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Daniel J. Watkins, *Berruyer's Bible: Public Opinion and the Politics of Enlightenment Catholicism in France*. McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion. Montreal and Kingston, London and Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. xviii + 326 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$130.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780228006305; \$37.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780228006299.

Review by Joseph P. Harmon, Independent Scholar.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, French Jesuits were energetic citizens of the Republic of Letters, employing their considerable institutional resources to carry out their evangelistic and educational mission in an era of rising literacy and philosophical and scientific innovation. Jesuit scholars not only composed new apologetics to counter new doubts on the model of the early Church Fathers. They also pursued scientific and philosophical knowledge for its own sake. But even this scientific objectivity had a purpose within the larger vocation of proclaiming the gospel: for by showing that the knowledge obtainable through philosophical reflection and empirical observation was conducive to the divinely revealed doctrine of the Catholic Church, they could reassure the faith of their educated readers and stem the spread of “unbelief.” In 1728, in the midst of this literary and evangelical activity, one talented young Jesuit named Isaac Joseph Berruyer published a paraphrase of the Old Testament under the title *Histoire du peuple de Dieu*, the first installment of an eventual three-volume paraphrase of the whole Catholic Bible. Berruyer's Bible exemplified the Jesuits' literary and evangelistic project on several levels. He employed a particular mode of empirical argument from facts (rather than a priori deduction) to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Catholic faith and its social utility, a strategy designed to reach a reader's head. More significantly, he aimed for the heart: he wrote his paraphrase in the style of a popular novel, to make the Bible, as he put it, “speak the language of the people” (p. 42). Or, as a witty duchess put it, to make people actually want to read the Bible. Not altogether surprisingly, such an endeavor provoked a heated controversy, one which would carry on long after Berruyer's death. The daring style of his book and his innovative articulation of ancient doctrines eventually dragged into disrepute the whole of the Jesuit Society in France, along with its approach of engagement with the Enlightenment. Berruyer's ill-starred project to attractively present the faith to his generation ultimately came to play a role in his order's suppression in France just four years after his death.

Daniel Watkins's *Berruyer's Bible* tells the story of this book--its origins, its tumultuous career and reception, its consequences in the political life of France, and its unexpected afterlife in the post-Revolution France of Romantic and ultramontane Catholicism. In doing so, Watkins brings together several historiographical conversations, marrying the methods of intellectual history and of the history of the book very fruitfully. He persuasively demonstrates that the affair of

Berruyer and his paraphrase of the Bible belong in any telling of the history of the French Jesuits in the period leading up to their suppression and, more broadly, of the emergence of public opinion as a force in the political life of the Old Regime. A strength of Watkins's own book is its sure-footed guidance in situating his subject within the contexts of the public sphere, book-reading and the publishing industry, the Jansenist-Jesuit quarrel, and especially Enlightenment Catholicism. On this last theme in particular, Watkins succeeds in advancing beyond questioning supposedly normative secular teleologies of the Enlightenment--work which has been accomplished by now--and provides a detailed study of how one style of Enlightenment Catholicism bore concrete consequences for eighteenth-century France and beyond.[1]

Chapter one explores the historical context in which Berruyer received his religious formation and conceived his plan to write a paraphrase of the Bible. Watkins presents Berruyer's project in parallel to the more famous *Journal de Trévoux*. In the early 1700s, a confluence of circumstances led the Jesuits of France to adopt a new missionary strategy. Shifting their energy from anti-Protestant and anti-Jansenist polemics, the Jesuits turned to confront the new perceived peril of atheism (or "unbelief"). The *Journal* aimed to do this by persuading the public with new philosophical arguments. Berruyer entered the Society and passed through formation in this new context, and, like the *Journal*, his retelling of the scriptures was intended to counter the contemporary obstacles to the gospel by engaging the reading public.

In the first chapter, Watkins crucially defines Berruyer's "style of Enlightenment Catholicism" as "a vision of the Catholic faith that was open to social and theological progress, that affirmed the explanatory and even salvific power of the natural world, that promoted the innate goodness of humanity, and that encouraged the pursuit of happiness" (p. 40). Chapter two explains in detail how Berruyer expressed that vision. This treatment of engagement with the Enlightenment is weighted more towards "cultural sensibilities" than epistemology, political theory, or natural science. Berruyer's narrative brought out the emotions of the biblical characters, counting on the readers' reciprocal emotional responses to draw them in to the point where they would be convinced of the doctrines as well. We are treated to numerous excerpts from Berruyer's paraphrase paired with the original texts, as well as examples of the accompanying illustrations, which demonstrate this emotional impact. The book's appearance in 1728 instantly sparked heated debate. All recognized it as belonging to the genre of the novel, but while some praised it for this reason, others--including both confreres within the Society and, more fatefully, the Jansenist community--condemned the work as a sacrilege. For all that, this first volume remained very popular, with nine editions of the revised version published from 1733 to 1753.

If the first installment was controversial, the Berruyer Affair proper exploded with the publication of the second volume in 1753, which paraphrased the four gospels, and continued through 1757, when volume three appeared containing the New Testament epistles. Chapters three and four tell the story of this Affair. Very much the crux of the book, here Watkins presents evidence to support his larger argument that "the Berruyer Affair contributed to the transformation of the Catholic Enlightenment in France and the polarization of many French Catholics against the Enlightenment as a whole in mid-eighteenth century" (p. 87). The first stage of the Affair, the subject of chapter three, played out in the press in a war over public opinion. While Berruyer had some allies who wrote pamphlets defending his works, the most consequential battles actually took place between the two groups who agreed that Berruyer's paraphrase contained dangerous errors. The leadership of the French Jesuits and of the episcopacy sought to suppress the dangerous work (Berruyer had published volume two without

the consent of his superiors). Their opponents the Jansenists, however, believed that Berruyer's theological errors were characteristic of the Society of Jesus as a whole. Here came into play the long tradition, which Dale Van Kley has explored, of entrenched opposition to the Jesuits as a vast international conspiracy. Rather than quiet the matter, Jansenist polemicists sought to sound the alarm about the un-Catholic ideas being spread throughout Christendom by the despotic and subversive Society. Throughout his study, Watkins draws on scholarship on the history of the book to situate the *Histoire* in the complex ecosystem of book markets and civil and ecclesiastical censorship which shaped the production and consumption of books in early eighteenth-century France. Chapter four follows the Affair from the pamphlets and journals to the censorial bodies. It explains how prelates and priests, lawyers and judges, and officers of the crown attempted to use the partially competitive censorial bodies of church and state against one another. Paradoxically, it was an evangelistic book by a Catholic priest, Watkins shows, and not the atheist tract of a *philosophe* that divided church institutions among themselves and against the state. By 1760, Berruyer's book had been censored by nearly every office imaginable up to the pope himself (and even ceremonially burned by the Paris Parlement). More significantly, the anti-Jesuit campaign succeeded in making Berruyer's name a symbol of the Jesuit menace and, in the process, made strategies of engagement with the Enlightenment seem incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy.

Chapter five follows up with the war against the Jesuits, which resulted only four years after Berruyer's death in the Society's suppression in France. Watkins makes an original intervention into our understanding of the suppression, showing how Berruyer's unusual book played an important role alongside the more well-known episodes of the Damiens Affair and the La Vallette scandal. He persuasively argues that a key dart in the quiver of the Jesuits' enemies was the name of Berruyer. Leading judges and barristers in the Parlement of Paris specifically cited Berruyer's *Histoire* as an example of the Jesuit assault on Catholic doctrine, and the book's persistent presence in markets across Europe despite numerous condemnations by church and state served as evidence of the craftiness of the Jesuits in avoiding the reach of law. One of the key tools used by the Parlement to justify the initial suppression of the Jesuits within its jurisdiction was a collection of quotations taken from Jesuit writings giving evidence of the Society's advocacy over the centuries for positions ranging from irreligion to murder and regicide (The frontispiece of this collection, opting for clarity over subtlety, depicted Jesuit assassins murdering a king and a bishop). Most of the excerpts presented were from long ago or other countries; however, it was the recently condemned work of Berruyer which served as evidence that the present Jesuits were as dangerous as ever. The month after publishing this attack, the Parlement began the suppression of the Jesuits in Paris.

In a surprising and rewarding final chapter and conclusion, we jump ahead to the early decades of the nineteenth century. Surprising, because the *Histoire du peuple de Dieu*, so widely condemned by Catholic authorities a half-century earlier for smuggling non-Christian Enlightenment philosophy into the Bible, was suddenly revived as "an instrument of re-Christianization" following the Revolution (193). Once again Watkins's close attention to the economic and political dimensions of book production is rewarding. A new censorship regime and new copyright laws starting in the Napoleonic period encouraged Catholic rebuilders to turn to old books as morally safe and royalty-free. Whether operating their own presses or contracting with printing houses that recognized a profitable opportunity in the market for "good books," these Catholic evangelists looked for books that were easy to read and most likely to reach a wide audience of young readers. Berruyer's *Histoire* fit the bill, and between 1811 and 1836 versions

of it went through numerous editions from multiple publishers. Perhaps most curious of all, one aspect that had made Berruyer's work so controversial in the 1730s made it conducive to the early nineteenth century. Berruyer's belief in theological progress and his conviction that the Church in the present day held a deeper understanding of divine revelation than it had in earlier ages made the *Histoire* much more at home in an age of Romantic and ultramontane Catholicism which looked to the living magisterial voice of the papacy.

Watkins is especially effective at bringing into the story the role of personalities and tracing personal networks from one chapter of the Berruyer saga to the next. For example, the initial controversy over the first volume of the *Histoire* largely followed pre-existing battle lines drawn decades earlier in response to the writings of the eccentric Jesuit numismatics specialist Jean Hardouin. Through careful archival work in numerous public and private archives in several countries, Watkins shows how individuals who had participated in the Hardouin Affair were again active in the Berruyer Affair. For example, René Joseph Tournemine, the senior Jesuit who played a leading role attempting to suppress Berruyer's book, had begun his career writing a refutation of Hardouin's theses.

It is indeed the specificity of Berruyer's "style" of Enlightenment Catholicism, as Watkins presents it, which is most persuasive. But this same specificity raises questions about how the more general notion of Enlightenment Catholicism functions as an interpretive lens. Berruyer's work is interpreted throughout as a project of Enlightenment Catholicism, and thus its criticisms as condemnations of that project ("Berruyer's Enlightenment Catholicism went on trial [...] and was declared guilty" [p. 148]). Yet in Watkins's own telling, it was the theological formulations Berruyer used to speak of Jesus and his relation to the Trinity that raised the most insurmountable obstacles to Berruyer's evangelistic project. This reader would have benefited from a clearer explanation of what were then standard articulations of the Incarnation and the nature of Jesus. At times one is forced to simply accept either Berruyer's judgment or that of his ecclesiastical judges that his formulations did not stray from traditional definitions. The point is that if the ecclesiastical officials (including the pope and his theological advisors) believed that Berruyer erred in expressing dogma, the role of Enlightenment Catholicism becomes less obvious. One wishes to know more as well about the genre of biblical paraphrase: the reactions to Berruyer's narrative style seem to have parallels in the more general early modern European pattern of returning to the sources, in which an aesthetic appreciation for artless simplicity vied with a solemn respect for the grave majesty of authoritative texts.[2]

Nevertheless, Watkins surely convinces as to the importance of Berruyer and his book for the great convulsions of mid-eighteenth-century France, the history of French Enlightenment Catholicism, and the history of the suppression of the Society of Jesus. Any reader interested in grappling with the interpretation of France's age of Enlightenment and its relation to the ideas of revealed religion, the Catholic Church, and the institutions, economics, and social practices of the public sphere will find this book illuminating, thought-provoking, and enjoyable.

## NOTES

[1] In this he supports the interpretations separately made by Jeffrey Burson and Dale Van Kley, that the anti-Jesuit campaign of the earlier eighteenth century (the positive side of which Van Kley labels "Reform Catholicism") helped to create the divide so particular to the French Enlightenment between the philosophes and the alliance of Throne and Altar. Like Burson,

Watkins also highlights the role the Jesuits themselves played in this contingent division—both in their efforts to engage new literary and philosophical currents, and in their (complicated) institutional relation to the censorship apparatus of the monarchy. See Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); and Van Kley, *Reform Catholicism and the International Suppression of the Jesuits in Enlightenment Europe, 1554-1791* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2018).

[2] As a point of comparison, in his essay “The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version” from the *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 126-145), C. S. Lewis surveyed the history of literary appreciation for the Bible. From antiquity to the Romantic era, readers reacted very differently to the same texts. Some eras felt obliged to excuse the rude literary quality of the scriptures while others praised their noble simplicity and honest artlessness. (In England, one Edward Harwood published a “liberal translation” of the Bible in 1768 in order to spare readers from having to endure the “bald and barbarous language” of the King James Version [p.140]). Anthony Grafton traces an identical debate (not unrelated to biblical criticism) which occurred in German universities in the field of Homer studies in the later eighteenth century in his introduction to the *Prolegomena to Homer, 1795* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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