

Incombustible Lutheran Books in Early Modern Germany

Avner Shamir. *Incombustible Lutheran Books in Early Modern Germany*. Routledge, 2021. 204 pp. \$160.00. Hardcover. \$48.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780367151201.

Avner Shamir, whose previous work includes research on the burning and desecration of early modern Bibles, presents here an investigation of the exact opposite—Bibles and other Lutheran literature that, having survived fires, were declared miraculously incombustible. Shamir asserts that incombustible books were transformed from devotional texts into material objects to be preserved and collected. By documenting instances of unburnt books from 1620 to 1750 and the narratives constructed to commemorate the events, Shamir persuasively demonstrates that not all contemporaries interpreted these events as miracles. He states the need to examine the negative evidence against the miraculous opinions. Furthermore, a variety of terms were used to describe these events, such as “unusual, wondrous and divine.” Often, the narratives disseminated after the events took on a life of their own. The result is that early modern Lutherans interacted with incombustible books in a variety of ways and the objects were promoted differently depending on the context.

One cannot approach the subject without considering Robert Scribner’s 1986 article on incombustible images of Martin Luther, which Scribner described as a cult of Luther similar to the Catholic popular devotion of saints. Shamir thinks Scribner’s ideas are convincing, but finds his use of Luther Bibles to support his case unpersuasive. This is partly because works by Luther were a small minority of the incombustible books reported and collected in early modern Germany. Rather than Luther’s works or biblical translations, the books surviving unburnt were prayer books, devotional works and hymn books. More than any author, the works of the Lutheran theologian Johann Arndt, particularly his *Paradiesgärtlein*, survived in the largest number of instances and it was the narrative about the incombustibility of his works that was most frequently retold and generated the most interest.

The first chapter offers an overview of the historiography of incombustible books, demonstrating that interest first emerged during the Thirty Years’ War. This was a time of great destruction often resulting in fire. Combined with the confessional conflict of the war, books surviving fire were promoted as examples of Lutheran supremacy over Catholic enemies. But later, incombustible books, such as those by Arndt, were used in internal Lutheran debates to support Arndt’s orthodoxy. However, by the eighteenth century, skepticism and downright rejection of incombustible books was common.

Chapter two examines the narratives crafted to disseminate stories about incombustible books. The earliest reports, originating in the 1620s and 30s, were imprecise, offered few details, and did not necessarily attach a miraculous interpretation. Shamir writes that nearly all these stories were forgotten in time. It was the 1624 survival of a copy of Arndt’s *Paradiesgärtlein* that broke the mold. In at least sixteen instances, the book is documented as having survived fire (and in one instance, water). The first was in 1624 in the town of Langgöns, when an invading Spanish lieutenant threw Pastor Justus Geilfusius’ copy of the *Paradiesgärtlein* into an innkeeper’s oven. The book survived and quickly ended up in the collection of Landgrave Philipp of Hessen-Butzbach. Early reports described the book’s survival as an unusual, isolated incident. Pastor Geilfusius did not suggest the survival of his book was miraculous. Nor did two theologians who examined the book and story on

behalf of the Landgrave. And yet, the event came to signify the superiority of Lutheranism over Catholicism. Neither the title nor author of the book was important, but simply that it was a Lutheran book.

It was on the title pages and in the prefaces of later editions of Arndt's prayer book that the story took on new significance. The miraculous nature of the book's survival was emphasized, which was portrayed as divine favor for Arndt's orthodoxy. Shamir writes that those involved in the publishing of Arndt's works played an important role in crafting and disseminating the miraculous survival of his books.

After the survival of another *Paradiesgärtlein* in Ulm in 1694, the local superintendent argued that while the book's survival was wondrous, it could not be miraculous, since several other sacred books, including a New Testament, were destroyed. However, there were instances where Bibles survived accidental fires. Shamir notes there were not many and that because so many Bibles were printed and thus statistically, were more likely to survive, that contemporaries were less willing to celebrate their unexpected survival as miraculous. Of the few that were described as miraculous, such as a Bible in Nordhausen in 1710, Shamir notes that rather than it being used in orthodoxy debates, its survival was used to compel atheists to return to the faith.

This contrasts with Scribner describing contemporaries interpreting the survival of Luther Bibles as divine approval of Luther. Shamir describes this evidence as inconclusive and shows that in a 1717 book about Luther and incombustible objects, the word "miraculous" was included in the Latin text but omitted from the German. Rather, Shamir states that the link between incombustible Bibles and Scribner's incombustible Luther was not the Reformer, but the timing of the narratives and their participation in the same genre.

After examining various narratives of incombustible books, chapter three focuses on the material objects and how they were used and portrayed after surviving fire. While there are stories of them being used in religious settings, many ended up in princely collections. Some were completely untouched by fire, some smelling of smoke, and others so badly burned that the text was hardly legible. In one example in Halle, all that remained was a single leaf. Shamir writes that these objects were no longer meant to be read, but to be seen and to memorialize. From the 1680s, demand outstripped supply for incombustible books, especially for those seeking unburnt copies of Arndt's works. The King of Prussia expressed interest in a copy of Arndt that miraculously survived a fire, but was uninterested in the other books that survived.

Declaring an unburnt book a miraculous event clashed with the Lutheran belief in the cessation of miracles. There was much debate within Lutheranism about miracles and many believed that they were confined to a specific period in the history of early Christianity. Because Lutherans did not consider their confession a new faith, but a continuation of true Christian doctrine, there was no need for miracles to prove its validation. Chapter four focuses on the nuances in the meaning of miracle and the different views within the larger debate. Because many Lutheran theologians denied the existence of contemporary miracles, they were skeptical of incombustible books. Instead of miraculous reasons, they sought natural causes for unburnt books, such as gilding, strong leather bindings or the fact that tightly bound paper burned slowly. In the case of the famous 1624 *Paradiesgärtlein*, the oven was found to have contained only a few coals. While the earliest instance of incombustible books also had contemporaries doubting its miraculous nature, by 1750, skepticism and doubt was widespread.

The last chapter, serving as a conclusion to the monograph, reiterates that incombustible books were not used as evidence for Lutheran superiority in the interconfessional controversies. Although the earliest instances took place during a time of Catholic and Lutheran conflict, the events demonstrated Lutheran convictions in their beliefs and divine providence. Instances of unburnt books peaked in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and first quarter of the eighteenth, long after the end of the Thirty Years War. Shamir stresses that dissemination of an unburnt book's narrative was crucial for turning the episode into a miraculous event. He also emphasizes that believing in the miraculous survival of books was not a practice reserved for the uneducated, but that learned clergy members were fundamental to authenticating miracles and that princes had an active role in preserving and spreading these narratives. Most importantly, Shamir convincingly demonstrates the variety of opinions, showing that unburnt books were not automatically considered incombustible or miraculous.

The project's bibliographic focus demonstrates Shamir's engagement with a wide range of primary source material spread across nearly one hundred fifty years. Not only are these books investigated in their contemporary settings, but Shamir also tracks their provenance history over the centuries, showing that unfortunately only a few are extant today. While it is no easy task identifying and tracking these copies, Shamir went further, tracking later editions that referenced unburnt books on their title pages and in their prefaces, details unlikely included in bibliographic catalog data and discovered only with systematic physical inspection. It is unfortunate for a project with such a bibliographic focus that there was no bibliography or appendix listing copies or editions identified as having survived fires or contemporary books referencing such events. In sum, if Scribner's article continues to be an entry point into the study of incombustible objects, this book serves as the necessary follow up, detailing how narratives were crafted and disseminated, how these objects were sought by collectors, and how from the beginning their miraculous nature was questioned and debated by theologians representing the diversity of views within early modern Lutheranism.

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