

Antal Molnár, *Confessionalization on the Frontier. The Balkan Catholics between Roman Reform and Ottoman Reality*, Interadria – Culture dell'Adriatico 22, Rome: Viella, 2019, 266 pp. ISBN 978-88-3313-080-4. €44.00.

“De-centering” historical narratives is now an established historiographical fashion. More often than not, it is a maneuver designed to “provincialize Europe,” to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s term, by shifting attention away from the West to “the Rest.” An essential counterpart to this revisionism has been a focus on the frontier zones of history. This collection of nine carefully selected essays, one previously unpublished, by the distinguished Hungarian scholar Antal Molnár, former director of the Hungarian Academy in Rome and author, inter alia, of the well-received study of Catholic missions in Ottoman Hungary in the aftermath of the battle of Lepanto (*Le Saint-Siège, Raguse et les missions catholiques de la Hongrie Ottomane 1572–1647*, Rome: Accademia d’Ungheria, 2007), is to be particularly welcomed. This is because it has so much to teach us about Balkan Catholicism at a particularly significant juncture in the history of both Roman Catholic missions and of the Ottoman Empire in Europe.

As the volume’s title suggests, Molnár has chosen to link the essays by explaining that, collectively, they test the hermeneutic traction of the paradigm of confessionalization in the whole of the Balkans, excluding the Greek lands, but including Ottoman Hungary. Framed geographically in such terms – which may hurt sensibilities in the northernmost part of the region thus contemplated but works fruitfully to remind us of the multiple geographical frames applicable – the essays offer a complementary gallery of case studies whose whole, even without a conclusion or afterword, definitely does amount to more than the sum of the parts. Essentially, Molnár finds that “Catholic confessionalisation in lands where Islam was the state religion [...] developed with many more idiosyncrasies [...] best described by the dynamic of entanglement” (10–11). The formula does not do justice to the revelations that this collection offers to those of us who are trying to understand the changes Roman Catholicism underwent in the early modern period, in the course of becoming the first global religion. To begin with, Molnár takes us to a region where it was merchants, not a feudal, land-owning ruling class, that ultimately shaped religious developments. Moreover, in the Bosnian countryside, for example, it was the Franciscans who sustained Catholicism not Rome or the local bishop (Chapter Two). When, after its foundation in 1622, the Roman Congregation de Propaganda Fide tried to interfere, it had to compete for authority with the Holy Office, whose conferment of faculties to missionaries to absolve certain categories of sin – including the all-too-common concubinage of parish

priests – together with the settling of other uncertainties (*dubia*) was vital to the whole project (Chapter Three).

One of the themes linking several of the essays is the need to be sensitive to local liturgical practice, which of course included the calendar. “Strict imposition of the Gregorian calendar,” for example, “would have seriously endangered the work of the Jesuit mission” (43). Chapter Four, which points to the usefulness of Oliver Jens Schmitt’s employment of the term “Venetian South Eastern Europe,” also emphasizes the importance of responding to local liturgical needs: in the form of supplying office books, printed in Venice, which had been revised in accordance with stipulations adumbrated by the Council of Trent, in Glagolitic script. Chapter Five provides a fascinating case study of the more than thirty-year long feud over the Catholic chapel in Belgrade, which was fought between the Franciscans and the Jesuits, but where it was the Christian merchants who called the shots: “Whoever happened to have ownership over it [the chapel] also ruled the Belgrade market” (121). Similarly, it was the merchants of Ragusa who played a determining role in the struggle for the chapel of Novi Pazar, a key trading station on the main Ragusa-Istanbul road (Chapter Six). The previously unpublished chapter (Seven) on Albanian nation-building is particularly suggestive for the analysis it provides of the important role played by “the church and clergy rather than scholars and representatives of the state who provided the institutional framework and ideological munition” (136). Here we meet several vividly drawn characters, none more so perhaps than Pietro Massarechi (Pjetër Mazreku), Apostolic visitor in 1623 and Archbishop of Antivari (1624–1634). Having spent eight years at the Collegio Romano, he lobbied (unsuccessfully) for the foundation of a joint Serbian-Albanian College in Rome and desired the standardization of Serbo-Croat (considering Serbian to be the Tuscan of the Balkans). Furthermore, he denied the Asian origins of the Albanian people – favoring Macedonia with its military associations. He then linked Albanian virtues with their Catholicism and, by extension, argued for the significance of his nation for the battle against the infidel Ottomans. In place of a dedicated Albanian college in Rome, the archdiocese of Antivari and diocese of Skopje sent a total of fifty-nine students to the two Italian Illyrian colleges of Loreto and Fermo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, at Rome’s Collegio Urbano, no fewer than sixteen students who completed their studies there between 1636 and 1686 were from the Balkans (including the College’s first five students, admitted in 1633). One of these students, Massarecchi’s great nephew, Pietro Bogdani, was author of *Corneus Prophetarum*, printed in Padua in 1685, which was the first original book published in Albanian.

A particularly effective chapter is that (Nine) concerning the Balkan missions conducted during the pontificate of Innocent XI (1676–1689). This enables Molnár to frame to particular effect the devastation of the Balkan Catholic Church which occurred as a result of the Great Turkish War (1683–1699) between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. Although, it was a loss which was compensated for, to a not insignificant degree, by the exodus of the Serbian and Albanian Catholics to Hungary and Dalmatia where they founded new friaries, often taking with them objects and images whose desecration at the hands of the infidel imparted a greater aura of holiness than they had before. The final chapter consists of the curious story of the seventeenth-century Bosnian female virgin, Magdalena Pereš-Vuksanović, “la Schiavona,” who, in order to retain her virginity from the attentions of both Christian and Muslim suitors, having spent several years adopting a male persona, fled her native Balkans (still in male disguise), and after several picaresque adventures, ended her life in Rome as a nun in odour of sanctity in 1670.

Molnár concludes that we should view her as the first recorded *tobelija* (by some two hundred years). They were Balkan females who adopted a male persona in response to local community needs. However, there is enough in what the author has written previously in this chapter, and in the book as a whole, to argue that the repertoire of Balkan Catholic culture and behavior possessed resources to explain this particular example. Indeed, it is an apt note to end on; since this excellent essay collection provides such a rich and suggestive conspectus of early modern Catholicism from a perspective that, save for the honorable exception of Tadhg o’hAnnrachain’s fine study, *Catholic Europe 1592–1648: Centre and Peripheries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), has been so woefully neglected in Anglophone scholarship, and so unnecessarily subjected to nationalist re-readings in the region covered by Molnár.

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