

In Honorem Irena Backus

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In autumn 2009 I had the honor and pleasure of meeting the eminent Genevan Reformation-scholar Irena Backus – at a Berlin conference called “Leibniz und die Ökumene,” held in the west wing of the Schloss Charlottenburg, only a few paces from the heart of the palace (where Leibniz and Queen Sophie-Charlotte had the conversations which eventually led to the *Théodicée*, “the justice of God.”) I was especially delighted to find that Dr. Backus and I share an almost obsessive interest in Leibniz’ great ecumenical treatise from 1698-1704 called *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken* (UB) (“Unprejudiced Thoughts”) on religious reconciliation, which was finally about to be published from the manuscripts (after 300 years!) in the Berlin Academy-Edition (A IV, 7, 2011). She rightly wrote that the UB “is no doubt the most important piece of Leibniz’ religious writing prior to the *Essais de Théodicée* of 1710” (“The Mature Leibniz on Predestination,” *The Leibniz Review* 22 (2012): 67-96; quotation from p. 68).

But she also thought that Leibniz’ sheer philosophical truth-seeking brilliance in the *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken* guaranteed his failure as a compromising, conciliatory ecumenist: and this startling (but inevitable) conclusion is defended in her article cited above. (See also my review of A IV 7 in the 2011 *Leibniz Review*, esp. pp. 124-26.) Leibniz’s “purest rationalism” (as Schrecker put it), which completely transcends the mere “reconciliation of opposing doctrines” or “views” in a conciliatory compromise, which makes all “contrasts” simply “disappear” in a “higher” Platonism, is for Backus precisely the *problem*: and here only her own brilliant words will suffice:

Posing no new theological questions and relying on approved vocabulary, [Leibniz] tried to blend as much as possible with the contextual background while proposing a new, metaphysical solution to the inter-confessional struggles of his era. We note that several of the arguments first used in the UB were subsequently taken up in T[héodicée] in a more overtly philosophical context. However, the very fact that Leibniz argued as a philosopher made his union project unacceptable. What Calvinist, Lutheran and Anglican theologians wanted was mutual toleration and not a union of their respective theological systems under a common metaphysical denominator. To accept Leibniz’s solution would have meant foregoing confessionalisation and so foregoing their

respective identities, painfully acquired since the Reformation. (op. cit., p. 87) Philosophers, in their reasonable concern with “coherence” and “force” of arguments, sometimes fail to notice what Irena Backus always sees so clearly: namely that the North German Protestants in c. 1700 did not *want* to “ascend” to Platonizing universalism, did not *want* quarrels within “Jerusalem” to be mediated by “Athens.” They wanted von-violence, but not “eternal peace.” Leibniz himself, who made up the grim proto-Kantian joke that *Pax Perpetua* is a slogan in a cemetery, would have acknowledged the sheer depth of Irena Backus’ historical and psychological insights. And here we will gratefully follow him in admiring her.

Irena Backus joins a distinguished list of scholars – Schrecker, Grua, Rudolph, the Academy-Edition editors – who have thrown invaluable light on the *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken*. All of them rightly viewed it as Leibniz’s greatest religious work before the *Théodicée*.

Long may she thrive!

[Editor’s note: In 2014 Dr. Backus slipped into a coma, prompting Patrick to write this tribute. Fortunately, she is now slowly recovering.)