Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France*. Renaissance Society of America Reprint Texts 14, University of Toronto Press in association with the Renaissance Society of America, Toronto, 2002. First published by Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, pp. xiv + 351, ISBN 0802085571. Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v21i2.249.

This study of preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France is a thorough examination of printed sermons and the messages disseminated between 1460 and 1560. The author examines how piety was defined in this volatile period and the responses from Catholic preachers to the serious threat from Protestant criticism. The author mainly wishes to address the question of the mentalité of the preaching. The concentration on published sermons means that the author focuses on some of the most well-known preachers of Late Medieval and Reformation France, such as Guillaume Pepin.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which sets the scene for public preaching. In the second part the author looks at the themes covered in sermons preached to the laity and in the third she examines the church and heresy. The first part, called 'The Art of Preaching', is a comprehensive introduction to some of the fundamentals of preaching in late medieval France. Here it is established that most of the sermons under scrutiny were preached in front of an urban audience which often took a lively interest in the themes and ideas presented. In examining the lives of preachers the author demonstrates that most had university degrees and often had their initial training in a mendicant school; in fact, the majority of preachers discussed were mendicants. Taylor also notes a keen awareness by the preachers of the need to captivate their audience, with tone and message tailored to meet the needs and conditions of the audience, while also adhering to a set form and style.

The content of the sermons in relation to the laity is the subject of the second (and lengthiest) part in which the author identifies some major themes such as the quest for salvation, the religious cosmos, the repudiation of materialism manifested in an irreverence for the rich and powerful when the preachers thought that they were pursuing a worthy cause and the practical advice given to the laity to encourage them to live a good Christian life. The preachers focussed on a conscious turning away from sin and an acceptance of salvation through the atonement of Christ.

One of the author's main concerns is the role of women in the preachers' universe, an important issue as women outnumbered men by four to one in the audience. She demonstrates that the images of women in the sermons were mainly positive during the fifteenth century and that they were taken seriously in these sermons, perhaps because females not only outnumbered men in attendance but also in patronage. The author also argues that women as a subject became less important in the sixteenth century when the attention of the preachers were more strongly focused on the church and heresy.

In the third part of the book Taylor deals with another major issue discussed by the preachers, namely their approach to, and discussions of, matters relating to the church itself. The preachers themselves were not blind to the problems facing the church and were often sharp critics themselves, even if they advocated reform from within and considered Luther, Calvin and their followers to be dangerous heretics.

Taylor makes some important points about late medieval piety. One is that there is an important distinction between the sometimes technical theological discussions held (and allowed) within the universities and the interpretations and 'stories' told by preachers. Another significant aspect is that quite critical and heterodox views of reforms within the church were preached during the fifteenth century, but that the discussions tended to become more doctrinally hardened and focused on permitted interpretations when the

preachers felt that they needed to address the criticism brought to the fore by the Protestants.

The author has clear sympathetic views of the late medieval church where the preachers valued women, catered for a certain entertainment component and were aware of the problematic issues of the church themselves, while at the same time valuing unity and believing that the church could be reformed from within. This basically positive opinion of the late medieval church has become quite dominant since the late 1970s. It offers a reasoned alternative to the very negative view propagated mainly by Protestants; one which has dominated the scholarly debate since the Reformation itself. This book is thus an important contribution to the ongoing debate centred around the positive and negative aspects of the late medieval church and how the challenges from radical critics such as Luther and his followers were met.

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