

**Michael Sauter.** *Visions of the Enlightenment: The Edict on Religion of 1788 and the Politics of the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century Prussia.* Brill's Studies in Intellectual History. Leiden: Brill, 2009. xvii + 242 pp. \$147.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-17651-5.



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In this recent book, Michael J. Sauter has set himself many tasks. His first argument urges the reevaluation of Johann Christoph von Woellner, the architect of the title's edict and a second one (the Edict on Censorship), as well as the debates they sparked among Prussia's enlightened elite. Woellner has been viewed as a Counter-Enlightenment figure, and his efforts to enforce the edicts as "nothing less than the end of the Enlightenment in Prussia" (p. 5). But Sauter is interested in much more than placing Woellner in his proper context. In identifying Woellner as a "typical representative" of the Prussian Enlightenment, Sauter is able to open up other questions about the nature of the Enlightenment in Prussia and the function and significance of the public sphere. In doing so, he confronts not only the historiography about Woellner, but also calls our attention to other longstanding assumptions. The book should thus interest not only scholars of the Prussian Enlightenment, but also to those considering the applicability and limitations of concepts like the public sphere in analyzing the German past.

Sauter first places Woellner within the Prussian Enlightenment's different strains. A preacher's son who studied theology and attended the enlightened University of Halle, Woellner was one of the young men whose fortunes became linked to the priorities of Frederick II. The generosity of a noble family brought him work as a tutor and court preacher, and eventually the opportunity to study agronomy in order to assist in managing their estate. Woellner familiarized himself with early economics literature on improvement and began his long employment with the Prussian state as a *commisarius oeconomicus* in the late 1770s. Sauter argues that "Woellner's experience as a preacher and as an administrator impressed upon him the need to organize Prussia's agriculture from the top down ... using the latest--and in the context of the time, enlightened--techniques, while also insisting on measures that maintained social control," most importantly through the influence of the local preacher (p. 28).

Thus, of the two threads of "enlightened" thinking Sauter identifies as products of Frederick

II's reign, Woellner was more closely associated with those who "saw top-down reform as the guarantor of order" and pursued enlightened economic policies, than with the "elite who saw religious criticism as its preserve and autonomy as its right" (p. 26). Sauter touches here on the historiography of the Enlightenment, and argues that we need to examine "the complexities and ambiguities that emerged from both sides having access to state power" (p. 26) rather than seeing the conflict between these two groups that erupted in the 1780s and 90s as a conflict between Enlightened and Counter-Enlightened forces. Interpretation of a variety of responses to the Edicts on Religion and Censorship of 1788 is used to illustrate the considerable value of this approach. Along the way, Sauter provides a number of useful insights about the nature of publics, publicity, and the public sphere in eighteenth-century Prussia.

The Edict on Religion of 1788 applied to Prussia's Protestant clergy, who were required thereby to teach "only Christianity's fundamental truths" (p. 23). The Edict on Censorship that was issued several months later was designed to quiet print criticism of the Edict on Religion. Both of these edicts have been viewed as "reactions to enlightened print debate" (p. 54), with Woellner as the main culprit. The real crux of the matter, however, was the realm of oral communication, in which preachers were entrusted with maintaining the social control so necessary to the very existence of a print public sphere. Sauter takes as his point of departure the work of the influential theologian Johann Salomo Semler, who delineated two publics, one religious and the other academic. This early modern distinction maps comfortably onto Sauter's differentiation between an oral sphere in which ideas could be carefully disseminated by the preacher to his flock, and the print sphere in which the educated or expert could debate (often religious) ideas openly.

Using a close examination of the dismissal of two clerics on the basis of the Edict on Religion,

Sauter shows that the enlightened elite responded primarily in a way that confounds any simple division between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment or any easy identification of the public sphere as directly subversive of state authority. Both "Ponytail Schulz" and Karl Wilhelm Brumbey were dismissed for crossing the social boundaries that divided preachers from their flocks and symbolized the other forms of hierarchy that ordered life in Prussia. Here, Sauter begins to formulate some of his most important points about the significance of the service elite and the discussion of religion in Prussia's enlightened public sphere.

His complex argument is directed primarily at the way that "the Enlightenment, publicness, and subversiveness have been inextricably linked" (p. 51), but it also makes an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship between state service and elite formation in Prussia. That the enlightened elite in Prussia was primarily a service elite, working for the state but participating as private citizens in print debate, meant that publicity in Prussia served as more of a stabilizing than a corrosive force *vis à vis* political authority. The tension between the autonomy implied in elite religious criticism and the significance of political and social stability not just for the state, but also as a safeguard of the possibility of enlightened debate, made for a distinct form of public sphere. The conflicts that took place on this terrain, in the wake of the Edict on Religion, were thus about "who would control religious speech in Prussia" (p. 55), rather than over whether or not it should be controlled.

The consensus among elites was that print debate should be limited to the educated, and that preachers policed the boundary between the kind of questioning that could be allowed among the *Gelehrten* and what Sauter refers to as "common orality" (p. 53). In other words, they kept the order that allowed for criticism. Outspoken, potential enthusiasts like Schulz and known enthusiasts

like Brumbey had to be disciplined in order to maintain that boundary and order. But the discussion that preceded the dismissal of each preacher also revealed conflict within the educated elite, and a defense of the different positions they occupied within the Prussian state apparatus. The protection of their privileges--to debate and to discipline--may have motivated the use of such designations as "Enlightened" or "Counter-Enlightened," but the latter did not represent the substance of the disagreement.

Sauter also uses two legal cases to suggest that publicity, "usually seen as a liberating force in history ... could also be used a disciplinary force" (p. 70). The cases illustrate how the enlightened public disciplined itself from within, often using the powers of the state to which it also had access to do so. As with the Schulz and Brumbey dismissals, however, the Johann Heinrich Würzer and Johann Friedrich Zöllner cases also reveal conflicts within the elite that--properly contextualized--are not accessible to the "Enlightened vs. Counter-Enlightened" label often applied to the debate over the Edicts on Religion and Censorship.

Würzer became subject to state prosecution for a text critical of the Edict on Religion because he dedicated it to Frederick William II and mailed a copy to him. The enlightened jurist Johann von Carmer produced a guilty verdict that Sauter skillfully dissects to illustrate how members of the service elite could simultaneously discipline and protect intellectual freedom using their access to state power. Würzer's most dangerous action, from their perspective, was that he invited the sovereign into the public sphere. Würzer could be acquitted of the most significant charge of attacking the king and his ministers through Carmer's argument that Würzer had simply erred in approaching the king as a fellow *Gelehrter*. At the same time, Carmer had to make clear that the explicit incursion of the state into the public sphere was not generally justified. He used a language of

conscience to frame Würzer's mistake as an honest one, motivated by "eagerness for humanity's benefit," invoking the "central lesson of the Reformation that constraint in matters of conscience" that justified "the withdrawal of the state from areas that had been disciplined successfully" (pp. 89-90). By isolating Würzer and disciplining his "disrespectful and derisive tone" (p. 87), Carmer identified the *Gelehrten* as successfully self-disciplining. Those who did not censor themselves sufficiently endangered Prussia's fragile public sphere. The rhetoric of conscience also appears in the Zöllner case, in which the censor Zöllner insisted that the Edict on Censorship left to him the judgment of whether a text could be damaging. He likened Woellner's high-handedness in overruling his choice regarding a certain text to "clerical control over conscience" (p. 100) in the formulation of his defense. Enlightened respect for the Edict on Religion and the Edict on Censorship was on display in both cases, but so was the assumption that "the state and the public sphere had to be policed by the right people" (p. 101), the *Gelehrten* whose freedom could and should be respected.

But the consensus among these "right people" was definitely strained by the end of the eighteenth century, and it is through a reading of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's responses to the Edict on Religion (one published and one unpublished) that Sauter suggests at least one potential cause: a generational shift closely related to the "social-intellectual markers" (p. 105) that had held the enlightened elite together. Fichte first wrote in support of the Edict on Religion in an unpublished work of 1792 and then later attacked its enforcement (in the form of censorship) in his famous "Reclamation" of 1793. Fichte's struggles to establish himself in the world of the *Gelehrten* explain part of his shift from an acceptance of the limits on expression (and a use of the rhetoric of conscience to justify it) to a radical tone of warning (in which freedom of conscience becomes an inalienable right endangered by the incursion of

princes into the sphere of religion and, by extension, of discussion about it). Fichte's attack echoes the defense of elite privilege. By the early nineteenth century, Sauter argues, Fichte narrowed that elite even more to privilege university scholars--both professors and students--and carved out a different kind of freedom that both partook of and expanded the notion of conscience.

Sauter's final two chapters provide a quantitative and qualitative assault that lays to rest any lingering doubt that the debates over the Edict on Religion can be understood using the old Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment dichotomy. In an exhaustive examination of published responses to the Edict on Religion, Sauter shows that a significant majority of the enlightened elite supported it. He then takes a closer look at the famous "What is Enlightenment?" debate and recontextualizes it within overall elite response to the edict, showing definitively that "enlightened discussion in the Protestant regions of Germany was based on and perpetuated by social exclusion," rather than "auguring a realm of freedom" more generally (p. 168). In a careful reading of the distinctions and commonalities between responses to the Edict on Religion and the discussion of the meaning of Enlightenment, Sauter argues for "a broader definition of what the political was" as a tool to "catch all the nuances in German debates" (p. 171).

*Visions of the Enlightenment* provides a thoroughgoing revision of the established perspective on Woellner. Sauter's use of a wide variety of sources to illustrate the tensions inherent in practicing Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Prussia provides comprehensive support to the first part of his claim that it was a "politically and socially exclusive moment, rather than an emancipatory one" (p. 1). The public sphere in question was certainly exclusionary and any language of freedom was intended to apply only to a select group that could be trusted with the freedom to debate because its members did not question state power openly. The "either-or" model of En-

lightenment vs. Counter-Enlightenment cannot explain the ways in which Woellner and his contemporaries negotiated the Prussian context, and Sauter's much more complex and subtle analysis is very compelling.

At the same time, however, I was struck by the impression that Sauter had placed unnecessary limits on the claims that his argument enables by taking what seems to be an "either-or" approach to the Enlightenment and the public sphere. Sauter leaves little room in his interpretation of the public sphere for the more subtly emancipatory potential of the kind of enlightened debate that happened there, even when his evidence suggests the possibility. For example, although he acknowledges repeatedly that the discussion of religion was "deeply political" (p. 89), and identifies the language of conscience as a tool used to carve out spaces of greater autonomy for the enlightened elite, he does not include this element explicitly in his broadening of the definition of the political. This criticism applies to the question of subversiveness as well. Although Sauter insists that "historians must reconsider what was subversive in early modern Europe and why" (p. 53), he does not follow through consistently with this task in his own analysis of evidence. The determination of what was to be disciplined by enlightened elites in Prussia seems to indicate that the public sphere--especially its oral component--did indeed contain the potential for subversion. Why it could not and did not lead to the same results it had elsewhere is explained exceedingly well by the evidence that Sauter presents, but a more extended analysis of the potential of "freedom of conscience" as a political wedge could also have opened up the question of politics more effectively.

These perceived inconsistencies may have to do with the fact that half the chapters of this book have already seen publication as articles, which results in some unevenness and repetition in Sauter's presentation of evidence and argument.

By the same token, the value of treating complex objects like Enlightenment and publicity using a variety of approaches—from close readings of specific texts and persons like Woellner and Fichte, to quantitative analysis of entire debates—is also demonstrated by how the chapters both stand alone and work in combination with one another. Overall, *Visions of the Enlightenment* directs our focus to tensions rather than dichotomies and to analysis rather than assumptions, and provides compelling examples of the important insights to be found in this way.

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