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# Introduction

Pius also introduced the *Index prohibitorum librorum*, the infamous Index of Prohibited Books, which guided Catholic reading and censorship until the middle of the twentieth century.

– Hans J. Hillerbrand, President, American Academy of Religion, 2005

To forbid us anything is to make us have a mind for it.

– Michel de Montaigne, 1580[1]

It is 1900 in the city of Trier, which straddles the banks of the Mosel River in the southern Rhineland on the border with Luxembourg. The city bustles with 43,000 people, many of whom are engaged in retailing and petty industry. Riesling grapes ripen on the steep slopes up and down the twisting Mosel; they will become the marvelous, crisp white wines that have been the pride of German viticulture since Romans planted the first vineyards upon them in the second century. But for the birth of Karl Marx here in 1818, Trier also boasts unimpeachable credentials as a center of Catholic piety. The roots of this piety run so deep that in 1794, French occupation officials mock the city, the first seat of episcopal authority north of the Alps, as "the throne of sacerdotal despotism."[2] German

[1] Epigraphs in Hans J. Hillerbrand, "On Book Burnings and Book Burners: Reflections on the Power (and Powerlessness) of Ideas," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, 3 (September 2006): 598 and *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, vol. 2, trans. Charles Cotton (London: George Bell & Sons, 1905), 331.

[2] "Einnahme der Stadt Trier durch die französische Armee. Ausplunderung der Stadt," in *QGRZfR*, vol. 3: 1794–1797, ed. Joseph Hansen (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2003), 173–174.



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Liberals mock it again in 1844 and 1891, when mass pilgrimages to the Holy Coat of Trier, the alleged tunic worn by Christ until His crucifixion, offend right-thinking scruples. Catholics living here meet these and other insults with defiance. "Away from us all timidity,/ Despite the hard sufferings/ Piled up against our church in recent times!" crowed a poem popular among them in 1874. "And even if the enemy's army rages ever so mightily all around us,/ We take comfort in a little saying that goes,/ 'Many enemies, much glory!'"[3]

But all is not well in the sacred domains of "*despotisme sacerdotal*." Despite the regular philippics of their bishops to reject secular newspapers, which have rung out like thunderclaps since the 1860s, the laity here subscribe to them with an indifference that confounds all clerical attempts at reading steerage, even when readers are threatened with the spiritual *damnatio* of the Index.[4] Worse, the effort in confessional alternatives to these newspapers is failing. Catholic newssheets intend to seal the hermeneutical space of the diocese by supplying religious interpretations of daily events. But lay distaste for them, which has been growing for decades, pushes them to the brink of extinction. Some readers say they prefer secular over Catholic newspapers for their greater attention to timely business news. Others ground their preference in considerations of public standing: subscribing to an "unbiased" secular newspaper is a mark of intelligence that wins one prestige; subscribing to a "one-sided" confessional newspaper is a sign of "backwardness" that exposes one to ridicule.[5] Still others deny Catholic newspapers because they are so irredeemably boring. In 1874, the Prussian government expanded the region's rail network by adding Trier to the *Kanonenbahn* (Cannon's Railway), a military-strategic line that linked Berlin with Metz in the Empire's newly won province of Alsace-Lorraine. With the trains come kiosk managers and itinerant hawkers from elsewhere. They sell secular newspapers briskly to Catholics on the move, who by the 1890s want their diverting feuilleton sections that ease the time of travel. Catholic newspapers hold the humor and empty-calorie fiction of feuilleton at arm's length; the penalty for doing so in the cutthroat fin-de-siècle rivalry for subscriptions is readership atrophy and publication death. Pastors in

3 Quoted in P. Robert Streit, *Führer durch die deutsche katholische Missionsliteratur* (Frieburg: Herder, 1911), 239.

4 "Die mit dem kirchlichen Bücherverbote verbundene Exkommunikation," *MPB* 16, 1 (1878): 1–4, continued in volume 16, 2: 15–19 and volume 16, 3: 29–32.

5 "Vierteljahrs-Wechsel," *TBf* 25 (23 June 1907): 1.

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Trier are not amused. "There are a great number of Catholics," one grumbles already in 1882, "who without compunction buy and read the most abominable texts at the railways . . . How many Christians are poisoned daily by what they read?"[6]

The *Sankt-Paulinus-Blatt für das deutsche Volk* [*Saint Paul Sheet for the German People*], Trier's diocesan newspaper, suffers this competition cruelly. After changing its name three times in three years in grasping attempts at subscribers who drift to the liberal *Trierische Zeitung*, in June 1901 it issues a desperate appeal: "The readers of the '*Paulinusblattes*' are asked to renew their subscriptions on time . . . We implore you most politely and urgently to make your circles of acquaintances aware again and again of the recognized advantages of the '*Paulinusblattes*' and to invite them to subscribe."[7] Its editors also canvass remaining readers for ideas about improvement. By the end of the month, and on the basis of these ideas, they resolve upon a survival strategy. "From this state of affairs there is only one way out. If we fulfill all wishes, then everyone will be well pleased. Therefore, in the future we will offer more politics and stories, expanding the paper considerably. This will begin with the next edition."[8] Religious articles, sometimes consigned to back-page oblivion, decrease in length and number, while simple short stories about humorous hijinks in the military and shooting stars and lion hunts take up the opened space in hastily assembled feuilleton sections. By 1905, the editors declare that the *Paulinus-Blatt* is free from peril, thanks to its "all important enlargement."[9] In the same year, and in addition to the *Extra-Blatt* it has already adopted for conveying yet more news and stories, it publishes a "Second Extra Supplement" containing the same material. These lures cast upon an increasingly elusive Catholic market, which marginalize religion in favor of usable knowledge and entertainment, save the paper, now all but indistinguishable in content from its secular competitors, from ignominious collapse. Tension like this between clergy and laity over reading discipline has long been grist for the mills of the church's liberal detractors, who miss nothing in their tireless campaign to destroy clerical reputations.

6 "Vom lesen schlechter Bücher und Zeitschriften," *SPBdV* 8, 23 (1882): 322.
7 "Zum Vierteljahrswechsel," *TBf* 24 (16 June 1901): 569 and "An unsere Leser!" *PBScF* 27, 43 (1901): 1009.
8 "An unsere Abonnenten," SPBdV 26 (30 June 1901): 617.
9 "Jahresschluß," *Af* 51 (17 December 1905): 1.

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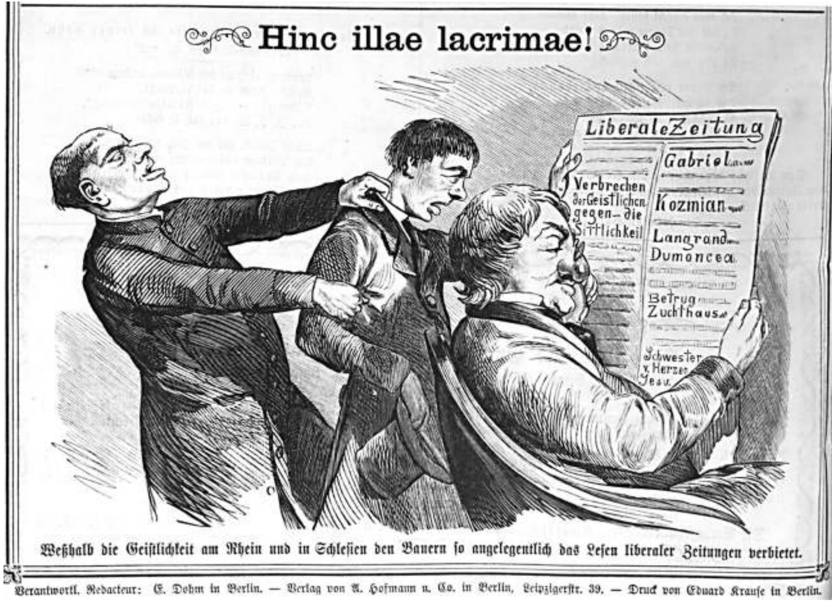


FIGURE 1 **Liberal Mockery of Catholic Book Discipline.** In this satirical cartoon, we see a priest tugging on a very determined parishioner, who cannot tear his eyes away from an article on clerical immorality published in a liberal newspaper. The caption to "Hence Those Tears" taunts, "That is why the clergy on the Rhine and in Silesia forbid the farmers so particularly the reading of liberal newspapers." Courtesy of Heidelberg University Library, *Kladderadatsch*, 25 nr. 14/15, 31 March 1872, p. 60, CC-BY-SA 3.0.

This vivid example of lay delinquency – deaf ears to admonitory diatribes, insouciance toward the Index of Forbidden Books and its penalties, refusals of religious texts, the elevation of personal values like economic advancement, cultural reputation, and literary taste over communal values like obedience and confessional loyalty in the setting of reading priorities, the exertion of mortal pressure on clerical publishers to accede to popular demands – would seem to be impossible. The quotation above from no less than the president of the American Academy of Religion expresses the commonplace view that the techniques of Catholic censorship, above all the Index of Forbidden Books, were so comprehensively and successfully applied that believers conformed to their strictures without deviation. And this conformity endured well into the era of mass literacy in a submission to authority unseen among any other social collective of comparable size. *Roma locuta; causa finita est*: "Rome has spoken; the matter is finished." In a remarkable translation,

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this maxim, which originated in one of Augustine's fifth-century sermons against the Pelagian heresy, became a bedrock principle of secular orthodoxy.

Michel de Montaigne would have been skeptical of the audacious leap in inference this maxim contains. Rome may very well speak, but does it follow necessarily that for the laity the matter is finished? The German clergy, the pastors and publishers of Trier not least among them, might have obeyed Rome in attempting to institute a disciplined regime of popular reading restricted to pious texts and confessional newspapers. But could it be true that the laity, despite their exposure to a vast print market, and in a developing *Kulturnation* that assigned the most pregnant meanings to the possession, consumption, and display of books, restricted themselves to "naïve" religious literature?[10] Could it be possible that these many millions, a full third of the population under the German Empire (1871–1918), therefore remained frozen in rudimentary reading practices, when every other literate group in Europe matured in skill and range by consuming diverse material by inclination and personal taste? And what about clerical oversight of these practices? Research on state censorship in modern German lands demonstrates that censors were nothing like the potentates of lore.[11] They may have pretended to cultural power, but in reality they suffered wretchedly from the unfeasible demands of their administrative superiors, who could not agree on acceptable rules of publication. They were also a fragile and retreating group, in large part because they so dreadfully feared public exposure as hidebound and inconsistent. How was it, then, that parish priests were able to do what no other censor in Germany was capable of doing, and with nothing like the state's resources and coercive methods at their disposal?[12]

In undertaking the study that lies before you, I asked myself these kinds of questions. My skepticism toward the answers the scholarship gives them was Montaignean. The "long nineteenth century" is known for the upheavals of industrialization; the destabilizing spread of democracy; and the volume, variety, and complexity of competing ideological movements.

[10] Reinhard Wittmann, *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels: Ein Überblick* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1991), 172 and 266.

[11] Grzegorz Kucharczyk, "Zensoren und Zensoramt. Studien über Aspekte der Zensurpraxis um 1848," in *Kommunikation und Medien in Preußen vom 16. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Bernd Sösemann (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002), 421–435.

[12] Wolfram Siemann, "Ideenschmuggel. Probleme der Meinungskontrolle und das Los Deutscher Zensoren im 19. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 245, 1 (1987): 79.

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It saw the rise of new social classes, the adoption of new public values, and the distribution of self-actualizing individuals across vast spectra of opinion on every conceivable subject of concern. It witnessed the establishment of compulsory schooling, too, which placed these individuals under new intellectual figures in expanding spaces of learning. Integrated consumption and leisure markets also came together, whose allure invited people to reconfigure their personalities in light of ambient social pressures to conform and the private desires they entertained to cut a preferred profile in public life. And at the center of all these basic alterations was the printed word in unprecedented diversity and abundance, which promoted and mediated them among people for whom reading had become an everyday activity. The historians of reading are quite clear about literacy's impact. In encouraging the independence of subjective intellect and will, literacy corresponded to these emancipating changes by freeing people from customary authorities in fundamentally restructured relations of social, cultural, and intellectual power.[13] Everyone in Europe it seems, including Russian peasants, experienced literacy in this way – except the vast majority of Catholics, who remained corralled behind ecclesiastical bans on reading freedom.[14] This "special path" is an exception to the norm that more than intrigues; it strains credulity to the breaking point.

In the historiography of modern Germany, the analytical structure in which this *Sonderweg* in reading comes down is the spatial metaphor of the "Catholic confessional milieu." In accord with social scientific imperatives to cut and sort, and reinforced by postmodern assumptions about the communal locations of meaning and identity, the milieu idea frames the interpretive environment. Its empirical facts assemble in a master narrative of historical development. This narrative argues that in response to the challenges presented by German modernity, Catholics

[13] Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, "Introduction," in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 2007), 4 and Roger Chartier, "Laborers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader," *Diacritics* 22, 2 (1992): 50.

[14] For example, see David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Ilona Dobosiewicz and Liliana Pisecka, "Reading in Polish and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Silesia," in *The History of Reading*, vol. 1: *International Perspectives, c. 1500–1990*, eds. Shafquat Towheed and W. R. Owens (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 101–116; and Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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found unity and mutual succor in an insular subculture, whose boundaries were policed by an authoritarian clergy.

The story begins with the destruction of the imperial church under French occupation and "enlightened" German officials at the turn of the nineteenth century. This traumatic *terminus a quo*, which shattered the unity of *Germania Sacra* and stripped the church of property, wealth, and confidence, threw Catholics on the defensive in their relations with public authorities. More than anyone else, the bishops embodied this siege mentality. Oppressed by their deprivation of temporal power and unequal to the new pastoral expectations set upon them, they struggled to reestablish an institutional presence. Instead of turning outward, where their authority in public affairs was no longer welcome, they turned inward, in on the Catholic laity themselves, whose ways of life in the aftermath of Enlightenment provocations, revolution, war, and foreign occupation in some cases were in need of correction. In making this inward turn, the bishops, who were themselves in need of guidance and reassurance, kneeled before the popes in a fundamental break with Teutonic traditions of ecclesiastical independence. Power-hungry popes were only too happy to accept their feudal allegiance. They, too, wanted to offset their loss of secular authority by reasserting pastoral domination within the fortified boundaries of their own church. In doing so, they hoped to realize the expansive claims of absolutist papal monarchy that expressed the Tridentine ideal but that had gone unmet due to stubborn regional particularisms. Now "the last impediments and hurdles" to total papal power had been overcome thanks to fortuitous opportunities created by the shakedowns of the age. The popes could finally rule unimpeded from on high with the cooperation of the bishops, who as "ideological frontline soldiers" would do the popes' bidding in an unprecedented and streamlined "ultramontane" centralism.[15]

The story continues. Not only could popes count on complying bishops but also on the priests arrayed beneath them. Early in the nineteenth century, the bishops began driving candidates for the priesthood into diocesan seminaries they themselves controlled, or they sent them to

[15] Manfred Weitlauff, "Von der Reichskirche zur 'Papstkirche': Revolution, Säkularisation, kirchliche Neuorganisation und Durchsetzung der papalistischen Doktrin," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 113 (2002): 355–402 and Hubert Wolf, "'. . . Ein Rohrstengel statt des Szepters verlorener Landesherrlichkeit. . .' Die Entstehung eines neuen Rom- bzw. Papstorientierten Bischofstyps," in *Kontinuität und Innovation um 1803. Säkularisation als Transformationsprozeß. Kirche—Theologie—Kultur—Staat*, ed. Rolf Decot (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2005), 109–134.

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study under conservative Jesuits at the newly reopened *Collegium Germanicum* in Rome. On those already ordained the bishops imposed a new regime of intellectual and cultural restraints that bound priests to the bishops' perpetually tensed view of the "outside" and hopelessly fallen world. This cluster of interrelated developments linked popes, bishops, and parish priests in a vertical solidarity – unprecedented in the history of Catholicism – that was powerful enough to hold believers in a breakaway collective, a *Sondergesellschaft*, whose binding ties were the principles not only of hierarchy and paternalistic authority but of popular deference to them.[16] Parish priests were the key figures in this economy of power for their proximity to the laity. They enforced this deference by stratagems of constant pressure. They harangued the laity from the pulpit, shamed them in the confessional, bullied them on parish grounds, and intruded physically in the otherwise secluded and protected spheres of their private homes.[17] The outcome was a tight system of consistency, coherence, and discipline that helps to account for the milieu's integrating force so surprisingly, and so far, into the twentieth century.[18] According to Catholic mystical thought, the people of God on earth constitute the "Church Militant," the *Ecclesia militans*. In its totalizing supervision, limitations, and punishments, and in its strict culture of obedience, in which the laity were themselves complicit, the German church was as militant as any national church on earth had ever been.

In recent years, many scholars have cautioned against defining the boundaries of the milieu too absolutely. In politics and social life above all, the laity sought rapprochement on multiple levels of thought and

[16] Ulrich von Hehl, "Zeitgeschichtliche Katholizismusforschung. Versuch einer Selbstbestimmung," in *Zeitgeschichtliche Katholizismusforschung. Tatsachen, Deutungen, Fragen: Eine Zwischenbilanz*, ed. Karl-Joseph Hummel (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004), 15–28.

[17] Olaf Blaschke, "Der 'Dämon des Konfessionalismus': Einführende Überlegungen," in *Konfessionen im Konflikt. Deutschland zwischen 1800 und 1970: Ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter*, ed. Olaf Blaschke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 29–30 and Wolfgang Schieder, "Die katholische Kirche in Deutschland nach der Säkularisation. Institutionalisierungen im Laufe des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Die Säkularisation im Prozess der Säkularisierung Europas,* eds. Peter Blickle and Rudolf Schlögl (Epfendorf: Bibliotheca Academica, 2005), 517–529.

[18] Most historians date the milieu's demise in the post-WWII era. For discussions of this subject, see Mark Edward Ruff, *The Wayward Flock: Catholic Youth in Postwar West Germany, 1945–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005) and Wilhelm Damberg, "Entwicklungslinien des europäischen Katholizismus im 20. Jahrhundert," *Journal of Modern European History* 3, 2 (2005), 164–182.

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action with the broader German world.[19] The core of the milieu idea, however, the narrative at its most tenacious, remains unchallenged. It turns on lay submission to the monopoly of cultural judgment the clergy allegedly set on them. We are talking here not so much about the smallish Catholic bourgeoisie. Like middle-class readers in other religious traditions, they set clerical authority aside. We are concerned primarily with the majority of largely landed Catholics, who fell beneath the disciplined management of their reading practices. This management's material foundation was the Catholic print market, which churned out a great quantity of diverse religious texts. Its social and cultural foundations were groups of activists led by local clergy, who were committed to these texts' distribution. According to the narrative, this distribution allowed the bishops to extend their croziers into every locus of reading activity, enclosing believers thereby within a disciplined intellectual landscape.

The most important group composing the substance and molding the contours of this landscape was the Association of Saint Charles Borromeo or Borromäusverein. Founded in 1845 with strong episcopal backing and dedicated to the erection and supply of home and parish libraries, it stood at the forefront of book culture in Catholic Germany. Its history, therefore, provides a unique glimpse of the values and practices of the milieu's cultural system at work. Scholars who have told it align this history with the broader institutional narrative we have been discussing. They focus on the views and intentions of bishops, which drove in the direction of creating a "closed," "controlled," and "narrow" culture of religious books to hold an "education-resistant" laity to the faith.[20] And they forefront the concerns of activist priests in concluding that yes, the Association functioned successfully as a "dam wall" against secular literature and a guarantee that the Catholic *Volk* read only those texts

[19] See, for example, Tobias Dietrich, *Konfession im Dorf. Westeuropäische Erfahrungen im 19. Jahrhundert* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004); Michaela Bachem-Rehm, *Die katholischen Arbeitervereine im Ruhrgebiet 1870–1914. Katholisches Arbeitermilieu zwischen Tradition und Emanzipation* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2004); and Rebecca Ayako Bennette, *Fighting for the Soul of Germany: The Catholic Struggle for Inclusion after Unification* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[20] Christoph Weber, "Der deutsche Katholizismus und die Herausförderung des protestantischen Bildungsanspruchs," in *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert, Teil 2: Bildungsgüter und Bildungswissen*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990): 156–157 and Olaf Blaschke, "Das 19. Jahrhundert: Ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 26 (2000): 65.

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given to them by their clerical masters.[21] Derivative conclusions about the extent of the laity's intellectual life – which, by the logic of clerical power and popular submission to it, apparently require no evidentiary support – then fall into line. The laity rejected the appeals of reading for entertainment, the most popular form of reading in their times. They held new ideas conveyed in books at arm's length, while every other literate group engaged with them. The epic battles over intellectual authority raging all around them, which were both sparked by and carried out in the public press, achieved no resonance, for unlike all other Germans they reconfirmed the soft submissions of customary deference. They read their saints' lives, edifying pious stories, and confessional newssheets in accommodating silence. Their intellectual experience in the long nineteenth century was thus a "stretch of desert" (*Durststrecke*), which is all it could have been for its conduct under the heavy hands of backward, benighted, and manipulative priests.[22]

It is not as if historians have projected this story without background. Catholicism in the era presented a proud, even obstinate church, a symbolically distinctive and culturally empowered clergy, defined public rites, theoretical unity of doctrine, official language, confident magisterial claims about the truth of matters, and a tradition of disciplining lay intellectual deviations. The story comports, in other words, with very strong preconceptions about what Catholicism was historically: preconceptions that also cohere with long-standing secularist narratives about Enlightenment and liberal progress that continue to shape the interpretive élan of international scholarship so far devoted to our topic.[23] And my argument here is not with scholars' understanding of clerical intentions when it came to popular reading. These intentions will only become clearer in the pages that follow. My argument is that in adopting the clerical hierarchy, and particularly the bishops, as the privileged unit of

[21] For the Borromäusverein as a *"Dammwall,"* see Michael Klöcker, "'Rheinisch-Katholisch.' Zur Mentalität des rheinischen Katholizismus seit der Aufklärung," *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 100, 3–4 (2005): 288–312. On the submission of the laity to clerical book intentions, see Steffi Hummel, *Der Borromäusverein 1845–1920. Katholische Volksbildung und Büchereiarbeit zwischen Anpassung und Bewahrung* (Köln: Böhlau, 2005).

[22] Hans Maier, "Lese-Zeichen. 150 Jahre Borromäusverein," in *Bausteine für eine lesende Kirche. Borromäusverein und katholische Büchereiarbeit*, eds. Norbert Trippen and Horst Patenge (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1996), 32.

[23] For thoughts on these subjects, see Mark Edward Ruff, "Integrating Religion into the Historical Mainstream: Recent Literature on Religion in the Federal Republic of Germany," *Central European History* 42, 2 (2009): 311.

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