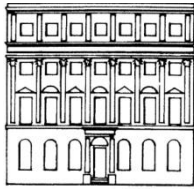


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Michael Schaich:

*Nobility and Religious Opposition: Britain and the Habsburg  
Territories in Comparison.*

Conference Report

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*Nobility and Religious Opposition: Britain and the Habsburg Territories in Comparison*, conference organized by the German Historical Institute London and the Historisches Seminar of the University of Freiburg and held at the GHIL on 18 Sept. 2009.

This gathering, jointly organized by Professor Ronald G. Asch (Freiburg) and Michael Schaich (GHIL), addressed the problem of religious opposition by the nobility, or certain sections of the nobility, in the Habsburg monarchy and the British Isles between c.1560 and c.1660. In both countries, parts of the nobility betrayed a religious allegiance which deviated from the dominant faith as imposed by the reigning dynasty, although the starting positions varied considerably. Whereas in Austria the majority of noblemen were Protestant before the turn of the seventeenth century and quite a number of noble families tried to defend and maintain their Protestant faith even after 1620 (at least in Lower Austria, where the legal situation was more favourable than in Österreich ob der Enns and Inner-Austria), Catholic peers in England comprised only a minority of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, this minority (before 1642 probably between 15 and 20 per cent of the peerage if the church Papists are included) managed against heavy odds to maintain their social status, not least at the local and regional level. What is more, some Catholics or crypto-Catholics gained influence at court, in particular during the 1630s but in some cases even under James I. Nevertheless both Protestant noblemen in Austria and Catholics in England were confronted by the problem of how to define their status and identity as nobles in a situation where access to offices was difficult or could only be gained at the price of hiding one's religious convictions. Moreover, choices constantly had to be made between allegiance to a faith which had been rejected by the ruler, and the need to preserve one's property and local influence.

Significantly, for a long time the fate of these noble minorities has been neglected and left to specialist historians. Only recently have the Catholic gentry and peerage in Britain and their Protestant counterparts in Austria come back into the mainstream of their respective national historiographies, thanks to the work of Michael Questier, Alexandra Walsham, Thomas Winkelbauer, and others. Against this background, as Asch explained in his introductory remarks, a Freiburg-based research project has started to explore the phenome-

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non from a comparative perspective. In particular, it asks whether these noble families developed a distinct cultural identity which set them apart from the rest of the nobility, be it by adopting traditional positions and values, or by emphasizing their cultural patronage in an attempt to compensate for their lack of actual power at court. In addition, the extent to which the Catholic gentry and peerage in Britain and the Protestant nobles in the Habsburg monarchy made up their own religious belief systems is at the centre of the investigations. After all, clergymen in noble families who found themselves in a minority position were much more dependent on their aristocratic patrons than in countries where normal ecclesiastical structures existed. And, finally, the group of Freiburg historians aims to break up simple typologies with regard to confessional identities. Facile dichotomies which pit sincere believers against turn-coat careerists who change their faith for political and secular gain are often too crude to capture the complex historical realities.

To continue these discussions with British, Irish, and German historians and to widen the scope of the investigation was the aim of the conference held at the GHIL. The first part, chaired by John Morrill (Cambridge), was devoted to 'Confessional Allegiances in the British Isles', and three speakers approached the specificities of the English-speaking Catholic nobilities. Michael Questier (London) opened the debate by re-assessing the role of 'English Catholic Peers and their Clergy in late Jacobean and early Caroline England'. As a social group, Catholic nobles were less likely to be punished according to the penal statutes against Catholics. They were also not entirely excluded from positions of power in the early Stuart period as they should have been. They were thus well qualified to take a position between confessional allegiance and loyalty to the state. This, on the other hand, raises the question, as Questier stressed, of whether their Catholicism was just coincidental to their role as peers of the realm. Although an answer is difficult to find given the paucity of family papers and the lack of explicit political statements, there are ways to approach this problem. By looking at the proposals of peers and their chaplains about reform of their own church and by reconstructing ecclesiastical debates such as the discussions surrounding the appointment of Catholic bishops in England or the so-called Approbation controversy, valuable insights into the thinking of the Catholic nobility can be gleaned, which also shed new light on polit-

ical developments (personal rule of Charles I, Catholic royalism in the Civil Wars). The complex relationship between faith and the state was further explored by James Kelly (London) in his paper on church papists entitled 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Catholics, Conscience and Secular Influence in Late Sixteenth-Century England'. Taking the example of one individual, Sir John Petre, he showed that the traditional view of church papistry as a feeble form of attachment to the Catholic Church was misguided. Although at first glance Petre conformed in all important respects to the demands of the Elizabethan state, even serving on commissions which were meant to enforce the allegiance of Catholics to the powers that be, he was also associated with activities that smacked of recusancy. In the end, as Kelly concluded, Petre's outward conformity was a means of allowing him to advance the Catholic cause. Church papistry could take on far more political overtones than has often been conceded by historians.

In contrast, Irish Catholic nobles faced a rather different situation, as Jane Ohlmeyer (Dublin) demonstrated in her talk on 'Religious Allegiance among the Irish Peerage in the Seventeenth Century'. At the beginning of the seventeenth century they formed the vast majority of the (resident) Irish peerage. And although the religious composition had changed by the middle of the century, half of the peers still professed to be Catholic. In addition, the penal legislation was only erratically enforced, leaving Catholic peers to live a devout life and practise their religion openly. They also continued to exercise political power and were major landowners. Of the twenty top landowners in Ireland, nine were Catholics and many of the Protestant big landowners had converted to Catholicism in the early parts of the century. A further testimony to the open state of affairs in Ireland is the occurrence of intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants and its ready acceptance by contemporaries. Even devout Catholic families contemplated marriages with Protestants. In the last resort, it was more important to a peer to marry a woman of honour than one of the same faith. This testifies to the importance of honour as the main context within which the Irish peerage of both confessions operated. The startling contrasts between Ireland and England were also picked up in the discussion, which was opened by John Morrill's comments on all three papers. He stressed, in particular, the differences between the British and Irish penal laws and, in addition, drew

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attention to the importance of the individual in deciding how to react to the faith versus state divide. Other issues debated were the different roles of church papists in Ireland and England, the importance of conversions, and comparisons with other European countries.

The comparative aspect was developed even further in the second session, chaired by Alexandra Walsham (Exeter), which took a closer look at 'The Protestant Nobility in the Habsburg Monarchy'. In the first paper Andreas Klein (Freiburg) introduced the audience to 'The Protestant Nobility of Austria and their Clergy 1570-1620'. Drawing upon a wide variety of case studies he showed how fluid the confessional borders still were around 1600. Local parsons often showed a blatant disregard for the norms of the Catholic church (celibacy, communion under both kinds) without, however, always incurring the wrath of the church superiors. Their aristocratic patrons were not too steadfast in their confessional allegiances either. When it came to the education of their offspring, they more often than not attached greater importance to the quality of the teacher or the university than to the correct theological viewpoint. The picture was further blurred by the fact that the Lutheran camp experienced an internal rift about dogmatic questions which helped confessional hardliners (Flacians) to gain influence and emphasize the importance of a clear-cut division from Catholicism. Thus both supporters of a strict separation of the confessions and those who showed greater ambiguity can be found in the Austrian lands before the Thirty Years War. The situation changed after 1620, at least in Lower Austria, as Arndt Schreiber (Freiburg) outlined in his paper, 'Religious Opposition and Political Loyalty: The Protestant Nobility in Lower Austria after the Battle of White Mountain'. The Protestant nobility was on the defensive in the aftermath of the battle that effectively ended the reign of the Winter King. Their legal position was precarious and their numbers declined in the decades that followed. To stem the tide, the noblemen pursued a cautious strategy of voicing their confessional opposition in moderate terms and limiting their actions to obstruction and subterfuge rather than showing open resistance. At the same time, they vociferously declared their loyalty to the Habsburg monarchy and abstained from any collaboration with invading Swedish forces during the war, instead supporting the defence of the country. In this way they could reconcile their religious antagonism with political loyalty to the dynasty.

The theme of blurred confessional boundaries resurfaced in the last paper of the day, given by Jörg Deventer (Leipzig). Speaking on 'Refashioning Confessional Identity: Conversions to Catholicism among the Bohemian and Silesian Nobilities', he looked at processes of negotiation and inter-confessional dialogue in the Bohemian crown lands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to overcome a traditional paradigm of confessionalization which applies a top-down approach to religious issues. In particular, he analysed the conversions in the Bohemian and Silesian nobilities that were a mass phenomenon during the period. In examining these shifting religious allegiances it would, however, be misleading, as Deventer stressed, to ask questions concerning religious sincerity and honesty, or to take the conversion narratives which often survive at face value, because they were informed by pre-existing discourses. As he illustrated with reference to a number of case studies, however, reconstructing the biographies of converts from other sources allows historians to discover factors that were conducive to conversions (for example, study trips to Italy and France) and to observe nobles in their attempts to refashion their and their families' histories *post festum*. The ensuing discussion, which centred mainly on conversions, was again started by comments from the chair. Walsham addressed, in particular, the problem of confessional boundaries which contemporaries had to navigate, the tension between resistance and loyalty which was played out in different ways in Britain and Austria, and the role of conversions as forms of cultural and political reorganization. She also highlighted aspects that were largely absent and should receive further attention, such as the occurrence of intermarriage, the issues of generational change, the emotional experience of conversions, and the significance of the shared values of a transnational noble culture.

These points led into the final discussion, chaired by Hamish Scott (Glasgow/St Andrews). Scott identified a number of common themes which had run through all the papers, namely, the importance of education, the defining role of periods of violence, and the surprising finding that, despite differences, there were stronger parallels between the situation in Ireland and Austria than between Ireland and England. He also posed the question of whether historians of the nobility should get away from explanations based on family strategies, a problem that triggered a lively discussion among

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the participants. Thus the conference went at least some way towards shedding new light on the history of early modern nobilities and on processes of confessionalization which have long occupied historians of early modern Europe.

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