The emergence of Reformed confessions, and later the attempt to harmonize them, must be seen in the context of early modern confessionalization. In the sixteenth century, Zurich and Geneva, as the two centers of the Reformed world, strongly determined the content of the confessions in the European churches which they influenced. Zurich’s most significant contribution was no doubt the Second Helvetic Confession. Originally composed by Heinrich Bullinger, it was received not only in the Reformed regions of the Swiss confederation but was also widely observed and recognized in eastern Europe and in the empire. Zurich was thus not alone in seeing the confession as an outstanding summary of Reformed theology. Wherever the confession received ecclesiastical and/or political approval, it also exercised a socio-disciplinary role in the life of the church and of society in general.

If in Bullinger’s time the church of Zurich rivaled Geneva in its status when it came to theological and ecclesiastical-political concerns, the situation changed abruptly after his death in 1575. Church polity in Zurich—or, more accurately, Zurich’s government and church—largely abandoned its European perspective. The church was determined to fend off the attempt by Queen Elizabeth I of England and Elector Johann Casimir of the Palatinate to create a Protestant league, using the Lutheran Book of Concord and the re-Lutheranization of the Palatinate; the Reformed church shut itself off from efforts undertaken by the Palatine theologians to draw up a Reformed confession that would be accepted by churches throughout Europe.

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2 Andreas Mühling, Heinrich Bullingers europäische Kirchenpolitik (Bern, 2001), 274–78.
In Switzerland there was no sense of an urgent political necessity to place a Reformed counterpart for all of Europe to match the confessional unification that was taking place within Lutheranism. For, Bullinger’s successor as antistes to the Zurich church, Rudolf Gwalther, succeeded in convincing the Genevans of his position. The Swiss did not participate in the Convention of Frankfurt of 1577, which deliberated the theological-political possibility of creating a new, common confession. They looked with utmost skepticism upon such plans, in large part because they feared that the confession’s contents would be watered down or, even worse, depart from the Second Helvetic Confession. The Swiss thought instead that a harmony of the confessions—that is, a compilation of the central Reformed teachings—would suffice as proof of Reformed Orthodoxy to the respective governments.4

The harmonies of confessions which were produced in the following decades may well have seen a wide distribution,5 but with a few exceptions did not obtain official ecclesiastical and political approval either in Switzerland or elsewhere in Europe. The Swiss churches were content with the hope for a consensus on core teachings among the rest of the Reformed churches in Europe. This consensus was to produce harmonies of confessions, but not new confessional symbols as such.6

Independently of the harmonies, however, the original Reformed confessions received further elaboration in numerous European territorial churches, including England, Scotland, Nassau-Dillenburg, Bremen, Hessen-Kassel, Baden, and Palatinate-Zweibrücken, just to name a few. The normative power that these recently updated confessions had in matters of doctrine thus contributed significantly to the establishment of what has become known as Reformed Orthodoxy. Yet, this process also formed the starting point for the polemics that were to break out not only within these regions, but also with the representatives of other churches and territories. The Reformed educational, ecclesiastical, and generally political network can be traced back largely to this process of intense discussion.

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5 See, e.g., the Harmonia Confessionum Fidei of Jean-François Salvard (Geneva, 1581); Gaspar Laurentius’s Catholicus et orthodoxus ecclesiae Consensus (Geneva, 1595); and his Syntagma (Geneva, 1612), as well as the revision from 1654.