

The Poor Friars

John's desire was to shine the light of Christ into the darkness of his generation. To do that, first of all he had to master 'scholasticism'. This was a medieval form of education that involved learning some philosophy and theology. Debate and reasoning were the methods of teaching used to sharpen the student's mind and increase learning. And once the Bachelor of Arts degree was achieved, a student was qualified to teach others.

John got his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1358. He became a 'Fellow' of Merton College which meant he could lecture undergraduates who were studying for their own B.A. degrees. All Fellows of colleges did some lecturing. John loved teaching his students. It gave him great joy and satisfaction to know that he was helping to prepare young men for a lifetime of service to the Lord. His reputation as a fine scholar spread throughout England and he was greatly respected by people of all walks of life. He was known and admired for his love of the Bible and his submission to it as the Word of God. It transformed him to be more like his

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Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. It was John's prayer that others would also be transformed through the Word and the Spirit of God. His passion for the Word of God, however, would lead John into conflict with others in the church who did not share his point of view.

John's dislike of the friars did not go away. His displeasure grew when it became known that the Franciscans were trying to lure the new students of Oxford to join them in their religious community. They offered hospitality to new students in exchange for the student's vows of obedience to the Orders of the Friars.

Richard Fitzralph was now the Archbishop¹ of Armagh in Ireland. He was so incensed about what was happening in Oxford where he was once University Chancellor, that he took the matter to the Pope. Fitzralph accused the friars of 'sheep-stealing' by using underhanded methods to entice students away from their colleges. The friars had drastically reduced the numbers of students at Oxford colleges. It was unpardonable! Although the Pope heard Fitzralph's complaint, he did nothing about it. The friars were allowed to continue their sneaky work unhindered.

John bided his time. Soon after receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree, he was elected to the grand position of Master of Balliol College. He was a fine academic and thought to be the best person to govern the college. John accepted the honour enthusiastically.

1. An *Archbishop* is the highest ranking bishop of a large district or area.

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While in this role, the day had finally come for him to speak up against the friars, as he promised his friend all those years ago. He wrote an essay called ‘Objections to the Friars’. He made his complaints against the friars public by publishing the paper in 1360.

‘The friar stuffs the people only too well with rubbish,’ he wrote, acknowledging that the friars were very good at communicating bad theology. But for John, the friars did not clearly nor helpfully proclaim the gospel of Christ to the people. Instead, they made long and imaginative speeches about sin. They dangled their listeners over the fires of hell and declared that hell was their listeners’ destination unless they paid money to the church to have their sins absolved.

In short, John likened the friars to the religious men of Christ’s day whose hearts were proud, falsely pious, and full of hypocrisy. The friars had the outward forms of religion, but their hearts and practices were deceitful and desperately wicked. They were no good at all and they did great harm to the population.

It was his pastoral concern for the people of England that moved John to attack the friars in this way. He did not want anyone hurt or led astray by the lies and superstitions of the friars. He often found himself challenging or correcting their teaching in his lectures to his students. John simply wanted all ministers of God to live under the rule of the Word of God. In fact, he wanted all people, everywhere to do the same, and know the peace and blessings of God in their lives.

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John's criticism of the church made him a useful friend to the State. Since the days of King John, England wanted to be free to rule over its own affairs without interference from the Pope in Rome. This struggle for power gave John the opportunity to teach the next generation of clergy at Oxford to place their trust, not in the declarations of the Pope, but in the Word of God.

The lecture hall was unusually full the week after the publication of his book about the friars. John looked around at all the new faces in the hall. 'We seem to have increased our class size today,' he said.

Straight away a voice came from the middle of the hall. 'Master Wycliffe!' exclaimed a student. 'Why do you think the Pope has so much authority in England?'

'This is not a history class, my young friend. Today we are thinking about Augustine's view of the Trinity².' The group moaned softly.

'Please, Master Wycliffe,' begged a young student.

'It might help us understand your recent book a bit better,' said another.

John exhaled quietly. He hadn't planned on a history lesson. But a few minutes to explain the context of the English struggle against the papacy wouldn't hurt.

'Let us rewind the clock about a hundred and fifty years,' he began. Silence descended on the packed hall. 'The year was 1199. John, the Duke of Normandy was crowned king of England, seven weeks after the death

2. *Trinity* is the non-biblical word used when talking about God as 'one God in three persons' – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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of his brother King Richard. King John was thirty two years old. Five years into his reign the Archbishop of Canterbury died. Does anyone know who he was?’

‘Master Wycliffe, it was Hubert Walter who was the Archbishop then. He died in 1205,’ came a reply from an older, more mature student.

‘Yes, that’s correct,’ affirmed John. ‘An argument arose between the king and his monks about the appointment of the new Archbishop of Canterbury. The monks at Canterbury elected their leader to succeed Archbishop Walter. What happened next?’

‘The king ordered them to reverse the election because he wanted to choose his own candidate,’ answered a tall student on John’s left.

‘That’s right,’ said John. ‘As both sides wanted their own candidate, and neither would compromise, they appealed to the Bishop of Rome³ who was Pope Innocent III, expecting him to settle the argument. How did he do that?’

Silence. Better to say nothing and appear stupid than talk and remove all doubt.

‘No one?’ asked John expectantly. ‘The Pope decided to ignore their elections and appoint the Archbishop himself. His choice was Cardinal Stephen Langton⁴. Does anyone know what else the Pope did?’

3. *The Bishop of Rome* was another name given to the Pope.

4. A *cardinal* is a senior member of the clergy in the Roman Catholic Church.

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‘The Pope also said that only he had the right to appoint any future Archbishop of Canterbury,’ came the reply from the front row.

‘Imagine that!’ said John light-heartedly. ‘How did King John react?’

‘He was furious?’ a young student sheepishly replied.

‘Is that a question?’ asked John. The students chuckled. ‘Yes, he was very angry, and it made him paranoid too. If the Pope was willing to ignore the king’s desire to appoint a new Archbishop, perhaps the Pope might want to appoint the next King of England as well.’

Every eye in the hall was looking at John, eagerly waiting for what happened next. John continued. ‘As King John rejected the Pope’s ruling, England was excommunicated from the family of the Church of Rome in 1207. Then what happened?’

‘The Pope ordered the church in England to stop working’ exclaimed an older student from the back of the hall.

‘That’s right!’ John agreed. The younger students were shocked by that revelation from their lecturer. They couldn’t believe it. John went on. ‘The Pope gave the order that priests were only allowed to baptise children, as well as hear the confessions of anyone who was dying. There were no weddings or funerals.’

‘What did the king do?’ asked a young student who was sitting on the floor near the entrance to the hall.

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‘That is a good question,’ said John. ‘What do you think he did?’ The young boy shrugged his shoulders. He had no idea. ‘Does anyone know what the king did?’ The hush from the students indicated that they didn’t.

‘Well,’ began John, ‘King John confiscated all church property. Then he forced the abbeys and churches to buy it back. He got a lot of money this way. But the king’s actions alienated him from the church. The Pope’s excommunication⁵ deeply shocked the nation because their lives are revolved around the church. It was then as it is now. The people of England had never heard of a king being shunned by the church before. Can anyone tell me what Pope Innocent III did next?’

‘Master Wycliffe; did the Pope encourage the French to invade England?’ asked one of the older students.

‘Yes, he did. By now the king’s relationship with the barons⁶ was at a low ebb because of how he was behaving. He could not rely on their support if the French attacked. So what did he do?’

‘The king yielded to the Pope,’ came the reply from a student who guessed the answer correctly.

‘And?’ asked John, willing the student to keep going with his answer.

‘And ... and ...’ The student was thinking hard. ‘And ...’ No. He did not know, so John helped him.

5. *Excommunication* is to be excluded from or thrown out of the fellowship of the Church of Rome.

6. A *baron* was a nobleman who was given lands by the King of England. A baron served as a member of the king’s council.

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‘And he gave up control of his kingdom to the Pope and all other popes that came after him. King John acknowledged Pope Innocent III as his superior. The king also agreed to pay a tax to the Pope of 1,000 marks⁷ every year.’

‘That’s a lot of money, Master Wycliffe,’ said a young student who was standing by the back the wall.

‘Yes, it is,’ replied John. ‘The king also had to agree that if he or any future King of England should break the agreement, he would lose all rights to the kingdom. When the papal ambassador came to announce these terms to King John on 15th May 1213, the king took off his crown and offered it to the Pope’s representative. Why did King John do that? Anybody?’

‘Master Wycliffe; it was a symbol of the king putting England into the hands of the Pope.’

‘Yes, very good. It was symbolic indeed. There was a ceremony of reconciliation held in Winchester Cathedral in the July of 1213. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, absolved the king of his excommunication. England was now restored to the good graces of the papacy. But the barons of England were not happy. They thought the king had humiliated the nation and they did not want to be slaves to the Pope. What did the barons do?’

7. A **mark** was the form of currency in England at the time, worth about two-thirds of a British pound sterling today (roughly 66 pence).

‘They drew up the Magna Carta⁸, Master Wycliffe, and had King John sign it,’ said a mature student from the middle of the student body.

‘Excellent!’ declared John. ‘Of course, the Pope condemned the barons, and declared the charter invalid. England has struggled to obtain freedom from papal authority ever since. When King John died, the barons and the government in London discouraged future kings of England from paying the Pope’s tax. If a king wanted support from the papacy, he paid the tax. If he did not need papal support, he did not pay it.’

‘Is that why you wrote your book, Master Wycliffe? Do you plan to help free England from papal rule?’

John thought for a moment before answering. ‘I wrote my book because unlike the friars, I am compelled to follow the example of my Lord and Master, who came into this world to seek and to save the lost. The people of England are lost without Christ. The friars are happy to keep people in fear of eternal damnation in hell, as long as they can sell their penances and line their pockets with the pennies from the poor person’s purse.’

‘We are poor people, Master Wycliffe!’ exclaimed a young threadbare student in front of him. The other students laughed loudly.

‘Yes, yes, you are poor people indeed,’ John replied. ‘So, hold on to your pennies! And don’t give them

8. *Magna Carta* means *Great Charter*. The Magna Carta was the barons’ statement of their rights, which they presented to King John in the summer of 1215 and made him sign it.

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to those begging friars!’ he said emphatically. More laughter erupted from his audience.

John raised his voice to be heard over the hubbub of the students. ‘You must listen to me carefully,’ he said, and waited for the mirth to die down. When he saw that they were listening to him, John spoke up. ‘Your lives should be spent in service to Almighty God, who sets the sinner free by the cross of his Son Jesus Christ,’ he said. ‘You are to live your lives in service to the One who welcomes the forgiven sinner into his family and into a glorious kingdom in the hereafter. The kingdom of God is not ruled by sinful and greedy men who set their minds on acquiring as much power and authority as they can muster for themselves. No. It is a kingdom ruled by the loving God of the Scriptures, who loves each of you and each of those poor sinners out there in the world. And it is your duty to proclaim the gospel of Christ simply, so that people can repent of their sins, believe in him, and receive the gift of eternal life.’

The respect that the students had for Master Wycliffe was palpable, even more so after his exhortation to them to serve the Lord Jesus and to love those who are lost from him. John was a good and godly role model for the students at Oxford. Some even wanted to be like him. But not everyone did. The staff and students of the Oxford colleges planned for a lifelong ministry in the church. Some of them were cautious of associating too much with the reformer, even if they agreed with some of the things that John said about the friars.

For now, they would watch him closely.