PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Religion and cultural exchange, 1400–1700:
twenty-first-century implications

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This extremely present-minded essay is written at a moment when
the European Union has expanded to twenty-five nations, extending
its political boundaries eastward in a north–south arc from Estonia to
Slovenia, together with two Mediterranean islands. These recent addi-
tions have enabled the expanded EU to incorporate nearly all of late
medieval Latin Christendom from Iceland to Cyprus and from Por-
tugal to Estonia. As the accompanying map of Latin Europe in 1400
reveals, only Croatia and a large part of northern Romania formerly
belonging to Hungary now remain outside the EU. Meanwhile, the EC
has also acquired two of Latin Christendom's late medieval Mediter-
ranean outposts: Cyprus, ruled by Venice in the fifteenth century, was
conquered by the Ottomans in 1570, while a Latin Christian chival-
ric order ruled Malta until 1800. Ironically, this very recent political
recovery of the late medieval borders of Latin Christendom is accom-
panied by persistent statements from European political authorities,
in both the core states and the new additions, that Latin Christianity
does not constitute the cultural basis of the European Union. However,
these twenty-first-century European spokesmen cannot offer any cul-
tural alternative to Latin Christianity which possesses any deep or
longue-durée historical validity. On the other hand, since its forma-
tion in 1997, our multinational ESF (European Science Foundation)
project on cultural exchanges in Europe has unanimously recognised
the priority of religious identities as cultural markers between 1400
and 1700. And we further recognise that, despite repeated denials from
most European officials, religion remains a major cultural force in
Europe, with clearly visible political and social consequences – some-
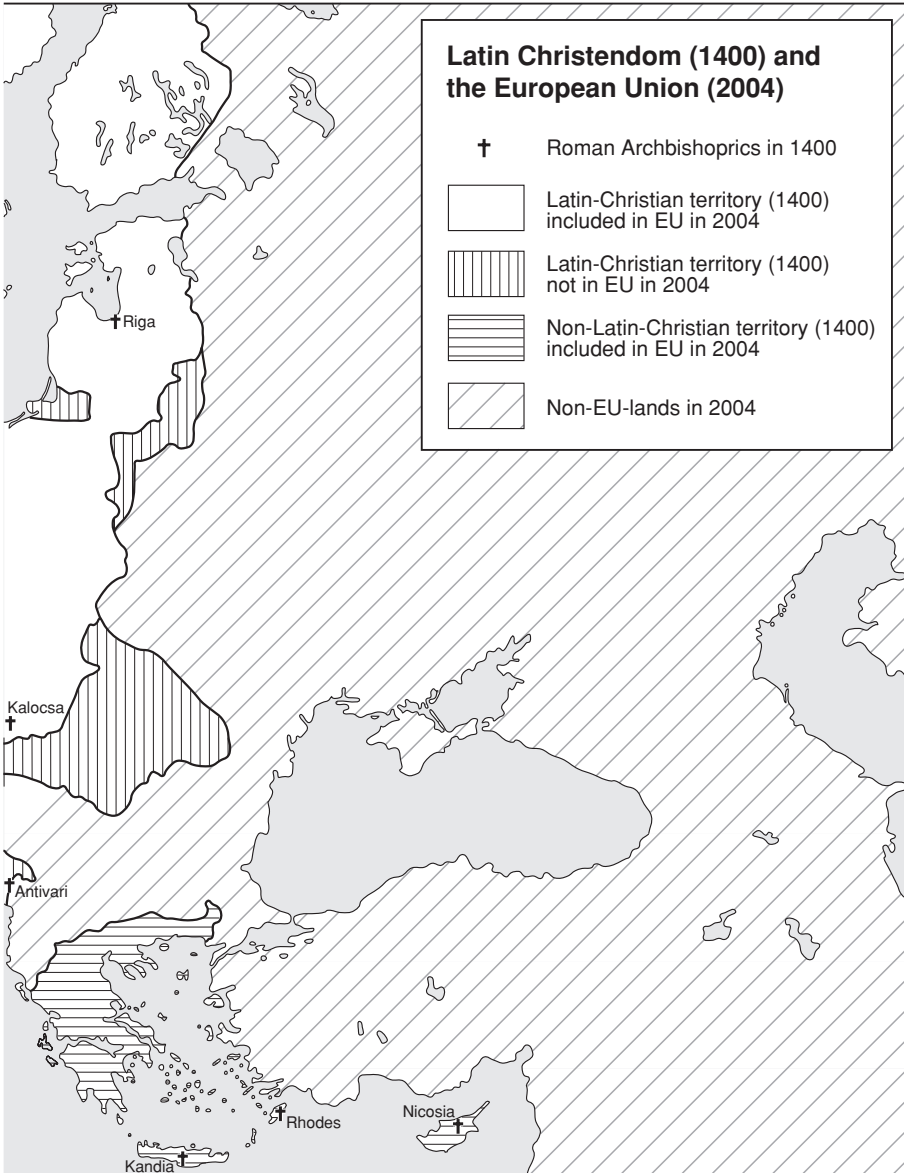times for better, sometimes for worse. The major and vital difference

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Map 1.1 Latin Christendom in 1400 and the European Union (2004).

**Latin Christendom (1400) and
the European Union (2004)**

† Roman Archbishoprics in 1400

Latin-Christian territory (1400)
included in EU in 2004

Latin-Christian territory (1400)
not in EU in 2004

Non-Latin-Christian territory (1400)
included in EU in 2004

Non-EU-lands in 2004

Map 1.1 (*cont.*)

is that, for a great many twenty-first-century Europeans, 'religion'
does not necessarily mean Latin Christianity.

Today's Europe is marked by a sharp erosion of religious obser-
vance among Christians almost everywhere and by some recent dis-
establishments of confessional churches (a few years ago in Sweden,
for example). A combination of twentieth-century developments in
Europe's religious history, the most important being the attempted
extirpation of European Jewry by the Third Reich in the early 1940s
and the enormous influx of Muslim workers throughout the European
Community in recent decades, has created a historically unprecedented
situation. Today, except in isolated pockets of Ireland or the Balkans,
Europe's most significant religious confrontations rarely occur within
Christendom. Instead, they revolve around conflicts between Europe's
Christian majority and its non-Christians. Unlike the situation dur-
ing the heyday of European nationalism between 1790 and 1940, I
would argue that Jewish assimilation into the European cultural main-
stream is no longer the primary issue. Although anti-Semitism unde-
niably persists in several parts of Europe, occasionally virulently, since
1945 the Jewish minority has been accepted and respected in most of
old Europe – a Europe which contains dramatically fewer practis-
ing Jews than it did before 1940. Instead of anti-Semitism, Europe's
current major religious and cultural conflict opposes some traditional
Islamic precepts to the demands of fully participatory twenty-first-
century citizenship in an officially (and often socially) de-Christianised
European Community.

Going behind today's official denials, this chapter explores the reli-
gious base of Europe's cultural pedigree between 1400 and 1700, stress-
ing what was either established or significantly deepened. It relies
primarily on contributions from our multinational ESF programme
and suggests a few research topics to help provide a more accurate
assessment of the cultural core of Old Europe as it passes into what
has been called (perhaps prematurely) a post-Christian phase. This
American author has watched the European scholars involved in this
project tackle the daunting enterprise of describing and analysing some
of the processes of cultural exchange within European Christendom
between 1400 and 1700, including a few exchanges with non-Christian

communities on the European continent; they have deliberately avoided cultural exchanges outside Europe during the early phase of colonialism. Within Europe, the single best vantage point for examining religious phenomena between 1400 and 1700 remains Latin Christendom's capital: Rome continued to hold the loyalties of a plurality of Europe's overwhelmingly Christian majority throughout the period.[1] However, a Roman Catholic perspective is not sufficiently catholic. Soon after 1400, the present-day Czech Republic formed an anti-papal Christian state which 'crusaders' could not crush, while the Polish–Lithuanian monarchy peacefully governed large numbers of other non-Roman Christians. After the Council of Trent in 1564, adding Europe's Orthodox Christian and small non-Christian populations to its large Protestant minority, Rome no longer controlled an absolute majority of Europe's inhabitants. By 1700, with Protestants and Muslims in sharp retreat throughout eastern and central Europe, the papacy had probably reclaimed an absolute majority; but Catholic recovery was now threatened in western Europe by an early Enlightenment which transcended confessional borders.

How can investigating centuries-old cultural exchanges in the sphere of religion provide useful information for twenty-first-century Europeans confronting their unprecedented situation? One suggested title for this volume, *Religious Identities and Cultural Differentiation*, expresses an essential approach to answering this question. It seems overwhelmingly obvious that for all Europeans living between 1400 and 1700 – whether Greeks or Latins, Protestants or Catholics, Muslims or Jews – their religion invariably became the primary defining aspect of their cultural identities. Although 'religion' (overwhelmingly Latin Christianity) provided Europe's primary cultural markers between 1400 and 1700, European religious identities were usually defined in ways which emphasised differences rather than shared elements. This argument holds for the entire period, but most clearly after the outbreak of the German reformation in 1520. Here and there

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[1] In this volume, the papacy is studied by M. A. Visceglia (chapter 9), while O. Chaline (chapter 3) and I. G. Tóth (chapter 5) explore Catholic recovery in east-central Europe.

one finds Christian irenicists bold enough to explore commonalities,
from the failed union of the Greek and Latin churches at the Council of
Florence in the 1430s to the Erasmian 'adiaphorists' of the reformation
era, up to the discussions between Leibniz and Bossuet in the 1690s.
But their quiet voices and futile negotiations were drowned out by tor-
rents of theological polemics refuting mistaken doctrines and practices
of every type: theological controversy forms an inexhaustible genre
of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European literature. Once spe-
cific confessions were officially established by Christian authorities,
each tended to erect walls against other confessions, indoctrinated
their children (to the point of forbidding them to study abroad and
trying to prohibit cross-confessional marriages), and relied on cus-
tom to cement a confessional identity. Need one add the polemical
and largely uninformed 'discourse' between Christians and Jews or
Christians and Muslims during these centuries?

The overwhelming evidence for religious and confessional hostility
in these centuries prevents us from offering a self-congratulatory cel-
ebration of the birth of religious toleration in early modern Europe,
although such approaches have not vanished.[2] We must recall that
'toleration' derives from a Latin verb implying suffering: one tol-
erates pain, one tolerates something that cannot be avoided without
courting catastrophe. Because of its religious complexity, early mod-
ern Europe did experience some religious toleration, when coexistence
between various faiths was overwhelmingly expedient. But never –
not even in such optimally multi-confessional situations as sixteenth-
century Poland, the seventeenth-century Netherlands or Ottoman-
ruled south-eastern Europe – did religious toleration become a matter
of principle. We must not be misled by legislation like the 1555 Peace
of Augsburg or the 1691 English Act of Toleration, both of which
excluded important religious minorities from their limited benefits;
the Peace of Augsburg, for example, excluded Reformed Protestants
and outlawed Anabaptists, while the English legislation penalised both
Catholics and Protestant dissenters. Until the nineteenth century, no

[2] E.g. Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 2003).

European state dreamed of granting civic rights to Jews – unless they
were (as in Spain in 1492 or Portugal in 1497) forced to become bap-
tised Christians. Matching our general theme of cultural exchange
with the primary European cultural marker of religious identity, one
must recognise that informed knowledge of other religious cultures
was extremely rare from 1400 to 1700. Instead, reciprocal loathing
became a significant form of cultural exchange; insults and contempt
for the religious 'other' formed a primary aspect of religious identity
in early modern Europe – as did disguise, concealment, and other
survival strategies among beleaguered religious minorities. We must
therefore confront frankly the mass of religious hatred which satu-
rates our sources for these centuries and occasionally erupted into
acts of 'religious cleansing', whether anti-Jewish (e.g. Lisbon 1507),
anti-Protestant (e.g. Paris 1572), or anti-anyone except Greek Ortho-
dox (e.g. Ukraine 1648). At an opposite extreme, the phenomenon
of conversion, certainly a privileged point of cultural exchange in the
religious sphere, seems dictated usually by sheer coercion or occa-
sionally by transparent self-interest between 1400 and 1700. Cases of
genuine conversion do exist, however, and deserve study, as do the
extent and cultural consequences of interconfessional marriages.

However, converts were outnumbered and outshouted by martyrs,
especially in the half-century following Luther's break with Rome,
when almost 4,000 stubborn Christians were publicly executed for
heresy after formal trials. Such martyrs could be found almost every-
where in western, southern, and central Europe; they not only came
from several Protestant denominations, but also included Roman
Catholic priests and laymen in England and the Netherlands, and even
a few Catholic laymen in remote Norway.[3] In many cases, martyrs
were followed by armed rebellions intent on changing the public reli-
gion of a state. Early modern Europe's 'wars of religion' began with the
unsuccessful fifteenth-century crusades against Bohemia's Hussites.
They intensified after the Lutheran reformation, when every political

[3] See the pathbreaking cross-confessional approach by Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation
at Stake. Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1999). My information about Norway comes from Gunnar Knutsen
of Oslo University.

sedition in Europe had a religious background. After 1560, confessional warfare almost destroyed Europe's largest kingdom, France, and almost ruined its prosperous northern urban core, the Low Countries. If Luther's own Germany suffered only incidental armed conflict in the 1500s, the Holy Roman Empire overcompensated for this relative respite with the gigantic slaughter of the Thirty Years' War. Even afterwards, one finds confessional warfare in a few places that had somehow avoided this conflict, for instance in Switzerland in 1656, or in Ireland, where a 1691 battle is still commemorated annually – and continues to provoke significant hostility from confessional opponents.

If Europe largely outgrew confessional crusades by 1700, it was only because Armageddon had repeatedly ended in stalemate. The pluri-confessional makeup of modern Europe was only earned through blood and sacrifice, after Christians and other Europeans had bled themselves white in the seventeenth century. In order to grasp this point properly in our thoroughly secularised and largely post-confessional age, the most useful point of comparison might well be with modern nationalism, which has certainly provided the cutting edge of most European cultural identities from 1789 until 1945. It seems more than simple coincidence that the enduring peace among European nations since the mid twentieth century, accompanied by interminable multilateral negotiations and the erosion of national borders, occurred only after Europe had once again bled itself white – and a good deal of the rest of the world as well – in two unbelievably murderous bouts of internecine warfare.

Among the fortunate exceptions, European lands already notorious for their breadth of religious toleration by the seventeenth century (and consequently privileged sites of cross-confessional exchanges), two regions stand out: the huge, sprawling Republic of Poland–Lithuania in eastern Europe, and the compact, populous, highly urbanised United Netherlands in western Europe. Both were new polities, created around the middle of this period – the merger of Poland and Lithuania occurred in 1569, the separation of the Low Countries and the embryonic Union of Utrecht a decade later – and both endured for over two centuries without experiencing any serious domestic

disturbances motivated by confessional hostility. The social contrasts between these polities seem overwhelming. Poland–Lithuania was utterly feudal, governed by its landholding magnates, while the Dutch Republic was utterly bourgeois, a state where the landholding nobility wielded less political power than anywhere else in Europe. Royal power was, however, sharply curtailed in both places. For our purposes, the most important feature shared by both places was that the dominant confession of the ruling class was never adopted by a majority of the politically underprivileged population. It has long been known that, although the Reformed confession was soon established within the United Netherlands, Roman Catholicism remained the largest single religion there, flanked by numerous Protestant sectarians and a small but strategic Jewish community. It is less well-known that Roman Catholicism was never a majority confession in Poland–Lithuania, where a combination of Orthodox Christians (by far the principal religious minority), Jews and Protestants always outnumbered them. Under such circumstances, it was impossible to impose confessional uniformity, the general goal throughout early modern Christian Europe.

REFORMATIONS AND CONFESSIONS

Little doubt exists about the long-term significance of the Protestant reformation, the single most important religious development of the early modern era. In the simplest and starkest terms, it has divided Latin Christendom for almost five centuries, with no end in sight. But should we consider the movement begun by Luther around 1520 as something essentially modern (as most Protestants believed unquestioningly before 1914), or does it now seem more 'early' than 'modern'? Although Luther was no fundamentalist and most 'mainstream' Protestants, guided by Luther's pastoral stepchildren, do not consider the Scriptures as literal truth, an element of biblical fundamentalism has been built into Protestantism from the outset. Within ten years of publicly denying papal authority and eliminating five of the seven Christian sacraments, Luther faced