Ulrich L. Lehner

On the Road to Vatican II: German Catholic Enlightenment and Reform of the Church. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 402. Pb, \$49.

Ulrich Lehner's book about the Catholic Enlightenment in Germany is an interesting hybrid. On the one hand it is a fairly traditional intellectual history of German Catholic thought in the two centuries after the Council of Trent. Lehner seeks to rescue what he considers important and innovative theologians from historical oblivion, linking their ideas to both the Catholic tradition and to wider intellectual developments, particularly the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Lehner's second project, as his title suggests, is to seek among these thinkers and their ideas some of the intellectual and theological origins of Vatican II. This latter aspect of the book argues that "Tridentine reform ideas [...] lived on in the eighteenth century and merged with the Enlightenment ideals to forge a Catholic Enlightenment that was to rejuvenate a complacent Church" (2). In this argument Ulrich insists that the pastoral tradition of Trent, reinforced by eighteenth-century thought, was an important influence on Vatican II. Lehner laments that this useful early modern tradition "has been completely marginalized by theologians because the twentieth-century roots of the Council have been overemphasized as its *only* roots" (3). The implication is that the Catholic Church reached back to this tradition in the 1960s to "rejuvenate a complacent Church" and, perhaps, that the twenty-first century church may need such rejuvenation as well.

This argument is, on the one hand, easy to make and historians (if perhaps not theologians) are easily convinced that there are multiple and complex roots of a major church council like Vatican II. On the other hand, Ulrich struggles to connect his eighteenth-century writers with both sixteenth-century Trent and twentieth-century Vatican II. The intellectual influence of eighteenth-century German Catholic thought on post-World War II Catholicism is often more asserted than demonstrated although Lehner shows some tantalizing connections across the centuries.

It is perhaps unfair to say that the writers and works analyzed here are obscure, but these are not household names. Scholars of German Catholicism, although perhaps not scholars of the Enlightenment, are well aware of the various trends within the Catholic Enlightenment, particularly Febronianism. Lehner devotes a dense chapter to the 1763 book *De statu ecclesiae*, written by the auxiliary bishop of Trier, Johann Nikolaus von Hontheim, under the pseudonym Febronius. A work of ecclesiology, Hontheim attacked papal authority, argued for increased episcopal authority, and praised conciliarism. Hontheim was censured by the curia and in 1778, under pressure from his

direct superior in Trier, Archbishop-Elector Clemens Wenzeslaus of Trier, retracted his book. Lehner argues that Hontheim's work was influential, not because of its originality, but because it brought together anti-papal sentiment, ecumenical ideas, enlightenment thought, and conciliarist traditions in a way that appealed broadly to educated Catholics. The large number of "anti-Febronian" writings attest to the influence of Febronianism. But, Lehner's dense analysis of Hontheim's ideas, which were imbedded in the particular world of the aristocratic Imperial Church (the *Reichskirche*), does not convincingly show that "many of Hontheim's requests, especially those for a more collegial governing structure of the Church and an increase of authority of local bishops, were fulfilled at the Second Vatican Council" (143).

Ecumenical ideas are another theme of this study, as well as another reflection of Lehner's modern concerns. Lehner examines several "academies," organizations of intellectuals aimed at bringing together Catholics and Protestants. Some of these, such as the Re-Union Academy of Fulda, worked to produce a plan for the reunification of Christianity through mutual understanding and education. Other projects were imbedded in the irenic tradition, aiming at toleration and acceptance of other faiths. Lehner has a chapter about Beda Mayr, a Benedictine theologian whose work "attempted to implement Enlightenment thought in his theology in order to reform Catholicism from within and free it from the 'burdens' of scholasticism" (90).

Lehner's early scholarship is on the Benedictines and he clearly admires Mayr's writings. The chapter on Mayr is well informed and often insightful, but it also reflects some of the weaknesses of this book as Lehner asserts important points without linking them to clear evidence. So, for example, he points out that Mayr's works were censured by church authorities and asserts that "a number of theologians felt uncomfortable about Mayr's sympathies toward certain Enlightenment ideas, e.g., criticism" (91). Lehner also discusses some of the more vehement of Mayr's Catholic opponents, such as Johann Evangelist Hochbichler, who considered Mayr an apostate. Then, at the end of his discussion of Mayr's thought, Lehner asserts, again rather baldly, that "it is noteworthy that his way of theologizing never led to divisive dissent, as was the case with many radical Enlighteners, but remained ever loyal to church authority and committed to the unity of Christianity" (109). At the very least, the chapter indicates that more than a few eighteenth-century Catholic intellectuals did not consider him either loyal or obedient.

There are chapters here about liturgical reform, biblical scholarship, and the development of the comparative study of history. In all these areas Lehner demonstrates that Catholic thinkers engaged new ideas coming out of the Enlightenment and often made interesting and important contributions

to the debates of the time. He rather downplays the difficulties, opposition, and official censorship these thinkers often faced from other Catholics and church authorities. Ultimately, Lehner insists on the long-term significance of eighteenth-century thought. His conclusion about new work in salvation history can stand for his view of all German Enlightenment Catholic thought:

With Aloysius Sandbichler, salvation history entered into Catholic theology. The new paradigm was received enthusiastically by the Catholic Tübingen School and has ever since provided a critical lens for Catholic systematic theology. That this reorientation of Catholic thought was grounded in the Catholic Enlightenment and a commentary on the book of Revelation of 1791 has been undeservedly forgotten (328).

Lehner's study, then, is really making a point about the intellectual history of Catholicism, insisting on the important (and neglected) place of eighteenth-century German thought. He often ambitiously tries to go further and demonstrate the direct influence of that period on Vatican II and he identifies some suggestive connections across the centuries. This sort of history has its weaknesses as well. Perhaps because of Lehner's concern with the intellectual influence of this period on contemporary Catholicism, the book is not as strong in putting the thinkers into the context of early modern Catholicism. One aspect of this weakness is that the Jesuits (and ex-Jesuits) appear in this study as individual theologians, but never as a group or an order. There is no discussion of the dissolution of the Society. Furthermore, Lehner does not discuss the popular practice of Catholicism, the object after all of "reform," and he downplays the opposition of church authorities and the essential conservatism of much of the Catholic elite in Germany and across Europe. Without this context, it is difficult to evaluate the importance of these thinkers and their works.

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