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Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Culture of Enlightening: Abbé Claude Yvon and the Entangled Emergence of the Enlightenment*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. xvii + 581 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780268105419.

Review by Andrei Pesic, Stanford University.

The contentious parsing of different Enlightenments—singular, plural, national, religious, radical, skeptical, and many more—has enriched our understanding of the variety of intellectual movements during the long eighteenth century. Yet these important conceptualizations of new subspecies of the genera can occlude the work of writers who sit between seemingly irreconcilable categories. Jeffrey Burson's *The Culture of Enlightening: Abbé Claude Yvon and the Entangled Emergence of the Enlightenment* sets out to demonstrate that even relatively obscure figures like the Abbé Claude Yvon (1714-1791) can teach us a great deal about the interconnections between different varieties of thinkers in what he calls “the culture of enlightening,” as well as about the changes this culture underwent during the eighteenth century.

At first glance, the Abbé Yvon is an archetypical eighteenth-century figure, the penurious “abbé philosophe” accepting money from the church with one hand and writing unorthodox articles for the *Encyclopédie* with the other.[1] In broad strokes, Burson confirms this picture, but the events of Yvon's career mark him out as atypical in fascinating ways. Three large themes stand out in Burson's telling: first, the lasting effect of Yvon's involvement in the Prades Affair, which dogged his career for the rest of his life; second, Burson demonstrates significant continuity in Yvon's ideas through phases in which he was labeled variously an *Encyclopédiste*, freemason, and *antiphilosophe*, and third, the ways that the intellectual landscape shifted around Yvon throughout the course of his long career. Taken together, Burson's account of Yvon's strange career shows the continued dynamism of theological debate and the fascinating cross-pollination of intellectual movements that we often consider in different contexts.

The first turning point of Burson's story is the Prades Affair of 1751, a scandal that erupted over the thesis defended at the Sorbonne by Jean-Martin de Prades, which despite its seemingly innocent proposal for proving the historical veracity of the gospel nonetheless became a cause célèbre among eighteenth-century religious debates. Burson's previous book on the case of Prades, *The Rise and Fall of the Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France*, untangled the web of accusation and counter-accusation that surrounded the denunciation of the Prades thesis by Jansenist and pro-Jesuit forces in turn, as well as the ways that the editors of the *Encyclopédie* used the ensuing chaos to criticize both sides.[2] Following this condemnation, Prades was forced into exile alongside his former

roommate, friend, and mentor, Yvon. In his new book, Burson seeks to move on from the Prades Affair to examine Yvon's later career, but the Affair haunts both the book and Yvon's career itself, returning constantly as a reason for Yvon's failure to secure benefices or stable patronage throughout the 1770s.

The ideas that Yvon developed in his youth at the Sorbonne grew into a lifelong project to show "the true light at the heart of Christianity itself: the accord between philosophy and religion" (p. 63). Yvon was critical of the Scholastic synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy with church doctrine. He viewed this synthesis as outdated and advocated its replacement by more recent philosophical work, especially Locke's theories of the mediation of sense perception (even, according to Yvon, of divine revelation). He viewed defensive orthodox theologians as leaving hostages to fortune: by preserving the obsolete philosophy baked into church doctrine, they could endanger the church itself. This attempt to reconcile sensationalist epistemology with Catholic theology was hardly unique to Yvon; sources as varied as the Jesuit *Mémoires de Trévoux* and the abbé Pluche's *Spectacle de la Nature* (1732-1742) praised similar efforts (p. 155).

Yvon contributed around fifty-five articles to the *Encyclopédie*, including its articles on "Âme," "Amitié," "Aristotélisme," and "Athéisme" (to cite just some a's). Several of these were denounced at the time of their publication as plagiarisms, though Burson shows the extent to which "creative plagiarism" was the coin of the realm in the eighteenth century (p. 93). One of Yvon's core intellectual tenets already visible in his *Encyclopédie* contributions was a minimalist definition of atheism, which he defined strictly as "the denial of intelligence, immateriality, and free will to divinity" (p. 144). This allowed him to avow a materialist philosophy, while distinguishing himself from thinkers he painted as more radical (such as Spinoza), whom Yvon condemned as atheists only if they denied the presence of a purposive design in the universe. Burson argues convincingly that the simplistic equation of materialism with radical politics and atheism are complicated by Yvon's brand of vitalistic materialism, which sought to distinguish between the soul's immateriality (which he disputed) and its immortality (which he defended) (p. 179).

During Yvon's period in exile from 1752-1762, he moved around in the Low Countries, seeking steady employment in journalistic work but constantly undermining himself with "continued lapses in judgment and seedy behavior" (p. 267). One of Yvon's regretful former employers, the publisher of the *Journal encyclopédique*, Pierre Rousseau, likened him to a "child in need of a spanking" (p. 269), though Burson struggles to pinpoint exactly what Yvon did to deserve the near-unanimous disapproval of his associates. During this period, Yvon's Freemasonry was another means by which he sought to find new ways to support himself. The presence of an abbé in a Freemasons' lodge was not as rare as one might think, in light of Robert Shackleton's estimate that four percent of French Freemasons were clergymen (p. 245). Brother Yvon was a founding member of the lodge Concordia Vincit Animos in Amsterdam, but his poverty likely forced him to end his membership; masonic equality was limited to those who could foot the bill. Yvon does not seem to have viewed his Freemasonry as marking a break with the church; his Masonic orations show significant continuity with his earlier writings attempting to reconcile reason and religion, depicting the Masons as an enlightened group who were better prepared to receive the "pure light" of reason that would frighten or anger the "stupid vulgar" (p. 257).

Yvon's sense that outdated philosophical doctrine could be dangerous for the church led him to argue that theology should be seen as a progressive science rather than a static one. This inspired him to advocate more broadly for freedom of conscience, which Yvon pushed to extremes in the

*Liberté de conscience reserrée dans des bornes légitimes* (1754). Here he argued (as Burson puts it) that the “Christian religion is, by its nature, intolerant, and that the Roman Catholic Church is uniquely so because of its tendency to speak of the history of church doctrine as an infallible monument to the immutable truth of God’s revelation” (p. 259). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the book landed on the Index of Prohibited Books, but Yvon’s arguments resonated among some French officials seeking justifications for religious toleration.

One of the fruits of Burson’s approach of seeing the Enlightenment from the perspective of (admittedly heterodox) theologians is that it highlights how some of the most famous debates of the High Enlightenment in the 1750s and 1760s, far from being two-sided battles between *philosophes* and a singular entity denoted as “the church,” involved a series of disputes between the *encyclopédistes* and different factions within the church, in addition to internecine battles within the church itself. Both of these arenas of debate were transformed by the fall of the Jesuit order. Here Burson draws on Dale Van Kley’s seminal work on the rifts in the Gallican church, the destructive legacies of the Damians affair of 1757, and the eventual expulsion of the Jesuits from France in 1764.[3] Yet the paradoxical figure of Yvon is helpful in complicating any linear narrative between the religious disputes of the mid-eighteenth century and the later crises of authority preceding the French Revolution; his heterodox ideas and financial struggles do not seem to have translated into political subversion.

Yvon’s struggles to obtain patronage after his return from exile were aggravated by the censors’ repeated refusal to allow the publication of his projected masterwork, the *Abrégé de l’histoire de l’église* (1766). In spite of Yvon’s attempts to gain favor with Archbishop Beaumont (notably by attacking Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s defiant open letter to the archbishop), the archbishop at first prevented the publication of the later volumes of Yvon’s *Abrégé*. Burson hesitates over whether the prohibition of Yvon’s later volumes was merely due to bad timing following the scandal surrounding the deism of Marmontel’s *Bélisaire* (1767), to which some passages of Yvon’s book were compared, or whether Yvon’s ideas would have been enough in themselves to give pause to orthodox theologians. As Burson muses, the archbishop might have wondered “with friends like Yvon, who needs the radical writers as enemies?” (p. 306) Although the patronage of the marquis de Voyer and later a position as court historiographer to the comte d’Artois saved Yvon from total ruin, his failures to obtain larger church benefices left him embittered in his old age.

The broad conceptual framework put forward by Burson of an “entangled culture of enlightening” is often illuminating but leaves some unanswered questions. Though he draws extensively on his previous book, *The Rise and Fall of the Theological Enlightenment*, Burson has revisited some of his earlier ideas, notably subsuming his earlier concept of a “Theological Enlightenment” at the Sorbonne into a broader “culture of enlightening.” This latter concept is intended to remedy what Burson sees as an excessive focus in intellectual history on the *philosophes*, whom he sees as only a subset of the broader culture of enlightening.

At several points when Burson seeks to articulate how different ideological groups were “entangled” in the “culture of enlightening,” the exposition could have benefitted from clearer analytical distinctions. He first defines this culture as “the constructive interaction of various ‘lights’ (whence catalyzed by sociopolitical contingencies) within a common discursive field of culture comprising numerous actors, institutions, and interests, who all spoke (albeit divergently at times) about ‘enlightening’ various facets of human existence” (p. 21). In other words, even though Jansenists, Jesuits, and *philosophes* held strongly different ideas about which “lights” to

follow, they all used similar vocabularies and some shared intellectual genealogies (especially an interest in Lockean epistemology and Newtonian physics). At times, the concept of “entanglement” seems defined minimally: that people in one intellectual grouping read and reacted to works by other thinkers, leaving the “culture of enlightening” as a mere synonym for the European Republic of Letters (e.g. on p. 65 and p. 291, where Burson uses the latter term almost interchangeably). But at other points Burson elaborates productively on the concept of “entanglement” to analyze the emergence of *antiphilosophie* in a way that saves it from merely playing second fiddle to the *philosophes*, showing how it became “on some points, more radical than the Radical Enlightenment it was designed to refute” while sharing an “entangled intellectual genealogy [that] drew upon debates and discourses of both religious enlightenment and radical enlightenment” (p. 306). Here Burson’s conception of a shared culture of enlightening forestalls the rigid sorting of thinkers into radical and moderate camps, allowing him to explore how ideas cut across such simplistic divisions.

The epithets leveled at Yvon by his contemporaries and later historians give the abbé the air of an eighteenth-century Rodney Dangerfield who got no respect: Voltaire deemed his article “Âme” among the worst in the *Encyclopédie*; he was described as “the fat kid” (by a secretary of the marquis de Voyer) and “pathetically confused” (by R. R. Palmer).<sup>[4]</sup> Burson has no illusions about elevating Yvon into the Pantheon (he is “most definitely not a great or especially systematic philosopher” [p. 365]), but shows us that deeply contextualized studies of second-rank thinkers can teach us a tremendous amount about the hidden riches, stubborn limitations, and dramatic changes in the intellectual life of an era. Burson is a profoundly erudite guide through the complex terrain of theology and philosophy and its transformations over the course of the century. This rich book should inspire further attention to the porous boundaries of sacred and secular thought and to revisit figures like Yvon who can help us refine the categories we deploy to understand the eighteenth century.

## NOTES

[1] On the figure of the disreputable abbé, see John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France. Volume 1: The Clerical Establishment and its Social Ramifications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 647ff.

[2] Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of the Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

[3] Dale K. Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Regime, 1750-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution from Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Dale K. Van Kley, *Reform Catholicism and the international Suppression of the Jesuits in Enlightenment Europe, 1554-1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[4] Voltaire's negative reactions to Yvon's *Encyclopédie* articles are detailed in Larissa L. Albina, “Voltaire lecteur de l'Encyclopédie,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, no. 6 (1989): 119-130. [https://www.persee.fr/doc/rde\\_0769-0886\\_1989\\_num\\_6\\_1\\_1008](https://www.persee.fr/doc/rde_0769-0886_1989_num_6_1_1008). For the remark by the secretary of the marquis de Voyer, see Emmanuel Davoust, “Claude Yvon: Un abbé écrivain et journaliste au siècle des lumières,” *Bulletin de la Société d'Agriculture Sciences et Arts de la*

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*Sarthe* (2015): 105. For Palmer's assessment see: Robert R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 119.

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