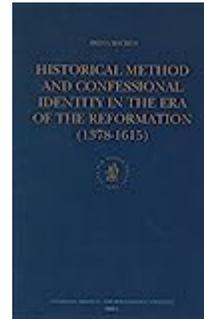




Irena Backus. *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378-1615)*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003. XII + 416 pp. \$145.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-12928-3.



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How Clio Met the Confessions

When discussing the confessions in the early modern period, we are still more inclined to think of theological quarrels, polemical disputes, or even civil wars rather than methodological discourses. Although the last decades have witnessed an increasing interest in the history of confessionalization, or the shaping of the different confessions in their political, social, cultural, and intellectual aspects, the function of historical writing in this process has often not fully been taken into consideration. First insights have been offered by scholars who no longer analyze early modern history writing in terms of criteria developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but rather place history in the broader context of memory.[1] Although *Historical Method and Confessional Identity* does not orient itself within the current trend of studies of “history and memory,” it stands nonetheless as a valuable contribution to the broader study of history, identity, and confession in early modern Europe.

In her book, Irena Backus, professor of Reformation history at Geneva and a specialist in biblical exegesis and the reception of the Church Fathers in the West, provides an exhaustive examination of the role accorded to history

by different reformers and their adversaries, especially to the history of the early church, and of their uses of surviving documents. In this last sense the book illuminates the contribution of the Reformation era to the development of an historical method (which included such matters as the uses of archival sources, the evaluation of ancient texts, criteria developed for determining truth, and so on). While Pontien Polman in his pioneering study in this field had argued that history and historical arguments were reduced to a role in service of religious controversies, Backus states that “the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were characterised by an interest in history first and foremost and that the very omnipresence of history made it the obvious means whereby theologians of all religious parties could affirm their confessional identity” (p. 3).[2] Even if such claims constitute a trend in several very recent studies, as readers we should still be careful with the assumption on which this thesis rests, that history is the main court of appeal for any religious identity.

The book is comprised of six thematically organized chapters. It starts with the Augustinian paradigm, which

is of special interest as it shows the presence of historical argument in the Great Schism at the end of the fourteenth century. In the Reformation era by comparison, the author claims, theologians became much more interested in historical sources for their own sakes. Chapters 2 and 3, previously printed but revised and well integrated into the study here, are devoted to pagan and Christian tradition in sixteenth-century thought and to patristic editions. Chapter 4 completes these two chapters by explaining the purpose of the patristic guides produced by all confessions, which was to impose order upon the increasing amount of patristic literature. Chapter 5 examines the Lutheran and Roman Catholic uses of historical documents. The last chapter presents the most important Protestant and Catholic histories of the early church and delineates their contribution to historical method.

The reason why the examination begins with the reception of Augustine in the late Middle Ages lies not only in the influence of Augustine's doctrine of predestination on the young Luther, but also in the crucial part Augustinianism had already played in late medieval treatises on ecclesiastical reform. Additionally, the rebirth of Augustine studies that accompanied humanism was embodied increasingly in the desire to read the full corpus of Augustine's writings rather than the *florilegia*, in the preference for older witnesses to the text, and in citations drawn from original works with the mention of provenance becoming ever more precise. But the direction of this development changed in the sixteenth century. Once the break with Rome was complete, Augustine could no longer serve as a common reference point defining the true Church. Reformers had to look to other models of the Christian past. While these reformers claimed figures like Wyclif and Hus as their predecessors (without excluding Augustine completely, who remains the main historical reference for the evangelical doctrine of justification and grace), their appeal to the past became more all-embracing. In the quest of confessional identity, Backus states, history became a central means of construction and expression. Here, we should make sure to consider Backus's claims in a larger context. While it is true that social groups often tell and write their own histories as a means of expressing identity, we should not forget that there are many other means of expressing identity and the sense of group solidarity, including songs, pictures, symbols, or rituals.

Reception of ancient tradition can always be a sign of historical consciousness. If the reception of ancient texts (by searching, discovering, reading, editing, or reusing them) constituted a general element of the human-

ist Renaissance, we should ask about the attitudes theologians held towards ancient texts, especially towards particular texts or groups of texts. Did their attitudes differ or go along with those of the humanists? Although the Genevan Reformer John Calvin himself made minimal use of the Fathers, this neglect did not present obstacles to flourishing Calvinist patristic scholarship, nor did Calvin avoid references to pagan tradition. Known for his dislike of scholastic speculation, Calvin redefined several Greek philosophical concepts to fit them for a Christian framework, like the philosophers' notions of virtue and happiness. While Calvin was not a humanist *strictu sensu*, he glimpsed and reworked links between Christian and pagan moral values. Calvin also found Greek philosophy to be a useful framework for his anthropology. In contrast with Melanchthon, he did not attempt to establish a continuity of values with virtues, but he did find philosophical values applicable to the Christian system. As for the Fathers, Calvin did not consider them fully because they neither shared his view of the Fall nor that of the bondage of the will, which might have been embarrassing to him. Sebastian Castellio, that great translator of both pagan and biblical texts, venerated pagan civilization. Although he found faith and purity of heart necessary for the true understanding of the Scriptures, he saw no problem in elucidating the letter of the Bible with other ancient texts, even pagan texts or apocryphal accounts, as long as they delivered philological data or historical facts. So, for Castellio the Bible was a historical document that could be altered or supplemented by data from pagan sources (but not by Christian tradition, which he regarded as being of no help here).

In the next chapter the book's focus narrows to the editorial activity of the reformers. As we have seen, although Calvin himself had little energy for the translation or edition of ancient texts, Calvinist circles did. In particular, the ante-Nicene fathers were attractive to both Catholics and Protestants.[3] As witnesses to the earliest history of the Church, they counted as the most serious guarantors of orthodoxy. Not surprisingly (and sometimes in order to increase their marketability, editions were liberally sprinkled with controversial and apologetic interpolations and additions. On the other hand, as Backus shows with the examples of editions of Irenaeus and Tertullian, interest in erudite editions, where controversy was subordinate to questions of accuracy of the manuscript, was not absent. Other editions, such as Theodor Beza's collections of works of several Fathers on the issue of Trinity, were preoccupied with combating current tendencies of Antitrinitarianism.

The plethora of patristic material available made it necessary for scholars to inform and orient the reading public. Backus shows that the existence of guides to the writings of the Early Church can demonstrate the general usefulness of patristic texts. The guides, which appeared essentially between 1560 and 1620, were focused on a larger reading public, lay and clerical, which was to be protected from possible misinterpretations. Whereas Lutherans produced only a few methodological guidebooks, Reformed Protestants intended them for pastors, and Roman Catholics envisioned the cultivated reader in general. Readers of the guides could draw support from them for their own beliefs.

But guidebook writers were not always successful with their recommendations. Robert Bellarmine, for instance, could not stop the promulgation of New Testament apocrypha by Roman Catholic theologians. Here again, we can find historical interest among the authors in addition to ideological motivation. Their contribution to historical method and historical consciousness consisted, if we follow Backus, in phenomena including: criticism of theological manuals for inaccurate citations and misattributions of certain works (like Hyperius); in their attempts at “purification” of the doctrine of the Church (accurate study and criticism of the text was seen as necessary, “purity” of text reflected “purity” of doctrine); in their discussion of translations (Greek or Latin—which is the better one?) and recommendations for the correct use of theological vocabulary. Moreover, they furnished criteria for distinguishing spurious from authentic writings, and last but not least, there was also a positive need for historical information (exemplified by Possevinus). The sheer existence of the guidebooks is an indication that there was in fact a larger reading audience for patristic texts, but social historians would always like to know more about this audience as well as finding information about prices, accessibility, and on reading practices.

Backus’s next chapter continues on this path in examining the uses of New Testament apocrypha. Indeed, minor orthodox early writers were put together in collections by scholars of all confessions, including Laurent de la Barre, Bibliander, Neander, or Grynaeus. Even Stefan Praetorius, a well-known editor of devotional texts, purveyed apocryphal texts, because he considered them to be useful for the study of history and also illustrated various forms of spirituality. But most Lutheran theologians did not share Castellio’s view that any ancient testimony was equally helpful for illuminating the Scriptures. In contrast, Roman Catholic collections were framed apologetically, were intended to edify readers and distinguish

clearly between pagans and Christians, as well as serving as sources of exempla. Backus offers suggestions as to the distribution of “history” in its role as a support of confessional identity, such as numbers of editions, guides, or use of patristic texts or ecclesiastical histories in schools and universities. But unfortunately she does not provide a systematic analysis of distribution and of the public audience of these texts. In her study, the bearers of identity are practically restricted to the group of theologians (who “somehow” distributed the ideas). The concept of “identity” has often been criticized, it is true, because identities are never clear-cut, there is often a hierarchy of identities, they can change, and they are—at least for institutional entities—more constructed than evolved. Despite these problems, I would not argue for avoiding this term. But can we nowadays talk about identities without analyzing their process of formation, in particular without asking whether identity development followed a top-down or a bottom-up model, who its bearers were, about its geographic spread, or its moments of resistance and inertia?

No book on historical method in the Reformation era can neglect the real histories of the early church produced after the second half of the sixteenth century: Carion, Melancthon, Chytraeus, Flacius Illyricus, and Baronius. Most of them are well known from the studies of Emil Clemens Scherer, Heinz Scheible, Claude-Gilbert Dubois, Bruce Gordon, or Martina Hartmann, not all of which are mentioned in Backus’s bibliography. I found most novel the sections on Simon Goulart and Gabriel du PrÃ©aux. Thus, this chapter does not really deliver new insights on the conception of history; instead, Backus focuses rather on their respective portrayal of the early church.

Overall, and this is also true for the other chapters, Backus’s proficiency in several ancient and modern languages is striking, and she wanders through different periods and countries like a true early modern humanist. The weak points of the book (the lack of attention to the extra-theological discourse, the use and reception of history and historical method in a broader social context, and discussion of how the confessional identity formulated among intellectuals was transmitted to common people) are compensated for by the fact that Backus provides an exhaustive and differentiated examination of the role of history in the different theological milieus of the Reformation era. As a consequence, the book serves as a valuable contribution to the development of historical method itself as well as to the origins of historical sciences, whose roots go further back than the nineteenth century. More research in the field of ecclesiastical histo-

riography might nonetheless—to my mind—benefit from the hitherto fruitful approaches regarding history as a form of memory that depends on contemporary social frames (such as confessionalization).

Notes

[1]. See several contributions in Joachim Eibach and Marcus Sandl, eds., *Protestantische Identität und Erinnerung. Von der Reformation bis zur Bürgerrechtsbewegung in der DDR* (Göttingen: Van-

denhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

[2]. Pontien Polman, *L'Évolution historique dans la controverse religieuse du 16^e siècle* (Gembloux: J. Duclot, 1932).

[3]. First steps toward a virtual library of the Church Fathers, edited by Gregor Emmenegger, can be found in: <http://www.unifr.ch/patr/bkv> (Accessed November 12th, 2004).

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