

2012

Book Review of Jesse Spohnholz, *The Tactics of Toleration: A Refugee Community in the Age of Religious Wars*

Amy Nelson Burnett

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, aburnett1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>

Burnett, Amy Nelson, "Book Review of Jesse Spohnholz, *The Tactics of Toleration: A Refugee Community in the Age of Religious Wars*" (2012). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 153.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/153>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Central European History / Volume 45 / Issue 01 / March 2012, pp 130-132; Copyright © Conference Group for Central European History of the American Historical Association 2012; published by Cambridge University Press. Used by permission. DOI: 10.1017/S0008938911001026

The Tactics of Toleration: A Refugee Community in the Age of Religious Wars.
By Jesse Spohnholz. Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press. 2011.
Pp. 334. Cloth \$80.00. ISBN 978-1-61149-034-3.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, as confessional tensions increased throughout Europe, the city of Wesel in northwestern Germany stood out as an example of religious toleration. An influx of refugees from the Netherlands in the mid-1550s and again in the later 1560s practically doubled the size of the officially Lutheran city, creating circumstances that could have led to confessional conflict. Instead, for four decades Lutheran Weselers and Calvinist refugees lived together in relative harmony, until the balance tipped in favor of the Calvinists in the 1590s. In *Tactics of Toleration*, Jesse Spohnholz looks at the mechanisms that enabled the city's residents to practice a degree of confessional coexistence unmatched elsewhere in the Holy Roman Empire.

Spohnholz stresses that he is concerned not with the long-term development of confessional identity but with the short-term decisions that allowed people with different religious convictions to live alongside one another. He argues that confessional coexistence in Wesel was made possible by the fact that individuals had various options for expressing their confessional preference within the sphere of shared public worship established by religious and governmental authorities. From Wesel's adoption of the Reformation in the early 1550s through the 1580s, these officials maintained a policy of promoting civic and religious unity. On the one hand, refugees were required to receive communion in the city's churches rather than allowed to establish a congregation of their own. On the other hand, those who insisted most strongly on confessional purity, whether Lutheran or Calvinist, were expelled from the city. The two parish churches had some latitude in the performance of various ceremonies, and Calvinists gravitated toward the church where the pastor was willing to omit the exorcism from the baptismal service and to place the host in communicants' hands rather than in their mouths during the Lord's Supper, which made both rituals more acceptable to them. As a consequence of these policies, Wesel's

inhabitants could maintain a balance between Christian unity and confessional difference. A few individuals from both confessions received communion or took their babies to be baptized in neighboring communities that were more unambiguously Lutheran or Reformed, but most Weselers were able to fit within the broad parameters of their city's church.

Contributing to religious tolerance in the city were the unofficial distinctions that existed between Lutherans and Calvinists, as well as the tendency to turn a blind eye to Mennonites and Catholics. Spohnholz looks at the institutional structures—poor relief, education, and church discipline—that were established separately for native Lutherans and refugee Calvinists. By allowing the Calvinist consistory to oversee the spiritual, material, and educational needs of the refugees, Wesel's magistrates avoided tensions over the allocation of scarce resources or over confessional issues such as the choice of catechism to be used in the schools. Catholics and Anabaptists were not officially acknowledged, but they were also a part of Wesel's religious composition. Because the city was subject to a Catholic prince, it could not impose harsh anti-Catholic measures without fear of reprisal. Wesel's religious houses continued to exist into the seventeenth century, and the city's few Catholic residents apparently were able to ignore repeated edicts forbidding them to attend mass there. The city government took action against Anabaptist cells when they were discovered, but as long as the Anabaptists dissociated themselves from violence and conformed outwardly to the city's religious ceremonies, they were left in peace.

Spohnholz presents a detailed view of the religious choices of Wesel's inhabitants, but his argument is weakened by his insensitivity to the theological debates among German Lutherans during the third quarter of the sixteenth century. He uses the terms Lutheran and Calvinist (rather than "Reformed," which would be more accurate) as if they were self-evident, unchanging, and mutually exclusive throughout this period. In fact, the definition of "Lutheran" was strongly contested, and the lines dividing moderate Lutherans from Calvinists were not obvious to all, as testified to by the bitter polemic against Philipp Melanchthon's students as "crypto-Calvinists." Wesel's church ordinance, written by Melanchthon and Martin Bucer for the attempted reformation of Cologne in the 1540s, was designed to accommodate as broad a spectrum of positions as possible and cannot be labeled as either Lutheran or Calvinist. Spohnholz rightly points to Wesel's adherence to the Augsburg Confession, but he does not say *which* Augsburg Confession—the original version submitted to the emperor in 1530, or the version modified by Melanchthon after the Wittenberg Concord and that was acceptable to some Calvinists. In fact, Wesel's church was neither Lutheran nor Calvinist, as those terms were being defined in confessional debates through this period. A more helpful interpretive framework would

examine how what were originally tendencies or preferences within one broadly Protestant church gradually separated into two distinct positions. In this respect, the Weselers' short-term strategies of toleration cannot be separated from the formation of confessional identity. By assuming that individual confessional identities were already fixed rather than emerging over the thirty-year period he studies, Spohnholz misses an important opportunity to show how people moved from tolerance to intolerance.

Despite this problem, *Tactics of Toleration* has much to offer as a study of Wesel in the later sixteenth century. It is based on an impressive array of archival sources that are used to provide everything from an analysis of residence patterns and the comparative use of beeswax (and so of candles in worship) in the city's churches to accounts of legal conflicts, patterns of business partnerships and marriage, and shifting priorities in the pamphlets produced by Wesel's printers. This solid foundation compensates for the too rigid use of confessional labels and provides us with a fascinating picture of the relations between native Weselers and the refugees in their midst.

AMY NELSON BURNETT
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN
doi:10.1017/S0008938911001026