

Respublica Controversa Re-Formata: Mapping the Catholic–Protestant Polemical Literature of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1573–1648)

This project seeks to provide the first in-depth reconstruction of the religious controversies that played out between Catholics and Protestants in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth during the important transitional period between 1573 and 1648. It focuses on polemical literature—that is, texts written to defend one confession and attack another—produced by Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and Unitarian authors. While existing research has explored individual polemics, writings, figures, regions, or confessions, this project takes a broader approach. It expands the geographical scope beyond the previously studied case of Vilnius to include three other major centers of controversy: Kraków, Poznań, and Lublin. It also brings in comparative material from England and France, where religious polemics were developing in parallel. In doing so, the project aims to help understand the nature of religious conflicts and the dynamics of multi-confessional coexistence in early modern Europe.

To fulfill these objectives, the project combines traditional methods of historical and rhetorical analysis with digital tools for examining large sets of texts. Thanks to a custom-designed database, the team will trace how controversial texts were written (including language, genre, rhetorical devices, and polemical themes), what authors and other figures they mentioned, what topics they addressed, and how they responded to one another. It will look at main theological themes—such as the doctrine of transubstantiation or the Scripture alone—and identify recurring rhetorical strategies, like accusing opponents of ignorance, blasphemy, or political disloyalty. It will also study how these writings traveled between cities and confessions. For example, a printed sermon in Poznań might directly respond to an earlier pamphlet from Lublin, while citing authors from Geneva, Paris, London, or Rome. The project will explore the full range of literary forms used in polemics—from formal treatises and theses to dialogues, narrative poems, or public disputation accounts—and ask why certain confessions in a given period preferred particular genres. Importantly, the study will also connect these texts to historical events: religious tumults, church removals, royal and Sejm legislations, or public disputations that influenced both the writing and reading of religious polemic.

Although the polemical literature was central to shaping religious, political, and cultural life in early modern Poland–Lithuania, it remains understudied across different scholarly traditions. This project addresses that gap by analyzing these texts as a shared and interconnected group—one in which opposing writings responded to common controversies, drew on overlapping textual sources, and circulated within similar political and institutional contexts. Its findings will be made available through a publicly accessible database of approximately 450 texts and a series of scholarly and popular publications.