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Religious Crisis and Civic Transformation

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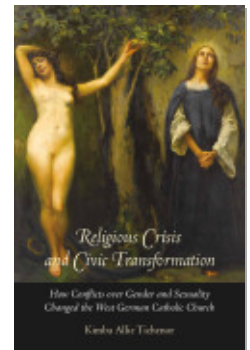
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Epilogue

This book has detailed the crucial role played by gender politics in producing first a crisis in, and later a transformation of, German Catholicism. It has argued that both the crisis and the transformation resulted from the dynamic interplay of endogenous and exogenous forces. It has emphasized that it would be an oversimplification to equate this transformation with religious decline. Between 1959 and 1989, the West German Catholic Church experienced a significant decline in numbers, as moderates and liberals distanced themselves from the Church or left it (or both). With their departure, what remained was an increasingly unified and activist-oriented conservative core. This conservative core has proved both resilient and flexible, developing new strategies, issue-specific alliances, and arguments in order to promote its message in Germany's changed political climate.

In the immediate postwar period, the German Catholic milieu and political Catholicism experienced a brief period of restoration as the nation struggled to recover from the moral and economic ruin wrought by National Socialism. Catholic politicians dominated the CDU-CSU coalition and championed the creation of a Christian occident as a fourth way forward—one that not only represented a break from the nation's Nazi past, but also distinguished it from its former American occupiers and from neighboring East Germany. The CDU-CSU successfully advanced natural law as the appropriate foundation for German law, using Christian principles to justify policies that promoted youth defense measures and the breadwinner/housewife model. However, even in the 1950s, signs of growing public discontent with CDU policy existed, and by the 1960s, a secular and religious crisis of authority engulfed West Germany. Neither the Church nor the secular state emerged from this crisis unchanged. Both were ill prepared to confront the wave of secular and religious movements that, beginning in the 1960s, challenged institutional authority and made the politicization of sexual relations, albeit in very different ways, the focal point of their campaigns (e.g., the student movement, the feminist movement, and the women's ordination movement).

For the Catholic Church, the battle was waged on two fronts. Within the Church, an internal debate on marital morality and women's place in the

Church developed that continues to this day. The German Church also was and remains an active participant in secular debates on women's reproductive rights and the defense of unborn life. In the second half of the twentieth century, these two debates, one religious and the other secular, became increasingly entangled as a result of changes taking place in the Church and in German society. With the redrawing of the map in 1945, Catholics ceased to be an embattled minority. In fact, they dominated the leadership of the ruling CDU-CSU coalition government in the early years of the Federal Republic. The Church also underwent significant changes. Vatican II introduced a new orientation in Catholicism, calling upon laypersons and members of the institutional Church to engage with the modern world. Reform-minded theologians, priests, and laypersons took their message to the court of public opinion, and the institutional Church responded in kind. As a result of secular media coverage, internal Catholic debates became public debates in which non-Catholics became active participants. Conversely, secular debates on gender and sexuality witnessed an active Catholic engagement. In both debates, German bishops, theologians, and priests championed a wide range of positions; thus, the postwar institutional Catholic Church was never the monolithic actor that many pundits and scholars have assumed.

Moreover, the diversity of views on gender and sexuality in the German Catholic community did not result simply from the importation of ideas from outside the Church. In arguing in favor of married priests, women's ordination, birth control, and the liberalization of abortion law, reform-minded Catholics based their arguments on Catholic traditions, as did their opponents. This theological contestation, which highlighted latent contradictions and ambiguities in Church doctrine and pitted Catholics against Catholics, has received little attention from historians seeking to explain either the collapse of the Catholic milieu or the Church's subsequent transformation. Instead, the transformation of Catholicism has been depicted largely as the product of external forces beyond the Church's control—namely, secularization, urbanization, industrialization, and consumerization of German society. Certainly, these external factors played an important role; however, in ignoring the internal dynamics of institutional change, scholars have underestimated the Catholic Church's ability to learn from and adapt to changing social, cultural, and political circumstances.

As we have seen, Catholic women in the late 1980s collaborated with Green Party women, radical feminists, and disability rights activists to promote strict regulations governing NRTs and stem cell research. The German

bishops also demonstrated a new willingness to compromise, overcoming past differences with the EKD on abortion, to issue a joint statement on the defense of life that gained the support of thirteen other Christian communities. These two actions played an important role in changing the terms of the political debate on NRTs and stem cell research. An early debate that focused on the costs and benefits of NRTs metamorphosed into one in which ethical considerations took center stage. The result was that the Bundestag adopted stricter regulations than those initially proposed by the conservative CDU-led government. In 2009, conservative Catholics won another political victory in the battle against the liberalization of German abortion law. By linking traditional pro-life arguments with a new argument that abortion violated the rights of the disabled, they were able to garner sufficient support from women in the Green and Social Democratic Parties to mandate a three-day waiting period for late-term abortions when a fetal disability had been diagnosed.

In highlighting these political victories, this study recognizes that the contemporary German Catholic Church has experienced multiple setbacks in recent years and that it faces significant challenges in the future. In January 2010, for example, news broke that there had been at least fifty cases of sexual abuse at a Jesuit high school in Berlin; the cases dated from the 1970s and 1980s, and the alleged perpetrators were two priests. Within weeks of this first report, a flood of victims came forward. More than 250 allegations of abuse were made, affecting twenty-two out of Germany's twenty-seven dioceses. The ZdK president, Alois Glück, described the scandal as "one of the worst crises that we've seen in the Catholic Church here in Germany."¹ An unprecedented 173,790 German Catholics separated from the Church that year—roughly a 40 percent increase over the previous year.² These events cast a pall over the Church in Germany.

The euphoria that many Germans experienced in 2005, when the first German pope was chosen by the College of Cardinals since 1523, had unequivocally ended. Gone were the banner headlines proclaiming "Wir sind Papst!" (We Are Pope!).³ Rather than a source of national pride whose election proved that Germany was no longer a "pariah" among nations, Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, became an embarrassment for some Germans and the symbol of everything wrong in the Church for many. *Der Spiegel* noted:

There is no lack of recommendations relating to the future of the Church, both from believers and non-believers. Suddenly everyone knows what the Church has done wrong in decades gone by: the celibacy and the exclusion of women from the priesthood; the hierarchy of old men and the persecution of any efforts to liberalize the theology; the blind condemnation of contraception and birth control in the poor regions of the world; the eternal lack of understanding of homosexuality; the mistrust of technology and modern culture; and the constant needling and provocation aimed at the Protestant churches, Judaism and Islam.⁴

This negative assessment of the Church was exacerbated by Benedict XVI's repeated failure to address the cases of abuse in Germany. On March 19, 2010, he issued a pastoral letter to Irish Catholics, apologizing for the clergy's abuse of children. The letter disappointed Irish Catholics because it did not directly address the Church's long history of concealing abuse. It disappointed German Catholics because it made no reference to the child abuse cases in Benedict's homeland; this failure became the subject of numerous headlines in the German press.⁵ Christian Weiser, the German spokesperson for the reform movement *Wir sind Kirche*, noted: "The pope's silence doesn't look good. It certainly won't improve his authority and his esteem in the church here. Just a word of compassion for the victims would have won him sympathies."⁶ News reports that linked Benedict XVI directly to the German child abuse scandal only made matters worse. First, his brother, Georg Ratzinger, was accused of physically abusing boys while he was the director of the Regensburger Domspatzen. Then, reports surfaced that a pedophile priest had been reinstated at a Catholic parish in Munich during Benedict's tenure as archbishop of Munich and Freising.

The pastoral letter also angered many reform-minded Catholics because it suggested that a "misinterpretation of the Second Vatican Council" was to blame for the current scandal, in that it had "contributed in no small measure to a weakening of faith and the loss of respect for the Church and her teachings."⁷ On March 24, 2010, the international office of "Wir sind Kirche" responded to this accusation, declaring it "outrageous" and demanding that the Church admit the "culpability of its own structures."⁸

The pope's handling of the clerical abuse crisis in Germany was far from the first misstep that Benedict XVI had made in the eyes of the German public, but it was the most damaging. It prompted his old adversary, Hans Küng, to release an open letter in which he cataloged the failures of Benedict's papacy and implicated him in the conspiracy of silence:

There is no denying the fact that the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Ratzinger (1981–2005) engineered a worldwide system of covering up cases of sexual crimes committed by clerics. . . . On May 18, 2001, Ratzinger personally sent a solemn communication to all the bishops addressing severe crimes (“*epistula de delictis gravioribus*”). It sealed abuse cases under the “*secretum pontificium*,” the violation of which could entail grave ecclesiastical penalties. Rightly, therefore, many people have expected a personal mea culpa on the part of the former prefect and current pope. Yet unfortunately the pope passed up the opportunity afforded by Holy Week. Instead, on Easter Sunday, he had the dean of the College of Cardinals attest to his innocence “*urbi et orbi*.”⁹

According to news reports, a few German Catholics were even calling for his resignation.¹⁰

Three years later, that resignation became a reality. In Germany, commentators immediately began debating whether Benedict’s resignation would be good for the German Church and for the world Church. The left-leaning *Tageszeitung’s* headline read simply, “Thanks Be to God” (*Gott sei Dank*). Innes Pohl, the chief editor of the daily newspaper, wrote: “During his eight-year pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI succeeded in surpassing even the worst fears. As God’s deputy, Benedict showed little interest in facing the numerous sexual abuse crimes within his own institution, or in confronting the fascist organization Opus Dei. Whether the topic was women, homosexuals, rape or human rights, it is hard to be more reactionary than this pope.”¹¹ The conservative *Die Welt* also criticized Ratzinger, but not because he failed to reform Church teachings on sexuality. Instead, it noted that Ratzinger had succumbed to the individualism that he had opposed. It also championed the Church’s stalwart defense of tradition:

One should, however, recognize that there are good reasons for strengthening the earthly institution of the church as an antipode to the current *zeitgeist* and its unavoidable relativization of values. One should understand why he cannot say yes to gay marriage and why he cannot embrace Protestantism. The church’s dilemma is simple: If it refuses to bend to the times, it will lose members; if it does bend, it will lose them anyway. Joseph Ratzinger, who once called himself a “servant to the truth,” embodies and bears witness to the conviction that the church can only be healthy if it remains convinced of the unlimited possibilities opened up by complete faith.¹²

These two statements encapsulate the ongoing battle between conservative and progressive Catholics over the future direction of the Church. Progressives believe that renewal necessitates that the Church modify its teachings on gender and sexuality. In contrast, conservatives believe that the Church must hold firm, even if that means cultivating a smaller Church.

Under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, conservatives had the upper hand. In fact, following John Paul II's call for a "new evangelization" that would be "new in its ardor, its methods, and its expression," the Catholic Church experienced an upsurge in grassroots, evangelical organizations that emphasized papal loyalty, Marian devotion, and the defense of life.¹³ In Germany, groups such as the Internationaler Mariologischer Arbeitskreis Kevalaer (1978), Jugend 2000 (1989), Initiativkreis katholischer Laien und Priester (1989), and Marianische Liga—Vereinigung Katholischer Frauen (1997) championed official Church teachings and billed themselves as representing authentic Catholicism. By 2011, there were seventy officially recognized evangelical Catholic communities operating in Germany.¹⁴ At the international level, Catholic evangelical events such as World Youth Day and the annual meeting of the lay evangelical movement *Communio e Liberazione* in Rimini, Italy, regularly attract more than a million Catholics from around the world. True to John Paul II's vision, these events capitalize on modern methods to spread official teachings. For example, World Youth Day combines a celebration of papal authority with a rock concert atmosphere.

In addition to supporting these grassroots movements, the Vatican under John Paul II employed the strategy of marginalizing liberals and moderates. Where one stood on clerical celibacy, artificial contraception, abortion, homosexuality, and women's ordination served as a litmus test for advancement in the Church. While supporting the Vatican's position did not guarantee high office, failing to do so prevented promotion and possibly led to disciplinary action. In Germany, Catholic theologians, such as Bernhard Häring, Hans Küng, Uta Ranke-Heinemann, and Hubertus Mynarek, were investigated by the CDF because of their positions on gender and sexuality. Moderate cardinals and bishops such as Joseph Frings, Julius Döpfner, and Heinrich Tenhumberg, who supported the limited use of artificial contraception by married couples, were replaced after they died by individuals who did not—Joseph Höffner, Joseph Ratzinger, and Reinhard Lettmann, respectively. Even lay Catholics were not immune to this trend. As we saw in Chapter 4, German Catholic women were forced in 2006 to choose

between continued involvement with Donum Vitae and holding office in official Catholic organizations.

This phenomenon was by no means peculiar to Germany. In the United States, Charles Curran and more recently Elizabeth McEnroy lost their teaching positions at Catholic universities because of their stances on sexual morality and women's ordination, respectively. The CDF also launched multiple investigations of the Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx for, among other things, his views on celibacy and the sacramental nature of the clerical office.

This strategy of promoting a “creative minority” was not without merit. Some sociological studies have shown that the religions that have experienced the greatest growth in recent years are the ones that clearly demarcate themselves from the prevailing secular culture—the Church of Latter Day Saints, Pentecostal Christianity, and Islam. In *A Theory of Religion*, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge labeled these types of religion “high tension religions.” They argued that, in a secularized world, mainstream religions get lost in the secular melting pot. Youth gravitate toward high-tension religions because they offer a clear sense of identity in a rootless secularized world.¹⁵ If high attendance at Catholic World Youth Days and the proliferation of Catholic pro-life youth group actions such as Jugend 2000 (1989), Totus Tuus—Evangelisation und mehr (1994), and Jugend für das Leben (1997) can be seen as indicators, this strategy has achieved at least partial success in attracting a dedicated cadre of German youth. But cultivating a “creative minority” based on strict adherence to official doctrine is not without its perils if, in addition to safeguarding doctrinal purity, its motive is that of recruitment and renewal. A smaller Church can be a more committed Church, but it also can lead to a poorer Church. Since evangelization costs money, the Church cannot ignore issues of retention entirely. It must somehow find the right balance between the enforcement of doctrinal purity and pastoral forgiveness for those who fall short in following the Church's teachings.

With the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina as Pope Francis I, moderate and reform-minded German Catholics hoped that the pendulum had swung back in their direction, and early informal statements made by the pope seemed to suggest that it had. In an interview conducted by Father Antonio Spadaro on behalf of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, *America*, and other major Jesuit journals in December 2013, Francis suggested that the Church in recent years had focused too much on sexual morality: “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of

contraceptive methods.” This statement in conjunction with the new pope’s off-the-cuff remark to a reporter concerning the acceptance of gay priests in the Church—“If someone is gay and seeks the Lord with goodwill, who am I to judge?”—created a new sense of possibility among reform-minded German Catholics. Christian Weisner of *Wir sind Kirche* commented, “It was a strong statement and an important signal that Francis is not afraid of reality.”¹⁶ This hope was reinforced by the pope’s choice of Walter Kasper, the former bishop of Rottenburg-Stuttgart and president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, to speak on the topic of family and marriage before a consistory on the family at the Vatican. In his two-hour address, Kasper argued in favor of allowing divorced and remarried Catholics to receive Communion after a period of penance.

This proposal prompted vehement protests from five prominent cardinals, including the German prefect for the CDF, Gerhard Cardinal Müller. In a January 2014 interview with *L’Osservatore*, Müller described Kasper’s theology as “radically wrong.”¹⁷ And just one week before the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization” (October 5–19, 2014), Müller’s interview appeared simultaneously in book form in the United States, Italy, and Spain. At roughly the same time, an edited volume, *Remaining in the Truth of Christ*, also appeared in print. Its list of contributors read like a who’s who of Vatican politics—Cardinal Gerhard Müller; Walter Brandmüller, president emeritus of the Pontifical Committee of Historical Sciences; Raymond Burke, prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura; Carlo Caffarra, archbishop of Bologna; and Velasio de Paolis, president emeritus of the Prefecture for Economic Affairs of the Holy See.¹⁸

The stage was set for an epic battle between conservatives and progressives at the synod. This battle captured the imagination of the secular and religious press to a degree not witnessed since Vatican II. It also pitted against each other two German theological heavyweights—Walter Kasper, backed by the German Bishops’ Conference, and Gerhard Müller, backed by the Roman Curia.

Initially, it seemed that the pastoral approach of progressives would win the day. The interim report of the synod released on October 14, 2014, suggested that on a case-by-case basis, divorced and remarried Catholics might be given access to Communion. It stressed that priests should emphasize the “positive aspects” of lifestyles the Church considered gravely sinful, including homosexual unions.¹⁹ Moreover, the report broke with earlier Church

documents that labeled homosexuality “intrinsically disordered.”²⁰ In doing so, the report was not recommending doctrinal change but a more forgiving approach in the application of doctrine to the pastoral setting.

The report generated banner headlines across the globe that contained words like “earthquake” and “radical about-face.”²¹ In Germany, the president of ZdK, Alois Glück, described the report as indicative of a significant change in Vatican attitudes and praised Pope Francis for acting as an “icebreaker for an anxiety-free discussion” on previously taboo topics; the DBK spoke of “significant change” in the Vatican’s attitude toward divorced and homosexual persons.²² In contrast, prominent conservatives labeled it “shameful” and a “betrayal”; in the German-speaking world, *katholisches.info*, the *Arbeitskreis für Katholiken*, and *Gloria.tv* provided German translations of conservative condemnations from around the world.²³ In the wake of the media frenzy and conservative backlash, most of the “welcoming language” found in the interim report disappeared from the final report.

The October 2014 synod was only the first of two planned synods on the family; the second was scheduled to take place in October 2015. But neither the progressive nor the conservative camp seemed willing to wait until then to resolve the issue. At a press conference on February 25, 2015, Reinhard Cardinal Marx, chair of the DBK, announced: “We are not a branch of Rome. Each conference of bishops is responsible for pastoral care in its cultural context and must preach the Gospel in its own, original way. We cannot wait for a synod to tell us how we have to shape pastoral care for marriage and family here.”²⁴

This statement prompted an immediate reaction from German members of the Curia. Cardinal Müller chastised the ZdK, stating that the idea of “delegating certain doctrinal or disciplinary decisions on marriage and family” to bishops’ conferences was “absolutely anti-Catholic” and failed to “respect the church’s Catholicity.” In a letter to the editor of the German Catholic newspaper *Tagespost*, Paul Josef Cardinal Cordes, former president of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, also rebuked Marx, noting that statements like “We are not a branch of Rome” demonstrated “theological blurriness.”²⁵ Conservative German Catholic groups also protested; the *Katholische Arbeitskreis* wrote an open letter to the DBK, in which it reiterated Pope Benedict’s repeated warning against “building a dictatorship of relativism.”²⁶ As one commentator noted, the Church stands at a “precipice,” and whether it can find a middle way between these two visions of renewal remains unknown.²⁷ The way forward into the future is not yet clear.