

# IN MEMORIAM

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## Irena Backus (1950–2019)

With the untimely passing of Irena Backus in June last year, the scientific community has lost one of the brightest minds in the early modern studies landscape. Of Polish origin, Backus left Warsaw when she was still young in 1961 and completed her studies up to her doctorate – awarded in 1976 – at the University of Oxford. After obtaining habilitation in the History of Christianity in 1988, she held the chair of Professor of Reformation History and Ecclesiastical Latin from 1992, working at the Institute of the History of the Reformation at the University of Geneva.

From the earliest research, her focus was on the history of Sacred Scripture in the early modern age and on biblical exegesis in relation to the sixteenth-century religious conflict. This interest began with her doctoral thesis examining the influence of Theodore Beza's exegesis of the English versions of the New Testament, the Geneva Bible (1560) and the Authorized Version (1611); the Bible was observed through its many critical editions and commentaries. This research was later incorporated into her first monograph, *The Reformed Roots of the English New Testament. Influence of Theodore Beza on the English New Testament* (Pittsburgh, 1980). These interests expanded throughout her career, leading to important contributions on the popularity of the Book of Revelation in the Protestant world and featuring a meticulous analysis of primary sources. Among the most important examples of her tireless commitment to the critical edition of the texts is the outstanding *Enarratio in Evangelion Iohannis de Bucer Martini Bucer Opera latina*, vol. 2: *Enarratio in Evangelion Iohannis (1528, 1530, 1536)*, ed. Irena Backus (Brill, 1988).

There are also numerous publications focused on the relationship between the scientific culture of early modernity and the Patristic tradition, both Latin and Greek, which also included a careful reconstruction of the material circulation of the works of the Fathers

of the Church. Also addressing Patristics in the Middle Ages and Renaissance ages were the two volumes of *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West. From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, published by Brill in 1997, in which Backus brought together research on the subject by 23 European and North American scholars. However, collaboration with the publisher Brill was not restricted to this work, which was also entrusted with the printing of a monograph that exploited numerous unknown documents to describe the different ways in which Roman, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic circles analysed ancient history, particularly Christian history (*Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation, 1378–1615*, Brill 2003).

A passionate Cinquecentist, she also devoted herself to studying both the late Middle Ages and the intellectual history of the seventeenth century. Her interest in different historical epochs can be seen particularly in the investigations that reconstruct the changes of a textual genre over time, as in the case of her research focused on the biographies of reformers written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (*Life Writing in Reformation Europe. Biographies of reformers by friends, disciples and foes*, Ashgate, 2008).

In the most advanced phase of her research, Backus devoted considerable attention to the relationship between philosophy and religious culture in the early modern age. This topic had been present in her studies from the beginning of her career but became prominent around the first decade of the twenty-first century. Examples of this include the essay on Erasmus and Sebastien Castellio, in which she examined the influence of sceptical philosophy in Protestant circles (“The Issue of Reformation Scepticism revisited: what Erasmus and Sebastien Castellio did or did not know,” in *Renaissance Scepticism*, eds Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto, Dordrecht: Springer, 2009, pp. 63–89) and the articles on the success of Ramism and the Zabarella system in Protestant schools (“Loci communes and the role of Ramism in the European Diffusion of Calvin’s Reformation,” *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 2 (2010), pp. 233–249; “The Teaching of Logic in two Protestant Academies at the End of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Reception of Zabarella in Strasbourg and Geneva,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 80 (1989), pp. 240–251).

These works also created fertile ground for Backus’s last, fundamental monograph centred on Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz: an extraordinary work that assessed Leibniz’s philosophical doctrine in

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the light of his Protestant faith (*Leibniz Protestant Theologian*, Oxford University Press, 2016).

Those who had the privilege of working with Irena Backus describe a research activity constantly driven by a genuine curiosity. This curiosity represented a significant competitive advantage over other scholars because it led her to read primary sources without ideological preconceptions, thus sidestepping a number of clichés transmitted by historiography.

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