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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 Susan Rosa, Northeastern Illinois University.

This book is a work of synthesis by a historian who is himself a master of the subject. As such, it will prove of inestimable value not only to scholars of the Roman Catholic Church in France during the long seventeenth century, but also to historians of religious reform, to generalists as an indispensable work of reference, and to anyone interested in an exemplary study of the intersection of social and cultural history in an early modern French context. Graduate students also will find it especially useful for its careful evaluation of the relative usefulness of different kinds of sources in different contexts, and for its delineation of gaps in our knowledge of this vast subject. The book is revisionist in approach, conceptualizing the period in question as one of “reformations,” and taking the perspective of the “longue durée.” As an intervention in the historiographical debate over the “successes or failures” of early modern religious reform movements, it argues that despite the resistance of “‘drag’ factors” (p. 240) and evidence of uneven results, the Catholic reformers in seventeenth-century France achieved a modest but solid success in the goals they set for themselves. At the same time, they developed strategies of catechizing that would later spread across Europe and would influence the character of enlightened Catholic reform in Spain, Italy, and Austria. Finally, the work is a marvel of rigorous contextualization, one that attempts to understand reform projects in their own terms, to be sensitive to local differences, and to do justice to the perspectives of contemporaries.

Consisting of a prologue and five parts, the book proposes an “internal” history of the French church (p. xiii), from the end of the Wars of Religion to the beginning of the Enlightenment. It is important to consider what Bergin means by this term, because it in no way implies a narrow institutional focus that neglects the social and cultural impacts of ecclesiastical reforms. It does mean, however, that Bergin plans separate treatments both of “politics and religion” (p. xiii) and of relations with the Protestants. This decision is understandable, though, for this reviewer at least, omitting discussion of the context of inter-confessional rivalry frequently gives the analysis a feeling of incompleteness. This is especially true in chapter thirteen, “The Form and Uses of Spirituality,” where a glance at Catholic polemical writing during the early part of the century, for example, would strengthen the argument regarding the appeal of humanist and Stoic ideals to courtiers and the nobility generally (p. 324). The same could be said for part five, where treatment of the polemical dimensions of Catholic scholarship is necessarily truncated. It must be said, however, that Bergin acknowledges this lacuna and, in doing so, encourages us to look forward to his next volume.

The five parts of the book are organized from the perspective of social history, proceeding, so to speak, from infrastructure to superstructure. More specifically, the book ranges from geographical organization and finances to an institutional renewal that involved the reordering and reeducation of personnel, as well as the remaking of the spaces of worship and the relations

between clergy and laity. It discusses the reform of cultural practices and its effects on lay religion. Finally, it turns to the actions of militant individuals and groups, namely confraternities, *dévots*, and Jansenists, who made essential contributions to the character of religious change in seventeenth-century France.

Of necessity, religious ideas, theological concepts, and “high” spirituality (p. 310) get relatively short shrift here in favor of a stronger emphasis on religious practice. There is no reason to quibble with such an approach, but intellectual historians will not be pleased to find themselves accused of practicing “the history of ideas” in the mode of A.O. Lovejoy, which entails bypassing the experiences of historical actors to concentrate instead on classic texts, unit ideas, and “long-term motifs” (p. 310). Here Bergin is merely setting up a straw man and, in the process, neglecting the significant insights into the imbrication of theological ideas, religious practices, and church policies that the new and rigorously contextualized intellectual history can provide. A good example of recent work in this style, which Bergin fails to cite, is Moshe Sluhovskiy’s study of the early modern Catholic struggle against antinomian and individualistic forms of spirituality and the hermeneutic challenge they presented to ecclesiastical authorities, as these authorities attempted to discern whether such encounters were divine or diabolical in origin.[1] The book includes an extensive discussion of the newly prestigious practice of exorcism, curiously barely mentioned by Bergin (p. 328). Solidly grounded in a local context (Loudun), Sluhovskiy’s analysis also reaches out to show how the reactions of clerical authorities to those events reflected an increasingly incoherent epistemology of the supernatural. More generally, he also shows how the struggle against antinomian spirituality on the ground helped to generate the more rationalized and naturalized theology that Bergin himself notes as characteristic of French Catholicism at the end of the seventeenth century (p. 331). Finally, Sluhovskiy also has interesting things to say about the gendered discourse of antinomian spirituality and the paradoxical ways in which it allowed women to compete with men as spiritual directors, a phenomenon discussed (chapter thirteen) but unaccounted for by Bergin.

Another difficulty that an intellectual and cultural approach would seem to be useful in resolving is the question of the importance of varying understandings of the economy of salvation in explaining the divergence of *dévo*t and Jansenist spiritualities during the course of the seventeenth century. I am not sure that I agree with Bergin that the attraction of Jansenism lay primarily in its moral rigor rather than in an Augustinian conception of grace and free will. The opposing styles of spirituality—for the *dévots* a sacrament-oriented, works-centered piety that veered toward mysticism and thus implied a possibility of union with the divine, and for the Jansenists an anti-sacramental theology and a sense of God’s distance and human corruption—seem to me to emanate from opposing views of how salvation was to be attained.[2] And I believe that this claim is confirmed by the continuing evidence of Augustinian preconceptions in the secularized Jansenism of the eighteenth century. None of this should suggest that Bergin should have written a book different from the one he wrote. Far from it! But it is to say that Bergin’s distinction between intellectual history and other kinds is not helpful in enriching our understanding of the religious history of seventeenth-century France.

These cavils aside, the book is superb. It has taken me to a new level of understanding of how the church actually *worked* in seventeenth-century France. It succeeds in humanizing the agents of Catholic reform in France without adopting an exclusively top-down perspective, and at the same time happily avoids the pitfalls of construing religious reform exclusively as social discipline. Sometimes the amount of detail makes it difficult to see the forest of the argument for the trees, and the last section (part five), which I believe interests Bergin less than the earlier ones, feels a bit hasty. Nevertheless, the work is a true service to scholarship. No library in any university should be without it.

NOTES

[1] Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Another useful work that traces the emergence of a rationalist theology from the clerical distrust of antinomian spirituality, though in a Protestant context, is Michael Heyd, *“Be Sober and Reasonable”: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, New York, and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1995).

[2] On this subject, see Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

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