

---

H-France Review Vol. 13 (November 2013), No. 180

Anne Cova and Bruno Dumons, eds., *Femmes, genre et catholicisme: Nouvelles recherches, nouveaux objets (France, XIXe-XXe siècles)*, in *Chrétiens et Sociétés*, Documents et Mémoires, no. 17. Lyon: Equipe Religions, Sociétés et Acculturation du Laboratoire de Recherche Historique Rhône-Alpes, 2012. 211 pp. 20.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-537928-9-8.

Review by Linda L. Clark, Millersville University of Pennsylvania.

The essays in this informative volume well reflect the surge of interest in the activities of French Catholic women since the publication in 1984 of Claude Langlois's *Le Catholicisme au féminin*, cited by many contributors to this book.[1] Langlois drew attention to the founding of more than 400 women's religious orders during the century after the Revolution and to the ensuing three to two ratio of women to men in active *congrégations*. In the volume reviewed here, lay women figure more prominently than *religieuses* and the variety in their activities is highlighted. Editor Bruno Dumons provides a valuable introductory essay focused on themes treated in recent scholarly works, and he places the ten individual essays within that historiographical framework. Anglo-American readers may find his introduction particularly useful because he cites many articles in collections or journals not necessarily familiar to non-French researchers.

The editors' presentation of the individual essays is thematic rather than chronological and, as the list below indicates, the essays are paired under five headings concerning political spaces, spirituality, gender relations, feminism, and nuns' missionary work. Part one, "L'espace du politique," opens with an essay on the reform efforts of the Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs (1902-1914). The four essays anchored in the nineteenth century come later. One virtue of the thematic organization is to draw readers quickly into a consideration of newer areas of Catholic women's action and the ways in which Catholic women justified engaging in areas not traditionally considered to be spaces for women's activity. Like non-Catholic contemporaries, they asserted that feminine and maternal sensibilities could contribute to the solving of social problems, as editor Anne Cova has noted in her previous work on this theme, often termed "maternalism." [2]

The most traditional of the five organizing themes is the second, "spiritualité." Introducing his case study of a mystic, Dominique-Marie Dauzet notes that despite an array of publications on such famous figures as Thérèse de Lisieux, most work on women mystics concerns individuals and that a synthesis remains to be done. When the aging Soeur Sainte-Cécile Hébert (1869-1944) had to withdraw from previous activities, she turned inward but routinely reported her experiences with divine voices to her spiritual advisor. That relationship, which Dauzet terms "coaching," illustrates the contributors' focus on gender relations throughout the volume. In this case, abbé Bastard evaluated the nun's oral and written reports, pronounced her sane, and encouraged her conviction that her prayers could ease the suffering of souls in purgatory. Dauzet's conclusion underscores a paradox of *la vie mystique*: the impossibility of having this "expérience profonde sans la partager" (p. 66).

Carol Harrison presents a spiritual lay woman, Pauline Craven née La Ferronays (1808-1891), whose *Le Récit d'une soeur, souvenirs de famille* (1866) utilized the letters and private journals of her deceased sisters and brother to portray their exemplary Christian lives. The piety of these lay women was traditional

but, Harrison argues, Craven's representation was a more modern effort to use writing to define a self, "*un moi*," in the sense discussed by Philippe Lejeune in his studies of autobiographical texts.[3] Significantly, men in the family objected to Craven's publicizing details about private lives. Within a year of publication, the book sold more than 10,000 copies in twelve editions.[4] Hundreds of readers wrote to Craven, many of them reacting to the virtuous women as though they were characters in a novel and asking for more revelations about them. Indeed, Harrison's essay is drawn from her forthcoming book, *Romantic Catholics*. [5]

Part five, "Religieuses et mission," is also anchored in the nineteenth century. Alexandrine De La Taille discusses the case of Anna du Rosier (b. 1806), a *religieuse* from a noble family in Poitou, whose missionary work unfolded on three continents: educational and charitable efforts in Turin where she was known as a "fanatique de la Vierge" (p. 167), until forced to leave by revolutionaries in 1848; a brief tour as a *visiteuse* of her order's North American installations; and then her final decades in Santiago, Chile. There she opened a *pensionnat* with a French curriculum soon prized by local elites, and it became the model for sister institutions elsewhere in South America. Sarah Curtis, who has also studied nuns' work as educators,[6] here focuses instead on their role in clandestine baptisms, particularly in China and the Ottoman Empire. Missionary nuns belonging to the Filles de la Charité and the Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de l'Apparition, like those in other orders, provided health care, especially to poor families, and when they visited homes and found children near death they might baptize their charges, a practice accepted by the Catholic hierarchy if no priest was available. Chinese officials were less troubled by this activity than were Muslim officials in the Ottoman Empire, which forbade conversions. French administrators in North Africa also discouraged conversions. For China there is further evidence of nuns using their order's resources to "buy" children whom they could convert, and some parents who consented to nuns' treatment of a dying child did not know that a baptism occurred. The nuns used the rationale that one's fate in heaven counted for more than earthly legalities.

Whereas nuns often functioned in spaces where men might not enter, Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée seeks evidence of nineteenth-century philanthropic men's and women's cooperation, even as they frequently operated in gendered spaces. Much recent scholarship has highlighted women's action in philanthropy, in France as well as elsewhere,[7] but Brejon de Lavergnée also underscores an increase in masculine philanthropy in the wake of the Revolution.[8] Philanthropy might be a family undertaking, but not all roles were interchangeable. Thus mothers would introduce daughters and fathers would introduce sons to charitable work. Visiting the poor was common but done in keeping with societal norms: men would visit single men, women would visit young single women; women would visit family dwellings, men would visit slums. *Patronages* for children mirrored the separation of the sexes in urban schools.

The two essays on "L'espace du politique" in part one take Catholic women into less traditional activity, as do those on Catholic feminism and another on women's recent claiming of a liturgical role. In Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel's study of the reform efforts of the women and men in the Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs (1902-1914), the subject of her recent book,[9] there is again emphasis on cooperation between the sexes, as exemplified by the activities of LSA founder Henriette Brunhes and her husband. Whereas Brejon de Lavergnée notes that the accumulation of statistical data to support desired reforms tended to be a masculine undertaking in mid-nineteenth-century philanthropies, by 1900 women were involved as well in the "social science" of compiling data and writing reports. The Catholics in the LSA also sought support from republican quarters and non-Catholics as they pushed their agenda for promoting Sunday as a day of rest and securing fair pay for workers. By contrast, the political activity of the Ligue Patriotique des Françaises (LPDF) did not aim for inclusiveness. Magali Della Sudda presents the LPDF as an organization that helped invent "the modern political woman," a theme treated in her *La Citoyenneté avant le vote*. [10] Like Odile Sarti [11] she links the LPDF origins to the mobilization on the political Right in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair and to the Right's continued resistance to republican laicizing policies, notably the Associations law of 1901 and separation of church and state in

1905. The Jesuit advisor of Jacques Piou, the founder of Action Libérale Populaire, provided the LPDF with tactical advice, with the approval of the archbishop of Paris. Unlike the various contemporary pro-republican feminist groups which supported women's suffrage, the much larger LPDF did not do so before 1914, but it definitely assumed that women had a role to play in politics, through their influence on husbands and children. The cooperation with Catholic men active in politics signified what Della Sudda terms the model of Catholic *conjugalisme*, in contrast to republican individualism. The husband and wife were assumed to act as a unit, and the LPDF objected that women's suffrage could divide the family unit.

Florence Rochefort's essay on the the review *La Femme contemporaine*, launched around the same time as the LSA and LPDF, opens part four on "Catholic feminism." The review was published in Besançon by Abbé Jean Lagardère between 1903 and 1914. Rochefort brings her expertise on the history of French feminism[12] to a close reading of the journal, looking for nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions in Catholic feminism. Lagardère and his early collaborators presented feminism as an aspect of the widening array of women's activities in the new century, taking note of Marie Maugeret's *fémminisme chrétien* and various Catholic reform groups. But like other Catholic contemporaries, Lagardère also drew distinctions between Catholic feminism and an undesirable feminism: "notre féminisme rationnel, social et chrétien," the other "impulsive, individualiste et athée" (p. 126). Although he once considered that women's suffrage might be acceptable, Lagardère preferred a *vote familial* to favor fathers of large families. As Pope Pius X imposed new limits on advocacy of reform in the Catholic world, Lagardère placed greater emphasis on women's social mission.

Finally, two essays in the pairings on "Genre" and "Féminisme" turn to those Catholic women and men of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who have worked to extend women's participation in the church and to modify the hierarchy's view on women. Mathilde Dubusset traces the efforts of the Franco-Belgian group Femmes et Hommes en Eglise (FHE), founded in 1971 and comprised of lay and clerical members. Emerging in the aftermath of Vatican II and coinciding with the second wave of French feminism, the FHE sought to realize the fundamental equality of the sexes seen in Christian scripture. Women authored many of the articles in the FHE *Bulletin* and drew attention to the church's "masculine" and sexist attitudes and practices (p. 147). In 1982, three women members (two of them trained in theology) published a book advocating the ordination of women, something firmly rejected by Pope John Paul II. Some members criticized the church's stance on contraception. Since 2011, the FHE has been folded into a new association, Femmes et Hommes Egalité, Droits et Libertés dans les Eglises et la Société. Like Dubusset, sociologist Céline Béraud highlights contestation among contemporary Catholics over women's roles, here presenting two recent controversies about women's involvement in liturgy. As the number of priests has declined, women have increasingly assumed supporting roles in the functioning of local churches, the ratio of lay women's participation to that of men now reaching nine to one (p. 107). As *chargées de mission* authorized by bishops, women are also numerous as chaplains (*aumôniers*) in schools and hospitals. In this context many Catholic women and men were outraged when the Archbishop of Paris commented in 2008 that the problem with women in certain church functions was not a matter of their *jupe*, but their *tête*. Their ensuing protests included the founding of the Comité de la Jupe, whose women leaders presented its goals as moderate and not in support of the ordination of women. The Conférence des Baptisé-e-s de France, founded in 2009, emerged as public attention turned to another controversy, involving two sisters in Bayonne, aged nine and ten, who previously had helped with altar service but were excluded by a new priest, despite a bishop's prior approval. Thus the efforts of Catholic reformers committed to gender equality continue.

The essays in *Femmes, genre et catholicisme* well illustrate some of the topics engaging contemporary scholars in several academic fields in Europe and the Americas. Although there is no concluding essay to provide a synthesis, readers can return to Dumons's introduction for reminders about the links between the topics addressed and to note agendas for future research.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Bruno Dumons, "Introduction"

Part 1: L'espace du politique

Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, "La consommation, un mode d'entrée en politique pour des femmes catholiques? La Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs (1902-1914)"

Magali Della Sudda, "L'invention de la femme politique moderne. La LPDF, les élections, la République"

Part II: Une spiritualité au féminin

Dominique-Marie Dautet, "Mystique féminine, 'coaching' masculin. La direction de conscience en débat"

Carol E. Harrison, "La Sainte Famille de Pauline Craven. Subjectivité et sainteté féminine: 'Le Récit d'une sœur'"

Part III: Le genre en question

Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, "Le genre du philanthrope. Pour une histoire sexuée de l'assistance au XIXe siècle"

Céline Béraud, "Genre, liturgie et contestation dans le catholicisme français"

Part IV: Le féminisme catholique

Florence Rochefort, "La revue *La Femme contemporaine*, quel féminisme catholique?"

Part V: Religieuses et mission

Alexandrine De La Taille, "Anna du Rosier. Le legs sur trois continents d'une religieuse du Sacré-Cœur"

Sarah A. Curtis, "'Civiliser' et convertir au XIXe siècle. Les baptêmes clandestins et les religieuses missionnaires"

## NOTES

[1] Claude Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au féminin: Les Congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1984).

[2] Anne Cova, *Maternité et droits des femmes en France (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: Anthropos-Economica, 1997) and "*Au service de l'Eglise, de la patrie et de la famille*": *Femmes catholiques et maternité sous la Troisième République* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008); Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds. *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

[3] Philippe Lejeune, *Le Moi des demoiselles: Enquête sur le journal de jeunes fille* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

[4] The catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France indicates that a 97th edition appeared

in 1930.

[5] Carol E. Harrison, *Romantic Catholics: Faith and France's Postrevolutionary Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

[6] Sarah A. Curtis, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000) and *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[7] For example, Christine Adams, *Poverty, Charity, and Motherhood: Maternal Societies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999); Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[8] Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul au XIXe siècle. Un fleuron du catholicisme social* (Paris: Cerf, 2008).

[9] Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, *Consommateurs engagés à la Belle Epoque: La Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2012).

[10] Magali Della Sudda, *La Citoyenneté avant le vote* (Paris: Belin, 2013).

[11] Odile Sarti, *The Ligue patriotique des Françaises (1902-1933): A Feminine Response to the French Secularization of Society* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

[12] Laurence Klejman and Florence Rochefort, *L'Egalité en marche: Le féminisme sous la Troisième République* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1989).

Linda L. Clark  
Millersville University of Pennsylvania  
[Linda.L.Clark@Millersville.edu](mailto:Linda.L.Clark@Millersville.edu)

Copyright © 2013 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