

---

H-France Review Vol. 11 (September 2011), No. 210

Karen E. Carter, *Creating Catholics: Catechism and Primary Education in Early Modern France*. Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011. xiii + 314 pp. Bibliographical references and index. \$40.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-268-02304-1.

Review by Eric Nelson, Missouri State University.

*Creating Catholics* is a welcome addition to our understanding of the Catholic Reformation on the ground in rural France over the *longue durée*. It fills an important gap in our knowledge by focusing on two related but largely neglected topics, the teaching of catechism by parish priests and the instruction of rural children in *petites écoles* during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The study comes to two principle conclusions: that instruction at the local level had an important impact on the religious lives of the faithful and that the success of these initiatives was largely due to a process of compromise and adaptation between multiple constituencies—the state, bishops, parish priests, secular notables, lay communities, and parents. Rather than a top down or bottom up initiative, the story mapped out is that of shared interests in religious training for children that through time focused less on doctrines than on a code of behavior that both clerics and laity agreed was essential for the smooth functioning of society. It was shared interests and compromise between interest groups that allowed some Catholic Reformation ideas to integrate into rural religious life, while others that lacked such backing failed.

The book is split into two parts. Comprised of two chapters, part one focuses on catechisms and their uses in rural communities across France. The opening chapter, “The Science of Salvation,” traces the process by which catechisms evolved during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to focus on practical religious behavior over doctrine and on children up to their first communion rather than all believers. Carter convincingly argues that the long term simplification of catechisms reflected the efforts of bishops to adapt to meet demands from local communities. Chapter two, “The Catechetical Method,” focuses on how by the late seventeenth century an accepted method of teaching catechism emerged that prioritized the teaching of proper behavior. It drew on pedagogical principles of the period to emphasize three components: starting education young, emphasizing exact memorization of material, and reinforcing the virtue of conformity to standards of behavior both in church and in society more generally. Carter shows how weekly catechism classes became one of the chief tools for teaching social discipline, an outcome supported by parents, clergy, and secular authorities.

Part two shifts attention from catechism texts to education on the ground through an examination of visitation records and other documents from the dioceses of Reims, Chalons-sur-Marne, and Auxerre. In chapter three, “The Curé and the Catechism,” Carter shows how improvements in the quality and training of clergy during the seventeenth century bore fruit in the eighteenth as dedication to the teaching of catechism increased among the parish clergy. But even with committed parish clergy the original vision of bishops that all ages in the community would attend catechism classes never materialized as parish priests reached a compromise with their parishioners that parents would send their children to catechism class until their first communion, but after this rite of passage attendance was no longer required. Here again the interplay between community, parish clergy, and bishop reveals the active role of the laity in defining the role and nature of religious education in their communities.

Chapter four, "The Village Schoolmaster," explores the roles played by schoolmasters and schoolmistresses. Carter shows how the interests of the bishop, state, parish priest, and lay community are all reflected in the schoolmaster's functions. For bishops and the state schoolmasters were potentially powerful agents of Catholic reform and social discipline, for the parish priest the schoolmaster represented a valuable assistant helping to educate the youth and conduct church services, while for the lay community the schoolmaster was needed to teach reading and writing but also to improve religious education and police the moral health of the community. As Carter summarizes, "Schoolmasters and schoolmistresses can indeed be described as agents of the Catholic Reformation, but not necessarily as agents of either the church or the state. Instead, schoolteachers answered to several authorities and served several purposes in the communities in which they taught" (p. 139). That said, it was neither the church nor the state that set up or paid for *petites écoles*. Thus, the most important impetus for these schools were the parents and local authorities who hired, administered, and paid the salaries of schoolmasters.

In chapter five, "Boys and Girls at School," Carter provides important revisionist interpretations for several issues in the history of education in France. First, she convincingly shows that while the centralized state failed to take a lead in primary education until the nineteenth century, local communities had established primary schools by the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, nine in ten parishes in the dioceses covered by this study possessed *petites écoles* by the Revolution.

Thus a secular educational system founded and administered by local laymen rather than the church was well established in the countryside well before the nineteenth century. Second, she shows that despite regulations issued by Louis XIV and the bishops, most *petites écoles* in the countryside were co-educational, teaching the same curriculum to both boys and girls. Along with evidence of less-documented schoolmistresses teaching girls in *petites écoles*, these co-educational schools transform our understanding both of how many rural girls had access to education and the relative importance of female teaching congregations in the education of girls especially in rural areas. Aside from these revisionist insights, chapter five also reveals the importance that parents placed on primary education and the agency enjoyed by rural communities who financed the schools in organizing education to suit their requirements.

In the final chapter, "Learning to Read, Write and Recite," Carter assesses the effectiveness of the *petites écoles* in educating the rural youth. She rejects traditional assessments that focus on literacy rates as revealed through signatures on marriage contracts because increasing literacy was merely a byproduct of the *petites écoles* rather than their primary purpose. Instead, she assesses their success in teaching students how to be upstanding members of society and good Catholics. By all measures Catholics in the three dioceses under consideration participated regularly and willingly in the sacraments and church services, sent their children to catechism classes, and sought more clerical services in their communities so that they could better practice their faith. While these communities did not conform to every church decree, they did adhere to many principles at the heart of the Catholic Reform movement. This she attributes in part to primary education.

Aside from the impressive amount of research that underpins this book, Carter should be commended for its engaging style and organization. While focused on the role of catechisms and *petites écoles* in rural primary education, the study makes significant contributions to a number of broader fields. In terms of the Catholic Reformation, it provides new insight into how efforts to create better educated believers continued to develop and strengthen in local rural communities through the eighteenth century even as other aspects of Catholic renewal like the growth of new religious orders waned. Moreover, the significant number of co-educational *petites écoles* identified in this study changes our understanding of the educational opportunities available to girls during the *ancien régime*. Finally, the sheer number of *petites écoles* and the lay funding and control of these establishments during the *ancien régime* complicates the classic narrative of the secular state wresting control of education from the church during the nineteenth century.

A limitation of this study concerns how broadly its conclusions can be extrapolated. While the chapters concerned with catechisms draw on evidence from across France, the chapters on *petites écoles* focus on three dioceses all located in the north and east of the kingdom. One wonders how typical these dioceses were, or whether 'typical' is even an appropriate term in a kingdom with such varied regional traditions. Another limitation lay in its assessment of religious education primarily in terms of its social function in creating good Catholics and disciplined members of society. One wonders what impact these developments in education had on spirituality and spiritual lives of believers. One could see, for instance, how a fuller understanding of the sacraments, which was a priority in catechism classes, might deepen one's spiritual outlook. But these limitations are really outside the scope of what is already a broad ranging and original piece of research that transforms our understanding of primary education in France and the dynamic process that underpinned the dissemination of the Catholic Reformation into rural communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Eric Nelson  
Missouri State University  
[ericnelson@missouristate.edu](mailto:ericnelson@missouristate.edu)

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172