Summer 1996

(Review) Communities and Conflict in Early Modern Colmar, 1575-1730

Marc R. Forster
Connecticut College, mrfor@conncoll.edu

(Review) Communities and Conflict in Early Modern Colmar, 1575-1730

Keywords
Colmar, Germany, politics, confessionalization

Comments
Initially published in *Sixteenth Century Journal,* 27 no 2 Sum 1996, p 547-549.

http://www.jstor.org/stable/2544189

as significant as the texts. The construction of a converso text in its very nature further removes the significance of the author, who consciously attempts to remain hidden.

Yet the real thrust of this book is that these converso texts are consciously crafted works, that is, they are, "in the eye of the Inquisition," defiant statements by conversos. By removing the author from the work this sense of consciousness that is so central to the book seems compromised. How do we know that these authors really intended their Jewish readers to read their work in a certain way? Many of the examples that Nepaulsingh gives could certainly be interpreted in more than one "Jewish" way, that is, they could have very different significance for different Jews. And Jews are not all the same, despite the fact that Nepaulsingh seems to want to assume that they are. He concedes that "Jews and conversos were as varied a group of human beings as any other group," but he also asserts often such statements as "most Jews would remember a story about someone suffering slavery, whether justified or not, in Egypt, and compare it with the story of their own people...." Even if this is true, Nepaulsingh would still need to present something more of the Jewish *mentalité* of the period to show that such is the case. Background information on the Inquisition and persecution of the Jews is not sufficient. What is equally perplexing is that Nepaulsingh asserts that Jews—again, it seems, all Jews—were multicultural readers, while Christians—he means inquisitors—were monocultural. And this after hundreds of years of living in something of a multicultural world? Here the problem is that Nepaulsingh slips back and forth between modern theories of reading and modern multiculturalism and the actual world of the sixteenth century. While he does utilize an impressive array of early modern, especially linguistic and literary, sources, it is clear that his work would have benefited from a more developed discussion of who sixteenth century Spaniards or Jews were, and how and why they would have written and read the way that they did. If in fact Nepaulsingh is correct in his central thesis, this work is not only interesting, but it is also important. To this end it would have been helpful if he had drawn out some of the consequences of his results, beyond the call to read multiculturally and the realization that texts often hide internal meanings not readily apparent from an external reading of them.

In the end, this book is eminently worth reading and an exciting addition from an excellent scholar of medieval Spanish literature. The results of the research contained within, however, could have been more amply presented and in a more extensive setting.

Dean Phillip Bell ..... Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies

Communities and Conflict in Early Modern Colmar: 1575–1730. Peter G. Wallace. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995. 299 pp. n.p.

Peter Wallace has written a very ambitious book about early modern Colmar. He examines the interplay of politics, society, economy, and religion over a complicated century-and-a-half period; as if that were not enough, he also engages the concerns and interests of both the French and German historians.

The ambitiousness of the project is one of its strengths. The chronological framework is very large. Wallace examines developments in Colmar before, during, and beyond the Thirty Years' War, something that remains rare in German city studies. By using a variety of serial records, especially tax and parish registers, he identifies Colmar's elite and traces their economic power and confessional loyalties over the whole period of the study.

Like any good study of this scope, the author makes several important points, one of them being the character of Colmar's ruling elite: it was small in size and was united by family and professional ties. As in most German cities, Colmar's magistrates were obsessed with main-

taining civic peace. As a result, after the "Reformation from above" of 1575, the magistrates tolerated a Catholic minority while quickly repressing any dissent from their less powerful fellow citizens.

If Wallace's discussion of politics within Colmar reinforces what we know about early modern cities, his presentation of Colmar's response to the rapidly shifting political conditions on the upper Rhine in the seventeenth century breaks new ground. One is most impressed by the adaptability of Colmar's ruling families. In the 1630s, these families survived an aggressive Counter-Reformation, with only minor shifts in the makeup of the magistracy. Later, after the French takeover in 1673, both Lutheran and Catholic magistrates learned to adapt to French rule.

Wallace demonstrates effectively how members of Colmar's oldest families abandoned "traditional civic politics," which were characterized by a belief in representation and mutually sworn oaths. By the turn of the eighteenth century, Colmar's magistrates had become officials of Louis XIV's administration; many of them also became bilingual and learned how to exploit systems of patronage to "access ... wealth and influence in the swelling Bourbon state ... through investment in public debt, venal offices, and tax farming." Finally, Wallace argues that Colmar's political elite willingly adopted this new political culture, and "served as the translators between the royal government and the king's subjects."

The political changes in Colmar contrast with the social and economic stability of the city. This part of Wallace's study also reinforces what historians have long known about the seventeenth century. The Thirty Years' War and the wars of Louis XIV destroyed Colmar's modest place in long-distance trade, but did not radically alter the professional or social balance in the city. Merchants and wealthy guildsmen, now restricted to a more "provincialized" economy, continued to control the city's economy as they did its politics. Colmar's social structure, like its economy, remained stable despite the many wars. In the century after 1650, despite French rule, Colmar was one of Mack Walker's "German Hometowns."

The final theme of this book is a study of the two confessional communities in Colmar. The author's focus is political, in that he traces the confessional allegiance of Colmar's ruling elite, and social, in that he studies the professional and geographical distribution of the two confessional communities. Here, too, one is impressed by the adaptability of the political elite of Colmar. An almost completely Protestant ruling class admitted Catholics to their circles when the French government demanded the inclusion of more Catholics in the magistracy. Socially and professionally the two confessional communities mixed quite easily. The author has carefully identified some increased neighborhood segregation of the two communities in the seventeenth century, but there were in fact consistently peaceful interactions between Catholics and Protestants.

Wallace does not clearly identify the outlines of a process of "confessionalization" before 1730. His analysis of immigration, neighborhood segregation, and the wealth of each confessional community tells a story that is as much about toleration and coexistence as it is about religious division and conflict. This is not surprising; first, he may miss key aspects of Colmarians' confessional identity because he does not analyze their religious and cultural experience; second, Etienne François, *Die unsichtbare Grenze*, shows that the general population, specifically of Augsburg, did not develop a self-conscious confessional identity until the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Perhaps the history of eighteenth-century Colmar is necessary for the complete story of confessionalization.

The argument that Colmar remained a "German Hometown" while being integrated into the French state is instructive, as is the discussion of confessionalization in the context of the French monarchy's support of Catholicism. Indeed, such arguments are possible only because this book successfully employs methods of both German and French historiography.

Studies of Alsace often serve to bridge the continuing gap between historiographical traditions. Wallace's book is part of this endeavor; a wide range of early modern historians will find it illuminating and thought provoking.

Marc R. Forster ..... **Connecticut College**

The World of the Rural Dissenters, 1520-1725. Edited by Margaret Spufford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 459 pp. $79.95.

A recent trend in the historiography of the English Reformation has been to de-emphasize both its Protestantism and its popularity. Readers of Christopher Haigh's *English REformations* (1993) are left wondering how the dynamic and diverse Protestantism of seventeenth-century England could have emerged out of the stunted, narrow, and unpopular series of religious changes that Haigh calls reformations which occurred during the sixteenth century. It is an incomplete explanation that leaves the reader dissatisfied. Fortunately Margaret spufford and a group of eight of her students or like-minded scholars have begun to fill that conceptual void with this collection of essays. volumes of essays, even when organized around a common theme, tend to b disjointed and uneven. This one, however, comes together quite nicely into an integrated whole although its various essays are also capable of standing on their own.

Several important points emerge time and time again in the various essays. First, religious dissenters came from all levels of the social hierarchy, excluding the titled nobility and the lowest vagrants. Lollards, Quakers, Baptists, and other dissenters could be poor or they could be quite well-to-do, or they could belong somewhere in the middle. The studies of Derek Plumb on Lollards and Bill Stevenson on post-Restoration dissenters show that the social profile of these groups was quite similar to that of the surrounding society. Christopher March studies of the Family of Love finds that they tended to come more from the upper reaches of parish society although not exclusively. The point is that religious dissent was not confined to any particular social group such as either the poor and ignorant or the emerging bourgeoisie of the parishes. Another important point that these studies reveal is that dissenters, whether Lollards, Familialists, Baptists, or Quakers, were not a despised minority alienated from the rest of society. Instead, members of dissenting groups tended to be remarkably well integrated into their local communities, serving as churchwardens, witnessing wills, giving alms, and generally participating in the greater society. They may have tightly organized their religious dissent within their families and households to ensure its survival but they still did not neglect their obligations to their neighbors. The work of Nesta Evans and Peter Spufford shows that many of these religious nonconformists were deeply rooted in their local communities. Lollards of the Chiltern Hills of Buckinghamshire were literally the ancestors of the Quakers and Baptists living there almost two centuries later. Disssenters did not move around nearly as much as the general population. Instead they served as the pillars of their local communities so that, as Peter Spufford so eloquently puts it, "[t]hey did not need to be tolerated, for the ... were so integrated into the fabric of society that they themselves could set the tone of what and who wa or was not to be tolerated." These dissenters were also not isolated from the greater nation either, as the essays of Tessa Watt and Michael Frearson show. The existing network of roads and inns made the Chilterns of Buckinghamshire an important conduit of the carrying trade to and from London. Even Familialist Balsham parish in Cambridgeshire had good access to itinerant peddlers, who frequently carried religious works. The volume closes with a brief, magisterial essay by Patrick Collinson which praises those aspects of the volume that have convinced him of their validity and points out those parts which he found inadequate.