CONFESSIONALIZATION IN EARLY MODERN GERMANY: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

DEAN PHILLIP BELL

Introduction to the Problem

Confessionalization is a concept that has been highly charged and much discussed in recent historiography. Whether seen as an important paradigm, a useful tool for periodization, or simply dismissed, the question of confessionalization has clearly and significantly affected how we think about early modern Germany.

Yet little attention has been given to the relation between confessionalization and early modern German Jewry. It is primarily within the context of the impact of the development of the modern state on Jewish communities or, alternately, the development of internal Jewish reform after the Haskalah (or in some recent literature the movement for codification or the false messianism of Shabbatai Sevi) that there has been any connection posited between early modern Jewry and confessionalization.

In what follows I offer a brief review of the paradigm of confessionalization and a look at the problems and implications of the model. I then ask whether there is evidence that early modern German Jewry experienced significant changes that might be usefully associated with the confessionalization paradigm and I illustrate with a few examples.

Confessionalization

Confessionalization has recently been defined as the “consolidation and advancement of the development of the three confessions (Catholic, evangelical, and Reformed Churches) in terms of religious doctrine, relationships with the state and developing religious identities, particularly in Germany but also in other parts of Europe and its empires.”

1 H-German forum launch (Monday, April 4, 2005) http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/Confessionalization/Confess_index.htm, last visited November 18, 2005. For a
According to another interpretation, confessionalization is “The spiritual and organizational solidification of the various Christian confessions diverging since the faith-split to a halfway stable Church according to dogma, constitution and religio-customal life form.” A product of German historiography in the 1970s, the paradigm generally assumes that confessionalization unfolded especially in Germany between the years 1555 and 1648, though some scholars maintain that the confessionalization of the Church followed the process of splintering and differentiation of Western Christianity that began with the Hussites in the later Middle Ages and culminated with the “confessional churches” after the sixteenth-century Reformation.

Despite its apparently simple definition, however, confessionalization has been used in a variety of ways in the scholarly literature. The paradigm raises significant questions of how historians understand the possible breaks between the medieval and the modern. It also forces us to consider broader early modern political developments such as state building, the concept of social discipline, and identity building, and how to compare various religious movements and developments, which despite differing theology, spirituality, and legal-institutional forms shared some general developments. Indeed, confessionalization has become a central category, even an “elemental process,” for distinguishing the early modern period. According to one recent historian,

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4 Johannes Wallmann, “Lutherische Konfessionalisierung—ein Überblick,” in Die lutherische Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland, ed. Hans-Christoph Rublack (Heidelberg, 1992), 33–52, here at 34. The historian Heinz Schilling, for example, has argued that the initiation of confessionalization began in the late 1540s through the 1560s, confrontational confessionalization developed in the 1570s, the high point of confessionalization occurred between the 1580s and the 1620s, and the conclusion of confessionalization took place with the Peace of Westphalia and growing irenicism. Schilling, “Die Konfessionalisierung im Reich,” 11–28.

5 When did it begin and end (how do we understand deconfessionalization, secularization, etc.)?