



Gerrit Walther. *Abt Balthasars Mission: Politische Mentalitäten, Gegenreformation und eine Adelsverschwörung im Hochstift Fulda.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002. 692 pp. \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-525-36060-6.



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Gerritt Walther has written a brilliant study of a little known sixteenth-century rebellion in the small central German principality of Fulda.

The basic outlines of the story are quite complex. In January 1570, Balthasar von Dernbach, just twenty-two years old, was elected Abbot of the ancient monastery of Fulda. As Abbot, Balthasar also became ruler of an important territory astride both crucial trade routes and the confessional frontier between Catholicism and Lutheranism. Balthasar's colleagues, the noble canons of the monastery, elected him because he had distinguished himself as an efficient administrator during his short tenure as Dean. To their surprise, Balthasar turned out to be an ardent Tridentine reformer and a committed supporter of the Jesuits.

Balthasar initiated an aggressive religious and political program in his principality that followed the pattern typical of Tridentine reform elsewhere in Germany. He brought the Jesuits to Fulda, installing them in the former Franciscan Church, providing them with a school building, and a relatively large annual income. The Jesuit school was an immediate success, attracting the sons of the local elite, Lutheran as well as Catholic. The Jesuits also served as preachers, organized processions, and generally revived the ritual life of the Fulda Catholic Church.

Balthasar and his officials then began to force out non-Catholic officials and started installing reform-minded Catholic clergy in the parishes, first in the city of Fulda and later in the countryside. These measures brought the Abbot into direct conflict with the local political elite. When Balthasar moved to reform the finances of the monastery and, especially, when he evicted the concubines of the canons, he also clashed directly with the canons of the monastery/chapter. These men were all members of powerful noble families of the region and their quarrel with the Abbot brought him into conflict with the regional nobility as well. The *Ritter* were a powerful group, predominantly Lutheran, with close personal and professional ties in neighboring (Protestant) Saxony and Hesse, and in the bordering Catholic ecclesiastical principalities of Würzburg, Mainz, and Bamberg. These families not only objected to the shabby treatment received by their sons and nephews at the monastery, they also resented their marginalization within Fulda's administration as the Jesuits gained influence, and they resisted the abbot's efforts to impose Catholic priests in noble controlled parishes. Balthasar's opponents also increasingly included middle-class city magistrates in Fulda and the towns of the principality, as they experienced the political and religious policies of the abbot's Regierung.

One of the strengths of Walther's book is that it is much more than a chronicle of these political conflicts. Walther analyzes with great perception the clash of political and religious cultures that lay behind the political events in Fulda. Tridentine Catholicism in Fulda was more than just a tool for the prince to strengthen his authority. Balthasar was personally committed to a new form of Catholicism. He participated actively in discussions with the Jesuits and other young clerics and during Lent 1573 he went through the Spiritual Exercises. Walther posits that the noble abbot, who had a very limited education and little experience in the world, was deeply influenced by this experience. Like others of his social class, he emerged with a deep commitment to advancing Catholicism, with a self-confident sense of his own destiny, and with more self-discipline and a love of order. "After he had gone through the Exercises, he felt himself now not only as a prince and a supporter of pious people, but himself as an expert in piety" (p. 246). He was, as the title of the book suggests, on a mission.

Balthasar's personal role was mirrored among his supporters. Tridentine reform and the Counter-Reformation in Fulda was a cosmopolitan youth movement. The Jesuits themselves were all young men and they hailed from all over the German speaking lands. The Jesuit College hosted guests from across Germany and at the same time became a social center in Fulda, attracting local men to discussions and services. The Jesuits themselves were "no grim doctrinaires, but instead worked with a certain temperament, elan, with the casual love of provocation of a younger generation" (p. 241). Walther argues that the Jesuit style—cosmopolitan, non-conformist, elitist—was very attractive in Fulda in the 1570s.

The Jesuits gathered a strong group of supporters, especially in and around Fulda itself. Converts from Lutheranism played an important role from the beginning of their time there. The Jesuit revival of Catholic ceremonial life and their use of visual culture and theater also appealed to families that had remained Catholic. Many of these were merchant families that had been excluded from the ruling class of Fulda and other towns and as a result were receptive to the new perspectives offered by the activist abbot and his supporters.

The Jesuits were also savvy politicians and as conflicts between the abbot and his various opponents started to heat up, they activated what Walther calls the "Jesuit network." Based on constant correspondence between the Jesuit colleges, the Jesuits and their follow-

ers were able to mobilize political support more effectively and more rapidly than their opponents. Political disputes in Fulda were quickly reported to Munich, Vienna, and even Rome, and political pressure was often applied before the opposition had even been informed of issues. The Jesuit network was also fairly homogeneous and easy to mobilize, in contrast to Balthasar's opponents, who included Lutherans, Calvinists, traditionalist Catholics of various kinds, nobles, Protestant princes, and local burgher elites. The "Jesuit network" also rapidly raised the stakes of what was in many ways a classic conflict between a prince and his estates. The tensions in Fulda became a confessional conflict of national importance.

Walther also very effectively illuminates the political culture of Balthasar's opponents. Although most of them were Lutherans, their opposition to the activist abbot was more traditional than religious or confessional. Balthasar's policies, of course, directly challenged the aristocratic lifestyle of the noble canons in the monastery of Fulda, by reorganizing the finances, removing the canons' concubines, and demanding a more vigorous liturgical life. Balthasar also moved to limit or even eliminate the role of the nobles in appointing clergymen and administering local parishes.

It was not just his policies that turned the Fulda elite against their prince. Walther shows how the pace and style of the reforms was perhaps the biggest source of discontent. The abbot's hierarchical and bureaucratic style of governing was new in Fulda. The nobles and town councilors complained that he failed to consult them before initiating new policies, that his primary advisors were outsiders, and that his officials moved too quickly and thoroughly when they instituted the abbot's plans.

The abbot's attack on the patronage rights of the nobles, the *Eigenkirche* inherited from the Middle Ages, was particularly problematic. The appointment of Catholic priests in country parishes undermined the authority of Protestant nobles, as peasants could turn to the priests for advice or even assistance in conflicts with nobles. Even Catholic nobles were concerned with this problem. Balthasar's officials also used soldiers to remove ministers who gave communion in both kinds. In a direct challenge to noble control of the parishes, the soldiers also forced the inhabitants to attend a Catholic mass and changed the locks on church doors. Such an attack on the nobles not only injured their rights, but also struck at the core of their sense of self. What the abbot declared an act of administration and authority, was for the affected

(nobles) a provocation, an insult, to which a *Ritter* should reply with just as decisive counter-attack (p. 392).

The conflict in Fulda was, then, a clash of cultures. The Fulda elite, led by the nobleman Carl Till von Berlepsch, considered Balthasar a tyrant intent on trampling their traditional rights and the religion of their fathers. Balthasar had a strong sense of his personal mission to restore the vigor of Catholicism and to assert his authority as prince of Fulda. Despite the strength of the “Jesuit network,” opponents of the abbot assembled a strong coalition. Most surprisingly, they gained the support of the Bishop of Wuerzburg, Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn.

Julius Echter’s aims in Fulda have always been unclear. As one of the leading Tridentine-minded bishops in Germany, one would imagine him in close alliance with Balthasar. However, in February 1576, Julius made a secret agreement with the nobles and chapter in Fulda, in which he would help overthrow Balthasar and become abbot himself. Walther points out the ways in which Julius differed from Balthasar. Perhaps less personally committed to new religious style than the abbot, the bishop was a far better politician who saw a chance to strengthen his position against the powerful abbey.

The conflict in Fulda came to a head in June 1576, in the small provincial town of Hammelburg. Using the extensive testimony of hundreds of witnesses gathered at the 1590 investigation of the events, Walther presents almost a minute-by-minute account of the what happened in Hammelburg. Walther’s style in this section is a good example of the accessible writing that marks this whole book. He mixes a lively account of the exciting events of the *Hammelburgischen Handlung* with an insightful analysis of the people involved. The events included the dramatic arrival of hundreds of noblemen with their armed and mounted followers, the entry of Julius Echter, Bishop of Wuerzburg with an entourage of high-ranking and influential officials and clergymen, the hard negotiations between the nobles and the abbot, an armed confrontation when townsmen and nobles stormed the abbot’s residence, and, finally, Balthasar’s surprising resignation in favor of the bishop.

Walther outlines the different political styles of the main parties. The noblemen, in particular their leader von Berlapsch, operated in a world of highly personal and highly dramatic public politics. Von Berlapsch and his allies used exaggerated gestures and language in their confrontations with the abbot and his advisors, behavior the abbot later called intimidating or even physically threatening. From the point of view of the nobles, how-

ever, the speeches, presentation of *gravamina*, and gatherings of armed nobles were the legitimate rituals and forms of traditional political action. Behind the scenes, the Bishop of Wuerzburg operated in a much more subtle, even Machiavellian fashion, looking for his best advantage while carefully avoiding any direct involvement in what could be considered a conspiracy to overthrow a legitimate prince. Abbot Balthasar, meanwhile, seems to have been overwhelmed by the pressure from the nobles and the bishop and, in the absence of a number of important advisors, finally gave in to pressure and resigned. He did not neglect, however, to secure generous financial support for his future.

Walther then turns to a fascinating discussion of the ways in which this rebellion/resignation was remembered and “constructed” over the next several decades. Balthasar embarked on a long and ultimately successful campaign to regain his position, exploiting the Jesuit network and the changing political situation in the Empire to his advantage. He and his lawyers argued that he had been threatened and had resigned under pressure. In the 1590 hearing, his lawyers further argued that von Berlapsch (conveniently dead by then) had told the abbot that if he did not resign there would surely be another peasant rebellion, as in 1525. The nobles’ argument that Balthasar was a tyrant carried little weight with the imperial judges who were deeply concerned with maintaining political order in the context of fierce confessional conflict.

Walther once again gives a lively and thoughtful account of the clash of cultures at the 1590 hearings. His discussion of the different understandings of “religion” is especially enlightening. In the view of the abbot’s opponents, Balthasar was guilty of giving too much “respect” to religion, of making it too central and important in his rule in Fulda. What he needed to do, in their view, was use more “discretion” in religious matters. These members of the Fulda elite wanted peace and order and, correctly, believed toleration was needed to achieve it.

These men were not the future of Fulda. Abbot Balthasar was restored to power and he brought his advisors and the Jesuits back to power. Somewhat mellowed by age and experience, he proceeded more slowly in his reforms of religion in the years around 1600. One consequence of his restoration, however, was an ugly witchhunt organized by Balthasar Nuss, one of the abbot’s top officials. Between 1603 and 1606, over 250 people were executed. Walther argues that the organizers of this witchhunt were from the new ruling class allied with the abbot, the victims mostly from the families of the

old Fulda elite. “Without inappropriately demonstrating the banality of evil, one could claim that the parvenu Balthasar Nuss represents the dark side of his prince, who was seeking holiness” (p. 688).

Walther concludes by arguing that the events in Fulda were more than an interesting episode. “Abbot Balthasar not only gave Tridentine Catholicism an institutional basis he made it socially, politically, and intellectually attractive.” Somewhat paradoxically, Balthasar’s successor, Johann Friedrich von Schwalbach, was a religious moderate and a pragmatic prince who tolerated a number of Protestants in his administration. At the same time, he certainly instrumentalized religion, enforcing Catholicism among his non-noble subjects. “While he himself handled the question of correct belief with aristocratic nonchalance, he supported [Catholicism’s] spread and supervision in the communities as a method of enforcing public order and the obedience of his subjects” (p. 692). The revival of Catholicism in Fulda had begun with Balthasar’s “mission;” it entered a different stage with von Schwalbach’s confessionalization.

This is an impressive book. Without neglecting the depth and *Grundsatzlichkeit* (and length) of a traditional *Habilitationsschrift*, Walther has written a lively and readable account. Written with a verve and accessibility not always found in German academic prose, the book is also full of deep insights, both theoretical and for the field of Reformation/Confessionalization. In the end, Walther succeeds admirably in explaining a whole range of important issues: the rapid religious changes of the mid-sixteenth century, the clash of political mentalities involved, and the ways in which the events in Fulda were explained, understood, imagined, and re-imagined by participants and outside observers alike.

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