



## WRITING AGAINST THE CLOCK JOSEPH BERGIN

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We arrived at the Villa Walther very early in September, having driven all day from Rotterdam through sheets of torrential rain. The following day the sun shone warmly and brightly, and it did so without interruption for weeks to follow; there was virtually no winter to speak of, and summer arrived in early March, it seemed – as if it had decided that

spring was redundant. Could this possibly be the same Berlin where we had planned to spend an interesting but possibly tough (climatically at least) year? However much one attempts to plan for the year ahead, Berlin retains its capacity to surprise, and this was certainly one, but rarely has the experience of being wrong-footed been so welcome!

Having waited until I arrived in Berlin before taking my summer vacation, I planned to regard the period of the intensive German language course as a vacation, during which language-learning, tourism and general acclimatisation to Berlin would weave seamlessly into one another. As September glided by, I gradually sensed that my initial ambitions for improving my German were grossly optimistic, but that was disguised by the fact that initially I was the only member of the advanced course for several weeks! Later, the disappointment of having to share the class with another Fellow was instantly dissipated when Pierre-Michel Menger and myself – followed by an initially bemused Eva von Kügelgen – laughed ourselves into total incoherence as we read Tucholsky's *Ratschläge für einen schlechten Redner*. There was a great deal of fun during the rest of the year at the Wiko, but this entirely unexpected epiphany in the basement of the Villa Jaffé has no rival in my memory. By the time the remainder of the Fellows began arriving in late September and early October, we already fancied that we knew everything worth knowing about the Wiko and Berlin. We had, after all, been to places as exotic as Prenzlauer Berg, Treptower Park, and Marzahn, thanks mainly to the "Saturday walks" with the architect Rolf Zimmermann. In fact, of course, we were just scratching the surface, and the rest of the year was to reveal so many other surprises. The most welcome of these was the discovery that a large twenty-first century metropolis could have so many green areas, such limited traffic and noise volumes, and such an unrivalled number of open spaces in which to walk and cycle. Not to witness a single urban traffic jam throughout an entire year is an experience that would be unimaginable in London, Paris, or New York and innumerable other cities.

However, "all play and no work" tends to make the average academic uneasy – even guilty perhaps, and especially in such extraordinary surroundings. An initial glimpse of the high seriousness of Wiko's "house culture" came with the celebration of its twenty-fifth anniversary in late September. Amid much eating, drinking, music-making and socialising, there were speeches reminding us how privileged we were to join such an institution and reiterating its mission as a laboratory of ideas for the future.

As an historian, I am never sure that I have much to say about – or for – the future, not least because my current subject (French religious history) and period of interest (the "long" seventeenth century) both seem so entombed in the past. But whenever I doubted

if I was in the right place, I consoled myself by reading – for the  $n^{\text{th}}$  time – the *Arbeitsvorhaben* book, which quickly reminded me of the “catholicity” of the Wiko’s agenda and its willingness to make room for the most non-utilitarian projects. I did at least follow Wiko practice, if not exactly precept, by re-designing my project at a relatively early stage of the year. I gradually realised that my original intention of writing a grand synthesis on the theme of church, religion and politics in France during the period from the wars of religion to the pre-Enlightenment was simply too ambitious and that I would ideally need a permanent fellowship at the Wiko if I were to finish it.

Given that the latter was/is not, alas, a realistic prospect, I trimmed my sails and gradually decided to focus my attention on the nature and structures of the French Church itself, before moving on to an analysis of the instruments and techniques employed to bring about religious change within French Catholicism. Its early chapters are an attempt to examine the Church’s basic structures, and how they worked, despite their antiquity and, consequently, their relative un-responsiveness to changing circumstances. This is as true of its dioceses and parishes as it is of its property-ownership and its distribution both across the country and among the clergy who were its tenants. I also wanted to write several chapters on the secular and regular clergy, which would be a combination of social and institutional analysis, in order to show how extensively colonised the French Church was by a variety of social groups who pursued their interests within the Church as much as they did in other spheres. I was particularly keen to rescue France’s religious orders, male and especially female, from the relative neglect they have suffered in much of the historiography of the past half-century. It was the female religious orders that grew at the most remarkable speed during the seventeenth century, but more interesting than their growth-rate *per se* was the fact that it was among them that new forms of community emerged that undermined the attempts to enforce strict enclosure upon female communities in the aftermath of the council of Trent (1545–63). Similar attempts had been made elsewhere in Europe, but few of them survived very long. France, with its high level of autonomy from papal control, was able to pursue an agenda that in the end helps to explain the huge explosion in female religious communities during the *grand siècle*. Beyond this particular point, which is important in itself, I wanted to reinstate the religious orders within the social and religious landscape of their time rather than leave them in the kind of ghetto to which they are usually consigned since, historically, the orders were the most frequent laboratories of new religious practices and devotions. This is well known and accepted by medievalists, but is far less so among early modern historians. Neglecting this dimension of

their history impoverishes our understanding of the processes of religious change occurring during the Catholic Reformation. My often crude attempts to measure the density of the religious orders' presence across France, which reached down into the smaller towns specifically in the course of the seventeenth century, convinced me that their role increased rather than regressed or stagnated at this time, precisely because they came in touch with a far greater proportion of the population.

For decades, the historiography has been dominated by the debate over the relationship between "elite" and "popular" religion, with attempts to uncover the nature of "popular" religion dominating much of the research. In recent years, this debate has subsided quietly and, as so often, inconclusively. "Elite" religion was never really closely defined, and it is often impossible to determine whether it refers to the actual religious practices of the social elites or to a higher, idealised form of prescribed religion which floats freely above both clergy and the population generally. Put differently, "elite" religion might not actually be the religion of the elites of any particular generation, with the implication that they, too, had as great a need for religious "education" of the kind proposed by the post-tridentine Church as did their social inferiors.

This confusion, which had its own ideological foundations, drove me to seek alternative approaches that would avoid the kind of straitjacket that it imposed on the analysis of religious change. Ultimately, I opted for an approach that focuses on the agents and instruments of religious change, conscious that it might not resolve all of the questions under discussion. It has the advantage of not privileging any single agent or instrument. It enables the historian to track the evolution, value and limitations of each one and to compare their relative effectiveness over time. Successive chapters touch on shifts in popular religious practices such as saints' days, processions, pilgrimages and the sacraments, but also on the attempts made to "educate" people, in the broadest sense of the term, about their religious practices. My analysis does not assume that the clergy were necessarily or always the carriers of new religious ideas or practices, as the history of attempts to produce a new type of "tridentine" clergy makes abundantly clear. In the course of chapters on confraternities, associations and the *dévots* generally, it becomes abundantly clear that laypeople were highly active and were often the initiators of religious change. Had the celebrated half-lay, half-clerical Company of the Holy Sacrament had its way, the French Church would have been directed from behind closed doors by a nation-wide network of affiliated companies working quite independently of the established structures, but co-ordinating the efforts and goodwill of those actively involved in religious affairs.

In comparative perspective, the French Catholic Reformation seems to have been far more ambitious and “radical” than its European counterparts. The fact that it fell short of its ambitions did not prevent observers from other parts of Europe from regarding it as a model that others should follow by the later seventeenth century. The fact that French Catholicism underwent such extensive change in the century after the wars of religion cannot simply be a matter of France being in a position to imitate initiatives that had already been tried in other parts of Europe and, therefore, to engage in “catch up”. In my account, I place considerable emphasis upon the initial surge of religious militancy that occurred during the religious wars and that reached its peak in the decade from about 1585 to 1595. Despite political and military defeat, that militancy survived, but took on a new format; and this peaceful militancy united those Catholics who had found themselves divided along political lines up to then. Secondly, the official toleration of Protestantism by the French monarchy between 1598 and 1685 represented a continual challenge and a provocation in the eyes of those involved in reviving French Catholicism. The constant friction with France’s Protestants was simultaneously a challenge to the *dévots* of all stripes to put their own house in order, the partly unintended effect of which was to produce a Catholicism that differed in many ways from that of Spain, Italy or the South German-Austrian lands. It was more combative, less traditional and less “baroque” than elsewhere. Historians have often claimed that the militancy of the post-wars of religion decades subsided by the 1640s, and there is some truth in that, but it fails to take account of the extent to which what is usually called Jansenism – and the conflicts to which it gave rise – included a strong reformist drive that was critical of popular superstitions, sub-standard clergy, and religious practices of dubious authenticity. When viewed as a component of a wider move towards moral rigorism, Jansenism contributed powerfully to realigning the French Church, one consequence of which was a considerable suspicion of the “accommodationist” *pastorale* of the Jesuits and those close to them. In the context of an analysis of how French Catholicism developed across the century, it is of lesser importance that Jansenism also generated damaging conflicts, especially during the eighteenth century; from my perspective, it can be seen as sustaining, albeit in a different register, the militancy of those earlier decades.

As the Wiko year ends and we prepare to move off the stage, there is still some way to go with my book, and ultimately I shall only have a clear view of the subject when I have finished the next one dealing with religion and politics during the same time-span! Despite the constant distractions and attractions of Berlin – the Opera, the Philharmonie and so on – I did make good progress with the project in its current format. I read more widely and

with more pleasure than I ever have before, ordering books by the cartload, it seemed. Virtually every visit to the Hauptgebäude involved a detour to the Weiße Villa. Like so many other Fellows before me, I cannot praise the Library staff highly enough for the service they provided during the year. There were moments, often late-nocturnal, when I even felt the urge to ask for “impossible” books or reviews, if only to see how they would react! But I did resist that urge in the end, overcome by the sense of how privileged I was to have a library service that acted as if each Fellow was the only person whose needs had to be satisfied. Needless to say, I could say the same about the Kolleg’s other *Mitarbeiter*, from the kitchen staff to the German language teachers, whose attitude was so positive that one was simply shamed into meeting the expectations that the Wiko had for each of us. Never have I had as much time to read and write, and yet rarely have I felt so acutely the value of time, as if somehow there was too little of it. Writing a book is a highly solitary and often frustrating experience, but so far at least this has been a massive exception. No wonder our collective dream throughout the year was that of a second year at Wallotstraße 19.