

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Davis, David J. From Icons to Idols: Documents on the Image Debate in Reformation England

John N. Wall

---

Volume 41, Number 3, Summer 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085700ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i3.31584>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Wall, J. (2018). Review of [Davis, David J. From Icons to Idols: Documents on the Image Debate in Reformation England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(3), 213–215. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i3.31584>

**Davis, David J.**

***From Icons to Idols: Documents on the Image Debate in Reformation England.***

Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 2016. Pp. xii, 211 + 4 ill. ISBN 978-0-227-17629-0 (paperback) US\$45.

David Davis's work brings together voices from the English Reformation on the subject of images, beginning in the early 1520s and continuing into the early years of the seventeenth century. Even though the title promises a debate, his collection reflects more the cases made for or against the waves of iconoclasm that swept across England from the earliest days of the Reformation. One strongly suspects that few of their opponents were convinced of anything by the voices on either side of this controversy.

Given the dramatic changes in both Catholic and Protestant practices, customs, and beliefs since the early modern period, the iconoclasm of the English Reformation can now be recognized as one of the great tragedies of that age. Today, Catholic and Lutheran authorities sign agreements on the Doctrine of Justification, the side altars Catholic priests once used to celebrate Masses for the dead are mostly left untouched, and the Bible is read and the Mass is celebrated in the vernacular by a priest facing the congregation in Catholic churches.

On the other side, Anglican clergy routinely wear priestly vestments, the Eucharist is most frequently the central service of the parish on Sundays and Holy Days, and a monastic community founded by the current archbishop of Canterbury lives corporately on the grounds of Lambeth Palace. Parish churches that can find remnants of medieval images eagerly uncover them because their presence increases the possibility that tourists will visit.

In light of such changes, Davis's work reminds us of the passion the Reformers put into their efforts to carry out what they viewed as the purification of worship and spiritual life. Along with their efforts to end the sale of Indulgences, to redefine the Mass as a communal meal, and to eliminate belief in our capacity to affect the status of our ancestors' souls, Reformers also sought to remove from church buildings what they believed to be corrupt uses of visual images.

The multiplicity of positions taken by the individuals Davis has brought together in this volume helps us recognize the complexity of the Reformers' efforts to redefine the sacred. Davis includes brief excerpts from nineteen

writers, including familiar figures like William Tyndale, John Jewel, and William Perkins, and lesser-known writers like John Ryckes, John Martiell, and John Heigham. He also includes images, notably the title page of the Great Bible (1539) and illustrations from the Geneva Bible (1560) and the Bishops Bible (1568). Davis organizes these entries into three sections, with seven entries from the early Reformation (but nothing from the reign of Mary), nine entries from the first two decades of the reign of Elizabeth I, and six entries from the later years of Elizabeth's reign and the early years of James I.

The voices Davis chooses from each period illustrate a helpful diversity of opinions. I was particularly happy to find John Maritall, William Bishop, Robert Bellarmine, and other voices from the Catholic side; as one more familiar with the Anglican side, I missed a few voices, like that of Richard Hooker, that might have been included. I also missed any medieval voices that might have helped set the stage for what was to follow.

I also wondered why Davis stopped with the early seventeenth century, not venturing into the years before the outbreak of the Civil War when much of the controversy around images was played out all over again, only this time very much within the confines of the Church of England. One might in fact consider the execution of William Laud and the destruction of the Church of England itself in the 1640s as the final and greatest act of English iconoclasm, short-lived thought it was.

Davis uses that diversity to remind us of the variety of iconoclasm in this period, including the official acts of removal commanded by church or state authorities as well as the more individual acts of destruction carried out by folks perhaps inspired by official rhetoric but also potentially motivated by more private concerns. One remembers an account of a particularly enthusiastic iconoclast who ascended church bell towers to scrape the names of saints off the bells, an act hardly consequential for achievement of the Reformers' goals.

Whether these voices are actually "representative" of that diversity, as Davis hopes, is more difficult to determine. After all, since what survives from this period is restricted to what was written down rather than actually spoken or thought, we are unable to assess the true depth or breadth of public opinion on any subject. So the extent to which any individual voice represents more than that individual's belief is open to question, more dependent on the model the author uses to choose his evidence than on its reliability as a guide to the persuasiveness of these individuals' opinions.

What Davis does bring us is, nonetheless, a valuable reminder of the significance and complexity of the issues and the actions Davis evokes through his collection. There is much, much more to discuss on this subject, including the ebbing and flowing of iconoclastic acts; the continuance of some practices such as the use of distinctive vestments, but not others; the unevenness of destruction (stained glass was swept away in some places but not others, and its use was being recovered late in the sixteenth century, for example); and, perhaps most important, the ways in which all these issues led to the fracturing of the Reform movement in England as the seventeenth century unfolded. I suspect that Davis's collection will serve as a spur to further research, which is the best and highest aim any scholarly work can have.

JOHN N. WALL

North Carolina State University

**Diamond, Jeff.**

***Ingratiation from the Renaissance to the Present: The Art and Ethics of Gaining Favor.***

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017. Pp. xviii, 217. ISBN 978-1-4985-4889-2 (hardcover) £70.

As many critics have observed, the sixteenth century was unusually preoccupied with dissimulation and pretense and their relationship to currying favour and social advancement. Jeff Diamond's *Ingratiation from the Renaissance to the Present: The Art and Ethics of Gaining Favor* explores the ethical dilemmas faced by Renaissance intellectuals who struggled to win over patrons and other powerful figures while staying true to their own principles and maintaining some degree of independence. Diamond analyzes the works of four of the greatest thinkers of the Renaissance—Machiavelli, Erasmus, More, and Montaigne—to see how they answered such questions as “Where is the boundary between innocent shading of truth and actually lying?” and “When does laudable affability slip into an unprincipled sycophancy?” (xvi).

Such dilemmas are unquestionably timeless, and Diamond's introduction underscores the point by familiarizing his readers with Anthony Robbins, the so-called father of the life-coach industry. Although the recounting of Robbins's