

Report on the Habilitation request of Dr. Ulrich L. Lehner

**(Habilitation monograph: *Enlightened Monks. The German Benedictines 1740-1803.*
Oxford University Press, 2011)**

The applicant is an internationally highly recognized specialist of early modern religious and ecclesiastical history, historical theology and intellectual history in the broader sense. Since obtaining his doctoral degree (in 2005 at the University of Regensburg, with a dissertation on Kant's concept of providence, published in 2007), he has been especially active and visible in the above-mentioned fields, and his publications (including the book now submitted as habilitation monograph) have received a broad range of critical acclaim. In particular, he has established himself as a foremost scholar of the "Catholic Enlightenment" (until relatively recently regarded as a paradoxical concept, but today acknowledged as a useful and promising research framework). Dr. Lehner's career as a university lecturer (beginning in 2004 at Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, and pursued since 2006 at Marquette University, Milwaukee) has been no less distinguished, resulting in his appointment, in 2012, as tenured associate professor, and in 2015 as full professor.

Enlightened Monks (which has received no less than 33 reviews in academic journals, including the *Historische Zeitschrift*, *Central European History*, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, to mention but a few of the most important) is a pioneering exploration of the ways in which ideas and socio-cultural practices widely associated with the Enlightenment penetrated the lives and minds of members of a Catholic religious order in the eighteenth century, and helped them confront the social, cultural, philosophical and theological challenges of their times. Along with scholars like Derek Beales, Peter Hersche, Harm Klueting, Michael Printy, Jonathan Sheehan, David Sorkin, and others, Lehner questions the traditional view that Christianity, including especially its Catholic version, was generally hostile to and in principle irreconcilable with the Enlightenment, and demonstrates that the attitudes to the Enlightenment among religious communities resembled those of any other segment of society, and thus were far more variegated than hitherto supposed – including many forms of responsiveness, accommodation and integration. This revisionist study, based on

thoroughgoing research in more than twenty archives across Germany, Austria and Switzerland, greatly enhances and nuances our understanding of monastic and religious culture in Central Europe in a crucial moment of the shaping of Western modernity.

In the introduction the author explicitly associates the endeavour of the book with that of the other students of the field mentioned above by asserting that the Catholic Enlightenment was part of the overall movement of the religious Enlightenment as an attempt to rearticulate faith using the new science and philosophy to promote a tolerant, irenic understanding of belief that could serve a shared morality and politics. In other words, it was an apologetic pursuit designed to defend dogma in dialogue with contemporary culture, and by implementing the core values of the Enlightenment associated with the “renewal” or “reform” of the whole of society. Lehner points to the influences on the German Benedictines from among the new tendencies within Christianity (Maurism, Quietism, Pietism), as well the Enlightenment (cameralism, utilitarianism). The centrality of academic preoccupations among monks receives special emphasis as an avenue for them to participate in scholarly communication or the “Enlightenment traffic”. “Anti-Enlightenment tendencies” are also acknowledged. The introduction effectively sets the scene for the ensuing investigation, though given the focus of the book one slightly misses an engagement with recent restatements of the essentially “secularist” commitments of the Enlightenment – either in a milder form, as an endeavour at “betterment in this world, irrespective of the next one” (John Robertson), or as a radically and definitively irreligious movement (Jonathan Israel).

Chapter 2 is devoted to “the challenge of historiography”, that is, the transformative influence of the study of history with the approach developed by the Benedictines of the Abbey of St. Maur (Mabillon in the first place) on the mentality of the monks in German monasteries. The features of Maurist historical studies which receive the greatest emphasis are the close resemblance of their epistemological foundations and their overall approach to the new natural sciences, and their cooperative or at least coordinated character, both of which were indeed crucial to the Enlightenment’s attitudes and practices to the production of knowledge. The reception of Maurist historical scholarship in Germany is traced by the author meticulously from the early efforts by Ulrich Staudigl at Andechs in Bavaria to the impressive contributions of the Pez brothers, Bernhard and Hieronymus at Melk in Austria, and beyond. Lehner demonstrates convincingly that the application of historical criticism fed among monastic scholars a new consciousness which re-evaluated ecclesiastical discipline as a dynamic process subject to change over time. The chapter is a welcome addition to the reassessment of the place of historical thinking and research in the Enlightenment, which has

been a steady feature of eighteenth-century studies over the past few decades. A more systematic contextualization of the Maurist-inspired historical work of the German Benedictines against the innovations in Enlightenment secular historiography (like in the case of the larger stakes of the book in the introduction, as pointed out above) would have made the chapter even more pertinent.

The new, “relativistic” understanding of monastic traditions generated by historical criticism, Lehner suggests, also triggered changes in monastic lifestyle, which are the subject of Chapter 3. Monks realized that it was less important to conform to traditional, rigid patterns of behaviour than to be faithful to the core of their vocational life in ways which also allowed integration with more general developments of the time – a desire to be more “like the outside world.” While Lehner stresses that it would be “impossible” to describe the social structure of eighteenth-century German Benedictine monasteries, he offers a nuanced analysis of the issue, which supports his assertion that monasteries, like academies, associations and other institutions, were venues where the participation of citizens was crucial and class differences could be overcome. We obtain vivid accounts of the ways in which monastic society indeed came to resemble more the surrounding secular environment in its working habits (including attitudes to time and money), as well as its worldly pleasures (the consumption of characteristically “Enlightenment” beverages, such as coffee and tea – but also of tobacco, snuff and alcoholic drinks), pastimes (playing cards, billiards), feasts and celebrations (which included theatrical performances and fireworks). A new, enlightened memory culture developed in the abbeys, which were also infiltrated by practices of Enlightenment salon culture, and their overall attitude to the use of space, with its implications to sociability as well as privacy, underwent significant changes. Such transformations often took place amidst heated debates – such as the one around the endeavour to abandon traditional tonsures – but the debates themselves were a sign of a changing climate of opinions in the monasteries.

The following chapters explore the participation of monks in the typical eighteenth-century communication networks provided by academic societies and journals (Chapter 5), and their increasing sensitivity to the new notions of individual liberty arising from such modes of communication (Chapter 4). In turn, all of this had an inevitable effect on ideas and practices of monastic discipline, including the views on monastic prisons (Chapter 6) and runaway monks (Chapter 7). Lehner asserts that during the eighteenth century the understanding of obedience “changed drastically”, and an increasing number of monks took courage to stand up against the authority of the abbot – either because of a sheer decline in

discipline, but more often by referring to one's conscience, and a conviction of the truth of certain Enlightenment ideals, such as the natural rights of the individual. A host of case descriptions are offered to illustrate the extent to which such instances became part and parcel of the "lived experience" of Benedictine monasteries in the period. A minority of Benedictines even became supporters of the French Revolution. But "freedom" for monks tended to assert itself most characteristically not in political dissidence and revolutionary action, but in engagement in the various modes of enlightened communication, especially as regards the avenues for the dissemination and circulation of knowledge. Lehner relies extensively on recent studies of the "republic of letters," and significantly expands our understanding of the extent to which monasteries became involved in the network of exchange based on scholarly societies and journals. From the foundation of the "Olmütz Academy of the Unknown" in 1746, German Benedictines were regularly involved in such projects. These sections of the book are a timely reminder that while "Jesuit science" has been a popular and fruitful area of research, the Society of Jesus was by no means the only Catholic religious order in which the study of natural phenomena was widely cultivated. In the course of the academic networking which went together with these pursuits (and involved scholarly journals – including a clandestine one - initiated and maintained by the Benedictines themselves), denominational boundaries were crossed frequently and with ease (a topic which is later resumed in the chapters on law, philosophy and theology, too). The chapter ends with a striking miniature case study of the Abbey of Melk, described as a genuine venue of "ebullient" enlightened sociability, with discussion groups, a Masonic lodge, liberal library policies, frequent visits by outstanding Protestant men of letters, and new modes of entertainment.

Monastery prisons, introduced in the High Middle Ages to punish delinquent monks (delinquency ranging from violations of discipline through common offenses to apostasy and escape) were subject to reformist thinking from Mabillon onwards, yet – as Lehner demonstrates via a range of interesting case studies in a chapter which since then has grown into an independent monographic study of the subject – until the last quarter of the eighteenth century remained "most unpleasant and inhumane" places, inviting a great deal of criticism as symbols of ecclesiastical despotism and intolerance. The consideration of the prisons also leads the author to discuss the subject of runaway monks, upon the growing recognition among church historians that dissenters are to be appreciated as important contributors to that history. What makes the topic especially pertinent for this book is that, with the growth of notions of individual freedom among the walls of the monasteries, and increasing familiarity

with developments in the world beyond those walls, the number of “disenchanted monks” also increased significantly. Some of them, as the protagonists in Lehner’s account, became “Enlighteners,” even in the radical sense of levelling full-blown attacks on central Catholic teachings. An especially poignant case in question is that of Gregorius Rothfischer, whose teaching and publications as a professor of philosophy and later theology at his abbey were equally indebted to Wolff (with whom he corresponded) and Leibniz, as well as modern experimental science, and who made an escape and converted to Protestantism (appreciated by him on account of its emphasis on freedom of conscience) in 1751.

The final portions of the book are dedicated to the challenges posed to Catholic monasticism by eighteenth-century developments in three established branches of knowledge: law, philosophy, and theology. In Chapter 8, Lehner traces the infiltration of the new, enlightened natural law (initially arising among Protestant authors and claiming that natural law is not only an objective order intelligible to reason but also that reason itself is capable of producing natural law) into Catholicism, via a pre-existing tradition of Jansenist and Conciliarist literature. Under such influences the idea of natural law thinkers like Pufendorf that the secular sovereign has certain rights over the temporal possessions of the church due to his obligation to the common welfare, and the overall subjection of their own interests to that of the state, gained ground even among some “enlightened monks”. The latter were also prominent among those ecclesiastics who were willing to make concessions to the state in the emerging debates on marital law. Lehner, however, also acknowledges sophisticated criticisms of modern natural law among eighteenth-century Benedictines. In philosophy (discussed in Chapter 9), many Benedictines saw no contradiction between faith and reason (confining the infallibility of the Bible to matters of the former, but excluding its authority from the teaching of scientific disciplines), and willingly embraced more optimistic anthropological notions, aspects of the thought of Locke, Leibniz and Wolff in the earlier and those of Kant and Fichte in the later years of the century; they were especially open to the achievements of experimental physics, and had less and less qualms about the vernacular as the language of academia. Finally, as demonstrated in Chapter 10, several Benedictines of especially the later eighteenth century formulated theological positions influenced by Enlightenment ideas of virtue and happiness, and pointed towards ecumenism and tolerance. Lehner’s account of these intellectual and theoretical trends among the German Benedictines rounds off the comprehensive portrait of “a powerful experiment, namely, the engagement of Catholic thought with Enlightenment ideas and practices” – an experiment which, he stresses,

ended abruptly with the Napoleonic wars and their consequences: among them, the dissolution of the German *Reichskirche* and the secularization of church property.

Enlightened Monks is one of the most important contributions in an increasing corpus of recent scholarship which has opened a new chapter in exploring the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion. Even if the antagonism which had long been assumed between these two poles was abandoned several decades ago, the study of this relationship largely focused on how representatives of “the Enlightenment” found it possible to cooperate towards the achievement of their ends with the established authorities, including ecclesiastical ones, of their time. Lehner’s self-positioning vis-à-vis this tradition of inquiry remains as much implicit in the book as to the more general trends in Enlightenment research already mentioned at the beginning of this report. Nevertheless, he is clearly one of the scholars who have taken the lead in reversing the optics, and who concentrate on tracing the penetration of ideals and practices associated with the Enlightenment into the structures of Christianity, including the Catholic church and its presumably most secluded and conservative arm, the monastic orders – which are in this way successfully reintegrated into the society and culture of the period of the Enlightenment. The book is a remarkable scholarly achievement, which eminently answers the requirements of a habilitation monograph. I warmly recommend the Committee to schedule the habilitation lectures of Dr. Lehner.



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