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*Pontianus Polman re-imagined:
how (not) to write a history of religious polemics*

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Abstract

This historiographical essay discusses several examples of how religious polemics have been studied with regard to their use of history. Only one book has ever treated the subject in a systematic way: Pontianus Polman's *L'élément historique dans la controverse religieuse du XVI^e siècle* (Gembloux, 1932). Applying a rigid scheme, Polman dealt first with Protestants and then with Catholics. For each side, he presented two sections: the first entitled 'The accumulation of material' (subdivided into 'history of dogma' and 'church history') and the second 'The synthesis of material'. Polman's general conclusion was that religious polemics stimulated historical research but that theological ideas were often considered to be of greater importance than evidence derived from historical documents and sources. After a consideration of contemporary reviewers such as Hubert Jedin and Lucien Febvre, I discuss Irena Backus' book *Historical Method and Confessional Identity* (2003) and argue that a new history of religious controversies should build on an 'anatomy of polemics', that is, on the study of scholarly conventions, their modification and rupture in Reformation polemics, with particular attention given to the criteria of religious knowledge as exemplified by debates about forgeries.

Keywords: historiography – Pontianus Polman – Irena Backus – polemic – disputations – forgery – Reformation

This story does not start in 1517. Instead, it begins in 1897, when Antonius Joannes Maria Polman was born in Amsterdam. During the First World War, he entered the Franciscan Order in the Dutch town of Wijchen.¹ He took the religious name Pontianus,

I would like to thank Simon Ditchfield, Jill Kraye, David Chambers, David Bagchi, Kevin Killeen and the anonymous reader of this journal for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

honouring both the third-century pope and the second-century Christian martyr from Spoleto, who shared this name. Pontianus of Spoleto was the patron saint of Utrecht, where some of his relics had been brought during the Middle Ages (and where Polman died in 1968).²

Pontianus Polman was ordained a priest in 1922. The year after, he left for Leuven in Belgium to continue his studies. This was both the oldest university in the Low Countries and the oldest extant Catholic university. It was also considered one of the world's foremost centres for Catholic theology, attracting a truly international student body. Polman studied there with Albin van Hoonacker, the first professor in Leuven to teach 'Critical History of the Old Testament', in which the historical method was applied to biblical texts. In addition, Polman was taught by the church historian Albert de Meyer. With de Meyer, he worked on Dutch Catholic-Protestant polemics. In 1926 he submitted a thesis to obtain his licence in theology (*sacrae theologiae licentiatu*s) on the polemic between the Dutch Bishop Cornelius Jansenius (1585–1638) and the Calvinist Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676). The topic was undoubtedly chosen by de Meyer, who specialized in Jansenist controversies.³ Polman's licentiate thesis became the basis of an article, published in 1928–29, on the polemic between Jansenius and

Suzanne Visschedijk from the Dutch province of the Franciscans kindly provided biographical material on Polman.

¹ On Polman see Lodewijk J. Rogier, 'De kerkhistoricus Pontianus Polman', *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Kerk in Nederland*, 10 (1968), 3–13, followed by a bibliography of Polman's most important publications up to 1967, 14–17 (both items are part of a Festschrift for Polman, entitled *Up Ponciaens outaer: kerkhistorische opstellen aangeboden aan Pater Pontianus Polman*); Jan de Kok, 'Pontianus Polman †', *Variant: tijdschrift van de Nederlandse Minderbroeders*, 2 (1968), 226–29; Mari P. van Buijtenen, 'Herdenking van Antonius Joannes Maria Polman', *Jaarboek der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, 1968–69, 255–62; Cornelis P. Voorvelt, 'Polman, Antonius Johannes Maria (1897–1968)', in *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, 6 vols. (The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1979–2008), vol. 1, 465–66.

² Pontianus of Spoleto exerted a fascination on Pontianus Polman – so much so that he devoted one of his last publications to him: 'Sint Ponciaen van Utrecht', *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Kerk in Nederland*, 9 (1967), 213–30.

³ The thesis was entitled 'Jansenius contra Voetius: een bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der polemiek tusschen katholieken en protestanten in Nederland, 1630–1635'. See also Albert de Meyer, *Les premières controverses jansénistes en France (1640–1649)* (Leuven: Van Linthout, 1919).

Voetius.⁴ It is useful to see how Polman arranged his material in this first work on polemic. He experimented with a structure that would enable him to analyse religious polemics and their context. Therefore, he divided the article into two parts. Part I dealt with the polemic itself, focusing on the works and their content. In Part II, Polman examined the historical milieu. He demonstrated Jansenius' dependence on the works of the French Cardinal Jacques-Davy Duperron and placed Jansenius' method within the development of French polemics. Here he concentrated on Jansenius' *Alexipharumacum* (1630) and *Notarum spongia* (1631) and on Voetius' *Philonium Romanum correctum* (1630) and *Desperata causa papatus* (1635). The dispute between the two writers centred on a key argument between Catholics and Protestants about the apostolic succession of the papacy.⁵ Voetius doubted whether Roman teaching on the authority of the papacy, indulgences and Mariology were based on Holy Scripture. Jansenius replied that a *successio doctrinae* (succession of doctrine) did not follow from a *veritas doctrinae* (truth of doctrine). Rather, it was the other way around – that is, the purity of dogma was guaranteed by the *successio cathedrae* (apostolic succession). The *successio doctrinae* was therefore connected to historical developments and could be verified only through historical proof. Ultimately, Polman's article thus analysed the differences between scriptural and historical argumentation in polemic.

Polman's doctoral thesis followed in 1927; his topic was 'The Historical Element in the Controversy between Catholics and Protestants, Mainly in the Netherlands'.⁶ The same year, he was appointed a professor of Church History in the *theologicum* at the

⁴ Pontianus Polman, 'Jansenius als polemist tegen de calvinisten', *Historisch Tijdschrift*, 7 (1928), 325–46, and 8 (1929), 5–17, 149–66, 248–58; repr. in *idem, Adversaria Pontiani: verspreide geschriften van Pontianus Polman*, ed. J. A. H. Bots et al. (Amsterdam: Holland Universiteits Pers, 1976), 93–139 (with a summary in English, *ibid.*, 309–10). On Polman's analysis of Calvinism see also Willem J. C. Buitendijk, *Het calvinisme in de spiegel van de Zuidnederlandse literatuur der Contra-Reformatie* (Groningen: Wolters, 1942), 55–65.

⁵ See Mathijs Lamberigts, 'Voetius versus Jansenius', in Johannes van Oort et al. (eds.), *De onbekende Voetius* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 148–67; Andreas J. Beck, *Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676): sein Theologieverständnis und seine Gotteslehre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 48–50.

⁶ P. Polman, 'Het historisch element in de polemieken tusschen katholieken en protestanten, voornamelijk in Nederlanden' (doctoral thesis, Catholic University of Leuven, 1927).

Franciscan friary of Alverna in Wijchen. (Alverna was the Latin name of the mountain of La Verna in Tuscany where St Francis received the stigmata.) When writing his doctoral thesis, Polman had begun to realize that polemics in the Netherlands had a ‘second-hand’ character and were, therefore, impossible to deal with in isolation from the rest of Europe. This realization led to his masterpiece, *L’élément historique dans la controverse religieuse du XVI^e siècle*, a few years later.

Albert de Meyer proposed to the faculty that Polman should aim for the title of *magister*, an advanced degree which only a few scholars attempted to obtain after their doctorates.⁷ Working towards this title, Polman published important parts of his doctoral thesis as articles in French. ‘La méthode polémique des premiers adversaires de la Réforme’ (‘The Polemical Method of the First Opponents of the Reformation’, 1929) surveyed Catholic replies to the dogmatic and methodological aspects of the Protestant ‘Scripture principle’.⁸ Polman pointed out that Protestants, by not accepting the authority of previous theologians, Church Fathers, councils and popes, created a stark rupture from the previous theological method.⁹ Martin Luther, for example, argued at the Leipzig Disputation in 1519 that church councils could err (as the Council of Constance had done in the case of Jan Hus), and he denied the authority of tradition. Consequently, Polman asked whether Catholics, too, modified their traditional approach in order to give a better answer to the Protestants. He showed that most Catholic authors, however, continued to have recourse to tradition as their key weapon. Justifications for this were the need for tradition in establishing a unified interpretation of Scripture and the function of the Church Fathers as a historical bridge to apostolic Christianity. The theologians John Driedo and Martín Pérez de Ayala aimed

⁷ This degree was a kind of Catholic *Habilitation*, although it seems that it was not necessary in order to be appointed a professor. My thanks to Wim François and Leo Kenis (Leuven) for information.

⁸ Pontianus Polman, ‘La méthode polémique des premiers adversaires de la Réforme’, *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique*, 25 (1929), 471–506; repr. in *idem*, *Adversaria Pontiani*, 1–33 (with a summary in English, *ibid.*, 307). This article was also published in German as a booklet entitled *Die polemische Methode der ersten Gegner der Reformation*, trans. Clotilde von Cohausen (Münster: Aschendorff, 1931). The German edition contained an additional bibliography of sources, but some of the notes were shortened.

⁹ Polman, ‘La méthode polémique’, 471–73.

to defend the forms of tradition; Johann Eck and others wrote on the authority of church councils and on papal primacy – that is, the concept that the bishop of Rome is the universal pastor and supreme head of the Church.

Polman demonstrated that there were three reasons for the prevalence of the argument centring on tradition: (1) the papacy, councils, Church Fathers and the Church itself had dogmatic value; (2) Protestants were not seen as equal sparring partners but were instead regarded as heretics;¹⁰ and (3) Protestants, too, referred to the Church Fathers (and it seemed easy for Catholics to show that this Protestant practice was a contradiction in itself). Thus, Polman showed the variety of Catholic responses and the reasons for them. He concentrated on a sample of authors from various European nations up to the 1560s (for example, Tommaso de Vio Cajetan and Gasparo Contarini from Italy; Alfonso de Castro, Pérez de Ayala and Melchior Cano from Spain; John Fisher from England; Josse Clichtove from Belgium; Stanislaus Hosius from Poland).¹¹ The reason for his chronological endpoint was the publication of the *Magdeburg Centuries*, the great Protestant church history, from 1559 to 1574, which led to equally great systematic works by the Catholics Cesare Baronio and Robert Bellarmine from the 1580s onwards. As Polman observed, these publications marked a new age of polemic involving history.¹²

Polman did not disguise the fact that Catholics disagreed about essential points within tradition. The Dutch theologian Albert Pigge defended the supremacy of the pope over councils, while the Spaniard Alfonso de Castro held the opposite view.¹³ Both, however, agreed that the Church had to be defended against the common

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 499: 'La plupart des théologiens, surtout au debut, voulaient se constituer, en quelque sorte, juges et inquisiteurs; ils refusaient de lutter à armes égales et en appelaient à la répression des coupables.'

¹¹ On Clichtove see the essay by Sam Kennerley, 'Students of History, Masters of Tradition: Josse Clichtove, Noël Beda and the Limits of Historical Criticism', in this issue.

¹² Polman, 'La méthode polémique', 476. See Matthias Flacius Illyricus et al., *Ecclesiastica historia*, 13 vols. (Basel: Oporinus, 1559–74); Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationes de controversiis Christianae fidei*, 3 vols. (Ingolstadt: Sartorius, 1586–93); Cesare Baronio, *Annales ecclesiastici*, 12 vols. (Rome: Tipografia Vaticana, 1588–1607). On Baronio see also the essay by Gianmarco Giuliani, 'Reformatio or restauratio? The Rehabilitation of Pope Gregory VII in Catholic Historiography after Trent', in this issue.

¹³ Polman, 'La méthode polémique', 482–83.

enemy, Protestantism. Not all Catholic authors had the same critical acumen, as some still used works which had already been demonstrated to be forgeries. Johann Eck and Josse Clichtove, for example, referred to Christ's letter to King Abgar V, the authenticity of which had already been placed in doubt.¹⁴

Only a very small number of Catholic authors engaged in disputes with Protestants on the basis of scriptural passages. A notable exception was the *Confutatio Confessionis Augustanae*, consisting of a Catholic critique of the Augsburg Confession, based on passages from Holy Scripture, by authors including Eck. This was the direct result of demands by Emperor Charles V, who still hoped that Protestants would return to the Catholic fold. The emperor had rejected an initial version of the *Confutatio* as being too polemical.¹⁵

To sum up, Polman showed that Catholic authors did not acknowledge the value of the Protestant 'Scripture principle' as a method because they considered it to be a dogmatic deviation. Catholic theological method, by and large, remained the same. Polman also pointed out what both Catholic and Protestant authors had in common: they both viewed history and Scripture largely through a dogmatic lens. Reviewers of the German edition of Polman's article (from both sides of the confessional divide) praised the clarity and helpfulness of his exposition and looked forward to his further works.¹⁶

Polman gave a further taste of the intricate connection between polemic and historical arguments in his article 'Flacius Illyricus, Church Historian' (1931).¹⁷ He

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 489. On the apocryphal correspondence between Jesus and Abgar, king of Edessa, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Uses of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 362–66. The church historian Eusebius claimed that he had uncovered the letters in the archives of Edessa.

¹⁵ Polman, 'La méthode polémique', 491–92.

¹⁶ See the reviews of Polman, *Die polemische Methode*, by Richard Birch Hoyle, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 33 (1932), 221; Florian Schlagenhaufen, *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, 56 (1932), 122; Canisius H. Lambermond, *Historisch Tijdschrift*, 11 (1932), 75–76. See also Otto Clemen, Review of Polman, 'La méthode polémique', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 49, n.s. 12 (1930), 113–14.

¹⁷ Pontianus Polman, 'Flacius Illyricus, historien de l'Église', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 27 (1931), 27–73. On Flacius (Matija Vlačić) see also the essay by Harald Bollbuck, 'Searching for

reviewed the various historical works by the Croatian reformer Matthias Flacius, including his *Catalogue of Witnesses to the Truth* (*Catalogus testium veritatis*, 1556) and his contributions to the *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559–74). Polman argued that the underlying historical idea of the *Catalogue* was not original. The idea that the Church was corrupted during the Middle Ages and that only a small circle of true believers preserved the truth of the Gospel through the centuries was already present in the works of Philip Melanchthon.¹⁸ Flacius deserved more credit for his tireless accumulation of historical material and his search for unpublished manuscripts. Polman also noted a growing interest in history among Calvinists towards the end of the sixteenth century, while interest among German Lutherans declined. Despite his great erudition, Flacius' works did not receive the attention they deserved from Protestants. The questions which Polman posed about Flacius are still being discussed today.¹⁹

In 1932, Polman proceeded to his magister examination, which lasted for three days. During the first two days, he had to defend no fewer than 72 theses.²⁰ These dealt with a wide array of theological topics, but some were concerned specifically with the subject matter of his work on history and polemic. Polman defended theses such as: 'One cannot maintain that the polemical method of the Catholic writers underwent a radical change during the sixteenth century'; 'The Calvinism of the sixteenth century possessed, to a larger degree than Lutheranism, the qualities required for polemic in the field of history'; and 'The historical works of Flacius Illyricus have not exercised an influence proportionate to the richness of erudition which they

the True Religion: The Church History of the *Magdeburg Centuries* between Critical Methods and Confessional Polemics', in this issue.

¹⁸ Polman, 'Flacius Illyricus', 50.

¹⁹ On the limited originality of the *Catalogue* see, e.g., Heinz Scheible, 'Der *Catalogus testium veritatis*: Flacius als Schüler Melanchthons', in *idem*, *Aufsätze zu Melanchthon* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 415–30. For a study of Flacius' search for manuscripts see Martina Hartmann, *Humanismus und Kirchenkritik: Matthias Flacius Illyricus als Erforscher des Mittelalters* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2001).

²⁰ Pontianus Polman, *Theses quas una cum dissertatione 'L'élément historique dans la controverse religieuse du XVI^e siècle' ... pro gradu magistri sacrae theologiae ... consequendo publice propugnabit Pater Pontianus Polman*, Universitas Catholica Lovaniensis, Facultas theologica, Theses, 1204 (Leuven: Bomans, 1932).

contain'.²¹ On the third day, he discussed his magister dissertation, which had become more limited than he had originally planned. His first project for the dissertation had aimed to cover more than one and a half centuries, from John Calvin to what Polman regarded as the 'showpiece' of seventeenth-century polemic: the work on the Eucharist by the Jansenist Antoine Arnauld, directed against the Calvinists (1669–74).²² In the end, however, he decided that the task was too daunting, as he would not only have to read hundreds of rare polemical texts but also familiarize himself with numerous historical arguments. He left aside the seventeenth century and ended his dissertation with the great works of synthesis of the sixteenth century, as we shall see below. The dissertation was given its final form – still massive at 580 pages – in the monograph *L'élément historique dans la controverse religieuse du XVI^e siècle*, published in 1932 in the magister dissertation series of Leuven.²³

In the 1950s, on behalf of the Dutch government, Polman worked in Roman archives to collect material about the Church in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dedicating his later life chiefly to research about Catholic life in the Netherlands during the eighteenth century. In 1958 he became a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences and was certainly the most famous Dutch Franciscan historian. In the Netherlands, his fame was due to his works about Dutch church history; however, abroad, it rested on his monograph *L'élément historique*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8: 'On ne peut pas soutenir que la méthode polémique des écrivains catholiques a subi, au cours du XVI^e siècle, un changement radical'; *ibid.*, 9: 'Le calvinisme du XVI^e siècle possédait, dans une plus large mesure que le luthéranisme, les qualités requises pour la polémique sur le terrain de l'histoire du dogme'; *ibid.*, 15: 'L'œuvre historique de Flacius Illyricus n'a pas exercé une influence proportionnée aux richesses d'érudition qu'elle renferme'.

²² Antoine Arnauld, *La perpétuité de la foy de l'Église catholique touchant l'Eucharistie*, 3 vols. (Paris: Prussurot; Savreux, 1669–74). Arnauld also featured heavily in De Meyer, *Les premières controverses*. See Rogier, 'Kerkhistoricus', 8.

²³ Pontianus Polman, *L'élément historique dans la controverse religieuse du XVI^e siècle*, Universitas Catholica Lovaniensis, Dissertationes ad gradum magistri in Facultate Theologica consequendum conscriptae, ser. 2, 23 (Gembloux: Duculot, 1932).

ANATOMY OF POLMAN'S BOOK

L'élément historique had a rigid scheme and was almost equally divided between two books, one focusing on the Protestants, the other on Catholics. Each part had two sections, the first entitled 'The accumulation of material' (subdivided into 'history of dogma' and 'church history') and the second 'The synthesis of material'. Overall, Polman's broad approach reflected his *credo* that a coherent historical image could be achieved solely through the art of synthesis. Only by rising above individual studies could developments in historical polemic be understood. In contrast to the mantra of one of his contemporaries, the cultural historian Aby Warburg ('God is in the detail'), Polman treasured the notion that 'the truth is in the whole'.²⁴ He was also proud of his efforts not only to write a balanced treatment of Protestants and Catholics, but also to understand and judge writers by the standards of their own times. He openly admired the great reformers, perhaps with a slight preference for those with a humanist education.²⁵ Nevertheless, in some cases, his Catholic identity shone through. For example, he criticized Luther and Calvin for reinforcing 'certain errors' of the fifteenth century, 'in particular those of Wyclif and Hus'.²⁶ In my opinion, it is futile to speculate as to whether Polman's purported impartiality might actually have been a hidden form of disrespect to Protestants. The balanced construction of his monograph had its own merits and spoke for itself.

Book 1 dealt with the Protestants, and the section on dogma (under 'accumulation of material') contained treatments of Luther and Melanchthon, Huldrych Zwingli and Johannes Oecolampadius, Calvin and their successors. For Luther, Polman focused on his break with humanism, while for the other reformers, he noted the influence that

²⁴ See De Kok, 'Polman', 226: 'Die Wahrheit ist im Ganzen – "de details zijn trouwens na te slaan", zoals Polman zelf zei ('The truth is in the whole – "anyway, the details can be looked up", as Polman himself said). This was a variation on Hegel's statement 'Das Wahre ist das Ganze' ('The true is the whole') from the preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

²⁵ Van Buijtenen, 'Herdenking', 257. Tellingly, Polman later regretted the title of his article 'La méthode polémique', wishing that he had called it instead 'La méthode historique'; see *ibid.*, 258.

²⁶ Polman, 'La méthode polémique', 473: 'Luther et Calvin renforçaient certaines erreurs du XV^e siècle, en particulier celles de Wiclef et de Hus'.

humanism had on them. The section about the next generation of reformers included subsections on Heinrich Bullinger and the history of dogma in Switzerland, and on the sacrifice of the mass (as studied by Flacius and George Major). Next came subsections on Peter Martyr Vermigli and the debates about the Eucharist in England, Theodore Beza and the Colloquy at Poissy, and polemics in the Netherlands.

The section on church history ('the accumulation of material') contained, in Chapter 1, two subsections on 'particular questions' – that is, the history of the papacy (papal primacy, St Peter in Rome, Pope Joan, Donation of Constantine) and precursors to the Reformation. In Chapter 2, Polman dealt with wider histories of the Church such as Sebastian Franck's *Chronicle*, the chronicle of Johann Carion and Melanchthon, and the works of Johann Sleidan. Section 2, 'The synthesis of material', dealt with the *Madgeburg Centuries*, Martin Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of Trent* and the works of Calvinists (patristic editions and the history of dogma).

Book 2 covered the Catholics. Again, under Section 1, 'Accumulation of material', the treatment was divided into dogma and church history. Under dogma, Polman followed a topographical arrangement. He first discussed German theologians, beginning with Eck, then moving on to the Jesuits at Ingolstadt and to humanists such as Johann Cochlaeus, members of the universities of Leuven and the Sorbonne who argued against Luther, and English polemics, which he divided into three periods (1. Henry VIII and Fisher, 2. Stephen Gardiner and Cuthbert Tunstall, 3. exiles on the continent such as Thomas Stapleton), and, lastly, polemicists in southern Europe. Proponents of irenicism received a separate subsection. Then followed a long chapter on discussions about the Eucharist. Part 2 of the first section, 'Church history', again turned to 'particular questions': papal primacy, the succession of popes, Pope Joan, ancient and medieval heretics, and martyrs. It also dealt with wider histories of the church by Nicholas Sanders (*De visibili monarchia ecclesiae*) and Gilbert G  n  brard (*Chronographia*).²⁷ Section 2 discussed the 'Synthesis of material'. This final section

²⁷ Nicholas Sanders, *De visibili monarchia ecclesiae libri VIII* (Leuven: Fowler; Velpius, 1571); Gilbert G  n  brard, *Chronographiae libri quatuor* (Paris: Martin Le Jeune, 1580). See Polman, *L'  l  ment historique*, 505–8.

dealt with the *Disputations about Controversies of the Christian Faith* of Robert Bellarmine and the *Ecclesiastical Annals* of Cesare Baronio. The work ended with a general conclusion, which drew all the threads together.

HOW WAS POLMAN'S MONOGRAPH RECEIVED?

There were several very perceptive reviews of Polman's monograph, which generally commented on the author's strengths, his scheme and the particular questions he posed. Starting with the strengths, many reviewers noted Polman's eminent fairness, great objectivity and admirable impartiality, as well as his vast erudition and precision. The *English Historical Review* judged his book to be 'admirably impartial'.²⁸ The French historian Gustave Constant stated that its subject was 'as new as it is important'.²⁹ Reviewers also admired Polman for writing the first comprehensive account of the subject (and it is still today the only comprehensive monograph on the uses of history in confessional polemics). As Arthur Bullowa commented in the *Catholic Historical Review*, 'In view of the cardinal importance of the subject, it is perhaps surprising that the present work ... is the first treatment of the theme.'³⁰ It was an indispensable guide to the controversial literature of the sixteenth century.

Polman's rigid scheme was, of course, open to criticism. Though some reviewers appreciated it, others were tempted to offer their own ideas. Bullowa stated the obvious by pointing out that Polman did not treat persons or subjects in a unified or complete manner.³¹ As examples he mentioned Melchior Cano, George Cassander,

²⁸ Charles Stanley Phillips, *English Historical Review*, 49 (1934), 124–26. On Polman's 'groote objectiviteit' ('great objectivity') see also the review by H. A. Enno van Gelder, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 49 (1934), 215–16.

²⁹ Gustave Constant, Review of Polman, *L'élément historique*, *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 29 (1933), 457–59, at p. 457: 'aussi neuf qu'important'.

³⁰ Arthur M. Bullowa, Review of Polman, *L'élément historique*, *Catholic Historical Review*, 3 (1935), 341–43.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Peter Martyr Vermigli, the legend of the female pope and the Donation of Constantine, which could be studied only by turning to the brief references in various sections.

Other reviewers were more creative. The historian Lucien Febvre, who in the same year (1933) was appointed to a chair at the Collège de France in Paris, thought that Polman's scheme had two great disadvantages. One was that it made the monograph into a *repertoire* rather than a lively account. The second was that Polman was not able to understand the 'intellectual novelty' and the 'new spirit' expressed in the works which he labelled synthetic.³² There was, according to Febvre, a general transformation of the conditions of intellectual existence, of modes of thinking in the course of the evolution of the century. The world of Montaigne was different from that of Rabelais. Events such as the French Wars of Religion were also neglected by Polman. Lastly, Febvre said that he, like Polman, would have divided the monograph into two parts. These, however, would have been about two different ages, each dealing with both Catholics and Protestants: the first would be on 'the age of opportunism and disorganized combat', while the second would be on 'the age of synthesis and pitched battles'.³³ We can imagine the sort of *histoire totale* of controversy which Febvre had in mind.

The German Catholic church historian Hubert Jedin, writing in 1933 from Breslau (present-day Wrocław in Poland), made so many suggestions that it seems he, too, desired a completely different treatment.³⁴ He approved of the clarity of Polman's scheme but also saw significant drawbacks. Only in very few cases was Polman able to present a coherent picture of the historical orientation of the theologians who

³² Lucien Febvre, Review of Polman, *L'élément historique*, *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature*, 100 (1933), 132–33: 'esprit nouveaux ... transformation très générale des conditions d'existence intellectuelle'.

³³ *Ibid.*: 'Mettant en regard l'attaque et la défense, la polémique catholique et la polémique protestante, j'aurais étudié d'abord, en terre luthérienne puis en terre calviniste, l'âge de l'opportunisme et du combat en ordre dispersé; ensuite l'âge de la synthèse et de la bataille rangée'.

³⁴ Hubert Jedin, 'Das geschichtliche Element in der Kontroversliteratur des 16. Jahrhunderts' (Review of Polman, *L'élément historique*), *Theologische Revue*, 32 (1933), cols. 305–11. See also *idem*, 'Die geschichtliche Bedeutung der katholischen Kontroversliteratur im Zeitalter der Glaubensspaltung', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 53 (1933), 70–97, at pp. 96–97.

engaged in controversies. Jedin said that he would not have separated the history of dogma from church history. He liked those sections where Polman broke with his own rigid scheme and concentrated on particular problems, such as the Eucharist, or on particular questions of church history. Jedin believed that it would have been fruitful to have adopted this approach when treating those problems which were most frequently the subjects of controversies (for example, the discussions about papal primacy in church history, the curial system and church councils), as well as the influence of individual Church Fathers and their writings (e.g. Augustine, the Greek Church Fathers, Tertullian's *On the Prescription of Heretics*). Jedin also recommended tracing the influence of church historical sources and groups of sources (e.g. Pseudo-Isidore, medieval debates about *regnum* and *sacerdotium* and Marsilius of Padua's *Defender of the Peace*). Lastly, it would have been rewarding if Polman had analysed the degree of historical thought contained in the controversial handbooks (by Eck, Johannes Hoffmeister, Ambrogio Catarino Politi, Luigi Lippomano and others)³⁵ and in the manuals of Christian doctrine (by Johannes Gropper and Stanislaus Hosius).³⁶ In this way, Jedin was sure that a stronger chronological and national differentiation would have emerged.

As regards individual figures, Jedin thought that some personalities had been short-changed. One of these was Luther, who, though not a historian, possessed more church historical knowledge than Polman credited him with.³⁷ In a sense, maintained Jedin, Luther's fight against the traditions might even have opened up a decisive new path for their considering them in the light of historical development. Martin Bucer

³⁵Johann Eck, *Enchiridion locorum communium adversus Lutherum et alios hostes ecclesiae* (first publ. 1525), ed. Pierre Fraenkel (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979); Ambrogio Catarino Politi, *Compendio d'errori et inganni luterani* (Rome: Cartolari, 1544); Johannes Hoffmeister, *Loci communes rerum theologicarum quae hodie in controversia agitantur* (Ingolstadt: Weissenhorn, 1547); Luigi Lippomano, *Confirmazione et stabilimento di tutti li dogmi catholici* (Venice: Al segno della Speranza, 1553).

³⁶Johannes Gropper, *Enchiridion Christianae institutionis*, in *idem*, *Canones Concilii provincialis Coloniensis* (Cologne: Quentel, 1538), fols. 47ar–313v; Stanislaus Hosius, *Confessio Catholicae fidei Christiana* (Mainz: Behem, 1557).

³⁷ On Luther's views on history see the essay by Marie Barral-Baron, 'A Church without History? Luther and Historical Argument in the Context of Humanist Polemics', in this issue.

was also treated too superficially. Finally, Polman underestimated the Catholic church historian Onofrio Panvinio (1530–68). As Jedin wrote, ‘Panvinio’s work had a much greater importance than Polman allows us to believe’. A modern biography of Panvinio was, sadly, still lacking.³⁸ A general point about politics was introduced by Arthur Bullowa, who lamented Polman’s lack of attention to political questions and to the ways in which they influenced historical thinking in theology.³⁹

TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS POLEMICS

In the last section of this essay, I want to fast-forward to the summer of 1995. My point of departure is another Dutch historian, Heiko Augustinus Oberman, born in 1930 in Utrecht (where, as mentioned above, Polman died in 1968). Oberman received his doctorate in theology from Utrecht and then emigrated to America, where he became a leading late medieval and Reformation scholar. In 1995 Oberman had a conversation with Irena Dorota Backus (*née* Kostarka), a historian of Polish background (d. 2019). Oberman suggested to her that Polman’s pioneering work needed revision. And so it happened that Backus, who had emigrated to England at the age of 11, had been educated in London and Oxford and later taught in Geneva, set out to revise Polman’s book.⁴⁰ Backus’ reply to Polman was eventually published in – not surprisingly – Holland in 2003. Her book was entitled *Historical Method and*

³⁸ Jedin, ‘Das geschichtliche Element’, col. 311: ‘Dem Schaffen Onofrio Panvinius kommt eine weit größere Bedeutung zu, als Polman erkennen läßt.’ On Panvinio see now Stefan Bauer, *The Invention of Papal History: Onofrio Panvinio between Renaissance and Catholic Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁹ Bullowa, Review of Polman, 343.

⁴⁰ A 2017 issue of the journal *Reformation & Renaissance Review* was published as a homage to Backus’ work; and a Festschrift came out the year after: Maria-Cristina Pitassi and Daniela Solfaroli Camillocci (eds.), *Crossing Traditions: Essays on the Reformation and Intellectual History in Honour of Irena Backus* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). For an introduction to Backus’ writings see Maria-Cristina Pitassi, ‘À la croisée des traditions et des savoirs: notes introductives sur l’historiographie d’Irena Backus’, *ibid.*, 1–11.

Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615).⁴¹ That the book started with the Great Schism of 1378 and with Wyclif might have been a nod to Heiko Oberman. Backus began her 'Introduction' by reviewing pertinent literature published after Polman, claiming that 'the various lines of enquiry followed have tended to share as a common denominator the issue of the reception of patristic thought by reformers and their adversaries'.⁴² This is a strong but very selective statement. After all, progress has also been made in most of the other areas treated by Polman: for instance, the views of history held by Luther, Melanchthon and Bullinger or studies on the history of the papacy.

In line with her belief in the central role played by the reception of patristic thought, Backus' first chapters dealt with 'Uses of Augustine in treatises on the Church' (Chapter 1), John Calvin and Sebastian Castellio on Greek patristics and philosophy (Chapter 2), editions of Irenaeus and Tertullian (Chapter 3) and sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century guidebooks on patristic studies (Chapter 4).⁴³ Chapter 5 provided a careful and nuanced analysis of apocryphal texts. Only Chapter 6 looked at histories of the Church in a stricter sense, concentrating on the presentation of the *early* Church in writers such as Melanchthon, the Centuriators of Magdeburg and Baronio; but even in this last chapter, Backus' main focus was on the reception of the Church Fathers.

It is curious that Backus did not engage with Polman in detail, apart from in the 'Introduction' (where she quoted only from his conclusion) and in Chapter 6. Also, Backus' own general thesis raises questions. While Polman had maintained that controversy stimulated historical research and was put at the service of controversy, Backus argued that 'the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were characterized by an interest in history first and foremost' and that this interest was both genuine and pursued outside of polemics.⁴⁴ According to Backus, therefore, while Polman's

⁴¹ Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴³ For a recent appraisal of the polemical use of Church Fathers see Mathias Mütel, *Mit den Kirchenvätern gegen Luther? Die Debatten um Tradition und auctoritas patrum auf dem Konzil von Trient* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2017).

⁴⁴ Backus, *Historical Method*, 3.

argument was not false, he nevertheless neglected to say that theologians were *also* interested in historical sources ‘first and foremost’. Editors of patristic texts had polemical aims but they *also* had ‘a genuine desire to present the best possible text or one which is historically most accurate’.⁴⁵ Yet there are problems with Backus’ thesis about a widespread interest in history ‘first and foremost’ – and the resulting dichotomy between ‘genuine’ and confessional interests in history.⁴⁶ It is difficult to speak of a ‘genuine desire’ to pursue historical research when authors were both implicated in a confessional struggle and also concerned with truths that transcended the parameters of historical facts. Melancthon, for example, had complex ideas about history and its moral values and functions as well as its connection to divine providence.⁴⁷

Having discussed the principal merits and demerits of Polman and Backus, I would now like to propose a new approach to the study of religious polemics and history. In light of the penetrating comments by Febvre and Jedin on Polman’s work, the relevance of an anatomy of polemics becomes apparent: how did polemics work and what were the rules of the game? For an anatomy of polemics, we can begin with an idea put forward by William H. Allison, who reviewed Polman’s monograph in the *American Historical Review*:

In the treatment of the theological disputes of the sixteenth century, the critic should differentiate, on both sides, between two types of forensics, the dexterous

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁴⁶ In his review of Backus, James K. Farge, *Theological Studies*, 66 (2005), 897–98, noted that Backus’ ‘distinction is not always evident’. He listed examples of the use of history and patristic authority as ‘weapons’ by authors discussed in her book. See also Simon Ditchfield’s pithy observation in his review of Backus, *English Historical Review*, 121 (2006), 842–45, at p. 845: ‘the relationship between scholarship and polemic is not one of either/or but fundamentally one of both/and’. Other reviewers observed that the simplicity of Backus’ overall thesis stands in curious contrast to the extraordinary richness and variety of material included in her book (see, e.g., Robert Kolb, *Church History*, 73 (2004), 204–6).

⁴⁷ Euan Cameron, ‘The Bible and the Early Modern Sense of History’, in *idem* (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 657–85.

thrust – cleverness instead of wisdom – to meet the attack of the moment, and the habitual form of a writer’s polemic or apologetic system or method.⁴⁸

A new history of religious controversies should consider scholarly conventions, their modification and their rupture in Reformation polemics. Scholarly controversies in the age of the Reformation were informed by an established model of learned disputations. Debate or public discussion is as old as humanity; however, throughout the centuries, certain disputation techniques evolved.⁴⁹ In a disputation, a question is posed, which is then debated by two sides, arguing pro and con. The aim of the debate is to obtain knowledge and seek truth. More specifically, in medieval universities disputations took on a pivotal role in teaching and research, and, under the influence of scholasticism, disputations were characterized by a highly developed structure.

A case in point is the Leipzig Debate of Luther and Karlstadt with the Catholic Johann Eck of 1519.⁵⁰ It took place after an elaborate ritual. A room at Pleissenburg Castle had been specially decorated, and two pulpits stood dramatically facing each other. As we know from the sources, the speakers were exhorted by Petrus Mosellanus, professor of Greek at Leipzig University, to avoid harshness and to concentrate on the substance of the problem. Speakers were also generally expected to present their arguments from memory. After a first disputation between Karlstadt and Eck, the debate turned to the intellectual duel between Luther and Eck. One of their arguments was about papal primacy. Eck maintained that Peter was the successor of Christ, which made the Roman Church superior to the other churches. Luther argued that this was false, and that the pretence of Rome’s superiority derived

⁴⁸ William H. Allison, Review of Polman, *L’élément historique*, *American Historical Review*, 39 (1933), 111–12.

⁴⁹ Olga Weijers, *In Search of the Truth: A History of Disputation Techniques from Antiquity to Early Modern Times* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Joshua Rodda, *Public Religious Disputation in England, 1558–1626* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

⁵⁰ On the Leipzig Debate see Markus Hein and Armin Kohnle (eds.), *Die Leipziger Disputation 1519* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011); Susan E. Schreiner, *Are you Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 148–65; Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016), 125–44.

from the 'ice-cold' decrees of the popes of the last 400 years.⁵¹ For Luther, this was a crucial insight gained from the study of historical evidence that papal primacy was not established by divine right, but was instead created by mere human actions. Another argument concerned the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus and the authority of church councils. Eck famously goaded Luther into admitting that because the Council of Constance had been wrong to condemn Hus to death in 1415, it followed that church councils could err.⁵² At various times during the disputation, Luther was overcome with anger and violated some of the time-honoured rules of behaviour. It was considered poor form that he sometimes slipped from Latin into German or that he appeared overly aggressive.

Luther, however, was spurred on by his experience in the face-to-face combat of the polemical disputation. In keeping with the tradition of disputations, Luther asserted that he was bound to search for the truth. It was this search that provoked the crucial moment, at Leipzig, in which Luther willingly abandoned the Catholic fold. Looking back a few months after the debate, he explained what his position had become:

And so to say clearly and freely what I think: I believe that I am a Christian theologian and that I live in the realm of truth. Therefore, I believe that I am obliged not only to assert, but to protect and defend the truth either with my blood or my death. Thus, I want to be free and not to be a slave to the authority of anyone, whether council, ruler, university or pope, so that I may confidently stand by whatever truth I see, whether it has been asserted by a Catholic or heretic, whether it has been approved or reproved by whatever council.⁵³

⁵¹ Martin Luther, *Disputatio et excusatio adversus criminationes D. Iohannis Eccii* (first publ. Wittenberg, 1519), in *idem, Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 121 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009) (hereafter *WA*), vol. 2, 158–61, at p. 161: 'Romanam ecclesiam esse omnibus aliis superiorem probatur ex frigidissimis Romanorum pontificum decretis intra CCCC annos natis'.

⁵² On the reception of the Council of Constance see the essay by David Bagchi, 'The Historical Argument in Early Reformation Controversy Revisited: The Council of Constance in the Writings of Eck and Cochlaeus', in this issue.

⁵³ Martin Luther, *Resolutiones Lutherianae super propositionibus suis Lipsiae disputatis* (first publ. Wittenberg, 1519), in *WA*, vol. 2, 391–435, at p. 404: 'Et ut plane et libere dicam quod

Medieval tradition demanded that the winner of a disputation should be declared. It soon emerged that this principle already broke down after this very first substantial debate with Luther. Both the universities of Erfurt and Paris, which were asked to decide, dragged their feet and eventually avoided passing judgment on the substance of the debate. Meanwhile, Luther's and Eck's supporters each claimed victory.⁵⁴ Yet Luther's fame, as well as the output of his writings, grew exponentially after the debate. Both the form of the disputation and one of its main concerns – that is, history – were instrumental in propelling the Reformation forward. Eck, on the other hand, became the victim of a biting literary satire, *Eccius dedolatus*, which did great harm to his reputation.⁵⁵

Paradoxically, by trying to establish a certain criterion for religious knowledge, Luther threw established standards of evidence into a turmoil.⁵⁶ The interpretation of Holy Scripture as aided by one's own conscience – rather than by tradition – had become the most reliable guide to the discernment of religious truth. Paradoxically, again, opponents of Luther such as Erasmus answered that only a dose of scepticism could solve this dilemma. In his diatribe on the Free Will, Erasmus argued, against Luther, that Scripture was not as clear as Luther suggested and that some passages were too shadowy for human beings to penetrate. Thus, the quest for certainty in the

sentio, credo me theologum esse Christianum et in regno veritatis vivere, ideo me debitorem esse non modo affirmandae veritatis, sed etiam asserendae et defendendae seu per sanguinem seu per mortem. Proinde volo liber esse et nullius seu concilii seu potestatis seu universitatum seu pontificis autoritate captivus fieri: quin confidenter confitear quicquid verum videro, sive hoc sit a Catholico sive haeretico assertum, sive probatum sive reprobatum fuerit a quocunque concilio.' See also Christoph Spehr, *Luther und das Konzil: zur Entwicklung eines zentralen Themas in der Reformationszeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 172.

⁵⁴ Jan-Hendryk de Boer, 'Aus Konflikten lernen: der Verlauf gelehrter Kontroversen im Spätmittelalter und ihr Nutzen für die Reformation', in Günter Frank and Volker Leppin (eds.), *Die Reformation und ihr Mittelalter* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2016), 208–50, at pp. 240–48.

⁵⁵ *Eccius dedolatus: A Reformation Satire*, ed. Thomas W. Best (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971).

⁵⁶ The epistemological implications arising out of Reformation polemics have been studied from a philosophical point of view. See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, revised and expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–16.

interpretation of Holy Scripture was futile. In his furious answer to Erasmus, Luther contended that a Christian could not be a doubter: 'a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian'.⁵⁷ The Catholic sceptic Erasmus, in Luther's view, was mocking God. In sum, as Luther warned, 'The Holy Spirit is no Sceptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions surer and more certain than life itself and all experience.'⁵⁸

It is an intriguing challenge to analyse how the disputes over the criteria of religious knowledge translated into the uses of history in religious controversies. An obvious starting point – but one whose importance has been overlooked by Polman – is the struggle over the legends and forgeries in church history and how they influenced controversial literature. Historical scepticism was employed or suspended when necessary. A well-known example is the legend of Pope Joan (fig. 1), according to which a female pope occupied the chair of St Peter in the ninth century; she pretended to be a man and then died in childbirth during a procession. The Centuriators of Magdeburg argued against the Augustinian Onofrio Panvinio, who had refuted the legend in 1562. Panvinio had convincingly made the case that the legend was false because of the silence of contemporary sources, including the *Liber pontificalis* (Book of Pontiffs).⁵⁹ The Centuriators were interested in upholding the authenticity of the story because it not only served to ridicule the papacy, but also because Pope Joan interrupted the continuity of apostolic succession. They therefore compiled a list of references to sources which, although they were not contemporary to Joan's papacy,

⁵⁷ Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio* (first publ. Wittenberg, 1525), in *WA*, vol. 18, 600–787, at p. 603: 'delectari assertionibus debet, aut Christianus non erit'; *idem*, *On the Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus on Free Will and Salvation*, trans. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1969), 105.

⁵⁸ Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, 605: 'Spiritus sanctus non est Scepticus, nec dubia aut opiniones in cordibus nostris scripsit, sed assertiones ipsa vita et omni experientia certiores et firmiores'; *idem*, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 109.

⁵⁹ Onofrio Panvinio, Annotation to Platina's life of Johannes VIII, in Platina, *Historia de vitis pontificum Romanorum*, ed. Panvinio (Venice: Tramezzino, 1562), fols. 102r–104v; Alain Boureau, *The Myth of Pope Joan*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 245–47. On Pope Joan see also C. A. Patrides, *Premises and Motifs in Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 152–81; Bollbuck, 'Searching for the True Religion'.

mentioned her story. The authenticity of the story, according to the Centuriators, was proved by its relatively long circulation inside the Catholic Church.



Fig. 1: Pope Joan *alias* John VII. From: Hartmann Schedel, *Liber chronicarum* (Nuremberg: Koberger, 1493). Courtesy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich (BSB-Ink S-195,4, fol. 169v).

The Centuriators countered Panvinio's key argument of the silence of contemporaries by throwing overboard a fundamental rule of source criticism: that the

highest value should generally be assigned to contemporary sources. Instead, they claimed, plainly, that the authors of the ninth-century sections of the *Liber pontificalis* had ‘deliberately omitted her name and dates because of the disgrace and because she was a woman’.⁶⁰ In 1610, a Church of England clergyman, Alexander Cooke (1564–1632), published perhaps the most imposing defence of this myth in the early modern period. In his *Pope Joan: A Dialogue between a Protestant and a Papist*, Cooke argued that the absence of contemporary written sources did not invalidate the story; after all, in many other cases, Catholics themselves contended that written sources came into play only centuries after a tradition had been established.⁶¹ As Thomas Freeman has pointed out, Cooke’s logic was dubious but it made for effective polemics.⁶²

In another case, the Centuriators of Magdeburg took a stance that was diametrically opposed to the one they put forward regarding Pope Joan. This was the Donation of Constantine, the forged imperial decree which stated that Emperor Constantine transferred temporal dominion over the entire West to Pope Sylvester I in the fourth century. This most famous of all medieval forgeries – fabricated in the eighth or ninth century – was still held by the Roman Curia to be authentic up to the end of the sixteenth century.⁶³ According to the Centuriators, it could not be claimed to be genuine precisely because no contemporary or near-contemporary source had been

⁶⁰ Flacius et al., *Ecclesiastica historia*, *Centuria IX* (1565), cols. 332–33, 500–2; quotation, col. 502: ‘nomen autem et tempus eius pontificios scriptores consulto omisisse propter foeditatem rei et sexum foemineum’. See also Boureau, *Myth*, 247–48; Harald Bollbuck, *Wahrheitszeugnis, Gottes Auftrag und Zeitkritik: die Kirchengeschichte der Magdeburger Zenturien und ihre Arbeitstechniken* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), 346–49; *idem*, ‘Searching for the True Religion’.

⁶¹ Alexander Cooke, *Pope Ioane: A Dialogue betweene a Protestant and a Papist, Manifestly Proving that a Woman called Joane was Pope of Rome* (London: Blunt; Barret, 1610), 69–70.

⁶² Thomas S. Freeman, ‘Joan of Contention: The Myth of the Female Pope in Early Modern England’, in Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake (eds.), *Religious Politics in Post-Reformation England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 60–79, at p. 70.

⁶³ Stefan Bauer, *The Censorship and Fortuna of Platina’s Lives of the Popes in the Sixteenth Century* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 149–66; Caroline J. Goodson and Janet L. Nelson, ‘The Roman Contexts of the “Donation of Constantine”’, *Early Medieval Europe*, 18 (2010), 446–67. For an English translation of the Donation see *Constantine and Christendom: The Oration to the Saints; The Greek and Latin Accounts of the Discovery of the Cross; The Edict of Constantine to Pope Silvester*, trans. M. Edwards (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 92–115.

found to validate it ('there is no explicit mention of this by well-reputed authors for several centuries').⁶⁴ With the force of their own arguments and also by accepting the earlier critique of Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457), who had shown that the Donation was a forgery,⁶⁵ the Centuriators were able to mount a strong attack on one of the principal foundations of papal primacy.

The reception of the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals – more often simply referred to as False Decretals – provides another case in point. These Decretals include papal briefs and councils from Pope Clement I (first century) to Gregory II (d. 731). They were forged in the ninth century and gained widespread currency in the Middle Ages. The spuriousness of certain fragments was already put into doubt by Marsilius of Padua (d. 1342/43), Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) and Heinrich Kalteisen (d. 1465).⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the Decretals were published by Jacques Merlin in his collection of church councils in 1524.⁶⁷

Catholic writers such as Albert Pigge attempted to prove the validity of the doctrine of papal primacy, for example, almost solely from the False Decretals (Pigge, *Defence of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 1538).⁶⁸ This begs the question of whether Pigge

⁶⁴ Flacius et al., *Ecclesiastica historia, Centuria IV* (1560), col. 567: 'nam de ea nulla apud probatos autores expresse fit mentio per aliquot secula'. See also Bollbuck, *Wahrheitszeugnis*, 341–46.

⁶⁵ Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ Martina Hartmann, 'Spätmittelalterliche und frühneuzeitliche Kritik an den pseudoisidorischen Dekretalen: Nikolaus von Kues und Heinrich Kalteisen als "Wahrheitszeugen" bei Matthias Flacius Illyricus und den Magdeburger Centuriatoren', in Wilfried Hartmann and Gerhard Schmitz (eds.), *Fortschritt durch Fälschungen? Ursprung, Gestalt und Wirkungen der pseudoisidorischen Fälschungen* (Hannover: Hahn, 2002), 191–210, at pp. 197–200; Arno Mentzel-Reuters, 'Ministri mysterii iniquitatis: die apokryphen Clemensbriefe in den Magdeburger Zenturien', in Arno Mentzel-Reuters and Martina Hartmann (eds.), *Catalogus und Centurien: interdisziplinäre Studien zu Matthias Flacius und den Magdeburger Centurien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 233–42.

⁶⁷ *Quatuor concilia generalia*, ed. Jacques Merlin, 2 vols. (Paris: Du Pré; Cornillau, 1524), vol. 1. For a critical edition see *Decretales Pseudo-Isidorianae et Capitula Angilramni*, ed. Paul Hinschius (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1863).

⁶⁸ Jedin, 'Das geschichtliche Element', col. 310; Albert Pigge, *Hierarchiae ecclesiasticae assertio* (Cologne: Melchior von Neuß, 1538). On papal primacy in the False Decretals see also Clara Harder, *Pseudoisidor und das Papsttum: Funktion und Bedeutung des apostolischen Stuhls in den pseudoisidorischen Fälschungen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2014).

suspended his historical criticism because the Decretals provided useful material for proving his points. The Centuriators of Magdeburg, on the other hand, proved that the Decretals were forgeries. They reminded their readers of St Paul's warning about the ever-present dangers of the 'mystery of wickedness' (*mysterium iniquitatis*). As the apostle had written to the Thessalonians,

Never let anyone deceive you in any way. ... The mystery of wickedness is already at work ... The coming of the wicked One will be marked by Satan being at work in all kinds of counterfeit miracles and signs and wonders (2 Thess. 2).

Thus, for the Centuriators, the Bible had given the clear instruction that forgeries must be eliminated. By fabricating the Decretals, the popes acted as ministers of evil. In other words, according to the Centuriators, here was proof that the popes were the puppets of the Antichrist.⁶⁹

In 1572, the Jesuit Francisco Torres, in Rome, defended the veracity of the Decretals. However, he also put forward an argument that went beyond historical proof. Like other Catholics before him, Torres pointed out that even if the Decretals were forged, the Catholic Church did not need them for its time-honoured traditions and prerogatives, such as papal primacy, to be valid. These traditions had been established in apostolic times.⁷⁰ Here emerges a fundamental aspect of the role of history in early modern polemical writing: source criticism was welcome, but overarching theological and political needs often had a higher priority.

With this in mind, it is worth taking into account recent considerations about the most celebrated Catholic church historian of the early modern period, Cesare Baronio. As Stefania Tutino has argued, 'the truth of history and the Truth of the Catholic

⁶⁹ See Flacius et al., *Ecclesiastica historia, Centuria II* (1559), cols. 143–52, esp. the comment on col. 150: 'Ex his pius lector facile intelligere potest has literas haud ab aliis quam a ministris mysterii iniquitatis ... scribi potuisse.' See also Hartmann, 'Kritik', 205–6.

⁷⁰ Francisco Torres, *Adversus Magdeburgenses Centuriatores pro Canonibus apostolorum et Epistolis decretalibus pontificum apostolicorum libri V* (Florence: Sermartelli, 1572), 345. See also Horst Fuhrmann, *Einfluß und Verbreitung der pseudoisidorischen Fälschungen von ihrem Auftauchen bis in die neuere Zeit*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1972–74), vol. 1, 9.

doctrines both stirred him in the same direction'. Thus, when Baronio assessed historical evidence, he allowed theological considerations to influence, and often dominate, his judgment.⁷¹ Baronio traced the origins of ecclesiastical institutions and traditions back to the time of the early Church and countered Protestant claims that these had ever been substantially corrupted – or even modified – in the Middle Ages. His avowed aim was to restore the original image of the Church in its pristine beauty – a Church 'without spot or wrinkle' (Eph. 5:27), one that was a shining reflection of the truth.⁷²

'Historical truth' is a term that the reviewers of Polman in the early 1930s were still using without much hesitation. Not much later, after the propaganda battles of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and World War II, George Orwell commented:

I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased, but what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history could be truthfully written. In the past people deliberately lied, or they unconsciously coloured what they wrote, or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but in each case they believed that 'the facts' existed and were more or less discoverable.⁷³

Orwell, who was passionate about the truth, marked a lucid transition to postmodern anxieties about the availability of factual correctness. Today, claiming that historical writing could represent the truth would be akin to flogging a dead horse. Nonetheless,

⁷¹ Stefania Tutino, *Shadows of Doubt: Language and Truth in Post-Reformation Catholic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 83 (quotation). See also Franco Motta, 'A Tale of History, Dogma and Tradition: Jesus in Caesar Baronius' *Annales ecclesiastici*', in Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce (eds.), *Texts, Practices and Groups* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 829–53.

⁷² Baronio, *Annales ecclesiastici*, vol. 1 (1588), *Praefatio*, 1: 'pulcherrima ecclesiae facies "non habens maculam neque rugam" [Eph. 5:27]'. See also Mario Mazza, 'La metodologia storica nella *Praefatio* degli *Annales ecclesiastici*', in Giuseppe Antonio Guazzelli, Raimondo Michetti and Francesco Scorza Barcellona (eds.), *Cesare Baronio tra santità e scrittura storica* (Rome: Viella, 2012), 23–45.

⁷³ George Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' (1943), in *Orwell on Truth*, ed. David Milner (London: Harvill Secker, 2017), 83.

reflecting on the criteria of proof in historiography is more urgent than ever. I would argue that connections can be drawn between the epistemological crisis sparked by Luther, its influence on standards of historical evidence and current debates over post-truth.⁷⁴

Overall, since the Reformation, controversy certainly stimulated historical research but theological considerations often trumped evidence which derived from research into history. Historical evidence was a highly charged term in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁵ A new history of religious controversies should illuminate the ways in which the early modern view of history both shaped and was shaped by the rules of polemic. Pontianus Polman's verdict remains valid: 'polemical passion stimulated research';⁷⁶ however, the implications of his observation point in new and fruitful directions when they are connected to Reformation controversies about authenticity, belief and proof.

⁷⁴ 'Post-truth' has been made topical in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States. For this term see also 'Word of the Year 2016', <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>; Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

⁷⁵ For an overview see Stefan Bauer, 'Theology and History', in Kenneth G. Appold and Nelson H. Minnich (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Reformation Era Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁷⁶ Polman, *L'élément historique*, 542: 'la passion polémique a stimulé les recherches'.