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## Review Article

### German Political Catholicism 1870-1933

*Windthorst: A Political Biography.* By Margaret Lavinia Anderson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981. Pp. 522.

*Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Centre Party in Württemberg Before 1914.* By David Blackbourn. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980. Pp. 267.

*The German Center Party 1870-1933: A Study in Political Catholicism.* By Ellen Lovell Evans. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981. Pp. 433.

German political Catholicism, in the form of the Center party, was born in 1870. In July of 1933 the party dissolved itself. During its lifetime it went through three major stages: the "liberal" phase of the *Kulturkampf*-Windthorst years (1870-1891); the more conservative phase as government ally (1891-1918); and the republican years ending in submission to the Nazi state. The story of this political movement and its leaders offers an instructive perspective on the nature of modern Germany to 1933. It sheds light on the difficulties of maintaining pluralism within a society seeking national consensus, on the problems created by rapid industrialization, urbanization and secularization, and on the continuous intensity of denominational divisions.

The exclusion of Catholic Austria from Germany in 1866 transformed German Catholics into a minority. When unification was consummated in January 1871, Catholics made up 36.2 per cent of the Empire's population. They did not proportionately share positions of leadership in the social, political, cultural and economic spheres. They were, in general, poorer, less educated, less influential than their Protestant and Jewish countrymen. The double disadvantage of confessional minority and socio-political inferiority forms the background to the establishment of German political Catholicism.

Confessional parties are not uncommon to continental Europe. In 1871, the Center, a national party representing Catholic interests in the new *Reichstag* (national parliament) was formed. Its purpose was to defend Catholic interests at a time of exuberant nationalism and liberalism. A new secular state, incorporating many liberal ideals had come into being. However, under the leadership of Pius IX, a rejuvenated ultramontane Catholicism took up the liberal challenge.

German Catholics did not share the exultant nationalist mood. They were dismayed by secularisation and the growing power of the centralizing state and wary of industrial capitalism. The political ruler of the new Germany, Chancellor Bismarck and his liberal allies, resented the cool reception given their accomplishments by the Catholic minority. Resentment grew into the infamous *Kulturkampf*, the bitter strife between the German states and the German Catholic community. The states introduced legislation designed to emasculate political Catholicism and the German Catholic Church's authority over its clergy, its members, and education. Civil marriage was introduced. Religious orders were banned in Prussia, the Jesuits throughout Germany. It has been estimated that by 1875, some 241 priests, 136 editors, 210 Center party members and 55 other persons had been arrested; 103 individuals expelled or interned, 20 newspapers confiscated, 74 houses searched, and 55 organizations dissolved. Some 989 parishes were without priests, 5 Prussian bishoprics were vacant, and the number of theology students had been halved. (Evans, 76)

The Center party not only survived but was strengthened by these heavy-handed measures, thanks mainly to its effective if unofficial leader, Ludwig Windthorst — "Imperial Germany's greatest parliamentarian." (Anderson, 3) Windthorst has received little attention from twentieth-century historians. Until recently, few documents relating to his career had been discovered. Furthermore, most historians have found the evolution of Germany's legislative life insignificant compared to the more dramatic issues of industrialization, class-struggle, war and revolution. Unlike Britain and France, Germany had even by 1914 not evolved into a parliamentary democracy. Hitherto historians have also neglected the Center party. Its confessionalism and heterogeneous social composition have made it difficult to fit the party into schematic explanations of modern German history. Anderson's biography focuses not only on an important actor on the German political stage but sheds light on German political Catholicism and parliamentarism.

In the first part of her book, Anderson describes the unexciting but highly successful early career of the young Catholic lawyer from the Westphalian region of Hanover. Despite his relatively humble back-

ground, at thirty-six he became a justice of Hanover's Supreme Court, and three years later in 1851 he began the first of two brief tenures as the kingdom's minister of justice. Even political opponents respected his work. It was, however, as Bismarck's most effective parliamentary opponent that Windthorst gained his place in history. Given Windthorst's instinctive conservatism, this was an unexpected development. The explanation for it lies largely in Prussia's annexation of Hanover in 1866 which transformed him into a "dogmatic libertarian." The assimilationist policies of the powerful Prussian state turned the aggrieved Hanoverian toward more radical politics. In his opposition to Bismarck's centralizing policies he claimed natural law as his guide, insisted tenaciously on parliamentary prerogatives and appealed to the masses for support. The *Kulturkampf* reinforced Windthorst's challenge to the Prussian political establishment. Under his guidance the Center party became more liberal than its members and he had intended. Not only did it become the influential voice of disadvantaged Catholics, but it opposed anti-Socialist legislation, fought militarism and successfully resisted internal as well as external pressures to resort to anti-Semitism. It espoused the principles of freedom of speech, toleration of minorities (e.g. Danes, Poles, Alsace-Lorrainers) and the rule of law. Through Windthorst's efforts the Reichstag became an effective public forum constraining the powers of Bismarck's government. "By guarding and defending constitutional liberties and by insisting that legislation be constructed universally and fairly, Windthorst offered his countrymen a new understanding of law." (Anderson, 406) The Center's primary battle was, of course, on behalf of German Catholicism, although it should be noted that Windthorst refused demands to make the Center an exclusively confessional party.

A particularly fascinating chapter in Windthorst's life was the disagreement between the Center and the Vatican over the dismantling of the *Kulturkampf*. Anderson re-examines this issue in the light of newly-discovered evidence. In contrast to most historians, she criticizes the attitude and policy of Pope XIII in this process. She demonstrates the wisdom of Windthorst's preference for a parliamentary dismantling of the *Kulturkampf*. For him the Center was to be the lever to force an end to Bismarck's discriminatory anti-Catholic legislation. The Pope was willing to sacrifice the Center for his ambitious goals. He had little faith in democratic procedures and political parties. His perspective was narrow; he sought to protect church organizations and institutions naively assuming that the welfare of Catholicism in Germany lay in political treaties rather than in the safety net of a pluralistic society. Windthorst strove to free the German Catholic community from the ambitions of its political rulers. Much to the

annoyance of the Vatican, he even proposed complete separation of church and state. He argued that in a pluralistic society, with rights for all minorities, the Catholic minority could freely pursue its own life and ideals. Not all Catholics, and not all Center party members, shared this liberal ideal. "The Zentrum's doctrinaire liberalism was, after all, a hot-house plant, the creature of one man's leadership and the crisis in the relations between Catholics and the state" (Anderson, 404). Leo's arrangement with Bismarck seriously reduced the Center's liberal thrust and effect. And with Windthorst's death in 1891 the Center drifted away from the libertarian precepts propounded by its most successful leader. "The dissidence of dissent lost its legitimacy" and many Catholics "compensated for their long years of spiritual exile by an orgy of over-assimilation" (Anderson, 405). Political Catholicism lost its sharp and admirable edge; instead it sought acceptance rather than respect, cooperation and accommodation with the majority and the state rather than the struggle for rights and confrontation.

As vital as Windthorst was to the libertarian nature of the Center in the *Kulturkampf* years, his departure inadequately explains the conservative phase which now set in. A socio-economic analysis of the German Catholic community—as provided by Blackburn's study of political Catholicism in Württemberg (1890-1914)—adds a dimension so far missed by historians. From the 1890s on, the Center in this south-west German state paralleled the national party sufficiently to be considered a legitimate microcosm. Blackburn focuses on the Center's turn to the right and its apparently inconsistent, opportunistic behaviour in the two decades preceding World War I.

Traditionally, "confessionalism" has been blamed for the Center's rightward drift and its political opportunism. According to Blackburn this explanation is insufficient. The Center had never been the willing, servile tool of the church. Admittedly, church and clergy still played a vital role in the life of the party and associated organizations, but they neither spoke with one voice nor were all party concerns related to confession. Issues such as education and the constitution which directly affected the church were still pursued by the party but they were no longer the marrow of Center politics. Party leaders continued to appeal to confessional loyalty when it appeared opportune or necessary but the religious glue increasingly lost its adhesion and the Center gradually lost electoral support. By the 1912 Reichstag election, almost half of the Catholics who voted supported parties other than the Center. Even those who remained loyal to the party did so, as Blackburn shows, frequently for pragmatic rather than pietistic reasons.

The rightward drift of the party was also not the work of aristocrats. Their place in the front-ranks of Center leaders was increasingly taken by members of the Catholic bourgeoisie—academics, officials, publishers, above all lawyers. The new generation of party leaders sought to escape the backwardness, the pariah status of German Catholics. They strove to overcome their social inferiority, to gain acceptance from and equality with the Protestant majority, to be considered loyal Germans. Such ambition drove Center leaders away from their potential allies on the left, especially the Social Democrats, although there were powerful reasons for cooperation with them. Catholics and Socialists had experienced a common fate as outsiders, as “enemies of the Reich” in the Bismarck period. Both movements had been considered inferior and dangerous and had been subjected to harassment by the state. In the post-Windthorst era, however, Center leaders preferred switching to fighting. The conservatism inherent in the drive for parity was reinforced by apprehension about industrialization and modernization. In their eyes, the traditional fabric of society was being torn by secularism and laissez-faire capitalism.

Of even greater conservative weight was the “backward” nature of the Center constituency. Although a microcosm of German society in general, it was less progressive. Catholics were under-represented in urban areas and in positions relating to a modern industrial order. A few statistics provided by Blackbourn bear this out: in 1912 Catholics made up only 25.8 per cent of urban dwellers in Germany although constituting 36.5 per cent of the total population; while in 1907 37.5 per cent of all Germans were engaged in agriculture, the corresponding figure for Catholics was 44.2 per cent. A proportionately higher percentage of peasants, artisans and shopkeepers—representations of a pre-industrial age—were Catholic. In turn Catholics were underrepresented in commerce and industry. The party was strong in rural and small-town areas and weak in expanding industrial centers.

The Center’s constituency was at odds not only with the industrial-capitalist order, but with the political parties supporting the growth of this order. While the SPD and progressive bourgeoisie parties sought to open up further German society and to make way for the open market, the Center succumbed to pressure from below and worked to keep the traditional socio-economic order alive. The SPD, of course, assumed that the industrial-capitalist order must first be brought about before it could collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions. Specifically, the Center stressed the difficulties besetting the peasant farmer and members of the *Mittelstand*, that is, the artisan and the small shopkeepers. It demanded that government act on their behalf and protect them from the storms of the modern world;

it demanded tariffs on produce and protection from competition for the *Mittelstand*. Because such measures increased the cost of living, they were opposed by the urban, working classes and other consumers (even by Catholic consumers). Thus a simple response to pressure from "below" was not good enough, for the demands of the constituents were frequently at odds with each other. Center leaders were consequently faced with the difficult task of balancing off the competing interests of their heterogeneous constituency. Since no easy solutions for squaring the circle were found, the party resorted to opportunism and demagoguery. Its policies were inconsistent and unpredictable as it sought to satisfy its different factions. Its demagogic appeal to the base interests and prejudices of its followers were resented by the left, while other right-wing groups applauded. The socialist "enemy" was hardly as vicious and dangerous as Center leaders in Württemberg, as well as the Reich, would have had their followers believe.

As a result of the Center's rightist policies, the reformist thrust in German society was seriously weakened; the establishment of responsible, democratic, parliamentary government would have to await the loss of World War I. Nor were Center's followers substantially helped by the party's willingness to take up their grievances. Instead of encouraging a positive adjustment to a rapidly changing world, the Center reinforced unrealistic expectations and fed the flames of resentment.

Blackbourn's fine study of political Catholicism in Württemberg refines the generally stark contours of modern Germany's and the Center party's historical pictures. Like the Center, Imperial Germany was beset by competing and countervailing tendencies and interests. But the empire was not—as some historians have maintained—merely a society manipulated from the top by a feudal elite, nor was the Center merely a confessional party controlled by church interests. Before 1914 both empire and party threatened to fall victims to internal contradictions. The war killed the empire but it gave a new lease on life to the Center party.

Whereas Anderson and Blackbourn have a particular focus, Evans presents a careful narrative of the Center from its inception to its demise. She stresses three themes throughout her account: "1) the effects of Catholic-clerical influence upon the parliamentary function of the Center; 2) the relation of the Center to other political parties in opposition and coalition; and 3) the efforts of party leaders to balance and satisfy the diverse interest groups which it represented." (Evans) The strength of the book, half of which is devoted to the republican period (1918-1933), lies in its analysis of political Catholicism's complex infrastructure.



As an important founding member of the Weimar Republic, the Center no longer needed to concern itself with acceptance and parity. Catholics had become social and political equals. The Weimar constitution guaranteed civil rights and "was far more favourable to Catholic interests than the laws and institutions of the Second Reich had been" (Evans, 230). Social reform, an important plank in the Center's prerepublican platforms, was now successfully pushed through by the Social Democrats. Although not all Catholic demands had been met, the need for a specifically Catholic party had significantly diminished. The result was disorientation and eventual disintegration. Center leaders were unable to construct a cohesive response to the problems of the young republic. There were many, as there had always been, who were ill at ease with parliamentary democracy. They were apprehensive about Catholic working-class influence, and they were unsympathetic to the millions of women who had been enfranchised by the constitution. The separation of Bavarian Catholics—in the form of the Bavarian People's Party—from the Center complicated the party's politics. The BVP was at least as pushy and difficult as is the CSU in contemporary Germany. A number of intellectuals and priests also defected from the party while some of the many Catholic lay organizations which had created such a vibrant Catholic community in the imperial days, expired. The party was also plagued by clashes among some of the leading personalities such as Wirth, Stegerwald and Joos. By 1928 the Center sought to escape its own aimlessness and disintegration by electing a churchman, Msgr. Kaas, as chairman and by emphasizing, as it had in its more heroic days, religion and educational issues.

The Center failed to support the republic in its last desperate years. Like others, Center politicians underestimated National Socialism. Once Hitler was in power, Center leaders all too easily forgot the party's libertarian tradition and its commitment to a pluralistic order. In return for facile and vague promises to protect special Catholic interests, the party dissolved itself in July 1933. Windthorst must have cringed in his grave.

Political Catholicism did not make a come-back after 1945; there was no need. Its suicide in 1933 should not blind us to its accomplishments. In the Windthorst years, the party had fought valiantly for civil rights and had significantly contributed to the Reichstag's political influence. Despite its increasingly conservative and sometimes demagogic stance, the party guided the integration of Catholics into German political and cultural life. And finally, the party had fought tenaciously and often successfully for the protection of Catholic interests in a predominantly Protestant society.

Anderson, Blackbourn and Evans demonstrate the significance of German political Catholicism. Their analyses of Center party policies, of its infrastructure and social basis, of its leading personalities and internal struggles, illuminate not only the political life of German Catholics but of all Germans during the most crucial period of their modern history.