
Review by Matthew Vester, West Virginia University.

In 2011 Damien Tricoire completed a dissertation in German under the dual direction of Martin Schulze-Wessel (Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, Munich) and Denis Crouzet (Sorbonne, Paris). Tricoire is now a professor of early modern history at the Martin-Luther-Universität in Halle-Wittenberg and has recently published a French translation of his thesis. This is an ambitious four-part work divided into seventeen chapters that examines the intersection of religious and political culture in three European polities (France, Bavaria, and Poland-Lithuania) during the first four decades of the seventeenth century, making numerous interrelated, substantive, and methodological claims. This review will first outline some of those key claims. It will then review the book’s four parts, highlighting its various historiographic interventions, and, finally, offer some comments and critiques.

The goal of the book is to show how religious representations affected politics during the age of Catholic Reform (roughly 1600-1660). Rather than portraying religion and politics as contrary motivating forces (an approach that has led to explanatory dead ends), Tricoire sees them as historically situated and complementary, as overlapping elements in a calculating decision-making process that took divine favor and supernatural agency into account. Religion should be seen as a component of seventeenth-century rationality, not as something external to it. “Politico-religious calculation” refers to the way in which actors assessed the likelihood that a given policy would achieve success, as a function of God’s favor or disfavor of it. Tricoire argues that this way of conceptualizing the actions of early modern rulers helps guard against anachronistic assumptions about rationality and irrationality. He rejects the idea that there were “real interests” lurking behind religious “propaganda” and seeks to take seriously actors’ statements about why they did what they did.

The author views the Catholic Reform as a response to an age of anxiety. “Universalism,” or the perspective that identifies a unity of purpose and action between heaven and earth and invites human participation therein, reassured the believer/subject whose terrestrial ruler engaged in this spiritual-material unity through politico-religious calculation. A chief means by which rulers demonstrated their universalist engagement was through adopting the Virgin Mary as official or quasi-official patron of their states. Mary herself embodied the link between heaven and earth. Her queenly status offered powerful patronage to rulers who submitted their
political destinies to divine direction and faithfully executed their roles as dispensers of God's justice.

Tricoire’s comparative method enables him to compare the consequences of the Catholic Reform in various places. He shows how the same mechanisms and intentions led to different results in different French, Bavarian, and Polish-Lithuanian contexts. Varied outcomes stemmed from both structural and contingent differences in these contexts. For example, in France, members of the Parlement of Paris who represented an “esprit gallican et érasmisant” (p. 372) until the 1620s opposed the universalism of the Catholic Reform. In Poland-Lithuania, the Catholic Reform expressed itself in part through aggression toward non-Catholics, especially Muslims, and a new Crusading impulse. In Bavaria (add the Habsburg lands), the idea of “universalité d’allégeance” (p. 373) meant that the one who fought to spread the faith would be assisted by God. This transformed the conflict in Central Europe into a religious war whose cessation became possible only when the politico-religious calculation weakened. While state power was reinforced by Catholic Reforms in France and Bavaria, such reforms eventually weakened the Polish-Lithuanian monarchy.

The first part of the book offers an interpretation of the “Catholic Reform,” beginning with its definition. Tricoire sees the Council of Trent as the moment that created Catholicism’s boundaries and marked a shift between “Catholic Reform” as a movement influenced by Erasmian humanism and one, after 1575 or so, that condemned Erasmus and heralded “une confession catholique pleinement constituée” (p. 43). He agrees with Bernd Hamm that late medieval religion was an anxiety-filled quest for certainty, and thus represents Catholic Reform as “une œuvre de désangoissement” (p. 47). His claim that the seventeenth century experienced less eschatological anxiety might not persuade some. The Catholic Reform was thus marked not by dogmatic or ecclesiastical change, but by an evaporation of anxiety and a focus on transcendence that differed from medieval immanentist Christianity.

Chapter two introduces the idea of “universalism.” Mary became a queen mother rather than the mother of the suffering Christ. Her elevated and regal sovereignty was universal, binding heaven and earth. She sat at the top of a celestial hierarchy and graced her earthly clients with her authority. Her universal appeal transcended the cults of local saints and promised access to the highest heavenly realms. It also extended abroad to the sites of early modern missionary activity. Mary’s status as the human mother of the Incarnate Word reinforced the link between heaven and earth. Devotion to her was both individual and collective, and pious practices dedicated to Mary served to render believers less anxious. In Bavaria the erection of Marian columns displayed her as crowned, with scepter, holding her son, participating as a sovereign in God’s universal glory. In France Mary was uncrowned, and her status as intimate mediator between man and God was stressed. This mediatory role made Mary the perfect state patroness. For Tricoire, “l’universalisation de la religion a rendu possible la propagation d’un patronage commun à tous” (p. 76). The ideas of hierarchy and transcendence, rather than distancing God from believers, integrated them into God’s glorious realm.

Tricoire then discusses the variety of strands within the Catholic Reform: urban and rural; Jesuit, Capuchin, and Dominican; neo-Stoic, and so forth. He considers Jansenism outside of the Catholic Reform since it lacked a universalist dimension, stressing instead an anxiety-driven ascetic retreat from the world rather than an affirmation of the believer’s ability to participate in the divine. Tricoire suggests that there was neither a specific French kind of spirituality nor
a Polish one. Bavaria, however, provided leadership in the Catholic reform. France and Bavaria differed from Poland in that rulers received more support for their politico-religious projects in the former places than in Poland-Lithuania.

Chapter four claims that the edicts of toleration during the religious wars disenchanted the monarchy, and that Henri III's efforts to re-sacralize were medieval and anxious. Henri IV's approach at first was more neo-stoic, distanced from religious passion, and tied to the consolidation of the French state. The state stood before God and was endowed with God's sacred power, although in France the Jesuits appeared to the Gallican and Erasmian parlementaires to threaten the monarchy—a kind of conflict not experienced in Poland or Bavaria. With a few exceptions, there were no general conflicts between spiritual and temporal power in the early 1600s. Catholic reason of state theorists, like Botero, believed that “good” reason of state indicated, ultimately, that morality and politics were not separated. Machiavellianism would ultimately lead to the state’s ruin, according to these theorists. Tricoire thus argues that reason of state theory exemplified the integration of heaven and earth that was central to the Catholic Reform. This argument complements Richard Tuck's discussion of the differences between scholastic political thought (stressing the constraints of the natural law) and humanist approaches (voluntarist justifications of taking action for the glory of the state) during this period by re-Catholicizing “reason of state”.3 By the time of his death, Henri IV had been won over to the Catholic Reform and he “renonçait à toute compétence spirituelle pour jouer le rôle de garant et de promoteur de l’ordre catholique” (p. 103).

In the second part of his book, Tricoire documents the appearance of a new princely and state model of rule that corresponded to the Catholic Reform. These three chapters look at new programs, new conflicts, and new patron saints. While historians of France have asked how the shift from the League to seventeenth-century absolutism took place, some describing it as a move to “devout monarchy,” France has not really been placed in the broader context of Catholic Reform. In Poland-Lithuania, writers stressed the exercise of justice as the key function granted by God to the ruler. In Poland, Jesuits began to issue a critique of serfdom and the awful conditions experienced by the poor, suggesting that God desired political and social reform. Maximilian of Bavaria offered a model of a devout prince who pursued anti-heresy policies, oversaw morality, and engaged in what scholars like Heinz Schilling called “social disciplining.”4 But Tricoire argues that these should be understood as policies meant to shield the duke’s subjects from divine wrath and to secure justice within his duchy. In this way, a proper understanding of “confessionalization” must take religion seriously.

In France and Poland, though, there was resistance to the program of devout monarchy. French parlementaires opposed the Jesuits, but “ne semblent pas avoir perçu à quel point les idées défendues par la Réforme catholique étaient différentes de celles de la Ligue” (p. 126). The difference was that while the League had collapsed the distinction between religion and politics, the new Catholic Reformers saw these as distinct spheres that nonetheless worked in harmony. Similarly, noble opposition to the Jesuits, which came from Catholics, not Protestants, was an element in the Polish revolt of 1606-8. Only in the early seventeenth century did Poland begin to be depicted as a bastion of Christianity against non-believers, following worsening relations with the Ottomans in the later 1500s. Some writers advocated for war against the Turks as a form of penance. By the time that war broke out in 1620, though, the opposition to it had dissipated, largely because of a shift in noble attitudes. There was new support among the
nobles for offensive warfare against non-Christians aiming to glorify God, inspired partly by the creation of a new military order dedicated to the Immaculate Conception in 1619. This crusading ideal was absent in France and Bavaria. The universalization of the Catholic Reform prompted rulers to seek “un ancrage divin plus profond” (p. 147) for their states. While there had been local patron saints in Bavaria, Poland, and France, they had not really been nationalized, and they failed to seduce the masses in the way that Mary could.

Part three outlines the growing influence of politico-religious representations in French, Bavarian, and Polish-Lithuanian politics from 1620 through the 1640s. It begins with the establishment of the Bavarian model, where Mary was first presented as the protectress of the state in a 1615 text by the Jesuit Matthäus Rader. During the same year a bronze statue of Mary was placed on the façade of the ducal residence in Munich, a position taken up “dans un contexte à la fois dynastique et universaliste” (p. 165). Marian banners were carried into the Battle of White Mountain (the 1620 victory that helped spread Marian devotion), the prince patronized Marian pilgrimage sites, and new Marian feasts were declared in 1629 and 1638. After Munich escaped destruction during the Thirty Years War, an annual outdoor Mass was decreed (1635) and a Marian column was erected (1637). The column symbolized how Catholic universalism transcended local dynastic cults and drew in the wider population. In France and Poland, military victories encouraged devotion to Mary, especially to Our Lady of Victory, in the early 1620s. Marian columns began to spread all over the empire. Marian patronage itself appeared to signify political autonomy, or “la prétention de constituer un État” (p. 179). War was part of a universalist tendency within the Catholic reform, in that it revealed God’s justice. For Tricoire, the interests of actors in conflicts like the Thirty Years War were defined within the framework of the universalism of the Catholic Reform. But this position had the effect of pushing Lutheran princes into the arms of the Calvinists after 1630, thus enabling the triumph of Gustavus Adolphus. The politico-religious calculus thus made peace impossible. In Vienna new arguments emerged by 1635 that God might choose to punish believers for their sins, that God’s will is not always knowable, and that it was presumptuous to expect victory. Tricoire views Mary’s patronage of the Bavarian state neither as the driver of religious war, nor as a simple cloak to cover power politics, but as a dynamic element that forced Bavarian elites to confront God’s expectations and to seek “une meilleure intégration dans la hiérarchie de l’Amour” (p. 194).

In France the monarchy also engaged in various devotional practices in which the king took up a position of humility and represented himself as an instrument of God’s justice, tying the earthly and celestial spheres together, not in order to exert social control but to unify the kingdom under God. A key question was how the French kings could portray themselves as Catholic rulers obedient to God’s will and then ally themselves with Protestants against other Catholic rulers. Tricoire takes seriously French arguments that God wanted the European state system to be preserved, because states were his instruments. For that reason, he favored a war by France against the Habsburgs for the purpose of counteracting a hegemonic force within this state system. This would be a way by which the French helped secure divine justice. According to Richelieu, “servir l’État signifiait contribuer à la réalisation de la volonté divine” (p. 211). Heretics could not be converted by force anyway. The state order was instituted by God and deserved to be defended. The dévots who opposed this view did so from the perspective of offering alternatives that better secured the French state. Thus, rather than an opposition between religion and politics, this was a conflict between two policies, both of which included religious calculations. Only the Jansenists had fundamentally different politico-religious views
and saw no divine role for the state system. In 1638 Louis XIII dedicated France to Mary, not by pronouncing vows in a church, but by issuing letters patent that were printed and distributed across the kingdom, along with ordinances requiring local preaching, processions, public prayers, and the establishment of the Feast of the Assumption as a state-sponsored festival.

In Poland-Lithuania, the idea of engaging in a universal order made expansionist foreign policy attractive, especially after the victory over the Turks at Khotyn in 1621. Writers celebrated God’s favor for the monarchy and were not contradicted prior to the 1640s. The high point of this tendency was the early part of Ladislas IV’s reign (1633-48). In Poland, Catholic Reformers did not emphasize the king’s judicial function as much as they did in France, probably because Polish nobles were divided on the topic. In 1633 Ladislas founded a confraternity dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, but it was criticized by some nobles for disrupting noble egalitarianism. Ladislas also encountered some challenges in generating support from the nobles for an offensive war against non-Christians. For these reasons, Tricoire describes Marian state patronage in Poland as “embryonnaire” compared to Bavaria and France. One of the key differences between Poland-Lithuania and the other polities analyzed was that “la dimension étatique de la construction universaliste était peu développée” (p. 266), leaving Polish subjects unintegrated into the Catholic Reform project.

The last part of the book explores the challenges faced by the French and Polish monarchs by the 1640s. Tricoire shows that both parlementaire and princely Frondeurs included religious symbols in their propaganda. For him, the Mazarinades were “marquées par l’imaginaire universaliste” (p. 273) that stressed harmony between heaven and earth. They acknowledged the king’s sacredness and claimed Mary for their side. Anne of Austria was deeply devoted to Mary, and she and others represented the birth of Louis, the “Dieudonné,” as a gift of God. She consecrated her regency to Mary in 1643, appropriating her husband’s vow. Tricoire argues that the defeat of the Fronde was due in large part to “la prégnance des représentations politico-religieuses propagées par la Réforme catholique” (p. 301), and to the inability of the Frondeurs to develop a “sacralité alternative au système universaliste de gouvernement” (p. 312).

The Polish monarchy saw a different outcome. Jean Casimir succeeded his brother in 1648, and immediately suffered military losses. He remained dedicated to Mary and followed his brother’s model of politico-religious calculation, viewing the Cossack revolt as God’s punishment for Polish refusal to wage war against non-Christians. But the Polish nobility would not follow Jean Casimir into a war against the Turks, and the Cossack revolt ultimately cost Jean Casimir his sacrality. In 1651-52 there was a noble revolt against the king’s judicial claims. Representations at court shifted from triumphalist to morose, identifying the king with the suffering Christ of the Passion. Unlike in France, the idea of a monarchy of justice was not well-rooted among the Polish subjects, and Marian patronage was not tied to the state. The Swedish conquest of Poland in 1655 caused the ultimate decline of sacred kingship there, despite the peace agreement secured in 1660. In subsequent years the court ceased its politico-religious policy-making, and the king was defeated by forces under the command of Jerzy Lubomirski.

Tricoire’s comparative approach to the Catholic Reform permits him to make several revisions or corrections to the established scholarship. In a general sense, he claims that historiographic
debates over the role of religion during the Thirty Years War, and the proper way of characterizing that set of conflicts (as political, religious, dynastic, etc.) boil down to analyzing the goals of the leaders involved. Tricoire sees this approach as sterile due to its assumption that “political reality” and theological justifications of the conflict were distinct and dichotomous. “Notre hypothèse,” he writes, “est que le problème de base qui se posait aux acteurs politiques peut se résumer ainsi: pour connaître le succès temporel, un soutien divin était nécessaire” (p. 187). The goal was not to balance political and religious concerns, but to act in such a way that each manifested the other. This makes it possible to reconsider historiographic interpretations of the Fronde, which have largely ignored the religious dimension, according to the author. Similarly, studies of French foreign policy have declined to identify the role of religion therein, due to a mistaken conceptual identification of “religion” with “confession.” Conversely, Tricoire’s attention to the religious dimension of Richelieu’s foreign policy points to the modernity of his dévot opponents. This opposition has been treated in the scholarship as an example of a religious group that rejected “reason of state,” fighting a rear-guard battle to uphold a lost unity of Christendom, and as a struggle between state-based foreign policy and a religiously-inspired one. But for Tricoire, the dévots never cited medieval ideals in opposition to Richelieu. In fact, he claims, they were modern: they accused those who opposed them of being bad Frenchmen. Propagandists like Matthieu de Morgues made the claim that war would weaken the French state but did not see Habsburg anti-Protestant policies in a more positive light. Richelieu and his supporters, however, claimed that God supported their efforts to defend a balanced system of states that had been implemented by God in order to secure divine justice on earth. In this reading, Habsburg foreign policy, while superficially Catholic, was at a more fundamental level working at cross-purposes to God’s design for the order of European states. French policy sought to defend that divine-instituted order. This is, as far as I am aware, a new interpretation of the Catholic element of Louis XIII’s foreign policy.

Tricoire’s study seeks to revise Polish historiography in several ways. He explains how secular historians of Poland like Janusz Tazbir portray Polish Catholicism as isolated, and as developing an essentialist Polish character. Tricoire’s comparative approach identifies similarities between Catholicism in Poland and in other countries. In fact, if Poland was distinctive, it was regarding the relatively late arrival of Catholic Reform there, but the overall picture is one of Poland’s cultural openness, not isolation. Perhaps more important, Tricoire shows how strong the idea of sacred kingship was in Poland-Lithuania from 1620 to 1640, in contrast to historiographic discussions about Poland being a republic of nobles. Similarly, the commitment of those nobles to warfare against non-Christians calls for a reassessment of the Polish nobility’s image as peaceful and tolerant. Ladislas IV has been portrayed as an irenicist, in part due to the multiconfessional colloquy that he held at Torun in 1645. But Tricoire explains this as an effort by the king not to listen to his opponents but to create confessional unity by converting the Protestants, to whom no concessions were ever made. After exploring the possibility of an inter-religious marriage, the king concluded that God opposed it and abandoned the effort. Finally, while the historiography sees the Swedish attack on Częstochowa as a key moment in rallying the Polish nobles to return to their support of the king, Tricoire contributes to the revision of this scholarship. The idea of a defense of Częstochowa was developed not during the course of events but after the war, by Augustyn Kordecki, in Nova Gigantomachia (1658), and was repeated by subsequent writers. It was John Casimir’s vow to the Virgin at Leopol in 1656 that gave retrospective significance to the attack on Częstochowa, a vow that had little contemporary impact but that helps historians of Marian state patronage
untangle some of the misconceptions linked to Polish Catholicism.

In the main, Tricoire’s organizational structure clarifies what his goals are, and what possible objections might be. The introduction and conclusion accomplish this well, and the four-part structure is straightforward. It is sometimes difficult, though, to follow the main points of individual chapters, especially in the last two sections. The approach is not strictly chronological, and there are chapters in which different themes get muddled as Bavaria drops out of the picture, and the focus shifts to Poland and France. Some consolidation might have been advisable.

The author’s comparative approach is brave and accomplished. He examines primary and secondary sources in at least five languages and makes several powerful points that will undoubtedly affect the scholarly conversation on the religious politics of the early seventeenth century. Tricoire’s continental survey has one wishing (however unfairly) for more: it would have been interesting to see how Italian cases worked with his thesis. He mentions Genoa electing Mary as the Republic’s patron in 1636, but six years earlier the Venetian Senate had made a vow to Our Lady of Health as the city’s protector, following a ferocious attack of the plague. Ground was broken next to the customs house for a church dedicated to Mary by Baldassare Longhena a year later. In 1596, Duke Charles Emanuel I of Savoy initiated construction on the sanctuary of Vicoforte, near Mondovi, under the direction of Ascanio Vitozzi. Would Marian patronage in an Italian republic and princely state sustain Tricoire’s arguments?

One of the author’s most thought-provoking suggestions is the role played by military victory in promoting the development of Marian state patronage (p. 177). Victories like the Battle of White Mountain demonstrated the authority of Mary and the kind of payoff that could accrue to her clients. It amounts to a kind of unexpected religious corollary to the “military revolution thesis.” This is a good example of the comparative approach bearing fruit and suggesting further research possibilities.

Tricoire’s argument about politico-religious calculation is compelling because it fits into a broader seventeenth-century culture of calculation, empirical observation, political cost-benefit analysis, quantification, and tabulation. On the other hand, the book seems to imply that this particular way of thinking about the nexus of religion and politics was operative in the minds of all contemporary actors. We know that the possibility of divine intervention was discounted or flatly rejected by some at the time. Fra Paolo Sarpi, in his History of the Council of Trent (1618) offers examples of a host of ways by which contemporary figures conceptualized the interplay of religious and political motives. In other words, it seems that the universalist perspective was not universally shared, probably not even at princely courts. Tricoire does acknowledge that “les acteurs peuvent penser leur relation au Ciel d’une manière tout à fait différente” (p. 21) and that “les calculs politico-religieux ne furent jamais aussi certains et consensuels que la propagande officielle cherchait à le faire croire” (p. 226). However, this recognition undermines the far-reaching explanatory power assigned to “l’angoisse eschatologique,” for example, which is described as “le moteur des guerres de religion en France” (p. 92). Did this anxiety necessarily affect everyone, and can we really understand it as the driving force of religious war? I think that Tricoire’s arguments could have retained their force without slipping into reductionist explanation. After demonstrating that the Frondeurs also used political symbols in their propaganda, he concludes that, “l’image, bien ancrée dans l’historiographie, d’une révolte
contre l’absolutisme royal semble donc incorrecte” (p. 278). It seems more plausible that there were multiple interests motivating the judges and princes who revolted, and a variety of ways of representing them, rather than writing off an entire line of interpretation. To my mind, this would make the author’s position stronger and more plausible.

There were a few other topics that might have been usefully addressed. One is a discussion of Marian theology, and how it developed during the period, both spatially and chronologically. It also seems that discussion of the motives and intentions of rulers and their key ministers rarely considers these actors’ own words. Was there personal or state correspondence that could have permitted examination of the terms in which leaders described their devotionally-driven decisions? Occasionally Tricoire’s use of certain concepts is a bit confusing. In the introduction, he notes recent use of the term “imaginaire” as a useful way for thinking about cultural frameworks but “trop vague pour permettre une étude du calcul politico-religieux” (p. 21). Yet, elsewhere, he discusses the “imaginaire universalist” (pp. 273 and 370) and the “imaginaire politico-religieux dominant” (p. 285). The terms “universalist” (and “universalism,” “universalization,” etc.) do a lot of work for Tricoire, so much so that it is difficult to nail down a specific definition for them. They might refer to a kind of absolute monarchic authority (pp. 265 and 372), or to the idea of a unity of purpose and action between heaven and earth and the harmonious interplay between these realms (pp. 370-71), or to the global extent of Mary’s influence and her superiority over other saints (p. 55).

One of the author’s chief arguments is that early modern actors engaged in “politico-religious calculation” to reach decisions, and that this meant not weighing “rational” factors against “emotional” ones, but assessing undifferentiated interests and impulses. Seventeenth-century people did not categorize politics as “rational” and religion as “emotional”. The author’s reminder to avoid anachronistic assumptions about human behavior is important, but at times he seems himself to trip up on such assumptions. For example, he wonders if “l’imaginaire politico-religieux dominant” was instrumentalized by the French monarchy “pour vaincre les résistances à la guerre [under Louis XIII]” (p. 285). This seems to take us back to the old distinctions between the spheres of the “rational” and “emotional,” and to portray religious claims as propagandistic for hard political interests.

This is a book with refreshingly original ideas and insights, but also one that sometimes struggles to break free of established interpretive tendencies. Appealing to the use of religion to justify and legitimize rulers or their actions is one such tendency. Another is the way in which the developmental status of state institutions determined the course of events or broad social and cultural developments. Because of the weaknesses of state structures, most subjects in that kingdom of Poland-Lithuania were unaware of Marian state patronage and the kinds of claims being made by the rulers, making it difficult for them to overcome noble resistance after the 1640s. In this sense, the context of institutional development remains a significant explanatory factor for Tricoire, as it has for many other historians of seventeenth-century politics. But thanks to this ambitious, provocative, and thoughtful study, we now benefit from some new frameworks through which to rethink old problems.

NOTES


[2] See the four volumes of Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern Culture, published in the series “International Archives of the History of Ideas” (Amsterdam: Kluwer, 2001), which focus on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.


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