



Anke Költch

(Ph.D. Candidate)

On Scholarship from the Gerda Henkel Foundation as Visiting
Research Fellow (2011-12)

Email: anke.koeltsch_at_netzwerk-arw.uni-halle.de

A Social and Cultural History of Jewish Converts between 1640 and 1792

My doctoral dissertation is a social and cultural history of Jewish converts to Lutheranism in the duchy of Gotha (Germany/Thuringia) in the early modern period. It deals both with Jews who converted in Gotha and those who, after converting elsewhere, turned to the Duke or other authorities in Gotha for help. Until now most research on conversion in early modern times has been based on the published biographies of learned converts and other printed materials. This project concentrates on manuscript sources—by, and about, converts whose authors had highly varied backgrounds—which reveal a far more complex story than that told by published sources. The latter, more often than not, convey — by design — theological commonplaces. By contrast, the sources used here reveal the converts as individuals in their complex path from one culture to another amid the ever changing social and cultural worlds of early modern Germany. They also open a curtain onto a stage where these converts were both viewed and dealt with on a day to day basis. These converts, many of whom were not especially learned, often merged successfully with Christian society, whether in their occupations or in their personal lives, marrying born Christians and living fully as Christians.

This was distinct from the learned Jewish converts, the principal authors of published writings. These converts often had reasons not to integrate fully into Christian society. As shown by the work of historians based mainly on biographies, autobiographies, and treatises written by learned converts, these converts sought to vindicate themselves; accordingly, their writings emphasize the triumph of the Christian religion. Their aim was also to enhance their professional reputation, for many of these converts pursued careers as teachers of Hebrew or as authors of (what today are called) ethnographic studies about Judaism. To be credible, they needed to emphasize their conversion. With self-designated names such as “Rabbi converso” or “Judeo converso,” they convinced others to deem them experts. Doing so, nonetheless, hindered their complete integration, since instead of becoming “Christians,” they remained “converts,” both to the outside and to themselves.

Many writings of learned converts appeared between 1675 und 1780, during the height of German Pietism, the most influential reform movement within Lutheranism. By contrast to Lutheran orthodoxy, Pietism, with its chiliastic and eschatological bent, significantly changed attitudes toward missionizing, actively promoting missions to Jews. Yet orthodox Lutheranism, too, was open to conversion, if more passively, accepting converts without direct missionizing. Nonetheless, it, too, enjoyed a measure of success. Special attention will be given to the many connections of learned Jewish converts and representatives of the Gotha court with famous advocates of conversion and mission.

Unlearned Converts—including a number of those I will study — were, as said, able to shed their Jewish origins more easily than the learned. Their integration into the Christian community was often smooth, not the least because it was easier for them to receive help in finding employment, whether in their previous professions or following vocational training. The problem in following the lot of the non-learned is that many left almost no written traces, such as autobiographies, and their only written memory is found in church and administrative records. Their fortunes are also recorded in documents touching legal questions that sometimes arose concerning their baptism, divorce, or inheritances. As was common in such cases, experts' reports were regularly produced in the theological or legal faculties. Thus we are able to know these people in some depth, and that is what will concern my work to a great extent.