

Heidelberg and the Trinity: Comments on the Ideological Formation of the Palatine Reformation

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It will be evident to all who are here that the most striking feature of the historiography of the Palatine reformation is the absence of any coherent alternative to the understanding of events as supplied through the work of reformed writers starting with Alting.¹ As was already noted in Lessing's well-known *Beitrag*, a study that itself did much to awaken a commitment to critical research,² this fact may partly be explained on account of the paucity of the extant sources, the necessary basis for any attempt to deconstruct this received line of interpretation. Even so it is to be regretted that such a crucial phase in the emergence of the reformed tradition should still be defined by the assumptions originally set forth at a time when the dictates of confessional orthodoxy imposed a clearly too simplistic view of the past. It is the purpose of this present paper to outline at least some of the parameters for such an alternative, as well as suggesting a number of directions for future research, which it is hoped may someday serve to provide flesh to the dry bones of theoretical analysis. The 'other side of the Heidelberg reformation' is not just a

¹ Alting and other reformed writers, cf. Benrath.

² Lessing's *Beitrag*. Reference to *The Heidelberg Antitrinitarians*, introduction.

‘loser’s testament’, as one noted scholar recently characterized the debate about toleration:³ rather it serves to unmask many of the pretensions that still cover up much of the reality of the reformation period.

As is already clear from the choice of title for this paper, the point of departure for my analysis is with the decision to treat the intellectual debates of the time as an aspect of ideological formation rather than as part of the unfolding of *Dogmengeschichte* and this is an approach which requires some form of explanation.⁴ Here my point is not to suggest that the bitterly disputed issues of confessional theology were not in themselves important, but simply that the contemporary perception of these problems cannot adequately be represented by means of exegetical or systematic analysis. Irrespective of what apologists such as Ursinus and Zanchi claimed or even thought they were doing in defending the orthodoxy of the reformed settlement, the reality is that any such statement had political overtones that can only be understood in the light of the ongoing project of establishing ‘die kurfürstliche Reformation’, a phrase which constantly recurs in the documents of the time as a means of characterizing the policy of the government.⁵ Without seeking to impose a conceptual definition at the outset, it yet seems to me that this attempt to supply a form of intellectual underpinning to a political project as a means of diverting attention from its more controversial and divisive aspects is what we have now come to understand to be the

³ Pettigree in Cambridge Conference Essays

⁴ Neuser et al.

⁵ Comment on ‘die kurfürstliche Reformation’.

function of ideology. This, I would argue, was the case with the way in which discussions about the Trinity arising out of the so-called Arian scandal were handled by the then leadership of the Palatine Reformation.

It may, of course, be objected that this was but one of the issues debated at the time and a point on which previously there was apparently a broad consensus within the reformed tradition: the absence of any serious protest at the handling of the Servetus' affair or at the treatment of Gentile in Bern in 1566 would seem to support such a view.⁶ Yet this was precisely why the debate about the Trinity was so well tailored to suit the needs of certain members of the Kirchenrat and their supporters in other branches of the Palatine service. There had been a number of major issues which had been the subject of political debate since the accession of Frederick III, points ranging from the implications of the breaking of the bread in the eucharist to the decision to provide military backing for the Huguenot party in France and the imposition of a revised form of the presbyteral system of discipline. Since on all of these issues it was clear that the Genevan party represented a minority defending an unpopular cause, so it was necessary to find a point of symbolic importance concerning which a broad consensus could be assured. Whether or not there was any substance to the argument, the identification of Sylvan and Neuser, the two most popular leaders of the opposition group, with the ever-

⁶ Reactions to the execution of Servetus etc. Reference to R.A. Muller's inaugural lecture.

constant menace of the Turk, served this purpose to a tee.⁷ Any further criticism of the Kirchenrat could thus be discredited through its association with an almost perverse rejection of values common to Christendom as a whole.

Nor was this simply an example of political opportunism, though that certainly played a crucial role in the initial decision to arrest and interrogate the Superintendent at Ladenburg and his associates. It was a common assumption at the time that theology was a form of copulative discourse, to borrow a term of the Philippist school well-known to Ursinus and his colleagues.⁸ In substance this was to say that all points of dogmatics held together as a structured whole and so it was tempting to argue that once the fundament was taken as granted, then the legitimacy of the rest of the system would necessarily follow. The fact that the issues in dispute with the Lutheran party in Tübingen and Strasbourg all turned around the problems of Christology only served to confirm this point. Thus it was less the principle of ‘sola scriptura’, which rarely came up for debate after Zanchi’s exhaustive treatment of the subject in his introductory course as professor of common-place theology,⁹ than the doctrine of God that formed the coping stone of the reformed system as defended in the Palatinate. Some idea of the importance attached to the subject is provided by the very considerable

⁷ This of course soon backfired, when Lutheran critics of the reformed settlement accused the leaders of the Palatine reformation of sympathy for Islam, cf. Calvinismo-Turcismus. Still this was evidently less plausible than Holder’s suggestion that there was a Judaizing tendency in Calvinist thought.

⁸ Ursinus on the methodology of Melanchthon. Zanchi held very similar views about the systematic character of theology.

⁹ Zanchi, ‘De puro, puro Dei verbo’, an introductory course which provided the basis of a more extensive treatment in his ‘De Sacra Scripture’.

sums of money paid to Zanchi as a reward for his work *De Tribus Elohim*, as well as the efforts that were made to ensure its wide circulation through the granting of an imperial imprimatur.¹⁰ This was an unprecedented move which showed that the authorities in Heidelberg were aware that the issue had a broader political significance for the fate of the electoral project as a whole.

Yet what exactly was that significance and how should it be qualified? It has normally been argued that the debate about the Trinity was purely defensive, a form of apologetics called forth by circumstance, which did little more than to confirm what any critical observer would have recognized in any case, namely that it was no part of the reformed intention to call in question the orthodox consensus concerning the doctrine of God. Be that as it may, the Arian scandal and its consequences still represented an important turning point in the way in which theological issues were being considered and treated in Heidelberg. No longer prepared to limit the debate to an exchange of exegetical proof texts with their Lutheran or Catholic antagonists, the spokesmen for the Elector portrayed a new confidence in their capacity to put together and to defend a systematic account of their position as a whole. Whereas previously there had been a tendency to try and justify specific points of difference with the adherents of the *Confessio Augustana* through the citation of standardized proof-texts, there was now a sense that the reformed tradition in Germany had a coherence and structure of its own. Events in Heidelberg during the first

¹⁰ See Burchill, *Portrait of a Reformed Theologian*, ...

half of the 1570's might thus be described as the catalyst that led to a coming of age.

Of course, it would be possible to provide an alternative explanation of this change, one that pays much less attention to the Arian scandal as such. However my purpose here is not to suggest that there was one particular issue that gave rise to this heightened sense of confessional consciousness. The awareness that differences within the evangelical movement were in no sense likely to be resolved through compromise, something which had come to be evident since the abortive colloquy at Montbéliard, was the 'conditio sine qua non' for such a development. There were also many other contributing factors, such as the widespread reaction to the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre and the emergence of the crypto-Calvinist party in Saxony.¹¹ Yet if all of these were important in providing a short-lived focus for political sentiment, something which went well beyond the confines of the Palatinate, they in no way provided the basis for a coherent ideology. Here it was the uncompromising position adopted by the Elector Frederick himself, and in particular the decision to proceed with the execution of Sylvan, that provided a sense of direction to the movement.¹² In fact the whole affair played into the hands of the leaders of the Genevan party, who emerged as the only group with the credibility necessary to sustain the political project of 'der kurfürstlichen Reformation'.

¹¹ Note on the Montbéliard Colloquy, St. Bartholomew's Day and the crypto-Calvinists.

¹² Attitude of Fredereick to the execution of Sylvan. Cf. the correspondence of Erastus and Bullinger.

Even accepting this use of the language of religious ideology as in some sense legitimate, it may yet appear as a game of words designed to do little more than provide an altered template within which the details of the Palatine reformation may better be recounted. While this may in itself be an exercise worth the candle, I hope in the rest of this paper to suggest a number of ways in which this approach could open up and help define new avenues of research. Here it is important to realize that the sense of any such ideological debate is necessarily context related—hence the theme of Heidelberg and the Trinity. We must try and understand the function of theological discourse as it was directed downwards through the structures of Palatine society during the 1570's.

This is not to suggest the need for a form of social history, the value and feasibility of which seems to me to be doubtful. The religious convictions of the 'gemeinen mann' are condemned to remain ever hidden beneath the surface, the very existence of which can only be inferred from some chance remark in one of the Kopiaibücher or the few surviving minutes of the Kirchenrat.¹³ Some indication of popular attitudes towards the new establishment is perhaps contained in a report submitted by Zanchi and Tremillius to the Court at the end of April 1571, where it was complained that the faculty windows were constantly being smashed and the building itself treated 'als were es ein gemeiner ortt'.¹⁴ At one level this was simply a nuisance that had to be treated as a question of public order.

¹³ Note on the surviving sources in Karlsruhe.

¹⁴ U.A.H. p.13. The problem with the windows was put down to 'bösen bubenn so sich gewöhnlich doselbsten uff dem kirchhoff zusammen finden'.

Yet it is not difficult to perceive behind this very expressive gesture of piling up bullshit at the entry to the Theologikum, the inchoate opposition of at least part of the town's population. Such evidence is revealing even if it cannot be quantified.

Expressed in this way, however, popular dislike for the reformed settlement had but little impact on the attitude of the Kirchenrat. Although the evidence we have suggests that there was a sustained effort to propagate the new teaching at a popular level through the dissemination of approved literature in the vernacular, it is yet significant that most of these initiatives were at one stage removed from the actual leadership, few of whom had any direct contact with the broad mass of the laity. The only really popular preacher at the time was Adam Neuser and this may in fact have been part of his undoing.¹⁵ Most of the well-known figures of the Heidelberg reformation had little aptitude for preaching in the vernacular or sought to confine their attention to the more stylized context of the court sermon. The watchwords of the Genevan party were 'Zucht' and 'Ordnung' and these well reflected their realistic appreciation of the situation.¹⁶ Provided the support of the government was assured, what mattered was simply to silence any form of overt dissent. This almost paranoiac concern was revealed at the time of the Pigafetta affair in 1574, where it was less the barber-surgeon's matrimonial misconduct than his cryptic theses 'on the Palatine dual and the arms of Saul' that commanded the

¹⁵ Neuser's reputation as preacher at St. Peter's.

¹⁶ Munch on Zucht und Ordnung. The need for a more thoughtful account of the sense ascribed to these terms by reformed writers at the time of the 'second reformation'.

attention of the church authorities.¹⁷ Here the object was to ensure that there was no possible nucleus around which any form of opposition could develop.

It was clearly realized that the long-term success of the reformed project depended on the creation of a substantial group of active collaborators, those who were to be called to represent the values of church and school within the parishes. Much work has already been undertaken by Bernard Vogler on the formation of the Rhineland clergy in the period leading up to the Thirty Years War, though the institutional context of the Sapienz College still requires further investigation.¹⁸ The tradition established under Ursinus owed more to the influence of Melanchthon and the pedagogy of scholars such as Jean Sturm than to the missionary ideals apparently characteristic of some of the other fledgling institutions at the time.¹⁹ The intention was to provide those commissioned within the Palatine service with a clear if somewhat rudimentary understanding of the reformed faith, which they were to present to their charge. It was the function of the clergy to embody the higher cultural values of ‘der kurfürstlichen Reformation’ and to ensure that these continued to be respected. In more ways than one, these were state appointed teachers of rectitude and it is as such that they came to understand their task.

¹⁷ Details on this obscure affair can be found in the lengthy reports in the U.A.H. 26-7. It may be noted that the David and Goliath story as recorded in I Samuel touched on an important aspect of the self-understanding of the Palatine reformation. Here Ursinus used Pater Martyr’s commentary on Samuel, which he had heard while studying in Zurich, as the basis for his work in the Sapienz College.

¹⁸ Vogler on the Rhineland clergy. Material on the Sapienz College can be obtained from Reuter’s Jubileum address, together with the lecture material of the two leading directors, Ursinus and David Pareus.

¹⁹ This appears to be the argument of Karin Maag, where the development of seminary education in Heidelberg is unfortunately explained without a single reference to the importance of the Strasbourg model.

None of these issues could be passed over without a certain amount of tension, especially where relations with the university were concerned, whose traditional independence was a source of constant irritation to the leaders of the Kirchenrat. Here, of course, Erastus was the key figure, the one whose position was finally betrayed through his personal association with the Arian group and some of the more radical critics of the Genevan party.²⁰ The real problem was not what Erastus and his friends believed, but rather the value system they embraced. This point was well made during the subsequent conflict over the control of the Paedagogium, a dispute that soured relations between the Senate and the Kirchenrat for over six months in 1574. In response to the well argued defense of academic privilege presented by the then Rector Lambert Pithopoeus, the president of the latter, Wenzel Zuleger, simply replied: 'Ir müget thun, waß Ihr wellet : wir wellenn fort faren, und wer der starkst ist, denn würdt gott helffn'.²¹ This expressed in a nutshell what the school authorities had never been able to grasp.

There remains one aspect of this problem on which some comment may be required, namely the attitude of the professors of theology, those primarily responsible for the definition of the official teaching. It seems to me, it was at this stage that the two concepts of orthodoxy and respectability came to be fused and the process is perhaps

²⁰ On the political involvement of Erastus we must await the publication of Chad Gunnoe's 1998 thesis, which prepares the way for a much better understanding of the intellectual background to many of these issues.

²¹ U.A.H. 22.

best represented in the character of Zanchi, certainly the most able of the Palatine spokesmen. Moreover, despite the considerable attention that the adoption of a more scholastic methodology has received, it has never been sufficiently emphasized that this was also a language of exclusion, one designed to impress and to intimidate as much as to convince. A good example of this was the carefully orchestrated interrogation of Vehe and Suter in a room just beside the torture chamber in the castle, when they were confronted with a table-load of weighty tomes and asked if they still wished to dissent.²² Yet the symbolism of orthodoxy went much further than that and came to constitute the very mental world of its protagonists. Financial success and social respectability, which were the crowing achievement of Zanchi's later career, served to confirm the conviction that the cause itself was valid and could justify the means to its attainment.²³ Thus was created a closed and self-perpetuating system in which the critical voice was submerged behind the claims of dogmatic certainty.

²² See Vehe's autobiographical statement, where it is significant that it was Suter who first realized this aspect of the debate and advised his friend simply to agree to whatever was proposed. It might also be suggested that the very superficiality of Zanchi's argument in favor of the Trinity at the time of this interrogation, namely that in every civilized language the word for God has either three or four letters symbolizing the triune nature of God, was itself designed to underscore the point that here the issue was one of authority rather than conviction.

²³ Zanchi had a high view of his own dignity as a professor of theology, a point which came to be more and more evident during the latter period of his life. Certainly he was proud of having obtained his doctorate at Padua, which he clearly continued to consider as a cut above any of the German universities, but this is only part of the explanation. Although his only official post was as the third professor of theology, it was his close personal association with the court circle that established the basis of his ascendancy. More so than Ursinus, who fought shy of any such contact, or Olevian, who lacked the theological acumen necessary to the task, Zanchi supplied most of the intellectual backing to 'die kurfürstliche Reformation'. The fruits were later to materialize in the personal acquisition of a major house in Neustadt, as well as in his rather telling concern to have a lot of 'top' people attend his daughter's marriage. Some material on these points is cited in Burchill, 'Portrait'.

In thus returning to the recurring questions of theology, it would appear that we have almost come full circle, and it is perhaps appropriate at this point simply to present three brief theses that may serve to summarize and to conclude this paper:

I. The debates which marked the course of ‘der kurfürstlichen Reformation’ were essentially about power rather than principle and it was only when this came implicitly to be recognized at the time of the Arian scandal that a cohesive basis for the movement was able to be established.

II. Central to the success or failure of the reformed cause was the ideological formation of the clergy, whose subsequent task was to represent the values of discipline, order and respectability within the parishes and thus to marginalize any expression of dissent.

III. The form of scholastic discourse as developed by Zanchi and his colleagues was ideally suited to promoting this end, since it served to confine the intellectual discussion of politically sensitive issues to a very narrow group of those approved by the church authorities.

In each of these respects it is clear that much further research will be required, though in the end I suspect it may serve to confirm the crucial importance of the whole complex of issues surrounding Heidelberg and the Trinity.