

Life between the Confessions—Nicodemism at Augsburg (1598)

Abstract

In sixteenth-century usage, the term Nicodemism referred to persons who overtly conformed to the official religion but privately practiced another (proscribed) religion or none. Sometimes it also included persons who were devout, but who refused to choose between one Christian confession and another. Nicodemism is named for Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin who visited Jesus one night to hear His teachings (John 3:1–21). The connections among simple dissimulation, religious indifference, and organized dissent were as poorly understood then as they are now. Generally speaking, aside from some incidences of persecution early on, Lutherans and Catholics did not try one another for heresy. The chief heretics persecuted in the German lands were the people whom their enemies grouped as Anabaptists. It is estimated that approximately 1,000 Anabaptists were executed in the German lands (many more were tried but acquitted), with the vast majority of these executions occurring between the late 1520s and 1580. The fear of Anabaptism resulted from a general cultural tendency, understandable in the wake of the German Peasants' War of 1525, to equate heresy with insurrection. While the vigorous persecution of Anabaptists began to wane by the mid-1530s, the policing of religious observance grew stricter. In the German lands, this was especially true in places where both major confessions, Catholic and Lutheran, were established. The largest of these places was Augsburg, one of the Empire's greatest cities. There, the Peace of Augsburg mandated the toleration of both confessions.

The following excerpts were taken from the minutes of the Augsburg city magistrates' interrogations of goldsmith David Altenstetter (1547–1617), furrier Martin Kühnle, and the latter's son Potiphar. The excerpts reveal something of the fluidity of confessional identities around 1600. The three had attracted notice for their failure to attend church regularly. They were suspected of attending secret Anabaptist assemblies, though it is unknown whether any traces of this forbidden group of sects actually existed in Augsburg at such a late date. The suspects do seem to have been influenced by the teachings of the Spiritualists—perhaps Caspar Schwenckfeld, though Kühnle denies possessing any of his writings. Altenstetter possessed a pre-Reformation Catholic Bible and some writings by late medieval mystical authors, as well as Erasmus' commentary on the New Testament. Their depositions make clear that they lived between confessions, taking this from one and that from another, but never committing to either.

The excerpts also reveal how important formal preaching was to the process of confessionalization, and how the quality of preaching influenced the selection of one confession over the other. Although their personal beliefs had been unsettled by the various confessional controversies, these artisans eventually faced the need to choose one of the two officially recognized confessions. Altenstetter formally joined the Lutheran church, but these interrogations had no lasting consequences for him or the others.

Source

First Interrogation of David Altenstetter (December 4, 1598). [...]

Q. What is his name? Where is he from? How old is he?

A. He says that he is a citizen here and is forty-eight years old.

Q. How does he make his living?

A. He is a goldsmith and practices that trade.

Q. Of what religion is he, and to which confession does he adhere? He shall answer this honestly and truthfully.

A. He has heretofore been unattached in religious matters, for although born in a Catholic place, he later moved to Switzerland, where the Zwinglian faith is established. But after he came to Augsburg, he sometimes heard the preachers of the Confession of Augsburg [i.e., Lutherans] and sometimes the Catholic preachers. He nonetheless joined neither religion, but if he has to join one, he will become a Catholic, though he will first need proper instruction in that faith.

Q. How has it happened that for many years he has not attended the churches of the Confession of Augsburg? What, in his opinion, is the matter with them?

A. He repeats what he said before. He has gone occasionally to the churches of the Confession of Augsburg but more often to the Cathedral, because the Catholic religion seems more forthright, and he likes the Cathedral preacher better than the Confession of Augsburg's preachers.

Q. For what reasons does he despise rather than approve of the churches, teachings, and ceremonies of the Lutherans?

A. As far as he is concerned, the churches, teachings, and ceremonies of the Confession of Augsburg may do as they please and remain as they are. He is of a mind neither to praise nor to blame their ministry here. In the past he has remained unattached in religion [...].

Q. What is his understanding of the Holy Sacraments, especially Baptism?

A. At the present time, and until God grants him grace and more understanding, he believes that there are two sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist, and the Sacrament of Baptism is especially necessary to acquire salvation. He was baptized once as a boy and never again, and, since God has granted him children, he has reared them in the same way. In general, he believes that the Holy Sacraments are God's mysteries.

Q. Since he attends neither divine services nor sermons, what does he do on Sundays and holy days? Where does he hear preaching?

A. He repeats what he said before. It is true that for a time he has attended neither the one church nor the other on Sundays and holy days. Instead, he stays at home, or in summertime he often goes walking in- or outside the city with some companions [...].

Q. Is it not true that not many years ago, conventicles and meetings were organized and held nearly every Sunday or holy day in Altenstetter's house, sometimes in the garden [...], between seven and eight o'clock in the morning?

A. No conventicle or meeting of the type specified was ever organized or held in his house or garden [...].

Q. Is it not true that such groups have met annually in April or May and again in the autumn in the woods outside of town and that strange sermons were preached from above in the trees? Where did this happen? Who did such things?

A. He knows nothing of such things [...].

First Interrogation of Martin Kuenle (December 4, 1598).

Q. How does he make his living?

A. He says that he is a citizen here and is about sixty-five years old [...]. He is a furrier and supports himself from this trade.

Q. Of what religion is he [...].?

A. He has sometimes attended the churches of the Confession of Augsburg, though not regularly. Otherwise, it is true that at home he has read Schwenckfeldian and Lutheran books, and he also heard [Father] Gregory preach at the Cathedral. He adds that Schwenckfeld's teaching pleases him best, because more than the others it emphasizes a Christian life and devotion [...].

Second Interrogation of David Altenstetter (December 7, 1598).

Q. It is known that he has not answered all of the questions fully, and now he must do it and not force the matter to more serious steps. He recently acknowledged that he has adhered neither to the Catholic religion nor to that of the Confession of Augsburg, but now he must state clearly, to what religion he does adhere.

A. He repeats once more what he said in the first interrogation. While the theologians of the Catholic religion and the Augsburgish [i.e., Lutheran] religion have in the past attacked each other so vigorously, he was attracted to join neither the one nor the other. Instead, he remained unattached. At home, he has all sorts of Christian books, including [Johannes] Tauler, *The Imitation of Christ* [by Thomas à Kempis], [Desiderius] Erasmus' interpretation of the New Testament, and an old Bible printed at Nuremberg a hundred years ago. He also attended the Catholic and sometimes also the Lutheran churches [...], and although he heard sometimes one, sometimes the other, he wasn't pleased, although he often heard good things preached in both churches [...]. And he hopes that no one will force him, based on what he has said, to choose precipitously either the one religion or the other, but he hopes to be given time to listen further to [Father] Gregory, the Cathedral preacher, and to learn more about the Catholic religion. If, however, this is denied him, he must accept the Confession of Augsburg, because he has at the present time insufficient instruction in the Catholic religion [...].

Second Interrogation of Martin Kuenle (December 7, 1598).

Q. As he knows that only two religions—the Catholic and that of the Confession of Augsburg—are permitted here, to neither of which he belongs, and because he recently said that he knows of no errors held by either, he shall now clearly testify to his confession or faith.

A. The Schwenckfeldian faith pleases him most.

Q. It is known [...] that he and his fellow believers have had secret meetings on holy days and Sundays between seven and eight o'clock in the morning [...].

A. He never attended any such meetings and knows nothing about them. Whatever he read in Schwenckfeldian books and writings, he read quietly by himself, and none of his workers were present. He says also that some of his people and their spouses go to the Catholic churches (including his aunt) and some to the Lutheran ones [...].

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