



GOLDEN LEAVES AND BURNED BOOKS

Religious Reform and Conflict in the Long European Reformation

edited by Teemu Immonen & Gabriele Müller-Oberhäuser

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CONTENTS

TEEMU IMMONEN AND GABRIELE MÜLLER-OBERHÄUSER	
Introduction	7
I BOOKS AND THE CREATION OF 'US-NESS'	
PÄIVI RÄISÄNEN-SCHRÖDER	
Books and reading among rank-and-file Anabaptists in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries	25
MARIKA RÄSÄNEN	
Books of golden rays and ripped folios: Thomas Aquinas's book-relics in religious reforms	61
MERI HEINONEN	
Good examples for the sisters: books about St Birgitta of Sweden and the reform of Dominican nuns in Teutonia	97
TEEMU IMMONEN	
The pictorial hagiography of Saint Radegund and the Capetian religious reform in late thirteenth-century Poitiers	121
II MARKING THE BORDERS BETWEEN 'US' AND 'THEM'	
REIMA VÄLIMÄKI	
Old errors, new sects: the Waldenses, Wyclif and Hus in fifteenth-century manuscripts	155

THOMAS DEVANEY	
Countering the 'heretics': miracle books and Marian devotion in early modern Spain	187
STEPHAN SCHRÖDER	
Between pilgrimage and reform: Bernhard of Breidenbach's Travelogue to the Holy Land (1486) as printed paradigm, moral guidebook and mirror of princes	219
III ACTION AND COUNTERACTION: BOOK CENSORSHIP AND VIOLENCE	
EVA SCHATEN	
The role of pamphlets in church controversies in late medieval England	267
GABRIELE MÜLLER-OBERHÄUSER	
Physical and verbal violence: persecuted Protestant communities during the reign of Mary I (1553–1558)	295
SARAH STRÖER	
Concepts of violent language in inner-Protestant controversies in Elizabethan England	321
Authors	341

Introduction

Teemu Immonen and Gabriele Müller-Oberhäuser

During the late medieval and early modern period, Europe witnessed a continuous series of religious reform movements. The phenomenon was not new. After all, the idea of reform had been central to Christianity from very early on, and in some ways reform is the essence of Christianity. To a degree, medieval society in its entirety was based on the same idea. Throughout the period, the concept of the return to and the renewal of a past considered exemplary formed an essential motive behind the activities of both religious and lay communities. For those who held power, the past offered a legitimate justification for the current situation by explaining how things were meant to be as they were and as they had always been. Likewise, the past could serve as an image of the ideal order, the golden age against which those looking for a change evaluated the present, in their eyes an inferior and corrupted age. It is against this background that the reformers typically sought to justify their demands. For them, the present appeared as a departure from the exemplary past and the only chance of redemption was in a return to authentic models it represented.

From the eleventh century and especially the thirteenth century onwards, an ever increasing number of people became involved in the religious and social debates, which were tightly interwoven. The development of trade and cities, as well as the expansion of the European cultural sphere were accompanied by a growing social mobility and

a rise in the number of people involved in literary communication. The many social changes and the emergence of new social groups claiming participation and influence in society inspired different reform movements. Throughout the religious world of the Middle Ages, the emerging groups inevitably had to justify their place in society in religious terms. Religious discussion and debate were essential to both the creation of identities of these new social groups and the re-creation or remodelling of the identities of the established religious communities. In these processes, books and other forms of written communication played a dominant role, for communities as well as for their individual members.

Concentrating on religious reform and the Reformation, the essays of this volume mainly cover the period from the Later Middle Ages to the sixteenth century, though some contributions also consider earlier reform processes in the High Middle Ages as well as some developments in the seventeenth century. Making use of the concept of the ‘Long Reformation’¹ as a frame for these essays with their different temporal *foci* implies a reference to more recent approaches to religious reforms and the Reformation with regard to continuity and discontinuity between the later Middle Ages and the Reformation, thus allowing for earlier influential processes of religious reform before the Reformation as well as for different types of reformation in Europe during the sixteenth century² and even later. This volume addresses various forms of textual and, in the case of book decoration, also pictorial communication in various processes of reform in Europe, thus giving special attention to the important relationship between text and image in manuscripts and printed books.

The chapters reflect on the use of books in religious reform movements and their impact on lay people and monastic communities, an impact which could be positive or negative, integrative and supportive or causing controversy and conflict. For those committed to religious renewal, books were the necessary and often enthusiastically welcomed vehicles for the transmission of religious reform concepts and for establishing

¹ Wallace 2004; Tyacke 1998.

² Wallace 2004, 2, 4–8 on the debate about religious camps, confessions, multiple reformations.

and consolidating new communities. In addition to texts, also the materiality of the books and the images on their leaves and covers were involved in the process. The mere existence of a material book offered a visual place of origin, a container, and a point of reference for the words that constituted the message; the object provided a tangible form for the message. The images, for their part, both added to the prestige of the books and contributed to the interpretation of their contents.

Books dedicated to the distribution and propagation of ideas of religious reform also met with severe opposition and negative reactions. Attempts to hinder or reverse religious reform verbally and textually in the form of controversial oral, written or printed material, are manifest indicators of conflicts over reform in the religious field. Consequently, books could become objects of literary censorship, not only on the textual level by refuting and banning them, but also in the form of attacks on books as material objects that often led to their mutilation or even to their complete destruction, as is most evident in book burning rituals. At the same time they could incriminate and endanger their owners and users and play an essential part in the persecution of ‘heretics’.

The inherent tension in the title of this collection of essays, ‘Golden Leaves and Burned Books’, signifies the two extremes in assessing and evaluating the function of books in the transmission of ideas of religious reform. Based on different views of the value of books for transmitting knowledge or for supporting religious beliefs and new ways of leading a good life pleasing to God, we find two opposing attitudes, of veneration on the one hand and of condemnation on the other. In the eyes of those in favour of reform, books could be appreciated as a highly valued *trésor*, textually with a precious content and possibly also materially in their shape and decoration, whereas those trying to suppress them or simply opposed to their content might consider books as poison, as infectious, devilish and definitely dangerous.

Thus, while concentrating on literary (and pictorial) communication processes in the religious field, the authors of the present book make use of various approaches, mainly from cultural history and book history. Their contributions are based on source material and case studies relevant to the topic of religious reform in mainland Europe, predominantly from Germany, France and Spain, but also from England. One objective of

the authors is to place book history in the broader context of cultural history, these two 'histories' being strongly connected by their emphasis on inter-disciplinarity. This implies a commitment to more recent attempts at redefining book history as it has developed as a discipline since the 1980s, its beginnings (among others) represented by the works of Robert Darnton³ and Donald F. MacKenzie.⁴ It is a discipline that now often aims to reach beyond Darnton's 'communications circuit' with its interconnected phases of the 'life course of the book' through production, distribution and reception, by placing the book more specifically within the context of "human history, including the history of culture".⁵

The authors of the present volume consider a book at the same time a product of a culture and an argument in a discussion about reforming a culture. With the concept of culture, we refer to the field of human activity in general as it appears in a particular temporal context determined by historical circumstances. We are particularly indebted to the French tradition of cultural history represented by the Annalists⁶ and to Michel Foucault's ideas concerning the "archaeology of knowledge"⁷. Essential with regard to the present volume is the notion popularized by the French that the deeds of man take place in a reality constructed on different time layers and discourses of which humans themselves are only partially conscious. These do not dictate human activity but they do provide the premises within which human activity can take place. A book employs cultural heritage to revolutionize and/or transform the present.

The era discussed in this volume, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, was one in which there was a far-reaching media change, often even called the 'first media revolution', with the arrival of the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century. Research

³ Darnton 1982; Darnton 2007.

⁴ McKenzie 1986.

⁵ Raymond 2017, 295; Howsam 2014; Howsam 2006; for a recent approach based on the core concepts of materiality, sociality/sociability and space in book history see Bellingradt and Salman 2017.

⁶ See, especially, Braudel 1958.

⁷ Foucault 1972.

on the change from ‘script to print’ was fundamentally stimulated by Elizabeth Eisenstein’s inspiring, and also in some respects provocative, study *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change. Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*⁸ of 1979. In a work of almost 800 pages, she discussed the impact of the new technology of book production on Western intellectual and cultural life, on the Renaissance, on the Reformation and on natural science. Her book can be considered the starting point of modern print culture studies, beyond traditional book history.⁹ It was especially her view of the inextricable connection between the Reformation and the printing press with its relevance for the changes in literary communication within the religious field of early modern Europe that had a far-reaching influence on further research. Among the many consequences of her work in later research, the debate on differences and continuities between the scribal culture of the Middle Ages and early modern print culture was in no small measure triggered by criticism from medievalists who argued convincingly that in many fields of literary communication there were more aspects of continuity than clear-cut rupture and ‘revolution’: for example, regarding the supposed opposition between the shifting (and corrupt) texts produced in the *scriptorium* and the typographical fixity guaranteed by the printing shop.

In more recent research, the refusal to see the change from script to print as one of an abrupt substitution of manuscripts by printed books is predominant. It is accompanied by concepts of a more complex relation between various types of literary communication from the Later Middle Ages to early modern times.¹⁰ Firstly, speech, that is oral modes of communication of any sort, had a huge importance in medieval times,¹¹ and even in early modern times it still played an indispensable role, often being more important for transmitting knowledge and religious reform ideas than books. Secondly, the continuing relevance of manuscript

⁸ Eisenstein 1979; for the most comprehensive response to and criticism of Eisenstein see Johns 1998, and for Eisenstein’s reaction to her critics Eisenstein 2005.

⁹ Baron et al. 2007 1–12.

¹⁰ Walsham and Crick, 2004, 1–26.

¹¹ Clanchy 1993.

production, even in the improved conditions of a well-established print culture, has been emphasized in research on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While literary communication by manuscript in a print culture was mainly a matter of choice, for example, to have manuscripts circulate only among the initiated and the chosen few or to hand over a manuscript as a unique presentation copy in search of patronage, very often this form of communication was also chosen under pressure and in case of danger of censorship or persecution so that manuscripts circulated underground to avoid detection and punishment.¹²

In concentrating on the theory and practice of religious reform with respect to the forms and the degrees of involvement of the religious orders and the secular clergy as well as laypeople, the interest in the impact of the changing processes of communication on these groups also implies a stronger emphasis on the reception phase of the communications circuit, on reading books¹³ or on hearing books read aloud as part of an audience,¹⁴ as well as on the use of books,¹⁵ thus allowing for different ways of reception with special regard to varying levels of literacy, first of all among the laity.

The history of medieval and early modern literacy and its role in the formation of shared identities has been well studied from many different viewpoints.¹⁶ James Thompson's *The Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages* (1960) was an early important study on the dispersion of literacy, although its scope did not reach beyond the upper social classes and it concerned only the period before 1300. More recently, the discussion about the diffusion of literacy to specific groups, such as knights and

¹² Marotti and Bristol 2000; Love 1998, 3–137.

¹³ Towheed 2011; Towheed and Owens 2011.

¹⁴ For the concept of “a history of audiences as a broader kind of reading history allowing for reception processes beyond the act of reading” see Rose 2002, 3.

¹⁵ Sherman 2008; Pearson 2008.

¹⁶ For recent surveys, see, for example Mostert and Adamska 2014; Bubalo 2014.

women, has brought interesting results.¹⁷ From the 1980s, scholars of medieval and early modern literacy have become increasingly interested in the function of literacy instead of focusing solely on the ability to read. On the one hand, recent studies have blurred the dichotomy between literate and illiterate; there existed different kinds of literacy and the needs of the people resorting to literary material varied greatly.¹⁸ On the other hand, perhaps more importantly for the present book, the focus of the research has moved towards ‘interpretive’, ‘imagined’, and ‘textual communities’.¹⁹

Stanley Fish originally coined the concept of ‘interpretive communities’ to explain how texts are interpreted in a cultural context. Fish was not interested in the veracity of the texts but in the ways that social interaction affects reading and how the community of readers produces new meanings for established texts.²⁰ Benedict Anderson, for his part, was interested in the formation of national identities. He argued that a nation is a socially constructed community, and therefore ‘imagined’ by people who consider themselves to be part of this community, which encompasses both the living, the dead and those yet to be born. This concept is equally useful to describe a religious community, as Tjamke Snijders has pointed out.²¹

Brian Stock’s ‘textual communities’ were communities united by a shared set of texts considered essential and by a shared interpretation of these texts. For Stock, the crucial factor for the development of such a community was not necessarily the level of literacy of the members of the group or a written version of a text, but an individual who, having mastered the text, interpreted it to the community, thus reforming the group’s thought and action.²² Stock’s study belonged to a tradition which reaches back to Maurice Halbwachs and his influential work

¹⁷ For the knights, see Aurell 2017 (2011); Johnston 2014. For nuns, see Blanton et al 2013; Blanton et al. 2013; Blanton et al. 2018. For the literate women in Quattrocento Florence, see Kaborycha 2012.

¹⁸ See, Gee 2014 (1990) and articles in Blanton et al. 2013.

¹⁹ Fish 1980; Anderson 2003 (1983); Stock 1983.

²⁰ Fish 1980, 147–174. For example Roger Chartier has developed Fish’s ideas. See, Chartier 2007.

²¹ Anderson 2003 (1983); Snijders 2015, 146.

²² Stock 1983, 90.

*On Collective Memory*²³. The role of memory, the past as a rhetorically constructed foundation of a group's identity, has been the focus of these studies,²⁴ which have developed into a complex area of research known as cultural memory studies, with important distinctions such as that between communicative and cultural memory proposed by Jan Assmann.²⁵ To arouse interest and a response among their audience as well as transmitting facts and intellectual ideas, the texts appealed to emotions, too. The emotional and affective nature of reading and listening to texts read aloud has been studied by Mary Carruthers and Mark Amsler, among others.²⁶

The essays in this volume build on earlier research yet offer a novel viewpoint on the history of books. The intention is to contribute new aspects to the discussion of the complex relationship between book history and cultural history in research on the development of the religious field from the Later Middle Ages to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The essays combine the studying of texts and the discussion of books as material objects. The approach demands attention to the external features of books, their decoration and the forms of writing, all of which add to the meaning of the texts. In addition, the focus on material aspects allows the tracing of the distribution of reforms even when narrative sources remain silent. These features are discussed over the long term and concern an area which covers Western Christendom.

While all the essays in this collection illustrate this central topic of forms of communicating religious reform, they have nevertheless different *foci*, especially with regard to the relationship between reform groups and the aspects of individual and social identity, of integration and conflict.

Part I focuses on books and the creation of 'us-ness'. Päivi Räisänen's article, *Books and reading among rank-and-file Anabaptists in the 16th and early 17th centuries*, explores the role of lay reading practices and ideas of religious and social reform among one of the most contested

²³ Halbwachs 1992 (1950).

²⁴ Fentress and Wickham 1992; Geary 1994; Hen and Innes 2000; Innes 2000; McKitterick 2004.

²⁵ Assmann 2010; Assmann 1992.

²⁶ Carruthers 1998; Amsler 2011.

proponent groups of the German Reformation(s), the Anabaptists. Bible study groups have been identified as a key context for forming specifically Anabaptist perspectives in Zurich, Switzerland, where one of the first Anabaptist groups emerged among the radicalized students of Ulrich Zwingli in the early 1520s. The author's focus, however, is on later groups in the German Empire. She places the scattered source evidence (e.g. interrogation protocols) in the broader context of social and cultural practices of early modern reading and communication. The article discusses, firstly, what texts circulated among the Anabaptists and which were produced by them. Apart from the Bible, the author focuses on three types of texts central for Anabaptist life and self-understanding, namely prophecies, song-books and martyrologies. Secondly, the author analyses the use of these texts, emphasizing social practices. Not only were texts read aloud, but they were also discussed, memorized, copied, modified, and sung, whether by one person or in company. The author argues that these practices not only helped to spread Anabaptist ideas, but also actively moulded both individual and collective identities.

The objective of Marika Räsänen's article, *Books of golden rays and ripped folios: Thomas Aquinas's book-relics in religious reforms*, is the cult of one of the major medieval scholars, Thomas Aquinas. The author focuses on Thomas's image as the saintly author whose books symbolized the true Catholic faith and which were the physical evidence of the reformer himself. Räsänen analyses how Thomas's image as the holder of the truth, often presented through books radiating gold on altar panels, was created and recreated in iconography, hagiography, and liturgy from the end of the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. She tracks the changes in the imaginary of Thomas holding a book from the times of the Great Western Schism, which caused division among the Dominican Order, through the conflict between protestant movements and the Catholic Church, which raised the profile of Thomas the Reformer to new heights.

In her article on *Good examples for the sisters: books about St Birgitta of Sweden and the reform of Dominican nuns in Teutonia*, Meri Heinonen analyses the spread of Birgittine texts within observant Dominican convents in Teutonia. The approach is based primarily on the existence of Birgittine manuscripts in the libraries of Dominican female houses,

but also on the known interaction between the male and female houses of the Dominican Order and between the Dominicans and Birgittines. The author also asks why the observant Dominicans, both friars and nuns, were interested in Birgitta and suggest that the canonized saint Birgitta enhanced the credibility of Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), who was not canonized until 1461 but had been considered a definitive example of reform-mindedness within the order already long before the reforms occurred.

In *The pictorial hagiography of Saint Radegund and the Capetian religious reform in late thirteenth-century Poitiers* Teemu Immonen discusses the role of manuscript 252 of the Médiathèque François-Mitterrand of Poitiers in the Capetian religious reform in Poitou. The manuscript survives in a mutilated form, its illuminated pages having been ripped out, probably in the 19th century. The contents of the illuminations can be deduced, however, from different surviving pictorial sources. Central to the article is the question of how the illustrations within the book covers of MS 252 were expected to promote the Capetian religious reform policy. The illuminations of the manuscript can be viewed by only a limited audience at a time. Thus, the article explores the limits and the potentials of manuscript illumination in the propagation of a religious ideology.

The essays in Part II on the marking of the borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’ contribute to the dialectic between religious groups and the outer world. The focus of Reima Välimäki’s article, *Old errors, new sects: the Waldenses, Wyclif and Hus in fifteenth-century manuscripts* is the Hussites, who represented the major heresy and the cause of an ecclesiastical and political crisis in fifteenth-century Bohemia. The article explores how the “old” heretical movement of the Waldenses was used to categorise, label and undermine the programme and doctrine of the Hussites. The fifteenth-century Catholic authors, including some of the most prominent figures of their day, saw connections between the earlier Waldensian heresy and the Wycliffite and Hussite movements they encountered. The old and new heresies were also compared at a very tangible level on the leaves of the manuscripts. Välimäki examines how treatises against Waldenses, especially those written in the 1390s during the last major persecution of German Waldenses, were combined

In religious reforms, books and other forms of written communication play a dominant role, both for individuals as well as for groups. Covering the period from the late Middle Ages to the early seventeenth century, the chapters of this volume reflect on the use of books in religious reform movements and their impact on lay people and monastic communities. For those committed to religious renewal, books are the necessary and often enthusiastically welcomed vehicles for the transmission of religious reform concepts. They are at the same time often the objects of severe opposition and negative reactions in attempts at hindering or reversing religious reform for others.

The researchers make use of approaches from cultural history, book history and English studies, among others. Contributions range from theory and practices of religious reform with special regard to the interaction between the laity and religious orders in their search for models of 'good religious living' to research on the changing processes of communication from manuscript to print and their impact on religious renewal.

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