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Review of Ines Peper's *Konversionen im Umkreis des Wiener Hofes*

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Konversionen im Umkreis des Wiener Hofes um 1700. By INES PEPER. Pp. 378. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, vol. 55. Wien: Böhlau. 2010. €39.80. ISBN: 978-3-486-59225-2

The nature of conversions in early modern Europe has attracted the attention of historians for quite some time. While most accounts investigate conversions to Protestantism or Judaism, Ines Peper's study is devoted to the examination of conversions to Catholicism in Viennese court circles. She attempts to establish the nature of the confessional boundaries crossed by these conversions and the difficulty of transition that they represented. The first chapter considers the political context of princely conversions around 1700. By the early eighteenth century only two Protestant Electors were left, those of Brandenburg and Hannover, and many traditionally Protestant dynasties had members who had converted to Catholicism. Unlike converts before and since, most gave an account of their change of creed in strictly rational terms by reference to the ecclesiology and doctrinal stability of Catholicism. Hardly any account refers to conversion 'experiences'. Other reasons for a change of religion were provided by the improved chances of gaining influence in the *Reich* that it afforded; although one could make a career as a Protestant, the highest positions in the Habsburg lands were reserved for Catholics. Thus, it comes as no surprise to find that the junior princes of Protestant houses converted to Catholicism in order to advance socially and to escape the disadvantages that

attended adherence to their native religion. In Vienna, not only the Imperial court but also the papal nuncio were interested in proselytizing Protestant princes — often supported by the curial congregation *De Propaganda Fide*, which frequently granted dispensations that allowed the converts to receive the chalice at mass. It seems, however, doubtful whether Leibniz's reunification project, which the author regards as an important reason for many to convert, had in fact such a profound influence.

The second chapter provides an overview of confessional politics in the Habsburg lands. A shrewd political move of the Habsburgs was to allow new Catholics to claim their inheritance of property rights, for which they would have otherwise had to wait, from the moment of their conversion. This brought many Protestant families close to bankruptcy. The protests of the *Corpus Evangelicorum* against such measures and against the kidnapping of children who were forced to undergo Catholic religious education were usually without effect. So-called 'conversion houses' were established where obstinate Protestants were forced to become Catholic; the euphemistic designation does not describe the reality of what were in effect prison camps that seem to have had a lot in common with a *gulag* (p. 66). Motivated by her own profound spirituality, Empress Eleonora Magdalena endowed a fund for the support of financially disadvantaged converts or of those who had lost their possessions or positions through a change of religious belief to Catholicism. Compared to other European funds of this kind (for example, in Spain), it was started relatively late and was unusually well endowed.

Short biographies of converts in Viennese court circles are presented in chapter three, while the most important part of the book is the fourth chapter, which considers the conversion (1707) of Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, in anticipation of her proposed marriage with Charles III of Spain/Charles VI of Austria. Her grandfather had asked not only the theologians of the University of Helmstedt but also Gerard Molanus, Christian Thomasius, and Leibniz for their theological opinions on her proposed reception into the Catholic Church. Would she forfeit her salvation as a baptized Christian? Could the marital proposal of the Viennese court be taken as a sign of divine providence? From sixteen theologians, the duke received nine positive answers that insisted that the princess would not risk eternal damnation because Catholics shared with Protestants the essential beliefs of Christianity. However, certain conditions had to be met: her education in Catholic theology had to be free of any anti-Protestant polemics and she was not to be forced to condemn her original Protestant belief as heresy.

Chapter five investigates these theological evaluations as well as the publication of pamphlets which were prompted by the conversion. The report of Hermann von der Hardt was the most purely rational and least affected by doctrinal considerations. For him, Christianity consisted in nothing more than 'doing penance, believing the gospel, avoiding evil, doing good [. . .]' (p. 165). Religious requirements in excess of these essentials were, in his view, the inventions of human ingenuity and accordingly without force. Thomasius and Leibniz stressed the fact that most Protestant theologians did not believe that Catholics were denied salvation. Thomasius even allowed confessional adherence to be entirely decided by reference to obligations towards the state and the fulfilment of the needs of a profession — a teaching that is consistent with his separation of political from religious activity. Peper rightly describes these irenic tendencies among Protestant theologians, including Martin Mulsow, as 'transconfessionalism' or 'indifferentism', in so far as these ideas rejected exclusivist claims to salvation and marginalized doctrinal differences. However, Peper's assertion that 'not a few' Christians around 1700 followed the irenic theologians remains unsubstantiated, since the small number of 'transconfessional' reports to which she refers does not provide an adequate basis for such a far-reaching claim. This chapter also illustrates the most important shortcoming of the book — a lack of rigour and accuracy in Peper's analysis of theological opinions. When, for example, she cites Leibniz's unpublished report and refers to the Catholic theologians who, he claims, supported his irenic stance, the reader is provided with no account of their identity. Moreover, in the footnote to the same paragraph in which she makes this reference to Leibniz, Peper

anachronistically describes such Catholic thinkers as ‘liberal theologians’ (p. 166). Peper claims that bishop Bossuet taught that the mass only commemorates the sacrifice of the cross imaginatively (p. 176), a proposition that would suggest that he denied or at least doubted the truth of the doctrine of the real presence. However, in *Exposition of the Catholic Faith* Bossuet defends the exact opposite view, namely that the mass is the time-machine-like re-presentation of the sacrifice of the cross. Peper also fails to give the names of the authors of the important theological lexicon articles she quotes — a fundamental lapse. The last two chapters analyse a wide number of pamphlets published between 1650 and 1720 that touch upon various aspects of the debate about conversions, including the question of the impediments to conversion and the development of confessional ‘mentalities’.

Although it is understandable why the author focused throughout the book on conversions in court circles, her many references to conversions among the lower orders would have warranted at least a short discussion as to how such cases differed from those of people placed at a higher social level, scholars and nobles (pp. 18 and 21). Was the conversion of a merchant a bigger ‘social drama’ than confessional change for a scholar, or what was merely a change in ‘social practice’ for a prince? Peper argues convincingly how unhelpful it is to differentiate between ‘true’ and ‘opportunistic’ conversions and reminds us that conversions around 1700 were, unlike those of the mid-nineteenth century, motivated by rational arguments or career opportunities and not by mystical experiences. Moreover, she demonstrates that the converts’ own accounts of the reasons for their change of confession employ rhetorical and self-serving arguments designed to demonstrate the consistency of their decision that historians all too often take at face value. Although the extent of the irenic movement was probably much smaller than she argues, the author establishes that conversions did not necessarily give rise to polemical exchanges but were, in many cases, the basis for genuine ecumenical discussion.

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