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Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. xv + 308 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-520-22136-2.

Review by Suzanne K. Kaufman, Loyola University Chicago.

France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart is a major contribution to the study of the political culture of modern France. In his sweeping analysis of the origins and development of the French devotion to the Sacred Heart, Raymond Jonas argues convincingly that worship of the Sacré-Coeur of Jesus played a central role in a deeply conservative vision of the nation that first emerged during the religious battles of the French Revolution. Long a source of spiritual comfort and a talisman against physical danger, the Sacred Heart became a key symbol in a modern “salvation narrative.” This narrative cast the Revolution as a sinful calamity and promised national redemption to the righteous who fought to re-Christianize public life and restore a monarch to the throne. Throughout the nineteenth century, devotion to the Sacred Heart—including the construction of the Sacré-Coeur basilica in Paris—continued to generate and sustain “a counter-discourse that challenged a still-fragile republican hegemony” (p. 5). Indeed, Jonas contends that “there would not be a revolution or military defeat which was not moralized, internalized and nationalized in terms of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” by France’s Catholic clergy, aristocratic royalists, and large numbers of non-elite lay Catholics (p. 141). In this sense, the Sacré-Coeur of Jesus as religious symbol and devotional practice was central to the development of a competing vision of “Frenchness” that the modern French Right has wielded from the “Vendée to Vichy” (p. 7). By carefully analyzing the many facets of this Catholic political culture, from the visual imagery and architectural strategies used to represent the Sacré-Coeur to the Church’s fund-raising techniques, millenarian beliefs, and pilgrimage practices, Jonas has written a history of the Sacred Heart that reveals how successfully (at least for a time) this vision of France competed with a still-fledgling French republicanism.

Jonas organizes his narrative around key moments in the development of the devotion to the Sacré-Coeur. He begins with an examination of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, a cloistered nun who, in the late seventeenth century, had visions of Jesus in which he promised blessings to those who worshiped his heart. Marguerite-Marie used these visions to enhance her status and power at the convent. Jonas also points out that this visionary, like other women religious before her, described her physical union with the body of Jesus (in this case, his heart) in powerfully erotic terms. More central to Jonas’s argument, however, is the political content of her visions in which Jesus, wounded and suffering, demanded veneration of his heart from the king of France himself. These visions called on the king to consecrate France to the Sacred Heart in order to rectify a religiously fragmented country. Marguerite-Marie’s apparitions soon became the foundation for a new salvation narrative linking the fate of France to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This narrative was further developed in the 1720s, when the residents of Marseilles sought protection from the plague by attaching images of the Sacré-Coeur to their clothes and by hanging emblems on the doorways of their homes. Following a series of public processions and ceremonies, the bishop of Marseilles even consecrated the city to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in order to atone for the city’s sins. Devoting oneself to the Sacred Heart through personal acts of piety and collective acts of faith became not only a sign of righteousness but also a tool to save society from

impending doom.

It is not surprising, then, that the Sacré-Coeur as religious symbol and devotional practice took on even greater significance during the tumultuous years of the French Revolution. Amidst growing schism and eventual civil war, the Sacred Heart of Jesus offered an anxious populace spiritual comfort and the reassurance of salvation. With tens of thousands of Sacred Heart emblems in circulation during this period, devotion to the Sacré-Coeur emerged as “the most potent spiritual counter to a growing ambient revolutionary evil” (p. 84). Yet Jonas contends that the Sacred Heart functioned as more than a safeguard; it also became a sign of militant resistance to the Revolution itself. The Sacred Heart was taken up by a counter-revolutionary clergy and by royalist Catholics who found in Marguerite-Marie’s message a battle cry to save a fallen France. Indeed, the story that Louis XVI, shortly before his execution, made a vow to consecrate France to the Sacré-Coeur became a stirring motif in subsequent counter-revolutionary discourse. During the revolt of the Vendée, men attached Sacred-Heart emblems to their lapels and fought under its banner.

The Sacré-Coeur henceforth became a key symbol for nineteenth-century royalist politics. Catholic elites and French clerics repeatedly invoked the salvation narrative and called for a renewed partnership between king and God to regenerate a once-great nation. The Sacred Heart was used by the Restoration clergy in their missionary campaigns to re-Christianize France. It was also mythologized in the portraits of heroic Vendéen generals that hung in Bourbon-sponsored salons. During the events of *l’année terrible*—which in 1870–71 saw France’s defeat in war, a failure to defend the Pope, and the violence of the Commune—Catholics again turned to the Sacred Heart to calm their fears and explain their nation’s fall from grace. Numerous dioceses consecrated themselves to the Sacred Heart; in fact, the idea of building in Paris a “church of the national vow” dedicated to the Sacré-Coeur was born of this moment. The Sacred Heart was also worn by the thousands of French men who volunteered to fight for the Pope as Papal Zouaves. Many of these papal defenders later lost their lives at the Battle of Loigny. Fighting under the banner of the Sacré-Coeur, Catholics loyalists became new martyrs in an on-going saga.

Jonas’s analysis culminates in a detailed discussion of the building of the Sacré-Coeur basilica and the religious practices that developed around it. Every aspect of the building project, from the choice of Montmartre as site to the Romano-Byzantine architectural style of the church, reflected the conservative message of the Sacré-Coeur narrative. Jonas notes that in the process this conservative message was sometimes packaged in new and even democratic forms of worship. Efforts to finance the project, for example, led to innovative devotional practices involving broad participation of the faithful. Yet the organized pilgrimages to the basilica largely reflected the Church’s desire to make the site a place of collective penance for a sinful nation. Pilgrimage to Montmartre involved no interaction with a sacred object; neither relics nor natural substances like water were part of the spiritual encounter. Rather, history itself became “theophany” at the site, and the pilgrimage served a “didactic function, explaining the devotion of the Sacré-Coeur and the historical vision of France” (p. 218). This didactic function emerges most clearly in the mosaic that appears on the ceiling of the basilica. Here, all the key episodes in the saga of France and the Sacré-Coeur—the plague at Marseilles, the vow of Louis XVI, the heroes of Loigny, and the vow to build a basilica in Paris—were immortalized in stone. The message was clear for all to see: France had sinned and suffered, but the nation’s consecration to the Sacred Heart would bring a new, glorious reign of God and king.

The supporters of the basilica, almost all Catholic Legitimists, were so successful in linking this message to the site that the Sacré-Coeur ultimately became a victim of its own singular vision. While a politics of expiation and exaltation spoke to the collective sense of fear and failure that gripped France during the 1870s, the mood of the country had already begun to shift within the span of a generation. By the 1890s, with an anticlerical majority in power, the last Bourbon dead and an economy on the rise, the conservative message of the Sacré-Coeur became much less relevant. Devotion to the Sacred Heart was

so tied to royalist politics, Jonas suggests, that the Sacré-Coeur could only be seen as a “partisan political emblem” (p. 237). His account ends in 1908, when the city of Paris took possession of the basilica following the separation of church and state. For Jonas, this event marked the end of the saga of France and the Sacré-Coeur.

The strength of Jonas’s study lies in his focused and careful analysis of the development of a single vision of the Sacred Heart, from the visions of Marguerite-Marie to the mosaic on the Sacré-Coeur ceiling. Not only does he explore the multiple ways in which the devotion was used by clerical officials and elite Catholics to promote a counter-revolutionary nationalist vision, but he also sheds light on the Church’s attempt to create a masculine religious cult with popular appeal. This rhetoric of Catholic manliness (the portraits of Vendéen generals and the martyred heroes of Loigny) usefully questions the feminization-of-religion thesis that has so dominated the study of French Catholicism in this period.[1] It may also help explain why the Sacré-Coeur became such an important devotion for soldiers fighting in World War I.

Yet while Jonas’s account opens up new avenues to explore in the history of religion, his focus on the Sacred Heart as the central icon in a conservative Catholic vision also limits, in a certain sense, the study’s potential impact. By insisting that the Sacré-Coeur came to have one meaning for Catholics in post-revolutionary French society, Jonas may read the Sacred Heart in unnecessarily narrow terms. At one point, the author asks his readers “if *any* reference to the Sacré-Coeur in post-revolutionary France, let alone one on the scale of the Sacré-Coeur de Montmartre, could truly be free of political resonance?”(p. 236). While Jonas answers his own question with an emphatic “no,” his own analysis, elsewhere in the book, suggests that the Sacred Heart may be a rather polysemous symbol and devotional practice. In a chapter on the visions of Marguerite-Marie, for example, Jonas argues perceptively that the mystic innovated a “vocabulary of spiritual yearning” for the actual body of Jesus. She “eroticized the body of Jesus not as a source of sexual pleasure, but as a source of grace, of plenitude, of comfort yielding intense satisfaction” (p. 31). Unfortunately, these insights are not developed in later sections of the work. But did such amorous language actually disappear from the devotion itself? Or did this erotic discourse of the Sacred Heart provide lay believers with different ways to imagine the Sacré-Coeur than those promoted by counter-revolutionary clerics and conservative male elites? One place to investigate these questions might be to look at Paray-le-Monial, the site of Marguerite-Marie’s apparitions, which became in the nineteenth century a place of mass pilgrimage and veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Michel Cinquin, for example, in his work on Paray-le-Monial, does find the continuation of erotic language in the literature of the shrine.[2]

Jonas fashions a compelling account of the political iconography of the Sacré-Coeur. Yet there is another depiction of this symbol that also might complicate his narrative. Probably the most popular image of the Sacred Heart in the nineteenth century and even today, especially for devout women, has been the Saint-Sulpice Christ, a figure with one hand pointing to his inflamed heart and the other hand outstretched in a gesture of forgiveness.[3] In these mass-produced images of the Sacred Heart, Jesus is depicted with saucer eyes, curly hair and delicate hands. This effeminate Jesus, so predominant in *l’art Saint Sulpice*, is a striking contrast to the virile men immortalized in the Sacré-Coeur’s mosaic of the same period. Such an image suggests that the Sacred Heart was not only politicized and eroticized but also sentimentalized and, ultimately, commodified.

The popularity and staying power of this sentimental vision of the Sacred Heart also suggests that Jonas may have overstated his central argument. It seems clear that conservative clerics and elite men embraced and fostered the Sacred Heart as a counter-revolutionary icon and religious devotion. Yet were these supporters of the Sacré-Coeur ever fully in control of the cult that they promoted? Did women and non-elites envision and interact with a different Sacred Heart when they went on pilgrimage to Paray-le-Monial or hung an image of the Saint-Sulpice Christ in their homes? Were these versions of the cult of the Sacred Heart in tension with one another? While discussing multiple meanings of the

Sacred Heart might have muddied Jonas's neat presentation of the emergence of a counter-revolutionary Catholic devotion, it could have pushed him to develop more fully his analysis of new male forms of religious worship. The rhetoric of Catholic manliness embodied in the clerical and royalist promotion of the devotion leaves one wondering if this counter-revolutionary icon was in part an attempt to compete with increasingly feminized forms of Catholic worship. Moreover, the continued vitality of the devotion in the twentieth century cuts against what is, in Jonas's hands, a declension narrative of religious practice in the modern age. By this I mean that the Sacré-Coeur as safeguard or as sentimental and erotic object of veneration seems to have outlasted its connection to counter-revolutionary politics. [4] There may yet be other histories of the Sacred Heart left to tell.

With these limitations noted, there is much to recommend in Raymond Jonas's *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart*. As a study of nineteenth-century political culture, Jonas's book is a major contribution to French history. His analysis of symbolic forms and collective action reveals a nineteenth-century Church that is not simply reacting to changing political circumstances but also helping to create them. This is an important argument, because it shows us that Catholic believers also played a role in shaping modern, albeit very conservative, definitions of Frenchness that would see a brief but potent revival under the Vichy regime. Drawing on an impressive range of archival sources and visual images, Jonas provides us with a carefully researched and compelling narrative. This well-written and accessible book would be a welcome addition to undergraduate surveys of France as well as more specialized undergraduate and graduate seminars in French history.

NOTES

[1] Key works that have established and elaborated this thesis for modern France include: Gérard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, vol. 1-2 (Toulouse: Privat, 1985-1986); Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Olwen Hufton, "The Reconstruction of the Church, 1796-1801," in *Beyond the Terror: Essays in French Regional and Social History, 1794-1815*, ed. by Gwynne Lewis and Colin Lucas (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 21-52; Claude Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin: les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1984); Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). For a very interesting attempt to complicate the feminization-of-religion thesis by analyzing the religious commitments of bourgeois Catholic men, see Paul Seeley, "O Sainte Mère: Liberalism and the Socialization of Catholic Men in Nineteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History* 70 (December 1998): 862-892; Also, for a critical discussion of this thesis in a larger European context, see Caroline Ford, "Religion and Popular Culture in Modern Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 65 (March 1993): 152-175.

[2] See Philippe Boutry and Michel Cinquin, *Deux pèlerinages au XIXe siècle: Ars et Paray-le-Monial* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), 276-277.

[3] For a discussion of the importance of *l'art Saint-Sulpice* in nineteenth-century France, see Claude Savart, "A la recherche de l'art dit de Saint-Sulpice," *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité* 52 (1976): 265-283.

[4] Paray-le-Monial, it should be noted, remains an important place of pilgrimage. Continued veneration of the Sacré-Coeur can also be seen today in the large number of websites dedicated to the devotion.

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