

Women in the Reformation Period

Female reformers – reformers' wives – Women who acted for reformation

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1. Impacts of reformation on the life of women during the 16th century

The reformation during the 16th century affected all members of the population and found many friends especially among citizens, local gentry population of free cities like Strassburg, Augsburg and Nuremberg, which were economically important centers and among the peasants.

Time was ripe for reforms in church and society and the internal and external political conditions in the Holy Roman Empire under the emperors Maximilian I. (1493-1519) and his grandson Karl V. (1519-1556) offered good conditions for this purpose.

In the long run, the reformatory activities of the cities, of the governing persons in the larger and smaller territories and of the reformers could only be successful, because they implemented their reforms pragmatically and particularly on a regional basis only and did not wait for an introduction in the whole empire.

Humanism and the reformatory movements in Bohemia and Moravia under Jan Hus had prepared the way for reforms, the new art of letterpress and Martin Luther's activities provided for a quick dissemination of the new ideas. As early as in 1520 Martin Luther's three so-called reformatory main works appeared: „To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation“, *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* („On the Babylonian captivity of the Church“), „On the Freedom of a Christian“. Especially Luther's work about freedom inspired men as well as women to make in fact use of their Christian freedom and to put it into actions – in the end this happened to a larger extend than Luther had intended.

Because of central reformatory basic convictions as e.g. the priesthood of all the baptized and of the reformatory “Sola scriptura”-principle women and laymen also started to get involved in theological and church political discussions of their time. According to Luther, baptism made all Christians to priests and enabled them to understand the Holy Scripture. However, preaching and baptizing by women should be reserved to mere emergency situations according to Luther. Although especially the awareness of the priesthood of all the baptized held the potential for the priesthood of women. In general, Luther has enhanced the status of laymen with his reformatory writings and has established a counter position to the prevailing

hierarchic structure within the church. Therefore many male and female lay theologians especially at the beginning of the reformatory period until the beginning of the peasant uprising in 1525 participated publicly in religious discussions. As a means to spread their views they used the medium of pamphlets, which achieved their maximum publications between the years 1521 and 1525. Whoever was not able to read, could have the contents of the pamphlet read loudly on the market, in the hostel or from the pulpit. The peasant upheavals slowed down this engagement effectively and the discussion was continued from 1525 mainly among university theologians.

Life of men and women in the early modern age was mainly determined by the belonging to a certain life age, civil status or social level. Most women worked in craft, merchant or peasant household as wives or maidservants in responsible positions. After marriage, the woman gained a certain position and work roles in the family, the household and the community. Marriage, on the one hand, included the model of „companionship“ between husband and wife, but on the other side also the wife's subordination. Along with reformation, marriage had become the model for the gender order and had replaced the multitude of pre-reformatory life models in their significance. Since reformation, the different authorities had seen in marriage God's first order, which was inevitable for the foundation of a common household.

At the same time, reformation has upgraded the value of sexuality lived within marriage and has especially legalized the marriage of priests. The protestant model of the vicarage which has been distinct over hundreds of years and still is, is based on the new appreciation of a priest's marriage and on the now favored role model for women as housewife and wife. For women this new ideal and concept had ambivalent impacts, since the reformatory understanding of marriage, too, stipulated the wife's subordination under the husband. For centuries this relationship of subordination has been proclaimed and cemented e.g. by marriage forms, in which bible passages from Colossians and Ephesians (Kol 3,18-4,1; Eph 5,22-6,9) were quoted rather than equal opportunity text passages as e.g. in Gal. 3, 27f.

Along with the new ideal and concept of the clerical marriage went the degradation of monastic life in monastic communities. There were voluntary renunciations from the life as nun as well as even hasty flights from monasteries and – not even seldom – there were compulsory liquidations of monasteries against the will of women who wanted to continue their life in the monastery. The women were thus deprived of

alternative possibilities to organize their lives if they do not want to marry. The convents offered unmarried women from noble or civic families a secure livelihood and far reaching possibilities to learn and to act, even to become part of the church leadership in the function of a prioress or an abbess. Often the closed and dispossessed monasteries had been reorganized as protestant hospitals or schools. But not all monasteries had or had been dissolved during the period of reformation. Mainly in northern Germany in the area of the Lutheran Church of Hannover or in eastern Germany some protestant monasteries still exist until today. Today these preserved monasteries, where mainly women convents live, offer places of rest and silence and many proposals for musical or spiritual timeouts.

2. Reformers' wives

The probably best known wife of a reformer is the former nun **Katharina of Bora** (born in 1499 in Hirschfeld near Nossen, died in 1552 in Torgau), who had married Martin Luther in 1525. At the beginning of their wedlock in 1525, the peasant uprising and its bloody suppression convulsed the country. Furthermore, Luther had made himself not only good friends, but also bitter enemies with his reformatory writings and steps. The Luthers dared to live this new model, namely the marriage of a priest, in an exposed position and especially the wife was under permanent observation and had to suffer severe attacks as well from the Catholics as also from other sides. It often remains unmentioned, that Katharina of Bora managed a household which was - considering its size - a small enterprise and which at times comprised more than 40 persons. As financial manager she surveyed the printing of Luther's writings and also had her part in the well-known table speeches. Luther expressed in many letters and speeches, how much he appreciated his „dearest Kaethe“ or „my Mr. Kaethe“. „Wittenberg's morning star“, because she was busy from morning to night with the large household with many guests and several students who also lived in the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. She gave birth to six children, among them two daughters who died young.

In 1528, three years after the Luthers, the 46-year-old Johannes Oecolampad, Basel's most important reformer, married **Wibrandis Rosenblatt**, (born in 1504 in Saeckingen, widowed Keller, died in 1564 in Basel), who was 22 years younger than her husband.

Oecolampad was a professor at the university and a preacher at Basel Cathedral. Similarly to Katharina of Bora, Wibrandis directed a large household, where children were educated, guests lodged and students were accommodated. There were also religious refugees and especially dismissed priests for shorter or longer periods who found a room there. After three years of wedlock, in which she had given birth to three children, Wibrandis became a widow for the second time at the age of 27. Since she was said to be an engaged and strong woman and since in the meantime also Wolfgang Capito's wife Agnes Roettel had died, Capito's friends arranged a new marriage. In 1532 Wibrandis Rosenblatt married the 26 years older Wolfgang Capito and left her home town Basel, in order to move to Strassburg with Capito. The academic and scientifically working Capito was very often ill, tended to suffer from depressions and had by his good faith accumulated a lot of debts. Wibrandis managed the household in the vicarage to a similar extent as before in Basel, but she had to get along with less financial means. She gave birth to five children in nine years of wedlock. In 1541 the plague raged at the upper Rhine and killed more than 3000 people in Strassburg within a short period. Wibrandis, who in 1541 had given birth to her daughter Irene, lost three of her children and her husband by the plague. Martin Bucer in Strassburg lost five children and his wife Elisabeth Silbereisen. Prior to her death, Elisabeth Silbereisen asked Wibrandis to take care of her husband and her remaining handicapped child after her death. So Wibrandis Rosenblatt, the three-fold widow, married Martin Bucer in April 1542. In the following year her son Martin was born. In the vicarage of St. Thomas, the church where Martin Bucer used to preach, Wibrandis sheltered not only the family members and orphaned relatives, but also again and again many refugees, since the situation had become critical after the defeat of the protestants in the Schmalcaldian war 1546/47. Wibrandis Rosenblatt had been married to three important reformers, had exchanged letters with many reformers' wives, had given birth to 11 children and had finally followed Bucer into exile to England/Cambridge, where he died in 1551. She had survived two epidemics of the plague and finally died after she had returned to her home town Basel in 1564 from another outbreak of the plague.

3. Female reformers and women who acted for Reformation

Outstanding among the female reformers is Katharina Zell, née Schuetz (born around 1497 in Strassburg, died in 1562 in Strassburg), who as layperson preached,

publicly defended reformatory ideas and who authored several writings. Only a small part of her literary work has been preserved. Katharina Zell has been designated as „female reformer“ in recent publications. She was a craftsman's daughter in Strassburg and attended a school. In 1523 she married the priest Matthäus Zell in Strassburg and already in 1524 two of her publications were printed. In one of them she defended her husband's breach of celibacy and a priest's marriage. The other publication is directed as a letter of comfort to protestant women in Kenzingen, whose husbands had to go into exile to Strassburg. Both writings reveal the whole extent of her literary work, which ranged from pastoral-theological to fierce and polemic publications. In 1558 she sent her interpretation of Psalm 51 and 130 and of the Lord's Prayers to Felix Armbruster to comfort him in his illness. She interpreted the Lord's Prayer several times. She says that the coming of God's kingdom will take place in one's heart and that God's will shall happen, when a human being is in uniformity with the suffering of Christ.

The reaction of the city council of Strassburg to her step into the public in 1524 was severe. Katharina was forbidden to publish furthermore, but the brave lay theologian was not really willing to step back. 10 years later in 1534 she published four small hymn-books in pocket-size with songs of the Bohemian Brothers which were available for small money.

No surprise, that she pledged for more tolerance in respect to all not-Lutheran communities, like baptists, Zwingli-devotees, spiritualists as Kaspar Schwenkfeld in her theological pamphlet of 1557. In questions of baptism, she nearly held a baptist's view. Baptism should be „free“ in respect of time and age. She read the bible from a female perspective and justified her own behavior with biblical women's behaviors and roles. In her interpretation of the Lord's Prayer she ventured to compare God with a mother, who knows about the pains of giving birth. She dealt with the biblical rule of silence for women and argued - as we do today - with Galatians (Gal. 3,27f) and Joel 2 or she defends her public appearance with reference to the story of Zacharias and Elisabeth, Mary Magdalena and prophetess Hannah. Katharina Zell has apparently preached three times: at her husband's burial in 1548 and twice 1562, when baptist women were buried, to whom protestant clergymen had denied a christian burial.

Additionally to her publishing activities, Katharina Zell developed broad social activities by getting involved with educational institutions, a poor house, prison

ministry and the lodging of refugees. In her works she also addresses the office of a deacon for women. Katharina was in personal contact to Luther and many other reformers and she had an active exchange of letters with them.

4. Women who supported the reformatory movements at the beginning of the 16th century with pamphlets and polemic papers were mostly members of nobility. They achieved their prophetic self-confidence from biblical models – women as Judith, Esther or Susanna played a role – and from verses from the bible, which implicated the equal ranking of women and men as e.g. Gal. 3, 28 or which invite to confess as Mt. 10, 32f. The people interpreted their period of radical social changes in the light of biblical or end time conditions. This encouraged especially women to appear in a provoking manner.

Argula of Grumbach, née of Stauff, was born in 1492 at Ehrenfels castle in Franconia and died 1554 on Zeilitz castle close to Schweinfurt. She was a descendent of old-Bavarian nobility and was the first woman to dare a reformatory publication. She had reached high circulations with her totally eight works. The very publication of her pamphlet, a letter of protest to the University of Ingolstadt, has been reprinted fourteen times within only few months. She exchanged letters with Luther, Spalatin and other reformers, unfortunately no of these letters has been preserved.

On September 20, 1523 she wrote a letter to the director of the university of Ingolstadt and spoke up for the 18 year-old Magister Arsacious Seehofer, who had campaigned for the Lutheran teachings and who had been forced to call off by threat of violence. With this letter she opened a dispute by letter with the university professors which revealed her extensive knowledge about the bible. She discussed the difference between God's word on the one hand and human wisdom on the other hand and requested the authority of the scripture as single relevant authority. In doing so, she claimed the *sola scriptura* principle. The Ingolstadt University did not answer her.

She suffered herself a lot of restrictions by her fearless defense of the reformatory ideas. Her catholic husband lost his job, the family turned against her. In 1524 she was invited to talk with the count palatine Johann of Simmern and Sponheim at the Reichstag in Nuremberg. However, over all she was disappointed by the princes and

their political engagement for reformation during the Reichstag. In a letter to her cousin Adam of Thering, who wanted to take actions against her public appearance, she expresses sharp criticism of the nobility.

Fearlessly she stood up for the free proclamation of the Gospel and issued reformatory writings and letters.

Ursula Weyda or Weida (born around 1504 in Altenburg, died in 1570 in Altenburg) was as well a member of nobility. She was born as Ursula of Zschöpperitz as a member of an old knights' dynasty in Osterland. She had married a county clerk, who in Eisenberg served the Duke Johann of Saxonia (1489-1537).

At the age of about twenty, in 1524, she published a pamphlet, in which she took a stand against the abbot of Pegau and his monks. The abbot had accused Luther and his followers in a publication of being responsible for the general decline in the country, for the decay of cloisters and churches and he maintained they provoked revolutions and the negligence of right and order. Ursula answered with a theological-ethical pamphlet, in which she dealt with the nature of the God's word and of the church and in which she took a stand to celibacy and matrimony.

Ursula Weyda's pamphlet is a testimony for her good knowledge of the bible and her ability to argue by means of the bible. She was driven by a prophetic consciousness and by the example of Argula of Grumbach. Ursula does not save on strong words and responds to expected defenses and protests of her opponents. Her publication has resulted in several further pamphlets and she has thereby together with other reformers formed the public dispute in the region of Saxo-Thuringia.

5. Women in radical reformatory groups and contexts

Women appeared and were active even in radical reformatory groups and contexts. The events of the peasant upheavals e.g. were attentively observed by women. They took a firm stand and took actively part in insurgent actions. In historical sources they appear as multipliers of sermons and speeches, they gave recommendations, spread rumors and buoyed up the insurgents. Women often supported in groups the anticlerical and authority critical statements and actions of their surroundings. They „disturbed sermons, insulted and threatened priests, demolished churches and cloisters and were actively involved in depredations.“ Anger and despair in view of social drawbacks and needs exploded in these upheavals as in all upheavals of this

period. The authorities penalized this behavior sometimes with the pillory, sometimes with prison or banishment from the town.

Thomas Müntzer's wife, Otilie of Gersen, a former nun, too, disturbed together with a group of women at the beginning of 1524 a service in Mülverstedt and was arrested for that. Possibly, she was also involved in the fights at Frankenhausen. It is passed on that the pregnant woman was raped during the fights by a soldier of the princes' army, which was later condemned by Luther.

Women who were attracted by Baptist sermons and who found their home in Baptist circles, often independently left their husbands, avoided marriage or tried to convince their husbands of their convictions. However, women were by no means equal ranking to men in the so-called "Baptists' Kingdom" in Muenster, but remained subordinated. The introduction of polygamy in the "Baptists' Kingdom" served after all the aim to better control women.

6. There were more **women who promoted reformation as princesses or regents** than has become aware in the general public consciousness. Some of the sovereign princesses, who were actively involved in the theological and political conflicts during the period of reformation, were e.g. the **Duchess Elisabeth of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, Princess of Calenberg-Göttingen; Elisabeth of Hassia or Rochlitz**, the Duchess of Saxonia, sister of Duke Philipp of Hassia and others. As sovereign regents they did not only represent, but also administrate and design their religious, economic and political interests.

Duchess Elisabeth of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, Princess of Calenberg-Göttingen (born 1510 in Coelln - today Berlin - as Elisabeth of Brandenburg – died in 1558 in Ilmenau). She had been countess and Lady Henneberg since 1546 and is said to be the "Princess of Reformation", who enforced reformation in South Lower Saxonia together with the Hessian reformer Antonius Corvinus (1501-1553). On the one hand she is one of the women who have acted in the reformatory sense, on the other hand she had as sovereign the political power to bring forward reformation on her territory.

After her husband Erich I. had died she ruled the principality of Calenberg-Goettingen until her son Erich II. attained full age. In 1538 she converted to the protestant confession, brought forward reformation in her principality and prevented her son,

who tended towards catholicism from cancelling the reformation. She was one of the most active woman writers, composed spiritual songs, lyrics and pedagogical writings, in 1545 a government compendium with religious and political admonitions for her son Erich, in 1550 a connubiality book for her daughter Anna-Maria, a book of comfort for widows in 1556, edicts, instructions and a mandate for the preservation of reformation after her son's take-over of the principality.

On the other hand she accused her husband's mistress to be a witch and used her political power to bring the maidservant of this mistress to death.

Among the princesses who were actively involved in the theological and political conflicts during the period of reformation was also **Elisabeth of Hattia or Rochlitz**, who was married to Duke Johann of Saxonia. She had put so much pressure on her catholic father-in-law, Georg of Saxonia, called „the Bearded“, until he finally organized the Leipzig disputation between Martin Luther and Johannes Eck in 1519. From the example of her mother Anna, Elisabeth had learned to preserve own claims and to defend them and also her sense of family cohesion. All her life she kept a close relationship to her brother Philipp. In 1537/38 she introduced reformation at her widow's domicile as a young widow, she became a member of the Schmalcaldian alliance in 1538 and tried by all means to prevent war. She lost her widow's domicile in 1546/47 by war and moved to Marburg. She died in 1557 and was buried in the church St. Elisabeth in her mother Anna's sarcophagus.

7. Scientists

Olympia Fulvia Morata (born in 1526 in Ferrara – died in 1555 in Heidelberg), an Italian, had almost become the first female university professor in Heidelberg.

Olympia Fulvia Morata was the daughter of an Italian humanist. From early childhood she had been interested in science, the classic languages Latin and Greece and in poets of the ancient world. A friend of the family, Coelio Secundo Curione - one of the first Italians who had been in contact to German reformers-, enthused Olympia's father for the protestant teachings. Since 1540, Olympia had lived as a teacher at the court of Ferrara. The duchess Renata d'Este or Renée de France (King Louis XII.'s daughter) had in her French home country come into contact with reformatory ideas and attached great importance to the education of her daughters and sons.

Furthermore the duchess harbored French religious refugees in Ferrara and together

with Olympia she fought for a man, who had been accused as heretic because of his reformatory confession. In 1549 Olympia married the German physician Andreas Grundler, left Italy and went to Schweinfurt. In 1554 during the conquest of Schweinfurt by the imperial army she lost her precious library and her manuscripts. When her husband was called to the University of Heidelberg, Olympia received a lectureship for Greek language, however she died in 1555 from tuberculosis. Posthumously, in 1558, the first edition of 50 letters and several smaller writings was published, edited by her paternal friend Curione.

8. Woman hymn poets

Let us have a last short glance at **Elisabeth Cruciger** (born around 1500 at the German-Polish border – died in 1535 in Wittenberg), the first protestant woman hymn poet, since the year 2012 has passed under the topic „Reformation and Music“. One of her hymns can be found in our protestant hymn book until today at number 67: „Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn“ in the epiphany chapter. She was born as Elisabeth of Meseritz in Pomerania, joined a convent at early age (presumably the premonstratensian convent Marienbusch close to Treptow). She corresponded with the baptized Jew Joachim of Stettin and exchanged theological ideas with him. In 1522 she left the convent and was received in the house of Johannes Bugenhagen in Wittenberg, where she got to know Luther’s pupil and assistant Caspar Cruciger. The two married in 1524. By order of Luther, Cruciger became rector and preacher at the newly founded Johannis school in Magedburg in 1525, in 1528 he became a professor in Wittenberg. Together with her husband and their belongings Elisabeth moved from place to place and gave birth to two children: Caspar, the younger, later became Melanchthon’s successor, later he belonged to the reformed denomination, and the daughter Elisabeth, who - as a widow - married Luther’s son Johannes. Elisabeth Cruciger died in 1535 in Wittenberg.

9. Summary

Women of all classes and from all social population groups were actively involved in the incidents and conflicts during the period of reformation, also in the disputes during the peasant upheavals and in the so called radical-reformatory movements as e.g. the Baptist movement.

Especially the beginning period of reformation is a witness for the diversity in print media which was triggered by women with their pamphlets and polemic papers. After the peasant upheavals in 1525 and along with the institutionalization of reformation almost only woman regents succeeded in actively influencing the events. Considering their effects the most sustainable institution remained the institution of the protestant vicarage, which has over the last 500 years generated many dynasties of clergymen and which - as a place – has emanated spiritual-theological and cultural impulses. The more family and household became private issues and the more it lost its former political function, the more the model of the clergyman's wife became restrictive to women. Generally, the clergymen's wives worked in a function subordinated to their husbands as unpaid assistants within the parish. The church authorities, the parishes and even the clergymen's wives used to regard this for centuries as a matter of course until women in the 20. century started to study, to start an own career and to go their way as female theologians and ordained ministers.

Reformation has introduced the congregational singing in German language as constitutive element of the church service. After laypersons had been pushed back from theological discussions and disputes after 1525 church music had remained the only working field where lay theologians had been allowed to work sustainably for centuries.

In the long run reformation gave fresh impulses to the education of girls and women by requiring at least an elementary education for both boys and girls.

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