Martyrs Mirror: A Social History

David L. Weaver-Zercher
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How sixteenth- and seventeenth-century martyrdom translated into key doctrinal lessons for certain contemporary Christians is what religious scholar David L. Weaver-Zercher tries to understand in his expansive and thought-provoking new work, Martyrs Mirror: A Social History.

The book’s percipient and fascinating analysis of the origins of anabaptism in Europe, including Mennonite and Amish sects, highlights sectarian differences within the Protestant Reformation and how questions of political power shaped and sustained those differences. Nowhere was the anabaptist belief in political nonresistance more exemplified than in the famed seventeenth century martyrology, Martyrs Mirror, which was compiled by Mennonite minister Thieleman van Braght.

This lucid social history follows the various publications, revisions, reprints and translations of that revered text, which, effectively, was a collection of martyr stories and graphic images of persecution, torture, and execution. Central to this new social perspective of the text is the question of how Martyrs Mirror contributed to religious identity and social-political development in both Europe and North America. Indeed, for Mennonites and Amish in the New World, its lessons of self-sacrifice were used to distill Christian principles, but also to preserve tradition in the face of assimilation and secularization.

Perhaps the most interesting findings from this new scholarship are the use of Martyrs Mirror in the twentieth century. Modern interpretations of the text were used to justify increased social activism, including Mennonite protests against the Vietnam War and collaboration with Martin Luther King Jr. in nonviolent civil rights protests. The trajectory of these political beliefs and doctrinal applications evinces the depth of Weaver-Zercher’s research. Martyrs Mirror: A Social History is a significant entry in religious scholarship that deepens our understanding of anabaptism and Christianity in general.

SCOTT NEUFFER (Summer 2016)

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