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Neil R. Leroux. *Martin Luther as Comforter: Writings on Death.* Leiden: Brill, 2007. xliii + 336 pp. $129.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15880-1.

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Comfort in Death

Death stalked Martin Luther's world more boldly and swaggeringly than it does our own. In addition to the collective visitations of plague, famine, and war, families were regularly cleaved and reconfigured by the untimely deaths of spouses and children. Luther lost three or four siblings by 1524, and went on to bury two of his own daughters before his own death in 1546. The place of death in the reformer's thought is hardly a new topic. It is central, for example, to the psychological portrait drawn by the late Richard Marius (in *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* [1999]), who saw Luther as a man obsessed by death and barely able to convince himself of the conventional Christian answers to the stark issues it raises.

Dissatisfaction with both Marius's approach and his conclusions is the starting point of Neil R. Leroux's new work, which aims to show instead how Luther powerfully and effectively "used discourse to bring meaning, comfort, and hope" (p. xxvii). Using a range of texts and genres, Leroux tracks Luther's role as a healer of souls or *Seelsorger*. Chapter 1 examines Luther's "Fourteen Consolations" of 1519, written to comfort the severely ill Elector Frederick the Wise and patterned to supplant traditional devotion to the fourteen Holy Helper saints, whose cult was widespread in late medieval Germany. The second chapter addresses Luther's sermon "On Preparing to Die," also from 1519, a text that grew out of the *ars moriendi* tradition and was imbued with the language of conquest over death. Succeeding chapters tackle, in turn, Luther's martyrological literature (mostly in response to the arrest and burning of heretical friars in the Netherlands); his funeral sermons of 1532 (written on the occasion of the death of Elector John); a set of consolatory letters to the bereaved (both intimates of Luther and distant parents of Wittenberg students); and his 1527 tract, "On Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague." In all of these contexts, Leroux finds Luther to be a sensitive dispenser of pastoral comfort, though also a no-nonsense theologian who condemned excessive mourning and located consolation firmly in the scriptures and the victory of Christ.

By training and employment, Leroux is a professor of speech communication, rather than a historian or historical theologian, and his principal concern is with the microstructure of Luther's writing–his use of rhetorical tropes and strategies, his employment of scriptural quotation and elaboration, and his calculated modulation between first and third person. Much of this is interesting and instructive, and, at the end of the book, Leroux appends a very useful "glossary of rhetorical terms"–essential for those of us not comfortably familiar with such concepts as anthypophora, asyndeton, enthymene, epistrophe, and meiosis. At times, Leroux's textual analysis provides more information than many readers will feel they need to know, such as when he tells us that Luther's first hymn, *Eyn news lyed*, comprises "43-52 words per stanza, the majority (64%) of which are monosyllables; … each stanza averages 66-68 syllables; … the pattern of meter is 8.7.8.7.8.7.8.7.6; and … the end rhyme pattern is a.b.a.b.c.d.c.e.f." (p. 96).

More broadly, however, a historian is likely to want more social and cultural context than the book is prepared to deliver. Leroux is clearly well read in the secondary literature, both on Luther and Lutheran Germany, and on the sociology of death and bereavement: the book is supplied with extraordinarily full and discursive footnotes. Yet, the discussion of the texts themselves is often rather enclosed and detached from the wider patterns of Luther's thought world. Leroux is reluctant to engage in detail with the question of the extent to which Luther's approach grew out of and overlapped with the traditions of late medieval *ars moriendi*. He is inclined, in places, to accept Luther at his own assessment, contrasting Luther's Christ-centered approach with an earlier "hagiographic" one, rather than considering the extent to which Luther's views were formed in the

intensely Christocentric piety of late medieval Catholicism. Luther's vivid perception of the devil and his fervent enthusiasm for angelology are barely touched on. Other relevant aspects of his eschatology are similarly neglected. For example, Leroux notes the imagery of sleep in Luther's consolatory writings, but makes no reference to his espousal of the doctrine of the "sleep of the soul" prior to the final resurrection (psychopannychism), an embarrassment to John Calvin and other later reformers. Nor does Leroux do much to place Luther in a comparative context of contemporary rhetorical technique and strategy. When he praises Luther's "rhetorical artistry, homilectical power, and consolatory effectiveness," it is hard to know whether the reformer's approach was innovative, highly conventional, or simply unusually accomplished (p. 80). An exception here is Leroux's good discussion of the humanist conventions of the consolatory epistle, and his demonstration that Luther adopted Erasmian elements in his letters, but tailored them to his more demotic style and intensely theological concerns.

"Presentism" is an intellectual sin of which most historians are regularly guilty, but to which few of us openly confess. Leroux, however, is unapologetic and explicit in his contention that "Luther's remarks about death are worth hearing" because they speak directly to the needs of contemporary society (p. xxv). His book starts from a familiar premise: that there is something desiccated and dysfunctional about modern Western attitudes to dying, death, and bereavement. He is critical of fashionable and influential "secular psychological grief theories," with their emphasis on "coping" and their reliance on support groups (p. 221). He also approaches all of these questions from a position of declared Christian faith. This, of course, is as valid a standpoint for the historian of religious culture as is a position of declared unbelief. While the believing historian can bring resources of empathy and insight to the study of religious historical subjects, however, he or she has to guard against the seductive illusion of sameness, and the danger of underestimating the cultural distance between ourselves and our ancestors. Thus, with all due allowances being made, one wonders whether Luther's consolatory letters, with their hierarchical inflections and concerns with "perilous" deaths, are a practical model for people wishing to speak meaningfully to the bereaved today. Leroux concludes that Luther's theology puts grief and loss into a perspective "that recognizes that death is not the end for the believer in Christ," but he does not ultimately manage to demonstrate how particularly or distinctively equipped Luther, or even Lutheranism, is to convey this insight to a frequently skeptical post-Enlightenment world (p. 269).

Yet, even modern skeptics can hardly fail to be moved by Leroux's descriptions of the occasions when Luther's personal experience of intense loss broke through the carapace of theological prescription. In 1545, for example, Luther wrote a letter of comfort to the Nuremberg reformer, Andreas Osiander, whose wife and daughter had both recently died. Three years earlier, Luther had lost his own beloved thirteen-year-old daughter Magdalene, and he confessed to Osiander that "'it may appear strange, but I am still mourning the death … and I am not able to forget her. Yet I know surely that she is in heaven, that she has eternal life there, and that God has thereby given me a true token of his love in having, even while I live, taken my flesh and blood to his Fatherly heart"' (p. 216).

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