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by W. B. Selbie

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# ENGLISH SECTS

A HISTORY OF  
NONCONFORMITY

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# NONCONFORMITY: ITS ORIGIN AND PROGRESS

## CHAPTER I

### THE BEGINNINGS

THE rise of Nonconformity in England was due to a great variety of causes. Some of these were local and occasional in their operation, while others of them may be said to be universal and permanent. These have to do with the very nature of the Christian religion, and with the special genius of the British people. As early as the beginning of the fourteenth century, when the people of this country were nominally all of one faith, there were many signs that the uniformity was by no means so complete as it seemed. Saxon and Norman were not yet fused into one race. The Normans loved the ornate and splendid ritual of the Roman Church, but the Saxons were a plainer folk and preferred a simpler worship. The distinction between the two

peoples corresponded roughly to the distinction between aristocrats and democrats. The average monk or priest was an aristocrat by birth, training and association. He was not of the common people, nor was he on their side in the hour of their need. This helps to explain what happened at the Coming of the Friars. The people responded eagerly to the call of these priests, who were ready to share their lot and to speak in their tongue. The Friars had the Pope's licence to preach either in sacred buildings or in the open air, and they freely availed themselves of the privilege. Their coming wrought something like a religious revolution. With their coarse wit and homely speech they brought religion home to the men in the street, and created an ideal of religious service which did not increase the popularity of those idle shepherds who devoured their flocks instead of feeding them. The Friars were, of course, loyal sons of Rome, and there is no trace of heresy or disaffection in their preaching. But, for all that, they prepared the way for Wyclif and the Lollards, and for that temper of mind which will not always yield to authority, but loves to exercise an independent judgment in matters of religion.

It is not surprising, therefore, that even before Wyclif's day signs of revolt against the dominant Church should be not infrequently forthcoming. They were confined at first to a few obscure people, and were easily

and quickly suppressed by the iron hand of authority; but they show that the temper of the people was not unprepared for change. It was at least a hundred and fifty years before the Reformation that the process which culminated in that great movement began. The reign of Edward III marked a real step forward in the history of the English people. It was the age of Chaucer and Langland, and it saw the rise of all those intellectual, spiritual and political forces which make for religious revival and revolt. The Reformation in England and Scotland was no sudden thing, still less was it a mere political movement. It had long been prepared for, and the form it took was the result of the peculiar temper and special circumstances of the people of these islands. Among the greatest Reformers before the Reformation was John Wyclif (1320-1384), a man who, in almost every respect, was in advance of his age, and who stands out as one who has left his impress not only on his own generation, but on the whole life of our people. After having been Master of Balliol College, Oxford, he became vicar, first of Fillingham in Lincolnshire, and afterwards of Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire, and of Lutterworth in Leicestershire. During his whole life his energies were directed against the corruptions of the Church, its moral failures and its usurpation of the temporal power. Though he aimed at Reformation he was no mere