

## KNOWLEDGE AND NATIONALISM IN IMPERIAL GERMANY: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF SAINT CHARLES BORROMEO, 1890–1914

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My dissertation is a history of Catholic reading practices in the Rhineland and Westphalia from the beginnings of popular literacy in the Napoleonic era to the onset of the First World War. I came to this study because I was excited about new theoretical approaches to “book history,” which attempt to describe not only what people read, but how and why they read, and the values that they invested in the act of reading.<sup>1</sup> I also came to this study because conclusions about Catholic reading culture during the “long nineteenth century” seemed to rest more on assumptions than research. The Catholic press specialized in religious news, devotional tracts, and moralistic literature. And because Catholics socialized in the “ultramontane milieu” must have obeyed the cultural guidance of their priests, who opposed the spread of modern ideas in their parishes, historians have concluded that Catholics read this confessional literature exclusively. Reinhard Wittmann, for example, writes that from the 1850s to 1914, Catholics in both urban and rural areas read mainly “naive” religious literature, a conclusion for which he cites no evidence.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Olaf Blaschke observes that in Imperial Germany, lower-class Catholics restricted themselves to anti-modern devotional books. He provides no research to support this claim beyond some publishing data and his own belief that since priests dominated the cultural behavior of their parishioners, they must have determined reading habits.<sup>3</sup>

This picture of popular reading practices seemed incomplete to me. Lower-class Catholics must have consumed a great volume and variety of religious literature; the book market catering to their spiritual needs was indeed enormous.<sup>4</sup> And yet theorists of reading behavior caution against relying upon publishing data as a foundation for studies of cultural consumption.<sup>5</sup> These data tell us only what Catholics likely purchased from their own confessional sources, not what they obtained from non-Catholic neighbors, public libraries, bookstores, auctions, fairs, hawkers, clubs, military barracks, tradesmen’s groups, professional associations, women’s sodalities, relatives at Christmastime, even factory collections, which developed rapidly in industrial areas. And if these sources

broaden our understanding of *what* Catholics read, we still do not know *why* they read what they chose to read, the location, manner, and rhythms of their reading, the social ambitions that shaped their patterns of book consumption and display, or the fears, prejudices, and ideological commitments that informed their engagement with the most dynamic print culture in Europe. My doctoral advisor, Roger Chickering, and I concluded that a study of Catholic reading practices might make a helpful contribution to German cultural history. By attending to changes in these practices over time and in investigating the social and cultural contexts of private reading on the popular level, the study might challenge basic features of the master narrative that structures histories of the Catholic "milieu." It might also shed new light on the vexed question of Catholics' integration into German society and contribute new information on their attitudes toward the German nation.

The sources I have just described, and others, including clerical reports on intellectual discipline, letters from Catholics to their bishops asking for permission to read forbidden literature, accounts of home libraries, and records of confessional book associations, expand and sharpen the contours of Catholic literary life significantly. Historians are right to this extent: lower-class Catholics read religious literature. This included spiritual tracts, lives of saints, Marian devotionals, prayer cards, sodality readers, pious stories of every kind, and church histories that condemned the Reformation and what one critic termed the "half-true, half-false ideas of the Enlightenment."<sup>6</sup> Such literature facilitated private devotion in a now literate church. It also played a vital role in the formation of the Catholic minority's religious culture, marking conceptual boundaries against Protestants, Jews, and secular liberals and emphasizing Catholic distinctiveness and strength in corporate unity.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude too much from this literature. From the moment they became literate, it was clear that religion did not control Catholics' reading practices. In both rural and urban areas they read religious literature, but they also read astrology, sawbones medicine, irreverent social commentary, Nostradamus-like forecasting, and tip sheets on how to win the lottery or divine dreams. They took up such material in hospitals, train depots, and work stations, purchased it from itinerant peddlers, or, in one of the surprises of this study, received it from their Protestant neighbors in mixed confessional communities, which abounded in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Lax reading discipline in the *Vormärz*, in fact, justified the bishops' attempt to impose an exclusive regime of pious books at mid-century. Their vanguard institution was the Association of Saint Chares Borromeo, or Borromäusverein, which was founded in Bonn in 1844. The Borromäusverein was supposed to replace the increasing volume of "dirty

and trashy literature" in Catholic communities with "good" religious texts and moralistic fiction. To this end, it distributed catalogues of suitable books from which members made choices and stocked reading rooms as cultural resources in parishes. The organization, at least in its first three decades, was relatively successful. By 1846, ninety-six chapters with almost ten thousand members had been established. Fifteen years later, in 1861, there were 989 libraries in over twenty Catholic dioceses in Germany, with the largest and most vibrant located in the region's sees of Cologne, Trier, Münster and Paderborn. The Borromäusverein's approach to popular reading had struck a chord among the lower-class laity. These readers wanted religious books, certainly to nourish their spirituality, but also to define their identity against Protestant liberals, who in the era of national unification thundered against popular Catholic culture as a critical impediment to overcoming regional, confessional, and class differences on the basis of shared symbolic texts, aesthetic tastes, and literary *Kultur*.<sup>8</sup>

But Catholics continued to hunger for more than pious books. To the chagrin of the bishops, who inveighed repeatedly against the consumption of forbidden literature, reading discipline after national unification was even more relaxed. The average Catholic reader, like the average German, took advantage of an ever-expanding press by indulging in large quantities of colportage literature, in direct contravention of the book rules of their church: secular calendars, serialized stories of love and adventure, tracts on the occult, songsheets complete with "suggestive pictures," and ubiquitous daily newspapers, which threatened the Catholic effort in dailies begun during the *Kulturkampf*.<sup>9</sup> Dime novels were popular as well, especially the so-called "behind the stairs novels," or *Hintertreppenromane*, whose themes of social democracy, violence, suicide, and easy morals provided grist for so many ethical mills after 1900. Some of the books found in the hands of male Catholics caught *in flagrante* by their priests included *Death on the Island of Love*, *The Pirates of the Spree*, *Poison and Dynamite*, *The Prince's Beloved*, *The Beautiful Nihilist* and, more attractive still, *The Beautiful Woman of the Harem*.<sup>10</sup>

If they read for religion, then, Catholics also always read for entertainment. These preferences located them firmly in the mainstream of the German *Alltag*. As one observer of book lending in non-Catholic libraries remarked in 1902, German readers most often went for "an interesting crime novel," a "story about robbers," or they "demanded a racy novel either from high society or from the demimonde."<sup>11</sup> Goethe and Schiller, apparently, were not the only German authors. Nor were the content and habits of popular culture the only forces that shaped lower-class reading behavior. Catholics in the German Empire lived in a punishing regime of discrimination. Protestant liberals reminded them repeatedly that their

outmoded religion, their apparent unwillingness to recognize the epistemic privilege of *Wissenschaft*, and their humble social condition left them culturally incompetent and intellectually unfurnished for national participation. And it was according to this nexus of faith, knowledge, and respectability that Catholics were excluded from public institutions and denied the status they craved as authentic Germans. A number of studies by Thomas Mergel, Martin Baumeister and, most recently, Michael Gross, to say nothing of the pioneering work done by David Blackbourn, document the efforts of bourgeois Catholics to overcome their alleged *Bildungsdefizit* and establish a place for themselves in the national community.<sup>12</sup> This discourse of assimilation reached beyond their circles. Lower-class Catholics, too, explicitly asked for and obtained books that would demonstrate their suitability for full participation in the life of the Empire, not least because so many of them, like Germans on the margins of the economy generally, feared descent into the ranks of the laboring and wretched poor.

Showcasing one's regard for books as a strategy for social leveling—making public goods one's private possessions—implied the development of tastes approved by the dominant elites. Books reflecting these tastes found their way into Catholic homes. Such books included histories that established Germany's national superiority, popular scientific readers, and canonical literature. Because the consumption—or at least display—of these texts was a requirement for inclusion in the culture, their purchase by Catholics was an attempt to accumulate cultural capital for negotiating social acceptance.<sup>13</sup>

And lower-class Catholic readers, like their bourgeois coreligionists, were unwilling to allow the church's reading restrictions to stand in the way of their social mobility. They routinely ignored the Index of Forbidden Books, for example, or petitioned for dispensations from its rules. Maria Höfener, a science instructor at a middle school in Essen, wrote in 1910 that it was "useful, perhaps even downright necessary, to read books that are forbidden by the Index," especially when studying for promotional exams.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the hope of avoiding the social stigma of ignorance was a powerful inducement for seeking a dispensation. One petitioner felt that he simply had to read modern novels, because "association with believers of a different kind" had become "indispensable." This association, he observed, depended upon his freedom from the embarrassment that attached to cultural illiteracy.<sup>15</sup> Some writers were more expressive. In April 1908, a petitioner from Aachen wrote:

Herewith I would like to request most courteously and with all respect in the name of God to be released from reading restrictions and be granted general reading freedom. As I have a lively

interest in art, literature, and philosophy, I would therefore like to ask Your Reverence most submissively for a free hand to study the works in question, so that I can properly inform myself about modern artists, literati, and philosophers, . . . speak about them in secular society, and distinguish between their pros and contras. I am a businessman, twenty-three and a half years old, from the best family, Roman Catholic born, and as educated as possible for my age. Since I do not wish to remain in my current state of education . . . once again I ask [for permission to read forbidden books].<sup>16</sup>

Diocesan offices were so overwhelmed by the volume of such correspondence that in August 1906, every bishop in Germany endorsed a letter to the Holy See citing the “wish stemming namely from lay circles for expanded permission to read forbidden books,” and asking that parish priests be permitted to exercise the “full power *dispensandi ad legendum libros prohibitos*.”<sup>17</sup> The negotiation of faith, knowledge, and respectability through book consumption and display had become one of the most pressing pastoral dilemmas of the Imperial era.

Which brings us back to the Borromäusverein. By 1890, the organization had withered on the vine. From 1870 to 1890, only fifty-eight new chapters had been founded in all Germany, less than three per annum. Over the same period, membership had dropped from 54,013 to 49,071, or 9.1 percent. Catholics now wanted little to do with the bishops’ exclusive regime of pious books. They repeatedly requested that the Borromäusverein respond to their updated reading preferences, but the organization balked. Unable to locate in their confessional libraries the reading material that satisfied their desires for entertainment, increased their chances for social mobility, enhanced their profile as cultural consumers, and established what they believed to be their rightful place in the nation, they bolted, and began patronizing secular collections in significant numbers. So many Catholics in Cologne used public libraries, for example, that in 1903 the Cologne Pastoral Conference recommended closing Borromäus libraries altogether.<sup>18</sup>

The church’s effort to shape popular reading behavior on the basis of ultramontane exclusivity had clearly failed. Then something really interesting happened. In 1897, the leaders of the Borromäusverein decided to abandon the regime of pious books and shift the Catholic reading paradigm to more closely approximate lay desires. It was a strategy of survival. While the organization continued to offer religious fiction, devotional texts, and church histories, to which Catholic readers remained attached, it now insisted that chapter leaders overhaul their outdated and moribund collections, throw out unwanted fire-and-brimstone texts from

the 1850s, discard books with smudged covers that frightened status-conscious readers away, and restock their libraries with attractive, well-bound secular histories, classic novels and poetry, biographies of national heroes, *Heimat* literature, and popular scientific works. It also restructured its annual book lists, adding the kinds of texts that could stand in the Catholic home "in a place of honor," as one promotional put it. Some chapters disdained the new imperatives. Their collections moldered, their patrons drifted away. But most underwent a fundamental renewal, and attempted to present the kind of socially sophisticated and culturally competent profile that confronted prejudice and cultivated status. Father Johannes Braun, the general secretary of the Borromäusverein in 1911, wrote, "Given our difficult position, given the many efforts of the other side to make the Catholic folk out to be enemies of cultivation and dumb, it is extremely important for us to say to all these people: we have so and so many libraries, so and so many books, so and so often were they read."<sup>19</sup>

The laity's response to the Borromäusverein's transformation was spectacular. From 1890 to 1914, membership in the organization skyrocketed 434 percent, from 49,000 to 262,000. The number of chapters also increased to over 4,600. New members came from every social group and all walks of life, including the bourgeoisie, who were always nervous about associating too closely with Catholics beneath them. In the western provinces alone, membership among middle-class men and women in the ten years preceding the First World War jumped 43 percent, to almost thirty thousand. One society lady in Xanten remarked in 1913: "I must say, that the Borromäusverein has come along. While one earlier thought and said that the organization is not for us, it is only for the humble people, today belonging to it seems like the most natural thing in the world. It has become truly modern."<sup>20</sup> The Borromäusverein did best, however, among Catholics in the lower middle class, for whose interests in entertaining, religious, instructional, and nationalistic books it now provided. The organization targeted all Catholic readers, but its appeal resonated loudest among the churchgoing, status-hungry, patriotic petite bourgeoisie.

This dissertation, then, draws several major conclusions. In the era 1815–1914, lower-class Catholics avidly read religious literature. Religion, however, did not dominate their outlook. As the century progressed, they read more often by inclination and fancy, exploiting, by the First World War, what Peter Fritzsche calls the "heteroglossia of modern print culture" to the full.<sup>21</sup> And contrary to assertions about the clergy's ability to maintain standards of cultural taste, the lower-class laity ignored or disobeyed these standards. Increasingly fragmented, diverse, ephemeral, and personal, their reading tastes did not submit easily to clerical disci-

pline, nor were priests, who complained constantly of *rebellia littera* among the laity, deluded in the belief that they did.<sup>22</sup>

Catholics also read to overcome stereotypes of their intellectual “backwardness,” to relax institutional barriers to their inclusion in society, and to broadcast their suitability for full participation in German culture. Exasperated with the narrow devotional readings offered by their bishops, they forced Catholic associations, like the Borromäusverein, to accommodate their desire to cultivate status by means of their reading preferences. The Borromäusverein responded by affirming these preferences for popular science, modern histories, and the classic texts of the German canon. It did so, however, with reference to the church’s intellectual heritage, in an effort to promote assimilation without effacing central features of Catholic identity.<sup>23</sup> It recognized that lower-class Catholics read to satisfy not only the demands of faith, but now also the demands of knowledge and respectability. Its success in the Wilhelmine era had to do primarily with this recognition.

Finally, the study of popular reading behavior provides little evidence of a rigid, exclusive Catholic “milieu” in nineteenth-century Germany.<sup>24</sup> In fact, lay reading at all levels of the population was a symbolically charged action that attempted to redefine the boundaries of national participation. In reading practices both in public and at home, the laity demonstrated that they sought a balance between spiritual allegiance and cultural respectability. This study of Catholic book culture describes the shape and characteristics of this compromise, which involved the harmonization of faith with the attitudes, ideals, and axioms of the dominant German culture. It therefore offers a fresh interpretation of modern German cultural history and enlarges the analysis of national integration.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850–1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Reinhard Wittmann, *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels: Ein Überblick* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1991), 172, 266.

<sup>3</sup> Olaf Blaschke, “Die Kolonialisierung der Laienwelt: Priester als Milieumanager und die Kanäle klerikaler Kuratel,” in Olaf Blaschke and Frank-Michael Kuhlemann, eds., *Religion im Kaiserreich: Milieus—Mentalitäten—Krisen* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 118–126.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Rudolf Pesch, *Die kirchlich-politische Presse der Katholiken in der Rheinprovinz vor 1848* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1966) and Susanna Schmidt, “Handlanger der Vergänglichkeit”: *Zur Literatur des katholischen Milieus 1800–1950* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Roger Chartier, “Texts, Printing, Readings,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 171; Helmut Zedelmaier,

"Das Buch als Recheneinheit: Überlegungen zur Erforschung der Buchkultur," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 120 (2000): 297. Helmut Smith also offers conclusions about the Catholic reading culture on the basis of publishing data, although he admits elsewhere that more research is needed into the Catholic community's "patterns of reading and ideological dissemination." See Helmut Walser Smith, "The Learned and the Popular Discourse of Anti-Semitism in the Catholic Milieu of the Kaiserreich," *Central European History* 27, 3 (1994): 315 and Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870–1918* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 20–37, 80–86.

<sup>6</sup> Unsigned review of *Ansichten und Vorschläge in Bezug auf das öffentliche Unterrichtswesen* (Innsbruck, 1836) in *Der Katholik* 17, 63 (1837): 92–93. On the avid consumption of religious literature, see Jeffrey T. Zalar, "The Process of Confessional Inculturation: Catholic Reading in the 'Long Nineteenth Century,'" in *Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Germany, 1800–1914* ed. Helmut Walser Smith (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 121–152.

<sup>7</sup> On the growth of mixed confessional communities, see Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> See Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict* and Wolfgang Altgeld, *Katholizismus, Protestantismus, Judentum. Über religiös begründete Gegensätze und nationalreligiöse Ideen in der Geschichte des deutschen Nationalismus* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> In 1897, censors in Rome added a catch-all "lascivious or obscene" category to the normal list of condemned heretical and schismatic books, which embraced all such literature. Frightening penalties awaited the rule-breaker: "Omnes et singuli scienter legentes, sine auctoritate Sedis Apostolicae, libros apostatarum et haereticorum haeresim propugnantes, nec non libros cuiusvis auctoris per Apostolicas Literas nominatim prohibitos, eosdemque libros retinentes, imprimetes et quomodolibet defendentes, excommunicationem ipso facto incurrent, Romano Pontifici speciali modo reservatam." See the "Decreta Generalia de Prohibitione et Censura Librorum," *Kirchliche Anzeiger für die Erzdiözese Köln* 37, 7 (1897): 48.

<sup>10</sup> Hermann Herz, "Charitas, Volkslektüre und Borromäusverein," *Charitas. Zeitschrift für die Werke der Nächstenliebe im katholischen Deutschland* 10 (1905): 181.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Schultze, "Über die Auswahl des Bücherstoffes für Volksbibliotheken," *Blätter für Volksbibliotheken und Lesehallen* 3, 3/4 (March/April 1902): 39.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Mergel, *Zwischen Klasse und Konfession. Katholisches Bürgertum im Rheinland 1794–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); Martin Baumeister, *Parität und katholische Inferiorität. Untersuchungen zur Stellung des Katholizismus im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1987); Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003); and David Blackburn, *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Centre Party in Württemberg before 1914* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1980). See also Derek Hastings, "Between Church and Culture: The Catholic Academic Community in Munich, 1900–1925" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey T. Zalar, "'Knowledge is Power': The Borromäusverein and Catholic Reading Habits in Imperial Germany," *The Catholic Historical Review* 86, 1 (January 2000): 20–46.

<sup>14</sup> Höfener to Generalvikariat, Historisches Archiv des Erzbistums Köln (hereafter, AEK) Generalia I, 20.6, 6, 5 February 1910.

<sup>15</sup> Darl to Generalvikariat, AEK Generalia I, 20.6, 6, 28 July 1911.

<sup>16</sup> Bolle to Generalvikariat, AEK Generalia I, 20.6, 5, 4 April 1908.

<sup>17</sup> Erwin Gatz, ed., *Akten der Fuldaer Bischofskonferenz*, vol. 3 (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1985), 93.

<sup>18</sup> "Hebung der Borromäus-Vereine," *Pastoralblatt* 40 (1906): 171–3.

<sup>19</sup> Johannes Braun, *Ausbau des Borromäus-Vereins* (Bonn: Hauptmann'sche Buchdruckerei, 1910), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Johannes Braun, "Bücherausstellungen als Agitationsmittel," *Die Bücherwelt* 10, 11 (August 1913): 255.

<sup>21</sup> Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin*, 235.

<sup>22</sup> Letters written by parish priests to their diocesan authorities document this rebellion. In AEK alone, see the letters to the General Vicar in Generalia I, 20.6, 1–4: W. M. Pastar, 26 August 1825; Peter Schürger, 24 August 1826; W. H. Vest, 6 September 1826; Bierdranger, 1 December 1826; Breuer, 5 April 1865; Fasbender, 14 March 1856; Neu (Mönchen-Gladbach), 12 March 1858; Wahsong (Gadorf), 15 August 1860; Schmebling (Krefeld), 25 February 1861; Pollerberg, 12 October 1863; and Kraeger, 22 May 1869.

<sup>23</sup> This approach had affinities with that of many German Jews, who sought justifications for assimilation within their own tradition. See David Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780–1840* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 28–41.

<sup>24</sup> For an alternative view, see for example Urs Altermatt, "Katholizismus: Antimodernismus mit modernen Mitteln?" in Urs Altermatt et al, eds., *Moderne als Problem des Katholizismus* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1995), 33–50; Olaf Blaschke, "Das 19. Jahrhundert: Ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 26 (2000): 38–75, and Irmtraud Götz von Olenhusen, "Die Ultramontanisierung des Klerus. Das Beispiel der Erzdiözese Freiburg," in *Deutscher Katholizismus im Umbruch zur Moderne*, ed. Wilfried Loth (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991), 46–75.