

The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England

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A few years ago, I pestered friendly Lollard scholars with a question which tended to flummox them slightly: how did English bishops know how to prosecute heretics? The broadest outlines of a reply had been sketched, in an article from 1936 by H. G. Richardson and another by Margaret Aston in 1993. In addition, Anne Hudson and J. A. F. Thomson had provided commentary on one detailed aspect, the use of two surviving interrogatories (1). But none of this satisfactorily explained matters, at least from my perspective as a researcher on continental heresy and inquisition, curious as to how one might make comparisons across the Channel. The situation has now changed. In this monograph, Ian Forrest provides an answer much fuller than I had ever hoped was possible, from a perspective rooted in English archival material but also conversant with wider, European issues. And in exploring the nuances of the topic, he further opens up a number of important areas of debate for scholars of Lollardy, of medieval canon law in England, and of late-medieval English social history in general. This is, in short, a very good and important book indeed.

The first section deals with the theory of anti-heresy activity. After a brief Introduction, which sets out the scope of the book and highlights some specific and technical issues regarding the evidence of episcopal records, Chapter One focuses primarily upon the canon law background to investigations of heresy. This work is grounded in an impressive foray into English manuscript records (primarily in Oxford and the British Library) of canon law commentary, most notably William Paul's (or William of Pagula's) *Summa summarum*, and through this demonstrates the degree to which English lawyers were informed by continental texts and procedures. As Forrest makes clear, this does not mean that one can simply assume a direct correlation between earlier models and late-medieval English practice; rather, what his book in large part attempts to examine is the complex means and processes by which English bishops adapted earlier procedures to their present task, and brought earlier canon law methods into English usage. Moreover, whilst clearly in command of the technical legal aspects, Forrest is also interested in the wider question of the shape of anti-heresy discourse, the particular issues of discernment and truth-production that underlay the continued commentary and refinement of legislation in this area.

Chapter two deals with the investigation of heresy, with a particular regard to its institutional basis. In the background lies an old (though perhaps, within an Oxford context, still current) controversy between Stubbs and Maitland, over the exceptionalism, or otherwise, of England with regard to canon law. The English

crown was enthusiastic in its pursuit of heresy (as Forrest points out, this very enthusiasm making secular power appear ironically Wycliffite in its determination to exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction), and throughout the period one sees a mixture of royal and ecclesiastical law and governance in the repression of Lollardy. But, Forrest argues, the former should not be seen as indicating an essential English independence from ‘continental’ canonical procedures; the nature of medieval canon law meant that local application was always subject to the particular politics of the moment. In turning to the episcopate—who, particularly after 1413, were the mainstay of anti-heresy actions—Forrest demonstrates how the activities of English bishops share many features with continental inquisitors; and, he suggests, there may even be a hint of papally-appointed inquisition in England (beyond the obvious, but oft-forgotten, fact of Templar prosecutions in the early-fourteenth century).

In chapter three, we are shown various techniques and methods by which heresy was detected. One major theme, previously neglected in its detail and implication, is the licensing of preachers; and, consequently, the tendency for authorities to focus upon preaching activities as potential sites of trouble. The importance of licensed preaching within Archbishop Arundel’s 1409 constitutions is, in this regard, placed into a much longer tradition of monitoring—and, as Forrest argues, ‘preaching’ was by this point being stretched in its definition to include, potentially, the relatively informal teaching or discussion of doctrine in private houses. The other major source of detection (detection, which had more the sense of ‘reported’ than ‘found out’) was through people informing upon others. This, Forrest points out, implicated the general laity in the pursuit of heresy at its base level, which itself raised various issues of authority and knowledge for the religious authorities.

The second section deals with the communication of the framework described above, to ecclesiastical officials, royal officers, and the general mass of the laity. Chapter four focuses upon statutes, and examines how they were copied and circulated. ‘The copying and modification of statutes produced recognizable families of texts, comparable to the stemmata by which literary scholars illustrate the redaction and alteration of prose and verse works’ (p. 82); through such careful comparisons one can track the flow of information, and the ways in which legislation was localized and adapted to circumstance. Looking in particular at the diocese of Lincoln under the episcopacy of Philip Repingdon, Forrest explores the web of influences laying behind a particular piece of diocesan legislation, arguing that a particular innovation (making proactive general inquisitions by questioning men of ‘good fame’ in every borough and deanery) was produced in this diocese in 1413—and from this local context spread upwards to future national legislation. The process was not simply ‘top-down’, in other words; the experience of an individual bishop could feed into future legislative models and procedures. This chapter, through exemplary prosopographical effort, further tracks the institutional and career trajectories of the kinds of officials who promulgated and exercised knowledge in this area, looking at a background of legal training, and also the potential use of legal formularies that contained anti-heresy elements.

Chapter five turns to ‘channels of propaganda’, by which Forrest means the routes of communication for authoritative anti-heresy discourse. This, he stresses, was not a case of elite knowledge and popular ignorance; ‘the cultural divide between elite and “popular” was not the chasm that it has sometimes been described as’ (p. 114). Licensed preaching was the most obvious medium, with various examples cited of fifteenth-century episcopal mandates to preach framed in specifically anti-Lollard terms. Those licensed by the episcopate were mostly graduates, with a background in arts or theology, but also some lawyers—raising the possibility that further legal knowledge could be propagated more broadly. Again, Forrest identifies Repingdon as a key figure in promoting this campaign of anti-heresy activity—a case, perhaps, of the reformed sinner being particularly zealous (Repingdon had had to abjure Wycliffite views in 1382, after contact with the heresy at Oxford). Another channel of anti-heresy dissemination was the proclamation of legal statutes, and the public citation of heretical offences; and third element was the public nature of (and participation in) rituals surrounding the prosecution of heresy, notably excommunications and penances.

Chapter six examines the content of this propaganda in great depth, which Forrest notes as interlinked across the different media—sermons citing law, for example, and legal citations referring to homiletic imagery.

Elements of Wycliffite doctrine were promulgated by these channels, in order to be condemned; and an image of the stereotypical Lollard—with a particular emphasis on the hypocrisy of heretics—was common to many cultural productions. The purpose of this propaganda, Forrest suggests, was to enable the laity to participate in the detection of heresy (in the sense of noting and reporting those suspected to the authorities). The propaganda was thus strongly informed by legal ideas, most particularly the importance of outward signs as a means by which inner heresy could be identified—gathering in ‘conventicles’ for example, or suspiciously ‘holy’ people who were not to be trusted.

The final section of the book looks at the implementation of all this machinery of repression, and does so by reading across various fifteenth-century trials and, in the final chapter, focussing upon the diocese of Lincoln, through extensive use of unpublished episcopal material. In chapter seven, Forrest examines the means by which heresy came to be reported, noting occasions when the traces of prior legal procedure can be seen in the records, and analysing the conception of heresy (or rather, suspicion of heresy) held by lay witnesses. Chapter eight looks at ‘the social contours of heresy detection’, in the context of a wider episcopal visitation by Repingdon in 1413. What Forrest finds here is remarkable: that, across all kinds of spiritual offences *including* heresy, those most likely to be ‘noted’ by the local informants are not the lowly or socially marginal but people of office-holding social stature. ‘If one was law-worthy in the sense of being reputable and trusted, it was more likely that one’s own offences would be deemed worthy of being dealt with at law than the offences of people outside this self-referential circle’ (p. 221). In his Conclusion to the book as a whole, Forrest consequently takes issue with two historians of continental inquisition, Jim Given and Grado Merlo. For Given and Merlo, inquisition was inimical to society and community, something that deliberately broke the skein of social relations. Not so, suggests Forrest: inquisition presented ‘opportunities for the individual to become more involved in public action than he, or to a lesser extent she, had been before’. The use of inquisition helped ‘to make the parish fidedigni part of the state’ (p. 234).

This is excellent, thoughtful, insightful work, based upon a considerable mastery of diocesan sources and some legal manuscript records (I am curious, regarding manuscripts of canon law, as to what else might be found beyond London and Oxford, but demanding more on this line from an already archivally-voracious piece of research would be ungracious). The approach that Forrest adopts demonstrates the complex interplay between the orthodox construction of heresy, and the lived experience of Lollardy within its social setting(s). It adds considerable nuance to ideas of ecclesiastical governance in late-medieval England, politely quarrels with some elements of literary scholarship in key areas (particularly where that scholarship overestimates the practical applicability of power), and, in its final thoughts on inquisition and community, adds to the growing tide of work on late-medieval England that, following Mark Ormrod’s lead, explores the bottom-up elements in statehood and governmentality for the period (2). Resisting the temptation simply to stand back and applaud, let me raise a few issues here of continental comparison, and then frame a few questions arising from the book as a whole.

Forrest stresses early on in the book the importance of the historian being sympathetic toward the inquisitor—not in an exculpatory sense, but in seeking to understand properly how, and for what reasons, the prosecution of heresy was pursued in a particular fashion. I agree completely with the sentiment; but I did wonder if the practice, at times, ends up making the prosecutorial machinery appear more coherent and logical than it in fact was. I do not mean that Forrest suggests that heretics were rightly prosecuted; rather that the systems and ideas that he analyses all end up seeming a bit *tidy*, as clever chaps set about working out how best to do things and then communicating that to equally talented lay people and so on and so forth. This is perhaps in danger of minimizing the degree to which anti-heresy discourses were caught up in certain ideological tensions, and confused by the ghosts of earlier heretical phantoms. It is clear, as Forrest argues, that English bishops produced methods for prosecuting heresy that depended upon lay interaction and agency; but it is surely also the case that English bishops (and monarchs, and justices, and so on) were also beset by worries over the gullibility, the waywardness, and the stupidity of ordinary lay people, particularly en masse. Whilst there was certainly no absolute ‘chasm’, in this sense, between elite and popular, it is the case that some elements of bridging the perceived gap were potentially fraught—this, after all, is why Reginald Pecock ended up in deep trouble in the later-fifteenth century for his attempts to bring greater

vernacular orthodox education to a wider public.

Moreover, within the legislation and canonical glosses examined here, it could further be noted that models of heretical behaviour were not based solely on English experiences of heresy or ideas about how best to prepare the laity to spot dissent; they were also carrying a baggage of earlier and rather different heresies. For example, the English canonist William Lyndwood, in glossing ‘vehement suspicion’ of heresy (discussed by Forrest p. 74), reproduces a list of qualities—and more importantly activities, such as supplying heretics with food—drawn from a gloss first provided at the council of Tarragona in 1242, there concerned with the political situation in Languedoc and northern Spain, and with the social setting of Cathar and Waldensian heretics. Elsewhere Forrest argues that polemical literature was not able ‘to say that seeing was believing, because that position had been tainted by its association with Wycliffite thinking’, and hence propagandists and bishops, desirous of allowing lay people to identify heretics, were forced to turn instead to the trope of Lollard ‘hypocrisy’ (pp. 158–9). Again, however, earlier models haunt fifteenth-century England: condemning (and identifying) heretics as ‘hypocrites’ was a model found in anti-heretical discourse throughout Europe in earlier centuries. It did have the effect that Forrest argues for it; but it was not, I would suggest, the outcome of logical, conscious choice on the part of orthodox legislators. The potential confusions at all levels thus occasioned make the system appear less, well, systematic than *The Detection of Heresy* would suggest, and the discourse of anti-heresy less transparent and coherent than Forrest at some points assumes.

My final point of demurral would be to note that whilst the concluding comments on inquisition and community are suggestive and intriguing within their English context, they do not work as rebuttals to Jim Given or Grado Merlo. In neither France (Given) or Italy (Merlo) was inquisition tied into state—and more importantly, regular diocesan—structures as it was for England; in both countries, inquisition was usually experienced much more as an external imposition of authority from without. Moreover, the detail of the English trial material does not indicate anything like as much focus on the incrimination of others as in the continental sources. Forrest is not quite comparing like with like; which perhaps suggests that the next stage for future discussion will be the real, rather than assumed, *differences* between English and continental procedure.

Let me conclude then with a few other questions arising from the new area of conversation that Forrest has admirably begun. The book is, he says, designed as, ‘a riposte to the notion that the significance of heresy and anti-heresy can be measured by the (allegedly small) numbers of people concerned’ (p. 13). I wonder firstly how the much better understanding of the legal framework that he provides might throw new light on the vexed question of how much of the iceberg (if it is that) we can see; that is, whether one now has stronger grounds for suspecting that there were many more fifteenth-century trials than the surviving evidence shows? Secondly, in a book which interestingly stresses the local informing the national, I am curious as to at what point, if any, one assumes a uniform and well-tutored set of procedures were in place—or whether English bishops were, in each generation, having to learn how to do it all again afresh. Finally, the question that will be on most Lollard scholars lips is: what does all this do to our perception of Lollardy? Forrest sketches the outline of an answer—and rightly emphasizes throughout the variety of unorthodox behaviour that could fall under the sign of heresy—but it would be good to know more. These three queries are in no ways criticisms. They are, rather, an indication that, having answered my original question—how did English bishops know how to prosecute heretics—*The Detection of Heresy* has now provided a clutch of new issues to explore and debate. For that, and for much else, it is a very welcome publication.

Notes

1. H. G. Richardson, ‘Heresy and the Lay Power under Richard II’, *English Historical Review*, 51 (1936), 1–28; M. Aston, ‘Bishops and Heresy’, in eadem, *Faith and Fire* (London, 1993); A. Hudson, ‘The Examination of Lollards’, in eadem, *Lollards and Their Books* (London, 1985); J. A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards, 1414–1520* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 226–31. There is apparently also an

American Ph.D. thesis, partially published, by John Rea Bacher, *The Prosecution of Heretics in Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1942) which, as far as I'm aware, is not held by any English library; I have not yet had the chance to consult it myself, and I suspect that this is similarly the case for the author under review here. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. W. M. Ormrod, *Political Life in Medieval England* (Basingstoke, 1995); A. Musson and W. M. Ormrod, *The Evolution of English Justice: Law, Politics and Society in the Fourteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 1998). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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