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Thomas A. Donlan, *The Reform of Zeal: François de Sales and Militant French Catholicism*. St Andrews Studies in French History and Culture. St Andrews: Centre for French History and Culture of the University of St Andrews, 2018. iv + 144 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. Open Access. \$0.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-907548-17-8. <http://cfhc.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/publications>.

Review by Linda Lierheimer, Hawaii Pacific University.

François de Sales (1567-1622) was one of the most significant figures of the Catholic Reformation. As a preacher, author, spiritual advisor, and cofounder with Jeanne de Chantal of the Visitation order, his impact on the movement for spiritual renewal in early-seventeenth century France was immeasurable. In *The Reform of Zeal: François de Sales and Militant French Catholicism*, Thomas Donlan offers a reexamination of Salesian spirituality and how it evolved over the course of his life, arguing that his experience during the French religious wars led de Sales to a theology of nonviolence embodied in the concept of *douceur*, or “gentleness.” This approach provided an alternative to the extreme militancy of many French Catholics of his time who embraced violence as a means to combat Protestantism and adopted a piety of extreme penitence. Donlan’s fresh reading of de Sales provides new insights on the saint and on the religious culture of early modern Europe.

De Sales was born in 1567 to a pious family in Savoy. His parents named him after St. Francis of Assisi and provided him with a model of compassionate Catholicism that shaped his later approach to spirituality. He was especially close to his mother, Madame de Boisy, which may help to explain his close relationships with women later in his life. When he was eleven, François went to Paris to study at the Jesuit Collège de Clermont, where he spent the next ten years pursuing a humanist education. As a teenager in Paris, he embraced the militant piety of his age. These years saw the increasing influence in the city of the Catholic League, which was dedicated to rooting out not just Protestantism, but moderate Catholics as well. Against this backdrop, de Sales had a spiritual crisis that led him to reject the violent militancy of ultra-Catholicism in favor of an affective piety centered on a merciful God.

Soon after the Catholic League seized control of the city in 1588, de Sales left Paris for Padua, where he spent three years studying law. The atmosphere of intellectual freedom and openness there contributed to his growing dissatisfaction with the extreme Catholicism that had taken root in the French capital. In 1593, he entered the priesthood and not long after was sent to the Chablais, a predominately Protestant region in northern Savoy. Here, he was able to put his evolving ideas about nonviolence to the test. De Sales employed a three-pronged strategy in his mission to convert the inhabitants and restore the region to Catholicism. First, he built

relationships with the Chablais Huguenots, meeting regularly with town leaders and ministers and gaining their trust. Second, since the Huguenots refused to attend his sermons, he wrote and distributed religious pamphlets that humanized and treated them with respect. Finally, he built on these relationships to reestablish and promote Catholic liturgy and devotional practices, rejecting the association of ritual and violence typical of militant Catholicism. Remarkably, his approach seems to have worked, as by the end of his mission in 1598 much of the region had reconverted.

Up to this point, de Sales's ideas about nonviolence had focused on relations between Catholics and Protestants. However, his experience as a spiritual director in the early 1600s led him to apply these ideas to personal piety, as he became increasingly ambivalent about aggressive forms of asceticism and mortification. De Sales came to believe that extreme penitence was a form of violence against the self that, rather than strengthening one's relationship with God, served as an impediment to it. It is during this period that what Donlan identifies as the defining principle of his theology—*douceur*—took shape. This concept, which had roots in late medieval and devotional trends (such as the *Devotio Moderna*) and in Erasmian humanism, was at the heart of the Salesian ideal of a merciful and nonviolent faith based on loving relationships with the self, with others, and with God. De Sales argued that the path to Catholic renewal lay not in violence toward oneself or toward the Huguenots, but in the imitation of a gentle and compassionate Christ.

The culmination of this ideal was the Visitation order. De Sales collaborated with Jeanne de Chantal to create “a concrete, institutional means for cultivating and witnessing to a Catholicism of *douceur*” (p. 95). The Visitation, founded in 1610 as an uncloistered congregation dedicated to the care of the poor and the sick, offered a powerful model of female religious life that required its members to eschew extreme forms of penitence and bodily mortification in order to pursue an active apostolate in the world. However, it came under pressure to accept enclosure and, despite de Sales's best efforts to preserve the original model, became a formal religious order in 1618.

Donlan's reinterpretation of the Visitation challenges a longstanding myth that the Visitation was a sort of second choice for women who were not strong enough to join one of the more rigorous orders, such as the Carmelites—a myth that itself originated in a militant Catholicism that privileged contemplation and penitence as a superior form of piety. However, his claim that the Visitation was the first women's religious congregation to advocate an active apostolate for women in France is incorrect and leads him to overstate its uniqueness. The French Ursulines, who adopted a similar model of an uncloistered life in the world devoted to caring for the sick and poor and running schools for girls, predated the Visitation by almost two decades and experienced the same pressures to accept monastic transformation. The Paris convent was the first to adopt formal religious vows in 1610 and set the stage for the gradual enclosure of other Ursuline congregations throughout France. Donlan's use of the Paris house as the exemplar of the Ursuline model is misleading, and risks giving de Sales too much credit for new trends in women's piety. In addition, his attribution of “severe asceticism” (p. 115) to the Ursulines is problematic. Like the Visitation, Ursulines tended to reject extreme forms of penitence, especially bodily mortification, viewing these as incompatible with their active mission.

The great strength of this book is that it situates Salesian spirituality in historical context and traces its evolution over time based on a careful reading of de Sales's writings. By showing that de Sales was responding to a climate of extreme Catholic fervor, Donlan refutes Henri Brémond's

characterization of him in the still influential *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* as appealing to a laity that had turned away from a dry, abstract Catholicism.[1] Donlan likewise complicates scholarly representations of de Sales as a “Tridentine Reformer” and “Counter-Reformation warrior” (p. 6) by showing that his views and actions often diverged from official church policy, and by documenting his shift in focus over time from countering Protestantism to the reform of Catholic piety. However, while Donlan rightly emphasizes the innovation of de Sales’s theology of *douceur*, the book’s biographic approach sometimes leaves the impression that de Sales was an exception, a lone voice against the dominant militant Catholicism of his time. Although he acknowledges the multiple spiritual traditions of the era, Donlan tends to paint an overly stark picture of the division between so-called militant Catholicism and its nonviolent counterpart. But these two strands of early modern Catholicism coexisted and often overlapped, even during the extreme chaos of civil war, as Donlan himself acknowledges in his discussion of the Jesuits.

Despite these minor criticisms, this slim volume should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand Salesian spirituality and its influence on the Catholic Reformation. The book also makes an important contribution to the history of nonviolent traditions in Christianity. The work of Natalie Zemon Davis, Denis Crouzet, Barbara Diefendorf, and others has greatly enhanced our understanding of religious violence in early modern France.[2] However, traditions of nonviolence have not received the same scholarly attention. Dolan’s examination of Francois de Sales’s theology of *douceur* thus offers an important corrective to our understanding of the movement for spiritual renewal in France during and after the wars of religion and leaves us with a fuller picture of early modern religious culture.

NOTES

[1] Henri Brémond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin de guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours*, vol. 1, *L’Humanisme dévot* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916).

[2] Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France,” *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 51-91; Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525-vers 1610*, 2 vols. (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1990); Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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