

Book Review: Crime and Forgiveness: Christianizing Execution in Medieval Europe by Adriano Prosperi

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Adriano Prosperi. *Crime and Forgiveness: Christianizing Execution in Medieval Europe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 657 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.

Crime and Forgiveness, the latest work in English translation by the prolific Italian historian, Adriano Prospero, shatters academic paradigms surrounding the connected nature of law and religion. Prospero's work is a carefully crafted narrative that allows the reader to understand the wide range of ramifications that spring from religious legitimization of capital punishment on a deeper level than previously accepted. Prospero argues that "the religious legitimization of violence" had more consequences than just the death penalty (p.vii). From the outset, the author is clear that his analysis does not represent an exhaustive examination of capital punishment. Instead, he asserts that his work will, "wait until the whole of humankind has turned its back on the death penalty" (p.xi). By establishing *Crime and Forgiveness* as a necessary survey of the subject, Prospero has built a defense into his framework, allowing omission of niche materials to not render his argument invalid.

Prospero sets the stage for his work, mentioning the wide-ranging reactions to former U.S. President, Barack Obama's, announcement of the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 (p.1). The author uses this example to highlight the core of his argument, that the religious legitimization of violence has done more than unilaterally create the death penalty; indeed, individual cultures have manifested the bond between blood and justice in many ways, and to different degrees.

To support his argument, Prospero carefully begins his narrative by demonstrating the theoretical framework for the reader. He notes the differing rationalizations the Catholic Church used to support violence, while at the same time preaching, "Thou Shalt Not Kill." (p.11-12). From that point, Prospero expertly weaves together examples, starting with Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* as one of the first works to criticize the death penalty, then moving on to the idea of comforting the condemned in Medieval Europe. The author continues his narrative

by providing examples of these different concepts while tracing their path over time, resulting in the “Slow Epilogue of Comforting in Nineteenth Century Italy” (p.514). By crafting such a narrative, Prosperi has provided a variety of different examples of how to apply the strategies needed to achieve the more comprehensive analysis the author argues the academic community should create. The author has even included an in-depth index, understanding the differing needs of readers, and facilitating the use of the work. This difference of needs of the reader is inconsequential to Prosperi’s argument, since the author’s true focus was to demonstrate the skills needed to create a more complex analysis than the death penalty.

Adriano Prosperi is a prolific historian and journalist. He began his career training at the University of Pisa and the *Scuola Normale Superiore*. Prosperi continued his career teaching at the University of Calabria, Pisa, and Bologna. He has written over fifteen books on different subjects and examples of how religious perspectives can intersect with legal thought. Specifically, Prosperi has focused on the heretical movements of the sixteenth century in Italy. Prosperi continued to create nuanced and provocative works for the field of Italian History into his status as Emeritus. *Crime and Forgiveness* is no change from Prosperi’s established pattern of nuanced and provocative works that have revolutionized the current paradigms in the field. The author uses *Crime and Punishment* as a response to the academic discourse touting the death penalty as one of the only creations of the religion legitimization of violence.

Crime and Forgiveness is wildly successful on multiple levels, ranging from a survey of historical information to a commentary against the current schools of thought in academics. Prosperi has created an expert defense of the material, even rationalizing the prevalence of Italian material as indicative of the tradition of “*Misericordie*” (p.vii). The result is a brilliant

work for all audiences from those academics specializing in Italian History, to students looking for the ideal primer on Italian History and legal thought.

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