9. Konfessionsbilder

The Process of Enforcing Confessional Identity in Early Modern Lutheran Territories

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Abstract

In the seventeenth century, Lutheran ecclesiastical authorities commissioned Konfessionsbilder (images depicting the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, 1530 and illustrations of Lutheran ecclesiastical life). These images help illuminate the theory of “confessionalization,” especially in light of the particular anti-Reformed emphasis of the paintings. These paintings reveal a concern for the rise of Reformed theology, prompted by the Peace of Westphalia, in the century and a half before the rise of the Prussian Union Church (1817).

Keywords: Lutheran Orthodoxy, confessionalization, Augsburg Confession, Konfessionsbild, ecclesiastical art
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the paintings, known as *Konfessionsbilder*, used in German Lutheran congregations in the seventeenth century as a means to reinforce the religious identity of those communities over against Roman Catholics and especially the Reformed. The existence of these paintings underlines the thesis of confessionalization since they reveal a conscientious effort to create specific religious identities and practices. In particular, these images should be viewed primarily for their anti-Reformed emphasis. The images reinforce a self-consciously Lutheran theological identity in light of the political changes (viz., toleration for Calvinist theology) wrought by the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Tangential to supporting this thesis, we will also identify the dominant theological themes of Lutheranism in this period as well as demonstrate the anti-iconoclasm of continental Lutheranism.

Context

Before we can delve into this topic, we have to establish a certain specialized vocabulary and particular historical setting. The time period in question is often called the Age of (Lutheran) Orthodoxy, ca. 1580 (with the formation of the *Book of Concord*) through the rise of Pietism in the late seventeenth-century (Philip Jacob Spener’s *Pia desideria* was published in 1675). This is a difficult age to describe without bias, as for some it was a period of ossification and stale Protestant scholasticism and for others it was the zenith of creativity when Lutherans and the Reformed were able to develop their own identities, even if mutually exclusive of each other. However, it is fair to say that this period of Lutheran Orthodoxy was a time of renewed confidence in Lutheran territories: the ecclesiastical structures survived the death of Luther and Melanchthon, the bitter intra-Lutheran debates that followed, the reunification efforts of Emperor Charles V, and the re-conquest efforts of Tridentine Catholicism. Likewise, Lutheranism now had the support of territorial princes whose legal right to exist was officially acknowledged within the Holy Roman Empire. This was a time to build and reaffirm a particularly Lutheran culture; though in fairness, we must remember that each side was building and affirming their understanding of the pure and true Christian faith. Thus, the theology of the Lutheran church, with its liturgical and artistic sensibilities, was given unmediated room to grow (see Spicer; Kolb).

The Peace of Augsburg (1555) ended Emperor Charles V’s efforts to restore religious uniformity in the Empire. Though he waged a very successful military campaign, he learned the woes of many a military occupier: holding the peace was harder than winning the war. The ensuing Peace of Augsburg established the legal equality of two confessions: Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism; Calvinists and the Anabaptists were still identified as heretics without legal standing. Territorial princes determined the religion within their realm (*cuius regio, eius religio*; “Whose realm, his religion”). Likewise, if an ecclesiastical leader changed his religious affiliation, he was allowed to resign while the property and affairs of the ecclesiastical estate remained in the hands of the religious confession that held control in 1555.

The period between 1555 and 1618 saw the consolidation of Lutheran ecclesiastical life and regional liturgical and confessional conformity. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648)
brought a brief time of chaos (with horrible famine, pestilence, and death). The tragedy of that time, however, in light of our interest, did not disrupt the self-identity of these Lutheran territories. With the ratification of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the principles of the previous Peace of Augsburg were reaffirmed – with one significant development: Calvinism (once limited to southern Germany and the Swiss Cantons outside the Empire) was now one of the officially tolerated religious confessions in the Empire (alongside Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism). Given the time period that the Konfessionsbilder were made and the distinct practices they upheld, it is my thesis that they should be viewed primarily for their anti-Reformed emphasis in Lutheranism.

The concern over the growing influence of Calvinism was not abstract. Moreover, religious identity was tied to political power; political decisions had confessional consequences and vice versa. Though Lutherans were a solid majority in the northern and eastern territories of the Holy Roman Empire, there were small (but significant) pockets of Calvinism, primarily in the west (e.g., The Palatinate, Hesse-Nassau, and Hesse-Kassel) and growing in the east (especially in Anhalt and Brandenburg). These were viewed as Calvinist incursions into Lutheran supremacy over Protestantism within the Empire. There were some significant conversions within the heartland of Lutheran Orthodoxy. In 1582, the Roman Catholic Archbishop-Elector of Cologne, Gebhard von Waldburg, took a mistress, Agnes von Mansfeld-Eisleben, the Protestant Canoness of Abbey Gerresheim. When, after a few years of intimacy, Agnes’ brothers convinced Gebhard to do the honorable thing, he announced the wedding date and that he and Agnes were both converting to Calvinism – and that he intended to bring the Archdiocese of Cologne with him. Obviously, Rome scoffed and deposed him.

In 1606, John Sigismund, the Elector of Brandenburg (an overwhelmingly Lutheran territory) converted to Calvinism. In 1613, he organized a plan to force a constitutional crisis and declare Brandenburg a Calvinist territory. His fiercest opponent was his wife, Anna of Prussia. When John Sigismund announced his plan to proceed over the objections of the Lutheran Consistory, an angry mob demonstrated outside the palace gates and eventually stormed the building – while Anna of Prussia encouraged them from an open window! A compromise was reached in which the ruling Hohenzollern family was allowed to be either Lutheran or Calvinist (most were the latter) but would not try again to move the religious identity of the people. In 1685, John Sigismund’s descendant, the Elector Frederick William, accepted 14,000-20,000 Huguenot refugees (with the Edict of Potsdam, a reaction to the Edict of Fontainebleau), much to the chagrin of Lutheran ecclesiastical authorities.

And so, these Konfessionsbilder stand as a witness to the true Christian (that is, Lutheran) faith, serving to educate and encourage a Lutheran populace. With the relative liberalization of social and political norms for Calvinists within the Empire, these images represent an effort by Lutheran ecclesiastical authorities to make sure that the religious boundaries were still enforced. I will present a sampling of images and some commentary on their context, content, and continuity with each other.

Confessionalization

As a final word about the immediate context of this time period, some reflection is in order about the methodology used. In the early 1990s, social historian Bodo Nischan coined
the term “confessionalization” (see Headley and Hillerbrand; Irene Dingel’s work on confessionalization at http://www.controversia-et-confessio.de). That is, after the religious wars and their resolutions in 1555 and 1618, the ecclesiastical authorities of Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism in the Holy Roman Empire (and Calvinists in the Swiss territories and the Netherlands) used their political and social influence to reinforce boundaries of religious identity to define and highlight that which made them unique and distinct from the “other.” In turn, political authorities supported this effort for the social uniformity and economic stability that came with it. Churches used “social-disciplining” through mandatory participation in worship and religious festivities and endorsed piety (such as fasting during Lent and Saturday confessions – even in Lutheran territories).

In the process of confessionalization, it was not a simple matter of point and counter-point (i.e., if they say X, we say the opposite). Rather, it was often a matter of exceeding (or at least matching) excellence. I have in mind here architecture and liturgy. The baroque age influenced Roman Catholics and Lutherans alike. The situation in Dresden is illustrative. In 1727, the Lutheran Consistory tore down the old Romanesque Frauenkirche to build a new edifice in the latest baroque style, complete with an impressive dome and massive Silbermann organ. Twelve years later, when the Lutheran Elector of Saxony converted to Roman Catholicism in an effort to become the King of Poland, he had to make a sign of good and sincere faith. So, he built the beautiful Hofkirche in the baroque style (with the requisite Silbermann organ) on the banks of the Elba. Each stands as an Ethel Merman-esque testimony to the “anything you can do I can do better” spirit of the age. And speaking of music, there was that same spirit of competition in musical forms, with the best Lutheran church musicians studying the works of Roman and Venetian composers to inform their own rich liturgical offerings (see Frandsen).

The Augsburg Confession

The central theme of all Konfessionsbilder is the presentation of a summary theological statement (which became known as the Augsburg Confession) from the Lutheran princes to Emperor Charles V at the Imperial Diet of 1530. With the 500th anniversary of the Reformation around the corner, we might think the singular and romantic image of Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the church door as the defining image. This is a modern impulse (as indeed the story of nailing the theses to the door seems also to be an invention). When Lutherans of the seventeenth and eighteenth century thought of the defining moment of “Lutheranism,” it was when the articles of faith describing the true Christian religion and practice were presented at Augsburg. The Imperial Diet, in hindsight, marked a decisive break with the Roman Catholic Church. Prior to 1530, edicts against the Protestant territories were promulgated and then nearly immediately rescinded. There was hostility, to be sure, and many harsh words were exclaimed. Yet, it was not self-evident that one party could not persuade the other (either by words or by force). The Imperial Diet at Augsburg gathered all of secular and ecclesiastical estates of the Empire to decide how to move forward; a papal legate was also in attendance.

Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560), a colleague of Martin Luther at the University of Wittenberg who served on both the Arts and Theology faculties, led the Evangelical delegation. Melanchthon and his fellow delegates (which did not include Luther, who waited
just over the border in Coburg because of the imperial ban) drafted a document presenting their beliefs. The document was conciliatory in tone and divided into two halves. The first half emphasized those things that Lutheran theologians and those loyal to Rome shared in common (such as the affirmation of the Creeds, retaining the Mass, an understanding of sacraments and the church, and condemnation of the Anabaptists). The second half gave an account of abuses that had been corrected with a brief rationale for those changes (these include the marriage of clergy, allowing monks and nuns to break their vows, and the confusion between justification and good works). The document was signed by the Protestant princes as a correct description of their confession of faith (though four imperial cities, with Reformed influence, could not agree to the statement). Though the negotiations between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic delegates at the Diet ended in failure, the Augsburg Confession (or, the Augustana) took on a normative status within the Church in Lutheran territories.

**Konfessionsbilder**

The primary purpose of the paintings is didactic; it is to teach the faithful common practices of the true faith, in contrast to the faith of their Reformed and Roman Catholic neighbors. From the Lutheran self-understanding, the true catholic and apostolic faith was reaffirmed and restored at the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1530; this true testimony was made before the Emperor himself. The paintings represent a bold moment, when Lutheran princes and theologians were tried and found to be true. The paintings hung in parish churches, though the original placement of the paintings is not always easy to discern, given church renovations necessitated by age, circumstance (e.g., war), and preference. However, in places where their historical placement is known, it has been on the west, choir side, clearly visible as one approaches the altar or faces the pulpit — perhaps even where a preacher could gesture to it during a sermon. And so, the first understanding of a Konfessionsbild (an image/depiction of faith) is a snapshot in time when the articles of faith were presented to the Emperor.

And yet, even a cursory glance reveals that there is a more going on. In the periphery of the main scene, we see illustrative details of the liturgical life of the Lutheran Church. We see: the Eucharist, Baptism, private Confession, preaching, and the examination of candidates for ordination. All of these are described in the Augsburg Confession (see Kolb and Wengert). So, a second way to understand Konfessionsbild is as an image of the true Christian faith in practice, as revealing not just a moment but also the content of the articles of faith. The images present orthodoxy and orthopraxis (e.g., people receiving both the consecrated bread and wine in the Eucharist). This second understanding is underlined in light of the fact that further realities of Lutheran parish life are illustrated that are not mentioned in the Augsburg Confession, such as marriage, catechetical instruction, music (viz., singing and playing the organ), and ringing bells. Simon Kremp has shown that, in the case

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1 Baptism (Article 9); the Lord’s Supper (Article 10 and 24); Confession (Articles 11, 12, & 25); Preaching (Article 5); and Ordination (Article 14).

2 These are not topics in the Augsburg Confession, not because they were unimportant but because they were not matters of controversy between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. Marriage is referred to tangentially under the controversial topic of the marriage of clergy (Article 23). Music is referred to tangentially in Articles 15 and
of the Konfessionsbild in Schorndorf (Figure 1), the presentation of the faith is supplemented with reference to the church orders of the regional churches (in this case, the Church Order for Württemberg, 1559). Moreover, the images give us a sense of other practical yet implicit matters in church life, such as the reception of both kinds in the Eucharist (see Article 25), the use (or not) of vestments, and the segregation (or lack of it) of men and women in catechesis and the reception of Communion.  

![Figure 1. Schorndorf (St. Stephen’s Church), dated 1645.](image)

In this regard (as presentations of true faith and praxis) the Konfessionsbilder of the seventeenth century have roots in the sixteenth century. One brief example is an altarpiece designed by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1547 (a year after Luther’s death) for St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg (Figure 2). Here we see three core Christian practices: Baptism, Eucharist, and Confession — all founded upon the preaching of Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23). Here we have a simple yet clear visual representation of Lutheran identity in the principle and practice of Word and Sacrament ministry. The altarpiece echoes a

24). Catechesis is not listed per se, but it is at the heart of the reform movements; see the Lutheran Visitatio Articles (1528 and again in 1592), the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, as well as the continued importance of catechetical sermons in parish life.

3 In many cases, the clergy depicted in the Konfessionsbilder are wearing cassock and surplice (and in a few instances, clerical hats – an early form of birettas). However, in the wider depiction of Lutheran worship, a standard use of historic vestments is apparent (see Schatz).

4 The historical role of Private Confession within the Lutheran tradition is strong, although it has not named Confession a sacrament. Early Lutheranism seemed to have treated it as such but later (following Luther himself) viewed Confession as a renewal of the promises given at Baptism.
propaganda broadsheet by the same artist of the same year, entitled “Die Unterschied zwischen dem evangelischen und katholischen Gottesdienst” (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Altar, St. Mary’s, Wittenberg; Lucas Cranach the Younger (1547).

Figure 3. “Die Unterschied zwischen dem evangelischen und katholischen Gottesdienst”; Lucas Cranach the Younger (ca. 1545)
According to Wolfgang Brückner, there are three significant styles of Konfessionsbilder, reflecting a tension between the primacy of the political-historical and the theological-catechetical. In one group of confessional paintings, the “Saxon-Thüringian style,” the presentation of the Augstana to the Emperor by kneeling princes is central (e.g., Schorndorf and Schweinfurt; Figure 4); in another, the “Württemberg-Hannover style,” in which the presentation is still central or peripheral but the princes are standing (e.g., Kasendorf; Figure 5); and a third, the “Frankish-Nuremberg style,” in which the crucifix-Eucharistic altar is central and the presentation moved to the foreground or periphery (e.g., Leipzig and Ulm-Jungingen). Interestingly, by the eighteenth century, the presentation itself seems to have disappeared in favor of a simplified depiction of the faith (see the painting from Ulm-Jungingen, Figure 6, or Bopfingen, Figure 7; the Evangelical princes are still, however, identified but are now standing around the altar). In some cases, the painters of these images are known: Andreas Herneisen (1538-1610), who painted two Konfessionsbilder (one in Kasendorf and the other in Nuremberg-Mögeldorf), and Johann “Augustus” Dürr (ca. 1600-1663). In other cases the painters are anonymous (such as the painting in Schorndorf).

It is possible to argue, however, that given the three styles, a unified point is made: all the other activities of the Church, in their various forms and relative importance, radiate out from the Cross and Eucharist (note how in several paintings there is a stream of water or blood from the side of the crucified Jesus into the baptismal font). While this emphasis may be striking and surprising to modern Protestants, it is worth noting the emphatic Christocentrism of the Lutheran reformation as well as the concerted effort to increase Eucharistic participation among the laity. Indeed, the Christocentric arrangement of ecclesiastical life matches the format of the Augsburg Confession itself.
Figure 5. Kasendorf (Parish Church, 1602); painted by Andreas Herrneisen.

Figure 6. Jungingen (Baden-Württemberg), 1711. From left to right (top): organist, God the Father, presentation of the Augsburg Confession; (center): baptism, private confession, the crucifix, marriage, preaching and catechesis; (lower) distribution of Communion.
The confessional paintings are united in purpose and, therefore, they share some common aspects. In the available literature on these paintings, it is not clear that a “school” or common workshop emerged for their production (though some painters produced multiple Konfessionsbilder; it is likely, for example, that the Konfessionsbild in Kulmbach is based on the painting in Kasendorf). Some are known copies; for instance, the painting in St. George’s Church in Eisenach is a copy of the Schweinfurt painting. However, it seems fair to venture that, given the scope and content of presenting the Augsburg Confession, some general themes become evident. In what follows, I offer some general observations:

The Presentation. As mentioned earlier when discussing the three general styles of the Konfessionsbilder, the historical presentation of the Augsburg Confession to the Emperor varies in placement and form.

Biblical and Confessional Testimony. In nearly all the paintings (a notable exception is in some of the later works), there is rich textual reference with each image. For instance, around the altar are quotations from New Testament accounts of the Last Supper as well as quotations from Luther affirming the real presence of Christ in the sacrament; around the choir singing is a quotation from Psalm 150; and around the couple getting married are references to Genesis 1:27 and 2:18. When combined with the rich imagery, the collective effect of the many biblical and confessional quotations is a well-documented and deeply rooted account of the Christian life. In some cases, the writing is not legible (either because of the age of the painting or due to the resolution of available images). The most detailed description of the text I have found is from a museum website detailing the painting at Kasendorf (see the source for Figure 5).
The Crucified Christ and Altar. The crucified Christ is always displayed above the altar set for Holy Communion. Often, an image of God the Father (or, especially in later paintings, the Tetragrammaton is displayed above the cross), sometimes with a dove. At times, blood from the body of Jesus flows into a chalice on the altar and/or the adjacent baptismal font. At the foot of the cross (often revealed underneath the altar linen) are often a skull, skeleton, snake/dragon – or some combination of the three – being crushed by a foot, symbolizing how the death of Christ defeats sin, death, and the devil.

At the foot of the cross and behind the altar are Saints. Paul, Mark, Matthew, and Luke (often with references to their works about the Lord’s Supper; Figure 8). These stand as witnesses to the true faith, and are often gesturing to important quotations or to the events at the altar. On either side of the altar, Communion is being distributed to the kneeling faithful in both bread and wine. Often, the clergy distributing Communion are wearing vestments (cassock and surplice/talar and chorrock). Sometimes, Luther and Melanchthon are the ones distributing Communion.

Baptism and Preaching. Baptism (of a child) and Preaching (from an elevated pulpit) stand in close proximity to the altar, usually just to the right and left. This should not be a surprise, given the importance of both in Lutheran theology found in the Confessions (Figure 9).
Private Confession. In all the paintings, private confession plays a prominent role. The penitent are shown kneeling or standing at a *Beichtstuhl*. Reflecting late medieval practice, Lutheran confessionals were simply benches without elaborate forms to conceal the identity of the one confessing.

Marriage. Likewise, marriage is portrayed in all the paintings, though further into the periphery. In each case, the betrothed couple stands before a pastor at an altar. When the detail on the painting is clear, there is usually a depiction of Adam and Eve on the altar triptych (Figure 10).

Catechesis and Examination of Candidates. In most of the painting, some form of catechesis is shown (usually with a group of people standing or sitting around a pastor (in cassock and surplice) holding an open book. In the paintings from Schweinfurt (center left) and Kasendorf (center right), in addition to catechesis there appears to also be the examination of a candidate for ordination: a man is seated in a chair and a dock of people on either side. (The reading is illegible on the images available to me and I have found no references to this specific aspect in the secondary literature.) In general terms, it is safe to assume that some form of education is taking place, either of the laity or clergy.

Music. In three paintings, music is highlighted. In the Kasendorf painting (upper right), a man is playing organ while another man directs a choir of boys and men. In the Ulm-Jungingen painting (upper left), a man sits in a choir loft playing organ. In the *Konfessionsbild* of the St. Andreas Church (Weißenburg, Bavaria), a choir of boys is singing from a large book (held by two men), accompanied by a harpist and horn (Figure 11).
Figure 10. Detail from Kasendorf painting; left to right: singing, organ playing, marriage, and bell ringing (upper right).

Figure 11. St. Andreas Church, Weißenburg, Bavaria.
Demons and Heretics. In two of the paintings, demons are depicted as leading some of the faithful astray by seizing or leading them out of the church. This detail appears in the Kasendorf painting (Figure 8, upper right) and the Bad Wildsheim painting (Figure 12).

Refuting heretics is an essential element of this type of painting. I wish to conclude by highlighting the polemical edge of these images, bringing us back to our thesis of confessionalization. The painting from Bad Wildsheim depicts guards with halberds and dogs keeping “Zwinglians” out of the church by force (Figure 12). In many cases, the paintings give an explicit list of heretics to avoid. Usually, this list of heretics is displayed on the altar linen (nearest to the image of Christ crushing the head of sin and the devil) – this pairing also means it is at the forefront and center/near center of the majority of paintings.

Again, the example from the painting in Kasendorf is illustrative (Figure 13). The list of heretics includes: Dr. (†) Andreas Karlstadt, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Theodore Beza, Caspar Schwenkfeld, Thomas Müntzer, J. Oecolampadius, Anabaptists, the Pope, “and their father, the Devil.” In some cases, these are the very people (or representatives of ideas) condemned in the first half of the Augsburg Confession (especially the Anabaptists). However, others clearly reflect opponents from later controversies, and Reformed theologians form the majority of the list. The observer will note that Roman Catholics are
barely present; the Pope is certainly a “catch-all” for the Roman tradition. But it is interesting that individual Roman Catholic polemicists (whether from the early or later controversies, such as Johann Eck, Peter Canisius, or Robert Bellarmine) are not mentioned, while a host of Reformed theologians are. The absence of references to specific Roman Catholics cannot be taken as proof that Lutherans had softened on their old nemesis. Nevertheless, as much as we can assume the Lutheran antagonism to Roman Catholicism, the Konfessionsbilder reflect that Calvinists, not Roman Catholics, were their main worry.

Figure 13: Kasendorf; detail of the altar and list of heretics.

As a final point on this note, the Konfessionsbild at Leipzig (formerly in the Nikolaikirche, Figures 14 and 15) deserves special attention. Like the Kasendorf painting, a detailed list of heretics is given in a particularly vivid and memorable form. In the foreground to the right, the presentation of the Augsburg Confession is shown. Opposite, in the left foreground, there stand three individuals. From their clothing, it seems certain to claim that they represent Judaism and Islam. The third figure, in a cassock and scholar’s biretta, is harder to identify, as his clothing could identify him as a cleric or scholar of any Christian denomination. Given the association with the representative Jew and Muslim, however, it is possible that he is an anti-Trinitarian. Crouching lower, pulling on the robe of the unidentified man, is a green-hued demon. Spilling out of his second mouth (where his anus should be) with an infernal blast are several small black-robed men. The identity of these men is given in text just to the right of demon. Though not all the names are discernable, the larger ones are clear and familiar: the Pope (“the Arch Heretic”), Andreas Karlstadt, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Theodore Beza, Caspar Schwenkfeld, Thomas Müntzer, J. Oecolampadius, and Anabaptists.
Conclusion

The Konfessionsbilder of the seventeenth century give us an important glimpse into the formation and control over religious identity in Lutheran territories. The Christian identity is tied to the content of the Augsburg Confession. In particular, the person and work of Christ (especially crucified for sin) and the Lord’s Supper usually stand at the center of that Lutheran Christian identity. From the solus Christus, the multiple works of the Church radiate out (this essay has focused on the liturgy and sacramental rites but works of charity are also
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presented or assumed; see detail from the Kasendorf painting; Figure 9). Given the confessional strife of the time and the challenge of the newly approved status of Calvinist/Reformed confessions, these paintings were to remind Lutherans of who they were as opposed to these dangerous elements (perhaps all the more dangerous because they too claimed the name Protestant/Evangelical). These images define Lutheran identity (as defined by participation in certain ecclesiastical rites) and thus remind the observer to be on guard against multiple dangers in order to preserve and promote the true faith.

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