

# H-Net Reviews

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**Rolf Decot, ed.** *Säkularisation der Reichskirche 1803: Aspekte kirchlichen Umbruchs*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 2001. 169 pp. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-8053-2940-8.

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This collection contains seven contributions presented at a 2001 workshop held at the Institute for European History in Mainz. The volume includes an introduction by the editor and a useful bibliography.

Like any collection of this kind, the articles published here vary widely in quality. Often the best contributions in such conference volumes are those that present the results of ongoing primary research projects, frequently by younger scholars. Unfortunately, there is little original research to be found here. Instead, most of the articles provide overviews or summaries of the state of the field. These overviews are sometimes useful, but none stands out as particularly innovative. Several authors, for example, make an attempt to conceptualize secularization, but ultimately the focus of the volume is on secularization in the narrow sense; that is, the takeover of church territories and lands by the secular German states in 1803.

All the authors are, however, aware that the secularization of 1803 had a long pre-history. Johannes Kistenich, in the one article that draws on extensive archival research, emphasizes the continuities in state interference in the internal affairs of monasteries between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Focusing on the lower Rhine (Jülich-Berg and Mark-Kleve), Kistenich shows that princes and their officials had always considered oversight of monastic discipline and finances part of their rights and responsibilities. Franz Brendle points out that German states presented plans for the secularization of Church lands, and especially the monasteries, throughout the early modern period. These plans became more aggressive and more realistic after 1750. The absolutist program of Maria Theresa and Joseph II in the Habsburg lands made secularization a re-

ality, while a flood of pamphlets and books undermined the legitimacy of ecclesiastical states. Brendle argues that by the last decades of the century, ecclesiastical states were living under the “Sword of Damocles” of secularization (p. 55).

Another set of articles engages the question of the consequences of the secularization. The best article in the collection, “Pfändener, Dunkelmänner, Lichtgestalten,” by Hubert Wolf, shows the quite rapid evolution of the German episcopate as a consequence of secularization. The noble prince bishops of the Imperial Church were often accumulators of benefices (*Pfändener*), but Wolf also points out that in the eighteenth century the episcopal movement (Febronianism) also offered an “alternative Catholicism to confessionalized Romanism” (p. 130). The decades after 1803 were difficult for the episcopate, as many bishops had to learn to work diplomatically with the (often Protestant) states that now controlled the Church. These bishops, who operated under the influence of late Enlightenment ideals, often helped integrate Catholics into the new states and worked out important compromises that gave bishops considerable control of ecclesiastical matters. This generation was discredited later in the nineteenth century, both by nationalist historians, for its willingness to work with the French, and Catholic historians, for its independence from Rome. Wolf does much to rehabilitate them. Finally, Wolf briefly describes the ultramontane bishops of the 1840s and beyond, who ascribed to what he calls (somewhat anachronistically) a Tridentine model of behavior. These bishops worked consciously against the state, placing the Church, and most Catholics, permanently in the opposition. By focusing on Catholics in Protestant states (Prussia, Württemberg),

the article does not give much sense of the variety of Catholicism. How, for example, did the episcopate evolve in Bavaria, where church-state conflicts did not have the confessional edge they had in Prussia? Still, Wolf shows some of the complex consequences that came out of the reorganization of the Catholic Church after 1803.

This collection is marred by a strong whiff of nostalgia for the old *Reichskirche*. Karl Ottmar von Aretin, for example, equates the end of the particular institutions of *Germania Sacra* with the “destruction of Catholic Germany.” This facile statement either ignores what happened to religious practice and belief among the wider population or, worse yet, assumes that the secularization of prince-bishoprics and the closing of monasteries destroyed “Catholic Germany.” Furthermore, von Aretin’s assertion that the secularization “was a catastrophe from

which Catholic life in Germany did not recover for a very long time” is not supported by any evidence about “Catholic life” itself (pp. 31-32). As a number of the articles in this collection, as well as much of the recent research, show, secularization of 1803 was one aspect of a major transition in German Catholicism—there is no particular reason to call it a disaster and there is little evidence it led to a crisis in Catholic life broadly understood. Catholic religious practice that emerged in the early nineteenth century owed much to the Baroque Catholicism of the century before, but the institutions of the Catholic Church were dramatically transformed. The old *Reichskirche/Adelskirche* became an ultramontane-dominated “bishops’ church” and a pillar of a developing Catholic milieu that was predominantly rural and small town.

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