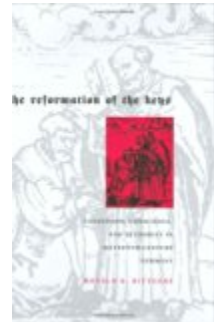


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ronald K. Rittgers. *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. xii + 318 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01176-2.

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In Matthew 16, Jesus promises to give the keys of heaven to the Apostle Peter. Along with the promise of the keys, Jesus asserts that Peter will have authority on earth to bind or to loose sins. The historian of Christianity cannot underestimate the importance and influence of these two promises on the history of the church and the societies shaped by it. Almost immediately the two promises were combined. Originally, their power extended only to the spiritual life of Christians as they related to their local congregations. Over time (and especially after the Constantinian settlement), their power began to creep into other aspects of life. By 1302, in the bull *Unam sanctam*, Pope Boniface VIII (d. 1303) could claim that the power of the keys gave him authority over all living creatures (including kings and emperors). Needless to say, not everyone agreed with Boniface's interpretation of Matthew, and the authority of the church over the spiritual and temporal lives of people continued to be a point of contention well into the era of the Reformation.

Ronald K. Rittgers, assistant professor of the history of Christianity at Yale, offers a thorough and thoughtful examination of the Power of the Keys during the Reformation in this revision of a dissertation written at Harvard under the direction of Steven Ozment. The book begins with a short introduction to the history of the Office of the Keys in the Western church. Rittgers then turns his attention to the city of Nuremberg and uses that city as a case study for his examination. Nuremberg is an excellent choice of cities for a number of reasons. While its size, history, and importance in the life of the Empire are key factors, more importantly Nuremberg adopted the Reformation of Martin Luther fairly early and became a model for the evangelical city as a consequence.

In chapter 2, Rittgers turns to examine the theology and practice of penance in the theology of the church. Penance was the process by which one paid the penalty for breaking the laws of God and of the church. This very detailed chapter highlights the religious milieu of the late medieval world. Chapter three examines the early critiques of late medieval penance by Luther and other early reformers. Rittgers highlights how the religious critique of penance and the Office of the Keys were welcomed by cities like Nuremberg who saw an opportunity to forward their social and political aims while reforming religion. This chapter, perhaps more so than the others, highlights Rittgers's ability to weave theological insights and historical narrative together.

Chapter 4 examines how the reformers and city magistrates dealt with the repercussions of their critique. It is one thing to call for dismantling a system; it is another thing entirely to try to put something new in its place, and Rittgers explains this difficulty well. Chapter 5, then, turns to look at the new system of the keys and authority (both spiritual and temporal) built by the reformers. The clergy and the civil magistrates had to struggle to find a balance between order in the church and the community and freedom to proclaim the new Gospel. Given the history of the Peasants' War, the Knights' Rebellion, and the Edict of Worms, finding this balance was both essential and rather difficult. Chapters 6 through 8 present vignettes that highlight the struggles and successes of the Nurembergers as they tried to walk this fine line.

The last chapter is perhaps the most interesting because it turns to assess the relative success or failure of Nuremberg to create a Lutheran city both in doctrine and life. The degree to which the Reformation was successful

in this regard has been a heated debate in Reformation studies since at least Gerald Strauss's important *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (1978). In that book, Strauss argued that this endeavor was largely unsuccessful. Rittgers offers a breathtaking critique. On point after point, Rittgers points out that Strauss's critique is overstated and at times says more about the author than it does about early modern Lutherans.

In the first chapter, Rittgers notes that the Power of the Keys has been largely ignored in the scholarship of the Reformation. As I read that, I thought that such a claim must surely be impossible. It is like ignoring the proverbial elephant in the middle of the room. And yet, Rittgers is absolutely correct. This book is a welcome remedy to such a striking deficiency.

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