

The disputation of 1549 and the confession of 1554

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

For about fifteen years the Reformed of Locarno lived in a grey zone. They met privately, read Scripture and Reformed writings, corresponded with Zurich and were tolerated or ignored according to the inclination of the *landfogto*. Two events moved the community out of this grey zone and into the sphere of public law: the disputation held before the bailiff in August 1549 and the written confession of faith that the community sent to Zurich in July 1554. The first exposed the community to the Catholic authorities and cost it its teacher. The second gave it a formal identity as a church that claimed the protection of the Reformed cantons. Both turned a local matter into a question for the twelve sovereigns.

1 The disputation of 5 August 1549

Public disputations were the characteristic procedure of the Swiss Reformation. In Zurich in 1523, in Baden in 1526 and in Bern in 1528, the authorities had invited theologians to debate disputed articles before a civic audience and had then decided which doctrine should be preached.¹ A disputation in a common lordship could not have that effect, since no single canton could change the religion of a bailiwick. It could nevertheless serve to identify dissenters and to fix their positions. On 5 August 1549, in a disputation ordered by the Catholic *landfogto* of Locarno, Beccaria and Duno defended the Reformed positions.² According to Philip Schaff's account, which follows the older Zurich historiography, the debate concerned the authority of the pope, the merit of good works, justification, auricular confession and purgatory. The presiding bailiff Wirz, who knew neither Latin nor Italian, decided in favour of the Catholic party.³

The result for Beccaria was immediate. He was imprisoned in August 1549 after the public dispute, released soon afterwards and left Locarno.⁴ He went to the Mesolcina, the valley of the Moesa that belonged to the Grisons and thus to a federation in which the communes chose their own religion.

There he worked as a teacher and preacher within a day's walk of his former pupils. Duno later wrote an account of the disputation in his *De persecutione adversus Locarnenses*, printed in 1602, which together with the Zurich archives formed the basis of the nineteenth-century history of the community by Ferdinand Meyer.⁵

2 The sources and their limits

Almost everything known about the community comes from its own side. Duno's account of the persecution, printed in 1602, almost half a century after the events, was written by a participant who had every reason to present the Locarnese as steadfast martyrs and their opponents as ignorant or malicious. Ferdinand Meyer's history of 1836, which remains the fullest narrative, was built on manuscript sources in the Zurich archives, from which Meyer printed a list of the members of the community and two lists of those who emigrated to Zurich. It shares the perspective of the city that received the exiles.⁶ The Catholic side of the story, in the archives of the Catholic cantons, of the nunciature and of the diocese of Como, has been studied far less. The recesses of the Diet record the positions of the cantons in the formal language of instructions and decisions, without the arguments that were exchanged in the corridors of Baden. The historical dictionary's warning about Barbara Muralto applies to the episode as a whole: later narratives, shaped by Reformed memory, have coloured the record, so that the facts that can be established with confidence are fewer than the familiar story suggests.⁷ This chapter therefore distinguishes, in its notes, between what the modern reference works confirm and what rests on the older literature alone.

3 Notes

1. Irena Backus, "Disputationen", HLS, version of 23 January 2006, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/017172/2006-01-23/> (Zurich disputations of 29 January and 26 October 1523; Baden disputation at the Diet, 21 May to 8 June 1526, held at the request of the Catholic cantons; Bern disputation, 6 to 26 January 1528). ↩
2. Backus, "Disputationen" (above) ("Der katholische Landvogt von Locarno ordnete eine Disputation an (5. August 1549), auf der Giovanni Beccaria und Taddeo Duno den neuen Glauben vertraten"); Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above). ↩
3. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. VIII: *Modern Christianity. The Swiss Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), § 40, "The Congregation of Locarno", online at Christian

4. Campi, "Beccaria, Giovanni" (above). Schaff (above) states that Beccaria went to Zurich, where he was received by Bullinger. The historical dictionary places his refuge in the Mesolcina, which is followed here. ↩
5. Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above) (account of the disputation in De persecutione adversus Locarnenses, 1602); Ferdinand Meyer, Die evangelische Gemeinde in Locarno, ihre Auswanderung nach Zürich und ihre weitem Schicksale (2 vols, Zurich 1836); Italian translation by Brigitte Schwarz with a preface by Adriano Prosperi, La comunità riformata di Locarno e il suo esilio a Zurigo nel XVI secolo (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2005, Tribunali della fede, Temi e testi 60),
catalogue record at
<https://swisscollections.k8s-001.unibas.ch/Record/991135809969705501>. Two-volume format of the 1836 edition. ↩
6. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol. VIII, § 40 (above) ("Meyer gives a complete list of members from the Archives of Zürich, and two lists of those who emigrated to Zürich, vol. I. 511-515 and 521-525"); Meyer, Die evangelische Gemeinde in Locarno (above). ↩
7. Nicoli, "Muralto, Barbara" (above) (scarcity of contemporary sources; difficulty of distinguishing facts from later narratives). ↩

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