

RelBib

Bibliography of the Study of Religion

<https://relbib.de>

Dear reader,

This is a self-archived version of the following article:

Author: Schuster, Dirk
Title: "Election and Probation: Religious Elites and Social Leadership"

Published in: Contemporary Church History Quarterly
Volume: 23 (1/2)
Year: 2017
Pages: 1 - 4
ISSN: 2291-0786
URL: <https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2017/06/conference-report-election-and-probation-religious-elites-and-social-leadership/>

The article is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

This version is consistent with the original publication but does not include the final layout or pagination of the original publication.

Thank you for supporting Green Open Access.

Your RelBib team



UNIVERSITÄTSBIBLIOTHEK

CONTEMPORARY CHURCH HISTORY QUARTERLY

News, reviews, & commentary on contemporary religious history with a focus on Germany & Europe in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

CONFERENCE REPORT: “ELECTION AND PROBATION: RELIGIOUS ELITES AND SOCIAL LEADERSHIP”

June 27, 2017 · by the Editors · in News and Notes, Volume 23 Number 1/2 (June 2017)

Contemporary Church History Quarterly

Volume 23, Number 1/2 (June 2017)

Conference Report: “Election and Probation: Religious Elites and Social Leadership,” Bensheim Dialogue, Institut für Personengeschichte (Bensheim), April 20-22, 2017.

By Dirk Schuster, University of Potsdam

For the eighth time, the Institute for Personal History held the Bensheim Dialogue, a conference devoted to the historical study of individuals, social groups, and their relationship to society as a whole. This year’s conference was a continuation of last year’s meeting under the theme: *Election and Probation: Religious Elites and Social Leadership* (Erwähltheit und Berührung, Religiöse Eliten und sozialer Führungsanspruch). This year’s conference was focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Right from the start, in his introductory remarks, Volkhard Huth of the Institute for Personal History drew attention to the importance of the idea of election within Christian thought. It developed within the ascetic monasticism of antiquity, which, according to Sigmund Freud, ultimately depended on a special relationship between a deity and its recipient.

Michael Hirschfeld of the University of Vechta examined religious consciousness in German Catholic noble dynasties, using the example of the von Galen family. Based on various members, Hirschfeld was able to demonstrate that, since the middle of the nineteenth century, family members understood entering into spiritual professions and ecclesiastical careers as a special vocation of the German Catholic nobility. In particular, younger sons opted for that path, assuming they were chosen because of their noble origin. Family members also committed themselves to politics—above all as members of the German parliament—in addition to careers as clergy or volunteer

positions in lay offices in the church. These changes in the sense of election within the German Catholic nobility and in their self-sustained leadership since the middle of the nineteenth century were demonstrated by Hirschfelder's account of the von Galen family chronology.

Markus Raasch of the University of Bonn and the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz made a similar point to Hirschfeld's in his presentation on the motivation of Bavarian nobles to become involved politically among the parliamentarians in the Catholic Center Party during the time of the *Kulturkampf*. In addition to the relatively large economic capital of this group, which made political commitment possible at all, it was above all the social prestige resulting from good contacts with regional church leaders which allowed the group to understand itself as a political representative of German Catholicism. Despite the rejection of the so called small-German solution under Prussian domination, this group saw the Reichstag as an opportunity to enforce its own Catholic interests in the newly founded German Empire. Raasch reads the commitment to Catholic Christianity as the central element in the Bavarian nobility's claim to be chosen to engage politically in the new imperial empire. This political self-integration helped in turn to overcome the initial tendency among Catholic nobles to reject the new German Reich.

The influence of the Catholic clergy on the relationship between German Catholics and the new German Reich was also prominent in the presentation of Elena Heim, from the Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg im Breisgau. Using the example of the Archdiocese of Freiburg, Heim assessed the extent to which Catholic clergy succeeded in enforcing the social demand for leadership in the Catholic milieu. Heim shows that the Catholic clergy stood between Rome and Berlin in the long nineteenth century, as in the case of Ultramontanism and the foundation of the German Reich in 1871, which created positive reactions in Catholic circles. In this context, Heim illustrated that the priests, as conduits to God, succeeded in carrying out their own legitimation over and against Catholic layman. In addition, in this period, the papal office shaped the position of the clergy, which also strengthened its own position within the Catholic milieu. As a third point, Heim identified the social origins of priests from rural peasants as an additional factor that increased the acceptance of church representatives within the Catholic population. In 1871, when the clergy began to participate in the culture of national festivals such as the Emperor's birthday or the commemoration of the Battle of Leipzig, they created an integration of the Catholic population into the new Protestant-dominated Reich. On the occasion of his birthday, the Emperor was seen as a guarantee of traditional Catholic dynastic and monarchical values. The discussion after the presentation emphasized that there were strong differences within the Catholic milieu, as reflected, for example, in the rejection of the celebration of the Emperor's birthday among Bavarian clergy.

In addition to Catholicism and its representatives, Protestantism was the second focus of the Bensheim Dialogue. Alf Christophersen from the Protestant Academy of Wittenberg employed the examples of Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich to show how history is always interpreted according to interests. Both Tillich and Hirsch saw God's activity in the political movements of socialism and National Socialism. From such perspectives, the entire story could be reinterpreted, which led, among other things, to Hirsch's completely new interpretation of Luther. Upon closer inspection, the individual biographies of protagonists such as Tillich and Hirsch reveal that not only political convictions but also pragmatism, opportunism, and so forth were behind these interpretations. Christophersen was able to demonstrate that, rather than condemning characters like Hirsch from today's perspective, we should rather try to understand the genesis of their ideas.

Dirk Schuster of the University of Potsdam showed how the Thuringian German Christian Church Movement understood both themselves and National Socialism as representatives of the divine will. In the appearance of Hitler, the Thuringian German Christians witnessed a revelation of God, which is why, from an ecclesiastical perspective, they felt compelled to follow National Socialism. The “dejudaization” of German society and Christian doctrine was intended to obey the will of God, and at the same time bring to a conclusion Luther’s supposedly incomplete Reformation. Such a theological construct, which included racial doctrine as the central element of divine salvation, excluded on the other side all “non-Aryans” from divine salvation.

In his presentation, Benedikt Brunner of the Bonn Protestant Theological Faculty devoted himself to Helmut Gollwitzer, who is one of the most famous representatives of West German left-wing Protestantism. Brunner showed how Gollwitzer developed into a radical pacifist after the Second World War. At the same time, Gollwitzer increasingly sought to unite religion and politics, and demanded the politicization of the sermon. Furthermore, he repeatedly spoke out publicly during the course of the 1968 movement. His growing radicalization in favor of socialism at this time and his ideas about a communist society with Christian ethics ultimately led Gollwitzer into increasing isolation in Western German theological discourse.

In addition to Protestantism and Catholicism, three other lectures were devoted to topics outside these thematic blocks. The well-known biographer of Max Weber, Dirk Kaesler, former professor of the Philipps University of Marburg, linked Weber’s paradigm of the rationalization of the modern world to Weber’s life. Weber himself tried to refute his own thesis over and over again, but he did not succeed. The idea of an increasing change in modernity through rationalization and bureaucratization made Weber doubt whether the modern world still had individual liberties. In the subsequent discussion, Kaesler showed convincingly that Weber reflected in his thinking the superiority of Western bourgeois society. The whole world, according to his assumption, would have to develop inevitably as the Western world did. Such a mindset can serve as the basis for explanations of current global conflicts, since the entire world does not want to follow western rationalization and demystification, as Weber described in his theory.

Oleksiy Salivon of the University of Stuttgart, on the other hand, devoted himself to the liberal Jew Isaac Mayer Wise, who after his emigration to the US in 1846 committed himself to political and social reforms for Christians and Jews. Mayer Wise’s own discrimination and stigmatization in Europe made him a pioneer in the field of equality and education for all people in the United States. He hoped that through the establishment of a free society in the US such ideas would then also be implemented in Europe. The outbreak of the American Civil War was understood by Mayer Wise to be a punishment of God against those Americans who continued to maintain slavery and thus oppose the establishment of an enlightened, free society.

Christoph Herzog of the Otto Friedrich University of Bamberg dealt with the reception of the Turkish Islamic reformer Said Nursî, a topic which has received fresh impetus especially in the last decade. Herzog pointed out that the new books on the life and teachings of Nursî all claim to be scientific and, as such, are also influential in the professional world. The problem, which Herzog has clearly pointed out, is that although books on Nursî claim the standard of academic and scientific works, all of them were composed by followers of Nursî. Through a detailed analysis of the literature on Nursî, Herzog was able to trace the ways in which myths and legends, which

mostly came from Nursî himself, were simply retold uncritically, and then raised to the status of historical fact. The lecture illustrated how a religious network can carry out a hagiography of a religious leader in the academic world. With regard to the conference theme, the lecture showed how the public sphere can be guided by an elite group, such as the members of the academic world.

In the concluding discussion of the conference, the Protestant idea of election was frequently raised as an explanation for various forms of radicalization. This same sense of chosenness may have evoked corresponding reactions in German Catholicism.