



Joachim Bahlcke. *Ungarischer Episkopat und österreichische Monarchie: Von einer Partnerschaft zur Konfrontation (1686-1790).* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005. 526 pp. EUR 58.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-08764-3.



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The End of the Confessional Age: A Hungarian Perspective

As an April 2005 H-German forum reminded its readers, a great deal of research around the issue of “confessionalization” has shown the many unexpected and unintended ways in which religious politics contributed to state formation in early modern central Europe. On the one hand, the interplay between religious and political change during the “confessional age” of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries produced more integrated polities, as religious and secular leaders alike tried to create and enforce confessional unity in the territories that they ruled. At the same time, however, such alliances between church and state ultimately gave secular rulers more authority over religious institutions and resources. As the “confessional age” came to a close in the German lands, worldly rulers could begin to consider religion as one of many issues affecting the interests of state. This trend toward the secularization of state power only increased after the middle of the seventeenth century.

This story is well established in German historiography. But is it true for eastern Europe? In his new book, Joachim Bahlcke tackles this question by focusing on the

Hungarian case. The choice is a fascinating one. At the height of the confessional age in the Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic Habsburg dynasty in Vienna only controlled a sliver of the Kingdom of Hungary. In 1526, Ottoman Turkish armies had broken Hungary apart. For the next century and a half, central Hungary was under direct Ottoman administration while local Hungarian princes, many of the most prominent among them Protestants, enjoyed a large measure of autonomy in Transylvania, in the East. Only in the 1680s did the Habsburg army begin to drive the Ottomans from Central Europe; Austrian troops recaptured Buda (Ofen), in 1686. In the years that followed, the Habsburg court and the Hungarian Catholic episcopate entered into a close partnership, similar to the church-state alliances formed over a century earlier in the German lands. As the Habsburg court in Vienna began to assert its authority over the whole Hungarian kingdom, Hungary’s episcopate began the slow work of re-establishing diocesan authority in formerly Ottoman lands and re-Catholicizing regions in which Protestantism had flourished. Together, they hoped to reconstruct post-Ottoman Hungary as a uniformly Catholic land under Habsburg dominion. Less

than a century later, however, the Catholic Church stood at the head of a national movement to defend traditional Hungarian rights against overbearing Habsburg rule. How this transformation came about and what happened to the partnership between the Catholic Church and the Habsburg court are the subjects of Bahlcke's book.

Two things, in particular, are crucial to this unexpected turn-around, according to Bahlcke. First, and most important, corporate privilege, a culture of *libertas*, remained a vigorous, deeply resonant ideal in eastern Europe for much longer and in more complex ways than in the West. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary, this persistence was not simply a matter of ancient noble families trying to defend their position against an absolutist state. As Bahlcke shows, who was a bishop was a complicated matter: diocesan bishops were nominated by the Habsburg ruler, who was simultaneously King of Hungary, and approved by the Pope; titular bishops were appointed in Vienna without papal sanction. In all cases, however, these men were chosen precisely because of their political loyalty and close connections to the court. But the church enjoyed an important place in the constitutional life of the Kingdom of Hungary in ways that dated back to the origins of the state and that bestowed significant political and social privileges on the episcopate. Over time, Hungary's bishops found that defending these institutional interests, against both a would-be absolutist monarch as well as against Protestant rivals, trumped personal ties to the Habsburg court. In discussing this evolution, Bahlcke ascribes special historical significance to the fact that ecclesiastical and political boundaries were established simultaneously at the founding of the Kingdom in 1000 by King, and later Saint, István I. Because the borders of Hungary's dioceses corresponded neatly with the political borders of the state, Hungary's episcopate could draw on deep historical memories of an integral and autonomous Hungary to defend its own corporate interests. In time, Hungary's bishops would describe the efforts of Maria Theresia and Joseph II to establish a politically subservient *Staatskirchentum* as an attack by alien rulers on an ancient nation's autonomy.

Second, Hungary remained a confessionally divided land and Hungarian Protestantism endured as a powerful political and cultural force. Especially in the eastern part of the country, many of Hungary's gentry nobility were Protestant, a politically significant fact that Habsburg rulers could neither alter nor ignore. Hungarian Protestantism sometimes surfaced as a diplomatic issue

as well, as Prussian diplomats in Vienna decried the Hungarian Catholic Church's attempts to stamp out Protestant heresy. As Bahlcke shows, this confessional division interacted with the deep-seated traditions of *libertas* in complex ways. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Hungary's Catholic episcopate increasingly found itself alone in the fight to create a confessionally unitary, Catholic, Hungary; as the court in Vienna struggled to imagine an acceptable *modus vivendi* with Hungary's Protestant nobility, the rhetorical excesses of a Catholic church militant were often viewed as an unwelcome political complication. Indeed, Hungary's Protestant gentry often framed their demands for religious toleration in a language of corporate right. Yet this same ideal of *libertas* also furnished the Catholic episcopate with its own vision of national defense. When Joseph II embarked on his ambitious program of centralization and standardization, the Catholic Church could link the defense of its own prerogatives to a broader, super-confessional defense of Hungarian national rights against foreign tyranny. Thus, confessional competition was already emerging as a fundamental element of Hungarian national politics by the end of the eighteenth century. It would remain so until well into the twentieth century.

This conflict between the Hungarian Catholic Church and the Austrian monarchy was slow to emerge and Bahlcke is careful not to make the process either too straightforward or too sudden. Instead, he analyzes particular episodes, such as the furor surrounding the publication in 1750 of Bishop Márton Padányi Biró's ferociously anti-Protestant tract, *Enchiridion de fide*, for the shifts they reveal in church-state relations. Mention should also be made of Bahlcke's scrupulous attention to the subtle variations in religious and political developments in historically distinct regions of the Kingdom of Hungary, such as Transylvania, Croatia or the Banat. This approach is particularly impressive, since his research demanded that he master nearly all the languages and historiographical traditions of the now vanished Habsburg monarchy. Synthesizing these fragmented histories, Bahlcke has managed to reconstruct the mental world of the Hungarian episcopate as it existed in an age before nation-states.

Theology plays little role in this narrative; in Bahlcke's analysis, religion figures largely as the institutional and political interests of the Catholic episcopate. In addition, those looking for a social history of Catholicism in early modern Hungary or for a discussion of other prominent aspects of the literature on confessionalization, such as the success, failure or conceptual

utility of social disciplining in the Hungarian context, will also be forced to look elsewhere. This book is ultimately about the high politics of church-state relations and Bahlcke's treatment of his chosen topic is masterful. Sifting through a mass of little-known pamphlets and manuscripts from the period, as well as the historical literature of over half a dozen nation-states, Bahlcke tells

the story of a society where the "confessional age" lasted until well into the eighteenth century and the secularization of politics went hand in hand with a powerful defense of traditional corporate rights. It is a tale with clear comparative value that all historians of religion in central Europe will read with interest.

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