The Reformation as Christianization?

Dorothea Wendebourg
Theologische Fakultät der Humboldt-Universität Berlin Unter den Linden 6,
D-10099 Berlin, Germany
dorothea.wendebourg@theologie.hu-berlin.de


The volume in question is, as the subtitle indicates, a discussion of an historical thesis put forward in a history of the Reformation published a few years ago by the well-known American Church historian Scott Hendrix: Recultivating the Vineyard. The Reformation Agendas of Christianization (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). Since this discussion cannot be understood without the knowledge at least of some of the principal notions of that book, a brief summary will be helpful before proceeding to a review of the essays in the volume named above.

Inspired by Lucas Cranach the Younger’s epitaph for the university professor Paul Eber in the Town Church of Wittenberg which shows Martin Luther and the other Wittenberg reformers busily and successfully at work cleaning and restoring an utterly neglected vineyard (cf. Isa. 5.1-0; Matt. 20.1-16), Hendrix depicts the religious history of the Christian West in the sixteenth century as that of a coherent, though internally diverse movement of recultivation, of ‘replanting authentic Christianity in the vineyard of the Lord’, of ‘Christianizing Christendom’ (Hendrix, p. xvii). In order so to argue, however, Hendrix has to
deviate from Cranach in an essential respect: on the epitaph the vineyard is divided in the middle by a hedge, the other half being the portion of the pope. This part of the vineyard is not only waste and dry, but the pope and other representatives of the Roman church do all they can to devastate it further. Hendrix takes down the hedge. In his view all religious parties of the Reformation era equally attempted to ‘cultivate the vineyard’; they all followed ‘the vision of replanting Christianity in a European culture’ which they all found in need of such replanting (Hendrix, p. xviii). The disagreements between these factions, among the Protestant reformers (Lutheran, Reformed, Radical) as well as between them and their Roman Catholic counterparts, are but differences in the concrete agendas for fulfilling the common concern. Thus, in the debate about whether it is more appropriate to speak of one Reformation or of many Reformations, Hendrix decidedly opts for the singular. Accordingly, this one Reformation not only comprises the different Protestant traditions, but equally includes what in other narratives is called ‘Catholic Reform’ and ‘Counter Reformation’. In other words, Johann Eck figures as a reformer not less than his adversary Martin Luther (e.g. Hendrix, p. 169).

Hendrix’s picture of ‘the’ Reformation builds on two earlier theories. First, regarding his notion of ‘christianization’ as the overall perspective of the different religious movements of the sixteenth century, he is indebted to Jean Delumeau who had characterized the Protestant Reformation as well as the contemporaneous endeavours of Roman Catholicism as ‘Christianization’. Yet Hendrix differs from the French historian in his view of the Middle Ages. Whereas, according to Delumeau, the officially Christian society inherited from the Middle Ages needed Christianization because it was in fact largely pagan, Hendrix sees the medieval church with its manifold attempts at mission and reform as having already successfully christianized Europe. It had done so in various and increasingly diverse ways, so that Western Christendom might have split in any case, independently of the Reformation. For since the Christianizing efforts of the Middle Ages had over time made Europe into a Christian Civilization, in the end there was no need for a single universal ecclesial hierarchy as unifying factor (Hendrix, p. 160). Given these threads of continuity Hendrix considers the (Lutheran, Reformed, Radical, Roman-Catholic) Reformation as the second act of a larger drama (Hendrix p. xx; cf. pp. 27 and 35) which is summarized in the first chapter of his book. Nevertheless, the Reformation was an act on its own. Since in the eyes of the Lutheran, Reformed, Radical, and Roman-Catholic reformers of the sixteenth century Christendom was ‘not Christian enough’, but rather deficient in many ways, they carried through ‘a more sweeping renewal’ (Hendrix, p. 17). Their diagnosis entailed a ‘widespread denunciation of religious life as un-christian ... especially in