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THE REFORMATION AS REVIVAL: THE HISTORICAL VISION OF JEAN HENRI MERLE D'AUBIGNÉ

by
Mark Sidwell[1]

In the 1850s, Swiss historian Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné was showing a French pastor the sights of Geneva. Coming to the building where he and other divinity students had met with Scottish preacher Robert Haldane in a series of Bible studies, Merle pointed to the apartments and said, "There is the cradle of the second Reformation of Geneva."[2] That Merle should commemorate the location where he commenced his evangelical Christian experience is not surprising, but why did he refer to the revival of his youth as "the *second Reformation* of Geneva"? An examination of Merle's writing shows that this description was not simply a literary flourish but is in fact bound up in his view of the Reformation and of history in general.

Merle's Background

Merle was born in 1794 in Geneva to a leading commercial family of Huguenot descent.[3] Encouraged by his widowed mother, he entered

[1]Dr. Sidwell serves as Professor, Division of History, Government, and Social Science, Bob Jones University. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Bob Jones University Theological Research Symposium, October 20, 2020. The author would like to thank Dr. John Matzko for reading this work and offering numerous helpful comments.

[2] *"Voilà le berceau de la seconde reformation de Gèneve,"* Alexander Haldane, *The Lives of Robert and James Haldane* (repr. of 1853 ed.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 429. The biography identifies this occasion only as occurring "not many weeks ago."

[3]On Merle, the best source, both as biography and analysis of his career, is John B. Roney, *The Inside of History: Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné and Romantic Historiography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996). See also his essay "Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné" in *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, ed. Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 167–89. Also helpful are a memoir by Merle's daughter, Blanche Biéler, *Un Fils du refuge: Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné, ses origins, sa vie, son oeuvre* (Geneva: Editions Labor, 1934), and Jules Bonnet, *Notice sur la vie et les écrits de M. Merle d'Aubigné* (Paris: Grassart, 1874). As Merle himself explained, his name was properly "Merle" or "Merle d'Aubigné," not just "d'Aubigné." His grandfather added "d'Aubigné," the name of a leading Huguenot family, to keep it from dying out (J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *The Protector: A Vindication* [repr. of 1847 ed.; Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1983], vi).

the theological school in Geneva less because of religious interest than in hopes of avoiding military service in the Napoleonic era. During his studies, Merle was one of several divinity students who met in Bible studies with visiting Scottish evangelical Robert Haldane in 1816–17, a formative event in the *Réveil* (awakening) that affected Europe in the early nineteenth century. The Scottish minister impressed the students by his ready grasp of Scripture, particularly when he would point out answers to their questions directly from the Bible, saying, "*Look here—how readest thou?* There it stands written with the finger of God."[4] Merle recalled how he heard Haldane reading from Romans "about the natural corruption of man,—a doctrine of which I had never before heard." He said to Haldane, "Now I see that doctrine in the Bible." Haldane replied, "Yes, but do you see it in your heart?" Merle said that the question "came home to my conscience" and "was the sword of the Spirit" that showed him "that I can be saved by grace alone."[5]

One should note that a key element in Merle's conversion was his reliance on Scripture, because his Bible-centered viewpoint and appeal to doctrinal truths influenced not only his Christian life but also his writing of history. "I had been seized by the Word of God," Merle recalled. "I had believed in the divinity of the Saviour, in original sin, the power of which I had experienced in my own heart, and in justification by faith. I had experienced the joys of the new birth."[6] He compared his situation with that of Edward Pusey, later one of the founders of the Oxford movement, who studied in Germany at roughly the same time that Merle did. Merle contrasted his own deliverance from rationalism with the path of Pusey. "Dr. Pusey, I presume, made his escape through tradition; while I, as has been seen, was saved by the Word of God. The weaker of the two found the stronger support."[7]

Development of Merle's Approach to History

After his conversion and completing his studies at Geneva, Merle was ordained. He then went to Germany, where he did further study and later served as minister to a French-speaking congregation. He arrived in Germany in 1817, the tricentenary of the Reformation, and

[4]These events are reported in an account by Frederic Monod, one of the participants, reproduced in Haldane, *Lives of Robert and James Haldane*, 430.

[5]Haldane, *Lives of Robert and James Haldane*, 431.

[6]Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné, *Germany, England, and Scotland Or, Recollections of a Swiss Minister* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1848), 11; hereafter cited as *Recollections*.

[7]*Recollections*, 17. Despite his appeal to objective truth in Scripture, Merle did encounter subjective doubts about his faith early in his Christian life. He reported that such doubts were settled shortly after he finished his studies when he met with former classmates Frederic Monod and Charles Rieu for a trip to Copenhagen. With them he studied Paul's epistle to the Ephesians and found assurance through Ephesians 3:20–21, especially the words that God works "exceeding abundantly" above what Christians ask or think (Merle, *Recollections*, 12–15).

this commemoration captured his attention. A festival for the Reformation found Merle at Wartburg, the place where Luther had remained hidden after the Diet of Worms and where he had translated the New Testament into German. In contrast to the Germans around him, who celebrated the Reformation as a political deliverance, Merle focused on the religious importance, and an idea seized him. In November he wrote in his journal, "I should like to write a history of the Reformation," and he outlined, rather prophetically, the procedure he would follow (see Appendix A.)[8] But before he would ever begin writing, Merle's studies at Leipzig and Berlin prepared him to become a historian.

Merle d'Aubigné entered the field of history during an era of transition in the field. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, history was still more a literary field, the realm of gentleman scholars such as Edward Gibbon with his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* The discipline began to change, however, with a new stress on professionalism and more systematic methods of research and documentation. History allegedly became more of a science. Living in the midst of this shift, Merle embodied elements of both the older and newer approaches. Through his studies in Germany, Roney notes, Merle picked up two key ideas. From theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, Merle came to see the importance of inner religious development. From historian August Neander he learned the importance of individuals and using their biographies to represent their era.[9]

Neander clearly had the greatest impact on Merle of all his teachers, despite his liberal doctrinal views. Merle's daughter wrote, "One could not talk with Neander about inspiration nor eternal punishment but one could listen to him perfectly on church history."[10] Merle, calling Neander "a writer, from whom the author differs on important points, but whose name is dear to all who know the simple beauty of his character," said that in 1818 Neander was the first to urge him to write on the Reformation.[11] He called Neander "the father of the new history of Christianity" (a concept discussed below),[12] crediting Neander with finding a "living Christianity" in all ages, a concept that

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[8]On Merle's experiences in Germany, see Merle, *Recollections*, 11–15, 24–26.

[9]Roney, *Inside of History*, 51.

[10]Biéler, *Un Fils du refuge*, 100–101.

[11]J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in the Time of Calvin*, trans. Henry White and William L. R. Cates (repr. of 1880 ed.; Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2000), 1:xi; hereafter cited as *Calvin.* Quotations from Merle's two major histories of the Reformation are from the reprint editions issued by Sprinkle Publications, who bound two volumes in one, but citations refer to the original volume numbers.

[12]J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, "The Study of the History Christianity, and Its Usefulness in the Present Day," in *Classic Reformed Discourses and Essays* (repr. of 1846 ed.; Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Books, 2005), 172–73.

resonated with the evangelicalism in Merle's makeup.[13]

Merle declared his own independence from the various schools of historiography of his day, not seeing himself as an advocate of a particular approach. "Neither the philosophy of the eighteenth century or the romanticism of the nineteenth century will guide my judgment or supply my colors."[14] Merle clearly rejected the rationalistic approach of the Enlightenment, which he identified with the theological rationalism he opposed.[15] However, his self-distancing from Romanticism, while no doubt sincere, is harder to defend.

One way in which Merle reflected the Romantic historiography of his era was his apparent acknowledgement of the "Great Men" view of history associated with Scotsman Thomas Carlyle. In a series of lectures delivered in the 1830s and published as *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History,* Carlyle asserted that "the History of the World…was the Biography of Great Men."[16] For Carlyle "the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here."[17] He even coined the term "Heroarchy," or "Government of Heroes," to describe the impact of his assemblage of mythological figures, prophets, priests, poets, writers, and kings who qualified as "heroes."[18]

Merle showed a debt to Carlyle and the Great Men approach. It was Carlyle's publication of *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* that motivated Merle to write a historical apology for Cromwell, one of his few book-length histories apart from his works on the Reformation.[19] Roney argues that Merle saw reformers as "heroes" in the sense of Carlyle or Schleiermacher as outstanding representatives of their times.[20] But if so, Merle differed in ascribing divine power as the source of the greatness of his heroes. He admitted that "the tendencies of an epoch are generally personified in some man whom it produces, but who soon overrules these tendencies and leads them to the goal which they could not otherwise have reached," a sentence Carlyle could have written. Merle was willing to identify the reformers as "great men, at once the

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[13]Merle, *Recollections*, 30.

[14]J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Henry White (repr. of 1875 ed.; Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2001–2003), 1:32; hereafter cited as *Sixteenth Century*.

[15]Merle indicates his attitude toward humanly based authority in that he rejected traditionalism as "a species of rationalism" that differed only in using human reason from the past (Merle, "Geneva and Oxford," in *Reformed Discourses*, 183–84).

[16]Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (repr.; New York: Macmillan, 1911), 18.

[17]Ibid., 1.

[18]Ibid., 15–16.

[19]Merle, *The Protector*, v.

[20]Roney, *Inside of History*, 163.

children and the masters of their age." The difference, however, was that "the heroes of the world make the forces of their epoch the pedestal of their own greatness," but the heroes of God aimed for "the greatness of their Master."[21]

Representing Merle's debt to the growing "scientific" approach to history was his appreciation for German historian Leopold von Ranke, the great pioneer of the new scientific history. Ranke emphasized that the historian must seek objectivity in his work, that by comprehensive, intense dedication to studying primary sources, the historian could write "history as it actually happened" (*"Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist"*). One might question how well Merle embodied the focus on objectivity, but he was a zealous proponent of primary sources, scouring archives across Europe for materials (see Appendix B.) Roney says Merle did not quote much secondary literature, but when he did he most often cited Ranke.[22] A Scottish publisher invited Merle to provide an introduction to the German writer's history of the popes. Most of Merle's comments dealt not with Ranke but with the history of the papacy. However, he prefaced his comments by calling Ranke "one of the greatest of modern historians" who provided a "narrative…full of life and interest" and who was "conscientious and profound" in his research.[23] He praised Ranke's impartiality but wondered whether he carried it too far, as shown by how some strongly pro-Catholic writers endorsed him.[24] "To write the history of the popes as I would the history of the kings of France or England, is what would seem to me to be an impossibility," said Merle, because the pope "usurps the rights of Jesus Christ, and who at the same time tramples on the rights of the Church."[25] Although Merle thought of himself as objective, as will be seen, more dominant was a devotion to what he saw as a transcendent truth in God's Word.

Despite such reservations, the goal and method of Ranke's school

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[21]Merle, *Calvin*, 1:381. Cf. also the following: "Shall we not recognize the hand of God in those grand manifestations, those great men, those mighty nations, which arise, and start as it were from the dust of the earth, and communicate a fresh impulse, a new form and destiny to the human race? Shall we not acknowledge him [God] in those heroes who spring from society at appointed epochs—who display a strength and activity beyond the ordinary limits of humanity, and around whom, as around a superior and mysterious power, nations and individuals unhesitatingly gather?" (Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:22).

[22]Roney, "Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné," in *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, 170.

[23]J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, "Introductory Essay" to Leopold von Ranke, *A History of the Papacy, Political and Ecclesiastical, in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1863), ix–x.

[24]Ibid., xi.

[25]Ibid., xiii. Merle's son-in-law, Adolphe Duchemin, also related a story "not without some reserve" in which Merle and Ranke met, with Merle defending "the lives of his favorite heroes" while Ranke pointed out their flaws ("Editor's Preface," *Calvin*, 7:vi).

appear in Merle's description of his own approach. "The work of the historian is neither a work of the imagination, like that of the poet," wrote Merle, "nor a mere conversation about times gone by, as some writers of our day appear to imagine. History is a faithful description of past events; and when the historian can relate them by making use of the language of those who took part in them, he is more certain of describing them just as they were."[26]

Merle's Historical Work

After his study and ministry in Germany, Merle went to Brussels to serve a French-speaking congregation (1823–31). He also served as a court preacher to the king of the Netherlands. However, with the revolution in Belgium in 1830, Merle returned to Geneva. There he joined the Société évangélique de Genève, which eventually became the nucleus of an independent free church. He also became professor of church history in the new seminary the Société founded. In this new role Merle began his work on the Reformation in 1831–32 with a series of public lectures on that topic.[27]

Although spending the rest of his career as a teacher, and soon emerging as an internationally known writer, Merle also functioned as what Roney calls an "Evangelical diplomat" for his travels and involvement with interdenominational causes.[28] He traveled to international conferences and supported organizations such as the Evangelical Alliance that defended orthodox Protestant evangelicalism and supported evangelical cooperation.[29] Merle urged fellow evangelicals to "remember that there are in reality but two nations on the earth—the believers and the unbelievers; and let us not allow trifles to separate those who have alike received into their hearts the living faith of the children of God."[30] This dual devotion to Protestant evangelicalism and evangelical unity expressed itself throughout his writings.[31]

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[26]Merle, *Calvin*, 1:xv.

[27]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:31.

[28]Roney, *Inside of History*, 6.

[29]In 1862 Merle visited London to speak at the Royal Chapel at the invitation of the bishop of London. While there he also visited C. H. Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle for the purpose, as Spurgeon put it, "publicly to shew his hearty fellowship with his brethren of the Free Churches of England." Spurgeon shortened his sermon to allow Merle to offer some remarks. See "An Exhortation by Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, and Salutation by Rev. Merle D'Aubigné of Geneva," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (repr.; Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1969), 8:286–88.

[30]Merle, *Recollections*, 41.

[31]Merle dated the movement for evangelical cooperation in his era from the founding of the London Missionary Society in 1795 (Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:7). The Baptist Missionary Society that sent William Carey to India had been founded in 1792, but the interdenominational nature of the London Society (led by Congregationalists but including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists among its supporters) likely caused Merle to view its founding as a more significant marker in the history of

In 1835, shortly after beginning his teaching career, Merle finished the first volume of his proposed history of the Reformation. Public reception surprised him. By the time he was putting out the fourth volume, he noted that sales of the previous volumes were only 4,000 in France but between 150,000 and 200,000 in English-speaking countries. As a result, he began with volume 4 to publish his books first in Britain instead of France or Switzerland.[32] Roney estimates that some seventy percent of Merle's readership was in English-speaking countries.[33]

We see the appeal of Merle in the fact that his work has been almost constantly in print since its initial publication. Furthermore, the reprinting has taken different forms in addition to publishing the whole of his thirteen volumes on the Reformation. Publishers often excerpted his large body of writing into more manageable, although not necessarily short, editions. Banner of Truth, for example, compiled Merle's sections on England into a continuous narrative of the English Reformation.[34] Even more common has been culling of his work into individual biographies, notably of Martin Luther.[35]

Undoubtedly, Merle's evangelical orthodoxy and fervor appealed to an international Christian audience. Roney notes how Merle saw history "as a universal lesson, one which demonstrated the need for Christianity at all times," an approach that sometimes gave his work "the qualities of a sermon."[36] Burnishing such devotional appeal, however, was a stylistic attraction. Merle clearly kept the general reader in mind as he wrote. For example, despite his considerable use of primary documents, Merle decided against extensive citation of sources, because he feared "they would prove a disagreeable interrupt to my readers."[37] Furthermore, his writing fits the cliché "it reads like a novel" as he sought to inject life and color into his work. "When an historian comes across a speech of one of the actors in the great drama of human affairs,"

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evangelical unity.

[32]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 4:iii

[33]Roney, *Inside of History*, 7.

[34]J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *The Reformation in England*, ed. S. M. Houghton (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977).

[35]An example of a long-popular edition is Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, trans. H. White (Chicago: Moody Press, 1950). I have myself also edited two such volumes: *The Triumph of Truth: A Life of Martin Luther* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1996) and *For God and His People: Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss Reformation* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2000). Another interesting example is the gathering of short accounts from Merle, arranged on the pattern of John Foxe's book of martyrs, *D'Aubigné's* [sic] *Martyrs of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1882), repr. as recently as 2018. Roney lists many of these abridgments and several others (*Inside of History*, 200).

[36]Roney, *Inside of History*, 141.

[37]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:32.

Merle wrote, "he ought to lay hold of it, as if it were a pearl, and weave it into his tapestry, in order to relieve the duller colors and give more solidity and brilliancy."[38]

The popular appeal of Merle's work likely also lay in the sense of drama woven into his narrative. For example, consider the following exchange between Martin Luther and papal legate Cardinal Thomas Cajetan (commonly called Tommaso De Vio). When the legate cited a papal constitution in favor of indulgences, Luther replied,

> "I cannot receive such constitutions as sufficient proofs on matters so important. For they pervert the Holy Scriptures, and never quote to the purpose."
> DE VIO.—"The pope has power and authority over all things."
> LUTHER, *quickly.*—"Except Scripture!"
> DE VIO, *sneering.*—"Except Scripture!… Do you not know that the pope is above Councils; he has recently condemned and punished the Council of Basle."
> LUTHER.—"The university of Paris appealed from this sentence."
> DE VIO.—"These Parisian gentlemen will receive their desserts."[39]

A reader needs only stage directions to make the narrative into a scene from a play, but Merle saw no tension between drama and history: "True history, no doubt, possesses coloring and life; but it describes such events only as are founded on the firm basis of truth."[40]

Merle's Approach to History

As important as drama and color were to Merle's appeal, there were also religious themes and a theological framework that attracted evangelical readers in particular. The best place to start with Merle's approach to history is where he placed the emphasis himself. At the beginning of his work on the Reformation, he wrote, "These volumes…lay down in the chief and foremost place this simple and pregnant principle: GOD IN HISTORY." As he explained, "History should live by that life which belongs to it, and that life is God. In history, God should be acknowledged and proclaimed. The history of the world should be set forth as the annals of the government of the Sovereign King."[41] The phrase "God in history," however, requires further explanation, for one could apply it many ways theologically and historically. The incarnation would be an example, as Merle himself argued.[42]

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[38]Merle, *Calvin*, 1:xvi.

[39]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:382.

[40]Merle, *Calvin*, 5:ix.

[41]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:21.

[42]See Merle, "Emmanuel" in *Reformed Discourses*, 9–21.

In the overall approach of Merle's history, "God in history" presents God as spiritually *active* and *evident.* Merle, for example, saw a twofold explanation for the Reformation—the action of God to initiate change but also the secondary causes that prepared humanity for the change. The historian, Merle said, must address both.[43]

Nowhere is God more evident in history than through his salvific work in the lives of individuals. Here is where he saw Neander's new departure in history—in not just the biography of a life but in biography of the interior of a life. Merle contrasted the "History of the Church," which is institutional, with the "History of Christianity," which is spiritual and both living and life-giving, "the history of that regenerative influence of Christianity, through which so many individuals and nations have experienced a thorough change in their moral and spiritual condition." His view of the church, which colored his histories, was overtly evangelical: "Christianity is an individual work; the grace of God converts soul by soul.… The Church is but the assembly of all the souls in whom this work is wrought."[44] The mere outward history of the church he labeled "barren."[45]

This consistent working of God throughout history is what joins the Reformation to Merle's own era, the fact that "faith in Christ…is the same in every age."[46] Such a focus on spiritual life shows how Merle could refer to the revival of his own days as a "second Reformation." Furthermore, to reverse the statement, Merle identified the Reformation as a revival, as, for example, "the mighty revival," the church's "great revival in the sixteenth century," and "this great revival."[47] Casting his metaphor more widely Merle referred to Philipp Spener of the Pietist movement as embodying the second Reformation of Germany and the tricentenary of the Reformation as the third.[48] Scotland had both a second Reformation with the Covenanter movement in the seventeenth century and a third in the events leading to the Great Disruption in the nineteenth century.[49]

What united the Reformation and revival was spiritual life. The Reformation "began with *life*," Merle wrote. "Luther felt in his heart, through divine grace, the living influence of Christianity as perhaps no

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[43]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:20–21.

[44]Merle, "Geneva and Oxford," in *Reformed Discourses*, 196. Likewise cf.: "It is not, perhaps, by great battles, but by a thousand struggles of individuals, that the King of Zion will establish his kingdom" (Merle, "The Church Called to Confess Jesus Christ" [*Reformed Discourses*, 146]).

[45]Merle, "Study of the History of Christianity," in *Reformed Discourses*, 157.

[46]Merle, *Recollections*, 111.

[47]Quoted from, respectively, Merle, *Recollections*, 377; "The Church Called to Confess Jesus Christ," in *Reformed Discourses*, 122; and *Sixteenth Century*, 5:x.

[48]Merle, *Recollections*, 24.

[49]Ibid., 292, 423. Roney comments on this usage (*Inside of History*, 170).

doctor of the Church had ever felt it before."[50] Merle could not join those writers who focused on "a literary or political history…. In my opinion the very essence of the Reformation is its doctrine and its inward life."[51] The spiritual took precedence over the political. Of the Reformation in England, surely one of the more politicized branches of the reform, Merle insisted, "History has taught the author that it was essentially a religious transformation, and that we must seek for it in men of faith, and not, as is usually done, solely in the caprices of the prince, the ambition of the nobility, and the servility of the prelates."[52]

Evaluation

Despite (or perhaps because of) his best-selling status as a writer, criticisms of Merle's work emerged during his lifetime. Catholics, of course, severely censured his whole work.[53] Others cited particular problems they found. Philip Schaff, after disparaging a story that Erasmus met John Calvin and Martin Bucer at Basel, then added, "Merle d'Aubigné…however, accepts and embellishes it as if he had been present and heard the colloquy of the three scholars."[54]

More serious was the criticism of what was apparently one of Merle's strengths, his reliance on original sources. Roney cites an example that shows Merle's idea of using primary sources was not always as "primary" as historians might wish.[55] Merle equated quotations from the pen of his subjects with those from "chroniclers."[56] For example, when challenged about his use of a quotation, particularly its description of the inner attitude of a martyr, he simply pointed out where he had gotten this from John Foxe.[57] It apparently never entered Merle's mind to question whether Foxe was accurate.

As the Catholic criticisms indicate, another charge against Merle was his partiality for Protestantism. Merle himself denied this, saying

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[50]Merle, "The Voice of the Church," in *Reformed Discourses*, 244.

[51]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 3:ix.

[52]Ibid., 5:iv.

[53]See, e.g., Martin J. Spalding, *D'Aubigné's* [sic] *History of the Great Reformation in Germany and Switzerland: Reviewed and Refuted*, 2nd ed. (Dublin; Battersby, 1846), for perhaps the most popular Catholic polemic, written by an archbishop. An interesting analysis of Spalding's approach to both Merle and Protestantism is David Schimpf, "Martin Spalding's 'Apocalyptical' Use of History in the Social Setting of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Catholic Community," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 96 (1985): 19–33.

[54]Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1910 repr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 8:327.

[55]Roney, *Inside of History*, 184.

[56]"Whether the speech be met with in the letters or writings of the actor himself, or in those of the chroniclers, is a matter of no importance: he should take it wherever he finds it" (Merle, *Calvin*, 1:xvi).

[57]Ibid., 5:xi.

he wrote "more favorably" of Catholic figures "than the majority of historians have done" and had not attempted "to conceal the faults and errors of the reformers."[58] Yet one does not have to read very far in Merle's work to discern who the heroes and villains are. Merle's son-in-law, Adolphe Duchemin, admitted that Merle showed partiality, in particular for Calvin, but said the partiality was merely reduced "severity" and argued that Merle's close acquaintance with Calvin through his long work with the sources enabled him to better explain what others saw as severe faults. In fact, Duchemin quoted a favorable reviewer as crediting Merle for portraying Calvin "not perhaps as he was on every occasion, but such as he would have wished to be."[59]

The tone of partiality calls into question Merle's objectivity. Again, Merle maintained his objectivity as a historian: "I address this history to those who love to see past events exactly as they occurred, and not by the aid of that magic glass of genius which colours and magnifies, but which sometimes also diminishes and changes them."[60] Yet his own religious views and deep sympathy with the theology of the Protestant reformers precluded what modern historians would regard as historical objectivity. Recall the words quoted earlier in which Merle argued against Ranke that theological concerns precluded writing about the history of the papacy in the same tone as the history of the monarchies of France or England. Duchemin recognized this fact when he wrote, "Do not therefore require him to be what is called an objective historian, and to hold himself coldly aloof from the facts which he recalls to mind. Is not this faith of the sixteenth century, of which he traces the awakening, the struggles, defeats and victories, *his own faith and the life of his own soul?*"[61]

Duchemin's words bring us back to our central point. A driving force in Merle d'Aubigné's approach was his personal sympathy with the faith of the Reformation. Undoubtedly, such a commitment was a root of his partiality. Moreover it colors all his work. The Reformation of the sixteenth century and the *Réveil* of the nineteenth century were expressions not only of the same theological core but also of the work of the same God. Merle saw a consistency in the human condition and human nature that he believed could be answered only by an evangelical application of the gospel, an impulse that united the eras of history in a fundamental way. A proper history furthered the cause of God's kingdom. As he wrote in his journal in 1817, "I should wish that this history should be thoroughly Christian, and calculated to give an impulse to true religion."[62]

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[58]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:31.

[59]"Editor's Preface," *Calvin*, 7:vii–viii, xii.

[60]Merle, *Sixteenth Century*, 1:32.

[61]"Editor's Preface," *Calvin*, 7:xiii. Note also the comments in Roney, *Inside of History*, 50, for how Merle saw parallels in his spiritual experience with that of Luther.

[62]Quoted in [Adolphe Duchemin], "Preface," *Calvin*, 8:vii.

John Roney offers a fair summary of Merle's work as a historian: "Merle attempted to bridge the gap between traditional orthodox interpretations of history and the modern demand for critical and scientific studies of the past."[63] Although an accurate evaluation of his work, we may want to qualify the description of "traditional orthodox interpretations of history." Merle offered something new in his approach by his emphasis on the subjective side of history which made possible the continuity he identified between the Reformation and revival movements. We should also note how he sought to bridge this gap. Evangelical historians since his day have faced the same dilemma, reconciling the expectations of the academy with the strictures of their faith. For Merle d'Aubigné the choice was obvious: what he believed about God trumped all scholarly expectations. Although he might affirm his belief in objectivity, careful research into the sources, and all the other qualities historians insist on as characterizing "good history," Merle subordinated them to the religious purpose he affirmed.

Is Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné a model for evangelical historians? Perhaps he is in the questions he confronted—the role of Providence in history, the basis for historical judgments, and above all the reconciling of faith and scholarship. Perhaps he is not so much in the way he answered these questions in practice. We would like to see a more detached tone of objectivity, for example. However, he made one undeniable—and enviable—contribution. He used his genuine literary skill and fervent Christian devotion to get Christians to read history and to read it avidly. It is probably no exaggeration to say that Merle is partly responsible for keeping the story of the Reformation alive and relevant for modern evangelical Christians.

[63]Roney, *Inside of History*, 188.

Appendix A: Merle's Inspiration for Writing His History

From Merle's journal, November 23, 1817: "I should like to write a history of the Reformation. I should wish this history to be a work of learning, and to set forth facts at present unknown. It should be profound, and should distinctly assign the causes and the results of this great movement; it should be interesting, and should make known the authors of the transformation by means of their letters, their works, and their words; and it should introduce the reader into the bosom of their families and into their closets. Finally I should wish that this history should be thoroughly Christian, and calculated to give an impulse to true religion. I would show by the evidence of facts that the aim of the Reformation was not so much to destroy as to build up—not so much to overthrow that which was in excess, superstition, as to impart that which had ceased to exist, the new life, and holiness, the essence of Christianity, and to revive or rather to create faith. I shall begin to collect materials, and I will dedicate my history to the Protestant churches of France."[64]

Appendix B: Merle's Method of Writing

The author of the preface to the final volume of Merle's work—almost certainly his son-in-law Adolphe Duchemin—described Merle's method of writing.

"First, he would make a summary study of an important period, and rapidly sketch its history; next, he would refer to the original sources, collecting around him all the documents which he could discover, and sometimes making a long journey for the purpose of consulting a manuscript preserved in some library. He would then plunge again into his theme, familiarizing himself thoroughly with its form and its color, so as to make it real and present to his mind, and see it as it were with his own eyes. And, finally, he would rewrite the story, completing and giving life to his narratives, and depicting the scenes for the reader as he had already done for himself. The result of this process was an entirely new work.

"A third and even a fourth recasting was not seldom undertaken before the author was satisfied: so vast and so complex was that spiritual movement which he had undertaken to describe, so numerous and almost inexhaustible were the documents of all kinds which he continued to examine throughout his life."[65]

Also informing Merle's method was the imagination and curiosity of a historian. Merle wrote, "As for me, I delight in going back into past ages, and, as I contemplate what I meet with in the places I visit,

[64]Quoted in [Adolphe Duchemin], "Preface," *Calvin*, 8:vii.

[65]Ibid., 8:ix–x.

to seek out what happened there in times gone by. I inquire into the historical reminiscences. I cannot look upon a field of battle, without marshalling armies upon it; on an ancient house, without bringing back its inhabitants; on a church, without placing in the pulpit the illustrious man who has preached there, and in the nave, the audience he was wont to animate with his words. I cannot pass through a cemetery without calling up its dead."[66]

[66]Merle, *Recollections*, 230.