BOOK REVIEWS

Natalia Nowakowska, *King Sigismund of Poland and Martin Luther: The Reformation before Confessionalization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, xiv, 279 p. ISBN 978-0-19-881345-3

This is probably the first ever encounter between a Catholic King of Poland and a German reformer *par excellence* reenacted in order to enable us to grasp fully the different religious, political and social agendas, and the different world-views, underlying the Catholic and Protestant self-images and their approach to each other. The leitmotif pervading the book is the idea that the Polish reaction to the early stages of the Lutheran Reformation was predicated on the pre-confessional understanding of what the Church and the Christian faith were all about (p. 13 ff.). Pre-confessional orthodoxy happens to be a constant discussion in search of unity and consensus, allowing for a range of different interpretations to coexist peacefully, while Reformation orthodoxy is bound up exclusively with clinging to the right *doctrinal* thinking, based on the sole guiding principle of salvation by faith alone, *sola fide* (pp. 20–30). In her attempts to demonstrate the paradigmatic shift wrought thanks to the theology of Martin Luther and his followers, the author is successful in delineating a field in which analytical tools can be employed. It is to be pointed out most favourably that Nowakowska does not take notions such as ‘religion’, ‘faith’, ‘heresy’ and ‘toleration’ to be self-evident, and thus tries to show their meaning and significance within a contemporary context. Hence, discourse analysis is another favourite method applied to what Lutheranism and what the Catholic Church were in the eyes of (Polish) Catholics and (Prussian) Protestants. Interpretations like these are always a question of the art of the historical craft, and even if one is not required or expected to agree with each and every particular thought or idea, a historian who is interested in this field of historical enquiry can afford the luxury of ignoring them only to his or her professional disadvantage. I find the *modus convivendi* as explained by Nowakowska with regard to Polish toleration vis-à-vis inside and outside Protestants convincing. To lay bare her understanding of why the relative toleration from the Polish crown and its clergymen,

despite high-flown anti-heresy rhetorical exercises, was a workable solution, the author has worked out nine principles of coexistence (pp. 99–111). Without testing your patience in enumerating them all, I would simply like to tell you that they go a long way in explaining and making sense of the apparently contradictory policy of King Sigismund I, who was, on one hand, very keen to be regarded as a most ardent Catholic ruler and defender of the Church, while, on the other, he managed to remain on good terms with a number of Protestant princes, and excelled in the support of his nephew Albrecht, Duke of Prussia, the first Protestant territorial ruler. This discrepancy (if any) was far from being an exercise in cynical pragmatism, as blood relations, the maintenance of peace, and social order and stability, carried much more weight than what the mere invocation of ‘heresy’ might conjure up. I have been specifically interested in the topic of royal anti-heresy edicts promulgated in 1520–1540, because they have not been subject to an in-depth study at least in any Western European language so far.¹ Nowakowska has filled this gap, by showing that, despite their thunderous tone, they were hardly meant to be acted upon; rather, they emerge as a piece of royal propaganda to show off royal piety to internal and external consumers (pp. 119–132). This was an exercise in soft, but not vain, power. In my opinion, this chapter is one of the best. This view of mine may not, of course, coincide with that of other readers. So I do appreciate an instructive and meticulous analysis of Church court trials of so-called heretics that can be characterised, as a culture of non-punishment (59 cases for the period 1522 to 1536; p. 161). Nowakowska devotes some space to a discussion of Lutheranism as ‘heresy’, and observes that in the pertinent Polish-Prussian texts, the ‘word was more often absent than present’ (p. 178). This may be viewed as a certain paradox (cf. p. 179). I think that in this case one ought to take into account the popular/rhetorical and judicial meaning of ‘heresy’. In the latter case, a (true) heretic is one whose guilt is proven beyond any reasonable doubt, and who, after being admonished, persists obstinately in his/her error. As the absolute majority of suspected Lutherans denied charges of heresy, and protested their desire to live in peace with the Catholic Church and the Polish crown, there were no legal reasons to qualify them as heretics, and so they were allowed to go free

¹For the study of these edicts in Polish see P. Kras, ‘Od represji do kompromisu. Edykty antyprotestanckie Zygmunta I i Zygmunta II Augusta’, in: *Jagiellonowie i ich świat. Dynastia królewska w drugiej połowie XV i w XVI wieku*, red. B. Czwojdrak, J. Sperka, P. Węcowski, Kraków, 2015, pp. 353–378.

from court (only those who were convicted of sedition and tumult – 13 Danzig rebels in 1526 – were put to death). We have to agree with Nowakowska that Lutheranism as social unrest caused much more anxiety to Polish Catholics than Lutheranism as new religious teaching. The author has succeeded in demonstrating in graphic detail how unity-conscious pre-confessional Catholics were reluctant to disown their wayward fellow believers, while it was the ‘Lutherans’ who were primarily interested in breaking free from the old Church in favour of ‘true Christianity’. It is no surprise that the latter framed this conflict in terms of a binary religious difference between polar opposites (pp. 195, 213). It is, *inter alia*, an instructive case study of a misunderstanding, of speaking one over another, a topic that might be of interest not only to historians of Christianity. As has already been noted, Nowakowska has put the stress on pre-confessional ecclesiology as an explanatory tool to account for the somewhat hesitant and unsure behaviour of the Polish Catholic decision-makers when they had to deal with Protestants in the period under consideration. No doubt, ecclesiological discussion is helpful, and in some cases indispensable. Nevertheless, it remains an open question as to how much Polish experience and knowledge of living side by side with the Other was responsible for the somewhat lenient treatment of ‘heresy’, and how much the day-to-day practicalities of social interaction could be held accountable for what Nowakowska calls freedom of conscience/belief (pp. 115–16, 165–66). In this case, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania may serve as a touchstone, and the Polish-dominated lands of Red Ruthenia as a playground in which the rules of the game with the Other were worked out and tested, at least to some degree. The book is written in a good, readable style. Since hardly any human creation is perfect, it is no surprise that there have been some snags along the way. I was surprised to detect a persistent tendency to use ‘catholic’ and ‘church’ where ‘Catholic’ and ‘Church’ would make perfect sense. In the 1990s, the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Encyclopedic Dictionary* could explain in plain English what the difference was between catholic and Catholic, and church and Church; but now, two decades later, has the same academic press adopted a different proofreading policy? Anyway, it is a curious development. Some expressions sound outlandish, at least in this part of Europe in which I write: ‘eastern empire’ when applied to some German Houses (p. 49), ‘Grand Master’ when applied to the Landmaster in Livonia (pp. 139, 142, 146), ‘Bishop of Gardialfranco’ when applied to papal legate Zacharias Ferri, Bishop of Guardialfiera (p. 153). Such infelicities are few and far

between; nevertheless, they still serve as a reminder of the usefulness of the culture of peer-reviews and proofreading, as it is still practised, at least in some academic quarters in some East-Central European countries. The chronology of the study covers virtually all the reign of King Sigismund I (1506–1548), so the argument why it had to end in c. 1535 (the end of *Acta Tomiciana*, the deaths of some major protagonists around this date), is understandable but not convincing. It should be emphasised that Nowakowska made fruitful use of the vast corpus of literature in West European languages dealing with late Medieval and Early Modern religious culture. Her extensive archival research has made available to anglophone academia a clear amount of source material and literary output of every sort related to the history of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic reaction to it in the 1520s to 1540s. In a sense, her book serves as a good bridge between the East and the West. Being confronted with the issue of the acclaimed Polish toleration (the *State without Stakes* theory), she has succeeded in demonstrating that this phenomenon was not so exceptional after all. During the last 30 years, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, much has changed in the world, and thus 'Eastern Europe' is not so far away mentally from Western scholars as it used to be. Despite this rapprochement, I do not think that Nowakowska's attempts to underline how early, precocious and sometimes violent the Polish and Prussian experience with the Reformation was, are superfluous. She has put forward a strong contention that the start of the Reformation movement in the Polish crown should be placed in the 1520s, that is, a generation earlier than what is usually dated to the middle of the 16th century. I think the biggest merit of this book is its author's ability to find out what the rationale for action or inaction of each and every party involved was.

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