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Sarah A. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. x + 373 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-539418-4.

Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney.

This book offers biographies of three French nuns who played an important role in the wider world in the first half of the nineteenth century. Philippine Duchesne (1769-1852), of the Society of the Sacred Heart, evangelized in Missouri, part of the Louisiana territory that France had sold to the United States, then on an Indian reservation in Kansas. Emilie de Vialar (1797-1856) founded the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition, which established mission outposts around the Mediterranean and further afield. Finally, Anne-Marie Javouhey (1779-1851) set up the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny, active particularly in Senegal and Guiana, and one of the major French colonial orders. A set of chapters on each figure is bracketed by an introductory chapter on church, state and empire in the period covered and a comparative conclusion.

Sarah A. Curtis' thoughtful and very readable volume is impressively documented with material from the archives of the three religious orders in which the women worked, local archives in the regions from which they came, and other repositories in Paris, Nantes, Rome and Dakar. With almost sixty pages of notes and more than twenty-five pages of bibliography, the author has clearly worked with thoroughness on her subject.

That subject is a story that is religious, social and colonial history of high order, as well as the life histories of three fascinating women. Curtis' book, like J. P. Daughton's *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism* of 2006, writes religion back into the international history of France, and that of French colonial expansion, in all its dimensions. Such works rescue the history of the church and its clergy from the hagiographers, and also from many older accounts that provide tedious litanies of the priests and nuns, parishes and missions, converts and martyrdoms. Curtis presents her material in a straightforward manner, dispensing with a postmodernist approach, and any jargon-laced discussion about how her figures might have "performed" their identity, in favour of a more traditional biographical method.

The lives of these three women were remarkable. All grew up in provincial France, two in upper-middle class surroundings, and Javouhey as the daughter of prosperous peasants. They developed religious vocations early in life, though having to butt against their families' resistance to their becoming nuns (and, in the case of Duchesne, the disestablishment of religious orders under the Revolution). Each rejected the life of enclosure and contemplation that had been the lot of nuns in the old regime. Nothing foreshadowed their international careers, but each developed a calling to take Catholicism overseas to impious French settlers as much as to native populations. The three often had to battle the church hierarchy (the misogyny of male clerics comes through regularly in their chronicles) to reach their goals. Though Duchesne lived quietly in the wilds of North America, Vialar and Javouhey became the heads of large religious orders with convents, schools and clinics spread around the world.

Yet each of the women presents a different experience of religion and empire. The Grenoble-born Duchesne, forced to leave a contemplative order by the revolutionary closure of religious houses in 1792, set up her own informal community, then in 1818 moved to America, making her way up the Mississippi River from New Orleans to St. Louis and then to more remote locations. This area was no longer French territory, but Curtis points out the vital role played by the French church in American Catholicism, providing many of its bishops, priests and religious; until the early 1900s, the French church considered America missionary ground. While the presence of Duchesne and other French men and women maintained French influence after the end of formal empire, it also represented what Curtis justly calls a 'Catholic empire' of religious and humanitarian work.

Vialar set up a community in Gaillac, where she was born to a family of *rentiers*, then went to Algeria in 1835, only five years after the French conquest of Algiers, and organised the first house of *religieuses* there. Though successful, she came into conflict with an antipathetic bishop, who disliked her and preferred a more docile order of nuns. The bishop succeeded in expelling Vialar and her community from Algeria in 1842, but they simply moved on to Tunisia (not yet a French protectorate). From there Vialar's work radiated out around the Mediterranean. When her ship ran aground in Malta, for example, she used several months to set up a community in Valletta and recruit Maltese nuns for missions elsewhere. Soon the French and Maltese nuns, and others enrolled along the way, were working in Crete, Cyprus, Greece, and in outposts of the Ottoman Empire from Beirut and Jerusalem to Trebizond, and even in such distant mission stations as Moulmein in Burma and Fremantle in Western Australia. Curtis compares Vialar to a modern CEO, raising funds, attracting new members to the order, despatching nuns around the globe, negotiating with the papal and French colonial authorities, tirelessly travelling between the branches of her enterprise.

Javouhey is perhaps the best known of these three women. The Sisters of St Joseph, which originated in Cluny, sent women to Senegal, France's major West African trading and slaving outpost. Javouhey also set up communities in the French West Indies, Saint-Pierre et Miquelon and the Indian Ocean, but she is most associated with Guiana, the "green hell" that instigated and defeated many colonisation projects. Inspired by religious utopianism, Javouhey's was a settlement in Mana, located in cleared jungle far removed even from the chief town of Cayenne. The sisters, in 1827, took charge of a group of French *colons* with the hopes of founding an autonomous and largely self-sufficient agrarian community run according to Christian principles. When the French settlers drifted away, Javouhey brought in blacks, eventually numbering five hundred. Her little town, its neat quadrilateral of streets surrounded by the plots of would-be peasant farmers, floundered by 1847, defeated by tropical conditions, isolation and other hardships. Her religious order, however, endured.

Curtis is sympathetic to her three figures, and it is hard even for a non-believer, such as this reviewer, not to admire their personal courage in facing the rigours of distance, disease and loneliness, as well as their acumen and their dedication. Curtis paints a picture of women who, contrary to stereotypes about the expected passivity of nuns, were bold and persistent in carrying out their labours. She also argues that, despite the innate conservatism both of Catholicism and French politics in the early 1800s, the women held progressive views. Duchesne ministered to Native Americans and African Americans with no discrimination and little prejudice. Vialar, though never abjuring the church's intention to convert heathen, infidels and heretics, nevertheless professed respect for Islam and felt that her sisters should demonstrate Christianity by the examples of their own lives and humanitarian works rather than by efforts to seduce Muslims into becoming Christians. Immediate efforts at conversion, she judged, would be inopportune. She enjoyed, it seems, great respect from Muslims. Javouhey's opposition to slavery and her efforts to establish a multi-ethnic community in Mana aroused the ire of other colonists in Guiana and defenders of the slave trade in the Caribbean and Africa. (Duchesne's order, by contrast, owned slaves.) Javouhey sent a small group of African men to a seminary in France and they became the first ordained clergy from Africa. (Curtis devotes several fascinating pages to this incident and the sad fates of the men.)

There are, however, other sides to the story. Curtis points out that Catholic doctrines permitted any baptised Catholic to baptise another person (a sacrament generally reserved for a priest) *in extremis*, if that person were in danger of imminent death. The missionary orders often cared for infants and children in areas of high mortality, and they did not hesitate to baptize dying children, and did so without the knowledge of the children's families or their own political or religious superiors. Indeed, a nun in Tunis boasted that she had baptized a thousand dying infants in one year alone, and her case was not unique. The occasional practice of removing children from parents and local communities for education was, in effect, stealing children, and plans to transport French orphans to the colonies now seem morally questionable, at best. The nuns dispensed lessons that, not surprisingly, emphasized traditionalist Catholic doctrine and behaviour and that trained women for careers as mothers, wives or nuns. They had no doubts about the superiority of French civilisation and Catholic religion over the cultures of the people to whom they ministered.

The question of whether the women in Duchesne's, Vialar's and Javouhey's religious orders served as agents of French colonialism is a difficult one. Though Javouhey's mission field was different, Duchesne worked in a place that was no longer a French colony, and Vialar's efforts occurred largely in places that were not (or were not yet) regions of French political control. There were occasional clashes between the orders and the state, though in the pro-Christian decades of the early 1800s, the nuns generally benefitted from the financial, moral and political support of the governments in office, and Vialar, in particular, often deftly played off Paris against Rome when she was in conflict with the Catholic hierarchy. Curtis (like Daughton in his study of the later period of missionary activity) argues that the nuns had wider horizons and more spiritual goals than the planting of the French flag in foreign soil. Their colonial role in this period—between the loss of most of the first French overseas empire and the “new imperialism” of the later 1800s—was, however, significant. Curtis concludes that the nuns were “forerunners” and “enablers” of colonial expansion. They were, one might add, also agents of “soft” imperialism.

In addition to the personal, religious and colonial history in which these women were involved, there is much in Curtis' book about social history. Religious vocations provided an avenue of social mobility for women, opening possibilities for education, respectability, security, freedom from marriage and child-bearing, and positions of authority. Curtis shows how the religious leaders created and used personal and familial networks. Vialar spent much of her considerable family wealth on her projects and worked alongside her brother, a landowning settler in Algeria. Javouhey stood at the centre of a family network, with three of her sisters entering her order (and sometimes placed as heads of her houses), as did her niece; Javouhey's brother, though without taking vows, also worked with the Sisters of St Joseph. Curtis' material on the ferocious battles between the sisters and the hierarchy underlines the disputes that occurred within a church that, from outside, often appeared monolithic; the vitriol of priests denying the nuns the sacraments and questioning their very Christian commitment during conflicts between the fathers and the sisters is rather extraordinary. The history of the orders as presented by Curtis reveals, in general, the neglected role of women in colonialism and in the church. Her work shows conduits of migration and networks of religious activity stretching across continents under the aegis of religious orders. Javouhey's project for Mana was remarkably similar to other grand designs (such as Fourierist communes) for colonisation, proof of ways that the colonies offered opportunities for all sorts of grand designs. Curtis' book also adds to our knowledge of the “feminization of Catholicism” and to the contours of efforts to re-Catholicize France in the 1800s.

There is little to fault in this rich book and only a few areas on which one might wish for some further discussion. Curtis acknowledges in her conclusion that spirituality was a driving force for all of these women, but she devotes relatively little attention to questions of theology and spirituality. The book's brief is the life of the three figures at its heart, but sometimes one wants just a bit more information about the women who joined them and

about those to whom they ministered. Some 400 new active orders were founded in France between 1800 and 1880, and it would also be good to know more about other actions overseas. Curtis notes that in the 1870s, three-quarters of Catholic male and female missionaries in the world were French. Though Curtis' study is far from hagiography, or even an apologia for religious vocations, some readers might have a more negative feeling about the church, an institution that counted among the most reactionary in the nineteenth century. Curtis' point about Javouhey being one of the few Catholic dignitaries to actively oppose slavery shows that she is in some ways the exception rather than the rule.

The three women featured in *Civilizing Habits* are heroines to the church, Vialar and Duchesne canonised and Javouhey beatified. Their orders are still active, thriving outside Europe despite the freefall in religious vocations inside France. From a long-term religious perspective, they are success stories. What Curtis does is to restore them, in a nuanced and complex way, to the history of France and of the French empire.

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