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Heresy and Simony: John Wyclif and Jan Hus Compared

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Near the end of his life, in the late fourteenth century, John Wyclif sat down to write a treatise on simony, the sin of buying and selling church offices. His views on the subject were remarkable in that he expanded the definition of simony, and by doing so he encroached on the authority of priests, popes, and kings. Wyclif had already been reprimanded for his controversial views, and even though he was summoned to appear before the pope, he died peacefully in his old age without having suffered serious reprisals for his writings.

Only decades later, a young priest and professor, Jan Hus of Bohemia, discovered Wyclif's writings and began to spread his findings among students and commoners. Hus was not alone in bringing new ideas to Bohemia, and even though he himself was a peaceful man, those surrounding him were leaning toward action. Bohemia was a province that was unstable politically. Hus' superiors, both political and religious, wanted to quell any rumblings of reform or rebellion. Hus was called to the Council of Constance in Germany to be corrected for his heretical teachings and was burned at the stake.

Simony was a subject that worried and intrigued both men. Wyclif wrote eloquently and with great care to reference every significant word on the subject from the Holy Scriptures and the church. He explained how simony was present in all levels of church authority and even secular authority. Wyclif was skilled in weaving into his writing contemporary theology about simony as well. He was especially interested in the link between simony and leprosy. Hus, on the other hand, although he roughly copied Wyclif's structure and some of his content, infused his own treatise on simony with emotion. The evils of simony was felt keenly by many in Bohemia because of recent events, and this made Hus' strong feelings about this sin palpable to his readers.

In the modern era, to write a thesis about these men is to walk fairly well-trodden ground. Some of the earliest historians wrote biographies and articles about Wyclif and Hus. The fairly recent translation of Wyclif's *On Simony* and a lively historiological debate about simony make this thesis timely.
I am greatly indebted to Dr. Philip Daileader, who believed that this project was possible and who carries the banner for medieval history in a modern world. I would also like to thank Dr. LuAnn Homza and Dr. Gail Bossenga for the time and effort they contributed to my thesis and my formation as a historian.

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Be it self-delusion or misunderstanding, most men and women branded as heretics by their contemporaries considered themselves to be orthodox believers. So it was with John Wyclif and Jan Hus. Both men were derided in their lifetime and after their deaths for their teachings that were deemed heretical. Their environments were vastly different, and the rank and file of church leaders who accused them of heresy had changed and evolved, but they both encountered opposition for similar—but not identical—teachings.

John Wyclif (d. 1384) was an ordained priest and a professor at Oxford University in England. He was an older man when he was accused of heresy, and even though some of his writings were condemned in his lifetime, his only punishment was social rather than corporal. He was forced from his position as a professor and ended his days quietly at his home in Lutterworth, England.

Jan Hus (d. 1415) was also an ordained priest and a professor at Prague University. Although his date of birth is unknown, it is safe to say he first encountered opposition for his teachings when he was middle aged. In his time the environment of the religious world had changed, and he was seen as a dangerous person in a politically unstable country. The condemnation that he experienced was on quite a different scale from that which Wyclif faced. Hus was ordered to attend the Council of Constance (1415), and there he was accused of heresy; specifically, he was accused of spreading the condemned teachings of John Wyclif, and was burned at the stake. As if to make up for their ancestors' lack of censure, this council also ordered Wyclif's bones to be removed from their resting place in England, burned and thrown into the local river. The Council of Constance, where Hus was condemned, is most remembered for implementing

\[1\text{ In modern Konstanz, Germany.}\]
long-awaited reform in the Church. This council ended the Western Schism by the
election of Pope Martin V (d. 1431) in 1417.

The Schism had been ongoing since the time of Wyclif. From 1309 the seat of the
papacy was moved from Rome to Avignon, France. This move was made because of
political unrest and unsanitary conditions in the city of Rome. Those who felt the papacy
should always be in Rome feared that the political influence of the King of France would
hold too much sway over the popes, who were of French extraction themselves. In
addition to this, Avignon was considered to be a worldly city of vice. Those who wished
the papacy would return to its traditional place in Rome called this period of almost
seventy years (1309-1378) the Babylonian Captivity, in a clever nod to the downfall of
the Kingdom of Judah, which experienced captivity in a foreign land for seventy years.

Wyclif was one of those who disapproved of the worldly aspects the Chair of
Peter had absorbed. Unfortunately, instead of being witness to the permanent return of
the papacy to Rome, he had the unhappy fate of watching the Roman populace riot for a
Roman pope to be elected while French bishops subsequently elected their own
candidate. Christendom was divided and would remain so with various rival popes
claiming the loyalty of Christian nations, even as many as three opposing papal claimants
at once.

Wyclif and Hus were not alone in their opposition to the troubles that divided the
Church on every side. There were reformers who remained in the loving embrace of
orthodoxy. Pierre d’Ailly was a significant reformer who fought against the practice of
simony as a bishop. As an older man, around 1402 d’Ailly became convinced that since
simony was so engrained in medieval society, adjustments to the canon law were needed.
His moderating views kept d'Ailly from being seen as a radical.\(^2\) Wyclif and Hus, however, were to follow a separate path.

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**John Wyclif**

There is little known about Wyclif's early life. Only conjecture can be made about his date of birth, the names of his parents, the date of entrance to Oxford, and even the date of his ordination to the priesthood.\(^3\) He received his Bachelor of Arts in philosophy from Oxford in 1356 and by 1360 was considered a Master.\(^4\) After receiving a position as parish priest, Wyclif was granted permission to be an absentee pastor in order to return to Oxford to study theology.\(^5\) Around 1372 he became a Doctor of Theology and began to teach at Oxford.\(^6\)

In order to best understand the controversies for which Wyclif is best remembered, the political and religious issues of the time must be considered. In 1371 King Edward III (r. 1327-1377) convened Parliament in order to raise money for the war against France. Certain groups took advantage of the meetings to attempt two movements against the political power of prelates. The first consisted of nobility who argued that churchmen should not be allowed to hold high offices of state; they successfully oversaw the removal of two bishops from the posts of chancellor and treasurer. The second movement was not as successful, but it spoke to an issue that was dear to Wyclif and to

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\(^3\) Andrew E. Larsen, “John Wyclif, c. 1331-1384,” *A Companion to John Wyclif: Late Medieval Theologian*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy (Boston: Brill, 2006), 9-11. Out of the many possibilities for Wyclif's background Larsen argues that it is most likely that Wyclif's family was of the lower gentry.

\(^4\) Ibid., 12.

\(^5\) Later in life, Wyclif would come to despise and condemn the practice of clerical absenteeism. See ibid., 44.

\(^6\) Ibid., 13.
other lowly churchmen. Two Augustinian friars argued that in dire need the king had the legal right to confiscate church property. They based their claim on the Donation of Constantine, which is a document that Wyclif cited often as the source of avarice and simony in the church. This attempt to place church holdings clearly under the jurisdiction of the crown was unsuccessful; the opinions of the landed bishops and abbots held sway.

Only two years later, Pope Gregory XI (r. 1370-1378) attempted to levy a new tax on the English clergy. Faced with what they considered to be an unfair tax, the clergy demanded that the king either lessen their dues to him for the war or be their advocate before the pope. Unsurprisingly, Edward opted to negotiate with the pope. Wyclif served on the negotiating committee; he was the only theologian appointed by the king. In the end the meetings with the papal representatives were futile, and when Wyclif returned to England, he had the personal experiences he needed to write about his frustrated feelings towards the pope.

These writings would not go unanswered. Even though teachers and students in the universities were blessed with the privilege to discuss heresy, writers who circulated outside of that environment were not so well protected. In addition, professors could only use heretical teachings to demonstrate and refute arguments against orthodoxy. If it was felt that heresy was actually being taught in the classroom, then action might be taken. So it was with Wyclif; he was called upon by a few local bishops to answer for charges of heresy in 1377, but the case was not heard due to popular backlash against one of Wyclif’s secular supporters. After this, Pope Gregory XI wrote a bull declaring Wyclif’s

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7 Terrence A. McVeigh, introduction to On Simony (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 5. The Donation of Constantine is a document that is now considered to be a forgery. See pages 34-35 for more detail.
8 Ibid., 6.
teachings to be unorthodox, and the next year Wyclif returned to a court of bishops. This time he was saved from sentencing by Joan of Kent, the mother of the heir apparent, Richard II. In the midst of all these things came Wyclif’s ultimate proof that the papal office was corrupt: the Western Schism occurred in 1378. Beyond being obliged to retire from his teaching career at Oxford, Wyclif was never punished for his views during his lifetime. The true retribution against him would not come until years after his death in 1428 when his “remains were exhumed, burned and poured out into the river Swift.”

First published in 1926, Workman’s biography of John Wyclif is remarkable. Workman mixed the expected information about Wyclif’s life with in-depth studies of his theological treatises. Early studies of Wyclif were plagued by what Workman referred to as “an insufficient knowledge of his Latin writings, studied chronologically, and an uncritical acceptance of the English works, to which must be added the frequent disregard of their late date.” Workman considered the impact Wyclif had on history, especially on the Reformation, to be a debatable topic.

Workman’s attention to detail and his tireless perusal of Latin sources are commendable, but he should be remembered most for his reexamination and ultimate rejection of what had long been held as Wyclif’s effect on future reform movements. Workman’s main complaint was that Lollard texts, written in English, were assumed to be written by Wyclif. At the time it was believed Wyclif was the preeminent Lollard leader. The offshoots, it seemed, flowed directly from the source. Even though Workman questioned using Lollard texts to glean information about Wyclif, he continued to profess

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10 McVeigh, introduction to On Simony, 6-7.
the belief that Wyclif was the ancestor of English nonconformity. He denied, however, the still older tradition that Wyclif was the father of the Protestant Reformation. He cited none other than John Milton as having written that Jan Hus, Jerome of Bohemia, Calvin, and Luther were all indebted to Wyclif. According to Milton, the “glory of reforming all our neighbors” belonged to England alone because of the proto-reformer Wyclif.

Workman took issue with this. Instead of claiming Wyclif was the founder of the Reformation, he wrote of him as the “father of the Puritans, Covenanters and Nonconformists.”

In the years directly following the publication of Workman’s biography of Wyclif, scholars turned to a biography of a different nature. McFarlane, writing 1952, focused on Wyclif’s political career rather than his theological beliefs. McFarlane asserted that if Wyclif’s followers ever took up the banner of correcting the abuses of the church and society, they would have been turning their backs on Wyclif’s original mission. In his readings of the sources, he found that Wyclif’s attacks on the corruption within the church were secondary to his main purpose. Wyclif’s polemical writings about simony, heresy, and the corruption of the papacy were simply “thrown in to make up full measure.” Besides filling in the gaps, Wyclif’s writing was simply the style of the day, according to McFarlane. He found contemporary sermons, written in a similar style to Wyclif’s polemical works, that were filled with harangues against monks, friars, and priests. If one was to assume that writing in this manner transformed a churchman into a reformer, then reform was far more widespread than historians have acknowledged. Therefore, McFarlane dismissed the notion that Wyclif was a man who wanted to change

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13 Workman, John Wyclif, 321.
the Church by purifying it from the inside. Wyclif's polemical writings, McFarlane implied, were the products of an author who was prone to exaggeration.\textsuperscript{16} This was a belief that many found troubling. For example, Wyclif's emphasized the abuses of the church in his treatise on simony, and it could easily be argued that his main goal was to correct these problems.

McFarlane's work has not been received without criticism. In his four hundred plus page book, \textit{Companion to John Wyclif}, Ian Christopher Levy accused McFarlane of reducing Wyclif to a "royalist ideologue who served John of Gaunt's political agenda."\textsuperscript{17} This is true to a point. To his credit, McFarlane did state that after 1378 Wyclif ceases to be a servant of John of Gaunt and turns to matters that were of personal import to him.\textsuperscript{18} Academics generally agree that Wyclif wrote \textit{On the Truth of Holy Scripture} and \textit{On Simony}, after 1378 for personal reasons and not on behalf of a political patron.

\textit{Use of Scripture and Memory}

To the medieval scholar, books were more than just a study aid, they were a source of knowledge to be memorized. These books contained meanings beyond the actual words the pages contained, meanings that should be searched out by the reader and then incorporated into writing to complete the process.\textsuperscript{19} Although some of these Biblical stories may seem to have little language or facts connected to the problem of simony, the meanings that had been gleaned from them pertained to the issue. All theologians who were concerned with this issue knew these Biblical passages because they were passed

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{17} Levy, introduction to \textit{On the Truth of Holy Scripture}, 202.
\textsuperscript{18} McFarlane, \textit{The Origins of Religious Dissent}, 94.
\textsuperscript{19} Mary Carruthers, \textit{The Book of Memory} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 190-191.
\end{flushright}
from scholar to scholar, book to book, memory to memory. It is likely that Wyclif’s readership would be aware of these traditions as well.

It did not trouble Wyclif or his fellow scholars that many of these stories came from the distant past and a different culture. The Bible was a part of memory. By definition everything that is memory must be past. The present and future according to the medieval worldview were mediated by memory, or the past. Medieval scholars did not worry about the “pastness of the past.”

Heresy

On the Truth of Holy Scripture is an English translation of the Wyclif Society’s version of De veritate sacrae scripturae. As for sources, Wyclif remains in familiar medieval waters: the Bible and Augustine. Wyclif wrote the work in 1377 and 1378, when he was brought before the English bishops to answer to two separate charges of heresy, and when Pope Gregory died in Rome, leaving two claimants for the chair. It is no accident that Wyclif desired to plainly argue for the truth and authority to be found in Scripture at a time when both his life and the church were in turmoil.

Perhaps because of the charges of heresy that he faced, Wyclif did not leave his readers in any doubt about what he believed to be heresy and who true heretics were. His first argument states that heresy is anything contrary to Scripture. In his meticulous way, Wyclif lifts word for word the definition of heresy that he had adopted for a previous essay, De civili dominio: “Heresy is a false dogma, contrary to Holy Scripture, which is

20 Ibid., 193.
22 Levy, introduction to On the Truth of Holy Scripture, 29, 30. On a technical note, the translator opted to excise two fairly large sections from the end of the chapter on heresy. See pages 357 and 359.
obstinately defended.” Wyclif probably borrowed this definition of heresy from Oxford scholar, Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253). In order to support this claim, he called upon the preeminent Doctor of the Church, Saint Augustine (354-430). In Augustine’s treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*, he professed the belief that all Scripture is true. Therefore, a heresy is a set of teachings that are contrary to Scripture. According to Augustine, in order for one to prove that a certain belief is heretical, it is necessary to find passages in the Bible that refute that belief. Wyclif adopted this idea completely. If heresy was contrary to Scripture, then only someone with a knowledge of the Bible would be able to point out heretical beliefs.

One of the skills any well-educated scholastic had to display when writing a theological argument was the ability to address potential questions or oppositions. Wyclif attempted to answer the question of whether or not the Scripture refuted every possible heresy. This was in essence an issue that could undermine his claim that the Bible was the best authority on heresy. He argued that “just as every catholic truth is included there, so every heresy is damned there.” In addition to this he postulates that heresies are all based on a kernel of truth. For example, if a heretic were to claim that God is not omnipotent, he or she would have made a partially true claim. After all, he or she must believe God exists in order to claim that he is not omnipotent. Therefore, heresies are usually based on some truth and, since all truths are included in the Bible, then the argument against every heresy can be found in Scripture. Since Scripture was the only

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25 Ibid., 352.
26 Ibid., 354.
27 Ibid., 355.
authority by which heresy could be judged, Wyclif believed that the judgment and
definition of heresy should be left up to theologians.28

The other main crux to his definition of heresy was that every heresy must be
stubbornly defended against the correct teaching. This was also a claim supported by
Augustine, who Wyclif quoted as having written: “A person is not deemed a heretic
unless he defends falsehood by word or deed. Nor does offering a merely spur-of-the-
moment defense make him a heretic. It is necessary, therefore, that he would obstinately
defend his own dogma.”29 In short, heresy “is an evil disposition in the act or habit by
means of which the infidel holds an opinion opposed to the catholic faith.”30

Simony and Feudalism: The Source of the Criticism

The concept of simony was not fully fleshed out until the eleventh and twelfth
centuries because the social and economic environment of these centuries made a
proliferation of the sin possible. This necessarily created the drive to define simony and
then expunge the Church of this sin. Theses centuries were largely shaped by feudalism.
This medieval institution is somewhat of an enigma. Marc Bloch has argued that
historians have defined the term in varying and even somewhat contradictory ways.31
With this in mind, it is most useful to consider what aspects of feudalism were universal,
and which may have had bearing upon the development of backlash against simoniacal
practices. Marc Bloch divided feudalism into two ages, and although he wisely avoids
assigning exact dates for these two ages, the first roughly spans the ninth and eleventh

28 Ibid., 352.
29 Ibid., 353. Here Wyclif quoted both Augustine’s Letter 4 to Volusianus and On Christian Doctrine.
30 Ibid., 352.
centuries. Some major changes took place in the middle of the eleventh century, which necessitated outlining two feudal ages rather than one.\textsuperscript{32} The first feudal age has the most bearing on simony. The lack of strong, centralized authority and the poor circulation of currency significantly impacted the structure of feudalism in the first age.

Feudalism on the continent became a mainstay in the wake of the declining Carolingian Empire. With the downfall of the empire also came the absence of public works, a disintegration in infrastructure, and therefore increased difficulty in communications. Roads and bridges were falling into disrepair and neglect. Because of the dangers of travels and poor communication, Medieval kings governed their far-flung lands through their vassals.\textsuperscript{33}

Currency in the form of specie was always present in feudal society. It could even be found among the lower rungs of society, but there was not enough currency to facilitate every transaction. European mints did not produce gold coins, but only silver \textit{denarii}. Although the name of the currency and its source material was generally universal, the exact mixture of silver and other base metals and the size of coins varied widely. This money was used, but it was not considered trustworthy: it was not made regularly, it was not standardized, and it did not circulate well.\textsuperscript{34} Since local money faced all of these difficulties, it was logical for the nobility and the churches to hoard their wealth in goods made from precious metals. Churches collected gilded reliquaries, patens, and chalices, but this did not make up the bulk of their wealth. Although these pieces could be liquidated or traded fairly easily, it was not a good way to store wealth.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 61-62.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 66.
After all, this was also the era of Viking raids. Instead, most of the wealth of nobles and churchmen alike was stored in land.³⁵

With the lack of centralized authority and the breakdown in communication and infrastructure that this brought about, land owning lords relied on lower freedmen called vassals to oversee the protection of their lands and peasants who tilled the land. It was impractical to attempt to control land directly because travel was difficult and communication was slow.³⁶

Wealthy as well as poor people in feudal society lived by daily consuming or spending their resources as soon as they were available.³⁷ In addition, since famines were common and crops could fail, one needed vast tracts of land in cultivation at any time. The church had to own land in order to survive. Of course, because of how feudal society was set up with the land-owning lords overseeing the laboring peasants, it was only logical that owning land brought the church to owning peasants as well.

The Carolingian church had been organized neatly with a diocesan structure. As government became more localized, bishops lost their perceived authority over the parishes in their dioceses. The diocesan structure faded away along with the rest of the Carolingian infrastructure. Gradually, lords and nobles took control of parishes and church lands in their area.

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³⁶ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 62.
³⁷ Ibid., 68.
Early Reformers Fight Against Simony

Church reformers who argued against this lay control of church property also produced the codification of teachings about simony that was completed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The trouble was that lay proprietors were not interested in protecting the declining parishes; they were in the business of making money. Secular landlords rented out the church land, and they sold parish positions to priests. Reformers were adamant that this amount of lay control was not healthy for the church. Bishops, especially, wanted to return to the diocesan structure to appoint priests. The greatest fear was that the landlord would appoint the most well-endowed priest, rather than the most godly. Therefore, the buying and selling of church offices became the best known form of simony.

These eleventh- and twelfth-century reformers argued strongly against simony because in their view it disrupted the hierarchy of the church. They stressed the preeminence of the pope and the importance of bishops, and they widened the accepted definition of simony. Wyclif was indebted to these early reformers, as he adopted this wide-ranging view of simony that could be applied to every position, clerical or lay, and almost every economic situation.

The compilation of teachings and traditions about simony was completed by these early reformers as well. In order to find patristic support for simony, they called upon the writings of Pope Gregory I. When the occasion demanded Biblical texts, they most frequently utilized the stories of Simon Magus, Gezi, and Jesus chasing the money.

38 The habit of lay proprietors appointing priests to their parishes was still a common practice in the Church of England until at least the nineteenth century.
40 Ibid., 65-66.
changers from the temple. Wyclif was well versed in this canon, and each of these stories played a major part in his own teachings on simony.

Simon Magus

The first and most well-known story also gave this sin its name. Simony, meaning the buying of spiritual things, is so called because of the Biblical figure, Simon Magus. In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Simon Magus, after seeing the miraculous works of the Apostles Peter and John, attempted to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit to others. Peter harshly rebuked him saying, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” This was a strong rebuke, indeed. There is little sense that Peter felt it likely Simon Magus would be forgiven. Wyclif explained the etymology of the name simony briefly, but he did not dwell on this story, though allusions to it appear regularly throughout the text.

Simony as a Heresy

Picking up his pen after writing the last word of On the Truth of the Holy Scripture, Wyclif seamlessly transitioned to writing his treatise On Simony. He begins with these words: “After the general discussion of heresy, the task of treating its parts

41 Ibid., 66.
42 Wyclif, On Simony, 30.
43 Acts 8:20-22 (ESV).
44 See Wyclif, On Simony, 30, 36, 59, 90, 109, and 110.
remains. Three types of heresy are best known: namely, simony, apostasy, and blasphemy.” After completing this treatise Wyclif moved on to treat apostasy and blasphemy in separate essays. The first chapter of this treatise includes a basic introduction to all three heresies, providing a definition for each.

According to McVeigh, Wyclif’s definition of simony was informed by his understanding of the Bible. He used the Scripture as the measuring rod for all theology. Any teachings that fell outside the Scriptures were heretical. As we shall see below, this resulted in a definition of simony that expanded the narrow definition espoused by his contemporaries. In Wyclif’s opinion, simony was the ultimate heresy. It was wrongful not only to buy and sell spiritual goods, but also to own more temporal property than necessary. After all, did not Jesus ask his disciples to go forth without possessions? Surely, the apostolic church should pay homage to Christ’s request. This extreme definition of simony would separate Wyclif from other theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas. Finally, with a basic comprehension of Wyclif’s other treatises we can see that in On Simony he holds tightly to his doctrine of dominion. He does this despite the fact that this doctrine had been declared unorthodox by church officials.

Students of the Gregorian reforms are also interested in the definition of simony. The Gregorian Reform was a period from circa 1050 to circa 1080 when Pope Gregory VII (d. 1085) instituted changes in the Church inspired by Saint Gregory the Great (d. 604). In 1947 Jean Leclercq wrote a short essay on the question of whether simony was a heresy in the period of Gregorian reform. Leclercq wrote that under the influence of

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45 See pages 16-17.
“Saint Gregory the Great, the expression simoniaca heresis came into frequent use.”

Even into the time of the Gregorian reform, Leclercq argued, it was universally acknowledged that simony was heresy. In order to support this claim, he paraphrased the words of Cardinal Humbert (d. 1061): “Not only is simony a heresy on the same level as all those [heresies] that put the faith in peril and that are banned by the church, but it is itself the greatest of heresies.”

Leclercq also used the writings of Geoffrey of Vendôme (d. 1132) to explain why simony was the greatest of heresies. A heretic was one who tried “to separate the Son or the Holy Spirit from the unity of the Father or affirms that one of the Persons [of the Trinity] is more or less greater than the others.” When simoniacs attempted to purchase the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they were asserting their own superiority over the Holy Spirit. In claiming ownership of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, one implied the superiority of oneself to the Holy Spirit. Instead of freely receiving, the simoniac takes what he wills.

Leclercq allowed that the modern definition of heresy is “a doctrine that is opposed to the revealed truth.” Although most modern definitions of simony would lead a person to believe that it is only an action and not a doctrine, Pope Gregory VII and the Gregorian reformers saw simony as more than an action. The church fathers “did not fear

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48 Ibid., 525.

49 Ibid., 526: “Non seulement la simonie est une héré au même titre que toutes celles qui ont mis la foi en péril et que l’Église a proscrites, mais elle est même la plus grade des hérésies...”

50 Ibid.: “...separer le Fils ou le Saint-Esprit de l’unité du Père ou d’affirmer que l’une des Personnes est plus ou moins grande que les autres.”

51 Ibid., 527-528.

52 Ibid., 523.
affirming that simony is properly a heresy,” so Leclercq argues, “it is with their ideas, not with those of today, that one should interpret their texts and their vocabulary.”

When Leclercq moved from the Gregorian reformers to Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), he brought trouble upon himself. He presented Thomas Aquinas as having written that simony was “a vice opposed to the virtue of religion.” Furthermore, he stated that Aquinas believed that because simony was opposed to the true religion, then it was a true heresy. In addition, he represented Aquinas as holding the opinion that the person “who sells the gift of the Holy Spirit proclaims himself, after a certain fashion, master of spiritual gifts, this is heretical.” As explained below, fellow historians did not agree with this reading of the texts.

Leclercq’s essay sparked two replies, one in French in 1954 and one in English published in 1965. His point of view was strongly countered by two authors. First, Paul de Vooght argued that in fact simony was not held to be a formal heresy by Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). He put forward the fallacy of accidents as proof. First, there are *simpliciter* statements, or statements that make a generalization; and second there are *secundum quid* statements, or generalizations that require qualification. De Vooght believed that even though Aquinas wrote that simony was a heresy, he also qualified that statement, with the end result being that simony was not considered a heresy. He claimed that Aquinas taught that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, being spiritual and not physical, could never be physically owned or sold by humans: “that which is a free gift

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53 Ibid., 530: “n’ont pas craint d’affirmer que la simonie est proprement un hérésie. C’est avec leurs idées, non avec celles d’aujourd’hui, qu’il faut interpréter leurs textes et leur vocabulaire.”

54 Ibid., 529: “est un vice opposé à la vertu de religion.”

55 Ibid., 529: “celui qui vend le don du Saint-Esprit se proclame, d’une certaine façon, maître du don spirituel, ce qui est hérétique.”

from God cannot be an object of sale.\textsuperscript{57} De Vooght’s concluded that simony was not heresy, but one could claim that simony came as a result of the heresy of the denial of the Supreme Being.\textsuperscript{58} Simony was only a heresy if one qualified the generalization.

A second historian, John Gilchrist, agreed with de Vooght’s position and continued the rebuttal of Leclercq’s claims. According to Gilchrist’s argument, not all theologians were in agreement that simony was a formal heresy. He pointed out that Urban II, a notable figure during his period of interest, referred to “\textit{simoniaca ac tyrannica potestate}” and did not use the phrase “\textit{simoniaca haeresis}.”\textsuperscript{59} In his reading of the eleventh-century clerics, Gilchrist found that the definition of heresy did not allow for the inclusion of simony. This is in direct opposition to Leclercq’s position. In the eleventh century, heresy was an error in belief, and therefore was linked to ideas and not to actions. Simony could be a sin and a crime, but not a heresy. He called upon Peter Damian (d. 1072) and Bruno of Segni (d. 1123) especially to support his point.\textsuperscript{60}

Gilchrist admitted that there were theologians who argued that simony was indeed a heresy, but he labeled them “extremists.” In his opinion, theologians who equated simony with heresy needed to thoroughly defend their position on the issue.\textsuperscript{61} He took one of Leclercq’s main sources and carried his argument further to explore whether the presence of simony invalidated a priest’s appointment. He argued that Cardinal Humbert’s view that a “simoniac was without grace, therefore he could neither give nor

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 66: “\textit{qu’une réalité spirituelle ne peu être évaluée en valeurs humaines}” and “\textit{que ce qui est un don gratuit de Dieu ne peut être un objet de vente}.”

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 67: “\textit{la négation du Dieu-créateur}.”


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 216, 217.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 217.
receive orders” was in fact a “minority viewpoint.”62 In addition he stated that other notable theologians, such as “Anselm, Bernold of Constance, Urban II and Gerhoh,” all believed that sacraments performed by heretical priests were valid.63 So, even if simonia priests were heretics, they would still have the power of dispensing sacraments. In general, he wrote, eleventh-century “canonists treated simoniacal orders as sinful and unlawful but not as invalid.”64

Although this argument was well supported by the author, it seems that one of his points betrays his main motivation in writing, namely, to prove that “the traditional teaching about the sacrament was preserved.”65 By this he meant that the Augustinian notion of the validity of unworthy priests was upheld. In other words, if Leclercq’s position were correct, this would imply inconsistency among some the Church’s most praised doctors. In Gilchrist’s point of view, majority opinion was and has been the same. Simony has never officially been defined as a heresy, especially after the time of Augustine.

Whether Gilchrist is correct about the Gregorian reformers has yet to be challenged by subsequent historians. Even Joseph Lynch’s 1976 book, *Simoniacal Entry into Religious Life*, did not address the issue. It seems that historians agree that the majority view outlined by Gilchrist was held by orthodox thinkers who were Wyclif’s contemporaries. According to Pascoe, Pierre d’Ailly believed, as did Wyclif, that the Donation of Constantine marked the beginning of the church’s problem with the appointing of benefices and the corruption of simony. That is where the similarities end

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62 Ibid., 219.
63 Ibid., 219, 220.
64 Ibid., 233.
65 Gilchrist, “‘Simoniaca Haeresis,’” 233.
between the two men’s positions on how the church should be reformed. D’Ailly did not support Wyclif’s claim that the church should return fully to a pre-Donation format and renounce all property. Instead, d’Ailly’s response to this problem is to return to a balance between papal and episcopal church authority in the appointing of church offices. According to d’Ailly, the papacy had only assumed control over benefices that would have been traditionally appointed by the episcopate because of corruption among the bishops. He agreed with Pope Nicholas II of the eleventh century who declared that simony was so entrenched that it was simply a lost cause. It would be impossible to remove all those who were stained by it. D’Ailly believed that simoniaclal bishops and priests must be kept in their offices so that their removal would not disrupt the working of the church. He argued for moderating the implementation of penalties for simony. He did not expect to reform the church quickly.

Paul de Vooght was also interested in this issue. D’Ailly was of the same opinion as Thomas Aquinas, that heresy is “strictly an error against the faith.” In agreement with Saint Augustine, d’Ailly comes to three conclusions. First, it is a heresy to believe that one can only receive a theology license for money. Second, those who do not hold the aforementioned heretical belief, and yet receive a license through corrupt practices, are simoniaacs and not heretics. Third, one does not have to believe that simony is a heresy, but this comes with the realization that it can contain traits of heresy. Aquinas agreed that simony was a heresy not generally but in specific cases. He thought that

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66 Pascoe, Church and Reform, 106, 106 n. 8, 108.
68 Ibid., 71: “La première, que ce serait une hérésie d’affirmer qu’il est permis de prendre une licence en théologie en la payant. Celui qui l’affirmerait porterait, en effet, un jugement faux sur une question de foi, et ce serait un hérétique.”
69 Ibid., 71.
Simon Magus could especially be called a heretic because it had been written of him that he had “thought wrongly about spiritual values.” Simon “truly thought that the gift of God could be bought with money.”\textsuperscript{70} So, again the definition of heresy being employed is one that relegates it entirely to the realm of ideas.

Considering all of this, how do Wyclif’s views on simony and heresy line up with those of his contemporaries and sainted predecessors? De Vooght’s article reads like a list of the opinions of scholastic giants on this question. He pointed out that they all follow the same pattern of logic when considering whether or not a simoniac is a heretic. First, they were interested in discovering whether or not simony was an intellectual belief: a “false dogma.”\textsuperscript{71} Second, they would decide it was an action and not a dogma. Third, they would decide that simony was not in essence a heresy.\textsuperscript{72} In contrast, Wyclif started at the top and claimed simony to be a heresy and then worked to prove that this was the case. In his mind, heresy was not defined “on a purely intellectual and ideological basis.”\textsuperscript{73} Instead, heresies were made up of three especially grave sins committed against the three persons of the Trinity. Since Wyclif defined simony so broadly, the implication is that the majority of priests and bishops were placed in the camp of heresy.\textsuperscript{74} Certainly this was not a position moderate reformers like d’Ailly held. Scholastic thinkers rejected Wyclif’s claims, claiming his reasoning was faulty.

Wyclif was not in line with the scholastics, according to de Vooght. Since the majority of Wyclif’s ideas were founded on the Bible and the older theological traditions,

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 71: “a mal pensé des valeurs spirituelles” and “Il a vraiment pensé que le don de Dieu, on peut l’acheter avec de l’argent.”
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 77: “faux dogme.”
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 78: “ne définit pas l’hérésie sur un base purement intellectuelle ou notionnelle.”
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 78.
the theologian would have been out of step with scholastics. De Vooght stated cryptically: "So, one will understand that Wyclif had not followed the scholastics in the question of simony at all, but he that he had reestablished contact with the 'ancienne' manner." This quotation was meant to remind us that Leclercq's had used the word "anciens" to refer to the theologians that he had discussed. It is not clear whether de Vooght meant to imply that Wyclif was in agreement with the theologians that Leclercq had enumerated, wrongly in some cases, according to de Vooght. It is possible that de Vooght only intended to draw a connection between Wyclif's view that simony and heresy were synonymous and that Leclercq had maintained that many other theologians had held this position. De Vooght does not provide proof for specific links between Wyclif and the Scriptures or the ancient writers.

On Simony- The Manuscripts, Latin Printed Copy and the Translated Edition

Directly after having finished On the Truth of Holy Scripture, Wyclif started work on a trilogy of treatises that examined what he saw as the three main heresies: On Simony, On Blasphemy, and On Apostasy. On Simony was written in early 1380; therefore, it represents one of the last major pieces of writing that Wyclif completed. There are ten extant copies of this piece of writing. One is held in Trinity College Dublin and one other elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Of the remaining eight copies, one is still housed in Prague, where many of the copies no doubt originated. Seven are housed

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75 Ibid., 77.
76 Ibid., 77: "On comprendra alors que Wyclif n'aït point suivi non plus les scolastiques dans la question de la simonie, mais qu'il aït rétabli le contact avec la manière 'ancienne.'"
77 Leclercq, "'Simoniaca Heresies,'" 530.
in Vienna. Even though they are widely dispersed today, all but one of the manuscripts is of Bohemian extraction. This is probably due to burning of Wyclif’s works years after he had died. Having said that, one should not ignore the respect that Bohemian scholars held for Wyclif’s writings, especially the followers of Hus. This is one of many of his treatises that were preserved by Bohemian scribes.

For the 1898 Latin published version, editors Herzberg-Fänkel and Dziewicki reviewed all of the manuscripts excepting the copy housed in Prague. This book was then used for the only English translation of *On Simony*, which was completed by Terrence McVeigh in 1992. I will be referring to and quoting the version translated from the Latin edition that was published by the Wyclif Society.\(^79\)

Reviewer Richard Pfaff was extremely clear in outlining what he expected to find in a translation. Topping the list was that the translator should explain the significance of the work. In this goal, he said, McVeigh failed.\(^80\) To defend this point, he underscored the fact that *On Simony* was the tenth in a twelve-treatise series written by Wyclif. Why should any scholar start near the end of the series? More importantly, he was confounded as to why the treatises on kings or popes had not been translated. After all, these were surely more significant and hence more useful to scholars.\(^81\)

Most likely the second review was published without knowledge of the above statements. If this is true, each previous protest was countered unwittingly, making this scholarly argument all the more amusing. Reviewer Donald Dean Smeeton’s prose was dripping with praise for *On Simony*. From the beginning of the review he lauded it as an

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\(^79\) Wyclif, *On Simony*, 19n; 44nn16, 20; 45n25. The translator does not mention, nor does the text suggest, that any abridgements were made to the text.


\(^81\) Ibid., 276.
“important” work. He believed that this treatise contained the underpinnings of Wyclif’s larger critiques of the church. In taking this stance, he contradicted the first reviewer’s opinion that other works would be more representative of Wyclif. In addition, Smeeton was not worried by the fact that this book is the tenth in a twelve-treatise series. He explained that the series is “considered the theologian’s summa.” Wyclif himself considered On Simony significant enough to explain to his readers that it would follow his treatise On The Truth of Holy Scripture. Consider further, Wyclif did consider simony to be a rampant problem and the worst of all heresies. Smeeton seems to have understood all of this. Furthermore, Smeeton understood the significance of Wyclif’s odd definition of heresy. He called it a jumping off point that Wyclif used in order to critique the church as an institution. Most importantly, the reviewer believed that the publishing of this tract added to the “growing body of evidence that demands a revision of traditional views.” This is lofty praise indeed, especially compared to the criticisms from the earlier reviewer.

If reviewers are so divided about the significance of simony, what then are the opinions of Wyclif’s most esteemed biographers and historians? The Wyclif Society was a group of historians who published many of the Latin and the so-called English Works of Wyclif in the 1890s and early 1900s. In their general introduction, there is no mention made of simony, although Wyclif’s entire life is outlined in some detail. However, there was a special focus on his doctrine of dominion and the sources that Wyclif drew upon to

83 Ibid., 229.
84 Ibid., 229.
formulate this doctrine.\textsuperscript{85} As you will recall, \textit{On Simony} confirms this doctrine, for which Wyclif had been criticized. This book totters on the very edge of the discipline of history’s transition to a legitimate academic pursuit. Perhaps the Wyclif Society’s neglect of simony can be overlooked.

The first extensive biography of Wyclif was written in 1926. Weighing in at four-hundred-and-thirty-seven pages, it is certainly a challenge to sift through. The fact that the author did not include an adequate index compounds the problem. To the best of my knowledge, the author makes no use of \textit{On Simony}, nor does he discuss Wyclif’s views on the matter. This is slightly surprising, for the author dedicated an entire chapter to “Abuses in the Church,” and he included \textit{De simonia} in the list of Wyclif’s works that prefaces the book. In the list he notes that the Wyclif Society published the Latin version of \textit{On Simony} in 1898. His knowledge of this treatise and his failure to address it suggests it is less significant than the other writings.\textsuperscript{86}

In 1940 a notable work was produced on the subject of Wyclif’s treatment of the Austin Friars. \textit{On Simony} is at least mentioned this time, even if the author did not seem to have considered it important. He brushes the treatise aside claiming that it repeats Wyclif’s already known teachings and focuses on the abuses of the pope. Most likely it is not seen as a significant piece of work because it does not contain the vicious attacks on the friars that are evident in his later works. In \textit{On Simony} Wyclif only accuses them of allowing the excesses of the church to pass without criticism.\textsuperscript{87} Since \textit{On Simony} does

\textsuperscript{87} Aubrey Gwynn, \textit{The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wyclif} (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 257, 258.
not focus on the friars, perhaps to expect the historian to provide a more substantial treatment of *On Simony* might be excessive.

The historian who has done the most to help the study of Wyclif make the transition to modern scholarship was K. B. McFarlane. His contribution to the study of *On Simony*, however, is not at the same level. He referred to the treatise only as a part of the larger trilogy that included *On Blasphemy* and *On Apostasy*. Moreover, he focused on the latter part of the trilogy and made the judgment that the treatises are sloppy and vengeful. He saw them as evidence for Wyclif's transition to producing only polemical writing. Beyond this, McFarlane does not seem interested in these writings, and he does not discuss Wyclif's views on heresy.

Our case for significance both improves and is questioned by the book *Latin Writings of John Wyclif*. The popularity of *On Simony* on the continent is evident in the sheer numbers of manuscripts that have survived. Ten copies exist, seven of which are in Germany. The other two parts of the trilogy survive in eight copies each. Certainly, this should be evidence of their significance abroad. A piece of evidence that does not support our case is the content of Wyclif's other works. Wyclif only referred to *On Simony* in three of his other works. This may be understandable because he wrote it so late in life, but *On Apostasy*, which was written later, is mentioned in about twice as many documents. What can be concluded is that *On Simony* was available, especially in Germany and Bohemia, two sites of church reform. This makes the treatise significant and warrants further research.

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90 Ibid., 336.
It would seem likely that since McVeigh’s translation had been available for ten years, the new *Companion to John Wyclif* would discuss the treatise. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The treatise itself is never referred to beyond the title and the date.\(^9\) The neglect of this work by modern historians is frustrating. Perhaps the influence of McFarlane led to the subsequent dismissal of the treatise. It would be foolhardy to judge the significance of this work, polemical or not, on the silence of busy scholars. I feel that *On Simony* is worthy of further investigation.

It is evident that Wyclif found himself at the center of many controversies in his lifetime. It should not be surprising that the subjects he covered are still controversial. The definition of simony according to Pope Gregory VII may still point to a link between simony and heresy, but de Vooght and others have proven that Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics felt differently. The modern view that heresy is an issue of ideology is a definition that has continuity, at least with the scholastics. Wyclif’s position was that heresy was anything contrary to the Bible, and simony certainly fell into this category. Wyclif used logic to which scholastics were not accustomed. Instead of beginning with the traditional definition of heresy and then asking if simony fit into that box, he adopted a definition of heresy that could encompass simony. Pierre d’Ailly, a contemporary of Wyclif who supported some reforms, also hated simony, but he held to the traditional definition of heresy.

There are at least two contemporary positions on the significance of *On Simony*. The first position is that the treatise is a good example of Wyclif’s fundamental teachings and shows his main concerns with the church. The second is that *On Simony* was one

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small treatise buried in a string of other more important works. Both early and later modern scholarship seems to confirm that the second point of view is the most universal. McVeigh’s translation has been under appreciated, even though both reviewers praised it as readable and true to the text. On the whole, both the Latin and the English version of *On Simony* are not much studied. It seems that this might permanently label the treatise as “not significant” until adequate attention is given to it.

*Wyclif’s Tone*

Historians are also not in agreement as to whether *On Simony* represents the intellectual inquiries of an academic or the polemical ravings of a rebel. Wycliffite historians as renowned as K. B. McFarlane believed that this treatise and Wyclif’s other late writings betrayed the theologian to be “the possible victim of high blood pressure, as goaded on by ‘disappointed ambition’ or ‘swept along by resentment.’”92 It is true that Wyclif suffered from poor health in his later years, and yet he continued to write despite his trouble. In late 1383 Wyclif was summoned by Pope Urban VI to appear before the papal curia for examination. The first contextual evidence we have for his failing health is found in *De citationibus frivolis*, in which Wyclif explained that he could not answer the summons because of being “‘feeble and lame.’”93

Whether the two remaining books of the trilogy *On Apostasy* and *On Blasphemy* are truly the product of a disgruntled, old professor is beyond the scope of this thesis. Some who wrote specifically about *On Simony*, however, have observed that Wyclif used an intricate scholastic style in his argumentation. As one historian noted, “His style and

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93 Ibid., 314.
language in this work are those of the professional theologian."94 Larsen argues that the tone of this later work suggests “that Wyclif’s stance on the papacy had moderated somewhat at the end of his life.”95 Moderation in Wyclif’s later years is certainly not what McFarlane would have argued. More evidence suggests that even if Wyclif’s health was failing, his mind was still nimble. To craft this thesis, Wyclif drew upon many authorities, demonstrating how widely read and well educated he was. He notably called upon Gregory the Great, Gratian, William of Peraldus and the New and Old Testaments.

*On Simony- The Contents*

A typical definition of simony would be the buying and selling of church offices, but it quickly becomes evident that Wyclif expanded this definition to cover any spiritual gift that is received through the exchange of money or property. Wyclif assumed that his readers had a basic understanding of simony, and he is more concerned with the “underlying principle” of this heresy. According to his opening definition, simony “is a striving to destroy God’s plan.” Specifically this heresy offends “God the Holy Spirit, who, although by his great benevolence he wisely establishes a peaceful order in his house, is thwarted by simoniacal corruption contrary to his plan. For resisting the Holy Spirit, the simoniac blasphemously strives to shatter this benevolent order and thus to shatter peace.” If the seriousness of grieving the Holy Spirit and derailing God’s plans for the church was not bad enough, Wyclif took his definition one step further. He alluded to Matthew 12:31-32 when he said that “according to Truth96 a sin against the Holy Spirit

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94 McVeigh, Introduction, 19.
cannot be forgiven either in this world or in the next.”

It is interesting that Wyclif made this leap from simony to the sin that cannot be forgiven that Jesus speaks of in Matthew; consider the Latin Vulgate:

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\text{ideō dico vobis omne peccatum et blasphemia remittetur hominibus Spiritus autem blasphemia non remittetur et quicumque dixerit verbum contra Filium hominis remittetur ei qui autem dixerit contra Spiritum Sanctum non remittetur ei neque in hoc saeculo neque in futuro.}
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I say to you, all sins and blasphemies will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this world nor in the future world.

It is fairly obvious that this passage is referring to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and Wyclif already has planned to write a separate treatise on blasphemy. Still, he decided simony was a sin against the Holy Spirit, so it must be unforgivable. The definition of the Greek word used in this verse, \textit{blasphēmia}, is “vilification.” Perhaps the Latin word is similar, in that it is typically used to mean “to speak evil against” but the word could have a vague enough meaning in order to inspire Wyclif’s use of the word meaning “to sin against.”

Of course, the act of holding property was not what Wyclif was fighting. He clearly believed that tithes and the receiving of dues for pastoral work were not forbidden. He wrote: “Learned men define simony as an inordinate desire to exchange spiritual for temporal goods.” He believed the key words in this definition to be “inordinate desire,” and he proved this by quoting 1 Corinthians 9:11, “If we have sown for you spiritual things, it is no great matter if we reap from you carnal things.”

Therefore, the sin of simony “does not consist in the exchange itself but in the

\[99\] The translation is my own.
\[100\] Strong, \textit{Strong's Concordance}, 1613.
extraordinary desire for the exchange." What matters is the heart. So, Wyclif’s full definition is as follows: simony is a sin and a heresy, and it is present in those who have an inordinate desire to profit from the gifts of the Holy Spirit or to gain the gifts of the Holy Spirit through material objects.

Just as the sin of buying a spiritual gift is called simony, so is the sin of selling a spiritual gift, called “gesia,” according to Wyclif. This word was derived from the name Gesi, the servant of the prophet Elisha. According to the Bible, Naaman, a powerful military leader from a foreign land, was suffering from leprosy. News of the healings performed by the prophet Elisha had reached him, so he went forth to inquire as to how he might be cured. When he arrived at Elisha’s house, the prophet would not come out, but only sent word by a messenger that Naaman should go and wash in the Jordan River so that his leprosy would be cured. After some persuasion, Naaman consented to dip himself in the Jordan, and he was healed. He returned to offer Elisha the king’s ransom that he had brought as a reward, but Elisha refused. Gesi, Elisha’s servant, was incensed by this refusal, and he ran after Naaman’s departing chariot; and when Naaman had stopped, Gesi lied and told him that Elisha had changed his mind. Naaman gave him the bounty. When Gesi returned to his master, he lied a second time to Elisha about where he had been. Through divine revelation Elisha knew the truth, and he said, “Did not my heart go when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments...? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and

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102 Ibid., 30.
103 Ibid., 30.
104 Ibid., 42 n5. In the Vulgate this name appears as Giezi; it is Gehazi in the modern Bible.
105 The story of the sin of Gesi is found in 2 Kings 5 (ESV).
to your descendants forever.’ So [Gesi] went out from his presence a leper, like snow.¹⁰⁶

This inspired Wyclif to refer to simoniacs as the leprous descendants of Gesi.¹⁰⁷

*Simony and Leprosy*

Because of this story, the sin of selling spiritual gifts is associated with Gesi. The punishment of Gesi, namely, leprosy, became many theologians’ favorite symbol for simony. For example, Wyclif explained that “it seems suitable to begin with this sin because simony is a leprosy that, because of the nature of the disease and its stubborn duration, cannot be cured except by a miracle which God does not often perform these days; furthermore, because of the disease’s contagion, the church must take great care to avoid it.”¹⁰⁸ Because of the connection with Gesi, leprosy came to be seen as not only a metaphorical symbol for simony but also as a literal punishment.¹⁰⁹ On account of the fact that leprosy in England had reached “epidemic proportions... between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries,” it is likely that this caused Wyclif and other theologians to go to great lengths to discuss the connection between the disease and the sin.¹¹⁰

In Greek editions of the Torah, the Hebrew word *tsara’ath*,¹¹¹ which could refer to many skin diseases, was translated as *lepra*. Further complicating translation and understanding, the Greek word *lepra* could refer to both *elefantiasis* (Hansen’s Disease) and other skin diseases known simply as *lepra*.¹¹² As a result, *tsara’ath* and *lepra* were both fairly generic terms, referring to many skin diseases. Likewise, Wyclif and his

¹⁰⁶ 2 Kings 2:6, 27 (ESV)
¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 29.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., 44.
¹¹¹ *Tsara’ath* is alternately spelled *zara’at*.
contemporaries termed many different skin diseases “leprosy,” since the subtle
differences between various skin diseases were not understood. This link between simony
and leprosy had been noted in Christian literature since the time of the church fathers.\textsuperscript{113} Medieval writers continued the tradition that leprosy was a signifier of spiritual sins,
especially “pride, envy, anger, and avarice.”\textsuperscript{114} Each of these sins subvert God’s divine
order. Wyclif conceptualized simony, a form of avarice, as rebellion against the authority
of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the Old Testament story of Gesi and Elisha demonstrates
that, through his greed, Gesi rebelled against the authority of Elisha, God’s anointed
prophet.\textsuperscript{115}

Another example is seen in a short story in the Torah. When Miriam and her
brother Aaron oppose the great prophet Moses, Miriam is punished by with leprosy. God
himself, in the form of a pillar of clouds, chastises the two for their rebelliousness, and
when the cloud disappears, Miriam is “leprous, like snow.”\textsuperscript{116} Miriam’s sin in this
passage is her failure to correctly judge her place in the divine order. God is angered at
this rebellion against Moses, the prophet to whom God had spoken face to face. The
punishment for her rebellion against Moses is therefore visible on her face. Along with
leprosy comes the punishment of separation from society. Moses, in compassion for his
sister, begs for her to be healed, but God insists on a seven-day separation from the camp
because of the shame Miriam brought upon herself.

To the modern reader, the fact that Miriam is punished and Aaron is not seems to
denote the authority of men over women in the divine order, but the overriding factor is

\textsuperscript{113} R. I. Moore, \textit{The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250}
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{116} Numbers 12:10
the fact that this was the rebellion of a layperson against a prophet or cleric. In addition, if Aaron had been punished with leprosy, being a priest, he would have been unclean and unable to perform his priestly functions. Therefore, Miriam was forced to live with leprosy outside the camp as a symbol of God’s hatred of rebellion against his divine order.

In England and elsewhere in southern and central Europe, leprosy receded during the fourteenth century; however, this does not imply that the disease had lost its stigma. This disease—that some argue is as old as civilization itself—was completely entrenched in the medieval memory. It was an important subject of study in medicine and appeared often in literature. In addition, it was present in both the New and Old Testaments. Even though it had become difficult by 1344 to find enough leprosy sufferers to fill the beds of the hospitals, society certainly would not soon forget the days when the stricken were abundant.

Literature can provide evidence that the Biblical relationship between simony and leprosy had been absorbed even into the non-clerical schema. Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400), a contemporary of Wyclif, created the character of the Summoner for his Canterbury Tales. The Summoner is described as having a reddish, pustule-filled face and a thinning beard, both of which are symptoms of leprosy according to medieval doctors. In addition to this, we are told that the Summoner had taken treatments of mercury and white lead in order to cure his illness. Both of these metals were used by contemporary doctors as a last-resort treatment for leprosy. Because Chaucer never named the cause of the Summoner’s affliction, scholars have argued that the disease

117 Grigsby, Pestilence, 46-47.
118 Ibid., 72.
119 Ibid., 84-85.
should rather be identified as scabies or perhaps syphilis. Medieval medical writings would attach the label of leprosy to most facial skin diseases.

Since the differing causes of these skin diseases were not thoroughly understood, it is doubtful that Chaucer would have expected his readers to label the Summoner as something other than leprous. In fact, the link was most likely drawn from Chaucer’s knowledge of the same contemporary theology upon which Wyclif drew, that leprosy signified simony.\(^{120}\) By not labeling the disease as leprosy, but by giving the reader clear clues to its identity, Chaucer created an awareness that there was a dangerous contagion close by that was not recognized by the healthy. This subtle warning that a sick person was hiding among the healthy was a frightening suggestion, not only because leprosy was believed to be extremely contagious, but also because the disease’s link to the health of the soul was a great danger to society. Chaucer and his readers would not have considered leprosy simply to be a disease, but a sign of underlying moral depravity. Contemporary medical journals emphasize the leper’s lack of morality, and hence their noxious effect on society. The Summoner is a danger to society through his subtle yet contagious illness and his hidden yet infectious sins.\(^{121}\)

Wyclif suggested that it would be best to treat simoniacs as if they had leprosy. He emphasized that this is especially wise for weaker Christians. Wyclif took the metaphor of leprosy and used the metaphor to suggest real-life solutions, by recommending that weaker brethren should not even communicate physically with any simoniae.\(^{122}\) This was a spiritual disease, and therefore the problem went beyond the

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\(^{120}\) Terrence McVeigh, “Chaucer’s Portraits of the Pardoner and Summoner and Wyclif’s Tractatus de Simonia,” *Classical Folia* 29 (1975): 55.

\(^{121}\) Grigsby, *Pestilence*, 88.

\(^{122}\) Wyclif, *On Simony*, 156.
disgusting exchange of money to the root of the sin, which is greed. He quoted Ambrose (d. 397) as saying, "When a bishop was ordained, what he gave was gold, what he lost was his soul; when he ordains another, what he receives is gold, what he gives is leprosy." He also pointed to deceitfulness as being the real danger for the church as a whole. He argued that simony in his time was open and visible, cast aside as business as usual, and also a hidden sin. In the second case, it was usually covered up by a non-participating player, a third party who did not partake in the sin but observed it. To avoid infection would be difficult in this scenario. Those who participate both openly and in secret and those who act as silent observer are equally guilty and equally dangerous.

The Source of Simony

As seen above, Wyclif believed that the three components of heresy were blasphemy, apostasy, and simony, and he conceptualized simony as one of the most divisive and dangerous of the three for the Church as a whole. Now what remains is to examine the practical components of his teaching: what was the source of simony, how is it reflected in each level of church hierarchy, and how can the disease be excised? Wyclif did not see a direct link between the sin of Simon Magus and the disease of simony present in his society. Instead, he believed that the present epidemic of simony in Roman Christendom stemmed from the actions surrounding a document called the "Donation of Constantine." It was most likely forged by a Frankish, not Roman hand. This document

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122 Ibid., 162.
124 Ibid., 161.
was used to defend the idea that the Emperor Constantine the Great donated no less than the entire Western Roman Empire to the papacy.\textsuperscript{126}

When the Church was in the throes of a schism, the division of what would become the Eastern and Western Churches, Pope Leo IX (d. 1054) used the document to assert the legitimacy of Rome as the papal see. His use of this document paved the way for it to come into common use by theologians and subsequent popes. Unfortunately, Pope Leo’s copy differed from the original forgery in one major aspect. This version stated that Constantine donated land to the Church based on the authority of the papacy that already existed, not based on an authority that Constantine would newly provide. This opened the door for future popes, such as Gregory VII and Urban II (d. 1099) to claim the right to political control over not just Rome, but the entire Western Roman Empire as well.\textsuperscript{127}

For Wyclif, there was no reason to doubt that the Donation of Constantine documented a genuine transfer of land holdings from the Emperor Constantine to Pope Sylvester (r. 314-335) as a gift. Wyclif writes: “From the time of Simon Magus to the Donation [of Constantine] this heresy was dormant.”\textsuperscript{128} Wyclif believed that this was the beginning of the simoniacal leprosy that infected the church. Before the Donation of Constantine each churchman received freely given tithes and small benefices, but then large bishoprics were developed, and the right to give tithes freely was replaced with “anti-Christian laws” that were “established to extort money.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{128} Wyclif, \textit{On Simony}, 36.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 36.
Simony in the Church Hierarchy

Simony was not only to be found in bishops and other churchmen, but it was also found in secular rulers. Often simoniacal relationships were made between the prelates and the secular leaders, as evidenced by the Donation of Constantine. Wyclif believed that kings who kept silent about their involvement in simony—or the simony that they observed—had broken their oath to the church to govern their kingdoms by God's law. Even those kings who were ignorant of simony in their kingdom would be held responsible on the Day of Judgment. It was especially important to Wyclif that secular leaders keep themselves free of simony because of his plan to deal with the issue, which will be explained below.

Yet another group was guilty in Wyclif's eyes of keeping silent about simony. He believed that the friars did not address this issue in their sermons or in their role as confessors. To Wyclif it was obvious they should be expected to actively condemn this heresy. After all, friars were without income and therefore acutely aware of the Christian principle of being content with what God provided. Wyclif concluded with an air of irony: "Nor is there any doubt, since these Watchmen ought to know and sharply counsel the opposite, that they should, by a most weighty consensus, be pronounced traitors."

Wyclif desired to emphasize how important this heresy is. First, he gave examples from Scripture and then he explained that simony had crept into church ranks and secular ranks. Second, Wyclif made the case that simony was a relevant issue that needed to be

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130 Ibid., 34. It is possible that Wyclif used the term "Watchmen" sarcastically. It is general knowledge that Wyclif's opinions of the friars declined sharply as he grew older. Usually, the term "watchman" is derived from Ezekiel 3:16-21 (ESV). In this passage God makes the prophet Ezekiel the watchman of Israel and commands him to preach repentance to the people. The sins of whomever the prophet neglects to warn about the coming judgment will be upon Ezekiel's head.
addressed immediately. He did this by explaining the destructive nature of simony: it will destroy the church, the kingdom and, at the end of time, the perpetrators.

On a fundamental level, Wyclif believed that this heresy would destroy “Christianity itself...because it takes away the grace of the Holy Spirit by which members are joined to one another and to Christ.” Simony separated the sinner from Christ and from other members. Since it has divided the church, the church will not be able to stand. As the Scripture says, “A divided household falls.” Not only did this sin put the Church at odds with itself, but it also created a division between the Church and God. Another illustration comes out of the symbolism of the Eucharist and an interesting reading of John 2:17. As quoted by Wyclif, the verse states: “The zeal for thy house has eaten me up.” He explained that the simoniac in his selfish zeal gobbles up the body of Christ. After having consumed the “fat offerings of the faithful,” simoniacs then turn from eating the mystical body of Christ to serving the Eucharistic body of Christ in the Mass. He believed that this practice undermined the hierarchy that God set in place, that the priests should build up the lay people and draw them toward a priestly life. Instead, the lay people were forced to challenge the priest about his worldly life.

Another surprising aspect of the destructive nature of simony interested Wyclif: “Nothing destroys alliances and kingdoms more [than simony].” Elsewhere he said, “nothing disturbs civil peace more [than simony].” He especially lamented that simony undermined the wise counsel that the Church should provide to secular leaders.

132 Ibid., 38.
133 Ibid., 37.
134 Luke 11:17b (ESV)
135 Wyclif, On Simony, 38.
136 Ibid., 39.
137 Ibid., 38.
138 Ibid., 35.
only did Wyclif believe that simony tore apart the inner workings of a kingdom, but he also believed that it would cause kingdoms to war against other kingdoms: “But one thing I dare to prophesy is that wars will continue in which nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, as long as this plague of simony persists.”

If the deterrence of destroying the Church and secular authority was not enough, one need only consider what lay ahead for the simoniac. Wyclif considered their sin worse than that of Judas Iscariot. Judas had only sold Jesus, God in the flesh, once; simonia have sold the Holy Spirit again and again. Considering that Dante put Judas in the lowest level of hell should lead us to guess at the conclusion. About the future of these heretics, Wyclif only dared to say that simony was a sin that would be punished with severity. He declared: “Woe to that man who strives to spread the seed of simony’s heresy.” Each man’s destiny is his own; Wyclif was not as concerned with this point as he was with the state of the Church in his day.

In the sentiment that simony had the ability to destroy the kingdom and the Church, Wyclif had in mind his own land and his own church. Of England he wrote, “In our country priests are bent toward evil, we ought to rise up with passion to punish them so that the crime of a few not become the ruin of many.” The statement is rife with emotion filled words. He intended to inspire others to stop the practice of simony. He was anxious to see this done in his day because of the schism. Wyclif wrote: “And hence it is said that with the help of the secular arm the wellspring of simony, the Avignon nest,
spreads itself in one manner or another." The papacy at Avignon was noted for simony. Terrence McVeigh, the translator, believes Wyclif may have been referring to either Pope Clement VI (r. 1342-1352) or to Pope Clement VII, who was the first Avignon antipope elected in 1378. Clement VI is a strong candidate because of his avarice, but it would make Wyclif’s argument stronger for the reader to assume that he meant to allude to Clement VII. Due to the schism, Wyclif’s prophecy that the Church would be torn apart due to greed was coming to fruition before his very eyes. It is no surprise that he considered simony to be an important issue in his day.

The Solution for Simony

It was not enough to remind his readers of sin in the world and its destructive power. In order to be helpful, he needed to provide solutions. He addressed the issue of who should have the authority to bring simoniocal prelates to justice. Wyclif was pleased to point out that Saints Chrysostom and Gregory the Great both determined that it was the right and duty of the secular lord to destroy simoniocal prelates. Not only did these auspicious men support secular authority over simoniacs, but it was also supported by a decree of Pope Pelagius. Finally, Wyclif had provided irrefutable proof of what he had always taught: “it is plainly evident, as I have often said, that temporal rulers can licitly take away temporal goods from a church that does not fulfill its obligations.” He also reasoned that these authorities approved the negation of the pope’s authority because, if the papacy had also been infected with simony, then the secular authority could bypass

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143 Ibid., 37.
144 Ibid., 45 n 26.
145 Ibid., 33. This decree was only attributed to Pelagius. Wyclif’s source was Gratian’s Decretum, Distinction 7, canon 4. See On Simony, 44n16.
146 Ibid., 33.
Wyclif recommended that the secular leaders first confiscate the moveable goods of prelates who were guilty of simony, and after this they should revert all their immoveable property back to the crown, including all benefices, all inheritances, and all lands. If these things were done, then the heresy of the prelates would be stifled, it would restore the God given authority of the king, and it would return the church to a pre-Donation of Constantine state.

John Wyclif was a learned philosopher and theologian, but his teachings were not free of controversy. By the time he was writing this treatise on simony, he had been summoned to answer for charges of heresy twice by the local authorities and once by the pope. About four years from his death he wrote a detailed and systematic examination of simony. He had already established his views of heresy at the end of On the Truth of Holy Scripture; the only knowledge necessary to prove heresy was the knowledge of Scripture. According to Wyclif, only theologians were properly equipped to discern which practices and teachings were heretical. He considered simony to be one of the worst heresies. Since Wyclif had already made the connection that heretics were predestined to hell, he had no qualms about suggesting that those who committed simony with the gifts of the Holy Spirit may not be forgiven in the next life. Simoniacs were spiritual descendants of Simon Magus, of the dove sellers in the temple during Jesus' time and of Gesi, through whom they were inheritors of a leprous mark. It seems that his great concern about simony stemmed from the abuses of the Avignon papacy and the disastrous Western Schism. Wyclif was a great champion for the authority of kings over bishops and even the pope, especially a simoniacal pope.

147 Ibid., 33, 34.
148 Ibid., 35.
Comparison with Jan Hus

Often historians cite how indebted Jan Hus, the Bohemian professor-turned-reformer, was to John Wyclif’s writings, but it is rare to find much information about how they differed. An essay or monograph that directly compared the two treatises was not forthcoming, so the conclusions that are drawn after the following introduction of Hus’ *On Simony* are my own. The fact that both men wrote treatises called *On Simony* provides an opportunity to explore their similarities and differences in this one topic. It was an issue that was important to them both, but has yet to be thoroughly examined by modern scholarship. The topic deserves a more complete historiography of Jan Hus, but that goal is outside the scope of this paper.

Jan Hus was born in obscurity; much like Wyclif, history has forgotten his parentage and family. In his short life, he was a splendid scholar and lecturer at Prague University. He belonged to a group of likeminded reformers that all studied or taught at the aforesaid school. Unlike Wyclif, Hus was a junior member of this group, and was only thrown into the spotlight because others had deserted the cause or died. In his late thirties he became one of the leading members of the Prague reform movement.\(^{149}\)

During this tempestuous time of the Western Schism, the sale of indulgences by the papacy was hotly debated by Hus. In fact, Hus’ hatred of indulgences resulted in such strong action against him that it may be tempting to see this as the central issue on the reform agenda. At the root of his hatred of indulgences was Hus’ abhorrence of simony,

and simony has long been argued to be the “real cause of the Bohemian troubles of this period.”

Jan Hus’ On Simony is considered by some to be “a sharply polemical work.” Hus’ tone in this work may be influenced by the fact that he was currently exiled from Prague, and it is believed that he wrote this treatise in hiding. In this treatise Hus’ grounding in the Scriptures and his tendency to subordinate “his scholastic reasoning” to the Bible is evident. Hus wrote the work in 1413 using Wyclif’s On Simony as his main source. Hus’ manuscript was written in Czech, so that his less educated followers would be able to read it. Like Wyclif, Hus was a university teacher, but unlike Wyclif, he taught educated and uneducated laypersons when he was appointed to be the preacher at Bethlehem Chapel in 1402.

Although the two men agreed on many points, and even though they both wrote their works on simony near the end of their lives, there are some striking differences between the two treatises. Hus was younger when he wrote his thesis on simony. His youthful exuberance is evident in the text and contrasts Wyclif’s overall measured tone. Hus, after all, was a popular preacher, and Wyclif was first and foremost a scholastic. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that both writers had a lively and forceful way of combating sin and corruption with the written word. Hus’ writing differs in that he was clearly interested in reaching an audience that encompassed people with various levels of education, while Wyclif’s audience was chiefly educated clerics and professors. Finally, Hus’ concern for the church in Bohemia makes his work distinct. He wrote his tract on

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151 Spinka, Advocates of Reform, 193-194.
152 Lützow, The Life and Times, 170.
153 Spinka, Advocates of Reform, 193-194.
simony for Bohemians and from a Bohemian perspective. Wyclif's tract, though it refers to a few English events, focuses mainly on the entirety of Christendom.

Hus did not copy Wyclif's *On Simony* wholesale; instead he picked out what he thought were the most important parts and dutifully copied them almost word for word into his book. He followed Wyclif's basic progression of ideas, beginning with a discussion of heresy. This thesis began with a discussion of Wyclif's views of heresy as seen from his *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, from which he transitions almost seamlessly into *On Simony*. Jan Hus copied this outline. He must have had access to *On the Truth of Holy Scripture* because he quotes from it thoroughly at the beginning of his own treatise. Like Wyclif, he identifies three heresies: apostasy, blasphemy, and simony. He agrees that each offends a different person of the Trinity. Most importantly, he quickly comes to the point that simony, as it is an offence against the Holy Spirit, must be a sin that is "unforgivable in this world and the next." In addition to this, Hus also agrees that simony is a "spiritual leprosy." It is important to be aware of this sin because of its ability to spread like leprosy, infecting many of the faithful. It must be staunchly guarded against.

Whereas Wyclif responded to the simoniacal practices of the English as well as other European prelates, Hus writes with serious Bohemian problems in mind. The former is interested in correcting faulty leadership in a time of schism and, without naming names per se, carefully plods through the writings of the Church Fathers and the popes, labeling what is and what is not heresy. Hus does not use generic terms or

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155 Ibid., 201.
156 Ibid., 201.
situations. He lacks no small proof in his mind that the papacy is in sin. Just after explaining what simony is and what Biblical stories best explain it, he launches into an attack against the sale of indulgences. After listing all the major Biblical characters that were guilty of simony, Hus chooses to focus on Balaam, a character who is not of much interest to Wyclif.

Balaam was one of the few prophets of God who was not an Israelite. One gets the impression that this prophet was a typical sorcerer who had the good fortune to be communing with God Almighty, not necessarily of his own doing, but to be used as a tool for God’s purpose. Before the Israelites settle in the Holy Land, they attempt to travel through the surrounding nations peacefully, but they are greeted instead with war.157 Remarkably, they soundly defeat their enemy. Hearing of this, Balak, king of the Moabites, was fearful of the newcomers. He sent for Balaam to come and curse his enemy before he had to meet them in open battle. Balaam was not allowed by God to curse the Israelites, but he does seem to have accepted payment for his trouble, although the text does not specifically mention him taking the offered money.158 What is plain is that Balaam wanted to curse the Israelites, even though he was not able to. On his way back to his own land, the prophet entices Moabite women to seduce some of the Israelite men into idolatry and illicit relationships.159

Even though the majority of Balaam’s story describes how he essentially blesses the Israelites, this final transgression did not gain him any respect with later authors. In the Pentateuch it is clear that Balaam was finally killed because of his advice to the Moabite women, yet his acceptance of monetary reward to curse the Israelites publicly

157 Numbers 21:22-23.
158 Numbers 22:37.
159 Numbers 31:16.
became the greatest blot on his memory. False teachers of the early church were spoken of as having “rushed for profit into Balaam’s error.” This same perspective continued into the Middle Ages.

This example served Hus best, possibly because Balaam was a prophet to whom God spoke, as opposed to Gesi and Simon, who were both laypersons. The sins of the latter were destructive, but the sin of Balaam the Prophet was disastrous. Quoting the Second Letter of St. Peter, Hus wrote that “there shall be false teachers who shall bring multitudes into destruction... [these false teachers are the] sons of Balaam who loved the hire of wrongdoing.” Specifically, Hus likened those who sold indulgences to the sons of Balaam. He explained how one could recognize a “descendant of Balaam.” They were those who preached for a fee, who “condemn men unrighteously,” and who give advice that leads to corruption.

Although Hussitism is famous for the doctrine of utraquism, lay people partaking of both the wine and bread, this was not the central reform that Jan Hus was attempting to implement. Future Hussites would take up utraquism, as their main goal, but Hus was most concerned with certain abuses of the clergy and the papal see, including the sale of indulgences. Earlier in 1412, the same year that Hus wrote his treatise On Simony, Antipope Pope John XXIII (d. 1419) authorized the selling of indulgences to support his war with the King of Naples. Although history remembers John XXIII as an illegitimate pope, he was recognized at the time by the Bohemian church as the true successor of Peter. The unfortunate struggle between the contenders for the papal throne put a financial burden on many parts of Europe that had not typically felt the financial burden

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160 Jude 11.
161 Hus, On Simony, 206. Here “hire” means monetary profit.
162 Ibid., 209.
of the papacy. Bohemia, for instance, experienced widespread sale of indulgences cyclically not continuously. In Bohemia, as well as the rest of Central Europe, indulgences from Rome were only gradually introduced in the early thirteenth century, climaxing in the mid thirteenth century before they declined shortly afterwards. Again, they experienced a large sale in the middle of the fourteenth century, but this too declined until being reintroduced in the jubilee years of 1390, 1393, and 1400.\textsuperscript{163}

Past historians have argued that the sale of indulgences in order to support a war was commonplace at this time, so they came to the conclusion that it is strange that Hus should have found fault in the practice. More recent research has provided evidence that shows that these same indulgences were not accepted willingly elsewhere. In Austria the papal bull ordering the indulgences was not read in churches because of the direct order of the Duke.\textsuperscript{164} In Bohemia, King Wenceslas (1361-1419) abruptly switched to favoring Rome over the Prague University reformers. He fully supported the sale, and pledged that it would be carried out even after the first public demonstrations against the indulgences.\textsuperscript{165} Credit for the fiasco must also be paid in part to Wenceslas Tiem, the papal representative who was overseeing the event. Basically acting as the papal tax collector, Tiem executed his duties with ambition but little sense. Not only did he oversee the sale of indulgences, but he also sold deaconries and parishes to any willing buyers.\textsuperscript{166} A more obvious example of simony could not be found, and Hus took advantage of this.

\textsuperscript{163} Eva Doležalová et al., “The Reception and Criticism of Indulgences in the Late Medieval Czech Lands,” Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe (Boston: Brill, 2006), 105-106.
\textsuperscript{164} Spinka, Advocates of Reform, 133.
\textsuperscript{165} Doležalová, “The Reception,” 126-127.
\textsuperscript{166} Lützow, The Life and Times, 150.
Hus organized a day of debates about indulgences at the university. He himself did not disapprove of indulgences, per se, but he took issue with the manner in which they were being sold. He did so thoughtfully and soberly, but Jerome of Prague preached violently against the practice. Jerome’s speech on the subject was so inspiring that a large part of his student audience accompanied the preacher on a triumphal march back to his home. This and other public displays against indulgences and simony caused King Wenceslas to decree that participation in riots was punishable by execution. The papal representatives who sold indulgences were encouraged by this decree, and they took up their indulgence preaching again. Protests broke out in three churches, and the supposed ringleaders were arrested and executed. Hus memorialized their deaths by naming them in On Simony: “faithful laymen... boldly risked their lives. Three of them, Martin, John, and Stašek, sacrificed their lives for God, for they were beheaded in Prague for opposing the lying sermons.” Simony was not a distant evil, nor was it one that only affected the upper echelons of society. The common people wanted sin washed clean from their city, and Jan Hus and others were there to remind them of it. Even more remarkable, three of their own countrymen had given their lives in support of the cause. It was not a conflict that was to end peacefully.

As mentioned above, historians believe that Hus did not find fault with indulgences in general, but he was not one to let the adoption of new practices excuse any divergence from the Bible or the church fathers. In On Simony he brings specific complaints against the indulgences of John XXIII. Fundamentally, the exchange of the

167 Spinka, Advocates of Reform, 134.
168 Lätzow, The Life and Times, 152.
169 Ibid., 155.
170 Ibid., 156.
171 Hus, On Simony, 206.
forgiveness of sins for a fee is a misuse of the intended function of indulgences. The original intent of indulgences has been recovered by the modern Catholic Church; they are not purchased, but earned by specific penances such as the saying of certain prayers or the wearing of various scapulars combined with a spirit of repentance. The exchange of money, Hus believed, in no way signifies that penance or contrition has been undertaken by the recipient. Popes who order such indulgences and clerics that administer them are deceiving the faithful and committing simony. Remission of sins could not be purchased, as it is a gift of God. Unfortunately, among the learned and clergy of Bohemia, he was almost alone in this opinion.

Hus complained that even his fellow teaching masters at Prague University supported the practice. He was joined in the fight against the indulgences only by Jerome of Prague and a few others. Stephen Páleč, who had been his friend for a long time and supported many of the church reform ideas, would not stand by Hus at this crucial moment. This censure of the pope was to be Hus' undoing, and it is likely that Páleč foresaw that. With the abandonment of many of his most learned supporters, Hus would have to address a wider audience. He wrote both in Latin and Czech, but this treatise was written in Czech and filled with references that a literate, non-clerical, resident of Prague would understand.

Through insertions of references seen here and there throughout the text, it is evident that Hus was writing for a Czech-speaking lay audience that lived in Prague. Hus reached the less educated members of his audience by using tactics that he undoubtedly employed as a popular preacher. For the complex task of explaining how granting

172 Ibid., 219-220.
173 Spinka, Advocates of Reforms, 134.
benefices for the payment of fees is truly simony, Hus uses colloquialisms and laymen’s terms. It was not a black-and-white issue for the typical Christian; for a rich cleric to pay dearly to obtain a bishopric was the modus operandi. Hus falls back on the tactic of telling a story using familiar phraseology. Using the Czech term “Lucek,” translated here as “Old Nick,” which is a “colloquial diminutive of contempt” for the Devil, \(^{174}\) Hus explains: “But perhaps Old Nick will say: ‘Simon said, “Take the money and give me the power”’; while the pope says nothing, but in silence grants [the benefice] before or after he has received the payment. Consequently, there is no trafficking.”\(^{175}\) According to Hus, Satan might attempt to explain away accusations of simony by accusing the person receiving the benefice as a simoniac but allowing only that the pope is a mute participant in the deal.

Hus agreed with the teachings of Wyclif and others, that to accept payment is to participate in the sin as much as to give payment. Instead of proceeding on the scholastic course, which would have compelled him to explain logically once again how receiving money is also simony, the preacher turns to familiar characters to act out the same scenario. In this way he can explain the argument in more familiar terms to his audience: “But Hodek the baker, or Hůda the vegetable woman, would answer Old Nick that when he [Hodek] has bread for sale, and when someone comes and in silence lays the money on the counter, either before or after taking the bread, Hodek or Hůda concludes that the customer as bought the bread.”\(^{176}\) Hodek and Hůda were characters that represented the Bohemian everyman and everywoman, a kind of “Tom, Dick, and Harry” of medieval

\(^{174}\) Hus, *On Simony*, 219, n. 77.  
\(^{175}\) Ibid., 219.  
\(^{176}\) Ibid., 219.
Prague. The innocent and uneducated baker would perceive the exchange of money as a type of trafficking, even if it were not referred to it as such by clever churchmen and their careful handling of terms.

Differences in the Two Documents

We can see how Jan Hus took care to reach his intended audience, which was most likely Czech speaking lay persons, the dwindling numbers of clergy who were interested in reform, and perhaps religious students, likely the same crowd that would congregate in Bethlehem Chapel to hear Hus’ sermons. This approach was different from Wyclif’s. Wyclif was writing for an entirely clerical audience, and although it is somewhat unavoidable for an author to incorporate the influence of his own country in his writings, Wyclif’s treatise was written for a wider range than simply England. It was written in Latin and in a formal style.

The tone of the two men is quite different. Whereas Hus’ writing gushes with emotion and exclamations, Wyclif saved his outbursts of feelings for his sermons. That is not to say that Wyclif’s version of On Simony does not criticize the church hierarchy, but it does so in a less emotive or personal way than Hus’ version.

Similarities

Hus has been accused of copying large parts of Wyclif’s On Simony, and it is true to a point. First, Hus’ first chapter is in effect a summary of Wyclif’s On The Truth of Holy Scripture, which came before On Simony in Wyclif’s series of theological treatises.

177 Ibid., 219, n. 78.
178 Thomson, The Latin Writings, 127.
It is very likely that Hus had access to a manuscript of both texts. Although the copied section was abridged by Jan Hus, he translated it into Czech without changing the sense of the words, so it is evident that the section was directly copied.

Hus also copies Wyclif’s basic outline. First he explains his reason for writing about simony coupled with his summary of *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, which he must have deemed a necessary prerequisite. He follows this with the lifted paragraph about the three types of heresy and the harm they do to the Trinity. Then Hus discusses the origins of simony and especially the Bible passages that are most pertinent to the subject. Finally this is followed with the specific ways in which popes, bishops, monks, priests, and laity can be guilty of simony.

Except for the beginning, this is almost identical to Wyclif’s organization. Wyclif spends many more pages, three chapters in the modern edition, explaining exactly how the pope could be guilty of simony. He also gives a proper introduction that is in a sense a summery of the entire book. Perhaps Wyclif was wise in explaining his logic in detail about the pope’s potential for committing simony. Even though it may seem as though Wyclif is particularly emphasizing the pope’s culpability, the extended treatment can allow him more space to employ sound logic and incorporate a sufficient number of Doctors of the Church and other orthodox theologians.

*Conclusions*

John Wyclif wrote about simony using the Scripture, traditions of the church fathers, and careful logic. He got himself into trouble when he took his condemnation of simony to unusual conclusions. He was bound to find enemies since he called a

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Ibid., 55.
commonplace practice a heresy. Although it was entirely correct according to some church fathers to call simony a heresy, this was not the contemporary practice.

In order to make sure the evils of simony were laid bare, Wyclif made constant comparisons and allusions to leprosy. That frightening and divisive disease which came on without warning, separating friends and family members, was all too present in the fourteenth-century conscience. Calling upon the simony-as-leprosy schema was as easy as referencing key Biblical passages, like the story of Gesi the servant of Elisha, and linking it to current theology and literature, as evidenced by Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Summoner.”

Wyclif also made it clear that simony had seeped into every level of the church hierarchy and must be exposed. He did not blush from pointing out strict canon laws that recommended the removal of simoniacal bishops and priests. He also explained how simony could be present among kings and the laity.

Controversial and daring, Wyclif maintains that the “Donation of Constantine” was a disaster for the Church. It was the moment when Simon Magus’ sin returned, never to leave again. Instead of seeing property as a boon for the Church and a way to aid her in staying abreast of meddlesome laypeople, to Wyclif owning unnecessary property was a hindrance to bishops and priests alike. Even more, in this new age of schism and division, where simony was rampant and the church hierarchy was put into question, he believed that the laity should take it upon themselves to restore proper order. For him this opinion was grounded in the Church Fathers, but it was not a popular stance with his contemporaries. As seen above in Marc Bloch’s first age of feudalism, the power of the secular authorities was weakened for various reasons, but this did not mean that
contemporary church leaders felt secure in their own status. In Medieval Europe owning land was essential.

Jan Hus’ opinions on simony were certainly influenced by Wyclif’s treatise, and it is certain that he had a copy and even carefully translated part of the treatise to do his own exploration of the topic. Moreso for Hus than for Wyclif, simony was a current event and a controversial one at that. Boisterous protests against the sale of the pope’s indulgences were stiffly reigned in by the king. Hus needed to address money, religion, and greed in Prague. Simony was a logical way to do just that.

Both Wyclif and Hus approach the topic by focusing on applicable Biblical passages. The structure of Hus’ argument follows Wyclif’s closely, and in places it is evident that Hus copies from Wyclif dutifully. Similarities were expected, points where they differ is more significant.

Jan Hus’ *On Simony* is different from Wyclif’s treatment of the topic in that Hus is clearly writing for an audience that cannot read Latin and is intimately connected with Prague. Hus connects his condemnation of simony in theory with reproachable deeds that were committed in Prague in reality. Unlike Wyclif, Hus lays aside steady logic and self-restraint to betray his passion about this topic. Hus was ever the preacher and Wyclif the theologian. Although they had different approaches, their goals were one in the same: to return the Church to a more perfect form. Even after losing their careers and security and being under threat of punishment from the Vicar of Christ and his representatives, Hus and Wyclif held to the idea that they themselves were orthodox believers entreating the Church to forego her sin.
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