



Benjamin Ziemann. *Katholische Kirche und Sozialwissenschaften 1945-1975.* Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007. 396 pp. EUR 44.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-525-35156-7.



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West German Catholics Respond to the Scientization of Society

This book will not be easy reading for English speakers. Benjamin Ziemann's style of writing is wholly Germanic, and his complex thought forms would appear to be derived from the innovative but dense stable of scholars associated with the universities at Bielefeld and Bochum. His principal emphasis is not historical but sociological or sociographical. His monograph seeks to analyze the process of what he calls the "scientization of society," which stresses the significance and the impact of the social sciences in twentieth-century history. As an example of this process, he has chosen to describe the affairs of the West German Catholic Church during the first thirty years after the end of the Second World War. To this end he has made extensive use of the archives of the principal Catholic dioceses of Münster, Paderborn, and Munich-Freising, as well as of the extensive secondary literature listed in his comprehensive bibliography.

His choice arose because of the fact that postwar Catholic Church leaders in West Germany had availed themselves of a new range of scientific techniques drawn from such newly developed disciplines as sociography,

demoscropy, and psychotherapy. This appropriation led to experiments with new and supposedly scientific methods of collecting church statistics, conducting church surveys among the laity at the local parish level, or instituting such innovations as group dynamic or collective counseling sessions.

In 1945, the German Catholic Church took up the convenient but self-serving stance that it had been among the principal victims of National Socialist repression and violence, that it had bravely and in the end successfully defended its institutional autonomy, and had resisted the rampant propaganda and racist nihilism of Nazi ideology. For pragmatic reasons, the occupying military governments accepted this one-sided version of events, and indeed extended considerable favors for the rebuilding of Catholic institutions. When the subsequent Cold War conflict developed, and Germany was split between two rival governments, Catholics in West Germany found their political position much enhanced. Numerically they were no longer a minority in a Protestant land. They held on to advantages gained through

the Reich Concordat of 1933. They enjoyed the support of West Germany's first chancellor, the Catholic Konrad Adenauer. They were no longer treated as second-class citizens. This moment, then, seemed to be the opportunity for a large-scale restoration of Catholic institutions in an effort to "re-Christianize" the nation, and to mobilize support for the government's anti-communist campaigns as well.

Nevertheless, the 1950s and 1960s did not turn out as hoped. The rapid economic recovery in particular led to a consumerist and capitalist mentality, especially in the newly rebuilt urban areas. Catholic nostalgia for the familiar rural-based and priest-led social patterns of the past found decreasing levels of support, particularly among young Catholics. In addition, the hierarchy's clinging to seemingly outdated patterns of morality, especially sexual morality, led to a widening gap between the clerical leadership and the laity. The hierarchy's decision to employ the new techniques described by Ziemann can therefore be explained as an attempt to regain lost ground in proclaiming the Gospel's message in changed social conditions.

Ziemann's verdict on these experiments is mixed. On the one hand, the organization and systematic collection of church statistics was a far more efficient system than

gathering this information from handwritten registers in damp church basements. But similar attempts to coordinate and standardize church bureaucracies met with stiff resistance from those who saw their authority and identities threatened. So, too, the laity did not take kindly to the new psychotherapeutic techniques, which seemed to lead to a reductionist evisceration of the Gospel's emotional content and comfort. Even the reformist impulse of the Second Vatican Council met with opposition. To be sure, performing the liturgy in the vernacular was popular, but the abandonment of long-familiar habits of worship in the interests of rationalization and simplification seemed an impoverishment. No amount of novel organizational measures compensated for the striking decline in the number of active priests. In short, the application of what looked like techniques drawn from scientific rational models, which were supposed to be a strategy for self-preservation, and for the mobilization of a scientifically trained laity, turned out to be a failure. Such steps certainly did not halt the seemingly inevitable advance of secularization, with a consequent increase in the levels of frustration amongst the clergy and committed laity. German Catholics today no longer need to be on the defensive. But it is understandable that many regard the current reformist impulse of modernization and rationalization as a challenge to the faithful witness that they have maintained for so many centuries.

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