

Maximilian Von Habsburg. *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi, 1425–1650: From Late Medieval Classic to Early Modern Bestseller*.

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This instructive and wide-ranging study of the afterlife of the *Imitatio* sets out to contradict Johan Huizinga's observation that this devotional classic "departs from all culture and belongs to no culture in particular" (*Autumn of the Middle Ages*, 1996, 266–67). Rather, Maximilian von Habsburg argues that various religious cultures in the early modern period appropriated it in ways that made it peculiarly their own, whether they were Lutheran, or Zwinglian, or Calvinist or English Protestants or Jesuits. It may have had universal appeal, but its use was inflected differently in each of these faith communities. Its wide dispersion demonstrates that it had something for everyone, but it was not the same thing for everyone.

Habsburg is at pains to point out that the *Imitatio* did not bridge the gap between the churches of the West, even though its popularity demonstrates the potential measure of agreement among them. This should not surprise us, given that Christianity was then in a process of disintegration. Reading the text might lead individuals from one church into another, crossing the Protestant-Catholic divide in either direction, but it did not promote any ecumenical spirit. As a devotional text it could be recommended as an alternative to controversy, without any intention of uniting believers, but rather to strengthen them in the particular faith of their church.

The transnational dimension of Habsburg's study is especially welcome. We see the role played by the *Imitatio* in nuancing several brands of spirituality and churchmanship across the continent. German translations by Caspar Schwenckfeld (1531) and Leo Jud (1539), for example, provide fascinating insights into the early Protestant Reformation and its discontents. In England, Thomas Rogers, whose

translation was first published in 1580, enlisted it in support of ecclesiastical conformity, with a high sense of the sacraments and church order, while others found it compatible with a depreciation of structures. It could be used in lay fellowships, religious orders or simply as a devotional aid for the devout. The call to holiness of life could be adapted to a *sole fide* view of salvation, or integrated into the full panoply of Catholic religious practices, including veneration of the saints, devotion to Mary, penance, and pilgrimage. This is because of its emphasis on interiority of religion. The *Imitatio's* Christocentricity, its subordination of outward observance to the resolution to know and follow Christ could be made to fit both Protestant and Catholic practices and enhance them. The main point of divergence was book 4, on preparation for the Eucharist, which most Protestant versions omitted.

The final three chapters are devoted to the place of the *Imitatio* in the Jesuit tradition, the order responsible for the largest number of editions and translations. St Ignatius found in it a way to progress beyond religious fervor to the personal reorientation on which the *Spiritual Exercises* was founded. With these credentials it became central to Jesuit formation in the colleges and ministry to lay Catholics. It has been suggested that the anti-intellectualism of the *Imitatio* was in conflict with the Jesuit ethos, but Habsburg points out that the insistence on the limitations of head-knowledge is directed towards the learned.

The text itself was intriguingly variegated, as it moved from manuscript into print. Habsburg provides a Short Title Catalogue of printed editions and translations of the *Imitatio*, organized chronologically by language: over 200 editions in Latin, and several in Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Croatian, Czech, Chinese, Greek, Hungarian, Japanese, and Polish translations. What this list does not tell us, unfortunately, is the translator or the denominational association of each edition; a pity, because the analysis of the various translations in the earlier chapters is so instructive in itself. Not the least interesting is the Neo-Latin version by Sebastian Castellio (Basel, 1563), which crucially influenced the work's later reception.

Habsburg covers the ground meticulously and with admirable awareness of the complexity of Reformation-era spirituality. Sometimes laborious, his writing is never obscure, and this study provides an illuminating compendium of information and ideas about the role of the *Imitatio* in the early modern period.

VICTOR HOULISTON

University of the Witwatersrand