

D.L. D'Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars. Sermons diffused from Paris before 1300*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1985, pp. 1-11.

Introduction

MANY non-medievalists, even academic historians, are under the impression that sources for the Middle Ages are scarce. This is half-true of the twelfth century, fairly true of the period before, and fairly untrue of the period after. From the thirteenth century on the study of many topics suffers from the same embarrassment of riches as, say, the study of the First World War. The preaching of the friars is one of them. There is a *Repertorium* of Latin sermons, for the period 1150–1350.¹ This gives the beginnings and endings of sermons, and lists the manuscripts in which they are found. It runs to nine volumes,² more than 7,300 pages in all. A high proportion of the sermons listed are by friars.

Paradoxically, this may explain why not much is written about the content of the preaching of the friars. It is not because the friars are regarded as a historical backwater; on the contrary, they have a prominent place in the landscape of medieval history, both at the research and the undergraduate levels. It is acknowledged, furthermore, that preaching was central to their ideal and a principal reason for their enormous influence. Again, the theme of preaching in general has been given a special prominence in recent work on religious history; in this perspective the thirteenth century and the coming of the friars are taken to mark a decisive break in the development of European religion.³ Perhaps if there had

¹ J. B. Schneyer, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters für die Zeit von 1150–1350* (Münster, 1969–).

² Professor Schneyer died before completing the index volume. The task has been taken over by Professor Hödl.

³ 'On ne s'étonnera pas de trouver, comme un leitmotiv au long des deux ouvrages, le thème de la prédication sous ses différentes formes... A mesure que la recherche historiographique progresse, elle réalise de plus en plus combien cette forme d'acculturation chrétienne a été importante jusqu'à une époque récente. De sorte qu'une véritable coupure dans la chronologie religieuse européenne peut être située au début du XIII^e siècle, moment de l'apparition des Ordres mendiants, dont la prédication devint un objectif essentiel (J. Delumeau (ed.), *Histoire vécue du peuple chrétien* (Toulouse, 1979), vol. i, p. 11 of his Introduction).

been less evidence scholars would have already found out more about what the friars preached. To isolate a body of evidence which is not absurdly large, some limitation by time and place is desirable.

This study is an attempt to put a rationally selected section of the mass of sermon evidence back into its various contexts. The section consists of 'model' sermon collections written by friars who were academics at the University of Paris, together with sermon collections diffused by the Paris University stationers. (Despite the university connection, these collections would have been mainly, though not exclusively, employed as aids for popular preaching; but of this more below). I have more or less confined myself to the period before 1300.

Paris has been chosen because of its strategic position in thirteenth-century culture. The thirteenth-century founder of the Sorbonne told this pious story:

Et nota quod quandoque plus proficiunt in parochia bonae mulieres quam etiam presbyteri, vel magistri in theologia regendo Parisius, per earum bona opera et exempla et bona verba. Exemplum de beguina quae venit Parisius emptum *Summam de vitiis et virtutibus*, quae, cum moraretur in quadam civitate ad quam saepe veniebant presbyteri subditi illi civitati, accommodabat eis per quaternos hujusmodi *Summam*, praequirendo si erant otiosi ante (quam) missam celebraverant, ita quod, per totam regionem illam, eam multiplicavit.⁴

Note that sometimes good women do more good in their parish than even priests, or Regent Masters in Theology at Paris, through their good works and examples and good words. An example about the béguine who came to Paris to buy the *Summa of Vices and Virtues*: when she was staying in a certain city, to which the priests who came under its jurisdiction often came, she used to lend them this *Summa* in quires (*per quaternos*), first asking if they had some free time before celebrating mass; in such a way that she multiplied it through the whole of that region.

⁴ B. Hauréau, *Notices et extraits de quelques manuscrits latins de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, v (Paris, 1892), 158-9; cf. A. Dondaine, 'Guillaume Peyraut. Vie et œuvres', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 18 (1948), 162-236, at p. 188.

This *Summa* was almost certainly by the Lyons Dominican Guillaume Peyraut; it can be regarded as a preaching aid. Its author complained about the way all academics wanted to teach at Paris—*plus ça change . . .*⁵—but Paris was an obvious place to pick up a copy of his *Summa*. An anonymous commentary criticizes bishops who give benefices to men who have not studied theology, and imagines them saying: ' . . . he will learn to preach well enough, he will get a sermon in a quire (*quaterno*) from Paris from some bookseller . . .'⁶ That Paris was a centre for the diffusion of preaching aids is not the point of either story: it is taken for granted.

In the second passage the words 'some bookseller'—my free rendering of 'aliqua statione'—may be alluding to the university stationers (*stationarii*), who sold or hired works reproduced by the *pecia* system, which was in effect a system of rapid copying. The separate quires (*peciae*) of works could be rented individually from a stationer, 'a practice which permitted several copies at varying stages of completion to be made concurrently'.⁷ The Paris *pecia* system played a large part in the diffusion of works written by friars (and not only Paris friars) to help preachers.

It is natural to study sermon collections by friars who were based at Paris in conjunction with collections diffused by the *pecia* system, and not only because the two categories overlap. Together they amount to something that can almost be called mass communication: the fanning out of ideas, aimed at and ultimately reaching a huge popular public, from a single

⁵ See below p. 116.

⁶ "Quidam eligunt garrulatores ut rustici in vineis faciunt regem magis garrulum, ut puri advocati, qui sunt ut ranae Aegypti, purum advocatum scientia divina minime imbutum. Hoc facit talis praelatus qui tales promovet et dicit: Satis per leges praedicabit, bene addiscent praedicare, habebit sermonem in quaterno de Parisius de aliqua statione . . .". Extrait d'un commentaire anonyme sur le *Ps. II*, 6, Ms. B.N. lat. 14254, f. 18 D (XIII^e s.) (J. Leclercq, 'Le Magistère du prédicateur au XIII^e siècle', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 21 (1946), 105-47, at p. 143 n. 5).

⁷ R. H. and M. A. Rouse, *Preachers, Florilegia and Sermons: Studies on the Manipulus florum of Thomas of Ireland* (Toronto, 1979), 170.

centre.⁸ There was not so much competition from rival mass media than in later centuries, and the impact of preaching must have been correspondingly greater. Through model sermon collections and other preaching aids much the same message would have been transmitted from Paris to audiences all over Europe. Preachers would have often made some changes when turning a model into living speech, even apart from translating Latin into the vernacular, so preaching was not a mass medium in the strict sense, but it was arguably the nearest thing to mass communication to be found in the thirteenth century. The most important center for the dissemination of ideas to a mass lay public happened also to be the intellectual capital of Europe in general and of the Franciscan and Dominican orders in particular, which adds to the interest of our twofold class of friars' sermons produced at or diffused from Paris.⁹

The social context to which I try to restore the content of this class of sermons is defined broadly. 'Society' sometimes tends to be equated with economic society, with the 'rise of the towns', when the central Middle Ages are in question. Society in this narrower sense cannot be left out of account, though it will be argued that the relation between the urban milieu and the content of preaching is much less close than it may seem at first. But the 'society' which demanded and supplied the model sermon collections was both a more

⁸ Cf. R. Rusconi, 'Predicatori e predicazione (secoli IX-XVIII)', in the Einaudi *Storia d'Italia, Annali 4*, pp. 951-1035, at p. 984: 'Quanto detto fino ad ora intorno alla predicazione degli ordini mendicanti non sarebbe completo se non si tenesse conto della sua natura di mezzo di comunicazione di massa negli ultimi secoli del Medioevo', and further references *ibid.*, n. 23; also J. Le Goff, 'Les Mentalités: une histoire ambiguë', in J. Le Goff and P. Nora (edd.), *Faire de l'histoire*, iii. *Nouveaux Objets* (Paris, 1974), 76-94, at pp. 87-8: 'Le palais, le monastère, le château, les écoles, les cours sont, au long du Moyen Age, les centres où se forment les mentalités... Les *mass media* sont les véhicules et les matrices privilégiés des mentalités: le sermon, l'image peinte ou sculptée, sont, en deçà de la galaxie Gutenberg, les nébuleuses d'où cristallisent les mentalités.'

⁹ In an ideal world this book would have also given full consideration to model sermon collections by non-mendicant Paris masters, and to the background of 'live' preaching to the people in the churches of Paris, but the task was too great for me. The second of these subjects is in the able hands of Mlle Nicole Bériou.

precise and a more complicated thing. The lay public (whose urban component can be overemphasized) is only one part of this society. The more immediate society of the sermon collections was one of small overlapping groups of men and systems: the élite orders of Franciscans and Dominicans, imbued with the apostolic ideals of which their books of sermons are a kind of archaeological survival; the men who copied the manuscripts or had them copied, thus determining the forms in which the sermons would circulate and in which they have come down to us; the university masters and students, whose studies were intimately linked with the preaching movement but not always in obvious ways. All these things make up the concrete reality in which the ideas of the sermons were embedded. The aim is to reconstruct this 'society' of the sermons, and to work out some of the relations between what they said and these different parts of their world.

Despite the danger of those 'clear-cut generalizations', those 'ghostly refinements of reflection', that 'stream-lined and neatly cupboarded history', which Sir Maurice Powicke rightly suspected,¹⁰ it may be permissible to give a brief statement, in advance, of the main ideas which will be found in this book. The risk of over-simplification and dessication has seemed worth running for a reason which has also led me to keep the main text short, viz., that the students and scholars for whom the book is primarily intended will ration the time they give to it. 'And this suspicion, to be honest, arises, as is generally the case, from our own wicked heart; for we have ourselves been very often most horridly given to jumping as we have run through the pages of voluminous historians.'¹¹ The following, then, are the principal points which I shall try to make:

¹⁰ Cf. F. M. Powicke, *The Christian Life in the Middle Ages and other essays* (Oxford, 1935), 49-50, and R. W. Southern, 'Sir Maurice Powicke', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 50 (1964), 275-304, at p. 294.

¹¹ Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, Bk. xii, ch. 3.

1. The ideal of regular and popular preaching was already old in the thirteenth century; it was the closing of the gap between preaching aids and their users which was new. (I. i).¹²

2. Paris is central in the history of the preaching of the friars; but also in the history of popular preaching before the friars, as far back as Maurice de Sully (ibid.).

3. Many of the lay people who listened to mendicant sermons were educated and sophisticated—especially but not only in Italy (I. ii).

4. There are reasons for thinking that the audience of mendicant preaching was not confined to the urban and commercial classes (ibid.).

5. Model sermon collections, and probably also a type of manuscript book in which they are frequently found, are a product of the ideal of the apostolic life (the meaning of which for the friars is well summarized in a sermon by Pierre de Reims); we cannot draw a clear line between a spontaneous, itinerant preaching, on the one hand, and a different, academic type of preaching, represented by the sermon collections that have come down to us. It is a false antithesis (I. iii).

6. Model sermon collections, though especially useful for the history of preaching, are one among a whole range of overlapping and interdependent genres. Moreover, we cannot exclude the possibility that this range of genres (including the model sermons) represents a second and supplementary level of preaching, which presupposed that the audience would have learned basic doctrines from a simpler and more catechetical sort of preaching. The two-tier structure of preaching found in seventeenth-century France may already have existed in a less developed form (II. i).

7. The established view that popular sermons were written down in Latin and preached in the vernacular—challenged in recent years, as it was in the nineteenth century—may be

¹² These references are to chapters and sections, as given in the headlines to each page.

reaffirmed as a broad generalization; it does indeed now seem possible that Latin and the vernacular were sometimes mixed together in 'live' sermons, but not that it was customary to preach the main substance of a sermon in a language which the principal part of the audience could not understand (II. ii).

8. A model sermon collection, transmitted to us by manuscript books, was both like and unlike a printed text, because it could be but did not have to be transmitted in a stable and standardized form (II. iii).

9. There is an affinity between a very common manner of abridging sermons in the course of transmission and the characteristic form—which was a form of thought, not just a rhetorical technique—of mendicant sermons (ibid.).

10. The audience and function of thirteenth-century model sermon collections was such that they tend to reflect the common factors in the religious culture of their age. Sermons originally preached to the clergy could be incorporated into model collections, and although popular preaching must have been the commonest way of using such collections, it is hard to show that they were specifically designed for that. The best hypothesis is that for most collections audience and function were relatively indeterminate. Thus, it is an over-simplification to categorize model sermons as a medium through which the clergy addressed the laity (II. iv).

11. In the thirteenth century Paris was the principal centre both of European scholasticism and for the diffusion of sermons. The problem is to decide whether the connection between these two functions of Paris University was accidental and extrinsic, or intrinsic and explained by an affinity between the forms of thought of preaching and scholasticism (III. i).

12. The majority (but not all) of the historians in this field have tended to think that there was such an affinity. In fact, however, the apparent similarities between the scholastic method and the form of mendicant preaching—distinctions, authorities, etc.—fade away on closer inspection. Moreover,

quaestiones even of a rudimentary kind are rare in thirteenth-century preaching, and the few exceptions merely prove the rule. In the light of this it is easier to understand why there is so little correlation, apart from Paris, between the centres of sermon production and the centres of scholastic thought (III. ii).

13. Nevertheless, the Paris schools were a favourable milieu for the diffusion of model sermons, for the academic and informal life of the university would have trained young friars in a number of ways to use the models more effectively. Even the part of the curriculum which can properly be called scholastic—the disputations and lectures on the Sentences—would have helped in certain indirect ways. The non-scholastic university exercises, however, were probably a more helpful background from this point of view. Lectures on the Bible told preachers (and future preachers) how important they were, and provided live examples of the type of thinking which the preaching aids embodied in an often rather desiccated form. So did university sermons, whose form and content cannot (as some imagine) be easily distinguished from the kind of thing one finds in model sermon collections. The fact that this kind of preaching had the high status of a major university exercise may be both a cause and effect of its success as a method of popular preaching. Finally, the oral culture of Paris University may have been a rich source of exempla which could be worked into the framework of model sermons (III. iii).

14. Model sermon collections enable us to test the valuable hypothesis that the language of the friars was 'heavily impregnated with a market-place vocabulary' and, by extension, the theory that their preaching is best interpreted as the product of an urban social context (IV. i).

15. But we tend to expect 'the rise of the towns' to explain too much. Feudal, aristocratic, and courtly society also leave their mark on thirteenth-century preaching. Gift exchange survived alongside the money economy, and sermons reflect both (IV. ii).

16. Furthermore, the reflections of urban and other social worlds do not imply a social conditioning of the content—a type of interpretation which many modern historians adopt a little too readily. The social imagery does not, paradoxically, have a primarily social explanation. It is only one manifestation of a mental habit: a passion for similitudes of all kinds, so pronounced as to bring thirteenth-century preaching nearer to the conventions of modern poetry than of modern prose (IV. iii).

17. Students of medieval preaching should attempt to identify more of these habits of mind, to which the theoretical treatises on the art of preaching are not on the whole an adequate key. We should, for instance, ask how the territory of thought is portioned out in mendicant sermons, what topoi were used, and how abstract and concrete types of thinking were combined. Specific hypotheses to test are: (i) that the overall structure of thought in a collection was liturgical, while the structure within individual sermons was that of a tiny artistic and symmetrical synthesis of the Christian scheme of things; (ii) that the commonest topoi take the form of clusters of concepts, like *intellectus-affectus-effectus* and *fides-proles-sacramentum*; and (iii) that divisions and authorities in sermons tend to represent abstract and concrete modes of thought respectively. These represent only a few of the possible questions and hypotheses, the number of which is only limited by the historian's powers of ^{devising} devising them. Here the comparative method—especially comparisons between different centuries—can be of assistance. It enables the historian to distinguish more accurately between the *longue durée* of preaching and the distinctive features of a particular century. It is, furthermore, the only way of bringing out the importance of what the sermons of a given period do *not* say. Thus, for instance, the emphasis on vocation and grace in marriage sermons of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries makes us aware of the silence of thirteenth-century marriage sermons on these topics (IV. iv).

The first of the four main chapters into which these ideas and findings are grouped deals with background developments: the preaching revival, the increasing sophistication of the lay public, and the *vita apostolica* movement. The remaining three chapters of the book deal respectively with the nuts and bolts of model sermons as a medium of communication, the university context, and the urban context. Certain themes cut across the different sections. The argument that the character of mendicant preaching cannot be accounted for in terms of an urban social context (IV. ii-iii) fits with the argument that the friars did not confine their apostolate to the towns and the bourgeoisie (I. ii). The various points made about distinctions and divisions should be connected: that they were not like scholastic divisions and distinctions (III. ii); that they were a vehicle for the mental habit of making individual sermons a small symmetrical synthesis (IV. iv); that they were (together with *auctoritates*) the part of a sermon that tended to survive the process of abbreviation (II. iii); that sermons transmitted or originally composed in this skeletal form did not take up much space in the little pocket-books which are typical instruments of the mendicant preaching movement (I. iii)—all these observations should be held before the mind together. Or again, the fact that model sermons could be written apparently without any precise category of audience in mind (II. iv) makes more sense in the light of two of the other conclusions: namely, that lay congregations were by no means uniformly unsophisticated (I. ii), and that thirteenth-century sermons cannot, on the whole, be assimilated to the much more intellectually demanding 'scholastic' method (III. ii).

The conclusions of an archaeological report or scientific paper are often the justification of the whole enterprise, whereas a statement of the 'results' or 'findings' of a historical work is usually a means rather than an end: a mere summary guide. At best they emphasize the contributions which the work claims to make to the progress of research at the expense of its character as the representation of a complex reality. The

attempt to abstract a single overriding conclusion is therefore even more suspect than a list of a number of them. But if it were necessary to reduce the various arguments of this study to one formula, it might be something like this. Model sermon collections are not only a historical source but a historical fact in their own right: more specifically, they were one of the nearest things to a common factor in the experience of different sorts and conditions of men in the thirteenth century. Precisely because they cannot be classified as one of the outlying provinces of scholastic thought, or as an ideological emanation from urban society, and precisely because their audience and function are so hard to pin down, these collections cannot easily be reduced to an aspect of the history either of clerical culture or of popular religion. Forms of thought which we find in model sermons must have been the common property of quite different social groups. Furthermore, geographical as well as social boundaries were crossed, because of the Latin transmission and the international clerical network. We may never know the different ways in which people drew on this common stock, but the common stock is a phenomenon which is in itself worth studying.

There is still a certain tendency to present the history of the friars—to students especially—in terms of the law of spiritual gravity: the impetus of saintly founders, an upsurge of fervour and success, then controversies, abuses, and decline. The formula works well enough if we view the Franciscan and Dominican orders as movements whose function was to make their own members more perfect. It is not so helpful if we view the friars as a chapter in the history of the communication of ideas. From this angle, what we see is an international system, the infrastructure of preaching, which takes shape in the course of the thirteenth century and which lasted for centuries afterwards. If we do not take the trouble to understand the system, we are left with a schematic and one-sided notion of the impact of the friars on Europe.