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History as a Weapon in Controversy

L. W. SPITZ

Eduard Fueter, ascribing the development of modern historiography to the Lutheran Reformation and more particularly to the purposes of polemics, declares that Protestant church history was created solely for the needs of confessional polemics. Ancient church history was to furnish the proof that Protestantism, in contrast to Catholicism, had preserved the original purity of Christianity. Medieval church history was to expose the terrible darkness to which the rule of the Antichrist had led.¹

This agrees with Menke-Glueckert's observation that in the final analysis the history of historiography is the history of the change in one's view of the world (*Weltanschauung*). Everything, says Menke-Glueckert, depends on this view of the world, which sets for history a definite goal, examines the way which humanity has pursued to reach this goal and must still cover, supplies new criteria of evaluation, and necessitates a different arrangement of materials, of criticism, and combination of facts.²

Bernheim lists three main stages in the development of historiography: the narrative, the didactic or pragmatic, and the evolving or genetic.³ These terms also furnish convenient criteria for the evaluation of the history of any particular period. The evaluation may turn out more favorable or less as the characteristics of the one or the other of these stages predominate. If these stages are regarded as progressive in the order named, then the more closely a historical production approaches the genetic stage, the greater is its value as scientific history. It must, of course, be assumed that these terms are relative and that to some extent the characteristics of each stage can be found in the others.

In narrative history, says Bernheim, the writer is satisfied

¹ Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte der Neueren Historiographie* (3d ed.; Muenchen: Druck und Verlag von R. Oldenbourg), p. 246 ff.

² Emil Menke-Glueckert, *Die Geschichtsschreibung der Reformation und Gegenreformation. Bodin und die Begrueundung der Geschichtsmethodologie durch Bartholomaeus Keckermann* (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1912), p. 1.

³ Ernest Bernheim, *Einleitung in die Geschichtswissenschaft* (2d ed.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1920), pp. 7-11.

with merely relating or enumerating interesting historical materials in their chronological order.⁴

Thucydides (ca. 460—400 B. C.) is the first classical representative of the didactic or pragmatic type of history, with which we are chiefly concerned here. He aimed to tell the history of the past in such a way that from it the reader could foretell what would happen similarly in the future. In this type of history, to which Polybius (ca. 210—127 B. C.) contributed the designation "pragmatic," the historian observes the motives and aims of individuals, the psychological mainsprings, which determine the events, and tries to explain everything on the basis of the passions and considerations of the actors. Pragmatic history is characterized by its reflections on the motives and purposes of the persons, by useful applications to the time of the writer, by moralizing and politicizing opinions. This type of history represents a long step forward, inasmuch as it pays some attention to the internal causes and conditions of the historical materials; but it also has its serious shortcomings, for, on the one hand, it depends upon the views which the historian has of the people's motives and, on the other, upon his didactic purposes. Pragmatic or didactic history, according to Bernheim, appears regularly whenever a people of culture become self-conscious and subjective. It predominated first in Greece, where finding expression in biographies and memoirs, it replaced the former stage of annals and chronicles. It was then cultivated in Rome, since the age of Augustus, and was classically represented in the works of Tacitus (ca. 55—117 A. D.). It maintained its dominance and in part exhibited its inherent faults in the declining culture of antiquity. The Middle Ages again largely sank to the lowest level of the narrative and memorandumlike stage; partly, however, took over the developed forms of Roman historiography, but with an admixture of new Christian views—the early dawn of genetic history. Pragmatic history again flourished with new vigor when the nations of Europe, with increased self-consciousness, began to cultivate their own peculiar national traits and to give expression to their national experiences in the literary use of their respective vernaculars. It flourished most where and whenever the power and whims of individuals seemed to be the determining factors in politics,

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7 f.

and the course of the historical event seemed, in fact, to be directed by personal motives and aims. So first of all among the French in memoirs and chronicles from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, then, beginning with the fourteenth century, among the Italians in the chronicles of the small despotic courts and the free states, torn by party strife; finally in Germany among the little states of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During that time history was defined in Germany as a knowledge of those events from which one learns what is useful or harmful in the political life and what, in general, is conducive to a happy mode of living.⁵

Fueter traces modern history, like other types of literature, to Humanism and credits Petrarch with being the pioneer in striking out along new lines. For the first time in many years, history was written by an independent layman according to his own individual opinion and not by order of some authority, or from the viewpoint of a certain estate, or dependent on some metaphysico-theological system. Petrarch and Boccaccio, however, wrote history merely as moralists and men of letters. Their historical writings constituted only a minor, and by no means the most important, part of their literary productions. A Humanistic historiography in the true sense of the term was first created when Coluccio Salutati introduced the new learning in the foreign office of Florence, thereby making it possible for his pupil Leonardo Bruni to found a professional Humanistic historiography intended for transalpine readers. In the new literary creation artistic and political tendencies were quaintly combined. Politically the Humanistic historians endeavored to place the history and politics of their own country in a favorable light abroad. Archbishop Johannes Magnus, who had breathed the spirit of Humanism as legate at the court of Leo X, demonstrated this in his history of the Goths and Swedes.⁶ As stylists they

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8—11.

⁶ Cf. Ionnem Magnus, *Gothorum Sveonumque Historia* (Romae: Apud Ionnem Mariam De Viottis Parmensem, 1554), p. 1: "For such instruction in history possesses great authority, praise, and dignity, and marvelous wisdom and, as it were, a majesty exquisitely adorned with modesty. Thus when we read in Homer what the kings, heroes, and highest noblemen did and spoke, we are kindled much more to virtue than by any precepts of the philosophers, if, indeed, history is (as Cicero said) the witness of the ages, the light of truth, the vitality of memory, the instructor of life, the messenger of the future. And because of my awareness of its so manifold usefulness and wide diffusion,

tried to gain glory for their own state and its heroes by attracting the reader with the brilliance of their style to a subject which of itself would not interest him at all. The desire for glory was united with practical political aims. The historian served a double purpose — that of the artist and of the publicist. Casting about for a model, the Humanists were persuaded that they could not attain a more effective style than by imitating exactly the classical Roman pattern. The annalistic historian copied the plan and style of Livy, whom Petrarch had already praised as the greatest of all historians.⁷

Church history was ignored by Humanism. Only those ecclesiastical events which played immediately into political history were occasionally mentioned by the Humanist historian. The internal history of the Church, the history of its doctrines and administration, did not exist for the representative of the new learning. Even Platina wrote merely the history of an ecclesiastical dynasty, not that of an institution.⁸ Indifferent to religion, Humanism found it easy to compromise with the views of the Church, the more so since its interest centered largely in the State. The Reformation changed all of this. The questions concerning man's final destiny always stir his soul and mold his perception of history; hence the importance of Christianity's victory over ancient paganism, hence also the importance attached to the controversies of the Reformation.⁹ Thus while Humanism's pleasure in gracefulness of form and rhetorical embellishment was enjoyed by only a relatively small group of scholars, the Reformation challenged everyone. It divided the homes of princes and noblemen as well as those of the bourgeois and the peasants. Father and mother, parents and children, were set at odds. Everyone had to take sides. For the sake of one's confession, it was necessary to suffer persecution, to leave one's home, to take up arms, to die if necessary. This gave to the period of the Reformation a heroic character. A thousand dynamic forces were unleashed. Under such stirring conditions the Reformation could not be satisfied with mere pleasure in rhetorical form;

I have truly spared no labor nor wanted in diligence to be useful to my fellow citizens and such most famous sons of the fatherland and, having banished all indolence, to have regard to their interests, fame and glory."

⁷ Fueter, *op. cit.*, pp. 1—10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁹ Menke-Glueckert, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

it demanded a new content for history and a different type of critical selection. It insisted that State and Church should be treated as equally important factors in history. In Germany it furnished an outlet for the hatred of Rome, which for centuries had given the Germans a limited sense of national unity,¹⁰ and prepared the ground for the use of history in controversy.

But though the Reformation produced some radical changes in the writing of history, it caused no complete break between the historiography of Humanism and its own. As a matter of fact, the first Reformation historian of note, Melancthon, may well be classed with the Humanists, for of him Erasmus, probably the greatest of them all, said:

"What hope does not Phil. Melancthon, still only a youth and almost a boy,¹¹ inspire of his future — a person who must be admired almost equally for his command of both literatures!¹² What keenness of inventive genius! What purity and elegance of speech! What a tremendous memory for recondite materials! What a wide field of reading! What magnificence of discreetness and wholly royal personal endowment!"¹³

Melancthon demonstrated how the good qualities of Humanism might be combined with the new type of church history. More than that, he also showed how chronicles could be clothed in a scientific and artistic literary garb. He wrote didactic history, but with emphasis on the power of divine direction.

His historical and biographical works are noteworthy not so much for their volume as for their excellence. Of his short biography of Luther, Augusti says: "Many have written on Luther's life in the past and now, no one, however, better than Philipp Melancthon, who in a brief indeed but faithful narrative recounted the facts of his friend and fellow worker in such a manner as to reveal and to present the genuine character of Luther for us."¹⁴

¹⁰ Cf. Arnold E. Berger, *Die Kulturaufgaben der Reformation* (2d ed.; Berlin: Ernst Hofmann & Co., 1908), p. 61.

¹¹ Eighteen years of age at the time.

¹² Latin and Greek.

¹³ Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider (ed.), *Philippi Melancthonis Opera, Corp. Ref.* (Halis Saxonum: Apud C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1834, I, CXLVI).

¹⁴ Jo. Christ. Guil. Augusti, *Philippi Melancthonis de Vita Martini Lutheri Narratio et Vita Philippi Melancthonis ab Joachimo Camerario Conscripta* (Vratislavae: Sumtibus A. W. Holaeuferi, 1918), p. iii.

Could Melanchthon have read Neander's "*Praefatio*" to his *Vitae Quatuor Reformatorem*, he would have been pleased to observe that his life of Luther was in the nineteenth century still serving the purpose for which he intended it.¹⁵

A work of broader scope, to which Melanchthon contributed the larger and more important portion, is Carion's *Chronicles*. Menke-Glueckert, having made a careful comparison of the German and the Latin edition in the light of Melanchthon's works, concludes that by far the greater part must be ascribed to the latter. Carion's part, he says, was limited to a promiscuous collection of notes, to which Melanchthon aptly refers as a "*farrago negligentius coacervata*."¹⁶ The *Chronicles* purport to be a universal history from the Creation to the Reformation.¹⁷

Fundamentally there is no difference between Melanchthon's and Luther's view concerning the content and the purpose of history. Luther took the first step in ascribing equal value to the secular and the spiritual factors in history. Melanchthon followed his example, but Melanchthon was superior to the Italian Humanists in the pedagogical arrangement of his materials and in his scientific approach to history. He established the position of scientific studies on a firm basis, demanded a coherent narrative, banning mere annals, and assigned to topography, chronology, and genealogy their place as auxiliary sciences to history. In Germany he led the way from mere compilations of disconnected items to properly authenticated accounts. Protestant research in history is deeply indebted to his influence.¹⁸ Sleidan, for instance, adopted Melanchthon's view of history as a coherent *narratio*. Emphasizing that it must be an unconditionally *vera narratio*, he introduced the custom of weaving documents and records as proofs into his narrative. Flacius Illyricus systematically searched through all materials of church history for proofs to justify the Reformation doctrines and to find weapons against the Papacy. Thus a progressive change is discernible in the

¹⁵ Cf. A. F. Neander (ed.), *Vitae Quatuor Reformatorem* (Berolini: Sumtibus G. Eichleri, 1841), pp. iii f.

¹⁶ Menke-Glueckert, *op. cit.*, p. 34 et *passim*.

¹⁷ Cf. John Carion, *The three booke of Chronicles*, trans. Gwalter Lynne (London, 1550). This edition contains a lengthy introduction on "the vse of readyng hystories."

¹⁸ Menke-Glueckert, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

writing of history. Luther and Melanchthon treat the secular and the spiritual or ecclesiastical as equal partners in history; Flacius and his co-workers, as will be seen, prefer the secular to the ecclesiastical; Reineccius is one of the first to use the term "pragmatic history" for political history; Keckermann calls this the real content of history;¹⁹ Seckendorf returns the church to its rightful place as an important factor in history.

Melanchthon, as already indicated, merely adopted Luther's views on the respective position of Church and State in history. Luther was the creative genius in the new church history as well as in other phases of the Reformation. Being too deeply engrossed with other important matters, Luther wrote no church history himself; but his controversy with Rome frequently compelled him to appeal to the records of history; and thus, in the course of his research, he not only acquired a rather respectable treasure of historical knowledge, but also formed a definite opinion regarding the use and value of history. His pronouncements on these points became basic for Protestant historiography.²⁰ Besides extolling its didactic or pragmatic use for the edification of the people, he valued history as a weapon in polemics.²¹ Luther often praised the usefulness of history. In his introduction to Wenceslaus Link's German translation of Galeatius Capella's *De bello Mediolanensi, seu rebus in Italia gestis pro restitutione Francisci Sfortiae Mediol. ducis*, he says:

Was die Philosophi, weise Leute, und die ganze Vernunft lehren oder erdenken kann, das zum ehrlichen Leben nuetzlich sei, das gibt die Historie mit Exempel und Geschichten gewaltiglich, und stellt es gleich [sam] vor die Augen, als waere man dabei, und saehe es also geschehen, alles was vorhin die Worte durch die Lehre in die Ohren getragen haben. Da findet man beide, wie die gethan, gelassen, gelebt haben, so fromm und weise gewest sind, und wie es ihnen gegangen, oder wie sie belohnt sind; auch wiederum, wie die gelebt haben, so boese und unverstaendig gewest sind, und wie sie dafuer bezahlt sind. . . .

Darum sind auch die Historienschreiber die allernuetzlichsten Leute und besten Lehrer, dass man sie nimmermehr

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 133 f.

²⁰ Walter Nigg, *Die Kirchengeschichtsschreibung. Grundzuege ihrer historischen Entwicklung* (Muenchen: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1934), p. 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

genug kann ehren, loben, oder thanksagen, und sollte das sein ein Werk der grossen Herren, als Kaiser, Koenige, usw., die da ihre Zeit Historien mit Fleiss liessen schreiben und, auf die Librarei verwahrt, beilegen, auch sich keiner Kosten lassen dauern, so auf solche Leute, so tuechtig dazu waeren, zu halten und zu erziehen ginge.²²

The use of history in controversy is emphasized by Luther with characteristically pugnacious vigor in his introduction to a small book entitled *Pabsttreue Hadrians IV. und Alexanders III. gegen Kaiser Friedrich Barbarossa geuebt. Aus der Historia zusammengezogen, nuetzlich zu lesen*. In this he says:

Recht und wohl ist's gethan, wer's nur thun kann, dass man den Pabst getrost herausstreiche als den Erzfeind unsers Herrn und Heilandes, und Verstoerer seiner heiligen christlichen Kirche. Hiezu dienen, neben der heiligen Schrift, sehr wohl die Historien von den Kaisern, darinnen man siehet, wie die Paebste voller Teufel sind gewesen und noch immer bleiben, dazu sehr grosse, grobe, ungelehrte Esel in der Schrift, zur ewigen Schande des verfluchten Stuhls zu Rom, sich beweiset haben. Denn siehe nur hier an den teuflischen Hochmuth und Bosheit Hadriani IV. und Alexandri III., wie sie mit dem loeblichen Kaiser Frederico I. umgehen, und ich halte wohl, wo sie jetzt sind in jenem Leben, oben, mitten oder unten in der Hoelle, so duerfen sie keines Pelzes, und sind die allerheiligsten Vaeter die allerhoellischten worden, denn von ihrer Busse liest man nichts; sind in ihren Suenden, der sie als der loeblichsten Thaten geruehmt haben sein wollen, gestorben.^{22a}

In his book *Luther als Kirchenhistoriker* Ernst Schaefer shows that Luther, for his time, acquired a very respectable knowledge of the history of the early Christian era and the Middle Ages, which was not limited to subjects of primary importance to his reformatory work, but also included more general topics evincing an interest in history as such, especially church history. Schaefer believes that it is possible to reconstruct from Luther's writings a fairly complete account of pre-Reformation church history.²³ He agrees with Nigg that according to Luther the purpose of historical studies and the

²² Joh. George Walch (ed.), *Dr. Martin Luthers Saemmtliche Schriften* (23 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880—1910), XIV, cols. 376—378.

^{22a} *Ibid.*, XIX, col. 1964.

²³ Ernst Schaefer, *Luther als Kirchenhistoriker. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Wissenschaft* (Guetersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1897), p. 3 f.

usefulness of good objective history are chiefly pedagogical,²⁴ but for the Reformer's immediate purposes also polemical. History served Luther, he says, as an effective aid in his polemics against the curia and the abuses within the Church. "Zwar ging er," says Schaefer, "in seinem Kampfe von dem Boden der heiligen Schrift aus vor; doch war es ihm eine besondere Freude, seinen Anschauungen durch geschichtliche Beispiele eine weitere Stuetze zu bieten."²⁵ One must, however, guard against thinking of Luther as a church historian in the modern sense of that term. W. Koehler warns against that mistake in his critique of Schaefer's book.²⁶

The first volume of church history owing its origin to the Reformation appeared at Wittenberg, in 1536, with an introduction by Luther. This was Robert Barnes's *Vitae Romanorum Pontificum*, a work which was indebted to Platina and other Humanists for its historical content, being original only in its polemical interpolations. Barnes followed faithfully Luther's prescription quoted above from his introduction to *Pabsttreue Hadrians IV. und Alexanders III. gegen Kaiser Friedrich Barbarossa geuebt*. He blames all the evil of history on the Popes and glorifies their secular opponents.²⁷ How

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶ Cf. W. Koehler, *Luther und die Kirchengeschichte nach seinen Schriften, zunaechst bis 1521* (Erlangen: Verlag von Fr. Junge, 1900), p. 3 ff.: "Abgesehen davon, dass Schaefer den Begriff der Kirchengeschichte zu eng fasste, indem er sie lediglich auf die aeußeren Ereignisse bezog, hingegen das innere Leben, Entstehung und Geschichte des Kultus, der Bussinstitution u. a. ausser Betracht liess — dass waere noch kein methodischer Fehler gewesen —, hat er sich den Weg zu einem Verstaendnis der geschichtlichen Aeusserungen Luthers verbaut durch seine Auffassung Luthers 'als Kirchenhistorikers' unter modernstem Schwinkel. Gewiss kann man durch Aneinanderreihung der bei Luther sich findenden Notizen das Geschichtsbild, welches er hatte, rekonstruieren, aber es ist ein prinzipieller Fehler, nunmehr dieses Geschichtsbild auf dem Wege historischer Forschung bei Luther entstanden sein zu lassen. Es ist ein Bau ohne Fundament, wenn man ein Geschichtsbild entwirft, ohne aus genaueste zu pruefen, wie es entstanden ist. Bei Luther ist es durchweg entstanden auf Grund seiner inneren Erfahrung; diese ist ueberall das Primaere, die Geschichtsauffassung das Secundaere, darum auch hat diese sich geaendert, je nachdem die erstere sich wandelte. Diese Einsicht, und damit zusammenhaengend eine *Entwicklung* der Geschichtsauffassung Luthers, vermisst man bei Schaefer. Natuerlich schliesst die behauptete Prioritaet der religioesen Erfahrung nicht aus, dass diese selbst durch Eindruecke aus historischer Lektueren beeinflusst wurde; selbst dann sind die historischen Urteile nicht streng historisch, sondern Werturteile, sofern sie, in das religioese Selbstbewusstsein aufgenommen, dieses widerspiegeln."

²⁷ Fueter, *op. cit.*, pp. 247 f.

rapidly and widely this view of history spread is seen from John Bale's *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum summarium in quasdam centurias divisum*, a dictionary of English writers from the earliest times to his own. This work might have excelled all other Humanistic collections of biographies had its author not been prejudiced; but, as Fueter remarks, in him the Protestant was stronger than the Humanist or historian. He inserted material which was unrelated to his subject for the mere sake of polemics and permitted his Protestant bias to misinterpret the statements of the authors whom he discussed in his work. He falsified the Middle Ages by transferring into the past the intent of the contemporary struggle between the "papacy and pure doctrine" and between the new culture of the lay principdoms and the clergy which clung to the old scholastic faith.²⁸

The early Protestant historians, however, were not the only ones to draft history into the service of polemics. One of the most successful writers to do this was John Cochlaeus, a Catholic. For a short time a supporter of Luther, he suddenly, in 1521, appeared in the ranks of his opponents. From that time on his pen was kept busy against the reformers, particularly Luther. The reasons for his change of heart are not important here; the fact remains, however, that his belligerence spoiled a promising Humanist. He wrote his historical works to expose the groundlessness and wickedness of all heresy and to incite posterity "to catch the little foxes while they are still young."²⁹ Of special significance are his *Commentaria de actis et scriptis Martini Lutheri*.³⁰ These are partly what their name indicates, comments on the acts and writings of Luther; partly a vindication of Cochlaeus' own activity as Luther's opponent. Spahn explains that if one would understand the true nature of this extraordinary work, it is necessary to consider the time in which it was written. Cochlaeus at that time was struggling with the reformers quite alone; already his own strength was threatening to give out.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 248 f.

²⁹ Martin Spahn, *Johannes Cochlaeus, Ein Lebensbild aus der Zeit der Kirchenspaltung* (Berlin: Verlag von Felix L. Dames, 1898), p. 233.

³⁰ Jonnes Cochlaeus, *Historia de Actis et Scriptis Martini Lutheri Saxonis, Chronographice, Ex ordine ab Anno Domini M.D.XVII, vsq; ad Annum M.D.XLVI. Inclusive, fideliter conscripta, & ad posteros denarrata* (Parisii: Apud Nicolavm Chesneav, via Iacobaea, 1565).

At that point he attempted to rouse the sense of duty of the negligent shepherds of the faith, as if with a final cry to pierce to the very marrow of the bones, by calling to their memory the deeds and the writings of the Church's destroyer.³¹

The effectiveness of history as a weapon in controversy is forcefully demonstrated by the results of Cochlaeus' *Commentaria*. Spahn asserts that Cochlaeus was much more successful in influencing his readers with them than with his polemical pamphlets. Whereas he possibly did not win a single reader to his view with his pamphlets, his *Commentaria* have remained the basis of the Catholic interpretation of the Reformation to this day. They put an end to that supposedly "crassest error" obtaining in Catholic circles "that Luther was a good, pious, and saintly man, who had penetrated into Holy Scripture before all others and more than all others."³² Raynaldus, for instance, cites Cochlaeus on Luther's alleged familiarity with the devil and rages against the Reformer for pages, quoting him in addition to Surius and Ulembergius.³³ Seckendorf found it necessary to meet the attacks of Cochlaeus.

Barnes and Bale still depended entirely on Humanism for their materials. The history of dogma, which certainly must be regarded as of great moment in a religious controversy, was not included in their work. This defect was corrected in a truly prodigious manner by Matthias Vlacich (Flacius), named *Illyricus* after his homeland, and his co-workers—the Centuriators. Flacius, born in 1520 at Albona in Istria, engaged in Humanist studies in Venice, was converted to Lutheranism at the age of nineteen and went to Germany, where, in 1544, he was made professor of Hebrew at Wittenberg. Becoming involved in a controversy with Melancthon and other theologians over the *Interim*, he went to Magdeburg, where he began to edit that gigantic work which because of the place of its origin and chronological arrangement is frequently referred to as the *Magdeburg Centuries*.³⁴ Empha-

³¹ *Johannes Cochlaeus*, p. 238.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 239 f.

³³ Odoricus Raynaldus, *Annales Ecclesiastici ab Anno MCXCVIII* (19 vols.; Lucae: Typis Leonardi Venturini, 1755), XII, 174 ff.

³⁴ Matthias Flacius et al., *Ecclesiastica Historia, Integram Ecclesiae Christi Ideam, Quantum ad Locum. Propagationem, Persecutionem, Tranquillitatem, Doctrinam, Haereses, Ceremonias, Gubernationem, Schismata, Synodos, Personas, Miracula, Martyria, Religiones extra Ecclesiam, &*

sizing their importance, Fueter says: "Erst durch die Centuriatoren ist die moderne Kirchengeschichtsschreibung eigentlich gegruendet worden."³⁵ They were the first to comb systematically the whole field of historical tradition to find material for church history, and the first to free Protestant historical polemics from dependence on Humanism and the books of Medieval church law. Whatever Protestant apologists needed by way of historical proofs was for the first time, and almost embracing all possible sources, arranged by them in a clear and orderly manner for ready reference. The artificial arrangement of the materials according to centuries reveals the purpose of the work. It was to be an arsenal for Protestant polemics, and each weapon was to be so placed that the warrior could lay his hand on it at once. In view of the mode of presentation, says Nigg, one is compelled to designate the *Magdeburg Centuries* as a handbook of polemics. Both form and content support this view. The whole of church-history materials is pressed through the filter of polemics. It is a partial writing of confessional church history. The Catholic adversary shall be crushed. The *Centuries*, Nigg concludes, can therefore be called a historical work only with certain qualifications.³⁶

Among various reasons stated in the "*Praefatio*" why pre-Reformation histories were not adequate, the Centuriators mention as the sixth:

They are, so to speak, only biographers, for they are mainly occupied with describing and praising persons. They commemorate of what nature and how holy some man was, what a wonderful life he led, how much he fasted and prayed, and the miracles he performed living or dead. Some of these, however, are not above suspicion of not agreeing with the truth. No dogmas, no controversies are there clearly related.³⁷

The *dogmata and certamina* are to the Centuriators the important things.

It was only natural that in the struggle between the secular and the ecclesiastical powers the Centuriators took

statum Imperij politicum attinet, secundum singulas Centurias, perspicuo ordine complectens: singulari diligentia & fide ex uetissimis & optimis historicis, patribus & alijs scriptoribus congesta: Per aliquot studiosos & pios uiros in urbe Magd'tburgica (13 vols.; Basileae: Per Ionnem Oporinum, 1560—1574).

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 250.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁷ Flacius et al., *op. cit.*, I.

the side of the former. In so doing they were simply following in the footsteps of their Protestant predecessors. The murder of Thomas à Becket is related without a word of censure for Henry II. In the struggles of Emperors Henry IV and Frederick II with the Papacy, piety is on the side of the former and on that of the latter the vice of lust for power. Until the eighteenth century the historical conception and method of the Centuriators served the Protestants as a model not only for popular church history, but also for scientific research. Even the form of the *Centuries* was imitated. The Zurich theologian John Henry Hottinger adopted their pattern so completely in his *Historia ecclesiastica Novi Testamenti* that the volumes which treat the fifteenth and even more fully the sixteenth century have been regarded as a continuation of the *Centuries*.³⁸

The historians of the Counter Reformation, like the Protestants, wrote didactic history and used it for polemics. The Jesuits in Germany, according to Duhr, acquainted their pupils with history and archaeology by having them read, and by explaining to them, the historians of ancient Greece and Rome; but this alone did not seem to suffice. The Rhenish commission of 1586, emphasizing the great value and necessity of history, recommended that a course in secular and church history should be given in the humanities and rhetoric. This, said the commission, would impart knowledge of events, furnish examples of virtues and vices, and radiate in these Christian times light and enthusiasm.³⁹ Regarding his proposed history, probably intended for the *Gymnasium* at Cologne, Rethius says:

Die reichste Tugendsaat werden wir in den Buechern ueber die Kirchengeschichte ernten. Wenn aber auch in der Weltgeschichte wenige Tugenden und viele Laster gefunden werden, so lehrt sie aber doch durch viele Beispiele, dass Gott, der Herr der Welt, das Boese nicht unbestraft laest.⁴⁰

In his *Illustres ruinae* (1856 ff.) the Bavarian Jesuit Johann Bissel (1601—1682) attempts to show that God is indeed

³⁸ Fueter, *op. cit.*, pp. 250—252.

³⁹ Bernhard Duhr, *Geschichte der Jesuiten in den Laendern deutscher Zunge* (4 vols.; Freiburg: Herdersche Verlagshandlung; Muenchen: Verlagsanstalt vorm. G. J. Manz, 1907—1928), III, 258.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 768.

long-suffering and merciful, but at the same time does not fail to execute His just punishments, casting the arrogant tyrant off his throne and crushing the oppressor of the innocent: "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht."⁴¹ The pragmatic use of history by the Jesuits served the purpose of controversy only in an indirect manner, namely, in so far as their history courses appealed to Protestant princes, whose sons the Jesuits hoped thereby to attract. Also Catholics, however, drafted history more directly for the service of controversy, though in a more covert way than the Protestants.

The *Annals* of Baronius and Raynaldus were the Catholic answer to the *Magdeburg Centuries*. They represent the Catholic antithesis to the Protestant thesis. Baronius does not want to admit, says Nigg, that the immense apparatus which he has set in motion serves only to refute the Protestant attacks. He takes great pains to avoid the impression that the *Annals* are dedicated to the mere purpose of refuting the "heretical" doctrine of Flacius. Accordingly, Baronius cleverly refrains from any direct polemics. Only occasionally the *Centuries* are declared to be a mere heap of lies. At various points, however, it is evident that the *Annals* are directed against nothing but the *Centuries*; Baronius, however, ignores the men of Magdeburg and tries to cover up his polemics as much as possible. The refutation of antagonistic opinions and assertions remain a side issue with him. He endeavors to prove their lack of validity not by polemical denial, but by a positive presentation, in which the truth of the Catholic Church should shine forth of itself. Baronius would create the impression that the church historian need but tell the truth in order to render the greatest and most beneficial service to the Church.⁴²

How well Baronius succeeded is a matter of dispute depending on the viewpoint of the reader. In a work of such gigantic proportions errors could hardly be avoided with the best of intentions. Basnage, referring to the difficulty of writing such a work, in the "*dedicatio*" of his own *Annals*, admits:

But, if you please, it is a gigantic task to write ecclesiastical annals, because the Papists and the Evangelicals disagree regarding the antiquity of ceremonies, and chronological items

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 566.

⁴² Nigg, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

are frequently quite as dark as night. Those who have read Baronius, who is far more famous for his annals than for his [cardinal's] purple but who marred his work with numberless errors, which I have sought to correct with utmost care, freely admit the difficulty of the task.⁴³

Basnage's *Annales* were therefore also admittedly controversial. He expected counterblows, for he continues: "But I am sure that I also have stirred up many hornets, whose stings I shall feel."⁴⁴ No doubt he had disturbed a hornet's nest. Changing the figure of speech in his "*Praefatio*," Basnage says of Baronius' *Annals*:

Truly tremendous is the work, which by its variety of subjects and the stupendous diligence in collecting the historical records of the fathers has earned much praise for the author as well as stirred the readers to admiration. Out of this fountain Godellus, Floridus, and our Natalis Alexander Suerius, not to mention others, have irrigated their gardens.⁴⁵ Indeed a peaceful metaphor for an alleged arsenal of controversy!

Engaging in controversy does not in itself imply a pugnacious spirit on the part of those engaged. Americans are familiar with the slogan: "A war to end all wars." So also the history of controversies may serve a peaceful end. In the introduction to his history of the Prussian Church, Hartknoch says: "Also koennen auch diese Streitigkeiten in geistlichen Sachen an die Hand geben, was man bey denenselben fuer Mittel zu Befriedigung der Kirchen gebrauchen solle."⁴⁶ But both pragmatic and controversial history, its martial child, are prone to fall a victim to bias: "Endeavoring to edify," says Rockwell, "historians often manifest bias."⁴⁷ Even where bias may be suppressed, pragmatic history has its weakness. Rockwell points this out in the words:

As "teacher of living," history frequently instructs by examples, and is usually edifying. The theory of rewards and

⁴³ Samuelis Basnagius, *Annales Politico-Ecclesiastici Annorum DCXLV. à Caesare Augusto ad Phocam usque. In quibus Res Imperii Ecclesiaeque observatu digniores subjeiuntur oculis, erroresque eveluntur Baronio* (3 vols.; Roterodami: Typis Regneri Leers, 1706), Vol. I.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Christophorus Hartknoch, *Preussische Kirchen-Historia* (Danzig: In Verlegung Simon Beckenstein, 1686).

⁴⁷ William Walker Rockwell, "Rival Presuppositions in the Writing of Church History," *Papers of the American Society of Church History. Second Series*, IX (1934), p. 8.

penalties involves not merely the tracing of causes and effects ("genetic history") but also the pointing out of the lessons of the past ("pragmatic history"), which itself presupposes some sort of philosophy of history. The weakness of most moralizing on history is that it presupposes a knowledge of human motives, which at best are complex, hard to determine, and conditioned often by physical and cultural factors which the moralist, who usually centers his attention on the human will, is likely to overlook.⁴⁸

What Rockwell says of the bias in wartime may well be borne in mind by the historian who writes for controversy. "In wartime," he says, "emotion . . . blunts the edge of discrimination, and makes men unwilling to think good of the enemy."⁴⁹ Nigg, referring to the harm done to history by its use as a weapon in controversy, says:

Die Verwendung der Geschichte als Mittel der Polemik war von weitreichender Wirkung. Ihre Folge muss als eine verhaengnisvolle bezeichnet werden. Sie fuehrte die Kirchengeschichtsschreibung in eine Sackgasse hinein, aus der sie sich nur muhsam wieder heraus fand.⁵⁰

Thus while controversy stimulated the writing of history and in that way made its contribution to historiography, it demanded its price in terms of prejudice and bias. The reader of history written for controversy must remain constantly aware of that. To correct the image which such history imprints on his mind, he must keep the writer's person and purpose before his eyes. This is true in a measure of modern genetic history as well as of the didactic history of some centuries ago. One more warning—and not an unimportant one—is in place: Not only the historian has his prejudices, but the reader has them as well. We must not read history, including church history, through our prejudices.

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⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 44.