CHAPTER FOUR

PROTESTANT PRINTING DURING THE FRENCH WARS OF RELIGION. THE LYON PRESS OF JEAN SAUGRAIN

Some years ago in remarks to the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, Heiko Oberman made a number of eye-catching observations about the current state of Reformation research. Introducing a session on French Calvinist church-building, Oberman pointed up the importance of recent new research in this field.¹ This new focus of interest suggested to him a fundamental re-orientation in Reformation scholarship. Indeed he was inclined to believe that the main focus of dynamic and innovative work in Reformation studies had now shifted from the first half of the sixteenth century to the second, and from Germany to France.

Such an observation, from one of America’s most distinguished scholars, and a man who had devoted the main part of an illustrious career to exploring the intellectual origins and development of Luther’s movement, was a significant recognition of an important renaissance in studies in the religious history of sixteenth-century France.² For my own research, it represented a second occasion in which our research interests had converged. Our scholarly paths had first crossed with his discovery of the ‘Reformation of the Refugees’ that crucial interlude in the mid-sixteenth century which eased the passage from a stalled Lutheran Reformation to the rise of Calvinism, for this had been the focus of my own doctoral research.³ Now, in a rather different life stage, I too had experienced the pull of France, at much the same time as Professor Oberman issued his call to arms.

For the past five years I have been engaged in the first stages of a full bibliographical survey of religious works published in French

¹ Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, Atlanta, October 1997.
² For a review of some of the most significant recent publications, Andrew Pettegree, ‘Recent Writings on the French Wars of Religion’, Reformation, 4 (1999), pp. 231–250.
during the course of the sixteenth century. The historical questions that lay behind this enterprise were a sense that scholars had not yet provided a satisfactory explanation for the sudden success of the French Calvinist movement in the middle decades of the century, after years in which Protestantism in France had been successfully contained. As the project had progressed, its initial findings have only deepened this initial sense that France offers one of the unsolved mysteries of the Reformation. How does one explain the great surge of enthusiasm for Protestantism in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, so much more perplexing than in Germany a generation before? In Germany one could at least offer structural reasons for receptivity to Luther’s message: a weak constitutional structure, German patriotism, the Protestant appropriation of the book. Yet in France, none of this applied. This was one of the most centralised states in Europe, where the power and prestige of the crown were emphatically placed behind the Catholic Church. In France, to be patriotic was to be Catholic, and evangelical sympathies something alien and foreign: so much so that blameless German travellers risked denunciation as Lutherans more as a result of their nationality than their actions. Furthermore, and this is a crucial point, in France the printed word was never exclusively evangelical property. In the five years since we began a systematic investigation of the sixteenth century religious book in France, it has become clear that French print culture diverged from the German experience in almost every respect. In France, the doctrines and practice of the Old Church found eloquent and effective defenders almost from the first days of the Reformation. For all but a few years in the early 1560s, Catholic authors traded blows with evangelicals on equal terms, book for book.

---

4 For an initial statement, laying out the agenda and parameters of the French Book project see ‘Religious Printing in Sixteenth Century France’, *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society*, 26, 5, 1997, pp. 650–59. I acknowledge with gratitude the courteous assistance of the rare book staff in municipal libraries around France, without whose this work would have been impossible. Special thanks are due to Professor Olivier Christin, of the University of Lyon (II), Mme. Beauvais of the Bibliothèque de l’ Histoire du Protestantisme Française (= BSHPF), Paris, and my colleagues in the St Andrews Sixteenth Century Book project.
