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Converts, Conversion, and the Confessionalization Thesis, Once Again

It was said that when Queen Christina of Sweden learned that her ambassador to Portugal, Lars Skytte, converted to Catholicism and entered the Franciscan Order, she responded dismissively, saying, "converts are like mulattos; white skin, wooly hair" (p. 23). Just a few years later, in 1654, the queen, who had been baptized a Lutheran but educated as a freethinker, set aside the Swedish crown, converted to Catholicism, and moved to the city of Rome. Looking back, her reaction to Skytte's conversion could have been applied to herself. Christina, convert and intellectual, is a fitting religious emblem of her century, as she negotiated a course across and between the confessions.

She was guided from outside and within. As it happens, Skytte was well acquainted with Antonio Macedo.[1] Macedo became the Jesuit chaplain to the Portuguese ambassador in Lutheran Stockholm, and after Skytte's conversion, it was Macedo who initially discussed Catholic theology with the young queen in private sessions. He was the first of the Jesuit team that led Christina to Catholicism. Macedo's most important informant on Swedish matters was probably Skytte, and Skytte therefore also seems to have contributed, at least indirectly, to Christina's hour of decision. Here are the external agents, Franciscan and Jesuit, who cut the first path to Roman obedience, if obedience is a term that really applies to the queen: For Christina was famously independent, in manner and intellect, the latter thanks to

an education in Plato and the hermetic tradition, reinforced and expanded by millenarian beliefs.[2] The complicated soul Macedo cultivated was bred of mixed spiritual blood, a mixture of rational and esoteric philosophy and premodern Christian myth, to be exact, the kind of mixture made famous in our generation by Richard Popkin.[3] The queen was a spiritual mulatto before she converted, and she remained one after, like many of her century, when the seemingly rigid limits marked by confessional theologies were frequently tested and transgressed.

The editors of the thirty-one impressive contributions gathered here suggest that "the concept 'conversion' presupposes … confession," and confessionalization makes conversion "in the full sense" possible (pp. 13-14). I'm not so sure. One must grant that if by conversion we mean switching confessions, then the three confessions–Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed–set parameters for conversions by an infallibly circular logic. Change of religion (Christianity to Judaism or Islam, and so forth), itself an enormous topic, falls outside the scope of this volume. As the editors acknowledge, and as a majority of contributions seem to bear out, the term "conversion" in the "confessional era" often referred to something very specific, namely a turn to Catholic truth, or theologically and canonically speaking, the *re*-turn of a Protestant heretic to the Catholic church, while in our time conversion refers to a subjective experience con-

joined to and facilitated by social factors, a "process." In the conversion process, as the experts understand it today, social and psychological forces make an extremely dense matrix, and the convert's perception of social factors is thoroughly impregnated by a wholly internalized, new perspective on the self and the world. This impregnable matrix is probed in this volume by Detlef Pollack's illuminating review of the sociology of conversion, which provides a theoretical foundation for the subject at hand. Conversion, Pollack explains, is marked by a radical change in the way one understands oneself and the world. Conversion requires a personal break with the past. It leads one to stigmatize one's past. It involves a feeling of having been overwhelmed. It demands individual choice and cooperation. It incapacitates one's ability to see his or her experience apart from the perspective established by conversion, and it belongs to an absolute worldview that resists adjustment and compromise. Religious converts in our lifetime, the kind who used to hawk redemption on the streets of American cities, find it hard to tolerate the moral relativist, the historian, and all who believe life is governed by a constant ferment of contingent choices and collective trends. In short, it is hard to think of a modern, or even postmodern, religious conversion apart from an intensely emotional, grossly domineering experience of religious change.

What, then, was the early modern counterpart? Subjective conversions took place within "confessional churches" and "confessional states" but were often shaped by a body of transconfessional devotional literature. For the fabled ordinary person, his or her religious subjectivity often existed within a confession, or within a confessional subgroup, and no doubt it was often cultivated by the apparatus of a confessional state. But the experience was also transconfessional, marked by a longing for salvation and the effort to satisfy this longing.[4] One may describe this transconfessional aspect as an intensified strand of late medieval Christianity, as Bernd Hamm might say, but conversion is just plain Christian, as mystics, Puritans, and pietists liked to point out. It was part of the European religious imaginary. We may doubt that early modern confessional switching counts as conversion in the modern sense at all. Or we could ask the more sophisticated question, as the editors do: whether or to what extent a new process of "authentication" and "self-fashioning" was astir when people moved between confessions in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Perhaps, they suggest, this volume's theme will help us rediscover, *mutatis mutandis*, the birth of the individual.

Abundant evidence in this volume suggests that people who switched confessions in the seventeenth century followed a subjective trajectory that remained quite constant before and after their switch, which means that by the standards of today's sociologist, experience then was not really what we would call "conversion" now. There were, for example, political converts and missionary strategists, examined in part one ("Religious Authenticity and Politics"). Since 1573, the Vatican pursued a top-down, princes-first approach to the recovery of Germany, which sometimes coincided with individual princely initiative. For example, Wolfgang Wilhelm of Pfalz-Neuburg sought a marriage with Magdalena, the daughter of Duke Wilhelm of Bavaria, to secure his dynasty. The Bavarian duke demanded that Wolfgang Wilhelm become a Catholic. After theological study and dialogue, Wolfgang Wilhelm did, and he really meant it. He launched a program of territorial re-Catholicization that lasted until Magdalena died. When he next married Sophie of the Palatinate, a Calvinist, he remained a devoted Catholic, but he also ended his missionary enterprise. The constant here was dynastic security. In France in the late sixteenth century, a rather different coupling of the political and religious can be observed in conversion reports, among which the case of King Henry IV, who won Paris for a mass, provided just one of many occasions to argue whether authenticity or opportunism was at play. This arguing helped "problematize" the relationship between religion and politics, contributing, it is suggested, to their eventual, modern separation. The constant here is an ideal of religious sincerity that raises the question of, and accentuates the tension between, worldly and spiritual ambitions, which in turn expresses a transconfessional value, namely, religious sincerity. A broad analysis of Calvinist networks among the French high nobility shows how acute the pressure to conform to the monarch's confession became, and Catholic faith became a mark of loyalty to the crown. Again, the authors presume that faith coordinates powers in the realm. August the Strong, Elector of Saxony, who converted to Catholicism, created the nucleus of a Catholic minority in Dresden, the Lutheran Zion. In this last instance, a re-Catholicized prince, without the usual legal trappings, created a biconfessional city typical in Germany after 1648: there was no *simultaneum*, a legal sharing arrangement between confessions.

These German and French examples suggest how the shape and permeability of confessional political environments varied, and how their shapes were specific to particular aristocratic communities. Part 2 ("Indifference and Radicalism") gives further evidence of this variety

and local specificity. In East Frisia in the second half of the sixteenth century, due to political circumstances and in spite of confessional ideologies, all three confessions coexisted with each other and with nonconfessional groups. As one might expect, a certain climate of religious indifference emerged in East Frisia, an attitude that accepts all religious groups as similar and allows one to make religious choices according to personal preference, sometimes again and again. But in the Dutch Republic a minority also entertained such a casual view of confessional distinctions, and some of the Dutch moved freely between religious groups. Indifference, of course, had its enemies. William Slawata is best known for having survived the Second Defenestration of Prague with Jaroslav of Martinicz on May 23, 1618. Slawata was a spectacular social climber whose postconversion marriage lifted him from poverty and made him one of the richest and most powerful Bohemian magnates. He became a Catholic zealot. After he abandoned the Bohemian Brethren in 1597, he helped organize a network of militantly Catholic nobles and worked hard to stamp out the religious indifference and heresy of biconfessional Bohemia. Yet, on the other hand, theological orthodoxy, like that promoted by Tübingen's Lutheran theologians, could have an unorthodox effect. The theologian Johann Valentin Andreae noted that his friend, the professor of law, Christoph Besold, converted to Catholicism because he read too much and exposed himself to so many different ideas. Lutheran-Catholic debate and the variety of Protestant opinions energized his studies, his individualism, and his readiness to change allegiances. The effect of confessionalization among German intellectuals in the early seventeenth century, it is suggested, was paradoxical and labile, producing orthodoxy and heterodoxy by means of a transconfessional promotion of interiority and individual salvation, giving rise to competing forms of intellectual piety. Similarly, the mere fact of contact between religious groups in a biconfessional area, such as the valley of the Upper Rhine in the east of the Swiss Confederacy, caused crises of conscience among clergy, especially among educated Protestant clergy, and prompted confessional switching. It was, to say the obvious, not the mere distinction of alternative Christianities that characterized this era, but the proximity and interaction of confessionally defined groups, the alternative choices their mere presence posed in biconfessional regions, in imperial cities, and under the triconfessional parity confirmed by the Peace of Westphalia. This interactive dynamic reached even into the order of households. After concluding the Treaty of Osnabrück, the imperial estates and jurists debated the age of account-

ability, the rights of child converts, and the authority of fathers, and the debate continued for a full century.

Part 3 ("Aesthetic and Rhetorical Strategies") considers art and literature. Confessional switching was seldom portrayed in Jesuit theater in Germany, because Jesuits preferred themes that reinforced Catholic faith to those that emphasized confessional confrontation. But by widening one's scope to include satire and polemical dialogue, such as, for example, the polemical writings prompted by Friedrich Staphylus's conversion to Catholicism, one discovers that the figure of a convert was also used to set up an argument for church authority in the new (Catholic) faith. A more ambivalent position was articulated by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's *Abentheurlichen Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1668). Grimmelshausen sought to degrade confessional differences and promote the multiplicity of religious perspectives. Jesuit art did the opposite. On the basis of diverse evidence (Niccolò Circignani's cycle of frescoes of martyrs in S. Stefano Rotondo in Rome, the Jesuit remodel of the city parish church in Glatz, Christoph Tausch's altarpiece for the Jesuit church of Breslau, and so on), Jesuits are shown to have developed an "aesthetic of overwhelming" the viewer. This aesthetic combined pious affect with rational evidence and allowed "pictures to become instruments of the politics of conversion" (p. 489). "Revocation sermons" by Catholic immigrants to Protestant Saxony lacked this emotional element and followed strictly managed theological scripts, tending to create back stories of Catholic doubt in preconversion life, creating an image of the convert's internal consistency. This narrative must have seemed plausible to audiences and perhaps masked the actual disruption caused by changing confessions. In Ireland in the second half of the seventeenth century, before the penal laws and converts rolls of the eighteenth century, "conversion reports" published as pamphlets narrated confessional choices. On the example of four pamphlets, two accounts of converts to Protestantism and two of converts to Catholicism, it is shown that the "communicative models" at play primarily follow social (or perhaps better, educational) differences and only secondarily follow confessional ones. Social position determines the degree to which a text may construct individuality. Self-fashioning is more evident in texts from more elite social milieus.

A leitmotiv of this volume, to underscore one of several, is the question of opportunism: did particular converts seek external gain, or did they act for internal and subjective reasons, like a modern individual who dramatically converts to another religion? The answer is usually

yes and yes. Social or political reasons to change one's religion often appear, but the convert usually seems to internalize available religious arguments against the old faith. By the same token, polemic over conversions usually takes aim at this very thing: the convert's motives. In both ways, the interplay of external and internal is apparent, which allows the authors to consider the question of modernization, a process often said to separate religion from other spheres of life, such as politics and economy. In premodern Europe, as many of these contributions presuppose, aligning politics (state-building) with increasingly rationalized differentiations of Christianity (confessionalization) was itself a remarkably dynamic process. The process created not so much culturally uniform bodies as a stockpile of well-defined categories and techniques of debate–instruments in a laboratory of political and individual experiment. The confessionalization thesis has had the effect of sharpening our focus on this dynamic process and on the tremendous variety of its forms. But paradoxically, it has also raised the question of whether, in the end, confessional differences explain very much at all.[5] In conflict, opposition defines a relationship, and the differentiations between groups serve their interaction.[6] The editorial framework of this volume, the introductions to the whole and each part, seem to stress how productive the confessionalization thesis is. But the volume portrays a complicated world of cultural mixing in which the spiritual mulatto not so secretly reigned supreme.

Notes

[1]. Oskar Garstein, *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in Scandinavia: The Age of Gustavus Adolphus and Queen Christina of Sweden, 1622-1656* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 624-631.

[2]. Susanna Åkerman, *Queen Christina of Sweden and Her Circle: The Transformation of a Seventeenth-Century Philosophical Libertine* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), passim, and p. 25 for the quotation of Christina's reaction to Skytte's conversion.

[3]. Richard H. Popkin, *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

[4]. Hartmut Lehmann, "Grenzen der Erklärungskraft der Konfessionalisiertungsthese," *Interkonfessionalität–Transkonfessionalität–binnenkonfessionelle Pluralität: Neue Forschungen zur Konfessionalisierungsthese*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz, Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen, Thomas Kaufmann, and Hartmut Lehmann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 242-249. For salvation, the individual, and historical change, consider also Rudolf Schlögl, "Öffentliche Gottesverehrung und privater Glaube in der Frühen Neuzeit: Beobachtungen zur Bedeutung von Kirchenzucht und Frömmigkeit für die Abgrenzung privater Sozialräume," *Das Öffentliche und Private in der Vormoderne*, ed. Gert Melville and Peter von Moos (Cologne: Böhlau, 1998), 165-211, and "Historiker, Max Weber und Niklas Luhmann: Zum schwierigen (aber möglicherweise produktiven) Verhältnis von Geschichtswissenschaft und Systemtheorie," *Soziale Systeme: Zeitschrift für soziologische Theorie* 7 (2001): 23-45.

[5]. Consider Thomas A. Brady, Jr., "We Have Lost the Reformation"–Heinz Schilling and the Rise of the Confessionalization Thesis," *Wege der Neuzeit: Festschrift für Heinz Schilling zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Stefan Ehrenpreis, Ute Lotz-Heumann, Olaf Mörke, and Luise Schorn-Schütte (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 2007), 33-56.

[6]. Georg Simmel, *Soziologie* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1968), 186-255.

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