



Kai Bremer. *Religionsstreitigkeiten: Volkssprachliche Kontroversen zwischen altgläubigen und evangelischen Theologen im 16. Jahrhundert.* Göttingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 2005. 329 pp. EUR 88.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-484-36604-6.



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Religious Disputes in Sixteenth-Century Germany

Kai Bremer dedicates his study to vernacular polemical pamphlets between Catholic and Protestant authors in the Holy Roman Empire. As a scholar of German language and literature, he is not primarily interested in the theological content or the historical background of his material, but tries to contribute to a history of German literature, taking into account stylistic as well as rhetorical aspects. He relies on recent research on printing, confessional theology and cultures as well as confessionalization, aiming at “not less than the further development of the connection of German literature studies to confessionalization research in the historical disciplines” (p. 22).

Bremer’s work, based on his Göttingen dissertation (2002), is roughly divided into three main parts, plus an addendum. After a general outline of the current state of research and an attempt of a general typology of religious pamphlets, he focuses on four case studies, each consisting of a series of pamphlets that formed a discussion, or at least a rhetorical exchange of blows, starting with the classical controversy between Martin Luther and Hieronymus Emser, which commenced with

Luther’s *Adelsschrift* (1520). Bremer describes in the following material different publications; analyzes factors like vernacular language, types of argumentation, rhetorical figures and genres; and shows how, in the course of the dispute, the rhetorical tools of both Luther and Emser changed. The second case study is focused on the controversy between Friedrich Staphylus and Jacob Andreae—a spin-off from the general debate that arose from Staphylus’s conversion to Catholicism and his attacks on Lutherans after the Colloquy of Worms (1557). Although the general debate was held primarily in Latin, in the controversy with Andreae both authors used the vernacular. In the third case, Bremer examines a long-lasting conflict between the emerging Jesuit order and one of the leading Lutheran theologians from Württemberg, Lucas Osiander, as a battle between early orthodox Lutheran defensiveness and Jesuit aggressiveness. The author describes the use of *emblemata* and aggressive rhetorical strategies as well as triumphalist and carnivalistic elements as new tools used by the Jesuits in their fight for propagating the faith. The last case treats a local controversy between Reformed and Catholic theologians in the region of Münster at the

end of the sixteenth century.

In the much shorter second part of the book, Bremer draws general conclusions from his case studies and comments on points like pamphlet readership, different dimensions of the conflicts (religious, political, authoritative, stylistic) and the identity-building qualities of polemical writing. The final third part leaves the topic of polemical writings to draw comparisons with other forms of rhetorical media like sermons, catechetical writings, Jesuit theatre and writings about conversions. Each group of material is the focus of a short essay of five to ten pages. Bremer declares the preliminary character of this part of the book and wants to reveal perspectives for further research in this field. At the end of the book, instead of a summary, the author presents three short remarks on aspects of religious conflict in the seventeenth century.

Bremer's work addresses an important phenomenon of sixteenth-century printing. Not only during the first phase of the Reformation up to 1530, but all through the century, polemical writings remained a main tool of religious conflict, with high numbers of prints and widespread popularity among readers. The author contributes to the history of German literature, a discipline that has neglected this group of material during the last decades. In analyzing his case studies, Bremer's comes to many interesting and inspiring observations and uncovers potential points of further research. In particular, his remarks on the connection between academic rhetoric and the style of the vernacular pamphlets (pp. 29-45, especially pp. 41f) open up many perspectives.

But the general impression left by the book is somewhat problematic. As a consequence of his approach as a historian of literature, Bremer draws his conclusions based on only a few cases, claiming general validity for observations sometimes taken from singular texts. Since he attempts to find general patterns in a mass of material numbering hundreds of pamphlets between 1517 and 1600, it is fairly easy to challenge his results by look-

ing at other sources. This problem is especially characteristic of the volume's confessional dimension. Although the title of the book aims at the whole picture, in the course of the reading it turns out that Bremer primarily focuses on the Catholic part of the dispute. While many of his generalizations may be true for the Catholic side, they nonetheless neglect Protestant peculiarities. For example, he discusses in detail the audience of lay readers without explicitly considering the new role that the idea of the "priesthood of all believers" attributed at least in theory to every Christian reader as a difference between the Protestant and the Catholic disputants and their audiences. In general, Bremer's considerations of the role of the audience—the buyers and readers of religious pamphlets—remain unsatisfactory. Other points, like the political, "triumphal" and theological dimensions of conflicts (pp. 194-212) are only discussed for the Catholic side without even an attempt to compare the resulting conclusions with Protestant phenomena. This is not to say that Bremer's approach is inappropriate, especially since the Protestant side has been the object of much more interest by researchers in the last decades, but he should have justified his focus on the Catholic side in his preliminary notes. Moreover, the analysis of the last third of the book remains at a superficial level. A commentary on the relationship between polemical printing and sermons on five (!) pages is so abbreviated as to be virtually useless, remaining as it does on the level of extreme generalization, and the discussion of Catholic catechetical writings or songs as means of polemic without taking into account the eminent role which this kind of texts played for spreading the Protestant message in the first place can only present a distorted picture.

Bremer's work contributes to the history of German literature in the sixteenth century and delivers many fruitful (in some cases even juicy) examples of confessional polemic. In the end, his book reminds us how fascinating this material is and alerts readers to how many interesting aspects of polemical writings, not only those in pamphlets but also other genres, remain to be discussed in detail.

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