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From Priest's Whore to Pastor's Wife: Clerical Marriage and the Process of Reform in the Early German Reformation

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Introduction

On 13 June 1525, after weeks of speculation, Martin Luther secretly married Katharina von Bora, a former nun, in a private ceremony officiated by city preacher Johann Bugenhagen and attended by jurist Johann Apel, professor Justus Jonas, and artist Lucas Cranach and his wife. Over the last centuries, scholars, writers, artists, Wittenberg citizens—in their popular, annual *Lutherhochzeit* [Luther's wedding] festival—and even a recent filmmaker have characterized this event as one of the iconic episodes of the Lutheran Reformation.[1] Yet Luther's marriage neither legalized nor heralded an immediate acceptance of priestly marriage even in reformed territories. Luther certainly was not the first cleric to marry. Three of the witnesses at his wedding—Apel, Bugenhagen, and Jonas—were former Catholic clergy who had all married by mid-1523, a full two years before this event. Only a few weeks prior to this event, Luther expressed hesitation about marriage even for political reasons, suggesting perhaps he would agree to a chaste marriage, a *Josephehe*, to support married clergy.[2] Luther's marriage does illustrate many aspects of the ongoing reform process. His mixed feelings about marrying, the atmosphere that led him to a decision, the subsequent outcry about marriage, and the personal trials that faced him and his wife in their married life had much in common with the many clergy who married before and after him in the first decades of the German Reformation.

The prevailing scholarly focus on the theological debate over celibacy and marriage led by major reformers such as Luther, Karlstadt, Melanchthon, and Bucer obscures the ambivalence that many, including supporters of the evangelical reform movement like Luther, felt about priestly marriage. Debating the merits of celibacy and marriage for clergy was not new nor did ensuing discussions end in the sixteenth century.[3] However, the years between the 1520s and the early 1540s in Germany, when thousands of Catholic priests, monks, and nuns married, were a period of unprecedented transformation in the relationship between

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[1] Barry Stephenson, *Performing the Reformation: Public Ritual in the City of Luther* (Oxford, 2010). The annual celebration of the publication of the 95 Theses in Wittenberg draws only 15,000 visitors compared to over 100,000 for the annual re-enactment of Luther's wedding.

[2] WA Br 3:522 (3 June 1525).

[3] For a recent overview of European discussions of celibacy, see Helen Parish, *Clerical Celibacy in the West, c. 1100–1700* (Farnham, 2010).

the clergy and their communities, precipitating a rapid reevaluation of spiritual, social, and political boundaries that were to impact marriage, gender, and social expectations.

Exploring how the reform movement developed from a theological debate to a social movement involves not only understanding the methods used by evangelical polemicists to spread their messages, but also investigating how these teachings influenced individual choices and changed social norms. It also is necessary to reverse that process to seek an understanding about how individual experiences and local reactions led to shifts in the content of the evangelical message and changes in institutional methods of regulation. Marriage, with its combination of secular and religious symbolism and practical implications, altered the position of the married priest in relationship not only with the church, but also with his congregation. It also generated a significant, and unexpected, redefinition of social, gender, and political roles. This book examines the experience of clerical marriage by many groups in the early German Reformation using an interdisciplinary approach that juxtaposes theological, legal, and political perspectives with a consideration of popular culture and gender. The process of religious and social reform unleashed by this debate provides a unique case study of the reform process, emerging simultaneously from above and from below. Diverse communities, at least in sixteenth-century Germany, alternately opposed one another and cooperated fully to create an ever-changing dynamic during this process.

This topic presents an opportunity for insight into how reform ideas were transformed through the lens of the experiences of the first married clergy. Unlike previous debates over clerical celibacy, the debate over clerical marriage during the German Reformation rapidly moved from purely theoretical discussions among theologians and church officials to arguments conducted in imperial meetings, city council chambers, guildhalls, taverns, and individual homes. One of the reasons for this shift is the approach taken by early Lutheran reformers in spreading their message. Certainly, evangelical authors wrote theological tracts directed at exhorting ecclesiastical authorities to reform their stance on clerical celibacy or defending their position against Catholic theologians and polemicists. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the polemical pamphlets were designed to gain support from two large groups, the clergy and the common man. These works sought to encourage the hesitant to marry and to persuade communities to accept those marriages. Evangelical clergy and authors also sought to convince local city councils and territorial princes of the necessity of accepting this change. However, it is the individual debates, personal decisions and experiences, and changing political and social circumstances that inspired, and were inspired by, these printed materials that became determinative in the process of reform.

One of the most identifiable differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic churches is the marital status of the clergy. Yet, little research has been done on how this shift from a celibate to a married clergy took place during the Reformation in Germany or what reactions such a move elicited. What specialized scholarship does exist on the topic of celibacy and clerical marriage in the German Reformation concentrates almost exclusively on the theological debate on clerical celibacy and priestly marriage by Catholic and Lutheran theologians and reformers. Such research rarely addresses the practical implications of the marriage of priests for individuals, communities, and rulers. In addition, few discussions note that even as the long-running debate over clerical celibacy continued for centuries, many priests lived in long-term stable unions with concubines, a situation that was accepted in their congregations. It is my interest in exploring why an ongoing theological debate resulted in very unexpected responses in the sixteenth century, and from very different quarters than previous discussions, that led to the main questions that concern my research here: how, where, when, and even why did clerical marriage become accepted as a behavioral norm for the clergy; why would monks, nuns, and priests and their sexual partners risk taking the step of marriage when they already had tacit toleration for their households; what were the public and official reactions to the change that marriage implied; and what impact were these changes and the events of public weddings of clergy to have on attitudes to and regulation of marriage, gender, and sexuality?

While many scholars have commented on the ongoing debate on clerical marriage or studied specific cases of a priest or monk marrying, very little comparative research has been done on the interaction between theology and individual reception of priestly marriages as the reform process progressed.[4] The growing divide between those studying clerical marriage in theological debates and print culture[5] and those focusing on the

[4] Bernd Moeller, "Die Brautwerbung Martin Bucers für Wolfgang Capito. Zur Sozialgeschichte des evangelischen Pfarrerstandes," in *Philologie als Kulturwissenschaft: Studien zur Literatur und Geschichte des Mittelalters: Festschrift für Karl Stackmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, edited by Ludger Grenzmann, Hubert Herkommer and Dieter Wuttke (Göttingen, 1987), 306–25; Thomas A. Fudge, "Incest and Lust in Luther's Marriage: Theology and Morality in Reformation Polemics," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34 (2003): 319–45; Ulrich Bubenheimer, "Streit um das Bischofsamt in der Wittenberger Reformation 1521/22: Von der Auseinandersetzung mit den Bischöfen um Priesterehen und den Ablaß in Halle zum Modell des evangelischen Gemeindebischofs," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 104 (1987): 159.

[5] See, for instance, August Franzen, *Zölibat und Priesterehe, in der Auseinandersetzung der Reformationszeit und der katholischen Reformation des 16. Jahrhundert* (Münster, 1971); John Yost, "The Reformation Defense of Clerical Marriage in the Reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI," *Church History* 50 (1981): 152–65; Otto Clemen, "Seltene Schriften

shifts in marriage, gender, and family or confessionalization and discipline methods[6] imposes an intellectual divide that did not exist for sixteenth-century clergy and their communities. Some recent scholarship has begun to address this through local urban studies showing how clerical marriage played out in one setting.[7] But, such studies generally do not consider the interaction of these local developments and experiences with changes at the regional and transregional level. A growing number of scholars have begun investigating the problems of concubinage before and after the Reformation, but few have looked at how concubinage was viewed and experienced during the debate in the 1520s and 1530s. Almost none of the existing research on the shift from a celibate to a married clergy during the Reformation addresses the popular reactions that this move elicited or how those reactions influenced the way that reformers framed their subsequent theological writings, sermons, and reform policies.

The first impetus for clerical marriage came not from the leadership of the reform movement, but from the parish clergy and their congregations. They transformed the theological debate over celibacy into a crisis of local authority by attempting to justify the communal need for clerical marriage, by circumventing the law and allowing priests to marry, and by otherwise advocating the acceptance of these marriages. Unlike other disputed church rituals or doctrinal debates, clerical marriage was simultaneously an intensely personal issue and a consciously public move by clergy challenging established social, legal, and theological institutions.

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gegen den Konkubinat der Kleriker aus dem Anfang des 16. Jahrhunderts," *ARG* 85 (1925): 115–27; Leon E. Halkin, "Érasme et le célibat sacerdotal," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 57 (1977): 497–511; Hans-Christoph Rublack, "Zur Rezeption von Luthers *De votis monasticis iudicium*," in *Reformation und Revolution: Beiträge zum politischen Wandel und den sozialen Kräften am Beginn der Neuzeit*, edited by Ranier Postel and Franklin Kopitzsch (Stuttgart, 1989), 224–37; Stephen Buckwalter, *Die Priesterehe in Flugschriften der frühen Reformation* (Gütersloh, 1998).

[6] Susanna Burghartz, "Ordering Discourse and Society: Moral Politics, Marriage, and Fornication during the Reformation and the Confessionalization Process in Germany and Switzerland," in *Social Control in Europe, Vol. 1, 1500–1800*, edited by Pieter Spierenburg and Herman Roodenburg (Columbus, 2004), 78–98.

[7] Rainer Postel, "Horenjegers und Kökschen. Zölibat und Priesterehe in der hamburgischen Reformation," in *Städtische Gesellschaft und Reformation*, edited by Ingrid Bátori (Stuttgart, 1980); Robert W. Scribner, "Practice and Principle in the German Towns: Preachers and People," in *Reformation Principle and Practice: Essays in Honour of Arthur Geoffrey Dickens*, edited by Peter Newman Brooks (London, 1980), 97–117; Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Woman and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989); Thomas A. Brady, "'You Hate us Priests': Anticlericalism, Communalism, and the Control of Women at Strasbourg in the Age of the Reformation," in *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Peter A. Dykema and Heiko Oberman (Leiden, 1993), 167–207; Joel Harrington, *Reordering Marriage and Society in Reformation Germany* (Cambridge, 1995), 25–47.

Once officials—territorial princes, city councils, and Lutheran leaders—took control of the process, however, the uniformity of popular support broke down and diverse voices emerged.

The laity, local pastors, and magistrates played a more active role than previously understood in situating and shaping public controversies over clerical marriage in the early German Reformation. A focus on disputes over clerical marriage and celibacy provides a unique window into the interactions between social identity, theology, and religious practice. Evangelical clergy appealed to city councils for citizenship and protection and to their congregations for toleration and support. Many congregations openly supported their pastors in defiance of imperial or territorial decrees and risked much so that their pastors could marry. At the same time, individuals, sometimes the same ones who helped clergy marry, expressed their ambivalence, and even hostility, about married priests and their households in their community. This is even more the experience of the nuns and monks. The use of the term "priest's whore" to describe a pastor's wife, sporadic rumors accusing married clergy of sexual impropriety, or continued distrust of former monks and nuns as oath-breakers all show the residual doubts and hostility. Less obvious are the financial and personal costs that such resistance imposed on the first generation of married clergy. The resulting disputes led to the creation of new cultural and social norms of clerical and lay behavior, and connected this change to broader intellectual and public concerns about marriage and social identity.

The political debates on clerical marriage provide an interesting insight into the political as well as theological divisions emerging during the Reformation. Clerical marriage emerged as a major issue shaping the relations between cities as they banded together in support of their married clergy and between cities and the emperor as they sought a resolution over this issue in the imperial councils between 1525 and 1544. In addition, territorial princes and city councils found themselves confronting broader social and political concerns as acceptance of clerical marriage led to debates over the position of the newly married clergy in the political and social fabric of the community. Should they be granted citizenship, be expected to carry weapons in defense of the city, and be allowed to enter into trades? Should their children and wives be able to inherit? City councils sympathetic to the married clergy found themselves mediating between the clergy and members of the community as resistance to the clergy and their wives became clear. Mediations were often necessary for reasons that were remarkably prosaic, such as conflicts between neighbors or marital squabbles, but secular authorities saw them as challenging their own emerging expectation of the clerical, and lay, household.

This book investigates the way that clerical marriage was received, and the progress of reform on this issue, in the dioceses of Mainz and Magdeburg under Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg from 1513 to 1545, concentrating on three key regions within this territory: Saxony, Franconia, and Swabia. Within these areas, I have explored a cross-section of rural and urban settings, independent imperial cities and those subject to territorial rule, and territories and cities that ranged from strongly confessional in identity to more ambivalent and flexible to gain a broad comparison of reactions. This book focuses on the first half of the sixteenth century when the debates were undecided and the intellectual and institutional situation remained fluid and changeable. It ends in 1545/1546, which marked a generational shift in leadership with the death of many of the primary players in the process such as Albrecht of Mainz, George of Brandenburg-Ansbach, George Spalatin, and Luther. In addition, the opening of the first session of the Council of Trent in 1545 and Interim of 1547/1548 began a more complicated relationship between the papacy, emperor, and evangelical states in the archdioceses of Mainz and Magdeburg. It is against this backdrop that confessional positions hardened and the confessional split became irrevocable.

My analysis utilizes the results of archival research in southern Germany and Saxony where a wide spectrum of official reactions to clerical marriage developed. Cities such as Nuremberg and Ulm and regions such as the Brandenburg-Ansbach and Ernestine Saxony rejected clerical celibacy and legalized priestly marriages. Others like Augsburg and Nördlingen publicly stated their intent to uphold imperial decrees and laws, but in practice tolerated clerical marriage. Cities such as Würzburg and territories like Albertine Saxony strictly upheld mandates and acted decisively against married clergy leading to the seeming elimination of clerical marriage. Much of this reaction seems indicative of later support or rejection of evangelical reform. However, the reactions of local clergy and congregations demonstrate an even more complex, nuanced, and fluid set of opinions and reactions that often defy such simple categorizations.

Although considering traditional legal, political, and theological sources, the following exploration of the debate over clerical marriage focuses on untapped archival sources and under-utilized contemporary printed sources such as published sermons, pamphlets, and woodcuts. Because there is no single collection or easy access to early sixteenth-century documents directly from the perspective of nuns, local clergy, artisans, concubines, or even concerned parents, I sought these voices in unusual locations—letters of appeal, chronicles, official and personal correspondence, city council records, visitation reports, court testimonies—and looked for snippets of conversation recorded in other documents. Using these archival sources and the published lists of pastors, I compiled a database consisting of the

demographic and career information of over 2,500 clergy who became Lutheran pastors during the 1520s and early 1530s.[8] This provides information about marriage patterns, social status of the married priests, monks, and nuns, and their spouses, and geographic differences.

The first chapter outlines the pre-Reformation background on clerical marriage and celibacy. While bishops, princes, and city councils sought to control clerical sexual misconduct in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, my research indicates that such efforts led to profound jurisdictional conflicts and increasing demands for action from communities. Chapter 2 begins with an overview of the first clerical marriages at the parish level in Electoral and Ducal Saxony before moving on in Chapter 3 to an examination of the methods used by reformers to spread their message on clerical marriage in the early 1520s. Chapter 4 examines the unique experiences of former monks and nuns whose marriages and laicization were considered as more transgressive than those of the secular clergy. Chapter 5 explores how differences in the way evangelical and Catholic authorities confronted clerical concubinage, an issue they both condemned, led to divergent policies and patterns of discipline. Chapter 6 focuses on the question of why the laity, male and female, would choose to marry former clergy. Chapter 7 shows how and why a wedding or local legalization of clerical marriage did not end the debate on marriage and celibacy even as clerical households individually and collectively became embroiled in continuing imperial discussions on the legitimacy of clerical marriage and were subject to local conflicts over social integration of clerical families.

Many reformers initially thought that clerical marriage would be resolved at a national council. What they were to discover was that the numerous transregional meetings of bishops, theologians, and secular authorities during the 1520s through the 1540s did not lead to the single imperial policy they wanted. In the place of unified decision, regional secular authorities instead stepped in to make and enforce their own policies on clerical households. This was done sometimes in conjunction with evangelical reformers and sometimes in opposition to their recommendations. Evangelical reform leaders, whether secular or clerical, discovered that they had limited control over discussions on concubinage, clerical marriage, and celibacy occurring at the individual or local level. They often found themselves facing new and unexpected

[8] For this study, I used available edited *Pfarrerbücher* from across Germany as well as other biographical sources such as the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (ADB) and *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (NDB). For a comprehensive list of the *Pfarrerbücher* used for this database, Max-Adolf Cramer, "Pfarrerbücher," *Blätter für württemberische Kirchengeschichte* 91 (1991): 382–92; http://www.hab.de/session/highlight?url=/forschung/projekte/vd17/bibh-pfarrer.htm&words=pfarrer%20&color=red.

debate and controversies as local clergy married, often with the full support and encouragement of their communities. But, there is also a surprisingly personal element in behavior and acceptance of many aspects of the reform program.

The reform process is often presented as imposed, successfully or not, and seeking to limit personal choice, and in some ways it did. Yet, the social and moral values of individuals did matter and this is evident in the imperfect, incomplete social integration of the married clergy. While married clergy could and did live peacefully in a community, they were still recognized as different long after theologians and politicians argued and legislated that they were not. This becomes evident when local events or social norms highlighted the uncertainty about clerical role in the community and led to local reactions demonstrating distrust of an imperfectly rigged social identity. The reason can be confessional, but not always. What were long-existing tensions in the community found expression through the new vocabulary of faith without always being conversations about belief. Theological doctrines often are lived in ways their proponents had not considered or imagined.

Map I.1 Archbishoprics of Magdeburg and Mainz, c. 1500