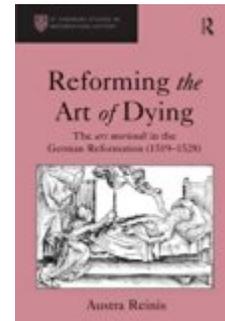


Austra Reinis. *Reforming the Art of Dying: The Ars Moriendi in the German Reformation (1519-1528)*. Ashgate, 2006. 324. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5439-1.

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Doubt and Certainty

Barely a generation ago, studies of death and dying seemed to most onlookers like the outlandish avant-garde of historical study. They are now firmly established in the mainstream of cultural and religious history, and the Reformation in Germany has in recent years been particularly blessed by the attention of historical thanatologists. Austra Reinis's study follows hard on the heels of Neil R. Leroux's *Martin Luther as Comforter: Writings on Death* (2007), and not so far behind Craig Koslofsky's *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450-1700* (2000).

Like Leroux, and unlike Koslofsky, this is a closely focused textual study, rather than a broad social history of representations and experiences of dying. It concerns itself with evangelical writing on preparation for death, and examines a set of sixteen pamphlets by thirteen reformers, beginning with Luther's *Sermon on Preparing to Die* (1519)—a text which had gone through twenty-four reprintings by 1525—and ending with Jakob Otter's *Christlich leben und sterben* (1528). The other authors include luminaries like Oecolampadius, Spalatin, and Bugenhagen, as well as such deeply obscure characters as Johannes Odenbach and Johannes Borner. The works themselves, which Reinis collectively dubs *Sterbebücher*, are a diverse grouping with various generic origins. Not principally liturgical texts or ritual orders, some are sermons on the theme of preparation for death, others are handbooks or manuals intended for use at the deathbed, and some are discursive instructions on dying found in wider summaries of Reformation teaching.

What unites these diverse texts, argues Reinis, is that all were vernacular devotional works aimed at a readership among the laity or lower clergy, and that they concerned themselves with a topic of direct pastoral relevance to all. The works also represent a case study in how medieval ideas were adapted by the early reformers, and how the central Reformation message of justification by faith and “certainty of salvation” was communicated.

The opening chapter provides an effective survey of the late medieval *ars moriendi* from which the Reformation texts evolved (though, sadly, it supplies no reproductions of the series of woodcuts for which the bestselling examples of the pre-Reformation genre were justly famous). This backwards look then allows Reinis to make an assessment of the later balance of continuity and change between Catholic and evangelical texts, as the authors of both wrestled with the question of how to ameliorate the temptations (*Anfechtungen*) faced by the dying person. Some continuities between Catholic and evangelical texts are evident: an emphasis on the need to meditate on the passion of Christ, and a pointing towards biblical models of consolation, such as the Good Thief. Sacraments retained an important role at the deathbed, though their precise number, as well as their theological rationale, was a conversation in progress among early evangelical reformers. For Reinis, however, such continuities are outweighed by a key change of emphasis. For Catholic authorities, salvation was a prize that had to be fought for and won on the deathbed (what Reinis calls, in a slightly odd formulation, “the doctrine of the un-

certainty of salvation”). The late medieval *ars moriendi* modulates between words of encouragement and monitions designed to undermine spiritual complacency. By contrast, the solafidian theology of the reformers encouraged them to place assurance of salvation at the heart of their message; to those preparing to die they were offering certainty of salvation.

Reinis makes a good case for an intensely affective and emotional approach on the part of the reforming authors. She concludes persuasively that her texts represent some of the earliest contributions to (in Berndt Hamm’s phrase) a Reformation “theology of piety,” and she argues that attention to the situations out of which the *Sterbebücher* arose lends “insights into how the Reformation message of justification by faith and certainty of salvation was disseminated beyond the walls of the academy” (p. 243). Nonetheless, some readers will find this study rather too narrowly focused on the textual structure and rhetorics of its pamphlet source base, and somewhat unambitious in its approach to some of the larger questions the sources invite.

One such key issue is whether the prospect of dying was a less threatening one for confirmed Lutherans than it was for their Catholic contemporaries and forebearers. The Lutheran sources insist that it was, and Reinis is inclined to take them at their word on this. She gives passing recognition that the fear of predestination to Hell was, in Luther’s eyes, the principal *Anfechtung* to which the dying were subject, but there is little exploration of this as a real existential dilemma. Throughout, Reinis uses the terms “certainty” and “assurance” of salvation interchangeably, but it is not entirely evident that they are straight synonyms. A strong pastoral emphasis on the latter was surely a response to a new dispensation which allowed Christians to exercise absolutely no objective control over salvation through strict adherence to the rules of the sacramental system.

While there is clearly some mileage in using the techniques of rhetorical analysis to gain access to the “affect-

tive dimension” of the reformers’ teaching on death, this sometimes involves making assumptions about reader response and reception which can seem rather heavy-handed. We are repeatedly told, for example, that the power of a text is less “effective” and “persuasive” when it makes use of the third rather than the first or second person. Well, you might think so, or maybe one wouldn’t.

Moreover, it would have been desirable to hear more about the role that advice on preparing for death may have played in shaping or reinforcing emergent religious identities—Lutheran and otherwise—in this crucial “pre-confessional” stage of the Reformation. Arguably the most interesting of the texts Reinis discusses is the anonymous *Euangelisch lere und vermanung / eines sterbenden menschen*, published in Leipzig in 1523, which was designed to instruct Lutherans in a still largely Catholic territory how to die well and how to deal with the deathbed monitions and ministrations of the Catholic clergy. Thus, it explains that if a priest asks “are you a Lutheran?” the *moriens* is to respond “I wish to be a good Christian. Luther was not crucified for me, thus I am not baptised in his name.” If asked to affirm belief in the seven sacraments, s/he should answer, “I believe what a Christian is to believe ... even if there were a hundred sacraments,” and should insist s/he was “too simple” to dispute the matter further. Reinis supposes that contemporary readers would find this verbal outwitting of the priest “humorous,” but beyond suggesting that a key motivation here may have been the desire not to be excluded from consecrated ground, she does not give proper weighting to the most revealing aspects of the text: its overtly casuistical character, its direct advocacy of equivocation, and its advice to its readers to behave in a way which a later generation of Protestant authorities would wholeheartedly condemn as “Nicodemite.” Indeed, the whole question of the relationship between this first creative and explorative phase of reformed writing about death in the 1520s, and the lineaments of later Protestant orthopraxy, invites considerably more reflection than it is accorded in this useful but rather restricted study.

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