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Religion in Austria

Volume 3



PRAESENS VERLAG

Published with support from the
Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, Forschungs- und
Wissenschaftsförderung



and the Research Platform Religion and Transfor-
mation in Contemporary Society



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**Bibliographic information published by the
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>

ISBN 978-3-7069-0955-6

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<http://www.praesens.at>

Vienna 2016

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Heiden, Christen, Juden und Muslime: Eine Geschichte der Religionen in Österreich.

by Anna Ehrlich. Wien: Amalthea Signum Verlag, 2009.
Pp. 280. ISBN: 978-3-85002-682-6. €24.95

Lukas Pokorny

Publications critically surveying Austrian religious history that go beyond mere Church history are rare indeed. The most recent attempt to provide such (scholarly) sound outline of religious pluralism in Austria's past and present has been made by the historian Karl Vocelka (2013), an attempt which, admittedly, has its share of shortcomings.¹ *Heiden, Christen, Juden und Muslime: Eine Geschichte der Religionen in Österreich* (Pagans, Christians, Jews, and Muslims: A History of Religions in Austria) represents another relatively recent attempt of that kind, albeit with a less pronounced academic aspiration. In fact, similar to Vocelka, Ehrlich ultimately writes for a popular science audience. An educated historian (Ehrlich 1966) and jurist, Anna Ehrlich (b. 1943) works as a cultural mediator in Vienna, publishing prolifically on a variety of historical topics over the last ten years. The present volume can be seen as the natural outgrowth of two prior studies (Ehrlich 2006 and 2007) that already touched upon scattered aspects of Austria's religious history. Ehrlich introduces the book as a 'compendium' in which she takes the "non-denominational and apolitical position of a professional historian, dealing with the beliefs of the Austrian people over time as well as the conflicts that occurred due to religious reasons or arose under religious pretence".² Ehrlich aims to contextualise religious with general (also European) history and offer a more diversified picture of the former, including an elaboration of non-Christian religions. To underline the breadth and crucial issues of the discussion, the blurb highlights three questions—how did Roman Catholicism prevail as a mainline tradition? When did religious persecution crop up? What are the historical roots of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia?—questions that call for a systematic treatment of the overall subject.

1 See the review by Pokorny (2015).

2 See <http://www.anna-ehrich.com/religionsgeschichte-oesterreich.html> (accessed: April 26, 2015).

Following a brief introduction (pp. 9-10), the book is divided into four main chapters: “From the Beginnings to the Reformation” (pp. 11-112), “Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Baroque” (pp. 113-178), “The Long Road to Tolerance” (pp. 179-222), and “The Church and the Republic” (pp. 223-260). The last section (pp. 261-280) comprises a seventeenth-century travelogue depicting Vienna’s *Judenstadt*, endnotes, a list of succeeding Babenberg and Habsburg rulers (1198–1918), a bibliography, picture credits, and a name index. The introductory remarks point to the reform spirit of Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790), whose reign (1765–1790) marks a turning point in Austria’s religious history with the codification of state-tolerated multi-confessionalism and, concomitantly, the loss of Roman Catholicism’s absolute sway. Ehrlich stresses that the ‘Church’ is the lynchpin in Austria’s religious history. Hence, a history of religions in Austria is to a great extent Church history, as is emphasised by the chapter headings. What follows is a very condensed overview largely crafted alongside major (religio-)historical developments, permeated with anecdotes, and accompanied by a rich number of illustrations. Given the scope of the subject and the indubitably central role of Christianity therein, Ehrlich cuts short the discussion of non-Christian history. Whereas Judaism and Islam receive some attention, other traditions remain underexposed. Information on the religious scenery of pre-Christian times makes up only a few pages, whilst the religious melting pot today is only adumbrated. In the latter section, especially, the line of argument displays a striking ambivalence. On the one hand, the *Sektendiskurs* is problematised and a neutral stance vis-à-vis new religious movements—a category to which Ehrlich does not assign a clear definition—is endorsed. On the other hand, Ehrlich uncritically³ partakes in this very discourse, condemning some forms of ‘new religion’ wholesale: “Esoteric cults, let alone destructive groups or Satanists, do not fall under the concept of sect, because they have nothing to do with religion. [...] One should in particular bring into question those groups, which claim to alone possess the truth and/or are imperiously led by a guru” (pp. 259-260).⁴ A similar odd blanket judgment is directed in particular against Jehovah’s Witnesses: “Through their seclusion and religious intolerance against other opinions, their rejection of state, arts, culture, and military service [...] as devilish things, their worrying denial of life-saving blood transfusions

3 Or rather: following a confusing nomenclature of ‘religion’ versus ‘non-religion’, ‘new religious movement’ versus *Sekte* (sect/cult), etc.

4 “Nicht unter den Sektenbegriff fallen esoterische Kulte oder gar destruktive Gruppen oder Satanisten, denn sie haben mit Religion nichts zu tun. [...] Besonders gut hinterfragen sollte man Gruppen, die behaupten, alleine im Besitz der Wahrheit zu stehen und/oder solche, die von einem Guru autoritär geleitet werden”.

[...], their baptism of adults [...], their missionary urge that can even take the shape of psychological harassment, their dubious chiliastic doctrine, and their seeming American-style naïveté in dealing with history, they are often met with hostility. Unfortunately, this also concerns their children, whose hardly child-like behaviour in school is apparent. [...] At any rate, Jehovah's Witnesses are people of good will, idealists, and religious seekers [...]” (pp. 241-242).⁵ Ehrlich's evaluating and moralising style is evident throughout the book. Naturally, it turns against the dominant religious context, that is, Catholicism, through which conflict and persecution has apparently been nurtured. Yet, despite Ehrlich's criticism of Catholic-laden ideological aloofness and moral ossification, in her narrative she resorts to a distinct language uncritically perpetuating a polemically pregnant emic vocabulary—'heathenism' (*Heidentum*), 'heresy' (*Häresie*), and 'heretic' (*Ketzer*) to name just a few. Her descriptions frequently blur the emic and the etic dimension. One pertinent example, among many others, is an account given of John of Capistrano (1386–1456) during the march of his Hungarian relief army to break the Ottoman siege of Belgrade, which reads: “In seventeen days he hardly slept seven hours overall. [...] A crust of dust and dirt covered the emaciated body well into the mouth cavity. He lost the sense of taste and, eventually, had to remove a thick crust from his tongue and palate with a knife, because the flesh started to decay” (p. 111).⁶ In general, Ehrlich's writing is full of colloquial prose and in favour of a sometimes overly illustrative presentation, occasionally caricaturing—“The Magyar raids passed through Austria, even prayer in the churches proved fruitless”⁷ (p. 37)—and unnecessarily embellishing the story elements—“It is also well possible that the Anabaptists had to serve in place of all

5 “Durch ihre Abschottung und religiöse Intoleranz gegenüber anderen Meinungen, durch die Ablehnung von Staat, Kunst, Kultur und Kriegsdienst [...] als teuflische Dinge, durch ihre [...] bedenkliche Verweigerung von lebensrettenden Bluttransfusionen, durch die Erwachsenentaufe [...], ihren Missionierungsdrang bis zur psychischen Belästigung, ihre eigenartige chiliastische Lehre und ihre amerikanisch anmutende Naivität im Umgang mit der Geschichte werden sie oft angefeindet. Das betrifft leider auch ihre Kinder, deren wenig kindgemäßes Verhalten in der Schule auffällt. [...] In jedem Fall sind die Zeugen Jehovas Menschen guten Willens, Idealisten und Sucher [...]”.

6 “In siebzehn Tagen schlief er alles in allem keine sieben Stunden. [...] Eine Staub- und Schmutzkruste bedeckte den gänzlich abgezehrten Körper bis in die Mundhöhle hinein. Er verlor den Geschmackssinn und musste schließlich mit einem Messer eine dicke Kruste von Zunge und Gaumen lösen, da das Fleisch in Fäulnis überzugehen begann”.

7 “Österreich war ihr Durchzugsgebiet, da half auch kein Beten in den Kirchen dagegen”.

Protestants for the hate-filled Catholics [...]”⁸ (p. 132). Additionally, references (even to quoted passages) are used unsystematically—if at all. Likewise, the information provided in the few endnotes seems to be assembled randomly; in this respect, referencing Wikipedia (note 4) is indicative of unfamiliarity with relevant textual sources. Aside from the fact that the bibliography includes much of what is actually not referenced in the text, the selection itself is rather limited. Also, Ehrlich does not refer to any secondary sources published in languages other than German, which, at one occasion, leads her to explicitly lament the scarce availability of (German language) scholarly literature on a specific topic, namely that of Bogomilism (p. 61). Suffice it to say that non-German scholarship, especially published in English, is crucial for the student of Austrian religious history and its many areas (such as the religious setting of the Habsburg lands or the background of new religious developments). In this specific case, a quick view at Dimitri Obolensky’s magisterial study of 1948 (Obolensky 2004) would certainly have proved beneficial.

The limitation of literature used but also the brevity of the discussion takes a qualitative toll on the approach to this doubtlessly complex subject. Some conclusions are too simple—for example, the rationale behind the triumph of Christian monotheism and soteriology in Late Antiquity, which Ehrlich identifies in general discontent with the rich and allegedly confusing pantheon of other local religions (p. 18). Even though suggested in the blurb, readers will not find a thorough and systematic examination of the three initial key questions. What are, in fact, the historical roots of Islamophobia? Readers are left alone here. Ehrlich is interested in tracing greater interplay, stringing together larger developments assessed from the traditionalist angle of the Great Man historiography. Only cautiously does Ehrlich shed light on the doctrinal context of Christian pluralism. Islamic, Jewish, and faith systems of new religious movements or pre-Christian religious traditions are either not or faintly addressed. The peculiarities of faith practice changing over time, be it Catholic or of any other belief, are not disclosed. Today, a history of religions in Austria must also be a history of how religions were articulated in its quotidian manifestations, that is, a ‘history from below’. No religious expression is static, but rather dynamically accommodating to a constantly altering socio-political, economic, and cultural environment, rendering local religion into localised religion with its distinct context-derived and -bound features. A modern take on the subject must, therefore, consider diversity and particularity, exploring the changing

8 “Außerdem ist es gut möglich, dass die Täufer bei den hasserfüllten Katholiken sozusagen als Stellvertreter für alle Protestanten herhalten mussten [...]”.

appearance and impact of religion over time. Ehrlich wants to entertain more than to educate, to create a readily accessible summary, however, at the expense of methodological rigour and multi-perspectivity. Writing a fully-fledged history of religions in Austria that satisfies the high scientific standards of Religious Studies requires not only enormous interdisciplinary knowledge but also ample technical skills. Such work remains a desideratum to date.

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