

Making Catholicism Cosmopolitan: Italy and the Transformation of Central Europe

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Project Overview

The Reformation passed through Central Europe with devastating effectiveness. Luther's act of defiance triggered a great defection among the German princes. The Empire's future seemed assuredly Protestant as the new believers were poised to gain a majority with the electoral college. Many of the Swiss cantons were in full revolt. In Bohemia Catholics may have constituted only ten percent of the populace. The church had become a minority religion in Poland while to the south in Hungary the nobility warmly embraced Calvinism. Even a city such as Vienna was now decidedly Lutheran. There were of course important Catholic pockets where the Lutheran and Calvinist onslaught had been stoutly resisted, and critical supporters such as the Habsburgs and Wittelsbachs would help the church regain its equilibrium as it steadied itself and then launched its counter-offensive. But more important were changes that were transforming the nature of Catholicism itself. Back in Rome ecclesiastical leadership had finally recognized the extent of the church's problems, and at Trent initial steps were taken to redefine the faith theologically. At the same time the entire culture of Catholicism was changing, creatively adapting itself to a new social context. This project will consider the broad scope of this dramatic transformation that changed a faith perceived in many corners as a parochial vestige of an outdated society into a dynamic and cosmopolitan confessional culture that stretched across Europe's broad middle from the modern-day Ukraine to the southern Low Countries.

In the seventeenth century the results of these changes were stunning. Though religious freedom was a foundational right of Polish society, a majority of the elites abandoned Protestantism and returned to Rome. Within the Empire Catholicism made equally impressive gains despite the new guarantees of Westphalia that recognized both Calvinism and Lutheranism. The study of the Catholic or Counter-Reformation in the Central European context, however, has long been a problematic field of research. Three particular issues need to be addressed.

- **Chronology:** Scholars of the Reformation era have been generally slow to examine the full chronological expanse of this period. A thorough assessment of Central Europe's

Catholic revival must trace developments from the sixteenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth.

- Geography: Nationalist biases have wrecked havoc with the study of the region. All too often, German and Slavic specialists have anachronistically carved up Europe's middle by setting borders that have more to do with political developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than with the cultural activity of the sixteenth and seventeenth. The challenge today is to recover the geographic diversity of Central Europe and reclaim a region ranging from Lwów to Louvain where a common Catholic culture took root and flourished.
- Religion: Scholars have frequently reduced the story of the Reformation to a confrontation between Catholic and Protestant. Central Europe's religious landscape was the continent's most diverse, and any consideration of this region's Catholic revival must expand its religious focus and critically evaluate the complicated interplay of a multi-confessional society where Calvinists and Lutherans mixed with the Orthodox, Utraquist, Unitarian, Jewish and even Muslim communities.

My project is an attempt to restore unity to this fractured field of study by examining Central Europe's religious culture from a very different perspective. Though there were many factors that contributed to this region's great Catholic revival, it was Italian influence that was most critical for its ultimate success. For this undertaking I will consider five broad areas of activity where Italians played a decisive role shaping a new confessional culture north of the Alps. By working thematically, I will cut across those traditional linguistic, geographic, religious, and disciplinary boundaries that have long divided this area of study.

Formation of Confessional Elites

For generations students from Central Europe had journeyed south to attend Italian universities. With the coming of the Reformation, however, there was an important new development with these long-established patterns of academic migration. Nearly all of Central Europe's Catholic reformers passed through the doors of an Italian school at some point in their early studies. Any understanding of Central Europe's Catholic revival must begin by considering this formative influence on the region's ecclesiastical leaders.

Missionary and Educational Activity

Central Europe's Catholic leaders were assisted by a dedicated corps of missionaries who came north from Italy to help their co-religionists turn back the Protestant advance. Changes within Italy in the sixteenth century brought renewal to older religious orders and led to the creation of newer ones. The Jesuits, Capuchins, Piarists and Ursulines were the most prominent of these new orders, and they brought their zeal to the task of evangelization north of the Alps.

Negotiating with non-Catholic Communities

The Catholic advance in Central Europe has been frequently characterized as a simple and often violent confrontation between Protestant and Catholic. When one looks at the Central European landscape from Rome's perspective, however, a different picture emerges. From Lutherans to Utraquists, from the Orthodox to Unitarians the church throughout this period pursued a variety of strategies to bring these wayward Christians into the Catholic fold. A proper understanding of early modern Catholicism north of the Alps must take into account a full range of the region's religious diversity and the church's often complex negotiations with these communities.

New Patterns of Devotion and Piety

As Catholicism reestablished itself in Central Europe, its growing appeal was based to a substantial degree on new and attractive forms of popular piety that were enthusiastically adopted by the region's elites. A tour through Italy would become a standard part of a nobleman's education, and from these trips young men would return exposed to a variety of devotional practices they would frequently implement back at home. Patterns of pilgrimage, new expressions of Marian devotion, and activities of confraternities were frequently inspired by Italian examples.

Art and Architecture

Finally, there was the distinct aesthetic appeal of early modern Catholicism. Central Europe's sacred art, architecture and music were of course heavily influenced by Italianate models. Though the general contours of this aesthetic exchange are well known, more work needs to be done to trace how specific models were received and adapted north of the Alps. The Jesuit church in Rome, Il Gesù, was the basis for many houses of worship that were constructed across Central Europe. By focusing on one such example, we can move beyond some long

accepted generalizations and work towards a more detailed understanding of how Italian influence shaped and molded Central European confessional sensibilities.

Summary and Schedule

This broad and ambitious undertaking consciously cuts across traditional chronological, disciplinary and geographic divisions as I rethink the very nature of Central Europe in the early modern period. Ranging from art history to history of science, I will be covering a wide spectrum of activity to track the development of a common religious culture that crossed artificial geographic divisions that too frequently still define scholarship today.

My early scholarly work has prepared me for this more adventurous project. My first book focused on the transnational religious culture of late-sixteenth century Austria. Since then, I have spent a number of years working in the archives and libraries of Germany, Poland, Austria and the Czech Republic as I have examined the Catholic resurgence of this region. Most recently, I have reached the final stages of a related project on the Bohemian lands and the cosmopolitan nature of its Counter-Reformation. In the past six years I have co-organized three international conferences that have been designed to bring scholars from a variety of disciplines together in an effort to present a more unified picture of the religious world of premodern Europe. One volume has recently been published (*Conciliation and Confession*) while the other two are in preparation.

I am now ready for this broad assessment of Central Europe, but to complete the research I must consider the Italian perspective. I plan to work in Rome where an extended stay would enable me to use the Vatican Library, the Biblioteca Angelica, the Propagande Fide Archives, the Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu (ARSI) and a number of other critical collections in the city. An academic year in Rome would complement my work in Central European archives and complete my primary research.

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