"Confessionalization – The Career of a Concept"

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Like the great trees of an ancient forest, the big stories we tell about history, the grand narratives we call them, are sooner or later toppled by history itself. One has only to reflect on how the twentieth century’s terrible events have undermined confidence in the narrative of Western Civilization and its long, progressive climb – Egypt and Mesopotamia to Greece and Rome; Middle Ages to Renaissance and Reformation; Enlightenment and Revolution to the nation-state built upon industrial capitalism and nourished by science – to appreciate how corrosively history destroys our stories about it. And yet, just as surely as history will disempower every narrative, the historians, like ants repairing a disturbed nest, will soon begin to fill the gaps and tackle the gaps of comprehensibility left by broken narratives. In the debris they discover, or rediscover, events, processes, persons, groups, places, practices, and institutions the old narratives had dimly perceived or simply ignored.

Along such ways, historians have been at work at restoring comprehensibility to the most radically disrupted of modern European narratives, the story of Germany and its place in Europe. For more than a hundred years this story had featured either the state, which had in 1918 and again in 1945 proved too fragile to carry this weight, or the nation, which had been utterly discredited by radical racist nationalism. In 1947 the Allies obliterated Prussia – whose rise had traditionally formed the bridge between the end of the medieval order in the Thirty Years’ War and the birth of the new German state in 1871 – from the map of Europe. By the 1960s, historians in both German states were fashioning new narratives of Germany’s passage from the Middle Ages to the modern era. Each successive thesis grappled with the problem of alleged German backwardness by European standards, and each sought to re-integrate Germany into general European history. In East Germany the Marxist historians constructed a thesis of the German Reformation as an “early bourgeois revolution,” the first in the series
of social upheavals that eventually transformed feudal into bourgeois Europe. This thesis confirmed the position of the Protestant Reformation at the traditional turning point between medieval and modern German and European history and affirmed Germany's vanguard role in the transition from feudal to capitalist Europe.

In West Germany at the same time, young historians were also turning their hands to fashioning an intelligible link between the recent and the deeper. Three major arguments – new ways of configuring the interim – emerged during the 1960s and 1970s: communalism, proto-industrialization, and confessionalization. The first, communalism, attacked the problem of German political backwardness. It holds that alongside the authoritarian state had grown communal forms of self-government in late medieval Germany, which though subsequently constrained and marginalized, had sustained a proto-democratic political culture valuable to a modern, democratic Germany.

The second thesis, proto-industrialization, argues for a regional growth of market-oriented rural industry and contemporaneous agricultural growth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during the decades that preceded the Industrial Revolution. While its connections to the Industrial Revolution are disputed, proto-industrialization is recognized as a general European process, the existence of which helps to explain the long gestation period of industrial capitalism between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century.

The third thesis, confessionalization, is today incomparably the most widely discussed and debated idea about early modern European history to have been

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formulated in Germany since 1960. It is an argument about the role of religious communities called “confessions” in the post-Reformation passage of Europe from the Middle Ages to modernity. A “confession” is, in the first place, an individual or collective – often normative – testimony of belief. It can be biographical (St. Augustine) or ecclesiastical (the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the term extended itself from normative statements of faith to the churches and communities which held or “confessed” them. This usage is proper, though not exclusive, to the German-speaking world, where since the middle decades of the sixteenth century churches of different confessions confronted one another. This situation produced a modern Germany which possessed not one but two national religions, Protestant and Catholic, and made confessional identity a central protocol of German social and cultural life.

There is thus no mystery in the fact that attention to confessions as historical formations has always been strongest in the German-speaking world. This, in itself, does not explain the rise of the confessionalization thesis, for until well into the twentieth century, a well established tradition found the history of confessions unproblematical. Catholicism was held to be simply backward, and between the two Protestant confessions, Lutheranism and Calvinism, the latter was considered more progressive and, therefore, more modern than the former. This view found a classic expression in Ernst Troeltsch’s essay of 1912, Protestantism and Progress. Troeltsch identified the two Protestant confessions, Lutheranism and Reformed (“Calvinist”), as respectively less and more progressive, based on their respectively more and less feudal social bases, and the differences emerge with notably clarity in the contrast between Lutheran and Calvinist politics. Lutheranism, Troeltsch argued, had a thoroughly conservative idea of the law of nature based on its complete confidence in divine providence. It is thus “favorable to absolutism, but, on the whole, essentially conservative and politically neutral.” Calvinism, by contrast, preferred a “modified aristocracy,” which gave it a “tendency towards progress, an impulse to reorganise governmental conditions when these were of an ‘ungodly’ character.” This impulse led Calvinism to the contract theory of the state.


5 Troeltsch, Protestantism and Progress, 63–4.
Troetschian position no longer held water. In the later 1970s, Heinz Schilling (now of Berlin) devoted his second dissertation (Habilitationsschrift) to a subject which seemed to contradict this interpretation of the historical relationship between the two Protestant confessions. In northwestern Germany, Schilling discovered a Calvinist prince, the count of Lippe, who used religious conformity as a means of suppressing the communal liberties of the town of Lemgo's Lutheran burgheis. Today, one might argue that in this situation, absolutist rule was more “modern” than traditional communal liberties, but Schilling’s conclusion was quite different. He found that the association of the two Protestant confessions with more authoritarian or more libertarian politics — Lutheranism and Calvinism, respectively — was a coincidental, in which case the classic association of Calvinism with democracy had to be revised. From this finding Schilling deduced that the two Protestant confessions related to one another not as less or more modern, but as two communities guided by parallel versions of the same program of religious renewal and social discipline, which played roughly comparable roles in the modernization of society and the state between 1550 and 1650.

Schilling eventually formulated his ideas as a “confessionalization paradigm.” Confessionalization, in this view, is a fundamental social transformation that includes ecclesiastical-religious and psychological-cultural changes as well as political and social ones. It includes “the rise of early modern confessional churches as institutions, the formation of confessions in the sense of a prominence accorded to religious-cultural systems that can be clearly distinguished from one another by their doctrine, ceremonies, spirituality, and the everyday culture of their people.” Confessionalization is thus a fundamental social process which largely coincided, but sometimes conflicted with, the formation of the early modern state and the shaping of its modern, disciplined society of subjects. Furthermore, “the process also ran parallel to the rise of the modern, capitalist economy, which deeply transformed both public and private life in Europe.” In the long view, therefore, “confessionalization belongs to the driving elements of the early modern process of transformation, which reshaped the


status-structured social world of old Europe into modern democratic, industrial society."

From the first, the confessionalization paradigm aimed to "produce a globally systematic or social-historical analysis. It is based on European comparisons formed within a universal historical perspective," for it seeks to understand the combination of forces that "enabled Europe to overcome the 'traditional' and 'feudal' social system and to emerge as the modern society characterized by citizens and economic activity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." In this version the paradigm is thus a variety of modernization theory, in which the sociology of religion supplies "the modification necessary to its application to the early modern era." The space it insists on for religion is determined by the point of view: "religious change is always conceived as social change."

Schilling's confessionalization paradigm thus seeks to repair the gap created by the demotion of the Protestant Reformation as the birth of the modern era by:

1. pushing modernity's pre-natal moment forward into the immediate post-Reformation era, where it can employ "confessions" in the sense of doctrinal statements as markers for "confessions" in the sense of distinct religious communities;

2. insisting that religion defined by its social forms and consequences rather than by its theological assertions, formed an essential force in the history of Europe between 1550 and 1660;

3. abandoning the idea, canonized by Hegel, of the evolutionary supersession of Catholicism by Protestantism as the normative form of modern Christianity; and

4. arguing for the overwhelming likeness of the process of confessionalization in the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire and in Europe as a whole, and thus for the relatively lesser significance of the differences, on which theories of German "deviations" (Sonderwege) from the path of the West have always rested.8

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8 This translates the term "Vorsatzezeit," which Schilling borrows from Reinhard Koselleck. Schilling, "Konfessionalisierung von Kirche, Staat und Gesellschaft," 5.


Like most large arguments about history, the confessionalization thesis required a shift from understanding—how contemporary witnesses saw their situations—to explanation—how the situations are to be understood in the hindsight of history. In this case, the shift transformed the several churches and religious communities—the Reformation’s most obvious products—from mutually exclusive, even hostile, bodies teaching mutually incompatible worldviews into similarly constructed bodies moving on parallel paths toward modernity. Multiple confessions thus resemble trains headed on parallel tracks for the same destination—modernity—on offset schedules. Their common destination and their common relationship to modern culture confirm their common historical character, whatever their spokespersons might have thought at the time.

Once formulated, this idea had to be debated. This happened at two conferences, one on “Reformed confessionalization,” organized by Heinz Schilling in 1985; the other on “Lutheran confessionalization” organized by the Tübingen historian Hans-Christoph Rublack in 1988. While the debates revealed a receptiveness on the part of many historians and theologians to the confessionalization thesis as a new paradigm, there were also those who defended the distinctiveness of doctrine and practice in the two confessions as essential to understanding their histories. At both conferences, the central debates turned on the issue of comparability vs. uniqueness. The concept of the Reformed confession as representing a “Second Reformation,” following the “First Reformation” of the Lutherans, seemed particularly unconvincing to those who saw it as reductive of the historical integrity of the Calvinist faith.

By this time, the notion of a “confessional age” was already well established. By the early 1980s the concept of confession was imported into Marxist historiography in East Germany, and in West Germany the concept was being employed to label a “confessional age.” Some years later appeared the first examples of the concept being applied in the context of the Protestant Reformation.
English work on confessionalization as “social discipline” and confessionalism as a culture, joined several years later by the first overview of confessionalization as a process in the German lands.14

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The confessionalization thesis, or “paradigm,” as Schilling has come to call it, arose, spread, and articulated itself in studies of Protestant Germany, where the fundamental comparability of the two confessions, Lutheran and Reformed, was assured by the use of common name “Protestant” and by the long series of unions, convergences, and mergers since 1800. To fit the Roman Catholic Church into this paradigm, which its acceptance outside Protestant Germany clearly required, proved a much tougher task. The model’s utility rested on comparability, and there was no possibility of treating medieval Catholicism as a confession. Not only could it not be understood in terms of confessionalization’s central marker – confessions, that is, elaborate statements of doctrine considered binding on all believers – it already possessed well-established comparators in Orthodox Christendom and Islam. The application of the confessionalization thesis to Catholicism, therefore, depended on its utility for the interpretation of the reformed Catholicism that began to spread through Europe since the Council of Trent, that is, in the last third of the sixteenth century. What made the task so daunting was that hardly any of post-Tridentine Catholicism’s markers – enhanced separateness of the clergy, strengthening of the episcopal office, the new religious orders, the revitalization of pilgrimages, confraternities, and Marian devotion, and the flowering of a new ecclesiastical style, the Baroque – possessed any obvious analogues in the Protestant confessions. On the other hand, the inability of historians of early modern Catholicism to agree on a defining concept – either “Counterreformation,” which emphasized the defense against Protestantism, or “Catholic Reformation,” which emphasized Catholic renewal – created an opening for a new paradigm.15

The fashioning of a version of the confessionalization thesis useful for comprehending Roman Catholicism was chiefly the work of the Augsburg (then Freiburg) historian Wolfgang Reinhard. His concepts arose not from study of the German territories, Schilling’s bailiwick, but – appropriate to his


subject—from his work on the reformed papacy and the broadly international world of early modern Catholicism. They led him to fashion, independently of Schilling, a new view of reformed Catholicism, which in 1977 he framed programmatically in four points:16

1. the concepts of “Counterreformation” and “Catholic Reform” are inadequate to designate an entire epoch of either German or European history, because they promote a false derivation of all historical processes from ecclesiastical history;

2. the conventional pseudo-dialectical antithesis of the supersession thesis—a progressive Reformation bound to supplant a reactionary Catholicism—cannot be justified historically, whether applied to the religious movements or to an entire epoch;

3. the movement of the Counterreformation proceeded parallel to and frequently in competition with the Reformation in the modernization of European society; and

4. the term “Confessional Age” is to be preferred for this era, because it supplants a chronologically based confessional antithesis with the idea of a parallel development, which makes it possible to understand the contemporary concept of “confession” in terms appropriate both to ecclesiastical history and to social history.

The convergence of their concepts led to a collaboration of Reinhard and Schilling in organizing yet a third conference, on “Catholic confessionalization,” at Augsburg in September 1993. A notable feature of this meeting was its joint sponsorship by the Society for the Edition of the Corpus Catholicorum and the Society for Reformation History, respectively the principal Catholic and Protestant learned societies devoted to the history of this era.17

It was not to be expected that this convergence of thinking about confessions and the confessional era would produce a model entirely acceptable to students of all confessions. Schilling recognized this in his introduction to the Augsburg volume. Reinhard’s concept, he pointed out, “can be entitled ‘confessionalization of the churches’ and mine ‘confessionalization of society.’”18 The difference fitted the respective milieu of origin, given the greater independence, deeper traditions, and international


engagement and claims of the Roman Catholic Church. In his conclusion to the Augsburg volume, Reinhard agreed with this assessment and refined the model he had presented some years before. He acknowledged the objection that “the concept of confessionalization leveled the real differences among the confessions, between country, and, finally, between individual cases,” which could be met only by affirming that “the accumulated knowledge about the overall process of confessionalization can make comprehension of confessional differences themselves much more extensive and more fundamental than before.” The Munich historian Walter Ziegler had disagreed and suggested that the absence of a break in theology and religious life made the question of a Catholic confessionalization pointless in principle. Reinhard replied that since the historian must affirm that all things change, so strong an assertion of continuity cannot be accepted, no more than can the assertion of a plurality of Catholicisms. The very possibility of applying the term “confession” to the Catholic Church, Reinhard saw, depended on recognizing the unique character of the post-medieval Church—a fact Leopold von Ranke had discovered in the late 1820s, more than 165 years before.

Reinhard’s quite imaginative concept of a confessionalization of the Church rather than of society preserved space for the “stresses and idiosyncrasies” of Catholicism that resisted generalization into an abstract model of confessionalization. His catalogue of these “propria,” as confessional peculiarities are known in the discourse of confessionalization, includes:

1. the binding of faith to the institution;
2. the binding of faith and religious life to tradition;
3. extensive capacities—the parish net, religious orders, collegial bodies, the hierarchy capped by the pope, and the continuity of canon law;
4. a clergy constituted as a legal estate;
5. the religious orders as agents of education and mission;
6. the mobilization of women for religious reform and charitable tasks;
7. the use of Latin as a liturgical language;
8. a superior international organization;
9. the ability to maintain a distinction between church and state;

10 extra-European missions—which had no Protestant parallels until the eighteenth century; and
11 a preservation and enhancement of traditional popular religion with its sensual attractions and emphasis on good works.

This very long list includes some of the most fundamental markers of the Roman Catholic Church, the relegation of which to "peculiarities" limits fairly drastically its capacity for comprehension in a general model of confessionalized Christianity. These differences lose some significance, however, the further the historians move away from the history of theology, doctrine and ritual and toward social history. Schilling, quite aware of this problem, tried to reduce one of the propria, Catholicism's supranational character, by internationalizing the entire thesis. Around 1990 he began to argue for confessionalization as a phenomenon not only of the internal articulation and strengthening of states and disciplining of societies, but also of the European system of international politics. Religion and confession, he concedes, contributed one "if an especially powerful factor in a multi-layered and multi-causal historical event"—the early formation of Europe's system of power politics, diplomacy, alliances, and war.24

The problem of the seeming irreducibility of the Catholic propria nonetheless remained, and it has colored the reception of the confessionalization thesis with respect to Catholic history. At first, the idea of an early modern parallelism among the confessions met with a warm response among some historians of early modern Catholicism, though it was always dogged by considerable skepticism. John Bossy made an opening with Christianity in the West, 1499-1700 (1985), in which he portrayed post-medieval Christianity as a single, if variegated, successor to medieval religion.25 During this era, he argued, the practical, affective, corporately social religion of medieval Catholicism gave way after 1400 to a more theorized, spiritualized, and individual Christianity, of which Protestantism and Catholicism represented two different but similar streams. Bossy expressed extreme wariness, however, about identifying the causes of this change, if any were to be sought outside religion itself. The migrations of holiness to the State, to music, and to texts, he concludes, may be envisaged as "signs of transition from an ethics of solidarity to one of civility. If we believe that a

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change in Christianity must be an effect of some other change thought to be
closer to the bone of human experience, we can point to the objectifying and
delimiting process as having eventuated, within this period, in modern
conceptions of property and the State; or, if we prefer, in a Holy Family which
excluded such non-resident kin as John the Baptist."26 Except for the state and
state-building, however, these changes "do not seem to evoke any convincing
motor event in the world of things: few, I guess, will be prepared to swallow
the proposal that the emergence of 'market society' was such an event."27

Fifteen years later, John W. O'Malley expressed a more skeptical attitude
toward the confessionalization thesis' adequacy to post-medieval Catholic
history. In Trent and All That (2000), he concluded from a review of the
national and ecclesiastical historiographies that neither "Catholic Counterreformation" nor "Catholic Reformation" had proved adequate to express the
great range of Catholic history in the early modern era. More
promising, he thought, is the confessionalization thesis, which "has brilliantly
captured and called our attention to the obsession gripping Western culture
to define 'who's in, who's out.'"28 He commended Wolfgang Reinhard for
pointing some of the thesis' limitations: its top-down bias, its obscuring of
continuities, and its minimization of differences. Yet fixing the thesis in the
century between 1550 and 1650 missed the critical era for defining Catholic
identity, notably in Germany, while the connection with state-building left
out the vast areas of the empire, mainly Catholic, which lacked centralizing
states. O'Malley's most severe criticism, however, was that the model's net
allowed to escape the one thing that distinguished confessions in the first
place—religion.29 This deficit led him to prefer the admittedly "bland and
faceless" but more capacious name of "early modern Catholicism" to all
competing terms.30 Not only more inclusive and less eurocentric, it makes
space for "history from below," the religious practice and mentalities of the
common people, whom the confessionalization thesis had treated chiefly as an
object of the disciplinary process.

O'Malley's thesis hits the nail on the head, and, as Mark R. Forster has
observed, "his methods and concerns, particularly his effort to grasp the
meaning of religious practices and rituals for the common people, need to be
better incorporated into the study of German Catholicism" in particular.31

26 Bossy, Christianity in the West, 169.
27 Bossy, Christianity in the West, 170.
28 John W. O'Malley, Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era
29 O'Malley, Trent and All That, 138–9.
30 O'Malley, Trent and All That, 140.
31 Marc R. Forster, "John Bossy and the History of German Catholicism," paper delivered
to the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference in 2002. The study of confessionalization and the
religious orders is a most pressing need, because of their role as agents of diffusion among the
Ironically, the inability to comprehend religion, the chief marker of confessionalization, as a set of coherent practices has proved the Achilles heel of the confessionalization thesis, particularly in its original version. Perhaps one could have listened more carefully to Ernst Walter Zeeden, whose studies of enduring Catholic elements in the religious life of German Protestants after the Reformation helped him to bring the very concept of “confessional formation” (Konfessionsbildung) into the historians’ vocabulary. His untheorized exploration of religious culture, his appreciation of the significance of visitation records for the study of religious change, and, above all, his sense for the necessity of a comparative history of the confessions pioneered the entire approach that led to the comparative study of confessions as religious formations. He thereby found for the post-Reformation era a counterpart to the sociologically oriented approach that has long dominated studies on the German reformation in its early, explosive phase.

Whereas practitioners of the confessionalization thesis have always worked from the elites downward, those of the new religious anthropology searched for the traditional and innovative elements in the religion of the common people, which meant practice rather than theology and doctrine. During the years when the confessionalization thesis was coming to maturity, the 1970s to the 1990s, the outstanding scholar of this alternative approach was the Australian Robert W. (“Bob”) Scribner whose premature death robbed the field of one of its brightest lights. Although he began to study the Reformation in terms of social movements, in the 1970s he turned away from all narratives, national, confessional, and social—all of which tried to fit the Protestant Reformation into the genealogy of the Enlightenment and modernity—and sought to understand why ordinary people had acted in ordinary ways to extraordinary effect. From data he turned to images, and one after the other he rediscovered the acts in which popular mentalities found expression—sacraments, magical practices, folkloric rituals, insult and shame, and rituals of violence. He explored, too, religious cosmologies, the great logics that bound these elements.

various sectors of Catholicism. See Hillard von Thiessen, Die Kapuziner zwischen Konfessionalisierung und Alltagskultur: Vergleichende Fallstudie am Beispiel Freiburg und Hildesheims 1599-1750 (Freiburg, 2002).

32 Ernst Walter Zeeden, Die Entstehung der Konfessionen. Grundlagen und Formen der Konfessionsbildung im Zeitalter der Glaubenskämpfe (Munich and Vienna, 1965). See also his Konfessionsbildung: Studien zur Reformation, Gegenreformation und katholischen Reform, Spätmittelalter und frühe Neuzeit, vol. 15 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985). To read Zeeden’s writings today is to discover why the confessionalization thesis arose in Germany, with its living confessional cultures, and why could do so only after confessionalism—the competition between Protestant and Catholic confessions—had come to an end in that country.

together, and came to understand how misleading was the conventional distinction between the mental worlds of the common people and their social superiors. The more Scribner explored this world with anthropological concepts, the less respect he felt for the grand narratives based on discriminations, and the more he appreciated the workings of the acts, images, and words that bound social worlds together. To Scribner, religion became not an aspect, a factor, or a function, it was the central subject of human history.

From this perspective, the centrality of religion and religious culture to premodern peoples, the confessionalization thesis truncated its story by closing an era just as its defining category, confessional religion, was approaching its great age. According to the thesis, religion should have become less important under the impact of secularization after 1650, whereas the reverse was more nearly the case. Not the sixteenth nor the seventeenth century, writes Etienne François in his study of the confessions in Augsburg, but the eighteenth century witnessed an acceleration of “the processes of differentiation, discrimination, and internalization, which anchored the respective confessional identities so deeply in patterns of mentality and behavior,” thus creating social and cultural dimensions “which expanded far beyond the religious sphere proper and explain its continuity down to our own day.” It is now being recognized that, in the German lands at least, the real peak of confessional cultures and their impact on public life probably fell during the nineteenth century, and it is becoming fashionable to refer to that century as a “second confessional age.” If in Germany, perhaps elsewhere, for the obvious features of German confessionalism represent but one configuration of the elements from which in other European countries the modern civil religions were fashioned. Indeed, Europe’s “confessional age” may well have lasted from 1550 to 1870—or even 1950!

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34 Zeeden, Die Entstehung der Konfessionen, 181, already recognized this point.
37 See the review article by Joel F. Harrington and Helmut Walser Smith, “Confessionalization, Community, and State Building in Germany, 1555–1870,” The Journal of Modern History 69 (1997): 77–101. Outside of German history, it is rare to find the term “confession” used as more than a descriptor without conceptual content. Such usage makes religion merely a traditional marker to be replaced in the modernization process by a more modern marker such as ethnicity or race. See, for an interesting example, Paul W. Werth, At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia’s Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905 (Ithaca, 2002).
These doubts, qualifications, and extensions hardly diminish the place the confessionalization thesis now occupies in the study of post-Reformation Germany and Europe. The thesis remains least problematic in the context—Zeeder's and Schilling's original field of study—of the German lands, which have been covered superbly by a seven-volume, region-by-region, territory-by-territory survey (with invaluable maps) edited by Anton Schindling and Walter Ziegler. Volumes have appeared, too, on confessionalization as a regional phenomenon. Conceptually more innovative than any of these is Ulrike Strasser's book on Bavaria, which takes the confessionalization paradigm into Catholic Bavaria, where she cleanses it from the remnants of secularization by demonstrating how central religious practice—from the piety of cloistered and married women up to the official cult of the Virgin Mary as patroness of Bavaria—was to the centralization of this most precocious of German territorial states.

Perhaps the most demonstrative sign of the confessionalization thesis' now established historiographical position is its use as a periodizing concept for German history in the tenth edition of Bruno Gebhardt's venerable *Handbook of German History*. Yet hard-boiled skeptics remain, even among historians of the German territorial states, who cultivate the thesis' original seedbed. Ernst Schubert of Göttingen, a leading scholar of the territories, holds that the territorial laws of this time, the crucial phase in the transformation of the old patrimonial principality into the territorial state, simply do not bear a confessional stamp. "Once the problem [of the rise of the territorial state] is untangled," he writes, "there remains, astonishingly, no strand which can be catalogued under the name of 'confessionalization.'" From the other

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direction, too, the connection between confessionalization and state-building has been challenged, notably by Marc Forster, who finds the growth of a Catholic confession in the politically luxuriant landscapes of southwestern Germany relatively untouched by the formation of strong states. Other studies, too, suggest that Catholic confessionalization had very little to do with either political or social modernization in the ecclesiastical states. The extension of the confessionalization thesis to new groups and new lands in- and outside the German-speaking world has required — just as did its adaptation to Catholicism — a loosening of the tie to state-development, a stronger emphasis on religion, and a questioning of the appropriateness of its dependence on modernization theory. In France confessionalization has become part of the historians’ vocabulary not only for early modern religious history but also as a term of periodization, but this has not altered the standard view of French social and political history. Much more surprising is an attempt to treat North German Mennonites — excluded as “non-confessional” by Schilling — as a confessionalized community. The original confessionalization thesis held that Mennonites and other sectarian groups were “non-confessional,” because, tolerated or not, they lay outside the crucial alliance between church and state. Once that link is set aside, confessionalization displays its full inherent power to become a descriptor for all Christian religious communities in early modern Europe.

The ideal forum for studying confessionalization in this non-political sense is the Dutch Republic, where both ecclesiastical establishment and state repression tended to be far weaker than in the German lands, France, or the British kingdoms. Benjamin Kaplan, in a study of Utrecht, writes that the “rise of confessionalism” had three aspects: the rebuilding of “ecclesiastical structures of religious life”; fierce competition for the doubters and unaffiliated; and the religious disciplining of congregations. All five of Utrecht’s churches — Calvinist, Remonstrant, Mennonite, Lutheran, and Catholic — “experienced the rise of confessionalism in its three aspects, and in

47 Michael D. Driedger, Obedient Heretics. Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age (Aldershot and Burlington, 2002).
this sense their development between 1600 and 1650 ran in parallel," though in other respects "the churches had divergent histories."48

The importation of the confessionalization thesis into East Central Europe has also been fraught with difficulties. At a conference held at Leipzig in 1997 to address the applicability of the thesis in its German form to the lands of East Central Europe, the weight of opinion fell definitely against the thesis, at least in its German form.49 There seemed, in the view of one participant, little belief in the comparability of the ecclesiastical and political structures of West and East Central Europe and even less interest in exploring interrelations between the everyday lives of the religious communities. Against this negative yield, however, Serhii Plokhy has attempted in a rich, provocative book to apply the confessionalization thesis to late sixteenth and seventeenth-century Ruthenian/Ukrainian religious history.50 This requires particularly strenuous adaptation, for the Ruthenians practiced the same religion in two different churches, Greek Catholic and Orthodox, and were divided politically between the Cossacks and the subjects of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Plokhy argues that confessionalization, as a phenomenon associated with the Reformation in Western Europe, also had a notable influence on the Orthodox lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.51 Responding to the challenge of the reformation in the west, "the Kyivan metropolitanate, which split into Uniate [Greek Catholic] and Orthodox branches, embarked on its own project of confessionalization." This was marked in both churches by greater dependence on the state, an expansion of hierarchical authority over discipline and faith, a new type of parish and monastic clergy educated abroad or in foreign-influenced schools, and a growing role for the laity elites in church affairs. Although Plokhy cites several of Schilling studies (plus some more general works), he might have preferred Reinhard's church-centered version of the confessionalization thesis, because the initiative came entirely from the church at Kiev/Kiev, where the metropolitan, Petro Mohyla (1596–1647), "was clearly intent on claiming the leadership of Ruthenian society and taking on a number of functions pertaining to the representation of the Ruthenian world that had earlier been carried out by the princely

50 Serhii Plokhy, The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine (Oxford and New York, 2002). Bořys A. Gudziak, Crisis and Reform: The Kyivan Metropolitanate, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Genesis of the Union of Brest (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), who examines much of the same history primarily from the Greek Catholic, rather than the Orthodox, side, does not employ the concept of confessionalization, much less the thesis.
51 Plokhy, Cossacks and Religion, 11.
stratum.” If this opening proves successful, it may produce a salutary revision to the structuralist overburden of the confessionalization thesis.

Something similar can be said of another newly invaded field, seventeenth-century Ireland. Ute Lotz-Heumann and Karl S. Bottigheimer have argued for the existence of a “double confessionalization,” Anglican and Roman Catholic, during the era of the War of the Three Kingdoms (1641–50). The Catholics, Irish and Old English (old-stock Anglo-Irish) fiercely resisted the English monarch’s military power and his established church, and did so with the help of their own church, whose agents introduced Tridentine Catholicism in Ireland. Of course, the confessionalization was not symmetrical, for the Irish Confederation of Kilkenny was by no stretch of the imagination a state, and the presence of Jesuits, a prime marker for Lotz-Heumann and Bottigheimer, and other priests trained on the continent did not prevent the Catholic Reformation from becoming “defined in terms of an ethnic tradition ... and transmitted through forms of religious expression which had their origins in the medieval Gaelic past.” The Irish case is nonetheless an interesting one, for while the confessionalization thesis in Schilling’s more state-centered version fits well the English state and the Anglican confessions, the Irish side conforms much better to Reinhard’s more church-centered argument, which allows for confessionalization without a disciplining state.

The general impact of the confessionalization thesis may be judged by its significance for conceptualizing the relationship of early modern to modern European history. No theorist has taken the thesis more seriously than has the American sociologist Philip Gorski. The thesis in its early stages contained a positive and a negative attitude to the theories of Max Weber: positive in its affirmation that modernization of society and the state was promoted ultimately by secularization; negative in its view that the Reformation promoted a necessary if temporary re-sacralization of state and society and fostered an ethic based on social discipline rather than on individual psychology. Gorski exploits

52 Plokhy, Cossacks and Religion, 240.
54 Samantha A. Meigs, The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400–1690 (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, and New York, 1997), 3. One might even argue that confessionalized Catholicism in the continental sense did not establish itself in Ireland much before 1850, when Paul Cullen (1803–78) came from Rome to assume the primatial office.
the confessionalization thesis (along with other cultural concepts) in a most important revision of the Marxist and Weberian theories of European state development that dominated the literature from the 1960s through the 1980s. "The formation of national states in early modern Europe (1517–1789)," he proposes, "was not solely the product of an administrative revolution driven by absolutist princes. It was equally the result of a disciplinary revolution sparked by ascetic religious movements, the most important of which was Calvinism." Gorski believes that a skeptical attitude is warranted toward theories that focus solely on elites, formal organization, or threats of coercion. He rejects the confessionalization thesis’ corollary that the confessions were somewhat differently configured bundles of the same set of religious ideologies, social movements, and political agendas, for he believes that the inter-confessional conflicts, not the common process of confessionalization, formed a “driving force” behind religious, social, and political development. In this he agrees with those, including many historians of Catholicism (and Anglicanism) who insist on the confessions’ "proprae," not their similarities, as the keys to understanding the historical significance of confessionalization. His object, however, is different. It is to preserve more of the thesis, which descends from Max Weber and Otto Hintze, that there are characteristic differences among the politics associated with the several confessions.

The differential disciplining powers of the confessions, in fact, stand at the heart of Gorski’s theory of state development in early modern Europe. He distinguishes two sectors of Europe, a highly urbanized Atlantic zone in the west and a sparsely settled agrarian region of central and eastern Europe. They are represented in his work respectively by the Dutch Republic from 1560 to 1650 and Prussia from 1640 to 1720. His selection is important, because Calvinism, the confession he believes — against Schilling — to have been most disciplining and most associated with revolution, or Pietism, which he holds to be an equivalent, became established in both states. But with quite different political consequence, because, so runs Gorski’s argument, “the successful disciplinary revolution led to the formation of republican states in the core region and made possible the construction of strong, centralized, monarchical states in the semiperiphery.” Of both types of political development, “the disciplinary revolution was a necessary condition.” Gorski thus attributes “a

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decisive causal import ... to Calvinism and ascetic Protestantism" in early modern social and political modernization. Their revolutionary political impact derived from a combination of a radical ethic of social discipline and an effective strategy of collective organization. "[...] The Calvinist movement," Gorski revises Weber, "provided the channel through which the discipline of the monastery entered the political world." That discipline was less individual than social, of course, and so was its confessionalized version.

The division of labor between the sociologist and the historian is a useful and salutary one. The sociologist aims primarily to construct a theory that is conceptually coherent and fits the data as well as may be; the historian aims primarily to understand what the sources have to tell and to explain it in terms which may be partial, so long as they fit the sources. Consistency on the one side, authenticity on the other. The sociologist looks upon the concepts in terms of their logic; the historian in terms of their utility.

It is appropriate to end by looking at a historian's work of fine utility. The chief study by the late Bodo Nischan, to whose memory this volume is dedicated, is his Prince, People, and Confession: The Second Reformation in Brandenburg. It is the story of how the Lutheran reformation came to Brandenburg under Elector Joachim II in the 1540s, and how a second, Reformed (Calvinist) reformation failed to succeed it in a struggle unleashed by the decision of his great-grandson, Elector Johann Sigismund to announce himself a Calvinist in 1613. It is set, therefore, in the very cockpit of the world, the interface between the two Protestant confessions, out of which one version of the confessionalization thesis arose. Nischan pays homage to the confessionalization thesis as Heinz Schilling framed it and acknowledges the term "Second Reformation" as "a proper synonym specifically for 'Reformed confessionalization.'" Yet Nischan chooses a somewhat divergent way, for he holds that "religion — how people worshiped and how they lived their faith, the history of the church — played a central role in these events and hence provides a key to our understanding of this period." Stripped of the teleological tendency that the confessionalization thesis borrowed from modernization theory, religion rises into the foreground of the story — much

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60 Gorski, "The Protestant Ethic Revisited," 305.
62 I allude here to what Max Weber called "sinnegerecht" and "sachgerecht" respectively.
64 Nischan, Prince, People, and Confession. 2.
65 Nischan, Prince, People, and Confession, 1.
as historians of early modern Catholicism have insisted it must. “I have tried to show,” Nischan writes, “how church ritual and ceremony — especially the communion liturgy — provide a handy litmus test for the mentality of both princes and people involved in these confessional confrontations.”66 From such an approach the history of the confessions must unfold not as a story of isomorphic programs and parallel development, but as one of confrontation, discrimination, and struggle. But Nischan does not recreate a straight fight between the two Protestant confessions, for resurgent Catholicism arrives on this northern landscape to provoke not a lessening but a sharpening of the conflicts between the Reformed and Lutheran confessions. “During the Second Reformation,” Nischan relates, “with the Calvinist court trying to give the Mark [of Brandenburg] a clearer, more Protestant identity to steel it in its struggle against the resurgent Catholic church, the old ritual and ceremonial were repudiated as leftover ‘papal dung,’ but ... defended by the country’s Lutherans as a sign of true evangelical orthodoxy.”

It was Bodo Nischan’s achievement to restore the taste of religious fealty and combative stalwartness to the story of a major engagement among the three confessions. The tale is true to the sources,67 but it does not say how these events might be significant for our understanding of what came after. That is roughly what Philip Gorski has in mind, and we can wish that future historians will at least meet him halfway. Yet it is difficult to imagine that the two duties — explanation and understanding — can be equally well served. “Subjects which do not admit of such a relation to the present,” Ernst Troeltsch once wrote, “belong [merely] to the antiquarian.”68 History without explanation may please, but it has no utility. But how valuable can an explanation be which is not rooted in understanding? We historians want to speak, wrote Arthur J. Quinn,

to these shades from time gone, some demanding our attention, some reluctant to have it, some long thwarted into abject silence, ... yet all there somehow, geniuses of a certain time and a certain place, and all strangely requiring only a little of our blood to return to fleeting life, to speak to and through us. For they do wait for us, you know, not as the faint spoor of long-vanished existence, but as real persons, real yet speechless until some questioning voice dissolves the spell of their silence.69

66 Nischan, Prince, People, and Confession, 2.
67 The sources, however, do not really support his contention that “the people” played a central role in the failure of the Reformed Reformation in Brandenburg.
68 Troeltsch, Protestantism and Progress, 17.
69 Arthur Quinn, A New World: An Epic of Colonial America from the Founding of Jamestown to the Fall of Quebec (Boston, 1994), 2.