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Carol E. Harrison, *Romantic Catholics: France's Postrevolutionary Generation in Search of a Modern Faith*. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2014. ix + 328 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl) ISBN 978-0-8014-5245-1.

Review by Joseph F. Byrnes, Oklahoma State University.

In *Romantic Catholics* we find a cohort, or coterie, of Catholics who were sensitive, literate, and, once matured or stabilized as practicing Catholics, interconnected. They were mostly non-monarchist and had problems with the French bishops who maintained an old-regime hierarchical style. After introducing this artful but amorphous concept of “romantic Catholic” by evoking Alfred de Musset’s 1836 autobiographical novel, *Confession of a Child of a Century*, Harrison writes, “The Catholic men and women of this book shared with Musset a generational sensibility that they directed to the project of reimagining their Catholic faith” (p. 2). Here we find Maurice de Guérin, Charles de Montalembert, and Frédéric Ozanam; Léopoldine Hugo, Pauline de la Ferronnays (married name, Craven), and Victorine Monriot. Of course, the sun by whose light they found their way to a greater or lesser degree was the Breton priest Hugues Félicité Robert de Lamennais, until he renounced Catholicism, the light of his faith and influence extinguished. Across the book we find elegant writing, exciting narrative, and a colorful (for all their earnest religiosity) cast of characters. I do have two problems with it though—the title and the subtitle—but I save this discussion for the latter part of this review.

“First Communion,” chapter one, is a presentation of the emotions and circumstances of the first communions of Victor Hugo’s daughter and the heroine of a novel for young women by Victorine Monriot, along with experiences from the life of Pauline Craven. This moment in a young person’s life has been a significant social as well as personal event down to the present day. “Society as it appeared in idealized microcosm in the first-communion ceremony, was simultaneously egalitarian, affectionate, and deferential, and it was, above all, united in a common Christian purpose” (p. 49). All of this is engagingly illustrated with a presentation of the correspondence of Léopoldine Hugo, Monriot’s Marguerite character and her mother in *Le Journal de Marguerite*, and Pauline Craven’s family. In so doing, Harrison makes available a repertoire of French historiography on the status of young women in the earlier nineteenth century, and vital work on the social meaning of First Communion—on their own, extremely valuable contributions to cultural history. But should we go so far as to say that “the stories of girls at the communion altar suggested that the Eucharist retained a power...that located Catholic ritual—and Catholic women—at the foundation of social order?” (p. 65).

“The Education of Maurice de Guérin,” chapter two, presents a young aristocratic man who counterbalances the women of chapter one, and whose whose *bildung* included time at the Collège Stanislas (a remarkable combination of defensive, sensitive monarchistic Catholicism and a sensible creativity), and participation in the open free-believing—if not free-thinking!—community of Félicité de Lamennais at his La Chênaie residence, near the Breton coast (about which more presently). But the young man’s religion was fashioned by poetic sensibility, rather than by religion-political engagements. Here he provides a good lead-in to what I consider a high point of Harrison’s narrative-explanation of the religious dilemmas facing the theoretically as well as personally engaged members of her cohort.

In “The Dilemmas of Obedience: Charles de Montalembert, Catholic Citizen,” Montalembert is presented as the “leader of France’s Catholic party” (p.103), yes, but mainly in relationship—and a complex relationship it is—with two other major figures, Félicité de Lamennais and Charles Lacordaire. Lamennais was the foundation figure here, a priest-intellectual of the highest order who attempted to bring Catholicism up front and center in French culture for a new era. Lacordaire was an agnostic who returned to the faith of his childhood after brilliant studies as a lawyer. By the end of it all, Lamennais had renounced Catholicism for agnosticism, Montalembert has worked out his own compromise with papal Catholicism, and Lacordaire, who had become a priest instrumental in the revival of the Dominicans in France, sacrificed his intellectual convictions to a mystical obedience. Integral to this chapter are Harrison’s sources on male friendship (p. 117 n. 43); she never oversimplifies the complexities of the individual personalities, and works gracefully around the spiritual friendship of the three men, expressed in otherwise erotic language by Lacordaire especially. She is also fortunate to have at her disposal the correspondence of all three, edited by Louis Le Guillou, as well as Le Guillou’s major studies of Lamennais.[1]

Lamennais wanted to establish a Catholic political theology that would be acceptable to all. Vincent Viaene, quoted by Harrison, puts it this way: “Liberal Catholicism was not a Catholic form of liberalism, nor some kind of cross between liberalism and Catholicism, but a variation of political Catholicism” (quoted in n. 25 p. 112). In fact, the much younger Lacordaire saw Lamennais as finishing and correcting Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Montalembert shared Lacordaire’s enthusiasm, as the two of them joined forces with Lamennais to promote this Catholic political theology built on individual freedom. The vehicle for these ideas was the newspaper they established, *L’Avenir*, with a readership of 1,200 at its height. This all goes together in a complex story of individual originality, sublimated love, and a reform attempt appreciated mostly by intellectually engaged church people, lay and clerical. *L’Avenir* did not promote religious freedom for everyone so much as the opportunities an open state could provide Catholicism. Lamennais, Montalembert and Lacordaire still had to deal with Pope Gregory XVI, and so important was he to them that they forced his hand. They headed for Rome to secure his approval of their enterprise, a church unencumbered by earlier church-government assumptions. Only in stages did the opposite of papal approval emerge. In his encyclical *Mirari vos* of August 1832, the pope did not cite Lamennais, but he wrote that it was “absurd and injurious to propose... ‘restoration and regeneration’ for [the church] as though necessary for her safety and growth, as if she could be considered subject to defect” (quoted on p. 133). Lamennais said nothing, but was soon preparing his *Paroles d’un croyant*, rejecting any full connection between religion and politics; Lacordaire simply submitted, and Montalembert, hesitating as long as he could, finally gave in.

Pauline Craven receives full attention in chapter four. Her *Récit d’une sœur* was the story of herself and her sister, a drama of marriage, social position, and preparation for death. Perhaps nothing in the *Récit* was more dramatic—I would like to say, operatic—than the romance and marriage of her brother Albert and Alexandrine d’Alopeus, a Lutheran whose father had been in the Russian diplomatic service.

“As the Abbé Gerbet, Lamennais’s onetime friend and collaborator, says [the nuptial] Mass at midnight, Alexandrine kneels beside her husband’s bed and holds his hand; Albert, however, releases her, telling her that she should ‘belong only to God.’ Their joint communion—her first, quite possibly his last—marks both the completion and the rupture of their marriage, and they share a single communion wafer. Albert dies in Alexandrine’s arms, surrounded by family, listening to a priest offering him final absolution, and with the hope of eternal reunion” (Quoted on p. 158).

A scene worthy of Victor Hugo! The story continues with Alexandrine’s widowhood and Eugénie de la Ferronnays’s marriage to Albert de Mun, the royalist social reformer. Others figure in the tale in their own way: the priest Alphonse de Ratisbonne, convert from Judaism, and a convert from Orthodoxy, Natalie Narishkin—whose life as a Daughter of Charity was the subject of a biography decades later. Craven’s writing received high praise for turning the drama of one family into literature that could be appreciated by many, inspiring and enhancing their own spiritual lives. Both the tolerant Bishop Félix

Dupanloup and the intransigent lay Catholic Louis Veillot admired her work. Discussion there was, however, as to the appropriateness of using intimate family stories, on one hand, and taking narrative liberties on the other (the elements of the communion and death scene quoted just above took place over several days). Harrison concludes that “there is very little of the supernatural in their sanctity, which emerges from the situations of women’s daily lives. Natural human emotions such as grief and love are the foundations of their holiness. Exploring those emotions and reaching ever-greater levels of self-understanding is the basis of their devotional practice” (p. 170). Interestingly, this type of spiritual self-revelation bears resemblance to an ultimately world-famous book, *Histoire d’une âme*, the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. They are worth comparing, though generations of readers have found much more than “little of the supernatural” in the autobiography of St. Thérèse.

For a personality of church-wide appeal across the generations to compare to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the recently beatified Frédéric Ozanam serves best, both on his own and in his marriage to Amélie Soulacroix, all of this the subject of chapter five. At this writing, the most recent number of the *Revue d’histoire de l’Église de France* is totally given over to Ozanam, with articles gathered under the sub headings *Université, Catholicité, Intimité* (Amélie is here), and *Éternité*. A major contributor to the number is Gérard Cholvy, whose recent major biography is duly noted by Harrison.[2] Ozanam was a university student in law and literature, who finally did his doctoral dissertation on Dante. He was the veritable founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, which grew from a group of five close friends to a charitable organization of thousands of members.

Ozanam’s own idea of a Catholic apostolate changed and grew from a mission founded on male friendship to a wider open charitable organization. Criticizing a patronizing philanthropic model, he sustained all practical efforts. But then along came Amélie. Ozanam’s courtship and marriage enabled him to progress beyond the model of elite young men for whom female love would be a detriment to pure charity. His view of his friends changed as he saw the possibilities for Christian living that his love relationship revealed to him. “He and his Vincentian friends had been pursuing parallel, autonomous paths, but he and Amélie were following interlaced trajectories” (p. 213). Unlike Montalembert, Ozanam did not see any significant value in a church-state political confrontation over education. He wanted to move freely in the French university in order to promote his own religious educational and social values. He wrote, “I stand with the Church and the University both, and I have not hesitated to dedicate to them my life, which will have been well lived if I honor God and serve the state. I want to reconcile these duties...[and] I think I have partially accomplished that in public education by standing in front of an audience of all faiths and parties and simply professing Christian learning” (quoted on p. 220).

Good Frédéric Ozanam still had to deal with Pius IX, whose youthful dynamism and early theological and political openness were to evolve into a grumpy disengagement from the political freedoms promoted in Italy and elsewhere. He believed that Pius was the pope of democracy (later explicitly condemned in the Syllabus of Errors). He thought that just as discerning popes in the Middle Ages saw how a dynamic Western Christian society could be built on a foundation of barbarian society, Pius could see how a new Christian society should be built on democracy! “Let us go over to the barbarians and follow Pius IX,” he said (quoted on p. 224). He died in 1853, well before the pope, once apparently open to new ideas and systems, moved to the theological and political ways that so constrained Montalembert and the others, i.e., democracy taken to be, in effect, the work of barbarians in the *worst* sense of the word. Ozanam continued his medieval studies, hoping, relative to his own era, that the Church could accomplish for the working class what it had accomplished for the barbarians.

The problems of *Romantic Catholics* as I see them are most clearly in evidence at the beginning (Introduction) and the end (chapter six and the Epilogue) of the book. Though doing no harm to the integrity of any individual numbered chapters, they add up, under the headings “romantic,” “generation,” and “modern.” From the start, the label “romantic Catholics” is used with numbing frequency, the author protesting too much, I believe. We constantly get the “like” phrase, as in “women

like Pauline de la Ferronnays [Craven],” “men like Charles de Montalembert.” What is a fault of many authors, historians or otherwise, is outsized here. The implication is that a fair-sized segment of the engaged Catholic population is made up of these people. Are readers to come up with these mysterious populations of folk who are “like” the protagonists? We might come up with a few more members of an elite, but we only have only the author’s word that they are out there in some numbers.

In spite of the curious imprecision of the words “romantic,” “romanticism,” and “the romanticisms,” we have a corpus of history, literature, and criticism that uses one or another of the terms to explain and narrate a new era of artistic sensibility. But how helpful is this? Nicholas Riasanovsky wrote some years ago:

“There is an enormous scholarly literature on the nature and definition romanticism. Nor does it exhibit consensus. In fact, some specialists denied the legitimacy of the generic term *romanticism*, arguing that one could effectively examine only different romanticisms.... The meaning has ranged from complex schemes with many variables to a highly selective listing of what the authors considered to be the essential and intrinsic elements of romanticism.” [3]

Studies of romanticism, and this book notes an appropriate number of sources, should stay close to the subject matter and techniques of the authors (or artists or musicians) at issue, such that “romanticism” can be jettisoned as so much scaffolding. Harrison’s scaffolding is, I am afraid, never removed; it stays on as structure. Even so, she maneuvers across the erstwhile medievalism, or nostalgia for the middle ages, of Catholic and secular writers—Victor Hugo figures here—who found in the cultural productions across those hundreds of years, a vital and creative French civilization. She also takes on the historian Jules Michelet in the middle of her Introduction, with his antagonism to Catholicism and his oversimplification/misinterpretation of the role of women in religious and cultural life. And she reckons with the notion that religious engagement and practice in France were primarily a female enterprise and gave nineteenth-century French Catholicism a feminine cast—a stereotype of emotional, yea even sappy, piety. But those generic romantic Catholics seem always on call: “His [Ozanam’s] fellow romantic Catholics of the post-revolutionary generation, however, had to confront the tension between their aspirations for a modern Catholicism and the increasing intransigence of the Roman Church” (pp. 236-237).

Chapter six is entitled “A Free Church in a Free State: the Roman Question.” Members of the group had gone ultramontane with the early Félicité de Lamennais, in the name of greater freedom for Catholic political participation. Ultimately the greatest challenge was Pius IX with his 1864 Syllabus of Errors and 1870 declaration of papal infallibility. The national politics of Pius was an affront to hopes for the fulfillment of Italian aspirations—e Risorgimento—and was accompanied by the effusive promotion of the sacredness of the pope, folk piety, and humility of the laity in a highly clericalized Catholic church. Montalembert, who lived until 1870, remained a papal loyalist against everything his reason and his heart told him. He had done it many years before when the goals of the Lamennais entourage were completely thwarted, and he did it again, in the face of an impending declaration of papal infallibility which, he thought, made minimal sense. He had been very clear years before that he wanted a free church in a free state, but now that was all gone: “In his final week, a private letter he wrote denouncing ‘Roman absolutism’ was leaked and published; in it he referred to infallibility as an ‘idol’ erected in the Vatican. Two days before his death, he recorded in his journal his fear that “having lost the Orient a thousand years ago and half of the West 300 years ago, [the church is] going to lose the half that remains” (p. 272). Montalembert died in May and papal infallibility was declared in July. But Craven and a few devout women of the Third Republic soldiered on; we are not always clear as to whether they felt more thwarted by the church or by the republic. Harrison adds on two more characters, a fictional heroine of Victorine Monniot and, yes, the Empress Eugénie, both of them, of course, belonging to the Second Empire. Monniot’s Sister Marie Elizabeth was, pre-vows, a full human personality, but became now a victim soul. And the Empress Eugénie was victimized by antagonists to the Second Empire and

by her later interpreters, who considered her religious devotion a cause of the failure of the Second Empire.

Can we say that these people are a “postrevolutionary generation” that is “in search of a modern faith”? Well, it is true that there exists a vaguely canonized use of “generation” based on Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge; and Harrison’s mentor, Robert Gildea, operationalized “generation” usefully in his *Children of the French Revolution, 1789-1914* (oddly enough, not cited by Harrison).^[4] I believe, however, that what we have here is a cohort or a coterie—my terminology at the beginning of this review. Following Merriam-Webster, take “cohort” to be “a group of individuals having a statistical factor (such as age or class membership) in common in a demographic study”; and take “coterie” to be “an intimate and often exclusive group of persons with a unifying common interest or purpose.” Here the group members have a statistical factor in common, though this is not a demographical study, and they have a common interest or purpose, although intimacy did not bind together the entire case of characters, but only segments thereof. In sum, it was a cross between a cohort and a coterie. “Postrevolutionary”? Well, these people were also post-Napoleon and post-Restoration; for that matter, *all* generations are postrevolutionary, as Gildea would have it (at least through 1914). “Modern faith” can, of course, mean anything, and attempts to explain it are likely to be sabotaged by the problem of discerning anyone’s faith and spirituality. Harrison seems to be talking about an implicit ecclesiology, i.e., how did these people understand the church? And “modern” faith here is the political theology of the ultramontanists, who here believed that features of the Catholicism they were born into were time-bound to the old regime. They wanted a purer Catholicism, a New Testament and patristic Catholicism: not so modern, because these were goals earnestly promoted *from 1790 on* by the constitutional priests and bishops. Unfortunately, members of the cohort/coterie presented in *Romantic Catholics* would never have built on this, in effect, Gallican reform.^[5] Ultramontanism was the downfall of them all.

NOTES

[1] Note especially Félicité de Lamennais, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Louis Le Guillou, 9 vols. (Paris : Armand Colin, 1971-1991) and *Les Lamennais : Deux frères, deux destins* (Paris : Éditions de l’Atelier, 1990). Le Guillou has also edited the correspondence of Montalembert and Lacordaire: *Lacordaire-Montalembert Correspondance inédite, 1830-1861* (Paris: Cerf, 1989).

[2] *Revue d’histoire de l’Église de France* 100 (janvier-juin 2014), and see Gérard Cholvy, *Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853) : L’engagement d’un intellectuel catholique au XIXe siècle* (Paris : Fayard, 2003).

[3] Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *The Emergence of Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69-70. The classic attempt to present a synthesis of Romanticism is Georges Gusdorf, *Fondements du savoir romantique* (Paris: Payot, 1982).

[4] See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1936), and especially “The Problem of Generations,” in *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952). Robert Gildea, *Children of the French Revolution, 1799-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[5] Rodney Dean’s new study of the origins of the Constitutional Church is essential here. *L’Assemblée constituante et la réforme ecclésiastique, 1790: La Constitution Civile du Clergé du 12 juillet et le serment ecclésiastique du 27 novembre* (Paris: chez Picard, 2014). See also Joseph F. Byrnes, *Priests of the French Revolution: Saints and Renegades in a New Political Era* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

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