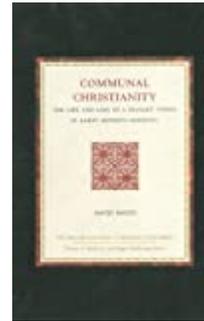




David Mayes. *Communal Christianity: The Life and Loss of a Peasant Vision in Early Modern Germany.* Boston: Brill, 2004. x + 374 pp. \$139.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-04225-4.



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Communal Christianity as an Independent Form of Religious Life

I can recommend this study of Upper Hesse as a challenging, thought-provoking study of religion and regime change in early modern Germany from the perspective not of rulers or city dwellers but of inhabitants of rural districts. In the era of the Reformation and its aftermath, Upper Hesse was a confessionally contested region like so many others in central Europe. According to David Mayes, sources allow a good window into religious life in rural communities in this region starting in the later sixteenth century. As he evaluated these sources with an eye on late twentieth-century historiography on confessionalization and communalism, Mayes developed the thesis that the Christianity practiced in rural communities around Marburg was a doctrinally unadorned, unique, and independent type that at first coexisted with confessionalized forms of Christianity and only after 1648 was transformed in their image. The book, covering the period from 1576 until 1730, is an elaboration on this view.

Upper Hesse is well-suited for a study of confessional change. The period Mayes examines was marked by confessional tensions following the death in 1567 of Philip of

Hesse and the division of his territories. Landgrave Ludwig IV gained control of Hesse-Marburg. In 1576 Ludwig appointed Ägidius Hunnius, a student of Jacob Andreae from Tübingen, to the long-vacant chair of theology at the University of Marburg. Hunnius had an active and influential career, during which he succeeded in educating a generation of Lutheran leaders and shaping confessional policy in the territory. Mayes accepts the scholarly consensus that, in the course of Ludwig's reign and Hunnius's influence, institutions and public norms in the key urban center in the region, Marburg, received a strong and enduring Lutheran stamp. Although it remained Protestant for the most part, Upper Hesse changed its confessional affiliation at least twice in subsequent generations. After Upper Hesse fell under the authority of Landgrave Moritz it underwent a period of Calvinist confessionalization in the years 1605-24. Another change occurred in 1624, when Upper Hesse became part of Hesse-Darmstadt, whose rulers reintroduced Lutheranism as the official confession of the land. At several points in his study Mayes notes evidence to support the claim that Lutheran confessionalization of the population (or at least its leading members) was suc-

cessful in Marburg. A chief (but not the only) example is popular resistance in the city to the introduction of Calvinism in 1605. But Mayes finds nothing comparable in rural districts around Marburg before the Peace of Westphalia. Explaining this phenomenon is the focus of the book.

According to his interpretation of the evidence, until 1648 rural communities were largely unaffected by the attempts of central rulers to shape their religious life decisively. Instead of fitting into one of the molds of early modern, doctrinally organized, confessional Christianity, religious life in Upper Hesse's small towns and villages followed its own set of norms. In Mayes's view, rural religion, which he calls "communal Christianity," was distinguished by its consistently non-doctrinal concerns. These included the maintenance of communal solidarity and custom in the face of outside manipulation. Community leaders worked over generations to regulate parish business (for example, rites and sacraments, parish infrastructure such as churches, and the selection of key officeholders) according to communal norms, not according to confessional standards. They were not particularly interested in the issues that motivated the Lutheran and Calvinist (or, in regions of Upper Hesse that came for a time under the control of Mainz, Catholic) officials that played a role in communal life as representatives of the central government. What was important for them was that the community be allowed to shape its own affairs according to the traditional values of *Bau* and *Besserung*, or consensus and common good. Mayes argues that because rural communal Christianity's focus was ethical rather than doctrinal, and local rather than universalizing, its adherents were able to accept and coexist with imported forms of confessionalized religion, regardless of their specific doctrinal content.

According to Mayes, this picture of rural Christianity has strong implications for our understanding of the role of confession in the periods both before and after 1648. Before the end of the Thirty Years War, legal arrangements meant that only one confession was allowed representatives in a given territory. Somewhat counter-intuitively (especially in light of the well-known interpretation of the period before 1648 as an age of confessional conflict) Mayes finds that confessional monoculture established conditions in which communal Christianity could maintain itself. In other words, in this period Christianity did not become assimilated to any single dominant, centralizing, confessional regime. There was, in Mayes's view, an affinity between the communal orientation of local leaders and congregational con-

cerns of Calvinist ministers in the early seventeenth century. Mayes sees the period of Calvinist dominance as a period in which communal Christianity thrived. However, local communities did not become Calvinist in a strict sense, any more than they were Lutheran before or immediately after the years 1605-24. Mayes notes there was an easy—even seamless—transition in rural regions from one confessional regime to another. He accounts for these smooth transitions by arguing that local communities adopted only the outer form and labels of each new confessional order, while the function and substance of community life remained unchanged. Instead of witnessing a confessionalization of rural communities, this period saw, so Mayes contends, a communalization of the central government's agents in the villages (pp. 202-204). Circumstances changed with the Peace of Westphalia. The terms of the treaty allowed Calvinist congregations to assert their right to have a presence in nominally Lutheran communities across Upper Hesse. Mayes devotes the last two chapters of his study to what he calls "communal confessionalization." The introduction of competing confessional groups with legitimate legal claims into rural communities frequently disrupted the mechanisms that had allowed for the maintenance of communal solidarity in previous decades.

One of the striking features of the book is how Mayes puts familiar ideal typical categories to new uses. The author's main declared intention is to recover the contours of rural religion as an authentic kind of Christianity distinct from other contemporaneous kinds of Christianity. We could think of Mayes's ideal type of communal Christianity as a "historical individual" (to use an older phrase) with its own unique role and "livelihood" (a term he uses). To this end the author instrumentalizes the typologies of communalism and confessionalization. The result is a clear, schematic, and easily understood portrayal of what the author claims is a forgotten way of life. As with all good ideal-typical models, the author's characterization of communal Christianity makes sense of a wide variety of data found in a specific set of sources, provides new ways of thinking about accepted knowledge, and also raises questions researchers could apply to other historical subjects. For example, the picture Mayes supplies suggests a historical progression from an early modern rural society indifferent to confessional markers to one riven by confessional conflict, a picture that does not fit the textbook understanding of increasing toleration of confessional difference with the advent of the Enlightenment. Can other researchers find similar patterns of non-doctrinal but still coherent forms of early modern

Christianity in other regions?

Mayes also suggests that communal Christianity existed further back in time than his sources reach. Does his typology help make sense of late medieval rural religion? The *Gemeinde*, the main subject of Mayes's analysis, was a category that applies not only to rural communities but also to urban ones. If, as Mayes suggests, the divisions of the Reformation affected urban *Gemeinden* differently than rural ones, what was the situation in cities before the Reformation? Was Christianity in urban *Gemeinden* really that different from rural Christianity? A thorough consideration of most of these questions falls beyond the reasonable subject matter of the book, but Mayes gives us a framework within which to ask them anew.

While the author's ideal-typical approach has many advantages, I was not entirely satisfied with his treatment of confessionalization. Confessionalization has been much debated in recent decades, as most historians of early modern Germany will know well.[1] Perhaps for the sake of convenience or clarity, the author has chosen to focus on Heinz Schilling's admittedly very prominent views on the subject, which set the end of the Thirty Years War as a point at which the confessional age began to fade away. Mayes's views stand in clear contrast with this understanding of the significance of confessionalization in European history. The problem is that there is little consensus among historians on the dating of confessionalization, or whether it is even the kind of phenomenon that can be identified usefully with any given epoch.[2] The result is that, to the extent that the book includes a critique of confessionalization (certainly not its sole or even main purpose), it is taking issue with an artificially limited understanding of the subject.

There are, of course, close affinities between the positions Mayes takes and work by scholars in the school of Peter Blickle on communalism in early modern Europe. I suspect that if there were doubts to be cast on the interpretation advanced in *Communal Christianity*, they would be similar to the kinds of criticisms aimed at communalism regarding a lack of attention to hierarchies and power struggles in communities. Mayes writes about ru-

ral communities as though they were effective and unified collective actors until the Peace of Westphalia. Their shared communal, agrarian, and religious values provided strong enough bonds, he hypothesizes, to withstand the tensions that arose in everyday disputes. One of his tests for this view is the treatment of Anabaptists, whom he considers representatives of a fourth brand of confessionalized religion. Although they tried in the sixteenth century to convince their neighbors of the need to reform their lives, they found little place in rural Upper Hessian communities, according to Mayes. Currently, Ellen Yutzy is working on a dissertation on Hessian Anabaptism, and I would be curious to know what she and other historians familiar with Hessian sources (for example, Robert von Friedeburg) think of the Mayes thesis.

In the end this study, although focused regionally, offers much of transferable heuristic value. My hope is that it will spark a lively debate.

Notes

[1]. See the H-German forum at http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/Confessionalization/Confess_index.htm.

[2]. For just a few discussions relevant to this issue, see Heinrich Richard Schmidt, *Konfessionalisierung im 16. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1992); Joel F. Harrington and Helmut Walser Smith, "Confessionalization, Community, and State-Building in Germany, 1555-1870," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 77-101; Stefan Ehrenpreis and Ute Lotz-Heumann, *Reformation und konfessionelles Zeitalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002); and Gerhard Lauer, "Die Konfessionalisierung des Judentums: Zum Prozeß der religiösen Ausdifferenzierung im Judentum am Übergang zur Neuzeit," in *Interkonfessionalität-Transkonfessionalität-binnenkonfessionelle Pluralität. Neue Forschungen zur Konfessionalisierungsthese*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz, Manfred Jakobowski-Tiessen, Thomas Kaufmann and Hartmut Lehmann (Götersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 250-283.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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