Piotr Wilczek

Polonia Reformata

Essays on the Polish Reformation(s)



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Johannes a Lasco Bibliothek
Grosse Kirche Emden
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1. Introduction

In the second half of the 1990s, during my shorter and longer research stays in the United Kingdom and the United States, I realised how distorted was the image of the Polish Renaissance, Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Western scholarship and how much work still needed to be done to present the early modern culture and history of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania to Western audiences. Certainly, a lot of research has been done in this field in the last 20 years, thanks to the tremendous efforts of scholars such as Norman Davies, David Frick, Karin Friedrich and Robert Frost, to mention only a few, whose merits are difficult to overestimate. The publication in 2015 of the first volume of the *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 600 pages long, written by the British historian Robert Frost, is a symbolic event, marking the new era of the presence of early modern Central European history in the English speaking world. Also in 2015, Oxford University Press published another important historical monograph, Benedict Wagner-Rundell's *Common Wealth, Common Good: The Politics of Virtue in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania*. These books are just two current examples of how far British historiography is now from attitudes, full of prejudice, disrespect and ignorance, presented in works such as *Jesuits in Poland* by A. F. Pollard, discussed later in this book. The change in the British and American approach to Central and Eastern European early modern history has taken place thanks to books by the above-mentioned and many other authors, and thanks also to recent major research programs, especially two current Oxford projects – *Cultures of Knowledge: Networking the Republic of Letters, 1550–1750* (conducted by Howard Hotson) and *Jagiellonians: Dynasty, Memory and Identity in Central Europe* (conducted by Natalia Nowakowska) – which show how intellectual, cultural and political networks worked in early modern Europe, with no division between the East and the West. Through participation in the *Cultures of Knowledge* project in 2009–2010 I also began a new stage in my thinking about the role of Central Europe in the international exchange of ideas in the early modern period.

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A general, comprehensive introduction to the issues discussed in this book is included in a few chapters of *A Companion to the Reformation in Central Europe*, edited by Howard Louthan and Graeme Murdoch and published by BRILL in September 2015, immediately after a manuscript of my book was sent to the publisher. The *Companion* is a breakthrough achievement in the long process of making Polish and Central European Reformation history and culture an equal and integral part of European history in the English-speaking world. Three chapters especially of this monumental work could be useful as introductions to the problems discussed in this book: *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* by Maciej Ptaszyński, *Antitrinitarianism* by Mihály Balázs and *Education: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* by Michael Tworek (Louthan/Murdoch: 2015).

However, there is still a lot to do in this process of presenting the "East" to the "West", especially in the field of early modern religious studies. Quite recently there was an opportunity to discuss this issue during the preparation of a special issue of *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, devoted to the Brest Bible, the first Protestant translation of the whole Bible into Polish. The editors – Simon Burton and myself – were very much aware that this was the first volume in English devoted to a fundamental work of the Central European Reformation. Not only this, but we realised how distorted and full of stereotypes the image of Eastern European Reformation still is in the materials available to a non-Polish-speaking reader.

Let me quote a longer passage from the *Editors' Introduction* to this volume. It is a source of great satisfaction to me that these ideas were formulated during an ongoing discussion with an excellent British scholar of the younger generation, intensively involved in research on Central European Reformation history.

> In both Polish and Western historiography there has been a predominant tendency to read the history of the Reformation in Poland in terms of two primary, connected themes: the rise of the radical Reformation, especially the antitrinitarian and Socinian movements, and the ideal of religious tolerance. In Poland this is exemplified supremely in the works of Stanisław Kot (1885) and Janusz Tazbir (1927) as well as in what has been called the wider "philosophical historical" school which has developed around their work (Wilczek: 2013). It is characterized by a twofold historiographical strategy, as is especially manifested in Tazbir's own work. Firstly, the Polish Reformation is stripped of all religious significance and portrayed quite simply as the cultural and political movement of a noble class (the *szlachta*) jealously seeking to preserve its privileges against royal and ecclesiastical interference. Secondly, the true heart of the Polish Reformation is then identified exclusively with its social and political thought. Hence, this is located variously in the "golden age" of religious freedom (c. 1540–90), the intellectual heritage of the antitrinitarian and Socinian movements and the wider cultural enrichment of Polish society (Tazbir: 1988; 1973). In this light the Polish state can be viewed not only as an exception to the inexorable and confronta-

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tional logic of European confessionalization, but also as an early advocate of universal religious freedom. As Tazbir evocatively put it (nicely capturing with word-play this supposed dual aspect of the Polish Reformation), sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Poland was a "state without stakes" (Tazbir: 1973).

Arguably, Western scholarship has been much less willing to sever the bond between the religious and the social and political aspects of the Polish Reformation. Consequently, it has resisted better the trend to view its theological dimensions as mere epiphenomena of deeper intellectual and cultural shifts. Indeed, Western scholars have done a great deal to emphasize the theological distinctiveness of Polish Reformation thought. Yet in doing so, like their Polish colleagues, their focus has naturally gravitated towards the avant-garde views of the Polish antitrinitarians, generally at the expense of their more orthodox contemporaries. Indeed, the widespread desire to construct a "genealogy of modernity" has led to a definite prioritizing of antitrinitarianism as the intellectual mainstream of the Polish Reformation. This is hardly surprising when it is considered that it was through Kot and Tazbir in translation that previous generations of scholars first became acquainted with Polish Socinianism. In fact, until comparatively recently the standard work on the history of Socinianism was that of Kot's translator and follower, Earl Morse Wilbur (1866–1956) (Kot: 1957; Wilbur: 1946). While the radical Reformation is no longer viewed with the same nostalgia or romanticism as it was by Wilbur and still is by Tazbir, the opinion that both it and its legacy of enlightened pluralism were "Poland's contribution to the Reformation" remains thoroughly entrenched (Hillar: 1993).

Yet, as Howard Louthan perceptively points out, to view the Polish Reformation only in terms of the impact of the radical Reformation is to gravely distort our understanding of it and its wider, European importance (Louthan: 2014). While any account of the Polish Reformation must give due place to the radical Reformation, it should not do so at the expense of the other Reformation movements that took root in Polish soil, most of them at an earlier date. As Jerzy Kłoczowski (1924–), the most eminent historian of Polish Christianity, has suggested, there is a need to view the Polish Reformation in both a broader and a longer perspective (Kłoczowski: 1988a). That is to say, the developments in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth must be seen in terms both of the wider transformations occurring in Europe's 'Long Reformation' and of a truly international, trans-confessional perspective. When it comes to be rewritten, the history of the Polish Reformation must embrace multiple currents of reform and their complex, changing interaction: conciliarism, humanism, Erasmianism, Hussitism (late-medieval and early-modern), Lutheranism, the Reformed, irenicism, universal reform, Orthodox and Catholic (Counter) Reformation.What earlier scholarship saw only under a monochrome light is now being revealed more and more as a rich and colourful tapestry (Wilczek, Burton: 2015).

The present volume is designed as an attempt to present this "rich and colourful tapestry" to readers who do not speak Polish and do not read primary and secondary sources in Polish, but are interested in the early modern religious history, literature and culture of the region.

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