

BOOK REVIEW

The Dynamics of the Early Reformation in their Reformed Augustinian Context

By Robert J. Christman. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 255. Cloth €124.00. ISBN: 978-9463728621.

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This is a book about networking and the relationship between center and periphery in the Reformation. Concentrating on the network of German Augustinian Observants (OESA), it examines how one former member, Martin Luther, operating from the Reformation's intellectual center in Wittenberg, influenced and (more importantly) was influenced by recently founded peripheral OESA cloisters in northern Germany and the Low Countries. Christman's excellent study does not draw on a new cache of sources but rather applies a series of new questions to established themes.

Luther's intellectual debts to his order are well known, especially the one owed to his mentor Johann von Staupitz. Christman's approach is institutional and eschews the tendency to examine exclusively Luther's impact on peripheries. Instead, the author's questions emphasize dynamism and reciprocity: What administrative and political strategies did OESA leaders employ to extend their influence into Lower Germany, and how did Luther and others use them to further their own cause? How did the constant exchange of students and ideas between Lower Germany and Wittenberg contribute to the reception of Luther's thought, and how did those same students influence Luther?

The fates of those OESA brethren who supported Luther varied depending on where they were. Institutionally speaking, the Holy Roman Empire was dissipated and unwieldy, whereas to the North, power was more centralized. The particularistic mix of secular and ecclesiastical authorities in the Empire made it difficult to enforce conformity; in the Low Countries Charles V, his former Dutch tutor Pope Adrian VI, and their handpicked officials operated with great efficiency in controlling the Reformation's spread. In 1523, they burned two OESA friars (the movement's first martyrs) and eradicated the order's house in Antwerp. Similar moves in the Empire would have required action by territorial princes, city councils, or any number of bishops whose authority often overlapped with their secular counterparts. Simply put, it was harder to get things done.

But the executions and OESA closure in Antwerp happened five years *after* Luther's "95 Thesis". Much of Christman's study (chapters 2–6) examines the development of the northern OESA after 1500, the administrative genius of Staupitz, and how numerous young friars spent their formative years of study under Luther after he became a professor in 1512. By the time Luther got into trouble, he had built a vast network of Augustinian friends in Lower Germany, many of whom passionately spread his ideas. Staupitz's founding of the Antwerp cloister (1513) was especially brash, for he sought neither the patronage nor blessing of local elites. Among those he infuriated counted the future Adrian VI, who would loom large in the Antwerp OESA house's 1523 demise. Despite the relative success of Catholic authorities in suppressing the movement in the Low Countries, Christman demonstrates the survival of an evangelical conventicle—much larger than previously thought—in

which the doctrines and memorialization of Antwerp's Augustinians and their martyrs persisted (chapter 8).

Later in the book, Christman turns to the impact of the 1523 executions on Luther and in parts of the Empire (chapters 7 and 9). In an especially convincing interpretation, which is also a new one, he examines the reformer's first hymn, the ballad-like "A New Song Here Shall Be Begun," to demonstrate that the burning of his "young [OESA] boys" needs to be understood in terms of Psalms 96 and 98, especially in relation to Luther's theology of Christian suffering. Luther saw their deaths as a watershed moment in providential history: God's hand was now at work in the service of Reformation. It fueled his eschatological expectations and convinced him that Pope Adrian was no reformer, but simply a hypocrite and murderer; thereafter, Luther's attacks against the institution of the papacy increased in intensity.

Christman's discussion of the impact of the executions in the Empire, however, is problematic. As he shows (along with others, such as Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake* [1999]), news of the executions reverberated in pamphlets and correspondence, but his evidence for a local case study, Ingolstadt, is thin, even if some of its residents invoked the martyrs as proof of church corruption. This small university town in Bavaria was home to the most prolific Catholic opponent of Luther, Johannes Eck, who is barely mentioned and mistakenly labeled a "Dominican" (179). The author makes no justification for his failure to examine Eck's voluminous publications during this period. Furthermore, Ingolstadt's source base is minimal relative to other Catholic cities: between 1523 and 1526, its presses produced only nine extant books and pamphlets (one of which Christman employs), an almost negligible output when compared to other anti-Lutheran printing centers such as Cologne, Leipzig, and Mainz (which printed, during the same period, 340, 203, and 52 titles, respectively).

The problems with Christman's handling of the Catholic response come to a head in the book's last substantive chapter (10), on the "Marian Dimension" of the executions. The two Augustinians burned in 1523, so the official accounts insisted, recanted their Lutheran heresies due to the intervention of the Virgin, which even Erasmus rejected as a propagandistic lie. Christman suggests that the execution date was chosen by Catholic authorities for the purpose of harnessing and defending Marian devotion, and that the key source noted the date as "on the day before the Visitation" (203), or July 1, 1523. This notation has nothing to do with Mary's feast whatsoever: it's simply how contemporaries dated events and documents, i.e., according to the church calendar, even for humdrum notations such as purchase receipts. Perhaps more relevant was the fact that, as a high and official holiday, such festivals attracted residents from beyond the city's walls. It's more likely that by choosing this day officials in Brussels sought both to maximize attendance at the spectacle and, thus, to increase the impact of the executions.

Christman is correct that Luther and those like him were cautious in their critique of Marian piety and the cult of saints. On the basis of Bridget Heal's *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany* (2007), however, he misdates and thus misses the robust Catholic response to these issues by nearly 50 years. Catholic apologists took up Mary's cause from the start, and despite Luther's caution, plenty of evangelical radicals published aggressive attacks against Marian piety. Furthermore, by the time Luther's brethren met their fate at the stake, there were enough divergent voices in the evangelical camp to lead Catholics to lump them all together in their diatribes (see David Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents* [1991]). Christman deftly handles the administrative and judicial responses of Catholic authorities in the Low Countries, but his treatment of the Catholic theological and polemical responses is inadequate.

Despite these criticisms, *The Dynamics of the Early Reformation in their Reformed Augustinian Context* is an innovative study that provides new perspectives on what was previously considered well-trodden ground. Beyond its obvious value to researchers, anyone whose teaching involves the German Reformation will find materials here that provide new ways of presenting and explaining its early growth in terms of institutions, networks, and politics.