

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of History

History, Department of

6-2014

Book Review: The Reformation: Towards a New History. By Lee Palmer Wandel.

Amy Nelson Burnett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Reformation: Towards a New History. By *Lee Palmer Wandel*.
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. x+281. \$90.00 (cloth); \$26.99 (paper).

Readers should not be misled by the title of Lee Palmer Wandel's new book. *The Reformation: Towards a New History* is neither a textbook nor a conventional narrative history of the Reformation. Instead, it is an extended interpretive essay that presents "a history of Christianity as European Christians redefined it in the sixteenth century and the consequences of that redefinition for all aspects of their lives" (10).

Wandel frames her essay with two provocative statements. In the opening pages, she states that all one had to do in 1500 to be a Christian was to be baptized, "nothing more" (17). Near the end, she asserts that "by 1600, Europe was no longer 'Christian.' . . . Even if we recognize them all as Christian, they did not" (256). In between, she argues that over the course of the sixteenth century, Christianity changed from a culture that characterized all of Europe to a belief system not linked to any specific place. Taking a deliberately postconfessional approach, Wandel says little about Luther, Calvin, or Loyola and focuses instead on the cultural impact of religious change.

Wandel builds her argument in three steps. In part 1, "Beginnings," she describes how thoroughly Christianity permeated Europe in 1500, organizing time, space, work, and family relations. She then discusses those developments that would prove corrosive to Christianity's cultural hegemony. The first was contact with the New World, which confronted Europeans with peoples not described in the Bible and, accordingly, raised the question of what it meant to convert them to Christianity. Meanwhile, the invention of printing gave more people access to the Bible and encouraged divergent readings and multiple interpretations.

The result was fragmentation, the theme of part 2. The most radical attempt to use God's Word to reshape society ended with the Peasants' War of 1525; at the other end of the spectrum, Catholics continued to emphasize the importance of tradition for interpreting scripture and ordering society. Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists fell between these two poles in formulating the relationship between God's Word and culture. Wandel looks

at marriage, family, and sexuality as one area in which differing interpretations of the Bible had a practical impact on society, and she highlights the new linkage between political and confessional boundaries and the problem that religious minorities posed for secular governments.

In the book's final section, Wandel describes how Christianity was reconceived as a result of the Reformation. Most important, she argues, a Christian was now defined by the holding of certain particular beliefs, which made the inculcation of correct belief paramount to each of the post-Reformation churches. The Reformation also had an impact on how interactions of the divine with the material world were understood. Drawing on her earlier research, Wandel here focuses on differing views of the role of images in worship and on disagreements over the Eucharist.

Wandel's essay deftly summarizes much of the recent research on the cultural history of the Reformation. Her most original contribution to this discussion is her linkage of European contacts with non-Christian peoples and places outside Europe to the transformation of Christianity taking place within Europe. She sees these contacts as reinforcing the challenge to the medieval Church presented by the Protestant reformers, raising questions about the meaning of conversion and the distinctions between sacred and profane with regard to physical objects and space. This global perspective is helpful for interpreting developments so firmly rooted in Europe.

Wandel's postconfessional approach to the Reformation influences her discussion of religious belief, in which she uses the language of literary theory rather than theology. She writes, for instance, of the importance of mimesis, rather than the *imitatio/Nachfolge* of Christ, terms that late medieval Christians would have used. This language may make her discussion more appealing to those uninterested in the technicalities of Reformation theological debates, but it can lead to a misrepresentation of the concerns of sixteenth-century theologians. In her emphasis on the priest's representation and mimesis of Christ in the Mass, for instance, Wandel misses the fact that what reformers objected to was not the identification of the priest with Christ but, rather, the claim that Christ's sacrifice could be repeated. This may seem like a technical detail, but these little imprecisions are troubling to those familiar with Reformation theology.

Even more problematic is Wandel's definition of late medieval Christianity exclusively as culture. Christianity was a belief system that shaped a culture, and what changed over the course of the sixteenth century was not the definition of Christianity but rather the relationship between Christian belief and culture, as components of the belief system were challenged and the cultural implications of differing beliefs were worked out. While baptism was necessary to become a Christian, it only initiated the Christian life, which was understood as a process. Some sort of belief was necessary, even if that was only implicit acceptance of what the Church taught—and that which was not questioned did not need to be taught explicitly. As Wandel acknowledges in her description of popular piety, the Church did its utmost to place Christ before the eyes of Christians in its art and architecture, in preaching, and in the Mass itself.

Nor did Europe cease to be culturally Christian at the end of the sixteenth century, even though its inhabitants no longer agreed on how true Christianity was to be defined. Wandel's sharp contrast between "Christians" and "non-Christians" oversimplifies her discussion of the changes to Christianity by eliminating the category of "heretic," which contemporaries understood as a third group along with "Christian" and "non-Christian." Other than pointing out that each group condemned as heretics those who were more radical, Wandel avoids the word "heresy." Her intent is presumably to avoid giving the impression that there was one correct understanding of Christianity, but her omission

distorts her assessment of the multiple interpretations of Christianity through the sixteenth century.

These criticisms should not deter historians from reading this book. Wandel's essay is thought provoking and often stimulating. Like most attempts to provide a "new history," though, its central assertion is overdrawn and cannot be accepted without qualification.

AMY NELSON BURNETT

University of Nebraska–Lincoln