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Evlogi STANCHEV, A Balkan Model of Catholic Confessionalization?
enrich the picture of the life and presence of the Bulgarians in Thessaloniki, enhancing it at micro level.

Irrespective of these personal preferences of mine, THESALONIKI AND THE BULGARIANS: HISTORY, MEMORY, PRESENT is very rich in content based on the use of a huge volume of historical sources, at that a part of them sought out and put into scholarly circulation precisely by the members of the project team. This fact, as well as the high level of academic discussion in most of the chapters make the volume an excellent addition to the rich portfolio of academic publications of the Institute of Balkan Studies and Centre of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. I am convinced that the book will attract a wide range of readers not only among the professional circles interested in the issues addressed, but also among the people outside the academia, who are interested in the history and fate of the Bulgarian expatriate communities and in particular that in Thessaloniki.

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A BALKAN MODEL OF CATHOLIC CONFESSIONALIZATION? MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES AND (PROTO-)NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE EARLY MODERN OTTOMAN BALKANS


In his latest monograph, Hungarian scholar Antal Molnár offers a comprehensive, as well as nuanced analysis of the specific historical, cultural and social contexts of the Catholic communities in the Ottoman Balkans in the 16th and 17th centuries. The main emphasis in the research is on the period of various missionary visions and initiatives from the Roman center concerning the strengthening of the faith of the Catholic communities in the Ottoman state as well as the considerable

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1 This text was prepared with the financial support of the National Program “Young Scientists and Postdoctoral Students” under PMC 5777 / 17.08.2018, in which the author participates.
missionary impulses and their various implications on the Balkans after the foundation of a centralized missionary structure in Rome in 1622 – the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide). In line with some general explanations in historiography, which see the period under review as a “confessionalization era” in early modern Europe, the author poses the fundamental question about the short- and long-term implications of the so-called processes of Catholic confession-building in the region. As is relevantly noted in the introduction of the book, and considering the newest studies on this topic, it is reasonable to expect that the Catholic confessionalization in the Balkans – a region ruled by a non-Christian administration during that period – has some local specifics (p. 10), which suggest considerable differences with the similar concurrent processes within Western and Central European territories dominated by Latin Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism). The so-called “Balkan Catholicism” is anything but a homogeneous cultural and religious phenomenon. In its essence, this is a highly conditional category that connotes a variety of dispersed communities, diverse in their cultures, languages and place within the specific hierarchy of the Ottoman state. In this regard, Molnár’s book significantly contributes to our knowledge of the history of early modern Catholicism in the Balkans. It also fills some hitherto inevitable gaps and even misunderstandings within the historiography of the field. Moreover, besides the history of Catholicism in the Balkans, the monograph also contains valuable insights about Ottoman history, Balkan cultural history, as well as some case studies within the framework outlined.

It is worth mentioning that Antal Molnár is an established expert in the history of the Catholic Church in Ottoman Southeast Europe, including the lands of Ottoman Hungary. In his work so far, he has covered a wide range of subjects, notably the characteristics and functioning of ecclesiastical structures in the region, the dynamics and specifics of the missionary activities of various Catholic orders (notably, the Franciscans, Jesuits and Benedictines) in the Balkans, as well as the different levels of diplomacy in this context. Of special interest in his studies are the often neglected “mediating” roles of several Dalmatian merchant cities with various degrees of autonomy – namely Ragusa (modern-day Dubrovnik)², as

² A. Molnár, Raguse, point de médiation entre Rome et la Hongrie Ottomane aux XVIᵉ – XVIIᵉ siècles, In: A. Di Francesco, A. C. Fiorato (eds.) La circulation des hommes, des oeuvres et des idées entre la France, l’Italie et la Hongrie (XVᵉ –
well as Cattaro (present-day Kotor)\(^3\) – for maintaining the relationship between Rome and the respective missionary territories. In his work, the author often prefers to study a variety of particular cases, which have the potential to significantly enrich our knowledge in the field but also to provide some promising insights that otherwise may remain neglected within a more general “grand narrative” of the history of Catholicism in Southeast Europe under the Ottomans. The author has been actively participating in this academic field by publishing his works in Italian, French, English, German, Hungarian, etc.

In its content, the book contains several already published papers, based on long-term work with a large number of unpublished sources, which offers a novel view on the subject under consideration. Among the archival institutions where the author worked in the course of his research, the following should be noted: the Vatican Secret Archives and the Archives of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome, as well as the Ragusan State Archive in Croatia.

Besides working with a variety of documents, the author’s methodology was also influenced by the field of contemporary social theory, including the latest achievements in the sociology of nationalism and national identity. When it comes to studying identity – be it religious, ethnic, national, etc. – the precise theoretical orientation is crucial for achieving the required analytical depth, which sometimes lacks if an author uses a mainly positivist methodology.

Structurally, the book does not offer a coherent analysis and does not aim to cover the entire context of the region during this period. Rather, it includes several chapters (or cases, to be more precise), diverse in their contextual and temporal scope, which focus on various aspects of the subject under consideration. Methodologically, the chapters can be grouped into three major categories:

**Context analysis.** Several chapters of the book shed light on some hitherto less-known aspects of Balkan Catholicism, while others offer an analytical reconsideration of some incomplete (or even incorrect) observations in historiography so far. The analysis of the role of the Bosnian Franciscan Province (*Bosna Argentina*) in maintaining Catholic identity in the region – in fact, quite a popular topic among historians of the medieval and early modern Balkans – as well as the Franciscans’ reactions

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against the Roman attempts for reforms in the 17th century (Chapter 2, pp. 17–29), is an indicative example in this regard. Of particular importance for our further knowledge on the missionary activities in the region are the studies of Rome’s visions for missions before the foundation of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622 (Chapter 3, pp. 31–46), as well as in the last quarter of the 17th century (Chapter 9, pp. 169–182). The consideration of the attempts for union with Rome by some parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Church (Chapter 8, pp. 157–167) should also be considered here.

Macrohistorical approach. Although focused on a specific set of problems, two of the book’s chapters correspond with a wider theoretical discussion on the general historical profile of the Balkans during the Ottoman period. For instance, the research on the characteristics of the Venetian influence on Catholicism in Ottoman Southeast Europe, mainly in Hungary (Chapter 4, pp. 47–63), considers the concept of “Venetian south-eastern Europe” offered by Swiss scholar Oliver Jens Schmitt. Molnár gives empirical as well as theoretical evidence that this idea, despite the Republic of Venice’s inarguably important maritime presence in the Adriatic and the Eastern Mediterranean in the early modern period (the so-called Stato da Màr), does not have enough validity concerning the Balkan hinterland (pp. 59–60). Moreover, two more problems that may generate further theoretical debate should be mentioned here – the idea of a specific Balkan model of Catholic confessionalization and the role of Catholicism in the formation of Albanian (proto-)national identity in the 17th century (Chapter 7, pp. 135–156), both of which will be considered in detail later in this review.

Microhistorical approach. Three of the book’s chapters have significant value due to their focus on particular case studies via the methodology of the microhistorical analysis. Although limited in their scope, these cases may provide some useful insights, which can be applied in other aspects of the history of early modern Catholicism in the Balkans, as well. Based on an in-depth analysis of relevant sources, the author shows two cases of rivalry and disputes between different Catholic orders – as well as the role of merchant communities in this strife – over the ownership of two Catholic chapels – the one in Belgrade (Chapter 5, pp. 65–121) and in Novi Pazar (Chapter 6, pp. 123–134). Such conflicts between Catholic orders about different things (control, property, leadership in missionary activities, etc.) could be observed in other parts of the Ottoman Empire too, including in the Levant and the capital Istanbul, as is seen, for
instance, in the disputes between the Jesuits and the Capuchins. Considering an interesting biographical case (Magdalena Pereš-Vuksanović, a rural Bosnian Catholic woman), the last chapter of the book contains an analysis of popular perceptions of religiosity, including Catholic, and everyday life in the early modern Ottoman Balkans (Chapter 10, pp. 183–203).

It is worth mentioning that in his academic work so far, Molnár has investigated in detail some other sources on the everyday aspects of Catholic life in the region, as seen in his analysis of the report of Don Vincenzo di Augustino, a Ragusan chaplain of Ottoman Buda.

Within this framework, Molnár’s book covers a wide range of problems – contextual as well as theoretical – pertaining to the subject under consideration. Instead of making an extensive overview of the book chapter by chapter, the following discussion will briefly consider only those of the author’s arguments and findings which the present review finds as central.

As already noted, the author pays considerable attention to the role that the Bosnian Franciscan Province plays in maintaining Catholicism in the Balkans during the Ottoman period. There is a relative scholarly consensus on the statute of the Bosnian Province as probably the most important and resistant Catholic institution in the Ottoman Balkans. Following the Ottoman invasion, Franciscan friars received considerable privileges – stipulated in the Ahdname of Milodraž issued by Mehmed II in 1463 – and even expanded the range of their activities, for example in regions of Bulgaria and the Ottoman-occupied territories of the “crown lands” of the former Kingdom of Hungary (most notably Slavonia). Furthermore, in another recent in-depth case study, Molnár also considered some hitherto less-known details about the residence of the Bosnian Franciscans in Ottoman Pest-Buda and their role in maintaining Catholic religious life in the former Hungarian capital. Due to the


major demographic changes after the Ottoman conquest, which led to a considerable increase in the South Slavic population in regions formerly inhabited by non-Slavic communities (mainly parts of the pre-Ottoman Hungarian state), the Bosnian Franciscans managed to keep its influence, also because of the language proximity, as noted by Elmira Vassileva⁷.

One of the central subjects in Molnár’s research regards the attempts and mechanisms for the implementation of various Catholic reforms in the Balkans after the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563) and the different local responses, respectively. Although the already mentioned influence of the Bosnian Franciscans in the region made them important intermediaries in the distribution of the post-Tridentine ideas, there were considerable discrepancies between the visions of Rome and the interests of the Bosnian friars and their merchant patrons⁸. This resulted in various disagreements and forms of local resistance, which continued after the foundation of the Congregation in 1622, and its attempts at centralization and stricter control on the missionary activity in the Balkans (pp. 24–27). Despite these contradictions, the distribution of the Tridentine reforms had some long-term implications in the Balkans, eventually influencing local Catholic life. Moreover, some of the reforms propagated by the missions (for example, regarding doctrine, the need for the opening of religious schools, for educating priests, etc.) in some sense also had a reformist impact on the Orthodox Church in its strife against the all-encompassing ignorance of its clergy, as is suggested by Tijana Krstić⁹. However, if put in another perspective, in addition to the various achievements, the attempts to implement the Tridentine reforms were marked in the long-term by some major failures – most notably the eventually high rates of Islamization in Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo – as noted by some authors¹⁰.

The contexts, main characteristics and eventual consequences of some of the missionary activities in the Balkans constitute another important part of Molnár’s research. Despite giving detailed information


⁸ For example, see E. Vassileva, The Catholic Reforms on the Balkans and the Bosnian Franciscans, 16th-17th Centuries, *Études balkaniques*, N 2, 2015, pp. 90–114.


on some specific missions from the period – for example, the Franciscan mission in Bulgaria (pp. 36–41) or the Jesuit mission in Ottoman Hungary (pp. 41–44) – the author also makes a wider comparative analysis of the particularities of each mission, as well as of the way the missionary visions developed over time, especially in the years before and after the foundation of the Congregation. Furthermore, the author refers to some interesting and little-known cases of programs and plans for eventual missions and ecclesiastical reorganization, which attempted to strengthen the positions of the Catholic Church on the Balkans, as illustrated by the example of the unrealized proposal of the Catholic prelate and Bishop of Bosnia Ivan Tomko Mrnavić (pp. 50–53).

A major contribution of the study under review is that the author constantly refers to the specific local Ottoman conditions, which are quite different when compared to other contexts of early modern Europe. The active participation in the Ottoman social and political life significantly influenced the local Catholic population, as is unambiguously shown by the example of the Bosnian Franciscans. In addition to the already mentioned privileges, the friars successfully adapted to the Ottoman reality, and often maintained close relations with the authorities; as noted by some authors, some of them eventually even converted to Islam. However, one should also have in mind that the Ottoman’s attitude towards the Franciscans drastically changed after the events of the Great Turkish War (1683–1699), as well as the former’s general attitude towards Catholics.

When discussing the positions of the Roman Church in Ottoman Southeast Europe, it is imperative to consider the role of the various mercantile Catholic communities – mostly Ragusan and Bosnian – and their trading networks in maintaining Catholic life in the region. Like the friars of Bosna Argentina, the merchants took advantage of the Ottoman invasion, thus expanding their activities in vast new territories. The historical context allows us to find Catholic merchants’ quarters in some of the major Ottoman cities in this period as far as Pest-Buda. Sometimes the merchants’ role in the life of the local Catholic populations can even be decisive, as the author shows in the detailed case study on the more than three-decade-long dispute over the Belgrade chapel (pp. 65–121).

The economic, social, as well as cultural processes in the period under discussion inevitably led to some irreversible demographic changes in the Balkans. In this respect, Molnár

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pays attention to the overall decrease in the Catholic population due to its gradual migration or Islamization, especially in regions of Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo and Bulgaria. Of utmost interest are the cases of some smaller Catholic communities, which practically disappeared in the period, notably the Ragusan merchant colonies, the Chiprovtsi Catholics, etc. Furthermore, the author also notes the significant Slavic migration north- and westwards in what was then the Ottoman-occupied territories of Hungary. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the period saw some active Serbian migration in vast regions of present-day Slavonia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, southern Croatia (p. 160, 163).

Although not narrowly ethno- graphic in its intentions and orientation, the book contains some valuable insights concerning various forms of religious “deviations” within Balkan Catholic communities. In this regard, the author refers to the major problem of the infiltration of elements of “popular religion” and various pre- or non-Christian folklore beliefs into the religious practices of local Catholics. Particularly, the last chapter contains empirical evidence about two religious phenomena, which were relatively common in the pre-modern Balkans, especially in rural areas – namely, what is often referred to by the contentious term “religious syncretism”, as well as the so-called crypto-Christianity\textsuperscript{12} (in this case crypto-Catholicism).

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This discussion will be somehow incomplete if we remain focused entirely on the author’s invaluable in-depth insights about the specifics of Catholicism in early modern Southeast Europe. It should also be noted that several of the problems suggested by Molnár correspond – directly or not – with wider theoretical subjects, which formally go beyond the scope of the book, but which, anyway, constitute important and ongoing debates within the social sciences. In this regard, in the paragraphs that follow, we will be concerned with three major problems alluded to by the author, namely: 1) the possibility of a distinct Balkan type of Catholic confessionlization, 2) the notion of “pre-modern nations”, and 3) the role of religion in nation-building processes with an emphasis on the case of the early-modern Albanian Catholic elite and their arguable (proto-)na-

tional implications.

As the title of the book clearly indicates, of crucial importance for Molnár’s study is the concept of “confessionalization” and its theoretical and methodological background. According to its original proponents Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, the concept denotes the processes of consolidation of confessional communities (and their identities, respectively) and the delineation of confessional boundaries in post-Reformation Europe, as well as the various relations of confessional groups to modernization and state-building. In this respect, according to Schilling, the formation of confessional identities and boundaries was an important precondition for the subsequent shaping of national consciousness in Europe. However, notwithstanding the rapid growth of the academic popularity and usage of this historical paradigm, soon it became subject to various contestations and criticism in historiography, especially in the course of the last few decades. Although in its original manifestations the category focused mainly on the conditions within Western and Central European Latin Christianity, here we are particularly concerned with its presumable applicability in different, non-Western contexts. Is it possible to adapt and use the concept within the specific social, political and cultural context of the early modern Ottoman Balkans? Can the confessionalization paradigm give us some valuable insights about the processes of confession-building (and even nation-building) of vari-


15 More on the debates in historiography about the limits and shortcomings of the confessionalization paradigm, see U. Lotz-Heumann, Confessionalization, In: A. Bamji et al. (eds.) The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation. Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 33–53.

16 On the applicability of the concept of confessionalization to non-Western regions of Europe, see U. Lotz-Heumann, The Concept of “Confessionalization”: A Historiographical Paradigm in Dispute. Memoria y Civilización, N 4, 2001, pp. 93–114. In recent years, some authors went even further and suggested the possibility of considering the usage of the concept beyond the scope of Western Christianity. For example, see A. Brüning, Confessionalization in the Slavia Orthodoxa (Belorussia, Ukraine, Russia)? – Potential and Limits of a Western Historiographical Concept. In: T. Bremer (ed.) Religion and the Conceptual Boundary in Central and Eastern Europe: Encounters of Faiths. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 66–97.
ous communities – in our discussion, Catholic ones – in a situation where no Christian state or state-sponsored church institutions existed at all? In his research, Molnár offers some comprehensive answers to these and other related questions.

According to the author, there is considerable evidence to talk about a “Balkan model of Catholic Confessionalization” in the early modern Ottoman Balkans (pp. 174–177). Already in the introduction of the book, Molnár outlines three major specifics of the confessionalization in the Balkans, which greatly differ from similar processes in other parts of Europe – namely, the non-Christian context, which made political and confessional territorialization practically impossible; the substantial local resistance against the papacy’s attempts for Catholic reforms; the important, sometimes even decisive role of the merchants and their economic networks (pp. 10–11). In this regard, some of these patterns resulted in a dynamic, non-homogenous, “hybrid” Catholic confessionalization, which according to the author shared more similarities with the processes within the Orthodox Church (p. 176). However, the confessionalization impulses had some reformist imprint on the Catholic communities, which, if one takes a more enthusiastic approach, can be considered as a major step towards the consolidation of national consciousness. For instance, Molnár sees in some features of the Catholic confessionalization – for example, the literary activities of the missions initiated by the Congregation – an invaluable role in formulating the early concepts of national identity within some Balkan ethnic communities (p. 175).

In this direction, the author refers to the fundamental theoretical question of the existence of a “pre-modern”/“early modern” nation (pp. 135–138). In his analysis, he mentions several times the concepts of nation and nationalism in the “early modern” (and even in the “medieval”) sense, apparently alluding to the presence and respectively the persistence of some forms of (proto-)national consciousness, which already existed in the era before classical modernity, where most observers locate the “birth” of nations. The author reasonably points to the importance in these processes of the pre-modern ethnic core (or ethnie), which was offered as a concept by the so-called ethnosymbolist approach in the field and its main proponent Anthony D. Smith. It is also promising that Molnár refers to some new studies within the field of nations and nationalism, which

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18 For example, see C. Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism: An Alternative...*
try to place the debate beyond the traditional modernist interpretations, which, although having indisputable contributions, also share some significant limits. In this respect, it is reasonable to expect that early modern confessionalization processes – in our case within Catholic communities – provide some important empirical evidence of the gradual changes in self-perception and identity among its bearers and eventually resulted in the formation of a more distinct sense of belonging, which in some way resembles that of the modern national identity. However, it is reasonable to ask to what extent the “awareness” of one’s ethnicity/nationality within a narrow segment of an ethnic community (resembling what one finds as “elite” in the context of modernity) corresponds with and influences the notions of groupness and belonging shared by the mass population in the Balkans, which is usually described as being ignorant, or at least predominantly indifferent to the strict notion of nationality until the formation of modern bureaucratic states in the 19th century. With this important assumption in mind, the necessity of further analyses of the roles of confessionalization in the formation of (proto-)national identity in the Ottoman Balkans is quite obvious.

These comments inevitably lead us to another wide theoretical question, which implicitly found its place in the text of Molnár – the presumable a priori formational role of religion in the nation-building process, at least when the Balkans are concerned. In the introductory remarks, the author emphasizes the “significant proto-nationalist identity-preserving functions” of the major church institutions (both Catholic and Orthodox) in the Ottoman Empire, which eventually forged close relations between religion and national identity among Balkan ethnic groups (pp. 7–8). The case of the Albanian Catholic community as a pre-modern (proto-)nation suggested by the author (pp. 135–156) is more than interesting in this respect. According to Molnár, in the course of the confessionalization processes in the early 17th century, a small literary community of Catholic Albanians emerged – among the most prominent of whom Pietro Massarecchi – which conceptualized and propagated a humanist notion of Albanian identity and heritage, of

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20 For example, see М. Мазовер, Балканите. Кратка история. София, Прозорец, 2005, с. 77–114.
course, in a strict confessional framework. The author finds in these processes an opportunity to suggest the existence of some sort of an early modern pre-Romantic (i.e. pre-Rilindija) Albanian nationalist sentiment (p. 150). Although valuable and plausible, these insights suggest the necessity for further and deeper discussions about the possibility to speak of the formation of an early-modern Albanian national community and its presumable influence on later Romantic conceptualizations of the Albanian national idea.

But why didn’t this intellectual Catholic tradition succeed in becoming a leading force of a nationalist movement on a wider scale around two and a half centuries later? Molnár explains this “failure” mostly with the dramatic changes in the situation of the Balkan Catholic population after the Great Turkish War (pp. 155–156). The post-war period witnessed a considerable decrease in the intellectual capacities of Catholicism, related mainly to its huge demographic losses (whole Catholic communities were destroyed or expelled) and practical de-intellectualization (the urban Catholic elite drastically diminished, and the religion continued its existence mostly as a rural phenomenon). These were also the times of considerably higher rates of Islamization and a parallel social and economic strengthening of Albanian Muslims. This leads the author to the conclusion that “Catholic Albanian national identity failed to endure into the 19th century” when a newly emerged elite eventually conceptualized a different notion of Albanian nationality (p. 155). However, it should be noted that Catholicism as an intellectual tradition didn’t cease completely within the circles of the Albanian intelligentsia; rather, it had some later manifestations with considerable cultural impulses within the process of Albanian nation-building, as noted by Robert Elsie with the notorious example of the Scutarine (modern-day Shkodër) Catholic literacy tradition. From this perspective, another explanation for the presumed “failure” of Albanian Catholicism as the driving force behind nation-building should consider the important fact that the processes which Molnár describes concerning the early 17th century developed primarily on a markedly limited “elite” level. Overall, the humanist tradition of early-modern Albanian Catholics, no matter how culturally significant, didn’t find enough popular resonance and thus, didn’t become a sustainable basis for wider segments of the Albanian-speaking population, back then.

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still with a considerable Catholic proportion. The historical context allows us to mention other, sometimes quite coherent and intellectually-grounded projects for nation-formation, which, however, almost completely failed in their realization on a more popular scale. The example of so-called Dalmatianism, i.e. the notion of a specific regional and cultural particularity of Dalmatians, is axiomatic in this sense.

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We may conclude that with its in-depth analysis – on a macro- and microhistorical level – Antal Molnár’s book represents a major effort in the academic field of the history of early modern Catholicism, in general, and the development of Catholic identity in the Ottoman Balkans, in particular. The author has based his arguments on a wide range of hitherto unpublished sources, as well as on relevant theoretical approaches, which contributes significantly to our further knowledge on the subject under consideration. Despite a detailed view of the history of diplomatic relations, and of the various missionary visions and the respective attempts for their implementation, the study also has some achievements with regard to the religious ethnography of the Balkans, which often remains largely neglected by many scholars. Of particular importance, and thus, among the main contributions of the text is that, in addition to offering comprehensive answers to important questions, the book also outlines directions for further research.

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