

Martin Christ, *Biographies of a Reformation. Religious Change and Confessional Coexistence in Upper Lusatia, 1520–1635*, Oxford 2021, Oxford University Press (Studies in German History), 288 pp.

One of the central problems of early modern European history continues to be the coexistence and the conflicts between the Christian denominations. In this regard, important contributions still come from studies in regional and local history since they address this phenomenon from a closer, more detailed and everyday perspective. With his latest book, based on his doctoral thesis defended at Oxford University, Martin Christ joins the ranks of significant English-language contributions to the history of Reformation in Germany. Following groundbreaking studies by his doctoral supervisor Lyndal Roper, as well as Bridget Heal, David Luebke, and others, he devotes himself to the processes, dynamics, and actors of confessional pluralisation in a region that may be regarded marginal in terms of power politics but is all the more interesting in terms of Church and cultural history: Upper Lusatia, a part in what is now eastern Saxony, close to the border with the Czech Republic and Poland. The salient feature of this region in the early modern period was its location at the crossroads of Central and Eastern Central Europe, resulting in its multi-confessional, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual character.

The book is structured in eight chapters, framed by an introduction and a summary. At first, Christ briefly introduces the reader to the general history of Upper Lusatia and then explains his specific epistemological interest and the approach of his book. His focus is on the concept of syncretism, which he defines as a “combination of systems of belief” (p. 16) and a “mixing of religious practices” (p. 17). He draws on theoretical frameworks developed in postcolonial religious studies, which understand syncretism as the encounter of Christian practices and practices of indigenous native religions (Nicholas Griffiths, Nancy M. Farriss). However, this postcolonial understanding of syncretism has so far rarely been applied to early modern multi-confessional spaces in Europe. The dominant paradigms here are cultural transfer, *histoire croisée*, shared history, *métissage*, hybridity, and others. This may have to do primarily with the idea that syncretism has its history in the Central European context; as a historical term, it is strongly linked to the “Syncretistic controversies” and other theological debates in the seventeenth century. In his book, Christ describes “Lusatian syncretism” (p. 19) as encompassing both worlds of belief and specific (secular) practices. The main argument of his thesis is that the Reformation in Upper Lusatia did not create a denominationally homogeneous and also not distinguishable bi-denominational situation, but rather a dynamic area of tension between pure doctrine and syncretistic religiosity within which

the contemporaries of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries sought their place. “The Reformation in Upper Lusatia was neither fully Catholic nor Lutheran, but a syncretistic combination that depended on localities, times, and individuals” (p. 17).

To illustrate his argument, Christ presents nine biographical sketches of selected figures, thus giving an in-depth insight into religious change and confessional relations in Upper Lusatia in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is important to note that Christ focuses solely on events in the six greater towns of Upper Lusatia (the so-called league of the “Sechsstädte”), while rural life does not play a role in his book. This is mainly due to the fact, as Christ points out, that there are significantly fewer sources available from rural dominions and communities. Since the decline of the Meißener diocese, there was no longer a supreme ecclesiastical authority in Upper Lusatia. That is why historical files and documents typically used in Reformation studies are largely lacking here. Christ had to rely primarily on city chronicles and annals, administrative books, council minutes, letters, contracts, and other documents preserved in Lusatia’s city archives in – fortunately – a great number and variety. In addition, he draws on contemporary literature.

Chapter one discusses the question of what exactly is to be understood by the phrase “introduction of the Reformation” using the example of Lorenz Heidenreich (1480–1557), known as the “first Lutheran preacher” in Zittau. Alongside Heidenreich, Christ introduces the Zittau town clerk Oswald Pergener († 1546), a brother-in-law of Heidenreich, an organist at the main church – and at the same time a member of a group of Zwinglians who were in close exchange with like-minded circles in southern Germany and Switzerland. The coexistence and entanglement of Catholics, followers of Luther, and partisans of Zwingli in sixteenth-century Zittau, highlighted in this chapter, challenges our understanding of the Reformation right from the start.

Chapter two focuses on the Görlitz councilman and town clerk Johannes Hass (c. 1476–1544), a declared adherent of Catholicism who found himself ever more isolated in his hometown. As the author of the Görlitz Council Annals, Hass commented on the changes brought about by the Reformation in a distant and even defensive manner. But increasingly, he began to have doubts. The absence of a divine sign against the turmoil of the Reformation led him to a gradual rapprochement with Lutheranism.

Chapter three deals with the continuities and disruptions in the municipal administration during the Reformation. The focus here is on Andreas Günther (1502–1570), the mayor of Kamenz, who, as a Catholic, headed a city council that had already become Lutheran for over two and a half decades. The fourth chapter, in which Christ portrays the Görlitz mayor Bartholomäus Scultetus (1540–1614), also points to the complex intersections of spatial, temporal and individual factors in Upper Lusatian Church history.

In contrast to his Kamenz counterpart Günther, Scultetus stood firmly on the side of the Lutheran Reformation. Yet for the mathematician, cartographer and astronomer, as whom Scultetus is best known to this day, differences in belief hardly played a role either. He was in close contact with Catholic and Calvinist authorities and scholars. He published calendars that all confessions could use and played a significant role in introducing the Gregorian calendar in Upper Lusatia, which happened as early as 1583/1584.

The self-confessed Lutheran and Görlitz mayor Scultetus dedicated several of his publications to the dean of the Catholic Bautzen cathedral chapter, Johann Leisentrit (1527–1586). Both were also in close correspondence with each other. Chapter five deals with Leisentrit and his policy of reconciliation and understanding between the Lutherans and Catholics. Christ vividly illustrates the extent and limits of Leisentrit's ability to compromise.

Chapter six turns to the city of Lauban (today Lubań in Poland), where the Lutheran pastor Sigismund Suevus (1526–1596) had to reach an agreement with the nuns of the still-running Magdalen convent as well as the remaining Catholics in the city. Christ argues that his daily interactions with Catholics may have contributed to some transconfessionality in Suevus's spirituality since he showed himself a proponent of pilgrimages.

Chapter seven examines the increasing limits of confessional coexistence, using the example of the Görlitz pastor Martin Moller (1547–1606), who was suspected of being a "crypto-Calvinist" but was allowed to remain in office due to his influential supporters. Other followers of deviant teachings fared worse, as Christ describes with regard to Anabaptists in Lusatia or the "mystics" associated with the despised philosopher Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) in Görlitz.

Chapter eight concludes the book with a portrait of the Bautzen pastor Friedrich Fischer (1558–1623), whose tenure was marked by growing tensions between Lutherans and Catholics. Unlike previous generations, Fischer steered the Bautzen parish onto the path of Lutheran orthodoxy, which shows his strict opposition to Calvinism and Catholicism. A clear example of the consolidation and separation of the two Bautzen congregations (Lutheran and Catholic) and the increasing rejection of previously accepted liturgical compromises is the conflict over the right to perform baptisms in St Peter's Church and its settlement in the so-called "Taufsteinreuz" in 1599.

In his conclusion, Christ summarises the most important findings of his study. An extensive list of primary sources and literature, as well as an index of places, persons and subjects, complete the book.

To this day, there is no comprehensive, up-to-date account of the Reformation in Upper Lusatia. The book reviewed here does not seek to remedy this deficiency, but it greatly enriches our understanding of the Reformation and its course in Upper Lusatia. Among its greatest benefits is that Martin Christ does not dwell too extensively on the reflection of previous

investigations but instead focuses on evolving his distinctly innovative and refreshing perspective. The fact that the history of Upper Lusatia is brimming with oddities, peculiarities and exceptions has long been put forward by its historiographers, but rarely has this been depicted as validly and surprisingly as in Martin Christ's book. Proficiently, almost incidentally, the author introduces his readers to various important aspects of Upper Lusatian history, such as religion and piety, school and education, trade and crafts, constitution and administration, historiography and memorial culture. In chapter three on the Kamenz mayor Andreas Günther, Christ devotes special attention to the minority of the Sorbs and their social position and religious life in the sixteenth century.

It should be noted that Christ's research, focusing on nine socially privileged men (pastors, councilmen, clerics), covers only a small section of social realities. Thus, the perspectives of women, peasants, craftsmen, monks, and even the Lusatian nobility are not represented. Christ often integrates comparative observations from European Reformation research to contrast them with his own findings on Upper Lusatia. This makes his argument very clear and comprehensible. It would have been worthwhile to follow this perspective in a more stringent methodological way, for example, in comparative excursions, better to distinguish the typical and special aspects of the topic.

Whether "syncretism" is an appropriate term for the variety of inter- and transconfessional phenomena covered in the book remains to be discussed. As Christ himself states in his introduction, what historical research today casually refers to as "Lutheranist", "Catholic", "Calvinist", and so on was not yet definitively defined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But does "syncretism" not already presuppose the existence of several entities that can be sharply distinguished from one another? Perhaps the various examples of confessional mixing and coexistence in Upper Lusatia, which Martin Christ compellingly describes here, are better characterised by terms such as pragmatism, flexibility, indifference, compromise, or networking. In his seminal study, *Hometown Religion* (2016), David Luebke speaks of hybrid patterns.

But those last remarks are minor details, which do not diminish the importance of this book in any way. With its novel approach and its debatable argument, the book represents a valuable contribution to research on early modern Eastern Central Europe. Above all, it provides international Reformation studies with access to a comparative field that has rarely been considered before. As an English-language study in a renowned international series, the book represents a benchmark work that will decisively influence the attention of international research.

*Friedrich Pollack*

Bautzen