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Following Zwingli: Applying the Past in Reformation Zurich

Euan Cameron

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Baschera, Luca, Bruce Gordon, and Christian Moser, eds.

Following Zwingli: Applying the Past in Reformation Zurich.

St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Farnham, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. ix, 300. ISBN 978-0-7546-6796-4 (hardcover) \$134.95.

This interesting collection presents the collective work of a group of researchers on the religious life of early modern Zürich. The title and the introductory chapter both suggest that the linking theme of the volume is the use of historical models in the shaping of the reformed church in the Swiss metropolis. However, this suggestion could potentially mislead. This is not primarily, or even substantially, a book about historiography. The “past” which is deployed in its chapters varies from Hebrew Scripture to Christian antiquity, to the immediate remembered lives of its actors or their parents.

It would be fairer to say that each of the substantive chapters offers a review and a detailed analysis and exposition of a handful of interesting, curious source documents, sometimes just one, sometimes two or four per chapter. So, in the first (and longest) chapter, Mark Taplin, the author of a splendid monograph on *The Italian Reformers and the Zurich Church, c. 1540–1620*, presents a detailed and scholarly analysis of Josias Simler’s *Scripta Veterum Latina* of 1571. This work, a carefully curated compilation of texts deriving from the Nestorian and Eutychian controversies, offered Simler an opportunity to affirm the Christological orthodoxy of the Zürich church against its critics from left and right. (This forty-page article is in turn an abridgement of an even longer piece published in *Zwingliana* for 2011). Jon Delmas Wood offers a concise digest of his analysis of Heinrich Bullinger’s *Sermones Synodales*, notes for addresses delivered to the Zürich clergy; these are also discussed in Wood’s doctoral dissertation, recently published as *Reforming Priesthood in Reformation Zurich: Heinrich Bullinger’s End-Times Agenda* (2019).

At a more manageable length, Torrance Kirby explores the theology of kingship to be found in Peter Martyr Vermigli’s letter to Elizabeth I of England on the occasion of her accession. Christian Moser explores four Zürich commentaries on the Book of Ruth, and explains how they used the text as an exemplary guide to the behaviour of Christian women, notwithstanding some problematic aspects in the text. Rebecca Giselsbrecht reviews two sermons, one

by Zwingli from 1522 and one by Bullinger from 1558, both of which rather defensively upheld some traditional views of Mary's perpetual virginity while denying her any saving role, and rejecting virginity as a calling for contemporary Christians. Kurt Jacob Rüetschi summarizes three sermons from a larger collection delivered by Rudolf Gwalther, in this case reflecting on the lessons to be drawn from the child Jesus's debate in the Temple in Luke's Gospel. Urs Leu describes and explains Conrad Gesner's three dialogues appended to his edition of Martial's epigrams from 1544, which argued back and forth about whether it was acceptable to expose young people to secular and often obscene erotic poetry.

Some articles present little-known and valuable new insights. Luca Baschera describes and summarizes a work by Otto Werdmüller from 1545, where this gifted but little-known and short-lived author presented the case for reformed scholars continuing to use Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, despite the battering that this work had received in the early Reformation. The *Ethics* was not just useful for teaching secular philosophy, as Werdmüller and his mentor Melanchthon had argued; in the life of the elect, since election was manifested in good works as the fruit on the tree, it was useful to know just what those fruits should look like.

The two final chapters explore the familial and collegial relationships that sustained the community of preacher-scholars which was the Zürich church. Matthew McLean expounds the ideal mentor-student relationship that emerges from the correspondence between Konrad Pellikan and Sebastian Münster, both brilliant scholars of Hebrew at the very emergence of Christian Hebraism in northern Europe as a viable discipline in the mid-sixteenth century. Bruce Gordon describes and analyzes two biographies, Konrad Pellikan's academic autobiography written for his sons, and Johannes Jud's life of his father, the peace-loving biblical scholar and preacher known since (though not so much in his own time) as Leo Jud.

These are, then, text-driven chapters, and despite a fluent and well-written introduction, the argument for blending them together in a single volume is not self-evident. Moreover, the reader must expect quite a lot of the text to be descriptive rather than evaluative. It makes obscure and untranslated texts accessible to the reader, rather than drawing large-scale historical conclusions from them. Some chapters (Rüetschi's most conspicuously) consist essentially of paraphrases or summaries of the source-texts.

There is an air of gentle, collegial generosity which suffuses this volume. It is pleasing to read, though one sometimes wonders whether it proceeds as much from the collaborative relationships between the authors as from the ambience of their texts. We learn that the Zürich reformers were decent, cordial souls, trying to build a church that was faithful to the Gospel but did not dishonour the valued past. This is not the Zürich of the “fanatic sacramentarians.” Maybe that is an important lesson.

EUAN CAMERON

Union Theological Seminary in New York City / Columbia University

Bednarski, Steven.

A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 199 + 9 ill. ISBN 978-1-4426-0477-3 (paperback) \$24.95.

In *A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner*, Steven Bednarski both narrates a chilling tale of medieval crime and punishment, and presents an interesting study in microhistory. The study itself centres on Margarida de Portu who was accused of “murdering her husband by nefarious means” (xvii). The unfortunate husband, Johan Damponcii, was a modest man who appears to have led a “quiet and unremarkable life” (62). The suspected poisoning and subsequent trial provide a surprisingly clear glimpse into the multiple worlds of fourteenth-century Provence.

The tale itself is fascinating. In 1392, Margarida, a young woman from the small town of Beaumont, married and moved to the more cosmopolitan town of Manosque. Within months of her marriage, Margarida had integrated herself into the fabric of the community. However, it seems that all was not perfect. Almost immediately, Margarida was said to develop the “falling sickness” (epilepsy). Among other complications, this allegedly prevented her marriage from being consummated. There were no other obvious signs of discord.

On an otherwise unremarkable morning, Johan ate a breakfast stew made from dried almonds, oil, and garlic that Margarida had prepared. Margarida