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Losing Heaven: Religion in Germany since 1945

by Thomas Großbölting; Translated by Alex Skinner.
New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017. 347 pp.

Christianity is dying in Germany. Despite the fact that it hosted dozens of commemorations nationwide to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, was the birthplace of Pope Benedikt XVI, and the state government of its second most populous state passed a law in 2018 requiring all public buildings to display crosses, Christianity's significance in the Federal Republic has decreased. Like much of the rest of the western world, Germany has undergone a process of secularization in recent decades. As a result of this trend, fewer and fewer Germans attend worship service regularly or perform Christian rites, such as baptism, and more and more are leaving the two major Christian churches. The changes to the religious landscape in Germany have happened quickly and have had a lasting impact.

These are just some of the central arguments put forth by the historian Thomas Großbölting in his new study, *Losing Heaven: Religion in Germany since 1945*. The author sets out in his book to “investigat[e] the religious field in Germany and its development over the past six decades” to examine how and why this transformation occurred and what its lasting impact have been (6). Großbölting refers to these changes as “dechurching” and claims that although it took centuries to Christianize the lands we now know as Germany, it has only taken mere decades to de-Christianize it (6). More concretely, it is in three key developments that Großbölting observes these changes. First, as he clearly demonstrates by the use of statistics, Church membership numbers have dropped significantly and religious teaching is playing a declining role in shaping Germans' personal behavior. Second, the position occupied by the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany has changed. The churches are no longer able to influence German politics or society like they once could. Third, new forms of religiosity have emerged in Germany, such as Islam, breaking the religious monopoly held in Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe for over a thousand years.

Großbölting believes the other studies of these phenomena have been too simplistic and offer insufficient explanations for why the role of religion, especially of Christianity, in German society has changed so significantly. Merely attributing the changes to general trends of secularization do not explain the reasons satisfactorily. Quantitative analyses of church-related statistics (e.g. that show declining membership numbers) come up short as well, according to the

author. After all, as Großbölting points out, such membership data cannot take into account people who leave the churches but who still are religious or people who remain members more out of habit than conviction. Instead, he offers an ambitious, three-pronged approach with which he charts out the entire topography of the religious landscape in Germany. This approach incorporates first, an examination of “individual religious orientation” (12). Here, Großbölting aims to elucidate the changes in how religion shaped personal behavior and what religious views have meant during the postwar era. Second, he attempts to historicize religion as a concept to shed light on the varying ability of the churches to influence society, for instance on issues related to sexuality, particularly via politics. Finally, he looks at changes within the two major Christian churches – i.e. the centrally-organized Protestant and Catholic *Volkskirchen* (People’s Churches) – themselves. Großbölting claims, “it is only by illuminating their interrelations and mutual entanglement that we can truly grasp the comprehensive transformation of the religious field in postwar Germany” (13). This all-encompassing approach is impressive and thoroughly convincing. As the author clearly demonstrates, there can be no doubt that religion’s place in Germany has shifted dramatically.

Großbölting organizes the book chronologically, breaking the postwar era into three parts. After the massive disruptions of the Second World War, there was hope for and even the expectation by some in the leadership ranks of the churches of a “re-Christianization” of what would soon become West Germany. Here, it is important to note that the study focuses primarily on West Germany during the Cold War and reunified Germany after 1990. Readers looking for a comprehensive treatment of the precarious situation of religious people and the churches in the German Democratic Republic will have to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, despite privileged positions within society granted by the West German Basic Law, the churches struggled to connect with the populace and the populace looked elsewhere for moral guidance. While many might assume the societal upheaval and massive cultural changes personified by the generation of the 68ers led to the demise of German Christianity, the author shows with his chronological account that the changes were already afoot. In many ways, as Großbölting shows, the year 1968 was more a culmination than a catalyst. Either way, by the 1980s the importance of Christianity in Germany and the churches’ ability to shape German society had withered away—a trend of marginalization that has continued to the present. Großbölting is quick to note, however, that the churches in

Germany are not completely irrelevant and are still able to influence politics and society; yet he is not sanguine **ab**out a return to Christianity in any meaningful way in the future.

The study offers an outstanding, compelling account of how the German religious landscape has changed since 1945 but is less persuasive in explaining the actual causes of these shifts. Was this development inevitable? It seems feasible that the societal upheaval of the past 80 years might have led to more religiosity, not less. However it has not, especially in Germany. Other countries have gone through similar processes of secularization, atomization, individualization, etc. In this regard, Germany is not unique. What remains unclear in this analysis is thus how the developments in Germany are different from the de-churching trends in other Western European countries and throughout the industrialized world. Why were Germans so receptive to these new anti-Christian views? While Großbölting occasionally draws parallels with developments in other countries, for example the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, more comparative analysis could have potentially fleshed out the key differences in the German case. Perhaps his starting point – 1945 – is the issue. At various points in the text, the author mentions trends away from religiosity that started before the postwar era, including one that was noticeable already at the end of the nineteenth century. His starting point also shortchanges the efforts of the National Socialists to nullify Christianity. Focusing primarily on West Germany moreover overlooks the active oppression of Christians in the GDR under the Socialist Unity Party (SED). It seems to me the postwar trends so ably identified by Großbölting toppled over an already wobbly tower of Christianity that once stood so prominently in Germany. While the effects are apparent, the causes remain befuddling.