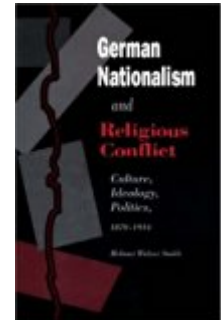


**Helmut Walser Smith.** *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xiii + 271 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-03624-3.



**Reviewed by** John S. Conway

**Published on** H-German (July, 1995)

After 1871, the champions of the new German national unity believed that Bismarck's political achievement would soon lead to the supersession of all previous and lesser loyalties. But in the succeeding years, these hopes were never realized in the highly significant area of religious attachment. The failure of the *Kulturkampf* only reinforced the differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants, so that Adolf Harnack was obliged in 1908 to lament that "Everywhere one confronts confessional prejudice; everywhere one encounters the fence, indeed the wall of confession."

Helmut Smith's excellently researched study of the reasons for this failure percipiently builds on the work of Thomas Nipperdey and provides a convincing argument against the claim that Imperial Germany was a strikingly successful attempt at nation building. He shows that there was throughout an absence of consensus between liberals, Protestants, and Roman Catholics on the true nature of the new nation's destiny. Liberals and Protestants predicted that the combination of Prussian vitality, the Hohenzollern dynasty, a

"high" culture in art, music and literature, and the morality of liberal Protestantism would succeed in eliminating the final relics of mediaeval or ultramontane sympathies and create a common sense of national values largely synonymous with enlightened Prussian Protestantism. Catholics never shared this vision. Instead, while not challenging the fact of national unity, they held their own version of its future path. They were repelled not only by Bismarck's heavy-handed use of the state's repressive powers against their precious institutions and clergy, but also by the unrelenting and triumphalist propaganda of their opponents. The result was a mutual antagonism, and the creation of separate cultures. The historical consciousness of each side was burdened by enduring memories of mutual intolerance.

Helmut Smith clearly places the fault for this situation on the strident cultivation of a one-sided nationalism by the liberal and Protestant activists, which propagated the idea of German cultural progress as flowing from Luther's Reformation and finding its apogee in post-1871 political developments. This nationalism left no space for either

Catholics or Jews, and resolutely refused to admit the possibility, let alone the desirability, of cultural and political pluralism. One particularly vocal participant was the Protestant League, whose files Smith has sifted excellently. The League's intolerant and high-handed defamation of Catholicism continued for years to preclude any more eirenic or ecumenical endeavors. Prominent writers and historians, such as Mommsen, Droysen, Sybel, and Treitschke, played their part in defining the "true" German culture in Prussian and Protestant terms, uncritically venerating those elements which fitted their bill and pouring scorn on the "disastrous" influence of Rome and the Catholic past. The strong sense of destiny which saw the new national state as part of the natural order of history and which viewed Prussia's dominance as a natural law could easily support the veritable crusade against all aspects of Catholic culture regarded as inimical to Germany's identity. Hence the supporters of the *Kulturkampf* could welcome the use of the state's power as an agent of enlightened modernization. By contrast, the Catholic church could be depicted as a bulwark of backwardness, while those countries where it still held sway were painted as centres of poverty, superstition, and political dissension.

Smith's description of the Catholic response is nuanced, even though he lacks a closer acquaintance with archival sources. But he rightly points out that Catholic solidarity in face of endured persecution was built on those very elements which rational Protestants most despised. These elements included popular piety, Marian apparitions, pilgrimages to venerated shrines such as Trier, and attachment to traditional and familiar patterns of religiosity. In this, Smith reinforces the findings of David Blackbourn's marvelous book *Marpingen* (1992), and rightly stresses the fact that such individual devotion can be seen as part of the stubborn, if volatile, opposition to the political and cultural centralization imposed by the liberal Protestant establishment.

Smith is at his best when describing the political consequences of this religious rift. By the end of the century, the Centre Party had become the champion of Catholic rights. In response the Protestants eagerly took up the challenge, attempting to recruit wider sections of the community to their cause. The result was a heightened consciousness of political division which in turn revived confessional conflict. This was particularly notable in those areas like Silesia and the Rhineland where large Catholic populations, including significant Polish minorities, were constantly under pressure to conform to the Protestant majorities. The Protestant League was very active in seeking to penetrate these enclaves, and frequently identified the national struggle for the German border areas with the desired victory for Protestantism. Even Max Weber could refute the accusation that Polish-speaking Catholics in Germany were being treated as second-class citizens by claiming that, on the contrary, "we made the Poles human". The Imperial Government remained divided. But after its earlier defeat, it refused to challenge the Catholic Church again, even for the purposes of overcoming the "backward legacy" of Polish influences. For their part, the German Catholic leaders were ready enough to prefer national to confessional loyalties, and even obtained the Vatican's support for the denial of Polish services or pastoral care - a fact which naturally heightened the Polish Catholics' sense of abandonment. On the other hand, neither the Government nor the Kaiser agreed to support the League's efforts to convert Germany to a purely Protestant entity, or to encourage the extremist *Los von Rom* movement with its polemical anticlericalism and its racist overtones.

Smith's conclusion is that national unity is always an artificial concept, especially in communities which have a divided and indeed contradictory memory of their past. Far from accepting the dominant Protestant view that Catholicism would be left behind as a relic superseded by modernity, the Catholics invoked their own collective memo-

ry to forge a different vision of Germany's destiny. These overlapping but in essence incompatible scripts remained a source of conflict throughout the Empire and even beyond. As such, Smith suggests that Germany after 1870 presents us with a peculiarly modern problem, very evident in eastern Europe today. His achievement is to show that, contrary to previous writers' beliefs, the *Kaiserreich* did not have a single unifying ideology, but rather a legacy of contention over the fundamental question of what it meant to be German. Catholics were loyal to the national state. They fought and died for it after 1914. But all along they constructed their own view of the nation's identity, appealing to different traditions, rival memories, and another history. Smith's study brings out this dilemma with clarity, and is therefore much to be welcomed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** John S. Conway. Review of Smith, Helmut Walser. *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 1995.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=113>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.