

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Susan Karant-Nunn.** *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany.* London and New York: Routledge, 1997. ix + 282 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-11337-3.

**Reviewed by** Kathryn Edwards (University of Southern Mississippi)

**Published on** H-German (December, 1998)

Susan Karant-Nunn begins her study of ritual reform in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Germany with a statement that will perhaps surprise many readers unfamiliar with her topic. Despite the influence of pioneering works of historical anthropology by Keith Thomas and Natalie Zemon Davis and the explosion of ritual studies, no such synthetic examination of ritual reform in early modern Germany has been attempted. In *The Reformation of Ritual*, Karant-Nunn fills this gap and in the process tackles difficult but central questions in German Reformation history. Those posed in this challenging and insightful book include the following: What was the impact of the Reformation on religious ritual? How do changes (or attempted changes) in ritual reflect the conscious and unconscious values of a society? What negotiations are involved in ritual change? Building on extensive archival and secondary research in German, American, English, French, and Italian sources and on a detailed knowledge of anthropological theory, Karant-Nunn in general succeeds in her ambitious task. Moreover, she does so with admirable balance and appreciation of the complexities of ritual interpretation.[1]

In her first chapter on ritual reform, "Engagement and Marriage Ceremonies," Karant-Nunn introduces most of the concerns and interpretations that underlie the rest of her book. The first of these involves the Bakhtinian-inspired theories of carnivalesque ritual, a theme that also concludes her study. For Karant-Nunn, such theories must be seen in light of the disciplining of human nature that was so much a part of the Protestant Reformation and which would reinforce the close relations between the church and government. "The Reformers," she says, "conscious of it or not, sought first of all better to tame and domesticate the wild beast of sexu-

ality than Catholicism had, so that human beings might be adequately insulated against the lesser world of nature and fully introduced into a higher existence, a civilized, existence, characterized by the channeling of base instincts" (p. 7). Although Karant-Nunn challenges the "two-tiered model of culture" that such an approach often imposes,[2] the model's emphasis on ritual negotiation and the suggestion of a "popular" counter-culture points to a key theme in Karant-Nunn's work. The common people saw the Reformation's social and liturgical reform—to draw an admittedly schematic separation—as socially and morally subversive. By opposing the banquets and ritual drinking that accompanied wedding celebration, the Protestant clergy were actually perceived as trying to demolish social bonds.

This interpretation is wonderfully paradoxical when seen in light of another of Karant-Nunn's themes. Throughout her work, she argues that church and state—however they may be defined—worked together increasingly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to enforce a conception of an orderly, moral earthly community. This interpretation of early modern Germany is anything but original; Karant-Nunn herself refers to the voluminous literature on confessionalization and social discipline that develops this interpretation. Her contribution is to show how ritual itself can be seen in this light and, in particular, how it fits into the debates over the effectiveness of such reform programs. In the case of weddings, she stresses the attempts by rulers and reformers to move weddings into the church as well as to curtail the other binding ceremonies mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Closely tied to this is the attempt to curb what rulers and reformers saw as the excessive physicality of traditional wedding ceremonies. While the general

population assumed that sexual activity between a couple began with their betrothal, the clergy and state increasingly tried to prohibit it until the marriage ceremony itself was complete. In their attempts to mold the body's performance sexually and ceremonially, reformers promulgated a more controlled society which reinforced the political aims of the early modern German states.

Closely tied to the preceding argument is Karant-Nunn's third theme, namely, that pre-Reformation clergy and the early pastorate were far closer to the common people and far more likely to share their sensibilities than the theological elite who developed the programs for ritual reform. Moreover, as the sixteenth century progressed, the Protestant clergy were increasingly distanced through education and upbringing from the communities to which they ministered. To take one example, Protestant clergyman would more frequently absent themselves from marriage feasts and dances, associating such revelries with "animalistic" debauchery.

The fourth and final theme developed throughout Karant-Nunn's work concerns the active role of communities in forming, and reforming, rituals. Rather than portraying these communities as passive recipients of reformed ritual, she agrees with Catherine Bell, who "insists that lesser participants in what are intended to be rites of power exert themselves through consent, resistance, and misinterpretation; they appropriate rituals and make them their own."<sup>3</sup> Such a perspective leads to thoughtful and convincing modifications of well-known anthropological approaches to fit the German circumstance. Van Gennep's "rites of passage," Turner's "communitas," and Durkheim's "solidarity thesis" are all applicable to early modern Germany, particularly in the case of Protestant weddings, but Karant-Nunn argues that these rites were more complicated than such theories might make them appear. For example, while weddings do provide social cohesion, they also exclude members of the community, contributing to differentiation. Moreover, such binding ceremonies also have divisive elements, such as the rapes and drunken brawls reported at weddings. Social difference and discord are *both* emphasized and overcome in such rituals.

One other recurring aspect of Karant-Nunn's work also appears in this chapter. Methodologically, Karant-Nunn follows approximately the same order in each chapter. Beginning with a summary of the late medieval pattern for the ritual she is discussing, she then expands into at least several sections related to different Reformed approaches and their effects, and concludes with a sec-

tion in which the preceding themes are more explicitly related to broader interpretations found in historical anthropology. Her analysis is grounded in Clifford Geertz's elaboration of Gilbert Ryle's "thick description." As such, one of the richest aspects of this book concerns the detailed descriptions of marriage, baptismal, death-bed, and other rituals provided in their respective chapters.

In Chapter Two, on baptism and confirmation, the distinction between the people and liturgists and the persistence of pre-Reformation beliefs and practices among the people are the two dominant themes. Karant-Nunn argues that by the early sixteenth-century the Church suffered from what she terms "ritual archaism"—rituals that had not kept up with changing social needs, especially in the cities. The rite of baptism had an essential social role in the Christian community but an increasingly theologically problematic one during the Reformation; if good works were not essential for salvation, what was to happen to the work of baptism? Luther himself, according to Karant-Nunn, was caught in this trap and "to Lutherans baptism was ascribed a tremendous power over the unseen world; it was indispensable" (p. 53). Thus, on one hand, the state and the clergy, Lutheran and Reformed, would gear baptism increasingly to reinforce communal authority, particularly in the German southwest, and the internalization of social discipline. On the other hand, the common people vigorously resisted the internalization of the Devil as taught by this clergy, protested over the removal of exorcism and other sacramentals from the baptismal rite, and "still accepted the Catholic teaching that baptism was a precondition of safety here and of salvation after death" (p. 62).

In Chapter Three, Karant-Nunn analyzes the ritual of churching; the ceremonies attached to a mother's return to the church after having given birth. Although the only ritual she discusses which was *not* a sacrament in the pre-Reformation Church, churching shared in popular attitudes towards the interrelationship between the sacral and social found in the other rituals treated here. In particular, churching reveals the negotiations that occurred between post-Reformation clergy and their congregations. The practice of churching itself was retained in Lutheran communities, and, even though Calvinists banned the practice, they still argued that a women should not appear in church until six weeks after having given birth. Rites involved in churching that the clergy condemned as "superstitious," such as circling the altar, were nevertheless retained. As such, churching reveals the continuation of the "semi-magical" perspective among many early modern Germans. In addition,

Karant-Nunn sees the early modern debates over churching and its ongoing practice as contributing to anthropological debates over social perceptions about woman's innate closeness to nature (pp. 88-90). While Karant-Nunn disagrees that the Middle Ages saw nature as benevolent and maternal, she accepts the argument of Carolyn Merchant to the extent that early modern Germany was undergoing "a shift toward the more intensive and rationalized exploitation and control of nature" (p. 88).[4] In the case of churching, the clerical inconsistencies over and opposition to the ritual reflect this movement.

At the beginning of Chapter Four, on confession and the eucharist, Karant-Nunn restates her approach to this book. Rather than enumerating the multitude of detailed, theological debates regarding these subjects—with which she is quite familiar, as can be seen in her footnotes—she wants to concentrate on both lay and official perceptions of what happened in the process of the Eucharist. She is remarkably successful in treating such a vast topic succinctly but not simplistically. Building on themes which she has introduced, Karant-Nunn distinguishes between Lutheran and Reformed practices and sees the Reformed Eucharist as reflecting the communalism of the German southwest as analyzed by Peter Blickle. She finds that confession, while not pleasant, did not deter people from taking communion; that hierarchicalization was reinforced in Protestant churches by, to take one example, the separation of the communicants physically from the rest of the congregation; and that the common people and clergy were increasingly at odds over the purpose of religious services and the Eucharist. Particularly interesting is her discussion of the way the physical structure of the building in which divine service was held reflected the attitudes and assumptions of the people and the attempts by Protestant states and clergy to communicate messages of "order and personal responsibility" through the rearrangement of objects and the alteration of decoration. Somewhat disquieting is her reliance on a more traditional interpretation of Calvinist rigidity.[5]

Karant-Nunn's final chapter of ritual analysis is appropriately on death, and it begins with a detailed description of the ideal death, both satirical and programmatic. In this area, too, Luther originally retained aspects of traditional doctrine, such as purgatory (until later in his career), and the common people maintained such beliefs far longer along with the rituals that accompanied them. Ironically, however, it is in the area of death that Karant-Nunn sees the continued attempts at state control. As far as the rituals themselves were concerned, "those who governed the churches felt less and less se-

cure entrusting ritual decisions... to individual clergy" (p. 154). Moreover, clergy were increasingly instructed to examine the process by which a person died in detail, because it was seen to reveal the soul's final destination, a perspective that hearkened back to traditional Catholic beliefs. Funeral services and burial practices reflected the growing differentiation and hierarchicalization of early modern German society. Among the examples Karant-Nunn provides are the removal of ossuaries and the movement of cemeteries to outside the city walls. The use of coffins by burghers reinforced the distinctions already made based on place of burial. The clergy also attempted to direct their parishioners' emotional states by prohibiting any lingering at a grave site or wailing during the period between death and burial. While such actions might seem to reinforce a Foucauldian interpretation of the state use of ritual to govern the body, Karant-Nunn again stresses her agreement with scholars such as Catherine Bell and argues that the process is more dynamic and relational than such an interpretation suggests.

The weaknesses of this book are quite few. I would like to have seen the interpretation of ritual reform expanded beyond the "sacramental," although, admittedly, the massive scope of such an undertaking would make such a study all but impossible. The author's juxtaposition of the clergy and common people throughout the text could be disquieting, but it is more a linguistic weakness inherent in such topics than a problem with Karant-Nunn's methodology. Although she states in the introduction that "some will reproach me for writing about elite and popular preferences, as though society were a clean dichotomy" (p. 5), her work is remarkably free from such generalizations; she stresses repeatedly the gradations within urban and rural residents, genders, social classes, etc. While she does not explore every possible variation, such a project would contribute very little to her work and substantially change its focus. Along the same lines, further development of the Reformed tradition would possibly add more nuance to some of her arguments, as would more precise discussion about Counter-Reformation German trends. Probably, though, the most frustrating aspect of her book is beyond Karant-Nunn's control. One of her work's rich aspects is its detailed, analytical notes. By placing them at the end of her work, the publisher has made reading this book a sometimes frustrating experience, involving almost constant hopping between sections.

Once that frustration is accepted, however, the many strengths of this work can be appreciated: its detailed

descriptions of many formative rituals, its thoughtful integration of description and theory, and the author's sharp writing style. (Particularly amusing, and accurate, is the description of the 1536 Wittenberg Concord as "weasel-worded.") In attempting such a broad synthesis, Karant-Nunn will surely be criticized by some specialists for "skimming over" particular aspects of liturgical rites or theological meanings. Rather than condemning the scope of her work, I would argue that Karant-Nunn should be praised for providing a persuasive and challenging interpretation that will surely inspire renewed research while remaining essential reading for years to come.

#### Notes

[1]. In this way Karant-Nunn's approach is quite like that advocated by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob in *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), which she cites.

[2]. The phrase comes from Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reforma-*

*tion Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). The literature on this topic is surveyed and this theme developed in pp. 1-9.

[3]. Quoted on p. 3; Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. Chapter Nine, pp. 197-223.

[4]. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980). Karant-Nunn cites the review by Marcia L. Colish in the *Journal of Modern History* 54 (March 1982), pp. 66-70.

[5]. One counterpoint to this perspective can be found in William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Kathryn Edwards. Review of Karant-Nunn, Susan, *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2590>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).