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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jens-Martin Kruse. *Universitätstheologie und Kirchenreform. Die Anfänge der Reformation in Wittenberg 1516-1522.* Mainz: Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 2002. xii + 452 pp. EUR 45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-8053-2758-9.

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Published on H-German (January, 2004)

Reformation history has long been one of the great subjects of German and European historiography. In particular, the personhood of Martin Luther, as well as the events in Wittenberg, the epicenter of the Reformation upheaval of the 1520s, have been exhaustively researched. The denseness of this material makes the reader all the more curious about the new insights Jens-Martin Kruse offers in his dissertation about the beginnings of the Reformation at Wittenberg. Kruse bases his methodological approach on an understanding of the Reformation as a communication process, an approach influenced by media history research on the importance of contemporary broadsheets and pamphlets for the formation of an early Reformation public.

“Dieser Einsicht folgend,” as Kruse argues, “bildet den Gegenstand dieser Arbeit eine auf Wittenberg konzentrierte Analyse der Kommunikation unter den dortigen Reformern und ihres Zusammenwirkens (besonders bei der Durchführung der Reformen) mit den anderen städtischen Akteuren” (p. 23). Kruse thus casts his glance beyond Luther upon the Wittenberg theologians and protagonists of the Reformation who cooperated with him towards a reform of church and society. Moreover, he looks at their relationship to Reformation events in the town of Wittenberg itself. So, university and town, the two major spaces of communication for the early Reformation, are the focus of his study. At the beginning, the university was of prime importance for the development of the new theological ideas resulting in the Reformation process. After 1516, a circle of reformers around Luther had come into existence at Wittenberg, a *schola Wittenbergensis*, as Luther himself called it more than twenty years later in one of his famous *Tischreden*. This group attempted to overthrow scholastic methods of teaching and

fundamentally reform the whole of the university studies according to their own theological positions. Consequently, Kruse puts the activities of this reform circle within the broader context of the contemporary trends and events at the University of Wittenberg.

Having been founded only in 1502, Wittenberg had to compete with older, more established universities for students; it was not easy to convince students to go to this small town of minor attraction in Electoral Saxony. In order to be able to outdo its more established competitors, the new university had cultivated an inclination for reforms from the start, a consciously expressed intention to adapt itself to new directions and changes in the intellectual landscape. For example, the official statutes of the university put at its head a committee of so-called *Reformatoren*, which consisted of the rector and three other professors as immediate representatives of the elector. Within this reform-minded context, Martin Luther developed a new understanding of central theological positions—an understanding documented for the first time in his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans, which contained his core thought of justification *sola fide*, which became the starting point of his frontal assault on scholastic theology and Aristotelian philosophy. In a detailed analysis, Kruse shows how Luther’s colleagues, at first skeptical, soon came into line with Luther and how they themselves began to reconstruct their teaching on the basis of Augustine and the Bible. This relatively rapid change was probably supported by the open-minded atmosphere of the university. As a final result, Kruse underlines the fact that this influential reform group came into being among the Wittenberg theologians between 1515 and 1517.

Kruse's methodological approach is deeply rooted in classical forms of church history, as is his comprehensive analysis of the development of theological ideas and concepts by Luther and leading members of the reform group documents. Among its main members at Wittenberg were Johann Lang (1488-1548) and especially Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483-1565), Andreas Karlstadt (1586-1541), Johannes Doelsch (d. 1523) and Philip Melancthon (1497-1560). Nevertheless, Luther remains the key figure in Kruse's study and the development of his theological thinking is the cornerstone of the analysis.

Especially noteworthy is Kruse's placement of the theological developments of Luther and his colleagues within the communication space created by the university and his clear outline of the ways in which lectures and disputations as their characteristic forms of communication were consciously used to gain public support for the new theology among the local academic public. An important date in this process was the disputation of Luther's early pupil, Bartholomaeus Bernhardt from Feldkirch, held on the occasion of taking his doctoral degree at September 25, 1516 on the *Quaestio de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia* (p. 78). In this context, Luther's new theological ideas were put in the public space of the university for the first time. And, as a result of this event, Luther managed to convince a majority of his colleagues of the correctness of his approach. When, in November 1517, his famous ninety-five theses for disputation on the power of indulgences put him and his new theology in the public eye beyond the Wittenberg scene, a core group of reformers was already in existence and, moreover, this group was of crucial importance for the future success of the Reformation movement.

Between 1517 and 1519 Luther and the reform group were forced by the confrontation with representatives of the Old Church, especially the Ingolstaedt theologian Johannes Eck, to make more precise their ecclesiological concepts, which were derived from the new theological premises of Luther's understanding of justification. Leading Old Church theologians had very soon recognized the revolutionary aspects of Luther's theology. Consequently they put the question of the papal authority into the center of the debate, with the consequence that Luther and his co-reformers were increasingly driven into opposition to the established church. The history of this development is a well-known one that has been researched in every detail, and it does not need to be treated any further in this review. It is worth mentioning, however, that Kruse works out how, even in this early phase the media form of the disputation (the famous

1519 Leipzig disputation may serve as an example) was still used within the academic public, and later expanded to its urban counterpart. But at the same time, with the accelerated printing of broadsheets and leaflets, a public discussion started which reached an audience far beyond the academic scene. In addition to the university, the public space of the city of Wittenberg gradually played a more decisive role. Here, according to Kruse, the city council was mainly responsible for furthering the Reformation. After 1519 the outlines of a reform program at Wittenberg, which comprised not only university reform but also the renewal of urban society and the church, can be recognized. In the third part of his work, Kruse deals with the successful implementation of the first steps of the Reformation in Wittenberg between 1521 and 1522. In comparison to the detailed analysis of the theological developments of the reformers in the preceding chapters, this section is rather brief. As Kruse correctly underlines, this circumstance results from the fact that these events have already been sufficiently researched, so that he only had to summarize the results of the existing literature. At the same time, however, this state of affairs documents again that the focus of the book is put on classical topics of church history.

Because of this emphasis, readers must ask what is new in Kruse's book. For example, if one compares his version of the events of the early Reformation with the corresponding chapters in the very detailed biography of Luther by Martin Brecht, it can easily be seen that most of the facts and events Kruse used for his interpretation were also deployed by Brecht.[1] This similarity results, of course, from the sources employed, because Kruse basis his study mainly on the analysis of modern editions of the works of the reformers and only partially on period publications. A quantitative analysis of his footnotes would probably show that the works of Luther in the *Weimarer Ausgabe* were the most frequently cited sources. Still, Kruse succeeds in gaining a new view of the early history of the Reformation by a detailed and mostly chronologically arranged exposition of the events written from the perspective of the writings, lectures and disputations of the members of the Wittenberg reform group. The development of Luther's theology within the university as well as the strong influence the university enjoyed as a space for the deployment and distribution of his ideas become more visible than before. In varying the famous dictum of A. G. Dickens "the German Reformation was an urban event," one could say that it was an university event as well.[2] So, the specific merits of Kruse's research lie in the creation of a new perspec-

tive on well-known facts and events. In addition, his detailed exposition of the theological developments of the early reformers, of the history of the forms of communication within the university and the interdependence with the early history of the Reformation in the town of Wittenberg make his work an indispensable contribution to the early history of the Reformation. But at the same time one should clearly mark the limitations of his work. Kruse himself only wanted to offer, as he put in his preface "einen Beitrag zu der sehr viel komplexeren und vielschichtigeren Gesamtinterpretation der Anfaenge der Reformation in Wittenberg" (p. xi). His contribution is focused on topics of church and theology history that follow his own specific interests as a church historian. The Reformation itself must, of course, be put in a much larger and more complex framework of social, cultural and political developments. But to that frame-

work Kruse has doubtlessly contributed an important element.

Notes

[1]. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther. Sein Weg zur Reformation 1483-1521*, 3 vols. 2nd ed. (1983).

[2]. Arthur G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther*, 2nd ed. (1983), p. 182.

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Citation: Wilfried Enderle. Review of Kruse, Jens-Martin, *Universit atstheologie und Kirchenreform. Die Anf ange der Reformation in Wittenberg 1516-1522*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.

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