Many societies across Central Europe had long experience before the Reformation of religious divisions between Latin Christians, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Muslims, and pagans. During the late medieval and early modern periods Utraquist, Bohemian Brethren, Lutheran, Anabaptist, Calvinist, Antitrinitarian, and Greek Catholic communities added to the diverse character of religious life. Some in Central Europe have celebrated traditions of religious tolerance in the region. The 19th-century anthem of Transylvania's Saxons spoke of their “dear fatherland” as a “land of tolerance, a safe haven for every faith”.¹ Some Polish historians have proudly observed that the Commonwealth was a “state without stakes” during the Reformation period, and emphasized how tolerant Poland was by comparison with Western European states.² While acknowledging the religious diversity of many societies across Central Europe, it is important to recognize that religious tolerance was not commonly regarded as a moral virtue during the early modern period. Indeed many commentators expressed deep anxiety about the spiritual, political, and social consequences likely to follow from permitting religious diversity to flourish. Writing towards the end of the 15th century the diplomat Jan Hasištejnský of Lobkovic profoundly regretted the plurality of religions in his homeland. Lobkovic compared the religious syncretism he claimed to have witnessed in Albania with “the Czech lands, [where] unfortunately the custom is to believe, whoever wants to, as they want …”. For Lobkovic, as for many in early modern Central Europe, tolerance was bearing or enduring difference rather than embracing it.³

This chapter analyses how Central European states, churches, and communities responded to the challenge posed by religious diversity following the Reformation. Some churches gained formal rights of public worship, some religious groups were only granted liberty of conscience, while other dissidents

¹ The Prussian-born Leopold Max Moltke wrote the words of the 1846 “Siebenbürgerlied”: “Siebenbürgen, Land der Duldung, jedes Glaubens sichrer Hort, mögst du bis zu fernen Tagen, als ein Hort der Freiheit ragen, und als Wehr dem freien Wort!”
³ Ferdinand Strejček, ed., Jana Hasištejnského z Lobkovic Putování k Svatému Hrobu (Prague, 1902), p. 27.
remained outside the law. However limited in scope, any accommodation of religious diversity was normally the result of hard-fought political compromises and of rather uneasy social acceptance of the presence of heretics when it proved impossible to eradicate them. Peaceful co-existence between religious communities in Central Europe was in most cases not the result of general backing for any abstract ideas of religious liberty. Rather, strategies to accommodate or to repress dissidents and heretics were hesitantly developed within the context of widespread support for religious unity both for spiritual reasons and because uniformity of belief was assumed to be a cornerstone of political and social stability.

Tolerance of religious diversity proved to be both fragile and reversible in Central Europe as across the Continent as a whole. It is now broadly accepted that there was no rise of toleration as a feature of European modernization. Writing about the history of religious tolerance has also shifted away from an earlier focus on the texts written by some advocates of religious liberty. Historians have instead paid greater attention to political processes of accommodating rival religious groups, to the precise legal rights extended to religious minorities, and to the everyday social experience of living with neighbours who were also heretics. Tolerance and intolerance in Central Europe is considered here through an examination of the strategies and policies adopted by state authorities and local communities to deal with the problem of religious diversity in a fluid and changing social and political environment.4

The Politics of Tolerance and Intolerance

The political and social structures of Central Europe’s empires and monarchies were crucial in shaping responses to changing patterns of religious loyalties.

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