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Brian Sudlow, *Catholic Literature and Secularisation in France and England, 1880-1914*. Manchester University Press, 2011. 264 pp. \$81.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13-978-0719083112.

Review by Bertrand Taithe, University of Manchester.

This book brings together, for the first time, two contemporary Catholic revivals in a rich comparative literary perspective. The concept of Catholic literature itself is, the author reminds us, a question in its own right. There are myriad Catholic authors, some of whom will discuss Catholic theses, sensibilities or present a Catholic perspective but that does not necessarily mean that François Mauriac, Paul Claudel, or Paul Bourget belonged to Catholic literature from a dogmatic point of view. Catholic authors had to go beyond assuming the beliefs of their education and contend with the role of literature, authorial autonomy in relation to the divine. To focus on secularisation when evoking religious revival is the paradoxical starting point of this book, but it serves the purpose of avoiding what the author calls “critical ghettoization” (p. 3). As the author acknowledges, it instantly creates a paradox and calls for a luminous and very interesting discussion of the concept of secularisation which would make the introduction of this book useful reading for graduate and even undergraduate classes (it certainly will make it into my reading list).

Engaging with William T. Cavanaugh’s and Charles Taylor’s understanding of secularisation, this book considers the corpus of Léon Bloy, Joris Karl Huysmans, Charles Péguy and Paul Claudel for the French, G. K. Chesterton, Manley Hopkins and Hilaire Belloc for the British. Paradoxically some of the most important works of the latter authors dating from the post World War era were left out from the study. The addition of two “representative writers” from outside this corpus, Adolphe Retté and Robert Hugh Benson, does not modify the feeling that the comparison is not strictly of equal weighting. Most of the French authors belong to an earlier generation and were widely regarded as heavyweights in literary circles. But this is not strictly speaking a limitative list and other authors (Bourget, René Bazin, Henry Bordeaux, Georges Fonsegrive, Jean Nesmy, Ernest Psichiari, William Barry, Pearl Craigie, E. H. Dering, Josephine Ward and Edmund Randolph) also feature, alongside cameo appearances of poets such as Paul Verlaine, Francis Jammes, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell. A range of others are also mentioned, including, paradoxically some non-Catholics such as Barrès and Charles Maurras, which make this book more a history of ideas, shared and distributed amongst a motley crew of intellectuals both sides of the channel, than a strict comparison between a handful of tightly interconnected intellectuals. The conclusion admits that the book explores parallels between French and British Catholic writers rather than their engagement with each other. The Catholic Church and dogma, religious events and rising charismatic appeal make the bridge between these two communities. This is paradoxically an area which could have been further developed. Many French congregations relocated in the United Kingdom under duress when the Third Republic applied strictly the terms of the Concordat, while some British Protestants considered France a land of missionary work.

The debates on secularisation are of course central to the focus of this book and building on the work of Ralph Gibson or, for Britain, Callum Brown, the author is keen to present a complex portrait of two societies from 1880 onwards, in which religiosity and religious revivalism could run parallel with more profound and secular social transformations. It is organised into eight chapters which cover the issues of

social and individual secularisation (chapters one and two), challenges to belief (chapter three) which individuals faced in fragmented societies (chapters four and five), how Catholics attempted to transcend this fragmentation by calling for social renewal (chapter six), and the church itself, which the author refers to as a hierarchical and a charismatic church (chapters seven and eight) with a strong emphasis on the appeal of liturgy and more spontaneous expressions of divine presence. This organisation of the material is fairly straightforward, but each chapter presents a complex perspective, as well as evidence which reveals how contested Catholic worldviews were and how Catholic authors engaged in sophisticated manner with their own uncertainties and the attacks of their opponents.

Chapter one begins with a well-rehearsed account of positivism and Theism in France by way of Freemasons and Renan's work. The chapter covers much ground in a few pages and one could undoubtedly query the narrative which seems overly intellectual. The usual references to Darwin, Comte and spiritualism are decidedly high- or middle-brow and do not account for the diversity or range of working-class religious life. The mass of religious pamphlets and books which dominated the nineteenth-century publishing market and exercised the hacks of Paternoster Square is not fully given credit. To describe the Sacré Coeur as "a supernova effect preceding Catholicism's corralling within a private sphere" (p. 44) is a little debatable. Subsequent chapters have each a specific task to enable the reader to simultaneously understand the nature and strength of the secularising social forces and diverse Catholic responses to them.

Religious porosity is a key concept in this book which, associated with a more idiosyncratic notion of "buffering," describes individuals coping with issues arising from their own moral autonomy from God and their daily confrontation with a world in which meliorist, positivistic and anthropocentric ideas come to be dominant. As the author puts it, "in terms of secularisation, what is crucial here is that emancipated morality and the primacy of individual conscience are put aside in favour of reunion with God through the Church" (p. 77). The debates on sexuality fall under this category and many of the key and minor authors Sudlow considered issues of homosexuality, although he deals with the issue only briefly, as he does euthanasia (p. 80).

This book, which is articulated around a single debate with secularisation, covers in fact most key issues and is remarkably extensive. It engages with the renewed appeal of contemplative life which led some like Claudel to attempt to enter Trappist monasteries; the rise of charismatic Catholicism which included Lourdes and its pseudo-scientific approach to the validation of miracles explored by Ruth Harris; or the development of specific and rabid politics in opposition to the bourgeoisie, Jews and Freemasons. On these well-explored conflicts which included Catholics *inter alia*, Sudlow is a little fast-moving and the readers will need to know a lot of the context to appreciate how he narrows the discussion to the secularism question. These are necessary choices but the undergraduate reader will need to consider these issues in context and it is too sketchy to become clear in this book.

In the political context this engagement with transcendent truth led many Catholic authors to take profoundly conservative or reactionary positions. The French context called for the starkest positions in many ways. The Third Republic and its rabid anti-Catholic politics provide a brutal testing ground for Catholic writers in which to express themselves. The Dreyfus affair, which is not really discussed in this book, is the background of much radicalisation of the social and political debates. The inclusion of Catholic nationalist authors such as Maurras makes absolute sense despite his avowed agnosticism, but it does mean that some other voices in the Church and its vicinity are not given the same weight. The Social Catholic thinking of Albert de Mun, Marc Sangnier, both proponents of *ralliement* to the Third Republic, or Gallican thinkers are not given much space, presumably because they failed to bridge the gap and reconcile Catholics to the new democratic rules. The focus on the secularisation debates emphasizes the more metaphysical dimensions of Catholic literary culture rather than the more political, missionary, social or charitable strands of Catholic thinking at the turn of the century.

As the book ends before World War One, the issue of the Union Sacrée, the temporary reconciling of Catholics and their opponents for the national cause, is only fleetingly evoked, notably through some references to Claudel. The British context is obviously radically different since Catholics enjoyed in the second half of the nineteenth century greater visibility and relative toleration than at any time since the reformation. Yet Sudlow does not give much attention to the ethnic divisions within the Catholic community, with the Irish increasing the numbers of practising Catholics, or to the less visible forms of suspicion and exclusion which affected Catholics in Britain. Interestingly, many of the British authors originated from outside the Catholic Church and brought to it the fervour of converts, but also a distance from grassroots believers.

While this book is a remarkable achievement and a rich intellectual history it does not always convince. This reader is not entirely certain that the very enjoyable *Napoleon of Notting Hill* deserves quite as much attention as it gets in this book or, indeed, that the comparison between the two communities of Catholic writers really works productively--there is sometimes a sense that the two groups are considered in turn and that it amounts to a juxtaposition which ought to have been further clarified methodologically. The comparison of Chesterton and Péguy, for instance, is not necessarily illuminating since it draws on their common beliefs rather than highlights their contextual differences. The unifying force that the Catholic Church represents and which is highlighted in the final chapter makes a transnational comparison a paradox. Another is that in some respects, the secular question is one which the Church seems to have almost wished upon itself. Sudlow points out that the anti-modernist and anti-enlightenment positions of turn-of-the-century churchmen attributed more dogmatic coherence to their enemies than they really had. Changes in and the diversity of Protestant responses to secular challenges would have been relevant to British authors, but would have added complexity to an already ambitious book.

In conclusion, this book transcends the boundaries of literary or intellectual history to become a major contribution to our understanding of Catholic engagement with or refusal of modernity. It is erudite, intelligent and often challenging. It is proof of its ambition and quality that the reader will feel that many of its sections deserved to be developed further.

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