

Henrich, Rainer (Hrsg.): *Oswald Myconius. Briefwechsel 1515–1552. Regesten..* Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich 2017. ISBN: 978-3-290-17890-1; 2 Bde., VIII, 1284 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Bruce Gordon, Yale Divinity School

In 1552, when he received news that Oswald Myconius had died, Heinrich Bullinger engaged a colleague, Konrad Lycosthenes, to arrange for all of his letters to the head of the Basel church to be returned to him on account of their sensitivity. Myconius' adopted son Jakob was reluctant to surrender the correspondence, but eventually Lycosthenes was able to report that most would be sent to Zurich as requested. It was not uncommon for the reformers to seek to claim back their missives. These confidential documents contained a wealth of information, some of which was quite private, that they did not want to see fall into the wrong hands. When Huldrych Zwingli died in 1531, Martin Bucer, in his letter of condolence to the fallen reformer's widow, Anna, requested that she burn his letters. The correspondence of the Swiss and German reformers remains a crucial source for the study of the Reformation, yet access to this body of material remains painfully limited and partial, restricted to only a few of the major figures. The massive project to edit the letters of Heinrich Bullinger, which has run for many years, has reached the late 1540s and still has almost thirty years of the reformer's life to go!

Oswald Myconius is less well known, yet he had one of the most extraordinary lives of the early Reformation. Having emerged as a humanist schoolteacher in Lucerne and Zurich, he played a key role in the calling of Huldrych Zwingli to Zurich and eventually led the church in Basel until his death in 1552. Myconius witnessed the torrid events of the first years of the reform movement in Swiss lands through to the Schmalkaldic War and the Interim. Yet, apart from the recent work of Amy Nelson Burnett<sup>1</sup>, this talented figure has received little scholarly attention, almost wholly overshadowed by his contemporaries, including the great Erasmus, at whose funeral he preached. Although a number of his theo-

logical and biblical works were printed in the sixteenth century, Myconius acquired a reputation as a secondary figure of limited intellectual ability. His letters, however, tell a different story. The head of the Basel church was deeply embroiled in the church disputes and politics of his time, profoundly well informed about events and sharing the confidences of all the major players, including John Calvin, who clearly regarded him as a man of significance and influence.

Rainer Henrich's scholarly achievement in producing two volumes of a register of Myconius' correspondence is astonishing. He has provided a new generation of readers with access to the worlds of humanist scholarship and of reformation history and politics in Basel, the Swiss Confederation, and across Europe. Myconius' letters, of which there are just under fifteen hundred extant, reveal networks of communication that involved the leading protagonists, clerical and lay, of the first two generations of the Reformation. As with most sixteenth-century correspondents only a portion of his letters survive, but quite remarkably those that we have are almost equally divided between letters sent and letters received by Myconius. Henrich has applied clear criteria for what qualified as a letter – each text, for example, had to be properly addressed to or sent from an individual or group including Myconius – but the rubric has proved remarkably expansive: the correspondence in this collection ranges from drafts or memos to printed dedications. The result is an enormous body of fresh information on virtually every aspect of the period that will go a long way to rewriting established narratives of the Swiss Reformation. Henrich himself takes the lead, providing in the first volume a new biography of Myconius based on the material that places the humanist reformer at the very front of theological and religious/political debates during the crucial decades of the 1530s, 1540s and 1550s. It also provides a moving account of Myconius' many friendships and his role as head of

<sup>1</sup> Amy Nelson Burnett, *Teaching the Reformation. Ministers and Their Message in Basel, 1529-1629*, New York 2006; Amy Nelson Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments. Print and Authority in the Early Reformation*, New York 2019.

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the Basel church, with his numerous letters to local pastors.

It is crucial that we understand exactly what these two volumes are. Henrich has provided not a critical edition of the letters (work which he has done on Bullinger), but rather registers with detailed summaries of each missive along with bibliographical information. This approach, as he fully appreciates, presents both opportunities and challenges. The great advantage is to make the rich information contained in the correspondence available to a much broader audience not able to read Latin. The summaries are by no means cursory, but rather extremely full synopses of each letter, offering a clear sense of the layers of information: news, doctrinal discussion, personal contacts, rumors etc. A comparison of the summaries with the letters of Myconius printed in the Bullinger critical edition, for example, reveals how fully and precisely Henrich has covered the details. As mentioned, however, there are drawbacks. The disadvantage of this approach is that we lose the original voices of the authors, whether individual or corporate. The vitality and freshness of the writing is inevitably diminished when the contents are put into reported speech. In every scholarly work difficult decisions must be made, and the choices here are wholly defensible.

Henrich has painstakingly recovered Myconius' correspondence from archives and libraries in Zurich, Strasbourg, St Gall, Basel and elsewhere, and scholars seeking access to the originals are given the exact information required to find them. With his generous summaries of the letters Henrich has done a great service to the field of Reformation studies, making available a vast body of information previously inaccessible to all but a few people. To read through these two volumes is to be confronted with virtually every aspect of early modern life: family, the household, travel, illness and commerce, to name but a few. We are reminded that the Reformation was not simply about a few well-known figures but involved a vast cast of men and women, now mostly forgotten, who in their day experienced and gave voice to the enormous religious and social changes enveloping them. As with the printed editions of

Bullinger, Bucer, and Vadian, the letters here provide a window onto a world that is not available to us in theological works, political tracts, and polemics alone.

Perhaps the most obvious question one might pose in our time is why the letters appear in book form and not as an on-line database. Once again, there are arguments for both directions. Certainly, for the scholar seeking particular information computer searches for particular persons, key words or themes are an invaluable tool and enormously time saving. A great deal of work can be done simply from a laptop. This advantage cannot be denied. However, perhaps surprisingly, at least among American and British students, there remains a preference for physical books over electronic versions. The two volumes invite more careful reading and a sense of the whole, countering the tendency simply to plunder details easily gathered. Henrich has provided full indices and reference sources that make the two volumes fully accessible. Such are our reading practices that when confronted with the volumes in front of us we absorb, I would argue, a great deal more information.

Rainer Henrich's labors in presenting the letters of Oswald Myconius make a major advance in Reformation scholarship that should be widely applauded. The scholarly precision and clarity with which an enormous body of material has been presented are remarkable and will shape the field anew.

HistLit 2019-1-075 / Bruce Gordon über Henrich, Rainer (Hrsg.): *Oswald Myconius. Briefwechsel 1515–1552. Regesten..* Zürich 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult 07.02.2019.