Patrick J. Houlihan

Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 302. Hb, \$99.

The First World War has conventionally been regarded as a cultural caesura, a cliff from which highly organized European societies plunged into the darkness of secularization and nihilism after experiencing the horrors of industrialized warfare. In the traditional view, this was most pronounced in Germany and Austria, the loser countries, where avant-garde Modernism gave artistic voice to widespread alienation. Religion was out; materialism was the new creed of a disillusioned society.

Joining the many historians who have been chipping away at once accepted legends about the Great War, Patrick J. Houlihan is challenging the standard narrative of war-engendered cultural despair. His book looks at the conflict's impact on society through the lens of religion. According to Houlihan, anti-war literary Modernists formed our perception of the war and its impact, often by "drawing on the memoirs of disillusioned middle-class former combatants" (85). The author reminds us that literature is not history. His book, *Catholicism and the Great War*, thus seeks to correct the Modernists' "master narrative." Houlihan argues that Catholicism was a resilient religion whose doctrines and practices helped both soldiers in the trenches and loved ones at home cope with the trauma and hardships of war without abandoning traditional beliefs. To support his thesis, Houlihan paints a canvas of everyday Catholic life in the two major loser countries, where Catholics represented more than half of the overall population. He begins on the eve of the Great War, takes us through the conflict, and ends his overview in the years just after the armistice and peace. By framing his study as a cross-border examination—simultaneously reviewing the Catholic experience in Germany, where believers formed a "suspect minority," and in Austria-Hungary, whose Catholics represented a "favored majority"—the author avoids the trap of being misled by country-specific features and can demonstrate that his findings reflect the transnational nature of a shared Catholicism in the two countries.

Houlihan has conducted extensive research in the Austrian, German, and Vatican archives and displays an impressive command of the published literature. And yet he emphasizes that his work is neither quantitative nor conclusive but rather a qualitative investigation. It is an attempt to trigger a "more empirically-grounded debate on the topic of religion during the Great War" (264) since, as he asserts, religion has been systematically ignored in favor of a purely cultural perspective.

Houlihan has written, in his own words, “a religious history that gives an impressionistic portrait” (15). His readers will immediately notice that his “religious history” is highly argumentative, particularly his conviction that Catholicism provided its adherents with an edge over those of Protestantism or, as he puts it, “an extra measure of comfort” (11) to cope with human loss on an unprecedented scale. He explains this dichotomy in historical-theological terms. Catholics traditionally believed life to be a continuous cycle marked by toil, disease, and famine as the result of the fallen human condition. The war was just one more setback for which religion provided succor. By contrast, Protestants, particularly German Protestants, had espoused a linear view of history that portrayed German unification under Protestant Prussia as the culmination of unbroken progress from Martin Luther to Kaiser Wilhelm II. Catholics were able to accept the collapse of the German Empire without feeling their Rome-based religion threatened. But for Protestants, defeat in war meant the end of their national-religious teleology.

In addition, hands-on Catholicism, with its sacraments of penance, the Eucharist, and extreme unction required the presence of Catholic chaplains at the front. Practices such as rosary recitation, reliance on sacramentals, devotions at shrines, and the belief in the communion of saints helped believers get through trials of isolation. This contrasted with the Protestant emphasis on individual justification and reliance on scripture as the written word. Houlihan documents Catholic chaplains at staging areas and among the troops at the front, while their Protestant counterparts were more to be found at command headquarters, satisfied that printed Bible verses and the texts of uplifting sermons could be distributed to soldiers in combat areas.

Houlihan's book is bound to attract rebuttal, and that seems to be his objective. He offers only scant Protestant examples to match his anecdotal stories of Catholic belief and practice. And while he has immersed himself in numerous archival collections, his database remains narrow. For the German Empire he relies heavily on input from Bavaria and the Rhineland; other areas of Catholic strength such as Silesia and Ermland in the former East Prussia are missing.

Equally absent from Houlihan's account are the religious orders although he mentions individual members of congregations in the course of his narrative. It is important to remember that Bismarck had enacted laws to suppress the religious orders during the *Kulturkampf*; Jesuit establishments were dissolved in 1872 and not officially reinstated until 1917. Congregations were still rebuilding. The author's silence on religious orders may also result from the fact that military chaplains were largely drawn from the pool of diocesan clerics. But a

discussion of the overall challenges facing the congregations during the war would still have been of interest to readers since most of the orders had members on both sides of the conflict. Like the Vatican, their respective leaderships had to walk a fine line between the warring parties.

Houlihan's terminology is often annoyingly fuzzy. Since the key but slippery term "Central Europe" is never defined in the book, readers must sometimes rely on guesswork to identify the geographic extent of what he is describing. Irritating is also his consistent designation of rural inhabitants and farm workers as "peasants." Although the term could well be used to describe dependent agricultural workers on the large estates in Silesia and east of the Elbe River, it is hardly appropriate for the literate villagers of wine-growing districts in western Germany or farming communities largely made up of owner-worked smaller plots.

Even more disturbing are passages where Houlihan inaccurately describes Catholic doctrine and practices. Is it, perhaps, careless wording when he writes about Catholicism's "worship of female spirituality" (1), or "May Altars devoted specifically to the worship of statues and pictures of Mary" (138)? It would be easy to overlook the faulty spelling of "hale and farewell" (142), his occasionally absent prepositions and infinitives, or his erroneous designation of the journal "Hochland" (256) as a Jesuit publication. But what about Houlihan's description of one German soldier praying "to his rosary" (68)? Or his assertion that in canon law, "suicide was a mortal sin that denied immortality to those who committed it" (232)? When he addresses the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception by explaining that it declared "that Mary, and hence also Jesus Christ, was conceived without original sin" (139) he seems to be putting the cart before the horse. And by defining the Trinity as "three aspects of the divine presence" (42) the author unintentionally stumbles into the heresy of modalism. Even worse, however, is his identification of the Trinity's second "aspect" as "God the Sun" (42).

These deficiencies raise the question of the copy-editing process at Cambridge University Press (CUP). Readers count on publishers to vet manuscripts before printing and selling them. Sadly for both the readers and the author of the work reviewed here, CUP missed these and other manuscript flaws. Houlihan's innovative approach to studying the Great War deserves a better platform. It is to be hoped that his next pronouncement on this subject will receive more support and monitoring from his publisher.

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