

# The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 16 (2019)

The *H*istorical Review  
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XVI (2019)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques  
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research  
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

**Reciew of: Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin, CATHOLIC EUROPE, 1592–1648: CENTRE AND PERIPHERIES, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 282 pages.**

*Meropi Morfouli*

doi: [10.12681/hr.22808](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.22808)

Copyright © 2020, Meropi Morfouli



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

## To cite this article:

Morfouli, M. (2020). Reciew of: Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin, CATHOLIC EUROPE, 1592–1648: CENTRE AND PERIPHERIES, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 282 pages. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 16, 261–264. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.22808>

Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin,  
*CATHOLIC EUROPE, 1592–1648: CENTRE AND PERIPHERIES*,  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 282 pages.

The present study is written by Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin, the head of the School of History and Archives at University College Dublin, where he studied before completing his PhD at the European University Institute in Florence in 1995. His main interest lies primarily in the field of early modern religious history. His rare multilingualism is the necessary tool for this profound study of Catholicism in a wide European spectrum. *Catholic Europe, 1592–1648* offers an original point of view in the study of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic reform. Its originality consists in the fact that the author chose to study, geographically, not the centre of Catholic renewal but what he calls the *peripheries* in relation to the centre during this crucial period, in which the political identity of modern Europe was shaped. He brings to our attention the fact that between Catholic reform and its application in the different geographical areas and in different societies, the actors behind the Council of Trent left the stage progressively and the reform itself underwent different changes through its application processes, according to the area and the society that it was being applied to. And this is the main purpose of this book, to show how the reform processes were transformed

according to the societal conditions. His methodology does not consist in a linear interpretation of the historical facts; rather he follows the discontinuity of the Catholic's Church's evolution with regards to the "active adaptation of the sixteenth-century inheritance" (p. 3). For the author, the Catholic renewal is not the immediate result of the decrees of the Council of Trent but represents their "active adaptation".

In the book's four main chapters, the author chooses different case studies. He analyses the political and religious situation of the case, identifies the Catholic communities of each area, and then investigates the relation of every state with Rome and the application of the reform within it. He shows the fragile balance at the multiple relational levels, the relation between the different states, between the Catholic communities and the official religion, and the relation between the states and Rome.

More specifically in chapter 2, Ó hAnnracháin studies the evolution of Catholicism in the western margins (Britain, Ireland and the Netherlands). For the Catholics of these three societies, a sense of marginality was an essential part of their religious inheritance. A highly variegated series of communities exposed to varying degrees of harassment

and persecution was strongly developed, with very different modes of church organisation. Their identity was sustained by a consciousness of belonging to a religion that crossed international borders.

In Britain the sharpening of anti-Catholicism was stimulated by a xenophobic and defensive anxiety about continental threats to the English monarchy. As a result, a significant number of Catholic persecutees was created who went into exile in continental Europe, influencing other countries. The type of Catholicism best suited to survive the pressures of the Elizabethan state could be found among the social elite, especially the gentry far removed from the political centre. For English Catholics, the Civil War offered the last opportunity for a profound renegotiation of their status within the state.

Ireland contained two critically important and atypical features of Catholicism: the first was its voluntary character, the choice of the people against the will of the state, and the second the vital connection between religion and national identity. The new church settlement faced formidable obstacles in embedding itself in Ireland. Poverty was certainly a massive problem. Irish emigration, though, provided the core of the Catholic communities that developed in Australia, New Zealand and even Scotland and the US.

The evolution of Dutch Catholicism was critically influenced by the war between the rebellious northern provinces of the Netherlands and Spain. In contrast to Britain and Ireland, however, the Reformed church did not aspire to conscript the entire population into an official national church. Because of

a shortage of clerical personnel, spiritual virgins became a crucial feature of Dutch Catholic practice.

The next chapter of the study moves to east-central Europe. A panoply of measures, ranging from outright violence to exclusion from office and favours, underpinned the increasing institutional strength of the Church of Rome in the region. The author investigates the different religious communities of the area and reveals the delicate strategies in the processes of implanting Catholic renewal.

Poland, characterised by religious and ethnic heterogeneity, became linked to the Catholic reform movement. An important factor in the success of Polish Catholicism in the first half of the seventeenth century was the degree of diversity it encompassed.

In 1592, in the three central territories of the Austrian Habsburgs (Bohemia, Hungary and the Erblände), Catholicism represented a minority. At the end of the seventeenth century, however, the Roman Church had made a spectacular recovery. Ferdinand II was certainly the decisive figure in what became an expanding movement of counter-reform, with the help of the Jesuits and the Capuchins. The great aristocratic families emerged as key players in the administration of a religion that emphasised the values of devotion, respect for legitimate (namely Catholic) authority and reverence for a church that validated the dynasty's rule.

In Hungary the limitations of the process of Catholic revival were more evident than anywhere else. Here, the populations were either under Turkish control or in Transylvania. Yet

coming from a much weaker base than in Poland, Catholicism made hugely important strides in the period under review, for three main reasons: first, the reconstruction of Catholic institutions, second, the increasing sapience of Catholicism among the higher nobility and, third, the successful elaboration of the idea of a Catholic identity native to the lands of the crown of Saint Stephen.

In the fourth chapter the author demonstrates the diplomatic aspect of pontifical policy, the difficult relationship between states and Catholic interests to deflect the noble martial culture of Europe towards war on behalf of religion, more precisely the anti-Muslim mission. It shows that the real goal of the anti-Islamic mission was the extension of Christianity to these territories and even into Asia. Ottoman power was seen as result of the disagreements of the Christian world and the failure of this mission was viewed as God's punishment of the Christian world, ideas that strongly characterise Catholic identity. The papacy and the Italian powers considered themselves as the ones who would accomplish the unity of Christianity, without excluding the possibility of a union of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Christianity was seen as a body composed of many parts; and each time that a part suffered, the rest of the body had to run to its aid so that the whole body could become healthy again. Popes were spiritual leaders and had the responsibility to form a common defence policy. To a great extent, they had the spiritual duty to make war on behalf of the Christian religion and the national duty to keep the Ottomans away from

Italy, to protect the cultural and religious inheritance of Christians and Italians.

The case study in this particular chapter reveals numerous and varied elements: first, the resources used by the Church of Rome; second, the limits of its influence; third, how critical the fear of an Ottoman extension was (as Venice was out of the picture); fourth, the extraordinary reach of Roman diplomacy in the Balkans, eastern Europe and the constant diplomatic activity in the Catholic capitals of Europe; and, finally, the relationship between Catholicism and the internal and external politics of the states.

The fifth chapter complements the fourth. It highlights the work of Catholic missionaries in the periphery in keeping the Catholic flame lit and in spreading it through the Christian communities. This missionary activity permitted the old church to differentiate itself from the reformed one. The mission in the peripheries comprised a Catholic example of a Catholic way of life, with a discrete presence, characterised by generosity on the part of the missionaries. Education played a crucial role, with the Jesuits generally underlining the greater need to finance educational projects than an anti-Muslim war.

Ó hAnnracháin's book is a rigorous study that offers clear insight into several aspects of Catholic existence inside and outside the boundaries of Rome. The focus is on Rome's wars: against Protestantism and against the Ottomans. These goals were shadowed by oscillatory feelings of hope that one was on God's chosen path and of despair that divine punishment awaited humankind. A sense

of responsibility was actively present, answering Rome's biggest dream of a *Republica Christiana* under its rule. Many different strategies were followed in order to establish Catholic unity (diplomatic activity, education, war, etc.). The accomplishment of this unity was more than difficult. In all those difficulties the author underlines some original aspects of each different society (for example, female involvement). *Catholic Europe* – apart from being a very

interesting book that studies different European societies, with a variety of national histories, interests, different understandings, etc. – invites us to think about the difficulty in establishing a homogeneous political and economic union among the European states.

Meropi Morfouli

*SYRTE, Paris Observatory*