

Margaret Stieg Dalton. *Catholicism, Popular Culture, and the Arts in Germany, 1880-1933.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. 378 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-268-02567-0.



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In 1435, well-known German painter Stephan Lochner was commissioned to make an altarpiece for a local church in Cologne. The central part of this altar, a scene of the Last Judgment, includes, among its residents of hell, a bishop, an abbot, a pope, and a king. Almost half a millennium later, in 1927, Catholic literary figure and poet Jakob Kneip use this painting to ask his audience at a local literary conference whether such a commission would be possible in present times. Would any Catholic artist, he asked, dare paint such a work? Would a church commission it? Probably not. Clergy and many leading lay Catholics, he concluded, had been "seized by a great touchiness, even an estrangement with respect to art" (p. 72). For Catholics in late imperial and Weimar Germany, the arts were no longer a forum for debate but the harbinger of a positive Catholic message. And the message had to stay on course.

In her new book, Margaret Stieg Dalton explores the dynamics of Catholic cultural production in the shift to modern mass society. She argues that as mass culture developed into something seemingly ubiquitous and secular, Catholics

consciously turned to all forms of the arts--theater, radio, film, literature--to produce a viable Catholic alternative. Moreover, this alternative had to be consistently positive about the message, to assert Catholic "eternal norms" in the face of popular change. This thesis allows her to explore to what extent Catholics accepted modern mass culture, and what their relationship with the dominant (Protestant) national culture was. Catholics, she argues, displayed a strong cultural conservative streak. They had an inherent fear that modern mass culture would displace their "traditional" values and thus, their religion. This, in turn, led to nostalgia for the past, especially the Middle Ages and the era before 1871, when a certain parity existed between Catholics and Protestants in German-speaking central Europe.

Dalton focuses on a wide range of the arts, analyzing how Catholics positioned themselves in national debates. A chapter on literature focuses on the *Gral*, a Viennese literary journal that tried to move cultural conservatism beyond pessimism with an ultramontane and pro-clergy approach. She also covers the Catholic *Literaturstreit* of

1909-10, which revolved around the question of what the purpose of Catholic art should be--aesthetic, critical, or religious?--and what role the clergy should be allowed to have in determining this direction: that is, in censoring Catholic cultural production. Another chapter analyzes reading habits, exploring the growth of reading associations and lending libraries such as the Borromäus Verein. Here, her professional experience in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alabama is demonstrated, as she takes the reader through the world of small-town libraries, analyzing usage statistics and lending habits with an attentive eye for interesting details. As membership in the Borromäus libraries peaked in the 1920s, these had almost four hundred thousand members in all regions except Bavaria, where the priest-run Preßverein dominated. As Dalton mentions, these numbers outpaced even local public libraries in rural and small-town settings.

Later chapters focus on cultural production and reception in the fields of fine art and music. The conflict over fine art was in many ways analogous to the approaches already mentioned: art in Catholic culture could never be an end in itself; art for art's sake remained an anathema; all art had to serve as the means to achieve an end, a platform through which to promote the Catholic worldview. In music, this conflict emerged between popular modernism (atonal music and jazz, which Catholics labeled *Musikbolschewismus*) and Gregorian chants, which Catholics felt contained an inner purity and medieval roots. Indeed, the latter was expressly sanctioned by Pius X in his encyclical *Motu Proprio* (1903) and popularized by the Cäcilien Verein. These singing associations enjoyed a high membership, though Dalton argues that broader success was hampered by limited repertoire.

A good book with many wonderful details, *Catholicism, Popular Culture, and the Arts* nevertheless suffers from a number of shortcomings.

First, Dalton never conveys the feeling that she is on sound historiographical footing. For example, she uses M. Rainer Lepsius's milieu concept to set up the study methodologically but never really grapples with the theory itself nor with its (changing) role(s) within the historiographical discourse of the past two decades. Furthermore, the book would have been greatly helped by a comparison of approaches to popular cultural between Catholic and other milieus, such as the Socialist or Protestant Conservative. Second, theology--or, better: theological proclamations--are mentioned here and there, but the book pays no attention to the fundamental theological debates then raging within Catholicism and the important effect these had on the willingness of Catholics to engage with popular culture. Nevertheless, though I would not recommend the book for the general reader, it is a welcome addition to the literature on German Catholicism and includes a wealth of interesting information.

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