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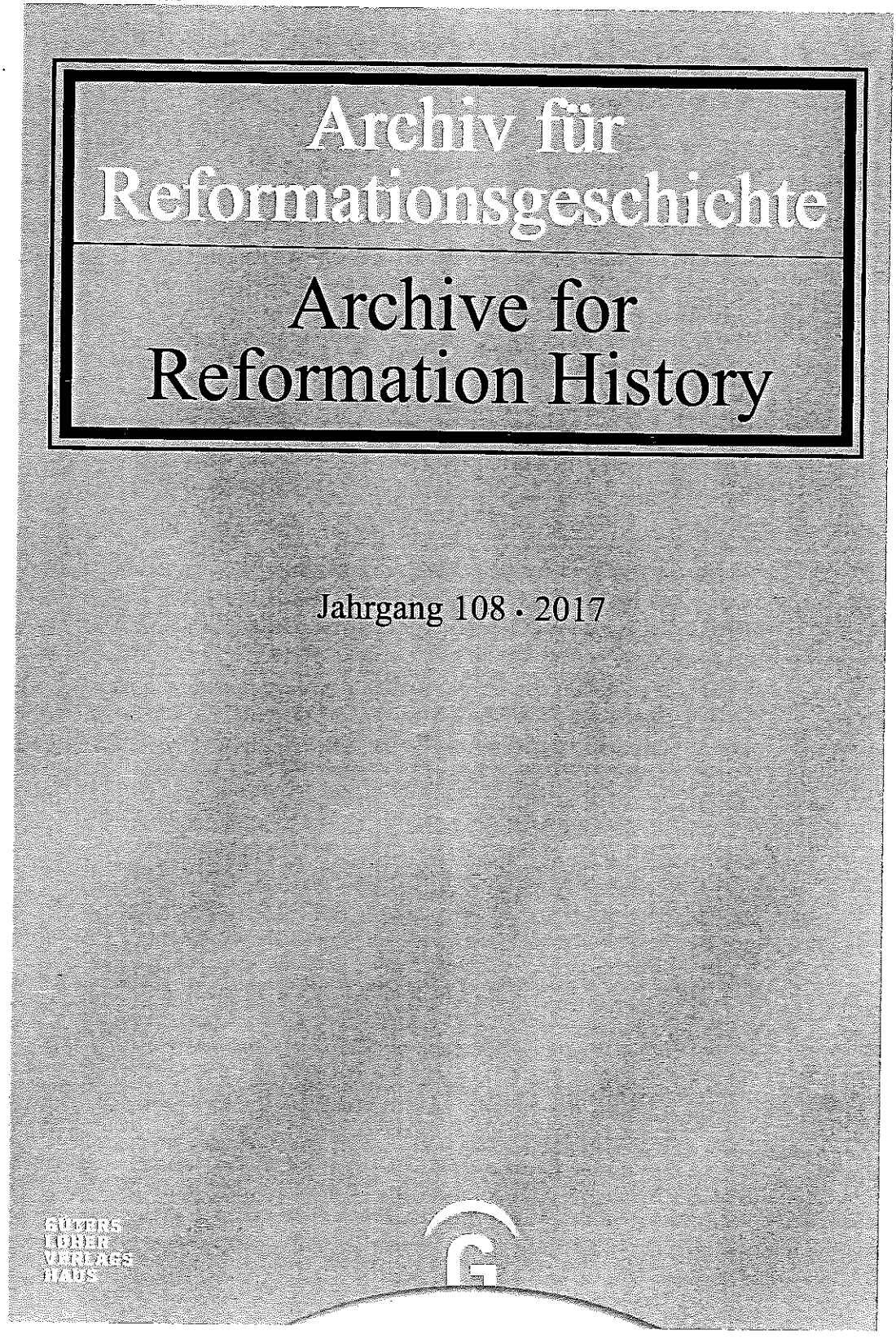

Global? Has Reformation History Even Gotten Transnational Yet?

By Philip Benedict

Today, few buzzwords circulate more among historians than "global" and "transnational." And if any field of history would appear to be naturally transnational, if not global, that field would be Reformation history – or so it appeared to me for a long time as an American historian of the subject. The Catholic Church was always a supra-national institution. The Protestant Reformation was a movement that rapidly transcended the initial association of the *causa Lutheri* with that of a German Hercules to expand across territorial borders to the farthest reaches of Latin Christendom, with echoes even beyond.[1] The new Protestant churches that emerged from the Reformation, while organized institutionally on a territorial basis, shared common confessional statements, exchanged theologians across borders, and built transnational networks of collective solidarity.

As I now realize, the fact of teaching in North America also made it natural for me to think in pan-European terms. Even if American historians of Europe tend to focus their research on a single European country, and even if members of large history departments or specialists in the recent past may teach courses on the history of individual nations, the teaching field that most American historians of Europe have typically been assigned to cover for generations has been that of the history of the continent as a whole, or at least a notional Europe consisting of the larger countries from Spain to Germany. European History, as distinct from the national history of any given

1. For aftershocks of the Protestant Reformation felt beyond Latin Christendom: Andrey Ivanov, "Reformation and the Muscovite Czar: Anti-Protestant Polemic in the Writings of Ivan the Terrible," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1109-1129; and Dénes Harai, "Une chaire aux enchères. Ambassadeurs catholiques et protestants à la conquête du patriarcat grec de Constantinople (1620-1638)," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 58 (2011): 49-71. For a demonstration that Reformation-era Protestantism could in rare cases span the globe as Catholicism regularly did: Shona Vance, "A Man for All Regions: Patrick Copland and Education in the Stuart World," in Allan Macinnes, Arthur Williamson, ed., *Shaping the Stuart World, 1603-1714* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 55-78; Polly Ha, "Godly Globalization: Calvinism in Bermuda," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 66 (2015): 543-561. The Scotsman Copland was chaplain to the East India Company before becoming a minister in Bermuda.

European country, actually has deeper roots in North American universities than in continental European ones, where only recently has the construction of the European Union begun to nudge historians to break out of the previously all-pervasive framework of national histories, and even then often only through participation in common European projects in which each participant brings to the table a story about a single country, usually her own.

As a newly appointed assistant professor starting to teach courses on the subject in the late 1970s, I also thought that a single broad, exciting trend could be seen transforming the national historiographies of the Reformation across western Europe. Bernd Moeller's *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (1962, French translation 1966, English translation 1972), Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), Jean Delumeau's *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire* (1971, English translation 1977) and Carlo Ginzburg's *Night Battles* (1966, French translation 1980, English translation 1983) and *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976, English translation 1980, French translation 1980, German translation 1996) all in their different ways seemed to announce a massive paradigm shift. Church history was giving way to religious history. A focus on the beliefs and lived religious experience of the "chrétien quelconque d'autrefois" was displacing the history of theologians, Popes and saints. Where the study of Luther's theological breakthrough had galvanized the previous generation working at the German center of the field, now the exciting issue was how his ideas and those of others who marched alongside him for a while before diverging were disseminated, received and acted upon. A broad new, continent-wide research agenda had emerged. The task of the next generation would be to map the character of local religious life at the end of the Middle Ages, to explain the success or failure of rival programs of religious reform in the different regions of Europe against this backdrop, to chart the changes in religious life that followed from the Reformation-era upheavals, and to reassess their broadest social, political and cultural consequences. Soon, events also suggested that this paradigm shift might become truly pan-European. The fall of Communism and the intensification of intellectual interchange between scholars from countries previously separated by the Iron Curtain encouraged scholars in the West to adopt a more geographically capacious vision of Europe than that which had previously unconsciously shaped their work. Volumes such as *The Early Reformation in Europe* (1992) and *The Reformation in National Context* (1994) took pains to include chapters on the smaller countries of Europe's peripheries. When I set out to write a general

history of the Reformed tradition to 1700, the only canvas on which I could imagine doing so properly was one stretching from Transylvania to Scotland and even Massachusetts.[2] Likewise, when I surveyed twentieth-century Reformation historiography in the United States for a volume on American historical writing, I presented recent developments within it as having chiefly been shaped by the broader international trends within the field that I have just sketched here.[3]

For all these reasons, I was at once surprised and dismayed a few years back to open the special issue with which this journal in 2009 marked the appearance of its one hundredth volume. The stated purpose of its collection of eighteen commissioned essays was to survey the course of Reformation history since World War II and the current state of the field, but the large research program that I had always seen driving the past generation's work could scarcely be discerned within the volume, much less assessed to see how far we had progressed in fulfilling its agenda, because with three exceptions all of the essays had been pre-formatted into narrow national and linguistic pigeon-holes, organized country-by-country, with work about the larger countries then further divided between the relevant literature in English and in the language of the land in question. Within their assigned confines, the essays were generally excellent. Contributions such as Maria Craciun's on the Reformation in Romanian and Hungarian historiography or Lu Ann Homza's on the recent literature on religion and spirituality in Spain drew attention to historiographic landscapes and significant bodies of literature with which few readers were probably previously acquainted and about which few authors assigned to write about larger themes in Reformation history would have said much. But the division of the subject into fifteen separate national and linguistic compartments, with its implicit assumption that each national historiography evolved largely in isolation from the others, foreclosed extended discussion of common trends or concerns that might have shaped the field across these boundaries.[4] Even though the

2. Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

3. Philip Benedict, "Between Whig Traditions and New Histories: American Historical Writing about Reformation and Early Modern Europe," in Anthony Molho, Gordon S. Wood, ed., *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 295-323.

4. It also ensured the complete omission of such great books as François Rapp's *Réformes et Réformation à Strasbourg* (Paris: Ed. Ophrys, 1974) or Etienne François's *Protestants et catholiques en Allemagne. Identités et pluralisme: Augsbourg, 1648-1806* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), since it

introduction highlighted internationalization as one of the central trends of the post-war era, the shape of the volume precluded assessment of the extent to which the growing volume of international exchange had eroded differences of perspective that had previously characterized work in different languages. Such a fragmented treatment of the subject seemed particularly surprising coming from so international and polyglot a journal.

Until my recent return to the United States, I lived and worked in Europe for twelve years. With the benefit of that experience, I now see that I probably should not have been surprised by the approach adopted by the journal's editors for 2009, although I think that on balance I should still be dismayed. Particularly in Europe, for all the changes that have brought historians from different countries into closer contact with one another over the past generation, several powerful structural forces continue to divide those who work on the religious history of the long Reformation era into discrete, if partially overlapping, networks and universes of discourse. If we are to continue to move in the direction of a more capacious and illuminating transnational perspective on our subject, it may help to be aware of them.

The first of these forces is the continuing weight of national histories. As I have already suggested, European history has been slow to develop in Europe, even with the many recent forms of encouragement offered by European Union funding agencies. To be sure, the overwhelming concentration on the national history that characterized historical instruction and research within just about every European country until very recently is now diminishing. In France, the subjects chosen for the *agrégation*, the competitive examination that shapes both curricular offerings and recruitment into the teaching profession, increasingly encompass a geographic area that reaches beyond the hexagon. Large ERC grants involving international collaboration are the holy grail of funding. Scholars increasingly move across borders for conferences and research leaves and know what kind of work is being done in several languages about the subject that interests them. Nonetheless, the structure of most larger European projects remains that of bringing together contributors who each write or speak about a single case or country, usually their own, rather than challenging individual authors to master and synthesize the different national histories, and in so doing to develop an adequate framework

left no room whatsoever for the possibility that either German- or English-language Reformation historians might read and take on board what their French colleagues wrote about the subject.

for making sense of the whole. Such mundane considerations as proximity to archives and confidence that one will understand the language of the sources continue to encourage research in local and national history. Political considerations do too, for even with the advance of European integration the nation remains the principal locus of political power, loyalty, and engagement across the continent. The mode in which national history is now written is very different from what it was a century ago. Where once historians believed that an accurate telling of their country's saga would reveal its essential nature and inspire justifiable pride, now they are more likely to suggest the contingency of formative events and to challenge myths of exceptionalism or essentialism. Yet old paradigms overturned leave ghost traces behind, and it is very hard for historians to escape the sheer weight of the intellectual traditions in which they are formed. To a greater extent than we would all like to admit (and as is only proper in a field with a long history of valuable scholarship behind it), a large part of what historians teach and write simply repeats, with modifications around the edges or a reversal of perspective, what those before them taught or wrote about the subject. For all these reasons national history and national schools of historiography are far from dead or dying.

Language barriers remain a second ongoing force impeding the development of a transnational perspective on Reformation history. American historians may regularly teach courses on European history, but rare is the historian educated in America, where the norm is to learn just one ancient or modern foreign language at secondary school, who eventually masters enough tongues to keep up effortlessly with the latest literature in more than one or two languages other than English – if the university library even buys books in other languages any more. Those raised in multi-lingual European countries whose secondary schools emphasize ancient as well as modern languages can more easily obtain the capacity to draw on multiple scholarly traditions, but even the best-educated offspring of the sort of European families one increasingly encounters – where the parents hail from two different countries and live in a third – will never master all 23 officially recognized languages of the European Union. Furthermore, linguistic division is much more than a matter of the limits of any individual's language skills; it is also an issue of initial formation and access to books and journals. Textbooks and general histories rarely get translated; these are what shape students' initial vision of their field of study. Mature scholars remain most likely to have access to and read the books and journals in their own language. It takes an active effort and often a lot of travel to keep

abreast of what is being published in four or five languages, even assuming that one has the capacity to read them all equally effortlessly. Of course, English dominates more and more these days, especially in smaller countries whose national language does not have enough native speakers to support the vigorous domestic publishing of academic works and textbooks. Scholars in Belgium and the Netherlands eager to reach an international academic audience now often choose English over Dutch when they write an ambitious monograph on their national history. Nonetheless even the most ambitious books in English do not reach students or become well known in France or Germany if they are not translated. English's dominant position within historical scholarship is nothing like what it is in the hard sciences, where publication and even instruction in English is now the norm across Europe. And let's hope it never will be. The importance that historians accord to the literary dimension of their craft argues for continuing to write in one's native tongue unless one has completely mastered English. The aspiration of the discipline to inform a wider public argues for continuing to ensure that books appear in the language of one's primary audience. For the foreseeable future, it will continue to behoove would-be historians of Europe to learn as many languages as they can and to make the extra effort required to keep abreast of the most important publications in languages other than those most easily accessible to them, difficult though this remains even in the age of amazon.com.

In case of Reformation history, a third obstacle also hinders the development of a transnational perspective on the subject: the field's German problem. Nowhere else has the Reformation been as central to the telling of the country's national history as it has in Germany. No other sixteenth-century religious figure occupies as central a place in national consciousness as Luther does in Germany. Nowhere else, then, is the temptation stronger for historians to think of the Reformation as an epoch in the national history and to relegate what happened elsewhere to a brief epilogue at the end of the story.[5] Furthermore, Germany's universities have always been and still are home to an unusually large number of historians of the Reformation. In addition to the many "profane" historians who have seen the Reformation

5. Compare in this regard the nearly contemporaneous general histories by a leading German and English specialist: Thomas Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Reformation* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2009); and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

as constituting a distinct and critically important epoch within the national history, church historians specializing in the era abound within the Federal Republic's state-supported theology faculties, and they are currently less threatened with extinction or downsizing than their counterparts elsewhere, since secondary education in Germany includes courses about religion, and studying church history thus offers a route to a career as a teacher at a *Gymnasium* as well as a pastor. An exceptionally long and rich tradition of scholarship that is particularly likely to conflate Germany's national experience of the Reformation with the general history of the subject thus continues to bulk particularly large within the world of international Reformation scholarship. As is suggested by the pattern of translations revealed by the titles that I highlighted in the third paragraph as particularly important in reshaping the field in the 1960s and 1970s, it also appears to feel little need to look outside its linguistic area for inspiration.

Now of course, since the Protestant Reformation began first in Germany, events there will always rightly occupy a central role in any broad, European-wide telling of the story of the Reformation. So where is the problem? I would suggest that while German history must occupy a *central* place in the story of the Reformation, it too often becomes the *privileged* point of reference for thinking comparatively about the fate of the Reformation in different lands, when in fact the course and outcome of the Reformation within the Germanic cultural world was actually highly idiosyncratic when compared with the history of Protestantism elsewhere. Because of the peculiarly contested and decentralized character of political authority within the Empire and its Swiss, Baltic and southeastern margins, as well as the particularly dense and decentralized network of printing presses that was quickly able to amplify Luther's call to all who understood his language,[6] Protestantism spread and came to be institutionalized there with a concentrated intensity and speed that has no parallel anywhere else. For this reason, comparisons to illuminate the course and outcome of Protestantism's development in any non-German-speaking area of Europe are likely to be particularly revealing when made with other such areas where the movement also had to transcend linguistic barriers and confront more powerful national monarchies than when made with the German case, as I and colleagues have sought to suggest with

6. Andrew Pettegree, *The French Book and the European Book World* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), esp. chs. 10, 13.

conferences comparing France to the Low Countries and Italy.[7] Furthermore, nowhere else in Europe did the Reformation mark so clear a step forward in the growth of state power as in the Lutheran principalities that appropriated control over the territorial church and extended their legislative power into new domains of human life with their *Kirchen- und Polizei-Ordnungen*. Given Germany's weight within the international marketplace of Reformation scholarship, this specificity did not impede Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard's strong theory of confessionalization, which clearly is most applicable to the German case, from shaping much of the wider recent discussion of the long-term consequences of the Reformation, when other paradigms might better have stimulated more insight into the similarities and differences between the confessional families that emerged from the upheaval.

"What is the problem with doing national history?," it might also be asked. After all, in a world of increasing mobility and immigration, national history has not lost its civic function. On the contrary, it may now be more important than ever, since instruction in national history helps immigrants understand the place to which they or their parents moved, and facilitates their integration into their new political community, when and if they are allowed to join it. In Switzerland today, at least in Geneva, a case can easily be made that students learn too little about their national history, not too much. Furthermore, engagement with specific national issues can serve as a powerful stimulus to scholars to undertake the hard labor of archival research, while distinctive traditions of national scholarship generate diverse concerns and approaches that enrich the field as a whole. Within Reformation history broadly defined, has any recent body of research revealed more in the past generation than that which has mined from Italy's inquisitorial archives so much new information and insight about folk beliefs, learned heterodoxy and the politics and institutional development of the Roman church?[8] Would nearly as many Italian scholars have tackled these archives without the Italian left's essentially insular preoccupation with coming to

7. Philip Benedict, Guido Marnef, Henk van Nierop, Marc Venard, ed., *Reformation, Revolt and Civil War in France and the Netherlands, 1555-1585* (Amsterdam, 1999); and Silvana Seidel Menchi, Alain Tallon, ed., *La Réforme en France et en Italie: Contacts, comparaisons et contrastes* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2007).

8. For an excellent overview: Silvana Seidel Menchi, "The Age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Italian Historiography," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte / Archive for Reformation History* 100 (2009): 193-217.

grips with the Catholic Church's enduring hold on the country's politics and its concern to reveal traditions of resistance to its hegemony in the period from the Renaissance to the Risorgimento? Would their readings of the documents have been anywhere near as rich without their distinctive intellectual heritage shaped by Benedetto Croce, Antonio Gramsci and Delio Cantimori? Scholarship will certainly be impoverished if we ever reach a point where historians around the world all work from the same instruction manual with the same tools.

That said, my own personal intellectual itinerary has convinced me strongly of the multiple benefits of transcending a purely national approach to any historical subject. As good fortune would have it, I was introduced to early modern history by one of the most European historians of a generation that included many refugees ripped out of their original national context by the experience of Nazism and war, the German-born, English-educated historian of European representative institutions and Habsburg government in Italy and the Netherlands, H.G. Koenigsberger.[9] I came to focus my attention on France for the most banal of reasons; French was the foreign language I had learned at school. The happy consequence was that I encountered the work of the *Annales* School as a graduate student about to undertake research. Its excitingly different approach to history from the one that I had initially absorbed from my chiefly English-trained professors taught me methods that were very important for my early work and that still today seem to me insufficiently integrated into the toolkit of most Reformation historians. Writing an ambitious work of transnational synthesis in mid-life subsequently led me to see how different were the historiographic traditions that had shaped and often blinkered the history of the Reformed churches in France, the Netherlands, England, Scotland and Germany, and how much these differences owed to the particular historical experience of the churches within each country. When I returned to archival work on the national case I knew best, I came with a substantially larger range of questions and points of comparison than I had previously been able to bring to bear on it.

Not only does a transnational perspective on any subject enable the historian to discern supra-national trends and structures at play within it; it facili-

9. On whom see now the excellent intellectual biography by M. J. Rodriguez-Salgado, "Helmut Georg Konigsberger 1918-2014," *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* 14 (2015): 301-333.

tates seeing what is locally specific and thus what requires special explanation. Breaking out of national or linguistic pigeonholes gives historians exposure to a wider range of methods and questions that might illuminate their subject. It sharpens awareness of the interplay of the specific and the general within the story they tell. It inoculates against the tendency to take a local manifestation of a tradition for the tradition as a whole. It increases the possibility that their telling of their story of choice will contribute toward what should always be one of the profession's larger collective projects: building and refining wider understandings through the multiplication of case studies. Within the specific field of Reformation studies, they who only perceive post-Reformation Lutheranism or Calvinism or Catholicism through one national manifestation cannot grasp the full range of the tradition's possibilities and nature; there was simply too much regional and national variation within each confessional family in institutional arrangements, spirituality and political context. Until the varied patterns of spirituality, institutions and political situations within Lutheranism and Catholicism are mapped as I sought to do for the Reformed tradition, it is hard to answer the most important question about the Reformation's long-term impact on European society: namely, what behavioral or psychological differences it made when an individual or a territory became Protestant or Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed. Given the variety of currents and situations within each confession, even a comparative analysis of a multi-confessional locality or of different confessions in three different places can only take on its full significance once one understands where the local manifestation of each one studied fits within the spectrum of variation within the confession. From Joseph Lecler to Benjamin Kaplan, the history of toleration is a subject about which some of the best works have long been transnational.[10] As the world enters a new age of religious warfare, we need similarly wide-lensed accounts of how church-state relations were reorganized, laws and church teachings about religious others modified, rights of individual conscience recognized and blasphemy decriminalized across Europe's diverse polities from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Continued movement toward a genuinely European, transnational history of the long Reformation

10. Joseph Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (Paris: Aubier, 1955); Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007). Also exemplary from this point of view on a related theme: Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

era is, on balance, devoutly to be wished for – in fruitful tension, let us hope, with more local and national preoccupations as well.

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