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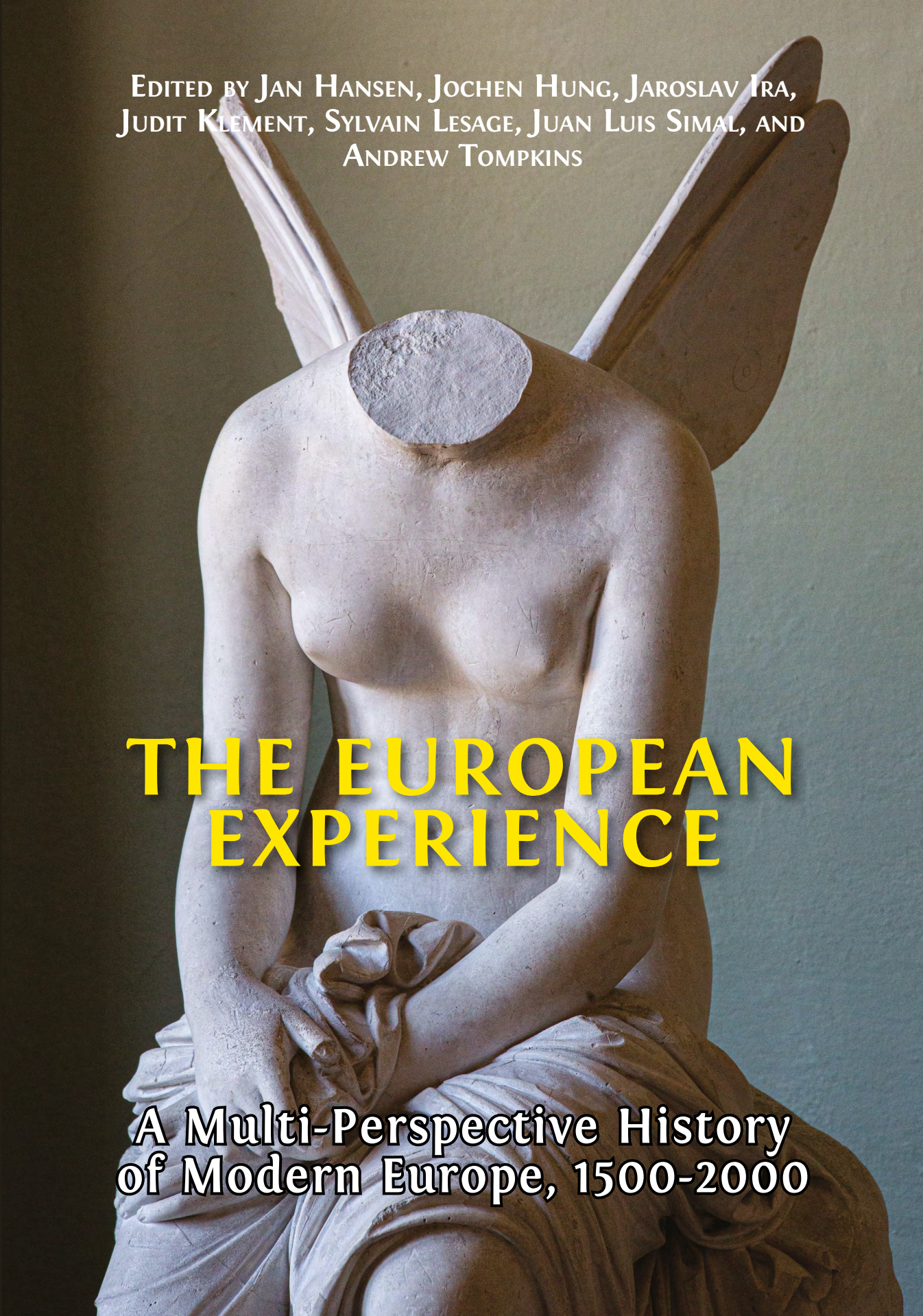

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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6.1.1 Religions in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Cristina Bravo Lozano, Péter Erdősi, Marjorie Meiss, and Dirk van Miert

Introduction

The conventional image of the religious landscape of early modern Europe is characterised by the master narrative of the Reformation developing into Lutheranism and Calvinism and the Tridentine Counter-Reformation. In contrast, this chapter emphasises the pluralistic reality of religious situations across early modern Europe, leading to a more diverse picture that pays attention to Judaism, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and factions within Protestantism as well as Catholicism.

The Confessionalisation of Europe

From 1517, Europe entered an era of profound religious upheaval. The lightning-speed success of Luther's ideas, the rupture brought about by the violent reaction of the Church of Rome, and the proliferation of reform movements modified the religious landscape of the continent in lasting ways. Of course, medieval Europeans were not unaware of the diversity of beliefs: they had experienced the schism between Eastern and Western Christendom (1054), as well as episodes of heresy. Christians rubbed shoulders with Jewish minorities in many cities, and with Muslim populations (and powers) in the Iberian Peninsula and Eastern Europe. From the 1520s onwards, however, Western Christianity crumbled. The Scandinavian kingdoms were taken over by Lutheranism from the 1520s to the 1530s. The Helvetic Confederation, which was close to the 'Protestant Rome' (Geneva, a state that was independent at the time), was divided into Reformed cantons, Catholic cantons, and mixed cantons as a result of the two Kappel Wars (1529–1531). The Italian Peninsula remained

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a land of almost uncontested Catholicism, but the political fragmentation of the Germanic area was coupled with a religious fragmentation by virtue of the *cuius regio, eius religio* ('whose realm, their religion') principle that prevailed at the time of the Peace of Augsburg (1555). France, after almost forty years of civil war (1562–1598), remained Catholic but with a large Reformed minority. The former Netherlands, which rose up against its Iberian ruler in the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), was split between a South that finally returned to Catholicism, and a North dominated by Calvinism (but where Catholics and Lutherans remained numerous). England, after the Henrician Schism (1534), hesitated and then followed its own path, that of an Anglicanism inspired by Calvinist theology but with an ecclesial organisation close to Catholicism. The Iberian Peninsula, less sensitive to Protestant ideas, reinforced its Catholic exclusivism by expelling or forcibly converting its Jewish and Muslim populations (1492–1525), then by expelling in 1609 these new Christians, many of whom had remained clandestinely faithful to the faith of their ancestors.

To analyse the reactions of populations to this new religious situation, historians have used the concept of confessionalisation. This concept originated in the work of Ernst Walter Zeeden on the constitution of confessional identity (*Konfessionsbildung*) in the Holy Roman Empire. In the 1960s, the German historian showed that the rivalry between Catholic and Protestant confessions had contributed to shaping the institutional and social realities of the various states and cities of the empire and to differentiating them through the construction of antagonistic identities. Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist spaces emerged, and defined themselves in opposition to each other in increasingly exclusive and intolerant ways. In the following decades, Zeeden's interpretative scheme was developed further and granted a key role to political powers and elites. These elites acquired, thanks to the Peace of Augsburg, the power to impose their religious choices on the population. Consequently, from the 1560s onwards, states and churches would subject the population to social discipline (*Sozialdisziplinierung*) by means of a series of acculturating mechanisms geared towards inculcating the faithful with the norms of their rulers. Through an intense catechetical effort and increased surveillance of morals, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities thus turned believers steeped in superstition into 'true' Catholics, Lutherans, or Calvinists. Over the last thirty years, historical research has nevertheless nuanced this schema by reducing the weight of the authorities in this process and by acknowledging that ordinary folk had a measure of agency and choice. In particular, the involvement of communities of believers in the surveillance of morals and dogmatic abuses has been re-evaluated, emphasising the role played in this respect by Protestant consistories or Catholic brotherhoods, and highlighting the demand for repression from the population.

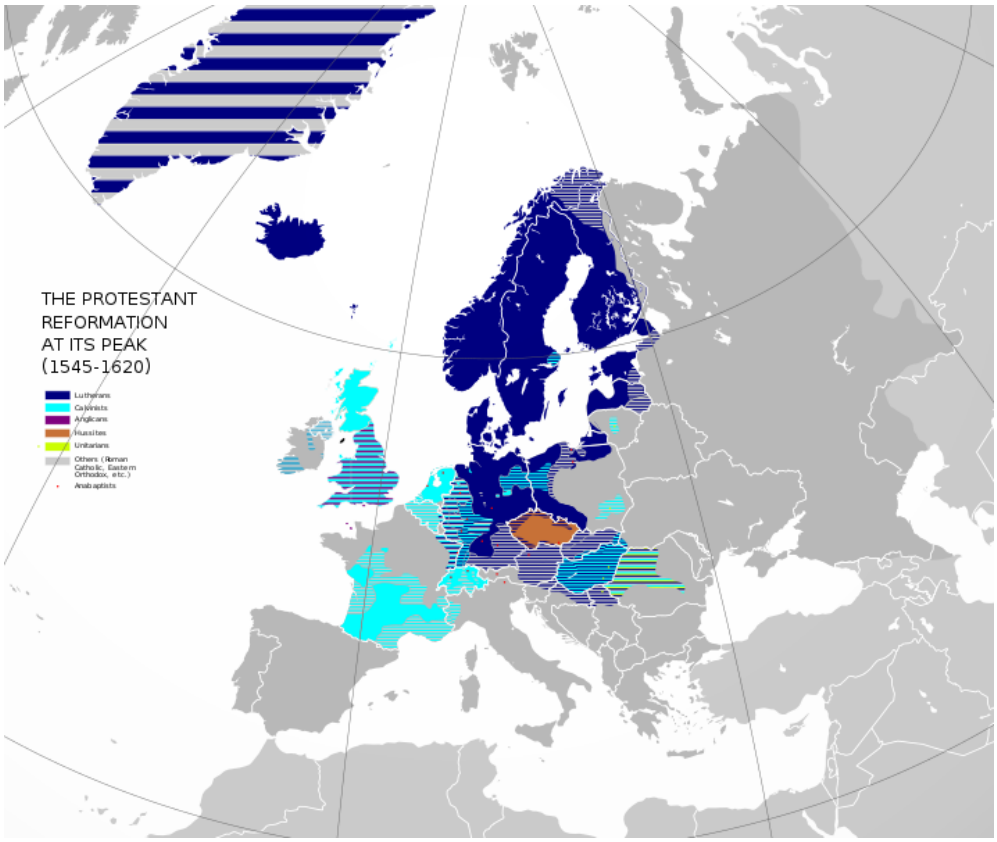

Fig. 1: Europe at the time of the greatest confessionalisation (initiated by the Reformation) (ca. 1620), CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia, Ernio48, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Protestant_Reformation.svg.

Nevertheless, the confessionalisation of European populations was never complete. In the first decades of the Reformation, many people were hesitant, their adherence to a particular confession often incomplete or based on a vague knowledge of doctrinal differences; indeed, confessional boundaries were still fluid in this period of heated theological debate. Once confessional identities were more firmly established in the second half of the sixteenth century, diversity of belief remained a reality in many places. Minorities, whether tolerated or clandestine, continued to exist. In the empire, the reality was more nuanced and complex than the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* would suggest. In Catholic Cologne, for example, there were large Protestant minorities. In areas where religious minorities were officially tolerated—such as in France after certain edicts of pacification and then from the signing of the Edict of Nantes until its revocation (1598–1685)—solutions had to be found to live together and coexist in difference, which was not without difficulties and violence. In the 1560s, for instance, Catholic and Reformed inhabitants of several towns and villages in the Rhone Valley and in southwestern France

joined together in pacts of friendship, swearing not to quarrel and to guarantee a peace that was essential for the security and prosperity of the community. At the end of the Wars of Religion, the weariness of fighting and its devastating consequences led the peasants, whatever their confession, to unite to protect their fields. Moreover, the higher echelons of European trade were always home to coexistent beliefs: if Venice sheltered the first Jewish ghetto in history (when the Jews of the city were grouped together in Canareggio in 1516), the city of the doges also saw Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, and Muslim merchants rubbing shoulders on a daily basis, and erected religious buildings for them.

The Impact of the Council of Trent

While the European continent was gradually fragmented by religious differences, the struggle between religions led to a profound transformation of the Catholic Church. Principles defined by the Council of Trent (1545–1563) would govern the new model of church, which emerged as a response to the reformed confessions burgeoning in Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Previous initiatives and movements were limited to specific territories, such as the Low Countries or the Spain of the Catholic Monarchs Isabella I of Castile (1451–1504) and Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516). These included the renewal of the episcopal hierarchy, the renovation of religious orders, or the introduction of humanism and the ideas of Erasmus of Rotterdam in universities such as Salamanca or Alcalá de Henares.

Progressively, the lifestyle and discipline of priests and the religious was modified. The traditional religious orders (Franciscans, Carmelites) were reformed, and others were created with a new spirit, such as the Theatines, the Ursulines, or the Capuchins. The Society of Jesus was the most prominent foundation of that time. The institute was structured by Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) as a hierarchical body of a quasi-military nature, with a fourth vow of obedience to the Pope. It was to be concerned with the evangelisation of Asia and America, the defence of Roman Orthodoxy, and the formation based on the pedagogical model of the *Ratio Studiorum*.

But it was above all the Council of Trent that would define the internal reform of the church and the principles of Catholic orthodoxy from then on. In the face of the reformed churches, the post-Tridentine fundamentals clarified and ratified Catholic dogmas in pastoral terms. The corrected version of the Bible, according to St Jerome, was to serve as the main source of faith. Works had value in themselves, mediated by the grace conferred through the seven sacraments. Eucharistic transubstantiation constituted the renewal of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, priestly orders would distinguish between lay

and ecclesiastical. Clerics were obliged to fulfil the three vows, to be trained in seminaries and to maintain a discipline for the care of souls through preaching, administering the sacraments, and teaching catechism from their parishes. However, there was no question of profound changes in the curia, a work carried out by the popes, nor of the interference of princes and secular authorities in religious matters. Also purified were popular traditions and practices, such as processions, devotional confraternities, Marian and saintly zeal, the recognition of certain miracles, and the canonisation of new saints. New catechisms, liturgies and homilies, missions, the ritual use of images and symbolic objects, sacred music, and the standardisation of religious texts were essential to this work.

In Catholic Europe, the Tridentine decrees were imposed in different ways. In Spain, Philip II set himself up as a champion of the faith and adopted the decrees through royal patronage and other proselytising instruments. Such dynamics were closely followed by the Holy Inquisition. This religious tribunal was charged with preserving the Catholic religion in the face of the heterodox movements that were beginning to spread throughout the dominions of the Crowns of Castile and Aragon—Protestants, *alumbrados* and Erasmians. With some delay, caused by the Wars of Religion and the rise of Gallican ideas, it was finally accepted in France. In the Pontifical Court, the post-conciliar popes introduced profound modifications to make Rome the head of the Church, with the institutionalisation of permanent congregations for ecclesiastical supervision, the establishment of national colleges and seminaries, and the sending of pontifical nuncios to Catholic courts and republics. One of the last works derived from the Council of Trent was the foundation of the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (*Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples*, 1622) for the spread of Catholicism through missionary exercise in the so-called 'Four Parts of the World'. In other territories, religious coexistence was determined by anti-Catholic policies which, as in the case of Ireland, ended up provoking a migratory movement towards Spain, the Netherlands, and France in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the activation of missionary strategies for the preservation of the Catholic religion.

Religious Diversity

The fact that it took almost twenty years for the Council of Trent to formulate anew the article of faith indicates that the post-Tridentine regime was not easily constructed. Different schools of thought continued to flourish even in the seventeenth century. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits campaigned against the theology of the Louvain theologian Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), whose ideas about grace and free will were opposed to

those of the 'Molinism' of the Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535–1600). After a fierce controversy, Pope Innocent X (1574–1655) in 1653 condemned 'Jansenism' as a heresy. Within Calvinism itself, the roles of grace and free will continued to be debated. A controversy between the two Leiden theologians Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) and Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) led to a public crisis that brought the young Dutch Republic to the brink of civil war, precisely during the period of the Twelve Years' Truce (1609–1621). 'Arminianism' (or Remonstrantism) was condemned by the Reformed Church during the international Synod of Dordrecht (1618–1619). The canons of this Synod, together with Calvin's *Institutions* and the Heidelberg Catechism (1566), effectively functioned as the new collection of articles of faith for the Dutch Reformed Church, although even then debates continued to rage.

On the other side of the Channel, meanwhile, the English Civil War (1640–1649) had seen a variety of political-religious factions pitched against one another in diverging opinions about the role of bishops in the Church of England: Scottish Presbyterians and English Protestants (later labelled Puritans) resisted the Arminianism of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud (1573–1645). Other 'dissenters' formed a colourful range of critical thinkers, including Quakers, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Brownists. The distinctions were not clear cut and some of these currents were rather fleeting. Even in these small communities, splits arose: the English Mathew Slade (1569–1628), originally a Brownist, went on to form an English community of the Dutch Reformed Church, in parallel to the French-speaking Walloon Churches. The latter were frequented largely by Huguenots: Protestants who had fled France and the southern Low Countries, and who set up their own Latin-French communication networks all across the northern part of Europe. These migrants contributed to the scholarly institutionalisation of Protestantism via professorships, the book industry, and journalism. Later generations in the Huguenot diaspora assimilated into the regional reformed churches.

The Huguenots were not the only religious group to go into exile and spread out over early modern Europe. Sephardic Jews moved out of the Iberian Peninsula, fleeing religious persecution and setting up communities in London and Amsterdam, where they met with Ashkenazi Jews. Creating vast economic and intellectual networks, Jews occupied important positions in such port cities as Livorno and Amsterdam, whereas Vilnius was an important theological centre. From Kraków to Venice, Jews maintained networks that were involved in the Hebrew book trade, stimulated by fierce debates over messianic movements such as Sabbateanism and by Christian Hebraists who sought to better understand the Bible via the Rabbinic traditions.

In Central Europe the religious mosaic is largely the result of early modern transformations. To an ethno-cultural and linguistic heterogeneity existing since the Middle Ages, growing religious diversity was added, from the sixteenth century, on account of two major changes. The first was Ottoman conquest in Europe, a process begun in the fourteenth century and which continued with further expansion in the sixteenth. Countries in the southern part of the region either became parts of the Ottoman Empire or were contiguous areas in direct contact with it, and thus witnessed the spread of Islam. In territories under Ottoman rule, the dominance of Islam did not exclude the presence of religious minorities, Christian and Jewish alike, and these territories were destinations of evangelising missions. The other paramount change was the advent of the Reformation, which produced a spectrum of Protestant communities, such as the Lutheran, Calvinist, Zwinglian, Anabaptist, and Antitrinitarian ones, as well as the coming of the subsequent Catholic Reform; the confrontation between the Reformation and the Catholic Reform produced very different confessional landscapes in each part of the region. Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Christians, and a Jewish diaspora enlarged by Askhenazi immigration, augmented the complexity of these landscapes.

Case Study: Transylvania

For the religious heterogeneity of Central Europe, the Principality of Transylvania is a case in point, as far as conflict and compromise are concerned. A fragment of the Hungarian Kingdom falling to pieces with Ottoman conquest, Transylvania, as a newly established state, avoided Turkish occupation and was paying annual tribute to the Porte. In parallel with the Ottoman campaigns against Hungary, the medieval Catholic Church of Transylvania fully disintegrated, and its holdings were secularised and given to the treasury. Catholics became a minority while three Protestant denominations, Lutheran, Calvinist and Antitrinitarian, took strong positions all over the country. The process of confessional change, concomitant with political turns, can be drawn up in three phases during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history of Transylvania. In the first phase, Antitrinitarians grew to prominence in the political elite of the princely court, and Antitrinitarianism was embraced by John Sigismund (1540–1571), the Catholic-born prince. In the second phase, from the 1570s to the 1590s, the Catholic ruling family of the Báthorys was striving to restore the institutions of their church; through the Jesuits, the pressure of Rome was growing stronger, albeit temporarily, with Sigismund Báthory (1573–1613) waging war against the Turks with support from Pope Clement VIII (1536–1605) and Emperor Rudolf II of Habsburg (1552–1612). The anti-Ottoman and Catholic project failed; the Jesuits were expelled by the

Diet. The third and longest phase, unfolding over the seventeenth century, was marked by the rule of a series of Calvinist princes. The peace treaties of Vienna (1606) and Linz (1645) between the Habsburgs and Transylvanian rulers contributed to the consolidation of the rights of Protestants in Hungary.

Notwithstanding confessional upheavals perturbing the court elite, religious conflict was significantly moderated by a system of compromise stemming from a series of laws issued by the Transylvanian Diet during the late sixteenth century. The result of these legal instruments was the official acknowledgement of four 'accepted religions', Calvinist, Lutheran, Antitrinitarian (or Unitarian), and Catholic; religions other than these four were merely 'tolerated' by the state. Religion, an organising principle of the Transylvanian society of estates, joined with a political category defining one's status, the 'natio'. The state acknowledged a system consisting of three political units, called 'nations' (an early modern term with a different meaning from the one established in the nineteenth century) each having a set of special privileges as well as representation at the Diet: Hungarian nobles, Saxon (ethnic German) burghers and the Székler (or Székely), a Hungarian-speaking group that differed in legal terms from the Hungarian nobility. The two categories—political and confessional—could overlap, as in the case of Saxons being predominantly Lutheran, or be detached from each other, as with Hungarians having Calvinists, Antitrinitarians, and Catholics among them. The system's featuring of four accepted religions and three political nations was not all-embracing. Most notably, it did not allow Romanians, who were predominantly Orthodox (though the Protestant Reformation and the Greek-Catholic/Uniate project affected their ranks) to create a 'natio' on their own and advance their confession among the accepted ones, despite their demographic significance. After the 1690s, when the Habsburg Dynasty captured Transylvania, the confessional system remained basically unchanged, with the difference that the Catholic institutions of Transylvania were restored. The exclusion of Romanians from both categories, preventing them from representing themselves by autonomous bodies in political and religious terms, was a cause of rampant tension from the eighteenth century onwards. By the nineteenth century, the limits and obsolescence of the twofold system became all the more visible in the context of liberal reforms and national movements.

Conclusion

Whereas the early modern religious history of Europe is usually framed as a split within Christianity in which the Reformation led to a conflict between Protestants and Catholics, Christianity was much more pluriform and fluid

than this narrative suggests. The fragmentation of Protestantism due to intra-confessional theological and political disagreements is a well-known element of the familiar narrative, but as we have seen in this chapter, Catholicism harboured a plurality of strands as well, and confessional identities continued to be unstable even after the establishment of confessional formularies of faith in the second half of the sixteenth century. Apart from the Christian story, however, Europe was also populated by non-Christians whose positions in society were contested, but whose economic or military power remained a force to be reckoned with. Persecution by the Inquisition is one part of the story, but *Realpolitik* aimed at coexistence was ubiquitous, even if such politics were not yet informed by positive philosophies of tolerance and expressions of epistemic humility that were formulated during the eighteenth century. Much has been made of 'secularisation' in this century of 'Enlightenment', but it should be underscored that religion continued to be a major political force and that the number of people who claimed to be atheist was very small.

Discussion questions

1. What was 'confessionalisation' and what were the consequences of this process?
2. In what ways did religious diversity fuel political conflict in early modern Europe?
3. Do you think religion plays less or more of a role in Europe today? Why?

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