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Miriam Usher Chrisman. *Conflicting Visions of Reform: German Lay Propaganda Pamphlets, 1519-1530.* Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996. xiii + 288 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-03944-5.

Reviewed by Joel F. Harrington (Vanderbilt University)
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From the earliest phase of his great cause, Martin Luther displayed a keen grasp of the unprecedented propaganda potential of the relatively new medium of the printing press. Unfortunately, as he quickly discovered, wide circulation of his own writings not only did not ensure uniform reception but often produced the opposite effect. In her latest book on early "Protestantism" and the press, the distinguished Strasbourg historian Miriam Usher Chrisman examines the spectrum of early lay publications on the Luther affair and comes to the conclusion that authors from diverse social contexts also employed diverse propaganda techniques and–more important–demonstrated very different understandings of the Wittenberg reformer's words and significance. Given the later magisterial and territorial Reformations' antipathy toward all non-conformity, particularly doctrinal, her findings further emphasize the "movement's" dramatic change of course in the mid-1520s. While not unexpected for most Reformation historians, Chrisman's descriptions of such interpretational diversity among the many segments of the literate laity do produce some valuable insights.

The book's methodology consists of a close reading of about three hundred pamphlets published between 1519 and 1530. Chrisman has very purposefully sought out exclusively lay works, thus also excluding any writings by ex-priests or even Anabaptist ministers/shepherds. One of the great virtues of the book is a very helpful bibliography of both pamphlet collections consulted (including most prominently the 5,000+ microfiche collection of Hans-Joachim Koehler) as well as those individual publications discussed in the text. From this sample, Chrisman then proceeds to group the pamphlets into chapters based on the author's social background, namely, imperial knights, nobles, minor officials and teachers, urban elite, artisans, and city secretaries and magistrates. Within each of these groups, the author then attempts to generalize and suggest distinctive patterns in the areas of rhetorical strategy, sequence of ideas and sources cited, language, and most importantly, content. This detailed comparison undeniably yields several interesting observations. Nobles, for instance, tended to compose in the form of grievances, urban leaders preferred personal correspondence, and artisans a variety of songs, poems, and dialogues. The nature of reform itself was similarly subject to a filter of social status, with imperial knights such as von Hutten viewing the issue in nationalist terms, while urban elites appeared most concerned about the monastic vocations of their own children, and nobles contrived new forms of confession and absolution.

Undoubtedly all of this proves Chrisman's central thesis that "the indepen- dence [of lay authors] was striking" (p. 14), particularly vis-a-vis clerical reformers such as Luther. It also clearly demonstrates the reluctance of many powerful figures in German society to associate themselves with Luther (a few imperial knights excepted), while those further down the social ladder–especially artisans and schoolteachers–were so openly and enthusiastically supportive of the same as to identify themselves as "Lutherans."

Yet should we really be surprised that members of a generally conservative and hierarchical society selectively interpreted and refashioned the many faces of Lutheran preaching in their own images? Certainly no other current historian of the Reformation has contributed more than Chrisman herself in demonstrating the very flexibility of "the Word," whether in written or oral form. Considering moreover that "most people heard the Reformation message first in sermons" (p. 7), and that no wealthy merchants or peasants were among the chosen authors, we might ask whether the attempt to establish a social stratification of religious perceptions based solely on pamphlets–whether three hundred or three thousand–is not in fact more appropriately limited to a comparison of propaganda techniques. This is, after all, Chrisman's undisputed expertise and she is particularly good at fleshing out impersonal tracts, effectively conveying the uncertainties and tensions of the

early 1520s, and humanizing the names at the bottom of the title pages. The occasional overreaching and awkwardness of the social categorizations, by contrast, results in odd intrusions in the textual analysis, such as a grab-bag social history chapter late in the book (chapter 8) and an overall uncomfortable synthesis of recent research on social order, urban reforms, and even poor relief. Most of this difficulty can be attributed to a nebulous and shifting audience: at times the uninitiated general reader in need of historiographical summaries and generalizations; at other points the Reformation or even publishing specialist who is no doubt more interested in Hilgart von Freyburg's alternate penitential order than the non-expert, yet probably simultaneously frustrated by the choice of endnotes over footnotes. This is unfortunate, for the book, at different points, contains much of value for both types of readers. Most important, it allows one of the leading experts on the early Reformation an opportunity to contextualize early evangelical authors and in the process convey the social diversity and complexity that we sometimes imagine unique to our own times. This is in itself no mean achievement. As Luther himself could testify, writing for several audiences at the same time is not without its perils; that Chrisman can succeed to the degree that she does would surely have aroused his envy and admiration.

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