
Many books on German history devote one chapter or essay to the Kulturkampf. But for years we have lacked a monograph on this crucial conflict between state and church which lasted from 1871 to 1887. Thus Johannes B. Kissling’s three-volume classic is still worth reading, even though it was published between 1911 and 1916 and takes a deeply Catholic position. So, too, does the most recent German book on this issue, edited by Rudolf Lill (Der Kulturkampf, 1997). This collection of sources ignores any document which shows the aggressive ambitions of the Roman Catholic Church (the Syllabus of 1864, condemning modern times, for instance, does not appear). In his introduction Lill lumps National Liberal and National Socialist attitudes to the church together, putting them on a par with critical contemporary historians. He blames them for calling the Catholic Church anti-modern, authoritarian, and anti-liberal. Thus for 130 years both the clergy and Catholic historians have presented Catholicism as the pitiful victim of evil, and of intolerant forces.

Donald J. Ross is not the first to break with this tradition. But he is the first to write a monograph which combines critical arguments and facts to demonstrate that the Kulturkampf was, ultimately, a failure. To be clear, Ross neither turns the tables, suggesting that Catholicism itself produced victims, among them infantile, fearful Catholics, non-conformist Catholics, non-Catholics, or Jews (anti-Semitism was especially widespread during the Kulturkampf), nor does he play down the suffering of many Catholics. But there has never before been such a sophisticated inquiry into oppressive laws and their inadequate implementation. Ross leaves the conventional path of examining Bismarck’s motives, parliamentary debates, or legislation. Instead, he goes to the level of towns and villages, parishes and cloisters, and confronts the practical problems of everyday social life. As a result, political claims were ‘evaded, resisted, reinterpreted, vitiated, and, on occasion, ignored’ (p. 14). The obstacles state power faced ranged from financial and administrative problems to popular disobedience.

The inability to achieve governmental goals against the church—and this is the subject of the first chapter—can be seen in the tensions
between Prussia’s policymakers. While Bismarck’s tactics relied on flexible improvisation, his Kultusminister, Adalbert Falk, as a jurist, clung strictly to legal actions. Furthermore, Protestants could not be persuaded to support every step against Catholics. Anti-Catholic sentiment was strong, but the Kulturkampf also damaged Protestant institutions. Disagreements among Protestant churchmen about how to behave towards Catholics divided rather than united Protestantism. The opposite was the case in the Catholic camp: the separatist Old Catholic movement was too weak to fulfil Bismarck’s hope of splitting Catholicism into two. On the contrary, Catholics appeared united as never before. Ross devotes an extended chapter to the often neglected Old Catholic Church. He discusses not just the famous Ignaz von Döllinger and Joseph Hubert Reinkens, the first Old Catholic bishop (1873-1895), but also their unorthodox community and its social background in the better-off classes.

‘Ineffectiveness’ proves to be the key-word for the chapter dealing with the imprisonment of clergymen. Many suffered from dreadful conditions, and many Catholics were deprived of spiritual succour. But even this weapon did not compel obedience. Ross’s study of the Congregations Law of 1875 is convincing on the limited impact of governmental policies. In fact, even contemplative orders were given plenty of time to dissolve, but most religious communities were exempt because their members were indispensable to the running of hospitals and schools. To replace them with lay substitutes would have been expensive enough, without considering the cost of relocating thousands of displaced religious persons. In the end just one third of the total number of convents, monasteries, and other religious houses was actually dissolved. The sufferings of many monks, nuns and other Catholics deserve respect. None the less, as Ross concludes, ‘Bismarck’s legislation proved far less injurious to the Roman church than Catholics feared or its advocates confidently anticipated’ (p. 77).

The observation that operations against the church were ineffective is confirmed in many other fields. There were not enough police to control Catholic assemblies. Police forces were understaffed and overstretched. Expelled priests could return undetected to their parishes and continue their work. A community of Franciscan nuns was established in Frankfurt am Main in 1875, and avoided discovery for at least two years (p. 102). Apart from the vast executive and
administrative problems, the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition to the Kulturkampf blocked its successful implementation. It was not merely Catholic resistance, as legend has it, but political constraints that made governmental policies fail.

We are left, though, with the question of whether the Kulturkampf was overdramatized both by Catholic contemporaries and by later generations. Ross avoids giving a clear answer. Instead, he points out the limits of state power. Moreover, he concentrates on Prussia and does not take into account the situation in other German states, such as Baden or Württemberg. Nevertheless, he claims that his observations are valid for ‘the German Empire’. This certainly requires further research, yet it seems plausible so far. Ross concludes that ‘Bismarck’s inability to develop a comprehensive system of surveillance, his unwillingness to incur heavy financial outlays, his failure to close legal loopholes in ecclesiastical legislation, and his unwillingness to correct deficiencies in the system of Prussian justice itself seriously restricted the authoritarian reach of the Bismarckian state and made the Kulturkampf an ill-advised, ill-prepared, and inefficiently conducted campaign that he could not hope to win’ (p. 190).

This perspective makes the book, based on many hitherto neglected sources, an important and revealing contribution to research on Catholicism, a field which has gained ground in recent years. If the Kulturkampf was a failure, at least this book about it proves to be a striking success.