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Henk Byls, *Rester catholique en France: L'encadrement religieux destiné aux migrants belgo-flamands du Lillois, de Paris et des campagnes françaises, 1850-1960*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019. 479 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. \$69.50 U.S. (pb.) ISBN 9462701865.

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Henk Byls provides one of the first French-language studies focused exclusively on the Belgian migrant community in France. More specifically, this rich monograph details the operations of various Belgian Catholic religious organizations in France from roughly 1850 to 1960 and analyzes the role they played in the integration of Belgian migrants. According to Byls, these organizations “voulut surveiller ses migrants” in France, presenting themselves as religious institutions offering “*protection* et réconfort” for migrants who found themselves “dans une position faible et vulnérable” (p. 18, emphases in text). Byls begins by readily admitting that Belgian migrants assimilated into French society throughout the period with relative ease owing to both linguistic similarities (French is one of the three official languages of Belgium) and the fact that they did not often gather in community or otherwise set themselves apart (pp. 15-17). Indeed, this would be one of the chief challenges for Belgian religious organizations which sought to rally “their” migrants throughout the period; namely, that Belgian migrants themselves remained immune to their efforts, fully capable of becoming “invisibles et transparents dans la société française” on their own (pp. 16, 17). Nevertheless, and in explicit dialogue with both previous studies on the role of “immigrant religion” in “the West” as well as contemporary debates about Muslim immigrants in France, Byls poses the question of whether and to what extent Belgian Catholic institutions either facilitated or thwarted the process of integration over the course of a turbulent century.[1]

Throughout the study, Byls remains attentive to internal dynamics attending the rise and consolidation of the French nation-state as well as how these dynamics helped or, more often, hampered the efforts of Belgian religious organizations at various turns. In the first place, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the growing delineation between citizens and foreigners in France. These increasingly strict boundaries between insiders and outsiders to the French national community affected the operations of foreign organizations on French soil even though, as Byls points out, Catholic religious leaders themselves preferred to draw distinctions not on the basis of nationality but belief. Secondly, Byls is attuned to how the politics of republican anticlericalism in the early Third Republic repeatedly stymied Belgian religious organizations, primarily as a result of two sets of laws: the first appearing in 1880 which prohibited foreign religious organizations in France, the second appearing in 1901-1905 which culminated in the official separation between Church and State. On both occasions, the activities

of Belgian religious organizations were severely circumscribed, if not halted altogether. Thirdly, Byls attends to how industrialization and urbanization impacted the relative success or failure of various efforts led by Belgian Catholic organizations on behalf of their compatriots.

This last consideration furnishes the logic for the study's framework, which is organized around a "spatial comparison" of three disparate regions in France: Lille, a frontier region defined by both geographic and cultural proximity to Belgium; Paris, a dense urban space defined by melting-pot *mixité*, and the rural countryside, defined by *l'exode rural* of native French and the concomitant expansion of agricultural labor opportunities for Belgian, and especially Flemish, farmer-migrants. Throughout the book, Byls is interested in "le comportement des divers protagonistes des oeuvres d'encadrement belges" in these three very different spaces and to what extent their efforts were helped or hindered by the environment in which they found themselves (p. 33). Overall, he concludes that Belgian religious organizations found willing partners in both Church authorities as well as the Catholic *patronat* of the North. Meanwhile, godless Paris furnished a multicultural environment in which their Belgian coreligionists remained largely indifferent to their pastoral activities. Above all, it was the rural regions of France where their spiritual efforts were most rewarded, thanks to the warm welcome they received from French agriculturalists who looked upon Flemish farmers approvingly.

Part one establishes a terrain in the North of France that Byls deems "le Lillois"—a border territory and frontier zone dotted by major centers such as Roubaix and Lille where Belgian migrants were akin to "foreigners in a familiar land" ("des étrangers en terrain familier," p. 31). There, the rise of the textile industry exerted a significant pull. "Historico-spatially," Byl contends, the Lillois was a "franco-belge" space that was linguistically divided between the more populous French Flanders where Flemish was spoken and the less populous French regions where French was spoken (pp. 74-76). Byls focuses on the Belgian Redemptorists, who arrived in the 1850s, and *les frères mineurs*, who arrived in 1868. Anchored in the migrant quarters of Roubaix, *les frères mineurs* in particular benefitted from strong ties with Catholic industrialists who invited them into the factories to help strengthen workers' religious ties—and dampen their spirit of rebellion. It helped that *les frères mineurs* spoke both French and Flemish, allowing them to integrate into the patchwork pastoral terrain of the North with ease. In spite of their local embeddedness, however, these Belgian religious communities found themselves repeatedly caught up in political flare-ups between Church and State in France throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter three discusses the social construction of the migrant religious community as "Belgian" despite their clear affinities with the French population in the Lillois. Although religious institutions themselves were reluctant to draw national distinctions among their flock, Byls argues that the diocese of Cambrai, the official French Catholic Church presence in the Lillois, eventually adopted national terms as a result of their ongoing conflicts with the secular French state: first in 1861 when Belgian Redemptorists were expelled from the department of the Nord, then in the 1880s as republican anticlericalism picked up steam and led to the expulsion of *les frères mineurs*, and finally in 1901-5. Against the background of the escalating import of nationality, the Cambrai diocese followed suit, increasingly insisting on the "alterité" of Belgian migrants in order to argue in favor of maintaining religious organizations, even foreign religious organizations like the Belgian Redemptorists or *les frères mineurs*, on French soil. In the process, French Catholic religious authorities in the North ironically contributed to undermining the Franco-Belgian "espace transfrontalier" they had so lovingly cultivated throughout the

nineteenth century. In addition to moving with the ebbs and flows of anticlericalism, the world wars, too, impacted the activities of Belgian religious organizations. Throughout the Nord, *oeuvres belges* declined with the onset of the First World War only to return in the interwar period reincarnated as social assistance organizations for migrants in France.

Part two shifts the reader's gaze to Paris, inscribing Belgian migration within a capital that, for much of the period under consideration, was in the midst of its own urban transformation. While Belgian migrants began streaming into Paris in the 1830s, they reached their high point of concentration in the capital between the 1880s and 1890s, especially in northern and northeastern neighborhoods. Though many Belgian migrants implanted themselves in the artisanal eleventh *arrondissement*, especially the contiguous quartiers of La Roquette and Sainte Marguerite, unmarried Belgian men settled in the more industrial eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth *arrondissements*. Through an analysis of local marriage records, Byls concludes that, far from sticking with their own, Belgian migrant sociability was mixed, the product of professional solidarities and neighborly networks. Indeed, for men, "la concentration professionnelle semble avoir largement primé sur le regroupement de type Communautaire" (p. 205). Inter-marriage, naturalization, and overall *francisation* proceeded apace, not least of all because, while they were a significant presence in the capital, Belgians were far from the only immigrants in Paris. In this, his findings are very much in line with recent scholarship.

Chapter five seeks to document the history of the construction of the Oeuvre des Flamands, later the Mission belge, located on the rue de Charonne in quartier Sainte Marguerite, as well as to explore the role it played in the Belgian migrant community of Paris. Modeled off the success of the Oeuvre des Allemands, which focused on Catholic German, Swiss, Austrian, and Luxemburger migrants in Paris, the idea of catering to the spiritual needs of Belgian migrants was born in 1863 but would not be realized until the 1880s. In addition to a host of organizational infighting and financial issues, construction was waylaid by the Franco-Prussian War and the ensuing Paris Commune. More significantly, however, Belgian migrants in the capital were indifferent to its construction. Byls posits that this may have been the result of the fact that foreign migrants were always on the move in the capital. But he also concludes that Belgian migrants were as well-integrated in Paris as their French provincial co-migrants. As such, Oeuvre leaders were unable to reach them and instead settled for catering to the spiritual needs of seasonal workers passing through the city. According to Byls, "les activités pastorales urbaines" in the capital had scarcely any impact on Belgian migrants save one: the chaplain of the Oeuvre des Flamands, Beyaert, made it a pet project of his to regularize the unions of cohabitating migrants. Thanks to his veritable fixation on—or possibly his obsession with—promoting the institution of marriage among migrants, Byls estimates that Beyaert was solely responsible for one-eighth of all *unions régularisées* among Belgians and some Dutch migrants between 1850 and 1900 (p. 251).

Part three begins with a review of the demographic crisis afflicting France after the First World War, which amplified calls for migrant workers and forever changed the profile of the workforce in modern France. Thanks to *l'exode rural*, seasonal Belgian agricultural workers had found work aplenty in the French countryside well before the war. After 1918, many remained in France, enjoying prosperity and passing along this rural *patrimoine* to their children since, after all, the French continued to move to urban centers throughout the twentieth century. While the representatives of Belgian religious organizations were fundamentally opposed to migration, preferring instead a world in which the faithful remained structurally rooted to their homeland,

they were nevertheless able to accommodate themselves more readily to the reality of post-WWI Belgian migration to the rural French countryside than they were to their migration to either industrial textile factories in the Lillois or anywhere in impious Paris (p. 301).

Chapter eight takes a closer look at interwar Belgian religious organizations in the rural French countryside after they came to the realization that many Belgian farmers planned to migrate permanently to France. Their efforts were hampered once again by indecision, lack of coordination, and petty infighting among leaders in both Belgium and France. Still, La Flandre, an agricultural trade union founded in 1922 by a Belgian chaplain and administered by both French and Belgian farmers, experienced some success for a few years. From 1925 onward, a similar sort of organization, the Union agricole belge (UAB), also effectively engaged in *la pastorale sociale*, their activities more focused on hosting celebrations for major Catholic holidays for Flemish farming families in the North. Over time, several chaplains ministering to Belgian migrants even grew rather close to their spiritual charges, for instance, helping to arrange marriages among them. But the Depression and the Second World War put a damper on even these limited activities and things were never quite the same after the war. For Byls, the major takeaway is that the agricultural regions allowed for “l’initiative d’encadrement de se montrer réellement efficace, du moins en ce qui concerne les Flamands qui adhèrent à l’UAB” unlike what transpired in either the Lillois or Paris (p. 370).

Chapter nine takes on the question of “la lutte identitaire” for Flemish farmers, who commanded the lion's share of attention from interwar Belgian religious organizations not least because of the cultural associations between agriculture and other prized conservative values (hard work, stability, morality). As it turns out, despite the reality of *l'exode rural*, the fantasy of a nation of farmers was as revered among Belgians as it was among the French during this period.[2] Consequently, French agriculturalists appreciated the arrival of Flemish farmers who were willing to undertake rural labor in which the French themselves showed little interest and thus ensure the future of French agriculture. Meanwhile, Belgian chaplains hoped that their flock of farmer-migrants might maintain their Flemish ties. Consequently, “les fermiers flamands étaient évalués par les deux parties de façon nationale et plus précisément identitaire” (p. 397). Although the emphasis on resemblances between French and Belgian had reigned supreme prior to the First World War, Belgian religious organizations instead were keen to play up their supposed national differences during the interwar years. They did so primarily by juxtaposing the stalwart Catholic Flemish peasant with the amoral, secular Frenchman. In other words, interwar Belgian chaplains and some Belgian writers manufactured discursive ethnic differences, though, as Byls admits, it remains unclear if Flemish farmers felt this way themselves. In the end, as was the case in both the Lillois and Paris, none of it amounted to very much as the second generation of Flemish farmer-migrants grew further and further away from their roots, the efforts of Belgian religious organizations notwithstanding.

Overall, the book is most successful in its comparative analysis of the very different assimilatory milieux to be found in each of the three types of regions of France where Belgian migrants alighted. It also does an excellent job of assessing how and when larger social and political dynamics within France affected the ability of Belgian Catholic organizations to pursue their spiritual mission on behalf of “their” migrants despite the fact that, as Byls acknowledges, “Ces différentes initiatives ne brillaient pas par leur organisation et la qualité de leur personnel laissait souvent à désirer” (p. 325).

That said, while Byls flirts with the idea of analyzing whether religion served as a bridge or a barrier to integration, this book is not ultimately about the role of religion or ethnicity in determining how Belgian immigrants integrated (p. 23). Throughout the book, Byls himself repeatedly alludes to the fact that Belgians did not consider themselves all that different from the French, nor did the French consider them as such. They were not ever, he concludes, the Other (p. 445). Furthermore, as Chapter nine attests, the social construction and discursive production of Belgian and/or Flemish difference was in fact restricted to a narrow set of actors with specific motivations lasting a very short duration of time. Without knowing what actual Belgian Catholic practice was like during this period, it would be hard to say how it differed, if at all, from French Catholic practice. It would also be difficult to determine how their spiritual practice might have influenced the ethnicized manufacture of religious difference between these two groups of coreligionists, in particular, or between Belgian migrants and French citizens, more broadly. On that score, the best case study for understanding how Islam has become a code for identity-based difference that both defines today's immigrants and marks them incontrovertibly as "other" remains in all likelihood pre-WWII Jewish migration to France.^[3] Nevertheless, Byls adds to our understanding of Belgian migration in France and offers a useful volume that will be of interest to historians of migration and Catholic associational life in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France.

NOTES

[1] Nancy Foner and Richard Alba, "Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion?" *The International Migration Review* 42, no. 2 (2008): 360-92. For a discussion on religion and ethnicity in France, see also Nancy L. Green, "Religion et Ethnicité. De La Comparaison Spatiale et Temporelle," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 57, no. 1 (2002): 127-44.

[2] Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[3] On the social construction of Islam as a barrier to immigrant assimilation that reflects modern French Islamophobia, see Jean Beaman, *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), chap. 3. On Jewish migration to France before the Second World War, see, among others, Nancy L. Green, *The Pletzl of Paris: Jewish Immigrant Workers in the Belle Epoque* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986); Paula Hyman, *The Emancipation of the Jews of Alsace: Acculturation and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

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