‘Confession-building’ and ‘confessionalization’ as alternative concepts to ‘Counter-Reformation’

The concept of ‘Catholic confessionalization’ is seen by its advocates as a replacement for the term ‘Counter-Reformation’: ‘Counter-Reformation’ (Gegenreformation) and ‘Counter-Reformations’ (in the plural) have been used in German scholarship since the later eighteenth century. In nineteenth-century Germany, the term became part of the Kulturkampf: ‘Counter-Reformation’ was used by Protestant historians as a negative and one-dimensional concept that stressed the aspect of reaction and resistance to Protestantism and neglected that of reform within Catholicism. The term was understandably shunned by Catholic historians. Even when the Protestant historian Wilhelm Maurenbrecher introduced the term ‘Catholic Reformation’ in 1880, German historiography remained confessionally divided on the subject. The term ‘Catholic Reformation’ appealed to Catholic historians because it offered them the possibility of avoiding the term ‘Counter-Reformation’, with its problematic connotation of a mere reaction to Protestantism. But it was rejected by Protestant historians – largely because they did not want the term ‘Reformation’ to be used for anything other than the Protestant Reformation. Protestant historians therefore continued to use the term ‘Counter-Reformation’. Responding to this state of affairs, Hubert Jedin, a Catholic church historian, wrote a short treatise in 1946 in which he described the conceptual and terminological problems of the terms ‘Counter-Reformation’ and ‘Catholic Reformation’ and suggested the compromise terminology ‘Catholic reform and Counter-Reformation’.

In 1958 the emphasis of historical research was changed fundamentally by the Catholic historian Ernst Walter Zeeden, who suggested a completely new concept

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1 For the preceding, see in more detail: H. Outram Evennett, The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation, ed. John Bossy (Cambridge, 1968); Hubert Jedin, Katholische Reformations oder Gegenreformations? Ein Versuch zur Klärung der Begriffe nebst einer Jubiläumsbetrachtung über das Trienter Konzil (Lucerne, 1946); John W. O’Malley, Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Period (Cambridge, MA, 2000); and Chapter 1 in this volume.

and terminology: Zeeden stressed that in the second half of the sixteenth century, Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism started to build modern, clearly defined confessional churches, each of which centred on a confession of faith. He called this process ‘confession-building’ (Konfessionsbildung), a neutral term which could be applied to all churches.³ Two scholars of the next generation, Wolfgang Reinhard, a historian of Catholic background, and Heinz Schilling, a historian of Protestant background, developed Zeeden’s approach further. Reinhard and Schilling introduced the concept of ‘confessionalization’.⁴

While Schilling developed the concept of confessionalization from his research on the interactions of Calvinists and Lutherans in north-western Germany, Reinhard’s main impetus in introducing the concept was to critique the negative and anti-modern implications of the term ‘Counter-Reformation’. With social history being the dominant influence in German historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, both Reinhard and Schilling sought to make the early modern period, and early modern religion in particular, part of a conversation that focused on social developments and modernization theory. Therefore, both Reinhard and Schilling sought to broaden Zeeden’s concept of ‘confession-building’, which was concerned with religious and church history, into a concept of societal history (Gesellschaftsgeschichte). In their view, the confessional divisions and conflicts in early modern Europe did not affect only the areas of religion and the church, but the entire social and political system.

The concept of confessionalization: basic observations and terminology

As Wolfgang Reinhard has put it, the concept of confessionalization proceeds from four basic observations about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. First, ‘ecclesiastical and political action still coincided if not entirely, then to a considerable extent.’ Therefore, ‘“confessionalization” turns out to be an early phase of modern European state formation, a phase found with remarkable regularity.’⁵ Second, by engaging in confessionalizing policies, the state gained control not only over the church, but was also able to foster a ‘national or territorial identity’ and, above all, to discipline its subjects, making confessionalization ‘the first phase of what Gerhard Oestreich has called the absolutist “imposition of social discipline”’.⁶ Third, as a result – and partly

⁴ For the most important articles in English by Reinhard and Schilling see the select bibliography.
as an unintended consequence – of confessionalization, society became modernized, for example through education and bureaucratic rationalization.7 And finally, because these were parallel developments in all confessional states and churches, ‘the idea that the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation were irreconcilable opposites and consecutive historical phases can no longer be supported’, as Reinhard put it in a programmatic article first published in 1983.8

In contrast to the older historiography, Reinhard and Schilling were not primarily interested in the differences of doctrine and ritual between the confessional churches, but applied a comparative approach which stresses parallel developments and ‘functional similarities’.9 This has also led them to employ a new terminology. The terms which were used by German historians to describe the development of the three confessional churches – Catholic reform/Counter-Reformation, Second Reformation (for Calvinism) and Lutheran orthodoxy – were replaced by the parallel terms Catholic, Calvinist (or Reformed) and Lutheran confessionalization and the term ‘age of confessionalization’ or ‘confessional age’.10

Methods of confessionalization

Proceeding from his interpretation of Catholic confessionalization as a Europe-wide process, Wolfgang Reinhard has identified seven methods or mechanisms of confessionalization which were used by church and state to establish confessional homogeneity.11 First: the establishment of ‘pure doctrine’ and its formulation in a confession of faith. This meant distinguishing one confessional church from other churches and eliminating possible sources of confusion. Second: the distribution and enforcement of these new norms, for example through confessional oaths and subscription. In this way, the religious orthodoxy of personnel in key positions – for instance, theologians, clergy, teachers and secular officials – was to be ensured, and ‘dissidents’ were to be removed. Third: propaganda and censorship. This meant making use of the printing press for propaganda purposes on the one hand, and preventing rival churches from using the printing press on the other hand. While the propaganda weapon of scholars was controversial theology, catechisms, sermons and broadsheets were used to influence the masses. Fourth:

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7 See Wolfgang Reinhard, ‘Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State: A Reassessment’, in Luebke, Counter-Reformation, p. 120.
11 For the following, see Reinhard, ‘Pressures towards Confessionalization?’, pp. 177–82.
internalization of the new confessional norms through education. By founding new educational institutions, especially universities, all confessional churches hoped to keep their flock from attending their rivals’ institutions and to ‘indoctrinate’ future generations. Fifth: disciplining the population. Visitations and church discipline were used to create a confessionally homogeneous population. The expulsion of confessional minorities also served as a means to this end. Sixth: rites and the control of participation in rites. In view of the importance of rites for the coherence of the confessional group, participation in rites like baptism and marriage was monitored through the keeping of registers.12 In particular, rites which served as markers of confessional difference were cultivated. Seventh and lastly, Reinhard refers to the confessional regulation even of language, a field in which little research has been done. As an example he mentions the fact that Calvinists preferred names from the Old Testament while saints’ names were particularly appealing to Catholics, these in turn being forbidden in Geneva.

Historiographical debates about the limits of the concept of confessionalization

The debate about the concept of confessionalization began soon after Reinhard and Schilling had published their programmatic books and articles in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The debate resulted in three conferences on Reformed, Lutheran and Catholic confessionalization (which resulted in the publication of three volumes of essays between 1986 and 1995) and a focal point in the Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte in 2003, as well as a number of other collections of essays and articles.13 The critiques of the concept of confessionalization fall roughly into four categories: first, confessionalization as modernization; second, periodization of the confessionalization process, especially Catholic confessionalization; third, a debate about the blind spots of the concept in terms of the propria – the theologies and religious rituals, the religious cultures and identities – of the confessional churches and their flocks; and fourth, confessionalization as a fundamental process in society.

12 For an interpretation of these rites in light of recent scholarship, see Chapter 10.

in particular the question of the relationship between confessionalization and state formation and the question of whether confessionalization can be characterized as a top-to-bottom process.

First, Reinhard’s and Schilling’s view of confessionalization as a modernization process has been criticized as an expression of the historiographical background of Gesellschaftsgeschichte of the 1970s. More recent social and cultural history has rejected the implications of modernization theory following Max Weber. As a result, these teleological aspects of the concept of confessionalization can no longer be maintained. Interestingly enough, however, the usage in historiography of the term ‘Counter-Reformation’ as a neutral shorthand to refer to Catholicism in the early modern period seems to indicate that the debate on the modernizing effects of Catholic confessionalization – and Reinhard’s insistence on the equality of the three processes of confessionalization – have had some effect; it seems that the term ‘Counter-Reformation’ has been stripped of its negative connotations. Historians who study early modern Catholicism seem to have banished from their minds the implicit value judgements associated with the term which led earlier generations of historians to shun its usage.

Second, with regard to periodization, Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling never did, in fact, agree on a time frame for the ‘age of confessionalization’ in which, as they both stipulated, the confessional churches experienced similar developments. Schilling has proposed a periodization of confessionalization in Germany which spans the period between the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 and the Thirty Years War. In contrast, Reinhard has extended the process of Catholic confessionalization much further, although he has not suggested a detailed periodization. He sees the beginning of the age of confessionalization in the 1520s with the development of written confessions of faith. And he argues that the Thirty Years War was not the end point of confessionalization. Rather, according to Reinhard, Catholic confessionalization ended only with the expulsion of the Salzburg Protestants in 1731–32.

Regional studies, such as those by Werner Freitag and Andreas Holzem on Westphalia, and by Mark Forster on the bishopric of Speyer, have shown that Catholic confessionalization ‘really developed strongly after 1650, after the so-called Age of Confessionalism was over. It appears that

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15 See, for example, Regina Pörtner, The Counter-Reformation in Central Europe: Styria 1580–1630 (Oxford, 2001); Ulrike Strasser, State of Virginity: Gender, Religion, and Politics in an Early Modern Catholic State (Ann Arbor, MI, 2007).
Catholics experienced confessionalization, but perhaps later than Protestants'.

While Wolfgang Reinhard continues to insist on Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed confessionalization as chronologically parallel developments, Mark Forster has pointed out the danger of such a strict periodization in the face of strong empirical evidence to the contrary: ‘For historians of Catholic Germany the chronological issue even threatened to bring back the notion of Catholic backwardness’.

Third, both Protestant and Catholic scholars, for example Thomas Kaufmann, Walter Ziegler and John O’Malley, have criticized the concept of confessionalization for ignoring the specific characteristics – the *propria* – of the confessional churches in theology, piety and spirituality as well as lived religion in its many shapes and forms. As John O’Malley writes: ‘But what about religion in and of itself – religion not as political or social force but as a yearning for the transcendent or an experience of it?’

The treatment of religion in the concept of confessionalization has been described a ‘functional-reductionist’; ‘functional’ because the concept looks only at the function of religion within state and society and ‘reductionist’ because the characteristics of the confessional churches are thus levelled.

Initially, such criticism was mostly voiced by church historians. However, in terms of research output, this aspect of the critique of the concept of confessionalization has been most effective in the current historiographical ‘growth areas’ of cultural history. The term ‘confessional cultures’, first suggested by Thomas Kaufmann, has gained wide traction among cultural historians, and we are seeing an increasing number of studies on, for example, the visual and ritual aspects of confessional cultures as well as space as a new category to explore confessional differences.

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19 Forster, ‘Review of Ehrenpreis/Lotz-Heumann’.


Fourth, from the very beginning, historians have doubted Schilling’s and Reinhard’s thesis that confessionalization was a fundamental social process and have described phenomena and processes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which existed independent of or were largely or partially uninfluenced by the process of confessionalization. Although acknowledging that religion was an important factor, historians have identified elements and developments in the age of confessionalization which were unconfessional or could not be confessionalized: Roman law and many aspects of matrimonial law, the mystic-spiritual tradition, alchemy, astrology and, at least in part, the humanist republic of letters.23

The question of a ‘fundamental process’ is closely related to another controversial aspect of the concept of confessionalization: the relationship between confessionalization and state formation. In recent historiography, a consensus has emerged that Reinhard and Schilling have overemphasized the role of the state in the process of confessionalization, thus interpreting it as a top-to-bottom process in which the common people appear as subjects who were controlled and disciplined by church and state. Although most scholars would not deny that there were pressures toward confessionalization ‘from above’, they argue that the process of confessionalization could only be successful if it found fertile ground in society. Next to the authorities in the state and church, communities and groups in society were agents in the process of confessionalization.

For example, in his study on the prince-bishopric of Münster, the Catholic church historian Andreas Holzem has drawn attention to the interaction between confessionalization ‘from above’ and the reactions and processes of appropriation and rejection in the local communities. He concludes that by the eighteenth century confessionalization measures eventually had a disciplining effect on the population, if only partially.24 In this context, territories of mixed confessional make-up and/or with a weak state have proven to be suitable ‘test cases’ for the critique of the concept of confessionalization. Marc Forster has drawn attention to the bishopric of Speyer and other smaller Catholic territories in south-western Germany, where the communities developed a Catholic identity ‘from below’ without much influence either by Tridentine reform or by confessionalization measures of the state. Confessional cultures and identities could, therefore,
develop without confessionalization ‘from above’. In addition, Trevor Johnson in his study of the Counter-Reformation in the Upper Palatinate has pointed toward ‘the importance of cultural intermediaries, of parochial clergy, low-grade officials … indicating the possibilities of recatholicization not just from above or below but also “from the middle”’.

The applicability of the concept of confessionalization to other regions of Europe

The aspect of agency beyond state and church and of ‘confessionalization from the middle and/or below’ has proven to be an important modification when the concept of confessionalization is applied to European case studies. For example, Randolph Head has used a Swiss territory, Graubünden, as a case study to test the concept of confessionalization. He comes to the conclusion that, although the state ‘was absent’, confessional identities emerged in Graubünden which were strong enough to disrupt the ‘power of communal solidarity created by the Bündner political system’. As a consequence, Head formulates three conclusions: ‘that agents besides institutional states or churches could have instigated the confessionalization process’, that ‘confessional conflict became an arena for carrying out underlying struggles that derived from both internal and exogenous forces’ and ‘that confessionalization … may have been only one version of a broader process of social and ideological transformation’.

Similar results have been presented by historians of east central Europe. Confessionalization processes in east central Europe, especially in Poland and Bohemia, took place in a multiconfessional framework and were thus regionalized and localized. In addition, they were not initiated centrally by the state, but by other agents, for example the estates or urban elites. Scholars working on the Dutch

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Republic have also argued that confessionalization processes were started and shaped in local communities and that agents in the middle of society, like parish priests and the urban middling sort, played an important role in these processes.\(^{29}\)

In recent years, historians have also increasingly discussed the application of the concept of confessionalization to France. Philip Benedict, James Farr, Gregory Hanlon and Mack Holt have concluded that the ‘strong theory of confessionalization’, which postulates that state-building and confessionalization were mutually reinforcing processes, cannot be applied to France.\(^{30}\) However, a ‘weak theory of confessionalization’ is regarded as a useful research tool for the French case. In Benedict’s words, the weak theory ‘defines confessionalization as a process of rivalry and emulation by which the religions that emerged from the upheavals of the Reformation defined and enforced their particular versions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, demonized their rivals, and built group cohesion and identity’.\(^{31}\) In terms of the role of the state, different views have been put forward. On the one hand, Benedict argues that ‘France’s wars of religion … illustrate how the division of Christendom into rival confessions could bring even the era’s strongest states to the very brink of dissolution’.\(^{32}\) On the other hand, Farr has observed that, if the time frame is broadened to 1530–1685 and if confessionalization is understood as an intention of state policy and not necessarily as a success, ‘then we can see that there was a relatively consistent state policy of catholicization’ in France.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{31}\) Benedict, ‘Confessionalization in France?’, p. 48.

\(^{32}\) Benedict, ‘Confessionalization in France?’, p. 50.

Introducing fluidity into the concept of confessionalization

In my view, we need to introduce more methodological ‘fluidity’ into our analysis of confessionalization in early modern Europe. By overstating their case and generalizing the allegedly successful alliance of state and church in the early modern period, Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling have often disregarded the strength of resistance to state-sponsored confessionalization from all levels of society. They have also largely eliminated the meandering of history, the importance of analysing development and timing, from their narrative of confessionalization. In hindsight, we as historians can describe how certain developments either gained momentum or did not come to fruition. However, history, when it happens, is a slow, meandering and, for contemporaries, open-ended development. Research into confessionalization as a process has to take this seriously. Furthermore, confessionalization should be understood as a process which was driven by negotiations between different agents. These agents were individuals or social groups, unified by similar aims and objectives. These agents included people who drove the action or those who stood back and reacted to actions by others. And finally, these agents included people who cooperated with or resisted a specific agenda of confessionalization proposed or driven by other agents.

Confessionalization in Ireland: an overview

In my own work on Ireland, I have come to the conclusion that the development in Ireland is best described as a process of ‘dual’ confessionalization. Although Ireland did not experience a popular first Reformation in the early sixteenth century, it entered a process of dual confessionalization from about 1580. Ireland became biconfessional because the majority of the population rejected the haphazard attempts by the English state to introduce the Protestant Reformation and remained Catholic. This led to two competing processes of confessionalization in the late
sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – one Catholic, one Protestant. While the Protestant process of confessionalization was state-sponsored, the Catholic process of confessionalization was initiated by the traditional elites who used Parliament or rebellion to voice their religious and political demands.

As a result of its failure to convert the majority of the Irish population to Protestantism, the Church of Ireland developed into a minority, but legal, confessional church while maintaining its claim to be an all-embracing state church. Catholicism, on the other hand, filled the vacuum left by the state church and developed from an exploratory mission into a full-fledged, if illegal and underground, Tridentine church. Thus, Catholic and Protestant confession-building were parallel processes in Ireland as they were perhaps nowhere else in Europe, which created a situation of intense confessional rivalry. While Protestantism came to be associated with colonial state-building, Catholicism came to be associated with resistance to that state – be it parliamentary or military. Obviously, neither process of confessionalization succeeded; the state-sponsored Protestant one failed because it could not achieve an integration of politics and religion in Ireland; the oppositional Catholic one failed because it could not break the legal status of the Church of Ireland and establish an official Catholic state and church.

While I suggest the following periodization for the process of dual confessionalization in Ireland, it is important to note that this process unfolded gradually and that its outcome was by no means inevitable. The first phase, from 1534 to 1558/60, was one of political and legal Reformation on the one hand and religious uncertainty on the other hand. The second phase, from 1558/60 to c. 1580, can be called the preparatory phase of confessionalization. The third phase, from c. 1580 to 1603, saw the gradual formation of confessional churches in Ireland as well as the gradual confessionalization of Irish society. During the fourth phase, starting in 1603, dual confessionalization and its resulting confessional rivalry became ingrained in Irish society, politics and culture.

**General observations for the study of confessionalization in Ireland**

The general observations on which my methodological approach is based are the following. First, Ireland as a dependent territory of England was not at all unique in early modern Europe. Rather, Ireland – even if it undoubtedly became an extreme case in the long run – started out as a ‘normal’ periphery, joined with England, Wales and eventually also Scotland in a ‘composite monarchy’. Second, early modern state formation, especially in ‘composite monarchies’, relied heavily on the collaboration of local elites, for example noblemen and urban elites,

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particularly in outlying territories. This observation leads me to my third point: notwithstanding the critique of modernization theories, we should not ignore that there was inequality regarding state formation between different territories in early modern Europe; all were not equal, especially with regard to their degree of institutionalization which was largely dependent on one factor – the backing by loyal elites and thus the availability of a sufficient number of loyal officials.

Fourth, I regard it as essential to any discussion of confessionalization to distinguish between ‘conformity’ – defined as visible compliance – and ‘conversion’ – understood as self-conscious adoption of a set of religious beliefs and practices. When early modern reformers, both Catholic and Protestant, complained that popular religious practices persisted, they created the impression that true conversion had yet to be achieved. But contemporaries still regarded those areas as firmly in the ‘Protestant’ (Lutheran or Calvinist) or ‘Catholic’ camp, even if the personnel of the state church was disillusioned with, and sceptical about, the impact it had made on the population. In contrast, in Ireland, by the seventeenth century, contemporary observers agreed that the Protestant Reformation had fared poorly and that Roman Catholicism had succeeded against the will of the English crown. Conversely, in those European states where a confessional church backed by the state became firmly institutionalized and subsequently established a confessional monopoly, conformity of the majority of the population was the norm. I therefore define ‘success and failure’ as success or failure in the enforcement of conformity and will focus on this aspect rather than the persistence of popular religious practices.

And finally, we should not forget that there was, in the early modern period, a strong ideal of the unity of state and church; in the eyes of contemporaries, one state should ideally have only one religion. In their view, state and society could not function without at least an official religion. Therefore, rulers in early modern Europe showed a strong will to unify religion and politics and to use religion as an instrument of state formation – even if they often did not have the power to impose their will on their territories.

This strong ideal of the integration of religion and state can be described as a ‘representation’, a perception that societies or social groups have of themselves and/or the world around them. As Stuart Hall has written, ‘cultural meanings are not only “in our head”. They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects’. Therefore, ‘representations’ also play an important part in power struggles among social groups. However, representations are, of course, never translated directly into action. Rather, there is a complex and tension-filled relationship between representations and actions.

Moreover, the possibility of ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’ has to be taken into account. This means that representations – the formulation of ideals, threats, measures that are announced but not or only haphazardly put into action, and so forth – provoke action from the persons and social groups to whom they were addressed. People do not act on the basis of an ‘objective’ evaluation of a situation; rather, they act on their interpretation of a situation. Therefore, it is important to observe the interaction between representations and practices when analysing the process of confessionalization.

Dual confessionalization in Ireland: a case study of gradual alienation, self-fulfilling prophecies and unintended consequences

In my study of Ireland, I investigate the interaction between confession-building, state formation and the development of confessional identities and cultures by looking at the interaction between representations and actions in everyday life. In the course of the dual process of confessionalization, competing social groups (and sometimes individuals) and political and religious institutions aimed for control of state and church. But instead of succeeding, they were locked in an unintended process of mutual misunderstandings, gradual alienation and, eventually, self-fulfilling prophecies which led to a hardening of confessional lines and the development of distinct confessional cultures and identities.

In order to provide readers with a glimpse of the complexities of the process of dual confessionalization in Ireland, I will focus on the relationship between the Old English inhabitants of Ireland and the English administration in Dublin. The Old English were the medieval colonizers of Ireland who had always been considered – and who had also regarded themselves – as the mainstay of ‘English civilization’ in Ireland. The religious estrangement of the Old English from the Dublin administration unfolded as a slowly escalating process. Misunderstandings, the gradual breakdown of communication and the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies eventually led to the collapse of social relations. Increasingly – and often reluctantly – people were forced to take confessional sides. Finally, the history of the Old English in the process of confessionalization in Ireland highlights the difficulties of stepping outside a process that began slowly, but then gained momentum, produced unintended consequences, and eventually seemed inevitable to contemporaries.

In the following, I will concentrate on the reign of Elizabeth I of England between 1558 and 1603 – that is, on the preparatory phase between 1560 and c. 1580, and the gradual confessionalization of Irish society from c. 1580 to 1603.

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Within roughly two generations, the English government lost the religious allegiance of the Old English, which resulted in the above-mentioned process of dual confessionalization. But in the 1560s, relations were still harmonious. Even though the Old English were religiously conservative and it was clear that they would not take the lead in introducing the Protestant Reformation to Ireland, they cooperated with the English government and the new Church of Ireland in many ways.

The starting point: a loyal elite conforms

The Irish Parliament of 1560, staffed mostly by the Old English, approved without signs of resistance the establishment of the Protestant state church through the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity. In the early years of Elizabeth’s reign, the Old English were receptive to all kinds of government initiatives. For example, they consistently and enthusiastically backed initiatives to establish grammar schools and a university in Ireland. These institutions, had they been founded in a timely fashion (which they were not), would have played a major role in disseminating Protestantism in Ireland. The younger generation would have grown up in the new religion.

In addition, the Old English conformed to the Protestant state church in the first decades of Elizabeth’s reign. While Protestant reformers regarded them as ‘ignorant’ and ‘superstitious’, they also noted that the Old English observed the law and attended the services of the Church of Ireland. Similarly, Catholic clergymen reported that the burghers of the Old English towns went to the Protestant services of the state church, while also going to hear mass celebrated half-clandestinely by older priests. These ‘massing priests’, as they were called by the Protestant reformers, would eventually have died out and been replaced by Protestant-educated clergymen. As a result, Protestant services would have been the only services available and the population of Ireland would have been slowly educated to the Protestant faith. As mentioned above, this would not have been a process of conversion, but the inculcation of conformity leading to an acceptance of the religion by law established as part of people’s everyday life. In European comparative terms, this would not have been an unusual development. In fact, this is exactly what happened in Norway which, as a peripheral area of Scandinavian Europe and a political dependency of the Danish monarchy, had much in common with Ireland. In 1536, the Danish king imposed Lutheranism on his Norwegian subjects. The new faith was not greeted enthusiastically and there was resistance. Yet, despite the fact that Lutheranism was identified with an alien monarchy and was propagated in the foreign language of that power, the majority of the population eventually conformed to the Lutheran state church. Why did this not happen in Ireland and why was it instead replaced with a process of dual confessionalization?
Gradual escalation: from political grievance to confessionalization

The key to this development is politics, or to be more specific, the particular political situation in Ireland in the sixteenth century. As a loyal elite and as English office-holders in Ireland, the Old English were keen supporters of a more vigorous political engagement of the English crown in Ireland and more military activity against independent noblemen. Throughout the sixteenth century, successive lord deputies employed military force to control the warring lords and to establish English rule over Ireland once and for all. In fact, if not in name, a standing army was deployed. However, the implementation of such a policy in a dependent territory was very expensive, and the resources of the English crown were limited. As a result, both the London and the Dublin governments looked to the Old English to find funding for this military enterprise.

As a loyal population that was comparatively prosperous, the Old English already contributed to their own defence by a levy called ‘the cess’ which had been a very useful instrument in the late Middle Ages. The cess could be levied on an ad hoc basis and without having to call Parliament. By the middle of the sixteenth century, however, the cess had become a much greater financial burden on the Old English because of the increased size of the army in Ireland. While the lord deputies could simply not do without the cess in order to keep up the army, the Old English increasingly resented it. This had the paradoxical consequence that the resurgence of the English crown’s power in Ireland gradually alienated the Old English who had originally been strongly in favour of such an enterprise.

The Old English, feeling betrayed by the various lord deputies who exerted ever higher amounts of the cess from them, saw a threat to their political liberties and privileges in general – a threat to the right of Parliament to consent to taxes, a threat to the material well-being and the traditional independence of the towns and, due to the increasing influx of New English, a threat to their status as a privileged elite in Ireland. The earlier positive interaction between the Old English and the Dublin government gradually turned into negative social interaction, marred by misunderstandings and negative representations of the ‘other’.

Successive lord deputies continued to use the cess as their main source of revenue to finance the army in Ireland. When Old English resistance to the cess registered with them, it no longer registered as a problem to be addressed and resolved. Rather, the Dublin administration increasingly saw the Old English as ‘troublemakers’, as a population group that simply did not cooperate with government initiatives. The more the Old English felt threatened and resisted, the more the Dublin government saw them as unreliable.

Gradually, as the Old English perceived themselves under attack from the Dublin government, their perception of what was going on changed fundamentally. They saw not only a threat to their political privileges, but perceived a general threat to their traditions and way of life. In their eyes, not only was Parliament and its right to consent to taxation under threat; the establishment of the Protestant
The Church of Ireland and the requirement to conform to it were increasingly seen as part of a universal attack by the government on time-honoured traditions – and these traditions included the Catholic religion. The Catholic faith, defined as their old, traditional religion, was appropriated as part of Old English identity vis-à-vis the Dublin government.

While outright rebellion was far from the thoughts of most of the Old English, they resorted to subtle and not-so-subtle acts of resistance against various aspects of government policy; for example, passive resistance to the cess by delaying their payments, parliamentary opposition, and, from the late 1580s onwards, non-attendance at the services of the Church of Ireland, the so-called ‘recusancy’.

I am well aware that this interpretation of events in Ireland invites accusations of a ‘functional-reductionist’ view of religion. Let me emphasize, therefore, that I am not arguing that religion was some kind of political pawn in early modern Ireland. There is no doubt in my mind that, by the end of the sixteenth century, the Old English were convinced Catholics, with many of them taking incredible risks for their faith. However, I am arguing that convictions and identities do not grow in people’s minds independently of their political, social and cultural situation. That is to say, the Old English might have become Protestants, but they reacted to specific political and social circumstances in Ireland and became conscious Catholics instead.

The process of dual confessionalization in Ireland after 1580

The Old English, facing increasing powerlessness and pressure from the Dublin government, formed a separate identity and took measures which bound them tighter together as a social group. They began to send their sons to Catholic universities on the continent rather than to England, in the full knowledge that their children would be educated in the spirit of Tridentine Catholicism. At the same time, they stopped forming marriage alliances with the Protestant New English. As a result, some Old English families split along confessional lines.

In the late 1580s and early 1590s, the Old English, finding a unified identity, increasingly stayed away from the services of the state church. Recusancy became widespread and Protestantism was openly rejected in favour of Catholicism. In the decades before, older priests, celebrating mass clandestinely, had kept up the old religion among the Old English. Now, however, a younger group of convinced Catholics sprang from the continental seminaries; the sons of the Old English returned to Ireland as priests and Jesuits and they strove to establish a substantial underground church in Ireland – a church with a hierarchy in place, with clandestine Catholic schools, and with a laity firmly asserting their Catholicism through recusancy. By initiating a process of Catholic confession-building and reinforcing the newfound religious and political identity of the Old English community as Catholics defending their ancient rights against an encroaching government, these clergy played a decisive role in the process of dual confessionalization in Ireland.
When the Old English embraced Catholicism, and recusancy became a widespread phenomenon, the perception of the Dublin government changed also. In the eyes of the New English officials, the Old English moved from being just ‘troublemakers’ to being at least potential rebels and traitors. In early modern Europe, there was a general expectation that difference in religion would result in political disloyalty and treason. Therefore, when the Old English advertised their Catholic faith by refusing to come to the services of the state church, this was automatically interpreted as an act of political disobedience.

Several factors accelerated this process of alienation and the resulting breakdown of social relations. First, the perceived resistance and troublemaking of the Old English led the English government in Ireland to curtail Old English influence as much as possible. The Dublin administration and the law courts were no longer staffed with Old English, but with New English office-holders and judges. Second, after there had been Old English resistance in Parliament, Parliament was not called for almost thirty years. And finally, the Dublin government attempted to enforce the so-called recusancy laws, laws that imposed fines on people who did not attend the services of the Church of Ireland. It is no surprise that such measures furthered mutual distrust, accelerated the breakdown of social relations and eventually led both sides to believe in their negative view of the other side as a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’. By the early seventeenth century, the relationship between the Dublin government and the Old English had come to a point where trust was eroded, and assumptions about the malignant intentions of the other side abounded.

What is most striking about this gradual process of alienation is that none of the parties involved wanted it to happen. The Old English wanted to be loyal to the crown, but felt increasingly threatened by the Dublin administration. The government wanted good relations with the Old English, indeed it desperately needed a broad loyal elite conforming to the state religion to implement both its political and religious reform programmes. But it increasingly regarded the Old English as troublemakers and potential traitors who had to be curtailed and repressed. This led to a vicious circle of increasing mutual distrust. As social communication deteriorated, reconciliation became impossible and the process of alienation between these two groups took its course. However, it has to be emphasized that there was nothing inevitable about this process which unfolded in small steps, and the point of no return was only reached in the early seventeenth century. In the end, what was meant to be a ‘success story’, with the Old English as the spearhead of state formation and Protestant confessionalization in Ireland, came to be a ‘failure’ for all concerned, resulting in a process of dual confessionalization in Ireland.

The future of the concept of confessionalization

In the light of recent research, it is no longer possible to see confessionalization as a fundamental process of society, as a modernizing force or as a process successfully integrating state-building and confessional formation. Not only do we
now know that opposition to centralized state-building and confessionalization ‘from above’ was widespread, possibly even universal, in early modern Europe, we have also come to realize that confessional conflicts and confessional cultures could be the result of local and regional developments rather than of state influence ‘from above’. As a consequence, the relationship between state formation and confession-building as part of the concept of confessionalization must be construed much more flexibly. First, opposition and resistance to state and church measures must move to the forefront of research. Second, we must ask whether even those measures ‘from above’ that did not achieve their goals did in fact have unintended effects; even if they remained declarations of intent, such measures were perceived as potentials and/or threats to which people may have reacted in some way. Third, we will have to look at different agents and their interests in the process of confessionalization. Social formations like confessional churches, confessional cultures or confessional identities could, after all, only come into being and continue to exist if they were reinforced again and again through interaction and communication. As research into the state is also changing and the early modern state is no longer seen as an entity, but as fragmented into different agents, it becomes possible to look at agents and their interests in state and society and thus the role of individuals and different social groups. Consequently, a microhistory of the state can be combined with a microhistory of social and cultural developments to describe the process of confessionalization as one of conflict, negotiation and accommodation.

This raises, among others, the question of ‘horizontal confessionalization’ within social groups, and self-confessionalization, about which we know little so far.\(^39\) It is clear that elites and also the middling sort played an important role in the process, but we need more research into how confessional identities and confessional cultures – on the eventual existence of which early modern historians largely agree – came into being.

One could perhaps say that in the manner of Thomas Kuhn’s scientific revolutions, the concept of confessionalization became a paradigm which was then criticized and modified by a mostly younger generation of scholars. According to Kuhn, this will eventually result in the replacement of such a paradigm. But are we at that point yet? While the result of the criticism of the concept of confessionalization has undoubtedly resulted in a concept of more limited scope, the question is whether this is a good or a bad thing. On the one hand, one could argue that there are limits to how much a theoretical concept can be redefined, supplemented or handled more flexibly before there is nothing left of the original concept. However, I would argue that, stripped of its macrohistorical claims and implications, the concept of confessionalization still serves as a fruitful research tool. One of the most striking phenomena in recent research is that works on various aspects of the Counter-Reformation, such as Regina Pörtner’s book on Styria and

Confessionalization

Ulrike Strasser’s *State of Virginity*, approach their topics in the broader spirit of the concept of confessionalization by closely observing the interactions between different agents of state formation and agents of religion while at the same time being critical of the original, strict formulations of the concept.

While it is true that questions about early modern popular religion can best be answered by using methods of microhistory, employing this approach alone runs the danger of fragmenting history-writing. If we still wish to attempt comparative approaches beyond individual case studies, look at structures, ask larger historical questions and examine long-term developments, the concept of confessionalization can help us do so. Confessionalization also has the advantage of being defined as a process. Thus, confessionalization is not the same as ‘confessionalism’, as it is sometimes translated into English. ‘Confessionalization’ draws our attention to the developments which led to confession-building and the construction of confessional cultures and identities by different agents in different social and political contexts. Applying the concept of confessionalization should therefore mean analysing parallels between, as well as specifics of, the early modern confessional churches and cultures. In this context, the ‘methods of (Catholic) confessionalization’ identified by Wolfgang Reinhard remain useful as a guideline. At the same time, new research, and in particular new case studies, can identify other methods of confessionalization and gauge their effectiveness as well as discuss and categorize the reactions and possible strategies of avoidance that they provoked. Finally, research into the creation of confessional cultures and identities can profit from using confessionalization as a framework and research tool because the concept offers a broad approach: it integrates political, social and cultural developments and analyses their interactions, and, as a developmental concept, it focuses on processes of cultural construction and (attempted) diffusion in society. As we have seen, recent research has shown that this process extended far into the eighteenth century, especially in Catholic regions. Therefore, the eighteenth century, with its possible overlap of processes of confessionalization and enlightenment, is a field which promises fruitful research and further debates.

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