

Catholicism – an outsiders’ and an insiders’ perspective
Beyond the European Horizon

Wilhelm Damberg
 Kai Reinhold

Originally this article was published in German in a special issue of the academic newsletter of the Ruhr-Universität Bochum concerned with global change (Wilhelm Damberg/ Kai Reinhold, Katholizismus von außen betrachtet. Hinter dem europäischen Horizont, in: Wissenschaftsmagazin der Ruhr-Universität Bochum RUBIN, Sonderheft "Globaler Wandel"(2007), 18-24).

CROSSINGOVER

Imprint

Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Damberg
 Kai Reinhold
 Ruhr-Universität Bochum
 Kath.-Theol. Fakultät
 Lehrstuhl für Kirchengeschichte
 des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit
 D-44780 Bochum
 Germany

www.rub.de/mnkg
crossingover@rub.de

RUBIN
 GLOBALER WANDEL



Catholicism – an outsiders’ and an insiders’ perspective

Beyond the European Horizon

Wilhelm Damberg
Kai Reinhold

While the church membership in Germany has decreased significantly in recent years, Catholicism has gradually become the largest denomination in the United States. How do we account for this, since the formal structures of the Catholic Church are quite similar on both sides of the Atlantic? Church historians at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum have taken a closer look at this paradoxical development, hoping to draw lessons from the more vital parish life in the United States and apply them to German parishes that are undergoing profound social and religious change.



Damberg: "The story of "religion, church, and parish" hasn't come to an end even in Germany."

Is religion experiencing a comeback in Europe? If globalization broadened the intellectual horizons of the Europeans, it did so by reexamining the phenomenon of religion. Since the Enlightenment, a strong notion has prevailed in Western Europe that religion has gradually withdrawn from the public sphere, a paradigm that has been known as “secularization” in the course of the 20th century. The phenomenon of religion from a European viewpoint has for a long time been reduced in the public mind to a simple formula: “modernization = loss of significance of religion = secularization”.

But this very notion has recently been disturbed, as European nations have become home to millions of Moslem immigrants. In addition, Western Europeans have observed with some discomfort the apparently growing influence of religion in the United

States. This is, to a certain extent, a greater challenge than the encounter with the Islamic world: in a way the latter can be dismissed as a stubborn problem child in the global process of modernization who has yet to adapt to the course of the world at some

Retreat of Religion – an Outdated Interpretation

point in the future. Such an interpretation can hardly be applied to the United States, which is seen as the driving force as such behind the process of global modernization. Thus, with regard to religious practice, the question of several paths of modernization arises. Is the European path of secularization, after all, just an exception to the rule, which by no means can be regarded as universally valid? Or is the United States, on the contrary, a special case that was and

still is characterized by a vital symbiosis of modernization and religious life? Precisely under this aspect the United States is often perceived from a European view as a strange, even repulsive “misunderstood giant”, as the national daily “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” (FAZ) put it.

All social sciences have by now acquired a comparative perspective of the complex fabric of religion, society and state in other cultures as a main field of their research. This should also be true for those academic disciplines that are concerned with the Catholic Church. With more than one billion members, the Roman Catholic Church is, after all, the largest religious “global institution”, which supported by extensive media coverage, gained an omnipresent personal presence through the large number of papal visits during the pontificate of John Paul II.

info¹

The “CrossingOver” Project: American and German Reflections in a Transatlantic Mirror

By studying American Catholicism in a comparative manner, the “CrossingOver” project seeks a new approach with which to analyze contemporary change in Germany. It comprises five fields of activity:

1 First of all, a comprehensive special library dedicated to the study of US Catholicism is being set up at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum since the most common American reference works cannot be found in many academic libraries in the state of Northrhine-Westphalia or even in the whole of Germany.

2 “CrossingOver” has organized conferences since 2004 enabling researchers from both countries to meet and to inform each other about their latest findings. The proceedings of the first conference were recently published in a German edition: Wilhelm Damberg/Antonius Liedhegener (Eds.), *Katholiken in den USA und Deutschland. Kirche, Gesellschaft und Politik*, Aschendorff-Verlag, Münster 2006.

3 Some fields of special interest, which have attracted attention in the process of initial analysis, will be explored in further projects. These themes include the importance of parishes, Catholic universities and schools or the activities of Roman Catholics in “civil society”.

4 “CrossingOver” organizes a program of practical learning, accompanied by research, for priests and pastoral associates in cooperation with the INSPIRE project of Loyola University, Chicago (cf. Info 2 for further information).

5 “CrossingOver” cooperates with other research projects that work on similar topics. Most of all, the Bochum-based research unit 621 of the “Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft” (=German Research Association) “Transformation of Religion in the Modern Age” has to be mentioned (cf. Info 3), but also a project of Prof. Dr. Mark Ruff. On sabbatical from St. Louis University, Ruff is carrying out research at the Ruhr-Universität, thanks to a grant from the German Humboldt Foundation. His research centers around the question of how West German society dealt with the National Socialist past and World War II after 1945. Last but not least “CrossingOver” also cooperates with another project, which examines the reception of the Second Vatican Council in Germany.

This is the background for a research project set up at the Chair of Medieval and Contemporary Church History at the Faculty for Catholic Theology at the Ruhr-Universität which focuses especially on examining the transformational processes of the Catholic Church and Catholicism in modern history and recent times in an international context. The “Crossing Over” project seeks to compare the history and the present-day situation of the Catholic Church in the USA with that of its counterpart in Germany and is funded with the generous support of Dr. Karl Albrecht (Mülheim an der Ruhr) (cf. info 1).

In Germany the United States is seen primarily as a Protestant country, a perception influenced by what appears to Europeans to be the high visibility of Evangelical fundamentalists. The facts, however, tell a different story. Roman Catholicism has now become the largest denomination in the USA, representing according to the census of 2001 a quarter of the entire US population, a number that is steadily growing because of immigration from Latin America. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation in Germany where church membership in recent times has decreased significantly. Though the Protestant Church provides the most striking example of this “fall-off” in membership, more than two million members have also officially left the Catholic Church in Germany during the last 15 years.

In response, the “CrossingOver” project is seeking to find new approaches to religious change in Germany by studying American Catholicism. In

Familiarity and Unfamiliarity With US Catholicism

order to achieve this, “CrossingOver” seeks to combine academic research and practical learning within its scope of activities (cf. Info 2).

What are the latest findings of these projects? At first glance, the formal structures of the Catholic Church in the United States differ little from

info²

A Common Cause: Research and Practical Learning

The “CrossingOver” program emphasizes the close connections between scholarly research and practical learning. Each year it sends German priests and pastoral associates from the Dioceses of Essen, Aachen and Münster to the Archdiocese of Chicago where they learn by observing and doing. The INSPIRE project of Loyola University, Chicago, assists “CrossingOver” in this program. The individual participants experience the religious life of the cooperating parishes and learn about their organizations. These experiences are reflected in accompanying seminars. The German visitors are regarded in the US parishes as observing with the “eye of the stranger”. The hosts hope to benefit from a critical view of their own parish structure and gain new ideas. After the visitors have returned to Germany, their findings are analyzed. The information helps the participants in their own field of work and at the same time contributes to further projects.

The Chicago area is, in many respects, very similar in its social structure to the Ruhr area. Just like the Ruhr it had to cope with a fundamental structural change in the economy, as the old traditional industry vanished. This region with its distinct Northern European flavor has turned out to be the center of Non-European migration in the last decades. Always a stronghold of the Democrats, Chicago as the “Global City” deliberately became a “testing site” for political concepts of integration under their leadership. Since the first decades of the last century the metropolis has been regarded as a major creative center of US Catholicism because of strong influences from Irish, Polish and now Latin American migration.

For further information: www.rub.de/kg2

those with which we are already familiar in Western Europe. On a deeper level, however, the religious life of the Catholic educational system and the parishes in the USA is characterized by a greater intensity and formative power. It is in these environments that the faithful develop identities and social contacts that often last for life.

The Catholic educational system in the USA is remarkable as such because of its enormous range. In 2005 there were not only 6,736 Catholic elementary schools and 1,378 Catholic high schools, but also no fewer than 234 Catholic colleges and universities. This makes the Catholic educational system in the USA the largest private one worldwide. Its institutions are met with high approval and this can also simply be concluded from the fact that they receive almost no public funding. This places a heavy financial

burden on both church budgets, private donors and, of course, the parents, who bear the lion’s share of tuition and fees. Simultaneously, the number of parishes that run their own elementary schools has decreased significantly for financial reasons during the last decades. Therefore the parishes themselves increasingly provide religious education, which is unknown in public schools. At the same time, many Catholic institutions of higher learning, in particular Jesuit sponsored universities and colleges, have strengthened their position in the last decades (cf. graph 2). They not only teach Catholic students, but have also been attended by significant numbers of Non-Catholics, and for quite some time, many Catholic universities have climbed to the top in national rankings. There is no parallel to be found within the German educational system and at the same time



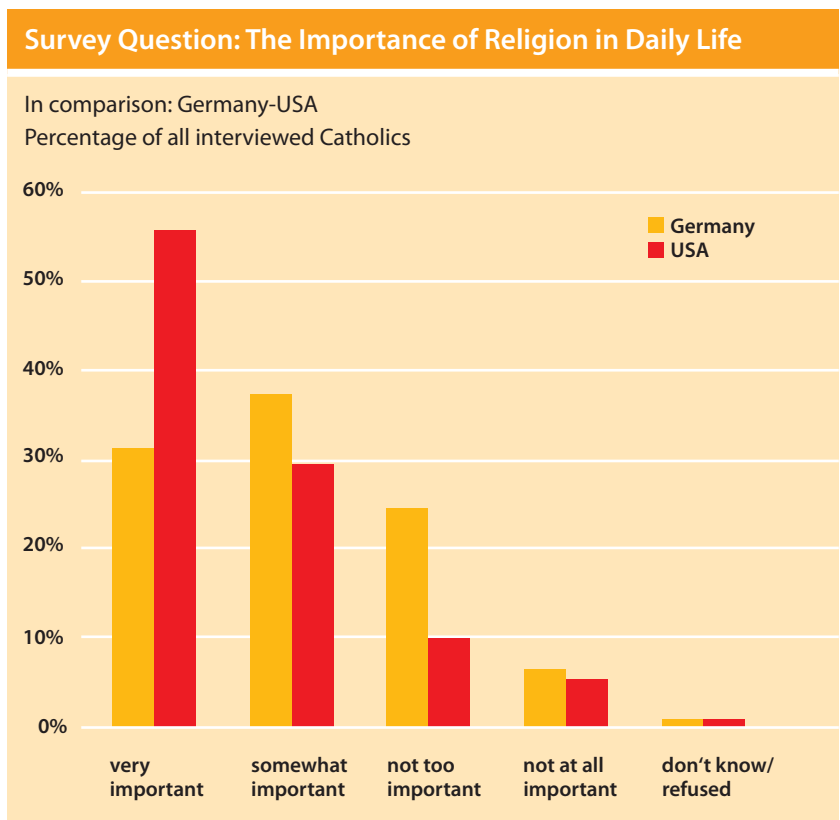
Picture 2: Praying students and their parents at the grotto of Holy Mary at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

it is indisputable that the educational institutions mentioned have a high impact on the socialization of Roman Catholics and that the influence of former students' networks cannot be overestimated.

Besides the often strong personal identification with schools and universities, the religious and social life of Christians in the USA doubtless cannot be adequately described without considering the impact of local congregations. All in all, the number of church affiliated communities in the USA is estimated to be more than 300,000. Catholics organize themselves in around 19,300 parishes, which on average are much larger than the very numerous but relatively small local Protestant communities. Thus one of the research-projects of "CrossingOver" compares the past and the present of parishes in the US to those in Germany. But here, ambivalent impressions arise. Just as in Germany Catholic dioceses and parishes in the United States have had to cope with declining budgets, the closing of parishes and a shortage of priests. The pedophilia scandals in recent years have left a disastrous impact on American Catholics, so

that, when talking to them, one is reminded of the European scenario of general religious decline. However,

when a Western European attends mass in a US-American parish for the first time, she or he has a rather dif-



Graph 3: Many German Catholics still think that religion, church and parish matter to them, but whereas only about a third of them consider religion to be "very important", more than half of the Catholics in the USA do so.



Picture 4: Sunday Eucharist at Old St. Patrick's parish in Chicago. (Photo courtesy of Old St. Pat's.)

ferent and even surprising perception of an unusually high number of believers, especially young persons and

young adults with children, and of a vital atmosphere, which is difficult to describe (cf. picture 4). It is hard

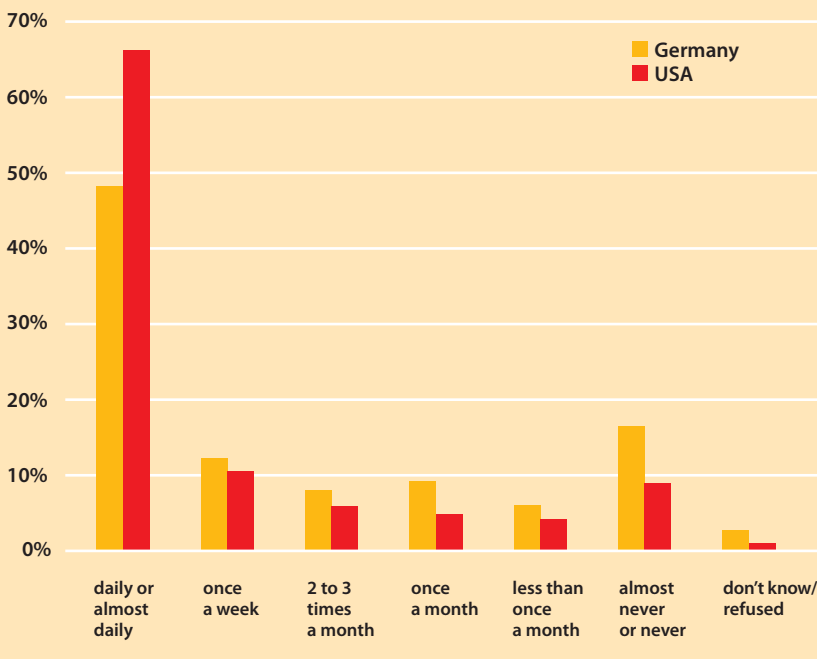
to believe from a European angle that over 150,000 new members were received into the Church during Easter 2005. Although the formal Church structures are the same as in Germany, US parishes obviously have unique and intangible features. Therefore, research into local parish life should prove to be very rewarding.

For this reason, a comparative study concerned with the attitudes of Catholics towards their parishes in the USA and in Germany was conducted in 2006 in cooperation with the sociologist Prof. James D. Davidson of Purdue University, Indiana, a leading American expert in the sociology of religion. In the course of this, the public opinion research institutes, Princeton Survey Research Associates Intl. and Dimap, simultaneously surveyed over 1,000 Catholics in Germany and the USA. The research data from both countries has been compiled by now and they are being studied at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Even preliminary results uncover astonishing facts.

Contrary to popular opinion, which is heard repeatedly over and over again in public, that churches have totally lost their significance in Germany or

Survey Question: Frequency of Private Prayer

In comparison: Germany-USA
Percentage of all interviewed Catholics



Graph 5: According to the surveys of two public opinion research institutes about 50 percent of the German Catholics pray "daily" or "almost daily", whereas two thirds of the American interviewees say that they do so.

that Christianity will even vanish and shrink, “religion”, “church” and “parish” still play an important part in the lives of most German Catholics, though hardly recognizable from the outside. For more than two thirds of German Catholics, religion is “very important” or “somewhat important” (cf. graph 3); at least almost 50 percent say that they pray “daily or almost daily” (cf. graph 5). Keeping in mind the gaping void often found in churches during Sunday mass, it is surprising that 53 percent of the Catholics – these are more than 13.7 million Germans – claim to maintain a sense of belonging to a certain parish and give high marks to the work of their local pastor.

The American survey results clearly surpass those from Germany. Whereas in Germany roughly one third agree that religion is “very important”, in the USA more than half of Catholic believers do so. Even 85 percent of US Catholics state that religion is relevant in their daily lives. Only 15 percent of US Catholics think that religion is not that important or not at all important “in daily life”; among German believers this number is more than twice as high (cf. graph 3). Whereas about 50 percent of German Catholics say that they pray “daily or almost daily”, more than two thirds of those questioned in the USA say that they do so. Slightly less than 9 percent of the US Catholics pray “never” or “almost never”, whereas in Germany this number nearly doubles (cf. graph 5). From other surveys, it is already commonly known that polls of regular mass attendance in both countries are unreliable. The interviewees’ self-reported attendance rates are regularly higher than they are in reality. However, the results of this survey confirm other estimates, which indicate much higher Sunday mass attendance among US Catholics, especially with regard to regular weekly churchgoers. 24 percent of those questioned in Germany say that they go to church with this regularity; in contrast, 42 percent on the other side of the Atlantic say that they do so. May the

higher level of lay participation in American masses be one reason for this? More than 75 percent of the interviewees agree that “active participation” of the laity in masses is “outstanding” or “good”, whereas in Germany it is only half the number (cf. graph 6).

In addition to that, there is much volunteering in the US, which in recent years has become a widely discussed topic in Germany as well. That such activities are a characteristic feature of the USA and that they are more often to be found there is a well-known fact. This can also be proved when looking at Catholics: more than twice the number of laypeople in the United States become involved in their parishes as “volunteers” than in

Germany. In the US volunteers represent more than 25 percent of all Catholics; this means after all over 17 million parishioners.

German parishes remain a significant point of reference in the social and religious life of nearly 26 million German Catholics, yet according to our study these institutions are of even much higher importance in the United States. The data indicate that parish life in the US is more dynamic and that parishioners are more satisfied with their parish than in Germany. This confirms the first main thesis of the comparative project, since it is the US parish that makes the difference in a Catholic system, which is otherwise comparable to the German one. Moreover, parishes provide the finan-

info³

Research Unit 621 of the “Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft” (=German Research Association): Transformation of Religion in the Modern Age.

The relationship between the European societies and the phenomenon of religion is at present ambivalent. On the one hand, it is common to discuss the loss of significance of religion in Europe since the 18th century. On the other hand, others maintain with both curiosity and concern that the secularization model is too one-sided and ignores many equally vital religious forms. The main research interest is the socio-historical background of the change in the public perception of religion. The research unit analyzes how the main Christian churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches, as the established organizational formations of religion have changed and how religiosity as an expression of individual and collective behavior in society has also been transformed in the second half of the 20th century. The research unit assumes that the fundamental change of religiosity is closely connected to the change in the formation of identity of the individual human being in the developed societies of the 20th century in general. The project notes the changes in education, communication, leisure time, consumption and occupational patterns. With these in mind the researchers try to establish the major causes for the transformation of religion and church-related religiosity in the following three sections:

- Religious Socialization
- Social Formation of Religion
- Representation of Religion in the Media and Religious Semantics

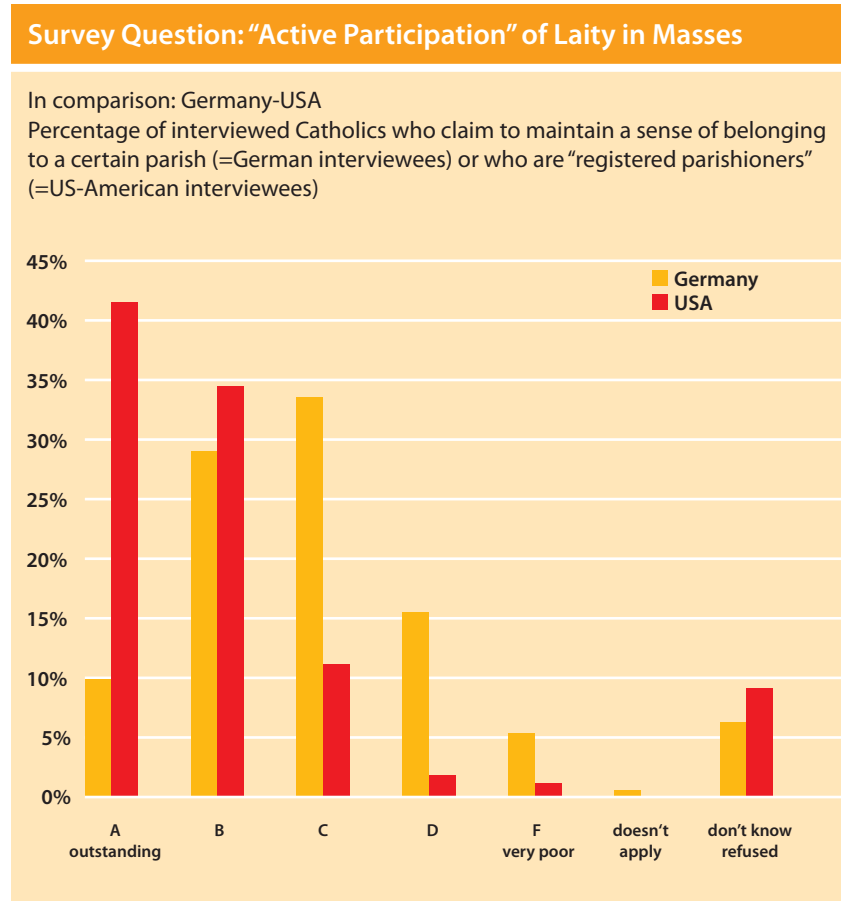
At the center of these studies are the post-war period and the “dynamic times” of the 1960s and 1970s, which significantly affected all religious groups, but most of all traditional forms of religious life.

For further information: www.fg-religion.de



cial basis for the Church in the USA through voluntary donations, as there is no official church tax administered by the government as in Germany. The inner structure of each of these contrary developments still needs, of course, to be analyzed further. These further studies not only have to examine the characteristic features of both religious cultures, but they also have to ask how these findings fit into larger patterns in secular society. Think globally – act locally!

Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Damberg, Kai Reinhold
(Chair of Medieval and Contemporary Church History, Faculty of Catholic Theology, Ruhr Universität Bochum)



Picture 7: The skyline of Chicago, seen from Lake Michigan.

Graph 6: According to the surveys there is a much higher degree of active lay participation in mass in the USA than in Germany.