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Weathering the Reformation: Climate and Religion in Early Sixteenth-Century Strasbourg. Linnéa Rowlatt. New York: Routledge, 2024. Pp. 220.

Inspired by ecological questions that emerged while she was running a biodynamic farm in Ottawa's Greenbelt, Linnéa Rowlatt embarks on a historical investigation in her book *Weathering the Reformation*. She undertakes a historical journey to Strasbourg between 1509 and 1541, driven by a desire to understand the cultural roots of Western society's self-destructive relationship with the natural environment. Rowlatt examines how the Little Ice Age influenced early modern Christian culture and investigates climate as a contributing factor in the Protestant Reformation. Central to her analysis is a detailed exploration of the concept of nature as reflected in three competing religious traditions in Strasbourg and Alsace during this period: Roman Catholicism, radicals, and Reform. Through focused case studies, she reveals how each tradition fragmented Christian views of the natural environment, particularly in how nature was defined, how it functioned, and how it was to be approached according to confessional lines.

To frame this inquiry, Rowlatt employs a hybrid, interactive model of socio-economic metabolism, a framework that emphasizes both the autonomous activity of the natural world and the cultural systems that shape human biophysical experience. This model enables her to trace the interplay between nature and human society, not as separate domains, but as mutually influential forces. Crucially, she foregrounds Christian representations of nature as pivotal to understanding these dynamics. Situating her work in dialogue with Max Weber's thesis on the "disenchantment" of the natural world through Protestant rationalism, and Lynn White Jr.'s assertion that Western Christianity bears responsibility

for the contemporary ecological crisis, Rowlatt organizes her study into four substantive chapters.

In Chapter One, Rowlatt reconstructs the physical environment and climate of Strasbourg and Alsace in the early sixteenth century, establishing a foundation for understanding the religious perspectives examined in the book. She outlines the region's ecological conditions, including mining, agriculture, and human interaction with the natural world, while drawing on historical climatology methods and sources for weather reconstruction. Woven throughout this analysis is a portrayal of Alsatian society, especially its late medieval institutional structures, social tensions, and the role of preaching in public life, particularly through James Geiler von Kaysersberg. By approximating Geiler's audience and situating him within Strasbourg's welfare system, Rowlatt contextualizes how religious views of nature were shaped by and addressed to specific communities. The chapter also sketches the dominant social, economic, and religious forces of the period, providing a comparative baseline to assess how Roman Catholic, radical, and Reformed theological perspectives on nature evolved following the onset of the Protestant Reformation after 1517.

In Chapter Two, Rowlatt examines pre-Reformation Catholic views of nature through the sermons of James Geiler. Geiler, preaching from what Rowlatt calls "the table of nature," used familiar natural elements (e.g., trees, lions, sheep) as moral and theological metaphors. His sermons, later collected in *Die Emeis* and widely circulated in Strasbourg, reflect a worldview shaped by Aristotelian natural philosophy, Catholic orthodoxy, and widespread beliefs in demons and apotropaic rituals. Nature, for Geiler, was infused with divine presence, evident in its design, animation, and inherent wisdom. He envisioned the natural world as a hierarchical society mirroring divine and human orders, with God at the top. Nature, in this view, could be understood through human reason, which was both God-given and culturally affirmed.

Though grounded in rationality, Geiler's worldview also accounted for spiritual forces active in the natural world. Rowlatt highlights how this vision reinforced a structured, sacred cosmology which was foundational to the Alsatian Catholic worldview and practice.

In addition to analyzing weather patterns from 1509 to 1525 and their social consequences in Strasbourg, Chapter Three is where Rowlatt turns to representations of nature among Alsatian peasants, focusing on Clemens Zyegler's *Ein Schön Büchlin* and the *XII Artikels* composed by the Memmingen peasants. Zyegler rejected social hierarchies, preaching economic justice, sacramental reform, and a radical egalitarianism rooted in divine sovereignty. He argued that Christ would have stood with the *Bundschuher*, aligning the Gospel with peasant rebellion. Furthermore, the *XII Artikels* of the peasants, in contrast to Geiler's hierarchical view, reflect an agricultural theology in which nature (i.e., streams, forests, and fields) is central to a godly life. To them, farming is a means of grace, and peasant labour a legitimate site of theological reflection. The harsh weather, famine (1511–17), coupled with ineffective Catholic rituals, intensified social unrest, contributing to the reception of Martin Luther's message, especially among peasants and the urban poor. Rowlatt contends that by the 1520s, a new religious understanding of nature had emerged, one that viewed agricultural order as divinely sanctioned. Though the peasants in the end failed to restructure society, their theology of farming as holy work endured, privileging the cultivated world over wild nature and significantly reshaping Alsatian culture while paving the way for Protestant reform.

Chapter Four turns to the reform of nature in Strasbourg, where Rowlatt examines how evangelical reformers pursued a middle ground between radical and conservative visions by addressing social problems through cultural transformation. Her analysis centres on Wolfgang Capito, particularly his *Hexaëmeron Dei Opus*, situating his work within broader evangelical currents, including the thought of Philip

Melanchthon and John Calvin. While Melanchthon sought to reconcile reform theology with natural philosophy, Calvin's *Institutes* (1539) offer limited reflection on the natural world. Capito, a leading figure in the Rhine school of exegesis, articulates a deeply anthropocentric theology. He emphasizes creation as the sole work of God, brought into being ex nihilo for human use, and interprets Genesis 1:28 through a framework of divine power and hierarchy. According to Rowlatt, Capito regarded extractive labour, such as mining, fishing, ploughing, and logging, not as ecologically harmful, but as faithful obedience to divine command. In contrast to Catholic practices such as rogations and Geiler's theology of demonic causality, evangelical theology portrayed all natural phenomena as direct manifestations of God's will. For Capito, therefore, human transformation of the environment was not only permissible but an expression of divine favour and providential purpose.

Throughout her analysis of climate and weather in sixteenth-century Strasbourg and Alsace, Rowlatt demonstrates how unpredictable weather, combined with rigid social hierarchies and mounting economic stress, created fertile conditions for the Protestant Reformation. She argues that this environmental turmoil not only intensified social unrest but also catalyzed the emergence of a new Christian representation of nature that stripped the natural world of inherent value and justified its exploitation as divinely sanctioned. Rowlatt aligns with Lynn White Jr.'s thesis that Western Christianity laid the ideological groundwork for the current ecological crisis, particularly in the works of Ziegler and Capito, where cultivated land is elevated over wilderness and little value is ascribed to nature per se. However, she challenges Max Weber's claim that Protestantism, as a rational religion, dispelled the "irrational, magic-filled miasma of late medieval Catholicism." Drawing on J. Agassi and I.C. Jarvie, she argues that Geiler exhibited a "weak form of rationality", a coherent, structured engagement with nature, even while holding seemingly irrational beliefs.

It is in Rowlatt's analysis and adoption of the "weak/strong rationality" framework to explain Geiler's late medieval Catholic theology, featuring the mysterious, incalculable forces and magic, that I find less convincing (104). While her critique of Weber is valuable, the use of a rationality hierarchy risks reinforcing a hierarchy not only of rational modes of thought but of knowledge systems more broadly. Rather than challenging the foundational assumption that rationality is the ideal framework for interpreting the natural world, Rowlatt introduces an internal distinction between forms of rationality to account for beliefs and practices such as demonic causality, rogations, or weather-related magic. However, practices like magic and witchcraft, particularly in premodern contexts, are themselves rational responses to uncertainty. Furthermore, the more compelling question is not whether these beliefs align with a modern rationality (hence hierarchization), but what they reveal about how people in that period understood agency, causality, and meaning in the natural world. Instead of explaining these practices away, we might do better to ask what they meant and how they functioned within their own epistemological frameworks.

Nevertheless, Rowlatt persuasively demonstrates that the people of Strasbourg and Alsace during this period conceptualized nature through a narrow, anthropocentric lens. Even the doctrine of salvation excluded the natural world. In the logic of late medieval European cosmology, as she notes, ants and demons shared a crucial feature: "they were not members of the Roman Catholic church" (101). By elevating extraction and cultivation as forms of holy labour, reformers and their contemporaries failed to recognize any link between environmentally harmful practices, such as deforestation or mining, and long-term climatic change. Weathering the Reformation is rich in historical detail, illuminating a cultural world distant in time yet strikingly relevant to contemporary ecological debates. Anyone interested in the intersection of history, religion, and climate, particularly the historical

roots of today's ecological crisis, will find this book both insightful and thought-provoking. The structure of the book, progressing logically from historical background to case studies of Catholic, radical, and evangelical perspectives, makes complex theological and historical concepts accessible. Its engaging narrative, clear organization, and wealth of well-documented sources offer valuable material for scholars, students, and general readers alike. The diversity of perspectives deepens the analysis and affirms Rowlatt's contribution as an important and timely work in environmental history, climate studies, and religious studies.

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