

## STERN PRIZE

---

### STRANGERS AND NEIGHBORS: THE TACTICS OF TOLERATION IN THE DUTCH EXILE COMMUNITY OF WESEL, 1550–1590

*Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize Presentation, November 18, 2005*

**Jesse A. Spohnholz**  
*Grinnell College*

A central conflict for people living through the Reformation, as I see it, was finding a balance between religious toleration and religious concord. Toleration I take to be the acceptance of religious difference within a community. Its opposite, concord, entails the elimination of difference on the basis of shared values. My research describes how neighbors of different faiths balanced these forces in Wesel, a Lutheran city on the Lower Rhine with a Catholic minority and a sizable population of Calvinist immigrants from the Netherlands. Residents of Wesel, of course, did not use the same terminology. They expressed their central goals in terms of securing both “peace and unity.” Achieving *unity* meant stressing concord—that is, preserving a united Christian church. Securing *peace*, on the other hand, meant developing strategies to manage disputes over religious differences. For residents of post-Reformation Wesel, finding a balance between peace and unity, between toleration and concord, was at the heart of preserving civic order.

My project considers the strategies for coexistence developed by individuals of conflicting faiths in Wesel. I focus my examination on these “tactics of toleration” from the vantage points of religious immigrants and their hosts, who learned to coexist during a period of increasing confessional consciousness and hostility. Although their initial strategies were unsuccessful, residents learned to avoid confrontation and violence by demarcating the spheres of religious activity in which either Christian unity or pluralism was most suitable. My research explores these negotiations through daily interactions, conflicts, and religious compromises that emerged in the late sixteenth century. For the purpose of illustration, I will focus my explanation here on describing how this process worked for the ritual of communion.

For all Christians, the Lord’s Supper was essential for reconciliation between an individual and God. But communion was also the preemi-

ment symbol of unity in the church. Civic and religious leaders of all stripes repeatedly lauded the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the most fundamental expression of unity and peace.<sup>1</sup> It was for this reason that in 1553, when the city had accepted the Lutheran faith, magistrates demanded that residents continue to take communion together. Because sixteenth-century debates about the Eucharist were so fierce, prioritizing unity of this sort inherently threatened to undermine peace. The solution developed in Wesel demonstrates that the tension between toleration and concord is more complex than the apparent mutual incompatibility suggests.

Although it took place only four times per year, the celebration of communion was the high point of religious devotion in Wesel. The service, ornamented with devotional candles and incense, began with the singing of psalms, a catechism, a Gospel lesson, a short sermon, and Lutheran hymns.<sup>2</sup> Following this came the Lord's Prayer, the *pax domini*, and finally the distribution of the Eucharist itself.<sup>3</sup> This was a thoroughly Lutheran liturgy, which turned its back on the Catholic mass while still rejecting the radical simplicity of the Calvinist service. The pretense that Wesel maintained Christian unity through its communion, in fact, masked deep religious differences.

Although Calvinists from the Netherlands generally complied with the magistrates' demands, being forced to celebrate communion in a Lutheran form bothered many of them. They repeatedly petitioned the council requesting a separate communion due to the exiles' distaste for Lutheran vestments, candles, altars, and the emphasis on the real presence.<sup>4</sup> The council, however, never conceded this point, and attendance at this mixed communion service remained the *sine qua non* for residence.<sup>5</sup> Periodically, Calvinists were caught illegally holding separate communion services. These incidents sometimes ended in expulsions, but always with an order that everyone celebrate communion together.<sup>6</sup>

Celebration of the Lord's Supper, lauded as a foundation of civic unity and harmony, could be a tense occasion in Wesel. Calvinists attacked what they called "superstitions," while Lutherans lashed out against what they saw as infiltrations of heresy. Sharing a united communion did not resolve these theological differences, but instead reminded residents of the religious and social fractures within their community. Yet the fact that Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics all continued to participate suggests that this strategy did meet with some success.

Problems within the Calvinist community were largely resolved by the efforts of their independent—and officially illegal—governing body, the consistory, made up of lay elders, who carefully regulated the doctrine, morals, and behavior of their community.<sup>7</sup> The elders worked tirelessly to convince reluctant Calvinists to attend communion. These cases reveal the discontent of some exiles, but also outline the methods by

which Wesel's residents negotiated between the twin specters of open schism on the one hand and compromising one's beliefs on the other. Considering the Calvinist emphasis on the remoteness of the divine from the worldly realm, the continued use of candles, organ music, and mass vestments was an affront to many exiles.<sup>8</sup> Peter Hasevelt, for instance, refrained from the Lord's Supper because his conscience rejected the excessive ceremonies. Nicolas Muller abstained from communion because of "several adiaphora," especially the use of the wafer rather than plain bread. He condemned the elders for tolerating Wesel's superstitions. Satan was present here, Muller charged, and tempted true Christians to idolatry.<sup>9</sup> Despite the consistory's failure to convince Hasevelt or Muller to comply, elders later attested that each conducted himself with "all piety and honor."<sup>10</sup> Their respect for these men notwithstanding, elders never ceased their efforts to ensure that all members attended the sacrament, as they explained, "in order to secure the unity of the church."<sup>11</sup>

When it came time to celebrate the Lord's Supper, some Calvinists retreated to nearby Reformed churches. In July 1575 an elder traveled to the town of Rees to find out how many of the Wesel brothers had attended communion.<sup>12</sup> Calvinist elders always discouraged this, because it could incite what they called "prejudices" and "divisions."<sup>13</sup> This practice of attending communion in neighboring cities, known as *Auslauf*, suggests that Calvinists unwilling to compromise still made efforts to steer clear of the public recognition of religious difference.<sup>14</sup> While requiring the united celebration of communion was deemed essential for upholding the pretense of religious unity, if the most uncompromising members had been strongly compelled to attend, they would surely have made matters worse. My research has shown that recorded cases of non-attendance were in fact quite exceptional.<sup>15</sup> Elders succeeded in convincing most Dutch Calvinists to attend communion. What these cases show us is not the overwhelming discord in Wesel's religious landscape, but the relative success of strategies to minimize that discord.

Some Lutherans, too, were reluctant to share the sacrament with those they believed to be schismatics and heretics. One "honorable pious woman" complained that she refused the sacrament in Wesel, "because she could not hold it with fanatics."<sup>16</sup> Some Lutherans grew so frustrated that they too held clandestine communion services.<sup>17</sup> The council rebuked this kind of insolence because it incited "division and disunity."<sup>18</sup> Yet hard-line Lutherans continued to protest that Calvinists, as one man wrote, "greatly disturb the Lord's Supper and create great anger in the church of God."<sup>19</sup> This overt contempt for the public communion ritual provoked anxiety from civic leaders for the same reason that the absence of Calvinists from the Lord's Supper did. Both sides threatened Christian

concord, which was at the heart of what leaders viewed as a stable social order.

Unlike Calvinists, Lutherans tried to draw as much attention to their discontent as possible. In late 1571, the “adherents of the unaltered Augsburg Confession” petitioned the council that Calvinists be refused the Eucharist. “Because the practice of the Lord’s Supper is a confession of faith . . . a Christian cannot take communion in good conscience with such repulsiveness.”<sup>20</sup> In 1572, a group of Lutherans protested that they held contempt for the local communion “because the ministers . . . openly allowed [Calvinists] to the Lord’s most esteemed Supper and Sacrament.”<sup>21</sup> The council refused all such requests from Lutherans, just as they did those from Calvinists.

Also like Calvinists, some frustrated Lutherans avoided confrontation by attending communion in nearby Essen.<sup>22</sup> I do not know how many Lutherans practiced *Auslauf*, but they apparently had significant sympathy. In 1575 the *Bürgermeister* himself, Otto von Bellinckhoven, told the council that by refusing to condemn Calvinists, the ministers had failed in their divinely ordained responsibility, justifying his separation from Wesel’s Eucharistic community.<sup>23</sup> Still, von Bellinckhoven was elected *Bürgermeister* four times over, and remained in the ruling patriariate for decades.<sup>24</sup> A city council edict from 1579 declared that Lutherans who took communion outside the city incited the “wrath of God” and brought “divisions and dangers” to the church.<sup>25</sup> Yet harsh disciplinary actions would have only increased the alienation of these men and women, since their anger was inspired above all by the failure of the secular and spiritual leadership to fulfill its Christian duty.

If Catholics were similarly discontented with Wesel’s mixed communion services, we have little evidence that tells us this because their archive has been destroyed. Yet it is surprising enough that Catholics attended at all. When Wesel initially joined the Lutheran church, Catholics were required to attend communion. Initially they had the option of receiving the bread alone and foregoing the wine offered to Protestant parishioners. Leading Catholics complained when this changed, but conceded that they only wanted to “hold themselves in all love with the honorable council.”<sup>26</sup>

We are best able to track the activities of Catholics though the city’s eight religious orders.<sup>27</sup> Just as with the Calvinists and Lutherans, magistrates and church leaders preserved the legal and social fiction of religious unity even as they overlooked peaceful Catholic dissenters. Although magistrates sometimes complained, religious orders continued to provide sacraments to faithful Catholics.<sup>28</sup> Although friars and nuns celebrated Mass in their chapels, they were required to keep their front doors shut during services.<sup>29</sup> When magistrates learned that several

priests were offering private Masses, they complained that this was an affront to the public communion and warned that it might incite “anger and disunity.”<sup>30</sup>

Yet if the members of the religious houses are any indication, we can surmise that most Catholics attended communion in the parish churches four times per year alongside their Lutheran and Calvinist neighbors. The Johanniter were still allowed to sing Latin hymns and place devotional candles on the altar and before images of saints. Overseers from Münster, visiting St. Martin’s *Fraterhaus* in 1575, complained that members took communion in the city church: in fact, the brothers kept their designated pews in the central parish.<sup>31</sup>

To Calvinist elders, the presence of Catholics at communion was disturbing, and the fact that the ministers allowed them to engage in rituals associated with the Roman Mass smacked of idolatry. In late 1578, the elders presented a request to the ministers concerning “the monks in St. John’s Cloister (because they go to communion here), that the placing of candles in front of the images and the singing of Latin songs be eliminated.”<sup>32</sup> The chief minister answered that Catholic worshippers could continue “because their singing is Christian, even though it is in [Latin], and they understand it well.”<sup>33</sup> The elders likewise complained about the people who “hold themselves in papacy” but were admitted to the Lord’s Supper.<sup>34</sup> The minister, already willing to accept Calvinists within the Eucharistic community, also acknowledged Catholics as part of the Christian family. For him, civic harmony rested on communal unity, particularly the united celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Through their very participation, Catholics accepted this line of reasoning. But this did not mean that they abandoned confessionally oriented activities, like holding private Mass or venerating saints. The ministers’ expectations for Wesel’s Catholic population were not that different from those for Calvinists. As long as they participated in the ritual of communion, they were allowed additional devotional privileges. For Calvinists, this meant that they were quietly allowed to practice their strict form of moral discipline within the privacy of their homes. For Catholics, this meant that they could hold additional services within their religious houses.<sup>35</sup>

Like most sixteenth-century Europeans, Wesel’s residents were not willing to abandon the ideal of a united Christendom. For this reason, Wesel’s urban leaders left the city’s legal structure in its older, intolerant form. But beyond the law, confessionally mixed communities like this one developed ways of coexisting. In Wesel, the necessary balance was established only through an unofficial arrangement, based on careful collaboration, unpunished duplicity, and maintaining the pretense of religious unity. Ironically, the united celebration of the Eucharist, ritually the most self-conscious demonstration of Christian unity, became the essen-

tial element in securing the toleration of religious difference. The solutions that emerged in Wesel—this balance between toleration and concord—did not satisfy everyone. In point of fact, they only had to satisfy enough of the population to keep the system running.

Residents of Wesel maintained this balance by creating and maintaining boundaries of acceptable behavior, which tacitly accepted religious difference, while stressing Christian concord just enough to keep antagonisms from escalating. Local civic and religious leaders would not accept institutionally dividing the church, but they also understood quite well that the Reformation had irreversibly divided Christendom. To maintain this apparent paradox, a set of daily compromises emerged, strategies that reduced confessional tensions. At the center of this was the city leadership's refusal to openly acknowledge religious division, while providing avenues for limited expressions of that difference.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example Stadtarchiv Wesel (hereafter as SAW) A3/58 f.99v. *Acta consistorii der gereformirder nederduytschen gemeente binnen Wesel*, Wesel Evangelisches Kirchenarchiv (hereafter as WKA) Gefach 72,1 f.61r, Gefach 72,2 f.60v.

<sup>2</sup> Wesel's liturgical order was the Church Ordinance of the evangelical archbishop of Cologne, which was never instituted in that city. *Reformation d. Hermanni Archiepiscopi Consoliensi* ([Cologne]: 1543). WKA Gefach 21,1. For a modern edition, see Herman von Wied, *Einfältiges Bedenken: Reformationsentwurf für das Erzstift Köln von 1543*, eds. Helmut Gerhards and Wilfried Borth (Düsseldorf, 1972). See also Werner Teschenmacher, *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Düsseldorf, 1962), 63–68; Johannes Hillemann, *Die Evangelische Gemeinde Wesel und ihre Willibrordikirche* (Düsseldorf, 1896). Wesel's parishioners used the Lutheran Bonn Songbook, printed in Wesel as *Geistlike Leider vnd Gesenge, van frome Christien gemeket* (Wesel, 1554).

<sup>3</sup> Von Wied, *Einfältiges Bedenken*, 151–63. SAW A3/51, f.52v. The use of the consecrated wafer instead of plain bread was a Lutheran practice that was rejected by Calvinists. Bodo Nischan, "The 'Fractio Panis': a Reformed Communion Practice in Late Reformation Germany," *Church History* 53 (1984): 17–29.

<sup>4</sup> SAW A3/275,1 f.6v. Most Netherlanders understood the Low German of Weselers without serious problems. Meredith Hassel, "Dialect Focusing and Language Transfer in Sixteenth-Century Germany" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> SAW A3/48 f.11v, f.15r, f.30v.

<sup>6</sup> SAW A3/48 f.2r. Also SAW A1/275,1 f.6v. SAW A3/49 f.2v, f.20r. In August 1556, exile ministers were allowed to distribute the Eucharist "in times of sickness and only to the bedridden" and only "according to God's word and the Augsburg Confession." SAW A3/49 f.28r-v. Ten days later the exiles requested that the council rescind its decision, with no effect. SAW A3 36v.

<sup>7</sup> *Ordnung der Eltisten*, January 1574. *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,1 f.21r. A list of offenses in 1578 included disobedience to the elders, household misconduct, idleness, and indolence, f.103r.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,2 f.218v.

<sup>9</sup> WKA 3,2,28.

<sup>10</sup> On Peter Hasevelt see *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,2 f.99v, f.134v-135r. For Nicolas Muller see f.75v, f.98r, f.120v and "An das Consistorium van Antwerpen, 24 May 1580." WKA Gefach 3,2,28.

Men who refused to attend communion could even be elected as deacons. This was not true of elders, who were required to attend communion. *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,2 f.34r.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,2 f.61r, f.68r-v.

<sup>12</sup> *Acta*, WKA Gefach 71,2 f.7v. Sadly there is no reference that indicates how many people made the trip.

<sup>13</sup> *Originalprotocolle der ref. Classis Vesaliensis*, WKA Gefach 12,5 f.10r-v, f.13v.

<sup>14</sup> For a similar case of French Calvinists attending Reformed communion in Basel instead of in their Lutheran exile home of Montbéliard, see Jill Raitt, "The Emperor and the Exiles: The Clash Of Religion and Politics in the Late Sixteenth Century," *Church History* 52 (1983): 154–5.

<sup>15</sup> Consistorial records from August 1582 to August 1586 are missing, suggesting that there may have been more cases than have been recorded. No chronological pattern emerges in cases of communion non-attendance. In 1573 there were seven cases, in 1578 there were eight, and in 1580 nine. Years with no cases are 1576, 1581, 1582, and 1586. On 21 February 1575, elders complained about the continuing problems with "those who still abstain from the Lord's Supper." *Acta*, WKA Gefach, 71,2 f.59v. As late as 1590 this remained a problem. *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,3 f.137 and f.162.

<sup>16</sup> WKA Gefach 3,1,61 f.239r. WKA 3,1,66a, f. 205r-v.

<sup>17</sup> SAW A3/55 f.55r. See also the complaint from the *Gemeinsfreunde*, SAW A3/55 f.53v. Heinrich Rollius to Heinrich Bullinger, 26 August 1564. Printed in J.F.G. Goeters, "Zum Weseler Abentmahlstreit von 1561–64," *Monatshefte für Evangelische Kirchengeschichte des Rheinlands* 2 (1953): 139–40.

<sup>18</sup> SAW A3/55 f.60r-v.

<sup>19</sup> Tileman Heshusius, "Bericht auß waß ursacken ich Tileman heshusius den Nicolaum Rollium and Johan pabst nicht kann vor Richter lehrer erkennen," 26 June 1564. WKA Gefach 3,1,61 f.236v.

<sup>20</sup> "Wichtige Notizen, 1564–1607," WKA 3,1,63 f.292v.

<sup>21</sup> WKA Gefach 3,2,8.

<sup>22</sup> SAW A3/58 f.65r. "Wichtige Notizen, 1564–1607," WKA Gefach 3,1,63 f.293r. Offenders included prominent citizens Bittern Schwager, Johannes and Werner van Bert, and "etliche Burger von Wesell." Teschenmacher, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, 85, 219–220. Hillmann, *Evangelische Gemeinde Wesel*, 89–90.

<sup>23</sup> "[A]lle rechtschaffene prediger schuldich den propheten, Christum selbst und seine apostolen in ire fusstapfen zu folgen nit allein mit reiner, gesonder lehr vorzupflanzen, sonder auch mitt straff und verwerffen der wedderwerdigen lehr und lehrer mit namen und zunamen noch laut hiebei ingefurten der H. Schrift spruchen und exempelen." WKA Gefach 3,1,63 f.293r-v.

<sup>24</sup> SAW A3/58 f.99r, A3/59 f.1r, f.33r, f.64v, A3/60 f.1r-v.

<sup>25</sup> SAW A3/59 f.1v-2v. WKA Gefach 3,2,27.

<sup>26</sup> SAW A3/45 f.7v-8r.

<sup>27</sup> Jutta Prieur, "Klöster und Konvente in der Stadt Wesel," in *Geschichte der Stadt Wesel*, ed. Jutta Prieur, Bd. 2 (Düsseldorf, 1991), 11–70. Julius Heidelmann, "Die Beguinehäuser Wesel," *Zeitschrift für Bergische Geschichte* 4 (1869): 85–114.

<sup>28</sup> Heinrich Drath, *Sankt Martini Wesel: Festschrift zur 500-Jahrfeier des Weseler Fraterhauses* (Wesel, 1985), 69–75; Hillmann, *Evangelische Gemeinde Wesel*, 61–62; Prieur, "Dominikaner in einer protestantischen Stadt," in *700 Jahre St. Maria Himmelfahrt Wesel: Vom Dominikaner-Kloster zur Pfarrgemeinde*, ed. Otto van de Locht (Kleve, 1990), 69.

<sup>29</sup> SAW A3/45 f.15r, f.18r. A3/55 f.11v.

<sup>30</sup> SAW A3/54 f.2v. A3/55 f.9v, f.11r-v, f.32v, f.36r.

<sup>31</sup> Drath, *Sankt Martini Wesel*, 69, 78–79; *Willibrordi Kirchenrechnungen 1552*, WKA Gefach 33,6 f.807.

<sup>32</sup> *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,2, f.122r.

<sup>33</sup> *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,2 f.125r.

<sup>34</sup> *Acta*, WKA Gefach 72,2 f.156v.

<sup>35</sup> SAW A3/60 f.18v.