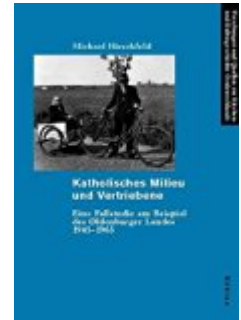


Michael Hirschfeld. *Katholisches Milieu und Vertriebene: Eine Fallstudie am Beispiel des Oldenburger Landes 1945-1965.* Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2002. XIV + 634 S. + 27 s/w Abb. gebunden, ISBN 978-3-412-15401-1.



Reviewed by Mark Ruff

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Over the last decade, there has been a surge of interest amongst historians and church historians in addressing the rise and fall of what has come to be known as the Catholic milieu in Germany. While it has been relatively easy to chart the rise of this insular subculture in the 19th century as a response to industrialization and state persecution, there has been less agreement over precisely when and how this milieu eroded. Some argue that this milieu was eroding already at the turn of the century when many male workers deserted church organizations for socialist institutions. Others claim that the Nazi years spelled the death knell to this subculture, while others such as Karl Gabriel ascribe its erosion to the rapidly changing cultural values of the 1960s. More recently, others including Wilhelm Damberg have insisted that the immediate postwar decades served as an era of erosion, as many young persons migrated away from church organizations.

Michael Hirschfeld likewise maintains that the two decades after the Second World War represented the pivotal period of erosion. He attributes this process not primarily to changes in

youth culture or to processes of economic modernization but to the corrosive presence of millions of refugees from the East in regions of the Federal republic that were confessionally foreign to them. In his book, *Katholisches Milieu und Vertriebene: Eine Fallstudie am Beispiel des Oldenburger Landes, 1945-1965*, Hirschfeld exhaustively describes what he regards as the failure of church leaders in the diocese of Münster to minister effectively to Catholic refugees from Silesia and Ermland who had been resettled in Oldenburg. While church leaders succeeded in providing immediate relief and by the 1950s in building new churches for the swelling number of refugees, they were ultimately unwilling and unable to develop and implement pastoral strategies that specifically addressed the pressing need of refugees to maintain their former religious traditions and regional identity. As a result, he argues, a small group of refugees stubbornly held on to their own religious heritage and emerged with an even deeper religious fervour, one that did not depend on the efforts of indigenous church leaders from their new diocese. A larger group, however, distanced itself from the church and assimilated

to the prevailing religious norms in the Protestant regions of Oldenburg, those of indifference and apathy towards religious institutions. As such, the immediate postwar years marked a significant break, or caesura, in the history of the German Catholicism in the 20th century

Individual sections of Hirschfeld's book examine the failure to create a single diocesan organization or Verband for the refugees. Some refugee priests and laity hoped to create an organization for the diocese along the lines of the Hedwigs-Werk, which had been created in the neighbouring dioceses of Osnabrück and Paderborn and had been named for a leading Silesian patron saint. Yet local church leaders were often loathe to embrace this new institution. Some urged refugees to join existing organizations, which were already quite extensive in the Catholic regions of Oldenburg; they feared that refugees might otherwise become ghettoised and marginalized were they to develop their own network of organizations. Some churches, similarly, attempted to accommodate the expellees' former religious traditions, such as holding of midnight masses on Christmas. Yet even they recognized that these ceremonies were to be temporary and transitional.

Other sections focus on efforts to provide charity and relief and to establish a system of patron parishes which donated money and resources to refugees parishes in need. Other analyze the refugee priests themselves. Hirschfeld's description of the conflicts which emerged on the local level between Catholic and Protestant leaders over ecumenical cooperation is particularly compelling. Some Catholic leaders, both on the local and diocesan level, were reluctant to embrace the hand of Protestants who offered the use of their own facilities

Without a doubt, Hirschfeld's work rests on a rock-solid foundation. This work is a revision of his dissertation, which exhaustively drew on materials from thirty archives, including significant

collections from the Bistumsarchiv Münster and the Offizialats Vechta. The work also includes reproductions of individual letters from local priests and church officials that most cogently illuminate his arguments.

Yet one wishes that this book might have been both shorter and longer at the same time. In places, the amount of detail, frequently expressed in turgid prose, is almost overwhelming. One wonders whether the book, as it currently stands, might not have been written in less than half of the existing 634 pages.

At the same time, Hirschfeld might have expanded his focus beyond an examination of pastoral strategies in the diocese of Münster. To make his case that the inability to minister to these refugees effectively led to the erosion of the Catholic milieu, he would need to show that these expellees were part of entrenched religious communities in their former homelands. But he does not address how religious these Silesians or Ermlanders were prior to the expulsion in 1945. And so while he can successfully show that these refugees failed to find a strong religious foothold in their new communities, he cannot conclusively show that this marked a point of departure from their previous religious experiences.

Similarly, he might have provided a fuller account of the refugees' lives and experiences apart from the church and linked his story to the more general accounts of the expellees written by secular historians. Ultimately, the absence of sound pastoral strategies can serve as only one ingredient in their exodus from an insular religious subculture. The refugees' gradual economic assimilation during the years of the economic miracle, high patterns of geographic mobility, changes in the socio-cultural landscape were certainly equally important in accelerating their departure from the church. In relying almost exclusively on reports from church leaders, Hirschfeld might have let the voices of individual refugees themselves emerge. He might also have examined the impact

of the refugees on the religious behaviour of their fellow-Catholics in Oldenburg. Did their presence weaken the religiosity of those non-refugees in local communities?

One might also ask, finally, whether his findings in Oldenburg translate to other regions of Germany. Though the diocese of Münster has been the subject of fine historical studies from Wilhelm Damberg, Antonius Liedhegener and other members of the Arbeitskreis für Katholizismusforschung, Münster, the Oldenburg region has received comparatively little attention. It consists of Catholic enclaves in Vechta and Cloppenburg and diaspora regions in the North and elsewhere. As Hirschfeld himself notes, the refugees were treated differently by church authorities in other dioceses. But on the other hand, Hirschfeld masterfully succeeds in evoking the peculiarities of this particular region, one that has not received the attention that it deserves. As such, his study, though ultimately narrow, provides valuable insights into the religious transformations in the world of the German expellees in the Northwest of Germany.

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