CHAPTER 2

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

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Introduction

The heterogeneous nature of the Reformation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth precludes an unequivocal characterization of the movement. The Polish and Lithuanian Reformation has been closely connected with the nobility. Wincenty Zakrzewski described “the growth of the self-consciousness of noblemen” as the decisive factor in confessional transformation. Gottfried Schramm described the change as a classic “case of the Reformation against the ruler”. For Schramm, the anti-clericalism of the nobility was the most important common feature shared by members of, and sympathizers with, the movement. Others such as Janusz Tazbir argued that the Reformation lacked any deeper religious convictions; it remained simply “an intellectual adventure of the nobility”. Jolanta Dworzaczkowa claimed that the weakness of towns was a major reason for the defeat of the Reformation. According to Maria Bogucka, “the quietism typical of agrarian societies” was responsible for the weakness of the movement.1

The Polish Reformation can be also described as a specific example of the “late Reformation”, characterized by its heterogeneity as well as by an intensive cultural transfer. The movement was strongly influenced by humanist and Erasmian traditions. Therefore, the process of confessional self-definition was protracted, complex, and heteromorphic. As typical “late reformers”, some Poles and Lithuanians transitioned smoothly from sympathy for Philipp Melanchthon and Philippism towards Calvinism and to Antitrinitarianism.

For scholars, the main problems posed by the nature of the Polish Reformation are the reasons behind its popularity and enormous success in the middle of the century but then its apparent failure some fifty years later. This chapter will review three important issues connected to the Reformation; its initial reception in Poland, the development of Protestant churches and communities, and the relationship between these new confessions and the state-building process.

1 An overview of research is discussed in Michael G. Müller, “Reformationsforschung in Polen,” Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte 100 (2009), 139–154.
The 16th century was a time of great political and social change in Poland. The
century was inaugurated with the political success of the Jagiellonian dynasty.
Around 1500, the family reigned not only in the Kingdom of Poland and the
Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but also in Bohemia and Hungary. In comparison to
these two other kingdoms, the connection between Poland and Lithuania was
deeper and stronger; both countries had been united under one sceptre since
1385, and after the Union of Lublin (1569), they created one “Commonwealth of
both nations” (Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów) with a common diet (sejm),
foreign policy, and currency. By this point, the Duchy of Masovia (in 1526) and
a portion of the lands of the Teutonic Knights known as Royal Prussia (in
1466/1525) had joined the Kingdom of Poland. After the Union, the size of the
Commonwealth was comparable only to the Ottoman Empire, to the Russian
monarchy and to the Holy Roman Empire. Other states, such as Spain and
France, were hardly half as large. In terms of population, however, the Polish-
Lithuanian Commonwealth was relatively small (7.5 million) when compared
to France (16 million), the Empire (12 million), or Spain (9 million).

The population of Poland and Lithuania was already before the Reformation a religious
and cultural patchwork where Jews, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and
Hussites coexisted with Catholics. The Reformation in the Polish-Lithuanian
Commonwealth was therefore a complex phenomenon of religious and social
change.

In the Kingdom of Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and then after
1569 in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, many earlier political and cul-
tural structures were preserved. Social relations retained their feudal character
of interpersonal obligations. Nobles considered themselves to be knights who
owed the monarch “aid and counsel”, but were unwilling to pay taxes and con-
sidered other social groups as rivals. Nobles were reluctant to support the
state’s administrative authorities because they considered themselves to be
the political body of the Commonwealth. On their domains, the wealthiest
noblemen held great political, judicial, and economic power. Despite differ-
ences in their social status, the nobility cultivated a mythology of equality.
Effectively, the diets, as a real representation of this “imagined” noble political
nation, was the most important institution, which not only had legislative

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2 Andrzej Wyczański, Polska w Europie XVI wieku (Poznań, 1999), pp. 15, 17.
3 Sławomir Baczkowski, Szlachectwo. Studium z dziejów idei w piśmiennictwie polskim. Druga
połowa XVI wieku, XVII wiek (Lublin, 2009).
4 Urszula Augustyniak, Dwór i klientela Krzysztofa Radziwiłła (Warsaw, 1999), pp. 14-75.