The basic idea of this attractively written book is that the Reformation ‘was primarily a paradigm shift in the religious imagination, not a structural reform, not even a doctrinal reform’ (p. 241). Matheson argues that as a movement to reform the church, or as an academic dispute about regaining pure doctrine, it would have failed. It succeeded, as he explains, referring to Huizinga’s metaphor, because it turned observers into participants. However, the participation of the masses, and the creation of ‘something like a public opinion’, were made possible only by ‘a comprehensive reimagining of law, prophets, wisdom, Gospel, Church, sacraments and discipleship’ (pp. 239, 242). The iconoclast Andreas Karlstadt, too, used the most daring linguistic imagery to sound the attack on ‘material images’ (p. 174). Matheson calls on the experts thoroughly to revise their image of the Reformation, and to see it as encouraging all Christians to create their own version of being Christian, in their original, personal imaginings. Logically, therefore, he does not accept the usual interpretation of Luther’s *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* as a programme for reforming the church, but sees it as ‘an invitation to an apocalyptic dance, to enter with Christ into his Kingdom’ (p. 243). The world of the Reformation is presented as a world of dreams and Utopias which could no longer be restrained by the fetters of learned theology and church tradition. In this context, the rhetoric of the Reformation gained a special significance. It was more than the linguistic forms in which religious thinking was expressed; rather it should be seen as equivalent to Reformation discourse itself, because religious meaning was created in it (p. 244). Even the polemic in the texts had a heuristic function. It was only in the polemical exchanges that positions were thought through to the end. Matheson sees the achievement of the pamphletists as to have created a new means of communication, new languages, at a time of complexity and of ‘the word’, which turned the Christian God into a ‘polemical God’ (p. 13).

It is not possible to separate what the countless authors said from the way in which they said it. Matheson, however, by no means operates only with texts as texts. The printed sermons, dialogues, and other forms of literature produced for immediate use cannot be grasped adequately at this level. For him, they are a representation of the oral
culture of the period. Thus the Reformation as a ‘scriptural movement’ signifies a new, drastic orientation of culture towards the Bible, but at the same time it also signifies a comprehensive, cultural translation of the Bible. In essence, Matheson is advocating the application of the methods and perspectives of post-colonial studies to our own history. He is concerned with a sort of cultural understanding of our own past, in the interests of which he is prepared simply to jettison the classical hermeneutics of the study of history: the practice of maintaining a scholarly distance to the subject, and the conceptual instruments with which we structure our knowledge of the past. This may sound adventurous, but does not require further criticism here, as it is not achieved in Matheson’s book. Rather, it is presented on the last page as the task of future research.

Like Bernd Balzer and others, Matheson assumes, contrary to Habermas, that the age of Reformation saw the ‘Emergence of a Public Opinion’ (thus the title of chapter two). But unlike Rainer Wohlfeil in his study, Einführung in die Geschichte der deutschen Reformation (1992), Matheson fails to distinguish clearly between Habermas’s concept of a public sphere, and a ‘Reformation public’. Quite correctly, Matheson initially interprets the rapidly growing contemporary pamphlet literature as indicating a loss of consensus and as the expression of a social crisis. The discourse in the pamphlets rarely addressed abstract themes in a moralizing way (and when it did, it was not successful). Rather, it presented itself as a dispute in which each side was grouped around a charismatic personality, and in which both sides tried to keep their supporters together through information and instruction, or by refuting opposing positions. In an approach that is reminiscent of the Cambridge history of ideas school, Matheson sees the Reformation pamphlet literature as ‘thought tailored to action’ (p. 6), which took into account the level of knowledge and the expectations of the public, interacted with the men and women it addressed, assumed that they were capable of judgement, and demanded that insight be translated into action.

At the height of Reformation pamphlet-writing, that is, in the early 1520s, at least, this did not take the form of any sort of manipulation of public opinion, according to Matheson. One of the main concerns of his study is to redefine the concept of polemics in this sense as heuristics, and thus to contrast it positively with the term ‘propaganda’. The concept of propaganda, which implies that a minority with an interest
directs public opinion in a linear way, does not do justice, in Matheson’s view, to the complex processes of inter-communication which were broken in so many ways at this time (pp. 44-5, 119-20, 138, 140). Matheson regards the Reformation literature which was intended for immediate use as a quasi experimental bridge between oral and written culture. It is more discursive than agitatory in nature, and was often the product of a communication process rather than something which initiated it. Thus the communication flow should not be seen as the one-sided infiltration of inexperienced masses by a writing élite, but as an interactive process.

The popular culture of the masses to some extent dictated to the writers, for this was the starting point and the conclusion of the argument, and thus largely influenced its form. Moreover, literary controversies often assumed the character of public acts. This meant that public assessments and expectations exerted enormous pressure on literary opponents. The pamphlet literature of the time thus assumed the existence of a certain degree of publicity, and indeed, itself constantly increased this by giving rise to other forms of communication (conversation circles, petitions, correspondences, etc.). Ultimately, the literacy of the time was not merely the reflection of an oral discourse, but also required the support of processes of non-verbal communication; in Foucault’s terms, it was embedded in a network of symbolic orders. Luther’s reforming writings must be seen together with his ‘German Mass’. His hymns were significant not only because of their words, but also as events, given that they were sung together. The concept of the public is primarily justified in terms of such synergetic effects between the various media within the ‘mini-media’ world of the Reformation (pp. 36-7, 40-3).

Matheson explicitly discusses his approach mainly in the first two chapters and in the concluding chapter of his book. He draws widely on the research of, among others, Robert Scribner, Miriam Chrisman, and Hans-Joachim Köhler, as well as on American dissertations which are as yet little known in Germany (Deborah Brandt, Kurt Werner Stadtwald, Neil Richard Leroux). In the third chapter he systematically explores the factors which might have persuaded a reformer to make use of the new literary form of the pamphlet. In addition to pastoral and pedagogical motives, there were polemical ones, and the desire to encourage the masses to act. But the main one was the urge towards personal confession. Matheson chooses Karlstadt as his example
partly to allow this Reformation writer to emerge from Luther’s shadow.

Chapters four, five, and six, on ‘Reformation Dialogues’, ‘Reformation Language’, and ‘Reformation Polemic’ respectively, make up the main part of the book. Here Matheson offers detailed descriptions of Reformation rhetoric based on close readings of the texts. He concentrates on a few texts, and focuses on central concerns and themes in them (the increasing value placed on the laity combined with the creation of a new, positive image of the ordinary man, anti-clericalism, use of the vernacular). Matheson conveys a lively impression of popular stylistic devices such as direct addresses to an opponent, the reader, or God, interspersed prayers and Biblical images, interjections, curses, and abuse, appeals to the judgement of readers, series of rhetorical questions, proverbs and aphorisms, elements drawn from the catechism, alliteration, vulgar language, contrastive style, the translation of religious contents into everyday images drawn from the lives of the ordinary people, and many more. However, Matheson would object to the concept of a stylistic device, for in his view the language of the Reformation should no longer be seen as a means, but as an end, as the actual setting for Reformation events, as in Martin Luther’s forays to the ‘frontiers of language’ (p. 124), or Thomas Müntzer’s and Argula von Grumbach’s attempts to draw up a new ‘language of the heart’ (pp. 138, 143). In the case of Müntzer, in particular, the meticulously quantifying textual analysis gives the surprising result that the Hochverursachte Schutzrede is dominated not by criticisms of Luther, but by positive images and the vision of a new Christianity (pp. 146-7).

Chapter seven, ‘The Down-Side of Polemic’, concerns the process by which polemic became propaganda after all, as the question of truth was reduced to the issue of power. According to Matheson this disastrous process of polarization was caused by the Apocalypse to some extent penetrating the old genre of satire in the rhetoric of the Reformation. Thus the Pope was no longer merely compared with the devil, he was actually identified with him. Matheson sees mental inflexibility, a loss of a sense of reality, and a reduction in negotiating space as the necessary consequences. In one of the few passages in which Matheson discusses the positions taken in the research, he argues, disagreeing with Siegfried Bräuer, that a quarrel such as the one between Luther and Müntzer was so intractable less because of the substance of the
dispute or the irreconcilability of the positions taken, than because of
the inability of the parties simply to listen to each other (pp. 185-6).
Taking Luther as an example, Matheson then demonstrates how the
experience of failure in the battle for the truth produced a ‘language of
despair’ (p. 192). The need, when exchanging blows, to hit the oppo-
ten ever harder, not least in order to maintain one’s own public
credibility, ultimately led to the point where the linguistic skills even
of a master of language such as Luther failed. Thus although Matheson
still tries to present Luther’s descent into the depths of vulgarity in his
late writings as an attempt to find a new language, he occasionally sees
it as a ‘loss of all language’ (p. 195).

Chapter eight, ‘Mediation and Reconciliation: Essays at Colloquy’,
provides a contrast. It looks at the historical alternative to the loss of
dialogue, that is, at contemporary irenics (Erasmus, Mosellanus, Bucer,
and Gropper, among others) and the religious colloquies of the Refor-
mation, in particular, at the Regensburg Reichstag of 1541. This chapter
to some extent deviates from the concept governing the book as a
whole, as it basically recapitulates contents and describes the moderate
viewpoints, and those susceptible of compromise, held by contempo-
rary irenic theologians on the question of truth. Matheson goes into
greater detail on Bucer’s rhetoric, but there is hardly anything else
about the language of the irenic scholars here.

When addressing the question of how effective the Reformation
pamphlets were, Matheson soon comes to the limits of what can be
researched. Statements about the ‘success’ of Reformation rhetoric are
regularly introduced with the words ‘as one can imagine’. Matheson’s
own rhetoric comes to resemble that of the Reformation, and thus the
reviewer’s language must become ‘polemical’ in response. When
Luther, asking a rhetorical question, did not distinguish between a
murdered priest and a murdered peasant, did all his readers (or
listeners, given the widespread practice of reading such texts aloud)
really beat the table with their fists to signify approval, as Matheson
‘can imagine’ (p. 122, cf. also p. 134)? This reviewer doubts it. He can
equally well imagine that respect for an ordained priest was still so
deeply rooted in the consciousness of the masses that the shocking
aggressiveness of Luther’s question might have produced an icy
silence among his audience. Reformation pamphletists faced the diffi-
culty that they had to create the public that they needed. Their success
was always only relative, and the pamphletists only had a short time
in which to work. The social revolutionary nature of their pamphlets soon came up against the inertia of the system, and controversies among the reformers helped further to reduce the force of the collision between the new and the old.

Matheson’s book, which is on the whole carefully edited and has a useful index incorporating subjects, names, and places, has few formal shortcomings. It is annoying that Luther’s works are generally cited in the form of a short reference to the Weimar edition, without mentioning the name of the text from which the citations come in each case. And there is no reference at all for Luther’s claim that the Gospel, preached truthfully, will always create turmoil (p. 13; is this really Luther?). Helmar Junghans’s statement that the theology of the Reformation is structured by its rhetoric is central to Matheson’s concluding chapter, but is neither documented in a footnote, nor traceable through an entry in the bibliography.

The author is economical with his references to relevant literature. This helps to make the book readable, and is probably also a reflection of the fact that the rhetoric of the Reformation is not yet established as a field of research. From a German point of view, it would have been helpful if more attention had been paid to the general historical research on rhetoric. Thus there is one reference to volume five of the journal *Rhetorik* (p. 198), but there is no mention of the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* edited by Gert Ueding. In general, however, the German as well as the English-language discussion is well represented.

Matheson draws on a variety of sources. He frequently cites texts from the invaluable microfiche edition of *Flugschriften des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts* by Hans-Joachim Köhler, representing the average discourse of the Reformation. And his exemplary systematic analyses of Reformation language draw upon not only master texts such as Luther’s main reforming writings *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* and *Von der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche*, and Thomas Müntzer’s *Hochverursachte Schutzrede*, but also Luther’s late invective *Wider das Papsttum zu Rom vom Teufel gestiftet*, and the literary works left by Argula von Grumbach, a member of the Bavarian higher nobility. There are reasons for the choice of examples. In the case of Luther, Matheson can draw upon Heinrich Bornkamm’s and Martin Brecht’s research on Luther the writer. Matheson himself is an expert on Thomas Müntzer and Argula von Grumbach, having produced edi-
tions of their works. Individual analyses of the works of these three writers provide an adequate spread across the spectrum, from the magisterial Reformation (Luther), to the radical though still professional Reformation (Müntzer), and the radical lay Reformation (Argula von Grumbach). That the textual basis of the investigation is rather narrow, and that the book in essence consists of case studies, is connected with a fundamental difficulty which confronts anyone working on rhetoric. The linguistic aspects of texts can be discussed sensibly only against the background of the contents of the texts, the contexts in which these contents are embedded, and the motives of the writers. All this must be included, and it takes up space. Important texts, in particular, quickly fill many pages. Matheson cannot afford to allude airily to the dispute about Holy Communion, anti-clericalism, or other central aspects of Reformation history. He has to explain them in order to relate what he wants to say back to them. Matheson’s book is therefore eminently suitable for student use, while also providing stimulating reading for professional historians.

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