

Book Reviews

Enlightened Monks: The German Benedictines, 1740–1803. By Ulrich L. Lehner. New York, Oxford University Press. 2011. 266 pp. \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-199-59512-9.

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Ulrich Lehner has written a book that anyone with an interest in eighteenth-century Catholicism and the more general phenomenon of religious Enlightenment will want to read. Focused on the roughly 150 monasteries (composed of some 3500–4000 professed monks) in the German-speaking Benedictine communities of southern and Middle Germany, Austria, and Switzerland over the course of the eighteenth century, the book draws on extensive primary research in local and regional archives as well as the very best of contemporary scholarship in German and English. Lehner is nothing if not a thorough and industrious scholar, and the wealth of information he has amassed alone makes this book a valuable resource. But he is also a fluid writer, with an eye for piquant details and arresting stories, ensuring that the narrative is enlivened along the way by a great number of vivid and sensitive portraits of individuals, like the ‘Catholic Werther’ (p. 118), Nonnosus Gschall, whose theological struggles and depressive illness led to his self-inflicted demise; the scholar and notorious convert to

Protestantism Gregorius Rothfischer; and the Scottish Benedictine Andrew Gordon, whose residence at the Abbey in Regensburg and keen interest in contemporary philosophy (above all, the thought of Christian Wolff) made him a central eighteenth-century intermediary between the Anglophone and German worlds.

Lehner organizes his study around a series of ‘challenges’ that beset the Benedictines in the age of Enlightenment. These ranged from the need to grapple with new philosophies, theologies, and understandings of history and natural law to responses to cultural and ‘lifestyle’ changes common to many parts of eighteenth-century Europe. Thus, Lehner traces how changing conceptions of leisure time and the introduction of new luxury items like coffee, tea, and tobacco led some monks to demand greater freedom and independence in which to play cards or billiards or smoke. So, too, did evolving understandings of personal privacy and self-expression lead to conflicts over space and appearance. Did monks have a right to privacy in their cells? Might they even lock their doors? And could they abandon the traditional tonsure in favor of something a little more dashing? By the end of the eighteenth century, Lehner observes somewhat amusingly, ‘hair emancipators’ (p. 41) were a feature of nearly every Benedictine community in the German-speaking world.

The attention to such changes in lifestyle and comportment, although certainly interesting in themselves, threatens at times to expand the notion of Enlightenment so broadly as to render it virtually synonymous with eighteenth-century culture as a whole. Yet Lehner’s overriding aim is to show that the Benedictines cannot be sealed off hermetically from the rest of eighteenth-century culture, including the culture of the Enlightenment. In this he succeeds admirably, showing not only how the attitudes of Benedictine monks tracked with wider conceptions of personal liberty that affected their thinking about discipline and punishment, freedom of movement and thought, and the relationship between rulers (abbots) and ruled but also, more specifically, how the order participated directly in the cultural practices and debates of the Enlightenment in a more restricted sense. Through scholarly exchanges and correspondence as well as university teaching, book collecting, travel, and the performance of scientific experiments,

enlightened Benedictines showed themselves remarkably receptive to many of the central developments of Enlightenment culture, reading John Locke and Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff, and even Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Yet Lehner is well aware, too, that this receptivity was apt to provoke a reaction: 'The more the Enlightenment shaped all parts of society, the stronger the support for the anti-Enlightenment grew' (p. 7). With the demise of the German Reichskirche in the wake of Napoleon's armies and the dissolution of the monasteries, light gave way to darkness of many, somber shades.

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