

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Hoffmann, George. *Reforming French Culture: Satire, Spiritual Alienation, and Connection to Strangers*

Jane Couchman

Volume 41, numéro 4, fall 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061944ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061944ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Couchman, J. (2018). Compte rendu de [Hoffmann, George. *Reforming French Culture: Satire, Spiritual Alienation, and Connection to Strangers*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(4), 245–247.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1061944ar>

self-examination, moral struggle, and the desire to achieve salvation in the early modern period.

ARAZOO FEROZAN

McMaster University

Hoffmann, George.

Reforming French Culture: Satire, Spiritual Alienation, and Connection to Strangers.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xxvi, 264. ISBN 978-0-19-880876-3 (hardcover) US\$74.00. Ebook also available.

This is a challenging book. George Hoffmann challenges much of what has been argued or taken for granted about the growth, development, and decline of the Reformed Church in France. He does so by offering the first sustained study of reformed satirical texts,¹ comparing them with classical and humanist examples of the genre and documenting their immediate and long-term impact. His arguments are challenging, too, and do not lend themselves to facile summary. They are supported by a close analysis of how satire functions in a broad range of texts by, among others, Conrad Badius, Théodore de Bèze, Pierre Viret, Henri Estienne, Simon Goulart, and Jean de Léry.

Hoffmann asks two central questions: Why did France remain a Roman Catholic country, given the history of gallicanism, the widespread interest in religious reform, and the initial swift adoption of the reformed religion by significant numbers of French men and women, especially nobles, intellectuals, tradesmen, and artisans? And were the reformers' satirical attacks on Roman Catholic beliefs and practices significant sources for Enlightenment thinkers?

In response to the first question, Hoffmann looks at satirical works in which reformers attacked the pope, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and indeed most aspects of the Roman Church. He is puzzled as to the goals of these excessively vulgar and scatological works. For example, their vivid conflation of the Catholic Mass with cannibalism, leading inevitably to images of the "sacrament-as-excrement [...] the digestive 'consequences' of the doctrine

1. Hoffmann deliberately uses lower case for reformed (and unreformed) (xxiii).

of transubstantiation" (40), seems excessive. Hoffmann is particularly struck by the way these pamphlets created distance between the reformed and their own society, and thus "taught their neighbors to see them as foreigners" (5), promoting alienation both at home and in exile. He concludes that these works actually drove away many moderates like Rabelais and Montaigne who might otherwise have supported the reformed cause. He also demonstrates that although their authors and publishers implied that they spoke for, and to, a widespread reformed community in France and internationally, including French exiles as well as foreign reformed churches, these works neither arose from nor enhanced unity among supporters of reform.

As for reformed satire as a source for Enlightenment questioning of Catholic beliefs, Hoffmann argues that this did occur, but only through a profound misunderstanding. Reformed incredulity was not rationalist. Even the most outrageous of reformed satirical writers believed that their radical questioning of Catholic beliefs and practices would lead to an understanding of a higher truth about God and about how to respond to his freely-given grace. But the position of critical distance established by this satirical tradition would be carried forward into works like *Les Lettres persanes* which present French culture through the incredulous eyes of foreigners. At the same time, Hoffmann argues, the reformers helped to create a new form of "communication" radically different from the bodily "communion" created within the Roman church through the common consumption of the body of Christ. Just as Christ is essentially absent from the reformed Lord's Supper and communicates spiritually with participants, so reformers created a community of physically absent but spiritually present participants, moving towards "the non-physical sense of connection that flourishes in modern senses of the word 'communication'" (157).

We should be grateful to Hoffmann for making his way through works like Badius's *The Sick Pope* or *The Pope's Kitchen* (attributed to Bèze) on our behalf! Especially strong are Hoffmann's readings of Jean de Léry's account of his sojourn among the cannibals of Brazil and of the ways in which New World cannibalism became intertwined with accusations that Catholics who accepted the doctrine of transubstantiation were literally God-eaters. Hoffmann's study of Montaigne's subtle (of course!) response to reformed thinking and to these satirical works is enriched by his ongoing conversations with the essayist. He traces the filiation from Jean de Léry and other reformed satirists

to Montaigne's "On Cannibals" and to later cultural relativism. In Montaigne's essay, cannibalism has nothing to do with the Mass. Hoffmann speculates that the third question posed by the Tupinamba Montaigne met in Rouen, the question Montaigne "forgot," was almost certainly about religion. (The first two questions were about royal authority and social justice.) Already the spiritual beliefs at the core of reformed satire were fading or being erased from memory, in favour of lay political and social concerns.

One important question remains for me. I didn't find in this study a discussion of how these satires functioned within the context of Calvinist beliefs in election, irresistible grace, and justification. Hoffmann argues persuasively that they failed to convince even moderates, indeed had the opposite effect. But were their authors actually seeking to convince, to convert others? According to Calvin (*Institutions*, book 3), the elect are converted not by persuasion but by grace, through which they understand that they are indeed among the elect. The elect did need constantly to be reminded of their duty to respond to God's gift of grace by living according to God's will. It seems unlikely, though, that these satires would have been designed to bring hitherto unconverted members of the elect to an understanding of their spiritual status; would they have been meant to encourage the elect to stay the course? Or are there other *raisons d'être* for these works that still elude us?

Already part of a lively scholarly discussion (vii–viii and *passim*), Hoffmann's work rewards both an overarching reading for its argument that in some important ways reformers defeated their own cause, and a close reading for its detailed study of the satirical genre and its various uses by reformed writers.

JANE COUCHMAN

Glendon College, York University