Title: Joseph II: Philosophy’s Meeting with Legislation
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Academia is a database that promotes the free exchange of exceptional ideas and scholarly work, setting a platform on which to foment and improve student discourse.
Joseph II’s ascendency to the Austrian throne promised a break from the traditional policies carried out by his Habsburg lineage. Ever since 1619, the House of Habsburg had pledged their support for the counter-reformation. Even through the reign of Maria Theresa, expulsion, forced conversion, and general prosecution of religious minorities was ever-present. At least the erblande was to be united in homogenous Catholic spirit. Moreover, when it came to Catholicism itself, the Austrian Empire was the centre of Baroque Piety, with all its excesses and grandiose customs. But the 18th century was a time of change, embodied in Austria by the rule of Joseph II. Joseph has often been labeled a revolutionary: an enlightened man with a faultless set of morals. However, while much of Joseph’s rule reflected enlightened philosophy, he went about implementing his reforms in a pragmatic and, occasionally reactionary way. Joseph was not driven to eradicate Catholicism but rather purify it of superfluous elements, like pilgrimages and the Rosary, that hindered the advancement of Christianity and Austrian culture. Maria Theresa, after coming to power in 1740, strove to create a centralized state. Joseph’s reform of state-church relations, while beyond the scope of his mother’s dogma, was an evolution of her idea of centralism. This paper highlights the interplay of the practical and radical elements of Joseph’s religious reform campaign by examining both the philosophical influences and the political reasons for his reshaping of the Habsburg Empire.

A New Catholicism

Joseph II, in a letter to Cardinal Herzan (Imperial Royal Minister in Rome) in October 1781, spoke about removing things from Catholicism that never belonged to it. He said, “I will have the Priest to preach, not the romances of the canonized, but the holy gospel and morality.”1 For Joseph, Catholicism in the form of Baroque Piety was a corrupted version of real Christian

dogma. He was embroiled in the tide of 18th century intellectual Europe. The ideas of Febronianism, Jansenism, and those of Ludovico Muratori were significant in the formation of his philosophy. Joseph talked about the “superstitious” elements of Catholicism that had to be removed in order to bring people back to the moral teachings of God.

Jansenism, named after Cornelius Jansen, held that due to the weak nature of man, God’s grace was necessary for salvation. It undermined the ceremonial system upon which Roman Curia thrived and questioned Church authority when it came to matters of faith. Similarly, Febronianism was the German equivalent of French Gallicanism, where an effort was made to make the French Catholic Church independent of foreign ecclesiastical authorities. Both these ideologies are heavily linked with Joseph’s effort to centralize the religious affairs of the empire (which is talked about in more detail later in this paper). In a letter to the Count of Aranda in 1773, Joseph spoke about suppressing the Jesuit order so that history would only remember them in contempt and look to Jansenism for the true light of Catholicism.

In Joseph’s philosophy, reason, morality and spiritualization were to be the cornerstones of the new purified Catholicism. While Joseph can be seen as a revolutionary when compared to his most of his predecessors, there were other Austrians who, impacted by the enlightenment, also advocated for less stringent and traditional Catholic practices. In 1754, Maria Theresa founded a chair of natural law at the University of Vienna. The arguments of natural law, drawn from the Viennese university environment, were used to confute papal claims and demonstrate the anomalies of old feudal constitutions. A Vienna based group, the “Institute of Sermon

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3 “Letters of Joseph II”, 84.
Critics”, also spurred the argument about religion. Their weekly publication, Wöchentliche Wahrheiten Über die Predigten in Wien, was cheap, widely distributed, and had a growing reading public.\(^6\) By no means was Joseph a purely reactionary ruler, but his label as “revolutionary” comes across as a gross overstatement because undertones of religious discontent were prevalent in the Viennese public.

Public practice of religion, however, was another domain for Joseph’s reform. He felt he needed to rid Catholicism of commercialism. Church attendance on Sundays and other holidays was not very high because people went on pilgrimages. These excursions were appealing for economic reasons: there was an active market for goods among pilgrims. Joseph also felt that such holidays or ‘Saint’s days’ were far too numerous and only led to idleness. Instead of allowing these practices to continue, the Emperor implemented two measures in an attempt to add order and conformity to the economic and religious lives of the Monarchy’s inhabitants. Joseph prohibited trade on Sundays and holidays and vastly reduced the number of these Catholic holidays.\(^7\) People not only worked more, but also spent more of their free time in Church. These changes fit in with both Joseph’s economic goals as well as those of establishing a specific religious convention, thus pragmatically applying his ideology to reap economic gains.

Another one of Joseph’s great reforms was his altering of the system of monks, bishops and priests. Joseph restructured the system of religious authorities and changed their educational curriculum to expel ‘superstitious’ aspects of the Catholic practice comprehensively in the long-term. While this measure was slow to materialize, it was nevertheless well in line with Joseph’s philosophy. Writing to the President of the Aulic Commission in 1788, Joseph said “propagation of the true principles of Christianity, and for the re-establishment of the purity and sublime

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\(^6\) Ibid, 7.
\(^7\) Klassen, 94.
dignity of the gospel, and for the improvement of morals, are proofs of my zeal for religion." In 1782, Joseph set up the Religious Fund (Religionsfond) that administered the dissolution of monastic houses and financed the appointments of new secular clergy and parish priests. By the new utilitarian philosophy, the monastic sector was too large and was subsequently cut down to less than half its size during his reign. He wanted to ensure more provision at the parish level, and less ‘unnecessary’ praying and fasting. To go about this, Joseph compiled large-scale statistics through the monarchy. He used these to reorganize the financial distribution to ecclesiastical authorities in an orderly and practical manner. Joseph was largely successful. From 52.9% in 1781, the regular clergy as a percentage of total clergy was reduced to 29.3% in 1790. This allowed for a vast increase in secular clergy that dealt with the spiritual, moral and dogmatic elements of Catholic life as opposed to those affiliated with the institutional processes of traditional Baroque Piety.

An influential Jansenist, Johann Opstraet, saw the priest as a caretaker or shepherd of men’s souls. Judging by Joseph’s reform movement, he held a similar belief. Joseph wanted to change the patronage system where patrons often chose pastors with their own inclination without regarding theological education. His State Board of Religion wanted increased bishoprics to influence individuals more closely with reform Catholicism, and he wanted them to be well versed in theological instruction. They decided to abolish tuition fees to make the study of this new theology easily accessible and more widely pursued as an academic subject. Joseph’s reform Catholicism represented a revolutionary shift from that traditionally practiced in Austria. However, when going about reforming the Habsburg landscape, he tried to apply his

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10 Ibid, 95-100.
philosophy to the roots; a calculated decision that would help the monarchy attain uniformity and centralized authority in the long-run.

The Evolution of Centralization

The policy of centralization was one both Maria Theresa and Joseph II looked towards to consolidate the Habsburg Monarchy. Their ideas were influenced heavily by German philosopher Samuel von Pufendorf who said that the state was one organism consisting of ruler and people having one unified will. When it came to state-church relations, however, Maria Theresa was less rigid than Joseph in her stance. Joseph took the motives of his mother and extended them to restructure the role of religion in the empire.

Uniformity being his end-goal, Joseph said that “nation and religion must in all this not make any difference, and as brothers in one monarchy, all must apply themselves equally, in order to be profitable to each other.”\footnote{Ibid, 14.} It was this sentiment that made him strive to redefine the role of the Church and bring ecclesiastical matters under the influence of the state itself. Soon after Joseph’s rise to power, the Church lost the support of the legal and military sectors of the empire. This idea was held by Franz Joseph Heinke, a diplomat and advisor to both Maria Theresa and Joseph II who was strongly influenced by Febronianism. In 1768, when Maria Theresa faced the problem of defining state-church relations, she called upon Heinke to draw out a solution. He felt that the clergy was materialistic and church involvement in secular affairs is what contributed to heresy. Heinke advocated for a state dominated Church where the clergy’s income would be provided by the state. Maria Theresa was reluctant to implement such a full-scale reform, something that Joseph eventually undertook. Nonetheless, in the 1760s the Milan Royal Board of Control was created. It served as the administrative machinery on Church...
matters in Lombardy and was a forerunner of the State Board of Religion at Joseph’s time.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, elements of church centralization were prevalent at the time of Maria Theresa, but it was Joseph’s more radical ideology that allowed for full-scale reform.

Joseph had the clergy pledge an oath of loyalty addressed to the state, a manifestation of his desire to not have loyalty transcend the boundaries of his empire. There was no contradiction in his mind between being a good Austrian citizen and being a good Catholic. However, he would not permit his subjects a higher loyalty to the head of an institution located out of Austria. While he respected Papal authority in Rome, he felt that it should only be a force in spiritual matters and wanted the control of all institutional matters to fall under the domain of the state. By 1783, even marriage became a matter of civil contract. The bishops retained their control over marriage only to the extent that it remained a sacrament. If a couple wanted to get married or separate, they had to meet the requirements of the state. Prince Kaunitz, and influential advisor to both Maria Theresa and Joseph, was also of the opinion that the state should control ecclesiastical matters. He proposed to restructure the system of bishops to offset the smaller role of the Pope. Joseph held Kaunitz in high regard and undertook his idea. The bishoprics were reorganized under the control of the state and were concerned only in matters of dogma, offsetting even that impact of Rome. Insofar as the state’s attack was directed against the Roman Curia, Joseph’s reforms were an effort to avoid foreign influence in Austrian affairs. But Joseph’s centralization was not limited to the expulsion of influences from Rome. At the Emser conference, when proposed a German National Church with bishop power, Joseph and Kaunitz rejected it. They felt authority should lie with the central state because various bishops would lead to uneven and partial reform.\textsuperscript{14} Here the difference in approach between Maria Theresa and

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 25.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 29-33.
Joseph is quite visible. Maria Theresa still represented the traditional Catholic practice and had faith in the Roman Curia. Joseph’s policies marked a shift in thinking. His policies of centralization were an evolution of those that began during his mother’s reign. However, it took a significant philosophical shift from Habsburg convention for him to be able to implement full-scale reform and break with the Papacy.

Symbolic of Joseph’s radical extension of Maria Theresa’s centralized policies is the change in support he received from Cardinal Migazzi over the years. Migazzi was the Jansenist Archbishop of Vienna through the years of both Maria Theresa and Joseph II, a transitional figure between Baroque and Enlightenment eras. He allied himself against the Jesuits on theological grounds and not the general jurisdictional grounds with which Joseph, Kaunitz and Heinke also associated themselves. Migazzi cooperated with the government to get assistance on his own separate pastoral objectives and organized new Italian Jansenist teachers to replace the Jesuits’ teaching of the clergy. What Migazzi did not realize, however, was that the new supervisory institutions, the commissions for censorship and education, would not be staffed by the clergy but by administrative control out of his jurisdiction. He felt that once the traditional ecclesiastical hierarchy was dissolved, not even the Jansenist’s could survive. This is where his opinion on religious reforms differed from Joseph. Here elements of Joseph’s relatively radical philosophy become apparent. Joseph felt that Catholicism should be revolutionized and brought under state control completely. But Migazzi, while a proponent of the new reform Catholicism, did not want Joseph’s reforms to override the Catholic spirit of the empire.

An Imperfect Edict

Joseph II firmly believed that the purpose of Christianity was to develop in man a spirit of selflessness which safeguarded the general welfare of humanity. In a letter to his civil servants, Joseph said that the welfare of the majority superseded their own, and his own, interest.\textsuperscript{17} His Edict of Toleration gave minorities the right to practice their religion freely in the empire, and even in the \textit{erblande}. This was seen as his most ‘revolutionary’ religious reform.

Greek Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish people had been historically exiled to Hungary, Transylvania and the Banat by Habsburg rulers. During Maria Theresa’s reign however, this policy was changed to that of forced conversion to Catholicism. Joseph believed that forced conversion was merely a short-term pledge on paper, but it would not have a lasting effect. Rather, he felt that by incorporating minorities into the social, economic, and political structure of the economy, the Habsburg lands would unite in prosperity. Moreover, he idealistically stated, “one ought to pursue most zealously and constructively the Catholic worship and practice, through which, with time, many souls will be led back to the Catholic religion and become truly good Catholics.”\textsuperscript{18} He felt that if Catholics practiced their religion properly, by respecting the rights of others, many people would be drawn towards the new tolerant Catholic faith. In a letter to Gottfried van Swieten, an Austrian government official, Joseph said, “tolerance is an effect of that beneficial increase of knowledge which now enlightens Europe.”\textsuperscript{19} Consequently, he felt that his sweeping new philosophy when applied to the Austrian framework would produce practical advantages for the prosperity of the Habsburg monarchy.

While the Edict of Toleration was symbolic of real progressiveness, on a practical level the freedom of minorities was still severely constrained. The Edict itself included that the right of

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 12
\textsuperscript{18} Klassen, 54.
\textsuperscript{19} “Letters of Joseph II”, 290.
private worship would be granted to minorities where it does not interfere with Catholic faith. Such a loosely termed statement could be open to different interpretation and application from authorities all over the monarchy. It also stated that “with regard to the chapel: chimes, bells, and towers, as well as public entrance from the street, are expressly prohibited.”

Joseph’s philosophical take on minority rights was more radical than the laws enacted by the restricted Edict. His expulsion of forty-nine Deist families from Paradubitz, Bohemia to Transylvania was reminiscent of his ancestors’ actions. A harsh punishment just because they did not keep their views to themselves.

The red-tape involved in his treatment of minorities also greatly restricted their liberties. All those not registered officially as non-Catholics could not begin Protestant practice they wished. Instead, Joseph made sure they would have to take a six-week course on Catholic doctrine after which they could declare themselves Protestant. Finally, they would be given an ID card with which they could enter Protestant churches. Joseph took these measures because he was a firm believer in Catholicism and did want to convert the residents of the Habsburg lands, albeit in the shadow of toleration. Interestingly, the Edict was not translated to Czech (in Bohemia) for two months after its publication. This is perhaps because the officials that were to enforce the principles of the Edict often opposed its provisions.

Several historians, like John Klassen, argue that the Edict was partially a reactionary one to the political strife created by religious intolerance in Bohemia. In October 1781, the month the Edict was issued, non-Catholics in the Chrudimer Circle in Bohemia revolted and formed a committee that sought to kill any Catholic individual. This was reminiscent of earlier Bohemian dissatisfaction. Ever since the Bohemian famine of 1772, the masses became more politically

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20 The Edict of Toleration of Joseph II (1781), in Man, State, and Society, p. 97.
21 Ibid, 98.
22 Klassen, 62.
23 Ibid, 62.
active in voicing their concerns. The famine also acted as a trigger that exposed the harsh realities faced by many people in different facets of political life. Religious intolerance on the part of Catholics was one such concern. Joseph did not only publish the Edict because of his undying love for humanity but also to avoid protests of similar essence to the ones in Bohemia.\(^{24}\)

Overall, the Edict of Toleration of 1781 is the Austrian equivalent of the Edict of Nantes. It’s provisions for minorities were far-reaching and drastically reformed the reigning religious structure of Austria. One of Joseph II’s biographers and historians, Derek Beales, claimed that Maria Theresa had loosely allowed minority rights but turning a blind eye is not the equivalent of legal toleration, and that’s where Joseph’s philosophy was applied.\(^{25}\) Despite the far-reaching benefits, the Edict did not provide the equality that Joseph II often advocated for. In the words of the Edict itself: “the Catholic religion shall retain its pre-eminence (in Austria).”\(^{26}\)

Conclusion

The Habsburg mandate through history had been to protect Catholic faith. Joseph’s version of Catholicism was altogether different from that of his ancestors. However, his reform of the church was not a hostile or revolutionary act—the state wanted to strengthen Catholicism and combat the trend towards irreligiousness which it regarded as a consequence of the clergy’s laxity.\(^{27}\) As such, Joseph was consistent with the traditional Habsburg mandate. His Edict of Toleration was a provision to religious minorities limited in its scope and ostensibly politically motivated.

\(^{24}\) Ibid, 57.
\(^{26}\) The Edict of Toleration of Joseph II, 98.
\(^{27}\) Klassen, 116.
In a claim typical of the nature of enlightened despotism, Joseph once said, “philosophy is the legislator of my empire.”28 Inspired by the cases of Catherine II of Russia and Frederick II of Prussia, and immersed in the undertakings of Voltaire and other enlightened philosophers, Joseph had developed a new, and arguably radical (by 18th century standards), set of principles. He brought in fresh ideas to a changing European climate. He sewed the seeds of change. However, in many ways, he did apply himself in a practical manner. He reacted to political upheavals. He examined the Austrian landscape thoroughly before decreeing how to effectively pursue religious reforms. He also managed to restrict the freedom of his subjects by giving them heavily symbolic concessions while realistically progressing out of the established order gradually. But even Maria Theresa’s had been a time of change, and Joseph’s reforms were an evolution of those carried out by his mother. The radical paint that Joseph smeared on Austria’s walls was tainted by history and tradition. Perhaps he came too early, the 1780s not ready for him to apply his enlightened philosophy. But Joseph recognized this. He did not rebuild the Austrian empire, but merely renovated it with the essence of progressivism.

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