

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

The War Against Catholicism. Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2db2r0qd>

Journal

The Catholic Historical Review, 93(4)

ISSN

0008-8080

Author

Anderson, Margaret Lavinia

Publication Date

2007

DOI

10.1353/cat.2007.0350

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Margaret Lavinia Anderson's review of:

The War Against Catholicism. Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany. By Michael B. Gross. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2004. Pp. xii, 354. \$25.95 paper. \$70.00 hardback.

Published in the *Catholic Historical Review* 93/4 (October 2007): 980-83.

Did sexual anxiety cause the Kulturkampf? So one might conclude after reading Michael B. Gross's provocative study of the anti-Catholic imagination in nineteenth century Germany. German liberals coded the Church as female. When a women's movement in the late 1860s produced "dramatic pressures for change" (239), liberals responded with a virulent anti-Catholic campaign. Within a decade they had succeeded in expelling the religious orders, depriving parish clergy of their role in schools, giving the state control over the education and appointment of pastors, and jailing bishops and banishing priests who refused to comply.

The picture invites scepticism. Could three new vocational associations, with "assiduously" unpolitical agendas and a modest, overwhelmingly non-Catholic membership (the latter unmentioned by Gross), really trigger such liberal panic as to precipitate an earthquake in church-state relations? If the political, social, and sexual order were so deeply unsettled by this "resurgence of the women's

movement," would not conservatives -- and Catholics -- have been even more alarmed? If sexism was "typical of the liberal middle class" (186), were the upper and lower classes more enlightened? Yet it was middle class liberals whose imaginations were "tortured" (206) by fantasies of Catholicism.

Gross argues that the incessant invocation of their own masculinity and repeated representation of the Church as female served to defend German liberals' monopoly on public space against the invasion of women. One could also argue the reverse: antagonistic masculine/feminine tropes aimed at barricading the public space against the Church. Was woman the target and religious invective the weapon, or was Catholicism the target and misogynist invective the weapon? Different passages of The War Against Catholicism suggest different answers.

But such queries are beside the point. The New Cultural History has never set its sites on anything so positivistic as causation; on distinguishing dependent from independent variables. It seeks, rather, to unravel tangled skeins of meaning. In this task Gross excels. In exploring what the Catholicism meant to liberals, Gross is at his most innovative and most persuasive. When he argues that "at the center of liberal anti-Catholicism was ... not merely religious intolerance but a more fundamental sexism" (203), that the Kulturkampf reflected a "more fundamental contest between men and women" (205), one might question his judgment as to which element is really "more fundamental," but not his nose for new and interesting historical

evidence. Gross has grounded his case for the gendering of anti-Catholicism on a much fuller empirical base than I (having also searched for such connections, mostly in vain) would ever have thought possible. His resourceful investigation of images, recurring metaphors, and verbal tics lays bare the filiations of liberal identity in ideas of independence, rationality, and masculinity, demonstrating powerful connections (although perhaps not causal ones) between liberal anti-Catholicism and what academics call "misogyny." Language that likened piety to nymphomania and offered prophecies of metaphoric castration if the Church remained unchecked betray, Gross tellingly observes, a "deep-seated fury" (239). Surely this was (forgive the misogynist term) hysteria.

The phobic dimension of liberal identity is Gross's most memorable contribution, as convincing as it is astonishing; but it by no means exhausts the riches of this stimulating book. Guarding against reductionism in accounting for the Kulturkampf, Gross pays his dues to "hard" empirical social and political history, shedding light on the legislative fallout of the anti-Catholic campaign as well as on the sources of Catholicism's conspicuous vitality. A particularly fine chapter explores the movement to invigorate Catholic piety through missions, arguing in passing that Catholic missionary successes spurred a competitive Protestant revival. His evidence is anecdotal and fragmentary, but if confirmed by further research his suggestion would significantly revise our picture of German

Protestantism in decline. Unpersuasive, however, is Gross's explanation for Catholic success: having "pounded audiences with the threat of infernal damnation, hellfire, and brimstone, the missions were instruments of psychological and public terror, traumatizing their audiences and driving them back into the church" (25; emphasis mine). Melodrama has always been popular and never more than in the nineteenth century. There is no impartial evidence, however, of its "traumatizing" its consumers, any more than horror movies do today -- despite the dark forebodings of critics. The notion that the nineteenth century's richly articulated Catholic piety was the product of trauma hardly accords with the explosion of vocations, which (thought liberals) "exceeded the requirements" of the population (131). For two decades after 1850, more than two convents, on average, were founded in Prussia every month. Is it reasonable to attribute these remarkable commitments to terror?

If some of Gross's interpretations outrun plausibility, others exaggerate his differences from predecessors like Jonathan Sperber, Helmut Walser Smith, Ronald J. Ross, David Blackbourn, and myself (all generously cited). On such matters, for example, as the duration of the missionary campaign, the explanation and timing of the Kulturkampf, whether or not anti-Catholic legislation was a betrayal of liberal principles, the difference [**should be differences**] are a matter of emphasis.

After having given us a powerful description of febrile anti-Catholicism through the early 70s, Gross unaccountably sees it declining at the century's turn. Had he looked at the kinds of evidence that he exploits so brilliantly for earlier decades, he might have concluded otherwise. In a 1903 Simplicissimus for example, little Michel, the elfin symbol of Germany, is pictured steering his fragile rowboat of state between the multiheaded Scylla of socialism and the monstrous mouth of Charybis, whose biretta reveals this leviathan as Catholicism. In 1909, a sinister Jesuit, a plague of rats swarming around his heels, offers a visual argument against the Center Party's motion to repeal the society's expulsion. Compared to such nightmares, those roly-poly monks quaffing beer in monastic cellars that Gross reproduces from Gartenlaube seem innocuous. Regardless, **[Whatever]** however, ~~of~~ one's demurs here and there, Gross's study is a notable addition to the history of anti-Catholicism and a methodological landmark. The "New Cultural History," whose apostles have promised so much, has at last found a subject worthy of its program and a historian with the imagination and skill to deliver on it.

Margaret Lavinia Anderson

The University of California, Berkeley

