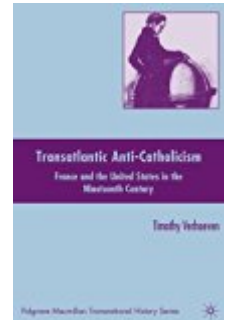


**Timothy Verhoeven.** *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the Nineteenth Century.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 230 S. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-10287-3.



**Reviewed by** Eveline G. Bouwers

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On the eve of the First Vatican Council, the American public got to know Father Hyacinthe. A man of modest appearance, this former Carmelite monk had attained fame overnight after having published a biting critique on the Catholic Church. In the resignation letter sent to the superior of his convent, he criticized the unwillingness of the Vatican to embrace the modern age. There was nothing new about this complaint. Religion, particularly Catholicism, had long been regarded as an obstacle for modernization. What made the criticism of Father Hyacinthe different was that it came from an insider. That a renegade monk attacked 'the divorce...between the Church, which is our eternal mother, and the society of the nineteenth century, of which we are the temporal children' (p. 2) confirmed contemporaries in their beliefs that the Roman Church threatened the nation.

The Carmelite monk turned anti-Vatican rebel forms the starting point of Timothy Verhoeven's *Transatlantic anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the nineteenth century*. Published as part of the 'Palgrave Macmillan Transnational

History Series', the book makes a convincing case for the need to study responses to religious culture and church activity from a perspective that moves beyond the nation-state. In the introduction, Verhoeven, who is a lecturer at Monash University, states that his aim is to probe the 'cross-border exchange between opponents of the Catholic Church' (p. 5) in both France and the United States during the period 1840-70. Catholicism's own international structure and the fact that it possessed a set of characteristics recognizable across national boundaries, explains why anti-Catholic literature found a ready audience on both sides of the Atlantic. It also explains why, as Verhoeven points out, studying attacks on the nineteenth-century Roman Church profits greatly from a transnational perspective. Whether a comparison of American and French anti-Catholicism can indeed provide this, remains to be seen.

*Transatlantic anti-Catholicism* emphasizes how discourses that appeared to be national borrowed heavily from international repertoires. Contemporaries believed that one nation alone could not overthrow the undue influence of the

Roman Church and that the critics of Catholicism had to unite. Although Verhoeven does not mention this, the transatlantic element was not only found among those attacking Catholicism; the religious revival of the mid-nineteenth century was similarly international in scope. Other than emphasizing the transnational element in anti-Catholicism, the book stresses the extent to which gender issues shaped this struggle. A principal argument held against Rome was that Catholic life violated the natural division between men and women. Celibacy, convent life and the figure of the androgynous Jesuit destroyed the 'separate spheres' (p. 15) between the sexes. This not only challenged the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of domesticity; transformed gender roles and the suppression of sexual experiences potentially hurt the nation, too. Dropping birth rates were explained by pointing at the unnatural confinement, allegedly against their own will, of healthy young women in convents. Although Verhoeven perhaps overstates the originality of his gender perspective, he is right in pointing at the importance of discourses on masculinity and womanhood in nineteenth-century Western society.

The book is divided in five chapters. Chapter one is concerned with the transfer of anti-Catholic ideas from France to the United States, much less in the other direction. As the principal Catholic country on the European continent and a post-revolutionary state itself, French anti-Catholic writings were revered for their 'credibility' (p. 31). Americans discussing whether Catholic schools should receive public funding cited similar debates in France following the promulgation of the Falloux Laws in 1850/51. Michelet's writings were mined for examples of how Catholicism threatened family life and national stability. If chapter one summarizes the transatlantic journey of the anti-Catholic idea, chapters two to five deal with specific topics and compare responses in both countries. Despite obvious differences be-

tween France and the United States, reactions were surprisingly similar.

The Mortara affair, whereby the Jewish boy Edgardo was brutally taken from his parents' house in Bologna because he had allegedly been baptized by a Catholic servant, was severely criticized by French and American readers. The Vatican's abduction jeopardized family life and, by analogy, endangered national stability. Celibacy, the topic of chapter three, was on both sides of the Atlantic regarded as unhealthy; such sexual abstinence was also believed to hurt national progress as it put a check on population growth. Chapter four is dedicated to the figure of the Jesuit. Often portrayed as a malicious and androgynous schemer, the Jesuit was suspected to aspire to world rule and overthrow national government. Jesuits were in both American and French minds a trope for Catholic duplicity and gender transgression. Finally, chapter five discusses the captivity of the Carmelite nun Barbara Ubryk, who had been locked up for 21 years in her cell in Cracow. The hapless nun's imprisonment served in both countries as a vehicle to discuss modern womanhood, and the extent to which Catholicism imposed counter-natural gender roles.

Verhoeven bases his study of anti-Catholicism on publications, mainly newspapers and novels. His aim is not to uncover historical facts but to analyze how ideas and discourses were mediated across the Atlantic (p. 16). The choice to concentrate on representations only is not unproblematic. For one, it becomes unclear what elements are borrowed and which invented. The American reception of the Mortara affair was based on information from the circle around Edgardo, from first-hand accounts of Americans living in Italy and from reports in European, including French, media. Jewish organizations intensively lobbied for Edgardo's liberation by sending letters to international newspapers and contacting Jewish organizations across the world: David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, New York 1997.

To discard ‘facts’ makes it difficult to probe what elements of the story Americans reproduced and what they added, and thus to understand the impact of French anti-Catholicism across the Atlantic. For another, Verhoeven’s focus on representations is limited to texts. The Jesuit, for instance, was a recurrent figure in anticlerical imagery. To study anti-Jesuitism without considering visual sources is to decouple word from image in a way that obliterates their historical entanglement.

The study of attacks on the nineteenth-century Catholic Church has been a booming theme in recent scholarship. Despite Verhoeven’s suggestion that anti-Catholicism is a much neglected theme in historical writing, a considerable body of literature (not always in English) exists that deals with attacks on the Roman religion. It is, however, true that most of these accounts concentrate on one country only. An exception is Manuel Borutta’s *Antikatholizismus* (2010). Manuel Borutta, *Antikatholizismus. Deutschland und Italien im Zeitalter der europäischen Kulturkämpfe*, Göttingen 2010. Concentrating on Germany and Italy, the book has common ground with the work of Verhoeven. Also Borutta emphasizes the role of gender in anti-religious discourses and the importance of historical comparison for understanding the critique on Catholicism. Like Verhoeven, he also concentrates on medial representations though he includes images. But different from Verhoeven, Borutta focuses not only on discourses but also on actions. He also analyses the racial element that anti-Catholicism often contained. Borutta can make this extra step because he integrates the anti-Catholic debate more fully in the political, cultural and social realities of the day. Indeed, anti-Catholicism existed in a historical context that Verhoeven not always sufficiently appreciates.

Verhoeven certainly deserves praise for studying anti-Catholicism from a comparative perspective, which is an approach that remains

somewhat contested in Anglophone historiography. Yet his concern for comparison has unfortunately prompted a certain isolation of the two countries from their international context. Cultural transfer is a messy business, to which the author’s exclusive French-American focus does not do justice. Of course, there are limits to the extent to which a comparative focus allows for discussing the broader picture. But anti-Catholicism was, as the author indeed points out, a very international discourse. Verhoeven could have given his analyses more depth by referring to anti-Catholic action in for example Germany and the United Kingdom, where the presence of Catholic minorities created a reality that was admittedly more comparable to the American case than the French one. Michael B. Gross, *The war against Catholicism. Liberalism and the anti-Catholic imagination in nineteenth-century Germany*, Ann Arbor 2004; D. G. Paz, *Popular anti-Catholicism in mid-Victorian England*, Stanford 1992. And what role did Latin American, notably Mexican, struggles against Church hegemony play in forming American opinion? To appreciate that anti-Catholic opinions in France and the United States were formed in a less linear way, would increase our understanding of the scope and impact of cultural transfer between two states.

Other than benefitting from historical contextualization, *Transatlantic anti-Catholicism* would have profited from probing differences within national discourses. French anti-Catholicism was above all a product of Paris; American discourses seem mostly to have been formed in New York, Philadelphia and the Boston area. The cultural fabric of a region would have affected the type, strength and impact of anti-Catholic writings. It would also have a bearing, at least in the American case, on the extent to which criticism on the Roman Church was indebted to French or rather to other European sources. By underpinning the variety of anti-Catholic discourses within a broadly defined national repertoire, the author could also have more convincingly demonstrated what

additional insights he has gained about French and American anti-Catholicism individually just by comparing them. It would also have enabled him to outline the scope of the phenomenon and the extent to which (local) anti-Catholicism interacted with religious revival movements. Having said that, the use of the comparative method remains sadly marginal to mainstream Anglophone historical writing. For this reason, Timothy Verhoeven's effort to retrace how transatlantic cultural exchanges shaped American and French anti-Catholicism deserves praise.

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