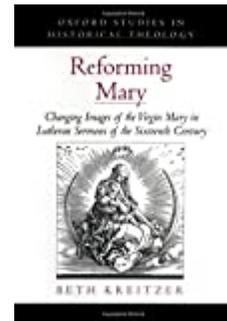


Beth Kreitzer. *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 239 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-516654-5.



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Lutherans and Mary

Protestant Marianism is one of the neglected topics of early modern religious history. There has been a general assumption that Mary disappeared from Protestant doctrine and devotion, a victim of the reformers' condemnation of saintly intercession. This assumption is due for revision. As Beth Kreitzer's book demonstrates, Mary retained considerable significance for Lutheran preachers. Indeed, as a recent issue of *Time* magazine (March 21, 2005) pointed out, her cult is even enjoying something of a Renaissance amongst modern day evangelical Protestants.

In this timely study, Kreitzer explores the ways in which Mary was presented in the sermons of sixteenth-century Lutheran pastors. The Protestant reformers rejected traditional veneration of the saints, arguing that it was non-scriptural and distracted attention from Christ, the only mediator between man and God. Pilgrimages were abolished, feast-days were phased out and prayers and liturgy were purged of invocations of the saints. Yet as Kreitzer points out, Mary was no ordinary saint. She was in a special position, "at the nexus of the divine and the human that Christians view as the incarnation of

God" (p. 27). She was essential to orthodox teaching: she brought Christ into the world, and she guaranteed his humanity.

Extensive debate within German scholarship has concerned Luther's own views on the Virgin. The positive things that Luther had to say about the Virgin might, perhaps, have permitted a Protestant tradition of Marian veneration to develop. Yet as Kreitzer argues, while Luther himself and a number of other early reformers spoke warmly of Mary, "later preachers are much more willing to criticize Mary and to suggest that she erred, or even sinned, in some of her behavior" (p. 24). Kreitzer's chronological span—1520 to 1580—enables her to survey two to three generations of preachers, and to construct a compelling account of the development of a Lutheran tradition of preaching on Mary.

Kreitzer begins by exploring briefly the "saint-saturated religious culture that was so formative for Luther" (p. 12). Thereafter, each of her chapters considers a set of Lutheran sermons on a text or series of texts from the gospels in which Mary plays an important role. The first three chapters deal with sermons preached on

the three Marian festivals that survived in most Lutheran areas: the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Purification. The remaining chapters consider sermons about other gospel texts in which Mary features prominently: the story of the loss of the twelve-year-old Christ in the temple at Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-52), the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-10), and Christ's nativity and passion.

In addition to acknowledging Mary's role as the Mother of God, Lutheran preachers also presented her as an example of Christian belief and behavior. Mary's faith was, they argued, so strong that it overcame her reason, allowing her to believe Gabriel's message at the Annunciation. Moreover, Mary's role in the gospels enabled preachers to exalt her as an example of humility and obedience. As Kreitzer writes, "Lutheran pastors hoped to inculcate the notion of the godly, well-ordered, hierarchical society in their listeners, and used Mary ... to help in this project" (p. 130). The story of the wedding at Cana, for example, provided an opportunity for preachers to reiterate the importance of marriage. Mary featured in this story as a positive example of love, mercy, and faithful prayer: she told her son that there was no more wine, but did not turn away from him when he responded harshly to her. Although her petition was not immediately granted, she continued to hope for future help. Lutheran sermons also emphasized that Mary helped to organize and serve at the wedding, an indication of her exemplary humility.

As Lutheran interpretations of the wedding at Cana suggest, Mary was used in particular to disseminate the preachers' ideal of proper female comportment. She was, for Luther and for some of his contemporaries, the ideal woman, wife and mother. The reformers no longer, of course, recommended virginity as a vocational choice, though Mary's chastity and modesty were still considered proper virtues for young women to emulate. Above all, however, Lutheran preachers spoke of Mary as wife and mother, "to impress upon their listeners the value and primacy of the married life" (p. 136). Mary's domesticity was emphasized to a much greater extent than in the Catholic tradition. We can only speculate, as Kreitzer does, as to the implications of this shift in emphasis for Lutheran women's own experiences of religious change. On the one hand, Luther's Mary served as an example "to limit women to a domesticated, tightly controlled sphere of existence" while, on the other, the importance accorded to her domestic activities "no doubt helped many women come to a new appreciation of their roles as wives and mothers" (p. 54). The Lutheran Mary could not, as Kreitzer points out, serve as a model woman

of action, but Reformation scholars need to acknowledge that her Catholic counterpart rarely, if ever, fulfilled this role either.

This is a work of historical theology, and as such will be of considerable value to Reformation historians. The separation of theology from piety, however, is an artificial one, as Kreitzer herself acknowledges in her discussion of late medieval Marian devotion. Kreitzer's focus on sermons enables her to discuss how Mary was viewed by literate male clerics and to explore the ideas that they wished to convey to their lay audiences. She deliberately, however, leaves aside other textual sources—biblical commentaries, confessional writings, catechisms, devotional literature—and liturgy and art. Her focus on sermons can be justified: they were, of course, as she points out, vital in spreading the Reformation message. Yet the late-medieval cult of the Virgin was a truly multi-media affair, and a remarkable amount of Marian imagery and liturgy survived in at least some Lutheran areas. This survival undoubtedly had a significant impact on lay understandings of the Lutheran Virgin.

A key theme of Kreitzer's book is that later Lutheran sermons were considerably less enthusiastic about Mary than those of Luther himself and his immediate contemporaries. Kreitzer's explanations for this shift are convincing, though perhaps she could have done more to develop them. There was, of course, an issue of increasing distance: the second and third generation of Lutheran preachers were less in thrall to the powerful devotional tradition of the late Middle Ages. As Kreitzer acknowledges briefly in her conclusion, there was a "decrease in reverential attitude among those pastors raised in a Protestant rather than a Roman Catholic context" (p. 136). Perhaps more important, however, was the threat of resurgent Catholicism. Kreitzer notes an increase in the number of complaints about Catholic Marian doctrine and practice in sermons published from 1569 onwards, and suggests that because of the activities of the Jesuits "maintaining the proper anti-Roman stance ... took priority over addressing Mary's special position as the blessed *Theotokos*" (p. 45). The changing nature of the Protestant church within the Holy Roman Empire may also have contributed to the shift in attitude. As Diarmaid MacCulloch has recently pointed out, adherence to traditional doctrines, such as that of Mary's perpetual virginity, served, during the 1520s, to mark out mainstream reformers from more radical groups such as the Anabaptists.[1] As the threat of radical reform receded, and intra-Lutheran debates over orthodoxy came to dominate theological discussion, such doctrines could

perhaps be safely abandoned. Such evidence and explanations are vital if we are to understand the evolution of Protestant piety during the early modern period, and Kreitzer's work broaches a field of inquiry that will surely become very significant.

Note

[1]. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 613-614.

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