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Anita Rasi May, *Patriot Priests: French Catholic Clergy and National Identity in World War I*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. x + 162 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8061-5908-9.

Review by Andrew Orr, Kansas State University.

Anita Rasi May's *Patriot Priests: French Catholic Clergy and National Identity in World War I* is a fascinating study of the experiences of French Catholic priests, as well as seminarians and members of Catholic religious orders, who served in the French Army during World War I. May's deep knowledge of her subject comes out in her skillful use of primary sources written by clergy members during the war. She succeeds in showing both the diversity of clergy members' hopes and the evolution of their views over time. Drawing heavily on clergy members' wartime letters and diaries, she argues that their experiences serving in the French Army, including in combat roles, helped to restore religious peace in France following the disestablishment crisis and was critical to the reintegration of the Catholic Church and its clergy into French social and political life.

There is a substantial literature on religion and war, including on Christian clergy and the world wars, but most of it has focused either on the role of the churches and clergy on the home front or on military chaplains. The literature on chaplains has explored the theological challenges faced by Christian ministers called upon to provide spiritual comfort for soldiers and a measure of religious sanction for the war effort.^[1] May's book takes a very different approach and one of her most remarkable findings was the relative ease with which priests accepted military service as soldiers, including combat roles. *Patriot Priests* also adds to a growing body of literature epitomized by Martha Hanna's works on mobilized intellectuals and letter-writing between soldiers and their families that erodes the dividing line between the home front and the battle front.^[2]

May's approach is heavily grounded in her sources. When possible, she allows the priests to speak for themselves by drawing on their diaries and letters, which she supplements with material published in the Catholic press. She skillfully exploits her rich primary sources to paint a picture of individual men struggling to come to grips with the reality of total war. She also depicts her subjects as a class that searched for a form of meaning and found it, though not in the way they expected, from their wartime experiences.

In *Patriot Priests*, May argues that the wartime experiences of mobilized priests, seminarians, and members of religious orders restored the social connections between Catholic clergy and their fellow French citizens. She contends that the Dreyfus Affair and the anticlerical reaction that followed had broken many of those bonds, leaving the Catholic Church's representatives increasingly isolated from much of French society. Through their extended wartime service, they proved their patriotism and loyalty to France, which overcame some anticlericals' belief that the French priests hated the Third Republic more than they loved France. While in the army, they formed strong bonds with their fellow soldiers, even those who were not believing or practicing Catholics. By showing a willingness to serve

others, even if they did not share their faith, Catholic clergymen successfully reintegrated themselves into larger French society.

Chapter one makes the case that the pre-1914 Third Republic was aggressively anticlerical. It emphasizes the exile of many priests and members of religious orders and the ongoing conflict over Church property and the place of the Catholic Church in French public life. It highlights priests' and seminarians' struggle to find a way to fit into French society while exercising their vocation.

Chapter two explores one of the great novelties of religious military history, the French Republic's mobilization of priests and members of religious orders during the First World War. May shows that the mobilization was a direct result of anticlerical influence on military laws, which removed seminarians' draft exemptions and meant that most younger priests were reservists in 1914. Surprisingly, although military service was largely incompatible with canon law, the Catholic Church not only tolerated the mobilization orders, but even provided official sanction by granting a dispensation exempting priests and members of religious orders from the relevant parts of canon law, effectively allowing them to serve without breaking their religious discipline. Given the Catholic Church's decade-long defiance of the secularization laws, which mandated the creation of local associations to manage Church property, its easy acceptance of the militarization of the clergy was remarkable.

Chapter three explores militarized priests as missionaries. May shows convincingly that in 1914 many of the mobilized priests hoped that the war and their close contact with other soldiers would let them lead men back to the Catholic Church. Although scholars have long noted that religious leaders in many countries hoped the war would lead to a return to the pews, May's analysis expands our understanding of the phenomenon by integrating an important gendered dimension. She shows that priests hoped they could inspire fellow soldiers to return to the Church and thus reverse the perceived prewar feminization of Catholicism which had occurred because male church attendance declined faster than women's attendance. These hopes fit with prewar fears that the Church's increasingly female membership was isolating male priests from important local leaders and further alienating the Church from the Third Republic's power structure, which denied women the right to vote. Surprisingly, rather than becoming discouraged when their efforts failed to produce mass reconversions, priests appear to have accepted their failure and to have embraced a religious duty to service that May argues proved critical to reintegrating the Catholic Church into France's social and political life.

May's most provocative findings come in chapter four, where she explores priests' experiences as combatants. Although many priests, seminarians, and member of religious orders were assigned to noncombat functions, others were assigned to, or even volunteered for, combat roles. May found that priests' motivations were religious and patriotic. Many French priests, like many other men in the army, were angry that the Germans were invading their country and even desired revenge for the defeat of 1870-71. Some priests came to embrace the image of warrior, reveling in the masculine role of fighting and killing German troops. At the same time, priests had a religious sense of duty that they adapted to justify their actions as combat soldiers. In letters home, they explained their seemingly anomalous situation by emphasizing the duty to obey superiors and to make sacrifices for the good of others. They also embraced the sense of masculinity that came with combat.

Chapter five emphasizes that even after priests realized that the war would not lead to a mass return to the Church, they still found ways to exercise their vocation. Whether officially designated as chaplains or not, militarized priests adapted their traditional social roles to wartime contexts. In addition to hearing confessions and exercising formal religious roles, they reached out to comrades who sought solace and support without religion and thus built bonds of friendship and respect even with men who were uninterested in organized religion. They also served as conduits between the trenches and the home front by writing letters to the families of dead soldiers. Their efforts did not lead to conversions and were not motivated by the belief that they would do so. May argues, however, that such actions

helped to bridge the clerical/anticlerical divide in France by restoring a sense that priests were not only fellow Frenchmen but performed useful social functions.

Chapter six argues that the wartime service of Catholic priests was critical to breaking the power of anticlericalism as a political issue. May cites interesting statistics, including the fact that a majority of newly appointed postwar bishops were veterans, to argue that the war led to a better integration of Catholic clergy into French society. Even anticlerical leaders like Clemenceau realized that they could not just go back to implementing the full slate of anticlerical laws; Clemenceau himself tolerated the revival of religious orders that had been effectively exiled before the war. May argues the revival of anticlericalism by the Cartel des gauches, an alliance between the Radicals and the Socialists (SFIO) that won the 1924 elections, did not lead to new anticlerical measures due to a public backlash against renewed attempts to crack down on the Catholic Church. She attributes the backlash to the wartime reintegration of priests and the Catholic Church into French social life through military service.

May's reliance on Catholic clergymen's own words as her primary evidence imposes some limits on her ability to prove her claims about the long-term effects of priests' military service. Her evidence is overwhelmingly focused on what the clergymen themselves hoped and believed during the war and she has few sources from the other side of the clerical/anticlerical divide. It would have been useful to see more evidence of how groups outside of the Church's orbit saw the militarized priests before concluding that the priests' hopes that their service would bridge the divide were realized. May's claim that the reintegration of priests into society was critical to the failure of the governments' anticlerical measures in 1924-1926 may be true, but there are other plausible explanations. The Cartel's well-documented internal weaknesses raise questions about whether resistance to the anticlerical measures really represented a sea change from the post-Dreyfus Affair period, or whether the failure of the anticlerical measures was instead rooted in the Cartel's internal contradictions and inability to deal with external crises (such as the exchange rate crisis and the Rif War) that doomed most of its other policies.[3]

Anita Rasi May's *Patriot Priests* makes an important and provocative contribution to scholars' understanding of the religious history of modern France and the social history of the First World War. By shining a light on an overlooked group, French priests, seminarians, and members of religious orders, and their experience of total war, May illustrates the transformative power of the war and the agency of both individuals and institutions caught up in the conflagration. She shows that, ironically, the very anticlerical laws that reduced the political power of the Church and left many clergymen either isolated in their parishes or in exile abroad laid the groundwork for their reintegration by stripping them of their military exemptions. This is a well-researched and well-written work that has important implications for the religious, political, and military history of the Third Republic.

NOTES

[1] Doris Bergen, ed., *Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

[2] Martha Hanna, *The Mobilization of Intellect: French Scholars and Writers During the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[3] Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Leçon d'histoire pour une gauche au pouvoir: La faillite du Cartel (1924-1926)* (Paris: Seuil, 1977; rev. ed. 2003).

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