Religious violence in early modern Germany

Freist, Dagmar

Religious violence in early modern Germany

Dagmar Freist

History has witnessed various forms of violence motivated, or, as it were, justified by religious reasons. For the historian of early modern history the persecution and expulsion of religious minorities springs to mind as well as the various religious wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, on a more individual level, the experience of coerced conformity to state religion by a militant form of confessionalisation and conversion politics. Martyrologies, letters, woodcuts and engravings bear witness to the physical and psychological sufferings these had caused. The victimised confessional and religious groups were eager to keep alive the collective memory of suffering and the experience of violence as a means of identification and resistance. However, apart from the stories about martyrs, we still know very little of the personal dimension of suffering caused by religious violence.

In this article I want to provide some insight into the experience of religious violence that resulted from confessional disputes on a personal level in eighteenth-century Germany. Hereto disputes in religiously mixed marriages will be analysed. Couples in mixed marriages provide some of the most fascinating insights into interconfessional life in everyday contexts. The motives for entering into a mixed marriage seem to have been largely based on socio-economic considerations. Love marriages seem rarer; they are certainly less well documented.[1] In any case, such reasons were stronger than the confessional differences; for ordinary people mixed marriages were uncontested despite religious teachings and confessional politics that aimed at keeping the competing confessions apart. At the same time men and women who entered into a mixed marriage were confronted at some point in their lives with the question of their personal confessional beliefs and identity. This question became important at the time of marriage, and again when determining the religion of their children. Whereas in some German territories the couple could decide for themselves which confession the children were to have, in most territories there was no individual choice. Legislation ruled either that the stately confession was binding, or that the

[1] Eva Heller-Karneth, 'Drei Konfessionen in einer Stadt. Zur Bedeutung des konfessionellen Faktors im Alzey des Ancien Régime', *Veröffentlichungen zur Volkskunde und Kulturgeschichte* 60 (Würzburg 1996) 157-158.

father by right of *patria potestas* determined his children's faith, or, alternatively, that daughters followed the faith of their mother and sons that of their father.[2] Needless to say that the churches tried to support their own faithful and strove to undermine state legislation if it worked against them. In the eyes of early modern theologians and politicians, mixed marriages threatened to undermine confessional parity because of the danger of conversion and the much disputed question of the education of children, a threat that was taken seriously by state and church. Thus, conflicts in mixed marriages which sprang from religious disputes were not only a family matter, but also a matter of order and religious conformity in a confessionalised state.

While mixed marriages that were peaceful left few traces in historical records, those marriages where disputes turned into violence are much better documented and provide the base for this study.[3] Violence in this context refers not only to physical violence which usually implied beatings and the forceful abduction of children, but it also refers to mental violence caused by the suffering inflicted on an individual's conscience by means of religious coercion. The dangers of seduction and of a suffering conscience were recurring themes among opponents of mixed marriages. It was a 'daily experience' that a faithful spouse was 'seduced by the infamous sweet poison of heretical teaching'.[4] Afraid of the last judgement and weighed down by religious dispute and the breach of baptismal promises, 'the tender conscience is terribly hurt and mortally wounded'.[5] The Lutheran clergy in Saxony stressed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the immense 'Seelengefahr' (danger to the soul) to which the Lutheran spouse was exposed in a mixed marriage because of the threat of seduction and coercion. Thus violence is experienced both physically and mentally.

---

[2] Dagmar Freist, 'Zwischen Glaubensfreiheit und Gewissenszwang: Das Reichsrecht und der Umgang mit Mischehen nach 1648' in: Ronald G. Asch, Wulf-Eckhard Voß, Martin Wrede eds., *Frieden und Krieg in der frühen Neuzeit. Die europäische Staatenordnung und die außereuropäische Welt* (= *Der Frieden. Rekonstruktion einer europäischen Vision*, ed. by Klaus Garber and Jutta Held, Vol. 2) (München 2001) 293-322.

[3] For an overall study of mixed marriages in early modern Germany see: Dagmar Freist, *Toleranz und Konfessionspolitik. Konfessionell gemischte Ehen in Deutschland 1555 bis ca. 1806* (forthcoming).

[4] Compare for example Philipp Müller, *Der Fang des edlen Lebens durch fremde Glaubens-Ehe* (O.O. 1689).

[5] Ibidem.

There was also a gender dimension to the experience of violence that occurred in disputes over religion in mixed marriages. Many case studies show that a man's undisputed authority over his wife and children could be undermined for religious reasons through legislation, through individual arrangements in a marriage contract or through interference by state and church. This had severe implications for the internal relationships in the household and in the community. What did it mean in practice for the supposed gender hierarchy between husband and wife, if the mother alone was responsible for the religious upbringing of their offspring and the religious conduct of servants? The husband's public position and honour must have been affected by his lack of *patria potestas*. How did he cope, and how did he react apart from the use of violence? What choices did a wife and mother have who was forced to convert, or else to lose her children? What did it mean to suffer severe pangs of conscience because of confessional differences and disputes? In the following I will look at these various forms of religious violence by concentrating on two cases taken from two different territories in eighteenth-century Germany.

The experience of religious violence

The following stories stem from the Electorate of the Palatinate and the Prince-Bishopric of Osnabrück. For several reasons, both territories are of special interest for analysing the question of confessional disputes and religious violence. First, they belong to those territories in Germany with the highest confessional mixture within its borders. Secondly, its populations experienced disputes over religious issues in the political and ecclesiastical spheres throughout the early modern period. The Electorate of the Palatinate was rigorously re-catholised since the late seventeenth century disregarding the stipulations of the Peace Treaty of Westphalia and the protest from leading Protestant nobles and the Imperial Diet; the Prince-Bishopric of Osnabrück was ruled alternately by a Protestant and by a Catholic prince who tried to reinterpret the arrangements of the Westphalian Peace according to their own interests each supported by the respective churches. Thus, in a climate of general confessional tension conflicts in mixed marriages obtained an exemplary status. If the confessional rights of the disputing spouses were violated within the family this was rhetorically equalled to the violation of religious freedom in the

state and in the Holy Roman Empire as a whole. Often marriage partners appealed to their right of religious freedom and the freedom of conscience as is shown in the first example.

In January 1775 Wilhelmina Bernhardina Fischer left her home in Hunteburg in the Prince-Bishopric of Osnabrück in a panic to seek refuge in her brother's house in nearby Bohmte. Her husband had beaten her so badly that neighbours needed to protect her. Apart from her own safety, Wilhelmina was deeply worried about her two daughters who, she feared, were in danger of being abducted, 'as many had been under similar circumstances'. On top of that, she suffered under 'insults against her conscience'.[6] According to one witness her Catholic husband had tried to beat Lutheran Wilhelmina into conversion. Because she opposed him on the basis of her religious conscience and their marriage contract, Conrad Fischer flew into a rage. The local Catholic priest, however, rejected any suggestion of violence and portrayed her as a woman with a bad reputation ever since she had come to live in the largely Catholic village of Hunteburg nine years before, upon her marriage to the widower Fischer.

When Wilhelmina Steinmeyer and Conrad Fischer decided to marry neither of them wanted to convert. With their future children in mind the couple made special arrangements for the religious practices of their family. Part two of their marriage contract stated that:

> according to the custom of this territory, which was, if God blessed them with one or more daughters, they would follow their mother's faith and brought up in the Lutheran religion, and if God blessed them with sons, they would follow their father's faith and brought up as Catholics, and neither of them would ever hinder or oppose the other in any way in the upbringing of their children.[7]

For their own religious life the spouses promised under oath not 'to hinder but in fact to encourage each other as much as they could in the pursuit of their different faiths'.[8]

In a confessionally mixed territory like Osnabrück this did not seem too difficult. Until the Westphalian Peace the Prince-Bishopric of Osnabrück was characterised by religious syncretism. After a brief interlude

[6] Staatsarchiv Osnabrück (StAOs), Rep 100/374 No 20 (1775-1777).
[7] StAOS Rep 100 Abschnitt 374, 20, fol. 4 (1775-1777).
[8] Ibidem.

of the Lutheran Reformation between 1543 and 1548 under Prince-Bishop Franz Graf von Waldeck (c. 1491-1553), Osnabrück returned officially to Catholicism under pressure from the Emperor Charles V. However, the Reformation had left its imprint; lay communion and clerical marriage remained. The Westphalian Peace finally acknowledged the biconfessional nature of the ecclesiastical territory. A separate contract, the *capitulatio perpetua*, laid down that the Prince-Bishopric was to be ruled in alternation by a Catholic and Protestant bishop.[9] It was divided into *Ämter* (districts) with Catholic, Lutheran and mixed *Kirchspiele* (parishes). Whereas Catholics tended to live exclusively in villages with a Catholic church – even if they were in the minority – Protestants also lived in Catholic parishes.

Mixed marriages were not unusual. If there were no private marriage contracts the children were brought up by gender: girls in the faith of the mother, boys in the faith of the father. Conrad Fischer lived in the village of Hunteburg, which had about sixty per cent Catholic inhabitants, and the rest were Lutheran.[10] There was only a Catholic church, but at least in theory Lutherans were free to go to a Lutheran church in one of the neighbouring villages. Bohmte, where Wilhelmina came from, had a small Lutheran majority, but there too, there was only a Catholic church. Private Lutheran services were held in the nearby estate of Arenshorst, in Astrup and in the Schelenburg (castle of Schele). In general, Catholic parishes tried to prevent private Lutheran worship; they themselves encountered opposition only under Protestant rule. Thus, many Lutherans visited the local Catholic church because it was easier. Some waited outside only to join in when the sermon started. Others refused to go to church at all. Some evidence suggests that Catholic priests coerced Protestants to go to mass. Even rites of passage like baptism, marriage and burial were often performed by Catholic priests on Lutheran members of the village community. Catholics, however, were under pressure to go to mass and to receive the sacraments by a Catholic priest only.

Regardless of the necessary compromises in everyday life for practical purposes, villagers seemed very aware of and committed to their religion. The proper upbringing of children was vital for the perseverance of

[9] Anton Schindling, 'Reformation, Gegenreformation und Katholische Reform im Osnabrücker Land und im Emsland. Zum Problem der Konfessionalisierung in Nordwestdeutschland', *Osnabrücker Mitteilungen* 94 (1989) 35-60.

[10] Hermann Hoberg, *Die Gemeinschaft der Bekenntnisse in kirchlichen Dingen. Rechtszustände im Fürstentum Osnabrück vom Westfälischen Frieden bis zum Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Osnabrück 1939) 19. The following passsage is based on Hoberg, *Gemeinschaft*, 34-44.

the true faith. In 1772 a Lutheran school was set up privately in Hunteburg and in other villages with a Lutheran minority, at just about the time when Wilhelmina's daughters might have used it.[11] According to her testimony, Wilhelmina Fischer had resisted her husband's attempts to force her to convert to Catholicism and to send their children to the local Catholic school for several years. At first, local office holders did not take her accusations seriously. When the *Amtsvogt* (bailiff) of Hunteburg was called by a neighbour to protect the wife from Fischer's brutality, he came, shared a few drinks with Fischer, laughed and walked off.[12]

When violence escalated Wilhelmina left 'to seek comfort, help and advice from her brother'.[13] In June of the same year she appealed to the *Geheime Rat* (privy council) of Osnabrück for help. In her petition she asked firstly that her daughters be educated according to the rules laid down in the marriage contract so 'her conscience be at ease', and secondly, that her husband gave sufficient security not to abduct the children. Only then peace could return to the family home, she argued.[14] The *Geheime Rat* ordered Conrad Fischer to accept the marriage contract. Local officers were asked to supervise the education of the children, and the couple were reconciled in the presence of the *Rentmeister* Meyer of Wittlage and Hunteburg in September 1775. However, the reconciliation did not last. The conflict between the spouses was intensified by outside influences. Conrad Fischer was regularly visited by a Dominican monk who was staying with the Hunteburger Catholic priest. These visits happened at night. Whenever the monk left, Fischer beat his wife. The Dominican had told him that he was not obliged to keep the marriage contract because of 'some awful moral reason'.[15] He went even further: Fischer and others who were living in a mixed marriage had to agree upon oath that they would break their contracts.

The *Geheime Rat* reacted half-heartedly and played down the accusations of violence for religious reasons. In October 1775, the priest of Hunteburg and Wittlage was admonished and asked to send the monk away but it took another two years before the monk was finally expelled on the grounds that he disturbed the peace of the land and violated the imperial

[11] Hoberg, *Gemeinschaft*, 34-44.
[12] StAOs, Rep 150 Wit No 1691.
[13] StAOS Rep 100 Abschnitt 374, 20, fol. 2l (1775).
[14] StAOS Rep 100 Abschnitt 374, 20, fol. 2-3 (1775).
[15] StAOS Rep 100 Abschnitt 374, 20, fol. 22-23 (5. Juni 1777).

right of religious freedom.[16] After he had left, the *Rentmeister* was asked to supervise the education of the Fischer children. This, however, had little effect. The father took his daughters to the Catholic school by force. Admittedly, Fischer was in a serious dilemma. His role as head of the household turned out to be incompatible with his marriage contract because there were no sons. Although he belonged to the religious majority in his village, in his family he was in the minority. This explains the helpless appeal he made in the end to be allowed to educate at least one of his daughters in his faith. Furthermore, he could not fulfil his duty as a Catholic. The Catholic marriage doctrine which expected parents to bring up their children in the Catholic faith was undermined by the rules laid down in the marriage contract, local custom and the imperial right of religious freedom. However, the law was not on Fischer's side. His support came from the missionary attempts of a Dominican monk and the hostile attitude of the local Catholic priest towards his wife; his power was based on threats of abduction and brutal force. To what extent his behaviour was driven by his religious conscience and to what extent by his struggle for authority in the household and reputation among his Catholic neighbours we can only guess. Eventually, the councillors invoked more drastic measures, partially because of the escalation of violence of which they were informed by the *Rentmeister*. In June 1777, Fischer was finally forced to give in under threat of punishment.

Wilhelmina Fischer pursued several strategies in her attempt to combat the threats and brutality of her husband and the hostile behaviour of the local priest and the *Amtsvogt*. Aware of her rights – and for reasons of her religious conscience – she tried to oppose her husband and eventually appealed to the authorities for justice. In spite of her bravery, however, she had to seek shelter with her brother in her home village. Initially her case was not taken seriously and she was admonished for presenting a case of justified beating as a case of religious persecution. In addition, Wilhelmina was stigmatised by the negative report of the Catholic priest who attacked her honour while defending her husband and labelled her as a lewd woman 'as everyone knew'. Whereas the *Rentmeister* of Wittlage and Hunteburg, Meyer, criticised the priest for his quarrelsome interference, the *vicarius spiritualiis generalis*, Carl von Vogelius, defended him in his letter to the *Geheime Rat*. According to this version the priest was a peace-loving man who told nothing but the truth whereas Wilhelmina Fischer could only be

[16] StAOS Rep 100 Abschnitt 374, 20, fol. 24 (1777).

trusted as much as the bad reputation she had gained throughout the whole neighbourhood allowed. Whether or not this view was justified and shared by the village community remains unknown. Local officers had not been able – or willing – to protect Wilhelmina Fischer from violence. In the end, however, her husband was forced by law to accept the marriage contract and his daughters were brought up in his wife's faith. The Imperial law on religious freedom was thus restored and those who had offended against it were duly admonished.

However, not all disputes were solved according to the law. The last resort for individuals was to appeal to the Imperial Diet in Regensburg with reference to the religious rights laid down in the Westphalian Peace. This step was finally taken by one Lutheran couple in the Electorate of the Palatinate – Maria Josepha Theresia von Staritz, née Von Mack, and her second husband, captain Joachim Peter von Staritz. Maria's daughter Maria Anna Antonia Walpurgis had been forcibly delivered by local officers to the Catholic orphanage in Mannheim in 1758 on the grounds that her deceased father had been Catholic, and that she had been baptised by the Catholic church. Before the forcible separation of parents and daughter nothing had been left undone to move the mother to convert to Catholicism.[17]

Originally from Neuburg at the Danube in the Pfalz-Neuburg, she had converted to the Lutheran faith in the Lutheran free Imperial City of Nuremberg on 21 January 1756 after her first Catholic husband and father of her daughter, Johann Christian Ernst Count von Woyda, Imperial captain, had died. She had then moved to Ansbach in the Upper Palatinate where she had married the Lutheran captain Joachim Peter von Staritz. Together they decided to bring up the girl in the Lutheran faith. The conflict about the girl's religious upbringing started when the couple arrived in Mannheim, the capital of the Electorate of the Palatinate since 1742. They had come to secure Maria Josepha's patrimony of 10.000 fl., which, they claimed, had been kept by her guardian ever since her father had died eighteen years ago. Her guardian refused to deliver the money and to hand over the original guardianship accounts, papers and receipts. While waiting for judicial aid the couple ran up considerable debts and lived in miserable conditions. In a letter to the elector of the Palatinate the deputy government of Pfalz-Neuburg described the danger of conversion the little girl was in. Consequently, the *churpfälzische Regierungsrath und Stadt-Director* of Mannheim,

[17] Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA) 77/4194 (1759); the following is based on these documents.

Gobin, was instructed by the government of the Electorate of the Palatinate to observe the family and find out about their religious practices.

On 17 February 1758, Maria Josepha and her daughter were finally cited by a notary before Gobin in Mannheim. The couple went to the *Stadt-Director* leaving the child with the *Consistorial Rat* and second Lutheran preacher Böttiger whom they had asked for help. When Gobin saw them without the child he threatened to get the girl by force – and von Staritz hastened to fetch his step-daughter himself. In a separate room the town clerk questioned Maria Josepha about her daughter's and her own faith. When did she convert? Where and why? Had her child already been confirmed? Which version of 'Our father in heaven' did she pray with her daughter, the Catholic or Lutheran? Maria Josepha explained that her daughter had been baptised in the Catholic church, and brought up in the Catholic faith while her father, who had belonged to an old Catholic family, was alive, but not yet confirmed as she was only ten years old. Up to now, she argued, she had done everything out of desperation because she had been denied her patrimony. But once she finally got her assets life would change for both her daughter and for herself. If the girl was taken from her, however, this would be the worst thing that could happen to a natural mother.

After she had answered and defended her Lutheran faith, Gobin entreated her to convert to Catholicism. If she succeeded in converting her husband, too, she would have saved a soul, he went on. She would then receive the patrimony and could enjoy a happy life in Neuburg where she had a house and land. Her husband would be advanced to a *Stadt-Major*, Gobin promised. She replied that she would not convert nor did she long to live in Neuburg. For her husband she could not speak. Gobin then entreated her to convert and leave her husband. Eventually Gobin sent the family home. For a whole week the little girl was guarded by two officers who were posted inside the family's lodgings. Escape was impossible. The girl was finally delivered to the orphanage in Mannheim by an Electoral order. The sources give ample evidence of the misery and pain this caused for both the child and the parents, especially the mother. The procession to the hospital with a screaming girl and mother, guards and the *Stadt-Director* attracted a large crowd of onlookers. Reportedly, the girl told the *Stadt-Director* in tears: 'I do not wish to be Catholic, I would rather die; why would

any one wish to take me away from my parents and make me an orphan?'.[18] She disappeared behind closed doors, and her Catholic education began. The government of the Palatinate justified this behaviour by claiming tutelage over the child arguing that the girl's natural father had come from an old Catholic family. In order to secure the girl's Catholic upbringing she was, according to a suggestion from Pfalz-Neuburg, to be handed over to Catholic foster parents and Maria Josepha's guardian, supported by the government, refused to hand over her inheritance unless she and her child converted back to the Catholic faith. Von Staritz, the girl's stepfather, objected that this was against inheritance law and also against the right of religious freedom as laid down by the Peace of Westphalia. Patrimony could not be withheld for religious reasons. His arguments, however, were ignored by the Electorate of the Palatinate: the Peace Treaty had little authority now, and the Electorate of the Palatinate pursued its own policy, so came the dry reply.

The abduction of children from biconfessional families and their Catholic upbringing in orphanages was part of a rigorous scheme of recatholisation in the mainly Calvinist Electorate of the Palatinate.[19] After the Protestant line of the House Simmern had died out, the electorate was governed by the Catholic House Neuburg, and the already extensive territory was enlarged by the Duchy of Neuburg at the Danube, Jülich-Berg at the lower Rhine, and - in 1742 - the Duchy of Sulzbach in the Upper-Palatinate. In violation of the Westphalian Peace, which had reinstalled the Electorate of the Palatinate as a Calvinist state with Catholicism legally non-existent, the Elector Philipp Wilhelm and especially his successor, Johann Wilhelm, replaced all officeholders with Catholics, allowed public Catholic worship and processions, set up images and sculptures of saints, founded Jesuit academies and a new place of pilgrimage, and introduced the *simultaneum*, that is the mutual usage of a church by Protestants and Catholics. Officeholders were ordered to favour Catholics and converts. Under these circumstances Maria Josepha and Joachim Peter von Staritz had few options left once their child was taken away. Only the mother was allowed to visit the child, not the stepfather. Due to their impoverishment, fear of arrest and fear of coerced conversion because of their debts the

[18] *An ein Hochpreißliches Corpus Evangelicorum unterthäniges Memorial und Species Facti, des Hauptmanns Joachim Peter von Staritz* (Regensburg 1759), GLA 77/4194 (1759) 7.
[19] Meinrad Schaab, 'Die Wiederherstellung des Katholizismus in der Kurpfalz im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert', *Zeitschrift zur Geschichte des Oberrheins* 114 (1966) 147-205.

couple left the Electorate of the Palatinate and went to Regensburg to appeal to the Imperial Diet. Here Von Staritz decided to present his appeal not only to the *Corpus Evangelicorum*, the Protestant Imperial Estates, but also to a wider public. The full story was published in print.[20] It opened: 'In submission and duty I appeal to you (…) to help me obtain for my wife her legal patrimony and to free my poor daughter from the slavery of 'Gewissenszwang'. She is moaning and screaming for salvation.'[21]

Obviously catering for both the Imperial Estates and a wider public, Von Staritz's argument is very personal and at the same time highly political. He refers to the right of religious freedom as granted by the Westphalian Peace and describes in all detail the sufferings of his wife and stepdaughter and the brutal force with which they had been separated on religious grounds. Of great interest are the alleged words of the little girl outside the orphanage, which seem highly unlikely for a ten year old, but mirror Von Staritz's political calculation and insights into alliances within the Empire:

> In the presence of the *Spitalmeister* and his wife and the two *Stadtwachtmeister* and a *Hofkammer Rat*, she said in a moving and heart-piercing voice: 'Now, my dear papa! If it cannot be otherwise and I am to be torn from you with brutal force, I would like to thank you for all your love and faithfulness; I plead with you for the sake of Christ's five wounds, I do not wish to become a catholic, I would rather die (…)' She continued: 'if there is no one to help me, so go to the King of Prussia and asked him to free me from these cruel hands; I do not wish to be catholic but Lutheran.' All bystanders (…) were shocked when hearing these words.[22]

The government of the Electorate of the Palatinate was irritated by the publication of Von Staritz's case which was circulated outside the Imperial Diet and even appeared in newspapers. The government rejected it as a defamation and swiftly published a counter-report with allegations about the mother's scandalous life including an interview with a former maid who described her unchaste behaviour years ago when her first husband was away with his troops. The Elector asserted that a government had the right of tutelage and religious education over a child until it came of age if the mother attempted its conversion. In addition, because of the mother's bad

[20] *An ein Hochpreißliches Corpus Evangelicorum.*
[21] Ibidem, 8.
[22] Ibidem

conduct and the public nuisance she caused the daughter had to be taken from her and delivered to much safer hands in the orphanage. This view was also presented to the Protestant Imperial Estates and backed up with numerous reports, papers and certificates. As for the patrimony, the deputy-government of Pfalz-Neuburg argued that it had been given to Maria Josepha already. The treatment of the case by the Protestant Estates was delayed so that they could confer with their respective governments about further steps.

In the meantime, a sequence of unforeseen events changed the situation drastically. Von Staritz died at the end of 1759, and the widow Maria Josepha had to confront the *Corpus Evangelicorum* alone. Her position was extremely weak because detailed reports about her bad reputation had been widely circulated. The Electorate of the Palatinate redefined the case of Maria Josepha as a problem of proper child-rearing in view of the mother's lewd conduct, rather than a case of brutal child abduction for confessional reasons. The rhetorical weapons employed against her were directed at her honour and every possible means was used to discredit her.

Conclusion

The cases above were not singular events but represent a general phenomenon in which the use of violence could grow out of confessional disputes in mixed marriages. Violent behaviour in this context implied threats and bribery, beating and child abduction. Of great interest is the experience of a suffering conscience which actually felt pain: violence was thus experienced both physically and mentally. The patterns of conflict varied considerably and involved parents and children, grandparents, guardians, Catholic and Protestant clergy and the gentry who tried to enforce their confession on the offspring of subjects who lived in a mixed marriage. These cases were dealt with first by local officers, who were asked to mediate, and, if the problem could not be solved, the case was referred to the Privy Council or even to the Imperial Diet and the Imperial Courts. The parties involved, including the children, were questioned about their religious beliefs. The individual religious conscience, marriage contracts and the imperial right of religious freedom were recurring arguments put forth by people who had come under pressure in a mixed marriage and tried to defend their faith even when experiencing religious violence.