Panel: “Heresy, Inquisition, and the State”

Joshua Fisher

Title: John Wyclif: Papal Reformer  
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Joshua Fisher is a senior and will be graduating in May with distinction with a B.A. in History. He is especially interested in the periods of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, specifically the development of religion and the resulting debates, and how these phenomena impacted both the secular and spiritual realms. He has been accepted for graduate study at Western Michigan University and the University of Tennessee, although he has yet to make a final decision on his immediate future. His career goal is to become an educator and researcher at the collegiate level. Joshua is a member of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi and is a founding member of IPFW’s Latin Club. He would like to thank those within the IPFW faculty who have helped his development, and his friends and family for their support throughout his collegiate career.

Abstract

John Wyclif has been an enigmatic figure since his death in 1384, and many of his notions are still being examined and debated today. One such example is his opinion on the papacy and, more specifically, the question of if Wyclif supported the abolition of the office. Many contemporaries, 16th century Anglicans who championed Wyclif as the so-called ‘Morningstar of the Reformation,’ and even some modern historians have argued that Wyclif was, in his true belief, antipapal and that evidence of this is found in Wyclif’s own words. This paper details the evolution of Wyclif’s career as a thinker, not just in an ecclesiastical capacity, but in a philosophical one as well, in an attempt to demonstrate that any antipapal polemics which can be attributed to Wyclif were the result of outside influences and anger over certain circumstances. I argue that while there are a few polemics (all of which came at the very end of Wyclif’s life) that can be construed as antipapal, the overwhelming majority of Wyclif’s writing on the papacy supports the notion that he was a reformer and not an abolitionist. This paper looks at specific examples from Wyclif’s contemporaries, later Wycliffites who either misunderstood or exaggerated Wyclif’s position when facing heresy accusations, and modern historians, all of whom have focused on a very small portion of Wyclif’s work. This paper makes an attempt to either discredit the sources for these claims or to demonstrate how the evidence has been misinterpreted. I have examined several of Wyclif’s own tracts which relate to the papacy, and I have made an attempt to use Wyclif’s own words to establish that he was not antipapal at his core. My argument, rather, is that those who have portrayed Wyclif as antipapal (such as William Courtenay, Archbishop of Canterbury during the life of Wyclif and Dominican inquisitors charged with questioning perceived heretics) have done so to promote their own arguments. This paper details how the historiography on the subject has evolved over time and also explains what more recent historians are saying on the subject. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to show that Wyclif was not the true ‘Morningstar of the Reformation,’ but rather was a papal reformer whose arguments have been used for various ends depending on time and place.
Bibliographical Note

As this research attempts to define the true opinion of John Wyclif concerning the papacy, many of the sources used in research are the writings of Wyclif himself. Some of these sources were found in translation, and some had to be translated into Modern English. Latin and Old English courses offered at IPFW proved invaluable in this research. Beyond Wyclif’s writings, the bulk of the research focused on the words of those who have attempted to portray Wyclif as an antipapist, or as he is commonly known “The Morning Star of the Reformation.” These sources included those written by contemporaries of Wyclif, heresy trial transcripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the words of Anglicans writing during the English Reformation, and modern scholars who have either misinterpreted Wyclif’s writings or simply used old sources in their work. Fiona Somerset and J. Patrick Hornbeck II are examples of modern scholars whose conclusions on Wyclif are similar to those of Joshua.