PREFACE

Everything in this strange, fascinating book . . . disturbs, throws into disorder, and tramples underfoot earlier certainties. Nothing can be understood as it was before, or more precisely, all is finally beginning to be understood.¹

Denis Crouzet’s book is destined to occupy a leading place in not only the religious but also the spiritual and mental historiography of the sixteenth century.²

In 1990 a book was published that would profoundly alter the historiography of sixteenth-century France—Denis Crouzet’s Les Guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion (vers 1525–vers 1610). The book has been called revolutionary,³ and provocative and perplexing,⁴ but there can be no doubt that Crouzet has, in the words of one reviewer, “. . . guaranteed that [the history of the Wars of Religion] can never again be explained ‘sans Dieu’.”⁵ Les Guerriers de Dieu has been called “. . . nothing less than a complete reinterpretation of the religious history of the French sixteenth century. . . . There was a ‘violence mentale d’avant les violences,’ which accounts for the sudden explosion of religious tension on the eve of the civil wars.”⁶ Another reviewer comments that “[h]is best and most original contributions, those which truly deserve a wider audience, probably lie in his sections on pre-1562 French astrology and eschatological prophecy.”⁷

² Denis Richet, “Preface,” in Crouzet, Guerriers de Dieu, 15.
With a brilliant analysis of violence and its roots, the book argues that in sixteenth-century France, the “violence is the history.” Crouzet asserts that the early part of the century was pervaded by a sense of eschatological anguish, that it was “a period haunted by the fear of God’s impending judgment.”

Crouzet has reprised this theme in later books. In *La Nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy*, Crouzet pursues this theme, tracing the origins of the troubles to

... an imagined eschatology, a system of representations put in place around the years 1500–1520, and hardening around 1540–1545. The decades that preceded the explosion of the wars of religion saw an anguish about the future mount irresistibly... All the channels of information were little by little invaded by the prophetic word, which carried to the ears of all the knowledge that the violence of God was in the process of unfolding on a humanity that had reached the most critical time of sin. The sermons prophesied the imminence of the end of the world.

In his most recent book, *La genèse de la Réforme française*, Crouzet paints the world at the end of the Middle Ages in Huizingian hues. He sees in the late Middle Ages an obsession with death and decay, arguing that

[the imagination, the presentiment of divine menace moves toward an anguish even more pregnant. We must not exaggerate this evolution, for the eschatological signs were already present earlier, for example, in the messages of preachers. However, now everything occurs as if it were the result of sliding inexorably toward an eschatology more full of pathos than ever before, as if there had been a passage toward a universe dramatized with very great intensity.

Simultaneously with the appearance of Luther in Christendom, the image of a God of chastisement became stronger... Humanity is beyond the signs warning of its corruption and calling for its reformation. For the wondrous time of God’s punishment has begun to unfold.

The current study of François Le Picart, the most famous Catholic preacher in Paris from the 1530s until his death in 1556, was under-
taken in order to delve more deeply into the religious and mental climate of France and its capital in the period before the Religious Wars. Crouzet devotes several pages to the man he calls a *prédictateur panique*, François Le Picart. He situates the preacher "... at the heart of the currents of eschatological thought," calling him "... a preacher of the violence of God and of the end of Time..." Finding an Old Testament inspiration in his rhetoric, Crouzet claims that it grows with the passage of time. Was Le Picart indeed a prophet? Does a close reading of Le Picart’s sermons, the only extensive corpus of sermons printed during this period, support Crouzet’s bold thesis? Was France in the first half of the sixteenth century obsessed by frenzied imaginings of God’s Judgment?

Le Picart was famous in his time, but "... recognizing that time has begun to efface his renown, and to take him little by little from the memory of men, I have decided to publish this history." So began his seventeenth-century biographer, Hilarion de Coste, a Minim who had published a memorial to François de Paul the year before, quite possibly in the hope of initiating canonization proceedings for Le Picart. *Le parfait ecclésiastique*, printed in 1658, is a work of hagiography, but contains an invaluable collection of sources, some of the originals of which have been lost in the ensuing centuries. Hilarion de Coste was following in the footsteps of the Catholic polemicist Artus Désiré (c. 1510–c. 1579), who noted on the anniversary of Le Picart’s death in 1557:

\begin{quote}
Have you forgotten the good he did for you 
And the great and perfect love he had, 
I certainly do not think so, for his fame and renown
Is so great before God that his name is immortal. 
To remind you of his goodwill 
I wanted to let you know this day 
Of that day at the end of the year since his decease, 
So that you and I will have memory of that end. 
\end{quote}

14 Ibid, I:208.
17 Artus Désiré, *Les regretz et complaintes de Passe partout et Bruictquicourt, sur la mémoire*
So strong had been the love of the people of Paris for Le Picart that his funeral procession was likened to that of a king, while his Calvinist enemies rejoiced that the man whom many felt had been responsible for keeping Paris in the Catholic fold was dead. Yet aside from scholars who study sixteenth-century France, Le Picart’s name has been forgotten, eclipsed by the violence and polemic of the Religious Wars that began shortly after his death.

It is in this context that a study of François Le Picart and his works can offer further insight into religious mentalités in the critical years before the outbreak of religious war, years that are still too often ignored by scholars. In the decades after 1520, French men and women experienced profound changes in almost every aspect of life, the most significant of which affected religious beliefs and behaviors. For centuries, the landscape of everyday life had been filled with the ever-present reminders of the Catholic Church: the frequent ringing of bells that signaled not only services but also celebration, death or danger to the community; churches, relics, statues and cult sites; and, of course, the markers of life stages through which every human being had to pass—the rituals of baptism, confirmation and extreme unction. In his prologue to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World*, Michael Holquist writes: “[t]he unique species of historical event we call a revolution occurs when everything changes at once, not excluding the very categories used for gauging and shaping change... It is in the nature of revolutions that no one can be an experienced citizen of the new order they bring into being.”

Everything did change in the decades before 1560. There could no longer be any certainties in a world thrown into disarray by challenges to its most dominant institution, challenges that would inevitably have an impact not only on religious belief but on literacy and attitudes to toleration, freedom and equality. Some felt in these times of radical change that God had re-entered the world historical stage. As many throughout Europe became enmeshed in the search

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18 Ibid.
for answers through astrology and prophecy, the challenge of predicting the time of the Judgment intensified, especially in the wake of frightening planetary configurations in the heavens.21 Others felt God had turned his back on the human race. Many people, heady with the wine of the new learning, gloried in the powers of the human mind and spirit, and began to question long-held truths. To understand fully the Religious Wars and that which followed, we must begin by exploring the years between 1520 and 1560. Speaking of only a six-year period in these four decades, Lucien Febvre wrote: “the world had moved between 1532 and 1538. And it had moved very rapidly.... These few facts serve as a warning that for those troubled years of the sixteenth century, when men were living on the double and ideas were causing things to move with unaccustomed rapidity, it makes no sense to mix up different conditions.”22

The forty-five years between the outbreak of the Lutheran Reformation and the beginning of the French Religious Wars covers the period in which William Monter sees Crouzet’s most significant historical achievement. These years offer rich details about life, beliefs and practices. François Le Picart was a leading actor in the events of these troubled yet exciting times. In a century when “[t]he pulpit was probably the strongest molder of public opinion,”23 it is remarkable, as Barbara Diefendorf has said, that “... there has been little serious inquiry into the content of... sermons and their relation to subsequent events.”24 Speaking of his own subject, Rabelais, Febvre wrote: “[t]he approach we are going to use seems obvious: focus the inquiry on one man, chosen... because the state of the documentation that enables us to reconstruct his thought, the statements contained in his work, and the meaning of the work itself seem to qualify him specially for such a study.”25 Le Picart’s contemporaries, as well as a man living a century later, all believed that the preacher represented Catholicism in Paris in his time. He was

25 Febvre, Problem of Unbelief, 11.
a man who initiated events that roused the anger of the court, who responded to heretical attacks on the symbols and beliefs of his faith, and who supported those—such as the Jesuits—whom he felt could steer the church back onto the right course. Yet unlike older colleagues on the Faculty of Theology such as Noël Beda, Le Picart was not an intransigent man. Although his passion for Catholicism was acknowledged by all and his orthodoxy was never questioned, he was far from immune to new ideas. His ambivalence about the study of philology, classics and ancient languages all demonstrate the influence humanistic ideals held over him. Without the hagiographical intentions of Hilarion de Coste or Artus Desiré, I hope this book will open a window not merely on the man François Le Picart, who embodied so much about his time, but also on the religious and intellectual climate of Paris in these years. This is not a biography, but rather a study of one man’s actions and reactions to unprecedented events, and especially his words—words that speak to us from his sermons of a mind dealing with change; words that themselves change as the situation in France does; words that profoundly affected their hearers. As Elizabeth Marvick states, words “... that deviate from the usual forms for the occasion are clues; they suggest latent meanings that prompt a search for nonobvious motives.” However much Le Picart was a champion of orthodoxy, one of those scorned theologastres of the Faculty of Theology, he was nonetheless a man who experienced the same changes as those around him and was in turn changed by them. His words often surprise the reader who comes to them with preconceived notions. Through him we can come to know more fully what life was like in post-Reformation Paris.

I have incurred numerous scholarly debts in the research and writing of this book. Many scholars offered suggestions and criticisms on the manuscript or the portions that were presented as conference papers, including Fred Baumgartner, Robin Barnes, Barbara Diefendorf, Jeanne Harrie, Katharine Lualdi, Lynn Martin, David McNeil, Ray Mentzer, Virginia Reinburg and Barry Sell. Without the research of James K. Farge, as well as his suggestions and friendship, this book would simply not have been possible. As will be obvious in the pages
that follow, the scholarship of John O’Malley has helped me understand the connections between Le Picart and the first Jesuits. It goes without saying that any errors are mine alone. Megan Armstrong obtained copies of original and secondary sources that were not otherwise available to me, and her insights on Franciscans in Paris in the later part of the century were invaluable. Denis Crouzet, with whom I disagree on some fundamental issues, has been both an inspiration and a generous friend over many years. In Reims, I owe special thanks to Mme. Claudine Belayche, director of the Bibliotheque Municipale, Abbé Goy, who pointed me to sources for Saint-Pierre-des-Dames and Renée de Guise, Dr. J.-P. Fontaine and M. Brice Gosset. As always, the staff of the Bibliotheque Nationale and Archives Nationales in Paris were extremely helpful. My special thanks go to my colleagues at Colby College, especially Peggy Menchen at the Reference Desk and Sunny Pomerleau and the interlibrary loan staff, whose indefatigable efforts to secure even the most obscure French journal article truly made this book possible. I would also like to thank my student research assistants, Jamie Smith, John Sauter, and Tom Donahue, who will undoubtedly be writing their own books in a few years’ time.

Portions of my article, “The Good Shepherd,” published in another form in the Sixteenth Century Journal are reproduced here in several chapters by permission.

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This book is dedicated to my companion and my muse, Kitikat.

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Note on Language and Translations

First, a note on terminology. Since the book is written from the viewpoint of François Le Picart, I have used the terms heresy and heretic as he would have used them—in reference to the doctrines and people he found suspect. Heresy in general refers to practices and beliefs in opposition to what the church decreed in a given time and place. A heretic was one who, when shown his or her error, persisted