal Word work with it. Whence it is written in Matthew 10:20: 'For it is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you.'¹¹

True, efficacious, preaching is seen, then, as the Holy Spirit working through the preacher, and not as a work of the preacher himself – a common enough understanding of the office of preaching.¹² Wyclif goes farther than most other preaching theorists, however, when he states that this work is above that of officiating at the Mass: "Preparation of the Eucharist does not make bread anything except sacramentally the body of Christ, preaching truly makes nature more dignified, because the human soul is made, in a way, Christ himself."¹³ Preaching purges and transforms the soul according to Robert Grosseteste, whom Wyclif quotes here,¹⁴ and it is the primary function of all priests, their most appropriate act:

But just as in the Old Testament those were ordained who were without defect in nature so far as the body, so in the New Testament, correspondingly to the figurative sense, they [who are to be ordained] should abound in spirituals and especially in faithful distribution of the divine seed. Just as indeed among all the acts of the hierarchy of the church militant, the faithful ministrations of this seed is the most pleasing

¹¹ *Sermones* 4.31, 265:8–16: "O stupenda virtus divini seminis quod fortem armatum eicit, corda quasi lapides indurata emollit et homines per peccata conversos in bestias et sic infinitum a Deo distantes revocat et transmutans in homines efficit deiformes. Non dubium quin tam summe mirabile non possit verbum sacerdotis proficere, nisi principaliter coefficient calor spiritus vite et eternum verbum. Unde Matthei X^o, 20 scribitur: *Non enim vos estis qui loquimini sed spiritus patris vestri qui loquitur in vos.*"

¹² See A. J. Minnis, 'Chaucer's Pardoner and the "Office of Preacher,"' in Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (eds), *Intellectuals and Writers in Fourteenth Century Europe: The J. A. W. Bennett Memorial Lectures* (Tübinger Beiträge zur Anglistik 7), D.S. Brewer: Tübingen 1986, 88–119, at 89: "The activity of preaching itself was described in the most fulsome terms. According to Humbert of Romans ... the office of preaching is apostolic, angelic and divine; its foundation, which is holy Scripture, excels all the other sciences."

¹³ *Sermones* 1.16, 110:16–19: "Iterum, eucaristie confectio non facit nisi panem esse sacramentaliter corpus Christi, evangelizatio vero facit naturam digniorem, quia animam humanam esse quoddammodo ipsum Christum."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110:21–24: "opus evangelizandi excedit omne opus alchymicum; nam per ipsum natura longe perfectio, metallo imperfecto purgatur a scoria plus nociva et in rem perfectionem convertitur."

to God, so fraud in that sowing is most pernicious and, as a result, most hateful to God.¹⁵

This is both an exhortation to preaching and a warning; a priest's moral standing was for Wyclif tied up in his preaching. The priest of the new covenant ought to be without spiritual defect just as the priests of the old covenant were to be without physical defect, and the primary measurement of this wholeness was to be the faithful distribution of the divine seed, the word of God, through preaching. This view that every priest ought to preach was at odds with what would come to be the official position of the church in the province of Canterbury, after Archbishop Arundel's Constitutions took effect. Before that time, Wyclif's opinion would have been controversial, but this opinion was not declared outright heresy when Wyclif's doctrines were under examination in 1382. In that year at the Blackfriars' in London, a council met to discuss Wyclif's teachings, and it was determined that Wyclif was in error, but not heresy, for stating that "anyone, even a deacon or presbyter, is allowed to preach the word of God, without the authority of the apostolic see, or a catholic bishop, or anyone else."¹⁶

Despite his expansive views on who could preach, we must remember that for Wyclif the contents of the preaching, and the moral standing of the preacher, were paramount. This is why the preaching of the friars is continually attacked in Wyclif's later works and sermons; they are preaching dangerous lies and misinterpretations of the scriptures.¹⁷

It is clear that Wyclif had an exalted view of the preaching office, and it is also clear that he used this office to promote his controversial views, something his opponents were certainly agreed upon.¹⁸ It also seems highly likely that

¹⁵ *Sermones* 4.31, 271:20–28: "Sed sicut in veteri testamento ordinati sunt sine defectu in naturalibus quoad corpus, sic in novo testamento correspondentur ad figuram habundent in spiritualibus et specialiter in fideli dispensacione divini seminis. Sicut enim inter omnes actus ierarchicos ecclesie militantis est fidelis huius seminis ministracio Deo maxime placida, sic fraus in ista seminacione est maxime pernicioso et per consequens Deo maxime odiosa."

¹⁶ *Fasciculi zizaniorum magistri Johannis Wyclif cum tritico*, W. W. Shirley ed., Longman & Co.: London 1858, 280: "Item asserere quod liceat alicui, etiam diacono vel presbytero, praedicare verbum Dei, absque auctoritate sedis apostolicae, vel episcopi catholici, seu alia de qua sufficienter constat."

¹⁷ See, for example, the various tracts against the friars found in *Polemical Works in Latin*, 2 vols, Rudolph Buddensieg ed., Wyclif Society: London 1883 (reprinted Johnson Reprint: New York 1966); *Sermones* 1.43, 1.57, 2.60. Cf. Levy 2006, 302–305.

¹⁸ Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1988, 62–81, especially 64–67.

Wyclif was at the center of some sort of organized group of preachers akin to the famous “poor priests.”¹⁹ Both Wyclif’s use of the preaching office and his organization of some sort of group of preachers bring the question of authority to the fore, but it is particularly the first that is so well illustrated in the sermon to which I will now turn.

The First Commandment in *Sermo* I.13

This sermon opens a series of ten which each deal with one of the commandments in turn. The placement of the series within the collection as a whole is of some importance. The sermons on the commandments are placed so that they span two ecclesiastical seasons – those of Epiphany and Lent, beginning with this sermon for the fourth Sunday after the Octave of the Epiphany, and ending with a sermon delivered on the fifth Sunday of Lent, that is, the Sunday before Palm Sunday.²⁰ Wyclif’s discussion of the commandments, then, is meant to be delivered to the congregation in the run up to Easter, when, in the medieval English church, according to canon law,²¹ all Christian men and women should be readying themselves for the obligatory once-a-year confession and reception of Communion. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, and despite Wyclif’s concerns about enforcing such legislation,²² that he intended his listeners to meditate on the commandments, and his teaching on them, as they prepared to confess their sins and receive the Eucharist.²³ In this Wyclif is entirely normal; Lent was a traditional time to

¹⁹ Levy 2006, 301–306, Hudson 1988, 62–81.

²⁰ So identified by Johann Loserth in the table of contents in volume one of *Sermones*.

²¹ The famous canon of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, *Omnis utriusque sexus* established once yearly confession and Eucharist for all Christians. This same council also laid out the importance of preaching, and declared that negligent prelates should be punished; see Wenzel 2005, 229. The text of *Omnis utriusque sexus*, is printed, *inter alia*, in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, Josepho Alberigo et al. (eds), Herder: Basel 1962, 221:1–23, and Tanner ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1.245.

²² In a sermon for Ash Wednesday (*Sermones* 4.6, 49–57), Wyclif voices his dissatisfaction with *Omnis utriusque sexus*, which, he says, is suspect because it requires confession to priests, when confession to God alone is truly necessary, and because it is founded in papal law rather than in God’s law, scripture. He even writes that yearly, obligatory confession, “videtur esse blasphem presumptio,” (57:4–5) a view which he then softens by saying that “supposito quod talis confessio sit utilis quandoque viatori” (57:7–8), especially if such confession move the penitent to “cordis contritio, oris confessio et operis satisfactio” (57:10), the first of these being the only truly necessary aspect of confession, and key to promoting a repentance of sin. His problem with the confessional system of the medieval church had more to do with indulgences than with auricular confession, see, for example *Sermones* 4.12, 99–104, and *Sermones* 4.15, 122–129.

²³ And this despite Wyclif’s reservations about auricular confession and the sacrament of penance, on which see Stephen Penn, “Wyclif and the Sacraments,” in *Companion to John Wyclif*, 249–291, 283–289.

discuss these sorts of topics and to prepare the laity for confession and reception of the Eucharist.²⁴

Roughly the first half of this sermon deals with the story of Jesus and his disciples in a boat during a storm (Matthew 8:23–27), which gives Wyclif the opportunity to discuss faith at some length. This section of the sermon is rather innocuous and does not concern us here. The second half of the sermon discusses the first commandment of the decalogue, which forbids the worshipping of foreign gods and idolatry. Wyclif opens this section by saying that he is delivering this discussion at the request of “a certain devout layman.” The phrase that Wyclif uses, *ut mandatus sum a quodam devoto layco*, is most likely a trope which he is using as a literary device to breach the topic.²⁵ Nevertheless, this does reflect Wyclif’s understanding of the duty of a priest to preach. He tells us here that he was commanded (*mandatus sum*), by a certain devout layman. In a sense, this places the layman in a position of authority over the clergyman; while the priest might have the authority to preach, it is also his duty and obligation, something that a layman can demand of him. This construction might be considered something akin to what Fiona Somerset has labeled “extraclergial.”²⁶ Wyclif here takes up a position that implicitly contrasts the two groups, clergy and laity, and subordinates the clergy, in this instance, to the laity. Who precisely the clergy are for Wyclif is not explicit here. Although he seems to be asserting himself as clergy in this instance, or at least as preacher, he is also submitting to his duty to follow the pious command of a layman, whose authority, no doubt, is linked, as is the case for Wyclif’s conception of the preacher, to his status as *devotus*. This is in fact a theme that runs through the rest of this sermon, and what clergy are, or rather, what they should not be, becomes somewhat clearer, as we shall see.

There are two other instances in this sermon that are important for this discussion of authority. The first of these is a discussion of what was a

²⁴ Wenzel 2005, 246, 346–353; Spencer 1993, 25–26, 207–216.

²⁵ Hugh of Saint Victor (d. 1141) uses a very similar construction in his *De sacramentis* and elsewhere, in this case stating that he is writing at the command of his students, see Paul Rorem, *Hugh of St. Victor*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009, 69–70, 130, 156, and 168–170, see also Anne Hudson, ‘Wyclif’s Latin Sermons: Questions of Form, Date, and Audience,’ *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen age* 68 (2001), 223–248 at 233–234. I would like to thank Stephen Lahey for directing me to Rorem’s book.

²⁶ Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1998, 12–13.

contentious issue in the later Middle Ages, the question of images.²⁷ The other issue was one that was even more contentious, the interpretation of the Eucharist.²⁸ The first issue arises directly from the words of the commandment itself (Exodus 20:3–6):

Thou shalt not have strange gods before me. Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them: I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.²⁹

Wyclif sees this commandment as necessary to salvation, since it “corresponds in a certain way to God the Father.”³⁰ Moreover, every sin is seen as in some way a violation of this commandment: “Many foolish people break this commandment by adoring images and the consecrated host. Indeed, in a nutshell, every guilty man is entangled in the transgression of this precept.”³¹ I shall turn to Wyclif’s comments on the Eucharist shortly, but suffice it to say for the moment, that it was a little unusual to put this sin first.³² Less unusual was Wyclif’s comment as to why these things were wrong:

²⁷ See Levy 2006, 334–336; Margaret Aston, ‘Lollards and Images,’ in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*, Hambledon Press: London 1984, 135–192, at 137–143, and Aston, ‘Lollards and the Cross,’ in Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard (eds), *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England*, Boydell: Woodbridge 2003, 99–113.

²⁸ Levy 2003, 239–245, and Penn 2006, 249–291.

²⁹ Wyclif cites the commandment in full in the sermon, at the point where he begins the discussion of the commandment. Possibly this reflects his desire that his parishioners should hear the commandments in full, since he follows this practice throughout the sermons discussing the Ten Commandments.

³⁰ Cf. Grosseteste’s Statutes in Powicke and Cheney (eds), *Councils And Synods*, 1.268: “Quia igitur sine decalogi observatione salus animarum non consistit, exhortamur in domino, firmiter iniungentes ut unusquisque pastor animarum et quilibet sacerdos parochialis sciat decalogum, id est, decem mandata legi mosaice, eademque populo sibi subiecto frequenter predicet et exponat.”

³¹ *Sermones* 1.13, 90:9–15: “Ubi patet ex alibi diffuse expositis quod oportet omnem salvandum servare ordinate et principaliter hoc mandatum; ipsum enim correspondet quodammodo Deo patri. Contra hoc mandatum faciunt multi stolide adorantes ymagines ac ostiam consecratam; ymmo breviter in prevaricatione huius precepti irreciuntur singuli criminosi.”

³² Aston 1984, 141, cf. 154.

For which reason it must be supposed that everything that a man sets above each and every other thing in affection, constitutes his god; this is clear from scripture's way of speaking and God's reason. Nevertheless the creatures or vanities thus constituted by man are gods, reputedly strange and most false gods, for which reason the law of Exodus 20 expressly calls these 'strange gods and graven things' which an idolator makes for himself.³³

Particularly worthy of note here is the use of the phrase *ex modo loquendi scripture* – from scripture's way of speaking. This term brings to the front the question of the logic of scripture; scripture has its own grammar and its own way of speaking, an idea which was axiomatic for medieval exegetes.³⁴ However, not all of them could agree as to what this meant in practical terms. In the fourteenth century, while there was general agreement that scripture could not actually be false, there were disputes as to whether or not it could be false *de virtute sermonis*, that is, whether or not it could be false in its literal words.³⁵ Wyclif's own position was that scripture could in no way be false; it was true *de virtute sermonis*, and it was up to the theologian, as *magister sacrae paginae*, to interpret its words.³⁶ In this case Wyclif is of the opinion that it is quite clear what scripture's *modus loquendi* means – whatever someone loves the most is their god, an object of worship, not, in the case of those who worship images or the host, a true god, but rather a false god. Wyclif relies here on his own authority as a theologian to interpret these words of scripture, to explain how, according to the *modus loquendi scripturae*, these things are 'gods.'

After this opening discussion of the commandment, Wyclif next turns his attention to explaining three ways in which it is broken, corresponding to the

³³ *Sermones* 1.13, 90:15–22: "Pro quo supponendum est quod omne quod homo supra singula alia in affectione preponderat, constituit Deum suum; patet ex modo loquendi scripture et ratione Dei, verumptamen creature vel vanitates sic ab homine constitute sunt dii, reputative dii alieni atque falsissimi, ideo signanter vocat lex Exodi XX° ipsos *deos alienos et fabricam sculptilem* quam ydolatra facit sibi."

³⁴ On the subject of Wyclif and scriptural logic, see Levy 2003, 81–122, especially 91–98. See also J. Wyclif, *De veritate sacrae scripturae*, 3 vols, R. Buddensieg ed., Wyclif Society: London 1905–1907 and an abbreviated translation of this in John Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, Ian Christopher Levy trans., TEAMS: Kalamazoo, MI 2001.

³⁵ See William J. Courtenay, 'Force of Words and Figures of Speech: the Crisis over *Virtus Sermonis* in the fourteenth Century,' *Franciscan Studies* 44 (1984), 107–128.

³⁶ Levy 2003, 95–97, where he discusses Wyclif's famous disputations with the Carmelite John Kynyngham, the texts of which are found in *Fasciculi zizaniorum*, 4–104 and 453–480, see esp. 453–454 for Wyclif defense of Scripture's truth *de virtute sermonis*.

three enemies of man: the world, the flesh, and the devil.³⁷ Here, Wyclif uses what might be called a canonical approach to understanding the commandment; he brings into account other passages from scripture that bear upon the subject.³⁸ These three types of sin are avarice or covetousness, gluttony or *luxuria*, and pride, the most subtle sin, that committed by Lucifer, the first parents, and those like them.³⁹ Once again, issues of authority are clearly at play. The use of scripture in these passages is understandable only in light of Wyclif's overall conception of its authority: passages from one part of scripture are understood in the light of other passages, the scriptures as a whole being one, unified authority and so best able to interpret itself.⁴⁰

After discussing these dangers, Wyclif turns to the subject of images proper, a subject about which he demonstrated some ambiguity.⁴¹ In his full length treatment of the decalogue, the *De mandatis divinis*, Wyclif offers his longest commentary on images,⁴² where he writes that images can be made for good or ill, and that the laity often err in thinking that there is something inherent to the image itself, rather than what is depicted, that makes them worthy of devotion.⁴³ Wyclif draws on Grosseteste and Origen to the effect that all images and sculptures are outside of the divine nature, and so do not participate in it, the point being that such things are "significantly called 'false gods', falsely or nominally fashioned."⁴⁴ So also in *Sermo* I.13 Wyclif points to the dangers of such images and the confusion that they cause the laity: "As far as images, it is clear that they smack of idolatry, if they are adored not by

³⁷ See Siegfried Wenzel, 'The Three Enemies of Man,' *Mediaeval Studies* 29 (1967): 47–66, reprinted in *Elucidations: Medieval Poetry and its Religious Background* (Synthema 6), Leuven: Peeters 2010, 17–38.

³⁸ Again, Wyclif is not unusual in this approach to scripture, see Ian Levy's introduction to Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 13–4, 112–118, and J. Wyclif, *De civili dominio*, 4 vols, R.L. Poole and J. Loserth (eds), Wyclif Society: London 1885–1904, 1.422–424. The concept of a canonical approach to scriptural interpretation has received renewed attention in the past 40 years, especially in the work of Brevard S. Childs, in his *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Westminster: Philadelphia, PA 1970, and more recently in his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, Fortress: Minneapolis, MN 1993.

³⁹ *Sermones* 1.13, 90:23–91:14.

⁴⁰ This is an ancient understanding; Wyclif draws on Chrysostom and Augustine, see *De veritate* 1.138–158, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 112–118.

⁴¹ Aston 1984, 142.

⁴² J. Wyclif, *De mandatis divinis*, J. Loserth ed., Wyclif Society: London 1922, 155–166.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 156–7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 159:3–10: "Patet quod omnia que formavit Dei creacio vel confixit ymaginacio vel fabricat artificis operacio nata sunt extra regionem nature divine. Et licet ex infidelium ficcione introducta sunt, ut participant deitate, tamen nihil est illis commune cum tribus personis divinis, que sole sunt huius regionis indigene: ideo signanter vocantur *dii alieni*, false vel nominatenus fieti." Quoted in Aston 1984, 140. The references to Grosseteste and Origen are at the bottom of *De mandatis*, 158.

vicarious worship but by the worship of God [i.e., the worship due God]. Since this often occurs among the laity, it is clear that it would be safe, as under the old law, were all such images destroyed."⁴⁵ However, despite the dangers in their use, Wyclif still saw the value of images, and there was no outright call for their destruction. In fact, in the *De mandatis*, immediately following the opinions of Origen and Grosseteste, Wyclif turns to Bede's discussion of the Temple of Solomon and the good effects of images.⁴⁶ Likewise in *Sermo* I.13, Wyclif is quick to point out that the laity can obtain much benefit from images, at least under the instruction of a good priest: "Yet I know that the people, having been fully instructed by a suitable curate, who are very much disappearing, he could make such sculptures be useful books for the laity."⁴⁷ But again, there are grave dangers in the use of images, as the clergy are just as susceptible to idolatry as the laity.⁴⁸ The real problem is that there is no scriptural warrant for the creation of images, which give rise to avariciousness and worldliness:

Therefore since neither Christ nor the apostles nor their writings cherish such images, it seems to many that it is a rash presumption, smacking of greed among curates as much as among artists, that so copious a variety of images is introduced.⁴⁹

They also lead to the abuse of the poor:

Likewise the error is very grave by which the poor people of the realm and the common people are defrauded, that very costly and superfluous things are gathered around such images and sepulchres of gold, silver,

⁴⁵ *Sermones* 1.13, 91:15–9: "Quantum ad ymages, patet quod sapiunt ydolatriam, si non adoracione vicaria sed adoracione Dei ydemptica adorantur. Quod cum sepe contingit in laicis, patet quod securum foret, ut in lege veteri, quod omnes tales ymagines sint delete."

⁴⁶ Wyclif, *De mandatis*, 159:11–160:13.

⁴⁷ *Sermones* 1.13, 92:1–3: "Scio tamen quod populus plene instructus per curatos idoneos, qui nimis deficient, posset facere quod tales sculpture sint libri utiles laicorum."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 92:3–5: "Sed tam in clero quam in laicis capitur occasio infideliter ydola (que nichil sunt secundum apostolum) venerandi."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91:31–5: "Ideo cum nec Christus nec apostoli nec scriptura eorum tales ymagines coluerunt, videtur multis quod sit temeraria presumptio, sapiens tam in curatis quam in artificibus avariciam, quod sit tam variarium ymaginum copia introducta." This same point is made in Robert Holcot's popular commentary on the book of Wisdom, see Aston 1984, 156–8.

and precious stones, with which not only the poor of the kingdom might be lifted up, but the kingdom itself pulled from ruin.⁵⁰

The money used to adorn these shrines could be used more effectively to ensure the safety of the kingdom and to help the poor, an idea linked to what Wyclif has to say elsewhere about clerical disendowment.⁵¹ “Our Pharisees” are more interested in jewels and sumptuous basilicas than in helping the poor.⁵²

There are two types of authority at work here: there is the authority of the clergy, who are consistently contrasted with the laity, and there is the authority of scripture. The clergy, and here it seems that Wyclif is referring very generally to all who are in holy orders, but especially those who are charged with *cura animarum* (cure of souls), are the ones who are supposed to act as authorities in the matter of images; they regulate their use and are to ensure that the laity, who are so susceptible to being led astray in the matter, are properly instructed in this use. Alas, the clergy are seen to be as susceptible to ignorance and idolatry as the laity, and thus fail to live up to the authority vested in them.

Instead of teaching the laity proper reverence for, and use of, images, the clergy abuse their authority and willfully allow the laity to continue in their ignorance in order to milk them of money and goods. *Pharisei nostri*, identified elsewhere with the “private religious,” that is to say, the mendicants and other religious orders,⁵³ are especially blameworthy in their fleecing of the laity.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *Sermones* 1.13, 92:5–11: “Error eciam nimis gravis quo fraudantur pauperes regnicole et vulgares est quod nimis sumptuose atque superflue congregantur circa tales ymagines et sepulcra aurum, argentum et lapides preciosi cum quibus nedum pauperes regnorum sed ipsa regna abstracta ruinis poterunt elevari.”

⁵¹ *Sermones* 1.19, 132–133, cf. *De officio pastoralis*, 8–9, J. Wyclif, *De ecclesia*, J. Loserth ed., Wyclif Society: London 1886 (reprinted Johnson reprints: New York 1966), 176–182; idem, *De blasphemia*, J. Loserth ed., Wyclif Society: London 1893 (reprinted Johnson Reprints: New York 1966), 32–33, 190–191, dealing mainly with the orders, and idem, *De potestate pape*, J. Loserth ed., Wyclif Society: London 1907 (reprinted Johnson Reprints: New York 1966), 80–102, dealing mainly with the papacy. See also Anne Hudson, ‘Poor Preachers, Poor men: Views of Poverty in Wyclif and his Followers,’ in *Haeresie und Vorzeitige Reformation in Spätmittelalter*, F. Smahel ed., Oldenbourg: München 1998, 41–53 and Levy 2006, 316–323.

⁵² *Sermones* 1.13, 92:11–4: “Et ad tantum pharisei nostri exaltant iocalia, sicut sumptuosas basilicas, quod dicunt propter eorum sanctitatem abstractionem non esse licitam, ymmo neminem posse in sumptuositate talium rationis limitem preterire.”

⁵³ *Sermones* 1.43, 288:10–291:11. Cf. Wyclif, *De potestate pape*, 294:7–297:29; *De civili dominio*, 2.28:33–31:21, 3.262:15–20; *De blasphemia*, 91:35–2:30; *De nova praevaricancia mandatorum*, in *Polemical Works in Latin*, 1:126/4–9; *De triplici vinculo amoris* in *ibid.*, 1.174:1–176:2; *De quattuor sectis novellis*, in *ibid.*, 1.264:11–20.

⁵⁴ Wyclif’s antifraternalism is founded in his conception of the unity of the Christian religion based on the eternal evangelical law, and his conviction that this law needs no human laws added to it. For instance, Christians are Christians and not “Jesusans” because they follow the divine Christ, not the human Jesus, see *De*

Scriptural authority, on the other hand, is what is at base here. It is on the authority of scripture that the use, or destruction, of images rests, and it is on the authority of scripture that Wyclif builds his case against *pharisei nostri* and their like. Wyclif himself is not entirely clear about how scripture should be interpreted in this regard, as his position on images contains some ambiguity, as we have seen. Nevertheless, it is still to the authority of scripture that Wyclif turns first in his discussion, noting that there is little scriptural warrant for the use of images, despite their potentially good use. These layers of authority are complex and intertwined, but what comes through clearly is that there is a tension between the authority of scripture and the authority of the clergy; the clergy are prone to the same vices as the laity and they fail to interpret scripture correctly.

In the final section of *Sermo* I.13, Wyclif ends his discussion of idolatry with a rather erudite discussion of the nature of the consecrated host. Essentially what Wyclif argues for here is a remanationist understanding of the Eucharist. He accuses the religious orders of hating the bread which they consecrate apart from its accidents; the friars believe that only the accidents of bread remain after the consecration, apart from its accidents, a position that Wyclif argues holds an impossibility, that the accidents can exist without the substance, and this position for Wyclif is the cause of many blasphemies and idolatry with regard to the Eucharist.⁵⁵ Wyclif accuses both Pope Innocent III and the friars of leading the laity astray in this regard: “And truly pope Innocent [III] and his disciples could as quickly as you like make many faithful believe that this sacrament itself were the head of an ass or whatever other substance would be named.”⁵⁶ The friars, Wyclif tells us, are motivated by greed to keep the laity uncorrected in their errors, all because they cannot recognize figurative language:

civili dominio, 3.15:5–22. My thanks to Stephen Lahey for sharing his thoughts on Wyclif’s antifraternalism in a personal communication 17 May 2011.

⁵⁵ *Sermones* I.13, 92:15–20: “Quantum ad hostiam consecratam, patet ex sepe dictis quomodo blasphemi et ydolatre in ista materia sunt divisi. Nam religiosi nostri qui abhorrent quod panem consecrent sed accidentia, defendunt pertinaciter quod ipsum sacramentum (sic tractatum ab ipsis sensibiliter) sit accidens ab eis incognitum in nullo simpliciter subiectatum.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 92:21–24: “Et revera papa Innocencius et eius discipuli possent cicius facere multos fideles credere quod ipsum sacramentum sit caput asini vel quecunque alia substancia nominanda.” Cf. Levy 2003, 239–245 and Penn 2006, 249–272.

This sacrament itself is, therefore, true bread made by the power of the words of the Lord the body of Christ; and thus, since this act of speaking, 'this is my body,' following Augustine, is figurative, it is clear that this sacrament itself should be adored vicariously somewhat more so than images made by man. But, the commonality of the laity believes that that bread is identically the body of Christ, nor are the friars prepared to dispel this error, not only because they are ignorant of what that sensible sacrament is according to nature, but also because they fear for themselves that they might lose the profit of their temporalities and also their fame, and thus as unfaithful heretics they fall into transgressing the first commandment. And so also the church ought to be purged of this unfaithful transgression and be made completely without wrinkle, to which state it will be restored only by God in heaven.⁵⁷

Once again, those in authority fail to live up to their duties, much to the detriment of the laity over whom they exert this authority, and in the end it will be only the will of God in the world to come which rectifies the situation, although the work can be started here and now to purge the church of such errors.

As was the case in the matter of images, it was the interpretation of scripture that was at the heart of the interpretation of the Eucharist.⁵⁸ Wyclif tells his audience that he is following St. Augustine in his interpretation of the words of Christ, *hoc est corpus meum*, as figurative language. Elsewhere in his writings, Wyclif is just as explicit about his rejection of transubstantiation, and in particular the annihilation of the substance of the bread.⁵⁹ What was at stake

⁵⁷ *Sermones* 1.13, 92:24–34: “Est igitur ipsum sacramentum verus panis, factus virtute verborum Domini corpus Christi; et sic cum hec locutio secundum Augustinum *Hoc est corpus meum* sit figurativa, patet quod ipsum sacramentum sit adorandum vicarie paulo supra imagines ab homine fabricatas. Communitas autem laicorum putat quod panis ille sit idemptice corpus Christi, nec audent fratres errorum istum abstergere, tum quia ignorant quid secundum naturam sit illud sensibile sacramentum, tum etiam quia timent sibi quod perderent lucrum temporalium atque famam, et sic ut infideles heretici incidunt in prevaricationem primi mandati, et sic idem foret purgare ecclesiam ab hac infideli prevaricancia et facere eam penitus sine ruga quod solius Dei est reservatum ad statum in patria” Cf. Wyclif, *De eucharistia*, J. Loserth, ed., Wyclif Society: London 1892, 97:29–98:4, and Penn 2006, 268. On Augustine and language, see Mark D. Jordan, ‘Words and Word: Incarnation and Signification in Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*,’ *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980), 177–198.

⁵⁸ See Levy 2003, 245–255.

⁵⁹ As early as the *De universalibus* (1374), Wyclif rejected annihilation, see *De universalibus*, Ivan J. Mueller, ed., Clarendon Press: Oxford 1984, 307–308. Cf. Wyclif, *De apostasia*, M. H. Dziewicki ed., Wyclif Society: London 1889 (reprinted Johnson Reprints: New York, 1966), 144; idem, *De eucharistia*, 71.

was the veracity of the Saviour, whom Wyclif refers to as *Veritas*, and as *Christus qui mentiri non potest*.⁶⁰ Christ's words, this is my body, meant for Wyclif that the host was more worthy of devotion than images, but there was the danger that the laity would understand the host to be identical to the body of Christ, and thus, to offer it worship due only to the Second Person of the Trinity. The friars, "our Pharisees," are both ignorant of the correct interpretation of the Eucharist, and unwilling to give up their ill-gotten gains by correcting the laity's understanding, and so, just as in the case of images, those in authority, in this case including the Pope, are found to be abusing their authority for worldly profit.

Conclusions

Siegfried Wenzel has argued that Wyclif and the Lollards only differed from other reform minded individuals on a small number of issues, such as the Eucharist and images.⁶¹ According to Wenzel, it was normal for "orthodox" sermons to leave controversy aside when dealing with these issues, and instead "content themselves with reaffirming basic Catholic faith and practice."⁶² He writes that

most popular preaching on the Eucharist thus consists of simple assertions about the *verum corpus Christi sub forma panis*, often presented as answers to questions: that God, who created the world *ex nihilo*, surely can change bread into human flesh; that Christ's body is present in every fragment of the consecrated host; and that he is simultaneously present in many different locations.⁶³

As we have already seen, Wyclif was not content to let the matter rest in this way; he expressed his controversial opinions without regard to these norms. In fact, it is nigh impossible that Wyclif was unaware of the controversial nature of these teachings when he was redacting his sermons in Lutterworth – the reason he was in Lutterworth to begin with was that he had been forced to leave

⁶⁰ Ian Christopher Levy, 'Christus qui mentiri non potest: John Wyclif's rejection of Transubstantiation,' *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 66 (1999), 316–334.

⁶¹ Wenzel 2005, 370–400.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 377.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 379.

Oxford over his views on the Eucharist. Even more than this, there is general consensus amongst historians that John of Gaunt, Wyclif's erstwhile protector, commanded his silence on this point.⁶⁴ That Wyclif went against the wishes of his powerful ally and against the general consensus of his peers at the university shows both the strength of his conviction and his disregard for convention. If he went against the normal trends of popular preaching, he also went against the generally held view that disputation and argument should be confined to the schools. It was not law at the time Wyclif wrote his sermons that disputations and controversy be kept out of the pulpit, but it was soon to be in the Constitutions of Archbishop Arundel.⁶⁵ All this to say that Wyclif was not one to shy away from controversy despite the fact that he was ruffling feathers and had set the Church authorities, or at the very least the Archbishop of Canterbury and several other high-ranking bishops, on a mission to condemn him.⁶⁶

No doubt Wyclif's unwavering fidelity to his opinion is in large measure accounted for by the fact that ultimately for Wyclif, the issue at hand was the interpretation of scripture. He insisted several times that he would retract any and all opinions if, and only if, they could be proved wrong from scripture.⁶⁷ As it was, Wyclif was as forceful as he was on these issues because he believed that he had interpreted scripture correctly, whereas the Friars and popes, such as Innocent III, had not, and had thus ceded their authority. Worse than this, they appeared to Wyclif to have abandoned true scriptural faith and teaching, willfully corrupting the faith, for the love of worldly gain. The reason that the Friars and Innocent maintain their mistaken understanding and teaching on images and the consecrated host is that they wish to keep the laity ignorant in order to line their own pockets with worldly wealth. Wyclif's authority, on the other hand, is secured in his correct interpretation of scripture.

In fact, in a way, Wyclif is appropriating the authority of scripture; he is able to harness the power of the divine seed and become a conduit for the Holy Spirit. In this way, Wyclif constructs for himself something of an extraclergial

⁶⁴ Stephen E. Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Great Medieval Thinkers), Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009, 22–23; Andrew E. Larsen, 'John Wyclif, c.1331–1384,' in *Companion to Wyclif*, 1–67, at 44–49; Evans 2005, 191; H. B. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the Medieval English Church*, 2 vols, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1926, 2.145–146.

⁶⁵ See Spencer 1993, 174–175.

⁶⁶ See J.H. Dahmus, *The Prosecution of John Wyclif*, Yale University Press: New Haven, CT 1952.

⁶⁷ Evans 2005, 167–169, see, for example, *De potestate pape*, 150:29–30 and 396:16–397:16.

authority; or perhaps it is better to say that his authority rests in that he is what a cleric should be, a humble interpreter of scripture, rather than what clerics so often are, individuals who subvert the correct interpretation of scripture in order to gain wealth and power in this world. We have seen that he is willing, at least in some respects, to subordinate the clerical to the lay: he follows the command of the devout layman, whether or not this layman is a fiction, and composes the series on the commandments; he consistently outlines the priest's duty to his flock both through his duty to instruct them concerning images, and, most importantly, in their interpretation of scripture. It seems then, that Wyclif's is "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," in his call for reform; his is the call of the Holy Spirit to return to the logic of scripture and through this a return to correct understandings of issues such as images and the Eucharist, which understandings can only be reached through a correct interpretation of the divine Word.

Sean Otto, MTS
Wycliffe College
University of Toronto
sean.otto[at]utoronto.ca.