During the Reformation, Christians across the German lands splintered into competing churches, which were defined by differences in theology as well as rituals — and increasingly by separate cultures. Leaders of Europe’s four main branches of Christianity — Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist — developed mutually exclusive conceptions of religious truth and claimed to be the inheritors of the one true church of God. Preachers and theologians perfected the use of the printing press in their efforts to convince laypeople that their views were the proper ones. Advocates of these churches stood in pulpits as well as the streets, lambasting their enemies as agents of Satan. They penned songs and poems, plays and pamphlets, short treatises and lengthy theological tracts condemning one another’s interpretation of the Bible, smearing each other’s reputation, and accusing each other of moral crimes — often sexual mischief — in ways that painted their opponents as socially devious as well as theologically errant.

This situation was dangerous enough, but matters worsened because of the relationship between religious and political authority. This was an age of state building, during which rulers of relatively weak states were attempting to consolidate their authority relative to one another and to other forms of authority such as the feudal privileges of nobles and urban freedoms of city dwellers. In this context, the Reformation offered politicians a chance to align their authority with one of these competing churches. They could thus earn divine mandates from religious leaders, who had every interest in tying themselves to political authorities. Religious dissenters went underground, fled, or faced various degrees of physical and financial punishments. In short, post-Reformation German-speaking central Europe was characterized by deeply institutionalized intolerance.

Recent research, however, has revealed that in virtually every community and state across the Empire, the goal of uniformity of faith was never matched by reality. Dissenters continued to persist almost everywhere. There emerged a deep chasm between the detested reality of religious and cultural pluralism and the desperately longed-for
dream of religious and cultural purity. In this situation, two logically consistent responses would be 1) to abandon or revise one’s intolerant ideals or 2) to kill or purge all difference. There are examples of both kinds of responses, of course, but neither was ever extensive enough to fully solve the problem.3

This article describes a third response to religious and cultural pluralism in the confessional age. Here I examine instances of lying, dissimulating, bending the truth, hiding in ambiguity, turning a blind eye, and omitting critical points, all of which created social fictions that in turn preserved political and social order in a world where the very existence of dissenting opinions posed a threat to that order. As we will see, politics in sixteenth-century Germany could be saturated by intentional and pervasive misrepresentations of fact in ways that created a shared social fiction that helped people balance the ideal and the real. Catholic and Protestant religious leaders alike railed against lying in matters of conscience, arguing that making a distinction between one’s internal beliefs and one’s external behavior constituted a betrayal of Christ and the church. And yet a whole host of motivations — saving one’s life, protecting one’s property, maximizing profit, ensuring political stability, protecting one’s reputation, safeguarding one’s authority — meant that few leaders and ordinary people ever fully lived up to these ideals. Perez Zagorin has appropriately called the Reformation era “the Age of Dissimulation.”4

This widespread willingness to accept social fictions as part of the mundane realities of life allowed politicians and neighbors from different backgrounds and of different faiths to avoid the systematic persecution that their laws and ideologies demanded.

This article provides three sets of examples of dissimulation, each of which builds on the next, such that the reality experienced by ordinary people could be extremely confusing, even if the social fiction that they perpetuated suggested a relatively straightforward case of religious uniformity. To explain what I mean, allow me to take you to Wesel, the largest and wealthiest city in one of the states in the northwest of the Holy Roman Empire — the duchy of Cleves. Wesel offers a compelling example for looking at how people dealt with the uncomfortable realities of pluralism in the confessional age.5 Like other communities across the German-speaking lands, Wesel was deeply divided by the Reformation. But Wesel’s location on the western border of the Empire, just a few kilometers from the Low Countries, also meant that French- and Dutch-speaking dissenters


5 This is the topic of my first book: Jesse Spohnholz, The Tactics of Toleration: A Refugee Community in the Age of Religious Wars (Newark, 2011). Some passages from that book have been reworked here, inspired by my more recent rethinking related to problems uncovering historical truth in Reformation history; Jesse Spohnholz, The Coment of Wesel: The Event that Never Was and the Invention of Tradition (Cambridge, 2017).
fleeing persecution back home fled to the city in large numbers, posing serious challenges to the constitutional arrangements for managing increasing religious diversity in the Empire. The result of this inquiry helps us see just how unhelpful laws and theologies alone are for understanding the ways in which ordinary people navigated religious and cultural diversity in the German lands after the Reformation.

I. A Protestant City in a Catholic Territory

Once the Reformation began to spread, some German princes used this occasion to align with the new Lutheran church as a way of challenging the emperor’s authority. When the emperor refused to accept either the new religion or challenges to his authority, war broke out in 1546. Initially, Lutheran princes faced devastating losses. By 1552, they launched a more successful campaign that forced the emperor to make concessions, which were formalized in the Peace of Augsburg of 1555. Critical to this treaty was the agreement that it was not the emperor who had the right to determine which church was the one official church, but the prince of each state.6 There was one critical limitation to this rule — the choice of the prince was limited to either Roman Catholicism or the so-called “religion of the Augsburg Confession.” Pretty much everyone agreed that Lutherans were included in this second category. Everyone definitely agreed that Anabaptists were not. The situation for Reformed Protestants, though, was a bit more complex because what might be meant by the “religion of the Augsburg Confession” remained ambiguous. The original statement of faith with this name was written in 1530 as a proposed declaration of religious unity between Lutherans and Catholics. It was only after the Catholic emperor had rejected it and most Lutheran princes had signed it that the document came to be seen as the definitive statement of Lutheran orthodoxy. Ten years later, in an effort to promote unity between Lutherans and Reformed Protestants, a revised version was penned, which some Reformed theologians were willing to sign. So while the Peace of Augsburg permitted churches that adhered to what it portrayed as a single document, in fact two versions of that document existed. As a result of these confusions, Reformed princes claimed that their churches were permitted by imperial law, even if they did not even use the 1540 version as a standard of orthodoxy in their territory. Thus, as Matthias Pohlig has shown, dissimulation came to be critical to the way that the Peace of Augsburg functioned in practice.7 The uncomfortable reality was that in imperial politics

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6 The literature on the Peace of Augsburg is extensive. See Heinz Schilling and Heribert Smolinsky, eds., Der Augsburger Religionsfrieden 1555 (Gütersloh, 2007).

the polarized rhetoric of good and evil, orthodoxy and heresy, could not be mapped neatly onto the more ambiguous distinction between legal and illegal.

As a city in the duchy of Cleves, Wesel was subject to the Peace of Augsburg. There was little doubt that Duke Wilhelm V continued to support Catholicism (though that did not mean that he always towed the line from Rome). Thus by imperial law and state law, Cleves remained Catholic. Yet in direct contradiction to imperial and state law, in October 1553 the magistrates of Wesel hired Protestant ministers and formally embraced the 1530 Augsburg Confession. These changes thus amounted to an implicit statement of civic autonomy.

The new church law also approved by civic officials at the same time offers a window into magistrates’ strategy. The Church Ordinance of Hermann von Wied, the former archbishop of Cologne, was not quite Lutheran or Catholic, but somewhere in between. Wied had produced the work, usually known as *Einfältiges Bedenken*, in 1543 after he had abandoned his efforts to find unity among Christians in the empire. Instead, he adopted a compromise church order that would only apply within his archbishopric. The idea was to create a broad church that most Catholics and Protestants could accept. In the wake of the failed Regensburg Colloquy in 1541, whose goal was to accomplish such a compromise at the imperial level, Wied now attempted a territorial solution that both offered a similar arrangement and strengthened his own ecclesiastical and political position at a time when the future of the balance between territorial, imperial, and papal power remained uncertain. Wied’s decision faced vigorous opposition from Catholic leaders in Rome and around the empire. In 1546, Pope Paul III excommunicated Wied; in 1547, Emperor Charles V forced him out of office. Consequently, *Einfältiges Bedenken* was never implemented in the Archbishopric of Cologne. In large part, it was the failure of efforts at reconciliation and unity like that promoted by Wied that had led to the outbreak of war in the empire in 1546 and to the legal recognition of Lutheran territories in 1555.

By the mid-1550s, thus, *Einfältiges Bedenken* was something of a throwback. Wied had attempted, and failed, to create an umbrella church in which all Christians could be united within an institution that was broad and accommodating in scope. Though Lutheran enough to incite disapproval from Catholics, *Einfältiges Bedenken* was neither radical nor rigid in its stipulations. It embraced the doctrine of *sola scriptura* but was ambiguous on other Protestant doctrines. The
text lacks contentious or divisive language, often leaving considerable room for differences on theological issues and holding out hope for a general Christian council to resolve those differences. In matters of ritual, *Einfältiges Bedenken* limited the sacraments to only infant baptism and communion, but left the Catholic ritual calendar largely intact. It also gave considerable room for the use of images in worship as well as Catholic rituals like exorcism. *Einfältiges Bedenken*’s emphasis on liturgical harmony and obedience over clarity and precision in theology had caused it to be rejected by Pope Paul III and Martin Luther alike.1 And while to my knowledge, John Calvin never discussed the document, he wrote disparagingly of other such compromises that “mixed God’s truth with human vagaries and were guilty of deceit in their desire for a specious unity.”12 In short, the church ordinance did not conform to the narrowly-defined models of confessional churches emerging by the mid-1550s, but was instead a product of the idealism of church unity that still existed in the early 1540s.

This broad ambiguous language is precisely why *Einfältiges Bedenken* appealed to Wesel’s magistrates. Their effort to use ambiguity to skirt the law was highlighted by the fact that in 1559 they hired as their chief pastor the duke’s own court chaplain, Nicolas Rollius.13 Rollius had been Catholic, though he was clearly flexible enough in his views to take the post in Wesel. In Wesel’s new church, ministers were banned from criticizing either Catholic or Lutheran doctrines, but were instructed, in the language of the city council’s repeated proclamations, to remain “united in doctrine” and “hold themselves in love and peace.”14 From now on, Catholics and Lutherans alike were required to worship in the city churches together. Magistrates intended this policy — ecclesiastical unity undegirded by ambiguity in matters of doctrine and liturgy — to provide the basis for social order under their paternal guidance. Yet claims that Wesel was religiously united — like claims that it conformed to the Peace of Augsburg — were a social fiction that everyone knew were bogus. Lutheran pamphlets produced by Wesel’s printers criticized Catholic doctrines. Meanwhile, members of Catholic religious orders attended services in the parish churches, but also continued to offer Mass in the privacy of their cloisters. Yet the social fiction of unity remained. Clearly, Weselers held social, political, and ecclesiastical unity as a higher priority than uniformity in theology or praxis.15 By adopting a church ordinance that harkened back to a time when unity between Catholics and Lutherans still seemed like a realistic goal,
and retreating to ambiguous language of Christian unity and peace. Wesel’s magistrates twisted the truth just enough that they were able to preserve the uncomfortable reality that Lutherans would continue to exist in a Catholic territory whose laws forbade their presence.

In 1595, when elected representatives of the citizens (called the Gemeinsfreunde) explicitly requested that Catholic Masses in the cloisters finally be halted, the city council even defended the private worship of Wesel’s friars, monks, and nuns, though again on an erroneous legal foundation. Ironically, to defend private Catholic services they appealed to the Peace of Augsburg, the very document that, had it been instituted as written, would have made Catholicism the only legal church in the city. The fact that dissimulation was a shared social fiction can be shown by the fact that the prince accepted the magistrates’ line of argument. Thus stretching the truth provided a pretense of legitimacy that helped Lutherans survive in a Catholic territory and Catholics survive in a Lutheran city. It also allowed the duke to remain a patron of Wesel’s Catholics without provoking political dissent from leaders of the wealthiest city in the duchy.

II. French and Dutch Reformed Protestants in a Lutheran City

Meanwhile, across the border in the Netherlands, a frenzy of widespread Reformed Protestant activity erupted in the summer of 1566. Reformed Protestants violently attacked Catholic churches and devotional images, sacked monasteries, attacked altars and burned Catholic books. When King Philip II’s general, the duke of Alba, arrived in August 1567 with 10,000 troops and began arresting the rebels and heretics, tens of thousands of French- and Dutch-speaking refugees fled to the Empire. The largest numbers went to the duchy of Cleves or the county of East Friesland, and most of those went to the two largest cities in those territories, Wesel and Emden, respectively. The arrival of these migrants in the empire posed serious constitutional questions to the Peace of Augsburg, princely authority, and the nature of imperial order itself.

The waves of refugees arriving in Wesel caused anxiety both at the city hall and the ducal court. The duke also made it clear that the refugees’ presence violated territorial and imperial law. Wilhelm repeatedly ordered magistrates to refuse entrance to rebels and migrants who “adhere to the Calvinist sect.” Magistrates made some efforts to comply. They ordered a house-to-house investigation, assigned


19 Repeated letters and edicts from the duke continued from 1567 to 1572. Ludwig Keller, ed., Die Gegenreformation in Westfalen und am Niederrhein, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1881), rrs. 61–67, 76, 80, 90. SAW A3/56 fols. 4v, 7r, 72v, 74r, 118r; A1/275,1,5–6, fols. 10r–11v; A1/275,1,11 fols. 16r–17v; A1/152,1, vol. 1, fols. 49r–62r; A1/275,1,15 fol. 21r–v; 17 fols. 23r–v; 20 fol. 25r–v.
an intensified guard duty, and ordered that innkeepers who housed rebels would lose their citizenship.20 Newcomers were only allowed if they accepted the Augsburg Confession and *Einfältiges Bedenken* — which were the basis of the social fiction that preserved Lutheranism in Wesel. Reformed migrants also had to accept the liturgy of the town’s churches. Many Reformed were willing to compromise on these points if the alternative was returning to a life of persecution. Key figures in promoting compromises among the refugees were the elders on two Reformed consistories — one for the French speakers and one for the Dutch speakers. Each body of eight elders monitored the orthodoxy of their members, but also worked to ensure obedience to local laws. Guided by the elders, Reformed Protestants began to fit themselves within the social fiction of religious unity in a city that was growing more diverse every day.

A key controversy that divided Lutherans and Reformed was disagreement on the doctrine of communion. Many Reformed argued that the ritual was an reenactment of Christ’s Last Supper, but that Christ himself was not substantively present in the bread and wine that congregants ate and drank, but at God’s side in heaven.21 Lutherans responded that this turned the act into an empty rite, and argued that Christ was in fact substantively present within the bread and wine.22 Keeping disagreement over communion from breaking apart Wesel’s religious compromise demanded vigilance. Celebration of the Lord’s Supper, after all, ritually symbolized Christian unity — a unity the city painfully lacked.

In Wesel, a chief task of French and Dutch elders was determining that members were suitably moral and theologically orthodox — according to Reformed standards, that is — to participate in the ritual of communion.23 Controlling access to the sacrament was thus a tool for ensuring Reformed orthodoxy. Yet elders could not actually refuse someone admittance to communion, since members could simply reject their supervision and take the sacrament as ordinary Lutherans. Even those migrants who submitted themselves to elders’ supervision still had to submit to an examination by town ministers, demonstrating that they conformed to the 1530 Augsburg Confession and *Einfältiges Bedenken*. Wesel’s foreign Reformed communities thus operated as voluntary subdivisions within the larger civic church. In this situation, ministerial examinations had the potential to expose the reservations among many Reformed about the city’s doctrines and worship. Dealing with the ministers’ questions often required finesse

20 E.g. SAW A3/56 fols. 2r–v, 4v–6v, 7r, 72v, 74r.
21 On complaints in Wesel, see SAW A3/271.1 fol. 6v; A3/48, fols. 11v, 15r, 30r, 31v.
22 For Lutheran complaints, see Spohnholz, *Tactics of Toleration*, 139–45.
23 For ritual and theological conflicts between German Lutherans and Reformed during this era, including on the Lord’s Supper, see Bodo Nischan, *Lutherans and Calvinists in the Age of Confessionalism* (Aldershot, 1999).
that ordinary refugees did not feel they had. Right before Christmas communion in 1573, the Dutch consistory, for which more detailed records survive, questioned members about why they had refused to attend communion. Hans van der Clocken and Bartholomeus Baert answered that they would only attend if an elder accompanied them to the minister’s examination. After receiving other such requests, in 1576 elders extended an open offer to arbitrate between troubled Reformed migrants and German clergy. No records of these discussions exist (and that point is important — since no one wanted written record of religious disunity), but the elders’ role was probably not so much defending Reformed doctrines to the ministers (which would have prompted arguments), but helping to find the best way for members to express their views in words that might be acceptable to their consciences and the expectations of the city’s pastors.

In general, those Reformed migrants who complained about this situation expressed distaste for what they saw as excessive and ornate ceremonies — which probably had been initially maintained to help Catholics feel more comfortable with Wesel’s compromise. Medieval forms of worship continued, like the placement of devotional candles by the image of St. Anthony. Many foreign Reformed saw these practices as superstitions. Accordingly, some simply stayed home during services. Truants summoned by the elders usually tried to avoid bringing unwanted attention to their objections by using vague language. In early 1574, for instance, Nicolas Reuvers reported that he had skipped communion for “secret reasons” that he would only explain in private to the senior-most elders. In 1578, Nicolas Muller took a different approach by openly condemning the city’s compromise liturgy. “Just as Christ brought the evil of the Pharisees to light,” he viewed himself as responsible to condemn the elders’ approval of what he called idolatry. The elders’ chief interest was keeping this kind of language outside of the public arena. And thus Muller’s rigid objections remained in private — all civil and church records subsequently ignored him and he stayed home on Sunday mornings, while the services going on in his absence continued to celebrate religious unity. Using words reminiscent of those used by city officials in the city council minutes, elders in their own records repeatedly justified their efforts to convince Reformed migrants to conform to local worship by appealing to what they called “the unity of the church.” As long as everyone accepted this social fiction, Wesel’s foreign migrants could find a home for themselves.

24 EKAW Gefach, 72.1 fol. 8v. Hans van der Clocken later became elder of the Dutch church, suggesting his serious commitment to the Reformed faith. Ibid., fol. 28r. Records from the French-speaking consistory only exist from the regional meetings of all the foreign Reformed communities in the region four times per year. The Dutch-speaking consistory records offer weekly reports on activities in Wesel.

25 EKAW Gefach 72.2 fol. 35v.

26 EKAW Gefach 72.1 fol. 9v.

27 EKAW Gefach 3.3.28.

28 EKAW Gefach 72.2 fols. 61r, 68r–v.
We can see more explicitly how this second example worked by turning to a political conflict between the city and the duke in the 1580s—a conflict that forced everyone to recognize the city’s de facto pluralism. These events brought greater attention to the strained relationship between rhetoric and reality required for preserving the peace in a religiously-divided community during the Reformation era. The conflict began in 1580 when the duke issued an order, much like others he had sent to Wesel, banning Anabaptists, Calvinists, and other foreign “sectarians.”

Magistrates gladly issued a proclamation against Anabaptism, but refused to extend the ban to Reformed, on the grounds the duke could not ask political rulers to make a theological determination on the differences between Lutherans and Reformed. A carefully worded letter from the pastors, sent to the ducal court in late November 1580, asserted that “We were not born Calvinists or Lutherans, we are not baptized in [Calvin’s or Luther’s] name and they did not die for us.” This language borrowed from phrasing used in First Corinthians, which urged Christians not to follow Cephas, Apollo or Paul, but only Christ. Wesel’s ministers extended the logic of this passage to the confessional divisions of their own age. Ministers had been using the same rhetoric for decades to tamp down complaints from Lutherans and Reformed to the city’s compromise worship services. This was the first time, though, that they used it with their duke.

Not surprisingly, Duke Wilhelm V was unwilling to accept this line of argument. In July 1581 he posted his edict without the council’s consent, including the ban on “Calvinists,” as well as “secret conventicles,” which was a reference to the consistorys and the French-language sermons offered in the city’s Heiliggeistkapelle. Representatives from Wesel protested that the duke had infringed upon local authority. In further negotiations in 1582, the prince’s agents accurately pointed out that in many respects the foreign consistorys acted as illegal independent churches. The duke claimed, quite rightly, that, according to imperial law, he had the prerogative to restrict religious practice. But if he really had intended to implement the Peace of Augsburg, he would have included Lutherans too in his ban. Of course, in Wesel the implementation of the Peace of Augsburg had always been a social fiction between the duke and his subjects more than a matter of following the letter of the law itself.

Before magistrates responded to the duke’s accusations, they gave the elders on the foreigners’ consistorys an opportunity to defend their

29 SAW A3/60 fol. 20r–v.
30 SAW A5/79 Missivenbuch 1580 fols. 90r–91v, 97r–100r.
31 EKAW Gefach 3.2.31a. The pastors drafted the letter initially for the magistrates, who forwarded it to the duke. SAW A3/50 fol. 23r.
33 EWAK Gefach 65.1.246 fols. 941r–943r. SAW A3/60 fol. 51r–v.
34 SAW A1/343.1 fols. 97r–109v.
The elders denied that they had introduced a separate church to Wesel and insisted that they never made decisions that conflicted with secular law. There was some truth to their claim. While the elders made judgments on the access of Reformed to communion, marriage law, and business practices, their authority was only informal — only the city’s ministers had the power to issue ecclesiastical punishments for sins or heresies and only the city’s magistrates and judges had the power to issue secular punishments for crimes. The duke’s agents argued that the very existence of the foreign consistories undermined the secular and religious hierarchy in his territory and the Peace of Augsburg itself. They further argued that the Reformed effectively operated an alternative government, led by their own “senators” (which they said Calvinists called elders). This illegal body usurped imperial power structures by demanding that members “live and die by their religion.”

In their defense, representatives from Wesel insisted that they did not permit anyone to disparage the local church and that everyone was required to receive the sacraments from the pastors. This too was factually true. But the delegates were not being forthright when they claimed that the consistory merely functioned as an organ to provide poor relief to foreigners; it did much more than that and the city’s envoys knew that perfectly well. In follow-up negotiations in 1583, though, Wesel’s delegates came equipped with specific examples to prove their point. They described the case of a woman whose husband had abandoned her. The consistory financially supported her, though the recovery of her husband’s debts was dealt with in municipal courts. They claimed that this proved that the consistory only supported the poor and orphans but did “not infringe on any jurisdiction.” Of course, it did nothing of the sort. Duke Wilhelm, well informed by his network of spies in the city, knew that Reformed migrants voluntarily subjected themselves to the French and Dutch consistories’ rulings on matters of social conduct, marriage law, business practice, and doctrinal orthodoxy. Wilhelm also knew perfectly well that Wesel’s magistrates and clergy tolerated this situation through ambiguous policies, informal negotiations, and expedient inaction.

The political conflicts about the right of the duke to regulate local religious policy only came to an end because more pressing matters arose. In 1583, the outbreak of the Cologne War, one of several short-lived regional religious wars in this era, diverted the duke. In

35 EKAW Gefach 72,1,12.
36 SAW A1/341 fols. 14v; A1/342,1 fol. 8r-v.
37 SAW A1/342,1, fols. 107r-v, 131r-v.
38 SAW A1/341,1,22 fol. 75r.
39 SAW A1/341,3 fols. 95r-96r; A1/342 fols. 90v-92v, 95r-v.

The woman eventually received a divorce, not from Wesel’s magistrates, but from those of nearby Xanten. This outcome preserved magistrates’ authority and the elders’ regulation of marriage. Herbert Kipp, ‘Trachtet zuerst nach dem Reich Gottes’: Landständische Reformation und Rats-Konfessionalisierung in Wesel, 1520–1600 (Bielefeld, 2004), 408.
the face of the prince’s pressing need to collect funds to defend his
territories, Wesel’s delegates refused to pay taxes if the duke inter-
fered in local matters. The duke compromised by agreeing not to
compel anyone’s conscience by force, even though he still refused to
give Lutherans or Reformed any explicit legal recognition. Wesel’s
delegates at the negotiations regarded this as a de facto victory, and
the city began paying territorial taxes again. The confrontation with
the duke marks the first time that magistrates openly acknowledged
their toleration of Reformed refugees in the city, even if they still mis-
represented the actual nature of that toleration. They were satisfied
to let the elders govern their own community, as long as all French
and Dutch Reformed refugees celebrated sacraments in their local
churches, upheld civic decency (including regulating the newcomers’
sexuality and drinking), and respected their jurisdiction. But because
this agreement was always informal, when the duke’s pressure
forced town leaders to justify their actions, they could only defend
themselves with a mix of ambiguities, half-truths, and outright lies.

III. Dutch Mennonites in a Reformed Church

My third example shows that the matter was still more complex. By
the time that Weselers began their experiment in religious pluralism,
Anabaptists — the last of the four major divisions of Latin Christian-
ity after the Reformation — were nearly universally reviled. In the
1530s, the region had been home to Anabaptists whose followers had
radical ideas about how to prepare for the imminent return of Christ.
Driven by an apocalyptic fervor, many believed that they were respon-
sible for creating godly communities on earth by taking over key cit-
ties. In 1535, these so-called Melchiorite Anabaptists led a successful
takeover of the nearby city of Münster. Within a year, allied Catholic
and Lutheran powers recaptured the city. The short Anabaptist rule
in Münster was characterized by the practice of adult baptism, the
elimination of private property and the introduction of polygamy.41
The movement shocked Wesel as well; thirty-five Melchiorites had
been arrested in Wesel before they left for Münster. After a long trial,
eight were executed, while the others were expelled.42 These Melchi-
orites left a powerful legacy for generations; Anabaptism continued
to hold the reputation of threatening not just religious orthodoxy,
but norms of behavior in politics, society, economics and sexuality.

In the 1550s a new stream of Anabaptism, largely influenced by
Menno Simons, appeared in the region.43 Preachers in the Mennonite

40 For a record of the fi-
nal arguments, see SAW
A1/152.1 fols. 196–201.
Keller, ed., Gegenforma-
tion, vol. 1, nrs. 241, 246.
Dünnwald, Konfessionsstreit
und Verfassungskonflikt,
256–59.
41 Ralf Klotzer, Die
Täuferherrschaft von
Münster: Stadtreformation
und Weltneuerung (Münster,
42 SAW A1/133,1 Mappe
6, unpaginated. Werner
Teschennacher, Annales
Ecclesiastici (Düsseldorf,
1962), 50–52.
43 J. F. G. Goeters, “Die Rolle
des Täuftums in der Ref-
ormanngeschichte des
Niederheims,” Rheinische
Vierteljahrsblätter 24
tradition called for a simplified worship that emphasized internal spiritual reform, following the model of Christ, including pacifism, and withdrawal from the world, though they still rejected infant baptism. Mennonites retained a pariah status, unable to cast off the memory of the radical Melchiorites of Münster. It is hardly surprising, then, that they remained banned by imperial, ducal, and civic law.

In August 1573 the magistrates even stiffened the punishment for following Anabaptism, in compliance with the ducal edict of 1565, pronouncing that all “Anabaptists, re-baptizers, and those belonging to the [sect] of Menno Simons” in his lands would have their property confiscated and should leave the territory within two weeks. If they would not renounce their faith or depart, they would be executed.

Yet despite civic, ducal and imperial pronouncements, the Mennonite community in Wesel persisted. Though magistrates and ministers prohibited public displays of Mennonite dissent, they often turned a blind eye to private devotions, which remained an open secret within the town. Meanwhile, Mennonites worked to safeguard themselves, as well as their sense of religious truth. This almost always required compromise, usually in the form of dissimulation and ambiguity. Reformed migrants, however, had every interest in presenting themselves as dutiful and obedient, to ensure that magistrates did not expel them. To do this, they often took a proactive role in helping magistrates seek out and punish Mennonites.

Curiously, upon arriving in Wesel, Mennonites (most of whom were Dutch-speaking refugees) sometimes joined the Dutch Reformed community. There is good reason to conclude that joining usually did not represent genuine conversion, but rather reflected a strategy to avoid unwanted attention. Consider the case of Andries de Braecker. Soon after arriving from the Netherlands, De Braecker came before the consistory in December 1573. The elders asked him if he was “still troubled” with Anabaptism, to which he simply answered “No” before he was accepted as a member. Yet his conversion was hardly genuine; the next spring De Braecker was unwilling to baptize his infant son, until pressure from the elders convinced him to comply. A similar case began in 1577, when the Mennonite silk weaver Jan Cuels arrived from Leuven. At first, he asked to join the Dutch Reformed and accepted tutoring on the doctrines about which the two churches disagreed — infant baptism, the incarnation of Christ, the swearing of oaths, and obedience to secular authority — “so that he professed himself” the elders recorded in the consistory’s minutes.

44 For an overview, see S. Zijlstra, Om de ware gemeente en de oude gronden. Geschiedenis van de dopersen in de Nederlanden 1531–1675 (Hilversum, 2000).
47 EKAW Gefach 72,1 fol. 8r.
48 EKAW Gefach 72,1 fols. 26v, 35r.
49 EKAW Gefach 72,2 fols. 64v, 111r–v, 257v–r.
“to be good enough.” When the elders read him their statement of doctrinal orthodoxy, he confirmed his new faith with a simple “Yes” and was accepted into the community — and immediately asked the Reformed deacons to help him find employment. Within a year, his financial fortunes had turned and Cuels left for Amsterdam, where he immediately rejoined the Mennonites. That Mennonites found it convenient to give lip service to Reformed Protestantism to avoid harassment suggests a curious phenomenon, since Reformed migrants were not legally permitted in Wesel, but themselves conformed to Lutheran standards of orthodoxy that Wesel’s magistrates had adopted. To complicate matters further, according to imperial law even Lutheranism was not permitted in Wesel, because the town’s territorial prince remained Catholic. For the Mennonites, the motivations to maintain the social fiction to preserve religious diversity where the same as in the earlier cases. Dissenters wanted to protect their lives and property, along with their conscience. Magistrates aimed to facilitate economic growth and protect their own authority, while they shared with the clergy an interest in securing ecclesiastical unity and orthopraxy. The difference is that as the dissenters moved further and further away from the standards that the social fiction demanded, the layers of dissimulation became correspondingly more complex.

The well-documented case of Oliver van der Vinct demonstrates how dissimulation could serve as an effective strategy for Mennonites struggling to survive the consequences of their beliefs.50 The son of a Flemish merchant in Antwerp, Oliver apparently fell in with an Anabaptist teacher, Joris van Scamerbeke.51 Under the threat of persecution, Van der Vinct fled to Wesel, bringing with him an attestation from his guild that he was coming to Wesel for his apprenticeship and was not a sectarian or rebel. By early 1574 Oliver and his wife (whose name is not recorded) celebrated the birth of their first child. If Oliver hoped to avoid attracting attention to his unorthodox beliefs, his absence at the baptismal font in the following weeks made this impossible.

On February 15, when Dutch elders visited his house, Oliver proclaimed “that his child was already baptized in the blood of Christ” and had no need for a baptism of water, since there was no scriptural basis for infant baptism.52 Elders frequently encountered Reformed migrants who refused to have their children baptized in the local church, because of their objection to the rite of exorcism. But Oliver’s rejection of infant baptism itself may have surprised them. At their
next meeting, the elders came with a prepared response. They argued that the children of the faithful had a covenant with God, initiated by Abraham. A Christian could not refuse baptism, which was the sign of this covenant. In response, Oliver only pointed out that there was no divine command in the Scriptures that “Thou shalt baptize thy children.” The elders replied by asking him to reflect further on the matter.

At their next meeting, five weeks later, Oliver maintained that there was no biblical command requiring infant baptism. He asked whether “he should baptize his son in the established church, in order to avoid the anger of the brothers, even though it was against his conscience?” Although the elders admitted that they did not want to violate his conscience, they concluded that through his argument he only proved that “he did not know what a conscience was, because if he had once tasted it he would not have spoken so,” which he took, they noted, “very badly.” Oliver retorted that forcing him to accept infant baptism against his conscience would be “a papist superstition.”

Matters worsened for Oliver when, in their meeting of April 12, he stated that “he would not be erring if he belonged to the Anabaptists.” When elders followed up by asking him about the nature of Christ’s incarnation, Oliver avoided the question by stating that “our conscience must be founded on God’s word,” the ambiguity of which did not satisfy the increasingly suspicious elders. They demanded that he describe the books where he learned his ideas. Oliver claimed he could not remember. The moment must have been tense. Everyone in the room knew that Oliver could well be subject to expulsion or death. The elders, realizing the repercussions of an impassioned response, asked Oliver to return home, write an explanation for why he would not baptize his child, and return to them.

Over the next several weeks Oliver repeatedly postponed composing this defense. After several rebuffs, the elders consulted the midwife who had attended the birth of his child. Oliver seems to have made her promise not to inform the pastor that the parents had refrained from baptizing the newborn. When the elders confronted her, she denied that she had made such a promise, at which point Oliver denounced her as a liar. When the elders asked again why she had neglected the child’s baptism, the midwife declared, “I remain by what I did. If he would not do it, I would not do it either.” Caught between Anabaptist parents and authorities, midwives could provide
the decisive testimony to turn in a parent who refused the ritual. In contrast, a sympathetic supporter in the birthing chamber who was willing to testify that she had administered an emergency baptism in order to explain away the parents’ absence from the baptismal font could allow Anabaptist communities to survive undetected.\footnote{Myriam Greilsammer, “The midwife, the priest and the physician: the subjugation of midwives in the Low Countries at the end of the Middle Ages,” The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 21 (1991): 307–11.}

Without further recourse, the elders finally asked the midwife to report to the pastors. She must have done so, because on June 22, 1574, the town council threatened to punish Oliver van der Vinct as an Anabaptist.\footnote{SAW A3/58 fol. 46v.} Now under official governmental investigation, Van der Vinct quickly made a confession of faith before the minister and openly admitted his resistance to having his child baptized in the local church. But now he claimed “that he would be happy to bring his child to be baptized at Hörstgen. He said that the pastor at Hörstgen, named Simbertus [Loon], had told him that he would do it.” Loon was a Reformed minister in the nearby noble enclave of Hörstgen. Devoted Reformed migrants living in Wesel sometimes traveled there to wed, baptize their infants, and receive the Eucharist in the Reformed manner.\footnote{E.g. EKAW Gefach 72,2, fol. 4.} Van der Vinct’s sudden claim that he was willing to have his child baptized in a more purely Reformed church represents some kind of bending of the truth, though it’s hard to tell what kind. Was he lying about Loon? Was he honest about Loon, but lying about whether he would actually go to Hörstgen? Did he actually have Loon baptize his infant, passing himself off as Reformed in the neighboring village? Without baptismal archives from Hörstgen, there is no way of telling whether he followed through on his promise, though considering his earlier resolve, there is reason to doubt it. But he did apologize to the pastor and “promised to carry himself in all peace and unity as other Christians.” He also confessed his guilt before the Bürgermeister, promising that “henceforth he would avoid similar things” and that he would bring his wife and child to the church “so that his honor would be restored.”\footnote{EKAW Gefach 71,1 fol. 33r.}

Reformed elders stopped pursuing the case, “so that we not create any new confusion,” but they continued to monitor Van der Vinct’s behavior. In the following years, Oliver abstained from communion, and if he and his wife had any additional children, there is no record of this in the city’s surviving baptismal registers. In December 1578, when they found him teaching Anabaptist ideas to a woman in town, the elders revived Oliver’s case, to try again to bring him “to union with the church and Christian doctrine.” But their repeated efforts were in vain. Oliver never again openly opposed the local church, but
neither did he fully conform to it.63 Still, magistrates were willing to grant Van der Vinct citizenship rights in July 1583, and he continued working in Wesel until at least the 1590s.64 After the events of 1574 he had learned to avoid the troubles that his religious dissent could cause him, by falsely presenting himself as an ordinary discontented Reformed migrant, unhappy with the “superstitious” remnants in the city church. Meanwhile city officials and Reformed elders all accepted his claims, which they must at least have suspected were false, though they let the matter be so long as the social fiction of religious unity was left intact.

Conclusion

For men and women living through the decades following the breakup of Latin Christendom, tolerating people of opposing faiths posed something of a paradox. Toleration demanded that they compromise between a sincere detest for another’s beliefs, perhaps even his or her very presence, and the person’s unwillingness to kill or be killed for those differences.65 The practice of toleration, in this sense, was not the opposite of intolerance, but one logical outcome of an attitude of intolerance. The other outcomes of intolerance — expulsion or execution — aimed to achieve religious and cultural purity. In contrast, the option described here — dissimulation — preserved a degree of religious and cultural diversity in the German lands. Of course, the diversity that resulted was bemoaned as evil, not celebrated as a *Multikulti* ideal. The examples I have described are not examples of lying in the classical sense that Augustine of Hippo defined: a malicious act of stating an untruth with the intention of deceiving another.66 After all, the goal in most of these cases was not quite to deceive — which requires an assumption on the part of the liar that the listener might be fooled. In Wesel, everyone seems to have been aware of the untruths. The episodes described here, instead, provide examples of a mutual dissimulation — a social fiction — in which everyone understood there was a disjuncture between the law and public rhetoric, which demanded religious uniformity, and the uncomfortable reality of religious pluralism. In sixteenth-century Germany, the legal and intellectual systems people had inherited from the Middle Ages provided no tools to cope with the increasingly diverse world of the Reformation era. Today we might not celebrate the forms of diversity that developed in Germany’s confessional age or the social fictions upon which they depended. But both suggest that humans can develop unwritten expectations for behavior that

63 EKAW Gefach 72.2 fols. 120r, 123r, 125r, 126r, 164v.
64 SAW A3/61 fol. 22r. EKAW Gefach 72.3 fol. 148.
65 On the willingness to kill or be killed in the Reformation, see Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).
can help people survive the fear and anxiety that living with diversity sometimes stimulates, even in the absence of political or philosophical frameworks that support more robust cultures of pluralism.

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