



Nicole Grochowina. *Indifferenz und Dissens in der Grafschaft Ostfriesland im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 499 S. EUR 74.50 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-39820-3.



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A New Model for Confessionalization?

Nicole Grochowina's University of Hamburg dissertation offers an original conceptualization of the early modern process of constructing territorial confessional identities. She has looked at the relatively young county of East Frisia, a territory in which Lutheran and Reformed confessions developed side-by-side and which was long known (and often criticized by contemporaries) as a haven for religious dissidents, in an attempt to refine the confessionalization model in a way that reconciles several approaches of recent decades to the study of early modern religion. She tries to provide a model that studies—as an integral part of the story, rather than as mere exceptions to the process—those individuals and groups who ignored or resisted territorial pressures toward confession-building. Grochowina's proposed theoretical framework, with its use of the concept *Indifferenz*, unfortunately, fails to live up to its promise and will not, I believe, be broadly useful. Nevertheless, this book provides a truly rich collection of data and examples that enrich our picture of confessionalization and of the difficulties of establishing confessional homogeneity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The process of confessionalization as developed and refined by Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard still tends to emphasize the role of the state and institutional authorities in shaping confessional identity, despite the criticisms and work of scholars such as Henrich Richard Schmidt and Marc Forster, who point out the importance of non-elite and popular impulses for reform. Grochowina begins her book with Anton Schindling's 1997 call to expand the historical concept of confessionalization by looking more closely at individual spirituality and the life of common folk. In this vein, Grochowina has compiled a detailed micro-history of individual experiences during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by investigating those who had various difficulties conforming to the dominant confession. Her focus is upon two phenomena, which she identifies as "indifference" and "dissent," that she hopes can bring the analysis back to the macro-historical level as markers on the complicated path of confessionalization and confession-building.

The book's theoretical framework is heavily influenced by Thomas Luckmann's perspective on the transcendental nature of religion and the manner in which

social and historical context shapes religious expression. Where Luckmann sees a modern move toward a privatization of religious consciousness and of individual existence, Grochowina considers the early modern period as she looks for evidence of the commonplace, daily expression of religious beliefs. This functionalist understanding of religion naturally goes beyond any mere category of confession, and Grochowina describes early modern East Frisians as shopping in Luckmann's "Markt der Sinnstiftungen," picking and choosing the particular religious or confessional features they found most useful in their daily lives.

Attempts to uncover the spirituality of the "common man" are fraught with difficulties, and Grochowina fully acknowledges the methodological problems inherent in such an investigation. Although her model of indifference is not a concept in the contemporary sources, she argues that it captures the religious expression of many who did not "dissent" by taking the more explicit step of rejecting a confessional alternative. Indeed, a central assumption that underlies the concept of indifference is that many early modern East Frisians perceived alternatives in the religious landscape and were perhaps somewhat disinterested in the institutional and theological structures promoted by the authorities. Thus, the model of indifference provided here is a direct consequence of the confessionalization process and could only exist in places where a confessional identity had been created but where there were at the same time religious alternatives across the confessional boundary. The complicated and diverse East Frisian religious situation offers a good test case for this thesis.

Grochowina formulates in this model three major categories of indifference. First were those who belonged (or were sympathetic to, if not congregational members of) the prevailing confession but who were not necessarily concerned with all of the confessional expectations. Certain confessional norms simply did not play a role in their day-to-day life or had little meaning for their individual religiosity. More difficult to identify is the second category of those who remained within the governing confession (and did not, as far as can be ascertained, join with a dissenting group) but intentionally withdrew themselves for an extended time from the communion congregation that was central to confessional identity. Grochowina excludes from this second group individuals who had some specific complaint with the congregation or conflict with another member; instead this category focuses upon those who had created a virtually individual system of meaning for themselves, however difficult

this might be able to determine from the sources. Finally, and most difficult for the historian to uncover with any precision, is the category of those who dissembled in their confessional allegiance: this dissimulated indifference allowed one to participate in the expected rituals and undergo necessary examinations in order to escape notice while maintaining their own, often spiritualistic, religious consciousness.

Going beyond mere indifference into dissent required an individual to take an active step of resistance to the confession. This more traditional category in the literature is, of course, rather easier to define and identify than the far more elusive indifference. Dissent could take the form of continuous dissenting groups with a long-term presence in an East Frisian locality or of more ephemeral groupings that occasionally emerged around a charismatic leader but which dissolved as the leader left the territory. One of the chief benefits of this book's model is that it brings discussion of dissenting groups, particular the *Tufer* in East Frisia, into the story of confessionalization as central players. Certainly many of these dissenting groups demonstrated tendencies, at least on the local level, similar to those of one of the major confessions. Grochowina shows that a more thorough analysis of dissent on this local level will further our understanding of confession building on the broader scale.

One of Grochowina's most important theses is the argument of a high correlation between incidents of indifference and the presence of dissenting groups and refugees. The types of criticisms and issues that Grochowina categorizes as indifference are clearly more prevalent in and around Emden and in the western portion of the territory, at least in the surviving sources and literature. It is these areas of East Frisia that also prove to be home to most of the dissenting groups. Living in close proximity to dissenting groups, refugees, and additional confessions quite likely expanded individuals' acquaintance with (and sometimes affinity toward) ideas and practices that did not fit within the dominant confessional model; it also required religious and political authorities to interact much more frequently with these groups outside the confessional norms.

East Frisia also saw a shift in how the authorities dealt with dissenters over the time frame of this study. In the sixteenth century, religious and political leaders pursued a double strategy of persecution and dialogue. By the seventeenth century, this approach began to shift as offers for dialogue were largely taken off the table and as the political elite began to recognize the economic use-

fulness of the dissenters. There were still sporadic attempts at suppression, but increasingly—first in the commercial center of Emden and then more broadly across the territory—political authorities began the practice of offering protection (*Schutzbrieife*) to dissenting groups in exchange for monetary payments. This economic “toleration” played an important role in the increasing integration of dissenters into society. Grochowina nicely demonstrates here the interplay between shifting political, economic, and confessional interests throughout this period.

Yet in the end, the book never makes it clear what it means to be a proper adherent of a confession. Indeed, while the book’s central argument has inspired a thorough and necessary look into the difficulties and deviations encountered during the attempt to introduce confessional homogeneity, the model of indifference proves ultimately disadvantageous as an analyzing principle. If the categories of indifference are defined tightly and carefully, then the methodological problems and shortcomings of the primary sources make it virtually impossible for the historian to find substantial evidence and documentation of it. If, on the other hand, almost every instance of misunderstanding, compromise, or complaint can be offered as an illustration of indifference—as often seems to be the danger in this book—then the concept becomes so broad that virtually everyone was actually indifferent, including many of the confessional leaders.

An important contemporary question was at what price is peace in the church a worthy goal? What is worth fighting over? Without a clear definition of what a confession is, Grochowina often leaves the impression that if one was not willing to fight, then that person was somehow indifferent. The book seems to imply that the complex correlation of political, economic, personal goals or concerns cannot be part of an equation for a pure religious belief or (though never defined) a confession. By stripping these elements out of the formula for a legitimate belief, our understanding of religious experience is left incomplete.

Strict adherence to the assumptions in this model of indifference is, I fear, a distraction to a thorough analysis of the accumulated evidence. Thus, East Frisian Countess Anna’s disputation with Anabaptists is presented as a sign of her indecision (p. 182); but Emden minister Albert Hardenberg’s later unwillingness to engage the Anabaptists in disputation is also a sign of his indifference (pp.

221-222). On the other hand, the strict Calvinist minister is accepted as such a confessional proponent that his arrival in Emden in 1575 is offered (as an accepted fact without evidence) as a marker for a shift to more intense church discipline; therefore the chapter on “Indifferenz des ‘gemeinen Mannes’ in Emden” is divided at 1575. Yet there is no noticeable difference between the kinds of examples of individual experiences that are provided in the chapter section before 1575 and those in the section after 1575. Moreover, even when the sources are silent, the assumed indifference of the period is offered as an explanation. Therefore, in a fascinating seventeenth-century case when an Emden pastor’s critique of a *Bürgermeister* ultimately carries the day with the city council (with the intervention of Johannes Althusius), the situation is provided here as evidence of indifference: with the council following the church’s position merely out of political expediency (though the sources are silent on this) not confession (pp. 212-213).

Grochowina misses a chance to use this evidence to construct a fully satisfying picture of the complex process of confession building, of what it meant to be a confessional adherent while still having questions or making compromises. Confession and religious orthodoxy are not necessarily the same: varying viewpoints certainly existed from the beginning in the early modern period’s evolving political and confessional systems. The political and religious conditions were frequently in flux, and in this light Grochowina’s study is rich with illustrations that will benefit the reader who looks at the data and considers it beyond the given model, which asks interesting and original questions, but which provides unsatisfactory answers.

What Grochowina gives us, then, is a detailed collection of accounts, case studies, and anecdotes that enhances our growing understanding of religious life in the early modern period. But that leaves the question of the development of a more private or individual spirituality. Our surviving sources do not provide much evidence of that. Despite the shortcomings that I find in the interpretative framework of *Indifferenz*, I nonetheless recommend the accumulated evidence provided by this study as an important addition to the literature on confession-alization. Those of us who study East Frisia will find that Grochowina has thoroughly scoured the early modern sources throughout the territory and provided a valuable resource for further investigations and analysis.

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