Ecclesiastical Reform in Historiographical Context[1]

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Abstract

The article initially discusses recent approaches to ecclesiastical reform and the Investiture Contest. In particular, it discusses the extent to which recent scholarship's concern with "power," "local units," "social aspects," "discourse," and "gender" has undermined earlier master narratives – accentuating as these did the unity of reform. The last part of the article argues for the need to establish new master narratives and puts forward a few suggestions in that respect.

> In a word, the turbulence of this period carried with it so many disasters, so many schisms, so many dangers of soul and of body that it alone because of the cruelty of the persecution and its long duration would suffice to demonstrate the unhappy lot of our human wretchedness.[2]

These words, from the pen of the 12th century historian Otto of Freising, encapsulate the Investiture Contest, with its surrounding reform movement, as a period of "human wretchedness." The "turbulence," "disasters," and "schisms" emerging in the wake of the attempt to liberate the church were, according to Otto, the inevitable results of the church transgressing its position within an Augustinian world order. Yet, Otto's harsh moral-theological verdict constitutes only one of many historical interpretations of the period. From contemporary and near-contemporary observers to the most renowned interpretations of the 19th and early 20th century – first and foremost, those of Auguste Fliche and Gerd Tellenbach[3] – the predominating tendency has been to derive unified interpretations from one or two characteristic features of the period. Fliche and Tellenbach were both concerned with the institutional history of the high medieval church, but whereas Fliche focused on popes and the reform of the papacy in the last part of the 11th century, Tellenbach emphasized the Investiture Contest rather than the reform movement and the extent to which the Contest accentuated authority – notions of how to reconstitute "the right order of the world."

In recent decades, these master narratives – emphasizing different forms of unity – have come under scrutiny from new narratives and approaches to the thematic complex involving the reform movement and the Investiture Contest. In the following, I will initially discuss recent scholarship with a particular emphasis on the dialog between older master narratives and new narratives in terms of what I call "the pluralization of ecclesiastical reform." Thereafter, I will reflect on the need for new interpretive frameworks by presenting a few challenges and suggestions for further research.[4]

The Pluralization of Ecclesiastical Reform

What I have called "the pluralization of ecclesiastical reform" is, from one perspective, not a particularly new historiographical feature; in a seminal work from 1959, Gerhart B. Ladner warned against a unitary and essentialist understanding of reform by presenting the many and varied understandings of reform in Late Antiquity.[5] A similar concern with the many sources

of reform is evident in the work of John Gilchrist and John Howe; by investigating the canon-law foundation of ecclesiastical reform, Gilchrist argued in 1993 for a "diversity of reform": an understanding of reform that was less controlled by the papacy, and at the same time, grounded in a number of traditions of reform.[6] John Howe, in another seminal article, directed attention at the contribution of the nobility to reform.[7]

The master narratives concerned with unity came under scrutiny from a different angle as well; at approximately the same that as church reform was pluralized, the "Investiture Contest" was considered a misleading term for a conflict that certainly not only dealt with investiture. True, investiture became the arguably most contending question in the decades leading up to the Concordat of Worms (1122), but in the 1070s, it was just one out of several issues in which simony and clerical marriage were considered more pressing.[8] In fact, recent scholarship has made it next to impossible to distinguish the reform movement from the Investiture Contest other than on a purely conceptual level.[9]

If approaches to ecclesiastical reform around 1990 followed the paths of older master narratives, much had changed ten years later. In Uta-Renate Blumenthal's textbook from 1988, the approach is "top-down," presenting the Investiture Contest as a struggle between popes and emperors (and a few kings).[10] Kathleen G. Cushing's textbook from 2005, *Reform and the Papacy in the Eleventh Century. Spirituality and Social Change*, is markedly different in its thematic concerns and in terms of approach. "Power" is a vital aspect of Cushing's narrative, but "power" is no longer exclusively tied to individuals (popes and emperors) and institutions. Rather, "power" is, if not exactly understood in its Foucauldian sense, at least a concept that is fluid and has different manifestations in which institutionalized power is just one form. For Cushing, local manifestations of power are the key to understanding ecclesiastical reform, since "reforming the papacy" was not necessarily the same as "reform in practice." Gilchrist's plea for investigating a "diversity of reform" has, in Cushing's case, resulted in two narratives: in one narrative, the traditional story of the growth of papal government is presented, even though Cushing emphasizes that "many elements and individuals contributed to the emergence of the papacy as the indisputable leader of the church…"[11] Cushing's second narrative, more or less detached from the first narrative, concerns "reform in practice" and tells the story of the three great reform issues, simony, clerical chastity, and lay investiture. According to Cushing, these issues emanated more or less independent of the papacy in the period prior to the elevation of the first reform pope, Leo IX (1049–54). In addition to "power" and "local units", Cushing's narrative accentuates "social concerns" – most forcefully addressed in her attempt to extend the elitist understanding of reform with one that argues for the social background as well as repercussions of reform. A fourth new aspect, "discourse," is displayed in the most innovative part the book: in the chapter "the rhetoric of reform," Cushing argues for the extent to which a langue, or discourse, of purity and pollution permeated the three main arenas of reform, simony, clerical marriage, and lay investiture.[12]

In addition to these four aspects ("power", "local units", "social aspects," and "discourse"), "gender" as a fifth aspect should be added, although Cushing does not make gender into a predominating category of analysis. The most significant, although not the first attempt,[13] at "gendering" ecclesiastical reform is Megan McLaughlin's *Sex, Gender, and Episcopal Authority in an Age of Reform, 1000–1122*. Published in 2010, it is an ambitious effort to understand – as well as to explain – the discourse on authority in the period 1000 to 1122 in terms of two discursive strategies – one indebted to the language of motherhood and, from the second half of the 11th century, "a language of paternity."[14]

The focus on "power," "local units," "social aspects," "discourse," and "gender" in recent scholarship dealing with ecclesiastical reform[15] are – needless to say – informed by the new cultural history's concern with smaller units of analysis and discourse.[16] These five aspects have been applied to a number of themes. The study of canon law is one example – with its particular

emphasis on local canon law collections and, as Kriston R. Rennie in particular has accentuated, the importance of the local enforcement of canon law at synods by means of papal legates.[17] New approaches have also been applied to what Kathryn L. Jasper calls "the economics of reform."[18] The arguably most stimulating result of the new concern with social history and the dialectic between economy and politics is John Eldevik's *Episcopal Power and Ecclesiastical Reform in the German Empire. Tithes, Lordship, and Community, 950–1150* (2012). By placing the ecclesiastical tithe within a socio-political context, Eldevik perceptively addresses the extent to which the struggle for tithes reflected as well as affected the turmoil during and after Henry IV's kingship, resulting in the disruption of old norms of behavior.[19]

A third, and perhaps the most comprehensive revision of an old theme, concerns the bishop. As late as in 2007, John S. Ott and Anna Trumbore Jones discussed what they called "the bishop's vanishing act" as a by-product of the historiography of the medieval church and religion of the past four decades.[20] More in detail, they argued that the focus on the institutional church, the emphasis on the "abuses" of bishops and a new interest in religious minorities in combination have resulted in "the bishop's vanishing act."[21] Although Ott and Jones overstate the case a bit – scholarship on bishops have indeed been undertaken in the past 40 years, but usually within the confines of local or regional history[22] – they are nevertheless correct in accentuating the new emphasis on "the complexity of the episcopal office and of the bishops' attitude towards their own role" as a characterizing trait of recent approaches to the bishop and the episcopal office.[23] Anna Trumbore Jones' own, *Noble Lord, Good Shepherd. Episcopal Power and Piety in Aquitaine, 877–1050* (2009) exemplifies the turn from generalizations regarding the bishop's political activities to "in-depth studies of particular bishops, with a focus on local custom and circumstance and a goal of understanding this complex office…"[24]

For all her emphasis on "in-depth studies of particular bishops," different units of analysis *have* been applied in recent scholarship. Eldevik, in his study of tithes, lordship, and community, is concerned with bishops as well but approaches these from a perspective concerned with landscapes – or rather the diocese, seen as a "dynamic space defined by cultures of control, competition, communication and alliance among numerous urban, ecclesiastical, and rural communities defined by the parameters and claims of episcopal jurisdiction."[25] Landscape is also a keyword in Valerie Ramseyer's *The Transformation of a Religious Landscape. Medieval Southern Italy, 850–1150* (2006): Ramseyer offers an analysis of the religious landscape of medieval Salerno before and during the period of reform. What studies like those of Eldevik and Ramseyer achieve, compared to those that mainly focus on individual bishops, are firmer grasp on development; by applying a unit of analysis that transcends the lifespan of an individual, the question of change, transformation and, in some cases, explanations are more easily approached. From this perspective, the most significant finding in Ramseyer's study is the dialectic between tradition and reform: "Beneath the language and rhetoric of the documents, much continued as before."[26] Eldevik's comparative approach to landscapes – in his case, Mainz, Lucca, and Salzburg – enables him to analyze the disruptive consequence of Henry IV's kingship with regard to tithes against the tenth-century background.[27]

A fifth new approach to ecclesiastical reform concerns conflict and conflict resolution. While the focus on non-institutionalized, symbolic, and ritualized conflict resolution can be traced back to Karl Leyser in the late 1970s,[28] the more recent emphasis on symbolic communication, rituals, and conflict resolution has been most systematically investigated within the research project "pragmatische Schriftlichkeit" at the university of Münster.[29] The project did not focus exclusively on the reform period but covered the tenth and (to lesser extent) the 12th century as well. Among a number of publications which dealt with reform period, the most significant, to my mind, is Monika Suchan's *Königherrschaft im Streit. Konfliktaustragung in der Regierungszeit Heinrichs IV. zwischen Gewalt, Gespräch und Schriftlichkeit*. Published in 1997, it was the first

treatment of the entire schism between Henry IV and his opponent in terms of how the conflict escalated and a resolution was attempted. By addressing the different norms and "rules of the game" that structured the relationship between individuals as well as groups, Suchan analyzes how resolutions of conflicts during the reign of Henry were attempted and, not the least, why they, in many cases, were not. According to Suchan, the characteristic new feature of the conflict between Henry and Gregory was the fact that the struggle was not between the nobility and bishops, but between the pope and the emperor. The pragmatic ways of conflict resolution that previously had been successful simply did not work in this new situation; the collapse of this system – and in particular, the pope's failure to act as mediator – paved the way for the increased use of the written word (polemics, letters, and historiography) as a new type of mediator.[30] Leidulf Melve's work on the public debate during the Investiture Contest is also a contribution to the study of conflict resolution, and is as such indebted to Suchan's idea of new forms of conflict resolution, but also to Althoff's analysis of private as opposed to public elements of counseling (*colloquium familiar – colloquium secretum – colloqium publicum*).[31] In addition, it is inspired by Brian Stock's concept of "textual communities" as well as by I. S. Robinson's work on "friendship networks."[32] However, whereas Althoff and Suchan are mainly concerned with face-to-face encounters and the arsenal of symbolic communication associated with such encounters, Melve's focus is rather on the public debate conducted in writing. More in detail, the study investigates the relationship between the increased concern with public opinion, the emerging of different intellectual networks, and discursive changes – the more varied and indeed more sophisticated ways the polemical writers put together their arguments as the conflict progressed.[33]

The Need for New Interpretive Frameworks

The scholarship addressed so far has been concerned with "power," "local units," "social aspects," "discourse" and "gender" but has also conjured up questions related to older narratives of ecclesiastical reform. The grand narratives of unity – mainly those of Fliche and Tellenbach – provided not only an interpretive framework, but they also established a chronology to which generalizations could be attached. The new approaches have been more successful in showing the grand narratives to be over-simplified – even on occasions simply wrong – than in offering alternative frameworks that present a more complex narrative of development than those of Fliche and Tellenbach.

    What is needed, in addition, are new interpretive frameworks that transcend the micro-units of analysis (bishop, bishopric, and region) by engaging in dialog with macro-historical developments. Such a need can be accounted for along two lines. Firstly, the emphasis on micro-units has obviously been a fruitful way of breaking free of the older grand narratives with their focus on popes and emperors within a framework concerned with political history. Yet, at one point, all these micro-histories, along with the new knowledge they enclose regarding power networks, local circumstances, social aspects, discursive strategies, and gender issues, should engage in dialog with the intention of generalizing this new insight and knowledge into new interpretive frameworks. Secondly, the need for interpretive frameworks that transcend micro-units of analysis can also be accounted for in terms of the relevance of history. Recently, Jo Guldi and David Armitage have made a powerful case for the return to different versions of *longue durée* history in order to secure that "the public future of the past remains in the hands of historians…"[34] Although Guldi and Armitage are concerned with specific issues – climate, world government, and inequality – their plea to look toward *longue durée* is surely relevant for the student of ecclesiastical reform as well. From such a perspective, Mauren Miller has argued for "power" and "holiness" as more adequate terms than "church" and "state" not only

for understanding the reform period, but also to enable us "to think about the past and the present in more nuanced ways."[35]

The question, then, is how new interpretive frameworks should be constructed. Admittedly, there are no clear-cut answers to this question as it all depends on the particular focus and emphasis of a given study. Yet, based on recent scholarship on ecclesiastical reform, a few suggestions can be put forward.

Firstly, there is now an urgent need to ground scholarship on ecclesiastical reform in studies of communication and networks. Studies of communication include not only literacy and written communication but should also pay attention to the entire circuit of communication, including formal and informal networks as well as oral, aural, and symbolic communication. A thorough understanding of the communicative network of the reform period is, in turn, one prerequisite for analyzing the dialectic between local efforts at reform on the one hand, and – in Miller's formulation – "the creation of a powerful new 'transnational' institution" on the other.[36] In William L. North's investigation of the *praevilegium* dispute of 1111–1112, the dispute is perceptively approached in terms of how "complex ecclesiastical networks…gathered and disseminated information, opinions and rumours" that resulted in debate and negotiation of "public orthodoxy."[37] The understanding of communicative patterns is finally vital for grasping the complex case of "the crowd" – another theme of recurring interest since R. L. Moore brought the "community" forth as a viable category of analysis.[38] More recent attempts in this direction that deserve to be mentioned is Olaf Zumhagen's analysis of the relationship between religious conflict and communal development in Milano, Cremona, Piacenza, and Florence,[39] Louis I. Hamilton's use of the liturgy in order to understand the crowd's relationship to reform,[40] as well as Kathrin Müller's examination of the Salerno ivories as new knowledge of "the variety of programmatic concerns of 'reformist' artistic production."[41]

Secondly, new interpretive frameworks should look beyond the period of reform; more in detail, there is, as Stuart Airlie has underlined, a tendency in recent scholarship to impose a master narrative where the year 1000 marks a decisive transformation.[42] At the other end, 1122 still seems to be something of a magical year to end the narrative. Almost 20 years ago, Giles Constable suggested that the reform period may be approached in terms of four periods, emphasizing generational change: (1) 1040–1070, concerned with moral reform of the clergy; (2) 1070–1100, concentrated on the freedom of the church from lay control; (3) 1100–1130, transitional in character and saw a growing emphasis on monasticism; and (4) 1130–1160, concerned with the nature of religious life and personal reform of all Christians.[43] Constable's perceptive suggestion has only too rarely been followed, and we need once again to think critically about periodization and challenge the chronological unit 1000–1122 as the predominating unit of analysis.[44] Furthermore, it is perhaps necessary to extend the chronological frame to include reform efforts in the Carolingian period as well – in new attempts to distinguish, in Constable's formulation, "the ideal from the reality and the old from the new…"[45] for the same reason attention may be directed at 12th-century efforts of reform. Chronological extension, that for instance could include the Becket Struggle in England, would, in addition, offer the prospect of investigating "the history of memory" of what John Howe refers to as "the intellectual hegemony of the Gregorian reformers" from a different perspective than that of the reformers themselves.[46]

Thirdly, the new interpretive frameworks should be established with comparison in mind. The piling up of micro-histories largely concerned with offering "thick descriptions" makes comparison difficult, at times impossible. Of the studies addressed above, the only truly comparative investigation is that of Eldevik who compares three landscapes of "episcopal authority" (Lucca, Mainz, and Salzburg). The comparative perspective enables Eldevik, among other things, to reflect on differences between dioceses north and south of the Alps: "Bishops in Mainz and Salzburg… effectively dominated the governance of those towns to a far greater

extent than the bishops of Lucca could ever have hoped to govern theirs."[47] The reasons for this reluctance to compare are most likely many and varied, but the emphasis on "in-depth-studies" of a particular subject is probably important – to the extent that even Eldevik accentuates that "any narrative like this resists easy generalizations over time and space."[48] Suggestions for dia-chronic extension have already been addressed (Carolingian period and the Becket Struggle), but it is also possible to offer comparisons with the more peripheral parts of Europe when it comes to ecclesiastical reform. The synchronic extension of micro-studies is in many ways easier, since synchronic extension does not demand familiarization with new periods. Yet, synchronic comparison would facilitate from agreement on key concepts and units of analysis; Miller's plea to use "power" and "holiness" is one suggestion, whereas McLaughlin's attempt to redefine "public" and "private" in terms of debate and dialog constitute another attempt to establish new concepts and approaches for understanding as well as explaining the nature and development of ecclesiastical reform.

Short Biography

Leidulf Melve, b. 1972, PhD (2005), is a current professor (2008–) and has been published on a number of subjects, in particular, the Investiture Contest and historiography.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Terje Breigutu Moseng and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

[2] *Denique tot mala, tot scismata, tot tam animarum quam corporum pericula huius tempestatis turbo involvit, ut solus ex persecutionis inmanitate ac temporis diuturnitate ad humanae miseriae infelicitatem sufficeret comprobandam* (Otto of Freising, *Chronica*, 401).

[3] For a brief historiographical discussion, see Miller, "The Crisis".

[4] The emphasis will be on English and German scholarship.

[5] Ladner, *The Idea of Reform*.

[6] Gilchrist, "Introduction," xiv.

[7] Howe, "The Nobility's Reform," 319: "A synthesis is now needed, not only to lay to rest the derogatory stereotype of the nobility as the enemy of reform but also to suggest some of the questions that must be addressed in order to define the relationship between the two more precisely."

[8] For the definitive treatment of the investiture question, see Schieffer, *Die Entstehung*. More recently, Christof Rolker has underlined the wider reform interest of Ivo of Chartres, often considered as the architect behind the intellectual solution of the Investiture Contest: "Not the question of investiture, and certainly not the concept of holy war, but rather the reform of the clergy and a better understanding of the sacraments are the themes dominating Ivo's thought and action…" (Rolker, *Canon Law*, 299).

[9] See for instance D. Hay, *The Military Leadership*, 15, who distinguishes, on a conceptual level, the Investiture Contest from the wider reform movement but refrains from applying this division in his narrative of Matilda of Canossa. One exception, however, is Werner Goez, who applies "Kirchenreform" as distinguished from "Investiturstreit" as categories of analysis (Goez, *Kirchenreform und Investiturstreit*).

[10] Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*. The "top-down" approach is signaled in titles such as "The German Emperors and the Legacy of Rome," "Reform and Rome," and "Henry IV and Gregory VII." This highly valued textbook was originally published in German in 1982 as *Der Investiturstreit*.

[11] Cushing, *Reform and the Papacy*, 53.

[12] Cushing , *Reform and the Papacy*, 111–38.

[13] See McNamara, "The Herrenfrage," 6, 21. The conflict was between what McNamara calls the *Herrenfrage* – defined as a masculine identity crisis that resulted in "encroachment of women in nearly every area of life" – and the *Frauenfrage* – understood as the result of "the surplus of women and their tendency to act for themselves": a new definition of woman and her proper relationship to man. See also Miller, "Masculinity, Reform, and Clerical Culture," 49: "The real struggle in the reform movement was not men against women, but clerical men against lay men."

[14] McLaughlin, *Sex, Gender, and Episcopal Authority*, 159.

[15] As such, the concern with these five aspects within studies of ecclesiastical reform reflect a wider change within the history of medieval religion that also, according to Berman, "Introduction," 2, "derive from demographic shifts in the historical and religious studies professions themselves, for the recruiting of women and minorities into academe has coincided with new interests in gender, multiculturalism, and non-elites."

[16] "The New Cultural History" was, among other things, a reaction against the traditional political history concerned with kings, states, nations, and war. In order to cover the terrain that traditional political history left uncovered, the emphasis was placed on smaller (local) units, individuals, and groups, often in search of how these units constructed their own identity. These smaller units were usually approached in terms of networks of power on the one hand, and in relation to the discourse that predominated within such networks of power.

[17] Rennie, *Law and Practice*, 16: "Overall, the present state of scholarship is exactly as Martin Brett predicted in 1995: incredible zeal is now being directed towards enlarging 'our understanding of local study of canon law…'"

[18] After providing a historiographical overview, the emphasis is on the need for "additional studies on how 'reformed' institutions and bishops distributed and managed their patrimonies" on the one hand, and the "need to situate economic changes perpetuated by reform movements within wider social and economic shifts" (Jasper, "The Economics of Reform," 447).

[19] Eldevik, *Episcopal Power*.

[20] Ott and Jones, "Introduction," 4.

[21] Ott and Jones, "Introduction," 5.

[22] See for instance contributions in Weinfurter, *Die Salier und das Reich*.

[23] Ott and Jones, "Introduction," 11: "Indeed, scholars have begun to explore the evidence that the bishops' position at the junction of various networks of power gave them a very particular type of authority, which made them effective as judges and mediators."

[24] Jones, *Noble Lord,* 11. See also Bowman, "The Bishop Builds a Bridge"; Howe, "St Berardus of Marsica"; and Vanderputten and Meijns, "Realities of Reformist Leadership".

[25] Eldevik, *Episcopal Power*, 27. On landscape as a category of analysis within medieval studies, see Howe and Wolfe, "Introduction".

[26] Ramseyer, *The Transformation*, 195. See also Miller, *The Formation of a Medieval Church*.

[27] Eldevik, *Episcopal Power*, 254–5.

[28] Several of Leyser's articles are gathered in Leyser, *Communication and Power*. See in particular "On the Eve of the first European Revolution" and "The Crisis of Medieval Germany."

[29] For a retrospective presentation of the project, see Meier, "Fourteen Years of Research at Münster."

[30] Suchan, *Königsherrschaft im Streit,* 175: "Mit den Konflikten Heinrichs IV. hatten die bis dahin praktizierten Regelungsmechanismen der Herrschaftsordnung die Grenzen ihrer Wirksamkeit erreicht; die salische Köningsherrschaft war in eine Krise geraten. Für die Beteiligten galt es daher, in der 'traditionellen' Form der Auseinandersetzung nach neuen Wegen zu suchen. Die Benutzung von Schriftlichkeit sollte sich dabei als richtungsweisend entpuppen."

[31] Althoff, "Colloquium familiare."

[32] Stock, *The Implication of Literacy*; Robinson, "The Friendship Network."

[33] Melve, *Inventing the Public Sphere*.

[34] Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 125.

[35] Miller, *Power and the Holy*, 5–6.

[36] Miller, "The Crisis," 1575.

[37] North, "Negotiating public orthodoxy."

[38] Moore, "Family, Community and Cult."

[39] Zumhagen, *Religiöse Konflikte*.

[40] Hamilton, *A Sacred City*. See also Boynton, *Shaping a Monastic Identity*.

[41] Müller, "Old and New."

[42] Airlie, "A View from Afar," 81: "The problem is that a grand narrative of social and cultural crisis and transformation around the year 1000 depends on a sketched background of the preceding period in order to make the transformation clearly visible."

[43] Constable, *The Reformation*, 4.

[44] Needless to say, exceptions do exist: Eldevik stretches his investigation of episcopal power and reform back to 950 and continues until the middle of the 12th century. See also Bouchard, *Sword, Miter, and Cloister*.

[45] Constable, *The Reformation*, 42.

[46] Howe, "*Gaudium et Spes*," 34–35. For an analysis of Guibert of Nogent's view on the reform movement, see Rubenstein, *Guibert of Nogent*.

[47] Eldevik, *Episcopal Power*, 265–6.

[48] Eldevik, Episcopal Power, 257.

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