

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Dynamics of the Early Reformation in their Reformed Augustinian Context.* By Robert J. Christman. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020.

The first executions of the Protestant Reformation were carried out in Brussels on July 1, 1523, with the “ritual humiliation” (202–5) and burning of two Augustinian friars from the cloister in Antwerp: Hendrik Vos and Johann van den Esschen. The event is well known to historians of the Reformation yet, as Robert J. Christman points out, scholars have usually treated it as an isolated incident without any noteworthy backstory, connection to events in Wittenberg, or impact beyond its use as propaganda (12). Christman’s detailed analysis persuasively demonstrates that the executions were the culmination of a “proxy battle” between Martin Luther, Johann Lang, and other pro-Reformation leaders of the Congregation of German Reformed Augustinians, on the one side, and the pope and emperor on the other (14). The Congregation had only recently established the Province of Lower Germany, consisting of seven cloisters “located by and large in the patrimonial lands” of Charles V. Luther and his allies sought to advance the Reformation through these cloisters; the other side reacted swiftly, eventually shutting down and destroying the Antwerp cloister and separating the Province from the German Reformed Congregation (15, 60–70).

A significant discovery is that Luther and his allies capitalized on personal networks and used strategies established by Johann von Staupitz to expand the German Reformed Congregation into the Low Countries in the first place. Luther learned from Staupitz not only theology, but also a method of achieving reform that “relied heavily on the placement of enthusiastic and energetic individuals in key positions, and on the recruitment of young friars to pursue studies in Wittenberg before returning to their home cloisters” (37; see also 98–106). Meanwhile, it was none other than the future Pope

Adrian VI (Adrian Floissoon) who had represented the canons of Antwerp's Church of Our Lady in their effort to stop the founding of the observant cloister there in 1513–14.

The book is well-researched and well-argued, and Christman resists the temptation to overinterpret sometimes limited evidence while constructing a compelling picture overall. The book contributes to scholars' understanding of the concrete processes through which the early Reformation succeeded or was stifled. The common assumption that the Reformation was ignited by ideas emanating from Wittenberg is dismantled—first because Luther and his allies did not rely simply on speaking or publishing their views, but on concrete strategies to achieve their goals within and through their order; second, because friars traveled a two-way street between the Low Countries and Wittenberg. Christman shows that friars from the Low Countries participated in the push for swift changes to worship and practice in Wittenberg in late 1521 to early 1522, and he documents the “autonomy and agency” of the Antwerp friars, who were shaped by the “long standing tradition of criticizing church practice and authority in that region” (121). Finally, Christman shows that personal connections heightened the political and theological significance of the executions for Luther; expected heroes of reform caved, but two young friars stood firm (140). Luther *may* have known Vos and van Esschen (54–55).

In addition to constructing the prehistory of the executions, Christman argues for the significance of the event in the Low Countries and the empire. In so doing, he argues for attention to events in the telling of the Reformation story. We cannot see the Reformation—or the counter to it, I would add—only as a *Sprachereignis* or as the result of controlled confessionalization; rather, there is need to see “historical events as shapers of opinion and stimulators of change” (222–23). The fact that the executions “worked [their] way into the fabric of early Reformation conflict” (185) and into debates on a wide range of topics (especially Mariology) makes it difficult to measure their broader impact. Christman argues that it is “difficult to overestimate [the] impact” of the executions (212); that said, Christman reminds us especially that sixteenth-century

Christians had to process and somehow fit together a series of dramatic and often traumatic events.

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