



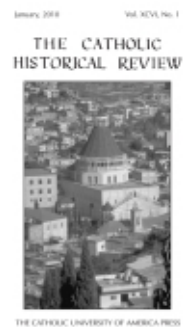
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*Life Writing in Reformation Europe: Lives of Reformers by
Friends, Disciples and Foes* (review)

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Goertz's contribution to this new perspective a generation ago was substantial, and several essays in the present volume show his originality and insight. Like all revisionists, however, there has been a tendency to overstatement, and his striking openness to approach the past aided by categories coming from Derrida and Foucault is not universally shared. Indeed, there are indications that the revisionist school of Anabaptist studies, which he represents, is triggering revisionism itself (for example, Andrea Strübind, *Eifriger als Zwingli*, Berlin, 2003).

The essays in this volume cover the gamut of early Reformation "radicality"—iconoclasm, biblical exegesis, community of goods among the Hutterite Anabaptists. What is important here is Goertz's insistence that the term *radicality* must be used for the entire spectrum of radical sentiment, that such "radicality" itself underwent a development as time passed, and that the phenomenon must not be understood as exclusively theological.

The book cements, if such were necessary, Goertz's pivotal place in the study of the dissenters of the Reformation during the last generation. The focus on "radical" movements, however, means that his other, major contribution to Reformation scholarship—calling attention to the ubiquitous phenomenon of anticlericalism in the early-sixteenth century as catalyst for the Reformation—receives only passing attention.

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Life Writing in Reformation Europe: Lives of Reformers by Friends, Disciples and Foes. By Irena Backus. [St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History.] (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. Pp. xxxiv, 259. \$114.95. ISBN 978-0-754-66055-2.)

Benjamin Disraeli once observed that one should prefer biography to history, for biography is "life without theory." Of course, Disraeli's remark says more about his view of the kind of history being written in his own day than it does about his notion of biography. To be sure, biography is not a neutral enterprise and often can reveal as much about the context of the biographer as it does about its subject or perhaps even more. Such is the focus of Irena Backus in her study, *Life Writing in Reformation Europe*. Exploring a number of important biographies or *Lives* of reformers written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Backus hopes to shed light not only on the methods and genre of these *Lives* but also on how they function as part of the reception and propagation of the European Reformations. Their accuracy or approximation to modern standards is not her primary concern. Rather, she argues that studying this kind of literature provides windows into the theological, polemical, and civic climate of this period.

While *Lives* are not a fundamentally new genre, those in the Reformation do have unique characteristics that distinguish them from the classical

models found in Plutarch and Suetonius as well as Christian examples in the *Vitae* of church fathers and legends of the saints. This is especially true of *Lives* that depict reformers as heretics—a category of biography without precedent. Yet even sympathetic biographies found it necessary to distance themselves from medieval hagiography or pagan *encomia*. There was certainly an apologetic or polemical dimension to these *Lives*, but this is not, Backus argues, the primary purpose. *Lives* favorable to the reformers had a pedagogical function, intended to edify the faithful. This might be directed to Protestant doctrine or piety, or, as in the case with the Swiss *Lives*, a more nationalistic picture of the Reformation.

Following a chronological structure, the first chapter is devoted to sixteenth-century biographies of Martin Luther. Already Backus is able to demonstrate how these lives are moving beyond the traditional genres. Detail of the reformer's person is unimportant in these *Lives*, for Luther is not to be approached as a medieval saint, either for veneration or emulation. Rather, Luther is situated in the course of salvation history as a prophetic figure, an instrument of God. As such, his life and his doctrine are identified and thus justified. Likewise, hostile lives of Luther depict the man as an instrument of the devil that then *de facto* condemns Protestant doctrine.

Zurich and Swiss *Lives* inculcate a broader, more nationalistic corporate narrative of the Reformation. Major figures like Zwingli and Bullinger are not only depicted as heads of Reformed Christendom but also as exemplars of Protestant piety for all to imitate. This extends to *Lives* of other Swiss Protestants who embody ideals of citizenship, scholarship, and servants of a Christian state.

However, it is the *Lives* of the Genevan Reformation that receive the most attention by Backus and perhaps exhibit the most interesting complex of context, doctrine, and the fashioning of Reformed identity. Beza's various attempts to compose a *Vita* of Calvin are closely examined, observing how the successor of Calvin struggled to find a form of biography that followed biblical models rather than classical and yet steered away from medieval hagiography. It is finally the Catholic biography of Jean-Papire Masson that moves the Calvinistic biography into a more "objective" direction that would ultimately influence the "Calvinography" of later centuries. Yet despite this shift, the old images derived from Beza's saint and Bolsec's sinner continue to have a lasting influence on the picture of Calvin even to the present.

In the end, Backus provides the reader with a very thorough and stimulating entry into the *Lives* literature of the Reformation, which in turn provides further insight into larger questions of *Wirkungsgeschichte* in Reformation Europe.