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Karen E. Carter, *Scandal in the Parish: Priests and Parishioners Behaving Badly in Eighteenth-Century France*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. Xiv + 296 pp. \$32.95 CDN (pb). ISBN 9780773556614.

Review by Mita Choudhury, Vassar College.

At this juncture, the scholarly discussion surrounding religion in eighteenth-century France has moved far away from the narrative arguing that revolutionary policies of dechristianization were the culmination of Enlightenment-driven critiques of Christianity and Church. Nor did they simply reflect antipathy toward the clergy and general apathy regarding Catholic practices. The Enlightenment itself was a series of “historical entanglements” in which theology was sometimes interwoven with Enlightenment thinking. The conflicts involving Jansenism underscore the dynamism of religion in eighteenth-century politics, in seminaries and courtrooms, and in the parishes of Paris.[1] Another potential false narrative assumes separation between eighteenth-century urban religious life (or the lack thereof) and rural devotion, alive but passively acquiescent before Church authorities. Yet our understanding of how religious life functioned in rural parishes of the eighteenth century remains vague, assuming continuity while the more populated urban centers of France witnessed change. In *Scandal in the Parish*, Karen E. Carter examines how eighteenth-century rural parishioners interacted as a dynamic community of believers.

Carter's central focus is on the contentious relationship between the parishioners of Mareuil-sur-Ay, in the Champagne region, and their curé Nicolas Hyacinthe Vernier. Carter analyzes the 1770 *officialité* case, involving nearly 100 witnesses and two decades worth of pent-up grievances that several lay members of the village harbored against their *curé*. Were they disgruntled parishioners angry at a priest too zealous in introducing reform? Or was Vernier a priest who, instead of providing a model of moral rectitude, threatened to introduce irregularity and even depravity into the community? Carter explores the array of accusations parishioners made against their priest, including irregular administration of the sacraments, affairs with women, and fomenting discord. Instead of revealing disenchantment with Catholicism, this conflict “demonstrates that a united, functioning religious community, cemented by a priest who performed the rituals associated with the sacraments, was still important to rural Catholics' understanding of society and religion in the eighteenth century” (p. 10). Parishioners had particular ideas about how the heart of the religious community--the parish priest--should behave and perform his duties.

Carter's exploration of the relationship between Vernier and his flock necessarily concentrates on conflict, given that her sources are records from the church judicial courts. Unlike prescriptive documents such as sermons and rules, which reflected elite perspectives, the *officialités* records allow the voices of rural non-elites to emerge. The nature of transcription prevents us from hearing direct words. Nevertheless, "Vernier's case and others like it are instructive for the information they provide about cultural and religious sensibilities" (p. 237). Carter provides tables that identify the plaintiffs by name and occupation; she identifies six family clusters who played a central role in the Vernier affair, which Carter speculates somewhat legitimates Vernier's complaint of conspiracy. Moreover, Carter endeavors to provide a balanced reading of the sources and not assume that Vernier was guilty of all the misdemeanors imputed to him. Although unusual in its large scope, the Vernier affair was not an outlier; Carter contextualizes the scandal in Mareuil-sur-Ay by bringing in similar cases heard before the *officialités* of Reims and Besançon. These rich sources potentially invite researchers to consider both similarities and difference in regional expressions of devotion, to see how every locale articulated its faith in distinctive ways.

Through deep and meticulous inquiry of these archival sources, Carter makes the following interventions in the religious history of the eighteenth century. First, she emphasizes how parishioners' need to police priests illustrates the centrality of their religion, an argument which complicates the scholarly focus on secularization and dechristianization. Second, Carter challenges the emphasis historians have placed on interiorized piety, sometimes interpreted as a vector of modernity. The readiness to intervene in religious matters reveals how villagers viewed their community as a sacred entity. Third, this persistence of a community-oriented faith suggests that the Catholic Reformation was alive and well, but perhaps not as elite reformers had imagined. Historians have often argued that in the wake of seventeenth-century reforms, the parish curé had become detached from his parishioners, an educated figure who prioritized his superiors' dictates of uniformity and conformity. On the contrary, "curés were involved in multiple, varied, and essential activities in the village world, and they were, in fact, central to that world" (p. 234). More to the point, villagers "negotiated, compromised, badgered, complained, appealed, and finally used the church court system to make sure they had a curé who met their standards" (p. 131).

The bulk of Carter's monograph unpacks the different kinds of scandal that precipitated the villagers of Mareuil-sur-Ay bringing allegations against Vernier before the *officialité*. What tied the supposed infractions together was that they were well-known to the public and were considered harmful to the community. "Both Vernier and the people of Mareuil-sur-Ay believed they were doing the right things to further the cause of religion in their parish and to create and support social ties. They did not always agree on what was right, however, and this led to significant conflict" (p. 90). First, and foremost, villagers were preoccupied with how the curé delivered the sacraments, particularly confession. Vernier appears to have been strict about the condition of the penitents' soul before administering communion; thus, alcohol, whether it was in the form of consumption or wine selling, could be grounds for withholding confession. Parishioners also claimed that Vernier found ways of extracting remuneration in exchange for confession and absolution. The confessional further generated controversy because of Vernier's resistance in issuing *billets de confession*, which allowed village penitents to confess to other priests besides Vernier. According to Carter, parishioners believed *billets* to be necessary if a curé was away and an individual was in need of last rites. The priest's willingness to provide such *billets* reflected flexibility and compassion, essential characteristics that the ideal curé should possess.

Vernier countered that his use of the *billet* affirmed a certain moral standard, a right he claimed through his authority as priest. Carter suggests that the tensions over *billets* in Mareuil-sur-Ay were not shaped by Jansenist controversies over the *billets de confession*. How did Mareuil-sur-Ay compare with other regions on the issue of Jansenism? And to what extent can we conclude that all rural areas were impervious to Jansenist debates? Such questions shed light on both the complexity of rural faith and the place of Jansenism in French society.

The conflict between the laity's desire for flexibility and the curé's authority spilled into other sites, highlighting the public nature of the sacred in village life. Carter provides anecdotes that show how burials and processions could result in such clashes. For example, when the curé Nicolas Quentin of Vendange neglected to wear a black cope at a woman's funeral, her family members, perceiving this action as an insult, refused to follow the priest to the cemetery. If such actions signaled how parishioners complained about the unsatisfactory execution of duty, priests similarly used their power to chastise parishioners. Vernier took revenge on the Billecarts, one of the village's notable families, by revoking their prominent place in a procession involving the Eucharist; for the Billecarts, Vernier's actions represented a religious and social affront to the community as well as to their family. Parishioners claimed that Vernier could at times be too harsh but then too lenient when teaching catechism; he reprimanded young people both physically and through public sermons in which he seemed to enjoy identifying individuals. Such public displays of authority were interpreted as an abuse of sacred spaces, as well as an abdication of duty.

One of the most fraught areas involving clerical duties involved how the curé conducted himself sexually. As readers are undoubtedly aware, this topic continues to be controversial as the Catholic Church has been forced to confront pedophile scandals that have erupted across the globe. Repeatedly, we see priests who used their positions to obtain sexual favors, regardless of the individual's consent. Carter suggests a distinction between "predators," who serially abused and assaulted their victims, and sinners who were one-time offenders; servants were the most vulnerable because they worked in priestly households. Whereas priests having concubines had been acceptable in the late Middle Ages, the practice was increasingly frowned upon in the wake of Catholic Reform, and Carter stipulates it was non-existent by the eve of the French Revolution. Carter devotes attention to the area of rumor and accusation, in which the charges of sexual misdemeanor were contested. Her examination illustrates how different members of the village, who had other grievances against Vernier, weaponized accusations of assault, aware that such charges would attract official attention in a way that other transgressions might not. In her conclusion, Carter states: "I suspect that many of the accusations against him regarding sexual misconduct were false, although I find I am less certain about that than I am about other things" (p. 237). Her uncertainty reflects the challenges historians face when examining sexual violence. *Scandal in the Parish* contextualizes the issue within village life. This study also raises the question of how assault was recognized and defined by the community, given that its primary concern was not about the victim but about how these episodes prevented Vernier from fulfilling his priestly responsibilities. To what extent did the judicial process reflect this attitude and in effect, suppress the victims' voices? And lastly, how do we as historians examine sexual violence since our training binds us to documentary evidence, which in many instances remains hidden? The absence of evidence and conviction does not necessarily mean that these episodes did not take place, especially when victims were really the sideshow of a conflict. [2]

As Carter notes, in the eighteenth century, the curé was expected to be a man “apart,” his vows of celibacy elevating him above others. Clerics then had to show more self-control than other men. Crises in the parish erupted when lay villagers believed that their curé lost that self-possession. Alcohol and violence, often intertwined, were seen as pulling at the threads of the community. Curés were expected to resolve conflict and not create it as Vernier did by challenging traditions and damaging property. What his parishioners perceived as a penchant for making enemies reflected anxieties about an ineffective spiritual leader and man. Here, Carter’s careful examination of the different ways in which Vernier inspired enmity would have been strengthened with some more discussion of the ideals of clerical masculinity. Indeed, the difficulties Vernier faced in terms of living up to his parishioners’ expectations of the *bon curé* also suggest the instability of masculinity itself, both in the Church and outside of it.[3]

Through its careful research, *Scandal in the Parish* uncovers a complex religious world in eighteenth-century rural France. Significantly, this study shows the persistent vitality of Catholic Reform in rural areas but not from the perspective of elites or through the historiographical lens of secularism. Instead, Carter showcases how lay parishioners had clear ideas about how a curé should fulfill his responsibilities, especially when it came to administering sacraments. Counter to the argument made by revolutionaries, the Catholic faith was not simply a form of social control deployed by conniving priests who could easily influence their flock. Indeed, “far from being intellectually and socially removed from their parishioners, [priests] were sandwiched in between the elite men they took orders from and the people they interacted with daily—people who sometimes gave their own order” (pp. 235–36). By providing a sociological study, Carter offers a more expansive way of thinking about religion that goes beyond doctrine. She notes: “what [rural men and women] truly believed about the doctrines of Catholicism cannot be uncovered; certainly, some of the laity were more practitioners of Catholicism than believers” (p. 238). Carter suggests that the performative nature of ritual was important in terms of a believer’s membership in the community. What did these practices represent with respect to the divine within the community and even for the individual? No doubt, the sources hamper our ability to look beyond external practices. How might historians tease out the more spiritual intentions and sensibilities attached to a ritual, an object, and image? The strength of Carter’s studies lies in evoking these questions. By recreating a social world in which the sacred and the secular were so inextricably woven together, Karen Carter gives agency and voice to a population that is sometimes characterized as passive and even inert in the early modern Catholic world.

NOTES

[1] On the Enlightenment and historical entanglements, see Jeffrey Burson, “Entangling the ‘century of lights’ to disentangle the Enlightenment,” in *Belief and Politics in Enlightenment France: Essays in Honor of Dale K. Van Kley*, ed. Mita Choudhury and Daniel J. Watkins (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019). The same volume includes essays by David Garrioch and David Bell, for example, that illustrate the breadth of religious devotion, particularly Jansenism, in the eighteenth century.

[2] On historians and the silence of the archives, see Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016). For a discussion of how historians read rape, see Amy Stanley, ‘Writing the history of sexual assault in the age of #MeToo’, *Perspectives on history* (September 24, 2018).

<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2018/writing-the-history-of-sexual-assault-in-the-age-of-metoo> (accessed 13 June 2020).

[3] On clerical masculinity, see Mita Choudhury, "Masculinity and Faith in the Eighteenth Century: Comparing François de Pâris and Jean-Baptiste Girard," in *Belief and Politics in Enlightenment France*, pp. 109-136. On early modern masculinity in France, see Julie Hardwick, "Policing paternity: historicising masculinity and sexuality in early-modern France," *European review of history-Revue Européen d'histoire* 22 (2015), pp.643-57.

Mita Choudhury
Vassar College
michoudhury@vassar.edu

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