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To the *philosophes* who marched under the banner of ‘écrasez l’insâme’, the notion of an Enlightenment in Catholic Germany was a contradiction in terms, a monstrous hybrid analogous to grafting a philosopher’s head and torso on to the hind quarters of an old, fat and malodorous sow. Nor was this kind of opinion confined to the French, who have never shown much appreciation of the intellectual life of Baron Thunder-ten-Tronckh’s fellow-countrymen. The Italian Carlantonio Pilati, who at least had first-hand experience of the German educational system, recorded in 1777 that ‘the German Protestants are infinitely more enlightened than the Catholics. [The latter teach] their children ideas which ruin their judgment and their reason: their minds are crushed and are steered towards error, futility and stupidity.’\(^1\) Although local historians of Catholic Germany have always sought to do justice to the cultural achievements of their region, it was not until this century that revision on a national scale began.\(^2\)

Even so, the image persists of the Catholic principalities as highly ornamental baroque troughs, in which epicurean prelates happily if sleepily wallowed. In a recent monograph on the German Enlightenment, for example, it is stated confidently that

the major thrust of the Aufklärung can be deemed Protestant in nature.\ldots German Catholicism did not experience a parallel intellectual development.\ldots Catholicism was channeled in different directions. Instead of finding an outlet in critical reflection, the Catholic movement produced an amazing renaissance in the plastic arts, seen in the construction of the numerous pilgrimage churches that dot the Austrian, Bavarian and Swabian countryside.\(^3\)

Quite apart from the eccentric chronology which underpins this observation, the reality of the Catholic *Aufklärung* – and with it the *raison d’être* of this chapter – can be defended in three ways: subjectively, on the grounds that both adherents and opponents believed that it existed; objectively, on the grounds that the movement did promote ‘man’s emergence from self-incurred immaturity’; and formally, on the grounds that the reception of North German *Aufklärer* such as Christian Wolff – and even Kant – can be identified.
A link, if not an alliance, can even be established between Catholic Aufklärer and anti-clerical philosophes, if only on the rather negative grounds that they shared a common enemy — the Jesuits. Indeed, the origins of the Catholic Enlightenment in Germany are to be sought in the revival of certain elements in the church which had been submerged but never eliminated during the Counter-Reformation. It was inevitable that sooner or later the opponents of scholasticism would return to the offensive and challenge the Jesuit monopoly of higher and secondary education. As the Jesuits’ teaching methods and curricula began to seem increasingly old-fashioned, the criticism multiplied and intensified to form a movement.4

What is more surprising, perhaps, is the source of this initiative, for it stemmed from Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries. ‘They sing, they eat, they digest’, was Voltaire’s hostile summary of the monks’ contribution to society, but in Southern Germany, at least, some also found time for scholarly pursuits.5 In several houses in Swabia, Franconia and Bavaria, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were marked not only by lavish building but also by a less flamboyant but ultimately more influential intellectual revival.6 In large measure, of course, this was but another round in the enduring struggle between two Catholic traditions, but a new element was introduced by the anti-Jesuits’ adoption of methodologies borrowed from critical history and the natural sciences. Moreover, the ever-growing influence of exponents of ‘practical Christianity’ such as Muratori ensured that the focus of the debate between defenders and opponents of scholasticism centred less on doctrine and more on education, liturgy and pastoral matters. This monastic movement — the Catholic ‘Frühauflklärung’, as Richard van Dülmen has termed it7 — developed into a self-conscious attempt to propagate an enlightened form of Catholicism, purged both of gothic barbarity and baroque excescence. The best institutional example of this missionary impulse was the foundation in Munich in 1722 of a learned society — the Parnassus Boicus — by the Augustinian Eusebius Amort, to promote enlightened Catholic literature.8

If a revival of anti-scholasticism was likely in the calmer confessional waters which followed the Westphalian settlement of 1648, so was a revival of episcopality. While it seemed possible that heresy might engulf all Germany, there was every reason for all Catholics to rally behind the papacy and its curia. But when the demarcation lines between the denominations had been stabilized, the German bishops could afford once again the luxury of antecurial gravamina. As early as 1673 the Rhenish episcopacy had launched a vigorous protest against such traditional targets as annates, the jurisdiction of nuncios and the like.9 The arguments used on this and other similar occasions, however, were traditional; it was not until the second quarter of the eighteenth century that a qualitatively new movement can be identified. At several Catholic universities, notably those at Trier, Mainz, Würzburg
and Salzburg, a more vigorous, radical and broadly based episcopalianism was developed by a methodology composed of a potent combination of archival research and rationalist natural law. Within a couple of decades, the episcopalian academics and bureaucrats had achieved such ascendancy in the ecclesiastical states that one historian of the period – Heribert Raab – has felt justified in speaking of an intellectual ‘revolution’ in Catholic Germany.\textsuperscript{10} Although the most celebrated and influential, Johann Nikolaus von Hontheim alias Febronius, whose \textit{De Statu Ecclesiae} was published in 1763, was only one of a large and growing party aiming at a fundamental reform of relations between the church in Germany and Rome.\textsuperscript{11}

It was not only the structure of the church that concerned the reformers, however. Their opposition to the ultramontanism of the Jesuits was always accompanied, complemented and sometimes even overshadowed by their equally fervent opposition to the baroque forms of piety (\textit{barocke Frömmigkeit}) favoured by their opponents. Just as they were attracted by the decentralization of authority which they believed was characteristic of the \textit{ecclesia primitiva}, so did they try to recapture the purity and simplicity of the early Christians. Here the major influence was Jansenism; not the Jansenism which agonised over problems of grace and free will but the Jansenism which sought the reform and revival of all aspects of religious life within the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{12} Since to trace all the threads which ran from Bishop Jansen’s \textit{Augustinus} to what became the Catholic Enlightenment in Germany a century and more later would be a major exercise, only the main points of contact can be listed here. Most obviously, there was the personal friendship and correspondence between Jansenists in France and the Netherlands and their sympathizers in Germany. The indefatigable Dupac de Bellegarde was particularly active, writing to supporters in Mainz, Trier, Cologne, Würzburg and Fulda.\textsuperscript{13} More generally accessible were the Jansenist books translated into German and the German journals which propagated Jansenist views.\textsuperscript{14} The schismatic church at Utrecht, the Dutch and Belgian universities, most notably Leyden and Louvain, and the Trojan horse in Rome – the Collegium Germanicum – were other important lines of communication.\textsuperscript{15}

If the Catholic reform movement had been nothing more than episcopalianism flavoured with Jansenism it would be difficult to award or penalize it with the adjective ‘enlightened’. It is notoriously easy to demonstrate that every component part of any intellectual movement has a pedigree of innumerable quarterings and, owing to the antiquity of its host, the Catholic \textit{Aufklärung} is more vulnerable than most to the lament of Ecclesiastes. But, quite apart from a difference of \textit{tone} – detectable only when the movement as a whole is surveyed – there is ample evidence to demonstrate the impact of enlightened influences. The chief source was not France, as might have been expected, but Protestant Germany, or – more specifically – the universities of Protestant Germany. Although this is a field of study which still cries out for
detailed and systematic investigation, it is already clear just how important these interdenominational links were. In the course of the century a significant and growing number of Catholics went north to study at Leipzig, Jena, Halle or Göttingen and then returned to their alma mater with quite a new conception of what and how they should teach. This academic migration no doubt helped the rapid reception of Protestant Aufklärung philosophy, most notably that of Christian Wolff and his follower J.G.H. Feder, which by the 1760s was being taught in several Catholic universities. The influence of the French Enlightenment, however, seems to have been much less penetrating, although little precise information is available. One might speculate that the sophistication, radicalism and anticlericalism of the philosophes limited their appeal in Germany to the aristocratic elites, whose urbane education and grand tours made them more cosmopolitan. When French thinkers did find an audience their ideas were refracted out of all recognition by native intellectual traditions. Far more important were the Italians, whose moderate tone, confident ability to reconcile reason with revelation and ecclesiastical concerns made them most attractive to their German colleagues. The works of Illuminati such as Cesare Beccaria, and, above all, Ludovico Antonio Muratori were translated, read—and acted upon. As early as the 1740s, a group of Muratori supporters had formed at the University of Salzburg (significantly Benedictine—rather than Jesuit-controlled), and was to exert an important influence on the Catholic reform movement in both the Habsburg Monarchy and the Reich as a whole.

These repeated references to universities have been neither fortuitous nor unintentional, for it was the universities which played the crucial, determining role in the formation, dissemination and implementation of the Enlightenment in Catholic Germany. As a report from Freiburg of 1791 maintained:

The Aufklärung is usually divided into the academic Aufklärung of the universities and the general Aufklärung of the public at large. And quite rightly so. The former is the pathfinder of the latter, it bears the torch. An opinion may be expounded in the lecture-room for twenty, thirty years or more before it is accepted and is put into practice by the general public.

In a recent study of the Catholic Enlightenment in Germany—Aufklärung und katholisches Reich—Notker Hammerstein has identified the universities as its single most important distinguishing characteristic:

Unlike those of our Western neighbours, German universities have had a colossal importance since the Reformation. Despite occasional periods of decay, they have always revived, and it was they which first introduced the Reich to the Aufklärung. . . . While in England and France during the period of the Enlightenment exactly the opposite happened and the universities relapsed into insignificance, in the Reich a new flowering began.
Part symptom and part cause of this renewed vitality were the successive waves of reforms which in many institutions had diluted if not destroyed Jesuit influence long before that order’s dissolution in 1773. And by the time the French revolutionary wars destroyed several and made life difficult for the survivors, the Catholic universities which had not experienced a thoroughgoing reform of structure, teaching methods and curricula were in a small minority.23

Significantly, that small minority included the only Catholic university to be located in a Free Imperial City: Cologne. As this suggests, the Catholic Enlightenment was the work of the principalities, and, moreover, was conducted always under the supervision and often at the behest of the princes. From the time the prince-bishops first began to look to their professors for theoretical support in their struggle with the Roman Curia, the relationship between rulers and progressive intellectuals was intimate and harmonious. In the course of the eighteenth century, as the Catholic princes of the Reich sought to emulate their Protestant colleagues in transforming their territories into states, so did their need for properly trained administrators, educators and priests prompt them to remodel the universities which could supply them.24 For this reason, the theory of the Catholic Enlightenment in Germany was both much more limited than its equivalent in other parts of Europe, but also much more closely related to practice. There was no better personification of this nexus than Johann Nikolaus von Hontheim, who studied at Louvain and Leyden, maintained close contacts with Göttingen, was influenced both by the Jansenist Dupac de Bellegarde and by the Pietist von Spangenberg and who became suffragan bishop of Trier, vice-chancellor of the university there, a senior official of the Electorate and the most influential episcopalist theorist of his day.25

With the chancellories of many Catholic states dominated by men like Hontheim, there developed legislative programmes which went far beyond the increases in power and revenue of the princes which are often thought to have been the exclusive concerns of the old regime. In addition to the educational reform already referred to, which was extended to secondary and primary schools as well as universities, a multitude of changes in the content and administration of the law, in social welfare, in the church and in religious life in general, and the granting of toleration to non-Catholic and even non-Christian minorities, reflect clearly the practical influence of the Catholic Aufklärung. This was Enlightened Absolutism, a phenomenon whose very existence has been denied by some historians but which in Catholic Germany at least is difficult to argue away. It was also a phenomenon with important implications for relations between state and society. In the words of Rudolf Vierhaus:

Enlightened absolutism and the social interests of that group which may be described as ‘the educated classes’ (Gebildete) combined to ensure that the group which was
potentially most active and most important for the development of a political and social consciousness in Germany did not adopt a position hostile to the governments but sought to take its reform proposals into the state and into the departments of state, in order to operate within them, and through them to develop further the social and political order not against but in cooperation with the rulers.  

Although the academic-bureaucratic character of the Catholic Enlightenment remained predominant, and to a far greater degree than in many parts of Protestant Germany, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century there were unmistakable signs of a popular movement developing—popular in the sense that it had no formal ties with the government. In part, of course, this was the gratifying result of the educational reforms referred to earlier. Although by its nature an elusive phenomenon, the emergence and development of this popular Aufklärung can be followed through the institutional forms it adopted. The clearest sign of a burgeoning public opinion was provided by the reading-clubs (Lesegesellschaften) founded across the length and breadth of Catholic Germany in the 1770s and 1780s, with the express purpose of providing—as the prospectus of the club at Mainz put it—’a suitable opportunity to read at a low cost new publications of all kinds and to enjoy social relationships in which literary and political knowledge will be exchanged’. The Mainz club subscribed to twenty-three literary and twenty-four political newspapers, forty-one periodicals and a large number of serially issued works of reference for its 200-odd members. This same impulse, to provide a common and congenial meeting-place for progressive intellectuals also played a major part in the contemporaneous spread of two other associations: the Freemasons and the Order of the Illuminati. Whatever the relationship between these secret societies and the Revolution may have been, they clearly deserve to be ranked with the reading-clubs as evidence of the development of a more spontaneous interest in the Enlightenment.

So by the end of the eighteenth century what had begun as an intellectual revival in the monasteries had become a popular movement in the towns. Indeed, van Dülmen has identified three distinct chronological phases in the Enlightenment in Bavaria: first, a Catholic reform movement, which reached its climax with the foundation of the Academy at Munich in 1759, followed—secondly—by the programme of reform sponsored by the absolutist state, followed finally by an era in which independent public opinion came to the fore and began the emancipation of nation and society from the state. While this pattern clearly works well for Bavaria, where the Elector Karl Theodor’s early change to reaction created exceptional conditions, and while its general outlines can be detected elsewhere in Catholic Germany, the divisions between the individual phases must not be overdrawn. Particularly the last two overlapped or even ran simultaneously rather than succeeded each other. Thus two of the most important developments in the Enlightenment at the universities— the foundation of Bonn and the reform of Mainz—
occurred in the 1780s. Indeed, many Catholic universities demonstrated their continuing modernity and adaptability by absorbing with remarkable speed the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In many Catholic states – Mainz, Cologne, Trier and Würzburg, for example – it was the last decade before the Revolution which saw the climax of Enlightened Absolutism and it was in 1786 that both the episcopalist and reform movements reached their climax at the Congress of Ems.

A caveat must also be entered regarding the social and political implications of this tripartite progression from monastery to state to public. While
The forms of enlightened activity may have diversified, there was no change of corresponding dimensions in the social origins of the participants. Over the century as a whole there was certainly a relative shift from regular to lay clergy and from clergy generally to laymen, but at all times virtually all adherents of the Catholic Enlightenment in Germany were drawn from those bureaucratic, academic, legal and clerical groups which were always linked to if not dependent upon the political establishment. The movement did not have a class character, it was the achievement of a socially mixed intelligentsia, both lay and clerical, both noble and bourgeois. This is demonstrated by the accompanying tables, which reveal the social composition of the reading-club in Mainz, of the Mainz branch of the Illuminati and of the Order of the Illuminati in general.

These figures in the tables should also supply adequate inoculation against the temptation to see the Enlightenment in this part of Europe at least as a bourgeois movement which led its adherents naturally if not inevitably to support social and political revolution. While a handful of Illuminati and Freemasons did move into the revolutionary camp after 1789, the great majority remained loyal to the regimes which had sustained them both materially and intellectually. Thus, in 1791 the reading-club at Mainz, often claimed as the parent of the revolutionary club established during the French occupation, wrote an open letter to an anonymous donor of French propaganda, stating loftily that they were concerned with more noble products of the human mind and that "under the mild, philanthropic
and paternal government of their Most Gracious Sovereign, they enjoyed the sweetest joy that legitimate freedom can bestow.\footnote{39}

If the Enlightenment did sire the Revolution, then the Revolution should be charged with parricide, for it was events in France during and after 1789 which transformed conservatives from outmoded alarmists into farsighted prophets. One Catholic prince after another checked, considered and then, with varying degrees of haste and thoroughness, adopted policies of represion. As a prominent journal of the Catholic Aufklärung, the Oberdeutsche Allgemeine Literaturzeitung, lamented in August 1793:

The empire of ignorance and superstition was moving closer and closer towards its collapse, the light of the Aufklärung made more and more progress, and the convulsive gestures with which the creatures of the night howled at the dawning day showed clearly enough that they themselves despaired of victory and were only summoning up their reserves for one final demented counter-attack. Then the disorders in France erupted: and now they reared again their empty heads and screeched at the tops of their voices: 'Look there at the shocking results of the Aufklärung! Look there at the philosophers, the preachers of sedition!' Everyone seized this magnificent opportunity to spray their poison at the supporters of the Aufklärung.\footnote{40}

While the alliance between the Aufklärung and absolutism was not yet entirely defunct – it reappeared in Bavaria after 1799, for example – those harmonious days of the 1770s and 1780s could never return. In future it was to be religious faith, social order or national loyalties which provided the cement to bind state and society.
Chapter 8: Blanning, 'Catholic Germany', pp. 118–126


6. For a list of the most important monasteries involved see Richard van Dümmen, Propst Franziskus Töpfl (1711–1796) und das Augustiner-Chorherrenstift Poling. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der katholischen Aufklärung in Bayern (Kallmünz, 1967), p. 4.

7. Ibid., p. 5.


10. Ibid., p. 7. The phrase ‘katholische Ideenrevolution’ was first coined by Ludwig Timotheus von Spittler in 1787; see Raab, ‘Kirchengeschichte im Schlagwort’, p. 509.


12. For an excellent recent study of Jansenism see Peter Hersche, Der Spätjansenismus in Österreich (Vienna, 1977). Although concerned mainly with Austria it contains much of relevance and importance for the Catholic Enlightenment in the Reich as a whole.
Notes to pages 120–123


16. See, for example, Raab, Die Concordata Nationis Germaniae, pp. 123–4.


19. For an excellent recent account of the development of Muratori’s influence in Italy see Franco Venturi’s masterpiece: Settecento riformatore. Da Muratori a Beccaria, 1 (Turin, 1969), esp. ch. 2. For an authoritative general comment on the importance of Muratori for the Catholic Enlightenment in Germany see van Dülmen, Prosp Franziskus Töpfl, p. 2.


22. Ibid., p. 11.


Bayerischen Geschichte. Accounts of reforms in four of the largest ecclesiastical states can be found in Max Braubach, Maria Theresias jüngster Sohn Max Franz, letzter Kurfürst von Köln und Fürstbischof von Münster (Vienna, Munich, 1961), T.C.W. Blanning, Reform and Revolution in Mainz, 1743–1803 (Cambridge, 1974), and Barbara Goy, Aufklärung und Volksfrömmigkeit in den Bistümern Würzburg und Bamberg, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Bistums und Hochstifts Würzburg, vol. xxii (Würzburg, 1909). The second volume of Heribert Raab’s biography of Clemens Wenzeslaus will perform the same service for the Electorate of Trier. On the crucial question of toleration see Hermann Stevens, ‘Tolerationbestrebungen im Rheinland während der Zeit der Aufklärung (Kurmainz, Kurtrier, Kurköln, Reichs-städte Köln und Aachen’ (Bonn Ph.D thesis, 1938).

27. Quoted in Blanning, Reform and Revolution in Mainz, p. 195.


30. Richard van Dülmen, ‘Zum Strukturwandel der Aufklärung in Bayern’, Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte, xxxvi (1973), 662. This stimulating article also provides an excellent guide to literature on the Bavarian Enlightenment.

31. Dreyfus, Sociétés et mentalités à Mayence, p. 500. For further information on the social background of the members of the Mainz club see Hans Hainebach, Studien zum literarischen Leben der Aufklärungszeit in Mainz (Giessen, 1936), p. 71.


33. Braubach, Maria Theresias jüngster Sohn, pt 2, ch. 5; Karl Georg Bockenheimer, Die Restauration der Mainzer Hochschule im Jahre 1784 (Mainz, 1884).


35. The figures are taken from the lists published by van Dülmen, Der Geheimbund der Illuminaten, pp. 439–53.