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Irenicism and Ecumenism in the Early Modern World: A Reevaluation

Artykuł proponuje nową próbę oceny nowożytnego irenizmu. Irenizm i ekumenizm, dawniej stanowiące istotne obszary zainteresowań badaczy dziejów reformacji, zostały z czasem zepchnięte na margines. Wykazuję, że zmiana ta jest częścią szerszego zjawiska w obrębie badań nad historią religii, oddalających się coraz bardziej od ujęć metodologicznych osadzonych w antropologii. W odpowiedzi artykuł niniejszy oferuje przegląd wiadomości o irenizmie epoki nowożytnej i stawia nowe pytania, a wszystko to dla lepszego zrozumienia dynamiki tych znaczących przemian.

The article offers a reassessment of early modern irenicism. Irenicism and ecumenism, which were once significant areas of study for Reformation specialists, have drifted to the scholarly margins. I argue that this shift is part of a broader phenomenon connected to the study of religion that draws increasingly more from anthropologically based methodologies. In response, the article provides an overview of irenicism in the early modern world and proposes a new set of questions to help us better understand this important dynamic today.

Słowa kluczowe: irenizm, ekumenizm, tolerancja, humanizm, mistycyzm, erazmianizm, pietyzm

Key words: irenicism, ecumenism, toleration, humanism, mysticism, Erasmianism, pietism

The following article examines three related terms, irenicism, ecumenism and toleration. Their meanings have shifted over time, and scholars have often used them interchangeably. Before proceeding, then,

<http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.2017.01>

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to a broader argument, let me begin by offering a brief definition of each of these critical concepts for the premodern period. Irenicism, derived from the Greek word for peace, points to the efforts of church leaders seeking to minimize doctrinal difference and discover a common theological platform between different Christian traditions. Ecumenism normally refers more generally to the actual activity of those attempting to bring those communities closer together. Most ecumenists were irenicists, but a number could also be prompted by political motives in their search for ecclesiastical alliances or church unions. Ecumenism as it is actually understood today is an anachronism. The term was not used with any real frequency until the late nineteenth century.¹ Still, it can be a helpful designation when describing the work of those seeking ever closer relations between different Christian traditions. Toleration is yet a broader concept. I will be using it simply to refer to how religious communities within a specific state or political unit learned to co-exist without violence toward each other.

The related themes of irenicism and ecumenism were once significant areas of study for scholars of the Reformation. The great landmark of this field was Rouse and Neill's *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* (1954), which went through multiple editions in the twentieth century. Today, however, much has changed, and what once was a lively field of research has fallen out of fashion. Indeed, in one of the most recent overviews of the period, Carlos Eire's beautifully written *Reformations*, a volume that comes in at close to 1000 pages, neither term appears in the index.² To understand what has happened and chart a way forward, we must begin by looking closely at the study of toleration in early modern Europe, for the dramatic methodological shifts that have transformed our understanding of this concept have helped push irenicism and ecumenism out of the mainstream and up lonely tributaries of academic research.

In the middle of the twentieth century, many viewed religious toleration as one of the great achievements of the West. Accordingly, scholars devoted significant time and effort tracking its supposed origins and growth. Most accounts began with the Reformation. In the 1930s

¹ Th. FitzGerald, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Interdisciplinary History* (Westport, 2004), p. 3.

² R. Rouse, S. Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948* (Philadelphia, 1954); C. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World* (New Haven, 2016).

an influential American academic, W. K. Jordan, who later became president of Radcliffe College, wrote a celebrated four-volume history charting the development of religious toleration in sixteenth-century England. Others quickly followed in his footsteps with this tradition reaching its highpoint in 1955 with the publication of Joseph Lecler's *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme*.³ Rouse and Neill's *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* was part of this intellectual world. Bishop Neill, a former missionary to south India, actively participated in the modern ecumenical movement. He and others involved with the project such as John T. McNeill worked with the World Council of Churches and were committed to its ideals. On the Catholic side, Pope John XXIII complemented their efforts by announcing in 1959 the church's first ecumenical council in nearly a century. *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* was essentially a Whiggish enterprise as its contributors carefully searched the Reformation and early modern periods for the roots of a phenomenon they saw reaching its maturity in their own days. Their understanding of early modern ecumenism was more a reflection of mid-twentieth-century ideals than an expression of the complicated reality of the earlier period.

The intellectual landscape looks very different today. For the early modern period in particular there has been a shift away from the West towards the global, and with that change there has been a parallel move to study toleration in its global dimension. We now have studies of toleration ranging from imperial China to the frontiers of the New World.⁴ Even more significant are the new terms of analysis. There is a justified suspicion of those triumphalist attitudes that lay beneath early studies of tolerance, implicit assumptions that toleration was a distinctive achievement of the West. Perhaps in part a reaction to this cultural hubris, most scholars today do not view toleration principally as an ideological construct. As Andrew Pettegree once famously noted, toleration was a "losers' creed".⁵ It was

³ W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1932); J. Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (Paris, 1955).

⁴ J. Ch. Laursen, ed., *Religious Toleration: "The Variety of Rites" from Cyrus to Defoe* (New York, 1999); S. Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (New Haven, 2008).

⁵ A. Pettegree, "The Politics of Toleration in the Free Netherlands, 1572–1620," in: *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, ed. O. P. Grell, B. Scribner (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 182–198.

what happened when no better solution could be found in a religiously pluralistic context. It was not so much the product of a theological or humanist ideal as it was the result of a pragmatic political settlement. As such, the field, which was once commanded by intellectual historians and historical theologians, has been to a significant degree ceded to social historians who are less concerned with elites who advocated ideals of confessional peace and harmony than with ordinary men and women struggling to survive in a confessionally pluralistic environment. Representative is Benjamin Kaplan's recent survey *Divided by Faith*, which examines toleration not as a theological phenomenon but as "lived experience" between people of different religious backgrounds.⁶ Scholars have drawn a sharp line between toleration as an ideal and those practical settlements and tactical arrangements of the era that enabled men and women of different faiths to live with each other.

But might it be time now to rebalance this picture? Irenicism and ecumenism, which were primarily theological ideals, have been pushed to the side in our larger consideration of toleration. Is it possible to reintegrate these ideological factors into our consideration of toleration? The following article offers an overview of irenicism, its origins and development, and considers ways in which this dynamic can be assessed with fresh eyes today. Towards that end we will first examine a series of "irenic impulses" that contributed to the growth of this phenomenon before turning to a brief consideration of specific Christian traditions and the ways in which individuals from these groups sought to minimize confessional tensions while working towards closer relations between churches if not actual union. The various examples that we will survey, though obviously far from exhaustive, have been selected as representative. Throughout I have paid special attention to developments in Central and Eastern Europe, the most religiously diverse region of the continent. Likewise, in this age of Christian expansion we must also cast our vision further afield and see irenicism as a global dynamic.

⁶ B. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

Irenic Impulses

Humanism

As one traces the history of irenicism, the first and arguably most important factor to consider is humanism, in particular a Christian humanism pioneered by scholars such as Lorenzo Valla that reached its apogee in the early sixteenth century with Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536). While Erasmus was active when more permanent confessional divisions were only beginning to emerge, it was his influence on later generations of scholars that was so critical. His philological skills, his devastating critique of ecclesiastical corruption, his Christocentric piety and biblicist orientation were all tools that his successors made good use of in their struggle to bring Christendom's warring factions together. Erasmus's fate, though, is also instructive when reviewing the longer history of irenicism. Though he initially had a great following across the continent, the favorite of princes and popes, over time suspicion mounted as both Catholics and Protestants grew critical of what they perceived as doctrinal imprecision and a lack of theological convictions. In the confessional world of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, irenicism was a very fragile phenomenon. A quick examination of three individuals, however, illustrates how the Erasmian legacy did survive and how his thought could be adapted to address the narrowing strictures of confessional theology.

The Polish nobleman, Johannes a Lasco (Jan Łaski, 1499–1560) had actually studied with Erasmus in Basel before launching an active career as a Reformer that took him from London to Lithuania. Particularly notable were his attempts to unify Poland's divided Protestants. His efforts eventually bore fruit after his death with the 1570 Consensus of Sandomierz, a settlement that brought Calvinist, Lutheran and Brethren communities together and served as a model for other attempts of Protestant union. The French philologist Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614) highlights a more scholarly response to the problem of Christian division. Through his learning Casaubon, who ended his career in the service of England's James I, endeavored to refute the assertion of Baronio, Bellarmine and others that the Reformation represented a great innovation in the history of Christianity and instead pointed to the first five centuries of the church as its epitome and a standard for the present age. Finally, there is Erasmus's own countryman, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645). The Dutch polymath,

perhaps best known for his study of international law, was also an important theologian. His *De veritate religionis Christianae* (1627) sought common ground among Christians and anticipated many of the arguments of eighteenth-century Deists.

As the seventeenth century progressed, the humanist impulse combined with other intellectual currents that contributed to the further development of irenicism and early ecumenism. Socinianism, fideism and Deism affected many who sought solutions to the problems of Christian division. Typical in this respect was the work of John Locke (1632–1704) whose writings on religious toleration and the reasonableness of Christianity were both controversial and influential. Locke in certain respects updated an Erasmian agenda. He emphasized non-dogmatic readings of Scripture, advocated a simple Christocentric piety, and stressed virtue and morality over doctrine and theology.⁷ There were similar developments on the continent. In the first half of the eighteenth century, a movement emerged in the Swiss lands known as “reasonable orthodoxy”. Its spokesmen, the so-called Swiss triumvirate, who saw themselves as members of a supra-confessional Republic of Letters that included such luminaries as Pierre Bayle and John Locke, challenged a narrower and more conservative form of Reformed theology that still held sway in the region. Even more important in this respect was the work of three figures central to the early German Enlightenment: Christian Thomasius (1655–1728), Christian Wolff (1679–1754) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Once more, the theme of a reasonable Christianity emerges from the work of this important trio. Thomasius, a prominent jurist, wrote an influential text examining the nature of prejudice and the need for autonomous thinking that is able to rise above the constraints of dogma. Wolff, a mathematician and philosopher, championed a philosophical Christianity that brought faith and reason together as equal and necessary partners. It was Leibniz, though, who represented the pinnacle of Christian metaphysics. His career and background reflected a cosmopolitanism rare for that age. He moved easily between Catholic and Protestant circles. His first important patron was the worldly archbishop of Mainz. Later, he transferred his services to the Protestant Hanoverians whose connections with England naturally favored ecumenical activity.

⁷ J. Locke, *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. V. Nuovo (Oxford, 2012).

In his ideal world a reunified Christendom would profit from the regenerative energy of Protestantism and the stability and authority of Catholicism.⁸

Mysticism

A second impulse to consider is mysticism. As opposed to humanism, this, of course, was a far older phenomenon, and here the legacy of the Middle Ages is critical to evaluate. The mystics emphasized the existence of a spiritual church that transcended the physical and immediate. There were various strains of medieval spirituality that contributed to the development of irenic thought. The millennial schemes of the twelfth-century Calabrian monk, Joachim of Fiore, echoed down the centuries and inspired many who saw the end of history culminating with the reunion of all churches under the triumphant reign of Christ. There were others such as Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) whose *De pace fidei* recounts a vision where emissaries of all faiths gather in heaven and declare that there is one religion manifested in various rites. Cusa's ideas resonated with individuals such as Guillaume Postel (1510–1581), Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) and later Leibniz himself. In an argument anticipating the eighteenth-century universalists, Postel, an expert in Middle Eastern languages, contended that Jews and Muslims would readily convert to Christianity once they saw the common foundation of the three faiths.

Not surprisingly, mysticism was particularly important in the Catholic context. In the Tridentine era, when doctrine was ever more tightly controlled and precisely defined, mysticism provided believers a way to avoid complicated theological notions and offered direct access to the divine. Foundational were the writings of Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) and her disciple John of the Cross (1542–1591). In the next generation it was Francis de Sales (1567–1622) who helped popularize these ideas of the spiritual life outside the cloister and spread them to a broad lay audience. Motives of these mystics were later molded into an extremely individualistic mysticism known as Quietism that reached its apogee in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Its chief proponent was Madame

⁸ U. Goldenbaum, "Leibniz, Wolff, and Early Modern Theology," in: *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600–1800*, ed. U. Lehner, R. Muller, A. G. Roeber (Oxford, 2016), pp. 550–563.

Guyon (1648–1717) whose admirers included important personalities at the court of Louis XIV and the influential archbishop, François Fénelon. Though Quietism's emphasis on contemplation, passivity and self-negation raised concerns with Rome and ultimately led to the imprisonment of one of its most important spokesmen, the Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos (c. 1628–1697), it was a form of spirituality that easily crossed confessional boundaries.⁹ The devotional writings of Madame Guyon were popular with both Pietist Lutherans and English Methodists.

On the Protestant side, the mystical impulse was most evident in the spiritualist tradition. Though some spiritualists such as Thomas Müntzer with his bloodcurdling calls for social equality were in no sense irenicists, there were others such as Kaspar Schwenckfeld who espoused more conciliatory ideals. Lutheranism, in fact, offered fertile ground for the re-invigoration of late medieval mysticism.¹⁰ Valentin Weigel (1533–1588), Johann Arndt (1555–1621) and Jakob Böhme (1573–1624), whose influence on later German philosophy was profound, were important representatives of this first generation of Lutheran mystics who opened channels of ecumenical dialog and prepared the way for the full flowering of Pietism in the seventeenth century. Finally, there were individuals who though not thoroughgoing mystics still borrowed from this tradition. The seventeenth-century Moravian, John Amos Comenius, serves as a prime example. Comenius, whose adult life was spent in exile, had clear millennial expectations. He believed an age was soon to dawn of universal reform when all Christians would be united in a single federation.

Politics

Politics is undoubtedly the most complicated and complicating of factors when examining the development of irenicism. How theological notions were affected by political developments is a very difficult issue. We should be careful before making generalizations or drawing facile conclusions. Irenicism was a fragile phenomenon, and even the most sympathetic of princes had limited influence to foster its growth. Emperor Maximilian II (1564–1576), arguably

⁹ U. Lehner, W. P. O'Brien SJ, "Mysticism and Reform in Catholic Theology between 1600 and 1800," in: *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology*, pp. 63–74.

¹⁰ B. McGinn, "Mysticism and the Reformation: A. Brief Overview," *Acta Theologica* 35, no. 2 (2015), pp. 51–65.

the most conciliatory of the early modern Habsburgs, presided over a court filled with Erasmians, and yet he was hard pressed to extend religious concessions to his non-Catholic subjects. Still, politics must not be ignored. A political settlement could create space where the expression of controversial ideas was possible. Such was the case in Transylvania as over the course of the sixteenth century its diet extended religious freedom to a number of churches including the Unitarians to ensure political stability. Here some of the most radical theologians of the Reformation found refuge including the anti-Trinitarian Jacob Palaeologus (1520–1585) who believed that Christianity, Judaism and Islam could be unified.¹¹ The Peace of Augsburg, the Warsaw Confederation and the Edict of Nantes were among those significant religious cease-fires in the second half of the sixteenth century.

To understand this dynamic better, let us consider two examples where there was a clear political dimension to irenicism. In 1613 Brandenburg's elector, Margrave Johann Sigismund, converted to the Reformed faith. Unlike other German princes who had become Calvinists, he did not impose the new faith on his territory. In a nod to his Lutheran subjects he announced after his conversion, "His Electoral Highness will not publicly or secretly force any of his subjects against their will to accept this confession." His theologians followed their patron endeavoring to minimize differences between the two Protestant groups. Most effective was the conciliatory Johann Bergius (1587–1658), an advisor to Brandenburg's first three Calvinist electors, who was praised by his Lutheran colleagues for "not being ill-disposed against our religion [– –] and dealing peacefully and kindly with our theologians."¹² While the electors of Brandenburg developed irenic strategies for their multi-confessional territory, those of Hanover in the following century faced a different challenge. On the continent they presided over a Lutheran duchy while they simultaneously served as head of the Anglican church in their new British kingdom. Though George I and II were devout Lutherans, they conformed to the Anglican rite in England. Both favored policies that softened confessional

¹¹ On Palaeologus and the fascinating case of Antitrinitarianism see M. Balász, "Antitrinitarianism," in: *A Companion to the Reformation in Central Europe*, ed. H. Louthan, G. Murdock (Leiden, 2015), pp. 171–194.

¹² B. Nischan, *Prince, People and Confession: The Second Reformation in Brandenburg* (Philadelphia, 1994), pp. 393, 404.

distinctives.¹³ George I supported the latitudinarian bishop, Benjamin Hoadly, while his son quietly aided the Moravians whom English authorities officially recognized as a church in 1749. Following the precedent of William III and his long struggle against Louis XIV, the first Hanoverian kings were seen by many as potential leaders of a broad Protestant alliance against the Catholic challenge of France. Though politics could bolster an irenic agenda as in the case of Brandenburg and England, political motivations could also complicate as reflected in the controversy surrounding Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. In 1708 she converted to Catholicism to marry Habsburg Emperor Charles VI. Her defection from Lutheranism prompted a series of conflicting responses from a number of Europe's leading irenicists including Leibniz. Some upheld the princess's decision to convert while others disagreed strongly.¹⁴ The confessional polemics of this complex affair were in certain respects more dependent on political expediency than on theological ideals – a clear reminder that scholars must study early modern irenicism in its local context and carefully consider all factors.

Global Christianity

Though Europeans had encountered non-Western cultures for centuries, it was in the early modern period that they initiated intense and sustained interaction. This era of early globalization had a profound influence on Christianity and a decided impact on the development of ecumenism. Two trends are most notable. As Europeans confronted non-Christian religions, they reflected back on their own systems of belief. A figure such as the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1601–1680) worked out an elaborate genealogy that highlighted links between ancient Egyptian, Chinese and Christian beliefs. Not all were as conciliatory as Kircher. For some the encounter with “idolatry” merely calcified theological convictions, but in most cases this interaction did foster some type of dialog. It is also important

¹³ A. Schunka, “Mixed Matches and Inter-Confessional Dialogue: The Hanoverian Succession and the Protestant Dynasties of Europe in the Early Eighteenth Century,” in: *Mixed Matches. Transgressive Unions in Germany from the Reformation of the Enlightenment*, ed. M. Lindemann, D. Luebke (New York, 2014), pp. 134–149.

¹⁴ Idem, “Irenicism and the Challenges of Conversion in the Early Eighteenth Century,” in: *Conversion and the Politics of Conversion in Early Modern Germany*, ed. D. Luebke et al. (New York, 2012), pp. 101–118.

to evaluate this cross-cultural activity in the context of mission. As Catholic and Protestant missionaries engaged beliefs very different than their own, they were compelled to adapt the message they were bringing to the local culture often favoring a form of Christianity that could accommodate elements of other belief systems.

It was the Catholics of course who led the way in terms of mission. In South America the Jesuit José de Acosta (1540–1600) crisscrossed the Andean highlands. Though his work on natural history is best known, Acosta also addressed the issue of conversion in a manner sensitive to native culture. His contemporary, the chronicler Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), went even further by arguing that it was the defeated Incas who better embodied Christian virtue than their Spanish conquerors. In East Asia Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) helped redirect the orientation of Jesuit mission towards a deep engagement of local culture and language. The accommodation Ricci made with Confucianism, though eventually igniting the firestorm of the Chinese Rites Controversy, was an important milestone in the development of interreligious dialog. Less well known are the efforts of Jesuit missionaries in India. Their creative engagement with Hinduism produced such works as the remarkable *Krista Purana*. Written in local Indian languages and adopting the form of a traditional Hindu *purana*, this epic poem of 11,000 stanzas retold the story of humanity from the creation to the life of Christ. The most celebrated of these south Asian missionaries was Roberto de Nobili who adopted the dress and manner of a Hindu ascetic and carried on a lively dialogue with his Brahmin interlocutors.¹⁵

As Europeans began deep and sustained conversations with non-Christian religions, they also evinced a greater interest in eastern Christianities. Gregory XII founded the Maronite College in Rome in 1584. One of its star pupils was the Arab Christian Ibrahim al-Haqilani (Abraham Ecchellensis, 1605–1664), whose busy career carried him from Lebanon to France. His work on Arabic and Syriac Christian sources opened new vistas for scholars of the early church.¹⁶

¹⁵ I. Županov, *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century India* (Oxford, 1999); R. de Nobili, *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, S.J., Missionary and Scholar in 17th-Century India* (St. Louis, 2000).

¹⁶ B. Heyberger, ed., *Orientalisme, Science et Controverse: Abraham Ecchellensis (1605–1664)* (Turnhout, 2010).

Equally important was the ongoing dialog with the Orthodox world. Protestants were particularly keen to establish relationships with Orthodox communities. The Unity of Brethren, a fifteenth-century offshoot of the original Hussite movement, had sent their first embassy to Constantinople in the late fifteenth century while in 1557 Sweden dispatched a mission to Muscovy that included Laurentius Petri, the first Lutheran archbishop of Uppsala, and Michael Agricola, Finland's leading reformer. Towards the end of the sixteenth century Jakob Andreae and Martin Crusius, two Lutheran theologians from Tübingen, initiated a discussion with Patriarch Jeremiah II concerning the Augsburg Confession, which they had translated into Greek. Despite the differences that emerged, the tone of the interchange was civil and irenic. Though interaction could produce controversy as was the case with the "Calvinizing" patriarch Cyril Loukaris (1572–1638), many Protestants looked to the Orthodox for possible solutions to confessional division. In 1599 delegates from Poland's Protestant communities met their Orthodox counterparts to discuss a possible alliance. A common creedal statement and plan for confessional union were even debated.¹⁷ A young Peter Romanov while making his grand tour of the continent in the following century helped pique Protestant interest in the Orthodox world once more. English bishops commented favorably on his understanding of theology while Leibniz saw him as the potential convener of a new ecumenical council.

These centuries were also a period of movement and expansion both within and beyond Europe. The displacement of peoples and hence religions contributed in a number of interesting ways to the development of ecumenism. In the sixteenth century an institution like the Strangers' Church in London became a working experiment in Protestant irenicism. Established in the late 1540s and serving a variety of communities including Dutch and French refugees, the church operated independently of the bishop of London. Its first superintendent was Johannes a Lasco who endeavored to accommodate a range of Protestant beliefs.¹⁸ An even grander experiment was going on at the same time in North America, principally in the

¹⁷ G. Mastrantonis, *Augsburg and Constantinople* (Brookline, MA, 1982); K. E. J. Jørgensen, *Ökumenische Bestrebungen unter den polnischen Protestanten bis zum Jahre 1645* (Copenhagen, 1942), pp. 318–325.

¹⁸ A. Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London* (Oxford, 1986); M. Springer, *Restoring Christ's Church: John a Lasco and the Forma ac ratio* (Burlington, VT, 2007).

English and Dutch colonies. In Maryland Cecil Calvert used his influence to help pass the 1649 Act of Toleration, which granted freedom of worship to all Trinitarian Christians. Rhode Island went even further as Roger Williams advocated the extension of religious liberty to non-Christian communities as well. The establishment of Pennsylvania as a haven for persecuted minorities (1682) produced the most religiously diverse society in North America.¹⁹ It is important, however, to recognize the limits of toleration and the fragility of these ecumenical experiments. In the wake of the Glorious Revolution colonial legislators repealed Maryland's law while in Pennsylvania schism divided the now fractious Quaker community in the 1690s.

Confessional and Sectarian Perspectives

It is also important to consider irenicism within a more specific confessional and sectarian context. The legacy of the Reformation is critical of course for any understanding of ecumenism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Protestants relied heavily on what we may call the language of restoration. They sought to recover what they perceived as the purity and unity of the primitive church. Such irenic ideals were reflected in their early creedal statements such as the Augsburg and Second Helvetic Confessions. It was somewhat different with the Catholics. Though many in the church recognized the need for reform, they also stressed the theme of continuity, that the church of the present despite its trials and problems still held true to the basic teachings and beliefs of the Apostolic era. While for Catholics and Protestants alike the recovery of ecclesial unity was an important impulse during this period, there is an implicit difficulty when evaluating irenicism in specific confessional settings. Those individuals involved in ecumenical activities often operated on the margins of their own communities. Irencism by its very nature de-emphasized confessional distinctives in a broader quest for unifying commonalities. Despite this caveat, examining irenicism from a confessional or sectarian perspective does yield important insights to an understanding of this phenomenon as a whole.²⁰

¹⁹ J. Turner, "John Locke, Christian Mission and Colonial America," *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 2 (2011), pp. 267–297.

²⁰ The following discussion skirts any significant treatment of the formal religious conferences and colloquies convened in the wake of the Reformation, a topic that moves far beyond the scope of this essay. On this issue see the exhaustive

Catholics

In certain respects it is difficult to argue that ecumenical ideals were ever a priority for the Catholic church in this period. Apart from its missionary endeavors the principal concerns for the church were the reconversion of lands lost to the Protestants and a refashioning of the faith following the guidelines of Trent. The bull of Clement XIII, "On Unity Among Christians," (1758) was no olive branch to the Protestants or appeal for ecumenical understanding. Rather, it addressed divisions within the Catholic church. For the church as an institution ecumenism is primarily a twentieth-century phenomenon most closely associated with Vatican II. With that said, Catholics made significant contributions both directly and indirectly to the development of irenic thought and theology. They in fact led the way in two areas we have already discussed: mysticism and missionary activity. The Jesuits, who on one hand were no champions of confessional compromise, were also Europe's most creative and innovative thinkers on cultural accommodation and interreligious dialog. There were also important moments of irenic potential that occurred in Catholic Europe. Though the 1598 Edict of Nantes, which guaranteed France's Huguenots certain rights, was very much a political settlement, it did create possible space for cross-confessional discussions in the following century. One of the more intriguing conversations of this period developed between the French bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704) and Leibniz.²¹ While the talks were ultimately unsuccessfully, Bossuet was only one of several Catholic bishops who did have a genuine desire for dialog and reached out to their Protestant counterparts. In 1683 Christóbal de Gentil de Rojas y Spinola, a Spanish Franciscan and future bishop of Austria's Wiener Neustadt, initiated a conversation with Gerardus Molanus, a leader of the Lutheran church in Hannover. Discussions between the two led to a plan of confessional reunion that was supported by Habsburg Emperor Leopold I.²² In the eighteenth century, there was even greater interest in the Catholic world for such endeavors.

study of O. Schieb, *Die innerchristlichen Religionsgespräche im Abendland*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden, 2009).

²¹ F. Gaquère, *Le dialogue irénique Bossuet – Leibniz: La réunion des Églises en échec, 1691–1702* (Paris, 1966).

²² K. Masser, *Christóbal de Gentil de Rojas y Spinola O.F.M. und der lutherische Abt Gerardus Wolterius Molanus* (Münster, 2002).

A number of Catholic Enlighteners developed ecumenical task forces and plans for reunion of the churches.²³

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Europe's most religiously diverse society, is an especially intriguing case to consider.²⁴ While its last two Jagiellonian kings, Sigismund I and Sigismund II Augustus, remained loyal to Rome, both were moderates and preserved an irenic tradition that continued into the seventeenth century. Central to this discussion is the Capuchin friar, Valerian Magni (1586–1661), who was a close advisor to the Commonwealth's Vasa king, Władysław IV. In an effort to bring Catholics and Protestants together, Magni helped organize the 1645 *Colloquium charitativum*, a colloquy that attracted some of the most important irenicists of the era including Johann Bergius, Georg Calixtus and John Comenius. At the same time he sought an understanding between Catholic and Orthodox communities. Ever since the Union of Brest (1595) there was significant unrest among the Commonwealth's Orthodox population. Many of them chafed at what they perceived as a forced union with Rome. Magni pressed for the passage of the *Articles of Pacification* (1633), which restored the rights of an independent Orthodox church, and then continued with fresh negotiations that sought a more equitable settlement between the Orthodox and Rome. Indeed, Magni saw Poland and its Vasa princes at the center of a grand ecumenical strategy that could restore religious harmony to a region stretching from the German lands to Muscovy.²⁵

Lutherans

The Lutheran case is also in some respects a curious one to consider. In the sixteenth century Lutherans spent significant time squabbling with each other concerning the theological direction of their church. There were two principal factions. The Philippists, a group inspired by Melanchthon, were open to compromise with both Catholics and

²³ J. Burson, U. Lehner, eds., *Enlightenment and Catholicism in Europe. A Transnational History* (Notre Dame, IN, 2014).

²⁴ For a full overview of multi-confessional relations in Poland with comparative attention to the Empire and the Netherlands see W. Krieger, *Stosunki wyznaniowe w relacjach państwo – kościół między reformacją a oświeceniem* (Warszawa, 2010).

²⁵ H. Louthan, "Mediating Confessions in Central Europe: The Ecumenical Activity of Valerian Magni," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55, no. 4 (2004), pp. 681–699.

Calvinists while the Gnesio-Lutherans sought to preserve without accommodation what they perceived as Luther's original teaching. In the end the Gnesio-Lutherans prevailed. The great Lutheran settlement, the 1580 *Book of Concord*, reflected their views and ended the theological disputes of the previous period. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, their triumph actually opened space for irenic activity in the following century, for the *Book of Concord* helped establish a new peace and stability within the Lutheran community. Undoubtedly, the most important figure to emerge in this next generation was Georg Calixtus (1586–1656).²⁶ A native of northern Germany, Calixtus was appointed professor of theology at the university of Helmstedt in 1614, a post he held for over forty years. Calixtus, who was an admirer of Isaac Casaubon, expanded on his work and looked to the ancient church for a solution to confessional division. He developed the notion of a *consensus quinquesaecularis*. According to Calixtus the church of the first five centuries with its doctrines and traditions in agreement with Scripture and upheld by the ecumenical councils offered contemporary Christendom a useful model to resolve its differences. Not unexpectedly, Calixtus's scheme precipitated yet another theological dispute, but despite the controversy Helmstedt remained an important center of irenic thought while Calixtus's ideas continued to resonate with many in the Protestant world including English Latitudinarians.

There was another current within Lutheranism that was arguably even more significant to the development of early ecumenism. As opposed to Calixtus's simplified doctrinal program, this approach avoided theology altogether, rejected the idea of a state church and saw no need for interconfessional dialog, for Pietism clearly prioritized the significance of religious experience that united believers across time and creed. Early Lutheran spiritualists such as Valentin Weigel and Johann Arndt laid the foundations of a movement that found its chief architect in the Alsatian Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705).²⁷ Central to Spener and Pietism was the idea of the "new birth". Reborn in Christ, the believer becomes part of a new fellowship of like-minded individuals. This community was one that crossed confessional lines. One of the hallmarks of German Pietism

²⁶ Ch. Th. Callisen, "Georg Calixtus, Isaac Casaubon and the Consensus of Antiquity," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1–23.

²⁷ C. Lindberg, ed., *The Pietist Theologians* (Oxford, 2005).

was the proliferation of spiritual biography. Gottfried Arnold's *Lives of Believers* and Gerhard Tersteegen's *Selected Biographies of Holy Souls* are examples of a genre that brought stories of godly Catholics and Protestants together. Halle became the key center of this movement after Spener was asked by the elector of Brandenburg to help establish a new university. His work was brought to completion by his successor August Hermann Francke (1663–1727). Under Francke's leadership Halle became the hub of an international network and a center for ecumenical missionary activity with contacts stretching from Siberia to North America. Though its origins were with German Lutheranism, Pietism had by the eighteenth century spilled its banks affecting both Catholic mystics in France and Wesley's enthusiastic followers in England and North America.

Reformed Tradition

While after the Peace of Augsburg (1555), Lutheranism became politically quiescent, the same was not true for Calvinism. The Reformed were not covered by this settlement, and with war in France and the Low Countries and tensions rising in Central Europe they saw themselves as a vulnerable minority. This difficult situation actually contributed to a certain type of ecumenical activity. Many in the Reformed community were eager to forge some type of intra-Protestant alliance if not an actual church union. The French noble and Huguenot, Philippe du Plessis-Mornay (1549–1623), traveled across Protestant Europe canvassing support for a potential church union. His efforts produced a series of ecumenical conferences culminating at the Synod of Tonneins (1614). He also founded a theological academy at Saumur, which became an important center of Reformed irenicism and a thorn in the side of more orthodox Calvinists. Here the controversial Moses Amyraut devised a milder interpretation of predestination. Amyraut also had a substantial impact on a young William Penn who would lead his own irenic experiment in British North America.²⁸ There were others in the Reformed world such as Franciscus Junius (1545–1602), who wrote an impassioned plea for Protestant unity most clearly reflected in his 1593 *Irenicum*, which identified the fundamental articles of faith as those touching the relationship between the individual Christian and God. In Heidelberg

²⁸ B. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, 1969); F. P. van Stam, *The Controversy of the Theology of Saumur, 1635–1650* (Amsterdam, 1988).

David Pareus (1548–1622), who had once attacked the Lutheran doctrine of real presence, changed his tone dramatically and composed arguably the most famous irenic text in the Reformed tradition, the *Irenicum* (1614).

At the beginning of the eighteenth century three Swiss theologians, Jean-Alphonse Turretin, Samuel Werenfels and Jean-Frédéric Osterwald, helped rekindle an interest in ecumenism.²⁹ This influential triumvirate were proponents of what became known as “reasonable orthodoxy”. They encouraged the Reformed to break loose from what they perceived as narrow formulations of Calvinist doctrine and enter into broader discussions engaging the intellectual currents of the day. They endeavored to formulate fundamental articles of belief and began dialoging not only with Lutherans but also Anglicans and Catholics. Their efforts attracted the attention of English princes who saw their plans as a way to facilitate a Protestant alliance. A final moment to consider came at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Brandenburg-Prussia. Lutheran and Reformed churches had co-existed there since the conversion of Elector Johann Sigismund in 1613. The Calvinist minority, though, had grown over the decades as the territory welcomed religious refugees from France, the Low Countries and other neighboring regions. Though there had been abortive attempts to bring the two confessions together, King Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840) finally resolved the situation. He decreed a common liturgy, and with the encouragement of Friedrich Schleiermacher he announced in 1817 the Prussian Union, which united the two churches together in a new Evangelical body. This Union became a model for the majority of Protestants in Germany.

Anglicans

The Anglican case is a special one to consider as this church did in certain respects offer an intermediary position between Catholics and Protestants though scholars have recently argued that despite its moderate character, force and compulsion were necessary to preserve its vaunted *via media*.³⁰ Regardless, sixteenth-century bishops such

²⁹ M. Klauber, *Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671–1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selingsgrove, PA, 1994).

³⁰ E. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2011).

as Thomas Cranmer, who with his conciliarist inclinations retained an ecumenical vision of the church, and Matthew Parker, who used his immense learning to argue for the antiquity and continuity of the English ecclesiastical tradition, pointed to the special role Anglicans could play in inter-confessional dialog. In the early seventeenth century James I attracted a significant set of foreign visitors who were deeply involved with irenic projects.³¹ Casaubon had come for an extended stay while both Calixtus and Grotius made shorter trips. One of the most intriguing of James's guests was Marco Antonio de Dominis (1560–1624). The brilliant but erratic de Dominis had made a name for himself as a Catholic before running afoul with Rome in its dispute with Venice. He fled to England in 1616 where he was welcomed with open arms and there published with royal approbation *De republica ecclesiastica*, his grand plan for church reunification. Though critical of the papacy, de Dominis supported episcopal authority and called for an ecumenical council that unlike Trent would address the church's failings impartially. It is important to remember that when examining Jacobean ecumenics, it is not always possible to disentangle political motives from spiritual aspirations. James's interest in the Synod of Ton-neins was as much about a potential foreign alliance as it was about confessional rapprochement.

James is also important as he points to a broader characteristic of the English church in the early modern period. There was a particular affinity that developed between the English and the Orthodox. James had a keen interest in the East and promoted interaction between the churches that intensified as an English presence expanded in that region. The celebrated travels of Isaac Basire, an Anglican priest who made an extended tour of the Middle East in the 1650s, stimulated further interest and elicited a sympathy from many at home for shared ecclesiastical traditions with Eastern Christians.³² The Revolution of 1688 marked a new chapter in relations as a substantial number of priests refused the formal oath of allegiance to the kingdom's new rulers on grounds of conscience. Deprived of their benefices, these "non-jurors" organized themselves into a rump church and looked to the Orthodox for possible communion. There

³¹ W. B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge, 1997).

³² W. N. Darnell, ed., *The Correspondence of Isaac Basire, D.D.* (London, 1831).

were also experiments such as the conversion of Gloucester Hall in Oxford into a college for Orthodox students.

In the eighteenth-century England there were at least two significant nodes of ecumenical activity. On the one hand there were inter-confessional discussions at the highest level of the church while on the other there were currents of religious revival that contributed to more popular forms of ecumenism. The former is arguably best represented in the work of Canterbury's William Wake (1657–1737).³³ Wake offers the classic example of how the Anglican church could in certain instances straddle the confessional divide, for as archbishop he carried on serious negotiations with both Catholics and Nonconformists. Earlier in his career Wake had served as chaplain to the British ambassador in Paris and there established lasting friendships with leading Catholic theologians. With these colleagues he sought to identify fundamental articles of faith while relying on their Gallican sensibilities to accept a more limited understanding of papal authority. With the Nonconformists he was willing to consider revisions to the Prayer Book, and in his dealings with Reformed communities abroad he recognized the validity of their ministries and sacraments but at the same time encouraged them to restore the episcopacy, a step that would facilitate ecclesial communion. The situation was slightly different on the popular level. In the late seventeenth century new interest in mysticism led to spiritualist groups such as the Philadelphian Society. Of greater importance was the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). Founded in 1698, the SPCK oversaw the translation of classic irenic literature including Johann Arndt's *True Christianity* and Hugo Grotius's *The Truth of the Christian Religion*. As a missions organization, the SPCK had a significant impact abroad. In the early eighteenth century it cooperated with Lutheran missionaries from Halle in the translation of the Bible into Tamil. Finally there is the contribution of John Wesley (1703–1791). Wesley's place is difficult to assess, for though the roots of his revival were undeniably ecumenical drawing from German Pietists and the Moravians, in the end he established yet another division in the Protestant world. Regardless, the influence of the Methodist revival and Wesley's religion of the heart reached across much of Christendom.

³³ N. Sykes, *William Wake Archbishop of Canterbury 1657–1737*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1957).

Hussite Tradition

A final tradition to evaluate presents researchers an interesting paradox. As a church, the Hussites had long vanished from the ecclesiastical landscape, but their influence was still present and continued to shape ecumenical dialog. Though after the execution of Jan Hus (1415) an independent church had arisen in Bohemia, Hussitism was a broad phenomenon and cannot be characterized in simple terms. There was, however, an aspect of this tradition that was open to confessional compromise. The Hussite or Utraquist church was party to the 1485 Peace of Kutná Hora, a settlement that created the first legally biconfessional state in Europe. The 1575 Bohemian Confession was a broad ecumenical statement adopted by that kingdom's Protestant factions as well as the Utraquists and the Unity of Brethren. The seventeenth century marked the end for both the Utraquists and the Unity as an institutional church, for they were either suppressed or sent into exile at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War.

The last bishop of the Unity, John Amos Comenius (1592–1670), emerged as one of Europe's most important irenic visionaries of this entire era. As a youth, he had studied with David Pareus in Heidelberg and exhibited an early interest in ecumenism though he wryly observed in his great satire, *The Labyrinth of the World* (1623), the seeming futility of such undertakings as Christians continued to bicker over trivial issues. Best known for his educational innovations, he clearly saw a reform of learning intimately connected to a broader *renovatio* of human society that included a union of all Christians in a single communion. In a career that took him from Hungary to England, Comenius developed an extensive correspondence network with other important irenicists including the peripatetic John Dury (1596–1680) and the polymath Samuel Hartlib (1600–1662) with whom he discussed utopian schemes of universal reformation.³⁴

Though the Unity of Brethren was dispersed during the Thirty Years' War, its tradition did survive in attenuated form. Comenius's secretary and son-in-law, Peter Figulus was the father of one of the most articulate irenicists of the eighteenth century, Daniel Ernst Jablonski (1660–1741).³⁵ Jablonski buttressed his irenic projects

³⁴ M. Blekastad, *Comenius* (Oslo, 1969).

³⁵ J. Bahlcke, B. Dybaś, H. Rudolph, eds., *Brückenschläge. Daniel Ernst Jablonski in Europa der Frühaufklärung* (Dössel, 2010).

with two basic principles: a simple biblicism drawn from his Brethren background and an appreciation of the episcopate developed during his student days at Oxford. He spent nearly fifty years as court preacher in Berlin where he promoted his plans to unite German, Swiss and English Protestants. Unlike Molanus, he did not believe that doctrinal unity was necessary for a settlement, for he contended that the theological differences between Protestant churches did not touch on essential matters of faith. Nevertheless, as his correspondence with Archbishop Wake attests, Jablonski and his allies faced significant political obstacles that ultimately thwarted their ambitions. Jablonski's younger colleague, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), highlights another way that the Hussite tradition could combine with more recent irenic currents. Zinzendorf, a product of Lutheran Pietism, had studied under Francke at Halle. The wealthy count opened his family estate in Saxony (Herrnhut) to remnants of the scattered Unity who were joined by like-minded German Pietists. Under his leadership, the Renewed Unity, better known as the Moravians, spread around the globe as they pioneered the first large-scale Protestant missionary movement. Zinzendorf, who was no separatist and desired that the Moravians remain within the Lutheran church, had strong irenic instincts and in Pennsylvania endeavored to bring German Protestants together. Though he viewed the Augsburg Confession as the classic ecumenical statement of faith, he believed that Protestants could also learn from the Catholic tradition and carried on a lively correspondence with Cardinal de Noailles in France. A great lover of church music, Zinzendorf included Catholic hymns and Orthodox liturgies in his 1753 *London Hymn Book*.

Conclusion

What broader lessons can we draw from this overview? The activities of the irenicists discussed in this survey have not gone unnoticed, but most of the newer scholarship in this area has been relegated to a subfield of historical theology or intellectual history and has not been incorporated into broader considerations of toleration and religious co-existence in the early modern world. Most scholars examining toleration today investigate the phenomenon not as an expression of belief or conviction but as a practical form of behavior. Two recent studies, Jesse Spohnholz's *The Tactics of Toleration* and Victoria Christman's *Pragmatic Toleration*, reflect

this trend.³⁶ Spohnholz looks at refugees along the Rhine in the city of Wesel while Christman investigates city officials who sought to manage the confessional diversity of sixteenth-century Antwerp. Both are excellent studies that evaluate the strategies developed to keep peace between religious communities. But is there more? How could a fuller consideration of irenicism contribute to our understanding of toleration without merely reformulating an old-fashioned history of ideas that focuses on elites and ignores the social realities of everyday men and women? As noted earlier, scholars today have drawn a clear line between the study of toleration as an ideological phenomenon and its investigation as a form of practice. Is it possible to work across this divide and bring the ideals of irenicism to the study of practical challenges facing multi-confessional societies across early modern Europe?

Let me conclude, then, by suggesting at least three ways that a revisionist history of irenicism may help us both expand our understanding of this phenomenon and better comprehend how toleration functioned pragmatically. First, scholars must carefully anchor such study in a specific historical context. In an article examining irenic activity between German Lutherans and Calvinists in the era of the Thirty Years' War, Howard Hotson has highlighted a clear link between the fortunes of war and ecumenical negotiation.³⁷ When Lutherans felt threatened by the Catholic menace, their theologians began earnest dialog with their Reformed counterparts. When they felt more secure, they were largely impassive to Calvinist overtures of union. To the west in France, Mona Garloff has examined the French ambassador Jean Hotman and has grounded her assessment of his irenic activities in the diplomatic missions he undertook.³⁸ Second, ecumenism must be more carefully located in a multi-confessional environment. As we have seen throughout this essay, irenicism was not simply an activity that occurred between Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists. A fuller understanding of this phenomenon must account for the diversity

³⁶ J. Spohnholz, *The Tactics of Toleration* (Delaware, 2011); V. Christman, *Pragmatic Toleration: The Politics of Religious Heterodoxy in Early Reformation Antwerp, 1515–1555* (Rochester, NY, 2015).

³⁷ H. Hotson, "Irenicism in the Confessional Age: The Holy Roman Empire, 1563–1648," in: *Conciliation and Confession: The Struggle for Unity in the Age of Reform, 1415–1648*, ed. H. Louthan, R. Zachman (Notre Dame, IN, 2004), pp. 228–285.

³⁸ M. Garloff, *Irenik, Gelehrsamkeit und Politik: Jean Hotman und der europäische Religionskonflikt um 1600* (Göttingen, 2014).

and heterogeneity of Europe's religious landscape and include communities such as the Orthodox and Utraquists. Finally, ecumenism is not a unitary but a multivalent dynamic. There were many impulses, some often at odds, that pushed irenic dialog forward. Scholars need to be careful disentangling the various skeins of ecumenical thought. There could be a sizable disjuncture between actual irenic activity and the motives and ideas reinforcing and informing such enterprises. Here one could point to the Union of 1817. Friedrich Wilhelm III and Friedrich Schleiermacher supported and pushed forward irenic policies for different reasons. In sum, a more historically sensitive interpretation of irenicism, attuned to its rhythms and nuances, broadens and deepens our understanding of this phenomenon and as such, also has new relevance for the study of toleration as a pragmatic form of social practice.

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Irenicism and Ecumenism in the Early Modern World: A Reevaluation

The article provides a wide-ranging assessment of early modern irenicism. In the mid-twentieth century, irenicism and ecumenism were lively fields of study for scholars of the Reformation. That is no longer the case as those examining early modern toleration tend to focus on material and social factors while downplaying the ideological roots of this phenomenon. This article reviews the state of the field and offers new lines of approach for a broader understanding and reassessment of irenicism. The first half of the essay considers a variety of impulses that contributed to its growth. From Valla and Erasmus to Leibniz and Wolff, the humanist legacy that minimized confessional difference played a key role. The tradition of Christian mysticism, which adapted to the new climate of the Reformation, also factored significantly. The practical challenges of ruling confessionally mixed territories gave rise to new political impulses, and as Europeans pushed abroad and encountered a variety of non-Christian religions, this experience fostered dialog. The second half of the article investigates irenicism from a confessional perspective. Here representative examples from the Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Hussite traditions are highlighted. The Capuchin friar Valerian Magni, the controversial Lutheran Georg Calixtus, the Calvinist theologian David Pareus, the Anglican archbishop William Wake, and the Moravian polymath John Amos Comenius are among figures discussed.

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