



Frauke Volkland. *Konfession und Selbstverständnis: Reformierte Rituale in der gemischtkonfessionellen Kleinstadt Bischofszell im 17. Jahrhundert.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005. 213 S. EUR 39.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-525-35863-4.



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Believers as Agents

This book is a critique of Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard's confessionalization theory. It strives to moderate that theory's categorical and top-down, hierarchical assumptions. Volkland declares at the outset that religious identity derives not from princely or magisterial commands but from a complex of interactions occurring within the strands of circumstance and conviction that form a person's life. She pursues identity (called *Selbstverständnis*, literally "self-understanding") as it is related to religious affiliation. In order to give this enterprise concreteness, she has marshaled the evidence from Bischofszell, a Swiss town in the hinterland, the early modern Thurgau district, of Constance. Constance, that scene of the eponymous council of the early fifteenth century and the burning of Jan Hus, was the seat of a bishop who intensely guarded his interests, including his spiritual sheep, from the "predations" of Reformed outreach. A micro-historical approach is, as Volkland says, indispensable. By contrast, she asserts that existing confessionalization theory has developed at the macro-historical level, expressing a statist and overly general manner of seeing (p. 13). Interaction between the macro-

and the microcosm always occurs, and this commingling has not been adequately taken into account. Further, the dynamism of personal interactions means that human beings continually revise their perspectives as they respond to people, ideas, and events. Self-understanding is never a firm and final achievement; rather, it undergoes continuous revision.

The author draws inspiration above all from Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, and Natalie Zemon Davis, and that is well and good. But it appears that her engagement with most works of ritual theory has stopped with the 1970s and is even then very selective. She attributes the concept of "thick description," analyzing the seeming minutiae of cultural expression within their larger contexts of values and relationships, to Geertz and ignores his express indebtedness to the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Her bibliography indicates that she has not consulted Turner's very creative successors, such as Ronald Grimes and Catherine Bell, both of whom would have proved useful in supporting her ideas. Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), for example, takes up the

manner in which mere participants in rituals appropriate and interpret them; individuals are not simply the objectified internalizers of leaders' indoctrinating messages, in whatever medium these messages are delivered. Language was clearly not a barrier, for Volkland cites English works.

This issue aside, the author wields her chosen instrument of the thick description of ritual acts to shed considerable light on key transactions between Catholic and Calvinist factions in this mixed-confessional community. Bischofszell's territorial matrix, the land of Thurgau, had about 30,000 to 40,000 inhabitants during the period from 1540 to the early eighteenth century. Of these, at most 10 percent were Catholic at the beginning of the period, rising to 25 percent at the end. The Church retained significant governmental rights, but the two *Landfrieden* of 1529 and 1532, Zurich's weighty influence in practice, plus the fact that many of the rich and influential families were Reformed, enabled Swiss Protestants to gain a number of concessions from the bishop. Within this small city, the pragmatic-minded populace managed to live together in service of the common good. Mixed marriage and godparentage crept in. Nonetheless, in their symbolic arsenal members of the two faiths parted company, and in these differences Volkland detects developing self-understanding. She studies this tendency in four contexts.

The annual Hohlensteinfest commemorated the residents' recovery from the disaster of war against Appenzell in 1407. Their town burned down; the Bischofszeller had to resort to living in caves until a year later, when the conflict ended, and they could process at Eastertime to the neighboring village of Sitterdorf to attend the Mass. Every Easter Tuesday afterward, they ritually replicated their resort to Sitterdorf. In the aftermath of the 1529 Reformation, however, remaining Catholics removed their observance to Pentecost. Their ceremony bore the marks of a pilgrimage. Instead of going to Mass in Sitterdorf, the Reformed marched, singing hymns, only as far as a ditch in the suburbs where they had earlier burned ecclesiastical images (p. 65). Then they proceeded to the evangelical schoolhouse, giving thanks for the word of God. The event increasingly featured music. By means of their respective courses, the creeds used the historic ritual to demarcate their differences. Among these, Volkland asserts, were perceptions of urban space and the assignment of importance ("heat" and "cold") to contrasting sites (pp. 88-89). For the Protestants, this observance was also a way of expressing ambitions of independence from the bishop.

As a second arena for differentiation, Volkland describes Catholics' and Protestants' simultaneous use of the canons' (*Chorherren*) church, Bischofszell's parish church. The canons were allotted the small choir for Catholic services, and the more numerous Reformed parishioners received the sanctuary. The rood screen, and later a grille, separated the two but did not hinder the competitive transmission of sound: "The monks held their worship service in the choir, the Protestants theirs in the nave; and each tried to drown out the other" (p. 72). Simultaneity of services meant that members of each group were thoroughly acquainted with the liturgies of the other. This intimate familiarity with the competing ritual underscored their contrasts, but it was also was able to facilitate conversion.

A third manifestation of perceptual differences is seen in legal proceedings against prominent Reformed young men whose musical frolicking on Corpus Christi offended Catholic authorities. The men performed an anti-ritual by setting up a table in the woods and furnishing it with bread and wine. They ate and drank, threw their hats on the ground in imitation of the Catholic sign of respect for the Host, and sang and played instruments. This spectacle was designed, Catholic witnesses maintained, to mock the Corpus Christi procession. A diocesan court ultimately fined each youth 15 Taler. Normally, such an infraction would have gone before a city court and the fact that this one did not was fraught, the author finds, with political meaning. The pastor declared that the Catholic *Obervogt* wanted to turn the citizens of Bischofszell into "absolute subjects" (p. 107), for, as Volkland reveals, these protagonists were not in fact youths at all but around thirty years of age, married, and from families of high rank (p. 118). Their "musical interlude" was a complex performance containing deeper significance than the actors admitted. Their self-understanding combined elements of faith, standing, and political conviction. Once again, the sensitive exploration of intentions within a specific milieu reveals more about actions and society than superficial description would have yielded.

Finally, in her search for early modern self-understanding, the author peers into one Josua Schlatter's conversion to Catholicism in the face of his family's outrage and ostracism. Indeed, Schlatter's wife and two young daughters refused to accompany him on his spiritual journey and took refuge with relatives safely outside the pertinent jurisdiction, where separation—even on such grounds—would not have been allowed. Volkland disagrees with Beat Hodler, who argues that attempts to identify the motives of conversion are seldom success-

ful (p. 142). She penetrates to the heart of Schlatter's personal revolution, once again drawing upon "thick description" and the combination of all available sources of evidence. Increasingly the bishop selected Catholics to sit in the town council. By his conversion to Catholicism, this younger brother gained precedence over his older sibling and acted strategically "in order to attain his political goals" (p. 150). As for his wife, the marriage had long been unhappy, and this turn of events provided her a pretext for terminating it.

The interpretive theme running throughout this book is that confessional alliances are fluid and strategic. Inner conviction is merely one element coming into play, par-

ticularly in those regions, as in Bischofszell and the Thurgau, where more than one creed existed legally. Volkland shares the view of Elisabeth Labrousse, arguing that temporal interest is just as important as any abstract religious fervor in understanding conversion. This claim would come quite close to Ethan Shagan's recent assertion concerning the reasons why the English people accepted Protestantism: they were canny political creatures and understood where their advantage lay. Shagan, however, does not approach the problem from an anthropological perspective as Volkland. Volkland demonstrates how useful the insights of other disciplines can be to the historian by suggesting new ways of grasping the mentalities of the past.

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