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HISTORIANS REVISITED

Lucien Febvre, Ecclesiastical Historian?

by PETER BURKE

Every ecclesiastical historian knows, or, dare I say, should know, Lucien Febvre's incisive and polemical article, 'Une question mal posée', first published in 1929, in which, beginning with a critique of recent work on the origins of the Reformation, the author ended by calling ecclesiastical history into question. The aim of this article is to place this famous article in context by examining Febvre's main contributions to the history of the Church, or as he preferred to say, the history of religion. Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) was a prolific writer and, although he has not been studied as intensively as his junior colleagues Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel, his scholarly work has often been discussed. A bibliography published in 1990 listed 2,143 items either by or about Febvre which had been published up to that time.[1] Since the history of religion was one of Febvre's main interests, it follows that this article will have to be rigorously selective, discussing his major contributions to the field together with a few studies of his achievement.[2]

[1] B. Müller, *Bibliographie des travaux de Lucien Febvre*, Paris 1990.

[2] Some of the most important essays on religious subjects were collected in a posthumous publication, L. Febvre, *Au coeur religieux du 16 siècle*, Paris 1957. Among the studies of his work most relevant to this article are D. Fenlon, 'Encore une question: Lucien Febvre, the Reformation and the School of Annales', *Historical Studies* ix (1974), 65–81; R. Mandrou, 'Lucien Febvre et la réforme', in P. Joutard (ed.), *Historiographie de la réforme*, Paris 1977, 339–51; U. Raulff, 'Der streitbare Prälat: Lucien Febvre (1878–1956)', in L. Febvre, *Das Gewissen des Historikers*, Berlin 1988, 235–51; D. Wootton, 'Lucien Febvre and the problem of unbelief in the early modern period', *Journal of Modern History* lx (1988), 695–730; P. Schöttler, 'Lucien Febvre, die Renaissance und eine schreibende Frau', in L. Febvre, *Margarete von Navarra*, Frankfurt–New York 1998, 347–82.

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In order to give some sense of his intellectual development, Febvre's books and articles on religious history will be discussed in chronological order of publication, before any attempt at an assessment of his reception, cool or warm, or the significance of his work. These books and articles appeared in three clusters, published in 1901–11, 1925–30, and 1941–9 respectively.

I

Febvre began his publishing career with three short studies on ecclesiastical history. The first, a summary of the *mémoire* Febvre wrote for his diploma at the École Normale in 1931, was concerned with 'La Contre-Réforme en Franche-Comté'. The second study approached the Reformation in France-Comté through the biography of an individual, Gilbert Cousin, who was at one time secretary to Erasmus. The third, one of the best-known and, some would say, one of the best of Febvre's articles, was concerned with excommunication for debt in the same region.[3] Febvre's doctoral thesis, *Philippe II et la Franche-Comté*, defended in 1911, was essentially a study of political history, but its third and fourth parts devoted a considerable amount of space to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, while his supplementary thesis examined the religious history of the region in more detail.

Febvre's account of the Reformation gave a relatively conventional interpretation of reform as a response to abuses in the Church. As he put it, in his characteristically vigorous way, 'In Franche-Comté as elsewhere, from the summit to the base of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, there was nothing but abuses, disorder, excess and licence' ('tout n'était qu'abus, désordre, excès et licence').[4] What was more unusual in French history at this time, on the other hand, was to see a professional historian, as opposed to a local antiquarian, approaching the Reformation and Counter-Reformation from a local perspective.

This local perspective was associated with Febvre's concern with the relation between religious movements and other general trends of the time, including the rise of the bourgeoisie. He wanted to write a social history of the Reformation. The parallel between Febvre's studies of Franche-Comté, carried out at the beginning of the century, and those of Geoffrey Dickens on Yorkshire, carried out nearly half a century later, 'saute aux yeux', as the French say. Italian and German historians were more accustomed to view religious changes, like history in general,

[3] L. Febvre, 'Un sécretaire d'Erasme, Gilbert Cousin, et la réforme en Franche-Comté', *Bulletin de la Société pour l'histoire du Protestantisme Français* lvi (1907), 97–179, and 'L'application du Concile de Trente et l'excommunication pour dettes en Franche-Comté, *Revue historique* ciii (1910), 225–47; civ (1910), 225–50.

[4] Idem, *Philippe II et le Franche-Comté*, Paris 1912, 499.

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through local eyes, but in centralised countries such as France and England the local perspective offered fresh insights.

II

Febvre's career, like that of so many of his contemporaries, was interrupted by military service in the First World War, but before 1914 he was already turning away from religion towards other topics, notably historical geography.[5] After the war, much of his abundant energy went into building up the history department in what was effectively the new university of Strasbourg. Only in the early 1920s did he return to the Reformation.

In 1922, reading the literary historian Abel Lefranc's 'strange' introduction to a new edition of *Pantagruel*, presenting Rabelais as an atheist, Febvre was 'shocked', or irritated, into offering his own interpretation of the religion of Rabelais. Planned in 1923, as a letter to his friend Henri Berr reveals, and 'three-quarters done' by 1928, this study was published only in 1942, and will therefore be discussed below.[6] The reason for this delay was that at much the same time, Febvre was working on Erasmus and Luther, on whom he published two articles as well as his better-known book, *Un destin: Martin Luther* (1928), commissioned for a series on Christianity.[7]

It is not difficult to understand the attraction for Febvre of a book on Luther, given the similarities between these forceful and fiery personalities, let alone the fact that Febvre described himself (historiographically speaking) as a 'heretic', yet ended his life as the head of a kind of Church – the Church of *Annales*.[8] All the same, one effect of his acceptance of this commission to write a biography for the general public was to force him to remain longer than he had intended within the framework of ecclesiastical history.[9] This was the very framework which he attempted to demolish in an article of 1929, the famous 'Question mal posée'.[10]

Historians like other intellectuals may be divided not only into hedgehogs and foxes, truffle hunters and parachutists, but also into oysters

[5] The exception to this trend was a brief article announcing themes which its author would only elaborate much later: idem, 'Iconographie et évangélisation chrétienne', *Revue des cours et conférences* (1914), 54–64, 359–69.

[6] Idem, *Le problème de l'incroyance au xvie siècle: la religion de Rabelais*, Paris 1942, 3, and *Lettres à Henri Berr*, ed. J. Pluet and G. Candar, Paris 1997, 155–8.

[7] Idem, 'Erasme', *Revue de synthèse* (1925); 'Erasme et Luther', ibid. (1926); *Un destin. Martin Luther*, Paris 1928; *Lettres*, 225.

[8] Idem, *Lettres*, p. xxiv.

[9] The preface to *Un destin* claimed that the book was not a biography but a discussion of a problem, the problem of the relation between the individual and the group.

[10] L. Febvre, 'Une question mal posée: les origines de la réforme française et le problème des causes de la réforme', *Revue historique* clxi (1929), 1–73.

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and sponges. The sponge – Fernand Braudel is a distinguished example of the species – reads the work of colleagues to soak up useful ideas without worrying too much about their consistency. The oyster, Febvre for example, reads in order to be irritated into originality, needing a grain of sand in order to produce a pearl. Abel Lefranc was one of Febvre's grains of sand. Another was Hubert Denifle, whose interpretation of Luther was denounced in *Un destin*.[11] A third was Pierre Imbart de La Tour, author of a three-volume work on the origins of the Reformation in France.[12] Febvre expressed his opinions on the first two volumes of Imbart's work in reviews in the *Revue de synthèse historique* in 1906 and 1909, returning to the combat in the 'Question mal posée', but generalising it in order to distinguish a superficial *histoire ecclésiastique* from a more penetrating *histoire religieuse*.[13] The latter approach involved viewing the Reformation as a revolution in religious feeling, 'une révolution profonde du sentiment religieux'. The homology between Febvre's historical reformation and that of Luther (and Erasmus) is worth emphasising. In both cases interiority was stressed at the expense of mere externals.

The suggestion that the bourgeoisie wanted to eliminate the religious middleman links this controversial article with the earlier work on Franche-Comté, but the emphasis on feelings is reminiscent of two historians Febvre admired, Henri Bremond and Johan Huizinga, both of whom had offered a kind of historical psychology of religion.[14] Other examples of religious history of which Febvre approved were those by Augustin Renaudet on the 'pre-Reformation' at Paris and Marcel Bataillon on the Spanish followers of Erasmus.[15]

III

After 1929 Febvre was once again distracted from religious history by other enterprises, including the editing of the *Encyclopédie française*. It was only during the Second World War that he was able to return to his book on Rabelais and a series of parallel studies on religious ideas in early sixteenth-century France, focusing on four individuals in particular: Étienne Dolet, Bonaventure Des Périers, Marguerite de Navarre and François Rabelais. Two of these studies are of particular importance for their approach, the well-known study of Rabelais and the relatively neglected book on Marguerite. The latter, published in 1944, was

[11] H. S. Denifle, *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung*, Mainz 1904–6.

[12] P. Imbart de La Tour, *Les origines de la réforme*, Paris 1905–35.

[13] Febvre was already making this distinction in 1924 in a letter to Berr: *Lettres*, 188.

[14] H. Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux*, praised by Febvre in 'La dévotion en France au 17e siècle', *Revue de synthèse* iii (1932), repr. in *Au coeur*; J. Huizinga, *Herfstij der middeleeuwen*, Haarlem 1919, a book praised by Febvre.

[15] Febvre, *Au coeur*, 82–5, 93–111.

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concerned with the traditional problem of reconciling the devout princess with the author of the *Heptameron*, a collection of stories in the style of Boccaccio. Focusing once more on religious sentiments, drawing once again on Johan Huizinga and also on his favourite psychologists Henri Wallon and Charles Blondel, this essay made explicit what had long been implicit in Febvre's work, the idea of the past as a foreign country, or as he put it, the sense of 'la distance psychologique et morale qui nous sépare de nos arrière-grands-pères'.[16] The Rabelais book is less concerned with religious sentiment and more with mentality or *outillage mental*. It draws more heavily than the study of Marguerite on the ideas of Febvre's old teacher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a philosopher interested in anthropology who formulated the ideas of primitive mentality and 'pre-logical thought'. With the still youthful enthusiasm of Febvre at sixty-four, the author drew attention to 'Lévy-Bruhl's wonderful books' and claimed that 'there is no one who has lived for long among those men of the sixteenth century … who is not struck by everything that evokes the "primitive mentality" which that philosopher has so interestingly reconstructed for us'.[17]

Febvre's analyses of individuals were preparatory studies for something more ambitious. He had promised Henri Berr a two-volume study entitled 'Religions du xvie siècle'. In 1945–6, his lectures at the Collège de France were entitled 'De la Réforme à la Contre-Réforme'.[18] Soon after the war ended, however, Febvre was once again distracted from religious history. He was deeply involved with the reorganisation of the École Pratique des Hautes Études until his death in 1956. So we shall never know how Febvre would have combined his historical psychology with the analysis of the movements and indeed the institutions conventionally known as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, or indeed with the study of religious practice in the style of Gabriel Le Bras, whose work he singled out for praise.[19]

IV

Looking backwards, it is possible to discern three overlapping phases in Febvre's work and thought. The first phase was a local history of religion with a place for social and political factors. In the second phase, Febvre turned away from Franche-Comté and towards a comparative European history, offering a critique of the institutional approach to the history of religion in general and the Reformation in particular. In the final and

[16] Idem, *Amour sacré amour profane: autour de l'Heptameron*, Paris 1944, 241n, cf. 8, 256.
[17] Idem, *Le problemè de l'incroyance*, 473. [18] *Lettres*, 561, 571.
[19] Idem, 'La pratique religieuse et l'histoire de la France', *Mélanges d'histoire sociale* iv (1943), 31–5, and *Annales ESC* i (1946), 350–1, repr. in *Pour une histoire à part entière*, Paris 1962, 834–43.

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more positive phase he elaborated the alternative religious history which he had sketched out earlier. To paraphrase Christopher Hill, he tried to take religious history out of the hands of the churchmen and to make a place for lay views of religion.

Febvre's approach to religion became increasingly distinctive, emphasising mentalities and sentiments rather than doctrines or institutions, open to ideas from other disciplines, notably psychology, sociology and anthropology. Febvre's use of literary and especially of visual sources for the history of religion as well as treatises and archives also deserves to be noted, even if he did not often study iconography.[20] That many aspects of his approach are taken for granted now, in certain locales at least, is a testimony to Febvre's penetration and creativity. Some of his substantive conclusions have also stood the test of time, notably his stress, unusual in the 1920s, on the fluidity of religious ideas 400 years earlier, at a time when neither Catholicism nor Protestantism had congealed. Both at the time and later, however, Febvre's work has provoked resistance as well as eliciting enthusiasm, as a bird's eye view of its reception will reveal.

The posthumous reception of Febvre's contributions to the history of religion has not yet been studied systematically. In France, religious historians of the calibre of Jean Delumeau and Marc Venard might reasonably be described as disciples of Febvre, while Claude Lévi-Strauss cited the study of Rabelais in support of his claim that all good history is 'impregnated with anthropology'.[21] In Italy, one of the leading historians of religion of the mid twentieth century, Delio Cantimori, was an enthusiast for his work, some of which he edited in Italian translation, while Adriano Prosperi, once a student of Cantimori's, has also expressed his appreciation for Febvre. The book on Rabelais appeared in Italian translation in 1978, and the book on Luther in 1982.[22] In Russia, the Rabelais book was criticised by Mikhail Bakhtin, but commended by Aaron Gurevich.[23] In Germany, on the other hand, despite the continuing interest in the Reformation, and the rise of a social history of religion, Febvre seems to have been a relatively recent discovery, encouraged by Ulrich Raulff and Peter Schöttler.

In Britain, Febvre's reception has been somewhat lukewarm or even ambivalent. One of his first disciples in the field of Reformation studies, in his Strasbourg days, was an Englishman, Will Moore, who wrote a thesis on the reception of Luther in France. However, Moore became a

[20] The most famous example, based on images mentioned in inventories, is idem, 'Amiens: de la Renaissance à la Contre-Réforme', *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (1941), 41–54. [21] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris 1958, 31.

[22] D. Cantimori, *Annales ESC* (1960), 556–68; cf. L. Febvre, *Studi su riforma e rinascimento*, ed. D. Cantimori, Turin 1966; *Il problema dell'incredulità nel secolo xvi*, Turin 1978; *Martin Lutero*, Rome–Bari 1982.

[23] M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 1965, English trans. Cambridge, Mass. 1968. A. Gurevich introduced the Italian translation of Febvre's *Rabelais* cited in n. 22 above.

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tutor in French at St John's College, Oxford, and his later publications were concerned with Molière and other literary topics.[24] The study of Martin Luther appeared in English translation as early as 1930, but the initiative for this came from the other side of the Atlantic. In the late 1960s I tried in vain to persuade an English publisher to commission a translation of Febvre's *Rabelais*. More than a decade later, it was Harvard University Press which published a translation.[25]

Of the few studies published in England and devoted to Febvre's work, two are extremely critical. Dermot Fenlon argued that Febvre did not take institutions seriously enough, while David Wootton has claimed that atheism was, after all, possible in the sixteenth century.[26] Geoffrey Dickens did not refer to Febvre's local studies in his *Lollards and Protestants in the diocese of York*, nor did Keith Thomas in *Religion and the decline of magic*. Indeed, in a review of the latter book, John Bossy criticised the author for not taking to heart Febvre's demonstration that 'Christianity was the only totalizing force in the popular experience of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.'[27]

To conclude, Febvre was sometimes carried away by his own rhetoric and made exaggerated criticisms of other scholars. All the same, he struck at genuinely weak points in their work and often achieved palpable hits. His sharp critique of his colleagues was accompanied by a positive programme which gave a prominent place to religious history. This programme too might be criticised in certain of its formulations, the uncritical acceptance of the idea of primitive mentality, for example, but it remains inspiring. Indeed, it may – and surely should – inspire us to go beyond it. For example, to escape from the alternatives of institutions or mentalities by studying how each affected the other.

So was Lucien Febvre an ecclesiastical historian? Perhaps this is another *question mal posée*. All the same, asking such a question has at least one advantage; that of leading us to ask ourselves, 'What is ecclesiastical history?'

[24] W. G. Moore, *La réforme allemande et la littérature française: recherches sur la notoriété de Luther en France*, Strasbourg 1930.

[25] L. Febvre, *The problem of unbelief in the sixteenth century*, Cambridge, Mass. 1982.

[26] Fenlon, 'Encore une question'; Wootton, *Lucien Febvre and the problem of unbelief*. More positive is P. Burke, 'The development of Lucien Febvre', in L. Febvre, *A new kind of history*, ed. P. Burke, London 1973, pp. v–xii.

[27] J. Bossy 'Early modern magic', History lvii (1972), 401.

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