

*Faith and science in the autobiographical work
of Ferenc Rákóczi*

Tout ce monde visible n'est qu'un trait imperceptible dans l'ample sein de la nature. Nulle idée n'en approche. Nous avons beau enfler nos conceptions au-delà des espaces imaginables, nous n'enfantons que des atomes, au prix de la réalité des choses. C'est une sphère dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part. Enfin, c'est le plus grand caractère sensible de la toute puissance de Dieu, que notre imagination se perde dans cette pensée.

BLAISE PASCAL: *Les pensées*

Ferenc Rákóczi II, is one of the most popular national heroes of Hungary. He was the leader of an uprising at the beginning of the 18th century called the Hungarian War of Independence by the Hungarian national historiography. He was also a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire and the elected Prince of Transylvania. His life naturally divides into three periods, each of which constitutes a distinct and important era in Hungarian history. (Köpeczi B. – R. Várkonyi Á., 2004) His youth concurred with the glorious delivery of Hungary from the Turks and the greatness of Austrian power in Hungary (1686–1699). His political career occurred during the War of Spanish Succession, which took only eight years (1703–1711). The last period of his life was a long saga of exile, which was also the period of his literary activity (1712–1735). He wrote his most important oeuvres during these years, including his two biographical works. His *Confessio Peccatoris* was written in Latin and his *Mémoires* in French.

The Prince's life can be divided into three great periods from the historical point of view, however, in terms of religion and Christian faith, Rákóczi himself divided his life into two stages due to the spiritual rebirth he had experienced at a certain time. The process began shortly after his arrival in France and he arrived at a decisive turning point of his life a few months later, when King Louis XIV died. The exiled Prince "converted" at the Christmas of 1715. In *Confessio Peccatoris*, which he began writing on Christmas Day in 1716 a year later, he calls his rebirth the moment, when he felt he had received the grace of faith. From that time on he considered that event his birthday every year. At the beginning of his reflection titled *In nocte nativitatis* written at Christmas in 1719, Rákóczi states: "This is the fifth night of my spiritual life, which awakens me, and which brings me before your face in the light of its light, O my eternal Father, my Creator. [...]. (Rákóczi F., 1978, p. 719.)

This does not mean, however, that Rákóczi was not religious or a believer in his earlier life. He read the Bible and attended mass regularly, visited Loreto, the most famous place of pilgrimage in Italy, prayed to God in difficult situations, confessed and sacrificed, but he had not immersed himself in the true depth of the faith as he looked back after 1715: „...but what am I saying, forgive me, when I say that I did not spend the time badly; because one does badly everything that one does not with you; one does not with you what one does for the satisfaction of one’s desires. I visited churches, but I did not seek you; I found you in them even without seeking, but on coming out I left you because I did not wish you to keep me in righteousness; I greeted you as I entered and perhaps as I came out too, but my heart, buried in sin, was far from those paths that led to you.” (F. Rákóczi II – *Confessio*, 2019, p. 52.)

So Rákóczi – not irrespective of the environment that surrounded him by the Camaldulians in Grobois, and his mostly exclusively Jansenist readings at the time (Zolnai B., 1927; Tüskés G., 2015) – after his conversion and his rebirth had to have his whole life weighed. However, he did so under the influence of this new mentality, as a result of which the earlier stages of his life, especially the one before the War of Independence, were redefined and gained new significance. Since the Christmas of 1715 he realized that all his memories, events of the past, no matter how insignificant they might be, all had fit into a process that affirmed Rákóczi’s faith in God, in divine Providence and Grace. For this reason, the *Confessio Peccatoris* is not simply a confessional autobiography, but a combination of self-examination, repentance, and remembrance, as well as an attempt to discover the manifestations of God’s involvement in his life. It is important to emphasize all this because, through conversion and rebirth did Rákóczi truly feel that he had become a new person, and so the concepts addressed in this study gained new meaning for him. This new conceptual framework was largely shaped by Jansenism, a trend that has always emphasized that faith can be obtained through the Grace of God (Czakó, 1943, pp. 21–22., 66.), which is well expressed in the first line of the *Confessio Peccatoris*: *Sentio te in me...* („I feel you within me ...”). The Jansenist interpretation of Christianity also implies that just like in the case of faith, there are two distinct periods in Rákóczi’s life, the ones before and after the Christmas of the year 1715, so in the case of science we also have to distinguish between his scientific views before and after his conversion. Therefore, one of the main issues in his autobiography centres around the search for faith and truth, that is, knowledge. During his conscious historical engagement Rákóczi tried to make achievements in two major disciplines – legal and political science and military science – but had failed in both areas, which eventually led to the consolidation of his faith. Nevertheless, before considering the results of Rákóczi’s work in these two fields of science, it is important to see how Rákóczi’s perception of both science and faith changed, and what a decisive role his conversion played in revising his earlier views. In his opinion science, as nowadays, comprised not only the practical (military) and theoretical (legal) sciences, but also the science of the study of nature, whose importance he had re-evaluated radically under the influence of Jansenism.

The change in his attitude is clearly testified by the passage of *Confessio Peccatoris* in which Rákóczi reports on his school years. As the purpose of his confession is to account for his sins, he highlights some events from his schooling at the Jesuit Educational Institution (now Jindřichův Hradec in the Czech Republic) which he afterwards, in his *conversion, rebirth*, reconsiders to be sins, and feels important to highlight. On talking about his studies at the institution, he describes himself as a man who, by nature, worked with a desire to study the invisible. That's why he had stolen a magnifying glass that he could use in his living room: „I had a natural instinct to pry into things that I had not seen and to take an interest in curiosities (*curiosa tractandi*); among these I took a particular delight in telescopes [...] I admired and examined, and one of which, as I was reluctant to ask for a loan, I took with me unbeknown to all.” (II. Rákóczi F. – *Confessio*, 2019, pp. 38–39.) He also states that he picked up an unused drawing compass from the library in Neisse (now Nysa in Poland) in Silesia: “The same thing happened to me after three years with a pair of compasses [...] instruments in the Fathers' celebrated library.” (F. Rákóczi II – *Confessio*, 2019, p. 39.) When recollects these thefts, he clarifies that he found pleasure not in the deed itself, but rather in the use of the stolen objects. He also adds that he had no intention to harm anyone. However, he emphasizes that he was so attached to those objects that, according to his subsequent interpretation, he had simply taken them to avoid feeling ashamed of having to ask for them. He also recalled that if someone had asked him about them, he would not have given them back, but would have sworn that he had not have them on him. It would have intensified his sin, but God spared him eventually.

Curiosity, the exploration of the secrets of nature, the *curiositas*, symbolically predicted by the stealing of a magnifying glass and a drawing compass, a mathematical tool, is a sinful act for the converted Rákóczi. The most obvious explanation for this is in the Italian section when he tells us what interest he had in Vesuvius: „Many and great were the wonders of Nature that came to my inquisitive sight on that my journey to Naples; but I was unhappy, for in them I did not seek you, whom it is our duty to seek as prime purpose in all those things that are revealed to the sight of our eyes. I admired the height of Mount Vesuvius, from which now and the streams of fire burst forth [...]” (F. Rákóczi II – *Confessio*, 2019, p. 56.) But his obsession, according to his own interpretation, was not entirely against God's liking: „[...] because I was more curious than was proper in the examination of them; but why do I say, Lord, more curious than was proper? For in fact it is not the seeking out of the phenomena of nature (*naturalium vera indagatio*) that harms us, Lord, but that desire to learn something by curiosity (*cupiditas curiose sciendi*) is contrary to your pleasure; you wish us to admire your magnificent works that in them we may worship you, and we admire your works that in them we may worship you, and as we admire your magnificent works recognise at the sight of them our puny stature [...]” (F. Rákóczi II – *Confessio*, 2019, p. 56.)¹

¹ Translated by Erika Szepes.

Thus Rákóczi distinguishes between *naturalium vera indagatio* and *cupiditas curiose sciendi*. Nevertheless, only after his conversion had this distinction become apparent to him, for he always had a keen interest in the phenomena of nature, and also in the sciences and scientific discoveries which he had profited from during the War of Independence. Examples include precious metal mining and related research. This curiosity persisted during his stay in France, as evidenced by Ádám Szatmáry-Király's Diary. Szatmáry-Király escorted Rákóczi to Poland as the Prince's wingman and then arrived in Paris with him. He faithfully noted down the events, so we know many tiny details of the Prince's hiding in the French capital. For example, the following was recorded by Adam Szatmáry-Király on May 11, 1713: "After lunch, we came up to the castle, where we visited the King's gallery, his sleeping quarters and small houses, all the medals and engraved rings, and all kinds of curiosities (consisting of pictures, clockwork and celestial balls). Here our lord entertained until late at night." It also turned out that on May 13, "[the] lord stayed in his quarters until noon, because he wanted to see a monkey, dressed in men's and women's robes, doing all kinds of military exercises and other crafts." They visited the Louvre on May 26: "At nine o'clock in the morning we went to see the pictures, statues and drawings of the palaces at the Royal House of Luvér [...] at the Royal Academy of Sculpture and Painting." And on June 22 he noted: "We were in the afternoon with our lord at the observatory, while we did all the curiosities." (Bánkúti I. – Köpeczi B. – R. Várkonyi Á., 2004, 2, pp. 378–380) Reading these lines the question might arise whether the symbolic site of the expression of human curiosity triggered the memory of the stolen magnifier some time later, when writing his *Confessio*.

However, when he met the Jansenist spirit, his earlier life took on a completely different refraction, which was also perceived by his surroundings. the Marquis Dangeau, who diligently recorded every step of Louis XIV, had a good relationship with the Prince and mentioned him as Count of Sáros several times in his diary. According to his note of Good Friday, April 10, 1716, the Austrian emperor wanted the French court to withdraw his support from Rákóczi, as "the Prince believed that the rebel would stir another uprising in Hungary". However, the Duke of Orléans declined the request, saying "he refuses to change his attitude towards Count of Sáros, who lives in the monastery of Camaldulense hermits in the utmost retreat and in great piety." (Bánkúti I. – Köpeczi B. – R. Várkonyi Á., 2004, 2, p. 393.) There was a cause, however, that Rákóczi was still interested in after his conversion: the issue of Hungarian freedom. Dangeau reported that a Turkish ambassador arrived on July 18, 1717, and suspected that the Sultan would offer Rákóczi a bid, because the Turkish ruler "wanted to stir up Transylvania, where he was expected to return Count of Sáros". (Bánkúti I. – Köpeczi B. – R. Várkonyi Á., 2004, 2, pp. 393–394.) Rákóczi took more than a month to make a decision, about the circumstances of which the Marquis wrote: "before he left, he had consulted with several lawyers and excellent minds on how to take a position on the above matter [ie, the invitation of the Sultan]; he chooses the better part, the one that comes with so much trouble, discomfort and danger." (Bánkúti I. – Köpeczi B. –

R. Várkonyi Á., 2004, 2, p. 394) Dangeau's account made it certain that Rákóczi had trusted the possibility of a fresh start in the War of Independence, for which he had thought two sciences were indispensable. One of them was military science, which had always been at the centre of his interest. The other one was legal science, which was helpful in the difficult context of international diplomacy, and the representatives of which Rákóczi, according to the above passage, would listen to before making decisions.

At Rákóczi's time Hungarian military science was still an underdeveloped discipline. Apart from Nicolas Zrínyi's exceptional oeuvre and, perhaps, Paul Esterházy's manuscript (*Mars Hungaricus*), the emerging Hungarian military thought was still very difficult to define. Even though Prince Francis Rákóczi II was very passionately interested in the subject. In his autobiographical works, especially in his Memoirs and per tangenter in his Confessio, he published his military reflections. His first military failures made the Prince realize that his army and his officers were incapable of defeating the well-organized mighty imperial army.

He complained in his Memoirs about their ignorance of military tactics, their fatal negligence, their national pride and their total incompetence in the art of war. There had been a strong resistance to modern military ideas practiced widely in Western Europe since the end of the Thirty Years War, a process called „military revolution” by historians: „Their idea of warfare was to stay away from the enemy, not to post any sentries at all, to drink and sleep a great deal, and to leave for a three- or four-day foray after a long rest for men and horses, and to charge the enemy suddenly, pursuing them if they fled and driving them back if they resisted. This concept of warfare had spread throughout the nation. [...] The nobility always disdained service in the infantry, considered that that arm was in no way good for anything and would have been ashamed to serve in it. It was proverbial that only dogs went on foot and that animals meant for carrying men. Scarcely any use was known for the infantry other than the guarding of the gates of castles and palisades, as the fortresses on the Turkish frontier were known. Their fortifications consisted of the longest available stakes, driven into the ground two or three feet apart and covered with wickerwork and plastered with mud mixed with chaff.” (F. Rákóczi II – Memoirs, 2019, pp. 75–76.)

Rákóczi considered the reform of his army as a personal matter, which he attempted to carry out on a modern scientific basis. He founded an elite corps inspired by the guard of French royal musketeers in 1707. This company of young nobles destined for the posts of officers were trained under his personal control. A great importance was placed on theoretical training, Zrínyi's publication on the art of war and, in addition to that Rákóczi also consulted his French officers on new military strategies. He also composed a scientific work in Hungarian, the title of which in English would be: “The training school for the man of war” dated from 1707-1708. The fragments of this manuscript include two original chapters written by the Prince himself and two others borrowed from the work of François de La Vallière entitled *Pratique et maximes de la guerre*, published in The Hague in 1693. (Windisch É., 1953) His masterpiece in the

field of the regularization of his army was the text concerning the intended regulations called *Regulamentum universale*, which was even approved by the diet / national assembly of Ónod in 1707. The legal text includes the fundamental rules of the creation and the organization of the Hungarian army: the raising of troops, the various weapons, internal organization, supplies and payment of troops, etc. Nevertheless, the reality was often far from the wishes of the Prince expressed in this law which remained mostly on paper... (Bánkúti I., 1976, pp. 151–154.) In his memoirs, Rákóczi criticized his generals several times, but also self-criticized his own inexperience and lack of scientific training: „I was at the time twenty-six, lacking all military experience, and with only quite a superficial knowledge of politics and history. I was therefore able to appreciate deficiencies and errors, but perhaps not always to remedy them. I confess therefore that I was blind, and leading the unilluminated.” (F. Rákóczi II – Memoirs, 2019, p. 62.)

His interest in military science did not diminish during his exile. His library in Rodosto displays his interest in military science. He possessed the most popular historical works of the time on the subject there: in particular the *Histoire de Polybe* by Folard, Monluc's *Commentaires* or the *Discours* by La Noue. (Zolnai B., 1925 and Knapp É. – Tüskés G., 2016) A very interesting new discovery points out that Rákóczi, while writing his most profound religious work, the *Confessio Peccatoris*, was keeping an eye on the development of military science. Following the Spanish Succession War, there were many debates in the European military thought on the advances in military technology, such as tactical considerations about the competition between firepower and infantry propulsion, or, for example, on the tactics of the column developed by the chevalier de Folard. Many representatives of military science returned to the views and works of authors of antiquity. A curious impact of the debate by “Ancients and moderns” on military science is illustrated by Rákóczi's manuscript, where the author subsequently upgraded the modern names of military rankings to ancient Latin names. (Takács L., 2020)

Rákóczi acquired his competence in legal and political science from different sources; partly from family traditions, from his studies, but most importantly from continuous self-education. Legal reasoning played a very important role during and after his War of Independence. His ancestor, George Rákóczi II also successfully applied legal arguments to justify the wars he had started. The German Protestant theologian Heinrich Bisterfeld (1605–1655), professor at the Academy in Gyulafehérvár, helped him to formulate a complex theory of just war, which comprised the idea of preventive war. (Tóth F., 2016, p. 147.) According to his memoirs, he wished to wage the war with the help of the French, relying on treaties between his ancestors and the French kings, although he failed to sign a new treaty with Louis XIV. He also put forward legal arguments in his patent issued in Brzezán on May 6 1703, when he called upon the people of the country to restore the patriotic glory and old freedom, in short, the constitutional rights of the Hungarian orders lost in 1687. At the same time, he sought to build

his fragile state on a broad social basis, autonomous institutions, European guarantees and, alongside historical legitimacy, a positive vision of the country's future.

In addition to establishing an independent army, Rákóczi succeeded in creating his own court and princely government as well as his own diplomacy under his personal control. The diplomats he sent abroad were often unsatisfactory, but some of them did excellent work in foreign affairs. Among them was Domokos Brenner, who was the most outstanding author of Rákóczi's pamphlets and diplomatic propaganda papers. These texts, which contained the arguments of contemporary international law (*ius gentium*), often included religious arguments, such as Rákóczi's prayer (*Prière que les rebelles disent tous les jours et principalement Ragoczy*). (Köpeczi B., 1971, pp. 376–377.) Similar high quality-level legal and political reasoning can be found in the *Re-crudescunt* manifesto edited by Pál Ráday in which he explained the causes of the freedom struggle. Towards the end of the War of Independence, Domokos Brenner and Mihály János Klement commissioned by Rákóczi himself attempted to communicate the arguments of the Hungarian War of Independence to the European public opinion in two important works *Lettre d'un Ministre de Pologne à un Seigneur de l'Empire sur les affaires de la Hongrie* [1710] and the *Déduction des droits de la principauté de Transylvanie* [1711]). Through these political pamphlets, even after the fall of the War of Independence, Rákóczi tried to bring the Hungarian question into the negotiations of the peace treaty in Utrecht. Professor Daniel Ernst Jablonski, a German Protestant theologian who supported the Hungarian affairs, described the *Déduction's* scientific quality as follows: „Le mémoire relatif aux prétentions sur la Transylvanie est bien fait, une seule chose lui manque: une armée qui pourrait l'appuyer et le rendre effectif.” (Köpeczi B., 1993, p. 62.)

After the peace negotiations in Utrecht and Rastadt had failed to incorporate Rákóczi's interests and requests in the final decisions, the exiled prince sought to put his legal and political arguments to paper. He owned one of the classic works of contemporary international law, Abraham de Wicquefort's *L'Ambassadeur et ses fonctions* in his library. In his memoirs describing the events of the war, he turned to the Eternal Truth (*Vérité Éternelle*), to the divine justice to explore the legitimate arguments for his struggle. With reference to divine laws, he used the ideas of jansenism in addition to the contemporary political literature on the absolute monarchies of his age, especially in his *Confessio Peccatoris*, whose title referred to the beloved author of the jansenists, Saint Augustine's famous work. Augustine's religious ideas were also important to Rákóczi, as the Bishop of Hippo's reflections on the just war also influenced him in his argument for his struggle. (Tóth F., 2009; Tóth F., 2016) Rákóczi explained extensively about imperial politics that disregarded and violated the country's traditional laws and presented his struggle as a just mission to eliminate injustice in his *Confessio Peccatoris*. Recognizing his own personal weaknesses and sins, he tried to find the implications of his political role in his life, turning to the Eternal Truth of the jansenists. The last sentence of his memoirs summarized very clearly the inexplicable relationship

between faith and knowledge: “I recognized the great truth which all proclaim aloud but in which only few truly believe: man proposes, God disposes. *His be the exaltation and the glory for ever and ever!*” (F. Rákóczi II – Memoirs, 2019, p. 223.)

Returning to the question of faith and science, especially if we narrow the concept of science down to natural sciences, we can summarize Ferenc Rákóczi’s II view. While in the case of *faith* his conversion manifested in the fact that the mechanically practiced religious activities and religious occasions were no longer empty forms for Rákóczi, but were filled with real spiritual content after the Christmas of 1715, and even meant life for the Prince. His interpretation of the notion of *sciences*, especially *natural sciences*, however, took the opposite direction. While he had previously neither in theory nor in practice opposed to scientific research, as evidenced not only by personal recollections, but also by contemporary accounts and other historical sources, he later considered scientific curiosity and research activities as ones that man should not do, because God did not accidentally hide it from man, and on the other hand, one mustn’t admire the great creations, beauty and richness of the created world for themselves, but because the creator God can be discovered in them, and one’s attention must really be directed towards the creator.

Thus, while Rákóczi’s faith was full of content, the search for and study of the secrets of nature lost its significance, meaning, and eventually became something from which a truly believing person should be able to keep a distance. It is also clear, however, that his aversion from science did not extend, either before or after his conversion, to the disciplines he needed as a prince and a warlord, that is, practical human sciences such as military science or law. To these, Rákóczi did not extend the rejection of the Jansenists, who were not motivated by curiosity about God’s plan, but by God’s Grace they were able to contribute to, by true human means, to the realization of God’s plan, as the inscription on the flag of Rákóczi’s War of Independence proclaimed: *Cum Deo pro patria et libertate*.

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