By Edwin Welch, M.A.

John Wycliffe died in the little market town of Lutterworth in 1384, but the ideas to which he had given currency continued to trouble England and parts of Europe for another fifty years. In Bohemia the martyrdom of John Hus caused a rebellion which was to last for many years. In England from 1382 onwards there were intermittent attempts to suppress Wycliffe's teachings, but they flourished until 1414 when Sir John Oldcastle rebelled not only against the Church but also the State. This added treason to heresy and the secular authorities instead of merely assisting the ecclesiastical courts began to hunt the Lollards in earnest. It was in the period between 1414 and 1431 that Lollardy ceased to exist as any kind of organised movement and, although it continued to be remembered in those counties which were particularly affected, it was never again a decisive influence in England.¹

East Anglia and the Midlands were particularly affected by Lollardy and it is interesting to note the connection between an early form of industrialisation and the growth of nonconformity. Both Lollardy and Elizabethan nonconformity seem to have appealed to the tradesman in the towns rather than the farmer or labourer in the country. A comparative prosperity seems to encourage the growth of unorthodox opinions in any age. This will be illustrated in the trials described below. Unlike the Midlands few East Anglian men actually took part in Oldcastle's rising, but this did not save them from persecution. In 1428 three priests, William White, Hugh Pie and William Waddon were burnt at Norwich and in the following year William Chiveling at Colchester. In 1424 John Florence of Shelton, Richard Belward of Erisham and others were compelled to do penance for heresy.2 The cases quoted below will confirm how strong a hold Wycliffe's followers had on the diocese of Norwich at this time. There is little doubt that his views were being propagated by priests travelling from town to town after the fashion of the early Methodist preachers.

To suppress heresy it was necessary to modify the existing procedure in ecclesiastical courts. The English canon lawyers had

¹ In 1526 John Wright of Leicester called Roger Canke 'a lowler' and was sued for defamation in the archdeaconry court (Leic. Museum, 1D41/11/1, f. 39).

² E. F. Jacob, Register of Henry Chichele, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1943), p. cxxxvii. K. B. McFarlane, John Wycliffe (London, 1952), p. 172. J. Fox, Acts and Monuments, vol. 1 (London, 1684), p. 750.

very little experience of such a crime. It was often impossible to compel a heretic to appear in the ecclesiastical court since it only possessed the power to excommunicate. In 1401 therefore a statute was passed to allow bishops and archdeacons to call on the assistance of the justices of the peace.³ Bishops also found the doctrinal questions involved somewhat complicated and by a provincial constitution of 1416 archbishop Arundel gave directions for the conduct of heresy trials and allowed the most difficult cases to be referred to convocation.⁴ Nevertheless the church courts applied the usual summary procedure to most causes of heresy. Summary procedure was used for all correction causes, that is causes in which the bishop or archdeacon was proceeding against anvone for misbehaviour of any kind-criminal jurisdiction. was much more simple than the procedure used in instance causes suits between two parties—and was therefore much speedier. Proceedings opened with the production of articles in open court. In summary causes these were usually viva voce not in writing, and gave a brief description of the facts. In most correction causes there were no witnesses as the accused was usually only 'vehemently suspected' of the crime. He would either confess and be ordered to do penance, or deny the crime and be ordered to purge himself. Purgation was nicely graded to suit the circumstances. A serious crime would require the production of many compurgators of high standing in the community, while a mere rumour of immorality could be purged by the accused's own oath. Purgation also allowed anyone to object to the proceedings and if this happened the process was abandoned and the objector instructed to proceed against the accused in the normal way. It was possible to have a purgation objected to in this way several times.⁵

Heretics being a special class were usually apprehended by the civil authorities and taken before the bishop or archdeacon. Margery Kemp was taken up in this way by the mayor of Leicester, taken before the abbot and dean of Leicester, and sent to the bishop of Lincoln to be tried.⁶ They were not usually tried in the ordinary courts, but before the bishop in person or a canon lawyer specially appointed for the purpose. In fact just as the archbishops of Canterbury had developed a court of Audience to hear causes

³ Rotuli Parliamentorum, vol. III, pp. 466 and 467.

⁴ W. Lyndwood, *Provinciale* (Oxford, 1679), pp. 288-305.

⁵ For example in 1500 Thomas Widerley of Brigge in Kent was accused in the court of the archdeacon of Canterbury of saying that a priest was only a priest when he said mass. He denied it and was admitted to purgation with two neighbours. However his vicar repeatedly objected although he was unable to prove the offence (Kent Record Office, P.R.C. 3/1, ff. 144–156).

⁶ The Book of Margery Kemp (Oxford, 1954), pp. 144-152.

involving important cases or matters, so from time to time certain bishops began to appoint similar diocesan courts, one of whose tasks was the suppression of heresy.⁷ It was for this reason that court proceedings in heresy causes are not to be found with the normal court records. The records of such a court of audience were usually less well written and always less well preserved because the court did not have a permanent staff of officials as the other courts did.

The survival of a fragment of an audience court book for the diocese of Norwich for the period between 1429 and 1431 is therefore of considerable importance. It has been examined, so far as I can discover, only once before, but that was by John Fox for his Acts and Monuments, more commonly known as his 'Book of Martyrs'.8 He claims to have seen it amongst the 'old Monuments within the Diocess of Norfolk and Suffolk', but it is no longer to be found in the diocesan records of either county. Part of the book is now bound with other items of a later date in a volume of the archbishop of Westminster's manuscripts.⁹ Unfortunately in a rebinding the arrangement of the leaves has obviously been disordered and John Fox's extracts do not provide sufficient information for a reconstruction of the original order of the missing folios.¹⁰ The surviving fragment contains 37 causes from Norfolk, 14 from Suffolk, and one from Essex in which the accused was arrested at Ipswich. It is with the 14 Suffolk and the one Essex cause that this article is concerned. All 15 occurred between 12 March 1428/9 and 11 March 1430/1, but most within the last twelve months.

The earliest cause was that of John Skylly, a miller of Flixton, who appeared voluntarily before the bishop in the chapel of his palace at Norwich on 12 March 1428/9. As in most of these causes the bishop was assisted by William Worstede, D.D., prior of the cathedral church, Richard Caudray, archdeacon of Norwich, and various friars. The scribe or registrar of the court was John Excestre, clerk and public notary. Excestre was responsible for all the court proceedings in this volume. He was working in the diocese as early as 1415 and seems to have been an important official.¹¹ At the beginning of the recorded proceedings Skylly

- ⁷ Sussex Arch. Collections, vol. xcv, p. 61.
- ⁸ Fox op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 751 and 752.
- ⁹ It is vol. B 2, pp. 205-362. It was bound in its present form in 1881 and fragments of an earlier binding are included at the end. I am indebted to the archivist, Father Fisher, who brought the volume to my attention, allowed it to be microfilmed, and obtained the Archbishop's consent for its publication.
- ¹⁰ The disorder was not caused in 1881 since an earlier (not contemporary) foliation runs 14-24, 35-38, 40-53, 55-76, 79-106.
- ¹¹ E. F. Jacob, Register of Henry Chichele, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1943), pp. xcvii, ci, civ.

confessed that he had harboured notorious heretics—William Whyte, the priest burnt at Norwich in 1428, and John Whaddon, a skinner, whose trial before the bishop is now missing from this volume—and maintained their erroneous and heretical opinions. Twenty-four articles which include almost all the charges brought in any of these causes were presented to Skylly. He admitted being taught all of them by Whyte and Whaddon and on being told that they were heretical willingly abjured them. Being a layman and unable to read he appointed the archdeacon to read the abjuration prepared for him. A paper schedule of his crimes was then given to him, he was doubtless reminded of the penalty for a relapsed heretic, and he was ordered to do penance in the Premonstratensian abbey at Langley in Norfolk.¹²

The next cause was that of Richard Fleccher of Beccles who appeared on 27 August 1429 in the palace chapel before the bishop, William Worstede, John Derham, D.D., prior of St. Margaret at Lynn, William Bernham, Dec.B., vicar-general of the diocese, and William Sokyngton, Dec.B. Fleccher must have been arrested by the secular authorities since he was produced in chains and did not appear voluntarily as Skylly had done. Written articles containing ten charges were read to him and he confessed teaching those heresies in the diocese of Norwich. He agreed to abjure them and appointed John Willy, public notary, to read the abjuration:

In the Name of god to fore you be worshipful fadir in crist William be grace of god Bisshop of Norwich y Richard Fleccher of Beccles of your diocese your subject knoweleche and confesse pat y have be conversaunt with heretikes and paym received in to myn hous wittyngly and paym supported favord and conseled, pat is to say with syr William Whyte, syr Huwe Pye, William Everdon, Richard Belward, Bartholomew Monk, John Skylly, millere, and William Wright of Martham. And of paym y have received be errours and heresies be whiche be contened in bese indentures Whiche y have beleved affermed and taught, pat is to say pat pe sacrament of baptem doon in water in forme customed in pe churche is noper necessarie ne vailable to mannys salvation. Also pat confession shuld oonly be made to god and to noon oper prest. Also pat no prest hath poar to make cristis body in sacrament of be auter. Also pat only consent be tuxe man and woman with consent of pe frendys of bope parties suffiseth for matrimony with oute expressyng of wordis or solemnizacion in churche.

¹² MS. B 2, pp. 220–223.

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Also pat every cristen man is a prest. Also pat be Pope of Roome is antecrist And oper prelates and persones of pe churche ben disciples of antecrist. Also pat no man is bounde to kepe be holydays but bat it is leful every body to do all bodyly werkes on sundays and oper festival days boden be pe churche. Also pat no man is bounde to offre in churches. Also pat no man is bounde to paye mortuaries to churches For suche payng of mortuaries and of oper pinges to pe churche makyn prests proude. Also pat no worship shuld be do to ony ymages but pat all ymages owyn to be destroied and do away. Also pat holywater and holybred ben of noon vertu and bat it were better prestes to halwe wellis and foldis ordeyned for mannys mete and drynk pan to blesse water in churche whiche men springe on here clokes. Also pat every prayer shuld oonly be made un to god and to noon oper seynt. Also pat commune blessyngs pat men use and make with here right hand it availeth to no thing elles but to skere away flies. Also pat in no maner it is lefull to sle a man noper be processes of lawe to dampne a man pat is gylty of thefte or of manslawght. Also pat it is not lefull in ony case to swere ne to lye. Also pat no pilgrimage shuld be do oonly to pore puple, Because of wiche errours and heresies y am called to fore you worshipful fadir whiche have cure of my soule and be you fully enformed pat pe said myn affermyng holdyng belevyng and techyng ben opin errours and heresies and contrarious to be determinacion of be churche of Roome. Wherfor y wyllyng folwe a sue be doctrine of holy churche and departe from all maner of errour and heresie and turne with good will and hert to be oonhed of be churche. Considerand pat holy churche spereth not hir bosum to hym pat will turne agayn Ne god will not pe deth of a synner but rather pat he be turned and lyve with a pure hert v confesse deteste and despise my said errours and heresies . . . And swere be pese holy gospels be me bodely touched pat from hens forth y shal never holde errour ne errours, heresie ne heresies, ne fals doctrine agayn the faith of holy churche and determinacion of pe churche of Rome . . . yf y knowe ony heretiks or of heresies ony man or woman suspect or of paym fautors, confortours, consellours or defensours or of ony man or woman making prive conventicles or assembles or holdyng ony divers or singuler opinions from be commune doctrine of pe churche y shal late you worshipful fadir or your vicar generall in your absence or be diocesanes of suche men have soone and redy knowyng, so help me god

atte holy doom and pese holy gospels. In wittenesse of whiche thing y subscribe here with myn owyn hand a crosse x And to pis partie endented to remayne in your Registre y sette my signet. And pat oper partie endented y receyve undir your seal to abide with me unto my lyves ende. Yeven at Norwich in pe Chapell of your Palace pe xxvii day of pe moneth of August The yer of oure lord a thousand fourhundred and xxix.

Having received his copy of the indentures Fleccher was ordered to receive an unstated number of beatings before the procession in the churchyard of Beccles at mass, and three beatings in the market place there on market days. On all these occasions he was to be dressed as a penitent—in a shirt only, with head and feet bare, and carrying a candle of one pound weight. He was also to fast on all feast days for the next year. With this penance he was dismissed the court.¹³

The only two priests to be included in these trials were Robert Cavell, a chaplain or curate at Bungay, and Robert Bert of Bury St. Edmunds. Cavell also was produced in chains before the bishop in the palace chapel on 2 March 1429/30. On this occasion the bishop was supported by the cathedral prior, John Thorp, a Carmelite and a doctor of divinity, a bachelor of divinity, three bachelors of laws, and a master of arts, together with John Excestre, three other public notaries and two clerks. Cavell was questioned by the bishop and admitted consorting with William Whyte, Hugh Pye and other notorious heretics. He was ordered to appear again on the following day and abjure his errors. He did so in the collegiate church of St. Mary in the Fields, Norwich, when he abjured the following nineteen heresies contained in a Latin schedule:

- (1) That the sacrament of baptism in water is of no value, and if the mother is blessed by the holy spirit then the infant is sufficiently baptised.
- (2) That when a child has grown up and can understand the word of God he is sufficiently confirmed.
- (3) That confessions should be made to God alone.
- (4) That remission of sins can be given only by God.
- (5) That no priest can change the bread into Christ's body at the sacrament.

¹³ MS. B 2, pp. 329–332.

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- (6) That fasting is unnecessary.
- (7) That it is lawful to work on Sundays and feast days.
- (8) That tithes and oblations may be lawfully withheld from the clergy.
- (9) That no honour should be paid to the relics of saints.
- (10) That priests and nuns would be better married.
- (11) That mutual consent of love in Jesus is sufficient for a valid marriage.
- (12) That it is not a sin to disobey the precepts of the Church.
- (13) That ecclesiastical censures and excommunications are not to be feared.
- (14) That prayers should be made only to God.
- (15) That no honour should be paid to any crucifix or image.
- (16) That the death of St. Thomas Becket was not a martyrdom.
- (17) That pilgrimages are unnecessary.
- (18) That it is unlawful to kill a man for theft or murder.
- (19) That it is wrong to fight.

Although Cavell only added his cross to the schedule he was obviously a man of some education for he read the Latin himself. He swore to undergo the penance assigned, but this was reserved by the bishop till a later date and we have no further information about it.¹⁴

Master Robert Bert, chaplain at Bury, came before the bishop in his chapel on the same day as Cavell. He was accused of being in possession of a book called 'Dives et Pauper' which contained many errors and heresies. He replied that it was a new book which he had lent to a friar preacher of Sudbury called Nicholas to be copied for Sir Andrew Boteler knt and had subsequently sold to someone living near Higham. He denied all knowledge of its heretical nature. He was also accused of associating with Sir John Poleyn and other heretics, and of preaching that tithes should not be paid to clerics in mortal sin or honour paid to images. He admitted only to an acquaintance with Poleyn but not to being his accomplice, and denied the other charges. By the bishop's 'special grace and favour' he was allowed to purge himself with seven priests after Easter when the bishop returned to London. Notice was to be given at Lavenham or Newmarket that anyone who objected to the purgation should appear then. On 20 April

14 MS. B 2, pp. 341-345.

in the chancel of St. James' church in Bury St. Edmunds he successfully purged himself of the charges. As a precaution he was then ordered to show all his books in English to the bishop.¹⁵

On 8 March 1429/30 Thomas Ploman was produced in chains before the bishop, the prior, an Augustinian friar and two canon lawyers. He was a 'shipman' and claimed to be a native of Sizewell near Leiston. The three charges against him were disregard of the sacraments, failure to confess and receive the communion, and failure to pay tithes for seven years. He denied all except the failure to pay tithes and swore not to associate with heretics. Since his life as a sailor would make it difficult to attend church regularly or pay tithes he may well have been orthodox, but it would be interesting to know where his voyages had taken him.¹⁶

Six suspected heretics from Beccles appeared before the bishop in his palace chapel on 18 April 1430. One was Matilda Fleccher, the wife of Richard Fleccher who had been tried the previous year. She was accused of eleven of the usual heresies, submitted, and was given the three beatings round her parish church and market place. Two others were glovers—John Eldon and John Reves and one a skinner—Richard Grace. The only exceptions to the usual articles were that Eldon had associated with Sir Hugh Pye and Reve had said that it was as good to be buried in a field as in a church. The other causes, those of Richard Knobbynge and Baldwin Cowper, were completely normal. All five were produced in chains and submitted to penance.¹⁷

There is no record of any further causes until 20 September in 1430 when John Fynche was brought before the bishop, the prior and William Ascogh, B.D. Fynche was a tiler who had formerly lived in Crowche street, Colchester, but had been arrested in Ipswich. He was accused of eleven heresies or errors, similar to those mentioned above but omitting the pacifist opinions. He admitted them all and also confessed to committing perjury at Michaelmas 1428. He had held these opinions since Christmas 1427, but when cited to appear before the commissary of the bishop of London at St. Nicholas' church in Colchester he had sworn on a missal that he was not a heretic. John Wylly, a public notary, read the English schedule of abjuration for Fynche and the usual oath was administered to him. His penance was to be three beatings before the procession in Norwich cathedral and three around the market place at Norwich. Fynche was also to appear

¹⁵ MS. B 2, pp. 289–292.
¹⁶ MS. B 2, p. 296.
¹⁷ MS. B 2, pp. 333 and 334, 297–316, 335–340.

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with the other penitents in the cathedral on Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday for the next three years and a final note records his failure to appear on Ash Wednesday 1431.¹⁸

The next trial in chronological order is of Katherine, wife of Roger Wright of Shottisham, on 20 December 1430. She appeared before the vicar-general, William Bernham, only and the account of her trial is very brief. She confessed to having believed heresies about baptism, confirmation, confession, matrimony, feast days, tithes, ecclesiastical censures, oaths, images, pilgrimages and prayers to the saints, but swore to abjure them for ever.¹⁹

The last two Suffolk causes in the volume are apparently both on the same day—11 March 1430/1—although the second is undated. In the first John Spycer of Bungay appeared before the vicar-general in St. Stephen's church at Norwich and abjured six heresies. He was to receive only two beatings in his parish church and round his market place. The articles produced against him were in Latin, but there is some evidence in the proceedings that he was literate in English.²⁰ Thomas Herde of Shipmeadow, tailor, appeared before the vicar-general in the chapel of the bishop's palace. He denied certain articles which are not copied and was ordered to purge himself seven handed. This he successfully did at a later date which is also not given.²¹

The charges against these lollards can be divided into three main groups-those relating to the sacraments, those relating to the forms of worship, and a miscellaneous group mainly concerned with the administration of the Church. In ecclesiastical court records it is always difficult to get behind the registrar and discover what the accused really felt and believed. This is because canon lawyers delighted in written precedents and so the same wording is used for the same type of offence even though the accused may have expressed themselves very differently. In this series of trials the lawyers were obviously leaning heavily on the provincial constitution of Archbishop Arundel which condemned those who defamed the decrees, constitutions and synods of the Church, the worship of the crucifix, images or relics, the making of pilgrimages and the taking of oaths. The Council of Oxford, at which this constitution was enacted, also established a procedure for the prevention of heresy and the punishment for relapsed heretics so it formed a valuable precedent.²²

¹⁸ MS. B 2, pp. 237–242.

¹⁹ MS. B 2, p. 288.

²⁰ MS. B 2, pp. 259 and 260.

²¹ MS. B 2, pp. 262–264.

²² W. Lyndwood, *Provinciale* (Oxford, 1679), pp. 298, 288-295.

In the group of sacramental heresies eleven of the accused held erroneous opinions on baptism, transubstantiation and confession. None of them thought baptism essential for either children or adults—'bat be sacrament of baptem doon in water in fourme customed in be churche is of noon availe and not to be pondred if be fadir and modir of pe childe be cristened and of cristen beleve'.23 At the Reformation Zwinglius held a similar view that baptism was only a sign of admission to the Church, but the nearest modern parallel is the Society of Friends which rejects all baptism. Transubstantiation has of course been denied frequently since the Middle Ages. Here the lollards do not seem to have desired much reform as they wished to retain communion in one kind for the laity. Some amplified their remarks on the communion by saying 'bat oonly consent of love in ihesu crist [is sufficient] to make be sacramentes and non oper erthly man'. On confession, however, they anticipated the Reformers-'pat confession shuld oonly be made to god and to noon over prest⁵.24

Nine were accused of errors about marriage and all in the same form of words—'that only mutual consent of love in Jesus Christ is sufficient for marriage between man and woman without any form or words or any ceremony in church'.²⁵ This was not so heretical as might be thought, because marriages valid in canon law could take place without a religious ceremony. All that was needed was an agreement between the parties in the presence of two witnesses and subsequent cohabitation. Although the Church frowned on this form of marriage, it was legal in England until 1752 and in Scotland until much later. Therefore the only error involved was that of despising a sacrament. However only a few of the more extreme religious movements have subsequently held such views.

Six lollards were accused of denying the necessity of confirmation—'pat pe sacrament of confirmacion doon be a Bisshop is unvaillable and noe profitable to mannys sowle ne to his lyve'.²⁶ Although most modern sects have dispensed with both bishops and confirmation too, they all retain some form of admission as an adult member of the congregation. It would be interesting to know whether these Suffolk lollards believed in the workings of the inner light (as Quakers do) or in the belief in personal salvation (like the Methodists) as a qualification for admission to the Church. Either can be read into some of the charges. Finally in this

²³ MS. B 2, p. 337.
 ²⁴ MS. B 2, pp. 337 and 330.
 ²⁵ MS. B 2, p. 343.
 ²⁶ MS. B 2, p. 337.

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section three were accused of denying the effectiveness of absolution, but this is a mere corollary to the denial of the value of vocal confession since the two are so closely linked.

In the second section eleven lollards were accused of condemning the use of the crucifix, images and other objects, while two went on to condemn relics of saints. They all advanced what were later to be common Protestant arguments that images were merely objects of wood or stone and that the relics were not worthy of worship. In the same Protestant pattern eleven objected to prayers made to the saints instead of to God, ten to pilgrimages, eight to fasting and two to the use of holy water. John Skylly was an extremist who said that holy water had no more virtue than river water, church buildings were unnecessary because prayers were just as effective if said in the fields, the ringing of bells was only to obtain money for priests, and that every true man living in charity is a priest. This last opinion is almost exactly that of the Quakers.²⁷

In the miscellaneous group of charges the most frequently mentioned are refusals to pay tithes and oblations. Sometimes these are to be refused to unworthy priests only, but at others the refusal is unqualified. Tithes have always been the cause of much trouble in separatist sects which objected to financing both their own and another church, but here the refusal seems to be a development of the medieval heresy that an unworthy priest was no priest. Nine held that it was no sin to work on Sundays and holy days so long as the work was not sinful in itself and seven that the pope was antichrist and the bishops his disciples. Seven denied that the precepts of the Church had any value and four denied the power of excommunication in particular. All these opinions, except the anti-sabbatarianism, have since become part of the beliefs of most Protestants. There was a widespread objection amongst these lollards to the taking of oaths, an attitude which they share with other medieval heretics and the Quakers and Moravians at the present time. John Skylly and Robert Cavell held that the death of Thomas Becket was not a martyrdom which was an interesting anticipation of the view of Henry VIII. He called Becket a rebel against his sovereign and removed his name from the list of saints.

From this summary it can easily be seen how far these lollards had advanced beyond Wycliffe's opinion. In particular they differed about the validity of the sacraments. Wycliffe had believed in the real presence at the communion and in the validity of the forms of baptism and marriage. His opinion on confession was that it should be made, if possible, to a good priest but that it

²⁷ MS. B 2, p. 221.

should not be compulsory.²⁸ Although Wycliffe had wished to abolish worship of the saints he had not included the Blessed Virgin Mary in his prohibition as his successors did, and he had justified the taking of oaths. Nevertheless many of these charges can be seen in Wycliffe's statements—the pope is only head of the Church as long as he follows Christ, to endow the Church is to do the work of antichrist, excommunication can only hurt those who are excommunicated by their own sin, and there is a universal priesthood of the predestinate.²⁹

It would be more satisfactory to end this article with an account of the church order which the lollards wished to establish, but that would create a false impression of their aims. Like Wycliffe they still believed in one universal Church and were not separatists like modern nonconformists. Their intention was to reform the Church and eliminate abuses from within. This fact and the form in which their opinions have been preserved emphasises the destructive aspect of their beliefs. Any constructive ideas which they may have had are lost in the bare record of the court proceedings against them.

²⁸ H. B. Workman, *John Wyclif* (Oxford, 1926), pp. 30–43.
 ²⁹ Ibid., pp. 11, 12 and 25.