

David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, Young Center Books in Anabaptist & Pietist Studies, 2016. Pp. xvii+414. Hardcover, \$49.95 USD.

One of the hallmarks of Mennonite history and identity is suffering. Mennonites have valorized suffering across the ages in tales of martyrs, migrants, conscientious objectors, and of victims of persecutions of many stripes. Of particular staying power within Mennonite and Anabaptist circles is the monumental *Martyrs Mirror*, and in particular the iconic image of Dirk Willems. David Weaver-Zercher in his book, *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History*, has provided a timely and invigorating exploration of the history of *Martyrs Mirror*. Though his thesis is self-described as “straightforward,” in that *Martyrs Mirror* functioned and still functions “as a measure of Christian faithfulness” (x). The stories of martyrs thus are much more than heroic tales, rather, they play a pedagogical role in transmitting the model answer to one of the key reformation questions, how to live the Christian life. For Mennonites and Anabaptists, martyrs exemplified “spiritual resolve” and “the content of authentic faith” (x).

As straightforward a thesis it is, Weaver-Zercher has written an intricate and sophisticated history of a book, its reception, and the role it played for a religious people centuries and continents removed from its seventeenth-century authorship. If the book has largely remained the same, the reading of it has not. To approach the subject, Weaver-Zercher divided his book into three parts each with four chapters. It moves historically through three distinct periods: the prehistory and production of *Martyrs Mirror*; the reading of the martyrology over the centuries, focused on North America; and then four distinct contemporary uses of the text, which completes a compelling and highly readable account of likely one of the two most influential books in the Mennonite and Anabaptist experience, the other being the Bible.

In the first part, Weaver-Zercher provides us with an exacting account of not only the creation and Dutch context of *Martyrs Mirror*, but of the long running Christian practice of memorializing persecution and martyrs. Noting early on that while not every Anabaptist was persecuted, Anabaptism grew up with martyrdom as a “part of life” (20). After four chapters of contextualizing the history of the martyrology in its Dutch context, examining the role of wealth in its creation as well as the myriad of available martyrologies, Weaver-Zercher has presented a near exhaustive account of

the production, context, and source material that came to be *Martyrs Mirror*. From here we learn of its reception in North America over the past centuries.

Over the course of part two, one significant point that is made is that over centuries, and through a complex process, a Dutch martyrology became an American text. As Mennonites migrated to North America already in the seventeenth century, *Martyrs Mirror* also made the Atlantic voyage and from colonial America to Revolution to twentieth-century civil rights activism, *Martyrs Mirror* was an instructive text guiding Mennonites from a “quiet in the land” posture to active engagement by the time of Martin Luther King. Moreover, *Martyrs Mirror* was not just an inspirational or instructional text, here, and throughout its history, it is also a commercial product.

Part three, takes us through how Mennonites on different places of the assimilation spectrum used *Martyrs Mirror*. There were key differences in how more traditional Mennonites and those more assimilated read and used the book; the important point is that they all did. Finally devoting a chapter on a single martyr, Dirk Willems, is appropriate considering how he serves as a Mennonite icon and is easily the most reproduced image in Mennonite and Anabaptist history—from reverence to satire. Ending the study with the *Martyrs Mirror* going global takes the micro-experience of Willems to the macro, as the stories, art and reading of the Anabaptist martyrology confront new challenges of audience, wealth, poverty and others. As Weaver-Zercher concludes his examination, he cautions against overstating the sustaining value of *Martyrs Mirror*, as other texts and elements of inspiration also played roles. But it did play an important one for centuries and, in many different ways, it addressed the question asked at the start, how did this particular martyrology become a measure of faith and spiritual resolve? Weaver-Zercher is to be congratulated for his contribution to Anabaptist and Mennonite history, but also for his excellent example of work in book culture, in a fashion both enlightening and engaging.

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