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## Review of *Preaching during the English Reformation* by Susan Wabuda

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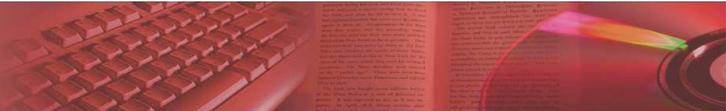
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# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Susan Wabuda. *Preaching during the English Reformation*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xix + 203 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45395-0.

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## A Work in Progress

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Susan Wabuda's book opens with a brief survey of the changes which have taken place in the study of the English Reformation over the past forty years, and more particularly over the past twenty. She ends with Christopher Haigh and Eamon Duffy, whose works frame many of the assumptions behind her book; she argues, against the former, that "the Reformation mattered, and mattered deeply" (p. 5), and draws heavily upon the work of the latter throughout the book. Her arguments consistently begin with late medieval practices and seek to examine how preaching changed through the Reformation, not just in its ideals, but in personnel, administration, and style. The story she tells is a messy one, not easily susceptible to neat formulation, and the book focuses more on the processes through which the change took place than on developing a clear argument concerning the meaning or effect of the changes.

Following the opening survey, the introduction gives a brief overview of the role of the sermon. Wabuda points out that in the medieval church "the sermon was handmaid to the sacraments" (p. 7). It was a necessary part of the teaching function of the church and especially the penitential process, but there was also a tension in the priest's role as he both taught the church's message and sought to keep the text of scripture from the laity. As the importance of the sacraments declined, however, the sermon moved to the forefront of the reformers' agenda. Wabuda notes that the translation of scripture for the laity had the potential to undermine the importance of sermons, but argues that while the reformers re-defined the clergy as a serving ministry rather than a wonder-working priesthood, they retained the idea of a spiritual elite with the authority to instruct its listeners in the correct interpretation of scripture. The rest of the book takes this outline for granted and moves through a number of discrete but related changes in English preaching.

Chapter 1, "For all Christian Souls," examines preach-

ing in late medieval England. The central argument of the chapter is that the state of the sermon was less dire in this period than the reformers, or some historians, have argued. Wabuda looks at both Henry VII's Westminster chantry and Lady Margaret Beaufort's provisions at Cambridge, and argues that while the foundations of the king and his mother were the most elaborate of their time, they were not unusual in their intent, for there was a widespread general interest in improving both the availability and the quality of sermons at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This interest served to intensify the tension between word and sacrament, as many devoted Christians eagerly sought greater knowledge of scripture. Wabuda points out that there were a number of different sources available to cater to this desire for sermons, all of which were impeccably orthodox: the homily within the Mass, the quarterly sermons within the parish, pulpit cross sermons, and provisions for sermons in wills. The rest of the chapter is devoted to exploring these options, their role and their efficacy.

Chapter 2, "Pulpit Men," looks at the movement to enhance the preaching role of the priest. Wabuda focuses on Fisher, Colet, and Erasmus, who between them created both a new ideal of the preacher and new institutions to produce them. She points out that Erasmus's *Ecclesiastes* revolutionized the idea of the preacher and continued to be a source of inspiration for reformers of all doctrinal positions through the century, though it sparked controversy over access to the scriptures from its publication. She also points out Erasmus's role in the development of the sermon as a political address, and the ways in which later reformers picked up on his struggles with conservatives to frame their own anti-conservative and anti-mendicant rhetoric, as well as to build up the image of Henry VIII as dispenser of the Word and protector of the church. With the exaltation of the king, however, came the rise of the laity more generally, as they took on the role of watchdogs over the clergy, a shift which

Wabuda describes as “one of the greatest reversals of the English Reformation” (p. 97). Not only did some of the laity take on the duty of monitoring the messages of the preachers they heard (a duty which Wabuda argues made some clergy more nervous about preaching), they also had, for the first time, free access to scripture, and the ability to read it for themselves and to each other, thus usurping the clerical right to both guard and disseminate the text. As with the removal of prayers for the dead from sermons, this development held the potential to end preaching altogether, for if the laity could read and interpret for themselves, what was the purpose of preaching? Wabuda argues that the sermon was saved both by the reformers’ ideal of a clerical spiritual elite and their insistence that the Word had to be heard, preached in a public, communal setting rather than simply being read as a private activity.

Chapter 3, “Flocking Companies of Friars,” faces squarely an issue which comes up in other contexts throughout the book: the role of the mendicant orders in the provision of preaching. Indeed, Wabuda argues, the mendicants were “the backbone of the bishops’ preaching rotas even into the 1530s, until the closure of their houses” (p. 119). This chapter deals with the problems caused by the dissolution of the mendicant houses, when the loss of their pastoral help, their university training, and their services as preachers represented an enormous drain of skill and manpower from the new church.[1] Some of the friars converted and they were welcomed into the reformed camp, both for their ability and for their propaganda value.[2] Bishops like Longland and Cranmer also worked to bring in good preachers and provide guidance for men who were inclined to preach well, but they struggled against royal indifference to preaching, which the king feared might encourage variety in opinion. Wabuda argues that some of the slack was taken up by the laity, who began to endow sermons and rebuild their churches as effective preaching spaces. Nevertheless, she seems to conclude that the gap left by the mendicants was never filled; while the new men preached better sermons by the standards of the reformers, there were never enough of them and there was never the political will to create more preachers or to train them properly.

Chapter 4, “The Name of Jesus,” stands apart from the rest of the book, for it does not deal with the changes in preaching in this period, but seems to work as a case-study. Wabuda opens by describing the growth in devotion to the Holy Name in fifteenth-century England, arguing that as the devotion spread, it was associated with the development of preaching chantries. These preaching chantries, in turn, helped to stimulate new

interest in sermons and provided men to fill pulpits in market towns, the university towns, and St. Paul’s or the Spital. Thus the preaching chantries, and especially Rotherham’s Jesus College, provided a model for early-sixteenth-century reformers, and in their Christocentrism laid strong foundations for the scriptural focus of both Erasmus and the continental reformers. Wabuda argues that from early on the Holy Name embodied the ambiguity of the early reform movement: for evangelicals it was connected to the power of scripture, and maintained a talismanic quality long after other religious images had been dismissed. However, devotion to the name of Jesus was also important to the conservatives, most obviously to the Jesuits. Wabuda argues that while the hotter sort of Protestants found the accommodations made with the Holy Name offensive, especially under Elizabeth, it represents the kind of adaptability which marked the new English church as a whole, providing an abstract image which could replace the medieval images of the saints and still remain acceptable to those focused on the Word.

The book has no conclusion, which is appropriate, for there is no real attempt to draw a clear conclusion from the material presented. This is very much a study of a work in progress, which focuses on the ideas and personnel available to the reformers when they came to shape their agenda and their program. It quickly becomes apparent that this inheritance, particularly early-sixteenth-century reform ideas, was enormously ambiguous, and that the men at the head of the English reformation struggled, not always successfully, to develop and implement an effective and consistent preaching model. Along the way, Wabuda highlights tangents, odd moments, and dead ends in the story of preaching in sixteenth-century England, as though to emphasize the contingent quality of many of the developments she discusses. While the imposition of a little more order might have been welcome at times, Wabuda works hard, and usually successfully, to avoid the pitfalls of hindsight. This is not a history written from the viewpoint of the victors, but from deep in the trenches.

#### Notes

[1]. Many reformers clearly recognized this as a problem, and one influential group sought to transform the houses rather than eradicating them, by re-establishing some of the leading houses as educational establishments which would train preachers properly. Wabuda places Anne Boleyn in this group, and spends some time on a sermon given by Latimer, apparently under Anne’s direction, which argued for the development of educational

institutions and against the greed of those who sought to profit from the dissolution.

[2]. Most remained in their houses until they were dissolved, when they were given dispensations to hold benefices as secular priests. As Wabuda points out, this was one of the more ambivalent solutions of the Refor-

mation, for the reformers were putting in charge of the daily conduct of the Reformation men they discredited as greedy, sexually voracious, and disloyal, but whom they recognized as well-trained preachers (p. 129). This is a brief tangent, and she does not make any reference to work such as that of Claire Cross on this topic.

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