

# Concordia Theological Quarterly



Volume 76:1-2

January/April 2012

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# The Reformation and the Invention of History

Korey D. Maas

The above title will undoubtedly strike the reader as, if not grossly erroneous, at least exaggerated far beyond warrant. One can hardly be unaware that the writing of history long predates that early-modern religious upheaval commonly referred to as the Reformation. Many will also be aware of particularly famous names associated with historical writing more than a thousand years prior to the Reformation, names such as Eusebius, Tacitus, Livy, or Herodotus. Some will know that Herodotus—who was writing two thousand years before the world had heard of Martin Luther—would already in the first century B.C. be dubbed the “father of history.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, what is known about the literature of the two millennia preceding the Reformation would appear to make it very difficult to speak of any “invention of history” in the 16th century. What is more, even what is known—or at least what is often believed—about the Reformation itself would seem to compound this difficulty. The British historian Alec Ryrie, for instance, illustrates the sort of thing most people “know” about the Reformation when he suggests that “Protestantism was in the truest sense a fundamentalist movement; it only accepted a single authority, Holy Scripture, and that authority was absolute. It had no logical need to appeal to custom or history.”<sup>2</sup> Making this point even more strongly, another British scholar, Thomas Betteridge, has argued not only that Protestants had no logical need of history, but that any appeal to history on their part would in fact be illogical. Noting the Protestant rejection of Catholic doctrines which could only be supported by appeal to what the Roman church called “unwritten verities,” that is, truths that could not be substantiated with the written words of Scripture, he writes, “in a world based entirely on Scripture what place is there for history? Indeed if history, and all other non-scriptural writing, lacks all authority or

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *Laws*, 1.5.

<sup>2</sup> Alec Ryrie, “The Problem of Legitimacy and Precedent in English Protestantism, 1539–47,” in *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol. 1, *The Medieval Inheritance*, ed. Bruce Gordon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 78.

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truthfulness as an unwritten verity what is the point of writing?"<sup>3</sup> That is to say, an unswerving commitment to the doctrine of *sola scriptura* will logically limit Protestants to biblical scholarship, and therefore prevent them from pursuing anything that might properly be called historical scholarship, especially in the realm of theology.

The noted German historian Gerald Strauss, however, reminds us that "[h]istorical reassessments have always coincided with turning points in history."<sup>4</sup> The religious controversy of the 16th century, whatever else it was, was unquestionably a turning point in history. Even before a thorough analysis of the evidence, then, Strauss could confidently claim that "[i]t would be astonishing if the Lutheran Reformation had not brought about a searching review of German history."<sup>5</sup> Strauss's assumptions about the role of historical scholarship in the German Reformation would be partially vindicated by his own research, while his broader claim has also been defended with respect to lands beyond Germany. Writing about the Reformation in England, for example, Richard Bauckham has noted that "[c]hurch history proved useful in English Protestantism from the start."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, and even more to the point, the doyen of English Reformation studies, A.G. Dickens, would conclude that "the progress of Reformation thought is coupled with a steady enrichment of historical perception and method."<sup>7</sup>

Assuming just for the moment that these claims are indeed true, the first question must be: why? If Protestants were in fact moved to define appeals to extra-biblical records of the past as logically unnecessary, and perhaps even inadmissible, what then accounts for their consistent, and allegedly successful, use of history and its fruits?

### I. The Context of Renaissance Humanism

In attempting to answer this question, it is perhaps worth recalling, first of all, the intellectual context in which the Reformation movement arose—particularly that of Renaissance humanism. As is well known, the humanists in the century before Luther, as well as those contemporaneous

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Betteridge, *Tudor Histories of the English Reformations, 1530–83* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 97.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Strauss, "The Course of German History: The Lutheran Interpretation," in *Enacting the Reformation in Germany*, ed. G. Strauss (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993), 676.

<sup>5</sup> Strauss, "The Course of German History," 676.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism, and the English Reformation* (Abingdon: Sutton Courtenay, 1978), 68.

<sup>7</sup> A.G. Dickens, "The Reformation in England," in *Reformation Studies*, ed. A.G. Dickens (London: Hambledon, 1982), 455.

with him, were driven by the familiar motto *ad fontes*, back to the sources. These sources were of course the writings of classical antiquity, including the Greek and Roman histories of men such as the previously mentioned Livy and Tacitus. Also included, and most admired on account of his elegant Latin, was the preeminent Roman orator Cicero, who advised his own contemporaries that "to be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child." This was a conviction eagerly adopted by the humanists, who would make Cicero's phrase "a ubiquitous commonplace in the sixteenth century."<sup>8</sup>

It was not simply that classical texts and ideas were being rediscovered during the Renaissance, however; the very fact of their rediscovery at the same time also forced their readers to come to terms with them as "historical" documents, that is, documents of a particular time and place very different from that of the 15th and 16th centuries. Unlike medieval annals and chronicles which began with creation and continued into the present as if history were simply a long, unbroken chain of events (and as if, for example, the Roman Empire of the first century were the same thing as the Holy Roman Empire of the 13th century), the humanist attempt to understand the world of classical antiquity brought with it "a sense of perspective on the past," a sense crucial in the eventual development of what might be called critical or analytical history.<sup>9</sup>

This sense of perspective fostered by the Renaissance humanists, and its contribution to critical historiography, is perhaps most famously and most frequently noted in the work of the 15th-century Italian Lorenzo Valla, who demonstrated on historical and grammatical grounds that the so-called *Donation of Constantine*—attributed to the fourth-century Emperor Constantine and ostensibly granting immense authority, both spiritual and temporal, to the papacy—was in fact a much later forgery. The reason for Valla's frequent mention in this regard will be rather obvious: not only is his work illustrative of the critical and analytical historiography being developed by Renaissance humanists and subsequently taken up by modern historians; it also highlights why such a method might be immediately and especially attractive to the Protestant reformers of the century following Valla.

Thus it has been argued that, building on these humanist foundations, the "16th and early 17th centuries were characterised by an interest in

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<sup>8</sup> Strauss, "The Course of German History," 665.

<sup>9</sup> Myron Gilmore, *The World of Humanism, 1453–1517* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 201.

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."<sup>10</sup> There is undoubtedly much truth to this; but it still must be asked whether and why history was the "obvious means" of affirming the confessional identity of Protestants, of those who swore allegiance to Scripture alone. This question especially deserves addressing because, to whatever extent history was becoming popular in the 16th century, there remained much about the new humanist historiography that the reformers in fact found unappealing.

Humanist histories, like humanist Latin, were consciously modeled on those of classical antiquity. And Luther, to name only one reformer, was not nearly as enamored of the ancients as were many of his humanist contemporaries: however credulous or unpolished the post-classical medieval authors might have been, at least they were not rank pagans, as were the authors of pre-Christian antiquity. Not unrelated to this was also the question of content and themes. Humanist history, like ancient history, was largely moral, even moralistic history—what the ancients described as "philosophy teaching by example," with philosophy encompassing more than simply a body of knowledge, and instead a comprehensive way of life. In this spirit, the fourteenth-century poet Francesco Petrarch—often deemed the "father of humanism" just as Herodotus was named the "father of history"—could explicitly assert: "It is better to will the good than to know the truth."<sup>11</sup> Humanist history, then, was not meant simply to inform, but especially to inspire—and particularly to inspire men to act justly because, as Aristotle had insisted, those who act justly become just.<sup>12</sup> But of course this is precisely the notion of justification that Luther and his fellow reformers so railed against.

Less obviously, but also militating against any eager adoption of humanist historiography by the reformers was a simple lack of patriotic motivation for doing so. The Italian Renaissance and its love of the classics were partially spurred by the belief that the glory of ancient Rome was the Italian heritage; men like Cicero and Tacitus were their forebears. The Germans, however, had no ancient glory to recall—with the unique exception of the virtue ascribed to them (and contrasted with Roman

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<sup>10</sup> Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation, 1378–1615* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Francesco Petrarca, "On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. E. Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, and J.H. Randall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 105.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1

decadence) by Tacitus himself, whose first-century *Germania* had only recently been rediscovered, and which went quickly into a variety of popular editions throughout Germany.<sup>13</sup>

## II. The Use of History by the Roman Church and the Reformers

Far more significant than any differences between southern European humanists and northern European reformers, however, is the simple fact that, over against a Protestant adherence to Scripture alone, the Roman church specifically and explicitly claimed history as its own sphere of authority. Illustrating this point is King Henry VIII of England, to whom the papacy granted the title "Defender of the Faith" for his persuasive writing against Luther and his doctrine. In his 1521 attack on Luther, Henry had dismissed *sola scriptura* and championed the authority of history, or tradition, by asserting that "many things were said and done by Christ which are not recorded by any of the Evangelists, but by the fresh memory of those who were present, delivered afterwards as it were from hand to hand from the very times of the Apostles down to us."<sup>14</sup> That is, the historical teachings and traditions of the church—even if "unwritten verities" not found in Scripture—must be granted equal authority with Scripture because they are assumed to have descended from Christ himself. This is precisely the position officially affirmed later in the century by the Council of Trent.<sup>15</sup>

In King Henry's own work, though, he was even more explicit about the authoritative nature of the historical record. If any error had been introduced since the time of the apostles, he wrote, then surely someone should be able to "point out the time [this occurred] by histories."<sup>16</sup> Nor was Henry alone in presenting the reformers with this historical challenge. Still in the 16th century the Jesuit theologian Edmund Campion would raise the rhetorical question: "In what age, upon what occasion, by whose power, hath a new and strange Religion invaded, not only that city of Rome, but the whole world besides?"<sup>17</sup> Into the next century, Catholic

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<sup>13</sup> See D.R. Kelley, "Tacitus Noster: The *Germania* in the Renaissance and Reformation," in *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, ed. T.J. Luce and A.J. Woodman (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993), 152–167.

<sup>14</sup> Henry VIII, *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, ed. Louis O'Donovan (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1908), 278–280; capitalization and punctuation modernized here and in further quotations from the same work.

<sup>15</sup> *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, tr. H.J. Schroeder, O.P. (Rockford: Tan Books, 1978), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Henry VIII, *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, 202.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Graham Windsor, "The Controversy between Roman Catholics and Anglicans from Elizabeth to the Revolution" (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of

polemicians would continue to ask: "in what Pope's days was the true religion overthrown in Rome?"<sup>18</sup> If this had indeed happened, as the reformers said it had, then certainly Protestants should be able to pinpoint when, exactly, in the church's history this had occurred. So strong was the conviction that history corroborated the claims of the Roman church that the late Richard Marius could claim that, for a staunch defender of the papacy such as Thomas More, "the meaning of history was so intertwined with the Catholic Church that if the Church were false, history made no sense at all."<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, if demonstrating the veracity of the Roman religion, history, it was assumed, also thereby demonstrated the *prima facie* falsity of Protestant claims. The result of this assumption was that the wide variety of Rome's rhetorical questions, challenges, and taunts became distilled into one very pointed historical question hurled at the reformers: "Where was your church before Luther?" It was this question that, eventually, the reformers would have to answer. In one respect, then, it might be said that the very nature of the controversies of the Reformation forced historical questions to the fore. Contrary to the previously noted suggestion that appeals to history were not logically necessary for Protestants, then, Rosemary O'Day has insisted that "[h]istoriography was, therefore, a science which the religious must master, not a luxury."<sup>20</sup>

Even before such explicit challenges were presented to the reformers, however, the utility of history in the Reformation debates had become apparent quite by accident. Before Campion, More, or Henry VIII threw down the historical gauntlet, and while still testing the validity of his ninety-five theses against indulgences, Luther, in preparation for debate on the subject, began a historical investigation of church councils, papal decrees, and canon law. Though primarily looking for data immediately relevant to the indulgence controversy, he discovered far more than he had anticipated: throughout its long history, the church had in fact regularly reversed and even condemned some of its own positions, making any claims to a historic consensus and continuity of teaching dubious at best.<sup>21</sup> It was this first foray into history that awakened Luther to the possible

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Cambridge, 1967), 259 n. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Windsor, "The Controversy between Roman Catholics and Anglicans," 258-259.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Marius, "Thomas More and the Early Church Fathers," *Traditio* 24 (1968), 393-394.

<sup>20</sup> Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (London: Methuen, 1986), 25.

<sup>21</sup> See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 1, *His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 307-309, 325.



benefits of a sustained, systematic study of history—so much so that already in 1520 Luther could make the novel proposal that universities endow chairs for the teaching of history.<sup>22</sup>

It was Luther's growing fondness for history that would prompt those statements still regularly heralded by history professors everywhere: that history is the "mother of truth,"<sup>23</sup> that "histories are . . . a very precious thing," and that "historians, therefore, are the most useful people and the best teachers, so that one can never honor, praise, and thank them enough."<sup>24</sup> Luther did more, though, than simply praise historians and encourage the establishment of history as a discipline in the university; he himself would take up research and writing in the field. He would publish his own refutation of the spurious *Donation of Constantine*, for example, and would write numerous prefaces and forewords to the histories penned by his contemporaries. That which has been described as "the most sophisticated historical analysis to come from Luther's pen," though, was his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*.<sup>25</sup> In this work Luther turned his full attention to the history of the church, the writings of its theologians, and the pronouncements of its official councils. Here he greatly expanded on the thesis he had first put forward twenty years previously in preparation for the Leipzig Disputation: on issues not clearly revealed in Scripture, the church had never reached unanimity. Quite the contrary; the pre-Reformation church had with an astonishing regularity contradicted itself, reversed its decisions, instituted new doctrines and rituals, or abolished old teachings and rites. As only one of the most important examples, Luther there demonstrated that the office of the pope—as supreme head of the church and even supreme temporal authority—was an office altogether unknown not only in Scripture, but also in the early church. Such arguments have allowed at least one modern scholar to suggest that Luther "rested his case for separation from Rome mainly on a historical argument, namely the gradual evolution of the

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis Spitz, "History as a Weapon in Controversy," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, *Disputatio Iohannis Eccii et Martini Lutheri Lipsiae habita* (1519), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Schriften*, 62 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1986), 2: 289.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface to Galeatius Capella's History* (1538), in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, 56 vols., ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986), 34: 276.

<sup>25</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 53.

hierarchical system of the Church contrary to the design of Christ."<sup>26</sup>

But Luther, of course, was only one of many reformers, even in Germany, the home of the Reformation. And it is at least arguable that, with regard to the development of history as a discipline, he was the least influential. So it has recently been argued that it was Philip Melanchthon, Luther's colleague at the university of Wittenberg and author of many of Lutheranism's confessional documents, "who was more committed to the academic study of history," and that "he regarded [it] as a key to understanding theology;" as a result, it was Melanchthon who "made history-writing an important polemical tool of the Reformation."<sup>27</sup> This claim echoes the similar conclusion of one of the standard surveys of the development of historiography. Not only did Melanchthon himself offer lectures in history, but, according to Ernst Breisach, it was Melanchthon who "soon grasped that the key battle between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism would be fought over the validity of church tradition, and he saw to it that history, as the mighty weapon in that struggle, was given a prominent place in the new Protestant universities."<sup>28</sup> It was thus Melanchthon who finally implemented Luther's earlier suggestion that history be introduced into the university curriculum, and throughout the 1540s and 1550s Lutheran universities throughout Europe began to institute professorial chairs in the discipline.

Moreover, as any academic discipline requires its assigned texts, Melanchthon was further able to exert his influence. Taking an unfinished work commonly known as *Carion's Chronicle*, he reshaped it into a hugely successful textbook published in multiple editions and languages, not only in Wittenberg and several other German cities, but also in Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands.<sup>29</sup> And *Carion's Chronicle* was only the first of many such publications. As history became established in the university curriculum, there arose in the mid-16th century a wholly new genre of literature devoted to the "*artes historicae*," works explaining how best to read as well as write history.<sup>30</sup> Influential in this regard was also a

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<sup>26</sup> Cyriac K. Pullapilly, *Caesar Baronius: Counter Reformation Historian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975), 50.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Gordon, "The Changing Face of Protestant History and Identity in the Sixteenth Century," in *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol. 1, *The Medieval Inheritance*, ed. Bruce Gordon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 166.

<sup>29</sup> Strauss, "The Course of German History," 686.

<sup>30</sup> Neal W. Gilbert, *Renaissance Concepts of Method* (New York: Columbia University, 1960), 79.

Lutheran professor, David Chytraeus, one of Melanchthon's former students. Perhaps best known as a theologian, and in particular for his role in the drafting of the *Formula of Concord*, Chytraeus was also a notable historian. In addition to lecturing on history at the university of Rostock and compiling several histories himself, he also produced a number of important treatises on historical method, giving an increasingly clear and coherent shape to the developing discipline.<sup>31</sup>

### III. The Development of Historical Method among the Reformers

This gradual shift from an earlier, utilitarian and polemical use of history to a more sophisticated engagement with questions of historical method is central to the thesis that history, as a discipline, has its roots in the Reformation. Histories—records of the past—certainly existed prior to the 16th century; and these were eagerly put to polemical use by the first generation of reformers. But history as a subject for objective intellectual inquiry began to develop only as it was introduced into formal university curricula and given shape by a specific and generally accepted methodology. And these two phases are not unrelated. It was the utility of history that gave rise to sustained interest in the subject as a subject; and once piqued, it was this interest which made apparent the need for an objective, critical, and analytical method of writing history.

This relationship becomes further evident when taking into consideration those convictions common to the reformers—convictions arguably necessary to the development of modern historiography, and yet largely absent in pre-Reformation Christendom. It has already been mentioned that 16th-century Catholics often assumed that the church's history and tradition justified those beliefs not explicitly revealed in Scripture. It has likewise been noted that critical historical investigations such as Lorenzo Valla's might prove very damaging to these traditional justifications. It should not be surprising, then, that an institution dependent upon tenuous historical claims would effectively discourage any critical investigation of the historical record. Conversely, with the coming of the Reformation and its insistence that only Scripture is normative in determining doctrine, "the abolition of tradition as justification for belief left the historian freer to investigate the past on its own terms, and encouraged the establishment of history as an autonomous discipline."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Strauss, "The Course of German History," 672; see also Robert Kolb, *For All The Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon: Mercer University 1987), 37.

<sup>32</sup> Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran*

It is worth noting that this is a conclusion voiced even by the late Jaroslav Pelikan—a historian and theologian raised and educated in the Reformation tradition, but later leaving Lutheranism for Eastern Orthodoxy, a body defined by tradition perhaps even more so than Roman Catholicism. Pelikan would note quite correctly that “[t]he Protestant principle in Luther’s Reformation enabled it to be critical in dealing with the historical assumptions in the inherited Catholic substance, and thus to make room for the exercise of objective, critical historical methodology in the study of church history.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the Protestant insistence upon Scripture alone being determinative in matters of doctrine allowed the reformers, and Reformation-leaning historians, to engage less tentatively and more objectively with that which was *not* Scripture. Further, it was precisely this objective engagement with the historical record that revealed even more clearly why *only* Scripture can be considered a trustworthy source of doctrine.

By way of example, Pelikan notes that the Roman theologians tasked with writing a confutation of the *Augsburg Confession* attempted to defend the disputed rites and doctrines of Rome with the assertion that they were part of an unbroken tradition going back through the history of the church to the apostles themselves. But a critical reading of the extant sources gradually revealed that these assertions had, in Pelikan’s own words, “no substantiation from historical evidence.”<sup>34</sup>

However unconvincing the Catholic appeals to tradition were, the presentation of the *Augsburg Confession* in 1530 did not mean final victory for Lutheranism. Both sides in the debate would continue not only to engage in a battle of ideas and a war of words, but in the following years would enter a very real war in which the Protestant territories would not declare victory. In 1547, only seventeen years after the presentation of the *Augsburg Confession*, the Lutheran princes of Europe were very decisively defeated in the Schmalkaldic War by imperial troops with funding from Rome. With that Catholic victory came the reinstatement of—among other things—the Catholic Mass. With no small irony, it was in the very city of Augsburg that Bishop Michael Helding announced this fact. More ironically still, Helding was intent on reasserting the dubious historical justifications his co-religionists had offered in the same city seventeen years earlier. In his sermon announcing the reintroduction of the Roman liturgy, the bishop declared that the text of the Latin Mass had been

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*Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1988), 102.

<sup>33</sup> Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, 32

<sup>34</sup> Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, 32.

written by the apostles themselves and had remained unchanged throughout the church's 1500 year history.<sup>35</sup>

This particular episode is noteworthy because it illustrates once again the significant role history played in justifying traditional Roman doctrine and practice, as well as the sorts of historical claims that had to be overturned if Protestantism was to justify its own existence. But it is also noted because it contextualizes the individual who, perhaps more influentially than any other, contributed to the Reformation's development of history as a discipline. Though far less famous than Luther or Melanchthon, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, like Chytraeus, had been a student of Melanchthon's at Wittenberg. Flacius would eventually fall out with Melanchthon, however, on the very issue addressed by Bishop Holding.

When the Roman Mass was reinstated in Protestant lands, Melanchthon and his followers concluded that it was permissible for Lutheran churches to worship according to the Roman rite. Flacius and his followers reached the opposite conclusion. These "*gnesio* Lutherans," as they were sarcastically called, insisted they could not worship in accordance with the style and substance of medieval Catholicism. This stance was justified in part by the common understanding that *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of praying is the law of believing. That is to say, to worship like Roman Catholics would engender believing like Roman Catholics—which of course is precisely why Rome insisted that the Mass be reinstated in Protestant territories. Moreover, the Roman Mass could not be made obligatory because it is not mandated by Scripture; Flacius argued that it is patently false to say that it was written by and then handed down unchanged from the apostles themselves. To prove his point, Flacius, like a good humanist, went *ad fontes*, back to the sources, and first made a name for himself by publishing various historic liturgies as they had existed in different times and different places, demonstrating conclusively that the Mass of the 16th century had been slowly and gradually pieced together over time, and therefore had no apostolic mandate.<sup>36</sup>

The approach Flacius took to liturgical history was the very same subsequently taken in his monumental fourteen-volume work officially known as the *Ecclesiastical History*, but more popularly known as the *Magdeburg Centuries*. Something of the lasting influence of this work is

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<sup>35</sup> Oliver K. Olson, "Matthias Flacius," in *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 85.

<sup>36</sup> See Olson, "Matthias Flacius," 85.

evident even in that popular title. Before Flacius and his co-authors wrote, the word “century” had been commonly used with reference to any grouping of one hundred: perhaps a century of years, but just as often a “century” of miles, or a “century” of apples. Only with Flacius’ decision to divide his history into individual books of one-hundred-years’ length—and with the subsequent popularity of his history—did use of the word “century” come to be limited to the now standard usage designating a grouping of one hundred years.

The true import of the *Magdeburg Centuries*, however, is to be found in their content and method. This was a comprehensive survey of the church’s past that chronicled the history of every ritual, every office, every doctrine, every conflict between church and state—doing so with constant reference to the primary sources. It asked of each source, as Valla had, whether it was an original document or a forgery? The *Centuries* had, as one modern author notes, “all the trappings of critical history.”<sup>37</sup> Oliver Olson, the foremost modern authority on Flacius and his work, even more pointedly regards the publication of the *Centuries* as “the first time ecclesiastical history was subjected to scientific investigation.”<sup>38</sup> In light of frequent references to the nineteenth century as the era of “scientific history,” it might seem anachronistic for one to claim that Flacius was engaged in something of the sort already three centuries earlier. But at least one modern historiographer concedes that Flacius was in fact one of those individuals who served to connect the Reformation writing of history with the modern discipline; his exhaustive, critical methodology provided the 16th-century foundation upon which the nineteenth-century discipline would rest.<sup>39</sup>

It is for this reason that, in the generations immediately following Flacius, “[s]cores of histories were written with techniques and materials borrowed from the *Magdeburg Centuries*.”<sup>40</sup> Of course these histories were, at least initially, written predominantly by Protestants. Many Catholics seem truly to have believed with Thomas More that “the meaning of history was so intertwined with the Catholic Church that if the Church were false, history made no sense at all.” Even the twentieth-century Pope

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<sup>37</sup> Pullapilly, *Caesar Baronius*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Olson, “Matthias Flacius,” 88.

<sup>39</sup> D.R. Kelley, “Historiography, Renaissance: German Historiography,” in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, 6 vols., ed. P.F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1999), 3:180.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald E. Diener, “Johann Wigand, 1523–1587,” in *Shapers of Religious Traditions in Germany, Switzerland, and Poland, 1560–1600*, ed. Jill Raitt (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 35.

John XXIII would look back and admit that the thorough, critical historical scholarship displayed by Flacius and his co-authors left 16th-century Catholics feeling “defeated, humiliated and despondent on the very territory of tradition and history on which defending their right of possession had seemed so simple and certain.”<sup>41</sup>

The preceding focus on historical writing as it developed out of the German Reformation should not be understood to imply that Germany was the only place such developments were taking place. English figures such as Thomas More and Henry VIII having been previously mentioned, it is also worth briefly noting the significant influence of John Foxe, the Elizabethan historian justly famous for his best-selling *Book of Martyrs*. As with Flacius’ *Magdeburg Centuries*, however, the title by which this work is most commonly known is not that given it by its author, and the more popular title obscures the fact that Foxe’s massive work (eight volumes in modern editions) was much broader in scope than a simple martyrology. His *Acts and Monuments* intended instead “to run over the whole state and course of the church in general.”<sup>42</sup>

Like the German reformers, Foxe was convinced that the contemporary Roman church had departed from certain fundamental teachings of the apostolic church, as well as invented some teachings and practices foreign to that church. He argued that these new doctrines had only entered the church and been tolerated within it “for lack of true history.”<sup>43</sup> Like Flacius, he intended to uncover and record the “true history” of the church by thoroughly and critically examining the records of its past. Describing his own method for preparing his most famous work, he said:

the records must be sought, the registers must be turned over, letters also and ancient instruments ought to be perused, and authors with the same compared; finally the writers amongst themselves one to be conferred with another, and so with judgment to be weighed, with diligence to be labored, and with simplicity, pure from all addition and partiality, to be uttered.<sup>44</sup>

Though rhetorically representative of prefatory claims to disinterested

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Oliver K. Olson, “Matthias Flacius Illyricus, 1520–1575,” in *Shapers of Religious Traditions in Germany, Switzerland, and Poland, 1560–1600*, ed. Jill Raitt (New Haven: Yale University, 1981), 14.

<sup>42</sup> John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1583 ed.), 1; spelling and punctuation modernized here and in further quotations of the same work.

<sup>43</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, unpaginated preface addressed “To the True and Faithful Congregation of Christ’s Universal Church.”

<sup>44</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 578.

objectivity, this was more than a feigned scholarly pose. Comparing Foxe's work with the original sources upon which he had relied, British historian Patrick Collinson memorably concluded that Foxe "worked only a little more carelessly and a few shades more partially than would be tolerable in a modern doctoral thesis, but with essentially the same methods."<sup>45</sup>

Foxe's work, like that of the German reformers, is not only illustrative of the Protestant doctrine of Scripture allowing for a method and use of history which had not previously been possible; its emphases also illuminate the manner in which the Protestant doctrine of the church allows for a new kind of history, the history of ideas. Foxe makes reference to this doctrine of the church at the beginning of his own recounting of its history; referring to "the proper condition of the true church," he noted, "none sees it."<sup>46</sup> That is, rather than the visible institution of popes, bishops, and lower clergy—or even those laity in attendance at worship—the true Christian church is that church which is hidden, its constituent parts being those who believe and that which is believed. Both Foxe and Flacius were often critical of earlier church historians for failing to recognize this. They believed that such historians had spilled too much ink describing what had been done in the church rather than what had been believed in the church. Commenting on Flacius and his co-authors, Norman Jones has highlighted the novelty of the historical approach deriving from this conviction. Shunning the simple chronicling of ecclesiastical events, which had dominated throughout the Middle Ages, they instead "wrote a history of the ideas that shaped the Christian church."<sup>47</sup> In doing so, says Jones, they became the unacknowledged "fathers of modern intellectual history."<sup>48</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

In light of the above, and by way of conclusion, three points suggest themselves as especially worthy of note. First, and contrary to popular belief, the Protestant reformers' doctrine of *sola scriptura* did not discourage historical investigation, but actually prompted it, gave it new direction, and in turn allowed its utilization in defense of the necessity of Scripture alone. As Bruce Gordon has concluded, "[f]or Protestants, the

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<sup>45</sup> Patrick Collinson, "Truth and Legend: The Veracity of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs," in *Elizabethan Essays*, ed. Patrick Collinson (London: Hambledon, 1994), 156.

<sup>46</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, unpaginated preface addressed "To the True and Faithful Congregation of Christ's Universal Church."

<sup>47</sup> Norman L. Jones, "Matthew Parker, John Bale, and the Magdeburg Centuries," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12 (1981), 44.

<sup>48</sup> Jones, "Matthew Parker, John Bale, and the Magdeburg Centuries," 35.



uncovering of history was a constituent part of establishing the Word of God as authoritative."<sup>49</sup>

Second, the Protestant engagement with history proved highly effective in the primarily doctrinal debates of the Reformation. The reformers were able to refute dubious historical claims made by a long line of Catholic theologians and demonstrate the antiquity of some of their own positions. Especially in the form of vernacular works such as Foxe's, historians effectively presented the case for reformation also to the laity. Given the choice between sometimes abstract, technical doctrinal arguments and concrete historical arguments, Anthony Milton has suggested quite probably that "it was the more tangible and straightforward questions of historical fact . . . which seemed to offer the clearest guide to the trouble layman."<sup>50</sup>

Finally, the reformers not only made use of history, but also did so effectively. This originally "polemical use of history affected the discipline of history itself."<sup>51</sup> To be persuasive in debate with Roman Catholic theologians who staked many of their claims to truth on history and tradition, the reformers were forced to be both thorough and critical in their search for historical documents, their evaluation of the authenticity of those documents, and their interpretation and application of the same. In emphasizing this critical and analytical methodology, which would soon become the accepted and expected norm, and which would be "professionalized" as it came to be learned and taught in Protestant universities throughout Europe, the reformers effectively inaugurated what continues to be described as the "historical revolution"—the invention of history as a modern scholarly discipline.

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<sup>49</sup> Gordon, "The Changing Face of Protestant History," 3.

<sup>50</sup> Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 270.

<sup>51</sup> Rainer Pineas, *Thomas More and Tudor Polemics* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1968), 220.

