

Matthew Laube: Christological Songs in the Discipline-Houses of Seventeenth-Century Germany

From the beginning of the Reformation, songs about Christ marked Protestant devotion and identity. It was newly penned Christological hymns like “Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein” and “Es ist das Heil uns kommen her,” circulating in variety of cheap formats, that early followers of Luther used to sing down priests and disrupt the Catholic mass. Whether printed in hymnals or on broadsheets, or sung in homes, churches, or on street corners, Christological songs undergirded a plethora of Lutheran and Reformed practices ranging from domestic devotion and confessional polemic to religious and general education. One context for early modern Christological songs that has hitherto gone unexplored is prisons. This paper is the first large-scale exploration of devotional singing in seventeenth-century discipline-houses, and probes widely held Protestant beliefs in the power of religious singing—particularly songs about Christ—to discipline social delinquents and induce moral and physical transformation in those incarcerated in cities across northern Germany and the Dutch Republic. Taken together, surviving iconographical, administrative, and cheap devotional material expands understanding of the environments where early modern Christological songs were sung and their social function to educate and induce societal change.