

Steven Van Hecke, Emmanuel Gerard, eds. *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe since the End of the Cold War*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004. 343 pp. \$72.50 (paper), ISBN 978-90-5867-377-0.



Reviewed by Mark Ruff (Department of History, St. Louis University)

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Tracking Europe's Christian Democrats

In many European nations, the end of the Cold War plunged Christian Democratic parties into crisis. As Communist regimes collapsed throughout Eastern Europe, a militant anti-Communism could no longer serve as a key plank for Christian Democratic party platforms, as it had done from the 1940s onward. The secularization of European societies and declining power of traditional religious institutions, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, meant that Christian Democratic parties were relying increasingly on an older, grayer, and less well-educated constituency. In Italy, such challenges even led to the demise of the Christian Democratic party, the *Partito della Democrazia Christiana* (DC), itself in 1993.

Yet, as this recent collection of essays argues, the obituary for Christian Democratic movements throughout Western Europe is premature. While the collapse of the Cold War did inaugurate an era of decline for much of the 1990s in Austria, the Netherlands, and Belgium, Christian Democratic parties in Germany were actually strengthened as a result of German reunification. In fact, in the first few years since the turn of the millennium there has been a resurgence of support for Christian Democratic

parties that had seemed to be in an irreversible tailspin, most notably in Austria and the Netherlands. The trajectory of Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe, this volume correctly argues, is anything but linear. Instead, one must differentiate between individual nations and different periods from the 1990s to our day.

Christian Democratic Parties in Europe since the End of the Cold War emerged from a conference on "European Christian Democracy in the 1990s" held at Leuven in February 2003. It focuses on the prospects for Christian Democratic parties after the often uncertain and tumultuous years of the 1990s. According to its editors, Steven Van Hecke and Emmanuel Gerard, this volume was put together to address a deficit in the existing research on Christian Democracy. They argue that the field has been underresearched, at least in comparison with its Liberal- and Social-Democratic rivals. It is theoretically inadequate, they say, and lacking in transnational comparisons, because much of the existing research has focused on the history of individual national Christian Democratic parties. Not surprisingly, this volume contains an introduction and conclusion that compare Chris-

tian Democratic parties throughout Europe and also provide questions for future research. They ask, in particular, whether the electoral decline in some Christian Democratic parties is long-term or temporary, and how European unification will alter the nature of these parties.

Their attempt to provide a more substantive analytical framework for understanding Christian Democracy is not, however, always the most lucid. This volume attempts to articulate what has been most characteristic of the manifold Christian Democratic movements throughout Europe. But the chapter that attempts to do this, "The Consociational Construction of Christian Democracy," frequently bogs down in political-science jargon, seeking to create a model independent of existing "rationalist" and "reflexivist" approaches.

"Christian Democracy is an articulate phenomenon characterized by political moderation and origination from a 'consociational' pattern of interactions that have been more or less institutionalized in time and in space. Moreover, it holds that such a pattern theoretically accounts for the social construction of both Christian Democracy's organizational and ideational dimension" (p. 24).

Put somewhat more simply, most Christian Democratic parties were composed of diverse interest groups, such as workers, farmers, employers, who were united by religion. Christian Democratic parties, as a result, often assumed a more moderate, mediating function, attempting to bridge the gap between these groups with different social and economic interests. It is not surprising then that most Christian Democratic parties were pluralized and decentralized, whereas their rivals on the left—Social Democratic and Communist parties—were more tightly centralized and run from the top down.

The real strength of this book is to be found in the substantive, individual chapters on Christian Democratic parties throughout Western Europe, all written in exceptionally clear prose. These include not only the obvious powerhouses—the German CDU-CSU, the Austrian *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP), the Belgian *Christelijke Volkspartij/Parti Social Chrétien* (CVP/PSC) and the Dutch *Christen Democratisch Appèl* (CDA)—but Christian Democratic parties in Luxembourg, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Finland, France, and most uniquely, the European People's Party, the transnational Christian Democratic and Conservative party in the European Union. Almost all of the contributors, including Frank Bösch, Paolo Alberti, Wouter Beke, Franz Fal-

lend, Robert Leonardi, Alexis Massart, Peter Matuschek, Philippe Poirier, and John T.S. Madeley, are younger scholars producing the most up-to-date research. These chapters are replete with highly informative and extremely persuasive accounts of the ups and downs of the national Christian Democratic parties. Many of these chapters contain readable charts detailing party membership and national electoral results for the 1980s and 1990s. The chapter by Frank Bösch, a leading young historian of the CDU, is exemplary, detailing the ebb and flow of the CDU's fortunes in the 1990s as a result of unification, financial scandals, and the personality of Helmut Kohl. This book is to be recommended on the strength of these chapters alone: it contains not a single inadequate or unsubstantial chapter.

One of the difficulties of writing what the Germans call *Zeitgeschichte*, however, lies in the reality that we write about our recent past in light of a present that is ever-changing. This volume was clearly intended to address whether Christian Democratic parties are viable in a post-Cold-War, increasingly secular Europe, as its somewhat prolix conclusion makes clear: "Although fairly pragmatically and contrary to other (sometimes one issue) parties, it seems to support the continued existence of European Christian Democracy as a political [sic] distinct phenomenon" (p. 318). But to a significant extent, the events of the last year have surged ahead of the accounts in this book, which appeared in print only in 2004. The assassination of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands has had an impact on Dutch politics that many have likened to the effects of the attacks of September 11 on the American political scene. While this reexamination of national traditions and values in the Netherlands was foreshadowed by the spike in popularity of the late Pim Fortuyn, it was only the death of van Gogh that not only threw Dutch politics into utter turmoil, but also forced other European nations to reexamine fundamentally their agendas of multiculturalism and immigration. In the Netherlands, the entire agenda of tolerance has been called into question. The impact of an insurgent Islamic radicalism on Christian Democratic parties in the countries with large numbers of Muslim, and in particular, Arab immigrants could well be enormous. If many of the Christian Democratic parties had drifted toward the center-right by the early 2000s, their future may well be strengthened by adopting a much stiffer position against Muslim extremists.

This volume only hints at the challenge posed by Muslim immigrants—it discusses the trajectory of Fortuyn, for instance—but sees it as merely one of many

questions, including asylum seekers, euthanasia, human cloning, abortion, gay marriage, and the expansion of the European Union. Recent debates about Turkey's entry into the European Union have underscored just how critical the issue of religion remains. These discussions have forced not just European governments but also the Christian Democratic parties to reexamine their notion of a Christian Europe, which for many years served as a fundamental underpinning of their own party ideologies. The issues of immigration and the expansion of the

European Union into Muslim Asia have and no doubt will continue to cause much ideological hand-wringing within these parties.

In spite of these caveats, which relatively few anywhere in Europe had foreseen even as late as 2003, these accounts of Christian Democratic parties throughout Western Europe remain excellent. This volume is a must-read for all interested in the recent developments of Christian Democracy in Europe and in the recent transformations in the political landscape of Europe.

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