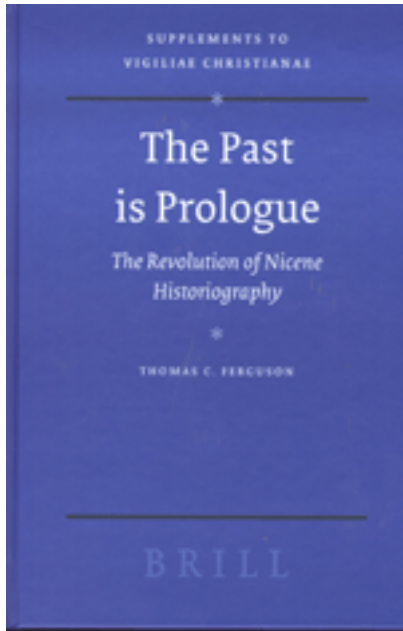


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**Ferguson, Thomas C.**

***The Past Is Prologue: The Revolution of Nicene Historiography***

Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 75

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One of the distinguishing features of modern historical scholarship has been its ability to produce specialized disciplines of study. To paraphrase Charles Frazier, modern scholarship works by paying smaller and smaller attention to detail, which allows us to recover patterns and events and facts that were unavailable to our predecessors. The value of the insights we gain from this method is surely undeniable, but one drawback may be an inability fully to appreciate historical thinkers who do not share our appreciation for specialization. Ancient historians were not historians in our sense of the word, and while we can gain historical data from them, to analyze their thought as though there were modern risks distorting that thought. As Thomas Ferguson suggests in his book *The Past Is Prologue*, this dynamic extends to the ancient Christian historians as well. According to Ferguson, early church historians such as Eusebius, Rufinus, and Philostorgius were theologians first, and whatever history they did was in the service of their theological agenda. To read them otherwise—as though there were historians first—is to miss their primary contribution to the development of early Christian faith and practice.

Ferguson begins his argument by reminding us that the standard categories scholars have traditionally used to describe the Trinitarian controversy, such as “Arian,” are no longer

adequate to account for the full range of theological and political perspectives that gave shape to the controversy. In place of these reductive categories, Ferguson prefers to examine the perspectives of local communities, building on the theory that it is these “local” perspectives that ultimately made up what we now call the Trinitarian controversy. This is where the church historians become so important, in Ferguson’s reading. Their primary purpose was to give a “narrative of community identity,” which means we can trace these communities through their historian. Thus, instead of thinking in terms of “Arians” and “Nicens,” we should think of “Eusebians,” “Lucians,” and so forth.

The first and most important of these fourth century historians is Eusebius Pamphilius. Eusebius is significant not only because he serves as the source and inspiration for nearly all the later fourth and fifth century historians but also because he makes a significant theological contribution of his own. As Ferguson shows, Eusebius devotes the key books in his *Ecclesiastical History* to a defense of Origen. By including otherwise random-seeming details and leaving out events and people who might otherwise seem significant, Eusebius can defend the viability of the Origen school and the legitimacy of Origen’s successors. Eusebius can then use Origen’s exegetical strategies to revise the persecution and recovery of the church under Constantine in Origenistic terms. Thus, for Eusebius, the church “fell” into persecution by its own sinfulness, and it was brought back to its purity by the teaching of Origen and the instrumentality of Constantine. A similar pattern emerges in Eusebius’s treatment of the Arian controversy: the church brought controversy on itself and needed God’s instrument, Constantine, to restore it.

Ferguson turns next to the anonymous non-Nicene author of the *Chronicon Paschale*. The author of this source has long been identified as an “Arian,” but Ferguson finds this identification too vague to be useful. He argues instead that the work reflects the theological concerns of the “Lucianic school,” which Ferguson identifies as the same theological tradition that would eventually include Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Ferguson’s reading of this text is necessarily dense, but he has made a strong case that the author of the *Chronicon* is concerned with venerating Lucian and accounting for Lucian’s followers, not with defending a generic group of “Arians.” As with Eusebius, then, the author of this text used his “history” to defend the theological agenda of his particular school, in this case, that of Lucian of Antioch.

In chapter 4 Ferguson examines the writings of the pro-Nicene theologian Rufinus of Aquileia. Rufinus is not widely treated as a church historian, but in translating Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* Rufinus adjusted it to bring it in line with his own Athanasian agenda. Rufinus belongs to the Origenist school like Eusebius, but he is also a Pro-Nicene, and his own *Ecclesiastical History* attempts to bridge those two schools of thought. To this

end, Rufinus engages in a bold—and bald-faced—exercise in hagiography by turning both Constantine and Athanasius into pious holy men. Rufinus does this at times by distorting the facts, but, as Ferguson suggests, the purpose of Rufinus’s history was to defend his theological agenda, not to provide historical accuracy. This agenda continues in the later books of the *Ecclesiastical History*, where Rufinus paints a picture of the Cappadocians as ascetic holy men in the mold of Origen. In this case, Rufinus is attempting to establish a model of church authority that is centered in the ascetics, which again betrays a theological agenda more than historical accuracy.

Ferguson concludes his work by examining the Eunomian historian Philostorgius. As with the other figures, Philostorgius follows a similar pattern of using history to pursue a theological agenda. Ferguson notes the near absence of scholarly appraisals of Philostorgius, even though the Cappadocian provides the only non-Nicene account of the later stages of the Trinitarian controversy. Ferguson sees Philostorgius, like the anonymous chronicler, as working within the tradition of Lucianic historiography. Philostorgius portrays his hero Eunomius as the heir to the theological legacy of that school. Eunomius’s unique doctrine of God, then, becomes the standard by which Philostorgius examines the entire controversy, with the result that we get a picture of an ideal doctrine of God—and ecclesiastical community—that is at once Lucianic and Eunomian.

I find most of Ferguson’s conclusions about the relationship between the various historians and their schools quite persuasive, but I do have a hesitation about the framework within which he presents these conclusions. In his attempt to break free from the strictures of categories such as “Arian” and “Nicene” and “heretical” and “orthodox,” Ferguson has imposed his own framework that risks being just as restrictive. Thus, for example, Ferguson does not do enough with the recent gains by modern scholars in distinguishing between the various non-Nicene theologies of the mid-fourth century. We know that Homoians were not Arians, which means that we can use the former label without being reductive. By limiting his focus only to the representatives of local communities, Ferguson cannot adequately account for the theological perspectives of church historians such as Hilary, Athanasius, and Epiphanius. These three were all pro-Nicenes, but, as with the non-Nicenes, there is a great deal of variety between them, and an examination of their historical works might shed additional light on these differences. Ferguson’s argument works fine without an extended treatment of these theologians, but a broader scope would have made the book and its argument stronger and ultimately given it wider appeal.

That I want the book to do more, however, is a sign of how good I think it is. By more accurately locating the work of these theologian-historians, Ferguson has made valuable

contribution to the ongoing effort to map more clearly the variety of parties, communities, and theologies that made up the fourth-century controversies. Ferguson has helped us better understand how ancient church history worked, and in the process he has shown us the potential of modern historiography.