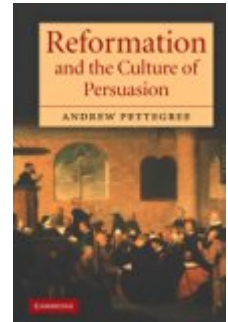


Andrew Pettegree. *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xi + 237 pp. \$28.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-60264-8.



Reviewed by Jonathan Wright

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Determining the motivations of those who embraced the evangelical cause during the sixteenth century has been one of the great quests of recent Reformation scholarship. How many people genuinely understood the theological ideas of Martin Luther, John Calvin, et. al.? How many other people became members of Reformed Churches grudgingly, haphazardly, or by dint of political circumstances? How far can we really trust contemporary conversion narratives when they are so often suspiciously formulaic or exhibit a decidedly propagandist edge? While Andrew Pettegree does not ignore such questions, his excellent book does not dwell on them: perhaps he senses that offering an adjudication of the qualitative success of the Reformation is a thankless labor. Instead, he starts out from an unassailable premise: some people clearly *did* make considered and often brave decisions to embrace the new faith. How, then, were they persuaded to do so? This is a much-studied area, but Pettegree does an excellent job of summarizing current research, elucidating the virtues and limitations of the various media the Protestant Churches had at their disposal, and, most importantly, challenging a host of

historiographical assumptions and orthodoxies. The book serves as both an informed synthesis and a pointer towards numerous avenues of future research. It also demonstrates an impressive geographical range, confirming Pettegree's previously articulated commitment to understanding the Reformation as a series of distinct, but inter-linked, regional phenomena that shared a common European context. Members of H-Albion will also be pleased to learn that, while Pettegree spends much of his time looking at the Continent, there are numerous references to events and developments in England.

The book explores different methods of persuasion in oral, visual, and written culture, always stressing that these realms were constantly informing and shoring up one another. It begins at the front line of the Reformation struggle: the pulpit. After a brief summary of the medieval preaching tradition (and Pettegree usefully provides medieval context for all of his subjects), we are introduced to an infuriating interpretative obstacle. Typically, we only have printed (often much-edited) versions of sixteenth-century ser-

mons; most of what we have of Luther's endless sermonizing, for instance, derives from notes taken by adoring students in his congregations. How accurately do such texts reflect what was actually said at the time? This presents a crucial issue if we seek to understand how preachers endeavored to win audiences over. As Pettegree explains, we can assert with certainty that preaching provided a platform for clerical activism, while insisting on the appointment of more radical preachers clearly represented some of the Reformation's first instances of lay assertiveness. We can also gain a decent impression of the themes that were hammered home. (Pettegree, in tune with recent scholarship, for instance, stresses that the content of early Lutheran sermons was far more diverse than previously believed.) Sadly, none of this gets us much closer to knowing what attending an early modern sermon felt like. And that, so far as understanding persuasion is concerned, is terribly important. We will never know, of course; but, Pettegree's analysis does a good job of explaining the different strategies (the mingling of terror and reassurance, the blending of sober exegesis and passionate outburst) that were available to preachers. There are pithy accounts of the preaching of Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Calvin, and Heinrich Bullinger, and the innovative nature of the Reformation sermon (not least the fact that it became a regular rather than an occasional event) is rightly stressed, along with the fact that the leaders of Reformed Churches were as convinced as their medieval forebears that preaching was a sacred, specialized duty, best left to well-trained experts.

Similarly wide-ranging accounts of drama and song come next. We see how reformers exploited the tradition of medieval carnival plays and fastened upon the burgeoning phenomenon of humanist biblical drama. Theater, in the broadest sense, operated very efficiently, both in the relatively secure homelands of Reform and, as a kind of coded religious dissent, in less salubrious locations. There is an especially useful account of

the history of religious drama in England, which traces the theatrical tradition all the way from the boisterous offerings of John Bale to the emergence of Godly opposition to the stage and the flowering of professional London-based theatrical companies. As for song, much recent research has shown that it has long been the neglected hero of Reformation persuasion. Moving the medieval passion for communal singing into the church was a masterstroke. Communal solidarity could be fostered, disconcerting theological innovations could be made more palatable, and (outside the church building, in the polemical songs of the street and tavern) confessional enemies could be lambasted. Pettegree stresses that not only the homely tunes of Luther had a phenomenal impact. In their way, the more austere metrical psalms of Geneva also had a knack of inspiring the faithful; in England, among the Huguenots of France or the embattled Protestants of the Netherlands, they became badges of solidarity and commitment.

Naturally, any account of how people were persuaded to embrace Protestantism eventually comes up against the fabled woodcut. Ever since Robert Scribner's magisterial account of the subject, we have been accustomed to assuming that these powerful images did more than anything else to turn the Lutheran Reformation into a genuinely popular movement.[1] Pettegree does not necessarily dispute this (his praise for Scribner is fulsome), but he asks us to adjust our opinion somewhat. He begins by floating the idea that, because lots of people had uncorrected, terrible eyesight in the sixteenth century, the power of the visual image was severely constricted. Perhaps--although what this means for the power of the visual image over the entire course of pre-modern human history is too extraordinary to contemplate. It is probably just easier to assume that people were able to bring the image in question a little closer or hold it at arms-length, according to their ocular needs. Far more valuable is Pettegree's assault on the ingrained notion that the vis-

ual image was somehow easier to understand than a printed text. Is that necessarily so? The woodcuts of the Reformation, Pettegree asserts, were often very sophisticated, and packed full of allusions that only the initiated could hope to interpret. Admittedly, such images were often accompanied by explanatory texts, but that hardly helped the illiterate. Pettegree also queries the notion that, because literate people in the sixteenth century would habitually read such texts aloud to their less well-educated peers, this was not an insuperable problem. He startlingly reveals that, aside from the venerable tradition of communal Bible reading, there is very little evidence of such reading-aloud. Besides, if it did happen, then it would have involved an extraordinary subversion of social hierarchies. Are we really to assume, Pettegree asks, "that a master craftsman should break off from his work to read to his apprentices?" He claims "this is, in sixteenth century terms, truly the world turned upside down" (p. 119). This is a very interesting suggestion, as is Pettegree's point that several popular Reform movements (in France and, before 1566, the Netherlands) succeeded without any great help from the visual image.

All of which leaves us, of course, with the book. That the book made the Reformation and that the Reformation changed the book are familiar mantras, and they are so self-evidently true that Pettegree does not intend to dispense with them. Instead, he again asks us to revise our interpretation. We assume that, when someone bought a book in the sixteenth century, they read it from cover to cover and, so the author doubtless hoped, were persuaded by its contents. Is that really what happened? At this point Pettegree launches into a charming, if distracting, account of his own reading habits. He has many books he will never read, others he skims through, others that are souvenirs, others that were gifts. Such meditations at least serve to prod Pettegree towards a fascinating and expansive interpretation of the role of the book in early modern culture. Perhaps

people bought books as, again, badges of identity. Perhaps they collected inexpensive pamphlets to establish reference collections. If they did, then the reductive schema of "buy a book and be persuaded by its contents" is certainly dented. He makes an excellent point.

In these chapters about the written word, Pettegree also provides a sterling account of the economic realities of religious book production, showing how, in very different circumstances, Wittenberg and Geneva both established highly organized, sometimes perilous, and (for some) very profitable enterprises. As a pointer to a definitive systematic survey of the economics of early modern religious publishing (a Herculean but much-needed project), this part of Pettegree's volume is very valuable.

The book concludes with an instructive chapter and coda about how the processes of persuasion evolved later in the sixteenth century. One might take issue with Pettegree's assertion that, by 1580, most of Europe's confessional identities had essentially been fixed, but there was, in many places, far more security for those of Reformed sympathies: erstwhile heresiarchs were now remembered as founders of well-entrenched religions. The work of persuasion continued, of course, and Pettegree traces how any number of initiatives--catechizing, liturgical calendar reform, the production of martyrologies--helped to foster a sense of Christian kinship and solidarity.

There is a great deal to ponder in this illuminating book. It is written with Pettegree's customary clarity, it selflessly doffs its cap to the work of other historians, and it rightly stresses that the business of religious persuasion was often a communal, shared event. There are (as there always should be) ideas to which not everyone will assent, but the book certainly forces the reader to question many assumptions about how early modern people took the dramatic step of casting off one faith so that they might embrace another.

Note

[1]. R. W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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