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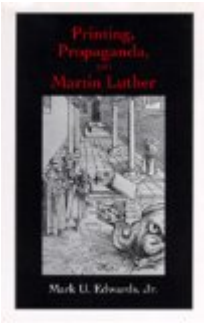
Mark U. Edwards, Jr.. *Printing, Propaganda and Martin Luther.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. xiii + 225 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-08462-9.



Reviewed by Susan R. Boettcher

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It has been a long wait for readers since Edwards's last book, and those who remember the readability and subtle arguments of his earlier works will not be disappointed. Edwards begins by analyzing the results of H. J. Koehler's *Tuebingen Flugschriften* project (1500-1530). The book goes on to position itself explicitly on two major and classic controversies in the field: the Ozment/ Moeller debate over the reasons for the appeal of the Reformation, and the issue of the role and importance of print in the spread of the Reformation. Finally, by analyzing what contemporary audiences might have known about Reformation theology at specific times, Edwards revises the narrative of Strasbourg's reception of the Reformation.

Edwards's analysis concerns Strasbourg imprints 1518-1525, focusing on vernacular and more frequently published titles. Based on his discovery of which texts were most widely available, he suggests that before gaining a reputation as a polemicist, Luther was seen as an "earnest and constructive pastor and man of the Bible concerned above all for the religious well-being of the laity" (p. 11). Luther's first works were devotional and pastoral, suggesting that the laity should surrender reliance on works, and trust G-d's promise in Christ as their only source of salvation. Only after 1520 did works appear in the Strasbourg vernacular press that portrayed Luther as a rebel and source of controversy. The problem of the reception of Luther's ideas was complicated by his supporters, who confused his "sola scriptura" emphasis with Erasmian insistence on untainted Scripture, and conflated his criticism of human laws with the Erasmian attack on religious superstitions. The consequences of this misunderstanding played out in Eucharistic theological controversies. So Luther sought to control perception of his ideas via Bible translation, reinforcing the points he thought the reader should glean from the text. Consequently, Luther's very authority to interpret became a major issue, as seen in debates over his alleged incitement of the Peasants' War (1525). According to Edwards, a narrative of the Reformation's arrival in Strasbourg based on this information would note that the early works by Luther available there did not mention Luther's difficulties with the Papacy, which vernacular

readers did not become aware of until mid-1520. This narrative would eliminate emphasis on Luther's education program, as well as discussion of when his breakthrough over salvation "sola fide" happened--two issues totally absent from these works. This reconsideration of Luther as he appeared to his audience versus how he allegedly "was" is the most valuable theoretical area of the book and could profitably have been expanded.

Edwards's willingness to summarize and address the longstanding controversies in Reformation studies will be valuable, particular to the non-specialist. The author expounds the idea that in Strasbourg imprints, concerns about late medieval penitential theology are at the fore rather than late medieval communal/political ideals. A frequent criticism of the former position has been that it repeats Luther's own explanation and is based primarily on the content of printed sources without any mechanism for the measurement of popular awareness of theological issues. Edwards's argument is a good balance to the work of authors who attempt to discount print's role in the Reformation. Authors in other fields, however, most notably Robert Darnton, have supplemented this type of analysis with anthropological considerations about how the reader experienced printing, in an attempt to assess what readers would have taken away from the texts with which they interacted. Edwards's work seems implicitly to admit the necessity of such considerations, for he goes on to show that many of Luther's adherents must have learned about him from the works of controversialists: "The hook could be set by anti-Roman, antipapal and anticlerical appeals, and the theological rationale could follow afterwards" (p. 72), a point which is curiously confusing when juxtaposed with his assertion that theological rather than political issues were decisive in bringing people to the Reformation.

Edwards seems to want to restart debate over the importance of literacy in the period. He mounts a statistical argument about the proportion of books to readers in the Empire in order to suggest that if so much print was around, it must have been influential. Someday historians will have a similar debate about the role of computers in twentieth century society. Calculations of machines per capita, cost as proportion of income, and dispersion of microcomputers will not be enough to assess how the machines were understood, how they were used, and what people gained by using them. So it is with issues of print. While Edwards's implicit methodology is nuanced and well-substantiated, it does not engage the recent anthropological and theoretical considerations that have proliferated discussions around the history of printing. Few would deny that the sudden explosion of printed material in the Holy Roman Empire was influential in the spread of the Reformation, but as Edwards himself seems to admit, it is only one part of the story. Readers who expect a more explicit methodological discussion will need to apply their own critical apparatus to Edwards's summary and analysis of the results of the Tuebingen project.

This book will be especially valuable for students and non-specialists because it provides an introduction to crucial and long-standing debates in Reformation history. In the age of the academic monograph, it is pleasant to review a book that will be accessible to a much broader audience because of its clear prose and judicious consideration of relevant issues.

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