

## **Reformation and Society: Martin Bucer and Strasbourg**

[Ronchi, L.](#) Reformation and Society: Martin Bucer and Strasbourg, in: Proslogion: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Social History and Culture, 2018. Vol. 4 (1). P. 70–83.

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**REFORMATION AND SOCIETY:  
MARTIN BUCER AND STRASBOURG**

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**1. City and Reformation. The case of Germany**

In rural Europe in the Modern Age it is the presence of the cities which propelled the process of economic and social growth as well as cultural and religious development. The early and intense urban development is one of the features that strongly characterizes the sequence of events in western Europe: this specific form of political-social organization comes to life here and everywhere, over and above the differences, being a citizen and a member of a social class or corporate body becomes a key aspect of the political identity of the individual. In Modern Europe one is a member of a city, a corporate body or a community, not a state; nor is it a coincidence that cities fiercely opposed the process of the formation of the principal states, mounting everywhere strong resistance in defense of their autonomy and independence.

The sixteenth century is a kind of watershed: except for rare exceptions the cities were not strong enough to resist the process of territorial centralization that notably characterized the administration of the cities, downsizing their privileges, immunity, and economic and military power.

The German situation with respect to this process is absolutely remarkable. On German soil different realities meet: the supranational and essentially universal Empire, the secular and ecclesiastical princes, and the free cities. We could describe them as a set of various Germanys which exist side by side, in collision with each other within, in the words of Giorgio Spini, «that gigantic and motionless ruin of the Middle Ages» the Holy Roman Empire, which should include them all but is unable to impose its will on any of them, while never doubting its integrality.

The cities of the empire can be listed in two principal categories, which also included some rural communities and various cities outside German territory (Zurich, Lucerne, Bern, Deventer, Kampfen, Zwolle, etc.):

— imperial cities (*Reichstadt*) which in some way had imperial status because the Emperor had once resided there (see *Aquisgrana*). These enjoyed considerable autonomy and depended directly from the Emperor, to whom they had to pay an annual tribute and also provide assistance in times of war;

— free cities (*Freistadt*) which were no longer subject to a feudal lord, whether he was a laymen or a bishop prince, and they had no obligation to the Emperor beyond providing help in the event of war against the Turks or supplying an escort to Rome for a coronation.

The Lutheran protest evolved at a time when the relationship between the power of the Emperor and the social classes' demands for freedom had not yet found a satisfactory equilibrium on the key issues necessary to govern the Empire: jurisdiction and territorial peace.

In 1521, on the morrow of the coronation of an Emperor who knew nothing about the Empire, not even its language, faced with the religious dissent which the Diet of Worms had to deal with, neither custom nor the regulations in force offered the necessary rules, religion was a completely new area of conflict, lacking ready-made answers. The Diet thus chose to deal with the problem of the Lutheran Reformation by making it a problem of government and not merely a religious issue. Opposing Charles V and a possible move on his part towards a «monarchical» management of the Empire, the social classes decided to view the religious problems as juridical problems, indicating that the legal way was the solution to the conflicts.

This recommendation in fact (with the Diet of Spira in 1526 also by right) entrusted the organization of putting the Reformation into effect to the legislative procedures of the territorial princes and gave ample room for manoeuvre to the city magistrates, thanks both to the autonomy which the cities enjoyed and to their understanding of themselves:

— the city was a community based on consent: its walls and the city's constitution guaranteed protection, freedom, rights: to become a citizen the individual vowed to operate for the common good;

- the city considered itself to be in a small way a «corpus christianum», in which the civil and the ecclesiastical community were one;
- in the city, in relation to political and governmental problems «the concept of community and association prevailed over the individualistic concept, which moreover, was seen as a threat that could wreck political order»<sup>1</sup>.
- the city was also an educated community.

The birth of the Reformation thus introduced into «the city system» a distinction between the cities in Catholic Europe and those in Europe of the Reformation.

In the former the ecclesiastical authorities maintained a hierarchy of functions and institutions. Often the seat of the bishop, in the city the ecclesiastical hierarchy was linked to the civil authorities: the church occupied public space (convents, monasteries, institutes providing assistance and educational facilities) and created pockets of privilege, immunity, tax exemption, but also a network of business interests that the laity could not do without.

The church is very much present also in the Reformed cities, although in different forms. Often the city and its institutions are the engine that drove the civil and social organizations as well as the cultural and moral ones. Initially the religious and civil authorities overlapped and the former were administered by the magistracy. By the end of the sixteenth century, however, in the cities of the Reformation, the distinction between civil and ecclesiastical authorities becomes important, both in theory and in practice, and often a necessity in the debate on sovereignty which was especially a characteristic of the Calvinist world.

Going back to Germany in the early years of the 1520s, the city as a stable community and independent politically, economically and militarily, was in an ideal position to embrace the theology of the Reformation: it is no coincidence that within a few years the 85 free cities which at the Diet of Worms had passed sentence on Luther adhered to the Reformation.

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<sup>1</sup> See: *Benedictis, A., de. Politica, governo e istituzioni nell'Europa moderna*. Bologna, 2001. P. 385.

## 2. Strasbourg: the arrival of the Reformation

Strasbourg was one of these cities. Within the Empire it already enjoyed special statutes; it was not only an imperial city but also a free city that did not have to take an oath of allegiance to the Emperor. The bishop had transferred his residence elsewhere and for some time had exercised only spiritual and no longer temporal power.

The city's constitution was extremely complicated and detailed in order to be able to maintain a balance between the various authorities as well as leaving space for all the social classes of the city: the bourgeoisie, who made up two-thirds of the population; the aristocracy with its hundred odd families; the craftsmen, meeting in twenty corporations. The appointments were usually for a short period, at most yearly and the joint management guaranteed peace in the city. Power, — legislative, executive and judicial, — was administered by the «Magistrate», a term that indicated collectively 63 members of «les Maitres»<sup>2</sup>, «le Conseil»<sup>3</sup> et «le XXI»<sup>4</sup>. «To it was added an institution which was original to Strasbourg, a committee that only met to deal with important issues, when convened by the Council, 300 «échevins» (aldermen for life), 15 for each corporation. Their job was to nominate the representatives of the crafts to the Council.

This complicated system, a mix of elected and coopted members, in the long run guaranteed the stability of the institutions, the strength and the peace of the city. Strasbourg did not have splinter groups and in the more turbulent years of the Reformation (at the outset, and during the peasants' revolt in 1525 in Alsace), the power sharing between the aristocracy and the new social classes was its strength, undermined only at the end of the century by Charles V's victory over the Schmalkaldic League.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Maitres* was formed by one *Ammeister*, a member of a guild who was elected for one year, and four *Stettmeister*, noblemen, who were elected for six months.

<sup>3</sup> The *Conseil (Rat)* was the city sovereign assembly. It was formed from ten noblemen (whose names were drawn lots) and twenty member elected by the guildes. The members continued in office for one year, but half of them were changed every six months.

<sup>4</sup> So were called the two Secret Chambers (1/3 of noblemen and 2/3 of members of the guilds), which was the heart of the city government: the first for military and diplomatic affairs; the second for economic and corporative matters. The XXI's was the only life office; its members could meet only jointly with the Conseil.

The Reformation reached Strasbourg early on and from below, encouraged by a population concerned about its own salvation, and with the backing of the Cathedral's preacher, Mathias Zell<sup>5</sup>, an erudite theologian and former rector of the University of Freiburg. In the past the widespread yearning for religious renewal fostered by the Church had opened opportunities for Waldensian and Hussite dissent, without, though, turning citizens away from their traditional piety: the chronicles relate that Cardinal Peraudi had to arrange for 60 carts to transport to Rome the money obtained at Strasbourg from the sale of indulgences<sup>6</sup>.

The process of reform had already begun before the future «reformers» arrived and it was the Magistrate who kept it in check, directly taking responsibility for the duties previously carried out by the ecclesiastical authorities. There was no vacuum of authority in Strasbourg and the transfer to civil authorities also of powers from ecclesiastical bodies took place without any traumas, despite the opposition of the non-resident bishop. In the unrest that already agitated the city, the political powers did not hesitate to declare their intention to defend «all those who preach the gospel in truth», and to authorize, despite the bishop's ban, Zell's right (from 1521) to preach on justification by faith and the centrality of the Scriptures in contrast with councils and tradition.

We can quote this declaration of the magistrates in support of «all those who preach the Gospel in truth» as the characteristic feature of the Reformation in Strasbourg, which was conciliatory, welcoming and open to dialogue also with those who, elsewhere, considered the reformers to be their worst enemies.

A real «spiritual adventure» as Georges Livet and Francis Rapp called it<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthäus Zell (Kaisersberg, 1477 – Strasbourg, 1548) was the founder of the Protestant church in Strasbourg and the most popular preacher in the city. He was the first to conduct the Mass in German in Strasbourg and to administer the Lord's Supper in both forms. He gave faithful support to the Reformers; in 1524 he married Katharina Schütz, and was therefore excommunicated; nevertheless he was kept in his office by the city magistrate. He was zealous in the care of the church and the school, always retaining a conciliatory mind.

<sup>6</sup> See: *Léonard, É. G.* Storia del protestantesimo. T. 1. Milano, 1971. P. 213.

<sup>7</sup> Strasbourg au cœur religieux du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Hommage à Lucien Febvre, Actes du Colloque international de Strasbourg (25–29 mai 1975) / Ed. G. Livet, F. Rapp. Strasbourg, 1977.

### 3. Bucer and Strasbourg: a story of a spiritual adventure

An adventure experienced by the whole city, transformed into an extraordinary laboratory of experiences and reflections on religion, not by just one, but various Reformation scholars of different persuasions: Mathias Zell, Wolfgang Capitone, Kaspar Hedio, Johann Sturm, Martin Bucer: a team in which Bucer quickly became the leading light and influential point of reference.

They succeeded in making people- also the peasant people- acquainted with the Reformation as spiritual event and as temporal proceeding.

Bucer had been a Dominican, but convinced by reading Luther's works, in 1520 he asked to be released from his vows, he married and began to preach protected by Franz von Sickingen, shortly after participating in the knight's defeat. In 1523 he arrived in Strasbourg with his family, a refugee in a divided city in which the adherents to the Reformation were still a minority, even though much of the population had adhered it and Luther's writings circulated freely. It was the preachers, Zell and Capitone, who welcomed him, defending him before the Magistrate from the bishop's excommunication and then including him in the work of converting the city by putting him in charge of the parish of St. Aurelius.

Separation from the Church of Rome and consolidation of the Reformation made headway successfully without traumas, thanks to the unusual understanding between institutions and citizens: the Magistrate allotted the preachers to the parishes, and reached a compromise with the capitularies, supported and guided the work of the reformers. Between 1524, when it became obligatory to preach only the Gospel, and 1529, when the Mass was banned, Strasbourg became a Reformed city and the chosen destination of a huge flow of migrants *religionis causa*, the majority of whom came from the ranks of the so-called radical reformation: spiritualists, Anabaptists, Epicureans, 2,000 out of a population of 12,000, with different opinions on almost everything but generally united in the rejection of infant baptism and of the establishment.

The radical groups had no intention of recognizing either the church, the state or the authority of the Magistrate, and the serious and profound dialogue with the reformers underlined how distant were their respective views and how radical was the dissent. They rejected integration,

they did not want to acquiesce to citizens' duties and proposed in fact an alternative ecclesiology to that of the Reformation, a church which was completely separate from the world.

Strasbourg was now in fact a Reformed city: it had endorsed a definite Confession of Faith (*Confessio Tetrapolitana*), but it had not yet adopted an organization or an ecclesiastical discipline: reform in the city was made possible by the civil authorities who were in control of the situation and of the direction of the movement, but they had not intervened to put a brake on the social, political and religious turmoil; also the traditional structure of the church was maintained: «the preachers were priests and the bishop was their bishop»<sup>8</sup>.

In the 1530s Bucer put all his efforts into the drafting of an ordinance for the regulation of the church: the discipline, with the word and the sacraments made up the *notae Ecclesiae*, the distinctive characteristics of the church<sup>9</sup>. What was urgently required was a clear explanation of the obligations of the *jus reformandi*.

On this subject Bucer distanced himself from the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms and sympathized with Zwingli's teachings, which acknowledged that the Magistrate, as a key figure of ecclesiology, had a real ministerial function. The ideas expressed by the dissenters (Carlostadio, Hoffmann, Schwenckfield, Frank, Cellarius, Campanus, Sattler) had attracted many citizens and riots increased. The Magistrate then intervened with a series of preventive and repressive measures to maintain public order: the reformers, instead, felt it was absolutely necessary to define as soon as possible ordinances which would guarantee unity and stability in the church.

Zell, Capitone, Hedio and Bucer prepared a memorandum in which they listed the main points on which the civil institutions were to intervene: they proposed that a synod should be convened and drew up a document for discussion, and in 16 Articles presented their theological positions with regards to the dissenters (art. 1–13) and a description of the duties of the civil authorities (art. 14–16). The Synod, convened in June 1533,

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<sup>8</sup> Hamman, G. *Entre la secte et la Cité. Le projet d'Eglise du reformateur Martin Bucer*. Genève, 1984. P. 44.

<sup>9</sup> After 1538 and the publication of *Von der Waaren seelsorge*, Martin Bucer emphasizes the ministry office of the Church which express oneself as doctrine, as diaconate and as discipline (that is to say spiritual care).

examined the text and in a series of discussions realized not only their absolute incompatibility with sectarianism but clearly that the Magistrate had no intention of adopting tough measures with them, nor would it renounce its right to intervene or mediate; and although an agreement on doctrine was reached in March of 1534, the Magistrate a year later accept the considerably emended articles which established the right to intervene and also monitor the life of the church. After all, only in 1535, concerned about the radical course of the followers of Hoffman at Munster, the Council reacted resolutely towards the dissidents, forcing them, with the threat of banishment, to sign the Tetrapolitana Confession and the XVI Articles as well as accepting the baptism of infants within six weeks of their birth.

The grueling battle in the Synod, even though in the end the *16 Articles* were accepted, had highlighted the fundamental difference of opinion on the subject of discipline, and the way it should be applied was cause for serious disagreement between the Magistrate and the pastors. Articles 14 and 15 were a reminder to the Magistrate of his religious duties and of his responsibilities before God, entrusting him with both tables of the law:

The Magistrate, who has the sword and is the highest external authority, is God's servant, and must therefore, as God commanded in His Law and as the Spirit of Christ teaches and encourages all those whom He guides, do all in his power so that among his subjects the name of God is sanctified and His reign expands and His will be done (...) the Magistrate will, however, act correctly... if he faithfully takes care... that among his own the divine doctrine is observed and taught to all in purity and truth... The Magistrate should also promote well-being and eradicate evil with punishments<sup>10</sup>.

For Bucer the defence of faith went beyond the problem of public order: in fact in the Memorandum of 1532 he declared that the Magistrate, «by virtue of divine right and of the Christian emperors<sup>11</sup> «was well-suited to taking control over moral standards but also over church attendance, the religious education of children, the ethical behaviour of believers and pastors and family catechism.

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr.: *Wendel, F.* Martin Bucer: Esquisse de sa vie et de sa pensée. Strasbourg, 1951. P. 250–252.

<sup>11</sup> See: *Wendel, F.* L'Eglise de Strasbourg, sa constitution et son organisation 1532–1535. Paris, 1942.

#### 4. Relations between church and state.

##### The conclusion of the Strasbourg spiritual adventure

The synod of 1533 marked a turning point in the relationship between church and civil authority. The acknowledged role of the Magistrate stirred up controversy, to which Bucer responded saying he was entitled to the role as the whole community had expressly appointed him representative in religious matters; and added:

the ministry of the magistrate and the ministry of the Word should not be confused or mixed up, and it is not the civil authority's duty to domineer over faith and interfere with the heart and consciences which Christ the Lord wishes to govern only with His spirit<sup>12</sup>.

A distinction that Bucer does not insist on but will examine in depth and will define evermore precisely in the coming years, distinguishing an «external discipline» entrusted to the magistrates which includes control, but also correction, excommunication and exile: and an «internal discipline», the jurisdiction of the Christian community, and basically pastoral (pastoral care, Christian education, spiritual progress) which excludes the interference of the civil authority.

In its practical application the request for an independent space reserved exclusively to the church, from the second half of the 1530s, will give rise to a conflict of interests between the Magistrate and the reformer, a conflict that worsened as Bucer's studies progressed in an unpredictable way.

Hamman underlines in a concise and effective way how close is the connection between discipline and ecclesiology in Bucer:

There are two important aspects of ecclesiology that deserve a mention: a) the dimension of the Kingdom, which is fulfilled in the church, requires a discipline, b) this discipline is essentially pastoral. In this context without discipline there is no church<sup>13</sup>.

The visible church had to discover within itself and not in the State the disciplinary measures which were more suited to its purpose, The Reformation could not be limited to doctrine and to the church but had to be, in essence, a reform of the whole life of the believer: discipline

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<sup>12</sup> *Martin Bucer*. Explication du contenu des trois dernier articles, in: Hamman, G. *Entre la secte et la cité*. P. 168.

<sup>13</sup> *Hamman, G.* *Entre la secte et la cité*. P. 239.

was needed to promote not only a new theology but also a new spirituality and a new ethics. From this point of view the church of Strasbourg was wanting, and the commitment of the civil institutions inadequate.

The problem of the church's autonomous administration of the internal discipline did not seem to be defined, nor resolved by the introduction of the *Kirchenpfleger* (the wardens) and the elders. From 1536, as there was no satisfactory answer, Bucer worked discretely in secret — as Calvin wrote to Farel in 1538<sup>14</sup> — to instill moral discipline in the church, formulating in the treatise *Vonn der waren Seelsorge* (1538) an original idea of the structure of the church; almost a second Reformation. When his desperate efforts to heal the break with the church of Rome failed (1540–1542), Bucer's reflections in his writings of 1544 against Latomus, dealt with the subject of the new life of the believers and the communion of saints in so far as they were the true essence of the church: the foundations of the future «confessing communities» were laid here. Bucer dedicated his last years in Strasbourg to a clarification of this further stage in the project of the reform of the church and tried to get the civil authority to accept their institution. Believing that there was room in the church for education, edification and mutual encouragement for the benefit of the more committed church members while respecting ecclesiastical discipline and the renewal of one's own life, did not mean division in the church nor appropriating the spheres which were the prerogative of the civil authority. It was the idea of a church made up of concentric circles with diversified practices and places depending on the achievement of spiritual progress and Christian education. As in the early Church, these groups would have galvanized the life of the entire community. The internal discipline, whose organization was the exclusive responsibility of the church, would cover preaching, the practice of the sacrament, absolution, ceremonies and spiritual practices, but also excommunication which took the form of being banned from the eucharist, a simple form of pastoral care, reserved in practice to the members of the «confessing communities».

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<sup>14</sup> *Nostri in disciplina instauratione magno conatu, sed dissimulanter incumbere pergunt, ne si intelligant improbi, intra ipsa principia impedimentum afferant (Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia. Ad fidem editionum principum et authenticarum ex parte etiam codicum manu scriptorum / Ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss. Brunsvigae, 1872. Vol. 10. P. II. Col 279).*

On the question of excommunication, which the civil government would not relinquish, disagreement with the institutions was inevitable. The project, initially approved experimentally with two communities (February 1547), divided the preachers in the very same months in which Charles V, having defeated the Schmalkaldic League, imposed the Interim of Augsburg. Strasbourg risked losing not only the Reformation but also its own freedom. In 1549 Bucer refused to agree to the Interim and had to leave the city: his departure marked the end of an age and of a long and creative period of history. The spiritual adventure of Strasbourg ended on 1st February 1550 when the Interim became law and the Catholic mass was reintroduced.

In exile in England Bucer returned once again to his favorite topics in the two books of the *De Regno Christi*, dedicated to Edward VI, not theoretical works on the Christian state, but as he writes «a precise programme of ecclesiastical, social and economic reforms able to ensure the Reformed Church its place in England»<sup>15</sup> in the hopes that in the reign of the Tudors, his dream of a world, the kingdom of Christ, would be achieved.

As Brady wrote: «This dream went far beyond the context of Strasbourg's Reformation, far beyond that of the German Reformation. But it did not die, and for generations to come some Protestants would dream of marshalling the world into the Kingdom of Christ. They would not be German-speakers, however, and they would not be called "Bucerians" but Calvinists»<sup>16</sup>.

#### Information on the article

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<sup>15</sup> *Martin Bucer*. De regno Christi Iesu Servatoris nostril libri II. Basilea: S. n., 1557. P. XXXVIII. See: *Hamman, G.* Entre la secte et la cité. P. 82, n. 56. See also: *Wright, D. F.* Martin Bucer and England-Scotland, in: *Martin Bucer and the XVI<sup>th</sup> Century Europe* / Ed. By Ch. Kriegerand, M. Lienhard. Leyden/New York/Köln, 1993. P. 523–532.

<sup>16</sup> *Brady, T. A.* «The earth is the Lord's, and our homeland as well». Martin Bucer and the politics of Strasbourg, in: *Martin Bucer and the XVI<sup>th</sup> Century Europe* / Ed. by Ch. Kriegerand, M. Lienhard. Leyden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1993. P. 143.

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The City of Strasbourg is the best pattern of the close ties between the reform of the church and the reform of the society. In few years (1523–1548) Strasbourg changed its institutes and its foreign and domestic politics. The city becomes one of the most relevant center of the Reformation and was able to welcome the different expressions of the Reformation. Martin Bucer was the author of that success. He was the man of the dialogue, able to work together with Capitone and Sturm and at the same time with authorities. The outcome was a «joint reformation» which by agreement of theologians, authorities, people made of Strasbourg the city of the refugees: reformed and sectarians (spiritualistes, anabaptistes, antitrinitarians). A peaceful revolution, a spiritual (political and social) revolution which was able to survive the Interim of Augusta.

*Key words:* Johann Sturm, Wolfgang Capitone, magistrates, sectarians, reform, agreement, cooperation, Church discipline, Reformation

### Информация о статье

*Ronchi, L. Reformation and Society: Martin Bucer and Strasbourg, В кн.: Prosligion: Проблемы социальной истории и культуры Средних веков и раннего Нового времени. 2018. Вып. 4 (1). С. 70–83.*

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УДК 284

Город Страсбург отлично показывает, настолько тесными были связи между реформацией церкви и реформой общества. За несколько лет (1523–1548) в Страсбурге коренным образом были преобразованы учреждения и политика; он стал одним из важнейших центров Реформации, предоставляя убежище и прислушиваясь к разным реформатским голосам. Создателем этого процесса был Мартин Буцер, бывший доминиканец, организатор диалога в разных богословских и политических столкновениях, которые воспламеняли Европу. Он смог работать с Иоганном Штурмом и Вольфгангом Капитоном и одновременно с городскими магистратами. Совместная реформа, ставшая следствием согласия theologов, магистратов и народа, послужила назидательным примером: город стал приютом как для сектантов и реформатов, так и для анабаптистов и антитринитариев. Таким образом, состоялась настоящая духовная, политическая и социальная революция, тем самым утвердившая значительную часть тех результатов, которые были достигнуты после требований аугсбургского интерима.

*Ключевые слова:* Иоганн Штурм, Вольфганг Капитон, магистраты, сектанты, реформа, Реформация, взаимодействие, церковная дисциплина, согласие

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