ACADEMIC HERESY, THE REUCHLIN AFFAIR, AND THE CONTROL OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN THE EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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Richard A. Muller’s research has highlighted the blending of humanist methodology with Aristotelian philosophy over the later sixteenth century to produce the Protestant orthodoxy that dominated theology faculties through the seventeenth century. The relationship between humanism and scholasticism was not always so cozy, however. Research on German humanism in the early sixteenth century has done much to clarify the issues at stake between humanists and schoolmen, emphasizing the role of personality conflicts as well as questions of theological content and differing methodologies.1 Erika Rummel has also highlighted the importance that scholastic theologians attached to having the proper credentials in order to study the Bible: those who approached Scripture without such credentials were condemned for “putting a sickle to another man’s crop.”2

The argument over whether a doctorate in theology was needed in order to pursue biblical and patristic studies was only one aspect of the larger challenge that humanists posed to the authority of scholastic theologians. Up through the fifteenth century the church had maintained a monopoly on theological discourse, concentrating it in the hands of prelates, theologians and canonists and developing mechanisms to deal with deviant views. With Erasmus at their head, the biblical humanists of the early sixteenth century demanded that they be included among those considered competent to shape theological discourse.

The Reuchlin affair would draw their attention to one of the key mechanisms for controlling theological discourse, the process of academic condemnation. The debate that resulted from the condemnation of Reuchlin’s Augenspiegel fundamentally weakened the procedures used to identify

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and suppress heresy in an academic context, so that when those measures were employed against Luther, they proved ineffective. An understanding of the traditional method of controlling academic discourse and its distortion by the Reuchlin affair thus illuminates one generally unnoticed aspect of the early humanist–scholastic debate that shaped initial reactions to the charges of heresy leveled against Luther’s 95 Theses.

**Academic Condemnation**

The medieval concept of heresy is difficult to pin down. Central to the definition developed by both theologians and canon lawyers was the idea, derived from Augustine and Jerome, that heretics pertinaciously held to new teachings that deviated from the interpretation of Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit. The thirteenth–century theologian Robert Grosseteste was credited with a definition that became standard: “Heresy is a statement chosen by human opinion, contrary to holy Scripture, and pertinaciously defended.” The distinction between simple error and pertinacity was crucial for the discussion of heresy. As Augustine expressed it, one who erred in matters of faith could not be a heretic if he did not defend his error pertinaciously and was willing to be led to the truth. Discussions of heresy within scholastic theology would emphasize the difference between error, which was a defect of the intellect, and pertinacity, which was a defect of the will.

This definition meant that there was a distinction between heretical teaching and heretical individuals. In the thirteenth century the church adopted and elaborated inquisitorial procedures used in Roman criminal law for both the identification of specific heresies, especially academic heresy, and the prosecution of those suspected of holding heretical beliefs. The use of inquisitorial procedure in the prosecution of heretical

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5 In contrast to popular misconceptions, there was no single institutional Inquisition under papal jurisdiction through the medieval period, and there was significant regional