

The old faith and the confessional border

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

When the Reformation reached Switzerland in the 1520s, Zug had to choose. Its powerful neighbour Zurich, under the leadership of Huldrych Zwingli, adopted the new faith. Its other neighbours, Schwyz and Lucerne, remained Catholic. In 1526 the town and the three communes of the outer Amt decided to remain in the old faith.¹ The decision placed Zug on the front line of the confessional conflict. The monastery of Kappel, where Zwingli fell in battle in 1531 during the second war of Kappel, lies just across the border in the canton of Zurich. The second war of Kappel confirmed Zug as a confessional borderland.²

The Catholic Reform of the late sixteenth century strengthened the confessional identity of the canton. After the Capuchins had come to Zug in 1595, the construction of the Capuchin convent of Maria Opferung began in 1608.³ For more than three centuries, Zug remained an almost entirely Catholic canton. Protestants could not settle freely. When industrialisation brought workers from Protestant regions in the middle of the nineteenth century, the change was abrupt: in Baar, the number of Protestant residents rose from 12 in 1850 to 209 in 1860, following the establishment of the large spinning mill on the Lorze. The first Reformed church of the canton was built there in 1867.⁴ In 2000, the canton counted 61,873 Catholics and 17,590 Protestants among its 100,052 inhabitants.⁵

The confessional history of Zug provides one of the sharpest contrasts with Geneva. In Geneva, the Reformation created a moral economy of work, thrift and credit, to which the Protestant refuge added the capital and networks that laid the foundations of private banking. In Zug, the old faith was preserved, and with it an economy centred on land, office and foreign service. Without a banking tradition of its own, the Catholic canton saw its elite invest in land, in houses and in the careers of their sons as officers. When international capital came to Zug in the twentieth century, it arrived from outside and was welcomed by a political class that had learnt to value

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what foreign money could bring. Part B will ask whether there is a Catholic, or at least a central Swiss, moral economy that corresponds to the Calvinist one described in the Geneva volume. The answer suggested here is cautious: the relevant tradition is a political practice, the practice of a small community that lives by making itself useful to more powerful partners.

1 Notes

1. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", section on the Reformation: in 1526 the town and the three outer communes chose to remain in the old faith. ↩
2. Source as cited in the printed edition. ↩
3. HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": arrival of the Capuchins in 1595; beginning of the Capuchin convent Maria Opferung in 1608. ↩
4. Wikipedia (German), "Spinnerei an der Lorze", accessed September 2026: growth of the Protestant population of Baar from 12 in 1850 to 209 in 1860; establishment of the canton's first Reformed church in 1867. ↩
5. HLS, "Zug (Kanton)", tables on population and religion (census 2000).
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