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12 de diciembre de 2002



**NÚMERO 23**

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**VISIONS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT: JOHANN CHRISTOPH  
WOELLNER AND PRUSSIA'S EDICT ON RELIGION OF 1788**

## *Resumen*

El Edicto Religioso de 1788 intentó controlar la práctica religiosa, y ha sido, por esa razón, identificado como el fin de la ilustración en Prusia. Sin embargo, este artículo argumenta que el edicto no representó el fin de la ilustración, sino la extensión del absolutismo ilustrado de Federico II a la práctica religiosa. Incluso desde los tiempos de Emmanuel Kant, se ha argumentado que la ilustración en Prusia estaba apoyada en la indiferencia religiosa de Federico II. Aun así, la Prusia de Federico II también produjo una tradición de estadistas ilustrados que enfatizaba el mantener la estabilidad a través de la reforma. El Edicto Religioso se originó de esta tradición y la tornó una extensión de las políticas de reforma absolutista a la esfera religiosa.

## *Abstract*

Prussia's Edict on Religion of 1788 is generally understood as a conservative reaction, its promulgation on July 9th of that year marking the end of the Enlightenment in Prussia. This article argues, however, that the edict was a product of the same forces that produced the Prussian Enlightenment's most famous members. Whereas, Prussia's Enlightenment in religion and philosophy (i.e. Semler and Kant) flowered during Frederick II's reign (1740-1786), other forms flourished as well. This article concentrates on what we may call the agricultural Enlightenment, which extended across Europe during the late eighteenth century. This Enlightenment emphasized rural agricultural reform as a way of increasing productivity. Johann Christoph Woellner, the edict's author, was Prussia's leading agricultural reformer, during Frederick II's administration. His experiences in rural Prussia and in working for the Prussian state made him both enlightened and politically conservative. The Edict on Religion represented, therefore, not the end of the Enlightenment in Prussia, but the end of Frederickian enlightened absolutism.

## *Introduction*

Prussia's Edict on Religion was late eighteenth-century Germany's most public political scandal. Registered on July 9, 1788, one year before the French Revolution's outbreak, the edict required Prussian preachers to teach only Christianity's fundamental truths, which it defined as the divinity of Jesus, the truth of the Bible, and the triune God. Critics instantly charged the edict's author, Johann Christoph Woellner (1732-1800), with attacking the Enlightenment. As a Rosicrucian, personal friend of King Frederick William II (1786-1797), and head of Prussia's Religious Ministry (*Geistliches Departement*), Woellner provided an easy target. In a flurry of books and pamphlets, enlightened writers across Germany, such as Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, Ernst Christian Trapp, and Anton Friedrich Büsching, to name only a few, decried the edict as a return to the Inquisition, and blamed Woellner's Rosicrucianism for it.<sup>1</sup> An offshoot of Freemasonry, the Rosicrucians emphasized hierarchy and mysticism over the egalitarian rationality common to Masonic lodges. As a highly placed member of the order who personally inducted Frederick William, Woellner became a visible link between the Counter-Enlightenment's anti-reason and the reactionary Edict on Religion. Woellner, the Rosicrucians, and the Edict on Religion quickly became an unholy trinity for an establishment that felt under siege.

Taking their cues from these eighteenth-century polemics, historians have pegged Woellner as the Enlightenment's enemy. The problem is not that this "enlightened" view is untrue, but that historians have accepted it as completely true. A closer look at the edict and Woellner suggests, however, that the divisions are not so clear. On the one hand, if we judge the edict by the standards of its day, it is moderate in tone. It did not attack academic debate, but prescribed what preachers could say before their congregations. This was hardly out of the mainstream, since everyone recognized that preachers were local state representatives. On the other hand, Woellner was also a product of the Prussian Enlightenment's most important institutions. He attended Halle, Prussia's leading enlightened university, where he studied philosophy and theology under enlightened professors. For fifteen years, he reviewed books for the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* ("General German Reader"),

<sup>1</sup> Dirk Kemper has edited a microfilm collection of books published in response to the Edict on Religion. See Kemper, *Mißbrauchte Aufklärung? Schriften zum preußischen Religionsedikt vom 9. Juli 1788* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1996). John Laursen and Johann van der Zande have recently published an English translation of the most scurrilous attack on Woellner. Carl Friedrich Bahrdt's *The Edict of Religion. A Comedy*. See Bahrdt, *The Edict of Religion. A Comedy and The Story and Diary of my Imprisonment*, trans. John Christian Laursen and Johan van der Zande (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Lexington Books, 2000). Also see Heinrich Philipp Conrad Henke, *Beurtheilung aller Schriften welche durch das Königlich Preussische Religionsedikt und durch andere damit zusammenhängende Religionsverfügungen veranlasst sind* (Kiel: Carl Ernst Bohm, 1793) for a contemporary collection of articles on the controversy.

one of Germany's most famous enlightened journals. He also wrote several well-respected books on agriculture, one of which won a prize from the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences and belonged to such enlightened social organizations as the Freemasons and the *Montagsklub* (Monday Society).<sup>2</sup> In short, Woellner lived the Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

The current view of Woellner as a counter-enlightened zealot is a myth, one that is based in the meta-historical commitment to finding modernity's "enlightened" origins—for better or worse.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this myth many historians have lapsed into a heroic analysis of the Enlightenment, seeing the late eighteenth century as a struggle between reason and anti-reason, between light and darkness.<sup>5</sup> Judged against this backdrop, anyone the enlightened establishment spurned is on the wrong side of

<sup>2</sup> Woellner was a member of the *Montagsklub* from 1781 to 1792. As a Freemason, Woellner was a member of the Berlin lodge "Zu den Drei Weltkugeln." See, J. D. E. Preuss, "Zur Beurtheilung des Staatsministers von Woellner," *Zeitschrift für Preussische Geschichte und Landeskunde* 2-3 (1865, 1866): 577-604; 65-95. I am grateful to Prof. Roger Bartlett for explaining the details of the St. Petersburg essay competition to me. For more on the essay competition see Bartlett's "The Free Economic Society: The Foundation Years and the Essay Competition of 1766," in *Russland zur Zeit Katharinas II. Absolutismus-Aufklärung-Pragmatismus*, Eckhard Hübner, Jan Kusber, and Peter Nitsche, ed. (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1998), 181-214.

<sup>3</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from Margaret Jacob. See, Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: freemasonry and politics in eighteenth-century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Jacob emphasizes the role that Freemasonic institutions played as a proving ground for ideas and behavior patterns that would dominate the French Revolutionary period. My work assumes, however, that eighteenth-century sociability yielded conservative political outcomes. Other works on sociability: Manfred Agethen, *Geheimbund und Utopie: Illuminaten, Freimaurer und deutsche Spätaufklärung* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1984); Richard van Dülmen, *The Society of the Enlightenment: The Rise of the Middle Class and Enlightenment Culture in Germany* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); originally published as *Die Gesellschaft der Aufklärer: zur bürgerlichen Emanzipation und aufklärerischen Kultur in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1986); Ulrich Im Hof, *Das gesellige Jahrhundert: Gesellschaft und Gesellschaften im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (München: Beck, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> The following are classics in this tradition: Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1932); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968); originally published as *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: an Interpretation*, 2 vols., (New York: Vintage books, 1968); Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century, from Montesquieu to Lessing* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973); originally published as *La Pensée européenne au dix-huitième Siècle: De Montesquieu à Lessing*, Paris: Boivin, 1954). See also, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1995). The exchange between Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas on this question is particularly illuminating. See, Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> For examples of this approach see Werner Schneiders, *Die wahre Aufklärung: zum Selbstverständnis der deutschen Aufklärung* (Freiburg: K. Albert, 1974), and Schneiders, *Hoffnung auf Vernunft: Aufklärungsphilosophie in Deutschland*, (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990).

modernity. Paul Schwartz's *Der erste Kulturkampf in Preussen um Kirche und Schule (1788-1798)* ("The First Kulturkampf in Prussia over Church and School (1788-1798)") is a prime example, barely containing its scorn:

This man [Woellner]...stood for years beside Frederick William as--advisor is too weak a term--a guide, like a sorcerer, who held the weak willed and credulous disciple under the spell of his magic wand.<sup>6</sup>

As the only full-length study of Woellner published in the twentieth century, Schwartz's book is the basis for more recent interpretations.<sup>7</sup> This is unfortunate, since Schwartz merely repeated the litany of charges that nineteenth-century historians had borrowed from Woellner's enemies.<sup>8</sup> Our historiography has, as a result, simply absorbed the view that Woellner and the Enlightenment were on opposite sides of an unbridgeable divide.

The Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment divide was, however, bridged almost everyday in common social and business activity. Consider Johann Friedrich Zöllner, the one who first posed the question "What is Enlightenment?" in the

<sup>6</sup> Paul Schwartz, *Der erste Kulturkampf in Preussen um Kirche und Schule (1788-1798)* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1925), 36. Schwartz's book is the standard reference for information on Woellner. Almost everyone who mentions Woellner sees him as a figure of the Counter-Enlightenment and cites Schwartz as their authority.

<sup>7</sup> Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966); Peter Mainka, *Karl Abraham von Zedlitz und Leipe (1731-1793): Ein schlesischer Adliger in Diensten Friedrichs II. und Friedrich Wilhelms II. von Preussen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 599-633; Franz Mehring, *Zur deutschen Geschichte von der Zeit der Französischen Revolution bis zum Vormärz (1789-bis 1847)* (Berlin: Dietz, 1976), 424-428; Karl A. Schleunes, "Enlightenment, Reform, Reaction: The Schooling Revolution in Prussia," *Central European History* XII, no. 4 (1979): 315-342. Fritz Valjavec tries to avoid political labels, but he still fundamentally accepts Woellner as being outside the Enlightenment. See Valjavec, "Das Woellnersche Religionsedikt und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung," in *Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1963), 294-322. Frederick C. Beiser's work is a prime example of reading Woellner through his contemporaries' eyes. For Beiser, Woellner's desire to protect religion as the source of social stability places him beyond the pale of the Enlightenment. See Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: the Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). James J. Sheehan has given Woellner some credit, characterizing him as a "complicated figure." Sheehan, *German History, 1770-1866* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1989), 292-294. Thomas P. Saine's *The Problem of Being Modern, or the German Pursuit of Enlightenment from Leibniz to the French Revolution* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997) comes closest to my position by recognizing that the edict was, in fact, a moderate response to Frederick II's religious policies. See Saine, *Problem*, 280-309. It does not, however, take into account Woellner's own "enlightened" background and fails, thus, to render problematic the prevailing historiographical vision of the Enlightenment, as is done here.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Philippon, for example, whom Schwartz cites often, supports his critical assessment of Woellner almost exclusively through the polemical pamphlet literature produced in opposition to the Edict on Religion. See Martin Philippon, *Geschichte des preussischen Staatswesens vom Tode Friedrich des Grossen bis zu den Freiheitskriegen* (Leipzig: Veit, 1880).

November 1783 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.<sup>9</sup> Zöllner was an important political and religious figure in Berlin. He was a preacher at the *Marienkirche*, a royal censor, a privy councilor, a member of the famous enlightened group the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* (Wednesday Society), and a bitter public opponent of the Edict on Religion. Zöllner lived the Enlightenment, too. Yet, as impeccable as his enlightened credentials seem, he was also a Rosicrucian.<sup>10</sup> This would seem a contradiction, but that Zöllner negotiated it should caution us against lapsing into the ideological divisions that he and his associates cultivated for their conflict with Woellner.

Let us pursue the “What is Enlightenment?” theme at another level by considering the most famous response to Zöllner’s query, Immanuel Kant’s “Was ist Aufklärung?”<sup>11</sup> Kant’s text has become a rallying point for historians interested in understanding what enlightenment was, and his argument that Frederick II’s religious policies incubated the nascent Prussian Enlightenment has become almost canonical.<sup>12</sup> On religion and the Enlightenment, Kant wrote:

I have placed the Enlightenment’s focal point, the exit of people from their self-imposed tutelage, above all in religious matters, because with respect to the arts and sciences, our leaders have no interest in exercising control over their subjects...<sup>13</sup>

That Kant located the Enlightenment’s origins in Frederick’s indifference to religion does not, however, tell the whole story. Kant was as much a creature of Frederickian Prussia as Woellner, and neither man’s position should, therefore, be taken as necessarily representative of the age. Frederick II’s administration included a determined effort to modernize and rationalize the Prussian state and economy, and this effort, I argue, provides an alternate context for the Prussian Enlightenment, one that I will explore through Woellner’s experience.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Johann Friedrich Zöllner, “Ist es rathsam, das Ehebündniß nicht ferner durch die Religion zu sanciren?,” *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (1783): 508-517.

<sup>10</sup> Karlheinz Gerlach, “Die Berliner Freimaurer 1740-1806. Zur Sozialgeschichte der Freimaurerei in Brandenburg-Preussen,” in Erich Donnert, ed., *Europa in der Frühen Neuzeit. Festschrift für Günter Mühlhfordt: Band 4. Deutsche Aufklärung* (Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 1997), 451-452.

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, no. 2 (1784): 481-494. The text is reprinted in Erhard Bahr, ed., *Was ist Aufklärung?: Thesen und Definitionen* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1974), and James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment?: eighteenth-century answers and twentieth-century questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, H.B. Nisbet, “‘Was ist Aufklärung?’: The Concept of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” *Journal of European Ideas* 12 (1982): 77-95, and James Schmidt, “The Question of Enlightenment: Kant, Mendelssohn, and the Mittwochsgesellschaft,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1989): 269-291.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, “Beantwortung,” 492.

<sup>14</sup> Ian Hunter has offered a powerful rebuttal of the metaphysical tradition in the history of German philosophy. He argues that Kant’s philosophy has been so overemphasized that an entire civic

Both Woellner and his religious policies were outcomes of Frederickian enlightened absolutism. Although his politics diverged from that of his enlightened countrymen, he was a product of the same world, having graduated from the same institutions and worked for the same boss, Frederick II. It is true that Frederick left religion alone, but he also supported state intervention in the economy, instituting numerous and intrusive economic reforms. Woellner's fight with the "Enlightenment" began in the lessons he drew from his experiences in the Frederickian state's service. Woellner shows us, thus, that whereas one segment of Prussia's service elite found enlightenment in religious indifference, another could find it in careful management by the state. Tracing Woellner's path through the latter worldview will suggest new ways of understanding the age-old debate about what enlightenment was.

### ***The Edict on Religion***

Historians have misunderstood the Edict on Religion because they lack adequate categories for dealing with its mixture of reformism and conservatism. They have fixated on the conservatism in the text, since it is so readily obvious in the opening paragraph:

we readily realized and observed long before our ascension to the throne how necessary it would be someday that the Christian religion of the Protestant church be conserved in its original purity and authenticity, and in part restored, after the example of our most serene predecessors, but especially our Grandfather, who rests in God's majesty.<sup>15</sup>

The language even seems reactionary, as it identifies a lost world to which Prussia must return. Yet there is a good deal of reformism buried beneath the surface and have missed it mostly because they put autonomy in the center of the Enlightenment. If one emphasizes autonomy, then the language in Woellner's language is quite damning. Consider the reason Woellner gave for protecting religion, writing that the king could not allow the Enlightenment to:

take away from the millions of our good subjects the peacefulness of their lives and their consolation on their deathbeds, and, thus, to make them unhappy.<sup>16</sup>

tradition in German philosophy, led by Christian Thomasius, has been forgotten. My argument is related to Hunter's, but I take the issue forward in time, rather than backward, and apply it to different issues. See, Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup>Acten, *Urkunden und Nachrichten zur neuesten Kirchengeschichte* (Weimar: Carl Ludolf Hoffman, 1788), 462-463.

<sup>16</sup>Acten, 471.

If one accepts the Enlightenment's apotheosis came in Kant's notion that the state should allow people the room to find their own happiness, then Woellner must stand on the outside looking in. In this section, I offer an alternate reading of the edict that puts Woellner's reactionary yearnings into a different context.

Let us consider the edict as a whole. It comprised fourteen sections, each of which set specific rules for religious worship.<sup>17</sup> Without getting bogged down in the details, I note its most important provisions:

1. It identified the Reformed, Lutheran, and Catholic churches as Prussia's official confessions, guaranteeing each state protection.
2. It announced that all sects heretofore only informally tolerated—Jews, Moravians, Mennonites, and Hussites—were to be tolerated officially.
3. It banned all proselytizing and interfaith tension, identifying it as a source of domestic squabbling.
4. It asserted control over religious doctrine and education, requiring the major faiths to teach the fundamentals of Christianity from the pulpit and in the schools. Recalcitrant clerics faced dismissal.
5. It banned all Socinians and Deists from preaching in Prussia, claiming they were dangerous to political order.
6. It extended the clergy's traditional exemption from the draft, charging that subjecting preachers to military service would lower the esteem in which the people held them.

All told, Woellner's strictures amounted to an attempt to use religion to maintain social control in the countryside.

The edict is usually perceived as an attack on the Enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> Yet, if we read it without the ideological baggage, two things become apparent. First, the law is moderate in tone.<sup>19</sup> It did nothing, for example, to prevent academic discussion, since it prohibited religious speculation only before uneducated audiences. This may not seem particularly enlightened to us, but it was actually a shrewd assessment of the conditions that the Prussian government confronted. Second, the edict was as much a political diagnosis as a religious manifesto. Most interpreters have mistakenly assumed that the edict was *only* about religion. This has, unfortunately, meant Woellner's exclusion from the Prussian "Enlightenment," since it is assumed that enlightenment began with religious debate. In eighteenth-century Prussia, however, no state action was simply concerned with religion, nor did secular activities leave religious questions untouched. In order to understand the edict as part of a public

<sup>17</sup> *Acten*, 465-480.

<sup>18</sup> See Schwartz, *Kulturkampf*.

<sup>19</sup> Otto Hintze, the great Prussian historian, actually called the Edict on Religion a *Toleranzedikt*, because it made limited religious toleration a matter of law. See Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk. Fünfhundert Jahre vaterländischer Geschichte* (Berlin, 1915), 411.



debate, we must read it as an attempt to determine religion's proper role in a society confronting the forces of change.

Woellner made religion the state's prerogative. The belief that this was unenlightened is based on Frederick II's reputation for complete disinterest in religion. This is only half right. Frederick II may have been a doctrinal skeptic, but he had always maintained his right to oversee religion and would never have allowed a preacher to subvert state authority by preaching doctrines that threatened political disorder.<sup>20</sup> Whereas Frederick II allowed people to argue about religion as long as they obeyed, Woellner expected them to obey and remain silent, or as he put it in the edict:

as long as each person fulfills his duties quietly as a good citizen (*Bürger*) and keeps his particular opinions to himself, while carefully guarding against disseminating his beliefs or persuading others.<sup>21</sup>

If religious doctrine was a bulwark of state security, protecting it from enlightened criticism was as enlightened as any call for more religious criticism.

In fact, there are perspectives from which the edict appears enlightened. Consider that for the first time in Prussian history an edict guaranteed in law the practice of non-Protestant faiths.<sup>22</sup> Until then, other faiths had been tolerated only at the monarch's pleasure. (This was especially the case for Jews.) As Woellner saw the edict, Prussian subjects were now legally free to worship quietly. Only preachers were subject to state control, and since they were state servants, the oversight was justified. In addition, although preachers were required to teach state-approved religious dogmas, they could believe differently and freely argue among themselves. For Woellner, the preachers' freedom to preach at the pulpit was circumscribed by the state's goal of maintaining domestic peace.<sup>23</sup> Within these constraints, however, members of the established and tolerated religions now enjoyed the legal freedom to worship.

In seeking to control religious expression, Woellner put his finger on problems that had become central to the Enlightenment in Germany: How far should education go? What rights and duties did citizens have? How far can freedom go without undermining political order? Woellner's answer was to put the state's interests above

<sup>20</sup> Günter Birtsch, "Religions- und Gewissensfreiheit in Preussen von 1780 bis 1817," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 11, no. 2 (1984): 184.

<sup>21</sup> *Acten*, 465.

<sup>22</sup> Birtsch, "Religions- und Gewissensfreiheit," 192; See (n.20) above.

<sup>23</sup> This situation was not limited to Prussia alone. Anthony LaVopa has recently shown how Fichte's famous *Atheismusstreit* of 1799 only became a scandal after Fichte made it a political issue. When the state investigated Fichte's alleged atheism, the bureaucrats initially proved willing to overlook Fichte's heterodoxy, because his ideas had appeared in obscure academic journals that only academics read. The real case against Fichte began when he admitted to having taught his doctrines to his students. Anthony J. LaVopa, *Fichte: the Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762-1799* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

those of the enlightened elite. Unfortunately, neither his enlightened contemporaries nor modern historians have ever forgiven him this transgression. Woellner may or may not have been unenlightened, but he always worked in what he believed to have been the state's interest. Consider this phrase from the edict:

No one should despise, deride, or disparage the clerical order, [behavior] we have constantly noted with great displeasure, and which in our opinion we cannot leave unpunished, since too often this unavoidably encourages the despising of religion itself.<sup>24</sup>

For Woellner, preachers were fundamental to daily life in Prussia. It is, therefore, difficult to say whether attempts to control them in the wake of Frederick II's reign was an unenlightened as has been assumed. It is not the historian's role to determine whether Woellner was truly "enlightened." In the end, it is much more important to understand how he chose from among a contradictory collection of values while patching together his own worldview.

### ***Producing an Enlightened Absolutist***

Woellner's life is a microcosm of the educated elite's progress through late eighteenth-century Prussia.<sup>25</sup> Born on March 13, 1732, in Döberitz, a village near Spandau, he was, like many of his educated brethren, a pastor's son. Woellner's father, also named Johann Christoph, and his mother, Dorothea Rosine, took great interest in his education. In spite of their limited means, they sent him to the local school in Spandau and paid for further private instruction.<sup>26</sup> Encouraged by his parents and his teacher, he learned French, English, and Latin. In 1750, he left home for the University of Halle, which was an important enlightened institution, at that time Founded in 1694, Halle had been the center of Prussian Pietism and enlightened philosophy in the first half of the eighteenth-century, producing preachers and philosophers who were deeply religious and attuned to the new rationalism.<sup>27</sup>

We do not know exactly what Woellner took from Halle, but his post-university career and subsequent training seems to have set the intellectual agenda he followed for the rest of his life. In 1753, he left Halle and took a position as a tutor (*Hofmeister*) in the home of Lieutenant General August Friedrich von Itzenplitz

<sup>24</sup> *Acten*, 477.

<sup>25</sup> See Anthony J. La Vopa, *Grace, Talent, and Merit: Poor Students, Clerical Careers, and Professional Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) for a social history of Prussian preachers.

<sup>26</sup> Rochus Wilhelm Liliencron, et al., *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie*. Vol. 24 (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1898), 148-158. (Cited hereafter as *ADB*.)

<sup>27</sup> Walter Sparr, "Auf dem Wege zur theologischen Aufklärung in Halle: Von Johann Franz Budde zu Sigmund Jakob Baumgarten." *Zentren der Aufklärung I, Halle: Aufklärung und Pietismus* 15 (1989): 71-89.

(1693-1759), a rural noble whom Frederick II held in great esteem. By 1755, the general nominated Woellner to be his court preacher (*Hofprediger*), a position Woellner filled until 1759, when bad health forced his resignation.<sup>28</sup> 1759 was a fateful year for Woellner. His boss, General von Itzenplitz, died in battle, leaving behind Sophie von Itzenplitz, his wife, and two children. Sophie von Itzenplitz then hired Woellner to finish her son's education and also arranged financial support that allowed him to study agronomy. By 1762, Woellner had become so knowledgeable on agricultural matters that he and the younger von Itzenplitz took over the estate's management.

Woellner's rural experiences and empirical research made him an ideal candidate for work in Frederick II's state. Frederick II had begun to rebuild Prussia immediately after the end of the Seven Years War (1756-1763), and agricultural reform was a central topic. In this context, Woellner was able to parlay his agricultural expertise into a career in government.<sup>29</sup> In 1767, Frederick's government hired him to be *commisarius oeconomicus*, a position that required him to supervise various projects, including land clearing, marsh drainage, and road building.<sup>30</sup> After finishing a two-year term in this position, Woellner accepted a commission under the Prussian Minister Thomas Philipp von Hagen to preside over the first enclosure of common lands in the Mark of Brandenburg and to study how people in Holland and Frisia used peat bogs for fuel (*Torfgräberei*). This work aided Woellner's rise by bringing him to the attention of Prince Henry, Frederick's youngest brother, who employed him from 1770 to 1786 as councilor (*Kammerrath*) and exchequer (*Rentmeister*) to his domain council (*Domänenkammer*).

During the 1760s and 1770s Woellner became a cog in Frederick II's enlightened absolutist administration. Well read and possessing great expertise, he became an important part of a reformist administration. Woellner's experience as a rural preacher then combined with his state service to send his thinking off in a particular direction. As we will see, Woellner took a rural view, believing that official oversight was the key to improving the state's economic and political fortunes in the countryside. To that end, he advocated state-led reforms in agriculture, but also

<sup>28</sup> Woellner was only twenty-three when the General nominated him for the position. The Consistory in Berlin, which had the right to approve all appointments, resisted the nomination briefly, because the members believed Woellner to be too young for the position. He was, however, eventually approved. Wilhelm Abraham Teller, *Denkschrift auf den Herrn Staatsminister von Woellner* (Berlin: Unger, 1802). The court preacher position became a family affair. Woellner's father succeeded him, and after his father's death in 1765, his younger brother took the position.

<sup>29</sup> For Frederick's post-1763 reform efforts, see Hubert C. Johnson, *Frederick the Great and his Officials*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975, and W. O. Henderson, "The Berlin Commercial Crisis of 1763," *The Economic History Review* 15, no. 1 (1962): 89-102.

<sup>30</sup> *ADB*, Vol. 24, 148-158; Teller, *Denkschrift*. Not everyone had a high opinion of Woellner's work. Commenting on Woellner's *Preisschrift wegen der eigenthümlichen Besetzungen der Bauern*, one reviewer wrote "If the bureaucrats know nothing more than what is in this work. Lord have mercy on the poor farmers!" Quoted in Holger Böning and Reinhart Siegert, *Volksaufklärung: bibliographisches Handbuch zur Popularisierung aufklärerischen Denkens im deutschen Sprachraum von den Anfängen bis 1850* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1990), 773.

insisted that reforms not weaken mechanisms of control. This was an important issue, since Prussia lacked a credible police force at the time. Naturally, Woellner turned to preachers to maintain order. In fact, in Woellner's world, a strong local preacher was essential for the success of enlightened agricultural reform.

### ***Agriculture and the Enlightenment***

In addition to working for Frederick II, Woellner was an active participant in the enlightened public sphere.<sup>31</sup> He was deeply embedded in the print world. In addition to his regular reviews in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*, he published three major agricultural works during the 1760s. In his 1763 translation of Francis Home's *Foundations of Agriculture and Plant Growth*, Woellner expressly mentioned that he was offering this book to a German audience so that Prussia could reform its agriculture along English lines.<sup>32</sup> Although Woellner's work is hardly original—he merely provided an annotated translation of this text for the German market—the act of translation itself puts him squarely in a European debate. Woellner did not merely read the materials coursing through the German public; he was an active participant in the process of public thinking.

If print communication was a characteristic of enlightened debate, then Woellner's agricultural writings put him in the middle of this enlightened world. But his participation was permeated by a general social and political conservatism. As an educated person (*Gelehrter*), Woellner was a member of the elite class that dominated public administration in Germany during the second half of the eighteenth century. This is evident in his choice of audience. Woellner's agricultural texts were not written for peasant farmers, but were directed at an elite group.<sup>33</sup> This had two

<sup>31</sup> Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: essays on French political culture in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life - Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory* 31, no. 1 (1992): 1-20; Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied, Berlin: Luchterhand, 1962); Anthony J. La Vopa, "Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 64, no. March (1992): 98-115; Benjamin Nathans, "Habermas' Public-Sphere in the Era of the French-Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 620-644.

<sup>32</sup> Francis Home, *Grundsätze des Ackerbaues und des Wachsthums der Pflanzen aus dem Englischen nach der zweyten vermehrten Ausgabe ins Teutsche uebersetzt und mit Anmerkungen begleitet von Johann Christoph Woellner*. Translated by Johann Christoph Woellner (Berlin: Verlag der Buchhandlung der Realschule, 1763), see the translator's introduction; originally published as Home, *The Principles of Agriculture and Vegetation* (London: Millar, Kincaid, and Bell, 1762).

<sup>33</sup> Holger Böning has argued that *Volksaufklärung* changed its approach to educating the farmers during the second half of the eighteenth century. Having begun with naïve optimism in the ability of farmers to comprehend the lessons that they proffered, the *Volksaufklärer* retreated over time to an elite discussion among themselves on the behalf of the farmer's interests. This was never the case for Woellner, as the peasants were never equals for him. See Böning and Siegert, *Volksaufklärung*, xxxiv-xlvi.

implications. First, since Woellner's audience was politically reliable, Woellner could say things in his books that he did not put into his sermons.<sup>34</sup> Second, in writing on matters of reform, he took a public and, hence, political position. Although he eventually disagreed with some of his enlightened brethren on how far reforms should go, Woellner was, nonetheless, a member of a larger print world.

Translating Home's book into German was merely the opening salvo of Woellner's battle to modernize Prussian agriculture. In 1766, he published *Die Aufhebung der Gemeinheiten in der Marck Brandenburg nach ihren grossen Vortheilen ökonomisch betrachtet* ("The Enclosure of the Commons in the Mark of Brandenburg, Judged According to its Economic Advantages").<sup>35</sup> In 1768, another publication followed, *Preisschrift wegen der eigenthümlichen Besitzungen der Bauern; welche bey der Russischkayserl., freyen ökonomischen Gesellschaft zu St. Petersburg den ersten May 1768 das Accessit erhalten* ("Prize Essay on Peasant Ownership of Property, which Received Honorable Mention from the Royal Russian Economic Society in St. Petersburg on May 1, 1768").<sup>36</sup> Woellner's point in both works was that feudal landowners should enclose and distribute common lands to the peasantry, as Frederick II had tried to do on his crown lands.<sup>37</sup> England, an archetypically enlightened nation for many, was Woellner's model. Moreover, Woellner was not only well versed in the English literature on the topic but also commanded the French work.<sup>38</sup> Woellner's reformism was a product of the Enlightenment's public sphere.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See the sermons collected in Johann Christoph Woellner, *Predigten* (Berlin: Buchhandlung der Königl. Realschule, 1789).

<sup>35</sup> Johann Christoph Woellner, *Die Aufhebung der Gemeinheiten in der Marck Brandenburg nach ihren grossen Vortheilen ökonomisch betrachtet* (Berlin: Verlag der Buchhandlung der Realschule, 1766).

<sup>36</sup> Johann Christoph Woellner, *Preisschrift wegen der eigenthümlichen Besitzungen der Bauern; welche bey der Russischkayserl., freyen ökonomischen Gesellschaft zu St. Petersburg den ersten May 1768 das Accessit erhalten* (Berlin: Verlag des Buchladens der Realschule, 1768). Woellner's contribution to the St. Petersburg Economic Society's competition is notable for, among other things, sharing fundamental assumptions with many of the other replies, namely that the peasant was a rational person motivated by dreams of gain suffused most of the work. See, Böning and Siegart, *Volksaufklärung*.

<sup>37</sup> On Frederick II's agricultural policies and their limits, see, Johnson, *Frederick*, 237-241.

<sup>38</sup> Woellner, *Aufhebung*, xiv. Woellner cited seven French books. I have been able to verify six. They are François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais, *Elemens du commerce* (Leiden and Paris: Chez Braisson, 1754); Ange Goudar, *Les interêts de la France mal entendus, dans les branches de l'agriculture, de la population, des finances, du commerce, de la marine, & de l'industrie* (Amsterdam: Chez Jacques Coeur, 1756); Pierre-Mathurin de L'Ecluse des Loges and Maximilien de Béthune Sully, *Mémoires de Maximilien de Béthune, duc de Sully, principal ministre de Henry le Grand* (London, 1745); Victor de Riquetti Mirabeau, *L'ami des hommes; ou, Traité de la population*. (The Hague: Chez B. Gibert, 1758); John Nickolls, *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Gr. Bretagne, par rapport au commerce & aux autres sources de la puissance des états* (Leiden, 1754); Henry Pattullo, *Essai sur l'amélioration des terres* (Amsterdam: J.C. Fischer, 1763); The mystery text is Turcilly (?), *Memoire sur les defichenues des Terre*.

<sup>39</sup> The literature connection the enlightenment with the public sphere is vast. The foundational text is Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a*

Let us trace one theme Woellner's reformism further, in order to deepen our sense for the politics behind his reformism. Woellner believed that changes in forms of production wrought changes in human behavior. He applied this idea to agriculture, arguing that the peasant would work harder and be happier, were he to have an interest in his land, an incentive structure Woellner encapsulated in his notion of property (*Eigenthum*):

One single word, property, will be so powerful that millions of peasants will awake as out of a dream, bid their innate sluggishness goodnight at once, and become completely different people.<sup>40</sup>

The object of reform was, thus, the practically minded peasant who brought reason to bear on rural problems. As Woellner put it:

The peasant has his own understanding as other people do. And he understands nothing more easily than what will increase his advantage. He will, thus, understand the seeding of feed crops much easier than one assumes, as soon as he has seen the advantage he will take from it.<sup>41</sup>

Woellner was confident that his reform proposals would work, because he believed that each peasant was rational. This rationality was, however, bounded by the specific knowledge each peasant had of his own lands. In this sense, the peasant was *homo oeconomicus* on the land, but only within carefully controlled boundaries.

Woellner's approach to the peasant's rationality explains the meliorism and paternalism that runs through his work. Much like other enlightened commentators, Woellner urged reform in order to update society, rather than to overturn it. Thus, the freedoms Woellner prescribed always came with rules designed to make change palatable. Peasant farmers may have become freer through receiving private plots of land, but they were not free.<sup>42</sup> With the state's grant of common land also came the reciprocal responsibility of being an obedient subject, not only to the state but also to the local lord, which in practice meant reform without a revision of noble privilege.

*Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); originally published as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: Berlin: Luchterhand, 1962). For introductions to this literature, see Benjamin Nathans, "Habermas' Public-Sphere in the Era of the French-Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 620-644, Margaret C. Jacob, "The Enlightenment Redefined: The Formation of Modern Civil Society," *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 475-495, Craig J. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life - Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory* 31, no. 1 (1992): 1-20, and Anthony J. LaVopa, "Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 64, March (1992): 98-115.

<sup>40</sup> Woellner, *Preisschrift*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Woellner, *Aufhebung*, 99.

<sup>42</sup> Woellner, *Preisschrift*, 47-62.

Woellner's own behavior as a landowner provides a glimpse of how he intended his ideas to be applied.<sup>43</sup> In 1790, he purchased the village of Gross Rietz from the von der Marwitz family. The estate was in terrible condition, so he immediately made large capital investments in it. Among other things, he built bridges, a brewery, a distillery, a new cow barn, and a carp pond. His biggest reforms came, however, in agricultural organization. In 1791, two years after the French Revolution's outbreak, Woellner emancipated his serfs in exchange for financial compensation. He also reformed the distribution of land, as he had advocated in his own books, uniting splintered plots into larger units that would allow each peasant to farm rationally. This allowed Woellner to eliminate the old three-field system and to experiment with new fertilizing techniques. Two things are important here. First, the agricultural reforms Woellner implemented came from the top. The peasants had little say in what happened. Second, Woellner completely reorganized village life along "enlightened" lines at exactly the same moment he was "reacting" against the Enlightenment.

The complicated meanings behind Woellner's actions become clear only against a broader Prussian backdrop. Woellner was both an enlightened Prussian and a Prussian bureaucrat. This combination of factors imbued him--and many others--with a basic conservative outlook.<sup>44</sup> We can best characterize his approach by seeing the Prussian state as a new kind of lord whose constant need for income required walking a thin line between reform and order. Thus, Woellner wanted the state to free peasants from the irrational requirement that they do what their neighbors were doing, or what their local lords arbitrarily required (i.e., farmers should not, for instance, be required to plant oats, simply because their neighbors were planting oats), but he also required that peasants plant "strategic" materials and fulfill their other duties.<sup>45</sup> Were the state to identify flax as a strategic material, peasant farmers would be bound to grow it. Nor did farmers have the freedom to grow nothing. In either case, the state could confiscate land, were the peasant not using it for the common good as the state defined it.

Woellner's reformism was a product of his practical experience and his public debates. An active player in the public sphere, he advocated enlightened policy toward a specific social group whose world he understood. That group, the peasantry,

<sup>43</sup> This paragraph is based on Klaus Koldrack, "Mit Fontane Nach Gross Rietz: Wer War Johann Christoph Woellner?" *Landkreis-Oder Spree* GB 221/93, no. 14, Oktober 1993 (1993): 26-32.

<sup>44</sup> Klaus Epstein's classic text *The Genesis of German Conservatism* places conservatism in the context of people reacting against the Holy Roman Empire's dissolution. I am tracing what I believe to be another source of conservatism, the creation of a state bureaucracy. Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966). See also, Jonathan B. Knudsen, *Justus Möser and the German Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Mack Walker, *Johann Jakob Moser and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

<sup>45</sup> For Woellner's delicate balancing act between freeing peasants and controlling them, see Woellner, *Preisschrift*, 47-62.

was, of course, excluded from participation in public discussion, because its people did not have the training and good sense that Woellner and his colleagues had acquired. Thus, when Woellner championed reforms, they were always tailored to the peasant's needs and capacities. Woellner never told the peasants directly that they ought to receive parcels of the commons; such political matters were outside the bounds of their competence. Peasants could understand agriculture because they were rational, but peasants were also potentially dangerous if freed from oversight. In Woellner's enlightened absolutist world, the peasant enjoyed a tutored freedom: rule by example and careful political oversight dictated his actions.

### *Updating Enlightened Absolutism*

Woellner's practical experiences and theoretical notions came together in the mid-1780s, when he delivered a series of policy lectures to Crown Prince Frederick William. Between 1784 and 1786, Woellner read a dozen lectures on public policy in order to familiarize Frederick William with the machinery of government. Frederick William was completely uninformed on such matters, since Frederick II had badly neglected his education.<sup>46</sup> Only nine of the original twelve lectures have survived, but the remaining texts convey the range of Woellner's knowledge, as they cover topics that from emancipating serfs and Jews to tax, religious, commercial, and bureaucratic reform.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, however, they place Woellner in the late eighteenth century's world of public debate. On the one hand, they show how Woellner appropriated Frederick's enlightened absolutism, while offering a critical appraisal of it. On the other hand, they betray a myriad of influences that go well beyond his agronomic studies, including especially Cameralist and Physiocratic ideas.<sup>48</sup> I will

<sup>46</sup> On Frederick William II's limitations, see Edith Ruppel-Kuhfuss, *Das Generaldirektorium unter der Regierung Friedrich Wilhelms II. mit Berücksichtigung der interimistischen Instruktion von 1798*. Würzburg: Konrad Tritsch, 1937), and Wilhelm Bringmann, *Preussen unter Friedrich Wilhelm II. (1786-1797)* (Frankfurt am Main ; New York: P. Lang, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> The texts are in the following locations GStA PK, I. HA Rep 92 Woellner I, Nr 6 Abhandlung von der Religion (M); GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 2 Abhandlung von der Bevölkerung der Preussischen Staaten vornehmlich der Mark Brandenburg (M); GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 4 Abhandlung von der Leibeigenschaft (M); GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 6 Acta aus Woellners Nachlass. Abhandlung von der Religion (M); GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 18 Abhandlung über die Fabriken, Manufacturen und das Commercium in den Preussischen Staaten (M); GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 96, Nr 206A Abhandlung von den Finanzen (M); GStA PK, I. HA. Rep 92 Woellner I, Nr 3 Abhandlung von den Finanzen oder Staatseinkünften; GStA PK, I. HA. Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 7 Abhandlung von der Ober Rechnungs Cammer.

<sup>48</sup> On the German tradition of economics, see the following: Hubert C. Johnson, "The Concept of Bureaucracy in Cameralism." *Political Science Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (1964): 378-402; Marc Raeff, "The Well-Ordered Police State and the Development of Modernity in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Europe: An Attempt at a Comparative Approach." *The American Historical Review* 80, no. 5 (1975): 1221-1243; Keith Tribe, "Cameralism and the Science of Government." *The Journal of Modern History* 56, no. 2 (1984): 263-284. Tribe, *Governing economy: the reformation of German economic discourse, 1750-1840*. Cambridge England : New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988;



only discussed three of the lectures below, but even this truncated analysis reveals again that Woellner was a leading expert on reform and that many of his ideas derived from the enlightened mainstream.

One of Woellner's early lectures, the "Abhandlung von der Leibeigenschaft" ("Treatise on Serfdom") (1784), reveals the continuity between his work as a rural preacher, writer, and government minister.<sup>49</sup> In this text, he was concerned with abolishing serfdom, arguing that it was nothing more than a medieval remnant, the abolition of which was justified on moral grounds alone, since serfs were so wretched that a sensitive person would recoil before the squalor. Woellner's interest in rural conditions highlights how he connected virtue, obedience, and the state's interests. In the lecture he argued that in addition to causing misery and moral decline, serfdom also harmed the state by limiting population growth, dampening the interest in farming, and making people less obedient.<sup>50</sup> As Woellner saw it, poor people did not multiply, did not farm, and did not respect authority. Rural reform was, therefore, about getting the right message to the right people.

Woellner's call for a new government farming institution is an example of his interest in reform with order. Woellner advocated the creation of a government office that would send newly-trained peasants into the countryside to educate their brethren.<sup>51</sup> This is important on three levels. First, it reveals the continuing influence of Woellner's religious views, showing how deeply he believed in good examples as a cause for right action. Second, it also underscores how he retained a naïve optimism in the power of reason to effect social change. Finally, and this theme will be important later, the diffusion occurred without print; peasants learned by watching people whom the state had trained, not by independent reading.<sup>52</sup> Although he may have disagreed with other members of the Enlightenment on methods, his belief in individual rationality suggests important connections with his political enemies.

Woellner's lecture "Abhandlung von den Finanzen" ("Treatise on Finances") (1784) highlights another key aspect of his thought: his recognition that Prussia's economic circumstances had changed and that new government policies were required to address them.<sup>53</sup> Woellner kept abreast of economic developments, relying mainly on Physiocratic and Cameralist ideas to formulate his positions.<sup>54</sup> He argued, for

Mack Walker, "Rights and Functions: The Social Categories of Eighteenth-Century German Jurists and Cameralists," *The Journal of Modern History* 50, no. 2 (1978): 234-251.

<sup>49</sup> GSStA PK. I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 4 Abhandlung von der Leibeigenschaft (M).

<sup>50</sup> GSStA PK. I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 4 Abhandlung von der Leibeigenschaft (M). Bl. 8VR.

<sup>51</sup> GSStA PK. I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 4 Abhandlung von der Leibeigenschaft (M). Bl. 16R.

<sup>52</sup> See (n.33) above.

<sup>53</sup> GSStA PK. I. HA Rep. 96, Nr 206A Abhandlung von den Finanzen (M).

<sup>54</sup> At this point, there is only evidence for Woellner having a second-hand knowledge of major English, French and German economic works. This evidence comes from his reviews of German collections of excerpts and reviews of economic texts. Such compendia were fairly popular, and Woellner reviewed a number of them. See, for example, Woellner, "Review of *Oekonomische Bibliothek oder Verzeichniß der neuesten und besten deutschen Bücher und Schriften, welche die*

example, that trade in useful goods brought gold into the country. This position was, of course, a staple of German Cameralism and its absolutist governance.<sup>55</sup>

Woellner's tax policies reveal again how the Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment lens obscures the complexity of eighteenth-century life. Woellner's main point in all his work was that Prussia needed to tax more of its wealth. In his view, none of the wealthy paid sufficient taxes.<sup>56</sup> The nobility owned huge tracts of land on which they paid nothing, and merchants paid no taxes on their vast stocks of goods. In response, Woellner proposed a tax plan in which indirect taxes, which fell most heavily on the peasants, would be lowered in exchange for an increase in direct taxes on wealth. The peasants would benefit, of course, but the state would be the real beneficiary, since it would reap the benefits of additional income and not have to worry about an unhappy peasantry's disobedience.

Woellner brought a critical perspective to Frederick's legacy. Consider another proposal he made, during his talk on finances, to reinstate the head tax. Traditionally, the head tax was a minimum payment levied on each person in Prussia. Frederick II had eliminated the head tax as part of his own financial reforms.<sup>57</sup> One could, therefore, see Woellner's desire to return to this tax as reactionary. Yet, here the need to understand Woellner's views from a broader perspective becomes clear: Woellner's plan updated the old system for a new reality.<sup>58</sup> Traditionally, the head tax was paid in three classes, known as Formal, Middle, and Popular, with the Formal class paying the most and the Popular class paying the least. Woellner argued, however, that the new economic situation required a fourth class of taxpayer, the Capitalist (his term), who would pay the highest rate. In this way, the state would require all people to contribute at least minimally to the state's maintenance, while relieving the middle class (*Mittelstand*) of an unfair burden. As was the case in Gross Rietz, it seems that Woellner demonstrated almost progressive instincts at the very moment when he was supposedly most reactionary.

Woellner's combination of reformism with conservatism is evident in another lecture, the "Abhandlung von der Bevölkerung der Preussischen Staaten vornehmlich der Mark Brandenburg" ("Treatise on the Population of the Prussian States, especially in the Mark of Brandenburg") (1784). In this lecture Woellner argued that since

*Oekonomische, Politische und Cameral-Wissenschaften einschlagen.* "Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek 3 (1765): 298; Woellner, "Review of *Johann Heinrich Gottlobs von Justi, ökonomische Schriften über die wichtigsten Gegenstände der Stadt- und Landwirthschaft,*" *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* 11 (1770): 347-348; Woellner, "Review of *Oekonomische Encyclopädie oder allgemeines System der Land- Haus- und Staatswirthschaft in alphabetischer Ordnung; aus dem Französischen übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen und Zusätzen vermehrt, auch nöthigen Kupfern versehen von D. Johann Georg Krünitz.*" *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* 20 (1773): 30-38; Woellner, "Review of *Lehrbegriff sämtlicher ökonomischer und Cameralwissenschaften. Des ersten Theils I. 2. Band Neue von dem Verfasser selbst durchgesehene und mit einem Anhang vermehrte Auflage.*" *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* 22 (1775): 266-267.

<sup>55</sup> See, especially, Tribe, *Governing Economy*.

<sup>56</sup> GStA PK. I. HA Rep. 96, Nr 206A Abhandlung von den Finanzen (M). Bl. 85-88.

<sup>57</sup> GStA PK. I. HA Rep. 96, Nr 206A Abhandlung von den Finanzen (M). Bl. 120-126.

<sup>58</sup> Ruppel-Kuhfuss, *Das Generaldirektorium*.

population and state power were direct correlates, the King could increase his power by encouraging immigration.<sup>59</sup> Woellner suggested six ways to do this: 1) Support farming by expanding roads, clearing new fields, and building new villages; 2) Protect religion and virtue, so that people could live happily in their new homes; 3) Build adequate medical facilities for keeping people healthy; 4) Provide freedom of conscience; 5) Establish an independent judiciary; 6) End serfdom.

Woellner's policies sound enlightened; few of his enlightened contemporaries would have argued with the desired goals. Calling for better roads, more doctors, and free peasants would have garnered applause from any enlightened group. Moreover, if we consider that Woellner called for an independent judiciary only a few years after the Miller Arnold affair had ended (1779), then his attitudes fit into the larger enlightened debate.<sup>60</sup> The difference lies in proposal number four, where Woellner (of all people, one is tempted to say) calls for freedom of conscience. Woellner's notion of conscience is the product of two things: his experience of rural life, and his opposition to feudalism. Freedom of conscience was anchored for Woellner in the belief that peasant farmers could only handle a certain amount of freedom while maintaining order. As a result, he emphasized external forms over religious authenticity. That is to say, freedom of conscience amounted essentially to the right to believe what one wished, as long as one followed sanctioned religious forms.

Having considered Woellner's economic policies, let us turn to his religious policies. In 1785, Woellner presented his lecture "Abhandlung von der Religion" ("Treatise on Religion") to the Crown Prince.<sup>61</sup> One historian has argued that this text was Woellner's "war plan" against the Enlightenment.<sup>62</sup> This characterization reflects the ideological concerns of Woellner's critics much more than it does Woellner's worldview. Woellner did attack a kind of religious criticism that he deemed destructive of order, but that does not mean his policies were "reactionary." On the contrary, this treatise was an attempt to update traditional patterns of thought for new conditions.

Woellner argued in his "Treatise on Religion" that religion maintained order in a state where the authorities could not monitor everyone.<sup>63</sup> It filled the gap between the will of the person in authority and the unwillingness of people to do what they ought by teaching them the consequences of not doing their duty. Soldiers kept discipline in battle and ordinary subjects worked conscientiously every day because they knew it was their duty to do so. Religion was, therefore, an integral part of the

<sup>59</sup> GStA PK. I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 2 Abhandlung von der Bevölkerung der Preussischen Staaten vornehmlich der Mark Brandenburg (M), Bl. 4R. This had been Hohenzollern policy for a long time.

<sup>60</sup> David M. Luebke, "Frederick the Great and the Celebrated Case of the Millers Arnold (1770-1779): A Reappraisal," *Central European History* 32, no. 4 (1999): 379-408.

<sup>61</sup> GStA PK. I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 6 Acta aus Woellners Nachlass. Abhandlung von der Religion (M).

<sup>62</sup> Schwartz, *Kulturkampf*, 72-92.

<sup>63</sup> GStA PK. I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 6 Acta aus Woellners Nachlass. Abhandlung von der Religion (M), Bl. 7V.

modern state's system of production, and this made disrespect of religion politically dangerous. In Woellner's view, the only way to protect religion was for the King to provide an example for his people to emulate, and for the state to set up structures that educated the people in Christian virtue.

If we recall Woellner's interest in maintaining order through virtue, then his attempt to control religious practice was an attempt to put religion at the state's service. This has two implications for my argument. First, Woellner was no reactionary, but was rather a conservative critic of a regime that was coming to an end. It is true that Woellner was religious and believed in Christianity. It is notable, however, that in his work, he never argued that Christianity should be defended merely because it was true, but always emphasized its utility. This leads to the second point. Woellner was conservative rather than orthodox in his religious positions. His prescriptions for renewal were based on a critical assessment of the state's problems and their causes. He may have believed in God, but he worked for another lord. That Woellner disagreed with the canons of the Enlightenment is testimony to the vitality that characterized eighteenth-century debate, rather than to the Counter-Enlightenment's inherent dangers.

### ***Sociability, Conservatism, and the Enlightenment***

Over the last twenty years, historians have concentrated on the increase in sociability during the eighteenth century as a fundamental shift away from the old regime's social forms.<sup>64</sup> Looking toward salons, reading clubs, patriotic societies, and especially freemasonic lodges, historians have argued that these "private" clubs were the soil from which modernity sprang.<sup>65</sup> In theory, men and women associated in these clubs without reference to social orders and cultivated a conceptual realm in which reason determined the value of social and political structures. As the story goes, sociability had a leavening effect on early-modern notions of order, and it created the conditions under which political upheaval became possible.

From this perspective, Freemasonry was the enlightened organization *par excellence*.<sup>66</sup> Masonic lodges provided a new social space in which people could define themselves independently of traditional religious and political forms. Masons were well educated, widely read, and usually devoted themselves to the enlightened cult of reason. These behaviors and attitudes eventually spilled over into the political realm either as calls for reform or even revolution. Margaret Jacob has shown, for example, how freemasonic lodges were central to developing behavior patterns in France and the Netherlands that dominated the French Revolutionary period.<sup>67</sup> As Jacob puts it, living the Enlightenment meant fighting battles over rules and constitutions, through which the members gained an intimate knowledge of political power's forms. Being conversant in the language of conflict prepared men (usually) for revolution when the opportunity arose.

Although there is a good deal of truth to this interpretation, eighteenth-century sociability did not guarantee that all men would become revolutionary opponents of the old regime. Woellner began as a Freemason before moving toward the

<sup>64</sup> See. Agethen, *Geheimbund; Dülmen, Gesellschaft; Gerlach*. "Die Berliner Freimaurer"; Im Hof, *Das gesellige Jahrhundert*; Franklin Kopitzsch, "Die Aufklärung in Deutschland. Zu ihren Leistungen, Grenzen und Wirkungen." *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 23 (1983): 1-21; Alan Charles Kors and Paul J. Korshin, ed., *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Helmut Reinalter, ed., *Aufklärungsgesellschaften* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993); Reinalter, *Freimaurer und Geheimbünde im 18. Jahrhundert in Mitteleuropa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

<sup>65</sup> On this question, see especially Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1988). Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and politics in eighteenth-century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Jacob, "The Enlightenment Redefined: The Formation of Modern Civil Society," *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 475-495, and Jacob, "The Mental Landscape of the Public-Sphere - a European Perspective," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28, no. 1 (1994): 95-113.

<sup>66</sup> Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Ran Halévi, *Les Loges Maçonniques Dans La France D'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1984); David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's century, 1590-1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>67</sup> Jacob, *Living*.

Rosicrucians. The problem with the traditional interpretation of Woellner's reactionary turn is that the move away from Freemasonry was a product of the same sociability that produced revolutionaries elsewhere. Woellner's experience with enlightened sociability highlights how people could draw conservative implications from the same conditions that produced revolutionary attitudes in others, and it suggests in the process that the distance from Freemasonry to Rosicrucian was not as great as many have presumed.<sup>68</sup>

Woellner was an important part of the Freemasonic movement in Prussia. In 1765, he joined *Aux Trois Globes*, Berlin's largest lodge, and rapidly rose through the ranks to positions of responsibility.<sup>69</sup> His rise to prominence is not surprising, since Woellner was already a recognized agricultural expert. Having already published two books on agriculture—one was the translation of Home—his third book would appear the following year.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, within two years he would be working for Frederick II, and within five for Prince Henry. His importance within Freemasonry is evident in his representing the Berlin lodges regularly at Freemasonic conferences. In 1771, he traveled to the Pforten (Lausitz) conference. In 1773, he attended the Berlin conference, acting as conference secretary as well. In 1775, he was at Braunschweig, and in 1776, he attended the Wiesbaden gathering. Finally, although he did not attend the famous conference in Wilhelmsbad, Woellner did sign one Berlin lodge's letter accepting the invitation to attend.<sup>71</sup>

Woellner was obviously an active Freemason, intimately involved in a variety of organizational matters. If organizational disputes prepared Freemasons for revolutionary activity, why did Woellner not become a revolutionary? German Freemasons confronted many of the same issues that fascinated Freemasons in Strasbourg.<sup>72</sup> Which lodges owed fealty to others? Who should be a member and how many membership grades should there be? And Woellner was in the middle of each major conflict. Unlike those Freemasons that turned to revolution in the name of

<sup>68</sup> Karlheinz Gerlach, "Die Berliner Freimaurer." Gerlach's subtle analyses of Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism's structure and membership have influenced my work greatly. See also Gerlach, "Freimaurer und Rosenkreuzer in Frankfurt an der Oder (1776-1806)," in Donner, *Europa*, 455-477, and "Die Freimaurer im mittleren Brandenburg-Preussen 1775-1806," in Jürgen Ziechmann, ed., *Fredericianische Miniaturen 3* (Oldenburg: Edition Ziechmann, 1993). With reference to Zöllner, whom I mentioned at the start of this chapter, Gerlach writes, "Zöllner zeigt, daß die ideologischen Grenzen zwischen der Gesellschaft von Freunden der Aufklärung und dem Gold- und Rosenkreuzerorden, zwischen rationalistischer Aufklärung, Deismus und Irrationalismus nicht so scharf gezogen waren, wie es die scharfe Polemik in Zeitschriften und Büchern und die Verfolgung aufklärerischer Publizistik unter Woellner erwarten liessen." Gerlach, "Die Berliner Freimaurer," 453.

<sup>69</sup> *ADB*, Vol 24, 148-158. This article has a useful discussion of Woellner's time as a Freemason.

<sup>70</sup> The texts in question are: Home, *Grundsätze* (1763); Woellner, *Unterricht* (1764); Woellner, *Aufhebung* (1766).

<sup>71</sup> Ludwig Hammermeyer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent von 1782* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1980), 41.

<sup>72</sup> Jacob, *Living*.

reason, however, Woellner's background led him to seek religious and political stability, that is to Rosicrucianism.

Woellner's switch to the Rosicrucians must be understood in a less ideological context. The Rosicrucians always maintained a nominal connection to the Freemasons, believing their order to be a higher level of Freemasonry. The split between the two was about the nature and possibility of esoteric knowledge.<sup>73</sup> Men such as Woellner were interested in penetrating beyond the limits of reason to knowledge about the ultimate causes of all things. In 1777, for example, Woellner wrote that it was his deepest desire to "acquire more knowledge of our Order's mysteries."<sup>74</sup> With this desire for supra-rational knowledge also came a fundamental commitment to hierarchy. Knowledge of the great mysteries that existed beyond reason could only be dispensed to those properly prepared for its burdens. This is why Rosicrucianism added a series of levels and grades that went beyond the original three-grade Masonic system. Members had to be inducted gradually into the system's higher mysteries.

There is, however, no reason to describe this development in the normative terms that many historians used. One can also understand Woellner's desire for knowledge of great mysteries as an extension of esoteric themes buried deeply in Masonic lore.<sup>75</sup> In Germany, for example, the split between those interested in rational knowledge and those pursuing esoteric knowledge came to a head at the Wilhelmsbad Convention of 1782, precisely the sort of gathering that typified enlightened sociability. Woellner's switch to Rosicrucianism was a product of forces deeply embedded within enlightened sociability. To see his turn toward esoteric knowledge as a Counter-Enlightenment shift to irrationality misses not only the many ways in which this change was about the *nature* of reason but also the extent to which it was a product of the same sociability that suffused Freemasonic lodges.

Woellner's membership in Berlin's exclusive *Montagsklub* is an example of how deeply he was implicated in this social world. The *Montagsklub* enjoyed a long and illustrious history, with many of Germany's most famous people having been members or honored guests.<sup>76</sup> Founded in 1749, it rapidly became the city's center of elite sociability. Unlike its more famous offshoot the *Mittwochgesellschaft*, the *Montagsklub* had no express political purpose. Whereas the former was devoted to reading papers and talking about the Enlightenment specifically, the latter existed purely for social gatherings. Although historians have concentrated on the

<sup>73</sup> There is a growing literature on the relationship between esoteric knowledge and the Enlightenment. See Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, *Esoterische Bünde und bürgerliche Gesellschaft: Entwicklungslinien zur modernen Welt im Geheimbundwesen des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Wolfenbüttel and Göttingen: Lessing-Akademie, 1995), and Neugebauer-Wölk, et al., *Aufklärung und Esoterik, Studien zum achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: F. Meiner Verlag, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> *ADB*, Vol. 24, 151.

<sup>75</sup> See Stevenson, *Origins*, for a discussion of Freemasonry's founding myths.

<sup>76</sup> Gustav A. Sachse, ed. *Der Montagsklub in Berlin 1749-1899: Fest und Gedenkschrift zu seiner 150sten Jahresfeier* (Berlin: Julius Sittenfeld, 1899); Erich Steffen, "Ein Klub im alten Berlin." *Alt-Berlin: Mitteilungen des Vereins für die Geschichte Berlins*, no. 9 (1910): 119-121.

*Mittwochgesellschaft* as the pinnacle of the Berlin Enlightenment, the *Montagsklub* was actually more representative of sociability in Berlin than its elite cousin.<sup>77</sup> It had more members than did the *Mittwochgesellschaft*, survived longer, and represented a broader spectrum of people and interests. A close look at its practices will shed additional light on the archetypical enlightened sociability that it represented.

The *Montagsklub* convened on Mondays for drinking, talking, and playing games. Its meetings began at 6pm, when many members played chess or chatted. Dinner was served at 8pm. Visiting dignitaries were invited to dinner regularly, so the night would be filled with toasting and conversation. The fun lasted until 10pm, at which time everyone traveled home to make curfew. Woellner was a club member from 1781 until 1792, and the list of people who were members at the same time is a veritable roster of Berlin's movers and shakers. It included such famous enlightened minds as Johann Erich Biester, Friedrich Gedike, Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, Wilhelm Abraham Teller, Ernst Ferdinand Klein, Johann Heinrich von Carmer, Peter Villaume, and Friedrich Nicolai. Once again, we see Woellner living the Enlightenment.

That Woellner was part of this elite group is even more surprising when we consider that admission was contingent on unanimity among the existing members. Voting was done secretly, with members casting their ballots by putting colored marbles into a bag. A white marble meant "yes" and a black marble "no." By 1781, when he was admitted, Woellner had already become a Rosicrucian and was ingratiating himself with Frederick William. Yet, that Woellner was admitted in spite of his counter-enlightened tendencies, reveals again how the social boundaries of the elites' world were not nearly as sharp as the post-1788 rhetoric has led us to believe. This does not mean, of course, that Woellner was "enlightened," only that he moved in the polite society where the Enlightenment flourished. Nonetheless, the point is that other ties could and did bring people together in the late eighteenth century.

Reconsidering sociability in Berlin offers another way of understanding the transition between Frederick II and Frederick William II. Rather than grafting an Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment split onto the succession, we should emphasize the many things that united the two periods. Too many aspects of public life could connect people beyond a particular vision of the Enlightenment. One factor that brought educated people in Berlin together was a common employer. Woellner and his fellow club members were almost all state servants.<sup>78</sup> (Nicolai was a notable exception.) Whether they were privy councilors, clerics, bureaucrats, or educators, the members of *Montagsklub* were part of a social realm created by association with

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Eckhart Hellmuth, "Aufklärung und Pressefreiheit. Zur Debatte der Berliner Mittwochgesellschaft während der Jahre 1783 und 1784," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 9, no. 2 (1982): 315-345 and James Schmidt, "The Question of Enlightenment: Kant, Mendelssohn, and the Mittwochgesellschaft," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1989): 269-291.

<sup>78</sup> Sachse, *Montagsklub*; Steffen, "Ein Klub," 119-121.



state power.<sup>79</sup> The ties that bound the members were, in many ways, broader than the desire to cultivate reason or autonomy. Thus, if the relationships that made up enlightened sociability were already complicated, they were made even more so by the common responsibility to the state that united many of the *Montagsklub's* members.

For many historians Woellner's Rosicrucianism explains the Edict on Religion completely. There is, however, reason to doubt the connection. First, the Rosicrucians remained an elite organization in spite of their supposed break with Freemasonry. Woellner and his colleagues kept their organization very small, and there is no evidence to suggest that anyone wished for esoteric knowledge to be distributed among the people. In fact, Woellner would have been completely against such a program. Second, although this detail has often been forgotten, it is important to recall that Woellner and his associates were officially Frederick William II's superiors within the Rosicrucian organization, which meant that Woellner's Rosicrucians actually inverted existing political hierarchies. Third, Woellner's collection of Rosicrucian lore, which was published after his death, reveals that Rosicrucians were Scottish Rite Freemasons devoted to traditional Christianity.<sup>80</sup> If Rosicrucians broke with Freemasons over the limits of reason, they continued to operate with rituals and lore that created the Freemason's independent social space.

The same sociability and desire for knowledge that dominated Freemasonry also extended deeply into Rosicrucianism. Woellner's Rosicrucianism performed many of the same social functions as Freemasonry. It was a place for the elite to meet and play games. The central difference between Rosicrucians and Freemasons in Germany lay in the former's absolute requirement that each member be an orthodox Christian. This seems reactionary. But for Woellner, the insistence on orthodoxy was not a simple counter-enlightened manifestation, since he embedded religion deeply within the state. When combined with his rural interests, Woellner's religious and state training led him to attack a particular kind of enlightenment that he felt threatened the state's security. Woellner was, therefore, critical of the positions that enlightened men such as Kant espoused, even as he took part in other practices that marked him as one of them.

### **Conclusion**

Johann Christoph Woellner and the Edict on Religion were products of the Enlightenment. Woellner's educational and social background, his work as a preacher, writer, and landowner, and, finally, his tenure as a state minister reveal how

<sup>79</sup> See Sachse, *Montagsklub*, for the club's membership content.

<sup>80</sup> Woellner, *Der Signatstern, oder die enthüllten sämtlichen sieben Grade und Geheimnisse der mystischen Freimaurerei nebst dem Orden der Magus oder Ritter des Lichts; mit allen geheimen Schriftzeichen, mysteriösen Ceremonien, wundervollen Operationen u.s.w.*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Aurum Verlag (Reprint), 1979).

enlightened them suffused his world. Woellne's enlightened roots have been overlooked before now, because he followed a different path out of Frederickian Prussia than the one historians have considered enlightened. Woellner was, however, a conservative reformer. He approached reform by carefully weighing of the capacities of the people involved, which made him inherently skeptical of blanket calls for greater autonomy. When he preached one thing to peasant farmers and suggested other things to a reading public, he revealed a belief in the power of reason *and* a desire to keep that power in check. This is not something normally considered "enlightened."

That Woellner broke with people whom we today consider representative of Enlightenment should not be construed as necessarily making him Counter-Enlightenment. Woellner's worldview was dominated by enlightened ways of thinking, and for all his conservatism, there is no doubt that he was also a reformer. This suggests a level of complexity within the enlightened debate that bears further scrutiny. Rather than dismissing Woellner as Enlightenment manqué, we must ask ourselves whether Woellner was as legitimate an outcome of the Enlightenment as any of the usual heroes whom historians have venerated. Dusting off those people our historiography has shunted aside is the only way adequately to confront this question. In this way, we can integrate the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment into Woellner's worldview, without hurling him and others from the enlightened ranks.

Although the case for including Woellner in the enlightened club is narrow, its historiographical implications are broad. First, seeing Woellner as a product of the Enlightenment, rather than as a reaction to it, requires that we rethink the Enlightenment's supposed subversiveness. If Woellner was a legitimate member of the club, then political subversion was not the inevitable outcome of enlightened activity, since Woellner was far from having been a revolutionary. We must, therefore, see the process of the Enlightenment in new ways, and explore how the social and political institutions that encouraged liberal ideas to proliferate could also have done the same for conservative ones. This article offers one way of understanding conservatism as a product of the Enlightenment. There can, no doubt, be many others. Woellner had his disagreements with the Enlightenment's leaders, but he and his opponents shared more than either side would have cared to admit.