

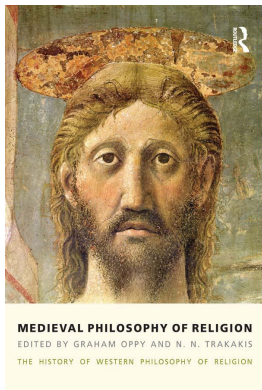
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JOHN WYCLIF

Stephen E. Lahey

Few medieval thinkers have evoked the reactions that Wyclif has. His admirers, from late medieval Oxford and Prague to post-Reformation historians and Protestant apologists, wax enthusiastic about the ‘Evangelical Doctor’ or the ‘Morning Star of the Reformation’. On the other hand, his detractors, from his day into the present, revile him as heresiarch and apostate. Turning to his many extant works, one would expect dramatic prose, still smouldering with the whiff of the bonfire, from such a polarizing figure. After all, two distinct, widespread reform movements claim Wyclif’s teachings as their inspiration. Lollardy beleaguered the English establishment into the fifteenth century, and the Hussite movement ended in full-scale war in Czech-speaking lands. Instead, the reader finds dense argument and scholastic terminology, dizzying repetition and endless reference to Scripture. Wyclif’s appeal, and his danger, lie not in his popular availability, but in his solid foundation in the scholastic tradition. He envisaged himself as continuing the tradition of Augustine, Anselm and Robert Grosseteste, and even championing the synthesis of Aquinas, in the face of Ockhamism’s threat to theology’s pre-eminence among the sciences. Wyclif was less an innovator or a reformer than a radical reactionary, a zealot hungry to cleanse the Church and its theology of the intellectual and political poisons that had built up by the fourteenth century. But his call for a royal divestment of ecclesiastical and especially papal power, the widespread availability of vernacular Scripture and his rejection of transubstantiation seem more consonant with Reformation theology than with scholasticism. While earlier scholars concluded that Wyclif’s thought presaged Protestantism, our understanding of later scholasticism, particularly of Oxford in the early fourteenth century, allows us to understand his ideas as products of his age.

Wyclif was born some time in the late 1320s or early 1330s, matriculated at Oxford in 1349 or 1350, and was associated with Merton College before becoming Master of Balliol College in 1360. He was ordained a priest in 1351, and income from benefices supported him throughout his early years in Oxford. He began studies in theology in 1363, and received his doctoral degree in 1372. At this point

he was also engaged in service to John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster and custodian of royal power during the dotage of Edward III and the childhood of Richard II. His conflicts with ecclesiastical authority began shortly thereafter, and despite papal condemnation and formal confrontation at Lambeth Palace, the Duke's authority afforded Wyclif assurance of continued protection. On being censured by a committee of theologians at Oxford for his Eucharistic teaching, Wyclif was forced to retire to Lutterworth in Leicestershire in 1381. There he lived out his final years as priest and instigator of dissent until his death on 31 December 1384. Following the condemnation of his ideas at the Council of Constance in 1415, where Hus was wrongly burned for having espoused heretical Wycliffism, his remains were exhumed and burned in 1428. Despite his conflict with ecclesiastical authorities and his heterodox theology, he was never excommunicated, probably because of his continued assertions of willingness to be corrected.

Wyclif's writings are defined by two primary collections of treatises. The *Summa de Ente* (Treatises on being; 1365–72), containing thirteen treatises, ranging over topics normally associated with a *Sentences* commentary, including the divine nature, being as such and its relation to humanity, and universals. The *Summa theologiae* (1375–81) contains ten treatises devoted to the practical application of his theology, including political and ecclesiological applications, and works on scriptural hermeneutics and exegesis. In addition, Wyclif produced a host of separate treatises, sermons, polemical tracts and short pieces, as well as a *postilla*, or expository summary, of the entirety of Scripture. Finally, he composed a substantial piece designed to introduce the laity to his theological vision, structured according to Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, as a three-way dialogue entitled *Triologus*. The Middle English Bible and sermons associated with his hand by earlier scholars are probably not his work; probably none of the Wyclif Bible is the result of his translation, and we have no evidence that any of the extant Wycliffite writings are his, although some are translations of his Latin works. Over a century ago, scholars began producing editions of Wyclif's Latin works, which work continues; the past several years have even seen translations of his writings into English.

In the first half of the fourteenth century Oxford enjoyed a reputation as a centre for theological, logical and philosophical innovation. William Ockham's influence was significant; his thought was championed by Adam Wodeham (*d.* 1358), an important Franciscan advocate of Ockham's austere ontology, and its implications were explored by the Dominican Robert Holcot (*d.* 1349), whose thought dramatically questioned the cohesiveness of the great synthesis of Aquinas. While Holcot himself may not warrant the label of sceptic, his approach and those of Nicholas Aston (fl. 1361), and of an anonymous Benedictine known as the Black Monk (fl. 1341), among others, suggested the sceptical tendencies for which Nicholas of Autrecourt had been condemned in 1346. Both Ockham's ontology and the spectre of scepticism figure in Wyclif's thought as the teachings of 'doctors of signs' that threaten the health of the Church. But Oxford was not simply a hotbed of Ockhamism; a group of secular scholars at Merton College known as

the Calculators introduced a mathematizing approach to philosophy beginning with the semantic analysis of propositions and proceeding to theorizing about fundamental aspects of what we now understand to be classical physics. A given ambiguous proposition such as ‘Socrates is whiter than Plato begins to be white’ can be parsed so that our assumptions about the degree of a quality like whiteness and its ratio to a lesser degree of whiteness can lead to more fundamental questions involving quantity and quality, and their relation to mathematical and physical speculation. This approach led to appreciation for the tremendous complexity involved in the mathematical analysis of physical reality, and in the theoretical understanding of force, resistance and velocity.

Two figures among the Calculators are very important for understanding Wyclif’s thought. Walter Burley (c.1275–1344) was innovative in the analysis of problems of natural philosophy using the Mertonian approach, advocating a particularly robust philosophical realism, in which universals figure as central to our scientific understanding of physical phenomena. While Burley’s realism seems not to have warranted much interest in Oxford during the 1320s, by the 1360s it was a rallying point for realist opponents of Wodeham and Ockhamism, including Wyclif. Thomas Bradwardine (c.1290–49) established a reputation for the mathematical analysis of physics in the 1320s, proclaiming that “Mathematics is the revelatrix of truth, has brought to life every hidden secret, and carries the key to all subtle letters” (quoted in Weisheipl 1959: 73). As his interest shifted to theology, Bradwardine began to explore the thorny problem of God’s foreknowledge and future contingents. Ockham had famously argued that God’s knowledge that ‘ x will occur at time t ’ is contingent, so that God’s knowledge of future events has a different truth structure to his knowledge of events of the past and present. Bradwardine’s reaction was to lead the theological reaction against what he (and others) decried as Pelagian heresy, and his massive *De causa Dei* (On God’s causation) contains every conceivable argument against Ockhamist voluntarism. Bradwardine believed that the fundamental truth of theology is God’s absolute causal power over creation, to the extent that God is co-agent in all human actions, and all good willing; it is only in willing evil that human beings act apart from God. To avoid problems such as double predestination and the fatalism attendant on later, Reformation versions of this position, Bradwardine carefully lays out a modal logic of necessity and possibility designed to preserve human agency while leaving clear God’s necessary knowledge of all created events. Earlier readers have assumed that Bradwardine turned from his Mertonian mathematizing and adopted a radical ‘Augustinianism’ in *De causa Dei*, but the mind of a careful analyst of propositions and terms is clearly evident in the book’s labyrinth of argument.

Wyclif’s understanding of the relation of propositions to things lies at the base of his philosophical theology. His position, recently described as ‘pan-propositionalism’, is that whatever is, is a proposition. “A proposition, broadly speaking, is a ‘being signifying in a complex way’; and so, because everything

that is signifies in a complex way that it exists, everything that is can well enough be said to be a proposition” (Wyclif 1893: ch. 5, 14.1–4). Roughly, the individual reality of a creature, such as a human being or a stone, is a ‘real proposition’. In it, there is subject and predicate; with Socrates, there is this person, an individuated particular of the human species, functioning as subject, and there is a human nature, which is essentially present in him as a predicate. Uniting the two is his essence, which functions as the actualization of the two, making the real proposition: Socrates [subject] is [essential actualization] a man [predicate]. A ‘true proposition’ is a truth signifying apart from the thing. The truth, ‘to be a man’, is a complex truth, reflecting the truth of a number of real propositions, or individual people. The existence of all the subjects having human being as a predicate essentially actualized in them must be a reality formulable into a more general proposition, ‘to be a man’. So there are real propositions existing as individuals in creation, and true propositions existing as describing, and organizing, the individuals. The result is an isomorphism between the language we use to interpret the world and the ontological structure of the world. This position is directly opposed to the austere position of Ockham and his followers, in which things in the world are either of the genus substance or are qualities reliant on substances. The effect of Wyclif’s approach is to hypostasize, to relate logical and epistemological issues directly to ontological criteria, which must provide the grounds for any sort of semantic distinction or variation that logic can recognize.

Understanding him as having argued for a propositional realism, a logically and semantically dictated ontology, provides an escape from the tendency to begin with Wyclif’s realism in an account of his philosophy. Extended arguments arising from Wyclif’s realism, which we will see are possible particularly with his thought on dominion, can easily lead to forgetting that ontology is grounded in propositional structure. Rather than explore his realism, it will be better to address the theological implications of Wyclif’s ‘pan-propositionalism’. What follows from this isomorphism between language and reality for a Christian philosopher? The answer depends on one’s epistemology. If we can understand truth using natural reason, without Grace, we might develop a philosophical picture of reality that, while accurate as far as it goes, does not necessarily lead to the salvation made possible by the Incarnation. By Wyclif’s time, philosophers were quite willing to recognize that human beings can understand scientific truths and the moral life by natural reasoning. As a result, many, like Ockham and Holcot, went so far as to describe theology as different in kind from science. But if we find truth only through divine illumination, as traditional Augustinian epistemology teaches, then Grace is a necessary prerequisite for any scientific, moral or theological understanding. The illumination theory of understanding, which Aquinas and Scotus had abandoned, was still a real philosophical option in the fourteenth century, largely because of Bonaventure and Henry of Ghent.

Wyclif’s epistemology is based in recognition that all that we know, aside from self-evident first principles, involves an element of faithful assent, which is made

possible through divine illumination. This allows him to argue that theology and the other sciences are not different in kind, and that we must include theological reasoning in any description of how we can know the truth. If we recognize type–token relations among things in the world, the logic of propositional realism compels us to recognize the reality of a type apart from its token. For example, when we perceive individuals and recognize them as human beings, we are led directly to the type Humanity, of which all these individuals are instances. This Humanity must have reality in some way not dependent on the being of the individual human beings, Wyclif reasons, because the universal does not change despite the transient nature of its particulars. The basis for the universal's being may be in the individual, as the semantic structure of 'Socrates is a Man' dictates. But propositions like 'Man is a rational animal' are about universals first and their particulars second; are universals as far as we can go? Wyclif argues that while we know a singular before we know its species, we have an innate tendency to proceed to the higher level of perfection, in which the species has its being. As Augustine teaches, universals have their basis in the contents of the divine understanding; they are the created actualization of God's ideas.

Wyclif is certain that our reason must lead us to recognize the necessity of God's being, and while he never does more than refer to arguments like those of Anselm and Aquinas, his conviction is that theology is central to the sciences. Any philosophy, then, that would allow one to conclude that the world is uncreated, or that God is not a Trinity, or that there are no uncreated, eternal truths at the base of created being, must inevitably be unfounded:

Now a philosopher is described as a lover of prudence (*sapientia*), though it is evident that nobody is a philosopher insofar as he lapses into error. For then he is no different from a fool who hates prudence or wisdom (*sophia*), the very opposites of falsehood. Therefore, the greatest philosopher is none other than Christ, Wisdom itself, our God. Consequently, it is by following him that we too become philosophers, while in learning falsehoods we are straying from philosophy insofar as we drift away from the authentic understanding of the saints, who are the true philosophers.

(*De veritate Sacrae Scripturae* I, ch. 2, trans. in Wyclif 2001: 60)

Wyclif's conception of Christ's nature lies at the heart of his philosophy of religion. Of all his scholastic forerunners, Wyclif held Grosseteste in the highest esteem, and Grosseteste's christology is paradigmatic for Wyclif's understanding of the Incarnation. Writing in 1235, Grosseteste argued that, far from being a divine response to human sin, the Incarnation completes the enfolding of creation, binding the universe in mystic union with its creator. Aside from arguing that the Incarnation would have occurred even had we not fallen, Grosseteste argues that Christ fulfils all law as the perfect moral agent. Given that Christ is also the great

Law-giver, mediating not only between God and human beings, but between all people in whatever attempt they make for truth and justice, Wyclif reasons that all created justice must rest on the law Christ ordained for all people, as given in the Gospels. This ideal serves as the opening motto for his massive *De civili dominio* (On civil lordship): “The divine law is presupposed by civil laws; natural dominion is presupposed by civil dominion”.

Christ contains far more than normative law, though; the second person of the Trinity contains the divine ideas, the eternally known truths according to which created being is structured. As Augustine had taught in his homilies on the Gospel of John, God made use of eternal paradigms in creating the world. These divine ideas figure importantly in Wyclif’s thought, as they define the very being of the Word, by whom all things are made. “We should understand how Christ ... is the essential foundation, which is with everything as internal vital being, according to John 1:3–4, ‘What has come into being in him was life’” (Wyclif 1890: 39; see also 62–3; 1869: I, chs 8–9). Thus, Christ is the greatest philosopher simply because he defines truth; his eternal being is identical with uncreated truth, and all who would seek the truth must turn necessarily to him.

Wyclif proceeds outward from the being of Christ into creation by means of the truth Christ defines. In *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (On the truth of Holy Scripture; 1377–8) he presents five gradations, or equivocations, by which we can understand the identity of Christ with Scripture (in 1382 he would reduce the number to three). First is the Book of Life, described in Revelations 20:12, which represents the divine mind revealed in its true glory at the apocalypse as divine legislator and judge. Second are the truths contained within the Book of Life. These are not essentially distinct from the being of Christ, but formally distinct in that we can consider individual divine ideas apart from the being of the Word in which they have eternal being. Third are the truths considered as brought into effect in creation, each defining genus and species by which created being is organized. These are the universals that figure so importantly in Wyclif’s ontology, directly corresponding to the divine ideas as created instantiations of the unchanging eternal truths. Fourth are the truths we comprehend when we encounter the world and gain understanding; these are the subject of epistemology, the concepts that reflect created beings that we use to recognize the universals. At this level are the concepts we glean from experience, as when we encounter people and formulate the concept ‘Humanity’. This concept gives evidence of the universal Humanity, which itself is the created manifestation of God’s idea of Humanity. Finally, at the lowest level of Christ’s truth is Scripture, the written signs, manuscripts and so forth that tell us of the reality of Christ at the centre of the universe.

It is one thing to claim that Scripture is an iteration of Christ, but quite another to equate the two. It is not hard to reason that in so far as the Word is identical to the Eternal Law, and the divine law of Scripture is an iteration of the Eternal Law given to us to effect human salvation, one can say that the divine law of Scripture is an iteration of Christ. But it is something else again to say that Christ and Scripture

are interchangeable. If Christ contains all created truth, the truths of mathematics, science and all the history of the universe, then so too must Scripture; how is this possible? Dismissing the possibility of discounting empirical truths such as ‘Lincoln was shot in Ford’s Theatre’ or ‘The atomic number of gold is 79’ as somehow less true, we are left with a very strange, Bible-based philosophical approach.

Wyclif does not mean for us to look for truths of science, history and so on in the Bible; we are, instead, to look for corroboration of their truth in scriptural exegesis. In *Triologus*, and two years later, towards the end of what was probably the last of his works, *De Antichristo* (Of the Antichrist), he lists five things that every seeker of truth must bear in mind when studying Scripture according to what he calls the ‘logic of Christ’.

First, that they be instructed in right reasoning about universals. They consider the few by collecting their perceptions to what is universal, and with their words they enter into combat against those who would speak smoothly. Secondly, that they understand the teachings of Christ according to right metaphysics, the truth about the quiddity of time and of other accidents, which do not exist unless as dispositions formally inherent in their subjects. Thirdly, that they know that everything that was or will be between God and humanity is, in the great time, present to God. Fourthly, that they know that creatures have ideal eternal being in God, eternally antecedent existence in their kinds. And fifthly, that they know material essence to be perpetual, and material form to be of its dispositions, although they are the quiddities of species and genera (Wyclif 1869: III, ch. 31; Wyclif 1895: vol. 2, book IV, ch. 12, 325.17–326.30).

Anselm, Hugh of Saint-Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux and Grosseteste would agree in this, Wyclif believed; Scripture is the source of every valid system of logic, the eternal source of truth in creation, and to understand it one must recognize that it has its own, all-encompassing logic, and devote oneself to learning it. This was the point of studying philosophy. One does not enter into a college simply for entertaining word games, or to play with doubts about the veracity of revealed truth. For him, education is not an end in itself, but the means by which one gains access to the eternal truths embedded within Scripture. This is why Wyclif emphasizes preaching and study as foremost among a priest’s responsibilities; because the vast majority of Christians lack the wherewithal to engage in this demanding intellectual labour, the clergy must make the logic of Christ clear to their charges in both their preaching and in the example of their lives. As we shall see, a priest ought to rely wholly on the alms of the people for his welfare, unencumbered by private property as were the apostles. Indeed, Wyclif’s emphasis on the duty of the priest to live an exemplary life can teeter on the brink of Donatism, as when he suggests that clerics negligent through avarice or lechery may justifiably be deprived of the alms on which they rely, both by scriptural (2 John 10) and ecclesial (*Decretum I* d.32, c.5) authority. His clerical opponents perceived him as having plunged headlong into this heresy, condemning him for it both at Blackfriars in 1382 and at Constance in 1415.

Wyclif held that not only the familiar genera and species, which he termed ‘universals by commonality’ have reality distinct from their particulars, but universal relations and causal universals have this as well. These he understood to be the ongoing metaphysical ground for instances of relations, causal and otherwise, between created beings. An important instance is the dominion relation. Dominion, the subject of several of the first treatises of the *Summa theologiae*, is generally understood to be the classic relation holding between lord and subject, based in the lord’s ownership of land, or of his subject liegeman, or both. Wyclif envisaged God’s dominion to be the primary relation uniting God and creation, based in the divine act of creation *ex nihilo*. The hallmark of this relation, Wyclif explains, is God’s love, which is realized in the divine creation, sustenance and nurturing of every created being. The Book of Genesis tells us that human beings were given dominion over the earth, in which ownership and property were unknown, and before the Fall human beings exercised their dominion relation over creation as created instances of the divine prototype relation.

The Fall robbed us of the possibility of this ‘natural dominion’, and with the advent of original sin came the idea of private property ownership. Prelapsarian human dominion was no longer possible, and ‘civil dominion’ came into being. This perversion of the universal dominion relation lacks the love characterizing God’s dominion, and entails the subjection of one human being to another. The Incarnation allowed the return of ‘natural dominion’ by Grace; as Christ and his disciples lived in apostolic poverty, so too can his body on earth continue in this pure state of communal harmony. That the Church has relapsed into sin is clear by virtue of its extraordinary wealth, Wyclif argues, and he tirelessly declaims the need for radical divestment of ecclesiastical wealth and property. Thus far, Wyclif’s arguments are strongly evocative of the poverty controversy that split the Franciscan Order earlier in the fourteenth century, although radical Franciscans did not frame their arguments for *usus pauper* in terms of a universal–particular relation holding between divine and just human dominion. Wyclif’s innovation is to argue that God favours civil lords with Grace to protect the Church’s ‘evangelical dominion’ by divesting it of its property and acting as its stewards on earth. This Grace-favoured civil dominion relation, he argues, is also an instantiation of the divine dominion relation, provided that the civil lord act with the love and nurturing care that characterizes divine dominion. Tyrannical civil lords or kings are certainly a possibility, but one must be very alert about the source of the accusation of tyranny; many a bishop’s mind has been poisoned by the cloying venom of property ownership, prompting them to accuse just civil lords as tyrants, to employ the weapons of excommunication and interdict in defence of their own ill-held goods.

Ideally, Wyclif sees Christian life as free of property ownership, communally enjoying the goods of creation under the protection of a Grace-inspired civil lord, who serves as divine steward. The office of priest is still needed, although under the right circumstances all Christians are evangelical lords through Christ’s

restoration of natural dominion; there is still a need for articulation and explanation of the Bible for those unable to find this for themselves, and so preachers will always be necessary in the Christian life. While Wyclif described this ideal in terms of universal divine dominion and particular created dominion relations, his detractors from his own day to the present have taken him to be moved more by allegiance to John of Gaunt than to metaphysical realism in his political thought. The duke was frequently at loggerheads with the Church, and probably admired his liegeman's arguments, but his patronage was not the reason for Wyclif's programme of ecclesiastical reform, which was inspired not by *realpolitik* but by metaphysical realism.

Another issue with which Wyclif is frequently associated is his rejection of transubstantiation. By the later medieval period, Eucharistic theology had become the quantum mechanics of the age; a forbidding thicket of philosophical complexity had come to define the disputes about how the elements become Christ's body and blood on the altar. Foremost among the theories is that of transubstantiation, in which the substance of the element is replaced with the substance of Christ, while the accidents (i.e. perceptible qualities) remain constant. To the eye, no change occurs; the wafer remains white, circular and hard, but it ceases to be bread and is Christ. In 1215, the Fourth Lateral Council's codification of transubstantiation led to three distinct means by which the miracle occurs; each attracted their own admirers, and each was judged a valid explanation. First, the substance of the bread might remain along with the substance of Christ's body, which is consubstantiation. Where once there was one thing, bread, now there are two, for the body of Christ begins to be in the same place. Secondly, the substance of the bread might be annihilated and replaced by the substance of Christ's body. Thirdly, the substance of the bread itself changes, becoming the substance of Christ's body, without passing out of existence. Here, the substance itself converts from 'being bread' to 'being body' without a change in the underlying subject.

Thomas Aquinas had rejected consubstantiation as allowing for the adoration of something in addition to Christ, given the legitimacy of the veneration of the consecrated host, and advocated the substantial change of the elements into Christ, a conversion from one substance to the other. Scotus agreed that the change took place by conversion from one substance to the other, though differing with Aquinas as to how the change occurred. He was not as opposed to consubstantiation as Aquinas. God could, by absolute power, allow Christ to be present in the substance of the bread, two things being in one place, but the teaching office of the Church has shown that this is not what occurs. Both Scotus and Aquinas had not chosen the annihilation of the substance of the elements as a possibility, but Ockham did. Ockham's approach was to argue that the substance of the bread is not reduced to absolute nothingness, but to the being it had as potential substance in God's mind before creation. Once this occurs, the whole Christ is present in the consecrated host under the species of the bread, transubstantiated into definitive place. Like Scotus, Ockham thought that, all things equal, consubstantiation

probably made more sense, but given that the Church had come to prefer transubstantiation, he was willing to submit to its authority. Ockham was called to account for his annihilation theory, the sacramental ramifications of which seemed excessive; he was made to answer charges at Avignon in 1325, where his Eucharistic theology was deemed within the bounds of orthodoxy, if only just.

Wyclif appears to have been very reluctant to turn the whole of his intellectual ability to the issue. Early on, he found annihilation to be repellent. Assuming that something that God created can be made not to exist is to assume that it is possible for an instance of a form to cease to be. Material form may change, it may become corrupted over time, but for it simply to wink out of existence would require a change within the universal it instantiates. If it were simply the elimination of one, isolated substantial composite of matter and form, it would be analogous to replacing one number in a series of numbers with a zero. This, it seems, is what Wyclif imagines his opponents to conceive. But because the substantial form of any given thing enjoys an identity relation with the universals it instantiates, dire consequences await the universals as well as the particular substance. For example, the substance of a plant instantiates the universal 'Rose' so that its form has identity with its universal. But the universal 'Rose' is a species of a larger genus, 'Plant', which is itself a species of 'Animal' (by Aristotelian biology), and so on up to 'Substance' itself. If the rose were annihilated, because of this identity, so would be 'Rose', 'Plant' and 'Substance' itself. On our mathematical analogy, annihilation would be multiplying the sum of a complex equation by zero; not only do you turn the sum into zero, you also render to nullity the complexity on the other side of the equal sign.

Given the eventual vigour with which he rejected the conversion theory of transubstantiation, it is natural to read Wyclif as having tacitly approved of consubstantiation. While he insisted that Christ was really present in the consecrated host, he could not bring himself to accept the arguments for Christ's substantial presence in the host. The approaches of neither Aquinas nor Scotus hold up under his criticism; as his thought progressed, he systematically rejected first Scotus' position, then Aquinas' as philosophically untenable. In part this was because his understanding of change over time was notably different from most of his scholastic predecessors. The standard Aristotelian understanding of any continua was that they are infinitely divisible, allowing any given unit of time or space to admit the kind of conversion of substance from Eucharistic element to Christ that Aquinas and Scotus envisioned. A minority of Oxford philosophers believed that space and time are composed of indivisible atoms; in the generation before Wyclif, Walter Chatton and William Crathorn argued for this, prompting withering scorn from Adam Wodeham, among others. Wyclif's earliest writings argue for spatiotemporal atomism, in part arising from his belief in the isomorphism of language and reality. If we think of a body moving through space and time, while most philosophers of the day would have envisaged the media through which it moves to be infinitely divisible, Wyclif conceives of the two media as composed

of points corresponding to propositions. There is a one-to-one correspondence of body to instant in time and in space, and the movement occurs through the succession of time. What Wyclif has in mind is a picture of time structured the way we watch films. Each frame of the film is in itself unified, a moment frozen in time. From one frame to the next, the subject portrayed seems to move, but in fact there is no movement distinct from the time in which it occurs, or the succession of frames.

Applying this model to the Thomistic conversion theory of transubstantiation, in which the change from bread and wine to body and blood is instantaneous, is disastrous. For an instantaneous change to occur to a substance, there must be a point at which the substance ceases being one thing and begins to be another. If we imagine a change in accident or property of a substance, this is not a problem, because the being of the underlying substance remains constant. We can say 'At time 1, the cat was still, and at time 2, the cat was moving'. But if we imagine a change in substances, as is necessary in transubstantiation, there is nothing to which the statement 'At time 1, this was bread, and at time 2, this is Christ' refers. To claim that 'this' refers to the bundle of accidents considered apart from their underlying substance, as Aquinas had argued, is simply nonsense. We are asked to believe that God would suspend the fundamental laws of creation to effect the conversion of the elements on the altar, Wyclif fumes, which is as good as saying that God causes our senses – and our reason – to lie to us in order to provide us with the salvific grace of the sacrament.

In his writings on both dominion and the Eucharist, Wyclif leads his reader back to the active complicity of negligence within the Church as the primary cause for error. Time and again, he argues, clergy have allowed themselves to be charmed by the enticements of the physical world. The Church was healthy until the terrible Donation of Constantine, when the papacy moved to declare itself sovereign in worldly power. Eucharistic theology was untrammelled by real error until Innocent III's contumacious demand that transubstantiation be the sole means by which the miracle could be explained. These errors, and many like them, arose when the Church drifted away from secure mooring in the logic of Christ. This hypnotic fascination with temporal goods seems to be accompanied by a rejection of universals and a biblical amnesia. Just as the Mosaic priesthood and the temple religion of the Jews had strayed from the fundamental truths of the Old Law in the time of Christ, so too has the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the panoply of earthly Christianity strayed from the truths of the New Law. Wyclif's later writings glow with an apocalyptic aura similar to the works of Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century and the spiritual Franciscans a century earlier. From our vantage point, it is easy to associate that glow with the fires that would burn two centuries later, but dangerously anachronistic. Wyclif's importance in the history of philosophical theology lies in his articulation of so many of the strands of medieval theology; scholastic logic and metaphysics, scriptural hermeneutics, the ideology of clerical and ecclesiastical reform and sacramental theology all

figure significantly in his thought and, in each case, his stance is a reactionary conservatism in the face of the evolution of the modern.

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On LOGIC see also Chs 2, 4; Vol. 3, Ch. 3; Vol. 4, Ch. 19. On MATHEMATICS see also Vol. 3, Ch. 8. On TRUTH see also Vol. 1, Ch. 13; Vol. 3, Chs 3, 8, 13; Vol. 4, Chs 8, 18; Vol. 5, Ch. 4.