

PREFACE

Cultural Bias and Historiography

The Reuchlin affair, a *cause célèbre* in the sixteenth century, presents an object lesson in cultural diversity. Reading about the radically different interpretations the protagonists put on the same set of events, we break through the 'crust of unity,' the cultural consensus that was once thought to define an era.¹ Until the middle of the twentieth century historians were searching for a coherent, synoptic view and therefore tended to impose on the past a grid of their own making. In neatly packaged presentations, 'The Renaissance' followed upon 'The Middle Ages,' and 'The Reformation' was contrasted with 'The Counter-Reformation.' Such broad categories, still prevalent in textbooks, are useful for organizational purposes, but imply an internal consistency and a cultural uniformity that did not exist. A study of the Reuchlin affair easily dispels such notions and opens a window on the degree of dissent present in sixteenth-century society. The tensions surface in the polemics surrounding the affair. The protagonists agreed on the facts but not on their meaning,² and variously portrayed the controversy as a battle between orthodox Christians and Judaizers, between Catholics and reformers, or between representatives of scholasticism and champions of humanism. The diversity of interpretations reflects the diversity of their cultural assumptions.

Part A of this book tells the story as it unfolded in 1509 when Johann Pfefferkorn, a Jewish convert, approached Emperor Maximilian I with a proposal to confiscate and destroy Jewish books. He argued that they were insulting to the Christian religion and an obstacle to the conversion of the Jews. With the approval of the emperor he set about confiscating books in Frankfurt, but the archbishop of Mainz saw

these activities as an infringement on his jurisdiction and requested that due process be followed. An imperial commission, chaired by the archbishop, was established therefore to reexamine Pfefferkorn's proposals. All members of the commission, with the exception of the jurist Johann Reuchlin, strongly endorsed the initiative. In the end, however, the emperor decided against taking further action. Thus Pfefferkorn's campaign came to an end, but Reuchlin's troubles were just beginning. In his report he had cited Pfefferkorn's writings as examples of ignorant ranting and hatemongering. A polemic ensued in which the two men traded insults. Reuchlin cast doubts on Pfefferkorn's motives and deplored his lack of education; Pfefferkorn in turn accused his opponent of Judaizing. In the report, Reuchlin had insisted moreover that a knowledge of Hebrew was necessary for the correct interpretation of the Bible. Attempts to do so without language skills, he said, had caused theologians to commit ridiculous errors. These remarks were offensive to Reuchlin's fellow commissioners, most of whom did not know Hebrew and did not like having their authority questioned. The conflict therefore widened. In 1513 the regional inquisitor, Jacob Hoogstraten, a member of the imperial commission and, as it happened, also of the faculty of theology at Cologne, cited Reuchlin before his court on charges of Judaizing. Reuchlin, however, appealed the citation and obtained a change of venue. The case was moved to the episcopal court of Speyer.

The initial campaign against Jewish books, the ensuing polemic, and the proceedings against Reuchlin were depicted by Pfefferkorn and his supporters as a campaign against Jews and Judaizers. In their writings, the Reuchlin affair took on the character of a crusade. Reuchlin rejected this interpretation of events and supplied an interpretation of his own, intimating that another issue was at stake: the preservation or destruction of historical sources. In Reuchlin's eyes this pitted scholars, who respected books as cultural witnesses, against boors, who had no appreciation for them, or more specifically, it pitted Reuchlin the humanist against Pfefferkorn and his supporters, the scholastic theologians of Cologne.

Confrontations between theologians and representatives of other disciplines, loosely styled 'humanists,' were endemic to German universities in Reuchlin's time. The meaning of the term 'humanist' had undergone considerable modification in Reuchlin's lifetime, changing from a professional designation to a cultural affiliation. In fifteenth-century Italy, a *humanista* was a teacher of the humanities; in sixteenth-century Germany, the term was no longer limited to any

particular profession or discipline. It applied to anyone who admired and emulated the artistic and literary standards of classical antiquity. In the context of university studies, being a humanist meant promoting the study of ancient languages over Aristotelian logic, the traditional core subject, and privileging rhetorical and philological methods over scholastic dialectic. In the debate over the merits of the two systems at German universities, the protagonists soon developed a typology of the enemy. Scholastics referred to humanists as 'poets' fretting over words and endorsing semi-pagan ideas. Humanists, in turn, called the scholastics 'sophists' and characterized them as obscurantists who spoke atrocious Latin and as solipsists who had no respect for other disciplines.

Reuchlin perceived his case as the latest instance in a long series of confrontations between humanists and theologians. In fact, he saw his case as paradigmatic. As soon as the scholastic theologians were done with him, he wrote, they would 'gag all poets, one after another.'³ Reuchlin's interpretation was readily embraced by other humanists, who rallied around him and began a letter-writing campaign to mobilize public opinion against the theologians. In 1514 Reuchlin published a selection of these letters under the title *Letters of Famous Men*. At the same time the court case was going forward at Speyer, ending in his acquittal in March 1514. The inquisitor, however, immediately appealed the verdict to the papal court in Rome, where it languished for the next six years. In 1515 another collection of letters was published, entitled *Letters of Obscure Men*. It appeared to be a scholastic response to the *Letters of Famous Men*, but on closer inspection turned out to be a satire on scholastic theology. The letters were fictitious; the authors remained anonymous.⁴ They frequently referred to the anti-Judaic angle put on the Reuchlin affair, but only to ridicule the Cologne theologians and point out the irony inherent in the fact that they supported Pfefferkorn, an ethnic Jew, while manifesting a paranoid fear of all things Jewish. The authors clearly did not believe that the Reuchlin affair was a case of anti-Judaism. In their view, scholarship, not orthodoxy, was the issue. The majority of letters accordingly dealt with academic concerns: examination standards, course contents, ranking of disciplines, the enmity of the theologians toward humanists, their fear of losing students and of suffering a loss of prestige and income.

The *Letters of Obscure Men* played an important role in shifting the emphasis in the polemic from the theological to the academic sphere, from the construct that made the Reuchlin affair a case of anti-Judaism to a second construct that made it an example of the

humanist-scholastic debate. The authors made a concerted effort to establish a pattern of confrontation between humanists and scholastic theologians. Many of the letters therefore contained lists of names and cases suggesting that there was a continuous history of confrontation from the fifteenth century to their own time, culminating in polemics involving contemporaries like Willibald Pirckheimer, Desiderius Erasmus, Ulrich von Hutten, and Reuchlin. Readers who perused the book when it was published no doubt identified the men listed as 'humanists.' A few years later, however, many of the men named there had, rightly or wrongly, become associated in the public mind with the Reformation. Those who read the satire in the 1520s, after Luther's rise to prominence and his condemnation by church and state, could easily conclude therefore that humanists and reformers shared a common platform and that Reuchlin and Luther were victims of the same party. Thus the *Letters of Obscure Men* served not only as a means of shifting the interpretation of the Reuchlin affair from the idea that it was a case of anti-Judaism to the idea that it was a confrontation between humanists and scholastics, but also pointed readers in the direction of a third construct: that the Reuchlin affair had much in common with the Luther affair. Luther's own writings prepared the way for this retro-interpretation of Reuchlin's case as a pre-Reformation controversy. He explicitly linked his own case to Reuchlin's. The Cologne theologians, he said, were smarting from the defeat they had suffered in their battle against Reuchlin. To save face and regain their old standing, they started agitating against Luther. Shortly afterwards, in May 1520, the papal court rendered the final verdict in the Reuchlin case: the acquittal was overturned, and Reuchlin was obliged to pay the court costs. His scholarly reputation remained unimpaired, however. He accepted a position at the University of Tübingen, where he taught Greek and Hebrew until his death two years later, in 1522.

In the following chapters (1–3), the three interpretations of the Reuchlin affair current in the sixteenth century will be examined in more detail. Chapter 1 will give an account of Pfefferkorn's life and works and discuss the anti-Judaic facets of the case. Chapter 2 will focus on the arguments of Reuchlin and his supporters and discuss the case under the heading of the humanist-scholastic debate. Chapter 3 will examine the events that led to a reinterpretation of the Reuchlin affair as a pre-Reformation controversy. The question whether these sixteenth-century interpretations reflected spontaneous judgments and genuine convictions or were purposely constructed and

used for strategic purposes is the subject of chapter 4. The concluding chapter 5 will examine the place of the Reuchlin affair in modern historiography.

In the 1970s Golo Mann observed: 'Historiography has become modest; it no longer searches for the great meaning.'⁵ He attributed the reduced scope of historical inquiry to epistemological doubts and the realization that the quest for a value-free account of past events was a pipe dream. As it became accepted wisdom that every age imposes its own cultural assumptions on the sources, historians fell back on documentary realism and microhistory, approaching the study of culture 'through single, seemingly insignificant, signs, rather than through the application of laws derived from repeatable and quantifiable observations.'⁶ Microhistory of course presents its own difficulties. The topical, and therefore apparently more manageable, choice of a microcosm over a complex universe does not allow us to achieve closure or approach new levels of accuracy that were elusive on a larger scale. The problem of writing about discourse without participating in it remains unresolved, but this book seeks to provide an antidote to the subjectivity inherent in any mediating narrative by supplying the texts on which the narrative is based.⁷ At the very least, this allows readers to evaluate the account given here and to balance the author's aesthetic and moral ground with their own.⁸

Part B supplies extracts from source texts that shed light on the affair: two pamphlets by Pfefferkorn, one full of virulent, anti-semitic rhetoric (*The Enemy of the Jews*), the other containing surprisingly authentic descriptions of Jewish rites (*The Confession of the Jews*); two tracts by Reuchlin, one containing his report to the imperial commission, the other his *Defence Against the Cologne Slanderers*; a selection from the *Letters of Obscure Men*; and an assortment of epistolary exchanges and official judgments that illustrate the opinions of faculties of theology at German universities and of well-known humanists and reformers such as Erasmus, Pirckheimer, Hutten, and Luther. Many of the texts are not available in critical modern editions and have been translated into English here for the first time. Headnotes to individual sources will provide the necessary background information.

Notes

- 1 C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, 1980), 20, uses the expression 'breaking the crust of religious unity.'

- 2 The most recent study is Hans Peterse, *Jacobus Hoogstraeten gegen Johannes Reuchlin: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Antijudaismus im 16. Jahrhundert* (Mainz, 1995). English readers will find a good account and discussion of the Reuchlin affair in James Overfield, *Humanism and Scholasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Princeton, 1984), 247–97. The classic account is L. Geiger's biography of Reuchlin, *Reuchlin: Sein Leben und seine Werke* (Leipzig, 1871; repr. Nieuwkoop 1964). These and other accounts of the Reuchlin affair are discussed in more detail below, 36–40.
- 3 G. Friedlaender, ed., *Beiträge zur Reformationgeschichte: Sammlung ungedruckter Briefe des Reuchlin, Beza und Bullinger* (Berlin, 1837), 47
- 4 *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* (1515); see excerpts below, 109–27. The principal authors of this collaborative work were Crotus Rubeanus and Ulrich von Hutten.
- 5 *Propyläen Weltgeschichte: Eine Universalgeschichte* (Frankfurt, 1976), XI–2: 522.
- 6 E. Muir, 'Introduction: Observing Trifles,' in E. Muir and G. Ruggiero, eds., *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, 1991), xxi.
- 7 Cf. G. Levi, 'On Microhistory,' in P. Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, 1991), 106.
- 8 Hayden White declared that historical interpretations rest on 'aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological ground' in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London, 1973), 427.