

9-1-1995

Review of Fifteenth Century Carthusian Reform: The World of Nicholas Kempf, by D.D. Martin

Joseph F. Kelly

John Carroll University, kelly@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Joseph F., "Review of Fifteenth Century Carthusian Reform: The World of Nicholas Kempf, by D.D. Martin" (1995). *Theology & Religious Studies*. 16.

http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub/16

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology & Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

start of the process of rebuilding a central government for the church. The conciliarists had made great strides in redefining the ground rules for this project, and both England and France had taken practical steps toward the nationalization of their churches (the Statutes against Provisors and the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges, respectively). Confusion, however, was not all on the side of the clergy. The Hundred Years' War was still a very hot campaign, and in neither England nor France was it always clear who was in charge. That problem was far from solved in 1464 (when Harvey's study ends): the Houses of York and Lancaster were still squabbling over England's throne, and France's future hung in the balance as its spidery king, Louis XI, struggled with Charles the Bold of Burgundy.

The first six of the thirteen chapters of Harvey's book provide information about individual Englishmen who worked in Rome, made pilgrimages there, or sought financial or spiritual assistance from the pope. Dependent as historians of the Middle Ages are on registers of letters and legal actions that tell only part of the story, the impression the chapters leave is that medieval Europeans were careerists preoccupied with schemes and stratagems for personal profit. Communications between kings and popes seemed to depend on *ad hoc* arrangements, for the confusion that marked the era worked against the development of formal diplomatic structures.

The remainder of Harvey's book, which deals largely with diplomacy, suggests that popes worked harder to stay in touch with kings than kings did to maintain contact with popes. Of particular interest are the chapters in which Harvey details the efforts of the papacy to thread its way through the mine field of the War of the Roses and come out on the right side. The period marks the point, Harvey claims, where the "politicizing" of spiritual office that is associated with the Renaissance papacy began to have an impact on England. Also fascinating are Harvey's two concluding chapters in which she assesses the degree to which conciliarism influenced English thinkers. Harvey concludes that nothing happened in the period between 1417 and 1464 to make us anticipate the breach between England and the papacy that widened in 1531. This is an unsurprising discovery providing an unnecessary justification for the subject chosen for a strong book.

Pennsylvania State University
Erie, Pennsylvania

A. DANIEL FRANKFORTER

Fifteenth-Century Carthusian Reform: The World of Nicholas Kempf. By DENNIS D. MARTIN. Studies in the History of Christian Thought 49. Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1992. xv + 415 pp. \$103.00.

This thoroughly-researched book has much to offer the church historian. Note the subtitle: *The World of Nicholas Kempf*. Throughout the book, the author situates Kempf (about 1416–1497) in the larger arena of Austrian

religious and intellectual life in the late Middle Ages and often in the larger Germanic world. Many readers who may not be particularly interested in Kempf himself will still find this book of value.

Martin begins with a review of Carthusian life, and then turns to Kempf's early career. He immediately compares Kempf to Lorenzo Valla, contrasting the Austrian's surrender of his will to authority to the Italian's self-assertion, and then goes on to relate Kempf to movements at the University of Vienna in the early fifteenth century. This is where Martin shines. He demonstrates that Kempf, in spite of his withdrawal from the world, interacted with and influenced that world enormously. Important names such as Valla, Nicholas of Dinkelsbühl, and Heinrich of Langenstein pass through these pages. The reader sees the impact not only of their strictly academic works but also of their sermons, vehicles whose power is not always appreciated by researchers. The author stresses the commitment of many late medieval scholars to true reform of the Church; for example, the Austrian Carthusians supported the ever-contentious Council of Basel, and Kempf even attacked the papal council of Ferrara.

Kempf began his career as a dedicated academic, but he soon came to fear that pride in his abilities could cost him his salvation, the same attitude which motivated the twelfth-century scholar Bruno to found the Carthusian order. "Kempf found teaching itself to be a constant temptation to pride. . . . Kempf had no doubt that the Carthusian order had been miraculously founded to save masters and students of the University of Paris from the perils of pride and learning, academic degrees, and ecclesiastical offices that threatened their eternal destiny. He had no sympathy for those who entered the mendicant orders to gain an education and pursue a scholar's career" (pp. 30–31). (One shudders to think of what Kempf's opinion would be of the typical reader of this journal.)

Martin treats Kempf's career topically, as teacher (*Magister*), scholar (*Theologus*), monastic leader (*Pastor*), and this approach allows him to investigate these facets of Kempf in depth. Of great value in these sections is the author's emphasis on Carthusian uniqueness, compared not only to university life but also to late medieval Benedictinism. Furthermore, always conscious of the impending Reformation, the author treats Kempf's theology of *sola fide* and takes a well-aimed shot at earlier scholarship. "Following the polemics of Renaissance humanists and Protestant theologians, scholars have conventionally assumed that monks were notoriously guilty of trusting in works righteousness" (pp. 140–141). Martin does not attempt to reconcile Kempf and Luther or, even worse, to resort to apologetics by making Kempf a forerunner of the Reformation. On the contrary, he makes it clear that Kempf's theology on this point derived from his medieval monastic background. "A monastic commentary on the Song of Songs might be the last place we would look for teaching on justification by faith alone and extrinsic righteousness. Yet that is

where Kempf's doctrine on discretion as a refusal to trust in one's own prudence leads" (pp. 134–135). *Discreto*, as all monastic writers taught, is the foremost of virtues.

The book includes three appendices. The first provides a list of Kempf's *opera* with the *incipit* and *explicit* for each work as well as a brief account of it; the second appendix includes excerpts of relevant texts, eight by Kempf and one by Bernard of Waging, a late medieval monastic reformer; the third provides a series of tables which illustrate, among other things, the relation of Viennese scholars to monastic reform.

This otherwise fine study does have one serious flaw. The author wishes to present Nicholas Kempf (about 1416–1497) as representative of late medieval Carthusian monasticism at its best, and he rightly recognizes that few modern readers will relate easily or well to Kempf's monastic *Weltanschauung*. So far, so good. Regrettably, the author also makes clear his own fondness for that view and his concurrent distaste for modernity to an extent which becomes distracting (for example, pp. 22, 270–271). The modern academic reader immediately becomes defensive, wondering what is so wrong with independent thinking and what is so wonderful about craven obedience. Much of this polemic should have been confined to footnotes.

E. J. Brill published this book, and every scholar knows what that means. Those interested in Kempf and in late medieval reform movements may be willing to pay the tariff; others will want to order this for their college libraries.

John Carroll University
Cleveland, Ohio

JOSEPH F. KELLY

Il profetismo gioachimita tra quattrocento e cinquecento: Atti del III Congresso Internazionale di Studi Gioachimiti. Edited by GIAN LUCA POTESTÀ. Genoa, Italy: Marietti, 1991. L80.000.

The highlight of this Congress could only have been experienced live. This was the translation of the body of Abbot Joachim to the newly restored basilica of the monastery that Joachim himself founded, followed by a delicious feast the next day. Most surprising were the townspeople from San Giovanni that packed the abbey church for the sessions and who listened attentively, even when they could not understand the language being spoken.

The Congress was the third sponsored at five-year intervals by the Centro Internazionale di Studi Gioachimiti, whose headquarters are now in the restored abbey. Most of the scholars who are currently doing research in Joachimism gave presentations. Bernard McGinn traced synthetically the development of apocalypticism prior to Joachim and briefly touched on the abbot's later influence. Robert E. Lerner discussed Joachimist manuscripts