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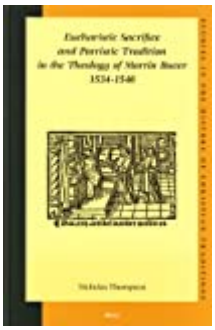

Nicholas Thompson. *Eucharistic Sacrifice and Patristic Tradition in the Theology of Martin Bucer, 1534-1546.* Leiden: Brill, 2005. 315 pp. EUR 109.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-14138-4.

Reviewed by Judith Becker (Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz)

Published on H-German (January, 2006)

Reunification of the Church by Interpretation of the Church Fathers? Bucer's Attempts at Irenic Theology

Thompson aims to present Martin Bucer as an ecumenical theologian who, at least for some years, developed an irenic theology, not for tactical but for theological reasons. By investigating Bucer's use of the patristic and theological tradition Thompson shows how Bucer could approach Catholic theologians and even come to some agreements. He also illustrates, however, how the whole attempt was ultimately doomed to failure because of different interpretations of the same patristic writings. For his study, Thompson focuses on the Eucharist. This topic was not only central to the Reformation debates and Bucer's theological conceptions, but there was a great deal of interaction between Bucer and Catholic theologians on the Eucharist.

The first third of the book presents an introductory description of the intellectual background of Bucer's theology in the work of the humanists and early reformers, including Luther, Oecolampadius, and Zwingli, but also less obvious early evangelicals such as Henri VIII. Thompson also describes the different Catholic approaches of the time. He then turns to Bucer. First, he introduces the development of Bucer's ideas in his early writings (1523-1531). He does not follow the usual periodization of Bucer's life in decades but centers his studies on Bucer's reconciliatory activities: preparations for an ecumenical council, colloquies, and fundamental treatises on the Eucharist. Here, too, a chapter on Catholic irenic writing is inserted.

Thompson focuses on the years 1534-1546, when Bucer hoped and tried to reconcile the Reformation with the Catholic Church and thus to restore unity. The study ends with an analysis of the treatise *De Vera et Falsa Caenae Dominicae Administratione* (1546). Thompson demonstrates the development of Bucer's Eucharistic theology. Bucer wanted to restore true ceremonies gradually. Unlike other reformers, Bucer did not seek to change everything at once, but began with abolishing the ceremonies he thought most dangerous for the souls of the believers and aimed at changing other ceremonies later. One of the reasons for this attitude was the central role of pastoral care in Bucer's theology, which evolved from his view of the church as a community of love. The

other and, according to Thompson's study, even more important reason was Bucer's concentration on the basis of ecclesiology, which made all other elements and ceremonies *adiaphora* and therefore changeable. The church was founded on faith in Christ and love of one's neighbor; as long as this principle was not questioned, ceremonies could be negotiated. His intensive study of church history demonstrated to Bucer the historicity and thus the relativity of many of the church's rites.

In his introduction, Thompson draws the reader's attention to a fact that explains Bucer's attempts at integrating the church's traditions in his theology (in addition to his interest in theological reunification): his pastoral concern for his Catholic neighbors. A strong motif for not abolishing false Catholic ceremonies immediately was his fear of alienating Catholic believers. Bucer hoped to win the hearts of the faithful with slow changes rather than by an abrupt restoration of true ceremonies.

Chapter 2 is entitled "The Place of Tradition in the Debate on the Sacrifice of the Mass." From Luther's attack on the Eucharist as sacrifice, Thompson moves on to the meaning of tradition for early sixteenth-century theology and the means by which knowledge of tradition was supplied, above all, via anthologies of the works of important thinkers. He states that the difference between humanists and their scholastic predecessors lay mainly in their understanding of tradition. Erasmus, for instance, interpreted the sacrifice of the mass as an opinion about which people could well dispute but for which they did not need to die. Already in humanism, Thompson finds the distinction between the essentials of Christian faith as prescribed in the Bible, subsequent more complex definitions made by the church, and currently disputed opinions, a distinction that would enable Bucer and his Catholic counterparts to seek a consensus in the 1530s and 1540s.

Thompson then treats early debates on the issue of the mass as a sacrifice. Here, as in the following chapters, he does not present his material chronologically but rather analytically via theological topics such as "opus operatum," "sacrificium," or "sacramentum sacrificii." Thompson presents not only Luther's and other reformers' critique of the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist but stresses the points where they interpreted it in a way that allowed for the use of traditional terms. Melanchthon, for instance, stated that the Mass could legitimately be called a "sacrifice" if the believers offered their thanksgiving and confession (pp. 39-40). The second half of the chapter is dedicated to a description of contemporary Catholic approaches to the Eucharist, stressing the difference between "Scotist" and "Thomist" explanations.

The subsequent chapter on the role of patristic testimony as a factor in the Reformer's debates over the mass again shows points of convergence between Catholic and Protestant theologians. They agreed that the memorial of the Last Supper represented Christ's sacrifice, that the Eucharist was effective in an objective way, and that Christ was the principal agent in the Eucharist. They did not agree, however, on the use of tradition. While Catholic writings were mostly defensive, minimizing differences between the ancient Church and sixteenth-century Christianity, Protestant reformers insisted on the primacy of Scripture. For them, tradition only assured their correct interpretation of the Scripture.

Chapter 5, "Bucer's Early Writing on the Mass (1523-1531)," lays the foundation for the following chapters. Thompson shows that the foundation of Bucer's Eucharistic theology was laid as early as the beginning of the 1520s: in faith in God and love of one's neighbors, as well as communion of the faithful with Christ, their head. This principle would not change. The theme of development mentioned earlier gets a third interpretation in this chapter: according to Bucer, individual believers as well as the church must grow and develop towards full communion with Christ. The longer Bucer read the Church Fathers the more he became convinced that they witnessed to the same theology as his.

Chapters 6 and 7 present Bucer's and Catholics' approaches to an ecumenical council (1534-1540). Thompson points out the influence of the MÃ¼nster Anabaptist experience on Bucer's ecclesiology and attitude towards tradition. From this time, Bucer laid more stress on tradition and institution. Erasmus, Georg Witzel, and Johannes Gropper prepared a Catholic theology that at least seemed to open the way for reconciliation with irenic Protestants like Bucer.

Efforts for unity culminated in the *Worms-Regensburg-Book* of 1541 (chapter 8). Thompson demonstrates how common formulations could be found but also shows the different ways in which they were interpreted. The *Worms-Regensburg-Book* therefore was not a document of consensus but rather a big misunderstanding–despite being based on common ground. For the moment Gropper, Bucer, and the other contributors thought they had really agreed on the different articles. This chapter is one of the most original and most important of Thompson's study, since it gives a

detailed analysis of the *Worms-Regensburg-Book*, its theological background, influences, and contributions to the articles on the Eucharist.

"The Aftermath of the First Colloquy of Regensburg (1541-1546)" is analyzed in chapter 9. The dimension of the Catholic/evangelical misunderstanding became visible in the attempted Reformation of Cologne. Bucer now turned his defense of unwritten tradition, which he had developed in his writings against the Anabaptists, against Catholic theologians. While Bucer still recognized tradition, written or unwritten, as offering important theological insights and truths, he now denied his Catholics opponents the ability to interpret tradition correctly. Chapter 10 describes the theme of Eucharistic sacrifices in two important texts by Bucer. Here again Thompson shows how Bucer "sued for ownership of the Eucharistic patrimony" (p. 225). Thompson sees two main points of divergence between Bucer and his opponents: the words used (not the contents!), and the question of which conclusions to draw from their insights, that is, if and how to implement changes.

In his conclusion, Thompson stresses that Bucer did not only neutralize tradition but appropriated the church fathers "in a relatively nuanced and sympathetic way" (p. 280). By distinguishing between the basics of Christianity as laid down in Scripture and their actualization, he was able to acknowledge many of the church's traditions. Summarizing the results of his study, Thompson points out that the debates between reformers and Catholic theologians in the early 1540s contained diplomatic language, ecumenical engagement, misunderstanding and some common ground. Neither Catholics nor reformers may be regarded as self-contained.

In this study, Thompson offers some new insights on Bucer's theology. More than that, he exemplarily shows strengths and limitations of irenic theology in the 1540s. Nonetheless, this is a book for specialists. Readers are assumed to know Bucer's life, at least basics of his theology and the historical background of the writings and events discussed. Although Thompson gives a short introduction to each chapter, much historical and theological knowledge is presupposed in order to fully savor Thompson's study. Specialists, however, will learn a lot from it.

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Citation: Judith Becker. Review of Thompson, Nicholas, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and Patristic Tradition in the Theology of Martin Bucer, 1534-1546.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

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