Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte

Archive for Reformation History

Jahrgang 97 · 2006

Gütersloher
Verlagshaus

Inhalt

Focal Point/Themenschwerpunkt: Post-Confessional Reformation History

Introduction

By Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Anne Jacobson Schutte

For the October 2004 meeting of the Sixteenth Century Society and Conference, that organization's president, Edward Muir, organized a roundtable discussion of post-confessional Reformation history. Susan C. Karant-Nunn chaired the session. Given the fascination with this subject expressed by members of the audience, an overflow crowd of more than two hundred people, we have decided to publish revised versions of the three presentations made on that occasion, along with a fourth commissioned essay.

In North America over the last generation, major shifts in historiography on the Reformation have occurred. Around 1970, when we entered the profession, scholars confessionally committed to Protestantism, mostly men, defined and dominated research on the subject. The following decades have been marked by great diversification in personnel and approaches. Not only have numerous women made their perspectives known; researchers of non-Protestant, indeterminate, or no confessional allegiance have joined the ranks of Reformation scholars. Many of them, furthermore, have adopted innovative approaches quite different from and broader than older formulations of the question, "Wie kam es zur Reformation?" The assessments of these changes that follow, we believe, will interest readers around the globe.

To avoid misunderstanding, we wish to issue a disclaimer affidavit. That these four essays focus exclusively on the "Protestant" and "Radical" Reformations does not imply disregard of or lack of interest in early modern Catholicism on the journal's part. As the range of studies published during our editorship makes clear, we consider developments in Catholicism to be an integral part of Reformation history.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die vier Essays des Themenschwerpunktes befassen sich mit dem Stand der Reformationsgeschichte in Nordamerika nach dem Verlust der konfessionellen Deutungshoheit und der zunehmenden Pluralisierung der Interpretationsansätze in den letzten Jahrzehnten.

What is Post-Confessional Reformation History?

By Philip Benedict

From where I sit, the question "what is post-confessional Reformation history?" does not strike me as terribly complicated. Two features define it. The first is a strong sense of the historical contingency of the various post-Reformation confessions: the recognition that their essential features were not fixed from the start, but instead both their core beliefs and their boundaries came to be defined over time in dialogue and dispute with rival confessions. The second defining feature is the recognition that few components and impulses found within any given confession were unique to it. On the contrary, many values and practices were shared widely across the churches that emerged from the Reformation. As a result, strong claims for the uniquely progressive role of any one confession can be advanced only with the utmost caution. Since I need not linger too long over the problem of defining post-confessional Reformation history, I propose to look as well at two additional questions. *Are we being post-confessional yet?* That is, do significant pockets of confessional historiography remain within the world of international Reformation scholarship, and are they significantly distorting our understanding of key phenomena of the period? *Do we want to be fully post-confessional?* That is, would it be a good thing if all confessional influence and interest were eliminated from the world of Reformation scholarship?

Two major shifts have been central to the history of Reformation historiography over the past fifty years. The first has been the shift from church history to religious history: from a historiography in which the history of theology reigned supreme and the focus was on key thinkers, leading churchmen, and prominent founders of new religious orders or movements to a historiography driven by anthropological approaches to religion and an interest in what Jean Delumeau famously called the *chrétien quelconque d'autrefois.* This shift has been underway since the 1970s, when books such as Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*[1] and Delumeau's *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*[2] pointed the way to a new research program for the field. According to this program, the goal of Reformation history was no longer primarily to understand the origins and formation of specific theological positions and traditions. It became instead to map the character and regional di-

1. London 1971.
2. Paris 1971; English translation, London 1977.

versity of Christian belief and practice on the eve of the Reformation, to examine how this fed into the Reformation upheavals, and to explore how these upheavals in turn changed the religious experience, affiliation, and identity of people of all social strata in the various corners of Europe and beyond. It was such a powerful and large research agenda that many aspects of the picture remain to be filled in, even though so much of the work of the past thirty years has been carried out within it.

The second important transformation – not as important as the first, but still significant – has been the growth of awareness of the ways in which confessional agendas or concerns have often distorted our understanding of central aspects of the story of the Reformation, combined with a conscious desire to move beyond this by studying religious traditions other than one's own or by doing explicitly comparative studies of several confessional traditions. To be sure, even fifty years ago confessional agendas and attachments were hardly all-determining within Reformation studies. To find them at their most intense, one must go back to the late nineteenth century, when Catholic and Protestant historians offered mutually exclusive accounts of key events in works that bristled with indignation at the perfidy of the other camp. By the mid-twentieth century, a wider domain of shared ground had emerged. Innovative historians were already beginning to approach the history of Christianity with "alien" categories drawn from the social sciences, as in the efforts by Preserved Smith and Lucien Febvre to use Freud in order to understand Luther. Yet it remained the case that most of those who wrote about any particular religious tradition were themselves members of that tradition. Their desire to understand its past was often inflected by a concern to define what it could mean to be a certain kind of Christian in their own time. More than other fields in history, Reformation history was the domain of believers.

Over the past 50 years, many of those of the field who are believers have been moved by ecumenical impulses to study other confessional traditions. A growing number of Reformation historians are non-believers drawn to the subject by their conviction of the critical importance of religion for understanding the transformations of the early modern world. As this broader range of concerns has driven research, and as our knowledge of the details of key moments and topics has deepened enormously due to the growing volume of scholarship, it has become clearer and clearer that in many key respects, the once prevailing accounts of topics such as the early history of Lutheranism, the early history of Anabaptism, or the history and character of Calvinism were not so much faithful accounts of a complicated historical reality as particularly attractive foundation myths for particular denominational identi-

ties and outlooks. The methodological lesson that needed to be drawn has been consciously articulated, and students are now warned against adopting a narrowly confessional approach to a given topic.

In the aftermath of these two trends, what does - or will - post-confessional Reformation history look like? A comprehensive post-confessional overview of the long Reformation era would start with a survey of the complex, regionally and sociologically differentiated, layers of traditions, beliefs, and practices that made up the world of Latin Christendom around 1500. It would go on to explore *all* the different currents and aspirations for reform that took shape in the first decades of the new century and trace the complex processes by which some of these triumphed and others came to grief in different parts of Europe, carrying the story down to the point where the new post-Reformation confessional map of Europe had finally reached some sort of stability and the reforming impulses had been implemented as fully as they would be at the local level across Europe. It would explore how thoroughly practice and belief were changed at the local level by these transformations and what consequences these changes had for social, political, and cultural as well as religious life. And it would do all this without essentializing what were always evolving and contested traditions, and with appropriate attention to transconfessional influences and comparisons. In short, it might look very much like such recent works of synthesis as James Tracy's *Europe's Reformations 1450–1650*[3] or Diarmaid MacCulloch's *The Reformation: A History*.[4] These two works, intended to serve as textbooks, suggest that such an approach is now becoming standard.

Are we being fully post-confessional yet? Not entirely. Institutional structures ensure that confessional considerations come into play when appointments are made in Reformation history in many divinity schools in North America and state-supported theology faculties in Europe. Certain corners of Reformation scholarship, for instance the study of Anabaptism and the radical Reformation, may even be currently undergoing a partial re-confessionalization. Those from outside the affiliated traditions who for a brief moment were drawn toward this subject by its apparent kinship with the politics and counter-culture of the sixties, and who made it for the span of a generation perhaps the most exciting single sub-field within Reformation studies, are now moving toward retirement. Fewer outsiders are now drawn toward the study of the subject. Consequently, those from within the tradition, for whom

3. Lanham, Md. 1999.
4. London 2004.

it naturally occupies a high priority, once again dominate the subfield of Anabaptism/radical Reformation.

When one reads widely about the Reformation across national boundaries, one discovers quickly that different national literatures have different preoccupations and different pockets of particularly intense debate, often ones that descend from enduring controversies within the particular country's national religious life or ongoing struggles about the place of different religious groups within the national community. Confessional impulses remain part of what drives these debates as well. Take, for example, the two great debates of the past thirty years that have set so much of the agenda of English Reformation history: whether a Calvinist consensus existed within the Elizabethan and Jacobean church, and whether England quickly and enthusiastically became a Protestant nation or only grudgingly accepted the Reformation as a result of the accidents of dynastic succession and royal decision. Both speak to fundamental questions about English national identity and the original shape of the Church of England, high church or low. Some of the historians who did the most to launch these debates seem to have been encouraged to adopt the positions they did at least in part by their personal religious convictions.

I cannot pretend to know the personal convictions of all who have entered so enthusiastically into the recent English debates. Still, from what I do know, it seems clear that although some participants were motivated partially by their personal religious beliefs or background, many others joined the fray and took the stances they did either simply because this was what they thought the evidence suggests, or out of a desire to deflate national mythologies, or else to show how clever they were in scholarly argument and reap the professional rewards that come with doing so. In the contemporary academy, all three motives are even more powerful than confessional ones. Whatever the initial motives of the participants in these debates, they have had an undeniable scholarly payoff, not only adding greatly to our understanding of the relevant aspects of English religious history but also providing leads that specialists in other regions should follow. Inquiries about the nature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean church, for instance, have illuminated the history of theology in the second or third generation after the Reformation far better than is the case for virtually any other country in Europe.

If aspects of the English debates seem to non-combatants to have been ill posed or sterile, this is at least as much because investigators working on England have operated in a narrowly national context, without reference to (or perhaps knowledge of) the historiography of the same subject in other lands, as it is because latter-day church disputes generated narrow or anachronistic

question framing. For instance, to those writing about the pre-Reformation situation in England, it has often seemed sufficient to demonstrate the vitality of popular attachment to many Catholic practices that came under theological attack during the Reformation in order to assert that subsequent assault on these practices must have come from above and from outside. Yet scholarship on religious life on the eve of the Reformation in areas of continental Europe that became hotbeds of the evangelical cause has shown that these too were places of intense commitment to many practices that came under attack in the Reformation. Scholars have long suggested the very centrality of these practices to popular piety may have intensified the disillusionment and anger people felt when they became convinced that the practices in which they once had invested so much emotion and money were unscriptural and antichristian.

Reading across various national historiographies, one sees that the tendency of each national tradition of Reformation historiography to foreground certain questions for investigation leaves others in the shadows. The best corrective for this problem lies in encouraging students to read widely across different national historiographies, as opposed to insisting that they devote all their time to reading every monograph in the ongoing debates within one national historiography. At the present moment, more than endeavoring to achieve a post-confessional Reformation historiography, we need to concentrate on constructing a post-national Reformation historiography. The forces propping up national specialization and an outlook shaped by familiarity with the questions and methods of scholarship in a single language community or national tradition remain considerably stronger than those supporting a narrowly confessional approach to the Reformation.

No, we are not fully post-confessional yet, nor should this worry us excessively. On the contrary, while we all need to be on guard against all forms of parti pris or limited knowledge that lead to tendentious or partial histories, it would be unfortunate if we ever were to stigmatize confessional motives for studying the religious history of this period so completely that those inspired by such motives found that they could not get jobs or were directed away from topics of special interest to them. Personal commitments to a given cause can distort historical investigation, but they also often inspire. There are so many neglected corners of the religious history of early modern Europe the investigation of which is kept alive only by the small band of people who feel the need to explore them for the inspiration or light they can shed on their own tradition and practice. If this sort of work were devalued, it would be a loss for the field, for original discoveries remain to be made in such areas. It is also extremely salutary for those of us like myself who write from outside

any particular religious tradition to know that experts with a deep personal and professional commitment to that tradition are going to read our books and chastise us if we get details wrong.

For Reformation scholarship in North America, the most serious threats to the long-term health of the field come less from the remaining pockets of confessional historiography than from the current culture wars that now make so many liberal intellectuals tone deaf or hostile to most varieties of Christian religious tradition. Positions within history departments dedicated to Reformation history that are now falling vacant through retirement are particularly vulnerable to being reallocated to other areas of study. If they are filled, most likely under the rubric of early modern rather than Reformation history, candidates doing research located near what once were the core areas of the subject, the history of theology and ecclesiastical institutions, run the risk of being passed over by search committees in favor of those exploring topics that lie far from the *coeur religieux* of the subject but conform to the dominant historiographical trends of the moment in other branches of history. I cannot stress too strongly that it was precisely within such old core areas of the field as the dating of Luther's Reformation breakthrough or the genealogy of Anabaptism where the most fundamental empirical work took place that exposed the limitations of narrowly confessional approaches to these topics. Subjects such as these are far too important to be left entirely to historians associated with theology faculties and divinity schools, no matter how broad and ecumenical their visions may be.

Given the institutional structures of the field, it will probably always be the case that scholarship about the Reformation will be vulnerable to two kinds of distortion at the margins. Some historians of theology will insist so strongly on the importance of the conceptual distinctions that their professional authority necessitates their mastering, and will be so suspicious of all forms of what they perceive as social reductionism, that they will overlook the many very clear ways in which extra-theological influences shaped the formation and reception of religious messages. Some social and cultural historians of religion will be so fascinated by the implications of religious movements for gender dynamics or long-term social and political transformations that they will caricature or fail to understand the conscious motives and beliefs of those who made and responded to these movements. So long, however, as these two groups are able to meet on the common ground of empirical historical investigation and civil debate, these extremes pose no threat to the health of the enterprise as a whole. On the contrary, particularly in countries like the United States and Canada, increasingly divided in sensibility and language between

the religious and the secular, it is useful to have different sorts of institutions and different kinds of impulses driving people to want to learn more about a subject.

Philip Benedict
Institut d'histoire de la Reformation
Université de Genève
3, Place de la Université
CH-1211 Genève 4

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Obwohl an den neueren Überblickdarstellungen von James D. Tracy and Diarmaid MacCullough deutlich wird, daß die Reformationshistoriographie im wesentlichen nicht mehr konfessionell determiniert ist, gibt es doch weiterhin eine konfessionell geprägte Geschichtsschreibung an den „theological seminaries" sowie in der Täuferforschung. Dieser Pluralismus der Methoden ist einer durchgehend post-konfessionellen und säkularisierten Historiographie vorzuziehen, da er dazu beiträgt, neue Fragestellungen zu entwickeln. Statt das Ziel einer gänzlich säkularisierten Geschichtsschreibung anzustreben, sollten Historiker und Historikerinnen sich um eine post-nationale Reformationsgeschichtsschreibung bemühen sowie um den Erhalt ihres Faches als Teil des universitären Curriculums.