



**Karin Masser.** *Christobal de Gentil de Rojas y Spinola O. F. M. und der lutherische Abt Gerardus Wolterius Molanus: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Unionsbestrebungen der katholischen und evangelischen Kirche im 17. Jahrhundert.* MÖnster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2002. 528 pp. EUR 64.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-402-03809-3.



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## A New Look at Ecumenical Efforts in Seventeenth-Century Germany

This slightly revised dissertation for the theological faculty of the University of Innsbruck enriches our understanding of the unsuccessful efforts in Germany in the second half of the seventeenth century to reconcile the Christian churches, but it also exasperates the reader or, at least, this one. The author sets out to show that apart from the considerable political and ecclesiastical obstacles to reconciliation growing out of the confessionalization of the period, fundamental theological differences stood in the way of understanding. The Catholic side ultimately wanted a reunion, that is, the return of the Protestants to the Catholic Church, rather than a union, and the Protestant side expected a reversal of the Council of Trent that Catholics could not accept. Secondly, the author wants to emphasize the central role of two figures in these ecumenical efforts: Spinola, the Franciscan and later Bishop of Wiener-Neustadt, and Molanus, the Lutheran Abbot of Loccum in Brunswick. Both are often passed over for the better known philosopher and polymath Leibniz and the French Bishop Bossuet.

Masser emphasizes the personal element in these negotiations. A decided strength of the book are lengthy

biographical sketches of the two main figures up to the decisive conference of 1683 in Hannover. They constitute the two sections of the book after the introduction and amount to a double biography of 187 pages. The author nicely shows how Spinola's background colored his mentality. He was born in the Netherlands about 1626 to a Spanish noblewoman and an Italian officer in the army of Ambrogio Spinola; his mother left him with the Franciscans in Cologne in 1636, after the death of her husband in combat and before her retirement to a monastery in Spain. Though he did not travel to Spain for the first time until 1658, he remained very much, according to Masser, a Spaniard and thus committed to the orthodoxy of Trent. On the other hand, his background in the Netherlands inclined him towards irenicism and tolerance; at one point the author even associates him with the Tradition of Raymond Lull. Spinola rose quickly in the Franciscan hierarchy and the year 1659 found him back in the Spanish Netherlands on business for the order, and the following year found him in Vienna as the confessor of the imperial minister Prince Portia.

Spinola's ecumenical plans, Masser shows effectively,

belong to the broader context of his efforts to strengthen the empire economically, militarily, and politically at a time when the Emperor Leopold faced challenges from the Turks in the east and the French in the west. Indeed, one might see a certain parallel with Charles V in the first half of the sixteenth century—a ruler who, in the face of similar challenges, sought to overcome the growing confessional division on terms not unlike Spinola’s by making concessions on church order and discipline but not on doctrinal issues. In the early 1660s, Spinola fostered a plan for a trading company to challenge the Dutch in Asia and Africa but not America. The plan was to involve the emperor, the king of Spain, and the elector of Brandenburg, whom Spinola considered ripe for conversion. Indeed, during this period, a number of German princes did convert to Catholicism including Duke Johann Frederick of Brunswick-Calenberg. Spinola also promoted a more unified imperial military as well as administrative reform in the empire. The fortunes of his ecumenical efforts and the relative support that he received from the emperor and from the papacy shifted with the changing political situation during the next decades. He made at least four tours of German Protestant courts—his tour of 1673 lasted eight months—to promote ecumenical understanding as well as his other plans to unite the empire. Twice he traveled to Rome, where he generally found the cautious support of the pope. Masser finds in the bishop’s tendency to exceed his commissions and to exaggerate the readiness of the other side to make concessions, that is “to disguise the facts without actually lying,” a significant factor in the breakdown of the ecumenical project (p. 151). But she seems to absolve him of the charge, found in the literature, that his efforts were dictated largely by a desire to create a spot for himself in the limelight.

In the negotiations Spinola initiated, his interlocutor Gerardus Molanus reacted. Molanus held the seemingly anomalous position of abbot of the one-time *reichsunmittelbar* Cistercian monastery of Loccum. Born in 1633 in Hameln, he studied at the University of Helmstedt where he came under the influence of the moderate Lutheran Georg Calixt and his colleagues. Eventually he took a chair in theology at the University of Rinteln in Hesse and subsequently became the leading member of the ecclesiastical council in Brunswick-Calenberg, where he effectively represented the Protestant clergy and administered church affairs in a Protestant principality where the prince was Catholic. In 1671 he joined the monastery of Loccum, which had by this time been incorporated into the territory of Brunswick-Calenberg. One of Masser’s most interesting digressions discusses how Molanus rec-

onciled the monastic life, especially as represented by the Rule of St. Benedict, with Luther’s *De votis monasticis*. He always remained a genuine Lutheran, she maintains, but he never underwent nor understood Luther’s existential experience of salvation.

In the central section of her volume Masser looks at the crucial conference, intended to be secret, held in Hannover for five months in the winter and spring of 1683 between Spinola on the one hand and Molanus and several less enthusiastic Lutheran theologians on the other. The new duke of Brunswick-Calenberg, Ernst August, though not a Catholic like his predecessor, sympathized with the ecumenical project. He sought imperial and papal support for the transfer of the bishopric of Osnabrück to his house and for his elevation to a ninth electorate, a goal he achieved in 1692. Masser analyzes in great detail the two lengthy position papers that served as the basis for discussion at the conference, Spinola’s *Regulae circa Christianorum omnium ecclesiasticum reunionem* and the response of Molanus, the *Methodus reducendae Unionis Ecclesiasticae inter Romanes et Protestantas*, showing their ultimate irreconcilability. The two papers were to remain, according to Masser, the fundamental positions of the two parties as they continued their discussions after the conference, with Bossuet and especially Leibniz taking increasingly active roles. The last two sections of the book follow the further ecumenical discussions and the varying support or opposition the participants received from the Catholic and Protestant sides as the political situation changed. Noteworthy is Spinola’s *Confessio Hungarica*, drawn up in the early 1690s as part of his response to Leopold’s request, for the second time, to help mediate between the government in Vienna and the restless Hungarian Protestants. When he sent this text to Hannover, both Molanus and Leibniz rejected it as a basis for discussion. Exhausted by his travels and labors, Spinola died in 1695. Molanus did not follow until 1710.

Masser draws on an enormous number of sources, manuscript and printed, as well as on the vast secondary literature, and she provides an appendix of fourteen documents. Her volume presumes considerable background not only in the German and European history of the seventeenth century but also in its theology, and the text is interspersed with lengthy untranslated citations in Latin, Italian, and French in addition to German.

What is maddening about this volume is the author’s style. She writes at times in an impenetrable manner, so that this reader periodically found himself virtually dia-

graming sentences that ran for half a page. The volume unfortunately represents German “dissertationese” at its worst and its prose probably will daunt all but the most persistent specialists. The text cries out for editing. In- excusably, if perhaps understandably, the book lacks any index. I cannot imagine an English-language press publishing such a volume. Whether that is a plus or a minus, readers of this service will have to decide for themselves.

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