

Review

Anne-Mette Kirkeby

To cite this article: Anne-Mette Kirkeby (2007) Review, *Library History*, 23:1, 77-80, DOI: [10.1179/174581607X177501](https://doi.org/10.1179/174581607X177501)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1179/174581607X177501>



Published online: 18 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3

REVIEW

HELGE CLAUSEN, '... *The written word is the most patient missionary ...*' *Catholic literature and Catholic public libraries in Denmark from the Reformation to Vatican II, 1536–1962*. Copenhagen: Katolsk Forlag, 2006. 345 pp. ISBN 87-85213-80-2

The history of Danish Catholicism has yet to be written, but Helge Clausen's work on the history of Catholic literature and libraries in Denmark, a moving account written in a matter-of-fact style, tells at least part of the story. In his thesis Clausen is eager to examine the importance of the role played by literature in the Catholic Church's strategy to convert Danes to Catholicism, 1536–1962, and particularly to analyze how effective this activity proved from the 1880s onwards. His work provides a detailed insight into the difficult circumstances in which these libraries existed in Denmark during the period in question and in doing so tackles a subject new to most Danes. The reviewer's own education focussed exclusively on a Protestant reading of Danish history, and Clausen's work is a timely reminder that a parallel Catholic history of both Danish libraries and Danish culture exists.

Early history

Following the Reformation Catholic books and manuscripts from the monasteries were confiscated by the king. Some were transferred to the University Library in Copenhagen, where many were lost following the fire of 1728. A number of manuscripts, however, were preserved, having been copied by scholars and kept elsewhere. Unlike in England, no Danish Catholic organizations went into exile abroad, and no new institutions were set up abroad after the Reformation. A number of noble families kept their Catholic faith more or less openly, but only for a generation or two after the Reformation. Unlike England, no Danish noble families of influence remained Catholic. Helge Clausen describes how at this time the book was used as a weapon by both sides, with books like the Bible frequently wielded by Catholic and Protestant alike. The Danish king was very aware of the danger of the Catholic book, and Jesuits were much feared in Denmark under Christian IV in particular. There was great concern that the Catholic Church would return to Denmark and convert the country's population, as Jesuits and Dominicans did elsewhere in Protestant Europe.

The oldest library

The first Catholic library, the Sankt Andreas Bibliotek (Saint Andrew's Library) as it has been known since 1953, can be traced back to 1648 — predating even Frederik III's Royal Library. It was founded around a century after the Reformation by Count Bernardino de Rebollo, the Spanish king's ambassador to Denmark. In 1622, in response to the change of creed in Scandinavia, Pope Gregory XV founded the 'Congregatio de propaganda fide' (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) with the task of ensuring that Catholic worship was conducted in the Protestant countries. Following a number of unsuccessful attempts to send Jesuits and

Dominican friars to Denmark, the Congregation asked the royal courts in Madrid, Paris and Vienna to send ambassadors who might hold religious services to the Scandinavian countries. This was to be missionary work linked to the court — the principal desideratum was to convert the crowned heads. Rebolledo was indirectly instrumental in the conversion of Queen Christina of Sweden to Catholicism in 1655, resulting in her abdication and move to Rome. Rebolledo failed, however, to convert the Danish king and queen. Ultimately, he was not suited to court life in Copenhagen. The queen was the one of few he found to his taste, the majority being ill mannered and hard drinking. He did, however, make a very scholarly and well travelled Danish friend in the person of Joachim Gersdorff, a man fluent in ten languages, possessed of a very fine book collection, and, perhaps most significantly, with contacts to the royal family.

Rebolledo was highly religious and wrote a number of theological works and poems. He brought his own books with him to Denmark, and the books belonging to the embassy chapel, later transferred to his successor, formed the nucleus of what later became known as the Sankt Andreas Bibliotek, the theological library of the Diocese of Copenhagen. Rebolledo celebrated mass for his household, which was permitted, just as Protestant ambassadors were allowed to hold services for their households in Catholic countries. Attendance at these masses, however, soon spread to a wider circle, giving rise to a small Catholic community. This was forbidden, but initially a blind eye was turned, Frederik III being more tolerant than his father, Christian IV. When missionary activity, particularly that of the Jesuits, became too zealous and complaints were made, the king intervened.

Clausen succinctly describes the incredible history of this, the oldest Catholic library in Denmark, charting its survival through fire, religious persecution and constant penury which at one stage reduced the collection to only seventy-two books. The library was saved from all these setbacks by a succession of enthusiasts, of whom Bernardino was the first, the majority being German rather than Danish bishops.

Parish libraries

Danish parish libraries came into being in the nineteenth century, with the St Vincent de Paul Society being important in their establishment. The St Vincent de Paul Society was a lay organization dedicated to the relief of the poorest in society. The parish libraries were set up on a foreign model, but Clausen stresses that the Catholic bishops, who mostly came from abroad, particularly Germany, tried to make them as Danish in character as possible and integrate them into Danish society. There is no equivalent of the parish libraries in the Protestant Church; unlike the Catholics, Protestants did not maintain the link between the church and libraries after the Reformation. The libraries of Danish institutions, however, could have connections with the Protestant Church; the old University Library in Copenhagen, for example, had ties with the cathedral, Vor Frue Kirke (Church of Our Lady), and its book collection was very Lutheran.¹

Niels Steensens Bibliotek

The second most famous Catholic library in Copenhagen is the Niels Steensens Bibliotek. The remarkable story behind its foundation focuses on the library fanatic, Marie Louise d'Auchamp, who moved to the USA just after the war and put together a book collection of some 2200 volumes with the assistance of American Catholics. The librarian travelled with virtually no funds, allegedly with the assistance of the Holy Ghost, presumably channelled through a selection of American Catholics. Despite the Catholic Bishop of Copenhagen not being informed of the

project, the library was rightly given his blessing some time after being opened on 19 January 1954. Clausen examines the book stock and lending of this and other Catholic libraries very carefully through the analysis of sources in the Sankt Andreas and Niels Steensen libraries. The number of books may have fluctuated dramatically, but lending was consistently high in relation to the number of books.

Mission and conversion

The empirical material on book stocks and lending statistics for the various Catholic libraries is used to support the author's theory regarding the contribution made by the libraries to the conversion of the Danish population to Catholicism. There is little Danish Catholic literature and only two well known Catholic authors, Johannes Jørgensen and Peter Schindler, both converts widely read by all Danes. The Norwegian author Sigrid Undset and Icelandic author Halldor Laxnes, also converts, were both awarded the Nobel Prize and are still popular today in Denmark.² Clausen selects the period 1880–1962 for his analysis of Danish converts. There have never been very many Catholics in Denmark; even after the Constitution of 1849, which introduced freedom of worship, Catholics made up no more than 0.3% of the population. In 1920 there were 5500 Catholics in Denmark, with this figure rising to around 25,000 in 1922, largely due to Polish immigration. There are around 35,000 Catholics in Denmark today and Clausen characterizes the period 1849–1962 as a boom period for the Catholic Church in Denmark, with the foundation of many churches, chapels, hospitals, children's homes and schools. The change from an almost underground existence began in earnest around 1900 with the Jesu Hjerter Kirke (Sacred Heart Church) on Stenosgade in Copenhagen, which became a centre for Jesuit activities, playing a similar role to the Jesuit Church on Farm Street in London.

Peculiarly Danish and Scandinavian factors

There is no detailed sociological analysis of Danish converts. Danish prejudice against Catholicism is largely based on it being a foreign element that does not suit the Danish mentality, whilst the Established Protestant Church in Denmark is clear in its view that it represents the sole Christian institution. Factors such as these made it difficult to convert Danish Protestants, with conversion far more common in the upper and middle classes. The Sankt Andreas Bibliotek was located in the well heeled old quarter of Copenhagen, a deliberate strategy on the part of the Church to try and convert people of influence. It was in the intellectual élite that conversion took place — priests found it virtually impossible to convert Danish workers and peasants. The concentration on the intellectual upper and middle classes may have been abetted by the belief within Catholicism that conversion was, at least partly, an intellectual process. Catholicism was perceived to be at a higher level of cognition than Protestantism, hence the key role played by Catholic literature. Conversion to Catholicism in Scandinavia was not only the expression of personal religious conviction, but also a manifestation of an active rejection of the convert's old foundation of faith.³ The Catholic mission in Denmark was mainly supported by North German Catholics and with missionary literature from northern Germany.

Reading Clausen's thesis, it is a wonder firstly that these libraries survived at all and secondly that the Catholics kept up their missionary activity, despite poor results. The author has relatively little material with which to substantiate his theory — a total of 169 converts answered the question regarding their reasons for converting, and the answers were so varied that it would seem difficult to draw any firm conclusions from them. In 75% of the published convert reports from

around 1880 to 1962, however, it is documented that reading Catholic, and occasionally non-Catholic, literature was a significant factor in the decision to convert. Only a small number of converts questioned mentioned libraries, but as Catholic literature was thin on the ground, particularly before 1930, and Catholic books were only printed in small numbers, it seems reasonable to assume that libraries were probable suppliers.

Clausen's book communicates important knowledge about conditions for Danish Catholics over a period of 400 years. The realization that a Christian creed so similar to that of the Danish National Evangelical Lutheran Church should have had to lead an underground existence for so long and be considered a foreign element in Danish culture, completely dependent on foreign funding, makes a strong impression. Clausen's thesis ends with the Second Vatican Council of 1962 at which the decision was taken to cease regarding Protestants as heretics. As a result missionary work in Denmark became less important — the Pope had finally given up trying to convert the Danes. In the face of the overwhelming Danish National Evangelical Lutheran Church this stance is understandable. Clausen's decision to conclude with the Second Vatican Council ties in succinctly with the arrival of the new media, which turned the role of all libraries upside down. This change of role is even more pronounced today, and it is easy to imagine that the Catholic libraries of Denmark face an even harder time today than they did fifty years ago.

ANNE-METTE KIRKEBY

COPENHAGEN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY