

Confessionalization processes and their importance to the understanding of Western History in the Early Modern period (1530-1650)

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Abstract: This article discusses the so-called ‘confessionalization processes’ and their importance in understanding Early Modern Western history. The text begins with an attempt to clarify the distinctively ‘modern’ aspect of the confessional phenomenon; then seeks to outline the historiographical fortune of that phenomenon between the providentialist historiography practiced in the sixteenth century and the German social history of the second half of the twentieth century. Described in this context is the emergence of ‘confessionalization theory’ proposed by Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling in the mid-1970s. Finally, the article proposes a critical reading of this theory and discusses the feasibility of its use, debugged of what are considered to be misconceptions and exaggerations; in particular, we are interested in its utility to historians from former colonial domains.

Keywords: confessional period; confessionalization processes; Early Modern.

Os processos de confessionalização e sua importância para a compreensão da história do Ocidente na primeira modernidade (1530-1650)

Resumo: O presente artigo propõe uma reflexão sobre a importância dos estudos em torno dos chamados “processos de confessionalização” para uma adequada compreensão da história ocidental em inícios da época moderna. O texto procura, inicialmente, precisar o aspecto distintivamente “moderno” do fenômeno confessional; a seguir, procura delinear a fortuna historiográfica desse fenômeno, entre a historiografia de viés providencialista praticada ainda no século XVI e a história social alemã da segunda metade do século XX. Nesse contexto, descreve o surgimento da chamada “teoria de confessionalização”, proposta por Wolfgang Reinhard e Heinz Schilling a partir de meados da década de 1970. Finalmente, propõe uma leitura crítica dessa teoria e discute a viabilidade de sua utilização, depurada do que se considera serem alguns equívocos e exageros; em especial, interessa-nos essa viabilidade para o trabalho de historiadoras e historiadores oriundos dos antigos domínios coloniais.

Palavras-chave: época confessional; processos de confessionalização; época moderna.

Article received on 27 June 2016 and approved for publication on 30 August 2016.

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DOI: 10.1590/TEM-1980-542X2017v230101

The confessional environment and its modernity

Between 1530 (date of the first confession of the faith presented by Protestant princes to Carlos V in the Imperial Diet in Augsburg) and 1647 (when an assembly of theologians concluded the last of the great Calvinist confessions of faith, the *Confession of Westminster*), Europe witnessed the phenomenon of the almost simultaneous production of numerous documents which had the purpose of synthesizing in *formulae* the doctrines considered basic for the Christian faith.²

These confessions of faith prepared at the beginning of the modern period emerged from the need, felt by all the expressions into which Western Christianity had subdivided during the sixteenth century, for demarcating their own field of religious existence. They were, thus, instruments of dogmatic definition in general by counterpoising other confessional fields, which always had a clear disciplinary character. Moreover, they also emerged with an ample scope: to the contrary of the council documents produced in Late Antiquity and in the Early Medieval period, which generally sought to deal with the resolution of specific doctrinaire difficulties, in the confessions of faith from the beginning of the Early Modern period, the intention was to formulate the global corpus of doctrines considered essential by the ecclesiastic group that produced them. The treatment was obviously synthetic, which is present in the actual nature of the 'formula' and explains why confessions of faith were in general followed, within each confessional group, by specific catechisms, whose purpose (as well as serving the catechetical work) was also to clarify what had been said in a masterly way in the confession. However, the underlying intention was globalizing, and this established a significant differential, especially in relation to the creeds produced during the first millennium of Christianity, in which we do not find the level of detail present in the confessions of faith produced at the beginning of the Early Modern era.³ Witness of the dawn of the confessional age, the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam appears to have perceived the inherent risks in this preoccupation with defining faith in an ever more complete manner when he wrote in 1523: "the more there are dogmas, the more material there is for heresies" (*apud* Chomarat, 1981, v. II, p. 1131).

In general terms, we can say that the confessions of faith which emerged in the Early Modern period had the basic objective of defining in the most detailed form possible the dogmatic content of the confessed faith, in a dynamic whose disciplinary character was

² In the Appendix can be found a non-exhaustive list of the principal Protestant and Roman Catholic texts from this period.

³ By way of example, we can consider the II Council of Orange (529): even though it was not an ecumenical council, but a local synod, it was the first synod held in Gaul to manifest itself in a broader form about doctrinaire questions, and not only about liturgical and administrative matters. Far from covering the principal aspects of faith, its 25 articles only deal with the problem of the Pelagian heresy (which affirmed the total liberty of human will in the work of salvation). See Rodrigues (2012, pp. 370-385, esp. p. 373) for the reference to the Council of Orange.

clearly perceptible. Believers, informed by the confession which was intended to be learned through rigorous catechetical effort, had to be recognized as members of their confessional groups and, simultaneously, be clear about the errors of other confessions. The subsidiary excluding nature of these documents is clear: in defining faith, they also defined those who were located *outside* it.

The confession became for believers an expression of their commitment, of their 'profession': confessing the faith was to profess it. Paolo Prodi offers us a precise (albeit synthetic) vision of the phenomenon:

Not only the birth of modern states, as the unquestionable protagonists of the new power, but also the birth of territorial churches compose this new panorama: an expression of this is the phenomenon of confessionalization, i.e., the emergence of the modern 'believer' out of medieval Christian man. In other words, a person who is linked to the Church not only by baptism and by participating in cults and sacraments, but also by a *professio fidei*, by a profession of faith which stops being a simple participation in the creed of Christian tradition becoming as well adhesion and faithfulness sworn to the ecclesiastic institution to which the individual belongs. (Prodi, 2005, pp. 237-238)

Prodi's synthesis allows us see clearly the concrete soil where the confessional phenomenon sprouted: in general, we are talking about the territorial churches, which suggests the intertwining of the profession of religious faith and secular authority. Prodi also takes into account another fundamental aspect: in this territorial church the believer was a member not only due to birth and baptism, but also due to personal adhesion, which carried a vote of obedience and faithfulness. Thus, the importance in the majority of Protestant groups of the specific act of the *profession of faith* as a conscious commitment assumed by the believer who, having been baptized in infancy and having received, later, catechetical instruction, becomes through this profession a full member and was admitted to the Eucharistic sacrament.

Even groups in which the secular power did not enter in confessional formulations except as external and threatening data, as in the case of the Waldensians and Huguenots in France, or groups for whom the idea of a swearing loyalty was questioned (the case of various expressions of the so-called 'radical reform'), also produced their confessions, which it was necessary to adhere to and obey (Williams, 1983; Clasen, 1972; Baylor, 1991).⁴ The disposition towards 'confessionalization,' even though it was linked on various occasions

⁴ I use here the expression 'radical reform,' notwithstanding its notorious limitations, in a merely descriptive form, taking into account its use in traditional historiography. For the vicissitudes of the groups identified as Waldensians on French soil in the sixteenth century, see *Histoire Memorable de la Persecution & Saccagement du peuple de Merindol & Cabrieres & autres circonvoisins, appelez Vaudois* (no authorship, place, or date; in general it is attributed to Jean Crespin and the probable date of its publication is 1555), whose principal information is repeated afterwards by Theodor Beza in his *Histoire ecclésiastique des églises réformées au royaume de France* (Antuérpia, 1580). See Cameron (1984) and Audisio (1984 and 1992).

with the secular authorities, could also at the limit operate contrary to the interests of civil authority.

Catholic confessionalization was of a much less multifaceted nature, taking into account the dogmatic centralization of Catholicism; but it occurred (in the Council of Trent) and was of as confessional a nature as observed in Protestant groups. The dynamic was the same, marked by catechetical discipline and by confessional specification (which in the Catholic case occurred through council documents and their mechanisms of application, rather than 'confessions of faith'). In this sense, it can be noted how Catholics and Lutherans took advantage of resources already used in the Catholic tradition (the use of catechisms or small summaries with a catechetical nature), but sought to improve them (Prosperi, 2001; Agnolin, 2007, pp. 135-233).

Since paleo-Christian times the word *confession* had been associated with the specific place where the remains of a martyr were buried; the verbal form '*confiteri*' ('confess,' 'profess') gave rise to the noun '*confessor*,' not found in classical sources. Its oldest attestation is found in Christian inscriptions from the second century, designating those who had experimented various sufferings due to their faith, not dying because of these ailments, but who had remained loyal to this 'confession' until the end of their lives. The *confessor*, thus, was distinguished from the *martyr*, among other aspects, because the latter sealed their testimony with their death, while the former, not even having died under persecution, gave *testimony* (in Greek, *martyrios*) suffering for the faith and remaining loyal to it throughout life (Rudge and Beccari, 1907-1912, v. IV, pp. 214-215, respectively).

Although the word 'confessor' was not used in Early Modern confessional sources, the use of the term *confessio* denounces this connection with the Christian past, the past of martyrs and confessors; a past continually idealized and which, in the reconstructions of history made by Protestants, appeared as a time of a Church still faithful to the Gospel. Implicitly, subscribing to a confession of faith meant giving this testimony and risking the same suffering which the ancient confessors had suffered. It was thus not only an instrument of confessional standardization, or a uniformization tool; in one form or another, the confession of faith was linked to conscience and impelled a testimony which culminated in the individual profession of faith.

It is interesting to perceive that *catechism*, an instrument generally chosen to make the learning of the confession of faith by the believer feasible, not only had a structure which, based on repetitions and on questions and answers, fit well with teaching that was above all oral; this structure was, after all, presented as an interrogation, something which must have been understood, in the highly polemical context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in a different way from the perspective which medieval catechists and catechumens had of this practice. Catechism not only instructed and with this prepared for the *professio* before the religious community (the moment of full reception as member of a Church),

but also prepared for a broader *professio*, confession before the rest of society. The unstable nature of the epoch meant that, even in apparently safe situations, in which the confessional group was not at the periphery of secular power, religious education was a constant preparation for external testimony (Calvino, 1547, p. Aⁱ-A^{iiiiv}).

Prodi's text, cited above, can suggest to us the modern nature of the confessional phenomenon, in other words, one which shows its specific novelty in relation to previous formulations, is associated with the place given to the individual in the condition of subject of the *professio fidei* against a medieval past in which faith is expressed in a more collective form, by frequenting (even if sporadically) the liturgy and the sacraments. But this does not correspond to the truth. The connection of the *confession* to the semantic universe of martyrdom links the use of the term in Early Modernity to a much older environment, in which the individual decision was already present. Although it could express a collective belonging, subscribing to a confession of faith, as well as suffering for the faith, or giving up one's life in martyrdom, implies individual action whose emblem came to be, in Protestant groups, the moment of the effective profession by the believer.

It is not any emphasis on individual character which makes the confessional phenomenon a modern phenomenon and the confessional situation an effective novelty on the horizon of Early Modernity. The modernity of the confessional environment was based rather on its wide-ranging dissemination, so widespread that a similar confessional mechanics could be observed in the production of confessions of different and even conflicting faiths; it was based on the scope of these confessions, in their attempt to embrace all details of the faith, in a dynamic which incorporated elements specifically developed in Early Modernity, such as the dealing with biblical and doctrinaire texts through philological criticism; it was also based on the complex relations which the confessional practice established with the secular power and which were not merely unidirectional. Confessional practice was not only constituted as an imposed instrument, whether by religious elites with catechetical, polemical, or doctrinaire standardization purposes, or by secular authorities with the objective of consolidating their own space of authority; it was also a phenomenon marked by great resonance among individuals who were part of these confessional groups. While in their dynamics of preparation they were certainly the work of religious elites, more or less interwoven in the interests of the secular power, the confessions also corresponded to the anxieties of the adepts; anxieties, in turn, certainly molded to a large extent by preaching, which once again brings us to the participation of elites and their official representatives. However, although a large amount of circularity was built into their formative processes, it cannot be lost sight of that the phenomenon counted on wide-ranging social roots which, in certain circumstances, explained their occurrence even in opposition to the authorities.

Anyone wanting to understand the living conditions and the structures of thought of Western society at the beginning of the modern era cannot ignore the confessional

phenomenon. The central place then occupied by the Christian religion obliges us to take into account carefully, this context, in which the meticulous and exhaustive formulation of faith comes to have decisive importance, if we wish to understand the social dynamics which gave rise to these representations and the long-term effects provoked by them. We begin by trying to briefly comprehend the historiographic fortune of the confessional phenomenon to, afterwards, concentrate on the way it has more recently been treated by the so-called 'confessionalization' theory proposed by German historiography.

The confessional phenomenon and 'confessionalization theory:' fortune and critical assessment

The confessional phenomenon has received various historiographic readings, starting with the strongly polemical and providentialist one present in the Lutheran *Magdeburg Centuries*, published between 1564 and 1574, which drew as a polemical response from the Catholic Church the *Annales ecclesiasticae*, written by Cardinal Cesare Baronius, published in 12 volumes between 1588 and 1607 (Scheible, 1966; Rau, 2004, pp. 115-138; Bouwsma, 1990, pp. 299-301; Cochrane, 1981, pp. 457-463; Cantimori, 1984, p. 281). On the one hand, among Protestant groups, we have the providentialist and triumphalist exaltation of the confessional attitude, understood as an eruption *ex tenebris lux*; on the other, on the part of Catholic confessionality, we have the anachronism of the perspective which sought to discern since the most remote past of the Church the presence, even if seminal, of new postures sanctioned by Tridentine reform. In both cases, new positions and a new form of relating with the content of faith were celebrated in a supposedly historical manner, which did not lack some refinements of documentary and philological research (which evidentially did not prevent these authors from twisting the historic data at their own convenience).

Later, the Enlightenment, impressed by what it understood to be the enormous measure of intellectual conformation demanded by the confessional attitude, interpreted as a dangerous tendency which curtailed the questioning liberty of human intelligence what, a little more than one hundred years before, had been celebrated by confessional Protestant historiography as the shedding of light and the liberation of consciences (Hazard, 1948, pp. 50-82). Although it is more comprehensible to us than the providentialist reading, it is necessary to recognize that this typically illustrated interpretation also had an anachronistic aspect. Also anachronistic was the reading made by the nineteenth century Protestant historiography, of which Leopold von Ranke gives us an example in his *History of the Popes*: according to Ranke, the Protestants, with their confessional practice, had guaranteed the existence of independent states, free of the dangerous universalism aimed at by the papacy, and thus had preserved the delicate balance of powers on the European continent (Ranke, 1853, v. II, pp. 3-17).

Twentieth century historiography, free of providentialist bias, but equally critical of the fascination exercised by the state, remained at a cautious distance from the question. When it was addressed, it was to emphasize what was understood as the profoundly ideological nature of these confessions and the confessional attitude as a whole: in this context, wrote Delio Cantimori in 1937, religion was an instrument to reinforce the authority of princes:

Patriarchal absolutism in politics and protectionist mercantilism in the economy corresponded in religious life to confessionalism and orthodoxy; it was a general phenomenon which implicated both Catholic and Protestant princes: all saw religion as an instrument to reinforce their absolutism, both in relation to subjects and in relation to imperial authority. (Cantimori, 1984, p. 99)

Cantimori's observations includes some very accurate perceptions, but they communicated a global image of the phenomenon which portrayed it in a unidirectional manner, as well as denouncing an excessive (and improbable) consciousness of princes about the instrumentalization of religion. After all, this perspective especially informed German social history (*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*), which flourished in the 1960s. Distrusting 'ecclesiastic history' produced under confessional patronage, afraid of the conservative connection which, since Ranke, appeared to have marked a similar approach aggravated in the German context by the profound intertwining of Lutheranism and Nazism, German social history was dedicated, above all, to analyzes with a socio-economic perspective, ostensibly ignoring problems of a religious nature. According to Hans-Ulrich Wehler, for example, confessional divisions were among the factors which hindered the construction of a well-integrated German society in the nineteenth century, exercising, above all, a dysfunctional role in terms of social relations.⁵

The 'theory of confessionalization' which emerged in German historiography at the end of the 1970s and rapidly gained expressivity, was an important attempt to revise the role of confessional phenomenon and their impact on European society in Early Modernity (Reinhard, 1999, pp. 169-192, 1989, pp. 383-404, and 1997, pp. 15-35; Schilling, 1992, 1997, pp. 675-691, 1986, pp. 21-30, and 2008). Its origin can be found in the already traditional concern of German historiography with the formative foundations of the modern state; an understandable problematic, it can be said in passing, due to the German context of a difficult and late unification. Practicing a history with a more sociological bias, Gerhard Oestreich had raised a basic problem in a very important text in 1969: how the state had managed to install the social discipline fundamental for its constitution, in a situation of competition

⁵ It is necessary to take into account the specificities in which the expression 'social history' is wrapped in the context of German historiography and distinguish it from what occurred in other countries: the borrowing of concepts and theories of the social sciences, tendencies towards theorization, attention to the broad configurations of social forces, little concern with more localized studies. See the observations of Eley (1979, pp. 381-382, 384, and 1989, pp. 301-305, 312-314), Kaelble (2003, pp. 29-35) and Wehler (1984-1985, pp. 101-109).

arising out of a society based on *ordines*, characterized by the presence of the old corporate forces with its multiple levels of authority (Oestreich 1984, pp. 179-200)? A critic of Weber, Oestreich did not believe that the controlling element in the structuring of the state could have been rationalization based on bureaucratic centralization and institutionalization, since the most recent historiography had demonstrated the ineffectiveness of these institutions in dealing with the numerous aspects involved in the consolidation of sovereign power. Oestreich thought that the fundamental element for overcoming the previous situation, reputed by him to be 'chaotic,' was the offering by the state of an alternative to the religious crisis, in a process he calls the 'detheologizing of politics:' to the anarchy provoked by the plurality of comprehensions and theological pretensions, the state offered a convenient way out, based on the triumph of *raison d'État* and the removal of the old theological references from politics (Oestreich, 1984, p. 192; see also Koselleck, 1999, pp. 19-47). The paradigm of this state, in turn, was that of the Roman principality, whose ideology, recovered in the form of neo-stoicism, had constituted itself as the decisive factor to allow, in a Europe divided by confessional questions, the emergence of a philosophy of discipline which came to permeate institutions and social practices in the seventeenth century.

It can be perceived that Oestreich distanced himself effectively from Weber by looking for a non-religious cause for this discipline which had become characteristic of the early modern age. With this his research was harmonized with the assumption of German social history and its vision of religious aspects as 'dysfunctional.' However, this approach lent itself to an explicit contradiction. Although he had criticized Weber's excess trust in a bureaucratic structure that was still insufficient to penetrate in an equal manner all the multiple layers of European society, Oestreich does not explain to us how disciplinary instruments could be disseminated by a state that was still not totally consolidated, still not totally master of the corporate forms of social existence, in order to allow such a broad control of society.

Without denying the importance of the concept of 'social discipline,' proposed by Oestreich, some German historians have tried to resolve the apparent gap in the explanation given by the latter. The theory they proposed consigns a more significant role to religion in the transformations which had characterized modernity, above all in the origin of the modern state itself, supposing that the centrality of the religious code in this context (religion as the *religio uinculum societatis*) could not continue to be ignored as had been done by German social history and sociological history following Oestreich.

According to Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, the confessional process, through which European Christianity became religiously plural, was a very important element of transformation and the modernization of social structures. Reinhard starts with the criticism of the old oppositions of 'reformation/bourgeoisie/modernization' versus 'counter-reformation/feudal society/reaction' and seeks to map out what he understands to be the *modernity* of the confessional phenomenon. A specialist in the Catholic context, Reinhard tried to show

the modernity of Jesuit institution, arguing that even the general attitudes of the Catholic Church (in relation to profit, for example) were even more positive and favorable than those envisaged, for example, in Calvinism. In this posture, there is a special rejection of mere opposition between ‘reformation’ and ‘counter-reformation;’ Reinhard talks of a two-century process to introduce reforms (the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), followed by an ‘evangelical movement’ of relatively short duration (in the sixteenth century, *also* covering Catholics), culminating in two centuries of confessionalization (between 1530 and 1750).

This confessionalization process was characterized by the identification of the social groups through religious and confessional elements: the German of Saxony was Lutheran and what differentiated him was the communion in both species (bread and wine); the German from Bavaria was Catholic and what marked him out was devotion to the Virgin and communion under the form of bread alone. In this process, the very reason of being of confessions of faith — the doctrinaire specification capable of making believers conscious about their faith — became secondary in light of the establishment and dissemination of new norms of institutional control. Resulting from this was the care which people in functions seen as strategic (theologians, pastors, preceptors, university professors, secular authorities, midwives) were submitted to a severe exam aimed at proving their confessional faithfulness.

The confessional process, from which there emerged different confessions of faith and, around them, specific communities, thereby became a confessionalization process, in which structures were created which differentiated each group, based on confession, and control mechanisms which guaranteed adherence to these structures. The confession of faith (in German, *bekennnis*) caused structuration around the formula of faith of a social group which came to be recognized by certain traits in common, not necessarily of a theological nature; this social group was thus structured as a ‘confession’ (*Konfession*).⁶ Rival confessional groups, in turn, learned to recognize and reject these structures identified with the ‘enemy;’ but at the limit they reproduced an identical process, only with their own confessional content. In this way, in Calvinist territories saints’ names were not given to children (except if the name was of biblical origin); preferentially children were given names of figures from the Old Testament. In Catholic territories, at the end of the sixteenth century giving saints names became almost normative. Various social practices thereby fell under

⁶ Schilling reminds us that in German the term *Konfession* designates the “organized body of Christians that accepts the determined interpretation of Christian doctrine.” The doctrinaire declaration on which a community is based (the ‘confession’ of that community) is called *Bekennnis*. This distinction allowed German historians to work more intensely with the paradigm of *konfessionalisierung* or ‘confessionalization,’ with the institutional structuration of confessional groups (Lutherans, Calvinists, or Reformers and Catholics all represented a specific *Konfession*) and less with particular doctrinaire perspectives (expressed in the different *Bekennnissen*). See Schilling (1986, p. 22, note 3). However, this distinction is something fluid; *Confessio fidei Augustana* (Augsburg Confession of Faith) was called in German, *Augsburgische Konfession oder Bekennnis des Glaubens* (Confession of Augsburg or Confession of Faith). See Triglot *Concordia. The symbolical books of the evangelical Lutheran church: German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921, p. 37). The relationship between confessional content and the institutional and social practices and structures, in turn, is more intimate than this distinction allows us imagine.

the sphere of influence of confessional assumptions, even in topics not directly linked to doctrine. In the mechanics of mutual rejection, even what was not of a religious nature was the target of suspicions when it came from the other confessional camp: Reinhard shows us that papal reform of the calendar, implemented in 1582, was not accepted by evangelicals within the Empire until 1699 (Reinhard, 1999, p. 181). In the process of establishing and diffusing these norms with a great impact on social experience, a profound intermeshing of secular and religious control, according to these authors, can be noted, in such a way that religious structures ended up serving for secular authorities' control over subjects, while in other contexts administrative and bureaucratic structures were also used for channeling religious control.

Intensely mobilized in this process were propaganda (catechisms, sermons, sacred music, images, plays, practices of worship) and counter-propaganda strategies, such as censorship measures, production of polemical material, etc. (Soergel, 1993; Baumgarten, 2005, pp. 35-48). For the internalization of the confessional order, teaching was of enormous importance: in the Empire and Low Countries alone, 12 Lutheran and eight reformed universities were founded in the second half of the sixteenth century, plus five more only in Switzerland; similarly, Jesuit colleges multiplied. An intensification of the dynamics of control was witnessed which, although previously existing in the Catholic world, came to mark, in specific forms in each context, all confessional environments: involved here were episcopal and inquisitorial visits in Catholic territories; ecclesiastical supervision visits in Lutheran territories; the diligent action of consistories in Reformed-Calvinist territories. In relation to the consistories, councils of preachers and elders who exercised discipline in Calvinist communities, Reinhard shows how these made feasible the diffusion of an effective vigilance over populations in an impressive process of capillarization of control networks (Reinhard, 1989, pp. 393 and 396; Palomo, 1997, pp. 121-127, and 2006, pp. 9-16).

The results for those in power were not sought in an exclusive manner, as if the opportunistic use of religion, to which we are used, was possible in that context. However, these results were intensely taken advantage of: confessional discipline demarcated the authority of the prince, restricted the mobility of subjects (for example, those who went to study in regions of different confessions were suspected), provided parameters of control which signaled potentially dangerous individuals. Finally, this approach appeared to respond more effectively to the problem presented by Oestreich: the state could impose its authority over the corporate forums of society, without proper structures for this, because religion lent itself to capitalizing on submission to central authority, which watched over not only civil order, but the salvation of the souls of subjects; after all, opposing the central authority was opposing God himself. In the absence of a control apparatus on the part of the state, the Church provided its own apparatus and made possible the consensus of those affected by disciplinary measures. In this context, and leaving aside the anachronical reading of

‘ideological instrumentalization,’ the Jesuit Giovanni Botero’s affirmation in his *Della ragione di Stato* (1589) makes full sense:

No law is more favorable to the prince than the Christian, because submitted to him are not only the bodies and the resources of subjects, but also their souls and consciences, and they are linked not only by the hands, but also by feelings and thoughts. (Botero *apud* Reinhard, 1989, p. 404)⁷

It can be noted how the perspective proposed by the confessionalization paradigm completely inverts Oestreich’s argument: the strengthening of the state did not occur due to a ‘de-theologization of politics’ which allowed the disciplining of society; to the contrary, ‘confessionalization’ had actually been the first phase in the ‘social disciplining’ necessary to the strengthening of the state. According to this theoretical perspective, this had occurred in an eminently modernizing dynamic, allowing in the *longue durée* the emergence of bureaucratic apparatus of the state, the literacy of European society and the levelling of the *status* of all subjects (against the old conception based on *ordines*); for the proponents of this theory the emergence of democratic society itself was even a tributary of this complex process (Reinhard, 1999, p. 189; Schilling, 2008, pp. 18-19).⁸

‘Confessionalization theory’ is thereby revealed to be a theoretical paradigm which tries to understand how religious confessions at the beginning of the modern period produced effects that went beyond doctrinal purposes in processes that were very similar in all confessional groups. These processes, seen by the proponents of the theory as eminently modernizing, created the conditions for the establishment of the modern state: social conditions, due to the opportune homogenization produced within territories; mental conditions, due to the introjection of discipline and the emphasis on individual religious conscience; and institutional conditions, through the creation of administration and bureaucratic control structures which the state could take advantage of.

We now move on to a critical assessment of this theoretical model. The ‘recovery’ of the religious element by social history, intended by the paradigm, is opportune if we take into consideration the context of German historiography, in which questions linked to religion found themselves discredited. However, the situation was not in the same in the rest of Europe, or even outside it. Before the emergence of this theory, religious questions were already the subject of investigations in social history, in France (with the research carried out following the line of historiography of the *Annales*, culminating in studies about

⁷ The work of Botero cited by Reinhard is Botero, Giovanni. *Della ragione di Stato* (Turim: Luigi Firpo, 1948).

⁸ Schilling writes: “Seen in long-term perspective, confessionalization was one of the driving elements of that transformative process of the early modern period that pushed the Old European society toward the modernity of universal, pluralistic, liberal, and democratic industrial or postindustrial societies” (Schilling, 2008, pp. 18-19). For our criticism of Schilling’s affirmation, as well as the general tendency to consider the processes of confessionalization as something that steered in the direction of modernity, see, below, our assessment of the theory; in a more detailed form, see Rodrigues (2012, pp. 394-443).

'mentalities' and with repercussions in different countries), in England (with brilliant studies, such as those of Christopher Hill about the imaginations of religious radicals in the seventeenth century, or of Keith Thomas about magic), in Italy (with the seminal research of Delio Cantimori and, afterwards, Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi), in the United States (with the investigations of Natalie Zemon Davis about religious turbulences on France). Obviously, this list is only representative. The fact is that the absence of religion on the agenda of social historians was a distinctively German phenomenon and could not be attributed to the Marxist nature of a large part of the social history practiced in that country. Principally it is related to the specific trajectories of that historiography: the rancor of a religious inheritance that was too intertwined with the structure of the state, the presence of the confessional question in exclusive university chairs (the *Kirchengeschichte* or 'Church History' chairs, which not rarely were still filled in the twentieth century following confessional parameters, alternating Protestants and Catholics) and principally the suspicion that the complex inheritances of the confessional past were at the root of German 'backwardness' and the authoritarian tendency of the state. Consequently, the renewed attention to religious questions by the historians involved in this new paradigm did not represent so much an 'advance' for German historiography as much as actually overcoming a backwardness in relation to historiographic work carried out in other countries.

'Confessionalization theory' is still excessively linked to macro-historical theoretical perspectives, influenced by sociology. Moreover, this is something common in German historiography, which risks forcing historical data by thinking in over-generalized terms. The model contemplates the similarities between the different types of confessional process, but does not adequately point out their differences. This tendency also combines with the emphasis on *longue durée* processes (confessionalization, secularization) which only with difficulty escape from teleology by suggesting, in a more or less implicit manner, a certain inevitability of these processes. Historians need to be able to deal with such type of broad concepts, but should do so with great care; rather than the apparent facilitations they offer us, historians should prefer to work with empirical elements, offered by the actual period studied. The specific and the particular constitute, it should be noted, the territory *par excellence* of the historian; something important to be highlighted when the old seductions of sociology reappear in new clothes.

Moreover, the theory still shows an exaggerated concern with the problematic of the 'modern state.' The absorbing concentration in this question resulted, in practice, in the role of secular authority as being seen as very important in confessionalization theory, in some moments almost making the confessional attitude an imposition of 'the elites.' However, the research, especially that concentrated on specific cases, based on theoretical paradigms of this type, has pointed in the opposite direction: not rarely was it populations who imposed their "desire for confessionalization" (Burnett, 2000, pp. 67-85; Forster, 1992 and

2001; MacCulloch, Laven, and Duffy, 2006, pp. 706-720). Moreover, the argument is often circular: now it is the 'Churches of the Reformation' which did not have the structure and used what was offered by the State, then it is the state which took advantage of the structures prepared by these churches. This imprecision only shows us that general formula ('the state,' 'structures') can be empty; historians need to identify specific cases, and have to empirically name which powers and structures are being talked about so that the effective role of confessional dynamics can be adequately measured.

However, perhaps one of the most fragile aspects of this theoretical construction is the excessive concern with the problem of 'modernization.' Looked at from this angle, this interpretative paradigm is shown to be singularly teleological and Eurocentric. Teleological because when talking about the 'modern' aspect of these religious phenomenon, the theory effectively reduces their historic importance by linking them with modernizing perspectives. Doing this is equivalent to stating that confessional phenomenon were important because in the end they were modernizing. By understanding the confessional phenomenon as heading in the direction of modernity, its specificity, what it represented at its own moment, is lost. The theory is also Eurocentric, since it assumes the path followed by European nations towards modernity as paradigmatic and attributes to German society, notwithstanding its apparently late modernization, a role of coryphaeus of modernity, by settling the foundation on top of which were forged various aspects of the modern experience and sensitivity. It should be kept in mind that the problem of the 'late modernization' of Germany was, for the *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* of that country, as burning a question as the notion of the modern state; and for the proponents of the confessionalization paradigm inverting the 'dysfunctional' role, traditionally attributed by German social history to religion, became a point of honor.

Notwithstanding recent attempts, especially by Heinz Schilling, to attenuate the criticism which the model received because of its excessive concentration on the idea of 'modernization,' in this author there persists the conviction that the "dynamic capacities" of Western Europe reside in its "capability for changes of a fundamental nature" and that confessionalization had played an important role in this; as a counterpart, this was lacking in regions that are now on the periphery of Western Europe (as was especially the case of Eastern Europe and the Balkan peninsula). In this way, the paradigm became a comfortable instrument to explain the present-day peripheralization of significant parts of Europe, done in a frankly conservative and ideological manner, which ignored the concrete situations and the effective interests which provoked the jettisoning of these territories (Schilling, 2008, pp. 13-28).

As has been observed, the results of the research dealing with specific cases and not the design of large global 'processes' also permit us to criticize the idea that confessionalization imposed confessional homogenization: there was never total homogeneity within different confessional societies, which are revealed to a meticulous examination to be much

more multiple and nuanced than the explanatory model allows us to infer (Paiva, 2007, pp. 45-57). Generalizing seduction, it can be seen, not infrequently ends up victimizing the historian with optical illusions.

The importance of the study of confessional processes

The critical analysis to which we submitted ‘confessionalization theory’ should not lead us to believe that it is totally useless to social history. Much to the contrary.

The concept of ‘confessionalization processes,’ used in the *plural*, seems to me to be useful if, freed from the excesses of theorization and the seduction of macro-history, greater attention is paid to specific phenomenon. These ‘confessionalization processes’ were related to contexts, mechanisms, and dynamics in which and through which religious groups from a divided Christianity structured themselves, giving specific expression to their religious identities and leading to significant changes in structures and social practices.

They were plural processes, with various emphases and scopes, but which had in common the attempt to recreate, at the ‘micro’ level of kingdoms and territories, the same unitary socio-religious structure, the structure of the *respublica christiana*, this millenary self-understanding of European society which suddenly found itself split by the religious crisis. Confessional dynamics were understood as relevant not just because of the results they could offer to secular powers, but because they reworked the old manner of being and thinking about the *respublica christiana*. This suggests these dynamics, far from proposing the building of something new and ‘modern,’ were compromised with the survival of very old structures. Confessional disposition did not point in the direction of the ‘new,’ but in the direction of the old reality which had disappeared. Confessionalization was, thus, the defensive response of a society which found itself divided in the most central element of its self-comprehension: religiosity. That this society, in this defensive movement, used new resources and tried new forms of social experience is something which belongs to the very nature of historic processes, always open to imponderability.

Moreover, the distinctively new aspect, present in confessionalization processes, does not reside in its results which would be presumably ‘modernizing,’ but in the characteristics inherent to these processes: their scope, the meticulousness of scrutiny to which consciences were submitted, the use of a philological approach in the treatment of religious topics, the making feasible of an atmosphere very favorable to strict social control. These processes were presented with a distinctly modern face, even though to a large extent the ideas behind them reworked convictions supported by tradition.

These confessionalization processes functioned as mechanisms for differentiation from the ‘other’ within the limits of West Christianity and led to confessional confrontations. The old Irenicist and Erasmian argument, based on the discernment that war between

Christian kingdoms was fratricide, was no longer viable, since it was the responsibility of confessional delimitation to define who was and who was not Christian. However, these confrontations led Europe not only to a chaotic situation because of the wars of religion, culminating with the Thirty Years War (1618-1648); they also provoked situations in which the exercise of politics based on *raison d'État* was hindered, to the extent that political alliances came to be conditioned on confessional belonging. During the seventeenth century, it slowly came to be perceived that it was necessary to overcome confessional dynamics so that newly emerging political structures, as well as new forms of politics, would have a place. The modernity of the state and its instruments of power, therefore, depended to a large extent on overcoming confessional dynamics.

Free of these theoretical excrescences, the concept of 'confessionalization processes' allows us concede to religion its due role in the constitution of the modes of being and thinking in the West at the beginning of modernity: the role of the fundamental 'hermeneutic code,' an index through which all of European mentalities had to pass during that period.

The emblematic example is still that of communities which confessionalized *against* power. It is already clear that the hypothesis of mere 'ideological' use is inviable, to the extent that secular authorities believed in what they were doing; when it was possible for them to operate confessionalization, they did not instrumentalize merely religion, but gave expression to profoundly enrooted convictions. The possibility of confessional action against authority showed how these dynamics were much more profound and capable of giving form to social structures, in a complex relationship between social agents which could not be resolved with summary equations. As recent research has shown, always attentive to the specificities of the context investigated and mistrusting generalizations, under the cover of an apparent confessional homogeneity are hidden multiple, polyphonic, voices, which when highlighted, show how these processes were complex and varied.

When dealing with this question, use of vigorously critical current historical methodologies free us from the risk of returning to the old approach of 'confessional history.' The study of these dynamics obviously assumes knowledge of the specific confessional dispositions of the context being investigated; but this study is carried out using methodologies which recognize the validity of these objects for historical analysis. It is important to highlight this because, even in the context of confessionalization theory, with its search for the recovery of religious data for social history, it is not rare to see constrained arguments which emphasize that the focus of the research was on institutional mechanics, the strategies of disseminating confessional norms, and not on the actual confessional material itself and its specificities (Reinhard, 1999, p. 178). Opting for normative and institutional aspects serves well one of the purposes of theory: emphasizing the basic similarities, the uniformity of processes in all confessional groups, at the same time that it removes any kinship with the old 'Church history' and its exclusively doctrinal interest. However, this concern

ended up obfuscating the significant distinctions and meanings among confessional processes. The specificities of confessions led to beliefs, behavior and practices which determined differences in the confessional mechanics themselves: in terms of the interiorization of norms and behavior, for example, in the Catholic case the *spectacular* aspects of rites and devotions was much more important, at the same time that the Catholic concern with controlling access to biblical texts resulted in a religion that was little dependent on a direct relationship with the text (Paiva, 2007, p. 48). The practice of the auricular confession of sins, which gained significant reinforcement from the Tridentine measures, molded Catholic confessionality in a very precise manner, with reflections on modern developments of the perception of interiority; on the other hand, no study about Dutch culture in the seventeenth century can afford to ignore the weight of a very specific aspect of Calvinism, its devotional and liturgical practice which tended to minimize visual resources and elaborate an ascesis minimally dependent on exteriorities. Violence, which was always an element present with great similarities in all confessional mechanics, as shown by Natalie Zemon Davis, could be molded by internal characteristics of confessions of faith: thus, in the French religious uprisings in the 1560s and 1570s, episodes of profaning corpses was more frequently practiced by Catholics than Protestants. According to Natalie Zemon Davis, this was because, in the Catholic perspective, reverence for bodies was a more significant element than for Protestants; it was not enough to kill Huguenots heretics, it was also necessary to destroy their bodies. Protestants were equally violent, but they directed their violence to aspects of the Catholic practice which was contrary to their doctrine; resulting in the episodes of destruction of images and the profanation of the consecrated host (Agnolin, 2007, pp. 99-107, 179-184, and 311-321; Delumeau, 1991; Prosperi, 1996, pp. 213-548; Schama, 1992; De Reuver, 2007; Davis, 1990, pp. 129-156, here p. 150; Pollmann, 2013, pp. 165-182).

The historian of confessional processes focuses with interest on institutional structures and the normative mechanisms produced by them; examines parochial documents, acts of synods and consistories, council dispositions, trying to understand how and by which paths an unprecedented social control was effectively exercised, in this context of the beginning of modernity; on sermons, but also pamphlets and simple and popular publications, rarely more than a single page, seeking to understand how this social conscience was accentuated by the elites, of what nature was the response coming from the less privileged layers and how these levels intertwined circularity relations. To understand this scenario, knowledge of the relevant confessional disposition is obviously of a propaedeutic nature; but what could be arid about dealing with these difficult texts is well compensated for by the perspectives they open for us towards the societies which produced them. Attention to confessional phenomenon makes us sensitive to the extreme multiplicity of life and the religious conscience at the beginning of modernity and the profound impact of this specific sensitivity on social structures.

For historians coming from old colonial contexts, the study of processes of confessionalization is dually interesting. First, because it allows us to better understand realities which also touch us strongly; after all, as Vieira said about overseas government in his beautiful metaphor of the sun and the shadow, dynamics of a European origin had repercussions in colonial dominions not rarely in more intense manner than in the 'center' itself.⁹ How in these new contexts, which the Europeans saw as threatening and where for them European logics were, if not inverted, at least distorted, were these formulations accepted? Did colonial environments add to the mechanisms of discipline coming from the European context, or did they change them? These are representative questions which, at the very least, remind us that research about colonial contexts cannot ignore these transformations in religious conscience and in the social practices arising out of this conscience, under the penalty of not understanding a society for which religion continued to play a central role.

Second, historians from the old colonial contexts, even when the exclusive subject of their research is elsewhere, can criticize from a privileged point of view the treatment given by European historiographies to questions traditionally considered 'European,' such as the confessional phenomenon; and they can re-read with various advantages the very sources which this historiography has focused on. Situated on the 'periphery,' these historians are used to comparisons between societies, having been introduced to the comparative exercise by the actual colonial situation; and they can with great ease accuse the seductions and siren songs present in the attempts to measure the rest of the world by Western European canons.

Finally, the use of the concept helps us to understand and analyze the social control mechanisms conceived during this period. Effectively, one of the most distinct aspects of the modern age was the emergence and prominence of these mechanisms, in such a way that we can say that modernity and pervasive social control were equivalent. The above-mentioned commitment of populations to the confession was, to a large extent, what supported these control mechanisms. In Calvinist territories, for example, discipline was maintained and administrated by the consistory, but supported by micro-networks which were intertwined in the interior of daily relationships; in Catholic regions, denunciations for the Inquisition did not solely occur as a result of pressures from the authorities, but as part of an awareness of religious obligations.

Looking at the confessional phenomenon in this manner, without concerns with detecting 'modernizing' signs, does not make us insensitive to what, at this time, was effectively again added to European social practices and consciences. Rather return to the past the 'strangeness' which configures it as such ("The past is a foreign country," Leslie Poles Hartley

⁹ The metaphor is found in Vieira (1940, v. I, p. 275). I found the reference in Souza (2006, pp. 246-247), who also includes it as an epigraph and uses it for the title of his beautiful book.

reminds us),¹⁰ and challenges ourselves to understand it without trying to approximate it, in an illusory manner, to our contemporary world.

Appendix

Basic confessional texts (non-exhaustive summary)

For a standard text of Lutheran confessional documents, see *Triglot Concordia. The symbolical books of the evangelical Lutheran church: German-Latin-English*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921 (Portuguese translations exist). For the text of the Confession of Westminster, a good standard edition is Green, James B. *A harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian standards*. New York: William Collins and World, 1976 (there are translations to Portuguese in many editions).

The multiple character of the confessional phenomenon can be perceived in a non-exhaustive mention of the principal confessional documents.

A) Lutheran: *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism* (1529); *Augsburg Confession* (1530); *Apology of Augsburg Confession* (1531); *Smalcald Articles* (1537); *Grosse kirchenordnung* (“Great Laws of the Church”, promulgated by the Lutheran territorial Church of Württemberg, 1559); *Corpus doctrinae Philippicum* (1560, also known as the *Misnicum* in a toponymal reference to the Saxon city of Meissen), *ordnung* of the territorial church of Saxony; *Formula Concordiae* (which summarizes the fundamental texts, 1577). Many other texts were produced before the standardization established by the Formula of Concord: the 1564 *Corpus Doctrinae Pomeranicum*; the 1567 (Prussian) *Corpus Doctrinae Prutenicum*; *Corpus Doctrinae Thuringicum* (from the Duchy of Saxony, 1570); *Corpus Doctrinae Brandenburgicum*, 1572; *Corpus Doctrinae Wilhelminum* (Lueneburg, 1576, which includes a document with an emblematic title: *Formulae recte sentiendi de praecipuis horum temporum controversiis*, or “Formula for correctly thinking about the principal controversies of these times”); *Corpus Doctrinae Iulium* (Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, 1576); *Confession books* from Hamburg (1560) and Braunschweig (1563 and 1570) and the *Order of the Church of Göttingen* (1568). See Bente, Friedrich. Historical introductions to the symbolical books of the evangelical Lutheran church. In: *Triglot Concordia. The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: German-Latin-English*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921. pp. 1-256.

B) Reformed-Calvinist: *Confessio Helvetica prior* (“First Helvetic Confession”, 1536); *Confessio galicana* (1559); *Scottish Confession of Faith* (1560); *Confessio Belgica* (1561); *Confessio Helvetica posterior* (1562-1564); *Heidelberg’s Catechism* (1563); *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church* (1571); the *Canons of Dort* (1618); the *Belgic Confession of Faith* (1618) and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (see also: *The Scottish Confession of Faith*. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications,

¹⁰ “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” Hartley, Leslie Poles. *The go-between*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953. p. 9.

1993; Schaff, Philip. *Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*. Vol. III, *The Evangelical Protestant Churches*. Nova York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1877; Gootjes, Nicolaas H. *The Belgic Confession: its history and sources*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2007; Bierma, Lyle D. et al. *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: sources, history, and theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2005).

Talking about Catholic confessionalization basically involves the canons drafted by the Council of Trent and the dogmatic and disciplinary dispositions which followed this Council. For the canons of Trent, see Alberigo, G.; Dossetti, G. A.; Joannou, P. P.; Leonardi, C.; Prodi, P. (Ed.). *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*. Bologna: Dehoniane, 1991; for *Catechismus tridentinus* (1566), see the Italian translation, *Catechismo tridentino: catechismo ad uso dei Parroci Pubblicato dal Papa S. Pio V*. Siena: Cantagalli, 1996. These basic documents of Catholic confessionalization can also be found in Dentzinger-Schönmetzer. *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (various editions; Brazilian edition: Dentzinger, H.; Hünermann, P. *Compêndio dos símbolos, definições e declarações de fé e moral*. Tradução. São Paulo: Loyola, 2007), §§ 1491-1816 (for the canons of Trent) and 1880 (for *Professio fidei tridentina*).

The author would like to thank the Research Support Foundation of the State of São Paulo (Fapesp), which made the translation of this text to English possible through the Regular Research Support Project (process 2014/18183-7).

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