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Joseph Bergin, *Church, Society and Religious Change in France, 1580-1730*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009. xvii + 506 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-300-15098-8.

Review essay by Keith P. Luria, North Carolina State University.

There are few, if any, historians as knowledgeable as Joseph Bergin about the seventeenth-century Roman Catholic Church in France. In particular, he is well known for his studies of the French episcopacy; here he offers a comprehensive view of the entire institution.^[1] His account is familiar in some respects. After the Wars of Religion, the Church overcame its inertia and disarray to embark on a process of rebuilding and reform. It undertook to remake the religion of a population steeped in what reformers saw as ignorance, superstition, and sin. This much is well known. But Bergin, whose study is based on vast reading in secondary literature, brings together the disparate elements of the reform with more sweep than anyone else. He is as aware of the shortfalls in the reform program as he is of its successes. And he also makes clear that as the French Church dealt with longstanding challenges, new ones appeared, sometimes spawned by the reform program itself. The book is a monumental achievement. Nonetheless, as a survey of the field, it also reveals gaps in current scholarship, and with its focus on institutional history it is definitely a history of the Church rather than of religion.

Bergin starts by describing the French Church's situation coming out of the Wars of Religion. The great damage to its material structure and the shortcomings of its clergy would require decades to repair. Long periods of economic distress over the course of the seventeenth century made financial recovery difficult. The benefice system supporting the clergy led to pluralism and the lack of episcopal control over appointments. Bishops would have a hard time overcoming these obstacles when embarking on their reform program.

Bergin provides an account of the transformation of the French clergy that, as is frequently the case in this book, relies on enumeration and a compilation of detail that will likely put off all but the most specialized readers. But in this case the reward is the most thorough description I know of the size, geographical distribution, social composition, and training of the ecclesiastical establishment. The reform of religious life began with the bishops. Increasingly, they took seriously the obligation to reside in their dioceses rather than at court. They developed a range of tools—synods, clerical assemblies, visitations of parishes, and questionnaires—to help them impose their authority on their flocks. Their first task was to renovate the parish clergy, which meant gaining control of nominations to benefices, establishing seminaries to train *curés*, forbidding them to engage in economic activities in their communities, and insisting that they undertake regular preaching in parish churches.

The regular clergy enjoyed enormous growth during the century. Recruits enrolled less in the old monastic orders, which were difficult to reform, and more in the mendicant and new Catholic Reformation orders. French cities witnessed an influx of these new groups between 1600 and 1660. As Bergin makes clear, they owed their success to their responsiveness to public needs. Offshoots of the Franciscan movement, the Capuchins were admired because of their austerity but also because they took on the fight against Protestantism, ministered to the sick during plague outbreaks, and promoted popular religious practices. The Jesuits' work as educators won them great public support, as did their efforts at combating Protestantism through preaching, publishing, and missions.

The innovative French Church also established new organizations, such as congregations of secular clergy, which played a vital role in carrying out its reform program. The congregations undertook specific tasks. Pierre de Bérulle's Oratory dedicated itself to training priests, as did the Sulpicians. Vincent de Paul's Lazarists worked as missionaries, as did the Eudistes, named for their founder, Jean Eudes. The lay brothers in Jean Baptiste de La Salle's Congregation of Christian Brothers devoted themselves to teaching poor boys. Bergin makes an important point about the success of the orders and congregations: their achievements depended just as much on the laity's efforts as on the clergy's intentions. The impulse for reform came not just from inside the Church but from outside it as well. As Bergin shows, the same could be said about the reform program as a whole.

But a question remains that this survey cannot easily address. What actually motivated the recruits who joined new orders and congregations? We can see their spread across the map of France, and the social demand for them is clear. But why did the sons of old noble, robe, or professional families give up bright and comfortable futures to join, say, the Capuchins, who demanded severe self-abnegation and fierce rejection of the worldly honor in which their families were so invested? Bergin suggests that there was an "appealing combination of leadership, way of life, [and] religious practices...at work within each [of the groups]" (p. 121). But what the appeal was is not obvious, and understanding it requires a different approach to their history, one that can assess the subtle combination of the recruits' piety and search for spiritual purity along with their desire, perhaps, for a different sort of public reputation. Henri de Joyeuse, scion of a prominent aristocratic family, reportedly provoked a sensation in Paris when he entered the Capuchin order.[2] For some, the more they gave up, the more renown they gained.

The question of motivation applies to the even more remarkable growth in the numbers of women joining religious orders. By 1750, women religious would outnumber men (approximately 55,000 to 30,000), thereby reversing the situation prior to the Catholic Reformation. Bergin examines the growth in a chapter rather oddly titled "The Silent Revolution." Reform of female religious orders was much discussed, and often the women who joined, like the men, became well-known figures. Also, as with men, the new orders enjoyed the most spectacular growth. Madame Barbe Acarie and the circle of *dévots* around her founded the French branch of Saint Teresa of Avila's Carmelites. And she helped establish in France the Ursulines, one of the most successful of the new female orders. The rich spiritual environment of these years also led to the development of other groups, such as the Visitation, co-founded by Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales.

Women's orders confronted constraints beyond those of men. Trent had insisted on strict enclosure for women, yet many women wanted to join groups that were actively engaged in the world, through charitable activities, hospital work, or teaching. The issue of enclosure has drawn a good deal of scholarly attention, and Bergin offers a useful summary of the matter.[3] As he points out, it is easy enough to portray the imposition of enclosure as an act of anti-women repression, but families felt that cloistering would protect the daughters they sent into convents. And while clearly not all nuns agreed, many also willingly accepted enclosure as central to the penitential, contemplative piety they sought to practice. But enclosure did check the social impact religious women could have. Here, too, the French Church innovated with new associations in which women did not take nuns' vows and were not subject to cloistering. The best known group was the Daughters of Charity, co-founded by Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul. Because these new foundations did not require dowries, they attracted poorer women than the orders, another reason they were not subject to enclosure.

These new groups devoted themselves to social work and teaching, and the demand for them was enormous. But what led women to join? The desire to do good works was one reason, as was the penitential piety that characterized elite spirituality after the Wars of Religion. Following Barbara Diefendorf's work, Bergin points to "the enormous religious energy, especially its ascetic and intensely meditative spirituality, released by the Catholic League that was essential for the success of the 'new' orders" (p. 135).[4] Yet François de Sales's less ascetic, devout humanism made "considerable room for the religious needs and sensibilities of women" (p. 138). So just what were these needs and sensibilities

that could find fulfillment in such different sorts of organizations as the Carmelites, the Visitation, or the Daughters of Charity? And were they the same for poorer women in the new congregations as for the wealthy women who financed them? We still have much to learn about Catholic women's religious lives in this period.

Bergin describes how the new secular and regular clergy undertook the vast educational/disciplinary project of reform. The Church developed new tools for its purposes or adapted old ones. Bishops oversaw the publication of a great number of catechisms for their dioceses. Missionaries toured cities and the countryside urging repentance, hearing confessions, and reconciling conflicts. New schools offered religious instruction. The goal was to improve individuals' understanding of the faith and promote pious practices that were more restrained than older collective celebrations and more under the control of the clergy. Bergin breaks down his analysis of the campaign into separate discussions of religious calendars, saints' devotions, the sacraments, and confraternities.

While the French Catholic Reformation did manage to promote changes in all of these areas, its successes were always more limited than its aspirations. Reforming clergy did not always understand the people's religion, convinced as they were that it was superstitious. Bishops tried to strip from diocesan calendars holidays that did not promote proper piety in favor of those, specifically christocentric and marian festivals, central to the Catholic Reformation's disciplinary and pedagogical goals. Bergin's attitude toward the old observances is surprising. For him, St. John's Eve or All Saints/All Souls Days were "baptised" versions of pre-Christian festivals (p. 230). But this is to adopt the reformer's view that the religion of the people was essentially superstitious or pagan. As he shows, over time dioceses did achieve a certain homogenization in their calendars, but traditional celebrations never disappeared; in the difficult conditions of the seventeenth century, people needed their old intercessory or patron saints as much as they ever had. These people were not, however, just a short step from pre-Christian pagans celebrating agricultural festivals. They practiced a religion adapted to their particular religious sensibilities and requirements. Elements of it were widely shared across the social spectrum, even if they were not in keeping with the precepts of reforming prelates.

Bergin, however, is not consistently dismissive of "popular" religion. He understands that "devotion to saints was massively collective in nature and was, precisely for that reason, embedded in local structures and institutions which could not be removed or changed with a wave of the hand" (p. 233). Reformers attacked traditional devotions; new saints' cults would encourage more acceptable observances and a better understanding of the faith. [5] Acceptable devotions would inculcate a piety based less on the search for supernatural intercession and more on an interiorized spirituality. Therefore, the reformers promoted devotions to the religion's central figures, such as Christ, Mary, and Joseph (patron of the good death). The new cults did take root, but only, as Bergin points out, through their adoption by local confraternities or leading parishioners. Meanwhile the old devotions did not disappear.

Bergin singles out confraternities as particularly central to religious life and emblematic of the reform campaign's successes and failures. The reformers disapproved of older, craft-based groups because of their autonomy from clerical supervision and their seemingly profane social events, such as banquets on patron saints' festivals. But relatively few of these groups disappeared. More of a preoccupation for the Church was the Penitents' associations. To a degree, they were in sync with the Church's aims: they combated Protestantism and their devotional focus was christocentric. However, they were highly independent of clerical control, and when the brothers paraded anonymously in their *cagoules*, they raised the anxiety levels of secular as well as ecclesiastical authorities. Much more to the liking of both were the Jesuit-founded sodalities established in cities. The members of these groups also concentrated their devotions on the Eucharist. They confessed and took communion regularly. They engaged in daily examinations of conscience along with frequent meetings and retreats. But the Jesuit sodalities drew in only urban spiritual activists. Rosary confraternities were much more popular throughout rural as well as urban areas, in large part because they were open to women. Over time they became largely women's organizations, while men gravitated to Holy Sacrament associations. The adoption of a marian devotion in Rosary confraternities or eucharistic devotion in Holy Sacrament or Jesuit groups suggests

that the Catholic Reformation was having some success. But, as we need to recognize, the continued strength of the Penitents indicates that resistance to the Church's program was always possible.

It was with the spiritual elite—urban, educated, and of relatively high social rank—that the reform program had its most obvious success but also, ultimately, its most problematic consequences. The penitential piety emerging from the Catholic League fed a mysticism that strongly marked French *dévots*. Many of the influential mystics were women such as Marie Guyart, Barbe Acarie, and Jeanne de Chantal. Mystical piety proved to have practical applications. For instance, Pierre de Bérulle, an associate of Acarie, turned mystical piety toward a revaluation of the parish clergy by associating their vocation with that of Christ, thereby raising their spiritual status heretofore deemed inferior to that of the regulars.

But there was more to the *dévo*t group than the small number of mystics, and Bergin's discussion of the spiritual ideas that tied this amorphous group together is relatively limited. He prefers instead to concentrate on its most singular and troublesome institutional manifestation, the Company of the Holy Sacrament, a secretive federation whose membership consisted of Catholic activists drawn from local urban elites. The Company focused on seemingly unobjectionable undertakings—poor relief, religious instruction, support for missions, and conversion of Huguenots. But its secrecy and independence made it suspect to authorities. In the wake of the Fronde, Mazarin, worried about unauthorized associations, sought its suppression, as did Colbert later. Louis XIV quashed it in 1666.

Far more problematic for the Church and the monarchy was the Jansenist movement that also emerged from the spiritual ferment of the early seventeenth century. Bergin presents an excellent overview of the complex phenomenon known as Jansenism, which in France owed much to the Belgian theologian Cornelius Jansen's Augustinian ideas on grace and free will but even more to the Abbé de Saint-Cyran's demand for a rigorous approach to penance and the absolution of sins. His follower, Antoine Arnauld, mounted an attack on Jesuit ideas about frequent communion. Late in the century, the movement also took on the notions of Pasquier Quesnel on making the Church less hierarchical. Richelieu opposed Saint-Cyran's ideas on contrition and locked him up. Louis XIV inherited Mazarin's distrust of the Jansenists and tried to repress the movement. His ire focused particularly on Jansenism's institutional center, the Port Royal convent, which was destroyed. Yet as Bergin shows, even as the movement's leaders succumbed to royal repression, their ideas on moral rigor gained ever wider support. As a result, Jansenism would be at the heart of political controversies in the eighteenth century.

Thus, Bergin depicts a French Catholic reform effort vast in scope and with some notable successes, but also with considerable shortcomings. The book is massive and heavily detailed. Such detail can be difficult to organize and, it must be said, the author does not always succeed. Discussions of various topics—e.g. marriage, catechizing, the *commend*e system, the social composition of the clergy—reappear in multiple chapters. Anyone trying to read the book from cover to cover will find it quite a trek. But the repetition may serve well those readers who use the book as a reference work on specific subjects.

It might seem odd to suggest that such an exhaustive study leaves out some topics and treats others in only a limited fashion. And it is no doubt churlish to criticize a work for not dealing with issues it never intended to address. But it may be useful to alert potential readers to what this book does not cover. Huguenots appear very little here, but the author promises a future study of Catholic-Protestant relations. Outside the Jansenist controversy, there is no sustained analysis of Church-State politics, a hot button issue, for example, during periods of Louis XIV's reign. Here too the author may have a separate study in mind. The book discusses interior missions, but foreign missions, an increasing concern of the French Church in the seventeenth century, receive no attention.[6] In general, despite an excellent discussion of the religious elite's spirituality, Bergin feels more comfortable discussing institutions than religious practice. We see relatively little on the religion of the people, except as a target for reformers' worries about saints' cults or confraternities. Some of these gaps reflect not so much the author's perspective as they do shortcomings in our current knowledge, which await further

research. Until then, Joseph Bergin's book will be the essential work for anyone interested in the seventeenth-century French Church.

NOTES

[1] *Cardinal Richelieu : Power and the Pursuit of Wealth* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); *Cardinal de La Rochefoucauld : Leadership and Reform in the French Church* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); *The Rise of Richelieu* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); *The Making of the French Episcopate, 1589-1611* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); and *Crown, Church and Episcopate under Louis XIV* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).

[2] Megan C. Armstrong, *The Politics of Piety: Franciscan Preachers during the Wars of Religion, 1560-1600* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 82.

[3] For a useful summary, see Amy E. Leonard, "Female Religious Orders," in *A Companion to the Reformation World*, edited by R. Po-chia Hsia (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 237-254.

[4] Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[5] Full disclosure: the author here cites my work generously.

[6] To be sure the literature on them is not as rich as it is on other topics, but we do have good studies of missions in Canada and some work on French missionaries in Brazil and the Ottoman Empire. See Dominique Deslandres, *Croire et faire croire: Les missions françaises au XVIIe siècle (1600-1650)* (Paris: Fayard, 2002); Andrea Daher, *Les singularités de la France équinoxiale: Histoire de la mission des pères capucins au Brésil* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002); Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la réforme catholique : Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1994).

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