

Review: [untitled]

Author: Rebecca Kennison

*Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September 1999), pp. 111–113

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717373>

George H. Tavard, *The Spiritual Way of St. Jeanne d'Arc*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998. Pp. vi + 197. ISBN 0-8146-5881-4. US\$17.95

In the conclusion to this book, one of many to have appeared in recent years on Joan of Arc (or, as this title and text would have it, Jeanne d'Arc), George H. Tavard presents his purpose in writing: Jeanne's "way of holiness," he says, "was general, not specific, public, not private, Catholic, not sectarian. . . . As such it remains available to all believers in all ages of the Church" (p. 169). As a devotional tract or as a series of sermons with spiritual lessons for the reader to be drawn from the life of Jeanne sprinkled throughout the text, it's not so bad. Unfortunately, in the Foreword, Tavard claims that his "precise" intent in writing the book is "to analyze the structure and depth of [Jeanne's] inner life" (p. v), but as a work of analysis, much less of balanced scholarship, this book gravely misses the mark.

Tavard's strengths lie in providing the historical, geographical, and theological background to the spiritual personality he is attempting to analyze. Although Chapter 1 would have benefited greatly from maps and genealogical charts to provide some visual context for the myriad places and names that continue to crop up throughout the text, in general throughout the book the presentation of background information is clear and fairly well written. This is especially true when Tavard, who has written an entire treatise on the subject, discusses the role of angels in the popular piety of the Middle Ages; his chapter on medieval saints is equally good, even though he (intentionally, perhaps) does not provide the reader with some pertinent facts about Jeanne's particular "saints," such as their no longer being recognized as such by the Church because they have been determined to be legendary rather than historical personages.

But as strong as this backgrounding might be, Tavard undermines it whenever he turns to Jeanne d'Arc herself. He adopts an almost reverential tone and refuses to concede that, for all her mystical experiences, she was sometimes quite human (and therefore more complex) than the saintly tradition about her this book seems to perpetuate. By way of example (and there are many), Tavard contradicts the words of Jeanne herself to insist that, when she leapt from the tower at Beaurevoir, "it was her duty to try to escape, as long as her voices did not outright forbid it. They did not, though their clear advice was not to jump" (p. 148). This, despite the fact that only two pages earlier Tavard quotes directly from the trial documents in which Jeanne is reported as saying "the said saints Catherine and Marguerite had forbidden her to jump. She says that this offense against them is a great sin, but she knows well that this sin was forgiven after she confessed it" (p. 146). Here, as so often in this book, Tavard ignores the complexity of Jeanne's personality to insist on an inner life consistent with his notion of her saintliness, but in contradiction to the evidence.

To this end, Tavad often dismisses people whose more complex reading of Jeanne counters his own views by calling their arguments “nonsense,” “far-fetched,” and “fantastic,” without explaining why their stances are ridiculous; sets up straw men to knock down (see, for example, the discussion of what Jeanne meant by her symbolism of the angel and the crown [p. 65 n. 70] and almost all the material in the appendices); and insists overly strongly on what can only be mere speculation — the use of “must,” “naturally,” “of course,” and “undoubtedly” is pervasive — while at the same time he roundly ignores evidence that Jeanne, while blessed with great mystical gifts, was also perhaps very human. For example, he seems to think that the tribunal’s charge of obstinacy was not in keeping with Jeanne’s “holiness” (p. 128), but nowhere does he deal with the stubbornness (to use another word) that was so much a part of her personality that it led her to disregard the wishes, if not outright disobey the commands, of a series of authorities: her parents, who would have perhaps forbidden her to go to Vaucouleurs, the first stage on her way to meet with Charles VII, if they had known about it before she left home without telling them either where she was going or why; her king, who had negotiated a truce, disbanded his army, and ordered Jeanne to stay at court, leaving as her only option to continue fighting that of joining the partisans who, although they did not have the king’s backing, were attacking Compiègne, where she eventually was captured; her voices, who told her she should not jump from the tower, a leap that caused her serious injury; and, finally, the Church, in the form of the Inquisition at Rouen, which forbade her to wear male dress, something that she quit doing and then (for practical reasons, yes, but even so against direct command) insisted on adopting again. Obstinate, stubborn, resolute — pick your adjective, but that is a part of Jeanne’s personality that is inescapable — and yet, because that trait does not fit into Tavad’s picture of this perfect virginal mystic who only followed the will of God in all things, this part of her character is glossed over, if not outright denied.

Add to this that Tavad often teases his readers with oblique references to certain details before discussing either the details or their significance (for example, he mentions the images on Jeanne’s standard twice [pp. 69, 83] before finally describing the standard and what the symbols might have meant [p. 99 n.103]); that he often, as mentioned above, contracts himself from paragraph to paragraph, if not from one sentence to the next; that he frequently leaps from subject to subject without transition; and that huge blocks of text are repeated almost verbatim from chapter to chapter — and even the most sympathetic reader will have to admit that the book can become a very maddening read. In another venue, as a series of devotional lectures given, say, during a pilgrimage to the important places in Jeanne’s life — Domremy, Orléans, Rheims, Rouen — spaced out over several days or even weeks, the reverential tone, the one-sidedness, and the repetition might all be overlooked, expected, or even desired. But as a book that claims to endeavor to enlighten the reader on Jeanne d’Arc’s “rich personality,” it fails to wrestle with the very complexity and contradictions of that personality that make her worthy of such analysis.