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Anne-Claire Husser, *Ferdinand Buisson, penseur de l'autorité. Du théologique au pédagogique*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2019. 446 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. €58.00 (pb). ISBN 9782745350657.

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There used to be a consensus among scholars that France lacked a liberal tradition. What France was best known for was its *illiberal* culture, traceable at least as far back as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his “proto-totalitarian” disciples, the revolutionary Jacobins. Under the sway of the Jacobin legacy, or so it was said, nineteenth-century French thinkers, with only rare exceptions, concerned themselves not so much with reducing the power of the state as with appropriating it for their own purposes. And, contrary to their Anglo-American counterparts, French “liberals,” had little regard for the individual. In a sense, then, French liberalism wasn’t actually liberal at all. And it was supposedly the *illiberalism* of French political culture that was to blame for the country’s nineteenth-century difficulties in establishing a stable, liberal regime. Unlike Britain, whose liberal traditions helped it to evolve peacefully, France’s political evolution was one of successive revolutions. The story of French liberalism was one of failure.

Recent scholarship has exposed the ahistoricism and Anglo-American prejudice of this point of view. Since the early 1980s, a plethora of new studies has unearthed a rich and robust French liberal tradition including theorists from Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël in the early nineteenth century to Raymond Aron and Marcel Gauchet in the twentieth. However, we still know relatively little about late nineteenth-century French liberalism and this is why Anne-Claire Husser’s book on Ferdinand Buisson is very welcome.

In fairness, Buisson has received a fair amount of attention lately, including a recent biography by Patrick Cabanel and a number of PhD dissertations, chapters in monographs, and articles. Husser’s book adds depth and nuance to this scholarship more than it contests it. She writes, for example, that hers is a more “philosophical” perspective than that of previous scholars. And her focus is on the idea of authority in Buisson’s thought. No one has approached Buisson quite in this way.

Director of Primary Education from 1879 to 1896, Buisson was one of the principal architects of the so-called Ferry Laws of 1881 and 1882. These laws have long been regarded as the most significant and lasting reforms of the Third Republic. Named after the Prime Minister Jules Ferry, they made French public primary education free, compulsory, and secular. Buisson also presided over the development of the school’s curriculum and the education of its teachers, publishing a *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d’instruction primaire* meant to serve as a guide. In 1905,

he chaired the parliamentary committee that implemented the separation of church and state in France. From 1902-14 and 1919-23, he sat as a radical-socialist in the Chamber of Deputies. He presided over the Ligue des droits de l'Homme from 1914 to 1926 and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (jointly with Ludwig Quidde) in 1927.

So much, of course, we already knew. Husser's argument is that there was an underlying coherence to Buisson's many causes; the guiding thread that connects them is his distinctive moral vision and idea of authority. Liberals tend to be wary of authority, she reminds us. They want to shield the individual from the state and circumscribe it as much as possible. But to say that about Buisson is to oversimplify and misrepresent his thought. In Husser's telling, Buisson wanted not so much to shield the individual from authority as to foster its interiorization.

Like so many liberals in nineteenth century France, Buisson was deeply concerned with the moral condition of France. The sad lesson of the country's successive revolutions was that its population was unprepared for citizenship. The centuries-long collusion of the absolutist state with the Catholic Church had created a population trained to obey authority rather than exercise it. Put simply, if the country was ever to become a stable and lasting liberal republic the French had to be trained for citizenship. And this was the purpose of the public education system Buisson helped to design. The schools were meant to cultivate in young boys (and to a certain extent in young girls) a conscience and the liberal discipline to follow it willingly. For this, Buisson thought that children needed to be taught to think critically and judge for themselves. Moral authority should not be imposed on them from the outside by either the church or the state. Instead it should be embraced voluntarily so that it became part of their inner being. Only such an education could give France's future citizens the capacity for self-government. According to Hussar, these ideas about authority informed Buisson's entire life's work.

Liberals like Buisson thought that preparing children for citizenship made it necessary first to detach them from the Catholic Church. In their minds, the church was deeply compromised by its centuries-long support for absolute monarchy and a social order based on inherited privilege. They thought it taught the young superstitious doctrines that made them fearful, weak, and selfish, more interested in their personal salvation than in the obligations of citizenship. The French public school system, as Buisson conceived it, would replace the blind faith taught by the church with a laic faith that taught the patriotic virtues needed to sustain a modern and liberal republic. If the Bible was taught, it should be approached strictly as an historical document that could help instruct morals.

Buisson's career as an educational reformer reminds us of the fierce battle French liberals fought against the Catholic Church. As early as the spring of 1791, Pope Pius VI had made the first of many denunciations of the Revolution, condemning, in particular, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. At regular intervals after that, successive popes issued briefs and encyclicals condemning liberalism in the most virulent terms. Countless books, articles, and speeches denounced liberalism a poison and a sin because it led Christians to question authority. So, when Buisson and his collaborators accused the church of preaching submissiveness to authority, they were not altogether wrong.

Nor was the Catholic Church far off the mark when its representatives called Buisson's secularizing school reforms a Protestant attack on the Catholic Church. Like many state officials and supporters of the school reforms, Buisson was, in fact, a Protestant. As Hussar explains in

the first part of her book, Buisson began his career as a theologian, and it was while participating in debates on the authority of Scripture that his own notion of authority took shape. This Protestant view was then transferred from the theological to the pedagogical realm, as the subtitle of Hussar's book suggests.

The Protestant debates in which Buisson took part pitted so-called liberals against evangelicals. The evangelical wing, which was in the majority, defended the dogmatic foundations of Protestantism. To be a Protestant meant subscribing to a number of established doctrines. The liberal wing, by contrast, insisted on an undogmatic—or even anti-dogmatic—definition of what it meant to be Protestant. Being a Protestant, according to liberals, meant exercising every Christian's right to free inquiry and following the authority of one's own conscience. A diversity of interpretations was perfectly fine as long as there was agreement on what they regarded as the moral essentials.

During the Second Empire, Buisson published several books and articles to explain and publicize his ideas. They carried titles such *Le christianisme libéral* (1865) and the *Principes du christianisme libéral* (1869). He also created an organization called l'Union du christianisme libéral. To Buisson, "liberal Christianity" was a religion without dogmas, without miracles and without priests. It welcomed all people, of whatever denomination, including even deists and atheists. Its central principles were moral, not theological; as such, they were tenets with which all well-meaning people could agree.

Of course, Buisson's adversaries, whether they were evangelical Protestants or Catholics, denied that his was a religion at all. As Hussar recounts it, however, Buisson saw himself as faithful to the message of Jesus. To him, a liberal church was exactly what Christ had intended, namely "une société de dévouement au bien" (p. 93). Moreover, he regarded liberal Christianity as also faithful to the Protestant Reformation, which, he believed, required each Christian to examine the Bible critically and decide for themselves what to believe. This right of free inquiry, in his telling, also meant that Christianity could evolve and modernize itself, keeping up with the progressive enlightenment of society so that it remained forever relevant. To Buisson, as to the other self-titled "liberal Christians" of his day, Christianity was a progressive religion. It was never meant to be wedded forever to any particular dogma; its essence was moral.

Paradoxically, Buisson could regard himself as a faithful Protestant while taking sides with the sixteenth century preacher and reformer Sebastian Castellio against John Calvin himself. Castellio was an early champion of freedom of conscience and of the separation of church and state who dared to disagree openly with Calvin on the treatment of heretics. As Hussar explains in a very informative chapter, Castellio became something like a personal hero to Buisson, who wrote his PhD dissertation about him.

In her last chapter, Hussar takes issue with those scholars who have argued that the French public school system was expressly designed to indoctrinate children against socialism in order to safeguard and guarantee the social order. She argues instead that it was meant to enable upward mobility and social advancement. Thanks to the equal education it would provide to all children regardless of their background and class, it was meant to transform social relations on the basis of aptitude and merit. In line with the solidarist movement of which Buisson was a part, the school system was also intended to cultivate in children a sentiment of debt to society and a commitment to social justice. It would favor the fraternity and human solidarity upon which a

liberal republic depended. It should eradicate selfishness. “L’individu pris en soi n’a jamais été notre idole,” he declared in an 1896 in a course he taught at the Sorbonne. “[L]e droit abstrait de l’individu n’est pas la fin dernière de la société” (p. 396). In fact, he thought that personal fulfillment was only possible through the transcendence or overcoming of the individual self to a superior, more communal, form of existence, without explicitly promoting a strict equality of wealth or abolishing *all* types of hierarchy.

Hussar’s is a very informative book about an important and interesting statesman who had a very rich, long and productive career. Its argument about Buisson’s view of authority is clear and compelling. But it is also a bit thin. Hussar’s analyses of various texts are illuminating, but the conclusions she draws from them might have been enriched by more context. It is not entirely clear, for example, how original Buisson’s views were. From Hussar’s telling, Buisson often seems to have conceived his ideas on his own and she therefore suggests that they are worthy of examination because they are unique. She provides little evidence of this. In fact, seen in historical context, Buisson seems to have been more of a propagandist than an original thinker. One wonders also how a “philosophical” approach, such as Hussar proposes at the outset of her book, is appropriate for someone who appears to have been more of a reformer than a theorist. In the end, it is not clear exactly how philosophical Hussar’s approach to her subject really is. The book reads more like a work of intellectual history, and that is another reason why one might have expected more context to understand how—or if—Buisson’s thought differed from that of other liberal Protestants of the nineteenth century.

For example, Benjamin Constant, who is mentioned twice but only very briefly, is used more as a foil than as a source or fellow traveler. The truth is, however, that both Constant and Madame de Staël were liberal Protestants who said very similar things about religion half a century early. Surely, Buisson would have known about Constant’s many writings on religion, and/or Madame de Staël’s. They, too, subscribed to a progressive form of Protestantism that promoted morals rather than fixed dogmas. They, too, believed that a viable liberal republic needed a liberal form of religion. Like Buisson, they distinguished religious form from religious sentiment in a way that allowed Christianity to evolve and enlighten itself over time. Finally, they also described religion as an innate aspiration to transcend oneself and one’s selfish interests. They never designed a school system—but it would seem that what Buisson did was to put their ideas into practice.

What Buisson called “progressive Protestantism” sounds almost identical to what Constant called “improved Protestantism” and what Madame de Staël labelled “a reformation of the Reformation.” Constant and de Staël, in turn, learned much from German liberal Protestants, especially the so-called neologists, who espoused the notion of “progressive revelation” to which Hussar makes brief allusion. Buisson’s key terms “the sentiment of infinity” and “elevation of the soul” are to be found in Madame de Staël’s widely read *De l’Allemagne*, in which she also repeats, several times, that the right to examine lies at the very foundation of Protestantism.[1] The right of free inquiry is, to her, why Protestantism is the religion of progress. In her *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française*, another widely read text, she declares again that a religion founded on examination was just the religion France needed to foster the kind of citizenship necessary to sustain a liberal polity.[2] All of this sounds quite like Buisson.

It would have been enlightening, also, to hear Hussar’s view of the recent scholarship critical of liberal secularism. For some time now, a multi-disciplinary group of scholars has accused liberal

secularism of a multitude of sins. Sounding much like Buisson's Catholic adversaries, they have accused Protestants of inventing secularism in order to expel religion from the public domain, strip it of its communal values, and empty it of its highest truths. They have claimed that secularism promotes neither equality nor emancipation. Instead, in their view, it has helped justify all kinds of subjugation. This reader would have loved to hear an expert like Hussar use her knowledge to weigh in on these debates. All in all, however, this is a valuable addition to the scholarship on Buisson.

NOTES

[1] See Helena Rosenblatt, "The Liberal Mysticism of Madame de Staël," in *Life Forms in the Thinking of the Long Eighteenth Century*, eds. Keith M. Baker and Jenna Gibbs, University of Toronto Press, 2016, pp. 233-246.

[2] See Helena Rosenblatt, "Madame de Staël's Religion," *Storia del pensiero politico* 3 (2018), pp. 403-418.

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