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# A Reading of French Protestantism through French Historical Studies

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*A Reading of French Protestantism through French historical studies*

My presentation aims to explore the particular relationship between Protestantism and History in France. It is often said that French Protestants have a particular interest in history. Indeed, many historians are Protestants. In France, one of the oldest and most prestigious historical journals, the *Revue Historique*, was founded by free-thinkers, Jewish and Protestant historians (like Gabriel Monod). Protestant publishers are numerous and special issues of journals dedicated to Protestantism always meet with a great success.

But the problem is first to know how and why this interest appeared, and, then, to study the effects that this interest has on history.

To understand that, we have to go back to the origins of Protestantism. The Reformation was first and foremost a question of theology with a central cry of salvation by grace alone and not through works. Therefore, the advent of Protestantism appeared to the faithful Christians in Rome as an innovation and an error. Catholic polemicists and controversists were always asking the same question: "Where was your Church before the Reformation, before Luther and Calvin?" Luther was the first who tried to answer this question with reference to John Hus and his calls for re-forming Christianity, of going back to the faith and the practices of the apostolical Church. Therefore he saw him as a precursor of the Reformation.

This then was the starting point of the search for an alternative ecclesiastical tradition. The Reformers wanted to show that there had been predecessors. As a result, Luther studied Eusebius of Caesarea, in order to understand the first centuries of Christianity better. Thus the first Protestant historical studies showed both the de-formation of the true faith due to papacy, and a continuous resistance to this deformation of the true faith. Protestant historians then imagined a continuity of the true Christian tradition. They gave a significant place to the so-called heretics, especially to the Cathars and the Waldensians in France. This is because French Protestant historians and theology scholars considered that they were the ancestors of

the French Reformation. But it was Flacius Illyricus who was the first to think that the precursors of the Reformation were not only opponents of the pope, but also advocates of the truth. This was shown in his *Catalogus testium veritatis* (1556) and above all in the *Magdeburg centuries*, the enormous ecclesiastical history which he edited. A similar collection of witnesses of the truth was produced by Jean Crespin and Simon Goulart in France (in reality in Geneva, but it was above all read in France): the *Livre des Martyrs* (with several editions between 1554 and 1619). We can find other *Books of Martyrs* in England (John Foxe, 1554), in Germany (Ludwig Rabus, 1554), in the Netherlands (Adriaan van Haemstede, 1559), etc. What is interesting is that these advocates of the truth are also persecuted witnesses: we can say then that the first Protestant historical studies occurred in a context of Martyrdom.

But, before exploring this topic of martyrdom, let us see how this alternative history was established and written. To do this, I suggest studying the French (or French-speaking) Protestant historical studies of the Church in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with reference to Philippe de Marnix, Nicolas Vignier, Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, Pierre Du Moulin, Jean Claude, etc. They all dealt with the following issues:

1. The chronology: for example the purity of the Church during the first three or four centuries, collusion of the Church and the State since Constantine, growing importance of papacy under Gregory 1<sup>st</sup> and in the latter centuries, corruption of the doctrine (for example, the doctrine of transubstantiation appeared between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> century).
2. Maintenance of the truth in the Church, in the communities who were opposed to the pope. At first, the historians picked out individuals, like John Scot, Bertramne, John Berenger, Peter Valdo, or even saint Bernard or saint Francis of Assisi. According to the Protestant historians, their ideas had spread all over Christendom. But very quickly they claimed that these individuals were leaders of real communities.
3. The existence of continuity from the apostles to the Reformers because of the relationship between these so-called communities. It was a continuity of doctrine, too: all believed the same faith as the Protestants. Therefore, it was necessary to deny the charges made against the heretics. For example, according to Jean-Paul Perrin, Charles Drelincourt, Pierre Gilles or Pierre Boyer, Albigensians were not manicheists, they were the heirs of Christians who had never known the corruption of Rome; all the charges were fabrications of the Roman Church.

Now, we can go back to the context of martyrdom which was peculiar to France, most probably because the Reformation did not win. Protestants fought during the so-called wars of religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, then they were only tolerated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and were persecuted again in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

It is true that persecutions had been studied by Protestant historians in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries: For example, Nicolas Pithou, one of the founders of the Reformed Church of Troyes (Champagne) in 1559, wrote in his *Histoire ecclesiastique de l'Eglise de la ville de Troyes*, that there was a “constance du temps des feux” (referring to consistent burnings at the stake). The historical studies of « witnesses of the truth » highlighted the persecutions, as in Agrippa d'Aubigné's *Tragiques*: the fourth volume's title is “Les Feux”; the next volume's name is “les Fers”. They told of the stakes and the wars of religion and they were published in 1616.

But martyrdom was not the only issue. Although lists of martyrs appeared at the beginning of each volume in the *Histoire ecclesiastique des Eglises réformées au royaume de France*, directed by Theodore de Bèze (1580), the main purpose was to show how the Reformed Churches were being established in the French kingdom.

With the edict of Fontainebleau (1685) the revocation of the edict of Nantes which forbade the Reformed worship persecutions against Protestants became common under the implementation of the Dragonnade police. Soldiers came into the houses to compel the Protestants to become Catholics. For the French Protestants, it was a real trauma: it was impossible for them to understand why God allowed that, unless he wanted to punish his flock because of its numerous sins. So, at this time, the Protestant historians emphasised the sins of the Reformed people and the terrible persecutions that they had to suffer. This was almost the only issue they covered in their historical accounts. They described the abuses and the atrocities committed by the soldiers. Other accounts were published by Huguenots who wanted to protest against the French policy, like Jean Claude, Pierre Bayle or Pierre Jurieu. In their memoirs, refugees talked especially about this short but traumatic experience, much more than about the rest of their life; these narratives were sent to their children, copied, sometimes published; as a result they have formed an important part of Protestant memory. To this is added the accounts of preachers who were arrested and condemned to death because of their faith, and the popular songs and poems about their death.

This memory of persecutions persisted also in the sermons and in the books which related the history of French Protestantism, like Elie Benoist's *Histoire de l'Edit de Nantes*

(1693-1695). This is in fact an history of the attacks on the edict of Nantes. Persecution was emphasised too in the speeches for toleration, for example by Antoine Court, Court de Gébelin or La Beaumelle, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The wars of religion, Saint Bartholomew's day, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the War of the Camisards played a very important role in the shaping of the Protestant identity in France.

In conclusion, we can advocate that the French Protestant identity is quite different from other European Protestant identities, because of the failure of the Reformation. As a result, the history of French Protestantism remains a history of violence, persecution and, recently, of toleration and coexistence. Other topics, like daily life, material culture (the material aspects of the Protestant culture) or the Protestant imaginative world are still unusual among French historians of Protestantism, contrary to historians from other countries.