
Johannes Brenz had a crucial influence on the course of the German Reformation, but, like many other "lesser" figures, he has been virtually ignored by modern historians. There has been no full length study of Brenz in English until this fine book on Brenz's reforming career. In focusing on Brenz's role as a church organizer, James Estes has provided a clear picture of Brenz as the architect of the polity of the German state church that had so great an impact on German society into the twentieth century.

Estes first provides the reader with a summary treatment of Brenz's career. At the University of Heidelberg he absorbed the ideals of Christian humanism under the tutelage of Johannes Oecolampadius, and after the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, became a Lutheran. In 1522, he was appointed town preacher at St. Michael's Church in Schwäbisch Hall. By 1526 the city had become Lutheran under his direction. During his tenure at Hall Brenz became a leading Lutheran protagonist in the sacramentarian controversy, attended the Marburg Colloquy, cooperated with Andreas Osiander in writing a common church order for the territory of Brandenburg-Ansbach and the city of Nuremberg, and served as a consultant to Duke Ulrich of Württemberg. In 1548 with the imposition of the Interim in Schwäbisch Hall, Brenz fled to Württemberg where he spent the remainder of his career in the service of Duke Ulrich and then his son Duke Christopher. Under Brenz's leadership the Württemberg Church was reorganized according to the provisions of the Great Church Order of 1559. Brenz died on September 10, 1570.

In the second chapter Estes considers the historical background from which Brenz operated and then sets forth Brenz's own arguments justifying the state church. Unlike Luther, Brenz did not see the intrusion of the magistrate into ecclesiastical matters as a necessary and temporary expedient; rather, the Christian magistrate legitimately governed the church. In taking this position there were two major influences on Brenz: the actual expansion by the German rulers of their authority over the church; and the advocacy of such magisterial control over the church by Christian humanists such as Erasmus. In the telling of the story it becomes clear that it was not so much a matter of the church allowing itself to become a tool of the state as it was the state protecting itself and society from the encroachments of the church.

Chapter Three deals in detail with Brenz's own justification of the state church. Up until 1530 Brenz linked the establishment of true worship with the successful maintenance of civil peace and order. After 1530 he dropped the latter point,
arguing instead that God wanted the magistrate to establish true preaching and worship and to suppress the false no matter the civil consequences. His divine duty as magistrate was to establish true religion and discipline and good morals, not simply to preserve order and peace. In coming to this position Brenz was greatly influenced by Melanchthon.

Estes then deals with the organization of the church in Württemberg, highlighting the consistorial system established in Württemberg in 1553 and then adopted by several other territories and cities. The Consistory was essentially an administrative organ, composed of four political councillors and three theologians. The material affairs of the church were managed by the political councillors while the theologians cared for doctrinal and pastoral affairs. Estes gives a fine description of how the system worked, judging that the “consistorial system was the fulfillment of his [Brenz’s] career as a church organizer and his great contribution to the institutionalization of the Reformation” (p. 77).

The topic of the fifth chapter is the discipline of morals. Estes deems that Brenz, like all Upper-German reformers, wanted a church discipline that included the use of excommunication. But, also like all the other reformers, his desire was frustrated, mostly because of lay opposition due to medieval excess and misuse of excommunication. The desire for such a discipline was based partially in his wish to preserve the sacrament from pollution; but like other reformers with a humanistic background “Brenz was committed to the notion of the church—the inclusive state church—as a holy community” (p. 83). Such generalizations hold water as long as one excludes the Swiss cities from the Upper-German Reformation. But if Zurich and the cities following its lead, such as Bern, are included, then one must account for the positions taken by Zwingli and Bullinger who were opposed to the use of excommunication, who did not consider the sacrament to be polluted if taken by sinners, and who had no vision of a “holy” inclusive church. In any case, Brenz’s highly centralized system of discipline was in place in Württemberg by 1554. It proved, however, to be unworkable—the Synod’s sentences were not enforced and indeed were not enforceable in a community unwilling to accept such discipline.

The final chapter has to do with resistance and toleration. On the issue of resistance to the emperor Brenz agreed with Luther’s opinion of the 1520s that the Protestant princes could under no circumstances take up arms against the emperor. However, unlike Luther, who may have been convinced in 1530 that secular law permitted armed resistance in certain cases, Brenz continued to insist that such resistance was contrary to God’s law under all circumstances. Estes provides an excellent discussion of Brenz’s motives within the context of the clash of interests between the German princes and the imperial cities.

When it came to the problem of the Anabaptists, Brenz also broke ranks with the majority of German theologians, although in this case on the “liberal” side. Up until 1557 Brenz steadfastly opposed the death penalty for false teaching. In 1557, Protestant theologians at a religious colloquy at Worms issued a document entitled Procedure for Dealing with the Anabaptists. The Procedure urged execution of recalcitrant false teachers on grounds of sedition. Brenz signed the Procedure. Estes argues that Brenz’s signature did not signal a change of mind on the issue of the death penalty. Rather, he signed the Procedure to “make common
cause with his fellow theologians while continuing to pursue his own established course in the area for which he was directly responsible” (p. 138). Although Estes’ argument on this specific point is not totally convincing, it is nevertheless quite clear that Brenz was one of those rare enlightened souls of the sixteenth century in his advocacy of a relatively tolerant response to the threat of the Anabaptists.

In a short “Afterword,” Estes discusses some of the implications of Brenz’s career as a reformer. His contribution to the establishment of the state church made him partially responsible for the eventual development of German absolutism, and indeed for the continuing German attitudes toward the state and the role of the subject in political society up into modern times. On the more positive side, Estes points to Brenz’s demand for restraint on the part of the rulers in exercising their authority over the church. Thus, in the short run, rulers like Duke Christopher took seriously their duty toward God and the church and attempted to be pious Christian magistrates. But after the Thirty Years War the princes increasingly became worldly absolutists who used their ecclesiastical authority to gain acceptance of the social, political and military order, thus using the church as an instrument of social control.

This excellent book offers not only a fine study of Johannes Brenz but also significant new insights into the German Reformation and its impact upon modern times. It is an important study that should not be ignored by either specialists or generalists dealing with the German Reformation.

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La personnalité de More est si complexe que sa bibliographie abonde en sous-titres spécifiant les aspects privilégiés par chaque auteur: “born for friendship,” “the king’s good servant,” “the field is won,” “la sage folie,” etc. L’emploi ou l’omission de “Sir” et de “Saint” annonce aussi, généralement, un point de vue délibéré.

Pour son premier livre sur un homme dont il a fait connaissance dès le seuil de sa carrière, par une thèse de doctorat à l’Université de Western Ontario, et auquel il a consacré plusieurs articles, Fox, qui est professeur d’anglais en Nouvelle-Zélande, a choisi un thème où histoire et littérature se mélangent. Pour découvrir l’homme, il interroge l’auteur. Passant au crible d’une analyse psycho-historique le corpus entier de ses écrits, depuis les poèmes d’étudiant en droit jusqu’aux méditations composées trente-cinq ans plus tard dans la Tour de Londres, il essaie de re tracer un itinéraire spirituel qui est loin de suivre une route droite: son Thomas More traverse des crises parfois aiguës tandis qu’il s’efforce de lire un dessein, et un dessin, de la Providence divine à travers l’histoire du monde et de l’Eglise, et d’y puiser le sens de sa propre vocation.

Entreprise périlleuse, on le devine, car si les voies de Dieu déconcertent la courte sagesse de l’homme, les voies d’un génie aussi riche et profond que celui de