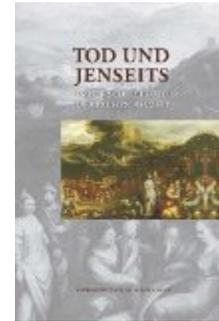


Marion Kobelt-Groch, Cornelia Niekus Moore, eds. *Tod und Jenseits in der Schriftkultur der Frühen Neuzeit*. Wolfenbütteler Forschungen. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2008. 243 pp. EUR 69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-447-05846-9.

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## Death and the Afterlife

In the second half of the twentieth century, scholars of early modern Europe increased their calls for examination of issues surrounding death and the afterlife. Funeral sermons, church and court records, and literary sources all pointed to the fact that women and men in early modern Europe were consistently concerned with death and the afterlife. In a world where wars, plagues, and even childbirth threatened everyday life, death and the accompanying fears about eternal punishment were constant companions. This collection offers insight into the complex preoccupation early modern culture had with death and the afterlife. Consisting of papers originally delivered at a 2006 conference at the Herzog August Bibliothek (HAB) in Wolfenbüttel, the book features research that relied heavily on its manuscript and print resources. Theologians, historians, and Germanists provided differing and interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches that make this interesting volume a helpful resource for many in the humanities. Crisscrossing the European continent and stretching from the late Middle Ages through the end of the early modern period, the essays sketch portraits of the ways in which death and the afterlife were understood, imagined, and ritualized by a variety of early modern communities. While the volume does not provide a vast overarching narrative about death and afterlife issues—or attempt to—it does give readers thirteen glimpses into early modern perspectives on death and the afterlife by outstanding scholars who capably raise important interpretive questions.

The essays, half in English and half in German, are arranged in roughly chronological order. Contributions by Robert Kolb and Bruce Gordon focus on sixteenth-century reformers. Kolb's article offers a thorough examination of Martin Luther's table conversations, letters of condolence, and sermons in order to understand the reformer's view of death and dying. Kolb concludes that Martin Luther's view ultimately stressed certainty and hope rather than a fear of death. Gordon's essay highlights the tension that Heinrich Bullinger faced when he reacted to the deaths of Huldrych Zwingli (1531) and Martin Luther (1546). Bullinger had to address each of their deaths, while balancing between the two reformers whose enmity had led to the great divide between magisterial Protestant confessions.

Susan C. Karant-Nunn, Marion Kobelt-Groch, Eva Labouvie, and Michael Prosser consider issues related to infant baptism. For both Protestants and Catholics, the death of an unbaptized infant posed a problem. Karant-Nunn's article highlights the inconsistency between theological representations of the afterlife and popular attitudes over the course of the sixteenth century. Lutherans held conflicting ideas about the eternal destination of the unbaptized, particularly unbaptized infants. Kobelt-Groch further explores this issue, examining extant *Leichenpredigten* in which pastors tried to alleviate fears about their eternal damnation. Labouvie's article focuses on how Catholics dealt with the necessity of baptizing an infant, the importance of naming the child, and the

ways in which this process entered the child among the community of saints. If a child was stillborn, procedures were conducted to “awaken” the child. The stillborn infant would then exhibit signs of life and baptism would be administered with haste. Michael Prosser examines what we might describe as the academic theology expressed in sermons about the existence of a soul in unbaptized babies. He then compares his findings with the reality of baptismal practice, noting striking variations from region to region.

A group of articles deals with different representations of death and the afterlife in edification literature. Harald Tersch’s article explores ideas about heavenly assurance found in house and family literature of the seventeenth century. This material opens a vista on early modern attitudes about death not available in judicial and clerical records, particularly stressing how widows utilized their resources to attempt to shorten their time in purgatory. Bernhard Lang’s essay focuses on the much-discussed John Bunyan classic, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). Lang finds contrasting views of a theocentric versus anthropocentric heaven within Bunyan’s writings, specifically between the first part and the second part of the book. This distinction, Lang argues, indicates a shifting understanding of heaven. Piet Visser turns to Dutch Mennonite edifying texts to explore their notion of the “Heavenly City” in the work of poets and artists. Bernd Ulrich Hucker focuses on the narratives of Till Eulenspiegel and the gravestone that was later restored, providing an interesting interpretation of the medieval jester. A criminal conversion narrative provides Eileen Dugan with a morality tale that illustrated the possibilities of repentance before death. Dugan highlights ways in which the perpetrator served as an anonymous model for conversion and repentance. Moore examines the eighteenth-century portrayals of heaven by the pietist Augusta Elisabeth von Posadowsky. Her poetic view of heaven exhibits several hallmarks of the pietist movement, such as bride language, emphasis on the scrip-

tures, and a subjective relationship with God. Examining a different motif altogether, Norbert Fischer’s essay discusses changes in gravestones over the course of the early modern period. His work on material culture highlights the shift from Reformation-era inscriptions dominated by biblical citations to nineteenth-century gravestones where such distinctively Christian motifs are no longer present.

This book makes a strong contribution to studies of death and the afterlife in a variety of different areas. It covers a broad range of material that historians of religion, art, and German literature can all use to benefit from this book. Each essay introduces interesting primary sources (as was the purpose of the project as a whole) and draws on the particular author’s area of expertise. The appearance of the book, with color illustrations, is very appealing and the authors use visual sources to the advantage of their work throughout the text. Arranged in roughly chronological order, however, the groupings of the articles are not always the most helpful for the reader. I would have preferred the book to be arranged by topic in order to enable comparisons between various arguments. For example, a cluster of articles focuses on various aspects of how popular culture, lay persons, pastors, theologians, and literary figures dealt with the issue of the unbaptized child. But these essays are spread throughout the text. As a cluster, they would have allowed greater ease of comparison. I envision that many readers will want to utilize one group of essays or one particular essay in this collection rather than read the entire book. However, the scholar who spends time with this work will discover a wealth of interesting analyses of how people in the early modern period understood and dealt with issues of death and the afterlife. Hopefully, this book will also inspire further research into these areas and a wider awareness of the rich resources available to other scholars interested in pursuing related lines of inquiry.

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