

Wyclif in the Early Fifteenth Century, Reception of



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Abstract

The reception of the thought of John Wyclif in Prague in the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-centuries is important both for understanding late medieval realism, and for appreciating the role Wyclif played in the genesis of the Hussite movement. Stanislaus of Znojmo and Stepan Paleč, along with Jerome of Prague and Jakoubek of Střibro, were profoundly influenced by Wyclif's realism, as was Jan Hus. In addition to the Oxford Realist school, these thinkers are the most important late medieval thinkers to have engaged with Wyclif's philosophy as a viable alternative to Ockhamism and the Aristotelian syntheses of Aquinas and Scotus.

Prague experienced a relatively brief but historically important period in which John Wyclif's thought captured the attention of a large number of Bohemian intellectuals. Charles University had been founded by Charles IV in 1348 in Prague, the first university in Central Europe. The School of Theology was divided into four groups of masters

and students: Bavarians, Saxons, Poles, and Bohemians. The former three groups, "the Germans," dominated the curriculum, so the Bohemian group, including scholars from Bohemia, Moravia, and Hungary, sent advanced students to the University of Paris for doctoral study, to expand the Bohemian theological faculty. While at Paris, several Bohemian students developed a strong interest in the Latin Neoplatonism of the twelfth century, particularly the thought of **William of Conches**. The philosophical realism he described appealed to the Bohemians' interest to present a response to the Ockhamism, Thomism, and Scotism of "the Germans," so copies of William's works, along with the Latin *Timaeus* and Calcidius's commentary, came to Prague in the 1360s.

Among these Bohemian students were Adalbert of Ranconis and Matthias of Janov, who became leaders of this realist school among the Bohemian students in Prague. Matthias composed a landmark critique of the ecclesiastical *status quo* in his *Regulae Veteri et Novi Testamenti* (ca. 1390), grounded thoroughly in a conception of the relation of God to creation evocative of Latin Neoplatonism. Matthias ran afoul of the church in Prague and in 1389 was forced to retract some of his ideas. Adalbert had also studied in Oxford in the 1360s and appears to have met **Richard Fitzralph**. He brought Fitzralph's *De Pauperie Salvatoris* back to Prague in the 1370s. Among the characteristic positions the Bohemians adopted at this point included a hostility

toward scholastic thought after the period of **Thomas Aquinas** and **Bonaventure**, a conviction that Scripture was the primary source and authority for all human reasoning, and a preference for the thought of **Augustine**, **Chrysostom**, **Bernard**, and **Anselm**.

By the mid-1380s, Bohemian scholars like Nicholas Faulfisch and Jerome of Prague began to bring John Wyclif's writings to Prague. The appeal was immediate: Wyclif's philosophical realism evoked the Latin Neoplatonism of the School of Chartres but was presented in a semantic-logical language that could engage in dialogue with *Moderni* thinkers. Further, many of his theological criticisms of the church were consonant with the thought of Matthias of Janov, including apocalypticism, frustration with the papacy, and the abuse of ecclesiastical office. Wyclif's thought quickly became identified with the nascent Bohemian theological movement.

It is important to recognize that only a portion of Wyclif's thought took hold in Prague. Wyclif's atomist physics, his monarchist *dominium* theory, his antifraternal polemics, and the greater part of his logical and hermeneutical thought were copied there but appear to have attracted little attention. His revised *Sentences* commentary, compiled into 13 interrelated treatises entitled *Summa Theologie*, initially attracted the most attention. Of these, two treatises enjoyed great popularity, *De Ideis* and *De Universalibus*. They feature arguments connecting the divine ideas to real universals in a "great chain of being" evocative of the twelfth-century conception and were the subject of many *disputationes*, *quodlibeta*, and *quaestiones* in the 1390s and 1400s. In 197N Frantisek šmahel compiled a catalogue of extant literature from this period, from extended commentaries on Wyclif's treatises to brief *quaestiones*, containing over 200 separate entries.

The three significant figures for Wyclif's reception in Prague are Stanislaus of Znojmo (d. 1414), Stephan Paleč (1367–1423), and Jerome of Prague (1378–1416). Later, Stanislaus and Palec would renounce Wyclif in 1409, while Jerome renounced Wyclif under duress at Constance in 1415 and then recanted his renunciation and was executed in 1416. Of the three, Stanislaus has left the most extensive and philosophically

interesting analysis of Wyclif's metaphysics, with a long commentary on *De Universalibus* (1400), a later, shorter commentary on the same topic (1408), and a treatise on the relation of propositional truth values to ontological reality, *De Vero et Falso* (1404). In the first, Stanislaus pursues Wyclif's reasoning about part-whole relations, the relation of generic and special characteristics within substantial essence, and reframes Wyclif's discussion of identity and difference by replacing identity with composition. The complexity of this treatise led the nineteenth-century editors of the Wyclif Society to assume that the commentary was actually Wyclif's *De Universalibus*. *De Vero et Falso* tests the "propositional realism" Wyclif had developed in his logical works, in which individual states of affairs are ontologically isomorphic with the subject-predicate structure of our descriptions of them. Stanislaus teases out tangled questions regarding the relation of the divine ideas to true statements, ascribing modal operators to true and false statements, and problems about privative or negative propositions' relations to reality. Stanislaus explores philosophical problems arising from Wyclif's discussion of mental acts and states, mental and spiritual change over time, and their relation to the nature of morality in his *De Felicitate*, dating from the same decade. Stanislaus's works are perhaps the fullest philosophical exploration of Wyclif's thought until contemporary scholars began to analyze it in the late twentieth century.

Stephan Paleč later gained fame for his zealous efforts to oppose Wycliffism, and the bulk of his extant writings fall into this grouping. His earlier works include several *Quaestiones* on the nature of universals, and on the causal power of the divine ideas, and logical treatises in the English logical tradition of **William Heytesbury**, **Richard Billingham**, and other notable figures from Oxford. These include *De Suppositionibus*, *Notabilia confusionum terminorum*, *Notabilia consequentiarum*, and *Notabilia in Richardi Billinghami Tractatum de propositionibus*. Paleč has also been credited with a running summary of the first nine chapters of Wyclif's *De Universalibus*, but his authorship has recently come into serious question. Jerome of Prague

was an active proponent of Wyclif's philosophy during this period but wrote considerably less than Stanislaus or Palec. His extant *quaestiones* address many of the same issues that characterize the disputations from the period at Prague. Among these are questions on the relation of general truth to specific true propositions, on the convertibility of terms, on the form of universals, and on the relation of universals to the harmony of the perceptible world.

By 1408, Gregory XII had become alarmed at the discussion of Wyclif's remanentist Eucharistic theology in Prague. Wyclif had argued that transubstantiation was physically and logically impossible and that the bread and wine remained after consecration. Stanislaus and his students did not fully embrace Wyclif's position but advocated for a refined remanentism that the Archbishop of Prague was willing to tolerate. Stanislaus and Palec were called to Rome to explain themselves, and 45 articles condemning Wycliffism were published in Prague in May 1408. When Stanislaus and Palec returned, having abjured their Wycliffism, the university had dramatically changed. The emperor had declared that the Czech students' voice was equal to the combined voices of the Saxons, Poles, and Bavarians, and a large number of the "German nation" left the university for Leipzig and Vienna. Of the 45 articles, 3 were directly related to Wyclif's philosophy, while the other 42 were against his theological ideas. A group of six young theologians staged a public defense of Wyclif's thought in 1410, with Hus defending his *De Trinitate*, Jakoubek of Stribro for *De Mandatis Divinis*, Zdislav of Zviretice for *De Universalibus*, Jan of Jičín for *De Materia et Forma*, and in what was certainly the most comical defense, Simon of Tišnow for *De Probacione Propositionis*, in which Simon engaged in a dialogue with the logic text regarding the dangers a work on propositional semantics posed to Catholic orthodoxy.

Academic drollery came to an end shortly thereafter, when Jan Hus expanded his preaching to include a ringing condemnation of the church based on Wyclif's *De Ecclesia*. The atmosphere for philosophical analysis of Wyclif's thought had vanished, and his ideas were subsumed into the

Bohemian reform movement Hus was leading. Wyclif's name and some of his ideas continued to be associated with Hussitism after 1412, but after Hus's death, Wyclif's influence dwindled; with the onset of hostilities between the Hussites and the Church and the Emperor, Wyclif's name was used as a blanket reference for the reform movement, but only in the most general sense.

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