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Brush for Hire
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Review of: *The Reformation of the Image* by Joseph Leo Koerner

There seems to be something paradoxical, even self-contradictory, in the very notion of a Reformation image. The movement of religious protest inaugurated by Martin Luther in Wittenberg in 1517 quickly targeted the veneration of images as a damnable superstition, the idolatrous confusion of gross matter with an invisible God who was pure and eternal spirit. The 15th century had seen a great flowering of the visual arts all over Europe, and in Luther's Germany a generation of giants – Dürer, Grünewald, Cranach, Altdorfer, to speak only of the painters – provided an astonishing flow of emotionally charged ultra-Catholic art, devotional or liturgical images for veneration or meditation in church and home.

With the appearance of Luther, the age of the cult image in north-eastern Europe came to an end: art, it seemed, was about to be eliminated by the word of God. The Kingdom of Christ, Luther declared, 'is a hearing kingdom, not a seeing kingdom: for the eyes do not lead and guide us to where we know and find Christ, but rather the ears do this'. He was inclined to think at first that religion would be better off with no images at all. Great painters, Dürer among them, welcomed the new teaching as a God-given liberation of the spirit, but they trembled for their livelihood. As the Strasbourg painter Heinrich Vogtherr observed, throughout Germany the gospel had brought the 'diminution and arrest of all subtle and liberal arts', so that 'in a few years, there will scarcely be found anyone working as painter or sculptor'. In 1522, one of Luther's closest collaborators, the priest Andreas Karlstadt, supervised the removal and destruction of all the images in the churches of Wittenberg, with the connivance of the city authorities – the first significant officially sanctioned iconoclasm of the Reformation era. As the new teaching spread outside Germany – to Switzerland, the Low Countries, eventually to England and Scotland – the public destruction of images would become a standard rite of purification, the concrete symbol of the overthrow of the Roman antichrist and the establishment of a gospel worship in spirit and in truth.

But not in Luther's Germany: alarmed by the extremism of the iconoclasts, Luther shifted from indifference to pictures, to positive approval of them. The human soul, he taught, was itself an image-making mechanism. When I hear of the Passion of Christ, he declared, 'it is impossible for me not to make images of this within my heart

. . . when I hear the word Christ, there delineates itself in my heart the picture of a man who hangs on the cross.' And if every hearer of the gospel has the image of Christ in his heart 'why then should it be sinful to have it before my eyes?' Images might therefore be usefully retained in church, so long as it was clear that they were not sacred in themselves, but served as mere reminders or teachers of gospel truths. To a papist, Luther thought, the crucifix was indeed an idol, something to be venerated and bowed down to. To the good Lutheran, by contrast, the same image was a message from heaven, a signpost directing the believer's gaze beyond the sign to the invisible signified.

As it happened, Wittenberg had in Luther's friend Lucas Cranach not only an ardently committed Protestant, but one of the most successful painters of his generation. Cranach and his highly commercialised factory-studio poured out images which decisively shaped the official visual propaganda for the new movement, creating not only dozens of Bible illustrations or woodcuts idealising Luther and lampooning the old religion, but also a series of elaborate painted altarpieces designed to adorn and explain the worship of the flagship churches of the new movement.

Despite superficial resemblances to their medieval predecessors, these Lutheran altarpieces share a number of striking new features. Relentlessly didactic rather than devotional, often heavily encrusted with explanatory text and biblical quotations, they ring the changes on a small repertoire of images officially approved by Luther as elucidating the meaning of Christ's death: Adam and Eve and the tree of temptation, the brazen serpent which Moses raised in the wilderness and which prefigures the cross, the Last Supper, the lamb of God, the pointing finger of John the Baptist, the resurrected Christ trampling the dragon or skeleton of sin and death. Many of them also depict the new church, in representations of Protestant celebration of the gospel sacraments of baptism and communion, and in portraits of its leaders or secular supporters. The Weimar altarpiece begun by Cranach in the 1550s but finished after his death by his son, deploys almost all of this repertoire of official Lutheran imagery in an extended allegory of salvation, while in the foreground of the picture Luther and Cranach himself stand alongside John the Baptist under the cross. Luther points to a text in his Bible, 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us of all sins,' while a jet of Christ's blood arcs spectacularly from his wounded side through the air to fall on Cranach's head, vividly if unsubtly imaging a direct salvation unmediated by priest or ceremonial, and reiterating in pictorial code the literal sense of Luther's text.

The dispiriting didacticism of this Lutheran art has often been commented on. Nineteenth-century Romantics blamed Luther for the death of art for art's sake, and its replacement with mere propaganda. Hegel thought that the Reformation inaugurated a tragic but necessary shift towards interiority which had robbed art of its

intrinsic holiness, a disjunction between the beautiful and the true. The material world, fetishised by medieval Christianity in the cult of relics, the eucharist and holy images, was now disenchanted, and from that point onwards, however skilfully God, Christ or the saints might be portrayed by painters, 'it is no help, we bow the knee no longer.' Art was no longer sacred, immediate, an encounter with the ultimate: instead, it offered an alternative form of textuality, mere food for thought.

Joseph Koerner's scintillating, learned and eloquent book explores this shift by an extended investigation of the method and meaning of Cranach's Lutheran paintings, especially the monumental altarpiece he painted for Luther's own church, the Stadkirche at Wittenberg, installed there in 1547 as a memorial to the first and greatest of the reformers. Koerner sees in this altarpiece the key to a new aesthetic, which preserved art by turning it into a form of pious self-effacement, enacting its own theological redundancy by presenting itself as a mere system of useful signs, not so much an alternative as a supplement to text, a vehicle for information and affirmation of the new gospel. Emptied of emotion and of claims to transcendence, Lutheran art represented the sacred not by confronting the visible church with images of the invisible church, a company of the saints caught up in a heavenly worship (as in Catholic altarpieces such as Duccio's Maestà or van Eyck's Ghent Adoration of the Lamb), but by depicting the quotidian activities of the visible church itself. For the first time, altarpieces included pictures of routine church services. Lutheran communions were therefore celebrated in front of pictures of Lutheran communion services, in a self-referential and resolute refusal of transcendence. Interestingly, while medieval high altarpieces almost never feature the Last Supper (a subject normally reserved for relic altars or monastery refectories), the overwhelming majority of Lutheran altarpieces include a picture of the Last Supper, as historical warrant for the contemporary church's celebration. Even Lutheran representations of the crucifix strive to display the cross in the mundane setting and neutral space of the church building, not the sacred space of Calvary, thereby rendering it 'an emotional blank', not an object of worship but a sermon in paint. As Koerner, in a characteristically striking phrase, writes, 'Christ dies in the dead air of a schoolroom.' This new 'mortification of painting through text' helped ensure Protestant art's survival and continuing use as a didactic and propagandist tool, but at the price of the aesthetic collapse for which traditional art historians have berated it.

Koerner's readings of Cranach's art are unfailingly arresting and inventive, but perhaps because of rather than despite their brilliance, one sometimes wonders if he doesn't over-read the evidence. What if the 'emotional blankness' of so much of Cranach's religious painting springs not from a 'new aesthetic', but from imaginative exhaustion, or from the routinisation and decline of quality inevitable given the use of assistants and of mass-production methods in his money-spinning studio? Cranach

was undoubtedly a convinced Protestant. He and Luther were close friends, godfathers to each other's children, and more than anyone else Cranach established the character and content of the Lutheran art of the mid-16th century. But religion was religion and business was business: when it came to winning a profitable commission, Cranach was a spiritual whore, a brush for hire to the highest bidder. A court painter who basked in the patronage of the great and the not-so-good, he was far from fastidious about his subject-matter: he specialised, for example, in soft porn cabinet paintings of naked nymphs and goddesses, simpering alluringly at their aristocratic patrons. And long after the Lutheran movement broke decisively from the old Church, Cranach repeatedly accepted commissions from its fiercest enemies. The 'new aesthetic' is nowhere in evidence in the work he produced for those clients. They included Cardinal Elector Albrecht of Brandenburg, the grandee whose sale of indulgences had triggered the Reformation in the first place, and whom Cranach more than once outrageously painted as St Jerome in his study.

In 1534, Cranach produced a major Catholic work, the epitaph triptych for the ardently Catholic Prince George the Bearded of Saxony (now in Meissen Cathedral). In it the prince and his Polish wife, Barbara, kneel surrounded by (male) patron saints. The biblical texts that Koerner sees as the bane of Lutheran art are in evidence here too, inscribed above the heads of the prince and his wife. The texts (in the Latin of the Catholic Vulgate Bible) are of a kind more often associated with Protestantism than Catholicism; above the prince's head are a series of Pauline passages commanding women to be subservient to their husbands, and above his wife is the epistle of St Peter's injunction to obedience to one's prince. But the central panel of the triptych is utterly traditional: Christ as the Man of Sorrows displaying his wounds, supported by the Virgin and St John, while a host of attendant angels carry the instruments of his Passion. It is before this image, traditionally associated both with intercession for the dead and with the sacrifice of the Mass, that George the Bearded and Princess Barbara kneel, the veneration of a cult image if ever there was one.

This is perhaps merely to demonstrate the chameleon adaptability of a commercial painter. But it does suggest that the decisive aesthetic break which Koerner associates with Cranach's work from the 1520s to the 1550s is not so absolute as he maintains. And it is certainly true that he often exaggerates, or at any rate misdescribes, some of the contrasts he discerns between medieval and Lutheran religious sensibility. This Lutheran aesthetic, Koerner believes, broke decisively with the past in transforming art from a direct encounter with the sacred into a cognitive instrument, a didactic device in which understanding was everything, veneration banished. He therefore insists on the corresponding absence of this cognitive priority in medieval religion. At the heart of his argument lies a sharp distinction between the materiality and objectivity of medieval conceptions of the sacred, and the contrasting subjectivity of

Lutheran approaches to the reception of the sacrament of the altar. In medieval Catholic ritual, he tells us, 'it counted for nothing whether a lay person entered or even understood the goings on. The Mass was effective ex opere operato, "from the work done", whenever and wherever a priest celebrated it.' In the Lutheran world view, by contrast, 'universal priesthood . . . held each person responsible for making sacrament efficacious for them[selves]'.

Koerner here effectively articulates a modern version of an accusation often made by Lutherans at the time of the Reformation: Catholicism was external, magical and mechanical, Protestantism was interior and rooted in personal responsibility. Reformation polemic is thus recycled as considered historical generalisation. As a description of medieval sacramental belief, however, it is quite simply mistaken. The medieval Church's insistence that the sacraments worked ex opere operato was a claim about the dependable availability of God's grace, but emphatically not a guarantee that grace would be effective for the recipient regardless of interior disposition. Essentially, the doctrine guaranteed the spiritual lives of ordinary people against wicked or inadequate priests. Mass might be celebrated by a saint, or by a clerical philanderer still reeking from his mistress's or his boyfriend's bed: but provided both had been duly ordained, and used the correct prayers, Christ would be just as truly present at the sinner's Mass as at the saint's. However, that presence, stupendous mystery as it was, was in itself no guarantee of benefit, either to celebrant or congregation. Medieval Catholics, just like 16th-century Protestants, thought that an unworthy or inattentive communicant not only received no blessing from the eucharist, but on the contrary ate and drank damnation. Christ was objectively present even to the wicked; but the inner spiritual power and healing of the sacrament was available only to devout penitence and faith.

That indispensable condition is spelled out in one of the central communion devotions of the Middle Ages, the so-called Prayer of St Thomas Aquinas, routinely included in both medieval and modern missals as part of devout preparation for receiving the Host. Emphasising the communicant's personal unworthiness, the prayer asks for the interior gifts of reverence and humility, contrition and devotion, purity and faith, and hence for a right disposition in taking communion, so that 'I may receive not merely the sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord, but also its reality and power' (non solum sacramentum . . . sed etiam rem et virtutem sacramentum).

On this point, then, the theological contrast between externality and interiority which Koerner thinks contributes to so sharp a divide between a Protestant and a Catholic aesthetic is largely illusory. On the need for devout inwardness, medieval Catholics and early modern Lutherans were at one. We may therefore question the readings of

pictures which Koerner deduces from that contrast. In the imagined objectivity of medieval worship, he tells us, 'understanding was but an ornament to action,' and 'whatever thoughts the laity entertained affected the ex opere operato of sacrament only marginally.' And this he thinks had direct consequences for painting: the marginality of lay people in the central mysteries of religion was reflected in medieval depictions of their presence at those mysteries. Sure enough, he carries these convictions into the gallery, and they colour what he thinks he sees there. Among the pictures Koerner offers in support of this contention are two which may be familiar to visitors to the Sainsbury wing of the National Gallery in London, The Exhumation of St Hubert, painted around 1437 in the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden, and the anonymous Mass of Saint Giles of about 1500. In each case, Koerner's a priori conviction of the theological marginality of the medieval laity is so strong that it causes him to misread what is plainly before him on the painted surface.

Van der Weyden's Exhumation of St Hubert presents an idealised version of a historical event, the exhumation and enshrinement of the body of the saint in the church of St Pierre in Liège. The saint's perfectly preserved body, uncoffined in the foreground, is being raised from its grave by a group of robed clerics. They in turn are surrounded by a crowd of well-dressed lay people, and the whole action takes place before an altar on which rests a large reliquary casket. Behind the altar is a slatted wooden screen, through which peer crowds of would-be spectators. 'Their access barred by a wooden grille . . . their vision blocked by altar, altarpiece and clergy, the common folk . . . cannot behold the uncorrupted flesh that the painter places front and centre.' This, Koerner insists, is because the holy place before the altar was meant to be inaccessible. Paradoxically, he thinks, even though 'the Church orchestrated an image-based piety', in practice 'it also restricted sight, exiling lay folk from what they yearned to behold.'

To sustain this account of the picture, however, Koerner is obliged to ignore the presence of the large group of lay people who stand in the foreground, crowding the sacred space between the body of the saint and the altar with its images and relics. The six clergy in the foreground – two bishops, two priests, and two clerks in minor orders, are outnumbered by 15 lay people, men, women and children, who cluster round them and enjoy an unhindered view of the saint's 'uncorrupted flesh'. The larger crowd of lay people corralled behind the screen, therefore, are excluded not, as Koerner says, because they are the laity, but because they are the plebs, the many-headed multitude. The divisions the picture displays are not theological – between clerical and lay – but social, between rich and poor. And, as Koerner himself argues elsewhere in the book, that distinction would persist, even in sacred things, and would if anything deepen, after the Reformation. Luther's colleague Philipp Melanchthon, the great theorist of confessional Lutheranism, wrote dismissively of the 'stupid

people', the 'mad riff-raff', 'Mr Everybody', 'the vulgar folks'. At Luther's insistence, social distinctions were preserved in the conduct of Protestant worship, and Lutheran church seating and proximity to sacred space, in the form of closeness to the altar, were carefully regulated according to social status.

Koerner projects the same polarities into his readings of other pictures of the medieval Mass. In the National Gallery's Mass of Saint Giles, for example, the saint elevates the Host at the moment of consecration. Behind him, two attendants kneel, laymen to judge by the long-sleeved gown and lack of tonsure of the one in front, who holds a tall torch aloft in honour of the sacrament. In the left foreground, the King of France, Charles Martel, kneels to the side of the curtained altar, while his entourage, men and women, stand behind. The king's eyes are lifted to the Host, his hands raised and open in the conventional gesture of adoration and welcome which lay people were expected to adopt at this point in the Mass (Richard II adopts the same posture in the Wilton Diptych). But both Charles Martel and the painting's viewer are distracted by the appearance of an angel, who descends from the top of the frame towards the altar, holding a letter of absolution for the secret sins which the king had been too ashamed to confess.

Once again, Koerner interprets this painting as a portrayal of lay exclusion from sight of the sacred. 'Meanwhile,' he tells us, 'blocked as usual from the proceedings . . . by a green curtain . . . stand the people . . . Able to glance surreptitiously from the ritual's periphery, they struggle to get a look at its centre, that white disc in which there is nothing to behold.' In fact, no one in the picture except the king struggles to look at the Host. The servers at the Mass could see it if they wished, but instead they focus on the king, who, himself a layman, has a ringside seat. The mixed entourage behind the curtain, understandably for courtiers in attendance on their master's routine devotions, look bored or abstracted. Far from struggling to see the Host, they face anywhere except towards the altar. One of them, a woman, has indeed pushed the altar curtain aside and holds it back, but she does this not so that she can see, but so that the king at his prayer-desk can see. She herself gazes calmly out of the picture, at the spectator.

Curtains, screens, archways and barriers of one sort or another certainly feature in several of the pictures of the Mass which Koerner discusses, but they function as emblems of proprietorship – enclosures symbolising the availability of the Mass to some lay people rather than others – rather than as excluders of lay people as such. Contrary to Koerner's reiterated claim, lay people do inhabit these sacred spaces, but usually with the best of rights to do so, because they are the patrons who have paid for the priest, and the Mass is being celebrated, and, in some cases, a picture of it painted, for their specific benefit. These pictures therefore reflect an aspect of

medieval Christianity against which Luther was to protest: the fact that the Mass could be bought, celebrated at family or guild altars to which outsiders had restricted access. Here was indeed a profound difference between Catholic and Protestant, but it is not the one Koerner claims to discern, and I doubt whether it will sustain the stark and simple aesthetic divergence which he seeks to deduce from it.

Does this spoil Koerner's book? I don't think so. If he sometimes misreads these medieval pictures, he is eagle-eyed in interpreting Cranach, and when he revisits old controversies he always has something fresh and enlightening to say. This is a great brick of a book, but it is a long time since a work of art history has kept me so consistently reaching for a pencil to register ardent appreciation or violent dissent.

Reaktion have tried to do Koerner proud with abundant illustrations, some of which are in bright and beautiful colour. But his exegesis often depends on the exposition of fine details, and the pictures, whether in colour or black and white, are often too small or too pale to allow for comfortable scrutiny. I don't know what could have been done to overcome this problem, short of larger illustrations on fold-out pages, but it made me long for an accompanying CD-Rom in which the often unfamiliar images Koerner so brilliantly expounds could be looked at properly.

From the LRB letters page: [21 October 2004] Janet L. Nelson.

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