

***The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England* By Ian Forrest, Clarendon Press, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2005. ISBN 0-19-928682-2, Price £65.00, pp 282**

Ian Forrest's study concerns what the author calls 'anti-heresy' in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century England. The proximate cause of England's first heresy crisis was the advent of lollardy – a collection of anti-clerical beliefs associated with John Wyclif and its dissemination 'from the lecture halls of Oxford' across the country in the 1370s.

The response of the religious and secular authorities comprised preventive measures such as the stricter control over the licensing of preachers and clerical training, and a sustained propaganda campaign, as well as coercive measures.

The work is based on a doctoral dissertation. As such it is addressed to an academic audience and it presumes a working knowledge of views of John Wyclif's followers and of the political background of the period. The author acknowledges in his introduction that he is not particularly interested in the heretics themselves, in their beliefs, or their fates. Heresy is approached as a crime, as indeed it was perceived by medieval legislators. Forrest's focus is on the process by which this crime was uncovered and combated. The author succeeds in arguing his brief though I was left feeling that a book length treatment of the subject should perhaps have aimed at a broader and more encompassing treatment. The reader is left wishing that some of the more provocative claims had been fully developed.

In the first three chapters, Forrest adopts a legalistic approach; these chapters are primarily interested the character of the judicial process that was brought to bear on heresy, with prosecution rather than persecution. The evolution of a workable definition of heresy is traced. The author convincingly argues that a Papal inquisition *was* established in England. England was less unique than has sometimes been claimed. Anti-heresy adapted in each country to peculiar circumstances. Here Forrest is particularly interested in the interactions between secular authority and cannon law, and in the learning process through which bishops, in particular came to possess an agreed upon body of legal knowledge concerning heresy and its suppression.

The second part of the book is concerned with the sociology of heresy and its detection. This is (for the reviewer at least) a richer topic and the author develops a number of intriguing insights which would reward further exploration. Defining heresy was a crucial first step. The lower clergy had to be educated enough to be able to distinguish sound from unsound arguments. The population at large had to be confronted with the manifest evilness of heresy. For this reason punishment and penitence had to be public acts. Heresy was described as treason against God. In art, literature and language rebellion was associated with adultery, sodomy, usury and other deviations from God's law. Lollardy was understood by some as solely consisting in the encouragement of illicit sex. Indeed one of the most provocative arguments in the book is Forrest's suggestion that the detection heresy and the enforcement of sexual regulations were strongly linked.

The other main feature of this work is the light it shines on the nature of the late medieval legal system. Forrest finds that heresy trials were rarely started by accusations. They typically began with inquisitions involving the examination of witnesses. The process through which evidence was gathered thus relied on collaboration and as well as coercion. Unlike the later

witch-hunts which convulsed parts of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the authorities were able to control and direct the detection of heresy.

In summation the book's strength is the way it focuses attention on the role of social networks in enforcing the laws against heresy. Outsiders and newcomers, itinerant preachers like William Ederyk were particularly suspect. Heresy was, the author notes, the most difficult offence to prove of all because it was a crime of the mind. With the parish and village-level networks that facilitated neighbourly surveillance, the enforcement of canon law would have been impossible. This particular aspect of heresy detection could become the subject of a more general work.

Now I will detail some of the questions and problems posed by the book. The study is dedicated to the question of *how* legislation against heresy functioned, how opinion and consensus was formed on the subject and how heretics themselves were brought to sentence. The wider question of *why* late medieval society pursued deviant opinion so fiercely is not addressed fully. The author's own conclusions are often in the form of pithy comments. Those less familiar with the existing literature will wish for a more sustained argument. Nor do we get a sense of what the consequences of heresy and its suppression were for late medieval England. It is hardly fair to criticise a scholarly work of this sort for not covering questions that lie outside its remit. Nevertheless, this omission seems unfortunate because it is the question which would particularly interest the non-specialist reader.

Forrest does briefly argue that the nature of their views concerning the necessary unity of the Church required them to respond to dissent in the way medieval legislators did. Religious enthusiasm provided vitality but it had to be controlled; and there was an invisible line dividing legitimate and illegitimate protest. For Forrest, waves of heresy and anti-heresy came about when this dividing line contracted. This occurred in England only after 1380. Unlicensed preachers became obvious suspects. So did alms collectors and celebrants. These groups had to be brought under the control of the Church or face punishment. Pamphlets and other heretical writings had to be controlled. The mere possession of books could make one suspect. In a time before printing suppressing heretical contraband was a simpler task than it was to become a hundred years later. Though he does not himself draw this conclusion, the evidence Forrest presents suggests that there was widespread crackdown on freedoms of expression and association in the first part of the fifteenth century.

Finally, popular works of medieval history dwell on horrific violence dealt out to traitors and heretics. They invite the reader to grimace at the sadism of our ancestors; they generate sympathy for the executed. In contrast Forrest discusses the question of punishment very briefly.¹ On the contrary, in both his introduction and conclusion, the author declares an explicit intention to view efforts of medieval churchmen and inquisitors 'sympathetically'.² I confess that I am not entirely sure I understand what this means. A historian should undoubtedly be interested in understanding the motives of historical actors. Forrest does this and is undoubtedly able to provide a sophisticated and analytical treatment of the

¹ He however does report that after 1414 only 6 percent of heresy trials resulted in execution and this relatively small figure perhaps provides support for Forrest's relative neglect of this aspect of anti-heresy.

² In the introduction Forrest states that he does so without the intention of 'descending into apologia for torture and execution' (p 27). In his conclusion Forrest argues that sympathy is appropriate because 'there was much vitality in the response to heresy as well.'

collaborative process through which heresy was uncovered. He rightly points out that both persecutors and persecuted believed in Christian unity; neither was interested in toleration. And he is wary of anachronistic interpretations shaped by 'post-reformation propaganda'. Nevertheless, 'sympathy' as opposed to 'empathy' carries the curious connotation that the author shares the viewpoint of medieval inquisitors.

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