

**Michael Fischer.** *„Ein Sarg nur und ein Leichenkleid“: Sterben und Tod im 19. Jahrhundert. Zur Kultur- und Frömmigkeitsgeschichte des Katholizismus in Südwestdeutschland.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2004. 437 S. EUR 49.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-506-71767-2.



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## M. Fischer: *Sterben und Tod im 19. Jahrhundert*

Ever since the publication of Philippe Ari s's studies in the late 1970s, the history of death has received much scholarly attention. In the book under review, which is the author's dissertation, submitted in 2003 to the Divinity Faculty of Freiburg University, Michael Fischer analyses Catholic discourses on death in South-Western Germany from the French Revolution until the First Vatican Council of 1869/1870. Fischer's ambitious aim is to reveal how these discourses contributed to the remaking of Catholicism, which was a crucial element of people's everyday life and culture. Popular Catholicism in nineteenth-century Germany has, of course, already been the subject of David Blackbourn's path-breaking study of Marian apparitions in Marpingen, a small village in the Saarland. Blackbourn made a strong case for taking religious phenomena seriously, and revealed in minute detail the extent to which religion, politics and society were intertwined to each other in late nineteenth-century Germany. Blackbourn furthermore suggested that the Catholic Church, over the course of the nineteenth century, moved closer to popular and local beliefs and, paradoxically as it might seem, became more centralised at the same time. Fischer, who, despite being

interested in similar questions, seems to be unaware of Blackbourn's work, takes a slightly different thematic and chronological approach. He uses unconventional sources, namely church hymns, catechisms, handbooks of dogmatism and popular songs, and studies nineteenth-century Catholic death discourse against the background of two important paradigms. The first paradigm views death as a phenomenon that became increasingly emotionalised over the course of the nineteenth-century, a view first proposed by Ari s. The other paradigm sees death in terms of rationalisation. Fischer holds that both developments were not mutually exclusive to each other, but rather complemented each other.

In the first part of his book, Fischer delivers a cogent analysis of the social, cultural and fr mmigkeitsgeschichtlich context of death in the Grand Duchy of Baden. Not least thanks to the rise of medicine and hygiene, the perception of death changed. Fischer argues that the middle classes in particular adapted views on death being rational, and, with the rise of the middle classes, these views soon had an impact on the lower classes who had hitherto held more

traditional and emotional concepts of death. An interesting, perhaps altogether too brief, sub-section deals with bourgeois concepts of funerals. The second part of the book looks at the impact of the social and cultural background, described in part one, on theological aspects of death, as reflected in dogmatism, catechisms and liturgies. Rather speculatively, Fischer argues that there was a mutual relationship between folk traditions and theological discourses on death. Not very surprisingly perhaps, there was a gap between liturgical concepts of death and the way they were put into practice by local priests. In the third and final section of his book, Fischer moves on to a study of church hymns on death from the dioceses of Constance, Freiburg, Rottenburg and Mainz. Fischer analyses these hymns in too much detail, and one wonders why he does not confine himself to the diocese of Freiburg, which covered the same area as the Grand Duchy of Baden, described in part one. Indeed, the section on church hymns from Freiburg is the most interesting one of these chapters, as Fischer manages to sketch out, too briefly perhaps, the relationship between state and church in Baden, a state with a mixed confessional population that was governed by a Protestant, mainly liberal elite. In his conclusion, Fischer tries to bring together the various aspects of death discussed in his book.

Fischer's material presented above indeed suggests a coexistence of rational and emotional aspects of death, which underlines Fischer's initial supposition that death became both rationalised and emotionalised in nineteenth-century Catholicism. Traditional elements were emphasised in the sources. But this does not prompt Fischer to view Catholicism as a generally anti-modern movement. Quite on the contrary, the inclusion of traditional aspects such as the Holy Family and local peculiarities was in itself modern. The Catholic Church managed to create quite a homogeneous and hierarchi-

cal culture of religion and everyday life that was specifically Catholicâ (p. 369). In short, the Catholic Church re-established itself within the modern world. And in the second half of the nineteenth century, Fischer argues by contradicting what he has argued earlier on, Catholicism can be seen as anti-modernism with modern meansâ (p. 371). But this view is debatable. Recent research has shown that it is too simplistic to speak of a clash between tradition and modernity when discussing nineteenth-century Catholicism. Rather, the duality of nineteenth-century Catholic discourses on death, being at the same time modern and traditional, seems to suggest a more complex pattern that has been highlighted by many historians, chiefly among them Blackbourn. Modernity itself is a highly ambiguous phenomenon, and traditional and modern aspects of religion are not mutually exclusive to each other.

Nevertheless, the book under review introduces hitherto largely neglected material into the debate and usefully re-evaluates some of the recent theories of death. But the crucial question, how congregations reacted to the Church's efforts to shape death discourse, is underdeveloped. Furthermore, Fischer does not manage to put his findings into their proper historical context. For instance, it is one thing to write on Catholicism in Baden. But this would have required much more thought on the impact of the confessional divide on Catholic discourses on death in Baden. Also, one would have wanted to see much more on the relationship between politics and Catholic discourses on death. Finally, the book is not always written very elegantly. The referencing system, slightly obscure endnotes in the author-date system rather than footnotes, and the lack of an index also mar the readability of the book. Nevertheless, Fischer's book is a worthwhile contribution to aspects of nineteenth-century Catholicism.

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