
One of the leading Italian publishing houses, *Viella* from Rome, has taken particular interest over the last fifteen years in the social and cultural history of the Croatian coast and Balkan inland. For this purpose, a special editorial series has been launched under the title *Interadria. Culture dell’Adriatico*. Among the twenty-two titles published to date, the latest is the work of the eminent middle-generation Hungarian historian, Antal Molnár, concerned with the position of the Balkan Catholics in the seventeenth century.

Full professor of Early Modern History at the Faculty of Philosophy, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, and vice-president of the History Board of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in international circles Molnár has been acknowledged as an expert in church history, with focus on the relations between the Holy See and the Balkans during Ottoman rule. After twenty-five years of zealous study of the topic, the author has selected eight essays which have been expanded and revised, in addition to a new chapter on the influence of the Catholic missions on the consolidation of the Albanian nation in the seventeenth century. The final version of the book has been prepared in the context of the research project “Christianity versus Islam. At a Crossroads between Crusades and Coexistence in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The central research issue concerns the forming of ethnic communities based on confession. The title *Confessionalization on the Frontier* suggests that the position of the Balkan Catholics between the spirit of Catholic Reformation and Ottoman rule is being envisaged as a process of parallel development of the church, state and society. The author justifies his focus on the Balkan Catholics by their high mobility, fairly strong political links with foreign centres, and the abounding written sources, which makes them a more convenient object of study than their Orthodox and Muslim counterparts.

The relative minority of this confessional group may be clearly read from the data on the number of Catholics in Bosnia. Based mainly on the documents from the Vatican Archives and secondary literature provided by Croatian historians of the older generation, it has been estimated that during Turkish wars of the latter half and late seventeenth century around 150,000 Catholics fled from Bosnia to the Habsburg Slavonia and Hungary, or to Venetian Dalmatia, so that in the mid-eighteenth century only 40,000 Catholics remained in Bosnia (pp. 180-181). Although that number increased to almost 100,000 by the end of the eighteenth century, this colossal demographic loss had far-reaching consequences on the social structure of population—virtual disappearance of the middle class—which significantly slowed down all the later attempts at modernisation. An additional hindrance was a competition of the three major forces in their approach to consolidate the Catholic community in the Balkans—Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Congregatio de propaganda fide*), Franciscan province of *Bosna Argentina* and Dubrovnik Republic.

The establishment of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622 on the basis of the Tridentine principles, the author sees as a strong impetus to the work of all Catholic missions, marked by centralisation tendencies and increased supervision over all missionary activities. In practice, this implied far more frequent missions of the apostolic visitors from Rome, who were given a special assignment to map out and describe the geographical, historical, religious and ethnographic features of each region they were sent to (p. 139). However, frowned upon by the Ottomans—traditionally neutral towards the Christian communities on the territory under their rule, yet fervent opponents of the growth of their religious institutions—papal missionaries in the Balkans also had to cope with unexpected resistance of the Franciscan order.
Underlying the mentioned resistance was Franciscan traditionalism, their discontent with the Tridentine reforms and the fear of losing the privileges granted to them both by the Roman popes and Ottoman sultans. The author observes that because of their missionary role, rooted in the Middle Ages, the Franciscans in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not strictly adhere to the rules of poverty, but received alms and bequests, mainly using them to build churches. This led to a conflict not only with new missionaries sent with the support of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith—most often secular clergy or Jesuits—but equally so with the Ragusans. Particularly noteworthy is the contribution of the chaplains of the Ragusan merchant posts throughout the Balkans and Hungary as far as Buda as the third important element in the highly complex mosaic of the Catholic communities on the territory under Ottoman rule.

On the example of a thirty-year conflict over Belgrade Church (1612-1643) between the Franciscans and the Ragusans, whose tiny trade colonies always had special chaplains, the author most exhaustively expounds his thesis that the religious and commercial, or social conflicts, if viewed more broadly, overlapped. The chapel dedicated to St. John the Baptist, erected in the south part of the Ragusan merchant quarter in Belgrade and formally under jurisdiction of the Franciscan Convent in Srebenica, became the subject of dispute when Ragusan merchants tried to replace the Franciscans with the Jesuits. The change had taken place in the 1560s, when Ragusan chaplains in Belgrade were replaced by Bosnian Franciscans, coupled by a rapid rise of wealthy Bosnian merchant families, such as the Brnjaković, who tended to threaten the centuries-old Ragusan positions. The Franciscan-Jesuit rivalry over the Belgrade Church ended with the Franciscan victory and the establishment of an independent Bosnian merchant colony in Belgrade in 1626 (p. 98), while the religious controversy turned into a commercial issue regarding the control of trade in the Balkan part of the Ottoman Empire. Although the Ottomans eventually banished the Franciscans, this blow upon Dubrovnik prestige was far too heavy and finally spurred the closing of Ragusan trade colonies in the Balkans. Noteworthy is the author’s assessment about the students surpassing their masters in trade: “how the Ragusans acquired know-how from the Venetians in the 13th century, the Bosnians learned the art of trade from the Ragusans in the 15th century” (p. 95).

Gradual expansion of the Franciscan Bosnian province to other lands was looked upon with concern and suspicion by the Ragusans. This was the case of Bulgaria, where the Bosnian Franciscans performed their missionary work from the end of the sixteenth century. The attempts of fra Petar Zlojutrić, whom the pope installed bishop of Sofia in 1601, to impose higher revenue ended with an intervention of the Ragusan Senate in favour of don Vicko Agustinov, chaplain of the then Ragusan trade colony. The field of this dispute also encompassed Slavonia, where the Bosnian Franciscans, having spread beyond the Sava River, acted as missionaries particularly near Požega, Velika and Našice, but also as far as Hungary in the 1580s. In these disputes, though reluctantly, Rome supported the Franciscans, Bosnian merchants contributed to the development of Bosnian Catholic culture, promoting the printing of books in the bosančica script and influencing the rise of Bosnian national consciousness (p. 96-97).

In addition, Molnár stresses the major contribution of the Catholic Church to the development of yet another national community in the Balkans—that of the Albanians. He agrees with the view put forward by the Orientalist Hasan Kaleshi, by which the Albanians did not have their own state nor language culture in the Middle Ages as in the case of Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, so that the Ottoman Empire, having destroyed other states in the Balkans, saved the Albanian ethnic group from extinction and complete assimilation. Under Ottoman rule, the Albanians expanded their
ethnic territory towards Kosovo and Macedonia and managed to preserve their tribal organisation, which came to the verge of extinction under earlier Byzantine and Serbian rule (p. 137). It is interesting to note that from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century as many as twenty-five out of ninety-two Ottoman viziers were Albanians, which tells of the strong Islamization among them. However, the key role in the shaping of the Albanian nation the author assigns to Pietro Massarecchi (alias Pjetër Mazreku), born in Prizren and 1624-1643 archbishop of Bar, who fought for closer connection of the Albanian Catholics with Rome, and their independence from the Slav Catholics (p. 143). Interpreted in that light is also the resistance of the Albanian lower clergy against Ragusan missionaries in Ulcinj and Lezhë, who had no knowledge of the Albanian language and customs, and who were even accused of appropriating for the Dubrovnik Church the means originally assigned to the Albanian clergy.

The prayer books as the first books printed in Albanian, along with the bursaries for talented Albanian boys to study at Roman colleges displayed a standard pattern of how Rome cared for the interests of the Catholic community, promoting literacy and culture. Sadly, the same catastrophe that hit the Catholics in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the end of the seventeenth century during the great Turkish wars also caused irreparable damage to the Albanian community, which, according to the author’s objective assessment, ultimately resulted in the Holy See’s loss of interest in the Balkans and withdrawal from bigger projects in support of the Catholics on the territory of the Ottoman Empire.

The research into the life of the Balkan Catholics would not be complete without addressing the relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church (the author intentionally omitted the Greek ethnic element, drawing attention to the far too great differences in relation to the dominant Slavic corpus). Having touched upon sporadic tensions in the relations between the two Churches, due mainly to the efforts of the Serbian episcopes to impose taxes upon the Catholic community, the author centres on the attempts to establish Church union in the course of the seventeenth century. He argues that all these attempts failed because of the cultural and national role of the Orthodox Church among the Serbs, but also due to the relative autonomy it enjoyed in the Ottoman Empire (p. 157). In view of the number of its members, Serbian Orthodox Church under the Ottoman rule had become the largest Christian community in the Balkans, yet the clergy was ignorant and apparently disinclined towards the reforms advocated by the Catholic side after the Council of Trent (p. 160).

The conclusion about the remarkable ignorance of the Serbian Orthodox clergy the author supported with the fact that an incomparably smaller number of Serbian written sources of that time has been preserved in relation to the sources from the Catholic circles. Connections with his central research topic on the role of Catholic Church in the shaping of the nations in the Balkans Molnár sees in the fact that Serbian Orthodox Church inherited the notion of medieval statehood of the Nemanjić dynasty, having become the bearer of Serbian national identity. Patriarch also represented the political head of the people (pp. 160-161). Similarities may also be drawn in the negative influence of popular beliefs on religious culture, especially in the form of Crypto-Christianity, a phenomenon observed earlier in the Albanian case (p. 141).

One minor flaw in this comparative survey is that no space has been devoted to the position and contribution of the Jewish community in the Balkans, apart from a cursory mention of the Split port, established in 1592 upon the prompting of a young Jew Daniel Rodriguez, which encouraged the Bosnian merchants in the hope that their collaboration with Venice would finally remove the Ragusans from their leading position in Balkan trade (pp. 95-96). While, in reference to this, the author discusses the weakening of Venetian influence in the Balkans because the Dalmatian dioceses under Venetian control avoided missionary work on the territory under Ottoman
authority (pp. 57-58), surprisingly, there is no mention of the Habsburg role in the Balkans and south Hungary at the time. A fleeting glimpse of this may only be found in the episode on Ivan Tomko Mrnavić (p. 60). We follow the lifepath of this canon of the Bishopric of Šibenik, who realised that in the current circumstances it was not possible to reorganise the Catholic Church in the Balkans through the plan he personally drew and sent to the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith in Rome. Thus he left Dalmatia and sought refuge in Hungary, where under the auspices of the archbishop of Esztergom he first became the canon of the Zagreb Cathedral, then the general vicar of the Bishopric of Zagreb, and finally the bishop of Bosnia.

The author rightly observes that the Franciscan province of Bosna Argentina was not a monolithic block, and that, on the level of micro-historical approach, it is possible to make a clear distinction between the positions held by certain convents. While Fojnica, as a leading friary, offered long resistance to the attempts from Rome, other friaries, such as those in Sutjeska and Kreševno, were more inclined towards agreements and negotiations. On the other hand, by the mid-seventeenth century the convents in Srebrenica and Visoko had already lost former influence due to the rapid fall in the number of Catholics. These circumstances certainly called for reforms on the level of the entire Catholic community in the Balkans, conceived not only by the fathers in Rome, but also clerics assigned to pastoral field work, such as Ivan Tomko Mrnavić or the Jesuit Bartol Kašić, with emphasis on the promotion of the culture of written word and education of the youth at Italian seminaries, as well as on stronger church surveillance through more frequent apostolic visits to these remote lands. Equally attractive are the unusual fates of ordinary people, such as that of Magdalena Pereš-Vuksanović known as La Schiavona, whose life struggle to preserve the vow of virginity—because of which she even disguised herself into a man and served in the army, until she found shelter in Rome as a servant and finally as a nun—has become a topic of hagiographies described by Roman Oratorians in 1639.

Equipped with a small glossary of Ottoman and South Slavic terms pertaining to certain religious or economic issues, along with twelve maps which show the distribution of the Catholic and Orthodox church institutions in the Balkans from the beginning of the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century, the book is an indispensable source of diverse information and possible research approaches to early modern church history of the Balkan Peninsula. In Molnár’s book we shall find reliable, comprehensive and well-argued answers to a long succession of research issues related to specific religious communities but equally so to the turbulent lives of the individuals of different rank. Therefore, we are indebted to the author and publisher for yet another valuable contribution to the understanding of the culture of the Adriatic and the inland of the Balkan Peninsula, with due attention paid to Dubrovnik and its past.

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