It was not too long ago that the pages of this journal served as a forum for Charles Tilly's caveat against the search for tidy, metahistorical theories of historical sociology. Taking that warning to heart, I make no claims for the universality of the patterns of behavior I intend to document here, except for the general observation of Peter Munz that all societies tend to use religion as a means to promote social cohesion. It is logical to assume therefore that where social cohesion is (or is believed to be) greatly threatened, the pressure to bend religion to that end will be highly pronounced.

This makes all the more surprising the relative silence of Norbert Elias on the role of religion in the 'civilizing process'. One would expect that early modern Europe, riven as it was with dynastic, confessional and national struggles, would provide an extraordinarily rich field for the investigation of religion's role in the processes that produced a 'social constraint to self-constraint'. Elias' silence on this matter has evoked a variety of scholarly responses, ranging from defense, to refinement, to outright rejection of his entire theory. I do not intend to debate here the merits of Elias' focus, methodology or conclusions. Yet I do hope to show that a great deal of evidence from the reform movements of the later middle ages and the early modern era provides insights into the changing relationships between social groups that supports rather than undermines Elias' study.

Some years ago Gerald Strauss drew attention to the socializing function of Lutheran catechisms. Strauss showed that through the discursive application of theology to daily life, catechisms were designed not only to teach the basic meaning of the Ten Commandments, Creed and Lord's Prayer but to shape comportment; to fashion lay folk into moral, obedient, disciplined believers. In related studies, other authors seized on Protestant catechesis and its parallel in post-Tridentine Catholicism as the mark of a new and rather ominous era in Christendom, strongly colored by a heavy-handed authoritarianism and intolerance.
What has not yet been grasped, however, is that the catechetical endeavors of the 16th century stand within the tradition of a movement far older. Luther and his colleagues boasted that their efforts restored the practice of the Patristic Church after many centuries of ecclesiastical neglect. In reality, however, Protestant attacks on the indifference of the Church to its spiritual and pedagogical mission may be fixed within a pattern evident since the early thirteenth century: reformers decried the negligence of fellow priests and the ignorance of parishioners; they crafted the tools to facilitate teaching and preaching; they issued mandates to ensure that clerics used them. Time passed; prior efforts were judged and found wanting; the cycle began once again, prompting a higher level of activity than the one that preceded it.

When we trace the progress of the catechetical movement, we find intriguing parallels to the development of the etiquette books that formed the source base for Elias’ study: growing numbers of texts requiring rising standards for comportment, aimed not simply to define these standards but to make people internalize them.

Though systematic work on this issue is still in its infancy, it is safe to say that a very rough graph of the production of catechetical literature from the 13th-17th centuries would resemble three successively higher peaks, each levelling off into the plateau from which the next peak rises. The first was prompted by Canon 90 of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which required all bishops to provide elementary religious instruction for the laity in their parishes. This phase, which extended into the fourteenth century, was marked by synodal legislation reiterating the Conciliar decree, and simple Latin texts written for the priests who were to teach from them. This effort seems to have foundered by placing the burden for catechesis on those least capable of bearing it. The barriers to effective parish instruction were considerable: ‘ignorance, pluralism, non-residence, and hard times.’

New characteristics in the catechetical movement appeared in a second phase, extending roughly from the late fourteenth into the early sixteenth century. First, there was an explosive rise in the production of vernacular catechisms, now aimed not only at the lower clergy but explicitly at literate lay men and women in noble courts and cities. Munich’s Bayerische Staatsbibliothek is the only major collection of late-medieval sources yet subjected to intensive investigation, but the numbers discovered there are very impressive: more than 120 separate titles, many in dozens, some in hundreds of copies; in all some 140,000 pages of catechetical literature, most of it by anonymous monks. Yet in this period, notable reformers scripted catechisms as well. Outside Germany and before the Reformation,
authors of catechetical sermons and texts include such luminaries as Wycliff, Hus, Gerson, Savonarola, John of Capistrano, Juan de Valdes, John Colet, and Erasmus. After 1400, Jean Gerson’s *Opusculum Tripartitum* was frequently reproduced in France and the Empire; it was prefaced by a letter laying out a program for catechesis which called on parents, priests and schoolteachers to use it in their respective realms of authority. In the Empire, the program left notable traces. Between 1417 and 1510, diocesan synods drew up plans for mandatory parish catechesis in Salzburg, Passau, Würzburg, Eichstatt, Basel, Spier, Weinsburg and Constance.

The Protestant and Catholic Reformations of the sixteenth century mark a third phase, though its genesis was somewhat different than conventional views. Luther was preaching over the catechism already in 1516, before the indulgence controversy, and several dozen catechisms scripted by pastors and school-teachers for local consumption survive for the period from 1520-1528. It is thereafter that we find another explosive rise in text production, after the dismal results of the first Protestant Parish Visitations. Gerald Strauss noted that something like every third pastor wrote a catechism through about 1580, when Luther’s was declared the standard. Zwinglians, Reformed Protestants and Calvinists went through similar patterns. In England, for example, more than 600 separate titles were produced between 1540 and 1700. The proliferation of Protestant catechisms, and the perception that they were horribly efficient, sparked contemporary Catholics to write their own. They were never as prolific: in Germany, several dozen reformers produced such works before about 1564, when the catechisms of the Jesuit Petrus Canisius, and the *Catechismus Romanus* of the Council of Trent became the authorized tools for lay pedagogy, and the first sixteenth-century Catholic works to rival Luther’s in number and geographic range. In this phase, and on all sides of the confessional divide, magistrates and clergy jointly issued coercive legislation aimed to force lay compliance with the catechetical endeavor.

In addition to rising numbers of texts, the moral demands made on the laity were elevated over time. One of the most intriguing discoveries gained from the ‘long view’ of catechesis is the growing prominence accorded the Ten Commandments. Beginning in the late fourteenth century, the Decalogue gradually replaced the Seven Sins as the chief source for teaching morality and the primary rubric for making confession. This process was capped in the sixteenth century by both Protestants and Catholics; like every Evangelical catechism, the Council of Trent’s authorized the use of the Decalogue alone.
John Bossy has called this a ‘traumatic shift’ in the ethical paradigms of the institutional churches. It lead to increasing emphasis on the Fourth Commandment, ‘Honor your Father and your Mother’, regularly (and selectively) applied to paternal authorities in home, church and State. In Bossy’s view, an older ethic stressing spiritual kinship and communal harmony was thus replaced by one commanding filial obedience to patriarchal authority.18

What were the impulses behind the catechetical movement? Religious education certainly: Christianity requires saving knowledge, and contrary to Protestant polemicists, the medieval Church was never content simply to shove the sacraments at the laity. But more was at work than this. As Elias noted, the social ferment of the late medieval and early modern periods was unleashed by a host of forces that both spurred and stemmed from the relentless competition between estates. Added to this was a factor he ignored: the sixteenth-century competition for souls. Together these fed a collective mentality of crisis, most evident among the clergy. In the introductions to catechisms, in the legislation that accompanied them, in sermons that reiterated their themes, and sometimes in the texts themselves, authors gave frequent voice to the conviction that chaos was conquering order; that all authority was under assault; that the fundamental bonds of society were snapping with explosive and audible force. ‘Honor your Fathers’ became the commandment of choice to stem what successive generations of reformers viewed as a rising tide of anarchy. Gerson used it in 1417 to condemn the alleged ‘sedition’ of the Flagellants against priests and princes;19 Melanchthon ordered it preached in rural Saxony to suppress the simmering resentment left from the Peasant’s War;20 Catholic theologian Johannes Eck - fervent opponent of the Lutheran movement - used it to denounce the egalitarianism of Baptist sects as an alarming affront to divinely ordained authority.21

The thematic similarities in sources widely separated by time and confessional affiliation hint at certain factors common to the reform cultures of late medieval and early modern Europe. One was the basic fact of ecclesiastical life after the Great Schism: there would be no real reform without the firm support of temporal authorities strong enough and daring enough to break down resistance by entrenched interests, political and ecclesiastical. Second, reformers helped encourage the steady drift of authority from Church to State by arguing from ‘the needs of the hour’. Conciliarists read crisis in the paralysis of the papacy and the machinations of the Curia; Protestants saw it in the diabolical resistance of Rome to the pure Gospel; Jesuits sounded the alarm at the proliferation of heresies (especially Calvinism). Directly or indirectly, each of these groups under-
mined centuries of ecclesiastical teaching that had helped set the Church apart from (or above) the body politic. Third, where no consensus existed about the nature or degree of reform, reform movements were themselves socially destabilizing: they required the forceful coercion of some social groups by others.

Resistance (or fierce counterattack) produced the kind of turmoil that threatened social cohesion and lead churchmen to preach and teach messages they believed might restore it.

These are some of the factors that help explain why catechisms from the later middle ages onward incessantly demanded obedience to paternal authorities as God's will according to God's own Law. In this way, they aided the efforts of rulers who were successfully gaining what Elias called the 'monopoly of power'. Catechisms added a religious dimension to the 'social constraint to self-constraint'.

Two sets of texts help to illustrate this convergence of interests. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Austrian Hapsburg dynasty was torn apart by a violent struggle over property and power. After the unexpected death of Archduke Albrecht IV, the lid burst off a simmering conflict between the Leopoldine and Erasteine branches. A series of feuds launched nobles and knights into civil war; bands of mercenaries broke loose from all constraints, plundering lands and cities at will. Battles destroyed crops; famine and plague followed. Scholars have branded these years 'the decade of anarchy'. A measure of order was restored in 1411 with the coming of age of Albrecht V. Only sixteen years old in the year of his accession, he confounded all expectations by gradually bringing the estates to heel. In the course of a remarkable career he restored stability, wrung extensive ecclesiastical authority from Rome, forced through the Observant reform of local monastic orders, weathered the harsh blasts of Hussite revolt, and finally became King of the German Nation in 1438, one year before his death.

Albrecht's ecclesiastical reforms were conducted at the urging and under the guidance of conciliarist reformers from the overlapping circles of university and monastery in and around Vienna. These same circles produced two generations of court preachers who wrote vernacular catechisms and preached catechetical sermons at the royal court. They were among the first Viennese catechists to employ the Decalogue rather than the Seven Sins for confession and moral instruction, and they unfailingly enjoined obedience to the Archduke as the 'father of the land'. General admonitions were accompanied by a specific one that would have been of particular interest to Norbert Elias: the clerics defined any unsanctioned use of
violence - especially feuds and vendettas - as mortal sin. The Law of God buttressed Albrecht’s monopoly on violence.

A similar process was at work in the cities of southwest Germany. The economic constriction of the later Middle Ages lead to violent clashes between artisans and masters, guilds and governors. From the early fifteenth century, catechists began to stress obedient submission to the victorious oligarchies. Citizens were told to honor leaders of the communes as ‘Stadtväter’ - city fathers. Confessional manuals employing the Decalogue required lay folk to confess whether they secretly desired to supplant their guild master or Bürgermeister.

Catechisms cannot tell us whether such texts shaped the way people thought. But they were clearly meant to. Johannes Wolff, a priest strongly motivated by the reform ideals of Jean Gerson, found a position as chaplain in fifteenth-century Frankfurt thanks to the combined efforts of papal legate Nicholaus of Cusa and the Frankfurt City Council, which broke down the resistance of the entrenched clergy in the Pfarrkirche, jealous of monopoly on the fees generated by baptisms, marriages, burials and the like. Once in place, Wolff designed a manual for parish priests that sketched out a method for organizing all of parish pedagogy according to the Ten Commandments. It began with a weekly Decalogue antiphon, conducted from the pulpit. Preachers were to recite the words of each Commandment slowly, in German, while counting them off on their fingers. After each phrase, the laity were to chant them back. This was to be supplemented by frequent preaching over each Commandment, and by the use of the Decalogue as the only rubric for confession. Wolff boasted that his method - in use for nearly a decade - was foolproof: ‘in a short space of time everyone of both sexes will learn the Ten Commandments even if they are as dull as a beast, a horse, or a stone, and whether they like it or not (sive eis placeret sive displaceret).’

The standards to which he held his own parishioners are remarkable. As surviving copies of Wolff’s penitential manuals demonstrate, to comply with the mandate to ‘honor your fathers’ required the careful governance of thoughts, words and actions. Indeed, it required the practice of a rudimentary civility. This is a portion of his guideline for the confession of mortal sins against the fourth commandment:

‘I have disobeyed the laws of the authorities.
I have murmured against them. I have wanted to know their secrets. I have thought myself wiser than they. I have failed to take off my hat in their presence.’
We have seen that reformers who found official support for their programs worked to instill in citizens and subjects the habits of deference, awe and obedience 'owed' to paternal authorities. But there was another side to all of this. Catechists also tried to fashion godly 'fathers': disciplined rulers who would in turn enforce public discipline. Here too the convergence of reforming zeal and temporal ambition left tangible marks long before the Reformation.

In the course of a four-year preaching mission in the Empire, the fiery Franciscan preacher John of Capistrano held a sermon before Duke Wilhelm of Thüringia in 1452. The preacher observed that Wilhelm's lands had been 'harshly plagued by God with rising prices, poor harvests, death, turmoil, and other burdens'; that these were the penalties for 'the breaking of God's Commandments'; and that it was incumbent upon Wilhelm to reform himself and his subjects. Five weeks after the event, the Duke issued a sweeping ordinance for the reform of public morals. He ordered compulsory attendance at Sunday worship, forbid gambling, drunkenness and fornication, set maximum prices for beer, bread and meat, warned idlers to find labor or leave the land, and threatened public officials with the loss of life and goods unless they stopped practicing usury. Explicitly, he warned that the new laws would apply to everyone, nobles and peasants alike.30

Two powerful movements came together at Jena. The preacher was engaged in a travelling crusade of repentance, drumming princes and people into armies of righteousness for the battle against sin. In the introduction to his ordinance, Wilhelm claimed to have been converted: '...having been powerfully moved through the preaching of the Holy Brother John of Capistrano, we have determined to reform ourselves, and everybody, and to act among our subjects with all necessary diligence.'

But there were great movements afoot in Thüringia as well. The frightful manifestations of God's punishment noted by the preacher - rising prices, poor harvests, plague and turmoil - were in no short supply in Wilhelm's lands, precisely because he had recently concluded a vicious little war against his brother for sole control of the rich Saxon territory. He acted quickly thereafter to consolidate control with an ambitious program for territorial reform that reached deeply into both the jurisdiction of the local Church and the daily lives of his vassals and subjects.

We cannot know whether Wilhelm had internalized the preacher's model of magisterial paternalism. The sources permit nothing more - or less - than a healthy agnosticism. But the sequence of events is clear enough. Wilhelm's newly-won strength drew the overtures of a religious reformer who urged him to use it to curb public sin. The Duke responded with laws
purporting to do just that, thereby extending his authority over new realms of public life.

The social and religious crises of the sixteenth century provided the context in which this convergence of reforming zeal and political power became commonplace. Protestants and Catholics, each apoplectic over the others' successes, turned ever more readily to the muscular arm of secular authority.

Through catechism and court or civic sermon, preachers urged rulers to become godly fathers: to punish sin, to root out heresy, and to curb social turmoil with firm and persistent discipline. Norbert Elias ignored this nexus, perhaps because it seemed so foreign to the great courts of the seventeenth century. Among their kings and princes we find few exemplars of the personal sanctity promoted by catechists. But we dismiss this movement too quickly if we stop here. No less than the books of etiquette, catechisms left their mark on Absolutist courts. Rulers may have used them selectively, but they used them: not for personal, but for social discipline; not for governing the body, but for the governance of the body politic.31

Notes

5 Though the constraints of the present forum necessitate brevity and summary, my observations are based on several years of research on the interrelationship between religious reform movements and state power from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, with special concentration on the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire. See my Honor your Fathers: the Emergence of a Patriarchal Ideology in Early Modern Germany (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Arizona 1993), forthcoming from E.J. Brill. References to this work appear below as HYF.

8 Strauss, *Luther’s House of Learning*, 155-156.

9 For an expanded discussion of the following, together with supporting documentation, see HYF, 1-45.

10 Ibid., 2-7.


15 Strauss, *Luther’s House of Learning*, 164-165.


17 Encyclopedic surveys of this development within the various confessions may be found in Heinrich Schmidt, Konfessionalisierung im 16. Jahrhundert (Munich, 1992) and R. Po-Chia Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation: Central Europe 1550-1700* (London, 1989).


25 On the economic, social and political transformation in the cities during this period see Eberhard Naujoks, Obrigkeitsgedanke, Zunftverfassung und Reformation. Studien zur Verfassungsgeschichte von Ulm, Eßlingen und Schwäbische Gmünd (Stuttgart, 1958, esp. 1-15). Documentation for the catechetical literature produced in this environment may be found in HYF, 205-208.


27 ‘...sequenda materna lingua predica­torem dicendo: Eyn got saltu anbeden, glauben, ut sit: Eyn got - eyn got; predi­cator: saltu anbeden; laicus simpliciter dicendo: saltu anbeden; predicatore: glau­ben; laicus sequendo: glauben etc.’ Wolffs untitled text is reproduced in Franz Falk (ed.), Drei Beichtbüchlein nach den zehen Gebotten aus der Früh­zeit der Buchdruckerkunst (Münster, 1907, here 65, 14-17).

28 Ibid., 65, 9-12.

29 Ibid., 34, 26-29.

30 For an extended discussion of this episode with supporting documentation see HYF, 248-255; also Schulze, Fürsten und Reformation, 67f. Wilhelm’s ordinance is reprinted in Diplomataria et Scriptores Historiae Germanicæ Medii Aevii, ed. Christian Schoettgen and Georg Kreysig (Altenburg, 1753, I.527-528).

31 The relationship between catechisms and social discipline is discussed by Hsia, Social Discipline, 113-116. Gerhard Oestreich suggested that the early mo­dern, humanist-driven political phi­losophy of Sozialdisziplinierung could be understood as a contributing factor to the civilizing process defined by Elias: Oest­reich, Neostoicism and the Early Modern State, Brigitta Oestreich & H.G. Koenigsburger (eds.) (Cambridge, 1982, 164-165).