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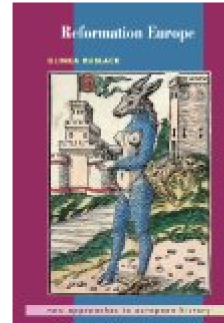

Reviewed by Amy R. Caldwell (Department of History, California State University Channel Islands)
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A New Cultural History of the Reformation in an Old Wineskin

Ulinka Rublack's *Reformation Europe* promises a new understanding of the history of the Reformation through the use of the new cultural history. More specifically, this latest volume in Cambridge University Press's New Approaches to European History series argues that in order to understand Luther and Calvin's success, "we need to begin to *locate* their work properly" (p. 10) in Wittenberg and Geneva, respectively. As with all books in this series, this volume was written as a survey of recent scholarship for advanced undergraduate students, and this shapes Rublack's focus. She asks two important questions: "[H]ow did Luther and Calvin, who seem so strange to us in many respects nowadays, manage to gain any influence at all? What did their new religious 'truths' mean for people in their everyday lives" (p. 10)? Her answers are first, that Luther and Calvin were "highly able team-workers, group leaders and managers of human and institutional resources" (p. 10), and second, that despite common assumptions, Protestantism was not a more modern, rational religion.

The book is divided into four chapters, with a prologue and epilogue. The prologue offers a brief introduction to sixteenth-century world-views and politics. Here Rublack uses Lukas Cranach's woodcut, "The Pope-Ass," to recreate Luther's visual language and accustom the reader to the people who used such invective against the pope and the Roman Catholic Church. She briefly describes the religious world-view of this period, arguing that to contemporaries the natural world and the supernatural were interconnected, and she provides short introductions to European politics and historiographical interpretations of the Reformation.

The first chapter, "Martin Luther's Truth," puts Luther in his Wittenberg context. This focus means that the well-known and oft-told details of Luther's life before Wittenberg are only briefly mentioned.[1] Instead, this chapter emphasizes Luther as the Wittenberg university professor: teaching students, controlling university appointments, mentoring junior faculty. Rublack also stresses the interactions between Luther and the rest of the civic community, and she describes him negotiating relationships with townspeople, important members of the Elector of Saxony's household, and German princes during the Peasant's War. She argues that sixteenth-century patterns of male friendship strengthened Luther's influence over those with whom he came in contact and were thus a significant factor in the spread of his ideas within his immediate circle and beyond.

In order to account for the spread of Lutheranism beyond Wittenberg, Rublack points to the networks created by Wittenberg graduates, who brought it with them as they took up appointments across Europe. She also points to the usefulness of *ReligionsgesprÃ¤ch*, religious conversations such as the Leipzig Disputation of 1519, which conveyed the message to new towns. Finally, she turns to the issue of printing in the Reformation. While many scholars argue that Protestantism benefited from the new printing technology, Rublack asks her readers to consider what this meant in a sixteenth-century context.

She proposes that for Luther the spoken word was more important, so "it comes as no surprise that Luther carefully considered how appearances and modes of speaking might help to convey his message in different contexts" (p. 49). She also points to the importance of images in the books and broadsheets of the time. To a largely illiterate population, the pictures conveyed as much, if not more, meaning than any written words possibly could.

In the second chapter, "The Age of Heterodoxy," Rublack briefly considers five individuals, Charles V, Erasmus, Ulrich Zwingli, Margaret of AngoulÃªme and Navarre, and Martin Bucer, to show the range of critical responses to Luther. Some rejected his doctrines outright, others adapted the ideas they found useful but remained in the Roman Catholic Church, and still others took Luther's ideas in completely new directions. Somewhat awkwardly, this chapter also includes brief and general discussions of the Reformation in France, England, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and Southern Europe.

"Calvinism," the third chapter, is much like the first in that it attempts to put Calvin into his Genevan context. Rublack points out that unlike Luther, Calvin had to work with a city council, and as the sixteenth century progressed also had to incorporate religious refugees into the city.[2] He also lacked the intellectual and institutional support provided by a home university. Instead, Calvin offered Geneva's council "his Protestantism as vital to solving local political problems and securing social order" (p. 113). While Rublack declined to continue her discussion of Lutheranism after Luther's death in chapter 1, here she goes beyond Calvin's lifespan to include Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor. This, along with her inclusion in this chapter of the spread of Calvinism outside Geneva, specifically the French Wars of Religion and the Dutch Reformation, may account for its broader title of "Calvinism" rather than "Calvin's Truth."

The final chapter, "The Truths of Everyday Life," explains the author's position that Protestantism was not a more rational, modern religion. Here she makes good use of material culture, sermons, stories of saints and martyrs, and even the appearance of the Protestant clergy to show that the Protestantism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "was a religion fired by emotion–by anxieties about God's punishment, by [the] determination to explain why there was so much suffering in the world and [the] deeply felt wish for everybody's salvation, and by intensely private emotions about life and life changes" (p. 151).

Students will most likely find this book to be an easy read, and will appreciate the lack of detailed theological discussions. Chapter 4 in particular, with its sections on daily life, is fascinating and will engage most college students. More advanced students will also benefit from the good survey of recent works on Reformation history. However, I would be quite reluctant to assign this book to a class. First, it lacks explanations of many important terms. For example, the author does not make clear the difference between a German prince and a German elector, the meaning of *sola fide* and other theological points, or the definition of such key terms as "Protestant," "Reformation," or "Reformed Catholic." Such omissions will make this book confusing for all but the most advanced students.

Rublack is also surprisingly lax in her use of language, stating at one point that Luther started a "religion," but elsewhere writing that he started a "cult" (p. 10). The most serious example of this is her use of the word "truth." While I agree with the author that it is not the historian's job to determine religious truth, and while it is important to remind students that different historical figures defined truth differently, it is also vitally important for students to understand that in the sixteenth century truth was not relative. Martin Luther would certainly be horrified by a title such as "Martin Luther's Truth," since to him, and to almost every other early modern thinker, truth was God's alone, and as God's truth it was also not new. Thus the author's casual use of such phrases as "the new truth" (p. 23 ff) completely undermines her efforts to reconstruct how Luther and his contemporaries understood their world.

Another worrisome problem with this book is that its organization lacks balance, as if the author is trying to accomplish too many things in a limited space. On the one hand it is a new cultural history, with a great deal of attention to gender, material culture, and ritual. On the other hand it is a traditional Reformation history with an old-fashioned emphasis on Luther and Calvin. If the last forty years have shown us anything, however, it is that anything called *Reformation Europe* must examine many centers of religious culture and discuss those reformers, like the Arminians or the Anabaptists, who did not maintain large territorial churches. Furthermore, no amount of detail on Wittenberg and Geneva can explain why Protestantism spread beyond those locations. Rublack herself notes that ideas "are not contained entities which are transmitted into people's minds; they travel and change course on the way" (p. 46). Thus if we accept Rublack's premise that our understanding of the Reformation depends on our ability to understand the

cultural context or location of those who created the reformed ideas, then to understand the spread of Protestantism it follows logically that we must investigate the cities, towns, and kingdoms that became Protestant, as well as those that did not. But while the author does briefly mention Breslau, Brandenburg, and a few other places, this is clearly insufficient to explain the entirety of "Reformation Europe." Rublack herself seems to be aware of this problem: "[W]e still have to build up a much better and European-wide sense of the Protestant world and its transformations" (p. 194). Perhaps a textbook of this length is simply the wrong place to test the author's thesis.

Finally, I question the value of limiting a book titled *Reformation Europe* to Protestantism. In her last chapter Rublack stresses the connections between Protestants and Catholics, arguing that Protestant culture in the sixteenth century was not radically different from Roman Catholic culture, but "that historical change principally took place through modifications rather than radical transitions" (p. 151). Indeed, this chapter shows how much all Europeans in the sixteenth century had in common in their understanding of the relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds, regardless of their religious differences. But by focusing in on the changes advocated by Luther and Calvin in the rest of the book, Rublack creates the false impression of a static Catholic culture, "whose religion had for centuries been deeply rooted in saint worship, Marian veneration, pilgrimages and processions, or the reading of masses for the souls of the dead" (p. 151). Yet Catholicism was constantly experiencing modifications, as well as radical transitions, before the Reformation, and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Catholic Europe changed just as much, and often in the same ways, as Protestant Europe.[3] To say "Reformation history thus can no longer be plausibly written from a partisan perspective" (p. 10) is a laudable goal, but very hard to achieve if historians themselves do not cross confessional boundaries.

Notes

[1]. For complete Luther biographies, see Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950); Heiko Obermann, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); or James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub House, 2003).

[2]. As with Luther, Rublack provides only brief explanations of Calvin's biography and theology. Readers interested in more detail should consult William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995).

[3]. For more on the Catholic Reformation, see R. Pochia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal 1540-1770*, New Approaches to European History, no. 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

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